



Messaging strategies in presidential commencement speeches 1980 - 2016: A content analysis

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Abstract:

U.S. presidents regularly speak at commencement ceremonies of colleges and universities of all sizes, and these addresses are often used for broader message dissemination. This study suggests that the tone and content of the speeches can be predicted well before the delivery. It found that across the board, presidents used their first-term speeches to advance their policy agendas, and their second-term speeches for focusing on legacy building while continuing to push their policy agendas. Democratic presidents used their second-term speeches for policy advocacy more than Republican presidents. In an age of increased presidential commencement addresses, insight into how a president is likely to use a commencement address, as demonstrated by the findings of this study, will be useful to institutions considering presidential speakers.

Introduction

The presidential commencement speech provides an opportunity for the graduates of an institution and their families to hear from the commander-in-chief in person, which is an opportunity not frequently available to average Americans. At the same time, presidents are able to use the opportunity to speak to an audience in the arena, while also reaching a broader constituency. The graduation ceremony is often used to make policy announcements or encourage passage of specific legislation. The unique appeal of a presidential commencement speech often lies with what Martin calls a “preoccupation with the moment, its exigencies, its promise, its admonitions” (Martin, 1985, p. 512, 514).

Because of the nature of both the speaker and the moment, presidential commencement speeches

can be important opportunities for the commanders in chief. Most commencement speakers focus on life lessons and wise advice; however, when a president is giving the commencement address politics inevitably plays a role (Ortega-Ribeiro, 2013). For the most part, these speeches are positive affairs, providing a platform for a president to make a speech with broad themes. These speeches also often serve to represent the broader values of society, with a unique mix of the work of the presidency and the current mood of the country. These speeches do not happen in a vacuum, but rather can both reflect and advance societal conversation. Presidents and their advisers view these speeches—both because of the formality of the setting and the exposure they provide—as a good opportunity to test messaging and reach policymakers indirectly (Johnson, 2014, p. 14, 17).

Keywords: Commencement Speeches; Presidential Speeches; Content Analysis; Message Design

Presidents have been speaking to university commencements regularly for nearly 100 years, beginning with Calvin Coolidge's speech to George Washington University graduates in 1929 (Wooley & Peters, n.d.). As of May 2016, the number of speeches surpassed 150. Military academies have heard from presidents at graduation 44 times, with 53 presidential commencement speeches at private colleges and universities, and 54 at public colleges and universities. The number of presidential commencement speeches has increased steadily since President Clinton in 1993, and commencement speeches have become part of the spring schedule for presidents (Bialik, 2016).

Before the 1980s, the general public learned about the content of a presidential commencement speech through media coverage or word-of-mouth from those in attendance. With the advent of C-SPAN, however, commencement speeches have been available to a broader audience. As far back as May 22, 1985, with President Ronald Reagan's speech to the U.S. Naval Academy commencement, presidents had a bigger messaging platform via this broadcast network (C-SPAN, n.d.). With the advent of social media and video streaming online, the audience for these speeches is broader still, expanding the reach of these remarks.

This content analysis of 16 speeches given by two-term presidents reviewed the words or phrases used, and analyzed the messaging strategies these words may convey, with the aim to determine how messages differ in the beginning of a presidency and at the end of an eight-year presidency. Between 1981 and 2016, the United States had four two-term presidents. Prior to President Reagan, the last two-term president was Dwight Eisenhower, who served from 1953-1961. Because of the twenty-year gap between Eisenhower and Reagan, this study focuses on the timeframe of 1981-2016.

The study is inspired by and loosely based upon the work of *Classifying Party Affiliation from Political Speech*, by Yu, Kaufmann, and Diermeier (2008), described in the literature review below.

Literature Review

Presidential commencement speeches play an important role in presidential messaging, as they provide an opportunity to reach audiences critical to advancing the president's agenda. Those working for the president, and the president himself, use this opportunity to reach those with policy influence (Martin, 1985, p. 514). It is apparent that presidents feel this way, as

evidenced by the increasing number of times presidents agree to give these speeches. Their participation reinforces and strengthens the belief that these ceremonies are important parts of our culture, and that speaking to commencement audiences is a respected role (Johnson, 2015, p. 15).

These events also help advance policy and political goals. In 1947, President Harry Truman gave the commencement address at Princeton, marking the first time in the modern presidency that a president used a commencement address to gain favor for political and policy goals (Martin, 1985, p. 515). Similarly, in 1975, President Ford's aide Richard Cheney identified a commencement address as a good opportunity to make a high-profile speech about world hunger (Martin, 1985, p. 514-15).

