

Original Research Article

## Electoral and Party Influence on Presidential Messages, 1789-1897

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### ABSTRACT

This article probes the history of various types of presidential messages from the outset of the U.S. Constitution in 1789 until 1897. Using statistical procedures, it assesses influences on these messages. The study finds that both electoral and party influences have an impact on the type and frequency of messages sent by American presidents, albeit in an uneven manner. The author tallies types of messages over time, providing a valuable tool for further research in the area.

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### Introduction

James D. Richardson's compilation of presidential messages from the Washington through the second Cleveland administration provides a rich source of data for an empirical examination of electoral and party influence on the chief executive's communications to the federal government and to the public. Copyright 1900, encompassing ten volumes, this collection contains all presidential proclamations, executive orders, veto messages, special message (excepting those simply making nominations), and annual messages from the period 1789-1897. All but the latter type will be analyzed in the present study, which seeks to determine the extent to which electoral factors (such as a president's popular and winning percentage of electoral victory) and measures of party influence bear a linear relation to the aforementioned classifications of messages.

The public communications of the presidents have doubtless increased many times over since the turn of the century: the augmentation of presidential power, growth of the federal bureaucracy, and impact of the mass media are among the catalysts of such a trend. Yet, the substance of each type of presidential message remains unaltered. In this sense, tradition has supplanted political expediency: the factual style of one kind of message essentially remains factual; the rhetorical emphasis inherent in another type of message endures as well. Taken as a whole, executive messages provide us with a permanent record of the immediate characteristics of a single administration on the one hand, and a public history of the institution of presidency--and for that matter the nation--on the other.

This study proposes that there is anything but an arbitrary nature to the number of each type of presidential message emitted per term--that instead we can only achieve a sufficient understanding of the influences on the chief executives' communications by viewing them as the outcome of a process of interaction between the public, elected officials, political parties, and the institutions which bind them.

### Previous Studies of Presidential Messages

There have been relatively few studies of presidential messages in general; fewer still have focused on specific types of communication. Jackson's (1967) descriptive essay on presidential vetoes is refreshing because he asserts vetoes emphasize, for the most part, "a positive position in government." Jackson notes that vetoes affirm the flexibility embodied in the

Constitution in that they allow several alternative actions on pending legislation. Ironically, the first ten presidential vetoes were applied to issues of constitutional interpretation, according to Jackson. During the time frame presently under consideration, Jackson concludes the effect of presidential vetoes as a form of communication was to augment the power of executive departments vis-a-vis Congress.

Black's (1919) classic analysis of the relation of executive power to legislation concurs with the latter finding, albeit he extends the generalization to include executive orders ("representing the practical side of government") and proclamations. Black defines three classes of proclamations, including those meant to give notice, such as the ratification of a treaty or the admission of a state into the Union; those authorized by acts of Congress which contain provisions for execution of those statutes; and those proclamations put forth by president's own initiative which have the constraining force of law.

Together with the growth of selective or partial vetoes, these messages have become akin to legislation, leading to the decline of representative government and the advent of presidential autocracy, according to Black.

Presidential special messages to the House of Representatives, the Senate, and to both bodies are perhaps the least, well-known type of executive communication. Generally, there are three kinds of special messages: (1) presidential responses to legislative requests for information, (2) presidentially initiated messages which include recommendations for legislative action; and (3) presidentially- initiated messages which are not accompanied by any specific directives or recommendations.

Several historical accounts of executive-legislative relations during the first century of United States government contradict Jackson and Black's contentions regarding the steady ascendancy of presidential autonomy, just as they refute the appeal and influence of political parties. For example, Wilson (1956) argued in his classic work, *Congressional Government*, that the shift in emphasis from state government to federal control coincided with a transfer of institutional and political power from the Supreme Court and president to the Congress.

He claims "the president is no greater than his prerogative of veto makes him; he is, in other words, powerful rather as a branch of the legislature than as the titular head of the Executive... it is not from the executive that the most dangerous encroachments are to be expected; the legislature is the aggressive spirit."

