

# ***Rebuilding Trust with the American People:*** **A Critical Discourse Analysis of** **President Biden's Rhetoric on Twitter**

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**Abstract:** This essay deals with the communication strategies of Joseph R. Biden, taking the significance of presidential rhetoric into account and aiming to identify how the 46th President of the United States employs the social network Twitter to rebuild trust with the American public. Drawing on Norman Fairclough's approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, the study concentrates on Biden's use of language on Twitter, analyzing his tweets concerning their social contexts. Focusing on Biden's presidential rhetoric on Twitter during his first 100 days in office, three recurring communicative patterns are identified: President Biden attempts to achieve visibility, adaptation, and control by directly engaging with the public, relying on the power of persuasion, and self-identifying as the Great Conciliator.

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In today's political culture of the United States, presidential rhetoric has assumed a vital role. This function was recognized early on by former President Woodrow Wilson, who stated that “[p]olicy – where there is no absolute and arbitrary ruler to do the choosing for a whole people – means massed opinion, and the forming of the mass is the whole art and mastery of politics” (Tulis, 1987: 117). Tulis awards this forming of the mass a unique role among the presidential powers, arguing that

[r]hetorical power is a very special case of executive power because simultaneously it is the means by which an executive can defend the use of force and other executive powers and it is a power itself. Rhetorical

power is thus not only a form of ‘communication,’ it is also a way of constituting the people to whom it is addressed by furnishing them with the very equipment they need to assess its use – the metaphors, categories, and concepts of political discourse. (ibid.: 203)

This unique role of presidential rhetoric partly explains why analyzing presidential communication strategies is particularly important to American Studies. Han writes that

“[a]n effective presidential communication strategy can be a critical factor [...] in developing and implementing the administration’s policy goals. To understand how a president communicates is to understand an important base of power for the modern presidency” (Han, 2001: 2).

Apart from this insight into presidential strategies for maintaining power, analyzing presidential rhetoric can also help to understand the evolution of the American presidency and its place in the political system since “a president’s communication ‘points directly to the pressures and possibilities of the office itself’... [and] presidential communication is a manifestation of the underlying institution” (Scacco / Coe, 2021: 23). Stuckey’s characterization of the American president as the “nation’s chief storyteller” (Han, 2001: 6) further highlights the significant role that the analysis of presidential rhetoric assumes in understanding the United States political system. As Tulis argues, “[b]y changing the meaning of policy, rhetoric alters policy itself and the meaning of politics in the future” (Tulis, 1987: 179).

Following technological progress, American presidents have become an indispensable part of the media landscape, employing diverse platforms to communicate with the American public. In doing so, presidents have always used the latest communicative innovation to convey their messages to the American people, evident in “President Franklin Roosevelt’s ‘fireside chats’ on the radio or President John Kennedy’s news conferences on television” (Andrews, 2020). With the emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, presidents have now been offered a chance to extend their public outreach. And the White House has noticeably taken advantage of that. The microblogging and social networking service Twitter, in particular, has become a buttress of 21<sup>st</sup>-century political discourse, occupying the prime role in American politics. While the first president to use Twitter for presidential communication was Barack Obama, the social network dominated the presidency of Donald J. Trump. With his tweets, Trump moved the presidential use of the social media platform into the public focus and established a new form of presidential communication (Ouyang / Waterman, 2020: 2), thus “[r]efiguring the contours of presidential public address” (Heidt / Pfister, 2019: 171).

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When President Biden succeeded Trump in January 2021, his goals were clear. He wanted to “[restore] credibility to government” (Karni / et al., 2020) and rebuild trust with the American people after the four turbulent years of the Trump presidency. Biden’s intentions were not only uttered in his Inaugural Address (Blake / Scott, 2021) but soon became evident in his communication on Twitter.

Under the impressions of Trump’s “Twitter presidency” (Kamps, 2021: 5), this essay strives to answer the following research question: How did President Biden communicate on Twitter at the beginning of his presidency to achieve longstanding goals of presidential communication while aiming to rebuild trust with the American public? A sample of tweets posted on the official Twitter account of President Joseph R. Biden (@POTUS) between January 20, 2021, and April 29, 2021, build the material base of this analysis. This selection thus constitutes the president’s first 100 days in office, a critical period in every term as it provides insights into his goals and establishes the presidency’s discursive framework.

## **The Evolution of Presidential Rhetoric**

The growing importance of presidential rhetoric went hand in hand with the rise of the presidency to the political power center in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Due to several factors, such as numerous wars and crises, the loss of significance of political parties, the rise of the mass media, and the advance of Keynesianism, Congress lost its status as the dominant branch in the polity. Consequently, the balance of power in American politics shifted in favor of the executive branch:

The imperial presidency was essentially the creation of foreign policy. A combination of doctrines and emotions – belief in permanent and universal crisis, fear of communism, faith in the duty and the right of the United States to intervene swiftly in every part of the world – had brought about the unprecedented centralization of decisions over war and peace in the Presidency. With this there came an unprecedented exclusion of the rest of the executive branch, of Congress, of the press and of public opinion in general from these decisions. (Schlesinger, 1973: 208)

