Institutional Change and the Presidential Mandate

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Institutional Change and the Presidential Mandate

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Abstract
Often treated as a unified concept with a single definition, the presidential mandate actually encompasses multiple definitions, each connected to distinct ideas about democracy and presidential leadership. This article looks at how and when modern presidents have used mandate rhetoric and seeks to explain changes in presidential mandate-claiming patterns. Using an original dataset of 1,467 presidential communications from 1933 through 2009, I find that after 1969 presidents became more likely to use election results to justify their actions. However, they also became less likely to emphasize the magnitude of the election result, focusing their mandate rhetoric instead on campaign promises and distinctions between candidates and parties. Evidence suggests that this shift is the result of a combination of several factors: changes to the presidential nomination system, polarized party politics, and an overall decline in presidential approval ratings. Based on this research, I conclude that ideas about the presidential mandate are closely connected with the political conditions and
challenges facing presidents. As the place of the presidency has shifted in American politics, the ways in which presidents interpret and communicate about elections have also changed.

The Puzzle of the Presidential Mandate

Few concepts in American politics have proved as controversial and yet as resonant as the presidential mandate. After an election, commentators devote much time and ink to considering whether the results conferred a mandate on the victor and, if so, which policies and stances were endorsed. Many have expressed skepticism about interpreting election results in this way. As Hans Noel (2010: 9) notes, “Exit polls saying some voters cared about some things are thin reeds on which to spin out the will of the people.” Not all scholars have been so quick to dismiss the mandate, however. In Presidential Mandates Patricia Heidotting Conley (2001: 146) applies a set of consistent criteria to distinguish among presidential elections, designating some as popular mandates, some as bargained mandates, and some “victories but not mandates.” Others have embraced the idea of the electoral mandate not as an objective measure of elections but as a constructed message after the fact. Charles O. Jones (2005: 184) suggests that “the mandate is a classic example of an illusion becoming reality in the context of power as persuasion.” Lawrence J. Grossback et al. (2006) systematically address how elites—the winners and losers of the election, along with the news media—construct mandate narratives to frame an election result that they did not predict.

Despite these inquiries, the presidential mandate continues to puzzle scholars. We know relatively little about how presidents themselves interpret elections or about how leaders use election results in public rhetoric to explain their actions and establish a legitimate basis for authority. This article attempts to shed light on these questions. Using an original dataset measuring the frequency and content of mandate rhetoric among modern presidents, this analysis reveals several previously unnoticed patterns. My findings suggest that the use of mandate rhetoric reflects perceptions about the state of the party system and the status of the presidency as an institution, rather than perceptions about election results.

Examining presidential rhetoric from 1933 through 2009, several patterns are evident. I find that over time presidents have come to rely more frequently on references to campaign promises and election results to explain and justify their choices. The content of mandate rhetoric has also changed. Presidential claims to an electoral mandate can take one of three related but distinct forms. One approach defines mandates as uniquely decisive and meaningful elections, distinct from routine political results. A more historical definition of the concept, derived from arguments made by Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson, posits that the president is the true representative of the whole people and draws on plebiscitary notions of presidential leadership (Dahl 1990: 356). The third definition has its origins in the theory of responsible parties. As Hanna Fenichel Pitkin (1972: 146) describes, “A mandate theorist will see the representative as a ‘mere’ agent, a servant, a delegate, a subordinate substitute for those who sent him.” As John P. Aldrich 1995: 10) explains, the central feature of the “responsible-party” model is that elected officials make specific policy promises and enact them once in office. That is, parties should differentiate themselves during the campaign, make clear policy commitments, and then carry them out. The first part of the article elucidates the three distinct conceptual definitions of the presidential mandate, examining their assumptions, historical origins, and relevance for contemporary presidential politics.

The second part of the article assesses how presidential mandate claiming has changed over time. The major finding of this inquiry is not only that mandate rhetoric has become more common but also that responsible-party claims that emphasize promises, and often cast elections as mandates for party government, have accounted for much of this expansion. These changes appear to apply to both Republican and Democratic presidents across a range of political circumstances. In the second section I also examine the communication genres that have contributed most to the expansion of mandate rhetoric.
The final section of the article examines the connection between institutional change and the use of mandate rhetoric. This section assesses changes in the presidential nomination process, the rise of partisan polarization, and the decline of presidential prestige as potential explanations for the changing frequency and content of presidential mandate claims.

Three Conceptual Definitions

In American history, three analytically distinct definitions of the presidential mandate have emerged. Each emphasizes a different feature: directness of representation, threshold of election result, and policy clarity. Each has a distinct origin and intellectual history. Each posits a different relationship between the president and the electorate and holds slightly different assumptions about the basis of legitimate presidential power. In the plebiscitary version, presidential legitimacy comes from the (imagined) relationship with the entire electorate. The critical-election definition suggests that presidents acquire policy legitimacy from some elections but only when the result fits certain criteria. Finally, the responsible-party variation suggests that the president’s legitimacy as a policy actor comes from the clarity of promises in the campaign and the president’s commitment to fulfilling those promises after taking office.

The Plebiscitary Mandate

The central premise of the plebiscitary definition is that the president, chosen by the entire nation, represents the true national will; the corollary is that Congress represents a conglomerate of parochial interests. This definition of the mandate was first introduced by Jackson in the context of a struggle with Congress over the charter of the Second Bank of the United States. After vetoing a bill renewing the bank’s charter, Jackson decided to destroy the bank before its charter expired. He ordered Treasury Secretary William Duane to remove deposits from the bank and place them in state banks instead. He justified this action on the grounds that, as president, his position represented the preferences of the entire nation. Although Jackson’s supporters had not campaigned specifically on the issue of the bank charter, the president maintained that his position had been clear and the electorate had endorsed it by reelecting him in 1832 (Ellis and Kirk 1995: 140). Central to Jackson’s claim was the idea that the basis of presidential power was the president’s ability to represent the entire electorate, thus conferring an advantage in clashes with Congress (Dahl 1990: 362). Based on this argument, he fired Duane after his refusal to remove the deposits and appointed Roger Taney as treasury secretary (Ellis and Kirk 1995: 145–48; Wilentz 2005: 106). In an analysis of the development of the presidential mandate, Richard J. Ellis and Stephen Kirk (1995: 149–50) suggest that “Jackson’s removal statement constituted a revolutionary change in the conceptualization of the basis of presidential power.” The legitimacy of the presidency, according to Jackson, rested on the office itself, not the campaign or the election result, constitutes the main element of the presidential mandate.

