

The Power of Suggestion: Signaling and Presidential Influence over Policy Making
in the Bureaucracy

by

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This paper was prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, MA, August 27-31, 2008.

Abstract

We examine the influence that presidents have over the bureaucracy at the macro level. We are interested in the president's ability to both shape the bureaucratic agenda and induce bureaucratic policy activity. While much research has focused on more overt efforts of presidential administrations to influence the bureaucracy (Golden 2000; Wood 1988; Moe 1985), signaling models are increasingly used to tap into less overt efforts by political principals to influence bureaucratic policy making (Epstein and O'Halloran 1999; Carpenter 1996). Using unique data collected on presidential policy tools and substantive policy change in the federal bureaucracy, we investigate whether presidential signals, sent using certain policy tools, are able to provoke bureaucratic policy activity.

Our measure of presidential efforts to signal policy directions are the policy content of State of the Union addresses. Our measure of bureaucratic policy making is the number of changes made to the parts comprising the Code of Federal Regulations. Are less overt avenues of influence such as signaling effective in inducing bureaucratic policy change? Is there a relationship between presidential signaling via State of the Union addresses and policy change in the federal bureaucracy? Is presidential signaling more effective in some issue areas than in others? We explore these questions and move toward a theory of presidential influence that relates the use of particular policy tools to presidential signaling about policy priorities and the influence of executive attention on policy change in the federal bureaucracy.

Many studies have focused on overt efforts by presidents to influence and control the views and actions of bureaucrats. Such efforts include attempting to attain control through the strategic choice of political appointees, reorganizing the bureaucracy, and the manipulation of agency budgets (Moe 1985; Arnold 1998; Nathan 1983; Snyder and Weingast 2000; Waterman 1989; Wood and Waterman 1994). An additional example of clear presidential efforts to control the bureaucracy comes in the form of unilaterally creating, structuring, and insulating federal agencies (Howell and Lewis 2002). Increasingly, signaling models are used to tap into less overt efforts by political principals to influence bureaucratic policy making (Epstein and O'Halloran 1999; Carpenter 1996; Whitford and Yates 2003; Eshbaugh-Soha 2008).

Broadly, we are interested in how much influence presidents have over the bureaucracy at the macro level. How do less overt attempts by the president to set the agenda of the executive branch of government shape the contours of bureaucratic policy change? Can presidents both set bureaucratic agendas and induce bureaucratic policy activity? More specifically, we examine whether presidents are able to induce bureaucratic policy activity with the signals they send with their use of State of the Union addresses. We make use of data on presidential signals across all policy areas sent via State of the Union addresses between 1997 and 2007. Using the Code of Federal Regulations, we examine policy change over the entire U.S. federal bureaucracy over the same time period. We argue that presidential signaling about policy priorities via the use of this tool has the ability both to set bureaucratic agendas, influencing bureaucratic policy activity, and induce policy change.

Presidential Signaling

How is presidential signaling best conceived? We conceptualize presidential signaling in terms of its relationship to the allocation of presidential attention across a range of issues. All organizations are subject to limitations on their ability to address multiple issues simultaneously. Even Congress, with over forty-four standing committees and 535 members, faces limits to its ability to attend to the agenda confronting government at any one point in time and there is reason to believe the effects of this “bottleneck” of attention (Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Simon 1996) are exacerbated in the executive branch where there exists greater centralization of decision making and hierarchical chains of communication. Given these limitations, allocation of scarce attention to an issue sends a strong signal regarding presidential policy priorities.

Given the wide-ranging avenues of influence presidents have for inducing policy change in the executive branch, why is the much less overt, and direct, use of signaling important? Presidents have at their disposal the power of political appointment, influence over agency budgets, and the ability to undertake far-reaching bureaucratic re-organizations. Nevertheless, presidents have the ability to signal policy priorities far beyond these overt and direct strategies. Given limited attention, allocation of presidential attention to some issues and not others represents real investment in a particular policy area. While the president has many more overt ways to pursue influence over bureaucratic policymaking, many of these avenues are subject to interference from the legislative and judicial branches of government.

