

DYSFUNCTION BY DESIGN: TRUMPISM AS ADMINISTRATIVE DOCTRINE

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ABSTRACT. The administration of President Donald Trump caused widespread damage to administrative capabilities of the American federal government. Actions of the administration can be attributed to several causes, including character weaknesses of the President himself, the disadvantages of a political insurgent, and the challenges faced by every president in an era of divided government. Most of the time, however, actions of the administration can be understood as the articulation of a governing strategy known as Trumpism. Important elements of Trumpism will continue to have political force in coming years. Attempts by the Biden administration to restore administrative capabilities will be constrained by these political realities.

THE TRUMP LEGACY

The Trump presidency has ended. What should specialists in public administration make of it? An early advisor to Trump, Steve Bannon, promised that Trump would "deconstruct the administrative state," and the executive establishment of the American federal government has indeed been badly damaged since 2017.¹ The Biden administration will try to repair some of this damage. But its ability to make repairs will be limited by underlying political realities. American politics remains polarized, and many voters still adhere to Trump's ideas about the role of federal government.

For advocates of good government, the Trump record is appalling. Trump ignored, insulted and dismissed experts. He gave key posts to family members, cronies, and amateurs. Many positions were not filled at all. Trump stonewalled Congress and attacked whistleblowers. He flouted the law and issued executive orders that were arbitrary and cruel. He endorsed crank conspiracy theories and undermined the merit civil service. He assaulted the integrity of the Justice Department and other institutions. Good people were driven out of government. Trust in federal agencies declined. And the dysfunction of the federal response to the pandemic of 2020 saw thousands of Americans died needlessly.

President Trump's record can be explained in four ways. Some decisions reflected character deficiencies of the President himself, such as impulsivity and vengefulness.

Mistakes were made because Trump was an insurgent, lacking experience in government and a strong connection to the old Republican Party apparatus. Some actions -- like a heavy reliance on executive orders -- were taken because Trump, like recent predecessors, could not rely on the cooperation of a legislative branch that was partly controlled by the opposing party. Most of the time, however, the actions of the Trump administration were a direct expression of his political agenda, which combined strands of conservatism, right-wing populism, and white nationalism.

In the next section, we describe what Trumpism meant as an administrative doctrine. Then we look at the immediate future. The United States may not see another president with Trump's personal weaknesses for a long time. But important elements of Trumpism are likely to retain broad political appeal for the foreseeable future. The persistence of Trumpism -- perhaps with a different label -- may constrain the ability to repair damage done to the executive establishment since 2017, and the path of administrative development within the federal government in years ahead.

TRUMPISM AND ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM

All national leaders have a strategy for governing: that is, a conception of what national priorities should be, and how those priorities should be pursued (Roberts 2019). President Trump was no exception, even though his governing philosophy -- what we call

Trumpism -- was never articulated with much sophistication. Like all other Presidents, Trump tried to renovate the executive establishment consistent with his philosophy.

In other words, Trumpism had its own distinctive program of administrative reform. This program reflected Trump's hostility toward the "Washington swamp" and the "deep state." It drew on strains of authoritarianism and white nationalism, and reflected Trump's own experience as the unquestioned leader of a family business that skirted the law, exploited governmental loopholes, and resisted accountability. It also extended practices of politicized management that were pioneered by earlier Republican presidents. The **key elements** of the Trump reform program are as follows.²

Divisiveness. Trump led by dividing. A contemporary definition of populism describes this leadership approach: "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 6). For Trump, the 'corrupt elite' included members of the federal government itself. The exceptions were parts of the public service – such as Department of Homeland Security, the military, US Federal Marshals or local police – that were deployed against internal threats, such as immigrants, Black Lives Matter, or Antifa.

Conspiracism. Many elements of Trump's approach reflect what Hofstadter (2012) labeled the paranoid style of thinking, which envisages elaborate conspiracies where

shadowy bureaucrats play an oversized role. Conspiracism has influenced the fringes of Republican party politics for decades, and revived during the Obama presidency. Trump brought conspiracism to center stage. Trump drew on the paranoid style in his public statements more than any presidential candidate since 1948 (Hart 2020) and argued he was being stymied by "deep state" actors determined to see him fail.

Isolationism. Trump's populism also included hostility toward the policy of openness and international engagement that typified American public policy during the preceding thirty years (Roberts 2020b). International agreements on arms, trade, and climate change were abandoned, and traditional alliances damaged on the premise that other countries were taking advantage of the United States.

Delegitimization of public service. In 1981, Ronald Reagan characterized the federal government as "the problem"; but Trump went much further, treating it as an existential threat. Such attacks made it palatable for Trump to oversee the largest federal shutdown in US history, and set the stage for public attacks on federal employees who he believed opposed him. Many employees quit their jobs. The idea of public service as a higher calling had little room in Trump's essentially transactional worldview, reflected in reports that he viewed members of the military as "losers" and "suckers."

