

# Conditional Presidential Priorities: Audience-Driven Agenda Setting

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## Abstract

The president's agenda-setting ability has a rich research history, with studies most often derived from the State of the Union Address. While a president communicates many of his policy priorities via the public address, the presidential agenda is more complex and variable than can be understood in one speech. Presidents have a number of tools to articulate their priorities, and how we understand presidential agenda-setting is linked to the tool and its intended audience. This research note illustrates the important variation in presidential agendas across venues by comparing the publicized agenda from the State of the Union with the policymaker-focused priorities conveyed in the annual Budget Message. Using the coding scheme of the U.S. Policy Agendas Project to assess presidential agenda setting over more than 35 years, we illustrate the audience-driven variability in presidents' agendas and highlight how the intended audience reveals presidents' strategic choices.

## Keywords

agenda-setting, policy agenda, president

## Introduction

Studies of presidential agenda setting have long focused on State of the Union (SOTU) messages in order to understand the presidential policy agenda. Presidential staff recommend looking at the State of the Union because the president's "top priorities will always appear in the message at some point" (Light, 1999, p. 6). The State of the Union is a highly partisan event where presidents seek broad support for their agenda, and the primary audience is the American people. The State of the Union represents a version of the president's policy agenda that meets the expectations of its intended audience, the public, to gain their support. And though presidents try to command the bully pulpit, presidents also have a role to play in inter-institutional agenda setting among policymakers (Edwards & Wood, 1999). Contrary to public-facing messaging, presidential budget messages are annual written messages attached to the proposed budget that target the attention of policy elites, which we define as Congress, the bureaucracy, special interest actors, and the media. The budget messages serve an agenda-setting purpose, like the SOTU, but that signal is not meant to capture the public's attention. Presidents have to work with policymakers inside the Beltway to pursue their agenda, as presidents cannot simply achieve their policy goals via bureaucratic appointments and more direct actions (Wood, 1988; Wood & Waterman, 1994), meaning that appealing to elite audiences is just as important as the signals that presidents send for a public audience. What makes this messaging significantly different from the SOTU address is that the message contains specific numbers for the proposed spending embedded in the rhetoric, offering an

explicit indication of priorities compared to the major address. President Joe Biden notably said "Don't tell me what you value, show me your budget, and I'll tell you what you value,"<sup>1</sup> and the budget message pairs that presidential rhetoric with numbers, so the budget message is the time when those numbers specify priorities.

In an era of hyper accessibility to lawmakers through social media and television, it might appear that all presidential agendas are public facing, but in reality, policymaker-oriented messaging like the annual budget message captures importance nuances in presidential agenda setting. While anyone can look at the budget and the president's budget message online, very few do, as the public is not the intended audience. Critically, the issues that matter to policy elites, such as bureaucrats, are different than the issues that matter to the public at large. The differing needs of these audiences contour the presidents' policy priorities. For example, Gallup surveys, like the Most Important Problem, show that the public routinely prioritizes the economy and healthcare, and while the relevant bureaucracies care about those issues, members of the bureaucracy are additionally attuned to government reorganization

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and operating procedures. We conduct a content analysis of over almost 40 years of presidential agenda setting to show these issue differences in the State of the Union and in the budget message.

A critical component of understanding presidential agenda setting is examining how the president's anticipated audience can shape the way the president defines his own policy agenda. A president's agenda is the intersection of the president's personal goals and what he perceives matches the interests of the audience. This research note examines budget messages as an additional venue for presidential agenda setting, and uses the U.S. Policy Agendas coding scheme to illustrate that the policies discussed in the messages are substantively different from the policies mentioned in the State of the Union, largely due to the different audiences associated with the messages. We assess policy coherence between the State of the Union and budgetary messages from Presidents Reagan through Trump to show how the agenda conveyed during the State of the Union only reveals a partial picture of presidential priorities. This research illustrates the importance of understanding the intended audience when measuring the presidential agenda, and highlights presidents' strategic choices about what messages they share with different audiences.

### *Different Audiences, Different Agendas*

Most of the research on presidential priorities focuses on the president and his public-facing agenda, such as the State of the Union or press conferences (Edwards & Wood, 1999; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2004; Rutledge & Larsen Price, 2014; Olds, 2013). But presidents are not limited to making policy proposals via the State of the Union and utilize a wide range of tools for communicating policy proposals. While there has been a great deal of work on agenda-setting dynamics, few scholars have focused on mapping the scope of a president's agenda in terms of the rhetoric attached to their budgetary priorities. By expanding our understanding of presidential agenda setting to include the agenda-setting dynamics between the president and policy elites, we gain the leverage to understand the complexity of agenda setting. While it is true that a president will raise his most important issues at the State of the Union, the budget message is used to understand how presidential promises are translated into action (Lynn, 2009).