Dodd and Schott (1979) use Wilson's study to form their own theory of the cycles of power. Warning against "extrapolating current pattern indefinitely" (in reference to Wilson), they recognize the ability of institutions to organize so as to utilize power prerogatives. The authors hold that certain characteristics of nineteenth century Congress—the high turnover rate and low incentives among them—contributed directly to the committee system and strong centralized leadership. Overall, Dodd and Schott agree with Wilson's evaluation of power relations among the branches of government during the mid-1800's.

A similar view of nineteenth century executive-legislative relations is forwarded by Stephen Wayne (1978). According to Wayne, presidential involvement in the legislative process was extremely limited during this period, both because, of the traditional separation of powers and the way the party system discouraged most presidents from using Congress as an arena for exerting political leadership. Employing recommendations to Congress as measure of presidential influence, Wayne finds Democratic presidents after Andrew Jackson had less political power and popular support than Republican or Whig presidents (who philosophically opposed a presidential role in Congress). He likewise concurs with assessments of post-Civil War congressional dominance cited above.

One deficiency found in all of the latter studies is that they fail to address electoral and party factors which may explain executive-legislative relations in general, or presidential communications in particular. Polsby and Wildavsky's (1968) study of presidential elections shed some light on such a framework. The authors state the role of elections is very important in keeping the American political system open and competitive and in ensuring responsiveness by public officials. Although Polsby and Wildavsky contend it is inaccurate to suggest voters in presidential elections transmit policy preferences to elected officials with a high degree of reliability, they nonetheless believe elections do serve as a guide for making such decisions. The agreements which must be made with other public officials, along with the two-party system's balancing role, render the relationship between presidential elections and policy more subtle than referendum voting, but more reliable than opinion polls, according to the authors.

McDonald's (1955) analysis of political parties was one of the first to recognize the complex, interdependent relationship between parties, public officials, and policy. "If political parties are to influence public policy and actions, they must do so by influencing public officials," states McDonald. Concerned with the methodological aspects of party influence on officialdom, McDonald asserts that "any attempt to understand the role of party in government first require that party influence be isolated

and then studied in as many ways as possible." Among the difficulties of isolating party impact in the executive branch are the various numbers of actors involved, as well as the president's own admittance or denial of party considerations.

Sorauf (1964) similarly examines party influence on government institutions. For the president, the party is both a means for organizing popular support and an instrument to prod recalcitrant legislators. However, the diverse constituencies which distinguish the presidential national party from the congressional party, together with the structure of the political system (separation of powers) tend to create a natural antagonism between institutions, according to Sorauf. In order for the system to operate, therefore, each set of actors must realize the necessity of aligning themselves with the interests of their counterparts. In this way, the two-party system represents a compromise between the goals of responsiveness and effectiveness. Sorauf declares that by estimating the reciprocal influence of parties on the president and Congress, we can assess the extent to which officials modify parties, in the same way that parties modify official communication.

### **Differences Between Types of Presidential Messages**

While this study assumes both party and electoral variables affect the incidence of presidential messages, it will be hypothesized that their respective influence differs with the type of communication. For instance, proclamations and executive orders may be distinguished from messages to Congress in several ways. For one, they are not addressed to the legislature, but rather to the general public (proclamations) or the executive branch (executive orders). These two types of messages are generally concerned with much broader policy issues than those included in special messages or vetoes. Thirdly, there is much more executive initiative inherent in proclamations and executive orders than others. That is, they offer a better glimpse of a president's policy prerogatives in that they are less affected by party makeup in Congress or other systemic constraints. Likewise, they provide a measure of an administration's responsiveness to the public. Therefore, the number of proclamations and executive orders released per term should be accounted for more by electoral than party factors.

The number of special messages sent to the House of Representatives or the Senate is a function of presidential initiative (which may include specific recommendations for action) as well as executive responses to legislative requests. What is common in both instances is the role of the political party in determining the priorities, in setting the political agenda, for the legislature and executive alike. If the president's party has a plurality in either house of Congress, it follows that he would communicate more (either through his own initiative or in responding to legislative requests) than if his party constituted a numerical minority.

