PERFORMANCE, THEATRICALITY, and the US PRESIDENCY

THE CURRENCY OF DISTRUST

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INTRODUCTION: OBAMA'S TEARS

On 6 January 2021, the United States Capitol was stormed by groups of far-right protestors contesting the legitimacy of Joe Biden's 2020 presidential election victory. Among the rioting groups were anti-government militias, white supremacists, and followers of QAnon, who believed that members of the Democratic Party were satanists engaged in the sex-trafficking of children. The storming of the Capitol forced lawmakers, who had been in the process of certifying the election results, to be evacuated from the House and Senate Chambers and to hide for hours in offices and safe rooms. The riot resulted in five deaths. Though the Capitol was eventually cleared of protestors, and Biden's victory confirmed later that evening, this was the first time that the seat of the legislative branch of the US federal government had been overtaken since the British invasion and the 'Burning of Washington' in 1814, which had also been the only time in US history that a foreign power occupied the nation's capital. President Donald Trump had for months insisted that the election held on 3 November 2020 had been stolen from him. Despite the decisive result that ultimately pitted 306 electoral votes for Biden against Trump's 232, at the time of writing, Trump has acknowledged only the need for an orderly transition of power, not his loss of the election. Encouraged by Trump's performances of anger and indignation at the supposedly stolen election, the rioters at the Capitol were convinced of the righteousness of their actions and seemingly unshakeable in the belief that American democracy had been fatally compromised and that their legislature could not be trusted. As such, the events of 6 January epitomise and brought to a dramatic climax the politics of distrust with which this book is concerned.

Though the chasm between different political views was made powerfully evident in the images of rampaging protestors carrying the lectern of the Speaker of the House of Representatives and waving the Confederate flag in the Capitol, distrust is a familiar and frequently recurring theme in US politics. The historian Richard Hofstadter's classic essay 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' ([1964] 2008) diagnosed distrust of the political establishment as a strong recurring tendency in American political life. Others have gone so far as to view antipolitical individualism as an innately American founding ideal, linked to the initial – and wildly inaccurate – perception of America as an 'empty' continent with such bountiful resources ripe for exploitation by European settlers that the need for structured political intervention in people's lives is obviated (Jaffe 1997). The popular appeal of the trope of the valiant and beleaguered outsider fighting against the powerful and corrupt political establishment had also been evident far earlier than the presidency of Donald Trump. It is the theme of Frank Capra's 1939 Hollywood classic *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, starring Jimmy Stewart as the eponymous Mr. Smith. In 1992, the businessman Ross Perot, a notable predecessor to Trumpism,[1] seemed for a time to be leading the three-way presidential race against Bill Clinton and President George H. W. Bush that would end with Clinton, who as Governor of Arkansas was himself something of a Washington outsider, being elected president. But whereas a generalised and diffuse suspicion of authority may be a perennial human and/or American tendency, conspiracy culture in the United States, as a 'default suspicion towards the authorities', gained particular, widespread currency over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, stimulated by the rise of the security state after the Second World War (the CIA was established in 1947) and by landmark events in twentieth-century political history like the Kennedy assassination and the Watergate scandal (Knight 2000). As the main theme of hit TV shows like Fox's *The X-Files* (1993–2002, revivals in 2008, 2016, and 2018), conspiracy thinking and distrust of the government morphed from the niche preoccupation described in Hofstadter's 'Paranoid Style' essay to become a more pervasive part of US culture during the 1990s.

According to the Pew Research Center, trust in the government has been at historic lows since Watergate (2015; see also 'Congress and the Public', n.d.). Trust can be defined as 'an individual's judgment that another person, whether acting as an individual, a member of a group, or within an institutional role, is both motivated and competent to act in the individual's interests and will do so without overseeing or monitoring' (Warren 2018, 75), and political trust more specifically as 'confidence in institutions such as the executive, the legislature, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, and the police' (Uslaner 2018, 4). Responding to declining levels of political trust internationally and in the United States in particular, there has been significant growth of research into political trust as an area of the larger field of political behaviour in recent years (Listhaug and

Jakobsen 2018, 573). Political trust is generally seen to be higher in the civil service and other supposedly 'neutral' institutions like the courts (though in the United States appointments to the Supreme Court and to a lesser extent other judgeships are increasingly politicised and thus struggle to be perceived as legitimate based on their supposed neutrality) than in elected institutions like parliaments, cabinets, and parties (Newton, Stolle, and Zmerli 2018, 40). Political trust is positively associated with voter turnout. Political distrust or a lack of trust is seen to depress turnout as well as to drive anti-incumbent and populist voting (Hooghe 2018, 617–18). In the United States, low levels of political trust are complicated by the fact that 'the American public is currently experiencing a state of affective polarisation in which Republicans and Democrats dislike each other to an unprecedented degree' (Hetherington and Rudolph 2018, 579), such that political trust and distrust are polarised along partisan lines. The *World Happiness Report* for 2018 identifies perceptions of the rise of corruption in government and business and waning trust in government as among the causes of falling happiness in the United States, despite rising GDP per capita (Sachs 2018, 147–8), whilst Marc J. Hetherington (2005) and Hetherington and Thomas J. Rudolph (2015) link polarised political trust to the increasingly sluggish American legislature and the decline of compromise in Washington politics.

The emphasis on the lack of political trust as a particular problem plaguing US democracy within the above literature suggests not only that there is *not enough* trust in the government but that there is a particular currency of *dis*trust in US politics. While a vast literature on trust and its centrality in sustaining democratic institutions exists, distrust has received comparatively less attention. Though there is a great deal of conceptual overlap between political trust or the lack thereof and political distrust, distrust is more than just the absence of trust. If political trust anticipates positive outcomes and a lack of trust indicates neutrality or uncertainty about the trustworthiness of government institutions and/or particular politicians, then distrust is distinguishable from both in that it evaluates the political system and/or its functionaries in distinctly negative ways and anticipates 'harmful outcomes' (Bertsou 2019, 220). In line with this thinking, Eri Bertsou defines political distrust as 'a relational attitude that reflects perceptions of untrustworthiness specific to the political system in its entirety or its components' and distinguishes between 'liberal distrust', which is reasonable and necessary as it justifies the establishment of institutional checks and balances on power, and political distrust, which indicates that existing institutions are 'inadequate and malfunctioning' or are at least perceived as such (220, 216). Political distrust is particularly pervasive where electorates are polarised and where communities are divided over particular social issues, and it is self-reinforcing but, unlike political trust, not self-disconfirming because distrust itself impedes cooperation, positive interactions, and ultimately the political process itself (224).

