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ARTICLE

One President at a Time? How the President-Elect Shapes U.S. Foreign Policy during the Transition

JEFFREY H. MICHAELS and ANDREW PAYNE

Over the past six decades, the presidential transition scholarship has grown increasingly rich, yet little systematic attention has been paid to the foreign policy activities of the president-elect. The idea that the United States has "one president at a time" may be a constitutional reality, but it is also a political fiction, more honored in the breach than in the observance. This article demonstrates how U.S. foreign policy operates along several simultaneous tracks during the formal transition period between the election and inauguration. We develop and illustrate a new framework for understanding the underexplored role and significance of the president-elect as a foreign policy actor during the era of the "modern presidency." By refuting the notion that the president-elect is a nonentity, this article lays the foundation for more active exploration of the foreign activities of presidents-elect and their impact on U.S. foreign policy.

Introduction

In December 2016, Congressman Jared Huffman introduced legislation that would amend the 1799 Logan Act prohibiting private citizens from engaging in

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unauthorized diplomatic activities on behalf of the United States. Under the proposed "One President at a Time Act," a clarification to the earlier law would be issued, confirming that its provisions also apply to incoming presidents. Huffman emphasized that "only the President, not the President-elect who is fresh off the campaign trail and not yet in office, has the authority to make critical foreign policy decisions that impact America's safety, economy, and global standing" (Huffman 2016). Reflecting widespread alarm at Donald Trump's intervention on foreign policy issues—including his opposition to a pending UN resolution condemning the construction of Israeli settlements (Trump 2016), his suggestion that British politician Nigel Farage be appointed UK ambassador to the United States (Woolf and Elgot 2016), his phone call to the president of Taiwan (Gearan, Rucker, and Denyer 2016), as well as phoning several autocratic leaders prior to calling democratic allies (Wintour 2016)—the bill was designed to preserve what its author and many others considered a long-standing norm in presidential politics. "In the past," explained Huffman, "president-elects [sic] have shown good judgment and restraint in understanding that our duly elected officials need to conduct foreign policy while they're in office." Trump's highly controversial public statements and tweets were now threatening to shatter that ostensible norm. "We've never had a president-elect with such impulse control problems," concluded Huffman (in Sarlin 2016).

If Trump's subsequent record remains littered with challenges to many prevailing norms of appropriate presidential behavior, including his reluctance to accept the results of the 2020 election, this article demonstrates that his actions four years earlier did not in fact stray as far from past precedent as his critics might wish to admit. Much like the notion that "politics stops at the water's edge," the suggestion that the United States has "one president at a time" is a conceit, frequently invoked for rhetorical expediency while obscuring the reality that presidential transitions are a period in which two sets of hands steer the ship of American diplomacy. After winning an election, an incoming president may lack the formal constitutional powers of the office they are due to assume, but their informal power and authority grow stronger with every passing day. This political reality is readily understood by the presidents-elect themselves, as well as their staffs, the sitting president, and foreign governments, each of whom have incentives to harness or influence the exercise of that power. Yet, despite significant media interest in the diplomatic activities of the new president immediately after the election—such as his or her communications with world leaders, as well as foreign government efforts to engage with the incoming administration and shape their agenda—this aspect of the period covering the election outcome through the inauguration constitutes an important gap in the scholarly literature on presidential transitions. The precise nature and relative importance of the president-elect as a foreign policy actor also remains curiously understudied and almost entirely divorced from wider debates about U.S. foreign policy.

This article addresses this gap, offering a new framework for understanding the president-elect's foreign policy role during the era of the "modern presidency," which we have defined, similar to other studies including American presidents from Franklin Delano Roosevelt through to the present day (Neustadt 1991). In doing so, we refute the implicit notion that the president-elect is a nonentity and lay the foundation for

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more active exploration of the foreign activities of presidents-elect and their consequences for U.S. foreign policy. Drawing on a range of archival documents, contemporary newspaper accounts, and other firsthand records, we argue that U.S. foreign policy during the transition operates along several simultaneous tracks, with the outgoing president and the president-elect pursuing their separate policies, and both also pursuing joint policies, while foreign governments seek to navigate the substantive and procedural challenges associated with this cyclical interruption in the American political system.

In focusing on the foreign policy dynamics of the transition period, this article aims to make a number of contributions to broader debates concerning U.S. foreign policy. If we can demonstrate that the president-elect plays a significant role in influencing foreign policy, we must question whether the conventional starting point for analysis of each administration's record—following the inauguration—gives an incomplete, if not misleading account. What decisions do standard analyses miss by failing to examine this earlier pre-presidential period of policy making? How does the communication between an incoming administration and foreign governments shape the nature of future diplomatic relationships? In shedding light on these questions, the framework we offer below also challenges us to think again about how a new president's relative inexperience can shape policy even before inauguration (Potter 2007; Saunders 2017), as well as how transitional advisory structures unsettle traditional understandings of the role of bureaucratic drivers of foreign policy (Allison and Halperin 1972). More generally, we add to a growing number of studies examining the issue of periodicity in presidential decision making and the influence of the electoral cycle on foreign policy (Armacost 2015; Fawcett and Payne 2022; Payne 2019/20; Quandt 1986).

The article proceeds as follows. First, we offer a brief survey of the existing scholarship on presidential transitions and justify our focus on the "formal" transition period. Second, we outline the ways in which the president-elect constitutes a significant foreign policy actor whose activities require more scrutiny than scholars have given hitherto. Third, we assess how these activities interact with those of the incumbent, examining the ways in which the sitting president may seek to harness the informal power of the president-elect, as well as the reasons why they may be more or less successful in doing so. Finally, we explore the impact of the incoming president's words and deeds overseas, highlighting the degree to which perceptions of an incoming administration's policy intentions shape the broader diplomatic environment in which a new president operates.

Presidential Transitions and U.S. Foreign Policy

The study of presidential transitions is notable for its uneven development, marked by stretches of apparent neglect and punctuated with predictable spikes of interest every four years. As each administration hands over to another, a flurry of

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articles and books appear, offering after-action reports of the effort that has just taken place (Burke 2004, 2009, 2018; Kumar 2009, 2015, 2021). Often written by or for career officials seeking a practical guide to the pitfalls associated with the handover of authority between administrations, the cumulative knowledge contained in these studies has become formidable over time. This has allowed for nuanced comparison across cases and the development and refinement of criteria that future transition planners should heed in order to ensure the next administration is set up for success come January 20 (Burke 2000, 2008; Clinton and Lang 1993; Eskerowicz and Hastedt 1998; Henry 1960; Jones 1998; Kumar, Edwards, and Pfiffner 2000; Pfiffner 1996).

Yet while some accounts have placed specific cases into their wider historical context (Brauer 1986; Shaw 2018), few have paid particular attention to the foreign policy components of the transition. Among those that have (Campbell and Steinberg 2008; Kumar 2013; Mosher, Clinton, and Lang 1987; Rollins 2012), the focus remains largely on the nuts and bolts of the transition process—how and when to recruit key members of the incoming national security team, establish decision-making structures, and coordinate intelligence briefings—rather than the substance of foreign policy activities that take place during the transition. In other words, they have little to say about the content, direction, formulation, execution, scope, and purpose of these activities. In contrast to mainstream studies of U.S. foreign policy, which discuss the relative importance of different institutions—the president, bureaucracy, Congress, and so on—in the making of policy, no such detailed analysis exists for the president-elect.

To the extent scholars have attempted to unpack the international implications of the transfer of American power, they typically do so by adopting a far broader definition of the transition itself than that which this article embraces. As Richard Neustadt (1991, 240) noted, a presidential transition can be defined in two ways: “narrowly by the time-span between election and inaugural, broadly by the time until he and his principal associates become familiar with the work they have to do.” While the prevalence of this broad definition in many studies permits robust analysis of the frequent troubles experienced by new presidents in their first few months in office (Campbell and Steinberg 2008; Friedman 2011), we suggest that it obscures several unique foreign policy dynamics associated with the shorter, “formal” transition period.

