Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy, 2020, 1: 137–158

Rethinking Public Appeals: Experimental Evidence on Presidential Performances

William G. Howell[1], Ethan Porter[2], and Thomas J. Wood[3]*

[1] *University of Chicago, Sydney Stein Professor of American Politics, Chicago, IL, USA; whowell@uchicago.edu*
[2] *George Washington University, Assistant Professor, School of Media and Public Affairs, Washington, D.C., USA; evporter@gwu.edu*
[3] *The Ohio State University, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Columbus, OH, USA; wood.1080@osu.edu*

ABSTRACT

While scholars have traditionally evaluated the influence of presidential appeals on approval and policy preferences, we investigate a different site of possible effects: on the public's evaluations of whether the president represents the best interests of the country, embodies national values, and fulfills the essential obligations of his office — that is, whether he is *presidential*. We construct a novel presidentialism scale, which we show to be meaningfully distinct from other measures of perceptions of the president. Across four experiments conducted during the Trump presidency, we recover consistently positive and substantively large effects. Members of the public randomly encouraged to watch Trump's Inaugural Address were more likely to say that he fulfills the duties, expectations, and norms of his office. Though these effects attenuated in magnitude, they remained discernible in every experiment we conducted. We find no evidence that Trump's addresses changed people's policy views. Our findings point toward new ways of assessing the character and significance of presidential appeals.

*For helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper, we thank George Edwards, Anthony Fowler, Justin Grimmer, Josh Kalla, Sam Kernell, Eric Posner, Lisa Wedeen, and B. Dan Wood. Standard disclaimers apply.

Online Appendix available from:
http://dx.doi.org/10.1561/112.00000002_app
ISSN 2689-4823; DOI 10.1561/112.00000002

Keywords: Public appeals; president; performance; public opinion

> "*With the exception of the late, great Abraham Lincoln, I can be more presidential than any president that's ever held this office.*"
>
> –President Donald J. Trump[1]

Scholars have long recognized the many purposes that political performances can serve: the propagation of myths, the promotion of social solidarity, the manipulation of history, the delineation of conflict, the mobilization of resources, the creation of common knowledge, and a good deal more (Chwe, 2013; Edelman, 1964, 1971; Kertzer, 1989). For presidents, political performances also serve communicative objectives — and ones that go beyond the contents of a speech delivered. The "spectacle" of presidential leadership, Bruce Miroff (2016, p. 18) reminds us, is deliberately intended "to craft public impressions of the president's identity as a leader, especially his/her virtues and strengths." Performances inculcate a sense that these men — and to date, they have all been men — are larger than life, that they follow in a rich and noble tradition, that they see the country as nobody else does, and that they stand ever-ready to defend her values, interests, and heritage.

Do presidential performances deliver on this promise? For the most part, evidence on this question has not kept pace with argument, as we still lack any systematic accounting of the broad impressions presidential performances leave on public opinion. For all that has been written on presidential appeals (for recent reviews, see Edwards, 2003, 2009, 2016; Eshbaugh-Soha, 2015, 2016), the existing quantitative literature focuses on the language of speeches and their corresponding effects on public attitudes toward specific policies and presidential approval, narrowly construed. This research has not systematically examined the effects that these appeals have on public perceptions of the president's suitability for office. This research, in other words, has not systemically examined the effects that these appeals have perceptions of the president as *presidential.* To date, the effects of what Jeffrey Cohen (2015, p. 9) calls "perceptual presidential leadership," or what Mary Stuckey and Frederick Antczak (1998) refer to as the "constitutive" consequences of presidential speech, remain undocumented.

This paper presents the first experimental efforts to evaluate how public performances — only one component of which is speech — alter the degree to which Americans believe that their president fulfills the duties and obligations of his office. In 2017, 2018, and 2019, we fielded more than a dozen surveys before and after Donald Trump delivered his First Inaugural, his first formal

[1]Speaking at a rally in Youngstown, Ohio, July 25, 2017.

address before Congress, which had all the appearances of a State of the Union address, and his first two official State of the Union addresses. Before all four speeches, we collected information about respondents' perceptions of Trump's ability to command the respect of other leaders, offer a coherent vision for the country, and fulfill his prescribed duties — views, we show, that do not reduce to standard presidential approval ratings and that have substantial political significance. We then randomly encouraged half of the respondents to watch Trump's speech. Immediately after each speech, again one week later, and in one instance again three months later, we resurveyed respondents.

In all our studies, outcomes were measured via a novel presidentialism scale, introduced and described below. The scale is meant to capture the extent to which the public views the president as *presidential*. By presidential, we mean something both specific and distinct. Specifically, presidential refers to the public's perceptions of the president's fitness for office; and distinctively, this perception does not reduce to standard assessments of political support. Fitness, instead, concerns the president's ability to meet broad expectations associated with the office. Does the president garner the respect of other elites? Does he (or, one day, she) act on behalf of the best interests of the nation as a whole? In his demeanor, his actions, and his speech, does the president channel, if not embody, core national values?

Notice that this understanding of what it means to be *presidential* does not refer to the public's agreement with the president's policy objectives. Nor is it synonymous with broad approval of the president. As we define it, presidential refers to evaluations of the president that are not overtly partisan or political. Presidentialism, instead, concerns public assessments of how well a president measures up against the expectations of the institution. As we show below, this understanding of what it means to be presidential is empirically dissimilar from other, more common approaches to evaluating the president.

Making use of our presidentialism scale, our experiments reveal that some public performances can alter the terms under which a public views its president, at least temporarily. Immediately after three of the four major addresses we study, those who had been encouraged to watch Trump's performances indicated that they perceived Trump as more presidential than did members of the control group. The observed effects, however, proved reasonably short lived, in all instances except the inaugural address disappearing within a week. And over the course of Trump's first three years in office, the immediate effects, while still positive and statistically significant, attenuated in magnitude.

Consistent with other work on the topic (e.g., Edwards, 2003), we find hardly any evidence that exposure to these performances altered respondents' specific policy views. On issues Trump spoke at length about, those encouraged to watch did not ever register policy views distinguishable from those in the control group. Although the president can leverage public performances to

affect the public's temporary perceptions of him *qua president*, we find no evidence that he can do the same on policy.

Our conclusions do not appear to be an artifact of attrition or any particular measurement or modeling strategy. Moreover, they point to dimensions of public opinion with genuine political relevance. As we show below, the presidentialism scale that we introduce is an unusually strong predictor of attitudes toward Trump's impeachment and beliefs about his campaign's collusion with Russia — suggesting that perceptions of presidentialism matter a great deal for real-world political debates.

