

Prospective versus Retrospective Rhetoric:
Temporal Framing in the Reagan, Clinton, and Bush Administrations

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Presidential scholars have devoted much of their efforts to understanding the “bully pulpit” as the premier venue for political leadership since Teddy Roosevelt coined the phrase a century ago. Examinations of presidential rhetoric have become even more prominent the last three decades with much of debate focusing on the ability of presidential rhetoric to move the public on policy issues.

Presidents speak for many different reasons, some of which may not be readily evident 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, or build their own prestige.

The question of why presidents speak is an essential one. Richard Neustadt’s argument that the key to presidential success is the ability to persuade other political actors (Neustadt 1990) has had a profound impact on the field of presidency studies since its first publication in 1960. However, it is no longer 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 presidents did see little evidence of movement on public opinion, they might well consider 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 behind presidential rhetoric is to look more specifically at presidential explanations. 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 involves explaining the policies and positions that the administration has already taken, rather than simply offering arguments for future directions.

This paper will focus on 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.

In this paper, we test the hypothesis that the White House shifts from *prospective rhetoric* (messages designed to win approval of policy change) to *retrospective rhetoric* (messages designed to support positive evaluations of the administration’s previous actions) for strategic reasons over the course of a presidency. If correct, this “temporal framing” 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 sometimes as concerned with building prestige through the shaping of perceptions of current policy as 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 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 process 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 finds 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).

Scholars have begun to struggle with what presidents are trying to accomplish by speaking. 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, in *The-Image-is-Everything-Presidency* (1999), 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. Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha (2006) contends 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. Brandon Rottinghaus (2010) suggests that presidents can have success in leading public opinion, but only *provisionally*; conditions need to be right for presidents to be successful.

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 analyses 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 created 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.

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 (Zullo 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 puzzle 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 has focused on retrospective evaluations. In the decades since V.O. Key's seminal work (1966) on retrospective voting, citizens' reliance on past performance in judging presidents has been the gospel among scholars of voting behavior. At the same time, presidency scholars have kept their presidents focused on painting pictures of policy proposals on the horizon.

While Kernell, Edwards and others have looked to see how often presidents get what they asked for in public appeals, we want to expand the view to include an examination of how presidents attempt to 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 highly polarized Congress, there are often few votes to be won on major issues. Winning the support of undecided members of Congress is less valuable when there are fewer members undecided. The role of campaign money, or attention to congressional redistricting, may be responsible for increasingly partisan districts that result in members who are closely tied to the party line and rarely undecided about how they should vote. Whatever the cause, Congress has become incrementally more filled with members who have little reason to respond to the wishes of a president.

Second, with the media environment and citizens becoming more polarized, the audience that is receptive to persuasion in presidential messages is small. 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 rather than risking defeat at the hands of a polarized and slow moving policy process. George W. Bush's portrayal of himself as the decider, illustrates the principle of acting first and explaining later.

Finally, administration policies that citizens view as successful can be used to build presidential prestige or popularity that might produce some leverage with Congress for future proposals. Richard Neustadt's original study of presidential influence actually 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, Neustadt’s concept of *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). Thus, 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 successfully 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. Presidential speechwriters sometimes talk about “touching the granite” or “touching the marble” as they describe their goal of writing words that will be forever carved into a monument or building. 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).

Presidents have both tactical and strategic reasons to spend time advocating for policies already in place and presidential policy action might be judged as only the first step in a president’s legacy. We can expect policy initiatives to be followed up by presidential speeches, memoirs, and exhibits in presidential libraries that proclaim the success of policy. Neustadt’s concepts of merchandizing and prestige suggest that we need to take a more nuanced look at presidential speech and the motives behind it. Thus, this study looks to more clearly differentiate two rhetorical strategies: prospective

speech that advocates policies the president is seeking and retrospective rhetoric that attempts to build approval for policies already in place. We hypothesize that presidents will shift from prospective to retrospective rhetoric over the course of their administration.

Data and Methods

The presidencies of Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush were selected as the initial case study in our analysis because eight years in office provide a complete time series that will allow us to see if rhetoric changes over time in office. Further, there seems to be little doubt that two of these presidents saw their speeches as an important part of their presidency. While George W. Bush may have often been somewhat reluctant to embrace the rhetorical presidency, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton did so enthusiastically and invested much of their personal energy into the construction of their rhetoric.