While the president has extraordinary organizational and budgetary powers with regard to influencing the bureaucracy for example, Congress nevertheless must pass on agency budgets, confirm political appointments, and oversee the various agencies comprising the bureaucracy. By focusing substantive policy attention on given issues the president communicates policy priorities and does so in a manner uninhibited by interference from the executive and judicial

branches of government. The use of signaling represents a very real avenue of influence over the bureaucracy that is not taxed by the cost of political capital lost in more overt and public conflicts with Congress and the federal judiciary.

What We Know About Presidential Influence and Policy Tools

There is conflicting evidence regarding the power of presidential rhetoric to set agendas and persuade. Most studies focus on the influence of presidential rhetoric on presidential success in Congress and/or public opinion (Brace and Hinckley 1993; Canes-Wrone 2005; Cohen 1995; Covington 1987; Edwards 1983, 2003; Hill 1998; Kernell 1986; Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987). Presidents, both popular and unpopular, are able to set the public agenda with their State of the Union Addresses in economic, civil rights, and foreign policy (Cohen 1995; Hill 1998). The effect is short term for economic and civil rights policy, while it is stronger and longer lasting for foreign policy issues (Cohen 1995). On the other hand, Edwards (2003) finds that presidents are not typically able to change public opinion or focus the public agenda.

The most recent research examining the indirect power of presidential rhetoric on success in Congress indicates that presidents increase their chances of legislative success by publicizing popular initiatives that Congress is not initially inclined to enact (Canes-Wrone 2005). Canes-Wrone (2005) also finds variations in presidential influence by policy area—with domestic policy, influence on the issue at hand must be congruent with public preferences in order to successfully pressure Congress, while foreign policy initiatives are less dependent on the public's initial support.

Signaling and Influence in the Bureaucracy

Research on the power of presidential rhetoric over the bureaucracy is sparse, yet growing. Whitford and Yates (2003) find that the drug composition of U.S. Attorneys' caseloads was positively related to presidential statements emphasizing drug policy. Presidential statements on the environment have been found to influence Environmental Protection Agency policy activity (Wood and Waterman 1993). And, when presidents send positive signals concerning civil rights policy, those signals tend to be followed by an increase in the number of civil rights cases filed in the U.S. District Courts (Eshbaugh-Soha 2008). More generally, research indicates that both cabinet-level secretaries and career bureaucrats responsible for implementation of policy look to presidential public statements as important sources of information (Regan 1988; Shull and Garland 1995). We build from that foundation and examine whether preferences signaled via State of the Union address policy statements influence bureaucratic activity and policy change. And further, whether this influence varies by substantive policy area.

The unique and broad nature of our data allows us to explore a number of interesting dynamics regarding the effects of presidential signals. Given existing research on the influence of presidential rhetoric on bureaucratic agendas (Whitford and Yates 2003; Eshbaugh-Soha 2008), we expect to find that State of the Union addresses do indeed influence bureaucratic policy making. We also expect the influence of presidential signaling via State of the Union addresses to vary with the nature of the issue. In other words, certain presidential policy tools are better suited to addressing particular issue areas (Larsen-Price 2007).

At the broadest level we examine whether presidential signals are more influential in the realm of foreign affairs and defense than they are in domestic policy areas. As both the "Commander in Chief" of the U.S. military and the nation's "Chief Diplomat," the president has

wide-ranging constitutional and extra-constitutional authority in the realm of defense and foreign affairs. We expect to find that the “two presidencies” thesis (Wildavsky 1975) holds up and presidential signals are more likely to induce bureaucratic policy change in foreign affairs and defense.

We also expect to find variations in presidential influence across policy areas. Presidents are much better equipped to influence policy in some issue areas than in others. Beyond the “two presidencies” thesis, and presidential dominance of foreign relations, presidents face stiff opposition in trying influence day-to-day domestic policy. Moving from foreign to domestic policies, presidents lose a rather heavy advantage in terms of information and ability to act unilaterally. Any president hoping to influence domestic policy ultimately confronts Congress with its sets of regularized relationships with organized interests and federal agencies. Policy subsystems limit the ability of presidents to induce policy change in some substantive issue areas. The influence of presidential signaling will vary with the relative strength of the subsystem arrangements in given policy areas.