Eighty years later Wilson incorporated the mandate into his new approach to presidential leadership. In his earlier life as a scholar of politics, Wilson advocated adopting British-style cabinet government in the United States. Part of his vision was that American political parties should conform to the standards of “responsible parties,” running on distinct platforms that would be enacted when their candidates won office (Stid 1998: 50). In the absence of a plan for enacting such a reform, Wilson instead “arrived at strong presidential leadership as a solution” (Dahl 1990: 355). The legitimacy of this solution rested on characterizing the president as “‘special’ ... because he was the only government officer with a national mandate” (Tulis 1987: 128; see also Dahl 1990: 360). Like Jackson’s, Wilson’s argument about the presidential mandate was, at its core, an assertion about the legitimacy of the office. Both justified pushing the boundaries of presidential power by presenting the president as the true representative of the “will of the people,” thus deserving of dominance over Congress. The plebiscitary mandate, in sum, depicts the president as possessing populist credentials and as removed from his party. It is this version of the mandate that Robert Dahl (1990) criticizes in “The Myth of the Presidential
Mandate.” The assertion that the president’s preferences ought to trump those of Congress because of his connection with the electorate, Dahl argues, is dangerous and ultimately undemocratic. Yet the plebiscitary version of the mandate taps into very specific ideas about presidential politics. Not all mandate claims rest on the assumption that presidents truly represent the people at the expense of Congress. As we shall see in the next two sections, there exist different ways for presidents to claim an electoral basis for their power.

Critical-Election Mandate Claims
The critical-election version of the presidential mandate emphasizes the election result rather than the nature of the presidency as an institution. This definition, which has been less prominent in the mandates literature than the history associated with the plebiscitary definition, derives from the literature on critical and realigning elections (Burnham 1970; Key 1955), which posits that some elections carry greater political and policy meaning than others. Some scholars have focused on the role of the critical-election mandate as a response to the challenges of the modern presidency. This approach has some theoretical basis. If an essential element of the critical-election mandate is its usefulness as a tool to persuade Congress, then it makes sense to examine this concept mainly as it relates to the modern, legislatively active presidency. However, not every analysis premised on the critical-election foundation limits its scope to the modern presidency. Conley (2001: 43–44) implies that the mandate is a static concept, carrying a similar meaning in 1860 and in 1980: occasionally, elections result in one candidate winning a majority that can be attributed to policy issues. Conley (ibid.: 11–14) stresses the connection between mandates and critical elections, or “realigning elections,” noting that “all realignments are mandates, but not all mandates are realignments.” She points out that Lyndon B. Johnson’s mandate for policy change occurred in the middle of a “resilient political regime” (ibid.: 14; cf. Skowronek 1997). Johnson’s 1964 election, however, represented an exceptional result; the essential elements of the mandate were the policy changes proposed and Johnson’s substantial majority at the polls.

In his first inaugural address in 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933) suggested that the people had “registered a mandate for direct, vigorous action.” Since that time, presidents have periodically emphasized the magnitudes of their victories when defending policy choices. The idea that some elections carry “special” policy meanings has attracted particular criticism from social scientists who contend that elections exist to artificially aggregate preferences rather than to reflect them. William H. Riker (1988 [1982]: 235) contends that the aggregation of preferences is not conducive to using elections as a real interpretation of public opinion. He argues that the way electoral institutions induce equilibrium sufficiently obscures public preferences such that “even if some method produces a reasonably justifiable amalgamation, we do not know it.” In real-life politics, claiming a critical-election mandate carries risks as well. Politicians who claim that their victories were the result of “overwhelming” or extraordinary excitement among voters invite criticism of their interpretations. Since the election of 1964, in which Johnson won over 60 percent of the popular vote alongside unexpected success among Democratic congressional candidates, true landslide elections have been rare in American politics. The few really decisive presidential victories in this period—Richard Nixon’s in 1972 and Ronald Reagan’s in 1984—have been dampened by a lack of similar enthusiasm farther down the ticket. In the elections of 1980, 2004, and 2008 one party emerged as a clear victor, yet presidential candidates in those years won only modest majorities. In other words, claiming to have been elected in an exceptionally significant or decisive election carries risk. Political opponents can easily challenge such a claim by arguing that the victory margin or vote share did not cross the necessary threshold to constitute a mandate. We should expect this risk to shape how and when presidents use critical-election mandate claims.

Responsible-Party Claims
The connection between the responsible-party thesis and the electoral mandate is intuitive; elected officials claim a mandate based on their clear policy commitments and the electorate’s understanding of those
commitments during the election campaign. This version of the mandate emphasizes policy and promises rather than plebiscitary leadership or exceptional election results.

However, as with the other conceptual definitions, the emergence of party mandates as a theme in presidential rhetoric also occurred as a result of institutional change. Daniel Klinghard (2005: 749) observes that as presidents began to cultivate their own independent political bases toward the end of the nineteenth century, they began to claim electoral mandates for party policies in their inaugural addresses. For example, James Garfield (1881) explained:

And now, at the close of this first century of growth, with the inspirations of its history in their hearts, our people have lately reviewed the condition of the nation, passed judgment upon the conduct and opinions of political parties, and have registered their will concerning the future administration of the Government. To interpret and to execute that will in accordance with the Constitution is the paramount duty of the Executive.

The responsible-party definition differs from the other definitions in several key ways. In contrast with the plebiscitary version of the mandate, it allows for the possibility that the president’s constituency is narrower than the entire nation. Responsible-party claims tie the president to promises rather than empower him to make judgments. Finally, the responsible-party definition sidesteps the question of thresholds. An election does not have to produce a landslide result to be a mandate; rather, the main requirement is that the policy issues should be clear.

