

The US President's State of the Union Address

SUMMARY

Since 2010, the European Parliament holds an annual State of the Union debate in the September plenary session, in which the President of the European Commission delivers an address taking stock of the current year and looking at future priorities. The EU State of the Union address is largely modelled on the US President's annual address to Congress.

Every January, the President of the United States presents his policy priorities to Congress. The speech, called the State of the Union Address, has evolved over time. Originally designed as a lengthy administrative report, it is today a strategic political instrument.

Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that the State of the Union Address is a major tool in the hands of the President to set the tone for the upcoming congressional session. Moreover, because the address is broadcast on television and radio, and more recently web-streamed, the President can potentially reach all US citizens and thereby influence public opinion with the aim of gaining support for future actions.

It is not an easy task to assess the political impact of this instrument as there are many variables. With that in mind, on the one hand, academic research argues that a reasonable proportion of policy proposals mentioned in the address have been enacted by Congress over the years; on the other hand, the State of the Union Address rarely seems to affect the President's approval rating.



In this briefing:

- The US State of the Union Address: origin and evolution
- Content and structure
- Language and rhetoric
- Political impact

See also our companion briefing on '[The State of the Union debate in the European Parliament](#)'.

The US State of the Union Address: origin and evolution

The US State of the Union Address (SUA), originally known as the 'Annual Message', is a communication between the President of the United States and a joint session of Congress in which the President reports on the conditions of the nation and presents policy proposals for the year to come. In 1942 it became informally called the State of the Union message and in 1947 it was officially named the State of the Union Address.¹

Today, the Address is delivered in the House Chamber and a House concurrent resolution,² agreed by both Chambers of Congress, fixes the day and time 'for a Joint Session receiving such communication as the President of the U.S. shall be pleased to make to them'.³

Including President Barack Obama's 2015 address, there have been a total of 93 in-person State of the Union Addresses.⁴

The legal basis for the address is Article II, Section 3, clause 1 of the [Constitution](#) which requires that the President: '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'.

From the perspective of Congress, the State of the Union Address may be considered the most important presidential speech of the year. Indeed, the President acts as both the head of government and the head of state; the merging of both these roles makes the address a '[uniquely powerful ritual](#)'. The address has evolved since George Washington gave his first in 1790 before both Houses of Congress. The following year, Washington established the precedent that the President would provide the address annually. Not all US Presidents have delivered their address orally; Thomas Jefferson started delivering his message in writing to Congress, where it was read by a clerk. In 1913, President Woodrow Wilson was the first to deliver his message in the House Chamber before a joint session of Congress. Finally, President Lyndon Johnson moved the speech from daytime to evening in order to attract a larger audience.

Content and structure

Over time, the structure, content and length of the message have changed substantially. Originally the SUA included agency budget requests and reports on the health of the US economy. Subsequently, Congress required more detailed information and thus it was decided to have two separate reports, called respectively the Budget Message and the Economic Report. The content too has evolved; in the 19th century it contained lengthy administrative information on the various executive branch departments whereas, since Wilson in 1913, it has become an instrument to outline the President's policy agenda.

Notwithstanding these changes, according to some academics⁵ it is possible to identify three consistent and consecutive rhetorical arguments in the address, notably:

- Public meditations on values;
- Assessments of information and issues; and
- Policy recommendations.

Facts and figures on SUAs

First radio broadcast: Calvin Coolidge, 1923
First television broadcast: Harry Truman, 1947
First live broadcast on Internet: George W Bush, 2002
The longest (spoken): Bill Clinton, 1995
The shortest: George Washington, 1790
Average length in 20th century: ca 5 000 words

Usually the President presents what they consider to be important values for the nation and identifies paths for future political action. The same structure is followed to present challenges in both internal and external policies. A reference to recent past accomplishments is also a common technique to celebrate US national identity. Even in times of divided government, when one party controls the White House and another party controls one or both houses of Congress, a fairly common feature for the message is a bipartisan approach. Indeed, the President addressing both Chambers in a joint session presents themselves as above political conflicts in order to build consensus.

