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For my late SOSC teacher, Professor Bernie Silberman.

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ABSTRACT

The American presidency is organized largely in reference to norms, or informal institutions. Though unofficial and unwritten, many presidential and political norms support good governance, facilitating interbranch relations, connecting the presidency with the public, and sustaining democracy by constraining presidential behavior. Most presidents conform to these norms most of the time. However, some presidents, under some circumstances strategically violate norms. This three-paper dissertation provides a framework to explain both presidential conformity and presidential disobedience. The animating characteristics underpinning the three papers included in this dissertation is a conception of presidential norms as technologies—tools that presidents exploit for political gain and a recognition of the public’s centrality in maintaining presidential and political norms. As such, the dissertation is particularly interested in the conditions under which norm violations will be tolerated or even rewarded by the public.

The first paper draws on research in political psychology, populism, and presidential appeals to examine President Trump’s outrageous behavior and its effect on the public. Using a series of original experiments, I find support for my expectation that Trump’s outrageous behavior is a politically advantageous public relations strategy. My results show that Trump’s outrageous behavior increases his support among self-identified Independents. However, contrary to popular conception, the results do not support claims that racial resentment or affinity for populism makes individuals more amenable to Trump’s outrageous behavior.

Through a series of original surveys and survey experiments deployed to nationally representative samples of Americans eligible to vote in the United States, the second paper investigates public attitudes toward a novel battery of presidential norms and examines the extent to which partisan and policy concerns affect American attitudes toward them. I find widespread public support for almost every norm in the battery. However, by dividing presidential norms into two sub-categories—what I call structural norms and presentation

norms—the results also show that important political constituencies value the two types of presidential norms differentially. I further assess how partisanship affects public attitudes toward presidential norms in a series of nationally representative survey experiments. The experimental findings suggest that Americans evaluate presidential norms and presidential norm violations with a partisan lens.

What explains the appeal of Trumpism? While recent public opinion research finds widespread public support for political and presidential norms, norm-violating political styles are increasingly prevalent in American politics. Former President Donald Trump’s political brand is founded on norm violation. In the third paper, I contend Trump uses strategic norm violations to beckon disaffected Americans to his political base. Conceptualizing Trump’s norm violations as a type of costly signaling, this paper assesses Trump’s January 6 “Save America” rally to deconstruct the mechanisms that lead some constituencies to reward Trump for his norm violations instead of recoiling, contrary to expectation. I argue that the vociferous condemnation Trump’s violations elicit from mainstream political elites, far from discrediting, for many, validates his movement.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Recent events have trained journalistic and scholarly attention on political and presidential norms. As president, Donald Trump violated many norms. According to the logic of political norms, he should have been punished for his transgressions. He was rewarded with 74 million votes in the 2020 presidential election and the loyalty of a large segment of the electorate. After a close loss in that election, Trump refused to concede defeat and attempted various maneuverings to overturn the results. This effort culminated in the deadly January 6, 2021, attack on the United States Capitol. After Joe Biden assumed the presidency, he faced the challenging dilemma of responding to Trump's alleged misconduct. Ultimately, the Biden administration took the unprecedented step of investigating the former president. The novelty and rapidity of these events have raised vital and heretofore unanswered questions about the nature of the presidency. What role do presidential norms play in presidential politics? Why did Trump violate so many norms and what explains the seeming windfall from his supporters he received for doing so?

To answer these questions, we must first direct our focus toward the norms-based presidency. This area of research offers many exciting new lines of inquiry because so little scholarship exists on the subject. Partly this is due to the qualities of informal institutions. For, unlike formal institutions, which are evident and quantifiable, political norms are often obscure or indefinite. Relatedly, most norms are likely only to generate significant interest when they are violated, which if done so frequently, would call into question their normative status. Finally, explicitly distinguishing a norm from other types of regularities is complicated and poses fundamental questions that are difficult to adjudicate conclusively. Because of these complexities, social scientific research on presidential norms has yet to achieve the level of rigor and precision political scientists have come to expect from compelling research on formal institutions.

As recent events have shown, however, the subject is too important for continued neglect from political scientists. So, despite the veritable difficulties of studying presidential norms, intrepid researchers are wading in to fill this gap of knowledge in the discipline. Recent research on the topic accentuates the importance of political norms to a well-functioning political system. Particularly, presidential norms are indispensable to the American political system because of the paucity of guidance regarding presidential behavior to be found in the United States Constitution. Norms edify and constrain the presidency, filling in the gaps left unaddressed by Article II (Renan, 2017). Others have transplanted constructive frameworks from research on the developing world (Azari and Smith, 2012), where the study of informal institutions is more commonplace (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Another prominent line of research on presidential norms is more descriptive and normative in nature, detailing the myriad scandals during Trump’s tumultuous four years in office and exploring the deleterious consequences of his violations (Carey et al., 2019; Clayton et al., 2021; Lieberman et al., 2019; Pfiffner, 2021).

A sizeable proportion of the analysis on presidential norms up to now fixes its attention on the Trump presidency and explains his behavior by invoking his personality or disposition (Pfiffner, 2021; Renan, 2017; Stuckey, 2020). However, this tact will likely bear little explanatory fruit. In the 1990s, presidential scholars began importing methodologies such as rational choice theory, quantitative studies, and other scientific techniques into the field (Moe, 2009). This movement redirected scholarly attention away from descriptive and personal preoccupation (Neustadt, 1991) and toward the office’s formal structures and formal powers (Cameron, 2000; Canes-Wrone, 2010; Howell, 2003; Lewis, 2008). Such an approach seeks to explain outcomes through institutional incentives (Kriner and Reeves, 2015; Reeves and Rogowski, 2022), rather than reflexively attributing variation in outcomes to the personality of officeholders. One of the central challenges facing contemporary presidential scholars is applying this perspective to the study of informal institutions. Can some presidential

norm violations be explained by the structures and dynamics of the office itself, or a larger politics happening outside of the White House? Was Trump the first and only president to profit politically from violating presidential norms or have other ambitious presidents realized political benefits from sometimes breaking presidential norms?

This three-paper dissertation aims to answer these questions by conducting a rigorous analysis of presidential norms. The papers, though designed to stand alone on their own terms, are deeply interrelated. Read in tandem, the three papers strengthen and clarify each other. They also share a basic orientation. Instead of emphasizing the personal characteristics of presidents, this dissertation takes an institutional approach to studying the presidency, conceiving of both norm conformance and norm violation as technologies, available to all presidents, rather than idiosyncrasies intrinsic to the personality of individuals. Leveraging nationally representative survey data, novel population-based survey experiments, and interpretive theories of symbols and affect theory, this dissertation assesses public respect for and commitment to presidential norms. By assessing public attitudes toward presidential norms, we better understand presidential norms in general and gain insight into the degree to which the public can be expected to serve as a check on presidents who violate them.

This dissertation proceeds as follows:

In Chapter 2, following this introductory chapter, I present findings that Trump's outrageous behavior is a politically advantageous public relations strategy, relative to a more conventional political posture and an innocuous control. My results show that Trump's outrageous behavior increased his support among self-identified Independents. By showing the surprising benefits of outrageous behavior, this research reveals empirically how divisive, outrageous appeals can be a viable way for presidents and politicians to engage the public.

In Chapter 3, I present findings showing that presidential norms are widely supported features of the modern presidency, though support crucially depends upon politically relevant characteristics like partisanship and affinity for populism. Furthermore, I propose and find

evidence for two sub-categories of presidential norms—what I call structural norms and public presentation norms. Republicans and populists exhibit greater support for presidential norms of public presentation, while Democrats and non-populists show more reverence for structural presidential norms. Additionally, I present evidence from a series of experiments that assess how malleable public support for presidential norms is in the context of partisan framing. I find that Americans evaluate presidential norms and norm violations with a partisan lens.

In Chapter 4, I explore the mechanisms for why, under some conditions, former President Donald Trump’s norm violations are met with increased political support from his supporters, instead of reproach. This paper employs interpretive theories of symbols and affect theory to assess how Trump uses norm violations to beckon disaffected Americans to his political base. I argue that although adherence to presidential norms can usually work to furnish diffuse support for most presidents under typical circumstances, strategic violations of presidential norms can help elicit trust and specific support, particularly from constituencies alienated by the status quo. Presidents unaffiliated with the dominant political order, seeking to distance themselves from the political establishment, can profitably violate presidential norms to signal their distinction from the regime and increase their political support. Put simply, presidential norms fortify presidential power until and unless the norm becomes associated with an outdated, discredited regime, whereupon they can become symbols of an out-of-touch and decadent elite. This paper explores how semiotic practices, authenticity, emotions, and status contribute to the cyclical logic of presidential norm conformity and deviance.

CHAPTER 2

DOES PRESIDENT TRUMP'S OUTRAGEOUS BEHAVIOR WORK?: RESULTS FROM TWO RANDOMIZED-CONTROLLED TRIALS

2.1 Introduction

American politics is suffused with outrage (Herbst, 2010; Baker, 2017; Berry and Sobieraj, 2016; Williamson et al., 2011). A simple fact can attest to this point: Donald Trump, the reality TV star turned political provocateur, was elected President of the United States. Trump's impolitic, withering approach to politics upended the political world and made him the subject of intense animosity from critics and fervent adulation from supporters. Rather than sink his political career, Trump's penchant for controversy has coexisted with his unlikely ascension to the nation's highest office. Trump isn't the only contemporary political figure to find traction with outrageous performances. Supporters such as Lindsay Graham and Rudy Giuliani and rivals such as Bernie Sanders have garnered national attention for their outrageous behavior, too. By outrageous behavior, I mean norm-violating behavior or discourse intended to arouse an intense emotional response, particularly anger, fear, or moral indignation. The prevalence of outrageous behavior in American politics provokes several questions. Does outrageous behavior benefit or disadvantage Donald Trump? If so, what are the mechanisms that convert outrageous behavior into mass support? Finally, who are the people that respond favorably to Trump's outrageous antics?

In a democracy, we might expect politicians to behave in such a way as to minimize the risk of alienating prospective voters. Myriad research suggests that positive evaluation of candidate characteristics play an important role in voting behavior and performance (Barber, 2008; Holian and Prysby, 2014; Abramson et al., 2007). National politicians regularly proffer anodyne, poll-tested behavior, rhetoric, and policies in an attempt to minimize the possibility

of controversy and maximize popularity within the mass public. In the case of presidents and aspirants to the office of the presidency, we might expect them to act “presidential”. To act presidential is to behave in accordance with “a particular set of expectations about the office that are held by the public, described by journalists and teachers, and encouraged by the presidents themselves” (Hinckley, 1990, 130). However, not all politicians pursue this precautious, well-worn political strategy. Many politicians, past and present, including the 45th President of the United States, traffic in outrageous, polarizing, sometimes offensive behavior. All else equal, we might expect there to be at least some political costs for outrageous behavior. Assuming that politicians are seeking to win office and achieve power, the prevalence of outrageous behavior in American politics reveals a compelling puzzle.

Previous research has examined the role of outrage in the American political scene, but does not directly address these questions. Prior work has examined outrage within the media (Berry and Sobieraj, 2016; Arceneaux and Johnson, 2013) or focused particularly on anger and outrage within the electorate (Banks, 2014; Mason, 2018). This study contributes to the study of public appeals, emotions, and outrage in American politics in at least three ways: (1) by examining how popularly available public appeals from sitting officeholders affects public attitudes, (2) by presenting an original experimental design to assess how outrageous behavior influences public opinion, and (3) by testing mechanisms for how outrageous behavior translates into political support by inspiring anger in susceptible populations in the electorate. The results from this study indicate that Donald Trump is not hampered by his outrageous behavior. In fact, there is limited evidence to suggest that Trump benefits from the deployment of outrageous behavior. Interestingly, these findings do not support claims that racial resentment or affinity for populism makes individuals more amenable to Trump’s outrageous behavior.

2.2 Outrageous Behavior as a Political Strategy

One of the central challenges of studying outrage is formulating a tractable definition for empirical assessment.¹ The textbook definition of outrageous is “exceeding the limits of conventional behavior; sensational, somewhat shocking; daring, provocative, shameless.”² What’s so shocking about the behavior of the aforementioned politicians is their routine flouting of established conventions of politics. Instances of norm-violation prevalent in contemporary politics include: Manichean rhetoric, institution-disdaining behavior, and spontaneity; in fact, according to Jamieson and Taussig (2017), such behavior is part and parcel of Donald Trump’s “rhetorical signature.” In this paper, I define outrageous behavior as *norm-violating behavior intended to provoke indignation, shock, or anger*.

Cultural norms significantly affect everyday life. Whether it be eating peanut butter with jelly, driving on the right side of the road, or shaking hands at the close of a negotiation, it is clear that norms have an enormous role in shaping the social world. Strict adherence to norms, however, is not ironclad—under certain conditions, scholars have found that norms can backfire, producing the opposite of their intended effect (Conway and Schaller, 2005; Conway et al., 2009). This area of research presents two different, but not mutually exclusive theories for why norms can backfire: (1) emotional reactance (Brehm, 1966; Fiegen and Brehm, 2004) and (2) informational contamination (Conway and Schaller, 2005; Conway et al., 2017). Emotional reactance occurs when one values freedom of choice and that freedom is thought to be limited by the hegemony of a norm, while informational contamination is the

1. (1) Outrage is inherently subjective. What is outrageous to some may be benign to others. What inspires outrage in a few may inspire excitement in many. (2) Outrage is both a noun and a verb. For example, people can be both outrageous and outraged simultaneously. Or a person can be outraged, but not outrageous, or vice versa. This study is particularly concerned with politicians being outrageous (i.e., using outrageous behavior) and the effect of outrageous behavior on mass attitudes, particularly support for candidates and their expressed policy preferences. In this case, an outcome of outrageous behavior might be outrage from a constituent. Less of a concern for this study is whether the politician is genuinely outraged, or the public is outraged.

2. “outrageous, adj. and adv.” OED Online. December 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/133862?redirectedFrom=outrageous> (accessed February 16, 2020).

consequence of a norm being enforced so vigorously that observers feel that norm-induced consensus is a product of coercion, which consequently sows doubt and mistrust in the information environment.

Political scientists are also beginning to take notice of the important role emotions play in contemporary politics (Christenson and Weisberg, 2019; Mason, 2018; Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019). American politics is riven with anger, fanned by social polarization and partisan antipathy (Mason, 2018). One promising avenue for outrageous behavior to benefit practitioners is by inducing anger among their supporters. Anger is a response to a perceived social transgression (Averill, 1983). In other words, anger is a righteous response to injustice. Valentino and his co-authors (2011) claim that anger motivates people toward political participation. In fact, they find that anger catalyzes action even more than enthusiasm or anxiety.

Outrage-based political content sells (Berry and Sobieraj, 2016). Not only does outrage media, intended to elicit an emotional response, garner attention and pecuniary reward, it also has important political consequences. Matthew Levendusky (2013) finds that exposure to extreme, partisan media, such as programs on *Fox News* (e.g., *Hannity* and *The O'Reilly Factor*), makes partisans more intensely partisan, while a bevy of research finds a public largely impervious to persuasion (Jacobson, 2015; Kalla and Broockman, 2018). People are resistant to persuasion. This occurs, in part, because human beings are often motivated reasoners (Levendusky, 2013). Rallying the like-minded is a surer political strategy than persuading out-partisans (Panagopoulos, 2020). Outrageous behavior from politicians may mimic the effects of partisan media, validating, buttressing, and strengthening supporters' beliefs.

Research finds that inspiring anger can produce valuable political outcomes. Inducing anger can help politicians encourage voters to engage in costly political behaviors (Groenendyk and Banks, 2014). Anger can be used to successfully to garner status and esteem,

because angry people are seen as more competent and elicit more support (Tiedens, 2001). Inducing anger makes people more optimistic (Lerner and Keltner, 2000). In conflictual environments, anger engenders people to turn to dominant, excessive leadership (Laustsen and Petersen, 2017). Banks (2014) offers experimental evidence to show how politicians can affect racial conservative policy preferences by inducing anger in individuals who score high in racial resentment. The consequences of racial resentment can have profound political import (Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Kinder and Sears, 1981). For example, Banks describes how the George H.W. Bush 1988 presidential campaign used the Willie Horton ad to activate racial animosity among white voters, upending the once-promising Michael Dukakis campaign.

Outrageous behavior can be used to garner attention, a platform that politicians can use instrumentally. During the 2016 Republican primaries, Trump earned billions of dollars in free media for his frequently outrageous antics (Confessore and Yourish, 2016). Though the public appeals literature largely focuses on the political strategies of presidents, we should also expect generating attention to be beneficial for other types of office-seekers as well (Mayhew, 1974). Samuel Kernell (1993) argues that presidents “go public” to mobilize support for themselves and their policies among the public, aggrandizing presidential power. Cohen (1995) finds that when a president spotlights an issue during a State of the Union address, the issue is likely to become salient to the public. As Cohen notes, “any presidential mention of a policy will increase public concern and awareness of it” (102). What’s more, neither the president’s personal popularity, nor their substantive position on the issue affects whether or not the public becomes concerned with the issue.

Getting attention for outrageous behavior can translate into legislative success. Brandice Canes-Wrone (2001) finds that promotion of issues, under certain conditions, can lead to increased legislative influence. Her study suggests that presidents can use plebiscitary appeals strategically, particularly when their stance on an issue is popular among the public, to improve passage in Congress. Druckman and Jacobs (2015) find that presidential adminis-

trations have successfully used their platform to spotlight popular initiatives and positions and minimize unpopular positions and events. According to the duo, under certain conditions, strategically emphasizing or understating issues and positions provides the opportunity to manipulate public opinion in the service of a president's political agenda.

Presidents need not rely on political appointments or even explicit directive to set the tone of the policies to be carried out by bureaucrats within the executive branch (Whitford and Yates, 2003). Outrageous behavior can indirectly affect bureaucratic behavior. The notion that "policy is enunciated in rhetoric; it is realized in action" (Kaufman and for the Future, 1967), aptly reflects the central role rhetoric plays in the formation and implementation of policy. As research from the public appeals literature makes clear, politicians are strategic and use public appeals to generate attention instrumentally to advance their political and electoral ambitions.

In an age where populism is ascendant around the globe (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz, 2016), fueled in part by anti-establishment sentiment, distinguishing oneself from mainstream politicians can pay dividends. Populist politicians often rail against existing institutions, consider political adversaries as illegitimate, and paint a dire, Manichean worldview that pits "real people" against the corrupt elite (Müller, 2016). Defining populism has been an bedeviling enterprise that has perplexed most and satisfied few (Canovan, 1981; Laclau, 2005). However, many prominent conceptions of populism (Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Galston, 2018) align with Oliver and Rahn's (2016) view that "at its core, populism is a type of political rhetoric that pits a virtuous 'people' against nefarious, parasitic elites who seek to undermine the rightful sovereignty of the common folk" (190). Thus, Trump's outrageous behavior is a strong signal that he's no ordinary politician, and therefore not beholden to the establishment. Ernesto Laclau (2005) posits that politicians can use populist rhetoric to stitch together wide-ranging coalitions with broad interests to upend longstanding regimes.

Outrageous behavior has been found to appeal to people antagonistic to strong political correctness (PC) norms. PC norms aim to reduce or remove negative group relevant language from respectable discourse (Conway et al., 2009). When norms become too overbearing, however, even when they're enforced in good faith, they can backfire (Conway et al., 2009). Politicians can leverage backlash against strong norms to establish legitimacy and favor among the disaffected. Indeed, some people support Trump not in spite of, but because of his norm-violating behavior (Guo, 2015). Conway and his co-authors (2017) point to emotional reactance and informational contamination as explanations for support of public displays of deviance. They find evidence from several randomized-controlled trials that over-exposure to strong PC norms increased support for Donald Trump among respondents scoring high in reactance to strong PC norms and respondents concerned about informational contamination.

My hypothesis is derived chiefly from the public appeals literature. As mentioned above, politicians behave instrumentally and make appeals to garner support, frequently to their benefit. Thus, I expect outrageous behavior to increase overall support for Trump and his policies. The rationale undergirding this contention is straight-forward politicians wouldn't knowingly make appeals, particularly risky or controversial ones, if there was no potential upside. Thus, we should expect politicians to use outrageous behavior strategically to increase support for themselves and their agenda.

2.3 Experimental Overview

I conducted two original survey experiments to test this hypothesis. Both surveys follow the same basic design. I recruited respondents with an advertisement on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is a crowdsourcing marketplace that provides a platform for businesses (requesters) to hire individuals (workers) to complete jobs that computers are unable to do (e.g., take surveys). MTurk convenience samples are among the most reli-

able convenience samples commonly utilized by researchers (Berinsky et al., 2012). Indeed, survey experiments conducted on samples obtained from MTurk produce estimates similar to ones obtained from population samples (Mullinix et al., 2015). Between August 20 and September 25, 2019, I recruited 1,267 respondents between the studies. The subjects were recruited in two separate waves. I paid all respondents who completed the task. Tables in the appendix shows the demographic data collected in the two studies.

Both studies contained the same basic structure. Subjects were first asked a few basic voting pre-treatment political attitudinal questions to obtain baseline partisanship. Subjects were then asked several questions to obtain a measure of their affinity for populism (Oliver and Rahn, 2016) and several questions to estimate their level of racial resentment (Kinder and Sanders, 1996). Then subjects were randomly assigned to experimental conditions that varied between the two studies. After exposing subjects to varying treatment conditions, all subjects were asked the same attitudinal and policy questions, which serve as the outcome variables of interest. Finally, both surveys concluded with several common demographic questions.

In Study 1, subjects were exposed to one experimental condition. In this study, subjects were exposed to either a 35 second clip from then-candidate Trump’s presidential campaign announcement, a 40 second clip from President Trump’s 2019 State of the Union Address, or a 20 second clip of then candidate Trump dancing to a parody of the song “Hotline Bling” on a Saturday Night Live skit from 2015. During Trump’s campaign announcement, he said:

When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.

This quote was captured in the video clip shown to roughly one-third of the subjects in this study. This treatment condition is coded as the outrageous behavior treatment. The

clip from Trump's 2019 State of the Union Address is coded as the conventional political rhetoric treatment because of its more anodyne, but partisan character. In this clip, Trump says:

The lawless state of our Southern border is a threat to the safety and security and financial well-being of all America. We have a moral duty to create an immigration system that protects the lives and jobs of our citizens. This includes our obligation to the millions of immigrants living here today who follow the rules and respected our laws. Legal immigrants enrich our nation and strengthen our society in countless ways.

The placebo is a video of Trump dancing to a parody of the 2016 hit song, "Hotline Bling". After subjects watch one of the three randomly assigned video clips, they completed a post-treatment attitudinal test. Specifically, attitudes on building a wall on the Southern border with Mexico and Trump's job approval are queried.

It's worth going into some detail about the two treatments, since they both possess policy and politicized content, delivered in a manner where the intended aim is to persuade. The outrageous behavior treatment is content obtained from the context of a heated campaign, prior to Trump assuming the presidency. The conventional political rhetoric treatment was obtained from a video of President Trump delivering a State of the Union Address. A difference between the two settings is discernible. Though the American flags, velvet curtains in the background, and the microphone offer some weight to Trump's pugnacious Announcement speech, the forum pales in comparison, in terms of pomp and circumstance, to the majesty of a State of the Union Address before Congress. In this clip, behind the president sit not only a sizable American flag, but also Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Vice President Mike Pence. The camera in the outrageous behavior treatment stays fixed on Trump, while the camera in the conventional political rhetoric treatment pans occasionally to distinguished political figures and concludes with applause from the audience. The august

trappings of State of the Union and the presidential performances delivered during them increase public confidence in the president (i.e., make Trump seem more “presidential”) (Howell and Moe, 2020). *Ceteris paribus*, the setting of the State of the Union offers a more amenable forum to appeal to the public, given the gravitas of the circumstance, than the comparably unadorned context of the outrageous behavior treatment video clip.

