

George W. Bush and Retrospective Rhetoric:
Reframing the Bully Pulpit

Ken Collier, Stephen F. Austin State University
Michael J. Towle, Mount Saint Mary's University

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Introduction

Examinations of the rhetorical presidency have grown dramatically in the past two decades. Much of the focus in the scholarly literature has been on the role that presidential speaking has had on efforts to move the public on issues of public policy. Of course, presidents speak for many different reasons, some of which may not be clear to their audiences. While they might be trying to sway the public on their policy priorities, they could also be trying to do such things as influence elites, raise the prominence of certain issues, build their own legacies, etc.

The question of what presidents are doing when they speak is an essential one. Richard Neustadt's argument that the key to presidential success is the ability to persuade other political actors to do what the president wants (Neustadt 1990) has had a profound impact on the field of presidency studies since its first publication in 1960. However, it is not clear that the use of presidential rhetoric adds much to presidential power. Recent scholarship by George Edwards (2003, 2009) and others suggests that presidential speech has little impact on public opinion about their proposed policies. It is possible – perhaps even likely – that presidents themselves do not know this. But even if they did, they might still calculate that it is worth their efforts to continue to speak to the public for other reasons.

A classic work in the field of congressional studies might offer insight into presidential speech. Richard Fenno, in his 1978 work *Home Style: House Members in their Districts*, observed that members of Congress go back to their constituents and “*explain* what they have done while they have been away from home. By explaining we mean to include the *description*, the *interpretation*, and the *justification* of their behavior” (p. 136, emphasis in original). Indeed, Fenno suggests that members are constrained in their policy votes and positions by what they think they can explain back home. He suggests that political scientists should spend “a little more of our time *explaining explanations*” (141, emphasis in original).

We believe that a fruitful way to understand the motivations for presidential rhetoric is to look at presidential attempts to explain their actions. Just as with members of Congress, it seems likely that presidents are constrained in what they do by their ability to explain their actions. If so, we should find that presidential speech is primarily about explaining the policies and positions that the administration has already taken, rather than offering arguments for future directions.

In short, this paper will present one possible reason why presidents speak; namely, that they are trying to influence the public's retrospective perceptions of administration actions. There is, of course, an extensive literature supporting the conclusion that Americans cast their votes based on their experiences with existing government policies (especially pertaining to evaluations of the economy) rather than new policy proposals. If presidential elections are based on retrospective voting behavior, one can assume that the public continues to evaluate presidents throughout their tenure based on its own retrospective analysis. If so, we would expect presidential rhetoric to attempt to prime the public to look favorably on the administration's actions.

Of course, new presidents do not have much of a record to defend. In this paper, we hypothesize and test the argument that the White House shifts from *prospective rhetoric* (messages designed to win approval of policy change) to *retrospective rhetoric* (messages designed to support positive evaluation of the administration's previous actions) for strategic reasons over the course of a presidency. If correct, this shift would help to explain why the utility of presidential persuasion may be underestimated by measures focused only on citizen responses to proposed policy change. We hypothesize that presidential speech is often more concerned with building prestige through the shaping of perceptions of current policy than with winning support for new initiatives.

Presidential Motivations for Speaking

Much of the most important literature on the presidency has involved presidents and public speaking. Samuel Kernell's Going Public (1997) argues that modern presidents frequently abandon direct bargaining and persuading with Congress, preferring instead to cajole the public to apply pressure to support administration legislative priorities; such an approach undermines compromise and results in policies that lack "negotiated consensus"(254). Similarly, Jeffrey Tulis' (1987) analysis of presidential history suggests that public presidential rhetoric about policy issues effectively redefined the presidency in the 20th century; among the negative effects has been an undermining of deliberation in the policy making process and a violation of the intent of the authors of the Constitution. In 1984 Roderick Hart (*Verbal Style and the Presidency*) examined where and when presidents speak, in order to explain the pre-eminence of presidential speech in our political system. In their book, *Politicians Don't Pander* (2000), Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro report that politicians have increasingly engaged in a strategy of simulating responsiveness to public opinion through a strategy labeled "crafted speech."

