

Delivering the People's Message: Presidential Mandate Claims from Truman to George W. Bush

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Introduction

The phenomenon of the president citing his own election as justification for policy action raises a fundamental question: under what conditions do presidents claim electoral mandates? Conventional understandings of presidential mandates in the American context emphasize the importance of the election results and the issue content of the campaign. In particular, the literature finds that large victories are conducive to mandate claims (Grossback, Peterson, Stimson and Gangli 2003; Conley 2001). I argue that these explanations are incomplete because they fail to take into account the constraints imposed by expectations surrounding presidential leadership.¹

Instead of addressing the question of whether certain elections confer mandates on leaders, I pose the more empirically tractable question of when mandates are invoked in presidential communication in order to justify policy choices. The contribution of this paper is to demonstrate that presidents are more likely to make mandate claims when political conditions are conducive to crafting rhetoric that emphasizes the role of a politician rather than a national statesman. Despite expectations that they will represent the national interest and rise above partisan politics, presidents are often required to act as politicians and party leaders (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Cronin and Genovese 2004). This paper attempts to develop operational measurements of the two competing paradigms of presidential leadership, and use these two conditions to explain the variation in the use of mandate claims across presidential terms.

This theory is tested using an original dataset constructed by coding presidential communications from the first three months of each elected presidential term beginning in

1949 and extending through 2005. The systematic analysis of presidential communications has thus far been neglected as a means of empirically testing the invocation of the mandate concept in political discourse. By creating and analyzing this dataset, I attempt to contribute to scholarly inquiry about presidential mandates by shifting the focus away from assessing whether certain elections confer mandates, and toward the question of when such claims are made. The data presented here show strong support for the theory that political conditions, leadership context in particular, matter for determining when mandate claims are used. Later sections explain and operationalize these leadership contexts.

Because mandates have been associated with quality of democracy and elite responsiveness (Stokes 2001) as well as with the development of extra-constitutional presidential power (Dahl 1990; Ellis and Kirk 1995), the findings in this paper have normative significance. Presidential appeals to public sentiment have been documented as attempts to circumvent inter-branch deliberation (Tulis 1987; Kernell 1997), with a popular president using public standing to implicitly threaten legislators with the possibility of electoral defeat. The data analyzed in this paper suggest that presidents make these claims based on a variety of political conditions, some unrelated to electoral and subsequent public support. As such, popular sovereignty claims may be linked to policies that are not actually bolstered by popular support. While presidential rhetoric has been dismissed as merely words (Edwards 2003), it has also been linked to presidential power. The power of presidential rhetoric to define “political reality” (Zarefsky 2004) and, under certain conditions, to persuade other political actors (Canes-Wrone 2005) indicates that disingenuous claiming of mandates may negatively affect the democratic responsiveness of the political system.²

The first section of the paper defines the concept of mandate claims as a communication strategy. A review of the relevant literature follows. I then connect the idea of mandates to debates in American political history about the nature and sources of presidential leadership. I suggest that, contrary to the findings of previous studies of presidential mandates, presidents make mandate claims when they are particularly reliant on a political base for support (usually, but not always, a partisan base), not when they enjoy high levels of national popularity. The data and methods used to test this theory are presented and results are discussed. The final section concludes by positing further ways to test this new connection between mandate rhetoric and presidential power, and its possible normative implications.

Previous Scholarship

The empirical literature on mandates focuses mainly on elections as effective means of signaling public demand for policy change. According to this view, presidents have a mandate when they have won a decisive election. Conley (2001) defines a mandate election as one in which the result can be attributed to the policy positions of the winning candidate. She argues that mandate claims can help presidents achieve policy goals when they have actually received an electoral mandate and when Congress is likely to oppose the president's policy agenda. Grossback, Peterson and Stimson (2006) define mandates as constructions rather than actual distinctions among elections, and they contend that the perception of a mandate election creates a unique and short-lived window of opportunity for policy change. The notion of mandates as elite constructions is systematically explored by Hershey (1994) in an analysis of media coverage of the 1984 election. Ellis and Kirk

(1995) describe the evolution of the concept of the mandate through the nineteenth century, arguing against the conception of the presidential mandate as a phenomenon endemic to the modern presidency. In the comparative politics literature, Stokes (2001) approaches mandates as measures of electoral accountability for politicians in Latin America.

Other scholars, however, question this perspective, arguing against the plausibility of a national will emanating from “the people,” thus calling into question the possibility of electoral mandates. From a positive political theory perspective, Dahl (1990) builds on Riker (1988) to argue that such aggregation of national preferences is impossible. From a historical perspective Morgan (1989) makes the case that the notion of “the will of the people” was invented instrumentally by early American elites to enhance the power of elected representatives.

The literature on mandates has thus far been unable to produce an empirically testable means of determining when electoral mandates occur, and only unsystematic measures of when they are claimed. I argue that in addition to lacking a consistent measurement of mandates or mandate claims, the existing literature has not fully considered the implications of the tension between competing paradigms of presidential leadership, and is characterized by a persistent ambivalence surrounding the relationship between the president and the electorate. The next section incorporates institutional factors into a theory of the conditions under which mandate claims are made.

Theory

Two contradictory paradigms of presidential leadership currently shape the options that presidents have for defining and justifying their actions.³ These paradigms are the

nationally-minded statesman and the partisan political actor. Existing scholarship on presidential mandates depicts the president as unique because he, unlike any one member of Congress, answers to a national constituency (Conley 2001). However, this literature does not make much of the fact that the relationship of the president with both political parties and public opinion has been somewhat ambivalent since the American founding, and in the most recent, “plebiscitary” iteration of the presidency, this incoherence persists (Cronin and Genovese 2004; Kernell 1997; Tulis 1987).

I argue that the variation in the use of mandate claims stems from these dual roles. In particular, presidents will make mandate claims when acting as a partisan politician. Mandate claims, explicitly or implicitly, invoke the partisan component of presidential leadership. They remind the audience of the inherently partisan, political process of the election, and by suggesting that the president’s policies are informed by campaign promises made in the course of that competition, they insinuate partisan definitions of policies.⁴ Such a leadership stance is at odds with founding paradigms of presidential leadership; presidents are expected to be apolitical despite the fact that the office actual requires a great deal of political skill and maneuvering, including the skillful management of the party (Cronin and Genovese 2004; Ketcham 1987). Furthermore, the president is expected to unite the country, but in taking decisive policy stances, must actually engage in decisive, and potentially divisive behavior (Cronin and Genovese 2004). One contemporary instantiation of this tension in popular understandings of politics is the use of a question in the Gallup poll that asks respondents whether the president is “too much of a politician” or “has the country’s best interests at heart,” often with these two responses as the only listed

options.⁵ Due to these conflicting expectations, communication strategies that rely on the president's role as a politician will not always be desirable.

The theory tested here is that presidents will include mandate claims as part of a communication strategy only when they are willing to present themselves as partisan politicians. Mandate claims are avoided – even following landslide elections – when conditions call for statesmanlike leadership. Statesmanlike leadership is linked to the presence of national crisis, particularly a crisis posed by an external threat, such as foreign policy threat. Under these conditions, we should expect presidents to make fewer mandate claims. By contrast, mandate claims will be used when the president is dependent on a political base for support – even following a narrow election victory. Rhetorical appeals to the political base are useful when domestic issues dominate the policy agenda. Lower public approval ratings, and thus less chance for broad, cross-partisan support, also suggest greater reliance on a political base. Finally, presidents will be more likely to use mandate claims when they have a larger partisan audience in Congress, and thus under the conditions of unified government.

