

## HOW HAVE PRESIDENTS ADDRESSED RACE SINCE 1964?

On a Tuesday night at 9:00 p.m. in the burgeoning industrial city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1964, Lyndon Johnson took the stage of the Pittsburgh Civic Center to talk about his campaign, his successes and, among other topics, race. He spent quite a while talking about his support for equal rights to the crowd in the predominately White working-class city. He called criticism of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 “pure dirty racism and propaganda.” He recounted a story about a White man who told Johnson’s wife, Lady Bird, “I would rather have a Negro stand beside me on an assembly line than to stand behind me in a soup line.” He then reminded the predominately White crowd, “We are outnumbered in this country 15 or 20 to 1 throughout the world,” so “you better not ever choose to fight it out on the basis of color. If you do the White folks are in trouble, I will tell you that.”<sup>1</sup>

Who was Johnson trying to convince with these comments? Probably not Black Americans or Northern White liberals who likely already supported civil rights legislation. The setting of the speech gives us a clue. He did not deliver it to a group of New York City elites, Southern farmers, or Black church members but at a civic center arena in a White, working-class city. Perhaps the best evidence comes from the words he spoke. The notion that Whites are outnumbered and the story about the assembly line worker tell us why *Whites* should support civil rights. These comments reflect the main theme of this book. They are typical examples of what a president might say about race because they appeal to a specific group: White swing voters. This book engages with this strategic decision

that seems to be adopted by most presidents who have run for reelection since Johnson and shows that, while the question of who is White in the United States has changed and is still changing, the message that is used to appeal to this group has changed very little. Ultimately, this book asks why it would matter if presidents direct their comments toward Whites.

There has been clear progress in race relations since before Johnson's presidency. Before Johnson became president, a Black ambassador visiting the United States from Africa was unable to travel along Interstate 95 outside of the nation's capital without receiving discriminatory treatment in the form of segregated lunch counters and hotels. Today, segregation is illegal and laws exist to protect any person, visitor or citizen, from many forms of discrimination. Discriminatory hiring practices, unequal treatment, and restrictions on voting rights have all been outlawed. Presidents have played a role in many of the developments in racial politics in the United States and it takes little effort to produce several examples: Dwight Eisenhower's nationalization of the National Guard in support of the Little Rock Nine, Kennedy's high-profile relationship with Martin Luther King, Jr., and Lyndon Johnson's support for the Civil Rights Act of 1964. And yet fifty years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, racial inequality still exists in the US and presidents seem to rarely talk about it.

Does the continued existence of racial inequality in the United States have something to do with the way that presidents address race? Does it matter if presidents direct their comments toward Whites? Will the US address its racial problems if political leaders do not talk about them? Why have presidents not pushed harder for racial equality in the US, especially in the years after the 1960s? This book hopes to provide some insight into these questions. To do that, I determine how presidents' comments about race have changed in the fifty years since Lyndon Johnson helped secure massive advancements in the struggle for racial equality in the United States. I find that, while some substantive aspects of presidential rhetoric have changed, the object of these comments remain static: to convince Whites and White ethnics to vote for the president. While there have been some efforts toward appealing to a more diverse coalition by both parties, the rhetoric meant to appeal to these groups has not changed much. Presidents, during election years, continue to define even the most basic concepts, like what it means to be American, with rhetoric that has been forced through the politics of racial resentment. I argue that presidential rhetoric during key election years is targeted to appeal to White Middle Americans and therefore contributed—and still contributes—to the lack of development in the public conversation surrounding race that would be

necessary to fully realize racial equality in the US. This history of post-1964 US presidential reelection year rhetoric reveals just how deeply intertwined race is with Americans' public discussions of political issues and American identity. It is not that presidents do not talk about race; it is concealed and in need of analysis.



Let me begin by clarifying the question that this book tries to answer. The main question that I ask is: how have presidents changed how they speak about race and ethnicity? To clarify this question, we have to begin with some assumptions that I make about presidential racial rhetoric. It is important to remember that notions of race and ethnicity have changed over time, as has the relationship between these two concepts. So, when I am asking about changes in racial rhetoric over time, I am also asking about the ways that the meanings of race and ethnicity have changed over time and the way that ethnic groups have been "racialized." Moreover, there is a temporal element to this question. It is predicated on the idea that presidents *have* changed either the words that they use to talk about race or the approach that they take to racial issues. Therefore, this book analyzes rhetoric over time. It looks for changes in the rhetorical strategies of presidents with regard to race and ethnicity by tracing these changes in reelection years from 1964 to 2012 and concludes with a brief analysis of the 2016 election.

The easiest way to gain some insight into my question is to analyze changes in the frequency of presidents' use of racial language over time. However, I am most interested in understanding language used for strategic purposes that was meant to appeal to the broadest possible groups. A count of the words that presidents use when they speak about race and ethnicity in election years can show us these changes. This question is where my inquiry began. In performing that research, which is documented in this chapter, I wanted to determine if I could give a simple answer to the question of whether presidents' use of racial or ethnic rhetoric during election years had increased or decreased since 1964. Unfortunately, the data did not lead to a clear answer to that question. Instead, I found a much more complicated—and therefore interesting—pattern in the data. There is no clear rise or fall in the rate in which presidents used explicit racial or ethnic language in the nine reelection years that took place during this 50-year period and as a result it is through this complex pattern that I frame my queries in the rest of the book. What accounted for the high rate of

racial language by Richard Nixon in 1972 and the low rate by George W. Bush in 2004? I want to understand these fluctuations. Ultimately, I want to understand the politics that surround the words that presidents use to talk about race and why, if presidents talk about race, have there not been more developments on the issue of racial equality in the United States since the civil rights era?

