Introduction: An Unsettled Time from *American Political Development and the Trump Presidency*

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Philip Rocco and Zachary Callen

As the words of his inaugural address echoed across a rain-soaked National Mall, Donald Trump cut a hole in time. His presidency, he said, marked a breaking point in American politics. No longer would a “small group” of elites reap the benefits of government while “forgotten Americans” bore the cost. “Now,” Trump suggested, “we are only looking to the future.” Even so, the speech telegraphed a dystopian present; the United States had become a landscape of rusted-out factories, cities teeming with crime, and national borders defenseless against terrorist threats. Gone was the promised land that Trump’s predecessors foretold in their inaugural speeches, the “city on a hill” that America was destined to be. Trump identified few, if any, sources of political possibility. America would be “made great again” not through providence, but by Trump himself: “I will fight for you with every breath in my body—and I will never, ever let you down.” Rather than binding the nation through conciliation and compromise, Trump promised nationalism: “The bedrock of our politics,” he said, “will be a total allegiance to the United States of America.” He labeled his foreign policy with a phrase burdened with an isolationist and anti-Semitic history: “America First.”

Trump’s presidency has created an atmosphere of tension that pervades American political life. On the one hand, Trump identifies and authorizes the grievances and fears of loyal followers spread across rural and suburban communities across the country. On the other hand, his actions in office have sparked credible fears about the future of U.S. democracy. Soon after Trump’s election, there emerged a cottage industry of nonfiction literature—written
by academics, journalists, and pundits—devoted to interpreting the present U.S. political situation. A sample of the titles is instructive:

*Can it Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America*
*Fascism: A Warning*
*How Democracies Die*
*How Democracy Ends*
*How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*
*How to Save a Constitutional Democracy*
*It’s Even Worse Than You Think: What the Trump Administration Is Doing to America*
*The Despot’s Apprentice: Donald Trump’s Attack on Democracy*
*The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*
*Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic*

As this list makes plain, anxiety is the genre’s central feature, and for good reason. In many respects, the Trump presidency has disrupted patterns of presidential governance. Trump is a figure untethered to republican virtues, who refers to the media as “the enemy of the people” and dehumanizes minorities, women, immigrants, and anyone who opposes him. Yet the anxiety runs deeper. Increasingly, even conservative commentators seem lost in the era of Trump and worried about the future of U.S. democracy itself, some going so far as to urge voters to turn to the Democratic Party. Does Trump portend a disruption not only in political style but in *regime type* in the United States? Given what we know about how democracies die, *can* it happen here? How “bad” is the situation? How much “worse” is it than our observational abilities allow it to appear? And, if regime change is indeed happening, can it be reversed?

Answering these questions, as the chapters in this volume show, requires us to understand how politics play out *in time*. One cannot consider whether “it can happen here” without historical data on regime change. It would be difficult to assess Trump’s potential impact on democratic institutions without analyzing how these institutions—including and especially the executive branch—have developed over time. What explains the rise of Trump and, indeed, of Trumpism writ large? Without attending to the intersecting developments of political parties, racial ideologies, and governing institutions, no answer to this question would be forthcoming. To explore how time and temporality have shaped the Trump presidency, we draw on the research
tradition of American political development (APD). APD research explicitly aims to consider how interactions among a range of institutions result in the shifting of power and authority in American politics, with careful attention to complex processes unfolding over time. By paying close attention to the factors that contribute to both continuity and change in American politics, APD research is ideally situated to take a longer view and help make sense of the Trump presidency in a period when other approaches to American political science continue to struggle.

In one way, time provides a methodological instrument for evaluating the Trump presidency. Leveraging historical comparisons across national contexts allows us to identify the key variables that have contributed to democratic collapse in the past, providing a battery of diagnostics for assessing the health of American democracy in the present. Historical analysis also reminds us that for millions of African Americans, the threat of authoritarianism is a reminder of the past rather than a future dystopia. Not only did local “pockets of authoritarianism” exist throughout the United States well into the 1960s, but the South remained a one-party apartheid state, with a formalized apparatus for disenfranchising and terrorizing African Americans. The absence of political competition in the South contributed in fundamental ways to American state formation, including the buildup of a robust national security state and a clumsy, fragmented welfare state. Tracking change over time reveals the social forces that disrupted these authoritarian orders and identifies the forms of struggle and mobilization that may be necessary to (re)produce democracy in America.