The 'currency of distrust' in this book's title should be understood both in the sense that distrust is currently a defining feature of the relationship between US politicians and their constituents and in the sense that distrust is being explicitly negotiated, mobilised, and used in politicians' public performances as they appeal to diverse audiences. This book asks how trust and distrust are linked to performance, not just in the case of Trump's populism but as structural features inherent in a representative system that relies on politicians' public performances and audiences' suspension of disbelief – a term I will engage with in depth in Chapter 1. This question ties in to more general ones about what role performance plays and what function it has in US presidential politics and in representative democracy more broadly conceived. What capacity do politicians' public performances have to mould people's perceptions of the legitimacy of politicians and government institutions, and how are those perceptions changed as the theatre of politics comes to increasingly revolve around distrust itself? In engaging with these questions, this book considers performance as a constellation of different factors: scripts, embodiment, ideas of selfhood, and historical norms and ideals. The book is interested in what performance does in politics generally and in US presidential politics in particular, but its focus is more on overarching questions about what performance is and how it works than on analysing specific, individual performances, though there are, of course, extended examples of this as well.

Performance, Theatricality, and the US Presidency is a product of theatre and performance studies as much as it is a product of political studies: the research for it was conceived of within a department of theatre and performance studies, and it was undertaken in collaboration with and is therefore deeply indebted to the perspectives of both scholars of politics and scholars of performance. Part of this research is empirical, engaging with the expert perspectives of political speechwriters and speech coaches, whose work it is not only to script but to envision, craft, and in many cases rehearse the public performances of US presidents. Speechwriters are usually not performers themselves; they do, however, have a unique position among politicians' staffers. They are often generalists rather than policy experts, and it is their job not simply to write the words their principals say but to pay attention to the politician as a person and the audiences they are addressing. As such, they are concerned with what makes their principal sound like themself and with how to convey those of their personal traits deemed most advantageous. Speechwriters also need to think about the hooks that might engage different audiences and they have to consider the setting, tone, and style in which a speech will be delivered. Some speechwriters also function as speech coaches and/or attend and contribute to rehearsal or speech delivery preparation sessions, in which they direct their principal towards more effective delivery. For all of these reasons, the inclusion of interviews with speechwriters in this book should not be interpreted as an argument for the

primary of text over performance. Portions of Chapters 2 and 4 in particular draw on these interviews.

Other parts of the book, and most especially Chapters 1 and 3, are much more conceptual and engage with debates around concepts of acting and performance, populism, embodiment, and authenticity. Integrating ideas and concepts from two different disciplines is often significantly harder to do than it is to pay lip service to, and I hope that this book offers useful impulses towards how we might think of performance and politics in a way that goes beyond citing robustly from one discipline whilst paying tribute to the other through engagement with one notable undergraduate textbook. But back to the currency of distrust as it applies to this book . . .

In US presidential politics, with which this book is primarily concerned, the currency of distrust of the contemporary moment has been traced to the candidacy of Jimmy Carter in 1976 (Cannon 1991, 101; Glad 1980, 366; Hess 2002; Strong, n.d.). By January 1975, in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, trust in government had fallen to just 36 per cent, half the level at which it had been a decade earlier (Pew Research Center 2015, 18). This was a setting in which Carter ran as an outsider to the Washington elite, asking for 'an unusual kind' of trust, one that 'necessitated a leap of faith, a giving of the heart to an unknown stranger' (Glad 1980, 367). Despite Carter's election as an outsider, however, lack of trust in the federal government again rose sharply during his presidency, capping at 70 per cent in March 1980. And despite the fact that trust rose again during the Reagan presidency (as it would to a more limited extent in the later years of the Clinton presidency), public trust in government has never again even come close to a pre-Nixon level and has surpassed the 50 per cent mark only once: in the immediate aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001.

Alongside and to grapple with the persistent low level of public trust in the government, politicians' public performances, particularly in presidential politics, have increasingly come to centre on distrust itself, with politicians presenting themselves as outsiders and infiltrators rather than functionaries of the political establishment. In both the 2008 and the 2016 US presidential elections – the last two presidential elections not to feature an incumbent candidate – a self-styled outsider was elected president. The performances of outsiderness in 2016 (by Trump and, in the Democratic primary, by Sanders) had a notably sharper, more controversial bent to them than those by Barack Obama, John McCain, and even Sarah Palin in 2008. Nevertheless, the trope of resisting against a corrupt political establishment, of being one of the good and rational people working against self-interested Beltway insiders, is pervasive. Note that while such performances take place within an environment of documented low levels of trust in government, they are more performances of distrust than performances of low-level or lacking trust: they are not

ambivalent or neutral towards political insiders, instead portraying them as definitely untrustworthy and harmful to those they purport to serve. The pervasiveness of this kind of speech is symptomatic of the extent to which populist rhetoric, which pits the good, rational people against the corrupt and manipulative establishment whilst evoking a sense of crisis and employing eye-catching, media-savvy tactics sometimes described as 'bad manners' (Moffitt 2016), has become a feature of mainstream politics. Its influence can be felt not just in the public appearances of notable populists like Trump, Sanders, and Palin but, as the next section illuminates in more detail, even in politicians known for their unemotional performance styles. As a mainstreamed style of performance, a particular 'zeitgeist' (Mudde 2004), populism complicates how politicians appear in public since its reliance on anti-establishment tropes seeks to shift perceptions of legitimacy by positing performing politicians as authentic and incorruptible outsiders, whilst maligning established institutions and their functionaries. As such, mainstreamed populism offers a way in to one of the key questions this book seeks to address: what is it that politicians' public performances actually do in representative politics and what makes for an effective political performance?

Mainstreamed Populism

Almost exactly five years to the day before protestors stormed the Capitol, on 5 January 2016, then-President Barack Obama gave a speech outlining a series of new executive actions on gun control at the White House. Obama stood at a lectern in the White House's East Room, speaking to an assembled group composed of journalists, survivors of gun violence, and relatives of shooting victims. At the time of this speech, he was entering the last year of his presidency, throughout which his intention to enact stricter gun control legislation had been foiled by the gun lobby. The stated purpose of the 5 January speech was to announce four executive actions, aimed at extending background checks on those purchasing guns, ensuring that mental health records are included in these checks, enforcing existing gun safety laws, and preventing accidental shootings through gun safety technology. Unlike executive orders, however, executive actions are legally non-binding and constitute presidential statements of intent, a detail that was largely ignored in the media coverage of Obama's speech (Farley 2016; Murse 2016). Even more than to outline new legal measures, the speech was designed to make an impassioned plea for the American public to hold gun lobbyists accountable. 'So the gun lobby may be holding Congress hostage right now', Obama said, evoking a corrupt political establishment, 'but they cannot hold America hostage'. As Obama made reference to Congress in his January speech, he left no doubt that though, as president, he might be expected to be able to exert influence on the US legislature even in spite of the fact that it had been controlled by the Republican Party intent on

blocking Democratic legislation for much of his presidency, this was not actually the case. Instead, he stressed that Congress as a whole was out of line with the thinking of 'the majority of Americans' and that this was the case because 'the gun lobby may be holding Congress hostage right now'. As a consequence, Obama exhorted that 'all of us [that is, the majority of Americans] need to demand a Congress brave enough to stand up to the gun lobby's lies', thus positioning himself as a concerned outsider who sides with 'the vast majority of Americans' against a corrupt political system in need of reform.

