**The Electoral Logic of a Lame Duck: The Case of Barack Obama**

**Julia R. Azari, Marquette University**

**Justin S. Vaughn, Boise State University**

**(DRAFT: Paper prepared for 2016 Western Political Science Association meeting)**

After the 2012 election, the usual debate about its meaning broke out among political commentators. Political scientist John Sides (2012) pointed out in the *Monkey Cage* that elections rarely confer mandates, and that interpretation of election results often occurs through a partisan lens. Journalists also challenged the idea that the election results offered a clear message. ABC News’s Rick Klein (2012) similarly argued that the nation was too divided in 2012 to declare any kind of real policy victory for one side. This viewpoint was not universally shared, however; for example, Jonathan Cohn (2012) argued at *The New Republic* that Republicans had turned the election into a referendum on liberalism - in which liberalism had clearly been victorious.[[1]](#endnote-1) These responses illustrate the pliable nature of mandate narratives; most elections have features that can be spun into mandate claims, but rarely do the results convince all observers.

 Although the susceptibility of elections to interpretation is constant, the attempt to interpret their results varies as political context changes. In the twenty-first century, politicians and commentators alike have been especially preoccupied with the meaning of elections and, in particular, how such meaning informs the policy agenda (Azari 2014). For the Obama presidency, this has posed different challenges. His claims about the 2008 election as a party mandate proved divisive and unhelpful in defining a clear policy agenda, in part resulting in his need to interpret his party’s midterm ‘shellacking’ in 2010 as a call for bipartisanship (Azari and Vaughn 2014). Subsequent years have provided Obama with additional opportunities to find meaning in national electoral outcomes, a phenomenom we have previously labeled “the rhetoric of electoral logic.”

This paper examines Obama’s public statements about the meaning of the 2012 and 2014 elections. We assess the role of several factors in shaping the forty-fourth president’s electoral logic. First, how does presidential rhetoric reflect the conditions of the elections themselves? These conditions include the issues stressed in the campaigns, the magnitude of the victory, and the nature of the coalition. Second, we look at structural and political factors, such as the type of election (e.g., presidential or midterm) and how presidential mandate rhetoric responds to polarized political conditions. Finally, we also assess how contingent factors, such as events and idiosyncratic qualities of specific presidents, affect post-election narratives. Our goal is to develop a deeper understanding of how presidents interpret elections, and how these narratives relate to the ways in which presidents define the terms of their leadership. The results of our analyses show that presidential interpretation of election outcomes is not only a frequent phenomenon, but also that the nature of these interpretations is shaped by not just the election’s actual outcome but also political conditions and other important factors.

**Presidents and Interpreting Elections**

 Conventional wisdom tends to divide presidential elections into two categories: ordinary elections without any particular message and extraordinary elections that carry a special mandate from the electorate about policy change. Scholars have broken these designations into more precise conceptual categories; for example, Charles Jones (2005) has distinguished between mandates for change and for the status quo, and Marjorie Hershey (1994) has identified distinctions between party, policy, and personal mandates. Others have pointed out that mandates are more the products of elite construction than reflections of the actual election result (Grossback, Peterson, and Stimson 2007; Azari 2014). Arguably no political elite has greater opportunity – and need – to interpret elections for the nation that the American president.

Indeed, recent studies also show that interpretation of election results and campaign promises has become a more prominent part of presidential rhetoric (Azari 2014; Azari and Vaughn 2014), even if the president’s desired effect does not always manifest (Villalobos, Vaughn, and Azari 2012). As the rhetoric of electoral logic has proliferated, this integration of mandate talk into justifications for governing decisions has resulted in a growing gap between the magnitude and clarity of election outcomes and the narratives that emerge around them, a phenomenon also observed by Robert Dahl (1990). Obama’s second election provides an informative test of the relative impact of election results versus broader political conditions on election interpretation. In general, higher levels of polarization and flagging public approval are associated with more frequent use of mandate rhetoric (Azari 2013). These factors were, for the most part, still in place as Obama’s first term began.[[2]](#endnote-2) But the election result was, as we shall see momentarily, an unusual contrast with Obama’s first term.

Obama’s communications after the 2012 and 2014 elections also provide insight into how presidents communicate under polarized political conditions. Under any circumstance, presidents play a dual role as both party and national leaders (Azari, Brown and Nwokora 2013; Cronin and Genovese 2004), and this influences rhetorical choices (Coleman and Manna 2007; Rhodes 2014). The rhetorical challenge faced by Obama in 2012 and 2014 was to highlight electoral legitimacy for his own party’s priorities, while also acknowledging the other party’s congressional victories. The differences between the agendas and ideological viewpoints of the parties make this an especially difficult situation to navigate.

