THE BULLY IN THE PULPIT

THE IMPACT OF DONALD TRUMP'S PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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Two RAND researchers contend that national political and civil discourse in this century has been characterized by "truth decay": an increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data; a blurring of the line between opinion and fact; an increase in the relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact; and lowered trust in formerly respected sources of factual information.[1] Donald Trump has contributed to each of these trends. Indeed, no president in modern times has been so willfully uninformed, so willing to rely on his instincts rather than careful analysis, so unconcerned with the accuracy of his statements, so critical of alternative sources of information, and so ready to violate the norms of civil discourse.

Both the tone and substance of Trump's public utterances are far beyond the norms of the presidency. His willingness to demean his opponents, mislead the public about the nature of threats, prevaricate about people, issues, nations, and his policies and accomplishments, employ racially charged language, and challenge the rule of law add a unique—and disturbing—element to American political life. In this paper, I discuss the most prominent characteristics of the president's public discourse and their consequences for both the president's attempts at leadership and the polity as a whole.

Branding and Delegitimizing

Before taking office, Trump directed his aides "to think of each presidential day as an episode in a television show in which he vanquishes rivals."[2] He took his own advice. The president's reflexive response to any opposition or criticism is *ad hominem* counterattacks.[3] As one prominent commentator put it, the president is "incessantly splenetic."[4] Rather than focusing on promoting policies, the president has emphasized branding his opponents, attacking their character or motives. Moreover, he is skilled at it, choosing memorable words and repeating them constantly, offering his followers simplicity and consistency. Prime examples include

- "Crooked Hillary"
- "Lyin'" Ted Cruz.
- "Pocahontas" (Elizabeth Warren)
- "Fake News,"
- The "failing" *New York Times*

In the process, he "essentializes" his opponents.[5] Clinton did not just commit a crime (in Trump's telling); she's "crooked" to the core. It was not merely that Cruz tells lies; rather, lying was essential to who Ted Cruz is. Elizabeth Warren does not simply espouse foolish ideas; people should not take her seriously at all. Similarly, it is not that the media made a mistake in reporting a story. Its falsehoods are endemic to what the media is. Even institutions such as the FBI and Justice Department, which he claims are corrupt and have engaged in "witch hunts," should not be taken seriously.

Trump often invokes the "how-dare-you" argument against his critics. When San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz criticized the federal effort at disaster relief in the wake of Hurricane Maria, Trump wondered how she dare complain considering all that the federal government was doing for Puerto Rico. When NFL players responded to his criticism of their kneeling during the

playing of the national anthem, he reminded them of their "privilege of making millions" playing football.

The president's goal is to delegitimize his opponents—and he is open and explicit about his strategy. When asked by veteran *60 Minutes* reporter Lesley Stahl why he kept attacking the press, he responded:

> "You know why I do it? I do it to discredit you all and demean you all, so when you write negative stories about me no one will believe you."[6]

Trump is a prolific insulter,[7] and although the main goal of the president's criticism of his opponents is to weaken them, it also allows him to highlight for his base that he is keeping his promise to be an irritant to people in power, calling out the sacred cows in Washington. The president also seems to think his criticism makes him look tough, a quality he values highly. On July 2, 2017, he posted a doctored video clip showing him bashing the head of a figure representing CNN. It is hardly surprising that the media gave substantial attention to such posts, which are so clearly outside the norms of civility — let alone the norms for a president.

In addition, Trump, like Richard Nixon, has bottomless reserves of self-pity. He claims to be lashing out at critics of his performance because he is the victim of unfair persecution — by the nation's elites, Democrats, the media, and law enforcement agencies. According to him—and he is almost completely ignorant of history—no president has ever faced such an onslaught of unfair opposition. This posture inspires sympathy from and solidarity with his aggrieved supporters, particularly because the president suggests that when critics assault him, they are under attack as well.

