When Jimmy Carter entered the White House in 1976 he sought to contrast his administration to the secrecy that helped define the Nixon and Ford Administrations. His solution was a robust public outreach that connected the American people with their government’s policy decisions. This study examines Carter’s public outreach program during the ratification of the Panama Canal Treaties and the energy crisis. It will examine why the program received varying degrees of success for different policy proposals.

Public opinion matters in American politics. In order to be elected and track support for policy proposals once in office, a candidate relies on polls to gauge popular opinion. Jimmy Carter, the 39th President of the United States, was no exception to this rule. In 1976, the nation continued to suffer from a general distrust in the federal government following President Richard Nixon’s resignation from office in August 1974. Consequently, Carter ran on a platform advocating increased government transparency during the 1976 election. This campaign strategy helped the largely unknown governor to defeat the sitting president, Gerald Ford, in the general election. Once Carter entered the White House in 1977, he remained committed to government transparency and regaining the trust of the American people.

Carter desired to do what was right for the future of the United States and its citizens. In order to steer the nation in the right path, Carter envisioned multiple policy proposals. The proposals needed Congressional support order to become law. The 39th President, unlike many of his predecessors, never served in Washington as a member of another administration, member of Congress, or other political role. As a result, he did not have many contacts across the city and did not understand, or abide by, all of the traditions that ran the nation’s capital. Carter’s outsider status in Washington (as well as the election language he used against Washington insiders) created early friction between the executive and legislature. Carter had to rely on the American people as the only force that could persuade Congress to support the executive’s plans given the friction that existed. Carter and his advisors reasoned that if public opinion was largely in favor of the President and his proposals that Congress would feel pressured to side with the outsider. The Carter Administration used polls in order to gauge public opinion on major proposals. When public opinion polling showed a majority (or at least a plurality) of citizens agreed with Carter’s ideas and proposals, then the case was clear for congressional action on the matter.

Many times though, and often on the most important issues, public opinion did not immediately support Carter’s proposals for the nation. When an alignment did not occur between Carter and the American people on a major proposal, the Carter administration developed a public outreach strategy. The outreach consisted of national television addresses, speeches by members of the administration across the nation, and focus groups made up of key community leaders. Over time, Carter and his advisors designed the strategy to increase public awareness about the issue with the administration’s spin on the facts. In theory, the more Americans that understood the issues at hand, the more support the policy gained. The president’s strategy worked on multiple occasions, including ratification of the Panama Canal Treaties.

The public outreach strategy did not always work so successfully. When Carter and his team could not reconcile the differences between the President and the people, the strategy’s
Unlike other politicians, however, Carter's interest in his constituents was genuine. His experiences shaped Carter into a politician with a genuine interest in what his constituents thought about his policies. This interest was a turning point in his political career, as it allowed him to react to public opinion approval during the energy crisis, Carter's strategy backfired. On this issue, the administration continued to remind the American people that they had not developed or implemented any solution to the nation's energy problem.

The failures of the Carter Administration's public outreach strategy disastrous for Carter in the 1980 election. Political rivals took advantage of the political environment. Meanwhile Carter continued to remind the public that he was inflexible on the energy crisis and he achieved no progress on the issue. As a result, Carter first faced a primary battle from the political left by Senator Ted Kennedy. After a damaging primary election, Carter went on to lose to Governor Ronald Reagan. There was no doubt that the political environment was unfavorable to any presidential incumbent in 1980. At the time, the national economy was struggling, and the Soviet Union appeared to be seeking a more aggressive Cold War strategy. Carter's public outreach program for the energy crisis, however, only exasperated the re-election challenges that he faced.

Public outreach worked for the Panama Canal Treaties but not for the energy crisis due to a variety of reasons. For instance, the Panama Canal Treaties were a proactive policy proposal. Carter's proposals to combat the energy crisis, on the other hand, were reactive. Additionally, the treaties seemed far less complex to the American people than the energy crisis. The treaties required a few, seemingly straightforward, transactions to occur. Conversely, it was not easy to predict the effects of Carter's energy proposals. Finally, the treaties were foreign policy, as opposed to the energy crisis, which affected Americans at home. These factors influenced the potential for public opinion to change through presidential public outreach. Carter's ability to harness this potential led to the ratification of the Panama Canal Treaties, but his insistence to push public outreach when that potential was not present led to his political defeat.

