

Unwarranted Partisanship: An Exploration of Presidents' Political Rhetoric in the State of the Union Addresses from 1966 to 2020

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Despite the rising prevalence of political polarization in society, there is a lack of understanding surrounding polarization's implications and lasting impact on society. This paper uses political rhetoric in State of the Union Addresses, a nonpartisan context, as a means to measure the partisanship of United States presidents between 1966 and 2020. The method entailed a context analysis of the SOTU Addresses, frequency charts, and a two-way ANOVA test. Together, the steps in the method led to an understanding that partisanship in United States presidents has increased over time in a statistically significant manner. Furthermore, an increase in bipartisanship in the midst of increasing partisanship suggests that bipartisanship is not an effective behavior to combat partisanship. Perhaps embracing a non-partisan posturing approach to communication in government is the solution the United States needs to lessen the partisan divide.

Introduction

Political polarization is considered to be one of the most detrimental phenomena in today's society. However, its causes and effects are widely unknown, leaving political scientists with an array of facets to explore to better understand polarization and its implications. Many researchers have used political rhetoric as a means to measure partisanship in political figures. Political rhetoric is best understood when it is broken down into its three subcategories: partisan, bipartisan, and cross-partisan rhetoric. Partisan rhetoric is functionally defined as positive statements that an individual makes about a political party and negative statements that an individual makes about a political party.¹ Conversely, when an individual scrutinizes or praises both political parties in a statement, it is considered bipartisan rhetoric. Lastly, cross-partisan rhetoric mentions both political parties, though one in a positive manner and the other in a negative manner. These distinctions are necessary to make when attempting to distinguish what constitutes examples of each rhetoric later in my method.

This paper will analyze the prevalence of political rhetoric in State of the Union (SOTU) Addresses given by US presidents through a content analysis, followed by bivariate analyses. It is important to note that political rhetoric has been studied between the years 1977 and 2012 on SOTU Addresses.² However, the content analysis performed encompassed all presidential statements and speeches. Inherently, this generalization leaves a gap in the understanding of presidential political rhetoric in varying contexts. Thus, this paper analyzes political rhetoric in a non-partisan context through the research question How has political rhetoric in the SOTU Addresses from 1966 to 2020 changed over time?

¹ Jesse H. Rhodes and Zachary Albert, "The Transformation of Partisan Rhetoric in American Presidential Campaigns, 1952-2012," *Party Politics* 23, no. 5 (September 2017): 566-577. doi:10.1177/1354068815610968.

² Jesse H. Rhodes, "Party Polarization and the Ascendance of Bipartisan Posturing as a Dominant Strategy in Presidential Rhetoric," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (March 2014): 120-142. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12090>.

Review of Literature

Political polarization: commentator dialogue

To understand the reasoning behind the study of political rhetoric, it is important to first frame the context in which it surmounts. Representative democracies like the United States leave governmental power in the hands of an elite group.³ This elite group is considered the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. As these branches make the country's political decisions, societal opinions on their decisions inevitably surmount. Such opinions have existed throughout United States history in the framework of political parties. These parties have unified Americans, despite contrasting demographics, under generalized core values. This function of political parties is exceptionally valuable.⁴ However, the downside to the unifying quality of political parties is the stark separation that takes place between members of opposing political parties. This polarization has increased over time, especially in recent years. The trends in such contrasting opinions of the American public have been explored extensively across 20th and 21st century time periods.⁵ Collectively, these studies have justified the prevalence of a growing divide in political opinion and even hostility between political parties over the past five decades.

It is worth mentioning that the existence of political polarization in the American public has been challenged by Political Scientist Morris P. Fiorina, but his claims have since been disproven by Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, both professors of Political Science at Emory University and Colorado State University, respectfully.⁶ The authors analyzed data from American National Election Studies and compared the cross-referenced data to each of Fiorina's five original claims against polarization from his book *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*.

The prevalence of political polarization has been studied and justified across a variety of other sources in scholarly peer-reviewed texts. Social media, in particular, has been identified as an influential aspect of polarization in recent years.⁷ However, social media has only been a more recent implication of political polarization. Thus, this paper examines a source type that has existed longer over time, as political polarization has been increasing even before modern social media.

It is one thing to justify the prevalence of political polarization in the American public, but more important is the justification of political polarization's negative effects on society. Dominik Duel and Justin Valasek investigate the voting process in representative democracies as it relates to polarization. They find that policy differences and social polarization together negatively impact voter understanding of politics and, subsequently, lead voters to make

³ Delia Baldassarri and Andrew Gelman, "Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion," *American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 2 (2008): 408. doi:10.1086/590649.

⁴ Stuart Chinn, "Political Parties and Constitutional Fidelity," *Marquette Law Review* 102, no. 2 (Winter 2018): 392. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=134921606&site=ehost-live>.

