



“It’s the Economy, Stupid!”

The Impact of the Economy and other External
Factors on Presidential Rhetoric

MORGAN DUBBS

Background

- ▶ Presidential rhetoric has the capability to influence, motivate many (Albertson & Gadarian 2015)
- ▶ Presidents address 5 main topics in their speeches:
 - ▶ Economy, Environment, Education, Security, and Healthcare (Coe & Reitz 2010)
- ▶ External factors can be influential in determining speech patterns (Social Science Automation, Coe & Reitz 2010)
- ▶ Confident leaders are more effective and, therefore, will be motivated to speak confidently (Folkman 2019)
- ▶ Research Question: What external factors impact the self-confidence within presidential rhetoric?

Competing Theories

- ▶ Differences in rhetoric result from the individual
 - ▶ Personality (Condor et al. 2013)
 - ▶ Role (Kesgin 2013)
- ▶ Differences in rhetoric result from external factors
 - ▶ Environment (Kurtz et al. 2010)
 - ▶ Economy (Virtullo & Johnson 2010)
 - ▶ Education (Kath 2004)
 - ▶ Health (Koch 1998)
 - ▶ Conflict (Kellner 2007, Esch 2010)

Hypotheses

- ▶ H1: *If the United States performs well economically, the rhetoric within State of Union addresses will demonstrate increased levels of self-confidence.*
- ▶ H2: *If the United States is at peace (rather than at war), the rhetoric within State of the Union addresses will demonstrate increased levels of self-confidence.*
- ▶ H3: *If the United States experiences positive health outcomes, the rhetoric within State of Union addresses will demonstrate increased levels of self-confidence.*
- ▶ H4: *If the environmental state of the United States improves, the rhetoric within State of Union addresses will demonstrate increased levels of self-confidence.*
- ▶ H5: *As the level of educational attainment of Americans increases, the rhetoric within State of Union addresses will demonstrate increased levels of self-confidence.*

Methodology

- ▶ Gather State of the Union Addresses from 1961-2020
- ▶ Enter SOTU speeches into text context analysis software
 - ▶ Utilize self-confidence (“SC”) scores → Dependent Variable
- ▶ Gather various data representing each of the external factor categories
- ▶ Conduct various multiple regression analyses
 - ▶ Pair the SC scores with data from the year prior to the SOTU
- ▶ Independent Variables: Public Debt, Change in GDP, Life Expectancy, Death Rate (2 measures), War vs Peace, Carbon Emissions, Educational Attainment (High School Graduates, College Graduates)
- ▶ Control Variables: Identity of the president, age of the president

	Model 1 (Regression Analysis on Index 1)	Model 2 (Regression Analysis on Index 2)	Model 4 (Regression Analysis on Index 4)
War	.110 (.128)	.078 (.155)	.086* (.094)
Unemployment rate	-.015 (.399)	.005 (.656)	
Change in GDP	.015* (.064)	.013 (.104)	.014* (.062)
Public Debt as Percentage of GDP	-.005* (.085)	-.004 (.112)	-.004 (.114)
Death Rate age 5 & Under (per 1000)	-.013 (.657)	-.007 (.743)	
Change in Death Rate	.249*** (.007)	.187** (.013)	.190*** (.005)
Change in Life Expectancy	1.054** (.035)	.571* (.079)	.595** (.024)
CO2 Emissions	-.034 (.244)		
Percentage with High School Diploma	.013 (.241)	.009 (.380)	.011 (.101)
Percentage with College Degree	-.018 (.439)	-.006 (.751)	-.020 (.194)
Constant	1.201 (.436)	.483 (.683)	.215 (.519)
R-Squared	.210	.330	.359

Analysis/Discussion

- ▶ *Economy*: Hypothesis 1 was supported
 - ▶ Except when Trump's cases were included
- ▶ *Conflict*: Self-confidence increases in relation to war
- ▶ *Health*: Death rate and life expectancy were significant across all models
 - ▶ Life expectancy findings consistent with hypothesis 3
 - ▶ Death rate: opposite of what was expected
- ▶ *Environment*: Decreased carbon emissions increase leader's self-confidence
- ▶ *Education*: Increased levels of education's impact: inconclusive
 - ▶ Rise in high school graduation rates: positive relationship
 - ▶ Rise in college graduation rates: negative relationship

Conclusion

- ▶ Only consistently significant indicators: life expectancy and death rate
 - ▶ Yet, death rate's relationship was significant in an unexpected way
- ▶ Change in GDP was a significant indicator, excluding when Trump's cases were included
- ▶ Some external factors influence rhetoric
 - ▶ Contributes to the body of research surrounding external factor's impact on rhetoric
- ▶ Limitation: Data is not available for many assumed indicators

Questions?

Bibliography

- Albertson, Bethany & Shana Kushner Gadarian. (2015). *Anxious Politics: Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World*. Cambridge University Press.
- Coe, Kevin, and Michael Reitzes. "Obama on the stump: Features and determinants of a rhetorical approach." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2010): 391-413.
- Esch, J. (2010) Legitimizing the 'war on terror'. *Political Psychology*, 31, 357-391.
- Folkman, Joseph. 2019. "How Self-Confidence Can Help Or Hurt Leaders." *Forbes*. February 12. Accessed October 25, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joefolkman/2019/02/12/how-self-confidence-can-help-or-hurt-leaders/#5a5674f25990>.
- Kath, R. "The education of Athens: Politics and rhetoric in Isocrates and Plato." *Isocrates and civic education* (2004): 125.
- Kesgin, Barış. "Leadership traits of Turkey's Islamist and secular prime ministers." *Turkish Studies* 14, no. 1 (2013): 136-157.
- Koch, Jeffrey W. "Political rhetoric and political persuasion: The changing structure of citizens' preferences on health insurance during policy debate." *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1998): 209-229.
- Kurtz, T., Augoustinos, M. and Crabb, S. (2010) Contesting the 'national interest' and maintaining 'our lifestyle': A discursive analysis of political rhetoric around climate change. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 49, 601-625.
- Social Science Automation, I. (2008). *Profiler Plus*. Columbus, OH.
- Vitullo, Elizabeth, and Jason Johnson. "University presidential rhetoric and the 2008–2009 economic crisis." *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 32, no. 5 (2010): 475-485.