The ambivalent relationship between presidential leadership and partisan political conflict suggests that mandate claims will not be uniformly advantageous. Reminding citizens and elites that the president attained the role of national statesman because of participation in a partisan election process will not always be the preferred way to navigate this tension. In addition to the election results, we should expect the political conditions faced by presidents upon taking office to influence the use of popular sovereignty claims in the justification of presidential policy action. This theory can be expressed in terms of three testable hypotheses:

1. Mandate claims are made in response to the political environment at the time presidents take office, rather than in response to the election results. Therefore, we should expect variables that measure political conditions to provide more explanatory leverage than those that measure the election result.
2. Based on the theory that presidents derive authority from the rallying effects stemming from foreign policy threats or crises (Brody 1991; Edwards and Swenson 1997), foreign policy salience should have a negative effect on the use of mandate claims. This claim is tested with a Mann-Whitney significance test as well as the multivariate regression model.
3. Interaction effects: this part of the analysis measures the conditional effects of the explanatory variables. The specific hypothesis tested in the interaction models is that the condition of unified government will magnify the negative effects of high public approval on the use of mandate claims because of the larger partisan audience for the claims. The theoretical reason for this is that under conditions of unified government, the president has more to lose from flagging public approval, and will use rhetoric aimed at co-partisans to avoid losing their support by reminding them that public opinion was on his side when it mattered.

Scope and Methods

The rest of the paper focuses on the presentation and analysis of the dataset, which presents the first three months of all available communications from each elected presidential term from 1949 through 2005. The communications are coded for whether they included a mandate claim. Coding methods are described in more detail in the section describing the dataset and analysis. By coding a diverse set of communications across

fifteen presidential terms, the dataset allows us to gain leverage in response to the question of when presidents will use mandate claims many times, a few times, or not at all.

The dataset begins with Harry Truman in 1949 and continues through the second term of George W. Bush. I present data from the first three months of each elected term during this time frame. The first three months are used in order to maximize comparability across presidential terms. By using the first three months, I am able to compare presidential terms during the time (first and second term) when presidents are in the process of attempting to establish a policy agenda and a set of priorities.

I begin with Truman for several reasons. The first concerns the availability of data: the analysis relies heavily on public opinion data including public approval ratings of the president, which are available for the period immediately following inauguration only from 1949 onward. The second reason concerns the major changes to the presidency that occurred during Roosevelt's twelve years in office, in particular the use of technology to communicate directly with the electorate, and the subsequent shift in norms of presidential communication (Ryfe 1999).

I limit the scope of the study to presidential terms in which the president was elected. This eliminates Truman in 1945, Johnson in 1963, and Ford in 1974. While I share the Grossback et al (2006) view that mandates are constructed, the theoretical assumption of this paper is that mandate claims are made when a link between presidential action and the election is more directly plausible. Presidents who take office after the resignation or death of the president may claim to continue the popular mandate conferred on their predecessors.⁶ These cases are excluded on the grounds that the legacy of a fallen

leader may constitute a factor that makes such claims conceptually distinct from mandate claims that do not have this intervening variable.

The figures in the appendix present both numbers of mandate claims by presidential term, and as a percentage of the total number of coded communications in each term. Due to the emphasis on explaining the variation in the number of mandate claims used in each presidential term, negative binomial regression analysis is used to test the hypothesized factors explaining the variation in the use of mandate claims across presidential terms. A Mann-Whitney *U*-test is used to assess the statistical significance of the difference between the data grouped by foreign policy and domestic policy salience.⁷ Foreign policy salience is assessed as an explanatory variable apart from the others because it is central to the theorized tension between mandate claims and statesmanlike presidential leadership. Under conditions of foreign policy salience, the leadership context will call for statesmanlike leadership, and will be less conducive to claims of partisan political victory. Domestic issues, on the other hand, are far more likely to be linked to partisan election platforms.⁸ This distinction also has implications for the debate begun by Wildavsky (1975) about whether there exist “two presidencies,” one governing foreign and the other governing domestic policy issues.

The data is presented as a count model, with presidential term (not individual president) as the unit of analysis. The reasons for this are theoretical: mandate claims are considered a means of justifying the presidential agenda at the outset of the term, and several of the explanatory variables such as the election outcome, vary only across presidential terms. Potential alternative conceptualizations of the unit of analysis, such as assessing the variation in mandate claims at the week, month, or individual communication

level, are not viable with the explanatory variables identified in this analysis. We would not expect party control of Congress, foreign policy salience, or election results to vary at the week, month or individual communication level.

In order to test the hypotheses presented in the previous section, a dataset of presidential communications has been created, coding each communication for whether it contains a claim to an electoral mandate for a policy or action. Most communications included in the Public Papers⁹ were included in the dataset, although several categories of communications were excluded. The dataset includes more than just presidential speeches: in addition to major and minor addresses, it encompasses press conferences and other statements to the media; remarks and statements accompanying legislative signatures and vetoes; remarks at partisan events; and letters to members of Congress and other governing actors. Excluded are executive orders, proclamations, joint statements, statements made by press secretaries or anyone else other than the president, remarks made to foreign media sources, and communications shorter than two paragraphs. These types of communications were excluded either because they contained no rhetoric, or, in the case of addresses to foreign audiences, because they contained no component pertaining to policy persuasion or justification of policy to domestic political actors.¹⁰

The purpose of including different forms of communication rather than perpetuating the conventional focus on major addresses is twofold.¹¹ First, mandates are often considered an inter-elite affair (Conley 2001; Steger 2000; Peterson et al 2003), with the electorate having already completed its role. Communications directed at both mass and elite audiences are included here in hopes of achieving a more nuanced understanding of how mandate claims are used and to whom they are directed. Second, this approach

allows us to better understand not only the audiences of mandate claims, but also the policies implicated in such claims.

Communications are coded dichotomously based on whether they contained one or more references to an electoral mandate. No distinction is made for multiple mandate claims used in the same communication, which in any case was quite rare throughout the dataset as a whole. Speeches and other communications were coded “one” if they made a reference to the election, the people’s will, or the people’s trust in connection with a policy action or direction, or if they justified a policy action in terms of it having been a campaign promise. Difficult cases arose when communications included references to the people’s will or to public opinion, but whether the president was referring to the election or some other measure of public opinion was unclear. In most cases, these were coded as zeros, but noted as instances of references to the public.¹²

Below, I present communications from the first three months of each elected term in office, beginning with Truman’s Inaugural Address on January 20, 1949 and proceeding through the end of March 2005. Figure 1 shows the number of coded communications for each president. The numbers may reflect a variety of factors, including variation among presidents in terms of how frequently they communicated with Congress or members of their administrations, as well as what they chose to include in their public papers. The trend shown in the figure suggests that communications have increased over time, though not monotonically.

Figure 1 is included to give a sense of the volume of communications included in the dataset. It also shows when large increases in public communications occurred: there is large jump from 22 public communications by Eisenhower in the first three months of his

second term, to 68 used by Kennedy in the first three months of his presidency in 1961. Still another large jump occurs between Kennedy in 1961 and Johnson's first elected term in 1965, from 68 to 108 communications, respectively. The number of public communications hovers in this general range between 60 and 100, until Clinton's first term begins in 1993, and the number of communications increases again, remaining over 120 for Clinton's second term and George W. Bush's first term. An important caveat accompanies these data. Since the data presented in Figure 1 reflects the communications in the first three months in office, the findings of this analysis cannot be automatically applied to presidential communications at other points during the term. Events that occurred after this period may have drastically changed the presidency, including the president's communication strategy. The first three months can only be used as a measure of the president's early-term communication strategy, when the agenda for the term is introduced and established.

