ABSTRACT
In examining Donald Trump’s presidential leadership, this article focuses on determining his efficacy as a political leader evident through three critical turning points in his presidency. His presidency began with a key legislative defeat, followed by a rare policy victory and in 2019, he controversially shutdown the government in a failed attempt to gain congressional funding for the US-Mexico border wall. By comparing the GOP attempt to reform healthcare with the passage of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, this article demonstrates how Republican legislative success relied upon a unified approach between Congress and the White House, with clear, long-established policy goals. Analysis of the longest government shutdown in US history provides insight into Trump’s leadership style, presidential power and relationship with Congress. In all three cases, Trump’s rhetoric failed to effectively support Republican policy efforts or convince Americans that their course of action was best. Indeed, Trump’s rhetoric and actions often proved more contradictory and damaging to Republican efforts and to the overall future of the party. This article concludes that Trump inexperience and character was ill-equipped to be an effective political leader, evident in his few legislative achievements and the toxic environment of hyper-partisanship he left behind.

When Donald Trump was elected to the presidency in 2016, accompanied by Republican majorities in both chambers of Congress, there was an expectation that the next four years would differ both in style and substance from the eight years of Barack Obama’s administration that had come before. What unfolded, however, was four tumultuous years with President Trump antagonistically targeting Obama’s political legacies, whilst contributing little substantive policy achievements of his own.

Consensus is lacking on the question of assessing what if any Trump’s long-term impact is on the relationship between the executive and legislative branch. As Toby S. James notes in the introduction, under Trump major tax changes were passed and this could be seen as indicative “of decisive,” as well as long-lasting change. Yet this can equally be seen as an aberration as there was little policy change in many policy areas (James 2021). Hyper-partisanship, however, remains strong within Congress and
coupled with the uncertainty surrounding Trump’s possible political future or impact, this creates an environment where it is less likely that “The legislation passed during his term in office could be just as quickly repealed” (James 2021, 438). Nonetheless, it remains true that depending on presidential priorities between a partisan or bipartisan approach to the legislative branch “can have a lasting effect on the norms of interaction” (James 2021).

This article examines Trump’s presidential leadership style and its impact on what had been a functioning democracy, despite an increasingly gridlocked legislature. Focusing specifically on Trump’s leadership of Congress and the health of America’s system of checks and balances, this article analyses three moments key to understanding the relationship between Trump and Congress and his legacy for the GOP. In terms of policy, firstly despite having campaigned on delivering healthcare superior to “Obamacare,” Republicans floundered in their attempt to overhaul the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Secondly and conversely, Republicans succeeded in passing tax cuts benefiting the wealthy yet advertised as supporting the working class. Analysing these domestic policy actions, both of which were based on longstanding Republican policy positions, and Trump’s use of the bully pulpit provides greater understanding of the impact of his political leadership. This reflects how presidents, as James describes, “have considerable scope to shape and affect policy by trying to initiate new policies or repeal old ones,” as Trump attempted to do with tax cuts and Obamacare (James 2021, 447). The opportunity for policy activism was especially ripe, prior to Trump’s loss of the House of Representatives to the Democrats in the 2018 midterms. The final section of this article focuses on the latter half of the Trump administration and in particular, the dysfunction evident in the 2019 government shutdown and the intransigent partisan divide that remained relatively consistent. These three cases, all critical to comprehending the Trump administration, demonstrate that while Trump had few legislative achievements and was largely ineffective as a political leader, leading his party down a path of tribalism devoid of realistic policy ideas, his destructive impact on the functioning of American government and especially the constitutional duty of congressional oversight in the twenty-first century era of hyper-partisanship, might be his most significant and consequential legacy.

Whilst President Trump’s leadership style challenged the norms of executive behaviour, the roots of hyper-partisanship under Trump date back to the 1990s. Notably, the “politics of anger” originated as Newt Gingrich’s brainchild in masterminding the “Republican Revolution,” taking control of Congress in the 1994 midterms (TIME 1994; Coppins 2018). As in the Trump era, hyper-partisanship during Bill Clinton’s administration resulted in a government shutdown and impeachment trial. Yet the “politics of anger” did not have a home in the White House until Trump’s election and his ensuing administration. Nonetheless, a notable difference between the GOP of the 1990s and Trump’s party is that the success and effectiveness of Gingrich’s aggressive strategy was supplemented by a policy agenda that acted as a unifying force (Strahan and Palazzolo 2004).

**Measuring presidential success in legislative leadership**

Scholars are divided on how best to determine presidential success and Trump’s dismissal of presidential norms has complicated this debate, making an examination of
individual leadership skills more persuasive. Trump’s presidential performance can be assessed as, “A standard metric of presidential success is major legislation passed in Congress,” while “[t]he most notable fact about Trump’s legislative record is the relative absence of passage of significant presidential initiatives” (Renshon 2020, 172; Edwards III 2021, 20). In analysing the success of the Republican Party, some scholars have looked at legislation roll rates, yet this approach does not encapsulate presidential leadership (Patterson Jr. and Schwartz 2020). Certainly, as James quotes, there is general agreement on “how little prepared the president and his team were” (James 2021, 438; cited from Oliva and Shanahan 2018). Despite this, scholars have struggled to assess Trump’s performance as president. Whilst it is logical to judge presidential success by their ability to fulfil their stated objectives, comparing Trump’s actions solely to his articulated aims, as exemplified by Karen M. Hult, is ill-suited for a president who was consistently inarticulate on policy details, let alone aims (Hult 2021; James 2021). Trump’s lack of policies was evident in how in 2020, the Republican National Convention “had no platform to pass, something that had not occurred since the party ran its first candidate in 1856,” leaving them to rely on their platform from 2016, representing a litany of promises that remained unfulfilled (Edwards III 2021).

