People in the State of the Union:
Viewing Social Change through the Eyes of Presidents

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Abstract

On-line databases of presidential speeches now allow for a diachronic exploration of language use at the highest political levels. This allows for a contrast between legislative and legal advances for minorities and the integration of those advances into the presidential lexicon. In this paper, I explore language use pertaining to 'people' in the American State of the Union addresses from 1945 to 2005. I demonstrate that while there was clearly a shift two decades ago to systematically portraying human beings as being made up of two genders, or being subsumed under a gender-neutral term, other aspects of gender, such as parenthood, are still stereotyped by American presidents. In short, analyzing lexical instances related to 'people' in the State of the Union address allows us not only to reflect on the values held by U.S. presidents, but also to systematically uncover how they use language to exercise power on the very people they are elected to serve.

1. Introduction

In the latter half of the twentieth century, American presidents have had the enviable task of shaping the way Americans think about themselves by delivering a State of the Union address near the beginning of each calendar year. This speech is broadcast live across the nation on major television and radio channels. In the address, the president emphasizes his accomplishments to date and sets out a new agenda for the year. Topics touched upon may include both foreign and domestic policy, and run the gamut from justification for war to a fervent plea to pass an education bill. The complete text of the address appears the following day in major newspapers and in on-line news resources.

Thus, these addresses constitute a narrow, but influential media genre, since subsequent discourse in the news media often reports on the proposals put forth by the president in his own terminology (Barrett 2000). This terminology reflects the ideology of the ruling political party, and it is this ideology that is used to exercise power "through the manufacture of consent" (Fairclough, 2001). Moreover, as Van Dijk (1993) notes, "More control over more properties of text and context, involving more people, is thus generally (though not always) associated with more influence, and hence with hegemony" (p. 257). Thus, a linguistic analysis of presidential speeches has the potential to shed light on how the president views (and wants the country to view) economic, political and social issues of the day.

However, it is only recently that the advent of on-line corpora has facilitated the collection and analysis of presidential speeches. Kowal et al. (1997), for example, had to create a corpus of Inaugural Addresses in order to look at the interaction between literacy and orality in presidential speeches. Charteris-Black (2004, 2005), on the other hand, was

able to examine the use of metaphor as well as rhetorical devices used by British and U.S. politicians in their speeches based on the corpus of U.S. Presidential Inaugural Addresses found on www.bartleby.com. However, to date there has been no systematic analysis of changes in lexical use within the scope of presidential speeches. Thus, it is the goal of this paper to demonstrate that by combining presidential speeches into a corpus, subtle changes in language use over time can be determined by examining the frequency of occurrence of key words as well as their associated collocations (Stubbs, 1996). In order to examine this issue, I will explore language use pertaining to 'people' in all of the State of the Union addresses (SOU corpus) from 1945 to 2005 by analyzing the tokens: *humankind, mankind, man*, *men, woman*, *women*, *mother*, *father* and *parent*. I will demonstrate that while there was clearly a shift twenty years ago to systematically portraying human beings as being made up of two genders, or being subsumed under a gender-neutral term such as *person* or *people*, other aspects of gender, such as parenthood, are still stereotyped by American presidents.

2. Methodology for Corpus Creation

The State of the Union (SOU) corpus was downloaded one speech at a time from the C-Span website (c-span.org). All State of the Union speeches from 1945-2005 (excluding Nixon's five SOU speeches from 1970-1974) were directly downloaded to text files (Table 1). Nixon's speeches were printed out from Adobe files, manually typed into a document file and then saved to a text file.

Table 1: State of the Union Speeches included in current corpora

Name	Year	Number	Political Party	Word Count	Avg. # Words/Speech
Truman	1945-1951	7	Democrat	53,066	7581
Eisenhower	1953-1960	8	Republican	54,145	6768
Kennedy	1961-1963	3	Democrat	13,970	4657
Johnson	1963-1969	8*	Democrat	33,463	4182
Nixon	1970-1974	5	Republican	19,567	3913
Ford	1975-1977	3	Republican	13,867	4622
Carter	1978-1980	3	Democrat	11,298	3766
Reagan	1981-1988	8	Republican	36,822	4603
G.H.W. Bush	1989-1992	5*	Republican	20,668	4134
Clinton	1993-2000	8	Democrat	60,751	7594
G. W. Bush	2001-2005	6*	Republican	27,437	4573
Total		**64**		**345,054**	**5391**

*Presidents gave more than on SOU in a given year.