What exactly did the research find? To answer this question, I will begin with a simple conclusion and then add five additional elements to it to add complexity and precision. Simply put, despite fluctuation in the frequency in which presidents spoke about race, many of the dominant themes used by presidents in their speeches on *race* have not changed much from Johnson's 1964 campaign to Obama's 2012 campaign because presidents shape their rhetoric to appeal to White and White ethnic voters. Even as the audience gets more diverse, presidents rely upon similar language.

The first qualifier that I add to this conclusion is that it is based on analysis of only six presidents' speeches. Clearly, each president did not make precisely the same types of statements. Parties compete and, therefore, presidents shape their rhetoric to appeal to specific constituencies that they hope will comprise their winning coalition. Often, presidential candidates change the message of a stump speech from audience to audience. My assertion is that the intended audience of the rhetoric has remained somewhat static (though the boundaries of this audience—White, White ethnic, and ethnic voters—has changed). However, the overall appeals have changed both over time and between parties. For instance, the frequency in which presidents used words associated with "ethnicity" has varied across time, but the concepts associated with American identity have not.

Second, ethnic voters remained a focus in presidential speeches, but notions of "Whiteness" and "ethnicity" have changed, as have the words used to talk to and about "ethnics." Presidents have adapted (and contributed) to those changes by modifying the way they approach the notion of "ethnicity." Often ethnic identities are racialized through their associations with notions of American identity. In 1972, Nixon and the GOP tried to convince Italian Americans to vote for Republicans like Nixon. However, Italians Americans' relationship to Whiteness changed during what sociologist Richard Alba calls the "twilight of Italian ethnicity." During and after Reagan's 1984 campaign, Latinos gained more attention from presidents. These shifts in ethnic language suggest that the politics of rhetoric follow changes in the relationship between notions of ethnicity, the topology of racial categories, and the association between coded racial rhetoric and American identity. Effectively, as more groups integrate into the American

ethno-racial topology, presidents adapt their rhetoric by perpetuating discourses that cut between these configurations. In other words, they reflect this preexisting topology, reinforce it, and help shape it by trying to appeal to an overlapping coalition of these groups. The coalition always includes Whites as it adapts to racialize new groups.

Third, while it is well documented that presidents from both parties have utilized campaign rhetoric that appeals to Whites' and White ethnics' racial resentments, presidents often used egalitarian rhetoric to justify and conceal their appeals. Nixon was the first president to deploy this strategy widely in the post-civil rights era, which he did in both 1968 and 1972, though its roots can be found in Goldwater's 1964 campaign and Reagan's 1966 gubernatorial campaign.<sup>2</sup> How did this work? Nixon defined common American values and juxtaposed them with those that allegedly shaped social welfare policies. While this was certainly not the first time that a politician used cultural or ethnic resentment during an election, it was, as I show later in this chapter, the first time that an American president attached these appeals to the word "ethnic" in a reelection campaign. Therefore, Nixon gave an important role to the word "ethnic" in his rhetoric that was, and still is, often attached to a strategy to appeal to voters' racial resentments.

Fourth, party does not predict if a president will use this type of rhetoric during the years I analyzed because both parties employed related strategies. Clinton modeled his rhetoric in 1996 on Reagan's campaigns and Reagan used many of the same types of rhetoric about welfare that Nixon used during his 1968 and 1972 campaigns. One reason for this, as I will demonstrate, is because both Republican and Democratic presidential campaigns are designed to appeal to overlapping groups. Indeed, there may be less overlap between the core members of either party and there is variation that exists between Democratic and Republican rhetoric, but both have a similar rhetorical goal. Race is only a single element of an otherwise complex web of political issues, but nonetheless is a significant issue that presidents use to send signals to certain voters. As a result, there are strong similarities between Democratic and Republican rhetorics, especially after the 1972 election.

Finally, presidents have broken from this strategy while still retaining several of the key elements in recent campaigns. George W. Bush often expressed the opinion that the GOP needed to do more to appeal to Latinos and used rhetoric during his campaign that reflected this goal. In doing so, he contributed to the racialization of Latinos by differentiating between "good" and "bad" Latinos: the law-abiding and hardworking Latinos from the stereotype of Latinos as the law-breakers and drug dealers. Barack

Obama, like Clinton and Carter, did not win by appealing to White voters alone. Obama needed to continue to appeal to liberal White voters in 2008 and 2012, but he won due to the high voter turnout among Black and Latino voters.

The future remains less certain. Shifting demographics suggest the possibility of changes to the ways that presidents will talk about race and ethnicity during campaigns and some of these are evident in Donald Trump's 2016 campaign, which I address in the epilogue. Changes in the demographics of the United States can have a profound impact on the political strategies of both parties. Diversification of the US has led to a modification of this strategy for candidates in recent campaigns, which will be interesting to watch in the future. One question that will have a profound impact on future campaign rhetoric is how will Latinos relate to racial categories in the United States?