Measuring Changes in Mandate Rhetoric

To measure presidential use of mandate rhetoric, I created a dataset using the Papers of the Presidents, housed electronically at the American Presidency Project (Woolley and Peters n.d.). The dataset includes news conferences, television and radio addresses, minor addresses made during travel and at meetings of groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, messages to Congress, and various remarks and memoranda addressed to members of the executive branch, totaling 1,467 communications from 1933 to 2009. I examine communications from inauguration through March 31 for several reasons. First, this 10-week span balances the need to collect an adequate sample of presidential rhetoric with the demands of qualitative review of a large number of communications. Second, the time period itself is significant in the presidency literature. It falls within the “first hundred days,” during which modern presidents have often felt pressure to demonstrate legislative success. The 70-day window also coincides with the “honeymoon” that most modern presidents experience, with higher levels of approval in the early part of the term. Because most presidents experience the honeymoon effect (Brody 1991), focusing on this narrow window allows for a degree of comparability across administrations. Examining rhetoric from the first 70 days controls for exogenous events and facilitates comparison across presidential administrations.

Each of these communications was coded for mandate rhetoric. Coding procedures were designed around a single central question: Does the president use the election result, the promises of the campaign, or the wishes of the electorate to justify policy action? Speeches or communications including a reference to an electoral mandate were coded 1, while those without were coded 0. If a speech included keywords, such as mandate and election as well as relevant synonyms, then it was coded as employing such rhetoric. The coding also takes into account context and meaning. A handful of the 121 references to electoral logic in the overall dataset refer to the election specifically as a mandate. Most others draw on the idea of “doing what I was elected to do” or respecting the wishes of “the people who sent us here.” In a number of communications, presidents defended policy choices by stating “I campaigned on this.”
Table 1 presents the results of this data collection effort, with presidential term as the unit of analysis. Use of mandate rhetoric has varied considerably. Several presidential terms opened with no or few mandate references. On the other end of the spectrum, nearly one-quarter of George W. Bush’s communications in early 2005 included mandate claims. The average percentage of communications containing at least one mandate reference was 7.5.

Two findings warrant further attention. First, the prominence of mandate rhetoric does not appear related to election results (this contention is tested more explicitly in a later section). While most presidents elected by “landslide” margins used some mandate rhetoric, these claims were equally common among presidents with more modest electoral fortunes. For example, Roosevelt used mandate rhetoric in almost 9 percent of his communications after the 1936 election, in which he won over 60 percent of the popular vote and defeated his opponent, Alf Landon, by a margin of more than 24 percent. However, mandate rhetoric was almost as common in Jimmy Carter’s communications in 1977, after he won the 1976 election with just over 50 percent of the popular vote and a margin of just under 2 percent. An even more striking comparison can be made between George W. Bush after the 2000 election, which ended in a statistical tie and an Electoral College result that overturned the result of the popular vote, and Johnson beginning his first elected term after the landslide election of 1964. Bush included a reference to the meaning of the election in about 4 percent of his communications, while Johnson referred to the election only 2 percent of the time as he set the agenda in 1965. These comparisons illustrate how disconnected mandate claiming appears from election results.

Table 1. Mandate rhetoric, 1933–2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presidential term</th>
<th>Total communications January 20-March 31</th>
<th>Percentage containing mandate rhetoric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt 1</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt 2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt 3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt 4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truman</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eisenhower 1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eisenhower 2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennedy</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nixon 1</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nixon 2</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reagan 1</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reagan 2</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. H. W. Bush</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton 1</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton 2</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. W. Bush 1</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. W. Bush 2</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama 1</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparisons between Roosevelt and Carter and between Johnson and Bush also illustrate a second major finding of the analysis shown in table 1. Mandate rhetoric has generally become more common over time. Between 1933 and 1965 mandate rhetoric figured prominently in some presidents’ communications but not others (although not in a way that reflected election results). The average percentage of communications
containing mandate rhetoric during this period was 3.9. Between 1969 and 2009 the average was 10.5. Beginning with Nixon’s first term in 1969, mandate rhetoric increased steadily as a percentage of communications until 1993, when it fell to somewhat more modest levels in Clinton’s two terms and Bush’s first term. However, Clinton and Bush still made more liberal use of mandate rhetoric, given their electoral circumstances. A comparison with earlier presidents in similar situations is illustrative. In 1948 Harry Truman beat his opponent, Thomas Dewey, by more than 4 percent but fell short of winning a majority due to Strom Thurmond’s third-party candidacy. In 1992 the election also featured a third-party candidate, H. Ross Perot, who won enough votes to deprive the election winner of a majority. Clinton’s deficit was even greater than Truman’s—he won only 43 percent of the popular vote. Yet Clinton used mandate rhetoric more extensively than did Truman. Similarly, John F. Kennedy avoided references to the narrow victory of the 1960 election, but, as mentioned earlier, Bush used the 2000 election result on several occasions to justify policies. Individually, these comparisons might be explained away by factors particular to each situation—Clinton’s victory meant that he would become the first Democratic president elected since 1976, Bush’s overall approach to executive leadership might account for his choice to claim a mandate after the 2000 election. But the overall pattern suggests something beyond a series of idiosyncratic factors. After the brief decline between 1993 and 2001, mandate rhetoric resurfaced. With Bush in 2005 and Barack H. Obama in 2009, an unprecedented percentage of communications contained references to elections and campaign promises—around 20 percent. A theory of presidential mandate rhetoric should explain this development.