VICTORY, DEFEAT, AND LESSONS LEARNED
Carter did not learn about polls and recognize their importance. The result was the opposite of the intended result. When this occurred, Carter appeared inflexible, and he found himself unwilling to support policies that the American people were unwilling to support. This occurred, for example, during the energy crisis that plagued much of the Carter administration's later half. By consistently speaking about the energy crisis, Carter's strategy backfired. On this issue, the administration continued to remind the American people that they had not developed or implemented any solution to the nation's energy problem.

In 1962, Carter campaigned in his first major election (he previously held a position on a local school board), when he ran against Homer Moore for the Democratic nomination in Georgia's 14th Senate District. Initially, he lost the election by fewer than two-hundred votes; however, Carter accused his opponent of fraud in a key county. Following a lengthy court battle, he won the nomination and eventually the Senate seat. The lengthy appeals process, however, had physical implications for Carter. After two weeks of court hearings, the candidate lost eleven pounds. It would not be the last time that an election affected the future president's health. The election of 1962 taught Carter a practical lesson in politics: every vote matters in a close election. Therefore, he believed that he had to generate greater public support in order to mobilize potential voters for his next election bid. The new state senator owed his victory to the people, and he would take that to heart.

While a state senator, Carter learned how to shape his public image while in office. He took pride in his visibility to constituents and frequently contacted them on a variety of political issues. In order to maintain a high degree of visibility he frequently wrote letters to the local newspaper and delivered speeches about the legislative battles occurring in Atlanta. However, with a future gubernatorial campaign in mind, Carter intentionally avoided publicity on controversial issues such as school integration. The decision was primarily political, but it emphasized that the then state senator cared about his reputation with his constituents. In a matter of months though, Carter's desire to be popular at home would move beyond the obvious political motives.

Carter defined the 1962 state senate election as a turning point in his life because it signaled the beginning of his life in public office. However, Carter's gubernatorial campaign in 1966 served as a turning point for his relationship with the public. Carter decided to enter the race in June of the election year after he learned that his political rival Bo Callaway, a Republican state senator and West Point graduate, also desired the position. In the early days of the campaign, Carter believed he made relatively successful strides towards becoming the Democratic nominee. In a statewide poll conducted by Gerald Rafshoon, who would later join Carter in Washington, Carter received only 4.2% of the votes in a race between all of the Republican and Democratic candidates. Carter did better on Election Day, but his 20.9% performance in the Democratic Primary still put him more than 20,000 votes below the threshold needed to enter a run-off election for the nomination. The people of Georgia's dismissal of the candidate changed Jimmy Carter the politician.
Following the failed campaign, Carter’s health faltered once again. The politician lost twice as much weight as he did following the court hearings years before (22 pounds), and, to make matters worse, Carter found himself in serious debt. Years later, Carter admitted that following the election he felt as though “life had no purpose.” In his time of struggle, Carter turned towards his re-invigorated faith and found new meaning for his political ambitions. In 1966, following a long walk with his sister Ruth, Carter’s religious transformation began. Between 1966 and December 1968, Carter declared himself “born again” after he had multiple religious experiences. These religious experiences changed not only his religious life, but also his political life.

In the wake of his religious experience, Carter viewed his role as a politician much differently. In particular, Carter’s views on the people he represented changed. He came “to realize that that in every person there is something fine and pure and noble,” and it was his role as a politician “to provide a society within which these human attributes can be nurtured and enhanced.” The media and public noticed Carter’s new emphasis on his faith. Hal Gulliver, the editor of the Atlanta Constitution wrote that Carter’s faith meant that he had “a profound caring about people.” In 1962, Carter learned the necessity of caring about people in order to gain their votes. However, seven years later, Carter’s care for his constituents and future voters exceeded basic political objectives. He was poised to run for governor again, and return to Atlanta as a people’s governor.

