

Abstract

Q: how and why do US presidents describe global climate issues in different ways?

- Background: American presidents, in recent decades, have displayed strikingly different patterns in how they discuss the climate crisis, both in frequency and possible policy responses.
- Methodology: used 63 terms related to mitigation or adaptation to examine the State of the Union Addresses of Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joseph Biden.
- Results: nearly 1000 unique mentions across nearly 5000 words. President's partisan affiliation and the presence of intervening political crises are closely related to how climate is discussed. Adaptation policies were mentioned more frequently by Democratic presidents than Republican presidents, with President Trump rarely discussing climate at all.

Mitigation: climate policy focusing on reducing or eliminating human-caused sources of emissions

Adaptation: climate policy addressing anticipated future impacts of climate change

Methodology

Hypothesis:

- Democratic presidents will discuss adaptation policies more frequently and have more of mentions of climate than Republican presidents. Republican presidents will focus mitigation measures and have fewer mentions of climate.
- Secondary contributors are a lack of an intervening crisis (like September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks) or extreme weather event in the preceding year will lead to more mentions of climate.

Research Design:

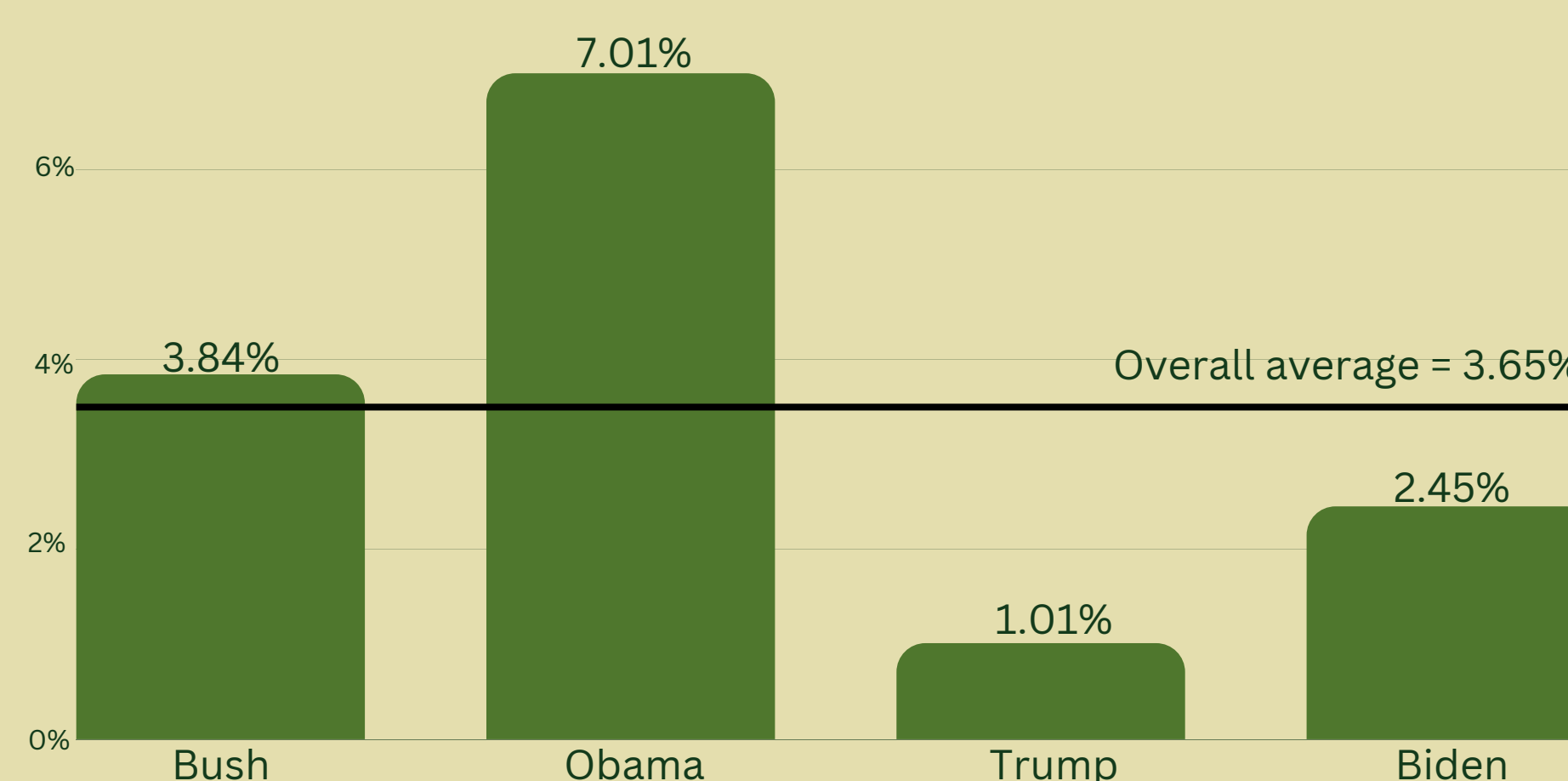
- Coded for unique list of 63 climate-related terms in the State of the Union Addresses of Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joseph Biden.
- Each term was designated as either mitigation or adaptation.
- Not all mentions of each term were counted. For example, "energy" could mean "enthusiasm" or relate to electricity.