**Audience and Context**

The dataset encompasses a wide range of speeches, statements, and other communications. Which communication genres account for the change we observe? To answer this question, I divided the communications into six categories: major speeches, media interactions, minor and miscellaneous communications, partisan speeches, government communications, and ceremonial speeches. The major speech category includes nationally addressed broadcasts on radio and television and State of the Union messages. The media interactions category is mostly composed of presidential news conferences but also includes interviews and exchanges with reporters. The minor speeches and communications group includes speeches and town hall meetings in particular locales throughout the nation, miscellaneous remarks and statements, and speeches given to most organized groups (such as the American Medical Association). The partisan communication category comprises presidential speeches at Republican and Democratic Party dinners and fund-raisers. It also includes speeches delivered to members of Congress from the president’s party (Democratic congressional leaders, Republican freshmen gathered at a retreat, etc.). In a limited number of cases, addresses to an assembled group, such as the Conservative Political Action Conference, were classified as partisan rather than minor addresses. Government communications include messages to Congress; remarks and memoranda directed to the executive branch (excluding documents that were not included in the dataset, such as executive orders); and speeches delivered to assembled audiences of mayors, governors, or state legislators as long as those groups were not exclusively from the president’s party (in which case they were grouped under partisan). Finally, the ceremonial category includes inaugural addresses, speeches given in honor of people or events, and other symbolic communications.

Predictably, the categories of minor speeches and media interactions have grown considerably over time. Presidents gave few local speeches and minor policy statements in the earlier decades covered by the dataset; by the turn of the twenty-first century these accounted for about half of the communications for each term. Similarly, communications with members of the government more than doubled between the 1930s and the 1960s and, with a few exceptions. Major addresses have grown from a handful per term to about 11 in the same period due to the inception of the president’s weekly radio address, classified here as a major national speech. Finally, the number of speeches in the ceremonial category has remained more or less constant.
To further examine change over time, figure 1 presents the frequency with which mandate rhetoric occurred in each category. In this figure, the dataset is divided into two groups, presidential terms beginning from 1933 through 1969 and terms beginning from 1973 through 2009. These groups are the result of simply dividing the dataset in half; they also provide a “hard test” for the theory, as 1969 appears to be the initial turning point when presidents began to use mandate rhetoric more regularly. In other words, if differences between the two groups are statistically significant despite this slight distortion, this provides additional support for the claim that systematic change has occurred.

![Figure 1: Communication genres in which the difference in means between the earlier and later groups was significant at the .05 level are listed in bold typeface.](image)

Examining communications by category suggests that the growth of mandate rhetoric has emanated from several specific sources and communication developments. First, the minor speech category has expanded and has accounted for some of the rise in mandate rhetoric. Many of these references came from George W. Bush’s tour in 2005 to promote his Social Security reform plan in local speeches and town hall meetings throughout the country. In a similar though less extensive effort, Obama made a number of appearances in early 2009 to discuss the economy and his plans for addressing the recession.

The other two areas of expansion for mandate rhetoric are government communications and partisan speeches. In both of these areas, the difference between the earlier and later groups was statistically significant. Like minor addresses, remarks and messages to other government actors have contributed to the overall expansion of presidential communication. Communications with other government actors contained hardly any mandate claims during the first decades of the analysis. This trend changed in the 1960s. Johnson and Nixon both issued a number of messages to Congress about the major policy issues of the day and statements and remarks to members of the cabinet and other executive branch officials. However, none of Johnson’s government communications included mandate claims, although a handful of Nixon’s executive branch statements, one message to Congress in early 1973, and a veto message included such rhetoric. Subsequent presidents used mandate rhetoric regularly in their speeches, memoranda, and other messages to executive branch employees.

As noted above, the number of partisan speeches has not dramatically increased over the years covered by the dataset. Partisan speeches have also consistently proved amenable territory for mandate rhetoric; this is not surprising. Party audiences are likely to be receptive to arguments about the meaning of the election, and the use of mandate claims by Roosevelt and Truman at party events illustrates this. However, the difference between the earlier and later groups is not statistically significant.
Communication with narrow audiences, not major speeches, accounts for much of the growth that we observe. By directing their mandate rhetoric toward presumed supporters—fellow party elites and citizens who attend local speeches—presidents have treated mandate rhetoric as a means of maintaining an existing support coalition, not as a source of bargaining leverage with opponents. The growth of mandate rhetoric in government communications further underscores this point; presidential mandate claims directed to members of the executive branch signify a kind of team leadership. Moreover, mandate rhetoric in governing communications suggests how deeply mandate logic—specifically, the logic of the responsible-party mandate—has pervaded presidential governance.

A final pattern in the data suggests a previously undertheorized defensive component to presidential mandate rhetoric. Although references to electoral mandates do not constitute a higher percentage of media interactions in later decades as compared to earlier, the growth of news conferences has contributed somewhat to the amplification of mandate rhetoric. Mandate claims in interviews and news conferences often have a defensive element; they are used in response to challenges and questions. In several instances, presidents maintained that “this is the reason I was elected” when asked by a journalist about critics’ objections to their policy choices. These exchanges occurred for the earlier presidents in the dataset as well as for the later ones. For our purposes, this suggests that defense against criticism has long been a reason behind and a component of mandate rhetoric and lends credibility to the hypothesis that declining institutional prestige may be a cause of the changes we observe.

The examination of where and to whom presidents make mandate claims suggests that their significance lies in the potential to appeal to partisan supporters and to inform the underlying logic of governance. The data also suggest that mandate claims serve as a means for presidents to respond to and deflect criticism. To delve deeper into the significance of mandate rhetoric, the next portion of the analysis turns to the way the content of mandate rhetoric has changed over time.

Classifying Mandate Rhetoric

Mandate claims were identified as belonging to one of three categories: plebiscitary, critical elections, or responsible party. As with creating the general dataset, coding procedures relied on a combination of keywords and nuanced analysis of presidential statements. If a statement made reference to the president’s relationship with the people but not specifically to the election result or to the promises of the campaign, it was coded as a plebiscitary claim. If the claim included any reference to the magnitude of the election result, identifying it as “overwhelming,” “historic,” or a “mandate,” or if it referred to the “demand” of the people for a particular policy, it was coded as a critical-election claim. Finally, if a claim mentioned campaign promises or “the reason I was elected” without reference to the magnitude of the election result, it was coded as a responsible-party claim. Table 2 shows the percentages of total communications in each term that contained each type of mandate claim.

