Exploring the Invocation of Emotion in Presidential Speeches

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Exploring the invocation of emotion in presidential speeches

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Scholars have long explored why presidential rhetoric is important and how it matters for public leadership and policy-making. However, relatively few works have considered the role that emotion plays in leadership communication and no research has conducted a thorough examination of the various types of emotions invoked in presidential rhetoric, their frequency, or how they have shaped presidential discourse over time. In this study, presidential speeches across 13 administrations (1933–2011) are examined to provide a first assessment of the extent to which US presidents have invoked fear, anger, and hope across policy domains and key types of speeches.

Keywords: presidents; emotions; speeches; rhetoric; political communication

Introduction

In addressing the public and other political actors, presidents strive to convey messages that are deemed important and influential. Speeches offer presidents an opportunity to set the agenda, signal their policy preferences, and, among other things, strike an emotional chord with the public. Therein, presidents – and political leaders more generally – may invoke motivational cues in their attempts to influence citizen responses and behaviour (Bucy and Newhagen 1999, Bucy 2000). Although scholars have long explored why presidential rhetoric is important and how it matters for public relations and policy-making, relatively few works have considered the role that emotion plays in presidential communication (but see Loseke 2009, de Castella and McGarty 2011). Nevertheless, emotional content is frequently on display in presidential messages.

In his address to a joint session of Congress on 24 February 2009, President Barack Obama filled his opening remarks with a general, emotional assessment of the growing economic crisis facing the country at the start of his first term (White House 2009):

If you haven’t been personally affected by this recession, you probably know someone who has – a friend; a neighbour; a member of your family. You don’t need to hear another list of statistics to know that our economy is in crisis, because you live it every day.
As his speech wore on, President Obama made further efforts to connect with constituents, letting them know he understood their concerns while expressing how important their support would be for moving key proposals through the legislative arena. In doing so, the president implored members of Congress to set aside their emotions (particularly any anger they might feel) and move past partisan politics in order to make progress on a number of key proposals for his economic recovery plan (White House 2009):

… in a time of crisis, we cannot afford to govern out of anger, or yield to the politics of the moment. My job – our job – is to solve the problem. Our job is to govern with a sense of responsibility.

At the end of his remarks, Obama painted an optimistic, hopeful picture of the future – one that Americans could strive for without being fearful (White House 2009):

If we confront without fear the challenges of our time and summon that enduring spirit of an America that does not quit, then someday years from now our children can tell their children that this was the time when we performed.

Following the speech, news outlets began discussions on whether and how Obama may have connected emotionally with viewers. At CNN, Deputy Political Director Paul Steinhauser conducted and reported the results of a national CNN/Opinion Research Corporation survey taken of individuals who had viewed President Obama’s address (Steinhauser 2009). Among other findings, Steinhauser reported that 68% of speech-watchers had a ‘positive reaction’ and that 85% felt ‘more optimistic’ about the direction the country was heading, which signified a 17 percentage point upwards shift compared to the level of optimism recorded before the speech. While speech-watchers were also polled on more substantive questions – such as whether they supported Obama’s economic plan – most of the focus of the survey was tied to respondent feelings and emotional expectations in response to the president’s words. CNN commentators subsequently relied on this data when debating the effectiveness of the speech and expressing their own personal sentiments.

While President Obama’s reliance on emotional rhetoric is nothing new, much remains in the way of scholarly investigation when it comes to understanding the extent to which presidents invoke emotions in their rhetoric, what types of emotions they invoke, and under what circumstances they tend to employ such rhetoric. In this study, we explore for the first time whether and how US presidents have invoked emotions in their speeches across time and circumstance. Focusing on the modern presidency from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Barack Obama (1933–2011), we examine 359 presidential speeches to assess presidential usage of the emotions of fear, anger, and hope while taking into account differences across administrations, policy domains (foreign and domestic), and types of speeches (State of the Union (SOTU) addresses, inaugural addresses, addresses to the nation, and addresses to Congress). In doing so, our aim is to provide a basis for scholars to further explore the utility and value of emotions in presidential rhetoric.

We begin with a review of the literature on presidential speechmaking and the public presidency. Specifically, we cover the general trends in presidential opinion leadership, the context and underlying causal mechanisms of such trends, the obstacles versus incentives presidents face in attempting to wield the bully pulpit, and a number of more recent, nuanced scholarly contributions. Thereafter, we discuss the potential role that emotions may play in presidential public addresses and introduce three key emotions to explore – fear, anger, and hope. We then present our hypotheses, data collection, and method of assessment. The results section examines the trends in the invocation of emotions in speeches across 13 presidential administrations, demonstrating that emotional content is prevalent across time and circumstance. We conclude with a discussion of the extent to which emotions play an integral role in presidential rhetoric and the implications of our findings for future research.
Speechmaking and the public presidency: strategy, obstacles, and potential

