Politics or Policy? How Rhetoric Matters to Presidential Leadership of Congress

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In this article, we examine the linkage between presidential policy proposal messages and legislative success. Employing a data set on presidential legislative proposals that covers the years 1949-2010, we find that politics matters less than policy. Purely political messages that reference the electoral logic of mandates or appeal to a sense of bipartisanship appear to have no impact on presidential legislative success, nor does policy signaling, though highlighting the role of agency-based policy experts in crafting legislation does. From these results, we conclude that although the way presidents communicate their messages to Congress represents an important component of presidential-legislative relations, it is instead the perceived quality of the legislation that more strongly shapes congressional support of presidential policy efforts.

Three days after his historic inauguration, Barack Obama communicated the following message to then-House Minority Whip Eric Cantor and other Republican con-

gressional leaders on Capitol Hill: "I won" (Calmes and Herszenhorn 2009).[1] Thirteen months later, at a bipartisan health care summit in February 2010, President Obama responded in similar fashion to a charge from his former electoral opponent, Senator John McCain, about the way deals were being struck in exchange for support on Obama's health care reform legislation. Obama provided McCain with a reminder that "the election's over," the implicit refrain continuing from his comment a year hence to Cantor that he had won and that his victory brought with it the kind of moral legitimacy that could only be bestowed by popular electoral referendum (Negrin and Hunt 2010).

Before the end of the year, however, President Obama was delivering his policy statements to members of Congress in a significantly different key, if not an altogether new tune. As the lame duck congressional session following the 2010 midterm elections proceeded—an election in which the president's party took a "shellacking," as Obama phrased it in a somber day-after press conference—the president's mandate-oriented rhetoric was replaced by calls to support new legislation on bipartisan terms. Amid these calls for bipartisan cooperation, the president's post–midterm rhetoric seemed to extol the normative virtues of cooperative policy making on issues like tax cut extensions and health care support for 9/11 Ground Zero responders as much as it did the policy substance of the legislative proposals.

Why did the president's rhetoric change so much in such a relatively short span of time? The answer to this question seems rather simple: the president's political context changed, and as his standing with the public declined and the electoral fortunes of his opponents overwhelmingly improved, Obama realized he had to change tactics. This interpretation underscores a long-held assumption embraced by presidents, pundits, and political scientists alike: the way presidents talk about legislation and talk to members of Congress matters. Recent scholarship, however, has weakened our faith in this assumption and provided new avenues for further examination. Here, we endeavor to determine not only whether presidential policy messages shape presidential legislative fortunes but how. Specifically, we ask whether rhetoric that highlights the president's standing with the electorate or champions a call to bipartisan comity matters when advancing the president's political agenda or if legislative success has more to do with the policy substance of a proposal and the manner it is communicated within a presidential message. In other words, do rhetorical strategies improve presidential success in Congress, or are legislators listening for more tangible, substantive cues about the content and quality of the policy initiatives proposed to them?

To answer this question, we analyze the impact that four different types of presidential messages have on congressional action. In particular, we consider presidential

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1. Having questioned the president's inclusion of certain refundable tax credits for low- and middle-income workers in the 2009 economic recovery package, Cantor recalled the president saying, "You're correct, there's a philosophical difference, but I won, so we're going to prevail on that." Similarly, then-Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel quoted the president as having told Cantor, "We just have a difference here, and I'm president." Regardless of the exact wording, the phrase "I won" received wide coverage across political outlets and clearly signaled Obama's main point—his election as president served as a mandate to lead.

messages that include the use of mandate rhetoric, bipartisan appeals, signaling, and agency input. In doing so, we extend arguments made previously in the scholarly literature concerning presidential influence in Congress and, for the first time, simultaneously test various key assumptions that scholars had not previously considered in unison. For example, Bond and Fleisher (1990, 230) argue that "The president's greatest influence of policy comes from the agenda he pursues and the way it is packaged," a statement that reflects Quirk's (1991) contention that presidential legislative success depends on how policy proposals are designed. What remains to be determined, however, is the extent to which different kinds of presidential messages influence congressional action differently.

An Evolving Understanding of Presidential-Congressional Communication

Since Richard Neustadt's (1960) observation that, in a system of separated institutions sharing powers, presidents lack the power to command Congress to act in a manner consistent with the chief executive's preferences, presidency scholars have brought ever-more nuanced theoretical arguments and increasingly sophisticated analytical tools to the task of determining how exactly presidents wield their alleged power to persuade. Early landmark studies in this literature found that presidential attempts to lead Congress are indeed tied to key political and structural ties between the White House and Capitol Hill; in particular, factors like partisanship, ideology, and public approval of presidential performance shape the extent to which members of Congress support the president's agenda (e.g., Bond and Fleisher 1980, 1990; Bond, Fleisher, and Wood 2003; Cohen et al. 2000; Edwards 1980, 1989; Edwards, Barrett, and Peake 1997; Fleisher and Bond 1983, 1984, 1992, 2004; Rivers and Rose 1985; Ostrom and Simon 1985). Such determinations were important for helping to reshape the landscape of empirical studies of interbranch relations; however, they did not directly evaluate the persuasive element of Neustadt's original contention.

At the same time that scholars were investigating the systemic determinants of presidential success in Congress, others were examining the rise of a new model of presidential leadership. In 1986, Samuel Kernell established the still-dominant conception of the "going public" model of presidential leadership, in which presidents lead not by going down Pennsylvania Avenue and up to Capitol Hill, but rather by going over the heads of the legislative branch and communicating directly with the American people, in the hopes that building public support for their programs will engender subsequent congressional acquiescence (see also Tulis 1987). Kernell's argument was complemented with significant descriptive evidence that presidents were continuously engaged in this exercise, though there has been little evidence that these populist gambits have been effective (see, however, Page and Shapiro 1984, 1992; Welch 2003a, 2003b). Rather, Edwards (2003) has shown the pathology of this going public model, finding that presidents rarely move public opinion in support of their preferred initiatives and are as likely to see their efforts backfire. Instead, he counsels a model of "staying private," where

presidents and members of Congress can collaborate in a way that prizes coalition-building over conflict expansion, thus achieving policy change without the distraction of parading positions before the electorate (see also Covington 1987). Subsequent works by Canes-Wrone (2001, 2004, 2006) and Rottinghaus (2009, 2010) have shown that presidential efforts to manipulate public opinion can affect policy change, but only under certain specific conditions (see also Powell and Schloyer 2003); nevertheless, as politics in Washington have grown more polarized (see Bond and Fleisher 2000; Fleisher and Bond 2004; Theriault 2006, 2008), these moments have become increasingly elusive. Elsewhere, Eshbaugh-Soha (2006, 2010) indicates that what is truly important in shaping legislative policy success is the president's usage of signaling as a way of making clear his priorities and preferences on passage and implementation (see also Fett 1994). Ultimately, these conclusions serve more as a complement to Edwards' overarching critique, rather than a refutation of it.

In this study, we attempt to reconcile this diverse range of views about the nature and influence of presidential messages. Many of these views have received limited or no direct empirical testing, and no works we know of have considered them in direct comparison with one another. As we address this oversight, we are particularly interested in determining not just whether presidential efforts to persuade are linked with congressional action, but how.[2] We argue that presidents ground policy proposals in four key ways, each of which taps a different rhetorical vein. Determining which of these rhetorical approaches yields cooperative congressional action will help to uncover whether and when members of Congress are susceptible to presidential discourse, which in turn should increase our understanding about the nature of the president's power to persuade.

