

The Ordinary Presidency of Donald J. Trump

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To our children:

Nathan and Adam

Kate, Josh, Henry, Ben and Will

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October 2018

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1

Introduction: The Ordinary Presidency of the Extraordinary Donald J. Trump

“Today, I stand before the United Nations General Assembly to share the extraordinary progress we’ve made. In less than two years, my administration has accomplished more than almost any administration in the history of our country.... So true.” Donald J. Trump address at 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly Annual General Debate in New York City, September 25, 2018.

Donald J. Trump has a very high opinion of himself and elicits the most extreme opinions in others. Almost no one is coolly objective on the man or his presidency. Some regard him as a disruptor and outsider who has challenged the cozy status quo of entrenched special interests and a corrupt political system that served the elites not the masses. In this view, he speaks truth to power on behalf of the millions of forgotten, downtrodden and economically insecure Americans whose jobs disappeared or are being threatened by a globalized marketplace in goods, services and the means of production. Trump has also rallied these “left-behinds” in the face of an alleged immigrant tide that is submerging traditional American values and culture, proliferating crime and threatening national security. He has, his cheerleaders argue,

broken the mold of American politics by constructing a new winning election coalition of God-fearing, culturally conservative, white working-class voters and by remaking the Republican Party in his image. The rock-solid backing of party supporters, and especially its activists, instills fear, respect and discipline in the Republican congressional caucus, which has been harnessed to achieve a string of ground-breaking policy triumphs on the economy, tax cuts, deregulation, immigration, security and more. His challenge to the established order extends beyond America's shores and includes his attacks on globalist international organizations such as the United Nations, NATO and the International Criminal Court as well as hated multinational environmental and trade agreements including the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. According to his admirers, he has succeeded in his pledge to Make America Great Again at home and abroad.

To Trump's supporters, his outsidersness, populism, nationalism, America First patriotism and rebellious disruption are celebrated in themselves and held up as reasons for his many extraordinary accomplishments. To his detractors, however, these characteristics are precisely what they fear. They see a deeply flawed character wholly unsuited to the job of president—mendacious, narcissistic, quickly bored and distracted, misogynistic and ethnocentric, thin skinned and easily provoked, stunningly ill-informed yet utterly convinced of his own brilliance and intelligence. They believe he is incapable of remedying his ignorance in part because he does not recognize it and further because he cannot assimilate new information into his long-fixed worldview. His character flaws interact with his politics in most unappealing ways: An unapologetic racist playing on the base fears of vulnerable citizens, offering simplistic yet dangerous solutions to inordinately complex public policy problems; a bombastic, undiplomatic ignoramus lumbering across the world-stage upending decades-old and even centuries-old alliances and the international organizations that America built and which have sustained its dominance, all while cozying up to dictators and demagogues and affronting supposed friends and allies.

Perhaps even worse, according to critics, is Trump's complete disdain for democratic institutions, structures and processes. At stake, they argue, is nothing less than America's constitutional democracy itself.

Anyone or anything that threatens, even minimally, Trump's status and power is roundly attacked in the most vicious terms. His assaults on an inquisitive and robust media holding power to account are emblematic of the way Trump deals with any democratic opposition: They are belittled and delegitimized. He will trash anything and anyone that stands in his way. He puts his own ends before the democratic health of the United States. This is not an America First presidency, but a Trump First presidency. The media is thus labeled the "enemy of the American people" and the journalists who staff it are "horrible, horrendous people" promulgating "fake and disgusting news" based on "fictional" anonymous sources. Investigating the internal deliberations of government is "unpatriotic" and puts people's lives at risk. The freedom of the press to write whatever it wants is "disgusting...and someone should look into it" and libel laws need "opening up" to allow Trump and others to sue more easily. No institution or individual, save his immediate family, seems safe from Trump's democracy-threatening invective.