Presidential budget messages have been a regular part of the budgetary process and presidential priorities since 1921, as directed by the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921. The message captures the attention of policy elites, mitigating uncertainty about the president's position on key issues. For example, there is often ongoing debate within the bureaucracy about what a president's policy priorities will look like, and the budget message can provide clarity for ongoing policy debates (Halperin & Clapp, 2007). Additionally, administration officials can often give mixed policy signals, and for those bureaucrats, congressional staff, or lobbyists closing

following an issue, they may consider the budget message as a reference point for new information (Halperin & Clapp, 2007, p. 3).

One way to identify the clear delineation between the public audience of the SOTU and the policy elite-oriented budget message is the response from congressional and policy-driven media. For example, at CQ/RollCall—whose subscription service targets lobbyists, special interests, and Hill staff—they traditionally dedicate an all-hands-on-deck approach to the president's budget release. Journalists are assigned to cover specific agencies, and they use the budget to determine specific programs worth highlighting in their coverage. While Congress is not obligated to implement the president's requests in his budget message, the budget proposal is the summary statement for those policy elites looking for indications of significant policy proposals and the legislative outlook. This has significant consequences for policy making, as policy actors like bureaucrats are often trying to anticipate the changes that may be coming (Page, 2012). We ask whether there is consistent variation over time in presidential priorities when the audience is public-facing versus elite-facing.

RQ1: Do presidents offer two distinct agendas with their public-facing rhetoric occurring in the State of the Union and their elite-facing rhetoric in budget messages?

### *Data and Methods*

Assessing the scope of the presidential agenda via policy content in budget messages and the State of the Union requires an analyzable structure that is consistent across years and document types. The U.S. Policy Agendas Project coding scheme provides a structure for coding the policy content of both tools by creating a clear set of coding rules that allow the new data set to be compared with their established data set of State of the Union messages.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Policy Agendas' coding scheme is composed of 20 major policy areas and over 220 minor policy areas. Each observation is assigned only one major topic and one minor topic nested within that major policy area. This creates a backward-compatible time series, allowing scholars to trace attention to issues (Baumgartner et al., 2002).

Given the desire to match the U.S. Policy Agendas Project methods, the data structure of the budget messages follows the structure of the State of the Union data set. In the State of the Union data set, the speeches are broken down into their grammatical subunit: the quasi-sentence. A quasi-sentence is the text between periods and semi-colons; each bit of text is a complete thought that can stand on its own. Then, each quasi-sentence is given its own major and minor topic code. This structure allows the coder to examine not only which topics are addressed in the speech, but the proportion of attention that a given topic receives within the speech as a whole. This method of parsing messages and coding each quasi-sentence was then applied to the budget messages.

### Results

We ask whether presidents tailor their policy attention to their audience, so we examine whether the distribution of attention to policy areas in the State of the Union was similar to the

distribution of attention to policy areas in the presidential budget message to see if there is policy coherence across policy tools. We examine this by calculating the pairwise correlation between the two documents, using the proportion of each document devoted to each U.S. Policy Agendas

