

THE MESSAGE IS TONE: EXAMINING TONAL EVOLUTION

IN STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESSES

by

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## ABSTRACT

The State of the Union address is one of the most anticipated and institutionalized speeches that the President of the United States of America can give, due to the rare opportunity it presents to simultaneously address both Congress and the electorate. Previous research has examined the policy objectives and rhetoric of the State of the Union address, but many questions remain unanswered. Tone, an emerging area of political communication, is a relatively unexplored concept that deserves further study. This study seeks to delve into this somewhat uncharted territory in an attempt to build upon previous research related to tone and to the study of the State of the Union address as a whole, investigating the link between policy objectives found in State of the Union addresses and the tone of those objectives, thereby setting a foundation for future scholarship. While further study is needed, this study sheds light on possible tonal distinctions between presidents and between the Republican and Democratic parties.

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## INTRODUCTION

The State of the Union address is a constitutionally-mandated annual speech given by the President of the United States before a joint session of Congress in which the president can communicate his thoughts to Congress and the general public as well as set the agenda for the upcoming year(s). It is a speech that is heavily anticipated, it is televised around the world, and it could be argued that it is the speech with the largest total audience. This gives the president the biggest stage possible with which to articulate his objectives and point of view. In this speech, the president has the unique opportunity to convey information as it relates to the current standing of the United States directly from his perspective as Commander-in-Chief and Chief Executive.

There is a considerable amount of research on State of the Union addresses, but these studies have largely been concerned with either how a president shapes his political agenda or the rhetoric of the speech itself. However, these studies are outdated. Therefore, this study seeks to give a fresh perspective on State of the Union analyses by taking cues from these early studies and combining them with new research on political tone in order to simultaneously update the current standing of the literature and study an emerging area of political communication. The purpose of this study is to investigate and compare the relationship between presidential policy objectives and the tone of presidential administrations, through systematic analysis and examination of a sample of State of the Union addresses.

## POLITICAL AND PUBLIC AGENDAS

The predominant analysis of State of the Union addresses has been in terms of the legislative political agendas of presidential administrations and how the State of the

Union is utilized as a tool to convey that agenda and administrative priorities to Congress and the mass public. Moen (1988) notes in his landmark analysis of Ronald Reagan's State of the Union addresses that the "clearest explanation of an administration's priorities" will often be found in the annual State of the Union address delivered by the president (p. 775). Furthermore, Light describes the State of the Union address as "the central battleground for presidential priorities" (Light, 1999, p. 160). Light's book, *The President's Agenda: Domestic Policy Choice from Kennedy to Clinton*, was a groundbreaking approach to the study of presidential agendas and is cited in nearly every presidential agenda analysis conducted since the early to mid-1980s. Moen (1988) shares Light's view of the tremendous importance of the State of the Union address, describing it as a "carefully constructed, conscious statement of true presidential priorities" (p. 776). One can argue that the State of the Union is one of the most deliberately assembled presidential speeches due to its institutionalized annual nature and the opportunity it presents to address both the entire federal legislative body and the mass public at the same time. This is in contrast to speeches given in response to more spontaneous events or at special appearances, as those speeches are typically written and delivered on short notice or even extemporaneously, depending on recent events.

When looking to discern the evolution of an administration's political agenda across various State of the Union addresses, scholars typically group the content of the addresses into a few distinct categories. Moen (1988), Cohen (1995), and Hill (1998) all utilized three main categories, but have just two of the same categories—international or foreign affairs and economic affairs. Cohen (1995) and Hill (1998) further examine civil rights as their third category, whereas civil rights was only a subset of Moen's (1988)

third category, which was social affairs. Moen's (1988) research added a fourth category, which he called miscellaneous, to cover introductory remarks, jokes, tributes, and other information which did not pertain to policy, or was more of a formality in the address. In contrast, Cohen (1995) and Hill (1998) chose to omit this miscellaneous information, and instead focused only on substantive elements of the addresses. These three studies are great examples of how diverse various analyses can be, even though each one uses similar categories of analysis.

Unlike Cohen and Hill's studies, Moen simply examined the evolution of Reagan's political agenda. This is a weakness in that the study does not sufficiently explain what the agenda's evolution affected. However, Moen's analysis does explain the general nature of how presidential agendas can change over time, which serves as a foundation for later studies and enhances our general understanding of 1980s politics. Thus, by analyzing State of the Union messages of a particular decade, one might gain a better understanding of the political discourse of the time period. Even though Moen admits that his data prevents him from making assessments about the tone of Reagan's addresses, he ends his analysis by charging scholars and pundits with the responsibility to use his concepts as a means to compare other presidential administrations. Keeping this challenge in mind, this study compares the tone of a sample of State of the Union addresses in order to examine the tonal themes of presidential policy objectives.

