

Projecting Presidential Personas on the Radio: An Addendum on the Bushes

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We expand our recent analysis of the Saturday morning radio addresses of Presidents Reagan and Clinton to include Presidents George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush. The Bushes' broadcasts contrast sharply and in some unanticipated ways with those of Reagan and Clinton.

In our recent exploration of the personality, stylistic, and substantive dimensions of Ronald Reagan's and Bill Clinton's Saturday morning radio broadcasts (Sigelman and Whissell 2002), we ignored Reagan's immediate successor and Clinton's immediate predecessor, George H.W. Bush, because we mistakenly believed that Bush had not followed Reagan's lead in addressing the nation via radio on Saturday mornings. Our error came to light in the very same issue of *Presidential Studies Quarterly* in which our study appeared. Writing about Reagan's broadcasts, Rowland and Jones (2002) noted that all three of his successors, including the first President Bush, had carried on his practice of Saturday morning radio broadcasts. As we subsequently determined, after delivering no such broadcasts during his first two years in office, Bush spoke to the nation via radio on seventeen Saturday mornings during the last two years of his term.

Here we correct our oversight by augmenting our original results to encompass the first President Bush's Saturday radio addresses. Moreover, because the second President Bush has carried on with Reagan's and Clinton's practice of delivering Saturday radio addresses every week rather than only occasionally as his father did, we include data from his first year in office as well.

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Data and Method

With the addition of George H.W. Bush's 17 Saturday morning broadcasts and the first 51 of George W. Bush's, we present results for 734 addresses (including 326 by Reagan and 340 by Clinton).¹ We employ the same measures as in our original analysis.

Personality. As we did for Reagan and Clinton, we derived two indicators of the personalities that the two Bushes projected in their broadcasts by applying Whissell's (1994) Dictionary of Affect in Language (DAL) computer program to machine-readable versions of their broadcasts. The higher the score on one of these scales, the greater the preponderance of positive over negative language (positivity) or of active over passive language (activity).

Style. Two of our four stylistic measures gauge garrulousness: the total number of words in a broadcast and the mean length of the sentences. To tap plain-spokenness, we used the DAL program to score the broadcasts in terms of reliance on common words on a scale ranging from 0 (if the president relied exclusively on rare words like *exegesis*) to 17,000 (if the president did nothing but repeat the word *the* over and over). Again using the DAL program, we scored broadcasts for the preponderance of highly concrete language over highly abstract language (concreteness).

Substance. We distinguished between four possible foci of a broadcast: domestic issues, international issues, a combination of domestic and international issues, and special occasions (typically civil or religious holidays).

Results

Table 1 shows the proportion or mean for each president on each measure just described, and Table 2 expands our original multivariate analysis to include all four presidents. Because we reported the results for Reagan and Clinton in considerable detail in our original study, we focus here primarily on Bush *père* and *filis*.

Notwithstanding some differences between them, the rhetorical similarity of the two Bushes stands out clearly in these data. Both used their Saturday morning broadcasts primarily to talk about domestic issues, though after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the younger Bush began to devote a larger portion of his broadcasts to international affairs. Perhaps reflecting discomfort in front of the microphone, both kept their broadcasts short. Both recited scripts composed of relatively brief, simple sentences. And the scores that one Bush registered on the concreteness, activity, and positivity scales all fell close to the other Bush's scores.

1. We downloaded the texts of George H.W. Bush's broadcasts from the Bush Library Web site (<http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu>) and the texts of George W. Bush's broadcasts from the White House Web site (<http://www.whitehouse.gov>). There were actually fifty-three Saturday broadcasts during George W. Bush's first year in office. On one occasion, though, the president shared the microphone with his wife, and on another occasion, Mrs. Bush substituted for her husband. We dropped those two broadcasts from consideration here.

TABLE 1
Reagan-Bush-Clinton-Bush Radio Address Differences

	<i>Ronald Reagan</i>	<i>George H.W. Bush</i>	<i>Bill Clinton</i>	<i>George W. Bush</i>
Focus (%)				
Domestic issues	46.3	70.6	82.1	60.8
International issues	35.6	11.8	10.3	21.6
Combination	10.1	0.0	5.0	9.8
Special occasions	8.0	17.6	2.6	7.8
Style				
Length of broadcast	825.5	609.3	879.7	517.7
Sentence length	18.7	15.9	19.7	15.7
Use of common words	2,206.7	2,107.5	2,168.3	2,165.9
Concreteness	-36.0	-32.9	-32.2	-33.7
Personality				
Activity	-14.5	-11.7	-12.0	-11.8
Positivity	2.2	3.0	3.2	3.6
Number of broadcasts	326	17	340	51

