Tweaking Tweets? Trump’s stylistic use of Twitter as a presidential candidate versus executive officeholder

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Abstract:

During the 2016 Presidential Campaign, President Donald Trump often turned to Twitter to issue statements regarding other candidates, state his positions on current events, and provide personal defenses and attacks. This frequent utilization of tweets did not change with his election as President of the United States. Indeed, President Trump has attempted to use Twitter to directly influence his followers and chart a course of public policy, much the way presidents of the past have done in their yearly State of the Union Addresses. This paper looks at President Trump's use of Twitter as a new form of traditional presidential communication. Specifically, it examines the frequency with which Trump, both as a candidate and as President, uses popular address rhetoric and actually makes policy-related commentary. The main question is whether or not his Twitter style changed when he became president of the United States. Secondly, can Twitter truly be seen as a contemporary 24/7 State of the Union Address? In the end, we find that President Trump’s tweets do not mirror the popular address rhetoric used in State of the Union Addresses. In addition, the significant percentage of Trump Tweets are not policy related, even though those that are attempt to influence policy through means that are consistent with presidential policy proposals in State of the Union Addresses.

“What FDR was to radio and JFK to television, Trump is to Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, et al.”

Neal Gabler, 2016

“The Fake News Media hates when I use what has turned out to be my very powerful Social Media - over 100 million people! I can go around them”

@realDonaldTrump, June 16, 2017

Presidential officeholders and candidates have always sought to connect with voters and their constituents using all of the available media that have been available for their times. From editorials in the *Massachusetts* Spy to whistle-stop tours via trains to Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s fireside chats, using any technological means possible to add weight to the Bully Pulpit is a commonality among all politicians and presidents. With the rise of New Media and Social Networking Sites (SNS) in the late 2000’s, there were even more ways to communicate with the electorate. Candidates and politicians started with creation of their own websites through which they could get their messages and policy priorities out. However, interactivity was limited and it was more of a one-way provision of information than a true back and forth between elected and electors. Facebook’s creation opened the door to a brave new world of immediate dissemination of information as well as and ability for users to “like,” “share,” or “comment” on the items that politicians posted to their feeds (see Teten 2016 for a Senatorial campaign example). Barack Obama is largely seen in the field of presidential studies as the pioneer in utilizing Facebook not only for communication with the public, but also fundraising, campaigning, and policy discussions.

Regardless of the success that Obama may have demonstrated in using Facebook for electoral and informational purposes, SNS’ were largely viewed as a novel offshoot of traditional politician and presidential communication as opposed to an important addition to the canon of official political rhetoric. It wasn’t until the highly contested presidential campaign of 2016, succeeded by the victory of Donald Trump, his continuous use of Twitter throughout the race, and then his continued employment of Twitter into his actual term of office that this “non-traditional” form of communication was forced to be accepted as a new campaigning *and* executive policymaking tool. This study specifically examines the tweets of President Donald Trump from his announcement of candidacy for President in June 2015 through his election to February 2018 to examine whether or not these 140 character (changed on November 7, 2017 to 280 due in no small part to Trump’s use of that SNS) messages can be considered as influential and similar in their form and function as a traditional public presidential policymaking outlet like the constitutionally mandated State of the Union Address. In addition, did Trump’s style and use of Twitter change after his transition from candidate to officeholder?

Although Twitter began as a social networking site for users to be able to update their statuses regarding everything from what they ate for dinner to how they felt about movies, Trump’s consistent use of Twitter to convey everything from his personal thoughts to policy priorities has forced tweets into the limelight as a viable rhetorical tool for presidential messaging. “Shoot-from-the-hip tweets that came from a reality television star campaigning for president have an entirely different effect when they come from the president of the United States” (Korte 2017). Indeed, “The White House later acknowledged that Mr. Trump’s tweets were official statements” (Miller 2017). Dunning (2018) also suggests that, because of Trump’s preponderance for its use, “Twitter in now officially a legitimate and effective political tool, Twitter is now the primary avenue for dissemination of political propaganda and ‘talking points’ and when weaponized, Twitter can completely fracture the public and tangibly alter the reality/perceptions of a non-discerning public (Dunning 2018, 206).

Trump also uses tweets to maintain relevance within each media cycle, ensuring that “a trending topic will capture the attention of a large audience for a short time and thus contributes to agenda setting mechanisms” (Prier 2017). This continuous news coverage linked to presidential updates through Twitter allows Americans to feel more engaged as the media “provide a limited and rotating set of public issues around which the public and the social system may engage in dialogue” (Fortuno and Martin 2016). When these Tweets and media discussion of them combine, “the American public is slammed daily…often through his Twitter account that, nevertheless, exudes a sense of ‘false familiarity’” (Gounari 2018).

In addition, Trump’s tweets are not only part of his overall communication strategy, but they are also his primary rhetorical weapon by which to announce policy. Therefore, Trump’s rhetorical stance on Twitter “has some real policy implications” and represents a significant change in the field of presidential communication (Thompson 2018). Trump’s Twitter use began to gain exposure and media coverage during his campaign, “Trump uses social media as a weapon to control the news cycle. It works like a charm. His tweets are tactical” (Lakoff 2018). As President, Trump and his team use Twitter to make the entire news cycle about exactly whatever they want it to be on instead of what was happening before, releasing a strategic or controversial tweet to regain control over the media (Schwab 2018).

Trump’s tweets are an integral part of his campaign and governance strategy; however, are they actually a viable way that he issues policy statements and attempts to influence national and international policy initiatives? The answer appears to be yes, as the white house considers his Tweets to be the official statement of the president (Chappell 2017), “Already, though, the foreign officials who spoke with VOA [Voice of America News] said Trump's use of rhetoric and social media has impacted the way they prepare their heads of state and other officials for trips to Washington” (Seldin 2017). He has also used Twitter as a way to float policy “weather balloons” as well, without formally making changes. Trump has tweeted about policies before the official announcement of his final decision regarding specific issues. In this way, the president is able to gauge public opinion and possibly change his decision based on the electorate reaction to it. At the outset of 2018, Trump tested the Twitter waters regarding a possible importation of trophy regulation change in the Department of the Interior. “The move comes as celebrities, politicians and even some Trump supporters had intensely criticized the administration's [decision earlier this week](http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-elephant-trophies-20171116-story.html) to again allow the importation of elephant parts from Zambia and Zimbabwe” (Trump Tweets 2017). Although initially insinuating that he would allow the ban on elephant trophy importation to be lifted, he reversed his position after significant Twitter backlash.