Since some presidents gave more than one SOU address in a given year (i.e. Bush gave two addresses in 2001, one on 2/27 and one on 9/20), there are a total of 64 speeches in this corpora.[1] Clinton, is, as noted by many pundits, the most prolix speaker on in terms of total number of words (Figure 1), although Truman is a close second, and Eisenhower is

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[1] C-span incorrectly lists Carter as giving a SOU speech in 1981. The actual file under Carter's name is in fact, Reagan's first SOU address. This has not been included in the Carter's corpus herein, but it is, of course, included in Reagan's.

not far behind. These are also the only three presidents to have a higher word count than the average of 5400 words per speech, all the other presidents average between 3700 and 4700 words per speech (Table 1 above).
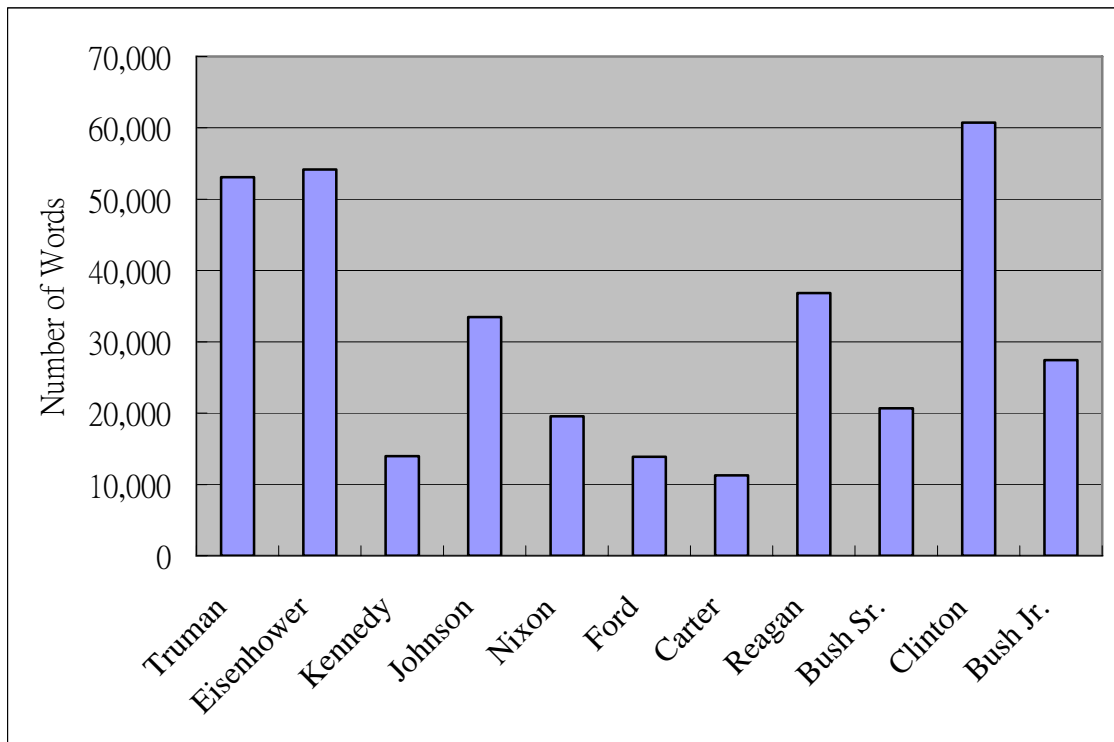

Figure 1: Total Number of Words in Each President's SOU corpus

After saving all 59 speeches as text files, a meta-file was created and word searches were run using Wordsmith, Version 4 (http://www.lexically.net/wordsmith/). Wordsmith creates a concordance for all instances of the lexical item chosen, with links to the full-text. Data on the number of instances found is then saved into Excel tables for further analysis (Biber 1996).