Contending Explanations for Why Congress Listens

As political situations shift and policy contexts change, so do the president's constraints and incentives. We contend that a strategic president will adjust his rhetoric accordingly. In particular, a president's choice of rhetorical strategy may be conditioned by the dynamics of his environment, rendering messages from one category more useful at one moment, less so at another.[3] Below, we introduce four separate categories of presidential messages, generating hypotheses based on the logic of our theoretical argument and the accumulated scholarly knowledge of the relevant literature.[4] These four

2. To be clear, we do not seek to explain when presidents will employ certain kinds of rhetorical messages (i.e., treating rhetoric as a dependent variable). Instead, we are specifically interested in determining the influence that each type of message has on congressional action (i.e., treating rhetoric as an independent variable). Future research, however, should examine the relationship between the president's political context and the rhetorical messages he chooses to employ.

3. The president, however, does not possess sole control over even his own words. Indeed, determinations of which types of messages to use and how to use them frequently come down to an intra–White House contest played out between the president's policy advisers and his wordsmiths in the speechwriting shop (see Vaughn and Villalobos 2006).

4. It should be noted that each of the four categories of presidential policy messages described here can be used in a way that is not mutually exclusive of other appeals. In other words, using one approach does not preclude the president from simultaneously using another. As well, although our theoretical framework

categories represent possible messages across two rhetorical dimensions important to presidential-congressional communication: political tone and policy substance. Specifically, the first two categories of presidential messages—mandate rhetoric and bipartisan appeals—are anchored in political messages designed to convince legislators to support the president for reasons linked to public considerations, while the second two categories—signaling volume and agency input—draw attention to the amount of emphasis placed on policy initiatives and substantive expertise involved in the crafting of bills under consideration.

Mandate Rhetoric

The first category of appeals, mandate rhetoric, concerns the president's rhetorical embrace of electoral logic. This type of message is in some ways the inverse of the going public model put forward by Kernell (1986). That is, rather than going to the public to sell a message in order to coerce reluctant members of Congress into voting for the president's preferred policy initiative, this type of appeal grounds the president's preference in the logic of a presumptive mandate. Presidential capacity to invoke an issue-based mandate in the context of a policy debate has historical origins in the rhetoric of Andrew Jackson, who suggested that the 1832 election had conferred a mandate for the elimination of the Second Bank of the United States (Ellis and Kirk 1995). Scholars also refer to the idea of a presidential mandate, conferred through the president's election victory as well as the success of the president's party, as a component of constitutional changes (e.g., Landy and Milkis 2000). The relationship between issue-based mandates and presidential policy success informs several modern-era case studies as well. Ackerman (1998, 267) attributes Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR's) ability to effect a "constitutional moment" to the "triggering election" of 1936 and suggests a parallel with the Civil War era. Historical accounts of Lyndon Johnson's ambitious (and largely successful) policy proposals after the 1964 election emphasize the role of mandates in producing legislative victories (Conkin 1986; Goodwin 1976). Finally, Ronald Reagan's policy success has been linked to the construction of a mandate for conservative policies (Grossback, Peterson, and Stimson 2006; Jones 2005).

In recent years, political scientists have brought increasingly sophisticated analytical techniques to the study of how and why mandates impact the political system. For example, Conley (2001) argues that presidential mandate claims, when made by presidents with a genuine claim to an issue-based electoral mandate, have the potential to be effective in winning interbranch conflicts over policy. Conley highlights the success of these claims for several modern presidents, including Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, and Ronald Reagan. Using formal models as well as case studies, Conley's

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assumes linear, positive relationships for each of these categories and that presidents rationally seek to maximize their use of appeals, it is also plausible, if less likely, that a president could attempt to overextend his use of an appeal strategy to the point of reaching an eventual upper bound and thus introduce a relationship that may not be as linear or positive as our equations imply. Accordingly, while our framework generally rests on the notion that presidents strategically and rationally attempt to craft their policy proposal messages in a manner that maximizes their likelihood of success, we apply two-tailed tests for our models in order to be conservative in interpreting our results.

rational choice contribution suggests that mandate claims serve as a useful communication strategy under two conditions: when the president has won a majority of votes and when a policy issue was the driving factor behind the election results. However, other scholars define the mandate and its credibility differently. Grossback, Peterson, and Stimson (2005, 2006), for instance, find that Congress responds more readily to signals in the electorate about a mandate than to presidential claims. Elsewhere, upon examining presidential mandate claims from 1929 through 2005, Azari (2007) finds that mandate claims are frequently, though not exclusively, used in association with presidential proposals that do not succeed, such as FDR's court-packing plan, Bill Clinton's health care reform proposal, and George W. Bush's Social Security reform proposal.[5] Clearly, the empirical evidence concerning mandate politics is mixed, allowing only the most tentative and cautious conclusions that presidential mandate rhetoric matters to congressional policy action. For our purposes, we follow the general logic that when presidents incorporate public preferences into their arguments for their policy proposals, it should increase the likelihood of congressional support for such policies. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

> H_1: As presidential references to a mandate increase, presidential success in Congress will increase.

Bipartisan Appeals

The second category of presidential messages moves away from the electoral logic of mandate rhetoric and toward the normative ethos of bipartisanship. In this category, rather than grounding an argument in a perceived mandate, the president makes the case for his policy proposal by highlighting efforts for having (or having had) the two major parties (and, thus, the two elected institutions) come together over common bonds—despite their political differences—to work on behalf of the public good. The logic here is quite different, as presidential messages of bipartisanship frequently contain within them not implicit threats but explicit pleas as well as references to evidence of bipartisan partnership. Furthermore, with these appeals for unity comes an incentive for congressional support: shared credit. The president who "goes bipartisan" is also the president who invites members from the other side of the aisle to Rose Garden bill-signing ceremonies and compliments rather than rebukes partisan opponents during subsequent State of the Union reflections.

A president who complements his policy proposal messages with bipartisan rhetoric is not, however, necessarily a benevolent, nonstrategic actor. As Coleman and Manna (2007, 401) note, "arguably weakening partisan loyalties in the public and an electoral base somewhat independent of fellow partisans in Congress provide presidents with incentives to portray themselves in their communications as above the political fray and virtually above or outside the system of partisanship and elections altogether." Indeed, in their study of presidential partisan rhetoric, Coleman and Manna find that the relative

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5. Nevertheless, Azari (2007) also finds evidence that certain mandate claims were linked to successful elements of Ronald Reagan's economic agenda in 1981.

degree of partisanship (or bipartisanship) in a presidential speech is driven by strategy, with the strength of a presidential embrace or snub of partisanship determined by the president's political situation.[6]

This conclusion squares with case study work done by Neustadt (1960) and Bonds (2002), whose analyses of Harry Truman's attempt to sell the Marshall Plan to Congress presents a bipartisan strategy rooted not in normative considerations, but rather in political pragmatism, in this case due to the political weaknesses of Truman's successor presidency.[7] Indeed, as Neustadt (1960, 54) contends, "The plain fact is that Truman had to play bipartisanship as he did or lose the game." Similarly, in an article that argues "bipartisanship is every bit as political as partisanship," Trubowitz and Mellow (2005, 433) add that bipartisan rhetoric is also motivated by a president's strategic desire to court swing voters while demonstrating political independence.[8] Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

> H₂: As presidential appeals to bipartisanship increase, presidential success in Congress will increase.

Signaling

The third category of presidential messages moves away from the political tone of the first two. Instead, it concerns the amount of information given by the president to Congress concerning a given policy proposal. In the post–World War II era, when concerns over executive branch secrecy and the existence and extent of an imperial presidency have proven durable, if somewhat dynamic (see Rudalevige 2006), presidential willingness to provide information about policy goals is an appreciated convention. As such, presidents may employ signaling in their messages to alert legislators of their priorities and propose specific policy initiatives for them to consider. In a previous study, Eshbaugh-Soha (2006) finds that when presidents deliver more verbose policy signals to legislators (and other actors) through speeches, they improve their policy-making performance (see also Eshbaugh-Soha 2008, 2010; Whitford and Yates 2003). Although it remains to be determined whether this improved performance is the result of Congress knowing more about the president's priorities (Fett 1994; Peterson 1990) or because the increased

6. Some policy issues, however, appear to receive almost natural bipartisan rhetorical treatment from national parties. For example, Turner (2002) shows the similarity of platform rhetoric concerning issues relating to American Indians from both major parties across most of the post–World War II era, even as the policy action taken by the parties became increasingly disparate.

