Prevalence of Substantive Policy in American Presidential Inaugural Addresses

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ABSTRACT
The inaugural address is the starting line of a four-year marathon, a bold declaration of ambitions outlined on the campaign trail looking to be crystallized into concrete policy. Presidents streamline their own national visions into a single, cohesive address and distill their proposals into rallying cries for the American people. But how does the subject matter of inaugural addresses predict or indicate a presidential administration’s later priorities and accomplishments? This study seeks to investigate this question by performing a content analysis of a stratified random sample of presidents. It develops a coding scheme and creates 12 categories that presidents have and could discuss in their inaugural addresses. It analyzes each of the chosen presidents’ inaugural addresses and subsequent State of the Union addresses, identifying substantive policy issues and recording an approximate word count for each one. After calculating the word count for each category in all of the selected inaugural addresses and States of the Union, the categories and word counts will be ranked for each individual speech. The rankings will then be compared between the two with a one-ranking margin of error. All of this data seems to preliminarily indicate that issue replicability is increasing over time, but magnitude replicability is much more variable. Therefore, it can be concluded that inaugural addresses are not likely to contain substantive policy that will affect the priorities and accomplishments of a president’s administration.

INTRODUCTION
Arguably the most literal incarnation of the field of political communication, speech writing and delivering is one of the most visible examples of setting a political agenda (Zarefsky, 2004). Major addresses highlight a speaker’s priorities through what they discuss and also speak volumes through what they do not. Often, they are delivered directly to constituents, on different occasions to invigorate, placate, inspire, inform, unite, or reassure. In an age where much of communication has been digitized and truncated to 140 characters, speeches have remained resilient, a relic of a more oratorical past.

One such staple of any president is their inauguration policy. These speeches are benchmarks in American history. Examples from Presidents Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan defined their respective eras (Korzi, 2004). As well as a longstanding tradition, inaugural addresses are also among the most visible events of the presidency. Donald Trump’s inauguration ceremony brought 30.6 million viewers across six major networks; Barack Obama’s had 37.8 million, and Ronald Reagan brought in a record 41.8 million (Battaglio 2017). It is nearly guaranteed that an inaugural address will be a landmark speech of any given administration. But each one consists of a great deal of patriotic filler, uplifting rhetoric that translates well into sound bites but conspicuously lacks policy and substance.

This begs the question: How does the subject matter of presidential inaugural addresses align with an administration’s eventual executive and legislative accomplishments? Both political elites and the public at large heavily weigh the newly inaugurated, or newly reelected, president’s words, but it is very possible that the speech lacks real meaning as it pertains to presidential priorities. Inaugural addresses are often characterized by idealistic rhetoric, especially following a major electoral victory (Mahoney et al., 1984). The issues itemized are too many and too complex to realistically be accomplished in one administration. In addition, unforeseen situations and crises inevitably arise and take precedence, derailing previous priorities and proposals. It could be better regarded as a final campaign stop on the way to the White House or simply a tradition quadrennially recurring for tradition’s sake.

The speech may serve little more than to unify a country and introduce the world to the new American leader. Yes, Thomas Jefferson sought to mend the union when he declared, “We are all
Republicans, we are all Federalists.” FDR comforted a distraught people when he remarked, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” But what did either statement accomplish in hard policy? In more than one sense, it is supposed to be a roadmap (Ericson, 1997). It should indicate what the president cares about and where the executive branch will be spending its time. This question could better reveal the impact of presidential rhetoric on public policy and decision-making.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background

In this section, I will merely provide a working understanding of the typical presidential speech and how inaugural addresses fit into a president’s legacy (Coe & Neumann, 2011). Coe and Neumann acknowledge that the president is the most important figure in the study of political communication, and as such, the president's words are closely scrutinized within academic circles. Regardless of whether or not it is true, presidents act as if the public at large is responsive to their words; the actual efficacy is not the debate at hand for this paper.

The authors seek to recognize a definitive set of criteria to establish the major addresses of presidents. For this purpose, they only take the modern presidency into account. Within political communication, there are four existing approaches to study presidential rhetoric: Researchers sometimes use inaugurals to study patterns in presidents' political rhetoric, but they are largely ceremonial and unlikely to be representative of most presidential communication (Coe & Neuman, 2011); state of the union addresses, occasionally combined with inaugurals, is the most popular option, but it is difficult to compare between written documents and verbal speeches; a broad analysis of all public presidential communications has been employed more recently, but it proves very difficult to manually code and is time intensive with the unfortunate inclusion of trivial communications; finally, the most effective choice is that of the “middle ground” where it enjoys the benefits of all the previous approaches.

But still, how are researchers to decide what qualifies as a major address? The authors provide a working definition of “a president's spoken communication that is addressed to the American people, broadcast to the nation, and controlled by the president.” Using that criteria, the authors narrowed down every speech from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Barack Obama’s second year and uncovered some early patterns. They were largely consistent in length and frequency with a higher emphasis on domestic affairs. Coe and Neuman's research is vital, if slightly delayed, in standardizing a widely variable topic.

