



President's constitutional powers and public activism: a focused analysis of presidential speeches under Finland's two presidencies

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Accepted: 20 December 2023
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Abstract

Changes in formal powers of political actors like presidents are expected to impact their behavior. This study examines speeches that presidents can utilize for a variety of purposes ranging from topical reflections to new political initiatives and criticism of the government and political parties. In semi-presidential regimes, presidents are often constitutionally weaker than governments, but their popularity opens the possibility of using the public platform for swaying the minds of citizens or politicians. We analyze the tone and content of Finnish presidents' New Year's messages and parliamentary speeches from 1932 to 2023. To contribute to the long-standing literature on regime effects, we gauge the impact of Finland's comprehensive constitutional reform that stripped off most powers of the presidency that was formerly considered among the strongest in Europe. The results show that presidential activity changed already in the mid-1990s when the reform was still underway, and presidents appointed since then speak systematically less about domestic policy and emphasize national unity and citizens, indicating that constitutionally weaker presidents recognize their jurisdictional limits and lean more on their role as directly elected heads of state operating above political parties.

Keywords Presidents · Powers · Communication · Speeches · Finland · Semi-presidentialism

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Introduction

At least since the seminal studies of Linz (1990; 1994) and Shugart and Carey (1992), the relationship between constitutional powers and presidential behavior has received a lot of attention among students of executive politics (e.g., Åberg and Sedelius 2020). A change in the relative powers of key executive actors can significantly alter the operative dynamics of the broader governing system. Semi-presidentialism, where a directly elected president shares power with the government accountable to the legislature, has become the most common regime type in Europe (Anckar 2022). Adjacently, the activities of ‘semi-presidents’ have begun to attract scholarly interest (e.g., Tavits 2009; Köker 2017; Grimaldi 2023). In such regimes, presidents are caught in a dilemma. During election campaigns presidents bask in media attention, and once in office they tend to be considerably more popular than prime ministers and other ‘party politicians.’ Yet in terms of their constitutional prerogatives, presidents often are subordinate to the government and the parliament. Hence, presidents need to weigh their options: should they use the public podium for advancing their objectives or should they stay above party-political disputes and focus on traditional presidential virtues like safeguarding national unity?.

This article approaches the relationship of presidential powers and activism through the most well-known and public of presidential activities: speeches. While there is considerable literature on the public addresses of the presidents of the USA, much less is known about the content or tone of presidential speeches in the context of semi-presidential regimes. The few existing studies cover the Austrian, Czech, Finnish, French, Irish, Portuguese, and Slovak presidents, focusing on different themes and topics in their speeches (Čech 2014; Labbé and Savoy 2021; Ovádek 2021; Grimaldi 2023, pp. 409–482; Kujanen et al. 2023). This article advances our understanding of the topic by analyzing the systemic factors affecting presidential speeches. Our main research question is: does the tone and content of presidential speeches vary with president’s constitutional powers? To examine it in a controlled and robust fashion, we perform a longitudinal analysis of the Finnish presidency that during past few decades was subject to a major constitutional reform.

Theoretically, a reasonable expectation is that president’s public activism depends on her/his powers in the political system, which vary significantly across regimes with directly elected presidents (e.g., Doyle and Elgie 2016). However, whether and how constitutional powers influence presidential behavior is not theoretically self-evident. Experiences from president-centered countries such as the USA, Brazil, and France suggest that politically strong presidents are typically also the most prominent public actors. Besides possessing formidable political leverage to back up their public initiatives, these presidents—as de facto chief executives of their countries—are expected to inform and address their publics. On the other hand, in semi-presidential regimes presidents may try to compensate their constitutional weakness vis-à-vis governments through public popularity and ‘going public’ tactics (Raunio and Sedelius 2020; Grimaldi 2023). An alternative



point of view stems from the general 'statespersonship' of the presidential office. It purports that the presidency is 'standing above the parties,' representing the entire country, and uniting the nation by avoiding divisive messages (e.g., Beardsworth 2017). Naturally, presidential speeches could be affected by more contextual factors. The speeches may reflect the country's overall political situation, particular events, and party-political dynamics. Presidential public activism may also be conditioned by abrupt situational changes, not least wars or natural catastrophes, or periods of economic recession.

To provide a theoretically lucid and empirically robust benchmark for this emerging field, we apply these theoretical arguments to a focused and longitudinal analysis of the Finnish presidency. The oldest surviving semi-presidential regime in Europe, Finland experienced a peaceful but major reform implemented gradually in the late 1980s and the 1990s and culminating in the new constitution of 2000 that drastically reduced presidential powers (see below for more details). The constitutional change allows us to effectively compare presidential speeches under two presidencies—the period of strong presidency versus the weaker presidency. The reform was based on broad, cross-party support, and the era of weaker presidency effectively started in connection with President Martti Ahtisaari entering office in 1994. The Finnish case also provides good grounds to control for societal effects. Today, Finland is a stable and affluent Nordic welfare state, but prior to the 1980s, it was characterized by short-lived governments. Our temporal coverage, spanning the years 1932 to 2023, covers major societal changes like wars, international financial and public health crises, and different economic conditions and party-political dynamics.

We utilize two methods that examine different aspects of presidential speeches: sentiment analysis measures their tone from positive to negative while thematic analysis measures their content, detailing the presence of various topics from appeals to national unity to references to economic policy, political institutions, and foreign affairs. Several scholars have recently utilized sentiment analysis in political science (e.g., Proksch et al. 2019; Fisher et al. 2022; Haselmayer 2021; Maia Polo et al. 2023), showing that the method is suitable for tracking different nuances and emotions in political texts. Thematic analysis, in turn, is a novel approach offering a robust way of analyzing the 'politicalness' of the speeches (Kujanen et al. 2023). We perceive negative tone as indicating president's criticism of the government or concern of the 'state of the affairs,' whereas positive tone reflects the presidents' mediating function as the head of state and instilling hope in the nation, especially during hard times. Appeals to national unity relate to the role of the president as the head of state, with presidents emphasizing societal cohesion, both at the level of the public and the elites. References to foreign policy are included as the president has been in a leading role in that policy area under both strong and weak presidency, while references to economy indicate presidential intervention in a key policy area directed by the government. Similarly, any reference to other domestic institutions, particularly the government and key ministers, indicates that the president in some way—either negatively, neutrally, or positively—comments on the work of these actors.

