A Theory of Presidential Norms

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April 6, 2026

> There is some risk involved in action, there always is. But there is far more risk in failure to act.
>
> —Harry S Truman (1948)

> I believe it is important that the President of the United States personify the ideals of our society.
>
> —John F. Kennedy (1960)

1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present an integrated theoretical framework to examine how presidential norms shape presidential performance. The central claim is that

presidents strategically engage presidential norms, typically adhering to and sometimes deviating from presidential norms for political gain. The argument rests on the premise that presidents adhere to norms because they calculate that the costs of violating norms exceed the potential benefits of deviating from presidential norms. When presidents predict that violating presidential norms will yield greater political dividends than adhering to them, they will be tempted to do so. To articulate and evaluate this theory of presidential norms, I propose the Strategic Performance Model (SPM). The SPM provides a diverse set of conceptual tools, theories, and terms from within and outside political science unified under one framework to trace how presidents strategically engage norms through norm-adhering or norm-violating performances.

Presidential success depends upon a president's ability to perform adroitly in crucial moments. How presidents act shapes public evaluations and influences their political standing. Presidential performances make or break presidencies, yet existing research provides few tools to understand why presidential performances unfold as they do, how they operate, or the factors that shape them. This isn't to say that scholars haven't studied these aspects of presidential performances. Research on public appeals, public opinion, communication, and other subfields offers great insight into specific aspects of presidential performance. What's lacking is a general, unified framework to assess the phenomenon of presidential performance.

However, this is no easy feat. Performances are complex undertakings involving numerous roles, motivations, activities, and progressions. For a model of presidential performance to succeed analytically, it must simultaneously account for the full breadth and purpose of a presidential performance while simply and clearly clarifying the relationships between the various factors and motivations of the interested parties. The SPM brings together a set of analytical tools to assess how presidential performance is generated, enacted, experienced, and evaluated. The model aims for comprehensiveness, exploring not only the effects of one singular performance but also how performances cumulate over time to influence future per-

formances. It also aspires for parsimony, reducing the relevant actors to three players: the president, media, and public, and distilling the vast complexity and ambiguity of presidential performance and its consequences into a four-phase process motivated by political gain and not just duty, tradition, or personality.

One of the central features of the SPM is an emphasis on presidential norms, which influences every facet of presidential performance, from the alternatives presidents consider prior to a performance to the setting and content of a performance to whether and how the media frames a performance, and ultimately, the public's reaction to it. Given the importance of presidential norms in determining how presidents act, a model of presidential performance must account for a president's orientation toward presidential norms within a performance and trace the implications of presidential norm adherence or deviation on key constituencies. Thus, the SPM aims to (1) make the complex phenomena of presidential performance more intelligible; (2) provide a framework to systematically evaluate presidential performances; (3) highlight the central role performances play in presidential politics; and (4) explicate the impact of presidential norms in presidential politics. By exploring the dynamics that shape how presidents use strategic performances to mold public opinion for immediate political needs, this model offers a theory for how presidential norms evolve over time in response to changing public expectations about the presidency.

Overview

Before elaborating on the fine details of the model, it is useful to provide a general overview of the four-phase SPM. Figure 1 summarizes the model. At the outset, it is important to emphasize the role of presidential norms throughout this model. Presidential norms shape every facet of a presidential performance. Norms operate as both constraints and opportunities. Norms are wide-ranging, influencing how presidents dress, what they say, and when and how they say it. In many respects, these expectations make the office intelligible to the media and public. However, sometimes, presidents violate norms, by definition,

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
President: Deliberation and Performance	**Media:** Agenda Setting and Issue Framing	**Public:** Elite Discourse, Public Opinion, Memory Formation, and Voting	**Feedback:** Short-term and long-term effects
President deliberates strategy by considering alternatives. President's performance conforms to or deviates from presidential norms.	Agenda setting and issue framing for presidential performance as appropriate or inappropriate.	(1) Fraction of the public exposed to the performance, while some are never exposed to the performance; (2) recipients process presidential performance through an interpretive frame; (3) respond with change in orientation which results in either a punishment or reward for the president.	**Short term (within presidency):** President collects information and adjusts, while public forms judgments. **Long term (across presidencies):** Legacy formation; presidential norms emerge, sediment, and evolve through norm violation, imitation, and best practices.
Theoretical Considerations			
Elements of Performance • Script • Role • Stagecraft • Timing • Audience	• Model: traditional or social • Organizational priorities (e.g., financial, ideological, topical) • Journalistic norms (e.g. professional standards vs. outrage media)	• Social identity • Partisanship • Elite/Mass	

Figure 1: Model of How Strategic Performances Influence the Media, Public, and Presidential Norms

contrary to expectations. Existing research on presidential norms does not offer compelling explanations for why presidents sometimes violate norms. One of the defining features of the SPM is the assumption that presidents engage presidential norms strategically, adhering to and violating presidential norms based on a cold calculation of political advantage. The implication is that, under some circumstances, violating presidential norms is a politically advantageous decision. As such, the SPM updates existing approaches for understanding the role of presidential norms, which fail to recognize the strategic considerations involved with presidential norms and the potential political dividends derived from strategic norm violation.

The decision for a president to adhere to or deviate from presidential norms is the product of a calculation that factors in various equities with the aim of determining the optimal course of action. Their assessment must take the incentive structure of the media into consideration, for it is not always neutral. In their broadcasts, media outlets filter, contextualize, and editorialize presidential performances, profoundly influencing how or even

if a president's actions will be received by the public. Presidents must also consider the public. However, the literature is vague regarding the public's role. If mentioned, existing research on presidential norms characterizes the public as a monolithic, undifferentiated mass. The SPM conceptualizes the public as an active and fragmented audience whose reception of presidential performances, or whether they even encounter them, is shaped by prior beliefs, ideology, political context, and other interests. Finally, little is known regarding how presidential norms emerge, evolve, or break down. By contrast, the SPM underscores the iterative nature of presidential image construction, with each successive performance building on previous ones, ultimately shaping the long-term reputation of the president and influencing future presidencies. Norms are affirmed or dismantled by a feedback loop that motors the presidential norm life cycle.

This cursory overview of the SPM underscores how presidential norms are deeply interwoven into the fabric of the presidency. Presidential norms shape almost every facet of how presidents enact the presidency, from how presidents formulate strategy and make decisions to how they engage political elites behind closed doors or address the public. Presidential norms, expectations of the president, also inform how the media and the public evaluate presidents. The routines of connection and the evaluative criteria are normative in nature. For example, presidential press conferences, in particular, and the public presidency, in general, are supported by a bevy of presidential norms. A president's actual performance is compared against what is considered appropriate or befitting of a president. The model emphasizes the relationship between established presidential norms and the coverage and reception of presidential performances. The upshot is that whatever a president's aims, partisan affiliation, or ideological outlook, they must reckon with and ultimately navigate the complex of presidential norms to perform their role effectively. Whether a president seeks to strategically adhere to or deviate from a presidential norm in a given situation, they nevertheless serve as an essential reference point from which to begin.

In what follows, the four phases of the model are explored in detail, explicating how presidential norms shape performances, how those performances affect the public, and how the process constitutes and reconstitutes the presidency through iterative performances. To investigate the nature and impact of presidential performance, we will apply performance studies frameworks developed to study theater. After, we will explore the role of norm violation in this framework. Sometimes, adhering to norms doesn't always yield the most effective performances. Under some circumstances, strategic norm violation might promise superior results to adherence. Thus, we will explain how strategic violations coexist with norm adherence and propel the evolution of presidential norms.

2 Phase 1: Strategic Performance

Overview

Phase 1 is further divided into two stages: deliberation and performance. The strategic component necessitates presidents to take the time to consider their aims, constraints, opportunities, and the manner in which they intend to perform for a given circumstance (Porter, 1982, 230). The deliberation stage consists of at least three steps. First, the president must find an occasion to make a decision. This could be as formal as a cabinet meeting or as informal as a late-night discussion with a few individual aides. The essential feature is the active effort to set aside the space and time to consider an action. The president then identifies a set of alternatives in search of a possible course of action. The deliberation stage concludes when the president chooses a course of action. Deliberation relates to the development of a coordinated strategy and tactics that accords with a president's overall objectives and aims.