3. Hypothesis

This paper hypothesizes that the language used by politicians will become more inclusive from the middle of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century. In particular, social gains from the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or gender, should become apparent.[2] However, mainly doors to women were still closed, even after this law went into effect. For example, the state law of Virginia prohibited women from being admitted to the College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Virginia as late as 1970.[3] Due to increasing demand for equal access to education at all levels, Title IX was passed,   and signed into law in 1972 by Nixon. Title IX prohibits institutions that receive federal funding from practicing gender discrimination in educational programs or activities. It took two years for regulations to be drawn up for Title IX, and in 1974 they were

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[2] These prohibitions on employment discrimination were codified in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

[3] Kirstein v. Rector and Visitors of University of Virginia, 309 F.Supp. 184 (E.D. Va. 1970), accessed from www.ed.gov/pubs/TitleIX/part3.html#road on October 20, 2005.

published, with President Ford signing them into law in 1975. Thus, there is a societal and legislative shift during the decade from 1964-1974. Since the corpus under consideration here identifies all uses by date and speaker, it is possible to contrast critical legislative and legal events with the occurrence of relevant terms or changing use of terms in the presidential lexicon and ask the question: How soon after this legislation was discriminatory language use dropped from presidential parlance?

In particular, I hypothesize that there should be a marked decrease in the use of 'mankind' to refer to all humankind, as well as the use of 'man' to refer to all people. In addition, references to women should go beyond motherhood and include the contributions that women make to society. Lastly, use of 'mother(s),' 'father(s)' should demonstrate the variety of roles that each parent plays in the family and society. These changes would reflect the advances American women have made over the past half a century and would indicate that women's contributions are being recognized at the highest levels of power in the government.

4. Data Analysis

We first look at the number of occurrences for 'mankind' and 'humankind' (Figure 2). It is clear that there is a steady decrease in the use of 'mankind' from 1945 to 1979. However, three Republican presidents continue to keep the term alive (cf. examples 1-3), while Carter and Clinton shun its usage, Clinton preferring to use the inclusive term 'humankind' instead (example 4).
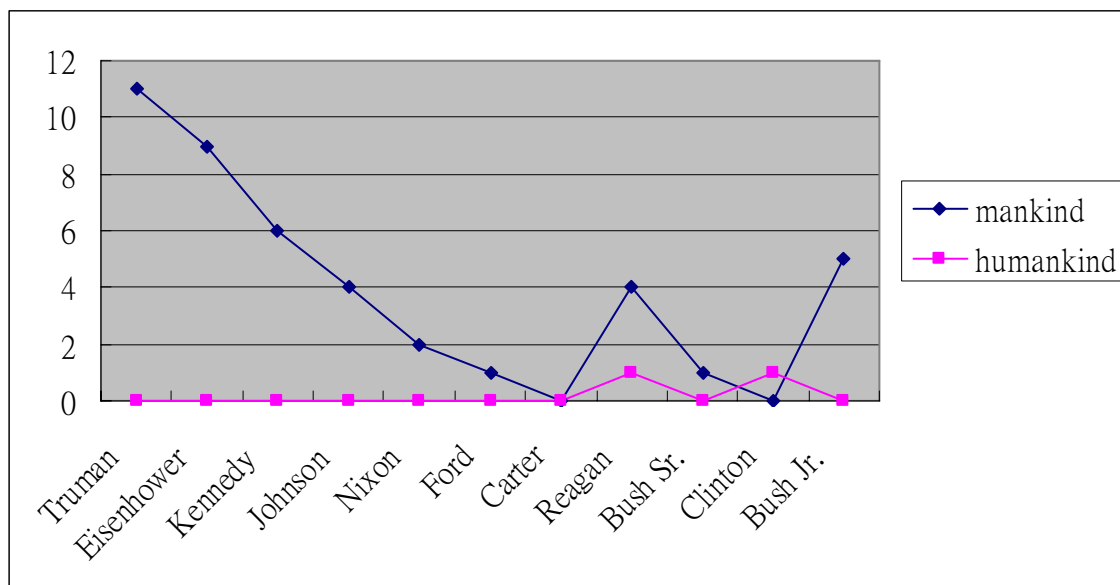

Figure 2: Use of 'mankind' versus 'humankind' by American presidents

(1) *That we would use these gifts for good and generous purposes and would secure them not just for ourselves, and for our children, but for all <u>mankind</u>.* (Reagan, 1987)

(2) *What is at stake is more than one small country; it is a big idea: a new world order, where diverse nations are drawn together in common cause to achieve the universal aspirations of <u>mankind</u> -- peace and security, freedom, and the rule of law.* (Bush Sr., 1991)

(3) *The cause we serve is right, because it is the cause of all <u>mankind</u>.* (Bush Jr., 2004)

(4) *Throughout all history, <u>humankind</u> has had only one place to call home, our planet, Earth.* (Clinton, 1998)

This indicates an insensitivity to language use on the part of these three Republican presidents. Reagan's case is especially telling since he uses both 'humankind' (example 5) and 'mankind' (example 6) in the same speech (albeit paragraphs away from each other).