After all, it is only during the formal transition that the principle of “one president at a time” is seriously called into question, with the president-in-waiting vested with sufficient political influence to rival the incumbent's authority in foreign affairs but still lacking any constitutional authority over the levers of official power. While scholars have explored the implications of this natural power shift for the policy aspirations and incentive structures facing “lame duck” presidents (Howell and Mayer 2005; Potter 2016), the agency of presidents-elect has received scant attention. Yet if “the influence of the sitting president begins to leak like a balloon” during this period (Pfiffner 1996, 5), it stands to reason that the incoming president can play a role in either repairing or puncturing the balloon. Unlike prior to the election, foreign governments during the transition are faced with a new sense of certainty as to the identity of the next president, though not necessarily of the incoming administration's

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intentions (Clinton and Lang 1993, 21). Wishing to develop a good relationship with the new administration and refrain from taking actions that might prove detrimental to that ambition, some form of outreach is often attempted prior to the inauguration in order to reduce uncertainty about future bilateral relations. Yet, ambiguity as to exactly who makes foreign policy in the incoming administration and thus represents the president-elect's policy preferences and is authorized to speak on their behalf presents considerable opportunity for miscommunication and miscalculation. During this period, allies will wish to be reassured of the continuity of essential U.S. policies. Adversaries, moreover, may seek to take advantage of this situation and precipitate an international crisis.[1] While crises early in a new president's term are commonly framed as "tests" of a young administration, acute security threats arising during the interregnum present a distinct kind of challenge, testing the coordination between an experienced but weak outgoing president and a successor who will likely inherit responsibility for the aftermath of any decisions taken. It is not without reason that one scholar recently observed that "the presidential transition is among the least studied moments of potential mayhem in the US political system" (Naftali 2020).

There are also distinct legal considerations associated with the formal transition. While a newly inaugurated president may struggle to get up to speed in his early months in office, he is at least constitutionally responsible for any diplomatic commitments made during that period, unlike the briefer window preceding his swearing in. That being said, although many presidents-elect have referred to themselves as "private citizens" prior to taking office, they nevertheless possess "quasi-executive authority" (Zoffer 2020). As Zoffer (2020, 2506) argues, the president-elect and his team constitute a "special government branch" or "special" White House, and they are able to wield "quasi-executive powers." Precisely because of this "quasi" status, the activities of the president-elect are effectively lawless, with no accountability or oversight despite the Logan Act proscribing foreign policy making by private citizens. Zoffer also distinguishes between formal and informal foreign policy power that "can allow Presidents-elect to overrule the wishes of sitting Presidents or force Presidents to act as quasi-agents of Presidents-elect in pursuing their own agenda" (Zoffer 2020, 2514). Thus, the president's constitutionally vested authority as the "sole mouthpiece" expressing the position of the nation in foreign affairs is called into question.

Legal scholars have noted that the U.S. Constitution's Article II, Section 1 vests executive power in "a President" and that the Twentieth Amendment reaffirms two presidents cannot serve simultaneously. These scholars have also referred to the "sole organ" doctrine in which the president is the "sole representative with foreign nations" (Fisher 2006). In practice, however, other nations look to the incoming president rather than the incumbent and are reluctant to wait for the formal transition of power (Beermann and Marshall 2006, 1281). A president-elect can also compete with the constitutional authority vested in the president. Trump's phone call with the Taiwanese

1. Paper prepared by Charles Burton Marshall and John H. Ferguson of the Policy Planning Staff, November 14, 1952, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), *1952--1954*, Vol. I, Document 7. All volumes of *FRUS* cited below are available at https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments.

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president not only caused diplomatic complications due to the vexed question of recognition as a result of the 1979 U.S.-P.R.C. Joint Communiqué, which limited the United States only to "cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan,"[2] but also arguably intruded on the president's authority under Article II, Section 3 to "receive Ambassadors and other public Ministers," as this function implies the authority to recognize foreign governments.

The anomalous legal status of a president-elect is exacerbated by the presence of a coterie of unelected foreign policy advisers who tend to handle the incoming president's diplomatic relations. These include prominent individuals nominated but not yet confirmed by the Senate to serve in cabinet positions, such as the secretary of state-designate, as well as a small army of foreign policy experts who by virtue of their earlier experience as former officials, think tank experts, international lawyers, business executives and so on, often have preexisting connections with foreign officials—and their lobbyists (Meyer and Thompson 2021). During the 2020 election alone, then-candidate Joe Biden had a foreign policy and national security team consisting of some 2,000 experts divided into 20 working groups (Lynch, Gramer, and Palder 2020). Given the limited amount of attention the president-elect can dedicate to foreign policy, or the degree to which he wishes to actively engage in diplomatic interactions with foreign governments that might prove highly controversial, it is these foreign policy advisers who are often delegated this task. Yet whereas foreign governments will try to develop links with these experts on the assumption that they will play an important future policy-making role after the inauguration, if not during the transition itself, scholars have paid them little heed. Unlike the postinaugural period, then, the window between an election and a new president's assumption of office constitutes a period of limited accountability, an absence of protocol, but with a great deal of diplomatic activity occurring on multiple levels.

Beyond the legality and appropriateness of a president-elect's diplomatic activities, there is another aspect of this position that has direct relevance for U.S. foreign policy—that of "agenda setter." An extensive literature exists dealing with the president's role as "agenda setter" (Andrade and Young 1996; Cohen 1995; Peake 2001; Wood and Peake 1998), but apart from some limited exceptions (Crothers 1994), this scholarship does not extend to the president-elect. In simple terms, an American president's voice is a loud one, or as Cohen (1995, 89) puts it, "No other politician or office is accorded such a role; none can compete effectively with the president in terms of prestige, status, media access, public attention and interest." When a president prioritizes a policy problem or frames it in a certain way, particularly in his public rhetoric, the public and foreign governments take notice. According to Henkin (1975, 49), "The President surely 'makes foreign policy' … when he declares the attitudes and intentions of the United States in matters that concern other nations…. It is foreign policy when Presidents encourage or discourage other governments, or assert displeasure or concern about their policies or actions."

2. Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (Normalization Communiqué), January 1, 1979, https://www.ait.org.tw/our-relationship/policy-history/key-u-s-foreign-policy-documents-region/u-s-prc-joint-communique-1979/.

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We argue the same principle also holds true for the president-elect. Despite being denied constitutional authority, the president-elect derives considerable attention, and hence informal power, from the simple fact that he will soon occupy the presidency. In this sense, during the transition period, the president-elect competes with the president as the key U.S. foreign policy agenda setter, with the president-elect becoming more powerful as the inauguration approaches. What the president-elect says, how he frames particular issues, what he chooses to do on his own or in conjunction with the incumbent president, or what he chooses *not to do* can all have implications for the foreign policy of the incumbent's administration. For instance, in his phone call with Japanese prime minister Yoshihide Suga, President-elect Biden reaffirmed U.S. defense commitments, including to the disputed Senkaku islands (Harding and Savstopulo 2020). In his phone call with the NATO secretary general, Biden (2020) also reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. More generally, Biden's phone calls with foreign leaders emphasized the importance of tackling climate change. In each of these cases, Biden signaled commitments that were widely interpreted as being at odds with the incumbent administration's policies.

