

NY Times Cites State of Union Address Research

In their book *Addressing the State of the Union*, Hoffman and Howard explored how and why the State of the Union address came to be a key tool in the exercise of presidential power. They outline ways presidents use it to gain attention, to communicate with target audiences, and to make specific policy proposals.

[READ ABOUT ALISON HOWARD'S RESEARCH IN NEW YORK TIMES](#)

Modern presidents have used the address to set the tone for their presidency by including specific calls for Congressional action in their address, with a median of 31 requests per address since 1965. This ranges from President Carter's 1979 low of nine to President Clinton's high of 87 requests in 2000.

Almost 43 percent of all requests made during the State of the Union since 1965 were at least partially successful, Howard said.

In a new paper "Obama in Word and Deeds," which appears in the current issue of *Social Science Quarterly*, Hoffman and Howard examine how President Barack Obama used the State of the Union during his first term, noting both differences and similarities between Obama and his predecessors.

Each of Obama's first-term addresses has contained an average of 35 legislative requests, and Obama's success rate is slightly above the average.

"President Obama has been successful with his legislative requests," said Howard, chair of [Dominican's Department of Political Science and International Studies](#). "His full and partial request success rate was about 45 percent during the first term, which is practically identical to Ronald Reagan's full terms in office and slightly above the median yearly rate of 43 percent."

Although Obama's success rate dipped in 2011, he still enjoyed a 42 percent partial or full success rate that year despite the Republican's controlling Congress.

Howard notes that Obama's rhetorical choices in the State of the Union Address portray him as an unusual chief legislator in many ways.

He is deferential to Congress on legislative detail, tending to focus his SUA requests on large-scale items and leaving the details of legislation to Congress. His use of symbolic rhetoric also is unique.

"Obama uses individuals and historical examples to highlight the instrumental and effective role government has played in supporting the pursuit of the American dream," Howard said. "He offers recognizable examples that match his vision of the role of government in order to persuade Congress and the public that his agenda is one that should be enacted."

While Ronald Reagan began the process of incorporating key individuals into his SUA in 1982, all were representations of what he called American heroes, Howard said. George Bush continued Reagan's practice of recognizing key people, and Bill Clinton used guests as symbols of the policy successes for which he claimed credit.

"Obama's SUAs are qualitatively different; given his own background, and the economic recession and weak recovery that have dominated his tenure, the individuals he utilizes for symbolic purpose all typify some element of the American dream."

However, his approach is fairly consistent with his predecessors when it comes to "credit claiming," Howard said.

"One way presidents further their re-election and legacy goals in SUAs is by claiming credit for their accomplishments."

In his first term addresses, Obama devoted about 17 percent of his time to credit claiming.

"Claiming credit for past achievements shows his audience that he has in fact been successful and with support he can continue to accomplish things."

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February 12, 2013