While these two views of Trump are polar opposites, they share a common assumption: that Trump's presidency is extraordinary. In the one view, it is extraordinarily good; in the other, extraordinarily bad; in both, extraordinarily different from any previous presidency. This book challenges these assumptions. The argument here and in the following pages is that Trump may well be an extraordinary individual, but that his is nonetheless an ordinary presidency. Before setting out what this seemingly counter-intuitive claim means, it is important to be clear about what it does not mean. This book does not claim that Trump is an ordinary *president*, but rather that his *presidency* is ordinary. Indeed, in the history of the United States, it is unlikely that there has been a more unusual, unorthodox, unconventional, unordinary president. On practically every criterion, Trump is an extraordinary man and an extraordinary president. It would be futile to argue otherwise, and readers will not find that argument made here.

To understand how and why Trump's presidency is ordinary it is useful to think about the way he approaches and executes this most difficult of jobs—what we call the methodology of the president—and to contrast this with the outcomes or accomplishments of his presidency. It is common and useful in many walks of life to contrast style and

substance, process and policy, words and deeds, rhetoric and action, and promises made and promises kept. It is useful here, too. In each of these binary pairs, it is the former that speaks to Trump's methodology and underpins his extraordinariness. In style, process, words, rhetoric and promises made, Trump is a most extraordinary president. But in substance, policy, deeds, action and promises kept, Trump's presidency is not extraordinary. Indeed, it is ordinary—largely conventional, orthodox and conservative, rather than revolutionary or radical. Consider this assessment by Peter Baker, the *New York Times* White House correspondent and respected Trump watcher, at the end of the president's first year in office:

[Trump] has spent much of his first year in office defying the conventions and norms established by the previous 44 [presidents], and transforming the presidency in ways that were once unimaginable. Under Mr Trump, it has become a blunt instrument to advance personal, policy and political goals. He has revolutionized the way presidents deal with the world beyond 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, dispensing with the carefully modulated messaging of past chief executives in favor of no-holds-barred, crystal-breaking, us-against-them, damn-the-consequences blasts borne out of gut and grievance. (Baker 2017)

Baker's conclusion that Trump has reinvented, even revolutionized the presidency is, however, almost wholly based on an analysis of style, tone and process, on the way that Trump approaches issues and speaks to Washington, America and the world. There is no question that he is extraordinary in these respects—that is, in his methodology—but they are not good criteria on which to judge a president. All presidents to some extent or other are different in their approach and presentation, and there is no single, accepted best way of *being* president. What presidents can be judged on and compared on is their record of achievements and outcomes. In judging Trump, therefore, we instead draw on Richard Neustadt's classic argument that presidential leadership is ultimately a question of how far a president is able to influence or engender the *outcomes* of government (Neustadt 1990, 4). It is our contention that for all his attempts at shaking up the system and smashing

convention, Trump's presidency is and will be relatively ordinary in its public policy outputs and their wider consequences.

But what does it mean to say Trump's presidency is ordinary in its outputs? How does one know ordinary when one sees it? The term ordinary is used here in two different but related ways. First, Trump's presidency is ordinary in that its outcomes are limited in number and scope. Trump simply has not achieved very much in policy terms. He has struggled to pursue his agenda in Congress, even though his party enjoyed unified control of both the executive and legislative branches during the first two years of Trump's presidency. His efforts to circumvent the legislative process and effect change via executive orders and other administrative actions have fared little better. The image of Trump penning his signature on a newly minted executive order is a familiar one, but those orders—at least the important ones—more often than not have been blocked and overturned in the federal courts. Trump's policy achievements look meager compared with the confident promises he made that change would come quickly and easily. They look meager next to his and his aides' grandiose claims about their successes once in office: "The President of the United States has accomplished more in just a few weeks than many Presidents do in an entire administration" said special political adviser Stephen Miller, while Trump himself bragged "I've done more in 500 days than any president has ever done in their first 500 days." More surprising than the laughter of his fellow leaders at the 2018 UN General Assembly when Trump repeated a version of his standard brag—quoted in the epigraph to this chapter—was that they did not laugh longer and harder. They also look meager when lined up next to the accomplishments of America's truly great presidencies: Washington's, Jefferson's, Lincoln's, F. D. Roosevelt's and perhaps Jackson's. But these presidencies are outliers. Their successes are not normal. They are the extraordinary presidencies. Meager is normal, meager is ordinary, especially in the post-Watergate era when presidents face additional constraints on their influence. In not achieving much of consequence, Trump falls within the parameters of presidential ordinariness.