7. Conversely, in an article about Arthur Vandenberg, a leading voice in the U.S. Senate on foreign policy at the time, Oliver (1948) noted that the senator's embrace of bipartisanship was due to principle, not politics. According to Oliver (1948, 320), "Vandenberg's espousal of the bipartisan foreign policy arose from a deep conviction that politics should end at the water's edge, and that other nations must have confidence in the consistency of United States foreign policy, regardless of the party in power. But his leadership in this struggle forced him to follow a precariously narrow path. He had to support administration measures, yet not so fully as to abandon the opposition status of his party."

8. At the same time, it should be noted that bipartisan appeals may also at certain times be a reflection of presidential vulnerability; that is, the president who "goes bipartisan" may be one who has few other options, due to unhelpful contextual factors such as divided government or low popularity ratings. We further discuss this alternative explanation, its implications, and respective future avenues of research in our conclusion section.

information on policy content reduces their uncertainty over substance, the pattern appears stable. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

> H₃: As the signaling volume (i.e., verbosity) of a presidential proposal increases, presidential success in Congress will increase.

Agency Input

Finally, the fourth category of presidential policy proposal messages concerns not necessarily the way the president sells an initiative, but rather the substantive quality of the legislative proposal being put forward. Presidents can earn greater policy credibility when they seek an enhanced level of involvement by policy experts, particularly those involved in the administration and implementation of existing law. By putting forward policy initiatives developed using the input of experts, such as key agency officials, presidents are also communicating to members of Congress about both the quality of the proposal and the degree to which the president has delegated the policy-crafting task not to his political subordinates, but rather to bureaucratic experts who are more neutral and policy competent.

In accordance with the recent work by Villalobos (2008, forthcoming), we posit that agency input provides presidential policy development with expertise and objectivity, process transparency, cooperative consultation with Congress, and agency support, which should markedly increase presidential policy-making success in Congress. The involvement of agency actors in the policy development phase provides presidents with a degree of bureaucratic expertise[9] that is more objective than the advice of the president's inner circle and that legislators—particularly partisan opponents of the president—are therefore relatively less likely to oppose (Villalobos 2008, forthcoming).[10] Agency actors are generally more objective than White House staffers because they are less likely to view policy options primarily through an ideological lens and instead base much of their preferences on bureaucratic expertise accumulated from years of policy learning and institutional memory, which provides them with an authoritative knowledge of government procedures and folkways (Weko 1995; Wolf 1999).

Agency involvement at the policy development stage also allows members of Congress to more openly observe and take part in the policy-making process, which helps legitimize policy initiatives in the eyes of legislators prior to their proposal. According to Rudalevige (2002, 150), "Members of Congress know less about an item being crafted in the White House than they do about a departmental production, and have less reason to believe that the information they do receive from EOP [Executive Office of the President]

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9. Friedrich (1940) defines bureaucratic expertise as advice that consists largely of technical knowledge regarding a certain public policy sphere (see also Balla 1998; Balla and Wright 2001; Gruber 1987; Lipsky 1980; Long 1952; Meier and O'Toole 2006).

10. In considering how partisan opponents may view the president's use of agency input, their perceptions of "quality" legislation may be skewed by a preference for a more partisan perspective of policy substance than a relatively more objective one as laid out by policy experts. Nevertheless, we expect that, on the whole, partisan opponents will view presidential initiatives encompassing agency input as relatively less partisan and of better quality (i.e., policy substance) than those initiatives that are more centralized and which lack such input.

sources is reliable." Given that congressional committees often hold hearings to ascertain whether a policy initiative represents a valid policy solution, presidential policy proposals with agency support are therefore less likely to generate skepticism among legislators. Consequently, by attaining the input of agency actors, the president thus signals to members of Congress that a given policy proposal has endured the scrutiny as well as earned the support of the very people responsible for its eventual implementation.

Although not all policy initiatives require policy expertise for their development or passage through Congress, most policy initiatives require the compliance of agency bureaucrats for their eventual implementation. For presidents, seeking the input and support of agency actors in developing policy initiatives is important for increasing the likelihood that the implementation phase will succeed in accordance with their policy agenda objectives.[11] Otherwise, the exclusion of agencies from the policy-making process may result in a lack of agency support, which could likely constrain a president's ability to implement policy and govern effectively. In other words, presidents cannot be sure that civil servants will be willing or able to effectively implement their policy directives if they do not provide an avenue for agency consultation during the policy development phase.[12]

For the reasons described above, the inclusion of agency input in the policy development phase should be useful for convincing legislators that a given presidential policy proposal presents a legitimate policy solution and merits passage into law. Presidential employment of agency input should therefore aid presidents in achieving their policy-making goals in Congress. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

> H_4: As a president's inclusion of agency input in a policy proposal increases, presidential success in Congress will increase.

11. In his seminal work, Moe (1985) contends that presidents often prefer to centralize (and politicize) the policy-making process since the employment of centralized EOP staff is more likely to provide the kind of responsiveness to policy preferences that presidents seek in developing their policy initiatives for proposal to Congress, emphasizing that such preference may be seen as the more institutionally rational (if not always more effective) approach to take (see also Moe and Wilson 1994). More recently, however, Rudalevige (2002) finds that, although presidents do generally prefer a centralized approach, there is little evidence that centralization dominates presidential policy making and no evidence of an increase in the overall level of centralization over time. Rudalevige also finds that although centralizing the policy-making process may ease a president's managerial burdens by reducing the amount of input to a small circle of White House staff (Burke 2000; Heclo 1975, 1999; Moe 1985; Ragsdale and Theis 1997; Walcott and Hult 1995, 2005), it can also result in greater levels of congressional opposition that may impede legislative success. As such, Rudalevige (2002) opens the door to further research on the role and value of alternative, decentralized approaches to policy making wherein presidents may rely more on agency input for influencing the likelihood of policy success in Congress. Building on Rudalevige's work, Villalobos (2008, forthcoming) finds that presidential employment of agency input for policy development leads to increased presidential policy success across both chambers of Congress and expressly outlines the benefits of a more agency-centered approach to presidential policy development. Beyond that, no research we know of has further explored the merits of agency input as a substance-centered rhetorical tool or done so in concert with other rhetorical dimensions.

12. Although agency personnel generally tend to follow executive and legislative policy directives, their exclusion by the president and/or Congress from the development process to circumvent agency opposition can damage agency morale and lead to ineffective policy implementation outcomes (Wolf 1999, 145; see also Heclo 1975, 1999; Seidman 1998, 156-57). In some cases, the exclusion of agency actors has even encouraged organizational deviation, resulting in the circumvention of legislative directives by civil servants who believe that their implementation would result in failed or negative policy outcomes (e.g., O'Leary 1994).

Data Overview

To test our hypotheses, we employ pooled cross-sectional ordered logistic regression analyses across 12 presidential administrations. Specifically, we analyze a set of 496 presidential initiatives spanning the years 1949-2010, which we sampled from the *Public Papers of the President (PPP)*.[13] For each observation, the unit of analysis is the presidential initiative proposed within a presidential message.[14] Each observation serves as a starting point for determining the content of a presidential initiative proposed to Congress, the level of agency input used to develop the initiative, whether the president referenced a mandate as a rationale for supporting the initiative, if the president appealed to a spirit of bipartisanship, the political circumstances that the president faced at the time of its proposal, and the legislative outcome.[15] We also employ a

13. The volumes of the *Public Papers of the President* are published annually by the National Archive and Record Administration's Office of the Federal Register (see also *The American Presidency Project* data resource available at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu). To generate a universe of presidential proposal messages from the *Public Papers of the President* resource, we build on previous work by Rudalevige (2002, chap. 4) who used State of the Union messages, presidential legislative Boxscore data compiled by *Congressional Quarterly*, a replication of Light's (1999) collection of the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) central clearance data, and internal reports of the Legislative Reference Division to help identify the elements of each president's legislative program (see also Villalobos 2008). Here, we update Rudalevige's (2002) data set to include Bill Clinton's second term in office, George W. Bush's two terms, and the 111th Congress covering Barack Obama's first two years in office (see also Villalobos, forthcoming). The total universe of our data set consists of 4,239 published items from which we randomly sampled 496 initiatives found within presidential messages. For future iterations, scholars should continue extending the time coverage as a means to further increase the validity and reliability of the data while keeping up with changes in the political landscape.