Our contribution is therefore both theoretical and empirical: given the shortage of empirical studies on the 'public presidency' (Tulis 1987) and 'going public' (Kernell 2007) strategies of presidents in semi-presidential regimes, we move the



debate forward through clarifying theoretically and contrasting empirically the central arguments regarding the impact of constitutional powers on presidential public activism. The next section contains our theoretical framework, where we discuss in more detail the various constitutional incentives that potentially influence presidential speeches, and we also briefly introduce other contextual factors which may impact the tone and content of the speeches. In the third section, we connect these factors to the case of Finland and formulate hypotheses for the empirical analysis. Fourth section explains our data and method before the empirical analysis found in the fifth section. The final section concludes and suggests paths for future research.

Constitutional, situational, and role-related drivers of presidential speeches

Theorizing presidential activism should begin by acknowledging president's constitutional prerogatives. In presidential systems, the president is the de facto chief executive, with the result that the president is expected to speak more directly about societally relevant matters, economy included. The president cannot hide behind the government's back to shield herself from criticism. Potential public confrontations instead take place between the president and the legislature, which due to separate origins may represent different partisan majorities. In any case, in presidential systems presidents are generally expected to present themselves in assertive manner, meaning that they actively take a leading role and put across political initiatives and messages.

However, when the constitutional powers of the executive are shared between the president and the government, intra-executive dynamics and president's public appearances take a different guise. In the so-called 'president-parliamentary' variant of semi-presidentialism where president impacts both the origin and survival of the government (Shugart and Carey 1992), the role and behavior of presidents may not differ much from actual presidential systems. In the 'premier-presidential' variant of semi-presidentialism (also defined by Shugart and Carey 1992), the president is more dependent on cooperation with the government and thus stepping on its toes with assertive public demands might backfire. Examples of such assertive behavior by the president would be for example publicly commenting on government's policies or proposing alternative solutions. Nonetheless, it has been argued that even weaker presidents might have sound incentives to publicly challenge the government. For example, in Finland President Sauli Niinistö has occasionally acted in an assertive manner in public, i.e., through his public warnings about rising debt burden or in spring 2020 when he suggested a special decision-making body for dealing with COVID-19, although management of the pandemic was not under the competence of the president. Presidents' relatively higher popularity among citizens accentuates the force and desirability of 'going public' tactics that provide the president a powerful tool to compensate her relatively weak constitutional standing (Raunio and Sedelius 2020). Supporting this perspective, Ovádek (2021) showed that the speeches of Slovak presidents conformed with the 'popular tribune' model



where presidents use them for mobilizing the public against the government. With the notable exception of France, in most semi-presidential regimes the constitutional powers of the president are mainly limited to foreign and security policy. The presidents may have the power of legislative veto, but economy and other domestic politics issues fall under the competence of the government (and the parliament). In such cases, presidents should respect jurisdictional boundaries and focus in their speeches on foreign policy and appeals to national unity, particularly if there is broad elite consensus about the appropriate division of authority between the president and the prime minister.

An alternative theoretical perspective has developed around the idea of 'statespersonship,' i.e., presidents' tendency to rise above partisan political quarrels and to work for the whole nation. Often, discussions of presidential communication revolve around controversial personalities such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, or even Vladimir Putin. Yet, the reason why the leadership style of Trump received so much attention was exactly because it deviated so enormously from usual patterns of presidential communication. Almost every other US president has displayed much more caution, avoiding aggressive language and divisive rhetoric. There is rather mixed evidence of the agenda-setting capacity of presidential speeches, while the speeches of recent US presidents have contained increasingly references to the people and national unity (e.g., Lim 2002; Teten 2003; Eshbaugh-Soha 2006; Hoffman and Howard 2006; Rutledge and Larsen Price 2014; Coe 2017; Russel and Eissler 2022). Regardless of the specific distribution of power, also in semi-presidential regimes presidents are official heads of state and thus mostly expected to stand above daily party-political squabbles. Even more ceremonial presidents, such as those in Iceland or Austria, still have official duties and at least some representative functions in foreign affairs. For such constitutionally weak presidents, public attacks on political opponents could easily backfire in terms of both popularity and policy influence. For constitutionally powerful presidents, the situation is largely similar: public criticism of opponents or negativity might decrease their popularity while undermining future cooperation with the government and the parliament. There are thus good reasons to expect that presidential speeches do not merely reflect the constitutional division of powers.

As was noted, presidential activism can also relate to more situational societal dynamics. For example, in many Central and Eastern European semi-presidential countries presidents' leadership styles have varied significantly (Elgie and Moestrup 2008; Hloušek 2013; Brunclík and Kubát 2019; Brunclík et al. 2023), and relations between the two executives have been more tumultuous compared with the more stable semi-presidential regimes of Western Europe, particularly during periods of cohabitation when the president and the prime minister come from opposing political camps (Sedelius and Mashtaler 2013; Elgie 2018; Yan 2021). In more unstable contexts where political gains are reaped through independent battles political agency can become more assertive and 'spill' more easily to public arenas and presidential speeches. A strongly polarized party-political situation may accentuate the public assertiveness of the president. Romania is a well-known example of a semi-presidential country where a relatively strong president has engaged frequently and fiercely in public altercations with other political actors (e.g.,



Stefan 2021; Gherghina et al. 2023). Societal changes may also bolster the activism of weaker presidents that seek to build coherence and unity. This applies particularly to various domestic and international upheavals from military threats to financial crises and global pandemics. In such situations, in line with the ‘rally around the flag’ theorem (Mueller 1973), the public normally rallies around its leaders that are expected to instill hope and resilience in the nation. Such contextual pressures should be accounted for in any meaningful analyses of presidential speeches.

We next fit these general theoretical arguments to the development of the Finnish presidency and formulate testable hypotheses for the empirical analysis.