Results

Frequency of Climate-related Mentions in SOTUs

	Bush	Obama	Trump	Biden	Total
Avg. total words	5143	6804	5874	7601	6355
Avg. related words	205	477	60	186	232

Percent of SOTU Related to Climate



- Presidents Bush and Obama discussed climate more frequently than President Biden.
- Presidents Bush, Obama, and Biden discussed climate to a significant extent, whereas President Trump did not.
- Presidents Obama and Biden discussed adaptation policies more frequently than President Bush, with more mentions of terms like "clean energy" and "solar."
- President Bush focused on mitigation policy, specific in reducing dependence on foreign energy sources.
- During an intervening political crisis, mentions of climate commonly related to that crisis.

Relevant Literature

- Rhetoric defines reality, meaning that "speaking is governing." [1]
- State of the Union Addresses represent a president's legislative agenda for the following year with no significant differences in rhetoric between election vs. non-election years, domestic vs. foreign policy, and first vs. second term. [2, 3]
- Partisanship is more important than age, gender, income, or education in determining political views on climate, with Democrats supporting climate action more than Republicans. [4]
- Populism amplifies the effects of partisanship, especially when the decision-making processes may not be as rational or formal. [4,5]
- Discussing climate leads to more policy action by opening up opportunity windows. [6]
- The public's willingness to undertake adaptation measures depends on their perceived risk to those localized impacts. [7]
- Discussing adaptation may help prospects of mitigation policy, even when discussing mitigation may not help short-/mid-term adaptation policy [6]
- President Bush Jr. framed climate change as not likely enough to happen to warrant the magnitude of economic cost and denied humans' role. [8, 9]
- President Obama frequently discussed climate but action fell by the wayside against economic, geopolitical, or political considerations. [9]

Term (total #)	Bush	Obama	Trump	Biden	Total
Car / vehicle	11	8	0	4	23
"Clean energy"	6	28	0	1	35
Climate	2	18	0	2	22
Energy	31	80	6	3	120
"Foreign energy" or "foreign oil"	6	7	0	0	13
Oil	14	29	2	1	46
Solar	2	12	0	1	15
Technology	17	8	0	0	25

References & Acknowledgements

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- [2] Jacques Savoy, "Analysis of the Style and the Rhetoric of the American Presidents Over Two Centuries," *Glottometrics* 38 (June 3, 2017).
- [3] Sam Potolicchio, "Potolicchio's Doctoral Thesis -- The Persuasive Presidency," 2013, 155.
- [4] Robert A. Huber, Lukas Fesenfeld, and Thomas Bernauer, "Political Populism, Responsiveness, and Public Support for Climate Mitigation," *Climate Policy* 20, no. 3 (March 15, 2020): 373–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2020.1736490>.
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- [9] Kyle J. Vint, "Contemporary High-Level Political Rhetoric Surrounding Climate Change — How Gore, Bush, and Obama Approach the Issue." (Thesis, 2012), <https://baylor-ir.tdl.org/handle/2104/8475>.