⁵ Baldassarri and Gelman; Delia Baldassarri and Barum Park, "Was There a Culture War? Partisan Polarization and Secular Trends in US Public Opinion," *The Journal of Politics* 82, no. 3 (July 2020): 809–827. doi:10.1086/707306; Nelson Liu, "Political Polarization in the United States: The Influences of Exceptionalism and Religion," *International Social Science Review* 96, no. 2 (May 2020): 1-24. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=144395154&site=ehost-live>.

⁶ Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, "Is Polarization a Myth?" *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (2008): 542. doi:10.1017/s0022381608080493.

⁷ Tae Kyoung Lee, Youngju Kim, and Kevin Coe. "When Social Media Become Hostile Media: An Experimental Examination of News Sharing, Partisanship, and Follower Count." *Mass Communication and Society* 21, no. 4 (2018): 450-472. doi:10.1080/15205436.2018.1429635.

irrational decisions on election day.⁸ Similarly, another study done eleven years prior illuminated the tendency of voters to align themselves with the prominent labels attached to party opinions on headlining social justice issues, instead of the issues in and of themselves.⁹ This is problematic as stereotyping by partisan traits rather than partisan ideology allows for more politically polarized opinions, inevitably contributing to an overall influx of political polarization.¹⁰

The presidential perspective: introduction

Polarization in public opinion has been further investigated by Gary C. Jacobson. He used aggregate electoral and survey data to evaluate political polarization's durability against unifying American public issues on opposite-party presidential approval ratings.¹¹ Through his data collection, Jacobson concluded that presidential approval ratings from opposing parties remained centered around presidential influence, meaning nationwide events do not affect presidential approval ratings as much as the president does himself.¹² In the short term, the president is the only force that can gather support from an opposing party.

As a political influencer, a president naturally takes on the leadership role within their political party. Subsequently, this role negatively affects the opposing party's acceptance of a president's actions, emphasizing that societal opinions are, once again, heavily impacted by the incumbent president and his party affiliation.¹³ This phenomenon stands as another negative implication of political polarization since stereotyping by party rather than specific political views only increases polarization, as mentioned previously.¹⁴ The severity of polarization between opposing party presidential approval ratings has increased since 1972, according to a content analysis performed on American National Election Studies.¹⁵ The influx of partisan polarization has also been observed in more recent years, as done so in 2010 on the Obama administration's "We Can't Wait for" movement.¹⁶ The influence of the Obama administration on the movement adds to the contextualization of the president's substantial influence on public opinion, in conjunction with Jacobson's findings.

The presidential perspective: discrepancies in coverage

Despite the substantial influence the president has on American political opinions, there is a lack of analysis performed on the individual formats in which Presidents communicate with the public. A content analysis was performed on all formal presidential speeches from 1977 to 2012.¹⁷ The study, by Jesse H. Rhodes, concluded that presidents have decreased in their use of partisan rhetoric over time, illuminating a rise in presidential bipartisan posturing. However,

⁸ Dominik Duell and Justin Valasek, "Political Polarization and Selection in Representative Democracies," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 168, (December 2019): 132. doi:10.1016/j.jebo.2019.10.004.

⁹ Baladassari and Gelman, 443.

¹⁰ Jacob E. Rothschild et al. "Pigeonholing Partisans: Stereotypes of Party Supporters and Partisan Polarization," *Political Behavior* 41, no. 2 (June 2019): 423–443. doi:10.1007/s11109-018-9457-5.

¹¹ Gary C. Jacobson, "Partisan Polarization in Presidential Support: The Electoral Connection." *Congress, & the Presidency* 30, no. 1 (2003): 1-36. doi:10.1080/07343460309507855.

¹² Jacobson, 32.

¹³ Kenneth S. Lowande and Sidney M. Milkis, "'We Can't Wait': Barack Obama, Partisan Polarization and the Administrative Presidency." *The Forum* 12, no. 1 (2014): 4. <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2014-0022>.

¹⁴ Rothschild et al.

¹⁵ Brian Newman and Emerson Siegle, "The Polarized Presidency: Depth and Breadth of Public Partisanship." *Polls and Elections* 40, no. 2 (2010): 342-363. doi:10.1111/j.1741-5705.2010.03756.x.

¹⁶ Lowande and Milkis, 8-24.

¹⁷ Rhodes.

investigating specific kinds of speeches, in that they are given in different contexts with different intentions, would be beneficial. This kind of analysis is necessary to help pinpoint the nature of the influence that the President holds and understand polarization's uncharted implications. Eventually, the substantial amount of historical research discussed thus far, along with the data collected in this paper, could be used to depolarize politics in America.