The two presidencies of Finland

We divide the Finnish case into two periods. In terms of constitution, the era of ‘strong presidency’ covers the years 1932 to 1994. The new constitution entered into force in 2000, but political practice changed already in the early 1990s through incremental constitutional amendments and at latest in connection with Ahtisaari’s presidency (1994–2000) and joining the European Union (EU) in 1995. Overall, we follow here the narrative outlined in previous analyses of the Finnish political system (e.g., Nousiainen 2001; Paloheimo 2003; Hallberg et al. 2009; Arter and Widfeldt 2010; Tiihonen et al. 2013; Arter 2016; Karvonen et al. 2016; Raunio and Sedelius 2020).

Before the Second World War, the regime was more parliamentary, but the role of the president increased during the early 1930s when President P.E. Svinhufvud took an active role in curtailing the far-right Lapua movement. After the war, the balance of power shifted toward the president who ruled the country while safeguarding independence through cordial bilateral relations with the Soviet Union. The constitution from 1919 left room for interpretation, which particularly President Urho Kekkonen used to his advantage during his long reign from 1956 to 1981. Kekkonen was the supreme leader, not just in foreign policy, influencing the formation and termination of short-lived governments. For example, Duverger (1980) ranked Finland highest among West European semi-presidential systems in terms of the formal powers of the head of state and second only to France in respect of the actual exercise of presidential power. The balance between the prime minister and president was therefore both constitutionally and politically strongly in favor of the president until the constitutional reforms, which were in part a response to the excesses of the Kekkonen era. A period of parliamentarization started in 1982, when President Mauno Koivisto took office after a quarter of a century of politics dominated by Kekkonen. Koivisto and the political elite in general favored curtailing the powers of the president. However, Koivisto nonetheless interfered in domestic politics, notably after the 1987 parliamentary elections when he overruled a center-right coalition between the Center Party and the National Coalition, indicating that a coalition between the National Coalition and the Social Democrats was preferable.

The period of ‘weak presidency’ starts from 1994. Until 1982, the president was elected by an electoral college of 300 members. A one-time experiment was conducted in the 1988 election, where to be elected by a direct vote a candidate needed to receive over 50% of the votes. As no candidate reached this share, the



election was passed on to a simultaneously elected electoral college. A new direct-election system for choosing the president was first used in 1994. If a candidate receives more than half of the votes, she or he is elected president. If none of the candidates receives the majority of the votes, a second-round runoff is held between the two candidates who received the most votes in the first round. The candidate who receives the majority of vote is then elected president. The president is elected for no more than two consecutive six-year terms.

The electoral system reform coincided with drastic reductions in presidential powers. The 1990s was a turning point, with incremental constitutional amendments—not least in connection with impending EU membership—altering the balance of power in favor of the government already before the new constitution entered into force. The reforms were based on careful preparatory work and broad consensus among the political and administrative elite, with essentially all parties represented in the *Eduskunta*, the unicameral national legislature, supporting the constitutional changes. All relevant actors therefore recognized the need to reduce presidential powers in domestic policy, while ensuring that EU and foreign policies were subject to parliamentary control. These constitutional changes were adopted gradually from the late 1980s onwards and culminated in the new unified constitution of 2000, with further amendments from 2012 consolidating the leadership of the government. However, because of the constitutional amendments adopted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the actual practice changed already when President Ahtisaari took office in 1994. Ahtisaari was a seasoned diplomat with formidable experience from peacebuilding and global affairs, and during his presidency Ahtisaari focused on such international activities.

Recent comparative studies of semi-presidentialism therefore rank Finland among countries where the president has weak formal powers (Doyle and Elgie 2016; Elgie 2018). Under the old constitution, the president influenced government formation and had the right to dissolve the parliament and call early elections, while nowadays the president's formal competences are restricted to co-directing foreign policy together with the government, being the commander-in-chief of the defense forces, and limited appointment powers. The government is responsible for domestic and EU policies, and the president is not expected to intervene in the formation or work of the government. As a result of the consensual nature of the constitutional reform process, there has been in the early twenty-first century a clear understanding of the respective domains of the two executives. For the most part, the president has not tried to (publicly) interfere with domestic and EU policy or government formation, while co-leadership in foreign policy has functioned without major problems (Raunio 2012; Raunio and Sedelius 2020). Compared with directly elected presidents in both presidential and semi-presidential regimes, recent Finnish presidents stand out with their unusually high popularity ratings (Kujanen 2023).

Building on the theoretical arguments regarding president's constitutional powers and the division of the Finnish presidency into periods of strong and weak presidencies, we now introduce our hypotheses. The first causal mechanism introduced in the previous section indicates that presidents' public political assertiveness increases with constitutional powers. Until the early 1990s, the Finnish president was the chief executive, also in domestic politics, whereas in the era of weak presidency the



prerogatives of the head of state are essentially limited to foreign and security policy. The orderly, consensual nature of constitutional reform suggests that the two executives recognize and respect each other's jurisdictions, which should be reflected in their public activities. Hence, we expect that the new context provides incentives for the president to focus more on her role as the formal head of state, i.e., promoting national cohesion and solidarity. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: Presidential speeches during the era of strong presidency were politically more assertive than the speeches delivered in the period of weak presidency.

The same historical division informs our second hypothesis. Whereas the first hypothesis argued that stronger presidents are more assertive, the alternative theoretical reasoning diverts from the standard constitution-centered explanation through suggesting that popular but weaker presidents may become incentivized to challenge the government with 'going public' tactics (Raunio and Sedelius 2020). Earlier empirical research has indicated that at least in Slovakia presidents have indeed frequently utilized the 'public tribunal' to enhance the visibility and impact of their political stances (Ovádek 2021). We thus also posit the following, alternative hypothesis:

H2: The weakening of president's constitutional prerogatives increases her/his public political assertiveness.