To better understand what these presidents' strategic intentions might have been when they were speaking, we examined State of the Union addresses given over the course of their administrations. State of the Union addresses were selected because they represented a consistent stream of presidential rhetoric intended to impact the policy debate nationally. Because the new president is not invited to give a "state of the union" address their first year in office, we included the first major address for Reagan ("Address to the Nation on the Economy," February 5, 1981), Clinton ("Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on Administration Goals," February 17, 1993), and George W. Bush ("Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Administration Goals," February 27, 2001) despite the fact that these addresses were not technically "State of the Union" addresses.

Each of these speeches was coded on a sentence-by-sentence basis. The 24 speeches selected for coding produced just over 6,964 sentences to be coded. The first determination made for each sentence was about the tense of the sentence: past, present or future. Since sentences often contained combined tenses or had atypical constructions (such as using the present tense to describe the past), we

relied on the coder's determination about whether the sentence was emphasizing the past, present, or future, rather than a strict grammatical definition of verb tense.

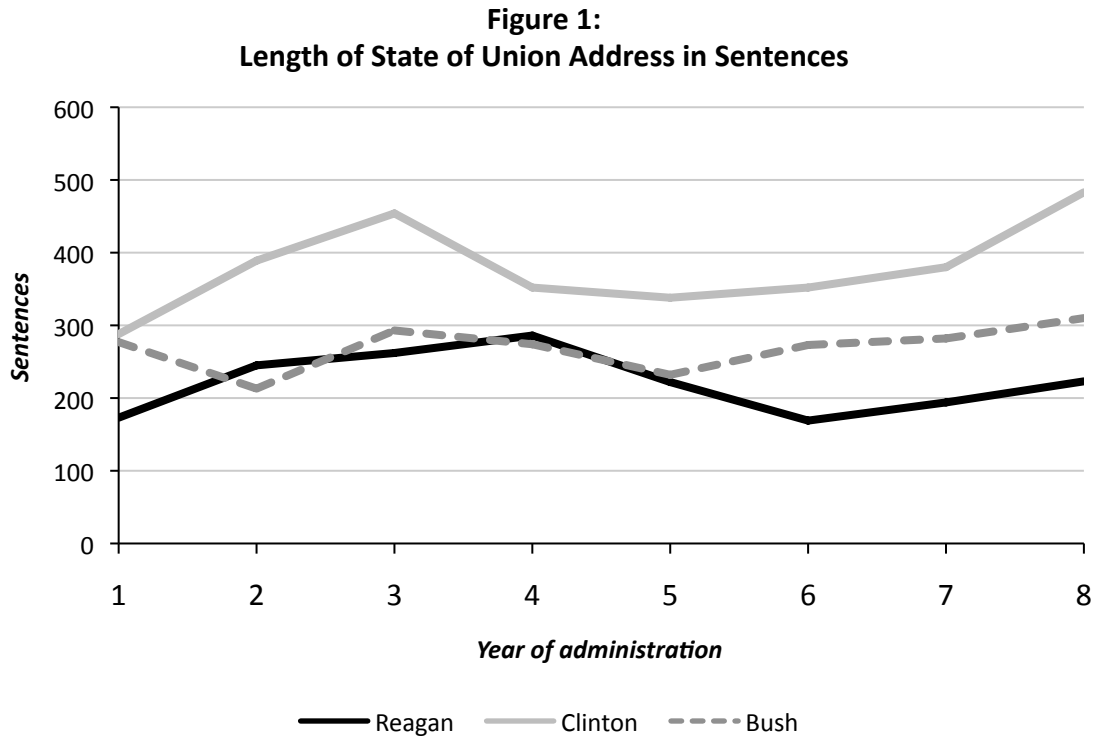
For each sentence coders determined whether the president was addressing a specific action by the administration. If so, they needed to also make a determination about whether he was speaking about a proposed plan, or an administration policy that had already been put in place. In either case, the reference to administration policy had to be specific. If either of these situations applied, the sentence was also coded for whether the president was discussing foreign policy or domestic policy.

Occasionally, coding was not as easy as it might seem. For example, would a discussion of "homeland security" (for a more contemporary example) be considered a matter of domestic or foreign policy? We decided that if the issue being discussed was external issues affecting the United States, it should be coded as foreign policy. Defense policy was coded as foreign policy, though veterans' benefits and trade issues described in terms of U.S. job creation were coded as domestic. 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 the president was listing various reasons for promoting science and math education and one was that it would keep America economically competitive, then we coded that sentence as foreign policy. Other similar sentences without that mention would be coded as domestic policy.