This paper proceeds as follows. The first section summarizes the existing literature on public appeals. The second section introduces the presidentialism scale and establishes its conceptual distinction from standard measures of presidential approval. The third section describes the main experiments we conducted and presents results. The fourth section investigates the political relevance of our measure of presidentialism. The final section concludes.

The Efficacy of Presidential Appeals

Presidents devote significant resources to actively court the American public through addresses, speeches, ceremonies, press conferences, and carefully choreographed interviews. "Going public" is not just a tactic available to the enterprising executive. Indeed, even more than an obligation of holding office, public appeals are a defining feature of the modern presidency itself (Kernell, 2007; Lowi, 1985; Tulis, 1988).

Whether presidential appeals meaningfully affect the content of public opinion is a matter of some dispute. Some studies suggest that presidents' communications reliably increase public support for themselves or their policy agendas, if only by a few percentage points (Barrett, 2004; Brace and Hinckley, 1992; Cavari, 2013; Ragsdale, 1984, 1987). Other studies, though, find that the benefits of public appeals are not nearly so certain, and that their incidence depends upon the president's prior approval ratings (Page and Shapiro, 1985; Page *et al.*, 1987), the policy domain in which he speaks (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake, 2011), and other contingent factors (Rottinghaus, 2010). Others suggest that public appeals can be counterproductive, yielding outcomes that run directly contrary to the speakers' intentions (Cameron and Park, 2011; Lee, 2008). Recognizing the ways in which public inattention to politics, media interference, and the general clamor of political speech all conspire against presidents who hope to mold public opinion, still other scholars argue that public appeals typically fall "on deaf ears" (Edwards, 2003; see also Edwards 2007, 2009; Franco *et al.*, 2018; Simon and Ostrom Jr., 1989).

What accounts for such widely varying results? Part of the answer concerns the methodological challenges endemic to this line of research (Gabel

and Scheve, 2007). As a matter of measurement, it is extremely difficult to parse the contents of presidential appeals and the relevant dimensions of public opinion. Additionally, the nonrandom occurrence of presidential speeches combined with the selective attention paid to them introduces all sorts of causal identification problems (Canes-Wrone, 2006; Hill, 1998; Iaryczower and Katz, 2016; Wood, 2007). Attempting to make headway, some scholars have tried to instrument for the issuance of presidential appeals, but they have struggled to account for other sources of endogeneity, such as the public's intermittent reception of these appeals (Cohen, 2015). Other scholars have relied upon lab and survey experiments (Tedin *et al.*, 2011), which themselves confront questions about generalizability (but see Franco *et al.*, 2018, which exploits plausibly random local variation in the timing of surveys).

A second limitation of the existing literature concerns matters of scope. Most studies consider the effects of presidential appeals on the willingness of respondents to support specific policies. Far less attention, meanwhile, has been paid to the public's views of the president himself. Though a handful of studies evaluate the public's general assessment of the president, as measured by job approval or thermometer ratings (see, e.g., Druckman and Holmes, 2004; Ragsdale, 1984, 1987), most empirical studies have not examined the specific ways in which appeals alter the public's trust in their president, assessments of the president's motivating beliefs and interests, or evaluations of the president's distinct role in the American polity (for important exceptions, see Cohen, 1997, 2015; Welch, 2003).

This leads to a third limitation of the existing quantitative literature on presidential appeals. Scholars have fixed their attention nearly exclusively on the language of the speech itself. To be sure, some scholars code speeches for certain contextual features — distinguishing, for instance, "large" from "small" speeches, or State of the Union speeches from minor addresses (Ragsdale, 2014). Yet, the rich displays of symbolism that accompany presidential speeches — the staging of performers and audience, the procession of supporters and beneficiaries, and the carefully selected backdrop — do not figure prominently in the investigations of quantitatively oriented scholars (but see Hinckley, 1990; Campbell and Jamieson, 1990). By and large, presidential speeches are characterized according to the words that are spoken. But as Miroff (2016, p. 19) reminds us, performances are "visual as well as verbal," imbued with gestures and symbolic meanings that existing quantitative studies, by and large, do not investigate.[2]

[2] A substantial body of work on presidential rhetoric focuses intently on these concerns. This scholarship, however, is altogether devoid of systematic tests of the impacts of presidential rhetoric on the contents of public opinion. For a review of this literature, see Bimes (2009).

The visual facets of performance — an umbrella category that includes rituals, rites, ceremonies, and other modes of public presentation — do not only adorn political appeals. In various ways, these facets serve distinct political purposes, about which the existing literature on public appeals has very little to say. For presidents, performances can reconstitute the public's understandings of the individual who stands at their center. As Schechner (1988, p. 124) explains, "fixed roles and rites of passage [transport] persons not only from one status to another but from one identity to another." Presidential performances, as such, function as mechanisms of perceptual transformation, altering an audience's understandings of performers. Through performance, Kenelm Burridge (1969, p. 166) reminds us, "one sort of man becomes another sort of man" (see also Bell, 1991, pp. 206–207), as the polio-stricken Franklin Roosevelt was seen to walk to the podium to deliver his First Inaugural, or as George W. Bush climbed atop the rubble at Ground Zero after the September 11 attacks and delivered an impromptu-address via megaphone, or as Barack Obama sang "Amazing Grace" in a church in Charleston, South Carolina days after a white supremacist had murdered nine black parishioners.

To date, the existing literature on public appeals does not investigate any of these possibilities, certainly not with quantitative data and a well-defined research design. Consequently, when someone of the likes of Donald Trump assumes the presidency, we have no basis on which to judge whether performances will deliver on their intended promise — that is, to render a mere politician something a good deal more, something distinctly presidential.

The Presidentialism Scale

Scholars have tracked changes in summary assessments about the president, as measured by approval or thermometer ratings. To our knowledge, however, no one has investigated the extent to which the public views a sitting president as quintessentially *presidential*. Consequently, our area of interest does not come with an off-the-shelf set of questions. We therefore devised our own. Our presidentialism scale, comprised of 3 sub-scales and 22 questions, is meant to capture views on the president's fitness for office, when viewed against the extraordinary expectations the public holds of the presidency.

The sub-scales and the items they comprise are provided in Table 1. One sub-scale measures respondents' impressions about whether the president commands the respect of other political elites. Another measures respondents' confidence in the president's ability to serve as a steward of the national mood. The third inquires about subjects' perceptions of the president's commitments to democratic values. Agreement to all items are recorded on a seven-point scale. In designing these items, we sought to de-emphasize

Table 1: Twenty-two items which comprise the *Presidential Standing Battery*.