Presidential vetoes and special messages to Congress as a whole can be distinguished from the aforementioned types of communication because the president must consider the aggregate number of members of his own party in order to minimize the chances of a veto override on the one hand, and the likelihood of compliance with a recommendation to Congress on the other. These two types of communication are measure of presidential prerogative and action toward a legislature with a majority of opposing party adherents; an executive should issue more of each message per four-year term when facing an uphill battle in getting legislation passed, or when he is constantly having to answer for the policies he initiates. Like all presidential communication, the amount of vetoes and special messages to Congress delivered during each four-year tenure is somewhat dependent on electoral factors—more so than special message to the House and Senate, less so than are proclamations and executive orders.

### **Hypotheses**

Given the inherent differences in types of presidential messages, along with the varying impact that electoral and party factors have on them, we can formulate some preliminary hypotheses with which to represent our model: The less a president's popular percentage of electoral victory, the more likely it becomes that the number of proclamations and executive orders communicated per term will increase.

The smaller the plurality of legislators from the president's party in both houses of Congress, the more special messages to Congress and vetoes that will be issued per presidential term.

The larger the plurality of representatives sharing the president's party affiliation, the more special messages which will be delivered to the House per presidential term.

The more senators from the president's party than from the opposing party, the more special messages which will be issued to the Senate for every presidential term.

### **Specifying the Model**

The electoral factors included in our analysis of presidential messages are popular and winning percentage of election victory, measured simply by the percentage of each which successive chief executives received. If the president-elect had a negative winning percentage of victory (as happened three times in the 1800's), it was coded that way. Where an incumbent president died in office the electoral and party variables, together with the number of presidential messages given per term, were attributed to his successor. This procedure seemed a logical step since the vice-president was elected on the same ticket and shared the party affiliation of the president. Only in examining the demographic variable area were the successor's characteristics substituted for the late president's; the latter variable is mainly descriptive and therefore not included in our model. It should be noted that those presidents who died in office between 1789-1897 (Harrison, Taylor, Lincoln, Garfield) did so very early in their term, leaving few if any messages of their own.

The party factors examined are denoted by the abbreviations HCPI, SCPI, and INDEX. HCPI, referring to House congressional party influence, is coded according to the total number of representatives sharing the president's party more than those subscribing to another political party during each four-year duration (two sessions of Congress). Similarly, SCPI, standing for Senate congressional party influence, is compiled according to the same formula. Because we are concerned with the impact that a congressional party plurality (from the president's party) has on presidential messages, neither figure was ever coded in the negative: where the president's party was a minority in either house, such a state was coded as 0. The rationale for the latter technique is that we want to isolate partisan influence for these variables, not the collective influence that all parties in the legislature have on the chief executive. HCPI is compared to the number of messages the president sends to the House; SCPI is correlated with the number of special messages sent to the Senate per presidential term.

The party factor INDEX is represented by the following formula:  $(HCPI+SCPI)/2$ . It corresponds to the aggregate plurality of legislators having the same party affiliation as the president for each four-year period. We will examine the INDEX measure in relation to the number of proclamations, executive orders, special messages to Congress, and vetoes issued per presidential term, although according to our hypotheses it should best explain the latter two above.

Finally, we added two demographic variables: one to compare our model with (AREA); the other of which is integrated into the model (TIME). Area is a dichotomous variable referring to the region of the country the president or his successor come from (non-South v. South). Although we make no explicit assumptions about how this variable relates to the number of any type of presidential message, the fact that almost half of U.S. presidents came from the South over the 1789-1897 time span gives us reason to at least observe the impact region has on executive communication. Time itself is the remaining explanatory variable analyzed in our study. Its inclusion is necessary in order to determine the relevance of our model overall, and to evaluate the influence of party and electoral factors in particular.

Before we proceed with the analysis, we should mention some considerations that arise from the use of documents as a source of data. According to North (1960), these concerns include (1) data reliability; (2) the comprehensiveness of available documentation; (3) qualitative characteristics of such documentation. Regarding the first point above, there is no question that Richardson's compilation of presidential messages contains authentic material. However, since he purposely excluded simple nomination messages to Congress, the source is not entirely comprehensive or authoritative. For purposes of this study, however, Richardson omitted precisely the kind of special message that would have had to be excluded anyway; for it is impossible to measure independent party influence on an action done for wholly partisan reasons to begin with. Further, the author's reputation and motive for publishing the

compilation, aspects of data reliability, are beyond reproach: Richardson was a representative from Tennessee who was authorized by a joint resolution of Congress to gather and publish the messages and papers of the first twenty-seven American presidents. Together with his son, he even included an appendix to the collection, an addition not part of the original authorization. Richardson did not attempt to correct errors in the messages and papers he collected, although he does indicate where some errors occur. Finally, other than a brief preface to each volume in the compilation, Richardson did not seek to interpret the motives or intentions of any of the messages he collected. He left that to the reader, and to posterity.