We acknowledge the possibility that changes in presidential powers do not change presidents' public posture. If the president operates in line with the general notion of statespersonship, she/he will stay above political parties and focus on facilitating societal cohesion and unity. Studies of presidential speeches in the USA have shown that recent presidents have put more emphasis on messages of unity, with references to the people and the country. The same applies to presidents in Baltic countries, where particularly recent heads of state have evoked the national spirit and a common political past and future, 'denoting the unity of people and the state repeatedly throughout the speeches' (Române-Kalniņa 2022: 206). Similarly, Labbé and Savoy (2021) report an increasing use of we-pronoun by French presidents. The main argument of the 'statesperson' thesis is that presidents should safeguard unity and avoid divisive messages regardless of their constitutional powers or specific party-political constellations. Presidents should also stay above partisan quarrels and focus on foreign affairs, a policy area where statespersonlike conduct is appreciated and which falls in the competence of the president. The third hypothesis is therefore formulated as follows:

H3: Presidents mainly display 'statespersonship' in their public speeches irrespective of their constitutional powers.

Data and methods

In this section, we introduce our speech corpus, methods, and dependent and independent variables. The corpus consists of presidents' New Year's Addresses and speeches at the opening of the parliament. These annual speeches were selected as they reach a wide public audience. Although New Year's Addresses are targeted to



Table 1 Information about presidents and the number of speeches in the dataset

President	Start date	End date	President's party	Number of New Year's addresses	Number of speeches at the opening of the parliament
Svinhufvud	03/1931	03/1937	KOK	3	8
Kallio	03/1937	12/1940	ML	3	3
Ryti	12/1940	08/1944	ED	2	4
Mannerheim	08/1944	03/1946	–	0	1
Paasikivi	03/1946	03/1956	KOK	11	11
Kekkonen	03/1956	01/1982	KESK	25	25
Koivisto	01/1982	03/1994	SDP	12	13
Ahtisaari	03/1994	03/2000	SDP	6	5
Halonen	03/2000	03/2012	SDP	12	12
Niinistö	03/2012		KOK	11	11

Parties: KOK=National Coalition Party (*Kansallinen Kokoomus*); SDP=Social Democratic Party (*Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue*); KESK=Centre Party (*Suomen Keskusta*, former ML); ML=Agrarian Union (*Maalaisliitto*); ED=National Progressive Party (*Kansallinen Edistyspuolue*)

citizens and speeches at the opening of the parliamentary session are targeted primarily to members of the parliament, in both types of speech media coverage is guaranteed. As indicated by previous research, such speeches offer the president a chance to raise general hopes and concerns but also to make political statements. For example, Köker (2015; 2016), Čech (2014), and Elo (2022) showed that presidents talk about a wide range of topical matters in these speeches. Analyzing the New Year's and Christmas speeches of Austrian, Finnish, German, Irish, Italian, and Portuguese presidents since the 1990s with qualitative content analysis, Grimaldi (2023: 409–482) found that the speeches focused on policy issues (as opposed to polity issues and values), with the heads of state speaking more about domestic policies than foreign affairs.

Presidential speeches were collected from the archives of the Library of Finnish Parliament (Eduskunnan kirjasto 2006), Institute for the Languages of Finland (Kotimaisten kielten keskus 2007), and the websites of Presidents Tarja Halonen and Sauli Niinistö.¹ The corpus covers altogether 85 New Year's addresses and 93 parliamentary speeches from 10 presidents over the years 1932–2023. The length of the speeches varies from 132 to 2040 words, with New Year's addresses being slightly longer. Summary of the corpus including presidents, their parties, and time periods in office is in Table 1. Before Ahtisaari's presidency, the number of presidential terms was not limited, which contributed to Kekkonen's several consecutive terms in office. In contrast, the war-time presidents' terms in office remained relatively short. This applies to Kyösti Kallio and Risto Ryti, whose terms lasted less than four years, and especially to Carl Gustaf Mannerheim, who had a central role in peace negotiations in Finland at the end of the war and refused to

¹ Archived website of President Tarja Halonen: <https://www.presidentti.fi/halonen/public/default.html>; Current website of President Sauli Niinistö: <https://www.presidentti.fi/>.



represent any party as a president for under two years. Kallio represented the agrarian Centre Party (Agrarian Union until 1965), as did Kekkonen, and Ryti represented the liberal National Progressive Party, which dissolved in 1951. Svinhufvud was the first prime minister of independent Finland and the third president after K.J. Ståhlberg (1919–1925) and Lauri Relander (1925–1931). Svinhufvud, J.K. Paasikivi, and Niinistö represented the conservative National Coalition Party, and Mauno Koivisto, Martti Ahtisaari, and Tarja Halonen represented the Social Democrats. (Tiihonen et al. 2013)

All preparations of the corpus were carried out with the Quantitative Analysis of Textual Data (Quanteda) package in RStudio. The speeches were tokenized into separate words, and all special characters such as numbers, punctuations, and separators, as well as common stop words were removed from the texts.

We utilize sentiment analysis to capture the tone of the speeches and thematic analysis to identify references to selected thematic categories. Regarding tone, our first dependent variable, we rely on the Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary (LSD) by Young and Soroka (2012a). Other dictionaries exist as well (see for example the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LWIC) dictionary by Pennebaker et al. (2001)), but we rely on the LSD since it is primarily intended for analyzing political texts (Young and Soroka 2012b: 211) and it performed well in tests when compared to other sentiment dictionaries (Young and Soroka 2012b). The original English-language LSD contains 1709 positive and 2858 negative words, but we use the translated version of the dictionary by Proksch et al. (2019) since there are no original sentiment dictionaries in Finnish. Proksch et al. (2019) also proved that the translated dictionaries performed well in comparison with hand-coded dictionaries. To calculate a sentiment score for each speech, we use the method by Proksch et al. (2019) and Lowe et al. (2011) and calculate the logged ratio of the relative share of positive and negative words in each speech. Only difference is that while Proksch et al. (2019) used the logged ratio of positive sentiment on negative sentiment, we turn the equation other way around and calculate the logged ratio of negative sentiment on positive sentiment as we are particularly interested in the negativity of the speech. We add 0.5 to both positive and negative scores to reduce bias which might occur when dealing with small counts (Proksch et al. 2019; Lowe et al. 2011). The equation is:

$$\log \frac{\text{neg} + 0.5}{\text{pos} + 0.5}$$

To capture the thematic content of the speeches, our second dependent variable, we are interested in the number of references that presidents make to economy, other political institutions, foreign policy, or national unity. For this purpose, we have designed four thematic dictionaries. The dictionaries include only words we believe are essential in each category, and hence, words that would likely be used in multiple policy areas were not included. For example, ‘crisis’ was left out from the foreign policy dictionary since it could appear in many other policies as well. In addition, words that have occurred only in certain periods of time such as ‘European Union’



were not included.² Applying these restricted dictionaries reduces the total amount of words we are able to analyze, yet it ensures that the speeches are comparable over time. We formulated reference scores for each individual speech by matching the tokenized speeches with the thematic dictionaries and calculating the share of words referring to each thematic category from all words in a speech. We measure the content of the speeches as the relative difference between clearly ‘political’ references (economy, other political institutions) and less confrontational themes (foreign policy, national unity). With this method, we aim to capture relative differences in presidents’ thematic priorities. The scores are thus calculated as follows:

$$\frac{\text{economy} + \text{institutions}}{\text{foreign policy} + \text{national unity}}$$

Our main independent variable is the change from stronger to weaker presidency, dividing our dataset into two periods. First, we examine trends in the tone and content of the speeches before and after the weakening of presidential powers. As explained in the theory section, we draw the line in 1994, as the political practice changed before the new constitution entered into force and the first directly elected president was elected. The impact of the change from stronger to weaker presidency is illustrated with descriptive time series figures and statistical tests. Second, we check whether other contextual factors have shaped presidents’ public behavior. For this purpose, we test the effect of economic development, general political turbulence/power dynamics, different types of crises, and the passage of time in presidential office on presidents’ speeches. The impact of these factors may differ depending on the level of presidential powers, and hence, they are tested both in a pooled regression model and separately for strong and weak presidents.

To measure economic development, we use annual change in the volume of GDP from Statistics Finland (*Tilastokeskus*). The GDP rates enter the dataset as a continuous variable. Presidents might, for example, react to weaker economic situation by addressing more ‘political’ topics in their speeches, or alternatively through focusing on more ‘uniting’ themes. The volume of these reactions may also depend on the level of presidential powers. For political turbulence, which in the Finnish case resulted in short-lived governments, we use government duration and code it as a sum variable of the total duration of the government and the passage of time from the formation of the government. Information on governments is collected from the website of the Finnish Government. Most of the turbulence occurred during the strong presidency and especially during the reign of Kekkonen (1956–1981) when the president also had the power to dissolve the *Eduskunta* and to effectively form a new government.

Turning to more specific power dynamics, the behavior of presidents may vary depending on whether the government includes the president’s party or not. The latter situation, cohabitation, is in the center of the literature on semi-presidentialism and has been found to increase presidential activism (e.g., Sedelius and Mashtaler

² Examples of words included in the thematic dictionaries: political institutions: “government”, “prime minister”; economy: “economic growth”, “tax”; foreign policy: “global”, “international community”; national unity: “civil society”, “unity”.



2013; Köker 2017; Yan 2021). Cohabitation is included in the analysis as a dummy variable (1 = the president's party is not represented in the government; 0 = the president's party is represented in the government). We also control the passage of time in the office as presidents may change their public behavior over time, for example, in the direction of more confrontational themes in the second term when the president cannot seek re-election (e.g., Köker 2017). However, as the number of presidential terms was not limited in the period of stronger presidency, the passage of time in the office is not measured as the number of presidential terms but as the number of months each president had spent in office at the time of the speech. It enters the dataset as a continuous variable but standardized individually for each president as the duration of presidential terms varies significantly between the presidents.

Finally, we trace the potential impact of crises: wars (Second World War, Putin's invasion of Ukraine), pandemics (COVID-19), and economic recession (early 1990s and the second half of the 2000s) and they are measured as a dummy variable (1 = significant crisis; 0 = no significant crisis). When faced with an imminent security threat, a global pandemic, or a serious economic recession, presidents have two alternatives. Either they deliver the bad news, or they focus on instilling hope in the nation. Following the 'statespersonlike' conduct approach, we argue that the presidents choose the latter course of behavior regardless of their formal powers. As skies grow darker, 'statespersons' should stay positive and remind the citizens that the way out of the crisis is through pulling together and helping one another. This rationale applies to the different types of crises included in our analysis. Here, we must emphasize that in Finland the president has above all been seen as the guarantor of independence and territorial integrity, with the speeches providing a high-profile platform for addressing the nation.

Results

We start by introducing the descriptive figures and statistics of our two dependent variables. Figure 1 illustrates the trend in presidents' references to economy and other institutions in relation to foreign policy and national unity between 1932 and 2023. The horizontal line in 1994 divides the data into the periods of strong and weak presidents and suggests clear change between the two presidencies. During the era of stronger presidential powers, the relative share of more 'political' references (economy, institutions) was clearly higher than under weaker presidents. In general, the reference scores were more moderate during the war-time period before 1950s and in the 1980s before the constitutional amendments to presidential powers, and especially high and volatile during the reign of Paasikivi and Kekkonen. When entering the era of weak presidency, the variation in the content stabilizes to a relatively moderate level and the emphasis changes more toward foreign policy and national unity.