Study 2 alters and builds on Study 1 in a few important ways. First, the placebo of the first stimulus is amended to address the potential concern that the placebo in Study 1 affects support for Trump and his policies for some remote reason. Instead of a video of Trump dancing to a parody of “Hotline Bling,” subjects assigned to the placebo treatment condition are randomly shown one of five television commercials (see appendix). The expectation is that television commercials shouldn’t prime subjects in any relevant and systematic ways—even though it seems unlikely this rather innocuous video of Trump dancing would do so, either. The outcome variables from Study 1 are retained.

In both studies, subjects across all treatment conditions are exposed to video content; the difference is that some were exposed to outrageous behavior, some were exposed to more conventional rhetoric or neutral, innocuous content. By manipulating the treatments in this way, I estimate the effects of exposing subjects to outrageous behavior, compared to a control baseline of conventional partisan behavior or neutral content, on political attitudes.

2.4 Data and Analyses

To assess the effect of outrageous behavior on political attitudes, each post-test is comprised of a series of questions formulated to obtain respondents’ attitudes or policy preference. Subjects are queried on Donald Trump’s performance as president and the level of support for the policy relevant to the content of the intervention. In each post-test, for example, respondents support Trump’s policy proposal when they indicate that they “strongly favor” or “somewhat favor” building a wall on the U.S. border with Mexico. Therefore, the results

from this study can only attest to how outrageous behavior affects support for Trump and issues specifically queried in the survey, as opposed to the effects of outrageous behavior more generally.

Both studies include a battery of items which are combined into an index of opinion to assess the impacts of outrageous behavior—the indexes serve as dependent variables in my analysis. I re-scale the outcome variable in each model to make the interpretation of treatment effects more intuitive. The dependent variable is a measure between the interval [0,1]. The indices include support for building a wall on the southern border and job approval of Donald Trump.

I begin by testing the effects of outrageous behavior on political attitudes using data from Study 1. I estimate:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 D_{1i} + u_i$$

Where post-treatment attitude y_i for individual i is regressed on a dummy variable D_{1i} which indicates the treatment condition. In this equation, u_i is an unobserved disturbance term. The second column contains a more elaborate model embellished with demographic control variables. If Hypothesis 1 is correct, I should find that outrageous behavior exposure has a positive coefficient, demonstrating that on average, those assigned to the outrageous behavior treatment are more supportive of Donald Trump and his agenda. In Table 2.1, I present the results. The results show some support for Hypothesis 1. I find that the average effect of outrageous behavior in Study 1 and Study 2 is a 6.6 percentage-point and 3.0 percentage-point increase for Donald Trump and his agenda, respectively. In Study 1, the effect is statistically significant. These results suggest Donald Trump uses outrageous behavior to his benefit and not to his detriment.

Table 2.1: The Effect of Trump’s Outrageous Behavior on Support for Trump

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Trump Support			
	Study 1	Study 1 w/ CA	Study 2	Study 2 w/ CA
Outrage	0.066* (0.036)	0.059* (0.030)	0.030 (0.037)	−0.0001 (0.031)
Conventional	0.024 (0.036)	0.032 (0.030)	0.030 (0.038)	−0.008 (0.031)
Party ID		0.278*** (0.019)		0.314*** (0.019)
Male		0.071*** (0.025)		0.050* (0.026)
Education		−0.010 (0.010)		−0.021* (0.011)
Age		0.007 (0.012)		−0.016 (0.011)
White		−0.113*** (0.028)		−0.086*** (0.029)
Constant	0.422*** (0.025)	0.521*** (0.064)	0.410*** (0.027)	0.655*** (0.063)
Observations	664	664	603	603
R ²	0.005	0.280	0.001	0.335
Adjusted R ²	0.002	0.272	−0.002	0.328
Residual Std. Error	0.374 (df = 661)	0.319 (df = 656)	0.378 (df = 600)	0.309 (df = 595)
F Statistic	1.739 (df = 2; 661)	6.467*** (df = 7; 656)	0.423 (df = 2; 600)	2.886*** (df = 7; 595)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

To further investigate Trump’s outrageous behavior, I constructed several more regression models to examine the relationship between the outrageous behavior treatment and partisanship. To test this relationship, these models include interactions of the outrageous behavior treatment with Democratic and Republican dummy variables. In both Study 1 and Study 2, the main effect remains positive, though neither is statistically significant. In contrast, in both studies, the Republican interaction is negative, suggesting that the outrageous behavior treatment had either no or a slightly negative effect on Republican respondents. The Democratic interaction is slightly positive in Study 1 and slightly negative in Study 2, suggesting the outrage treatment had either no or a small positive effect on Democratic respondents’ appraisal of Trump and his preferred policies. Thus, the results indicate that Independents responded most favorably to Trump’s outrageous behavior and partisans were ambivalent about Trump’s outrageous behavior.

These results point to outrageous behavior as a viable political strategy for Donald Trump. However, the results indicate the benefits of outrageous behavior relative to an innocuous control condition. To assess the benefits of outrageous behavior relative to conventional political rhetoric, I filter out respondents assigned to the control conditions in both Study 1 and Study 2, and then regress the outcome measures on treatment condition (outrageous behavior or conventional political rhetoric). The results are listed in Table 2.3. In Study 1, the outrageous behavior treatment has a bigger effect than the conventional political rhetoric treatment, but the difference falls short of significance. In Study 2, the difference between the two treatments is essentially 0. A covariate adjustment barely affects the estimates for either study.

2.5 Basket of Deplorables Hypotheses

In a 2016 campaign fundraiser former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said half of the people who supported her Republican rival could be lumped into a “basket of deplorables.”

Table 2.2: The Effect of Trump’s Outrageous Behavior on Support for Trump

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Trump Support	
	Study 1	Study 2
Outrage	0.056 (0.052)	0.023 (0.053)
Conventional	0.043 (0.031)	-0.002 (0.032)
Democrat	-0.192*** (0.036)	-0.176*** (0.037)
Republican	0.276*** (0.042)	0.366*** (0.043)
Outrage × Democrat	0.010 (0.064)	-0.016 (0.065)
Outrage × Republican	-0.022 (0.072)	-0.073 (0.073)
Constant	0.434*** (0.031)	0.419*** (0.033)
Observations	664	603
R ²	0.243	0.304
Adjusted R ²	0.236	0.297
Residual Std. Error	0.327 (df = 657)	0.316 (df = 596)
F Statistic	35.150*** (df = 6; 657)	43.382*** (df = 6; 596)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 2.3: The Effect of Trump’s Outrageous Behavior on Support for Trump

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Trump Support			
	Study 1	Study 1 w/ CA	Study 2	Study 2 w/ CA
Outrage	0.041 (0.036)	0.028 (0.031)	-0.0002 (0.038)	0.005 (0.031)
Party ID		0.261*** (0.023)		0.313*** (0.023)
Male		0.068** (0.032)		0.022 (0.032)
Education		-0.019 (0.013)		-0.009 (0.013)
Age		0.001 (0.015)		-0.012 (0.013)
White		-0.114*** (0.035)		-0.071* (0.037)
Constant	0.447*** (0.025)	0.607*** (0.076)	0.440*** (0.027)	0.586*** (0.076)
Observations	443	443	403	403
R ²	0.003	0.252	0.00000	0.325
Adjusted R ²	0.001	0.241	-0.002	0.314
Residual Std. Error	0.374 (df = 441)	0.326 (df = 436)	0.378 (df = 401)	0.312 (df = 396)
F Statistic	1.348 (df = 1; 441)	4.440*** (df = 6; 436)	0.00004 (df = 1; 401)	1.733*** (df = 6; 396)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Of them, she opined “they’re racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic.” Republicans and Democrats, journalists, and scholars have described Trump and his core supporters as populist or racist (Steinhauer et al., 2016; Edsall, 2017; Inglehart and Norris, 2017; Macaulay, 2018; Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018). We might be inclined to believe that the racially resentful and those with an affinity for populism, Trump’s so-called base, are particularly amenable to his outrageous behavior. People predisposed toward populism and racial resentment are particularly angry. Populism is widely considered to be a political phenomenon fueled by animosity and indignation (Mudde, 2004). Oliver and Rahn (2016) find that anger at the federal government goes hand-in-hand with support for populism and populist candidates. Other research focused on the relationship between anger and political behavior finds a tight relationship between anger and out-group prejudice (Banks, 2014). Anger is the relevant emotion undergirding racial conservatism and symbolic racism (Banks and Valentino, 2012). Assessing the literatures on populism and anger in political science, I formulated two additional hypotheses to further investigate the types of people catalyzed by Trump’s outrageous behavior.

What’s so outrageous about some of Trump’s behavior is that he is saying explicitly what other racial conservatives have traditionally expressed implicitly (Banks, 2014). Instead of dog-whistle politics, Trump’s racially charged invective is a clarion call. By making racialized appeals which breach PC norms that few contemporary politicians have been willing to cross, Trump can activate and signal commitment to racial conservatism. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is that *subjects scoring higher in racial resentment will respond more favorably to Trump’s outrageous behavior.*

Trump’s breach of political norms of speech can not only show commitment to racial conservatism, but also demonstrate independence from the political establishment. Drawing the ire of prominent political and media figures with the strategic use of outrageous behavior allows Trump to brandish his anti-establishment bona fides (Hess, 2016). My third hypoth-

esis is that *subjects with more populist attitudes will respond more favorably to outrageous behavior*. I expect that individuals roiled by disaffection and anger at the political establishment will interpret outrageous behavior as an expression of authenticity, making Trump’s message more compelling than it would be otherwise.

If Hypothesis 2 is correct then I should find that when I interact the racial resentment index with the outrageous behavior treatment, there will be a positive and significant coefficient. The results provide neither substantive nor significant support for Hypothesis 2. In Study 1, the interaction coefficient goes in the wrong direction and is not statistically significant. While in Study 2, the interaction coefficient is negligible and not significant. My third hypothesis, which proposes that respondents who score high on the populism scale, an outrageous behavior intervention will have a positive and significant increase in their support for Trump and his agenda. Evidence from these two studies fails to support this hypothesis, as well. Interacting pre-test affinity for populism and the outrageous behavior treatment is neither substantial nor significant.

2.6 Discussion

When politicians address the public, we might expect them to behave in a sanitized way that is unobjectionable to most and offensive to few. Donald Trump takes a different tact. Trump’s behavior is sometimes polarizing, strident, and outrageous. This paper attempts to make sense of why that is. The results from this paper show that Trump can increase his support and support for his agenda by trafficking in outrageous behavior. There is little evidence, however, to show that those with an affinity toward populism or racial resentment are particularly affected by Trump’s outrageous behavior. Republicans weren’t particularly affected by Trump’s outrageous behavior, either. However, Independents responded favorably to Trump’s outrageous behavior. Lacking sufficient data, this paper can only speculate for why that might be. Independents typically exhibit low levels of interest in politics—perhaps

Table 2.4: The Effect of Trump’s Outrageous Behavior on Support for Trump

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Trump Support	
	Study 1	Study 2
Outrage	0.085* (0.048)	0.026 (0.041)
Conventional	0.014 (0.035)	0.022 (0.035)
Racial Resentment	0.164*** (0.035)	0.321*** (0.036)
Outrage × Racial Resentment	−0.062 (0.061)	0.006 (0.061)
Constant	0.344*** (0.030)	0.296*** (0.028)
Observations	664	603
R ²	0.043	0.172
Adjusted R ²	0.037	0.166
Residual Std. Error	0.367 (df = 659)	0.345 (df = 598)
F Statistic	7.398*** (df = 4; 659)	31.003*** (df = 4; 598)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 2.5: The Effect of Trump’s Outrageous Behavior on Support for Trump

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Trump Support	
	Study 1	Study 2
Outrage	0.063 (0.053)	0.048 (0.046)
Conventional	0.018 (0.035)	0.037 (0.037)
Populist	0.115*** (0.037)	0.196*** (0.037)
Outrage × Populist	0.005 (0.064)	−0.002 (0.063)
Constant	0.350*** (0.034)	0.311*** (0.032)
Observations	664	603
R ²	0.027	0.068
Adjusted R ²	0.021	0.062
Residual Std. Error	0.370 (df = 659)	0.366 (df = 598)
F Statistic	4.620*** (df = 4; 659)	10.891*** (df = 4; 598)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

the outrageous behavior treatment transmitted novel information to this slice of the public?

More research is necessary to identify which constituencies are persuaded by Trump’s outrageous behavior. Who might these people be? Alt-right memers, avid reality TV viewers, and low information voters are all plausible candidates for future research. Better understanding who is persuaded by Trump’s penchant for norm-violation will do much to demystify his notorious, but poorly understood “base.”

My experimental design allows me to examine how Donald Trump benefits from outrageous behavior and where he doesn’t. Furthermore, my experimental design provides an example for how to assess difficult to test political phenomena, such as affect or political rhetoric, with a causally-oriented research design. Future research can build on this design—leveraging large, relatively inexpensive convenience samples, cutting-edge online survey tools, and burgeoning technology such a deepfake software to significantly bolster excludability assumptions (i.e., the treatment and only the treatment is producing the estimated effect).

Although my experimental design is proficient in at least several ways, including resourcefulness, identification, and measurement, concerns regarding external validity are appropriate. First, examining only Donald Trump’s outrageous behavior under very specific conditions raises both excludability and generalizability concerns regarding the effectiveness of the proposed treatment. Trump is a singular political figure in many ways. Perhaps there is something unique about Trump or his circumstances that allows him to use outrageous behavior for his benefit. Or only the outrageous behavior selected for these studies is beneficial, while Trump’s outrageous behavior under different auspices might yield different results. Second, because my estimates are obtained using a relatively small convenience sample recruited on MTurk, my sample may not be representative of the national population. Conducting these experiments on a larger, representative sample could therefore produce different results. Third, the treatment delivered in my surveys may not fully simulate the ways in which outrageous behavior manifests in the real-world. People consume political content

via news programming that contextualize political content in distinct, often-times impactful ways. This phenomenon is particularly prominent with partisan media (K.H. Jamieson et al., 2007). Lastly, we should be particularly concerned about a violation of the exclusion restriction. Although I have attempted to home in on the effects of outrageous behavior, by limiting potential confounders, perhaps unobserved factors are driving the results. Therefore, since the manipulations are real-world clips, instead of researcher-created videos, there are potentially additional factors accounting for the difference between the media that could affect the results. Hopefully, however, what is lost in terms of control is gained in terms of authenticity.

Future research can turn to other methods of inquiry to examine the effects of outrageous behavior, with careful consideration for external validity. For example, case studies, elite interviews, and focus groups can test the influence of outrageous behavior on political attitudes in a more dynamic manner, including other ways in which the phenomena can impact an individual beyond attitudinal change. Elite interviews can help unpack the ways in which outrageous behavior not only affects the public, but also other politicians, institutional performance, and inter-branch relations. Furthermore, more tests of outrageous behavior on the political attitudes are in order. My study found that the average effect of outrageous political on respondents' outlook for the future was -3.34 percentage-points and the average effect on enthusiasm for the next election was -7.4 percentage-points. In an age marked by intense scholarly debate over voter suppression in the American political system (Burden, 2018; Grimmer et al., 2018; Hajnal et al., 2018), examining how these effects might be incorporated into a broader political strategy of voter de-mobilization would be of interest to scholars concerned with voting and political engagement.

CHAPTER 3

PARTISANSHIP, POPULISM, AND SUPPORT FOR PRESIDENTIAL NORMS

3.1 Introduction

Throughout his two presidential campaigns and single term as president, Donald Trump shattered an unprecedented amount of presidential and political norms (Gittleson, 2021; Lieberman et al., 2019; Martin, 2020; Montgomery, 2020; Nyhan, 2017a; Pfiffner, 2021; Renan, 2020). Running as a populist firebrand, Trump took negative campaigning to new heights (Gross and Johnson, 2016; Nai et al., 2019). During presidential debates he belittled and mocked his opponents, lied brazenly, and refused to agree he would concede if he lost the election. Trump's surprise victory in 2016 only affirmed this approach to politics. As president, Trump personally profited from official business, refused to release his tax returns, interfered with Department of Justice investigations, attacked judges, and lied more than any previous president (Montgomery, 2020). Trump has the ignominious distinction of being the only president to have been impeached twice. The House of Representatives impeached Trump in 2019 for Abuse of Power and Obstruction of Congress regarding allegations that Trump pressured Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy to investigate the son of his political rival Joe Biden. The House of Representatives impeached Trump in 2021 for incitement of an insurrection on January 6 related to Trump's attempts to overturn the 2020 presidential election results. In both cases, Trump was acquitted in the Senate, largely along party lines.

Trump has achieved considerable political success despite his prodigious norm violations. According to the literature on political norms, he should have been punished for his transgressions. He was rewarded with 74 million votes and the loyalty of a large segment of the electorate. Even in the wake of a tumultuous term in office and an acrimonious defeat in

2020, as of the time of this writing, Trump remains one of the most popular politicians in the United States and the undisputed leader of the Republican Party (Penn et al., 2022). In fact, there is evidence that Trump can benefit politically from presidential norm violations (James, 2022). These details beg the question: Do presidential norms matter to the public? If the answer is no, then we might question the notion of presidential norms fundamentally. Prior research assumes their existence. Taking a step back, this paper assesses whether the public endorses what scholars, journalists, and politicians assert are presidential norms so as to measure the potential for “presidential norms” to be considered as such.

Scholars argue that norms are vital to a well-functioning democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Renan, 2017). Such norms resolve ambiguities and gaps in formal institutions, or work alongside them to structure governance. Despite this, the degree to which a president must conform to presidential norms is not written in stone. Presidents can choose if and how much they will conform to them because immediate sanction for breaches of presidential norms are not self-executing and costs for infraction are indeterminate. Existing literature emphasizes the central role the public plays in maintaining political norms (Weingast, 1997; Azari and Smith, 2012; Renan, 2017). Weingast theorizes that the public must achieve consensus to serve as a reliable check on sovereign transgressions. Without public consensus and the consequent sanction for transgressions, the concept of political norm would lose all meaning. In other words, for a political norm to be considered as such, public backing is likely necessary. However, little is known regarding what the public thinks about presidential norms. Trump isn’t the first or only president to break presidential norms, though he is likely the most prolific norm-violator.

Building on previous research which identifies and explores the importance of presidential norms (Renan, 2017), in this paper I develop methods to gauge public recognition and respect for what political scientists and journalists call presidential norms. In doing so, we can gain some leverage for understanding Trump’s fervent Republican support, despite his presidential

norm violations (Pfiffner, 2021). Drawing on research on presidential norms and populism, I formulate and test several hypotheses about public attitudes and presidential norms.

Much of the existing research on presidential norms is vague regarding the public's role in sanctioning norm violations even though widespread (i.e., public) agreement is likely necessary for most presidential norms to be considered as such. This is problematic since one conception of norms, “expected behavioral patterns”, must be expected by a group powerful and large enough to generate reasons for compliance (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Renan, 2017). This literature theorizes norm violations only yield public sanction (costs), when considered at all (Azari, 2016; Pfiffner, 2021; Renan, 2017). This perspective does not theorize conditions when violations might yield public approbation from some groups, as well as costs from others. Lastly, if mentioned, the public is described as a monolithic, undifferentiated mass.

My findings reveal that presidential norms are not merely academic constructs but are widely supported features of the modern presidency. However, the makeup of public support for presidential norms is variable, depending on what norm, and several politically relevant characteristics. The public is not a monolith, but rather a collection of various overlapping and discrete publics with sometimes convergent and other times divergent expectations, policy preferences, and sentiments. The results of my survey reveal two analytically distinct categories of presidential norms—what I call structural norms (e.g., releasing personal tax returns) and presentation norms (e.g., taking the oath of office on a Bible). The sub-types of presidential norms are constructed categorically, in terms of function. The presidential norms that make up the two sub-types relate politically, in terms of who supports them. I find that different politically relevant constituencies value the two types of presidential norms differentially. In short, politics matters. In addition to these analyses, I provide some suggestive evidence that intrepid presidents can use particularistic adherence to and deviation from presidential norms, like how they can use particularistic policies, to appeal

to key constituencies. In this sense, presidential norms are technologies, available to all presidents to use instrumentally to obtain political support.

3.2 Two Dimensions of Presidential Norms

If we are to make sense of the presidency, it is critically important to understand presidential norms. As Daphna Renan argues, “The nature of the presidency cannot be understood without reference to norms” (2017, 2188). Despite their importance, presidential norms are something we know very little about. Part of this is a consequence of their nature. Political norms, “socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels” (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004, 727) are widely recognized as essential to a well-functioning democracy (Carey et al., 2019), but what counts as a norm is often unclear.

I define presidential norms as *informal institutions, routinized practices, and customs that structure the presidency*. Some of these are what Renan (2017) defines as structural norms. These are “expected behavior patterns” that function to (i) insulate decisions from certain types of actors, (ii) limit self-dealing or corruption of government power, (iii) structure decision making to make it less arbitrary, (iv) allocate authority among different branches or institutions of government, and (v) structure the role of politics in governance (Renan, 2017). Norms of fair play, such as avoiding using government agencies to attack political opponents, which help sustain democracy, are similar (Carey et al., 2019). Following Renan, I call all these types of presidential norms structural norms. They promote and support constitutional governance. Structural norms “stabilize expectations, neutralize incipient conflicts, or settle points not resolved by the written rules,” edifying the workings of American government and structuring presidential behavior, when there are tensions or gaps in the formal rules (Azari and Smith, 2012, 43). Structural norms work largely to constrain presidential behavior and affect how the president operates within a largely institutional context, frequently with

respect to other elite political actors.

The other type of presidential norms I present are what I call presentation norms, which are concerned with expectations that presidents often eagerly abide and even encourage. I define presentation norms as *symbolic and public presentation practices that structure the way in which the president engages with the public*. While the formal institutions of the presidency have received careful and copious scholarly attention, the symbolic presidency is relatively understudied, especially given the resources that presidents pour into maintaining and developing the symbolic potency of the office (Miroff, 2016). The symbolic presidency is “a set of expectations about the office that are held by the public, described by journalists and teachers, and encouraged by presidents themselves” (Hinckley, 1990, 130). Spectacles, or “symbolic events,” are the manner in which leadership is enacted in the modern presidency (Miroff, 2016). Empirical research on presidential spectacle demonstrates how the symbolic context can yield dividends politically (Howell et al., 2020). Relatedly, more than most people, politicians manipulate their presentation of self, depending on the context and audience, adjusting their persona and performance as needed in pursuit of political support (Fenno, 1977; Goffman, 1959).