Legally, Trumps tweets also carry the weight of executive law that proclamations and executive orders marshal. It makes it especially important to evaluate the presidential Twitter posts not only for their policy implications, but also for their appropriateness for the policy-making process. “A federal judge in Maryland cited Mr. Trump’s tweets as an example of bad policy-making, even going so far as to put screen captures of three tweets in his opinion halting the president’s policy against transgender troops serving in the military” (Dinan 2017). This illustrates that Trump’s tweets, no matter how the president himself or the discipline may view them, are taken seriously in regards to judicial decisions.

Trump’s use of Twitter has not been embraced as an official means of executive communication universally, even if he himself does so. Internationally, “Chinese officials and the state news media want Mr. Trump to know that their leaders prefer doing diplomacy the old-fashioned way, behind closed doors and muffled in platitudes.” (Buckley 2017). In addition, proposing policy in only 280 characters may lead to vagaries that can confuse or be easily misinterpreted. Regarding the ban on transgender military personnel, Senator John McCain, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, [said](https://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/press-releases?ID=80124D36-EF8B-4CBD-A75A-9C6C697CA235) Trump’s policy pronouncement was “unclear” and that “he should let the policy reviews into the issue proceed as planned” (Ward 2017). Another concern surrounds studies that have proposed that Twitter posts may not be subject to presidential immunity and open to charges of libel (McKechnie 2017).

Also, when Trump retweets other users’ posts that may not be accurate, there is immediate backlash for the presidency and America that occurs because the account is seen as the president’s official word. As an example, Trump used his account to retweet anti-Muslim videos from a British far-right account run by Jayda Fransen, the deputy leader of Britain First. “Trump's retweets were leading several major British news websites Wednesday morning, and officials condemned him on Twitter” (Landers 2017). The videos were later even shown to have been staged or altogether faked. This creates a conundrum under which the electorate is unsure whether Trump’s tweets are serious lawmaking and policymaking rhetoric, or still just sidelight commentary not to be viewed as official. "I don't think he's going to be involved in the daily administration of government the way previous presidents have been. I think he's going to be more of a showman" (Seldin 2017).

In the end, it appears as though Trump walks a fine line with Twitter between personal commentary and official presidential rhetoric. His use of Twitter is not unexpected, however, as Obama and many world leaders utilize the SNS. “All of us in leadership have to find ways in which we can re-create a common space on the internet” but “one of the dangers of the internet is that people can have entirely different realities. They can be cocooned in information that reinforces their current biases” (Miller 2017). Trump “has to remember that tweet is read not simply by, say, a political base within the United States but is read all around the world” (Shapiro and Haas 2018). This study will compare the language commonly used by presidents in State of the Union Addresses, as well as the number of policies they proposed and the way they proposed them and compare these with Trump’s tweets during his campaign and presidency to determine more concretely whether or not Twitter is indeed similar in nature to traditional executive rhetoric and should be given the gravity of such. We also look at whether or not the murky mixing of personal and policy posts suggest that Twitter, though a preferred method of communication of Trump, can be realistically seen as official presidential policymaking and a new weapon of the rhetorical presidency.

**Politician Communication and the Rise of New Media 2.0**

 Since the inception of New Media, and especially the launch of Facebook in 2004 and Obama’s use of the internet in his 2008 presidential bid, politicians and political scientists alike have tried to gauge the usefulness of the internet and social networking sites for the overall impact on the citizenry, and how they could be used to increase presidential visibility, issue executive policy statements, and influence constituent political participation and efficacy. Because of the exponential increase in social media site memberships as well as constant evolving innovations in technology each year, it is essential that our scholarship constantly evaluates the new ways that politicians and the people interact via these Social Networking Sites (SNS). This study attempts to fill the gap in scholarship that proposes that “how technologies such as Twitter, Facebook and other new web features may affect strategies represent important areas for future work” (Druckman 2013, 18) and evolve “the internet politics research agenda [that] is still in a fledgling, pre-paradigmatic stage” (Karpf 2013, 414). Here, we hope to “advance new studies that help us answer practical questions about what Twitter…can do to act as good corporate citizens,” especially regarding national policy and executive power (Karpf 2013, 12). We build on work that prioritizes the need to add “understanding how candidates who adopt the technology actually use it as a campaign tool and what their objectives are for doing so” as it “can offer insight into the ways social media are changing how congressional campaigns are waged today” (Gulati and Williams 2015, 35).

Primarily, this study extends the traditional examination of Social Networking Sties (SNS) use in congressional and presidential campaigns to its actual and frequent use as a rhetorical and policy tool for a campaigning and sitting executive (see Sanchez-Gimenez and Tchubykalo 2018; Ott 2017; Liu, 2016 for a Twitter examination during Trump’s *campaign*, for example). For many scholars, Obama’s success in 2008 at securing the presidency began a new era of examination of his garnering both fundraising and networking support through Internet and Social Networking Site (SNS) use. Social media study is relatively new to the world of political science, campaigns and elections, and policymaking. Indeed, even though Barack Obama’s campaign is often studied as the first to heavily use the internet, Howard Dean is usually noted as one of the first successful candidates to establish a website for fundraising and communication purposes in his 2004 presidential election bid.

Since that time, we have seen the development of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest, and literally thousands of other social networking sites. It was Obama, however, that used a fuller breadth of the internet to spread his message than previous politicians had done (Bimber and Davis 2003; Carr and Stelter 2008; Druckman 2013; Farrar-Myers and Vaughn 2015; Foot and Schnieder 2006; Lentz 2002; Miller 2008). “Next to his own website, Obama used fifteen Social Media sites to run his campaign” (Effing 2011, 26). Facebook, with its nearly 1.55 billion active monthly users, is by far the largest of these sites, accounting for over half of all social media site visits (Smith (b) 2015; Number 2015). Twitter is the second largest with 330 million users each month, however. “Social media also played a major role in the 2012 U.S. presidential election, with Facebook citing nine million of its users voting in the November elections” (Carlisle 2013, 883; Farrar-Myers and Vaughn 2015).