14. Given our research design and unit of analysis, the rhetoric found within each presidential proposal may be defined as a president's "announced intent" for which the outcome may be some level of success or failure. As such, it should be noted that our design is rhetoric-focused and may thus overlook other forms of communication (e.g., behind closed doors negotiations) that do not clearly announce intent but nevertheless signal intent to members of Congress by other means. As such, this limitation should be kept in mind when interpreting our analyses.

15. Our method of sampling largely mirrors Rudalevige's (2002) technique, which we adapt to cover a broader time span. Specifically, our sample is stratified by administration to ensure a stable number of initiatives across time and to avoid oversampling from any one administration (see Rudalevige 2002, 72-73; see also Villalobos 2008, forthcoming). The sample includes 16 items for each of the 30 Congresses covered (specifically, the 81st-111th Congresses), which correspond on average to eight items annually per administration (out of approximately 64 messages and 153 proposals for each president per year on average) totaling 32 items for a normal four-year term. Therein, appropriate adjustments were made for presidents serving less than a full term, thereby minimizing any sampling error while allowing for comparisons between strata (see Rudalevidge 2002, 73, 216; see also Cochran 1977; Henry 1990; Villalobos 2008, forthcoming). Such stratification by Congress across administrations is appropriate since each two-year Congress represents "the temporal unit within which an administration's policy formulation process must work" (Rudalevige 2002, 73; see also section 8-e of OMB Circular A-19, available online at http://clinton2.nara.gov/omb/circulars/a019/a019.html). In following Rudalevige's (2002, 216) technique, we assume, as he does, that "sampling from the presidential items sent to Congress represents a random sample of all items for which a presidential decision to centralize or not is actually made (that the number of things for which a centralization decision is made but not observed, because they were never entered in the *PPP*, is negligible)." It is also worth noting that while the *PPP* content provided by *The American Presidency Project* data resource (see http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu) has become more expansive in recent years (e.g., to include news media interviews, White House press secretary remarks, and other written statements) and has thereby effectively expanded the universe of possible observations, our stratified blind sampling technique has allowed us to update Rudalevige's (2002) data set in a consistent manner that insures a proportionally and substantively comparable and unbiased set of additional proposal observations across administrations, all of which pertain to the same unit of analysis (i.e., the presidential initiative).

number of other control measures that relate to presidential policy making in the legislative arena.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable for our analyses measures presidential legislative success. We measure presidential legislative success using an ordinal index scale derived from the proportion of a presidential initiative that the president signed into law, where "0" represents defeat or inaction, "1" denotes passage of less than half (< 50%) of what the president wanted, "2" denotes passage of more than half (> 50%) of the president's proposed initiative, and "3" signifies that the president obtained substantially all of what he originally proposed (Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for this variable). Accordingly, we are able to test (1) what key factors condition a proposal initiative's passage into law and, for those policy proposals that are signed into law, (2) the extent to which the final substance matches the president's original intentions.

Independent Variables

We have argued that there are multiple ways in which presidents may ground policy proposal messages. Determining which of these rhetorical approaches yields cooperative congressional action can further our understanding of whether and when members of Congress are susceptible to presidential persuasion. Below we describe the measurement strategy for our four key theoretical explanatory variables as well as a number of additional control measures.

Rhetorical Dimensions. Our first major independent variable concerns mandate rhetoric. Here, we attempt to determine if presidents have greater success when they root their rhetorical appeals in a democratic logic, linking their request for support with perceptions of a public mandate for policy change. Our mandate variable is measured using an ordinal index, for which "3" denotes more than one mention of a general

TABLE 1
Presidential Legislative Success (Descriptive Statistics for the Dependent Variable)

Level of Success	Frequency	Percentage
0 = Defeat or inaction	278	56
1 = Less than half (< 50%)	37	7.5
2 = More than half (> 50%)	66	13.3
3 = Substantially all	115	23.2
Total	496	100%

mandate, "2" denotes one mention of a clear claim to a general mandate, "1" denotes a more basic reference to a campaign promise,[16] and "0" denotes no reference to a mandate.[17]

The second major independent variable concerns the rhetoric of bipartisanship. Here, the president makes the case for support of his policy proposal by calling for the two major parties to come together to work on behalf of the public good. We measure bipartisan appeals using an ordinal index, wherein "3" denotes more than one specific mention of bipartisanship, "2" refers to one specific mention that explains how the bill is bipartisan, "1" simply refers to a bill as bipartisan without specific details, and "0" denotes no bipartisan reference.[18]

Our third major independent variable is signaling. As previously mentioned, signaling is a policy-making tool that presidents employ to alert legislators of their priorities and propose specific policy initiatives for them to consider (Eshbaugh-Soha 2006). The measure of presidential signaling we apply follows the work of Eshbaugh-Soha (2006) to capture the overall volume length of a signal.[19] Specifically, we measure the number of paragraphs dedicated to a presidential policy initiative in a presidential message, which helps to gauge whether the length of a given proposal within a message influences the likelihood that legislators will consider a policy initiative more positively.[20]

16. For example, George W. Bush referred to a campaign promise in a speech about tort reform by claiming, "I know you're serious about this liability issue here. I talked about it everywhere I went on the campaign—nearly everywhere I went on the campaign trail, and I believe the voters made their position clear on election day about medical liability" (Bush 2005).

17. As an alternative measure, we also applied a basic dichotomous variable to account for the presence or absence of mandate rhetoric, the results of which did not differ significantly across our models. These additional analyses are available upon request.

18. In coding bipartisanship claims, we identified phrases that suggested the assertion of bipartisan support at either the elite or mass level, such as "This request is fully in accord with our 2-year bipartisan budget agreement" (Reagan 1988) or "The first of these measures is the creation of an Agency for Consumer Advocacy, which will bring to fruition eight years of bipartisan effort in the Congress" (Carter 1977). Also included were statements that referred to support from "both parties" or "both sides" such as "This is not a partisan measure—and it neither includes nor rejects all of the features which have long been sought by the various educational groups and organizations. It is instead an attempt to launch a prudent and balanced program drawing upon the efforts of many past Congresses and the proposals of many members of both Houses and both political parties" (Kennedy 1963). We also applied an alternative dichotomous measure to account for the presence or absence of bipartisan rhetoric, the results of which did not differ significantly across our models. These additional analyses are available upon request.

19. In using the term "volume" and its measure as applied by Eshbaugh-Soha (2006), we emphasize that our measure focuses on volume in terms of signal length (i.e., "verbosity") and should not be interpreted as a more literal measure of signal volume, such as "noise."

20. While our focus here is on capturing the effect of signaling in terms of signal length, one might also consider, as one of our reviewers suggested, a more compositional approach to measuring signaling effects, particularly with regards to how the ratio between the length of a given proposal and the overall length of a message may affect signaling strength. To explore this possibility, we also conducted a set of sensitivity analyses for which we calculated a ratio that divided the number of paragraphs for each proposal within a message by the total number of paragraphs for the entire message. However, the measure did not provide any significant findings for either of our models, nor did it produce any significant differences when compared to the results of our main models. As such, we decided to keep our initial measure given its previous application in the literature by Eshbaugh-Soha (2006, 2008). Nevertheless, scholars might further investigate signaling in a more compositional manner, perhaps at different stages of the policy-making process. For instance, it would be interesting to explore whether certain interactive effects may exist between the signal length of a particular proposal initiative and the overall tone of a president's speech—be it negative/positive, bipartisan/partisan, or some combination, particularly at the agenda-setting stage.

