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Agenda Setting in the State of the Union: The Impact on Legislative Success

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Abstract
This essay explores the success of the agenda set in the State of the Union and attempts to provide insight on the factors that affect this success. Specifically, I will examine many factors on legislation which include: How does the year in a President's term affect legislative success? How does control of government affect legislative success? What role does partisanship play in the success of the agenda? After this analysis, I will evaluate the presidential success scores reported by the CQ almanac in relationship with the success of the President's agenda.

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Theory: Contemporary theories of presidential success factors on legislation are used to examine the success rates of the president's domestic agenda, which has been set in the State of the Union address dating from the time of President Carter's address in 1978.

Hypotheses: First, I look at the effects of the balance of power in Congress on legislative success. Second, I look at the effects of percentage of party in office in Congress on legislative success. Next, I look at the year in the President's term and how that affect the legislation passed. Also, I look at the change in public opinion polls of presidential approval ratings before and after the State of the Union and its effects on legislation passed. Finally, I will compare my agenda success rate with presidential success scores as reported by the CQ almanac to examine the validity of the score.

Methods: I will employ a bivariate regression analysis of the success of presidential agenda items stated in the State of the Union in the Congressional Legislative year. The variables to be tested will include: Length of presidential term in office, Balance of Power in Congress, and Percentage of Seats held by the President's party. The presidential agenda success score will also be used to analyze the validity of the annual CQ presidential success scores and vice versa.

Results: The effects of the variables on the legislative success of the President's agenda in the State of the Union were not overwhelmingly significant. Balance of Power in Congress appeared to be the only variable with any statistical significance. However the "honeymoon" theory of Presidential terms appears to be disproved in relationship with agenda items. It appears that outside factors not used within the research are the determining factors upon legislative success of agenda items in the State of the Union.

The constitutional design of the United States government requires cooperation and compromise between Congress and the President. However, lately this relationship has been marked by circumstances that discouraged compromise. As many experts have put it, we have been in an era of polarized politics. This leads us to the question at hand – what role does the president's agenda play in legislation? Also by constitutional design, the president is required to address the entire government once a year thru the State of the Union. This address has become a political stage for the President. With the attention of the entire United States government and the American society, the President uses the address to set his agenda for the upcoming Congressional year. Little information exists on the success of this agenda and the possible effects of that success. This is particularly important research for further knowledge on the relationship between the President and the Congress, Partisan effects in Congress, and also public opinion including ideas on how public opinion affects public policy and the possible influence of presidential ideas on public opinion.

This essay explores the success of the agenda set in the State of the Union and attempts to provide insight on the factors that affect this success. Specifically, I will examine many factors on legislation which include: How does the year in a President's term affect legislative success? How does control of government affect legislative success? What role does partisanship play in the success of the agenda? After this analysis, I will evaluate the presidential success scores reported by the CQ almanac in relationship with the success of the President's agenda. Are the CQ success scores valid in relationship with the "big ticket" agenda items or is this merely a score based on partisan support for all legislation? I will address these questions and attempt to answer within this essay.

Previous Research

Given the increased importance of the State of the Union in the late 20th century, it is particularly surprising that there has been very little research on its effects upon legislation. The president occupies the most prominent position in American politics. He or

She has the unique ability to promote a national vision and to influence actors both in the public and private sectors. In the 20th century, the president's visibility in American politics has increased with a growing role in domestic policy. With words and images as well as the actions of the administration, the president sets the terms of debate for the entire political system. Over the years, presidents have used their "power of persuasion" the public in its opinions. This has lead to an important bartering tool with members of Congress. However, the president doesn't always have to speak out. The threat of "going public" is just as effective. The State of the Union has evolved to become the most important event in the President's public speaking schedule. It is the major event in presidential leadership and congressional relations. When presidents give the State of the Union address, they face a rare assemblage of both houses of Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Cabinet; the vice president and Speaker of the House are seated behind the president, and a huge flag, the very symbol of democracy itself, hangs in the background. All major television networks cover the address thoroughly, halting regularly scheduled programming to televise the event. The address covers the range from domestic policy plans to foreign relations for the coming year. Even if the designs are not yet completed, presidents announce their agenda for the upcoming legislative year. Theorists have noted that the setting of the speech is just as important as the words spoken and goals articulated. Very few spectators can remember everything in the speech, but most can recall the memory of the symbolic backdrop. The substance retained is usually restricted to a few key phrases or ideas. Therefore, only the most important or the priority policy is mentioned within the address (*Presidents and the Public*, 1990). This is done to build momentum and obtain agenda space in Congress.