Obama's outsider positioning in this speech exemplifies the pervasiveness of certain aspects of the populist style in US politicians' public performances. However, the speech was memorable not just as one of many examples of anti-establishment discourse emanating from the centre of political power. In the media coverage this speech attracted, the fact that Obama, whose rhetorical style more typically tended towards the professorial and matter-of-fact, shed tears as he discussed the shooting of first-graders at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut on 14 December 2012 took centre stage. How pundits interpreted Obama's tears in their coverage of the speech was largely indicative of where on the political spectrum they were situated, with left-leaning and centre-left commentators praising the speech's emotional openness (Blake 2016; Cillizza 2016; Rhodan 2016), while right-wing pundits sought to debunk the speech as 'bad political theatre' and the tears as part of a planned performance, possibly even the result of Obama having rubbed raw onion on his face before taking the stage ('Andrea Tantaros' 2016). But aside from being an obvious indicator of the level of political polarisation in American political news coverage, the extent to which the tears – and by extension Obama's emotional state, his level of sincerity, and his entire public persona – were open to interpretation highlights with particular clarity the issues of trust, distrust, and the suspension of disbelief involved in the theatre of politics more broadly. Since this book is concerned not just with (dis)trust and populism as contemporary phenomena but with theorising and evidencing the extent to which representative politics relies on public performance, the next section will focus quite literally on Obama's tears to outline how we might think of performance and theatricality in the realm of politics and why the potential for distrust is ever-present in, and ineradicable from, a representative system that works through performance and its reception.

On the basis of a long, professionalised tradition of how US presidents perform in public, we assume that what is required of a politician's public performances shifts once they are elected to the highest office. For the political sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, for instance, political candidates' '[s]uccess in a campaign depends on making the civil sphere's binary language walk and talk' such that, through the successful deployment of a reductively binary discourse that vilifies opponents whilst exalting the candidate's own side, and in spite of

attempts by political opponents and the media to destabilise a politician's performed persona, the winning presidential candidate is elevated into 'a collective representation – a symbolic vessel filled with what citizens hold most dear' (2010, 11, 18). Upon being elected president, however, a former candidate has to do the reconciliatory work of disavowing their own partisanship even whilst continuing to make the binaries work for themself, in effect appearing 'to wash partisanship from [their] body' (270). In Alexander's view, this was accomplished in Obama's case when, '[a]fter a bruising and heated electoral struggle, Obama called for the restoration of solidarity' in his victory speech at Grant Park in Chicago on 4 November 2008 (268), where the president-elect famously spoke of 'Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been a collection of Red States and Blue States: we are, and always will be, the United States of America' (qtd in Alexander 2010, 268). In other words, winning a presidential election is seen to shift the emphasis of a newly elected president's public performances away from stressing partisan differences and towards the evocation of a sense of unity.

The notion of different 'grammars', or sets of structural features, of politics and performance, as introduced by Shirin M. Rai and Janelle Reinelt (2015b), is a helpful one here. In the most general of terms, we might distinguish between sovereign and critical grammars of politics and performance (Saward 2015). Critical grammars emphasise the personal authenticity of the speaker, the particularity of them and their causes as well as their dissension from the reigning authority or at least the opposing party. Dissidents, protestors, but also candidates hoping to get elected make use of critical grammars in their public performances. Sovereign grammars, on the other hand, aim to create a generalising sense of unity out of diversity and to speak to a broad mass of citizens in order to 'constitute an audience out of citizen subjects-objects' (Saward 2015, 219). If Alexander's argument were applied to this distinction, then one might say presidential candidates attempt to distinguish themselves in performances that make use of critical grammars even whilst they attempt to speak to a broad subsection of Americans. Performances by US presidents, particularly those that follow election campaigns which themselves emphasise and exacerbate society divisions, are paradigmatic examples of sovereign grammars, as the US president is the only person elected to represent the entirety of the American people.

The rhetoric of Obama's 2016 White House speech on gun control, however, mobilises critical grammars much more than sovereign ones, demonstrating the usefulness of performing binary divisions outside of election campaigns. Likewise, the image of the president shedding tears in front of a group of journalists and television cameras presents a startling contrast to the soaring rhetoric of the Grant Park victory speech. Obama's speech not only does not emphasise the president's 'heroic might' (Alexander 2010, 272); it makes explicit his

powerlessness in the face of Washington's powerful gun lobbyists, who, Obama claims, 'hold America hostage'. Far from offering a straightforward message of unity, the 5 January speech constructs a binary division between the 'majority of the American people', including the president, and the Washington establishment, composed of Congress and the gun lobby. This division is strikingly underscored by Obama's tears, emphasising the speech's evocation of a sense of crisis that speaks to the corruptness and ineffectiveness of Beltway politics.

At first glance, Obama's expression of powerlessness simply matches the mood of the moment at which this speech was performed, late in the second term of his presidency, and might be seen as broadly reflective of Obama's perceived effectiveness as president: Gallup's continuous Obama Job Approval Poll shows that Obama started his presidential career with 69 per cent of Americans approving of him versus only 12 per cent who disapproved. In January 2016, the figures had roughly equalised, with 47 per cent of Americans approving of Obama's job performance on 4 January 2016, and 48 per cent disapproving ('Gallup Daily', n.d.). A LexisNexis News search for the phrase 'Obama is a failed president' performed on 29 September 2016 returned 262 results, including one for a debate on whether Obama is a failed president organised by the London-based debating forum Intelligence Squared for 20 June 2016 that was also scheduled to be broadcast on BBC World (Intelligence Squared 2016). These figures reflect Obama's fall in the public perception from an inspiring election victory to a more ambiguous record of accomplishments during a presidency whose agenda was hindered by an almost perpetually deadlocked Congress.[2]

However, the speech functions more shrewdly as an attempt to garner legitimacy through a demonstration of resistance in the face of corruption. Obama's reference to partisan battles within the political class characterises Congress as unable to adequately represent the American people by asserting that politicians are much more polarised on the issue of gun control than the electorate, among whom he asserts there exists a 'general consensus'. The binary here set up further pits the majority of the American people against the political establishment by asserting that its partisan squabbles ignore and run counter to the people's interests. In the picture Obama paints, the 'vast majority of Americans' are right to be suspicious of political functionaries who are supposed to represent them but are preoccupied with their own partisan battles, in which they are influenced by lobbyists who make an illegitimate oligarchy out of a system that is meant to be democratic. Flattery is a classic tool of political rhetoric, painting audiences as 'rational, honest, independent, and capable of decisions that are wise' (Alexander 2010, 91), as Obama does here. Appealing to the audience's wisdom also saves the speech from sounding too pessimistic. As Robert Lehrman, a former speechwriter for Vice President Al Gore, observes in his *Political Speechwriter's Companion*, in the United States audiences' sense of what makes for an acceptable political speech has traditionally imposed 'sharp

limits on the complexity of political debate'; among the most stringent limits Lehrman identifies are the need to project a sense of upbeat optimism and an outlook towards an eventual happy ending even in the midst of crisis (2010, 11). Here, the flattering address to the audience underscores the central binary division on which the speech relies, that between 'the people' and the political establishment. By asserting that he is one of these virtuous and wise people, and therefore not part of the corrupt, polarised, irrational establishment, Obama turns his confession of powerlessness into a subtle show of strength that consists in resisting the pull of the broken system and siding with the supposedly rational majority instead.

