

2010

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Recommended Citation

Hoffman, Donna R. and Howard, Alison D., "The Presidential Rhetoric of Hard Times" (2010). *Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship*. 1.
<https://scholar.dominican.edu/all-faculty/1>

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The Presidential Rhetoric of Hard Times

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Prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association,
Washington, D.C., September 2-5, 2010.

The Presidential Rhetoric of Hard Times

Is there a presidential rhetoric of hard times? We are interested in presidents' rhetorical reactions during economic contractions. Do they rhetorically react at all? If they choose to speak, what do they seek to convey to the public about the economy? We analyze the major discretionary speeches presidents give during recessions. Some presidents are reluctant to address major economic remarks to the public; in five of the 11 recessions since World War II, presidents have not offered a major economic speech. They do, however, deliver major discretionary speeches on other topics during recessions. While most presidents tend to deliver more major remarks about non-economic subjects during recessions, Reagan is a notable exception. When presidents do choose to direct major remarks on the economy, we search for common characteristics in their rhetoric to examine if this subset of speeches classifies as a genre of rhetoric. We examine three dimensions in the speeches: orientation toward time, the tone of the remarks, and whether or not there is action specified. We found that there is no discernable overall pattern for how presidents orient their rhetoric in time, the speeches are more negative in tone than expected, and while there are a good number of action oriented sentences, the speeches are not uniformly action oriented. Thus, there is not sufficient evidence to suggest there is a uniform presidential rhetoric of hard times.

The Presidential Rhetoric of Hard Times

Hard Times, hard times, come again no more
Many days you have lingered around my cabin door;
Oh hard times come again no more.

-Stephen C. Foster, *Hard Times Come Again No More*, 1854

American presidents have many opportunities to address the public with major speeches and minor ones, in good times and bad. Presidential rhetoric can have many purposes, among them: educating, explaining, persuading, proclaiming, reassuring, criticizing, blaming and credit claiming. When Hard Times occur (in the vernacular of Stephen C. Foster and APSA annual meeting organizers), what are the rhetorical choices that presidents exhibit when they choose to make a major economic speech? Are there rhetorical patterns in the way presidents choose to address the public in hard times? Do these choices about how to address an audience constitute a genre of rhetoric? We are not trying to gauge the effect of presidential rhetoric during hard times. Our goal is much more elementary; we seek to determine if there are commonalities in presidential rhetoric of this type. And, while this may seem a rather simplistic goal, we regard this avenue of research as important because there are often conflicting findings regarding presidential rhetoric and its effectiveness.¹ Would the findings of presidential rhetoric studies be

¹See for example, Kernell ([1986] 2007) who first talked about the concept of presidents “going public,” the strategy of appealing to the public to put pressure on their members of Congress so they will support a presidential policy goal. Subsequent scholars have not agreed on whether this strategy actually works well for presidents. Fett (1994) casts doubt on its effectiveness; Barrett (2004) concludes it is effective. Tulis (1987) illustrates how the strategy did not work for Wilson and his advocacy of the League of Nations. Patel (2003) documents how the strategy failed for Clinton’s health care reform effort. Cohen (1995) and Hill (1998) find that a president’s rhetorical attention to issues can improve the salience of those issues with the public. Canes-Wrone (2005) finds the president’s rhetorical involvement can shift public

more consistent if one confined analyses of presidential rhetoric to a genre, an approach more common in communication research? This is not a question we seek to answer in this research, but we do believe that some research in presidential rhetoric could be improved if more consideration was given to the type of rhetoric that is analyzed. In this regard, we borrow from communication scholars, who are much more inclined to rely on generic analysis. What are the components of the rhetoric of hard times? Does it constitute a genre? Given similar circumstances (an economic contraction), how have presidents constructed an economic message and communicated it to the public?

The workings of the business cycle are unpredictable in terms of when a contraction will emerge and how long it will last, but as its nature is cyclical, we know that a recession will occur following a peak of economic activity. Some presidents will be unlucky enough to have recessions occur on their watch. Presidents during recessionary periods must react to these economic events; they must carefully measure their reaction and speculate about what the public's reaction may be. After all, the public's perceptions and expectations about the economy affect their voting (Lewis-Beck 1988; Lewis-Beck and Tien 1996), presidential approval (MacKuen Erikson, and Stimson 1992), and their economic behavior (see Wood, Owens, and Durham 2005 for review of this literature). There are any number of reactions to economic conditions a president may have, but we are only concerned with his rhetorical reactions. Before making a major speech, any administration is going to weigh: 1) how might the president's remarks impact any coming election (midterm or presidential)? 2) how might the president's

opinion, while Edwards (2003) illustrates that presidential rhetoric largely falls on "deaf ears," and does not move public opinion.

remarks impact his standing with the public? and 3) how might the president's remarks impact the economic behavior of consumers? For good reason, presidents are likely to tread carefully in making economic remarks during recessionary periods. To present the situation as too dire could negatively affect the public's prospective economic view; yet, to sugar coat or gloss over the situation may not give a president the leverage he needs with various actors (in both the public and private sector). In fact, there is evidence that presidents make fewer speeches when inflation and unemployment worsen (Ragsdale 1984). We are interested in presidents' rhetorical reactions during economic contractions. Do they rhetorically react at all? If they choose to speak, what do they seek to convey to the public about the economy? To gauge how presidents have chosen to rhetorically react in major economic speeches during recessions, we examine the following.

1. When confronting an economic recession, do presidents choose to use the bully pulpit and address the economic situation with the public?
2. If they choose to address the economic situation, what are the dimensions of their message?
 - How is the message oriented in time (that is, does it focus on the past, present, or future)?
 - What tone does the speech take? Is it positive, negative, or neutral?
 - Do presidents communicate a plan of action? From whom do they request action?

Analyzing economic speech in this manner allows us to determine if the rhetoric we are examining constitutes a genre of speech. If patterns and commonalities emerge, then we may be able to identify a genre of presidential speech. If there is a lack of discernable attributes that are shared across speeches, then our subset of speeches is not a genre.

We find that there is a reluctance on the part of some presidents to talk about the

economy in a major address during recessions. When they do choose to give a major address about the economy, there are few commonalities evident in terms of the speech's temporal orientation and tone. They do all communicate action, but this varies greatly from president to president. Thus, there is not sufficient evidence to suggest there is a uniform presidential rhetoric of hard times.