If Trump is petty and vindictive, he is so to people whom his base dislikes, and it appears to embrace his incivility. E. J. Dionne, Norman Ornstein, and Thomas Mann have argued that Trump's rhetoric built on longer-term trends that have shaped the modern Republican Party, including a war on the "liberal media," the delegitimization of political opponents, appeals to racism and xenophobia, and hostility to democratic norms. "This history helps explain why so many Republican leaders are reluctant to call out Trump's excesses and to acknowledge the risks he poses to our political system." [8]

Yet his base is a minority of the public and not monolithic. When asked whether it was appropriate for the president to tweet personal attacks on individuals, such as attacking their personal appearance or characteristics, 56 percent of female Trump voters and 36 percent of Trump male voters responded that it was not. Only 32 percent of all Trump voters thought it was appropriate for him to levy personal attacks.[9] Similarly, three quarters of the public said it bothered them when Trump insulted people,[10] and two-thirds said insulting political opponents was never appropriate.[11]

We do not know the impact of Trump's branding on public opinion. He may well have diminished support for Hillary Clinton a small amount in 2016, but Republicans did not need him to convince them that they did not care for her. The same is true for Republican's views of other leading Democrats during the president's tenure. Conversely, Trump did not seem to influence Democrats with his rhetoric, at least not in the direction he intended.[12]

We do know that Trump is much better at branding enemies than policies. Despite his skill at mocking people, it has not helped him increase public support for his policies, as we have seen. This lack of impact is not surprising, because it is much more difficult to condense the case for complex policies in a hashtag than it is to ridicule individuals.[13]

Moreover, disparaging opponents is hardly conducive to attracting broad support or encouraging people—such as members of Congress—to work with him in the future. The president may reinforce the views of his followers with his branding, but he seems to persuade few others—and may also alienates many others in the process. He also ends up demeaning himself.

Trump's greatest influence may be on the civility of public discourse. There is a difference between attacking a person or a person's motivations and critiquing an idea. Uncivil discourse trivializes serious issues as commentary on them descends into name-calling and disregards the truth. Demonizing advocates and their ideas eliminates the need for sound counter reasoning and fact-based argument. "Today the goal is linguistic," said Frank Luntz, a Republican strategist who specializes in the words and messages that candidates employ. "We are no longer rewarding policy; we are rewarding rhetoric." "On a personal level," Luntz added, "it sickens me."[14]

In July 2019, Trump hosted a White House conference on social media. Although he declined to provide a full list of attendees, there is no question that he afforded a stage to people who had a track record of sending inflammatory tweets and videos and posting other troubling content. "They're advocating for a particular kind of social media system where they are allowed to harass, defame [and] post indecent content, and not be censured for it, and not be moderated in any way," said Joan Donovan, the director of the Technology and Social Change Research Project at Harvard University. "They want the benefits of social media with none of the civility."[15]

Trump and his supporters' coarse rhetoric has driven some of those who oppose him to extremes of their own. Comedian Kathy Griffin was fired after posing for a picture in which she seemed to be holding the president's decapitated head. Samantha Bee, another comic, apologized for using a crude term to describe Ivanka Trump. Actor Peter Fonda wrote on Twitter, "WE SHOULD RIP BARRON TRUMP FROM HIS MOTHER'S ARMS AND PUT HIM IN A CAGE WITH PEDOPHILES." He also used a vulgar term to describe the president. Fonda later deleted the tweet and apologized: "I went way too far. It was wrong and I should not have done it." Most prominently, Robert De Niro appeared on the nationally televised 2018 Tony Awards show and declared, "I just want to say one thing: F--- Trump. It's no longer down with Trump. It's f--- Trump."[16] Given the polarized views of the president, it is not surprising that the actor's outburst earned him a sustained standing ovation, but it did little to foster civil discourse.