The importance of Facebook, Twitter and social networking to politicians cannot be understated. “The networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action” (Shirky 2011, 29). There is also an “increasing tendency for politicians to focus on mobilization via such sites, as has been evidenced in particular by the overwhelming success of the Obama-Biden campaign” (Dalsgaard 2008, 8). The value of social network study also stems from its potential for interactivity, as “activities on SNS are largely communal, interactive and directed by users” (Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero 2015, 182; Tedesco 2007).

Until the rise of Social Networking Sites like Twitter, candidates utilized their campaign websites as the best way to disseminate candidate rhetoric, presentation of self, and attempted interaction with potential voters. Although “utilizing interactive web technologies introduces significant risk because candidates lose message control,” Almost every politician seeking and within office must embrace the New Media technology and its interactive possibilities, in some way, to be successful (Druckman 2009, 345; Chadwick 2006; Eveland and Dunwoody 2002). “Political sites have notable direct effects on voters and can generate engagement and social interaction” (Druckman 2013, 2; Gibson and McCallister 2006, 2009).

The rise of Twitter presented presidential and congressional candidates with an even more fluid, interactive environment that provided all of the same opportunities for information sharing, and also a new interactivity that was absent from traditional candidate websites. Scholars such as Gulati and Williams (2011, 2012, 2015), have suggested that SNS are the “new,” 2.0 versions of candidate websites, which are quickly becoming viewed as static and less interactive campaign sources. They found that among congressional candidates in 2010, “82% had a presence on Facebook” (Gulati and Williams 2015, 32; 2011). Others have also shown that Congressional incumbents and challengers, men and women candidates alike, although to varying degrees (Evans et al, 2014), have embraced Twitter use. With Facebook, “the capacity to tie tailored messaging to specific target voters can increase the amount of issue and biographically-based information that campaigns communicate” (Hall-Jamieson 2013, 430). We agree with the monumental shift candidates have embraced towards daily interactivity with the electorate and believe that social networking sites are better suited at gauging politician communication and behavior, interacting with voters, and providing a longitudinal measure of candidate decision-making. This study’s research extends and evolves from “which candidates were more likely and less likely *to* use Facebook during their campaigns and…*how* the candidates tend to use Facebook as a campaign communication tool” (Gulati and Williams 2015, 33; see also Gulati and Williams, 2008) to an examination of how a successful presidential candidate continues the employment of SNS, and specifically Twitter, during his tenure in office.

Because of the changing capability of technology and SNS like Twitter, it is no longer true that “technologies, at least in terms of the web, do not seem to have fundamentally changed…campaign approaches” (Druckman 2013, 18). Instead, similar to Gulati and Williams, we suggest that Twitter is becoming the new standard over traditional websites, even those like whitehouse.gov, in terms of quickly and cost-effectively spreading message, and setting policy priorities. “We should expect that all candidates and political parties will use social media sites to create enthusiasm in their troops, raise funds, and influence our perception of candidates” (Metaxas and Mustafaraj 2012; see also Frum 2014). In fact scholarship suggests that “we have reached the point where having a social media presence via a website, Facebook page, and Twitter account is a necessary means to be an effective political communicator” (Farrar-Myers and Vaughn 2015, 2; Gulati and Williams 2011, 2012, 2015; Kreiss and Welch 2015). In addition, the preponderance of SNS use in 2016 congressional and presidential elections show that politicians realize that “social media platforms have an agenda-setting impact and constitute a powerful arena for constructing and maintaining a candidate’s image” (Enli 2017). Donald Trump, however, is really one of the first presidents to embrace Twitter as not only a campaign tool, but also the main source of informing his followers during his presidency on a daily, and usually hourly, basis.

Even though presidential and congressional campaigns have garnered increasing attention in the field, there has been little study on SNS use by sitting presidents as a policy or rhetorical communication tool, or studies that compare the Twitter styles of a campaigning versus a sitting president. Social networking sites present politicians with new ways of examining the same issues of “going negative, issue ownership, and position taking” with which the scholarship has been long engaged (Druckman 2009, 343; Franklin 1991; Lau and Pomper 2004; Petrocik 1996). In addition, Twitter posts and social networking feeds provide a real time analysis of how much “competition and incumbency influence rhetorical choices” (Druckman 2009, 343; Kahn and Kenny, 1999; Militia et al 2014; Trent and Friedenberg 2008). Far from being an isolated “.com” that existed and then passed into history (as did MySpace for example), Twitter has established itself as a new medium of importance. “The most profound technologies are those that disappear. They weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it” (Bimber, Flanigan and Stohl 2012, 54-55). It is no longer a mundane and “novel platform” (Bimber and Copeland 2013; Karpf 2013, Druckman 2013), but instead embracing new media is becoming indispensable because “politicians can use technology to promote democracy and change. And, for effective change to happen, campaigns must learn all facets to the rhetorical emerging media” (Johnson 2012).

Indeed a study by Bond (2012) suggests that SNS platforms like Twitter and Facebook not only connect with the average American with a frequency that New Media has never seen, but also have the potential to increase turnout and political participation. In fact, historically, these kinds of “interpersonal appeals increase the likelihood of voting” (Hall-Jamieson 2013, 429; Farrar-Myers and Vaughn 2015; Green and Gerber 2008; Gulati and Williams 2011, 2012, 2015; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993) and SNS applications are a contemporary way, domestically and internationally, to issue these appeals to reach voters (Spierings and Jacobs 2014; Elson et al 2012). Another important reason for examination of Twitter and SNS use is that, in terms of political efficacy and interaction, studies have suggested that “political technology has a positive effect on traditional, offline participation” (Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero 2015; Karpf 2013, 416; Boulianne 2009). Politicians can encourage activity through Twitter posts that will immediately be transmitted, free-of-charge, to their followers. Whether this is political protest and organization or voting encouragement, Twitter is the new standard in electoral connectivity. Recent studies have found concretely that established SNS sites like Twitter and Facebook illustrate that “political activity is correlated with increased political action offline” (Macwilliams 2015, 580; Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero 2015; Park, Kee and Valenzuela 2009; Vesnic-Alujevic 2012).

