

## The University of Virginia Center for Politics



### State of the Union Address

**Purpose:** This lesson is intended to prepare students for watching the State of the Union (SOU) address. Students will learn the Constitutional requirement for the SOU and learn how the SOU has been used by presidents in the past. Students will also learn about the formalities of addressing Congress and the traditions that have been established throughout the nation's history.

#### Objectives:

1. Students will examine Article II of the Constitution in order to identify the need for a State of the Union Address.
2. Students will look at SOUs from American history to determine how the presidents have used this address to communicate their plans for leadership.
3. Students will identify key traditions of the SOU in order to write an opposition response to the 2022 SOU.

#### Key Terms:

*State of the Union Address*

*Article II, Section 3*

#### Materials:

1. Copy of the *United States Constitution* (see downloadable copy on YLI website)
2. Student resource, *The State of the Union Address: Past and Present*.
3. Graphic Organizer, *Watching the 2020 State of the Union Address*
4. Student Assessment, *Creating the Opposition Response*
5. Video, *2020 State of the Union Address*:  
<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/sotu/>

#### Procedure:

1. Warm Up/Motivator: Ask students to answer the following question. How many times a year is the President required, by the Constitution, to address Congress in person:
  - Twice- at the beginning and end of each year
  - Once- at the beginning of a new session of Congress
  - Never- the President is not required to address Congress in person
  - Four times- the President must address the Congress during each fiscal quarter.
  - The answer is c- the President is not required by the Constitution to address Congress in person.

2. Follow up this question by asking students to read the Constitution, Article II, Section 3 of the United States Constitution,

“ He (or she) shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he/she shall judge necessary and expedient; he may, on extraordinary Occasions, convene both Houses, or either of them, and in Case of Disagreement between them, with Respect to the Time of Adjournment, he may adjourn them to such Time as he shall think proper, he shall receive Ambassadors and other Public Ministers, he shall take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed and shall Commission all the Officers of the United States.”

Now, how would you answer the warm-up question? Does the President have to speak to the Congress directly? Why or why not?

What does from time to time mean? Why do you think that the Constitution doesn't specifically state that the President must speak to Congress?

3. Ask students how many of them have watched the State of the Union address? Ask them to brainstorm what they remember?
  - Who was there?
  - Where did you see/hear it?
  - What was in the address?
4. Distribute the student resource, *The State of the Union Address: Past and Present*. Ask students to highlight or take notes on the following:

What is the purpose of the State of the Union address?

How had the address changed throughout history?

Why has the State of the Union address become such a media event?

How does the President use the address to garner support for his agenda?

How does the opposition party use the address?

5. This year's State of the Union address will take place on Tuesday, March 1. Have the students predict what they think will be included in this year's State of the Union address. What issues are especially important to Americans right now? What is the President trying to gather support for during this legislative year?
  - War in Ukraine
  - COVID
  - Economy
  - Immigration
  - 2022 Elections

**Extension Activity:** Have students examine State of the Union Addresses throughout American history using <http://stateoftheunion.onetwothree.net/>. This interactive site provides a list of key terms and words used in every State of the Union address. Just click on a year and the words used most often appear on the chart. There are also links to every State of the Union Address presented to Congress.

6. Distribute the graphic organizer, *Watching the 2022 State of the Union Address*. As students watch, they should take notes on the pomp and circumstance, the address, and the opposition response. Have them work in small groups to discuss their observations, what they found interesting, what they agreed and disagreed with.
7. To assess their understanding of the State of the Union address. Distribute the student assessment, *Creating the Opposition Response*. Students are directed to imagine themselves as members of the opposition party and write a respectful and thoughtful response. The rubric outlines what constitutes an appropriate response. Some students may want to present their responses to the class.



## State of the Union Address: Past and Present

The State of the Union is an annual address presented by the President of the United States to the United States Congress. The address is authorized by Article II, Section 3 of the United States Constitution. The address not only reports on the condition of the nation but also allows the president to outline his legislative agenda and national priorities to Congress.

