

Understanding the Trump Presidency

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Topics

- A very different presidency
- The job?
- The office most defined by the incumbent's personality
- Trump's style
- Trump's likelihood of success
- Policies
- The purpose of the tweeting and lying
- Could President Trump be removed?

A very different presidency

- And president – from what we are used to
 - No prior government experience
 - No prior military experience
 - He has retained ownership of his business empire
 - He is the oldest person to become president
 - He has begun with the lowest approval ratings of any postwar president
 - Family is part of government
 - Many appointees have no experience in their areas of responsibility or are opposed to the activity

- A bigger contrast with previous presidents than any president we have seen in some time
 - Adopted the tea party platform (not what he ran on)

A job largely defined by tradition

- There isn't much in the constitution that defines the president's job – Article II:
 - “The executive power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America.”
 - The oath – “faithfully execute the office”
 - “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution...”
 - Commander-in-chief
 - “...he shall take care that the Laws be faithfully executed...”
- Big contrast with Art. I, Sec. 8 - Congress

As a result

- The details aren't there
 - Consequently, the presidency has evolved over time
- **The P is the office in the US most dependent on the personality, style, and political character of the incumbent**
 - And what a style this president has!

Style

- You can see a real estate person here – a big project real estate person
 - Where as a strategy, you tear down and demolish the existing structure – and then
 - If there is local resistance to your project,
 - You wait patiently until they give in
 - Trump is great at demolishing – or verbally demolishing – existing patterns, structures, institutions, trade deals:
 - Trans-Pacific Partnership, Paris accords, UNESCO, Iran nuclear deal, Obamacare, NAFTA

The Trump White House

- The open door presidency, led by a person who likes chaos:
 - Who undercuts his top officials in public – why?
 - Who refuses to coordinate policy within the administration
 - Who doesn't like structure
 - “I prefer to work each day and see what develops”
 - Who allows shifting factions compete for his ear
 - The factions do not agree – does the last one win?
 - Until the next day, when the P contradicts himself

- Inability to ignore criticism – the thinnest skin
 - Tends to make bad situations worse (gold star families recently)
- No interest in the content of policy
 - And no commitment to any particular policy
 - Tends to agree with whatever is presented to him
 - And that is his style – open door policy, people come in with problems, he weighs in, and they leave
 - Does the presidency work that way?
- Means that building anything new
 - Is almost impossible for him
 - Many Rs in the Senate now think his presidency will fail

- All as a function of his personality
 - Which he seems unable to control
 - But that in fact is what his supporters love about him
- For a fellow who says that he is a “deal maker”
 - He seems unable to make deals politically
 - Because he is no longer working in an environment where he is a CEO

■ Compared with earlier presidents

■ Earlier ones largely conformed to the norms for presidential behavior:

- Try to bring the nation together in the wake of tragedies
- Try to be above the crowd
- Try to negotiate with Congress over legislation

■ But Pres. Trump:

- Largely abhors these norms
 - Clearly doesn't adhere or believe in them
- Instead, much of what he does is directed only toward his strongest supporters

Is the Presidency powerful?

- We **think** of it as powerful, because of nuclear war
 - But in fact, the P was designed to be weak in an era when the founders profoundly distrusted kings and executive power
 - Articles of Confederation? **No** executive – post office only
 - Presidents can sign/veto laws, make appointments, etc. but – power is divided
 - Less power than 44 state governors – who have item vetoes
 - In short, you are not a king, or even a CEO
 - Much less power than someone who has commanded his own business and real estate empire

Trump's presidency

- The presidenCY is powerful
 - Witness Obama's executive orders/memos
 - Much was done administratively
 - Historically Congress might have objected
 - But recently Congress has been weak because of its divisions
- Pres. Trump's likelihood of success
 - Think about what he brings to the presidency:
 - His professional reputation?
 - His relationship with his political party?
 - Friends on Capital Hill?

- White House organization and functioning
 - Fired aides? (Really? 3-6 months after hiring them?)
- Control over the bureaucracy
 - Policy: not to hire assistant secretaries, deputy assistant secretaries, etc.
 - Preventing leaks in the WH and bureaucracy?
- His own skill set from his CEO experience?
 - Would you put a man like DT in a position where his accomplishments depend on persuading others?
- In his role, he needs 100s of people to help
 - And more are walking away – 6 months into the 4 year term
- His own public approval?
- Are these factors that lead you to believe he can be successful? The last 9 months?
 - By traditional political science standards, this is a recipe for disaster – but Trump is not being judged by these standards

Will Congress step in?