Turning first to plebiscitary mandate claims, I find that these types of claims are generally infrequent; they were not used by presidents between 1933 and 1965, and even after 1969 they have remained infrequent. The presidential terms in which this kind of rhetoric was most frequent (around 3 percent) were the second terms of Nixon and George W. Bush. This finding is consistent with the attitudes these two presidents held about the nature of executive power; both saw presidential power in expansive terms and, by the beginning of their second terms, outwardly expressed confidence in the legitimacy and popularity of their actions.

Table 2. Types of mandate rhetoric, 1933–2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presidential term</th>
<th>Percentage plebiscitary</th>
<th>Percentage critical elections</th>
<th>Percentage responsible-party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt I</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Critical-election claims follow a different pattern. These claims were most prominently used by Roosevelt after his second inauguration in 1937; 8.7 percent of communications contained a reference to the exceptional nature of the election. Thereafter these claims virtually disappeared until Reagan’s first term. As with Nixon, Bush, and plebiscitary mandate rhetoric, this pattern is consistent with existing ideas about Roosevelt and Reagan. For presidents cast in Stephen Skowronek’s (1997) “reconstructive” mold, it makes sense to justify policy innovations in terms of a groundswell of public demand for such changes. After Reagan, two presidents used the critical-election framework: Clinton in 1993 and Obama in 2009. Like Roosevelt and Reagan, Clinton and Obama both represented a change in party control of the presidency after a period of control by the other party. This circumstance may have made the “exceptional” narrative seem more plausible, particularly in the case of the 1992 election. Notably, however, as an increasing percentage of presidential communications has come to contain mandate rhetoric over time, the percentage of communications that refer to the election as a critical or exceptional election has declined.

In contrast, responsible-party references have generally increased over time, accounting for much of the growth in the use of mandate rhetoric. Prior to 1977, with the exception of Dwight Eisenhower in 1953, presidents rarely referred to their campaign promises when promoting their policy preferences. Beginning with Carter, these references have become a standard feature of presidential rhetoric, averaging nearly 8 percent of overall communications between 1977 and 2009. The past 30 years have produced a durable and significant shift in how presidents have defined the role of elections in their governing choices. Changing mandate rhetoric also indicates a change in the way presidents depict their relationships with the electorate. In contrast with the plebiscitary and critical-election styles of mandate claim, which implicate “the people” in a more inclusive manner, mandate rhetoric based on campaign promises and issue positions suggests a loyalty first and foremost to one’s supporters rather than to the nation as a whole. In other words, presidential mandate claiming has traditionally been about creating a myth around the president’s connection with the people as a whole—what Dahl (1990: 370) calls the “pseudodemocratization of the presidency.” Recent changes, however, have turned away from this narrative and toward one that presents the president as representative of only a segment of the electorate. During this same period, polarization has deepened, and parties have behaved more...
“responsibly,” voting together in Congress at much higher rates than during the mid-twentieth century (as we shall see in a later section). Presidential rhetoric has followed, and has helped illustrate, the reality of American politics.

A few representative examples of presidential mandate rhetoric illustrate this point. Invoking his connection with the electorate, Reagan (1985) commented at a meeting of the National Governors’ Association:

“I noted last week in my press conference that we’re enjoying the strongest economic expansion since the Korean War and that our first duty now is to prolong and protect this expansion. We intend to do this by carrying out the mandate delivered November 6th by the American people, the terms of which I think were quite clear. We seek the full cooperation of the Congress in moving forward now on this agenda and keeping our promises.”

Similarly, Nixon (1973b) asserted in a message to Congress on drug abuse prevention: “The crime legislation I will submit to the Congress can give us the tools we need to do all that we can do. This is sound, responsible legislation. I am confident that the approval of the American people for measures of the sort that I have suggested will be reflected in the actions of the Congress.”

The distinctive features of these arguments are that they refer broadly to “the American people” and hold Congress up as a foil to the president. Mandate rhetoric that emphasized the unique nature of the election was less likely to paint Congress as an opponent but similarly stressed their relationships with the whole nation. Even at a Democratic victory dinner, Roosevelt (1937) maintained that “our victory was not sectional. It did not come from compromises and bargains. It was the voice of twenty-seven million voters—from every part of the land.” Johnson (1965) referred to the 1964 election as “America’s consensus,” and Nixon (1973a) suggested that “in a real sense, ... the 1974 budget is the clear evidence of the kind of change in direction demanded by the great majority of the American people.” Later in the same message to Congress, he said, “Lethargy, habit, pride, and politics combine to resist the necessary process of change, but I am confident that the expressed will of the people will not be denied.”

In contrast, responsible-party mandate rhetoric invoked campaign promises or contended that certain issues had driven the president’s victory. But these arguments, more often than not, linked the president to a specific stance in a national debate. Some examples illustrate this premise.

Eisenhower (1953) responded to a reporter’s question on farm subsidies by stating: “I merely show—and I must emphasize here—that it is a very complicated problem. But above all things, let me emphasize this: all through the campaign I stated—and promised—to the farmers of America: we will support the present law which goes, as you know, to December 1954, and in the meantime, we will convene commissions.”

In a televised address to the nation on energy, Carter (1977) invoked the 1976 election: “When I was running for President, I made a number of commitments. I take them very seriously. I believe that they were the reason that I was elected. And I want you to know that I intend to carry them out. As you probably noticed already, I have acted on several of my promises.”

Obama (2009) used responsible-party language at a partisan event:

“We can’t embrace the losing formula that says only tax cuts will work for every problem we face, that ignores critical challenges like our addiction to foreign oil, or the soaring cost of health care, or falling schools and crumbling bridges and roads and levees. I don’t care whether you’re driving a hybrid or an SUV, if you’re headed for a cliff, you’ve got to change direction. That’s what the American people called for in November, and that’s what we intend to deliver.”
The quotations above stress commitments and promises made by the president to the electorate. In the cases of Eisenhower, George W. Bush, and Obama, they specifically refer to the policy promises that distinguished the winning party from its opponents. Although Obama’s comments refer to the American people, the central point of the statement is about reversal of Republican policies.