### **Data Analysis**

Utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), we first generated Pearson correlation coefficients (Table 1) to examine the electoral, party, and demographic variables individually over the entire sample of twenty-seven presidential administrations. However, because our model assumes interdependence between party and electoral factors, we present the Pearson correlations for descriptive purposes only. Accordingly, we find negative correlations between popular percentage of

election victory and three types of presidential messages (proclamations, executive Orders, and special messages to Congress); four negative correlations between winning percentage of victory and types of executive communication (proclamations, executive orders, special messages to Congress, and vetoes); a .35 correlation between HCPI and the number of special messages sent to the House; a .18 correlation between SCPI and the number of special messages delivered to the Senate; and a -.22 correspondence between INDEX and special messages to Congress.

From the demographic-based factors included in these correlations, we can surmise that (1) non-Southern presidents, constituting half the sample as a whole issued more of every type of message than Southern presidents, with the exception of special messages to the House (even); and (2) the passage of time led to an increase in each type of presidential message (most notably in the number of proclamations and executive orders) delivered by successive administrations from 1789-1897. One explanation for the former finding is that eight of the first nine presidents were Southerners; because the majority of Southern presidents served early in the nation's history, the passage of time didn't have as much effect on the number of messages they issued as it did for later non-Southern chief executives.

### Regression Analysis

To evaluate the hypotheses presented earlier, we conducted a multiple regression analysis, whereby we could include and observe the interaction between electoral, party, and demographic variables as they relate to the incidence of each type of executive communication. According to Lewis-Beck (1980), a multiple regression procedure allows for both a closer examination of the influence of a particular independent variable, as well as a fuller explanation of the dependent variable. The  $R^2$ , or coefficient of multiple determination, indicates the proportion of variation explained by all the independent variables. The slope of the regression equation indicates the average change in the dependent variable associated with a unit change in the independent variable. Since time played a major factor in the increase of presidential messages, we will be particularly interested in the slopes of the factors we have identified to be catalysts of these messages. Overall, a linear specification of our model seems to be the most parsimonious procedure; few alternative methods are possible when theorizing about historical trends in presidential communication.

Table 2 outlines the results of our multiple regression analysis. All figures are based on eighteen cases here, since electoral statistics for presidential elections weren't available until the 1824 presidential election. Hence, the time period under consideration in this part of the analysis is 1824-1897.

Hypothesis 1 above predicts that the less a president's popular percentage of electoral victory, the more proclamations and executive orders that will be produced per four-year term. By observing the independent effects of popular percentage of electoral victory, the plurality of members of Congress sharing the president's party affiliation, and time, this hypothesis appears to be confirmed for both types of presidential messages above. First, the slope of POP (popular percentage of election victory) is negative for both proclamations and executive orders (-.15, -.17, respectively), indicating that a lower percentage of election victory led to an increase in the number of these types of presidential messages issued by respective presidential administrations. Further, the correlations between POP and proclamations, and POP and executive orders are very similar to those generated over the full range of presidents included in Richardson's compilation. The F-value for POP was likewise significant in both cases (.05 probability), allowing us to reject the null hypothesis that the number of presidential messages issued per administration cannot be explained by electoral factors.

Next, we note that the INDEX variable is also a significant explanatory factor in the number of proclamations issued per term (.26 slope, significant F-value). While this finding was not anticipated in our initial hypothesis, it serves to reinforce the overall reciprocal influence which party and electoral factors may have for certain types of presidential messages. A plurality of members of Congress belonging to the president's party, if large enough, may stimulate ideas for proclamations that, while appearing to be in the national interest, also serve party interests as well.

As delineated earlier, the passage of time also led to an increase in the number of proclamations and executive orders issued per presidential term. The time variable includes the effects which reelection can have for the issuing of presidential messages, as well as other factors not readily amenable to measurement in our model. The time indicator, significant independently for both proclamations and executive orders, likewise contributed to the relatively high  $R^2$  generated for these types of presidential messages (.70, .61, respectively).