Analysing President Trump’s success therefore demands an individual consideration of his leadership skills, skills that if demonstrated effectively are the difference between success and failure in passing legislation. Indeed, George C. Edwards III stresses “individual-level measures of presidential support” and the “need to focus our attention on how presidents attempt to structure legislators’ choices in addition to the influences on individual decisions” (Edwards III 1985). Presidential scholar Richard Neustadt equally emphasized “an individualistic” approach to analysing executive power (Schaefer 2021). This reflection on an individual president is especially pertinent for scholars who identify Trump as “a new kind of president” (Renshon 2020). James P. Pfliffer’s approach of judging Trump against presidential norms appears more appropriate, particularly for a more detailed study and comparative study (Pfliffer 2021; James 2021). This can also be said of Fred I. Greenstein’s consideration of presidents’ policy vision, political skill, organizational capacity, cognitive style, emotional intelligence and public communication (Greenstein 1988, 2009, 2013; James 2021).

Presidential scholars often cite skill in political tactics and communication as key for success. In considering Trump’s presidency within the context of Neustadt’s approach, Todd M. Schaefer uses two of the same case studies as this article, healthcare reform and the historic government shutdown, in his chapter “Three Cases of Catastrophe” to demonstrate “how Trump’s failures to practice good presidential power relations skills” are responsible for these defeats (Schaefer 2021). The blame Trump attempted to place on Democrats for congressional gridlock clearly failed to resonate with voters either in 2018 or 2020. Jon Herbert, Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Wroe broadly explain Trump’s “personal failings” and how his “skills have not proved very effective in influencing legislators” (Herbert, McCrisken, and Wroe 2019). They continue, however, by emphasizing how “his failings have been strategic. He began his term with an extraordinary delegation of power to Congress at the expense of his radical agenda by choosing conventional Republican priorities: healthcare and tax reform,” both of which are the focus of this article (Herbert, McCrisken, and Wroe 2019). Similarly, Edwards identifies Trump as having “adopted a passive approach to agenda setting,
putting him in a reactive mode” (Edwards III 2021). Trump’s approach of limited presidential policy leadership resulted in limited legislative success, reflected by the successful passage of a single legislative priority. In terms of presidential success at legislative leadership, defined either as the number of bills passed or their significance, even “meager” might be too generous in describing Trump (Renshon 2020).

“Repeal and replace” Obamacare

During his barnstorming across the nation in 2016, Trump campaigned on repealing Obamacare, yet if this created a mandate, it was one Trump was unable and ill-suited to fulfil (Humer 2016). As a political novice with a background of divided partisan loyalties, candidate Trump had to quite literally prove his loyalty to the Republican Party, signing a pledge and endorsing core conservative policies, such as pro-life opposition to abortion (Viebeck 2015; Lace-Evans 2016). Being new to the party and to politics more broadly, Trump was certainly not a policy wonk and was elected with little understanding of legislation or the legislative process. It was perhaps unrealistic to have high expectations of Republican legislative successes, considering the inexperience of the incoming president. Inexperience, however, can be overcome with concerted effort in pursuing informed and coherent policies. These elements of leadership, including teamwork with congressmen and women, and even an interest in detailed policy, were critically absent.

Under the Trump presidency, the Republican Party became the party of grand old promises. “Repeal and replace” was their mantra on healthcare, planning to dismantle Obamacare but without a substantive plan in its stead (Jackson 2017). As president-elect, Trump declared that Republicans would grant “insurance for everybody,” yet the American Health Care Act (AHCA) proposed by the Republican controlled House in 2017, failed to live up to these grand promises, both vague and specific (Jackson 2017). Politico compared the promises of the Trump administration to the AHCA, finding that it ran afoul of Trump’s promise not to cut Medicaid and his campaign pledge to “get rid of the artificial lines around the states,” enabling consumers to access health insurance outside of their home state (Jackson 2017). Furthermore, the apolitical Congressional Budget Office (CBO) determined that if the bill became law, during the next decade 24 million people would be kicked off their healthcare plan, directly contradicting statements made by presidential counselor Kellyanne Conway (Jackson 2017). The CBO found that health premiums during two years of the law’s existence, would rise by approximately 15–20 percent, defying Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price’s public assurance that the act would not negatively impact Americans’ wallets (Jackson 2017).

Concerns raised by the CBO analysis encouraged disunity amongst Republicans, which was integral to the decision not to put the bill up for a final vote in the House (Lawder and Holland 2017). Trump had attempted to force a vote after calling off negotiations with members of his own party who were hesitant to support the bill, yet this strongarm tactic did not produce the passage of legislation (Lawder and Holland 2017). Indeed, there was little incentive for Republicans to act with a Quinnipiac poll finding that only 17 percent of American voters supported the bill (Quinnipiac Poll 2017). After the fact, Trump seemed to distance himself from the legislation by
vaguely asserting that “There were things in this bill that I didn’t particularly like,” despite having offered very little leadership or input in the crafting of the policy detail itself (Lawder and Holland 2017).

The healthcare debacle was not just any failure. It represented the death knell of “Trump’s first major legislative initiative,” within the context of what traditionally should have been the president’s honeymoon period and from the advantage of having party control of Congress (Lawder and Holland 2017). This, however, did not stop Trump from blaming the failure on “no Democrat support,” contentiously adding he would co-operate with Democrats, “when they all become civilized” (Lawder and Holland 2017). Trump suggested a hands-off approach to healthcare, attempting to demonstrate consistency from his previous depiction of an impending crisis by suggesting action would be taken, “after this mess known as Obamacare explodes” (Lawder and Holland 2017). Trump revealingly added that “We learned a lot about loyalty. We learned a lot about the vote-getting process,” indicative of his inexperience in politics and the legislative process (Lawder and Holland 2017).

Consistently throughout his presidency, Trump prioritized loyalty and through this prism, was unable to effectively wield the president’s power to persuade and persuade from the vantage of policy substance (Neustadt 1991). Neustadt explains how president’s derive power to persuade from “authority and status” and “What other men expect of him” but having come to the Oval Office through an extremely controversial election and diminishing the status of the executive through his own actions, Trump began and ended his presidency with little authority (Neustadt 1991). Furthermore, Trump seemed to embrace the element of surprise and being unconventional and this lack of consistency in rhetoric or action, meant that policymakers never really knew what to expect, making Trump’s power to persuade exceedingly limited.

