Abstract  Despite the effectiveness of Neustadt’s model in explaining Trump’s meager accomplishments and/or lack of persuasive skill and power, nevertheless he does appear “relatively better off” or “more successful” than the model would predict. Notably, despite his poor relations and personal and power skills with other elites, he has had notable success in Congress in his first two years, passed some bipartisan legislation like criminal justice reform, and has won over, if not demanded loyalty from, his partisans. His public support, while somewhat low by historic standards, is also stable, and while it doesn’t go up much, it doesn’t drop much either, despite the controversies and setbacks of his term, up to and including impeachment. He also appears quite competitive for reelection in 2020.
Keywords Trump, Donald · Presidential performance · Leadership · Relations with Congress

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapters of this work made the case that Donald Trump’s tumultuous presidency, and with it, a number of political and policy failures in the first half or more of his term, can be explained using Richard Neustadt’s model of presidential influence from his classic work, Presidential Power (Neustadt 1960, 1990). The basis of that model is the premise that presidential power is the power to persuade, namely through bargaining with other political actors. Beyond the advantages conveyed by the office itself, presidential power comes from presidents’ cultivation of their “reputation” or standing with political elites, and their “prestige,” or popular support (see Neustadt 1990, pp. 29–90).

Such an analysis of Trump finds him lacking in several areas. Trump has attacked or alienated political elites of all stripes, even from his own party, and has largely disdained the DC establishment, thereby making governing more difficult than it should have been. Trump also has been a relatively unpopular president, and has stirred strong dislike from some sectors of the electorate. This characteristic is especially unusual for a president early in his term, and one who presided over a period of general peace and prosperity. His lack of attention to these aspects of his power, and his own personal foibles and misjudgments, have cost him in major policy priorities such as health care, border security, and relations with North Korea (see Chapter 4). Furthermore, Trump’s management (or mismanagement) of his staff and the executive branch, discussed in Chapter 5, have indirectly contributed to many of his difficulties in the political and legislative realms.

This chapter, however, explores the “other side of the story”—namely, the paradox that even with Trump’s self-inflicted troubles and lack of attention to the edicts of presidential power that Neustadt posits are necessary for success, he has nevertheless managed to survive, and not only produce some achievements, but also more crucially maintain his political support. That Donald Trump has performed as well as he has as President flies in the face of what such a model would presumably predict. For example, his ability to politically squash most resistance to his position within his party, largely resist the strident attacks of his opposition,
in addition to making some policy changes in the face of controversy and discord he has sown by his own poor decisions in other respects, is by this standard quite remarkable.  

Trump does see the world—political and otherwise—in competitive, zero-sum, terms. He very much wants to be, and assumes he is, a winner. As Trump put it in his second book: “Life is a series of challenges. Some of the challenges you face turn out well. Some don’t. What separates the winners from the losers, I’ve learned – is how a person reacts to a twist of fate. You have to be confident as you face the world, but you can’t be too cocky” (Trump and Leerhsen 1990, pp. 3–4). While at times one might wonder whether he really believes this, or even behaves this way as President, beyond certain major setbacks, in other respects during his first few years in office he has been potent, and persevered.

Areas of Political and Policy Success

Despite the strong support for Neustadt’s model described in Chapters 3 and 4, the Trump presidency has been far from—to use one of the president’s favorite terms—the “disaster” one might expect given that earlier analysis. Trump has been and remains a formidable political actor, and not just because he occupies the Oval Office. In a number of notable areas, the Trump experience seems to defy Presidential Power expectations, though this list is by no means exhaustive.

Trump: Agenda Control and Presidency as Nation’s Focal Point

First, Trump has put the presidency back in the center of the political world, and clearly has seized the spotlight, but also the political agenda. Issues such as immigration, trade, alliances, and US manufacturing were certainly part of the political landscape before his ascendancy, but took a back seat to other issues like health care, terrorism, and the budget, to name a few (see Gallup data reported in Jones, 2019). In particular, concern with immigration has risen (perhaps partly due to his policies), and concern with “government” has as well.