Generic Analysis

Generic analysis is a technique that is typically used in communication studies, which involves establishing categories of rhetoric based on commonalities. Once genres are established, judgments can be made as to whether the type of rhetoric achieves its ends, or whether specific examples are deemed to be excellent, ordinary, or subpar (Campbell and Jamieson 1990, 12; Campbell 1996, 66). In addition, a generic analysis of presidential rhetoric can aid in institutional analysis, in particular how rhetoric has (or has not) served to further institutional ends (Campbell and Jamieson 1990). Political scientists are typically not concerned with judging the quality of rhetoric. But, political scientists have been concerned with whether or not presidential rhetoric achieves its ends (institutional and otherwise). For example, when presidents choose to "go public," are they effective? When presidents make rhetorical appeals directly to Congress or a particular targeted constituency, does the president achieve his goal? Different types of presidential rhetoric can have different ends and utilizing genres as the basis of analysis can aid researchers in keeping sight of those ends. Examining whether or not rhetoric is effective may be more fruitful if speeches that constitute a genre are utilized. When political scientists utilize a generic framework (that is, basing an analysis of rhetoric on a genre), it more readily ensures that rhetorical apples are being compared to rhetorical apples; we are aided if

before we begin an analysis of rhetoric we ensure that there is some common basis of that rhetoric. It should not be disputed that there are different types of presidential rhetoric. For example, a State of the Union address is a high impact speech with unique characteristics (presidents are engaging in virtually the same activity with the same ends); it is a different form of rhetoric than what is contained in a presidential proclamation that is merely published in the *Public Papers of the President*. Likewise, an Inaugural address is a particular type of presidential rhetoric with common characteristics across presidents (Campbell and Jamieson 1990). Some research designs, perhaps detrimentally, do treat all presidential rhetoric as equal. We think this can be a mistake. It should be noted, however, that using a generic framework for presidential rhetoric may present the researcher with a “small n problem,” which may limit statistical analysis.

Data

We examine major discretionary speeches given by presidents during an economic contraction (recession) from the end of World War II to the present.² The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) defines a recession as “a significant decline in economic activity spread across the economy, lasting more than a few months, normally visible in real GDP, real income, employment, industrial production, and wholesale-retail sales” (NBER 2010). During the time period under examination, there have been 11 recessions, including the current downturn (Table 1). We rely on the beginning and ending months of economic contractions as determined by NBER and major discretionary speeches are only taken from recessionary

²All speeches are from the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* and accessed through the American Presidency Project [online]. John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>

months.³ One potential problem with using the actual dates of a recessionary period is that the dating of economic contractions lags, sometimes substantially. For example, the current recession was judged to have begun in December 2007, but NBER did not announce this date until 12 months into the recession as shown in Table 1. This is less of a problem, however, when one thinks of public perceptions and sentiment. Political cartoonist Drew Sheneman illustrates this aptly (Figure 1). The public knows what “hard times” feel like, even if there has not yet been a formal announcement that we are in a recession; at the time the editorial cartoon in Figure 1 was published, we were technically in a recession, it had just not been formally announced. Furthermore, while NBER has been concerned with the study of business cycles since its inception in 1920, it did not begin formally announcing its determination of when recessions began until 1978 when the Business Cycle Dating Committee was formed. From 1961 to the formation of the Committee in 1978, the Department of Commerce relied on NBER research and published its determination of peaks and troughs (NBER 2008). Prior to 1961, there does not appear to have been any standardized publication or announcement of recession dates by either the federal government, or NBER. There is also the issue of the lag at the end of the recession; for example, NBER has not announced the current recession as having ended, although some believe it has (Chan 2010; Blinder and Zandi 2010). We did investigate using the announcement date of the trough (where given) as a substitute for the actual ending date of the recession. Were this to be done, however, it would only have added two economic speeches to the data, both Reagan speeches given in early 1981. Furthermore, we do not have similar announcement dates

³NBER, a private, nonprofit research group, was formed in 1920 to further the study of economics and was particularly organized around the study of business cycles (Fabricant 1984). For the history of business cycles in the U.S., see NBER 2010.

for the earlier recessions, only for the last four (Table 1). Therefore, we did not substitute the announcement month for the actual month the recession ended and maintained consistency by using the date established by NBER as the month in which the trough occurred.

Given that we need a firm definition of “hard times” in order to select our speeches, we use the beginning and ending dates of recessions as determined by NBER.

As for the speeches that we selected from the recessionary periods, we chose to utilize only major discretionary speeches. A discretionary speech is one a president chooses to make (this excludes such speeches as inaugurals, State of the Union addresses, and farewell addresses where there is a general expectation that a president will give these at particular points in time). We used this as our criteria because part of what we are interested in is whether the choice is made to give an economic speech in the first place. Furthermore, inaugurals, State of the Union addresses, and farewell addresses are already established as distinct genres of speech (Campbell and Jamieson 1990). Second, we chose to isolate our examination to major discretionary speeches, that is, speeches broadcast to a national audience during prime-time hours.⁴ These are high impact speeches crafted primarily to address the American public and have the largest potential viewing audiences. Finally, once major discretionary speeches given during recessionary periods were identified, we determined whether the speech had a substantial economic component or not, defined as at least half the speech devoted to the subject of economy

⁴There is some disagreement over the nature of what constitutes a major speech (Kernell 2007, 115, 144-45 n2-3). While Ragsdale (1998) identifies major addresses (Table 4-1, 159-166) and defines them as those “delivered to a national audience during evening listening hours” (150), the table includes speeches that were, in fact, not delivered during prime-time hours. We have excluded any speeches from Ragsdale’s list that were not given at or after 7 p.m eastern time (or the equivalent). In addition, we updated the list to the present time.

(Table 2). While most of these discretionary speeches are primarily on a single subject matter, there are a few that span more than one policy area. For example, George H.W. Bush gave a speech on September 11, 1990 on both the Persian Gulf and the federal budget. However, the majority of the speech deals with happenings in the Persian Gulf, and only a minority of it deals with the budget; it did not, therefore, meet our criteria and was not included in our subset of economic speeches. Of the 43 discretionary speeches that presidents have given during recessions, only 12 (28%) of them are classified as being substantially about the economy.⁵ A plurality of them (21) are about foreign policy. Thus, our subset of discretionary economic speeches given during recessions is quite small. Furthermore, only one of them is from a Democratic president (Truman) and Reagan speeches make up five of the twelve that satisfy our criteria.

