

Study shows power of imagery in improving perceptions of president

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A new study by leading UChicago presidential scholar William G. Howell concludes that the rituals of public performances enhance the president's standing in the American public. Citizens who watch presidents participating in these performances are more likely to view them as fulfilling the obligations of office, enjoying the respect of key constituencies, and embodying the values and aspirations of a nation.

Most analysis of presidential speeches focuses on the text of the [speech](#), the policies that a [president](#) presents and the way that the president makes his argument. But in a new working paper, Howell and his coauthors focused on the visual aspects of presidential [performance](#) and found that "when presidents perform public rituals, pictures matter far more than what is actually said."

"The public expects much more of a president than the Constitution actually allows the president to do," said Howell, the Sydney Stein Professor of American Politics at the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy. "Much more than just the text of a speech, a president uses the symbolism and ritual of grand public performances to show the country that he is indeed at the center of the political universe and worthy of their trust—and it works."

The new study shows that individuals who watch events such as a [presidential inauguration](#) or State of the Union address have a more favorable impression of a president's ability to govern than those who do not, even among those who disagree with the president's policy goals.

"While some look for policy prescriptions at the State of the Union Address, most Americans instead see the president flanked by governmental elites, with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Supreme Court surrounding him," Howell said. "They see a commanding presence that is, at least for the moment, completely in control of the political world."

Howell and his coauthors directed a random sample of individuals to watch the 2017 inauguration of President Donald Trump and the president's speech to a joint session of Congress. As a control, they also directed a group of individuals to watch an unrelated event on television.

The research shows that:

- Members of the public who watched the two events were more likely to say that Trump "fulfills the obligations, expectations and norms of his office."
- The most educated and well-informed viewers were the most likely to be affected by the imagery.
- Of those who viewed Trump more favorably after watching these addresses, those who initially reported low ratings for Trump had the largest positive change.
- The visual elements of political performance leave larger impressions than the content of the speech.

Howell and his coauthors conclude that the visual trappings of the presidency allow the president to convince the public that they are indeed "presidential." While public appeals on policy topics have little impact on American's [policy](#) views, they can alter the public's view of the president himself as more fitting for the office he holds.

Howell, chair of the Department of Political Science, is the author of many books on the presidency, including most recently *Relic: How Our*

Constitution Undermines Effective Government—and Why We Need a More Powerful Presidency (2016).

Provided by University of Chicago

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