These differences are supported by the descriptive statistics and comparisons in Fig. 2 and Table 2. Stronger presidents, especially Paasikivi, Kekkonen, and Koivisto, emphasize more 'political' themes (institutions and economy) than weaker presidents that address more foreign policy issues and appeal to national unity. The differences of the two presidencies are statistically significant in terms of both mean



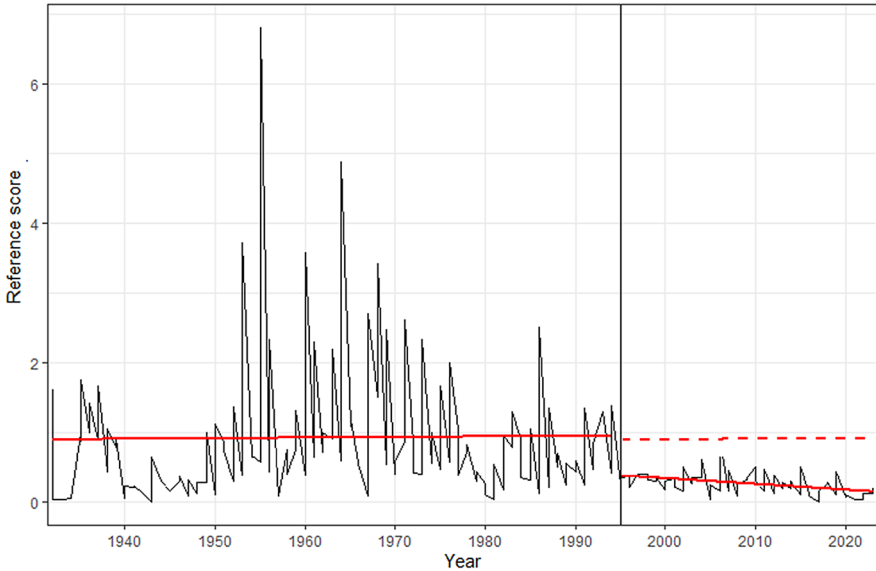


Fig. 1 Content in presidential speeches, trend 1932–2023. Reference scores are calculated as the relative difference between the thematic categories (economy+other political institutions)/(foreign policy+national unity). The figure shows trend lines before and after 1994 and forecast of the trend without the ‘intervention.’

values (t test = 7.137***) and variance of the samples (F test = 35.711*****), and the structural break between the presidencies is confirmed with the results of Chow test (F value = 160.810***).

Turning to the tone of the speeches, the difference between strong and weak presidents is less clear. According to Figs. 3 and 4 and descriptive statistics in Table 2, both the relation between negative and positive tone and the volume of variation is similar between the two presidencies, and the results of the t test and F test regarding differences of the mean and variation of the samples are statistically insignificant. Results of the Chow test indicate a statistically significant structural break between the two presidencies, which may, however, be explained by the temporary drop of the sentiment scores at the time of the ‘intervention’ (1994).

In general, the speeches of all ten presidents lean more toward positivity than negativity, although the total share of words with sentiment varies between the presidents (see Fig. 4 for the average share of words per each category). Highest peaks of negativity occur in the period of stronger presidents, yet the overall trend does not suggest a clear difference between the two presidencies. This may stem from the formal nature of the speeches or the general ‘statespersonlike’ behavior of the presidents, although in terms of content there were clear differences between the presidents. In other words, presidents might speak with a neutral tone but still make political statements. Since the differences between the two presidencies were relatively small and statistically insignificant, we do not employ regression analysis on the tone of the speeches. Instead, we analyze variation in the content of the speeches in an OLS regression setting.



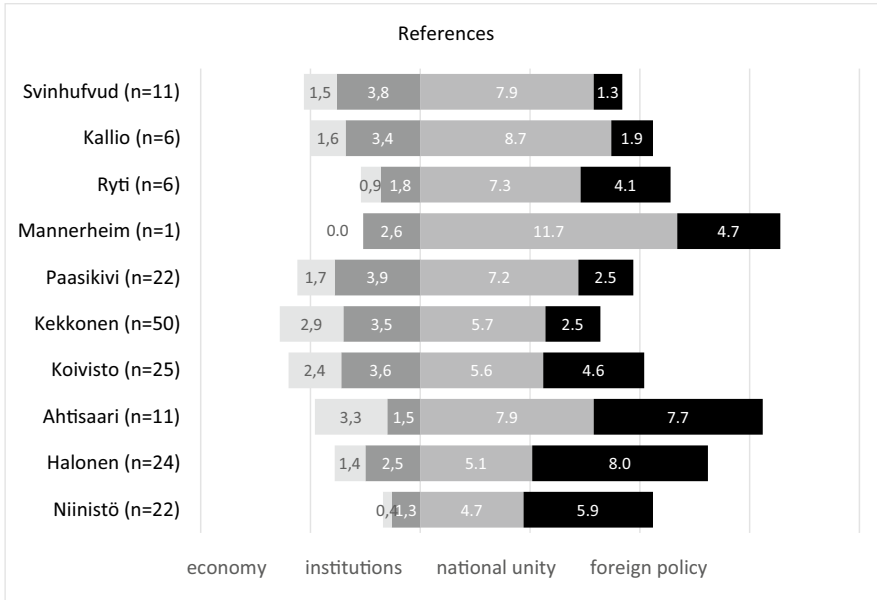


Fig. 2 Share of words per each thematic category (%)

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and mean/variance comparisons

	Strong	Weak
Content		
Mean	0.920	0.254
Min	0.000	0.000
Max	6.800	0.895
Standard deviation	0.998	0.167
<i>F</i> test (<i>F</i> value)	35.711***	
<i>t</i> test (<i>t</i> value)	7.137***	
Chow test (<i>F</i> value)	160.810***	
Tone		
Mean	-0.315	-0.467
Min	-2.120	-1.350
Max	1.170	0.379
Standard deviation	0.489	0.443
<i>F</i> test (<i>F</i> value)	1.220	
<i>t</i> test (<i>t</i> value)	2.066*	
Chow test (<i>F</i> value)	142.860***	

*** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$. Content is measured as the relative difference between the thematic categories (economy+other political institutions)/(foreign policy+national unity), and tone is measured as the logged ratio of negative sentiment (+0.5) on positive sentiment (+0.5)



