

The President's State of the Union Address: Tradition, Function, and Policy Implications

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Summary

The State of the Union address is a communication between the President and Congress in which the chief executive reports on the current conditions of the United States and provides policy proposals for the upcoming legislative year. Formerly known as the "Annual Message," the State of the Union address originates in the Constitution. As part of the system of checks and balances, Article II, Section 3, clause 1 mandates that the President "shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient." In recent decades, the President has expanded his State of the Union audience, addressing the speech to both the nation and Members of Congress.

Over time, the State of the Union address has evolved considerably. The format and delivery of the speech have changed, and its length has fluctuated widely. Technology has also influenced the delivery of the address, with the advent of radio, television, and the Internet playing significant roles in the transformation.

Although each President uses the State of the Union address to outline his administration's policy agenda, most incorporate common rhetorical arguments and ceremonial traditions. Bipartisanship, attention to both the past and the future, and optimism are recurring themes in State of the Union addresses.

The legislative success rate of policy proposals mentioned in State of the Union addresses varies widely. Addresses given after a President's election or reelection and during periods of unified party government tend to produce higher rates of legislative success. Presidents can also use the State of the Union address to increase media attention for a particular issue.

Immediately following the State of the Union address, the political party not occupying the White House provides an opposition response. The response, usually much shorter than the State of the Union, outlines the opposition party's policy agenda and serves as an official rejoinder to the proposals outlined by the President.

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Overview

The State of the Union address is a communication between the President and Congress in which the chief executive reports on the current conditions of the United States and provides policy proposals for the upcoming legislative year. Formerly known as the "Annual Message," the State of the Union address originates in the Constitution. As part of the system of checks and balances, Article II, Section 3, clause 1 requires that the President "shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient." In recent decades, the President has expanded his State of the Union audience, addressing the speech to both the nation and Members of Congress.

From the perspective of Congress, the State of the Union address may be considered the most important presidential speech of the year. Although Presidents may ask to address Congress in joint session on extraordinary occasions, the State of the Union is the one time Presidents are regularly scheduled to venture to the House chamber to present their programmatic priorities and set the tone for the ensuing year. Although modern Presidents communicate with Congress and the public consistently and persistently, the State of the Union provides the President with a unique opportunity to present his entire policy platform in one speech.

From the President's perspective, the State of the Union address has evolved from a constitutional duty to a welcome source of executive power and authority. Standing before the American public to deliver the annual address, the President combines several constitutional roles: chief of state, chief executive, chief diplomat, commander-in-chief, and chief legislator.[1] Besides delivering the State of the Union, there is no other annual opportunity for the President to showcase his entire arsenal of constitutional powers.

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Historical Perspective

As a rhetorical tool, the State of the Union Address has changed in several substantial ways since the origins of the American republic. It is difficult to point to one moment in time when the address developed into the contemporary speech now commonly recognized as the starting point of the legislative session.[2] Instead, several presidents throughout American history presided over shifts and variations to the address.

George Washington gave the first State of the Union Address on January 8, 1790. Washington's address, which was quite short at 1,089 words, was delivered before both houses of Congress.[3]

[1] Clinton Rossiter, *The American Presidency* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1956).

[2] On this point, for more detail, see Ryan L Teten, "We the People: The Modern Rhetorical Popular Address of the Presidents during the Founding Period," *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 4 (December 2007), pp. 669-682.

[3] John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project, "Length of the State of the Union Addresses and (continued...)

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After Washington gave his second State of the Union address the following year, he established the precedent that the President would provide information annually to Congress.[4]

John Adams followed Washington's precedent during his tenure. Likening it to a "speech from the throne" reminiscent of monarchy's vestiges, Thomas Jefferson changed course and instead submitted his Annual Message in writing.[5] Historians also speculate that Jefferson was a poor public speaker and did not want to deliver the Annual Address orally since his Inaugural Address had been barely audible and was unfavorably received.[6] Between 1801 and 1913, Presidents fulfilled their constitutional duty by sending their yearly report as a formal written letter to Congress. These written messages contained information about the state of the nation, and also included policy recommendations. During this time period, the Annual Message swelled in length, with several exceeding 25,000 words.[7]

President Woodrow Wilson altered historical precedent when he delivered the 1913 Annual Message in the House chamber before a joint session of Congress. Although Wilson's action "stunned official Washington," he had written extensively in *Constitutional Government* about his disagreement with Jefferson's decision to submit the address in writing. Instead, Wilson read the Constitution as providing the President with the broad authority to serve as a national spokesman.[8] Wilson altered presidential rhetoric, using it as an intermediary tool to draw widespread public attention to the policies he supported. The public's endorsement served as political leverage that could compel Members of Congress to support his legislative agenda.

