

Reagan's Rhetorical Revolution:
The Role of Appearance and Public Persona in Media Age U.S. Politics

Alex Cho

Senior Division

Historical Paper

Historical Paper: 2,500 words

Process Paper: 492 words

Process Paper

Throughout the last 250 years, several presidents have left enduring legacies—shaped by the political climate, economic cycles, and societal issues that defined their eras. But in 2026, at a time when media is deeply intertwined with politics, I cannot overlook the lasting legacy of Ronald Reagan. Popular interpretations of Reagan’s presidency center on his economic and national security agendas, as he became a symbol of neoliberalism and defiance against the Soviet threat. However, Reagan was not the sole actor in this chapter of history who produced major geopolitical changes. His idea of small government and lower taxes was the embodiment of classical *laissez-faire* economics, in much the same way the Reagan Revolution can be interpreted as a counterrevolution against the “Great Society” of the 1960s. Therefore, I concluded Reagan’s impact on rhetorical politics in the age of mass media was a more compelling subject for research.

I began my research by surveying previous scholarly critiques of Reagan’s presidency, including historical and political science analyses of Reaganomics, the Cold War, and conservative realignment. I noticed that many interpretations of Reagan’s policy success were contested, and scholars often disagreed on the effectiveness of Reagan’s communication in actually changing public opinion. This finding encouraged me to shift my focus from simply defining Reagan’s communication as successful and tracing how future politicians followed it, to identifying which aspects of Reagan’s rhetorical style contributed to the broadly positive public perception of him, and how contemporary politicians have sought to emulate that strategy. I also drew a historical parallel by comparing optimism and reassurance projected by Franklin D. Roosevelt’s fireside chats and John F. Kennedy on television with Reagan’s use of media.

Because Reagan is a relatively recent historical figure, I was able to work extensively with primary sources in modern media, ranging from presidential debates and campaign advertisements to nationally televised addresses. This process allowed me to identify recurring themes of optimism and individual liberty, which reflected Reagan's skepticism of government. I also used contemporary newspaper coverage and political commentary to study how Reagan's rhetoric was received during specific moments, especially regarding the Challenger disaster and U.S.-Soviet relations.

My conclusion addresses the dual legacy of Reagan's rhetorical revolution. As a Hollywood actor-turned-politician, Reagan was especially effective on national television, and frequently engaged with the American people through mass media. Reagan's campaigns were among the most effective early examples of television's full integration into presidential communication strategy, a milestone that is still relevant in today's political landscape. Reagan's emphasis on political rhetoric and public persona became an influential model for presidential politics, as symbolism and political performance increasingly received greater attention. By explaining the downside of Reagan's rhetorical legacy through the case of George H.W. Bush, a policy-competent president who lacked communication skills compared to Reagan's, I argue that this legacy contributed to a greater tendency for appearance and public persona to eclipse political accountability—a shadow of Reagan's optimistic and shrewd use of media rhetoric.

Historical Paper

On the evening of January 28, 1986, the American people gathered before their televisions to watch President Ronald Reagan's address to the nation. In the wake of the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster, Reagan initially appeared on screen with a mournful tone. Presidential speeches after a disaster usually carry heightened significance as the event itself is so indelible, but they rarely become a distinct chapter in history. Reagan's speech that night was an exception. Instead of merely eulogizing the lost, Reagan enabled his audiences to vicariously explore the values the crew embodied. He lauded the astronauts as "pioneers," invoking America's frontier spirit. Despite the tragic imagery of flames and scattered debris from that morning, Reagan's speech allowed Americans to dream that the astronauts ultimately achieved the goal of their journey, expanding the limits of human ingenuity. Reagan's poignant yet sanguine tone, epitomized by the phrase "slipped the surly bonds of Earth to touch the face of God," offered hope that Americans could still achieve great things, as they did in the past, while attempting to restore faith in institutions shaken by the tragedy.¹ This relatively short four-minute speech channeled support for continued commitment to space programs and unified the people through a common denominator of grief and ambition.²

The speech epitomized Reagan's moments as the "Great Communicator." As an actor-turned-politician with a Hollywood background, America's then-oldest president projected confidence and casual optimism. This conspicuous positivity of the 1980s led many to believe in

¹ Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger," speech, January 28, 1986, *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-nation-explosion-space-shuttle-challenger>; John Gillespie Magee, Jr., "High Flight," *Poetry Foundation*, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/157986/high-flight-627d3cfb1e9b7>.

² R.W. Apple, Jr., "The Shuttle Explosion; President as Healer," *The New York Times*, January 29, 1986, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/01/29/us/the-shuttle-explosion-president-as-healer.html>.

the ostensible success of the Reagan presidency, exemplified by his sixty-five percent approval rating when he left office in 1989.³ James Sloan, Catherine Schonhardt-Bailey, and Lee Sigelman with Cynthia Whissell corroborated this view by highlighting Reagan's leadership skill, distinctive civil-religious rhetoric, and broader role in shifting the national political narrative.⁴

Nonetheless, numerous scholars have also challenged overgeneralized accounts of presidential rhetoric and communication, including Anne Pluta, Jeffrey Cohen and John Hamman, Martin Wattenberg, and Reed Welch. They argue that presidential influence over public sentiment is often constrained by political circumstances, media structures, and issue-specific persuasion limits.⁵

These authors provide important correctives to facile glorifications of Reagan by using statistical analysis to expose the limits of the rhetorical presidency. This essay, in contrast, examines Reagan's legacy in rhetorical and public persona strategy, arguing that he revolutionized how politicians shape popular sentiment through socioeconomic and cultural appeals. In doing so, it sheds light on how, decades after Reagan left office, politicians'

³ John W. Sloan, "Meeting the Leadership Challenges of the Modern Presidency: The Political Skills and Leadership of Ronald Reagan," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1996): 795, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27551632>.

⁴ Sloan, "Meeting the Leadership Challenges of the Modern Presidency," 796; Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey et al., "Yes, Ronald Reagan's Rhetoric Was Unique—But Statistically, How Unique?," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2012): 491–497, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41684514>; Lee Sigelman and Cynthia Whissell, "'The Great Communicator' and 'The Great Talker' on the Radio: Projecting Presidential Personas," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2002): 137–146, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552369>.

⁵ Anne C. Pluta, "Reassessing the Assumptions behind the Evolution of Popular Presidential Communication," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (2015): 70, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43285460>; Jeffrey E. Cohen and John A. Hamman, "'The Polls': Can Presidential Rhetoric Affect the Public's Economic Perceptions?," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2003): 420–421, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552492>; Martin P. Wattenberg, "The Changing Presidential Media Environment," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2004): 571, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552613>.

appearance and performance have become increasingly salient in U.S. politics as policy details have receded into the background.

The Roots of the Conservative Revival

Reagan's prowess lay primarily in communicating his overall agenda rather than scrupulously drafting better policies. Serving as president during a consequential era when television became truly ubiquitous, Reagan readily embraced the media's role in politics. He had the proclivity and audacity to frequently engage with the American people, delivering thirty-nine addresses to the nation and giving hundreds of Saturday morning radio broadcasts.⁶ Reagan possessed charm that resonated with his audiences as he championed the noble mission of restoring an optimistic America he remembered from his youth. This helps explain his rise to national prominence as a vehement adversary of the "welfare state" in the 1960s. Though Reagan was initially a fervent supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt and New Deal initiatives, his politics leaned to the right in the 1960s, culminating in his 1964 endorsement of Barry Goldwater.⁷ Reagan, then a 53-year-old General Electric spokesperson, employed antithesis, sarcastic jokes, and a sense of historic urgency to galvanize the national audience in favor of smaller government and anti-communist defiance.⁸

⁶ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, "President Reagan's Addresses to the Nation," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, National Archives, accessed February 15, 2026, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/reagans/reagan-administration/president-reagans-addresses-nation>.

⁷ Ronald Reagan to Harold Ward, May 26, 1962, accessed February 15, 2026, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/ronald-reagan-economics-and-political-parties-1962>; Ronald Reagan, "A Time for Choosing," speech, October 27, 1964, *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, accessed February 15, 2026, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/reagans/ronald-reagan/time-choosing-speech-october-27-1964>.

⁸ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, "A Time for Choosing Speech, October 27, 1964," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, National Archives, accessed February 15, 2026, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/reagans/ronald-reagan/time-choosing-speech-october-27-1964>.