The failure of the bill in March 2017 incited questions regarding Speaker of the House Paul Ryan’s leadership and control of his party members, especially as he was “chief architect of the act” (Lawder and Holland 2017; Reinhardt 2019). Ryan referred to the failure as an example of “growing pains” as Republicans became accustomed to working within the context of majority control of government (Lawder and Holland 2017). These “growing pains,” however, were not confined to Washington. In February and again during the August 2017 summer recess, Republicans returned home to find angry constituents fearful of losing their healthcare, forcing their awareness that despite its partisan moniker of “Obamacare,” the ACA “has grown rather popular among Americans” (Kaplan 2017; Weigel 2017; Reinhardt 2019). Trump added fuel to the fire of American’s anxiety and confusion by repeatedly tweeting that “Obamacare is imploding,” seeming to portray a crisis that Republicans were looking to resolve through their own legislation (Lawder and Holland 2017). The combination of the lack of a clear replacement to the ACA and the divisive rhetoric from the bully pulpit demonstrated a clear lack of leadership and control over policy and communications.

On May 4, 2017 despite twenty GOP defectors, leading House Republicans succeeded in passing a moderated form of their previous legislation, derogatorily referred to as a “skinny repeal” of Obamacare and were invited to the White House for a party in the Rose Garden (Wilensky 2017; Jacobs, Gambino, and Beckett 2017; Graham 2017). This turned out to be the only celebration the AHCA bill would get. Notably, this time, the AHCA was passed through the House prior to an updated analysis from the
CBO, implying a sense of urgency and lack of concern by a majority of Republicans over the actual human consequences of their legislation (Wilensky 2017). Indeed, the CBO reported a similar negative outcome for the revised AHCA (Wilensky 2017). A month later after the Rose Garden party, at a White House meeting with senators, Trump denigrated the legislation as “mean” (Graham 2017). This could have been a personal jab at how some called the bill “Ryancare,” whilst Trump sought singular attention and credit for any supposed achievements under his administration (Reinhardt 2019). Whatever the reason, Trump’s inconsistency caused confusion and again failed to provide leadership for concrete policy proposals and party unity. The result was a rupture within Republican ranks and the viral thumbs down vote by Senator John McCain that doomed “Trumpcare” (Scott 2018). Congressional Republicans voting in favour, in the face of pressure from party leadership, including the president, were culpable in attempting to pass legislation whose consequences had not been thoroughly considered.

The inability to “repeal and replace” Obamacare was a painful lesson for Republicans on the distinction between rhetoric and policy. Even if congressional Republicans had stood united behind a bill, they had not campaigned on or prepared any clear or comprehensive healthcare policy plans, which are critical for an issue this complex. Political economist Uwe Reinhardt characterizes the GOP attempt at healthcare reform as an act of “collective professional ignorance” (Reinhardt 2019). He further emphasizes how President Trump is particularly culpable of naivety, in describing his statement that ‘Nobody knew that health care could be so complicated,’ although, after the stillbirth of the Clinton health reform plan in the 1990s and the breech birth of the Affordable Care Act of 2010 (Obamacare), he must have been the only one who did not know. (Reinhardt 2019)

The first Republican attempt to pass the AHCA persisted for only 63 days, whereas the ACA took up over a year of work between the president and Congress (Collier 2017). As Edwards argues, “The administration simply never invested in developing policies” (Edwards III 2021). Leadership and a determined focus on policy proposals and details, particularly from the Trump White House, were sorely lacking and the hype with which Trump infused the issue heightened the thud of failure as it died on the Senate floor, making it not just “one of the biggest setbacks of his first year,” but of his presidency (Schaefer 2021). The consequence of this legislative failure could in the short-term be seen as “Aside from Trump himself, the issue of healthcare was the biggest burden the Republicans carried into the midterm elections” (Edwards III 2021).

“Big tax cuts”

Nonetheless, the Trump administration followed this healthcare defeat by succeeding in gaining what the president termed “big tax cuts” (Lawder and Holland 2017). Similar to the failed healthcare overhaul, the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy think tank describes how the “hastily enacted” Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA) in last minute desperation included, “provisions of the legislative text … scrawled in the margins” (Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy 2019). Despite the same last-minute rush to create legislation without considering the ramifications, Republicans were able to quickly form a united front on this issue, with the Senate voting strictly along party lines, 51–49 (United States Senate 2017). This unity is not necessarily because taxes are less
complex than healthcare but because tax cuts are a policy that has been a central plank of the party since the vaunted presidency of Ronald Reagan, who remained the face of the modern conservative movement until the rise of Trump. Indeed, in their analysis of the consequences of the TCJA, the Center for American Progress headlined that, “Trump’s Corporate Tax Cut Is Not Trickling Down,” using a phrase reminiscent of Reaganomics (Hendricks, Hanlon, and Madowitz 2019). Stephen Skowronek further recognizes Trump within the context of, as James explains, “the Reaganite political order, an order under considerable pressure with a divided Republican party, which made governing difficult” (Skowronek 2020; James 2021).

When Republicans failed to move forward with healthcare reform in March, their attention shifted to tax cuts and their strategy became more coordinated, resulting in the passage of the legislation in December. As analysed by the non-partisan Tax Policy Center, Republicans remained focused on benefitting business, yet the legislation “evolved” to become “much smaller and it became far less regressive” (Gleckman 2017). This conclusion was based on the “one-page summary” of “proposals that candidate Trump had made during his presidential race,” in contrast to how “Hill and White House negotiators downsized the net tax cut” (Gleckman 2017). That being said, the final TCJA still became “the largest one-time reduction in the corporate tax rate in U.S. history, from 35 percent down to 21 percent” (Long 2017). Having gone through a campaign consumed by character, with a candidate devoid of political experience, familiarity with policy or detailed policy proposals, Republicans were successful by starting from the unified standpoint between Congress and the White House of achieving tax cuts for business and provided details from there to ensure the legislation’s viability.