Presidents benefit from the celebratory nature of commencement exercises, speaking in a more relaxed atmosphere than a formal presidential address and to an audience that is in attendance for reasons other than to hear the president speak. This allows him to leverage the stature of the presidency to his benefit without the burden of partisan expectations (Martin, 1985, p. 526).

Martin discovered a partisan difference in the use of commencement speakers by presidents in his 1985 study, determining that Democrats discussed policy at a rate of four times that of Republican presidents in the same time period, despite an almost even number of events (Martin, 1985, p. 526). This is useful context for understanding the way presidents have used commencement speeches to advance policy goals.

Presidential commencement speeches also humanize the president, allowing him to appear more part of the community; the very fact that the president is participating in a commencement ceremony provides a context that differs from the usual, more official address given from the White House or in an event created specifically for presidential messaging (Ortega-Ribeiro, 2013, p. 4-5). While the speech itself is likely to include political elements, the audience at commencement addresses is there for another purpose completely separate from the president, the celebration of collegiate graduation; therefore, the audience is seen as more open to hearing the president's message in this venue (Johnson, 2015, p. 14).

Classifying Word Choice

In *Classifying Party Affiliation from Political Speech*, Yu, Kaufmann, and Diermeier (2008) highlighted the im-

portance of context in the use of nouns in political speeches; these nouns may have no partisan meaning in everyday language, but mean something different and more political in a debate (p. 34). They used classifiers for congressional floor speeches. Word choice in presidential speeches can also serve to highlight the focus and scope of a presidency, including when changes take place. When Ronald Reagan was embroiled in the Iran/Contra affair in 1986-87, his state of the union address took on a more international tone. Through a content analysis of Reagan's State of the Union addresses that year, Moen found that his speech included words focused on an international agenda rather than a domestic agenda, and that this was a departure from earlier addresses (Moen, 1988, p. 775-76).

The process they used by Yu, Kaufmann, and Diermeier (2008), and by Moen (1988) to identify classifiers and word choice were useful in determining words to include in this research study. The hypotheses for this study are:

H1: Modern United States presidents use the platform of commencement speeches differently depending on where they are in their presidencies.

H2: Presidents in their first term in office use commencement speeches to advance a policy agenda, promoting policy initiatives with those in the audience, those watching at home, and members of Congress.

H3: Presidents nearing the end of their second terms in office use commencement speeches to build their legacies and promote their accomplishments.

Methodology

This content analysis involved reviewing the written text of sixteen different presidential speeches from 1981 to 2016. The speeches were chosen from a selection of commencement speeches given by four two-term presidents during the first and last years of their terms, always in May or June. This timeframe was chosen to ensure a partisan balance of the study, as an equal number of Democrats and Republicans, and because this timeframe had the most consistent number of two-term presidents in the modern era.

The primary resource for transcripts of presidential commencement speeches was The American Presidency Project, a project of the University of California-Santa Barbara. This repository of presidential

speeches included the commencement and State of the Union speeches from Presidents Reagan, Clinton, Bush, and Obama. Speech transcripts were unedited. They were formatted in a document with the same font and font size and copied for review by coders.

Word Selection

It was important to select words and phrases that were readily understood as indicating legacy building or policy advocacy. Presidential speeches not used in the study were reviewed to determine frequently used words. These speeches were chosen from those given to similar general public audiences, including State of the Union addresses and commencement addresses not used in this study. Additionally, the researcher took guidance and words from a content analysis of floor speeches at the U.S. House of Representatives (Yu, Kaufmann, Diermeier, 2008). These words were counted to identify party affiliation, but the words served legacy-building and policy-advocacy purposes as well, which made them valuable examples to use for this study.

In addition to floor speeches, presidential farewell speeches were reviewed for ideas for legacy building

Table 1: Words Used in Content Analysis

<i>Legacy building:</i>	<i>Policy Advocacy:</i>
Accomplished	Benefit
Achieved	Challenge
Best	Change
Growth/Grow/Growing	Congress
	Cut(s)
High/Highest	Government
I/we create/created	Hope
I/we change/changed	House
I/we did/have	I am/we are
I/we expanded	I/we can/will
Last eight years	I/we must
Legacy	Jobs
Looking back	Pass(age)
My administration	Promise
Opposed	Propose
Proud	Pursue
Results	Reform
Secured	Restore
Strongest	Revive
Than ever	Senate
	Task force
	Urge
	Value
	Will do

words to include in the study, because these speeches are primarily used for solidify a president’s reputation for posterity. For policy advocacy, the first State of the Union address for each of the four presidents studied was reviewed to determine policy advocacy words to use in this study. These were selected because the purpose of these speeches is to advocate for an agenda to Congress and to the country. The words and phrases in Table 1 were selected and reviewed by a colleague with extensive content analysis experience to ensure they represented these ideas before being built into a codebook.