Yet time is not merely a methodological tool for comparing the Trump presidency with past moments of political disruption. Rather, understanding Trump’s rise to power as well as his effects on political institutions demands attention to how time works as a substantive component of politics. As Elizabeth F. Cohen argues, time “is required for almost any exercise of liberty that people seek to protect through the enforcement of social contracts, constitutions, and laws.” Politicians’ terms in office are expected to end after regularly scheduled elections. Statutes contain clauses that define their effective date and, in some cases, their date of expiration. On the other hand, constitutional rights are assumed to be “locked in” for the foreseeable future. In general, APD research reminds us that political action takes place on a “prior political ground of practices, rules, leaders, and ideas, all of which are up and running.” Although Trump projected the image of a “dealmaker” like no other, he could not immediately displace any policy or governing
routine simply because he wished to do so. Indeed, his status as a political outsider has in numerous ways proved to be a liability rather than an asset.

Despite these formal strictures, institutions evolve over time in ways that their designers did not necessarily intend. Creative agents within and outside the state routinely act on preexisting rules, reinterpreting their meaning, evading them, or repurposing them to serve new ends. A glance across the political terrain reveals the unsettling of taken-for-granted rules and procedures intended to enhance democratic governance. Past presidential administrations have thoroughly undermined transparency measures like the Freedom of Information Act and the Federal Advisory Committee Act. Since the 1990s, the intensification of congressional partisanship has all but eroded norms of reciprocity and restraint in the legislative branch. Filibusters, government shutdowns, and debt-limit showdowns have embedded themselves as routine parts of political life. Polarized majorities have also found new ways of disempowering rank-and-file members by concealing the content of draft legislation. At the state level, sophisticated mapping software has helped legislators to draw enduring partisan gerrymanders that disadvantage opposition parties at the polls. States have also seen a resurgence of new voting restrictions, which the U.S. Supreme Court further legitimated by striking down the Voting Rights Act’s preclearance provisions in the 2013 *Shelby County v. Holder* decision. All of these developments, which preceded Trump’s election, have contributed to the weakening of democratic processes that the Trump administration could more easily exploit.

Because political actors are motivated by the prospect of change, they invoke time to legitimate their actions, either by claiming fidelity to deep historical traditions or by promising a radical break with the past. Presidential challengers—noting the “brokenness” of American politics—portray themselves as the vehicle for a new moment in politics. Trump has gone a step further, portraying the 2016 election as a “moment of crisis” in which “our very way of life” is threatened. As Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Doron Taussig argue, Trump “apocalyptically contrast[s] the country’s supposed demise with the deliverance that only he can provide.”

Political actors also invoke time by concealing or revising public ideas about historical struggles. The emergence of so-called color-blind approaches to racial policy has helped to sanitize and reimagine the history of discrimination against African Americans in the United States. In *Shelby County v. Holder*, Chief Justice John Roberts’s majority opinion relied heavily on a comparison of voter turnout statistics from the 1960s and early 2000s, ignoring...
the historical record of persistent racial discrimination compiled by the House and Senate Judiciary Committees. Trump has used both rhetoric and policy to advance a version of American history—a story of a country falling into economic ruin and facing an unprecedented onslaught of illegal immigration—that conflicts with official statistics. After federal courts blocked Trump’s initial ban on travel from Muslim-majority countries, administration lawyers redrafted the ban to neutralize Trump’s self-described desire for a “Muslim ban” and his promotion of anti-Muslim propaganda videos on Twitter. Thus when the Supreme Court upheld the third version of the ban in Trump v. Hawaii by a 5–4 vote, the Court explicitly acknowledged Trump’s racist tweets about Muslims as matters of fact, but decoupled these speech acts from the exercise of authority:

Plaintiffs argue that this President’s words strike at fundamental standards of respect and tolerance, in violation of our constitutional tradition. But the issue before us is not whether to denounce the statements. It is instead the significance of those statements in reviewing a Presidential directive, neutral on its face, addressing a matter within the core of executive responsibility. In doing so, we must consider not only the statements of a particular President, but also the authority of the Presidency itself.