The endorsement speech helped propel Reagan toward the California governorship in the late 1960s and early 1970s, where he solidified his image as a fervent defender of traditional American values.⁹ Reagan's reliability and optimism drew a reassuring contrast with the mayhem of the time: political assassinations, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the stagflationary economy. Notwithstanding their personal integrity, both Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter were ineffective in communicating their governance agendas. Carter's "Crisis of Confidence" speech, despite an initial surge in approval ratings due to the president's genuine tone, ultimately failed to resolve the leadership and energy crisis facing the nation, leaving an enduring association with malaise and an eventual electoral defeat.¹⁰ To endure the vicissitudes of socioeconomic instability, American voters needed sanguine reassurance, not a didactic sermon, and Reagan was more effective in providing that sentiment.¹¹ Reagan's rhetorical strategy was not to directly restore the credibility of government, but to reinstate faith in the American people themselves. In "A Time for Choosing," Reagan expressed his resentment toward defining the people as "the masses," as if they were the subject of control and coercion.¹² Reagan's faith in the American people's strength was likewise conveyed through his skepticism of concentrated government power, which he argued should remain subordinate to collective citizenry rather than encumbering individual liberty.

⁹ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, "A Time for Choosing," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*.

¹⁰ Robert A. Strong, "Recapturing Leadership: The Carter Administration and the Crisis of Confidence," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1986): 647, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40574414>.

¹¹ Robert C. Rowland and Robert A. Payne, "The Context-Embeddedness of Political Discourse: A Re-Evaluation of Reagan's Rhetoric in the 1982 Midterm Election Campaign," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1984): 508, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27550126>.

¹² Reagan, "A Time for Choosing," speech.

Strategic Campaign Choices

In addition to personal charisma, Reagan and his advisers' judicious choices of diction and appearance tactics contributed to the reinforcement of his admired public persona. He used symbolic imagery to convey his ideas more often than he outlined statistics or specific details.¹³ A typical Reagan oration would commence by envisaging an ideal world, usually through Biblical references or mythical symbols, before connecting them to his policy agenda, which ranged from tax cuts and welfare reform to defense spending.¹⁴ Compared to other presidents in the 20th century, Reagan stands out in his use of words related to civil religion, consequently popularizing the phrase "God bless you, and God bless America," originally spoken by Harry Truman in 1953.¹⁵ Analyses of his seminal speeches and the State of the Union addresses suggest that words related to civil religion comprised 58.5% and 48.2% of those transcripts respectively, dwarfing the portion allocated to fiscal policy, domestic economic growth, and the Soviet threat.¹⁶

For Reagan, Biblical analogies were an effective tool for contrasting his vision of family-friendly, conservative America with the atheistic Soviet communism. Reagan championed the idea that individuals bestowed value on society, and he scorned the Soviet style of expansive government power. Considering Reagan's rhetorical style of employing abstract symbols in lieu of direct statements, the recurring use of civil-religion themes in his speeches served as a strategy for implicitly advancing his policy agenda. His use of simple, binary words also helped him

¹³ Sigelman and Whissell, "'The Great Communicator' and 'The Great Talker' on the Radio," 144.

¹⁴ Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey et al., "Yes, Ronald Reagan's Rhetoric Was Unique," 493.

¹⁵ Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey et al., "Yes, Ronald Reagan's Rhetoric Was Unique," 491–497.

¹⁶ Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey et al., "Yes, Ronald Reagan's Rhetoric Was Unique," 491–497.

appeal to ordinary Americans.¹⁷ Reagan was especially assiduous in simplifying the nation's complex problems before delivering his messages. Focusing on rudimentary but stark frames—individual endeavor versus big government, benevolent United States versus menacing Soviet Union, religious conservatives versus secular liberalism—Reagan seized the higher moral ground in the language of national debate. Therefore, the rightward realignment of voters across multiple cohorts during the 1980s cannot be fully comprehended without considering the White House's rhetorical influence.¹⁸

Conviction Politician?

One of the most common descriptions of Reagan is that he was a “conviction politician.”¹⁹ He suggested that America had perennially answered the major questions of the day by upholding individual liberty and imposing a limit on government; he also traced contemporary problems to the estrangement from such traditional values.²⁰ Reagan's efficacy in broadly appealing to ordinary Americans also mitigated the resistance from a recalcitrant Congress. Although Republicans recaptured the Senate in 1980, the House of Representatives remained in Democratic control (see Figure B2), and Reagan's credibility on the Hill was tenuous as his adversaries viewed his electoral success as a rebuke to Carter's presidency rather than an endorsement of his mandate.²¹ Instead of engaging Congress in a direct and cumbersome

¹⁷ Sloan, “Meeting the Leadership Challenges of the Modern Presidency,” 796.

¹⁸ Yair Ghitza et al., “The Great Society, Reagan's Revolution, and Generations of Presidential Voting,” *American Journal of Political Science* 67, no. 3 (2023): 535, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48737419>.

¹⁹ Sloan, “Meeting the Leadership Challenges of the Modern Presidency,” 796.

²⁰ Sloan, “Meeting the Leadership Challenges of the Modern Presidency,” 796.

²¹ David Mervin, “Ronald Reagan's Place in History,” *Journal of American Studies* 23, no. 2 (1989): 275, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27555182>.

way, Reagan maneuvered around it by mobilizing ordinary Americans, pressuring legislators through the very constituents they served. In early 1981, when Washington politicians received a flood of letters in support of Reagan's economic recovery plan after he asked people to call or write their representatives on national television, the political establishment recognized Reagan's favorable standing with the public, or at least his supporters.²²

But many scholarly evaluations of Reagan's policy achievements indicate that he adapted his tone and governing approach over time, instead of being a "conviction politician" with unwavering ideological goals.²³ Reagan's shifting stance on the Soviet threat is an example of why he was a pragmatist. The contrast between the words of his "Evil Empire Speech" in 1983 and his actions after meeting Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 is stark: he vehemently highlighted the moral struggle against the Soviet Union and the threat it posed to democratic family values, just four years before announcing a milestone nuclear treaty with Moscow.²⁴ Reagan's rhetoric of emphasizing the positive aspects of the outcome, regardless of his previous predicaments or statements, enabled him to remain a "conviction politician" in voters' minds even as his policy positions evolved. Many of Reagan's signature policy initiatives—supply-side economics, Strategic Defense Initiative, and the Reagan Doctrine—reshaped the terms of political debate,

²² Reed L. Welch, "Was Reagan Really a Great Communicator? The Influence of Televised Addresses on Public Opinion," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2003): 871–872, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552540>.

²³ Hugh Heclo, "The Mixed Legacies of Ronald Reagan," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2008): 555–574, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41219701>; Joint Committee on Taxation, *General Explanation of the Revenue Provisions of the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982 (H.R. 4961, 97th Congress; Public Law 97-248)*, Joint Committee Print JCS-38-82. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 12, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://www.jct.gov/publications/1982/jcs-38-82>.

²⁴ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, FL," speech, March 8, 1983, *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-annual-convention-national-association-evangelicals-orlando-fl>; William Burns et al., *The Treaty on Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces: History and Lessons Learned*, Arms Control Series paper 9 (Brookings Institution, 2012), 1–5, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/30-arms-control-pifer-paper.pdf>.

putting his opponents on the defensive while consolidating the coalition of “Reagan Conservatives,” an influence that persisted even into the Clinton era.²⁵

Reagan’s Use of Mass Media and Public Persona

In 1984, Reagan continued to eloquently project his rhetorical optimism, declaring “Morning in America” through his famous television commercial.²⁶ Television and mass entertainment were deeply integrated into ordinary American life by the 1980s, setting a favorable media environment for Reagan, who was adept at generating a holistically positive atmosphere for himself. Roosevelt first established an intimate and effective form of direct communication with the American people through his fireside chats (see Figure A3); John F. Kennedy’s telegenic success in 1960 then marked the rising significance of appearance in presidential politics.²⁷ Early media dynamics, however, revolved around episodic, ceremonial events—like presidential debates—rather than the continuous, message-disciplined media strategy that would characterize later presidencies. By the 1980s, broadcast television was deeply entrenched and alternative forms of video distribution were expanding, as more than 10 million people watched the evening news.²⁸ Adapting to the fragmented media landscape, Reagan

²⁵ Chester Pach, “The Reagan Doctrine: Principle, Pragmatism, and Policy,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2006): 76, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552748>.

²⁶ C-SPAN, “Video Clip: 1984 Ronald Reagan Presidential Campaign Ad,” video, 1:12, *C-SPAN*, March 19, 2012, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.c-span.org/classroom/document/?7280>.