THE PEOPLE’S GOVERNOR

Carter won the 1970 gubernatorial election for governor with relative ease. After a victory in a run-off primary, Carter defeated the Republican candidate, Hal Suit, in the general election by nearly 200,000 votes. Armed with a popular mandate and his new regard for his constituents’ beliefs and opinions, Carter was ready to employ public opinion measurements to judge his popularity across the state. Governor Carter arrived prepared to tackle some of the controversial issues that he once dodged as a state senator. The new governor, however, needed to rally public support for his new controversial legislative agenda. His first, and arguably most controversial, proposal focused on the reorganization of the state government. The proposal called for a fundamental restructuring the government in order to increase both efficiency and the governor’s level of control. Carter introduced his plan in HB 1 shortly after entering the governor’s mansion. Expecting legislative opposition, Carter launched a large public outreach program. Carter’s budget included $15,000 to the public relations firm Bell and Stanton to promote the bill to the people of Georgia and another $14,000 was allocated to create an eight-minute film in support of the proposal. Furthermore, the Governor listened to his advisors (primarily Rafshoon), and then traveled for about six weeks during the summer of 1971 to speak to some 13,000 Georgians and promote his plans while listening to their concerns. During these trips, Carter took on the persona of a preacher more than an elected government official. Rafshoon wrote to the Governor that the outreach “actually gives the little man a voice in government (we’ve certainly
talked about this a lot).\textsuperscript{20} He went on to write that the program aimed to have the average citizen:

come away with a warm, favorable feeling towards the reorganization concept. Let him see this and then the next time he sees his legislator, he'll say, 'Man, I really like Carter's plan to save money, give more services.\textsuperscript{21}

The plan certainly served Carter's political goals. On April 6, 1972, after nearly a year of public outreach, the governor signed the reorganization bill into law.\textsuperscript{22} Carter's first public outreach campaign achieved a tangible victory.

In a 1974 speech before the National Press Club, Governor Carter claimed that “for too long politicians have been isolated from the people. They have made political decisions from an ivory tower.”\textsuperscript{23} In an environment where “our people feel that they have little access to the core of government and little influence with elected officials,” Carter saw it as his mission to bridge “this chasm between people and government.”\textsuperscript{31} Carter saw a much larger purpose in his outreach program than politics. His public appearances served to heal and connect a population separated from its government. Carter's relationship between his government and his constituents followed a similar model to a Southern Baptist pastor and his congregation. A pastor's main aim is to build and foster a strong relationship between his people and God, who at one point, may have, become disconnected from each other. Similarly, Carter's re-born religious experience introduced him to the power that a leader could have in building relationships. Between 1971 and 1975, Carter's political congregation consisted of the inhabitants of Georgia. In 1976 he would attempt to broaden his influence to the entire United States of America.

**1976: AN OUTSIDER’S OUTREACH**

In December 1974, only a month before he left office, Carter announced the beginning of his presidential campaign at the Atlanta Civic Center.\textsuperscript{25} The soon to be former Governor of Georgia was committed to winning the Democratic primary election and the general election as a Washington outsider who could bridge the rift between the American people and the federal government. The 1976 election was the first presidential election since the Watergate scandal destroyed the Nixon administration and made Ford the 38th President of the United States. Carter and his advisors believed that given “Watergate, economic setbacks, and confusion in Washington that maybe… the 1976 election, will be quite different from the ones in the past.”\textsuperscript{26} In this different election, Carter believed his bridging method between the government and the people would resonate with the electorate.

Carter’s belief was correct. During the campaign, he emphasized his values in contrast to the incumbent, Ford, who many Americans continued to see as an extension of a dishonest Nixon presidency. At a luncheon in Baltimore, Carter boldly stated he “wouldn’t tell a lie…make a misleading statement…betray a trust… [or] avoid a controversial issue,” and if he did not follow through during the campaign he told the audience “don’t support me, because I wouldn’t deserve to lead this country.”\textsuperscript{27} In April 1976, while Carter was on pace to win the Democratic nomination, the Democratic frontrunner challenged the audience that “if there are things you don't like about our nation…take advantage of this year, election year, and help guarantee…that our country actively represents the finest aspects of our people.”\textsuperscript{28} This message propelled Carter to victory in the primary election.