Presidential communication is one cog in the concept of the rhetorical presidency, and the previous authors’ work would have been vital to Stuckey and Antczak (1998), had it existed at the time. The authors explain the rhetorical presidency and its evolution into the modern presidency. They are careful to make distinctions between analyzing a speech’s persuasion and its rhetorical instruments, and they point to a similar distinct separation between the individual (the president) and the institution (the presidency) (Stuckey & Antczak, 1998). The presidency can inherently be weakened by the president’s personal relationship with the public. While the president's personality has played an increasingly large role in polls, the presidency also wields the ability to affect public opinion. For example, the well-documented rally effect is a powerful phenomenon in times of national crisis. The authors end with a brief discussion on media framing as well as the president’s position in putting pressure on Congress to advance an agenda.

Ericson (1997) attempts to distill the permanent ideals of American politics from the presidential inaugural addresses that line its history with an ambitious content analysis. The author seeks to discover which cyclical patterns in inaugural rhetoric have resulted in distinct, long-lasting pillars representative of political culture and, in at least some respects, American society at large. The article identifies and discusses at length II such features, some mentioned in almost half of inaugural addresses and at least one included in all of them (Ericson, 1997). The article claims inaugural addresses primarily serve to reiterate and ingratiate the incoming president with any number of the II themes. Not unlike Coe and Neuman, Ericson outright rejects the notion that an inaugural address is meant to inform the American public of imminent policy proposals and substantive legislative ambitions. While it is certainly a bold and popular position to take, little is offered to substantiate that claim.

Ericson's early research provided key foundational work off of which to build for political communication academics. Prior to Ericson, Mahoney et al. sought to understand the core values that undergird every presidential inaugural address. They believe that the many “concrete belief systems reflect the interaction of only a few abstract values” (Mahoney et al., 1984). That is, a few pieces of ideological divide can create boundless partisanship. Eight main values were identified that are present in each inaugural address between George Washington and Ronald Reagan. Each was rated according to the frequency with which it appears in inaugural addresses. Even though the paper insufficiently defined its methods and classified its values, the authors found that the values of “freedom” and “equality” were clearly the frontrunners, leading religion, economy, power, justice, peace, and morality (Mahoney et al., 1984).

Building off of core values, this section will close with some specifics about the language of inaugurals and where they generally cross paths with each other. Mahoney et al. discussed “freedom” as an underlying belief, but Coe (2007) delves even further into the idea. He examines the
use of the word “freedom” and its derivations in executive rhetoric, noting differences between a president's ideology and the time period's context through qualitative textual analysis as well as quantitative content analysis. For this work, Coe studies every inaugural and State of the Union address. In any given speech, he identifies three ways that presidents use the language of freedom, two methods of defining America, and five categories to define freedom (Coe 2007).

Coe concluded that “freedom” was used more often as a universal right in contexts regarding foreign affairs, while it was more likely to align with the idea of national identity concerning domestic affairs. It would have been beneficial to segregate the data on inaugural addresses and State of the Union addresses, but Coe is probably correct in that it may have proved unnecessarily complicated and burdensome. His connections to newspapers and other speeches were a productive detour and provided helpful contextual information outside of the presidential addresses themselves. He supplied constructive analysis as he commented on the potential perspective of marginalized groups and their reaction to the idea that “freedom” was no longer a universal right in the domestic sphere.

Coleman and Manna (2007) takes all this previous research, sees where it can be woven together, and tackles partisanship comparatively. In the symbolic but vain effort of George Washington, past presidents have sometimes attempted to maintain an air of nonpartisanship, “a statesman above the fray” of party politics. But the authors perform content analyses of the rhetoric of four recent presidents to find the truth in this widely believed sentiment. In fact, they find that presidents often directly align themselves with parties, even when tested against divided government, elections, and other common features of federal government (Coleman & Manna, 2007). The authors prove that presidents are politicians above all else, deploying regular partisan tactics at key points in an administration. With the current president, the article feels especially outdated. It would be shocking to spend this time on research when there is a man so unashamedly partisan in the White House. Nonetheless, their work joins the others in laying a solid foundation from which to launch toward a better understanding of inaugural addresses within the context of presidential communication and the rhetorical presidency.

**Evolution**

Transitioning from a background on inaugurals to their growth and evolution over time, I plan to use the bulk of this section discussing how presidents address national issues and making distinctions between presidents of differing parties and time periods. To start, Hernández-Guerra (2011) uses presidential inaugural addresses to determine the most pressing global problems and identifies how both political parties address them. Although she conducts a thorough and helpful overview of the presidents, she chooses to only analyze John F. Kennedy to Barack Obama, an unusual and seemingly arbitrary time frame. Even with two-term presidents, the author chooses to only factor in the first inaugural. She divides up common threads and discussion topics into seven different categories: background, foreign policy, American values, goals, cooperation, progress, reference to previous presidents, or the Bible.

In her results, Hernández-Guerra finds that recent presidents are battling the same issues that presidents always have. However, presidents have rhetorically lashed out less viciously against enemies since the end of the Cold War. Almost every president has asked the American people or some category of providential being for help. Finally, the author determines that foreign policy is raised more often under recent inaugural addresses, and it is also more likely to be successful than other issues by the incumbent's own metrics.

