CHAPTER 7

Trumping Neustadt?: An Altered Political Environment Helps No. 45

Abstract This chapter attempts to resolve the paradox that despite Trump’s apparent disregard for many of the power principles of Neustadt’s Presidential Power he has been relatively successful in some respects. It argues that his rules or suggestions were based on a view of 1950s Washington, which no longer exists today. Namely, changes in the political environment have also changed the landscape of presidential power and governance, and Trump reflects those. Three main relevant developments: Party Polarization; the Changed/New Media Landscape; and the Unilateral Presidency are used to explain his resilience. All three enable Trump to maintain a high level of support with his own party, dominate the public and governing agendas, achieve a number of his goals, and keep him a strong contender for the 2020 election.

Keywords Trump, Donald · Party polarization · New media · Media usage · Unilateral presidency · Executive power

INTRODUCTION

The initial chapters of this work showed that Richard Neustadt’s (1960, 1990) model of presidential power and influence—primarily through
persuasion, based on a president’s elite and public support as currencies of power—appear to help explain a number of Trump’s difficulties in office through his first three years. Conversely, the previous chapter provided some contrary evidence that Donald Trump has in some notable ways been more successful or powerful than one would predict after applying Neustadt’s insights. In this chapter, I offer some reasons why he has done “better than expected” as well as provide ideas for other students of the office to ponder given the Trump experience so far.

It is not immediately obvious what the causal explanations are for Trump’s buoyancy in the face of his incompetence, and even lack of political skills Neustadt saw as critical. I believe the answer can be found in the different circumstances and altered political environment of the contemporary presidency.

As others have noted (e.g., Morris 2010, pp. 93–94), Neustadt’s thinking was time-bound, or at least honed from the experiences of the mid-twentieth century and the Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower administrations. Neustadt himself did perform a reflective role in each new edition of his book, with the addition of more presidencies. Additionally, other notable scholarly efforts attempted to alter or adapt his model to new developments. Among these are Kernell (1986), regarding the role of the public in presidential leadership, given the TV age, etc., and Rose (1991) on how globalization and the end of the Cold War changed presidential power relations, especially in foreign affairs. Along these lines, this chapter discusses three main features and trends impacting the presidential power context in the 2010s, which were not present in the 1950s: party polarization; the new media environment; and the rise of the “unilateral” or administrative presidency. In a nutshell, “Trumpworld” is not the “Land of Harry and Ike.”

**Party Polarization**

First, is the reemergence of partisanship, namely ideological and identity polarization among partisans at both the elite and mass levels—otherwise known as the “party-in-the-government” and the “party-in-the-electorate,” respectively—in contemporary American politics. Trump exists and operates in an entirely different partisan political context than was the case five-plus decades ago.

At the time of Neustadt’s original work, parties were an important if declining source of influence for different reasons. A “moderate middle”
(in the electorate) and the “conservative coalition” (of some Northern Republicans and Southern Democrats in Congress) held sway, and bipartisanship and compromise was more the order of the day. In terms of voting behavior, the New Deal coalition was weakening, witnessed by Republican gains in elections in the 1950s; independents and ticket-splitting also increased. In terms of the party-in-the-government, both Truman and Eisenhower—the main subjects of Neustadt’s initial analyses—could count on being able to persuade or gain the support of at least some members of the opposition. As one set of parties scholars noted, “for most of the Twentieth Century, it was not inter-party divisions but intra-party divisions that required members of Congress to seek allies to pass legislation” (White and Kerbel 2018, p. 165).

That is largely not the case today, and partisan identification for both officials and masses plays a key role in understanding today’s politics (see for example, Abramowitz 2010). Indeed, a check of the index of Neustadt’s Presidential Power yields only a few pages where the subject of political parties (outside discussions of specific presidential nominations) is mentioned. He did envision them—at least, via the leadership in Congress—as one possible vehicle for increased presidential persuasion, but rightly saw in the 1960s trends that made this doubtful. “Instead [of partisan majorities backing the President] the chances are that he[sic] will gain majorities, when and as he does so, by ad hoc coalition building, issue after issue... Our parties are unlikely to be revolutionized as instruments of government because they are unlikely to be altered fundamentally as voter coalitions differently aligned for different offices in different places” (Neustadt 1990, p. 157).