Recently, the trend in the literature has been to turn against the idea that presidents can influence the public through rhetoric. George Edwards (2003) questioned the extent to which presidential speaking has any effect on public opinion. Through a careful examination of various historical efforts to persuade the public, Edwards suggests that presidents have little ability to sway public opinion. Even presidents who seem to lead public opinion are actually acting as "facilitators" of opinions that have already gained prominence. Edwards further notes that presidents face enormous obstacles in focusing the public's attention on an issue agenda or framing the debate about an issue, in part because of competing messages from other sources. And even if they do manage to get the public to listen, people are very unlikely to change their minds. Edwards asks, "Presidents, then, find it very difficult to move the public. Usually they fail. If this is the case, why do they keep trying?" (238). In answering this question, Edwards observes that president may have other goals when bringing up

policies to the public, such as to activate their existing support bases or influencing other political actors (244-245).

Druckman and Holmes (2004) argue that presidents can increase their public approval by “priming” the public; that is, by altering the criteria that the public uses to evaluate the president. Waterman, Wright, and St. Clair offer another explanation. In *The-Image-is-Everything-Presidency* (1999), they argue that the very high levels of (sometimes contradictory) expectations on presidents in the modern era have led to a situation where contemporary presidents are motivated to elevate style over substance. Most importantly for our purposes, they observe that while the number of speeches given by presidents went up significantly between 1945 and 1985, the amount of substance in these communications has gone down. Presidents have increased such things as the number of speeches that they give in political or ceremonial settings, while keeping the number of major speeches relatively constant.

Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha (2006) has argued that presidents use speeches to maintain the public support that they already have and to signal their preferences to the policy elites in the Congress and bureaucracy, who are much more closely tuned into presidential rhetoric than the general public. There are certainly times when a president intends to send a message over the heads of the public. According to Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman, Nixon told his speechwriters in 1970 that he wanted a speech that would move the nation, including the Supreme Court: “We must hit it effectively in a way that will affect the Court” (1990, 31).

A few scholars have examined the extent to which presidents make appeals to the public for purposes of “pandering” or gaining short term political gain. Canes-Wrone (2005) argues that presidents seldom engage in such activity, and instead use their public presentations as chances to favorably alter the policy-making environment. Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) are somewhat dismissive of the term “pandering”, and lament the lack of political responsiveness to the public. They argue instead

that politicians increasingly have engaged in a strategy of simulating responsiveness to public opinion through a strategy labeled “crafted speech.”

Roderick P. Hart (2002) has attempted to summarize, into six categories, scholarly explanations for why presidents speak in the manner that they do. He suggests that the scholarly record has focused on 1) “biographical forces” (that presidents speak from their own life experience), 2) “philosophical forces” (that presidents attempt to speak from their underlying political assumptions), 3) “cultural forces” (that presidents speak according to the demands of the audiences they address), 4) “institutional forces” (that the political system constrains the way that presidents can speak), 5) “temporal forces” (that presidents speak in response to the times they find themselves in), and 6) “mediated forces” (that modern presidents speak according to the demands of television). Hart is critical of presidency studies for being too atheoretical, and calls for an improved research agenda “about presidential discourse” (707).

Content Analysis and Presidency Studies

Hart has other work that is relevant to this study as well. Hart has produced many studies that attempt to get a further understanding of the presidency and the American polity through the use of content analysis. In *Verbal Style and the Presidency: A Computer-Based Analysis* (1984), Hart uses a computer program (DICTION) to analyze speeches by presidents from Truman to Reagan. In addition to many general conclusions and observations, Hart also suggests specific rhetorical styles for each of the presidents examined. Similarly, in *Campaign Talk: Why Elections are Good for Us* (2000), Hart uses the same program to analyze presidential campaign speeches (as well as the words of citizens and the media) during presidential campaigns between 1948 and 1996; he concludes that the interchange of ideas and communication has favorable aspects for American democracy.