Political rhetoric: introduction

Most studies examining political polarization and its relationship to political rhetoric have largely focused on politically involved groups and their influence on American perception. Such studies have examined Senators, the House of Representatives, presidential candidates, and presidents.¹⁸ The examination of these areas of government provides a broad understanding of rhetoric's importance as a means to invoke partisanship in Americans. However, a more specific understanding of political rhetoric's effects in variables aside from the speaker themselves—namely the purpose of the speech—is ill-researched. Furthermore, except for Rhode's analysis on presidential rhetoric, current studies neglect the use of bipartisan and cross-partisan rhetoric in their analyses. Bipartisan posturing has been a common stance taken by presidents to seem more reliable in the eyes of opposing political parties.¹⁹

Political rhetoric: commentator dialogue

Partisan rhetoric has been studied in various forms of literature and through various perspectives. As exemplified in a study previously mentioned, partisan rhetoric was studied in the context of American Presidential Campaigns from the years 1952 to 2012 in the form of a content analysis.²⁰ The authors compiled stump speeches and then isolated statements, using a ruby script, that contained political rhetoric. The authors' keyword dictionary included the terms "Democrat," "Democrats," "Democratic," "Republican," and "Republicans."²¹ From there, the statements were divided into the following categories: "Positive Statements about Only the Democratic Party; Negative Statements about Only the Democratic Party; Positive Statements about Only the Republican Party; Negative Statements about Only the Republican Party; Statements Contrasting the Parties in Favor of the Democrats; Statements Contrasting the Parties in Favor of the Republicans; Bipartisan Statements; and Not a Statement about the Parties."²² They then re-categorized the statements into the proportions of bipartisan, cross-partisan, and partisan rhetoric by finding the amount of each kind of rhetoric per 1000 words of each speaker. In doing so, the variation in the length of stump speeches could be accounted for.

Next, a bivariate analysis was performed through a two-sample t-test. The dependent variable was the proportion of partisan rhetoric per speaker per 1000 words. The independent variable was the year in which the speeches were given.²³ The authors ultimately find that Republican presidential candidates generally tend to avoid partisan rhetoric while Democratic presidential candidates do not.

Similarly, a study by Annelise Russell examined partisan rhetoric on the Twitter accounts of U.S. Senators to pinpoint their use of partisan rhetoric as means to advance political agenda and diminish the opposing party's

¹⁸ Annelise Russell, "Minority Opposition and Asymmetric Parties? Senators' Partisan Rhetoric on Twitter," *Political Research Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (June 2020): 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912920921239>; Jonathan S. Morris, "Reexamining the Politics of Talk: Partisan Rhetoric in the 104th House," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (February 2001): 101-121. doi:10.2307/440405; Rhodes and Albert; Rhodes.

¹⁹ Rhodes.

²⁰ Rhodes and Albert, 569.

²¹ Rhodes and Albert, 570.

²² Rhodes and Albert, 570.

²³ Rhodes and Albert, 574.

integrity in a hyper-partisan context.²⁴ The study brings more recent years into conversation as it collects data from January to June of 2013, 2015, and 2017. Interestingly, the study finds that Republicans in secure Congressional seats tend to engage in partisan rhetoric more than their Democratic counterparts, highlighting a contrast between their conclusions and the conclusions of Rhodes and Albert's study on presidential candidates. Additionally, Russell's study confirms the existence of polarization beyond the physical floor of Congress, which was proven by Robert Morris through his analysis of partisan rhetoric on one-minute speeches given on the 104th House floor.²⁵ These one-minute speeches have become increasingly popular in media as their brief nature draws watchers in while simultaneously spitting-out blunt political information—fostering an environment fit for direct partisan affiliation or partisan cynicism.²⁶

Given that current research on political rhetoric has largely focused on primary sources in highly partisan contexts, I aim to contribute data that comes from primary sources that are non-partisan to contextualize the rhetorical changes during America's growing political divide. Additionally, in doing so, I provide an additional perspective from which political rhetoric is used throughout the time periods used in both Rhodes and Albert's and Russell's studies.

Notably, political rhetoric has been studied between 1977 and 2012 on SOTU Addresses.²⁷ However, the content analysis performed also included all presidential statements and speeches. Inherently, this generalization leaves a gap in the understanding of presidential political rhetoric in specific contexts such as non-partisan or informational. It is also important to clarify that SOTU Addresses are not considered to be partisan speeches.²⁸ By definition, a SOTU Address is an informational communication from the President to Congress concerning the state of the country.

Due to the lack of research addressing the prevalence of political rhetoric in presidential non-partisan speeches, it becomes necessary to consider the question How has political rhetoric in the SOTU Addresses from 1966 to 2020 changed over time? and discuss my study's results and implications.

Methods

Overview

The research design is a content analysis of primary source documents incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data with bivariate analyses. The design closely follows that of Rhodes and Albert's 2017 article on partisan rhetoric in presidential campaign speeches. A few details stray from their method, but such deviations will be discussed and justified as needed.

Primary source collection

Prior research has been done on the rhetoric of SOTU Addresses. Most notably, Ben Wasike published an article in 2017 that examines the prevalence of charismatic rhetoric in all SOTU Addresses through the end of the Obama

²⁴ Russell.

²⁵ Morris, 102.

²⁶ Morris, 102.

²⁷ Rhodes.