The Democratic Party nomination reforms after 1968 also were a source of greater independence for presidential candidates, and thus, presidents in office. These changes untethered or at least weakened ties between presidents and their parties (e.g., Davis 2000, pp. 29–31; Rose 1991, pp. 120–121), as candidates, especially outsiders, did not owe their election to their party.¹

Since the mid-1980s—ironically, when political science was debating their demise—American parties have made comeback, not just organizationally, but in terms of party unity in government. While there is some dispute about how much has really changed in the party-in-the-electorate in the literature (see for example, Dalton 2013), it is rather clear that within Congress, if not the states and even the judiciary, party unity or partisan behavior is at record levels. As one set of Congressional scholars
note, “Party voting [i.e., when a majority of Democrats vote together on legislation against a majority of Republicans] is far more prevalent today than it was in the 1970s or early 1980s. Indeed, contemporary levels of party voting recall the militant parties of the late-nineteenth century” (Davidson et al. 2020, p. 272). For example, party voting in both chambers set a new record in 2017.

This unity has also been accompanied by ideological realignment, with Democrats becoming more uniformly liberal, and Republicans, conservative. Studies have found that in the 1950s, ideological diversity within the party coalitions was far greater than it has been in recent years, whereas “in today’s Congress, members’ party affiliation and ideological views overlap almost perfectly” (Davidson et al. 2020, pp. 278–279).

However, it is the relationship between elite and mass partisanship that is key to understanding the politics of the Trump presidency. On the surface, Trump’s “maverick” nature, unusual policy stances (for a Republican, as he really wasn’t one until recently) presumably could hurt him in his dealings with Congress and other elites. Even having unified government—as he did until 2019—is no guarantee of success, as the Carter presidency’s difficulties with Congress showed. Nevertheless, it is clear that Trump’s remarkable success with Congress overall in his first two years, as noted earlier in Chapter 6, cannot be explained without strong party ties.2

Second, and more importantly, at the mass level Trump has engineered a solidly loyal following and effectively made the Republican Party his own, changing its stances to fit his. While some elites may have been—and a few still are—“never Trumpers,” the reluctant Republicans in the electorate who held their nose and voted for him have largely been won over during his term into part of his “MAGA (Make-America-Great-Again)” base. To return to the point about presidential approval in Chapter 3, Trump has some of the strongest and consistent support among Republicans (in the upper 80s in percent approval) of any president, rivaling George W. Bush after 9/11, and surpassing him in the second term (Jones 2020). While this level of support isn’t unprecedented, it is nevertheless notable given Trump’s extreme outsider status, unorthodox political views, and lack of an economic or foreign crisis.3 The effect of this dynamic translates into his stable ratings over time, and accounts for his strong “floor” of support overall. Trump’s joke during the campaign that he could shoot someone on the street in New York City and his followers would stick by him is not too far from the truth.
Trump’s popularity with the Republican grassroots, and potential involvement in primary fights within the GOP for other offices, have also had the effect of muting intraparty disputes and only token expressions of dismay when he goes off message or launches a Twitter rampage. For example, after Trump’s vicious, arguably racist tweet against “the Squad,” four fresh-women congressional Democrats of color ("go back where you came from")—vulnerable Republicans from demographically diverse states and districts up for reelection in 2020 were torn between support for Trump and sensitivity to their voters. Trump in turn actually criticized several of them for not defending him publicly (Everett and Arkin 2019).