From 1913 until 1934, the Annual Message entered a transitional phase in which Presidents occasionally issued the address orally. Wilson delivered six of his eight Annual Messages in person, and Warren Harding presented his two addresses orally. Calvin Coolidge gave one address in the House chamber, and became the first President to broadcast the annual speech on radio.

During his presidential terms, Franklin Roosevelt solidified the oral tradition of the Annual Message. Roosevelt also applied the constitutional language "State of the Union," both to the message and the event, which became the popular nomenclature from his presidency forward. Given its oral rather than written delivery, the length of the address decreased to between 5,000 and 7,000 words. Roosevelt also ushered in the modern tradition of using the collective words "we" and "our" with greater frequency than his predecessors.

(...continued)

Messages," at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/sou_words.php, accessed December 14, 2008.

[4] Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, "The State of the Union Address and the Rise of Rhetorical Leadership," in *State of the Union*, ed. Deborah Kalb, Gerhard Peters, and John T. Woolley (Washington: CQ Press, 2007), p. 2.

[5] Ryan L. Teten, "Evolution of the Modern Rhetorical Presidency: Presidential Presentation and Development of the State of the Union Address," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 2 (June 2003), p. 337.

[6] Gerhard Casper, "Executive-Congressional Separation of Power during the Presidency of Thomas Jefferson," *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 47, no. 3 (February 1995), p. 480.

[7] Chad Murphy, "The Evolution of the Modern Rhetorical Presidency: A Critical Response," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 2 (June 2008), pp. 303-306.

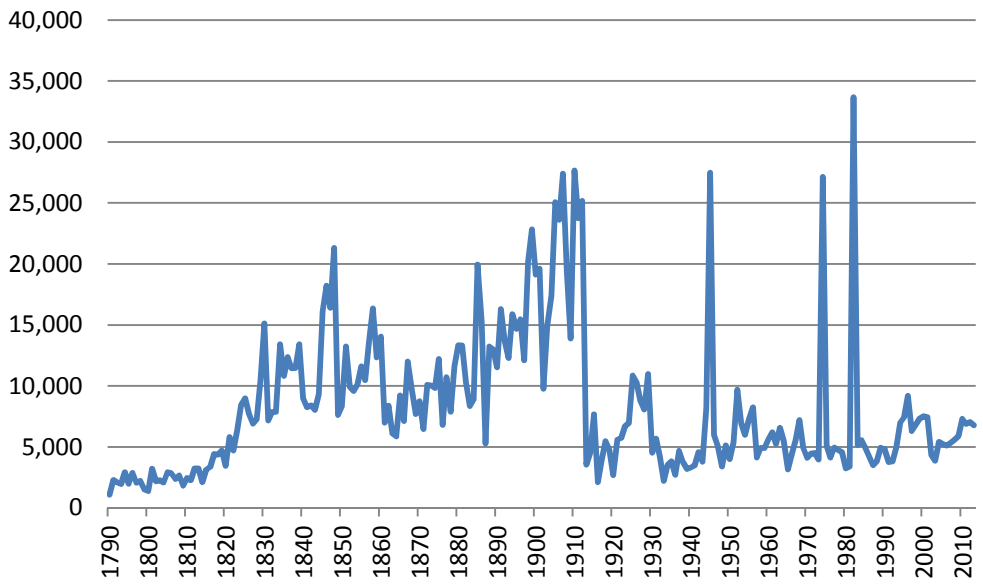
[8] Robert Alexander Kraig, *Woodrow Wilson and the Lost World of the Oratorical Statesman* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), p. 131.

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Figure 1 displays the length of State of the Union addresses across American presidential history.[9] The graph shows the sudden drop in 1913, when Woodrow Wilson resuscitated the oral mode of delivery. The spikes in **Figure 1** after Wilson are instances in which Presidents issued the final State of the Union of their term in writing, such as Franklin Roosevelt in 1945 and Carter in 1981. After winning reelection in 1972, Richard Nixon issued a series of written messages in 1973 instead of giving an overview speech. Barack Obama's 2013 speech contained 6,775 words, which was slightly shorter than his 2012 speech of 7,059 words.[10]

Figure 1. Length of the State of the Union Addresses

Number of Words, 1790-2013



Source: Data provided by John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project*, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/sou_words.php, accessed December 29, 2011.

Harry Truman's 1947 State of the Union address was the first televised. Until 1965, Presidents issued the State of the Union during the day. To attract a larger viewing audience, Lyndon Johnson changed the time of the speech to the evening. This practice has been followed since Johnson, and Presidents now explicitly direct the address to the citizens of the United States as well as Congress.[11]

[9] Several addresses made before a joint session of Congress were not technically titled as State of the Union Addresses. These speeches immediately followed a President's first term inauguration, and included Reagan's 1981 address, George H.W. Bush's 1989 address, Bill Clinton's 1993 address, George W. Bush's 2001 address, and Barack Obama's 2009 address. However, scholars consider these speeches to serve the same ceremonial, rhetorical, and political function as a typical State of the Union. Therefore, they are routinely counted and analyzed with the other Annual Addresses as such.