Method

In order to determine whether there are commonalities in presidential economic discourse during a recession, we subject each of our 12 speeches to quantitative content analysis.⁶ Within each speech, we utilize the sentence as our unit of analysis.⁷ Every sentence was coded on two dimensions: tone (positive, negative, or neutral), and temporal orientation (past, present, future).

⁵We should note that two Nixon speeches on energy and Obama's speech on health care reform were excluded from our data set of economic speeches. While the energy crisis of 1973 and health care reform certainly have economic aspects, these speeches were more about energy policy and health care policy, respectively, than the economy writ large.

⁶While generic analysis is common in communication studies, it typically involves qualitative, rather than quantitative analysis.

⁷Each author independently coded each sentence. Determinations were then compared. Initial agreement on tone and orientation between coders on each speech ranged from 84% - 94%. Discrepancies in coding were then resolved.

Furthermore, each sentence was examined for calls to action. Did the president propose some policy or action and who was asked/charged with acting (administration, Congress, states, business, people, etc.)? While some have profitably used computerized content analysis to judge tone and other aspects of presidential speech (Hart 1987; Wood 2004; Wood, Owens, Durham 2005; Wood 2009), we have chosen to utilize human coders because we are interested in several other aspects that do not lend themselves to computerized content analysis. For example, in judging the tone of the sentence, set dictionaries are often not comprehensive enough, and cannot consider words and sentences in context. Furthermore, we know of no computerized content analysis program that can analyze speeches' overall purpose, or the position taking of the president.⁸ Each sentence was examined for tone and judged to be positive, negative, or neutral. Much like a computer would, we considered the individual words in the sentence and the connotations carried by them. For example, Truman began remarks on the national economy by saying, "I want to talk to you tonight about our country, about its future, and about its importance to the hopes and aspirations of all mankind" (Truman 1949). Based upon his use of "hopes" and "aspirations," we judged this sentence's tone to be optimistic. Unlike a computer, however, we were also able to judge a phrase's contribution to a sentence's tone. For example, a Ford speech mentions "international forces beyond our direct control," a phrase we use to deem the sentence's tone negative because it conveys an inability to affect a situation (Ford 1975). Sentences that contained both positive and negative aspects were labeled as neutral in tone. In judging the tone of sentences, it was occasionally necessary to consider the sentence in the

⁸For a discussion of both the pros and cons of computerized content analysis, see Bligh, Kohles, and Meindl 2004.

context of previous sentences. Each sentence was also examined for its temporal orientation. Did the sentence refer to the past, present, future, or some combination? Relatively few sentences were combinations. As an example, the above sentence from Truman refers to the future. Finally, each sentence was examined for calls to action; sentences were identified where the president was proposing or requesting action (and from whom action was solicited). We seek to quantify these aspects because they can be used as an assessment guide regarding whether these speeches constitute a genre or not.

The Quantity and Subject of Speech during Recessions

Do presidents address the public (on all subjects) at normal rates during recessions? Do they specifically address the economic situation with a major speech? Ragsdale (1984) found that presidents were less likely to make any major public addresses when economic indicators (inflation and unemployment) were worsening. Our more narrow examination comports with what Ragsdale found in one sense.⁹ During some recessions, presidents have chosen not to focus any major addresses on the economy. Table 2 lists the major discretionary speeches given during economic contractions. Of the eleven recessions in the time period under study, presidents offers no major economic speech in five of them. Furthermore, the current recession, which has likely well surpassed previous post-war recessionary periods in terms of length, features only one address by George W. Bush; Obama has not focused any major discretionary speeches on the economy.

Secondly, there are 43 major discretionary speeches given during identified recessions.

⁹Ragsdale (1984) focused on all discretionary major speeches (including non-prime time ones) and used consumer price and unemployment data as indicators of the economic situation.

Ragsdale found that overall, a president would give a major discretionary address about once every 3.3 months (1984, 973). If this is used to guide our expectations, there are 114 months of recession (excluding the current recession). We would expect there to be approximately 35 total speeches if those 114 months were consecutive. There are actually 40 speeches given during these 114 (non-consecutive) months of recession, somewhat more than Ragsdale's research would suggest overall. On this measure, at least, it does not seem like during a recession, presidents are less likely to make a major discretionary address. Ragsdale, however, does not use recessions as her economic indicator, but does factor in worsening economic conditions. Furthermore our gauge here is somewhat flawed because of the non-consecutive nature of the total months of recession. Finally, only 12 (28%) of these 43 major speeches are substantially about the economy. This suggests the possibility that presidents may be just as likely to give a major speech during a recession as during a non-recessionary period, but that they prefer to focus attention away from the economy itself. We cannot, however, fully assess this with the data we have.

What is evident, however, from our data is that when choosing to address the American public during recessionary periods, presidents have tended to talk about non-economic matters more frequently than economic ones. Why is there a relative dearth of economic speeches during a recession when the economy figures so prominently in the public's political calculations and their consumer behavior effects the economy? Ragsdale notes that "through their speeches, presidents offer the impression that they are in charge of existing political circumstances" (1984, 983). Recessions are unpredictable and the president's ability to command the economy in the short-term virtually non-existent. Presidents seem hesitant to talk about things where outcomes

are uncertain, policy actions are complex and involve multiple actors who may or may not do what the president desires. During recessions, however, presidents do give major addresses on international events and foreign policy; almost half of all discretionary major speeches during recessions concern foreign policy and international events. Presidents, by virtue of being commander-in-chief and chief diplomat, have more short-term ability to exercise leadership in these policy realms, whereas with economic matters, they are highly constrained in their actions by other actors and possess comparatively fewer economic tools than in the foreign policy realm. Future research, therefore, might compare major discretionary speeches during recessionary and non-recessionary periods and determine if presidents are, in fact, less active rhetorically during recessions, and whether during recessions they are less likely to focus their remarks on the economy than during non-recessionary periods. It would also be instructive to assess if they are more likely to talk about international events and foreign policy during recessions than expansions.

We note, then, some presidential reluctance to address economic remarks to the public during periods when economic times are hard, but not a reluctance to address the public on other topics. There are five recessions in which there are no discretionary economic speeches, but there are other discretionary speeches. Ronald Reagan, however, is a notable exception in our data. Of our 12 discretionary speeches about the economy, five of them are given by Ronald Reagan. Reagan stands out for the quantity of his economic rhetoric. This is not surprising when one considers that Reagan was more active giving major addresses than other presidents (Ragsdale 1998, 150). In addition Reagan specifically sought to break with past economic policies, and in one sense took advantage of the hard times the country was experiencing in the

first two years of his presidency to argue for a fundamentally different view of economic policy. The former actor, skilled before a camera, did want to talk about the economy and talked about it a lot.

