

Repetition as Policy Tool: Anaphora, Tricolon, and Slogan-Motifs in Joe Biden’s 2023 State of the Union (7 February 2023)

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Abstract. This article examines how repetition operates as a policy tool in Joe Biden’s 2023 State of the Union address (7 February 2023). Using qualitative rhetorical–discourse analysis of the prepared transcript, it traces three repetitive forms—anaphora, tricolon, and slogan-motifs—and explains how they cooperate to make policy agenda publicly legible. Anaphora (“we/when/let’s...”) structures problem–solution sequences and assigns agency to government and citizens; tricolons compress complex claims into rhythmic, memorable triads; and recurring slogans (notably “finish the job”) function as ideographic labels that bind diverse initiatives into one narrative of continuity and completion. Drawing on work on political discourse, framing, and processing fluency, the study argues that repetition simultaneously reinforces salience (what audiences should notice), coherence (how policy items fit together), and credibility (why the agenda sounds familiar and ‘true’). The findings show that, in this speech, repetition is not ornamental but instrumental—an interface between institutional policy language and mass audience cognition—in a high-stakes national address to Congress.

Keywords: *political discourse, repetition, anaphora, tricolon, slogan-motifs*

1. Introduction

Presidential State of the Union (SOTU) addresses are hybrid genres: constitutional reports to Congress, national speeches to a mass audience, and strategic performances aimed at agenda-setting. In such speeches, “policy” does not appear only as legislative detail; it appears as a story about priorities, conflict, achievement, and next steps. Repetition is central to that translation task. By repeating a clause, pattern, or slogan, a speaker can turn a complicated policy package into a recognizable public object and can cue audiences to treat particular themes as central.

This article analyzes repetition in Joe Biden’s 2023 SOTU (7 February 2023) as a deliberate policy tool rather than a merely ornamental style. It traces three recurring forms—anaphora, tricolon, and slogan-motifs—and argues that they are instrumental because they (a) raise the salience of preferred

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themes, (b) stabilize interpretive frames, and (c) provide portable language for later media circulation and political reuse.

The study addresses three questions: (1) where do the major repetitive devices cluster in the 2023 address; (2) what policy work do they perform (agenda, framing, legitimation); and (3) which cognitive and cultural mechanisms help explain why repeated forms are memorable and persuasive.

2. Theoretical Background

Rhetorical theory treats repetition as patterning: repeated form produces rhythm, expectation, and emphasis, shaping how audiences segment and remember arguments (Fahnestock, 2011). At the level of schemes, anaphora (repetition at the beginning of successive clauses) and tricolon (a three-part series with parallel form) are especially associated with public oratory because they are easy to process, easy to anticipate, and easy to quote (Lanham, 1991). In political speech, repeated form also projects control: the speaker appears to guide the audience through a designed sequence of claims rather than a loose list of topics.

Framing scholarship clarifies why repetition matters for policy communication. Frames highlight some aspects of reality and downplay others, shaping problem definitions, causal stories, evaluations, and remedies (Entman, 1993). Repetition is one practical mechanism for that highlighting. By returning to key lexical items—such as “middle class” or “Made in America”—a speaker reinforces which elements should be treated as central and how to connect them. In media-effects research, framing interacts with agenda setting and priming: repeated cues make certain considerations more accessible and thus more likely to be used in judgment (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Cognitive research helps explain why repetition often feels persuasive. Repetition generally increases processing fluency (ease of comprehension), which can yield more positive judgments and a sense of familiarity (Reber et al., 2004). Familiarity can also influence perceived truth. Classic work on the “illusory truth effect” shows that repeated statements are judged as truer than novel ones even when content is unchanged (Hasher et al., 1977). Evidence also suggests that higher repetition frequency tends to strengthen this truth-by-familiarity pathway (Hassan & Barber, 2021), making repetition a powerful—though ethically ambivalent—resource in political argument (Brashier & Marsh, 2020).

Slogans extend repetition into cultural shorthand. McGee’s (1980) concept of the ideograph describes how short, value-laden terms can organize public argument and invite audiences to supply shared meanings. A repeated slogan can label a bundle of policies and attach it to a moral narrative. These slogan-motifs resemble recurrent devices in American narrative and journalistic discourse, where repetition helps build recognizable public voices and cultural myths. Pashayeva’s work on Mark Twain’s narrative mythopoetics and on Twain’s relationship to American journalism highlights how repeating motifs can sustain public-facing storytelling and stance (Pashayeva, 2021; Pashayeva, n.d.).

3. Data and Method

The study uses the prepared transcript of the 2023 State of the Union as the primary text, cross-checked against major archival sources (Miller Center, 2023; The White House, 2023). A qualitative rhetorical–discourse approach is applied in three steps: (1) identify anaphoric sequences, triadic parallelisms (tricolons), and recurring slogans; (2) code each cluster for policy function (agenda highlighting, framing/evaluation, coalition building, or legitimation); and (3) interpret the clusters in relation to the speech’s policy themes (economy, manufacturing, health costs, democracy, and foreign policy) and its communicative setting (Congress plus a national audience).

The aim is functional explanation rather than an exhaustive frequency list. Nevertheless, the findings align with contemporaneous reporting that described “finish the job” as a defining refrain and noted its repeated use in the address (Associated Press, 2023).