²⁷ Scott Yenor, “A New Deal for Roosevelt,” *Claremont Review of Books*, last modified 2007, accessed May 18, 2026, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/a-new-deal-for-roosevelt/>; Margaret Biser, “The Fireside Chats: Roosevelt’s Radio Talks,” *The White House Historical Association*, last modified August 19, 2016, accessed May 18, 2026, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-fireside-chats-roosevelts-radio-talks>; James N. Druckman, “The Power of Television Images: The First Kennedy-Nixon Debate Revisited,” *The Journal of Politics* 65, no. 2 (2003): 559–571, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2508.t01-1-00015>.

²⁸ Jonathan Levy et al., *Broadcast Television: Survivor in a Sea of Competition*, OPP Working Paper 37 (Washington, DC: Federal Communications Commission, 2002), 1–6, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-226838A22.pdf>; Pew Research Center, *Network TV: Evening News*

deployed communication across multiple platforms: from town-hall meetings and radio broadcasts to prime-time television and addresses to the nation. The way the public perceives political issues, as elucidated by the Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model, helps explain Reagan's communicative strength. According to the model, public opinion often reflects the elite cues and salient considerations most available to citizens, depending on people's political awareness and prior predispositions.²⁹ Reagan's advantage lay in his ability to supply those cues through a coherent public persona.

In contrast to popular sentiment, Reagan's communication was not always a panacea for reshaping public opinion to his advantage. Exposure to Reagan's speeches did not reliably persuade audiences that he was more effective or more trustworthy as president.³⁰ It did, however, make the public more likely to attribute strong leadership qualities to Reagan.³¹ This discrepancy between "effectiveness" and "perceived qualities" as president suggests that Reagan's media strategy emphasized the construction of a holistic public persona that could remain buoyant above fragmented policy debates or political scandals. Reagan's approval ratings bolster the claim that he was indeed a "Teflon president," remaining comparatively resilient throughout most of his presidency, with notable exceptions during the 1981–1982 recession and the Iran-Contra affair (see Figure B1).³²

Ratings Over Time by Network, July 9, 2015, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://www.pewresearch.org/chart/network-tv-evening-news-ratings-over-time-by-network/>.

²⁹ John Zaller, "What Nature and Origin Leaves Out," *Critical Review* 24, no. 4 (2012): 569, accessed April 6, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2012.807648>.

³⁰ Welch, "Was Reagan Really a Great Communicator?" 868.

³¹ Welch, "Was Reagan Really a Great Communicator?" 868.

³² Marilyn Berger, "Ronald Reagan Dies at 93; Fostered Cold-War Might and Curbs on Government," *The New York Times*, June 6, 2004, accessed February 22, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/06/us/ronald-reagan-dies-at-93-fostered-cold-war-might-and-curbs-on-government.html>; Gallup, "Presidential Approval Ratings — Gallup

Comparison with Reagan's Successors

For a politician whose signature theme was a curb on government's power, Reagan left a rather ironic achievement: contributing to a renewed sense of dignity and admiration for the presidency.³³ Many of his successors emulated his style, whether intentionally or inadvertently, before claiming the office. Clinton reportedly studied Reagan's rhetorical patterns and sought to develop an altered approach to the "rhetorical presidency."³⁴ He certainly made a memorable impression as a presidential candidate when he appeared on a late-night talk show to play the saxophone (see Figure A4).³⁵ While both Bush presidents extensively applied media strategies in their campaigns, the forty-third president more closely mirrored Reagan's small-town traditional American values and folksy communication strategy, though he lacked Reagan's oratorical skill.³⁶ As a convincing orator and an optimistic politician, Barack Obama's rise to the presidency parallels that of Reagan. Both first gained national prominence through an impactful endorsement of a presidential candidate.³⁷ Their sustained optimism in spite of economic downturns provided a source of reassurance to apprehensive Americans.

Historical Statistics and Trends," accessed February 21, 2026, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx>.

³³ Heclo, "The Mixed Legacies of Ronald Reagan," 566; Berger, "Ronald Reagan Dies at 93."

³⁴ Keith E. Whittington, "The Rhetorical Presidency, Presidential Authority, and President Clinton," *Perspectives on Political Science* 26, no. 4 (1997): 199, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10457099709600675>; Heclo, "The Mixed Legacies of Ronald Reagan," 566.

³⁵ C-SPAN, "Clinton Appearance on Arsenio Hall Show," *C-SPAN*, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.c-span.org/program/campaign-1992/clinton-appearance-on-arsenio-hall-show/19384>.

³⁶ C-SPAN, "2000 Political Ads," *C-SPAN*, Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network, last modified August 30, 2004, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://www.c-span.org/program/vignette/2000-political-ads/132870>.

³⁷ Reagan, "A Time for Choosing," speech; C-SPAN, "Barack Obama 2004 Democratic National Convention Keynote Speech," video, 19:05, *C-SPAN*, accessed February 23, 2026, <https://www.c-span.org/program/american-history-tv/barack-obama-2004-democratic-national-convention-keynote-speech/193754>.

Politics in the 2010s also faced another critical inflection point: the introduction of social media. Americans now have access to an unprecedented amount of information, including political messages and rhetoric. Though Reagan's media politics were largely television-based, his rhetorical and campaign style—particularly its incremental integration into everyday American life—has remained relevant even in the age of social media.

Reagan's Rhetorical Legacy

The legacy of Reagan's rhetorical revolution extends beyond cultivating presidents of optimistic charisma; it also helped institutionalize an unsustainable model of political communication that privileges appearances while eclipsing policy substance. The tumultuous end of George H.W. Bush's presidency best illustrates the duality of this legacy. In 1988, Bush himself campaigned as a pragmatic conservative who proclaimed, "no new taxes."³⁸ Yet his campaign also benefited from Republican televised advertisements invoking fears of radical liberalism and portraying Michael Dukakis as permissive on crime.³⁹ Bush ultimately defeated Dukakis by a commanding margin, and the following years proved him to be an experienced statesman who displayed prudence and seasoned leadership.⁴⁰ Often described as a "Pragmatic Conservative," Bush represented a different strand of conservatism compared to Reagan,

³⁸ George H.W. Bush, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans," speech, August 18, 1988, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-republican-national-convention-new>.

³⁹ Peter Baker, "Bush Made Willie Horton an Issue in 1988, and the Racial Scars Are Still Fresh," *The New York Times*, December 3, 2018, accessed February 22, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/03/us/politics/bush-willie-horton.html>.

⁴⁰ Adam Nagourney, "George Bush, Who Steered Nation in Tumultuous Times, Is Dead at 94," *The New York Times*, December 2, 2018, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/30/us/politics/george-hw-bush-dies.html>.

advocating for “a kinder and gentler nation.”⁴¹ Candidate Bush largely followed the framework of Reagan’s media politics, but President Bush focused more on public policy outcomes than campaign optics.⁴² The tragedy for Bush was that his foreign policy competence and conciliatory approach to domestic issues often failed to generate equivalent political enthusiasm among voters. As economic sentiment among many voters remained weak heading into the 1992 election, Bush’s once-solid approval ratings fractured, ultimately paving the way for the victory of young, charismatic Bill Clinton.⁴³ Implied by Bush’s lament to supporters that he did not receive enough credit for his accomplishments, his standing in the media was conspicuously more tenuous than Reagan or Clinton.⁴⁴ Clinton’s victory in 1992 reinforced the growing importance of politicians’ rhetorical efficacy in U.S. politics, a lasting shift first signaled during the Reagan Revolution.

About four months after his Challenger address, Reagan received the report of the Rogers Commission, which had been tasked with investigating the accident.⁴⁵ Reagan’s optimistic narratives sought to restore public confidence in America’s space program, but it was evident from the report that NASA’s institutional communication and technical accountability were

⁴¹ Nagourney, “George Bush Is Dead at 94.”; Bush, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention,” speech, *The American Presidency Project*.

⁴² John Kornblum, “How George H.W. Bush Made Modern Europe,” *Politico*, December 1, 2018, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.politico.eu/article/george-hw-bush-made-modern-europe-cold-war/>.

⁴³ David E. Runkle, “No Relief in Sight for the U.S. Economy,” *Quarterly Review* 16, no. 4 (1992): 13–14, <https://doi.org/10.21034/qv.1642>; Nagourney, “George Bush Is Dead at 94.”

⁴⁴ Walter Mears, “George H.W. Bush: Great on Experience, Not as Communicator,” *Associated Press*, December 1, 2018, accessed February 23, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/north-america-financial-markets-us-news-ap-top-news-ronald-reagan-d90885dbd04d41e9b3f7da8f34555291>.

