palgrave▶pivot

Trump, Twitter, and the American Democracy
Political Communication in the Digital Age

Yu Ouyang
Richard W. Waterman

palgrave
macmillan

The Evolving American Presidency

Series Editors
Michael A. Genovese
Loyola Marymount University
Los Angeles, CA, USA

Todd L. Belt
Graduate School of Political Management
George Washington University
Washington, DC, USA

This series is stimulated by the clash between the presidency as invented and the presidency as it has developed. Over time, the presidency has evolved and grown in power, expectations, responsibilities, and authority. Adding to the power of the presidency have been wars, crises, depressions, industrialization. The importance and power of the modern presidency makes understanding it so vital. How presidents resolve challenges and paradoxes of high expectations with limited constitutional resources is the central issue in modern governance and the central theme of this book series.

More information about this series at
http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/14437

Yu Ouyang • Richard W. Waterman

Trump, Twitter, and the American Democracy

Political Communication in the Digital Age

palgrave
macmillan

Yu Ouyang
Department of Political Science,
Economics, and World Languages
Purdue University Northwest
Hammond, IN, USA

Richard W. Waterman
Department of Political Science
University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY, USA

Yu Ouyang:
I dedicate this book to Xiudan, Kenneth, Thomas, and Jojo.

Richard W. Waterman:
I dedicate this book to Edith and Benjamin Waterman, Beverly Elliott,
and Michael Spikes.

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

List of Tables

CHAPTER 1

Social Media, Politics, and Donald Trump

Abstract Since entering the 2016 Presidential Election, Donald Trump's tweets have been a major part of his communications strategy with the public. While the popular media has devoted considerable attention to selected tweets, it is less clear what those selected tweets tell us about Trump the businessman, the political candidate, and, finally, the president of the United States. This book takes a social science approach to address two related questions: (1) what does Donald Trump say on Twitter and (2) why? We argue that to fully understand Trump both as a person and as a major political figure, we must take a more comprehensive approach to examining all of his activities on Twitter. This introductory chapter lays out our approach.

Keywords Donald Trump • Twitter • Case studies • Media coverage • Presidential rhetoric

Speaking to reporters on February 18, 2020, President Donald Trump stated, "I probably wouldn't have gotten here without social media because I certainly don't get fair press." He then added, "Social media, for me, has been very important because it gives me a voice, because I don't get that voice in the press. In the media, I don't get that voice. So I'm allowed to have a voice."[1]

As the president reveals, Twitter provides presidents with a voice that allows them to communicate directly with the public. It also allows them to circumvent the power of the press, which since at least the days of Richard Nixon has been increasingly more negative in its coverage of U.S. presidents. While Barack Obama was the first president to tweet, Donald Trump has established a new method of presidential communication. What we call *going directly public* (or as we cleverly refer to it, GDP) is not merely a new means of communication, it is a major development in the accretion of presidential power. Our book therefore is not merely an examination of Trump's tweets—it represents an evaluation of a new mechanism designed to advance presidential power. It also raises a serious question that concerned the Founders. Does presidential rhetoric, in this case in the form of GDP, promote democracy or does it reflect a movement toward mob rule and demagoguery?

Persistent Interests in Trump's Tweets

On July 14, 2019, President Donald Trump renewed his attacks against the four female Democratic lawmakers led by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York. The president tweeted that the four liberal members of Congress should "go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came."[2] Three of the lawmakers actually were born in the United States. The president's tweet promoted a backlash to his ongoing Twitter fight with members of "The Squad," as the four representatives were known. Despite negative press, Trump not only continued his attacks, especially on Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota (Rupar 2019a), a Muslim originally born in Somalia, he maintained that his words were not racist (Forgey 2019a; Liptak and Collins 2019).