²⁸ Colleen J. Shogan, *The President's State of the Union Address: Tradition, Function, and Policy Implications*, CRS Report No. R40132, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 2016.

administration.²⁹ Wasike did so through a content analysis. He compiled the SOTU Addresses from an online repository titled *The American Presidency Project* that contains transcripts of presidential speeches and records. I used the same website to gather my dataset since I, too, conducted a content analysis on SOTU Addresses. The speeches I collected were from between the years 1966 to 2020. The data set begins in 1966 to maintain consistency between the context the addresses were given in. The opposing-party public response to the SOTU began in 1966. Thus, for the sake of potential partisan posturing biases, I chose to exclude the years a president's address would be evaluated formally by their opposing party in front of the public.

55 speeches were collected in total. However, researching a sample size that included other non-partisan speeches would have been beneficial. Doing so would have created a more representative sample that could better account for potential factors related to SOTU Addresses that affect the results, outside of the speech being non-partisan, such as the party in control of Congress at the time of the address.

Content analysis

The content analysis begins with the isolation of statements that explicitly mention the political parties. This was done so after transferring transcripts of all of the Addresses to Google Documents. To isolate the statements, I entailed a keyword dictionary derived from Rhodes and Albert's study containing the following terms: "Democrat," "Democrats," "Democratic," "Republican," and "Republicans." I used the Ctrl "F" function on my computer to identify each keyword in the transcripts. Each sentence that a keyword was found in was then coded as a political statement. Additionally, the identified political statements were read to check for false positives.³⁰

Next, the statements were divided into eight different subcategories related to political rhetoric. Those categories, as used in Rhodes and Albert's study, were "Positive Statements about Only the Democratic Party; Negative Statements about Only the Democratic Party; Positive Statements about Only the Republican Party; Negative Statements about Only the Republican Party; Statements Contrasting the Parties in Favor of the Democrats; Statements Contrasting the Parties in Favor of the Republicans; Bipartisan Statements; and Not a Statement about the Parties."³¹ I determined the placement of each statement into its corresponding category as did Rhodes and Albert in their study. The isolation of each statement before its classification as a kind of political rhetoric will allow for a better understanding of the intent of the statement. Additionally, categorizing the statements later into the three kinds of political rhetoric was made easier in employing this step.

Next, I recategorized the statements into one of the three different kinds of political rhetoric. The figure below displays what kind of political rhetoric each of the eight categories was coded as.

²⁹ Ben Wasike, "Charismatic Rhetoric, Integrative Complexity and the U.S. Presidency: An Analysis of the State of the Union Address (SOTU) from George Washington to Barack Obama," *The Leadership Quarterly* 28, no. 6 (December 2017): 812. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leafqua.2017.04.002>.

³⁰ Rhodes and Albert, 569.

³¹ Rhodes and Albert, 570.

Political Rhetoric	Corresponding Subcategory
Partisan	Positive Statements about Only the Democratic Party
	Negative Statements about Only the Democratic Party
	Positive Statements about Only the Republican Party
	Negative Statements about Only the Republican Party
Bipartisan	Bipartisan Statements
Cross-Partisan	Statements Contrasting the Parties in Favor of the Democrats
	Statements Contrasting the Parties in Favor of the Republicans
Not applicable	Not a Statement about the Parties

Figure 1.

The next step entailed quantifying the amount of each of the three kinds of political rhetoric—partisan, bipartisan, or cross-partisan—in each speech. The number of politically rhetorical statements was then found for each president since SOTU addresses are given annually; thus, most presidents have given multiple Addresses during their time in office. Thus, I had data recorded by year and by president. Albert’s study also found the kind of rhetoric per speaker and the kind of rhetoric per year. Comparing data between presidents, instead of between years, allows for a clearer understanding of the differences between presidents of opposing political parties. If rhetoric was examined in only its prevalence per year, the results would neglect the role political party affiliation may play in a president’s use of political rhetoric.

Given that the SOTU addresses vary in length, a standardized measurement needed to be created before the proportions of rhetoric could be accurately compared. Therefore, the proportions of partisan, bipartisan, or cross-partisan rhetoric per Address were converted to the proportions of partisan, bipartisan, or cross-partisan rhetoric per Address per 1000 words of the Address. The use of a 1000 word standardization was taken from Rhodes and Albert’s study. In employing this standardization, the varying lengths of the addresses could be controlled. Data could have been skewed if this step did not take place. For example, two addresses could contain the same number of partisan rhetoric statements, and thus they would be recorded to be equally partisan. However, if one SOTU address was shorter than the other, the shorter address proportionally used partisan rhetoric more frequently than the other. So, while they appeared to contain equal amounts of rhetoric, the shorter address ultimately leaned more partisan when taking into account the number of statements in proportion to the length of the address.

Frequency charts

After the standardized measurements were calculated as explained above, the results were graphed in various frequency charts. Frequency charts display the recurrence of statistical outcomes over a period of time. The proposed research question How has political rhetoric in the SOTU Addresses between 1966 and 2020 changed over time? can be addressed by graphing the varying proportions of political rhetoric in such a way.