Of course, content analysis of presidential speeches has frequently been used as a tool to ascertain various aspects of the role of the American presidency. For example, it has been used to analyze: presidential statements about the economy to demonstrate that optimistic presidential speech about the economy has a positive effect on economic growth and reduction of unemployment (Wood, Owen, and Durham 2005); State of the Union addresses to suggest that presidents have an impact on the issues that the public deems important (Cohen 1995); inaugural addresses and annual messages to Congress to generate five areas where changes in presidential rhetoric in the twentieth century reflected a fundamental change in the presidency (Lim 2002); inaugural addresses to ascertain the existence and role of a civil religion in America (Toolin 1983); speeches of presidents Hoover through Eisenhower to suggest that post New Deal conservatives publicly accepted many of the basic tenets of the New Deal philosophy (Prothro 1956).

In addition, content analysis has also been used to analyze various aspects of presidential campaigns, such as: Nixon's 1972 campaign speeches to show how his campaign used polls to prime the public on his issue agenda and public image (Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004); the 1960 presidential debates to show that they promoted candidate clarity and the use of evidence to defend positions (Ellsworth 1965); candidate comments and journalist questions in the 1960 and 1976 presidential debates to suggest that the policy concerns of candidates were different than those of journalists and the public (as revealed in public opinion polls) (Jackson-Beeck and Meadow 1979); candidate speeches to predict the "volume" and "tone" of rhetoric about the federal budget (Burden and Sanberg 2003); acceptance speeches from 1900 to 1984 to show that the more pessimistic candidates tend to lose (Zullow and Seligman 1990).

Theory

"It's easier to ask forgiveness than it is to get permission"
Grace Hopper

We build upon the work of the scholarship of presidential rhetoric by taking a new look at how presidents frame their rhetoric. In particular, we begin our work from the question of why the study of presidential performance has been focused almost exclusively on the prospective impact of presidential rhetoric, while the study of presidential elections is focused on retrospective evaluations.

While Kernell, Edwards and others have looked to see how often presidents get what they ask for in public appeals, we want to include looking at how presidents build approval for previous administration actions. There are three reasons why it is important for presidents to use speech to build approval for what the administration has already done.

First, with a strongly polarized Congress, there are often few votes to be won on major issues. Seeking the support of undecided members of Congress is less valuable when there are fewer members undecided. Congressional redistricting has built increasingly partisan districts that seldom produce undecided members of Congress. Redistricting has also produced electorally secure members who have little to fear from a president.

Second, with citizens and/or the media polarized, there is less of an audience for presidential messages. It seems increasingly clear that presidents may be pursuing an administrative strategy of using executive orders, executive agreements, signing statements, and other forms of unilateral policy making. George W. Bush, viewing himself as the decider, illustrates the principle of deciding first and explaining later.

Third, administration policies that are viewed by voters as successful will build presidential prestige/popularity that presidents might use to influence Congress. As Cohen and Collier (1999) point out, Richard Neustadt's original study of presidential influence described two distinct strategies for what would eventually be labeled going public. "Merchandizing" involves presidents advocating for specific

policies (1990, 83). This approach is the model of presidential influence traditionally hypothesized in the literature. It is appealing because it most closely resembles our expectations of the “bully pulpit,” and the strategy was vividly displayed by presidents like Reagan and Clinton.

In fact, Neustadt was dismissive of merchandizing because it “only has its uses while events remain incalculable.” For Neustadt, the persuasive impact of the bully pulpit is no match for the results of the real world: “Salesmanship cannot compete with life. Merchandizing is no match for history.” (1990, 83)

In contrast, *prestige* involves presidents building their popularity in hopes that a popular president will be harder for members of Congress to ignore. Neustadt described prestige as an important component of presidential persuasion because members of the Washington community depended on outsiders and “dependent men must take account of popular reaction to their actions” (1990, 73). While merchandizing involves inherently prospective appeals to citizens, prestige can involve arguments for policies the administration is proposing or already has in place.

The impact of framing actions already taken by a president goes beyond short term approval, and the president’s words reach beyond current public opinion to form a first draft of history. Probably the most important and most often cited example of the power of presidential speech to shape history is Lincoln’s Gettysburg address. Gary Wills characterizes the Gettysburg address as remaking America, and asserts that the speech is one of the most compelling demonstrations of the power of words. Speechwriters sometimes talk about “touching the granite” or “touching the marble” as they describe their goal of writing words that will find themselves forever carved into a monument. According to speechwriter Robert Sherwood, Franklin Roosevelt knew “once he had the microphone before him, [that] he was speaking for the eternal record—words were, as Sandburg said, ‘throwing long shadows’” (219).