The share of the public saying Trump was too critical of Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election was substantially higher than voters' assessments of any other candidate—of either party—in elections going back more than two decades.[17] Midway through 2018, 91 percent of

the public thought the lack of civility in politics was a serious problem, and a plurality blamed the president.[18]

At the time of the 2018 midterm elections, 74 percent of the public, including 63 percent of Republicans, thought the overall tone and level of civility between Republicans and Democrats in Washington, D.C. had gotten worse since Trump's election. Forty percent felt Trump was most to blame for negative tone and lack of civility in Washington, while 20 percent faulted the media, 17 percent blamed Democrats in Congress, and 7 percent accused Republicans in Congress. Equally important, 79 percent of the public were concerned that the negative tone and lack of civility in public discourse would lead to violence or acts of terror.[19] In the spring of 2019, majorities of the public concluded that political debate in the United States had become less respectful, less fact-based, and less focused on issues, and 55 percent said Trump had changed the tone and nature of political debate for the worse.[20]

More broadly, incivility poses challenges for the polity. Seventy-nine percent of the public thought the 2016 president election was uncivil. Fifty-nine percent of those who did not vote for president in that election said incivility played a role in their decisions. The same percentage said they quit paying attention to politics because of incivility. Ninety-seven percent thought it is important for the president to be civil.[21] It is difficult to mobilize voters when they are tuning you out.

Media

The media has been the president's number one irritant, and he has criticized it often and harshly. He frequently dismissed unfavorable coverage as "fake news" and after less than a month in office he tweeted that "The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!"[22] When challenged that his rhetoric encouraged uncivil and even violent behavior, the president placed responsibility on the press. "The media also has a responsibility to set a civil tone and to stop the endless hostility and constant negative — and oftentimes, false — attacks and stories," Trump explained. With no hint of irony, he declared that those in the political arena should "stop treating their opponents as morally defective."[23]

Sometimes the president's criticism of the press descends to the absurd. On January 29, 2019, the nation's top intelligence officials testified in open congressional hearings, which C-Span televised, and the director of national intelligence submitted a 42-page public statement regarding threats to U.S. national security. Their testimony generated stories about their contradicting what the president has said about the regarding Iran, the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), and North Korea. Trump predictably lashed out at his own appointees the next day, tweeting that they were "wrong" and "extremely passive and naïve." He also suggested that they might need to "go back to school." Still, he needed to defuse embarrassing stories, so he claimed the media had fabricated a conflict, claiming the officials later told him they were "totally misquoted"[24]—even though their testimony was available for anyone to see in its entirety.

The Quinnipiac University Poll has regularly asked registered voters who they trust more to tell them the truth about important issues, President Trump or the news media. The news media has always won majority support on this question, with little variance over time (Table 1).

We find similar responses when pollsters asked whether people trusted Trump or their "favorite news source" more. People overwhelmingly chose their favorite news source (Table 2).

Insert Tables 1 and 2 here

However, there is a strong partisan tilt to the responses. For example, in the April 26-29, 2019, poll, 82 percent of Republicans put their trust in Trump while 92 percent of Democrats selected the media, as did 54 percent of Independents.[25] In the same poll, respondents were asked which came closer to their view: "the news media is the enemy of the people, or the news media is an important part of democracy?" Republicans were split, with 49 percent choosing "enemy of the people" and 36 percent selecting "an important part of democracy." Democrats and Independents were not similarly torn. Ninety-two percent of the former and 70 percent of the latter said the news media was "an important part of democracy."

Fueling Fear

Presidents often identify problems facing the country and offer their solutions to solving or at least ameliorating them. They also make decisions that certain matters that do *not* require attention. If the president intentionally or unintentionally misleads the country about the extent or nature of a problem or chooses to ignore problems, the public's evaluations of possible solutions are likely to be distorted, undermining rational discourse about the way forward.

Identifying Threats

President Trump tends to see problems that he believes require attention as *threats* to the nation, and his public rhetoric reflects this mindset. In the fourth sentence of his speech accepting the Republican nomination in 2016, Trump declared, "Our convention occurs at a moment of crisis for our nation. The attacks on our police, and the terrorism in our cities, threaten our very way of life." He continued by cataloging the dangers of crime, uncontrolled immigration, the national debt, Iran, ISIS, and other challenges. In his Inaugural Address, he spoke of ending "The American carnage."