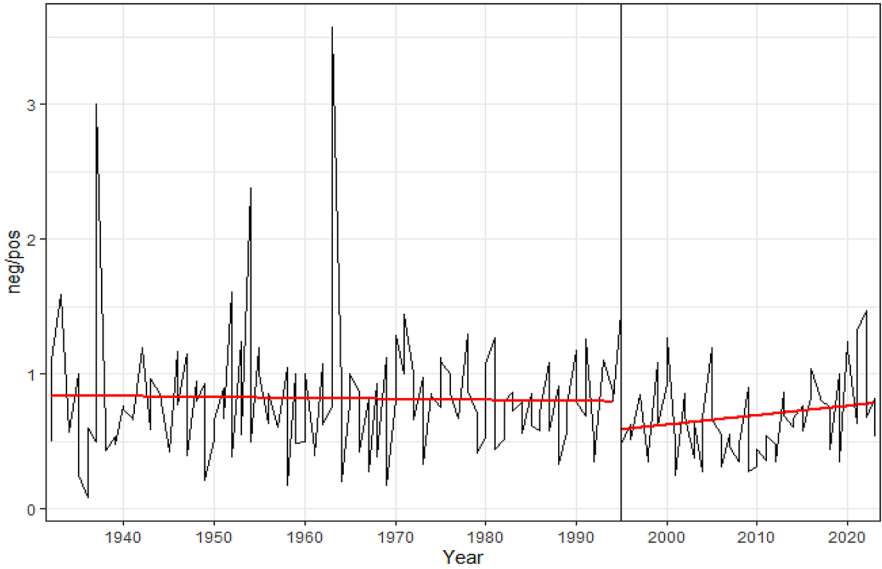


Fig. 3 Tone in presidential speeches, trend 1932–2023. Sentiment scores are calculated as the relative difference between negative and positive words (negative words/positive words). The figure shows trend lines before and after the ‘intervention’ (year 1994)

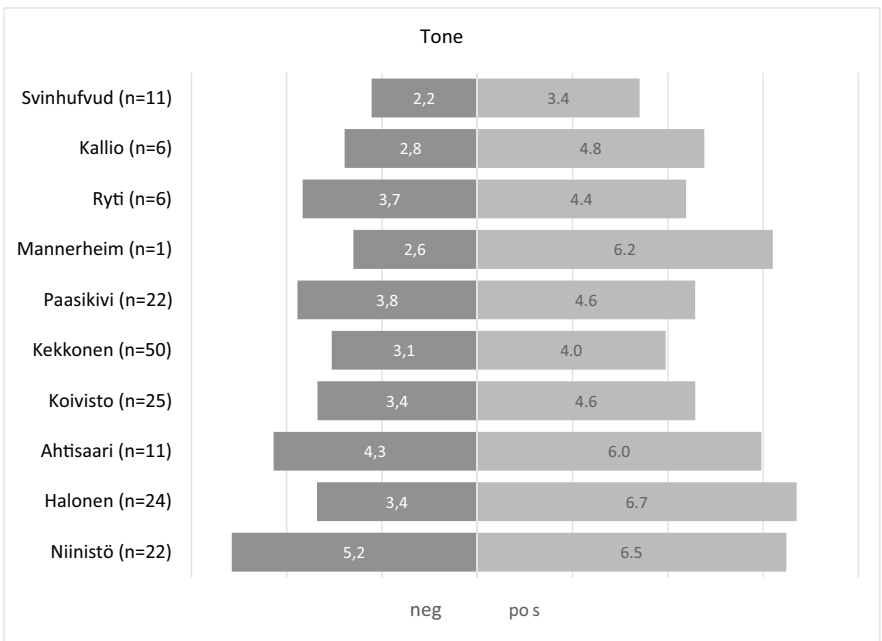


Fig. 4 Share of positive and negative words (%)



Table 3 OLS regression, content of the speeches

	All speeches			Stronger presidency	Weaker presidency
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Change from stronger to weaker presidency	-0.096*** (0.012)		-0.091*** (0.013)		
Time in office		0.051 (0.026)	0.018 (0.023)	0.020 (0.031)	-0.021 (0.078)
Gov. duration		-0.069** (0.024)	-0.028 (0.022)	-0.045 (0.032)	-0.022 (0.059)
Cohabitation		0.020 (0.015)	0.027* (0.013)	0.031 (0.019)	-0.020 (0.062)
GDP volume		0.055 (0.038)	-0.007 (0.035)	-0.019 (0.043)	-0.03 (0.084)
Crises		-0.039* (0.019)	-0.060*** (0.017)	-0.068* (0.026)	-0.093 (0.061)
Constant	0.135*** (0.007)	0.092** (0.029)	0.148*** (0.027)	0.161*** (0.034)	0.329*** (0.078)
R^2	0.124	0.152	0.344	0.124	0.151
Adjusted R^2	0.119	0.127	0.321	0.085	0.064
N	176	176	176	119	55

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. The dependent variable is measured as the relative difference between the thematic categories (economy + other political institutions)/(foreign policy + national unity) with three-order moving average. The variables are standardized between values 0 and 1

Table 3 presents the results of the regression analysis with content as the dependent variable. We use moving averages of the dependent variable to reduce some noise and smooth the time series.³ The first three models include all speeches from the corpus, the fourth model includes only strong presidents' speeches (1932–1994), and the fifth model includes only weak presidents' speeches (1995–2023). Model 1

³ Smoothing the series did not significantly change the results of the regression models, except for crises that turned out to be statistically less significant ($p < 0.05$). The impact of change from stronger to weaker presidency remained significant. We also ran additional robustness tests to ensure the validity of the results. First, we tested the regression models without presidents that were in office around war-time (Svinhufvud–Mannerheim) and had to operate in a highly different environment, potentially causing noise in the time series. As a logical result, the impact of change from stronger to weaker presidency and regarding political turbulence was slightly stronger (presidential powers, model 1: -0.107*** and model 3: -0.100***; government duration, model 2: -0.092**), although still quite moderate in terms of their explanatory power. Consequently, when removing the war-time presidents, the effect of crises became weaker and statistically insignificant. Second, we changed the 'intervention' cut point in our main independent variable from 1994 to 2000 when the new constitution entered into force to test whether it has any impact on the results of the regression analysis. Not surprisingly, considering the long period of analysis, the effect of the change from stronger to weaker presidency remained very similar and did not have a statistically significant impact on the direction of the other independent variables. Yet, the explanatory power of the models indicated by the R^2 values turned out to be slightly weaker than in the original models, which is also a logical result and supports our theoretical argument of the change in 1994. Third, we tested the impact of unemployment as an alternative indicator of economic development, replacing GDP



tests the individual effect of the strength of the presidency on the dependent variable, while model 2 controls for the effect of other independent variables without controlling for the change from stronger to weaker presidency, and model 3 tests the combined effect of these factors. Models 4 and 5 are run separately to test whether the contextual variables have different impact on presidents with different powers.

