CHAPTER 2

The Trump Record so Far: Are We Tired of Winning Yet?

Abstract  This chapter reviews the political and policy record of the early-to-mid Trump presidency, making the case that despite some advantages coming in, the record—in terms of both skill and effectiveness at getting things done, plus the results themselves—is less than stellar. By a number of metrics, such as bills passed, promises kept, as well as the evaluation of expert and public opinion, his time in office has been underwhelming.

Keywords  Trump, Donald · Presidential power · Presidential performance/greatness

Introduction: How Effective a President Has Trump Been?—That Is the Question

The previous chapter introduced the goal and schematic of the book, namely the application of Richard Neustadt’s (1960, 1990) classic work on presidential power and persuasion to the Trump presidency. It briefly reviewed the precepts of his model and ideas.

In this chapter, before explaining Trump’s performance and behavior in office from the standpoint of Neustadt, we first must examine his record. Such an exercise shows Trump has failed on a number of counts.
and in a number of areas, both to get what he wants, and in terms of results. I present the case that Trump—despite his claims to the contrary—has not been a very good, and is arguably a bad president in terms of effectiveness in using political power, in achieving his policy aims, and even in governing the country well.

First, the chapter reviews standards for evaluating presidential performance, and the scholarly literature on “presidential greatness,” as a guide to judging Number 45. Next, it provides evidence that Trump’s record is less than impressive.

One must of course separate the notion of “success” in terms of the results of influence, actions, policy, etc., from the notion of political success at exercising power—in other words, getting others to go along or support one’s goals or policies, or in Neustadt’s terms, persuasion. For example, one might argue that President George W. Bush was extremely successful in getting Congress, the media, the public, and even many in the foreign policy establishment to support going to war against Iraq in 2003—yet the war itself, while efficient in overthrowing Saddam Hussein and defeating Iraq’s army, was far less successful, and arguably a failure, in stopping terrorism or rebuilding the Iraqi polity as a democratic regime. In fact, the continued US occupation, as well as related economic, military, strategic, and diplomatic efforts have been very costly, and especially so in humanitarian terms. That country still suffers from instability and violence to this day.

President Obama, in similar fashion, was able—as Bill Clinton and Harry Truman were not—to get Congress to enact major, near-universal health care reform legislation, informally known as “Obamacare.” Yet difficulties in implementation, and political struggles with Republicans, limited its subsequent policy success in practice, though it did have some positive effects. A backlash against it also likely hurt his party in subsequent elections, and with it, much of his future political strength.

Both political skill and its results are important metrics, and will be used to evaluate Trump. Presidents, of course, want to achieve greatness, or have their policies be successful as well as be enacted, and are judged by history to some degree on the results. On the other hand, given the fragmented nature of the US system, as Neustadt noted (1990, p. 29), they must first succeed at influence and the “power game” to even hope to achieve policy ends.

Indeed, research into the question of presidential stature has a long and distinguished pedigree in the field, stemming back to such studies as polls
of experts by noted Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. in the 1940s and carried on by his son in later years. Others have followed up these efforts, often with varied methods, and include popular assessments done through public opinion polls by the likes of Gallup and Harris, which continue to the present.

To cite just a few examples, Landy and Milkis (2001) focus on a subset of presidents they deem worthy of emulation, whereas Simonton (e.g., 1991, 2006) emphasizes psychological and event factors in explaining presidential ratings, and Felzenberg (2008) examines political, personal and policy ones to rank the presidential pantheon. However, as Morris (2010) points out, the direct role of policy performance in analyzing presidential greatness has been limited.

Another thorny issue in judging presidential performance is how to do so—not only which benchmarks to use, but also how to properly interpret the data. As noted, various scholars have addressed the issue of rating presidents, the keys to “presidential greatness,” etc., and come to somewhat different conclusions. Nevertheless, there is some consensus on the “greats” and the “failures.” Washington, Lincoln, and the Roosevelts are some who fall in the former category, and Grant, Harding, Hoover, and Nixon are placed in the latter.

One notable pair of presidential scholars argue that all serious attempts to evaluate presidents necessarily involve some types of viewpoint, criteria, or even political, slant. “[W]hen ranking presidents we often learn more about the raters than the rated. Even the most serious efforts at evaluating presidencies invariably involve subjective or partisan biases” (Cronin and Genovese 2004, p. 100).

