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Conceptualizing and Measuring White House Staff Influence on Presidential Rhetoric

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Scholars have debated extensively the impact of presidential rhetoric on public opinion and congressional behavior, but have largely ignored the determinants of what the president actually says. This inattention is partly the result of the difficulty of acquiring systematic observations of presidential speech crafting. We devise a method of quantifying White House staff influence over the composition of rhetoric that captures the multistage negotiations between the president's speechwriters and his policy advisors and provides a framework for future studies on the determinants of presidential rhetoric. We employ our method to study influence over the writing of President George H. W. Bush's announcement of his veto of a tax bill.

Presidential rhetoric is hardly an understudied phenomenon in American politics. Since Richard Neustadt (1990) famously defined presidential power as the power to persuade, political scientists have evaluated and analyzed the empirical evidence supporting this claim. Scholarly treatments of the subject have ranged from the development and normative consequences of the "rhetorical presidency" perspective (Tulis 1987) and the strategic considerations behind "going public" (Kernell 1997) to the impact of presidential rhetoric on public opinion (Edwards 2003; Page and Shapiro 1984, 1992; Welch 2003a, 2003b), the public agenda (Cohen 1995, 1997; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2005; Edwards and Wood 1999; Hill 1998; Wood and Peake 1998; Young and Perkins 2005), and congressional behavior (Canes-Wrone 2001, 2005; Powell and Schloyer 2003).

These studies treat presidential rhetoric as an explanatory concept, one that primarily shapes other events. Scholars have largely ignored, however, the determinants of what

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the president says. Given the importance of presidential rhetoric, both substantively and symbolically, it is essential that we expand our understanding of why presidents speak as they do. Furthermore, it is important to explain the influences over rhetoric because the manner in which the president presents his ideas and positions on policy determines the nature of policy debates (Schattschneider 1960; Cohen 1995, 1997; Light 1999; Edwards and Wood 1999). Accordingly, the decisions of whether to endorse or oppose a particular policy position and how to frame that position are just as important as the action itself (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

We suggest that White House-centered factors explain a great deal of what the president says and how he says it. We maintain that two key sources of power within the White House—speechwriters and policy advisors—vie for control over the words of the president, and that the balance of power is both dynamic and meaningful to presidential speech. In this article, we illustrate the dimensions of this conflict and provide a framework to guide future research on it.

Intra-White House Conflict over Presidential Rhetoric

A few scholars with humanities backgrounds have focused on the question of the influences on presidential rhetoric (see, e.g., Gelderman 1997; Huebner 1970; Medhurst 1998; Ritter and Medhurst 2003; Smith 1976, 1977), but no one has systematically addressed the question in a social scientific fashion. One reason for this lack of attention may be that scholars perceive they lack quantifiable data on rhetoric. In this article, we ameliorate this challenge by providing a method for creating such data using archival resources.¹

By chronologically ordering and examining iterations of speech drafts, along with memos between White House staffers and speechwriters concerning specific drafts, scholars can observe the cooperation and conflict between speechwriters and policy advisors on individual speeches. Scholars can use a specified set of speeches to explain how and why presidential rhetoric develops and evolves over a particular span of time. Not only can scholars exploit this archival data to compose descriptive narratives but they can also mine quantifiable data from the archives by tracking the ratio between speechwriter inputs and policy advisor inputs over iterations and the final drafts. In the section that follows, we introduce and apply our quantification method using a best-test case study for speechwriter versus policy advisor influence in the White House: President George H. W. Bush's announcement to veto the Tax Fairness and Economic Growth Acceleration Act of 1992.²

President Bush's veto threat is a best-test case of speechwriting for two reasons. First, Bush delivered the speech to relatively little fanfare and public attention, rendering

1. Presidential libraries, as required by federal law, collect drafts of speeches and memos concerning speeches in the White House Office of Records and Management files, primarily under codes designated for the Office of Speechwriting, as well as the official papers of individual speechwriters.

2. The data concerning this speech are contained in the archival files for President George H. W. Bush, located in the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum at Texas A&M University in College Station. See <http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/>.

less pronounced the contextual factors that often govern presidential behavior, and leaving more room for intrastaff negotiation between speechwriters and policy advisors.

Second, because the speech concerned a presidential veto threat of pending legislation, the drafting process took on a more formalized nature than the usual presidential message-crafting process. The executive branch formally processes veto threats through the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in the form of Statements of Administration Policy (SAPs), which serve as formal notice to appropriate committee and subcommittee chairs that the president intends to veto particular pieces of legislation if Congress passes them.³

In the George H. W. Bush White House, Phillip Brady—in his role as assistant to the president and staff secretary—disseminated drafts of pending SAPs to a group of as many as twenty-three presidential advisors, ranging from the OMB director to the assistant for legislative affairs to the chairman of the Republican National Committee. In this capacity, Brady typically served as an intermediary between the policy advisors and the OMB. However, because the president was to deliver a speech justifying his decision to veto this legislation, the various drafts of this speech were also disseminated through the OMB's SAP vetting process, making Brady an intermediary for the speechwriters, as well.⁴

Measuring Influence

We examine Bush's speech on the veto threat at each draft stage to identify where substantive policy rhetoric originates and the extent to which speechwriters and policy advisors are responsible for the content. Following the narrative of the drafting process, we introduce a coding scheme that measures the relative inputs of both speechwriters and policy advisors. From the resultant data, we compute a score that measures the extent to which speechwriters (*vis-à-vis* policy advisors) influence the rhetorical content of a speech.

