Governing in Conflict or Cooperation?
Trump's Populism and the Republican Party

Jon Herbert

Abstract

Trump's election in 2016 generated an unusual political alignment, shackling a fervently populist presidency to an establishment political party in Congress. Trump appears to have emerged victorious from this conflict, as elected Republicans appeared to tolerate many of his populist impulses. Many explain this behavior through a "fear" argument, suggesting that Trump bullied senior Republicans, using rank-and-file Republican support and his communication skills to quell their resistance. This essay challenges that argument. Instead, it examines the nature of the relationship between a political party and a populist presidency in a deeply partisan era, developing Sidney Milkis's work on the "New American Party System." Three arenas—policy, institutional, and electoral—of conflict or cooperation between presidency and party are identified as are the incentives of party and presidency in these arenas. Rather than the model of conflict and presidential dominance underpinning the "fear" argument, these facilitate the identification of an alternative coalitional-transactional model. The essay outlines a brief application of this framework, of three arenas and coalition transactions, to the Trump case study. This application explains why many Republicans were willing to tolerate Trump's leadership. The clashes expected of the Madisonian system, and potentially exaggerated by the presence of a populist in the White House, are moderated by shared partisanship, hence acceptance of Trump's behavior by Republicans. This analysis presents worrying evidence of the U.S. political system's vulnerability to populist excesses in an era of heightened partisanship, as members of the president's party refuse to deploy their powers in defense of the overall system by prioritizing calculations based in partisan conflict.

Keywords: Backsliding, Constitution, political parties, populism, presidential leadership, Republican Party, Trump, U.S. presidency.

───────────────

Jon Herbert is Senior Lecturer in U.S. Politics in the School of Social, Political and Global Studies at Keele University, Staffordshire, England. <j.n.herbert@keele.ac.uk>

Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election of 2016 sent shockwaves through the U.S. political system. During his campaign, Trump had delivered populist rhetoric attacking elites in Washington, displaying a cavalier attitude toward the Constitution, and habitually delegitimizing the norms and institutions of the U.S. political system. He preached industrial-strength condemnation of the establishment and saved particular ire for democratic institutions, including judges, legislators, both political parties, the "lamestream" media, and former presidents. His discussion of the institution of the presidency seemed to involve the wielding of power in his hands alone. In a period characterized by the rise of authoritarian leaders and democratic decay, Trump fitted into a global pattern of a populist assault upon democracy. Many observers considered his election a threat to the U.S. constitutional system, triggering extensive discussion of democratic backsliding, all underpinned by the question, "Will the system hold?"

The Madisonian system depends upon the willingness of institutions to guard their prerogatives, so containing the aspirations of any potential authoritarian and that individual's pursuit of power. The design of the Constitution relies upon players within these institutions to act to ensure the survival of U.S. democracy. After the 2016 election, Republicans in Washington had a particular potential to contain Trump's populist excesses. The new president would be reliant on the conduct of others if he were to impose his will. The U.S. constitutional system places elected officials in the position to exert such power to influence, and constrain, presidential action. Formal constitutional powers could have been deployed such as oversight, the power of the purse, and even impeachment. Democrats could be expected to resist on partisan grounds, but two years of minority status and exclusion from the executive branch offered them only limited purchase on the Trump presidency. In contrast, Republicans, sharing their party label with the president, would be the key actors. As Trump took office, they were equipped with majorities in both houses of Congress and staffed the new administration. Party mechanisms gave them access to a network of interests and voters to be influenced. Public profile also offered the opportunity to articulate concerns over a Trump presidency.

What followed over the length of the Trump presidency, though, was extraordinary, as the Republican Party elite chose not to contain Donald Trump. The party elite largely selected a strategy of public tolerance, evasion, and denial for four years, culminating in many of them maintaining the biggest lie, that the 2020 election was stolen from the incumbent. The question is not whether they had the capacity to constrain Trump, but why elite Republicans chose to exercise their power so rarely. Why did those in the position to defend the constitutional system not do so? This essay explains why Republicans were slow to resist Trump, raising serious concerns about the interactions between populism and the U.S. political system and the system's capacity to resist a populist threat.

Much contemporary commentary outlined a simple narrative of the relationship between the Trump presidency and the Republican Party. That account begins with Trump's hostile takeover of the Republican Party in the 2016 primaries. Despite a substantial swathe of "Never Trumpers" at the elite level, Trump reached the mass of the party—his so-called "base"—and won the presidency. This began a pattern of Trump wielding his support among the party's rank-and-file to threaten the elite and force their obedience. He believed in developing leverage over his fellow politicians and even in maintaining a little persuasive "fear."[1] Bolstered by persistently high approval ratings among Republicans in the public, Trump could quash attempts by party elites to articulate objections to his leadership. Trump took over the Republican Party, the ultimate expression of this command being the party's platform statement adopted at the 2020 Republican nominating convention, which in terms of substance, at least, only resolved to call "on the media to engage in accurate and unbiased reporting" and declared "that the Republican Party has and will continue to enthusiastically support the President's America-first agenda."[2]

At best, this "fear" story is merely a fragment of a much broader explanation of Trump's apparent command of the Republican Party. It is an account built on fragile presumptions. It relies on belief that Republican politicians had little capacity to act for themselves, including influencing the views of their party members. It relies on belief that Trump had unprecedented ability to reach the public, despite scholarship on the limited power of presidents to "go public."[3] It relies on belief in Trump's strategic genius. This essay offers an alternative explanation of Republicans' behavior and the interactions between Trump and his party. By considering Trump's presidency and Republicans' behavior as a product of grafting a right-wing populist presidency onto a deeply "partisanized" political system and identifying the range of incentives his fellow partisans had to avoid crossing their president, an alternative explanation of the Trump presidency and the lack of Republican resistance to it emerges.

Trump, Populism, and Partisanship: An Unusual Alignment

Trump's ascent to the presidency presented an extraordinary clash. Arguably, Trump was the most populist candidate elected to the presidency. He would confront a Republican Party at a time when it was in its most ideologically coherent state in well over a century. There are contradictions inherent to

---

[1] Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

[2] Republican National Committee Executive Committee, "Resolution Regarding the Republican Party Platform," Ballotpedia, https://ballotpedia.org/The_Republican_Party_Platform,_2020 (accessed April 2, 2021).

[3] George C. Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

layering populist leadership over an established partisan system: how does a vocally anti-establishment president interact with the embodiment of the establishment, a successful party of 160 years' standing?

The history of populism in the United States did not offer encouragement to the nascent Trump presidency. The U.S. system has a long record of containing populist impulses. The literature on American populism can be read as containing two distinct schools, one more historical and one more presidential.

Historical scholarship emphasizes the tendency of populism to emerge in the form of social movements, rather than expressing itself through the main political parties. Articulating the basic populist construct—a mass expression of disillusionment with an established order thought to be dominated by a powerful and corrupt elite—these movements threaten both the constitutional order and establishment policies. However, they are often undermined by the mainstream political parties, which respond to the political opportunity of populists' grievances by adopting sympathetic policy positions. The social movement, and sometimes the third party it had engendered, are politically outmaneuvered and the popularity of their leaders wanes. Populism is defanged before it can reach direct political influence in Washington.

Presidential populism, in contrast, is often seen as a more recent and less threatening phenomenon. In this reading, presidential populism is not just prevalent but an American norm: in the United States, populist and mainstream politics are usually interwoven.[4] Candidates and presidents rail against the flawed nature of U.S. democracy and the failure to deliver the promises of the American dream to the middle class on a regular basis. They present themselves as outsiders going to "sort out the mess in Washington"; populism is a strategic discursive tool usually deployed by challengers and political outsiders, not incumbents.[5] This weaker form of populism carries only a limited threat of grand institutional reform and is regularly contained by the political system in three ways. First, Terri Bimes and Quinn Mulroy suggest that presidential populists, once elected, downplay their populist claims and become the establishment.[6] Second, others point to the predominant tradition in considering presidential power as the means to contain a populist president. Even if populism were to mutate into a governing strategy that tested constitutional bounds, it would be contained by the Madisonian system and its core principle of setting institution against institution in a battle for power. A

---

[4] Frances E. Lee, "Populism and the American Party System: Opportunities and Constraints," *Perspectives on Politics* 18, no. 2 (2020): 1, and Alan Ware, "The United States: Populism as Political Strategy," in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, ed. Yves Meny and Yves Surel (New York: Cambridge University Press), 119.

[5] Bart Bonikowski and Noam Gidron, "The Populist Style in American Politics: Presidential Campaign Discourse, 1952—1996," *Social Forces* 94, no. 4 (2016): 1594.

[6] Terri Bimes and Quinn Mulroy, "The Rise and Decline of Presidential Populism," *Studies in American Political Development* 18, no. 3 (2004): 136-159.

third mechanism of containment lies in the inability of the presidency to lead on policy. Bimes and Mulroy suggest that the presidency must govern from a position of consensus, especially if state-building is to be undertaken. Pursuit of reform demands governing from the center, rather than a populist extreme.[7] Frances Lee uses a similar argument, claiming that the U.S. system resists single-party rule. Populism's tendency to encourage polarization makes it even harder to achieve the super-majorities often required to achieve reform.[8]

Trump's circumstances and behavior, though, did not fit any of these patterns particularly comfortably. First, the containment mechanism associated with the historical examples did not function: Trump was elected. Questions on how a populist governs in the U.S. system looked very different once such a populist was sitting at the "Resolute" desk in the Oval Office, rather than just threatening populist revolution from the stump. Furthermore, Trump's populism did not simply fade away, as reflected in his continuing rhetoric against the establishment and the institutions of U.S. democracy and policy pronouncements that appeared to challenge constraints on presidential power.

The comparative literature on populism offered clear, and for Trump much more favorable, cues on how the president's battles with Republicans might play out. In many non-U.S. examples of populism, the relevant political party owes its existence or revival to the populist leader and acts as his or her personal vehicle. According to this scholarship, Republican deference might have been expected. Trump's situation, though, was different. The Republican Party did not owe its status to Trump; instead, Trump inherited established party structures after a victory over genuine resistance to his leadership. Trump led a highly successful Republican Party that was already in majority control of the House of Representatives and dominant in state-level elections in the first half of the 2010s. The Republican Party may have had image problems in 2016, but it was by no means moribund nor wholly dependent upon its president. Both sides in the presidency-party clash seemed empowered.

The remaining question, then, was how this clash would play out and whether powerfully placed Republicans would use their power to resist Trump. He had won office during a period of intense partisanship, many observers regarding partisan conflict and its prosecution as the defining feature of the period's politics. The sharpening of partisan incentives has done much to shape the conduct of American politics, creating an increasingly rigid two-party system, in both ideological and institutionally competitive terms.[9] The election of a populist president, then, confronted a deeply partisanized system. The 2016 election produced a highly unusual institutional alignment with, theoretically, a set of inherent contradictions. The disruptive president, with radical policy

---

[7] Ibid.

[8] Lee, "Populism and the American Party System," 370-388.

[9] Frances E. Lee, *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

ideas and a disdain for the establishment, was shackled to an established party, that party's agenda, its elite leaders, and established institutions. The process of reconciling those differences is key to understanding the politics that followed and so the events of the Trump years. This layering of a populist presidency over a partisanized system created a situation laden with tensions. The president threatened the constitutional system, and those sharing a party label with him would have the clearest responsibility for maintaining the health of the institutional balance at its heart.

Understanding the Party-Presidency Relationship

To understand the choices made during the Trump presidency demands examination of the incentives of both sets of players. It is useful, therefore, to examine how this binding of a populist president and an established party might work. The literature on the presidency-party relationship highlights sources of conflict and cooperation. Understanding the presidency's and the party's mutual needs promotes a better understanding of the incentives for both and the limited incentives for representatives of Trump's party to use their positions to constrain him. The analysis below identifies potential goals for presidency and party, and how the presence of a populist president might complicate them, as a basis for a subsequent consideration of the currencies exchanged between the two.

The Party: What Does It Need of the Presidency?

Sidney Milkis and various co-authors identify a "New American Party System" that has developed since the 1980s.[10] This concept offers a framework for looking at party interaction with a presidency. They note a series of phenomena changing party politics in the United States: growing public scepticism of government and disgust with partisan conflict; increasing polarization in voting patterns on the basis of party among members of Congress; heightened interparty conflict over the direction of policy and the growth of national party organizations; alongside a revival of grassroots engagement. These observations encouraged them to argue that a new system has emerged with consequences for presidential attempts to lead, describing "an emergent style of partisan presidential leadership featuring vigorous efforts to accomplish party objectives."[11] Focusing on evidence from the Reagan and Bush administrations especially, they argue that parties have come to expect forms of cooperation from the presidency in a system of "executive-centered partisanship." They

---

[10] Sidney M. Milkis and Jesse H. Rhodes, "George W. Bush, the Republican Party, and the 'New' American Party System," *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 3 (2007): 461-488.

[11] Sidney M. Milkis, Jesse H. Rhodes, and Emily J. Charnock, "What Happened to Post-Partisanship? Barack Obama and the New American Party System," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 1 (2012): 58.

can be characterized as looking for presidential leadership on three fronts, which can be broadly labeled as "winning power through elections," "policy leadership," and "furthering party power in governance."

Some argue that parties exist primarily as a device to win elections. While that is a less weighty argument in a more ideological era, winning power through elections is still a core goal for a political party. Presidents play a key role in party building and organization. This includes fortifying grassroots organizations, raising and distributing campaign funds, and working to expand the party's appeal.[12] Presidents are important in ways that extend beyond immediate party building, however, as the president is integral to developing the party's public messaging and image. As Gary Jacobson's recent work suggests, presidential candidates and presidents shape party images significantly. While perceptions of a candidate are driven initially by the party label, Jacobson shows that this process is quickly reversed during a campaign, as opinions about the president come to shape the public perception of the party. The impact may be immediate and may last for a generation.[13] Hence, the party has a very high stake in the president's choice of messaging. Furthermore, in an era of negative partisanship, the party looks to the presidency to lead the tribe: the president must prosecute partisan conflict, confronting and damaging the opposition party.[14] The goal of these activities is, of course, to win office and, from the party's perspective, not just to access the presidency *per se*, but also to use it to accomplish the party's policy and power objectives.

Policy leadership involves the president's pronouncing of party doctrine and selling it to the rest of the political system and public.[15] If its presidential candidate wins, a party travels with hope and expectation that its policy objectives will be achieved. The presidency is the gateway to enhanced control of the executive branch; after decades of delegation of legislative power to the executive, much concentration of power in the White House, and with a gridlocked Congress with less ability to assert control of policy, that is a vital resource. The presidency has become increasingly important to partisan pursuit of the party's policy objectives as the party has become more united around those objectives. Parties are now more dependent on the presidency for executive support to change policy.

---

[12] Sidney M. Milkis, *The President and the Parties: The Transformation of the American Party System since the New Deal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Milkis and Rhodes "George W. Bush, the Republican Party, and the 'New' American Party System"; and Daniel J. Galvin, *Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[13] Gary C. Jacobson, *Presidents and Parties in the Public Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

[14] B. Dan Wood, *The Myth of Presidential Representation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[15] Milkis and Rhodes, "George W. Bush, the Republican Party, and the 'New' American Party System."

The party's goals once a president is in office are not just policy related. The sharpening partisan conflict has given rise to a concerted effort to partisanize the federal government, a campaign more effectively prosecuted with control of the White House. As the competition between the parties has intensified, each party aspires to maximize its advantage.[16] The party's pursuit of power demands that it try to control as many elements of federal processes as possible. Most obviously, this process of partisan inundation has involved persistent efforts to influence court appointments, but more broadly it has also been reflected in efforts to control supposedly nonpartisan, independent institutions and processes to favor the incumbent party, including institutions that play a role in electoral politics. High-profile examples include the growing partisan nature of U.S. attorney appointments since the 1980s and manipulation of scientific reports to favor the party's chosen agenda. Staffing is a further key point of access to power. With its power of appointment, the White House machinery to oversee rules and regulatory processes and a capacity to structure institutions to embed preferred power structures and values, the presidency is an extraordinary vantage point for the furthering of party power.[17]

The party is dependent upon the presidency in the three ways described above. However, each of the three areas—winning elections, policy leadership, and partisan control—is a potential area of agreement or disagreement between president and party. To consider the implications of populism in the presidency, it is worth adding a further element. A commitment to partisan activity involves a particular "mental map" of the U.S. political system which identifies and legitimizes the role of the political party. The party functions as a representative organization, connecting with voters and transmitting their concerns to Washington. The party acts as a bridging mechanism between the local and the national arenas and across institutions in Washington within the pluralist system. Parties may want to be seen to perform that role to assert their legitimacy as political actors. This mental map stands in contrast with populist assumptions.

The Presidency: What Does a Populist Presidency Need of the Party?

Just as the political party has needs of the presidency, the presidency has needs of the party. What follows is derived from two different ways of thinking about these needs. It begins with consideration of the needs of a presidency that is specifically populist, but the commentary develops to integrate broader understanding of presidential needs.

---

[16] Lee, *Insecure Majorities*.

[17] Thomas J. Weko, *The Politicizing Presidency: The White House Personnel Office, 1948–1994* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), and David E. Lewis, *Presidents and the Politics of Agency Design: Political Insulation in the United States Government Bureaucracy, 1946–1997* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser define populism as a "thin-centred ideology" and a political strategy, presenting populism's "mental map" of the political system in quite simple terms, with its separation of society into "the pure people versus the corrupt elite" and presentation of politics as "an expression of the general will of the people."[18] The leader, in this context, claims to be tribune of the people delivering popular agency. In this hyper-majoritarian vision, no force should oppose the people's will, as expressed by the leader.

The populist leader, therefore, must be seen to perform the above role as agent of the people. To continue with Mudde and Kaltwasser's description, populism is distinguished by "emergence of a strong and charismatic figure, who concentrates power and maintains a direct connection with the masses." The leader "seeks to govern based on direct and unmediated support from their followers."[19] For the presidential candidate, the populist approach performs key strategic functions. It shapes the means to win election by defining the nature of the candidate's public messaging. Once in office, that approach is the successful candidate's source of authority: the president has been elected to implement the public will. This connection is performed through a folkloric style that embraces popular culture, rejecting expertise and intellectualism to demonstrate understanding of the people's perspective. Maintaining that populist narrative is crucial, therefore, but imposes requirements that are not necessarily easy to achieve. Particularly, this strategy causes problems for the president's relationship with his political party.

The difference between the roles of political parties in the different mental maps of the U.S. system is marked. Personalized leadership is largely independent of party, as there is only a sole representative of the people and no intermediate. The populist leader cannot be seen as dependent and must be considered as a dominant force who achieves on behalf of the people. Any close association risks being seen as serving the established elites and thus betraying their outsider status. In this model, parties are denied their representative roles and reduced to offering due reverence as loyal followers of the great leader.

In a further problematic dynamic for parties, the populist leader will always be tempted to portray established leaders of political parties as functionaries of the elite and therefore as illegitimate actors. The populist leader must delegitimize other institutions, treating them not as representatives, but by labeling them as agents of the elite establishment, portraying them as barriers to the realization of the popular will represented by the leader. It may serve populist leaders' messaging well to be seen to reject and defeat their party. Tensions between partisan and populist mental maps clearly suggest reasons

---

[18] Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

[19] Ibid., 3-4.

for tension between party and populist presidency as they attempt to perform roles that are mutually irreconcilable except through party deference.

In the U.S. system, this image of an independent, populist president acting against the establishment must be achieved while the president depends upon party help. In pursuing their main goals, re-election, good public policy, establishing a legacy, and gathering power, presidents traditionally look to their party for support in three categories: policy leadership, winning power through elections, and maximizing presidential power in governance.[20]

The president and his staff will need to develop a full policy agenda, relying on the extant work of participants in the party coalition. Few presidents enter office with a detailed design for their policy initiatives and most call on policy experts from within the party.[21] This challenge is particularly pertinent for populist leaders, as they usually politicize new issues during their campaigns, needing both careful policy planning to deliver policy alternatives and the parties' willingness to embrace these new positions. The president will also depend on party members and mechanisms to sell his agenda. With unfamiliar policy positions, the populist leader faces the challenging task of breaking down traditional policy structures and understandings inherent in existing ideological frameworks. This is not a solo task. The party plays a key role in magnifying and legitimizing the president's voice, on a scale from national news shows, via social media, to the doorstep. Especially given the predilection of media coverage to focus on intraparty conflict, the populist leader who wishes to provide policy leadership depends upon party support.

Presidents, populist or otherwise, also attempt to maximize their power and will rely on party support to achieve this. They depend upon on party mechanisms to overcome institutional resistance throughout the U.S. political system, whether considering Congress, the federal bureaucracy, or statehouses. Party is a device needed to overcome all the veto points in a system of dispersed power. Even if the populist leader does not wish to pass legislation, party support will be required to get budgets through, as will the party's tolerance if the president chooses to take contentious executive actions. While the presidency can exert executive power, especially using the tools of the administrative presidency, it depends on the party to tolerate those actions where party members could use checks to constrain the presidency. To pursue these goals, the presidency needs a staff, both in the White House and to fill each position detailed in the "Plum Book" of federal appointments. If a president is to impose an agenda on the federal bureaucracy, agents are required

---

[20] Paul C. Light, *The President's Agenda: Domestic Policy Choice from Kennedy to Clinton* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), and Terry M. Moe, "The Politicized Presidency," in *The New Direction in American Politics*, ed. John E. Chubb and Paul E. Peterson (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1985).

[21] James L. Sundquist, *Politics and Policy: The Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Years* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1968).

throughout the executive branch. Appointing so many people is a task well beyond the capacity of any president's personal networks and certainly that of a populist less embedded in the existing political system. Party cooperation is required to expand presidential power.

Last, but not least, presidents also rely on their party to pursue their re-election. Whether using party identification to trigger voter support, state level organizations and activists, party money, or party endorsements, partisanship still dominates U.S. elections. While an incumbent president may capture some of the relevant party mechanisms through a targeted appointment strategy, the president still depends upon party support to win elections.

U.S. presidents, even those of a populist inclination, remain shackled to their party. The populist president is clearly dependent on his party to lead, whether pursuing a policy agenda, maximizing power while in government, or winning re-election. Reliant as he may be, at the same time a populist president needs to hold that same party at arm's length and emphasize his separation from it, potentially even confronting it to assert his own leadership and demonstrate the conquering of the corrupt elite.

Characterizing the Presidency-Party Relationship: Mutual Dependence and Currencies of Exchange

Populist presidents and political parties within the U.S. system are mutually dependent in a series of ways. The above identifies three areas—the policy agenda, pursuit of electoral success, and pursuit of power in office—either for antagonistic rivalry if cooperation is not forthcoming, or for mutual benefit if agreement can be reached. Each requires closer examination, as below, to understand what threats presidency and party pose to each other and what scope for cooperation might be possible.

The tensions around policy leadership are the easiest to conceptualize. Presidency and party may pursue different agendas, and each may fail to achieve its policy preferences without cooperation. The presidency might be used to challenge and change party doctrine, promoting different agendas. While the shared party label is usually a basis for some degree of congruence between presidential and party agendas, this tension is persistent: Skowronek's understanding of the presidency as a disruptive force describes presidents needing to win party support for new ideas, while operating within constraints imposed by the extant policy regime.[22] Potential for cooperation, of course, is found in areas of agreement on ideology and policy.

The arrival of a populist suggests greater ideological distance between party and presidency, as the president is promising radical change. The normal party process of honing an agenda for office is bypassed by the outsider's election.[23] Populists need to demonstrate action on their campaign issues,

---

[22] Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1997).

[23] Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*.

delivering their promises and reaffirming that they provide a different type of leadership. A populist presidency would appear to make for higher levels of tension.

Clashes, though, are not inevitable. The policy agenda is divisible; presidency and party may agree to pursue shared goals while disagreeing on other issues. Points of contention may be downplayed. Logrolling, on a grand scale, might lead to agreement of mutual support despite disagreements. Furthermore, the populist outsider may come to office unprepared to lead on policy on at least three levels. First, the outsider may not have policy alternatives developed and will need help from the party, or allied organizations, to develop those alternatives. Second, the outsider's need to appoint staff from the party may also give the party influence over the agenda. Third, the party may have, given the power it holds at various veto points in the system, leverage over the presidency to decide the fate of presidential proposals. Each of these features of the party-populist interaction would allow the party influence over the shape of the emergent agenda. Examining the Trump example demands attention to agenda items for which there was agreement and to the means used by both sides to further the goals about which they could not agree.

As detailed above, both presidency and party attempt to maximize their power once in office. For the presidency, the threat is that the party chooses to constrain the president's institutional ambitions, resisting the assertion of power. Presidents fear that legislative and oversight powers, even impeachment, could be used to constrain a presidency. For the party, there is a risk that the presidency becomes overbearingly powerful and denies the party access to executive power, so squandering, as partisans might see it, the opportunity to further party interests. In the most extreme form, the party itself might be marginalized, or subjugated, by overweening presidential power.

The Founding Fathers' expectation that institutional friction would be generated by the ambitions of all players to gather power was based in a vision that rejected faction. They considered power as a zero-sum game in which one institution gathering power did so at another's expense. That understanding, though, was based on the ideas of institutional conflict, most notably between the presidency and Congress, rather than in the light of the party acting as a bridge across institutional boundaries. The mutual benefits to be derived from party and presidency working together across institutional boundaries have long been a staple of U.S. politics. While the threat of an assertive presidency might well be at the expense of congressional or judicial authority, it is not so apparent that it would be the party's loss. If the presidency asserts its power in the pursuit of partisan goals, it is not entirely clear why the party should resist. Partisan individuals throughout the system may wear two hats, maintaining partisan and institutional loyalties concurrently, but their partisan identity may applaud a presidency's purposes as their institutional identity hesitates. This dynamic is most obvious in presidential attempts to exert executive power beyond the boundaries of normal presidential authority. Many recent works

have emphasized that the presidency can be constrained by other players within the system, so the presidency's challenge is to establish what behavior will be tolerated. Andrew Rudalevige writes of executive orders often being issued in cooperation with the relevant legislators, or on occasions legislators asking for the presidency to take executive action.[24] Depending on the goals of the action, other players in the system, especially those sharing a party label, may encourage executive action. That there is an inherent clash between presidential executive action and party interests is anything but inevitable. With Congress delegating substantial powers to the executive and the party keen to exploit the opportunities to harness that power, presidential-partisan cooperation in pursuit of shared goals would seem an obvious outcome.

The presence of the populist presidency, therefore, would appear to compound the threat of concentrating power in the presidency, as the populist presidency is inclined to this centralization and the party, potentially sharing these goals, has incentives to facilitate, rather than restrain that power grab. There are two qualifiers. First, the populist president needs such cooperation to remain private to maintain the desired public messaging, emphasizing the appearance of denying power to the party's elites. Power should appear a matter of personal, presidential whim. Second, the populist's hollow agenda creates a space for the party to exert its influence: the populist's lack of planning and planning capacity, in terms of staff and expertise, offers an opportunity for the established party with these resources to exploit. The shared need to access presidential power establishes a basis for cooperation.

Analyzing the Trump presidency demands examination of the potential shared objectives in terms of holding and applying power, alongside the institutional tensions expected between the presidency and other parts of the U.S. system and consideration of the degree to which party-presidential cooperation facilitates or constrains the pursuit of partisan power.

Pursuit of power through elections gives the populist presidency and the party many reasons to cooperate. There is strong mutual interest in the party and presidency cooperating to win both the presidential election and, if the president wishes to further his policy agenda, elections to lesser offices as well. The threats for both sides are serious. The party fears a president who will damage the party image and brand, perhaps through poor messaging. The president may fail to expand the party's appeal and, ultimately, lose the election and the party's access to the White House. There is the possibility that the president fails to embrace the party, "going solo" to achieve his own re-election without building or supporting the party. For the presidency, losing control of the party machinery could be a substantial hindrance to efforts to enthuse and mobilize voters. Equally, a party pursuing a different messaging

---

[24] Andrew Rudalevige, *By Executive Order: Bureaucratic Management and the Limits of Presidential Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

strategy from the presidency compromises the president's message and implies a lack of effective leadership. The president, too, could lose.

There are, then, substantial incentives for party and presidency to work together. They normally portray unity; party nominating conventions that fail to do so, such as those of Democrats in 1980 and Republicans in 1992, are regarded as terrible burdens for campaigns to bear. The media concentrate on such intraparty divisions. There is some ambiguity here, however. In a period when parties and partisanship are unpopular, a candidate's attempts to reach out toward nonpartisan voters, at the expense of partisan loyalty, may be tolerated as part of expanding the party's appeal, as demonstrated by Clinton's "Third Way" and George W. Bush's "Compassionate Conservativism." There is an incentive to present the presidential candidate as distanced from the party mainstream.

A populist greatly increases the chances of "going solo." The populist lacks the habits and loyalties of being bound by and working with the party. He may have emerged without relying on partisan insiders. He may not be tied to party by devotion to the ideological agenda either. Wanting to be seen as outside the party and in opposition to its elite encourages the populist to use the party as a rhetorical foil and demonstrate that opposition. There is a substantial imbalance here: the populist president has a strong incentive to break with the party, but the risk to the party is extremely high. In a two-party contest, there is little incentive for the party to pull away from the presidency. Throwing a sitting president aside creates an image of such division it is highly likely to gift the opposition party four years of presidential power. Furthermore, a populist is unlikely to go quietly; indeed, the populist presents himself as the representative of the people, suggesting such an action could be labeled an elite coup. Unless the populist's presidency is so damaging to the party's image that there are clear long-term costs and no chance of a victory in November, the party has little incentive to abandon its president.

Analysis, therefore, designed to assess the party-presidency relationship should focus on the degree of coordinated activity between the populist presidency and the party, identifying how they attempt to reconcile tensions, with particular attention to any presidential attempt to "go solo." Coordination of messaging and public criticism by the president of the party and vice versa are especially worth attention as they are high stakes activities.

Much of the above is framed by an expectation that the presidency and the party will cooperate on the basis of mutual dependence. A process of populist-partisan coalition is presented as negotiation and bargaining over tensions that may be recast as locations for transactional exchange in a range of currencies: elements of the policy agenda, cooperation in pursuit of institutional power, and cooperation in campaigning. The coalition may be uneasy and in a state of perpetual negotiation, perhaps involving different levels of tension and cooperation in and across different currencies. The above offers less acknowledgement of the potential for one side or the other in the relationship

to try to dominate, rather than cooperate. Given the nature of populist rhetoric, with its focus on the leader's power, that seems a substantial oversight. The relationship could be conceived in terms of power. Sidney Milkis, Jesse Rhodes, and Emily Charnock consider this option, arguing that the party system is "becoming executive-centred, with partisan activity revolving around the political needs of the president, even to the extent of denigrating broader collective purposes."[25] They worry that "the party [could] serve chiefly as an instrument of—rather than a check on—presidential power."[26] The first part of the analysis, then, considers whether this is a relationship based on transaction or dominance.

Trump's Populism and Republican Partisanship

Trump argued publicly that he was the dominant force in his relationship with the Republican Party: the party elite were vanquished by, and rendered subservient to, the president. The following examines that interpretation of the Trump term, and, identifying many reasons to doubt such an explanation, progresses to consider the Trump-Republican relationship in much more detail, focusing on each of the three arenas, policy, institutional, and electoral.

Dominance or Coalition?

The idea that Trump dominated the Republican Party relies on the "hostile takeover" narrative generated during the 2016 primaries. In this much recited account, Trump was classically populist, mobilizing the mass of his party, "the base," against the horrified party establishment. Subsequently, responding to the message sent by Republican primary voters, the elite had little choice but to follow him.

Trump's public behavior, performing as a strong leader, reinforced this impression. He reveled in public demonstrations of his power, particularly imposing it on any establishment figure who might resist him. He consciously attempted to diminish some individuals who defied him within the party, Mark Sanford (R-SC) proving a high-profile case. He aimed to generate "fear" of his power, to inform the political calculations of anyone considering crossing him.[27] Thus, combined with his refusal to be bound by the standard rules of political communication in Washington, Trump performed the curbing of the establishment by the great leader acting as agent of the mass and alleviated the threat that occupying the presidency would compromise his outsider image and authenticity.

The limited nature of overt opposition to Trump from Republicans in Washington, broad patterns of congressional voting among those representing

---

[25] Milkis, Rhodes, and Charnock, "What Happened to Post-Partisanship?" 60.

[26] Ibid., 69.

[27] Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House*.

the party, and many journalistic accounts all support the argument that Trump took over the party.[28] In this interpretation, those who occupied crucial veto points could not oppose the president for fear of his support among the Republican rank-and-file. The failed impeachment in the Senate seems a primary example of deference among Republicans to their popular, among in-partisans, leader. This unnerving analysis is, though, a straw man. Trump faced partisan dependencies that limited his room for maneuver, as demonstrated on a regular basis.

Even if "the base" was a key source of Trump's authority, he had to be sensitive to that base. Indeed, as Trump's perceived leverage over the rest of the party, the base's support had to be maintained at all costs. Trump's behavior suggested that this calculation was at the forefront of his day-to-day thinking. Some interpreted his heavy consumption of political television programming, particularly from Fox, simply as a function of his ego or his obsession with branding his presidency. These partial explanations of Trump's viewing habits neglect his understanding of base politics. Trump regarded Fox as a means to both influence and monitor the opinion of the base. Staff members report his extraordinary sensitivity to negative Fox stories, and he could be seen to reverse policy positions in response to bad coverage.[29] Trump monitored the behavior of the base carefully and nurtured its support.

Yet, Trump's public behavior suggests that the simple "base" model of party dominance by the president should not be taken at face value. Trump deployed an unusual approach to staking out policy positions in public, one that betrayed his dependencies. He is widely lambasted for a lack of ideological and policy consistency, but this characteristic reflects his unusual approach to public statements and testing policy positions. Presidential use of "trial ballooning" is well recognized: the president states, or merely leaks an idea to assess how it is received. Most of Trump's policy positions started as trial balloons. He experimented with new phrases and ideas and then responded to the reaction of his allies. Thus, many of his policy positions as president were conditional. Repeatedly, Trump made bold statements, knowing that he would cause outrage and win media attention, and then withdrew them, contradicting or denying the position if poorly received. This calculated outraging was a conscious technique, as exemplified by his June 2020 threat to insert military forces into the nation's capital in the face of Black Lives Matter protests. Trump's leadership was inherently conditional and suggested the need to

---

[28] FiveThirtyEight, "Tracking Congress in the Age of Trump," *fivethirtyeight.com*, https://proj ects.fivethirtyeight.com/congress-trump-score/ (accessed March 10, 2021), and Elaina Plott, "Win or Lose, It's Donald Trump's Republican Party," *New York Times Magazine*, November 1, 2020, 22.

[29] Matthew Gertz, "I've Studied the Trump-Fox Feedback Loop for Months: It's Crazier Than You Think," *Politico Magazine* (January 5, 2018), https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/ 2018/01/05/trump-media-feedback-loop-216248/ (accessed October 12, 2017).

reconceive his understanding of the relationship with the party, emphasizing his sensitivity to the nature of his legitimacy and the coalition he maintained with the party. The story was much more an account of mutual accommodation than of presidential dominance.

Substantial examples of partisan resistance also suggest that Trump did not dismantle opposition to his leadership. Senior figures in the congressional party, including elected officials, were highly critical of Trump such as Senators Collins, Corker, Flake, McCain, Murkowski, Romney, and Sasse. Gary Jacobson and Huchen Liu's studies of opposition to Trump during the campaign of 2016 and his early period in office did not reveal unquestioning deference.[30] Within the Trump administration, a Republican "resistance" identified itself, by which Republican staffers worked around Trump to moderate the impact of his eccentric behavior and extreme ideas.[31] In Congress, Trump suffered significant legislative defeats. His humiliation on health-care reform was dramatic. His attempts at legislative reform of immigration policy were equally unsuccessful. Failure on a signature issue, driven largely by the president's own party, represents extraordinary willingness to resist presidential leadership. Equally, Republican officials in Congress contributed to congressional action to constrain Trump's action on policy toward Russia and on trade. As the 2019 budget shutdown over funding for the border wall developed, and as the coronavirus spread, party members were very willing to criticize Trump's conduct publicly. Trump did not persuade the Republican Party to nominate all his chosen allies to run for office in party primaries at state and local levels. These are not the acts of a party subdued into mindless deference by a dominant leader. It is more productive to consider Trump's relationship with the Republican Party as a coalition based on mutual benefit. The Republican Party chose, strategically, when to follow Trump and when to oppose him. While elected officials and other party leaders did not choose a Trump presidency, they saw opportunity to exploit it to their advantage.

The Policy Bargain

When Trump took office, he appeared to offer a major threat to the Republicans' conservative agenda. During the 2016 campaign, he offered a broad brand of populism with ideological elements from left and right. He promised big spending. His health-care pledges that "everybody's going to

---

[30] Gary C. Jacobson and Huchen Liu, "Republican Candidates' Positions on Donald Trump in the 2016 Congressional Elections: Strategies and Consequences," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2017): 49-71, and Gary C. Jacobson and Huchen Liu, "Dealing with Disruption: Congressional Republicans' Responses to Donald Trump's Behavior and Agenda," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2019): 4-29.

[31] Anonymous, "Opinion: I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration," *New York Times*, September 6, 2018, A23, and Anonymous, *A Warning* (London: Little, Brown, 2019).

be taken care of much better than they're taken care of now," that it would be "much cheaper for everybody," and "that the government's gonna pay for it...I don't care if it costs me votes or not," cannot have endeared Trump to fiscal conservatives.[32] A substantial infrastructure program would have had a similar effect. Free marketeers would not have enjoyed the government intervention of his protectionist trade policies. Internationalists were very sceptical about this assault on free trade, plans for a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border, and an "America First" argument that seemed to involve a degree of withdrawal from global affairs, especially from the Middle East. Trump's positivity toward Putin's Russia also jarred. Trump could not even pledge, credibly, commitment to social conservatism. His colorful personal life hardly reflected Christian devotion and he had previously expressed liberal views on gun control and LGBTQ+ issues. Trump made conservative pledges, to cut taxes and regulation, to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA), and to appoint conservatives to the courts, but he was hardly a true believer. The scene seemed set, after his victory, for policy showdowns.

Yet, in office, Trump delivered substantial policy gains for conservatives. Trump met with the congressional Republican leadership during his transition. The December 9, 2016 Trump Tower meeting was notable for Speaker Paul Ryan's success in pitching a proposed legislative agenda of repealing ACA and tax cuts as the primary items in the first year of the 115th Congress. Trump decided to work with the Republicans rendering him, in legislative policy terms, a very standard Republican, particularly in his first year.[33] He rarely worked with Democrats; his one serious experiment in bipartisanship, a budget deal negotiated with Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi in Autumn 2017, drew such opprobrium among Republicans that Trump did not attempt a subsequent deal until forced to do so by the failure of his 2019 government shutdown. Instead, Trump and the Republicans acted on areas of agreement. While the Trump-Republican coalition failed to repeal and replace ACA— reflecting a lack of policy planning by legislature and executive as well as unhelpful presidential leadership and Republican Party divisions—Trump had long abandoned any grand challenge to conservative ideology in this area. The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act later that year offered hefty tax cuts in the traditional Republican style, although with emphasis on cuts to corporate tax rates. Meanwhile, Trump's presidency pursued deregulation, cutting back Obama-era regulations in areas such as climate change and financial markets. The Trump-Republican coalition acted on its areas of agreement, and these provided Trump's major legislative achievements. Nor did Trump challenge conservative

<hr>

[32] Donald J. Trump, "Donald Trump Presidential Campaign, 2016 on Healthcare," *Ballotpedia*, https://ballotpedia.org/Donald_Trump_presidential_campaign,_2016/Healthcare (accessed February 12, 2021).

[33] Jon Herbert, Trevor McCrisken, and Andrew Wroe, *The Ordinary Presidency of Donald J. Trump* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

orthodoxy on social policies. Trump made liberal-sounding pronouncements, for example, promising in February 2018 to be "very strong on background checks" after the mass shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida. He did not push new legislation. On LGBTQ+ issues, he circumscribed the rights of transgender people, for example banning transgender military service and withdrawing health-care protections. Conservatives were deeply satisfied with what some labeled, in recognition of the Senate Majority Leader's contribution and the reflection of conservative principles, "McConnell Republicanism."

Trump's less traditionally conservative ideas were, in Congress at least, marginalized by the Republicans. Proposals for action on infrastructure fell among a dispute over sources of funding for the program. Trump's proposals for immigration reform were revealed in his 2018 State of the Union address but did not reach floor votes. In the Senate, McConnell quietly steered policies that would not command majority Republican support to their demise without floor votes that would demonstrate Republican division. Funding for the wall was barely forthcoming, despite two years of unified Republican government.

The strategy appeared to revolve around a division of labor. Congress would not pass major legislative reforms in support of Trump's agenda but allowed Trump to take executive action to develop his less traditionally conservative policies. Trump acted on immigration by issuing his ban on travel from some Muslim-majority nations by executive order and then by proclamation. He repurposed defense funds to build the wall, having declared a state of emergency. His trade war was prosecuted through power delegated to the presidency under the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, which allowed him to act if he considered national security under threat. The presidency has extensive power over foreign policy, allowing Trump to make controversial moves in Syria, Iraq, and North Korea. The congressional party's strategy seemed clear: major legislative changes would be blocked, but broadly Trump would be allowed to pursue his less welcome agenda items through executive power. This strategy had clear appeal. The party could retain plausible deniability, sidestepping responsibility if policies failed or were unpopular with traditional conservative allies, and claim credit if they succeeded. Furthermore, the party could act as a constraint if the policies were so extreme as to become intolerable: a calculation perhaps based on whether widespread public indignation over any particular policy innovation threatened the party's public standing. Formal capacities to restrain executive action were one tool, but the ability of party officials to join a cacophony of condemnations when Trump took extreme actions was not a weapon to be underestimated with such a media-sensitive presidency. Although many of Trump's executive initiatives were tolerated, many Republicans condemned family separations and the incarceration of children on the border. Trade wars with China (and particularly where trade measures hurt U.S. allies) were condemned, as were many foreign policy adventures. Occasionally, Republicans in Congress actively opposed Trump on foreign policy, pressuring the administration to impose sanctions on Russia

after interference in the 2016 election campaigns and trying to prevent arms sales to Saudi Arabia. The populist's policy agenda was managed item-by-item by Republicans.

The Trump-Republican bargain on policy involved tangible gains for the Republican Party and little legislative action on items beyond the traditional conservative agenda. The populist leader was permitted to demonstrate activity on items that stood outside the party's chosen parameters through executive action, but Congress held that agenda at arm's length.

The Institutional Bargain

Traditional scholarship rooted in an understanding of the presidency's constitutional position highlights the conflict between institutions, portraying the presidency as at loggerheads with other players in the system as it attempts to centralize power. Partisan incentives, though, facilitate cooperation across institutional boundaries. Furthermore, institutional scholarship draws more attention to participants' pursuit of power, allowing a reassessment of the presidency-party relationship and the nature of cooperation between the two. Rather than denying each other power, Trump's populist presidency and the Republican Party found key shared ground on which to cooperate in manners that maximized power for both through pursuit of shared interests.

Trump, wanting to maximize personal control, acted to concentrate power in the presidency. He innovated regarding some means used: for example, he treated the executive branch as his own personal fiefdom, expecting unusual degrees of personal loyalty from the executive branch and seeming to have little concept of the rule of law.[34] However, this was an extension of established trends rather than aberration; the idea that the presidency would aspire to control executive branch processes is familiar.[35] Demands for loyalty to the presidency were prevalent during previous presidencies.[36]

Trump's power, though, was deployed for both presidential and partisan objectives due to broad agreement on the direction of his presidency. The Republican Party accessed power to engineer partisan influence over institutions of federal government. As each political party attempts to maximize influence, much as congressional behavior has been changed to serve the needs of partisan competition, each location in government is becoming a venue for partisan conflict. Effectively, partisanship is inundating U.S. governmental institutions, generating a proliferation of areas of conflict. Each party aspires

---

[34] James Comey, *A Higher Loyalty: Truth, Lies, and Leadership* (New York: Macmillan USA, 2018).

[35] Richard P. Nathan, *The Plot That Failed: Nixon and the Administrative Presidency* (New York: Wiley, 1975), and Andrew Rudalevige, *The New Imperial Presidency: Renewing Presidential Power after Watergate* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

[36] Donald P. Moynihan and Alasdair S. Roberts, "The Triumph of Loyalty over Competence: The Bush Administration and the Exhaustion of the Politicized Presidency," *Public Administration Review* 70, no. 4 (2010): 572-581.

to control any area where important decisions that impact party influence may be taken. The White House is a key vantage point in those conflicts.

Trump cooperated in the above process willingly, facilitating party access to greater control of institutions supposedly characterized by neutrality and competence. Appointments to the executive branch were openly and avowedly partisan and intended to further partisan objectives: Trump often articulated this fact. He consistently appointed Republican supporters to executive branch positions. While Trump appointed some of the "black sheep" of the Republican family, selecting people who had taken relatively extreme positions, and many "in-and-outer" Republicans declined to serve in a Trump administration, positions were still filled by partisans and party influence was established. Nowhere was this party influence more obvious than when Trump confronted "the resistance" within his administration. Senior Republican appointees worked to resist Trump's more eccentric initiatives from within the administration.[37] Even after Trump swept aside many higher-profile executive appointees amid the extraordinary churn of his personnel practices, the administration was largely staffed by those with histories of association with the Republican Party.

Particularly, Trump advantaged Republicans in future elections. He may have used the bully pulpit of the presidency to claim that the U.S. political system was biased against him personally, but he pursued measures that enhanced Republican Party control of the electoral process. Many locations in the federal government can influence the conduct of elections: there is obvious tension between holding free and fair elections and appointing partisans to positions that allow influence over how those elections are conducted. Trump did not appear to hesitate in making openly partisan appointments to important positions from which party advantage could be maximized.

For example, Trump attempted to influence the 2020 census process. His efforts to include a citizenship question were widely interpreted as an attempt to minimize enfranchisement of Latinx voters, affecting future state allocations, both in electoral processes and in funding formulae, to advantage Republicans. The administration repurposed the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, moving it from its designated goals of enforcing antidiscrimination laws such as those designed to prevent voter suppression. The Division filed few antidiscrimination cases and instead, under a rhetoric of preventing voter fraud, encouraged purging of voter rolls (a technique used to suppress minority voting) and pursued cases to encourage voting from members of the military, a Republican-leaning group.[38] In media coverage,

---

[37] Anonymous, "Opinion: I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration," and Anonymous, *A Warning*.

[38] Sam Levine, " 'An Embarrassment': Trump's Justice Department Goes Quiet on Voting Rights," *The Guardian* (June 23, 2020), https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/23/us-justice-department-voting-rights-2020-election (accessed March 20, 2021).

these activities were personalized as Trump's pursuit of political power, an impression reinforced by his vocal claims of voter fraud and attempts to influence Postal Service practices to discourage mail-in voting. Trump certainly pursued these goals with enthusiasm, but when seen in context of the Justice Department's voter fraud scandal under the previous Republican administration, they appear more as standard party practice when given access to power. The George W. Bush administration had sacked U.S. attorneys unwilling to support a partisan agenda, pressured states to restrict voting access, and abandoned established practices for enforcing civil rights law.[39] Trump furthered his own, and his party's, interests, attempting to shape the electorate in their favor.

Trump's appointments were not illegitimate: he used his nominating power as president. However, his support of partisanship was notable. He did not search out nonpartisans to support his populist presidency. Rather, in positions that might have been considered as requiring technocratic focus on implementing the law, the president appointed partisans. He led the institutionalization of Republican Party power. Republicans in Congress, nominally tasked with the role of overseeing these agencies, often decided not to investigate administration practices, implying a tacit agreement to allow Trump to further their party's power.

The same disdain for the concept of a neutral, competent bureaucracy was prevalent in administration manipulation of information emanating from the executive branch. Trump's personal disregard for the truth is well-documented: high-profile cases included his claims for attendance numbers at his inaugural celebrations and his conviction that Hurricane Dorian threatened Alabama.[40] Official sources were encouraged to back the president's lies rather than present the truth. The administration, though, generated more than back-up for inventions of a blowhard in the Oval Office. Instead, the administration systematically tampered with the flow of data from the federal government, including results of federally funded scientific research and data that would underpin external research. For example, Department of Interior scientific research reports were regularly edited to present uncertainty over the presence of climate change, in defiance of scientific consensus.[41] Federally employed analysts were pressured not to testify to congressional committees on climate change.[42] Scientific advisory committees were disbanded in the

[39] Adam Gitlin and Wendy R. Weiser, "The Justice Department's Voter Fraud Scandal: Lessons," *Brennan Center for Justice* (2017), https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/public ations/Justice_Department_Voter_Fraud_Scandal_Lessons.pdf (accessed March 16, 2021).

[40] Washington Post Fact Checker, "In Four Years, President Trump Made 30,573 False or Misleading Claims," *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/?itid=lk_inline_manual_4 (accessed April 1, 2021).

[41] Hiroko Tabuchi, "A Trump Insider Embeds Climate Denial in Scientific Research," *New York Times*, March 2, 2020, A1.

[42] Rod Schoonover, "Opinion: The White House Blocked My Report on Climate Change and National Security," *New York Times*, July 30, 2019, A31.

Department of the Interior, Food and Drug Administration, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Expertise that might influence the policy process, or inform those outside government who might influence it, was marginalized.[43] This practice, again, echoed the behavior of the preceding Bush administration, notorious for its editing of NASA scientific reports on climate change and marginalization of scientific expertise, titled by some as a "War on Science." While Trump's personal conduct drew attention, the Republican Party pursued its extant approach to minimize acknowledgement of climate change.

Neither Trump nor the contemporary Republican Party saw the executive branch as a potential ally. Rather than conceiving government as neutral and competent, bureaucracy was seen as representing the enemy. There was, therefore, fertile ground for cooperation between Trump and Republicans. During the 2016 campaign, one target of Trump's populist rhetoric was the "deep state." He talked of this in ambiguous terms, but particular attention was given to corporate influence, as Trump outlined his understanding of workers in the Midwest being exploited for economic gain by wealthy, free-trade-supporting Washington elites. Condemnation of bank bailouts slotted neatly into a populist theme on the evils of government operating in service of the elite. The candidate's symbolic pledge not to accept money from corporate donors during the primaries reinforced the message of Trump's willingness to attack corporate interests, if elected. Yet, when Trump took office, no campaign finance or lobbying reform accompanied him; instead, the attack on the "Deep State" mutated into a classic Republican approach with the federal government, especially its bureaucracy, as enemy. Trump's rhetoric and Republicans' public choice understanding of a self-interested bureaucracy meshed. Trump's expectation that the bureaucracy would serve him alone, and consequent disappointment on discovering that other factors might influence their judgment, clearly eased his transformation. Trump found his will blocked and decided to conquer elite resistance. He politicized agencies for their perceived opposition to him, whether the State Department, intelligence services, or Justice Department. The fit with Republicans' dislike of government was often comfortable: declaring the bureaucracy partisan and self-interested was grist to both traditional conservatives' and Tea-Partiers' anti-government mill. Some scepticism was expressed over attacks on institutions which usually had conservative sympathies, such as the intelligence services, but largely Trump's message, of a deeply political, progovernment bureaucracy that needed to be tamed, was congruent with Republicans' values. They often cooperated in this politicization, given their shared desire to undermine the credibility of the federal government.

---

[43] Charles Seife, "Opinion: The Trump Administration's Misinformation Machine," *Scientific American* (March 8, 2020), https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/the-trump-admi nistrations-misinformation-machine/ (accessed April 2, 2021).

The partisan assault was not just upon the neutrality of the federal bureaucracy. Trump's appointments to the federal bench will be a lasting legacy. Working with the Federalist Society and Republican leadership in the Senate, Trump facilitated appointment of a swathe of conservative justices and judges: three to the Supreme Court, fifty-four to the appeals courts, and 174 to the district courts. Again, Trump and conservatives found common ground, arguably with conservatives dominating the process. Trump conceived himself as nominating people to support his policies, as reflected in subsequent Twitter rants when they failed to do so, while Republicans knew they were appointing people with records of taking conservative decisions on contested policy issues.

Trump and the Republican Party shared incentives to control and diminish the standing of the executive branch and to further partisan control of federal institutions. Maximizing party control and presidential power pointed in the same directions, giving excellent reasons for cooperation. When confronted with opportunities to constrain Trump, there was little incentive for Republicans to do so amid the calculations of partisan warfare.

The Electoral Bargain

Trump's hostility to the Republican Party in 2016 suggested a president likely to "go solo," that is, choosing his own path regardless of his nominal party's well-being. Equally, there were reasons to believe Republicans might be wary of cooperation with Trump, not least that he might prove an electoral liability. Either participant abandoning their coalition could have caused both great damage in the electoral arena. Instead, Trump and the Republicans established an electoral bargain that minimized tensions between the two, despite Trump's populist rhetoric. Trump worked with the party in electoral politics, fulfilling many partisan expectations of a presidency.

The first element of the Trump-Republican bargain was Trump delivering the presidency in 2016. This was no mean feat: the deeply ideological Republicans were committed to some policies that were unpopular and vulnerable to partisan attack, but Trump won not only the presidency but also unified control of the government. This success demanded a re-examination of his campaign message's impact. The immediate threat, though, was that a newly elected Trump would act as a lone operator, ignoring the well-being of his party.

Trump did not go solo. On the contrary, in many respects, he proved a loyal and effective partisan. The initial key dispute occurred within the administration. Trump confronted conflicting advice on co-existence with the Republican Party. Party loyalists, such as his first Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, advocated cooperation with the party. Meanwhile, advisor Steve Bannon hoped Trump would support a cohort of firebrand populists to challenge establishment Republicans during the 2018 primaries. This purge would further Trump's radical, populist agenda. In late 2017, with preparations for the midterms looming, Trump chose his course. He backed his party, refusing

to attack establishment Republicans as they pursued party nominations. While Trump occasionally attacked a fellow partisan to make clear his power was undiminished and his support conditional, Trump was notably uncritical of most of his party during 2018.

In fact, Trump did much to fulfill his partisan role. Perhaps assuming that it was his party now, he delivered many of the messages expected from a partisan warrior. His grand claims of triumph promoted the partisan brand: here was a Republican president delivering major goals to the voters, he claimed. He also fulfilled the all-important role of demonizing the opposing party, his scorched-earth rhetoric treating Democrats as enemies to be hated, rather than as respected opponents. Especially after 2018, once Democrats held a majority in the House of Representatives with Nancy Pelosi as Speaker, Trump treated Democrats as the establishment to be attacked. Democratic governors who refused to lift coronavirus restrictions and open their states were treated to withering attacks. Talking up the threat of extreme liberalism, on the grounds of race, law and order, bureaucracy, and big government, the echoes of Nixonian populism were unmistakeable. Trading on the perceived threat to some voters' status in a changing U.S., the style was more nihilistic, but the substance was a common Republican technique, presenting themselves as the party of those sceptical toward social change. Trump delivered his anti-establishment attacks in a form adapted for a period of affective partisanship. His was tribal rhetoric calculated to induce emotion and motivate partisans. Trump nurtured grassroots enthusiasm, as reflected in Republicans among the public expressing fervent support of their president.[44] Trump's populism was compatible with partisan rhetoric: he appeared a committed and effective Republican messenger and the direct threat of party disunity was averted.

The conduct and public performance of the direct relationship between Trump and the party was one element of messaging, but other tensions were possible. Trump's advocacy of new policy positions, his right-leaning political strategy, his disdain for norms of presidential behavior, and his statements on the integrity of the political system each threatened to damage the party's reputation or performance. Equally, Trump could have faced party dissent and resistance on any of these practices.

Trump's articulation of new policy positions caused concern in the party not just because of policy substance, but for the implications of the messaging for the party's image. His particular brand of nationalism represented a political strategy. Policy rhetoric on immigration, trade, and "America First" was underpinned by approaches to racial politics, economics, and foreign policy that suggested a less open, tolerant Republican Party. Since the 1990s, many in the party had attempted to soften the party's image, fearing the electorate's

---

[44] Jeffrey M. Jones, "Trump Job Rating Steady; Other Mood Indicators Tick Up," *Gallup News* (October 21, 2020), https://news.gallup.com/poll/322310/trump-job-rating-steady-mood-indicators-tick.aspx (accessed January 21, 2021).

hostility to apparently uncaring "small government" policies. The party's own report on the defeats of 2012 had noted the demographic time-bomb threatening the party's future if it could not broaden its appeal to reach more nonwhite voters. Consequently, the report advocated a more inclusive approach to future election campaigns. Instead, Trump's articulation of intolerance of many groups in U.S. society and of anti-internationalism seemed to double down on images of Republican harshness. His personal conduct, flying in the face of presidential norms by the performance of anger, hostility, and insulting behavior, only reinforced the impression. Trump's distinctive political strategy adapted the Tea Party's almost anarchic attitude toward government and proved the presidency could be won with it. Motivating the "base," Trump did not just win the presidency but won it with unexpected victories across mid-western states and breached the Democrats' supposed "red wall."

After 2016, the party had to decide whether to embrace Trump's messaging as its future direction. Trump, emboldened by his victory, had no intention of changing his strategy. Pursuing "base politics," he maintained his aggressive, uncompromising communications. For establishment Republicans, then, with little leverage over the president's personal communications, the decision was whether to embrace him or distance themselves from him. Elected officials and party leaders spoke to journalists off the record, declaring their reservations about Trump and his right-leaning appeal. Mostly, though, they offered little public condemnation of his behavior, even as Trump failed to condemn neo-Nazi protestors or denigrated entire countries on racist grounds. In contrast, the mass of the party supported the president enthusiastically. Trump's popularity remained sky high in polls of party sympathizers. He served Republican elites by motivating the rank-and-file.

The "fear" argument suggests Republican elites were pinned in by support for Trump among the mass of the party. That support made the act of crossing Trump publicly a risk, especially given Trump's use of social media to attack party dissidents. Largely, in his first three years, only those not running for re-election or with very strong personal support bases would criticize him in public. Most, though, were not under direct threat from Trump as long as they did not criticize him personally. He had decided not to support Trump-style opponents in primary battles, so legislators could choose simply not to articulate their opposition to him. That strategy did not involve adopting a Trump-style message at every turn, while Trump continued to motivate the base and so, votes for Republicans. Many became adept at dodging the inevitable "Do you agree with the president's latest statement?" questions from journalists. Instead, they retained the ability to use Trump as a foil to stake out their own moderate positions locally, if such stances were beneficial. The 2018 midterm results did nothing to compromise this strategic response. First, a diminished share of the vote for the presidential party fit normal trends. Second, Democrats' victory in the House shifted Republicans back to the default partisan strategy under divided government: unify and fight the opposition party in the hope

of future electoral reward. Trump performed his populism and was tolerated as the price for the party's power in government. Impeachment proceedings launched by a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives were seen as a threat to the party, as well as the populist president. Trump's willingness to prosecute partisan conflict, and effectiveness in so doing, meant that he fitted the model of the party leader under divided government: this was a source of power within the party. Trump pursued the strategy legislators had followed in Congress for many years. The messages, of Democrats' extremism and the dangers they posed were familiar narratives. The electoral bargain, of Trump serving partisan needs and so receiving limited criticism from the party, served both the populist president and the party.

Only the events of 2020 began to challenge this coalition. Trump had used presidential prerogatives to take over the commanding heights of the Republican Party machinery. Aided by the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic, his team engineered dominance of the Republican convention, even leading to the unprecedented party platform that stated simple, direct support of Trump. Even as Trump concentrated power, three key, interrelated processes developed to undermine him. First, coronavirus began to damage perceptions of Trump's competence. An initially tolerant public began to question Trump's ability to deal with an overwhelming public health crisis. His strongest policy suit, the economy, underpinned his re-election strategy, but the sharp recession sapped that strength. Second, Trump's attacks on U.S. democratic systems, culminating in his refusal to accept the presidential election results and the insurrection of January 6, 2021, were genuine causes for concern within the party. While the party applauded pursuit of partisan power at an institutional level, many Republicans were sceptical of threats to dismantle basic features of American democracy and an unleashing of the extreme right. How far Republicans should adopt Tea Party nihilism when dealing with the U.S. governmental system was contentious. Most importantly, these two factors combined to impact Trump's poll ratings enough for Republicans to question the electoral benefits of running with him. The support of his base softened only a little: in primary contests, running as Trumpian was often a viable, even necessary strategy because of his popularity with the rank-and-file.[45] The president, though, had long driven away many moderates and independents, so his message seemed less of an electoral asset. Considering the capacity of the party to win power overall, Republicans began to doubt whether Trump had maintained the successful formula of 2016. Once it was clear he had not, many were willing to break with him, confirming the presidential election result and privately, at least, welcoming his departure from office. Republican elite support had been conditional on maintaining the surprising success of 2016

---

[45] Elaina Plott, "Tennessee Republicans, Once Moderate and Genteel, Turn Toxic in the Trump Era," *New York Times*, August 6, 2020, A17.

to prove the validity of Trump's right-wing strategy; the 2020 election result initiated an extensive post-mortem on whether that validity could survive Trump's defeat.

Conclusion

Understanding Trump as a populist who brought Washington to heel through popular support is a simplistic interpretation of his presidency, much as it might serve the presidential ego. Republicans were cautious in their followership but recognized plenty to gain from a Trump presidency.

The patterns of behavior of the Trump term are much better understood by recognizing the implications of layering a populist presidency over the intense partisanship of contemporary U.S. politics and examining the tensions and opportunities in the frictions between the two. Understanding the presidency-party relationship as one of mutual dependence draws attention to three arenas for conflict or cooperation between the presidency and the party. It also helps to identify many of the dynamics involved within those arenas and how they might be adjusted by a populist presidency.

The 2016 result left Republicans and Trump shackled together and attempting to negotiate in each of those three arenas. The brief analysis above offers first ways to think about how those transactions were executed, usually to substantial satisfaction for Republicans. The Trump-Republican coalition was, despite expectations, functional for at least three years. The aligned incentives of Trump and the Republicans sharply reduced the tensions between the two, encouraging elected Republicans to protect their president. Convicting Trump for impeachment offenses or confronting him publicly on the wall would have incurred unacceptable costs while Trump looked to be delivering other Republican policy priorities, access to executive power, and appeared electorally viable. Trump, for his part, was willing to be the good partisan warrior, to open executive power to Republican use through staffing and the broader administrative presidency and shared many policy priorities with his own party. The coalition was effective for both sides.

Trump then, may have sounded like a different kind of populist, but only in 2020 did he really begin to threaten the power and credibility of the Republican Party, as well as U.S. democracy as a whole—and only then did Republicans begin to break with him in substantial numbers. It is reasonable to argue that he fits within a long-established tradition of presidential populism. He may have been more strident in his populist statements than recent predecessors but examining the presidency-party relationship suggests not a grand takeover by the New Yorker acting as agent of the people, but an awkward coalition between president and party based on mutual dependence amid a series of tensions. These are a familiar politics of a president in a pluralist system dealing with his party. Much of Trump's support was conditional upon his party's tolerance. Even a president as populist as Trump is shackled to his

party like presidential populists before him. Republicans did not support their president unconditionally or simply through "fear."

Significant questions, though, remain unanswered about what degree of democratic backsliding or undermining of liberal democratic values Republicans might have tolerated for other political gains, only being asked to confront Trump's most authoritarian impulses when he was already scheduled to leave office. Worryingly, understanding how particularly virulent presidential populism is shackled to an established party suggests that the inherent contradictions that binding the two would appear to involve are less tension-ridden than the maintenance of the constitutional system might require. Shared incentives are plentiful, creating scope for transactional cooperation and discouraging party elites from challenging the populist president.