If the first way in which Trump's presidency is ordinary is that its outputs are meager but average, the second way is that the few policy

achievements that Trump can genuinely lay claim to for the most part are pretty mainstream Republican ones rather than the radical departures he promised on the campaign trail. The populist insurgent who hijacked the Republican Party in the primaries has followed a policy agenda in office that is largely in tune with his party colleagues at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, even though he has frequently attacked their leadership. When Trump pursues policies that can be thought of as outside the Republican mainstream, the initiatives usually end in failure, are reined in by Congress or the courts, or self-adjusted to greater orthodoxy by the administration itself. Tax and immigration reform are exemplars of the two types. The 2017 tax cut is the signature domestic policy achievement of Trump's first two years in office. It is not the biggest tax cut in American history, as he has claimed repeatedly. It is more ordinary than that, perhaps scraping into the top ten depending on the economic assumptions underpinning the calculations. More importantly, the biggest winners in terms of dollar reductions in tax are big business and America's richest families—people like Trump himself—not the ordinary hardworking Americans of limited and precarious means that Candidate Trump talked about protecting and helping while on the campaign trail. It is the hedge fund managers and Mar-a-Lago members who are smiling most broadly. There is nothing in the legislation to worry the plutocrats and business interests that donate large sums to the Republican Party. What's more, as we will detail in Chapter 4, the American public seem to recognize the true nature of the tax cut since it is approved of by less Americans than any similar tax reduction in the last 40 years and is even less popular than two major tax *hikes* during that period.

Conversely, when Trump challenged Republican orthodoxy on immigration—or at least one very influential strand of it—he failed to make any legislative progress. While it is true that anti-immigration and particularly anti-illegal immigration voices are slowly getting louder in the Republican Party, the pro-immigration chorus still easily out-sings them. The Republican congressional caucus is dominated by a pro-business wing that promotes a flexible and cheap labor force abetted by generous levels of immigration. Few pro-business Republicans would today openly support *The Wall Street Journal's* proposal for a constitutional

amendment that “there shall be open borders,” but a solid majority oppose Trump’s plans to build a border wall with Mexico, to return Dreamers (who entered the United States illegally as children but were given legal protection from deportation by President Barack Obama) to the status of illegal immigrants and to reduce the level and change the composition of legal immigration. Despite the centrality of immigration to Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, his populist and nationalist agenda remains largely unfulfilled and opposed by elites in his own party.

Similarly, in foreign policy, despite Trump’s promises to put America First and disrupt international alliances and his penchant for insulting foreign leaders, especially allies, Trump has adopted the mainstream Republican strategy of seeking “peace through strength” and largely pursued the same policies and priorities as previous administrations, albeit with a very different style and attitude than his immediate predecessor. For example, while he has been more than willing to berate publicly his NATO allies for their apparently insufficient burden sharing, he is far from the first US president to do so and he shows no serious signs of withdrawing from the common defense alliance which continues to play a significant role in defense and security planning, including in strategy documents such as the Nuclear Posture Review. As we argue in Chapter 8, even his seemingly most extreme and extraordinary projection of power and rhetorical saber-rattling with North Korea has operated within the bounds of a common Republican approach of upping the ante in order to negotiate from a perceived position of strength. The ideas behind Trump’s foreign policy approach are very orthodox in their view of how states interact on the international stage and to date most of his achievements in foreign affairs have been very modest, which is a scorecard in keeping with the track record of many post-World War II presidencies that have found it very difficult to deliver big wins and have suffered several major setbacks in their adventures overseas. Despite all the bluster and the over-confident claims of success, Trump’s foreign policy has been fairly ordinary.