As we will highlight in the next section, a president-elect's unwillingness to publicly support the incumbent on a particular issue can effectively amount to deliberate sabotage of the president's foreign policy. On the other hand, it is worth noting that because the sitting president retains formal powers until the inauguration, the president-elect will be cognizant of the possibility that the outgoing president may take actions that will sabotage the agenda of the incoming administration. For instance, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo took a number of actions shortly before leaving his post—for example, relisting Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism, imposing new sanctions on Iran, and recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara—that were interpreted as deliberate efforts to undermine the Biden administration's foreign policy (DeYoung 2021). In addition, Trump's decision to reduce the number of troops in Afghanistan to 2,500, while not inconsistent with Biden's stated intention to end the war, did at least narrow the options available to him upon assuming office—and might have done even more had a signed presidential memorandum ordering a complete withdrawal not been resisted by advisers (Woodward and Costa 2021, 156–58). This was not the first time that major decisions on troop deployments have taken place during the transition, of course, with George H. W. Bush's announcement that he would dispatch almost 30,000 troops to Somalia in 1992 as another striking example. It is thus in the interests of the president-elect to maintain good relations with the outgoing president, although this may not always be possible, as was clearly demonstrated during the Biden transition. As will be shown, many earlier transitions were also problematic, even if not to the same degree.

In terms of the scope of our study, we have mainly limited ourselves to the era of the "modern presidency," allowing us to isolate a distinct period in which the scale and complexity of the transition process have undergone significant change.[3] The 11-week

3. We exclude from our analysis those presidents who assumed office following the death or resignation of their predecessor, in light of the absence of any formal transition period in such instances.

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interregnum itself was a product of the Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution in 1933. Prior to this, as Henry (1960, 190) notes, "most persons considered it inappropriate for the two men to pay any heed to the other's existence or to make any statement or take any actions that might embarrass the other." Indeed, there was precious little coordination during the first cross-party transition in U.S. history, when John Adams chose to depart Washington on a horse-drawn carriage before dawn on March 4, 1801, to avoid even seeing his successor, Thomas Jefferson, being inaugurated (Georgini 2020).

Besides changing political norms, a series of pragmatic innovations and legal reforms have encouraged greater coordination between incoming and outgoing administrations, from Harry Truman beginning the tradition of providing intelligence briefings to candidates and presidents-elect in 1952 (Helgerson 2021) to the passing into law of the Presidential Transition Act of 1963, alongside several amendments passed in the six decades since (Hogue 2020; Kumar 2021). The value of these latter reforms has sometimes been questioned, including by the head of the very transition that set the process in motion, who later regretted the "useless commotion" generated by "The Transition," which had become "a seventy-day monster that springs up overnight once every four years, has no purpose except its own existence, feuds with itself, and then suddenly disappears on January 20, leaving behind nothing except empty cardboard boxes" (Clifford 1991, 328). By contrast, analysts have more recently credited the robustness of these legal provisions as a key factor explaining how new presidents may be able to get off to a productive start despite unprecedented attempts by the sitting president to obstruct the transition of power (Kumar 2021, 593–604). In some ways, it is precisely the scale of these changes that warrants the particular attention given by much existing scholarship, while our interest in this period is further justified by the more prominent role the United States played in global affairs relative to before the Second World War,[4] as well as other developments, such as the increasing sophistication of international communications, that are directly relevant to this issue.

To be clear, our focus on the "modern presidency" should in no way be meant to convey the impression that the United States was an unimportant international player before 1932, nor that the transitions of presidents-elect during the "pre-modern" presidency period were devoid of foreign policy activity. In fact, the president-elect who traveled to the most foreign countries during the transition period was Herbert Hoover, whose "good will" tour of Latin America in November–December 1928 encompassed 10 countries. Presidents-elect William Howard Taft and Warren G. Harding visited the Panama Canal, and similar to Hoover, traveled on U.S. Navy ships (Deconde 1950; Harding Inspects 1920;

4. The U.S. role in the 1932–1933 debt crisis serves as an exception, but one that nevertheless proves the rule. As Henry (1960, 190) notes, the "depression emergency" was critical to the change in custom of mutual ignorance among incoming and outgoing administrations. Hoover "shattered this precedent by inviting FDR to the White House to discuss pending international matters shortly after the election."

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Chavez 2021, 302–6). Prior to Taft, however, no president-elect had traveled abroad during the transition.[5]

The President-Elect as a Foreign Policy Actor

Having discussed several important gaps in studies of the transition period, we now turn our attention to the ways in which the president-elect constitutes a legitimate foreign policy actor on a par with other foreign policy actors. In theory, a president-elect should not be considered a foreign policy actor. After all, presidents-elect not only have no official power but also in key respects do not represent the U.S. government either. Admittedly, when it is in their interests to do so, they have occasionally served as "citizen diplomats" acting at the behest of the incumbent, but the president-elect's foreign policy role extends well beyond this type of diplomacy. It is the knowledge of their future power that has allowed presidents-elect to act and be treated *as if* they have power. Even though the power is informal, it is power that still has real consequences. Despite the fact that a president-elect can be identified as playing multiple foreign policy roles, when it comes to studies of U.S. foreign policy, the president-elect is not mentioned as a relevant actor, even in best-selling textbooks focusing on decision making and the domestic sources of foreign policy (Gvosdev, Blankshain, and Cooper 2019; McCormick 2018). If this absence from theories of U.S. foreign policy were reflected in practice, the president-elect would be effectively silent on matters of foreign policy, would not speak to foreign leaders, would not have subordinates meet with foreign officials, and so on. Although this might have been the norm for presidents in the pre-modern era of the presidency, it is a far cry from the practice of the "modern presidency."

As we will show, the perceived need to actively engage in foreign policy has been a constant feature of presidents-elect across the modern presidency. Moreover, we will consider ways in which presidents-elect can unwittingly engage in foreign policy. Put another way, we argue that the president-elect is both an active as well as a passive foreign policy actor—it is not only the president-elect who engages in foreign policy, but for many foreign governments he is identified as representing U.S. policy despite the lack of any constitutional authority. Thus, what the president-elect does or does not do in the foreign policy realm is still treated as meaningful. Every time the president-elect makes a public statement relevant to foreign policy, even if intended for a domestic audience, or repeats lines from his election campaign, he is sending signals about the future direction of U.S. foreign policy. Foreign governments, the media, policy analysts, and other international audiences will be watching his words carefully for clues about his administration's intentions, such as the substance, tone, and emphasis of his remarks, and may choose to assign greater weight to the foreign policy statements of the president-elect than those of the incumbent president.

5. Department of State, Office of the Historian, Travels Abroad of the President, https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/travels/president.

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Direct Communications with Foreign Leaders

A more straightforward approach to showcasing the active foreign policy role played by presidents-elect is to examine their direct communications with foreign leaders. In some rare instances, the president-elect may travel abroad during the transition. President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower traveled to South Korea in December 1952 amid ongoing hostilities, meeting with both military commanders as well as the South Korean leader Syngman Rhee. On the other hand, the choice to visit South Korea was also interpreted as a choice not to visit other countries. In this case, the Japanese government regretted that Eisenhower was not able to stop in Japan (Jorden 1952). In other cases, foreign leaders will seek an audience with the president-elect, but those who request meetings but are not received can feel insulted. As president-elect, Richard Nixon met with the Amir of Kuwait and Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan but not Iranian Prime Minister Amir-Abbas Hoveyda[6] or Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, with the latter conveying his hurt feelings to U.S. diplomatic interlocutors.[7] Although Hoveyda was unable to meet with Nixon, President Lyndon Johnson arranged instead for him to meet with Nixon's national security adviser-designate, Henry Kissinger, in the Oval Office.[8] Following Ronald Reagan's election, Israeli leader Menachem Begin sought a meeting with the president-elect, but this request was not granted on the grounds that Reagan would not be meeting with foreign leaders. When West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt was nevertheless able to secure a meeting with Reagan, this was negatively interpreted by Begin (Godsell 1980).