Still, immediate public responses to the racially charged language in Trump's tweets arose from across the political spectrum. For example, in unity with other Democrats (Resto-Montero 2019), Senator Elizabeth Warren condemned Trump's words and tweeted in response that Trump's tweet was "[a] racist and xenophobic attack on Democratic congresswomen. This *is* their country, regardless of whether or not Trump realizes it."[3] Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, responded by noting that, "when [Trump] tells four American Congresswomen to go back to their countries, he reaffirms his plan to 'Make America Great Again' has always been about making America white

again" (Saacks 2019). Responses from Republican members of Congress were more measured, walking a delicate balance between direct criticisms of the president and the policy sentiment therein (Everett and Arkin 2019). Senator Lindsey Graham, a strong ally of the president on Capitol Hill, noted that Trump's words were more narcissist than racist, criticized the policies that the Congresswomen support, and suggested that Trump "aim higher" (Panetta 2019). Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell refused to speak directly on Trump's tweets, focusing instead on "criticizing the 'incendiary rhetoric' across the ideological spectrum. He ultimately concluded that the 'president's not a racist'" (Zhou 2019).

Regardless of the underlying intent of Trump's tweets in this case, two points seem clear. First, despite the immediate and strong condemnations of Trump's rhetoric (Davis 2019), there are advantages for Trump to engage in negative political attacks on Twitter. As Kim (2019) reports in a *Vox* article on July 17, 2019, "following the uproar surrounding Trump's racist comments, support for the president among Republicans rose by 5 percentage points to 72 percent… His net approval rating dropped by 2 percent among Democrats." In other words, Trump gained further approval from his base supporters while losing only a small degree of support (within the margin of error) from Democrats, who were unlikely to support him anyway. Second, as often is the case with Trump's tweets, unplanned policy announcements via Twitter resulted in confusion and a scramble to incorporate and to defend Trump's spontaneous outbursts. His attacks on The Squad sparked a rush by his 2020 campaign team to incorporate and "to repackage the attack on the four women of color into a broader patriotic message" (Orr 2019).

As another example of a controversy that mostly began on Twitter, consider also Trump's decision to pull U.S. troops out of Syria. U.S. involvement on the ground in Syria began in October of 2015 when President Barack Obama ordered the deployment of dozens of special operations troops into Syria to advise the locals fighting against the Islamic State (Baker et al. 2015). By the end of 2018, there were approximately 2000 U.S. troops in Syria, in mainly supporting roles to Syrian Kurdish allies fighting against ISIS. Ever critical of U.S. military involvement overseas, Trump announced abruptly on Twitter on December 19, 2018, that ISIS had been defeated, and he intended to bring the troops home.[4] Then on October 6, 2019, following a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the White House announced that Turkey would begin military operations in the Turkey-Syria border region

against the Kurds, and U.S. forces would withdraw from the northeastern Syria area (Schmitt et al. 2019). While the timing of Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria may have surprised many people, including officials serving inside his own administration, his decision to do so was not. In an off-script comment at an event in Ohio on infrastructure in March 2018, Trump commented on the state of ISIS, noting that, "We're knocking the hell out of ISIS. We'll be coming out of Syria like very soon. Let the other people take care of it now" (quoted in Browne and Starr 2018). He tweeted on December 19, 2018, that it is time to bring the troops home from Syria, a decision which prompted the resignations of Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Brett McGurk, the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Ewing 2018; Van Sant 2018). It was only upon the recommendation of John Bolton, the National Security Advisor, other national security officials, and military commanders that the decision to withdraw troops from Syria was delayed in order to allow preparations for an orderly withdrawal (Schmitt and Haberman 2018).

While it is common that foreign policy decisions by the president are kept secret until they are ready for public consumption, what is unusual about this case is the decision on Syria surprised nearly everyone. Writing about Trump's announcement in October 2019 to pull back U.S. troops from northeastern Syria and to allow Turkish forces to carry out military operations against the Kurds, Morgan (2019b) noted that "the White House announcement upended military and State Department plans to deter a Turkish offensive with a system of safe zones and joint patrols that were getting underway." Not only did Trump's decision surprise members of his own political party (Kellman 2019), it also stunned Kurdish allies in Syria. As quoted in O'Connor and Jamali (2019), one Kurdish intelligence official stated, "When we heard the news of American withdrawals, well, it was over Twitter, we had no idea, we were like, 'What is this shit?'" More importantly, the abrupt decision posed particular challenges for General Joseph Votel, the commander of U.S. Central Command, who was in charge of carrying out U.S. military operations in the region. "Trump's tweet put Votel in a difficult spot. Here was a sudden 180-degree turn in U.S. policy that severely undercut an ongoing effort… Votel found himself in the position of having to tell his allies, in effect, *We're screwing you, but we need you now more than ever*" (Bowden 2019, emphasis in original). Most significantly, Trump's decision on Syria induced

considerable uncertainty into a region already destabilized by years of military conflict (Wilson 2019).