The president not only utilizes spectacle and performance instrumentally, but they also use pre-established spectacles (i.e., presidential rituals) and rich imagery to pursue advantage. Often certain symbols or symbolic practices are employed systematically, by so many successive presidents, that the public comes to associate certain symbolism and symbolic practices with the presidency itself and expect its presence or usage under some predetermined circumstances. In this way, norms are routinized into existence by successors following a norm innovator. These norms are categorically different than structural norms, since they are generally prescriptive as opposed to proscriptive. Presentation norms are less immediately and obviously consequential for the maintenance of the constitutional order, but are nevertheless essential, since they aesthetically connect the president and the institution of

the presidency to the people.

3.3 The Public and Presidential Norms

Existing literature persuasively demonstrates the importance of presidential norms for the American political system. Highlighting and documenting abuses has trained scholarly and journalistic attention on the subject. However, for much of the research in this domain, the public is a passive, but reliable check on presidential norm violations (Azari and Smith, 2012). When considering the public, these accounts treat it as a homogeneous mass (Renan, 2017; Pfiffner, 2021). What’s missing is a more nuanced understanding of the public and its capacity to punish presidential norm violations. Will the public stand together to reliably sanction presidential norm violations? Answering this question requires a more sophisticated understanding of the public – one that recognizes that the public is less a homogeneous mass, and more a collection of overlapping publics with sometimes convergent, oftentimes divergent preferences and expectations.

Due to his norm-violating behavior, Donald Trump has been described by many scholars and political analysts as a populist. In an era marked by substantial disdain and distrust for institutions, norm violation has been used by politicians around the world seeking to brandish their anti-establishment bona fides. Trump has described the press as the “enemy of the people” (Grynbaum, 2017). He frequently employs Manichean rhetoric, pitting the “corrupt” elite against the virtuous “people.” Trump and other populists foment distrust of institutions, employing terms like the “establishment” and “deep state” to undermine the legitimacy of institutions hostile to their politics. Such rhetoric has political traction because a sizeable fraction of the population maintains an affinity for populism (Oliver and Rahn, 2016). Populist politicians leverage “representation gaps” to indict political opponents and justify unconventional methodologies. By employing transgressive, norm-violating behavior, populists signal authenticity, distinction from the status quo, and a commitment to confront

entrenched political rivals.

Over the last decade, an ascendant populist wing has transformed the Republican Party. Populist politicians, once consigned to the periphery, are now plentiful and influential in a party where Donald Trump still casts a long shadow. Anti-elite energy in the public fueled Trump's outsider 2016 presidential campaign and remains a potent source for ambitious politicians, especially on the political Right. In the electorate, the populist Right makes up a sizable share of the electorate and overwhelmingly supported Trump in the 2020 presidential election (Pew Research Center, 2021). The rising influence of populism in the American political system has prompted many mainstream Republicans to adopt Trump's populist political style (Economist, 2021).

There is also emerging evidence that partisanship mitigates support for democratic principles (Graham and Svulik, 2020). In recent years, the Republican Party, led by Donald Trump, has demonstrated a disdain for structural norms. As evidenced by Trump's election fraud lies and the 147 Republicans who voted to overturn the 2020 presidential election results, the Republican Party is gripped by anti-democratic impulses. The Republican rank and file are in lockstep. In 2021, 68 percent of Republicans believed that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump (PRRI, 2021). According to the same survey, Republicans are much more likely than Democrats and Independents to believe that "true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country." Following this emerging research, I expect Republicans to show less respect for structural norms than others.

President Trump once actually hugged and kissed an American flag at the 2019 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). Trump is a prolific norm-violator, however most of the presidential norms that he violates are structural norms. Trump appears to embrace presentation presidential norms. Trump almost always wears a navy suit and power tie, golfs regularly, and suffuses his public appearances with American flags. Republicans are generally more respectful of traditional symbols and disdain those who refuse to embrace

these symbols. For example, 88 percent of Republicans believe that it is inappropriate for players to kneel during the national anthem compared to 23 percent of Democrats (Dann, 2018). After President Barack Obama wore a tan suit to a press conference in 2014, many Republican commentators decried the president's sartorial choice. Republican Congressman Peter King went so far as to lament that with respect to Obama wearing a tan suit, "there's no way I don't think any of us can excuse what the president did yesterday" (Coscarelli, 2014). What statistics and comments such as these indicate is that Republican politicians utilize and emphasize these symbolic practices to appeal to voters. Voters take these messages from elites and politicians and use them to make sense of political information (Zaller, 1992; Berinsky, 2009; Levendusky, 2009; Lenz, 2013; Endres et al., 2021). Therefore, consistent with elite Republican commitments to patriotic emblems of the presidency, I expect Republican voters to embrace presentation norms.

Because of the powerful political cleavages that organize American politics, I expect political considerations like partisanship and affinity for populism to shape one's commitment to presidential norms. While the existing literature puts all presidential norms on par, suggesting uniform public acquiescence, it is worth speculating whether all presidential norms hang together so easily. I contend that there are two sub-types of presidential norms (structural and presentation), and public support for them will vary according to partisanship and affinity for populism. In the contemporary context, support for structural norms will be strongest among individuals relatively satisfied with the status quo: Democrats and the disinclined toward populism. As such, support for structural norms should be weakest among Republicans and the inclined toward populism. Conversely, I expect the inclined toward populism to support presentation norms more than Democrats and the disinclined toward populism. These concerns call into question the public's ability to reliably and forcefully sanction presidential norm violations and recommend an investigation with these considerations in mind.

3.4 Data and Methods

Americans strongly support presidential norms, both the presentation and structural variety. I find this in a nationally representative Lucid survey sample of 788 American adults eligible to vote deployed during the week of January 17, 2022. Appendix Table B.1 derives the demographic data of the study. To investigate the public’s support for presidential norms, I asked a battery of sixteen questions regarding people’s agreement with a plethora of phenomena acknowledged by scholars, journalists, and politicians to be presidential norms. Some of the presidential norms were items of my own construction, while others are adapted from previous studies by other scholars (Azari and Smith, 2012; Carey et al., 2019; Pfiffner, 2021; Renan, 2017). Nine questions in the battery concern structural norms and seven concern presentation norms (I provide the sources I derived the questions from in the Appendix.).

Support for structural presidential norms. In this survey, I analyze nine questions on evaluations of presidential norms which ask respondents how presidents ought to conduct themselves while in office. For most of the questions, respondents were presented a statement and asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement. The specific question wordings are:

- Presidents shouldn’t hire their relatives to high-ranking positions in their administration.
- Presidential candidates should release their financial records, including their personal tax returns.
- Presidents should not use public office for private gain.
- When experts generally agree, presidents should listen to experts about matters of public policy.
- As head of the Executive Branch, the President of the United States is responsible for

implementing and enforcing the laws written by Congress. Presidents may sometimes encounter laws that they morally oppose. Presidents should enforce laws, even laws that they morally oppose.

- Generally, former presidents should attend their successor's inauguration.
- A concession is the act of a losing candidate publicly admitting defeat to a winning candidate after an election when the result of the vote has become evident. It is important that candidates for political office concede after losing elections.
- It is inappropriate for the President of the United States to direct government agencies to monitor, attack, or punish political opponents.
- It is inappropriate for the President of the United States to ask leaders of foreign countries to investigate political rivals.

I refer to these instruments in shorthand as structural norms because they promote and support constitutional governance. The response values allow respondents to answer using a five-level Likert item, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scale is constructed from these statements by coding the five potential responses from each assertion from -2 to 2 in intervals of 1, with -2 being the least supportive response and 2 being the most supportive. Americans generally support structural norms. Most norms received at least 71 percent agreement. Support for structural norms (i.e., the agreement with the norm or disagreement with the norm violation) ranged from 87 percent to 69 percent. The presidential norm that “presidents should not use public office for private gain” received the most support. Figure 1 provides a full summary of the results.

Support of presentation presidential norms. I analyze seven questions on evaluations of presidential norms which ask respondents when and how presidents ought to present themselves before the public while in office. For most of the questions, respondents were presented a statement and asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement. The

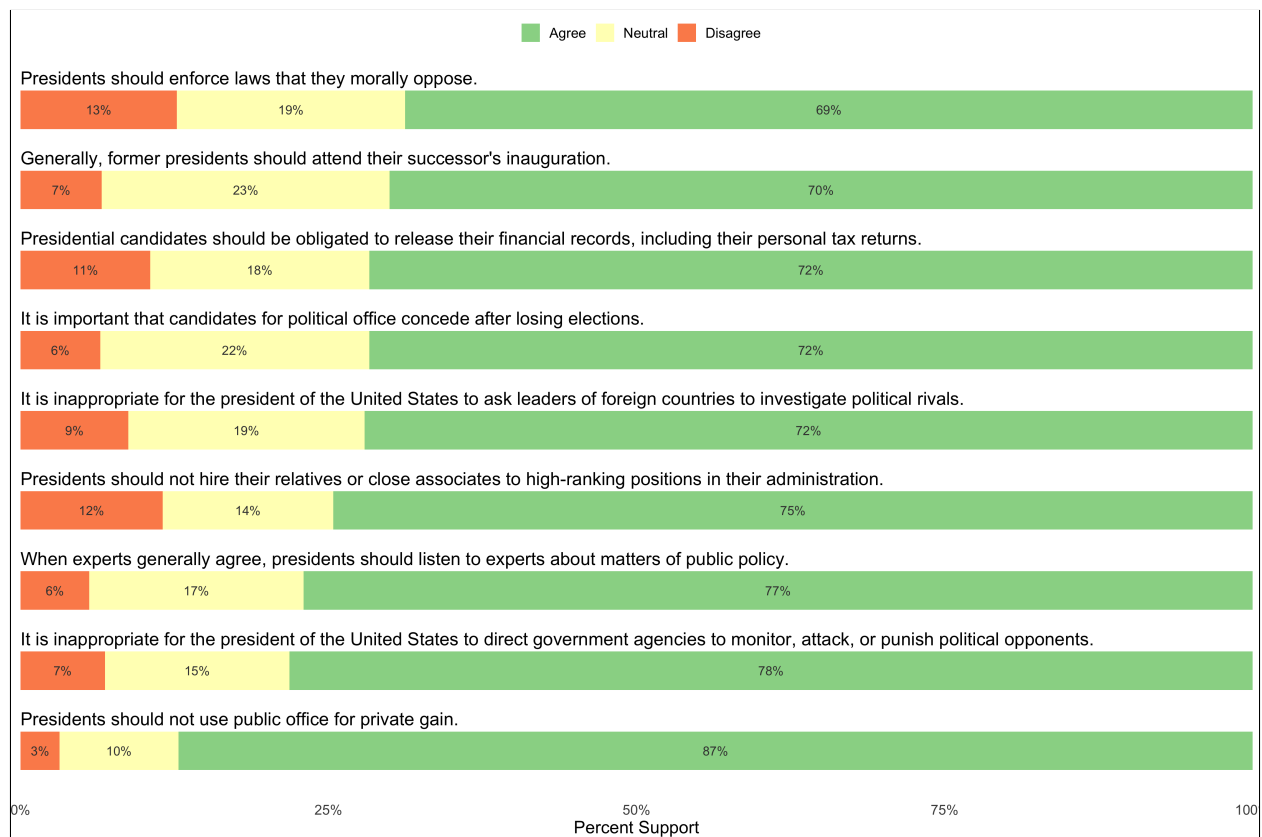


Figure 3.1: Public Support of Structural Presidential Norms

scale is constructed from these statements by coding the five potential responses from each assertion from -2 to 2 in intervals of 1, with -2 being the least supportive response and 2 being the most supportive. The specific question wordings are:

- Presidents should salute military personnel, especially when boarding and departing Air Force One and Marine One.
- Presidents should deliver the State of the Union address before Congress as a speech.
- Presidents shouldn't lie to the American public.
- Presidents should visit areas in the United States recently devastated by natural disasters.
- Presidents should take the oath of office on a Bible.

- Presidents should welcome professional and college sports teams to the White House to honor their championships.
- Presidents should regularly communicate with the public, using press conferences, interviews, social media, or other modes of communication.

I refer to these instruments as presentation norms because they are practices that structure the way in which the president engages the public. Like the response values for the structural norms, respondents were asked to use a five-point Likert scale to indicate their support for these norms. As with structural norms, Americans generally support presentation norms. Each norm elicited at least majority support, most in fact, obtained support exceeding 70 percent. The range of support for these presidential norms was between 52 percent and 86 percent. Figure 2 also provides a full summary of the results.

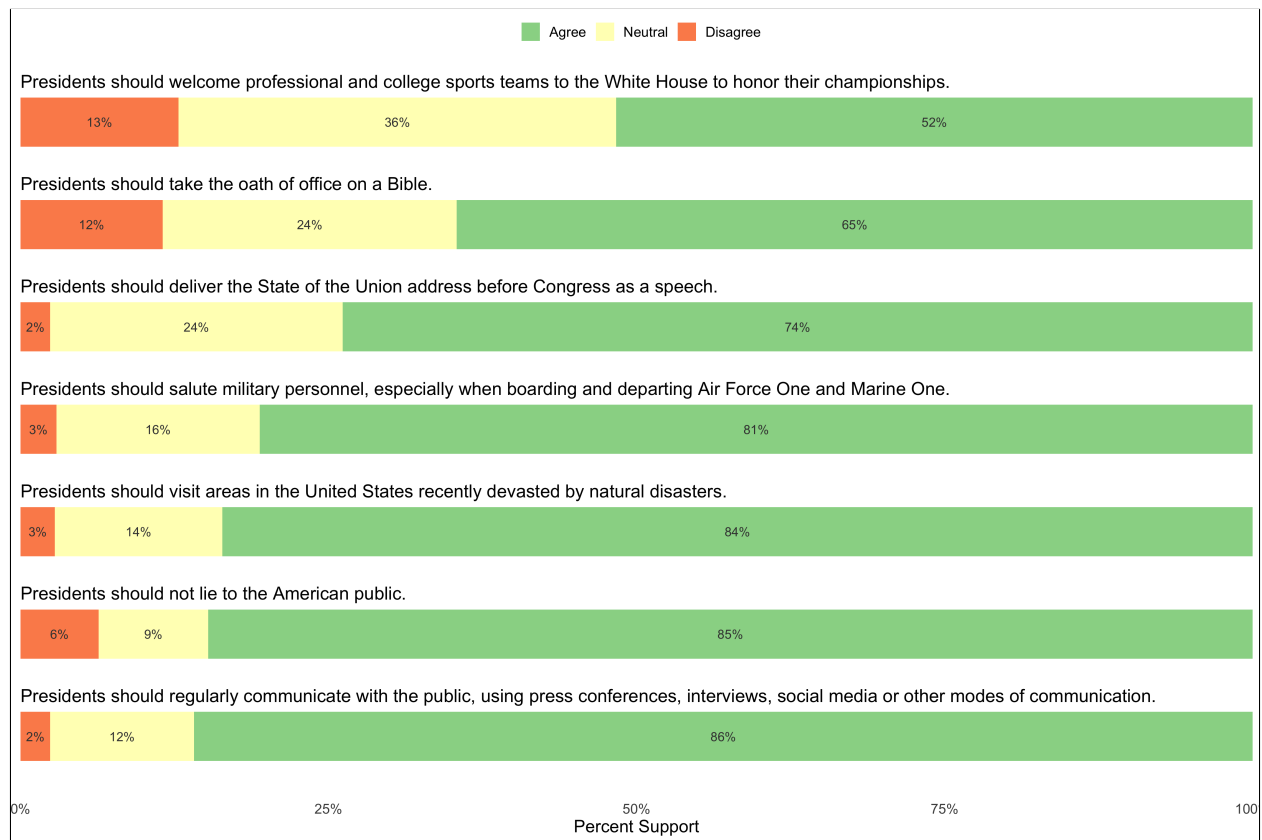


Figure 3.2: Public Support of Presentation Presidential Norms

The results above reveal widespread public support for both structural and presentation norms. We can ascertain from these findings that the public writ large supports many prominent informal constraints on and expectations of the presidency. Further, the presidential norms under examination engender minimal opposition. The degree to which there is any counterweight to the broad consensus on presidential norms come in the form of neutrality or ambivalence, rather than outright opposition. Nevertheless, despite widespread agreement, there is variation in support, the nature of which is the subject of the following section.

As mentioned above, I expect some groups to support structural norms more than others. Likewise, I hypothesize that some groups will support presentation norms more than other groups. To further assess presidential norms, I construct a set of regression models to examine the relationship between support for structural and presentation norms and various politically relevant characteristics. I combine all the structural norms items into an index of opinion and do the same for presentation norms to obtain a more general assessment of public support of presidential norms. The Cronbach's alpha for the structural norms and presentation norms indices are 0.71 and 0.70, respectively. Table 3.1 presents the loadings for a two-factor solution that detects two different patterns in the data; in many ways, corroborating the sub-setting of presidential norms into structural and presentation norms. The first dimension captures all of the structural norms and the second dimension taps into the presentation elements of presidential norms. In other words, my theoretically motivated conception of presidential norms does not differ much from a more data driven approach. The procedures used to obtain the optimal number of factors can be found in the Appendix.

3.5 Heterogeneous Support for Presidential Norms

Partisan support for presidential norms. Emerging research finds that partisans demonstrate less commitment to democracy (Svolik, 2020). Prominent political scientific research contends that in an effort to win mass support and achieve a conservative policy agenda, the

Table 3.1: Factor Analysis Loadings

Question	Structural	Presentation
Release their financial records.	0.643	
Concede after losing elections.	0.608	
Inappropriate to ask foreign countries to investigate rivals.	0.597	
Attend their successor’s inauguration.	0.58	
Listen to experts.	0.564	
Inappropriate to direct government to punish opponents.	0.425	0.335
Don’t use public office for private gain.	0.414	0.388
Enforce laws they morally oppose.	0.353	
No relatives to high-ranking positions.	0.336	
Salute military personnel.		0.647
Regularly communicate with the public.		0.62
Visit disaster areas.		0.531
Deliver the State of the Union as a speech.		0.53
Oath on a Bible.		0.473
Don’t lie to the public.		0.376
Sports teams to the White House.		

Republican Party poses the gravest modern threat to democracy and the norms that edify it (Hacker and Pierson, 2020; Lieberman et al., 2019; Mettler and Lieberman, 2020). I expect that Republican partisans will support structural norms less than Democrats. Therefore, our first quantity of interest is the effect of partisanship on support for presidential norms. If this hypothesis is correct, I should find that the partisanship indicator variable has a negative coefficient, demonstrating that on average, Republican and Republican-leaning respondents exhibit less support for structural norms. I estimate this using OLS regression, given by,

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 R_i + \beta_2 E_i + \beta_3 W_i + \beta_4 M_i + \beta_5 A_i + \epsilon_i$$

where Y_i is a measurement of support for presidential norms. Instead of measuring all the presidential norms together, I assess structural norms and presentation norms separately. I do this by combining all 9 of the structural norms into one index and all 7 presentation norms into another, that I call structural norms and presentation norms, respectively. The key input R_i is an indicator variable that describes the partisanship of the respondent. Here, the variable takes on the value of 1 if the respondent identifies as an “independent leaning

Republican,” “leans Republican,” “Not very strong Republican,” or “Strong Republican” and 0 otherwise. The key parameter of interest is β_1 , which shows the correlation between partisanship and support for presidential norms. Included in the model are several controls for educational attainment, race, gender, and age. ϵ_i is the residual or error term.

The results from my survey support this expectation. Table 3.2 presents the results. The key parameter of interest is β_1 , which shows the effect of identifying as a Republican on support for presidential norms. I found a substantively and statistically significant relationship between party identification and support for structural norms. Respondents who voted for Trump in the 2020 presidential election corroborate the finding above. The OLS model below regresses support for presidential norms on voting for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election, with several control variables. The key input T_i is an indicator variable that takes on a value of 1 if the respondent voted for Trump in the 2020 presidential election and 0 otherwise. Included in the model are several controls for educational attainment, race, gender, and age. ϵ_i is the residual or error term.

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_i + \beta_2 E_i + \beta_3 W_i + \beta_4 M_i + \beta_5 A_i + \epsilon_i$$

Table 3.2 also presents these results. Voting for Trump is associated with far less support for structural norms. The results for the relationship between support for presentation norms and partisanship was inconclusive. From the data obtained in this survey, we can distinguish no clear partisan difference in support for presentation norms. A detailed partisan breakdown for both sub-types of presidential norms is shared in the Appendix.

Populism and support for presidential norms. Populist politicians often breach norms to distinguish themselves from more conventional politicians. In doing so, they seek to demonstrate authenticity and leverage anti-elite sentiment for political gain. Thus, I expect respondents amenable to populism to exhibit less support for structural norms. Because populism implies a veneration for “the people” and their traditions, I hypothesize that respondents with greater scores in populist sentiment will show more support for presentation

Table 3.2: (OLS) Predictors of Support for Presidential Norms

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Structural (1)	Presentation (2)	Structural (3)	Presentation (4)
Republican	-3.734*** (0.427)	0.061 (0.318)		
Trump 2020 Voter			-3.991*** (0.411)	-0.003 (0.309)
Education	0.391*** (0.099)	0.044 (0.074)	0.395*** (0.098)	0.043 (0.074)
White	0.693 (0.445)	0.355 (0.331)	0.596 (0.438)	0.367 (0.329)
Male	-0.052 (0.382)	0.068 (0.284)	0.075 (0.379)	0.073 (0.285)
Age	0.065*** (0.012)	0.056*** (0.009)	0.059*** (0.012)	0.056*** (0.009)
Constant	6.304*** (0.683)	5.224*** (0.508)	6.685*** (0.675)	5.219*** (0.508)
Observations	788	788	788	788
R ²	0.128	0.064	0.146	0.064
Adjusted R ²	0.123	0.058	0.141	0.058
Residual Std. Error (df = 782)	5.323	3.960	5.268	3.960
F Statistic (df = 5; 782)	23.043***	10.618***	26.780***	10.610***

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

norms. To measure populist attitudes, I asked the respondents about their feelings toward experts, elites, and their attachment to an American identity using a battery of fifteen questions developed by Oliver and Rahn (2016). Answers are then summed to create a populism index. Each response can take a value between $[-2, 2]$, with -2 being the least populist response and 2 being the most, so that an overall positive value for the populism index indicates an affinity for populism. To assess the relationship between populism and support for presidential norms, I present the following model.

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 P_i + \beta_2 E_i + \beta_3 W_i + \beta_4 M_i + \beta_5 A_i + \epsilon_i$$

Where, again, Y_i is a measurement of support for presidential norms. Here, though, the key input P_i is an indicator variable that takes on a value of 1 if the respondent's overall score for populism is positive and 0 otherwise. The parameter of interest is β_1 , which shows the effect of a populist outlook on support for presidential norms. Included in the model are several controls for educational attainment, race, gender, and age. ϵ_i is the residual or error term. The relationship between populist attitudes and support for structural norms falls short of statistical significance, however the relationship between populist attitudes and support for presentation norms is positive and statistically significant. Table 3.3 presents the results.