Finally, even Trump’s election to the White House was pretty ordinary in terms of the nature of the vote cast for and against him. Again, this claim is not to be confused with thinking that his campaign was

ordinary. Far from it. His victory in the Republican primaries was utterly extraordinary and unexpected and the nature of his general election campaign broke many conventions and received wisdom about what works and what does not. His messaging, rhetoric, outsiderism, approach to campaigning, the inexperience of his campaign team and tribulations during the campaign (particularly the Access Hollywood “hot mic” tape) all defy the tag of ordinariness. But the vote that turned out for him as the Republican candidate was nothing out of the ordinary. Republicans voted for him as their candidate and Democrats voted for Hillary Clinton as theirs in similar proportions to previous presidential elections. Yes, Trump won a bigger slice of the working-class vote than Romney four years earlier, but the movement of less educated Americans into the Republican camp is far from a new phenomenon and Trump did not win more of them than would be expected given the historical trend. And despite the prominence of immigration and other racialized issues in the campaign—such as Trump calling Mexicans rapists and criminals, equating Muslim immigration with threats to national security and appearing to reach out to white voters more generally—there was little notable redistribution of vote choices by race or ethnicity compared with the previous presidential election.

So, we have a president with few significant successes under his belt—whatever his own view about his greatness—and what few accomplishments he can lay claim to are mostly standard Republican fare. In this sense, the presidency of Donald J. Trump is ordinary. But how did we get here? How can the presidency of what seems to be the most extraordinary president in American history have descended into ordinariness?

The answer is fairly straightforward. First, as all students of American politics know, the Founding Fathers designed a system to constrain ambitious and potentially dangerous leaders. A president must share his constitutional powers with others and as Neustadt (1990, x) said: “to share is to limit.” All presidents must work within constitutional structures that separate and constrain. The structure limits presidential agency. That is normal. That is ordinary. That is the American system. Of course, some presidents do manage to effect great change, to leave

their mark on the US, and these are generally regarded as the great presidencies. But Washington, Lincoln and FDR were afforded opportunities for greatness by the times in which they lived. During times of crisis—war, insurrection, a depression—power flows to the center, to the executive branch, which presidents can utilize to introduce long-lasting and deep-seated reforms. However, while the opportunity presented by crisis increases the chance of presidential success, it does not guarantee it. In their efforts to lead and govern, let alone make history, US presidents must take opportunities when they present themselves and then utilize their political skills to achieve results (Edwards III 2012). These skills, as Neustadt tells us, amount primarily to the president's ability to bargain with and persuade other office holders of the merits of his ideas, legislation or course of action. Not all presidents can or do. Barack Obama's chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, famously observed that "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste," but his boss is accused of doing exactly that by critics on the left. Their complaint is that Obama was offered a huge opportunity to remake America's financial system and even social fabric in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, but instead propped it up and saved it. He bailed out the banks that instigated the crisis at a cost of hundreds of billions of dollars to American taxpayers; failed to hold to account individual bankers for their misconduct; and ultimately offered only the most tepid of reforms, which actually strengthened the financial status quo. But unlike Obama, Trump has not yet had the opportunity for action that a crisis presents and without one his opportunity for greatness, for success on a historical scale, is seriously constrained.

Trump also governs during deeply polarized times, in which politicians from the opposition party are loath to support presidential initiatives. Reaching across the aisle to build a bipartisan coalition in Congress, once common, is now most uncommon. And with special interests better organized and funded than ever and, following the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision, able to spend unlimited amounts on political campaigns, they can more effectively protect their entrenched interests and defend against threats from reform. The political system is increasingly sticky or "thick" in the words of presidential historian Stephen Skowronek (1997). In other words, it is more difficult

to navigate and to bend to one's will if you are the president today. There are fewer opportunities for persuasion and persuasion is generally less effective. There is less leeway for action and thus for success. In this thick, sticky Washington soup (one could even call it a swamp) of entrenched interests with partisanship at its postwar high and challenging congressional math, Trump's is a most difficult task.