Once a president devises a strategy, they select an advantageous moment to enact their

intention through performance. In presidential performances, as with unilateral action, the president retains the advantage of moving first, leveraging opportunities to realize their plans and aims through the evidence and symbolism of their objective person and strategic behavior (Mayer, 1999; Moe, 1998; Howell, 2003). Although strategy and preparation inform their approach, once the president takes the stage, whether that be behind closed doors in high-level negotiations with world leaders, before Congress during a State of the Union address, or on a nationally televised address directed to the American people, the inherent uncertainty of real-time action imbues presidential performances with contingency. Presidents may have a script, yet choose to meander or make "unplanned" remarks to the press that have, in fact, been premeditated for weeks (Kernell, 1993, 106). Every presidential performance is described by at least five features: actors, stagecraft, scripts, timing, and action. Presidential norms fundamentally structure all five key features of performance. In this sense, presidential norms make presidential performances intelligible as such. Even when they are violated, the fact of a norm being broken is part of what makes the action noteworthy.

Theoretical Considerations

Effective presidents are consummate performers. The unanticipated success of great entertainer-turned-politicians like Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump attest to the value of compelling performance in presidential politics. In fact, performance has been central to the presidency since Washington. However, the importance of this dimension of the office has only increased in the modern era with the rise of mass media. Compelling performance is of recognized importance regarding a president's ultimate success, but the nature of this aspect of the presidency is poorly understood. The challenge lies in applying a mode of analysis that is flexible enough to capture the essence of the phenomenon (i.e., acting to shape public opinion) yet precise enough for careful observation, measurement, and inference.

To leverage the analytical potential of the concept of performance and explain how presidents strategically act for political gain, we must begin with a deceptively simple ques-

tion. What is a performance? The term poses a conceptual challenge similar to that of norms. Similarly, no consensus definition of the term exists. In this sense, performance is a contested yet analytically generative concept used to describe:

> A broad spectrum of actions ranging from play, games, sports, popular entertainments, and rituals to the performing arts, professional roles, political personae, media, and the constructions of race, gender, and identity in everyday life (Schechner, 2020, 1).

Given the breadth of activity subsumed by this usage, definitions tend to be capacious. Erving Goffman's approach is indicative of this mode. He defines performance as:

> All the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way the other participants. Taking a particular participant and his performance as a basic point of reference, we may refer to those who contribute to the other performances as the audience, observers, or co-participants. The pre-established pattern of action which is unfolded during a performance and which may be presented or played through on other occasions may be called a "part" or "routine" (Goffman, 1959, 15-16).

This conception of performance emerged as an outgrowth of the scholars across the disciplinary spectrum who incorporated "presentational forms associated with theatrical performance" into diverse fields of study such as political science, anthropology and sociology, and "transformed [them] into analytical tools" to evaluate social life (McKenzie, 2001, 8). What unifies these various activities is the performer's acute awareness of what they are doing, how others perceive them, and the conscious effort on the part of the performer to influence perception.

Goffman's (1959) application of dramaturgy to explore social life led him to observe that people routinely manipulate their presentation-of-self to manage their relationships. Extending the metaphor of theater to the reaches of social life, Goffman likened individuals to performers, who act out their social roles on stage with teams to impress watchful audiences. The framework he developed "can be applied to any concrete social establishment, be it domestic, industrial, or commercial" (Goffman, 1959, xi). Social scientists, philosophers, and gender theorists have taken up this approach assiduously and have used the concept of performance and principles derived from dramaturgy to explicate the construction of complex identities like race and gender (Butler, 1999). From this perspective, "all the world's a stage," and we are all performers; performance permeates social life.

More than any other researcher, Richard Fenno is most associated with transporting an emphasis on performance to the study of American politics (Fenno, 1977, 1978). His research explored how elected representatives perceived their constituency and how those perceptions shaped their subsequent behavior. Exploring this subject by "soaking and poking," Fenno spent months with a number of members of the House of Representatives while they were in their districts to observe how his subjects behaved before their constituents (Fenno, 1977, 884). Fenno argued that a House member's perceptions shape both how they vote in Washington, and how they act at home. He coined the term *home style* to describe their effort to cultivate their constituencies. A key component of a House member's home style is their presentation of self, a term he borrowed directly from Goffman (Fenno, 1977, 898). He writes, "Goffman's dramaturgical analogues are appropriate to politics because politicians, like actors, perform before audiences and are legitimized by their audiences" (Fenno, 1977, 898). The ultimate aim of the politician is political support, and Fenno argues they strategically perform to accomplish this objective. Fenno considered politicians to be a special class of human beings who, more than most people, "consciously try to manipulate" their presentation of self for impression management (Fenno, 1977, 898). He hypothesized that their presentation could be explained by three factors: context, personal motives, and strategic

considerations (Fenno, 1977, 907). The implication is that how a member performs, guided by the goal of political advantage, is variable, strategic, and informed by their view of public perceptions.

Fenno's investigation focused on members of Congress and their presentation of self within the context of their particular district. However, his general approach can be applied productively to other elected officials, including, perhaps especially, U.S. presidents. This is due to the nature of the modern presidency—its singularity and influence, intense media coverage, and reliance on public support—which motivates presidents to endeavor to ascertain public perception and manipulate it through strategic performances (Druckman and Jacobs, 2015). The media age has transformed the presidency into the world's greatest stage and elevated the president to worldwide fame and concern. Surely, what they do with this attention is consequential and based on political calculation. Conceptualizing the president primarily as an actor provides a ready-made and germane set of terms and framework to evaluate how perception shapes their performance and the consequent effects thereof on the institution of the presidency and American politics. As such, following Fenno, the SPM frames presidential performance in dramaturgical terms to explore how the elements of performance come together to affect the public.

Presidential Norms: Script

Key to any performance is the script, which details how the roles, stage direction, dialogue, scene, and setting coalesce to produce a choreographed situation. Thus, we can start by thinking of the presidency as a role and the incumbent president as an **actor** who plays the part by acting "presidential." From this perspective, presidential norms serve as a general, unwritten, and unofficial **script** to guide the production of presidential performances.

Acting Presidential: Role

When presidents adhere to presidential norms, they exhibit the appearance, speech,

and deportment that people expect from the office. In theatrical terms, these expectations refer to costume, dialogue, and manner, respectively. Typically, presidents present conservatively and modestly, usually clad in navy suits and solid or striped ties, clean-shaven, with closely cropped hair (Givhan, 2007). They are meticulous in their appearance and highly conscious of how the wider public will perceive their deportment. It is important to seem self-possessed, in control, and unbowed by the tremendous pressure and stress of the office. Presidents aren't afforded the luxury of having the occasional bad day. With the world watching, failures to uphold public expectations about how a president should come across can sap the public's confidence in a president's leadership and undermine their actual capacity to govern. For example, President Herbert Hoover's remoteness from the public was perceived as aloofness and contributed to his reputation as indifferent to the suffering wrought by the Great Depression.

Through their performance, presidents must convey certain qualities expected of a president, such as optimism, patriotism, assertiveness, and vitality. They must also evince more complex, nuanced qualities, such as bold leadership without parochialism or pettiness (e.g., presidents shall not bow) (Seligman, 1956; Ohlheiser, 2014), reassuring confidence without softness (e.g., such as George W. Bush's rousing bull horn speech in the wreckage of Ground Zero), and eloquence without intellectualism (Lim, 2008). To communicate these qualities, they must demonstrate them palpably through how they dress, what they say, and the manner in which they move and act during their public performances.

Some expectations regarding what makes someone presidential are qualities less amenable to easy manipulation, such as gender and racial identity, sexual orientation, profession, and religious affiliation. Nevertheless, these factors matter in terms of who is considered a plausible presidential candidate from the perspective of the media and the public, which we will cover in greater detail in the sections to come. Table 1 shows that less than 50 percent of Americans would vote for their party's well-qualified nominee if they happened to be a

	All	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Obese	59.4	61.5	54.2	59.9
No BA	54.7	48.6	52.4	64.5
Billionaire	54.4	47.8	48.8	67.2
An evangelical Christian	53.8	45.3	46.4	70.2
Feminist	50.6	63.7	50.0	33.2
Transgender	43.9	56.4	45.8	25.6
Muslim	42.6	53.9	47.6	24.0
Atheist	42.1	49.4	44.0	30.9
Socialist	40.2	56.4	42.9	16.4
In debt	22.7	26.0	23.8	17.6
Mentaly Ill	14.3	20.7	13.7	6.1
Racist	7.5	10.6	6.0	4.2

Note: If your party nominated a generally well-qualified person for president who happened to be (see above), would you vote for that person? % Yes, would vote for. Source: 2022 nationally representative sample of 788 Americans.