**Barack Obama’s Second Term Rhetoric of Electoral Logic**

One obvious feature in favor of mandate claims in 2013 was the clarity of the issue differences between candidates. In congressional races and state referenda, many Democratic candidates and liberal issues such as including marriage equality and recreational marijuana won at the polls. Whether these issues played a role in Obama’s victory, they provided a starting point to frame the national agenda. Republican candidates, including Mitt Romney, also presented the election as a vote on the Affordable Cart Act, and a potential rejection of the administration’s foreign policy. If the administration had wanted to claim a mandate in any of these issue areas, they could have pointed to the campaign to bolster credibility.

On the other hand, the first challenge Obama faced in interpreting the 2012 election was the marginal nature of the result itself. Obama beat his opponent, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, by a margin of less than four percent. Although he was the first president since Dwight Eisenhower to win more than fifty-one percent of the vote in two consecutive elections, he also became one of the few presidents to be reelected with a smaller vote share than in his first election.[[3]](#endnote-3) Furthermore, although the Democrats picked up 8 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, they failed to win control of the lower chamber, and lost 6 seats in the U.S. Senate, barely holding on to majority status. As a result, the election maintained the divided government status quo. In this sense, the election results probably most closely resembled those of 1980, an election that has previously been described by Azari (2014, 146) as seeming to be “custom-made to frustrated mandate theorists.” However, unlike the 1980 campaign, in which Reagan’s small majority nevertheless brought the defeat of an incumbent president, the 2012 election looked like a weak affirmation of the status quo. The ability to break with the past is an important factor in defining the terms of presidential leadership (Skowronek 1997), and surprise is an important element in constructing a persuasive mandate narrative (Grossback, Peterson, and Stimson 2007). A modest endorsement for staying the same divided government course, however, presents an entirely different – and much less exploitable – opportunity.

Nevertheless, President Obama did not have the option to avoid explaining the meaning of his slight reelection and his party’s mixed and modest congressional successes. Instead, he had to do as rhetoric scholar David Zarefsky (2014) has suggested and define the new political reality facing both the nation and the remainder of his presidency. We now turn to an empirical analysis of precisely how Barack Obama responded to the 2012 election’s outcome in his second term rhetoric of electoral logic.

To analyze Obama’s rhetorical approach to explaining the results of the

2012 elections, we follow the approach of Azari and Vaughn (2014). In doing so, we use data from the Public Papers of the Presidency,[[4]](#endnote-4) which we use to code communications over two relevant spans: the period immediately following the 2012 elections through the rest of that calendar year (i.e., November 7-December 31, 2012) and the period immediately following his January 2013 inauguration through the end of that quarter (i.e., January 20-March 31, 2013). By focusing on these two separate post-election periods, we are able to identify both the president’s immediate interpretation of the election as well as how his interpretation influences the policy arguments being made as he starts his second term.[[5]](#endnote-5)

 We first classified each public communication made by the president during these time frames as one of seven different kinds of speech types: major speeches, minor remarks and communications, weekly radio/Internet addresses, speeches to party audiences, interactions with the media, government communications, and ceremonial speeches. We then determined whether it included electoral logic rhetoric, such as references to election results, campaign promises, or the will of the people as expressed by the election’s outcome. Communications were coded as including a mandate claim if they linked a course of presidential action to responding to the demands of the electorate or fulfilling a campaign promise. Many communications coded as containing mandate language included an attempt to define “what the election was really about.” In other instances, electoral logic took the form of stressing that the president had campaigned on a particular issue. Several words and phrases we found recurring through such communications were “mandate,” “reason I was elected,” “promises in my campaign,” and “what the people voted for.” After we determined whether a communication included electoral logic rhetoric, we identified whether the election was characterized as a party mandate: did the president refer to the party platform (i.e., emphasize the differences between the two parties) or use mandate rhetoric to frame one of the party’s signature issues (such as health-care reform).

