

MASTERING THE ART OF PERSUASION: ANALYZING LYNDON B. JOHNSON'S LEGISLATIVE SPEECHCRAFT AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION TACTICS

INTRODUCTION

Presidents often make speeches on congressional issues to either advocate for or try to block legislation. Presidential rhetoric on congressional issues is necessary because of the different perspectives held by Congress and the executive (Tulis, 2017). Furthermore, presidents make speeches to influence the public agenda and encourage legislators “to place it prominently on the legislative agenda and work to enact it” (Eshbaugh-Soha and Miles, 2011, p. 305). Presidents will speak on pieces of legislation for different reasons, such as to frame the debate during the agenda-setting stage, help speed up a stalled debate in Congress, or to secure final passage of a bill (Eshbaugh-Soha and Miles, 2011, p. 303). Presidents may avoid making speeches on controversial issues because they do not want to alienate supporters, so they don't divide the country further on the issue, to avoid potential backlash, and ultimately they may not want to voice support for a bill that will not pass.

This thesis focused on Lyndon Johnson because of his skill as a president and legislator, his notable speechmaking ability, and the far-reaching impact of the legislation passed during his presidency. This thesis uses the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as case studies for Johnson's speechmaking on legislation.



Lyndon B. Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964.^a

METHODOLOGY

- Traveled to Lyndon B. Johnson Library in Austin, Texas to conduct archival research
- Collected documents such as letters, memos, speech drafts, and meeting notes related to Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency
- Viewed 89 boxes of documents and photographed relevant documents
- Conducted textual analysis of relevant documents

QUESTIONS/OBJECTIVES

1. How much did Johnson orate on each piece of legislation, and what did he say in those speeches?
2. What audiences did Johnson direct his speeches to?
3. Why did Johnson orate more on certain pieces of legislation compared to others?
4. How controversial were the issues that these pieces of legislation focused on?

FINDINGS

<h3>Economic Opportunity Act of 1964</h3>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent speechmaking - two “Poverty Tours” across multiple states, speeches to public, and speeches to Congress • Non-controversial nature of Bill- poverty aid could help everyone, rather than just advancing the status of a few; wasn't viewed as taking away rights from anyone • Political and social context - Johnson wanted to carry out Kennedy's legacy on civil rights but needed to have own accomplishment for election of 1964 • Minor racial objections but Civil Rights Act bore the brunt of the racial objections
<h3>Civil Rights Act of 1964</h3>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infrequent speechmaking - few speeches to both Congress and public; advocated to small groups/opinion leaders and bargaining behind the scenes • Controversial nature of Bill - racial divide in America, upcoming election and fear of losing support from Southern Democrats • Framing of legislation as inevitable next step in America's road towards progress; emphasis on moral value of supporting Bill
<h3>Voting Rights Act of 1965</h3>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infrequent speechmaking - few speeches to both Congress and public; most effort directed to behind the scenes bargaining • Viewed as continuation of Civil Rights Act, which set the stage for passage of Voting Rights Act • Time factor - wanted to pass Bill quickly to alleviate racial violence

IMPLICATIONS

- Presidents appear to *speak less to the public* when discussing a *more controversial piece of legislation*
- Prioritization of specific legislative agendas is dependent on social and historical circumstances, controversial nature of an issue, and political dynamics
- Differences in strategic speechmaking reflects the delicate balance between *advancing political agendas* and trying to *avoid political opposition to one's actions*
- Historical context and sociopolitical dynamics can significantly influence the decision of whether to speak on a piece of legislation
- Johnson's specific targeting of messages suggests that presidents ought to adapt their communication strategies based on the audiences they aim to persuade



References

1. Eshbaugh-Soha, M., & Miles, T. (2011). Presidential speeches and the stages of the legislative process. *Congress & the Presidency*, 38(3), 301-321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07343469.2011.602040>
2. Tulis, J. (2017). *The Rhetorical Presidency*. Princeton University Press.

Images

a. Leffler, W. K., photographer. (1968) *Pres. L.B. Johnson signs the Civil Rights Bill* / WKL. United States, 1968. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2003673965/>.



This work was funded in part by a College Alumni Society Undergraduate Research Grant [Vagelos Undergraduate Research Grant] through the Center for Undergraduate Research and Fellowships and the Annenberg School of Communication.