Hypothesis 2, asserting that the smaller the number-of legislators from the president's party, the more special messages to Congress and vetoes which are communicated per term, is for the most part contradicted by the regression analysis. Although the INDEX variable has negative slope (-.14) when regressed on special messages to Congress, the relationship is not significant. Neither does there seem to be much correspondence between INDEX level and number of vetoes delivered per administration:

the high positive slope (.82) is not significant. Strangely enough, the electoral variable POP has a negative slope for both special messages to Congress (-.32) and vetoes (-.20), and the demographic variable TIME is only slightly significant in the regression with special messages to Congress. Additionally, the correlation between INDEX and special messages to Congress, and between INDEX and vetoes, are negative over eighteen cases (-.19, -.02, respectively). From these data we conclude that there is no clear linear relation between electoral and party influences as they relate to these types of executive communication. More so than special messages to Congress, the number of vetoes handed down by presidents between 1824-1897 appears to be attributed more to aspects of particular administrations and presidential personalities than to external causes.

Hypothesis 3 proposes that the larger the plurality of representatives sharing the president's party affiliation, the more special messages which will be sent to the House. The data from the regression analysis partially confirms this prediction: the HCPI variable has a positive (.16) slope; it is highly correlated with the number of messages addressed to the House (.42) over eighteen presidential administrations; but the relationship between them is not statistically significant. The  $R^2$  value for this equation is .21, with most of the change in it caused by the HCPI factor. Thus, neither the electoral nor demographic factors affect the outcome of the regression to a great extent. In interpreting these results, one should be aware that the formation of short-lived coalitions in the House, which often cross party lines, was and remains today a more likely phenomenon than in the Senate. This is due to the more specialized policy concerns of the House. The high turnover of House membership in the 1800's, compounded by the frequency of House elections to begin with, likewise may have contributed to a lack of party cohesion, resulting in less communication between the president and his partisan supporters in the House.

Finally, Hypothesis 4 assumes that the larger the plurality of senators from the president's party, the more the chief executive would communicate with the Senate by way of special message. Although the  $R^2$  for this regression equation was .29, with a non-significant F-value, the SCPI measure has a high positive slope (.79) and is independently significant at the .05 probability level. Further, the correlation between SCPI and the number of special messages sent to the Senate is .48 over eighteen cases, much higher than the correlation between the two

over the full twenty-seven administration sample. The effect of the electoral variable (popular percentage of election victory) and the demographic variable (time) on the number of Senate-addressed special messages is each insignificant: POP has a positive slope (.36) and correlation (.16) to the number of Senate special messages, while TIME has a negative slope (-.48) and correlation (-.19) to special messages communicated to the Senate. The above findings demonstrate the institutional stability of the Senate. Insulated from

the electoral process until after the turn of the century, the Senate and its membership were less vulnerable to environmental forces than the House. Secondly, because it shares more constitutional powers with the president, the impact of party influence in communication between them becomes more pronounced. Thirdly, most presidents who served between 1824-1897 were much more familiar with the workings of the Senate than the House; this affinity no doubt helped them formulate a legislative strategy for policies they wanted to implement. Finally, the size of the Senate in relation to the House must have made it easier to achieve party consensus on issues of concern to both entities.

## **Discussion**

The present study has attempted to identify and isolate certain influences on, as well as explanations for, the incidence of various types of presidential messages. We have ventured beyond a merely descriptive essay on the progression of presidential communication, toward a more scientific analysis. In doing so, we have formulated a unique measure of party influence on executive officialdom, a measure which by and large proved valuable for examining the model and accompanying hypotheses.

Despite the longitudinal-based methodology, however, we have transformed the dynamic and continuous nature of the presidency into discrete terms: first by assuming all presidential communication is public; secondly by implying that all presidential messages are recorded. Neither, of course, is the case. But then the variables affecting private, confidential communication are most likely distinct from the ones we have chosen; certainly, they are not amenable to measurement and generalization in the same way catalysts of public communication are.