Quantifying the Speechwriter-Policy Advisor Conflict

The president depends on the expertise of both speechwriters and policy advisors. Moreover, both speechwriters and policy advisors utilize their expertise in order to influence White House policy positions, whether by deciding which policy positions to discuss or how to frame a policy position. For the typical White House speech, the chief of staff or another key presidential aide presents the Office of Speechwriting with a general list of guidelines about the topics the president's speech concerns. Using thematic and rhetorical devices that are consistent with the administration's style and policy goals,

3. Samuel Kernell (2005) has provided an exhaustive list of SAPs, recently published on CD-ROM by Congressional Quarterly. In addition, Richard Conley's (2003) research illustrates the importance of veto threats in shaping the national-level policy debate.

4. Due to this bureaucratic formalization, the various iterations of the speech were preserved in a more centralized location than is typically the case. It should be noted, however, that the data found for this speech are no different or more prevalent than the data concerning the typical White House speech; it was simply easier to find and collect due to the application of the OMB procedure.

the wordsmiths in the Office of Speechwriting create an initial draft of the speech. Later, the president's policy advisors examine the draft with a critical eye. The president's advisors make factual corrections, stylistic suggestions, and propose other ideas for the speechwriters to take into consideration on subsequent drafts. The speechwriters receive the edits, choose to heed or ignore them, and compose the next draft. This back and forth continues until either the date of the speech or the production of a draft that is acceptable to all, with the frequency and intensity of the iterations in the drafting process positively related to the importance of the speech.

It is this negotiation over language in the drafts that provides the basis of our quantification of the disparate influence of speechwriters and policy advisors on the ultimate content of the speech. To observe which of these contributions are present in a speech, memos and transcripts passed between the actors involved require thorough documentation. To determine rhetorical influences, we assess (1) the original directions and guidelines sent to the speechwriting office, (2) the content of the first draft, and (3) the changes and suggestions occurring between subsequent iterations and the final draft. In order to quantify the influence of the parties involved, we tally specific instances of influence over the speech content for both speechwriters and policy advisors. Once tallied, we determine the percentage of the total number of inputs that indicate speechwriter influence over the content of presidential speeches.

To maintain consistency in scoring, we apply the most straightforward measures possible. Instances of suggestions, textual changes, and both original and successive draft guidelines leading to the final speech all count as single measures of an "input." However, we distinguish between types of inputs; specifically, we distinguish substantive policy inputs from those inputs that concern framing policy positions. Substantive policy inputs count as a whole measure (e.g., scored as 1) and policy-framing inputs count as half-measures (e.g., scored as .5). We score the latter inputs less because they do not initiate mentioning a policy position but instead only signify a change in its presentation to the public.⁵

With these scores properly incorporated into the measure, we identify and code the content of the various policy advisor and speechwriter inputs contained in the first draft. Once this is complete, we code each of the following iterations of the speech, as well as the memo comments corresponding to each draft, in the same manner. Upon completion of coding for all drafts, we tally the inputs for both the speechwriters and the policy advisors, and calculate the percentage of the total for the speechwriters.⁶ Hence, we are able to calculate a relative measure of rhetorical influence between the delegated

5. This measurement is justified by the fact that a policy input has two parts: (1) its substantive component and (2) how it is framed or communicated. When an input marks a change in a policy position, the input necessarily changes both the policy and the way the policy is framed. When an input only changes the way a policy is framed, however, it changes how it is communicated without changing the actual substance; thus, it is considered as a half-change. Though speechwriters are less likely than policy advisors to suggest substantive policy inputs, both groups technically have the power to change either. Indeed, in this speech, some of the speechwriter inputs concerned both the substantive components of policy positions *and* how to frame them.

6. The choice of calculating the percentage for the speechwriters and not the policy advisors is arbitrary. Whatever percentage of the total inputs that does not belong to the speechwriters belongs to the policy advisors, so this figure is actually a measure of both speechwriter and policy advisor influence.

authority of the president's policy advisors and the expertise of speechwriters in composing the message.