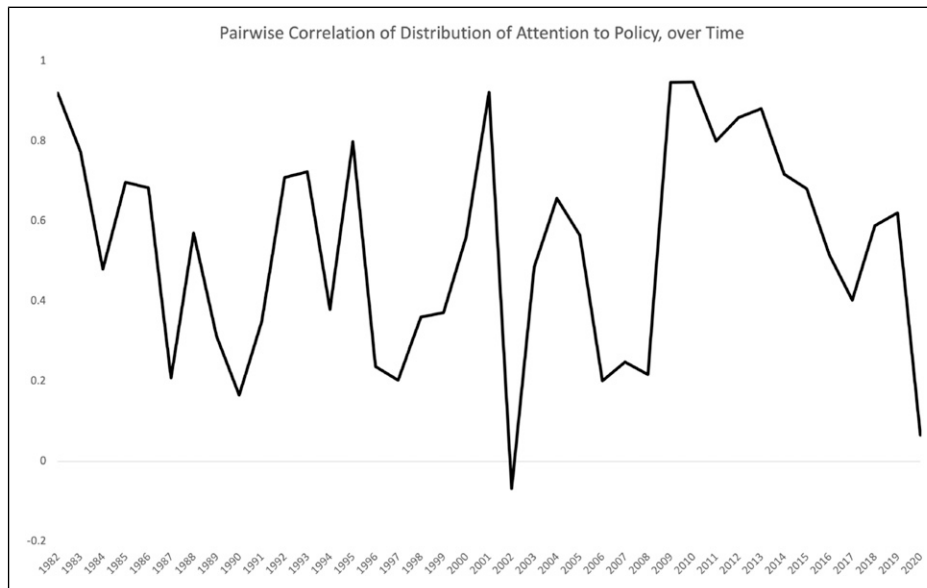


Figure 1. Higher correlation coefficients indicate higher levels of policy coherence across the two documents.

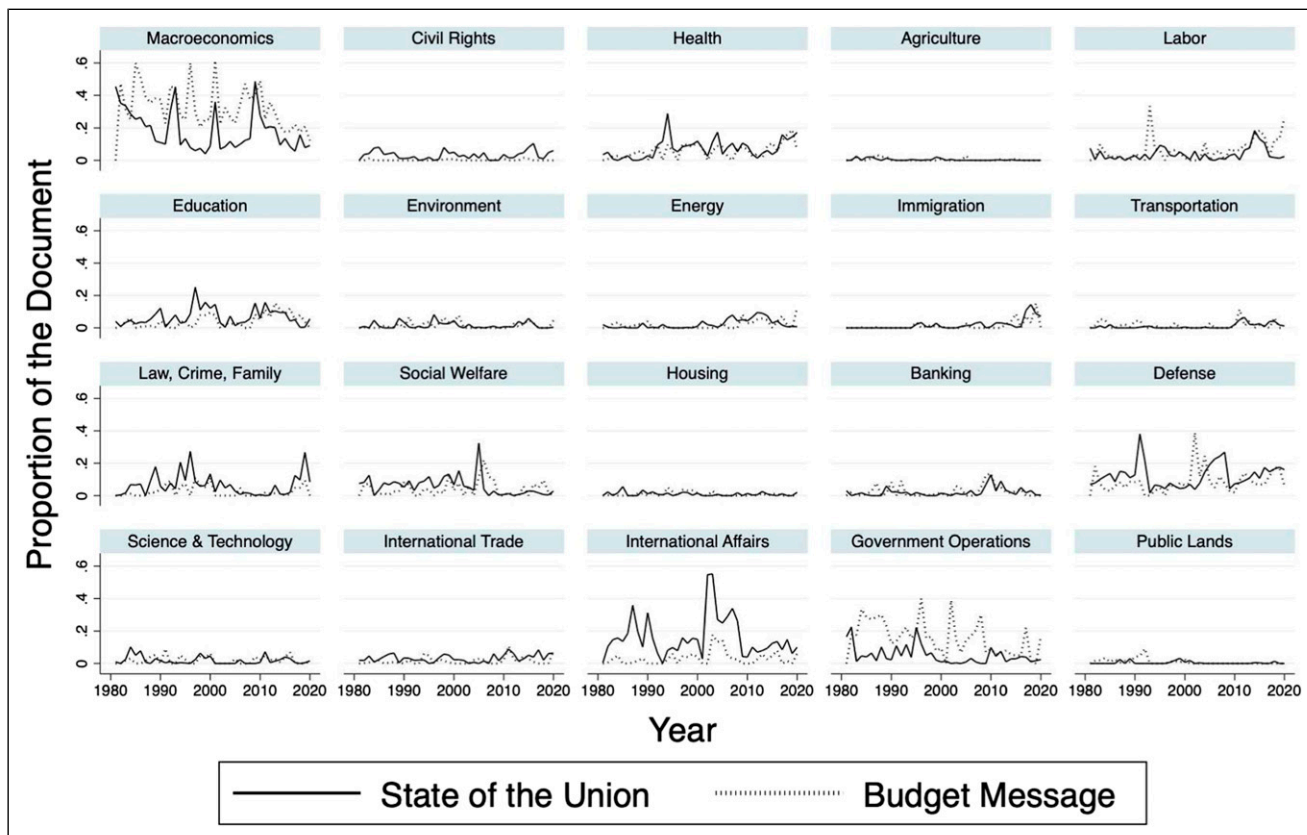


Figure 2. Presidential attention by document over time by policy area.