Scholars have also discovered that “those who are more active in political online groups are more politically active offline, with online group membership mimicking some of the positive effects of offline group membership” (Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero 2015, 186; Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero 2012). Another study discovered that Twitter was utilized to begin candidate and issue conversations and debate current political issues as opposed to existing as a static virtual bulletin board where interactivity was rare or non-existent (Tumasjan et al, 2010). The social engagement and inspired political activity of SNS’ may provide benefits that suggest “virtual bowling” may be as useful as Putnam’s “bowling in leagues” (2001) for political socialization. Contrary to a traditional view of virtual interaction, scholars have found that “political participation on Facebook has a statistically significant effect on attending a rally, participating in a boycott, and signing a petition” (Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero 2015, 193). Not embracing this technological advance not only leaves politicians in the minority, it has the potential to miss opportunities for increasing voters’ political engagement and feelings of political efficacy.

Newer studies also show that nearly 63% of Twitter and Facebook members are using the site as their source for news and other information traditionally gleaned from network or cable television news sources (Barthel 2015). “For today’s young people some form of digital instrument often serves as the gateway to both traditional and new forms of print media” (Roberts 2008). Social media “is indeed delivering—through tweets, Facebook posts blogs and the like—a large volume of information and opinion on newsworthy events and other subjects” (Chandrasekhar 2013). In a study in 2015, the Pew Research Center for Journalism and Media found that over half of SNS users were getting their news regarding Sports, National News, National and International Politics, Local Government and Politics, Crime, and Health and Medicine from social network feeds or online news organizations that they were following (Barthel 2015). Further, nearly 70% of users looked for their news and information regarding Entertainment and Local news about Events and People in their Community from SNS feeds (Pew). Another study “found that 45% of youth reported getting news at least once a week from family and friends via Twitter and Facebook” (Kahne 2012, 53-54).

Studies also found that nearly as many Americans were getting their Political news from SNS sites (48%) as they were from their local broadcast television news (49%) (Mitchell 2014). Pew concluded that more Americans who utilized the internet were getting their political news from SNS sites than even CNN (44%), Fox News (39%) or NBC news (37%) (Mitchell 2014). This increased news consumption occurs across demographics as well and grew among both males (44% to 61%) and females (49% to 65%) over the last two years (Duggan 2015). A recent survey found that an increasing 65% of Americans got their information and news from SNS sites like Twitter (Gottfried and Shearer 2016). Conclusively, SNS sites and the news and politics provided therein, have become an increasing authority and source for Americans as opposed to traditional outlets in television, newspaper, radio, or even other websites.

SNS sites also allow individuals to engage secondary groups and news organizations that can be followed; this seems to have a direct effect on the desire of the user to engage in political discussion and debate. This “online” discussion of information seems a simple adaptation of Katz and Lazarsfeld’s findings that “mass media alone do not change people’s minds; instead, there is a two-step process. Opinions are first transmitted by the media, and then they get echoed by friends, family members and colleagues…access to information is far less important, politically, than access to conversation” (Shirky 2011, 34-35). Twitter users frequently harness news information from their feeds, especially information regarding political stories, and then share this news/opinion/issue with others to whom they are connected. “With the changing Internet environment, there are opportunities to involve and empower citizens in campaigns and work of representatives and government” (Effing 2011, 27). According to a recent Pew study, nearly 32% of SNS users regularly post about political issues (Mitchell 2014). The significant danger here is the potential for “fake news” to be presented via SNS sites as official information, thereby misleading and confusing the citizenry in both campaigns and during governance (See Alcott and Gentzcow 2017; Ehernberg 2012; Metaxas and Mustafaraj 2012).

There is also no political or economic cost to participating in discussions on Twitter. “New media lowers the cost of accessibility to political information thereby making it more likely that people are willing and able to invest themselves politically” (Carlisle 2013, 884). “Posting” to a social networking site means the creation of original comments and content by the user themselves, discussing or engaging a topic of the day. Studies have shown that this kind of activity can “propel individuals into political life especially in terms of allowing them to gather political information, connect with others, mobilize, and recruit individuals to causes and actions because the Internet can significantly reduce the costs of participating” (Carlisle 2013, 884).

This is purposeful and active political engagement that can be clearly differentiated from activity such as a simple “like” click of a political story. “Participation seems to be the key concept that explains the difference between ‘old’ web and ‘new’ Social Media…Social Media is a new stage of development where users are more actively participating than ever” (Effing 2011, 28;30). One study of elections in the Netherlands found that “Politicians with higher Social Media engagement got relatively more votes within most parties” (Effing 2011, 31). Twitter is indeed being recognized as a political tool and “mobilization has become so popular that politicians as a category now have specific kinds of profiles, where they have ‘supporters’ instead of ‘friends.’ Here it is not votes that strengthen the politician, but relationships” (Dalsgaard 2008, 12). In a 2013 study, Strauss et al found that Congressional candidates have attempted to maintain the connection with their constituents by establishing Twitter and SNS accounts that provide information even outside of campaigns.

Each contemporary president attempts to be in touch with the electorate in new and ever-more-current ways that no president of the distant past, and very few of the recent past, have imagined. From the internet to e-mail, and from 24 hour cable news networks to social networking (see Rosenblatt 2010; Owen and Davis 2008; Owen 2010; Gulati 2010; Wayne 2011; Hershey 2010; Iyengar 2011), today’s president is seemingly always discovering new ways of those to whom he can propose initiative, as well as citizens who may be possible voters for his next term in office. During his candidacy, Obama seized on these technological changes and moved with a message that proposed that “the center of gravity in politics had shifted toward younger-thinking Americans who are much more comfortable…with a new media approach to processing information” (Steinhorn 2010, 145). In fact, “Obama’s campaign was particularly adept at employing cutting-edge strategies for voter outreach” (Owen 2010, 169). He offered identification with the public and everything he did was “geared toward building relationships between supporters and his campaign and each other” (Steinhorn 2010, 150). Alan Abramowitz suggests that this “growing Democratic identification within the electorate” was, indeed, one of Obama’s keys to victory (Abramowitz 2009, 41). However, even though SNS use in presidential and congressional races has seen recent examination, presidential use of Twitter is still largely unexplored, and almost completely absent in its possible effects when used by an executive as his main form of electoral communication. This study attempts to bridge that gap by comparing how Trump talks and what he substantively says via Twitter with the State of the Union speeches of presidents in the past.