Carter continued this down-to-Earth strategy into the general election against Ford. Following the presidential debates, Carter scored better than Ford on a scale that measured whether each candidate was more deceptive or open.\textsuperscript{29} The American people’s trust in Carter and the belief that he would increase the White House's transparency helped propel him to victory over Ford. Carter ultimately won 297 electoral votes to Ford's 240 and received 50.1% of the popular vote.\textsuperscript{30} During Carter's inaugural address, the new president reaffirmed the principles that got him elected and told the American people that they gave him “a great responsibility—to stay close to you, to be worthy of you, and to exemplify what you are,” but he was “confident that in the end we will triumph together in the right.”\textsuperscript{31} After a short period of time in office, the President proved that he could work with the American public in order to move proposed policies forward.

**THE FIRST TEST: PUBLIC OUTREACH AND THE PANAMA CANAL TREATIES**

In 1977 the Carter administration faced its first public opinion challenge: the Panama Canal Treaties. The treaties were a foreign policy priority in Washington, and multiple administrations had negotiated them before Carter took office. The final agreement gave Panama full control of the canal by 1999, but granted the United States the right to defend the waterway if an adversary threatened access. In return, the United States would ensure Panama received a share of the canal's tolls, and the United States would provide loans and credits to the Panamanian government.\textsuperscript{32} The treaty was initially unpopular with the American people; however, as the chief negotiator of the treaties, Sal Linowtiz, noted, Carter “was truly insistent on getting a treaty, and was prepared to pay a political price for it.”\textsuperscript{33} The young president understood that convincing the American public to believe in the treaties would take a great deal of work. He told his staff that he truly believed the treaties were in “our highest national interest.”\textsuperscript{34} In the coming months, Carter and his advisors strove to change public opinion on the treaties and gain ratification from the Senate.

Pat Caddell, the chief pollster in the White House, stated that the administration conducted more polling on the treaties than on any other policy issue during Carter’s time in office. He noted, however, that because the issue was so controversial, Carter likely would not have committed to the treaties if he allowed public opinion to set his political agenda.\textsuperscript{35} In
The Preacher President

June 1977, Caddell’s polling company, Cambridge Survey Research, found that only 29 percent of Americans supported the treaties, compared to 44 percent who disapproved ratification.36 A few months later in August, the administration received mixed polling data. One poll showed 39 percent approval for the treaties.37 Another poll taken at the same time, however, revealed only 25 percent approval for the treaties.38 It was clear that the Senate would not ratify the treaties when some polls showed such low public opinion. Although public opinion did not influence Carter’s agenda, it did influence many senators’ agendas. One important member of Carter’s Panama Canal Treaties organization was George Moffett, the Director of Research for the Committee of Americans for the Canal Treaties. A prominent California pollster, Mark DiCamillo, wrote Moffett after Carter’s time in office and confirmed that California’s senators would not have supported ratification while public opinion was so low.39 The Carter team needed to find why Americans opposed the treaties and then change the public’s perception of them.

Carter knew in his mind that the treaties were best for the nation. He now needed to guide his political congregation to the same conclusion. In order to do this, he first needed to find out what the primary opposition to the treaties was. He assigned Caddell to this task. It did not take the pollster long to find one reason many Americans opposed ratifying the treaties: they did not understand the issue. One poll asked American citizens to answer three basic, fact-based questions about the treaties. Only one in fourteen Americans could answer all three questions correctly. Of those who answered all three correctly, 51 percent approved of ratification.40 In a letter to his staff, Carter stated that “many Americans do not understand exactly what the Treaties do. Recent nationwide polls indicate that most Americans would support the Treaties if they understood that our country retained the right to defend the Canal and keep it open to ships of all nations.”41 Carter’s aide, William Blair Jr., seconded the President’s belief and stated that “the Gallup findings strongly suggest that great knowledge of the treaties’ provisions results in higher levels of approval.”42 Caddell and the Carter staff drew the conclusion that an informed public would translate to popular opinion.

To inform the public, Carter took to the airwaves. Carter and his team prepared their talking points based on conclusions drawn from further polling of the American public.43 In February 1978, Carter decided that he would make a public address on television to address the treaties directly. In preparations for the speech, Carter’s speechwriters identified the main objection to the treaty and provided Carter with refutations to each.44 During the speech, Carter quickly looked to dispel rumors about the treaties. Within minutes, Carter said, “Let me answer specifically the most common questions about the treaties.” He proceeded to directly quote the treaty and counter his opposition’s arguments one by one.45 Carter received another unlikely supporter in the media: John Wayne. In one thirty second television ad, the all-American actor plainly asked the American people to “write your Senators in support of the Panama Canal treaties. I’d appreciate it.”46 The television advertisements were not, however, the only outreach tool that the administration used.