Table 1: Americans' Willingness to Vote for Presidential Candidates From Certain Groups

Muslim, socialist, or atheist. It is thus noteworthy that of the 45 men who have held the office, all can be identified as Christians, most have been wealthy, and only one has had demonstrable non-European ancestry. Presidents communicate in traditionally masculine ways and assume office alongside their wives and children. More than a useful prop for a president's political ambitions, the First Family holds real cultural and political significance, serving as a patrimonially-tinged synecdoche for the nation as a whole, with the president serving as the literal and figurative pater familias. Presidents have traditionally embraced such paternalistic associations of the office.

Many American children grow up venerating the president as a benevolent leader (Greenstein, 1960). Perhaps one of the most significant yet underappreciated aspects of presidential performance is how presidents observe their religion. As moral leaders, presidents typically publicly adhere to the moral conventions of the day, such as avoiding swearing in public (Wootson, 2018). The president's role as a national leader is deeply tied to their purported Christian faith (noa). The presidential norm that presidents swear the oath of office on

a Bible during the presidential inauguration ritual is indicative of the often unacknowledged relationship between presidential legitimacy and religious faith. Although the Constitution requires no religious tests to serve as president, it seems like the public does. Americans are much less likely to support Muslim and Atheist candidates than they are Christians (Mitchell, 2016). All these factors combined make presidents "equivalent to the nation, religious and cultural leaders" (Hinckley, 1990, 133). These presidential norms constitute only a portion of the role presidents attempt to enact to satisfy the outsized expectations of the office (Neustadt, 1991). What's clear is that to be president, you've got to act the part.

Scene and Setting: Timing and Stagecraft

Presidential norms are what make presidential performances so distinctive as a genre. Besides instructing presidents on how they should look, what they should say, and the manner in which they should present themselves, presidential norms guide presidential behavior by greatly influencing the scene and setting of a presidential performance. **Setting** refers to the time and place of a presidential performance. This includes what the audience observes in the background of a performance, such as the physical environment and props, as well as the historical and political context in which a performance unfolds (Skowronek, 1997, 18). The **scene** refers to the specific place and moment in which the performance takes place and the sequence of activity following the inciting incident. Scenes are the smallest meaningful segment of a performance. The deliberate production of a scene is called **stagecraft**. Presidential norms inform the scene and setting of presidential performances.

Some of the most memorable moments in American history were presidential performances acted out in the familiar trappings of places like the Oval Office, Camp David, and the Rose Garden. Repeated usage of these places by presidents in moments of consequence continues to invest them with historical weight and reinforce their indelible association with the presidency. When presidents perform in these contexts, they explicitly invoke the legacy and grandeur of the office and implicitly invite comparisons with the history-making deeds

of their predecessors. Empirical research assessing the political consequences of the usage of these evocative settings remains limited, but the emerging work on the subject is striking. A recent study finds simply witnessing a president give a State of the Union address in the setting of the House Chamber increases public confidence in the president and makes them seem more "presidential" (Howell et al., 2020).

Even when necessity forces presidents to venture outside these hallowed settings, such as addressing foreign audiences, barnstorming on the campaign trail, or recharging during a vacation, presidential norms still subtly guide the show. For example, presidents are expected to visit areas recently devastated by natural disasters. Whenever they perform, no matter where they are, presidents require a scene worthy of the august office they occupy. To ensure the performance goes off without a hitch, teams of White House aides, so-called "advance men" are deployed days ahead of a scheduled event to meticulously stage the visual environment of the designated site of performance to ensure that the setting is adequately presidential (King, 2016).

The right props and stagecraft can make almost any location befitting of a presidential performance. Perhaps the most important icon in the repertoire is the American flag. When it comes to Old Glory, more and bigger is better. Presidential performances are lavishly decorated with flags to foreclose any doubts about where a president's loyalties lay. Another presidential performance mainstay is the presidential seal. When presidents speak, they usually stand before a podium with the iconic presidential seal emblazoned on the front. But before they take the stage, the United States Marine Band, who accompany the president wherever they go, plays "Hail to the Chief" to announce their arrival. The teleprompter, invented in 1949, has been an enduring element of presidential performance since Dwight D. Eisenhower first used it during the 1952 presidential campaign and his State of the Union Address in 1954 (Stromberg, 2012). By carefully choreographing the scene and setting, presidents endeavor to contextualize their performances to produce an awe-inspiring exhibition

of power, magnificence, and command. In doing so, they influence the perceptions of their power that go a long way in determining it in reality.

Application

The essential elements of a presidential performance are the actors, the audience, and the stage. Audience refers to the media and public, which we will discuss later in the chapter. Presidents direct and star in their own performances. They are not auteur, however. Their control over the performance is mitigated by various factors, particularly presidential norms. Presidential norms are a sort of script or blueprint for presidential performance. They inform what presidents say (i.e., dialogue), how presidents move and communicate non-verbally (i.e., stage directions), where and how presidents present themselves (i.e., scenery), the motivations and expectations of the position (i.e., role), and the timing in which they act (i.e., setting). Although presidential norms serve as a basic standard for performance, they are not inviolable. Presidents can strategically defy expectations on any one of these dimensions within a performance.

By playing the role of "president"—taking special consideration regarding what they say, where and how they appear, and the manner in which they comport themselves once they choose to act—presidents choreograph their activities to enhance their political situation. Adhering to the norms in these areas can shroud their performances with the majesty and tradition of the office. However, as mentioned, presidents don't always adhere to presidential norms. Moreover, that's not always a bad decision. Presidential norm violations can occur in any of these dimensions of presidential performance (i.e., role, setting, or scene). In this respect, within a performance, presidents can violate norms in one domain yet adhere to norms in another.

For example, Donald Trump typically adheres to norms of dress and setting. Usually clad in his navy suit and bright red power tie, Trump has turned the Oval Office into the

primary scene of his second term, presenting himself routinely before the press. When he's outside of the White House, he suffuses his public appearances with American flags. He's more apt to violate norms concerning how presidents should act and speak. He curses and makes inflammatory remarks, such as saying, "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters" or when he referred to Haiti and African nations as "shithole countries" (ABC News, 2016; Davis et al., 2018). He violates structural norms, such as facilitating a peaceful transfer of power, with aplomb. Conversely, Barack Obama typically talked and carried himself according to expectations befitting of a president. However, he didn't always adhere to such expectations regarding how a president is supposed to look. His tan suit and mom jeans are particularly high-profile examples of Obama violating the presidential dress code. Obama was also willing to go where no president had gone before. His visit to El Reno Federal Correctional Facility made him the first president to visit a prison. The upshot is that presidential performances can become norm-violating even if only one aspect of the performance transgresses presidential norms.

The SPM leverages the conceptual forms and richness of theatrical performance to analyze the nature of the norms-based presidency. One of the primary objectives is to facilitate empirical research by deconstructing presidential performance into its constituent parts. This facilitates analysis because every presidential performance can be described and assessed according to these features. The SPM distinguishes two types of presidential performances: norm-violating performances and norm-adherent performances. This is determined by evaluating whether a norm was violated in any of the essential elements of performance. If a presidential norm is broken with regard to any one of the elements of performance, the performance is classified as norm-violating. A further benefit is that the nature of norm violations can be described with greater specificity and assessed in relation to other elements of the performance that may or may not be norm-violating (i.e., just because one part of the performance is norm-violating doesn't mean that other parts are, too). Taken altogether, the SPM assesses the relationship between presidential performance and presidential norms

by decontextualizing and deconstructing presidential performance into its constituent parts.