In contrast to Moen, Cohen (1995) views the State of the Union as a means to allow the president to focus the public agenda on the priorities he feels are significant. He examined presidential leadership of the mass public's policy agenda, measured by the amount of attention that presidents give to policy areas in their State of the Union

addresses, and found that the public responded to that attention. Cohen mentions that other policy areas, such as “energy, the environment, or crime, appear sporadically” throughout his frame of analysis, but there are not enough cases to substantively and effectively analyze those areas, leaving the main three policy agenda areas as the medium for analysis (1995, p. 91). Similarly, Hill (1998) views the State of the Union as a means by which presidents can influence the public’s attention to specific policy agenda areas. However, she builds on Cohen’s analysis in order to show the reciprocal influence process between presidential attention to issues in his State of the Union address and the salience of the same issues in the mass public: as the president discusses an issue in his State of the Union, the issue will become more prominent in the public eye, and as the public becomes more concerned with an issue, the president will be more likely to discuss it in his State of the Union. She uses previous research (Geer, 1996; Jacobs & Shapiro, 1994, 1995; as cited in Hill, 1998) that suggests presidents are “highly attentive—and often highly responsive—to public opinion” as the foundation of this reciprocal influence hypothesis (Hill, 1998, p. 1329).

In a more interpretive account that is closely related to the concept of political agenda setting, Fred Greenstein, a longtime observer of the modern presidency, analyzes the leadership qualities of each of the presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to Barack Obama, focusing on six qualities related to executing the duties and responsibilities of the Oval Office. Two such skills in particular, as Greenstein describes, “bear on the president as political operator—his *political skill* and the extent to which it is harnessed to a *vision* of public policy” (Greenstein, 2009, p. 5-6). The other four qualities (organizational capacity, cognitive style, emotional intelligence, and public communication) are not

pertinent to this study as they are not involved in the creation or content of the speech, but instead are involved with the everyday practices of the presidency or with the delivery of the speech itself. A president's "vision" refers to his fixation with policy content, his ability to assess the feasibility of policies, and the "possession of a set of overarching goals" (Greenstein, 2009, p. 228). Since the State of the Union address is the "central battleground" (Light, 1999, p. 160) and "clearest explanation" (Moen, 1988, p. 775) of the goals and policy objectives of the president, it is important for him to have, at an absolute minimum, some semblance of a vision as described by Greenstein. Vision gives the president a road map to follow, and, in theory, it also provides a consistent viewpoint for the president to fall back on in times of uncertainty. One example Greenstein cites in the importance of vision is that of President George W. Bush, who excelled at setting a broad policy vision because "[h]e took it as an article of faith that if he failed to set his administration's policy agenda, others would set it for him" (2009, p. 204). He learned from his father's mistake of underestimating the importance of political vision (President George H. W. Bush dismissed it as "the vision thing") and instead articulated a broad policy vision in his State of the Union addresses and other public remarks.

#### RHETORIC OF THE NARRATIVE

Another area of State of the Union analysis has been concerned with the rhetoric and structure of the narrative, rather than the policy implications found within it. To understand the rhetoric of the State of the Union address, one must first understand its origins. The State of the Union address as we know it is derived from Article II, Section 3 of the United States Constitution, which states in part that the president "shall from time

to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient” (U.S. Const. art. II, § 3). Presidents have taken this clause to mean different things, as presidents from Thomas Jefferson to William Howard Taft would send a letter to Congress detailing the current state of the union and also would take advantage of the “from time to time” phrase of the Constitution in deciding when to send the letter, or even whether to send one at all. This letter served as the foundation for the rhetoric narrative. Woodrow Wilson “revived the delivery of the speech in person to the legislative branch” and this gave way to what has become the annual televised address of today’s day and age (Teten, 2003, 337-338).

Teten (2003) makes it clear that his goal is not to refute prior literature or the study of presidential policy development, but rather to analyze the growth of the “modern rhetorical presidency” (p. 335). Teten chooses to study only State of the Union addresses in order to have a consistent basis for comparisons of presidents and presidential rhetoric. He analyzes the length of the addresses and conducts content analysis to view terminology and specific word usage changes across time in those addresses. Like Moen (1988), Teten looks at the number of words in an address devoted to a category or policy area. This is problematic because the context in which the word is mentioned is not taken into account. To combat this, this study follows the example of Cohen (1995) and examines the number of sentences devoted to each policy area.