Finally, we turn to the question of whether the different types of mandate rhetoric also have different issue content. The data in table 3 indicate that responsible-party claims tend to reference “partisan” topics somewhat more often than the other two mandate categories. This holds true for the references made by Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower to their party platforms as well as for more recent leaders. Among later presidents, claims of electoral legitimacy have been linked to a range of partisan issues. Reagan and Obama claimed electoral mandates to reverse the economic policies of their predecessors. George W. Bush argued that his election to office in 2000 was the result of his promises to cut taxes; in 2005 he claimed to have “campaigned on” the issue of Social Security reform. Both of these issues reflect the priorities of the Republican Party. The Social Security privatization proposal that the newly elected president promoted in the spring of 2005 failed to attract support from all except the most ideologically committed Republicans (Ross 2007: 424).

In sum, presidents have used mandate rhetoric more frequently in their communications. This change cannot be attributed to a more rhetorically active presidency; mandate rhetoric has expanded as a percentage of communications as well as in raw numbers. This change appears both durable and systematic, with certain types of communication accounting for much of this increase. I also find that responsible-party mandate claims constitute much of the expansion of mandate rhetoric. The next section turns to explanations for why mandate rhetoric has proliferated and why it has done so in a specific and systematic way.

Table 3. Content of mandate rhetoric, 1933–2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presidential term</th>
<th>Issues: critical-election claims</th>
<th>Issues: plebiscitary claims</th>
<th>Issues: responsible-party claims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Government action on economic issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt 2</td>
<td>Democratic platform</td>
<td>Government action on economic issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truman</td>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic platform/agenda</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eisenhower 1</td>
<td>Broad governing issues</td>
<td>Farm subsidies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eisenhower 2</td>
<td>Basic values and consensus</td>
<td>Medical care legislation (Medicaid/Medicare)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nixon 1</td>
<td>Representation of entire nation</td>
<td>Post Office reform, science research, private property ownership, listening to NATO allies, budget cuts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nixon 2</td>
<td>Budget</td>
<td>Drug/crime policy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>Foreign policy</td>
<td>Energy, budget issues, electoral reform, tax reform</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reagan 1</td>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>Economy, changes in government</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reagan 2</td>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>Economy, changes in government, authorization of &quot;Superfund&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. H. W. Bush</td>
<td></td>
<td>Active governance, education, child care, taxes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton 1</td>
<td>Ending gridlock</td>
<td>Environmental policy, ending gridlock, health care reform, technology policy, economy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Explaining Change

Throughout the modern presidency, mandate rhetoric appears to have been disconnected from election results. This has been especially true of the post-1969 set of presidents, many of whom have claimed electoral mandates in some fashion despite failing to win a majority of popular votes cast. By contrast, a changing institutional environment emerges as a plausible explanation of the changes we observe. As earlier sections explained, historical treatment of the presidential mandate—especially of its origins in the Jackson and Wilson presidencies—suggests that the status of the presidency and the dynamics of the party system have shaped presidential thinking about mandates. The following sections test whether this has been true in the modern era as well.

I hypothesize that the changing relationship between presidents and political parties has promoted the use of mandate claims as a means of clarifying the party agenda and appealing to supporters. Geoffrey C. Layman et al. (2006) identify three main features of polarization: the decline of ideological variety within parties, sometimes measured as “party discipline”; the increase in distance between the stances of the two parties; and an increase in attention to fundamental issues and principles in political debate. These developments have the potential to alter the contours of presidential public leadership.

Similarly, presidents in this later period have experienced more challenges to their overall legitimacy than their predecessors. This trend has resulted from the deepening of polarization, with members of the opposite party in the electorate more likely to report disapproval of the president and partisan opponents in Congress more likely to work actively to resist the president’s agenda (Skinner 2008: 607). At the same time, the decline in legitimacy is not entirely an outgrowth of polarization. Public attitudes toward government changed substantially in the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly with regard to the idea of a strong executive. Andrew Rudalevige (2005: 58) notes that “the ‘presidential government’ that seemed imminent and desirable in 1944 and even 1964 seemed horrifying in 1974.” With few exceptions, presidents since 1969 have had lower approval ratings on taking office (and returning to office after a reelection). Here it is hypothesized that mandate rhetoric offers presidents a means to establish transparency and accountability and an opportunity to reach out to partisan supporters. Responsible-party mandate rhetoric is especially compatible with these two goals. As a result, we should expect that these factors will not only be associated with the frequency of mandate rhetoric but also help explain the use of responsible-party rhetoric rather than the plebiscitary or critical-election forms.

Table 4. Percentage of mandate claims and explanatory variables, 1933–2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Popular vote</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral College vote</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular vote margin</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarization</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public approval</td>
<td>-0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delegates</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The next sections assess these explanations, using the presidential term as the unit of analysis. With only 20 observations, the forthcoming analysis relies on simple statistical tests to draw reliable inferences. Table 4 presents correlations between the percentage of communications using mandate references and the proposed explanatory variables. In addition to correlations, I used t-tests to determine the statistical significance of the hypothesized relationships. For each potential explanatory variable, I found the median value and divided the sample into two groups based on scores above and below the median. I then tested the significance of the difference in means of the percentage of mandate rhetoric used in each group (the dependent variable).