During a presidential performance, when the president acts, they do so with an audience in mind, perhaps the nation as a whole, even if the immediate witnesses include only several aides, producers, and camera operators, as during televised addresses. Alternatively, some performances, such as inaugural addresses, routinely include thousands of physical spectators alongside a small army of press. In any performance, the goal is to influence the audience. However, access to the mass audiences presidents seek to reach is jealously mediated by a set of actors—newspapers, social media outlets, cable news shows, etc.—who may not share a president's goals and outlook. Press coverage of the president is incessant. Hundreds of reporters cover the White House every day. The press pool, a traveling corps of journalists, follows the president wherever he goes, across the globe on state business or across the country on vacation. However, this incessant coverage of the president is motivated by more than civic duty. The media have an agenda of its own, too. Thus, for presidents to shape public opinion, they must take into consideration not only the public's motivations and preferences but also the media's. In the next section, we turn to phase 2 of the SPM, which concerns the role of the media in presidential performances.

3 Phase 2: Media Coverage

Overview

The media covers the presidential performance, mediating the president's act and the public's reception of it. As such, the media serves as an essential bridge between the president and the public, documenting the president's performance and broadcasting its coverage to viewers. However, The relationship between the president and the media is complicated. In some respects, the relationship can be described as symbiotic. Presidents

use the media to stay relevant and engage the public. The press uses its access to produce highly interesting stories about the president for its subscribers, readers, and users. At least since Teddy Roosevelt, White House reporters have had close access to presidents. Today, hundreds of journalists, bloggers, podcasters, and other various types of president-watchers are dedicated to covering every move the president makes. In this way, media outlets are both consumers and producers of presidential performances, transmuting live and fleeting instances into endlessly transmissible media content distributed through various channels, such as television, radio, newspapers, social media, and online platforms.

There's also an antagonistic dynamic between the press and the presidency where their interest diverge. Media coverage is influenced by various factors, including a media outlet's ideological, financial, and stylistic prerogatives. These factors are embedded in the editorial process and lead to systematically different coverage of the same stories (Davenport and Litras). Editorial decisions regarding whether the performance is covered, its prominence, and how the material is presented influence if and how members of the public receive and interpret presidential actions (Kinder and Kam, 2010).

Theodore Roosevelt's presidency ushered a seismic change in the way presidents engaged the public. One of his main innovations was his new conception of the president's role in public discourse. He described the office as a "bully pulpit," a unique, elevated platform to espouse a sweeping national program for the public's welfare. Although the president occupies a rarefied space in public discourse, ultimately, the media sets the agenda. News organizations do this by deciding which issues get the most attention. In prioritizing some issues over others, the media directs public attention and influences what is perceived as important. Even the president must take this into account since the media decides to what extent a presidential performance is newsworthy. One of the president's major sources of influence—their relationship with the public—is at stake in this dynamic. Increased coverage amplifies the president's performance, while media disinterest can diminish a president's

capacity to shape public opinion and erode their political standing.

In Phase 2, the media choose whether, how prominently, and in what manner a presidential performance is evaluated and broadcast to the public. Presidents attempt to influence their coverage by producing intriguing, newsworthy events to capture media interest. For example, the news media's copious coverage of Donald Trump's shocking, norm-violating 2016 presidential campaign generated billions of dollars of free "earned media" for the candidate and amplified his message (Azari, 2016; Confessore and Yourish, 2016). Presidents can draw media attention quite easily, especially if they stimulate controversy.

Controversy is risky, however, because presidents have little control over how the media chooses to frame a performance. Framing refers to a variety of concepts used to describe how information is presented or interpreted, with important implications for how people respond to it. Phase 2 also focuses on media framing, which refers to the "words, images, phrases, and presentational styles" the media uses to relay presidential performances to the public (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). Scholars have found that frames can have a statistically significant effect on how information is processed (Nelson et al., 1997). The way in which the media frames a presidential performance can be conceived of as a type of *issue framing* (Jacoby, 2000). As noted, presidents actively seek to frame their performances. To avoid confusion, I will refer to how the president frames their performance as *staging*. Table 2 presents the terms and concepts and diagrams the connection between presidential activity and the media's response.

Table 2: Overview of Terms and Concepts

	President	Media
Action	Performance (*e.g., norm violating performance*)	Agenda setting (*e.g., prominence of coverage*
Framing action	Staging/frame construction (*e.g., choice of medium*)	Issue framing (*e.g., editorial decisions*
Conditions	Before and during the event	During and after the event

The SPM simplifies the range of options a media outlet has regarding how it covers

a presidential performance. Once a president takes action, the media can ignore the performance or choose to frame it as either appropriate (e.g., "presidential") or inappropriate (e.g., "unpresidential"). A president's strategy toward presidential norms influences how they are covered by the press. Presidents are faced with uncertainty regarding which strategy will be most effective. Adhering to norms is a risk-averse but potentially sub-optimal strategy. While violating norms is risky, it is potentially beneficial under some circumstances. General conformity to presidential norms makes the pool of instances from which to draw uneven. For example, all incumbent presidents used the White House as their primary residence, even though the Constitution issues no restrictions regarding where a president can live. Instances of significant norm violations are fewer but consequently more striking. John F. Kennedy was the last president to wear a hat during his inauguration, notably taking it off during his swearing-in ceremony and inaugural address.

In Phase 2, the media covers presidential performances, making determinations regarding headlines, content, and prominence of their stories of the episode. These editorial choices help the public make sense of the performance in relation to its broader political context. At the most basic level, the media evaluate the performance against what they expected. These expectations are derived from their view of the individual but also from widespread expectations for the office—what's considered presidential or behavior befitting the president. The media determines this by evaluating and interpreting the performance. However, some presidential performances are vague or ambiguous. The media's framing can clarify and crystallize the meaning of a hitherto undefined or inchoate performance. For example, Barack Obama drew criticism for saluting a Marine with a cup of coffee in his hand. On the surface, Obama adhered to the norm that presidents salute military personnel when boarding and departing Air Force One and Marine One. However, Fox News and other conservative news outlets framed the performance as unpresidential because of the implied lack of respect for the military Obama's distracted salute supposedly revealed. It can also cast novel presidential activities as perfectly consistent with the expectations of the president.

Obama is considered the first social media president. However, the use of these nascent mediums caused little stir despite the great significance of this sea change in presidential communication.

Theoretical Considerations

The media is the primary mechanism through which the public is exposed to presidential performances. However, not all media are created equal. In the words of media theorist Marshall McLuhan, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan and Lapham, 2002). The American political media landscape is a highly competitive communications network, composed of numerous outfits that are highly variegated in terms of style and mission (Benkler et al., 2018). The result is considerable variation in the coverage of presidential performances. Of the many qualities that distinguish the media, three stand out as particularly important in terms of how presidential performances are covered. The first distinguishing characteristic is their orientation toward journalistic norms. The coverage of news organizations that adhere to journalistic norms differs substantially from those that don't. The second distinguishing characteristic concerns their organizational priorities. Whether an outlet's priority is ideological, partisan, financial, or entertainment, the result is the motivation for slanted coverage of events. The third distinguishing characteristic is technological in nature and refers to the contrasting ways digital (e.g., social) media and traditional media function. These two models of communication present sharply different considerations and implications for presidential performances. The upshot is that the fraction of the public exposed to a given presidential performance will witness it filtered through particular media outlets—and their standards, values, and structure—which has significant ramifications for how the performance is ultimately depicted and consumed.

3.1 Journalistic Norms

The first characteristic is a media outlet's orientation toward journalistic norms. Journalistic norms comprise a set of professional standards to ensure truthfulness, objectivity, accuracy, and other principles adopted to enhance the quality and respectability of journalism. With the rise of cable news and other political opinion shows based on outrage, a declining proportion of political news consumed is constrained by principles of objectivity (Berry and Sobieraj, 2016). Driven more by the desire to entertain than to inform, these outlets cover presidential performances in profoundly different ways than media constrained by journalistic norms.