Populism is less an ideology, and more rather a style, outlook, or collection of features (Canovan, 1981; Ionescu and Gellner, 1969; Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004). Over the years, both right- and left-wing populists have emerged into political prominence. To wit, Democratic Socialist Bernie Sanders, sometimes described as a populist, exploded onto the national political scene in the same election as Donald Trump. In their assessment of populist attitudes in the public, Oliver and Rahn (2016) found that their items load on three, separate dimensions of populism, what they call mistrust of expertise, anti-elitism, and national affiliation. The mistrust of expertise dimension of populism “indicates a general skepticism of science and expert opinion” (Oliver and Rahn, 2016, 198). Respondents scoring high on

Table 3.3: (OLS) Predictors of Support for Presidential Norms

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Structural	Presentation
	(1)	(2)
Populism	0.859 (0.585)	3.071*** (0.401)
Education	0.436*** (0.104)	0.073 (0.071)
White	-0.064 (0.458)	0.263 (0.314)
Male	-0.390 (0.400)	-0.103 (0.274)
Age	0.043*** (0.013)	0.058*** (0.009)
Constant	6.399*** (0.724)	4.573*** (0.497)
Observations	788	788
R ²	0.046	0.129
Adjusted R ²	0.040	0.123
Residual Std. Error (df = 782)	5.569	3.819
F Statistic (df = 5; 782)	7.509***	23.140***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

this dimension of populism correlate with fundamentalist Christian beliefs, nativism, and endorsement of conspiracy theories. Scoring high on the anti-elitism dimension of populism denotes marginalization and the sense that a group of rich and powerful elites (i.e., “the establishment”) dominates the political system. The national affiliation dimension of populism assesses a respondent’s affiliation with the American “people,” tapping a sense of belonging instead of anomie, as the other two dimensions do. People who score high on this dimension of populism are more trusting of people and express less anger at the American government. Although the three dimensions are commonly ascribed to populism, they bespeak to different, sometimes contradictory populist tendencies in the public.

Parsing populism by these three dimensions provides for a more finely tuned understanding of the relationship between populist tendencies and public attitudes. For example, Oliver and Rahn find that Trump supporters score the highest in mistrust in expertise and national affiliation, while Bernie Sanders supporters score highly on anti-elitism, particularly on issues related to economic inequality and political marginalization. Though Sanders supporters are distrustful of the elite, they are more likely to venerate democracy. Anti-elite populists want more democracy and participation as opposed to the destruction of the norms that support them, therefore I expect anti-elite populists to express more support for structural norms. Overall, anti-elite populists are more likely to hold nativist and fundamentalist beliefs, so I expect them to express more support for presentation norms. National affiliation populists are less angry at the system and more deeply connected with the American people and their American identity. As such, I expect national affiliation populist to express more support for both structural and presentation norms. Anti-expertise populists are alienated from the system, mistrusting of government and experts, and tend to hold a Manichean view of politics, so I expect them to show less support for structural norms because of their association with the establishment. However, I expect anti-expertise populists to express greater support for presentation norms because of their nativist and conspiratorial inclinations, tendencies asso-

ciated with intuitionism. Intuitionists are drawn to metaphor and magical thinking (Oliver and Wood, 2018).

To assess these three dimensions of populism on support for presidential norms, I created three indices for the three types of populism and estimate the following regression model:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 M_i + \beta_2 A_i + \beta_3 N_i + \beta_4 E_i + \beta_5 W_i + \beta_6 M_i + \beta_7 A_i + \epsilon_i$$

where Y_i is a measurement of support for presidential norms. M_i is an indicator variable and describes a respondent's attitude toward expertise, taking a value of 1 when a respondent scores positively on the mistrust of expertise battery and 0 otherwise. A_i is an indicator variable and describes a respondent's attitude toward elites, taking a value of 1 when a respondent scores positively on the anti-elitism battery and 0 otherwise. N_i is also an indicator variable and describes a respondent's attitude toward their American identity, taking a value of 1 when the respondent scores positively on the national affiliation battery and 0 otherwise. Included in the model are several controls for educational attainment, race, gender, and age. ϵ_i is the residual or error term.

All three dimensions of populism are strongly associated with attitudes toward presidential norms. Table 3.4 presents results showing the relationship between the three dimensions of populism and support for presidential norms. Results assessing the relationship individually between each of the three dimensions of populism and support for presidential norms can be found in the Appendix. Evaluating support for presidential norms along these dimensions of populism provides some clarity. Consistent with my expectation, I find that mistrust of expertise and support for structural norms is negatively correlated, while mistrust of expertise and support for presentation norms is positively correlated. Both estimates are statistically significant. Respondents who score highly in national affiliation and anti-elitism demonstrate support for structural norms. Thus, we find in our examination of the relationship between populism and presidential norms that populists in general exhibit greater support

for presentation norms, while populists who mistrust experts show less support for structural norms.

Table 3.4: (OLS) Predictors of Support for Presidential Norms

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Structural	Presentation
	(1)	(2)
Mistrust of Expertise	-3.732*** (0.506)	0.715** (0.349)
Anti-elitism	2.753*** (0.639)	-0.421 (0.441)
National Affiliation	2.243*** (0.578)	3.419*** (0.399)
Education	0.365*** (0.100)	0.075 (0.069)
White	-0.405 (0.445)	-0.005 (0.307)
Male	-0.339 (0.384)	-0.084 (0.265)
Age	0.026** (0.012)	0.046*** (0.009)
Constant	6.729*** (0.713)	5.206*** (0.492)
Observations	788	788
R ²	0.121	0.188
Adjusted R ²	0.113	0.181
Residual Std. Error (df = 780)	5.352	3.692
F Statistic (df = 7; 780)	15.360***	25.770***
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

These results reveal significant variation in the public's respect for presidential norms.

Support for presidential norms varies along several politically relevant characteristics, such as partisanship and affinity for populism, among others. We also see that presidential norms are not all of a kind. Overall, these patterns offer strong evidence that the public generally supports presidential norms in the abstract, but a closer examination reveals a more nuanced description of that support. Separating presidential norms into two sub-categories—structural norms and presentation norms—the results also show that Republicans and Democrats value the two types of presidential norms quite differently. What are the consequences of this subtle, underlying polarization? To wit, in the political realm, rarely are actions performed and received in the abstract. Rather, political action, including the violation of presidential norms, occurs in a dynamic, contested discursive environment. If presidents violate presidential norms, we might expect them to do so strategically, for example justifying the action with a compelling argument or appealing to some higher aim. In the next section, I test the explanatory power of partisan cues and policy preferences on public attitudes toward presidential norms in a series of experiments embedded in nationally representative surveys.

3.6 Justification Experiment

The results from the study detailed in the preceding pages reveal that support for presidential norms is widespread among the American public. However, the results also indicate two sub-categories of presidential norms that are supported differentially by the public in terms of partisanship. This section aims to understand how malleable public support for presidential norms is in the context of partisan framing. What kinds of arguments on behalf of presidential norm violations resonate? Do such arguments resonate differentially for Democrats and Republicans? To answer these questions I examine the extent to which partisan and policy concerns affect public attitudes toward presidential norms. I partnered with Lucid to recruit 996 participants to test this possibility through a series of experiments

embedded in a nationally representative survey conducted in March 2023.¹

The first experiment assesses the extent to which partisanship influences attitudes toward presidential norms by examining how politically-purposive arguments on behalf of violating norms affect public attitudes toward presidential norms. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of six conditions, including a control condition. Those in the control group received no prompt. Subjects assigned to one of the five justification treatment conditions were provided information about presidential demands as an explanation and justification for lying to the American people. These subjects were first told either:

- **[National Security:]** Sometimes presidents lie for reasons of national security, with the intention to protect Americans from foreign threats.
- **[Pass Laws:]** Sometimes presidents lie to get laws passed, with the intention of improving the lives of American citizens
- **[Create Jobs:]** Sometimes presidents lie to spur economic growth and create jobs.
- **[Unite America:]** Sometimes presidents lie to promote social harmony, with the intention of uniting Americans.
- **[Win Reelection:]** Sometimes presidents lie to get reelected.

Afterward, all respondents were then asked whether they agree, neither agree nor disagree, or disagree with the following statement, which derives from a question asked in the first study described in the preceding pages: “Presidents shouldn’t lie to the American public.”

If the public’s attitudes toward presidential norms are firm, we should observe two patterns in the data. First, support for presidential norms should not vary much across treatment conditions. Second, the justification treatment should not decrease support for presidential norms. In fact, we might expect support for presidential norms to increase because

1. For sample demographics and additional details, see the appendix

assigning a motive to a presidential norm violation accentuates the violation. We are also interested in how partisan concerns influence attitudes toward presidential norms. If partisan concerns don't influence how Americans respond to presidential norm violations, we should see that Democrats and Republicans respond similarly within and across treatment conditions. If partisan concerns influence attitudes toward presidential norms we should see that support for presidential norms varies along partisan affiliation within treatment conditions.

The selected treatment conditions offer an additional means to assess how partisan concerns affect attitudes toward presidential norms. Although President Biden was not invoked explicitly in the prompt, his incumbent status is indexed in reference to the usage of the term president enunciated in the question-wording. Therefore, if partisanship influences reactions to presidential norm violations, we might observe divergent treatment effects among Democrats and Republicans. Under this logic, Democrats should respond more favorably to the justifications for presidential norm violations than Republicans, since the justifications would, if practiced contemporaneously, likely redound to the benefit of a Democratic president and thus Democratic political priorities.

A brief discussion of the various treatments will add clarity to our analysis. Lying to pass laws or to win reelection, if such action is perceived to be critical to achieving the desired end, redounds primarily to the benefit of the president and their supporters. Whereas lying for the purpose of national security or to unite the country, offers a more diffuse benefit. Thus, in this experiment, we are primarily interested in the absolute value of the treatment effect, while the direction of the treatment effect is an important, though secondary, concern since both a positive and negative effect would demonstrate that framing presidential norm violations alters public attitudes toward presidential norms.

To examine how partisan affiliation influences public attitudes toward presidential norms, I constructed the following regression model:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 D_i + \beta_2 R_i + \beta_3 \text{NationalSecurity} \times R_i + u_i$$

where Y_i is a measurement of support for presidential norms and D_i indicates the treatment condition. The dependent variable is coded 1 for subjects who strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with the presidential norm. Similar to other studies investigating polarization, the analysis excludes pure independents (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019). To focus the analysis, the key independent variables are national security justification treatment and its interaction with a Republican dummy variable. The model also includes the four other treatments. In this equation, u_i is an unobserved disturbance term. The results are presented in Table 3.5. A model that controls for gender, educational attainment, age, and race is included in Appendix Table B.11.

The model shows that the estimated effect of the national security treatment on support for presidential norms was negative and statistically significant. This suggests that presidents can manipulate attitudes toward presidential norms with strategic framing of norm-violating actions. By contrast, the effect of the pass laws treatment was positive and statistically significant. The effects of the create jobs, unite America, and win reelection treatments varied, though the coefficients miss conventional thresholds of statistical significance. These results show that some, but not all arguments on behalf of a presidential norm violation will achieve the desired end.

If Americans process norm violations through a partisan filter, then the effects of the treatment should diverge along party lines. To test this hypothesis, the model includes an interaction of the National Security justification treatment with the Republican dummy variable. The main effect (i.e., the effect for subjects who affiliate with the Democratic party) is negative and statistically significant, while the national security justification treatment and Republican interaction variable is positive and statistically significant, suggesting that the national security justification treatment had the effect of reducing Democratic support for presidential norms much more than Republican support.

Because respondents were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups, comparing

Table 3.5: (OLS) Effect of Justification by Partisanship

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Support Norm Against Lying
National Security	-0.137** (0.054)
National Security \times Republican	0.176*** (0.067)
Republican	-0.013 (0.027)
Pass Laws	0.088** (0.043)
Create Jobs	0.071 (0.044)
Unite America	-0.047 (0.043)
Win Reelection	0.050 (0.043)
Constant	0.844*** (0.033)
Observations	777
R ²	0.034
Adjusted R ²	0.026
Residual Std. Error	0.344 (df = 769)
F Statistic	3.913*** (df = 7; 769)

Note: This analysis excludes pure independents. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

mean levels of support for presidential norms observed across treatment and control groups is tractable, and quite instructive for making sense of the results from the regression model. Table B.3 presents the difference-in-means test for the Justification experiment.² In the control group, 82% of Democrats and 83% of Republicans strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with the norm against presidents lying to the American people. In the National Security treatment, support for the norm decreased overall, with only 67% of Democrats and 85% of Republicans supporting the presidential norm. In the Pass Laws treatment, support for the presidential norm increased for each partisan subgroup, to 91% for Democrats and 95% for Republicans. The varying changes in public support for presidential norms among the partisan groups observed in the justification treatments compared to the control group baseline suggest that Americans assess presidential norm violations through a partisan filter. Justification treatments tended to fortify Republican support for presidential norms, except in the case of the Unite America treatment, which reduced support for the presidential norms across all partisan affiliations. The National Security treatment reduced Democratic and Independent support for presidential norms. Although President Biden was not named in this experiment, Republican responses to the various treatments suggest that partisanship is an influential source of variation in subjects' responses.

3.7 The End Justifies the Means Experiment

To further explore whether and to what extent public attitudes toward presidential norms are a function of partisan predispositions, I ask whether citizens' attitudes about presidential norm violations are dependent upon the aim for which the norm violation is employed. This experiment permits the examination of whether the policy or objective a president pursues affects support for presidential norm violations. As such, I conducted an experiment to

2. Additional summary statistics and difference-in-means tests for this and the subsequent experiment are provided in the appendix.

examine whether the ends for which a president violates presidential norms affect public tolerance for presidential norm violations.

To answer these questions, I included an experiment in the same March 2023 survey that explores the conditions under which norm violation is permissible. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of five treatment conditions, including a control condition. Subjects assigned to the control condition were asked whether they agree, neither agree nor disagree, or disagree with the following statement: “A president should sometimes break presidential norms.” Subjects assigned to one of the other treatment groups were provided additional information and an aim to complement the statement so as to provide a purpose for which to violate presidential norms. These subjects were told either:

- **[Fake News:]** Presidents sometimes violate presidential norms to challenge the influence of mainstream media, what some people call “Fake News.” Presidents should sometimes violate political norms to challenge fake news.
- **[Like-minded Judges:]** Presidents sometimes violate presidential norms to install judges aligned with their judicial philosophy. A president should sometimes violate presidential norms to install like-minded judges in federal courts.
- **[Deep State:]** Presidents sometimes violate presidential norms to take on the entrenched power of what some people call the “deep state,” meaning military, intelligence, and government officials who try to secretly manipulate government policy. A president should sometimes violate presidential norms to combat the deep state.
- **[Campaign Promise:]** Presidents sometimes violate presidential norms to enact promises they made during their presidential campaign. A president should sometimes violate presidential norms to fulfill their campaign promises.

The treatments utilized in this experiment offer some notable benefits. The purposes selected (i.e., treatments) to augment the statement derive from real-world political concerns.

Each aim has been prominently invoked by recent presidents or their allies as a purpose worthy of violating presidential norms. While this quality facilitates external validity, the choice does introduce some additional complexity because some of the aims are associated with conservative political priorities and others are more associated with liberal political priorities. This feature enhances rather than diminishes the study, because if presidents violate presidential norms in service of some ostensibly higher aim, then they would likely only do so in a way that improves their standing among their political allies. Put differently, we should expect strategic presidents to violate presidential norms in service of politically compelling objectives, which more often than not will be partisan if violating presidential norms is necessary to achieve them. Thus, partisan aims (as opposed to innocuous or nonpartisan ones) offer a stronger test of the public’s tolerance of presidential norm violation.

Does the end (e.g., policy or political objective) the president pursues affect public reaction to norm-violating means to achieve it? To answer this question, I constructed the following regression model:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 D_i + \beta_2 R_i + \beta_3 FakeNews \times R_i + u_i$$

where Y_i is a measurement of support for presidential norms and D_i indicates the treatment condition. Although this experiment contains four different treatment conditions, we will focus our analysis on just one for the sake of brevity. Thus, the independent variable of interest is the Fake News treatment. The dependent variable is coded 1 for subjects who strongly disagreed and somewhat disagreed with presidents violating presidential norms (norm-affirming) and 0 otherwise. As in the previous study, the analysis excludes pure independents. To assess the role of partisanship, a Republican dummy variable is included, as well as its interaction with the Fake News treatment indicator. The model also includes the three other treatments. The results are presented in Table 3.6. A model that controls for gender, educational attainment, age, and race is included in Appendix Table B.12.

Table 3.6: (OLS) Effect of Political Goal on Opposition to Presidential Norm Violation

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Oppose Presidential Norm Violation
Fake News	-0.030 (0.065)
Fake News × Republican	-0.153* (0.088)
Republican	-0.029 (0.039)
Campaign Promise	0.085 (0.054)
Deep State	0.035 (0.055)
Like-minded Judges	0.082 (0.054)
Constant	0.370*** (0.041)
Observations	777
R ²	0.025
Adjusted R ²	0.017
Residual Std. Error	0.481 (df = 770)
F Statistic	3.300*** (df = 6; 770)

Note: This analysis excludes pure independents.

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The coefficient for the Fake News treatment and Republican interaction term is negative and statistically significant. By contrast, the coefficient for the Fake News treatment is diminutive and statistically insignificant. Thus, the Fake News treatment had the effect of increasing Republican tolerance for norm violation and had no sizeable effect on Democratic tolerance for norm violation. This suggests that the public’s tolerance for presidential norm violations is at times conditioned on the aim the president seeks to achieve by violating the norm. Further, the results indicate that the expression of this tolerance can manifest in partisan terms. A polarizing and partisan aim can alter public appetites for norm violations along predictably partisan lines. Among subjects assigned to the Fake News treatment condition, 87% of Republicans compared to 66% of Democrats agreed in some form with the statement that “Presidents should sometimes violate presidential norms to challenge fake news.” Such results provide evidence for the claim that partisanship and policy preferences shape assessments of presidential norm violations.

3.8 Conclusion

The United States is increasingly politically divided on a wide range of issues. As intense contestation spreads to more of the political terrain, many worry that foundational political norms are next on the chopping block. My findings offer some relief for those concerned about the denigration of common ground in the political sphere. A nationally representative sample of nearly 800 Americans eligible to vote indicate substantial agreement with presidential norms. However, by distinguishing respondents on various politically relevant characteristics, I show that some publics exhibit substantially stronger support for presidential norms than others. Furthermore, I detail how presidential norms are different in kind. I argue that we can distinguish two sub-types of presidential norms: structural norms and presentation norms. Here, too, politically relevant groups support these norms differentially. The political consequences of this paradigm are yet to be fully explored.

Political entrepreneurs can be rewarded by stitching together various distinct constituencies, instead of appealing bluntly to a vague median voter (i.e., “the general public”) (Downs, 1957; Riker, 1984; Druckman and Jacobs, 2015). I argue that enterprising presidents can use particularistic adherence to and deviation from presidential norms, like how they can use particularistic policies, to appeal to and satisfy key constituencies (Berry et al., 2010; Kriner and Reeves, 2015). Alongside previous research that finds Trump can use outrageous behavior to obtain political support (James, 2022), we can begin to obtain a richer understanding of presidential norms and their wider political consequences. Presidential norms are supported by large majorities of the public and structure the office of the presidency. Widespread public support of presidential norms indicates that the public is available to sanction presidential norm violations. However, presidential norms are supported differentially by the public, depending on various politically relevant characteristics. When presidential norms are at cross purposes, or in apparent conflict, presidents can use strategic violation to signal allegiance to key groups or constituencies, especially when the violated presidential norm is more important to opponents than it is to allies or the justification for the norm violation is compelling and partisan in nature.

CHAPTER 4

MAGA COUNTERCULTURE: THE STRATEGIC USE OF NORM VIOLATION AS COSTLY SIGNALING

4.1 Introduction

The political scene can be characterized in ambivalent terms. On one hand, President Joe Biden’s administration promises a return to normalcy (Rogers, 2021a; Yglesias, 2022). On the other, the normalcy is stilted and tense (Demirjian, 2023; Howell, 2023). That is to say, the times are strained and disjunctive, without definition. Extreme political rhetoric is commonplace. Political violence is increasingly prevalent (Belew, 2018; Kalmoe and Mason, 2022; Kleinfeld, 2022; Times, 2022). In 2023, Trumpism is not yet a spent force. Nearly two years after the January 6 Capitol riot, a bipartisan select committee investigating the deadly attack declared that “one man” was responsible for the insurrection (Broadwater and Feuer, 2022). That man, Donald Trump, happened to serve as president of the United States at the time. The two Republicans who joined the committee were cast out of the Republican fold. Liz Cheney, the most high-profile member of the committee, lost in the Republican primary for U.S. House Wyoming At-large District on August 16, 2022, in a landslide (66% to 29%). In November 2022, Trump announced a third bid for the presidency amidst a swirl of investigations (Bender and Haberman, 2022; Shanahan and Bromwich, 2023). Despite the shocking public hearings detailing Trump’s multifaceted effort to overturn the 2020 election results, his political foothold remains intact (Cohn, 2023; Yokley, 2023; Brittany, 2023).¹

It’s still too early to tell whether the Trumpification of American politics will cement

1. On March 30, 2023, Trump became the first U.S. president to be indicted (Bromwich et al., 2023). The Manhattan district attorney’s office charged him with 34 felony counts. Trump’s standing among Republicans in national opinion polls improved after the indictment (Potts, 2023; Romano, 2023; Shepard, 2023). His lead over Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, his likely rival for the 2024 GOP presidential nomination, surged in the aftermath of the indictment as the “The Republican base—especially downscale voters and those who describe themselves as very conservative” rallied around Trump in response to the indictment (Shepard, 2023).

a new era of political discourse (Demirjian, 2023; Bender et al., 2022), or fade away as an unpleasant eccentricity of a craven, polarized era (Shear, 2023). Such a prediction would fall out of the scope of this paper. This paper aims to explain the ascendance and appeal of political Trumpism. I define Trumpism as *a countercultural, coordinated political movement seeking to elevate Donald Trump to the heights of political power* (Yinger, 1960). Many observers utilize the term MAGA, derived from Trump’s 2016 campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” to describe this phenomenon. In this paper, I will explore the attraction to Trump. Trump employed various strategies to build and maintain his political movement. Chief among these strategies was a strategic utilization of political norm violation. His reputation as a norm-violating, non-politician gave credibility to his shambolic, but novel pitch to the electorate in 2016. In that election, amid soaring inequality and social dislocation, politicians as a species had few vigorous defenders.

Americans support presidential norms (James, 2023). In principle, at least according to much of the existing literature on political norms (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004; Azari and Smith, 2012; Renan, 2017), violating norms should be costly. How was Donald Trump able to break political and presidential norms and remain politically viable? This paper hinges on an understanding of political norms as technologies—tools that presidents exploit for political gain. This perspective contends that adhering to and violating political and presidential norms have costs—violations coming in the form of repudiation and adherence coming in the form of opportunity costs. Further, both adherence and deviation have the possibility for attendant benefits, beyond the prospect of punishment or lack thereof. Adhering to political and presidential norms yields legitimacy (i.e., diffuse support (Muller et al., 1982)), while deviating from them can serve as a signal to attract the support of certain groups by obtaining their hard-earned trust (i.e., specific support Easton (1975); Hetherington (1998)). This perspective helps explain why presidents adhere to or deviate from political and presidential norms. I use this framework to explain why and how Trump uses the technology of strategic

norm violations (e.g., incendiary political rhetoric) to target disaffected voters, people on the political fringe, and groups such as the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers. Attracting a sizeable number of such supporters is crucial to understanding Trump's political resiliency. Their unstinting support and loyalty provide him with a base of support that few other politicians can muster.