(5) *...the belief that the most exciting revolution ever known to <u>humankind</u> began with three simple words: "We the People"--the revolutionary notion that the people grant government its rights...* (Reagan 1988)

(6) *It reduces the risk of war and the threat of nuclear weapons to all <u>mankind</u>. Strategic defenses that threaten no one could offer the world a safer, more stable basis for deterrence.* (Reagan 1988)

Reagan and Bush Sr. also use 'man' to stand for 'human being' (Figure 3; examples 7 and 8), again indicating an insensitivity to the language and gender issues. In fact, given that Reagan and Kennedy average about the same number of words per speech, Reagan uses 'man' as a generic term at a similar frequency to Kennedy.
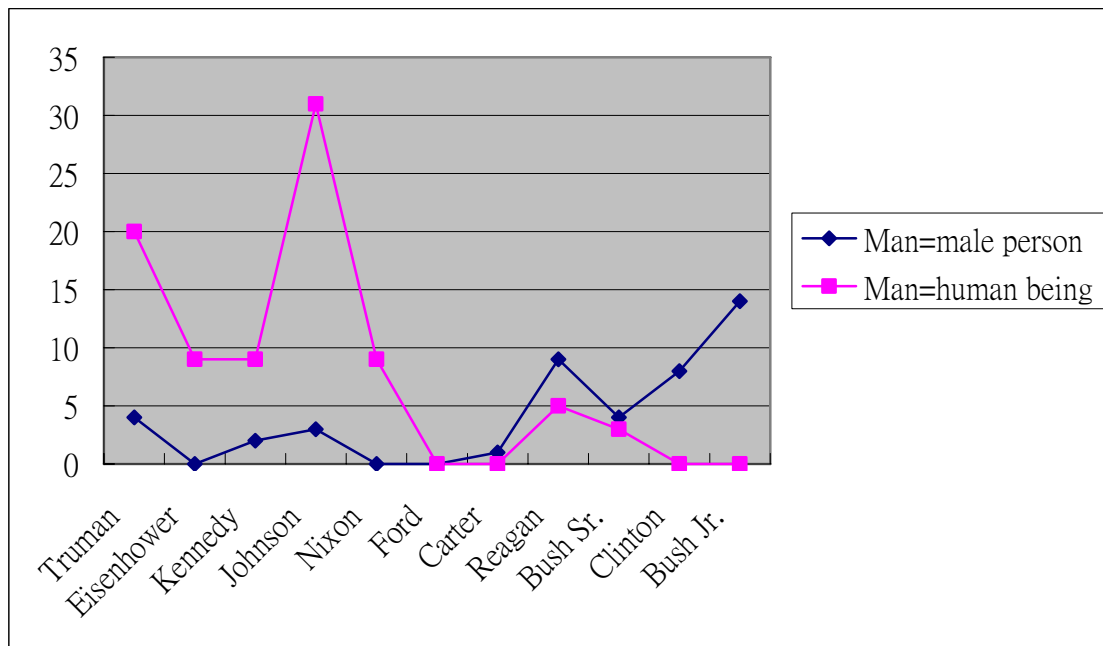

Figure 3: Use of 'man' as a male person versus 'man' as standing for all humans

(7) *How can we not do what is right and needed to preserve this last best hope of <u>man</u> on Earth?* (Reagan 1984)

(8) *Twice before, those hopes proved to be a distant dream, beyond the grasp of <u>man</u>.* (Bush Sr., 3/6/1991)

Clinton and Bush Jr., however, both clearly shun the use of 'man' to stand for human being.

Thus, from the data so far, results are mixed. In terms of 'mankind' there is a trend for less frequent usage after 1975. However, Republican presidents are keeping the term alive. In terms of 'man' to stand for all people, it did not disappear until 1993, much later than hypothesized.