Data and Methods

We used the presidency of George W. Bush as a case study in our analysis. The Bush administration is a good case to test the hypothesis. Bush's eight years in office provide a complete time series that will allow us to see if rhetoric changes over time in office. Also, the Bush administration faced challenges on both domestic and foreign policy.

To determine what President Bush was doing when he was speaking, we examined the seven State of the Union addresses that he gave over the eight years of his presidency.¹ Each of these speeches was coded on a sentence-by-sentence basis. The first determination made for each sentence was about whom the president was speaking for (or attributing views to). Four specific categories were coded: 1) the president was speaking for himself or his administration; 2) the president was attributing views to opponents or other "wrong-thinking" people; 3) the president was attributing views to the American people or other "right-thinking" people; 4) the president was relying on a historical reference to make a point.

Next, for each sentence we determined whether the president was addressing a specific action by the administration. If so, we made a determination about whether he was speaking about a proposed plan, or an administration policy that had already been put in place. If either of these situations applied, we made a determination about verb tense: was the president speaking in the past, present, or future tense?

Finally, for each of these action lines, we coded whether the president was discussing foreign policy or domestic policy. Occasionally, this exercise was not as easy as it might seem. For example, is

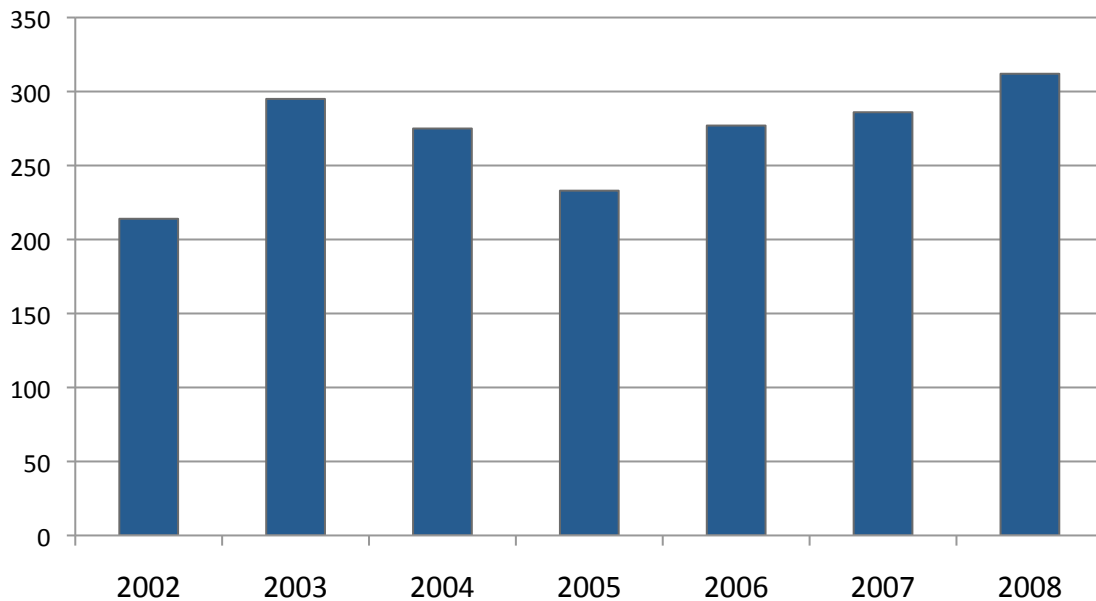
¹ Since Ronald Reagan's presidency, new presidents have delivered an address to Congress soon after being inaugurated, but these are not State of the Union addresses. President Bush delivered an "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Administration Goals" on February 27, 2001. For accuracy, and to maintain consistency in comparisons, we have not included that address in this analysis, though a reference to it will be made in a subsequent footnote.

discussion of homeland security a matter of domestic or foreign policy? We decided that the issue being discussed was generally external threats to the United States, and therefore coded such discussions as foreign policy. Defense policy was coded as foreign policy, though veterans' benefits were coded as domestic. Immigration, similarly, was coded as foreign policy. On other topics, if there was confusion, we coded according to whether there was a specific mention of issues outside of the United States; for example, if President Bush, while listing reasons for proposing the development of a hydrogen-based automobile, included that it would keep America competitive overseas, then we coded that sentence as foreign policy. Other similar sentences without that mention were coded as domestic policy.