⁴⁵ Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident, *Report to the President by the Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident* (Washington, DC: Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident, 1986), 1, accessed February 21, 2026, https://sma.nasa.gov/SignificantIncidents/assets/rogers_commission_report.pdf.

insufficient, exposing a troubling contrast between public narrative and operational reality.⁴⁶

Presidents inevitably face moments of chagrin and accountability. Bush would admit this burden as he once again apologized for breaking his tax cut promises.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, presidential accountability weakened in subsequent years, as polarization permitted partisan actors to deflect or diffuse scrutiny.⁴⁸ Since the Reagan years, voters have increasingly evaluated political candidates on the basis of their affective appeal and political atmosphere, rather than by scrupulous analysis of policy commitments and disqualifying political liabilities.

Correspondingly, affective polarization, which extends beyond case-specific policy disagreement, has intensified, further undermining voters' ability to attribute responsibility for socioeconomic outcomes.⁴⁹ The Reagan Revolution, however, left another valuable legacy as well: the significance of optimism and faith in the American people. The Great Communicator would not have been great without the rhetorical eloquence and commanding public persona that ultimately helped orient the nation toward its ideal: the shining city upon a hill.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger," speech; Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident, *Report to the President on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident*, 1.

⁴⁷ Nagourney, "George Bush Is Dead at 94."

⁴⁸ Rongbo Jin et al., "The Policy Blame Game: How Polarization Distorts Democratic Accountability across the Local, State, and Federal Level," *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2022): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1017/spq.2022.21>; G. Bingham Powell and Guy D. Whitten, "A Cross-National Analysis of Economic Voting: Taking Account of the Political Context," *American Journal of Political Science* 37, no. 2 (1993): 391, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111378>.

⁴⁹ Shanto Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, no. 1 (2019): 129–146, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>.

⁵⁰ "Farewell Address to the Nation," speech, January 11, 1989, *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/farewell-address-nation>.

Appendix A



Figure A1. Ronald Reagan Addressing the Nation on the Challenger Space Shuttle Explosion
Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum



Figure A2. Reagan on a Whistle-Stop Tour in Ohio During the 1984 Presidential Election
Source: Ernie Mastroianni via *The New York Times*



Figure A3. Franklin D. Roosevelt Delivering a Fireside Chat Through Radio
Source: National Archives and Records Administration



Figure A4. Bill Clinton Playing Saxophone on The Arsenio Hall Show in 1992
Source: The Arsenio Hall Show



Figure A5. George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis in the 1988 Presidential Debate
Source: University of California, Los Angeles