[10] The American Presidency Project, "Length of the State of the Union Messages and Addresses (in words)," at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/sou_words.php#axzz2EOF5jM00.

[11] Teten, *Evolution of the Modern Rhetorical Presidency*, p. 338.

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Tradition and Ceremony

The State of the Union address is a speech steeped in tradition and ceremony. It is known for its display of pomp and circumstance, perhaps corroborating Thomas Jefferson's objection that the custom retains monarchical elements. In presenting the address, the President acts as both the head of government and the head of state. The combination of both roles makes the annual speech a uniquely powerful ritual.

Timing

Until the 20th amendment changed the timing for the new terms of Senators and Representatives to January 3, the annual message was routinely delivered in December. Since 1934, the President's annual message has been delivered on a range of dates, from January 3 to February 2. To attract television viewers across the United States, the address is normally presented at 9:00 in the evening, Eastern Standard Time.

Location, Seating, and Attendance

The State of the Union address is now customarily delivered in the House chamber of the Capitol, before a joint session of Congress. A concurrent resolution, agreed to by both chambers, sets aside an appointed time for a joint session of the House and Senate "for the purpose of receiving such communication as the President of the United States shall be pleased to make to them."[12]

Aside from reserved places for leadership, seats in the chamber are not assigned to Members. Any time during the day, House Members may claim a seat for the evening's address. They must, however, remain physically in the seat to retain their place for the speech.[13]

At the designated time, Senators cross the Capitol to the House chamber, where seats are reserved for them as a group at the front of the chamber. The Speaker and the Vice President (in his capacity as President of the Senate) occupy seats on the dais, and the Speaker presides. Seats in the well of the House chamber are reserved for the President's Cabinet, Justices of the Supreme Court who choose to attend, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, former Members of Congress, and members of the diplomatic corps.[14]

In accord with long-standing custom and to ensure the continuity of government, one Cabinet secretary does not attend the speech. After September 11, 2001, congressional leadership began designating two Members from each house of Congress, representing both parties, to remain absent from the Capitol during the President's speech.

At the January 25, 2011, State of the Union, Members of Congress broke from tradition and sat next to Members of the opposing party. In previous years, Members have taken their seats in a bifurcated fashion, choosing to sit with Members of their own party. In a "Dear Colleague" letter

[12] For example, H.Con.Res. 282, 110th Cong., 2nd sess.

[13] Interview with William Sims, Director of Chamber Security, House Sergeant at Arms, December 22, 2008.

[14] "State of the Union Address," at http://artandhistory.house.gov/house_history/stateunion.aspx . http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/house_history/stateunion.html

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written two weeks before the speech, Senator Mark Udall urged Members of both chambers "to cross the aisle and sit together."[15] Members of Congress have continued the bipartisan practice of seating since 2011.

Special Guests

Seating in the gallery is restricted to ticket holders and is coordinated by the House Sergeant at Arms. Each Member of Congress receives one chamber ticket, with a specific reserved seat, for the address. Congressional leadership and the White House receive multiple tickets.[16]

Since 1982, in a new tradition established by Ronald Reagan, Presidents frequently ask guests to join the First Lady in the gallery. These individuals usually have performed an act of heroism or achieved an impressive milestone that illustrates an important theme in the President's speech. At the appropriate time, the President acknowledges the guests seated adjacent to the First Lady and identifies their particular contribution. Presidential speechwriters refer to these guests as "Lenny Skutniks" in reference to the first guest highlighted by Reagan in 1982.[17] Recent guests have included Representative Gabrielle Giffords, Tim Cook (CEO of Apple, Inc.), Sammy Sosa, Julie Aigner-Clark (CEO of Baby Einstein), Rosa Parks, Hamid Karzai, Dikembe Mutombo, former Treasury Secretary and Senator Lloyd Bentsen, Hank Aaron, Wesley Autrey (who rescued a man on the New York City subway tracks), and numerous active military service members and veterans.

Common Elements

The State of the Union address is a unique genre of presidential speech. Historian Charles Beard commented, "Whatever may be its purport, the message is the one great public document of the United States which is widely read and discussed."[18] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson have identified three repetitive, sequential rhetorical arguments in State of the Union addresses:

- public meditations on values;
- assessments of information and issues; and
- policy recommendations.[19]

[15] "Udall Urges Congress to Put Aside Partisan Divisions – Sit Together During State of the Union," available at http://markudall.senate.gov/?p=press_release&id=877, accessed on December 29, 2011.