Coding

Three independent coders reviewed and coded the full text of all sixteen speeches, allowing for a three-way validity check. Specific instructions were included to clarify how and when words were used. For example, coders were directed to not consider forms of the word “proud” when they were used to speak directly to the graduates, but rather when they were spoken in reference to the work of the president. Coders were

Table 2: Legacy Building Words by Speech Term

<i>Word/Phrase</i>	<i>1st Term Occurrences</i>	<i>2nd Term Occurrences</i>
Accomplished	2	3
Achieved	8	4
Best	1	2
Grow/Growth/ Growing	4	5
High/Highest	0	3
I/we create/created	0	0
I/we change/changed	0	0
I/we did/have	32	56
I/we expanded	0	2
Last eight years	0	4
Legacy	2	2
Looking back	0	0
My Administration	7	3
Opposed	0	0
Proud	3	6
Results	0	0
Secured	0	0
Strongest	1	3
Than ever	0	1

not given information about the classification of the words into legacy building or policy advocacy categories. Worksheets were then compiled and compared for discrepancies. If one coder’s count for a particular word was different than the other two, that count was not included. In 95.5% of words or phrases counted, coders reported the same numbers.

After the counts of words and phrases of the 16 speeches were coded, the speeches were organized by president, political party affiliation, and whether first or second term. Numbers were totaled and compared.

Results

For this preliminary content analysis, the researcher provides an explanatory, descriptive look at this topic. The data include the raw count of each word in its selected universe. For example, the researcher cal-

Table 3: Policy Advocacy Words by Speech Term

<i>Word/Phrase</i>	<i>1st Term Occurrences</i>	<i>2nd Term Occurrences</i>
Benefit	3	2
Challenge	12	30
Change	22	59
Congress	11	22
Cut(s)	13	8
Government	43	23
Hope	16	28
House	0	3
I am/we are	24	30
I/we can/will	17	28
I/we must	6	11
Jobs	27	7
Pass(age)	0	6
Promise	2	2
Propose	4	2
Pursue	2	1
Reform	2	7
Restore	9	4
Revive	2	0
Senate	1	3
Task force	6	5
Urge	2	1
Value(s)	15	20
Will do	0	0

culated how many times each word in legacy building and policy advocacy appeared in first-term and second-term speeches. The researcher also calculated how many times each word appeared in speeches given by Republicans and Democrats. What follows includes the counts in these categories.

When it came to legacy building language, presidents used “achieved,” and “my administration” more in their *first-term* speeches, appearing more than two times as frequently than in *second-term* speeches. Ten of the 19 legacy-building words or phrases (52.6%) were used more frequently in *second-term* speeches, and seven words or phrases (36.8%) appeared the same number of times in both categories. The phrase “I/we did/have” was used substantially more than any of the other words counted, with 32 usages in first-term speeches, and 56 usages in second-term speeches.

Ten of the 24 policy advocacy words and phrases (41.7%) were used more frequently in *first-term* speeches, with “cut(s),” “government,” “jobs,” and “restore” among the most used in this category. Twelve of the 24 words and phrases (50%) were used more

frequently in the *second term*: “challenge,” “change,” “I am/we are,” “hope,” and “I/we can/will” top the list of second-term policy advocacy words. “Promise” and “will do” were used in equal numbers in both categories (8.3%). See Table 3.

In reviewing the data, it became apparent that party affiliation also played a role in word choice related to legacy building and policy advocacy. Data were also analyzed for frequency of word usage by category among first- and second-term speeches given by Republican presidents and Democratic presidents.

During first-term speeches, Republicans used two (10.5%) of the 19 legacy building words—“my administration” and “strongest”—more than Democrats. On the other hand Democrats used five (26%) of the legacy building words—“achieved,” “legacy,” “best,” “I/did,” “proud”—more than Republicans. Most words in this category (63%) were used equally by the parties in this category of speeches. See Table 4.