Bivariate analysis

The final step in the methodology entailed a bivariate analysis. The analytical strategy used was a two-sample ANOVA test. A two-sample ANOVA test analyzes the variance in statistical outcomes across two independent variables to determine whether or not the differing outcomes are statistically significant. This strategy strays from Rhodes and Albert’s study in that they used a two-sample t-test. However, Both t-tests and ANOVA tests determine the significant differences between statistical data. Thus, the only difference between a t-test and an ANOVA test is the number of

groups being analyzed and compared. Rhodes and Albert had one group (partisan rhetoric per speaker per 1000 words) while I had three groups (partisan, bipartisan, or cross-partisan rhetoric per president per 100 words). Both analytical strategies also had a two-sample design, as results were drawn separately from two independent variables: Democratic affiliates and Republican affiliates. Thus, using Rhodes and Albert's study to justify my two-sample ANOVA test, despite their use of another type of bivariate analysis, is applicable.

The dependent variable was the proportion of partisan/bipartisan/cross-partisan rhetoric per year per 1000 words. The independent variable was the year in which the SOTU address was given. It is important to note that the analyses were done separately on Democratic and Republican presidents, then compared after the analysis for each kind of rhetoric, hence the two-sample modeling structure. Additionally, it is important to emphasize that the bivariate analyses were done on the "per year" data instead of the "per president" data, as Rhodes and Albert's did so in their study as well. The proposed null hypotheses according to the ANOVA test are listed below.

H₀1: There is no difference in group means at any level for the kind of political rhetoric used.

H₀2: There is no difference in group means at any level for the party affiliation of the president giving the SOTU Address.

H₀3: The effect of one independent variable does not depend on the effect of the other independent variable.

The ANOVA test itself will add further contextualization to the data observed in the frequency charts. The statistical test will suggest whether or not the possible differences in political rhetoric are justifiably changing during the time period tested.

Hypothesis

As suggested in Rhodes's study on presidential speeches, I believe that presidents will, too, take advantage of bipartisan posturing in non-partisan speeches to maintain that neutral atmosphere. Thus, presidents would use bipartisan rhetoric more than partisan or cross-partisan. Additionally, I suspect that bipartisan rhetoric usage will increase over time. When compared to partisan rhetoric, political rhetoric that is bipartisan works to foster a less hostile reaction to the rhetoric. Inherently, given the rise of political polarization in recent decades, I hypothesize that presidents, as influential political leaders, have to work harder to create a less hostile environment between political parties over time. So, their use of bipartisan rhetoric would, in turn, increase. Lastly, I anticipate that presidents will generally decline in their use of partisan and cross-partisan rhetoric overtime to, again, help foster a less partisan atmosphere, especially in SOTU Addresses where the context is non-partisan.

Results

Content analysis

A summary of the results from the content analysis and frequency calculations can be found in Appendix A. Additionally, an example of a statement that represents each one of the three kinds of political rhetoric is shown in the chart below.

	Example Statement
Partisan Rhetoric	“That Congress, led by Republicans like Senator Arthur Vandenberg, answered President Truman's call. Together, they made the commitments that strengthened our country for 50 years.”
Bipartisan Rhetoric	“In the aftermath of that terrible shooting, we came together, not as Republicans or Democrats, but as representatives of the people. But it is not enough to come together only in times of tragedy.”
Cross-partisan Rhetoric	“I'm a Democrat, but I believe what Republican Abraham Lincoln believed: that Government should do for people only what they cannot do better by themselves and no more.”

Figure 2.

As stated in the method section, the data from the content analysis was converted to a standardized measurement. Figure 3 displays the results in a frequency chart after converting the content analysis data into a standardized measurement. In general, bipartisan rhetoric appears to be the most used kind of rhetoric, followed by partisan rhetoric, then cross-partisan rhetoric. The most bipartisan rhetoric was observed in 2011. On average, 1,309 bipartisan statements were made for every 1000 words of the 2011 SOTU Address. It is also important to note that cross-partisan rhetoric was only used once over the course of the period tested and that was in 2012.