Results of the first model show a clear and statistically significant effect of the change from stronger to weaker presidency as weaker presidency decreases the level of more 'political' references in relation to less confrontational themes. The second model indicates that longer government duration decreases the share of 'political' references in presidents' speeches but only when the constitutional strength of the presidency is not controlled. We interpret this to reflect general political turbulence during the stronger presidency, but not to impact variation in the content of the speeches within the presidencies as such. In addition, major crises seem to decrease the relative share of more 'political' themes in the speeches. This means that in such situations presidents focus more on foreign policy issues and national unity, which is logical when a country faces a major threat. Instead, the effect of time spent in office, cohabitation, and economic development are not statistically significant. Cohabitation causes positive yet very moderate variation in the content of the speeches. This is again logical, as representing the opposite party opens the possibility for the president to confront the government, yet the impact is so weak ($0.027, p < 0.05$) that we cannot draw any clear conclusions from this association. Regarding the separate models for weak and strong presidents, the contextual variables do not explain variation in the content of the speeches to any significant extent, and the impact of cohabitation disappears entirely. This boosts our interpretation that the transition from strong to weak presidency has had the strongest impact on the behavior of the presidents, although it must be noted that the overall explanatory power of the models indicated by R^2 values is quite weak. To conclude, the results mainly support hypothesis H1: speeches during the era of strong presidency were politically more assertive than the speeches delivered in the period of weaker presidency. Stronger presidents' speeches systematically contained more references to economy and other political institutions in relation to foreign policy issues and national unity, while weaker presidents' speeches were more neutral and stable. These differences were demonstrated by the statistical tests of the means and variances of the two series and the lack of influence of the other contextual factors. H3 was also weakly supported by the nonexistent differences in tone between strong and weak presidents. In addition, emphasis on national unity and foreign policy was stronger in all presidents' speeches when compared to the more 'political' content, although the relative distance of the thematic categories caused the systematic difference between the two presidencies. However, we did not find support for the theory that presidents' weaker powers would boost their political assertiveness and can therefore reject hypothesis H2.

Footnote 3 (continued)

volume. As a result, the impact of other variables did not change yet in Model 2 higher unemployment had a negative and weakly statistically significant impact on the 'assertiveness' of the speeches. This association did not apply in the other models. We must also notice that there have been some changes in the measurement of the unemployment rate in the Labour force survey by Statistics Finland, which may possibly cause some noise in the variable.



Concluding reflections

Our case study of presidential public communication in Finland clearly shows the interaction between the change from stronger to weaker presidency and the content of the speeches. Strong presidents referred to economy and domestic political institutions in their speeches, whereas weaker presidents focused primarily on foreign affairs and facilitating national unity. At the same time, the tone of the speeches did not really vary over time, indicating ‘statespersonlike’ conduct regardless of the constitutional prerogatives of the presidency or changes in the political environment. The results, therefore, suggest that in terms of overall style presidents as head of state ‘stand above political parties’ but, more significantly, that their political behavior is shaped by constitutional powers.

When interpreting the results, we must recognize the importance of the orderly, consensual nature of the gradual constitutional reform process in Finland. There was broad agreement among the political and administrative elites about the need to reduce presidential powers and the division of labor between the two executives. The constitutional reform was also preceded by political stabilization, as measured in this article by longer government duration, and was linked to the fall of the Soviet bloc and EU membership. Here, the ‘transition presidency’ of Ahtisaari from 1994 to 2000 was also important. Ahtisaari—an ‘outsider candidate’ whose selection was facilitated by his party’s (Social Democrats) decision to apply an open primary—focused almost completely on foreign and security policy, leaving domestic policy issues to the government. Subsequently Halonen and Niinistö have largely refrained from publicly commenting on domestic or even EU matters. It also appears that they have not attempted to influence government formation. Overall, such contextual factors contributed to the changes in presidential communication in Finland.

Future research should provide more fine-grained analyses of presidential speeches. Our longitudinal approach uncovered trends and broader patterns, while previous, more qualitative studies on Finland have displayed thematic variation between individual presidents (Hallberg et al. 2009; Grimaldi 2023) or have zoomed in on values expressed in the speeches of presidents (Portman 2014) or on specific topics such as presidential speeches on the refugee crisis and how they were received by the public (Ojala et al. 2019). Yet speeches are only one aspect of presidential activism. Scholars should therefore explore whether constitutional reform—such as the move to direct presidential elections in the Czech Republic in 2013—impact on presidents’ behavior, for example, on their links to political parties or relations with the parliament and the government. There is certainly evidence that in less stable semi-presidential regimes presidents tend to be considerably more assertive (e.g., Brunclík et al. 2023; Gherghina et al. 2023), and hence a logical expectation is that in such contexts their communication is also more confrontational irrespective of their exact constitutional prerogatives (Ovádek 2021). Another aspect for consideration, which we were not able to analyze in this study due to lack of data, is the association between presidents’ popularity and their activism. For example, presidents who enjoy stronger popularity could make more assertive public statements.



Finland provided a rare case of peaceful, major constitutional reform. This enabled us to compare two presidencies—strong and weak—in the context of one country. While we focused on presidential activism, our framework can be applied to other institutions and actors. For example, prime ministerial speeches should also reflect alterations in constitutional distribution of authority. Another unexplored line of inquiry is how constitutional powers and party-political dynamics shape the reception of presidential communication by politicians. Stronger presidents are likely to elicit stronger reactions, while the speeches of weaker heads of state should produce less divisions among the public and the political elites.

Acknowledgements The authors thank Aino Myllymäki, a research assistant who helped with collecting and analyzing the speech corpus.

Funding Open access funding provided by Tampere University (including Tampere University Hospital). The research has received funding from the Academy of Finland, Grant Number 333013.

Declarations

Conflict interest No conflicting interests to declare.

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