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Understanding Trump's Improvisational Presidency

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Much has been made recently of Donald Trump’s improvisational presidency. Through tweets and public comments about border security and Syria, the president appears to be making policy on-the-fly. This behavior is nothing new for Trump. As USA TODAY (April 5) [reported](#): “From transgender troops in the military to immigration and tax cuts, Trump has a habit of winging it: announcing (or tweeting) a policy pronouncement, and leaving it to aides to fill in the details (or somehow walk it back).”

Despite Trump’s clear propensity for acting on impulse, this “details to follow” approach to policymaking is also nothing new. In recent decades, there have been many cases in which presidents have engaged in policymaking through public pronouncements, leaving their policy shop scrambling to craft substance that matches the rhetoric. My [research](#) on George W. Bush’s rhetoric of Compassionate Conservatism demonstrates that this process—which one Bush aide I interviewed described as “building the bicycle as they’re riding it down the hill”—is not one of Trump’s improvisations.

The practice of policymaking through presidential rhetoric is driven by three features of American politics. The first is the relentless media pressure on presidents to deliver rhetorically. The presidency has to, quite literally, have something to say about everything. As John J. Dilulio, Jr., the former Director of Bush’s Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, explained to me during an interview, media is “demanding answers to things, political things, media things, global things, all day long.”

Can you imagine a reporter asking about the president’s position on an issue and the White House replying that he doesn’t have one? No matter how obscure the issue, the public expects the administration to speak to it and do so in a timely way. If it does not, then *that* becomes the story.

The second factor is the lack of capacity within the White House to meet these demands. Emphasizing that presidents have “too much on [their] plate,” Dilulio described a White House that “is always focused on something. There’s always a couple of things that are sucking the air out of the room, that are consuming the Oval Office, that are driving the president’s schedule.”

As is the case for the rest of us, there simply are not enough hours in the day for the president and his staff. Far from setting and controlling the agenda, the White House spends most of its time playing “keep-up” with developing events, responding to critics, and trying to maintain the appearance that everything is in control.

The need to maintain this appearance of control is the third factor that drives policymaking through presidential rhetoric. Presidents are not powerful because of Article II of the Constitution—it is the perception of power that empowers. By staying “on offense” through a constant stream of rhetoric, the White House frames events and defines issues to reinforce the popular myth of a presidency-centered system of government.

Dilulio [points out](#) that while few follow the nuances of policymaking, “nearly everybody knows and reports whether the president has ‘said something’ about a given topic.” In today’s noisy media landscape, the president saying something, anything, often matters more than what is said.

Taken together, these three factors have institutionalized the incentive for presidents to substitute rhetoric for the challenging process of policy development. The incoherent policy proposals that result—neither fully researched and deliberated, nor shared with Congress—are indicative of a broken system of governance. This broken system is further distorted each time a president makes policy promises that cannot be kept.

As the late political scientist, Theodore Lowi, [argued](#): “The more the president holds to the initiative and keeps it personal, the more he reinforces the mythology that there actually exists in the White House a ‘capacity to govern.’” It is this mythology that ramps up the relentless pressure of public expectations; and the cycle begins anew.

There is little that is ordinary about the Trump presidency. This makes the need to distinguish between the man and his office all the more important. Failure to do so risks mistaking systemic, long-term problems in American politics for temporary disruptions that will leave the White House with Trump.

Richard Holtzman is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Bryant University in Smithfield, RI. His research primarily focuses on presidential rhetoric and he teaches courses in American politics.