[16] Interview with William Sims, December 22, 2008.

[17] Peters and Woolley, *State of the Union*, p. 11. Lenny Skutnik was a government employee who dived into the Potomac River to rescue a survivor after a plane departing from Washington's National Airport crashed into the 14th Street Bridge. Reagan stated that Skutnik embodied "the spirit of American heroism at its finest."

[18] Charles A. Beard, *American Government and Politics*, 7th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1935), p. 185.

[19] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 139.

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The Sequence of Arguments

These three rhetorical arguments typically occur in a predictable sequential order. The President offers his opinion concerning important values or national character. Such an assessment leads him to identify targeted issues that will constitute his legislative agenda. Finally, he offers specific policy recommendations. The iteration of values, issue identification, and policy recommendations typically repeats itself numerous times in a State of the Union speech.

For example, in his 1962 address, President John F. Kennedy identified the values he deemed critically important to the nation:

> But a stronger nation and economy require more than a balanced Budget. They require progress in those programs that spur our growth and fortify our strength.

He then recognized the policy problem that arose from the values he emphasized:

> A strong America also depends on its farms and natural resources.... Our task is to master and turn to fully fruitful ends the magnificent productivity of our farms and farmers. The revolution on our own countryside stands in the sharpest contrast to the repeated farm failures of the Communist nations and is a source of pride to us all.

Finally, Kennedy provided his specific policy recommendation:

> I will, therefore, submit to the Congress a new comprehensive farm program—tailored to fit the use of our land and the supplies of each crop to the long-range needs of the sixties—and designed to prevent chaos in the sixties with a program of commonsense.[20]

Presidents use this three-part rhetorical sequence when discussing both domestic and foreign policy in the State of the Union.

Recurring Themes

In addition to a common sequence of rhetorical arguments, State of the Union addresses also exhibit recurring thematic elements. Most include rhetoric about the past and future, bipartisanship, and optimism.

Past and the Future

Typically, the speech focuses on both past accomplishments and future goals. State of the Union addresses pay homage to the historical achievements of the nation and its recurring national values. In his 1983 address, Ronald Reagan stated the following:

> The very key to our success has been our ability, foremost among nations, to preserve our lasting values by making change work for us rather than against us.[21]

[20] John F. Kennedy, "Address to Congress on the State of the Union: January 11, 1962," in *State of the Union: Presidential Rhetoric from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush*, p. 577.

[21] Ronald Reagan, "Address before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union," in *State of the Union: Presidential Rhetoric from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush*, p. 882.

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Through attention to both past and future, Presidents can use the State of the Union address to develop their own definition of the national identity. For example, Bill Clinton used his 1995 speech to introduce the concept of a "New Covenant" that blended the traditional themes of "opportunity and responsibility" with the current policy challenges his Administration faced. Moving back and forth between historical themes and contemporary issues is a common rhetorical practice in State of the Union addresses. Using the past to explain legislative proposals and decisions is a method aimed at legitimizing the President's policy program.

Bipartisanship

The State of the Union address is not primarily a partisan speech or document. The bipartisan tone of the speech distinguishes it from other types of presidential rhetoric.[22] Speaking before a joint session of Congress, Presidents often try to frame their arguments in such a way to build consensus. In his 2002 speech, George W. Bush stated the following:

> September the 11th brought out the best in America and the best in this Congress. And I join the American people in applauding your unity and resolve. Now Americans deserve to have this same spirit directed toward addressing problems here at home. I'm a proud member of my party. Yet as we act to win the war, protect our people, and create jobs in America, we must act, first and foremost, not as Republicans, not as Democrats but as Americans.[23]

A rhetorical emphasis on bipartisanship can be politically empowering. By claiming a willingness to reach across the aisle, Presidents can remind listeners that their constitutional authority includes a mandate to protect the welfare of all citizens. Such a claim is unique to the presidency, and can serve as a powerful component of the chief executive's national leadership.

Optimism

The final recurring theme is optimism. No matter how terrible the crisis facing the country, Presidents always adopt a can-do "Horatio Alger" tone in their annual speech.[24] Only a month after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Franklin Roosevelt began his 1942 State of the Union address with the following statement:

> In fulfilling my duty to report on the State of the Union, I am proud to say to you that the spirit of the American people was never higher than it is today—the Union was never more closely knit together—this country was never more deeply determined to face the solemn tasks before it. The response of the American people has been instantaneous, and it will be sustained until our security is assured.[25]

Presidents often acknowledge the difficult nature of the goals they set, but such acknowledgement is qualified by a strong statement that Americans will always fulfill their destiny, solve intractable

[22] Matthew Esbaugh-Soha and Brandon Rottinghaus, "Presidential Position Taking and the Puzzle of Representation," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 1 (March 2013), pp. 1-15.