Robert DiClerico cogently notes how, in many ways, identifying presidential “success” is thus in the “eye of beholder.” He goes on to list some additional complications in accurate evaluation. These include the problem of perspective or historical reevaluation (views change over time, such as Truman being rated retrospectively much higher than he did upon leaving office); how to weight presidents “being ahead of the times,” in terms of raising new issues that become important later, even as they were unable to achieve policy changes in those areas during their tenure; and whether presidents really deserve the credit or blame for things that happen during their term (DiClerico 2013, pp. 429–435). Admittedly, therefore, some might take issue with the assessment offered here. Notably, the Trump White House itself regularly crows about
its (supposed) achievements, and has claimed great successes (whitehouse.gov, n.d.). Of course, that is far from an unbiased or even balanced assessment, and presidents shouldn’t get to judge themselves.

Still, most experts look for major, concrete accomplishments, and whether the president provided leadership for the common good or met the challenge(s) of the day (see for example, Curry and Morris 2010). So although there may be no neutral or entirely objective way to measure presidential performance, the sections below document how in many respects Trump is not the “winner” he claimed he would be, or even continues to claim he is. (In fact, one area he almost universally receives low marks on is honesty.)

**Trump: Less Than Successful**

During the campaign, Trump made the boast that under him, Americans would “win so much, [they’d] be tired of winning” (e.g., Lutey 2016; Abebe 2017). Instead, by a number of measures, the Trump presidency—through its second year—has been far from impressive. At the very least, as will be addressed in more detail subsequently (see Chapter 5), his administration has been marked by volatility, a lack of focus, almost daily controversies, and staff defections of unprecedented proportions. In addition, besides scandals and discord, his tenure is a record of limited political achievements.

According to PolitiFact (2019), Trump has failed to achieve most of his promises through his first two years in office. As one of their analysts put it, “at his term’s halfway point, almost half of his promises from 2016 have been blocked or dropped. On the positive side, close to a third of his goals were achieved or saw partial progress.” They noted that he had two years with friendly Republicans in Congress and yet failed to get two of his major goals, repealing Obamacare and building a wall along the border and making Mexico pay for it. The three of his other five major promises were achieved, but most were partial or compromises from what he claimed, such as lowering the corporate tax rate to 15 percent (it was lowered to 21). Based on their calculations, his scorecard on 100 promises through August 2019 was 17.6% promises kept, and 16.7% promises broken, with 10% “compromises” and the bulk “stalled” or “still in the works.” By contrast, President Barack Obama in his two terms, kept 48%, with 27% compromised and 24% broken—and notably, also out of a greater total number of 533 (PolitiFact 2019). Trump’s
record is likewise low by other historical standards. Fishel (1985, pp. 42–43), in one of the first detailed works on the subject, examined the success of presidential party platform proposals from Kennedy through Reagan’s first term, and found presidents not only tried to keep, they generally kept their promises—ranging from a low of 34% (Nixon) to a high of 62% (Johnson).

A cross-national, meta-analysis—or study of studies—on parties keeping their promises provides a different context, albeit with similar conclusions. An examination of 18 articles and book chapters over the past 40 years from European and North American cases found that, on average, parties kept 67% of their promises, though there was wide variation across time, countries and regime types (Petry and Collette 2009). Nevertheless, by this metric it would seem Trump’s record would fall on the low end of that spectrum.

Another major area where he has contradicted his own promised stance is on the role of lobbyists and special interests in his administration. He campaigned on “draining the swamp” of these influence-peddlers—always a popular target for presidential ire—and instead, he has filled it. A study by the nonprofit journalism outlet Propublica found that through the halfway point of his term, Trump had hired (not that they all kept their jobs, as is his wont) an incredible 281 lobbyists to work in his administration, or one lobbyist for every 14 political appointments he made (Mora 2019). This was four times the number Obama had hired through six years in office, and many of them were in a position to influence the regulation of the industries they regulated, such as Andrew Wheeler, a former coal lobbyist, whom Trump successfully appointed to be head of the Environmental Protection Agency. A related study, examining a government report, found numerous instances where Trump officials had violated the very ethics rules the administration put in place; and despite Trump’s ethics rules being weaker than some previous administrations, it still found notable violations in several agencies and departments (Kravitz 2019).