Results

The results of our analysis point to a range of issues. As Figure 1 illustrates, the number of sentences in the State of the Union addresses of the presidents studied here varies somewhat with Clinton making much more of his opportunities to address the Congress and nation. In fact, over his eight addresses Clinton delivered 3,035 sentences, over 40% more than George W. Bush (2,154 sentences) and 70% more than Reagan (1,774 sentences). While the finding that Bill Clinton talked at

great length may not shake the foundations of political science, it is worth noting that length of speech may not reflect perceived communication skills since Reagan chose shorter addresses than George W. Bush.

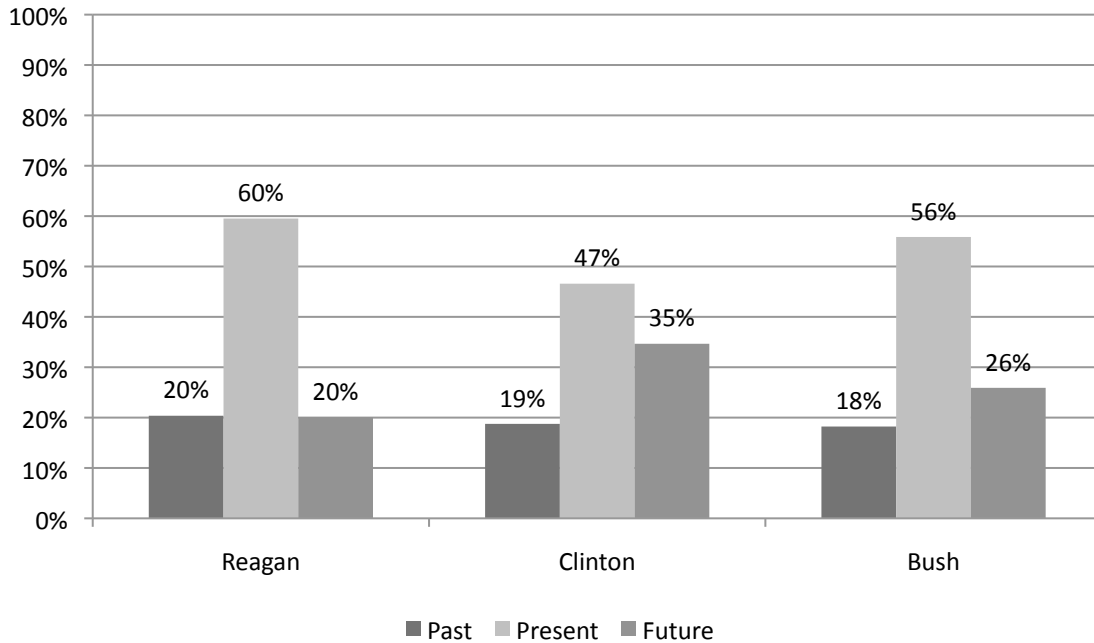


To address the question of how recent presidents have temporally framed their speeches, we looked at presidential language in several different ways. First, we examined sentence tense. Figure 2 summarizes the use of past, present, and future tense for all three presidents. It is not surprising that presidents use the present tense far more than past or future tense, since the implied mandate of the State of the Union address is informing the nation of where it stands at the moment.

While all three presidents generally focused on the present, they differed somewhat in their references to other times. When not using the present tense, President Reagan was evenly balanced between past tense (20% usage) and future tense (20%) while President Bush was slightly more inclined to use the future tense over the past tense (25% versus 18%). In contrast, President Clinton seemed to prefer looking ahead, using present tense less than Reagan and Bush and showing a clear preference of

nearly 2-to-1 for the future tense over the past tense (35% versus 19%) when not speaking in the present tense.