The Dimensions of Discretionary Economic Speeches

During recessions, we found some presidential reluctance (except for Reagan) to focus major addresses on the economy. But, when presidents do choose to speak about the economy, what do they seek to convey? That is, what are the dimensions of their rhetoric? Specifically, we examine three dimensions: how the speech is oriented toward time (past, present, or future), whether the tone of the remarks are positive, negative, or neutral, and whether the president calls for action (and from whom).

We expect these speeches to be policy oriented speeches, heavy with deliberative or policymaking rhetoric that addresses problems (specifically the economy) and provides potential solutions (Campbell and Jamieson 1990, 52-78; Hoffman and Howard 2006, 53-55). We expect this policymaking rhetoric to urge action upon various actors (governmental, as well as non-governmental). As speeches heavy with action-oriented rhetoric, we would expect them to be future oriented as a president explains what actions he wants to see taken. Finally, we would expect these speeches to be positive in overall tone. For their own ends (whether electoral or policy related), as well as for the economy generally, presidents want the public's prospective views of the economy to be favorable. They, therefore, have an incentive to accentuate the positive.

Temporal Orientation

How do presidents orient their economic rhetoric in time? Do they draw upon the past,

focus on the present difficulties, or are they more forward looking in their remarks? We expect presidents to talk about the past, present, and the future, but we expect the overall speech to be dominated by sentences with future orientation, in part because we expect these to be policy oriented speeches. Certainly, there should be some time spent detailing the present situation, but we do not expect presidents to dwell upon the present's hard times at great length. Given that at the time of the address, economic conditions are poor, we don't expect a president's rhetoric to be dominated by sentences referring to the present.

Figure 2 shows our findings relating to the temporal orientation of sentences by illustrating the percentage of sentences oriented to the past, present, and future. Our expectation of these speeches being dominated by future-oriented sentences is not met; only five of the 12 speeches have a plurality or majority of future oriented sentences. In particular, Reagan's temporal orientation stands out (in part, because he dominates our data). While his first two addresses are forward looking overall, his orientations toward the future decline with each successive speech he gives. As he talks less and less about the future, he talks more about the past. Two of his speeches (April and August 1982) are even dominated by sentences referring to the past. The recession had not abated by April, or by August, 1982, yet Reagan had been in office for more than a year; as a result, he goes to some length detailing and explaining the longstanding economic policies of the past that he feels were responsible for the downturn. It is worth noting that if Reagan's speeches were excluded from our data, sentences referencing the past would be the smallest category for all other speeches. Reagan's final speech in our data (October 1982) is dominated by present oriented sentences as he spends a substantial portion of the speech detailing present circumstances and conveying his empathy to the public. One of the

ways he does this is by relaying the details of a letter from someone who had written to him about her own present economic condition.¹⁰

Clearly, across these speeches, there is no discernable overall pattern about how presidents choose to orient their rhetoric in time; this is largely due to the different purposes that emerge from these speeches. For example, Truman's speech argues for no large policy changes, and thus expends energy explaining why present circumstances aren't too bad. George H.W. Bush's sole objective with his October 2, 1990 speech was to explain the federal budget agreement, so it is dominated by sentences oriented toward the present. Ford's March 1975 address is also dominated by present oriented sentences. The purpose of this speech was so that he could sign the Tax Reduction Act, and he used the opportunity to complain about the things that were wrong with the bill he was signing into law. While these speeches are all economic in content and given during similar economic conditions, presidents use these discretionary speeches for different purposes and this has affected the overall temporal orientation of their speeches.

Tone

Wood (2004) notes that presidents have become more optimistic in their general discussion of the economy. Is this also true of the economic speeches given during hard times? When presidents choose to make remarks during economic recessions, we expected the overall tone of the speech to be positive both because of previous research, but also because we expected more sentences to be oriented toward the future. As discussed above, our expectations about

¹⁰ The technique of incorporating individuals into his rhetoric is characteristic of other Reagan speeches. He began the practice of incorporating individuals into his State of the Union addresses, a practice most subsequent presidents have emulated (Hoffman and Howard 2006).

future oriented sentences were not met. As shown in Figure 3, this is also true of our expectations regarding the net tone of economic discretionary speeches. Figure 3 charts the net tone of speeches, calculated by subtracting the percentage of negative sentences from the percentage of positive sentences. Seven of our 12 speeches have a net negative tone. In this subset of speeches, presidents have not become more optimistic over time, but rather more negative (recognizing the movement of time represented by these speeches is irregular).

Ford's March 1975 speech is a definite outlier here, but as discussed above, this is a speech where Ford makes the decision to sign a tax bill during prime-time viewing hours in order to register his displeasure with certain aspects of it. But, after Reagan's initial speech given in July 1981 that returns to a net positive tone, the remainder of these speeches are on the whole characterized by more negative language than positive. The sunny optimism often associated with Reagan does not carry over when one considers this subset of speeches. Our expectation that presidents's economic rhetoric during recessions would take on a positive cast is not met.

Action

Given that these are discretionary speeches, we expect presidents to have a clear purpose in giving the speech, and we expect it to be a policymaking purpose as measured through the quantity of their calls for action. We expect presidents to give a clear plan of action in these speeches. While some have noted the "comforter in chief" role presidents may play during times of crisis (t'Hart, Tindall, and Brown 2009), we don't expect this role to be prominent in these speeches. First, an economic recession is typically not prompted by any one, dramatic event; therefore, there wouldn't be an immediate necessity to respond to a particular crisis that would typically precipitate the "comforter in chief" role to take center stage in a speech. As the impact

of recessions begins to be felt and economic conditions worsen, the public will often expect presidential action and public expectations are important, even if the president's ability to affect the situation is minimal (Waterman, Jenkins-Smith, and Silva 1999). Therefore, if a decision is made to make a major public address, we expect presidents to offer a certain quantity of solutions to indicate leadership and direct actions to further those solutions; to not do so may risk signaling presidential impotence, indicate a disconnect between the president and his constituents, and might also ring hollow with the public. The president can always stay silent by choosing to not make a major address if there is no specific plan an administration plans to pursue.