Politicized and personalized executive management. Trump's Republican predecessors used two techniques to exert control of the bureaucracy: centralizing

policymaking in the White House, and keeping close watch over political appointees (Moynihan and Roberts 2010). Trump continued this approach but with crucial differences. Policymaking was centralized but also deinstitutionalized and often chaotic. Family members held positions of influence. The President's son-in-law was tasked with managing the opioid epidemic, diplomatic relations with Mexico and China, criminal justice reform, Middle East peace, a shadow COVID-19 task force, and reforms to make the federal government "run like a great American company." Member of Trump's Mar-A-Lago Club wielded influence over the Department of Veteran's Affairs and helped to oust its Secretary.

Loyalty over competence. All Presidents must balance competence and loyalty while making key appointments (Lewis 2007). As an insurgent, Trump lacked a deep bench of potential appointees who were loyal but also experienced. Many positions were left vacant for prolonged periods or staffed with acting officials. The White House often appointed inexperienced junior officials to executive positions over the objections the agency's own leadership. After his acquittal on impeachment charges in February 2020, Trump sought to remove career and political appointees he considered disloyal.

Even if Trump could have drawn from a deeper bench, he offered little sign that he was interested in the credentials. When experts within the executive establishment challenged his conclusions, they were swept from public view, or attacked. The Nixon-era

tactic of transferring uncooperative career officials became commonplace. An entire research unit within the Department of Agriculture was moved to Kansas City because it angered the White House, prompting three quarters of the staff to quit. Weeks before the election, Trump signed an executive order that would convert tens of thousands of career officials into de-facto at-will political appointees (Kettl 2020).

Trump's disdain for expertise extended to science, and eventually cost lives. Long before COVID, CDC officials were told to avoid using the terms "evidence-based" and "science-based." Trump publicly denounced Anthony Fauci, perhaps the most respected infectious disease scientist in the world. Political appointees demanded the right to edit CDC reports, claiming that career scientists were exaggerating the pandemic to hurt Trump politically. Four former CDC Directors wrote an open letter complaining that no president had "ever politicized its science the way Trump has."

Blurring roles. In recent history, presidents have been encouraged to distinguish between three roles: President, candidate, and private citizen. These distinctions eroded under Trump. He refused to separate himself from his business empire. He encouraged agencies, and private actors currying his favor, to support his private businesses. Trump failed to fully disclose potential conflicts of interest, becoming the first President since Nixon to withhold his tax returns.

The line between presidential and political work also blurred. Violations of Hatch Act prohibitions on political work by federal employees went unpunished. Trump used the White House as a site for political events such as the Republican National Convention. Trump's impeachment centered on his trading of public resources in exchange for damaging information against his political opponent. He also used federal agencies to serve his personal interests. Most notably, he refashioned senior intelligence positions, the Department of Justice and the FBI to avoid legal threats, pursue his political opponents, and create a cadre of loyalists that would justify his conduct.

Empty populism. While Trump usually framed politics as a battle between ordinary Americans and the corrupt elite, his policies actually benefited elites. Trump largely eschewed programs that would have directly redistributed resources to supporters facing economic insecurity. He urged Congress to overturn the Affordable Care Act, and then pursued litigation on the basis that it was unconstitutional. Elsewhere, he pushed new administrative burdens such as work requirements on basic social programs such as Medicaid and food stamps (Herd and Moynihan 2018), even as he sought to minimize burdens on corporations by demanding reductions in regulation.

Reduced accountability. In a variety of ways, Trump sought to render ineffective traditional mechanisms for maintaining presidential accountability. Inspectors General were removed for perceived disloyalty. Congressional requests for documentation were

rejected, while whistleblowers were pursued and attacked. A key mechanism to protect political interference of the bureaucracy, the Merit Systems Protection Board, became inoperative because the Trump administration failed to fill vacancies.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

The damage caused by Trump's rejection of basic tenets of good governance was vividly illustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. For many, the pandemic became Trump's Hurricane Katrina – a mass event that created a coherent narrative of how bad government affects the public welfare.

What did Trump do wrong? Leaders in crises are most successful when they provide consistent, sober and fact-based messaging, while calling forth the idea of shared sacrifice and effort (Boin, Stern and Sundelius 2016). Trump's public communication was wildly inconsistent, underplaying the threat, and reflecting personal beliefs rather than evidence. He promoted unproven medical cures, cast doubt on CDC public health guidelines, and held mass events in the midst of a pandemic. His tone was divisive, directing blame at Democratic Governors and Asian Americans with his framing of "Chinese virus." He sidelined experts and politicized scientific agencies such as the FDA and CDC.

The results of the 2018 and 2020 federal elections might seem to provide a vindication for advocates of good governance. The Democratic Party regained control of

the House of Representatives in 2018, winning forty seats from the Republicans. And Trump was ultimately defeated in the November 2020 election. Good governance, it might seem, was good politics too.