The success of presidential influence on bureaucratic policy change varies not only with differences in issues, but differences in administrations as well. Some administrations favor particular strategies of influence over others, and this too varies with regard to the given issue. For instance, Golden (2000) argues that the Reagan administration sought influence in environmental policy by pursuing an administrative strategy—particularly in the use of the appointment power.

Within the federal bureaucracy, signals concerning presidential policy priorities are processed by varying organizational and institutional configurations of bureaucratic agencies and departments. How presidential signals are processed by the machinery of the federal bureaucracy

is an important factor buffeting the influence of presidential signals (May, Workman, and Jones, forthcoming). The organizational makeup of given federal agencies leads in some cases to an over-response by the bureaucracy to presidential policy signals and an under-response in others as the bureaucracy translates attention at higher levels of government into policy action. We also expect that bureaucratic agencies will vary in their response to presidential signals based on how the particular agency was created (Howell and Lewis 2002). Those agencies created by legislation may feel less compelled to respond to presidential signals than those created by executive orders or presidential reorganization plans. To summarize, we expect presidential policy signals sent via State of the Union addresses to be associated with policy change in the bureaucracy; nevertheless, this influence will vary with the nature of issues and the organizational makeup of given agency.

Data and Hypotheses

All primary independent and dependent variables for the project are being collected and coded as part of the Policy Agendas Project. The Policy Agendas Project is unique in that all data collected is coded in a uniform manner by issue area (using 19 major topic codes and 225 sub topic codes), allowing for comparisons in issue attention and policy outcomes across datasets. At this point in our research our data is complete for the 1997-2007 time period.¹

We collect and code State of the Union Addresses as an indicator of presidential signaling about policy priorities. Each speech was content analyzed for policy statements, and

¹ We are continuing to extend our data series for subsequent iterations of this and other papers that stem from this project. The larger project of which this research is a part includes an examination of signaling across presidential policy tools. Specifically, we examine variation in the use of State of the Union addresses, Executive Orders, and Solicitor General Briefs to signal presidential policy priorities and the influence of these tools on agenda setting and policy making in the federal bureaucracy. Data collection for the presidential policy tools is complete since the Second World War. Data collection for the bureaucracy includes an examination of changes to the *Code of Federal Regulations*, federal agency rulemaking, and overall policy activity in the pages of the *Federal Register* since the Second World War. Data collection for the bureaucracy is complete from 1986 to the present.

each quasi-sentence is coded according to the Policy Agendas Project framework². Quasi-sentences devoid of policy content were removed from all analyses, as all State of the Union Addresses contain some statements that are greetings at the beginning of the speech, closing comments, and many feel-good statements about the nation that do not contain any hint of policy.

In order to gauge the extent to which the president is able to effectively influence bureaucratic attention and policymaking via signaling, we examine changes to the *Code of Federal Regulations* (CFR). The CFR is organized by major title (1 through 50), chapter, and further by part (and even further by sections). Various institutional units within the federal bureaucracy make policy under the various chapters and parts of the CFR. Since we are interested in the relationship between presidential signaling and substantive policy change in the bureaucracy, we examine the *List of Sections Affected* (LSA) for the time period under study. The LSA records the sections under each CFR chapter and part that have been changed or “affected” by bureaucratic policy making. Thus, the LSA records substantive policy change pursuant to bureaucratic policy making over a given period of time.³

We collected and coded each CFR part over the period 1997 through 2007, 15,732 parts in all. Each part was coded by title using the same Policy Agendas Project coding scheme as used to code State of the Union addresses. After coding each CFR part, we use the LSA to count the number of changes to each CFR part occurring in a given year. In all, we were able to identify 73,619 changes to CFR parts from 1997 through 2007. From these data, we are able to

² Coding at the quasi-sentence means that when semi-colons exist in a sentence, they signify the beginning of a new thought or topic of discussion. So, semi-colons are treated as periods. Lists typically follow semi-colons, and those lists often concern multiple-policy areas. Therefore, coding at the quasi-sentence allows all of the policy attention to be included in the study, rather than be condensed under topic area.