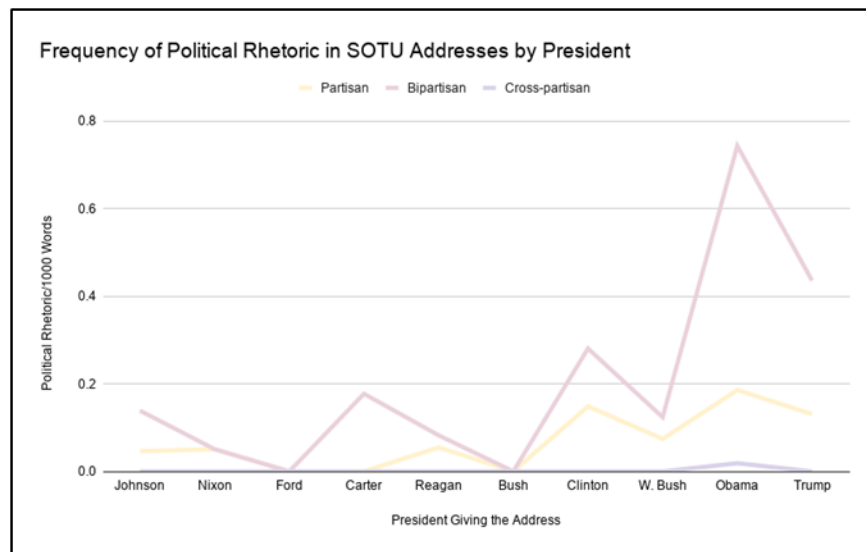


Figure 3.

A second frequency chart was employed to display the rhetorical differences between presidents. That frequency chart is shown in Figure 4. Several important conclusions from Figure 4 should be mentioned. Firstly, Barack Obama used the most of all three kinds of rhetoric. On average, he used a partisan statement 0.186 times for every 1000 words of an Address, a bipartisan statement 0.744 times for every 1000 words of an Address, and a cross-partisan statement 0.0186 times for every 1000 words of an Address. The two-way ANOVA test, which will be discussed later in the Results section, will attempt to justify the statistical significance of the difference between these results as the difference appears to be numerically small. Secondly, only two presidents, over the period analyzed, refrained from

using political rhetoric. The two presidents were Ford and Bush. Figure 4 also better demonstrates an overall increase in rhetoric usage for all three kinds of rhetoric than Figure 3 over time.

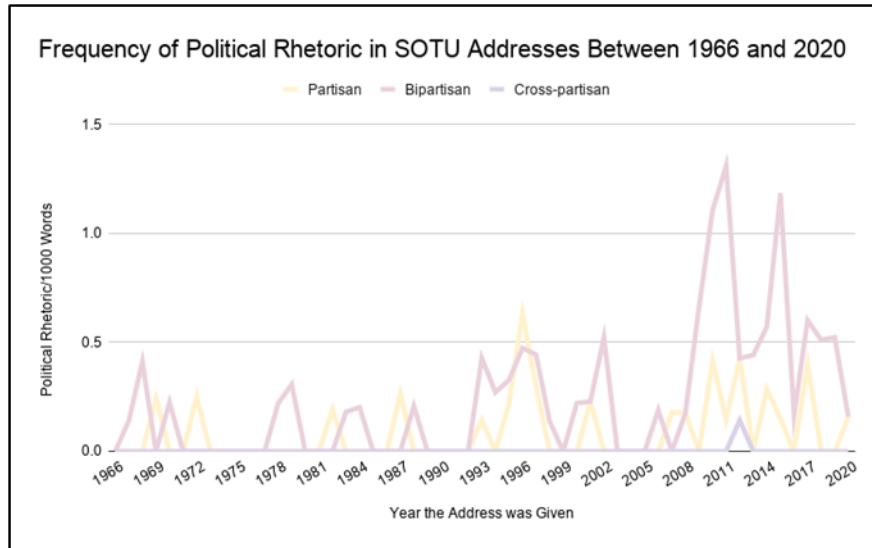


Figure 4.

A third and final frequency chart, shown in Figure 5, displays the average rhetoric differences between Democratic and Republican presidents. Democratic presidents used more political rhetoric as a whole than their Republican counterparts.

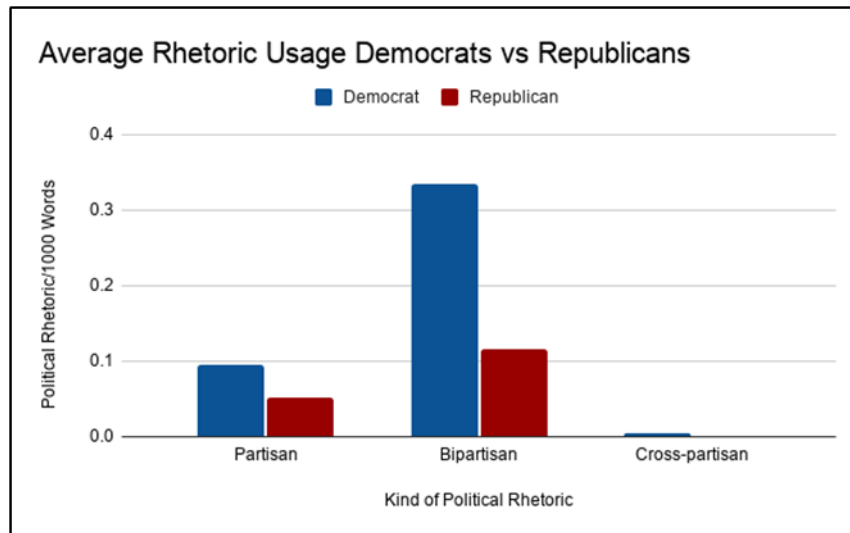


Figure 5.