Considering the magnitude of the decision, it was no surprise that Trump's decision generated significant criticism from across the political spectrum. Megan Specia (2019) noted that one consequence of Trump's decision to withdraw troops, among others, was to allow Russia and Iran to have greater footnotes in the region. Senator Christopher Murphy (D-CT) minced no words in his tweet: "[T]he hell you unleashed – by double crossing an ally and restocking ISIS – will cost thousands of U.S. lives in the long run."[5] Even Republican members of Congress issued strong statements against the withdrawal of U.S. troops in Syria. In a public statement, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) noted that "a precipitous withdrawal of U.S. forces in Syria… would increase the risk that ISIS and other terrorist groups regroup."[6] Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC), typically a fervent supporter of the president, called the forces withdrawal "a stain on America's honor" (Cummings et al. 2019). In a tweet of his own, Graham also noted that, "I worry we will not have allies in the future against radical Islam, ISIS will reemerge, & Iran's rise in Syria will become a nightmare for Israel. I fear this is a complete and utter national security disaster in the making and I hope President Trump will adjust his thinking."[7]

If anything, Trump did the exact opposite (Newburger 2019; Porter 2019; Superville 2019). In a combative set of tweets over several days, Trump intensely defended his prerogative to withdraw troops. Noting that the United States had gotten "deeper and deeper into battle with no aim in sight,"[8] that the "stupid endless wars" need to end,[9] and that he was focusing on the "big picture,"[10] Trump asserted that, "it is time for us to get out of these ridiculous Endless Wars, many of them tribal, and bring our soldiers home. WE WILL FIGHT WHERE IT IS TO OUR BENEFIT, AND ONLY FIGHT TO WIN."[11] In response to these decisions and the articulations of his reasons for doing so, some observers stated that Trump's Syria announcements represented the clearest articulation of Trump's worldview and foreign policy doctrine: "Only fight in wars in which the US has a clear national interest and path to victory; otherwise, let others fend for themselves" (Ward 2019). Whatever the case may be, several points are clear: policy announcements by tweets, often early in the morning, are typical in the Trump administration; these pronouncements often surprise people inside and out of the White House, as well as allies

Fig. 1.1   Trump's tweet about Hurricane Dorian and Alabama

in the field of battle; and Trump's tweets often generate strong reactions from political elites and the public alike.

While occasional political and policy missteps by the White House happen, what is unusual about the Trump administration is that these political problems are often of the president's own making, often exacerbated by tweets. Consider, for example, the firestorm generated by Trump's incorrect announcement on Twitter that Alabama was likely to suffer damage from the approaching Hurricane Dorian (Fig. 1.1)[12].

Within minutes, the National Weather Service in Alabama issued a corrective tweet, noting that the state was not expected to be in the path of the hurricane (Fig. 1.2).

Mistakes happen, and this factual error was easy to correct. While early projections have shown that Hurricane Dorian would move further westward, thereby affecting Alabama, by the time of Trump's tweet, the newer, projected path of the hurricane showed Dorian moving to the northeast, along the eastern coast of the United States. The matter should have been settled at this point. The president had made an honest mistake. Instead, the incident took several bizarre turns.