Professional standards such as fact-based reporting, transparency, and harm-reduction constrain how outlets can tell their stories. Old-line institutions such as *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Associated Press* are examples of media outlets still guided by such a code. As national outlets, they represent the pinnacle of American journalism. As a class, however, they represent a dying breed. Local newspapers in this mold are disappearing. The expense of running what was once considered a legitimate journalistic operation is staggering in an age where the content is plentiful, and the competition for attention is intense. Many outfits apparently find it easier to survive without adherence to professional journalistic norms.

Whereas journalistic norms steer reportage toward staid, reserved, and fact-based coverage of events, political media unconstrained by such standards tends toward outrage, sensationalism, and opinion. For many political news consumers, objectivity is a small price to pay compared to the validation derived from the consumption of ideologically aligned opinionated media (Levendusky, 2009). Some of the most popular examples can be found across the political spectrum, such as *Fox News*, *Huff Post*, and *Breitbart*. In the main, right-wing media is qualitatively different than centrist and left-wing media because even "core

right-wing sites," such as *Fox News* and the *Daily Caller* do not adhere to journalistic norms (Benkler et al., 2018, 14). Media without stringent professional standards are susceptible to the dissemination of disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda. Benkler et al. (2018) describe the right-wing media ecosystem as "radicalized," where conspiracy theories, half-truths, and outright lies proliferate and are packaged as "news."

The consequences of the rise of media outfits unbound by the standards of journalism on American democracy are profound, especially as it relates to coverage of the U.S. president. Public trust in the media has plummeted to all-time lows. At the same time, more and more Americans are receiving their political news from sources that are likely to validate rather than challenge their views. The combination of greater demand for ideologically-aligned political news and a decreasing supply of professional journalism further polarizes the electorate. Siloed into partisan and ideological echo chambers, how the public receives and interprets presidential performances will vary largely by where they get their news. This diminishes the likelihood of consensual reactions from the public to any given presidential performance, even norm-violating ones.

3.2 Media Incentives

The second distinguishing characteristic is the outlet's organizational priorities. A media outlet's editorial decisions are a function of the financial, ideological, or institutional interests of the organization's ownership. The press has always been guided by other motivations beyond the desire to impartially inform the public. Prior to the emergence of journalistic norms, newspapers generally had no illusion of presenting their coverage as unbiased. Most American newspapers before the twentieth century were party organs that unabashedly advocated the party line (Kaplan, 2002). Publishers and editors were routinely active in the highest levels of politics. It wasn't until the turn of the century that publishers, such as

William Randolph Hearst, realized that they could rake in outsized profits from newspapers with the use of advertising (Kaplan, 2002). Around this same time, yellow journalism emerged to captivate public attention with sensational headlines and coverage. Muckraking journalists ostensibly serving the public interest with their detailed investigations exposing corruption during the Gilded Age were eventually discredited by many for their unscrupulous approach.

Today, money remains a significant motivation for media outlets. In fact, media is big business. Behemoths such as the New York Times (NYSE: NYT) and Fox Corporation (NASDAQ: FOXA) are publicly traded companies that generate billions of dollars of annual revenue. The source of this revenue is attention. Thus, media outlets are compelled to continuously seek to produce novel and interesting content relevant to their existing customer base and enticing prospective clients. With the advent of social media and the digital age, the competition for attention has only intensified. Social media companies use algorithms to understand user preferences and personalize their feeds to maximize user engagement. One of the unintended consequences of this automated approach is a proliferation of highly engaging but incendiary and provocative content (Munn, 2020). Owners of these organizations can alter their algorithms to affect what users see. For example, in January 2025, X (formerly Twitter) owner and at the time the world's richest man, Elon Musk, changed the social media website's algorithm to "promote more informational and entertaining posts" (noa, 2025). According to one study, he also tweaked the algorithm to boost his own account and those of conservatives following his endorsement of Donald Trump in July 2024 (Andrejevic and Graham, 2024; **?**).

A vast majority of the content consumed by the American public is produced by private companies. The leaders of these companies are accountable primarily to the shareholders. Owners of media outlets can use their platforms to amplify their political beliefs, promote outside interests, and make a profit. For much of the history of American journalism, these

prerogatives were pursued explicitly and generally accepted as natural to the enterprise. The rise of journalistic norms in the 20th century obscured this aspect of journalism somewhat. However, the decline of journalistic standards and print media, alongside the rise of social media, has left control of the levers of media power in the hands of just a few. Decisions from the top, shaped by organizational interests, trickle down to the rank and file and ultimately shape how a media outlet covers presidential performances.

3.3 Technology

A third characteristic distinguishing media outlets is whether they are traditional media or digital media. Traditional media refers to well-established broadcast media such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and direct mail. Digital media refers to digital communication that emerged during the internet age, such as social media, YouTube, podcasts, and email. Changes in the media landscape have fundamentally reshaped how presidents engage the media, providing new opportunities and challenges to effectively reach the public. Careful consideration of these factors sets the stage for better coverage and impactful performance, while inattention may lead to bad coverage or, worse yet, invisibility and, thus, ineffectual performances.

Traditional and digital media use categorically different communication models to reach their audiences. Traditional media is based on a broadcast model, wherein information is centrally produced and distributed to a mostly passive audience. The audience is treated primarily as consumers, while broadcasters compete by producing high-quality content. Social media operates under a fundamentally different paradigm. Social media companies provide platforms for users to produce and consume each others' information. Another important quality of social media is the ability of users to actively engage with the information they are exposed to, often in real time. Many social media platforms possess a feature

often referred to as the endless scroll, which allows users to continuously load new content by scrolling downward, such that a user can scroll indefinitely. This is only possible because of the tremendous amount of new content that is generated on these sites on a daily basis. Therefore, the locus of control is different for traditional and digital media. Prior to the rise of social media, information transmission was tightly controlled and highly hierarchal. Political elites, especially presidents, used this monopoly to reliably access the public, censor marginal perspectives, and dominate public discourse.

The widespread adoption of social media has democratized the flow of information in many respects. Social media is much more decentralized than traditional media. However, the ultimate control of the platforms is retained by just a handful of people. By decreasing friction in the exchange of information, the internet has diminished established institutions' domination over public discourse. But, as we have discussed, malicious actors have used this freedom to disseminate misinformation and disinformation on a colossal scale. Social media sites enable billions of people to connect with others to build digital communities, but this aim is often compromised by the imperative to maximize shareholder value. A whistle-blower accused her former employer, Facebook, of manipulating their users, tinkering with what they saw on their feed to evoke emotions such as anger and outrage, to increase engagement on the site (Mac and Kang, 2021). A growing body of research points to social media as one of the principal factors driving declining teen mental health (Haidt, 2024). Although social media's rise has undoubtedly loosened traditional media's communications monopoly, its full impact on society and politics is complex.

Presidents have embraced these new communication technologies. Moreover, their example has figured prominently in the wider public's adoption of these tools. In 1994, Bill Clinton became the first president to send an email. As president, he presided over the dot com boom that was fueled by the rapid spread of the internet. Barack Obama was the first to use social media extensively in political campaigning. This innovation transformed how

politicians would engage their supporters and organize their campaigns. Obama's successor, Donald Trump, used social media sites, such as Twitter, to lampoon political rivals, muse on trending cultural controversies, and even pronounce official policy. Social media provided him with a direct line to his followers—which included millions and millions of members of the voting public and media. During his first term, his tweets would routinely drive the day's news cycle. Social media affords presidents powerful new tools to disseminate their performances and reach target audiences.

However, the decline of traditional media has impaired the president's capacity to reach national audiences. National stations no longer command the broad audiences they once did, so presidents need to use digital media in general and social media, in particular, more effectively to reach the people. When Bill Clinton gave his State of the Union address in 1993, prior to the fragmentation caused by the advent of social media and cable TV, 66.9 million viewers tuned in to hear him speak. These numbers are sizable compared to the paltry 27.3 million that tuned in to watch President Joe Biden's State of the Union address in 2023 (Grynbaum, 2023). Before cable news and social media, the nation was brought closer together by the shared experience of watching the same few channels. Now, people have an almost infinite array of choices when it comes to media and content. Although presidents can more easily connect directly with their followers through social media, the more fragmented communications landscape has, on balance, diminished the effectiveness of going public. It is more difficult to reach people and much more challenging to control how a president's message is framed once broadcast. No longer is the public confined to the role of the passive consumer of presidential performances, but now plays a significant role in the amplification and framing through their active engagement on social media. In the next section, we will explore the implications of this more fully by training our focus specifically on the public.