Presidential speechmaking is a process that incorporates the president’s vision and political preferences, the general structure for the type of speech to be given, and the manner that speechwriters and policy advisors help develop and fine-tune a president’s speech content across numerous draft iterations circulated among staff (Hart 1984, Ragsdale 1987, Vaughn and Villalobos 2006). Presidents – and other types of leaders – often employ speeches to help increase public awareness of, and interest in, key issues (Behr and Iyengar 1985, Cohen 1995, 2010). In doing so, presidents seek the public’s support as a means to leverage influence over their key policy and political goals as well as bolster their overall popularity (Ragsdale 1984). Scholars note that public support endows presidents with a ‘political resource’, a degree of justification for pursuing the presidential agenda in Congress, achieving re-election, and leaving behind a favourable legacy (Neustadt 1990, Brody 1991, p. 3). Conversely, presidents who lack (or lose) public support are subject to frustration and vulnerability at the hands of their political opponents (Sigelman and Sigelman 1981, Edwards 2003, p. 4). Not surprisingly, presidents dating back to Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson have increasingly sought ways to wield the bully pulpit (Ceaser et al. 1981, Kernell 1986).

Above all other governing strategies, modern presidents have endeavoured to lead the public by using public appeals to advance their policy agendas, a strategy known as the ‘going public’ model (Brace and Hinckley 1993, Kernell 1986). In his seminal work, Kernell (1986) describes the going public model as a strategy wherein presidents forgo executive-legislative bargaining to seek support for their policy proposals directly from the public in the hope that it places pressure on legislators to pass their initiatives into law. Contrary to pluralist theories emphasizing the president’s need to bargain with legislators and other Washingtonians (Neustadt 1990), the going public model asserts the potential to effectively displace bargaining when practiced in a tactical, dedicated manner (Kernell 1986, p. 3).

Despite its intuitive appeal, the going public strategy can be detrimental to the policy-making process because it encourages presidents to take less flexible policy positions, replaces substantive exchanges with symbolic rhetoric, leaves little room for legislators to modify their policy positions or opportunity for policy input, and offers no explicit reward for legislative compliance. Nevertheless, presidents have an incentive to go public given the gridlock often experienced when bargaining with legislators, particularly under a divided government and during an increasingly polarized political era. Other conditions in the political environment such as the rising influence of caucuses, working groups, political action committees, and policy entrepreneurs in Congress have also served as incentives for presidents to go public over the last few decades (Kernell 1986, pp. 26–35). However, despite these developments, some scholars have seriously questioned the merits of the going public model, pointing out that the strategy rarely succeeds, is prone to backfiring, and asserting that the approach is actually ‘antithetical’ and ‘anti-deliberative’ to governing (Edwards 2003).

The fact that presidents and other leaders regularly fail in their efforts to move or direct public opinion is largely due to the series of major obstacles they continually face (Edwards 2003, Han and Heith 2005). To begin with, securing the attention of the nation represents a monumental challenge for presidents (Edwards 2003, p. 129). Although the president is the most highly salient political actor, few people are attentive to a president’s activities and only a portion of those who are attentive develop a deep, long-lasting understanding of the president’s public messages. Furthermore, the majority of presidential public appeals are not sufficiently covered by the press (Barrett 2007), which places an additional burden on presidents in their attempts to reach the public. In the aftermath of a public appeal, subsequent criticism by journalists and other elites who have access to the public domain may negatively influence public perceptions, undermining the core strengths of a president’s carefully crafted message (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, Krosnick and
Kinder 1990). Perhaps the most difficult challenge a political leader faces in leading the public is overcoming existing public predispositions since individuals tend to ignore or reject arguments that contradict their long-held personal preferences (Page and Shapiro 1985, Edwards 2003, p. 218). Historically, a change in predispositions across a wide cadre of the electorate has been a rare event. When it does occur, it is more often the result of an exogenous shock (e.g. the 9/11 terrorist attacks) than a product of a president’s – or any other leader’s – rhetorical overtures.

Despite historical evidence that presidential efforts to go public rarely succeed (Edwards 2003, Han and Heith 2005), previous setbacks have not dissuaded succeeding presidents from believing in the power of the bully pulpit. Outside of the academic community, few have questioned the merits of a going public strategy. Interviews with presidents, their advisors, political experts, and other staff suggest a continuing mainstream view that the use of presidential public appeals to move opinion represents an effective governing strategy (e.g. Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, Edwards 2003). In fact, presidents often perceive their failures in moving opinion as more a problem of communication than of flawed strategy or ill-advised policy.

Regardless of how often they fail or how they perceive their failures, presidents have limited alternatives to going public. For instance, coalition building in Congress is a complex and difficult endeavour, given the marginal ability presidents have for persuading legislators to support their policy agendas in what has become an increasingly partisan and polarized political environment (Edwards 2000). Indeed, presidents have little bargaining capacity within the constitutional construct and are unlikely to be able to bargain with legislators when lacking public support, which is particularly crucial when a president has no cohesive majorities in Congress (Kernell 1986, Edwards 1989). As mentioned above, when presidents find themselves trapped in congressional opposition, they often turn to public support as a means to break through congressional gridlock. Amid these circumstances, it is not surprising that presidential trends in going public have increased, rather than decreased, over time.