He also uses his position as fundraiser- and tweeter-in-Chief, combined with his mass following, to enforce loyalty and reward and punish Republican elected officials (Bacon 2019). “If he does not enjoy the broad admiration Republicans afforded Ronald Reagan, he is more feared by his party’s lawmakers than any other Oval Office occupant since Lyndon Johnson” (Martin and Haberman 2019). Interestingly, in reverse fashion, one study found that members of Congress who praise Trump on their online and social media platforms see modest increases in fundraising after doing so, while those who criticize him see their funding significantly decrease, creating another incentive to support him (Fu and Howell 2020).

The tepid responses from major officials such as Sen. Majority Leader McConnell, Sen. Mitt Romney and the like over Trump’s attacks on party deacon Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) even after his death—as detailed in Chapter 3—are telling. The even more extreme case of Sen. Lindsay Graham (R-SC) going from Trump critic to Trump cheerleader (e.g., Leibovich, 2019) is another vivid example.

It is this “rock star” quality coupled with his thin skin that explains Trump’s ability to get Republicans to go along, not just on policy or legislation, but rhetorically in day-to-day events and issues as well. This dynamic likely explains the phenomenon, mentioned in Chapter 6, of former Trump opponents for the 2016 nomination, and/or Republican Trump critics in Congress—such as Susan Collins (R-ME) and Ben Sasse (R-NE), who once penned a book critical of Trump, and even, Sens. John McCain, Jeff Flake, and Bob Corker—supporting him on votes at levels far above where they would be expected to, given the “redness” of their state or district. (Again, see Fig. 6.1 in the previous chapter.)
Plus, Trump has managed to purge, directly or indirectly, some of his most independent or contrarian partisans: notably, House Speaker Paul Ryan, along with Corker and Flake, voluntarily retired; Reps. Barbara Comstock and Mia Love lost in 2018—ironically, partly if not mostly due to their linkage to Trump. (Notably, Flake has been replaced by Martha McSally, and Corker by Marsha Blackburn, both of whom have been even more loyal publicly and on votes.) In the executive branch, he either fired, or drove out, others who questioned him or tried to change his mind, like Chief of Staff John Kelly, Defense Secretary James Mattis, and National Security Advisor John Bolton.

Another prime example of Trump’s partisan elite support was seen in the impeachment and eventual trial over his blatant actions of threatening to withhold, and then delaying, Congressionally appropriated aid to Ukraine unless its new government investigated his rival presidential hopeful Joe Biden and his son’s business dealings there. Unlike Nixon’s Watergate, or Clinton’s Lewinsky scandal, no members of the president’s party in the House were willing to vote to impeach him, and most went out of their way to fawningly defend him. When the trial began in the Senate, one former opponent of the president in 2016, Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) claimed up to 45 of his partisan colleagues wanted to dismiss the charges outright. While that didn’t happen, nevertheless, the majority Republicans then blocked all motions calling for the addition of any new witnesses. In the end, only Mitt Romney (R-UT), notably the former presidential standard-bearer in 2012 from the strongest “never Trump” red state in the union, crossed party lines and joined the Democrats on one of two votes to convict him. All of the other 52 Senate Republicans held firm to acquit him. This group included those who believed he acted improperly, such as Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN), likely fearing a backlash from his supporters if not social ostracism back home (see, for example, Beauchamp 2020).

One can also see his influence over the Republican “base” in terms of persuasion: Trump has changed mass Republicans’ views toward his stances on issues such as trade, crime, relations with Russia, etc.—if not a majority, at least an increase in that direction (Burmila 2018). For example, during the 2019 shutdown, Trump’s speech appealing for the wall may not have moved public opinion overall (see the case study in Chapter 4), but polls found while Republicans did not support the tactic, greater percentages of them did support spending federal funds for the border wall than before the standoff (Nather 2019, citing Pew 2019).
On the flip side, of course, this means he has also solidified the Democratic opposition both on Capitol Hill and in the electorate. This fact was likewise readily illustrated during the wall/shutdown fight, and the move to impeach him.

Although this bimodal state of affairs was true at times for both Presidents Bush and Obama, Trump is more extreme; Gallup found his approval ratings are the most polarized in history (Gallup 2019). Trump thus may experience what Oppenheimer (1993) called the “Whipsaw of Party”: greater presidential success under unified government, and greater failure under divided government, given Trump faces a Democratic House after the midterm elections. Still, it also means that Trump has some leverage over red-state Democrats in the Senate. If that fails, his voters may do him the favor instead: some that opposed him, like Sens. Claire McCaskill (D-MO) and Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND), were ousted in November 2018.

Lastly, his ability to keep his partisans firmly on his side create impressions of power that provide him with status in the DC community, building his power reputation. For example, as Entman (1989) has noted and found, the degree of support for a president by his own party—especially under difficult conditions—is a key indicator for journalists in evaluating a president, coloring their coverage. His strength during his impeachment, for example, sent messages to the media of his power and stature.

The Contemporary Media Milieu

A transformed media landscape since the 1990s has likewise altered the equations of presidential power. While this subject could be a book in itself, and space limitations prevent doing it full justice, it is safe to say that the role of the media (mass, new, social) in explaining the Trump presidency cannot be underestimated. The contemporary media environment helped create Trump as a political force, and continues to sustain him.4

The media environment is perhaps the biggest area of change from the time Neustadt developed his model. Television was in its infancy in the 1950s, and while he recognized its increasing influence throughout the 1960s and beyond, it too plays a relatively minor role in his framework. He saw it more as a potential problem for presidents than a guaranteed boon, but believed that skill in using it would be part of one’s reputation (1990, pp. 260–265).
It is true the media are more prominent as a factor in later scholarship on presidential persuasion, such as Tulis’s “rhetorical presidency” (1987) and especially Kernell’s “going public strategy” (1986). The connection between the media and public prestige in both building and using presidential power has been widely studied since the 1960s. But new emerging technologies in the last decade or two, along with changing outlets and audiences, has impacted the way the office and its occupant relates to the public and media professionals.

Three interrelated forces are most relevant: the rise of partisan news; the advent of social media, especially Twitter; and self-selection and “news grazing” habits by the public (see Forrette 2019). The interactions between these have given Trump the ability to at least maintain a certain level of support and power positioning, if not always to influence policy.

The explosion of media outlets since the 1990s that brought new choices, coupled with a reciprocal fragmentation of audiences, created a shift from nonpartisan patently “objective” media to outwardly partisan news outlets. These include not only cable TV channels like Fox and MSNBC, but blogs, websites, and other platforms from the left and right, like HuffPost and RedState. These now promote opinion, commentary, and discussion formats with a partisan slant over reporting of straight news. Most notable here are Fox News (cable) and Breitbart (web) which not only gave rise to the Trump candidacy, but have even helped and/or continue to supply Trump with advisers such as Steve Bannon. Indeed, there appears to be a revolving, Trump Tower door between the White House and the Fox Network, with people like FN executive Bill Shine, who became deputy chief of staff for communications, joining the administration, and people like Hope Hicks, former communications director, and Sarah Huckabee Sanders, former press secretary, taking jobs at Fox as either executives or commentators.

President Trump also has a symbiotic relationship with these outlets as he consumes and responds to, as well as provides content, interviews, etc., for them. These outlets provide Trump with a loyal, friendly voice with which he can communicate and in turn, they amplify his message to their audience. They even attempt to influence him via their content and media figures, like the hosts of Fox and Friends or Sean Hannity, whom Trump is known to favor.

What this means in practice, as many critics have noted, is that Trump is largely guaranteed a pseudo-propaganda arm that protects him from
loss of support during controversies, scandals, and failures while at the same time promotes his policy aims, at least ideologically. For example, even before Trump, a “Fox News Effect” (Brock and Ravi-Havt 2012) was identified that separated its viewers from others, and was found to have opinion effects in a conservative direction. Such outlets likewise bolster his influence over his base voters and the elite establishment by extension. Fox had already become an outlet for conservative populist rhetoric and “community brand building” before Trump (see Smith 2019), but Trump embodied the network’s messaging better than it even could. “Trump not only tapped into his audience’s deep reservoirs of shame, contempt, and resentment that had come into their psyches via Obama’s scolding politically correct lectures... Trump’s candidacy gave birth to ‘Foxocracy,’ a fully aligned, twenty-four-hour, TV-to-pulpit united front of hatred toward liberals” (Smith 2019, p. 99). Furthermore, a recent news usage study by Pew found that Republicans placed more trust in one source: Fox (65%), and used it more than any other (60%), while also having less trust in, and correspondingly less use of other media sources (Pew Center 2020).

Of course, as with partisanship, alternative media on the other side of the spectrum do the same for the Trump “resistance” in the elite and mass public (see the same Pew studies). This state of affairs likewise limits Trump’s ability to persuade the other side, to the degree he cares. But it also helps explain the degree of partisan polarization in the mass public and politics today. Trump has merely accelerated and capitalized on these trends.

Second, social media outlets now allow politicians constant, direct access to the mass public through vehicles like Facebook and Twitter, making two-way communication possible, though more in theory than reality (see Gainous and Wagner 2013). Facebook essentially allows the transmission of controlled content (akin to TV ads) which are then “shared” by supporters, regardless of veracity. Trump’s campaign utilized this tactic effectively in 2016, and his reelection campaign has continued to spend heavily on the platform, though it is also branching out to other outlets like Google (Fisher and Swan 2020).

But it is Twitter (2006–) that has done the most to build the Trump brand and presidency. Through the use of 124 (now 248) characters to compose his thoughts, sent from his phone to subscribers, Trump has access to roughly 80 million followers. While other politicians—notably Barack Obama as well as many Senators, etc.—also utilized this outlet,
Trump has revolutionized its use as a messaging platform. His style of simplistic, pithy, and bombastic tweets (“Build the Wall,” “Lock Her Up,” etc.) enabled Trump to seize the discourse in 2016. More importantly, of course, is the “ripple effect” he gets in mainstream and other media outlets from the audacity and controversy of his Tweets. As one report puts it, in the campaign, the outlet was “a digital howitzer that he relished firing. In the years since, he has fully integrated Twitter into the very fabric of his administration, reshaping the nature of the presidency and presidential power” (Shear et al. 2019).

Research on Trump’s Twitter use and its impacts is still in nascent stages, and undoubtedly more evidence and insights will come (e.g., Auxier and Golbeck 2017; Waterman and Ouyang 2019). The point here is merely that Twitter has provided Trump unprecedented ability to set the news and even political agenda (e.g., Wiemer and Scacco 2018), keep his opponents off balance, and potentially alter news cycles away from stories created or emerging from other sources. Granted this latter effect can be good or bad, depending on the topic, and here too Trump often gets in his own way by detracting from his desired message. But at the same time, it can help him “move on” quickly from a bad news cycle (see Kight 2017, 2019). One study of Google searches found that in his first year in office, “the visible spikes of increased Googling on a topic indicates that Trump-related news captures the public’s interest, but that attention quickly fizzles out or is captured by the next bombshell report or firing” (Kight 2017).

The above media effects also fit into the audience or public opinion trends of his presidency, given the public’s reliance on media sources for information. Changes in technology have led to changes in information and political opinion processing. One is the revival of self-selection bias, used in the 1950s—the concept that people will only seek out information that appeals to them, or even agrees with their preconceived notions (see Stroud 2011). Given the audience decline of “straight news” outlets like the big three networks and national newspapers, and the availability of partisan ones, members of the public can—and do, if Pew surveys are any indication—simply choose the cable, social media, TV, internet outlet that fits their fancy, creating their own media bubbles.
An additional advantage in the case of Trump is the current level of distrust among Republicans—and to a lesser extent, the general public—toward the news media, excepting some outlets. Trust in the press ironically has dropped since the 1970s, after their high public regard following the Watergate scandal. But recently, this trend took on a more partisan cast. Currently, an in-depth Pew Research Center Study found that partisanship was the leading factor in opinions about, and trust or confidence in, the news media, with Republicans far more negative and skeptical (Pew Center 2019). Plus, even within identifiers of both parties, Trump was a factor: “Republicans who strongly approve of the job Trump is doing are far more pessimistic in their evaluations of the news media than other Republicans. And Democrats who are most disapproving of Trump’s job performance are often far more supportive of the news media than Democrats who approve most strongly” (Pew Center 2019).

Some members of the public thus appear to trust Trump more than journalists. All of these factors again mean that Trump is able to keep his followers devoted to his version of reality, with little chance they will see, much less believe if they do, alternative sources of information.

Next, is the related phenomenon of “news grazing” (Forgette 2018)—the practice of a sizeable percentage of the public who jump around (on the TV dial, their smartphone, or their computer) and encounter or use news haphazardly as opposed to sitting down every evening to watch nightly TV news or read their daily newspaper. For these people, entertainment or at least interest is the key to following events, and therefore media attempt to cater to them through visually stunning and/or high shock-value issues. This format favors items such as breaking news, commentary, etc. Or, as Forgette (2018, p. 7) puts it: “media choice is altering how we collect news, resulting in an emerging class of news grazers... in response, news producers and makers have altered the news itself” toward commentary, breaking, and partisan news formats, which in turn affect “perceptions of conflict and polarization between the parties and within Congress,” resulting in greater distrust of the system.

When we add this all up, what do we get?

First, we have a public, and by extension, a media, that is easily distracted and plays into a “click-bait” and controversy peddler like Donald Trump. Trump learned the importance of media and public attention as a businessman in the 1980s–1990s, and unlike many other executives, intentionally sought the limelight, good or bad, believing that in the end it was good for his business and his influence. For “in Donald
Trump’s world, there is no such thing as over-exposure” (Slater 2005, p. 226).

If there is one thing Donald Trump knows how to do, it is to attract attention and an audience. For example, it is estimated he gained approximately $5 billion of “free” media coverage during his election (Francia 2018). In his first month of office—granted, more than he likely received after—one firm estimated he’d received the equivalent of $817 million in ads, a record (Rodriguez 2017). Love him or hate him, he is the focus of attention and sets the tone and topic for debate.

Second, this milieu gives Trump an ability to have his messages delivered—if not generally amplified, often coupled with a favorable spin—to his followers as well as Republicans and independent “leaners” more broadly. As noted, this in turn keeps his partisan support solid and secure, which helps keep other political elites (especially, but not solely in the GOP) in line, or at least wary of him. These forces contribute to the creation of “uncertainty in the minds of president-watchers” and resulting deference, that Neustadt strongly believed was part of the toolkit of presidential influence (see for example, 1990, p. 48).

**The Unilateral/Administrative Presidency**

Finally, another source of Trump’s impact—especially on the policy agenda—is found in the “unilateral” presidency, or direct administrative action (see Cooper 2002; Howell 2003, 2005). This concept includes such mechanisms as executive orders, executive agreements (with other nations), proclamations, memoranda, signing statements, and the like. As Waterman (2003, pp. 374–377), and others have noted, presidents have turned to these “new political resources” because of challenges to or declines in their power bases elsewhere, such as the increased frequency of divided government, where they face at least one house of Congress controlled by the other party.

Granted, Neustadt did allude to the inherent powers of the office as one source of power, but in his time this source was not the major engine of presidential action. (Once again, a search of the index of the 1990 edition finds no listing for “executive order,” though “orders, self-executing” are found on five separate pages. Admittedly, this is not a definitive measure.) In his terms, these were a last resort, and unusual. He “concluded that the situations in which the president can issue ‘self-executing orders’ are rare. Even when circumstances present themselves,
Such orders are not costless” in terms of future power or prestige (Morris 2010, p. 92).

Just as Trump was not the first president to use social media, he is far from the first to utilize these tools, which stretch back to Washington in some respects; two famous examples are Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and FDR’s internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II by executive order, among others. Presidents have increasingly turned to these devices as they have been frustrated by Congress or even their own cabinets in some respects (Howell 2005).

As Howell (2017, p. 226) puts it, these actions “turn the central precepts of Neustadt’s argument upside down: unilateral action has little to do with persuasion. Instead, presidents simply act;... through unilateral directives, presidents set public policy and wait for Congress and the courts to counter,” essentially daring the other branches to defy them. Presidents can be checked, but by taking the initiative, they exploit the weaknesses of the other branches—their slow, procedural, and less unified structures.

What is unusual with Trump is the degree to which he relies on and relishes the use of such instruments, especially given his party control of Congress (until 2019) and to a lesser degree the courts. He signs them in public much like a bill with great fanfare, clearly enjoying the symbolism. He almost seems to believe that his mere signature equals action—like the Pharaoh Ramses, that if it is written (or signed by him), it is done.

Yes, like Bush and Obama he initially took many actions to “undo” orders by his predecessors that he opposed or disliked, or to reward interest group allies (e.g., concerning abortion). But Trump had already issued over 100 executive orders plus a number of other actions through March 2019 (see Fig. 7.1). While this is not nearly as many as Truman or Eisenhower, much less FDR, from Neustadt’s time, it is on a pace beyond the last four administrations. These also have been a large variety to achieve aims he claimed during the campaign, like the travel ban, immigration detention, suspending DACA, mandating free speech on college campuses, etc.

Like Trump’s legislative initiatives, some of these are not well-crafted or reasoned out, and have been challenged in court, and thus end up being blocked or put on hold. Still, he has prevailed or achieved a number of his policy aims—for example, his initial travel ban, though challenged and refined, was eventually upheld after modification by the US Supreme
Court, and in February 2020 he even extended it to six new countries (Oprysko et al. 2020).

Perhaps Trump has simply been more flamboyant or controversial with many of these actions than other presidents, but it does seem as if he prefers to rely on these devices, which our government through precedent has intentionally or unintentionally ceded to the executive. As some academic observers of Trump’s actions in the first months of his term saw it:

Trump has embraced the levers of presidential discretion and power inherent within the modern executive office. …Moreover, far from using administrative power to simply rollback his predecessor’s goals, the new president has sought to redeploy state resources in ways that will further entrench traditional commitments of the Republican Party, while simultaneously redefining them to mirror the president’s personal policy objectives. (Milkis and Jacobs 2017)

**Fig. 7.1** Cumulative proclamations, executive orders, and memoranda; Presidents following partisan change (Source: *The American Presidency Project*, “Trump in Action: Early Analyses: Comparing President Trump’s Record of Executive Orders and Actions to Other Recent Presidents.” April 29, 2017. [https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/analyses/trump-action-early-analyses](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/analyses/trump-action-early-analyses)
A notable example is his actions regarding the (his?) wall on the Southern border. After Trump failed to receive funding from Congress in early 2019, following the government shutdown and his capitulation (see Chapter 4), he then declared a “national emergency on the border.” He quickly moved to divert funds from certain defense projects to cover it. Congress attempted to rescind the emergency via joint resolution in February, but Trump vetoed it in March 2019, and Congress failed to override. While the wall is far from finished, Trump demonstrated another of Howell’s (2005) points—although presidents cannot act by decree and still may be checked, when they do act, they have particular advantages.

While not 100 percent effective, it is nevertheless clear that part of Trump’s success at altering the political landscape in the face of weaker “power dynamics” or skill in other areas is due simply to the options provided by the unilateral or administrative presidency itself. Notably, after the Democrats won control of the US House in the 2018 elections, Trump had already decided to largely “go it alone,” bypassing Congress (Swan 2019).

**Conclusion**

The enigmatic and turbulent presidency of Donald J. Trump calls out for some kind of clarity. Richard Neustadt’s model of presidential power and persuasion helps explain much of Trump’s difficulties and ineffectiveness (see Chapters 2–4). Yet a paradox remains: how has someone like him—especially a political novice with arguably poor people skills and a rough-and-tough manner, relatively unpopular with elites and masses—taken DC by storm, prevailed in some notable areas, and continued to be a strong contender for reelection?

The answer, as we have seen, can be found in the context of American politics today, and changes in the political environment that make “Art of the Deal” style leadership more viable. Personal factors, then, interact with contextual ones, for as one scholar put it, “power is not exercised in a vacuum. External factors will have an impact upon the extent to which the president can utilize power resources, and how they will be received” (Kerbel 1991, p. 130).

The interrelated factors of party polarization, the new media landscape, and the “unilateral” presidency of executive action that have developed in the half-century since Neustadt wrote mean that his “rules” no longer
fully apply. Or, perhaps as Trump has shown, someone can flaunt them and yet still govern—albeit by the thinnest of margins.

The resurgent strength of party affiliation at the elite and mass levels has sorted the political populace into almost tribal, warring camps and cultures (e.g., “Red and Blue America”), loosely based on ideological differences, though Trump has upended them somewhat. It has given Trump, along with his own skills, the ability to keep his party team with him. Similarly, the new media era has created information bubbles of partisan filters that allow him to maintain his brand loyalty and prevent competing messages from getting through, while at the same time rewarding his bombastic style via influence on the media agenda. And, if those were not enough, he has utilized the means of inherent executive authority which have grown since the 1930s, making him more politically potent. These tools not only “turn persuasion on its head” but also perform important symbolic and public relations functions for his tribe, as dramatic actions showing he is “keeping his promises” and fighting for them to “Make America Great Again.”

Thus, the political world Trump inhabits is particularly suited to, or at least enables, his behavior. Neustadt, much less others, could not possibly imagine a Dwight Eisenhower, or even a John Kennedy, performing as President of the United States in this manner; they couldn’t get away with it, even if they had wanted to. The implications of this new politics of persuasion—for presidents as well as political science—are discussed in the final chapter.

NOTES

1. In a twist of fate, these reforms—similarly affecting Republicans via state law changes—would also help pave the way for Trump to be nominated, and then elected.

2. As noted in Chapter 6, according to Congressional Quarterly, Trump’s success rate with Congress for both of his first two years in office was at record highs—98.7% in his first year (highest ever recorded), and 93.4% in his second year, the third highest recorded (CQ 2019). Needless to say, 2019 was not the same. Some scholars dispute this measure since it weights all votes (bills) equally, and doesn’t take into account other factors. It does, however, break out votes by party, and one main reason Trump did so well was not only Republican control of Congress but strong Republican support in Congress—for example, in 2017, he had a perfect 100% rate with House members of his party.
3. As previously mentioned, this analysis was through Trump’s third year in office, and thus before the Covid-19 pandemic and crisis. Even so, at least initially Trump’s approval ratings among Republicans held firm.
4. Another noteworthy aspect of the Trump Presidency in this vein is the media relations of the administration, which likewise must unfortunately be given short shrift here. Suffice it to say that Trump and his staff relish attacking the media and collectively are the most hostile White House to a free press since Nixon. The difference is that, unlike the 1970s, media credibility is down to Congress levels, and Trump capitalizes on this sentiment, along with perceptions of media bias and lack of reporting standards, to attack any outlets or even stories he doesn’t like as “fake news.” As I note elsewhere, this sour and surly relationship is also part of Trump’s appeal to and control over his base.
5. Though lately, circa late 2019, Trump seemingly has soured a bit on Fox because of some of their polls and reporting (of news, oddly enough) that he finds not fawning enough. Instead, he has come to promote One America Network (OAN), a more far-right and unabashedly pro-Trump outlet. Still, he has not given up watching Fox or giving interviews to its leading figures like Sean Hannity.

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