Figure 2 about here

A figure 2 show that, like overall volume of public communications, the number of mandate claims has generally increased over the period included in the dataset. Both measures show the highest value in 2005, at the beginning of George W. Bush's second term. However, as demonstrated in Figure 3, the trends do not match up exactly; the increases in mandate claims as an overall percentage of presidential communications can be seen as a part of a trend toward more public communications overall, but this alone cannot explain the overall variation.

Figure 3 shows that mandate claims as a percentage of total coded communications is higher in the beginning and end of the dataset, with a valley in the middle. This pattern suggests that while presidents have been engaging in more formal and informal communication with different types of audiences, their inclination to invoke popular sovereignty in those communications cannot be attributed solely to this trend.

Considering the Content: Which policy issues are linked with mandate claims?

Policy issues are critical to the responsible party component of the mandate concept. Both skeptics and believers in the mandates debate emphasize the role of issues in the concept of a presidential mandate (Conley 2001; Dahl 1990). This section will attempt to flesh out the content of presidential mandate claims in a broad, cross-temporal perspective in order to go beyond an understanding of each presidential term as a particular case, and to see the way that issues and ideas are linked to popular sovereignty claims in a developmental perspective. Scholarship on the modern presidency suggests part of its institutional development has been to assume responsibility for an increasing number of policy areas (Neustadt 1990), in turn suggesting that we should see mandate claims made for more issues. This is due to the increasingly limiting and obstructive political environment faced by modern presidents, and to the expansion of the federal government and thus the issue areas in which presidents need to establish a sense of legitimacy for their actions.

Table 1 about here

Conley's assessment of mandate claims over time includes a very limited picture of the types of issues for which presidents have claimed mandates. Table 1 demonstrates that

modern presidents frequently claimed electoral mandates to justify policy action across a number of issues. In addition to the broadening of the application of mandate claims over time, the table shows that mandate claims are exclusively made to justify policy in the domestic arena during the time span under consideration here. The variety of issues linked to election outcome in presidential discourse is interesting in light of the scholarly debate about whether it is possible to extract a single policy explanation for an election outcome when the possibilities for rationales behind voter decisions are quite numerous (Conley 2001; Dahl 1990). The evidence presented in the dataset suggests that modern presidents frequently use multiple interpretations of the policy meaning behind the election outcome within the first three months of taking office (or remaining in office in the case of second-term presidents).

Operationalizing Explanatory Variables

Reflecting the hypotheses in the previous section, the variables used in the following analyses fall under four conceptual headings: election results; public approval; party control of Congress; and foreign policy salience. Election results are measured in three different ways, and analyzed in separate equations to avoid problems with multicollinearity. The three different measures have slightly different theoretical implications. *Popular vote share* captures the closest measure to the conceptual definition of an electoral mandate: a strong consensus among members of the electorate in favor of a particular candidate over other options. *Margin of victory*, often associated with electoral mandates, often tells us more about the other candidates than about the eventual winner.¹³ Large margins of victory typically occur in elections with third party candidates, and in several

recent cases accompany a plurality (Clinton, second term) or slight majority (Reagan, first term) victory. While it is difficult to determine definitively the meaning of any election result (the whole point of this project), there is ample evidence to suggest that large margins of victory occur when the opposing candidate is not very strong, and that they are often influenced by the presence of third party candidate.

Electoral College victory is often referenced in news commentary on whether the election conferred a mandate upon the president.¹⁴ How many states a president won, or the margin by which they were won, is considered a component of the potential mandate in these cases.¹⁵ The Electoral College is capable of distorting a 50 percent popular vote share into a 90 percent victory (one example of this is Reagan's 1980 victory). Because of its ability to transform a small victory into an apparent landslide, it is worthwhile to test *Electoral College victory* as a factor explaining the use of mandate claims.

Public approval is measured by the percent of respondents giving a "yes" answer to the question "Do you approve of how [President's name] is handling his job as president?" The response dates used for this question are typically about a week after the inauguration.¹⁶ This measure presents problems because of its requirement that respondents assess the performance of presidents who have only been in office a few days. However, it conveys a sense of public approval of the president at the outset of the term, and provides a degree of comparability across presidential terms.

Foreign policy salience is measured dichotomously. This variable was coded "zero" if the most salient issue when the president took office was a domestic issue, and coded "one" if the most salient issue was a foreign policy issue. The most salient issue was measured using the Gallup Poll responses to the question "What is the most important issue

facing the country today?”¹⁷ Issues relating to foreign countries, national security or war were coded as foreign policy, while issues relating to topics like the economy, unemployment, or social welfare were coded as domestic.

Party control of Congress is measured dichotomously as well. From a methodological perspective, using a dichotomous variable in an interaction term is more straightforward than using a continuous variable (Brambor et al 2006). From a theoretical perspective (reflecting the methodological concerns about what exactly is being measured), the dichotomous variable treats unified government as a condition; in other words, the main concern here is not about seat margins or other nuances of party control. Since interaction terms measure conditional effects, these models present the effects of the other variables dependent on whether the condition of unified government is present. The models thus treat unified or divided government as a condition to which the president¹⁸ responds in the crafting of communications. If either chamber of the legislature is controlled by a party other than the president’s party, it is coded as divided government. Party control in Congress obviously signifies that the president has more potential allies in office, and the theory tested here posits that a larger potential audience will have a positive effect on the number of mandate claims used. The conceptual treatment of party control of Congress as a dichotomous condition also reflects the nature of this control: a slight majority confers a number of powers as far as committee leadership and agenda control, which are not enhanced by gaining a broader majority.¹⁹

Results: Explaining the Variation in Number of Mandate Claims

The tests and analyses in this section are aimed at explaining the variation in the number of mandate claims used in each presidential term. The focus here is on the number of mandate claims used rather than mandates as a percentage of total communication. One reason for this is that the number of total communications – the denominator – may not be systematically related to any of the variables of interest. Another reason is that the number of mandate claims is more directly related to the probability that the claims will be heard by either citizens or elites.

The first test in this section is directly related to the statesman versus politician tension. Foreign policy crises and concerns are often considered to have a different impact on presidential leadership than domestic policy concerns (Wildavsky 1989; Brody 1991). Based on the theory advanced in earlier sections, we should expect that when foreign rather than domestic policy is most salient, fewer mandate claims will be used.

Table 2 shows the presidential terms divided into two groups. Using Gallup polling data, as described earlier, presidential terms are coded either as having begun under a period of foreign policy salience, or domestic policy salience. The Mann-Whitney *U* test assesses the statistical significance of the difference between these two groups. The hypothesis tested is that under conditions of foreign policy salience, presidents taking (or returning to) office will be less likely to use mandate claims as they establish the agenda for the term. The reason for this is rooted in the tension between statesman and political notions of presidential leadership. Presidents taking office when foreign policy dominates public political concerns will be more apt to present themselves as statesmen who represent a national interest, and will avoid potentially political mandate claims. Table 2 shows that presidential terms beginning during a time of domestic policy salience feature more

mandate claims, and the Mann-Whitney test verifies that this difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 2 about here

Next, a series of multivariate models testing the various hypotheses advanced earlier, including a dummy variable for foreign policy salience, is presented. The first table shows a multivariate model with interaction terms, using *popular vote share* as the measure of the election result. The next table presents the same model with using *popular vote margin*, and the third table uses *Electoral College vote share*. The purpose of the multivariate model is to test the effects of the variables measuring for political context while controlling for election result.