Nonetheless, in the most recent period, presidents have avoided talking about race and/or used some variation of the same rhetoric that was once attached to coded, racially charged issues as standard components of their campaign strategies. George W. Bush avoided directly speaking about racial issues, but did talk about "what it means to be an American" in a way that echoed the racially charged rhetoric of the past. Obama used a similar strategy but he directed this rhetoric toward new groups. Rhetoric about work, morality, and family, which was once deployed for strategic purposes, has been adopted by presidents in their core statements about American identity. Whether this "coded" rhetoric continues to transmit messages about race is a fair question to ask.

Why does any of this matter? Continued use of this strategic rhetoric reinforces norms about race and American identity. Presidents articulate their policies to be consistent with these norms and use justice and equality as interchangeable terms. Redistribution is absent as a means to address disparities now that presidents have ceased trying to convince White voters to support racial justice and have instead used ethnic language to normalize race-neutral rhetoric. Whether use of this rhetoric reflects, reinforces, or establishes truth about politics, it is how presidents talk about race during their campaigns.

## Method

This book attempts to understand what presidents say about race by analyzing the content and context of presidential racial rhetoric. While analysis

is fundamentally historical, it is intended to be systematic and, therefore, my research questions are derived from a quantitative content analysis of election-year volumes of the *Public Papers of the Presidents*. These questions guide my analysis in the remainder of the book. Quantitative content analysis reveals trends in presidents' use of explicit racial rhetoric over time while close textual analysis identifies the strategic use of language such as the coded racial messages used by presidents during election years.<sup>3</sup>

The main dataset for this book is reelection year volumes of the *Public Papers of the Presidents*, a set of presidential speeches compiled by the Government Printing Office (GPO). The GPO prints one, two, or three approximately 1,500-page volumes each year. This study focuses on the reelection year volumes from 1964 to 2012, some seventeen books and over 25,000 total pages.<sup>4</sup>

Why these elections? The purpose of this inquiry was to explore presidential rhetoric about race during elections. To perform an inquiry on a common set of data, I needed to compile a standard dataset. Unfortunately, there is no standard compilation of presidential candidate election speeches like the *Public Papers of the Presidents*. While it may have been compelling to compare the 1968 and 2000 candidates' rhetoric, we do not have a standard set of data because there was no incumbent presidential candidate.

Data collection was performed in two parts. First I coded instances of the words race/racial, Black, Negro, White, African American/Afro American, Non-White, ethnic, Latino, Hispanic, Chicano, Mexican/Mexican American, Italian American, Muslim, Jewish, and Minority.<sup>5</sup> The words chosen for analysis in this chapter were divided into two groups: ethnic and racial. In the category of racial language are the words: race/racial, Black, African American, White, Negro, and non-White. In the category of ethnic terms are the words: ethnic, Latino, Hispanic, Chicano, Mexican/Mexican-American, Muslim, Italian-American, and Jewish. I also searched for the word "minority," which cannot be categorized as either "ethnic" or "racial."

When constructing a list of "racial" and "ethnic" language for this type of inquiry, there are countless words that could be included. For instance, it could have been argued that Caucasian, Haitian, or Cuban could have been added to the list. In order to provide a manageable comprehensive list, I limited word searches to reflect the type of inquiry I hoped to perform. Indeed, there are several ways to construct this list, and other scholars could certainly choose to design this inquiry in a different manner. To begin I constructed the list of words to search by using the categories found on the

United States Census. To count racial language I searched for the words Black, White, African American, and Negro as these are the categories that exist on the census. While not a census category, I added “non-White” to count instances where the word white did appear in a racial context but to distinguish those cases from instances where the president was referring to Whites.

Counting instances of ethnic language was more difficult. As of 2010, the US Census Bureau only lists one ethnic category, Latino/Hispanic, which is also further broken down to include Mexican American/Chicano, Cuban, and Puerto Rican. While I did not count Cuban and Puerto Rican, I did count Chicano and Mexican American. I chose to do this because initial scans of presidential speeches showed that Mexican American was the word that Lyndon Johnson most frequently used to speak about Latinos. I constructed my inquiry to only search for instances of Latino and Hispanic, but I found that if I did not add the phrase “Mexican American” into the search, it would appear as if Johnson rarely spoke about Latinos, which is not true. Therefore, Mexican American was included in the analysis. I added Chicano because the census changed the “Mexican American” category to “Mexican American/Chicano” in 1980, however I found few instances where presidents used this word.