**Presidential Popular Address Rhetoric in the Twitter Era**

When studying presidential speech and its interaction with the public, it is important to observe the rhetorical shifts that take place in the president’s language for varied effect and in order to employ a certain type of power and argument. Popular Address rhetoric can be employed in the simple manipulation of different pronouns. In effect, the executive uses different kinds of words and different kinds of speech to speak as one of the people, to the people, in reference to the people, or as the president. “Politicians make use of pronouns to good effect: to indicate, accept, deny, or distance themselves from responsibility for political action; to reveal ideological bias; to encourage solidarity; to designate those who are supporters (with “us”) as well as those who are enemies (against “us”) and to present specific idiosyncratic aspects of the individuals and personality” (Wilson 1990, 76). In addition, “the meanings of selected pronouns shift and change depending on the way in which they are textually employed…selectional choices such as those which operate between exclusive and inclusive ‘we’ for example, offer politicians ways of directing attention towards or away from their own existential center, i.e. themselves” (Wilson 1990, 76). Trump uses these variations in his rhetoric to account for the many different interests of his audience as well as different environmental contexts he may face.

In her study on national identity, Vanessa Beasley observes that “however mythic and outdated, such clear distinctions…between “them” and “us” still persist in presidential talk” (2004, 90). Among many public speakers, the president is not alone in utilizing rhetoric to create and forge different audiences that would be more receptive to his proposals; he is very aware that “a democracy must also have strong and generous words for its common life and common words” (Rodgers 1987, 222). Wayne Fields remarks that in the presidential address, the president “must manage to be both apart and included, must be at once particular and universal, present challenges that do not necessarily confront Congressmen or Senators… The job is always, as Washington foresaw, the difficult business of building affection, affection for one another and for the union itself” (Fields 1996, 16; 228). Trump attempts to accomplish this inclusion and unification through a manipulation of the ways in which he speaks to, for, and about his audience using identification rhetoric, authority rhetoric, and directive rhetoric (Teten 2011; 2007).

The first type of popular address rhetoric that we will look at will be coined “Identification Rhetoric.” In Vanessa Beasley’s book (2004), much of what she seeks to find in creating a national identity involves the use of presidential speech that creates a similar identification of president with the people, and they with him. She illustrates that 9/11 brought this very theory to life. “The events of September 11th and their aftermath have demonstrated…how powerful the felt communion of a national ‘we’ can be” (Beasley 2004: 4). According to Beasley, presidents use the State of the Union Address to mold the American people into one body that can come together in support of policy and action. “In other words, for there to be an American nation, or an American ‘we,’ or even an American presidency at all, U.S. presidents must find ways of breathing life into the otherwise abstract notion of American political community” (Beasley 2004: 8). In order to pass policy and gain support from the electorate, “chief executives clearly had a great interest in making sure that the American people *feel* united, even if citizens’ actual demographic, economic, and psychological differences would suggest otherwise…by creating an American identity based on such abstractions, presidents have been able to offer their diverse constituents ways of viewing themselves as a united group” (Beasley 2004: 46, 63).

It is by the use of certain rhetoric that the president is able to speak to the people and also seek to convince them that he is on their side, on the same page with them, and has the interests of the greater whole in mind. Through the use of identification pronouns (words such as “our,” “We,” and “us”) both presidents and the common man place themselves en masse with the larger group in question (Teten 2011). “We are attempting to control our environment in particular ways by promoting an identification with other people or by persuading other people” (McGee 1998b: 127). Identification rhetoric is used traditionally within State of the Union Addresses in order to make the public, or the listening audience, feel that the president is indeed one of those to whom he speaks. In his 2003 State of the Union Address, George W. Bush used identification rhetoric to get the people on his side regarding the cause and course of war. He proposed that “*We* will not deny, *we* will not ignore, *we* will not pass along our problems to other Congresses, to other presidents, and other generations. *We* will confront them with focus, and clarity, and courage.” This was an exercise in the use of identification rhetoric. George W. Bush portrayed himself as one of those in America and in government who would confront the problems of the country and work toward their correction. This constant repetition of “we” is the president’s attempt to build consensus and agreement by creating identification between the citizens of the United States and himself; if they identify with what he speaks, he will receive greater support and have the ability to proceed further with policy objectives. This is reminiscent of Roosevelt’s “fireside chats” that made the American people feel as though the president really did care, and really was one of them.

The second rhetorical label that will be used here is that of authority rhetoric. Authority rhetoric is usage of the words “I,” “me,” and “my” within the State of the Union Address. This category is recognized by Tulis, among others, who suggest that “authoritative speech combines the power of command with the power of persuasion (or force of argument)” (1987: 81). By using specific pronouns, the president is attempting to exert the power of his station and the power of the presidency to propose policy and programs. Because of their position, “the spoken remarks of presidents exert influence not found in the speeches of others” (Hart 1987: 79). In fact, “the speech of presidents is more powerful than most. This power derives in part from the office of the presidency, but it also derives from the attitudes the presidents have toward the speech act itself” (Hart 1987: 110). It is the president’s use of pronouns such as “I,” “me,” and “my” in the State of the Union Address that objectify him as commander in chief, and suggest that his rhetoric holds value largely because of that position alone. “It is through the example, the rhetorical leadership, the moral correctness of the leaders of state, and their ability to inspire self-sacrifice, that the power of a state is mobilized” (McGee 1998: 127). Authority rhetoric offers “the suggestion that leadership stems from a person’s formal position…with an officially sanctioned title, the holder of that title can legitimately direct others for the achievement of a goal” (Dorsey 2002, 4; See also Teten 2011).

 We see illustrations of authority rhetoric yet again in 2003, when George W. Bush proposed numerous policies regarding the environment, stating that “*I* have sent you a comprehensive energy plan to promote energy efficiency and conservation, to develop cleaner technology and to produce more energy at home. *I* have sent you Clear Skies legislation that mandates a 70 percent cut in air pollution from power plants over the next 15 years. *I* have sent you a Healthy Forests Initiative, to help prevent the catastrophic fires that devastate communities, kill wildlife and burn away millions of acres of treasured forest. *I* urge you to pass these measures, for the good of both our environment and our economy. Even more, *I* ask you to take a crucial step, and protect our environment in ways that generations before us could not have imagined. Tonight *I* am proposing $1.2 billion in research funding so that America can lead the world in developing clean, hydrogen-powered automobiles.” This repetition of the word “I” in the midst of policy proposals sends a message to Congress that the President has been active on certain issues and has certain policies that he would like to see activity on by the Congress. In addition, this use of authority rhetoric reminds the people of the United States that the President is working hard towards many different environmental goals, and that Congress only need approve his plans to get the protection that the President sees as necessary. It is this flexing of the muscle of the power of the presidential position that makes authority rhetoric effective.