What do norm violations do for Donald Trump politically? There are material and symbolic reasons for his norm violations that I will explore in detail throughout this paper. Scholarly research analyzing Trump's norm-violating style emphasizes how norm violations brandish his populist bona fides. They do so in at least at least seven related, but distinct ways: 1) Norm violations generate attention. 2) Norm violations distinguish Trump from mainstream politicians. 3) Trump's frequently off-script rhetoric manifests as authentic. 4) For many, Trump's norm violations signal independence from the two major parties or the so-called political establishment. 5) Relatedly, Trump's violations demonstrate resolve or ability to bear costs imposed by hostile politicians and media outlets aligned with the establishment. 6) Trump's rhetoric is more relatable to white voters without a college degree. 7) Trump's transgressive norm violations are provocative. Attacks on perceived political enemies can be thrilling and enjoyable, but also confirmatory and gratifying to people who find conventional political discourse overly cautious, stodgy, or insincere.

All these explanations fit under the umbrella of my contention that Trump uses norm violations as costly signaling to target audiences, particularly those disaffected by the political system (Greene, 2014; Edsall, 2020; Pazzanese, 2020). These signals depict him as a powerful and resilient leader-martyr of an ascendant countercultural political movement. A characterization put forward by Kinder and Sears (1981), that symbolic priorities are valuable resources in the adjudication of political conflict, is instructive. The values of society, influenced in no small part by government action, are at stake in elections, hardly different than marginal tax rates and trade policy. The result of this contest is governmental recog-

nition of who deserves esteem and status and who doesn't. Trump's norm violations are an expression of freedom that supporters can both admire and vicariously enjoy, tapping into and utilizing their resentment and status anxiety to further his political project.

Surveys and survey experiments assessing public attitudes toward presidential norms and Trump's violations of them reveal an ostensible paradox. Presidential norms are widely supported by the public (James, 2023), yet Trump's violation of them can surprisingly redound in an increase in political support (James, 2022). The article, "Partisanship, Populism, and Support for Presidential Norms" (2023), offers some clarity concerning the paradox. Public attitudes toward presidential norms are not homogeneous, rather there is heterogeneous support for presidential norms. Some publics venerate some presidential norms more than others. Dividing presidential norms up into two distinct analytical categories—structural and presentation presidential norms—this research finds that certain groups value the sub-types of presidential norms differentially. Most relevant to this paper is the finding that Republicans are less supportive of structural norms than Democrats and Independents. However, explaining the mechanisms for that outcome fall outside of the scope of the article. Furthermore, the methodology employed would be an awkward tool for the task, as I will discuss in the following paragraphs. In this paper, I address this puzzle squarely.

I argue that strategic norm violations can be politically beneficial. However, it is important to recognize that norm violations are not unambiguously beneficial to the norm violator. Norm violations are potentially profitable when the violations are recognized as a signal to groups sufficiently large and motivated to outweigh the attendant costs for the violations. Thus, only under certain "socioeconomic" conditions (i.e., amidst crises such as yawning inequality or war) will norm violations be likely to yield political benefits. Evidence from across the globe supports this conjecture. Scholars of comparative politics find a strong and persistent correlation between economic inequality and democratic erosion across a variety of settings (Rau and Stokes).

Insofar as norm violations are (costly) signals,² they must be interpreted in such a way as to be politically meaningful. Understanding the nature and significance of Trump’s norm violations necessitates the interpretation of those symbols. Thus, interpretive methods of analysis are particularly constructive for such an objective. To take a rather trite example, it’s straightforward to survey how much the public values symbolic objects like an American flag pin on the lapel of a politician with a five-point Likert scale but explaining why suggests an interpretive approach. For even if we could construct a suitable survey instrument to assess public attitudes toward the phenomenon of interest, obtaining an accurate measure might prove difficult given the subject matter. During Trump’s first two presidential campaigns, polls underestimated his support, likely due to nonresponse bias or social desirability bias among Trump supporters (Kennedy et al., 2017; Cohn, 2022). Whatever the reason, Trump supporters may be reluctant to respond forthrightly to pollsters, particularly regarding their attitudes about some of Trump’s most dubious behaviors. I am interested in the mechanisms at work that convert Trump’s norm-violating political behavior into substantial political support. Accordingly, this paper employs semiotic theories to explain Trump’s norm violations and their effects on his supporters, instead of relying solely on surveys and focus groups. Specifically, I use affect theory to analyze the emotional substrate of Trumpism by analyzing Trump’s January 6 “Save America” speech. In doing so, I examine the fantasies, anxieties, projections, displacements, resentments, and other preoccupations that underpin the MAGA movement.

4.2 Presidential Norm Violations: Costly Signaling

As described above, Donald Trump has repudiated myriad social and political norms since his emergence onto the political scene. His rhetoric, behavior, and political style flagrantly

2. signal, n. a symbol; a gesture, action, or sound as the prompt for a particular action. OED Online. December 2022. Oxford University Press. (Accessed January 03, 2023)

trampled expected behavioral patterns when such expectations were at cross-purposes with his ends. Norms, or “a name for a pattern of sanctions,” reinforce desired behaviors (Scott, 1971, 72). One of Trump’s most lamentable social norm violations occurred when he mocked a disabled reporter during a rally in South Carolina (Haberman, 2015). Political norms, “socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels” are a class of norms (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). Political norms, or informal institutions, often promote efficiency in the arena of politics. Throughout the 2016 Republican Party presidential primaries, Trump violated Ronald Reagan’s “Eleventh Commandment,” when he mercilessly savaged his Republican rivals with blistering ad hominem attacks and refused to vow that he would support another G.O.P. nominee if he lost the primary (Haberman, 2016; Reagan Foundation, 2022; Quealy, 2021).

Race and racial attitudes are defining features in American politics (Cohen, 1999; Dawson, 1995; Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Mendelberg, 2001; Tesler, 2016). In the post-civil rights era, a widespread taboo against outright and public racism in the United States prevails. This dynamic, alongside increasing diversity and racial liberalism in the United States, has fostered a social context in which racist behavior or speech often yields punishing social costs. Private individuals who breach norms against racism might face loss of employment, diminished social standing, or possibly even face legal consequences depending on the nature of their racist actions. Despite its overarching significance, frank discussion about race is often taboo among White Americans. At the same time, racist attitudes persist in the public (Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Kinder and Sears, 1981; Tesler, 2016), though few individuals would openly identify as racist. Thus, openly racist behavior is often very shocking and likely to generate attention, usually in the form of backlash.

The ways in which U.S. presidents have stymied, ignored, reversed, facilitated, or championed the cause of social and racial justice, through both word and deed, are manifold. The historic relationship between the presidency and the issue of race is ambivalent and variable.

Among the American public, since the 1940s, a trend toward the principle of racial equality and against biological racism has emerged (Schuman et al., 1998). The norms informing presidential rhetoric have corresponded to this trend, though it's important to note that advocacy of social justice and refusal to employ nakedly racist speech are not equivalent. However, at least since the heyday of the civil rights movement, and possibly earlier, presidents seeking to make racial appeals to the public have typically done so implicitly through the “strategic use of a racial symbol”, as opposed to an overtly racist message (Mendelberg, 1997, 138).

Critics accused Trump of numerous acts of racism and racist dog whistle, the usage of racial campaigns intended to prime racial conservatism among the electorate (Mendelberg, 1997; Roose and Winston, 2018; Shapiro, 2020; Kristof, 2016). The pool of allegations from which to select examples is sizeable. His unapologetic embrace of the racist “birther” conspiracy theory and dogged commitment to the bit demonstrated grim tenacity in an era marked by stringent discursive mores. As a candidate, Trump claimed that he would not receive fair treatment from a Mexican American judge in a case related to Trump University. Republican Speaker of the House Paul Ryan described Trump’s assertion as “the textbook definition of a racist comment” (Steinhauer et al., 2016). Another prominent example of Trump’s alleged racism is Trump’s “Muslim Ban” (Davis et al., 2018). As president, Trump used an executive order to block people from six majority-Muslim countries from entering the United States. He offended the international community when he described Haiti and African nations as “shithole countries” (Healy and Barbaro, 2015). By saying racist things but claiming “he’s the least racist person,” Trump creates enough ambiguity for his supporters to perpetuate the avowal that he’s not a racist (Shear, 2018).

Donald Trump’s term as president was distinctive for many reasons, but perhaps the most politically consequential distinction was his utter contempt for some of the most vitally important presidential norms (Pfiffner, 2021; Renan, 2017). Presidential norms are “informal

institutions, routinized practices, and customs that structure the presidency” (James, 2023). These norms organize the office, filling in gaps within the formal rules, or working alongside or despite them to facilitate constitutional governance. Though informal, some presidential norms are crucially important to the preservation of American democracy (Azari and Smith, 2012; Renan, 2017). For example, the facilitation of a peaceful transfer of power from one president to the next is regulated largely by reference to norms.

Presidential norms are not all of a kind, however. Research on presidential norms posits two meaningfully distinct and analytically purposive sub-categories of presidential norms: structural and public presentation presidential norms (James, 2023). Structural norms “stabilize expectations, neutralize incipient conflicts, or settle points not resolved by the written rules” (Azari and Smith, 2012, 43). These norms are proscriptive, typically elite-facing, and more immediately consequential to the constitutional order. Presentation presidential norms, “symbolic and public presentation practices that structure the way in which the president engages with the public,” aesthetically connect the president and the office to the people (King, 2016; Miroff, 2016; James, 2023). They are typically prescriptive, concerning what ought to be done, and are public facing. For example, presidents are expected to regularly communicate with the public, using press conferences, interviews, social media, or other modes of communication, though the constitution neither condones nor demands such activity.

Abstractly, presidential norm violations can be thought of as costly signaling to communicate information to a designated group of people. Reveling in controversy, Trump appealed to Americans frustrated by restrictive so-called “Political Correctness (PC) norms” (Conway et al., 2017). He lambasted his political opponents, ridiculed “the rigged system,” challenged the authority of experts, and pitted “evil” political and cultural elites against the goodly “real people” with spontaneous flair, all of which became part of Trump’s populist rhetorical signature (Jamieson and Taussig, 2017). Trump’s populist performance connected with many (usually white) Americans on an emotional level, tapping into their latent resentments and

sense of unfairness. Trump's brazen, off-the-cuff style earned him the disparagement of the "establishment." Former senator and secretary of state Hillary Clinton's remark at a 2016 campaign fundraiser captures the orthodoxy attributed to liberal coastal elites pointedly, she described half of Trump's supporters as "racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic." Thus, Trump was able to make common cause with the millions of Americans resentful of the major transformations wracking America (Hochschild, 2018).

We can make sense of Trump's outrageous behavior as costly signaling to woo resentful voters, distrustful and frustrated with mainstream politicians and institutions. By establishing himself as a lightning rod of elite disapprobation, Trump was able to demonstrate evidence of a range of qualities important to gaining the trust of wary voters.

- *Attention*: He was anything but boring, parlaying his antics into the most valuable resource in the hyperactive discursive sphere of the internet: attention (Confessore and Yourish, 2016).
- *Distinction*: He didn't talk like a politician - Trump's seemingly off-the-cuff rhetorical style implied that he didn't need an army of advisors and pollsters to focus group every utterance he made (striking a major difference with his 2016 opponent Hillary Clinton).
- *Authenticity*: His willingness to breach PC norms and risk ostracization or defeat was evidence, for many, that he was more trustworthy than the typical politician (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Jamieson and Taussig, 2017; Goren, 2018; Hahl et al., 2018).
- *Independence*: He was not beholden to the expectations and demands of the establishment. He could say or do almost anything because he seemingly didn't want or need the approval of the establishment (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016).
- *Resolve*: Bearing the costs of social ridicule offered evidence that Trump was willing to fight for his populist agenda and the supporters who aligned with his program, despite

the reputational costs for challenging the status quo (Oliver and Rahn, 2016).

- *Relatability*: Many of the controversial things that he said or did was in the vernacular of “the people” themselves, suggesting that he understood their problems and was one of them (Lim, 2008; Kazin, 2016).
- *Provocation*: By speaking like “the people” for “the people” with impunity, Trump came to embody and permit a sanctioned transgression, in which outward support for Trump allowed a supporter, who could ill-afford to wantonly break other PC norms individually, to enjoyably stick it to the establishment with the validation of the U.S. presidency (Mazzarella, 2019).

As illustrated above, accounting for one side of the ledger, Trump managed to leverage outrageous behavior to signal to prospective voters that he possessed various qualities: chief among them authenticity, outsider status (extraordinary politician), and anti-elitism (speaking like and directly to the people). But that’s just one side of the ledger, as there were substantial costs associated with his contentious behavior. Throughout the 2016 presidential election, Trump elicited extraordinarily negative feelings from the public (Christenson and Weisberg, 2019). Trump, however, was able to weather the sizeable costs of his political style by skillfully marketing the “punishment” he received. He was particularly effective at exploiting the punishment that came in the form of liberal disdain. Thus, the punishment itself became a signal to voters and a boon to supporters. 1) By eliciting and obtaining widespread denunciation for his norm violating behavior, implicit rules of presidential campaigning and presidential behavior were made explicit among the broader public, thus Trump could more credibly commit norm violating and unsavory behavior and policies in the future. 2) In refusing to back down, never apologizing, and nearly always doubling down in the face of controversy, Trump utilized the “punishment” imposed for his norm violating behavior and never seemed cowed by it.

Trump acted as if he were omnipotent and could do anything with relative impunity. This conception was a further testament to his power and resiliency. Hence his statement: “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn’t lose any voters” (ABC News, 2016). Such brazen disdain for the political norms circumscribing appropriate behavior was key to his pitch to many voters fed up with the status quo. The system, with its sprawling network of rules and norms, is anathema to the disaffected, marginalized, and exploited. The political norms that Trump trampled served as a reminder of their outsider status. Trump bucked elite expectations and made common cause with the disaffected, sealing the outlandish union with his incessant stream of odious remarks and behaviors. Notably, Trump was most uncomfortable and ineffectual operating within the paradigm of conventional political behavior. His prepared remarks, especially when the intention was to thread some political needle, were typically awkward and unremarkable. Trump was in his element when he was raucously violating political norms.

What’s written above generally summarizes a set of theories for how Trump’s outrageous, norm-defying behavior worked to his political advantage. These relatively abstract descriptions, however, tell only part of the story. In Trump’s harangue of the establishment, disdain for political and presidential norms, and the beckoning of marginal groups, we can see the essential arguments in the logic of my theory of presidential norm violation. However, the general characterization I’ve thus far elaborated on does not wrestle with the details of the dynamic that speaks to the profundity of Trump’s political movement. In the pages to come, we will explore the rich details of Trump’s beckoning of various groups through his norm defiance. In doing so, we will address fundamental concerns of political scientists: coalition formation and maintenance, race and politics, populism, right-wing extremism, and political legitimacy. That Trump was able to break norms, generate media outrage, and transform negative coverage into a political commodity is by now well-documented. First, he would do, post, or say something provocative, an action suffused with the intention to shock or

outrage. Initially because of his status as a cultural icon, then because of his (front-runner) status as a presidential candidate, and later because of his position as president of the United States, the mainstream press routinely and copiously covered Trump's controversial actions. Many major outlets couched their coverage in dismay. Despite the ostensible antagonistic relationship between Trump and much of the media, including behemoths like the *New York Times*, *CNN*, and at times *Fox News*, Trump was well-situated to exploit the increased scrutiny to disseminate his message (Azari, 2016). Just as an illustration, according to some accounts, by May 2016 Trump had received \$2 billion in earned (i.e., free) media (Confessore and Yourish, 2016). This total dwarfed the amount received by any of his competitors. The more outrage Trump generated, the more coverage he received. He believed, "newspapers, television, all forms of media will tank if I'm not there because without me, their ratings are going down the tubes" (Times, 2017a). The negative coverage did little to stymie his poll numbers among Republicans. Initially, his poll numbers increased as the scrutiny intensified. The fact that he rarely wavered or backed down from the controversy was a part of the appeal.

Norm violations distinguish Trump from mainstream politicians. Employing divisive, controversial rhetoric, such as claiming that President Barack Obama is the "founder of ISIS" (Corasaniti, 2016), Trump proves he's no conventional politician and is thus able to credibly cast himself as a political outsider (Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Jamieson and Taussig, 2017). As a political outsider, Trump castigates the so-called establishment with and through his controversial rhetoric.

Not only is Trump's rhetoric divisive but it is often off-script. His meandering tangents and cringe-worthy fusillades suggest that Trump's speeches are not beholden to a party line, polls, or political consultants. The following digression is characteristic of his style:

Look, having nuclear—my uncle was a great professor and scientist and engineer, Dr. John Trump at MIT; good genes, very good genes, okay, very smart,

the Wharton School of Finance, very good, very smart—you know, if you're a conservative Republican, if I were a liberal, if, like, okay, if I ran as a liberal Democrat, they would say I'm one of the smartest people anywhere in the world—it's true!—but when you're a conservative Republican they try—oh, do they do a number—that's why I always start off: Went to Wharton, was a good student, went there, went there, did this, built a fortune—you know I have to give my like credentials all the time, because we're a little disadvantaged—but you look at the nuclear deal, the thing that really bothers me—it would have been so easy, and it's not as important as these lives are (nuclear is powerful; my uncle explained that to me many, many years ago, the power and that was 35 years ago; he would explain the power of what's going to happen and he was right—who would have thought?), but when you look at what's going on with the four prisoners—now it used to be three, now it's four—but when it was three and even now, I would have said it's all in the messenger; fellas, and it is fellas because, you know, they don't, they haven't figured that the women are smarter right now than the men, so, you know, it's gonna take them about another 150 years—but the Persians are great negotiators, the Iranians are great negotiators, so, and they, they just killed, they just killed us (Valley, 2015).

While conventional politicians hew closely to their talking points, Trump sounds off with reckless abandon. One consequence of this dynamic is that Trump sounds less like a “politician”. Thus, Trump's off-the-cuff and unconventional rhetoric might give the impression of authenticity to people who associate preparation, reservation, and delicacy with ulterior motives (Golshan, 2017; Hahl et al., 2018).

For many, Trump's norm violations signal strength because breaking norms, especially in a highly conformist pursuit like American politics, can be daunting and costly. Often, it may seem easier simply to acquiesce to political norms, no matter their triviality or obsolescence.

The bizarre tradition of presidential turkey pardon comes to mind as an example (Rogers, 2021b; Storey, 2013). Thus, unabashed norm violations can come to signal independence.

Trump's defiant rejection of many mainstream political norms, such as refusing to release his tax returns, undermining the peaceful transition of power, attacks on the free press, profiting from his office, refusing oversight, openly courting white supremacist and extremist groups, and routinely making false or misleading claims fomented an antagonistic dynamic between his administration and the mainstream press (Montgomery, 2020). Whether Trump expected and sought such hostility from the press is, at this point of our analysis, trivially important; what matters is that he managed to re-frame, politicize, and ultimately capitalize upon the barrage of negative coverage he received because he trampled presidential and political norms.

Due to stringent norms against infidelity at the time, when reports surfaced in 1987 that presidential candidate Gary Hart engaged in an extramarital affair, he suspended his campaign in shame (Bai, 2014). Donald Trump, the thrice-married, foul-talking, serial philanderer, who once allegedly directed his lawyer to pay an adult film star \$130,000 in hush money to keep quiet regarding an extramarital affair, often stood firm as instances of his norm-violating lifestyle surfaced to public scrutiny (Rothfeld and Palazzolo, 2018). One of the most prominent examples of his prodigious obstinacy in the face of public rebuke came in October 2016, after the release of the *Access Hollywood* tape. In this tape, Trump admits to what many describe as sexual assault when he relayed a situation in which he attempted to seduce a married woman and remarked:

I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything (Times, 2016b).

Before the release of this tape, Trump had broken a lot of norms, but with little discernible backlash. However, this "October Surprise" caused a firestorm. Democratic and Republican leaders alike rebuked Trump for his statement (Burns et al., 2016). A few prominent

Republicans, such as John McCain, withdrew their support, with some even calling for the replacement of the Republican nominee. Even Trump's vice-presidential running mate Mike Pence expressed disapproval. Many expected Trump to drop out. He barely even apologized, offering a terse statement on his campaign website:

This was locker room banter, a private conversation that took place many years ago. Bill Clinton has said far worse stuff on the golf course—not even close. I apologize if anyone was offended (Diamond, 2016).

In a slightly longer video statement, Trump admitted he was not a “perfect person” (Diamond, 2016). Most other politicians would have buckled under the onslaught; Trump went on the offensive. Several days later, just hours before a debate with his rival Hillary Clinton, Trump appeared with former President Bill Clinton's accusers in a media event (Stack, 2016). He even unsuccessfully attempted to seat them in the V.I.P. box next to the former president, though they did attend the event (Peters, 2016). Trump's doggedness was rewarded with the enduring loyalty of the GOP rank-and-file, obtaining the support of 82% of Republican women and 84% of Republican men in a poll taken in the days after the release of the tape (Malone, 2016).

Trump's rhetoric is more intelligible, and thus more relatable, to voters without a college degree (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Fessenden, 2016; Shafer, 2015; Cohn, 2021). Trump's rhetoric, though replete with unfortunate grammatical construction, blistering ad hominem attacks, and polarizing invective, is more comprehensible to some voters than the language employed by his more premeditated contemporaries. Some scholars contend that Trump speaks like the “drunken guest” with “bad manners” (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014). What the “drunken guest” description captures is the fact that for many people, the highfalutin discourse of Capitol Hill or the *New York Times* editorial page is inaccessible to large swathes of the electorate, and Trump's freewheeling rhetorical style, pegged at just below 6th-grade reading level, is more amenable to their understanding (Lim, 2008; Shafer, 2015; Moyer,

2021). A national figure espousing their frustrations and resentments in comprehensible vernacular sanctions and affirms their feelings.

Since the 1970s, trust in the U.S. federal government has waned (Bell, 2022). Only 28% of Democrats and 9% of Republicans “trust the government to do what is right just about always/most of the time,” figures not much changed since the beginning of the new millennium (Bell, 2022). Concomitant with the growing distrust of the federal government is an increase in the number of people who align with neither of the two major political parties. As of 2004, the most sizeable political identification in the United States is independent (Skelley, 2021; Gallup, 2007). Many politicians have exploited these trends by attacking the very government they seek to serve. The tradition of this dynamic is long and storied in Congress (Mayhew, 2004). Thus, it should come as no surprise that Congress regularly receives very low marks from the American people. According to a December 2022 Gallop Poll, only 21% of Americans approve of the way Congress is handling its job (Gallup, 2023).

The governing elite, also described by Donald Trump in his 2017 inaugural address as “the establishment,” has long served as a central antagonist among populists in established democracies (Canovan, 1999). Furthermore, the rank of disaffected toward the governing elite is sizeable. This yawning “representation gap” foments populism and alienation (Oliver and Rahn, 2016). The basic idea of a politician is odious to many Americans, who see in the very essence of the profession duplicity, corruption, and malevolence. Trump’s populist message struck a chord with many Americans discontented with the status quo. However, the reality TV star and real estate developer had no experience in government to corroborate his commitment to “Drain the Swamp” (i.e., reduce the influence of special interests in Washington, D.C.). His prolific norm violations provided evidence that he was willing to go after the “establishment” because he was castigating them and subject to their scorn.

All these explanations fit within my contention that Trump uses norm violations as costly signaling to target audiences, particularly those disaffected with the political system. These

signals depict him as powerful, resilient, and a martyr of a powerful but countercultural political movement.

4.3 The Political Freedom of Trumpism

These folks don't get it that when they
come after me, people who love
freedom rally around me. It
strengthens me (Nava, 2022).