At the core of every president's legislative strategy is getting his or her agenda accepted and supported by Congress. If presidents cannot focus the attention of Congress on his or her priority policy, the policy will get lost in the legislative process. Huntington (1973) asserted that "Scholars have maintained that the President has the most significant role in setting the policy-making agenda." Bond and Fleisher (1990) also found that "The

president's greatest influence over policy making comes from the agenda he pursues and the way it is packaged." The most prominent work on the president and agendas is that of Paul Light (1991), who examined the president's domestic agenda from the Kennedy presidency to the Reagan presidency. Light provides a descriptive and qualitative study of the agenda setting process. Through this study, Light presents two theoretical ideas, the first of which concerns how presidents develop goals of the agenda. Light creates the idea of the "soup pot". The soup pot represents the collection of policy input from media, the public, Congress (both majority and minority parties), and most importantly advisors and the president's self-ideology. From this collection the president develops personal policy, using ideas from all sectors and not restricted in the policy formation. Light's second theoretical idea is what actually forms the agenda from the ideas. Light states, "Presidents must often sacrifice careful planning in the search for legislative enactment .... Presidents must often have to choose between reelection and good policy." Presidents often have to move away from the best ideas or the ideas that best represent their ideology for quick fixes. Our politicians are often judged on the idea of "what have you done for me lately?" This is the dilemma that faces all Presidents and their agendas. This study however only centers on how the president's agenda is created and not the role the president plays in getting that agenda set in Congress. Mouw and Mackuen (1992) observed in their study that Presidents set agendas that balance these two objectives: they try to "tailor the policy content to have a chance to win," while reflecting the president's "preferences about the policy matter at hand."

It is also pertinent to analyze the working relationship between the President and Congress. Covington, Wrighton, and Kinney (1995) compared a Presidency augmented model of presidential success with a traditional Congressional centered model. The Congressional centered model is illustrated by the following, "presidential success is determined in large measure by the results of the last election. If the last election brings individuals to Congress whose local interests and preferences coincide with the presidents, then he will enjoy greater success. If, on the other hand, most members of Congress have preferences different from

the president's, then he will suffer more defeats." This appears to be a strictly partisan view of presidential-congressional relations. However, the Presidential augmented model makes two modifications on the Congressional centered model. The model recognizes the ability of the President to shape proposals considered by Congress and that Party leaders can shape the ideas of Congressmen to follow those of the President. The President can affect legislation by "framing issues that favor his programs, the president sets the terms of debate on his proposals and thus the premises on which members of Congress cast their votes...When a President is successful in framing issues to his advantage, he has won half the battle. He has established the premises or direction of a policy or sets of policies." The authors examined these two models by a means test of roll call voting. The results found no support for either the Presidency augmented model or the Congressional Centered model. However, the results did prove that the President did have at least some effect on legislation. The authors concluded that "we must go further in our search for measures of presidential involvement at the pre-floor stages of the process, and the effects of their involvement in that process."

E.E. Schattschneider (1960) in The Semi-Sovereign People produced a new theory on American politics. Schattschneider's theory is based on the idea that all politics are a conflict between two actors. The actor who has the most support will "win" the conflict. Therefore, each actor's goal is either to expose the conflict to bring more people to one side or to conceal and internalize the conflict to keep the sides as they are. Simply put, "He who has more friends wins." It can be seen that the State of the Union exposes the conflict, which is the president's agenda, and assists in bringing more friends - the American public on the side of the president.