With this newly acquired position of strength, new possibilities and expectations arose for American presidents with the turn of the century. In a fundamental departure from 19<sup>th</sup>-century notions of leadership, where “policy rhetoric [...] would be written, and addressed principally to Congress” (Tulis, 1987: 46) while being “public (available to all) but not thereby popular (fashioned for all)” (ibid.: 46), popular presidential rhetoric became “routine”

(ibid.: 116) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Tulis, Woodrow Wilson initiated the so-called *rhetorical presidency* in the United States (ibid.: 118 f.), and since then,

the doctrine that a president ought to be a popular leader has become an unquestioned premise of our political culture [...] Today it is taken for granted that presidents have a duty constantly to defend themselves publicly, to promote policy initiatives nationwide, and to inspire the population. And for many, this presidential ‘function’ is not one duty among many, but rather the heart of the presidency – its essential task. (ibid.: 4)

Unsurprisingly, the gradual advancement of communication technologies has notably influenced the evolution of presidential communication strategies. Consequently, it has also influenced notions of leadership. Considering the changing socio-cultural and technological contexts since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as “the evolution of the media, the public, and executive influence” (Scacco / Coe, 2021: 3). Scacco and Coe suggest the emergence of a new period of the American presidency, which they call the *ubiquitous presidency*, explaining that

contemporary presidents create a nearly constant and highly visible communicative presence in political and nonpolitical arenas through the use of mass as well as targeted media. They do this to achieve longstanding goals of visibility, adaptation, and control. But, in a socio-technological environment where accessibility, personalization, and pluralism are omnipresent considerations, the strategies presidents use to achieve these goals are very different from what we once knew. It is at the intersections of these familiar goals and new contexts that we locate the ubiquitous presidency. (ibid.: 4)

President Trump perfected the role of the ubiquitous president, successfully catering to an American public expecting accessibility, personalization, and pluralism from its Commander in Chief. In large part, Trump’s success can be attributed to his Twitter presence. By employing the social network for his presidential communication with the American public, Joe Biden appears to be following in the footsteps of his predecessor. However, by analyzing Biden’s use of communication strategies on Twitter, this article makes evident that he refrains from replicating Trump’s rhetorical style and instead opts for a more traditional approach to presidential communication. Aiming to rebuild the public’s trust in the presidency, the 46<sup>th</sup> President resorts to three communicative strategies: going directly public, relying on the power of persuasion, and self-identifying as the Great Conciliator.

## Going Directly Public

As Ouyang and Waterman indicate, “Twitter provides presidents with a voice that allows them to communicate directly with the public” (Ouyang / Waterman, 2021: 2). Trump fully exploited the social network’s potential in that respect, and Biden follows suit. His venture to go directly public via Twitter can be identified in three different communicative situations. While propagating his presidential agenda, asserting pressure on Congress, and entering non-political arenas, President Biden directly approaches the American people.

Biden’s propagations of the presidential agenda frequently feature direct appeals to the American people in which the public is not only included in the political discourse but prioritized. This prioritization is exemplified in a tweet from March 6, 2021, which contains a short video clip of the president promising the American people, who were suffering under the repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic, immediate economic relief through his American Rescue Plan. Talking straight into the camera, the president states:

It puts us back on the road to recovery and beyond that – setting down new principles – to care for our children, our families – and health care. There’s so much more in it, but the bottom line is – it’s going to start and it’s going to start almost immediately. So thank you very much, keep the faith – There’s so much more we have to do, but this is consequential.<sup>1</sup>

Using an imperative clause (*keep the faith*) and the second-person singular pronoun *you*, Biden is directly addressing every person in the United States, ensuring that no one is excluded from the political discourse. Other examples that showcase his direct appeal to the American people are tweets that contain recordings of one-on-one conversations between the president and individual citizens.<sup>2</sup> By letting voters get a word in, Biden illustrates how abstract and generalized policies can concretely affect the lives of American citizens. As a result, these postings not only present Joe Biden as a compassionate leader but make his policies more comprehensible and graspable for the public.

President Biden’s policy promotions on Twitter are thus also characterized by a simplification of the presidential agenda. Apart from applying abstract policies to concrete social processes, this simplification is further achieved by focusing on the main takeaways of Biden’s plans. Abiding by President Wilson, who “[acknowledged] that the power to command would require simplification of the arguments to accommodate the mass” (Tulis, 1987: 129),

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1 @POTUS. “What will the American Rescue Plan do for you?” *Twitter*, 6 Mar. 2021, 7:50 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1368363309326606341](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1368363309326606341).

2 @POTUS. “Last year, Michele lost her job because of the pandemic. I recently gave her a call to hear her story and discuss how my American Rescue Plan will help families like hers.” *Twitter*, 6 Feb. 2021, 11:01 a.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1358083335508082690](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1358083335508082690).

President Biden frequently resorts to one-sentence tweets when promoting his political plans, such as “Broadband is infrastructure”<sup>3</sup> or “It’s time to rebuild America”.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the president’s tweets often feature paratactic patterns and repeated collocations, such as “Wear a mask. Stay socially distanced. Wash your hands. Get vaccinated”,<sup>5</sup> thereby making his Twitter communication memorable, consistent, and cohesive.