[23] George W. Bush, "Address before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union," in *State of the Union*, p. 1083.

[24] Campbell and Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, p. 140.

[25] Franklin D. Roosevelt, "State of the Union Address," in *State of the Union*, p. 306.

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problems, and ultimately "establish a more perfect Union." No President has ever reported that the crisis facing the nation was insurmountable.[26]

Policy Impact

The State of the Union address is uniquely situated to strengthen the President's role as chief legislator. The President routinely uses the address to convey his policy priorities and advertise his past legislative successes. In the course of the speech, Presidents can advocate for policies already being considered by Congress, introduce innovative ideas, or threaten vetoes.[27]

Prior to Woodrow Wilson's precedent-changing personal appearances before joint sessions, Presidents from Thomas Jefferson forward directed their annual address mainly to Congress, although major newspapers and magazines analyzed the contents of the speech. Now that the State of the Union is broadcast on television, radio, and the Internet, Presidents can speak directly to Congress and the American public. By speaking directly to citizens, Presidents attempt to convince the public to pressure their elected Representatives and Senators to support particular policy proposals mentioned in the speech. From 1965 through 2002, the median level of policy requests in a State of the Union address was 31.[28]

Progression of Presidential Term

Presidents often change the emphasis of their State of the Union addresses as their term in office progresses. Electoral pressures, the state of his relationship with Congress, and the President's past legislative record influence such a development.

First Year Addresses

In an "inaugural" State of the Union address, Presidents attempt to set the tone for a new administration.[29] Most of the rhetoric contained in early term speeches is forward-looking. In their first address, Presidents take positions on numerous policy issues in an attempt to direct the legislative agenda for the next four years. Since 1965, the median number of policy requests in a first year State of the Union address is 36.[30]

[26] Campbell and Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, p. 141.

[27] Donna R. Hoffman and Alison D. Howard, *Addressing the State of the Union: The Evolution and Impact of the President's Big Speech* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), p. 96.

[28] Ibid. p. 111. The median is used instead of the arithmetic mean (average) due to the presence of outliers in the data. The median is the middle value of a dataset. With outliers, such as Clinton in 2000 (87 policy requests) and Carter in 1980 (9 policy requests) the median more accurately represents the central tendency of the data.

[29] Ibid.

[30] The calculation is based upon data provided by Hoffman and Howard on p. 111. It does not include addresses given by Presidents Nixon, Ford, or Carter. These three Presidents declined to give a policy address to a joint session of Congress during their first year in office.

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Midterm Addresses

State of the Union addresses in a President's second and third year of his term in office usually adopt a different tone. Presidents use a greater portion of their time in the address highlighting their policy achievements; approximately 10% of the sentences in mid-term addresses are credit-claiming statements. The number of policy requests typically decreases in a midterm speech, falling to a median of 30.[31]

Election Year Addresses

An impending election can influence the types of arguments Presidents make in their annual address. Claims of past achievements rise to 13% of the sentences. Policy proposals also rise to a median of 36 requests, perhaps in an attempt to demonstrate an active agenda if elected to a second term. Despite electoral considerations, Presidents do not use the State of the Union address to stump for office, according to scholars. If the election is mentioned at all, it is discussed indirectly and with a bipartisan tone.[32]

Second Term Addresses

The second term addresses of Presidents have disparate qualities. For example, President Reagan decreased both his credit claiming and policy proposals in his second-term addresses. On the other hand, President Clinton increased his policy proposals, while maintaining the same level of credit claiming. One characteristic, however, is common in second term addresses. In their second terms, Presidents concentrate more of their legislative requests on defense and foreign policy.[33] It might be that Presidents turn towards building their legacy in their second terms of office and decide to focus more of their resources, political capital, and time on issues concerning defense and foreign policy.

Legislative Success and Policy Proposals

Given the powerful spotlight the State of the Union address provides for the President in his legislative role, a good question to ask is whether the proposals mentioned in the speech actually get enacted in the subsequent year. According to data from 1965 to 2002, on average, 43.3% of all policy proposals contained in a State of the Union address are enacted by Congress in the legislative session in which the President gave his speech, although the rate of legislative success varies widely throughout this time period.[34]

[31] Hoffman and Howard, *Addressing the State of the Union*, p. 115.

[32] Ibid. p. 116.