So, Trump's ordinariness is partly explained by constitutionally fixed and limiting structures of power and also by the time and environment in which he governs. But the second part of the explanation for his presidency's ordinariness is the president himself. Simply put, Trump is just not very good at the job of being president. He has not been able to drain the swamp. He has not been able to cut through the established practices, let alone rules and regulations, that determine outcomes in US politics, nor even in international relations where those restrictions are perhaps looser. He claimed that being president would be "easy" and that he would win so much that people would get bored of winning. But there have not been many wins and he has made the job look almost impossible at times. He has done so in part because of his personality and character—he does not have the personal attributes required to make the office work for him—but also in part because of his presidential methodology, which was defined above as the way he approaches and executes the job. Some examples: Trump made key staffing decisions based as much on looks and personal loyalty as on experience, competence and ideology; he seems immune or uninterested in the cabals fighting a civil war around him and has allowed and even encouraged the White House to descend into a permanent state of chaos; he is happy to switch positions on a dime; he runs a personal public relations and outreach operation via Twitter; and he has settled on a self-defeating bargaining strategy—which we call 'hostage politics'—as his main method of leveraging policy successes.

This is an extraordinary list of methodological malpractice. Not only does it seriously hinder the president's pursuit of his policy goals because he cannot persuade others to do what he wants them to do, but it also opens up a policy space into which others sprint in an effort to dominate the agenda, which is a key reason why Trump's few policy successes have been largely mainstream Republican ones, not nationalist,

populist or particularly disruptive. These problems are of Trump's own making. Indeed, some observers may find it ironic that it is precisely the president's methodological extraordinariness and the exceptional nature of his personality and character that help to render his presidency ordinary.

The goal of this book is to make a persuasive case that Trump's presidency is ordinary and to explain why it is so. Chapter 2, however, begins the task by setting out the opposite case. It presents the arguments made by the president himself, his supporters and critics, as well as more neutral commentators that Trump's presidency *is* extraordinary. We do this in the interests of objectivity but also to set out the case against which we are arguing. Chapters 3 and 4 present the evidence for ordinariness. We show that the vote for Trump was close to historical precedents in terms of who voted which way and why and that the president has not realigned or even de-aligned the long-standing attachments that American voters have to the Republican or Democratic parties. We also analyze the record of Trump's presidency in terms of its policy achievements, demonstrating as outlined above that he has enjoyed few policy successes, and that the few "wins" he has had are largely mainstream Republican ones. If Chapters 3 and 4 present *evidence* for ordinariness, Chapters 5, 6 and 7 turn to explaining *why* the Trump presidency is ordinary. These arguments were outlined very briefly above but the three chapters explore in depth the complex interactions between the president's personality and character, his methodology or approach and in particular his legislative, media and public strategies, and the political system and structures of power in which he operates.

The final substantive chapter takes a different turn. The previous chapters focus heavily on Washington and domestic politics. Chapter 8's focus is foreign policy and international affairs. These have their own chapter because the making of foreign policy and the president's role in international relations is different from that in the domestic sphere. For one thing, presidents have more leeway for action and more power in international affairs, including issues of trade, as Aaron Wildavsky (1966) showed half a century ago. Congress is generally more deferent in foreign affairs, so presidents are more likely to be able exert influence and demonstrate difference from their predecessors. For another thing,

the distinction between policy, process and outcomes is less clear in foreign affairs than in domestic politics. In the domestic sphere, a president can have a “policy”—perhaps a carefully or not-so-carefully considered document on environmental protection or the status of a certain class of immigrant—but it remains just words and of no import until approved by Congress or put into effect via a formal and legal process of executive action. In the foreign sphere, the policy can become self-executing without a legal process. Other nations may respond to these words or presidential tone with actual actions, perhaps striking new alliances, building up their armed forces, or even launching a preemptive attack. Words and tone are much more consequential in foreign affairs than domestic matters. Nonetheless, our argument remains the same despite the more difficult terrain of international politics and trade: Even in foreign matters, the Trump presidency does not deserve to be called extraordinary. Instead, it is rather ordinary.

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2

A Trump Revolution?