The administration also brought multiple groups of local leaders to the White House to receive briefs on the treaties directly from the administration. Jack Watson, one of Carter’s closest advisors, made the opening remarks at one of these briefs. He told the crowd that “the purpose of this briefing this afternoon is a simple one. It is in effect to conduct straight-forward, factual briefing about the Panama Canal Treaties, of which you will note there are two.”47 In another brief, Jane Wales, the Assistant Deputy Secretary of State, told a group of prominent women leaders that “the President wants to be sure that the American public is informed on the treaties—their contents and history.”48 The meeting, which lasted approximately two hours, featured speeches and question and answer sessions with National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, Ambassador David Popper, Secretary of the Air Force John Stetson, Admiral James Holloway of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the First Lady Roselyn Carter.49 Another meeting for Hispanic leaders featured Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Ambler Moss, Secretary of the Army Clifford Alexander and Vice President Walter Mondale.50 These meetings gave local leaders the opportunity to hear direct from administration officials and formulate an informed opinion on the treaties.

The feedback from these local leaders was overwhelmingly positive. The National President of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs reported shortly after her meeting at the White House that the President should “feel assured” that she would “get the message across to [her organization].”51 Additionally, the President of the National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union told the President that she planned “to make a report of the conference to our membership so they will be advised of the treaty and intent of the treaty at this time.”52 Sister Elizabeth Barrett sent such a letter to her organization, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. In the letter, she told her members that “it is urgent and very important to write to your senators indicating your support of the treaties and to suggest others that they likewise write.”53 This sort of feedback showed the success of the administration’s briefing program. The local leaders returned home from Washington and then contributed free advertising for the administration.

Over time the combination of television addresses directly from the White House, celebrity advertisements, and meeting with local leaders succeeded in turning around public opinion regarding the treaties. During the public outreach process, Moffett made the following observation:

Pan [sic] shows Admin [sic] to be good at two things. One is education—or persuasion—of the public…It has
A HARD CASE TO MAKE: PUBLIC OUTREACH AND THE ENERGY CRISIS

In the spring of 1979, Rafshoon informed Carter that “energy has very quickly become the most significant domestic political issue.” He was right; Americans faced rising energy prices and shortages. The crisis directly affected the average American family, and, as gasoline lines grew with seemingly no end in sight, the public looked for a figure to blame. Stuart Eizenstat, a top Carter aide, informed Carter that “nothing else has so frustrated, confused, angered the American people—or so targeted their distress at you personally.” Another aide, Richard Moe, seconded Eizenstat’s remarks and believed that “many people think no one is in charge of this issue and the President, naturally, is getting most of the heat.” Consequently, Carter saw his poll numbers sharply drop that spring. At the end of March, Carter’s approval rating was only 39 percent, compared to 50 percent disapproval. By the end of June, only 30 percent of the nation supported the President. Repairing Carter’s approval numbers and fixing the energy crisis itself would require a public outreach effort even more powerful than during the Panama Canal Treaties.

Advisors recognized that “no single quick-fix or politically popular action is going to pull the nation through its near term crisis or place it on a solid energy basis for future generations.” Carter, however, was determined to present what he believed the best solution was, whether it was popular or not. Two years before the crisis, he unveiled his energy plan.
The Preacher President

before a joint session of Congress and called for an overall energy consumption decrease of two percent, gas consumption to decrease ten percent, fewer than six million barrels of oil imported daily, the establishment of a ten month emergency petroleum supply, an increase in domestic coal production by two-thirds, ninety percent of buildings to be properly insulated, and two and half million homes to run on solar power.\(^2\) Congress did not enact the majority of this legislation. Carter and his staff realized that they had so far "failed the nation on energy leadership" and it was "time to come through."\(^3\) As a result, they proposed the Energy Management Partnership Act of 1979 (EMPA) on May 18, 1978, which restated the President's 1977 agenda.\(^4\)

