

# Introduction: What Is Populist Nationalism and Why Does It Matter?

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This essay serves as an introduction to the US Foreign Policy in the Age of Trump Symposium. Two years into his first term as president of the United States, Donald Trump has made his presence known on the international stage. In articulating his administration's position on a range of foreign policy issues, he has been called many things, including "antiglobalist," "nativist," and "isolationist," which suggests a break from American foreign policy of the recent past. Is this perceived break indeed real? While many pundits and political watchers believe that President Trump's foreign policy is fundamentally different from that of his predecessors, political scientists are only now beginning to examine these important questions in detail. This symposium brings together a set of scholars to provide some initial answers and to offer some educated speculations on the short-term future of American foreign policy.

Since taking office in 2016, President Trump has been called many things—"antiglobalist," "antitrade," "different," "nativist," "isolationist"—all positions that according to his critics fuel new levels of polarization, rivalry, and hate and threaten to undermine the international order. Broadly, public discourse suggests that his approach to foreign policy is fundamentally different from his predecessors. But questions remain about the extent to which Trump's actions and policies constitute a meaningful departure from past administrations or simply a change in style and rhetoric that will eventually "wash out" once filtered through interactions and institutions.

What is the substance of a Trump foreign policy? Is Trump actually different from politics as usual in the United States or compared to those of contemporary global leaders? What are the likely consequences of his foreign policy decisions, style, and rhetoric? And will America's and the world's institutions ultimately reign in or smooth out those consequences? While it is early days to come to judgment, new research is beginning

to shed light on US foreign policy in the age of Trump. This symposium brings together scholars of social science to speak to these questions with both facts and educated speculations.

## IS TRUMP DIFFERENT?

President Trump and his administration are most often described as uniquely "nationalist," focused on the promotion of American interests. Since his inauguration, it has been "America First." Nevertheless, the nationalist moniker is not very helpful. Other major schools of thought—against which Trump allies such as Steve Bannon have defined themselves—also promote the American national interest. Liberal internationalists are at pains to note that the multilateral order created in large part by the United States has fostered unprecedented peace and prosperity, both for the world and the country (Ikenberry 1999). Neoconservatives are unabashed American nationalists (Rathbun 2008). The George W. Bush administration can hardly be accused of not having put American

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interests first. The particular essence of Trumpian nationalism thus needs further distillation.

Trump's nationalism is often described in discussions as uniquely "narrow" (Jervis 2018; Schweller 2018), a modifier that potentially helps us frame a difference between the interests of his administration and other, more traditional orientations in American foreign policy. Narrow takes on a number of meanings. First, Trump is argued to frame international relations in zero-sum terms. Second, Trump is accused of having a short-term orientation. His limited time horizon and distributional frame of mind are related and offer a stark contrast to the liberal internationalists his allies so dislike, who think of multilateral institutions and the post-World War II rules-based order as an investment in future American prosperity (Keohane 1984). Trump in contrast sees this order as a kind of international altruism in which others exploit the United States and is willing to put long-term gains at stake to extract a greater share of the pie, precisely the political "hold-ups" these organizations are created to avoid (Carnegie 2014). Finally, the narrowness of Trump's nationalism is evident in its materialism. Trump is said to have no greater sense of America's mission or responsibility that animates both neo-conservatives and liberals. His approach is "transactional."

The narrowness of Trump's nationalism only gets us so far in distinguishing Trumpism from other foreign policy orientations. American realists have been vociferously arguing in the post-Cold War era that the liberal tradition in US foreign policy leads to disastrous overextension. This has led some to characterize Trump as a realist (Jervis 2018). And yet, even though they share his distaste for what they see as American self-righteousness and sanctimony and define the national interest in a narrow and material sense, realists have almost exclusively disavowed Trump. Realist objections are less substantive and more stylistic—driven by concerns about Trump's rationality. They center around his perceived incompetence. For example, Walt (2016) claims that Trump lives in a "fantasy" world in which no difficult choices need be made. His foreign policy is "waving the big stick while running a big mouth." He simply "doesn't know much about foreign affairs." Trump is in realist eyes almost literally a loose cannon.

Realist distaste of Trump's nationalism is largely a product of its "populist" character, a theme of Boucher and Thies (2019, in this issue) in this symposium. Populism is "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people" (Mudde 2004, 543). Populism is politics of the "pub," "highly emotional and simplistic discourse that is directed at the 'gut feelings' of

the people" (542). This explains Trump supporters' disgust with economic globalization, seen as enriching global and American elites at the expense of hard-working Americans. His foreign policy is populist in the sense that it seems calibrated to make sense to even the most uneducated on foreign affairs. It is simple, moralistic, and emotional.