Trump also claimed to have been a legislative dynamo in the beginning of his administration, signing more bills than most other presidents. In fact, Politifact found that not only did Roosevelt and Truman sign far more bills through their first 150 days in office, Presidents Kennedy and Clinton came close (Carroll 2017). Trump made a similar claim at the end of his first year in office, after he inked the Republican tax bill (“our numbers are off the charts” [Keith 2017]). In fact, this too was wrong:
based on a National Public Radio study, Trump trailed his previous six predecessors with 96 bills signed into law, versus Obama (124), W. Bush (109), Clinton (209), H. W. Bush (242), Reagan (158), and Carter (249) (see Fig. 2.1). He even signed fewer bills than the presidents who served before those six, and again, the records of Truman and Franklin Roosevelt far surpass his (Keith 2017).

Taking a somewhat longer view, if one compares the number of bills passed by a “full” (two-year) session of Congress in the first part of a president’s term, at least since the Nixon administration, the 443 under Trump place him fifth out of the last seven presidents (govtrack.us; again, see Fig. 2.1). He does best his two previous predecessors, Obama and W. Bush, and is just below fourth-ranked Clinton, but has far less than Carter (804), H. W. Bush (665), and Reagan (529), the latter two of whom faced at least one chamber controlled by the opposition.

As some analysts noted, quoting political scientists, a better way to judge legislation is by significance. And on that measure, too, Trump ranked below his predecessors because many of his laws were either minor changes or extending other actions (again, see Carroll 2017, etc.). His claims of being a great legislator-in-chief were thus rated as exaggerations or false.

Another measure examined Trump’s own supposed priorities. Trailing Hillary Clinton in 2016, Trump gave a list of 60 policies he titled a
“Contract with the American Voter” (a loose ripoff of the 1994 Republican House platform), and tweeted 10 proposals he’d pass in the first 100 days if elected. Examining Trump’s record three years later, Bump (2019) found that “almost none of his proposed 100-day legislative agenda has seen the light of day, even 1000 days into his presidency,” and despite the fact, as noted, his party controlled both houses of Congress for two of those years. Only two of them were partially enacted (middle class tax relief, part of the GOP tax bill of 2017, and increased defense spending), while the other eight—including issues such as immigration “reform” and the border wall, enacting tariffs to prevent US corporations from shipping jobs overseas, school choice, lobbying (‘drain the swamp’) reform, and a trillion dollar-infrastructure investment—remained unfulfilled.

In the foreign policy realm, his achievements are scant as well. Major trade battles and supposed “resetting of the deals” with countries like China and Canada and Mexico were rocky, and have either led nowhere or to relatively minor changes (e.g., Raleigh 2019), in contrast to Trump’s rhetoric about “trade wars being easy to win.” One analyst characterized the deal with China as “underwhelming” and merely a “cease fire in the war,” not a comprehensive new agreement (Johnson 2020). His efforts to bring the North Korean regime and its nuclear program to heel have largely come to naught. (The case of North Korea and its leader Kim Jong Un is discussed in detail later.) He also was only partially successful in getting Western allies to burden more of the defense and NATO commitments.

A Council on Foreign Relations analysis argues that while the first two years of the administration “have been marked by a surprising degree of stability,” and “have not translated into obvious disaster,” the president has “outlined a deeply flawed foreign policy vision that is distrustful of US allies, scornful of international institutions, and indifferent, if not downright hostile, to the liberal international order the US has sustained for nearly eight decades” (Cohen 2019). True, this perspective in part depends upon one’s view of America’s role in the world.

But other measures are clearer. Despite his claims of making the United States “stand tall” and be respected again, our nation is arguably less influential thanks in large part due to him. The United States is now not leading in a number of areas like responses to technology giants, air safety, etc. (Johnston 2019). US standing in terms of global opinion also faltered. Favorability toward US and American power declined in most
nations since Obama, or is even lower than Bush during the Iraq War, though granted some measures also weakened under his predecessors. Most notably, a repeated cross-national study by Pew Research Center shows majorities in many nations view Trump and his administration unfavorably—a median of two-thirds having “no confidence” in Trump to do the right thing in international affairs, a situation that has not improved much during his first three years (Pew 2018, 2020). By some indicators, America’s “soft power” stature has declined significantly just since he took office from first to fourth in the world (Portland/USC 2019).