Carter’s team enacted many of the same tactics that they employed during the Panama outreach program. On June 1, 1979, the White House hosted another briefing with community and business leaders to inform them on the President’s plan to end the energy crisis. Attendees included representatives from the Consumer Energy Council, National Consumers League, the Sierra Club, and dozens others.\(^5\) A similar meeting occurred on August 1 where attendees heard from Anne Wexler, Special Assistant for Public Outreach, Elliot Cutler, from the Office of Management and Budget, and Eizenstat.\(^6\) These meetings met more mixed opinions afterwards than those regarding Panama. David M. Roderick of U.S. Steel guaranteed the President the company’s “cooperation toward achieving a workable program.”\(^7\) His counterpart, Lloyd McBride of the United Steelworkers of America, agreed that it was time “for Americans to embark on a course marked by a cohesive energy policy that makes use of our own resources.”\(^8\) Finally, Loyd Hackler of the American Retail Foundation told Carter that “the outlines of [his] energy program offer the nation a direction that can give us lift.”\(^9\) Unfortunately for the administration, not all leaders had such positive reviews.

The Consumer Federation of America released a scathing press release on the same day as a representative attended a White House brief. The organization told its members that:

President Carter tells you, the American consumer, that this is a crisis, and a crisis isn’t solved by finger pointing. This is a crisis, but a crisis is solved when American consumers and their leaders exercise the responsibility of following their conscience.\(^70\)

The statement reflected the sentiment of much of the nation. The American people believed that they should be able to choose to limit their consumption on their own, and not because of a government mandate. In one poll conducted by Caddell’s company, 48 percent agreed that “conservation is not a realistic solution to the energy crisis unless we are all prepared to accept a much lower standard of living.”\(^71\) The American public was not willing to accept this at the moment. The administration needed to directly reach out to the American public and persuade them that energy sacrifices were necessary.

Rafshoon recognized that the administration had to use direct methods of public outreach rather than indirect methods, such as local leader engagement. He told his staff “to take every opportunity available to help build public and Congressional support for the President’s determined efforts to unite the Nation…for his energy proposals.”\(^72\) The administration enlisted the help of General Benjamin O. Davis Jr., the well respected retired Air Force general and commander of the famed Tuskegee Airmen, to be the Secretary of Transportation’s representative for the administration’s ridesharing and 55 m.p.h speed limit programs. Davis made speeches in thirty cities with the stated purpose of talking “about the ridesharing and driver awareness in the context of the energy problem.”\(^73\) However, Carter and his team found no noticeable changes in attitude from the crowds that Davis addressed. After Davis, and other administration partners’, nationwide tour failed to change public attitudes towards his proposed programs, it became clear that the message had to come from Carter’s mouth directly.

Rafshoon initially argued that it would be unwise for Carter to make a national address regarding the energy crisis during the summer of 1979. He advised the President that “there tends to be an inverse correlation between the degree to which we hype an announcement and the seriousness with which the press reports it.”\(^74\) However, Carter, however, recognized that he had to tackle the issue directly and tell the American people what he believed, regardless of the political ramifications. On July 15, 1979 he delivered his famous “Crisis of Confidence” speech on every major television network from the Oval Office. He opened the speech by reiterating that he was “a president who is not isolated from the people, who feels your pain, and who shares your dreams and draws his strength and his wisdom from” the American people.\(^75\) During the energy crisis, Carter told the public that he realized “more than ever that as president I need your help. So I decided to reach
out and listen to the voices of America.” However, in the speech, Carter tied the energy crisis to a larger fundamental lack of confidence from Americans in their government. Despite Rafshoon’s initial hesitations about the speech, the American people responded very positively to the President’s words. Four days after the speech, Rafshoon reported that “the arresting response to [Carter’s] speech has revealed a deep, wide reservoir of enthusiasm for conservation.” The next day, the White House received 1,221 phone calls. The press office reported that 86 percent expressed positive feelings about the speech. The opportunity to change public opinion presented itself. The administration now needed to follow through.

Carter’s success in directly addressing the American people paved the way for a direct outreach program by the President. In the wake of Carter’s speech, the administration recognized that in the coming weeks it was “crucial that [they] take advantage of opportunities to get our message out about the energy crisis.” To do this, Carter decided to conduct interviews with a variety of regional newspapers and participate in a call-in show on NPR. Despite these outreach efforts, the issue continued to plague Carter into the 1980 election season.