Donald Trump

December 19, 2022

Trump's political ascendancy and 2016 election were a surprise; in part because the man and the movement were so distasteful to liberal sensibilities (Flegenheimer and Barbaro, 2016; Healy and Peters, 2016). Trump's use of racist dog whistle politics, economic nationalism, and unconventional political style helped to stitch together a powerful base of support within the Republican Party. Analyses of Trump's base find that racial resentment and animus toward Democratic-linked minority groups predicted support for Donald Trump (Pollard and Mendelsohn, 2016; Mason et al., 2021). Other studies highlight Trump's substantial support from whites without a college degree and the politically disaffected (Thompson, 2016; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Hochschild, 2018). Eventually, Trump took over the Republican Party and re-shaped the party of Lincoln in his own image, unifying the organization with his unorthodox methods. After his selection as the party's standard bearer, Trump expanded upon his core support beyond whites without a college degree. In both the 2016 and 2020 general elections, where he received about 63 million and 74 million votes, respectively, Trump's support skewed male, white, evangelical, and rural (Huang et al., 2016; Times, 2020). Trump is not the first economic nationalist to use populist rhetoric to engage the

American public (Kazin, 2016). However, he is one of the most politically successful instances of right-wing populism in the history of American politics (Continetti, 2022).

Although Trump has flirted with the prospect of a presidential run since the early 1970s, we can understand his bona fide emergence onto the American political scene as the leader of the hair-brained “birther movement,” a thinly veiled racist conspiracy theory that questioned then-President Barack Obama’s religious preference and national origin. Few prominent politicians would openly avail the movement, even though millions of Americans doubted Obama’s U.S. birth. Trump championed the cause with alacrity. He also had the audacity and connections to take the fringe conspiracy theory on the road, espousing the birther claims on national TV shows such as *Good Morning America*, *The View*, and *CNN Newsroom*. The gimmick earned Trump public mockery from Obama himself at the 2011 White House correspondents’ dinner and the attention of a sizeable portion of the electorate, and a majority of Republicans, suspicious of America’s first black president (Clinton and Roush, 2016).

Trump’s roasting at the White House Correspondents Dinner proved only a temporary setback for the host of the hit NBC show, *The Apprentice* (Barbaro, 2011; Gopnik, 2015; Wang, 2017). The mockery and setting would furnish a bitterness between Trump and the press that would come to be a defining feature of his political identity (Crouch, 2017). This public rupture between Trump and the political elite would become the basis for his political emergence. The experience evidently made him tougher, and more resistant to media backlash, a resilience he would use to incredible political effect in the years to come. Numerous scandals would swirl around his administration without denting his support among Republicans (Dunn, 2020). Like Ronald Reagan before him, whose public support seemed so impervious to scandal that he was often described as the “Teflon president” (Shaw, 1992),³

3. The two Republican presidents share more remarkable qualities. Both, for instance, used the phrase “Make America Great Again” as political slogans (Vavreck, 2015). Critics allege both engaged in demonology, “the creation of monsters as a continuing feature of American politics by the inflation, stigmatization, and dehumanization of political foes,” which justifies extraordinary prerogatives for the counter-subversive (Ro-

Trump’s support from his base would prove so reliable that some analysts characterized his movement as a cult or “cult of personality” (Ben-Ghiat, 2016; Dicciccio, 2016; Horton, 2020).

The first major test came after his campaign announcement speech. In this widely covered screed, Trump lambasted Mexican immigrants (“they’re rapists”), political correctness (“people are tired of these nice people”), corrupt and ineffectual politicians (“they’re controlled fully by the lobbyists, by the donors, and by the special interests, fully” and “all talk, no action”), and free trade (“people are tired of [...] being ripped off by everybody in the world”) (Time, 2015). The speech was a grievance-filled harangue of the status quo. Neither “establishment” Democrats nor RINO (Republicans in Name Only) Republicans were spared in the rambling fusillade. Trump’s populist rhetoric charged the political elite with gross mismanagement, to the point of corruption, in the arenas of war, international trade, and domestic policy. In his words, the United States political leaders of the past few decades were “losers [...] morally corrupt [...] people that are selling [America] down the drain” (Terris, 2015). At the dawn of his presidential campaign, few took his words or campaign seriously (Perucci, 2017).

Over the next few years, Trump achieved an outsized role in American cultural life due to the polarizing effects of his norm-defying approach to politics. He responded to suggestions that his controversial statements and actions reflected poorly on his temperament by contending during a prime-time Republican primary debate that “the big problem this country has is being politically correct” (News, 2015; Chow, 2016). In the 2016 Republican presidential primary, he belittled, derided, interrupted, and outflanked his rivals, cruising to victory over his erstwhile challengers, Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, John Kasich, Ted Cruz,

gin, 1988; Peters and Davis, 2018; Diaz, 2018; Baker, 2020b). Both ascended to the presidency later in life as political outsiders after careers in the public eye as media figures. Furthermore, the foundation of their connection to the public derived from their political identities and personal brands (Troy, 2005; Fortunato et al., 2018), though the nature of the emotional appeals they used to connect to the public differed markedly. Ronald Reagan portrayed himself as the “happy warrior” and staked his identity on optimism and American exceptionalism (e.g., “It’s morning in America”), whereas Trump’s political identity is primarily that of a purveyor of anger and resentment (e.g., “Sadly, the American Dream is dead”) (Time, 2015; Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018).

and 12 other candidates. In the 2016 United States general election against Hillary Clinton, Trump ran a scorched earth campaign (Doherty et al., 2016), going so far as leading chants of “lock her up” at his rallies (Stevenson, 2021). On election night, Trump eked out victories in key battleground states, defeating Clinton in a political upset few political prognosticators predicted. His victory was devastating for large swathes of the country, for Trump’s unsavory rhetoric, xenophobic policy agenda and scandalous behavior were an affront to many Americans (Remnick, 2016; Healy and Peters, 2016). The fact his election stymied the ascension of the first female president, for many, added insult to injury (Doherty et al., 2016).

Trump’s earliest days in office were a mad scramble. Each day Trump filled the airwaves and memescape with incendiary remarks, unfiltered social media screeds, and divisive executive orders, a constant stream of continually startling news with an almost stupefying effect for his opposition and supporters alike (Egan, 2017; Nyhan, 2017b; Flegenheimer, 2017). For every new day, a collection of events and statements to wade through, assess, condemn, or celebrate; rolling controversies, displacing previous scandals, blurring the resolution of previously shocking events. Such was the scene in American politics until something broke through morass—an event with staying power.

On August 11, 2017, a motley collection of right-wing extremist groups descended upon Charlottesville, Virginia for the controversial “Unite the Right” rally. The rally attracted neo-Nazis, neo-confederates, Klansmen, and figures associated with extremely online alternative right or “alt-right” (Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, 2016), among many other fringe white supremacist groups. The ostensible purpose of the congregation was to protest the Charlottesville City Council’s decision to remove a Robert E. Lee statue, the infamous Confederate general known for his tactical prowess and Southern pride, from Market Street Park (then known as Lee Park). The rally also attracted counter-protesters to challenge the white supremacists and militia groups to protect them. The volatile agglomeration of groups, ide-

ologies, and emotions turned the sleepy southern city into a powder keg. Violence erupted after the protesters and counter-protesters clashed. The nadir of the lamentable event occurred when a self-identified white supremacist called James Fields Jr. drove his car into a sea of counter-protesters, killing a woman named Heather Heyer. All told dozens were injured in the maelstrom. In response to these startling events, Donald Trump “condemned hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides,” and defended the “very fine people on both sides” (Thrush and Haberman, 2017). In this equivocation, Trump appeared to condone the White supremacists and their hateful ideology (Neiwert, 2017).

For many, Trump’s refusal to categorically reject the alt-right and neo-Nazis was among the most shameful moments in American history (BBC, 2017; Pudwill, 2018). Unbowed by the controversy and negative associations, the Trump administration rolled on, to the delight of Alt-America and other Americans disgruntled with “cancel culture” and the cultural ascendancy of mainstream progressive politics. Trump’s presidency, both its successes, and failures served as a political Rorschach test (Lerer, 2018; Marlantes, 2019). Either you loved him or hated him. No president in recent history has inspired such division and polarization (Bump, 2019; Eady et al., 2018). Although Trump’s approval ratings never exceeded 50 percent, his approval among a sizeable portion of America was remarkably resilient—holding steady in the mid to low 40s, despite impeachment. Describing the investigation and impeachment trial as a “witch hunt” and “bullshit,” Trump exulted after his acquittal in the Senate, holding up an issue of the day’s *Washington Post* with the headline “Trump acquitted” (Kirby, 2020). “I’ve done things wrong in my life, I will admit,” he said from the East Room of the White House, “but this is what the end result is” (Mason and Cowan, 2020). After a controversial first term in office, Trump was on solid political ground with the 2020 general election around a year away.

The months leading up to the 2020 presidential election were a discomfiting period in American history. By April 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic was declared a national

emergency in the United States, leaving recession and uncertainty in its wake (Zumbrun, 2020). Mass protests and civil unrest enveloped the nation in reaction to the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020, aggravating venomous and long-standing racial tensions (Searcey and Zucchini, 2020). Trump exploited the discontent by openly pursuing a racially charged “law and order” strategy (Bouie, 2020; Baker, 2020a), insistently deploying federal law enforcement to local authorities, utilizing menacing tough-talk, and tweeting things like “when the looting starts, the shooting starts” (Baker and Haberman, 2020). Several weeks prior to the first debate, liberal Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died; Trump quickly nominated conservative jurist Amy Coney Barrett to replace Ginsberg—a move that would dramatically shift the balance of power on the court (Baker, 2020c). During this period, Trump enunciated a truly disturbing playbook that would serve as his political program in the months to come. He questioned the integrity of the election system, specifically mail-in voting, refused to commit to a peaceful transfer of power if he lost the election, and hinted that his supporters should take action to keep him in office if he lost in a “fraudulent election” (Crowley, 2020). During his first debate with then-former Vice President Joe Biden, the most notable quote from the night came when Trump was questioned about his stance on white supremacists and right-wing militia groups. In response to the moderator’s invitation to denounce these groups, such as the Proud Boys, Trump demurred, and directed the heavily armed, far-right, neo-fascist, self-described “Western Chauvinists,” to “stand back and stand by” (Martin and Burns, 2020). Astonishingly, the President of the United States was making common cause with a Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) “Designated Hate Group” in a nationally televised presidential debate (SPLC).

The debate was widely pilloried (Peters, 2020b; Stevens, 2020). However, it was *The New York Times* that recognized “both men were embodying their campaign pitches through their style” or political presentation of self (Poniewozik, 2020; Fenno, 1977; Lowndes, 2013; James, 2023). This recognition is astute for several critical reasons: it (1) appreciates that

Trump’s coarse behavior was intentional, (2) connects this intentional behavior with the strategy of Trump’s larger presidential campaign, and (3) respects the possibility that such a campaign was a viable winning strategy. A perspective that takes seriously the strategic logic of Trump’s outlandish political style, will offer a promising and heretofore under-explored orientation to make sense of Trump’s success in politics and approach to the presidency. Further, by examining Trump’s norm-defying time in office, we can better understand the normative musculature of the presidency that makes the office what it is.

4.4 The Anatomy of a Trump Rally

A sustained analysis of one of his political rallies offers a salutary ingress into the nature of Donald Trump’s movement. The much-maligned, boisterous MAGA rallies attest to the scope and fervency of the radical right political movement. Trump rallies became a gathering place for the disaffected and discontented, people fed up with the perceived dysfunction and ineptitude of Washington, D.C. At his rallies, before his supporters, Trump was at ease, energized, and in command—the absolute center of attention. The only place where the fantasy of Trump’s competent leadership approached reality was during these rallies. We can surmise that this was one of the reasons he continued holding them, even once he took office, his permanent campaign yet another presidential norm violation (Barabak, 2017; Graham, 2019). His fumbling administration was in many respects dysfunctional (Landler and Haberman, 2018; MacLellan, 2019), or perhaps generously, mediocre, but within the safe confines of a MAGA rally, the man transformed into the superlative president he claimed to be. To his delight, the adoring crowds validated his greatness in real-time with synchronized cries of “We love Trump!” Collective effervescence concertized an uncanny, alternative reality, with alternative facts (Durkheim, 1995; Rutenberg, 2017). Through his unhinged performance, a palpable unity was established between speaker and audience, instantiated in harmonic chants of “lock her up” (Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Panizza, 2005; Perucci, 2017). Within the

spectacle of a Trump rally, lies could be truth, villainy could be made virtuous, and the fantasies of angry, aging, disgruntled Americans could be spoken to, if not brought closer to fruition through sheer obstinacy, credulity, and willpower.

Since his campaign announcement and historic descent down the golden escalators of Trump Tower, America's 45th president has held hundreds of rallies. Though Trump was regularly accused of inflating the size of the crowds (Davis and Rosenberg, 2017), it is true that, in the aggregate, millions of people have attended these spectacles since 2015. These events contain multitudes of themes and styles. From the jocular and freewheeling to the histrionic and unhinged, the totality of Trump's rallies was a political spectacle unseen before in the history of American politics. The Trump show leveraged the disruptive and liberating qualities of the carnivalesque style to upend the preeminence of the political elite and liberal values (Lachmann et al., 1988). Preternaturally sensitive and responsive to the energy of the crowd, Trump seamlessly weaved together apocalyptic harangue, bizarre musings on pop culture, and unfettered grandiosity to contrive a spectacular performance. Unlike typical political campaigns, each speech was unique, a Trump speech du jour, due to his off-script approach. However, underneath the perceived novelty of each individual speech, exist a set of consistent themes. These themes include the rhetoric of unreason, Right-wing extremism, outrageous political behavior, affective politics, and Machiavellianism. Perhaps these themes were explicated most significantly and consequentially during his notorious January 6, "Save America" rally.

4.4.1 The Rhetoric of Unreason

Trump's January 6, 2021, "Save America" speech is brimming with the rhetoric of unreason. To lay the groundwork for illogical or patently false claims, Trump works to de-legitimize people and institutions that might credibly contest his preferred narrative, usually with ad hominem attacks (Downie Jr. and Sugars, 2020). Hence his chief nemesis, "the fake news

media.” According to Trump, the media “is the biggest problem we have” and is “the enemy of the people.” He offers no real evidence of their alleged duplicity. Trump merely asserts his incredible claims as if they’re incontrovertible, with bravado and zeal making up for what he lacks in evidence and veracity. The media is the enemy because sometimes they refute his dubious claims. Trump’s object is to become the only legitimate source of information—to the extent that other people and institutions rival his influence in the minds of his followers, they risk his enmity (Downie Jr. and Sugars, 2020). According to Trump, the media, the Democrats, big tech, et cetera, are “corrupt” and “illegitimate,” but he asserts without a hint of irony that he’s “honest.” They want to “deceive and demoralize you and control you” and he wants to “Save America.” Who is the “they” that Trump invokes so readily?

Trump often introduces controversial ideas or demonizes a despised group, without taking full responsibility for the implications of his claim, by couching his assertions in ambiguity with assignations like “people say” or referring to a class of people by saying “they,” without explicitly identifying who exactly “they” are (Johnson, 2016; Golshan, 2017). The “they,” sometimes seemingly in reference to elites, Democrats, or Muslims, are typically left ambiguous strategically. The rhetorical value of such ambiguity is manifold. 1) Specifying the enemy would humanize those whom he seeks to demonize and provide a reason for further inquiry into the nature of their villainy. 2) Being more specific would demand greater accountability for the charges leveled. A person has a history and can be identified and interviewed. They is a pronoun and nonentity. If you believe his assertion, no further step is necessary or possible and if you don’t, then refuting him is more nebulous. 3) The vagaries of an unnamed enemy is a preferable straw man, “they” as an empty signifier, is more easily transformed into the monster of whatever figure the listener has in mind. 4) “They” is easier for Trump to remember.

Trump’s argumentative style is unorthodox if not demagogic (Merritt, 2021). He does not hew to conventionally-accepted reasoning standards, logically coherent arguments, or

evidence-based political discourse. His arguments are nevertheless compelling for some for a plethora of reasons. Prominent among them is the notion of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990). Trump gives voice to the prejudices and biases ingrained in American society (Hofstadter, 1964, 1966). Using the prestige of wealth, celebrity, and later major political institutions, including the Republican Party and the presidency, Trump leveraged his platform to spread misinformation, lies, and conspiracy theories on a global scale. A celebrity enunciating the prejudices of Middle America was fodder too enticing to pass up. Since Hoover, presidents have increasingly simplified their public speeches to connect more directly with the public (Lim, 2008). Trump's speech accelerated this trend in presidential rhetoric.

Employing a dubious but straightforward rhetorical style, characterized by simple, unadorned speech, Trump sets forth a self-evident, if not harrowing prognosis for the country. Trump offers simple solutions to complex issues (Mudde, 2004) or what we might call causal reductionism. Jettison the stupid and corrupt opposition; invest your hopes and dreams in Trump's political fortunes because he "alone can fix it" (Times, 2016a). Complexity and nuance in politics can be tiresome and unnerving; such an explicative style is associated with the policies and politicians that many Trump voters consider responsible for whatever problems they understand to be wracking America. In the United States, experts and intellectuals are viewed with suspicion (Hofstadter, 1966). Populists are much more likely to "put [their] trust in the wisdom of ordinary people than the opinions of experts and intellectuals" (Oliver and Rahn, 2016). Trump's unpretentious diction, unabashed articulation of good and evil, and informal, conversational tone all serve as a palliative to anxiety-ridden supporters seeking relief from the ceaseless pressures of the perceived ongoing crisis unfolding in America. His incendiary rhetoric heightens the sense of crisis, which makes his unreasonable style more, not less compelling to his aggrieved devotees. Thus, we may conclude that while some of Trump's followers uncritically receive his dubious claims because the merits genuinely persuade them, we can assume that a substantial proportion of his base cynically

disregards their doubting minds because sustaining their conviction is more satisfying than conforming their worldview to what's veritably factual.

4.4.2 *Right-wing Extremism*

Alongside the “fake media,” Democrats and progressives feature prominently in Trump’s demonology. Vilifying his Democratic rivals is somewhat politically sensible in the polarized environment of American politics (Iyengar et al., 2019; Mason, 2018). After largely consolidating his support among Republicans, and Democrats united in opposition to his presidency, Trump turned up his divisive rhetoric toward the opposing party. Fueled by perceived status threat, many Republicans supported Trump because of his combative approach (Mutz, 2018). His highly partisan fusillade paints Democrats as socialist, corrupt, and immoral. Meanwhile, he describes Republicans in glowing terms, “smarter,” “stronger,” in a word, better. Republicans are the people that “built this country.” Unless you’re a Republican willing to demonstrate independence from Trump, then you’re a “weak Republican,” or a RINO.

The “us” versus “them” paradigm that characterizes Trump’s description of American politics, particularly in regard to partisanship, is a tractable political strategy in an era marked by extreme partisan polarization (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Mason, 2018; Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015; Abramowitz and Webster, 2016). Partisan antipathy is a notable feature of American politics. According to Trump, Democrats “want to cheat” and “for years, have gotten away with election fraud.” Democrats can’t be trusted. Thus, when Trump claims that “in Pennsylvania, Democrat secretary of state and the Democrat state Supreme Court justices illegally abolished the signature verification requirements,” or “in every single swing state, local officials, state officials, almost all Democrats made illegal and unconstitutional changes to election procedures without the mandated approvals by the state legislatures,” or “in Wisconsin, corrupt Democrat-run cities deployed more than 500 illegal

unmanned, unsecured drop boxes, which collected a minimum of 91,000 unlawful votes,” the allegations, qualified with partisan assignation, are more credible to his supporters *prima facie*. Trump charged Democrats of committing the ultimate political sin: attempting “the most brazen and outrageous election theft.” He’s unambiguous in his accusation, devious Democrats “want to steal the election. The radical left knows exactly what they’re doing.”

Democrats and Republicans across America are increasingly sorted into their respective partisan camps, infrequently coming into close contact with people who hold divergent political views from themselves (Mason, 2018). One of the important consequences of partisan sorting is that the “electorate increasingly treats its political opponents as enemies” (Mason, 2018, 77). What does such intense partisan antipathy do for voters, particularly for those with whom this study is concerned, Trump supporters and their ilk? Several compelling explanations offer insight. Democrats represent a manifest scapegoat, a powerful nemesis, fully committed to the destruction of America and American values. Democrats serve as an obstacle to America’s flourishing and the pursuit of the American Dream, with their calamitous policies and lurid values. The powerful antagonism of Democrats and their supporters explains not only the setbacks of Trump and his administration but also the concomitant individual misfortunes suffered by rank-and-file Trump supporters. Democrats stealing elections at the elite level is a tragic microcosm on the national stage of presidential politics of the powerful trends wracking the lives of millions of individuals across America—immigrants replacing citizens (Confessore and Yourish, 2022), or “less qualified” black students gaining admission to colleges over “more qualified” white students on the individual level, for example, (Banks and Valentino, 2012; Kuklinski et al., 1997).

In this worldview, Democratic politicians tip the scales to the detriment of the deserving and industrious (Hochschild, 2018). This ideology serves as a compelling, though disconcerting palliative for adherents. On the one hand, the problems of life are situated into a political framework and attributed to some real and recognizable entities, but on the other,

its simplistic and parochial logic limits deeper reflection and makes enemies out of potential allies. Progressive values, particularly cultural liberalism, are anathema to many Trump supporters who maintain a more traditional value system (Koenig, 2022), many of whom are conservative evangelical Christians (Oliver and Rahn, 2016). The challenge is more than an impetus to bigotry, though bigotry is a byproduct, but something more fundamental, a threat to one’s sense of the good life (Kinder and Sears, 1981). Such a life, defined by the values of hard work, individualism, religious observance, and belief in the American dream, organizes the worldview of many Americans (Hochschild, 2018; Koenig, 2022). Thus, for some Trump supporters, “the Democratic Party was best understood as an active force against what is good and righteous in America” (Koenig, 2022, 70). Trump’s norm-defying, Manichean rhetoric and behavior attest to the high stakes of the political contest: good versus evil (Canovan, 1981; Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Mudde, 2007).

4.4.3 *Outrageous Political Behavior*

Trump’s political style incorporates outrageous political behavior and extreme, inflammatory rhetoric (Jamieson and Taussig, 2017). Under some circumstances, this approach can be quite effective for him politically (James, 2022). Trump traffics in superlatives and hyperbole. He describes this style of marketing in his 1987 book *Trump: The Art of the Deal*. In this book, he contends that if you’re “a little outrageous, or if you do things that are bold or controversial, the press is going to write about you” (Trump and Schwartz, 2009, 58). Trump declares upsetting conventional expectations will procure media coverage. Discounting the limited context in which this advice is likely to pertain to most individuals, we can nonetheless ascertain from this statement some key features of Trump’s norm violating political style. Firstly, attention from the media is preeminent, a worthy end unto itself. Secondly, he stands behind the motto controversy sells, and creating controversy is worth the coverage secured from doing so. Thirdly, advancing a more subtle point: earnestness and

virtue are conspicuously absent from this formulation. The possibility of perfidy is dismissed as an externality too insignificant for moral hand-wringing. A widely known Trump quote, also from *The Art of the Deal*, accentuates this point. Trump posits:

People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It's an innocent form of exaggeration and a very effective form of promotion (Trump and Schwartz, 2009, 58).