	President's standing among elites	
Donald Trump commands the respect of ...		Republicans in Congress
		Democrats in Congress
		the Supreme Court
		Military Leaders
		the National Press Corps
		Business Leaders
		Foreign Leaders
	President as steward of national mood	
How confident are you that, during his first term in office, President Trump will be able to...		...perform the duties and obligations of the office of the presidency
		act in the best interests of the nation as a whole
		vigorously defend the nation's economic and security interests when negotiating with foreign states
		earn the respect of those who did not vote for him
		persuade the public of his policy positions
		work productively with Congress
		improve economic growth
		bring the country together after a divisive presidential election
	President as exemplar of liberal democratic values	
Do you agree with the following descriptions of Donald Trump		The President is a true leader
		The President loves the Constitution and understands the rights and responsibilities it bestows
		The President's loyalties are to country, above all else
		The President has a clear understanding of where the country must go
		The President speaks with clarity and conviction about the change our nation needs
		The President supports the rights of free expression, freedom of religion, and free assembly
		The President is committed to traditional American values

Each item is posed following the prompt provided in the left column. Items are grouped by their underlying dimension of presidential standing. Subjects respond on a 1–7 point agreement scale.

partisan cues.[3] Accordingly, the scale does not explicitly inquire about a respondent's impression that the president will implement a partisan agenda or thwart his political opponents. Instead, it measures the impression that the president has independent standing and justifiably occupies the nation's top political office.

The presidentialism scale, it bears emphasizing, gauges public perceptions that are conceptually distinct from standard measures of presidential approval ratings. While we expect impressions of a president's institutional standing to be related to their affective valence (summarized by indicators of approval), these dimensions are distinct when a respondent concedes that even a president whose agenda is unwelcome might fulfill the fundamental requirements of office. We expect *approval* to tap impressions of policy accordance, group affiliation, and evaluation of emergent political events, while impressions of *presidentialism* will tap deeper impressions of character, judgment, and legacy — elements of what Richard Neustadt (1990) referred to as a president's "reputation" and "prestige."

To test these expectations in January 2018, we administered our presidentialism scale alongside a battery that elicited respondents' views about President Trump's job performance on seven current political questions.[4] We also asked standard measures of partisan identification, ideology, and a 0–100 Trump feeling thermometer. Responses were collected over Mechanical Turk in January 2018 (n = 913). All batteries, including the questions that comprise our scale, were vended in random order.

The loadings for a four-factor solution reveals a clear pattern, which can be found in Table 2. While approval dominates a first affective dimension of public evaluations, this first dimension taps the confidence and values elements of the presidentialism scale. However, approval items do not systematically load on factors 2 through 4. After removing the effects of approval, these three factors separately tap each element of our scale. Significantly, the three subordinate factors account for about as much variance in the separate indicators as the first approval factor. Approval is related to, but empirically distinguishable from, impressions of presidentialism.

[3]Clearly, any evaluation of a contemporary president will be at least partially partisan. Our scale, however, seeks to locate those opportunities for a president to enjoy that bipartisan standing furnished by virtue of holding the office.

[4]Specifically, we asked approval of Trump's managing the US relationship with North Korea, his handling of the economy, of foreign policy, health care, immigration, jobs, and taxes.

Table 2: Factor analysis of presidentialism battery and approval.

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Presidential approval				
Approve...handling DPRK	.70			
...handing economy	.67		.42	
...foreign affairs	.79			
...health care	.75			
...immigration	.76			
...jobs	.84			
...taxes	.73			
Steward of national mood				
Confident...act in country's interests	.65		.46	.44
...bring country together	.44	.40		.68
...earn respect of his opponents	.44	.39		.66
...improve growth	.50		.63	
...perform duties	.56		.56	.43
...persuade on policy	.46			.55
...defend US abroad	.55		.61	
...work with congress	.50		.48	.48
President's standing among elites				
Earn respect...business leaders		.46	.57	
...democrats in congress		.84		
...foreign leaders	.47	.68		
...military leaders	.42	.56	.54	
...national press corps		.83		
...republicans in congress		.55	.45	
...scientific leaders		.77		
...US jurists		.67	.44	
President as an exemplar of liberal democratic values				
Values...not beholden to foreign interests	.59		.47	
...speak with clarity	.65		.46	
...knows where country must go	.67		.44	
...committed to American values	.51		.57	
...loves constitution	.63		.48	
...loyal to country	.60		.54	
...supports freedom	.63		.48	
...true leader	.70		.40	
Proportion variance explained	*.32*	*.18*	*.17*	*.11*

These loadings were extracted from data gathered in January 2018.

Experimental Findings

To investigate the impact of political performance on public opinion, we conducted a series of experiments in 2017, 2018, and 2019 surrounding Trump's Inaugural Address and his first three major addresses before Congress. In various ways, each provided a plausible source of identification, and thereby overcame one of the central limitations of the existing literature on presidential appeals.

Trump's Inauguration

Our first experiment focused on the first performance of any presidency: the inauguration. We offered a small financial inducement to US residents on an online survey platform to watch President Trump's Inaugural Address, and we administered the presidentialism scale before and after the speech. Given the successful random assignment of subjects and the high compliance patterns (see details below), estimating treatment effects proved straightforward.

Our identification strategy, carried out over four waves and five months, is a variation of an "encouragement design," wherein subjects are incentivized to uptake some treatment for which it is unfeasible or unethical to either deny or force uptake. Encouragement designs in political science have been profitably deployed in the study of media effects and national policy implementation (e.g., Barnes *et al.*, 2018; Sovey and Green, 2011).

The experiment was administered over Amazon's Mechanical Turk service. A low-cost vehicle for survey subject acquisition (Berinsky *et al.*, 2012), experiments carried out on Mechanical Turk tend to mirror results observed with more traditional survey vendors, often to a surprising degree (Coppock, 2018; Mullinx *et al.*, 2015; Thomas and Clifford, 2017). Prior research also has used Mechanical Turk for multi-wave experiments premised on real-world media stimuli, finding attrition rates comparable to those observed on larger, nationally representative samples (Gross *et al.*, 2018).