Table 3 about here

The results presented in Table 3 confirm some of the basic hypotheses derived from the theory. The *popular vote share* variable is positive and significant, suggesting that election results do have some effect on the use of mandate claims. The negative coefficient on the interaction term *Unified government*public approval* is modest but in the predicted direction, and is significant at the .01 level. The variable measuring foreign policy salience has a larger coefficient, and clears conventional social science thresholds of statistical significance at the .05 level. The constituent terms of the interaction, *Unified government* and *Public approval*, are each significant on their own, but cannot be interpreted separately from the interaction term (Brambor et al 2006). The results of this model are consistent with the theory that low levels of public approval and the absence of salient foreign policy issues contribute to the increased use of mandate claims, controlling for election result.

Table 4 about here

Unsurprisingly, the results using *popular vote margin* to measure the election result are similar to those using popular vote share.²⁰ *Popular vote margin* and *unified government* are still positively correlated with the use of mandate claims, while *public approval*, *foreign policy salience*, and *unified government*public approval* are negatively correlated with number of mandate claims.

Table 5 about here

The model using *Electoral College vote share* as a measure of election result produces smaller effects than the other models. This finding is somewhat surprising, given that the Electoral College often gives presidents a much larger vote share and margin of victory than the popular vote. The Electoral College vote share (which shares roughly the same range as the popular vote share) has a coefficient of .04, compared to popular vote share, which has coefficient of .18. Both are significant at the .05 level. The coefficients for *Foreign policy salience* and *Unified government*public approval* are smaller than in the other two models as well, although the difference in magnitude is not as striking as the difference between Electoral College and popular vote share.

Discussion

The analyses presented in the previous section suggest that both election results and political conditions influence the use of presidential mandate claims. The dichotomous measure of foreign policy salience remains significant in the multivariate models, consistent with the results of the Mann-Whitney significance test used to assess the statistical significance of the measure on its own. This result lends support to the theoretical proposition that presidents use mandate claims less when they are in a position to cultivate an image of a national statesman. Times of foreign policy crisis provide presidents with an impetus for leadership, diminishing the incentive to use popular sovereignty claims. It may also be riskier for presidents to use electoral mandate claims, which may be divisive, under such conditions. Further research is needed to test these causal mechanisms more directly.

It is necessary to be careful about interpreting a statistical model with so few available observations. With that caveat, the regression analyses presented in this section support the hypotheses enumerated in this paper. The statistical significance of the interaction between unified government and public approval ratings suggests that the inverse relationship of public approval ratings and mandate claims is conditional on the president's party controlling Congress. In other words, presidents who suffer from flagging popularity ratings will invoke the election in their communication strategies when they have the incentive to persuade co-partisans in Congress; that is, when co-partisans have substantial control over the legislative agenda. The posited mechanism for this effect is that the presidents under unified government will perceive substantial potential benefits from telling fellow partisans what the election meant in policy terms. When the president

has high public approval ratings, reminding fellow partisans of the election through public discourse is unnecessary. When popularity is low and party control is divided, the potential rewards of mandate claims are not worth the potential risks. The findings of this analysis reflect existing theories positing a combination of factors influencing the use of mandate claims, but contrary to previous accounts, these findings suggest that unified government and low popularity, rather than the opposite combination, contribute to the use of mandate claims.

In addition to the caveat required by the low number of observations, modest pseudo R squared values also indicate that the regression models presented here do not tell the whole story. However, the main point to be taken from this section is that the results are consistent across a number of tests, and several of the variables are consistently significant and have coefficients consistent with the predictions of the theory. What the statistical models in this section tell us is that we can likely reject a null hypothesis that the conditions of unified government, low public approval, and foreign policy salience are unrelated to the use of popular sovereignty claims in presidential communication.

Finally, an interesting anomaly emerges from the data. Although foreign policy salience has a negative effect on the use of mandate claims, it is worth noting that the president who has used the most mandate claims in any presidential term in the data set – by both count and percentage – is George W. Bush in 2005. In January 2005, as Bush was beginning his second term in office, the plurality of respondents (24.73) in a Gallup poll chose “issues with the war in Iraq” as the most important problem facing the country.²¹ As such, Bush does not fit into the pattern established by most presidents in the dataset. Further research is needed to understand this particular case. One possible explanation is

that foreign policy has become more politicized over time, and thus presidents during times of heightened foreign policy salience are less likely to rely on the statesman model of leadership than were previous presidents under similar conditions. Because Bush's claims to an electoral mandate relate mostly to the privatization of Social Security, it can also be argued that perhaps the foreign and domestic agendas of this particular administration have been kept separate to a greater degree than in the past.

Conclusion

The evidence in this paper suggests that presidential mandate claims are made when presidents are reliant on a political base and thus can use rhetoric that justifies their policies in terms of partisan politics rather than national leadership. While the statistical data must be interpreted cautiously, the statistical tests of the hypotheses presented point to several conclusions. First, political conditions at the time of the president's inauguration influence mandate claims at least as much as the results of the election. The regression analyses reveal that popular vote share has a small, but statistically significant, positive relationship with the use of mandate claims. Also statistically significant, and with much greater magnitude, is the interaction between public approval ratings and unified government. Foreign policy is also significant at the .05 level in the regression model that includes popular vote share, and has a larger (negative) coefficient. Foreign policy salience and party control of Congress could be considered part of the election result, but I argue that they constitute an analytically separate category of conditions upon taking office. International events are not an inherent feature of the election cycle or result. The partisan composition of Congress is naturally determined in large part by the election. However,

since control of Congress rarely changed parties in the period under consideration, party control belongs in the category of political conditions as well – it is likely that the party that controls Congress when the president runs for office will be the party that controls Congress after Inauguration Day (the dataset in this paper contains one exception, Eisenhower in 1953).

Second, mandate claims are more common when the president's party controls Congress. Third, presidents are more likely to use mandate claims when they begin their terms with lower public approval ratings. While we cannot interpret the coefficients of the public approval and unified government variables as meaningful independent estimators (Brambor et al 2006), these values are presented in the table for clarifying purposes.

The theory suggested in the earlier part of the paper posits that presidential mandate claims are made under the conditions of relative weakness, and to fellow partisans, because of the tension between two competing leadership paradigms. Presidents will claim mandates when conditions are conducive to presenting an image of a politician rather than that of a statesman. One potential indicator of such conditions is the salience of foreign policy issues. The analysis presented here suggests that presidents make significantly fewer mandate claims when foreign, rather than domestic policy issues are most salient.

Several avenues for further research have been identified. The crux of the theory is that mandate claims are not used under some conditions because of the risk of appearing too political. The micro-foundations of this theory can be tested in several ways. First, qualitative case studies of individual presidents and their communications staffs may provide insight into the reasoning behind choices for presidential communication

strategies, fleshing out the mechanisms by which presidents and their speechwriters manage the tension between appealing to the public as a partisan politician and as an apolitical statesman. The theory also remains to be tested at the audience level.

Experimental or survey work assessing citizen response to mandate claims, including their impact on perceptions of the president as excessively political or partisan, would also further test the micro-foundations of the theory.