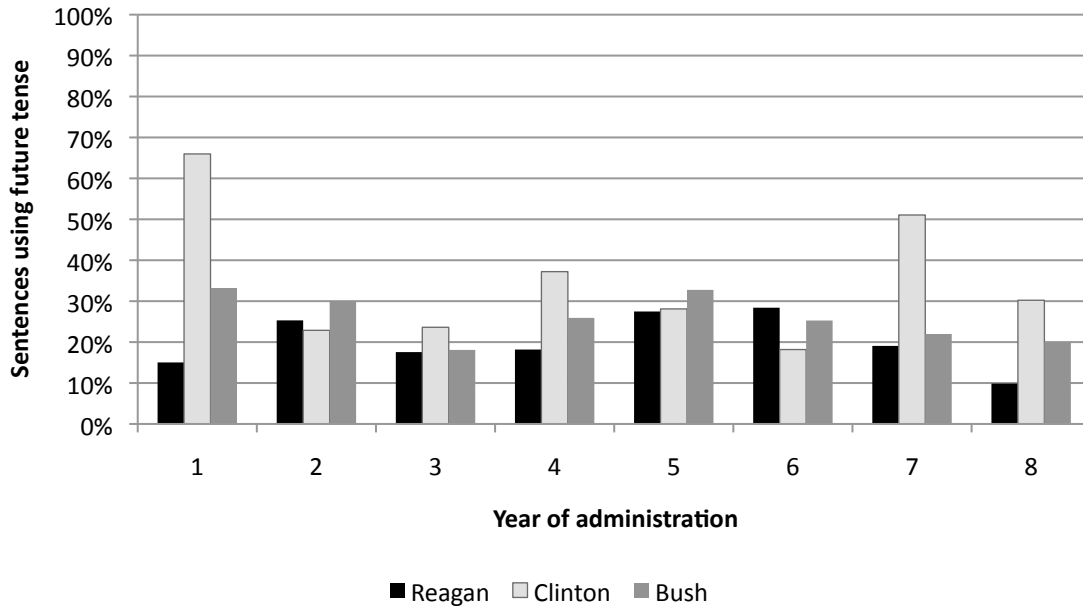
**Figure 2:
Sentence Tense of State of Union Addresses by President**



To look at the changing use of tense over time we focused on the use of the future tense, by year of administration. The results (Figure 3) do not reveal any strong patterns over time. For example, Clinton makes the most use of the future tense in his first address to Congress with almost two-thirds of his sentences focused on the future. However, while his first year had his heaviest use of future tense, he would focus on the future again in his seventh year in the presidency. While Clinton was the most inclined to use the future tense, Ronald Reagan was the least likely. These results probably tells us more about these presidents and their agenda than the presidency in general. Clinton's preference for the future tense may result from a liberal agenda that reflected a desire to implement new policies while Reagan's rhetorical leanings may reflect a conservative agenda focused on returning the country to older values. These differences could also be generational, with Reagan preferring to draw more on tradition and Clinton reflecting the baby boomers' relative lack of nostalgia. George W. Bush's use of the

future tense is harder to understand. He generally makes more use of future tense than Reagan. However, his focus may have been shifted by the on-going war on terror with few roots in historical conflicts.

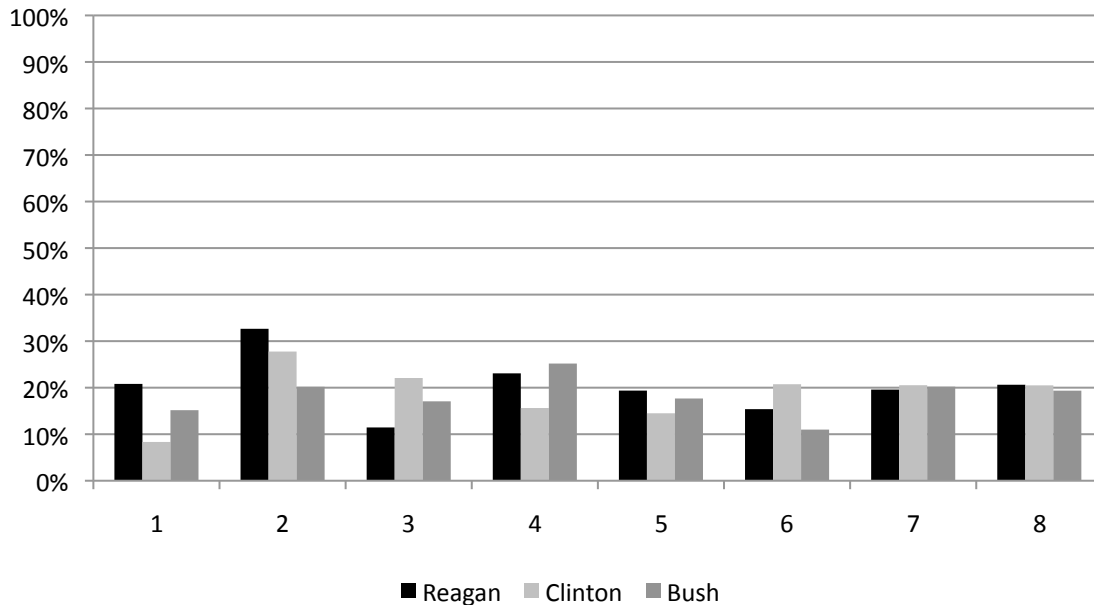
**Figure 3:
Use of future tense by president in State of the Union Addresses
over course of administration**