Biden’s direct appeal to the American public, together with streamlined dissemination of policies, thus support his efforts to achieve adaptation, visibility, and control, the longstanding goals of presidential communication (Scacco / Coe, 2021: 4). First, with his simple messages addressed directly at the American people, the president successfully adapts his rhetoric to the addressees and the communication platform. Second, by adding visuals to his tweets, Joe Biden makes his posts more accessible to the public and, as a result, more visible. Considering that Twitter guidelines recommend using visuals in tweets to attract more attention (Anonymous, 2023), Biden’s multi-modal presentation of content on Twitter thus accomplishes another central objective of the ubiquitous presidency. Third, the communicative strategy of going directly public on Twitter also helps President Biden to keep the upper hand in the quest for message control within the communication landscape. Unlike traditional media platforms, the microblogging and social networking service grants the president complete editorial control over how and when his messages are presented to the American public. Contemporary presidents are thus no longer dependent on traditional media platforms to deliver their messages to the American people while having no say in determining the final product (Han, 2001: 3). Moreover, they possess a so-called “first mover advantage” (Ouyang / Waterman, 2021: 132) toward the press, meaning the president can influence the news cycle by scheduling and delivering specific policies or announcements as he pleases. “[A]s Gainous and Wagner (2014) argue, ‘social media shifts more power to political actors and interests ... and ... ‘Tweeting to Power’ has become the de facto standard” (Ouyang / Waterman, 2021: 132).

The president’s quest for control not only appears toward the press but also toward other political actors, mainly the United States Congress. Intending to gently exert political pressure on the legislative branch, Biden regularly refers to Congress in his tweets, calling for legislative action regarding current political debates such as gun control, police reform, or the president’s Build

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3 @POTUS. “Broadband is infrastructure.” *Twitter*, 5 Apr. 2021, 6:10 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1379194637320126471](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1379194637320126471).

4 @POTUS. “It’s time to rebuild America.” *Twitter*, 6 Apr. 2021, 1:15 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1379482785438703618](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1379482785438703618).

5 @POTUS. “Wear a mask. Stay socially distanced. Wash your hands. Get vaccinated. Now is not the time to let up in the battle against COVID-19 – we have to fight this to the end.” *Twitter*, 17 Apr. 2021, 6:45 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1383552100295004167](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1383552100295004167).

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Back Better Agenda, as can be seen in a post from February 10, 2021: “We’re facing an economic crisis caused by a public health crisis – and we need bold action to address both. That’s why I’m urging Congress to pass the American Rescue Plan”.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, President Biden pressurizes Congress with his representation of social actors. In his tweets, the social roles are clearly allocated. By placing the first-person singular pronoun in subject position, President Biden portrays himself as the active agent, able to drive the political process forward, while depicting Congress as a passive participant in object position, thereby implying that Congress is subjected to him and his actions. Biden also refers to the legislative branch, composed of Senators and Representatives, as *Congress*. This “[i]mpersonal representation of social actors [...] can dehumanize social actors, take the focus away from them as people, represent them, for instance, [...] instrumentally or structurally as elements of organizational structures and processes” (Fairclough, 2003: 150).

On the other hand, Biden’s calls to action also display a strong commitment to necessity as they are written as modalized demands from the first-person perspective. In addition, President Biden asserts political pressure on Congress through the timing of his tweets. Pitting the first-mover advantage against Congress, Biden’s tweets address hot topics right when they become relevant and accumulate before congressional votes. In campaigning for his policies, the president also resorts to surveys and opinion polls, using them as leverage against the legislative branch, for instance, when promoting his American Rescue Plan as “[a] plan for all of America – supported by the majority of America”.<sup>7</sup> Presenting himself as the mouthpiece of the American people, Biden attempts to get his way since one way to organize a majority in Congress is to circumvent Congress by establishing a direct connection with the electorate.

Since 21<sup>st</sup>-century presidents are struggling to get public attention amid an increasingly “fragmented media environment” (Scacco / Coe, 2021: 6), Heidt argues that they “cultivate presence in political and non-political arenas – making presidential rhetoric accessible, personal, and pluralistic” (Heidt, 2019: 5). Accordingly, Joe Biden also goes directly public on Twitter to enter non-political arenas, wishing to increase his visibility and adapt to an audience expecting accessibility, pluralism, and personalization.

On the one hand, this pursuit of ubiquity manifests itself in Biden’s attempts to expand his outreach. By sharing pictures and videos of himself at

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6 @POTUS. “We’re facing an economic crisis caused by a public health crisis – and we need bold action to address both. That’s why I’m urging Congress to pass the American Rescue Plan.” *Twitter*, 10 Feb. 2021, 12:15 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1359551604236648450](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1359551604236648450).

7 @POTUS. “A plan for all of America – supported by the majority of America.” *Twitter*, 3 Mar. 2021, 5:38 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1367242883519029251](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1367242883519029251).

work,<sup>8</sup> the president takes the spotlight and builds a constant public presence via social media. Furthermore, Biden employs various networking techniques, such as enlisting prominent support by including celebrities as social actors in his Twitter messages<sup>9</sup> or using popular hashtags.<sup>10</sup> Apart from participating in popular discourses online, these metadata tags serve another vital function: appealing to specific audiences. Responding to the evolution of an increasingly pluralist American public, Joe Biden's tweets include holiday greetings to Muslims, people of the Jain faith, and Asian communities.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, President Biden also personalizes his communication on Twitter by highlighting his personal roles, expressing his personality, and using colloquial language. This self-personalization already becomes evident in his bio sketch on Twitter. It reads: "46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, husband to @FLOTUS, proud dad & pop",<sup>12</sup> thereby mixing official and personal, family-centered roles and "publicly performing ... 'backstage' norms of informality and disclosure" (Scacco / Coe, 2021: 16). Furthermore, tweets revealing Biden's favorite ice cream flavor<sup>13</sup> or alluding to his history as a passionate commuter<sup>14</sup> contribute to the creation of the president's backstage persona as an everyday man and allow him to develop an intimacy with the American people (Scacco / Coe, 2021: 37).