We administered the first wave one week before the inauguration. At that time, we recruited 1,496 U.S.-based subjects and administered standard demographic questions, the presidentialism scale described above, several political knowledge questions, and the standard authoritarian battery.[5] (To determine eligibility, all subjects were also asked if they would be available to watch television "this upcoming Friday," the day of the inauguration.) At the very end of the survey, we told subjects that they would be eligible to participate in future studies, including one with a $400 raffle prize. So as not to bias selection into the second wave, we made no mention of the inauguration.

[5]Table A.1 of the Appendix reports participation rates in all the experimental studies in this paper.

(The full text of this and all subsequent communications with subjects are available upon request.)

In between waves 1 and 2, to improve the efficiency of our estimates and make for better balance between treatment and control, we block randomized on covariates we believed would be predictive of outcomes. Respondents were block randomized on their partisanship, their 2016 presidential vote, and their pre-treatment affective evaluation of Trump (a 101-point feeling thermometer was trichotimzed into groups of equal size.) Treatment and control groups appear balanced across a wide range of pre-treatment demographic and attitudinal variables. This balance was mostly maintained across the multiple waves of the experiment. (For complete results, refer to Tables A.3 and A.4 on pages A5 and A6 of the Appendix.)

On January 19, the day before Trump took office, we told treatment subjects to watch the inauguration for one hour and to expect a survey that afternoon. We told control subjects that they were in a study, and to expect a survey that same afternoon. Though we did not mention the inauguration in the control message, we also did not tell subjects *not* to watch Trump's speech, as we feared that doing so would send a signal about the purpose of the study to control subjects, thereby increasing the possibility of observing demand effects.

At 1 PM EST, roughly an hour after Trump was inaugurated, we emailed subjects a link to our survey, which included the presidentialism scale as well as several questions designed to evaluate whether participants had complied with their treatment assignment. After collecting their responses to our substantive outcomes, we measured compliance in a variety of ways. We asked all subjects if they had watched the inauguration, and if so, for how long and on what channel. We also presented respondents with a set of photographs of Supreme Court Justices and other political leaders, asking them to select who had administered the oaths of office to President Trump and Vice President Pence. We also showed them three sentences that plausibly could have been uttered by President Trump while delivering his inaugural address — all three related to his theme of "America First" — and asked them which had actually been said. At no point did we suggest that eligibility for the raffle would be contingent upon correct answers to the compliance questions.

To assess effect duration, we administered a third survey a week after the inauguration and a fourth in May 2017. Both of these surveys contained only the presidentialism scale. So as not to cue respondents' memories of the initial assignment, we did not mention the inauguration in our communications with subjects during these later waves.

While our estimates do not depend on compliance, the extent to which subjects appear to have complied with their assignment is still worth noting. In the inauguration study, subjects who were assigned to the treatment group were significantly more likely to report having watched Trump's inaugural

address. Whereas 47.9% of the control group claimed to have watched the inauguration, fully 84.7% of the treatment group did so. And while 81.8% of the treatment group reported having watched at least some of the speech specifically, only 45.3% of control subjects did. Reassuringly, members of the treatment group proved themselves adept at answering factual questions about Trump's speech. For example, when presented with a set of photographs of judges and asked to select the one who had given Trump the oath of office, 52.3% of treatment subjects correctly identified John Roberts, as compared to only 29.5% of control subjects. (For a complete inventory of indicators of compliance patterns, see Table A.6 of the Appendix.)

To assess treatments effects, we followed a straightforward strategy. First, given concerns about attentiveness on Mechanical Turk, for all studies we omitted respondents who failed a pre-treatment attention check, similar in design to that advocated by Berinsky *et al.* (2014).[6] Second, to estimate sub-scale effects — for example, the effects of treatment on perceiving that Trump enjoyed elites' respect — we regressed the mean response to questions within that sub-scale on treatment assignment. To measure effects on the entire presidentialism scale, we regressed the mean of the sub-scales on treatment assignment.

Average treatment effects (ATEs) across all waves for Study 1 are displayed in the top panel of Figure 1.[7] The left portion of the panel presents aggregated results by each constituent component of the scale by survey wave, while the right panel collapses the scale, again showing results for each wave. Table A.2 presents results by wave for this study as well as the subsequent studies. For this study, the results are consistent across all sub-scale as well as the full scale.

Being assigned to watch the inaugural provoked subjects to increase their confidence in Trump, their belief that Trump enjoys the respect of elites, and their belief that he exemplifies democratic values. These effects were observed immediately after the inauguration and were still apparent a week later, as shown in the third wave results. Subsequent studies, we shall see, did not yield effects that endured as long as those observed here, suggesting that the inauguration was an unusually powerful public performance.

---

[6]The question read: "Debates about television shows are a pastime of American life. Everyone has a different favorite show. We want to know if you are paying attention to this survey. To show you are paying attention, ignore the question below and choose both 'The Sopranos' and 'Saturday Night Live.' What's your favorite television show? Choose only one." Below the question was an array of 15 choices.

[7]Estimates of the effects of having actually watched the speech, rather than merely being encouraged to do so, can be recovered by using the random treatment assignment as an instrumental variable for uptake (Krueger, 1999). The resulting treatment on the treated (TOT) estimate is just a scalar increase in the ATE as a function of compliance patterns in the treatment and control groups. Though less informative about the actual effects of watching Trump's speech, the more conservative ATE estimates require fewer assumptions about contagion and spillover effects.