Democrats used more legacy building words in their second-term speeches than Republicans. See Table 5. Four of the legacy building words (21%) were

Table 4: 1st Term Legacy Building Words by Party Affiliation

<i>Word</i>	<i>Republicans</i>	<i>Democrats</i>
Accomplished	1	1
Achieved	3	7
Best	0	1
Growth/Grow/Growing	2	2
High/Highest	0	0
I/we create/created	0	0
I/we change/changed	0	0
I/we did/have	7	25
I/we expanded	0	0
Last eight years	0	0
Legacy	0	2
Looking back	0	0
My administration	4	3
Opposed	0	0
Proud	1	2
Results	0	0
Secured	0	0
Strongest	1	0
Than ever	0	0

Table 5: 2nd Term Legacy Building Words by Party Affiliation

<i>Word</i>	<i>Republicans</i>	<i>Democrats</i>
Accomplished	2	1
Achieved	4	0
Best	0	3
Growth/Grow/Growing	1	4
High/Highest	0	3
I/we create/created	0	2
I/we change/changed	0	0
I/we did/have	21	35
I/we expanded	1	1
Last eight years	1	3
Legacy	0	2
Looking back	0	0
My administration	2	1
Opposed	0	0
Proud	1	5
Results	0	0
Secured	1	0
Strongest	1	3
Than ever	0	1

used more frequently by Republicans in second-term speeches. Ten of the legacy building words (53.6%) were used more frequently by Democrats in second-term speeches, and five of the words were used equally. The phrase, “I/we did/have” stood out among those in the legacy building category, with Democrats recording 35 instances, and Republicans with 21 instances.

When it comes to advocacy words in first-term speeches, Republicans used nine (37.5%) more frequently than Democrats, with “government” used 37 times in Republican first-term speeches and only six times by Democrats. Ten of these words (41.7%) were used more frequently by Democrats, such as “change” and “jobs”; and five (20.8%) appeared equally between the two parties’ speeches. See Table 6.

The difference between the parties is greatest when it comes to second-term policy advocacy speeches. Seven of the words (29.1%) were used more frequently by Republicans, with “government” again used most frequently. Democrats used 13 of the words (54.2%) more frequently than Republicans in this category, but the number of times the words were used was much higher with Democratic speeches. For example, “change” appeared 47 times in Democratic speeches but only 12 times in Republican speeches, and “cuts” were used 17 times to Republicans’ nil. See Table 7.

While some words or phrases were not used at all in any of the speeches, others were used quite frequently or with consistent recurrence among both first- and second-term, and among Republican and

Table 6: 1st Term Policy Advocacy Words by Party Affiliation

<i>Word</i>	<i>Republicans</i>	<i>Democrats</i>
Benefit	3	0
Challenge	1	8
Change	6	16
Congress	4	7
Cut(s)	2	0
Government	37	6
Hope	12	4
House	0	0
I am/we are	8	16
I/we can/will	7	10
I/we must	3	3
Jobs	6	21
Pass(age)	0	0
Promise	1	1
Propose	4	0
Pursue	0	2
Reform	2	0
Restore	4	5
Revive	2	0
Senate	0	1
Task force	4	2
Urge	2	0
Value	7	8
Will do	0	0

Table 7: 2nd Term Policy Advocacy Words by Party Affiliation

<i>Word</i>	<i>Republicans</i>	<i>Democrats</i>
Benefit	0	1
Challenge	10	20
Change	12	47
Congress	7	15
Cut(s)	0	17
Government	19	4
Hope	17	11
House	2	1
I am/we are	12	18
I/we can/will	17	11
I/we must	3	8
Jobs	1	6
Pass(age)	0	6
Promise	0	2
Propose	1	1
Pursue	0	1
Reform	3	4
Restore	3	1
Revive	0	0
Senate	0	2
Task force	4	4
Urge	1	0
Value(s)	12	8
Will do	0	0

Democratic, speeches.

Discussion

When tabulating the numbers of times the words and phrases were used, categorizing them into first-term speeches or second-term speeches, H2 is proven partially correct. Presidents do, in fact, use first-term speeches to advance a policy agenda. 41.7% of the policy advocacy words were used in these early remarks. Additionally, presidents do use second-term speeches to build their legacy, as evidenced by the 52% of legacy building words appearing in those speeches given at the end of a president's time in office, addressing H3. With regard to legacy building and taking credit for accomplishments, presidents were consistently using phrases from this category in their second-term speeches, which is to be expected. Phrases like "accomplished," "growth/grow/growing," "I/we create/created," "I/we did/have," and "proud" all demonstrate that presidents definitely use second-term speeches to build their legacy and reputation more than in first-term speeches. The data gathered challenged H3, however, as policy advocacy words weren't primarily included in first-term speeches. Indeed, more of the policy advocacy words were used in second-term speeches (50%) than in first term speeches (41.7%).