The speech's use of anti-establishment sentiment also serves to construct the president as an authentic and trustworthy leader not swayed by illegitimate exertions of power. His remark 'I'm not on the ballot again. I'm not looking to score some points' stresses the relative freedom of expression provided by this late stage of Obama's presidency and thus recuperates, or at least approximates, something of the outsider status Obama claimed for himself in his first election campaign. In the launch announcement for that campaign he had memorably proclaimed, 'I know that I haven't spent a lot of time learning the ways of Washington. But I've been there long enough to know that the ways of Washington must change' (2007). That announcement was made after Obama was pointedly advised by both Harry Reid, then Senate Majority Leader, and former Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle that, as a first-term senator, he could still run for president as something of an outsider to the Washington establishment (Heilemann and Halperin 2010, 33–4, 70).

Obama's reliance on binary anti-establishment rhetoric, and the 5 January speech's evocation of a sense of crisis, and even, to a lesser degree, the uncharacteristic emotionality displayed are elements of the populist style of political performance (Moffitt 2016).[3] That a sitting president other than Donald Trump was deploying elements of this style in 2016 illustrates the degree to which this style has become a feature of mainstream politics in the United States,[4] such that the style has not only lost a lot of its transgressiveness but has become an unremarkable, even expected, element of politicians' performances and their attempts to garner legitimacy. It is important to note here that considering populism as a style of performance makes it possible to discuss how different public speakers incorporate some populist elements into their public performances but not others or not to the same degree or intensity as another speaker. That is, populism regarded as a performance style is gradational rather than binary (Moffitt 2020, 26). The point in mentioning Obama and Trump in a single paragraph is not to suggest that Obama was 'just as much' of a populist as Trump, nor that Obama's populism had the same effects as Trump's – to assert this would be absurd. The aim here is to use a less than immediately obvious example of a speech incorporating elements of the populist style to suggest how

commonplace elements of this style have become in American political discourse. This book builds on a wealth of populism scholarship (Arditi 2007; Laclau 2005a, 2005b; Moffitt 2016; Mudde 2004; Sorensen 2021) that has established populist discourse as a feature of the mainstream politics in Western democracies. The following paragraphs explain how performances that make use of elements of the populist style function in US presidential politics by looking at the connection between political distrust and the elevation of politicians who style themselves, paradoxically, as outsiders to the institutional and governmental system within which they work and to which they seek election.

Michael Saward's theory of the representative claim posits that representation is both performed (as in a speech given for an audience) and performative, in that a claim to represent someone constitutes, or evokes, the represented 'in the sense of portraying them or framing them in particular, contestable ways' (2006, 301–2). Having assigned certain characteristics to their constituents, representative claim-makers then 'argue or imply that they are the best representatives of the constituency *so understood*' (302, emphasis in original). Audiences who are at the receiving end of a representative claim are then in a position to accept the claim or reject it. Acceptance implies that the audience give credence to both the image of themselves and the image of the claim-maker evoked through the representative claim. Of fundamental importance here is that the claim to represent does not merely describe or reflect an existing audience's or constituency's character and the persona of the claim-maker; instead, the claim is involved in the construction of a shared, but contestable, social reality through which both audience and claim-maker come to be defined in specific ways.

In Obama's case, the audience is framed, fairly conventionally, as rational, level-headed, and capable of reasoned consensus. Secondly, and more intriguingly, the audience Obama's speech evokes is one which is rightly sceptical of its political leaders, fed up with the power struggles at the centre of American politics that do not concern it, and cognisant of the undemocratic and conspiratorial influence of the gun lobby. Obama then presents himself as an outsider to this corrupt sphere of influence and, by implication, an ideal representative of the people as he has evoked them – all this despite the fact that, as president, Obama would quite naturally be perceived as standing at the top of the very political system outside of which he claims to stand. In other words, Obama is mobilising distrust of politicians and political institutions among the electorate and making use of it in his speech on gun control. Insofar as Obama is presenting himself as someone who, however paradoxically, can present an alternative to the norm in US politics, his speech appeals to audiences by evoking a sense of authenticity, which, here, consists of the at least partial disavowal of being an institutional functionary and the presentation of himself as a frustrated outsider.

Obama's self-presentation, his characterisation of the audience, and the particular sense of authenticity which the speech seeks to evoke all relate to

the speech's generation of legitimacy. While legitimacy might elsewhere be seen simply as a matter of normative or legal definition, this book considers legitimacy, or legitimation, as a complex process to explore tensions that exist between its objective and subjective dimensions. Though legitimacy might be most readily thought of as a set of established democratic norms and formal legal procedures that authorise the use of state power, Max Weber stressed that compliance with these norms and procedures nevertheless rests on the widespread 'belief in legality', meaning that those who are part of a social order accept its legal norms as binding and regard the enforcement of those norms as acceptable (1978, 37). Weber's ideas have been developed further by numerous scholars; Michael Saward's (2010) thinking around democratic legitimacy and especially Elisabeth Anker's (2014) concept of felt legitimacy and Judith Butler's (1997) theorisation of shifting legitimacy will be particularly central to this book.

Focusing on the performative generation of perceptions of legitimacy, as all of these scholars do, highlights the importance of the processual, subjective, and continually contested aspects of legitimacy. For instance, Anker argues that, despite the fact that they were never subjected to established legitimation procedures, many of the George W. Bush administration's War on Terror actions were able to garner 'vast popular legitimacy' because the War on Terror rhetoric used by Bush administration officials exerted a significant affective impact on a large part of the American electorate (2014, 110–11). Here, legitimation procedures were absent and norms of legitimacy broken, thus objectively these policies might be seen not to be legitimate at all; nevertheless, they were framed and communicated in ways that meant they were widely perceived to be legitimate, which shows the capacity of the subjective perception of legitimacy to override more objective evaluations.