Given the paradox between the rising trend in presidents going public and the general dearth of success observed historically, more recent scholarship has shifted away from measuring direct presidential influence on public opinion and instead placed its focus on exploring when presidents are most likely to succeed in going public and how presidents might employ their public leadership opportunities in a more strategic sense. For instance, Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) posit that presidents can use information taken from public opinion polling to strategically frame their public appeals in a way that may manipulate the public into supporting their policy and political goals while concurrently portraying themselves as attentive and responsive to public preferences. Nevertheless, they note that manipulating opinion is difficult, citing as a major example the failures of the Clinton Administration in attempting to pass its major health care initiative.

Canes-Wrone (2001) argues that presidents should be strategic in addressing issues that are already salient and popular among the general public. Examining nationally televised presidential addresses concerning domestic spending proposals for federal agencies, she provides systemic evidence that presidents can strategically employ public appeals. Although her findings provide vital evidence of systemic influence in how presidents can use existing public support to their advantage, she notes such findings are not intended to suggest that ‘a president can achieve any policy goal by appealing to the public about it’ (Canes-Wrone 2001, p. 326).

More recently, Barrett (2004) produces additional empirical evidence suggesting that presidential appeals can have a direct, positive influence on public support for presidential initiatives. Employing a content analysis of presidential remarks from 1977 to 1992, Barrett develops a data set covering 186 legislative proposals and finds that the more often presidents address an issue through public statements, the higher their likelihood of policy success in Congress. Along similar lines, Rottinghaus (2009) argues that presidents can best increase their prospects for influencing the public through their messages by relying on nationally televised addresses to propose...
their initiatives and avoiding as much as possible televised interactions with the media. He concludes that by focusing on strategic communications tactics, presidents can, if moderately, lead public opinion.

Despite these many advances in knowledge, one area of research that merits further investigation concerns the role that emotions play in presidential rhetoric and how presidents are strategic in their employment of emotional stimuli when making public appeals. Although a number of key works have investigated the role emotions play in political rhetoric, such studies have been largely relegated to the fields of political communication and psychology and few have focused specifically on the US presidency. Furthermore, no work we know of has systematically investigated trends in presidential use of emotional appeals across multiple administrations nor considered the differences in usage across policy domains or types of speeches.

Emotions, public perceptions, and presidential leadership

Emotions can influence citizen behaviour in distinct and important ways. Scholars have found that emotions may influence voting decisions (Marcus et al. 2000), candidate evaluations (Lodge and Taber 2005), policy preferences (Brader 2006, Erisen et al. 2014), or individual responses in the political realm at large (Redlawsk 2006, Neuman et al. 2007). As well, cognitive arousal may lead individuals to respond to stimuli (e.g. presidential overtures) in a more emotional than rational manner, which may lead to lower levels of critical thinking or analysis when forming perceptions (Marcus et al. 2000, Erisen et al. 2014).

Previous studies have demonstrated that emotions may stem from several sources, including political actors’ messages and media coverage of key political events (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, Graber 2001). The way politics is framed by politicians and covered in the media may activate certain emotions that alter one’s political thinking, behaviour, and judgement (Brader 2006, Weber 2012, Erisen et al. 2014). As such, when a leader uses emotion-related rhetoric in a major speech, emotional reactions may be widely transferred to the public, leading perhaps to the activation of feelings that result in higher overall levels of public support for the president (see e.g. Gonzalez-Bailon et al. 2012).

One notable study regarding the role of emotions raised in executive-level speeches is de Castella et al.’s (2009) examination of the fear-inducing content invoked in Australian Prime Minister John Howard’s speeches during the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Examining 27 terrorism-focused speeches, the authors found that fear-arousing rhetoric was employed in strategic fashion – particularly during times of decline in public support – to help bolster the Prime Minister’s leadership position. However, the study focuses on a single emotion and selects particular speeches rather than employing a more collective sample, each of which limits the generalizability of the findings.

In a more recent study, de Castella and McGarty (2011) conduct an analysis of fear and anger content in political rhetoric concerning the issue of terrorism. Examining 49 terrorism speeches delivered between 2001 and 2003 by US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, they find that fear and anger-laden content was persistent, but varied widely across time and between the two leaders. In exploring the correlation between speech content and public reactions, they find that while fear-invoking rhetoric did not coincide with levels of public fear of terrorism, it did correlate with declining presidential approval. This suggests that political actors may turn to emotional stimuli for their speeches when they feel their approval ratings are slipping.

Other recent studies have looked at emotion-laden rhetoric with respect to presidential efforts to justify war (Loseke 2009), ‘preventive war’ persuasion strategies, and the more general utility of empathy as a tool for presidential leadership (Shogan 2009). However, most studies focus on a single time point with respect to a particular issue or topic in a single policy domain and/or a
singular dimension of emotion rhetoric. To build on these studies, we introduce three types of emotions that presidents invoke in their speeches as we look to examine their use across administrations, policy domains, and types of speeches.