Here, Trump's self-aggrandizement is the chief consideration. His aim is that people respond to "truthful hyperbole" by promoting Trump's interests. He's happy to delude and obscure the truth if it runs counter to his aims. To the extent that the truth is sullied by "exaggeration," Trump waves away the conflict by modifying the mistruth with the adjective "innocent," and even implying that people might prefer a lie to the truth when the former is more exciting than the latter. The deleterious impact of exploiting the gullible with misleading or false marketing is scarcely considered. This style, explicated and developed over decades as a real estate developer and celebrity entrepreneur, has been instrumental in Trump's political rise.

Trump's aptitude for branding and self-promotion is widely acknowledged (Johnson, 2021). During his 2016 presidential run, Trump's outrageous behavior garnered attention, leading to billions of dollars in earned media (Azari, 2016; Confessore and Yourish, 2016). Trump uses derogatory nicknames and withering attacks to ridicule his adversaries (Flegenheimer, 2018). Trump's primary insult for his 2016 rival, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, was particularly devastating. By insulting Bush with the epithet, "Low Energy Jeb," Trump simultaneously accentuated Bush's virility, the lack of enthusiasm for his campaign, and his cautious, pensive political style (Yglesias, 2015). In Trump's telling, people are either "winners," "the greatest," "central casting" (Collins and Fritze, 2019; Haberman, 2015) or they're "losers," "the worst of all time," or even a "disgusting [...] slob [...] with an ugly, fat face" (Stack, 2016). Of former senator and Republican nominee for president, John McCain,

who was taken as a prisoner of war and tortured during his service in the Vietnam War, Trump quipped, “He’s not a war hero [...] I like people who weren’t captured” (Martin and Rappeport, 2015).

Such antics are part and parcel of Trump’s rhetorical signature (Jamieson and Taussig, 2017). He was true to form during the January 6 “Save America” rally. Trump introduced the occasion with histrionics, claiming that during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, “Democrats attempted the most brazen and outrageous election theft,” a “pure theft in American history.” He contended that the election wasn’t even close and he actually “won in a landslide.” However, the greatest, purest theft in American history, doesn’t quite reach the level of significance he sought, because later he claimed that the 2020 election was in point of fact “the most corrupt election in the history [...] of the world [...] It’s so egregious, it’s so bad, that a lot of people don’t even believe it.” Thus, he declared the purpose of the rally was “to save our democracy.” To underscore the supposed stakes of the situation, he said that if Joe Biden ascends to the presidency, the “country will be destroyed.” The boundless hyperbole was ratcheted up even more when he claimed later in the speech to be fighting “for the sake of our democracy, for the sake of our Constitution, and for the sake of our children.” According to Trump, the villainy of his enemies is without limit, that the Democrats “want to indoctrinate your children.” Although Trump won the 2016 U.S. presidential election, he posited that America “doesn’t have free and fair elections” and “for years, Democrats have gotten away with election fraud.” These outsized claims are indicative of a political style unmoored from discernible fact and reasoned analysis—a style that Trump has employed throughout his political career: “seeming spontaneity laced with Manichean, evidence-flouting, accountability-dodging, and institution-disdaining claims” (Jamieson and Taussig, 2017). In Trump’s “Save America” speech, we can see how quickly the line between “innocent” exaggeration and the “Big Lie” can become irrevocably blurred.

One might assume that Trump’s outrageous behavior is so incredible that few thinking

individuals would take him or his claims very seriously or literally. However, polls have shown consistently that large majorities of Republicans consider Biden’s 2020 election victory illegitimate, though the nature of these attitudes is not obvious (Blake, 2022; Murray, 2022; Bump, 2022). The types of doubt can run the gamut, from those who believe that the “wrong people won the election” with acknowledgment of Biden’s “technical” victory to those harboring serious reservations about the election results to those who fully endorse Trump’s most far-fetched conspiracy theories (Ellmers, 2021; Zimmer, 2022). The aggregation of these various types of doubt regarding Biden’s election is pervasive distrust in the election system (Visé, 2022).

What explains these attitudes, given the lack of evidence of widespread voter fraud, and the chorus of venerable institutions and officials who attest to the validity of Biden’s victory? I argue two related dynamics drive this phenomenon and are key to understanding not only belief in the “Big Lie,” but also support for Trump’s larger political program. As discussed previously, extreme partisanship is clearly at play. The tribalism of American politics fosters an environment in which political loyalty trumps almost all other values (Svolik, 2020), including reason, decency, and democracy. Motivated reasoning, partisan sorting, and outrageous partisan media echo chambers sequester ideological worldviews (Kunda, 1990; Levendusky, 2009, 2013; Berry and Sobieraj, 2016; Merkley, 2020; Longwell, 2022). One’s political affiliations and beliefs provide for social identity (Greene, 1999; Green et al., 2002; Huddy et al., 2015; Huddy and Bankert, 2017). Thus, belief systems and partisan identities are both brittle and precious, simultaneously critically unexamined and vaguely ontological. Also, the fact that 147 Republicans in Congress voted to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election helps to validate the “Big Lie” with the imprimatur of the Republican Party in Congress (Eder et al., 2022). The second dynamic concerns the role of emotions. Facts appear to have little bearing because the feeling of rightness or wrongness exceeds whatever data that happen to contradict one’s preferred narrative. In the next section, I

will explore how emotions are employed and activated to power the MAGA movement.

4.4.4 *Affective Politics*

I play to people’s fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do (Trump and Schwartz, 2009, 58).

Donald Trump

The Art of the Deal

The politics of emotion is a burgeoning scholarly lens through which to investigate attitudes and preferences of the American body politic (Cohen, 1999; Berlant, 2011; Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2018). Such a paradigm has been used to make sense of the observation that some people seem to vote contrary to their economic interests (Marx, 2012; Frank, 2005; Cramer Walsh, 2012; Hochschild, 2018). Feelings such as shame (Cohen, 1999; Harris, 2014), resentment (Kinder and Sears, 1981; Banks and Valentino, 2012), anger (Banks, 2014; Valentino et al., 2011), outrage (Berry and Sobieraj, 2016), anxiety (Valentino et al., 2008; Koenig, 2022; Mutz, 2018), hope (Berlant, 2011), excitement, and pleasure (Mazzarella, 2019) have all been documented to play a substantial role in the domain of politics. What’s clear from this area of research is that emotions, alongside careful deliberation and rational self-interest, sometimes instead, influence and structure political behavior. As the epigraph above denotes, Donald Trump is adept at exploiting people’s emotional investments, particularly their sense of resentment and fantasy for personal gain.

Lauren Berlant writes, “politics is always emotional” (Berlant, 2016). In their 2016 article, “Trump, or Political Emotions,” Berlant explicates the emotional pitch Trump offers to the electorate. Trump offers unabashed emotion in response to the status quo, particularly

feelings of rage and anger. He performs and encourages strong emotions as a just reaction to the economic and social trends that have decimated “Middle America,” or in Trump’s words “policies that chipped away our jobs, weakened our military, threw open our borders, and put America last.” He also “foments hope in the exercise of his emotional freedom” (Berlant, 2016). Trump’s swaggering, reckless, offensive, norm-violating political persona as an expression of freedom is a powerful aspect of his appeal (Lizza, 2020). The deliverable is the experience of his exhibition of freedom and the provision of the feeling of freedom to his supporters. Laughing at his buffoonery, reviling his enemies, and believing his narrative, allows for a vicarious experience of Trump’s freedom. But not only that. In participating in the MAGA movement, by supporting Trump and his political project, individuals engage in a form of protected, mass transgression (Robertson, 2021; Coppins, 2018). To the extent that the Trump brand now serves as not only a giant F-you to the establishment but also as a synecdoche for white nationalism, the mere association is politically and socially suspect (Peters, 2020a; Neiwert, 2018). The pleasure of transgressing the stigma of Trumpism is part of the appeal (Serwer, 2018).

Trump’s emotional appeal speaks to his supporters’ anxieties and fantasies. His emphasis on strength and weakness connects with a widespread conception of masculinity in the United States. Strength and aggression are coded in American politics as highly gendered characteristics, typically associated with masculinity (Conroy, 2015). Trump plays on the fragile dualism of this type of masculinity, where strength is virtuous and weakness is contemptible. In Trump’s worldview, the ultimate disgrace would be to be “intimidated,” “control[led],” or “forced.” Republican politicians who resist his entreaties to aid in his effort of overturning the election results are thus “weak Republicans.” They “should be ashamed of themselves throughout history, throughout eternity.” He wants to “let the weak ones get out. [Because] this is a time for strength.” Those who abet him in his efforts are strong. For example, Rudy Giuliani, the attorney who represented Trump in the lawsuits he filed

to overturn the election results, has “guts. He fights.” Democrats are “stupid people,” while Trump’s supporters are “stronger [...] smarter [...] real people [...] the people who built this nation.” He and his supporters “will never give up [...] will never concede,” instead they “fight. Fight like hell,” because “if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore.” If Trump and his supporters fight, if Vice President Pence does Trump’s bidding, then “we become president, and you’re the happiest people.” If that doesn’t happen, “you’ll see some really bad things happen.” The future in Trump’s mercurial speech swings wildly from abject misery if his plan to overturn the election fails, to divine paradise if the plot succeeds. Though the bitterness and resentment Trump stokes is front and center in his “Save America” speech: “we’ll take care of going forward. We got to take care of going back.” Forward-looking fantasy, too, factors centrally in his appeal: “for our movement, for our children and for our beloved country, and I say this, despite all that’s happened, the best is yet to come.”

4.4.5 *Machiavellianism*

Massive Fraud of this type and magnitude allows for the termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution (Astor, 2022).

Donald Trump

December 3, 2022

Machivellianism is a construct used to describe a devious, cynical approach to interpersonal relations, where self-interest and personal gain supersede morality (Christie and Geis, 2013; Muris et al., 2017). The concept was derived from the writings of Renaissance Italian politician and political theorist Niccolo Machiavelli, who advised kings and lords in the dark

arts of Realpolitik (Machiavelli, 1998). This approach has often been summed up, attributed apocryphally to Machiavelli, by the statement “the ends justify the means.” Donald Trump’s political instincts were refined under the tutelage of Roy Cohn, chief counsel for the notorious Senator Joseph McCarthy (Kruse, 2019). Trump’s informal political advisor, Roger Stone, the self-proclaimed, “dirty trickster,” cut his teeth in the Nixon White House (Haberman, 2017). His mottoes “attack, attack, attack – never defend” and “admit nothing, deny everything, and launch a counterattack” (Toobin, 2008), speak to his qualifications to advise Trump. Trump’s associations, behavior, and rhetoric are consonant with Machiavellianism, that the ends justify the means. After losing the 2020 presidential election, his lawsuits failing in the courts, and his grip on the Republican party loosening, Trump staked his future, and the country’s, on a naked power grab, stripped bare from even the flimsiest democratic veneer. The *raison d’être* of the January 6 “Save America” rally, Trump’s most brazen and Machiavellian speech to date, was to overturn the 2020 election using extra-constitutional means.

One of the striking features of the speech is how little effort Trump dedicates to proving that election fraud changed the outcome of the election. His “evidence” is teased more than elaborated, so evidently abundant that Trump warned the audience not to “get bored listening to it [...] because it’s so much.” As mentioned previously, the claims that Trump asserted are riddled with unreason and inaccuracies so as to make them incredible (Eggers et al., 2021). In this sense, one might contend that Trump’s claim of voter fraud is merely a pretense for ulterior motives. For example, Trump raised over \$255 million in the immediate weeks after losing the election. Further, admitting defeat refutes his claim that “I alone can fix it” (Times, 2016a), and labels Trump a loser, a crushing blow to his political brand. Finally, the specter of voter fraud provides a pretext for extraordinary action. Whatever the reason, even though some of Trump’s closest advisors told him that his election fraud claims were contrary to fact, he persisted with his false claims (Broadwater and Feuer, 2022).

At the January 6 “Save America” rally, Trump said the “Radical Left” is “ruthless” and Democrats are “a criminal enterprise,” while “Republicans are constantly fighting like a boxer with his hands tied behind his back [...] We want to be so respectful of everybody, including bad people [...] [But] we’re going to have to fight much harder, and Mike Pence is going to have to come through for us.” How can Pence come through for Trump? Trump asked Pence to do “something” about the criminal Democrats and “stand up for the good of our Constitution and for the good of our country” by unilaterally overturning the 2020 U.S. presidential election results. Trump claimed that if the Republicans don’t “get tougher [...] you’re not going to have a Republican Party.” He said “they want to play so straight” when they [those who maintained the Vice President’s role in the Electoral College vote count is ceremonial] claim the “Constitution doesn’t allow [Pence] to send them back to the States.” But Trump claimed, “fraud breaks up everything,” and if there’s a fraud “you’re allowed to go by different rules.” If Mike Pence, Trump’s heretofore loyal vice president, refused to support Trump’s illegal power grab, Trump was “going to be very disappointed” in him.

As the speech and spectacle of January 6 unfolded in real time, no one knew with certainty how the situation would play out. The sitting president of the United States had gathered a mob of his supporters and directed them to bear down on the Capitol to pressure legislators to overturn the presidential election in his favor. The prospect of a slow-motion coup attempt was not far out of the realm of possibility. At that time, the president of the United States was making apocalyptic assertions about the fate of the country, and presenting himself as the only force available to prevent mayhem, “the only line of demarcation.” Trump offered himself as the only solution to “Save America”; “to take back our Country” Mike Pence had to have “the courage to do what he has to do,” “the Republicans have to get tougher,” the gathered audience needed to “walk down to the Capitol” to “try and give our Republicans [...] the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country” and Trump told his followers, “I’ll be there with you.” At that moment, what Pence would ultimately

do was still a question.

4.5 Conclusion

A pro-Trump mob stormed the Capitol after Trump’s speech (Buchanan et al., 2021). American institutions, flimsy but valid, held firm despite a broadside from within. The event is just as notable for its orgiastic exuberance and fringe figures as for the far-right political symbols and palpable lust for the blood of politicians (Edmondson, 2022). The nation watched raptly as the shocking spectacle defined itself primarily as a massive act of political disrespect (Rosenberg, 2021). As a large group of insurrectionists dangerously approached a contingent of legislators, a Capitol police officer fired their gun and Ashli Babbitt lay dead, killed by the gunshot (Barry et al., 2021). She was not the only fatality. All told, five people have died as a result of the day’s events (Evelyn, 2021). President Trump never connected with his throng of supporters. He sent them on their way as he stayed behind. He would ask his supporters to stop the mayhem only after several hours. When he did, he also said, “We love you. You’re very special” (Karni and Haberman, 2021).

Donald Trump’s full impact on the trajectory of American politics is yet to be determined. Aspects of his norm violations are already being diminished or forgotten, in some cases, willfully so by an exhausted electorate, worn weary by doomscrolling constantly shocking news (Silber, 2021; Chen, 2020). Trump’s successor, Joe Biden promised a return to normalcy, the politics of articulation following a preemptive interloper (Rogers, 2021a; Skowronek, 1997). Some efforts have been made to formalize some of the presidential and political norms Trump broke or attempted to contravene (Savage, 2021). Some of the norms that Trump violated are receiving the same treatment from Biden (Haberman et al., 2023). These norms are now at-risk. Relatedly, Trump’s norm violations have opened up new space for future presidents. Perhaps future presidents, like successors to presidents Woodrow Wilson (Tumulty, 2018), or Teddy Roosevelt (Nelson, 2018), will follow Trump’s lead concerning some of his norm

violations. Or maybe they will emulate only his violation of the norm, but pursue their own means of doing so, discarding the violated norm without establishing Trump's action as a precedent. The impact of Trump's norm violations on constitutional government is unclear, too. Whether Trump's prominence represents a swan song of a declining empire or a call to action to rejuvenate a polarized democracy will be determined by actions and events occurring now.

As discussed throughout this paper, Donald Trump utilized an unorthodox political style to ascend to the White House, maintaining the posture throughout his presidency and thereafter. Instead of sinking his political career, the approach worked to take control of the Republican party and garner the support of millions of Americans. Although in 2020 Trump lost the popular vote by a sizeable 7 million votes, just 44,000 across three states, Georgia, Arizona, and Wisconsin, prevented his reelection (Montanaro, 2020). The unprecedented media coverage, the millions of votes in 2016 and 2020, and the resiliency of his support despite the litany of scandals constantly swirling around him demonstrate the deep resonance of his appeal to his numerous supporters. As this paper has sought to show, norm violation is fundamental to his political identity. Making sense of Trump as a political figure is important to scholars of the presidency and American politics, but understanding why Trump's novel pitch resonated with such large segments of the public is of much wider significance. For many American voters, Trump's pitch was the answer to a question they were asking. For many of his supporters, his norm-violating behavior was perceived as a laudable rebuke of an untrustworthy, insincere, and insular political establishment. Through both word and deed, Trump gave voice to a sentiment in the electorate that has yet to disappear. His rise and the public's response to him invite observers to ask weighty and fundamental questions concerning the efficacy and responsiveness of American political institutions (Howell and Moe, 2016; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Howell and Moe, 2020), of the compatibility of America's various political cultures (Elazar and Zikmund, 1975; Lipset, 1997), and of the future of

democracy in America (Tocqueville, 2002; Mettler and Lieberman, 2020).

APPENDIX

A Appendix to Chapter 2

Table A.1: Balance of Demographic Covariates in Treatment and Control Groups in Study 1

	Control	Outrage	Conventional
N	221	221	222
Voted Trump 2016	0.37 (0.48)	0.37 (0.48)	0.34 (0.47)
Party ID	-0.14 (0.66)	-0.12 (0.70)	-0.20 (0.64)
Ideology	-0.12 (0.67)	-0.06 (0.67)	-0.07 (0.62)
Republican	0.25 (0.43)	0.29 (0.46)	0.21 (0.41)
Male	0.51 (0.50)	0.48 (0.50)	0.54 (0.50)
Education	4.43 (1.17)	4.36 (1.29)	4.40 (1.21)
Age	2.72 (1.11)	2.54 (1.13)	2.56 (1.03)
White	0.64 (0.48)	0.60 (0.49)	0.57 (0.50)

Table A.2: Balance of Demographic Covariates in Treatment and Control Groups in Study 2

	Control	Outrage	Conventional
N	200	208	195
Voted Trump 2016	0.36 (0.48)	0.36 (0.48)	0.37 (0.48)
Party ID	-0.24 (0.66)	-0.11 (0.69)	-0.12 (0.66)
Ideology	-0.10 (0.67)	-0.10 (0.65)	-0.07 (0.64)
Republican	0.21 (0.41)	0.28 (0.45)	0.25 (0.43)
Male	0.46 (0.50)	0.42 (0.50)	0.47 (0.50)
Education	4.45 (1.21)	4.54 (1.12)	4.48 (1.21)
Age (2=25-34)	2.68 (1.21)	2.74 (1.18)	2.77 (1.31)
White	0.67 (0.47)	0.75 (0.44)	0.66 (0.48)

	Treatment	Trump Support	N
1	Control	0.4155	73.0000
2	Outrage	0.4906	62.0000
3	Political	0.4965	72.0000

Table A.3: Study 1 Independents

	Treatment	Trump Support	N
1	Control	0.2357	93.0000
2	Outrage	0.3085	94.0000
3	Political	0.2913	103.0000

Table A.4: Study 1 Democrats

	Treatment	Trump Support	N
1	Control	0.7470	55.0000
2	Outrage	0.7449	65.0000
3	Political	0.7110	47.0000

Table A.5: Study 1 Republicans

	Treatment	Trump Support	N
1	Control	0.3918	57.0000
2	Outrage	0.4421	59.0000
3	Political	0.4396	69.0000

Table A.6: Study 2 Independents

	Treatment	Trump Support	N
1	Control	0.2500	100.0000
2	Outrage	0.2500	91.0000
3	Political	0.2327	77.0000

Table A.7: Study 2 Democrats

	Treatment	Trump Support	N
1	Control	0.8043	43.0000
2	Outrage	0.7342	58.0000
3	Political	0.7653	49.0000

Table A.8: Study 2 Republicans

B Appendix to Chapter 3

Table B.1: Study 1 Survey Demographics and Representativeness

	Party ID	Structural	Presentation	Trump Voter	Education	Follow	White	Male
1	Stg. Democrat	12.51	8.89	7%	4.60	2.86	62%	48%
2	Weak Democrat	9.89	7.04	13%	4.29	2.23	53%	39%
3	Ind. Democrat	11.14	7.37	3%	4.08	2.32	63%	47%
4	Independent	9.92	7.57	20%	3.99	1.99	67%	46%
5	Ind. Republican	8.30	8.24	74%	4.39	2.50	83%	61%
6	Weak Republican	10.26	8.66	65%	4.53	2.15	89%	48%
7	Stg. Republican	7.10	9.02	89%	4.19	2.52	89%	53%

Table B.2: Study 2 Summary Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Min	Pctl. 25	Pctl. 75	Max
Age	996	45	18	31	60	92
White	996	73.3%	0	0	1	1
Men	996	49.6%	0	0	1	1
Bachelor's degree or higher	996	41.8%	0	0	1	1
Household Income over \$100,000	996	18.1%	0	0	0	1
Republican	996	34.1%	0	0	1	1
Democrat	996	43.9%	0	0	1	1
Trump 2020 Voter	996	35.2%	0	0	1	1