Considering an apparent online political apathy (Anderson / Auxier, 2020), Biden thus manages to expand his presence beyond political issues, reflecting

a demonstrable turn toward personalization in the age of the ubiquitous presidency. Amid changing expectations and in new venues, presidents have adapted by finding opportunities large and small to adopt a more informal demeanor and disclose personal information. They have revealed a controlled backstage persona and, in doing so, attracted media attention and gained visibility among new audiences. (Scacco / Coe, 2021: 44)

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8 @POTUS. "Another week in the books." *Twitter*, 5 Mar. 2021, 8:02 p.m., twitter.com/potus/status/1368003933709467648.

9 @POTUS. "Equal Pay Day is a big deal around here. Right, @mPinoe and @100percent?" *Twitter*, 24 Mar. 2021, 10:41 p.m., twitter.com/potus/status/1374914278336167941.

10 @POTUS. "Congratulations to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers on their #SuperBowl victory – a team whose season was a story of resilience, reinvention, and grit." *Twitter*, 7 Feb. 2021, 11:57 p.m., twitter.com/potus/status/1358640953024778241.

11 @POTUS. "From the Biden family to yours, happy #LunarNewYear. We wish you happiness, health, and prosperity in the Year of the Ox." *Twitter*, 12 Feb. 2021, 12:01 p.m., twitter.com/potus/status/1360272714641121283.

12 @POTUS. "46th President of the United States, husband to @FLOTUS, proud dad & pop. Tweets may be archived: <http://whitehouse.gov/privacy>. Text me: (302) 404-0880" *Twitter*, twitter.com/potus.

13 @POTUS. "Can confirm it's chocolate chip." *Twitter*, 24 Jan. 2021, 8:06 p.m., twitter.com/potus/status/1353509611026919425.

14 @POTUS. "Grateful for the short commute on days like these." *Twitter*, 31 Jan. 2021, 10:15 p.m., twitter.com/potus/status/1356078800845627402.



However, Scacco and Coe emphasize that the construction of the president's backstage persona is only symbolic (ibid.: 41) since “in the ubiquitous presidency the publicity afforded to backstage moments ensures that they are crafted in relation to contextual constraints and communication goals” (ibid.: 42).

## The Power of Persuasion

Aiming to rebuild public trust in the American presidency, Joe Biden's presidential rhetoric is also characterized by a firm reliance on his power of persuasion. Complying with Richard Neustadt's argument that “[p]residential power is the power to persuade” (Neustadt, 1960: 10), the 46<sup>th</sup> President builds rational arguments to justify and promote his political agenda, engages in “controlled interactivity” (Stromer-Galley qtd. in Scacco / Coe, 2021: 15) with the American public, touts his presidency as a story of success and progress, and displays strong commitments to act and truth.

Biden follows the generic structure of an argument in furnishing his tweets with grounds, warrants, and claims (Fairclough, 2003: 81). Ensuating from the fact that “the United States ranks 13<sup>th</sup> in the World in infrastructure quality and the United States has dropped from #5 to #13 over the last 15 years,” Biden claims in a tweet from March 31, 2021, that “[w]e have to invest in America again” since “[w]e can't allow this to continue”.<sup>15</sup> As in this case, the warrants of Biden's arguments sometimes remain implicit and must thus be inferred from the underlying context. The president frequently justifies his claims by alluding to American Exceptionalism, the popular notion that the United States “is exceptional in the sense of being exemplary (‘a city upon a hill’), or a beacon among nations” (Bell, 2001: 51) and a central aspect of American identity (Campbell / Kean, 2016: 300). Moreover, the president often establishes causal relations in his arguments using subordinating conjunctions (*to*<sup>16</sup>) or linking adverbials (*that's why*<sup>17</sup>). Thus, Biden's arguments are presented as “a matter of general ‘common sense’” (Fairclough, 2003: 82) to the American people, consequently enforcing their persuasive power.

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15 @POTUS. “Infrastructure isn't just about roads and bridges – it's about our global competitiveness. And as we continue to fall back, the rest of the world is closing in. We can't allow this to continue. We have to invest in America again.” *Twitter*, 31 Mar. 2021, 2:12 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1377322916451381252](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1377322916451381252).

16 @POTUS. “No child in America should go hungry. The American Rescue Plan will extend and invest in critical food programs to help ensure every family gets the food they need.” *Twitter*, 1 Mar. 2021, 11:55 a.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1366431794120302593](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1366431794120302593).

17 @POTUS. “I believe every worker should have a real opportunity to organize and collectively bargain. That's why today, I established a White House Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment – helping empower workers to make the right choice for themselves and their families.” *Twitter*, 26 Apr. 2021, 5:20 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1386792203306115076](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1386792203306115076).