Performances of mainstreamed populism, like Obama's 5 January speech, similarly disturb the association of authority and institutionality with legitimacy. Obama's speech seeks to harness legitimacy primarily not by relying on Obama's authority as the President of the United States but by disavowing Obama's entanglement with distrusted institutions and the corrupt political establishment. Legitimacy is linked to the authenticity and clear-sightedness ascribed to the critical outside infiltrator and not, or not just and not primarily, the authority conferred by holding elected office or the experience of working inside institutions. The speech relies more on the speaker's personal authenticity than on their authority. In this, it is indicative of a more broadly perceived, 'almost plangent', and certainly nostalgic hunger for authenticity that has developed in recent decades, despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that reality in the twenty-first century 'incurs not as reality but as it is *performed* (presented) and *perceived*' (Lavender 2016, 22, 24, emphasis in original). Authenticity in politics can be seen as a process that is highly contested rather than a fact (Parry-Giles 2001;

2014, 11) or as dependent on an actor's ability to 'sew the disparate elements of performance back into a seamless and convincing whole' (Alexander 2006, 55). Like much of the contemporary experience of social and political life, politicians' public performances are usually experienced in mediated and mediatised ways. Audiences who receive such performances are likely to at least suspect that, even if they accept a political representative as authentic, this representative's appearance in public life is nevertheless consciously staged and performed. What is seen as authentic in this context is not simply the opposite of the staged and performed but stands in a complex relationship to it.

In the early 2000s, the novelist David Foster Wallace detailed his own desire to believe in then-Republican presidential primary candidate John McCain's authenticity as 'something old and maybe corny but with a weird achy pull to it like a smell from childhood or a name on the tip of your tongue' (2006, 166), suggesting that associations of authenticity have a particularly strong pull in politics. If a politician can convince their audience to perceive them as authentic, then this personal authenticity might become an antidote to the increasingly pervasive lack of trust in and distrust of politicians and political institutions. But, despite professing his own desire to believe in McCain's authenticity, particularly because of McCain's war hero credentials, Wallace never quite managed to do so even after following McCain for a week on the campaign trail. He attests to a 'very modern and American type of ambivalence, a sort of interior war between your deep need to believe and your deep belief that the need to believe is bullshit, that there's nothing left anywhere but sales and salesmen' (226, 229). This ambivalence pinpoints the dilemma that haunts twenty-first-century political culture, where the desire to give in to the 'weird achy pull' to move beyond postmodern nihilism is continually ambushed by a creeping doubt that to believe ultimately results in being exploited for one's naivety. In addition to this, despite all its plangent, nostalgic relevance, a hunger for authenticity in the face of a reality that includes not just the unmediated but also 'the replicated, the staged, the reconstructed, and also, sometimes, the simulated' (Martin 2013, 15) might indeed be indicative of a 'bullshit', misguided search for an absent essence.

While it is a truism in politics and performance scholarship that the evocation of a sense of authenticity plays an important part in a performance's success (see Alexander 2006, 54–7; Alexander 2010, xii, 32; Bleeker 2009, 249, 253; Kugler and Kurt 2000, 154–5; Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2002, 11–12; Saward 2015, 223), focusing on authenticity has also been judged to be something of a fool's errand. In his influential lecture series *Sincerity and Authenticity* the literary critic Lionel Trilling argued that, unlike sincerity, the concept of authenticity is built around the illusory essentialist idea that an individual's innermost self can be found beyond 'all the cultural superstructures' imposed on it (1972, 2, 12, 104). More trenchantly, Richard Sennett observes in

The Fall of Public Man, his study of the decline of people's involvement in political life, that the search for the pre-cultured inner essence of a person's character is not just futile but can be dangerous insofar as it erodes people's ability to focus on questions of ideology by replacing a focus on policy issues with a valuing of authenticity through which 'self-disclosure becomes a universal measure of believability and truth' ([1977] 1986, 29–30). At the very least, the evocation in politicians' public performances of a sense of personal authenticity based on professed, if not actual, outsider status chimes with the sense that Western democracies have moved away from voters' strong affiliation with political parties to become 'audience democracies', primarily defined by increasingly personalised and image-based election campaigns and by 'reactive' voting behaviour, wherein voters respond to the terms of electoral choice as defined by candidates rather than actively expressing their identities through the act of voting (Manin 1997, 218–34). In audience democracy, a candidate's personal authenticity is a highly prized and protected commodity.

Performative success rooted in appeals to the performer's own outsiderness, and thus their (assertion of) lack of previous authority rather than their pre-existing authority, is paradoxical insofar as legitimate and institutionally conferred authority is seen to be indispensable in making performative utterances 'felicitous' (Austin 1962; Bourdieu 1991). Yet, as historically low levels of political trust persist, assertions of outsider status and disavowals of previous institutional affiliation are increasingly connected to performances of personal authenticity and to the cultivation of legitimacy. More and more presidents and presidential candidates have deployed elements of the populist style in their public performances in recent years and have done so alongside developments in the media landscape that incentivise more controversial, media-savvy, and less risk-averse performance styles. Since widespread distrust already calls the legitimacy of established institutions into question, this mainstreamed populism works through the performative enactment of a further anti-establishmentarian shift of legitimacy away from the institutions and onto the politician who presents themself as a representative of the people. It threatens to turn legitimacy into a zero-sum game. By discouraging the perception of the political system as a unified whole and by pitting different institutions and political actors against each other, populist-style performances by mainstream politicians ultimately undermine institutional legitimacy even whilst they bolster the perceived authenticity and legitimacy of individuals.

The Theatre of Politics

Whilst populism has been a nearly all-consuming focus in US politics and in politics research during the last few years, and whilst political distrust and populism reached fever pitch in US politics with the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016, the focus of this book is not limited to the contemporary

moment. One of the book's central aims is to show that, even though the theatre of politics has come increasingly to revolve around distrust of politicians and political institutions, the potential for distrust inheres ineradicably within a political system that is, at its core, performance-based. If political representation happens through performance, then its functioning relies on the suspension of disbelief of political audiences rather than their more straightforwardly given belief. Suspension of disbelief is quite different from an open-ended investment of belief (Davis 2005; Tomko 2016); it is a term usually applied to fiction: audiences of fictional worlds on stage and screen are generally aware that these worlds do not actually exist, but temporarily proceed as if they did. Suspension of disbelief, then, is a fleeting, willed pause in questioning that allows an audience member to let themself be absorbed, to follow along, and give themself away for a moment, before they resume their sceptical questioning.

Why is suspension of disbelief a more appropriate concept to apply to politicians' public performances than the more straightforward belief in or acceptance of a representative claim? Politicians at the national and, especially, presidential level of politics are usually far removed from their audiences. Personal acquaintance with one's political representatives at these levels is rare, and audiences are often consciously, but at the very least subliminally, aware that politicians' performances are hardly ever unplanned or spontaneous. These performances are carefully curated and present aspects of a politician's persona that they and their team judge to be advantageous. As such, while the public personas of politicians are not exactly fictional, they are quasi-fictional constructions insofar as they are the product of the selective abstraction of characteristics from the real person of the politician for public performance with a particular goal, a kind of ideal self-presentation, in mind. Politicians' performances also strive to constitute social 'realities', rather than reflecting them.

