English phrasal stress is rule-governed, but variable. A sentence like

(1) the savings of many years in thousands of families are gone
    (F.D. Roosevelt, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933, Sentence 19)

can be performed with different stress contours. Both the regularities and
the variation require an explanation. We explore the view that regularities
in phrasal stress come from stress rules such as the Nuclear Stress Rule
and the Compound Stress Rule that operate on syntactic structures
(received wisdom), while variability partly depends on ambiguity at the
level of lexical phonology (new proposal). For example, words like in
may or may not be lexically stressed. Since phrasal stress is a function
of lexical stresses and their mode of combination, variation results.

On the empirical side, we report on our ongoing study of rhythm in
presidential speeches. Building on data made available by the American
Presidency Project (Peters and Woolley 1999-2017), syntactic analysis
by the Stanford Parser (Chen and Manning 2014), automatic metrical
analysis by MetricalTree (Dozat 2015), and native speaker stress
judgments collected using the web application MetricGold (Shapiro
2016) we compare the theoretically predicted stress patterns to the
actually experienced stress patterns, exploring the interaction of stress,
lexical frequency, and syntactic linearization. In particular, we consider
the hypothesis that informative words tend to be placed in positions
where they are highlighted by phrasal stress (Bolinger 1972, Cohen Priva
2012).