Indirect Communications with Foreign Leaders

Presidents-elect may seek to avoid the controversy associated with meeting foreign leaders by tasking lower-level officials to meet with them instead. On several occasions, the vice president-elect has traveled abroad during the transition, including Nixon traveling to Mexico in 1952 ("Nixon in Mexico City to See Inaugural" 1952) and Joe Biden visiting Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq in 2009 ("Vice-President-Elect Biden Arrives in Iraq" 2009). Shortly after Barack Obama was elected, many foreign leaders attending a G-20 summit in Washington, DC, wished to meet with the president-elect. Rather than attend the meeting himself, he dispatched former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former Republican Representative Jim Leach to meet with them (Charles 2008). Likewise, further meetings between Obama's foreign policy advisors occurred on the sidelines of the G-20 Summit. Among them was a meeting convened at the Brookings Institution between South Korean President Lee Myung-bak

6. Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Hart) to the Executive Secretary of the Department of State (Read), Washington, November 19, 1968, *FRUS*, *1964–1968*, Vol. XXII, Document 315.

7. Telegram from the Department of State to the U.S. Interests Section of the Spanish Embassy in the United Arab Republic, December 17, 1968, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. XX, Document 351.

8. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, December 5, 1968, *FRUS*, *1964–1968*, Vol. XXII, Document 321.

and several of Obama's foreign policy advisers, including Susan Rice, nominated by Obama shortly thereafter to be the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations (Kim 2008).

In some cases, a president-elect will dispatch emissaries to engage with foreign leaders overseas, such as President-elect Nixon's dispatch of Governor William W. Scranton to the Middle East or President-elect Jimmy Carter's choice of Governor Averell Harriman to engage with the Soviet leadership.[9] In other cases, the president-elect will meet with a foreign ambassador, such as when FDR met with the British ambassador, Sir Ronald Lindsay, to discuss the war debt crisis ("Roosevelt Moves for World Revival in Lindsay Parlay" 1933) or John F. Kennedy met with British Ambassador Sir Harold Caccia to discuss a post-inaugural meeting with Prime Minister Harold Macmillan ("Kennedy Invites Macmillan Talks" 1960). Presidents-elect and their representatives have also met, wittingly or unwittingly, with foreign intelligence officers. For instance, Robert F. Kennedy met with a KGB officer (posing as a journalist) in December 1960 (Naftali 2017), Kissinger maintained a back channel with Soviet intelligence officer Boris Sedov,[10] and Reagan met with the French intelligence chief, Count Alexandre de Marenches (Marenches and Andelman 1992). This particular set of back-channel relationships sometimes had unusual results. Kissinger's private relationship with the Soviets led to the crafting of Nixon's inauguration address in a way that would signal to the Soviet leadership that his administration sought a more positive relationship. Several weeks prior to the inauguration, Sedov told Kissinger that the Soviet Union was "very interested that the inaugural speech contain some reference to open channels of communication to Moscow."[11] As a result, Nixon's speech contained the following lines: "After a period of confrontation, we are entering an era of negotiation. Let all nations know that during this administration our lines of communication will be open" (Nixon 1969).

Substantive Implications of Pre-Presidential Communications

By establishing relationships with foreign states and clarifying intentions, the president-elect's foreign policy can help reduce the likelihood of foreign policy failures early on in the new administration. On the other hand, if handled inappropriately, it can lead to foreign policy problems. Given the protocol associations of alternative types of communication, those which are chosen or not chosen, and the timing, can have important foreign policy implications. For instance, a foreign leader who speaks directly with the president-elect is viewed as having a higher status than a foreign leader who receives a written message, and a leader who is called immediately after the election is viewed as having a higher status than one who is called later. After receiving an influx of

9. Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between W. Averell Harriman and Ambassador Dobrynin, Hobe Sound, Florida, November 19, 1976. National Security Archive, IV-230, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/carterbrezhnev/salt_ii_ebb.html.

10. Memorandum from Henry Kissinger to President-elect Nixon, December 18, 1968, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. XIV, Document 334.

11. Memorandum of Conversation, January 2, 1969, *FRUS, 1969–1976*, Vol. XII, Document 1.

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congratulatory messages, which foreign leaders should be given the privilege of a reply, by what means, and in what order? Actions may speak louder than words in international politics, but in a context in which a president-elect is constitutionally prohibited from acting, his words, the timing of those words, their form, and thei audience carry extra significance.

It is precisely for this reason that State Department officials are generally tasked with advising an incoming administration on such matters of diplomatic etiquette, though a successful candidate's inner circle may ultimately control access to the president, especially in the immediate aftermath of an election. In 1992, for instance, Clinton advisers preferred to let the president-elect sleep off his recent victory rather than answer congratulatory calls from the leaders of Russia, Britain, and Germany (Burke 2000, 358–59), whereas President-elect Trump took at least 32 calls with foreign leaders before consulting with the State Department, including one apparently arranged by a prominent lobbyist for Taiwan (Cotter 2017). These communication patterns have become the subject of routine scrutiny among analysts looking for clues of the incoming administration's intentions, and what the president-elect's statements reveal about the personal relationships likely to develop over the coming years (Borger 2021; Said-Moorhouse 2016). It is curious, then, that scholarly attention of such statements pales into insignificance compared with statements made while president. As George W. Bush's press secretary, Ari Fleischer (2010, 53), recalls, messaging during the transition is second only in importance to that of the presidency itself: "What you say as a candidate isn't as important as what you say as the nominee, which isn't as important as what you say as the President-elect, which isn't as important as what you say as President."

Several examples from Barack Obama's transition provide a useful illustration of how the order and content of pre-presidential communications shape perceptions of a president-elect's foreign policy priorities. In the Indian press, for instance, Obama was criticized for giving India short shrift by placing a call to the Pakistani president before the Indian prime minister (Cooper 2008). Curiously, whereas it might have been assumed that the president-elect would arrange an early phone call with the Iraqi prime minister, given that Obama came into office amid ongoing hostilities, he instead waited until December 3 (Shanker 2008). A five-minute courtesy call Obama held on November 8 with the Polish president, Lech Kaczynski, meanwhile, demonstrates how such routine correspondence can spark considerable diplomatic discord. According to Kaczynski, Obama promised to continue planning commenced under President Bush for a controversial missile defense system located in Poland and the Czech Republic. A statement followed by one Obama aide suggesting missile defense had been discussed in the call, but the aide denied that Obama had made any commitment (Bellantoni 2008).

Change over Time

One further aspect of the president-elect as foreign policy actor has to do with the evolution of the transition period and the transition team. While existing work has

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examined the role of transition teams in organizing the incoming foreign policy bureaucracy and planning the immediate actions a new administration intends to take upon assuming office (Kumar 2013, 2015, 171–248), there is still more we can learn about how, when, and to what effect officials represent the incoming administration's policies and preferences to foreign leaders during the transition itself. In some cases, the president-elect's team is particularly active immediately after the election, dealing with such matters as responding to foreign leaders' congratulatory messages and drafting policy papers, whereas in others, they only become more active closer to the inauguration. Over the course of the transition, the composition of the transition team will change in important ways. Immediately after the election, the president-elect's transition team will include members dealing with foreign policy matters who organize the communications with foreign leaders, advise on policy statements, and so forth, but typically several weeks or more will elapse before senior foreign policy officials of the new administration are designated, such as the secretary of state, secretary of defense, and national security advisor. When analyzing this period, it is essential not to assume that the transition bureaucracy is somehow immune from infighting. After all, the transition period is one in which advisors will be seeking jobs with the new administration, and competition will be intense. In this regard, the transition is a proving ground for aspiring policy makers. Not all the foreign policy advisors will be brought into the government after January 20. Indeed, shortly after Al Haig was nominated to be Reagan's secretary of state in December 1980, he fired virtually the entirety of the transition team that had been jostling for future jobs at Foggy Bottom (Harsch 1981). As the personalities involved shift, so too will the quality of interactions with foreign governments. Once a new secretary of state is designated, other governments will pay close attention to his or her statements and may seek to reach out directly to establish a relationship. Moreover, the choice of certain individuals for key positions can also be interpreted as having foreign policy relevance, as it may indicate the direction in which the new president wishes to take the country, especially if those individuals hold well-known views on particular issues.