Loebs’ (n.d.) chapter in Denton’s (2012) edited book takes a deeper look at the rhetoric of President Bush’s State of the Union addresses, specifically what he calls the “terror narrative” present in Bush’s 2002-2006 addresses (p. 67). In the preface, Denton

describes Loeb's analysis as examining "the way the 9/11 attacks and the war on terror were explained to the nation in five of Bush's State of the Union addresses" by exploring the characterization and "description of the terrorists, their actions and intentions, in order to justify and garner support for the American offensive" (Denton, 2012, p. x). Loeb details the expanding narrative to explain the changing nature of the war on terror and the changing description of the enemy. Loeb makes note of how issues such as the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and the War on Terror can be framed in order to be used to a president's advantage. This study, however, is different from Loeb's analysis in that it seeks to examine the changing tone of President Bush's State of the Union addresses, as well as those of President Obama. Loeb does a good job at rhetorically analyzing some of Bush's State of the Union addresses, but his analysis is confined to a small subject within those addresses. In contrast, this study draws on Loeb's example and examines tone in relation to specific policy objectives.

### TONE

Rhetoric is essential in politics, especially to the president, who is viewed as both the chief executive and chief politician. However, what about the tone of that rhetoric? Tone is often discussed in literary works or academic assignments, but its exact meaning is difficult to grasp. Often, tone is viewed in the context of how the reader feels while reading a text, but there is no scientific reasoning behind it. As mentioned earlier, tone is a relatively new focus in political communication, and there has not been a large amount of in-depth research on the topic. Moen challenged scholars to use his concepts as a means to compare presidential administrations and assess the tone of presidential addresses. Hart et al.'s study of tone argues "political tone addresses problems that

cannot be addressed by other means,” and researchers “treat tone as that which mysteriously ‘leaks out’ of a text to reflect a speaker’s take on things” (2013, p. 21). Rather than looking at who said what to whom, the researchers instead examine how it was said. The researchers analyze an assortment of texts, including speeches, advertising campaigns, and debates, among others, using DICTION, a computer-aided text analysis program created by the first author, Roderick P. Hart, and Craig C. Carroll. DICTION has since grown to become one of the most respected computer-aided text analysis programs and is often employed by researchers across academia.

Scholars such as Hart et al. examine President Bush’s tone, but in a broader sense. The researchers gathered nearly all of his public remarks, amounting to almost 2300 full texts for a rough average of approximately 275 speeches per year of Bush’s presidency (p. 152-153), admittedly a “heavy oversampling” (p. 18). Interestingly enough, the researchers found that “rhetoric and policy often run counter to one another” and that Bush “was an adaptive animal,” able to adjust, adapt, and overcome obstacles that arose during his presidency with a prudent practicality and an even, measured tone (Hart et al., 2013, p. 170).

Hart et al. also note, like Moen, that tone warrants further study, since tone “blends politics with humanity. Politicians...cannot walk away from their tones” (Hart et al., 2013, p. 233). The researchers note the mysterious nature of tone, describing it as “that which is implied by that which is said,” and concluding that even after an extremely thorough analysis, many more questions still remain unanswered (Hart et al., 2013, p. 233). One such question regards the evolution of tone. This study examines the evolution

of tone as it relates to State of the Union addresses in an attempt to build upon Hart et al.'s work.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

The previous literature leaves a hole that this study hopes to fulfill. The intent of this analysis is to determine the impact of policy objectives on the tone of State of the Union addresses. The regular occurrence of the State of the Union address, according to Loeb, “allow[s] an apples-to-apples comparison as to the manner in which a president might speak to any particular policy” and the combined audience of the legislature and the electorate “make the [State of the Union] an event of primary importance to a president when seeking to advance policies, or...define the nation’s struggle” (n.d., p. 71). Tone is still a relatively unexplored quality of the State of the Union address, and, by understanding it, a clearer insight may be gained into the person in the Oval Office and his/her political agenda.