Last, our fourth major independent variable is agency input. To measure agency input, we utilize an array of primary and secondary source records that include the *PPP*; the THOMAS federal legislative information resource; the GovTrack information on congressional data; and the LexisNexis academic, congressional, and government periodical indexes (see Villalobos 2008, forthcoming; Rudalevige 2002).[21] Specifically, we measure agency input on an ordinal scale going from most centralized to most decentralized, where "1" represents a policy that is a product of staffers within the White House Office; "2" represents a product of centralized staff outside the White House Office, such as in the Budget Bureau/Office of Management and Budget (OMB) or the Council of Economic Advisors (CEA); "3" represents a product of mixed White House and agency/departmental origin, with the White House taking the lead; "4" represents a product of mixed origin, with the agency/department taking the lead role; and "5" represents a product of executive branch agencies and/or departments.

Following Rudalevige's (2002) example,[22] the main objective in identifying the level of agency input for each proposal is to determine its "preponderant" source within the executive branch (see also Villalobos 2008, forthcoming).[23] In doing so, one may consider three key coding factors: (1) where an idea originated from, (2) who had the most influence over the direction and design of the policy, and (3) who had the capacity and substantive knowledge required to package the proposed policy with programmatic and legislative substance (see Rudalevige, 2002, 76).[24] Thus, although there may at times be some degree of overlap between the five categories of agency input, one can nevertheless ascribe the overall form and content of the presidential proposal as a means to generate a useful ordinal measure of variance across observations.

21. Our coding here relies mainly on published sources, but nevertheless follows similar, comparable coding criteria as previously applied by Rudalevige (2002, 76), which focuses on identifying the "preponderant" source for policy development for each presidential initiative by applying three key coding factors. That said, presidents may sometimes overstate agency input (or omit the absence of such input) within the proposal itself, which is why it is important to use presidential messages as a starting point for thoroughly investigating the legislative prehistory of each initiative across a variety of primary and secondary source records in order to insure an accurate, unbiased coding scheme.

22. Rudalevige (2002), in turn, adapted Chamberlain's (1946) strategy for determining whether a bill can be categorized mainly as pertaining to the legislative or executive branch. One can also look to Ponder's (2000) categories of centralized, decentralized, and mixed sources of staff policy advice, which he applied with respect to Jimmy Carter's administration.

23. For example, one can infer that then-Chairman of the White House Council of Environmental Quality Jim Connaughton's leading role in developing the proposal for the Clear Skies Act of 2003 constituted a centralized (level 2) approach aimed primarily at satisfying George W. Bush's political agenda. When the proposal fell into congressional deadlock, the Bush administration then shifted gears in an effort to implement some of the initiative's central tenets administratively, rather than legislatively. By stark contrast, a look into the history behind the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 reveals a long-term, highly decentralized (level 5) effort led largely by the Department of Labor and Senator Chris Dodd to develop and move a major policy proposal through Congress. Although two initial versions of the bill were vetoed by President George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton strongly endorsed the initiative as part of his 1992 "People First" presidential campaign theme. Satisfied with the overall substance of the proposed bill, Clinton basically adopted it for his own policy agenda and used it as a major talking point during his successful bid for the presidency in 1992. Later, in delivering his inaugural address, Clinton proposed the initiative to legislators, referring to it as a top legislative priority for his new administration. Less than two weeks later, President Clinton signed the bill into law.

24. One can also look to the detailed illustrations provided by Rudalevige (2002, 76-80, 119-23), which we likewise employed as major reference points for our own coding decisions.

Issue Dynamics. In looking at presidential proposal messages, there are a number of issue dynamics that may condition the likelihood of presidential legislative success. Perhaps most notable among these is policy domain. Scholars have long explored whether and to what extent presidents tend to hold a greater amount of influence (and leeway) over foreign policy issues than domestic ones in their dealings with Congress. In line with the recent work of Canes-Wrone, Howell, and Lewis (2008), we expect that Congress has an overall tendency to delegate foreign policy powers to the president (see also Fisher 2000; Peterson 1994). Accordingly, we control for policy domain by employing a dichotomous control measure for which "1" denotes a presidential proposal pertaining to foreign affairs and "0" pertains to proposals addressing domestic affairs.

In addition to policy domain, issue salience may influence legislative perceptions of certain presidential policy initiatives. Issues with the potential to directly affect the public often become a topic of public discourse in Washington and in the media, making them more nationally visible and thereby increasing the likelihood that politicians will take some form of action in dealing with them (see Brians and Wattenberg 1996). On the other hand, low salience issues do not carry with them a sense of urgency in the eyes of the public. We measure issue salience as a dichotomous variable for which "1" denotes an issue that is salient at a given point in time and "0" denotes otherwise.[25]

We also consider the extent to which issue novelty might decrease the likelihood of proposal passage. A new issue is one that presents a societal problem for which no president or legislator has previously offered a policy solution. Examples include the earliest initiative put forth to deal with terrorism, the first Medicaid bill proposed, and the first legislative initiative put forth to prohibit the cloning of humans. Old issues are those that represent refinements, alterations, or reauthorizations of existing laws. We measure issue novelty as a dichotomous variable where "1" represents issues that are new to the policy agenda and "0" otherwise (see Rudalevige 2002, 89-90).

In addition, we expect that more complex issues may require a greater amount of information transaction costs to garner legislative approval, which may lower the likelihood of policy success. To measure issue complexity, we use a three-point index (see Light 1999, 119; Rudalevige 2002, 91). Initially applied by Light (1999) as a "large/small" dichotomy between small requests not intended to alter existing laws and larger ones that are, Rudalevige (2002) expanded the "large" category measure between proposals requiring technical expertise in limited areas and those large in scope that require expertise across a multitude of policy areas, thereby creating the three-point index we adopt here.

Presidents at times also address policy issues that cut across multiple congressional committees. If multiple committees are involved, legislators may engage in jurisdictional turf wars over the substance and transferal of a given initiative, which may complicate a president's ability to gauge how best to develop a proposal initiative that avoids major congressional opposition or gridlock (Oleszek 1996, 17; see also Groseclose and King

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25. We code our dichotomous measure for salience in accordance with Binder's (2003) coding method wherein a salient issue is one that appears in ten or more *New York Times* editorials during a given Congress (see also Rudalevige 2002, 97-98).

1998; King 1997; Shepsle 1989). We therefore expect that initiatives representing crosscutting jurisdictions will decrease the likelihood of legislative passage. To track the number of legislative committees that have jurisdiction over a given initiative, we use the THOMAS and GovTrack legislative information resources. As a means to control for overall committee jurisdictional influence, we employ a measure that codes "1" for cases where only a single committee takes up an initiative, "2" for a case where two committees are involved, and "3" for cases where three or more committees are involved, therein applying chamber-specific measures for the House and Senate in separate models.

Last, proposals that constitute the reorganization of one or more agencies may result in congressional opposition and a lower likelihood of proposal passage for a number of reasons (Rudalevige 2002, 126-27; Wilson 1989, 268; see also Arnold 1998, 18-20). Perhaps the most fundamental cause of opposition may be "a proprietary sense of the departments and agencies as they stand, since they were created by Congress in the first place" (Rudalevige 2002, 126). Agency reorganization may also constitute a shift in congressional committee oversight responsibilities such that those who hold jurisdiction at the time of proposal are unlikely to want to cede that authority to another committee (see Wilson 1989, 268). In addition, the prospect of agency actors providing advice for the reorganization of their own agency makes it less likely that legislators will view such advice as objective or reliable, particularly if the proposed reforms threaten an agency's hierarchy or remove jurisdictional authority over a certain policy sphere. We measure reorganization initiatives as a dichotomous variable that equals "1" if a policy initiative calls for a reorganization effort for a given department or agency and "0" otherwise.