The President-Elect's Foreign Policy Influence at Home

The ultimate source of a president-elect's foreign policy influence stems from a natural power shift that takes place during a transition. As an incumbent's days in office draw to a close, the reality that the resources notionally still at their disposal will soon be formally transferred to a successor steadily dawns. “For the outgoing,” recalls Henry Kissinger (1979, 18), the transition is thus a “somber time” in which “foreign governments go through the motions of diplomacy but reserve their best efforts and their real attention for the new teams.” After attempting in vain to lobby allies to endorse the European Defense Community (EDC) in 1952, Dean Acheson (1969, 708) similarly remembered how foreign representatives “treated us with the gentle and affectionate solicitude that one might show to the dying, but asked neither help nor advice nor commitment for a future we would not share with them.”

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Just as foreign governments recognize that the president's authority is slipping away, a similar view is held by the American foreign affairs bureaucracy. Awareness of the limited shelf life of the outgoing president's authority may lead officials to anticipate the preferences of the incoming administration, either to smooth the bureaucratic friction associated with an expected change of course or leverage a preferred position in internal debates. In 1952, for instance, the CIA was buoyed by the election of a president who seemed more favorable to the kind of covert operations it had been pressing the Truman administration to undertake in Guatemala. Having been forced by Secretary of State Dean Acheson to cancel one plot to topple the Arbenz government prior to the election, senior intelligence officials allowed elements of the plan to continue without State's knowledge during the transition, apparently in the hope that Eisenhower would breathe new life into the endeavor (Cullather 2006, 27–33). Later, in 1976, Henry Kissinger was particularly exercised about the prospect of diplomatic officials spending more time currying favor with incoming administration than implementing the policy of the outgoing one. The day after the election, he convened a meeting with senior officials in which he demanded that "the Foreign Service is to do its job carefully and with dignity in the period between now and January 20," rather than "go running around pushing their points of view and obviously looking for jobs" (FRUS, November 3, 1976).[12] His warning was apparently unheeded, however, with Kissinger (1979, 18) later regretting that "decisions of which officials disapprove will be delayed in implementation" during the transition. While "lame duck" presidents hoping to shore up their foreign policy legacies may be more active than is commonly assumed (Potter 2016), then, their ability to achieve meaningful and lasting successes is thus limited by the latent power possessed by the president-in-waiting.

"One American Voice": Co-Opting the Power of the President-Elect

In addressing this problem, lip service may continue to be paid to the "one president at a time" principle, but it is frequently considered more prudent to adopt an alternative principle that we refer to as "one American voice." Recognizing that authority does not dissipate entirely but rather transfers to one's successor, this entails an attempt by an outgoing president not to deny the agency of his successor but rather to harness it in such a way that preserves as much international credibility as possible. Incoming presidents are not blind to this tactic. As President-elect Nixon remarked in relation to President Johnson, "it would be very difficult for him to make any kind of an agreement on a major policy matter unless he could give assurance to the parties on the other side that it would be implemented by and respected by the next President" (cited in Henry 1969, 477). As we shall see, the incoming president's willingness to cooperate plays a critical role in determining the success of an incumbent's effort to promote "one American voice," with plenty of examples of misalignment.

12. Memorandum of Conversation, November 3, 1976, *FRUS, 1969–1976*, Vol. XXXVIII, Document 214.

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Direct Cooperation. The most obvious mechanism for co-opting the power of the president-elect is through direct requests for support. Until recently, meetings between the incoming and outgoing presidents had become "a ritual of American political life," as one observer put it (Armacost 2015, 141). Donald Trump's refusal to recognize Joe Biden as his legitimate successor aside, these formal occasions have indeed taken place with great regularity since Harry Truman invited Dwight Eisenhower to the White House in December 1952. Not all such audiences are cordial affairs—one participant considered Eisenhower to be "wary, withdrawn, and taciturn to the point of surliness" (Acheson 1969, 706). They also vary considerably in timing, frequency, and length. Obama met with Bush once, on November 10, the earliest such meeting in the history of the modern presidency (Burke 2009, 581), while Eisenhower met with Kennedy twice, fatefully leaving the most urgent policy considerations concerning Laos and Cuba for the second meeting on the eve of inauguration day.[13] Yet one constant feature of all these one-on-one meetings is the prominent position of foreign affairs on the agenda.

Crucially for the present discussion, these direct meetings are also viewed as a means of securing the president-elect's endorsement of a particular policy position favored by the incumbent. For instance, Truman's invitation to Eisenhower emphasized that while several "vital policy matters" were pending for his action, he "would prefer not to make firm decisions on these matters without your concurrence."[14] Among other items, Eisenhower's help was sought in defeating a draft UN resolution concerning the fate of prisoners of war amid ongoing hostilities in Korea. The outgoing administration physically handed the president-elect a draft statement endorsing the government's position during the meeting, commenting that any such public expression of support by Eisenhower "would be of the greatest possible assistance."[15] The president-elect declined to use the statement, but he did arrange for Senator Alexander Wiley, then serving as a delegate to the United Nations, to let it be known that Eisenhower favored the core principle of "non-forcible repatriation" at the heart of Truman's position.

Even before his customary audience with the incumbent, President-elect Nixon's assistance had been sought by President Johnson, who asked by telephone if his successor could arrange for an intermediary to advise the South Vietnamese ambassador that the U.S. government would "operate as one" concerning the peace talks underway in Paris. Pleading for his successor's support in pressuring the South Vietnamese to end their holdout from the negotiations, Johnson assured the president-elect that "I am not going to make any decision there that will adversely affect those people without talking to you."[16] The irony of the fact that Nixon had actively encouraged the South Vietnamese to stay away from the talks prior to the

13. Notes of Conversation between President-Elect Kennedy and President Eisenhower, January 19, 1961, *FRUS, 1961–1963*, Vol. XXIV, Document 7.

14. Telegram, Truman to Eisenhower, November 6, 1952. Papers as President of the United States, 1953–1961 (Ann Whitman File) (hereafter AWF), Name Series: Box 33, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas (hereafter DDEL).

15. Memorandum of Meeting at the White House between President Truman and General Eisenhower, November 18, 1952, AWF, Name Series: Box 33, DDEL.

16. Telephone Conversation between President Johnson and President-elect Nixon, November 8, 1968, *FRUS, 1954–1968*, Vol. VII, Document 207.

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election was not lost on Johnson's advisers. Recalling the president-elect's veneer of obeisance during the transition, Clark Clifford (1991, 604) wrote that Nixon's professed eagerness to present a united front came "from a man whose agents had sung the song of dissension to Saigon only a few days earlier." Indeed, just weeks after acceding to Johnson's request, Nixon secretly initiated his own exchange with Hanoi via a French intermediary, indicating his desire to engage in talks and welcoming a general presentation of the North Vietnamese position even prior to January 20.[17] Though Nixon's backchanneling ultimately came to nought, his case is a good illustration of the limits of coordination that can be achieved through direct contact between an outgoing president and his or her successor.