**Election Results**

Initial assessment of mandate-claiming choices over time suggests that election results do not seem to matter. Tables 4 and 5 present further evidence. The difference between the two groups is not statistically significant, and in fact the group with the smaller vote shares has a higher mean percentage of mandate claims. The correlation between mandate rhetoric and election results—whether measured by popular vote share, by Electoral College vote share, or by popular vote margin—is both negative and weak. We can comfortably conclude that election results are not the driving force behind the frequency of mandate rhetoric. Looking at the below-median group, we find that larger vote shares are associated with higher percentages of mandate rhetoric, as in the cases of Obama in 2009, George W. Bush in 2005, and Reagan in 1981. In the above-median group, no such pattern is evident.

| Political context and mandate rhetoric, 1933–2009. *significant beyond the .1 level **significant at the .05 level |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Group 1 mean (below median) | Group 2 mean (above median) | t | p |
| Polarization | 4.39 | 10.64 | 2.20 | .051* |
| Nomination | 4.14 | 10.91 | 2.75 | .02 ** |
| Popular vote | 9.00 | 6.07 | 0.93 | .38 |
| Public approval | 10.30 | 7.00 | 0.84 | .43 |

**Polarization**

Polarization for each Congress was calculated as the difference between the mean DW-NOMINATE scores of Republican and Democratic members of the House of Representatives. Figure 2 shows the change in polarization over time. House polarization was relatively low during the 1930s, flattened out during Roosevelt’s first term, and increased slightly during the Truman and Eisenhower years. A sharper increase occurred during the early 1960s, then another decline lasted until the Ninety-Third Congress met in 1973. The late 1970s brought a slight leveling off of polarization, followed by a steep and steady increase through the beginning of the twenty-first century.

How does this trajectory compare to that of the presidential mandate rhetoric? One broad pattern holds in both cases: around the late 1960s both congressional polarization and presidential mandate claiming experienced turning points. After the Eighty-Ninth Congress (which met from 1965 to 1967), levels of polarization in the House never dropped below 0.48, whereas between 1931 and 1961 that was the highest polarization score. In other words, although polarization levels fluctuated somewhat throughout the period in question, the baseline levels of polarization in the later decades were significantly higher than during the 1930s through the 1950s. A similar phenomenon is evident in mandate rhetoric. After 1969 nearly all presidents have used mandate rhetoric in at least 5 percent of their communications (with two exceptions, Clinton after the 1996 election and George W. Bush after the 2000 election). In many presidential terms, the figure has been much higher. By contrast, in the earlier period only two presidential terms featured mandate rhetoric in more than 5 percent of communications. In sum, both polarization and mandate claiming appear to have become the norm during a
similar period. In terms of sequencing, the rise in polarization seems to have preceded the rise of mandate rhetoric, which is compatible with the hypothesized causal relationship.

The correlation between percentage of mandate rhetoric and polarization was 0.54. I test the statistical significance of the difference between two groups divided by polarization score. The median polarization score was 0.495877, and scores corresponded almost perfectly with timing. All of the presidential terms that coincided with above-median polarization began in 1969 or later; the only term in the below-median group that happened after 1969 was Carter’s, with a congressional polarization score of 0.49357. As we see in table 3, the difference in mandate rhetoric between the two groups is significant at or near the 0.05 level.

The variation in polarization levels helps explain the use of mandate rhetoric in particular cases. Among the earlier presidential terms in the dataset, polarization follows a similar pattern to mandate rhetoric: higher levels for Roosevelt’s first two terms and a subsequent drop-off, followed by an increase in the late 1940s through the 1950s. The two most prolific mandate claimers in the dataset, George W. Bush and Obama, also served when House polarization was at its 80-year apex.

The theory also suggests that the polarization should explain within-group variation in the use of responsible-party rhetoric. In other words, did the most polarized moments of the lower-polarization group produce the most responsible-party rhetoric? Do we observe less responsible-party rhetoric from the less polarized presidencies among the higher polarization group? The evidence is mixed. Among the earlier, lower-polarization presidents, Truman and Eisenhower (in 1953, at the start of his first term) used the highest percentages of responsible-party references. Truman began his first elected term in 1949 with a Congress that would ultimately prove more polarized than the previous Congress, but overall, as we have seen, the Truman-Eisenhower period represented a low point in the differences between the two parties.

The later part of the dataset shows even more variation across presidential terms. The highest percentage of responsible-party claims came from George W. Bush in 2005, following Republican victories in the 2004 elections. In second and third place were Obama in 2009, following a similarly consistent party victory, and George H. W. Bush, following an election that produced mixed party results. While George H. W. Bush won the presidency with more than 53 percent of the vote, the Democrats held on to control of Congress, belying any sense of party mandate for either side. Both of the later terms began in the context of high polarization—George W. Bush and Obama had reason to anticipate congressional polarization based on the scores of the previous Congress, and divisions persisted throughout their terms. Variation in congressional polarization, however, does not explain the low points of responsible-party claiming in the latter half of the dataset. These include Clinton in 1993 and 1997 and George W. Bush in 2001. Both presidents used significant mandate
rhetoric in these years but placed less emphasis on the responsible-party narrative than Reagan in 1981, Obama in 2009, or George W. Bush himself in 2005. In 1993 Clinton focused his efforts on establishing the 1992 contest as a critical election. In contrast, George W. Bush’s rhetoric about the 2000 election included more plebiscitary claims. In fact, this period coincides with one of the steepest increases in party division in the House of Representatives. In sum, higher levels of congressional polarization seem to correspond with high points in responsible-party mandate claiming. However, this connection appears asymmetrical: lower rates of responsible-party claiming are not associated with lower levels of polarization.

Nomination Procedures
As ideas have changed about the relationship between the president and the people, conceptualizations of the presidential mandate have emerged and undergone transformation. The method of nominating presidential candidates has played a key role in defining the way elites and citizens imagine that relationship. The plebiscitary mandate emerged with Jackson and Martin Van Buren’s mass-based party system, which brought electoral politics to the center of presidential leadership. The idea of the president as the people’s representative resurfaced during the Progressive Era, when political thought turned toward ideas about the president as popular representative. The introduction of the presidential primary in 1912 contributed to the expansion of the president’s personal and public role (Milkis 2009: 81). The formal transformation of the presidential nomination system was complete by 1972, after the Democratic Party altered its nomination rules to create a system of binding primaries, prompting state laws about nominations that affected both parties (Polsby et al. 2008: 97). Scholars continue to debate the impact of these changes. One theory maintains that the new system has contributed to the “personal presidency” by favoring candidates with strong stage presence and campaigning skills. The new nomination system coincides with the rise of governors—Washington “outsiders”—as presidential candidates: Carter, Reagan, Clinton, George W. Bush. Another possibility is that the need to pay attention to “primary constituencies” has heightened the importance of the party base, leading presidential candidates to position themselves closer to the ideological extremes than to the national median voter (ibid.: 235–36; Hacker and Pierson 2005; cf. Brady et al. 2007).