Michael Tomko, in a study about the purpose of literature in human life, observes that people engaging in the willing suspension of disbelief cease 'striving to determine whether the[] sensations [presented to their minds] correspond to external reality' and accept them 'as if they were representative of reality, without, crucially, the concession that they are' (2016, 8). In politics, of course, the stakes for people's real lives are such that they might seek to conclude that some politicians' performances are truly representative of who the politician really is and how the world actually is, and some might hold the passionate conviction that they are, but the point here is that the distance between politicians and audiences and the mediated and goal-oriented nature of their performances means that the door is always open for doubt to creep back in. Politicians' performances, similar to fictions, might thus create a 'split between a part of the self that "believes something which another part of him [*sic*] disbelieves"' (Tomko 2016, 4, citing Walton 1980, 7). Tomko also argues that to engage in the willing suspension of disbelief in the case of works of art,

people need not only to find them plausible but to be excited by them (2016, 4). Kendall L. Walton similarly describes suspension of disbelief as a perceived 'decrease of distance' (1980, 15). The equivalence to this in politics is that it is all too easy for political audiences to dismiss politicians' performances as fake and dissembling; it is much harder, and arguable rarer, for politicians to generate excitement.

Obama's speech on gun control from 5 January 2016, and particularly the tears he shed during this speech, serves to highlight the tensions involved in the reception of politicians' public performances. Towards the end of this speech, about 29 minutes and 30 seconds into its 35 minutes, Obama paused. He blinked repeatedly and wiped the corner of his eye with a finger. His eyes cast down, he continued to pause before he looked up and said, 'Every time I think about those kids, it gets me mad', as tears rolled down his cheeks. 'Those kids' was a reference to the twenty primary school students killed in the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut on 14 December 2012. Sandy Hook was one of several examples the president had given during the speech of what the media had dubbed 'an epidemic' of mass shootings in the United States. Obama wiped one of his tears away and said, 'And by the way, it happens on the streets of Chicago every day.' This rhetorical gesture served to connect the Newtown shooting to the city (known for gun violence)[5] in which the president cut his political teeth as a community organiser. Obama wiped a tear from his other cheek. In the video footage of the speech, while the camera remains focused on the president, people in the audience can be heard applauding at this moment. Shortly after this, Obama appears to recover emotionally, though when he ends the speech by forcefully stressing the need for voters to be passionate about the reform of gun laws because 'all of us need to demand a Congress brave enough to stand up to the gun lobby's lies', the footage still shows the president's cheeks glistening with tears.

As noted above, reactions to Obama's tearful speech and answers to the question of whether Obama's tears were real or fake were often indicative of where on the political spectrum a commentator was situated. While this question was thus one of partisanship, on a conceptual level it is a question of believability and of the willingness of a spectator to suspend their disbelief in a performance. In other words, it is because we have to make a judgement call on the believability of Obama's performance in the first place that judgements can diverge widely and along partisan lines.

In discounting a performance, one of the simplest, most well-worn arguments to make is that it is 'only' a performance or 'mere' theatre. This argument is contained, for instance, in Meghan McCain's dismissal of Obama's speech as 'bad political theatre' ('Andrea Tantaros' 2016). As part of a Fox News panel discussion that accused Obama of rubbing raw onion on his eyes, McCain made the argument that Obama's was a 'bad' performance. In McCain's framing of

it, Obama's performance was so bad that it revealed its own constructedness, its manipulative reality, its status as mere 'political theatre'. As theatre scholar Sophie Nield observes, this kind of framing 'assumes two discrete spheres – the "real" and the "symbolic", or "theatrical"' (2010, 4). Performance and theatricality are relegated to the side of the symbolic, the assumption being that they are at best artificial and substanceless and at worst manipulative and corrupting. In its entirety, this argument is buttressed by the antitheatrical prejudice – this is the widespread hostility to theatre, manifested, for instance, in the fact that expressions borrowed from the theatre ('putting on an act', for example, or 'making a scene') generally have negative connotations. Jonas Barish's (1981) seminal study of the hostility to theatre in the Western philosophical tradition traces the roots of antitheatricality to Plato's *Republic* ([c. 380 BCE] 1968).

While it is relatively easy to call out 'bad' performances for being constructed and fake, the antitheatrical prejudice is not, of course, restricted to performances easily unmasked as insincere. If we were to concede that Obama's speech, tears and all, was performed *well*, then this raises further questions about the nature of acting and performance. Does a performance reveal an actor's inner life or does it merely represent the outward signs of one, without being bound by an inner substance? Denis Diderot's *Paradox of Acting*, written in 1773 and first published (in French) in 1830, famously argued that an actor's successful performance depends not on feeling the emotions performed but 'upon rendering so exactly the outward signs of feeling, that you fall into the trap' (1883, 16). 'The player's tears', if skilfully performed on cue, therefore, 'come from his brain', not his heart – and for the French philosopher this was true '[i]n tribunals, in assemblies', in the political sphere, as much as on the theatre stage (17, 108). For theatre historian Joseph Roach, Diderot's acting theory is not just historically the most persuasive theory of acting (1993, 226); it also goes some way towards explaining the distrust and marginalisation of professions like 'begging, seduction, prostitution, and apostasy' whose practitioners, like the actor, were historically considered to be 'professional illusionists' (138). Among political thinkers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was so suspicious of the idea of representation that he argued in his *Social Contract* that '[s]overeignty . . . cannot be represented; it lies essentially in the general will, and does not admit representation: it is either the same, or other; there is no intermediate possibility' ([1762] 1923, 83). For Rousseau, the gap between political representatives and those they purport to represent was so wide that it was altogether impossible to bridge.

Tears crystallise the tenuous and contentious connection between acting and authenticity, between the need to suspend disbelief in a performance and the nagging doubt that it is not 'real'. Unlike, for instance, anger or laughter, tears are difficult to fake and therefore pose a problem for someone intent on disavowing the validity of another's emotional investment. Insofar as tears are the emotional expression of an intense feeling of sadness, they may be a visible

result of uncontrollable affect. However, tears are also more complicated than affects that result in the autonomic responses of a person breaking a sweat or blushing, because tears *can* be faked, even if it does require considerable acting skill to convincingly cry on cue. As such, tears are usually a trustworthy sign of someone genuinely feeling deeply upset, but not always. Tears are suspect because they can be faked, but only under certain circumstances and only by certain people. As literary critic Tom Lutz observes in *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears*, 'the meaning of tears is rarely pure and never simple' because the sincerity of tears remains 'in the moist eye of the beholder' (1999, 23, 60). If we do not believe that Obama's tears were spontaneous and unwilled but we credit his performance with making it look as though they were, we then have to allow that Obama is a good actor and come to the uncomfortable conclusion that he might be capable of manipulating his audience. I asked an Obama White House speechwriter about the 5 January speech and in response the speechwriter closed off precisely this uncomfortable possibility: 'he's not that good of an actor, where I could write, you know, brackets, cry here, and he'd do it'. While Obama is often recognised as a skilled orator, it was apparently important to note that he is not so good at performing that he could emotionally manipulate his audience.