In this way, one can characterize much of Trump's foreign policy so far as a policy of moral grievances, seen most clearly in complaints about the fairness of existing alliance arrangements and trade deals. What international relations scholars characterize as free-riding, he casts as freeloading (Carnegie and Carson 2019, in this issue). Trump has repeatedly stressed, as early as 1987, that others are laughing at the United States (Wertheim 2018). This international victimization narrative, as noted by Boucher and Thies (2019), is common to populist leaders beyond the United States. Ordinary people might not understand the complexities of international trade, but they feel it is wrong when others do not buy as much from us as we do from them.

While sympathetic to the substance of these concerns, realists have long warned against this kind of righteous nationalism, which lacks complexity and encourages what they would regard as self-defeating, irrational behavior based on gut instincts that seems to appeal to Trump. For realists, self-regard is not the same as self-interest; indeed the former might undermine the latter. Trump, however, seems intent on dismantling the foreign policy bureaucracy (Drezner 2019, in this issue). After all, technocracy's pragmatic politics of managing complex problems is at direct odds with populism's claims to transcend them (Canovan 1999).

It is also possible that Trump is not nearly as much of a departure from underlying trends in Republican foreign policy in recent decades or that Trump's foreign policy is simply traditional policy of the kind pursued by both parties without the pretense. Busby and Monten (2018), for instance, provide evidence of a growing conservative disenchantment with the multilateral order that long precedes Trump's political career. There is even evidence that Trumpism marks a return to a kind of narrow nationalism that was the Republican norm before the Cold War. The primary Republican objections to the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, for instance, were burden sharing and fears of being entrapped into foreign conflicts not in the US interest, the exact same concerns raised by Trump (Rathbun 2012). Or we might be seeing a coherence that is not there. Trump might be primarily an improvisational president (MacDonald 2018).

#### DOES IT MATTER?

Understood one way, the descriptive question of whether Trump and his administration are different from preced-

ing presidents and presidential administrations is an uncontroversial truism. After all, everyone is unique in some way. The more meaningful and difficult question is how Trump is qualitatively different along important dimensions of foreign policy and whether the differences between Trump and his administration are different enough from preceding presidents and administrations to uniquely change foreign policy.

Trump may be a fundamental departure in some (if not all) ways, but it is America's, and the world's, institutions that will ultimately determine whether and where his defiance of politics as usual has a lasting effect on the international order. Leaders exhibit many different styles, dispositions, and cognitive biases; Trump certainly appears to operate as a "system one" thinker, making intuitive choices often driven by emotion (Haidt 2012; Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Tversky and Kahneman 1974). However, public opinion, the media, elections, Congress, and other domestic and international bureaucracies and institutions may in principle dampen and reign in a leader's imprint on actionable policy (Hafner-Burton et al. 2017). This might truncate his influence and produce a more typical outcome.

The research on this question—the extent to which institutions will mediate Trump's influence—is nascent, in part because it is difficult to study the passage of a leader's preference through the complex chain of delegation, negotiation, and institutions that determine America's role in the world. The articles in this symposium thus only speculate but nevertheless begin the process of understanding the likely foreign policy consequences of the Trump era more systematically. Each article has at its core a theory about how foreign policy is made and influenced, which in turn implies independent variables that are important in the policy-making process, interacting with the Trump administration's preferences in ways that may change foreign policy outcomes in the future.

Two articles characterize the Trump administration as uniquely populist and then generate expectations about the likely consequences of his populism for the domestic politics of foreign policy. Drawing on existing knowledge about populists and using the tools of network analysis, Boucher and Thies (2019) argue that Trump's use of populist rhetoric on foreign policy issues has generated a polarized elite-versus-people divide (instead of the usual partisan boundary) and that Trump dominates his cluster of followers (compared to other networks that have a multitude of social leaders). This is just the kind of dynamic that realists fear.

Drezner (2019) also suggests that—in contrast to his predecessors—Trump is unique in his promotion of populist nationalism. Given the dramatic departure from prevailing postwar American foreign policy he has failed to institu-

tionalize his less mainstream foreign policy principles given bureaucratic resistance. However, Drezner expects that Trump will continue weakening bureaucratic institutions, particularly the State Department, in order to reduce constraints on his foreign policy actions. Drezner predicts that an ultimate consequence of Trump's populist nationalist ideology is the undermining of liberal internationalist instincts in the American foreign policy apparatus. Since populists aim to disrupt as much as create, this would leave Trump supporters satisfied.

Meanwhile, two articles in this symposium are focused more on the international consequences of Trump's administration. They characterize the Trump administration as uniquely hostile to the institutions of global governance and then generate expectations about the likely consequences of protectionism for foreign policy.