**Anger, fear, and hope in presidential rhetoric**

Although speculation has long abounded about the use of emotions by presidents (and other world leaders) and recent works demonstrate the general potential for emotions to affect public opinion, scholars have yet to thoroughly examine the use of different types of emotions in presidential speeches across administrations and different types of speeches. In this study, we fill this gap by focusing on the invocation of different emotions in presidential speeches across time and circumstance. In doing so, we rely on a discrete conceptualization that draws on the notion that emotions are constituent experiences: that is, for example, fear is not the same as anger. In discrete emotions research, the goal is to predict how behavioural differences (also known as action tendencies) in distinct emotions may promote particular behavioural outcomes.

In the literature on emotions, two discrete emotions – anger and fear – draw particular attention in terms of how they influence individual thoughts and behaviour. For instance, scholars have found that the distinct behavioural effects of fear and anger may increase support for certain government actions (Lerner and Keltner 2000, 2001, Huddy et al. 2005). Individuals feeling anxious or fearful tend to be more risk-averse and thus oppose policies such as military action, whereas individuals experiencing anger are more supportive of military action, particularly if they perceive the risks to be relatively low (Huddy et al. 2005). Put in the context of the trade-off between security and liberty in the post-9/11 phase, they find that those experiencing a high perception of threat regarding a possible terrorist attack are more likely to support anti-terrorism policies, while those with high anxiety and fear concerning how anti-terrorism policies may endanger people’s civil liberties are less likely to be supportive.

From a similar vantage point, Lerner and Keltner (2000, 2001) employ the appraisal-tendency framework as a basis to examine emotion-based differences in decisions involving risk. The authors’ major finding was that anger and fear differ profoundly (albeit both being in the category of negative emotions) in generating different action tendencies, or behavioural outcomes, in risk assessments such that fearful people are more likely to make ‘pessimistic’ risk assessments (or higher risk assessments), whereas angry people more likely make ‘optimistic’ risk assessments (or lower risk assessments). Thus, although both fear and anger are negative emotions, they may promote distinct attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. For our purposes, we are interested at this point in determining the extent to which presidents tend to employ these different emotions across administrations and types of speeches, leaving other comparative inquiries for future studies.

Aside from our focus on the negative emotions of anger and fear, we also consider the use of hope in presidential rhetoric as a positive emotional overture (see e.g. Atwater 2007). Although the notion of hope has often been used by presidents (e.g. Ronald Reagan’s implicit references to hope in describing the country as a ‘shining city’, Bill Clinton’s mantra of being ‘the man from hope’, Barack Obama’s campaign theme of ‘hope and change’ in the 2008 election, etc.), few studies have examined the invocation of hope in presidential speeches.

We approach hope as a source of positive emotions raised by presidents in their speeches. This conceptualization may be tied to enthusiasm, optimistic forecasts, and other affirmative feelings conveyed by the president. By adding this third dimension of rhetoric, we explore in a comparative manner whether and to what extent presidents tend to rely on positive versus negative emotions in their key speeches, whether it varies across administrations and/or types of speeches, and what that may say about how presidents view the public and the manner they are willing to attempt to affect people’s sentiments.
Hypotheses

In setting out to explore the role of emotions in presidential rhetoric, we put forth a set of key broad hypotheses concerning the presence and frequency of emotions employed by US presidents across time and circumstance. Given the potential influence emotions can have on public perceptions, we generally expect that presidents raise emotions quite frequently in their speeches, either explicitly or implicitly (Hypothesis 1). This general expectation applies to each type of emotion investigated (fear, anger, and hope) across policy domains (foreign and domestic) as well as across types of speeches (SOTU addresses, inaugural addresses, addresses to the nation, and addresses to Congress). Despite a dearth of previous systematic examination of presidential speeches on the subject, key historical examples of presidents using emotional stimuli to evoke emotive reactions along with long-standing media speculation of presidents and other leaders using emotions to tug citizens’ heart strings lead us to believe that the practice has been widespread across past administrations.

Beyond our general expectation for overall usage, we further expect that presidents employ different types of emotions to varying degrees when comparing across foreign and domestic policy domains. When it comes to foreign policy, fear or anger may be invoked most often when speaking about an outside threat to the country, whereas hope is perhaps most often employed when reaching out to allies across our international borders or overseas. In the domestic sphere, sentiments connected to fear or anger may be employed in response to crises such as economic downturns or natural disasters in the homeland, whereas hope may be invoked when proposing certain policy ideas and their potential to positively impact societal conditions. Aside from such variance within each domain, we expect presidential usage of emotions (particularly anger and fear) to be more frequent in the foreign policy than domestic realm since foreign policy speeches are more often centred on major conflicts and crises than domestic policy speeches (Hypothesis 2).