**Obama Interprets the 2012 election**

After the 2012 election, Obama appeared poised to construct a mandate narrative around economic and budget issues. He referenced the election in nearly 20% (10/53) of his communications in the period the election and the end of the year. For example, in a press conference week after the election, Obama suggested that, “We should not hold the middle class hostage while we debate tax cuts for the wealthy. We should at least do what we agree on, and that's to keep middle class taxes low …I know that that's what the American people want us to do. *That was the very clear message from the election last week.*”[[6]](#endnote-6) In the same press conference, though, Obama offered a cautious and less specific commentary on the issue of mandates in general. In response to a question from Ed Henry of Fox News, Obama described his approach to mandates:

And with respect to the issue of mandate, I've got one mandate*. I've got a mandate to help middle class families and families that are working hard to try to get into the middle class.* That's my mandate. That's what the American people said. They said: Work really hard to help us. Don't worry about the politics of it, don't worry about the party interests, don't worry about the special interests. Just work really hard to see if you can help us get ahead, because we're working really hard out here and we're still struggling, a lot of us. That's my mandate.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The president went on to say:

I don't presume that because I won an election that everybody suddenly agrees with me on everything. I'm more than familiar with all the literature about Presidential overreach in second terms. We are very cautious about that. On the other hand, I didn't get reelected just to bask in reelection. *I got elected to do work on behalf of American families and small businesses all across the country who are still recovering from a really bad recession, but are hopeful about the future.[[8]](#endnote-8)*

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

In the weeks after the election, however, Obama described the election as evidence of the electorate’s decision between distinct policy alternatives. In a speech visiting a manufacturing plant in Pennsylvania, Obama described the choices between congressional inaction or moving forward on a deal to prevent the so-called fiscal cliff:

So those are the choices that we have. And understand, this was a central question in the election, maybe the central question in the election. You remember. We talked about this a lot. [Laughter] It wasn't like this should come to anybody—a surprise to anybody. We had debates about it. There were a lot of TV commercials about it. *And at the end of the day, a clear majority of Americans—Democrats, Republicans, Independents—they agreed with a balanced approach to deficit reduction and making sure that middle class taxes don't go up.* Folks agreed to that.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Similarly, at the end of November, in remarks on the economy, Obama employed the frame of the election as a policy choice: “This was a major debate in the Presidential campaign and in congressional campaigns all across the country. *And a clear majority of Americans—not just Democrats, but also a lot of Republicans and a lot of Independents—agreed we should have a balanced approach to deficit reduction that doesn't hurt the economy and doesn't hurt middle class families.”[[10]](#endnote-10)*

Obama’s rhetoric immediately following the election, therefore, brought together two frameworks for translating the results into a policy directive. As with his interpretation of the 2008 election, he suggested that the campaign had been a contest between competing visions. In 2009, Obama’s electoral logic rhetoric portrayed the issue conflict with more specificity and depth, indicating not only different policy approaches but different economic philosophies (Azari and Vaughn 2014). In 2012, however, another election narrative tempered these interpretations: that the voters had chosen bipartisanship and cooperation in government.

An examination of Obama’s rhetoric of electoral logic after his second inauguration reveals a somewhat different rhetorical approach by the president that what we observed immediately following the election two-and-a-half months earlier. Following his second inauguration in January 2013, Obama presented a number of agenda items to Congress and the public. However, he only justified a few of them with references to his campaign and/or reelection. In fact, only about 3.7% (3/82) of Obama’s communications during the first twelve weeks following his inauguration included any reference to his 2012 victory. [As a point of comparison, Azari and Vaughn (2014, 528) show that about 18% of his public statements in the first twelve weeks of his first term included some electoral logic rhetoric.]

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Each of these references came in a different context. One was before an elite partisan audience – the House Democratic Issues Conference in Virginia on February 7, 2013.[[11]](#endnote-11) The general theme of the speech was the economy, and the president made several comments linking the election and the campaign to fundamental governing values:

But even as I think it's important to be humbled by the privilege of this office and the privilege of serving in the United States Congress, *even as it's important not to read too much into any particular political victory*—because this country is big, it is diverse, it is contentious, and we don't have a monopoly on wisdom, and we need to remember that—despite all those things, I think it's also important for us to feel confident and bold about the values we care about and what we stand for.

And:

*Throughout my campaign, and throughout many of your campaigns,* we talked about this bedrock notion that our economy succeeds and our economy grows when everybody is getting a fair shot and everybody is getting a fair shake and everybody is playing by the same rules.

The context and content here reflect a specific approach to election interpretation that aligns with the responsible party model. The focus is on campaign promises, demonstrated values, and clear differences between the two parties. In this speech, Obama’s rhetoric of electoral logic clearly emphasizes his role as head of the Democratic Party.

