

## State of Union Research Attracts National Coverage

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.

In their 2012 paper “Obama in Word and Deeds,” which appeared in *Social Science Quarterly*, Hoffman and Howard examined how President Barack Obama used the State of the Union Address during his first term, noting both differences and similarities between Obama and his predecessors. Hoffman and Howard developed a tool to assess a president’s success by calculating how many of the legislative requests presidents make of Congress in their State of Union Address get adopted in the next session.

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Modern presidents (presidents since 1965) include specific calls for Congressional action in their State of the Union Address, with a median of 31 requests per address. President Clinton holds the record for most requests - 87 requests in 2000. President Obama requests range from 21 in 2009 to 45 in 2010 and 41 in 2013.

President Obama’s median full and partial request success rate was about 45 percent during his first term - practically identical to Ronald Reagan’s full terms in office and slightly above the median yearly rate of 43 percent. However, he has seen his success rate decline since the Republicans took control of the House in 2011. In 2012, his full and partial success rate was 21.4% and of his 2013 legislative requests only two were enacted by Congress for a success rate of 4.9%. However, Obama has taken executive action on a number of his requests since Congress has failed to act.

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.

“President 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 State of the Union Address 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. He also introduced AmeriCorp participants as a way of touting the program as a success while making the case that Congress should not cut the program.

“President 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.”

The upcoming State of the Union Address could give insight into how Obama would like his presidency to be remembered, as second term presidents typically focus on their “legacy” during their remaining time in office. For example, both Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton concentrated on foreign policy during their second term. Howard believes Obama’s policy rhetoric during his second term will be similar to his first term.

*[View presidential requests for Congressional Action in State of the Union Addresses.](#) Sources: Donna R. Hoffman and Alison D. Howard, *Addressing the State of the Union* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2006), 144. Donna R. Hoffman and Alison D. Howard, “Obama in Words and Deeds,” *Social Science Quarterly* 93 (2012): 1326. Updates by authors.*

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