Aside from wanting a legislative win to shift the narrative away from the failure of healthcare, as a former businessman Trump seemed like the perfect president to deliver tax cuts for business. Most helpful to Republicans was Trump’s appeal to the overwhelmingly white, male working class who were increasingly flocking to their party and fast becoming a stalwart group of base supporters (Turney et al. 2017). Trump became the ideal messenger to try and convince average Americans that these “big tax cuts” were for them. Indeed, Trump sold the bill as “a tremendous thing for the American people,” insisting that “It’s going to be fantastic for the economy” (Wagner 2017). Yet he was equally unrealistic in describing it as “a bill for the middle class and a bill for jobs,” that contradictorily meant that “corporations are literally going wild” (Wagner 2017). Trump’s characteristic detachment from legislative details, despite Edwards III citing the TCJA as “an exception to Trump’s passivity,” consequently made him reliant on congressional Republican leaders to deliver (Edwards III 2021). Just as when Trump thought healthcare reform would pass, he praised Senate and House GOP leadership, although this time he waited until the legislation had successfully gone through Congress. Namely, Trump stated, “Mitch McConnell has been fantastic, he worked so hard,” “And the exact same thing could be said of Paul Ryan” (Wagner 2017). Playing on his rhetoric that would fit Cas Muddle and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser’s definition of populism, Trump declared that, “Democrats don’t like tax cuts” (Muddle and Kaltwasser 2017; Wagner 2017). Trump thereby magnified this portrayal of victory through party unity by contrasting the political success of the GOP with the failure of the Democrats, despite their unified disapproval of the bill in both chambers, to prevent the legislation from passing (Newport 2019).
The success of passing this legislation reflected the attainment of a well-established Republican policy goal and it was this unified perspective and approach shared between the Trump administration and Republican Congress that was so critical, especially in maintaining party unity. The TCAJ represented “the most significant overhaul of the U.S. tax code in 30 years” (Wagner 2017). Notably, tax cuts were one of the few areas in which Trump appeared ideologically in sync with his party, preaching fiscal conservatism whilst depicting Democrats as irresponsibly wanting “to raise your taxes and spend money foolishly … in many cases” (Wagner 2017). Yet the TCAJ raised some concern from a few Republicans in Congress. For example, the final legislation reflected how “A change made Friday morning to win over Rubio expands the child tax credit even further to give more money to working-class families” (Long 2017).

More significantly and controversially, Tennessee Senator Bob Corker, who had previously been the lone Republican senator to vote against the bill, switched his vote to support passage of the TCAJ (Kim 2017). Corker had had a torturous relationship with Trump, that included Corker publicly criticizing the president during the early months of his administration, referring to the White House as “an adult day care center” after he had declared his intent not to seek re-election (Diaz 2017). Trump responded, tweeting that Corker “couldn’t get elected dog catcher in Tennessee, is now fighting Tax Cuts” (Diaz 2017). While it can be argued that there is limited benefit in attacking a retiring member of your own party who has little to lose, it is possible that regardless of his propensity to engage in political mudslinging, Trump hoped to pressure Corker into supporting the bill.

Yet Corker’s original opposition to the TCJA reflected a deficit hawk perspective, another tenet of conservative orthodoxy, albeit one that has increasingly been diminished in the face of other policy priorities (Diaz 2017). Characteristically, Trump did not engage in a policy debate but focused entirely on denigrating Corker’s character and professional reputation, repeatedly referring to him as “liddle’ Bob Corker” and tweeting, “Isn’t it sad that lightweight Senator Bob Corker, who couldn’t get re-elected in the Great State of Tennessee, will now fight Tax Cuts plus!” (Diaz 2017). Aware of his inability to significantly impact the passage of the bill that already had support from all the Republican senators that had voted for a previous iteration of the legislation and having debated the legislation with a variety of conservative economic advisors including Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, Corker switched to support the bill (Kim 2017). Depicting a member of his own party as the enemy reflected the priority Trump placed on loyalty, not necessarily to the party but certainly to him and the TCJA was a rare case in which loyalty to Trump and the Republican Party demanded the same thing, support for this legislation as a long sought policy priority.

Yet this priority, similar to that of repealing and replacing Obamacare, might have been misguided. Tax cuts may be a Republican Party priority but they were not a priority for voters. As analysed by Gallup, throughout 2017 whilst GOP members were desperately trying to pass the TCJA, as little as 2 percent of Americans mentioned tax cuts as “the most important problem facing the nation” (Newport 2019). Trump helped lead his party members in Congress by demonstrating his persistent and shared desire in the GOP policy goal to pass tax cuts but he led them down the wrong path, away from the kitchen table issues that would help Democrats regain control of the House in the 2018 midterms (Stanton, Shepard, and Arrieta-Kenna 2018). Even prior to the
midterms, the non-partisan Brookings Institution noted that the TCJA was “poorly situated to mobilize Republican voters, whose support for the legislation was lukewarm” (Williamson 2018). Trump’s leadership also failed in convincing American voters beyond his base that the TCJA was good for them, with many scarred from the Great Recession and skeptical of the reality of “trickle-down” Reaganesque (Newport 2019). Economic context combined with Trump receiving 35 percent job approval, the lowest rating of any president at the end of their first year since Dwight Eisenhower, reflected a widespread distrust in his leadership (Nelson 2017).