Conversely, in a news conference on March 1, Obama offered a somewhat different interpretation of the election and campaign, also in the context of discussing the economy.[[12]](#endnote-12) After presenting an argument about “smart” cuts that would ask for some sacrifice from everyone, Obama justified this approach by pointing out, “I don't think that's too much to ask. I don't think that is partisan. It's the kind of approach that I've proposed for 2 years. *It's what I ran on last year. The majority of the American people agree with me in this approach, including, by the way, a majority of Republicans.*” In this instance, the president’s policy position is still grounded in a campaign promise justification, though this time with an added explicit claim to bipartisanship. In this case, Obama’s rhetoric of electoral logic features a clearer balance of his dual presidential roles – distinctions between parties are noted, but the central focus is on the American people.

Finally, the next day, the president concluded his weekly address to the nation by saying:

Because the American people are weary of perpetual partisanship and brinksmanship. This is America, and in America, we don't just bounce from one manufactured crisis to another. We make smart choices: We plan, we prioritize. So I'm going to push through this paralysis and keep fighting for the real challenges facing middle class families. I'm going to keep pushing for high-quality preschool for every family that wants it and make sure the minimum wage becomes a wage you can live on. I'm going to keep pushing to fix our immigration system, repair our transportation system, and keep our children safe from gun violence.

*That's the work you elected me to do.* That's what I'm focused on every single day.

This speech stressed bipartisan themes on the surface, yet also criticized political opponents for their approach to the budget process. Even so, these opponents remain nameless in this portion of the speech, when Obama invokes electoral logic. In this case, Obama’s role as party leader takes a backseat to his role as leader of the American people

Taken together, Obama’s comments about the 2012 election in non-partisan venues constitute a narrow claim for an election about economic issues, yielding his interpretation of the 2012 elections as an electoral mandate with bipartisan implications. This narrative is consistent with the emphasis on economic values in the partisan speech, though the messages have important differences. In sum, Obama’s mandate claims after the 2012 election are quite different from those in 2009 in tone, content, and frequency, where he assertively claimed mandates both for his party and for his preferred position on multiple policy issues (Azari and Vaughn 2014). Although the 2012 election was, strictly speaking, a victory for the Democrats, Obama’s language about the election was careful to avoid the “I won” themes of 2009.

It is reasonable to assume that this more restrained approach to mandate claiming was a function of either the president’s awareness that he won a smaller proportion of the vote share in 2012 than in 2008, or the virtually impenetrable veil of polarization and opposition his policy agenda encountered following his first inauguration. However, a few other factors may also have shaped Obama’s approach. First, governance in the second term presents unique difficulties. The “second term curse” is a well-documented phenomenon among political scientists, although its roots are somewhat less clear. David Crockett (2008, 716) identifies several possible explanations, including “early leadership failure” for second-term woes that have included Roosevelt’s court-packing plan, scandal over Eisenhower Chief of Staff Sherman Adams, Watergate, and the Clinton impeachment. Crockett also observes that first-term decisions number among the many factors that contribute to the “second-term blues” phenomenon. In President Obama’s case, his focus on economic issues and on the budget may have represented an attempt to break from politically difficult priorities such as health-care reform.

Crockett’s analysis also suggests that second-term problems are not a feature of timing or even of the Twenty-second Amendment, but rather a function of overreach in the pursuit of legacy and in response to reelection. This line of logic raises the possibility that Obama was consciously trying to avoid setting himself up for this kind of problem. Both his modest reelection margin and his anticipation of strong opposition from congressional Republicans suggested against the wisdom of any strategy that would raise expectations about his second term. Second-term presidents also, in a sense, succeed themselves. For presidents like Obama, who defined their first campaigns around the theme of change, second-term definition can be elusive. Charles O. Jones (2005, 188) calls these “status quo mandates” and places many successful modern reelection campaigns, including 1956, 1972 and 1984 in this category.

Finally, another idiosyncratic yet important factor that might have constrained Obama’s mandate-claiming strategy is the shift that occurred in the policy agenda following the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012. In the wake of this event, in which 26 people, including 20 children, were killed, Obama urged Congress to pass gun control legislation. Gun control had barely registered as a campaign issue in 2012, but it gained public salience after the election. Obama’s speeches reflect this; high-profile addresses like the State of the Union stressed gun control as a priority. That the president pivoted to a newly salient issue that had not previously been a significant focus during the election shows the power political dynamics can have in crowding out mandate claiming opportunities (Gelman, Wilkenfeld, and Adler 2015).

In retrospect, regardless of the explanation, Obama’s strategic balance seems wise. He had won reelection, but not overwhelmingly so, and Republican successes at the state level and in the U.S. Senate combined the Democrats inability to take back the House of Representatives ensured that any message sent about the preferences of the American public would necessarily be mixed. Unfortunately for the president, the electoral interpretation task would not become easier two years later, for if presidents face difficult strategic choices about how to frame elections with mixed victories, they face an even harder set of decisions about how to confront election losses. In the next section, we turn to Obama’s interpretation of the 2014 midterm election results.