Finally, the findings suggest that further inquiry into the increased use of mandate claims over time is warranted. Scholarship on the role of communication in presidential leadership has long noted the developmental aspect of presidential communication, arguing that the increasing reliance on public communication constitutes a new constitutional understanding of the presidency (Tulis 1987). The results of the analysis presented here suggest that this posited shift to a more “public presidency” has manifested itself in the communication about the electorate as well as to the electorate.

The analyses presented here do not address the normative puzzle surrounding the issue of presidential mandates. However, using measurable data about presidential mandate claims, I find that presidents do not invoke electoral mandates or popular sovereignty when they enjoy high public support and must use that support to persuade a recalcitrant legislature. Rather, the opposite is true: mandate claims are used when public approval is low and the president’s party support in Congress is high. This paper also tests the theory that mandate claims are related to an inherent tension in presidential leadership.

The evidence presented here suggests that mandate claims are connected to the president’s role as a partisan politician rather than as a national statesman. From an empirical perspective, this contributes to an overall understanding of how presidential

communication is used under different political conditions. The findings in this paper also contribute to our understanding of how elite interpretations of elections are disseminated into mainstream political discourse. In other words, elections may be deemed a “mandate” for a set of ideas or policies not when the conditions of the election suggest such an outcome, but when it is politically advantageous to invoke the president’s role as a political participant.