President Biden's tweets also notably feature a "‘problem-solution’ relation" (Fairclough, 2003: 91), according to Fairclough a prominent characteristic of policy texts (ibid.: 91). On February 11, 2021, the president, for instance, addressed the problem of child poverty in the United States while offering a solution in the form of his American Rescue Plan: "No child should grow up in poverty. The American Rescue Plan will expand the child tax credit and cut the child poverty rate in half".<sup>18</sup> By simultaneously pointing to a problem and presenting a matching solution, Biden performs the role of a dynamic and reliable troubleshooter whom the American people can trust to be their president.

Another feature of President Biden's communication on Twitter which helps him build rational arguments to rebuild public trust in the presidency is the cultivation of a scientifically oriented discourse, first and foremost when discussing issues surrounding the coronavirus pandemic. Apart from explicitly heralding that "science is back",<sup>19</sup> Biden's intention to act according to scientific knowledge also becomes evident through his word choices and the fact that he is basing his arguments on scientific sources and official institutions such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).<sup>20</sup>

In addition to presenting rational arguments, President Biden's tweets tell a story of success and progress to give his policies leverage and add to his persuasiveness. For one thing, this narrative is established by presenting milestones of his presidency in chronological order while including retrospective views to highlight how far the United States under the Biden administration has come. This approach is particularly evident in posts concerning the fight against COVID-19. On March 18, 2021, Biden tweeted: "Before I took office, I set an ambitious goal of administering 100 million shots in my first 100 days as president. I'm proud to say that we'll reach that goal tomorrow, just 58 days in".<sup>21</sup> Palpable evidence in the form of quantifiable data and expressions of contrast between his presidency and the previous administration, such as *Before I took office*, further make Biden's achievements more visible. For another thing, Biden's representation of social actors touts his presidency as a story of success and progress. By distinctively featuring himself as the "Actor in [the process]" (Fairclough, 2003: 145) using the first-person singular pronoun *I*,

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18 @POTUS. "No child should grow up in poverty. The American Rescue Plan will expand the child tax credit and cut the child poverty rate in half." *Twitter*, 11 Feb. 2021, 4:06 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1359972175768412165](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1359972175768412165).

19 @POTUS. "This Earth Day, I'm proud to say science is back." *Twitter*, 22 Apr. 2021, 10:01 a.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1385232169468055561](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1385232169468055561).

20 @POTUS. "On Saturday, the FDA issued an emergency use authorization for the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine. Dr. Fauci sat down to answer your questions." *Twitter*, 1 Mar. 2021, 10:04 a.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1366404049252347904](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1366404049252347904).

21 @POTUS. "Before I took office, I set an ambitious goal of administering 100 million shots in my first 100 days as president. I'm proud to say that we'll reach that goal tomorrow, just 58 days in." *Twitter*, 18 Mar. 2021, 8:21 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1372704743345287170](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1372704743345287170).

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the president underlines his agency and presents himself as the driving force behind the nation's success and progress. Strikingly, Biden also employs the first-person singular pronoun *we* in these messages, which “is important in terms of Identificational meanings [...], how texts represent and construct groups and communities” (ibid.: 149). Therefore, the president includes the American people in his narrative, presenting the nation's success and progress as a joint effort under his leadership.

In comparison to traditional media outlets, social media platforms such as Twitter

allow for a multidirectional flow of information and the establishment of possible feedback loops [...] When this possibility is realized, media fragmentation inverts presidential public outreach. That is, the president becomes not just a figure that people hear from, but someone with whom they interact. (Scacco / Coe, 2021: 15)

At first glance, President Biden seems to utilize this possibility for interaction with the American public. Explicitly inviting Twitter users to engage in a conversation with him,<sup>22</sup> answering questions from them via posted video clips,<sup>23</sup> and letting American citizens participate in the discourse on his Twitter profile,<sup>24</sup> the president enhances his accessibility to the American public. Seemingly complying with Scacco and Coe's postulated presidential duty, these interactive elements are designed to support Biden's political arguments while attempting to overcome the extensive social hierarchy and distance between the president and the American people. By putting himself on a communicative par with the citizens, Biden tries to persuade the American public of his policies and restore confidence in the presidency. However, as Biden's Twitter presence suggests, the strive for increased accessibility through interaction clashes with another essential goal of the ubiquitous presidency, and that is message control. Therefore, United States presidents usually opt for a more moderate approach to interactivity, with President Biden being no exception. Accordingly, there is no real interactivity on Biden's Twitter account as only selected questions from selected citizens serving his political arguments are displayed.

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22 @POTUS. “The American Rescue Plan will deliver direct payments to 85% of American households – and checks have already started going out to folks across the country. Let me know if you've received yours by sharing below.” *Twitter*, 15 Mar. 2021, 9:05 p.m., twitter.com/potus/status/1371628532376408070.

23 @POTUS. “I know a lot of folks have questions about when you'll get your stimulus checks and how we're increasing vaccine production, so I sat down to answer a few.” *Twitter*, 19 Feb. 2021, 5:30 p.m., twitter.com/potus/status/1362892348632530944.

24 @POTUS. “The American Rescue Plan's \$1,400 checks will start going out as early as this weekend. Here's how folks plan to use theirs.” *Twitter*, 12 Mar. 2021, 8:30 p.m., twitter.com/potus/status/1370547738614636544.