To extend the inquiry beyond Latinos was particularly difficult. One challenge was deciding which specific groups of ethnic Americans to include in my inquiry such as Italian or Irish Americans. I wanted to include one of these groups to be able to trace the development of White/White ethnic identity over time, but also wanted to keep my data manageable. Therefore, to determine which groups to include, I ran an initial rough search of various “dash American” groups or groups that connected an ethnic identification with the word American by a hyphen.<sup>6</sup> This inquiry cannot be comprehensive because it excludes examples of when a president referenced a group (like Italian-Americans) without use of a hyphen, but it does give a rough sketch of the number of times that presidents used these specific words. Figure 1.1 shows these results. What it shows is that presidents rarely reference specific groups and, instead, opt to use more general groupings. Despite this, I decided to include “Italian American” in my general inquiry for two reasons. First, as I previously mentioned, I wanted to track references to one group that developed a clearer White identity during the period, so I chose to track the group with the highest number of references in Table 1.1 that also fit that criteria. Second, I wanted to see if the existing scholarship on Nixon’s appeals to Italians during the 1972 election would manifest in a count of language use across time.<sup>7</sup>



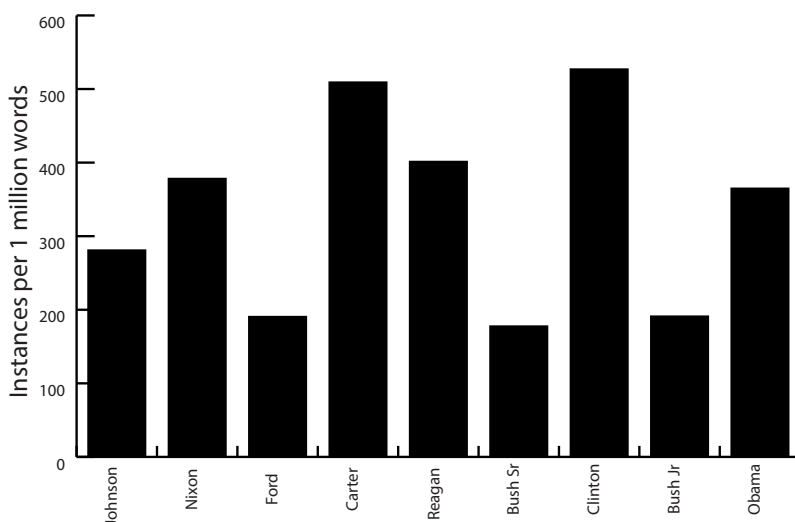


Figure 1.1. Instances of Racial Language, Ethnic Language, and the Word Minority in the *Public Papers of the Presidents* during Reelection Years, 1964–2012

Table 1.1. Instances of “Dash-Americans” in the *Public Papers of the Presidents* during Reelection Years, 1964–2012

	Johnson	Nixon	Ford	Carter	Reagan	Bush	Clinton	Bush, Jr.	Obama
Italian-American	1	4	17	18	7	0	2	6	0
Japanese-American	1	2	10	1	0	0	0	0	1
Polish-American	4	8	17	0	0	5	1	1	0
German-American	0	0	3	0	15	8	5	0	2
Mexican-American	1	2	1	2	1	4	1	17	0
Swedish-American	1	0	0	0	5	0	0	1	0
Chinese-American	1	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0
Hispanic-American	0	0	0	2	1	8	4	6	0
Asian-American	0	0	0	0	0	8	10	4	1
Arab-American	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Asian-Pacific-American	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Greek-American	0	0	1	0	0	8	2	1	0
Caucasian-American	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Totals	9	16	49	23	34	41	29	36	4

I also decided to trace religion as it related to the changing notions of Whiteness. To do this, I tracked two words that are not in the census: Muslim and Jewish. I chose to count Muslim to see if these appeals increased or changed after 9/11. I chose to count instances of the word Jewish for two reasons: first to add another group to my inquiry about Whiteness and ethnicity and, second, to provide another religious group that I could use to compare with references to Muslim. Perhaps it is not surprising but most of George W. Bush's references to Muslims in his speeches referred to foreign relations and few discussed the population of Muslims in the United States.

Of course, my inquiry could have included any list of words, and there are several words that were omitted that would have been useful. Some of these words were excluded for specific reasons. For instance, the word Caucasian was omitted because presidents simply did not often use the word. Through a search of the rhetoric, there was only one use of the word Caucasian-American (by Clinton in 1996) and a search for the word "Caucasian" (without American) in all of the *Public Papers* reveals only fifteen total instances and only four during the years analyzed in this book: 1992, 1996, 2004, and 2012. However, there are other words that may have strengthened the analysis. For example, while I initially framed my inquiry in relation to the census, it is important to note that there are two groups that appeared on the census that were omitted from this inquiry: Asian Americans and American Indians. My reasons for this omission were simply due to the choice to trace the relationship between ethnic identity and Whiteness through analysis of language to appeal to White ethnics and Latinos. Omission of this language is in no way intended to suggest that it is unimportant. On the contrary, presidential rhetoric that addresses Asians and American Indians is important and needs further analysis. While I do analyze some rhetoric directed toward Asian American audiences in the later chapters, the omission of both groups from the quantitative study is a place where further research is needed.

Of the groups that I chose to track, each instance was checked to ensure its use in a racial or ethnic context to exclude, for example, instances where the president used the word White to refer to the White House or race to refer to the arms race. The data generated from this procedure is analyzed in this chapter and provides a map that guided my research for the rest of the book. Therefore, to provide a closer look, speeches and their contexts during the 1964, 1972, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2004, and 2012 elections were read and analyzed, based on the questions generated in chapter 1, to determine the content of explicit and coded racial messages.

Analysis was performed in a manner that considered historical circumstances and electoral strategy. The speeches analyzed fell into one of the following four categories: campaign speeches, State of the Union addresses, press conferences, and speeches directed at ethnic or racial organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) or the National Italian American Foundation. Also, other scholars' research and my own preliminary scans of the data consistently pointed to the issues of education, economic inequality, welfare, and crime as locations where racially coded statements could be found and, as a result, I also analyzed these speeches.