Figure 4 shows the percentage of sentences in which the president signals action. He may indicate he, himself, will be taking action. Or, he may indicate he is directing others in his administration to take various actions. He may ask for general government action or congressional action; he may encourage states and governors to take certain actions; he may ask the business sector to do certain things; and finally, he may target the public as an entity that he can spur to action. When we identify action sentences, we are identifying sentences in which the president says some variation of, "I will do x," or "my administration will do x." We also identify sentences in which the president requests various other entities to take some action. Also, not all sentences that request action are going to be specific. For example, a president may say "I am going to work with Congress to restore prosperity." While this is quite vague, it does signal action. Action signaling sentences are going to be a minority of sentences in the overall speech because requests for action often have to be set up with other rhetoric (even those that are rather vague). The situation will be detailed, various options may be explained, wrongheaded ones dispensed with, and then typically only a minority of sentences will actually be action

oriented. But, we do expect there to be a level of consistency here from president to president and from speech to speech.

In examining our results in Figure 4, one sees our expectation of consistency is not realized. These speeches are not uniformly action oriented, although they all do contain some number of action oriented sentences. Once again, Reagan is unduly prominent in this determination, but not totally alone. For example, George W. Bush's speech in September 2008 is primarily devoted to explaining the rather complex economic circumstances taking place. He does urge congressional action, but only twice and each time in a very vague manner. The only calls for action that Bush makes in this speech are asking for Congressional action on the administration's proposal, and, after mentioning a blueprint by Treasury Secretary Paulsen that would modernize financial regulations, he states, "There are other good ideas, and Members of Congress should consider them" (Bush 2008). Bush has no other action oriented sentences.

Similarly, Reagan's speeches contain very low percentages of action oriented sentences, never comprising more than 5% of a speech. Reagan's overall project was to further a philosophical outlook; to propose and enact an economic policy that was a departure from past economic practices, and as such, his speeches concentrate more on explaining his viewpoint than asking for detailed actions. Furthermore, we also coded to whom presidents directed calls to action. Another way in which Reagan stands out is that while he had few sentences which were action oriented, the ones he did use were substantially directed at urging the public to action, primarily to contacting members of Congress (Figure 5). George H.W. Bush also uses this tactic when he addresses the public to explain the budget agreement that had recently been forged between his administration and members of Congress. The congressional vote was looming, and

he urges the public to do things such as “help us move this agreement forward” and “tell your Congressmen and Senators you support this deficit reduction agreement” (Bush 1990). While our collection of speeches are all about presidents going public to some degree, both Reagan and George H.W. Bush are prototypical examples of the strategy, being quite overt about it; other presidents tend to be more subtle by simply presenting and arguing their case to the public.

In analyzing the dimensions of discretionary economic speeches, Ronald Reagan stands out in both quantity of speech, as well as quality. He doesn't mind reminding the public about the economy's state by discussing it frequently during a recession; other presidents seem hesitant in this regard. Reagan presents his economic vision as a sea change when compared with previous administrations. It makes some sense that he is more active (and comfortable) giving this type of speech because he is ideologically driven to offer a different economic viewpoint. In doing so, he wasn't hesitant to talk about the economy in a recession because he felt the hard times of the 1981-82 recession were due to longstanding government economic policies with which he disagreed and offered an alternative. Furthermore, the quality of Reagan's rhetoric stands out. Here we are not referring to whether or not his rhetoric is “good” or “bad” in quality, but quality in the sense that his is different from much of what we find in other presidents' rhetoric of this type. His rhetoric is more oriented toward the past than others and he talks less about the future as the recession lingers. Unlike how Reagan's rhetoric is typically characterized as optimistic, he is notably negative in tone in these speeches. Finally, he includes fewer sentences of action, but those he does include are dominated by asking the public for some action. Finally, he has the only speech in our data (October 1982) that refers to a specific individual, ordinary citizen, a technique he used in other speeches. Several of these factors

remind us how much Reagan's rhetorical style, as a whole, altered and affected presidential rhetoric that came after him.

Is there a Presidential Rhetoric of Hard Times?

We conclude there is not sufficient evidence to identify a presidential rhetoric of hard times. In examining speeches that satisfy our selection criteria (major discretionary economic speeches given during recessions), we don't find evidence that leads us to conclude they are a genre of speech. First, our analysis was hampered by the small number of these speeches and also by the domination of Reagan speeches in our data set.¹¹ Our expectations regarding the nature of the rhetoric that met our criteria were uniformly not met by our analysis. These speeches appear quite idiosyncratic on most of the dimensions that we examined. There does not appear to be a lot of continuity in the rhetorical form and function of these speeches, despite our criteria that sought to select speeches that theoretically might have this continuity. In part, this may be due to the fact that recessions are not uniform in either length, cause, or governmental response.

That said, there are some findings of interest. During recessions, presidents often choose to remain silent on the economy by not delivering a major discretionary speeches on that subject; five recessions contain no major economic address by the president. But, this does not mean they stay silent on other subjects during recessions; all recessionary periods do have major addresses given by the president. Future research should compare major speeches and subjects in recessionary and non-recessionary periods, to determine if presidents are less likely to talk about

¹¹We should note, however, that the number of speeches typically does not matter when communication scholars identify genres. For example, see Campbell and Jamieson's (1990) discussion of pardoning rhetoric and rhetoric it forestall impeachment.

the economy in hard times than in good times. Furthermore, presidents today may be more likely to make economic remarks during recessions in minor addresses (not given to a national audience during evening hours), such as Obama's economic speech at Georgetown given at noon on April 14, 2009. The expansion of ways to access presidential remarks on demand, as well as the move away from network television to cable outlets on the part of viewers may have changed the calculus of when presidents choose to make addresses (see Young and Perkins (2005) as possibly instructive on this note).

In 1956, Clinton Rossiter delineated the various duties or roles presidents were expected to perform. At the time, he identified a role that was, as he put it, "still taking shape" (22). This function he labeled "manager of prosperity" (21). Whereas presidents have rhetorically embraced most of the functions that Rossiter delineated, relishing in being able to give speeches where their commander-in-chief power or chief legislative powers are on full display, they have seemingly not responded in kind to the "manager of prosperity" hat. Perhaps we should take comfort in the relative lack of presidential speech of this type. As Tulis (1987) noted, a more rhetorical president means there are more opportunities for demagoguery. During recessions, most presidents do exhibit some rhetorical restraint.