Similarly, Figure 4 shows the use of the past tense, by year of administration. There does appear to be a pattern in these action statements in first three years, with all three presidents using the past tense considerably more in the second year than the first, and less often again in the third year than the second. One possible reason is that there is not much policy already in place when they first speak to Congress, thus explaining the rise in the second year. However, this explanation does not account for the drop off in the third year, suggesting that political factors may be at play: the second year is a midterm election year, and the president may be reminding the public of his accomplishments to shore up support for his party. Beyond this modest observation, however, there are no other clearly

discernable trends in the use of the past tense in statements about policies in place or policy proposals.

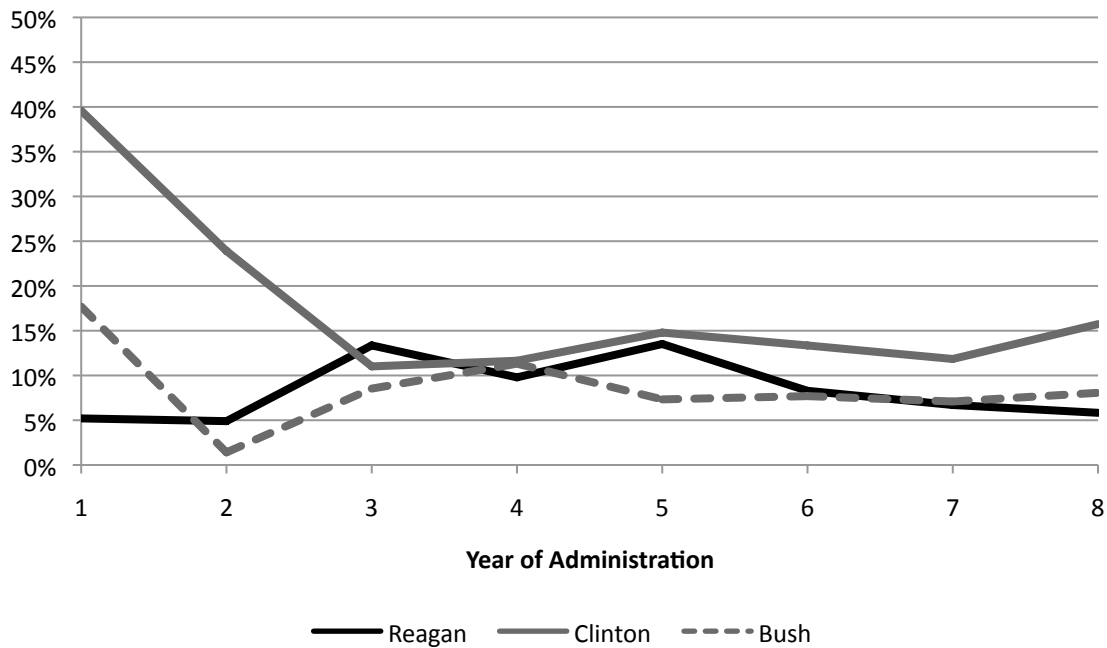
**Figure 4:
Use of past tense in State of the Union addresses
by president over course of administration**



Another way to examine temporal framing is to look at the overall percentage of sentences referencing current or proposed policies, independent of the tense used. Figure 5 summarizes the percentages of sentences in each State of the Union address that reference policy proposals, by year of presidency. Clinton is striking insofar as nearly 40% of the sentences in his first address are about policy proposals, a figure that plummets by the third year to approximately 12%. Bush has a similar decline (though perhaps not as dramatic) from approximately 18% in the first year to nearly 2% in the second year.¹ One would expect that new presidents would come in with ideas that they wanted to present to the public. Still, we cannot determine any clear pattern, as President Reagan had only slightly more than 5% of sentences dedicated to policy proposals in his first year, a level that remained constant through his second year; his discussion of policy proposals rose after that and remained higher for the subsequent years of his term.