According to the president, there are threats to personal safety from violent crime, Islamic terrorist, and immigrants. Then there are threats to people's personal economic status from foreign trade, regulations designed to combat global warming and environmental degradation, the Affordable Care Act, and immigrant labor. There are also threats to group status from immigrants, both legal and illegal. Finally, abortion, Muslims, the LGBTQ community, and others pose threats to American values. Critics of the president's policies are also threats, of course. In his campaigning in the 2018 midterm elections, for example, Trump claimed that Democrats were too dangerous to govern.

Trump has lacked evidence for many of his claims of threats, and many are contrary to the best evidence. During the presidential campaign, he maintained that unemployment was much higher than it was—although he had a change of heart once he took office and could claim credit for low unemployment. Similarly, he has claimed health care had deteriorated under President Obama, again without offering evidence.

From shortly after his election and throughout his presidency, Trump has asserted that there were millions of illegal voters in the 2016 election. If that were true, there clearly would be

need for reform of the administration of our election system. During recounts of some races in the 2018 midterm elections, the president charged that there was fraud in counting the votes. He offered no evidence at all for either allegation. Many people seemed to believe the president about the prevalence of election fraud,[26] although there is no systematic evidence to support such a claim.[27]

Trump warned at the 2016 Republican National Convention that "decades of progress made in bringing down crime are now being reversed." At election time, the Pew Research Center asked voters if crime has worsened since 2008. Fifty-seven percent of voters, including 78 percent of Trump supporters, responded that crime had gotten worse.[28] In reality, the FBI's reported that violent and property crimes had decreased by 19 percent and 23 percent, respectively. The Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics found violent crime had fallen by 26 percent and property crime by 22 percent. People typically overestimate the incidence of crime,[29] but in this case the fact that more than twice as many Republicans as Democrats thought crime was increasing indicates that Republicans were likely influenced by their standard bearer's charges. In 2019, the president was still at it, telling a police organization that violent crime was "going down for the first time in a long while."[30] This assertion was false.

Advocating tax cuts, the president tweeted on September 6, 2017, "We are the highest taxed nation in the world." If Trump was correct, he would be providing a strong motivation for policy change, which no doubt was his goal. His assertion was false, however. In fact, the U.S. has one of the lowest effective rate rates in the developed world.[31] Nevertheless, majorities of registered voters thought their taxes were too high.[32]

In an address to a joint session of Congress on February 28, 2017, the president defended his travel ban by asserting, "According to data provided by the Department of Justice, the vast majority of individuals convicted of terrorism and terrorism-related offenses since 9/11 came here from outside of our country." This statement grossly distorted the facts.[33] In response to a Freedom of Information Action request for data supporting Trump's assertion, the Justice Department responded that "no responsive records were located." There was no report and no support for the president's claim.[34]

Trump campaigned vigorously in the 2018 midterm elections, emphasizing threats to the nation. He characterized a caravan of asylum seekers slowly traveling through Mexico as a potential "invasion" of the U.S. and sent several thousand troops to help secure the southern border. The president made a number of unsubstantiated claims about the criminals and Middle Eastern terrorists among the travelers, and even charged that the Democrats were paying migrants to enter the United States so that they could vote for Democratic candidates. When a reporter asked him for evidence, he dismissed her question with, "Oh, please, please, don't be a baby."[35] Back in the White House, journalists persisted in asking for evidence of the caravan threat. At that point, he admitted that he had "no proof of anything"—but added that his charges could be true.[36]

More generally, the president lacked perspective on immigration. When he took office, the number of illegal immigrants was at its lowest level in a decade, as was the percentage of undocumented immigrants in the workforce. Moreover, there was a net outflow of

undocumented Mexicans back to Mexico.[37] Nevertheless, the president declared, "The southern border is a dangerous horrible disaster."[38]

The president also regularly distills complicated issues into easily understood me-versus-them fights and presents himself as the protector of his base against the threats. He told the Republican National Convention in 2016, "I have joined the political arena so that the powerful can no longer beat up on people that cannot defend themselves. Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it." "I am your voice," he declared, "I will fight for you, and I will win for you."