In much the same way that the president uses “I,” “me,” and “my” to exercise his presidential authority, he can also use his station to give commands and place the need for performance on his audience. The third classification of popular address rhetoric examined here is that of directive rhetoric (Teten 2011). This type of rhetoric employs the words “you,” “yours,” and “your.” These three words are labeled directive rhetoric because they are used to send a direct command of action to the audience, whether it is Congress or the people. The examples from the 2003 address for authority rhetoric above also show how these many different types of rhetoric are often closely associated. The 2003 State of the Union Address also saw George W. Bush address Congress with this directive rhetoric: “*You*, the Congress, have already passed all these reductions, and promised them for future years.. I ask *you* to end the unfair double taxation of dividends…Even more, I ask *you* to take a crucial step, and protect our environment in ways that generations before us could not have imagined.” These policies are not simply suggestions that the President is giving for directions the country *could* take. These are commands from the president himself framed in the format of a request that combines both authority and directive rhetoric. Bush uses “I ask *you*” to convey the point that the President of the United States is asking the Congress of the United States to follow his policy initiatives. He does not simply hope they examine his policy; he wants the Congress to act as he has requested on the issues he has discussed.

**Research, Methodology and Findings**

The central method by which the presidential State of the Union Addresses will be compared to the tweets of President Donald Trump is by a line-by-line content analysis of all of the State of the Union Addresses in presidential history as well as Trump’s tweets. To engage the issues discussed above, we began by collecting all state of the Union Addresses as well as Twitter posts by Donald Trump from the date of his announcement of candidacy through his first presidential term to March 1st, 2018. In all, there were 227 State of the Union Addresses, 5157 Trump Campaign Tweets, and 3110 Presidential Twitter Posts. After collecting the data, it was then examined for policy proposals as well as popular address rhetoric use. Each post was coded independently by three different researchers so that there would be as much confidence in the findings and results as possible. After all of the posts were coded, the three data sets were compared and any discrepancies or oversights that may have led to variation were examined and resolved unanimously. Inter-coder reliability for the study was 95%.

 Figure 1: The Presidents and Number of Speeches Included in the Study

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Speech Type | PresidentsIncluded | Years | Number of Speeches/Posts | Number of Words |
| State of theUnion Address | Washington-Trump | 1790-2018 | 229 | 1,868,334 |
| Trump Presidential Tweets | Trump | 2016-2018 | 3110 | 66,144 |
| Trump Campaign Tweets | Trump | 2015-2016 | 5157 | 88,058 |

Scholars describe many possible pitfalls in presidential content analysis research such as small sample size, generalizations made from addresses in differing contexts, and comprehensiveness of study (King, 1993; Edwards and Wayne, 1983; Krippendorff, 1980; Carney, 1972). However, I propose that the content analysis in this manuscript has many benefits in providing a valid and reliable study from which to make inferences and generalizations relating to presidential rhetoric. The extensive content analysis that we conducted is a thorough and cautious line-by-line examination and reading of each State of the Union Address and tweets in order to determine policy proposition, word usage, political activity, and context. A simple word count or use of a content analysis program which could detail frequencies or occurrences of specific words tends to miss many implicit suggestions for policy. Our line-by-line reading remedies this issue because of the thorough qualification that can be given to each word or policy proposal to assure its proper inclusion and intent.

The first examination is the comparison of the percentage of identification rhetoric in presidential State of the Union Addresses with the percentage of identification rhetoric used by Trump in his Tweets. This is the frequency, in effect, of the use of the words “we,” “our,” and “us” within these two forms of executive speech.

Figure 2:



There are several interesting things that are illustrated within the findings displayed in figure 2. Firstly, as noted in previous research, there is a *consistent increase* in the percentage use of identification rhetoric of the presidents of the 20th and 21st centuries in the State of the Union Address (Teten 2011). In effect, presidents in the 21st century use nearly triple the percentage of identification rhetoric in their State of the Union speeches than did presidents of the founding and 19th centuries. This can be explained because these presidents delivered ever-lengthening State of the Union Addresses in written instead of orally delivered form until the presidency of Woodrow Wilson. This combination of written transmission to Congress of the State of the Union Address as well as the increasing length (from 3224 words with Jefferson to 25518 with Taft) consistently decreased the percentages of identification rhetoric used, as it was lost in enormous speeches that dealt with everything from trade to the borders and longitudes and latitudes of newly created national parks.

 We can say with confidence that contemporary presidents use identification rhetoric in amounts never before seen in the State of the Union Address. The president has a larger audience than ever before, and increasingly attempts to portray himself as one of them in order to garner support and further his policy goals. In his State of the Union Address, Trump, as president, continues the general trend of contemporary presidents to use the Address to attempt unification with the people and the Congress. In fact, he uses the highest levels of identification rhetoric in the history of the State of the Union Address (4.31%) and levels that double the overall average use by all presidents (1.9%). This can be easily seen at the very outset of his State of the Union, where he states, “Over the last year, *we* have made incredible progress and achieved extraordinary success. *We* have faced challenges we expected and others we could never have imagined. *We* have shared in the heights of victory and the pains of hardship. *We* have endured floods and fires and storms. But through it all, *we* have seen the beauty of America's soul and the steel in America's spine [emphasis added]” (Trump 2018). In each of these rhetorical instances, Trump uses identification rhetoric to set the tone that he is a fellow member of the country and has experienced its ups and downs along with the rest of the population.