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Table 1: Post-War Economic Contractions (Recessions)

Beginning	Ending	Peak Announced (lag in months)	Trough Announced (lag in months)	Length (months)
Nov 1948	Oct 1949			12
July 1953	May 1954			11
Aug 1957	Apr 1958			9
Apr 1960	Feb 1961			11
Dec 1969	Nov 1970			12
Nov 1973	Mar 1975			17
Jan 1980	Jul 1980	June 3, 1980 (6)	July 8, 1981 (12)	7
Jul 1981	Nov 1982	Jan 6, 1982 (7)	July 8, 1983 (9)	17
Jul 1990	Mar 1991	April 25, 1991 (10)	Dec 22, 1992 (10)	9
Mar 2001	Nov 2001	Nov 26, 2001 (9)	July 17, 2003 (21)	9
Dec 2007		Dec 1, 2008 (12)		

Source: NBER, Business Cycle Expansions and Contractions, www.nber.org/cycles.html (accessed March 2010)

Table 2: Major Discretionary Given During Economic Contractions

Dates of Contraction	president/date of speech	subject	Substantial Economic Component?
11/1948 - 10/1949	Truman/ July 13, 1949	National Economy	Yes
7/1953 - 5/1954	Eisenhower/ July 26, 1953	Korean Armistice	No
	Eisenhower/ Aug 6, 1953	Achievements	No
	Eisenhower/ Jan 4, 1954	Purposes & Accomplishments ¹²	No
	Eisenhower/ March 15, 1954	Tax program	Yes
	Eisenhower/ April 5, 1954	Goals & Problems	No
8/1957 - 4/ 1958	Eisenhower/ Sept 24, 1957	Little Rock Desegregation	No
	Eisenhower/ Nov 7, 1957	National Security	No
	Eisenhower/ Nov 13, 1957	National Security	No
	Eisenhower/ Dec 23, 1957	Report on NATO Conf.	No
	Eisenhower/ March 16, 1959	Foreign Policy	No
4/1960 - 2/1961	Eisenhower/ May 25, 1960	Foreign Policy	No
12/1969 - 11/ 1970 ¹³	Nixon/ Dec 15, 1969	Vietnam	No
	Nixon/ April 20, 1970	Vietnam	No
	Nixon/ April 30, 1970	Cambodia	No
	Nixon/ June 3, 1970	Cambodia	No
	Nixon/ Oct 7, 1970	Vietnam	No
11/1973 - 3/1975	Nixon/ Nov 7, 1973	Energy shortage	No
	Nixon/ Nov 25, 1973	Energy Policy	No
	Nixon/ Apr 29 1974	Watergate tapes	No
	Nixon/ July 3, 1974	Soviet Union	No

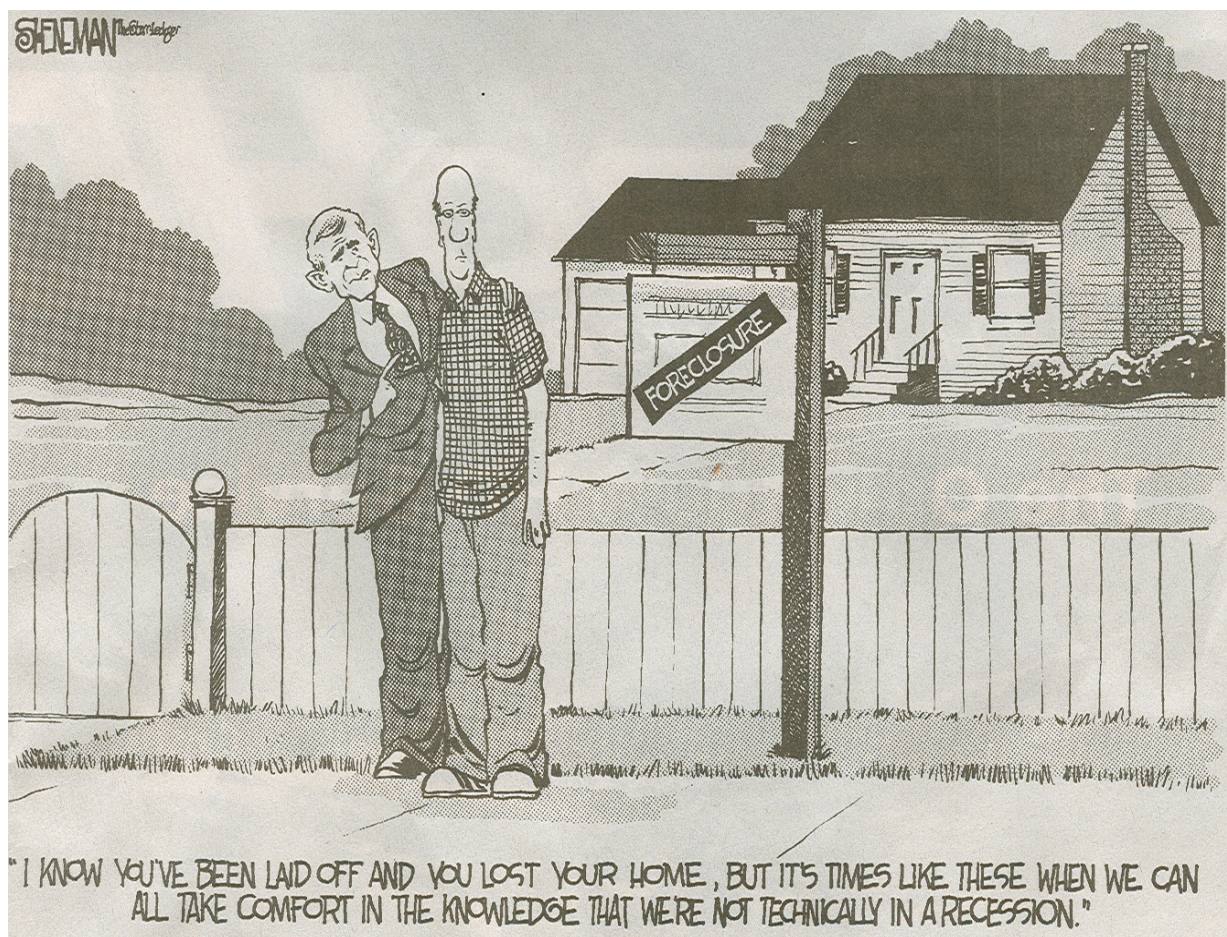
¹²Precursor to State of the Union Address to be given three days later

¹³Nixon gives an economic address on June 17, 1970, but it is delivered at noon.