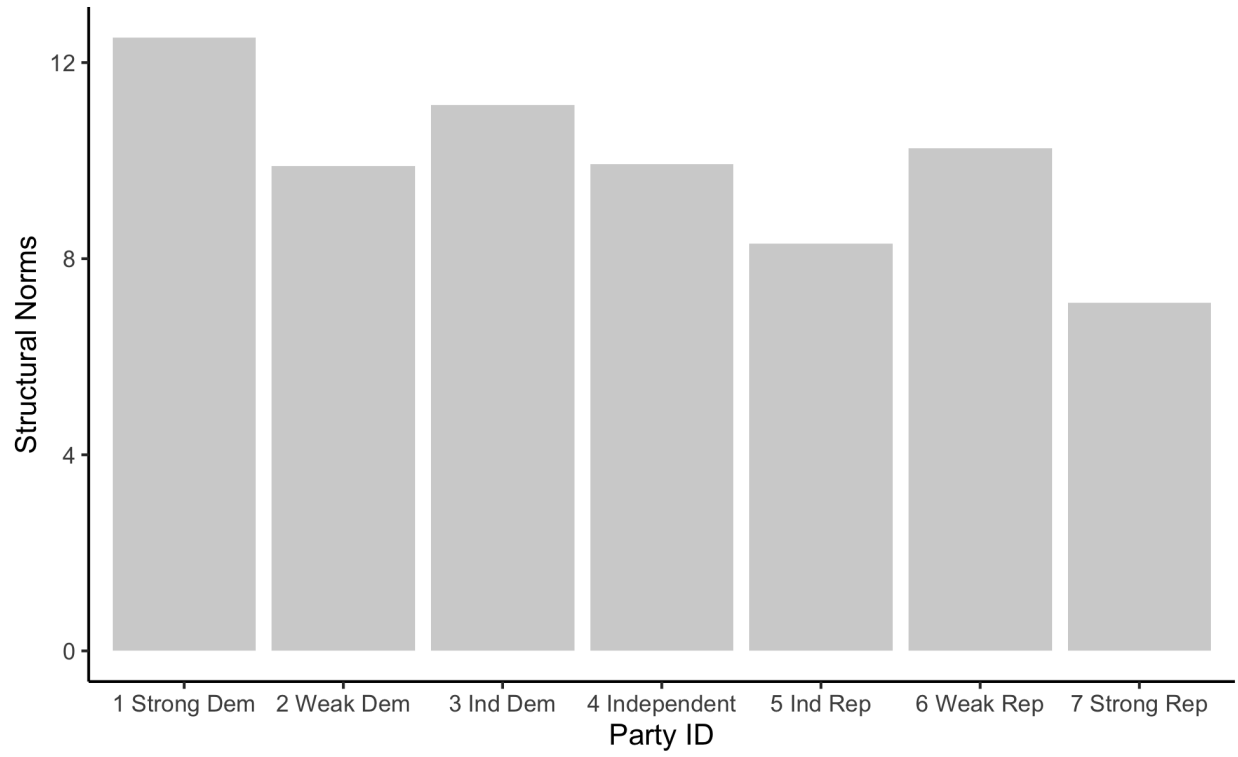


Figure B.1: Mean Support for Structural Norms by Party ID

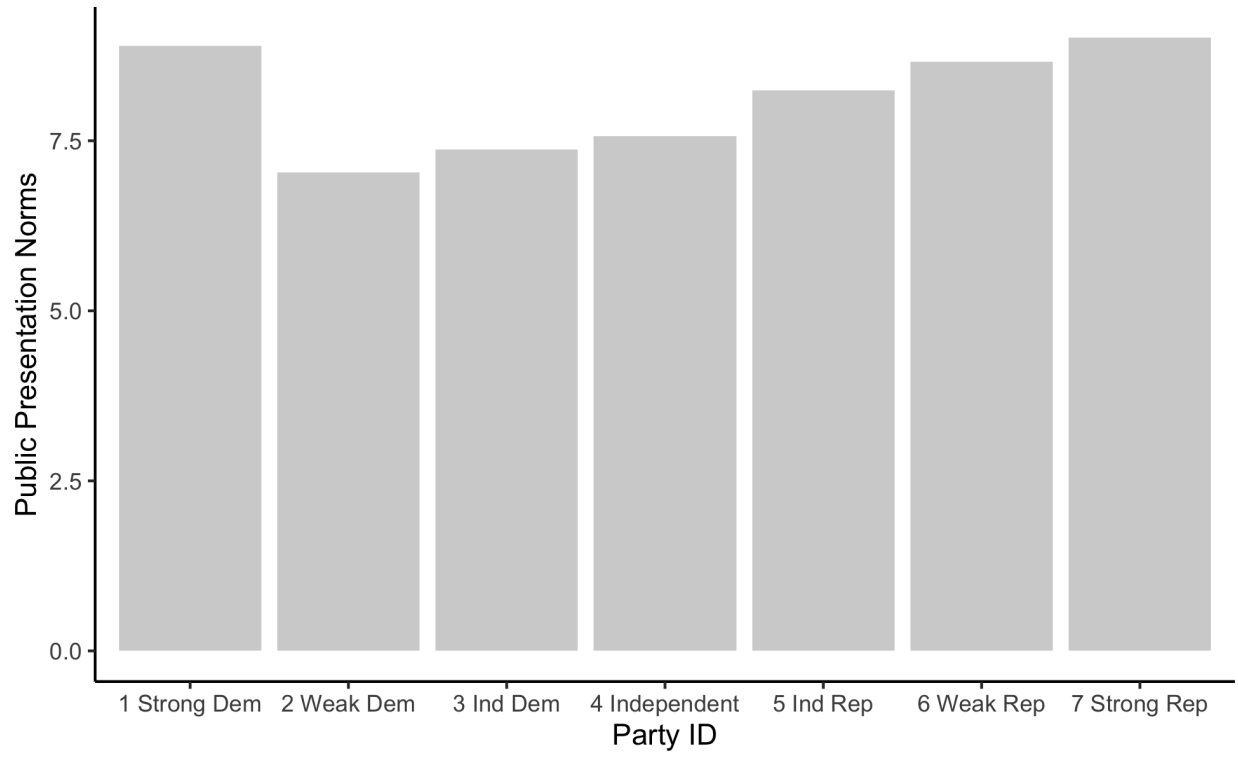


Figure B.2: Mean Support for Presentation Norms by Party ID

	Control	Security	Laws	Jobs	Unite	Election
Democrat	82%	67%	91%	95%	79%	90%
Independent	78%	72%	91%	74%	76%	80%
Republican	83%	85%	95%	88%	79%	91%

Table B.3: Difference in Means for Justification Experiment

		Control	Promise	Deep State	Judges	Fake News
1	Democrats	40%	38%	35%	46%	34%
2	Independents	30%	39%	30%	47%	24%
3	Republicans	35%	53%	50%	37%	13%

Table B.4: Difference in Means for Noble Aim Experiment

B.1 Additional Specifications

Table B.5: (OLS) Predictors of Support for Presidential Norms

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Structural	Presentation
	(1)	(2)
Populism	1.940*** (0.653)	2.716*** (0.472)
Republican	−2.745*** (0.627)	−0.282 (0.453)
Democrat	1.747*** (0.496)	0.788** (0.358)
Education	0.374*** (0.098)	0.064 (0.071)
White	0.771* (0.441)	0.365 (0.319)
Male	−0.140 (0.379)	−0.040 (0.274)
Age	0.067*** (0.012)	0.060*** (0.009)
Populism × Republican	−0.273 (1.279)	1.870** (0.925)
Constant	4.785*** (0.758)	4.066*** (0.548)
Observations	788	788
R ²	0.153	0.141
Adjusted R ²	0.144	0.132
Residual Std. Error (df = 779)	5.258	3.801
F Statistic (df = 8; 779)	17.534***	15.932***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table B.6: (OLS) Predictors of Support for Presidential Norms

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Structural	Presentation
	(1)	(2)
Republican	-2.630*** (0.539)	0.500 (0.403)
Democrat	1.649*** (0.498)	0.657* (0.372)
Education	0.362*** (0.099)	0.032 (0.074)
White	0.779* (0.443)	0.389 (0.331)
Male	-0.047 (0.380)	0.071 (0.284)
Age	0.065*** (0.012)	0.056*** (0.009)
Constant	5.265*** (0.748)	4.809*** (0.559)
Observations	788	788
R ²	0.140	0.067
Adjusted R ²	0.134	0.060
Residual Std. Error (df = 781)	5.289	3.954
F Statistic (df = 6; 781)	21.278***	9.392***
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Table B.7: (OLS) Predictors of Support for Presidential Norms

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Structural	Presentation
	(1)	(2)
Trump 2020 voter	-2.632*** (0.533)	0.028 (0.405)
Republican	-1.122* (0.613)	0.484 (0.465)
Democrat	1.317*** (0.495)	0.660* (0.376)
Education	0.363*** (0.097)	0.032 (0.074)
White	0.841* (0.437)	0.389 (0.332)
Male	0.093 (0.375)	0.069 (0.285)
Age	0.065*** (0.012)	0.056*** (0.009)
Constant	5.671*** (0.741)	4.805*** (0.563)
Observations	788	788
R ²	0.167	0.067
Adjusted R ²	0.159	0.059
Residual Std. Error (df = 780)	5.212	3.957
F Statistic (df = 7; 780)	22.260***	8.041***
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Table B.8: (OLS) Predictors of Support for Presidential Norms

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Structural	Presentation
	(1)	(2)
Mistrust of expertise	-1.624*** (0.426)	1.802*** (0.299)
Education	0.386*** (0.103)	0.089 (0.072)
White	-0.069 (0.454)	0.404 (0.318)
Male	-0.248 (0.396)	-0.030 (0.277)
Age	0.037*** (0.012)	0.062*** (0.009)
Constant	7.011*** (0.717)	4.741*** (0.503)
Observations	788	788
R ²	0.061	0.105
Adjusted R ²	0.055	0.099
Residual Std. Error (df = 782)	5.526	3.871
F Statistic (df = 5; 782)	10.091***	18.381***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table B.9: (OLS) Predictors of Support for Presidential Norms

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Structural	Presentation
	(1)	(2)
National Affiliation	1.741*** (0.498)	3.569*** (0.333)
Education	0.436*** (0.103)	0.061 (0.069)
White	-0.235 (0.459)	-0.043 (0.306)
Male	-0.410 (0.396)	-0.068 (0.265)
Age	0.036*** (0.013)	0.044*** (0.008)
Constant	6.602*** (0.709)	5.265*** (0.474)
Observations	788	788
R ²	0.058	0.183
Adjusted R ²	0.052	0.178
Residual Std. Error (df = 782)	5.534	3.698
F Statistic (df = 5; 782)	9.609***	35.138***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table B.10: (OLS) Predictors of Support for Presidential Norms

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Structural	Presentation
	(1)	(2)
Anti-elite	1.494*** (0.512)	1.881*** (0.359)
Education	0.439*** (0.103)	0.058 (0.072)
White	-0.054 (0.456)	0.343 (0.320)
Male	-0.408 (0.397)	-0.011 (0.279)
Age	0.044*** (0.012)	0.058*** (0.009)
Constant	6.107*** (0.729)	4.624*** (0.512)
Observations	788	788
R ²	0.053	0.095
Adjusted R ²	0.047	0.089
Residual Std. Error (df = 782)	5.547	3.892
F Statistic (df = 5; 782)	8.837***	16.458***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table B.11: (OLS) Effect of Justification by Partisanship

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Support Norm Against Lying
National Security	-0.132** (0.054)
National Security × Republican	0.173*** (0.067)
Republican	-0.018 (0.028)
Pass Laws	0.089** (0.042)
Create Jobs	0.065 (0.044)
Unite America	-0.041 (0.043)
Win Reelection	0.043 (0.043)
Male	-0.006 (0.025)
Education	0.019*** (0.006)
Age	0.0002 (0.001)
White	0.068** (0.030)
Constant	0.702*** (0.053)
Observations	777
R ²	0.057
Adjusted R ²	0.044
Residual Std. Error	0.341 (df = 765)
F Statistic	4.242*** (df = 11; 765)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table B.12: (OLS) Effect of Political Goal on Opposition to Presidential Norm Violation

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Oppose Presidential Norm Violation
Fake News	-0.018 (0.063)
Fake News × Republican	-0.151* (0.085)
Republican	-0.061 (0.039)
Campaign Promise	0.093* (0.053)
Deep State	0.054 (0.053)
Like-minded Judges	0.094* (0.053)
Male	-0.038 (0.034)
Education	-0.006 (0.009)
Age	0.007*** (0.001)
White	0.046 (0.041)
Constant	0.077 (0.069)
Observations	777
R ²	0.088
Adjusted R ²	0.076
Residual Std. Error	0.467 (df = 766)
F Statistic	7.399*** (df = 10; 766)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

B.2 Exploratory Factor Analysis

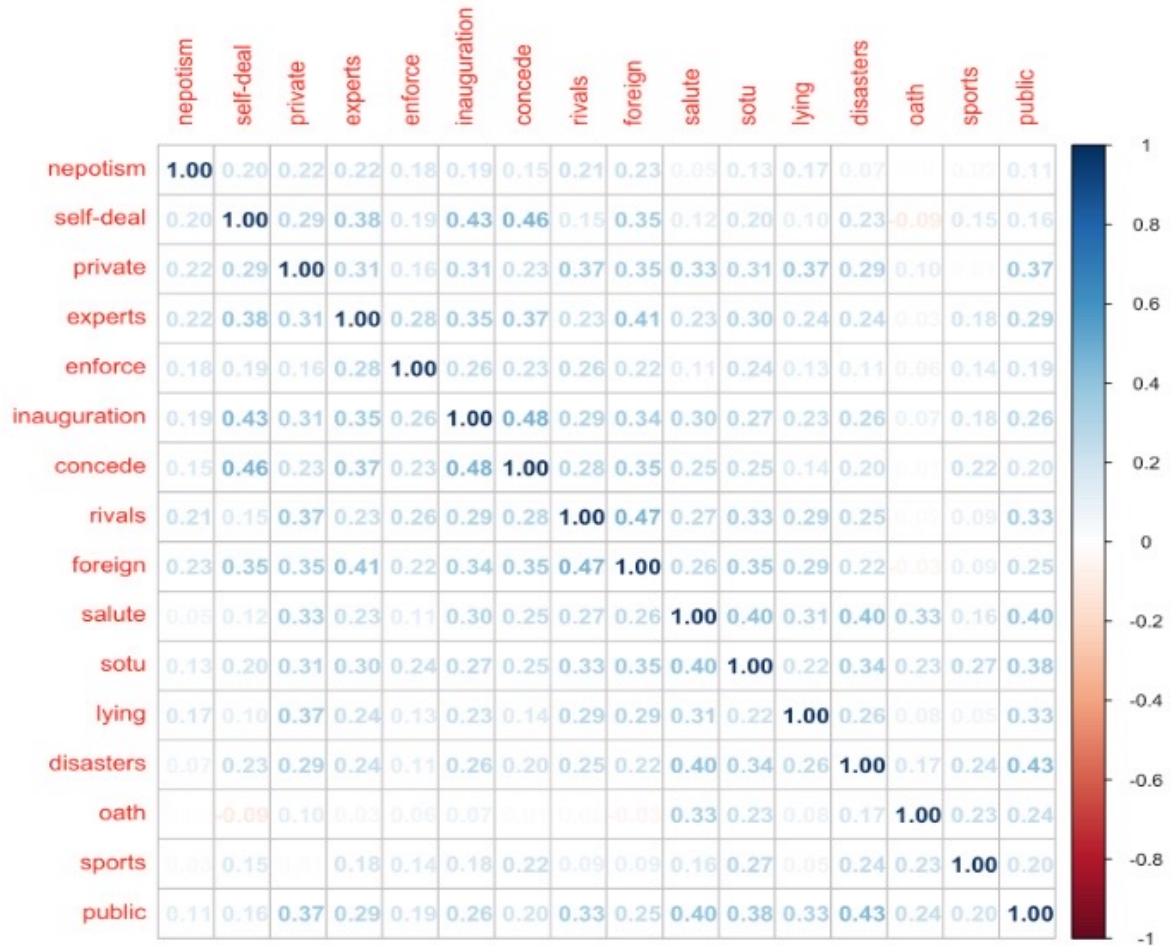


Figure B.3: Presidential Norms Correlation Matrix

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) factor adequacy of presidential norms index = 0.87

Tucker Lewis Index of factor reliability = 0.85

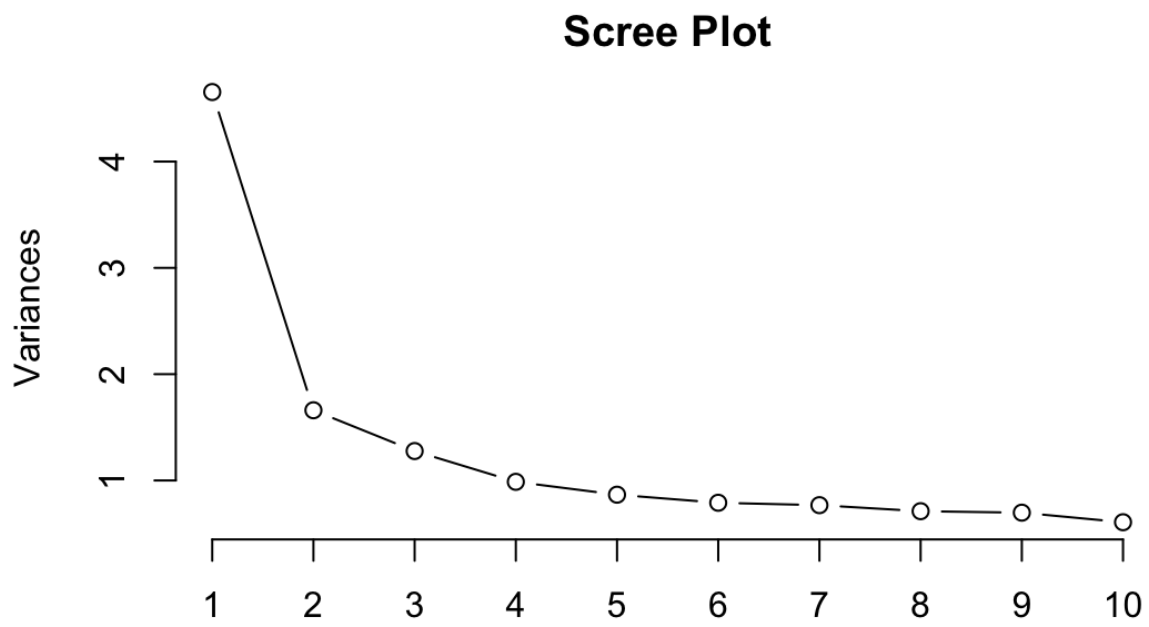


Figure B.4: Scree Plot

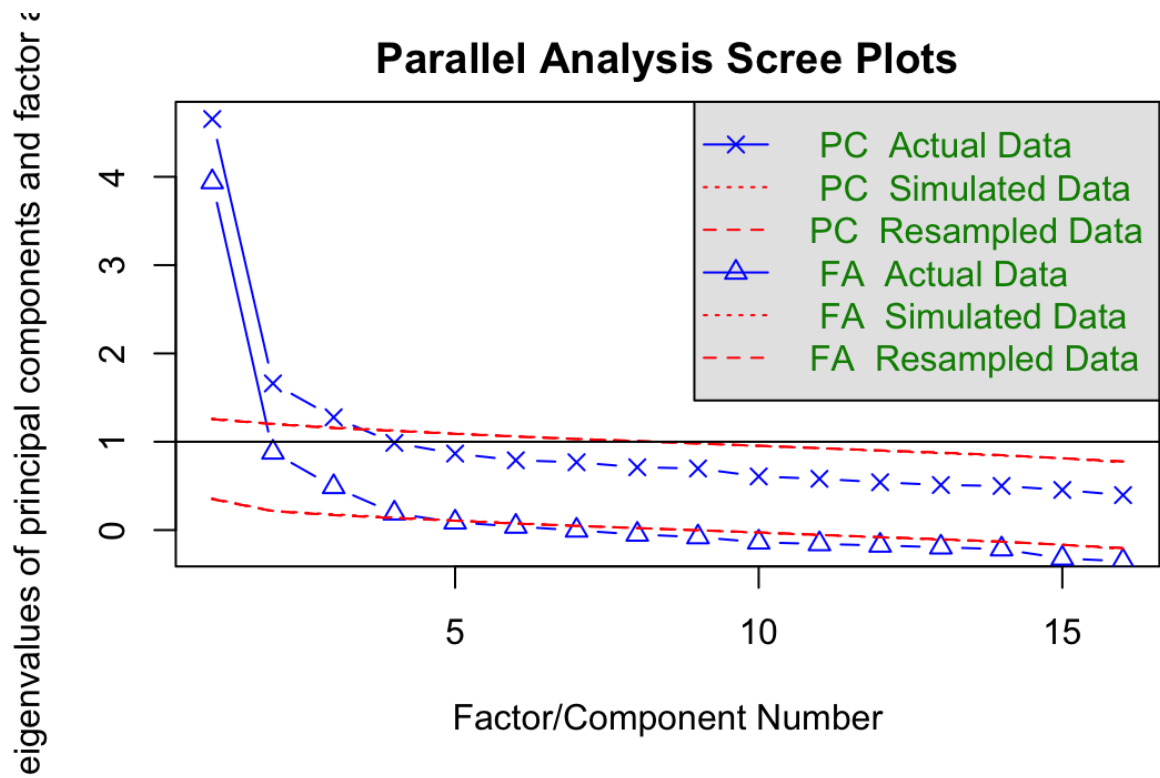


Figure B.5: Parallel Analysis Scree Plots

Factor Analysis

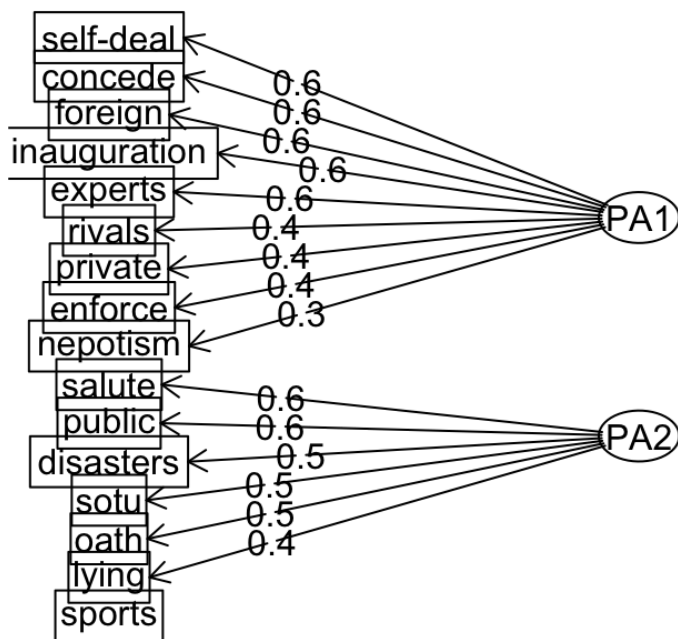


Figure B.6: Factor Analysis

B.3 Books, papers, and articles about presidential norms discussed in this article.

Structural Norms

- President's shouldn't hire their relatives to high-ranking positions (Gerstein, 2017; Viebeck and Rein, 2016; Times, 2017b).
- Presidential candidates should release their financial records, including their personal tax returns (O'Mara, 2020; Montgomery, 2020).
- Presidents should not use public office for private gain (Montgomery, 2020; Renan, 2017; Carey et al., 2019; Gerstein, 2017).
- When experts generally agree, presidents should listen to experts about matters of public policy (Renan, 2017; Montgomery, 2020; Tollefson, 2020; Editors, 2020).
- As head of the Executive Branch, the President of the United States is responsible for implementing and enforcing the laws written by Congress. Presidents may sometimes encounter laws that they morally oppose. Presidents should enforce laws, even laws that they morally oppose (Renan, 2017; Carey et al., 2019).
- Generally, former presidents should attend their successor's inauguration (Fortin, 2021; Garrison, 2021; Gearan, 2021).
- A concession is the act of a losing candidate publicly admitting defeat to a winning candidate after an election when the result of the vote has become evident. It is important that candidates for political office concede after losing elections (Richman and Gilles, 2020; Solly, 2020; Rainey, 2020).
- It is inappropriate for the President of the United States to direct government agencies to monitor, attack, or punish political opponents (Carey et al., 2019).

Presentation Norms

- Presidents should salute military personnel, especially when boarding and departing Air Force One and Marine One (Winfrey, 2009).
- Presidents should deliver the State of the Union address before Congress as a speech (Tumulty, 2018; Lindsay, 2022; Pluta, 2015).
- Presidents shouldn't lie to the American public (Cannon, 2007; Montgomery, 2020).
- Presidents should visit areas in the United States recently devastated by natural disasters (Mulcahy, 2012; Jaffe and Eilperin, 2016).
- Presidents should take the oath of office on a Bible (Schumaker, 2021; Boston, 2020; Waller, 2021).
- Presidents should welcome professional and college sports teams to the White House to honor their championships (Neumann, 2016; Streeter, 2020).
- Presidents should regularly communicate with the public, using press conferences, interviews, social media, or other modes of communication (Azari and Smith, 2012; Smith, 1990).

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