**Interpreting Midterm Loss: The Case of 2014**

In comparison with the literature on mandates and presidential elections, scholarship on presidential responses to midterm elections is relatively sparse, despite the fact that midterm elections since 1994 have been increasingly national affairs (Jacobson 2013). In 2014, Obama openly embraced this view of the midterms, and the narratives that arose around the 2014 midterm election also left little room for doubt about the nationalized character of the campaign. Although the 2014 races lacked a focal point like the Affordable Care Act in 2010, Obama himself noted, “I am not on the ballot this fall. Michelle’s pretty happy about that. But make no mistake: *These policies are on the ballot. Every single one of them”* (Dennis 2014). There were many different policy areas to which Republican leaders could have tied the election result – economic, social, and foreign – but the idea that Republican congressional candidates ran in opposition to the president was not in doubt.

Like all elections, the 2014 midterms were open to multiple interpretations. When votes were counted, the Democrats lost thirteen seats in the House of Representatives, expanding the Republican majority and more than undoing the modest gains they had made in that chamber in 2012. Senate Democrats also fared poorly, losing eight seats and, along with them, control of that chamber. Senate losses included several incumbent defeats, including Mark Pryor in Arkansas, Kay Hagan in North Carolina, Mark Udall in Colorado, and, in a late run-off election, Mary Landrieu in Louisiana. After the heavy Democratic losses, various pundits contemplated whether the result constituted a Republican “wave,” or merely a routine midterm setback for the presidential party (Blake 2014, Cohn 2014). Nevertheless, with the exception of liberal victories on ballot issues over minimum wage and same-sex marriage, the 2014 elections were difficult to present in a positive light for the Democrats. Although there was some debate about whether the results carried a positive mandate for the Republicans or merely a show of frustration with the status quo, they were clearly not an electoral endorsement of Obama’s policies.

If the politics of election interpretation were primarily driven by the facts of the election results, we might have expected Obama to avoid discussing the results as much as possible, or even to concede defeat to the other party. Utilizing the same methodological approach as previously discussed concerning the 2012 presidential election, we find that Obama included references to the election in over twenty percent (11/52) of his communications between the day after the election and the end of the year.[[13]](#endnote-13) This figure is double the percentage observed following the 2010 midterm “shellacking” (10.5%; Azari and Vaughn 2014, 533), slightly higher than his immediate post-election references to his reelection victory in 2012, and significantly higher than his post-inaugural references in January 2013.

More importantly, the nature of Obama’s interpretation illustrates the interbranch tension that underlies the concept of an electoral mandate. Previous scholarship points out that the presidential mandate was crafted in part to circumvent the obstacles of the separated powers system, by positing the president as the true representative of the people Azari 2014; Ellis and Kirk 1995; Dahl 1990) As such, the president was presumed the spokesperson of the popular will and the legitimate winner of any policy conflicts with Congress. The same logic is also applicable, with some adjustments, to midterm elections, which are easy to cast as retrospective evaluations of presidential performance (Campbell 1985). After the 2014 midterms, some commentators suggested that Obama should take the election as a message about policy and adjust his agenda accordingly (Gergen 2014; McDuffee 2014; Vinik 2014). However, electoral logic is not the only way to justify policy. Instead, Obama’s responses note his distinct constitutional prerogative as well as his own electoral legitimacy.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

In these statements, Obama employed three frames after the midterms: emphasizing his own previous elections and campaign promises; rejecting Republican claims about the meaning of the election while defending his own policy prerogatives, and framing the election as an endorsement of bipartisanship and compromise. Immediately following the election, Obama offered a complex interpretation of the midterm results. It was clear he, as president, would need to respond to the results and develop a narrative about how they would fit into his governing plans. Congratulating the Republicans while noting they had “obviously” had a good night, he stated in the news conference the day after the election that he looked forward to them assembling their governing agenda and that he would offer his own ideas where the two parties could work together.[[14]](#endnote-14) He also conceded that the election results carried an important message, but interpreted it in a way that emphasized bipartisanship rather than acknowledging defeat: “*What stands out to me, though, is that the American people sent a message, one that they've sent for several elections now. They expect the people they elect to work as hard as they do. They expect us to focus on their ambitions and not ours. They want us to get the job done.*”[[15]](#endnote-15) However, after acknowledging the possibility that the election sent a policy message, he also referred to the low turnout for which midterm elections are known, noting that two-thirds of the electorate had not cast votes and assuring the non-voters, “I hear you, too.”