However, when we look at the use of 'men' in Figure 4, post-1970, it was used only infrequently to refer to all human beings.
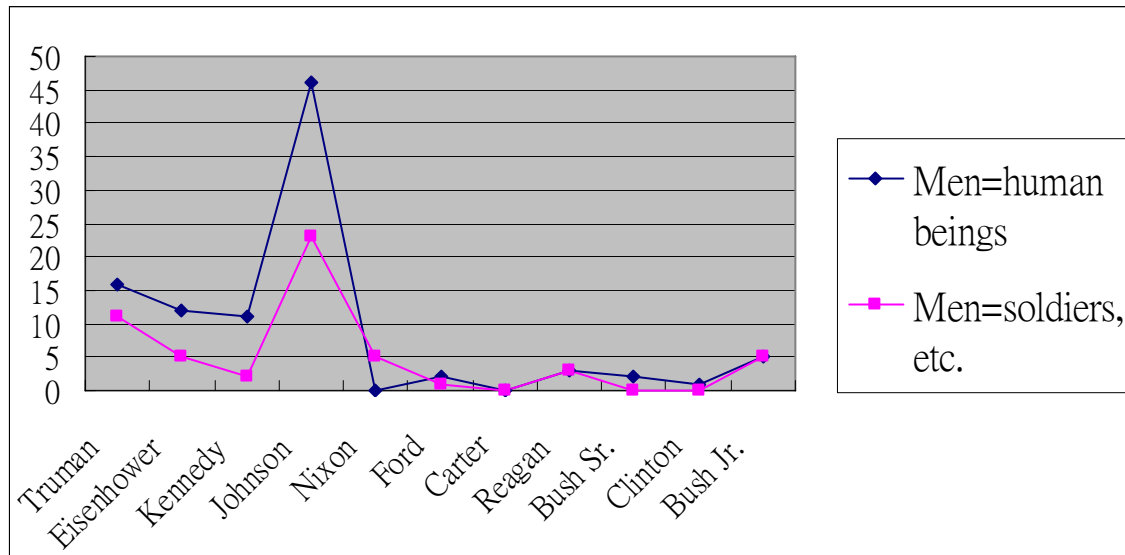

Figure 4: Use of 'men' as soldier, etc. versus 'men' as standing for all people

The use of 'men' pre-1970 is used generically, but also to refer to soldiers (9), senators (10), lawyers (11), i.e. jobs that were prototypically male (examples 9-10) and Figure 4 above.

(9) *Our <u>men</u> are fighting, alongside their United Nations allies, because they know….*(Truman 1951)

(10) *You will soon learn that you are among <u>men</u> whose first love is their country, men who try each day to do as best they can what they believe is right.* (Johnson 1965)

(11) *I ask the Congress for authority to hire 100 more. These young <u>men</u> will give special attention to this drug abuse, too.* (Johnson, 1968)

In fact, it is not until Reagan that women are recognized as being part of the Armed Forces, although many fought and died as nurses and support staff in the Armed Forces prior to 1980. Bush Jr.'s use of 'men' is interesting because this use refers to 'evil-doers,' as in example (12).

(12) *This conviction leads us into the world to help the afflicted, and defend the peace, and confound the designs of evil <u>men</u>.* (Bush 2003)

Although Bush Jr. is careful to talk about America's servicemen and servicewomen, he terms propagators of acts of terror as men and does not use gender-inclusive language that can be found elsewhere in his speeches. Although I sincerely hope that it is the case that terrorist masterminds will not in the future include women among their ranks, it is

interesting to compare Bush's language with that of Eisenhower, Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson, as it is apparent in their speeches that they did not foresee women joining the ranks of lawyers, politicians and soldiers.

The data used to provide Figure 4 also shows that the use of the word 'men' occurs 148 times in the total corpus (referring to both human beings and soldiers, lawyers, politicians, etc.) 'Women' by contrast, occurs alone only 34 times (i.e. it does not co-occur with 'men'). Truman talks about working women (2 times), Carter emphasizes equal rights for women (2 times), Reagan talks about legal and economic equity for women (6 times), and women as mothers (1 time) and workers (1 time). Bush Sr. talks about pregnant women and working women (1 time each). Clinton talks about taking better care of women and children (7 times) and equity for working women (2 times). Bush Jr. talks about rights for women at home and abroad (7 times), and protecting women and children from terrorist acts (1 time). Women are talked about much less frequently than men, even in recent years, and when they are talked about they are not thanked for their contributions to the society as the Founding Fathers, senators, lawyers, and soldiers are (although to be fair, later presidents (Reagan and on) do thank the men *and* women serving in the armed forces). Women are not held up for emulation, they are only mentioned in reference to having their economic and political lot improved.