Ideology and Partisanship. One important measure concerning the makeup of Congress is the ideological distance between the president and each chamber pivot. We measure the president's ideological proximity to (1) the Senate cloture pivot and (2) the House median pivot using separate models for each chamber in order to avoid problems of multicollinearity.[26] Specifically, we use Poole and Rosenthal's (1997) common space coordinates to measure the distance from the president to the cloture pivot for the Senate (see Krehbiel 1998), which involve the sixty-sixth vote pivot ideological score for all the years preceding 1974 and the sixtieth vote pivot ideological score for the years thereafter. In a separate model, we employ the House median pivot to capture the ideological distance between the president and the House of Representatives.

The level of ideological polarization between the two major parties in each chamber may also play a role in mediating a president's legislative performance. In the post–World War II era, polarization remained stable until the late 1970s, and has been on the rise since then (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; see also Bond and Fleisher 2000). To account for such trends, we control for polarization in each chamber by measuring the

26. As alternative measures, we also calculate the absolute value of the difference between the Senate majority party leader and the president and do the same for Speaker of the House and the president (see also Rudalevige 2002, 93-95). Although the Speaker of the House does not participate in roll call voting (except in special circumstances) during his or her tenure, the common space coordinate scores provide lifetime liberalism measures that are applicable to control for the distance between the president and the Speaker's ideology. A comparison of the measures across different models indicates no significant changes for the variable coefficients. These additional analyses are available upon request.

difference between the Republican and Democratic Party means on the first DW-Nominate dimension (i.e., the liberal-moderate-conservative dimension) across each Congress over time (see Poole and Rosenthal 2007; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006).

Majority Control. Presidents have a better chance of getting their policy proposals passed into law when they have a high level of party support in Congress (see Bond and Fleisher 1990; Edwards 1989). To control for the president's general level of party support in Congress, we employ the standard dichotomous variable for divided government where "1" denotes a state of divided government and "0" denotes otherwise.[27]

Public Opinion. Following the tradition of the literature, we expect that public approval is likely to influence whether presidents can achieve their policy agenda goals.[28] Regarding legislative behavior, presidential approval allows members of Congress to gauge whether they should support a certain presidential policy proposal (see Edwards 1989, 2003). As such, when approval ratings are high, members of Congress are more likely to support a president's legislative proposals than when ratings are low (Brace and Hinckley 1992, 1993; Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002; Edwards 1980, 1983, 1989; see also Edwards 1997). We measure presidential approval as the percentage approval of the president according to the most recent Gallup poll prior to the proposal of a presidential initiative.

An additional measure of presidential approval concerns the change in approval from the time the president proposes an initiative to the time of the initiative's passage or legislative defeat. Controlling for change in presidential approval over time is important because, as Bond, Fleisher, and Wood (2003, 97) find, "Not only does the president's public approval rise and fall over time, the interpretation that members of Congress place on a given level or change in approval also is likely to vary over time." We measure change in

27. In cases where party control of the chambers is split, our measure codes "0" for divided government concerning the chamber controlled by president's party and "1" for the chamber controlled by the opposition party. In separate sensitivity analyses, we also applied an alternative measure of the percentage of seats the president holds in each chamber. Although this measure provides a more approximate measure of the level of party support the president holds in a given chamber, it does not capture the core dynamics of whether the president has majority control over a chamber in the way that the divided government variable does. In any case, a comparison of the measures across different models indicated no significant changes for the variable coefficients. These additional analyses are available upon request.

28. We should note that although the scholarly consensus supports the observation that a marginal yet significant linkage exists between presidential approval and congressional behavior, this relationship is constrained in at least two key ways. First, Bond and Fleisher (1990, 23-29) provide a thorough critique of the various limitations of the research linking presidential popularity and legislative success, though their research findings indicate the persistence of the marginal connection identified most notably by Edwards (1989). These limitations lead Bond and Fleisher (1990, 29) to conclude that the effects of presidential approval on congressional action are likely indirect, a reflection of electoral forces that alter ideological and partisan forces in the legislative branch. Second, a large body of research on mass preferences and individual legislative decision making shows that while members of Congress (especially those in the House of Representatives) have an ever-present electoral incentive to be responsive to their constituents, several other considerations occasionally have the power to overwhelm this connection, including pressure from interest groups, parties, and committees, as well as specific policy or career goals, not to mention each member's own ideological preferences (see Canes-Wrone 2006, 22-23 for a review of the key studies in this area of research). With respect to our particular study, we believe our relatively strong, positive findings merit further investigation, perhaps by incorporating more of the limiting factors mentioned above in future analyses.

presidential approval by subtracting the percentage approval of the president according to the most recent Gallup poll prior to the proposal of a presidential initiative from the percentage approval of the president once a decision is made on that initiative in each chamber of Congress. Typically, a final decision is the roll call vote for a given bill but can also constitute the date that Congress adjourns for cases where a bill simply dies and does not come to a vote. As with the measures for ideological congressional makeup, we use separate measures of change in approval for each chamber decision in the House and Senate.

Temporal Factors. In deciding whether and how to consider a given presidential proposal, one chamber of Congress may take into consideration the actions of the other chamber. For instance, if one chamber is the "first mover" and overwhelmingly rejects the proposal of a given presidential initiative, the other chamber may decide not to consider the measure at all. If, on the other hand, the first mover chamber overwhelmingly approves the passage of a given initiative into law, the other chamber may be more likely to follow suit. In cases of a close outcome and/or certain compromise on the part of the first mover chamber, the other chamber may react strategically to either pass a similar bill or pass a bill that would require further compromise from the first mover before reaching the president's desk. To control for the influence of the first mover chamber, we include a dummy variable for each model where "1" signifies an observation for which the chamber under investigation is the first mover and "0" otherwise.

Another important temporal factor to consider is a president's time in term. Time generally constrains the ability for Congress to get through appropriations bills, reauthorizations, and their general workload. We therefore expect that the further a president is into his term, the lower the likelihood of proposal passage. We measure time in term as the number of months a president has served in office at the time that the president proposes an initiative (reset after reelection; see Rudalevige 2002, 141-42).

Budgetary Situation. With regards to the budgetary situation, one may expect that a president's success in Congress decreases as the deficit grows, since less funding will be available for instituting presidential initiatives that require some measure of appropriations. Alternatively, the advent of a budgetary surplus is likely to increase the number of proposals passed in a year given a greater amount of funding available for more government programs and other spending opportunities. We thus expect that increases in the deficit decrease the likelihood of proposal passage. We calculate the deficit variable using the standard measure for the fiscal year deficit (or surplus) divided by the total federal outlays (see Rudalevige 2002, 141-43).

Administration Dummy Variables. A final factor to consider in explaining presidential leadership of Congress is whether and how the idiosyncratic effects of individual presidents and their administrations may influence legislative success. To address this influence, we employ separate dummy administration controls for each empirical model in our analyses using the Truman administration as the baseline.[29]

29. Due to space limitations, the results for our administration dummy variables are not shown in Tables 2 and 3, but are available upon request. Generally speaking, our analyses produced one significant

Empirical Findings

We conduct pooled cross-sectional ordered logistic regression analyses across 12 presidential administrations to determine the extent to which presidential policy-making success in Congress is a function of a president's utilization of mandate rhetoric, bipartisan rhetoric, signaling volume, agency input, the ideological makeup and majority control of Congress, presidential popularity, and a number of other control variables. Given the bicameral structure of Congress, we conduct separate analyses for each chamber to control for the differences in the makeup and legislative procedures inherent in each legislative body. For each of our analyses, we report predicted probability scores to provide substantive conclusions about how certain factors influence the likelihood of legislative success.

Overall, our results indicate that it is the substantive dimension of presidential requests that matters most, with our indicator for agency input exhibiting a statistically significant relationship with presidential success in both legislative chambers (see Tables 2 and 3). None of the other main independent variables are linked in a statistically significant manner with success in either chamber of Congress, suggesting that politics matters less than policy.

Examining Rhetorical Influence on Presidential Success (Senate Model)

With respect to our model for the Senate, we find that presidential success is linked in a statistically significant manner with agency input, policy domain, issue complexity, the Senate cloture pivot, presidential approval, and change in approval. Concerning the influence of agency input, the predicted probability scores in Table 2 indicate that when the level of agency input changes from its minimum to maximum value (i.e., from the most centralized "1" to the most decentralized "5" level of agency input), the likelihood of presidential legislative success increases by 12.3%.

This key finding corroborates our fourth hypothesis (H_4) suggesting that rhetorical cues focused on policy substance have a positive, influential impact on how legislators view and vote on a presidential initiative. With respect to policy implications, the findings suggest that presidents can benefit considerably from employing agency input as a means to keep their policy proposals intact as they move through the legislative process. That said, so long as the president does not overly compromise on substance during the initial development of a given proposal, one can assume that a president stands a relatively greater chance of maximizing his policy preferences while also maximizing the likelihood of legislative passage.

Turning to our control variables for issue dynamics, the results demonstrate that policy domain and the level of issue complexity both matter when it comes to the

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finding indicating that, relative to the other administrations, President Eisenhower was less likely to succeed in the Senate during his term in office. In separate sensitivity analyses, we were also able to test controls for every Congress as an alternative means to account for any general time effects (i.e., besides within administration differences) but did not obtain any significant findings. The results of these alternative analyses are available upon request.

TABLE 2
Rhetorical Influence on Presidential Legislative Success, 1949-2010 (Ordered Logit Regression Model with Senate Controls)

Variables	Senate Model			
	Coefficients	*Z-Score*	*Min->Max*	*+-sd/2*
Rhetorical Dimensions				
Mandate Rhetoric	−1.247	−1.13	–	–
Bipartisan Appeals	.111	.68	–	–
Signaling Volume	−.002	−.69	–	–
Agency Input	.256**	3.04	.1230	N/A†
Issue Dynamics				
Policy Domain	.906***	4.07	.1113	N/A†
Issue Salience	−.161	−.56	–	–
Issue Novelty	.224	.97	–	–
Issue Complexity	−.294**	−2.13	.0721	N/A†
Crosscutting Jurisdictions	.125	.91	–	–
Reorganization Impact	.093	.41	–	–
Ideology and Partisanship				
Senate Cloture Pivot	−8.099**	−2.40	.4563	.1565
Senate Polarization	−3.47	−.90	–	–
Majority Control				
Divided Government	.404	.70	–	–
Public Opinion				
Presidential Approval	.022**	2.01	.1659	.0370
Change in Approval	.031**	2.28	.2789	.0322
Temporal Factors				
"First Mover" Chamber	.003	−.79	–	–
Time in Term	.003	.53	–	–
Budgetary Situation				
Deficit	−2.605	−1.48	–	–
N	485			
LR *Chi^2*	88.06			
Prob > *Chi^2*	.0000			
PRE (maxcut)	11.39			

Dependent Variable: Ordinal index scale derived from the proportion of the president's initiative that became law ranging from 0 = defeat or inaction, 1 = less than half (< 50%), 2 = more than half (> 50%), and 3 = substantially all of what the president proposed.

† The predicted probability scores for a half standard deviation above and below the mean (i.e., one standard deviation shift) are not applicable for these variables in the ordered logit model.

PRE stands for the proportionate reduction in error in predicting specific categorical outcomes compared with the overall distribution (maxcut specifies using a cutoff that maximizes the number of correctly predicted outcomes).

Note: Administration dummy variable results (not shown) are available upon request.

Results are for two-tailed tests, *$p < 0.1$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

president's level of prominence in the legislative arena.[30] As we expected, presidents appear to have a greater amount of influence over foreign affairs than domestic ones when dealing with members of Congress. In particular, we find that the likelihood of legislative success in the Senate model may increase by about 11.13% when presidents propose a foreign policy initiative rather than a domestic one. As for issue complexity, the predicted probability results suggest that when the level of issue complexity changes from its minimum to maximum value (i.e., from 1 to 3 in the index measure), the likelihood of success may decrease by up to 7.21%.

We also find that an increase in the ideological distance between the executive and the Senate decreases the likelihood that a presidential proposal will pass into law. Specifically, we find that a one standard deviation increase (i.e., within a half standard deviation below and above the mean) in the ideological distance between the president and the Senate cloture pivot can decrease the likelihood of presidential legislative success by up to 15.65%. Given that a half standard deviation represents an increase in ideological distance of .081 in the Senate (on a -1 to 1 scale), this means that a total ideological distance of .162 (i.e., one standard deviation) between the Senate cloture pivot and the president can decrease the likelihood of presidential legislative success by a little more than 15%.

Public opinion of the president also appears to be a notable factor in determining whether Congress will pass a given presidential proposal into law.[31] In accordance with previous studies, the predicted probability results for the Senate model indicate that a one standard deviation shift (i.e., within a half standard deviation below and above the mean) may change the likelihood of presidential policy success by 3.7%. Given that a half standard deviation represents a 6.8 percentage point difference in approval ratings, this means that a one standard deviation shift of about 14 percentage points can either increase or decrease (depending on the direction of the shift) the president's likelihood of legislative success by nearly 4%.

Last, our results indicate that the change in public approval from the time the president proposes an initiative to the time of its legislative outcome also has a notable influence on the president's ability to move policy initiatives through Congress. Specifically, the predicted probability results for the Senate model show that a one standard deviation shift (i.e., between a half standard deviation below and above the mean) in approval from the time a president proposes an initiative to its final outcome may increase (or decrease) the likelihood of presidential policy success by 3.22%. Given that a half standard deviation represents a change of about 4.16 percentage points in approval from the time the president proposes an initiative to the time Congress makes a final decision,

30. With regards to our null findings for the reorganization impact variable, one of our reviewers pointed out that our negative expectations surrounding general reorganization-related proposals (for which we expected that legislative committee turf wars would lower the likelihood of success) may have been washed out by other types of reorganization proposals. One type to consider in particular is president-led reorganization plans, which, under congressionally delegated reorganization authority, tend to take effect on most occasions. We leave it to future studies to further explore the topic across various types of reorganization proposals.

31. But refer back to our comment in note 28 concerning the limitations of this linkage.

this means that a one standard deviation shift of about eight percentage points can either increase or decrease (depending on the direction of the shift) the likelihood of success by more than three percent.

Examining Rhetorical Influence on Presidential Success (House Model)

The results of our analyses for the House model largely parallel those of the Senate model. As Table 3 shows, we find once more that agency input plays a key role in determining legislative outcomes, whereas the other main independent variables do not. Specifically, the minimum to maximum predicted probability scores indicate a 12.15% potential increase in the likelihood of success in the House when the president takes a more decentralized approach to policy development. Such result once again corroborates our fourth hypothesis (H_4).

With regards to policy domain, we once again find that presidents are more likely to succeed in passing initiatives that fall into the foreign policy realm. In particular, the results indicate that the likelihood of legislative success in the House may increase by about 11.71% when presidents propose a foreign policy initiative rather than a domestic one. Also in line with the Senate model results, we find that the higher the level of issue complexity, the lower the likelihood of presidential success in the House. Specifically, the predicted probability results show that a change in the level of issue complexity from its minimum to maximum value (i.e., from 1 to 3 in the index measure) can decrease the likelihood of success by up to 7.22%.