The Court’s defense of executive power highlights an even more important temporal dynamic: time bounds the exercise of sovereign authority. Leaders in both authoritarian and democratic regimes invoke the notion of “wartime”—an exceptional circumstance—to justify the suspension of existing liberties and the extralegal expansion of state authority. Yet as Mary Dudziak has noted, ongoing military conflicts have made “wartime” into “normal time.” This shift has helped to create a permanent “state of exception,” in which rights and liberties can more readily be suspended. The Trump administration has adapted the legal and rhetorical strategies of past administrations to defend its suspension of immigrants’ rights at the southern border of the United States. De jure and de facto policies meant to deter immigration at the southern border have resulted in a humanitarian crisis of their own.

The Trump presidency is thus an unsettled moment in two senses. Trump’s rise to power is the product of an unsettling. The weakening of party organizations, the reconfiguration of racial orders, and the withering of institutional trust created a target-rich environment for a self-styled “outsider”
presidential candidate to foment race-, gender-, and status-based resentments. To some extent, prior developments shape the institutional world Trump inhabits. In the absence of a robust executive branch and a polarized and institutionally weakened legislative branch, Trump’s rise to power might appear less consequential than it does. Nevertheless, Trump has also unsettled the politics of the presidency as well—using the office less as a tool for policy change than as an instrument of cultural warfare. In turn, Trump’s rhetoric has helped to animate a violent brand of white supremacy and anti-Semitism among members of the so-called alt-right. Trump has simultaneously served as a focal point, unifying—at least temporarily—a national coalition of opponents, who have turned out to protest his actions in record numbers.24

To better understand this unsettled moment, the chapters in this volume analyze the Trump presidency in the context of American political development. We asked contributors to consider how long-term shifts in the organization of political parties, the implementation of public policy, and the construction of political ideologies shaped Trump’s victory in 2016 and the unfolding of the early months of his presidency. Contributors also considered the ways in which Trump’s presidency constitutes a break with historical trajectories, as well as the implications of his presidency for future political developments.25

While all the contributions address these overlapping themes, we have grouped the chapters under four distinct headings. Given the pivotal role of parties in structuring American political development, the chapters in Part I consider how party legacies have shaped the politics of the Trump era.26 As Julia Azari argues, political science analyses of Trump’s leadership must consider the increasing instability in the party system. In particular, Azari interrogates our understanding of political time, arguing that Americans have entered a new phase of ongoing political disjunction. Yet whereas Trump’s party has focused on the creation of a durable (if syncretic) ideology and powerful emotional appeals to voters, Democrats have focused their attention on interest intermediation.27 Perhaps as a result, Daniel J. Galvin and Chloe N. Thurston suggest, the party presumed that the creation of general-interest reforms such as the Affordable Care Act would result in gains at the ballot box. Even so, rising partisanship has limited the effectiveness of this strategy, with important implications for Democrats’ long-term competitiveness. Further, as Travis Johnston shows, Democrats’ setbacks in 2016 are unlikely to generate interest in party reform. Focusing on the power of
institutional structures, Johnston stresses how the lack of widespread demands for nomination reform, especially from the parties’ elites, has created barriers to change.

The chapters in Part II turn our attention to the politics of race and national identity. The struggle for racial justice has been a central axis of American political development. From the abolition of slavery until the 1960s, “pockets of authoritarianism” existed in the United States, making it a “late, late democratizer.” Yet the story of racial equality is not a linear narrative of progress; instead, it has been defined by persistent contestation. The chapters here consider how racist and nationalist elements in Trump’s rhetoric, and the reactions to Trump by party leaders and social movements, fit into this developmental story. Gwendoline Alphonso argues that Trump’s campaign rhetoric draws on a tradition in Republican Party ideology that blends neoliberal narratives about individuals and choice with ascriptive, nativist appeals to “forgotten” white Americans. Alphonso reveals how Trump draws on older racial tropes present in Republican political thought, if generally more sublimated in contemporary politics, and fuses these tropes with a contemporary spin to exceptional political effect. Yet as Paul Nolette claims, Trump has struggled to find support for his more nativist positions among Republican elites, in terms of both rhetoric and policy. This struggle has prevented Trump from delivering on his populist and nativist promises, steering him instead toward an unpopular neoliberal agenda. This development perhaps reflects a broader intransigence of American political institutions on racial issues, and the fact that the politics of race often play out beyond institutional boundaries as the result of social movements, as the chapter by Megan Ming Francis shows. Her evidence illustrates how the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) launched a crusade to protect black lives from lynching and mob violence during the administration of President Woodrow Wilson. And even with a president hostile to civil rights, the NAACP found that mass protest could be the catalyzing force behind revolutionary change in the political and legal branches. By drawing on the lessons of the past, Francis argues, social movements like Black Lives Matter have the potential to catalyze significant institutional and ideational developments on race in the Trump era.