Indirect Cooperation. Personal animosity can impede the level of cooperation at the highest level, particularly in elections in which the president-elect's victory is seen as a repudiation of the incumbent's record. In such cases, a president-elect's latent foreign policy power may be tapped more fruitfully through intermediaries. Henry Stimson's role in breaking a deadlock between Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt is a classic example. After Hoover publicly released details of Roosevelt's refusal to cooperate in devising a mechanism for resolving the European debt crisis (Hoover 1932), the embittered outgoing president eventually agreed to authorize his secretary of state to act as liaison with the incoming team. By January, the president-elect had come to effectively exercise veto power over the sitting government's diplomatic statements, influencing both the frequency and form of the outgoing requests for repayments.[18] So successful was Stimson in this effort, having facilitated meetings between Roosevelt and British government representatives and even secured the president-elect's endorsement of the Hoover administration's policy toward Manchuria, that Roosevelt would quip that he and Stimson "do pretty good teamwork, don't we?" (Stimson 1947, 293).

Beneath the presidential level, indirect cooperation may also take place. A week before Barack Obama's inauguration, for instance, the outgoing and incoming national security advisers met to agree which upcoming decisions would be taken off the president-elect's plate and which might be delayed until the new administration was in place. Among the latter were substantial items such as the announcement of France's reintegration into NATO (Kumar 2015, 181). During Reagan's transition, the president-elect delegated authority to his incoming national security adviser, Richard Allen, to deal with a request by outgoing State Department officials for help in protecting a prominent South Korean opposition leader from execution. In the event, Allen brokered a deal with Seoul whereby the politician's life would be spared in exchange for a visit by South Korean president Chun Doo-hwan to Washington (Armacost 2015, 134–36).

17. Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to Secretary of State Rogers, January 31, 1969, *FRUS 1969–1976*, Vol. VI, Document 14.

18. See *FRUS, Diplomatic Papers, 1933, General*, Vol. I, Documents 656, 705, 708, 709.

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Drivers of Cooperation

The extent to which a president-elect is willing to cooperate with his successor depends on two key factors: the extent to which they see eye-to-eye over the policy issues at stake, and the degree to which cooperation with the outcoming administration serves the incoming president's political self-interest.

(Mis)alignment of Policy Preferences. The natural tendency of candidates to magnify their substantive disagreements with the incumbent administration during an election campaign makes a full unity of purpose relatively rare. Nevertheless, some opportunities have arisen. For instance, after Kissinger helped set the United States on a path toward the normalization of relations with China under Nixon and Ford, Jimmy Carter was disinclined to disrupt that process. Having pledged "a substantial amount of continuity" in foreign policy (Gwertzman 1976), Carter heeded his advisers' recommendations to seek an opportunity to reaffirm the Shanghai Communiqué of 1972. In a lunch meeting arranged by Kissinger, Secretary of State-designate Cyrus Vance duly assured the Chinese ambassador of the incoming administration's commitment to the Communiqué, which he described as "the guiding principle which should govern our bilateral relations" (Vance 1983, 75).[19] Similarly, in January 1977, an unprecedented meeting between the Soviet ambassador and both the incoming and outgoing secretaries of state helped smooth communication between the Carter White House and the Politburo (Dobrynin 1995, 380–81).

In some cases, presidents have set aside their differences over the manifestation of a problem in order to work together to resolve them during the transition. Nixon's outreach to the South Vietnamese falls into this category, as do Ronald Reagan's exhortations to the Iranians to abide by the terms of a deal offered by the outgoing administration during the hostage crisis (Armacost 2015, 136–67). In other cases, developments during the transition have brought both parties into alignment on a policy issue that once divided them. Alarmed by the number of Haitians heading toward the United States on rickety boats, Bill Clinton announced that he would continue the Bush administration's policy of intercepting and returning those seeking refuge (Clinton 2004, 463–64) in what observers recognized to be his "first foreign policy action" (Sciolino 1993). Clinton's reversal was likely facilitated by the provision of briefings on the issue by outgoing staff, who had been instructed by Bush to "be helpful and leave no ticking time bombs for the incoming Clinton administration" (Kumar 2021, 604).

For each such example of apparent unity of purpose, however, there are plenty more instances in which the president-elect's foreign policy proceeded along an altogether different track. Eager to "hit the ground running," incoming administrations often use the interregnum to put foreign governments on notice about pending shifts in U.S. policy. Vice President-elect Biden's trip to the Middle East and Central Asia, for instance, was clearly designed to signal to allies that a new era of U.S. foreign policy

19. Memorandum of Conversation, January 8, 1977, *FRUS*, *1977–1980*, Vol. XIII, Document 2.

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toward the region had dawned. Biden made clear to Afghan officials that continued U.S. support would soon become conditional. President-elect Obama wanted to establish "a new contract" with Afghanistan, he recalled telling President Karzai, but warned, "if the Afghan government failed to effectively address key problems, such as poor governance, poppy cultivation, and corruption, it would be difficult to retain the strong U.S. public support necessary to continue large-scale assistance to Afghanistan" (Biden 2009).

While Biden's role as the outgoing chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee afforded him the ability to issue such signals with a veneer of legitimate authority, we have already seen plenty of other examples of presidents-elect using back channels and intermediaries to circumnavigate the legal and ethical prohibitions on premature diplomatic activity. An additional challenge in such cases, of course, is the risk that the go-betweens stray "off-message." William Scranton's intimation that the Nixon administration would pursue a more "even-handed" approach to the Middle East left the president-elect scrambling to calm a brewing diplomatic storm after questions were raised about what such a policy meant for Nixon's support for Israel (Kissinger 1979, 50–51). The sprawling nature of modern transition teams presents even greater risk that policy disagreements between incoming and outgoing administrations can make it difficult for the incumbent to pursue a coherent approach. For instance, comments made by members of Reagan's State Department transition team about the new administration planning a "fundamental change of course" away from the Carter administration's emphasis on human rights were slammed by Carter officials as an effort to undermine the sitting government's policy by encouraging rightist forces seeking to establish military dictatorships in Latin America (Goshko 1980a, 1980b).

In extreme cases of misalignment over policy, presidents-elect may go beyond signaling and instead actively seek to undermine initiatives pursued by the incumbent. Nixon's successful attempt to thwart the outgoing Johnson administration's hopes for a summit meeting with the Soviet Union qualifies as perhaps the most transparent and well-documented instance of this kind of sabotage. Skeptical of the value of any summit, which would only serve to tie the incoming administration's hands in any future arms control negotiation and limit the president-elect's ability to craft a new policy of "linkage," Nixon worked strenuously through back channels to signal his dissatisfaction to the Soviets (Dobrynin 1995, 187; Nixon 1978, 345–47). In one such exchange, Kissinger informed Sedov that the president-elect considered the summit to amount to "propaganda to embarrass the new Administration." As such, the USSR's response to any invitation Johnson might send would be seen as a "crucial test of Soviet intentions to improve relations with the US." If they accepted, cautioned Kissinger, "the Nixon administration will be forced to make it clear that we will not be boxed in."[20] The summit idea duly died, with Johnson complaining that Nixon's team had "thrown a wrench into SALT."[21]

20. Memorandum from Henry Kissinger to President-elect Nixon, December 18, 1968, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. XIV, Document 335.

21. See Editorial Note, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. VII, Document 275.

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(Mis)alignment of Political Interests. The president-elect's willingness to cooperate with the incumbent is also profoundly shaped by the relative alignment of their political interests. While a departing administration retains the authority of the office, the incoming administration has the benefit of an electoral mandate. As Clinton and Lang (1993, 6) observe, “one will jealously guard its authority, the other its mandate; each instinctively resents and resists the encroachments of the other.” Beyond functional considerations, of course, there are more personal political motivations in play. In the twilight phase of their administration, “lame duck” presidents will typically be hoping to burnish their foreign policy legacy, whether through launching last-minute bids for signature accomplishments or delaying decisions on thorny challenges that might damage an already robust record. By contrast, an incoming administration is likely to be skeptical of any perceived attempt to co-opt the agency of the president-elect, preferring to preserve their room for maneuver while seeking to claim maximum credit for any quick “wins” that might be achieved at the outset of their own term in office.