Appendix A

Figure 1 Total Coded Communications, 1949-2005

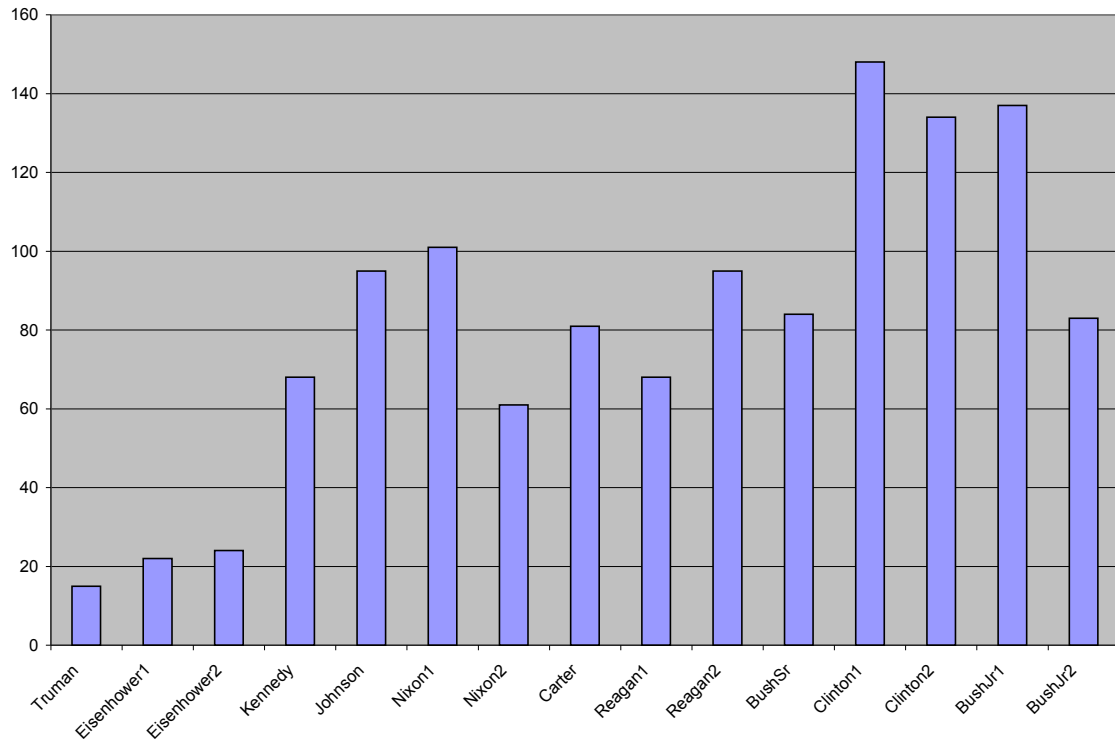


Figure 2 Number of Mandate Claims Per Presidential Term, 1949-2005

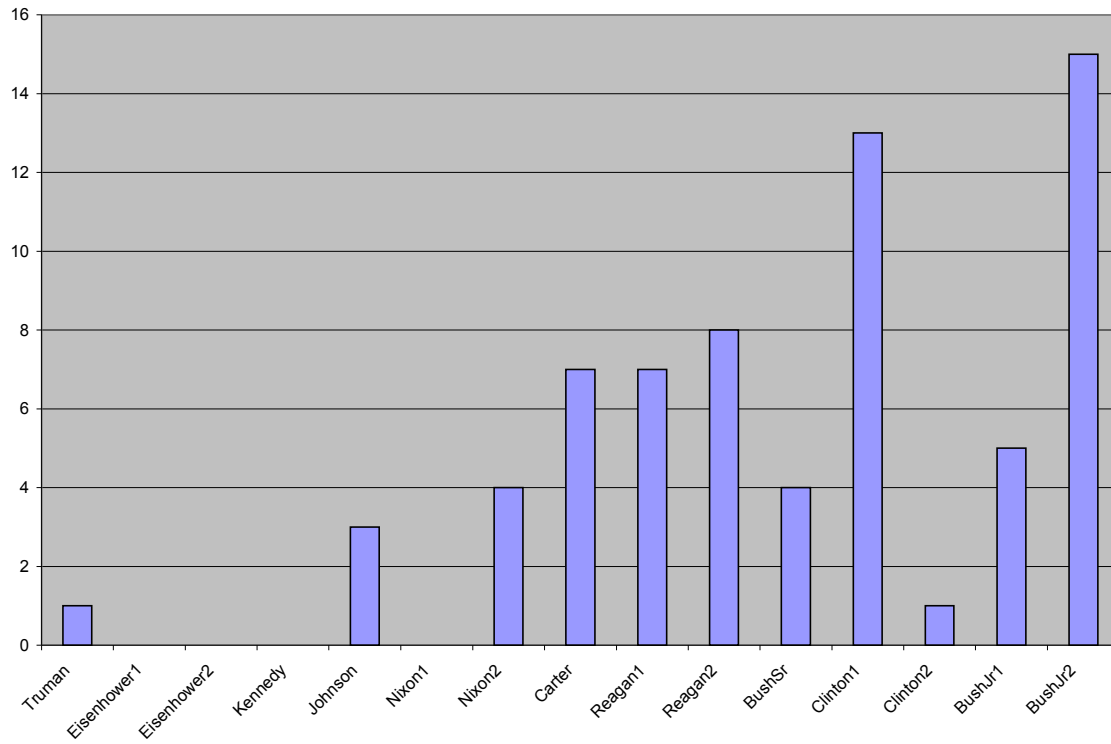


Figure 3 Mandate Claims as Percentage of Total Coded Communications, 1949-2005

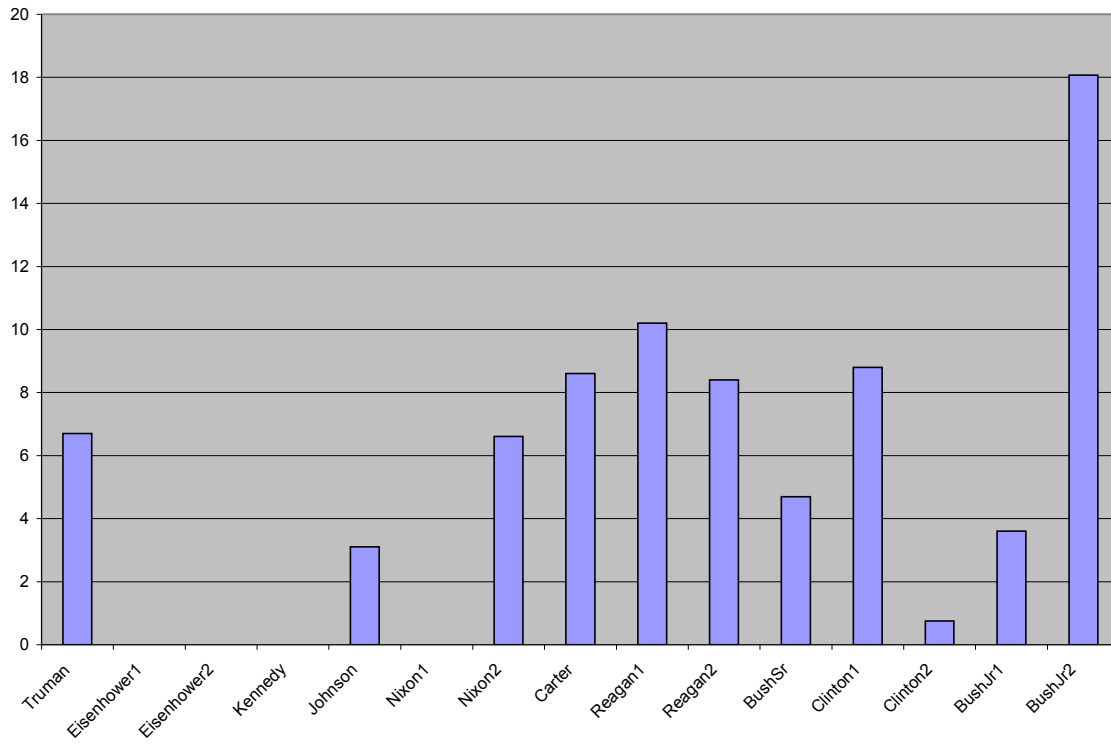


Table 1: Issues and Mandate Claims, 1949-2001 (Chronological Order)

Presidential Term	Issues
Truman	Democratic agenda
Eisenhower1	None
Eisenhower2	None
Kennedy	None
Johnson	Civil rights, increased social programs, medical care programs
Nixon1	None
Nixon2	Budget, crime legislation, prices and taxes
Carter	Energy policy, election reform, government reorganization, Equal Rights Amendment, budget
Reagan1	Size of the federal government, spending, budget, controlling inflation
Reagan2	Economic expansion, budget, taxes
George H. W. Bush	Tightening means test for college loans, child care, trade deficit, taxes
Clinton1	Change, ending partisan gridlock, economic improvement, healthcare, environmental issues
Clinton2	Balancing the budget, campaign finance reform
George W. Bush	Education, unified governmental direction, Social Security, tax cuts, economic improvement
George W. Bush2	Social security, tort reform

Table 2 Domestic vs. Foreign Policy Salience and Number of Mandate Claims, Mann-Whitney *U* Test, 1953-2005

Domestic Policy Most Salient

Foreign Policy Most Salient

Term	Number Mandate Claims	<i>Term</i>	<i>Number Mandate Claims</i>
Carter	7	<i>Eisenhower1</i>	0
Reagan1	8	<i>Eisenhower2</i>	0
Reagan2	7	<i>Kennedy</i>	0
GHWBush	4	<i>Johnson</i>	3
Clinton1	8	<i>Nixon1</i>	0
Clinton2	1	<i>Nixon2</i>	4
GWBush1	5	<i>GWBush 2</i>	15

Table 3 Multivariate Model with Interaction, Popular Vote Share (1949-2005)

Variable	Coefficient
	(Standard Error)
<i>Popular vote share</i>	.18**
	(.07)
<i>Public approval at inauguration</i>	-.047 (.046)
<i>Unified government</i>	12.9***
	(4.3)
<i>Unified government*public approval</i>	-.17***
	(.06)
<i>Foreign policy salience</i>	-1.3**
	(.06)
N = 15	
Pseudo R squared = .19	

Table 4 Multivariate Model with Interaction, Popular Vote Margin (1949-2005)

Variable	Coefficient
	(Standard Error)

<i>Popular vote margin</i>	.11***
	(.04)
<i>Public approval at inauguration</i>	-.04 (.04)
<i>Unified government</i>	11.6***
	(4.02)
<i>Unified government*public approval</i>	-.15**
	(.06)
<i>Foreign policy salience</i>	-.95*
	(.53)

N = 15
Pseudo R squared = .19

Table 5 Multivariate Model with Interaction, Electoral Vote Share (1949-2005)

Variable	Coefficient
	(Standard Error)
<i>Electoral College vote share</i>	.04**
	.02
<i>Public approval at inauguration</i>	-.02
	.04
<i>Unified government</i>	12.4***
	4.2
<i>Unified government*public approval</i>	-.16***
	.06
<i>Foreign policy salience</i>	-.6
	.5