4 Phase 3: Public Reception

Overview

The goal of a presidential performance is to influence public opinion so as to enhance the president's overall political standing. Phase 3 concerns the public's reception of the media's depiction of a presidential performance. As President Abraham Lincoln once said, "public sentiment is everything. With it, nothing can fail; against it, nothing can succeed." However, presidential performances can only have an effect on someone if they are exposed to them. If a performance is covered and viewed live, this begins instantaneously, though, for most eventual viewers, exposure to the performance will occur only after it has concluded, and likely only a small snippet of that.

Upon exposure, viewers must make sense of the performance, evaluating the details and implications of the event through their expectations, personal experience, ideological orientation, and other cognitive frameworks to make judgments and perceptions regarding the president and their place in American politics (Goffman, 1974). Once viewers interpret a performance and how it relates to them, they are positioned to react. Reactions can be minor or significant, attitudinal or behavioral; in a sense, we can understand reactions to be an update of expectations and intentions following the delivery of novel information regarding the president. Several important caveats are worth elucidating here. First, the public is not a monolith but is instead a collection of overlapping and sometimes competing publics with disparate goals and values. Presidents calibrate their performances to target specific constituencies depending on their aims. Second, many recipients of a presidential performance will respond in kind with performances or productions of their own. As such, responses can't be measured in the polls alone but can manifest through a wide range of alternatives, including memories, the collection and compilation of the event into archives, or critical responses. In this way, presidential performances influence public attitudes, drive

political discourse, and shape history.

Phase 3 of the SPM concerns the public's reaction to the president's performance. The public here includes elites and the mass public, foreign and domestic. The set of the public is wide because the president's influence is immense. The intended audience for strategic presidential performances is variable, a key feature of the model. The underlying assumption is that presidents modulate their performance depending on their intended audience.

Consequently, presidential performances should vary depending on a president's goal, political base, and political context. The existing research on presidential norms treats the public as a monolith. This is problematic because the American electorate is highly polarized politically in terms of partisanship and attitudes toward presidential power (Reeves and Rogowski, 2018; Svolik, 2019). Partisanship is an important cleavage in American politics, but it is not the only one. Americans are divided politically by other factors such as race, gender, age, ethnicity, and education. Finally, when presidents go public, they do so primarily as a part of a strategy to influence other political elites with whom they must bargain. The political elite's orientation toward presidential performances is categorically different from that of the mass public, given the former's role in the bargaining process. I argue that the audience can be meaningfully distinguished by at least three characteristics, including their partisanship, social identity (e.g., race, gender, age, education, etc.), and whether or not they are members of the political elite. A viewer's status on these dimensions significantly shapes 1) whether and under what conditions an individual is exposed to a presidential performance, 2) the interpretive frames used to process the performance and make sense of it politically, and 3) the actions recipients take in response to the stimulus of the presidential performance. This final step represents the signals the public sends back to the president and other interested parties.

Theoretical Considerations

4.1 Elite/Mass

Over the last century, presidents have increasingly turned to the political strategy of "going public" to achieve their political goals. Going public refers to the "class of activities that presidents engage in as they promote themselves and their policies before the American public" (Kernell, 1993, x). This book describes these activities as a class of presidential performance. The objective of this strategy is to generate and leverage public support to enhance the president's bargaining position in Washington, among other political elites. Going public provides the president with another powerful mechanism to achieve their goals, but Kernell argues that this indirect strategy is somewhat at odds with the bargaining process (Kernell, 1993, 3). Going public is a blunt instrument of coercion, while ongoing bargaining relationships typically require compromise, nuance, and reciprocity.

Richard Neustadt describes the American political system as one in which separate institutions, with independent bases of authority, share power. Despite their awesome stature, presidents are ultimately dependent on others to accomplish their goals (Neustadt, 1991). The political elite, what Neustadt describes as the Washington community (e.g., Members of Congress, senior bureaucrats, and judges, etc.), factors prominently in a president's political fortunes. For presidents to succeed politically, they need a baseline level of support in Washington. Similarly, the Washington community closely watches the president because their job security, personal advancement, and political goals are significantly impacted by who happens to be president of the United States at the time (Lee, 2008). This necessitates that presidents carefully calibrate how they engage the political elite.

Political elites shape politics in ways beyond their role in the formal bargaining process. As opinion leaders in their own right, elites influence public attitudes through cues, which voters use to make sense of political information (Berinsky, 2009; Endres et al., 2021; Lenz, 2012; Levendusky, 2009; Zaller, 1992). Their platform and stature give them some influence

to shape how presidential performances are interpreted by the larger polity. While public presidential performances are generally considered public fare, they are also consumed with keen interest by the political elites within the Washington community. Compared to the average voter, political elites have the motivation and time to watch presidents with careful interest because presidential performances implicate both their political interests and personal fortunes in tangible ways. Because these elites possess independent power bases, shape media narratives, and operate within influential political networks, presidential performances that ignore the Washington Community do so at their own peril.

4.2 Partisanship

Although the existing research on presidential norms assumes a monolithic public acting harmoniously to enforce expectations, public opinion research depicts an American public that is deeply divided. For many voters, party identification is singularly instructive and often determinative in how they cast their vote (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008). Since the 1970s, political polarization among political elites has increased dramatically (Druckman et al., 2013; McCarty et al., 2008; Poole and Rosenthal, 2001). Taking the cue from party leaders, the public has followed suit and is increasingly divided along partisan lines (Druckman et al., 2013; Iyengar et al., 2019; Levendusky, 2009; Mason, 2018). These divisions are driven by more than ideological, issue-based disagreement. Partisanship is also a social identity wherein members come to harbor in-group bias, favoring members over non-members (Tajfel et al., 1979). In today's polarized America, "ordinary Americans increasingly dislike and distrust those from the other party," a phenomenon described by scholars as affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019).

As political polarization becomes further entrenched, partisanship has fundamentally reshaped the opportunity structure of American politics. The American electorate is in-

creasingly sorted into two competing political camps that live in different places, consume different political media, and hold different values. Politicians are both a source of this state of affairs and beholden to it. In political campaigns, the mobilization of likely supporters has been found to be more effective than persuasion (Jacobson, 2015). One of the consequences of this approach is that winners are more reliant on (and thus attentive to) their supporters and less obligated to out-partisans. Even presidents who represent a national electorate are not immune to the practical demands of our polarized politics. Presidents use their national post to pursue particularistic, partisan ends (Kriner and Reeves, 2015; Berry et al., 2010).

Downsian spatial models and conventional wisdom suggest that presidents should maximize support by courting the median voter and avoiding highly controversial rhetoric or extreme stances (Downs, 1957). Partisan polarization and the political success of norm-violating politicians such as Donald Trump call this strategy into question. In polarized political environments, an alternative to alienating the fewest potential voters might be to alienate the right people. Taking the costs of attracting and maintaining large coalitions into account, Riker reasons that rational politicians should aim to form minimum-winning coalitions, seeking to build a coalition sufficient to win but no larger (Riker, 1984). As the two major parties grow farther apart, the potential gains from moderation are increasingly counterweighed by the incentives to rally co-partisans. Whipping up the base is more than throwing red meat to core believers. The point is to intentionally alienate prospective voters to further consolidate the base. When the opposing side is viewed with antipathy, opposition is assumed, and their hatred becomes a badge of honor. Divisiveness thus serves as a signal of partisan bona fides and a mechanism to energize supporters. Conservatives describe this practice as "owning the libs." normThe Downsian approach is to build broader, more heterogeneous coalitions of voters. The Rikerian strategy seeks not the largest possible majorities but a minimum-winning coalition built atop a fervent and loyal political base.