The annual, institutionalized nature of the State of the Union allows for readily available transcripts and data, which allows for effective comparisons of the speeches. Rather than examine all of the State of the Union addresses, I have chosen to examine odd numbered years for two presidents – George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Therefore this study will examine the 2001, 2003, 2005, and 2007 addresses of President George W. Bush and the 2009, 2011, and 2013 addresses of President Barack Obama. (At the time of this study, President Obama had not yet delivered his 2015 State of the Union address.) This sample allows for comparison not only across time and between the last two presidents, but also across party lines and between the first and second terms of each president. Presidents Bush and Obama were chosen as the case studies because they are

consecutive presidents and similar issues have characterized each presidency. This allows the study to measure similarities and differences in tone between the two presidential administrations. The consecutive presidencies also eliminate the possibility that different era-specific social or political norms would affect the analysis, as Bush and Obama governed under similar economic, social, and political conditions, both domestically and globally.

To conduct this study I am drawing on the work of Hart et al. (2013) who examined President Bush's tone in nearly all of his public remarks. However, in my study I use their methods to gain a better understanding of one specific type of speech, the State of the Union address. The researchers admit that although they "have accounted for more rhetoric than most scholars...not all speeches are created equal. A State of the Union address witnessed by millions surely has more impact than [a speech] observed by two hundred brave souls standing in the rain outside a VFW hall in Des Moines" (Hart et al., 2013, p. 165). Recall that DICTION is a well-respected computer-aided text analysis program that is often utilized by researchers from a variety of disciplines. The reason for Hart et al.'s admission is that DICTION assumes all texts are equal; in reality, this is simply not the case. Thus, by examining only State of the Union addresses, all texts will be equally comparable, validating the study.

For the purposes of their analysis, Hart et al. make the fundamental assumption "that tone is the product of (1) individual word choices that (2) cumulatively build up (3) to produce patterned expectations (4) telling an audience something important (5) about the author's outlook on things" (2013, p. 12). This study repeats this assumption in order to advance the study of tone, as tone has already been defined in a scholarly context.

Scholars are concerned with the words and phrases used by a speaker, not necessarily the speaker's pitch, rate of speech, or volume. This study will apply Hart et al.'s definition to identify if State of the Union addresses focusing on domestic policy objectives have a specific tone and if State of the Union addresses focusing on foreign policy objectives have a specific tone. Because foreign policy issues are considerably different than domestic policy issues, it is logical to infer that as a whole, each will likely have a different tone. This inference, along with the master definitions of DICTION, leads me to the following hypotheses:

*H<sub>1</sub>: State of the Union addresses referencing domestic policy issues in 50% or more of the sentences will have a tone of Commonality.*

*H<sub>2</sub>: State of the Union addresses referencing foreign policy issues in 50% or more of the sentences will have a tone of Certainty.*

*H<sub>3</sub>: State of the Union addresses referencing economic policy issues in 20% or more of the sentences will have a tone of Realism.*

The first hypothesis relies on the premise that when referencing domestic policy issues, presidents will try to highlight themes of cooperation and agreement on core values and identity. These themes are appropriate because the issues are prevalent on American soil, and so it is necessary to garner support for these issues and raise awareness. The second hypothesis relies on the idea that when discussing foreign policy issues, presidents will emphasize the need for confidence, tenacity, and perseverance, and will insist on accomplishing goals and objectives. These qualities are appropriate due to the United States being a world power and an example that other nations look to follow, as well as the propensity to show its strength to the rest of the world in order to be an active

peacekeeper. The third hypothesis is based on the economy's near-constant presence in the media and the coverage it receives. Due to this prevalence, it seems logical to infer that presidents will approach the economy in a realistic manner because of the public's concern with the economy and the economy's capability to affect everyone.

## **Methods**

This design is twofold: first, this study is based on a preliminary content analysis of the policy objectives found within the State of the Union addresses. This preliminary analysis determined the policy objectives present in each State of the Union address, examining the number of sentences devoted to each policy area rather than individual words. The results of this preliminary policy objective categorization can be found in Table 1 and Table 2 in the Analysis section. Using sentences as the unit of analysis allows for the context in which the word is used to be taken into account and also allows easy category assignment of sentences. This prevents having to determine what words would or would not be counted, and also avoids having to decide to which category an ambiguous word should be assigned. Content analysis has several advantages, including the ability to study inaccessible subjects like presidents, avoiding subject reactivity due to its unobtrusive nature, and providing the opportunity to study a subject over a period of time (Moen, 1988).