4. Analysis: Anaphora

Anaphora in the 2023 SOTU builds agency and moral urgency. Clause-initial repetition (“we...,” “when...,” “let’s...”) turns policy talk into coordinated action talk: it assigns responsibility and invites the audience into a collective subject position. In the SOTU genre—where the president requests action from a coequal branch—anaphora helps fuse institutional authority with democratic legitimacy by speaking as and for a shared “we” (Chilton, 2004).

Anaphoric clusters also structure the address into digestible segments. The repeated past–present framing (“Two years ago... Today...”) guides listeners through an evaluative timeline and foregrounds the policy meaning of change (progress, recovery, resilience). Similarly, repeated “let’s...” prompts function as agenda markers, moving from one proposal to the next while keeping a constant action frame. This repeated scaffolding reduces cognitive load, enabling listeners to focus on evaluative content rather than on tracking topic shifts (Bonnefille, 2011).

Finally, anaphora increases quotability. Repeated openers create clean boundaries for extraction into headlines and short clips, which helps the administration’s preferred wording persist beyond the chamber (Entman, 1993).

5. Analysis: Tricolon

Tricolon compresses complex policy rationales into rhythmic triads. Triadic parallelism works by creating expectation and closure: after two parallel elements, listeners anticipate a third, and the third often supplies escalation or completion (Lanham, 1991). In policy communication, that sense of completeness matters because it suggests the agenda is coherent and that the speaker has a whole plan rather than isolated initiatives.

In the 2023 SOTU, tricolons frequently bundle values and policy domains. Triads link economic themes (work, wages, dignity), institutional goals (restore, rebuild, unite), and democratic commitments (freedom, fairness, opportunity). Even when audiences do not recall bill names, they can recall the triad as a portable summary. Triads also bridge domains—for example, linking

domestic manufacturing to strategic competition—so that separate policies appear mutually reinforcing rather than disconnected.

Tricolon additionally supports coalition management. A triad can include elements that resonate with different audiences (labor, business, and national-security voters), making it easier for diverse listeners to find their preferred reason within the same packaged claim (Beard, 2000).

6. Analysis: Slogan-Motifs

The most salient slogan-motif in the 2023 SOTU is “finish the job.” Reporting on the speech identified the phrase as a defining refrain and highlighted its repeated use (Associated Press, 2023). Functionally, the slogan performs three forms of policy work: narrative continuity, accountability, and coalition aggregation.

First, it creates narrative continuity. By framing new proposals as completing an ongoing project, the slogan invites audiences to interpret disparate measures as sequential steps in one story of progress. Second, it foregrounds accountability: a completion frame encourages evaluation in terms of deliverables—what has been started and what remains. Third, it aggregates heterogeneous preferences. Because “finish the job” is abstract, different groups can map it onto different policy desires (health costs, infrastructure, manufacturing, education), allowing the slogan to behave like an ideograph that unifies diverse policy items under one moral banner (McGee, 1980).

Other recurring motifs—such as “Made in America” and repeated invocations of the “middle class”—work similarly as policy-dense shortcuts. They allow the address to reference a suite of measures (industrial policy, procurement incentives, tax priorities) without constant technical detail. Repetition therefore operates as an interface between institutional policy language and mass-audience cognition, improving memorability and supporting post-speech media circulation (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

7. Discussion

Across the three devices, the policy value of repetition in the 2023 SOTU can be summarized as salience, coherence, and credibility.

Salience: repeated cues make certain issues more accessible and easier to retrieve from memory, aligning with agenda-setting and priming logic (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). **Coherence:** repetition ties separate planks into one story; tricolons and slogan-motifs bundle domains and imply a unified plan (Entman, 1993). **Credibility:** repetition increases familiarity and processing fluency (Reber et al., 2004), and truth-effect research suggests that familiarity can raise perceived truth even without added evidence (Hasher et al., 1977; Hassan & Barber, 2021). In political settings, this is ethically ambivalent: repetition can clarify but can also oversimplify or substitute resonance for argument (Brashier & Marsh, 2020).

Repetition also connects presidential speech to journalistic circulation. Slogans and triads are designed to survive outside the chamber as headlines, captions, and campaign shorthand. This

uptake logic resonates with scholarship on American public discourse and journalism, where recurring motifs are key to building recognizable voice and stance (Pashayeva, n.d.).

At the same time, repetition has risks. If audiences perceive overuse as manipulation, it can trigger reactance and skepticism; slogans can reduce specificity and invite critique that policy is being replaced by branding (Beard, 2000; Chilton, 2004). Effective repetition in governance communication therefore balances memorability with informational integrity.

8. Conclusion

The 2023 State of the Union illustrates how repetition can function as a tool of policy communication rather than a decorative flourish. Anaphora structures agency and urgency, tricolon packages complex reasoning into memorable triads, and slogan-motifs—especially “finish the job”—bundle diverse initiatives into a coherent narrative of continuity and completion. Read through framing theory and cognitive work on fluency and repetition, these devices help explain how a president can translate institutional policy into public meaning and increase the likelihood that preferred frames circulate beyond the moment of delivery.

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