Taking a step back from the specific policy arenas, Kinnier, Dannenbaum, Lee, Aasen, and Kernes (2004) instead choose to spotlight the conceptual evolution throughout presidential inaugural addresses. The authors hope to uncover what values Americans hold in high regard and how that has changed over time, and to understand this, they look to presidential inaugural addresses. It wields a different objective than Hernández-Guerra; rather than using inaugural addresses for their own sake, the authors want to uncover a truth about America. But it is important to mention that the authors themselves admit a glaring limitation in their research: Inaugural addresses are not necessarily indicative of the actual values of Americans.

Nonetheless, they analyze every inaugural address throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, specifically mentioning that they are forced to omit five presidents because they never gave an inaugural. The study codes for identifying specific values and measures the degree to which those values were present. The authors conclude that “truth/honesty” was a larger topic in inaugurals throughout the nineteenth century, and addresses of the twentieth century are more likely to discuss “courage” (Kinnier et al., 2004). The authors attribute this to the rise and prevalence of global conflicts throughout the 1900s, and it is worth noting that Republican presidents mention “lowering taxes” more often than Democrats. In a slightly different angle than Kinnier et al., Sigelman (1996) compares and contrasts the change in veneration of traditional values as well as the use of unifying language.

Sigelman (1996) seeks to understand how inaugural addresses unify the American people while upholding traditional values, two widely accepted objectives of every inaugural address. He wants to know how these quadrennial speeches have served these objectives over
time. The author uses the commonly accepted Flesch score to analyze the “readability” of a speech. The Flesch score assigns a value to factors such as vocabulary and sentence structure to rate how complicated the language is. At the time of publication in 1996, he finds that George Washington had the highest score and George H.W. Bush had the lowest (Sigelman, 1996). This means that Washington had the least accessible language and Bush had the most, indicating that the speeches became clearer to the American people over time.

He also tracks unity words, such as “us” and “our,” and he discovers that once again Washington had the least unifying language. Bill Clinton adopted the most unifying rhetoric. When it comes to traditional values, the content analysis reveals that inclusion in inaugurals has increased over time. Because of his role as a Founding Father, Washington did not need to establish his ethos by glorifying basic American beliefs. With the few major exceptions of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Kennedy, the trend of mentioning traditional values has almost been a linear progression upwards. Finding these two patterns through careful research, Sigelman confirms that inaugural addresses have “increasingly been appropriated into service as a tool of presidential governance.” His research is thorough but precise, exactly completing the job that he set out to accomplish. Departing from Sigelman’s focus on unifying language, Teten (2003) looks to the use of personal pronouns and overall word length. Even though his work utilizes State of the Union addresses instead of inaugurals unlike Hernandez-Guerra, Kinnier et al., and Sigelman, his research and areas of focus are of importance to presidential rhetoric.

Though Teten’s goals seem to border on ambitious with two separate metrics and analyses, he efficiently compartmentalizes his work, and he successfully avoids confusing or overwhelming his reader. At the same time, he synthesizes the data and distinctly underlines the collective relevance. Teten laments the results from past studies that utilize incomplete and unrepresentative data; he notes that while inaugural addresses are well-documented and held at regular intervals, they are more ceremonial and inherently contain less partisanship and substance. He uses two metrics, total length, and the use of personal pronouns to understand how the speakers identified with their audiences.

He uses a random sample of 50 State of the Union addresses, but he purposefully oversamples speeches between Theodore Roosevelt to Woodrow Wilson because of its known significance as a period of rhetorical change. The paper finds that word length started low with Washington and Adams, but it skyrocketed throughout the rest of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries (Teten, 2003). But, perhaps due to Wilsonian innovation or because of the logistical concerns of actually reading a speech rather than delivering a report, the word count fell after 1914. Personal pronouns have become more common over time, and these two metrics combined demarcates three periods of State of the Union addresses: modern, traditional, and founding.

In the same vein as Teten’s final conclusions, Korzi (2004) categorizes inaugural addresses into three imperfect eras. Korzi specifically states that he is not analyzing what is enduring but instead examines the substance that is changing between inaugurals. He makes an interesting but not unique choice to use newspapers to supplement his arguments, and he raises the concept of media framing: Do the newspapers reflect public opinion, or is public opinion molded by the newspapers?

By Korzi’s research, almost all early presidents mention the Constitution, and George Washington starts a trend for the first six presidents by emphasizing the primacy of the Constitution. John Quincy Adams used a constitutional approach, but it is widely known that he lost touch with the American people (Korzi, 2004). Therefore, beginning with Andrew Jackson — Adams’ successor — the Constitution was still emphasized, but it was marginalized by the ideas of populism and public sentiment. From Jackson to William McKinley (18 inaugural addresses), only three do not mention campaign pledges, and party presidents still vow their deep respect for Congress. The party model extols the belief that people choose not just the president as a person but as a collection of ideals and principles. Woodrow Wilson began a new era by claiming an individual link between himself and the American people, and since then, inaugurals have positioned the executive as the leader of government. In this current plebiscitary model, parties, Congress, and the Constitution are secondary to the executive’s primary role in political affairs.