In the absence of personal knowledge of the president, the tears and what prompted them become a matter of intense speculation and controversy that, in Obama's case, plays itself out along predictable party-political lines. In the context of Obama's tears, what then is at stake in asking if Obama was acting authentically? Suppose the president had felt the sincere desire to weep, but could have stopped the tears from falling in this public setting and chose not to, then to what extent could Obama still be said to be acting authentically? For audience members, whether the tears were spontaneous or planned, heartfelt or fabricated is not finally determinable. The salient question here is ultimately not about the status of Obama's tears, but about the willingness of the audience to suspend disbelief in his performance.

The historian Paul Friedland argues in his study of the French Revolution that, as soon as a system of representative democracy was established, contemporary commentators were troubled by the incongruous leap of faith required of voters in a system that lacked 'links of actual acquaintance between the representative and the represented' (1995, 207). Political audiences, then as now, had to rely on their own 'political suspension of disbelief which made abstract, representative government possible' (222). In other words, as political representatives, politicians are supposed to represent their constituents' interests and views. However, constituents, as political audiences, have to judge on the basis of politicians' public performances (as well as their previous records, achievements, and party platforms, of course) whether or not a particular politician will represent them well or is likely to do so. Because acting and performance

are inextricably linked with suspicions of duplicitousness, distrust of politicians' performances is likewise an inherent feature of a representative system that relies on performance. In other words, one might assume that efforts to dismiss the authenticity of Obama's tears are instances of the antitheatrical prejudice in action, because they paint Obama's performance as merely 'bad political theatre', for instance. The pervasiveness in Western culture of antitheatrical thought that associates acting and performance with artificiality, corruption, and manipulation adds to the persuasiveness of such dismissals.

However, this book argues that, by moving beyond the antitheatrical prejudice, it becomes possible to identify a real, ineradicable tension in the representative relationship between performing politicians and their audiences. Studies of social performance that use theatre and performance as metaphors go back more than half a century – Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* ([1956] 1990) being the most well-known example – but the way in which this field of research now conceives of performance can be nuanced and refined through engagement with concepts like theatricality and the suspension of disbelief. This book builds on conceptualisations of theatricality emerging from theatre and performance research which locate the nature of the theatrical in a cleft (Féral 2002), breach (Davis 2003), or doubling (Nield 2006, 2014) between the real and its fictionalised representation; it uses the concept of theatricality to argue that, precisely because trust and the suspension of disbelief are asked of political audiences, the possibility of audiences failing or being unwilling to suspend disbelief and vest their trust in politicians inheres within the system as an inevitable consequence of the required investment of belief. In a system built on the suspension of disbelief, it is not possible to eradicate the possibility that audiences might not (be willing to) suspend their disbelief and might, instead, come to view the entire system with increasing suspicion and distrust. In showing that, to the contrary, distrust is an ineradicable potential within a democratic system built on theatrical performance and therefore reliant on the suspension of disbelief of receptive audiences, this books further develops theories of the performative nature of political representation and makes the case for a more nuanced understanding of how politicians' performances function within representative democracy.

Methods, Scope, Structure

Each of this book's chapters discusses different aspects of the theatre of politics and each is introduced by a salient example of US presidential performance – Hillary Clinton's apparent mismatch between uninspiring performances and inspiring potential during the 2016 presidential campaign in Chapter 1, Bill Clinton's 1993 inaugural address in Chapter 2, Donald Trump's hyperbolic performances of his own health and physicality in Chapter 3, and Woodrow Wilson's 1913 in-person address to a joint session of Congress in Chapter 4.

These chapter-opening case studies are accompanied by analyses of other presidential performances throughout the book. However, because each chapter comes at the subject of US presidential performance from a slightly different angle to explore aspects of the constellation of factors involved in politics and performance, the book does not endeavour to analyse the performances or performance style of every president mentioned systematically or chronologically. Chapters 1 and 3 are more broadly conceptual, investigating how and why we should concern ourselves with performance in politics at all (Chapter 1) and how performances cultivate legitimacy through embodiment and rhetoric (Chapter 3). Chapters 2 and 4 are more empirical, exploring early US presidential performances as well as what I call the conventional theatricality of the US presidency – the ways in which presidential speeches have constituted presidents and their audiences in the public imagination – (Chapter 2) and the ways in which changes in media ecology affect this conventional theatricality and how they incentivise a theatre of politics that revolves increasingly around distrust (Chapter 4). Chapter 2 can be thought of roughly as an empirical counterpart to Chapter 1, and Chapter 4 as an empirical counterpart to Chapter 2; however, while these chapters build on each other to develop a fuller picture of US presidential performance, to the reader more interested in some of the ideas in this book than others, each chapter should still make sense in isolation.

Chapter 1 draws on contemporary political theory and historical studies that connect the emergence of representative democracy to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's antitheatrical thought (Barish 1981; Fliegelman 1993; Friedland 2002). This chapter shows how historical concerns influence political science's persistent tendency to dismiss performance as by definition antithetical to an ideal of rational and deliberative politics. In contradistinction to the idea that 'proper' democratic politics is (or ought to be) devoid of the affective and aesthetic element of performance, the chapter situates performance at the very core of representative democracy. The chapter modifies existing theories of performative representation through a more complex conceptualisation of performance, using theatre/performance theory to show why representative democracy's reliance on performance, theatricality, and suspended disbelief makes the potential for distrust an ineradicable part of representative politics.

Through engagement with historical patterns of presidential performance and with insights gleaned from twenty interviews with political speechwriters, Chapter 2 demonstrates that political representation is a complex process in which performance, theatricality, and distrust interlink. Focusing initially on early norms limiting presidential oratory (set down in *The Federalist Papers* and other sources), the erosion of these norms over time, and technological developments that ensured that the public's relationship to the chief executive became increasingly personality focused, the chapter situates current speechwriters' work in historical perspective. The chapter goes on to demonstrate

that presidential speechwriting must be understood as a professional theatrical practice, through which speechwriters from Reagan to Obama simultaneously constructed the president's persona for public performance and an idealised cohesive and receptive national audience.

Focusing on what might be called the 'establishment view' of effective presidential performance, Chapter 2 explores how speechwriters saw the rules governing performances of the presidency, largely before anti-establishmentarianism morphed from a background feature to a dominant characteristic of presidential performance. Reflecting on interviews with the people directly involved, the chapter illuminates the speech preparation processes of Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, focusing on each president's individual style but also on the common values and conventions that cut across the different presidential administrations.