Congress continued to debate EMPA well into the election cycle. It remained a “must pass” piece of legislation. Therefore, Carter and his team continued to emphasize the importance of the bill to the public, despite the fact that the public did not seem to care. Americans ranked oil dependency as only the third most important issue in the election against Reagan (behind domestic spending and military strength). In fact, only four percent of voters identified “energy” as the nation’s most pressing issue. Regardless, the administration remained inflexible. They touted a variety of energy accomplishments to include the creation of the Department of Energy, a gradual decontrol of natural gas, and the proposed EMPA. By insisting on continually talking about energy, Carter only reminded the American public that little had changed.

Reagan did not need to campaign on energy issues because the incumbent president already made the case for him. Carter happily continued to remind the American public through his outreach program that, despite his best efforts, he could not implement what he believed to be the solution to one of the nation’s problems. The defeat of EMPA in the House signaled the ultimate failure of Carter’s proposal midway through the election. He could no longer use energy as an accomplishment against Reagan’s attacks on the Iranian hostage crisis and defense spending. Carter not only failed politically, but his public outreach program reminded the public about his failure. He went on to lose the 1980 election handily.

LESSONS LEARNED
A comparison of two of President Carter’s two major public outreach programs reveals two very different outcomes. Three major conditions existed which created success for the Panama Canal Treaties but failure during the energy crisis. First, the Panama Canal Treaties were a proactive policy by Carter. No specific event forced the treaties into the policy discussion. This allowed Carter and his team to shape the narrative. The majority of the American public had no previous experience with the Panama Canal. Therefore, the American public was more receptive to the facts presented by Carter. On the other hand, specific events that Carter could not control caused the shock in the energy market. As a result, most Americans had some previous experience with the energy crisis, which impacted the way that they received the information presented by Carter. Their negative experiences with a pre-existing condition outweighed any new information that Carter brought to the table.

Second was the direct nature of the Panama Canal Treaties against the complexity of the energy crisis. Carter framed the treaties as straightforward and that two relatively simple treaties would solve the United States’ potential problems in Panama. On the other hand, the word “crisis” made the energy problem seem far more complex. The multiple portions of EMPA and other programs, like ridesharing, made the nation recognize that no panacea existed to solve the nation’s energy woes. As a result, it became harder for the public to throw its support behind Carter and his proposals. Politicians understand that complex policies do not sell well; Carter failed to accept this rule.

Finally, and most importantly, public outreach was more successful with the Panama Canal Treaties because it was a foreign policy issue with very little direct impact on individual Americans. Public disapproval for the treaties most commonly referenced national pride. Disapproval for energy proposals referenced the standard of living for Americans. The closer to home an issue is, the tougher it is to persuade the public that it is necessary to undergo a fundamental change. Carter’s reorganization of the Georgia state government proved an exception because, although a domestic issue, the
reforms did not threaten to change the way his constituents carried out their lives. Carter faced an uphill battle on his energy policies from the beginning because he threatened to change the lives of Americans at home fundamentally. Regardless of the persuasion techniques used, few Americans would be willing to change the way they lived.

President Jimmy Carter’s belief in transparency and his attempt to restore faith in the federal government following the Watergate scandal defined his presidency from its inception in 1976 until he left office in 1981. Carter’s emphasis on transparency transcended simply satisfying the electorate at the time. His faith and moral code made him firmly believe that his role as a political executive was similar to a pastor. As governor or president, Carter held to his firmly held convictions on how to solve specific problems. It was then his responsibility to reach out to his constituents and guide them to the same conclusion that he already reached. As a result, he created a strong polling and public outreach apparatus. This system helped him achieve some of his greatest achievements as a public official. However, he learned the hard way the limits of public outreach, and his belief that his position was akin to a preacher cost him his political career. Carter’s public outreach strategy had the noblest of intentions. Unfortunately for him, however, noble intentions do not always translate to political success in Washington.

Endnotes

[13] Ibid., 112.
[18] Ibid., 163.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 166.
[24] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Letter, Jimmy Carter to Staff, January 14, 1978, Office of Public Liaison, Panama Canal Selected Documents 12/77-1/78, Box 32, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library (hereafter JCPL).
[37] Polling Data, Tom Ottenad, Office of Communications,
Panama Canal [2], Box 5, JCPL.

[38] Personal Notes, George D. Moffett Collection, Polling Data, Box 9, JCPL.

