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To Aidan and Seth, who always helped me to remember what is important in life

and

To my incredible wife Tonya, whose support, encouragement, and love made this all possible

“In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.” Proverbs 16:9

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INTRODUCTION

Theorists, political scientists, and politicians alike continuously attempt to better understand the office of the presidency, the men who hold that office, and the powers (constitutional and informal) that are exercised by that office. They seek to characterize, classify, and categorize the office and its holders in order to discover trends, changes, and evolutions since the time of George Washington.

The 20th century (and indeed the 21st century) has witnessed the widespread adoption of a certain understanding of the way the presidency has evolved that has acted as a kind of Burkean “terministic screen” to direct and guide the lion’s share of presidential research. This ‘screen’ is the belief that there have been two periods in the office of the presidency—the “traditional” and the “modern” period.

Many contemporary articles and books studying the presidency make sure to characterize themselves as either studying the “modern” or the “traditional” presidency, or busy themselves with searching for differences between the two. Thus focused, studies take issue with the origins of the contemporary presidency or the true ending of a “traditional” presidency instead of questioning the actual propriety of such a distinction; they attempt to clarify the line of division between the two periods instead of examining whether or not a line is appropriate. Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Dwight Eisenhower are favorite demarcations for debate of the origins of the “modern” presidency.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Fred Greenstein led studies that suggested that the history of the presidency was best characterized by a division into “modern” and

“traditional” periods. In 1981, following up on Greenstein’s work and codifying the differentiation between periods of presidential activity and behavior, James Caesar, Glen Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph Bessette published “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency,” followed by Tulis’ work *The Rhetorical Presidency* in 1987. This school of thought frames the “traditional/modern” distinction through an examination of the rhetorical changes in the presidency. The “traditional” period is characterized by a presidency that is seemingly bound to the formality, propriety and tradition of the Constitution itself. A respect for the establishment of different branches of government as well as a reluctance to assert power of the presidency over the other two branches allegedly keeps presidents from proposing policy, speaking directly in appeal to the people, or proposing personal visions for the government or the country.

Conversely, these scholars propose that beginning in the early 20th century, presidencies broke from this mold and began to assert their power in the federal sphere. Through policy proposition, policy advocacy, position taking, speaking to the people, going public, and presenting a vision for the nation, this “modern” presidency has seemingly “bucked off” the constitutional restraints of old and evolved into a powerhouse in the governmental field of play. Taking their assumptions from data as well as speeches from presidential history, Tulis and others have thus made the case for a “modern” rhetorical presidency.

Although not without challenges, these classifications have largely become a discipline heuristic for presidential study. Indeed, many studies, when attempting to examine the presidency, will begin with Woodrow Wilson or Franklin Roosevelt in the

assumption that the “modern” presidency is where innovation and change will be best observed, to the possible neglect of events and trends occurring before the 20th century.

However, the complexity of personality, context and environment surrounding the presidency and its officeholders make it extremely difficult not only to draw a comprehensive conclusion, but also to compare across different time periods with confidence and surety.¹ This challenge leads to the starting query of this study; although the “traditional” and “modern” labels may be a way for us to easily demarcate different time periods in the presidency, are they inappropriately simplistic for a complete understanding of the men of the presidency, as well as its history overall?

It is of utmost importance that assumptions, such as that of the “modern” rhetorical presidency, that are so seminal and prominent in research, be evaluated in their own right before becoming accepted bases for further study. This study represents a comprehensive evaluation of the rhetorical tradition of the presidency, as well as the questions surrounding the “traditional/modern” distinction, in an attempt to refine our understanding of presidential history and reconsider the “traditional/modern” paradigm that seems widely used as a parsimonious categorization in much of our field.