But the conclusion should be treated with skepticism. The 2018 election results tell us little, because the party of the incumbent President typically loses influence in Congress after mid-term elections. The 2020 election did not produce a sweeping electoral repudiation of Trumpism at the ballot box. In fact, the election showed that Trumpism was as politically vibrant as ever, notwithstanding 230,000 deaths from COVID-19. Trump won five million more votes in 2020 than in 2016. His share of the popular vote actually increased from 46 percent in 2016 to 48 percent in 2020. Trump won a majority of the popular vote in twenty-four of fifty states.

It appears that a substantial part of the American public remained supportive of Trump despite evidence of a massive policy failure. In fact, many Trump supporters disputed whether there was any significant policy failure at all. In a September 2020 POLITICO survey, Trump supporters did not identify the pandemic as an "extremely important" issue, and more than ninety percent of likely Trump voters approved of his handling of the pandemic (Politico 2020). In an August 2020 YouGov poll, almost sixty percent of Republicans said that the number of fatalities from coronavirus was acceptable (Sanders 2020). Trump's approval rating among Republicans was as high in the autumn

of 2020 as it had been at the time of his inauguration; his overall approval rating was higher on average in 2020 than in 2017.³

Without COVID, President Trump probably would have won the 2020 election. Put another way, much of the American public was uninterested in Trump's attacks on the federal executive establishment. Indeed, his supporters viewed these attacks as evidence that he was delivering on his commitments. His setbacks and missteps were often construed as evidence of the resilience and power of that establishment.

Trump may be gone, but some version of Trumpism as a governing philosophy will persist. Trump showed how a populist authoritarian model can be applied to the American state. Political entrepreneurs within the Republican Party will look for ways of repackaging the important elements of Trumpism in less offensive ways. Elements of Trumpism -- such as its commitment to the theory of the unitary executive -- are likely to be supported by the federal judiciary, thanks to the Trump administration's success in filling judicial vacancies with appointees who are overwhelmingly white, male, and conservative.

President Biden will need to account for these political realities as he develops his own program of administrative reform for the next four years. Some Trump policies -- such as those effected through executive orders or administrative action -- can be easily reversed. Biden himself will set the tone by showing more respect for federal public

servants and the conventional processes for decision-making. But Biden will also face constraints. Progressive elements of the Democratic Party will push for major change on healthcare, climate change and civil rights, which would imply an expansion of federal capabilities in these areas. Progressives will also push for a reversal of Trump policies on immigration enforcement. But these are also areas where the risk of reaction from swing voters is highest.

The reality is that the American polity is deeply divided on the question of what the proper role of the federal government should be. Many swing voters supported Biden because he promised to act as a conciliator and peacemaker, not as a reformer. Much of the Biden presidency is likely to consist of brokerage between camps -- progressives on one side, moderates and former Trump voters on the other -- and administrative style may follow political imperatives. The new governing strategy -- Bidenism -- may emphasize consultation, conciliation and restraint. It may even reflect some aspects of Trumpism, such as skepticism about free trade, open immigration, and international engagement.

LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

Scholars of public administration should draw an important lesson from the experience of the last few years. Our field has proved to be particularly inept at looking

at the larger trends in American politics and anticipating how these trends are likely to affect the domain of public administration. Scholarship has been largely reactive. Every crisis -- the 9/11 attacks, Hurricane Katrina and other natural disasters, the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, the rise of populism, the COVID-19 pandemic and the movement for racial justice -- has come as a surprise, usually triggering a rash of special issues within academic journals on the topic of the moment.

At the same time, the field has not been well-equipped to formulate a coherent response when it is confronted with a serious challenge to basic institutions. Leading journals and associations were slow to articulate concerns about President Trump's agenda, and in some cases failed to mount any protest at all. This might be symptomatic of a broader weakness in the field. Over multiple generations, the field has retreated from the domain of grand politics, focusing more heavily on mid-level questions of public management. One result is an inability to talk coherently about regime design and regime values, and a reluctance to rise to the defense of core institutions at critical moments.

The first decades of this century have been challenging, and there will be more turbulence in coming decades. Intense debate about the role of government will persist, and so will challenges to core institutions. We can prepare for these challenges but refining our capacity to talk about the macro-level of public administration: about socio-economic trends, executive leadership, governing strategies, and regime design (Roberts 2019;

Moynihan 2020). This does mean a retreat from rigorous research about middle-level questions of public management. Rather, it means welcoming additional approaches that will improve our ability to anticipate and respond to threats to liberal democratic governance in the United States and abroad.

Notes

¹ The "administrative state" was often discussed during the Trump presidency. For a discussion of different meanings attached to the term, see (Roberts 2020a).

² Moynihan (2020) offers a more detailed account and sources for the key factual claims made here.

³ Data is available from the Gallup Poll's Presidential Job Approval Center: <https://news.gallup.com/interactives/185273/r.aspx>.

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