The State of the Union is typically given before a joint session of the United States Congress and is held in the House of Representatives chamber at the United States Capitol. The address is traditionally given in the month of January. George Washington set the precedent of having yearly addresses and since 1790 State of the Union messages have been delivered regularly at one year intervals.

Most presidents present their State of the Union address orally in front of Congress but this is not always the case. In fact, from 1801 (Thomas Jefferson) through 1912 (William Howard Taft) the address was a written report sent to Congress. Jefferson believed that the presentation of an address in the Congress appeared too monarchical referring to the British Monarch's practice of addressing the opening of each new parliament.

Woodrow Wilson believed that the presidency was more than an impersonal institution, that it needed to be dynamic, alive and personal and thus in 1913 Wilson addressed the Congress in person. The practice of speaking to Congress was sporadically followed until 1934 when Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the modern tradition of an oral speech. There have been some exceptions such as Presidents Truman (1946 and 1953), Eisenhower (1961), Nixon (1973) and Carter (1981) but during all other years the President has presented the State of the Union to the Congress.

Prior to 1934, the annual message was delivered at the end of the calendar year, in December. The ratification of the 20<sup>th</sup> Amendment changed the opening of Congress from early March to January, affecting the delivery of the annual message. Since 1934, the message or address has been delivered to Congress in January or February. Today, the speech is typically delivered on the last Wednesday in January although there is no such provision written in law.

Sometimes, especially in recent years, newly inaugurated presidents have delivered speeches to joint sessions of Congress only weeks into their respective terms, but these are not officially considered State of the Union addresses. The address is most frequently used to outline the president's legislative proposals for the coming year. George W. Bush's 2001 speech is actually his "Budget Message," and President Obama delivered a similar non-State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress on February 24, 2009.



Calvin Coolidge's State of the Union in 1923 was the first to be broadcast on radio. Harry S. Truman's 1947 address was the first to be broadcast on television. Lyndon B. Johnson's address in 1965 was the first delivered in the evening. Ronald Reagan was the only president to have postponed his State of the Union Address. On January 28, 1986 he had planned to give his address but after learning of the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster he postponed the speech and spoke to the nation on the day's events. Bill Clinton's 1997 address was the first broadcast available live on the World Wide Web.

### **Pomp and Circumstance**

Watching the State of the Union can be fun if you know what to look for. Over the years traditions have been established that emphasize the importance of the State of the Union speech.

#### *Entry into the House Chamber*

A formal invitation is made to the President for each State of the Union Address. By 8:30 p.m., the members of the House have gathered in their seats for the Joint Session. Then, the manager of the Majority Cloakroom addresses the Speaker and loudly announces the Vice President and members of the Senate, who enter and take their assigned seats.

The Speaker, and then the Vice President, specifies the members of the House and Senate, respectively, who will escort the President into the House chamber. The House Majority Floor Services Chief addressed the Speaker again and loudly announces, in order, the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, the Chief Justice of the United States and the Associate Justices, and the Cabinet, each of whom enters and takes their seats when called. The justices take the seats nearest to the Speaker's rostrum and adjacent to the sections reserved for the Cabinet and members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Just after 9 p.m., as the President reaches the door of the chamber, the Majority Floor Services Chief and House Sergeant at Arms stand shoulder-to-shoulder just inside the doors, facing the Speaker and waiting for the President to be ready to enter the chamber. When he is ready, the two officers jointly announce his presence, with the Floor Services Chief loudly stating the phrase: "Mister (or Madam) Speaker!" to which the Sergeant at Arms rejoins: "The President of the United States!"

As applause and cheering begins, the President slowly walks toward the Speaker's rostrum, followed by members of his Congressional escort committee. The President's approach is slowed by pausing to shake hands, hug, kiss, and autograph copies of his speech for Members of Congress. After he takes his place at the House Clerk's desk, he hands two manila envelopes previously placed on the desk and containing copies of his address to the Speaker and Vice President.