Specifically, I analyze the State of the Union Address from George Washington to George W. Bush to determine the types of changes in presidential rhetoric, address, and policy proposition that have taken place. Through these findings, I am able to not only provide a better understanding of presidential rhetorical and political history, but also to evaluate whether or not certain elements—discussed above as singular to a “modern”

¹ We can see this dilemma in the study and categorization of “Great” presidents, where many scholars attempt to determine specific characteristics that make a president great (see Barber, 1992; Schlesinger Jr., 1997; and Genovese, 2001). However, Skrownek (1997) proposes that the complexity of the presidential

presidency (policy proposition, speaking to the people, going public, and visionary speech)—occurred in the proposed period alone, or whether 19th and even 18th century presidents began to assert these powers long before Woodrow Wilson or Franklin Roosevelt.

My findings suggest that presidential policy making in the State of the Union Address is not a function of 20th century presidents alone. In fact, presidents from the founding have utilized the means at their disposal (i.e., television, radio, written format, orally delivered format) to the greatest extent possible. In addition, 19th century presidents have proposed numbers of policy in their Address that rival and surpass their 20th century successors; there also appears to be a consistent increase in the number of policies proposed in each State of the Union Address as opposed to a singular presidency in which the policy-proposing president originated. I also find that presidents of today use the same rhetoric as their “traditional” predecessors to identify with the audiences to whom they speak as well as to propose policy with their position as president as justification.

My findings are very important to developing a richer understanding of presidential rhetorical history, as well as the evolution of the contemporary president. They suggest that presidents of the 19th century and the founding are as important in contributing to our understanding of the presidency as those of the late 20th century. In addition, I find that the “traditional/modern” paradigm may be too parsimonious for a complete understanding of presidential history.

office demands that scholars evaluate presidents according to similar contexts to get a better idea of how presidents in similar situations have dealt with their environment.

The first chapter of this dissertation examines current scholarship as it relates to understanding the evolution of presidential rhetoric and the tenets of the “traditional/modern” paradigm. I consider this prior research both its value to the study of the presidency and its shortcomings in terms of gaining a more complete understanding of presidential rhetoric. Additionally, Chapter 1 sketches out the research design and the methodology that is used in the study and contains a historiography of the State of the Union Address.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the history of policy proposition in the State of the Union Address. Specifically, these chapters show data from State of the Union Addresses illustrating the tradition of policy proposition of presidents within their Addresses. In Chapter 2, I find that the word length of State of the Union Addresses dramatically increases during the 19th and early 20th centuries, and that since the return to oral delivery, Address length has dropped. In addition, presidents during the 19th century who gave very long Addresses proposed more total policy in their State of the Union Addresses than their 20th century counterparts. Chapter 3 begins by controlling for the length of Addresses to present a more systemic picture of policy proposal in the State of the Union Address. I find that when length of Address is controlled for, presidents from the founding to the present have consistently proposed increasing amounts of policy in their addresses. In addition, I see no clear evidence to suggest that there is any demarcation between a “traditional” and a “modern” period of presidential policy proposal behavior. I also look at other environmental variables such as war and divided government that may impact the number of policies presidents propose in their addresses.

Chapter 4 examines presidents' use of popular address rhetoric in the history of the State of the Union Address. I look at data that illustrate the use of identification rhetoric (the president attempts to identify himself as one of the audience using "We," "our," and "us"), authority rhetoric (the president uses the power of his station to make a policy proposal or convey a point using "I," "me," and "my"), directive rhetoric (the president speaks directly to the audience with instruction or reminder of obligation using "you," "your," and "yours"), and referential rhetoric (the president refers to an audience on whose behalf action should be taken using "them," "their," and "they"). I find that presidents of the late 20th century and the founding utilize similar levels of popular address rhetoric within their Addresses. In addition, as opposed to a singular innovation of 20th century presidents, I find that the use of popular address rhetoric and its connection to policy proposal has been present since the founding and exhibits consistent trends of use from Washington to George W. Bush.

Chapter 5 concludes the study and examines the broad history of presidential rhetoric and policy proposal activity as well as possible directions for further study. I question the utility of a "traditional/modern" categorization and find that a more subtle and nuanced understanding of each president and their contributions to the present office is needed for a fully informed study and understanding of presidential research.