[39] Letter, Mark J. DiCamillo to George D. Moffett, November 24, 1981, George D. Moffett Collection, Polls, Box 9, JCPL.

[40] Polling Data, “Carter Thesis on Canal Treaties Basically Right: Better informed more likely to favor ratification,” George D. Moffett Collection, Polling Data, Box 9, JCPL.

[41] Letter, Jimmy Carter to Staff, January 14, 1978, JCPL.

[42] Memorandum, William D. Blair Jr. to Ambassadors Bunker, Linowitz, Todman, and Douglas Bennett, October 27, 1977, Office of Communications, Panama Canal-Mail, Box 5, JCPL.


[44] Speech Outline, January 25, 1978, Speechwriters-Subject File, Panama Canal, 1/12/78-8/17/78, Box 19, JCPL.

[45] TV Address, Jimmy Carter, February 1, 1978, Office of Communications, Panama Canal Treaties—Fireside Chat 2/1/78, Box 29, JCPL.

[46] Television Advertisement Script, Office of Communications, Panama Canal [1], Box 5, JCPL.

[47] Opening Remarks, Jack Watson, August 30, 1977, Office of Public Liaison, Panama Canal Treaties Briefing Book, 11/77, Box 7, JCPL.

[48] Opening Remarks, Jane Wales, November 10, 1977, Office of Public Liaison, Panama Canal Treaties Briefing Book, 11/77, Box 7, JCPL.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Schedule of Events, October 21, 1977, Office of Public Liaison, Panama Canal Publication 12/77-1/78, Box 32, JCPL.

[51] Letter, Inez W. Tinsley to Jimmy Carter, November 11, 1977, Office of Public Liaison, Panama Canal Treaties Briefing Session, Responses to, 10/77-3/78, Box 8, JCPL.

[52] Letter, Edith Stanley to Jimmy Carter, November 22, 1977, Office of Public Liaison, Panama Canal Treaties Briefing Session, Responses to, 10/77-3/78, Box 8, JCPL.

[53] Letter, Sister Elizabeth Barrett to Jimmy Carter, Thanksgiving, 1977, Office of Public Liaison, Panama Canal Treaties Briefing Session, Responses to, 10/77-3/78, Box 8, JCPL.

[54] Personal Notes, George D. Moffett Collection, Polls, Box 9, JCPL.

[55] Letter, Louis Harris to The Chicago Tribune, April 3, 1978, Office of Communications, Panama Canal [1], Box 5, JCPL.


[57] Memorandum, Jerry Rafshoon to Jimmy Carter, May 15, 1979, Office of Communications, Memoranda from Jerry Rafshoon—March, April, & May 1979, Box 26, JCPL.


[65] Attendee List, June 1, 1979, Press Office-Granum, Energy 4/20/77-6/29/79, Box 83, JCPL.

[66] Meeting Schedule, August 1, 1979, Anne Wexler Public Outreach, Energy Responses, Box 19, JCPL.


[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Press Release, Consumer Federation of America, June 1, 1979, Press Office-Granum, Energy 4/20/77-6/29/79, Box 83, JCPL.


[72] Memorandum, Jerry Rafshoon, July 20, 1979, Office of Communications, Memoranda from Rafshoon—June, July, & August 1979, Box 28, JCPL.

[73] Briefing Material, March 27, 1980, Anne Wexler Public Outreach, Energy Outreach, Energy Briefings (Clipping), Box 18, JCPL.

[74] Memorandum, Jerry Rafshoon, March 21, 1979, Office of Communications, Memoranda from Rafshoon—March, April, & May 1979, Box 28, JCPL.


[76] Ibid.

[77] Memorandum, Jerry Rafshoon and Gordon Stewart to Jimmy Carter, July 19, 1979, Office of Communications, Memoranda from Rafshoon—June, July, & August 1979, Box 28, JCPL.


[79] Memorandum, Jerry Rafshoon to Jimmy Carter, August 2, 1979, Office of Communications, Memoranda from Rafshoon—June, July, & August 1979, Box 28, JCPL.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Anne Wexler Public Outreach, Campaign 1980 Accomplishments in States, Box 6, JCPL.


[83] Anne Wexler Public Outreach, Campaign 1980 Administration Accomplishment, Box 6, JCPL.