The style of his rhetoric is absolutist, emphasizing non-negotiable principles and moral outrage at their violation.[39] It has some advantages for the speaker. William Davies argues that an emphasis of fear over facts creates an audience for whom it does not matter what is said, but rather how it makes them feel.[40] Perceived threats increase the likelihood of obtaining the public's attention and evoke emotional responses.[41] Moreover, these threats affect some people's policy views[42] and also may increase in-group identification, political participation,[43] and preference for strong leadership.[44] Perceived threats also bolster views of the competence of the one describing the threats,[45] and absolutist rhetoric boosts impressions of positive character traits of the speaker.[46] Moreover, fear increases the public's tolerance for norm-busting policies to deal with perceived threats.

Offering Reassurance

Leaders not only identify problems; they also reassure the public. Franklin D. Roosevelt famously told the country at the nadir of the Great Depression that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance." He did not pretend that conditions were not bad. Instead, he summoned the nation to defy what it feared rather than succumb to it. George W. Bush, standing on a pile of rubble of the World Trade Center in 2001, assured the country that the terrorists responsible for the attack would be punished and the U.S. would move ahead.

Trump certainly assures the public that his policies will solve the problems he has identified. However, he also tries to reassure the public that some problems that many people see are not concerns at all and thus it need not worry about them. If the president can convince the public that problems do not exist, there is no need for a solution to them. Moreover, it is not necessary to make tradeoffs such as those between economic growth and environmental protection.

In an interview on CBS's *60 Minutes* on October 14, 2018, Trump expressed the view that climate science was nothing more than political opinion, and that the scientists who have documented human's impact on the climate had "a very big political agenda." He has never offered any evidence for this view, however, apparently believing it unnecessary.

The next month, on November 23, the federal government released Volume II of the *Fourth National Climate Assessment*, a major scientific report mandated by Congress and issued by 13 federal agencies. The report presented the starkest warnings to date of the consequences of climate change for the United States, predicting that the failure to rein in global warming posed serious threats to the nation's health, water supply, and economy. The report's findings

were directly at odds with Trump's agenda of environmental deregulation, which he asserted would spur economic growth. Trump had taken aggressive steps to allow more planet-warming pollution from automobiles, power plants, and oil wells. Aside from releasing the report on Black Friday, when the White House hoped people would have shopping on their minds, the president largely ignored the study. His primary response was simply, "I don't believe it."[47] A few days later he added, "a lot of people like myself—we have very high levels of intelligence, but we're not necessarily such believers."[48]

The public did not follow the president's lead. Table 3 shows responses to questions about how serious a threat climate changed posed to the U.S. Most people saw climate change as a major threat. By January 2018, 46 percent of the public thought dealing with global climate change should be a top priority for the U.S. government, and another 24 percent thought it should be an "important" priority. Only 9 percent agreed with the president's view that no response was necessary.[49] By the last half of 2018, more than 70 percent of the public saw climate change as a "big" problem. Again, only 9 percent saw it as not a problem at all.[50]

Insert Table 3 here

In November 2018, 48 percent of the public found evidence of climate change more convincing over the previous five years while only 13 percent viewed it through the president's eyes and found it less convincing.[51] Ninety-one percent saw climate change as a serious or very serious problem.[52] In March 2019, 54 percent responded that government had a great deal of responsibility for addressing climate change, while only 12 percent said it had none at all.[53] Similarly, in May 2019, 65 percent of the public saw climate change as a major problem that the government should address.[54]

Nevertheless, Republicans, already skeptical about climate change, tended to stick with the president. In July 2019, for example, only 27 percent of Republicans and Republican leaners saw global climate change as a major threat to the United States, compared to 84 percent among Democrats and Democratic leaners.[55]

The issue of Russian interference in the 2016 election haunted Trump throughout his presidency. The president downplayed the impact of any such meddling and took no initiative to combat such interference in the future. It appears that he viewed reports of Russian intrusion as a threat to the legitimacy of his electoral victory. Going far beyond any findings, the president declared at a March 6, 2018, news conference, "the Russians had no impact on our votes whatsoever." He did admit that "there was meddling and probably there was meddling from other countries and maybe other individuals."