In the following days, Obama referred to the election in several sets of remarks, in each case expressing the view that the election had been “significant”[[16]](#endnote-16) and that its message had been that “that the American people just want to see work done here in Washington. I think they're frustrated by the gridlock. They'd like to see more cooperation.”[[17]](#endnote-17) In other words, his early response to the election revealed some concession to the idea that the results had been a negative evaluation of the status quo and, thus, conferred policy meaning.

In references to previous campaigns and commitments, Obama emphasized issues that were separate from major economic debates. One such reference was in the context of a discussion on Internet neutrality a few days after the midterm,[[18]](#endnote-18) while another occurred during a December speech to the White House Tribal Nations Council.[[19]](#endnote-19) When addressing budget issues, however, Obama repeatedly mentioned the election as a public endorsement for working together. His defenses of his own unique institutional prerogatives and responsibilities came at more idiosyncratic moments, too. In an interview with George Stephanopolous, Obama said:

You know, it was … a tough election for us on the midterms and people were understandably down. And I said, "Folks, *all of you collectively are in charge of the single most powerful institution in the world. And it's responsible for delivering on behalf of millions of Americans and billions of people around the world* when you start looking at some of the security and development assistance we provide.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Conversely, the president offered a somewhat different take when addressing his export council, where he maintained that despite the election results, “the dynamics really don't change in terms of the number of votes in the House and the Senate that are there to be gotten for a good trade deal.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

There are two main lessons to be taken from this. First, Obama’s narratives about the 2014 midterms were somewhat scattered. He neither fully countered the narrative of a Republican mandate, nor accepted it and integrated it into a broader vision of cooperation and bipartisanship, as he had done following the 2010 midterms (Azari and Vaughn 2014). Obama’s attention to the 2014 election results also suggests that presidents do not abandon the rhetoric of electoral logic after they have run their own last race. On the contrary, the political situation called for Obama to comment on how the midterm results would inform his final years in office, even though he had not actually been on any ballot. This undermines the suggestion that Obama’s more conservative use of mandate rhetoric at the beginning of his second term was due to the end of the “age of mandate politics” (Azari 2014, 1), but instead provides evidence that party polarization and institutional legitimacy continue to drive mandate-claiming. The fact that Obama often responded to queries about the meaning of the Republican victories for his presidency reflected both phenomena. The implication was that the election result not only jeopardized the president’s chances of achieving policy goals on a practical level, but also delegitimized his agenda by handing him a losing result in a national referendum.

**Conclusion**

What does this analysis of Barack Obama’s second term rhetoric of electoral logic tell us about the interpretation of elections? One of the key points raised by this analysis is the frequency with which contemporary presidents refer to elections as sources of legitimacy. This suggests that it has become the norm for presidents to contend with the idea of elections – presidential or midterm – as a set of instructions about the nation’s policy agenda. Although Obama occasionally pushed back against this idea somewhat after the 2012 and 2014 elections, the consistent presence of election references in his communications after both elections suggests he would have been hard pressed to simply ignore the election results, despite their ambiguity. A second important conclusion is that the terms by which elections are interpreted also seem to be at least as closely linked to political conditions as they are to electoral outcomes. The unexpected salience of gun control in December 2012 minimized opportunities to focus on other issues that the president had actually campaigned on that year, while the large number of non-voters in the 2014 midterm elections gave the president some rhetorical cover as he sought to repudiate the Republican’s post-election narrative. More generally, the continuing presence of extreme partisan polarization, which has been a core characteristic of the Obama era as it was throughout the preceding administration of George W. Bush, limits both the likelihood of bipartisan cooperation and President Obama’s willingness to abandon his policy preferences in favor of his opponents.

Barack Obama’s efforts to interpret the 2012 and 2014 elections underscore some of the central structural challenges of his presidency. Although conventional wisdom often posits that presidents enjoy substantial control over the political situation, including (but not limited to) crafting an advantageous mandate message, Obama’s post-election communications instead shed more light on considerable obstacles. The challenge of legitimation is evident in his rhetorical efforts to link various choices to campaign promises. The need to direct the national agenda, attempt to acknowledge the other party’s victories, and balance these with pressure from the president’s supporters in the Democratic base is also evident in his election interpretation rhetoric.