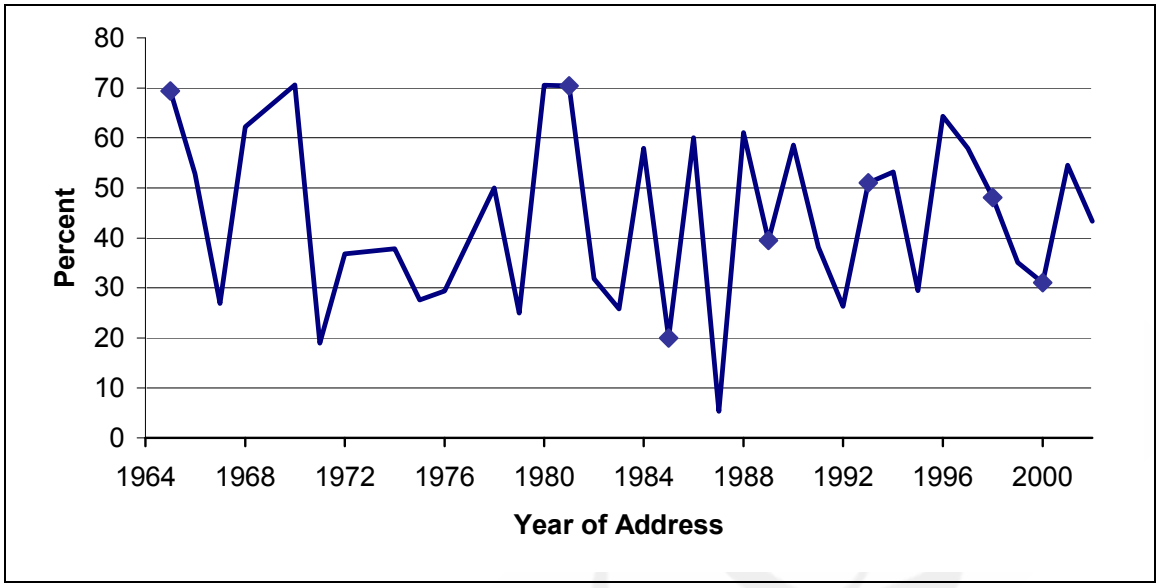
[33] Ibid. p. 119.

[34] Ibid. p. 143.

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Figure 2. Legislative Proposal Success Rate

State of the Union Addresses, 1965-2002



Source: Legislative Proposal Success Rate data provided by Hoffman and Howard, Addressing the State of the Union, p. 144.

Note: Data points with a marker indicate postelection addresses.

One pattern that can be discerned from **Figure 2** is that Presidents typically experience increased legislative success in the year immediately following an election. Of the five Presidents since 1965[35] who gave State of the Union postelection addresses, the average State of the Union legislative success rate was 51.4%, approximately eight percentage points higher than the overall average. The success rate falls for second-term addresses to 38.6%.[36]

Another comparison can be drawn between the legislative success rate during years of unified party government versus divided party government. The average legislative success rate during years of divided government is 40.9%. During years of unified government, the average legislative success rate rises to 49.3%.[37]

Capturing and Holding the Public's Attention

Evidence also suggests that Presidents can successfully capture the public's attention by mentioning a policy proposal in the State of the Union. Increased emphasis in a State of the Union speech translates into a higher level of public interest in that particular policy area. Both substantive arguments (in which the President took a position on an issue) and symbolic rhetoric (in which the President spoke generally about an issue but did not offer a specific

[35] The seven addresses analyzed are Johnson (1965), Reagan (1981), Reagan (1985), George H.W. Bush (1989), Clinton (1993), Clinton (1997), George W. Bush (2001).

[36] Hoffman and Howard, *Addressing the State of the Union*, pp. 145-146.

[37] Data provided by Hoffman and Howard, *Addressing the State of the Union*, pp. 144. Calculations provided by the authors. The number of SOTU addresses analyzed for divided government was 24; the number of SOTU addresses analyzed for unified government was 11.

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recommendation) can increase public attention. Merely mentioning an issue in the State of the Union has the power to heighten the public's awareness of it. In a 2004 analysis of State of the Union addresses from 1946 to 2003, every 50 words a President devoted to an issue resulted in a 2% increase in the public identifying that problem as the most important in the nation.[38]

However, the President's ability to maintain the public's interest varies according to issue area. Increased public attention to economic policies mentioned by the President in his State of the Union address tends to evaporate by the end of the year. Conversely, however, the American public appears to retain its interest in foreign policy: attention to foreign policy issues mentioned by the President in his annual speech remains steady at the year's conclusion. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that the President can use the State of the Union address more successfully to reshape and reconstitute public opinion about foreign policy.[39]

The empirical evidence suggests that presidents have used the address to discuss foreign policy issues in recent years. Using a "word cloud" tool that counts the frequency of words in a document, President George W. Bush said "terrorist" 14 times on September 20, 2001. In 2003, he used the name "Saddam Hussein" 19 times. In 2005, President Bush used the word "security" 29 times. "Iraq" was spoken 10 times in 2007. The frequent use of foreign policy terms is not, however, a product of a post-September 11 world. President Jimmy Carter said the word "Soviet" 57 times in his 1980 State of the Union, and President Lyndon Johnson said "Vietnam" 32 times in his 1966 speech.[40]