In fact, the TCJA could be seen as a promise broken, rather than a promise kept. This “significant tax break for the very wealthy” represented “a departure from repeated claims by Trump and his top officials that the bill would not benefit the rich” (Long 2017). The nonprofit Center for Public Integrity wrote in 2020 that, “Promises that the tax act would boost investment have not panned out … Though employment and wages have increased, it is heard to separate the effect of the tax act from general economic improvements since the 2008 recession” (Cary 2020). Upon its passage in December 2017, the TCJA was described as, “The new tax break for millionaires goes beyond what was in the original House and Senate bills” (Long 2017). In 2019, the Center for American Progress confirmed voters suspicions that, “The ballyhooed tax cut bonuses were a mirage” (Hendricks, Hanlon, and Madowitz 2019). Furthermore, in a damning conclusion, the Center for American Progress found that the TCJA does “little that would ultimately benefit U.S. workers. Instead of trickling down to workers, the 2017 tax cuts have largely served to line the pockets of already wealthy investors – further increasing inequality” (Hendricks, Hanlon, and Madowitz 2019). Under Trump’s leadership therefore, the TCJA became the only “significant legislative accomplishment for Trump” (Wagner 2017). With the failure of the infrastructure initiative, despite Trump’s claims that “Infrastructure is the easiest of all … People want it, Republicans and Democrats,” Trump’s limited legislative agenda and leadership came to a grinding halt (Wagner 2017).

“Build the wall”

Trump’s personal campaign priority to “build the wall,”1 blinded him from policy priorities that could have been more attainable and reflective of consensus within his own party. Trump single-handedly led the country into a historically long government shutdown in 2019 (Baker January 2019a). This shutdown had been preceded the previous year by two shutdowns, one in January and one in March, that only lasted for a few days and reflected the partisan divide on immigration (Siddiqui, Jacobs, and Gambino 2018; Scott, Golshan, and Nilsen 2018). While President Trump was consistent in blaming Democrats for the shutdowns, in January 2018 he was active in negotiating with congressional Democratic leadership, including Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (Siddiqui, Jacobs, and Gambino 2018). Notably, in analysing the impact of social media on partisanship, three University of Cambridge psychologists find that “Since 1994, the number of Americans who see the opposing political party as a threat to ‘the nation’s well-being’ has doubled,” and therefore government shutdowns are “predictable” (De-Wit, Van Der Linden, and Brick 2019). Yet the brief shutdown in March 2018 was the result of divisions amongst Republicans and in particular, the objections
of Rand Paul whose conservative ideology led him to oppose the federal spending hike and filibuster the budget (Scott, Golshan, and Nilsen 2018). Legal scholar Jed Handelman Shugerman convincingly disputes the understanding that no single political actor should be blamed for a government shutdown as “it takes two to tango,” instead arguing that this unprecedented shutdown “is clearly the result of Trump playing hardball. He rejected the status quo of continuing resolutions in favor of funding for a wall” (Shugerman 2019). This analysis is supported by Trump’s own words claiming responsibility for the shutdown by telling Schumer and Nancy Pelosi, “I will be the one to shut it down. I’m not going to blame you for it,” a statement devastating to GOP political rhetoric that sought to blame Democrats (Shugerman 2019).

It is significant that all three government shutdowns during the Trump presidency reflected deep seated division on immigration, an issue that aided by Trump’s 2016 campaign, has become embroiled in America’s culture wars (Scott, Golshan, and Nilsen 2018; Elcioglu 2020). Whilst partisan and cultural divisions over immigration between congressional Democrats and Republicans and within the GOP itself, had contributed to the 2018 shutdowns, it was President Trump who instigated the 2019 shutdown in defense of one of the few policy goals he had espoused during his 2016 campaign and one that represented a fringe view and understanding of immigration and border patrol.

The 2019 government shutdown is the clearest example of Trump’s failed presidential leadership. The supposed legendary dealmaker ended the shutdown by accepting the same provisions that Democrats had offered over a month before, failing to gain funding for his beloved border wall (Baker January 2019a). Ignoring the precedents that demonstrate “that government shutdowns could be hazardous to one’s political health,” Trump led his party head into the controversy, disregarding how as one of his former aides explained, “Most people who have initiated shutdowns find it’s a hard negotiating position to be working from” (Baker January 2019a). Trump did not seem to consider this or have any concern when he stated that he would feel “proud” to instigate a government shutdown over lack of funding for the border wall (Hayes 2019).

Trump lost both in terms of political strategy and communications. While placing priority on border security and demonizing immigrants had been a successful campaign tactic, Trump was alone in insisting that the wall be a policy priority. This left him vulnerable to being out-maneuvered by politicians with greater legislative experience and especially by congressional Democratic leadership. Meeting with Schumer and soon to be House Speaker Pelosi in the Oval Office on December 11, 2018, Trump openly threatened to shutdown the government and yet Democrats had no incentive to blink, knowing full well that even before their new majority was sworn into the House, Trump did not have the necessary support within his own party (Hayes 2019).

Ignoring the political reality, Trump made it clear that he was unwilling to capitulate to avoid a government shutdown. While Congress scrambled to pass a funding bill, Trump emphasized, “I’ve made my position very clear: Any measure that funds the government must include border security,” admitting his willingness for “a long shutdown” (Hayes 2019). Trump’s strategy of trying to compel compliance for funding the border wall is in stark contrast to attempts at negotiations within Congress and even in his own administration, including Vice President Mike Pence, Budget Director Mick Mulvaney and his son-in-law Jared Kushner (Hayes 2019).
Entering his third year in office, it is possible that Trump overestimated the power of the presidential bully pulpit to persuade and negotiate. Considering that according to a 2017 Pew Research survey, only 29 percent of Americans thought a wall would effectively stem illegal immigration, President Trump should have realized that this particular policy had limited ability to incentivize action from lawmakers and limited traction beyond being a campaign rallying cry (Elcioglu 2020). December 22, 2018 marked the start of the shutdown and by January 4, 2019 after the new freshmen class of House Democrats had taken their seats, Trump attempted to increase the pressure for congressional funding of the wall (Hayes 2019). On the one hand, he seemed to imply that he was unperturbed by the consequences of the shutdown and had infinite patience to allow it to continue for years (Hayes 2019). Yet he also demonstrated his more characteristic impatience in floating his ability to, “call a national emergency because of the security of our country, absolutely,” to bypass Congress for funding the border wall (Hayes 2019). On January 8, President Trump made his first formal address from the Oval Office, yet it was ineffective in persuading members of his own party that the shutdown over the border wall was worth it, particularly as Republicans were becoming increasingly concerned over the economic consequences (Hayes 2019). In contrast, Democrats appeared united, consistent and compelling, with Pelosi stating that, “President Trump must stop holding the American people hostage, must stop manufacturing a crisis, and must reopen the government” (Hayes 2019). By making the comment, “We don’t govern by temper tantrum,” Schumer stressed how Democrats had gained the upper-hand in the strength of their political rhetoric and over Trump’s shutdown strategy (Hayes 2019).