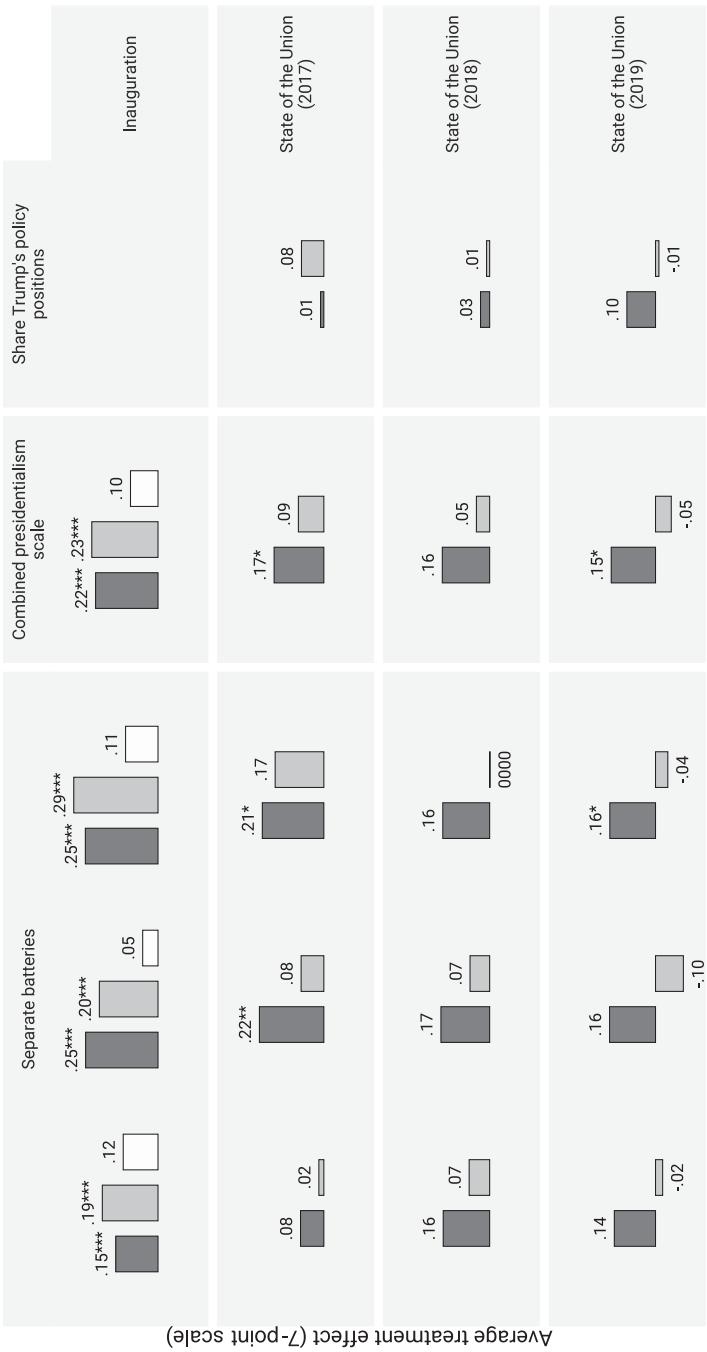

Figure 1: Treatment results across studies and waves. Bars indicate mean differences, subtracting the mean agreement among those in the control condition, from those who were assigned to see the inauguration, by dimension and survey waves. A positive value indicates that those in a treatment condition had a more positive view of Trump, or were more likely to share his issue positions, than subjects in the control group. Labels indicate differences and the associated levels of significance. Estimates are drawn from linear models, with errors clustered by randomization block.

Note: $^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$.

These results are robust to a wide range of measurement and modeling strategies. Rather than take the raw averages of respondents' answers, we also built scales that weight each item according to its estimated factor score. To account for effects of attrition, we followed Gerber and Green (2012) and applied inverse probability weights to our estimates. As a further robustness check, we separately estimated conditional differences *within* subjects who were observed across multiple survey waves. In all of these instances, we recovered similar results to those reported above.[8]

Trump's First Three Addresses before Congress

Recognizing the exceptional qualities of a presidential inauguration, we administered additional studies around Trump's first three addresses before Congress. The broad outlines of these studies were similar to the first one. Once again, we fielded a multi-wave encouragement design over Mechanical Turk, compensating subjects for each wave and entering them into a raffle. We recruited subjects with access to television roughly a week before the addresses, gathering standard demographic measures, and responses to our presidentialism scale. In each, we intermittently assigned members of the control group to either a placebo condition or to the same control condition as used in the first experiment. Again, details about all of these experiments can be found in Table A.1 of the Appendix.

In all these experiments, we block-randomized on partisanship, 2016 presidential vote, and Trump affective evaluation, separating subjects into treatment and placebo groups. The day before Trump's address, we messaged treatment subjects an encouragement to watch it, while we either emailed control subjects a message encouraging them to watch the Food Network at that time or we told them not to do anything at all. We again entered subjects into a raffle. To test whether subjects complied with their assignment, we again asked subjects a set of questions about facts relating to their treatment assignment.

Presidents routinely use their State of the Union address to communicate a set of policy objectives for the following year. In pre- and post-treatment waves, therefore, we asked subjects to express their level of agreement with policy issues that, we anticipated, Trump would discuss in his address. (The full text of all persuasion questions appears in Subsection A.1.1 of the Appendix.) We administered the survey a week before the address, immediately after its conclusion, and a final time a week later.

Subjects generally adhered to their assignments. Again, as above, our estimates do not depend on compliance, but the evidence we have on the issue is still worth reporting. For the 2017 congressional address, for instance, 89% of treatment subjects reported having watched Trump's address, while only 27.2%

[8] All of these results are available upon request.

of control subjects did. And it appears the treatment subjects did not just watch the address in passing — 80% of them reported having watched for longer than 30 minutes. We also asked subjects to choose which company, among five choices, Trump had mentioned recently meeting with representatives from. Fully 74.6% of treatment subjects correctly selected "Harley–Davidson." This suggests that, like the inauguration, treatment subjects watched the address, and did so intensely. (Table A.6 presents complete compliance results for Study 2.)

Perhaps the most striking evidence of compliance comes from placebo subjects. Just after the 2017 congressional address, for instance, we asked subjects who reported having watched the Food Network that night: "What kind of meat did the contestants make?" A description of the episode available in advance had said the contestants would make lamb. Lamb was one of four options. While subjects could only select one meat, the show contestants defied TV Guide and made *both* lamb and chicken. In all, 62.26% of our respondents correctly chose either lamb or chicken. We received three emails from subjects pointing out the discrepancy. "The contestants made lamb and chicken but it didn't let me pick both," wrote one eager-to-comply subject.

We followed the same estimation approach we used in Study 1. Average treatment effects (ATEs) across all waves of the experiments involving Trump's first three congressional addresses are displayed in the second, third, and fourth panels of Figure 1. The accompanying regression results can be found in Table A.2.[9]

In the three studies of Trump's addresses to Congress, the recovered treatment effects continue to be positive and, in some instances, statistically significant. In the immediate aftermath of the 2017 and 2019 addresses before Congress, those respondents who were encouraged to watch Trump's performance scored systematically higher on the overall presidential battery than did those respondents in the control group. In 2018, the treatment effect is positive and of similar magnitude, but it falls just below standard thresholds for statistical significance. In a variety of ways, however, the results from these subsequent studies are weaker than those from the inauguration. To begin, we only see statistically significant effects when examining the more precisely estimated effects associated with the full battery of questions. Second, the magnitude of the estimates attenuate, despite the fact that compliance patterns remain largely unchanged. And third, in all three studies, positive effects are confined to the post-treatment survey administered immediately after the presidential addresses. We find no evidence that respondents within

[9] A difference-in-difference approach to measuring and displaying effects is taken in Figure A.1, in the Appendix. Our substantive conclusion remains identical with this approach: The power of Trump's speeches to affect responses along our scale was at its peak after his inaugural address.

the treatment groups assess Trump any differently than do members of the control group just one week after these addresses before Congress. Collectively, these result suggest that the capacity of Trump's speeches to affect subjects' perceptions of his presidentialism was at its height at the beginning of his presidency.