The President's increasing role in American politics is reflected in, and magnified by, the American media. The State of the Union just serves as one example. The media exhaustively covers the address, with all news outlets predicting what the President will cover, every major network televising the address, and every newspaper and news outlet covering every last word of what was said. This has become the major political event of the

year. The media coverage has also been used to gain support from the American public on certain policy areas and plans. Kernell and Jacobson (1987) discovered evidence that suggests presidents have enjoyed an advantage in press coverage over Congress throughout the twentieth century. Edwards and Wood (1999) explored the president's success in focusing the attention of Congress and the mass media to targeted issues using a time-series measure of presidential, congressional, and mass media attention. Their findings discovered that, "in domestic policy, we find a more interactive relationship, one that appears to offer the president the opportunity to act in an entrepreneurial fashion to focus the attention of others in the system on major presidential initiatives." Edward Schneier (1969) supports this claim by stating "public attitudes and opinions about issues under public discussion are also conditioned by our knowledge of the opinions and behaviors of other groups." The president must play the game of politics, a game which is a game of skill. Much of this skill involves the power of persuasion: the ability to mobilize public opinion, to convince sympathetic policy-makers that they should act and unsympathetic ones to change their minds. Presidents strive to invoke the mindset of "if he's for it, I'm for it." All this leads to the concept that public opinion is actually a dependent variable; it takes the shape of the ideas of outside actors. The president plays a leading role in shaping the ideals to be taken on by the American public.

Research Design and Hypotheses

This exploratory project examines the Legislative success rate in Congress of the Presidential agenda set in the State of the Union and the extent to which it is associated with the length of presidential term, balance of power in Congress, and the percentage level at which the President's party controls Congress. The data set contains the presidential terms from Jimmy Carter in1978 to the current George W. Bush term of 2004. The data was collected by determining the agenda items established in the State of the Union and assessed on the success of their passage in Congress. These items were then analyzed to see if they were signed into law during that Congressional year. A simple

percentage equation will be used to create the Legislative success score. The legislative score will be determined using the following equation and a regression model will be run with the following variables:

Legs suc= a+b1(maj con)+b2(% seat)+b3(LoT)

Three propositions will be examined in the following sections.

Balance of Power
Hypothesis 1: The presidents with their party in control of Congress will be more likely to experience legislative success in the agenda set in the State of the Union.

This hypothesis will be tested using a nominal variable. Zero (0) will represent having neither the House or Senate controlled by the president's party, one (1) will represent having either the House or Senate controlled by the president's party, and two (2) will represent having both the House and Senate controlled by the president's party. The House has sole power to set the legislative agenda for the upcoming year; therefore having control of Congress serves the President as a great power. Controlling the Congress has traditionally meant that the President can take on more ideological policies instead of having to appease the other party when they may have control of the Congress. Bond and Fleisher (1990) acknowledge this power when they stated that, "The president's party leaders typically assume the role of administration lieutenants in Congress." These whips help rally the vote counts for presidential policies, securing their passage through both chambers and onto the President's desk. Sinclair (1997) discovered similar findings "When the president and the congressional majority are of the same party, greater partisanship leads to greater presidential success."

Party Control of Congress
Hypothesis 2: Presidents with their party holding a higher percentage of Congressional seats will be more likely to experience legislative success in the agenda stated in the State of the Union.

This hypothesis will be tested using an ordinal variable. I will determine the percentage of members of Congress that is in the president's party. The number of party members will be divided by 535, being that there is 435 seats in the House of Representatives and 100 seats in the Senate; the number of vacancies will be subtracted from the total. The hypothesis follows common logic. The president is supposed to support and follow the party policy plans, along with members of the same party. However, when it comes to constituents beliefs versus party policy, which way will the Representative choose? Taylor (1998) and Edwards (1989) found that Congressional members are typically apt to follow the president's lead. Kingdon (1989) discovered that, "Congressional members' voting patterns are shaped primarily by constituency interests. Perhaps members are more supportive because they have constituencies that are more attuned to the president's wishes than do other members."

Length of term
Hypothesis 3: Presidents who have served in office longer will be less likely to experience legislative success in the agenda stated in the State of the Union.

This hypothesis will be tested using an ordinal variable. The year in term will be designated simply by the year number in the term. The first number that will be used will be 2 due to the fact that the President does not give a State of the Union address in his first year. In that first year, the President's agenda is laid out in his inauguration speech. However this essay will only evaluate State of the Union addresses and therefore the first year is left out. A popular theory in contemporary American political science is that of the Presidential Honeymoon. This idea is that the president will experience much more success in the earlier years of his term. Right after an election, the president experiences a majority support of the American public, or at least an Electoral College majority of support. Presidential nominees are usually given support based on their policy ideas. Therefore the norm is that presidents come into the office with a "running start" of support

for his policy plans for the upcoming congressional year. Conversely throughout his or her term, the president begins to lose support and opposition policy ideas arise to the agenda. Kernell's study (1978) found that "since popularity polls have been taken in the mid-1930's, every president besides Eisenhower has left office less popular than when he entered." Also, as the public popularity for the president falls throughout the term, legislators are less likely to support the president and his agenda in order to appeal to their constituents' opinions. Edwards III and Barrett (2000) stated that, "The President's advantage over Congress in the success of his initiatives is restricted to unified government." This unification ceases to exist as presidential support scores plummet.