We also find that a one standard deviation increase (i.e., within a half standard deviation below and above the mean) between the president and the House median pivot can decrease the likelihood of presidential legislative success by up to 9.11%. Regarding presidential approval, our predicted probability results for the House indicate that a one standard deviation increase (i.e., within a half standard deviation below and above the mean) may increase the likelihood of presidential policy success by 4.1%. Likewise, regarding changes in presidential approval, we find that a one standard deviation increase (i.e., within a half standard deviation below and above the mean) may increase the likelihood of legislative success in the House by 3.47%. Last, we find that, unlike in the Senate model where the effect falls short of statistical significance, the deficit variable in the House model suggests that a one standard deviation increase in the U.S. deficit (i.e., within a half standard deviation below and above the mean) can significantly decrease the overall likelihood of presidential legislative success by up to 4.35%.

Conclusion

The preceding analyses indicate that although presidents do possess the power to shape activity in the legislative arena, this ability is not unconditional. Instead, it appears that when presidents attempt to persuade Congress to support their initiatives, political tone matters less than policy substance. Purely political messages that reference the electoral logic of mandates or appeal to a sense of bipartisanship appear to have no impact

TABLE 3
Rhetorical Influence on Presidential Legislative Success, 1949-2010 (Ordered Logit Regression Model with House Controls)

Variables	House Model			
	Coefficients	*Z-Score*	*Min->Max*	*+-sd/2*
Rhetorical Dimensions				
Mandate Rhetoric	−1.332	−1.18	–	–
Bipartisan Appeals	.13	.80	–	–
Signaling Volume	−.001	−.28	–	–
Agency Input	.253**	3.01	.1215	N/A†
Issue Dynamics				
Policy Domain	.954***	4.29	.1171	N/A†
Issue Salience	−.281	−.97	–	–
Issue Novelty	.255	1.11	–	–
Issue Complexity	−.295**	−2.13	.0722	N/A†
Crosscutting Jurisdictions	.135	.98	–	–
Reorganization Impact	.106	.47	–	–
Ideology and Partisanship				
House Median Pivot	−4.275**	−1.88	.2778	.0911
House Polarization	−1.643	−.41	–	–
Majority Control				
Divided Government	−.334	−.83	–	–
Public Opinion				
Presidential Approval	.025**	2.19	.1824	.0410
Change in Approval	.034**	2.41	.2951	.0347
Temporal Factors				
"First Mover" Chamber	.21	.99	–	–
Time in Term	.001	.17	–	–
Budgetary Situation				
Deficit	−3.055*	−1.82	.2137	.0435
N	485			
LR *Chi²*	86.51			
Prob > *Chi²*	.0000			
PRE (maxcut)	13.16			

Dependent Variable: Ordinal index scale derived from the proportion of the president's initiative that became law ranging from 0 = defeat or inaction, 1 = less than half (< 50%), 2 = more than half (> 50%), and 3 = substantially all of what the president proposed.
† The predicted probability scores for a half standard deviation above and below the mean (i.e., one standard deviation shift) are not applicable for these variables in the ordered logit model.
PRE stands for the proportionate reduction in error in predicting specific categorical outcomes compared with the overall distribution (maxcut specifies using a cutoff that maximizes the number of correctly predicted outcomes).
Note: Administration dummy variable results (not shown) are available upon request.
Results are for two-tailed tests, *$p < 0.1$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

on presidential legislative success, nor does policy signaling, though highlighting the role of agency-based policy experts in crafting legislation does. From these results, we conclude that it is substance that matters most when members of Congress decide to support the president's position, more so than rhetorical tone or policy signaling.

This, of course, is not to say that politics—and political rhetoric—does not matter. The null findings associated with the political tone measures (i.e., the bipartisanship and mandate tests) and the measure of signaling volume could simply mean that those phenomena may only influence the legislative process at another, often earlier stage (i.e., prior to the floor vote, perhaps either by getting an issue on the legislative agenda or more procedurally by moving a bill out of committee or getting a floor vote scheduled). Outside of investigating the impact of such rhetorical tools, understanding what motivates presidents to use such tools can also help explain why and when presidents employ them. For instance, it may be that presidents turn to bipartisan appeals or mandate rhetoric when they operate from a less advantageous position. Indeed, as was the case with the previously referenced example of President Truman's attempt to sell the Marshall Plan to an otherwise hostile Congress at a time of significant political weakness, it is possible that presidents more often "go bipartisan" when forces such as divided government and dismal levels of popularity effectively prohibit other paths to legislative leadership. Alternatively, presidential messages of bipartisanship could simply be insincere expressions designed not to reflect policy substance, but rather to link public expectations of (and/or preferences for) ideological moderation with the more rigidly ideological/partisan content of the legislation under consideration.[32] Future studies should similarly examine the contextual forces that shape presidential willingness to claim mandates. Beyond such readily apparent factors, such as a president's margin of electoral victory and time since inauguration, are there other forces or factors (such as temporal sequencing) that shape presidential decisions to make this particular rhetorical choice?[33]

In addition, scholars should explore not only the motivational factors behind each strategy as described above, but also the instances in which presidents may use more than one strategy simultaneously and why. For example, scholars may investigate the circumstances under which presidents may seek to inform legislators about a certain policy initiative not only by signaling their policy priorities, but also through bipartisan or partisan appeals and/or mentions of a political mandate.

32. More generally, as one of our reviewers pointed out, it is worth considering the general argument put forth by Wood (2009), which suggests that presidential rhetoric is rarely centrist in substance despite presidential claims to the contrary. As it relates to our study, our general hypothesis concerning bipartisan rhetoric suggests that such rhetoric (whether delivered with sincerity or not) would, on average, more often lead to success than failure. However, in the context of Wood's (2009, chap. 4) argument (and the evidence he finds to the contrary, which demonstrates that presidents most often adhere to their partisan supporters rather than the median, moderate, nonpartisan voter), future studies should move toward more nuanced measures of bipartisan rhetorical appeals for further investigation of how such motivations affect presidential behavior and performance, as well as what the implications might be with regards to scholarly appraisals of such behavior and the manner that legislators and others respond to it.

33. Such considerations open the door to future studies for which the generalized hypotheses presented in this study may be modified and adapted, perhaps even in a mutually reinforcing manner, to fit subsequent, more nuanced empirical explorations of the various rhetorical dimensions.

In terms of further investigating the impact of presidential rhetoric on legislative success, scholars should take a deeper look into whether and to what extent each of the rhetorical dimensions presents a linear versus nonlinear relationship in affecting the likelihood of presidential legislative success. Although presidents are presumed to act rationally in an effort to maximize their likelihood of policy success, they may sometimes miscalculate their efforts and thus overextend their use of a certain strategy. For example, presidents may inadvertently apply too strong a signal to the point that their effort to push a given initiative backfires in the form of diminishing returns. Given this possibility, it may be that, at least under certain circumstances, presidential rhetorical strategies may function in more of a curvilinear than linear fashion (perhaps more in the long-term as compared to short-term gains in agenda setting).

Another area that merits further study concerns the manner in which legislators—particularly partisan opponents of the president—may view the "quality" of a given proposal despite the presence of agency input. Indeed, although we find that legislators are relatively more likely to support presidential proposals that rely on policy experts rather than a president's inner political staff, scholars should further explore the extent to which partisan opponents may nevertheless object to certain initiatives such as those stemming from highly politicized agencies or departments, those dealing with highly politicized issues, and/or those that lie in the domestic policy domain for which presidents have less leeway than in foreign affairs.

Last, though our study considers presidential intent in terms of publicly announced proposals, presidents also at times signal their intent through less public means, as in bargaining with key legislators behind the scenes. Accordingly, scholars should further attend to the gap between a president's public announcements and his overall intent encompassing both public and private efforts to move members of Congress to support presidential legislative proposals. An in-depth, longitudinal analysis of memos and other communicative documents shared between the executive and legislative branches may be helpful toward that end.

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