To ensure an accurate and comprehensive story, additional analysis was also performed to understand presidents' rhetorical strategies outside of the key years. This analysis focuses on relevant periods such as 1965, when Johnson attempted to expand civil rights reforms to issues of economic inequality, Nixon's "Silent Majority" speech in 1969, Reagan's discussion of the welfare queen in 1976, and George H. W. Bush's use of the Horton advertisement in the 1988 campaign. While these additional sites of analysis add to the story, they are not the central focus of the book and were only chosen if the addition provides further context to an event that occurred during the relevant election year. For example, Reagan's discussion of "welfare queens" in the 1976 election provides important background information about his discussions of welfare in 1984. In fact, the meaning of Reagan's statements about welfare in 1984 would be unclear without that analysis. Similarly, an understanding of the 1965 Moynihan Report is essential to understanding the rhetoric surrounding welfare in the 1970s and Nixon's "Silent Majority" speech provides important context for understanding his "New Majority" campaign theme in 1972. In other words, additional sites of analysis were included if they provide context that would help the reader to understand the strategies employed in the years analyzed. In each case, justification is given when I discuss these additions.

Despite my best attempts to be accurate and thorough, the data limited my analysis in two major ways. First, the compilations of presidential documents are inconsistent. In 1977, the GPO first added proclamations and executive orders to the *Public Papers*. Other documents were added or removed based upon the administration. For example, Nixon released an annual national security report to Congress in 1970 that appears in the *Public Papers*, while subsequent administrations omitted their foreign policy plans. These inconsistencies meant that analysis could not be performed on precisely the same types of documents. To address these inconsistencies, my

quantitative analysis results are reported as word frequency per one million words rather than overall instances.

A second limitation of analysis was the large text corpus, which made it impractical to provide a close reading of all presidential rhetoric. While several techniques employed by quantitative content analysis could be used to limit the data to a subset of important speeches, I wanted to perform a closer analysis of presidential rhetoric that was not limited by the type of speech or the changes between speeches. For example, a more comprehensive approach allowed me to note that George W. Bush changed his approach to race and the achievement gap shortly before the 2004 election. Therefore, I attempted to address the large volume of text by reading major speeches, speeches directed at organizations that retained some interest in racial or ethnic issues, campaign speeches, or speeches about an issue that often contains racial codes such as welfare or crime. While this method is not without fault, it did allow for a much more comprehensive view of presidential rhetoric.

### Long-Term Trends

Before I pose some questions about campaigns, race, and presidential rhetoric, I will introduce some of my initial findings regarding the frequency in which presidents used racial and ethnic language and whether those frequencies have changed over time. I introduce this data first because it shows that no simple answer can fully capture the changes that took place in presidents' use of racial and ethnic language during the post-civil rights era. To begin to explain the nuances in the long-term trends in presidential racial rhetoric during election years since 1964, I will discount some simple conclusions that one might assume about this rhetoric. First, there is no clear pattern in which the frequency of racial or ethnic language increases or decreases in presidential election year speeches since 1964. Second, there is no strong correlation between a president's party and their use of racial or ethnic language during these years. Third, some form of racial and ethnic language is present in each president's reelection year volumes of the *Public Papers* since 1964 and the words race, Black, ethnic, Jewish, Mexican, and minority appear at some point in each volume assessed. Of course, these patterns in presidents' use of racial and ethnic rhetoric do not signify that each president addressed the topic in a uniform manner or even that they used the same words. The words Latino, Negro, African American, Hispanic, Muslim, and Chicano do not exist in each of the analyzed volumes of the *Public Papers*. Finally, there are politically significant trends in the way that presidents used racial and ethnic language during this period.

The first question I ask is: How frequently did presidents talk about race and ethnicity? Figure 1.1 depicts the total racial and ethnic language found in reelection years of presidents from 1964 to 2012. The data reveals that the frequency of racial and ethnic language does not rise or fall over time in an even pattern. One period of sustained decrease exists from Jimmy Carter to George H. W. Bush, but there is no other period of increase or decrease lasting three elections or more in the years analyzed. Therefore, one cannot reach the conclusion that use of racial rhetoric has risen or fallen during presidents' reelection years since 1964. Time does not directly correlate with fluctuation in presidents' use of racial or ethnic language.

Another assumption one might make is that Republicans talk about race less than Democrats. This assumption is true overall, but party has no *statistically* significant relationship to presidents' use of racial and ethnic language despite the higher rate of racial and ethnic rhetoric in Democrats' volumes.<sup>8</sup> To quantify this, language pertaining to racial and ethnic difference occurs in Democrats' volumes of the *Public Papers* at a rate 1.4 times the rate in Republican speeches. The highest frequency of racial and ethnic rhetoric appears in volumes of the *Public Papers* documenting Democratic presidents—specifically Jimmy Carter's (657.89/per 1m) and Bill Clinton's (560.65/per 1m)—and the lowest frequency occurs in Republican presidents' volumes—George H. W. Bush's (204.34/per 1m) and Gerald Ford's (225.80/per 1m) volumes.