In addition, we also found hardly any evidence that people were more likely to adopt his policy positions. In the three studies in which we evaluated his ability to sway policy views, we find no evidence that Trump brought treatment subjects around to his positions. Just as Trump's capacity to shape people's views about his presidentialism declined after his inauguration, his ability to change policy attitudes appears altogether fleeting.

Figure 2 illustrates the extent to which the effects varied by party for all four studies. Effects were largely concentrated among Democrats and independents. The inaugural left particularly sizable impressions on the latter — so much so that effects among this group were still detectable a week later. Given that this was the only study in which we found significant average effects in subsequent waves, the size of the third wave effect for independents is notable. Independents were also sharply affected by Trump's 2019 State of the Union Address. The 2018 address also impacted this group, though the difference narrowly missed conventional significance thresholds.

Political Implications of Presidentialism Scale

Does the presidentialism scale tap into beliefs beyond those relating to evaluations of the president? If performances like the First Inaugural and Trump's addresses before Congress can temporarily affect perceptions of presidentialism, what political consequences might follow? To answer these questions, we exposed subjects to four additional questions with more immediate political consequences: the then-upcoming midterm elections; whether Trump should be impeached; if Trump's 2016 campaign colluded with Russia; and if subjects would participate in an anti-Trump protest.[10]

[10]Specifically, we asked subjects: "If the election were held today, would you want to see the Republican or Democratic Party win control of the House of Representatives?" [Democratic Party/Republican Party/No opinion]; "Do you feel that President Trump should be impeached and removed from office?" [Yes, I feel that President Trump should be impeached and removed from office/No, I do not feel that President Trump should be impeached and removed from office/No opinion]; "Do you agree with the following statement: 'President Trump's campaign colluded with the Russian government in the 2016 presidential election."' [Strongly agree/Somewhat agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Somewhat disagree/Strongly disagree]; "If you were asked to take part in a protest against President Trump, would you do so?" [Definitely yes/Probably yes/Might or might not/Probably not/Definitely not].

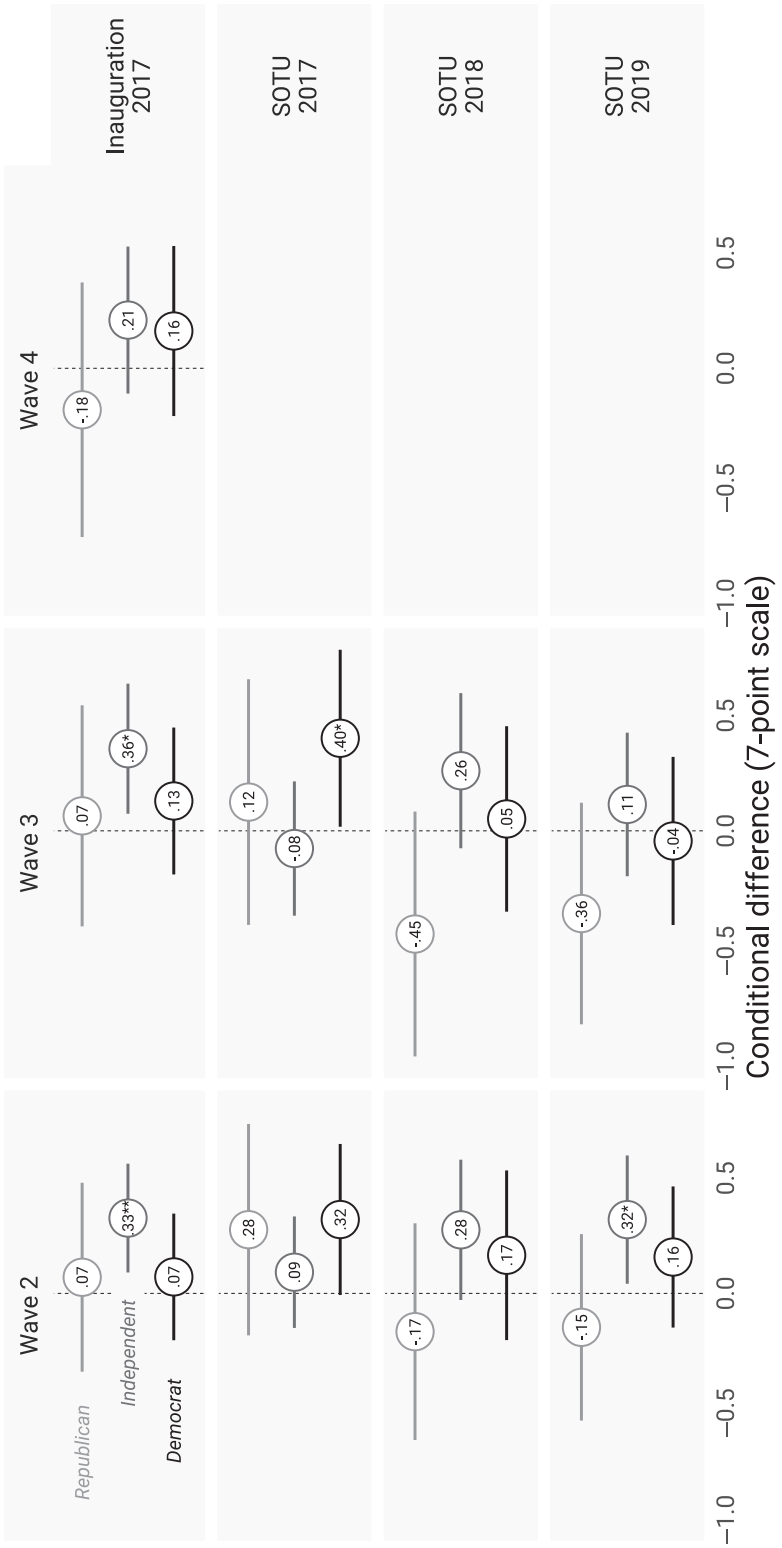

Figure 2: Regression contrasts for treatment effects, by respondent partisanship, for presidentialism scale, by wave and study. These estimates are drawn from the regression models in Table A.11 of the Appendix.