Validity Check

CQ Almanac publishes yearly their Presidential Success score. This score is based on the percentage of roll call votes won that the president made a clear stand on. These votes can include anything from budgetary items to domestic policy or even foreign policy. This score will be analyzed along with the Presidential agenda score to check the validity and the effects of non-agenda items versus agenda items.

Discussion

Regression results for all independent variables while the President's State of the Union Agenda served as the dependent variable and can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: SOTU Agenda Regression

	B Value	Beta	Significance
BoP %	4.48	0.282	0.432
Seats	0.26	0.145	0.67
YiO	1.322	0.188	0.434

R square: .137

Contrary to original expectations, no hypotheses were proven to be correct. Not only were none of the variables

statistically significant, they were nowhere close to carry that benchmark. However Balance of Power and Years in Office appeared to hold a little more weight than that of Percentage of Seats in Congress. Yet Years in Office was not negative as predicted and hypothesized, possibly showing a trend that does not follow many popular theories.

Due to these results, the same regression model was run but CQ's Presidential success score was used as the dependent variable. The results can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: CQ Presidential Success Regression

	B Value	Beta	Significance
BoP %	10.724	0.601	0.007**
Seats	0.231	0.115	0.55
YiO	-2.238	-0.284	0.045*

R square: .726
* p<.05
**p<.01

When using this regression model, I found two variables to be significant. Balance of Power followed the predicted hypothesis and was significant to the .01 level. Years in office was significant to the .05 level. Despite the fact that the previous equation using State of the Union agenda found nothing significant, its significance trends seem to follow the same trends as did the CQ success score equation. Balance of Power in Congress appears to hold the most effect of all variables. Years in Office also appears to have a similar affect though it is in the opposite direction than was hypothesized and that many theorists have discovered. Percentage of Seats in Congress appears to not play a factor at all in this analysis.

After finding these results, I decided to run the same equations individually using the only two-term presidents studied in this analysis, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. Table 3 below

contains the regression results using the State of the Union Agenda as the dependent variable.

Table 3: Reagan SOTU Agenda Regression

	B Value	Beta	Significance
BoP %	2.366	0.081	0.704
Seats	1.35	0.122	0.578
YiO	7.188	1	0.016*

R square: .899
*p<.05

Once again, Years in Office was significant to the .05 level but in the opposite direction than was hypothesized. According to these results, Reagan was more successful the longer he was in office, disproving my hypothesis. The other two variables, Balance of Power and Percentage of Seats controlled were nowhere close to being significant. Below, in Table 4, is the regression model with CQ's presidential scores of Reagan as the dependent variable.

Table 4: Reagan CQ Presidential Success Regression

	B Value	Beta	Significance
BoP %	2.789	0.141	0.415
Seats	0.632	0.084	0.615
YiO	-4.387	-0.893	0.011*

R square: .941

*p<.05

The results were similar in relation to the previous Reagan equation. Once again, Years in Office was significant to the .05 level. Opposite of the previous equation, this variable did support the hypothesis. This establishes that Reagan was more successful

on overall roll call votes earlier in his term but was more successful with agenda items later in his term.

Regression results for President Clinton, using his State of the Union Agenda as the dependent variable are represented in Table 5.

Table 5: Clinton SOTU Agenda Regression

	B Value	Beta	Significance
BoP %	38.487	3.544	0.717
Seats	-6.668	-3.55	0.683
YiO	2.869	0.755	0.728

R square: .216

This equation has produced absolutely no significant findings. No variable is even close to the threshold of being statistically significant. Table 6 contains the regression results for President Clinton using CQ's presidential success scores as the dependent variable.