When Donald Trump descended the escalator into the gilded atrium of Trump Tower on New York's 5th Avenue to announce his candidacy for the presidency of the United States on June 16, 2015, few seasoned observers believed that he could win. At best, his campaign was seen as a novelty. To some, it was a joke. The following year confounded the conventional wisdom on electoral politics as Trump achieved the extraordinary feat of winning the Republican Party's nomination. Six months later, President-elect Trump was preparing for office after an unexpected victory over Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton.

There followed a period of frenzied speculation as to how a Trump presidency would unfold. Observers had spent the best part of eighteen months attempting to understand the Trump phenomenon, generating a range of ways to comprehend how he and his interactions with the political system were different. Most acknowledged the extraordinary nature of Trump's victory, but extended debates developed over the ways in which he was unusual and what the impacts of those differences would be once he was in office.

In this chapter, those differences are explored in terms of titles that Trump earned during his campaign and transition and has, according to many observers, carried with him into the White House. Trump was and is seen, variously, as an outsider, disruptor, nationalist, populist and insurgent. While these descriptions of the Trump phenomenon overlap in certain respects, each is conceptually distinct and each, in their own way, suggests that Trump's presidency is extraordinary. This chapter presents evidence which is in opposition to the book's main argument that Trump's is an ordinary presidency. It is important to be transparent, to set out all sides of the argument, but we also want to establish the case that we will be arguing against. In many ways, what is presented here is the "conventional wisdom" about the Trump presidency. And the conventional wisdom is that it is unconventional. So much so, indeed, that it can be labeled extraordinary. Subsequent chapters tackle the conventional wisdom head-on, presenting contrary evidence and arguments to make the case that Trump's presidency should be viewed as ordinary. For now, however, we make the case in favor of extraordinariness.

1 Trump the Outsider

Trump came to the 2016 campaign with no experience of political office, presenting himself as an outsider offering to fix politics in Washington. The outsider campaign is a regular feature of presidential election contests. Recent candidates as diverse as Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama have emphasized their distance from, and opposition to, a demonized politics-as-usual within the Washington Beltway. Presidential candidates trade on public distrust of politicians and political institutions to portray themselves as agents of change intent upon confronting an interest-dominated, out-of-touch capital.

Trump's outsider campaign, however, was a particularly virulent strain of the type. He presented himself as the anti-politician. Assisted by never having held elected office or even run for office before, Trump argued that he was a true outsider. He emphasized that his campaign was not funded by special interests, arguing that his personal wealth

freed him from the malign networks of US politics. He touted his lack of commitment to either party, repeatedly attacking both Republican and Democrat leaders, although he contrasted himself in particular to the highly politicized and polarizing character of his extremely experienced opponent. Unlike Hillary Clinton, he argued, as a successful businessman, television personality and true independent, he could resist the constraints imposed by normal party and interest politics in Washington and truly represent his supporters.

The candidate's outsider status was a particular achievement given the tensions inherent to any outsider candidacy. Any realistic attempt to win the presidency demands that a candidate secure a major party nomination. Thus, he or she must become an insider, playing to party concerns and compromising their outsider appeal. Trump resolved this problem in an unusual way, maintaining his individual status by mounting a hostile takeover of the Republican Party nomination.

Conventional wisdom suggests that political party elites control their own nominating processes. The McGovern-Fraser reforms of the 1970s appeared to allocate the power of choice to rank-and-file members of the parties, but influential work by Marty Cohen and his co-authors popularized the idea that party elites had regained control of the nominating process. They argue that while rank-and-file party supporters formally choose the nominee in primary contests, party elites still control the process behind the scenes in an "invisible primary" in the year or so leading up to the first formal caucus and primary elections. Power lies with the party's broad "coalition of interests" which includes national, state and local elected officials, the leaders of various organized interests such as unions, business and religious groups, and other civil society organizations and pressure groups, unpaid but committed activists that staff the ground game and the mega-donors and the fundraisers with huge donor networks (Cohen et al. 2008, 15–18). These party insiders mobilize during the invisible primary to dissect and narrow down the field, rally around a particular candidate, and persuade rank-and-file voters to back their choice in the following public primaries.

This analysis points to one particularly important factor in determining who wins the nomination: endorsements by elective officeholders and especially officeholders from a different faction than the