While figure 1.1 shows the total amount of rhetoric used by presidents during election years—both ethnic and racial—figure 1.2 (page 14) shows only racial rhetoric. This graph shows the highest frequency of racial language in election-year volumes of the *Public Papers* occurred in Carter's volume (329.58/per 1m), followed closely by Nixon's (318.65/per 1m) and then Clinton's (306.92/per 1m).<sup>9</sup> Overall, Democrats were 1.7 times more likely to talk about race than Republicans. The average rate for Republicans was 160.94/per 1m versus 271.78/per 1m for Democrats. However, it also shows that in 1972, Nixon used racial language at a higher rate than any other Republican and at a higher rate than both Obama and Johnson. What accounts for the high rate of racial rhetoric during Nixon's 1972 campaign and the seemingly low amount during Johnson's 1964 campaign? Why did Johnson use racial rhetoric less than Nixon if Johnson supported the Civil Rights Act of 1964 during that year?

Of course, each of the tests performed in this section is dependent upon the words I chose to analyze. It is possible that a different list of words would generate different results. However, there are still important questions raised by my analysis in this section. If party does not predict the likelihood that a president would use racial or ethnic language, then

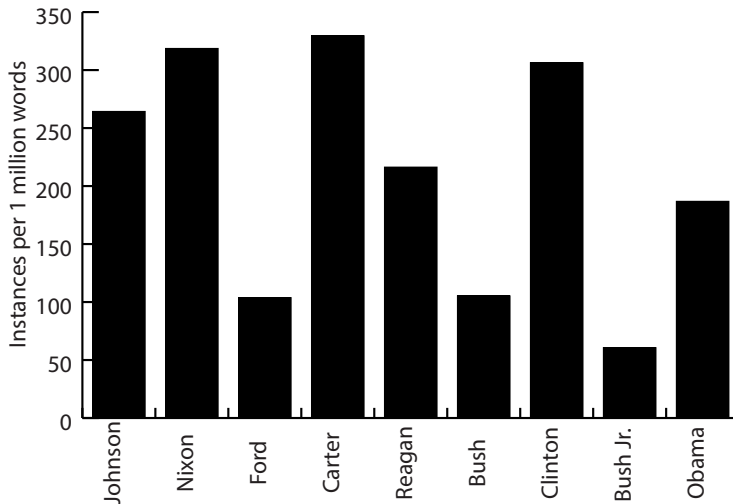


Figure 1.2. Instances of Racial Language in the *Public Papers of the Presidents* during Reelection Years, 1964–2012

what, if anything, does? Reagan and Nixon were more likely to speak about race than Obama. What did they say? Did Nixon use race in his electoral strategy? Why did other Republicans use racial rhetoric less often? Why was Nixon much more likely to use ethnic and racial language than George W. Bush? Finally, there seems to be no specific pattern of increase or decrease in the frequency in which presidents talk about race. If neither time nor party is a factor in the frequency in which presidents talk about race, what is? Does political context impel presidents to talk about race more often?

### Presidential Rhetoric and the Rhetorical Presidency

Analysis of the long-term trends in presidential racial rhetoric raises important questions about the study of presidential rhetoric. Regarding the issue of presidential rhetoric, we should first consider exactly what is meant by this phrase. In terms of scholarship, there are two distinct fields of study with regard to the presidency and rhetoric that have slightly different agendas. These two fields can be understood through what Martin Medhurst defines as the difference between studies of “presidential rhetoric” and the “rhetorical presidency.”<sup>10</sup> Presidential rhetoric is the study of the words and

strategies used by presidents. In contrast, the rhetorical presidency refers to the study of the institution of the presidency and the change in the way that power has been expressed by the president over time to include more reliance on speeches.<sup>11</sup>

At first glance, some may categorize this book as an attempt to understand the rhetorical strategies of the president, and, therefore, falls into the first category. However, the second group focuses on the strategic decisions made by presidents to change the relationship between rhetoric and power over time. While I do not approach this relationship in precisely the same way as other scholars of the rhetorical presidency, this book attempts to use the first approach—study of the rhetoric—to track changes in the nature of presidential strategy and power in the United States and to consider the significance of those changes.

There is a third group of scholars relevant to this book that focuses on how race is utilized in political campaigns. While this book centers on the study of presidential rhetoric and, to a lesser extent, political campaigns in general, it does contribute to our understanding of political campaign tactics. Indeed, studies that focus on political campaigns and race establish many of the central themes of this book. For example, Thomas and Mary Edsall show how Reagan responded to the political environment during the 1960s and 1970s and adopted coded rhetoric on race, welfare, and taxes to harness White resentment.<sup>12</sup> Sugrue and Skrentny highlight the way that Nixon appealed to White ethnics in the 1972 election, but they focus on his strategy rather than his rhetoric.<sup>13</sup> David Holian, Philip Klinkner, Martin Carcasson, and Adolph Reed all show how Bill Clinton adopted many Republican rhetorical strategies to build a common coalition.<sup>14</sup> Yet, these studies often do not analyze the rhetoric of campaigns over time and, instead, focus on single elections. Therefore, they do not account for changes across time such as why Democrats adopted the Reagan approach to race and ethnicity, nor can they show how it persisted after Clinton. While each of these studies establishes key concepts about the relationship between political campaigns and race, there is no single study that links these campaigns and the rhetorical strategies during presidential elections across time through a comprehensive analysis of presidential speeches.