4.3 Social Identity

Partisanship is an important cleavage in American politics, but it is not the only one. One's social identity, such as race, gender, age, and educational attainment, profoundly shapes their experience of the world. As predictors of political behavior, these characteristics are highly determinative for an array of phenomena, including vote choice in presidential elections. In fact, educational attainment seems to be driving party realignment over the last several decades. Since the 1980s, "college-educated white voters have become reliable democrats, while the white working class has moved steadily toward the Republican party" (Marble, 2024, 2). This pattern doesn't hold for black Americans, whose working class still supports the Democratic Party by high margins. Dawson argues that black political behavior is shaped by a sense of linked fate, where African Americans conclude that what's considered good for the group is a "useful proxy for self-interest" (Dawson, 1994, 77). Social identities inform life experiences and establish group boundaries that can be consequential politically.

These characteristics influence other political behavior besides voting, such as support for the political system and political participation. For example, a recent study finds that attitudes toward norms of equality and free expression are strongly correlated to gender, education, race, and age (Chong et al., 2024). Race has profound influences on American politics. Differences in racial attitudes and disagreements regarding government policy toward racial minorities have divided the United States since its founding (Cohen, 1999; Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Tesler, 2016). Age matters, too. Younger voters possess fewer resources, vote at lower rates, and tend to be more liberal (Hartig, 2021; Peterson et al., 2020). On average, women tend to work different jobs, get paid less for the same jobs, and vote more Democratic. Although social identity can't be said to cause political behavior, the persistence of group differences in this range of political activity suggests that social identity powerfully influences how people process political information.

In the SPM, the public is the primary audience of presidential performance. The aim of the performance is to influence public opinion to maximize political advantage. However, this is difficult because the public is not a monolith. Rather, it is a collection of various overlapping and discrete publics with sometimes convergent and divergent expectations, policy preferences, and sentiments. As discussed above, the public can be distinguished politically by at least three characteristics, including elite status, partisanship, and social identity. One's social position informs the interpretive frames used to make sense of a presidential performance. Thus, different groups will often evaluate the same presidential performance differently, depending on their relationship to politics, party affiliation, and social identity. Moreover, these audiences possess heterogeneous preferences. Strategic presidents can leverage public fragmentation by choreographing their performances to resonate disproportionately with target audiences. Underlying this approach is the contention that presidents don't need everybody to appreciate their performances, only the right people.

5 Phase 4: Feedback

Overview

Presidential performances aren't just one-off events. They fit within larger, ongoing, and overlapping political strategies that shape public opinion and reach beyond a president's term in office. The feedback between the president, the presidency, the media, and the public is endlessly recursive and contingent. Feedback refers to the process in which "part of a system's output is reentered or 'fed back' into the system as input, thus allowing input and outputs to be compared" (McKenzie, 2001, 70). Presidents act, the media covers and frames, and the public watches and reacts. The president appraises the results and refines the act, re-initiating the process. In this sense, we can think of presidential performances as an iterated game where players develop strategies based on the outcomes of previous efforts.

Evaluation of the public's responses requires mechanisms to collect public attitudes, analyze compiled information, disseminate the results to relevant stakeholders, and initiate protocols to apply what's learned to subsequent performances. Phase 4 concerns how feedback is collected, processed, and incorporated to inform and refine future performances.

The information gleaned from the feedback process shapes public attitudes regarding the president in the short term and the presidency in the long term. In the short term, it reduces uncertainty regarding the president's identity—what type of president they are and what can be expected of them in a given situation. Through the iterative process of presidential performances, the president cultivates a political reputation that, once established, is difficult to change. Presidents learn, too. By repeatedly strategically performing with the aim of influencing public opinion, they gain insight into what resonates with the public and what doesn't. The accumulated wisdom of one or two terms of performance doesn't dissipate when a president leaves office. Successors evaluate the performances of their predecessors and borrow strategies that work. Over time, effective repeated performance tropes aggregate into a collection of best practices. Through this process, norms emerge and evolve over time. Once a given practice or symbol is used so regularly, and by successive presidents that it becomes associated with the presidency, the public may come to expect the practice or symbol under some predetermined circumstance. In this way, presidential norms are routinized into existence by successors following a norm innovator.

5.1 Short term feedback

The SPM uses the term feedback to describe the process in which presidents collect responses to their presidential performances. Useful information can come in a variety of forms. Information obtained from presidential approval polls is perhaps the most conventional method to appraise public responses to presidential performances. Many people are familiar

with surveys that ask a sample of Americans whether they approve or disapprove of the way that the president is handling his job as president. Polls of this sort provide a snapshot of the public's general attitude toward the president, but polls can be designed to ascertain more specific information, too. Since the 1960s, presidents have dedicated tremendous resources to White House polling operations (Druckman and Jacobs, 2015). Given these resources, presidents and their political operations can commission hundreds, or even thousands, of bespoke polls to gauge opinions and attitudes on a range of concerns.

Polls provide quantitative information that presidents can use to measure public attitudes, but it isn't the only way to do so. Subsequent media coverage and social media trends provide an alternative means to assess the impact of a presidential performance. This method is not without its limitations, given the numerous avenues for bias to intrude. Furthermore, the public can express itself through other means, such as demonstrations, donations, and, of course, voting. The upshot is that public responses to presidential performances can come in a variety of forms, making the task of obtaining, interpreting, and incorporating the information more difficult. The fundamental challenge for presidents is discerning the signal from the noise. This is compounded by the potential for bias in the uptake of information, as well. The quality of the information presidents receive is greatly impacted by factors related to the structure and character of their administration, including the competence and ideology of staff, organizational model, and idiosyncrasies of the president. Nevertheless, strategic presidents will seek to obtain an accurate understanding of public opinion and use that information to improve the effectiveness of future performances.

As the number of a president's performances increases, the public comes to possess expectations about them. Over time, presidential performances are revealing, shedding light on the political identity of the president and what can be expected of them. The president learns public expectations by responding strategically to their reactions over time. In this way, uncertainty regarding the presidency is reduced over the president's term. This feedback

loop helps to establish an enduring identity or character that is shaped by both public opinion and strategic performance. By the end of their time in office, the president's contemporary reputation is cemented.

When a new president assumes office, the process begins anew. However, many of the public's expectations for how a president should act remain. These expectations are what this book calls presidential norms. As mentioned previously, presidential norms are backed by a pattern of sanctions that manifest through the public's reaction toward presidential performances. Presidents are rewarded when they act in accordance with public expectations and are punished when they don't.

New presidents face a more uncertain political environment than established ones. Novice presidents face greater uncertainty about how their actions will be perceived, and the public is uncertain about what type of president the new leader will be. At the outset, the president doesn't know what will work to achieve their political goals. To solve this problem, the President can do something unprecedented or turn to the past for inspiration. In many instances, presidents choose the latter option, following the example of past presidents whose actions have been deemed satisfactory or appropriate in the court of history. George Washington had no such luxury and was forced to create the office as he went along. As such, Washington paid special attention to the precedent his actions might set for future presidents, such as the two-term tradition (Chernow, 2011). By the end of his presidency, Washington was revered as the "Father of the Nation." His prestige and reputation thus consecrated the office as a national symbol. Thereafter, Washington's presidency served as a model of presidential leadership, which successive presidents to this day strive to emulate.

Presidential Norm Life Cycle

Washington's performance of the presidency left an indelible imprint on the office and established a standard to which all future presidents would later be judged. While Wash-

ington's outsized legacy looms large, he isn't the only president to establish consequential norms. In fact, all presidents play a role in the evolution of the norms-based presidency, and they do so in at least four ways: innovation, norm violation, adoption, or norm adherence. *Innovation.* Sometimes, presidents create new norms by simply responding to novel situations where previous precedents don't pertain. *Norm Violation.* Presidents can strategically violate existing norms. *Adoption.* If the violations prove effective, sometimes subsequent presidents abandon the previous norm and follow the precedent set by their norm-violating predecessor. In these cases, the norm violation is transformed into a norm, such as when Woodrow Wilson violated expectations by giving the State of the Union address as a speech before Congress as opposed to a written report. *Adherence.* Finally, presidents contribute to norms by adhering to them. All presidents adhere to at least some presidential norms, and most could reasonably be classified primarily as norm adherents. This suggests that the norms-based presidency isn't an immutable, unchanging system of rules but instead a flexible, evolutionary construct amenable to change and disruption.