After continuing applause from the attendees has diminished, the Speaker introduces the President to the Representatives and Senators, stating: "Members of the Congress, I have

the high privilege and distinct honor of presenting to you the President of the United States.” This leads to a further round of applause and to the beginning of the address by the President.

Both the Speaker (Leader of the House) and the Vice President (Leader of the Senate) sit at the Speaker’s desk, behind the President for the duration of the speech. Once the chamber settles down from the President’s arrival, the Speaker officially presents the President to the joint session of Congress. The President then delivers the speech from the podium at the front of the House Chamber.

### *The Address*

In the address the President traditionally outlines the administration’s accomplishments over the previous year, as well as the agenda for the coming year, in upbeat and optimistic terms. Since the 1982 address, it has also become common for the President to honor special guests sitting in the gallery, such as everyday Americans or visiting heads of state.

State of the Union speeches usually last a little over an hour, partly because of the large amounts of applause that occur from the audience. The applause is often political in tone, with many portions of the speech being applauded only by members of the President’s own party. As non-political officeholders, members of the Supreme Court or the Joint Chiefs of Staff rarely applaud in order to retain the appearance of political impartiality. In recent years, the presiding officers of the House and Senate, the Speaker and the Vice President have departed from neutrality expected of presiding officers of deliberative bodies and they too stand and applaud in response to the remarks of the President with which they agree.

### *The Opposition Response*

Beginning in 1966, the speech has been followed on television by a response or rebuttal by a member of the political party opposing the President’s party. The response is typically broadcast from a studio with no audience. In the response the chosen speaker will respond to comments made by the President in the State of the Union and offer his/her party’s ideas for the legislative year. Usually the selected speaker is a congressperson or senator recognized by their party for being an up-and-coming politician.

Sources:

**The American Presidency Project:** Gerhard Peters- [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/sou.php](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/sou.php)  
( Has list of guests to the SOU- also Opposition Party Speeches)

**The National Archives:** <https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/sotu>

**NBC News:** <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/smart-facts/2019-state-union-address-what-you-need-know-n956921>

**Wikipedia:** [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State\\_of\\_the\\_Union\\_Address](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_of_the_Union_Address)



Graphic Organizer

**Watching the 2022 State of the Union Address**

<i>Guests (Who are they?)</i>		<i>Importance</i>
<i>Pomp and Circumstance:</i>		
<i>Entrance:</i>	<i>Who did the President greet?</i>	
<i>Standing:</i>	<i>During the speech, who stood and why?</i>	
<i>Applause/Clapping</i>	<i>During the speech when did:</i>	<i>What might that mean?</i>
	<i>Republicans clap:</i>	
	<i>Democrats clap:</i>	
	<i>Everyone Clap:</i>	
<i>The Address</i>	<i>Key Themes:</i>	<i>Importance:</i>
	<i>Repeated words:</i>	<i>Importance:</i>

### Creating the Opposition Response

**Directions:** Imagine that you are a member of the opposition party. You have been selected by your peers to give the opposition response. This means that you will be on nation-wide television for perhaps the first time in your career. You are going to craft a short speech that addresses the key themes of the 2022 State of the Union and reflects the ideas and opinions of your political party. Before you begin there are some things you should keep in mind.

- You want to promote civility- use language that is respectful
- You want to promote your party’s ideas about the themes addressed in the speech
- You want to promote your political career- which means that you will want to write your address to appeal to the eighty percent of American voters who consider themselves moderates.

Criteria	Possible Score	Your Score
Used respectful language and thoughtful criticism when constructing the response	35	
Addressed key themes presented in the State of the Union	40	
Presented your party’s ideas about the President’s agenda in a way that would convince moderate voters to follow your party	25	
Total		





Comments: