

When the President Tweets: Exploring the Normative Tensions of Contemporary Presidential Communication

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Presidential communication has evolved from mass-focused messaging to include more tailored appeals across multiple media platforms. Although researchers have documented how presidents use media and have catalogued some institutional shifts due to communication technologies, we know surprisingly little about public opinion related to presidential communication style. This blind spot is important given the election and presidency of Donald Trump, whose unique use of Twitter challenges traditional norms of presidential communication. In two separate studies, we assess the public's normative beliefs toward President Trump's use of Twitter. Using statewide survey data collected in 2017 and national-level survey data collected in 2019, we assess the normative tensions between deliberative and liberal individualistic presidential communication. The findings illuminate a public grappling with these tensions in evaluating the frequency and appropriateness of the president's tweets.

Keywords: political communication, American presidency, presidential communication, norms, Twitter, Donald Trump

Contemporary presidential communication has evolved from broad, mass-focused appeals to include tailored, narrowly targeted messages in various media settings (Jacobs, 2005). From an institutional perspective, researchers have documented how presidents use major addresses for mass communication

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(Coe & Neumann, 2011); reach national and local media through strategic travel and minor addresses (Kernell, 2007); and harness digital, social, and entertainment media to find fragmented audiences (Gallagher, 2017). Scholars also continue to explore the extent to which presidential communication can influence individuals' beliefs and opinions (e.g., Rottinghaus, 2010). At the same time, research has largely overlooked how people view presidential communication itself.

The present research advances an understanding of public opinion toward the form and content of President Donald Trump's Twitter use by testing two competing normative frameworks of presidential communication: deliberative and liberal individualistic (Dahlberg, 2001; Freelon, 2015). Political communication scholarship has noted that digital discourse is infused with both deliberative characteristics (e.g., moderation rules and practices in online discussions) and liberal individualistic practices of self-expression maximization (Dahlberg, 2001). Such a mix of discursive characteristics also may extend to how the public evaluates presidential communication. Public outreach during Trump's administration not only engenders questions about the frequency and appropriateness of specific types of discursive appeals but also necessitates systematic assessment of public views toward these matters.

In this article, we focus on Trump's use of Twitter for three reasons. First, the White House devotes considerable organizational resources to public messaging (Kumar, 2007). In efforts to reach fragmented audiences, contemporary presidents have downplayed more established forms of public outreach, such as primetime addresses, in favor of less formal means of digital communication (Scacco & Coe, 2016). A less formal, more frequent style of ubiquitous presidential communication may conflict with professionalized notions of official discourse, a possibility that could blunt organizational outreach efforts.

Second, communication scholars and practitioners have a limited understanding of the public's attitudes toward presidential communication. Even as former President Barack Obama shifted White House communication outreach to include social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, pollsters and survey researchers did not document public opinion toward these changes. Public research entities, such as the Pew Research Center, have only explored the nature of these opinions more recently (Doherty, Kiley, Tyson, & Johnson, 2019). The contours of these attitudes should matter from elite and popular perspectives. Attitudes about the presidency are linked to enduring expectations of how presidents ought to behave (Waterman, Silva, & Jenkins-Smith, 2014). Should expectations go unmet, presidents can face public opinion consequences.

Finally, Trump has used Twitter as a centerpiece of his public outreach. Although only one-fifth of American adults on Twitter follow the president (Wojcik, Hughes, & Remy, 2019), news accounts amplify the reach of Trump's tweets (Mitchell, Gottfried, Stocking, Matsa, & Grieco, 2017). How the president uses the platform, including to announce major policies and to attack his opponents and the media, has faced scrutiny and derision for its inappropriateness (e.g., Becker, 2018; Langer, 2017). Yet standards of what constitutes "appropriate" communication assume a baseline normative framework that remains elusive.

To advance an understanding of public opinion toward the form and content of Trump's Twitter use, we examine data from a 2017 statewide survey of Ohio voters and a 2019 national survey of U.S. adults. The results illustrate normative tensions between deliberative and liberal individualistic presidential communication.

Deliberative and Liberal Individualistic Norms of Presidential Communication

Institutional structures are built on norms for the communicative roles people adopt in given situations. The President of the United States, as Berlo (1960) noted, is expected “to behave in certain ways and not in others—because he is the President” (p. 117). However, the public’s normative standards for presidential communication remain elusory (cf. Bucy & Newhagen, 1999; Scacco & Coe, 2017). Yet by mediating every facet of the president’s verbal and nonverbal behavior, mass and digital media technologies allow the public to judge how a president should respond in communication situations.

From a historical perspective, public expectations of presidential behavior—defined here as public actions considered to be appropriate (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003)—evolved alongside the development of a more public presidency at the beginning of the 20th century (Ceaser, Thurow, Tulis, & Bessette, 1981). Notions of “presidentialness” spring from injunctive norms of how a president ought to perform the duties of office or behave in particular situations (Cialdini et al., 2006), as well as the characteristics the president should embody, such as honesty, intelligence, and charisma (Howell, Porter, & Wood, 2020; Kinder, Peters, Abelson, & Fiske, 1980; Trent, Short-Thompson, Mongeau, & Metzler, 2017). These traits are constructed for audiences via verbal and nonverbal communication.

The changing tone and tenor of presidential communication may set up a clash among different standards by which the public could evaluate elite political communication. A deliberative standard would approach presidential communication as rational, evidence-based, and politically cross-cutting (Dahlberg, 2001; Freelon, 2015; Stromer-Galley, 2007). According to this framework, the president’s language is inclusive, self-reflexive, and both acknowledges and seeks to understand alternative perspectives. This deliberative understanding springs from public viewpoints on presidential performance and image. Traits of honesty, fairness, intelligence, and political independence are expressed in a communicative style that is reasoned, civil, and accommodating of other viewpoints. Jamieson (1988) emphasizes education and intellect, the ability to construct arguments using various methods, and adaptability to electronic media as central to presidential communicative eloquence.

Although research has yet to associate prototypical presidential communication with deliberative norms explicitly, some evidence suggests that presidents generally seek this ideal. George W. Bush’s administration used the official website to conduct “Ask the White House” question-and-answer sessions with the public. Barack Obama innovated presidential communication through social and digital media, including “Twitter Townhalls” as part of his interactive outreach (Katz, Barris, & Jain, 2013). Modern presidents also have invoked the notion of civility (Herbst, 2010) and refrained from the use of coarse language in their official communications (Coe & Park-Ozee, 2019).

The public also may judge leaders with deliberative ideals in mind. Research shows that people use an appropriateness heuristic to evaluate presidential images (Bucy, 2000; Bucy & Newhagen, 1999). Individuals view low-intensity displays—or communicative acts that are consistent with normative expectations—more positively (Bucy & Newhagen, 1999), and these displays engender beliefs that the president is more honest and appropriate (Bucy, 2000). These accounts present a baseline for testing factors associated with deliberative norms of presidential communication directly.

This deliberative standard may compete with a liberal individualistic framework of presidential communication. Democratic models emphasizing liberal individualism focus on “uninhibited self-expression, usually at the expense of civility and responsiveness” (Freelon, 2015, p. 774). Dahlberg (2001) argues that individuals who adhere to liberal individualism use communicative spaces for one-way communication, as opposed to the transactive discourse appropriate for deliberation.

Political elites do evince liberal individualistic practices at times, particularly on social media platforms. Communication venues such as Twitter reflect a hybrid space where professional styles of political communication mix with more personalized discourse (McGregor, 2018). In presidential (Rossini & Stromer-Galley, 2016) and congressional campaigns (Hemphill, Otterbacher, & Shapiro, 2013), candidates use digital transactive spaces such as Twitter to broadcast messages. Moreover, Obama and Trump placed more emphasis on presidential self-expression in legacy and digital venues (Gallagher, 2017), including regular ad hominem attacks by Trump on news outlets and individuals (Coe & Griffin, 2020). Liberal individualistic norms toward presidential communication also may exist among segments of the public, a possibility we explore in this research.

To assess public viewpoints of these competing normative frameworks, we evaluate how individuals judge the frequency and content of Trump’s communication on Twitter. These normative outcomes are built on historic and contemporary perspectives of presidential communication. A ubiquitous presidency produces communicative content that may privilege both normative conceptions, including deliberative accessibility with the public via digital venues and personal expression that characterizes liberal individualism (Scacco & Coe, 2016). How the evolution of presidential communication form and content has registered with individuals warrants consideration given Trump’s reliance on Twitter to publicly communicate.

The Frequency and Content of Contemporary Presidential Communication

The White House devotes considerable resources to shaping and disseminating the president’s public communication, from major spoken addresses that are broadcast widely and highly controlled (Coe & Neumann, 2011) to more digitally focused appeals on the official website (Owen & Davis, 2008). These well-documented—and sometimes recurrent—communicative acts serve as (in)direct pressure campaigns for congressional action (Kernell, 2007) as well as a tool to set the public’s and news media’s agenda (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2011). Yet the evolution of established presidential communication practices alongside the contemporary media ecology not only changes how and how often presidents communicate but also how the public perceives the frequency and content of these communications.

The Frequency of Presidential Communication

Contemporary presidents speak with greater frequency to the public (Kernell, 2007). Not only has the number of non-primetime presidential communications increased in the past 40 years, but so too have news stories about these pronouncements (Scacco & Coe, 2016). The fragmentation of the post-broadcast media environment has scattered audiences for presidential messages (Baum & Kernell, 2009), and has led presidents to communicate more frequently through entertainment-focused media outside the strictures of politics. From the creation of the White House website during Bill Clinton’s administration to Obama’s

appearances on *Between Two Ferns* with Zach Galifianakis, presidents are attempting to reach scattered audiences. Case in point, Trump tweeted more than 12,000 times during his first three years in office.

These developments raise questions about the normative standards for the frequency of presidential communication. Some politically-engaged individuals view frequent presidential communication as necessary to meet both governing and authenticity objectives, according to recent qualitative assessments (Scacco & Coe, 2017). Consequently, we might expect support for more liberal individualistic communication. Yet frequent communication can conflict with deliberative standards for argument-based presidential discourse (Hart, 1987). Indeed, scholars have warned that frequent communication can devalue the importance of presidential words (Ceaser et al., 1981). Here, we explore this potential normative tension.

The Content of Presidential Communication

Trump's use of the microblog platform Twitter—and deviation from more established practices of deliberation and comity—necessitates a holistic understanding of the public's attitudes toward the content of presidential communication. Digital and social media emphasize more personal and affective components of communication (McGregor, 2018; Papacharissi, 2015). Although researchers have been concerned about the personality and character of the U.S. executive (see, e.g., Kinder et al., 1980), the affordances of social media spotlight these qualities (McGregor, 2018). This centralization of personality privileges informality and disclosure of information that would traditionally be considered private, whether that may be about the president's family or hobbies (Scacco & Coe, 2016).

Trump's histrionic tone and style on Twitter—including his use of adjectives, capital letters, and ad hominem attacks—represent an uncivil approach common in many online discussion spaces (Freelon, 2015; see Figure 1). Since he declared his candidacy for president in June 2015, Trump has readily used Twitter to attack the news media (Scacco & Wiemer, 2019) and insult his political opposition (Coe & Griffin, 2020). His approach reflects the self-expressive communication characteristic of a liberal individualistic style (Dahlberg, 2001).

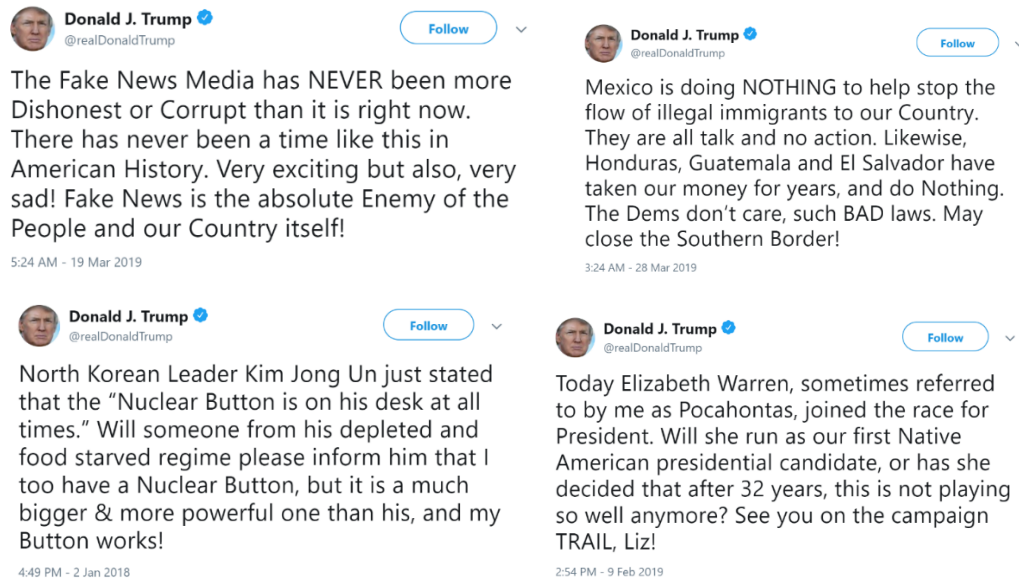


Figure 1. Examples of President Trump's tweets.

Trump's Twitter use presents an opportunity to assess the public's normative standards of presidential communication. Both the frequency and content of his tweets suggest he favors a liberal individualistic style of expression at the expense of more deliberative presidential communication. Consequently, factors related to deliberate and liberal individualistic communication norms may shape people's views on Trump's Twitter approach.

Explanatory Factors for Normative Assessments

To examine public opinion toward Trump's Twitter use, we look to several factors that should influence normative assessments. Broadly, we expect that factors that support a more deliberative communication style will influence beliefs that the frequency and content of Trump's tweets are less appropriate. Specifically, we examine trust in traditional media and support for politically correct communication as indicators of support for this deliberative presidential style. The contemporary media environment in which presidents communicate, however, challenges such deliberative norms. We anticipate that factors associated with a liberal individualistic communication style—including trust in Trump and familiarity with Twitter—will influence beliefs that Trump's tweets are more appropriate.

Source Trust

Assessments of trustworthiness are a critical factor in judgments of public communication (McCroskey & Young, 1981). Trust, or judgments of performance relative to expectations (Hetherington, 2005), should be an important indicator for assessing how individuals evaluate presidential tweet frequency and content.

Evaluations of news media trust should help explain public evaluations of Trump's Twitter use. Although there have been long-standing strains between the press and the presidency (Ladd, 2012), the sociopolitical environment has created additional tensions between how the news media and the president disseminate information. This tension, in part, reflects competing normative understandings about how news functions versus how modern presidents communicate. News media represent a source of political information independent of the president, and—in most circumstances—they vet content based on particular industry practices of sourcing, fact checking, and objectivity. In the process of vetting content, news media fulfill their democratic role in incorporating deliberative practices into news coverage, such as by providing multiple perspectives and background information on an issue (Gastil, 2008). Yet Trump has attacked numerous news outlets for their coverage of his candidacy and presidency (Peters, 2017). Simultaneously, he has used social media to circumvent the press and position himself as an authoritative source of information (Scacco & Wiemer, 2019). Our measure of trust assesses this negotiated tension between trust in media and trust in the president. We expect that individuals who trust news media more than Trump to provide truthful information also prefer more deliberative approaches. This style has been placed in contrast—by journalists and the president himself—with Trump's approach. More formally:

H1: People who trust news media outlets more than the president will be more likely to believe that Trump (a) tweets too frequently and (b) that his use of Twitter is inappropriate.

Conversely, Trump has created separate situational expectations for how he will communicate. In general, presidential trust is linked to expectations individuals have about job performance and character (Waterman et al., 2014). For Trump's supporters, these expectations feed his credibility as a communicative source. Not only is Trump's communication style informal (Ahmadian, Azarshahi, & Paulhus, 2017), but people also view his inability to self-censor as more authentic (Becker, 2018; Hart, 2020)—two important markers of self-expression with liberal individualism. This informality would seem to fit social media communications in general (McGregor, 2018), as well as with the emergence of a ubiquitous presidency (Scacco & Coe, 2017). As a result, we anticipate that people who trust Trump more than the news media to provide truthful information will judge the frequency and content of the president's tweets as appropriate. More formally:

H2: People who trust the president more than news media outlets will be less likely to believe that Trump (a) tweets too frequently and (b) that his use of Twitter is inappropriate.

Support for Politically Correct Communication

Part of deliberative discourse involves the accommodation of others' perspectives and identities (Witschge, 2004), a norm at the center of political correctness. Not only is deliberative communication civil and reasoned in the pursuit of common goals among competing ideas (Gastil, 2008), but it must also evince an openness to different perspectives. Yet Trump's presidency—in placing the locus of responsibility for political change with him personally—has opposed these accommodative communication norms. Recent work has found that increasing the salience of such "restrictive" communication norms also increases support for Trump (Conway, Repke, & Houck, 2017). Therefore, we expect individuals who support more deliberative, politically correct styles of communication to disapprove of the president's use of Twitter.

H3: People with a preference for political correctness will be more likely to believe that Trump (a) tweets too frequently and (b) that his use of Twitter is inappropriate.

Use of Twitter

Immersion in digital spaces can make situational—and anti-deliberative—norms of expression more salient (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). These situational norms implicate more personal, self-expressive styles—including incivility—associated with liberal individualism (Freelon, 2015). Journalists on Twitter, for example, increasingly engage in opinionated expression even while adhering to objectivity norms because “microblogging generally encourages it” (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012, p. 30). Visitors to some online spaces regularly engage in flaming behaviors, or hostile communication expected of some digital platforms (O’Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003). Trump has adopted a similar personal and aggressive style in his tweets. We anticipate that individuals who use Twitter frequently will find Trump’s tweets more appropriate because they are immersed in a digital space that features liberal individualistic communicative norms.

H4: People who use Twitter more will be less likely to think Trump (a) tweets too frequently and (b) that his use of Twitter is inappropriate.

Data and Methods

We conducted two studies to test our expectations. For Study 1 (S1), we collected original survey data among Ohioans between February 24 and March 8, 2017, ($n = 1,019$), using an online panel Qualtrics curated with quotas in place for gender and age based on the 2015 American Community Survey for Ohio. For Study 2 (S2), we collected original survey data of U.S. adults between September 27 and October 7, 2019, ($n = 1,003$), using an online panel Qualtrics curated with quotas in place for gender and education. Sample statistics for independent and control variables in S1 and S2 are shown in Table 1.

Dependent Variables

Trump Tweet Frequency

To measure beliefs about the frequency with which Trump tweets in S1 and S2, we asked respondents, “Do you think Donald Trump is using his personal Twitter account too much (S1: 64.1%; S2: 63.6%), too little (S1: 1.3%; S2: 2.4%), or the right amount (S1: 21.2%; S2: 20.1%)?” Respondents also could say they were unsure (S1: 13.4%; S2: 13.9%).

Trump Tweet Appropriateness

We assessed whether individuals think the content of Trump’s tweets is appropriate by cueing respondents to think about the public statements he has made: “As you may know, Donald Trump has made a number of public announcements through his personal Twitter account since winning the 2016 presidential election. Do you think Donald Trump’s use of Twitter is appropriate or inappropriate, given his position?” Response options in S1 included: “appropriate” (24.8%), “inappropriate” (56.5%), and “unsure” (18.7%).

In S2, we used the same question, but measured appropriateness on a 5-point Likert scale: very appropriate (15.2%), somewhat appropriate (12.8%), neither appropriate nor inappropriate (15.7%), somewhat inappropriate (18.8%), and very inappropriate (37.6%). The scale ranged from very appropriate (0) to very inappropriate (4; $M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.47$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Independent/Control Variables in Studies 1 and 2.

Variable	Study 1	Study 2
	Ohio 2017	United States 2019
Independent variables		
Trust news media more than Trump (= 1)	33.8%	33.8%
Trust Trump and news media equally (= 1)	7.4%	9.6%
Trust neither Trump nor news media (= 1)	21.7%	22.5%
Support for politically correct speech	$M = 2.00$, $Mdn =$ "change a little," $SD = 1.10$	$M = 3.25$, $Mdn =$ "very important," $SD = 0.97$
Use Twitter frequently	$M = 0.94$, $Mdn =$ "never," $SD = 1.33$	$M = 1.07$, $Mdn =$ "never," $SD = 1.42$
Control variables		
Age	$M = 47.40$, $Mdn = 48$, $SD = 16.85$	$M = 43.10$, $Mdn = 41$, $SD = 15.48$
Female	51.82%	50.95%
Education	$M = 2.33$, $Mdn =$ some college, $SD = 1.02$	$M = 3.05$, $Mdn =$ some college, $SD = 1.37$
Political interest	$M = 2.71$, $Mdn =$ "most of the time," $SD = 1.02$	$M = 2.19$, $Mdn =$ "about half the time," $SD = 1.22$
Partisanship (strong Democrat = high)	$M = 3.35$, $Mdn =$ Independent, leans Republican, $SD = 1.78$	$M = 3.61$, $Mdn =$ Independent, leans Democrat, $SD = 1.77$
Ideology (very liberal = high)	$M = 2.79$, $Mdn =$ "moderate," $SD = 1.06$	$M = 2.92$, $Mdn =$ "moderate," $SD = 1.10$

Independent Variables

Source Trust

We measured trust in Trump versus news media by asking respondents, "Who do you trust more to tell you the truth about important issues, President Trump or the news media?" Response options included "President Trump," "The news media," "Both equally," "Neither," and "Unsure." Using this measure, we created three dummy variables for both studies with "President Trump" as the base category (i.e., Trust Media More than Trump, Trust Trump and Media Equally, and Trust Neither Trump nor Media/Unsure).

Support for Politically Correct Communication

We measured support for politically correct speech in two different ways across S1 and S2. Both measures capture notions of accommodative communication inherent to support for political correctness. In S1, we adapted a measure from the 2016 American National Election Studies: "Some people think that the way people talk needs to change with the times to be more sensitive to people from different backgrounds. Others think that this has already gone too far, and many people are just too easily offended. Which is closer to your opinion?" Higher scores indicate greater support for politically correct communication: people are much too easily offended (1), people are a little too easily offended (2), the way people talk needs to change a little (3), and the way people talk needs to change a lot (4).

In S2, we created a measure based on previous research that assesses restrictive communication norms (Conway et al., 2017). "How important is it for the President of the United States to avoid saying things that might offend particular groups?" Higher scores indicate greater support for politically correct communication: very unimportant (1), somewhat unimportant (2), somewhat important (3), and very important (4).

Twitter Use

To measure Twitter use in both studies, we asked, "How frequently do you use Twitter—if at all?" The scale ranged from never (0) to several times a day (4).¹

Control Variables

We controlled for additional factors that might explain variation in the dependent variables. These variables include age, education, gender, political interest, party identification, and political ideology. We controlled for respondents' age in years because younger respondents might be more likely than older respondents to think Trump's use of Twitter is appropriate.

¹ In a robustness test of the effect of social media use for S1 and S2, we find similar results with a more general social media use question ("How often do you use social media to obtain political information?").

We controlled for education because people with higher levels of educational attainment might be more likely to support deliberative norms of presidential communication. In both studies, we measured education on a scale ranging from *no high school diploma* (1) to *masters, doctoral, or professional degree* (6).

We controlled for gender because research suggests that women may be less receptive to anti-deliberative communication (Mutz, 2015). Gender is coded 1 for “female” in both studies.

We controlled for political interest because people who are more immersed in politics may be more familiar with deliberative norms of political speech. As a result, they may view Trump’s tweets as less appropriate. We measured political interest by asking respondents how often they “pay attention to what’s going on in government and politics?” The scale in both studies ranged from *never* (0) to *always* (4).

We also controlled for party identification and political ideology because both factors influence how people interpret politics and potential violations of deliberative norms (Muddiman, 2017). For each study, we created a 6-point party identification scale ranging from *strong Republican* (0) to *strong Democrat* (5). We measured political ideology on a 5-point scale ranging from *very conservative* (1) to *very liberal* (5).

Analytic Plan

For our first dependent variable (the frequency with which Trump tweets), we estimated two multinomial logistic regressions—one for S1 and one for S2—with “the right amount” as the base category. Multinomial logistic regressions are ideal for categorical dependent variables that cannot be ranked (Long & Freese, 2014). For our second dependent variable (the appropriateness of Trump’s tweets), we estimated a multinomial logistic regression for S1 because the dependent variable is categorical. For S2, we estimated an ordered logistic regression because the dependent variable can be ranked, but does not have precise differences between categories.

To interpret the nonlinear coefficients, we used CLARIFY (King, Tomz, & Wittenberg, 2000) to estimate predicted probabilities for each model by taking 1,000 draws. The base probability was calculated holding all ordinal and continuous variables at their median and all binary variables at zero.² Other probabilities are calculated by changing the variable to its maximum value, holding all else constant.

Results

² For the 2017 Ohio data, the base probability is for a 48-year-old male with some college. He follows the news most of the time, thinks that the way people talk needs to change a little, and self-identifies as an independent who leans toward the Republican Party. Finally, he trusts Trump more than the media, and he never uses Twitter. For the 2019 U.S. data, the base probability is for a 41-year-old male with some college. He follows the news about half the time, thinks it is “very important” for the president to avoid saying things that might offend particular groups, and self-identifies as an independent who leans toward the Democratic Party. Finally, he trusts Trump more than the media, and he never uses Twitter. Predicted probability tables for each model are available on request.

Frequency of Trump's Tweets

The first set of results examine attitudes toward the frequency of President Trump's tweets, with an emphasis on the comparison between people who believe Trump tweets too much and people who believe Trump tweets the right amount (Table 2).³ In S1 and S2, the coefficients for trusting the news media more than Trump, trusting Trump and the news media equally, and trusting neither Trump nor the news media are positive and significant. The predicted probabilities show that people who trust the media more than Trump are about 42 points (S1) and 38 points (S2) more likely to believe that Trump tweets too much. People who trust Trump and the media equally are about 21 points (S1) and 10 points (S2) more likely to believe Trump tweets too much. Finally, people who trust neither Trump nor the media are about 32 points (S1) and 31 points (S2) more likely to believe Trump tweets too much. These results support H1a and H2a.

We also hypothesized that people with higher levels of support for politically correct speech would be more likely to believe that Trump tweets too much. In S1 and S2, the coefficients for politically correct speech are positive and significant. In S1, people with the highest level of support for politically correct speech are about seven points more likely to believe Trump tweets too frequently. In S2, the median value and the maximum value for support for politically correct speech are the same. Therefore, there is not a percentage point difference. Both studies provide support for H3a.

Finally, we hypothesized that people who used Twitter more frequently would be less likely to think Trump tweets too much. In both S1 and S2, the coefficient for Twitter use is negative and significant. People who use Twitter several times each day are about 18 points (S1) and 11 points (S2) less likely than people who never use Twitter to believe Trump tweets too frequently. These results are consistent with H4a.

When we examine the demographic factors that predict attitudes about the president's tweet frequency, we find partisanship and political ideology to be consistently significant factors across the 2017 and 2019 surveys. Strong Democrats are about 14 points (S1) and 11 points more likely (S2) than people who lean toward the Republican Party to believe Trump tweets too much. Individuals who identify as very liberal are about nine points (S1) and 10 points more likely (S2) than moderates to believe Trump tweets too much.

³ The standard errors for those who believe Trump tweets "too little" are large in S1 because only 1.3% of respondents in S1 reported that Trump tweets "too little," and zero respondents selected the response categories "both equally" or "neither Trump nor the media."

Table 2. Multinomial Logistic Regression Models Predicting Attitudes Toward the Frequency of Trump's Tweets.

	Study 1: 2017 Ohio Data			Study 2: 2019 U.S. Data		
	Base Category = "Right Amount"			Base Category = "Right Amount"		
	Too Much	Too Little	Unsure	Too Much	Too Little	Unsure
Age	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)
Female (= 1)	0.25 (0.20)	-0.50 (0.64)	0.31 (0.24)	0.18 (0.21)	-0.41 (0.47)	-0.00 (0.25)
Education	0.22* (0.10)	-0.30 (0.31)	0.06 (0.12)	0.11 (0.08)	-0.23 (0.19)	-0.23* (0.10)
Political interest	-0.04 (0.10)	0.13 (0.34)	-0.48*** (0.12)	-0.21* (0.09)	0.38+ (0.22)	-0.52*** (0.11)
Partisanship ("strong Democrat" = high)	0.19* (0.08)	0.25 (0.24)	-0.05 (0.10)	0.19* (0.08)	0.04 (0.18)	-0.02 (0.10)
Ideology ("very liberal" = high)	0.30* (0.13)	-0.25 (0.42)	0.22 (0.16)	0.30* (0.12)	-0.16 (0.25)	0.22 (0.14)
Trust news media more than Trump (=1)	3.21*** (0.47)	2.74** (0.96)	1.58** (0.54)	2.94*** (0.39)	2.26** (0.83)	1.42** (0.49)
Trust Trump & news media equally (=1)	1.16*** (0.34)	-13.77 (973.97)	0.58 (0.43)	1.05** (0.32)	0.89 (0.75)	1.21** (0.37)
Trust neither Trump nor news media (=1)	1.69*** (0.26)	-13.00 (624.23)	0.64+ (0.33)	2.55*** (0.32)	1.51* (0.75)	1.74*** (0.37)
Support politically correct speech	0.24* (0.11)	-0.08 (0.34)	0.17 (0.13)	0.50*** (0.11)	-0.26 (0.21)	0.23+ (0.12)
Use Twitter frequently	-0.25** (0.08)	0.40* (0.19)	-0.41*** (0.11)	-0.19* (0.08)	-0.17 (0.17)	-0.28** (0.10)
Constant	-1.98** (0.61)	-3.86+ (1.98)	-0.04 (0.70)	-3.20*** (0.63)	-0.73 (1.24)	-0.26 (0.70)
Observations	1,019	1,019	1,019	1,003	1,003	1,003
Pseudo R ²	0.24			0.27		

Note. In 2017, zero respondents who reported that Trump tweets too little also reported that they trust Trump and the media equally nor that they trust neither Trump nor the media. Standard errors in parentheses. Statistically significant coefficients at $p < .05$ in bold. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .10$.

Appropriateness of Trump's Tweets

The second set of results examine attitudes toward the appropriateness of Trump's tweet content (see Tables 3 and 4). First, we find that source trust is a critical factor in assessments of tweet appropriateness. In both 2017 and 2019, the coefficients for trusting the news media more than Trump, trusting Trump and the news media equally, and trusting neither Trump nor the news media are positive and significant. For S1, people who trust the media more than Trump are about 61 percentage points more likely to believe that Trump's tweets are inappropriate. People who trust Trump and the media equally are about 24 points more likely to believe Trump's tweets are inappropriate. Finally, people who do not trust Trump nor the media are about 37 points more likely to believe Trump's tweets are inappropriate. In S2, the predicted probabilities show that people who trust the media more than Trump are the least likely to believe that Trump's tweets are "very appropriate" (at 1%) and the most likely to believe Trump's tweets are "very inappropriate" (at 64%). These findings support H1b and H2b.

Second, the results illustrate support for politically correct communication—in both 2017 and 2019—as a significant factor in predicting appropriateness attitudes. In line with H3b, the coefficient for support for politically correct speech is positive and significant. In S1, people who believe that "the way people talk needs to change a lot" are about five points more likely than people who believe that "the way people talk needs to change a little" to say that Trump's tweets are inappropriate. In S2, the median and maximum predicted probabilities are the same.

Finally, Twitter use is predictive of attitudes about the content of the president's tweets. In support of H4b, the coefficient for Twitter use is negative and significant in both studies. People who use Twitter several times each day are about 10 points less likely than people who never use Twitter to believe that Trump's tweets are inappropriate (S1). The predicted probabilities in S2 show that people who use Twitter several times each day are the most likely to believe that Trump's tweets are "very appropriate" (at 26%) or "somewhat appropriate" (at 28%) and the least likely to believe Trump's tweets are "very inappropriate" (at 7%).

When we look at the demographic and political control variables, we observe a positive and significant effect of partisanship across the two studies. Strong Democrats are about 16 points more likely than people who lean toward the Republican Party to believe that Trump's tweets are inappropriate (S1). Political ideology is only a significant factor in S2. Further, factors that are significant predictors in the 2017 statewide data—including gender, education, and political interest—are either nonsignificant in the 2019 national survey (gender) or marginally significant (education, political interest).

Table 3. Multinomial Logistic Regression Model Predicting Attitudes Toward Inappropriateness of Trump's Tweets Using 2017 Ohio Data (Study 1).

	Base Category = "Appropriate"	
	Inappropriate	Unsure
Age	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Female (= 1)	0.65** (0.20)	0.52* (0.21)
Education	0.21* (0.10)	0.17 (0.11)
Political interest	-0.26* (0.10)	-0.42*** (0.11)
Partisanship ("strong Democrat" = high)	0.28*** (0.08)	0.07 (0.09)
Ideology ("very liberal" = high)	0.22 (0.13)	-0.02 (0.14)
Trust news media more than Trump (= 1)	3.48*** (0.42)	1.04* (0.48)
Trust Trump and news media equally (= 1)	1.27*** (0.34)	0.49 (0.37)
Trust neither Trump nor news media (= 1)	1.89*** (0.26)	0.70* (0.29)
Support politically correct speech	0.25* (0.11)	0.29* (0.12)
Use Twitter frequently	-0.20* (0.08)	-0.15+ (0.08)
Constant	-2.27*** (0.62)	-0.68 (0.62)
Observations	1,019	1,019

Pseudo $R^2 = 0.28$

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. Statistically significant coefficients at $p < .05$ in bold. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .10$.

Table 4. Ordered Logistic Regression Model Predicting Attitudes Toward the Inappropriateness of Trump's Tweets Using 2019 U.S. Data (Study 2).

Variables	Coef. (SE)
Age	0.01+ (0.00)
Female (= 1)	0.21 (0.13)
Education	0.08+ (0.05)
Political interest	-0.11+ (0.06)
Partisanship ("strong Democrat" = high)	0.26*** (0.05)
Ideology ("very liberal" = high)	0.30*** (0.07)
Trust media more than Trump (= 1)	2.63*** (0.22)
Trust Trump and Media Equally (= 1)	1.04*** (0.22)
Trust Neither Trump nor Media (= 1)	2.05*** (0.19)
Support politically correct speech	0.35*** (0.07)
Use Twitter frequently	-0.13** (0.05)
/cut1	1.96*** (0.37)
/cut2	3.17*** (0.38)
/cut3	4.31*** (0.39)
/cut4	5.58*** (0.41)
Observations	1003
Psuedo R ² = 0.22	

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. Statistically significant coefficients at $p < .05$ in bold. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .10$.

Discussion

President Trump's Twitter use offers an important case in understanding the underlying normative frameworks the public may use to assess a central component of his communicative outreach. Although Trump's use of digital media platforms builds on some practices that originated during the Obama administration (Scacco & Coe, 2016), the frequency of and means by which Trump uses these platforms raises normative questions about presidential communicative behavior.

Across two surveys, including a 2017 statewide survey of a presidential swing state and a 2019 national survey of U.S. adults, we find evidence of a normative tension between factors associated with more deliberative communication styles and those tied to liberal individualistic norms. The types of information spaces where individuals encounter politics, as well as preferred styles of public communication, serve to anchor contrasting normative conceptions of presidential outreach. The findings speak to these normative frameworks the public may use to assess the appropriateness of Trump's approach to communication outreach, the methodological contributions and considerations to be integrated in future

work on this topic, and to the practical conclusions of the public's attitudes toward presidential communication.

Two Competing Normative Frameworks

This study tests indicators of two competing normative frameworks—deliberative and liberal individualistic—to understand the extent to which viewpoints toward presidential communicative behavior may extend beyond standard demographic and political factors. Although the descriptive statistics suggest that most people disapprove of both the frequency and content of Trump's tweets, these attitudes appear to be much more nuanced and seem to be inspired—at least in part—by competing normative frameworks. The main factors we examined—source trust, support for political correctness, and use of Twitter—all are extensions of such norms. The results indicate that researchers and practitioners should exercise care with generalizations about the contemporary normative acceptability of some forms of presidential communication.

The pattern and strength of results suggest that individuals use different frameworks to evaluate presidential communication. For instance, an individual who trusts the news media more than the president, supports a politically correct communication style, and uses Twitter infrequently will be much more likely to say that the president tweets too much and that his tweets are inappropriate. This pattern is associated with support for more deliberative political communication approaches. Conversely, someone who trusts the president more than the news media, opposes restrictive communication practices, and uses Twitter more frequently will be much more likely to approve of the frequency and content of Trump's tweets, which is in line with a general affinity for liberal individualistic communicative practices. These findings are consistent across both studies and point to how information environments and discursive style preferences inform normative viewpoints of presidential communication.

Source trust, in particular, emerges as a potent factor in understanding attitudes about the president's use of Twitter. Our measure, designed to capture the dualities associated with the adversarial relationship between the president and the press, also reflects the deliberative and liberal individualistic elements of public communication. Even after controlling for demographic and political factors such as partisanship, the predicted probabilities show that trusting the news media more than the president is the strongest predictor of viewing Trump's tweets as violating frequency and content norms in both 2017 and 2019. From a practical perspective, this result is important given the volume of coverage legacy news media have afforded to the president's Twitter pronouncements (Mitchell et al., 2017). Conceptually, this coverage may provide opportunities for the press to contrast its deliberative style to the president's liberal individualistic approach to communication.

Although we cannot say that such media trust effects are due only to attitudes about the deliberative norms that traditional news outlets ascribe to (Gastil, 2008) or just a situational reflection of Trump's attacks on the press (Peters, 2017), we suspect such public trust judgments reflect more than situational assessments. Public attitudes toward essential press functions have polarized sharply during the Trump presidency, particularly among Republicans (Gottfried et al., 2019). Yet historic strains also have existed between presidents and the press (Ladd, 2012). Moreover, legacy news spaces, in particular, privilege deliberative forms of communication and information management (Gastil, 2008; Kovach &

Rosenstiel, 2007). Extant work suggests that when news outlets model deliberative norms, such as civility, objectivity, and the use of evidence, audiences use the same normative tones when they talk about the news (Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, & Curry, 2015). Individuals' familiarity with these environments, and corresponding trust in the news media, may allow them to contrast news media's approach with Trump's anti-deliberative approach to presidential communication. Given such possibilities, we posit that long-standing deliberative assessments of the press are meaningful here and are contrasted situationally against Trump's communicative approach. Future research should tease out the potential causal structure of such beliefs.

As hypothesized, individuals' attitudes toward politically correct communication also influenced assessments of Trump's tweets. Support for political correctness, where intentionality of word choice and communicative accommodation of others is important, reflects both deliberative and liberal individualistic tensions of public expression. Normatively, the deliberative process is characterized by the careful selection of arguments and weighing of different perspectives. These approaches to communication seem to be antithetical to both frequent speaking/tweeting and coarse messaging. Situationally, the president's messaging, both during the campaign and his administration (Conway et al., 2017), against political correctness may make liberal individualistic norms of more "open" communication salient. Although this approach engenders short-term support for the president among some individuals, scholars have argued that the president's rhetorical power is linked to a careful selection and use of words (Ceaser et al., 1981; Hart, 1987). Long-term assessment of the president's support may be negatively influenced, a possibility warranting attention.

Finally, the frequency with which a person uses Twitter also influences normative assessments. Individuals immersed in such a digital environment are more comfortable with how Trump uses Twitter—suggesting that situational, liberal individualistic norms of online interaction can challenge more injunctive, deliberative norms at times (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003; Freelon, 2015; Postmes et al., 1998). Indeed, Chadwick (2013) discusses this process of normative tension when newer and older media practices hybridize. Although Trump's tweet style and frequency may be anti-normative in the context of traditional presidential communication, his anti-deliberative style is consistent with an online space in which even professional political actors engage in informal communication at times (Lasorsa et al., 2012). Recent research cautions scholars to take into account how genres of communication apply to particular digital platforms (see Kreiss, Lawrence, & McGregor, 2018). Our findings offer affirmation for such caution.

Methodological Contributions and Considerations

This study also assists in developing survey questions and approaches for continued study of public attitudes regarding presidential communication. Public opinion surveys (as reflected in a search of the Roper Center's iPoll database) traditionally ask about reactions to primetime speeches. Yet the decline in frequency of such primetime events (Baum & Kernell, 2009) and the rise of ubiquitous forms of presidential messaging (Scacco & Coe, 2016) warrant new possibilities. Our approach offers opportunities for continued methodological development with regard to the normative frameworks discussed, the scope of presidential communication examined, and the means to track such attitudes.

First, as we have noted, our indicators for the normative frameworks we assess—source trust, political correctness attitudes, and use of Twitter—are proxy measures for such norms. Although anchored conceptually to either deliberative or liberal individualistic norms, the measures also implicate present situational factors associated with the Trump presidency. This circumstance does not preclude their validity as proxies for norms, given that Trump currently privileges liberal individualistic communicative standards and eschews deliberative ones on Twitter. Future studies should test measures of these normative frameworks directly alongside the indicators we identify, including the potential causal connections between norms and the structure of presidential communication attitudes.

Second, the dependent variable measures represent an important start for future assessments of presidential communication. The present study is limited to only one administration's communication on one messaging platform. Although the benefit of time will allow for explorations beyond particular platforms and presidencies, the survey questions offer prototypes and vocabularies for continued development. This research thus builds on recent qualitative work on generalized presidential communication attitudes (Scacco & Coe, 2017) and joins quantitative analyses of the value assessments individuals bring to evaluating Trump's communication (Hart, 2020).

Finally, the dual survey approach employed—statewide data in 2017 and national data in 2019—allows us to test the validity of the survey questions we have designed, our hypotheses, and the robustness of our findings. Although we cannot track attitudinal changes across time with cross-sectional data, future analyses may uncover how particular presidential communicative acts and the platforms that are used may continue to shape public attitudes toward presidential discourse. We note that the similarity in our overall results, given modifications to the presidential tweet appropriateness and political correctness measures between the 2017 and 2019 surveys, offers construct validity for the concepts employed in this analysis. Further, the consistency of results—across time and different samples—illustrates validity for the normative frameworks at play.

Conclusion

These findings inspire additional questions regarding whether some digital communication behaviors will be viewed as effective for the president in the long term. The extent to which individuals weigh normative concerns about President Trump's communication in the formation of other political attitudes is beyond the scope of this study, but it warrants thoughtful consideration. Prior research suggests that when presidents fail to meet standards for executive leadership, the gap between ideals and actual behaviors can negatively affect approval ratings (Waterman et al., 2014). In the long term, the testing of deliberative communication norms that traditionally undergird presidential discourse may influence the legitimacy of other presidential institutional processes as well as the evolution of normative behaviors ascribed to public discourse.

The normative foundations of presidential communication are in a process of contestation in the Trump administration—due in part to the evolution of presidential practices alongside fragmented media, as well as Trump's own style of communication. Deliberative communication logics presidents have employed off-line are placed in contrast to the logics of liberal individualistic communication in digital spaces. This research is among the first to consider and uncover such normative tensions associated with presidential

communicative behavior, as they exist in public attitudes. Our study works to foster a greater understanding of what is acceptable—at least in the public’s eye—in terms of presidential outreach.

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