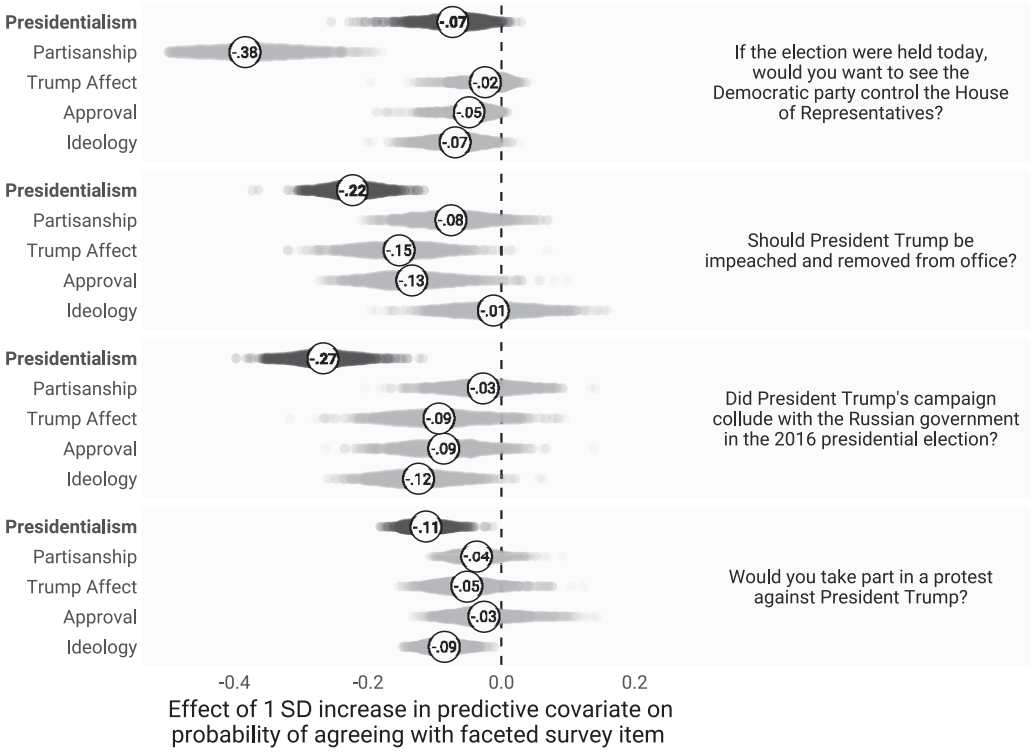

Figure 3: The political consequences of presidentialism. Each point indicates a simulation of the difference in probability of agreement with the survey item, as a result of a one-standard deviation increase in the predictive covariates listed on the y-axis, while holding all the other covariates at their means. The estimated models that generate these estimates are described in Table A.8 of the Appendix. The data used here were collected in January 2018 and come from the same survey that was used as the basis for the findings presented in Table 2.

Figure 3 displays our results. In the figure, each point estimate reflects the probability that a respondent will agree with the survey item, measured as a result of a one-standard deviation change in presidentialism. Subjects with lower estimates of Trump's presidentialism were strikingly more supportive of impeachment, more likely to say that Trump's campaign colluded with Russia, and more willing to take part in a protest against Trump. Perceptions of presidentialism are decidedly wrapped up in other significant political attitudes.

Moreover, because we also gathered measures of respondents' partisanship, Trump affect, Trump approval, and ideology, we are able to compare those covariates with presidentialism. For three of the survey items, presidentialism is the covariate that is most strongly predictive of agreement. Respondents with lower estimates of Trump's presidentialism were sharply more supportive of impeachment, more likely to say that Trump's campaign colluded with Russia, and more willing to take part in a protest against Trump. Interestingly, for all four questions, perceptions of presidentialism were more predictive than approval ratings. The only exception to this pattern concerns the 2018

elections. There, perhaps as one might expect, partisanship prevails. On the whole, these data offer compelling evidence that presidentialism does not merely relate to how people evaluate their presidents, but casts a large shadow — indeed, larger than traditional types of presidential evaluations — over their responses to broader questions of political importance.

Conclusion

Having deployed a straightforward identification strategy, we find that Trump's public appeals can have a discernible, if short-lived, impact on Americans' views toward him. Exposure to Trump's inaugural address caused some Americans to view their president differently — more exemplary of democratic values, more likely to command the respect of others, more worthy of confidence. These effects are most pronounced around his inaugural performance, though they are still detectable in the third year of his presidency.

Our focus on the public's assessments of Trump as presidential necessitated the construction of a new, 22-item presidentialism scale, designed to tap into the public's impressions that the president commands the respect of political elites, serves as a steward of the national interest, and demonstrates a commitment to democratic norms. We show empirically that these considerations are distinct from conventional measures of approval and policy preferences. Instead, they better capture the president's "reputation," "prestige," and general fitness for office (Neustadt, 1990). We further show that our scale is strongly related to views toward impeachment, the 2016 Trump campaign's relationship with Russia, and willingness to take part in an anti-Trump protest. Taken together, this evidence underlines the importance of the concept we are studying.

Our findings do not parse the individual elements of presidential performance. Our research design does not allow us to estimate the separate influence of, say, the visual and auditory elements of these performances; and certainly not the individual components therein, such as the size of the crowds, the symbols and flags, the tenor of the president's voice, and so forth. The findings on offer, instead, represent the overall effects after integrating over all these components, and we commend to future research the important work of disaggregating public performances into their constituent parts.

We do not know whether similar effects would be observed if and when similar experiments were administered about other presidents, or even other politicians who inhabit other stations of government. Nor do we know whether Trump's other performances — his rallies, say, or his impromptu press conferences — in any meaningful way improve his public image.

Our findings, instead, document the potential of presidential performances to reshape public opinion about the nation's chief executive. Having spent decades gauging the narrow effects of presidential appeals on public support for policies and limited approval measures, it is overdue for political scientists

to investigate the yet unknown ways that such appeals can affect broader perceptions of the person making them.

References

Barnes, L., A. Feller, J. Haselswerdt, and E. Porter. 2018. "Information, Knowledge and Attitudes: An Evaluation of the Taxpayer Receipt". *Journal of Politics* 80(2): 701–6.

Barrett, A. W. 2004. "Gone Public: The Impact of Going Public on Presidential Legislative Success". *American Politics Research* 32(3): 338–70.

Berinsky, A. J., G. A. Huber, and G. S. Lenz. 2012. "Evaluating Online Labor Markets for Experimental Research: Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk". *Political Analysis* 20: 351–68.