TABLE 2
Discriminant Function Analysis Summary

<i>Variable</i>	<i>First Function</i>		<i>Second Function</i>		<i>p</i>
	<i>Total Structure Coefficient</i>	<i>Standardized Discriminant Coefficient</i>	<i>Total Structure Coefficient</i>	<i>Standardized Discriminant Coefficient</i>	
Focus					
Domestic issues	.428	.512	.325	.153	.001
International issues	-.328	.193	-.315	-.216	n.s.
Combination	-.110	.106	-.087	.021	n.s.
Style					
Length of broadcast	.612	.608	-.571	-.511	.001
Sentence length	.538	.483	-.386	-.450	.001
Use of common words	-.047	.079	-.166	.221	.05
Concreteness	.599	.534	.588	.359	.001
Personality					
Activity	.357	.163	.596	.454	.001
Positivity	.150	.118	.319	.132	.05
Centroids					
Reagan		-0.624		-0.578	
G.H.W. Bush		-1.161		1.549	
Clinton		0.902		0.206	
G.W. Bush		-1.637		1.800	
Canonical correlation		.660		.558	
$\chi^2(20) = 685.8, p = .001$					
Correctly classified = 78.1%					
Proportional reduction in error = 59.1%					
Number of cases = 734					

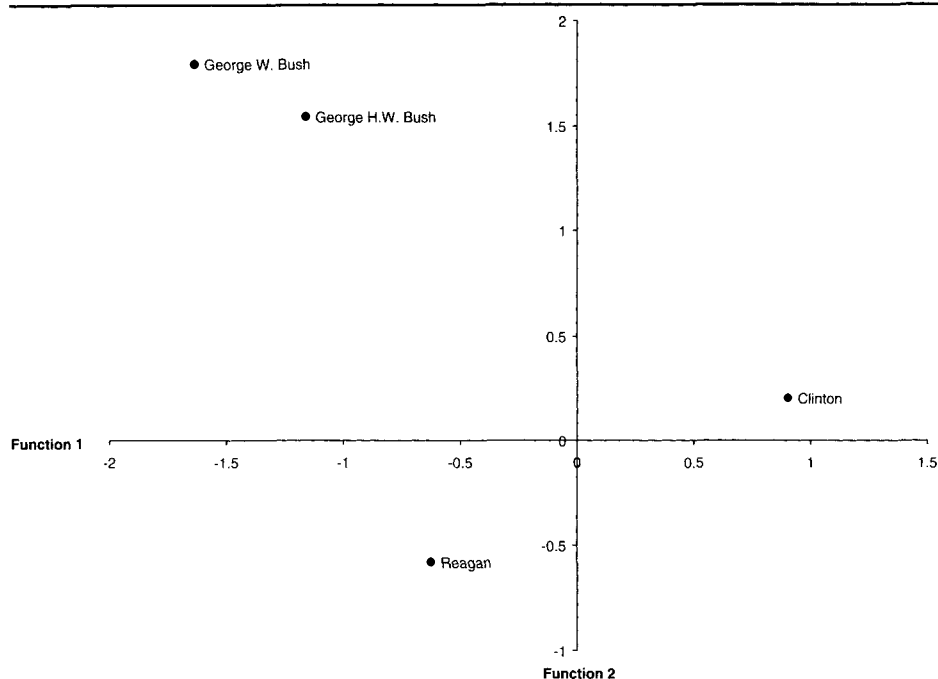


FIGURE 1. Placements of the Four President's Saturday Radio Addresses in Rhetorical Space.

Not only did the two Bushes display similar rhetorical profiles in their Saturday morning broadcasts but, no less strikingly, their profiles also contrasted sharply with those of Presidents Reagan and Clinton. In Table 1, readers can identify the specific rhetorical contrasts between the Bushes, on one hand, and Reagan and/or Clinton, on the other. For an overall sense of the Bushes' distinctiveness as communicators, though, the best guides are the group centroids that are given in Table 2 and shown graphically in Figure 1. These centroids place each president on the two significant discriminant functions, which are simply linear combinations of the presidents' scores on the measures described earlier, weighted according to each measure's ability to discriminate among the four presidents.² The first function, as the total structure coefficients indicate, is closely associated with the two garrulousness measures and with concreteness, while the remaining measures play lesser roles; broadcast length and concreteness are also prominent in the uncorrelated second function, as is the projected activity level conveyed in the broadcasts. Reagan, in the lower-left-hand quadrant of Figure 1, stands a good distance away from all three of the other presidents, as does Clinton, in the upper-right-hand quadrant. However, the two Bushes' centroids place them in close proximity to one another but farther away from Reagan and Clinton than Reagan and Clinton are from one another.

2. A third function was dropped from the analysis because it was statistically nonsignificant and accounted for only 1 percent of the explained variance (in contrast to the significant first and second functions, which accounted for 62 and 37 percent, respectively).

Some of the observed differences between the two Bushes and Reagan are intriguing. Using highly imaged language and projecting activity and positivity are normally considered keys to being perceived as an effective communicator and a dynamic person (see, e.g., Emrich et al. 2001). It is notable in this regard that Reagan's Saturday broadcasts were *less* concrete and *lower* in both activity and positivity than either of the Bushes' broadcasts (or, for that matter, Clinton's). Even so, it is the Bushes, not Reagan, who have been roundly criticized for their manifold deficiencies as public speakers. Obviously, then, emerging as a great communicator involves considerably more than the ability to recite prepared scripts in brief radio messages, and sounding peppy and upbeat on Saturday mornings may do little to help a president overcome an established image of wimpiness, lack of the vision thing, or arrested communication skills.

References

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