Since 1966, the address is followed immediately by an [opposition response](#) which is given by one or more selected members of the political group not occupying the White House. The reply is usually much shorter than the President's speech and it is structured around current matters too (e.g. call for bipartisanship, response to President's proposals and presentation of a few major opposition issues).

Language and rhetoric

The use of modern media has had an impact on the content and political language of the SUA. Because it is broadcast on television, radio and also web-streamed, Presidents have two audiences in mind: Congress and US citizens. In order to capture the attention of the general public, certain issues and words are mentioned more frequently than others. Suffice to mention that Jimmy Carter said in the 1979 [address](#):

To establish those values, two centuries ago a bold generation of Americans risked their property, their position, and life itself. We are their heirs, and they are sending us a message across the centuries. The words they made so vivid are now growing faintly indistinct, because they are not heard often enough. They are words like 'justice', 'equality', 'unity', 'truth', 'sacrifice', 'liberty', 'faith', and 'love'. These words remind us that the duty of our generation of Americans is to renew our Nation's faith, not focused just against foreign threats but against the threats of selfishness, cynicism and apathy.

Notwithstanding Carter's claims, a [look back](#) at the number of times Presidents have used selected words in the SUA suggests that these words are constantly present in the rhetoric of the State of the Union Address (see figure 1). 'Justice', for instance, is one of the most popular terms used by Presidents as well as 'peace' and 'war' which are often used together. Most recently, due to increased public attention to economic policies, 'jobs', 'tax' and 'recovery' have also become frequently used.

Figure 1: Use of key words in SUAs

Word	Speeches	Occurrences
Peace	207	1 821
War	206	2 631
Justice	180	752
Freedom	154	6 736
Liberty	137	306
Faith	134	341
Equality	85	149
Truth	69	101
Unity	60	102

Data source: The State of the Union [word cloud tool](#).

Political impact

One way to assess the political impact of the address is to look at how many policy recommendations mentioned in the speech are enacted by Congress in the forthcoming year. According to one [academic paper](#), the most recent Presidents have used the address to set the tone for the Presidency by making specific requests for legislative action, with an average of 31 requests per address since 1965 (see figure 2). This ranges from President Carter's nine requests in 1979 to President Clinton's 87 in 2000.

While data from George W. Bush's second term (2005-08) were not analysed in this paper, the research concludes that around 41.6% of all requests made during the State of the Union since 1965 were to a certain extent implemented by Congress.

The same research notes that Presidents seem to be particularly successful in the year immediately after their first election. The success rate is not only linked to timing but other elements may influence it such as the willingness to compromise in Congress, the presence of unified party government and the types of requests. For instance, it is argued that Clinton called for legislation on less controversial issues for which it would be easier to find consensus.

It seems that, at the very least, the President – via the SUA – manages to get public attention on specific issues. An analysis⁶ of SUAs from 1953 to 1989 looked at influencing public opinion through political rhetoric and found that the President's emphasis on topics such as foreign policies or economic affairs, for example, led to an increase in public concern on those issues in the short and medium term.

Another way to assess political impact is to look at to what extent SUAs affect the President's approval rating. [Political scientists](#) have found that addresses from 1978 to 2008 did not bring about any meaningful improvement with two exceptions: the most recent was in 2005, when Bush's approval rating increased from 51% to 57%, and, in 1996, Clinton's approval increased from 46% to 52%.

Endnotes

¹ The President's State of the Union Address: Tradition, Function, and Policy Implications, CJ Shogan, Deputy Director CRS, 16 January 2015.

² A concurrent resolution from the House of Representatives is designated with the code 'H.Con.Res.' followed by its individual number. It has to be approved by both the House of Representatives and Senate. However, a concurrent resolution is not submitted to the President and therefore does not have the force of law.

³ <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/114/hconres7/text>

⁴ Data source: <http://history.house.gov/Institution/SOTU/State-of-the-Union/>

⁵ Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words, KK Campbell & KH Jamieson, University of Chicago Press, 2008.

⁶ Presidential Rhetoric and the Public Agenda, JE Cohen, American Journal of Political Science, February 1995.

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Figure 2: Requests in SUAs, by year