Descriptive Narrative

Looking at the documentation sequentially, it is evident that only a small portion of the intermediaries is actively involved. Out of 23 policy advisors copied on the SAP memo list, only 12 provided inputs in the form of guidelines or suggested draft changes. The president's policy advisors initially provided the Office of Speechwriting with 13 substantive policy positions, each of which the speechwriters incorporated into the first draft. After receiving these initial guidelines, the Office of Speechwriting then contributed an additional 39 inputs to the first draft.⁷ Upon completion of this draft, the speechwriters submitted the text to the policy advisors for approval through the OMB's SAP memorandum system. Several policy advisors responded through the OMB's SAP memorandum system to this first draft with suggestions concerning the content. Included in these memos were 36 inputs, 16 of which the speechwriters incorporated into the next draft.⁸ There were no additional original speechwriter inputs in this second draft. Memos circulated again, and the policy advisors presented the Office of Speechwriting with 10 additional inputs from policy advisors, 4 of which they incorporated into the subsequent draft. Following the circulation of this draft and the corresponding memoranda, the policy advisors presented 6 more inputs to the speechwriters, 3 of which the speechwriters included in the next and final draft.

Thus, the draft of the speech that the president delivered included 75 inputs from the preceding drafting stage. Of these 75 inputs, 39 originated from the speechwriters and 36 came from the policy advisors. These figures seem to indicate that the speechwriters maintained a slight edge over the policy advisors in terms of influencing the president's speech. This type of analysis, however, fails to recognize fully the speechwriters' prerogative of not including certain inputs suggested by the policy advisors; that is, it dilutes the actual influence that speechwriters possess in the speechwriting process.⁹

7. Five of these inputs concerned both the substantive policy position and how to frame it; the remaining 34 inputs only affected the way in which policy positions were framed.

8. One of the disregarded policy advisor inputs at this stage came from National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, who questioned the wisdom of including the president's position on term limits for members of Congress. Scowcroft notes in his draft revision memo that "Ginny Lampley has strong objections to language on pages 5 & 11. . . . [The] NSC has serious concerns about including this position. Smacks right at our Republican leadership too. This is a dangerous position to take." That it is not rescinded from the final speech illustrates a clear policy contribution stemming from the Office of Speechwriting. In addition, it is important to note that Scowcroft's level of authority on this matter is limited in the sense of his position (national security advisor), which is powerful as a part of the president's inner circle of major advisors but also quite distant from the policy discussion at hand. In other words, though Scowcroft's words carried much weight with respect to national security issues, his views on the political ramifications of taking a stand on congressional term limits received less attention and deference. See White House Staffing Memorandum, "Presidential Address Remarks: Announcing Veto Message of Tax Bill, 03/20." Document no. 316496/2124, marked "NSC concurs with the attached, as revised" (92 MAR 20 p12:58).

9. To further make the point, a look at the draft memos provides evidence of the amount of discretion the speechwriters possess throughout the revising stage. Of the total number of revisions suggested by the policy advisors ($n = 68$), barely a third were included in the final draft of the speech ($n = 23$). Out of all the revisions submitted, only five of the eight contributors have their suggestions included in the final speech.

To appropriately capture this effect, we employ our measure of rhetorical influence, which takes into consideration not only the inputs accepted and included in the final draft of the speech, but also those ignored or rejected by the speechwriters. By doing so, the number of inputs rises considerably from 75 to 113. Of these 113 inputs, 77 denote speechwriter influence and 36 denote policy advisor influence. Thus, using our measure of rhetorical influence, we find that speechwriters exercised 68.1 percent of the influence over the president's words.

Discussion

Before generalizing about the nature of the speechwriter-policy advisor conflict over the constructing of presidential rhetoric, we must take into consideration the circumstances surrounding this particular speech. Unlike other modern presidents, Bush did not place a strong institutional emphasis on speechmaking. Instead, the president delegated this responsibility to his closest advisors. These advisors primarily directed the speechwriters by providing the policy positions that the president intended to discuss. During the Bush administration, the Office of Speechwriting exercised considerable independence with respect to framing those policy positions within the president's message. Different presidents have delegated authority over message production in different ways.

Further research into the speech-crafting process of other presidents is bound to identify contextual explanations for who wields more influence in the White House and when, as well as how this variation affects the speechwriting process and content of presidential rhetoric. Future studies should investigate the extent to which the president's political context explains variation in speechwriter versus policy advisor influence. Indeed, only by applying a systematic form of measurement, such as that provided in this article, may scholars be able to study and measure rhetorical influence in speechwriting within administrations and across presidencies.

Conclusion

This approach makes research on the topic useful for political scientists as well as for scholars of the rhetorical presidency. The framework also provides a way to replicate the process with other speeches, allowing the aggregation of multiple case studies in order to draw broader conclusions. Indeed, the ability to generalize is the key to understanding presidential speechwriting as a process.

Although the analysis in this article provides considerable insight into the speechwriter-policy advisor conflict over influencing the words of the president in one particular speech, it also leaves us with new, unanswered questions. For example, did each of Bush's speeches follow a similar give and take and were the negotiations resolved in a similar manner, or was there variation over the influence that the speechwriters and policy advisors enjoyed vis-à-vis one another? If so, under what conditions did this influence vary and how? Similarly, were other presidents different from George H. W. Bush? Did

Presidents Reagan and Clinton, widely considered more vested in the speechwriting process, have different ratios of influence between their wordsmiths and their policy advisors? Each of these questions, and many others, can be resolved if scholars take advantage of the immense amount of data held in presidential libraries across the nation.

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