¹ The 2002 State of the Union may be unique, in that it came within a few months of the 9/11 attacks of 2001.

**Figure 5:
Percentage of State of Union sentences involving proposals**

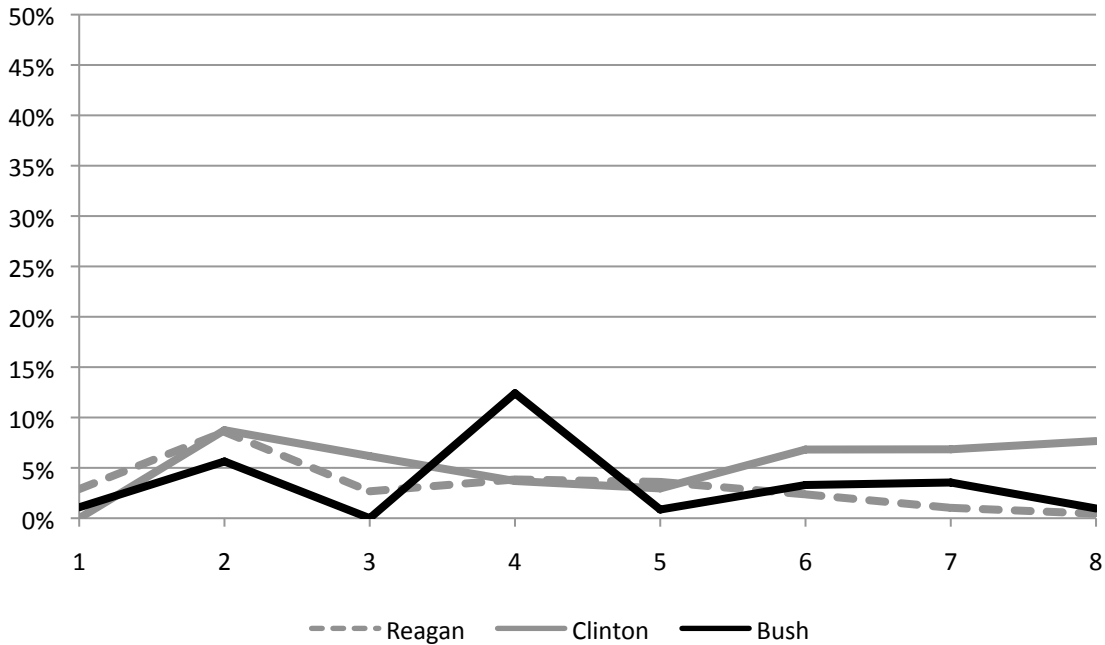


We also examined percentages of sentences in each State of the Union address that reference policies already in place, again by year of presidency. As with the use of the past tense in sentences referencing administration policies or proposals, there is a noticeable pattern in the first three years of these presidencies. Figure 6 indicates that presidents spend little of their first State of the Union addresses dealing with policies in place, no doubt because there aren't many. There is an increase in references to current policy in the second year and a drop off in the third year. Once again, the political situation in the midterm election year is the most likely explanation. The one noteworthy observation across the full eight years is the overall low level of references to existing administration policies. President Bush is the only one of the three presidents to exceed 10% in this category, and only in his fourth year. Clearly, presidents have found it possible to focus on the state of the union without dwelling on what they have already done.

What may be most striking about the results of Figures 5 and 6 is the relative stability of proposals and policy defenses over most of these presidents' time in office. Only the first year differs

dramatically from later years, and that may result from the inclusion of the new president's first address to Congress as a fill-in for the State of the Union address.