The second key concept in this study is tone. To measure tone, this study utilizes the computer-aided text analysis program DICTION in order to identify the tone of each State of the Union address. This is advantageous because it eliminates the possibility of human coder error, and the program used in this study, DICTION, is one of the most used and respected text analysis programs to date, ensuring reliability and accuracy in its

measures of tone. DICTION searches the text with over 10,000 search words in various lists, takes the data from that search, analyzes it, and then determines the tone of the text based on that analysis. The five master variables in DICTION (Certainty, Optimism, Activity, Realism, and Commonality) are defined as follows:

Certainty indicates resoluteness, inflexibility, and completeness and a tendency to speak [with the full authority of the office]. Optimism [refers to] language endorsing some person, group, concept, or event or highlighting their positive entailments...[Activity] features movement, change, the implementation of ideas and the avoidance of inertia and helps distinguish reflective from nonreflective texts. A fourth dimension is Realism, language describing tangible, immediate, recognizable matters that affect people's everyday lives...Finally, Commonality [denotes] language highlighting the agreed-upon values of a group and rejecting idiosyncratic modes of engagement (Hart et al., 2013, p. 14-15).

Since none of the search terms are duplicated in the lists, and “no statistically significant relationship exists among any of these master variables,” the user is given “an unusually rich understanding of [the] text” under examination (Hart et al., 2013, p. 14). I utilized this same program and method of analysis in order to discover the tone of each selected State of the Union address. These results can be found in Table 4 in the Analysis section.

### **Operationalization of Variables**

#### *Independent Variable*

The independent variable of this study refers to the policy objectives covered in the State of the Union addresses. Policy objectives refer to the subjects of the president's speech, and will be determined through the preliminary content analysis of the full State of the Union addresses. There will be three main categories: (1) Foreign Policy Issues, (2) Domestic Policy Issues, and (3) Non-Policy Issues. The foreign policy category includes all references to other nations and international organizations, wars, international affairs, military and defense issues, and the like. The domestic policy category includes all

references to issues in the United States, including, but not limited to, the economy of the United States, equality, and social affairs. The non-policy category encompasses all subjects not related to either foreign or domestic policies or issues, and is included in an effort to be exhaustive in the assignment of every sentence. The fourth category is an overarching category, which involves both foreign policy and domestic policy. This overarching category is Economic Policy Issues, which consists of references to budgets, budget deficits, taxes, spending, unemployment, gross domestic product, gross national product, economic sanctions and regulations, and so on. The examples listed in this paragraph are by no means all-inclusive. Additional examples and information pertaining to each category can be found in the Appendix. There is a rudimentary difference between economic and non-economic policy, and much of economic policy bridges the gap between domestic and foreign policy. This category allows for the separation of non-economic aspects of foreign and domestic policy. For example, when discussing foreign policy issues, two large subcategories will likely be international economic policy and national security policy. These two subcategories are quite different, and separating the economic elements from the non-economic elements ensures that economic policy issues do not affect the measures of non-economic policy issues, due to the inherent differences between the two.

Each sentence in each address was coded according to the category it references. Categorizing the sentences within State of the Union addresses is a subjective process. However, as Bailey noted, “categories for content analysis generally are not derived from theory or constructed out of thin air, but are constructed by examining the documents to be studied and ascertaining what common elements they contain” (as cited in Moen,

1988, p.777). It is important to create the categories based on the content of the documents or speeches, rather than use a cookie-cutter approach copied from another source. This enables the categorization to be collectively exhaustive.

### *Dependent Variable*

The dependent variable of this study will be the tone of policy objectives of State of the Union addresses. This variable will be determined using DICTION's five master variables of Certainty, Optimism, Activity, Realism, and Commonality. After each State of the Union address was analyzed to determine the proportional policy objective categorization, each address as a whole was then analyzed using DICTION to determine its tone. This tonal analysis was then compared with the proportional policy objective categorization from the preliminary content analysis to determine if the hypotheses should be accepted or rejected.

## ANALYSIS

### **Preliminary Policy Objective Categorization**

Before examining the results of the DICTION tonal analysis, it is first necessary to note the results of the preliminary policy objective categorization. Recall that the first step in the research design was to conduct a content analysis in order to determine the independent variable policy objectives. That content analysis yielded a simple proportional categorization of policy objectives discussed in the State of the Union addresses. From there, the simple analysis was further divided in order to account for overlap in those cases where a sentence might fall into multiple categories, such as one that discusses military defense spending, which would fall into both the foreign policy and economic policy categories. Table 1 shows the simple proportional policy objective

categorization, while Table 2 depicts the expanded version. The expanded version in Table 2 shows the breakdown for every possible categorization in each speech, while the simple categorization in Table 1 does not account for the overlap described above. The percentages are rounded up to the nearest whole number, which accounts for some speeches in Table 2 exceeding 100%. Due to the overlap that exists in Table 1, no maximum percentage exists; instead, each value should be looked at independently, as the percentage of sentences in the speech that references the given category.