Despite showing a reluctant commitment to interactivity, President Biden still displays a strong commitment to act in his Twitter communication. In frequently making offers to the American people, such as “I am heading to the Oval Office to get right to work delivering bold action and immediate relief for American families”<sup>25</sup> or “I’ll be signing executive actions to expand testing, administer vaccines, and safely reopen schools and businesses”<sup>26</sup> the president packages himself as a confident man of action and thus appears trustworthy. These offers are realized using first-person statements that contain the modal verb *will*, which is usually “used to express strong volition” (Sammon, 2017: 112). Moreover, the congruent verbal representation of these social processes instead of a metaphorical nominalization again underlines Biden’s agency (Fairclough, 2003: 143).

Apart from a strong commitment to act, Joe Biden also shows a determined commitment to truth, which further enhances his persuasiveness and helps him rebuild public trust in the American presidency. This strong commitment to truth is mainly realized through declarative statements (ibid.: 167) and explicit references. That is, for instance, evident in the following tweet from March 11, 2021: “For all of you asking when things will get back to normal, here is the truth: The only way to get our lives back — and to get our economy back on track — is to beat the virus”<sup>27</sup>. One aspect that is important to consider in this context is the fact that “there are social limits on modality choices which go beyond the social relations of particular texts” (Fairclough, 2003: 167). Ex officio, President Biden has the “socially ratified power of prediction” (ibid.: 167), which he repeatedly uses to legitimize his policies. By legitimizing his strong statements of truth with presidential authority, Biden gives them validity, which adds to his persuasiveness.

Another vital factor supporting Biden’s strong commitment to truth is repetition. By constantly repeating phrases such as “[h]elp is here”<sup>28</sup> or “America is back”<sup>29</sup> in his tweets, the president takes advantage of the so-called “illusory truth effect” (Colley, 2019: 45), which is especially relevant for dis-

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25 @POTUS. “There is no time to waste when it comes to tackling the crises we face. That’s why today, I am heading to the Oval Office to get right to work delivering bold action and immediate relief for American families.” *Twitter*, 20 Jan. 2021, 12:36 p.m., twitter.com/potus/status/1351946842838347776.

26 @POTUS. “We don’t have a second to waste when it comes to getting this virus under control. That’s why today, I’ll be signing executive actions to expand testing, administer vaccines, and safely reopen schools and businesses.” *Twitter*, 21 Jan. 2021, 10:42 a.m., twitter.com/potus/status/1352280291088457731.

27 @POTUS. “For all of you asking when things will get back to normal, here is the truth: The only way to get our lives back – and to get our economy back on track – is to beat the virus. Here are the next steps we’re taking to make that happen.” *Twitter*, 11 Mar. 2021, 8:33 p.m., twitter.com/potus/status/1370186026526838788.

28 @POTUS. “Help is here.” *Twitter*, 10 Mar. 2021, 2:18 p.m., twitter.com/potus/status/1369729349272866822.

29 @POTUS. “America is back. Diplomacy is back.” *Twitter*, 5 Feb. 2021, 2:05 p.m., twitter.com/potus/status/1357767292080312322.

courses on social media. As Colley explains, this term describes the phenomenon that “the truth value of statements increases with repetition; that is, the more familiar an individual is with a statement, the more likely he or she will be to rate that statement as valid” (ibid.: 45). Regardless of whether the statements made are, in fact, true or whether they match one’s political ideology (ibid.: 45 ff.), the inherent characteristics of social media platforms amplify the illusory truth effect since “likes’ suggest acceptance and comments and retweets reiterate, and consequently strengthen, the information” (ibid.: 46 f.). Moreover, these recurring coin phrases created a sense of reliability and consistency, thus promoting the public’s confidence in him.

### The Great Conciliator

The final communicative strategy that President Biden employs on Twitter to rebuild public trust in the American presidency is construing his image as the Great Conciliator, a trustworthy politician pledging to unite the nation. This analysis demonstrates that Joe Biden’s political identity is created through a composition of rhetorical definitions of the self and the other in his tweets.

In the 2020 presidential election, Biden tailored his campaign around his reputation as a veteran aisle politician, “a creature of the Congress” (Smith, 2020). Now, he carries that narrative forward in his communications as president. Fondly reminding the American public of his role as Barack Obama’s “Senate whisperer, his chief dealmaker, his aide with the best bipartisan relationships” (Grundwald, 2019), Biden, for example, shared a photograph showing President Obama and himself, then Vice President, celebrating the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010.<sup>30</sup> With such tweets, Biden turns the spotlight on his bipartisan achievements from his long political career in Washington and uses these accomplishments to legitimize his policies as president.