He has achieved this change through a combative and controversial style, but has done it nonetheless. He is the main topic of political conversation in DC and the nation. In many respects, he has continued his dominance of the news cycle—or at least, broad swath of attention,
Despite the ups and downs of the 24/7 media agenda—that he had during the 2016 campaign. A Harvard University study found that during his first 100 days, Trump received a stunning 41 percent of the coverage in major newspapers and television networks, three times the amount of previous presidents (Patterson 2017; Warren 2017). While this extreme pace has ebbed, nevertheless he does seem to “monopolize the public space” (see Miroff 1982) of politics in the media and popular mind. His adroit use of new communication tools and framing of issues has abetted this process. Other researchers, examining in particular Trump’s usage of Twitter regarding tax reform and North Korea, found he did have an effect on changing the network news agenda. However, they noted that a president’s (or even Donald Trump’s) ability to “disrupt” the media and public agenda through attention-grabbing social media messaging should not be overstated (Wiemer and Scacco 2018). And, as discussed earlier, he may not stay on message. Nevertheless, Trump intuitively knows how to garner attention, and thus by default makes others respond to him.

**Relations and Relative Success with Congress**

Despite his apparently weak power position and inept bargaining skills, and notable setbacks such as failing to repeal “Obamacare” (discussed in Chapter 4), by other measures Trump has been extremely successful with Congress. 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, which was the highest ever recorded, and 93.4% in his second year, the third highest recorded (CQ 2019). Remarkably, on this measure—which granted, to use a baseball metaphor, is more like a batting average than slugging percentage—Trump appears more successful than even the famed legislative master Lyndon Johnson, much less Ronald Reagan, in his first two years. After losing the House in his third year, his support in the House fell to record low levels, though thanks to a slight increase in the GOP seats in the Senate, and his lack of position-taking on bills outside of nominations, his overall support score was 73%, better than Obama, Clinton, or H. W. Bush in their third years. Still, he prevailed on few major votes (CQ 2020). On the other hand Trump also has been able to effectively “pack” the federal courts, insuring a legacy far beyond his tenure (e.g., Relman 2019), even after the 2018 midterms.

And, beyond government shutdowns, policy disputes over Russia, immigration, and conflicts with leaders Rep. Nancy Pelosi and Sen.
Chuck Schumer, Trump also has had some notable “bipartisan” legislative achievements, though the extent to which he worked with Democrats or received their support varied. Two of the most notable were in the areas of criminal justice reform and responding to the opioid crisis (White House 2019). The First Step Act, which was lobbied for by members of his administration like his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, was signed by Trump in December 2018. This law made significant reforms to sentencing, such as eliminating the “three-strike” mandatory life sentence for federal drug crimes, as well as revised policies and procedures to help reduce recidivism and help prisoners reenter society. Earlier that year, Congress also passed the SUPPORT act that provided more resources for communities facing massive opioid addiction, the “largest single piece of legislation to address a drug crisis in history,” according to his administration (White House 2019).

He also signed the VA Mission Act, which made several significant reforms to the Veterans’ Administration in terms of structure, medical care, appeals process, and an increase in its budget for medical services (White House 2019). Granted, his attempt to “privatize” and carry out other more extreme reforms, however, failed—but that bill did essentially create private options and incentives in some areas that did not exist before (Beaton 2019).

Public Opinion and Electoral Prospects

While his overall job approval rating has been relatively low, historically, it’s also been remarkably stable (Skelley, 2019). Regardless of what happens, Trump’s approval rating never goes below the upper thirties in percentage terms, indicating he has a core support “floor.” Yes, good news like the economy or positive world events don’t increase his approval much, but bad news—or controversies, scandals, etc., of which Trump has many—likewise have little impact. This feature gives him a solid base on which to draw.

Even impeachment news, and the heavy negative media coverage it spawned, failed to move his approval ratings. Furthermore, despite his relatively weak standing in the polls, as of his third year, Trump remained a likely strong contender for reelection, especially given the Electoral College (White and Shepard 2019).
Elites: Falling in Line, or Ineptly Opposing Him

Even with an apparently weak reputation, as of his third year Trump continues to engender subtle elite support, if not fear, and attacks on him seem to have little effect. Republicans who once disparaged Trump or criticized him during the election have largely fallen in line, if not backed Trump publicly. Indeed, FiveThirtyEight.com’s “Trumpscore,”—a measure of how often members vote on bills in the way Trump wants, taking into account the “Trumpiness” of their state/district—graphically illustrates the point about his Congressional support mentioned above (FiveThirtyEight 2019b). Some of the most “disproportionally” pro-Trump Senators, even after controlling for their constituency’s vote for Trump in 2016, include Marco Rubio (fifth), Susan Collins (13th), Ted Cruz (15th), John McCain (16th), and even Jeff Flake (19th). Only Bob Corker (R-TN) and Rand Paul (R-KY) even have negative scores, indicating they vote(d) with Trump less than expected (see Fig. 6.1). Significantly, Rubio, Cruz, and Paul ran against and fought with Trump in the 2016 primaries; whereas Corker, Flake, and McCain publicly feuded