**Table 1: Simple Proportional Policy Objective Categorization**

Speech	Foreign Policy	Domestic Policy	Non-Policy	Economic Policy
<b>Bush 2001</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>50%</b>
<b>Bush 2003</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>13%</b>
<b>Bush 2005</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>12%</b>
<b>Bush 2007</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>16%</b>
<b>Obama 2009</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>78%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>56%</b>
<b>Obama 2011</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>28%</b>
<b>Obama 2013</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>43%</b>

**Table 2: Expanded Proportional Policy Objective Categorization**

Speech	Foreign/ Economic	Domestic/ Economic	Foreign/ Domestic	Foreign/ Domestic/ Economic	Solely Domestic	Solely Foreign	Solely Economic	Non- Policy
<b>Bush 2001</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>19%</b>
<b>Bush 2003</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>8%</b>
<b>Bush 2005</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Bush 2007</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>19%</b>
<b>Obama 2009</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>Obama 2011</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>14%</b>
<b>Obama 2013</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>8%</b>

### Intercoder Reliability

Due to the subjective nature of the policy objective categorization, it is necessary to have checks in place to account for errors that may accompany such categorization. Intercoder reliability determines if a particular coding criteria is appropriate to use in categorizing certain content, measuring the extent to which independent coders agree or disagree on the classification of the content of interest when using identical criteria or instructions. In this particular case, I sought out individuals majoring in political science, members of the department's Distinction Program, and those engaged in writing undergraduate political science theses to independently code portions of State of the Union addresses in order to measure the degree of intercoder reliability of my coding criteria system. These individuals are familiar with research methods and are thus

qualified to serve in such a capacity. I provided these coders with an instruction sheet that explained how each sentence should be assigned using examples, as well as how context should be used in determining where seemingly non-policy sentences belong. The instructions also state that coders should code according to the criteria, not their own preferences. If a topic is not listed in the criteria, then the coder should use his judgment based on the given criteria in making his determination. These instructions can be found in the Appendix.

I provided six different coders with a sample of 59 sentences and then compared their coding with my own to determine how much of the sample was consensual. Table 3 displays the results of each coder, identified by a single letter. In the case of the two lowest averages (coders A and C), each brought in his own personal opinion and ignored deliberate instructions in the criteria, which accounts for the lower measure. Coder A ignored the instructions about how energy independence should be categorized, while Coder C ignored the instruction concerning context in assigning seemingly non-policy sentences. Had these coders followed the criteria explicitly, the average would be even higher. Given the average of 92% and this error on the part of two coders, I am confident that my coding criteria is a good measure for categorizing State of the Union sentences.

**Table 3: Intercoder Reliability Results**

	A	B	C	D	E	F	Average
<b>Total Sentences</b>	<b>59</b>						
<b>Correct</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>85%</b>	<b>93%</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>93%</b>	<b>95%</b>	<b>95%</b>	<b>92%</b>

## Tonal Analysis

The next step in my analysis is to test the relationship between the tone of the State of the Union addresses and the preliminary policy objective categorization. Once I had the preliminary policy objective categorization, I ran each speech through DICTION. Table 4 depicts the rankings of DICTION's five master variables for each State of the Union address. In the table, 1 represents the top ranking and 5 represents the lowest ranking.

**Table 4: DICTION Tonal Rankings**

Speech	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Bush 2001</b>	<b>Optimism</b>	<b>Realism</b>	<b>Commonality</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Certainty</b>
<b>Bush 2003</b>	<b>Certainty</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Realism</b>	<b>Optimism</b>	<b>Commonality</b>
<b>Bush 2005</b>	<b>Optimism</b>	<b>Realism</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Certainty</b>	<b>Commonality</b>
<b>Bush 2007</b>	<b>Optimism</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Realism</b>	<b>Commonality</b>	<b>Certainty</b>
<b>Obama 2009</b>	<b>Realism</b>	<b>Optimism</b>	<b>Commonality</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Certainty</b>
<b>Obama 2011</b>	<b>Realism</b>	<b>Commonality</b>	<b>Optimism</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Certainty</b>
<b>Obama 2013</b>	<b>Optimism</b>	<b>Commonality</b>	<b>Realism</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Certainty</b>

### *Testing Hypotheses*

In order to test my hypotheses, the State of the Union addresses which meet the minimum conditions must first be identified. For hypothesis one, an address must reference a domestic policy issue in at least 50% of its sentences. Bush's 2001 and 2005 addresses and Obama's 2009, 2011, and 2013 addresses meet this standard. For

hypothesis two, an address must reference a foreign policy issue in at least 50% of its sentences. The only address to meet this requirement is Bush's 2003 address. For hypothesis three, an address must refer to an economic policy issue in at least 20% of its sentences. Bush's 2001 address and Obama's 2009, 2011, and 2013 addresses meet this condition.