Last, we expect that the frequency of certain emotions could differ depending on the particular type of speech a president employs. Accordingly, we examine SOTU addresses, inaugural addresses, addresses to the nation, and addresses to Congress. Because inaugural addresses occur at the start of a president’s term (i.e. during the ‘honeymoon’ period) when the potential for presidents to make a positive, perhaps emotional bond with the public (while also reaching out to political adversaries in a bipartisan fashion) is particularly high, we expect positive emotions related to hope will be most prevalent in such speeches (Hypothesis 3a). Similarly, since SOTU addresses provide an opportunity for presidents to highlight their accomplishments of the previous year while proposing new initiatives for moving forward, we expect that positive emotions will also be very frequent in SOTU speeches, if somewhat less so (due in particular to conflict arising with congressional opponents over the previous year), compared to inaugural addresses (Hypothesis 3b). By comparison, because addresses to the nation and to the Congress may occur at any point in time during a president’s term in response to major national or global developments (while inaugural addresses occur only at the start of each term and SOTU speeches at the start of each year), we expect that presidents are more likely to invoke all three types of emotions in such speeches than in SOTU and Inaugural Addresses (Hypothesis 3c). Last, because members of the public may be more susceptible to emotional overtures than members of Congress, we expect that presidents are generally more likely to invoke emotions when directly addressing the public in their addresses to the nation than when reaching out to legislators in their addresses to the Congress (Hypothesis 3d).

Data and methods

To conduct our study, we employ data from the Public Papers of the Presidents collected from The American Presidency Project archival resource. The data cover 13 presidential
administrations (Franklin D. Roosevelt to Barack Obama) across four types of public addresses (SOTU addresses, inaugural addresses, addresses to the nation, and addresses to Congress) from the years 1933 to 2011. Once we identified all pertinent observations provided in the database universe, we applied a coding process to determine whether and how frequently each speech invoked a distinct emotion of fear, anger, and/or hope. We also used a coding scheme to determine whether each speech was primarily a foreign or domestic policy address. We then arranged the data to examine the average frequency with which the president invoked each distinct emotion for each category of observation across each president’s term in office, first to compare differences between foreign versus domestic policy domains and then to compare differences across types of speeches.

The coding process for identifying the invocation of emotions in presidential speeches was conducted as follows: four independent coders unaware of the research hypotheses coded the presidential speeches according to their perceptions of distinct invocations of one or more of the three emotions under study. Importantly, because presidents may (and often do) invoke emotional stimuli without explicitly referring to the type of emotional reaction they seek from the public, we devised a method that considers the full context and content of each speech rather than making a generalist evaluation of key pronouns. Unlike word-count coding procedures used in other studies, the coders did not simply count the number of times the target emotion words (i.e. fear, anger, and hope) were explicitly used, but also took into account all instances where associated words or phrases were present in each speech in a manner that could evoke the respective emotions. This allowed us to better capture all potential emotive stimuli within a speech.

Each coder was first trained on the coding procedure and asked to code a number of sample speeches. Each coder was then given the following directions for the coding procedure:

The coder should read the speech from a printed text and in that process s/he shall count the number of times a distinct emotion was invoked (explicitly or implicitly) by the president. In other words, in completing this task, the coder should not simply count the frequency with which an emotion word is used in the speech; rather, the coder is to focus on the context in which a particular emotion may be evoked, either explicitly or implicitly. For instance, if the president never used the word ‘fear’ in a speech but underscored substantive concerns with respect to the missiles in Cuba (during the Cuban Missile Crisis), this case should be counted as a situation in which the emotion of fear was invoked by the president in the speech.

To ascertain whether an emotion was raised or not, an evaluation of whole sentences (and phrases therein) was conducted for each speech under study since certain words or styles can lead to a variety of emotions being invoked by a president. To better understand this procedure, providing an example of a particular emotion observed may be helpful. In President Lyndon Johnson’s August 1964 address to Congress on the Vietnam War, one may observe a number of instances in which anger is being invoked by President Johnson as he talks about, in one instance, ‘further deliberate attacks against US naval vessels’. Use of the words ‘deliberate’ and ‘attacks’ would serve to stir up anger in the listener’s mind. The coding procedure tediously teases out such distinct instances of potential emotion-inducing content within and across the speeches of interest in this study.

In coding each speech, we also account for the repetition of certain emotions being raised by the same object by emphasizing to the coders that they differentiate between each distinct instance wherein a particular emotion appears to be invoked. Accordingly, a particular object is counted differently only if it raises a different, distinct invocation of an emotion. For instance, the Cuban Missile Crisis is an object that caused the emotions of fear and anger repeatedly in JFK’s address to the nation in 1961. Yet, since the missiles in question represent the same object for which fear is invoked, the occurrence is considered as a single occurrence for each type of
emotion in the speech. In addition, there may be different objects tied to the same type of emotion within a single speech. For such cases, the coder was to record each object as a separate invocation of such emotion. Last, it is also possible to observe all three emotions being invoked across multiple objects within a single speech, all of which count as separate measures. We then aggregate all observed invocations of each emotion by speech type and presidential term, and report the average frequency (averaged from all speeches for each category examined across policy domains and types of speeches) with which each president invoked an emotion per speech during a term in office.8

Findings and discussion

In total, we examined 359 presidential speeches across 13 administrations from 1933 to 2011 to provide a first assessment of the extent to which fear, anger, and hope have been invoked in presidential speeches during the modern era. The coding procedure produced approximately 9000 emotion-inducing remarks observed across these presidential speeches. Our findings indicate that US presidents frequently invoke the emotions of fear, anger, and hope across time and circumstance and that there are notable differences in how presidents invoke emotion across different policy domains and types of speeches (see Figures 1–8).