In both policy priority and strategy, Trump was a leader without any followers. Trump’s unwillingness to negotiate and the way in which he “walked out” of meetings with congressional Democratic leadership damaged his political position and belittled the executive office, which Democrats like Schumer emphasized by describing Trump’s actions as “unbecoming of a president” (Hayes 2019). Trump stubbornly insisted that he would veto any bill without funding for the border wall and again stressed his consideration of citing a national emergency prior to visiting the US-Mexico border in Texas, thereby making any potential negotiations between congressional Democrats and Republicans exceedingly challenging, if not impossible (Hayes 2019).

On January 16, Democrats in turn pressured President Trump to end the shutdown, making use of their newfound majority in the House (Hayes 2019). Pelosi wrote to Trump requesting that he deliver his upcoming State of the Union address at a later date or in writing, if the government continued to be closed and therefore the Secret Service remained limited (Hayes 2019). Republicans attempted to match the previous political rhetoric of the Democrats with House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy responding, “I think it’s unbecoming of the office to disinvite the president” (Hayes 2019). Yet President Trump was increasingly facing a war on all fronts with his approval rating falling to 37 percent, “rank-and-file Republicans in revolt” and Democrats threatening to cancel his scheduled State of the Union address, Trump had run out of options (Sparks 2019; Baker January 2019a). Additionally, a Quinnipiac poll from January 9–13 determined that 63 percent of Americans were against the government shutdown over funding the border wall (Kafura and Smeltz 2019). If Pelosi was “playing politics” as her GOP colleagues argued, it was a masterful stroke perfectly timed to convince both President Trump and Senate Majority Leader McConnell to act (Hayes 2019; Baker 538 L. E. SMITH
January 2019a). McConnell intentionally held votes on two bills for re-opening the government that he knew would fail, one that aligned with Trump’s demands and the other reflective of Democrat policies, solely for an audience of one – the president (Baker January 2019a). This effectively showed Trump how limited his options were to end the shutdown.

Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, demonstrated greater leadership than the president through their willingness to negotiate, concern over the economic implications of the shutdown and in the end, their determination to force the president into agreement. Trump wanted to get his State of the Union address back on the calendar and with McConnell and Kushner both advising him against the use of a declaration of national emergency, Trump finally agreed to end the shutdown in showman style (Baker January 2019a). From the Rose Garden, Trump announced he was “very proud to announce today that we have reached a deal to end the shutdown” (Baker January 2019a). Notably, Trump did decide a month later in this unprecedented context, to declare an emergency to gain funding for the border wall, demonstrating the short-term effectiveness of Republicans who argued against this action (Baker February 2019a; Edwards III 2021). Trump could not conceal his loss even from fellow Republicans outside of the vaulted halls of Congress. Conservative firebrand Ann Coulter tweeted, “Good news for George Herbert Walker Bush: As of today, he is no longer the biggest wimp ever to serve as President of the United States” (Baker January 2019a). Trump responded to this friendly fire by re-iterating on Twitter that, “This was in no way a concession” and finally mentioned how the shutdown had caused many Americans financial hardship, an issue that an effective leader would have expressed more concern about much earlier (Baker January 2019a).

In referencing Neustadt’s approach, Schaefer points to an array of Trump’s limited presidential skills (Schaefer 2021). These included “Trump’s limited power, and inept bargaining skills,” “his own poor timing and weak agenda-setting, his position-changing, and general lack of strategy” (Schaefer 2021). In summarizing, Schaefer even states “it is hard to even chronicle all the ways he failed to use his power effectively” and as a whole, “Trump’s presidential inability to succeed at persuasion, in spite of some favourable factors on his side, [was] due to his poor choices and ineffective tactics” (Schaefer 2021).

**Conclusion**

Overall, while President Trump was largely an ineffective political leader, what he wrought in terms of stoking partisan divisions and establishing GOP loyalty to him, was of far greater consequence than any legislation. Even the TCJA, Trump’s singular key legislative accomplishment and legislative legacy, is under threat by President Joe Biden’s infrastructure plan (Romm 2021). Yet whilst Trump did not create our hyper-partisan politics, he threatened the future of the Republican Party who in tying their fate to Trump, chose to limit their appeal to white voters, disregarding the autopsy of their 2012 presidential election loss (Cheney 2016). Most significantly, he did possibly irreparable damage to the efficacy of Congress’s constitutional oversight obligation. The 2019 government shutdown ended due to the ability of Republican congressional leadership to intervene and force Trump to face political reality. However, as both his impeachments by the House of Representatives attest to, congressional Republicans
were not always able to save Trump from himself. There was a golden opportunity in the impeachment trial following the insurrection at the Capitol just before Biden’s inauguration, for Republicans to divorce themselves from the outgoing president. Their refusal to do so indicates that the politics of anger, partisanship and congressional gridlock are bound to continue regardless of who sits in the Oval Office.

Note

1. See: Clua-Losada and Keck (2021).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Dr Laura Ellyn Smith is a presidential historian. She is an Adjunct Assistant Professor teaching the American Presidency at Richmond, The American International University. She also teaches American Politics at Canterbury Christ Church University, while pursuing a second doctorate – a DPhil in History analysing the development of US presidential power at Oxford University, St. Anne’s College. She graduated with a PhD in History from the University of Mississippi. She gained a Distinction in her MA in U.S. History and Politics at University College London, where she was awarded the Americas Excellence Award. She graduated with First Class Honors for her BA in American Studies with a Year Abroad from the University of Leicester. Her list of publications can be found on her ORCiD page and include op-eds on current politics, an article analysing Barack Obama through the lens of the transformational presidency and a White House Studies article comparing Franklin D. Roosevelt and James K. Polk as imperial presidents. She also has two forthcoming book chapters respectively on Obama’s foreign policy in Cuba and FDR’s support of baseball during World War Two. Furthermore, she has contributed on the 2020 election to the latest edition of the Encyclopedia of the American Presidency.