A completely different story seems to emerge when Trump’s tweets are examined for their use of identification rhetoric and comparability against presidential State of the Union Addresses. Within his Twitter posts, on the average, Trump uses less identification rhetoric (1.78%) than any other president of the 20th or 21st centuries besides Herbert Hoover (1.48%) in their State of the Union addresses. Just as there are variations among presidents in their State of the Unions, there are indeed tweets that do contain identification rhetoric in levels that are much higher than that average. For example, on January 16, 2018 President Trump tweeted that “We must have Security at our VERY DANGEROUS SOUTHERN BORDER and we must have a great WALL to help protect us and to help stop the massive inflow of drugs pouring into our country!”

Although identification rhetoric is, on the whole, used in lower Twitter levels than is seen in contemporary State of the Union Addresses, this can be attributed less to a neglect of identifying with the American people and more to the fact that the Tweets that Trump posts are on topics that vary from congratulating NBA championship winners to DACA reform. A State of the Union address sees a constant audience and is given during a specific time each year. Twitter is open for posting and social networking twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week in response to any current development or event. In fact, analysis found that almost 90% of Trump’s 3110 tweets as candidate and president were **NOT** policy related (see Figure 3 below). The picture of popular address rhetoric use changes dramatically when we look at the level of identification rhetoric in Trump’s tweets that were ONLY policy related (in a similarity to State of the Union content). In these policy specific statements, Trump uses an average of 2.5% identification rhetoric, which is a higher level than the average of all presidential state of the union addresses (1.9%) as well as much more similar to the State of the Union Addresses of the 20th and 21st centuries which had 3.1% identification rhetoric overall.

Figure 3:



Figure 4:



Figure 3 illustrates the number and percentage of policy and non-policy related Tweets issued by candidate and president Trump. Figure 4 is an examination of the average use of authority rhetoric in State of the Union Addresses as well as the tweets of Donald Trump during his candidacy and presidency. Once again, this graph shows a tale of two Trumps. In his State of the Union Address, he uses a lower level of the words “I” “me” and “my” (.92%) than any other president since Kennedy (.69%). However, in his tweets as president, Trump uses an elevated level of authority rhetoric (1.71%) that has not been seen since the State of the Union Addresses of George H. W. Bush (2.05%). In his campaign Tweets, this percentage actually doubles and triples the amounts used by presidents in their State of the Union Addresses.

In Trump’s State of the Union Address, authority rhetoric use is few and far between, but still exists. For example, he states in 2018 that “as President of the United States, *my* highest loyalty, *my* greatest compassion, *my* constant concern is for America's children, America's struggling workers, and America's forgotten communities. *I* want our youth to grow up to achieve great things. *I* want our poor to have their chance to rise [emphasis added].” Authority rhetoric in Trump’s State of the Union is consistent with past presidents who utilize that rhetoric to use the weight of the office to suggest policy proposals predominantly with terms such as “my administration will” or “I ask Congress to.”

 Although there is a difference in authority rhetoric use by Trump in policy versus non-policy tweets, the overall average percentage of authority rhetoric that is used by *President* Trump in his tweets is not significantly different from the average levels used by several presidents in their State of the Union Addresses since LBJ (1.4%). In addition, 20th and 21st century presidents show a significant variation between their averages; they range from .41% use by Coolidge to 2.07% use by George H.W. Bush. As we saw above with identification rhetoric, when Trump actually utilizes SNS for policy proposal, the language that he uses closely resembles traditional language of policy proposal as used in State of the Union Addresses. If we examine the use of authority rhetoric and its use only in those tweets that are policy related, his average (.92%) exactly resembles the authority rhetoric format of his State of the Union Address. On January 12, 2018, for example, Trump Tweeted “*I* want a merit based system of immigration and people who will help take our country to the next level. *I* want safety and security for our people. *I* want to stop the massive inflow of drugs. *I* want to fund our military.” This tweet firstly shows the finding that presidents in their State of the Union Addresses, and Trump in his tweets, can mix forms of popular address rhetoric to pursue policy goals, as his authority rhetoric is here paired with identification rhetoric as well (see also Teten 2011). More importantly, it also clearly demonstrates that Trump is attempting to exert *his* influence as president and executive officeholder to present *his* vision for what is right for the country. Trump’s authority rhetoric, therefore, is not a significant departure from State of the Union Addresses given by contemporary presidents, and, in tweets that contain policy proposals, closely resembles State of the Union formats by Trump himself and many presidents past.

Figure 5:



Figure 5 examines the inclusion of directive rhetoric, on the average, by each president in their state of the union address as well as the average of directive rhetoric in the Twitter posts by President Donald Trump. First, it should be noted that presidents use directive rhetoric at a much lower frequency than the other two forms of popular address rhetoric. Trump’s State of the Union Address exhibits directive rhetoric percentages (.61%) that are similar to those utilized by presidents since Reagan (.62%). Hi campaign Tweets, however, show a percentage of Authority Rhetoric (1.6%) that *three to five times higher* than the presidential SOU average and is even above his own presidential Twitter levels. The presidents after 1980, including Trump, display a level of directive rhetoric in their State of the Union Addresses that is well above the overall presidential average (.24%) and even above the other presidents of the 20th century (.27%).

Trump and other presidents use directive rhetoric in two distinct ways in their State of the Union Addresses. The first use is in addressing the American people in the context of policy proposal. In his State of the Union in 2018, Trump addresses “every citizen watching at home tonight, no matter where *you've* been or where *you've* come from, this is *your* time. If *you* work hard, if *you* believe in *yourself*, if *you* believe in America, then *you* can dream anything, *you* can be anything, and together, we can achieve absolutely anything [emphasis added].” Once again, we see the ways that presidents often mix the three types of popular address rhetoric in their State of the Union address; the transition to “we” at the end of the statement suggests that the president and the people are working together in progression towards the goal at hand. The second use of directive rhetoric in State of the Union Addresses is when the president speaks directly to Congress regarding items he would like to see accomplished or policies he would suggest that they engage. In 2015, Obama did just that when he commented that “I ask *you* to join me in the work at hand. If *you* disagree with parts of it, I hope *you'll* at least work with me where *you* do agree. And I commit to every Republican here tonight that I will not only seek out *your* ideas, I will seek to work with *you* to make this country stronger [emphasis added].” It is here that directive rhetoric addresses the other audience of the State of the Union Address than the American public; namely, the actual members of the House and Senate in attendance.