³ The List of Sections Affected appears each month, but four annual volumes cover different CFR Titles and are issued throughout the year. By looking at the December volume, one gets a picture of the changes that have occurred over the previous calendar year.

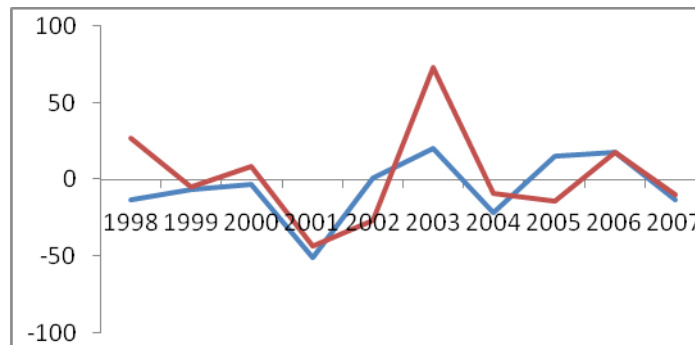
gauge the amount of policy change in given issue areas over time. With these measures we are able to relate presidential signaling about policy priorities as measure using State of the Union addresses to substantive policy change in the federal bureaucracy.

In addition to coding the substance of CFR parts, we collect information on the bureaucratic agencies administering different CFR parts. We collected information on whether the federal agency or organizational unit was an independent regulatory commission or board, or whether it was lodged in one of the cabinet departments. Using this information, we are able to examine the influence of organizational structure on the relationship between presidential signaling and bureaucratic policy change.

Presidential Signaling and Bureaucratic Policy Change (Some Initial Evidence)

Figure 1 displays the percentage change in the aggregate number of policy statements in State of the Union addresses along with aggregated changes to the CFR parts from 1998 through 2007.⁴ In Figure 1, the red line displays the State of the Union data, while the blue displays the CFR part change data. The figure generally shows a positive relationship between policy statements in the State of the Union addresses and aggregate change across the federal bureaucracy in the parts of the CFR.

Figure 1: Percentage Change in State of the Union Policy Content and CFR Part Changes.



⁴ Necessary differencing leads to the loss of information for 1997 in this figure.

While the two series suggest a relationship between presidential signaling and bureaucratic policy making, the aggregate series mask a great deal of variation across issues and organizational configurations. We have argued above that the influence of presidential signaling will vary with the issue under consideration. Figure 2 displays the allocation of attention to each of the 19 major topic areas in the Policy Agendas Project coding scheme. Each series is the proportion of State of the Union address policy content or CFR part changes falling into each issue category. Note that Figure 2 already suggests differences rooted in issue variation in the relationship between presidential attention and bureaucratic policy change. Some issues (e.g. labor and immigration, foreign trade, or health policy) receive similar amounts of attention from the president and the bureaucracy, possibly indicative of the influence of presidential signaling about policy priorities. Nevertheless, several of the issues show a disjuncture between presidential attentions as measured in State of the Union addresses and bureaucratic policy making. Some of these differences, like international relations, are to be expected given the high concentration of presidents on that policy area combined with their freedom of action. Likewise, a great deal of federal agency policy making concerns the inner-workings of the agencies themselves and their relationships to one another. Similarly, agriculture and transportation are policy areas distributive in nature and historically the setting for subsystem politics dominated by the set of interest alignments and supportive congressional allies for farm subsidies and highway funds buttressed by traditionally powerful bureaucratic entities in the Departments of Agriculture and Transportation.

Figure 2: Presidential Attention and Bureaucratic Policy Making Across Issues.