As Table 1 illustrates, with respect to the collection of speeches we analysed, we identified 20 inaugural addresses, 79 SOTU addresses, 233 addresses to the nation, and 27 addresses to the

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<th>Inaugural addresses</th>
<th>SOTU addresses</th>
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<td>Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933–1937)</td>
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<td>Franklin D. Roosevelt (1937–1941)</td>
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<td>Franklin D. Roosevelt (1945)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dwight D. Eisenhower (1957–1961)</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>Lyndon B. Johnson (1965–1969)</td>
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<td>Richard M. Nixon (1969–1973)</td>
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<td>Ronald Reagan (1985–1989)</td>
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<td>William J. Clinton (1993–1997)</td>
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<td>George W. Bush (2005–2009)</td>
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<td>Barack Obama (2009–2011)</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>79</td>
<td>233</td>
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| Primarily foreign policy (%) | 13 (65%) | 69 (87%) | 122 (52%) | 15 (56%) |
Congress in which emotions were invoked. Therein, 219 out of the 359 speeches analysed were mainly foreign policy related (61%). Broken down by speech type, 65% of all inaugural addresses, 87% of SOTU addresses, 52% of all addresses to the nation, and 56% of all addresses to Congress dealt with foreign policy as the principal subject of the speech.

Invocation of emotions across policy domains

Figure 1 reports the average frequency for which all three emotions (i.e. fear, anger, and hope) were invoked per speech during each president’s term in office and therein shows differences between foreign and domestic speeches. Accordingly, the x-axis indicates the term of the president and the y-axis reports the average frequency of all three emotions raised in domestic (grey bar) or foreign policy- (black bar) oriented speeches. We find that presidents do indeed employ a variety of emotional overtures during their terms in office, corroborating Hypothesis 1. As well, in line with Hypothesis 2, we find that presidents more frequently invoke emotions in foreign policy speeches. The only exceptions to this were the results for Truman and Obama (for the first three years of his 1st term). Overall, while there were on average about four invocations of emotion for each domestic policy-oriented speech (addressing economic, social, civil, and other domestic issues) compared to approximately seven invocations of emotion on average for each foreign policy-oriented speech.

Considering the invocation of three emotions in a foreign policy context, we find that Johnson (2nd term), Ford, Reagan (1st term), Clinton, and George W. Bush had the highest usage of emotions in their public addresses. Among this group, modern presidents (since Johnson) tend to invoke a variety of emotions more than their predecessors, particularly in the foreign policy realm. Having examined the tendency for presidents to invoke all three emotions across their speeches, we next provide our findings regarding the invocation of particular emotions (i.e. fear, anger, and hope) across time and circumstance.

Figure 1. Presidential use of three emotions across policy domains.
Invocation of fear

When looking at the invocation of fear across all speeches by presidential term (see Figure 2), we find that presidents invoked a distinct emotion of fear approximately four times on average in each of their domestic policy-oriented speeches compared to six times in their foreign policy speeches (consistent with Hypothesis 1). For instance, George W. Bush raised a distinct emotion of fear 11 times on average in his foreign policy-oriented speeches during his first term and nine times on average during his second term, doing so largely in response to the 9/11 attacks, the threat of future terror attacks, and concerns over the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

At the start of the modern era, Franklin D. Roosevelt raised fear about four times on average in his key public speeches during his four terms in office. The primary reason for Roosevelt to induce fear in his speeches relates to the Second World War. As well, as the rising threat of communism became more of a major foreign policy concern for the USA, Roosevelt’s successor, Harry S. Truman often invoked fear relating to the potential spread of communism in his key foreign policy addresses. In later years, the continuance of Cold War threats and the lead up to the Vietnam War were major underlying themes for which fear was invoked in Dwight Eisenhower’s key foreign policy addresses. During Gerald Ford’s presidency, the Mayaguez incident was a major source of concern and trouble for his presidency which he voiced repeatedly in his addresses, driving the frequency to over 12 invocations on average in foreign policy-oriented speeches (the highest among his modern era peers). Later on, Cold War conflicts between the USA and USSR (such as the Iran–Contra Scandal, the Afghanistan War, etc.) during the Reagan presidency were the main stimulating themes for the invocation of fear.

A clearer picture of the use of fear in presidential speechmaking is the comparison between Clinton and George W. Bush. The use of fear somewhat decreased during the Clinton presidency compared to previous years. Although not free of imminent threats and international crises during his time in office, President Clinton’s rhetoric did not raise the emotion of fear anywhere near to the level reached by George W. Bush. Obviously, references to the 9/11 terrorist attacks increased the use of fear during the Bush Administration when compared to Clinton and other predecessors. The spike of distinct fear mentions observed during George
W. Bush’s two terms clearly reflects Bush’s reliance on emotional overtures in dealing with the threat imposed by global terrorism. This finding represents the clearest case in which the citizens could be exposed to the emotion of fear raised in a president’s key public addresses.