On February 13, 2018, top U.S. intelligence officials testified that Russia was already meddling in the midterm elections, trying to worsen the country's political and social divisions. Even though evidence of Russian meddling was, in the words of Trump's national security assistant, Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, "incontrovertible," the officials reported that Trump had not directed them specifically to combat Russian interference.

On February 16, 2018, special counsel Robert Mueller indicted more than a dozen Russians and three companies for interfering in the 2016 elections. President Trump's first reaction was to claim personal vindication: "The Trump campaign did nothing wrong — no collusion!" he wrote on Twitter that day. He voiced no concern that a foreign power had been trying for nearly four years to upend American democracy, much less resolve to stop it from continuing to do so in that year's midterm elections.

More broadly, Trump has made little public effort to rally the nation to confront Moscow for its intrusion or to defend democratic institutions against continued disruption. The president has not imposed new sanctions called for in a law passed by Congress in July 2017 to retaliate for the attack on America's political system or teamed up with European leaders to counter a common threat. Nor has he not led a concerted effort to harden election systems in the United States or pressed lawmakers to pass legislation addressing the situation.

An issue closely related to the Mueller investigation was the president's relation with Russian President Vladimir Putin. As a candidate, Trump frequently spoke of his admiration for Putin. Yet he went further. On July 27, 2016, while campaigning for president, Trump invited Russian hacking of his opponent, Hillary Clinton. "Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing. I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press." Two years later, special counsel Robert Mueller indicted Russian intelligence officers, alleging that on the same day as Trump's invitation, they began targeting Clinton's email server. Mueller's team had already obtained indictments against another group of Russians for attempting to influence the election over social media.

In general, the president has spoken of Putin in flattering or friendly terms, avoiding direct criticism. On February 5, 2017, Fox News host Bill O'Reilly interviewed the president. After Trump reiterated his respect for Putin, O'Reilly interjected, "He's a killer, though. Putin's a killer." To which the president responded, "What do you think, our country's so innocent?" It is not surprising, then, that in March 2018 and in the face of international outrage over the poisoning of a former Russian intelligence officer on British soil and over his advisers' objections, Trump congratulated Putin on winning reelection as Russian president.[56]

When the two leaders held a press conference in Helsinki on July 17, 2018, Trump expressed doubts about U.S. intelligence conclusions that the Russian government tried to influence the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Instead, he indicated he believed Putin's denials. "My people came to me. Dan Coats [Director of National Intelligence] came to me, and some others. They said they think it's Russia. I have President Putin. He just said it's not Russia. I will say this: I don't see any reason why it would be." Although Trump later backtracked somewhat from his statement, it was consistent with many others over the previous two years.

Despite the president's friendly attitude toward Putin, Americans maintained an unfavorable view of the Russian leader (Table 4). There was little change from 2015, the year after Russia annexed Crimea, through Trump's tenure as president. Clearly, most Americans did not follow Trump's lead.

Insert Table 4 here

Nevertheless, some Republicans did. Table 5 shows the results of four Gallup polls. Only Republicans shifted to a more positive view of Putin over the 2015-2018 period. Even for this group, however, only 27 percent followed the president's lead. Comparted to 2015, then, 15 percent of Republicans switched their views in a more supportive direction. Yet most Republicans agreed with the rest of the nation in holding unfavorable views of Putin. These results are consistent with other polls, which found modest changes in Republican opinion.[57]