Particularly during transitions between parties, a sentiment can develop among an incoming team that the election vindicated their view that everything their predecessors did was wrong. “If this means, as it often does, that they must reinvent the wheel,” notes Mosher, Clinton, and Lang (1987, 71), “they are confident that their wheel will roll with less friction than the older one.” Perhaps this explains the limited contact between Dean Acheson and Secretary of State-designate John Foster Dulles during the Truman–Eisenhower transition. Other than two meetings between the pair, Acheson had no further contact with the incoming team, while Eisenhower designated just two men to represent him across all other issues, an arrangement the outgoing secretary considered “so fantastic a misconception of the problem as to be ludicrous” (Acheson 1969, 707).

Indeed, the net result of these often conflicting political interests tends to be a rather cagey approach to policy coordination during the transition. Even in cases where policy preferences broadly align, cooperation in the spirit of “one American voice” can be limited and grudging. It was precisely this difficulty in reconciling competing political priorities that made mediating between Hoover and Roosevelt such a “ticklish task” for Henry Stimson (1947, 293). And it was why Henry Kissinger agonized about the wisdom of providing briefing papers for the incoming team, reasoning that since they would likely ignore them, as he had eight years earlier, all they would do is leave a politically damaging paper trail that could be used against him.[22]

While a confluence of factors may determine the exact character and degree of cooperation between an incoming and outgoing administration, one theme common to all the examples highlighted in this section is the significant influence held by the president-elect to shape and constrain the foreign policy of the United States. This power can be exercised directly or indirectly, implicitly or explicitly, and as a means of supporting the incumbent's policy preferences in line with the “one American voice” principle or opposing them in pursuit of a separate track. Until inauguration day,

22. Memorandum of Conversation, November 3, 1976, *FRUS, 1969–1976*, Vol. XXXVIII, Document 214.

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however, this influence rests on a perception rather than a reality of power. That perception is based not only on the recognition by an incumbent of the latent power of a successor to undermine their policies, but also on foreign governments' recognition of the president-elect as a meaningful foreign policy actor. It is to that outward-facing impact that we now turn.

The President-Elect's Influence Overseas

If the president-elect's role as a foreign policy actor were as insignificant as the "one president at a time" principle implies, we might expect foreign governments to focus limited attention on them, restricting contact to inconsequential courtesy calls while reserving matters of substance for the consideration of the sitting administration. This is not the case. In fact, election day represents something of a starter pistol for allies and adversaries alike to begin jockeying for the opportunity to engage with the president-elect. In their ubiquitous attempts to extract information, assurances, and even formal commitments, the behavior of foreign leaders clearly serves as a useful indicator of the significance of the president-elect's policy influence.

When Do Foreign Governments Engage with the President-Elect?

During an election campaign, it is of course routine for foreign governments to seek to ingratiate themselves with and learn more about the policies of opposition candidates. Though increasingly mindful of perceptions of foreign meddling after claims of Russian interference in the 2016 campaign, candidates are used to entertaining meeting requests from the diplomatic community gathered in Washington. In part, this simply has to do with the standard practices of seeking influence across the political aisle and keeping their own government informed about U.S. politics, especially as they will want to have ample warning of any major policy shifts and adapt to new U.S. priorities. Establishing contacts early on can help facilitate influence with the victorious candidate immediately after the election, for instance, when it comes to placing that country on the president-elect's priority list, and for the arranging of direct communications with that country's leader. And as other governments are also seeking influence, there are risks to waiting until after the election, much less after the inauguration (see Meyer 2005, 140–54).

A quaitative distinction may be made, however, between a foreign government's interest in and engagement with the president-elect as opposed to the presidential candidate. This should be unsurprising. After all, becoming too closely associated with a presidential candidate can risk alienating his or her opponent, who might become (or remain) the U.S. president. By contrast, the certainty resulting from the election leads foreign countries to increase their engagement activities with the successful candidate and the advisers around them, many of whom are likely to occupy positions in the next administration. Although they will continue to maintain formal relations with the

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sitting president, it will be apparent that a power shift has already occurred immediately post-election rather than post-inauguration, and their diplomacy will be adjusted accordingly. It is better to get onto the new administration's agenda and shape political relations at an early stage when the incoming administration's advisers are still formulating policies rather than waiting until after the inauguration when there is a higher risk that the policies have already been set. Put simply, then, although there is no *de jure* recognition that the president-elect represents the U.S. government, there is nevertheless a *de facto* recognition that prior to the inauguration the president-elect is the more important figure in American politics than the sitting president, and will often be treated as such by other governments.

The diplomatic etiquette concerning the exact timing of any outreach to a president-elect is often more complex than might be imagined. During the 2000 presidential election, George W. Bush was prematurely congratulated by many foreign governments only to have those congratulations retracted shortly thereafter ("World Leaders Prematurely Congratulate Bush" 2000). More recently, Donald Trump's unwillingness to concede created additional complications and raised questions about the appropriate time to formally recognize the winner of the election. For example, Trump resented foreign leaders, including close allies such as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who recognized Joe Biden as the new president (Associated Press 2021). Among the consequences of this unprecedented situation was that some governments were initially reluctant to recognize Biden's victory (Taylor and O'Grady 2020), and the State Department avoided providing assistance with Biden's communications with foreign leaders (Hannon 2020). Four years earlier, the undisciplined nature of the Trump transition effort resulted in allies being dislodged from their traditional place on the "early phone calls" list. The British ambassador at that time was left to improvise a line of communication to Trump Tower, only to be pipped to the post by the Australian ambassador, who had obtained Trump's cell phone number through Greg Norman, Australia's top golfer, who happened to have played several rounds with the president-elect (Darroch 2020, 109–11).

How Do Foreign Governments Engage with the President-Elect?

The most common form of communication employed by foreign governments seeking to reach the president-elect is a congratulatory phone call. While these calls may at first glance seem substantively anodyne, they can carry significant implications for foreign policy. Foreign governments certainly see intrinsic value in their position in the president's call log. Sinking to ninth in line as a result of Trump's disorganization in 2016 was a grave disappointment to the British government, for instance, with the ambassador later recalling how the delay had triggered a "Whitehall meltdown" over the "presentationally important, and symbolic" first transatlantic call between the prime minister and the president-elect (Darroch 2020, 109).

Phone calls are only one means of reaching the president-elect, however. Historically, of course, technological developments dictated the reliance on diplomatic

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telegrams, and foreign leaders have relied on written correspondence to convey more significant messages. In 1960, for instance, Harold Macmillan agonized for several days over how to pitch his reply to John F. Kennedy's offer of a post-inaugural meeting. Anxious to impress upon the president-elect that the British prime minister still had "young and fresh thoughts" despite his advancing years, Macmillan figured a letter "*must* interest him and put one or two exciting ideas - yet it must not be pompous, or lecturing, or *too* radical!" (Macmillan 1972, 308–9). The result of several drafts was a somewhat fawning letter conveying the British position on general economic prosperity, overseas aid and trade, and disarmament (Macmillan 1972, 309–12). And of course it is not just U.S. allies who use letters during the transition to try to foment a personal relationship with the president-elect. According to Taubman (2003, 485–86), Nikita Khrushchev effectively besieged Kennedy with feelers and proposals. In addition to an official congratulatory message, Khrushchev dispatched numerous officials to make contact with key Kennedy aides. In 2008, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made headlines as the first Iranian president since the 1979 revolution to congratulate an American president on his victory, sending Obama a letter that was interpreted as a signal of willingness to engage in dialogue (Fathi 2008). In retrospect, Ahmadinejad's outreach was more successful than that of former Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who wrote a long letter to President-elect Eisenhower in 1953, expressing the hope that the next U.S. administration might come to support Tehran in its ongoing oil dispute with Britain, only to be deposed several months later by a coup authorized by Eisenhower.[23]