Briefly, I will admit the limitations of discussing inaugurals at large while within a specific time period and the effect this can have on research and analysis. Harnett and Mercieca (2007) make stunning accusations against George W. Bush’s administration, accusing him of effectively converting mass media into a means of mass confusion. Combined with imperial recklessness, the authors claim that presidential rhetoric is “dead.” Not only does the language noticeably veer from academic norms, but it appears steeped in turbulent partisan bias. Writing from the early 2000s, they assert that mass communication overwhelms the public, and people are inhibited from exercising independent and critical thinking. “Imperial” policies propagated by the executive are supposedly masked and hidden from the American people, stonewalling prying eyes and crippling democracy at the knees.

Though a current perusal of the literature benefits from 20/20 hindsight, the paper nonetheless appears alarmist even for its era. It presents academic language that is more biting than informative. The authors make patently false comments about President Thomas Jefferson; they claim that he sought grandeur in his administration and his presence. Exactly the opposite, Jefferson is known
for his egalitarian demeanor, and he was even criticized at the time for appearing too pedestrian (Wilkins, 1991). The paper's scaremonger tactics are reminiscent of the media's typical knee-jerk reaction to original research. It takes a little information then leaps and bounds to conclusions. It overanalyses tangential details of the Bush administration communications strategy, such as simple images projected in the background during a speech (Hartnett & Mercieca, 2007). The authors utilize unconvincing stats that do not actually illuminate the full picture, and their extended reference to Brave New World Revisited seemed unnecessary at the least. In short, the paper was dramatic and uninformative as to the actual state of rhetoric under President George W. Bush. It provides an unfortunate but helpful case study, a lesson to temper both one's writing and one's claims.

Moralism and Civil Religion

Inaugurals have a recurring tendency to invoke the divine, and even though it does not directly relate to frequency of policy substance, I believe it is vital in characterizing the mood of inaugural addresses and how they have shifted over several generations (Pinley, 1997; Ritter, 2009; Schonhardt-Bailey, Yager, & Lahlou, 2012; Shogan, 2003). This discussion will begin broad, juxtaposing the difference between Democrats and Republicans. Then it will narrow to a smaller discussion of presidents before addressing a small comparative case study.

Ritter (2009) embarks on one of the most comprehensive studies to identify religious language in presidential rhetoric and mark its change over time. Anecdotally and in the public mind, many presidents are tied to religion. The author uses a content analysis of State of the Union addresses, inaugural addresses, and historically significant speeches to measure the impact, frequency, and trend of this language. Ritter finds that Republicans invoke divine power more often than Democrats, but generally speaking, religious language has increased for everyone over time, growing more specific and more Christian. In an interesting but unsurprising takeaway, the author discovers that this rhetoric and language skyrocket during times of conflict.

In a narrower topic of study, Shogan (2003) seeks to understand how nineteenth century conservative presidents differed from Woodrow Wilson's distinctive rhetorical style and how they shaped the modern presidency. She uses a content analysis trained on inaugural addresses since George Washington, and she codes to identify moral or religious language classified in policy or nonpolicy contexts. In her research, she finds a surprising number of nonpolicy moral remarks after Wilson's administration, but from there, she further divvies up the speeches into a forward-thinking visionary or a traditionalist/retrospective perspective.

Throughout his career, Wilson believed in combining public sentiment and the collective future with societal values, rather than simply drawing on traditional principles. Other presidents who have built off of his legacy include Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Jimmy Carter. In contrast, Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover believed in “individual moral responsibility and constancy” (Shogan, 2003). Following this counter-Wilson stance, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan modernized the model of individual responsibility and prepared it for a post-World War II era. Shogan discovers that Wilson redefined liberalism, and in response, Republicans had to redefine conservatism as well.

Building off of previous research, Pinley (1997) and Schonhardt-Bailey et al. (2012) each conduct an analysis of a modern Democrat and a modern Republican's use of “civil religion.” Civil religion has no universal definition, but for the purposes of this study, it is the common practice where some political elites inject a nondenominational, nondescript invocation of God into public discourse. To begin, Pinley takes the inaugural address of a young president ready to enact change but inexperienced at the federal level, and he dissects the speech. He underlines recurring themes and main motifs that can be found throughout its text. He identifies three main sources of inspiration for William “Bill” Clinton's first inaugural: the Bible, his education at Georgetown University, and other inaugural addresses from his predecessors.

As for the Bible, he clearly reserves no qualms toward invoking civil religion, and Pinley comments how words like “covenant” and “season” manage to communicate well with religious citizens as well as secular ones. He writes about the significance of Clinton’s Jesuit education at Georgetown University, and it once again signals the importance of faith in America, even when it is not your own faith (Clinton is Baptist, but Georgetown is Catholic). From a professional working note, Senator William Fulbright led Clinton to adopt much of the same internationalist rhetoric as his collegiate role model. Even though paying homage to previous incumbents of his same party is not uncommon, Clinton took it a step further and drew inspiration from Reagan and Nixon's inaugural addresses. Pinley notes that the combination of these influences was carried into the writing process and, not long after, the delivery of Clinton's first presidential inaugural address.