N= 15

Pseudo R squared = .16

Appendix B

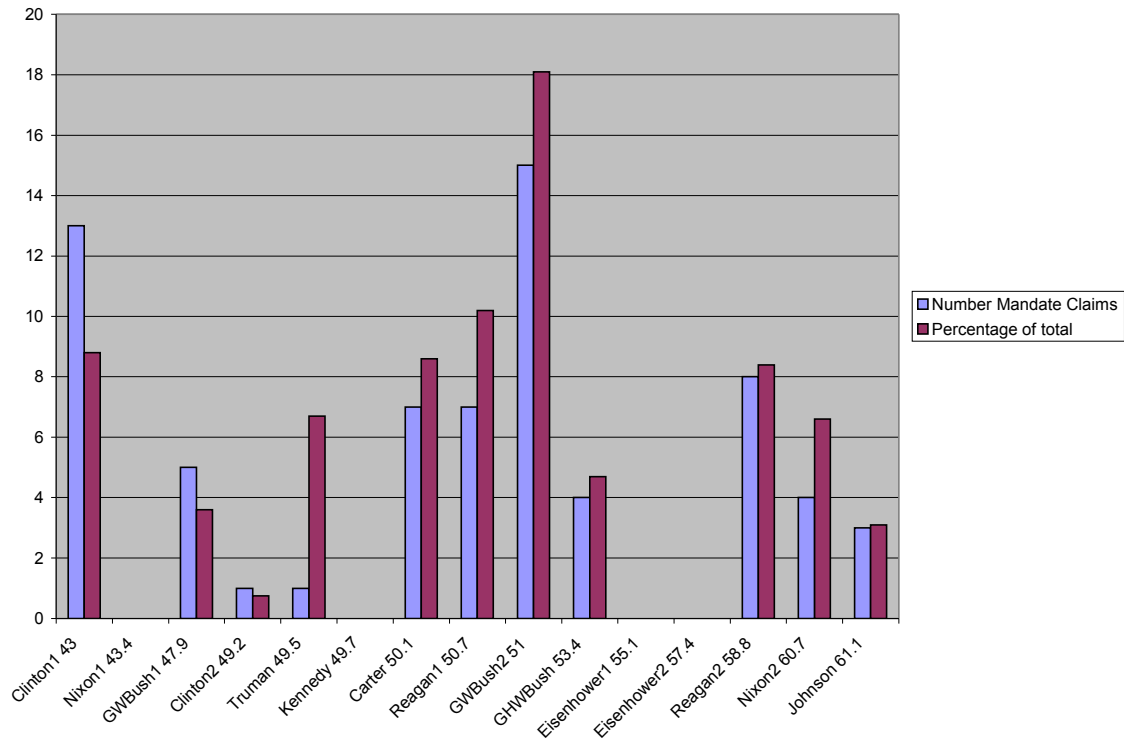


Figure 4 Popular Vote Share and Mandate Claims

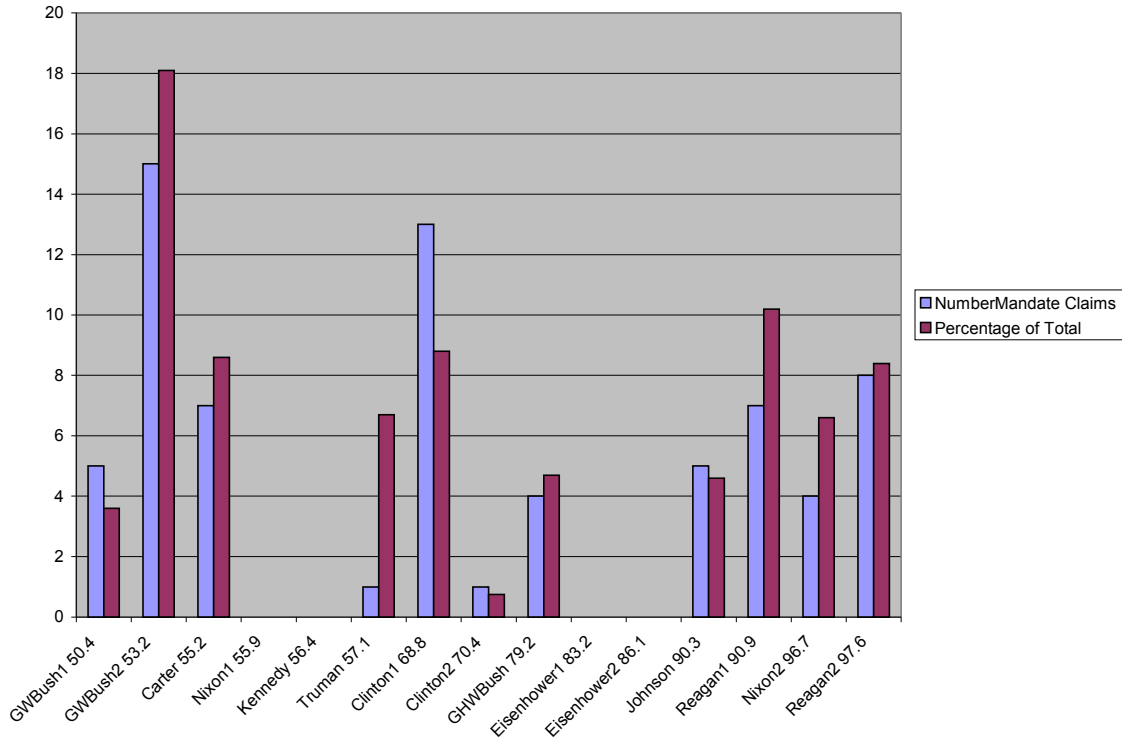


Figure 5 Electoral College Vote Share and Mandate Claims

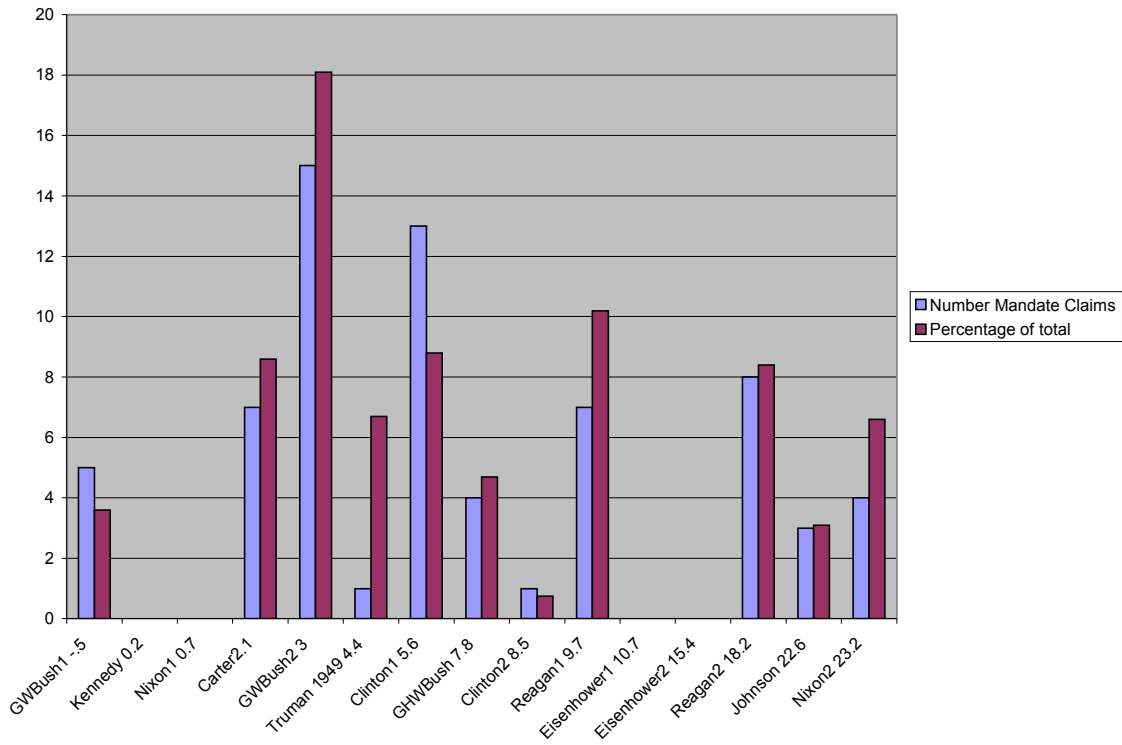


Figure 6 Margin of Victory and Mandate Claims

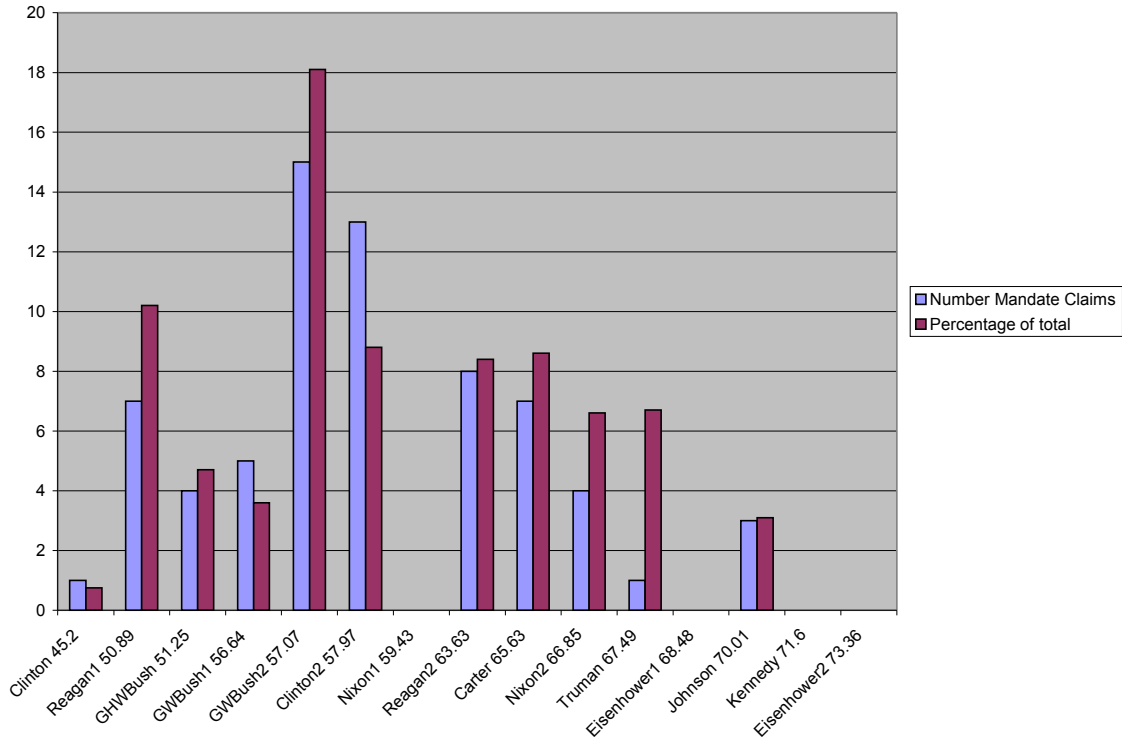


Figure 7 Public Approval At Inauguration and Mandate Claims

Notes

¹ One such example occurred on March 27, 2001; President George W. Bush defended his tax cut proposal before an audience at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan. “You see, it’s the President’s job to look for warnings of economic trouble ahead and to heed them and to act. I got elected because the people want the President to act, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do.” Despite losing the popular vote and winning in an extremely controversial election process, Bush made a claim to an electoral mandate for his first major economic policy initiative. Even though by any empirical definition of an electoral mandate, Bush had not secured one, Bush’s use of this type of claim in the early months of 2001 was not limited to the speech in Kalamazoo. Although Bush never used the word “mandate,” he used the election to justify major policy shifts on taxes, Social Security funding, and federal involvement in education, in the three months after taking office.

² The impact of presidential rhetoric has been contested in important works. Edwards (2003) systematically tests the effect of major presidential addresses on public opinion, and finds that there is little evidence that such appeals have an effect. The opposite perspective is maintained by scholars such as Hart (1985) and Zarefsky (2004), who link leadership to overall leadership style and to the capacity to delineate important political concepts (See note 3).

³ The definitional aspect of mandate claims is a non-trivial aspect of the mandates question. Zarefsky (2004) demonstrates that the power of presidential rhetoric is to “define political reality.” This relates to the mandates question insofar as it suggests a mechanism by which the linkage between policy and popular sovereignty made during the course of presidential communications influence general understandings of politics.

⁴ The connection between the president and the will of the electorate is often said to have been forged by Andrew Jackson’s relationship with his Congressional opponents, first vetoing the Maysville Road project and then removing deposits from the Bank of the United States (Ellis and Kirk 1995). Ackerman (2005) argues that Jefferson claimed a mandate from the people after taking office in 1800. Both of these accounts of mandate claims are based in part on the link between presidents, party, and policy. Mandate claims were originally made possible only with the clarity and competition afforded by party platforms. In Ellis and Kirk’s account, in order to confer a policy mandate, the 1932 election had to feature a clear choice between two alternatives, with a decisive victory in favor of one. The connection between mandates and policy proposals, and, to a lesser extent, the connection between presidential mandates and the overall electoral performance of his party, suggest that mandates may be part and parcel of the idea put forth by Schattschneider (1967) that without political parties, meaningful democracy would be “unthinkable.” Such a definition is consistent with the links scholars have drawn between mandates and democratic accountability (Stokes 2001; Conley 2001). Mandates imply a sense of the national will, but only as a byproduct of winning a political competition, therefore presenting a tension between party competition and the idea of a national consensus.

⁵ This question appears in Gallup poll #616, July 1959, in reference to Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy. The question reappears in the mid-1960s and appears in Gallup polls with regard to prospective presidential candidates through the 1980s. In the months leading up to the 2000 nomination and election campaign, respondents were asked whether they considered Al Gore and George W. Bush “a typical politician.” (Source: Gallup Brain)