References

Baker, Peter. 2019a. “For a President Consumed With Winning, a Stinging Defeat.” The New York Times. January 25. Accessed April 1, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/25/us/politics/trump-shutdown.html.

Baker, Peter. 2019b. “Trump Declares a National Emergency, and Provokes a Constitutional Clash.” The New York Times. February 15. Accessed April 2, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/15/us/politics/national-emergency-trump.html.

Cary, Peter. 2020. “Republicans Passed Tax Cuts — Then Profited.” The Center for Public Integrity. January 24. Accessed June 29, 2021. https://publicintegrity.org/inequality-poverty-opportunity/taxes/trumps-tax-cuts/republicans-profit-congress/.

Cheney, Kyle. 2016. “Trump Kills GOP Autopsy.” March 4. Accessed June 28, 2021. http://www.politico.com/story/2016/03/donald-trump-gop-party-reform-220222 (December 23 2016).

Clua-Losada, Mònica, and Michelle Keck. 2021. “Trump’s Authoritarian Neoliberal Governance of the US-Mexican Border.” Policy Studies 42 (5–6): 611–627.

Collier, Roger. 2017. “Why Trumpcare Failed.” Canadian Medical Association Journal. May 1. Accessed March 23, 2021. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5415398/.

Coppins, McKay. 2018. “The Man Who Broke Politics.” The Atlantic. October 17. Accessed March 23, 2021. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/11/newt-gingrich-says-youre-welcome/570832/.
De-Wit, Lee, Sander Van Der Linden, and Cameron Brick. 2019. “Are Social Media Driving Political Polarization.” Greater Good Magazine. January 16. Accessed March 23, 2021. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/is_social_media_driving_political_polarization.

Diaz, Daniella. 2017. “Donald Trump and Bob Corker: A timeline.” CNN. October 24. Accessed March 26, 2021. https://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/15/politics/bob-corker-donald-trump-timeline-relationship/index.html.

Edwards III, George C. 1985. “Measuring Presidential Success in Congress: Alternative Approaches.” The Journal of Politics 47 (2): 667–685.

Edwards III, George C. 2021. “Was Donald Trump an Effective Leader of Congress?” Presidential Studies Quarterly 51 (1): 20, 9, 4, 5, 8, 13 and 21.

Ecioglu, Emine Fidan. 2020. Divided by the Wall: Progressive and Conservative Immigration Politics at the U.S.-Mexico Border. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. 220 and 247.

Gleckman, Howard. 2017. “How The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act Evolved.” Tax Policy Center. December 28. Accessed March 24, 2021 https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/taxvox/how-tax-cuts-and-jobs-act-evolved.

Graham, David A. 2017. “‘As I Have Always Said’: Trump’s Ever-Changing Positions on Health Care.” The Atlantic. July 28. Accessed March 23, 2021 https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/as-i-have-always-said-trumps-ever-changing-position-on-health-care/535293/.

Greenstein, Fred I. 2009. The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Barack Obama. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Greenstein, Fred I. 2013. Presidents and the Dissolution of the Union: Leadership Style from Polk to Lincoln. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hayes, Christal. 2019. “Government Shutdown: A Look Back at the Major Events, Decisions and Bills that Got Us Here.” USA Today. January 19. Accessed April 1, 2021. https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/01/19/government-shutdown-timeline-how-we-got-here/262416002/.

Hendricks, Galen, Seth Hanlon, and Michael Madowitz. 2019. “Trump’s Corporate Tax Cut Is Not Trickling Down.” Center for American Progress. September 26. Accessed March 24, 2021. https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/news/2019/09/26/475083/trumps-corporate-tax-cut-not-trickling/.

Herbert, Jon, Trevor McCrisken, and Andrew Wroe. 2019. “Trump and Congress.” In The Ordinary Presidency of Donald J. Trump. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.1007/978-3-030-04943-0_7.

Hult, Karen M. 2021. “Assessing the Trump White House.” Presidential Studies Quarterly 51 (1): 35–50.

Humer, Caroline. 2016. “Trump Promised to Repeal Obamacare. Now What?” Reuters. November 10. Accessed March 23, 2021. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-obamacare-analysis-idUSKBN135171.

Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy. 2019. “Tax Cuts and Jobs Act: A Timeline.” August 7. Accessed March 24, 2021. https://itep.org/tax-cuts-and-jobs-act-one-year-later/.

Jackson, Henry C. 2017. “6 Promises Trump has Made about Health Care.” Politico. March 13. Accessed March 23, 2021. https://www.politico.com/story/2017/03/trump-obamacare-promises-236021.

Jacobs, Ben, Lauren Gambino, and Lois Beckett. 2017. “John McCain sinks ‘Skinny Repeal’ of Obamacare Health Act.” The Guardian. July 28. Accessed March 23, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jul/28/healthcare-bill-us-senate-votes-down-obamacare-skinny-repeal-revolt-by-john-mccain.

James, Toby S. 2021. “Assessing the Policy Effects of Political Leaders: A Layered Framework.” Policy Studies 42 (5–6): 437–454.

Kafura, Craig, and Dina Smeltz. 2019. “Majority of Americans Oppose Expanding US-Mexico Border Wall.” Chicago Council on Global Affairs 3.
Kaplan, Thomas. 2017. “Angry Town Hall Meetings on Health Care Law, and Few Answers.” *The New York Times*. February 13. Accessed March 23, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/13/us/politics/affordable-care-act-sensenbrenner-republicans.html.