Figure 6:
Percentage of State of Union sentences referencing current policy



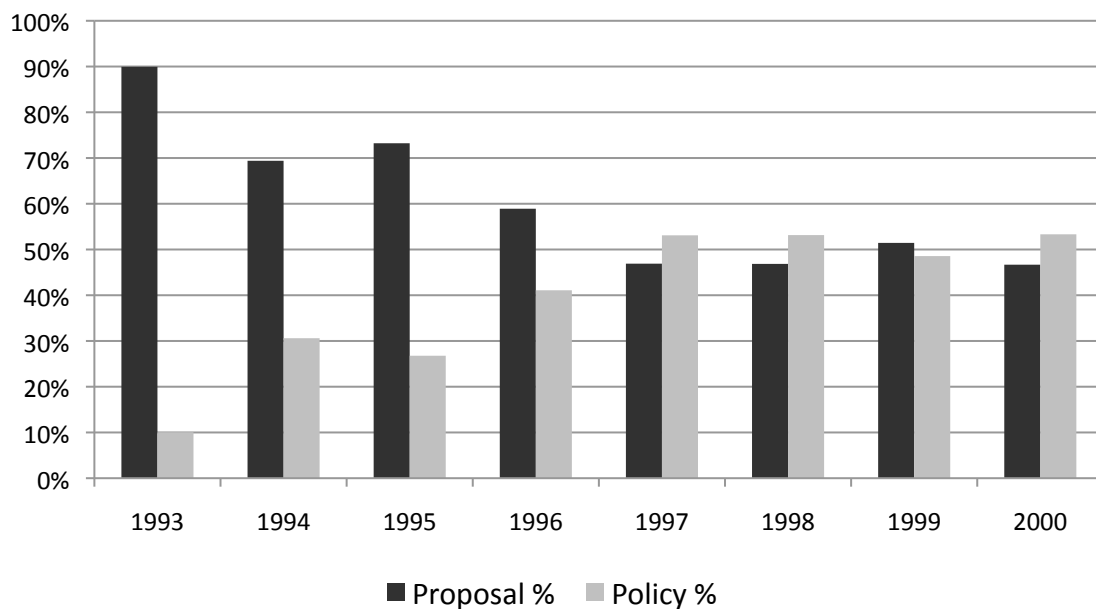
Overall, the results reported are inconclusive. Nonetheless, we suspect that sampling only State of the Union addresses may be skewing our results. We began this study with State of the Union addresses because they are consistent across all administrations and are prominent speeches representing presidents' best chances to present their agenda. However, these State of the Union addresses may have proven too consistent

These addresses may be atypical in several ways. For example, State of the Union addresses are the product of extensive internal negotiations within the administration (Hoffman and Howard, 2006). In addition, they are specifically designed as speeches to Congress with a national audience; as such, they could be distinct insofar as they are preparing for negotiations (as well as position-taking and credit-claiming) for the year ahead. In this regard, the State of the Union may be an institution with a

process and set of expectations somewhat distinct from other presidential speeches.

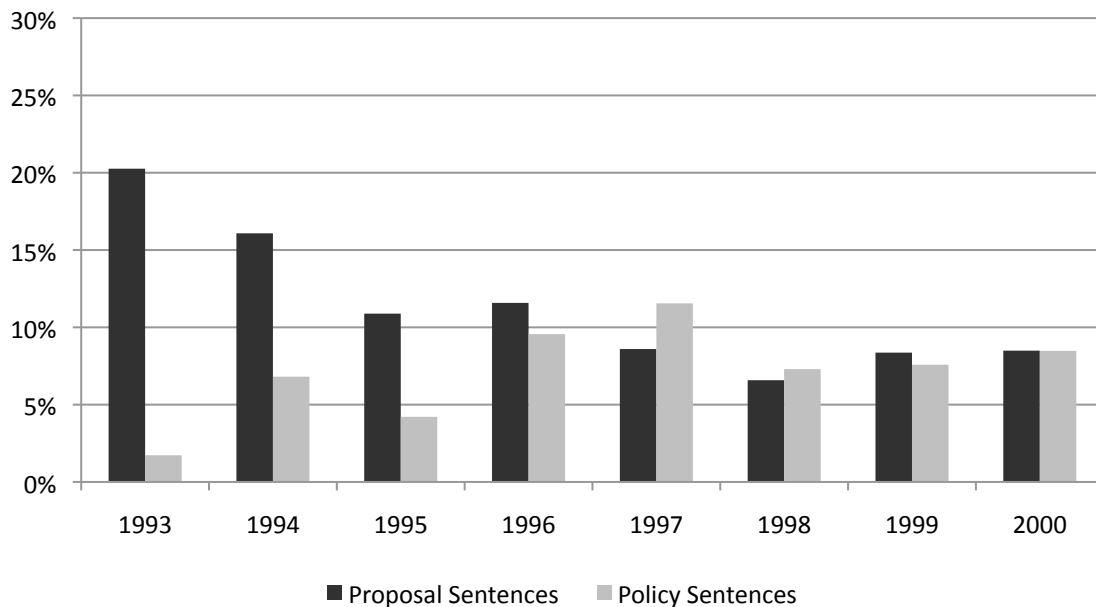
Some preliminary research suggests that expanding beyond the State of the Union address may create a different picture. In addition to the State of the Union addresses for all three presidents, we also coded 205 speeches of President Clinton that we determined to be intended for a national audience, including State of the Union addresses as well as some weekly radio addresses (we chose one per month), commencement addresses, Oval Office addresses, policy speeches before major interest groups, etc. In all, we coded over 20,000 sentences. The fuller set of speeches did present evidence that President Clinton altered his temporal framing strategy over time; results are reported in Figure 7 below. In 1993, in the average speech during the first year of his presidency, only 10% of Bill Clinton's mentions of administrative actions were about administration policies that had already been implemented. Of course, this is unavoidable since he had few policies in place yet to discuss. This percentage increased sharply over the course of his first term, to a high of 41% in 1996. In the second term, the percentage of policy mentions only dropped below 50% in 1999 (at 49%).