Appendix B

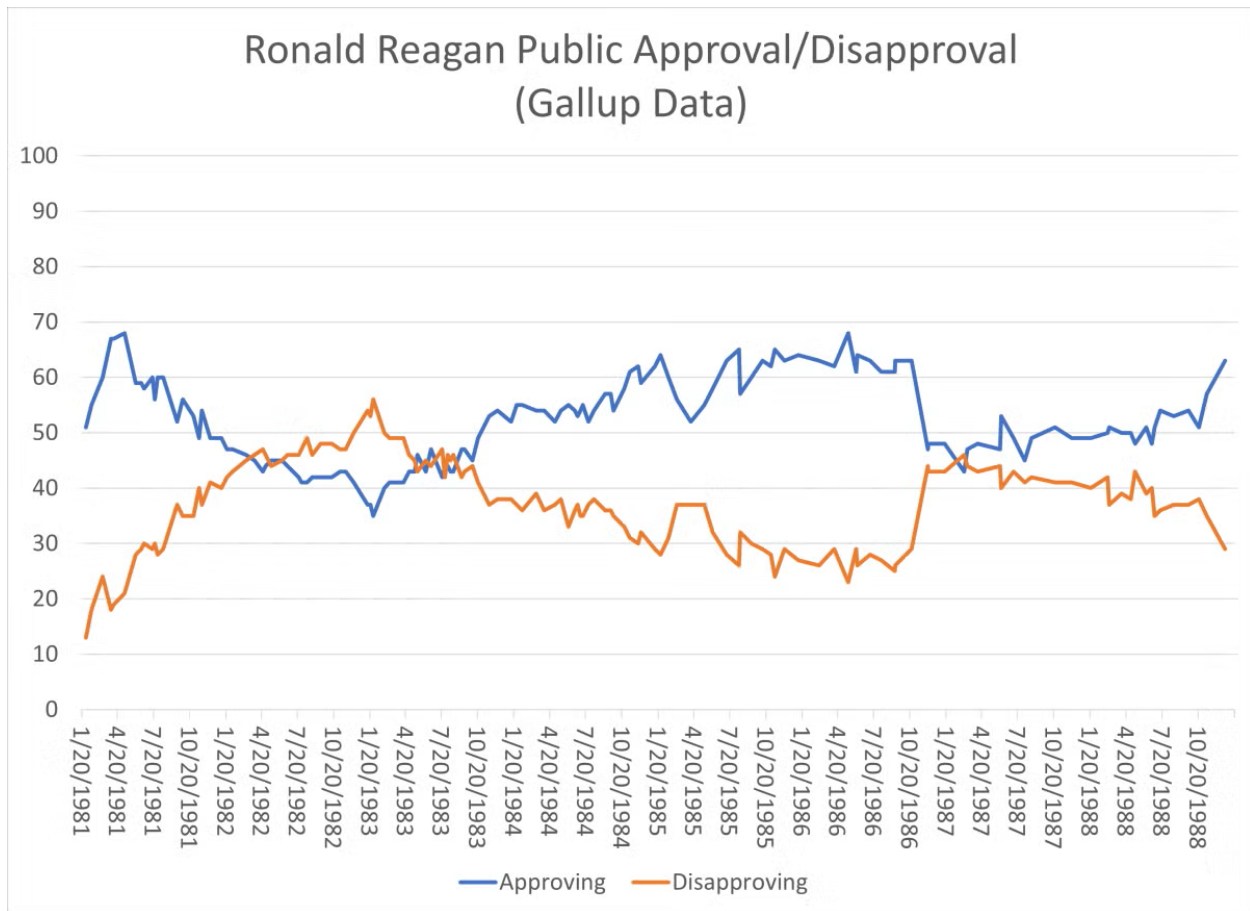


Figure B1. Ronald Reagan Public Approval and Disapproval Ratings, 1981–1988

Source: The American Presidency Project

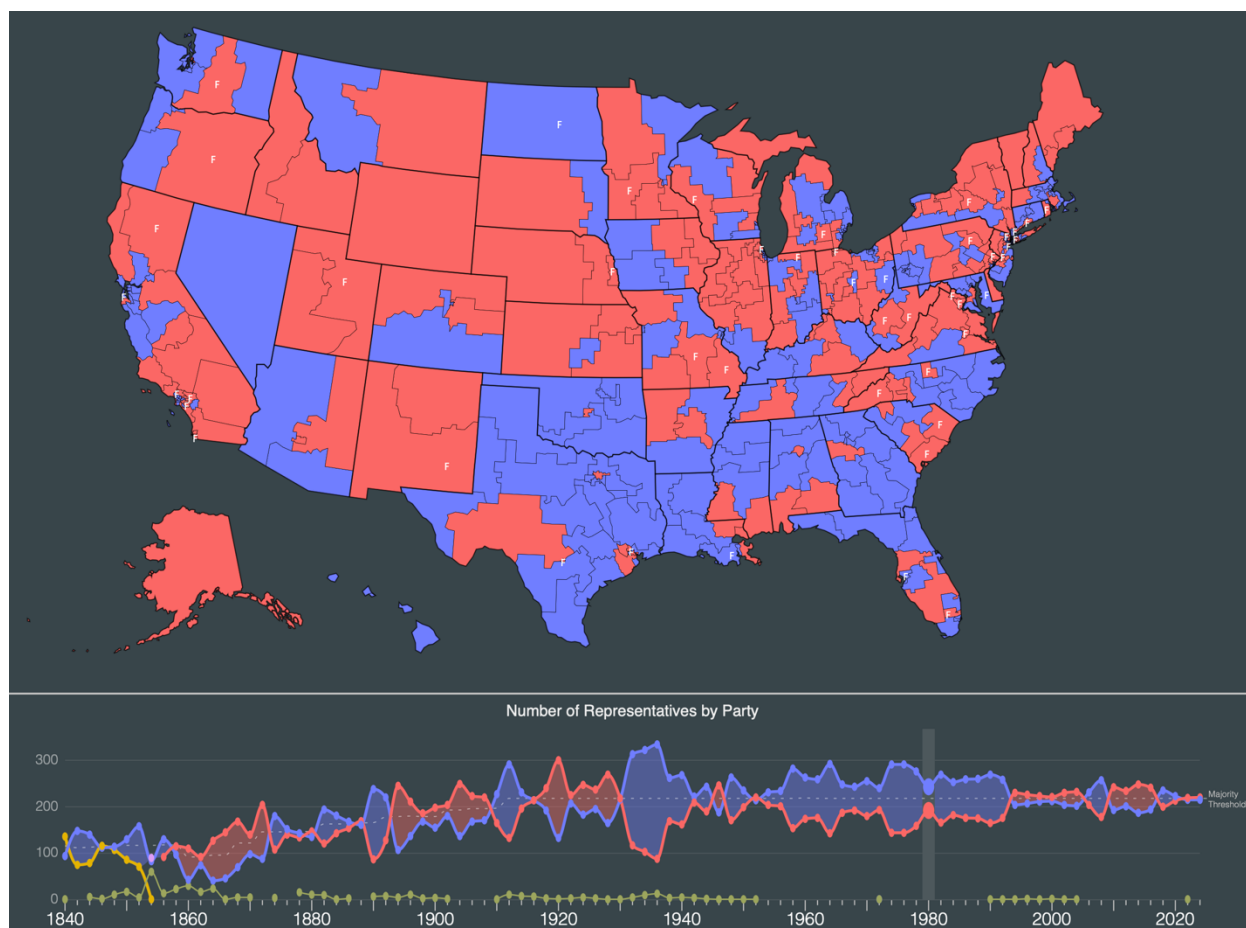


Figure B2. The House of Representatives Election of 1980
Source: Digital Scholarship Lab of University of Richmond

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Apple, R.W., Jr. "The Shuttle Explosion; President as Healer." *The New York Times*, January 29, 1986. Accessed February 24, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/01/29/us/the-shuttle-explosion-president-as-healer.html>.

This article from The New York Times was used to assess the immediate public reaction to Ronald Reagan's Challenger Speech. The article mentions Reagan serving as a "healer," seeking national solidarity while expressing his faith in the space program moving forward. The article suggests that Reagan's Challenger Speech was widely framed as consoling.

The Arsenio Hall Show. *Bill Clinton Playing Saxophone on The Arsenio Hall Show in 1992*. Photograph. *TV Insider*. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://www.tvinsider.com/2979/rerun-bill-clinton-on-arsenio-hall/>.

This photograph of Bill Clinton playing saxophone during his visit to The Arsenio Hall Show was cited in the Appendix A to emphasize Clinton's role in shaping television politics. The then-Arkansas governor's appearance on the late-night television show was part of his effort to expand the scope of his audience.

Bush, George H.W. "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans." Speech, August 18, 1988. *The American Presidency Project*. Accessed February 24, 2026. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-republican-national-convention-new>.

George H.W. Bush's 1988 Republican National Convention address was used to underscore his belief in pragmatic conservatism, epitomized in the phrase "a kinder and gentler nation." Although Bush was Reagan's vice president for eight years, the two men had different visions for the Republican party, and this address highlights the varying direction Bush sought to lead the nation into.

C-SPAN. "Barack Obama 2004 Democratic National Convention Keynote Speech." Video, 19:05. *C-SPAN*. Accessed February 23, 2026. <https://www.c-span.org/program/american-history-tv/barack-obama-2004-democratic-national-convention-keynote-speech/193754>.

Barack Obama's 2004 Democratic National Convention speech was used to illustrate the similarity between Obama and Reagan, both of whom rose to national prominence after delivering a powerful endorsement for their party's presidential candidate. This highlights the significance of rhetorical efficacy in capturing voters' attention in the era of mass media.

C-SPAN. "Clinton Appearance on Arsenio Hall Show." *C-SPAN*. Accessed February 24, 2026. <https://www.c-span.org/program/campaign-1992/clinton-appearance-on-arsenio-hall-show/19384>.

This video of Clinton playing a saxophone on late-night television was used as an example of Clinton extensively utilizing TV to reach his voters, similar to the media strategy of Reagan. This video illustrates how televised performance and image-making had become central to presidential politics by the post-Reagan era.

C-SPAN. "2000 Political Ads." *C-SPAN*. Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network. Last modified August 30, 2004. Accessed February 21, 2026. <https://www.c-span.org/program/vignette/2000-political-ads/132870>.

The presidential advertisements of George W. Bush demonstrate how he used the imagery of mundane, approachable small-town farmers to earn support. Both Bush and Reagan crafted a favorable public persona to their advantage, while framing their opponents to be unattuned to ordinary Americans. They also highlighted the significance of individual Americans while shunning large government; this relates to Bush's advertisement comparing himself to Al Gore and claiming that he gives "more choice for the American people."

C-SPAN. "Video Clip: 1984 Ronald Reagan Presidential Campaign Ad." Video, 1:12. *C-SPAN*, March 19, 2012. Accessed February 24, 2026. <https://www.c-span.org/classroom/document/?7280>.

Reagan's 1984 campaign advertisement epitomized his optimistic communication strategy. It was used to demonstrate his effective use of television to reinforce the hopeful public image he projected. The ad also shows how Reagan sought to inspire confidence among the American people and restore national morale by emphasizing renewal and prosperity rather than focusing on government's role.

"Farewell Address to the Nation." Speech, January 11, 1989. *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*. Accessed February 24, 2026. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/farewell-address-nation>.

This farewell address was used to examine Reagan's invocation of John Winthrop's "city upon a hill" metaphor. Reagan frequently employed this image of American exceptionalism to project an optimistic vision of the United States. The speech also illustrates his broader tendency to rely on symbolism and the language of civil religion in order to communicate his central political message.

Gallup. "Presidential Approval Ratings — Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends." Accessed February 21, 2026. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx>.

This Gallup data was used to support the claim that Reagan remained a popular president when he left office. It also shows that he maintained generally strong approval ratings

throughout much of his presidency, with the notable exception of the 1981–1982 recession and the Iran-Contra affair. This source therefore supports the argument that Reagan’s public appeal and political image remained resilient despite certain setbacks.

Joint Committee on Taxation. *General Explanation of the Revenue Provisions of the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982 (H.R. 4961, 97th Congress; Public Law 97-248)*. Joint Committee Print JCS-38-82. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983. Accessed February 21, 2026. <https://www.jct.gov/publications/1982/jcs-38-82/>.

This Joint Committee on Taxation report was used to show that Reagan’s tax policy did not always align with his anti-tax rhetoric. The report documents the major tax increase enacted through the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982, which contrasted with Reagan’s longstanding opposition to higher taxes. This discrepancy served as one piece of evidence for the argument that Reagan cultivated a public persona resilient enough to remain popular even when his policy decisions varied from his rhetorical image.

Magee, John Gillespie, Jr. "High Flight." *Poetry Foundation*. Accessed February 21, 2026. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/157986/high-flight-627d3cfb1e9b7>.

John Magee’s poem “High Flight” was used as the source for the quotation “slipped the surly bonds of Earth to touch the face of God,” which Reagan cited in his address to the nation after the Challenger disaster. This source exemplifies Reagan’s use of literary allusion and symbolism to make his rhetoric more emotionally resonant and personal for a grieving national audience.

Mastroianni, Ernie. Ronald Reagan on a whistle-stop tour in Deshler, Ohio, during the 1984 presidential campaign. Photograph. *The New York Times*. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/business/the-ad-that-helped-reagan-sell-good-times-to-an-uncertain-nation.html>.

In this photograph, cited in Appendix A, Reagan stands before a large crowd during a whistle-stop tour in Deshler, Ohio, with the historical pageantry of the setting reinforcing the theatrical quality of the event. The image underscores Reagan’s ease before mass audiences and illustrates how he used historical symbolism and visual staging to lend greater significance to his public message.

National Archives and Records Administration. Franklin D. Roosevelt delivering a fireside chat through radio. Photograph. *The White House Historical Association*. Accessed May 18, 2026. <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-fireside-chats-roosevelts-radio-talks>.

This photograph was cited in Appendix A to provide historical context for Reagan’s use of mass media. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s fireside chats demonstrated how presidents could use emerging communication technology to speak directly to the American people and project reassurance during national crises. The image supports the paper’s comparison between Roosevelt’s radio intimacy and Reagan’s television-based public persona,

showing that Reagan's rhetorical revolution built on an earlier tradition of presidential media communication.

Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2015 (Aug. 22, 1996). Accessed February 22, 2026. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/104th-congress/house-bill/3734>.

This law was useful for showing that the major restructuring of federal welfare policy occurred after Reagan left office, despite his conspicuous attacks on the "welfare state." The most significant legislative shift of responsibility from the federal government to the states came with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, signed during the Clinton administration; Reagan's rhetoric against welfare did not necessarily produce the most consequential welfare reform legislation.

Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident. *Report to the President by the Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident*. Washington, DC: Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident, 1986. Accessed February 21, 2026. https://sma.nasa.gov/SignificantIncidents/assets/rogers_commission_report.pdf.

This report was used to document the difference between Reagan's optimistic public rhetoric and the institutional realities exposed by the Challenger disaster. Although Reagan's address to the nation sought to restore public confidence in the American space program, the Rogers Commission report revealed deeper technical and organizational failures behind the explosion. It can be concluded that Reagan's rhetorical effectiveness could shape public memory even when underlying governance problems were more complex and troubling.

Reagan, Ronald. "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on the State of the Union." Speech, January 26, 1982. *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*. Accessed February 15, 2026. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-joint-session-congress-reporting-state-union>.

This source was used alongside the JCT report to reveal the discrepancy between Reagan's tax rhetoric and his later policy decisions. In the 1982 State of the Union address, Reagan celebrated the administration's major tax cuts, but later signed the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982, which substantially increased taxes. This source highlights the gap between Reagan's anti-tax messaging and the more pragmatic fiscal choices made during his presidency.

Reagan, Ronald. "Address to the Nation on the Explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger." Speech, January 28, 1986. *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*. Accessed February 24, 2026. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-nation-explosion-space-shuttle-challenger>.

This speech was useful for illustrating Reagan's reputation as the "Great Communicator" and his ability to reassure a national audience during crisis. In response to the Challenger

disaster, Reagan used vivid imagery, sanguine tone, civil religious themes, and historical allusion to frame the tragedy in resonant terms. Because the address captures many of the defining characteristics of Reagan's rhetorical style, it was used in the essay's introduction as a representative example of his broader rhetorical legacy.

Reagan, Ronald. Letter to Harold Ward, May 26, 1962. Accessed February 15, 2026.
<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/ronald-reagan-economics-and-political-parties-1962>.

This letter reflects Reagan's political transition from a New Deal Democrat toward modern conservatism. It explains Reagan's background as a former Democrat and shows how his economic and political views had shifted by the early 1960s, culminating in his 1964 endorsement of Barry Goldwater.

Reagan, Ronald. "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, FL." Speech, March 8, 1983. *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*. Accessed February 21, 2026.
<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-annual-convention-national-association-evangelicals-orlando-fl>.

This speech highlights Reagan's fervent anti-Communist rhetoric early in his presidency. In condemning the Soviet Union on moral grounds and its hostility to individual liberty, Reagan presented himself as an uncompromising Cold War leader. But the speech also served as a useful contrast to his later diplomacy toward Mikhail Gorbachev, which culminated in the signing of the INF Treaty in 1987. This is another example to support the argument that Reagan's foreign policy was ultimately more pragmatic than his public image might suggest.

Reagan, Ronald. "Remarks on Signing the Family Support Act of 1988." Speech, October 13, 1988. *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*. Accessed February 21, 2026.
<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-signing-family-support-act-1988>.

This speech shows that Reagan's attack on the "welfare state" did not always translate into the elimination of welfare programs, but often into more pragmatic efforts to reform them. In signing the Family Support Act of 1988, Reagan framed welfare reform as a means of encouraging self-sufficiency instead of simply cutting benefits, aligned with his pragmatic policy approach and the emphasis on individual responsibility over dependence on government.

Reagan, Ronald. "A Time for Choosing." Speech, October 27, 1964. *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*. Accessed February 15, 2026.
<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/reagans/ronald-reagan/time-choosing-speech-october-27-1964>.

Reagan's powerful endorsement of Barry Goldwater propelled him to national prominence and effectively illustrated his belief in small government and individual

liberty. Through this speech, it can be inferred that Reagan used a televised address to expand his political reach while articulating his core political convictions.

"Reagan vs. Mondale: The Second 1984 Presidential Debate." YouTube video, 87:02. YouTube. Posted by PBS NewsHour, September 26, 2020. Accessed February 15, 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SbsCaRYW6w>.

Concerns about Reagan's age surfaced during his 1984 reelection campaign, especially after his poor first debate performance. When asked about this in the second debate, however, he defused the problem with a famously witty line about refusing to make his opponent's "youth and inexperience" an issue, instantly shifting the dynamics of the exchange. The episode captures Reagan's ability to mitigate political challenges through rhetoric, a skill that helped sustain his public appeal.

Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. *C33109-17, President Reagan addresses the Nation from the oval office on the space shuttle "Challenger" explosion*. Photograph. *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*. Accessed April 7, 2026. https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/2021-09/C33109-17_0.jpg?xYGm0GsZbcTGME_6qRp_p4qN3T6u8z0W=.

This photograph depicts Reagan delivering his famous Challenger disaster speech from the Oval Office. His use of anecdote, civil-religious language, and sanguine tone epitomizes the rhetorical style that made him widely appealing to the American public. The image is useful as it captures Reagan in a moment when presidential authority rested less on policy detail than on reassurance and symbolism.

University of California, Los Angeles. *George Bush and Michael Dukakis*. Photograph. *UCLA Newsroom*. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://newsroom.ucla.edu/file?fid=5fc964e12cfac24c273731db>.

This photograph portrays George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis after a 1988 presidential debate. Although Bush campaigned on pragmatic conservatism, he also employed an aggressive and often negative style against his opponent. The black-and-white image effectively conveys the tense and complicated character of the 1988 election, making it useful for examining how post-Reagan politics relied increasingly on image and rhetoric conveyed through mass media.

Secondary Sources

The American Presidency Project. "Ronald Reagan Public Approval/Disapproval (Gallup Data)." Chart. *The American Presidency Project*. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/ronald-reagan-public-approval>.

This chart tracks Reagan's approval ratings from his inauguration in January 1981 to October 1988. It shows that he remained broadly popular throughout most of his presidency, and especially during the last days of his term, despite noticeable decline

during the 1981-1982 recession and in the aftermath of the Iran-Contra affair. The chart supports the argument that Reagan enjoyed relative political resilience, reinforcing the image of him as a “Teflon president.”

Baker, Peter. "Bush Made Willie Horton an Issue in 1988, and the Racial Scars Are Still Fresh." *The New York Times*, December 3, 2018. Accessed February 22, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/03/us/politics/bush-willie-horton.html>.

Rather than reflecting Bush’s more moderate personal image, the 1988 campaign against Michael Dukakis became a textbook example of negative political rhetoric. Republicans invoked the apprehensive imagery of crime and radical liberalism, entrenching the style of modern attack politics. This article suggests that rhetorical image and framing could become as significant as, if not more than, a candidate’s governing temperament.

Beasley, Vanessa B. "The Rhetorical Presidency Meets the Unitary Executive: Implications for Presidential Rhetoric on Public Policy." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 13, no. 1 (2010): 7–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41955589>.

Beasley’s research was used to place Reagan within the broader concept of the “rhetorical presidency.” Beasley elucidates that Reagan combined strong public rhetoric with an expansion of executive power for political advantage, a relevant claim to this essay’s focus on Reagan’s public persona and its efficacy in governance communication.

Berger, Marilyn. "Ronald Reagan Dies at 93; Fostered Cold-War Might and Curbs on Government." *The New York Times*, June 6, 2004. Accessed February 22, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/06/us/ronald-reagan-dies-at-93-fostered-cold-war-might-and-curbs-on-government.html>.

This obituary of Reagan from *The New York Times* was used as a general overview of his personal life and political legacy. It was directly cited to support the claim that he was the “teflon president,” able to remain popular and show resilience without succumbing to political scandals or economic recessions.

Biser, Margaret. "The Fireside Chats: Roosevelt's Radio Talks." *The White House Historical Association*. Last modified August 19, 2016. Accessed May 18, 2026. <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-fireside-chats-roosevelts-radio-talks>.

The article by Margaret Biser provides a strong overview of how the White House began to talk to America, explaining the history and origins of Roosevelt’s fireside chats. The article highlights that Roosevelt used radio to communicate with the public without the intermediary of the press, giving listeners primary access to presidential rhetoric. Biser also compares Roosevelt’s use of radio with that of his predecessor Calvin Coolidge and his successor Harry S. Truman, situating the fireside chats within the broader historical development of presidential communication.