For a conservative inversion of the same topic, Schonhardt-Bailey et al. (2012) begin their discussion of Ronald Reagan's rhetorical remarkable by admitting that although religion was ignored by and large in the political science community for far too long, the idea of civil religion has been revived and popularized. The idea of civil religion existed far before Reagan, but he was particularly adept at weaponizing its rhetoric. The authors employed “automated textual analysis software” to analyze Reagan's civil religion rhetoric in his “semanal”
speeches, State of the Union addresses, and every state of the union address from Wilson to Obama. (The concept of seminal speeches is never formally defined and appears, at least in part, subject to the authors' personal discretion.) The texts of speeches are drawn from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation’s list of his major speeches, a move that appeared informed but inherently biased. The other presidents are included to provide a backdrop by which to judge the supposedly unique rhetoric of Reagan. State of the Unions are partially chosen because they are primarily policy-driven with less room for civil religion (Schonhardt-Bailey et al., 2012). The authors make the decision to test whether a difference in audience matters, proving to be a valuable insight in the delivery and content of his rhetoric. Additionally, the authors succeed in admitting the limitations of their work; it is not a perfect or comprehensive study, but it starts the conversation. Each of these studies on moralism and civil religion offer a new and helpful perspective to better understand the context of inaugural addresses.

Framing

The final section will begin a discussion of the influence that a president’s rhetoric has on the general public, especially concerning hard policy topics. While there are few studies specifically targeted at inaugural addresses through this particular lens (Rush, 2017), there has been more research into the influence of presidential language and its effect on a macro scale (Zarefsky, 2004). While it may inevitably backtrack to the evolution of inaugurals at times, I want to understand how a president attempts to shape the narrative throughout his or her administration (Cohen, 1995; Rhodes, 2013).

Rush (2017) is one of few to specifically analyze a president’s power to sway through an inaugural. He researches whether inaugural addresses impact the perception of the newly sworn in president and, at a larger scale, whether they impact a person’s opinion of the state of the nation. He also specifically looks for differences between voters and non-voters. To do this, the author conducts a test with Donald Trump’s inaugural address. He exposes the experimental group to the address before surveying both the experimental and the control group on the competence, reliability, leadership ability, positive personality traits, and trust of the president. To measure how people thought about the state of the nation, the groups give their general opinions followed by specific policy polls.

Between the control and experimental group, people are largely unaffected by the inaugural address. There is no statistically significant difference between the viewer versus non-viewer’s perception of Trump or the state of the nation. The only thing that set them apart is that someone who already voted for Trump felt positively about the direction of the country, while someone who did not vote for him did not feel that way (Rush, 2017). Overall, the inaugural address is mainly inconsequential.

Rush gives a few potential reasons why. For one, social media could have transformed the landscape. Perhaps, it is less likely that someone’s perception of a president will change because their personality is so brazenly on exhibit and accessible through social media throughout the campaign, as is the case of Trump. The author also cites the uniqueness of the 2016 presidential election as a potential factor. Rush acknowledges his limitations: The sample group comprised a disproportionate amount of liberal and liberal-leaning citizens. Additionally, multiple weeks passed between the live inaugural and the experiment, so the subjects may have had time to digest reviews and political commentary prior to being surveyed. All the same, the research is a helpful view into an intriguing, if likely unrepresentative, microcosm.

Conversely, Zarefsky (2004) looks at the larger historical picture. The author brings the spotlight onto the idea of rhetoric itself and how it should be understood. There are many different dynamics at play. It can be seen from the perspective of a speech to an audience, a speaker to his or her own text, or a speaker to a responding critic. No matter the viewpoint, the author makes a claim about the effect executive language has: “[Presidential rhetoric] defines political reality.” To support his claim, he cites several historical examples, including George Washington and the Whiskey Rebellion, Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War, Lyndon B. Johnson and the War on Poverty, and George W. Bush and the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (Zarefsky, 2004). Each is a case study where the words of the president helped draw the parameters of the political reality. Zarefsky closes with some concrete examples as to how reality can be defined. In one in particular, he describes setting the narrative. The president’s language is used and repeated, and in that basic sense, the issue is framed how the president originally wanted it framed. This concept of framing and agenda-setting is not at all unfamiliar in the arena of political communication, but this number and detail of examples is illuminating, nonetheless.

Cohen (1995) and Rhodes (2013) both delve into a president’s framing abilities over the course of his or her administration. Cohen gives an overview of the research, while Rhodes expands on those findings by examining one case study in depth. Cohen begins his work by acknowledging a few standard principles in political science. Presidential rhetoric allows the president to manipulate his or her own popularity, and additionally, it encourages the president to cater to public opinion. But Cohen seeks to understand this further by analyzing the extent to which presidents influence the public. As he notes, wide-ranging access to the public does not directly correlate to a receptive audience.