This finding can be corroborated by contrasting proper name usages for 'man' and 'woman'. Only one woman is mentioned by name in all of the SOU speeches – Rosa Parks, who sat in the front of a bus in the south and galvanized the Civil Rights movement by her action. Seven specific men are mentioned by name, all of them are heroes, and 'wise' or 'brave' or 'good' or 'exceptional'. Thus, it seems while there has been advances in recognizing the fact that women serve alongside men in the Armed Forces, and that 'man' is not a gender-inclusive term, still women face an uphill battle to have their deeds and accomplishments recognized – to be held up as the standard bearer for others to follow.

Lastly, the role of 'motherhood' has traditionally been the contribution that women were supposed to play to society. Yet Figure 5 shows that the presidents before Regan rarely discussed motherhood or parenting. When presidents talk about 'fathers' it is to mention the Founding Fathers or fathers who went away to war (in terms of the children who are left without a father).
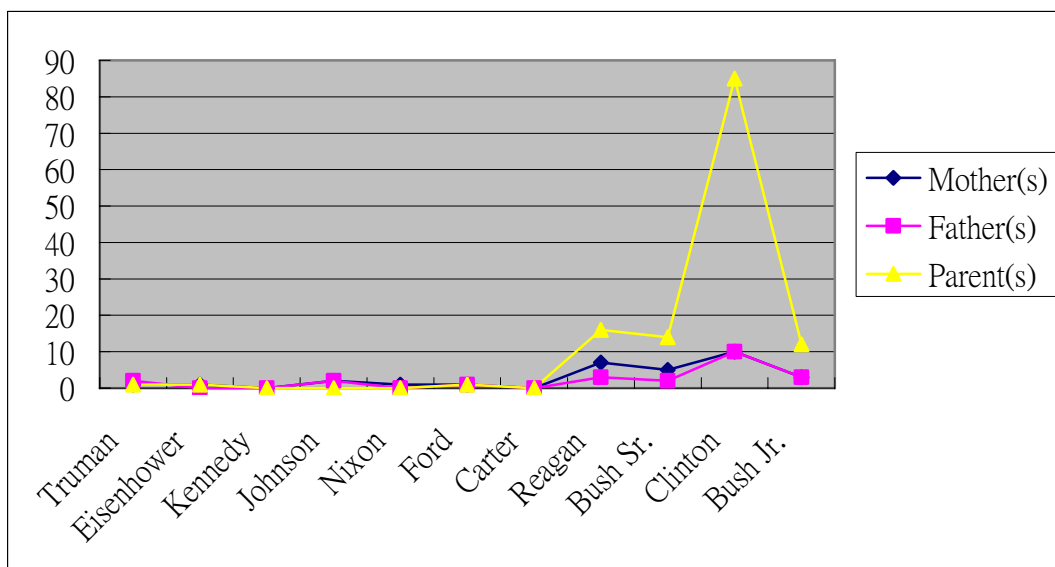

Figure 5: Use of 'father(s),' 'mother(s),' and 'parents' in SOU speeches

More recent examples (Clinton, for example) talks about the responsibilities fathers have to support their families. "Mothers," on the other hand, are often mentioned in terms of their age ('young' or 'teen'), work status ('working') or health ('pregnant' or 'expectant' or 'drug-user'). While the sample size is admittedly small, it is comprehensive and demonstrates that the fathers are still primarily considered the providers and the mothers are primarily nurturers. Imagine, for example, the use of 'working fathers.' It doesn't appear in the presidential corpus because it is a given. We do not yet prototypically identify fathers as being either working or non-working as we do mothers.

5. Conclusion

This paper hypothesized that the language used by politicians would become more inclusive from 1945 to 2005. In some aspects, it certainly did. There was a marked decrease in the use of 'man' to refer to all people, with a similar decrease in the term 'mankind' to refer to all humankind, although its usage still occurs even today.

However, references to women did not emphasize the contributions that women have made to society. In the eyes of the presidents, they are still struggling for equal pay and equal rights. While this may be the case, the use of women as role models is lacking. Lastly, discussion of issues relating to parenting showed a slight increase in the past twenty years. However, the use of 'mother(s),' 'father(s)' did not yet demonstrate the variety of roles that each parent plays in the family and society. Thus, the gains American women have made over the past half a century are not yet reflected in the eyes of the American presidents.

6. Acknowledgements:

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