Project major topic area, producing a correlation coefficient for each year in our time series (see [Figure 1](#)). Higher correlation coefficients indicate higher levels of policy coherence across the two documents.

Immediately, it is clear that the level of coherence between the documents varies significantly. Some years, the distribution of attention is very similar, such as in 2001, when President George W. Bush's SOTU and budget message correlated at 0.922, indicating roughly identical proportions of attention. Yet, many years show a different picture, with either different policy areas emphasized or different proportions of attention to similar issues. In 14 years across the time series, the policy content of the State of the Union and the budget message were significantly different enough to produce a correlation coefficient of 0.4 or less. This is a level of difference that is noteworthy given these documents are produced at roughly the same time of year.

We also examine more closely the specific issue-areas a president prioritizes in each document by looking at the distribution of attention by policy area graphically (see [Figure 2](#)). We find variation in issues drives the lack of coherence, specifically macroeconomics and government operations garner much more attention in the budget message, compared to the SOTU. Attention to macroeconomics tends to increase at the same time in both the SOTU and the budget message, but economics clearly plays a larger role in those budget messages. Government operations—ethics, the post office, and federal employees—is rarely a large part of the SOTU, but it is a significant component of budget messages. These different priorities support our expectation that the audience of the documents shapes the agenda, as congressional appropriations and government operations are of unique interest to policymakers rather than the public. International affairs has a different dynamic; it tends to get a lot more attention in the SOTU than the budget message, though there have been periods of disconnect. One reason for this may be the public, “rally around the flag” effect that presidents employ in the State of the Union ([Ragsdale, 1987](#)), but find unnecessary when engaging with policymakers or agency staff.

## Conclusion

Presidents have a multitude of tools to convey their agenda and define their policy priorities, and their choice of tool reflects the desire to reach a specific audience with a particular version of the president's priorities. A president's agenda in budget messages is demonstrably different than in State of the Union, meaning that how we understand the presidential agenda, its success, and its reach is shaped by communication choices and intended audiences. Presidential messages have different target audiences and thus, contain different priorities. The primary audience of the State of the Union address is the American public, which is why we see speeches dealing

heavily with issues of public importance, such as education, families, and healthcare. The intended audience for the budget messages are policy elites, including the federal bureaucracy, where actors care about department funding and whether the president believes that government itself needs to change. This leads to a great deal of attention to government spending and the budget deficit, items which fall in the macroeconomics category and government operations. The different audiences, with their different concerns, lead to the documents containing different policy content, even within the same year.

By establishing the different dynamics in presidential policy agendas, future work on the complexities of the presidential agenda should consider what shapes each of these agendas in a causal way. This would allow for scholars to control for any presidential personality-type causes in the variation and simply examine the institutional- and audience-based differences. Additionally, future analysis may choose to assign multiple codes to budget message observations that examine how issues are paired and framed together in meaningful ways. The method used in this paper, of assigning only one code, comes from the Policy Agendas Project, but the budget messages are regularly populated with observations spanning multiple major topics with equal levels of attention applied to all. Often, those statements contain mentions of either macroeconomics or health, causing these two policy codes to be loaded with observations that call attention to a broad number of policy areas. By allowing multiple codes for these kinds of observations, we would be able to get a better sense of the distribution of collaborative policy priorities that presidents place in their budget messages. Because the goal of this project is to understand the full scope of attention, it is vital to extract as much information as possible, rather than allowing some of the data to be swallowed by other policy categories.

Presidents are faced with the expectation that they respond to problems in all policy areas. Yet, research on attention tells us that there are limits to the agenda space ([Jones & Baumgartner, 2005](#)). The power of the presidential agenda is his or her ability to set the broader governmental agenda, yet there are still questions as to the scope of the president's attention and how that attention can be framed or narrowed. Some issues are more regularly on the president's agenda than others, but it is also clear that in order to get a complete picture of the president's agenda it is necessary to consider more sources than just the State of the Union, and this study begins to give us a sense of that agenda complexity.

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## Notes

1. "Biden's Remarks on McCain's Policies" <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/15/us/politics/15text-biden.html>
2. The data used here were originally collected by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, with the support of National Science Foundation grant numbers SBR 9320922 and 0111611, and were distributed through the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Neither NSF nor the original collectors of the data bear any responsibility for the analysis reported here.

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