

The Forum: Spring 2021

Introduction

<https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2021-0020>

The presidency of Donald Trump attracted deeper fascination than any other administration in memory. Trump was the primary national topic of conversation for nearly every one of the 1461 days he was in office, inspiring a unique style of devotion among his supporters and an unusual degree of outrage and fear among his detractors. Mass electoral participation and interest in politics reached modern peaks during the Trump presidency, while political elites, analysts, and scholars spent four years obsessing over every dramatic twist in the Trump storyline and debating what his political rise meant for his party, his government, and his country.

Trump's departure from the presidency in January 2021—a process that produced plenty of additional drama in its own right—has not settled most of the critical questions that arose during his time in office and that continue to engage students of American politics. To what extent was the nature of Trump's support and the operation of his administration historically extraordinary, and to what extent did his ascent and governing style represent a continuation of existing trends? How successful was the Trump presidency in achieving its goals, and what is its enduring legacy likely to be? Was the larger political climate in which Trump was nominated, elected, and nearly re-elected distinctive for its levels of politically mobilized anger, or for its prevalence of anti-establishment attitudes and conspiratorial thinking? Had rank partisanship become so powerful that it drowned out other important considerations in the minds of citizens and elites alike—even their sense of reality itself?

This issue contains a set of essays by academic experts addressing these and other major questions raised by the events of the past five years. In some cases, these authors confirm the assertions of journalists and media commentators; in other cases, they directly challenge the conventional wisdom. But in every case, they advance our understanding of the Trump presidency by applying historical perspective, systematic evidence, and analytical rigor to a larger-than-life subject who has often been viewed through the lens of ideological dogma or emotional hyperbole.

Casey Dominguez begins our retrospective by assessing the Trump administration as a whole. She invokes two competing visions of the presidency, contrasting Richard Neustadt's theory of presidential power—traditionally popular among political scientists—with the unitary executive theory advanced more recently by a school of conservative intellectuals. Trump's frequent defiance of other political actors' preferences and his inattention to public opinion beyond his own loyal base prompted advocates of the Neustadt model to judge his presidency to be mostly a failure; taken on the terms of its own objectives, however, the Trump presidency might have been more successful than it appears.

Matthew J. Dickinson and Kate Reinmuth place the personnel decisions of the Trump White House into valuable historical comparison. The splashy arrivals, sometimes acrimonious departures, and attention-grabbing behavior of many top advisors and aides provided the Trump presidency with ongoing court intrigue that consumed official Washington; beneath the surface, however, the careful analysis presented here suggests that the organization and composition of Trump's White House staff did not break sharply with those of his predecessors.

The next two articles address a subject that is often associated with Trumpism as a political phenomenon: popular mistrust of and anger at elites, the “establishment,” and the political system, which can manifest as belief in widespread political fraud and the existence of powerful conspiracies. **Adam M. Enders and Joseph Uscinski** demonstrate the prevalence of anti-establishment and conspiratorial sentiment in the contemporary public, which is associated with support for Trump and is important to understand as a distinct phenomenon from the ideological and partisan polarization often assumed to explain the emotionally charged Trump-era political climate. **Heath Brown and Lindsey Cormack** examine the prevalence of fraud—an accusation frequently directed by President Trump against his opponents or election administrators—as a topic of discussion in congressional newsletters. They find that Trump's rhetoric indeed prompted Republican members of Congress to more frequently address the subject of electoral fraud in their public communications to constituents, while Democratic members were more likely to discuss fraud with an angry tone—often when disputing Republican charges of fraudulent balloting or vote-counting.

We turn next to the matter of Trump's presidential legacy by focusing on what may have been his two biggest substantive priorities in office: revising American immigration policy and appointing ideological conservatives to the federal judiciary. **Rebecca Hamlin** provides a comprehensive assessment of Trump's immigration record, finding that it extended far beyond his very limited success at building the famous wall along the Mexican border that was his most famous campaign promise. The Trump administration pursued multiple administrative

avenues to reduce all forms of immigration, legal as well as illegal, in ways that will have lasting effects beyond the end of his tenure in office. **Amanda Hollis-Brusky and Celia Parry** examine Trump's prolific judicial appointment record and the role of the Federalist Society in supplying conservative candidates for the bench during his presidency, proceeding to consider the potential implications of these lifetime appointments for decades of future rulings in the areas of cultural issues, economic regulation, and election law.

Our survey of the recently departed presidential administration concludes by widening our intellectual field of vision to address the overall state of American politics during the Trump era. **Jeremy Pope** reflects on the prevalence of what he calls "partisanism"—a combination of group favoritism and perceptual bias that extends beyond simple ideological or issue-based polarization to produce an unthinking, emotionally laden, and factually undependable black-and-white view of partisan conflict. Pope argues that the rise of partisanism is a deeply concerning trend for the overall health of the American body politic, and suggests that scholars use their platforms as classroom instructors and public intellectuals to warn students and other citizens of its corrosive effects while promoting a more thoughtful and empirically grounded alternative view of politics.

In our book review section, **Brian Calfano** reviews *Outsiders at Home: The Politics of American Islamophobia* by Nazita Lajevardi, and **Peter H. Schuck** reviews *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* by Robert D. Putnam with Shaylyn Romney Garrett.