For a baseline of what represents significant issues to the public, the author utilizes Gallup’s Most-Important
Problem series. As for the president, Cohen hypothesizes that he or she sets the agenda with State of the Union addresses and that the amount of time spent on a topic in the address relates to how much the public cares about it. He chooses a peculiar presidential window: State of the Union addresses from 1953 to 1989, and because first-year presidents do not give a State of the Union, he substitutes a different “major national address” that would be around the same time period. This is never directly defined, and as such, the description appears subjective. To control for cross contamination of influence, Cohen uses a pre-test and post-test with the Gallup polls. He finds that economy, foreign policy, and civil rights are without a doubt the most frequent topics in State of the Union addresses, and that correlates with public priorities as well (Cohen, 1995). According to this research, the popularity of a president does not factor into the salience of their message. A potential limitation that he recognizes is that mass media may be a clear intervening variable. Media framing could affect both public opinion and the topics that a president chooses to highlight. Often, the media presents a tricky roadblock, and his admission of such was prudent. Finally, stemming from Cohen and others’ pertinent research, Rhodes narrowed the focus to a single president and his legacy: Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Roosevelt talks about rights in a unique fashion, unlike the way anyone in his office talked about them before. He describes economic, social, and human rights that he believes should be extended to every citizen, which include the famous Four Freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. These four fundamental human rights were outlined in his 1941 State of the Union address. Because of the vast rhetorical legacy left behind by the only president elected for more than two terms, Rhodes seeks to understand whether or not people envision and discuss rights differently or more often than they once did. The author hypothesizes that Democrats are more invested in laying out these same rights than Republicans, and to analyze this, Rhodes uses inaugural addresses, State of the Union addresses, and primetime radio and television speeches.

The study divides each section of speeches by president before picking out keywords to narrow whether the speech made a claim about rights. If it does make a claim, the list is divided twice more into substantive claim or general American rhetoric, and then it is classified into economic, social, civil, human, constitutional, democratic, or other. Together with this quantitative study, the author completes a qualitative analysis of the 20 inaugural addresses between 1933 and 2009. The only criticism would be that the author’s definition of “right” seems to have a bias toward a liberal interpretation. In the results, the paper concludes that language about economic and social rights declined since Roosevelt, but civil rights peaked under Lyndon Johnson. Apart from all the rest, rhetoric about human rights has remained just as popular over time. In closing, Rhodes and Cohen’s work on an administration’s framing legacy dovetails cleanly with Zarefsky’s large-scale agenda-setting research, and they all culminate in Rush’s most recent findings. All of their work sets the stage for a new question for inaugural addresses and their association with American culture and politics.

HYPOTHESIS

Taken as a whole, the current literature on the topic discusses at length an inaugural address’s relationship to American tradition, providing a sturdy launchpad into the question of a speech’s substantive rhetoric. This paper will test the colloquial theory that speeches inform the public of policy proposals working from the following hypothesis: Half or less of the issues mentioned in a presidential inaugural address (1789–present) materialize again with the same magnitude in the following State of the Union address.1

METHOD

The study performs a content analysis of a stratified random sample of presidents. To begin, it develops the coding scheme and creates 12 total categories that presidents have and could discuss in their inaugural addresses. These categories split between domestic issues and international issues. Domestic issues include civil rights, crime, economy, expansion, First Nations, government, immigration, infrastructure, and science and education. International issues are comprised of diplomacy, trade, and national security (see Appendices A and B for the operationalization of each category).

Next, the presidents are neatly divided into Korzi’s eras: constitutional, party, and plebiscitary. However, because the eras are so wide and the number of eras are so few, it is important to remove the exceptions that could muddle the research. Six presidents — Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, T. Roosevelt, and Wilson — were systematically excluded due to inaugural irregularities. They all fall within the party model, and they all are exceptions to the norms of that era. For example, Lincoln’s second inaugural address and both of Grant’s are exceptions to the party model, but Lincoln

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1 State of the Union addresses were the solution to the ambiguity of a president’s priorities and accomplishments. Even though a “priority” is not an easy concept to concretely measure, States of the Union are the most accessible correlative. As was mentioned in the literature review, they are similarly delivered at fixed intervals, they are widely believed to contain more substantive content, and they can be measured by the same metrics as inaugurals.
**FIGURE 1.** George Washington (1789 - 97) Comparative Word Count

**FIGURE 2.** Martin Van Buren (1837 - 41) Comparative Word Count
FIGURE 3. William Howard Taft (1909 - 13) Comparative Word Count

FIGURE 4. Ronald Reagan (1981 - 89) Comparative Word Count
is more plebiscitary while Grant is more constitutional. In other words, Lincoln connects more directly with the people, bypassing Congress, the party, and the Constitution, whereas Grant emphasizes the importance and direct responsibilities outlined in the Constitution. Five more are removed because they entered office according to the presidential line of succession and thus never delivered an inaugural address. John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Andrew Johnson, and Chester Arthur are in the era of party model presidents, and Gerald Ford is under plebiscitary.

Each inaugural address is assigned a number, and a random number generator is used to select one presidential inaugural from the constitutional model and two from the party and plebiscitary eras. Only one is chosen from the first 11 addresses because it is such a small era compared to the latter two. Washington, Martin Van Buren, William Howard Taft, Reagan, and Clinton are randomly selected, and the random number generator is used again to determine the order in which they are analyzed.

For each of the chosen presidents, the study performs a content analysis of their inaugural address as well as the closest subsequent State of the Union address, identifying substantive policy issues and recording an approximate word count for each one. Unfortunately, the space between each president’s inaugural and their State of the Union varies widely between administrations. But for the sake of consistency, the study continues with the closest subsequent State of the Union. The word count is intended to calculate the intended magnitude of the topic, the importance that the president is trying to assign to it. One measure the study implements is recognizing a 10-word margin of error for every word count. The margin of error is meant to control for stuttering, filler words, and small improvisations in spoken States of the Union as well as titles and headers for written speeches.