In addition to displaying past achievements on Twitter, Biden also documents his bipartisan efforts as president. Painting a picture of a politician who can unite opposing parties, Biden, for instance, tweeted about his meeting with Republican Governor DeWine:

“This afternoon in Columbus, I met with Ohio Governor Mike DeWine to discuss our coordinated response to COVID-19. The virus

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30 @POTUS. “Today marks eleven years since the Affordable Care Act was signed into law. The landmark legislation has changed countless lives, but our work isn’t done. I’m committed to ensuring every American has the peace of mind that comes with quality, affordable health care.” *Twitter*, 23 Mar. 2021, 5:55 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1374479845309128706](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1374479845309128706).

doesn't just impact red or blue states – it impacts us all – and I'm committed to working across the aisle to defeat it.”<sup>31</sup>

While emphasizing the bipartisan character of these meetings, the use of first-person plural pronouns such as *our* and *us*, and adjectives such as *coordinated* advance the textual construction of communities (Fairclough, 2003: 149) and highlight the cooperative aspect of Biden's style of governing. Moreover, his first-person statements, accompanied by an explicit commitment to act, portray the president as the “Actor” (ibid.: 145) in the social process. At the same time, other politicians, in this case, a Republican governor, are syntactically realized in object position by using transitive activity verbs (*met with*). Therefore, while Biden aligns his language with his inclusive approach to governing by including politicians from both sides of the aisle in his discourse, he nonetheless demonstrates that he is the driving force behind this conciliation.

President Biden's self-identification as the Great Conciliator also manifests through an explicit demarcation from his predecessor. Apart from subtle emulations of Donald Trump, for instance, evident in Biden's attempt to replicate Trump's authenticity using colloquialisms,<sup>32</sup> the 46<sup>th</sup> President predominantly presents himself as the Anti-Trump. On the one hand, Biden achieves this differentiation by working with contrasts, both explicitly and implicitly. On March 25, 2021, he distinguished himself from his predecessor by emphasizing that he has “been hired to solve problems, not create divisions”.<sup>33</sup> This tweet makes a clear allusion to Trump, who “[i]nstead of seeing in his platform a responsibility to unite the nation, [...] used that platform to further divide the nation” (Stuckey, 2021: 144). Furthermore, Biden implicitly touts himself as the opposite of Trump through his neutral tone, his strong commitment to truth, and by displaying consistency, which, as previously discussed, make him seem reliable.

In contrast, Trump's term in office was marked by impulsivity and emotional outbursts (Kamps, 2021: 4). Strikingly, Biden never mentions Trump by name in his tweets. According to Fairclough, who notes that “exclusion may be politically or socially significant” (2003: 149), Trump's exclusion as an explicit social actor in Biden's discourse on Twitter suggests Biden's refusal to engage in Trump's “insult politics” (Winberg qtd. in Pérez / et al., 2019: 16), thus further emphasizing Biden's self-identification as the Anti-Trump. Biden

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31 @POTUS. “This afternoon in Columbus, I met with Ohio Governor Mike DeWine to discuss our coordinated response to COVID-19. The virus doesn't just impact red or blue states – it impacts us all – and I'm committed to working across the aisle to defeat it.” *Twitter*, 23 Mar. 2021, 11:49 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1374568909215518722](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1374568909215518722).

32 @POTUS. “Everyone 16 and older in America is eligible for the shot today. Go and get 'em, folks.” *Twitter*, 19 Apr. 2021, 2:40 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1384215260781944834](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1384215260781944834).

33 @POTUS. “I've been hired to solve problems, not create divisions.” *Twitter*, 25 Mar. 2021, 1:47 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1375142384401530883](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1375142384401530883).

also deviates from Trump in the fact that he sets a great store on pluralism by appearing inclusive on Twitter. Unlike Donald Trump, who “spoke almost exclusively to his political base and was generally uninterested in efforts to make his views more legible or acceptable” (Stuckey, 2021: 129), Joe Biden pledges “to bring everyone along regardless of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability”.<sup>34</sup> Attempting to appeal to as many Americans as possible, Biden’s presidential rhetoric thus illustrates his self-identification as the Great Conciliator.

On the other hand, Biden frequently employs metaphors centering around the resurgence of the United States ever since he took office. This proclaimed resurgence is especially evident in the phrase “America is back”,<sup>35</sup> heralded numerous times in Biden’s tweets. For something to be back, it must be gone before, so this alleged return to normality implies that the previous administration plunged the nation into a state of emergency. Moreover, the verbal imagery is especially visible in the following tweet, posted on April 28, 2021: “After 100 days of rescue and renewal, America is ready for takeoff. We are working again. Dreaming again. Discovering again. Leading the world again. We have shown each other and the world: There is no quit in America.”<sup>36</sup> By using buzz words such as *again*, *rescue*, and *renewal*, the president implies the awakening of the United States under his leadership after tumultuous times, his characterization of the Trump presidency.

Considering that essentially, American identity has always been a product of rhetoric (Dörner, 1993: 285), another strategy helping Joe Biden appear as the Great Conciliator can be observed in this analysis: By recentring on shared American values and popular national ideologies, the president employs Twitter to construe a collective American identity. First, Biden’s tweets frequently feature references to the foundational documents of the United States. Just a few days after his inauguration, the president, for example, posted:

“America has never lived up to its founding promise of equality for all, but we’ve never stopped trying. Today, I’ll take action to advance ra-

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34 @POTUS. “Here’s the deal: Wall Street didn’t build this country – the great American middle class did. It’s time we rebuild the middle class and bring everyone along regardless of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability.” *Twitter*, 5 Apr. 2021, 3:06 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1379148484415217666](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1379148484415217666).

35 @POTUS. “America is back at the table.” *Twitter*, 21 Jan. 2021, 8:50 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1352433299331948544](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1352433299331948544).