⁶ However, particularly in cases when the president has died, the “legacy” aspect of these mandate claims may place them in a different conceptual category from more direct claims to a mandate for one’s own actions because the legacy concept takes on a distinct symbolic importance (Abbott 2005).

⁷ The Mann-Whitney *U* test is a test of the significance of the difference in central tendencies of two independently drawn samples of nonparametric data (Hollander and Wolfe 1999).

⁸ This theoretical proposition is derived from a long-standing, although contested, notion that “politics stops at the water’s edge.” Although scholars have shown this to be a questionable assumption, it is a paradigm that has informed much of Cold War political analysis (Gowa 1998; McCormick and Wittkopf 1992).

⁹ The American Presidency Project, www.presidency.ucsb.edu

¹⁰ These decisions were made based on the theoretical proposition that presidential mandate claims are typically made to persuade domestic audiences, and thus that presidents will not make mandate claims in communications with foreign journalists or communications dedicated to other individuals, such as speeches in honor of other people, such as statements following the death of prominent figures.

¹¹ In *Going Public*, Kernell (1997) focuses on minor as well as major addresses.

¹² The coding was replicated by an undergraduate research assistant.

¹³ Barry Goldwater in 1964 is one such example. Other examples include unpopular incumbent presidents, such as Jimmy Carter in 1980.

¹⁴ One example of this can be found in an article entitled, “GOP Mandate: Reagan Buries Carter in Landslide Throughout Country,” by James M. Perry and Albert R. Hunt, *Wall Street Journal*, November 5, 1980, which describes Reagan’s victory not in terms of the vote share that he won but in terms of Electoral College victory.

¹⁵ An article in the *New York Times* following Carter’s 1976 victory employs this logic as well. The article, entitled, “Mr. Carter’s Mandate,” states: “... In seven states won by Gerald Ford, Mr. Carter got at least 49 percent of the votes. So if it’s true that had a few thousand votes in the right states gone to Mr. Ford he’d have won, it’s also true that had a few thousand votes gone to Mr. Carter in those seven states he’d have had a huge Electoral College victory.” Tom Wicker, Nov. 7, 1976.

¹⁶ This data was obtained from The American Presidency Project, www.presidency.ucsb.edu

¹⁷ Some variations of this question exist, such as “Suppose you were participating in a presidential press conference when Jimmy Carter becomes President. What specific question regarding either domestic or international problems would you most like to ask him?” from a Gallup survey on Jan 11, 1977. This data was obtained from the Gallup Brain archive.

¹⁸ References to the president crafting a communication strategy are intended to signify the president as well as his speechwriters and other communication staff who may be working on public statements, press conference talking points, television or radio addresses, or other forms of public communication.

¹⁹ Obviously, the inclusion of this variable does not take into account scholarship demonstrating that unified versus divided government does not have a substantial impact of the passage of important legislation (Mayhew 1991) or that parties are not the important unit of analysis to understand legislative behavior (Krehbiel 1998). The purpose of the inclusion of this variable is that the perception of a different partisan environment may affect presidential communication strategies, regardless of eventual policy outcomes.

²⁰ A bivariate regression analysis with *popular vote share* as the independent variable and *popular vote margin* as the dependent variable yields a correlation coefficient of .62, significant at the .01 level.

²¹ From a poll taken January 3-5, 2005 (Source: Gallup Brain).

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