After calculating the word count for each category in all of the selected inaugural addresses and States of the Union, the categories and word counts will be ranked for each individual speech. The rankings will then be compared between the two with a one-ranking margin of error. The word count is used to determine the ranking; it is not compatible with comparability between speeches. For example, if diplomacy ranks as the second most important issue in the inaugural, it can rank first, second, or third in the State of the Union to be within the same magnitude, regardless of the difference in word count between the two. After studying the number of issue categories that are repeated across both types of speeches and their respective magnitudes, then it will be clear if American presidential inaugural addresses regularly include substantive policy.

**DISCUSSION**

After Washington’s first year, the singular issue from his inaugural addresses did not resurface in his State of the Union. Therefore, his issue replicability is zero out of one, and his magnitude replicability is again zero out of one. For Van Buren, one of the two issues from his
inaugural appeared again in his State of the Union within the same magnitude, giving him a one out of two issue replicability rating and another one out of two magnitude replicability. For Taft, six of the seven issues reappear, albeit in widely varying orders of magnitude. Only one of those original seven is presented in the State of the Union within one ranking of his inaugural.

Reagan is far and away the most consistent president the author studied in terms of inaugural to State of the Union. The four substantive issues that appear in his inaugural address all resurface in his first State of the Union a year later, almost in exactly the same order of importance according to word count. Therefore, Reagan has a four out of four issue and magnitude replicability. Finally, five of Clinton's six issues are consistent from speech to speech, but they are not in exactly the same order. Four out of six are within one ranking. (See Appendix C to view a detailed list of issues and the respective word counts for each speech).

All of this data seems to preliminarily indicate that issue replicability is increasing over time, while magnitude replicability is much more variable. On average, 63.8 percent of the policy issues a president highlights in their inaugural address reappear in their following State of the Union address (issue replicability). However, on average, 46.2 percent of the policy issues a president highlights in their inaugural address reappear in their following State of the Union address at or closely near the same magnitude of importance. Therefore, the author fails to reject the hypothesis, and from the early results of the study, it can be concluded that inaugural addresses are not likely to contain substantive policy that will affect the priorities and accomplishments of a president's administration.

At this point, it is prudent to acknowledge multiple shortcomings of the research. Firstly, broad policy topics are used. Science and education includes healthcare, environmental concerns and climate change, and elementary through university education. Next, an organizational model that makes sense for inaugural addresses may not make sense for States of the Union. Eleven exceptions in the Korzi model makes you question the quality and reliability of the model, especially when ten of the eleven are concentrated in a single era. Furthermore, even though the author divided up the presidents according to the type of inaugural (the Korzi model), the author also analyzed presidential States of the Union as the correlative. But the State of the Union has changed over time; some were written, some were spoken.

A large concern is the measure of word count versus studying an issue's placement in the speech. Issues earlier in the speech might matter more than ones in the middle, but many issues are peppered throughout. Reagan and Taft in particular related everything back to the economy, so it is untrue to say that the economy is less important just because it may not be the very first issue. Instead, it is everywhere, and word count helped account for that. Going hand-in-hand with placing an issue throughout a speech, many policies overlapped within the same paragraph or even the same sentence. When a president talked about the macroeconomic cost of education for example, the author needed to code for whichever presented itself as the predominant issue. So because it was coded the way it was, the author removed the gray area and attempted to make it black and white. This alteration forces speeches to lose necessary nuance.

In closing, despite a number of limitations, this research fills a hole in the current literature, providing a valuable answer to the oft assumed but never confirmed notion that an inaugural address lacks substance. It is not drastically devoid of policy, as proven by the 46.2 percent average magnitude replicability. However, more often than not, a listener cannot expect an issue in the inaugural address to resurface in a meaningful way down the road. If the number was much lower, an inaugural would be a useless indicator of where the president will spend his or her time and energy. For all intents and purposes, policy wonks, think tanks, and Washington elites would have no need to look toward an inaugural address for its predictive abilities. Conversely, if the average magnitude replicability far exceeded 50 percent, then it would be an indispensable bellwether for the incoming administration's prime concerns. This research puts to rest the debate on an inaugural address's importance in terms of substantive policy.

Further research with greater time and resources should expand on these findings. It would be fascinating to see whether these results are consistent after a census content analysis, rather than a sample. In addition, it would be important to know whether the issue or magnitude replicability have changed over time. With that knowledge, inaugurals could perhaps again be divided into more apt eras of policy substance. Is there a difference between Democrats and Republicans, young and old, incoming presidents and reelected incumbents? There is only one way to find out, and needless to say, political communication surely has bright and consequential research ahead in the near future.
APPENDIX A: OPERATIONALIZATION OF DOMESTIC CATEGORIES

- Civil Rights: This category refers to race, racial specifics (including slurs), the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, Fifteenth, and Nineteenth Amendments, voting, suffrage, prejudice, slavery, and civil rights. It includes discrimination on the basis of sex and race, and it is comprised of the American civil rights movement and the campaign for women's suffrage.

- Crime: This category refers to civil unrest, safety, security, illegal drug use, and gang activity. It is primarily invoked when the president discusses his authority and responsibility to protect citizens from internal threats.