There have been some scholars who attempt large-scale analysis of presidential rhetoric, but they generally avoid close textual analysis. The few studies that can directly address the way that presidents invoke race focus on how presidents frame America as inherently egalitarian<sup>15</sup> or analyze the way that presidents tend to avoid discussions of specific groups.<sup>16</sup> In addition, many of these scholars frame the presidency as an institution

that establishes national identity and do not account for party competition. Even though these scholars help to establish trends regarding presidents' explicit use of race, they do not consider the strategic use of presidential rhetoric. Analysis of presidential rhetoric in this book considers its strategic deployment and documents how and why presidents, as political agents, developed their approach to race and ethnicity. It also considers the political implications of these strategies.

What new insights can we gain from a historical analysis of presidential racial rhetoric in election years? We can see how it developed from administration to administration, allowing us to better understand the way that race has been integrated into political rhetoric and how notions of racial coding have become commonplace in presidents' depictions of American identity. It shows us how the history behind commonplace ways for presidents to frame social, economic, and international policy is rooted in racial coding. Finally, it shows how those rhetorical structures are all built on a common strategy aimed to appeal to White Middle Americans. In other words, the way that presidents define our culture helps us make political decisions and the issues that the public considers are framed in a way that seems to be directed at a common audience. Even as more groups are integrated into party coalitions, similar rhetoric persists.

### Does It Matter What the President Says?

What is the point of studying presidential speeches? As George C. Edwards III puts it, "we cannot assume rhetoric, even in the hands of the most skilled rhetorician, directly influences public opinion."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, as Edwards points out, some scholars assume that there is a direct relationship between public opinion and presidential rhetoric without providing evidence for this relationship. Edwards calls for more research on the topic because, as he notes, we simply do not know whether presidential rhetoric influences public opinion. Since the writing of Edwards's essay in 2004, there have been some studies that have found that presidents usually have little influence on public opinion. If these studies do not show a strong relationship between rhetoric and public opinion then why would we continue to study presidential rhetoric? I contend that, while presidential rhetoric may not directly impact public opinion, there is a relationship between language and our world that deems presidential rhetoric worthy of analysis. To make that case, I argue that the problem does not lie in the ability of presidents to convince the public or Congress to adopt a certain policy position, but in



the questions that we are asking about the relationship between presidential rhetoric and American politics.

Studies of presidential rhetoric do not show that the American public is swayed by the president's support or rejection of specific policies. However, there are more reasons to study rhetoric than to determine the existence of a direct causal relationship between presidential rhetoric and an outcome. These types of questions assume that we *can* measure the relationship between presidential rhetoric and a specific political outcome. To do this, the relationship between rhetoric and public opinion would have to happen fast enough so that it could be measured. One would have to be able to isolate rhetoric from any other factor that may have led to the adoption of the policy. What if rhetoric has an impact on public opinion after years of repetition through a calculated long-term campaign to change the way that people talk about an issue? And what if the relationship between rhetoric and public opinion cannot be directly measured given all the other factors that might go into changes in public opinion? What questions might we ask about presidential rhetoric? To answer that, we need to take another look at the question of what rhetoric *does* and *can do*.

The first question I ask about presidential rhetoric is: Why do presidential *candidates* use rhetoric? While there are broader questions about presidential rhetoric in non-election years, this book focuses on presidential rhetoric during ongoing political campaigns. I assume that candidates believe that rhetoric matters in some way and that, during elections, candidates speak in certain ways because they believe that their speeches will affect the election. So, what do candidates try to do with rhetoric? Presidential candidates do several things, but most importantly, when a presidential candidate campaigns, he or she attempts to formulate a coalition of voters by using his or her rhetoric to construct an image that resonates with specific voter groups. While some of these groups, who make up the greater coalitions, are deeply embedded within the party's identity, they are not permanent, and some of the elements of these coalitions are more fragile than others. Presidential candidates use rhetoric to unify and ignite their coalitions in an attempt to win over newly emerging voting blocs, retain support from old blocs, and steal votes from competing parties.

For example, since 1964, Black Americans as a bloc have overwhelmingly voted for Democratic candidates. Therefore, while this is not necessarily the case, presidential candidates from both sides would *appear* to have limited *strategic* interest in attempting to make promises to Black voters. According to this logic, Republicans likely will not likely win over a majority of Black voters, and Democrats can be relatively confident that

they will retain support from Black voters. However, this conclusion is not necessarily true. Democrats should not ignore Black voters, nor should Republicans show no interest in racial issues. Indeed, even if Democrats continue to win the majority of Black voters, they still need Black voters to *vote*. From a purely strategic perspective, which necessarily ignores the possibility that politicians might be motivated by philosophical concerns, Democrats need to maintain a loyal demographic by making statements that will resonate with Black voters. However, the choice of which issues a candidate will discuss depends upon the salience of the issue among different demographic groups. The most successful appeals will resonate with sympathetic Whites whose support is necessary to propel presidents into office. For example, if they support and care about affirmative action, they might more passionately support the candidate who supports that issue. If the majority of White liberals reject affirmative action and care about it, then a candidate's support for the issue might scare away some of those sympathetic votes and it might be a bad idea for a candidate to support it. However, if White liberal voters reject the issue, but do not necessarily think it is important, but Black voters support it and think it is important, then it can be wise for a presidential candidate to support that issue. According to this, Democratic rhetorical strategy needs to attune to White voters' opinions on racial issue.