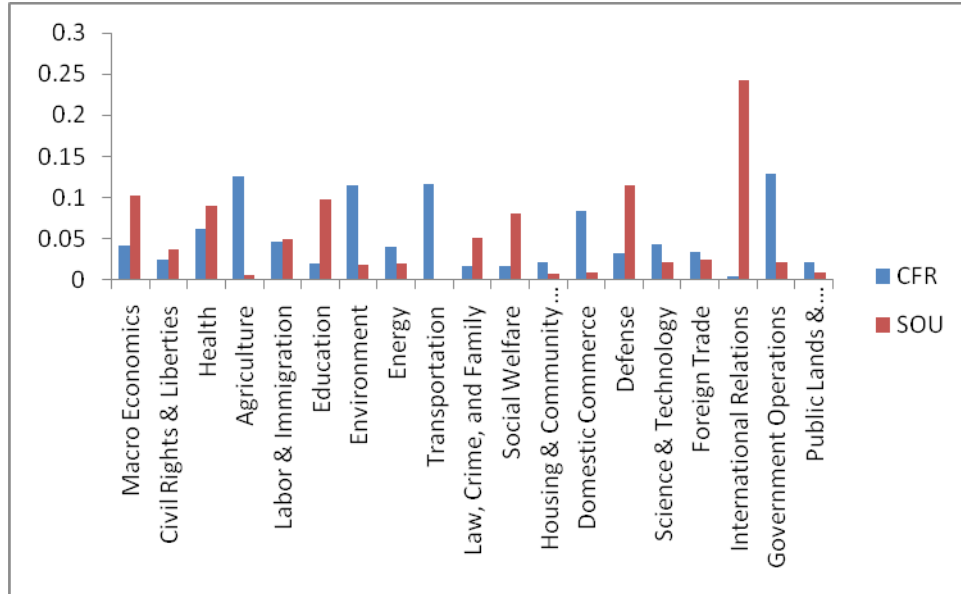


Table 1 displays the correlations between policy statements in the State of the Union addresses and changes to the parts of the CFR along with tests of statistical significance for these correlations. The first thing to note is that the strong positive relationships of Figure 2 reach conventional levels of statistical significance in Table 1, even in the face of a relatively small sample. The eight negative correlations of Table 1 are statistically indistinguishable from zero. High positive and statistically significant relationships between presidential attention to an issue in the State of the Union addresses and bureaucratic policy making exist for education, the environment, housing and community development, science and technology, foreign trade, government operations, and public lands.

While a few salient issues do not display strong, statistical relationships in Table 1, it should be noted that this is in no way an indication that the president is not influential in these areas, but that the pathways of influence are perhaps more direct (e.g. defense). Still, it is somewhat puzzling that there is not a detectable relationship between presidential attention and

bureaucratic policy making in issue areas like macro economics and domestic commerce.

Presidents historically devote a great deal of attention to managing the economy, including the syncing of fiscal and monetary policy and attention to regulatory activity in domestic commerce.

Issue	Executive Orders	P <
Macroeconomics	-.08	.821
Civil Rights & Liberties	-.09	.600
Health	.13	.707
Agriculture	.40	.110
Labor & Immigration	.37	.269
Education	.64	.033
Environment	.70	.017
Energy	-.24	.469
Transportation	-.04	.905
Law, Crime, & Family Issues	.21	.536
Social Welfare	.06	.849
Community Development & Housing	.65	.015
Banking, Finance, & Domestic Commerce	-.67	.989
Defense	-.02	.527
Space, Science, Technology & Communications	.82	.001
Foreign Trade	.65	.015
International Affairs & Foreign Aid	-.38	.874
Government Operations	.72	.012
Public Lands & Water Management	.62	.020

Table 1: Presidential Signaling and Bureaucratic Policy Making

Institutional variation is perhaps nowhere greater than in the federal bureaucracy. Since some of these broad policy areas are administered by federal bureaucracies with departmental status, while others are administered by federal agencies operating as independent regulatory

commissions and boards, issue variation in the link between presidential signaling about policy priorities and bureaucratic policy activity could be in part due to the organizational makeup of the federal agencies making policy in given areas. One might expect the correlation between presidential signaling as measured in State of the Union addresses and bureaucratic policy change to be stronger in agencies housed within cabinet departments than with independent regulatory commissions and boards.

Examining the relationship between presidential signaling and bureaucratic policy activity while accounting for whether the bureaucratic entity was departmental or an independent regulatory body yielded no significant difference in correlations. Issue areas in Table 1 displaying a strong relationship continued to do so, while issue areas not displaying a relationship continued unaffected. The issue bases of variation in the linkage between signaling and bureaucratic policy activity seem the strongest of those posited, though the data is preliminary.