The existing literature on presidential norms offers little guidance to explain how norms emerge, change, or why. Thus, building on the work of Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), I propose the presidential norm life cycle to provide a theoretical framework to trace the evolution of presidential norms. Table 3 summarizes the terms and progression. The presidential norm life cycle is comprised of four stages. In Stage 1, a norm innovator performs in a novel way and is rewarded politically. Stage 2 concerns adoption, where a successor emulates the norm innovator by conforming to their precedent. They are also rewarded. Over time, through iterated performances, the public comes to expect the behavior in certain predetermined circumstances. However, public attitudes are not fixed. In Stage 3, the patterns of public response toward the norm become more ambivalent. The norm is still followed, but the rewards for adherence are minimal, and the risks for deviance attenuate. Phase 4 concerns norm death. Norms are contested when a norm-violating president breaches the norm, goes unpunished, and is possibly even rewarded politically for it. Norms die when successors to

the norm-violator follow their lead, such as in the case of State of the Union addresses. After Wilson, every president since (except Hoover) has given the State of the Union address as a speech before Congress. I conceptualize presidential norms as the working standards of the presidency or "presidential best practices," such that norms are routinized into existence by successors following a norm innovator. Innovation becomes an obligation, in time, a cliche, and eventually obsolete.

Table 3: Presidential Norm Life Cycle

	Stage 1 *Innovation*	*Stage 2* *Early Adoption*	*Stage 3* Cliché	*Stage 4* *Norm Death*
Actor	Norm innovator	Early Adopter	Laggard	Norm violator
Norm Status	Pre-normativity	Normative	Contested	Post-normativity

5.2 Long term feedback

As both the head of state and government, presidents play a singular and prominent symbolic role in American cultural life. Their heroic performances and tragic failures track the ebb and flow of an unfolding national epic. Presidents represent the nation in a way that no other person can claim. Presidential representation manifests through strategic performances. Moreover, presidential performances shape more than how presidents are viewed by the public within their term. The impact of the most consequential presidential performances reverberates beyond a president's time in office, informing how future presidents perform in office and how the nation understands itself. Phase 4 of the SPM also concerns the long-term impact of presidential performances.

The feedback process informs presidential performances across presidencies in at least three ways. First, presidential performances influence future presidents. The Presidential Norms Life Cycle illustrates how strategic responses to short-run political considerations influence the evolution of presidential norms across presidencies in the long term. Presidential norms emerge as a product of successor presidents emulating the behaviors of predecessors

they perceive to be successful or constructive. Eventually, depending on their usefulness or necessity, these practices are routinized into habits and expectations of the presidency—*best practices* perceived to produce optimal results. However, adhering to presidential norms is not always the optimal strategy. Sometimes, in retrospect, violating a presidential norm proves to be a superior approach. Adherence to presidential norms presents as a risk-averse strategy and suggests conformity with the established order, while norm violation, though risky, signals distinction and offers potential upsides. This underscores the historically constructed nature of the office and how immediate actions and motivations of presidents in one period ultimately inform the context, motivations, and strategies of future presidents in later periods.

Second, a president's cumulative public performances coalesce into a composite picture of their presidency, which forms the basis of their historical legacy. More than other politicians, presidents are concerned about securing their place in history. Thus, presidents endeavor to accomplish significant achievements and shape the narrative of their time in office. When a president adheres to presidential norms in their performances, the public receives the explicit information conveyed, as well as implicit information about the president's orientation toward the status quo. Presidential norm adherence implies continuity and suggests alignment with the established institutions, rules, and practices of the prevailing order. Strategic presidential norm violation, conversely, signals change and indicates a discernible distinction between the norm violator and the establishment. This is valuable information for the public to make their determination regarding the quality and character of a president. Through successive performances, presidents ascertain a stable reputation (Kernell, 1993, 14). A president's reputation forms the bedrock of their historical legacy. Once established, this reputation is hard to change.

Third, presidential performances, particularly the most evocative ones, exploit and revise national myths—the stories Americans tell themselves about themselves over time. Presidents are most successful when they can present themselves as the temporary protagonist

in the ongoing American epic. When this occurs, their stories shape the American story. However, this is no easy task. Many of the most important factors that make conditions suitable for transcendent leadership, including the political context, are out of the president's immediate control. The stakes of a performance greatly determine its potential for historical consequence. Major crises, wars, economic depressions, and catastrophes provide amenable circumstances for presidents to demonstrate their capacity to perform under pressure. Few have the misfortune to serve during such dire circumstances. A smaller proportion possess the skills to rise to the occasion. Even during less fraught times, disastrous performances can tank a presidency, such as Joe Biden's shaky debate performance in the summer of 2024. For presidents to leave their mark, they need to perform when the world is watching. Managerial competence is a necessary but ultimately insufficient skill for presidential greatness. "Great presidents," remarked David Axelrod, political strategist and former senior advisor to Barack Obama, in one of our interviews, "tend to be great performers"; this skill distinguishes presidents who stand out in the eyes of history from those that are forgotten.

6 Discussion

Presidents act "presidential" by behaving in a way befitting the office. Presidents perform the presidency guided by presidential norms. However, presidents sometimes strategically violate presidential norms. A president's strategy toward presidential norms has major implications for how their performance in office is perceived by the wider public and future historians. This chapter has proposed the SPM to explain the strategies by which presidents engage presidential norms, the factors that shape the success or failure of those strategies, and the long-term impact of strategic performance across presidencies. At the core of this theory is the argument that presidential norms are technologies that presidents strategically engage for political gain. Presidents adhere to or deviate from presidential norms based on

a calculation that seeks to maximize political advantage. This contention yields a simple explanation for the emergence of the norms-based presidency. Presidents adhere to norms because they believe doing so serves their purposes. However, there is uncertainty regarding whether this is always the optimal political strategy. Under some circumstances, violating norms may be the superior approach.

By defining presidential performance in reference to presidential norms, the SPM simultaneously illustrates the performative nature of the presidency and the centrality of norms in presidential politics. Performance implies strategic choreography, media interposition, and an intention to influence an audience. The fragmentation of the media and public determines the opportunity structure for presidential performances. Presidents must factor in the motivations and potential reactions of the media and public to calibrate their performance to optimize the chances of success.

For most presidents, adhering to presidential norms is probably the most advantageous path. For a few, following norms is critical. Barack Obama, for example, felt great pressure to adhere to norms. Partly, this might be due to the nature of his political situation. He and his advisors believed he would be punished more severely than other presidents by deviating from expectations. This could be because his supporters valued presidential norms more than others. Or perhaps Obama and his advisors feared the public writ large would judge Obama harshly if he failed to live up to the standards of the office. Some of his advisors pointed to his race as the motivation to adhere scrupulously to presidential norms. As the first black president, his team surmised that adhering to presidential norms would demonstrate to skeptical Americans that he was up to the job.

However, for some presidents, the potential for strategic norm violation has a greater upside. For example, Donald Trump's political career is founded on norm violation. Tapping into widespread public disaffection, Trump signaled his populist bona fides by trampling over political and presidential norms. Fed up with politics as usual, his core political base saw in

Trump's norm violations a rebuke of the political system they loathed. His political success as a norm violator might also have to do with his social identity, as well. As a white male billionaire real estate developer and former reality TV Star, Trump's ability to violate norms with impunity may have something to do with the status afforded by these identities. It's hard to imagine his rivals Hillary Clinton or Kamala Harris succeeding politically with such a brazen approach (Goren, 2018).

Thus, it is hypothesized that a president's orientation toward presidential norms—and consequently their performances—will vary depending on the president's aims and political attributes, public attitudes, and the political context. In the coming chapters, we will explore these dynamics in greater detail. But before we proceed further, we must ask a simple but heretofore unanswered question: Do presidential norms actually matter to the public? Weingast posits that the public must act in unison to check sovereign transgressions (Weingast, 1997). Put differently, for a norm to be considered as such, wide swathes of the public must not only support the norm but be willing to punish deviant behavior. Prior research assumes their existence. However, there are real questions about whether America's divided electorate can be expected to hold a norm-violating president to account. A divided public or tepid response to a norm violation would serve as no check at all, challenging the normative status of the putative presidential norm. Despite this, little is known about public attitudes toward presidential norms. Therefore, the next chapter investigates public attitudes toward presidential norms and examines the extent to which partisan and policy concerns affect attitudes toward them.

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