![Selected Senators: Support for Trump](image)

**Fig. 6.1** Selected Senators: support for Trump (Explanation: “Raw Trump Score” is the percentage of times the senator supported Trump’s position on votes in the Chamber, through February 5, 2020. “Trump Differential” is difference between their actual support of Trump, and what was statistically predicted, given percent of the vote Trump won in their state in 2016 [i.e., “Trumpiness” of their constituency]. Source Created from data from Fivethirtyeight.com)
with or outwardly criticized him (and all no longer serve); Collins, a more moderate member of the party caucus from Maine, publicly refused to support or vote for him in 2016.

Also, newcomers seated after the 2018 midterms like Martha McSally (R-AZ) and Rick Scott (R-FL), although not hailing from Trump strongholds, have quickly learned to fully support him, and both top the list of pro-Trump deviants (again, see Fig. 6.1). Scott even paid for ads to attack former Vice-President Biden in the Democratic primaries.

Elite opposition to Trump has likewise been ineffective. Democrats may be able to thwart him in some areas, but overall their message and attacks have failed to counter him. Not only did Trump survive impeachment, he emerged almost stronger than before in public and especially elite Republican circles. Even criticism by members of his own party and the media, which should be credible to the public, have little impact and thus lead to elite acquiescence. (More about what explains this dynamic is discussed in the next chapter.)

Foreign, Domestic, and Economic Policy Climate

Trump has managed to avoid major foreign disasters or entanglements, despite some risky moves on his part, such as pulling US troops (granted, temporarily) out of Syria or killing one of Iran’s top generals. As he endlessly reminds us, the economy—at least by a number of measures—has performed well under his watch, with historically low unemployment, inflation, and a strong stock market, even as the deficit, and income inequality, have increased (see for example, Brown and Alberti 2020).3 The economy also remained buoyant despite his trade wars, and even these—with China and the North American neighbors—have at least come to tentative agreements, though as noted in Chapter 2 were likely more hype than real change. While these contextual factors are largely beyond a president’s control, they do interact with personal traits, bargaining skills, etc., to influence a president’s power equation and increase (in this case) or decrease the probabilities of success (see Kerbel 1991, esp. pp. 129–151).

As noted in Chapter 5, Trump has also utilized his control over the executive branch and his appointed officials to alter government policies such as on immigration and the environment. Similarly, his has used his executive power to greatly reduce government regulations on business in certain areas, even exceeding his goal of cutting two regulations for every one introduced by agencies (see Crews 2018), though some of these were challenged in courts, etc., on procedural grounds.
CONCLUSION

By a number of measures, Trump’s performance in his first two and half years in office have been more successful than at first glance, at least if one applies the power currencies of reputation and prestige, and a wise, sly, Franklin Rooseveltesque approach to governing as the standard. True, Neustadt is not here to provide his analyses of these trends, but it seems clear that Trump has managed to achieve a degree of success that belies his lack of skill or attention to the forces and parts of the presidential job Neustadt saw as critical.

Trump has proven relatively effective in refocusing the Washington community on his policy priorities, dominating the public space, gaining the support (at least in some respects) of Congress, and maintaining public and elite support at least among his own party. His chaotic, discordant, and “revolving door” executive branch, combined with budgetary tools and regulatory changes, have had the effect of undermining the capacity of the federal government in a number of respects, as was noted in Chapter 5. While in a sense this undermines the very branch he leads, one of his goals was to attack the so-called “Deep State” and the bureaucracy.

All told, however, the picture is a mixed one, and certainly one that the model developed by Neustadt cannot fully explain. The next chapter attempts to decipher how and why Trump has managed to “survive at the top”: namely, the political and governing environment of Washington, DC is very different than the one Neustadt experienced as a staffer for Harry Truman, and observed as a young professor in the 1950s–1960s.

Notes

1. This narrative and analysis is up through roughly year three of his presidency, and before the disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic and related crises, though some of the observations fit even then.
2. See note 1 in Chapter 2 regarding Trump’s concept of “winning” as dominating others, and an existential mindset of superiority rather than mutually beneficial, e.g., “win-win” (Abebe 2017).
3. Again, this chapter was written before the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, and applies to the period, up to roughly March 2020, at which time the economy took a rapid nosedive under the lockdowns and health threat. Unemployment skyrocketed to about 15 percent; economic growth was expected to contract, and enter into recession, and the stock market plunged (though did recover somewhat).
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