The modern American President has had a role as “legislator-in-chief” thrust upon him. The primary measure of the successfulness of a President’s tenure in office has become his ability to guide major legislation through Congress. Despite this expectation, the President has limited tools to lead Congress in pursuing his legislative agenda. One of the primary tools the President can possess is having public opinion on his side. Once a President’s proposed legislation gains a large popular following, it is possible for a President to turn this into influence with Congress, and thus to exercise leadership on the legislative agenda.

An interesting case study of a President attempting to lead Congress is that of President Clinton’s attempts at health care reform. The President would first introduce his Health Security Act of 1993 in a September 1993 televised address to a joint session of Congress. He would pursue an approach of “going public” in order to gain the support of the American people and Congressional leadership on the topic. President Clinton would make 27 major speeches in all dealing with the subject of the Health Security Act from August of 1993 until June of 1994. In these speeches the President primarily stressed the need to reform health care due to the increasing cost of health care in America, followed by the universal access provisions and overall affordability of his plan. While universal access was seen as an important part of the Act by the American public, the President’s other two main points of emphasis were not seen as important parts, suggesting a disconnect between the President’s and public’s perceptions of the plan. Additionally, a confusing mix of metaphors and inconsistencies within his speeches would lead the American public to become confused with Clinton’s message.

Analyzing the effectiveness of Clinton’s strategy to “go public” in an attempt to lead Congress on health care reform, three questions must be asked: (1) did the strategy increase public perception that health care reform was an important issue? (2) was he able to convince more Americans that his plan was the correct way forward? and (3) was he able to increase the public’s understanding of his plan? The answer to all three of these questions was no. From January of 1994 to June of the same year, the number of Americans who viewed health care reform as the most important issue facing America decreased from 31% to 21%. Over the same time period, the margin of support for Clinton’s plan would drop from 59% to 40%. Finally, from October of 1993 until April of 1994 there would be only a 7% increase in the number of Americans that stated they understood the President’s plan.

In order for a President to successfully transform a “going public” strategy into Congressional leadership, the President must do an almost flawless job of manufacturing a mandate. President Clinton failed to do this in the attempts to pass the Health Reform Act of 1993. Through a combination of The confused public message and the disconnect between Clinton’s view of the Act and the American public’s view of the Act combined to undermine the President’s bid to achieve broad public support for this legislative agenda. Without this support it is not possible for a President to seize Congressional leadership.