Table 6: Clinton CQ Presidential Success Regression

	B Value	Beta	Significance
BoP %	135.839	6.212	0.183
Seats	-17.632	4.662	0.241
YiO	9.592	1.254	0.216

R square: .871

This equation confirms the previous equation's findings to an extent. The variables are closer to being significant but are still not significant to the .05 level. This equation shows that Balance of Power held some weight during the Clinton term. One thing both equations did prove was that neither followed the hypothesis that Presidents will have more success in their earlier terms. Both failed

to produce a negative figure which is required to prove this relationship.

Conclusion

The results from this exploratory analysis of Presidential Agenda setting in the State of the Union and its success suggests that outside factors play a large role in the success or failure of policies. The variables used in this analysis failed to fully identify the influences of success opposed to those of failure. Balance of Power in Congress was weakly proven by the research within this analysis. This result is consistent with the previous literature and conventional wisdom. Having power in Congress helps secure the fact that the agenda items will be placed on the legislative agenda. Most experts agree that most of the battle in domestic policy is getting the policies on the agenda. The project rejected the idea that party majority in Congress plays a role in policy acceptance. This appears to disprove the idea of strict partisan voting by both representatives and senators. These results appear to prove that these individuals form their voting around their constituents' views and opinions and that these are the factors that dominate roll call voting patterns by Congressmen. One interesting finding by the analysis was the disproval of the "Honeymoon theory" in certain circumstances. In the overall analysis of years in office using CQ's presidential scores as the dependent variable, this theory appears to hold true. However, when using the President's agenda in the State of the Union, the opposite effect is seen. The presidents appear to have more success the longer that they are in office. These findings seem to support some new ideas. Agenda items are usually new ideas or very complex and complicated policies. It appears to take many years to assure the policies' acceptance by all members and passage through legislation. Also, when first elected, the President enters not only with his new policies, but the policies of all 435 representatives that were just elected or re-elected and the 33 or 34 senators that were elected or re-elected as well. It takes time to decipher between all of the ideas and policies in order to create a cumulative and all-encompassing policy.

Future research should begin by reconstructing the model presented here and examining other potential direct, interactive, or

intervening variables in an attempt to capture all factors of legislative success. In particular, future research should take into account the influences of public opinion, media coverage of agenda items, and interest group activity and influence on policy. Time spent on legislation should be another factor to be taken into consideration. It is apparent that drafting and considering legislation is a time-consuming procedure. Some congressional legislative years are controlled by domestic dilemmas while others are dominated by foreign dilemmas. This controlling force appears to be a factor that could greatly affect the legislation passed. Overall, one factor appears to be controlling the procedure that was not taken into consideration; simply put, it may be the policy itself. Many times the president mentions the same policy issues year after year in the State of the Union and every year they will not be passed. By the information found in this analysis and the literature analyzed for this essay, policy is the main factor that controls how a Congressman votes. If it is a good policy that his/her constituents support, the vote cast will be yes. If it is a bad policy that his/her constituents would not support, the vote will be no. Analysis of this concept would not only improve the understanding of agenda voting, but it may serve as a step forward in understanding bicameral relations.

Appendix 1

Data Table

Year	Agenda percent	CQ suc	BoP	% Seats	YiO
1978	71.4	78.3	2	65.3	2
1979	42.9	76.8	2	62.5	3
1980	50	75.1	2	62.4	4
1981					
1982	16.7	72.4	0	44.8	2
1983	25	67.1	1	41.2	3
1984	25	65.8	1	41.7	4
1985	40	59.9	1	44	5
1986	50	56.1	1	43.7	6
1987	57.1	43.5	0	41.8	7
1988	50	47.4	0	41.9	8
1989					
1990	50	46.8	0	41.3	2
1991	45.5	54.2	0	39.1	3
1992	33.3	43	0	39.2	4
1993					
1994	22.2	86.4	2	58.1	2
1995	22.2	36.2	0	45.6	3
1996	43.8	55.1	0	45.9	4
1997	35.7	53.6	0	46.7	5
1998	25	51	0	46.7	6
1999	25	37.8	0	48	7
2000	33.3	55	0	47.7	8
2001					
2002	41.7	88	1	51.7	2
2003	55.6	78.7	2	52.6	3
2004	41.9	72.6	2	52.2	4

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    the Legislative Arena.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
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