We have observed that just as there are various types of presidential messages, so the impetus for issuing each type is different. At the same time, though, we have claimed that electoral and party factors affecting executive communication are interdependent, and that demographic characteristics of communication cannot be ignored if we are to achieve a greater understanding of executive behavior toward government institutions and the public. The primary conclusion we can draw from this work is that the issuing of presidential messages is not an arbitrary or haphazard process—rather, such action is the result of an interplay of forces, some of which a president has control over, while others not. The advent of the

modern presidency confounds this calculus by making it more difficult to pinpoint pertinent indicators of each type of presidential message. But scholars committed to seeking a more comprehensive view of the presidency should not be swayed by such a challenge.

Representative Richardson concluded the Preface of his final volume of presidential messages by stating: "If my work shall prove satisfactory to Congress and the country, I will feel compensated for my time and effort." In its own way, this project has sought to repay the debt which all Americans owe him.

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**Table 1**

Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Various Indices and Types of Presidential Public Messages, 1789-1897

	POP	WIN	HCPI	SCPI	INDEX	AREA	TIME
PROC	-.24	-.16	-.13	.13	-.07	-.44	.64
EO	-.25	-.16	-.20	-.15	-.20	-.42	.66
HSM	.20	.10	.35	.34	.37	.03	.28
SSM	.17	.27	.06	.18	.09	-.22	.48
CSM	-.08	-.25	-.21	-.23	-.22	-.24	.28
VETO	.02	-.16	-.06	-.18	-.10	-.25	.40

**Abbreviations**

PROC-proclamations

EO-executive orders

HSM-special messages issued to the House of Representatives

SSM-special messages issued to the Senate

CSM-special messages sent to both houses of Congress

VETO-number of presidential vetoes

POP-popular percentage of electoral victory

WIN-winning percentage of electoral victory

HCPI-plurality of House members from president's party (per four-year term)

SCPI-plurality of Senate members from president's party (per term)

INDEX-plurality of members of Congress belonging to president's party AREA-region of the country (non-South, South) where president comes from TIME-represents the effect which the passage of time has on number of messages issued per presidential term



**Table 2**

Compendium of Types of Presidential Messages, 1789-1897

PREZ	PARTY	POP	WIN	PROC	EO	HSM	SSM	CSM	VETO	HCPI	SCPI	CPI
Washington	Fed	-----		8	7	2	41	61	1	16	11	13.5
Washington	Fed	-----		8	0	5	22	69	1	0	10	5
J. Adams	Fed	-----		12	0	10	29	45	0	32	14	23
Jefferson	D- R	-----		3	1	16	25	53	0	96	21	58.5
Jefferson	D-R	-----		7	2	14	33	71	0	185	42	113.5
Madison	D-R	-----		10	0	30	37	63	4	118	46	82
Madison	D-R	-----		6	0	15	26	31	2	96	32	64
Monroe	D-R	-----		11	0	38	55	26	0	228	52	140
Monroe	D-R	-----		2	0	97	66	34	1	294	80	187
JQ Adams	Coali.	30.6	-13	22	4	67	65	40	0	0	0	0
Jackson	Dem	56	14	8	2	41	87	40	5	148	8	78
Jackson	Dem	56.5	13	3	4	43	71	42	4	134	2	68
Van Buren	Dem	50.9	10.1	5	2	77	85	42	0	7	18	12.5
Tyler*	Whig	53.1	6	4	0	77	123	21	8	37	0	18.5
Polk	Dem	49.6	1.5	8	4	43	115	23	3	60	21	40.5
Fillmore*	Whig	47.3	4.8	8	1	31	130	36	0	0	0	0
Pierce	Dem	50.9	6.8	13	2	56	168	47	9	63	41	52
Buchanan	Dem	45.5	12.2	8	0	41	102	21	7	4	26	15
Lincoln	Rep.	39.8	10.3	49	70	28	126	69	3	89	48	68.5
A. Johnson*	Dem-U	55	10	48	31	133	181	49	22	201	63	132
Grant	Rep.	52.7	5.4	32	4	53	123	37	17	116	80	98
Grant	Rep.	55.6	11.6	22	12	40	46	38	29	42	46	44
Hayes	Rep.	48	-3	14	8	31	66	28	12	0	0	0
Arthur*	Rep.	48.5	.4	6	28	74	105	228	4	0	2	1