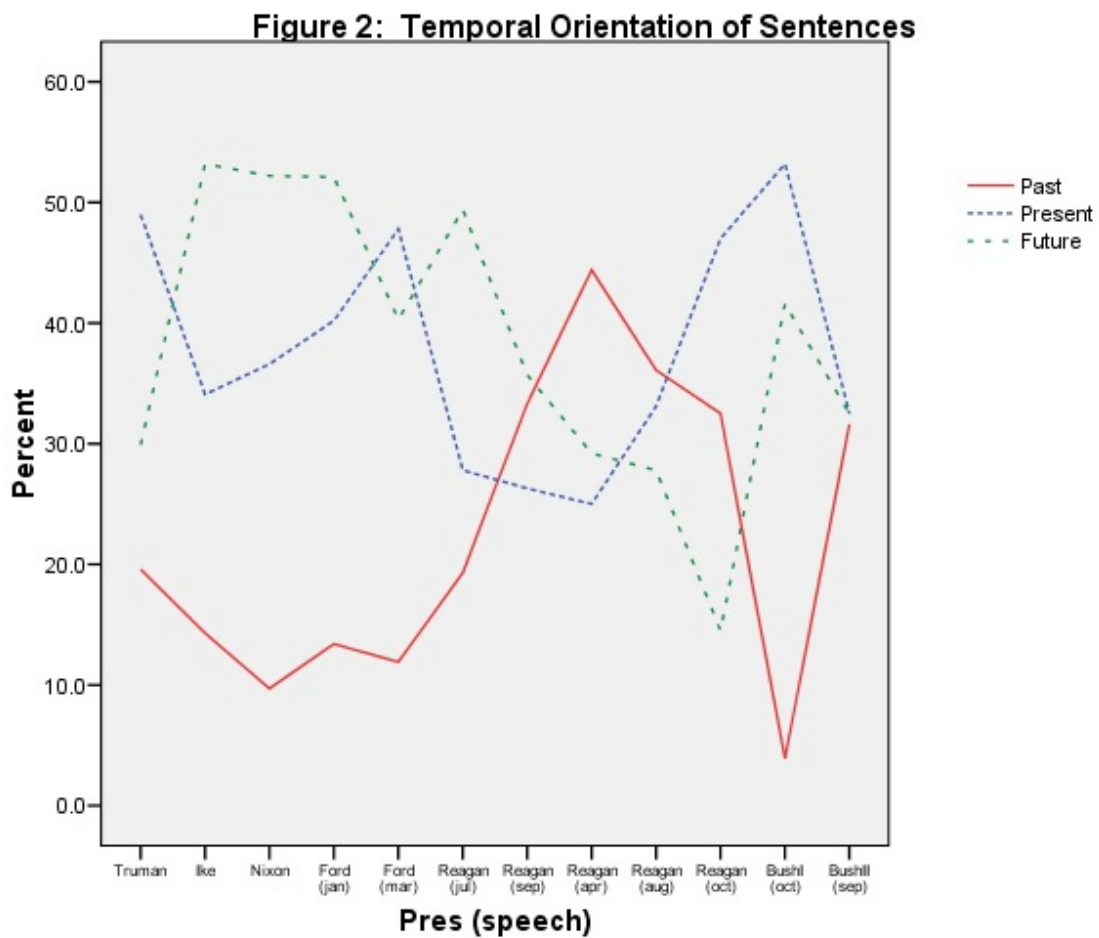
	Nixon/ July 25, 1974	Economy	Yes
	Ford/ Aug 12, 1974	Jt. Session address ¹⁴	Yes
	Ford/ Jan 13, 1975	Energy & Economy	Yes
	Ford/ March 29, 1975	Signing of Tax Bill	Yes
1/1980 - 7/1980	Carter/ Jan 4, 1980	Afghanistan	No
7/1981 - 11/1982	Reagan/ July 27, 1981	Tax policy	Yes
	Reagan/ Sept 24, 1981	Economy	Yes
	Reagan/ April 29, 1982	Budget	Yes
	Reagan/ Aug 16, 1982	Budget	Yes
	Reagan/ Sept 1, 1982	Middle East	No
	Reagan/ Oct 13, 1982	Economy	Yes
	Reagan/ Nov 22, 1982	Foreign Policy	No
7/1990 - 3/1991	Bush/ Sept 11, 1990	Persian Gulf & Budget	No
	Bush/ Oct 2, 1990	Budget	Yes
	Bush/ Jan 16, 1991	Persian Gulf	No
	Bush/ Feb 23, 1991	Persian Gulf	No
	Bush/ March 6, 1991	Persian Gulf	No
3/2001 - 11/ 2001	Bush, GW/ Sept 11, 2001	Terrorist attacks	No
	Bush, GW/ Sept 20, 2001	Terrorist attacks	No
12/2007 - ??	Bush, GW/ Sept 24, 2008	Economy	Yes
	Obama/ Sept 9, 2009	Health Care	No
	Obama/ June 15, 2010	Gulf Oil Spill	No