Over the next few days, the Alabama office's statement was *corrected* by officials at the Commerce Department, indicating that the storm might indeed threaten Alabama. The president then presented what appeared to
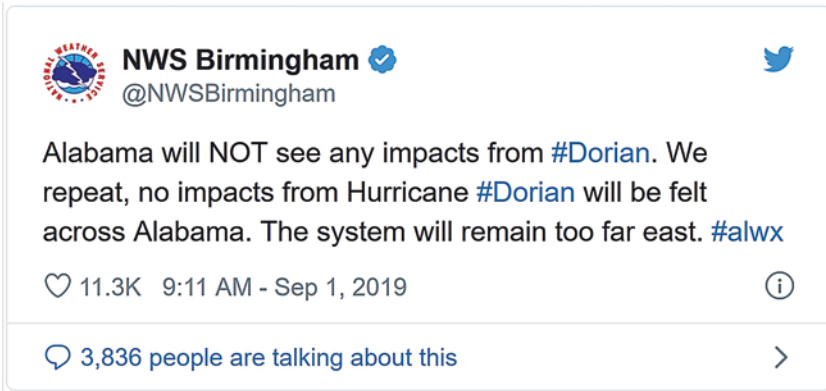
Fig. 1.2 Tweet from National Weather Service Birmingham

be a map altered by a sharpie showing the hurricane moving toward the United States. Quickly labeled *SharpieGate*, the president also fired back on twitter (Fig. 1.3).

The bizarre affair took another twist when it was revealed that Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross threatened to fire officials for correcting the president's statement (Wise 2019). Since weather advisories are important information that protects the safety of all Americans, the scandal also raised serious questions about the ability of meteorologists to warn the public of an oncoming hurricane.

In any event, the aforementioned examples nonetheless illustrate one unique aspect of the Trump presidency: never had America experienced anything like this lightning fast series of tweets and presidential crises. We live today in a world of instantaneous and constant communication. Twitter is but one of many social media platforms that connect us to the White House. It is, however, Trump's preferred means of communicating directly with the American people, or more commonly, to fortify support among his base of political supporters. As such, Trump's tweets represent a means of examining the president's thoughts, self-doubts, congratulatory boasts, misinformation campaigns, and attempts to control not merely the message, but also the media and what and how they report the news. Never have we had such intimate insight into the mind of a president.

Given the extent to which Trump relies on social media, especially Twitter, as a core political and communications tool, in this book, we

Fig. 1.3 Trump's responses on Twitter to criticisms of his initial tweet

provide an analysis of all of Trump's tweets. We approach the issue from a broad social science perspective. That is, in Chaps. 2, 3, and 4, rather focusing on specific tweets, we examine his tweets over time, beginning with his very first tweet long before he decided to run for president. We then empirically examine Trump's tweets over time. In Chap. 5 we then provide a qualitative discussion of whether the president's tweets promote democracy or demagoguery.

Broadly, our study builds on existing works in political communications and on social media in several ways. First, we add to the growing literature on the use of social media by political elites. Second, we extend the already extensive work on Trump and social media by including tweets prior to his entry into the 2016 Presidential Election and after the 2016 Inauguration. Finally, we analyze how Trump's use of social media contributed to his rapid rise in politics.

Media Coverage of Trump and Twitter

To assess the importance of Twitter as part of Trump's overall political strategy, we begin with an analysis of how the media covers the president and his activities on Twitter. Examining the breadth of media articles on Donald Trump and his use of Twitter reveals several patterns.

Trump and His Presence on Social Media

While previous presidents have methods of gauging the public attitudes and positions on issues, few (if any) have maintained the level of constant interaction with the people that Trump has via Twitter. Various news sources regularly publish updated articles on how often Trump tweets (Carlisle 2019; Dale 2019b; Moran 2019; Oprysko 2019c). An Internet search for the phrase "Trump tweets" returns more than 1.4 billion results, including over 53 million news articles.[13] Why the constant attention to Trump and his utterances on Twitter? First, there is the love-hate relationship that Trump has with the media. Despite the "fake news" moniker that he used to describe the mainstream media outlets, Trump is an avid consumer of the news, even in the White House. For instance, a senior White House staffer noted that, "while the staff sleeps on long airplane rides on foreign trips, Trump sometimes stays up and goes through the entirety of four or five boxes of newspapers, magazines and other printed matter" (Lippman 2019). Moreover, Trump would dole out praise to White