Insert Table 5 here

If we focus on the most visible Trump-Putin interaction, the Helsinki summit in July 2018, we find that only 33 percent of the public approved of how Trump handled the meeting, while 50 percent disapproved. Only 29 percent approved of his expressing doubts about US intelligence on the issue of interference in the election, while 56 percent disapproved. Fifty-one percent of Republicans backed the president, but nearly one-half of his own base did not.[58] Similarly, only 27 percent thought the meeting was a success while 52 percent considered it a failure. Interestingly, only 60 percent of Republicans followed the president's lead in proclaiming the summit a success.[59]

There was more movement among partisans regarding the broader issue of relations with Russia. For decades, the Republican Party has been more hawkish toward Russia than Democrats. That changed with President Trump's election. Republicans in the public are now more positive than Democrats toward Russia. In fact, on the issue of Russia cyber-meddling in the U.S. elections, Republican public opinion more closely resembles public opinion in Russia than overall opinion in the United States.[60] In December 2018, half of all registered voters, including 78 percent of Democrats and 52 percent of Independents thought that Russia had "definitely" interfered in the 2016 presidential election to help Trump. However, only 15 percent of Republicans held that view.[61] By July 2019, 65 percent of Democrats and Democratic leaners felt Russia's power and influence was a major threat to the United States, while only 35 percent of Republicans and Republican leaners held the same view.[62]

We can compare Chicago Council on Global Affairs polls taken in June 2016 and June-July 2017 to see the impact of the change in party of the president.[63]

- In 2016, Democrats (62 percent) were more inclined toward cooperation with Russia than were Republicans (50 percent). By 2017, with a Republican in the White House, Republicans were more likely to say that the United States should undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with Russia (56 percent versus 28 percent for Democrats), while Democrats were more likely to say that the United States should actively work to limit Russia's power (70 percent versus. 40 percent Republicans).
- While Republicans grew less likely to believe that Russia is working to undermine U.S. influence (64 percent versus 75 percent in 2016), Democrats grew more likely to believe it to be so (82 percent versus 72 percent in 2016).
- Republicans are far less likely than Democrats to describe as critical threats to the United States Russian influence in U.S. elections (65 percent Democrats, 19 percent Republicans) and Russia's military power (50 percent Democrats, 32 percent Republicans).
- Democrats (51 percent) are far more likely than Republicans (29 percent) to support increasing sanctions against Russia.

We can also compare results of Pew Research Center polls at the time of Trump's election with those in the summer of 2018. In 2016, 60 percent of Democrats felt "cold" toward Russia, and this figure increased to 76 percent in 2018. Interestingly, Republicans increased their feelings of "cold" as well, from 53 percent to 60 percent. Only 8 percent of Democrats and 12 percent of Republicans felt "warm" toward Russia.[64]

Prevaricating

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Donald Trump's approach to politics is that he seems to be unconcerned with the accuracy of what he says. Fact checkers of a range of organizations have concluded that the president has made thousands of false or misleading claims,[65] far more than any of his predecessors. The *Washington Post* reported that Trump averaged 15 false claims a day in 2018,[66] and 8,158 false or misleading claims in his first two years in office.[67] By mid-2019, the total had risen to 12,019.[68] We have seen that the president has frequently exaggerated or otherwise distorted the nature of threats facing the American public and chosen to rationalize away the existence of other dangers.

In August 2019, accused sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein committed suicide. Perhaps to distract from his past relationship with Epstein, on August 10 Trump retweeted a conspiracy theory alleging that Epstein was killed because he had information on Bill Clinton. Promoting such unsubstantiated—and untrue—charges was not new for the president,[69] who seemed to find them an effective tool for emotionally connecting with voters and supporters.

Presidents of both parties are typically very sensitive about saying anything that is not true and go to great lengths to avoid it. President Trump is different. Unburdened by shame, unchastened by criticism, and unconcerned with facts, he says whatever is convenient at the moment. He claimed to have built a wall on the border with Mexico, although no wall had been built. He claimed the largest tax cut, the best economy, and the highest defense spending in history, although these assertions were clearly untrue. He declared that steel plants had opened in response to his tariff policy, that the U.S. had the most liberal immigration laws in the world, that the U.S. paid most of the budget of NATO, and that defense contracts with Saudi Arabia were responsible for tens of thousands of jobs in the U.S. All these and many others were simply untrue. To put it simply, the president is a brazen and incessant liar.