**Political Struggles and Unsuccessful Power Dynamics**

Despite winning in a surprise election, and being dealt a relatively good hand in terms of a healthy economy and a Congress controlled by his own party the first two years, Trump appears to have made governing a struggle and an ongoing dog fight, largely due to “unforced errors” of his own making. Major legislative accomplishments, have been few and far between—like tax cuts at the end of 2017, and criminal justice reform in December 2018. Trump has had difficulties with Congress, including some members of his own party, and exhibited an inability to keep focused on a clear agenda, even during his first year when most presidents rack up some of their most impressive victories. As one Congressional scholar put it in 2018, looking back: “Governing is always hard in polarized times, but it has been especially hard during US President Donald Trump’s first year in office. Undisciplined and unpopular, Trump has been largely unable to advance his agenda on Capitol Hill despite Republican control of both houses of Congress” (Binder 2018, p. 78).

More notably, overall both experts, and the public, seem to agree Trump has been “underwhelming.” A survey of presidential scholars in the American Political Science Association rated Trump the worst president in American history (Kostur 2019, etc.), despite his limited tenure in office at the time. The public, at least into his third year, thought similarly: in a 2019 poll, 47% expected that his presidency wouldn’t be successful in the long term. Furthermore, not only were fewer undecided about this question at this point in his term than they were about other presidents, they were more pessimistic about his administration than any in 25 years (Enten 2019).2
His chaotic approach to the job, controversial persona, if not his policies, also cost him and his party dearly. In the 2018 elections, despite a tax cut, a relatively favorable electoral map, and a good economy, his party lost the US House of Representatives, especially in traditionally Republican suburban areas. While Republicans did gain in the Senate, they still underperformed, due in part to his approval ratings and record (Yglesias 2018). The election was, at least in large part, a referendum on Trump himself (e.g., Jacobson 2019).

The result of this mishap was to weaken Trump’s political power hand in the second part of his term, opening him up to congressional investigations into potential wrongdoing and mismanagement by him and his team. Some of these issues directly sparked investigations of his administration by the new Congress, and even led to his impeachment over the Ukraine “extortion” scandal, though notably not his removal from office.

**Conclusion**

While there may be no neutral, objective standard for judging presidential performance or even “greatness,” this chapter has demonstrated that, at a minimum, Donald Trump is unlikely to be added to Mount Rushmore. The fact that he is ranked *last* by presidential scholars after only two years in office, along with members of the public giving him low marks, serve to reinforce that conclusion.

One can also argue that although his surprise election may not have handed him a mandate, he was dealt a relatively favorable political hand in other respects, and failed to capitalize on it (e.g., Binder 2018). His record is spotty at best. His presidency has been marked by rancor and discord, and an inability to focus. Furthermore, the Republicans’ poor performance in the 2018 elections, and notably the loss of control of the US House, were in large part due to him—his behavior, his stances, and his handling of his job.

The next two chapters attempt to make sense of this state of affairs by utilizing Richard Neustadt’s (1960, 1990) presidential power and persuasion framework. The first of these concerns the ingredients of presidential power, and how Trump has approached his job in relation to them. The second examines three key political events in his first term, and how Trump’s decisions and actions contributed to their negative outcomes.
Notes

1. In a different sense, Abebe (2017) makes the insightful point that “winning” for Trump, and perhaps US culture, is a broad notion that goes beyond mere competitions (elections, etc.) where it makes sense, and also is no longer used in the context of mutual gains—e.g., “win-wins”—but is instead a kind of bipolar view of dominance versus submission (indeed, perhaps related to Trump’s “Art of the Deal” negotiation approach). [In] “the core Trump worldview... winning and losing seem like existential issues – not the outcome of specific conflicts, but an almost theological separation of beings into two types. Winners take bold actions, dominate others, and impose their will upon the world; losers hem and haw, dither and consult, exercise restraint.” He further argues this drove Trump in office to make bold claims about rather meager accomplishments, congressional votes, etc. One can see this in Trump’s supposed ballyhooed “phase one” trade deal with China, which left many issues unresolved and didn’t change much for the United States despite the harm his tariffs did; even the conservative outlet The Federalist declared it did “almost nothing for the United States” (Raleigh 2019).

2. Perhaps the public was right or prescient, given Trump’s changing fortunes and botched response to the Covid-19 pandemic that would come in 2020.

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