**Invocation of anger**

When it comes to invoking anger in key speeches (see Figure 3), we find that every president invoked anger approximately three times in domestic policy-oriented speeches and four times in foreign policy-oriented speeches, on average (consistent with Hypothesis 2). The invocation of anger is most clearly observed in the first term of Franklin D. Roosevelt, in Nixon’s second term, Ford’s term in office, and Clinton’s first term. Both Nixon and Ford repeatedly voiced their anger towards a growing Communist threat and its consequences in their foreign policy speeches. For Ford, the Mayaguez incident was a major part of the anger evoked in his speeches. Meanwhile, the target of anger for President Nixon was mostly the Vietcong and Soviet Russia. Following these two leaders, Clinton most frequently used the emotion of anger – particularly regarding the Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia crises. On average, Clinton invoked a distinct emotion of anger about 8.5 times in his speeches. Also notable is the difference between Clinton’s use of fear and anger in his rhetoric compared to George W. Bush. President Clinton invoked anger much more often than fear while George W. Bush more often raised the emotion of fear than anger in his foreign policy speeches.

**Invocation of hope**

Hope was also quite frequently raised in the speeches under examination across policy realms, though with greater frequency overall in their foreign policy speeches (see Figure 4). More specifically, presidents invoked a distinct sense of hope approximately 6 times in domestic-oriented speeches and 11 times in foreign policy speeches on average, further corroborating Hypothesis 2. In fact, except for FDR’s first term and Truman’s two terms, presidents raised hope-related emotions in foreign policy speeches more frequently than domestic ones.
Invocation of emotions across types of presidential speeches

The aforementioned findings suggest that the presidents repeatedly used one or more of the three emotions in their public addresses and more often employed emotions in foreign policy addresses than domestic ones, thus lending support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. Given these insights, we next turn our attention to the variance across types of speeches. Disaggregating the data across the four key types of presidential speeches under examination, we analyse each speech category separately while also differentiating between the three types of emotions invoked.

Inaugural addresses

In line with our expectations for Hypothesis 3a, we find the nature of inaugural addresses to be overwhelmingly more positive and hope-oriented (than fear or anger-oriented), aiming to motivate the public for a brighter future amidst certain difficulties that await a newly elected president (see Figure 5). As well, there are also some idiosyncrasies concerning the other two types of emotions that merit further discussion. In the years leading up to the Johnson presidency, we find that the invocation of fear was quite notable (five times on average in every speech, with peaks during Truman and Eisenhower’s final terms in office). As with our general findings on the invocation of fear across all speech types, we again see international events playing a key role in inaugural speeches, particularly amid the rising threat of Communism. Later on, Nixon’s second inaugural address seemed to raise a significant amount of anger along with sentiments of hope. Détente with the Soviet Union and the Vietnam War were the two chief factors leading the president to invoke anger in his speech. Also interesting is how George W. Bush’s two inaugural addresses, although dominated by more positive emotions related to hope, also saw an interesting switch between a notable amount of anger invoked in 2001 (with fear almost completely absent) versus a dependence on fear in 2005 (with anger notably absent).
Figure 5. Presidential use of emotions in inaugural addresses.

**SOTU addresses**

Figure 6 presents the results for SOTU addresses across the three types of emotions. For this set of findings, two trends are immediately apparent. First, it is notable that the frequency for presidents invoking the three types of emotions runs fairly steady and below an average of 10 mentions from FDR to Johnson’s first term, but thereafter exhibits a notable increase in frequency and variation.

Figure 6. Presidential use of emotions in SOTU addresses.
across the remaining terms. Secondly, we find that, of the three types of emotions, hope is once again the most predominant (especially during Reagan’s first term), though less so overall compared to the findings for inaugural addresses (but particularly in the years prior to Reagan), thereby providing partial support for Hypothesis 3b.

Addresses to the nation and addresses to Congress

By nature, unlike inaugural addresses that occur once a term and SOTU speeches that are pre-scheduled at the start of each year, presidential addresses to the nation and Congress are more centred on (and responsive to) particular issues or events as they occur while the number of speeches for each category may vary widely from year to year and from one administration to the next, opening the door for presidents to invoke a variety of emotions across different potential contexts and circumstances. Perhaps not surprisingly, in line with Hypothesis 3c, we find that presidents are more likely to invoke all three types of emotions in addresses to the nation and to Congress than in SOTU and Inaugural Addresses. Nevertheless, what is surprising is the extent to which hope in particular is invoked relatively more often in these latter two types of speeches than in inaugural and SOTU addresses, thereby contradicting part of our underlying expectations for Hypotheses 1 and 2 (Figure 7).

