

The State of the Union Address

Overview

The State of the Union address is a communication between the President and Congress in which the chief executive reports on the current conditions of the United States and provides policy proposals for the upcoming legislative year. Formerly known as the “Annual Message,” the State of the Union address originates in the Constitution. As part of the system of checks and balances, Article II, Section 3, clause 1 requires that the President “shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.” In recent decades, the President has expanded his State of the Union audience, addressing the speech to both the nation and Members of Congress.

From the perspective of Congress, the State of the Union address may be considered the most important presidential speech of the year. Although Presidents may ask to address Congress in joint session on extraordinary occasions, the State of the Union is the one time Presidents are regularly scheduled to venture to the House chamber to present their programmatic priorities and set the tone for the ensuing year. Although modern Presidents communicate with Congress and the public consistently and persistently, the State of the Union provides the President with a unique opportunity to present his entire policy platform in one speech.

From the President’s perspective, the State of the Union address has evolved from a constitutional duty to a welcome source of executive power and authority. Standing before the American public to deliver the annual address, the President combines several constitutional roles: chief of state, chief executive, chief diplomat, commander-in-chief, and chief legislator. Besides delivering the State of the Union, there is no other annual opportunity for the President to showcase his entire arsenal of constitutional powers. Over time, the State of the Union address has evolved considerably. The format and delivery of the speech has changed, and its length has fluctuated widely. Technology has also influenced the delivery of the address, with the advent of radio, television, and the Internet playing significant roles in the transformation.

Common Elements

The State of the Union address is a unique genre of presidential speech. Historian Charles Beard commented, “Whatever may be its purport, the message is the one great public document of the United States which is widely read and discussed.” Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson have identified three repetitive, sequential rhetorical arguments in State of the Union addresses:

- public meditations on values;
- assessments of information and issues; and
- policy recommendations

These three rhetorical arguments typically occur in a predictable sequential order. The President offers his opinion concerning important values or national character. Such an assessment leads him to identify targeted issues that will constitute his legislative agenda. Finally, he offers specific policy recommendations. The iteration of values, issue identification, and policy recommendations typically repeats itself

numerous times in a State of the Union speech.

In addition to a common sequence of rhetorical arguments, State of the Union addresses also exhibit recurring thematic elements. Most include rhetoric about the past and future, bipartisanship, and optimism.

Typically, the speech focuses on both past accomplishments and future goals. State of the Union addresses pay homage to the historical achievements of the nation and its recurring national values. Moving back and forth between historical themes and contemporary issues is a common rhetorical practice in State of the Union addresses. Using the past to explain legislative proposals and decisions is a method aimed at legitimizing the President's policy program.

The State of the Union address is not primarily a partisan speech or document. Speaking before a joint session of Congress, Presidents often try to frame their arguments in such a way to build consensus. A rhetorical emphasis on bipartisanship can be politically empowering. By claiming a willingness to reach across the aisle, Presidents can remind listeners that their constitutional authority includes a mandate to protect the welfare of all citizens. Such a claim is unique to the presidency, and can serve as a powerful component of the chief executive's national leadership.

The final recurring theme is optimism. No matter how terrible the crisis facing the country, Presidents always adopt a can-do "Horatio Alger" tone in their annual speech. Presidents often acknowledge the difficult nature of the goals they set, but such acknowledgement is qualified by a strong statement that Americans will always fulfill their destiny, solve intractable problems, and ultimately "establish a more perfect Union." No President has ever reported that the crisis facing the nation was insurmountable.

Conclusions

The State of the Union address is an important weapon in the President's arsenal as a legislative leader. Although recent State of the Union addresses utilize common structure and often include similar types of arguments, the speech provides the President with the opportunity to outline his own policy agenda for the upcoming congressional session.

Presidents have two audiences in mind: Congress and the American public. Presidents must receive the support of a majority in the House, and oftentimes a supermajority in the Senate, to enact their legislative proposals. Presidents have realized that the American people can help accomplish this frequently difficult task. By appealing directly to the public, a President can use popular leverage to convince Congress to adopt his policy agenda.

While the State of the Union address highlights the President's legislative role, it also serves as an annual reminder that the chief executive exists within a separated powers system. Legislative powers are shared between Congress and the presidency, evidenced by the constitutional requirement that the President "shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient."

Adapted from "The President's State of the Union Address: Tradition, Function, and Policy Implications" by Colleen J. Shogan and Thomas H. Neal, CRS Report, December 17, 2012; available at www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R40132.pdf