Part III takes up the question of Trump’s engagement with the American state. In one respect, Trump’s 2016 campaign was similar to the campaigns of other contenders in the Republican primary. Trump promised to disrupt how “big government” worked and to return power to “the people.” Yet
unlike the other primary contenders, and certainly unlike his Democratic challenger in 2016, Trump celebrated his lack of expertise about how government worked: better to drain the swamp than learn how to navigate it. In an age of collapsing confidence in government institutions, Trump’s anti-expert gambit was a reasonable one. Yet upon taking office, Trump faced the challenge of managing the prodigious set of institutions that define the U.S. “policy state.” Trump’s distance from and lack of interest in the workings of government have led to a highly idiosyncratic style of governance. As William Adler shows, despite Trump’s populist message in the campaign, he has lacked a governing cadre that could convert this message into a comprehensive program. This lack may help to explain the consistency of Trump’s agenda with elements of the so-called Reagan regime. Trump has also used executive orders to distinguish himself from the Reagan regime—particularly on the issues of trade and immigration. For this reason, Adler contends that Trump is a disjunctive leader. While Trump marks a departure from the Reagan regime, his “anti-analytic” style of leadership exposes underlying tensions in the use of expert advice in the policy state. As Philip Rocco argues, although expert analyses have thwarted Trump’s legislative agenda, Trump has been more successful at using policy knowledge to sow doubt and uncertainty about significant political issues ranging from climate change to election integrity. The most important legislative development in the first one hundred days of Trump’s presidency was the administration’s assault on the Affordable Care Act, the signature legislative accomplishment of Barack Obama. Although the administration benefited from polarized public opinion on “Obamacare,” Andrew Kelly contends that the law has created a strong base of support among health-care providers (as opposed to beneficiaries) who may well erect a barrier to policy retrenchment. Although the law may remain stable, however, its capacity to adapt to future political and technical challenges remains an open question. Beyond individual policy enactments, Trump’s presidency may also have broader effects on the American state, as Zachary Callen suggests. Callen’s chapter shows how the Trump presidency is unlikely to dismantle the federal state but will instead reorient the federal government’s activity away from public-goods production and toward the consolidation of private gains.

Part IV features two reflections from leading APD scholars on how Trump’s presidency may affect the study of American democracy. Adam Sheingate’s chapter offers a critical reflection, arguing that scholarship on American politics can benefit from a greater level of intellectual arbitrage
with comparative work on democratization, political economy, and racial politics. Coming from this broader perspective, Sheingate argues that Trump himself is not the threat to democracy. Instead, the real danger is an American democracy that bounds from reactionary leader to reactionary leader. Robert Lieberman concludes the volume by considering how APD research helps us understand why the Trump era is an “unsettled time.” Examined individually, none of the elements of the Trump era—polarization, executive overreach, racial resentment, or weak democratic norms—is entirely new. Yet, as Lieberman shows, what makes the Trump era a time of political uncertainty and disorientation is the heightened salience of each of these political patterns at a single moment. The approach of APD scholars, he argues, allows us to consider how the conjunction and collision of multiple institutional orders over time has affected American democracy in the present.

On the ultimate question of what Trump’s election means for American democracy, the chapters in this volume do not speak with a unified voice. Further, we do not provide a final word on what has already proved to be a highly unpredictable moment in American politics. Rather, the contributions here invite readers to question existing assumptions about the political dynamics that unleashed, and have been unleashed by, Trump’s election. Whether the Trump presidency ultimately results in “durable shifts in governing authority” or not, we submit that political scientists and the public alike can benefit from an APD approach to thinking about American politics. Given the sense of uncertainty that pervades the present moment, improving our understanding of how the institutions and ideas that support liberal democracy endure over time, and the conditions under which they might fail, seems more essential than ever.
Notes

Introduction


28. Valelly, *Two Reconstructions*.


Chapter 1