36 @POTUS. “After 100 days of rescue and renewal, America is ready for takeoff. We are working again. Dreaming again. Discovering again. Leading the world again. We have shown each other and the world: There is no quit in America.” *Twitter*, 28 Apr. 2021, 11:08 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1387604675176943616](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1387604675176943616).

cial equity and push us closer to that more perfect union we've always strived to be",<sup>37</sup>

thereby alluding to both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Second, by regularly displaying the United States as a nation that can do anything,<sup>38</sup> the president invokes the concept of American Exceptionalism. This

uniqueness or 'exceptional' quality of the American experience [has been defined] in the form of a 'national narrative' – a story of agreed principles, values and myths that gives the country a coherent sense of identity, an 'image repertoire productive of the U.S. national community ... through a recitation of the key terms in the national meta-narrative.' (Campbell / Kean, 2016: 2 f.)

Therefore, Biden's references to traditional American value systems and ideas serve an essential function. By exploiting this identity-establishing function of national ideologies in his discourse on Twitter, the president creates a sense of community. This rhetorical creation of a community is further reinforced by the fact, that the comprehension of these references depends on the existence of some common ground among the American people. As Fairclough notes,

[i]mplicitness is a pervasive property of texts, and a property of considerable social importance. All forms of fellowship, community and solidarity depend upon meanings which are shared and can be taken as given, and no form of social communication or interaction is conceivable without some such 'common ground'. On the other hand, the capacity to exercise social power, domination and hegemony includes the capacity to shape to some significant degree the nature and content of this 'common ground', which makes implicitness and assumptions an important issue with respect to ideology. (Fairclough, 2003: 55)

Therefore, through the authority of his office, President Biden can also participate in defining this common ground and thus determine what it means to be American.

Biden also reconstructs a collective American identity by drawing upon a discourse of unity. This discourse of unity is mainly realized by including the American public in the president's tweets. By prominently featuring first-

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37 @POTUS. "America has never lived up to its founding promise of equality for all, but we've never stopped trying. Today, I'll take action to advance racial equity and push us closer to that more perfect union we've always strived to be." *Twitter*, 26 Jan. 2021, 8:20 a.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1354056690027683841](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1354056690027683841).

38 @POTUS. "This is the United States of America. There's nothing we can't do if we do it together." *Twitter*, 12 Mar. 2021, 2:14 p.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1370453161010462725](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1370453161010462725).



person plural pronouns such as *we* and *our*,<sup>39</sup> the president takes a backseat semantically, celebrates unity, and emphasizes the importance of a national community, thus acting as the Great Conciliator.

## Conclusion

As this analysis of Joe Biden’s presidential rhetoric has repeatedly shown, the 46<sup>th</sup> President has taken another path than his predecessor regarding his communication on the microblogging and social networking service Twitter. Instead of channeling President Trump, who “broke the norms of presidential oratory, disrupting ‘the sanitized prepackaged rhetoric of his predecessors’” (Pérez / et al., 2019: 16), President Biden understands Twitter more “as a PR tool” (Collins, 2021). Pursuing visibility, adaptation, and control, he publishes carefully designed messages to rebuild trust with the American public. This analysis thus confirms Daniels’ characterization of Biden’s communication strategy as a “return to calm” (Daniels, 2021), constituting a “head-spinning departure from four years of President Donald Trump” (ibid.).

Even though there are “diverse venues where the presidential presence has emerged during the last four decades” (Scacco and Coe, 2021: 24), digital platforms are expected to take root in presidential communications:

Given the changing media ecology, Twitter and analogous genres of internetworked rhetoric are henceforth likely to be permanent fixtures in presidential rhetoric. Even if Twitter falls into disuse, the ‘basic architecture’ of microblogging ‘prevails across internetworked media genres.’ While presidents may use alternative and evolving genres in the future, digital communication is likely to retain the affordances of addressivity to others, capacity of response, and ease of re-circulation. (Heidt / Pfister, 2019: 171)

Further aiming at enhancing the president’s visibility, adaptation, and control, presidential communication will likely continue to move toward increased interaction between the presidency and the American public. In the process, the institution will change its appearance from one president to the next. While Schlesinger describes the presidency as “a peculiarly personal institution [...] a chameleon, taking its color from the character and personality of the President” (Schlesinger, 1973: 212), Heidt and Pfister argue that “[t]he presidency is a self-referential institution” (Heidt / Pfister, 2019: 172). This analysis of President Biden’s communication on Twitter suggests that both characteri-

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39 @POTUS. “We will be judged for how we resolve the cascading crises of our era. Will we rise to the occasion? Will we master this rare and difficult hour? Will we meet our obligations and pass along a new and better world for our children? I believe we must and I believe we will.” *Twitter*, 2 Feb. 2021, 9:00 a.m., [twitter.com/potus/status/1356603297172500485](https://twitter.com/potus/status/1356603297172500485).

zations of the presidency apply. Therefore, how presidential communication and, thus, also the American presidency will evolve under future presidents remains to be seen and will surely be the subject of future analyses. However, what can be said with a fair degree of certainty even now is that analyzing presidential communication strategies will remain a central tool for gaining a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of American politics since, as Woodrow Wilson put it, “the forming of the mass” (Tulis, 1987: 117) will always be “the whole art and mastery of politics” (ibid.: 117).

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