Berinsky, A. J., M. F. Margolis, and M. W. Sances. 2014. "Separating the Shirkers from the Workers? Making Sure Respondents Pay Attention on Self-administered Surveys". *American Journal of Political Science* 58(3): 739–53.

Brace, P. and B. Hinckley. 1992. *Follow the Leader*. New York: Basic Books.

Burridge, K. 1969. *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities*. Schocken Books.

Cameron, C. and J.-K. Park. 2011. "Going Public When Opinion Is Contested: Evidence from Presidents' Campaigns for Supreme Court Nominees, 1930–2009". *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41(3): 442–70.

Campbell, K. K. and K. H. Jamieson. 1990. *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Canes-Wrone, B. 2006. *Who Leads Whom? Presidents, Policy, and the Public*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cavari, A. 2013. "The Short-Term Effect of Going Public". *Political Research Quarterly* 66: 336–51.

Chwe, M. S.-Y. 2013. *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge*. Princton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cohen, J. E. 1997. *Presidential Responsiveness and Public Policy-Making*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Cohen, J. E. 2015. *Presidential Leadership in Public Opinion: Causes and Consequences*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Coppock, A. 2018. "Generalizing from Survey Experiments Conducted on Mechanical Turk: A Replication Approach". *Political Science Research and Methods*: 1–16.

Druckman, J. and J. Holmes. 2004. "Does Presidential Rhetoric Matter? Priming and Presidential Approval". *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34(4): 755–78.

Edelman, M. 1964. *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Edelman, M. 1971. *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence*. New York: Academic Press.

Edwards III, G. C. 2003. *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Edwards III, G. C. 2016. "The Nature of Presidential Leadership". In: *Triumphs and Tragedies in the Modern Presidency*. Ed. M. Angerholzer, J. Kitfield, N. Ornstein, and S. Skowronek. Santa Barbara, CA: Prager.

Eshbaugh-Soha, M. 2015. "Presidential Persuasion and Public Opinion". In: *Oxford Bibliographies: Political Science*. Oxford University Press.

Eshbaugh-Soha, M. 2016. "Going Public and Presidential Leadership". In: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Oxford University Press.

Eshbaugh-Soha, M. and J. S. Peake. 2011. *Breaking through the Noise: Presidential Leadership, Public Opinion, and the News Media*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Franco, A., J. Grimmer, and C. Lim. 2018. "The Limited Effect of Presidential Appeals". Working paper. Available at: https://www.dropbox.com/s/5ym94ggasbff260/public.pdf?dl=0.

Gabel, M. and K. Scheve. 2007. "Estimating the Effect of Elite Communications on Public Opinion". *American Journal of Political Science* 51(4): 1013–28.

Gerber, A. S. and D. P. Green. 2012. *Field Experiments: Design, Analysis and Interpretation*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company.

Gross, K., E. Porter, and T. J. Wood. 2018. "Identifying Media Effects Through Low-Cost, Multi-wave Field Experiments". *Political Communication*.

Hill, K. Q. 1998. "The Policy Agendas of the President and the Mass Public: A Research Validation and Extension". *American Journal of Political Science* 42: 1328–34.

Hinckley, B. 1990. *The Symbolic Presidency: How Presidents Portray Themselves*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Iaryczower, M. and G. Katz. 2016. "What Does It Take for Congress to Enact Good Policies? An Analysis of Roll Call Voting in the US Congress". *Economics & Politics* 28(1): 79–104.

Kernell, S. 2007. *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*. 4th edition. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press.

Kertzer, D. I. 1989. *Ritual, Politics, and Power*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Krueger, A. 1999. "Experimental Estimates of Education Production Functions". *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 114(2): 497–532.

Lee, F. E. 2008. "Dividers, Not Uniters: Presidential Leadership and Senate Partisanship, 1981–2004". *Journal of Politics* 70(4): 914–28.

Lowi, T. J. 1985. *The Personal President: Power Invested, Promise Unfulfilled*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Miroff, B. 2016. *Presidents on Political Ground: Leaders in Action and What They Face*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.

Mullinx, K. J., T. J. Leeper, J. N. Druckman, and J. Freese. 2015. "The Generalizeability of Survey Experiments". *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 2: 109–38.

Page, B. I. and R. Y. Shapiro. 1985. "Presidential Leadership through Public Opinion". In: *The Presidency and Public Policy Making*. Ed. G. C. Edwards III, S. A. Shull, and N. C. Thomas. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Page, B. I., R. Y. Shapiro, and G. R. Dempsey. 1987. "What Moves Public Opinion?" *American Political Science Review* 81: 23–44.

Ragsdale, L. 1984. "The Politics of Presidential Speechmaking, 1949–1980". *American Political Science Review* 78: 971–84.

Ragsdale, L. 1987. "Presidential Speechmaking and the Public Audience: Individual Presidents and Group Attitudes". *Journal of Politics* 49: 704–36.

Ragsdale, L. 2014. *Vital Statistics on the Presidency*. 4th edition. Washington, DC: CQ.

Rottinghaus, B. 2010. *The Provisional Pulpit: Modern Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.

Schechner, R. 1988. *Performance Theory*. London and New York: Routledge.

Simon, D. M. and C. W. Ostrom Jr. 1989. "The Impact of Televised Speeches and Foreign Travel on Presidential Approval". *Public Opinion Quarterly* 53: 58–82.

Sovey, A. J. and D. P. Green. 2011. "Instrumental Variables Estimation in Political Science: A Readers' Guide". *American Journal of Political Science* 55(1): 188–200.

Stuckey, M. and F. Antczak. 1998. "The Rhetorical Presidency: Deepening Vision, Widening Change". *Communication Yearbook* 21: 405–41.

Tedin, K., B. Rottinghaus, and H. Rodgers. 2011. "When the President Goes Public: The Consequences of Communication Mode for Opinion Change across Issue Types and Groups". *Political Research Quarterly* 64(3): 506–19.

Thomas, K. A. and S. Clifford. 2017. "Validity and Mechanical Turk: An Assessment of Exclusion Methods and Interactive Experiments". *Computers in Human Behavior* 77: 184–97.

Tulis, J. 1988. *The Rhetorical Presidency*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Welch, R. 2003. "Was Reagan Really a Great Communicator? The Influence of Televised Addresses on Public Opinion". *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33(4): 853–76.

Wood, B. D. 2007. *The Politics of Economic Leadership: The Causes and Consequences of Economic Leadership*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.