Securing a personal audience with the president-elect can be seen as the ultimate diplomatic coup during the transition. Personal meetings afford foreign leaders a rare opportunity to press their agenda one-on-one. Given the disinclination of some presidents-elect to meet with foreign governments prior to their inauguration, some have had to display creativity in their efforts to find time in the incoming president's schedule. After Woodrow Wilson chose Bermuda for his post-election vacation, for instance, the British government apparently arranged for the island's governor and the British ambassador—an old acquaintance of Wilson's—to visit the president-elect and lobby him (successfully) to oppose recent congressional legislation placing British ships at a disadvantage when traveling through the Panama Canal (Lawrence 1924, 65). More recently, Schmidt's meeting with Reagan upset some of the president-elect's aides, who felt the "crafty" Schmidt had made "blatant exploitation" of his courtesy visit to discuss policy matters, including the U.S. commitment to SALT (Pond 1980). And in 1953, Winston Churchill seems to have invited himself to a conference with Eisenhower, without a formal agenda but in the hope of strengthening the fledgling "special relationship." Eisenhower had in fact already passed word through Dulles to the British foreign minister in late November that he intended to "strengthen the intimate relations between the two countries" when in office ("Ike Reported to Have Pledged

23. Letter, Mossadegh to Eisenhower, January 9, 1953, in The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/exchange-messages-between-the-president-and-prime-minister-mossadegh-the-oil-situation-and.

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Eden Close U.S. Cooperation" 1952), but Churchill apparently wanted to hear such a pledge in person—and have the photos to show for it.

Deciding which representative of the foreign government should meet with the president-elect—or other high- and mid-level officials of the incoming administration—is another important consideration. Downing Street required a "cast-iron guarantee" that Boris Johnson would *not* meet with the president-elect before authorizing the then-foreign secretary's visit to the United States in mid-January 2017, in which he brushed off a haranguing by Jared Kushner for the British government's position on Israel's settlement policy and the Iran nuclear deal (Darroch 2020, 122–24). As this example highlights, it is often in meetings between individuals other than the president-elect that matters of greatest significance are discussed.

Why Do Foreign Governments Engage with the President-Elect?

Foreign governments have a multitude of reasons for reaching out to the president-elect. They may have an immediate concern in an ongoing international issue about which they desire U.S. support or counsel, as did the Polish government in seeking Obama's support for the missile defense system, the Germans in soliciting Reagan's commitment to arms control talks, and the Soviets in seeking to influence the content of Nixon's inaugural address. In fact, the Soviets were not the only ones to see the significance of influencing the president-elect prior to the inaugural address. During an extensive cabinet discussion in early 1933, British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald stressed the urgency of having Ambassador Lindsay confer with Roosevelt on the issue of war debts *prior* to the address, which he considered "a very important event in the life of a President."[24] In a subsequent meeting, the cabinet agreed on detailed instructions for their representative, offering guidance on how to frame his inaugural address and generally indicating a clear desire not merely to gauge the president-elect's views but to actively engage in negotiations over the substantive issues at stake.[25]

Alternatively, foreign governments may wish to influence the agenda of the incoming president in a more general way, pushing their interests to the top of an already crowded to-do list and highlighting the diplomatic value of good relations with their government. Even states with a more adversarial relationship with the United States see the transition as a moment in which a greater harmony of interests may be fostered. "What we really want," Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin thus told Secretary of State-designate James Baker in 1988, "is a meeting with George Bush. We're happy dealing with you guys. You are known quantities" (Baker 1995, 62–63). Just weeks later, Gorbachev would indeed meet with the president-elect in New York, with Bush recalling how the Soviet leader "was anxious to know what direction I planned to take regarding the Soviet Union" (Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 3), taking home a pledge from Bush for "general continuity with Reagan's policy" (Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 7).

24. Meeting of the Cabinet, January 30, 1933, CAB 23/75/5, National Archives, Kew, London.

25. Memoranda for Instructions to His Majesty's Ambassador at Washington, February 13, 1933, CAB 23/75/8, National Archives, Kew, London.

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Finally, foreign governments may wish to clarify or preempt indications of a pending shift in U.S. foreign policy. The Soviet Politburo issued detailed instructions governing its outreach efforts to President-elect Carter along these lines. Fearing that Carter would be influenced by "the general rightist trend in American public opinion" while devising his policy toward the Soviet Union, Foreign Minister Gromyko proposed that Dobrynin initiate contacts with the president-elect through Averell Harriman to get a better picture of his intentions (Dobrynin 1995, 378). In 1988, meanwhile, the Israelis floated vague references to a new Middle East peace plan, in what Secretary of State-designate Baker (1995, 118) understood to be "a preemptive peace-plan strike because they were uncertain about, and somewhat suspicious of, the President's intentions." Several election cycles earlier, in 1952, the British foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, was dispatched to meet with Eisenhower in large part to decipher the incoming president's position on the pending UN resolution concerning the Korean War, finding Eisenhower to be "helpful" yet "guarded," while noting widespread "irritation at the American constitution, which compelled the interregnum" between Truman and his successor (Eden 1960, 23). In private talks with him, another senior British diplomat observed that it was "rather like negotiating directly with George III" (Jebb 1972, 253–54). It was uncertainty about future U.S. policy that led the British and other Commonwealth nations to push forward a resolution that effectively tied Eisenhower's hands on the terms of the ceasefire that was eventually agreed upon. Eisenhower's case is in fact a striking one of the significance of what the president-elect does or does not say and do in shaping the perceptions of foreign governments. Though he made no commitment to escalate the war during the transition, his visit to Korea in December conveyed that impression to some foreign governments. Mao Zedong expressed as much in a cable to Joseph Stalin on December 17, expressing concern that Eisenhower was "currently carrying out preparations for military actions that will take place after he comes to power" (in Stanley 2009, 231).

Conclusion

Controversies over presidential authority during the transition period of the modern presidency have led American leaders to publicly reiterate time and again the notion of "one president at a time." Yet, as we have argued, this statement should be followed by the question: which one? In the realm of foreign policy, the transition represents a gray area—a finding that runs contrary to many existing theoretical assumptions but not existing practice. After all, how is it that an incoming administration possessing no legitimate authority can run what effectively amounts to a parallel foreign policy that, based on historical precedent, has often undermined the policies of the sitting government? In this article, we have presented extensive evidence across numerous administrations to demonstrate the blurred nature of foreign policy authority during the transition, and the ways in which foreign actors seek to shape their relations with the incoming administration and its impact on the sitting one.

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Our study opens up four important avenues of revision and inquiry. First, due to the lack of existing scholarship on how a president-elect shapes U.S. foreign policy, the literature on presidential transitions needs to focus more on this topic rather than limiting itself to the process and mechanisms of the transition. Second, the conventional understanding of the presidency as beginning with the inauguration, though understandable, requires tweaking. To put it bluntly, what goes on during the transition does not stay in the transition, but instead it carries over into the presidency. While the inauguration of a new president may provide a methodologically convenient means of identifying a change in the country's foreign policy agenda, this article suggests that beginning such analysis at that point may already be too late. This dynamic of a president's foreign policy has not been evaluated in any systematic way, but future studies should bear this in mind. Third, within the literature on U.S. foreign policy, the president-elect needs to be raised from the present status of non-entity to the status of a legitimate foreign policy actor, despite the relatively short and infrequent periods in which the "problem" of a president-elect exists. Once classed as a worthy object of study, more specific theoretical and empirical analyses can be pursued, to include fuller accounts of the formulation and execution of the foreign policies of individual presidents-elect, not only during the modern presidency but the premodern presidency as well. Finally, our findings should be of interest to legal scholars and legislators and can inform long-standing debates about shortening the transition period, giving the president-elect some degree of formal authority during the interregnum and ensuring appropriate oversight exists in this loophole of American foreign policy.

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