In first-term speeches, presidents use the opportunity to put forth parts of their policy agendas. Ten of the 24 words and phrases (41.7%) were policy advocacy words, with "cut(s)," "government," "jobs," and "restore" among the most used in this category. These words are in line with what would be expected in first-term speeches: policy and focus on the future.

In second-term speeches, however, the data showed that policy advocacy is still very much on the minds of presidents. Twelve of the 24 words and phrases (50%) were used more frequently in the second term. "Challenge," "change," "I am/we are," "hope," and "I/we can/will" topped the list of second-term policy advocacy words. The substantial representation of these words in second-term speeches demonstrate that presidents still want to actively pursue their legislative agendas despite being near the end of their terms. The fact that these words and phrases were used so much more in the second-term speeches suggests presidents may even take a more policy-driven approach in second-term speeches.

Digging deeper into the data, it becomes apparent that Democratic presidents are more likely to use words from the policy advocacy list in their second

terms than Republicans, suggesting that Democratic presidents are more focused on advancing their policy agendas in second-term commencement speeches than are Republicans. Democrats used 13 of the policy advocacy words (54.2%) more frequently than Republicans in this category, and the number of times the words were used was much higher with Democratic speeches. For example, "change" appeared 47 times in Democratic speeches but only 12 times in Republican speeches.

Of the 24 policy advocacy words and phrases, Democratic presidents used 13 more frequently than Republicans in second-term speeches. Words and phrases that stood out as used much more frequently by Democratic presidents in second-term speeches include: "challenge," "change," "Congress," "I am/we are," "reform," and "value(s)."

Conclusion

As discussed in the literature review, presidential commencement addresses are about more than wishing graduates well—they serve as opportunities for presidential advocacy (Bialik, 2016; Martin, 1985; and Ortega-Ribeiro 2013). Martin (1985) particularly discussed the use of presidential commencement speeches as policy advocacy tools, and this research shows the practice is still very much in use today.

Through this research, it is clear that presidents are keen to advance a policy advocacy agenda at the end of their terms, and not just when they're getting started. Though they may only have a few months left in office, presidents demonstrate through their word choice in commencement speeches that their work is not yet done.

Examining the results of this study, certain words and phrases are used much more often than others ("government," "I/we did/have," "change," "I am/we are," "challenge," and "congress"), which could suggest that presidents have determined these particular words represent the work they want to take credit for, or the work they have yet to do. Particularly with regard to words about institutions ("government," "congress"), it would be interesting to further study the usage of these words in the context of speeches beyond the commencement arena.

Though not included in the initial hypotheses, partisanship also played a role in how these speeches were used, with Democratic presidents using second-term speeches for policy advocacy more frequently than Republicans. The trend of Democrats

using second-term speeches for policy advocacy, identified here, warrants additional study to determine if this was true because of these particular Democratic presidents, or if it's a broader trend in the use of commencement speeches for advocacy by Democrats.

Second-term speeches are also important opportunities for presidents to cement their legacies and reflect on their time in office. The frequency of presidents being commencement speakers "lends credence to the notion that these events are valued, respected opportunities for speakers, and hold a position of importance within American culture at large" (Johnson, 2015, p. 15).

When colleges and universities are weighing the selection of a president as a commencement speaker, considering where the president is in his or her term in office could help predict the tone of the speech. A president at the beginning of her or his first term will be more likely to advocate for policy change, increasing the potential for activism and/or controversy from the stage. A Republican president at the end of his or her second term will be likely to use the opportunity to reflect upon her or his presidency and may be less likely to invite controversy due to her or his remarks. With these findings, educational institutions will have additional information to consider when choosing a speaker.

Similarly, reviewing presidential commencement speeches provides those teaching in small programs the opportunity to compare and contrast the messaging strategies employed within these speeches. Faculty teaching public relations and political communication could use this content analysis to exemplify messaging strategy and word choice, and could expand the exercise to encourage students to find other ways to interpret meaning and intent from political speeches.

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