The data garnered from the CFR present a particularly tough test of presidential influence. The data recorded in the table are actual changes to the CFR rather than somewhat less demanding agenda items. The counts represent the addition, deletion, and manipulation of given parts of the CFR. Many of these go beyond more trivial changes to constitute large scale changes in the provision of public services, goods, and regulation.

Our data at this point can only touch on the major influence of given administrations on the relationships we seek to understand. Table 2 presents the yearly averages and total number of changes to parts of the CFR by presidential administration for our limited time frame. President Clinton oversaw more changes in the substantive body of code administered by the federal bureaucracy in the four years in our current sample than the current President Bush has oversaw

in seven years. Likewise, President Clinton’s State of the Union addresses contained an annual average of 342 policy statements that we were able to code, while President Bush’s State of the Unions contained an annual average of only 226 policy statements. This highlights the great variation with which presidents actually seek to influence substantive policy making in the federal bureaucracy and the tools they might use to do so. Further, presidents not only vary in their decisions about which policy tools to use in which issue areas, but they also vary a great deal in their decision making regarding the targets of these tools. These are not easily addressed with the admittedly short time series we have in this research, but will be areas for future study.

Table 2: Changes to CFR Sections by President

President	Average Part Changes	Total
Clinton (1997-2000)	9904	39,619
Bush II (2001-2007)	4857	34,000

Conclusions

This paper serves as an initial test of whether presidential signals influence bureaucratic change. We began with the expectation that the effect of presidential signals would vary by issue area due to two factors. First, presidential attention to issues is dynamic and also varies within each policy tool at their disposal. Second, differences in the organizational makeup of bureaucratic units led us to expect variation in reactions to signals by type of unit. As expected, we find significant, positive relationships between presidential statements and changes in the CFR in seven of the nineteen topic areas examined. These findings are very encouraging considering the small time span we are dealing with and the fact that we are looking at actual bureaucratic change (rather than just bureaucratic agendas). Our findings are also surprising in that we failed to find that the organizational makeup of bureaucratic unit matters when it comes to these relationships between presidential statements and bureaucratic change. In the future we

plan to include a control for those bureaucratic agencies that were created by presidential design (executive orders or reorganization plans) to see if they are more likely to respond to presidential signals than those units created via legislation.

One of the initial questions that we ask in this paper is can presidents both set bureaucratic agendas and induce bureaucratic policy change? Obviously, we only begin to address the possible inducement of bureaucratic policy change in this paper; however, we are only in the preliminary stages of this project. Our data collection effort is still underway; therefore, future iterations of this paper (and others that stem from this project) will examine both presidential signals influencing bureaucratic agendas and then actual bureaucratic policy change. We will do this by including agency rule making, the volume of activity in the Federal Register, bureaucratic organizational changes as recorded in the U.S. Government Manual, and additional measures of presidential signals.

When examining both the influence of signals on agenda setting and policy change, we expect to find that presidential signals exert greater influence over bureaucratic agendas than actual policy change, as it is logical that it is *easier to tell bureaucrats what to think about than it is to induce them to change their actions*. As stated earlier, we consider this paper a hard test of our expectations in light of the fact that changes in the CFR are a step beyond agenda setting; therefore, presidential signals inducing these changes provide strong support for our theoretical story. So while our findings are limited by our data series at this point in time, they provide both preliminary evidence for some of our expectations and encourage the continuation of our project.

In the future, when our data spans the administrations of Eisenhower through George W. Bush, we will be able to answer questions about the role of Congress, divided government, and the bureaucratic agenda itself in this process. We recognize the need to control for other sources

of influence, or other signals that may reach and influence the bureaucracy (such as presidential signing statements). Bureaucratic policy activity and change may stem from other signals such as changes in public opinion (or the salience of particular issues) and changes in congressional attention to issues. We also hope to eventually distinguish the effect of the overt presidential control mechanisms (i.e., political appointments) from the less overt presidential signals.

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