Drawing on theories of domestic political power, Johns, Pelc, and Wellhausen (2019) speculate in this issue that, as the United States steps back from multilateral cooperation, powerful interest groups—especially businesses—will occupy the regulatory space, no longer constrained by America's commitments to international institutions. Chipping away at multilateralism will further empower large firms to lobby government and engage in private regulation in their interests, which is likely to be less transparent and unsympathetic to civil society. Concerningly, among the predictions that follow, is that large multinational corporations are likely to be especially good at capturing government resources and bending policies toward their interests at the expense of smaller firms. America's core institutions, alongside the world's, will be in a more difficult position to reign in this shift of power. Rather than empower the electoral system and ordinary Americans, Trump may empower big industry. Trump's populism is better at destroying than creating.

Carnegie and Carson (2019) suggest that, while many previous leaders have shown hostility toward the inherited institutional order, the Trump administration has a unique proclivity for using public rhetoric to draw attention to what the president deems to be unfair, discriminatory trade policies and trade relationships, part of the moralistic populist style we note above. That matters not just domestically, in terms of generating popular support, but also internationally. The authors speculate that trade-bashing rhetoric has a toxic effect: it creates public skepticism of the world's trade institutions, which in turn provides an excuse for countries to break the rules that normalize global economic cooperation and undermine global governance more broadly. When the foundation of normalized trade erodes, people are harmed.

Finally, two articles characterize the Trump administration as coming into office at a time of uniquely high polarization, "silencing," and partisan motivated reasoning and then generate

expectations about the likely consequences of this for foreign policy. Baum and Potter (2019, in this issue) suggest that the Trump administration has operated in a media, information, and public opinion environment that is more fragmented and siloed than in the past. Today, the polarization of the political system generates a media that erodes rather than augments constraints on politicians. Consumers are now more inclined than ever to back their leaders and their taglines, no matter what, and shun the policy of the opposition, in large part because “contrary views less frequently break through,” and those that do are “easily dismissed as ‘fake news’” (748). The result is a decay of democratic constraint on foreign policy, reduced public knowledge, and a rise in extremism in the age of Trump. Worrisomely, this may actually lead public opinion to be less sensitive to new information and more prone to sudden and destabilizing changes that undercut foreign policy commitments. That might explain why Trump was the only candidate in the run up to the 2016 presidential election for whom the amount of media coverage translated into a bump in his popularity (Reuning and Dietrich 2018).

McDonald, Croco, and Turitto (2019, in this issue) are similarly doubtful that Trump voters will reign him in—partisan politics and preexisting attitudes are prime. While Trump critics remain steadfast in their negative affect toward the policies of this administration, supporters forgive his sins and readily look the other way as Trump flip-flops on major foreign policy issues such as military intervention and tariff manipulation. Drawing from the literature on flip-flopping, McDonald et al. argue that polarization and partisan-motivated reasoning imply that Trump will pay little to no costs for reversing on matters of foreign policy, even when Americans are aware of his reversal, as long as the president moved closer to their preferred position. In short, at present, there is grave concern that voters may not reign him in.

Couple this skepticism with Trump’s expansive take on executive power—going so far as to suggest a self-pardon—and the emerging research paints a dismal picture, especially in the short term, about the ability or willingness of institutions to reign Trump in. Yet there is reason for hope that many of the effects of Trump’s foreign policy (especially the deleterious ones) will by and large be contained or later reversed. It is likely that Congress (now split) will act as a tempering institution in those areas where it has jurisdiction. Some of Trump’s senior aids, allies, and appointees, although they are constantly rotating through, are by many accounts seeking to reign him in. Moreover, the rest of the world marches on with many issues without the United States (the Paris accord, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Iran deal, etc.), and there will be options for his administration or the next to reengage.

## CONCLUSION

What will come of US foreign policy in the age of Trump? Is Trump actually different from politics as usual, and what are the likely consequences of Trump’s differences in both substance and style? Scholars are generally hard pressed to make reliable forecasts given the complexities of the international system: strategic actors are bound to adjust in expectation of Trump’s policies, and—as we explain here—the impact of Trump’s foreign policy preferences may ultimately moderate as a result of factors like domestic and international institutions. But this collective reticence by scholars to forecast foreign policy outcomes has not stopped policy makers and pundits from often wildly speculating about the likely consequences of the Trump administration. As numerous, oftentimes divergent forecasts proliferate, the relative silence from scholars may seem all the more deafening to those seeking clarity. In this light, symposia like this one are invaluable forums in which scholars may generate cogent predictions that are derived from and disciplined by theories of foreign policy and international relations. We applaud the authors and editors of the *Journal of Politics* for participating in this valuable enterprise.

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