**Figure 7:
Proposal vs policy sentences as as an percentage of "action"
statements in all Clinton speeches**



This evidence suggests that by the start of his second term, Clinton settled into a pattern of dividing his discussions of policy relatively evenly between advocating new proposals and defending existing administration policy. Figure 8 presents a similar measure from the full set of Clinton speeches, with policy and proposal sentences as a percentage of all sentences (rather than simply as a percentage of those sentences that mention administration action); the pattern is the same. Again, it is clear that Clinton began shifting to a retrospective style of speaking after the first year of his term and was speaking retrospectively about as often as prospectively by the second term.

**Figure 8:
Proposal and policy sentences as a percentage of all sentences
in all Clinton speeches**



While these results may not reflect a total reversal of strategy and a complete reliance on retrospective rhetoric late in a presidency, they do suggest a strategic shift to giving the share of prospective and retrospective rhetoric roughly equal weight in Clinton’s policy discussions. This gives further credence to our notion that State of the Union addresses may be too unique for the analysis conducted here. Our analysis of the full set of Clinton speeches suggests a pattern that is not revealed in the smaller sample presented above. We believe that the difference between the data from only the

State of the Union speeches and Clinton's fuller set of national speeches suggests that a complete examination of the questions presented here will require coding of additional Reagan and Bush speeches to determine whether a clearer pattern can be discerned.

One interpretation of these results is that the State of the Union address is an institution in its own right. That is, the expectations and traditions surrounding this speech confine the rhetoric in a way that make that speech less responsive to changes in the political setting over the course of an administration. The results presented here are striking in that the president's annual address to Congress changes very little despite the changes going on around it.

Conclusion

In our search for the impact of presidential rhetoric we have shifted from *what* the president is talking about to include *when* the president is talking about. We believe that presidential attempts to direct citizens to look to the past, present, or future is a part of their message strategy that needs to be understood before we can fully understand the impact of presidential rhetoric. Such "temporal framing" is consistent with current models of voting behavior since voters who judge presidential incumbents based on retrospective evaluations are likely to be influenced by rhetorical framing when judging the desirability of presidential activities.

Although we have not uncovered linear trends in the temporal framing of presidential rhetoric in State of the Union addresses, the evidence of differences between administrations is clear and year-to-year changes driven by other factors cannot be ruled out. The challenges of creating meaningful and systematic means of coding rhetoric will continue to test the patience of researchers. However, the need to understand the time frame that the president is talking about should remain an important consideration for scholars judging the impact of presidential rhetoric.

While our data on the State of the Union addresses of the three presidents showed little systematic change in temporal framing over time, the data collected on the broader set of Clinton speeches suggests that his administration shifted its focus from advocating new policies to a balance between advocating the new while defending the old. We worry that the narrow focus on State of the Union addresses here left the multi-administration results reliant on an atypical sampling of presidential speeches. State of the Union addresses may be bound by traditions and processes that constrain their rhetorical style and make them unique, but important, components of an overall communication strategy.

Additional research is needed to develop a better understanding of temporal framing in the overall communications strategy of the White House, not only in the shifting rhetorical strategies deployed by the White House but also in regard to the distinct roles of specific types of speeches. While results so far have not produced a clear picture of systematic shifts in presidential rhetoric during State of the Union addresses, these results do suggest that presidential speeches often differ significantly in how they point Americans' attention to the past, present, or future. Scholars should remain mindful of this temporal framing while analyzing presidential communications.

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