In comparing addresses to the nation and Congress, we hypothesized that because members of the public may be more susceptible to emotional overtures than members of Congress (who are, relatively speaking, more policy-oriented in their dealings with the president), presidents would be more likely to invoke emotions when directly addressing the public in their addresses to the nation than when speaking more directly to legislators in addresses to the Congress (Hypothesis 3d). The results strongly corroborate our expectations, particularly given the fact that for quite a few presidential terms, emotions are completely absent from addresses to Congress (Figure 8).
Conclusion

Taken together, this study provides a unique analysis of presidential invocation of emotions in major speeches across time and circumstances. The principal contribution of the study lies in demonstrating that presidents quite frequently use a variety of emotion-inducing remarks in their public speeches and that the context of a speech matters. More specifically, our findings show that distinct emotion-laden words and arguments are more often employed in foreign policy than domestic speeches. We also find evidence that the invocation of emotions varies depending on the type of speech employed. While inaugural and SOTU addresses mostly tend towards raising positive emotions related to hope, addresses to the nation and Congress include a greater variety of three types of emotions and, surprisingly, a higher frequency of hope-related sentiments overall.

Looking to future avenues of research, we believe that our unique methodological approach and findings hold potential for wider application in subsequent studies. For instance, aside from the major speeches that we cover here, scholars may further investigate a wider array of speeches, including day-to-day speeches delivered by presidents that may not, for instance, receive the same level of coverage or reach as many constituents, but nevertheless reveal additional, important new insights into how presidents employ emotions in their speeches (and more directly in informal settings such as question and answer sessions at town hall meetings) when reaching out in different ways to key constituencies in a more local setting (e.g. see Barrett and Peake 2007).

Beyond unearthing the trends in the usage of emotions across types of speeches, future studies may also further explore the potential influence that different types of emotions in presidential rhetoric may have on public attitudes. Previous studies demonstrate that more determined experimental tests could tease out the distinct effects of certain emotions on public attitudes (e.g. Brader 2006, Erisen 2013), and scholars could further investigate the influence of emotions in rhetoric along the lines of recent research that has begun to employ nuanced

Figure 8. Presidential use of emotions in addresses to Congress.
experimental designs for understanding the underlying factors and effects of presidents ‘going public’ (e.g. Tedin et al. 2011). Doing so would allow scholars to test how and in what ways emotions may affect a number of important dependent variables, including presidential approval ratings and support for presidential policy initiatives.

Aside from studies on the US presidency, scholars may also examine such questions for a variety of other leaders such as prime ministers, major opposition leaders, speakers of legislative branches, and institutional leaders such as the European Union Parliament leader, to name a few. Indeed, though political leaders of all stripes may employ emotions in their oratory as a tool for communicating with and influencing the public to gain support for their policies, relatively little research has investigated the subject in a systematic way or done so in a manner suitable for comparative analysis across types of leaders. Despite the vast of array of past studies that have examined, for example, leadership typologies and leadership behaviour variance across different political contexts (e.g. Hermann and Hermann 1989, Hermann et al. 2001) and countries (Kesgin 2013), much remains to be known concerning the manner that different leaders use and benefit from emotional overtures. Similarly, building on research concerning the importance and influence of leadership styles, scholars may also examine if and how differences in the way leaders employ emotions in their public appeals may affect a leader’s ability to attain (and maintain) their posts, vie for control over the policy agenda (in both the foreign and domestic realms), and ultimately shape a lasting legacy.

In sum, given our findings that presidential employment of emotions has been persistent across modern administrations and key speeches to the public and Congress, it is evident that presidents believe such overtures are helpful for pursuing their political agendas. It could be that emotions provide an avenue for moving opinion where other types of rhetorical overtures have failed. Perhaps the effects of emotions persist across ideologies and partisan loyalties or it may be that they only help presidents shore up support among their base. By continuing to explore the subject, scholars stand to derive new knowledge and understanding concerning the role emotions play in the speeches of presidents (and other leaders).

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Notes

1. For an in-depth exploration of earlier going public efforts that preceded and helped to shape the modern public presidency, see Laracey (2002).
2. Beyond the US context, the use of public appeals (including emotional overtures) is a common practice by heads of executive governments across the globe and likewise merits similar scholarly investigation. See http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/.
3. Specifically, coders generated a range from 0 (entirely domestic policy issues) to 100 (entirely foreign policy issues) with a split at 50 on the scale. Those below 50 are considered domestic policy-oriented speeches and those above the threshold are considered foreign policy-oriented speeches.
4. All four of our coders were political science research assistants trained to follow the same coding process.
6. Their initial coding during the training period was checked for accuracy and consistency and coders were informed about mistakes and corrections. After each coder passed the satisfactory threshold for approval to code the official data, two coders were assigned to each of the 359 speeches under study. Coder reliability fell between .72 and .85 for each type of speech under study, reflecting acceptable levels of coder reliability to reach valid analyses and inferences (Krippendorff 1980). Finally, we generated our primary measure of emotion usage for every type of speech by calculating the average frequency of emotions observed across each presidential term.

7. Doing so allows us to account for all instances that one or more emotions are invoked while, for our purposes in assessing average frequency across speeches in our key figures (see the findings and discussion section), we are able to develop counts that focus on distinct instances of emotional invocation across different objects, thereby avoiding inflated measures in our reported findings.

8. It is important to note that despite our focus on aggregated counts of presidential emotive appeals across categories, our data collection approach was done in a manner helpful for disaggregating the data to conduct further and more in-depth analyses of speech content in future studies.

References