The task that now remains is to determine whether Barack Obama’s rhetoric of electoral logic is consistent with that of his predecessors. We do not yet know if Republican presidents interpret elections differently than Democrats such as Obama do, or if presidents who either experience victories or defeats of different magnitudes react differently. Similarly, we do not know if the rhetoric of electoral logic has evolved over time, which may be likely as the nationalization of midterm elections has transpired. Future research attending to these questions should be conducted as we seek greater understand about how the American president understands and explains democratic outcomes.

**References**

Azari, Julia. 2013 “Institutional Change and the Presidential Mandate.” *Social Science*

*History* 37: 483-514

Azari, Julia. 2014. *Delivering the People’s Message: The Changing Politics of the*

*Presidential Mandate*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Azari, Julia, Lara M. Brown, and Zim G. Nwokora. eds. 2013. *The Presidential*

*Leadership Dilemma: Between the Constitution and a Political Party*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Azari, Julia R., and Justin S. Vaughn. 2014. “Barack Obama’s Rhetoric of Electoral

Logic.” *Social Science Quarterly* 95 (June): 523-540.

Blake, Aaron. 2014. “Yes, This Was a GOP Wave Election.” *Washington Post*,

November 5. Available online at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-

fix/wp/2014/11/04/yes-this-is-a-gop-wave-election/.

Campbell, James. 1985. “Explaining Presidential Losses in Midterm Elections,” *Political Science Quarterly* 47:1140-1157.

Cohn, Jonathan. 2012. “Yes, Obama Won a Mandate,” *The New Republic*, November 7.

Available online at: https://newrepublic.com/article/109818/obama-won-mandate-election-day-take-america-further-forward.

Cohn, Nate. 2014. “A Republican Victory by a Nose, Not a Wave.” *New York Times*.

August 1. Available online at: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/02/upshot/a-

republican-victory-by-a-nose-not-a-wave.html.

Coleman, John J. and Paul Manna. 2007. “Above the Fray? The Use of Party System

References in Presidential Rhetoric,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37:399-426.

Crockett, David. 2008. “An Excess of Refinement: Lame Duck Presidents in Historical

and Constitutional Context,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 38: 707-721.

Cronin, Thomas and Michael Genovese. 2004. *The Paradoxes of the American*

*Presidency*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Dahl, Robert. 1990. “The Myth of the Presidential Mandate.” *Polity* 105: 355-372.

Dennis, Steven. 2014. “Obama: My Policies are on the Ballot.” *Roll Call*. October 1.

Available online at: http://blogs.rollcall.com/white-house/obama-ballot-unemployment-extension/.

Ellis, Richard J. and Stephen Kirk. 1995. “Presidential Mandates in the Nineteenth Century: Conceptual Change and Institutional Development,” *Studies in American Political Development* (9): 117-186.

Gelman, Jeremy, Gilad Wilkenfeld, and E. Scott Adler. 2015. “The Opportunistic

President: How US Presidents Determine Their Legislative Programs.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 40 (3): 360-390.

Gergen, David. 2014. “The Sobering Message for Obama.” *CNN.com*, November 5,

2014. Available online at: http://www.cnn.com/2014/11/05/opinion/gergen-election-takeaways/.

Grossback, Lawrence J., David A.M. Peterson, and James A. Stimson. 2005. “Comparing

Competing Theories on the Causes of Mandate Perceptions.” *American Journal of*

*Political Science* 49 (2): 406-419.

Hershey, Marjorie Randon. 1994. “The Meaning of a Mandate: Interpretations of

‘Mandate’ in 1984 Presidential Election Coverage.” *Polity* 27: 225-254.

Jacobson, Gary. “How the Economy and Partisanship Shaped the 2012 Presidential and Congressional Elections,” *Political Science Quarterly* 128: 1-38.

Jones, Charles O. 2005. *The Presidency in a Separated System,* 2nd ed. Washington, DC:

Brookings Institution Press.

Klein, Rick. 2012. “For Obama, A Mandate Only if He Earns One.” ABC News,

November 7. Available online at: http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/OTUS/2012-presidential-election-results-analysis-president-obama-mandate/story?id=17662404.

Jones, Jeffrey M. 2015. “Obama Approval Ratings Still Historically Polarized.” Gallup.com, February 6. Available online at:

http://www.gallup.com/poll/181490/obama-approval-ratings-historically-polarized.aspx.

McDuffee, Allen. 2014. “Romney: Obama ‘Needs to Learn That He Lost’ the

Midterms.” *The Atlantic*, November 16, 2014. Available online at: http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/11/mitt-romney-says-obama-needs-to-learn-that-he-lost-the-2014-midterms/382802/.