There are two major examples of Twitter uses by Trump of directive rhetoric, the first of which addresses members of Congress or the people directly. In an immigration tweet on September 7, 2017 Trump said “For all of those (DACA) that are concerned about *your* status during the 6 month period *you* have nothing to worry about - No action!” Secondly, and similarly to the way in which almost half of the directive rhetoric incidents in State of the Union Addresses occur, almost half of the directive-rhetoric-containing tweets contain “thank you” messages to a particular group or individual. On June 14, 2017, Trump posted a “Happy birthday to U.S. ARMY and our soldiers. *Thank you* for *your* bravery sacrifices & dedication. Proud to be *your* Commander-in-Chief!” Thanking groups or individuals, or showing support for them (tweets expressing support for hurricane ravaged states, for example) is a prominent use of directive rhetoric in Trump’s tweets that parallels its (and Trump’s) use in State of the Union Addresses as well.

Figure 6: Total policy proposals



Figure 6 looks at the number of policies that were proposed, on the average, in each president’s State of the Union Address as well as the tweets that Trump issued since being elected president. First, Trump’s State of the Union address average for policy proposal was 16.51 policies per 100 words. This is above the total presidential State of the Union Address of 14.4 policies, but slightly lower than the average of the 20th and 21st centuries of 18.6 policies per 1000 words; however, neither difference is significant. Recent presidents have moved towards a more efficient average of policy proposal in their State of the Union Addresses, seemingly doing more with fewer words. Traditionally, presidents tend to also follow the formats of their predecessors but also vary their State of the Union styles throughout their presidencies. Therefore, Trump’s State of the Union both resembles the policy proposal activity of presidents of the past, and has the opportunity to change and evolve over the course of his presidency, which may change his average policies proposed in his addresses.

As discussed above, a significant number of Trump’s tweets are not germane to policy proposal. Overall, however, he does propose an average of 3.87 policies per 1000 words of his presidential tweets and 6.82 policies per thousand words of tweets made during his candidacy for president. Just as the contemporary presidents propose more policies in fewer words in their State of the Union Addresses, when Trump seeks Twitter as an outlet for policy proposal or endorsement, he does so with a frenetic speed; he is, after all, limited to 280 characters. Most of these posts list different aspects of policies that he would like to see enacted and often do not even use complete sentences to do so. For example, on October 12, 2017 Trump tweeted “We need a tax system that is FAIR to working FAMILIES & that encourages companies to STAY in AMERICA GROW in AMERICA and HIRE in AMERICA!” In a tweet that only has 26 words, he proposes 4 separate policies. He asks for a tax system that 1) is fair to working families, 2) encourages companies to stay in America, 3) grow in America 4) and hire in America. In the end, Trump does use Twitter for policy proposals, but these Tweets pale in comparison to the number of posts that are not policy related.

# Conclusions

As technology has advanced, politicians have made every attempt to utilize the new media tools at hand for campaigning and governing purposes. Trump embraced Twitter as a candidate, and continued its employment during his presidency as a way to comment on policy, comment on politics, and comment on everything in between. In doing so, we see his clear uses of identification, authority and directive rhetoric as well as policy proposal. Even though Obama largely eschewed the use of Twitter in favor of Facebook, Sousa and Ivanova found, in much the same way Trump’s do, that Obama’s tweets illustrated “a predominant choice of the inclusive and proximal over exclusive and distal” (2012). Although Twitter may be a new medium, presidents Obama and Trump have seen its possibility to identify with voters and the electorate through posts that used “we” “our” and “us” to build a sense of community.

Just because it is a newer Social Networking Site, and this study found tweets to resemble State of the Union Addresses in some rhetorical and policy proposal aspects, this does not necessarily mean that it is an appropriate way to convey presidential positions. "There's something about the platform of Twitter, the ease of access, the lack of time it requires and the simplicity of creating the message that encourages impulsiveness." (Watson 2017). A significant concern is, because Trump uses Twitter for so much non-policy related material, there is a danger that “The President’s behavior does not add value to US public diplomacy in the social media…it erodes social capital and reduces both trust and intercultural communication” (Sanchez-Gimenez and Tchubykalo 2018).

We cannot dismiss, however, despite the dangers, that the findings above relating to popular address, and specifically identification rhetoric, indicate important changes in the understanding of presidential communication. This study suggests that Trump’s Tweets largely do not contain policy information and popular address rhetoric consistent with former presidents in their uses of identification, authority and directive rhetoric in State of the Union Addresses. Indeed, “Trump’s self-presentation within the logics and representational patterns of reality television and Twitter renders the realms of entertainment and politics virtually indistinguishable” (Edwards 2018). Trump’s policy proposals were the minority in a cache of “aggressive and compulsive Tweets and daily insults against his opponents” (Kellner 2018). A 2019 study also found that only 7% of Trump’s tweets had a positive message, as opposed to 80% negative (Perez-Curiel 2019). These findings propose that Twitter may operate as a new communication outlet through which presidents can instantaneously “go public” to express their opinions on anything. Although, once in office, presidential use of popular address rhetoric “has waxed and waned depending on strategic circumstances and the proclivities of individual presidents” (Laracey 2002, 171), Trump appears to utilize popular address rhetoric consistent with his campaign uses in Twitter, even if his own state of the union address is more formal and traditional compared to other presidents.

The recognition of the individual contribution of each president to the concept and powers of the “Chief Executive” is of utmost importance in the research of the presidency. “The presidency is less an outgrowth of the constitutional design and more a reflection of ambitious men, demanding times, exploited opportunities, and changing international circumstances…The presidency has been shaped by the varied individuals, operating within a dynamic system under changing circumstances.” (Genovese 2001, 14; 16) Indeed, in both State of the Union Addresses and tweets, Trump constructs his own messaging though the lens of his own ambition and capabilities, as well as his own goals. “A rhetorical context is a unique array of forces—rhetorical, historical, sociological, psychological, strategic, economic, and personal—that exists at any given moment in time and that impacts the speakers selection and presentation of topics” (Medhurst 1996, xviii). Despite the penchant to summarily dismiss Twitter as a method of communication with less intrinsic value, unless Trump suddenly eschews its use, it appears as though it must be looked at as a new outgrowth of the rhetorical presidency that is being used for policy, to talk to the people, and in ways not previously examined in our discipline. As Trump said in a tweet on July 1st, 2017, “My use of social media is not Presidential - it’s MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL. Make America Great Again!”

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