Results

One advantage of using only State of the Union addresses is that their lengths are relatively consistent. Still, there is some variation. While Bush's addresses averaged 270 sentences, they ranged from the relatively brief 2002 address (214 sentences) to his 2008 address, weighing in at 312 sentences. As chart 1 illustrates, while there is no clear linear trend, the overall length of Bush's annual address seems to grow over the term. This may result from the growing bureaucratization surrounding the White House speechwriting process as more and more institutional interests found their way into the editing process, especially after Michael Gerson, one of the presidency's most influential speechwriters, left the Bush speechwriting team. While Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha's focus on speechwriting as a signal to the bureaucracy and Congress (2006) may not be accepted by some scholars as a primary motive for presidential speech, there is always a battle to have agencies' priorities placed into the State of the Union address each year. As Aram Bakshian, a speechwriter who served in three administrations, points out, everyone wants to get into this speech: "Every little crappy agency wants their stuff, their agenda, included" (2002). Over time, the ability of the speechwriting staff to resist sentences pressed by bureaucratic interests may be worn down.

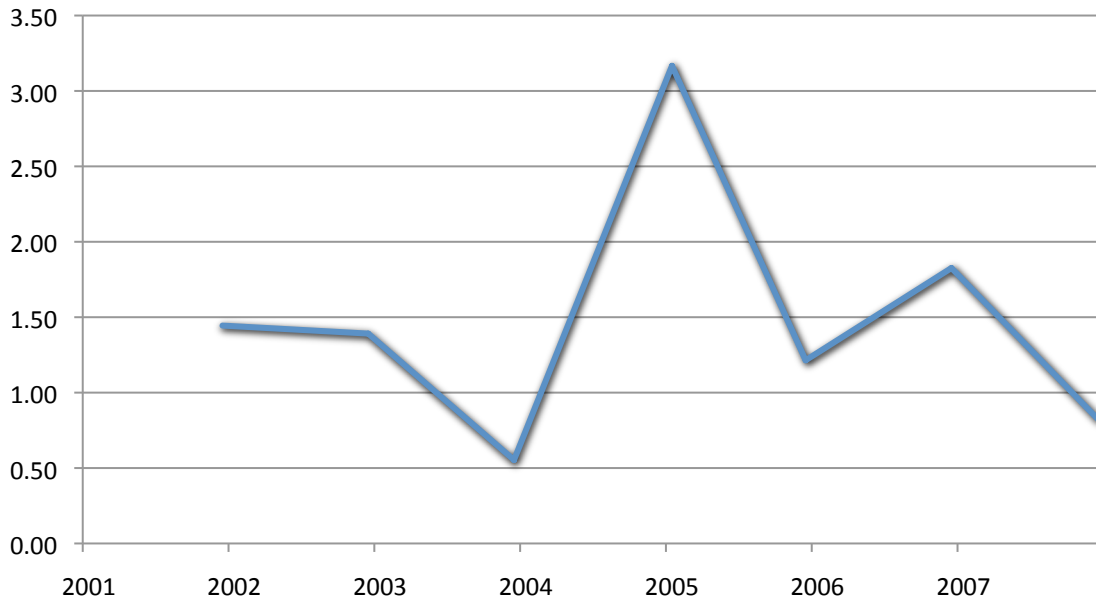
**Figure 1:
Length of George W. Bush's
State of the Union Addresses in Sentences**



To address the question of whether President Bush framed his rhetoric prospectively or retrospectively, we can analyze the data in several different ways. One is to look at the aggregate data for how often the President talked about policy proposals versus how often he talked about administration policies already in place. This data is summarized in Figure 2. While the slope of the line in Figure 2 appears relatively flat, there is a general downward slope in each of the two terms of his administration, most notably in the second term after the major spike in policy statements in 2005.² Such a result is consistent with our expectation that presidents, as their terms advance, would spend more time defending policies in place than making new proposals.

² Since Ronald Reagan's presidency, new presidents have delivered an address to Congress soon after being inaugurated, but these are not State of the Union addresses. President Bush delivered an "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Administration Goals" on February 27, 2001. For accuracy, and to maintain consistency in comparisons, we have not included that address in this analysis, though a reference to it will be made in a subsequent footnote.

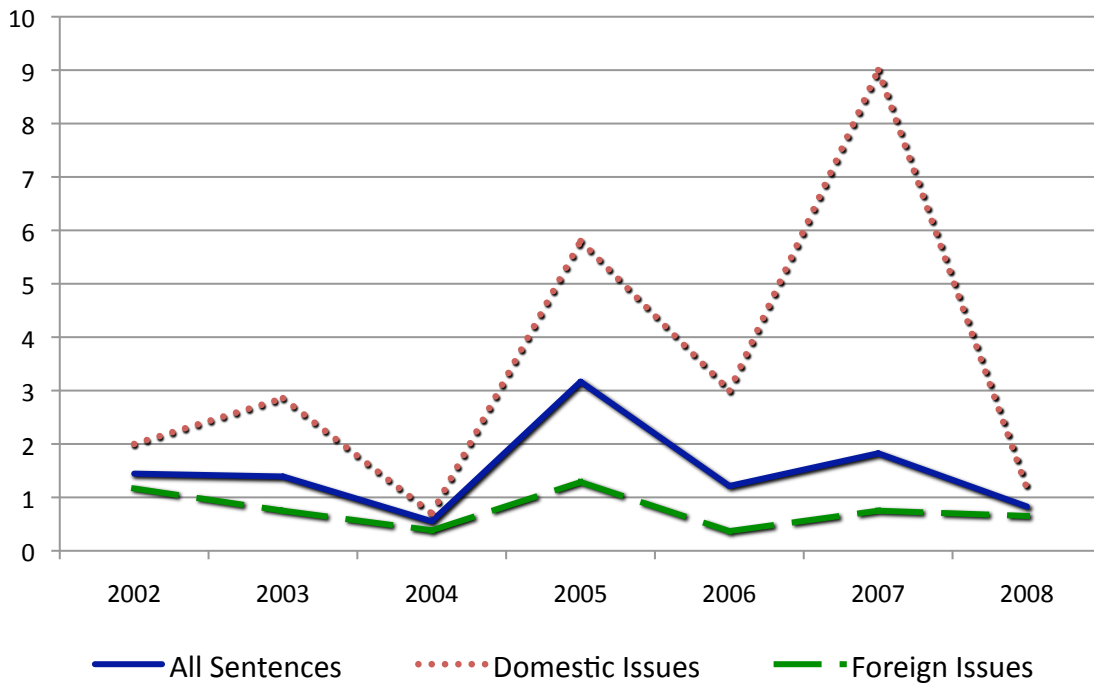
Figure 2:
Ratio of proposal statements to policy statements
State of the Union Addresses



To determine whether retrospective or prospective speech might vary by policy type, we further broke down the aggregate data according to whether the president was speaking about domestic or foreign policy. Figure 3 summarizes the result.

As the figure shows, there is much more variation in the mentions of policy proposals on domestic issues. This is especially interesting in that there is a jump in the discussion of domestic proposals in State of the Union messages after each election, most notably in the election after the Republicans lost control of the Congress. Further, there are jumps following both presidential and “off-year” elections, suggesting that presidents see the spring after each election as the most fertile opportunity to launch policies even without a specific presidential mandate.

Figure 3: Ratio of references to proposals to current policy

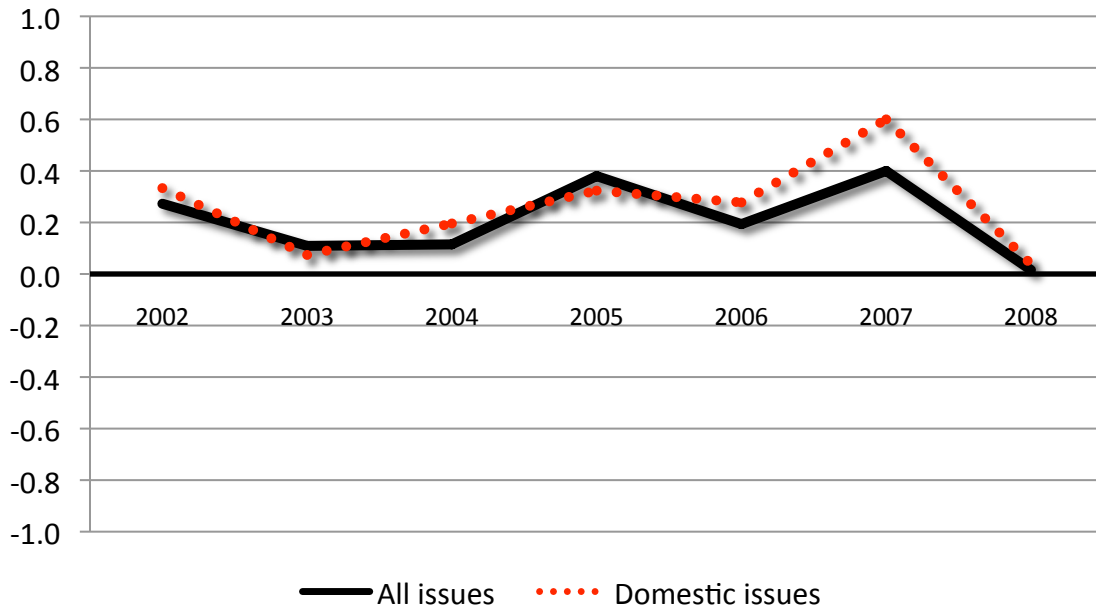


The general upward trend in domestic policy proposals observed here runs counter to our expectation of an increase in retrospective talk over a president's years in office, though it is noteworthy that the years with the lowest ratio of proposals to current policy are 2004, when the President was facing reelection, and 2008, when he was perhaps concerned with either the party of his successor or his own legacy.

Another way of looking at the framing of presidential rhetoric in these speeches is to compare the tense of the verbs in sentences describing administration actions or proposals. By coding these sentences ranging from past tense (coded -1) future tense (coded 1), with present tense in between, we can construct an intuitive measure that can be averaged. These averages, presented in Figure 4 below, do not show any clear trend.

**Figure 4:
Tense of verb**

-1 = past, 0 = present, 1 = future



Conclusion

This project is part of a multi-administration examination of retrospective and prospective speech. We are extending our coding efforts to other presidential speeches beyond State of the Union addresses. Our focus here on these speeches has allowed us to complete a preliminary study of one administration dealing with a similar audience, for similar purposes, at seven points in time. A complete data set that included other speeches might prove more revealing. Similarly, the idiosyncrasies of the Bush presidency, dominated as it was by issues stemming from both the events of September 11, 2001 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, may be skewing the results shown here.

There are a few trends in the data reported here that may be worthy of further research. The Bush data suggests a tendency to increase policy proposals in years after elections, and there is a noticeable lack of new policy proposals in the last year of each of Bush's terms. In domestic policy, there may be an increased tendency over time to make policy proposals, a trend that is not suggested

by the data for foreign policy comments. But overall, the results here are somewhat inconclusive and suggest the need for further study.

The lack of a clear trend is itself interesting given the changes we would expect over time. We would expect an administration to have more past activity to talk about as the president's tenure wears on and there are fewer potential future actions to hope for. Of course, the political situation that President Bush found himself in during his second term could be affecting the results here. Evidence that Bush was not talking more about earlier administration initiatives may reveal the political reality that the Bush administration was facing. Perhaps Bush may have avoided mentions of his political legacy as his unpopularity increased because few citizens found his accomplishments compelling.

Whatever the case, the relative lack of retrospective language found here may reflect another political reality. Perhaps presidents feel compelled to talk about the future for broader reasons. Citizens expect presidents to lead, and that is seldom done by talking about the past. No matter how much presidents may have accomplished, the expectations of leadership may compel them to stay focused on the future. While we initially expected presidents to build prestige and credibility by talking about past accomplishments, citizens may be too restless to allow presidents to become complacent with their accomplishments.

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