Table 4 displays the information necessary to determine the results of my hypotheses. A hypothesis stating that an address will have a certain tone indicates that said tone will hold the top ranking, though this tonal analysis tends to reject this idea, or at least indicate a lack of conclusiveness. In hypothesis one, Commonality ranks third, fifth, third, second, and second in the 2001, 2005, 2009, 2011, and 2013 addresses, respectively. These results do not support the first hypothesis. In hypothesis two, Certainty ranks first in the 2003 address, the only one that meets the minimum requirement. While this seems to support the second hypothesis, additional testing should be conducted on other State of the Union addresses, considering the lack of addresses that meet the minimum requirement. In hypothesis three, Realism ranks second, first, first, and third in the 2001, 2009, 2011, and 2013 addresses, respectively. This hypothesis appears to be supported in the 2009 and 2011 cases, and not supported in the 2001 and 2013 cases, and so it is inconclusive. Overall, these hypotheses are not supported by this tonal analysis.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The research began with an interest in presidential rhetoric and speechwriting, as well as political communication as a whole. To address these puzzles, perhaps the most institutionalized speech an American president can make, short of his inaugural address,

was chosen as the medium of study, since it had already been examined in several different lights. Previous research challenged scholars to build upon the foundation they set in order to analyze presidential tone. In order to follow up on this research, I chose to analyze tone in order to determine whether it is an effective means to address unanswered questions from the literature and its potential for further research. Following a preliminary content analysis of the policy objectives discussed in a sample of State of the Union addresses, DICTION, the leading computer-aided text analysis program created by Hart, was chosen as the means to analyze the tone of State of the Union addresses in order to answer Moen's challenge and furthers his and Hart et al.'s research.

Overall, the hypotheses are not supported. Due to the relatively small sample size of seven speeches, the results are inconclusive. However, this identified a potential for further research. It is possible that more specific hypotheses and policy objectives may be better able to measure common tones, as discussion of educational policy likely differs from discussion of Medicare, although both are categorized as domestic policy issues. Specifically, further research should build upon my proportional policy objective categorization and identify specific policy objectives within each category in order to see if any common objectives exist across the sample, which will likely lead to the addition of new hypotheses. If such common policy objectives did emerge among the addresses, then specific policy objectives would be examined in order to explore how the tone of those objectives changes over time. For example, a policy objective like terrorism could be further analyzed to see if, or how, the tone of terrorism evolves across State of the Union addresses. The proportion necessary to warrant further analysis would have to be determined following a more specific analysis of the common policy objectives. It is

entirely possible that the tone of a specific policy objective is different in each State of the Union address, or that policy objectives do not have a significant impact on tone whatsoever. However, this has yet to be determined due to a lack of testing, and doing so will further Moen and Hart et al.'s research, as well as my own.

Despite the inconclusive nature of the hypotheses, the study should not be considered a plateau or a failure. At a minimum, despite the lack of a conclusive relationship between tone and the presidential policy objectives in State of the Union addresses, this study is still able to provide clues as to how tone changes between presidents and between the Republican and Democratic parties. These questions depend on the assumption that a president is the leader of his party and so his beliefs and tone are representative of his party as a whole. Thus, if Bush were to approach a policy issue with the same tone throughout his State of the Union addresses, but Obama approached the same issue with a different tone, then it could be inferred that Republicans favor one tonal approach and Democrats favor another approach to the same issue.

In this sample, excluding the economic aspects of the policy objectives, President Bush tended to focus on foreign policy issues (also excluding his 2001 address, which was occurred prior to the September 11 terror attacks that some would say came to define his presidency) and was more activity-oriented than his successor, who was more commonality-oriented. President Obama also tended to focus on domestic policy issues over foreign policy issues. If the above assumption is held to be true, this would seem to suggest that Republican presidents will be more activity-oriented than their Democrat counterparts, and Republican presidents will favor a foreign-policy focus over the domestic policy focus tended to be favored by the Democrats. An important caveat to

note here is that in his 2001 address, Bush was less activity-oriented than in his other addresses and also focused far more on domestic policy issues and the economy than he did foreign policy issues. However, this could be attributed to the fact that since his 2001 address came just after his first inauguration, it is generally viewed as a budget message, since he would not yet have been aware of much else, and that this was pre-War on Terror. It is possible that activity is linked with foreign policy and commonality is linked with domestic policy, and it is also possible that these are mere coincidences. All of President Bush and President Obama's State of the Union addresses should be analyzed to complete this picture. In addition, it would be imprudent to generalize to all presidents without further testing. The sample size in this study is relatively small, and so it can provide a foundation for further study, but additional testing will be needed in order to apply the findings to all presidents.