Of course, voting cannot be easily reduced to assumptions about how racial groups might react to a single message. Let me be clear: the previous example is an oversimplification. The decision-making process is more complex than this, but even if none of these assumptions about rhetorical strategy that I just described can be empirically proven to be effective, they still matter because they reflect the way that presidential candidates act during campaigns. In fact, the question of how presidents talk when they attempt to gain support from various groups is a central concern of my study. Therefore, I assume that presidential candidates will use rhetoric to try to build coalitions. Presidential rhetoric matters because candidates act in a way that demonstrates that *they* believe that rhetorical appeals can lead to the modification of key coalitions that determine electoral outcomes. All of this assumes that voters are voting prospectively, and not retrospectively. Some voters may assess whether the president had done a good job governing over the past few years. Particularly in reelection years, this matters because after presidents are elected, they have to deliver on their promises to maintain the fragile coalitions that led to the electoral outcome that put them in office. This leads to a key point: if candidates attempt to appeal to certain groups with rhetorical appeals, then these

appeals will be used to set the public agenda, reinforce our viewpoints of certain issues, and ultimately aid in the public's understanding of complex political issues.

However, the notion of retrospective voting matters for another reason. Presidents believe that it matters what they promised during a campaign. In the 2016 election, Donald Trump clearly believed that he could gain the support of enough traditionally left-leaning working-class Whites to win. His rhetoric reflected someone who hoped that those voters would think about the changes that took place during the Obama administration and that they would be dissatisfied. We can assume that some of the support that Trump gained from this group was aided by the image of himself that he rhetorically constructed. If this is true, then Trump and the Republican-controlled Congress will likely use his policy proposals to create a legislative agenda. If Trump cannot deliver on his promises to working-class Whites, they might feel betrayed, which *could* cause that coalition to fall apart. Likewise, Congressional representatives will likely feel compelled to implement his promises or risk primary challenges. Perhaps, for a president, it might be enough for him or her to *appear* as if s/he is attempting to maintain their support (even though these policy changes might not actually materialize). It matters more what people think than what is empirically true. So, if White working-class voters are opposed to a buzzword, like “Obamacare,” and not the actual law—the Affordable Care Act—that was implemented under this banner, then the voting behavior of a key demographic might change. It could be affected by voters' perceptions of whether or not the candidate tried to implement this policy, whether the courts allowed it, or if the Congress could find a way to implement it if elected.

In other words, what presidents say matters because their words are an indication of the types of policies that they will subsequently do their best to implement. In fact, studies show that presidents try to keep their promises.<sup>18</sup> Subsequent campaigns are then run based on trying to communicate their own and their party's success to voters. If this message is successful, then the party will continue to maintain the winning alliance and will win reelection. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that maintenance of the coalition depends, in part, on voters' perceptions that their candidates did a good job in trying to implement those policies. Either way, while the rhetoric may be strategic, it does lead to real policy proposals that become part of the public agenda.

None of what I just described is a complete picture of voter behavior nor do I intend it to be. Voters may not be entirely informed about the candidates and their policies. Political scientists have shown that voting

behavior can be influenced by a myriad of perceptions of candidates that may or may not be accurate. For example, do voters view the candidate as trustworthy? If a president does not try to implement his or her proposals, that message might circulate and cause voters to have a negative image of them. This occurred in 1988 when George H. W. Bush promised not to raise taxes but was forced to by a Democrat-controlled Congress in 1990. My central point here is that presidents try to implement the policies that they propose because voters care if these promises are kept. Therefore, the way that they talk about race and ethnicity offers the public a vision of politics for the US to consider.

Certainly, presidential rhetoric on racial issues cannot be shown to determine election outcomes. However, it is accurate to say that presidential rhetoric is often important in coalition building. These coalitions often build their perceptions based on images that are circulated among these key voters. Presidents must try to implement what they promised. So, why does rhetoric matter? To understand the language is to understand the direction of policy discussions, which is reaffirmed by the party that maintains power. In turn, they attempt to appeal to key demographics with further policy proposals and images.

Therefore, I ask: What are key demographics that presidents try to gain support from and what do presidents say to try to win the support of these groups? We need to look at the rhetoric that is used to appeal to White swing voters because it is the appeals to this group that dominate many conversations about race and American identity. We need to investigate what kind of rhetoric is used because an understanding of that relationship can tell us a great deal about the direction of the country in terms of policy, and it can tell us about what is at the heart of American political culture. What I will show here is that the message used to appeal to these key demographics is racially coded to appeal to White America. What this means is that the direction of political culture is largely determined by White Americans. The message in presidential speeches reaffirms a connection between long-held beliefs embedded within American identity and the nature of the racial hierarchy in the United States.

This understanding of rhetoric is supported and clarified by studies that analyze the relationship between political candidates, constituents, Congress, and the media. Scholars who study the rhetorical presidency explain that increased partisanship has led to more direct appeals to the public. Effectively, these scholars show how presidents have recently moved away from the policy-making process described by Richard Neustadt where behind the scenes negotiations between the president and legislators lead