Boot, Max. *Reagan: His Life and Legend*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024.

Max Boot's exhaustive biography of Reagan was the initial source that inspired this essay's focus on Reagan's rhetorical legacy rather than on his social or economic policies. Boot also draws connections between Reagan and Donald Trump, another president who crafted a unique public persona while having a tenuous grasp on policy details.

Burns, Jennifer. "Did Ronald Reagan Pave the Way for Donald Trump?" *The New York Times* (New York), September 9, 2024. Accessed February 22, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/09/books/review/reagan-max-boot.html>.

This New York Times review of Boot's biography focuses on aspects of Reagan's legacy that resonate with Trump-era politics. It observes that although Reagan and Trump employed similar political slogans and public-image strategies, their legacies differ significantly: Reagan is remembered for the optimism of "Morning in America," whereas Trump is associated with the darker rhetoric of "American carnage."

Burns, William, Steven Pifer, and John Woodworth. *The Treaty on Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces: History and Lessons Learned*. Arms Control Series paper 9. Brookings Institution, 2012. Accessed February 21, 2026. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/30-arms-control-pifer-paper.pdf>.

This Brookings report examines the negotiation and significance of the INF Treaty signed by Reagan and Gorbachev in 1987. It was used in the context of explaining Reagan's shift in foreign policy after Gorbachev became the Soviet leader, underscoring a transition to pragmatism that departed from the more confrontational rhetoric of his earlier presidency.

Covington, Cary R., Kent Kroeger, Glenn Richardson, and J. David Woodard. "Shaping a Candidate's Image in the Press: Ronald Reagan and the 1980 Presidential Election." *Political Research Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (1993): 783–98. <https://doi.org/10.2307/448931>.

This study of the Reagan campaign's use of an Issue of the Day (IOD) strategy in 1980 reveals that even Reagan was unable to fully control the narrative of his public image, frequently resulting in inadvertent communication and unintended press coverage. But it also argues that Reagan was often able to minimize the report of his mistakes and generally received more positive opinions on television than in print, informing the extent of Reagan's communication effectiveness.

Druckman, James N. "The Power of Television Images: The First Kennedy-Nixon Debate Revisited." *The Journal of Politics* 65, no. 2 (2003): 559–71. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2508.t01-1-00015>.

The presidential debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon was one of the earliest and most consequential televised moments in presidential politics. This study analyzes the influence televised debates have on public opinion, which is a major implication for Reagan's communication strategy two decades later.

The Economist. "The Man Who Beat Communism." *The Economist*, June 10, 2004, Leaders. Accessed February 15, 2026. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2004/06/10/the-man-who-beat-communism>.

Published immediately after Reagan's death, this Economist article was used to assess how his legacy was framed by the press at the time. The article suggests that Reagan was remembered less as a policy intellectual than as a leader with an exceptional ability to project a compelling and admirable public persona.

Feldman, Stanley, and Lee Sigelman. "The Political Impact of Prime-Time Television: 'The Day After.'" *The Journal of Politics* 47, no. 2 (1985): 556–78. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2130896>.

This study was used to support the claim that Reagan utilized symbolism and abstract imagery rather than detailed statistics or policy plans when communicating his agenda. The study also argues that the strengths and limitations of prime-time television depend on the educational attainment of the audience and that its effectiveness must be considered alongside other media formats like newspapers. It was inferred that Reagan's communication success depended not on television alone but on his ability to project a coherent public persona across multiple forms of media.

Ghitza, Yair, Andrew Gelman, and Jonathan Auerbach. "The Great Society, Reagan's Revolution, and Generations of Presidential Voting." *American Journal of Political Science* 67, no. 3 (2023): 520–37. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48737419>.

This statistical evaluation of political behavior concludes that many voter cohorts shifted to the right as a result of the Reagan presidency, aligning with this essay's evaluation of Reagan's rhetorical legacy in national politics. The study also suggests the rightward shift among voters during the Reagan years was moderated during the Clinton administration, though only to a limited extent, exemplifying Reagan's legacy on politics that transcends his specific policy decisions or individual remarks.

Heclo, Hugh. "The Mixed Legacies of Ronald Reagan." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2008): 555–74. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41219701>.

Heclo's holistic study of Reagan's policy and rhetorical legacies provides valuable insight into the ways Reagan's political rhetoric often differed from actual policy outcomes. Heclo's argument that Reagan restored dignity to the presidency while criticizing the overreach of government, along with his discussion of Reagan's image as a "conviction politician," develops an important foundation for the argument that Reagan's approach to governance depended less on policy achievement alone than on the broader morale and confidence he was able to foster among the public.

Iyengar, Shanto, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, and Sean J. Westwood. "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States." *Annual*

Review of Political Science 22, no. 1 (2019): 129–46. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>.

This study was used to evaluate how affective polarization can weaken democratic accountability by encouraging voters to evaluate politics through a broader partisan perspective rather than through specific issues or policy outcomes. In that sense, it reinforces the argument that Reagan's legacy of broad public-persona appeal may have contributed to a more emotionally polarized political culture, one in which voters approach political questions in parochial and partisan terms.

Jin, Rongbo, Alexander Cloudt, Seoungjin Choi, Zhuofan Jia, and Samara Klar. "The Policy Blame Game: How Polarization Distorts Democratic Accountability across the Local, State, and Federal Level." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2022): 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1017/spq.2022.21>.

This study examines how polarization distorts and weakens democratic accountability across the United States. It was used to establish the broader context behind the decline of accountability for politicians who fail to fulfill promises to their voters in an increasingly polarized political environment. The study supports the argument that strong public-persona appeal can make politicians less vulnerable to consequences over unmet policy goals if they remain highly effective in delivering a compelling political message.

Kornblum, John. "How George H.W. Bush Made Modern Europe." *Politico*, December 1, 2018. Accessed February 24, 2026. <https://www.politico.eu/article/george-hw-bush-made-modern-europe-cold-war/>.

This Politico article reviews Bush's foreign policy competence in concluding the Cold War and establishing a new global order. Compared with Reagan, Bush appeared more attuned to policy details and prioritized policy outcomes than campaigning, which delivered him success abroad but failed to generate comparable enthusiasm among American voters. This article serves as a useful resource that illustrates Bush's diplomatic success, which contrasts with his failed 1992 reelection referenced later in this essay.

Levy, Jonathan, Marcelino Ford-Livene, and Anne Levine. *Broadcast Television: Survivor in a Sea of Competition*. OPP Working Paper 37. Washington, DC: Federal Communications Commission, 2002. Accessed February 21, 2026. <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-226838A22.pdf>.

This FCC Working Paper analyzes changing media dynamics from the 1960s through the 2000s. It was used to establish the broader media context in which Reagan's rhetoric operated: a fragmenting broadcasting environment impacted by the emergence of new media. The difference between the media environment of the 1980s and that of the 1960s is an important counterargument to claims that place Kennedy as the more influential figure in national media politics. Because today's mass media environment more closely resembles that of the 1980s than that of the 1960s, Reagan's media legacy appears more salient than Kennedy's.

Mears, Walter. "George H.W. Bush: Great on Experience, Not as Communicator." *Associated Press*, December 1, 2018. Accessed February 23, 2026. <https://apnews.com/article/north-america-financial-markets-us-news-ap-top-news-ronald-reagan-d90885dbd04d41e9b3f7da8f34555291>.

This article explicitly compares Bush to Reagan, assessing that despite his policy competence and extensive experience, Bush was unable to galvanize his supporters in the way Reagan could. It is also useful for referencing Bush's famous moment during the 1992 presidential debate, when he glanced at his watch before answering an attendee's question, leaving an unfavorable image on national television.

Mervin, David. "Ronald Reagan's Place in History." *Journal of American Studies* 23, no. 2 (1989): 269–86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27555182>.

David Mervin's scholarly work was useful for providing background on Reagan's 1980 victory over Carter and his often tumultuous relationship with Congress. That context helped explain why Reagan chose to appeal directly to the American public through televised addresses rather than rely solely on negotiation with a relatively recalcitrant Congress.

Nagourney, Adam. "George Bush, Who Steered Nation in Tumultuous Times, Is Dead at 94." *The New York Times*, December 2, 2018. Accessed February 24, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/30/us/politics/george-hw-bush-dies.html>.

