Chapter 11
Content Analysis as Rhetorical EEG of the Presidency

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ABSTRACT

Electroencephalography (EEG) tracks voltage fluctuations resulting from ionic current flows within the neurons of the brain by recording electrical activity along the scalp to reveal what regions of the brain are involved in different mental processes. This chapter demonstrates how DICTION can be used to measure the fluctuations in the rhetoric in drafts of presidential speeches as they move through the White House speech drafting and review process. This chapter incorporates rhetorical analysis of 494 drafts of 67 presidential speeches gathered from the archives of administrations from Franklin Roosevelt to George H.W. Bush. Like the EEG, looking at the fluctuations in rhetorical scores may not reveal exactly what the thoughts are in the process, but it can reveal how a speech’s language changes over the course of the speechwriting process and help us unravel the mysteries of the inner-workings of this vital institution.

INTRODUCTION

Big presidential speeches are constructed in the way the Romans built their temples: The major components are carved in workshops all over the site and then hoisted into place according to the architect’s plans.- George W. Bush speechwriter David Frum (2003, 147)

While the serene exterior of the White House has become one of the world’s most reassuring symbols of American democracy, its inner workings involve a messy set of institutional, ideological, and personal clashes seldom seen by the people. Scholars often reinforce this image by talking about the presidency as a single institution and focus almost exclusively on the occupant of the Oval Office, occasionally acknowledging different perspectives from the other offices in the building but regarding such differences as aberrations caused by unhealthy personal ambitions or overworked political ideologies.

Paradoxically, the story behind speeches, the presidency’s most public function, may provide the best window into institutional politics hidden within the White House. In fact, speechwriting may present the best opportunity for studying inner workings of the presidency for several reasons. First, it is a waypoint for every kind of policy that finds its way to the president’s desk. Jeff Tulis has described the speechwriting office as “an institutional locus of policy making in the White
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House, not merely an annex to policymaking” (1987, 185). While policy advising has increasingly become specialized and segmented, almost every presidential decision involves some kind of speech or formal message that will pass through the speechwriting office. Speechwriters seldom decide public policy or political strategy (with notable exceptions like Ted Sorensen and Mike Gerson), but they work closely with policy and political advisors on every type of presidential decision. The speech clearance process brings the full range of political and institutional interests that roam the Executive Branch to the editing table much as if a watering hole draws many exotic species to one location. Speechwriters often become, in the words of one Reagan speechwriter, “the referee among warring factions” (Muir, 1992, 34) and the internal debates they mediate reveal a great deal.

In addition, the centrality of speeches to the power of the modern presidency means that the speechwriting process is as important to scholars and the public as it is to those inside the White House. As Nixon speechwriter Will Sparks mused, “Now that nudity has taken over the stage, politics is the sole remaining branch of show business where importance is still attached to the spoken word.” (1971, 49) The struggle between the president and his opponents is often termed a “war of words” and presidential statements are analyzed, repeated and sometimes carved into stone. There is little doubt that speeches become a primary tool that citizens and scholar use to judge the historical legacy of a president. As Bradley Patterson (1988) put it, “Speeches and statements are the testament of each presidency.” (198)

Finally, the paper trail yielded by the speechwriting process provides a rich data set because it requires that the White House commit specific idea to paper at different points in time. Thus, while many of the plans and principles of the presidency may never be fully articulated and recorded in some corners of the White House, the nature of the speechwriting process leaves the remnants of deliberation in written drafts as a proposed speech takes form and moves from office to office. This trail of drafts traces the intellectual and political evolution of the administration’s deliberations and helps researchers to see differences between individuals and offices otherwise not recorded.

This chapter utilizes data from a larger study of presidential speechwriting that explores changes to drafts of presidential speeches from the archives of presidencies from Franklin Roosevelt to George H.W. Bush to construct a kind of crude rhetorical electroencephalograph designed to detect institutional fluctuations of the thinking within White House. Medical science uses electroencephalography (EEG) to track voltage fluctuations resulting from ionic current flows within the neurons of the brain by recording electrical activity along the scalp. Using this technique, researchers can learn what region of the brain is involved in different mental processes. In a similar fashion, this chapter introduces the use of changes in the rhetoric of presidential speech drafts to demonstrate that speeches change significantly over the course of the process within the White House and that the presidency is best viewed as a collection of many offices with similar—but not identical—perspectives and goals, supporting Terry Moe’s description of the institution as “a maze of supporting expectations and relations” (1985, 241). In fact, while the different perspectives within the White House walls are often relatively subtle, DICTION proves proficient at detecting differences in speech drafts that reveal significant disagreements within the presidency.

Studying Speechwriting and Clearance

What most people fail to realize is that making a major Presidential address is something akin to enacting a public law.- Ford Speechwriter Robert Hartmann (1980, 384)