As with polarization, the percentage of delegates chosen by primary coincides almost exactly with the passage of time, and the difference between the two groups is statistically significant (figure 3). The causal link is difficult to establish, however. Unlike polarization, very little within-group variation can be explained by differences in nominations. The change in nomination procedures also occurred slightly after the major turning point in the frequency of mandate claims.

Figure 3. Delegates
Declining Institutional Status

Institutional status is operationalized here in terms of public approval, aggregated by the beginning of each elected term. Figure 4 shows the average percentage of Americans reporting approval of the president between January 20 and March 31 of each elected term. This constitutes a reliable measure for a difficult and abstract concept. By aggregating the measure for each elected term, we can engage in a straightforward comparison across different presidential terms. We also have substantial data on presidential approval dating back to the Truman presidency, whereas other measures appear more sporadically on polls. The evidence for declining institutional status as a predictor of mandate rhetoric is mixed. As we see in table 5, the difference between the below- and above- median groups is not statistically significant. However, the general decline of public support for presidents does appear connected to individual presidents as well as to overall change over time. As figure 4 shows, the average approval ratings during the first three months of a new term declined substantially at the same time that the transition in mandate language occurred. Overall, the approval ratings of the later presidents—Reagan, both Bushes, Clinton—were lower than those of Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. By comparison, the highest approval ratings in the later group were those of Carter, with a 69 percent average, and Obama, at about 63 percent.

Figure 4. Public approval

When we divide the sample into earlier and later presidents, public approval explains some within-group variation. From the earlier group, Truman had the lowest ratings after his inauguration in 1949, an average of about 61 percent approving, and used mandate rhetoric more frequently than the average for the earlier group (5.3 percent versus the 3.9 percent average), all in the responsible-party mold. Kennedy, the most popular president in this interval, made no mandate claims at all. Public opinion fares less well as an explanation of within-group variation with the later set but still provides a meaningful framework. The two presidential terms that began with the lowest approval ratings featured substantial responsible-party mandate rhetoric. The lowest average ratings at the start of a term were those of George W. Bush in 2005. This term also featured the highest percentage of responsible-party mandate rhetoric—more than one-quarter of total communications during the first 70 days of Bush’s second term, much of it devoted to the ill-fated Social Security plan. Among the later presidents, Carter and Obama enjoyed the highest ratings early in their terms. Yet, despite promising starts, both of these presidencies exemplified many features of the “postimperial” period and its problems. For Carter, memories of Watergate and distrust of the government were fresh in the public mind (Jones 1988:17). In Obama’s case, public evaluation of his performance quickly divided along partisan lines (Jones 2010). As a result, despite his high approval numbers in the early months of the term, Obama also faced early challenges to his governing legitimacy.
Conclusion

Presidents have changed the way they talk about elections. This shift appears to have persisted over more than 40 years of presidential politics and to have occurred among presidents from both parties. Presidents elected in landslides, three-way races, and virtual ties have all talked about campaign promises and their responsibility to keep the promises made to those who elected them. This change is also politically significant; responsible-party rhetoric depicts the president as a political, often partisan, actor whose decisions are informed first and foremost by his pledges to his constituents. Perhaps most strikingly, this research finds that the expansion of mandate rhetoric—and indeed the use of mandate rhetoric in general—is largely disconnected from election results.

As the emphasis on the responsible-party definition of the mandate has increased, presidents have become less likely over time to describe their leadership in plebiscitary terms. In other words, instead of emphasizing the idea of the president as the direct representative of the nation as a whole, mandate rhetoric has come to emphasize specific issues and promises. References to the exceptional character of the election result, classified here as the critical-election definition of the mandate, have remained sporadic throughout the modern presidency. Each of these definitions of the presidential mandate emerged from a period of changing ideas about the presidency.

To understand the most recent change, this article examines changes to the party system and in public attitudes. While the evidence presented here is more suggestive than conclusive, the patterns illustrate the relationship between mandate rhetoric and political context. Presidential authority has been generally eroded by polarization and by loss of institutional prestige since the period 1965–75, and after that period we observe a significant increase in presidential reliance on mandate rhetoric not to explain enhanced presidential power but to identify electoral victory as a basic source of presidential authority. The analysis presented here provides some evidence for an institutional explanation of rhetorical changes. Because many of the variables of interest are correlated, it is difficult to disentangle the different potential factors. Yet we find several consistent patterns that help us understand how changes in the political system may have contributed to a rise in the frequency of mandate rhetoric. Quantitative and qualitative analysis suggests that polarization has played a role in shaping the use of mandate rhetoric. Polarization passes all three tests: there is a statistically significant relationship between House polarization and the percentage of mandate rhetoric used at the beginning of a presidential term, change in the hypothesized cause precedes change in the hypothesized effect, and polarization seems to explain the use of different types of mandate rhetoric. Party effects were further tested by looking at the possible connection between changes to the nomination process and the use of mandate rhetoric. These two developments coincide, although changes in rhetoric precede changes in nominations.

The decline in the status of the presidency, measured by aggregate levels of public approval, shows more mixed results. When we divide the presidential terms into groups based on public approval, the difference in the frequency of mandate rhetoric is not statistically significant. Yet variation in public approval helps explain patterns in the use of responsible-party rhetoric, which is predicted by the theory.

Finally, the temporal trends found here not only challenge conventional wisdom about mandates but also challenge approaches to presidential rhetoric that focus on individual differences in style, content, and tone. Instead, these findings constitute at least a preliminary suggestion that the content of presidential rhetoric is linked to changes in the broader institutional environment. The shift evident in the late 1960s further indicates that such developments are not limited to the historical presidency. Rather, the basis of the president’s institutional authority remains varied and dynamic.
Notes
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1. To bolster reliability, seven months of the dataset were selected at random and recoded according to these guidelines by graduate research assistants, accounting for 214 of the 1,462 communications in the larger dataset. This “spot check” yielded a Cronbach’s alpha statistic of 0.857.

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