- Economy: This is a broad category referring to income, inflation, prices, employment, taxes, spending, deficits, the national debt, mortgages, the cost of living, productivity, industry, capital, commerce, business, bonds, stocks, revenue, expenditures, fiscal and monetary policies, and banking. Most topics that involve money within the domestic sphere fall under “economy.”

- Expansion: This category is primarily concerned with the outdated concept of “Manifest Destiny.” Though slavery is inevitably intertwined with American expansion, it is listed under “civil rights” instead. This is because slavery is euphemistically associated with expansion for political reasons, but it is literally the act of unlawfully stripping persons of their rights. Expansion only was tied to slavery because of the social and geopolitical concerns of the time period. When expansion was at various points “completed,” that did not immediately eliminate the evils, effects, or condition of slavery. Therefore, the category of “expansion” is by necessity limited to the literal augmentation of the United States' territory.

- First Nations: This category refers to Native Americans, American Indians, and the assorted specific tribes. It includes the peoples themselves, their relationships and interactions with the United States government, political agreements or treaties, and explicit communications, orders, or apologies.

- Government: This category refers to the growth, influence, size, power, and levels of government. It includes corruption, states' rights, the federal apparatus nationwide, and specific names of departments and agencies. For elections, refer to the “civil rights” category.

- Immigration: This category refers to foreign persons in the United States, various nationalities and identities (such as Italian American or German American), and permanent aliens. It includes immigrant rights as well as their arrival, presence, and deportation.

- Infrastructure: This refers to roads, bridges, and structural stability of public utilities generally speaking.

- Science and education: This broad category refers to the domains of science, all levels of education, and healthcare. This includes experiments, innovation, technology, conservation, climate change, natural resources, forests, waterways, land, the Atomic Age and Information Age, medicine, schools, students, classrooms, and libraries.

APPENDIX B: OPERATIONALIZATION OF INTERNATIONAL CATEGORIES

- Diplomacy: This category refers to allies, international relationships, sovereignty, neighbors, and treaties. It includes efforts to expand democracy and extoll American values abroad.

- National Security: This category refers to enemies, conflict, wartime, terrorism, weapons, threats, adversaries, the branches of the Armed Forces, the militia, defense, tyranny, and aggression. Diplomacy and national security are closely related but distinctly different. Putting it simply, diplomacy is between friends, allies, partners whereas national security has to do with threats to the country and to democracy, wars, defense, and so on.

- Trade: This category broadly refers to the global economy, and trade with partners around the world.
## APPENDIX C: ISSUES AND WORD COUNTS PER SPEECH PER PRESIDENT

### Table C1: George Washington

| INAUGURAL | 1. Government (153 words) |
| STATE OF THE UNION | 1. Science/education (305 words) |
| | 2. National security (212) |
| | 3. Economy (116) |
| | 4. Diplomacy (88) |
| | 5. Immigration (30) |

### Table C2: Martin Van Buren

| INAUGURAL | 1. Civil rights (473 words) |
| STATE OF THE UNION | 1. Economy (5302 words) |
| | 2. Diplomacy (2524) |
| | 3. National security (1249) |
| | 4. First Nations (652) |
| | 5. Government (400) |
| | 6. Expansion (349) |
| | 7. Infrastructure (81) |

### Table C3: William Howard Taft

| INAUGURAL | 1. Economy (1263 words) |
| | 2. International trade (967) |
| | 3. Civil rights (953) |
| | 4. National security (828) |
| | 5. Government (277) |
| | 6. Science/education (218) |
| | 7. Immigration (109) |

| STATE OF THE UNION | 1. Diplomacy (4067 words) |
| | 2. Government (4038) |
| | 3. Economy (2063) |
| | 4. International trade (1640) |
| | 5. Science/education (486) |
| | 6. National security (466) |
| | 7. Expansion (382) |
| | 8. Infrastructure (175) |
| | 9. Civil rights (173) |
| | 10. Crime (139) |
Table C4: Ronald Reagan

| INAUERAL                        | 1. Economy (430 words) |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|
|                                 | 2. Government (232)    |
|                                 | 3. National security (168) |
|                                 | 4. Diplomacy (56)      |
| STATE OF THE UNION              | 1. Economy (1962 words) |
|                                 | 2. Government (834)    |
|                                 | 3. Diplomacy (298)     |
|                                 | 4. National security (252) |
|                                 | 5. International trade (110) |
|                                 | 6. Civil rights (101)  |
|                                 | 7. Crime (46)          |
|                                 | 8. Science/education (45) |

Table C5: Bill Clinton

| INAUERAL                        | 1. Civil rights (171 words) |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
|                                 | 2. Science/education (163)  |
|                                 | 3. Government (121)         |
|                                 | 4. Economy (72)             |
|                                 | 5. National security (57)   |
|                                 | 6. Crime (24)               |
| STATE OF THE UNION              | 1. Science/education (2610 words) |
|                                 | 2. Economy (914)            |
|                                 | 3. Diplomacy (400)          |
|                                 | 4. International trade (367) |
|                                 | 5. National security (285)  |
|                                 | 6. Crime (261)              |
|                                 | 7. Government (142)         |
|                                 | 8. Immigration (59)         |

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