- Not so far
 - Tradition since WWII:
 - “President proposes; Congress disposes”
 - Congress weakened by years of staff cuts, feuding
 - Divisions in the Republican party
 - Rs weakened by their own rules, where the majority of the caucus decides
 - You fall in line (a conservative line) or face a primary challenge
 - Fueled by outside money (Club for Growth, Koch brothers organizations, many others)
 - And now it is starting on the left also

Policy wise

- Deconstructing the administrative state
 - Meaning - taxes, regulations, trade pacts
 - Trump and Bannon say these have held down economic growth and infringed upon US sovereignty
 - Many felt that DT would moderate once in office
 - Actions
 - Trade: import restrictions on solar panels
 - Tariffs on Bombardier aircraft
 - Washing machines case brought by Whirlpool
 - Budget: defense/security/military – more \$
 - But not much beyond basic services on the other side

- Appointees
 - Chosen to undo Obama/Bush/Clinton actions
 - Many positions left vacant on the grounds that they are unneeded
 - An effort to weaken the bureaucracy generally

- Deregulation – pro-business actions
 - Attempts to neutralize or eliminate numerous environmental regulations
 - And to eliminate the people who believe in such regulations
 - Internet privacy – gone – so that the providers can share and sell your personal information
 - Obamacare

- Much of this is supported by the Freedom Caucus in the House and by the most conservative Republican Senators
 - Many of whom would like to have significant reductions in entitlement, regulatory, other programs
 - Except defense and the police

What is the purpose?

- Of the President's endless tweeting:
 - Shannon Wheeler's "Sh*t My President Says: The Illustrated Tweets of Donald J. Trump"
 - The tweets are about his base
 - The goal is to "entertain" them
 - Message: you can indulge your prejudices, be racist, be sexist, hate and fear the world
 - Hate DC / federal government – encourages distrust
 - What does that do?
 - It keeps them in the coalition and fires them up
 - Same as campaign rallies and social media – it's **how** he won

What is the purpose

- Of repeating lies time after time after time?
 - Examples:
 - Obama born in Kenya
 - Number at his inaugural
 - Phone calls from the president of Mexico and head of the Boy Scouts
 - Holds the record for being on the cover of Time Magazine
 - Millions of undocumented immigrants voted for HJC

- Clear that the consequences of lying are diminished
- Some politicians no longer have to apologize and ask for another chance to get that chance

- Huge difference between Trump and past Ps:

True/mostly true False/mostly “Pants on fire”

■ Jeb Bush	48%	23%	3%
■ Obama	49%	24%	2%
■ Trump	17%	52%	16%

- The audience? His supporters, not the rest of us
 - Media challenges are then met with charges of “fake media”

Threats to the administration

- The Mueller investigation
- Uncertainty over N. Korea, Iran
- Global warming – where will the P end up?
- DT's relations with congressional Republicans
- His own inability to hear negative news
- His own physical and mental health
- DACA – another case raising the question
 - Thinking for the nation? Or for yourself?

Removal from office?

- Based on history – over time:
 - 1 resignation
 - 2 impeachments & trials
 - 8 deaths
- To impeach = indictment
 - 50% vote in the HR
 - To convict, 2/3rds vote in the U.S. Senate
 - A past lesson: **“Presidential popularity is crucial to surviving an impeachment”**

25th amendment

- VP and cabinet majority (or another body Congress specifies) – VP must agree to this
 - Tell Congress in writing the P “is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office”
 - VP becomes acting P
- But if thereafter the P tells Congress in writing that no inability exists, the P resumes the office unless
 - VP & cabinet majority tell Congress in writing in 4 days that the P is still unable to discharge the powers and duties....
 - Then Congress shall decide the issue, assembling in 48 hours
 - **Congress has 21 days to sustain the VP/cabinet by 2/3rds vote**
 - If not, the P resumes the office

- But what IS “inability to discharge” the duties of the office?
 - Like an impeachable offense, this is a political question
 - Not defined deliberately so that it will be a “political” Q
 - Not a medical question – not up to the MDs
 - Use considered in 1987 (Reagan 76 years old)
- Use of the 25th amendment prematurely
 - Trump would certainly fight it
 - Will result in a huge political fight
 - Many might find it a act of a political coup d'état