This New York Times obituary of Bush was largely used to elucidate his vision for a "kinder, gentler nation," which represented a more moderate strand of conservatism. It outlines a general narrative of Bush's political career, including its bitter end in 1992, which connects to the essay's conclusion of how Reagan's rhetorical legacy often disadvantaged more judicious politicians who lacked comparable communication skills.

Pach, Chester. "The Reagan Doctrine: Principle, Pragmatism, and Policy." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2006): 75–88. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552748>.

This study suggests that the Reagan Doctrine was an elusive and flexible idea, varying from case to case and across countries. It was useful for showing that Reagan's foreign policy often prioritized broad ideological image and anti-communist messaging over a single, consistent framework.

Pew Research Center. *Network TV: Evening News Ratings Over Time by Network*. Pew Research Center, July 9, 2015. Accessed February 21, 2026. <https://www.pewresearch.org/chart/network-tv-evening-news-ratings-over-time-by-network/>.

This historic evening-news ratings data was used to support the claim that broadcast television remained highly prominent during the 1980s, often attracting more than 10 million viewers.

Powell, G. Bingham, and Guy D. Whitten. "A Cross-National Analysis of Economic Voting: Taking Account of the Political Context." *American Journal of Political Science* 37, no. 2 (1993): 391–414. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111378>.

Powell and Whitten's study was used to provide theoretical context on how economic performance affects voting behavior. By highlighting that economic voting also depends on the political context and the clarity of government responsibility, the article explains why rhetorical leadership and public perception can weaken direct policy accountability.

Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. "President Reagan's Addresses to the Nation." *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*. National Archives. Accessed February 15, 2026. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/reagans/reagan-administration/president-reagans-addresses-nation>.

The archived data was used to exemplify Reagan's frequent engagement with the American people through television. Reagan's casual integration of televised addresses into his governance elevated the role of public persona in modern political discourse.

Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. "A Time for Choosing Speech, October 27, 1964." *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*. National Archives. Accessed February 15, 2026. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/reagans/ronald-reagan/time-choosing-speech-october-27-1964>.

The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum's commentary on "A Time for Choosing" speech explains how the speech launched Reagan's rise in national politics, as he later served as governor of California before becoming president.

Rowland, Robert C., and Robert A. Payne. "The Context-Embeddedness of Political Discourse: A Re-Evaluation of Reagan's Rhetoric in the 1982 Midterm Election Campaign." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1984): 500–11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27550126>.

This study shows that Reagan's rhetoric was not completely independent of political context, as shown in the 1982 midterm election. Although Reagan was unable to completely mitigate the Republican defeat in Congress, he still managed to reassure many middle-class voters. His prowess in reassuring the public emerged as a recurring pattern across multiple sources used in this essay.

Runkle, David E. "No Relief in Sight for the U.S. Economy." *Quarterly Review* 16, no. 4 (1992): 13–14. <https://doi.org/10.21034/qr.1642>.

David Runkle's report for the Federal Reserve Bank at Minneapolis documents the weak economic outlook that persisted after the 1990–1991 recession. By showing that the recovery remained sluggish in 1992, the article explains the economic backdrop to George H.W. Bush's defeat by Bill Clinton, whose campaign maintained a sharper rhetorical focus on the economy and ordinary Americans.

Schonhardt-Bailey, Cheryl, Edward Yager, and Saadi Lahlou. "Yes, Ronald Reagan's Rhetoric Was Unique—But Statistically, How Unique?" *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2012): 482–513. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41684514>.

This statistical analysis of Reagan's State of the Union addresses and seminal speeches concluded that he stood out for his use of civil religious language and for his emphasis on the individual, family, and children. It also found that Reagan popularized the phrase "God bless" in presidential speeches, an example of his enduring rhetorical legacy and his strategic use of civil religion to advance his domestic and foreign policy agenda.

Sigelman, Lee, and Cynthia Whissell. "'The Great Communicator' and 'The Great Talker' on the Radio: Projecting Presidential Personas." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2002): 137–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552369>.

This study compares Reagan with Clinton, another rhetorically effective president. It suggests Reagan's rhetorical influence on later presidents, even across the political aisle. Its emphasis on radio's role in late twentieth-century politics was also refreshing, since discussions of Reagan's communication more often focus on television.

Sloan, John W. "Meeting the Leadership Challenges of the Modern Presidency: The Political Skills and Leadership of Ronald Reagan." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1996): 795–804. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27551632>.

John Sloan provides an extensive evaluation of Reagan's characteristics as president, offering insights that lay the foundation for this essay's research focus. The article covers topics ranging from Reagan's diction and image as a "conviction politician" to comparisons with Franklin D. Roosevelt and the role of his advisors in shaping his communication style.

Strong, Robert A. "Recapturing Leadership: The Carter Administration and the Crisis of Confidence." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1986): 636–50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40574414>.

As Reagan's immediate predecessor, Jimmy Carter is often compared with Reagan in terms of rhetorical effectiveness. Contrary to the later reputation of the speech, Carter's "malaise speech" initially received a positive public response, but his rhetoric emphasized sober reflection on the nation's problem rather than the optimism Reagan later offered. This source supports the conclusion that, after a decade of political and economic instability, many voters ultimately preferred Reagan's reassuring style to Carter's more chastening tone.

University of Richmond. "Electing the House of Representatives: Election of 1980." Map. *Digital Scholarship Lab*. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/congress/map/1980>.

This map of the 1980 House of Representatives election results illustrates the legislative constraints Reagan faced during his presidency. Because Democrats retained control of

the House, Reagan often relied on direct appeals to the public to pressure Congress rather than depending solely on bargaining within Washington. The map contextualizes Reagan's rhetorical strategy within an institutional environment that limited straightforward legislative control.

Wattenberg, Martin P. "The Changing Presidential Media Environment." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2004): 557–72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552613>.

Martin Wattenberg argues that the presidential media environment was becoming less favorable to presidents trying to address the nation as a whole. By tracing the decline in audiences for presidential speeches and political news more broadly, he shows that modern presidents operated within an increasingly fragmented media structure. His findings add nuance to Reagan's rhetorical presidency, suggesting that Reagan was more proficient in navigating a changing media environment than other presidents.

Welch, Reed L. "Was Reagan Really a Great Communicator? The Influence of Televised Addresses on Public Opinion." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2003): 853–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552540>.

Reed Welch's statistical analysis of Reagan's speeches served as a major turning point in this essay's research, as it suggested that Reagan was often unsuccessful in influencing public opinion through individual televised addresses. The discrepancy between Reagan's limited success in specific speeches and his overall reputation as president led to the conclusion that his communication strength rested less on case-specific rhetoric than on a holistically positive public persona, which allowed him to remain above recurring political headwinds.

Whittington, Keith E. "The Rhetorical Presidency, Presidential Authority, and President Clinton." *Perspectives on Political Science* 26, no. 4 (1997): 199–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10457099709600675>.

Keith Whittington's study illustrates Reagan's impact on Clinton's rhetorical style and suggests that both contributed to defining the modern presidency as a more media-oriented institution. This source was cited to illustrate Reagan's enduring influence on his successors.

Windt, Theodore Otto. "Presidential Rhetoric: Definition of a Field of Study." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1986): 102–16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27550314>.

Theodore Windt's research provides a framework for this essay's focus on the "rhetorical presidency," an institution that Reagan played a major role in defining in its modern form. This research elucidates Reagan's ability to govern through public image and media communication, both of which allowed him to directly communicate with the American people.

Yenor, Scott. "A New Deal for Roosevelt." *Claremont Review of Books*. Last modified 2007. Accessed May 18, 2026. <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/a-new-deal-for-roosevelt/>.

This review of Jonathan Alter's *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope* provided useful analysis of how Roosevelt reshaped the means of presidential communication. Through his fireside chats, Roosevelt sought to foster optimism and confidence among the American people during the Great Depression and the Second World War. This source also helped frame a comparison with Reagan, as both presidents used rhetoric and media to restore public confidence amid economic distress, though Roosevelt expanded government activism through a Keynesian approach while Reagan championed a more limited state under neoliberal principles.

Zaller, John. "What Nature and Origin Leaves Out." *Critical Review* 24, no. 4 (2012): 569–642. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2012.807648>.

John Zaller provides a valuable theoretical framework through the Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model, which argues that elite cueing plays a considerable role in shaping mass opinion. At the same time, this paper revises his earlier work by emphasizing the limits of elite influence and the shallowness of some partisan responses. Zaller's model helps explain how Reagan's communication strategy could shape the interpretive frame through which political events were understood, even when individual speeches did not always produce lasting persuasion.