Kim, Seung Min. 2017. “Why Corker Flipped on the Tax Bill.” *Politico*. December 18. Accessed March 26, 2021. https://www.politico.com/story/2017/12/18/bob-corker-tax-bill-kickback-republicans-respond-302482.

Lace-Evans, Olivia. 2016. “Donald Trump on Abortion – from Pro-choice to Pro-prison.” *BBC News*. March 31. Accessed March 23, 2021. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-us-canada-35912638.

Lawder, David, and Steve Holland. 2017. “Trump Tastes Failure as U.S. House Healthcare Bill Collapses.” *Reuters*. March 24. Accessed March 23, 2021. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-obamacare-idUSKBN16V149.

Long, Heather. 2017. “The Final GOP Tax Bill is Complete. Here’s What is in it.” *The Washington Post*. December 15. Accessed March 24, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/12/15/the-final-gop-tax-bill-is-complete-heres-what-is-in-it/.

Muddle, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2017. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nelson, Louis. 2017. “Poll: Trump’s Approval Rating Hits Historic Low of 35 Percent.” *Politico*. December 19, 2017. Accessed 28 June. https://www.politico.com/story/2017/12/19/poll-trump-approval-ratings-304742.

Neustadt, Richard E. 1991. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. New York: Free Press.

Newport, Frank. 2019. “U.S. Public Opinion and the 2017 Tax Law.” *Gallup*. April 29. Accessed March 24, 2021 https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/249161/public-opinion-2017-tax-law.aspx.

Oliva, Mara, and Mark Shanahan. 2018. “Introduction.” In *The Trump Presidency: From Campaign Trail to World Stage*, edited by Mara Oliva, and Mark Shanahan, 1–8. Springer International Publishing.

Patterson, Jr., Shawn, and Thomas Schwartz. 2020. “Parties, Agendas, and Roll Rates.” *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 32 (2): 348–359.

Pfiffner, James P. 2021. “Donald Trump and the Norms of the Presidency.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 51 (1): 96–124.

Quinnipiac Poll. 2017. “U.S. Voters Oppose GOP Health Plan 3-1.” Quinnipiac University. March 23. Accessed March 23, 2021 https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2443.

Reinhart, Uwe E. 2019. *Priced Out: The Economic and Ethical Costs of American Health Care*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Renshon, Stanley. 2020. *The Real Psychology of the Trump Presidency*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Romm, Tony. 2021. “Democrats, Republicans and Businesses Gird for Battle Over Biden’s Proposed Tax Hikes.” *The Washington Post*. April 1. Accessed April 2, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/us-policy/2021/04/01/tax-hikes-biden-infrastructure/.

Schaefer, Todd M. 2021. *Presidential Power Meets the Art of the Deal: Applying Neustadt to the Trump Presidency*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Scott, Dylan. 2018. “I’ll Never Forget Watching John McCain Vote Down Obamacare Repeal.” *Vox*. August 27. Accessed March 23, 2021. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/8/25/17782664/john-mccain-legacy-obamacare-repeal-thumbs-down.

Shugerman, Jed Handelsman. 2019. “Hardball vs. Beanball.” *Columbia Law Review* 119 (3): 91 and 97.

Siddiqui, Sabrina, Ben Jacobs, and Lauren Gambino. 2018. “US Government goes into Shutdown after Senate Rejects Funding Bill.” *The Guardian*. January 20. Accessed April 1, 2021. https://
www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jan/20/us-government-faces-shutdown-after-senate-rejects-funding-bill.
Skowronek, Stephen. 2020. *Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal*. 3rd ed. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
Sparks, Grace. 2019. “CNN Poll of Polls: Trump Approval Takes a Hit Mid-shutdown.” *CNN*. January 24. Accessed April 1, 2021. https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/24/politics/poll-of-polls-shutdown/index.html.
Stanton, Zack, Steven Shepard, and Ruairi Arrieta-Kenna. 2018. “How Democrats Won Over Older Voters – And Flipped the House.” *Politico*. November 13. Accessed March 26, 2021. https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/11/13/2018-election-analysis-democrats-republicans-politics-222412/.
Strahan, Randall, and Daniel J. Palazzolo. 2004. “The Gingrich Effect.” *Political Science Quarterly* 119 (1): 99.
TIME. 1994. “Mad as Hell: The G.O.P’s Newt Gingrich has Perfected the Politics of Anger.” 144, no. 19 (November 7).
Turney, Shad, Frank Levy, Jack Citrin, and Neil O’Brien. 2017. “Waiting for Trump: The Move to the Right of White Working-Class Men, 1968–2016.” *The California Journal of Politics & Policy* 9 (1): 23.
United States Senate. 2017. “Roll Call Vote 115th Congress – 1st Session.” December 2. Accessed March 24, 2021. https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=115&session=1&vote=00303.
Viebeck, Elise. 2015. “Trump Signs Republican Loyalty Pledge.” *The Washington Post*. September 3. Accessed March 23, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2015/09/03/trump-to-sign-republican-loyalty-pledge/.
Wagner, John. 2017. “Trump Signs Sweeping Tax Bill into Law.” *The Washington Post*. December 22. Accessed March 24, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/12/22/trump-signs-sweeping-tax-bill-into-law/.
Weigel, David. 2017. “At Raucous Town Halls, Republicans have Faced Another Round of Anger Over Health Care.” *The Washington Post*. August 11. Accessed March 23, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/at-raucous-town-halls-republicans-have-faced-another-round-of-anger-over-health-care/2017/08/10/9d82cbbe-7de9-11e7-83c7-5bd5460f0d7e_story.html.
Wilensky, Gail. 2017. “The Economics and Politics of the American Health Care Act.” *The Milbank Quarterly* 95 (3): 462–465.
Williamson, Vanessa. 2018. “The ‘Tax Cuts and Jobs Act’ and the 2018 Midterms: Examining the Potential Electoral Impact.” *Brookings*. August 27. Accessed March 26, 2021. https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-tax-cuts-and-jobs-act-and-the-2018-midterms-examining-the-potential-electoral-impact/.