Sides, John. 2012. “The 2012 Election Was Not a Mandate.” *The Monkey Cage*,

November 7, 2012. Available online at: http://themonkeycage.org/2012/11/the-2012-election-was-not-a-mandate/.

Skowronek, Stephen. 1997. *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams*

*to Bill Clinton*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University.

Rhodes, Jesse H. 2014. “Party Polarization and the Ascendance and Bipartisan Posturing as Dominant Strategy in Presidential Rhetoric,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 44: 120-142.

Villalobos, Jose D., Justin S. Vaughn, and Julia R. Azari. 2012. “Politics or Policy? How

Rhetoric Matters to Presidential Leadership of Congress.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 42 (3): 549-576.

Vinik, Danny. 2014. “Tuesday’s Elections Were Major Warning Sign for Democrats.”

*New Republic,* November 7, 2014. Available online at: https://newrepublic.com/article/120187/voters-sent-dangerous-message-democrats-midterms.

Zarefsky, David. 2014. “Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition.” *Presidential*

*Studies Quarterly* 34 (3): 604-619.

**Table 1: 2012 Presidential Election References, November 7, 2012 – December 31, 2012**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Total number**  | **Election references**  |
| Ceremonial | 6 | 0 |
| Government  | 12 | 0 |
| Major  | 2 | 1 |
| Media | 4 | 1 |
| Minor/miscellaneous  | 21 | 5 |
| Party | 0 | 0 |
| Weekly  | 8 | 3 |

 **Total 53 10**

**Table 2: 2012 Presidential Election References, January 20, 2013 – March 31, 2013**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Category**  | **Total** | **Mandate claims**  |
| Major | 3 | 0 |
| Minor/miscellaneous  | 40 | 0 |
| News/media | 1 | 1 |
| Weekly addresses | 10 | 1 |
| Ceremonial  | 6 | 0 |
| Party  | 2 | 1 |
| Government  | 20 | 0 |

 **Total 82 3**

**Table 3: 2014 Midterm Election References, November 5, 2014 – December 31, 2014**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Number**  | **Election references**  |
| Ceremonial | 3 | 0 |
| Government  | 12 | 2 |
| Major  | 2 | 0 |
| Media | 7 | 5 |
| Minor/miscellaneous  | 20 | 4 |
| Party | 0 | 0 |
| Weekly  | 8 | 0 |

 **Total 52 11**

1. Ellis and Kirk (1995) make a similar argument about Andrew Jackson and the National Republicans in the election of 1832, where they made the Second Bank of the United States into an issue and lost. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Obama began his first term with high approval ratings, but these leveled off quickly, and through out his time in office, his approval levels have been highly polarized (Jones 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The only other presidents to do so were Grover Cleveland in 1892 and FDR in 1940 and 1944, as he ran for his unprecedented third and fourth terms. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The American Presidency Project is available publicly online at www.presidency.ucsb.edu, [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In Azari and Vaughn (2014), only the period following the inauguration was analyzed. We argue this dual focus provides a richer and more valuable set of observations. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The President’s News Conference, November 14, 2012. Full text available at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=102644. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Remarks at a Rodon Group Manufacturing Facility in Hatfield, Pennsylvania, November 30, 2012. Full text available at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=102709&st=&st1=. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Remarks on the National Economy, November 28, 2012. Full text available at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=102704&st=&st1=. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Remarks at the House Democratic Issues Conference in Leesburg, Virginia, February 7, 2013. Full text available at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=103240&st=&st1=. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The President’s News Conference, March 1, 2013. Full text available at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=103322. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Because Obama himself was not on the ballot in 2014 and was not inaugurated in 2015, we do not present an analysis of both time periods as was the case in the treatment of his post-2012 rhetoric of electoral logic, but instead focus exclusively on the immediate responses to the November 2014 midterm elections from the day after the election until the end of the calendar year. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. The President’s News Conference, November 5, 2014. Full text available at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=107910. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Remarks Prior to a Cabinet Meeting, November 7, 2014. Full text available at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=107871&st=&st1=. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Remarks Prior to a Meeting With Congressional Leaders and an Exchange With Reports, November 7, 2014. Full text available at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=107872&st=&st1=. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Statement on Internet Neutrality, November 10, 2014. Full text available at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=107927&st=&st1=. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Remarks at the White House Tribal Nations Conference, December 3, 2014. Full text available at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=107927&st=&st1=. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Interview with George Stephanopoulos of ABC News “This Week,” November 23, 2014. Full text available at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=109760. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Remarks at a Meeting of the President’s Export Council, December 11, 2014. Full text available at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=108018&st=&st1=. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)