Given that Presidents now must compete with cable television channels not airing the State of the Union address, the threat of a declining viewership might depress the speech's potential salience.[41] Smaller viewing audiences do not, however, necessarily mean the annual speech is less influential. Many citizens rely upon media coverage of the State of the Union address to learn about the President's policy priorities. Research shows that media coverage of the State of the Union address leads to increased public knowledge about the highlighted issues, regardless of a person's educational background, age, or partisan affiliation.[42] Presidents have recently turned to the Internet as an alternative method of dissemination. In 2013, President Obama featured an "enhanced broadcast" of the State of the Union, which included charts and graphs on the White House website that appeared simultaneously as he spoke.[43] Even if an individual does not watch the address on television or the Internet, the State of the Union presents a significant opportunity for the President to communicate his ideological preferences, ideals, and policy agenda to the public writ large.

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[38] Adam B. Lawrence, "Does It Matter What Presidents Say? The Influence of Presidential Rhetoric on the Public Agenda, 1946-2003", (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2004).

[39] Jeffrey E. Cohen, "Presidential Rhetoric and the Public Agenda," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 39, no. 1 (February 1995), pp. 95-100, at http://www.jstor.org/stable/info/2111759 .

[40] The State of the Union word cloud tool can be accessed at http://stateoftheunion.onetwothree.net/index.shtml#. For an online tool that compares speeches from 1934 through 2013, see http://graphics.wsj.com/SOTUWORDS2013/#selCat=sCat1&l=2009&r=2013.

[41] Reed L. Welch, "Is Anybody Watching? The Audience for Televised Presidential Addresses," *Congress and the Presidency*, vol. 27, issue 1, (2000), pp. 41-58. According to media reports, President George W. Bush's final State of the Union address in 2008 drew 25 million viewers. This number was considerably less than 2007, when his speech drew 31 million viewers.

[42] Jason Barabas, "Presidential Policy Initiatives: How the Public Learns about State of the Union Proposals from the Mass Media," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 2 (June 2008), p. 215.

[43] See http://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2013.

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Opposition Response

An opposition response is a speech given by select members of the political party not currently occupying the White House. The opposition response is usually broadcast immediately after the completion of the President's State of the Union address. It is a much shorter speech than the State of the Union; recent opposition responses have been approximately 1,500 words in length and lasted about 10 minutes. The practice of an opposition response to the State of the Union address began in 1966 when Senator Everett Dirksen and Representative Gerald Ford provided the Republican reply to President Lyndon Johnson.

Format

From 1967 to 1986, the opposition response adopted a variety of formats. Several times, the opposition response included comments from one or more Members of Congress. For example, in 1970, seven Democratic Members participated in a 45-minute televised response to President Richard Nixon's State of the Union speech. In 1984, 12 Democratic Members recorded a reply to President Ronald Reagan's speech that was aired on most networks. In other instances, one or two Members delivered their party's official reply.[44]

By 1987, the opposition response adopted a format in which either one or two individuals provided a reply to the President's address. Parties often select rising stars, new congressional leaders, or possible presidential candidates to give the opposing view. For example, Senator Robert Dole gave the opposition response in 1996. The new Senate minority leader, Harry Reid, used the opposition response to introduce himself to the American people in 2005. In 2006, in an attempt to highlight Virginia's status as a well-managed state, the Democrats chose Governor Tim Kaine to give the reply.[45] In 2012, Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels, also considered to be an effective state chief executive, delivered the Republican response.[46]

In 1995, Republican Governor Christine Todd Whitman of New Jersey became the first non-congressional elected official to deliver the opposition response.[47] In 2007, Senator Jim Webb was the first freshman Member of Congress to provide the opposition response to the State of the Union address.

Common Rhetorical Arguments

No matter which party is giving the speech, opposition responses to the State of the Union address typically contain similar themes or arguments. The opposition's response routinely contains the following three rhetorical elements:

[44] "State of the Union Address," at http://artandhistory.house.gov/house_history/stateunion.aspx .

[45] The rankings were issued by the Government Performance Project of the Pew Center's on the States. See "Grading the States," ("Virginia Gets Top Grade in Management,") at http://www.pewstates.org/research/reports/grading-the-states-2008-report-85899379355 (http://www.vaexcels.governor.virginia.gov/TempContent/Best_Managed_State.cfm, accessed on December 29, 2008.)

[46] The American Presidency Project, List of Opposition Responses to State of the Union Addresses at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/sou_response.php#axzz2EOF5jM00.