Bivariate analysis

A two-way analysis of variance was performed to examine the statistical difference between the amount of political rhetoric present in the SOTU Addresses between Democratic and Republican party affiliates' use of the different kinds

of political rhetoric (partisan, bipartisan, and cross-partisan rhetoric). Below is a repeat summary of the three null hypotheses tested.

H₀1: There is no difference in group means at any level for the kind of political rhetoric used.

H₀2: There is no difference in group means at any level for the party affiliation of the president giving the SOTU Address.

H₀3: The effect of one independent variable does not depend on the effect of the other independent variable.

From the output of the two-way ANOVA test, party affiliation and the kind of political rhetoric used each suggest that there is a significant amount of variance in the amount of political rhetoric between SOTU Addresses (p-values < 0.0001). Thus, the null hypotheses H₀1 and H₀2 can both be rejected. Additionally, the interaction between party affiliation and the kind of rhetoric used also suggests a significant amount of variance in the prevalence of political rhetoric in SOTU Addresses (p-value 0.0002). Thus, the third null hypothesis H₀3 can also be rejected. The complete table of results from the two-way ANOVA test can be found in Appendix B.

Discussion

The implications surrounding political polarization have been studied extensively in recent decades. Such studies have used the analysis of political rhetoric as means to measure partisanship of various political figures such as members of Congress, presidential candidates, and presidents. However, these studies have focused on the political figures' rhetoric usage as a whole, without making distinctions between the context in which the rhetoric was given. Thus, a gap exists in the understanding of presidents' political rhetoric usage when giving a speech that is not partisan.

Throughout this paper, I identify the prominent rhetorical trends in SOTU Addresses from 1966 to 2020. Due to the exploratory nature of my research question, no one trend or datapoint will fill the gap in scholarly understanding at hand. Instead, situating various trends into conversation with their implications and current research will thoroughly examine the research question. Furthermore, is it important to mention the effect my ANOVA test has on the validity of my results. In getting to reject all three of my null hypotheses, it can be affirmed that despite the small numerical difference between the values mentioned in the results section, their differences are statistically significant. Subsequently, the accuracy of the discussion to follow is reaffirmed through the ANOVA test.

A rise in bipartisan posturing

A study performed on all presidential speeches given between 1977 and 2012 is heavily intertwined with my results.³² Rhodes found that bipartisan rhetoric had increased in the tested time period. My results align with Rhodes's bipartisan trend. Furthermore, my study showcases the rise in bipartisan rhetoric usage over an expanded time period, as well as in a supposedly politically neutral atmosphere, as SOTU Addresses are non-partisan speeches. Through my results alone, it can be assumed that bipartisan rhetoric is being used by presidents to maintain a neutral atmosphere, a claim that cannot be derived from Rhodes' study as not all speeches analyzed were prefaced to be non-partisan. Presidents likely use high amounts of bipartisan rhetoric to minimize their partisanship during a speech. Furthermore, since presidents are assumed to be the leaders of their affiliated political party, it is contradicting to see them take on a more politically neutral tone in instances where their party's political agendas could easily be advanced, like in SOTU Addresses where partisan ideals are supposed to be nonexistent from the start.³³ Furthermore, presidents largely refraining from cross-partisan rhetoric in their SOTU Addresses, emphasizing the likelihood presidents want to seem

³² Rhodes.

³³ Lowande and Milkis, 4.

less partisan. There is also a possibility that presidents have felt the need to appear more moderate in the eyes of the public over time because of the increase in political polarization. This theory stands to be a likely cause of increased bipartisan posturing since the public perception of presidents largely relies on their political affiliation.³⁴

Unwarranted partisanship

However, along with an increase in bipartisan rhetoric, I found a similar increasing trend in the usage of partisan rhetoric, which was the opposite of what I anticipated. Now, neither the increase nor the prevalence of partisan rhetoric exceeded that of bipartisan rhetoric, but it is an important trend to bring into the conversation, nonetheless. A high prevalence of partisan rhetoric was also found in speeches on the 104th House floor and Senators' posts on social media.³⁵ Both studies were done in the past three decades, suggesting that there is a relationship between the increase of partisan rhetoric found in presidential SOTU Addresses and the partisan rhetoric of other political leaders. This similarity reiterates that despite the many factors that can play a role in the political atmosphere, partisanship is still increasing across the board, as my findings and other scholarly research both point towards similar trends despite their variance in speaker and context.

Furthermore, given the rise in bipartisan posturing observed by Rhodes in presidential speeches and reaffirmed through my results, the similar rise in partisan statements in a non-partisan context suggests that bipartisan posturing may not be a full-proof way for presidents to omit themselves from contributing to polarization.