An additional area for future study with the common specific policy objectives is in evaluating how a president's tone evolves over the length of his time in office. It is possible that once in office, political party affiliation may be minimized, if not irrelevant, to the point that the two presidents in this study may approach a policy objective with the same tone. At this juncture the picture is too broad to make a determination or estimation on this question of how presidents differ from one another, in terms of tone, once they are in the Oval Office. Another possibility is that once reelected to a second term, a president's tone on an issue may change, as he no longer needs to worry about reelection, and so has a newfound freedom to advocate policies he deems necessary in a manner he sees fit. How tone changes between a president's first and second term should be analyzed with the inclusion of President Obama's 2015 State of the Union, so as to have

an equal number of speeches for both subjects. This is also a question that could be examined by analyzing all of the State of the Union addresses of President Bush and President Obama, prior to studying more presidents.

The tonal analysis imperfectly addressed the hypotheses, but yielded an interesting piece of information that could lend credence to a belief which seems to be held by many cynics, pessimists, and analysts, and that could be used to quell (or encourage) criticism of the president from the opposing side of the partisan aisle.

**Table 5: Average Tonal Rankings**

Rank	DICTION Master Variable
<b>1</b>	<b>Optimism</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Realism</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Activity</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Commonality</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Certainty</b>

As Table 5 shows, the average rankings of the DICTION analysis seem to indicate that overall, presidents are optimistic. Yet despite that Optimism, Certainty's position in the tonal analysis average would suggest that presidents do not really know what they are talking about, no matter how much they may pretend to the contrary.

## APPENDIX: CODING INSTRUCTIONS

Read each sentence and determine, using the below reference list as a guide, whether the sentence references/describes an issue or problem related to foreign, domestic, economic, or non-policy issues. The sample words in each category are not all-inclusive. The economic policy category is an overarching one; thus, it is permissible for a sentence to be economic and foreign or domestic, but also solely economic. There is a rudimentary difference between economic and non-economic policy, and much of economic policy bridges the gap between domestic and foreign policy. This category allows for the separation of non-economic aspects of foreign and domestic policy. Occasionally, a sentence may make reference to both foreign and domestic issues; if that is the case, it should be coded as such. It is also important to recognize the *context* in which a sentence appears: If a sentence at first appears to be non-policy, look at the sentences immediately adjacent to, before, and after it to see if it supports an issue statement. If so, then code it as that issue. Topic sentences of paragraphs should also be used in this determination.

### Foreign Policy Issues

- |                               |                         |                  |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| • Other nations               | • International affairs | • Threats abroad |
| • International organizations | • Military action       | • Foreign aid    |
| • War                         | • Defense               |                  |
|                               | • Trade                 |                  |

### Domestic Policy Issues

- |                      |                       |                        |
|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| • Issues in the U.S. | • Education           | • U.S. Environment     |
| • Equality           | • Energy Independence | • Crime                |
| • Social affairs     | • Medicare/Medicaid   | • Justice/legal system |
| • Domestic economy   | • Healthcare          | • Law enforcement      |
| • National debt      | • Insurance           | • Social Security      |
| • Tax relief/cuts    | • Military benefits   | • Immigration          |

### Non-Policy Issues

- Anything not related to foreign, domestic, or economic policy issues, so as to be exhaustive in assigning every sentence
- Introductory remarks (that do not fall into other categories)
- Jokes (that do not fall into other categories)
- Tributes (that do not fall into other categories)
- Introduction/description of guests (unless specifically used to support an issue statement)

### Economic Policy Issues

- Overarching category (sentences can be economic and one of the other categories)
- Most economic policy statements will also fall into the domestic or foreign policy categories
  - But not necessarily all statements, as it is possible to be just economic
- Budgets
- Budget deficits
- Taxes
- Government spending
- Government funding
- Unemployment/jobs
- Economic sanctions/regulations
- GDP/GNP
- Trade
- Aid

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