[47] Other governors, such as Bob Graham from Florida (1985), Bill Clinton from Arkansas (1985), and Charles Robb from Virginia (1986) participated in opposition responses, but were accompanied by several Members of Congress.

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Call for Bipartisanship

As with the President in the State of the Union address, the opposition often calls for bipartisanship. Cooperation and consensus are common themes. Providing commentary from outside of the nation's capital, bipartisanship can play a more prominent role if a governor gives the address rather than a Member of Congress. For example, Democratic Governor Kathleen Sebelius of Kansas emphasized bipartisanship in her 2008 response. She stated:

> I'm a Democrat, but tonight, it doesn't really matter whether you think of yourself as a Democrat or a Republican or an Independent. Or none of the above.... And, so, I want to take a slight detour from tradition on this State of the Union night. In this time, normally reserved for the partisan response, I hope to offer you something more: An American Response.[48]

In other instances, the opposition response may ask the President directly to work in a bipartisan fashion to accomplish a particular task. In 2011, Representative Paul Ryan began his speech with prayers for the recovery of Representative Gabrielle Giffords and those injured or killed in the Tucson shooting massacre.

The Opposition's Agenda

The political party not occupying the White House uses the opposition response to outline its policy agenda. While the President's State of the Union address can include a long list of proposals, the opposition response usually focuses on two or three major issues. The brevity of the opposition response limits the range of discussion. In 2007, Senator Jim Webb remarked, "It would not be possible in this short amount of time to actually rebut the President's message, nor would it be useful."[49] Opposition responses have always included a discussion of domestic issues. From time to time, the response also discusses foreign policy.

The response usually explains what the policy agenda would be if the opposition party controlled the White House. It may also include a discussion of issues that the President did not address in his State of the Union speech. A clear distinction is drawn between the President's priorities and the priorities of the opposing political party. For example, in his 2006 speech, Virginia Governor Tim Kaine repeated the phrase "There's a better way" six times during his televised address.[50]

Direct Response to President

The opposition often responds directly to specific proposals contained in the President's State of the Union address. Excerpts of the State of the Union address are usually leaked hours prior to delivery. This enables the opposing party to change its response by adding specific ripostes to the President's proposals. Other details are added as the President delivers his speech. For example, in 2000, Senator Bill Frist criticized the health care proposals offered by President Clinton:

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[48] "Transcript: Democratic Response," at http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/01/28/politics/main3762263.shtml, accessed on December 29, 2008.

[49] "Transcript: Democratic Response," at http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/01/23/politics/main2391890.shtml, accessed on December 30, 2008.

[50] "Virginia Governor Tim Kaine's Response," at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/31/AR2006013101246_pf.html, accessed on December 30, 2008.

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> Earlier tonight we heard the President talk about his latest health care proposals. The last time he proposed a health plan was seven years ago ... Now tonight, 84 months later, the President has unveiled a similar plan just as bad as the first. It makes government even bigger and more bloated because each new program we heard about tonight—and there were about 11 of them in health care alone—comes with its own massive bureaucracy.[51]

Arguments directly responding to specific State of the Union policy proposals are usually criticisms of the President's approach or priorities. After such criticism, the opposition response usually offers counterproposals for the public's consideration.

Social Media

In his 2010 opposition response, Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell included an invitation for listeners to contribute ideas on social networking websites. He stated,

> In fact, many of our proposals are available online at solutions.gop.gov, and we welcome your ideas on Facebook and Twitter.[52]

This remark is the first request for listeners of a State of the Union Address or opposition response to use social media to communicate thoughts, ideas, or reactions.

Concluding Observations

The State of the Union address is an important weapon in the President's arsenal as a legislative leader. Although recent State of the Union addresses utilize common structure and often include similar types of arguments, the speech provides the President with the opportunity to outline his own policy agenda for the upcoming congressional session.

Presidents have two audiences in mind: Congress and the American public. Presidents must receive the support of a majority in the House, and oftentimes a supermajority in the Senate, to enact their legislative proposals. Presidents have realized that the American people can help accomplish this frequently difficult task. By appealing directly to the public, a President can use popular leverage to convince Congress to adopt his policy agenda. A campaign of such sustained public pressure must go beyond the State of the Union address, but Presidents often use the State of the Union as an initial vehicle to introduce policy priorities to a large viewing audience.

While the State of the Union address highlights the President's legislative role, it also serves as an annual reminder that the chief executive exists within a separated powers system. Legislative powers are shared between Congress and the presidency, evidenced by the constitutional requirement that the President "shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient."

[51] "Sen. Bill Frist," at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/white_house/jan-june00/frist_1-27.html, accessed on December 30, 2008.

[52] "Bob McDonnell's GOP Response: Full Text," at http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/01/27/politics/stateofunion/main6148483.shtml, accessed on October 28, 2010.

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