An in-office inclination towards partisanship

Interestingly enough, Democratic and Republican presidential candidates have historically used less partisan rhetoric between 1952 and 2012.³⁶ As previously discussed, I found an opposing, upward trend in the use of partisan rhetoric in presidential SOTU Addresses. This difference suggests that when presidential candidates are elected into office, they have felt increasingly inclined to engage in partisan rhetoric, likely because they only need to appeal to the opposing party for approval but not for votes, too.

Party affiliation distinctions

So far, I have discussed the rhetorical trends I found as a whole. Now, I will briefly discuss the observed differences between the two parties' political rhetoric usage, as party affiliation has resulted in differing trends in similar studies on political rhetoric. Rhodes and Albert found that Democratic presidential candidates engaged in partisan rhetoric more than Republicans, and my research goes further to say that once these candidates are elected into office, this trend remains consistent. However, Russell found that Republican Senators instead engaged in more partisan rhetoric on social media than Democrats.³⁷ In situating my results into conversation with these two studies, it could be argued that the difference between political parties' rhetoric usage is not affected by whether or not a political official is running for office or is actively in office. However, such a claim calls for further comparison between political figures' rhetoric usage between Democrats and Republicans, both in-office and out-of-office.

Limitations

An interesting trend I would like to mention was the almost non-existent use of cross-partisan rhetoric. As a reminder, for a statement to be classified as cross-partisan, it needed to mention both political parties in one sentence, with one being mentioned positively and the other being mentioned negatively. I believe these standards are too strict, which likely explains why I found so little cross-partisan rhetoric in the SOTU Addresses. Singular sentences that explicitly

³⁴ Lowande and Milkis, 4.

³⁵ Morris, 102; Russell, 243.

³⁶ Rhodes, 133.

³⁷ Russell, 243.

contrast both parties and mention them by name are hard to come by, but that does not mean politically-charged rhetoric is not being used. It simply means that cross-partisan rhetoric is not being used in singular sentences. Furthermore, I could not pick up on politically charged statements that did not explicitly mention the political parties because I used a keyword dictionary, meaning I only coded for statements that mentioned the political parties by name.

Conclusion

Professional conversation

With political polarization on the rise, it has become necessary for researchers to explore its many implications. Such studies have commonly found the frequency of political rhetoric as a means to measure partisanship in political figures. Many of these studies focused on a wide variety of political speeches, without taking into consideration the potential difference in context between speeches. Before this study, presidents' political rhetoric had been studied across all presidents' public statements between 1972 and 2012. However, my study was able to measure the prevalence of presidents' political rhetoric in a non-persuasive context by only analyzing the rhetoric of SOTU Addresses. Doing so limits the possibility that presidents are trying to appeal to a particular audience since SOTU Addresses are directed towards Americans as a whole.

Implications

The heightened use of partisan rhetoric in Democratic presidents when compared to Republican presidents should motivate Democratic presidents to limit their partisan rhetoric usage instead of attempting to overcompensate with bipartisan rhetoric, which has been steadily increasing over time according to my results. Furthermore, while bipartisan rhetoric is increasing, and thus a presidents' outward benevolence towards both political parties, this trend does not negate that the frequency of partisan rhetoric, rhetoric that favors one party over the other, remains fairly consistent. My research may even go so far as to suggest that bipartisan posturing may not be a successful remedy for subsiding political polarization even though it is an increasingly common stance taken by political figures.³⁸ Polarization continues to rise despite the increase in presidential bipartisan rhetoric I have found. Additionally, as presidents are the only force that can gain support from an opposing political party, their ability to easily make impressions on the American public emphasizes the possibility of a relationship between political polarization and presidential partisan rhetoric usage. Thus, to decrease political polarization, presidents and other political figures alike should refrain from one-sided partisan language. I propose a shift from bipartisan posturing to non-partisan posturing for all political leaders.

Future directions

I believe it would be beneficial for future researchers that are examining political rhetoric with the same keyword dictionary as mine to either omit cross-partisan rhetoric from their research or find a different way of coding. As I mentioned in my discussion, the small amount of cross-partisan rhetoric I found was likely due to the strict requirements that needed to be met for a statement to be considered cross-partisan.

Additionally, analyzing the speeches of other political figures could be beneficial, but due to the influential nature of the president, I suggest that future research focus on the presidents' contribution to the political atmosphere. Secondly, it may also be beneficial for research endeavors to isolate and analyze other political speeches in varying contexts, such as celebratory and persuasive, as doing so may add further contextualization to the use of political

³⁸ Rhodes, 133.

rhetoric as means to influence political polarization. However, I believe research entirely dedicated to identifying and discussing the trends between all of the scholarly information on political rhetoric would be the most beneficial. The trends found in this paper, along with many other papers in political science, are multifaceted. Politics in America encapsulates almost every aspect of life, from infrastructure to civil rights. Thus, in order to thoroughly understand the trends observed here and in other papers, future research should largely focus on analyzing current studies' results and their possible relationships with other studies' results, instead of adding another facet of results to further complicate the matter.

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