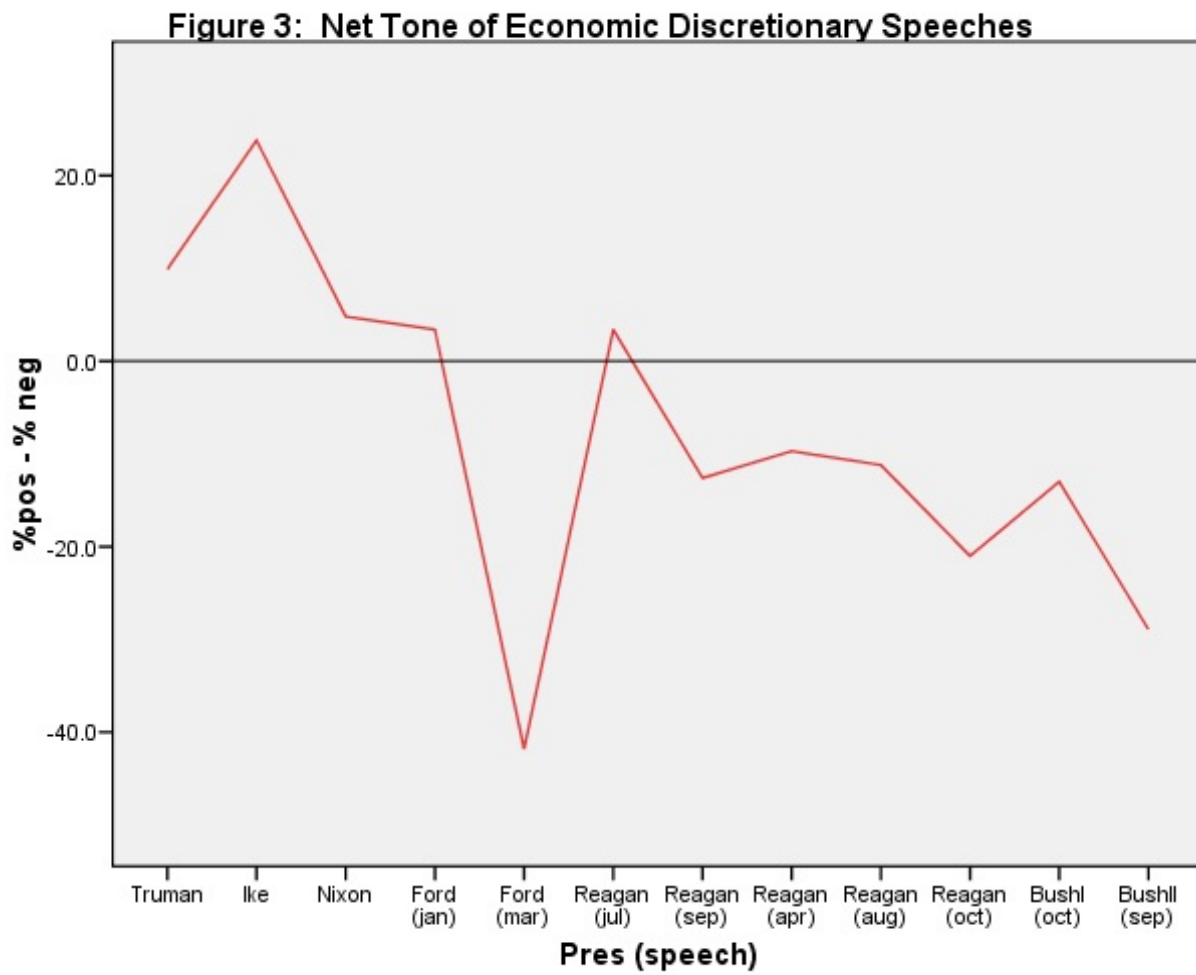
¹⁴This speech is not coded as it takes on the form of a State of Union Address/Joint Session Address given at beginning of one's term.

Figure 1



Source: Drew Sheneman, Editorial Cartoon of September 5, 2008, Newark (NJ) *Star-Ledger*. Available at: www.gocomics.com/drewsheneman/2008/09/05.





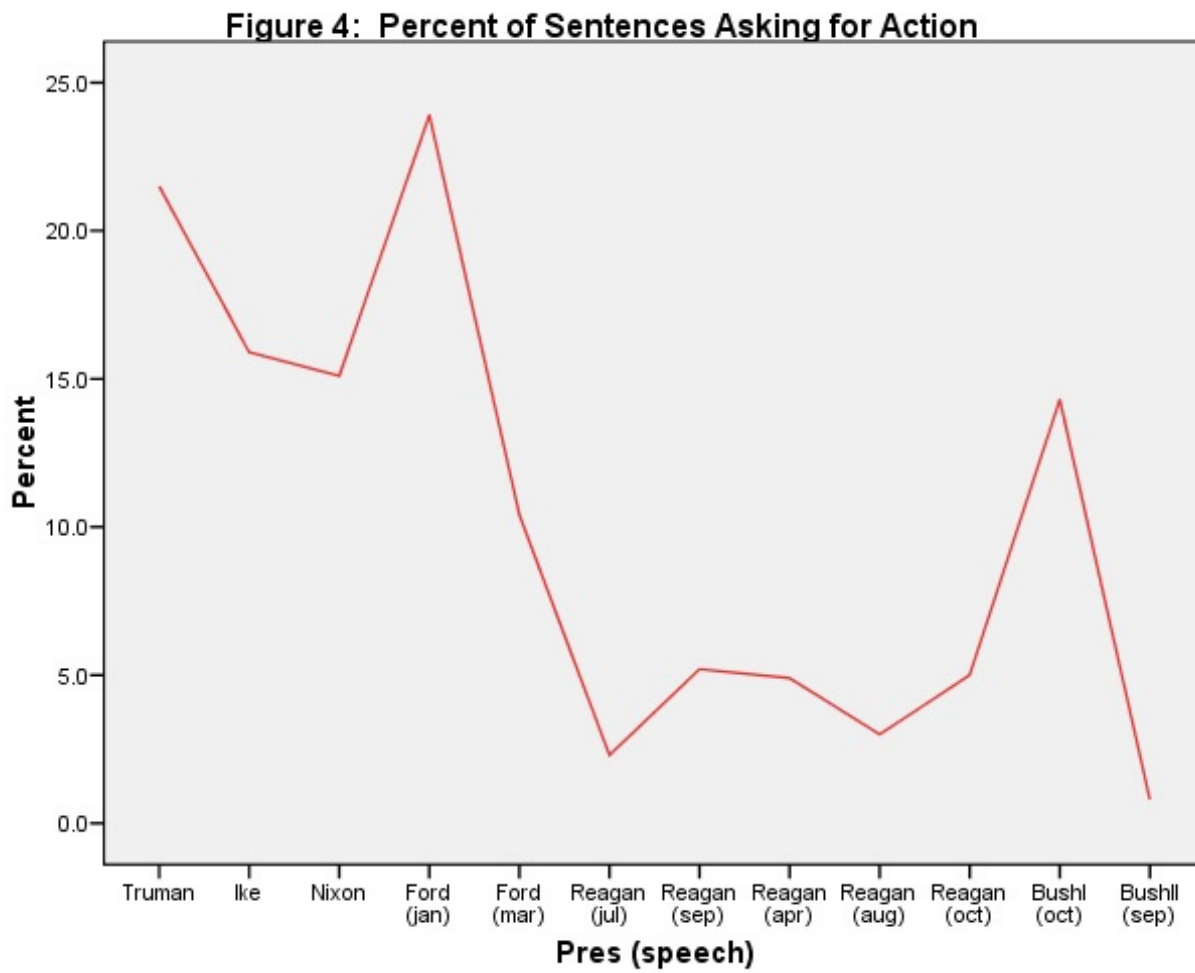


Figure 5: Percent of Action Sentences Directed at People