The majority of speechwriters I interviewed were former White House and/or presidential campaign speechwriters spanning administrations and campaigns from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama. Twenty interviews were conducted in 2017 and 2018, a majority in-person in Washington, DC, and London, UK, and some over the phone.[6] The interviews give insight into how political speechwriters work and think and thus explore politicians' public performances from the production side. Of course, the meaning of speeches and of politicians' performances more broadly cannot be reduced to the intentions behind their creation or the processes through which they are produced. Political audiences are diverse and multiple, and they are exposed to politicians' performances in many different ways. Speeches, like any cultural output, are 'not a line of text releasing a single "theological" meaning (the message of the "Author-God") but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings . . . blend and clash', and their audiences are, like Roland Barthes's reader, the 'one place where this multiplicity is focused' (Barthes 1977, 146, 148). Nevertheless, the most basic ontological premise for the empirical research that contributes to this book was that 'people's views are meaningful properties of the social reality [the] research questions are designed to explore' (Mason 2002, 63), which in this case meant that speechwriters' views contribute to constituting the social reality in which both the content and the form of political speeches are produced. More specifically, the rationale for conducting interviews with speechwriters was, firstly, that speechwriters would be able to provide background knowledge on how US presidential speeches are created; this includes detailed information on collaborations between writers and politicians and on ways in which performance techniques like improvisation and performance rehearsal are used in and adapted to the political realm.

The second rationale for drawing on a corpus of interviews with speechwriters is that these give insight into how political speeches and speechwriting have changed in recent years, as well as how mainstreamed populism and changes in

the media landscape affect speechwriters' work. Speechwriters' views substantiate some of the arguments presented in this book. Although the findings from qualitative interviews cannot be generalised to make assumptions about how the views represented might be distributed across a population of US political speechwriters, the data included in this book does identify distinct lines of thinking that were pervasive across the interviews conducted, which themselves span the last five pre-Trump presidential administrations.

Chapter 3 examines in detail how politicians' performances cultivate legitimacy through a variety of metalingual, rhetorical, affective, and gestural repertoires of engagement. The chapter begins by discussing the question of what it means to say a politician 'embodies' a constituency, a nation, or a set of values. Engaging with the ahistorical tendencies of some populism theory, the chapter argues for an understanding of political representation that is distinct from premodern ideas of political embodiment (like the idea of the king's two bodies) and posits that ideas about performance, and about the importance of the body in performance, can only be meaningfully applied to political performances following the development of modern political thought around representation. Acknowledging that presidential rhetoric has since Watergate increasingly called the legitimacy of political institutions into question, Chapter 3 then draws on theories of performativity and legitimacy (Anker 2014; Austin 1962; Bourdieu 1991; Butler 1997) to explore how anti-establishment performances break with accepted norms of discourse to restructure the terms of legitimacy through which institutions of the federal government are perceived. It questions whether presidential anti-establishment rhetoric raises the risk that legitimacy increasingly is becoming legible only if claims to it are accompanied by the disavowal of affiliation with democratic institutions. In doing so, the chapter brings together theorisations of legitimacy as a performative process with discursive-performative theories of populism, with the aim of thinking through the implications of presidential performances that make use of (elements of) the populist style.

Using interview data and a series of case studies of presidential speeches from Carter to Trump, Chapter 4 makes the empirical case for the currency of distrust since the Nixon era – understood both as a medium of exchange through which the representative relationship between politicians and political audiences is negotiated and as the contemporary prevalence of political distrust in US presidential performances. The chapter explores speechwriters' views of political speeches within the media ecology of the early twenty-first century and their views on how political speeches have changed and are changing. It interrogates how anti-establishment rhetoric and mainstreamed populism have become increasingly incentivised, while the conventional theatricality of US presidential performance, which relied on presidential restraint and the performative construction of national unity, is subverted.

The Afterword reflects on the dangers and inherent absurdity of a system that sustains itself through representative connections created in politicians' public performances and political audiences' suspension of belief when the performances given increasingly purport to undermine the very system they work to sustain. Although the potential for distrust is always present in representative politics, for a long time presidential performances followed a conventional pattern that emphasised contrasts to presidential predecessors but also national unity and the integrity of government institutions (the pendulum). In the contemporary moment, presidential performances increasingly follow the trajectory of a slope towards ever more entertainment-like, controversial, and anti-establishmentarian performances that erode trust in the integrity of government institutions. Insofar as presidential populism in the contemporary moment is a reaction to the de-democratisation of US politics in the era of neoconservative neoliberalism and especially to the increasing securitisation and circumscription of expressions of dissent following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, it might be seen to reintroduce an element of agonism that threatened to be lost in a political environment that tended towards postpolitical consensus and moralising discourse. Nevertheless, we must ask what effects performances that purport to attack the very system that they ultimately sustain have not just on the functioning of that system but on the possibility of imagining other modes of political organisation and on expressions of dissent both within the representative system and outside of it.

Notes

1. Trumpism refers to the political ideology of Donald Trump; relevant characteristics include a business-centred, entrepreneurial approach to politics, and a populist, anti-establishment attitude that elevates the self-styled outsider (Tabachnick 2016).
2. For a detailed record of the campaign promises Obama kept, broke, and compromised on, see PolitiFact (n.d.).
3. Moffitt counts 'bad manners' as constitutive of the populist style but allows that 'bad manners' might extend to simply 'presenting oneself in more "colourful" ways than we usually expect from politicians' (2016, 60). As will be discussed later on, a definition of the populist style that includes 'bad manners' like swearing, over-the-top claims, and political incorrectness as essential features more accurately describes forms of right-wing populism than it does populism's left-wing, or, as in Obama's case, centre-left, expressions. 'Bad manners' might be amended to include media-savvy displays that catch the public's attention through a variety of techniques – including displays of emotion, solidarity, and controversial rhetoric – to describe different inflections of the populist style more accurately.
4. Bart Bonikowski and Noam Gidron show that 'populism is predominantly used by political challengers rather than incumbents and that it is more prevalent among candidates who can credibly position themselves as political outsiders' but also that

'populism is a significant feature of American presidential politics among both parties' (2016, 1595).

5. By some distance the highest number of homicides and non-fatal shootings committed in any major US city were committed in Chicago, both in 2016 and in 2017. The Chicago Police recorded 650 homicides in 2017, for instance, whereas the next highest number of homicides in a major city was 318, recorded by Baltimore Police (Major Cities Chiefs Association 2018). However, as *The Trace* points out, Chicago's homicide rate per capita was only the ninth highest in a major US city in 2017; moreover, in 2015, Chicago's non-fatal shooting rate per capita was the eleventh highest in a major US city (Mirabile and Nass 2018; Mirabile 2016). Nevertheless, *The Trace* observes that there is a higher prevalence of fatal shootings (as opposed to other types of homicides) in Chicago than in many other cities: while the difference between the rate of other types of homicide in Chicago and New York was less than 1 percentage point in 2015, 'the fatal shooting rate in Chicago was five times as high as it was in New York' (Givens 2017).
6. For an in-depth look at my methods of interviewee selection and interview analysis, see Peetz (2019).