Conservative political commentator Amanda Carpenter describes a pattern to many of Trump's lies.
  Step 1. Stake out political territory no one else will occupy, taking over the news cycle.
  Step 2: Put the falsehood into circulation, but do not own it ("people are saying")
  Step 3: Create suspense by promising new evidence or revelations, even if they never appear.
  Step 4: Discredit his opponents with attacks on their motives or characters
  Step 5: Declare victory, no matter what the circumstances[70]
At the same time, the president tells the public that the press cannot be trusted to deliver the truth on the matter, thus empowering people to privilege beliefs that fit their personal biases.

Trump, unsurprisingly, has a different view. In an interview on ABC News on October 31, 2018, he gave a halfhearted explanation for his proclivity for falsehoods. "Well, I try. I do try . . . and I always want to tell the truth. When I can, I tell the truth. And sometimes it turns

out to be where something happens that's different or there's a change, but I always like to be truthful."[71] The next year, he told ABC news, "I like the truth. You know, I'm actually a very honest guy."[72]

Not exactly. To begin, he is a serial embellisher. *In Trump: The Art of the Deal*, he wrote:

> I play to people's fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That's why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular.
>   I call it truthful hyperbole. It's an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective promotion.[73]

Part of the explanation for the president's falsehoods is that he refuses to accept some established facts. Perhaps his extensive experience in New York real estate convinced him that all people are prone to shading their views according to their own self-interest. He does not seem be believe that people are capable of objectivity.[74] Moreover, he relies heavily on instinct. As he put it, "I have a gut, and my gut tells me more sometimes than anybody else's brain can ever tell me."[75] Finally, the president does not read—books, studies, or memos—so he is likely to be poorly informed.[76]

Whatever the reason, he has persistently rejected clear evidence regarding a wide range of issues. He refused to accept the innocence of the Central Park Five, despite DNA evidence and a detailed confession from another man. He has argued that there is a link between vaccines and autism, a claim medical professionals have rejected. He persisted in his conviction that Barack Obama was born in Kenya long after the state of Hawaii produced Obama's official birth certificate. He has resisted accepting the unanimous conclusions of intelligence officials that Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election or that Prince Mohammed bin Salman was responsible for the death of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The president also continues to deny human contribution to climate change, contrary to the nearly unanimous view of the scientific community.

There often appears to be a method to his mendacity, as the president seems to say whatever is expedient. Sometimes the motivation is simply to make himself look good, such as his exaggerations of the size of his electoral victory in 2016 and the crowds at his inauguration, the number of times he has appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, or the success of his policies. At other times, Trump simply wants to avoid personal embarrassment, such as the many iterations of what he knew about payoffs to Stormy Daniels.

A few days before the 2018 midterm elections, the president claimed he was moving rapidly to have Congress pass a 10 percent middle class tax cut (and not one for businesses). Of course, he never proposed such a bill, and Congress was out of session anyway. Equally suspect were his claims that a caravan of asylum seekers traveling across Mexico was an "invasion" posing a looming threat to America. He even promised to sign an executive order ending the constitutional right to citizenship for children born in the United States to undocumented immigrants. The president dropped all these matters right after the election.[77] Throughout the 2018 campaign, Trump told supporters at his "Make America Great Again" rallies to "pretend

I'm on the ballot." Shortly after the election, he told Fox News, "I didn't run. I wasn't running. My name wasn't on the ballot."[78]

Most frequently, however, he prevaricates in his arguments regarding the nature of problems facing the nation, policy options, and the character and competence of political opponents. Typically, he offers no evidence. Often, his assertions and explanations are so convoluted that it is difficult to understand what he means. Untethered from the burden of objective proof, the president says whatever he thinks will help him win. His narratives often have so many layers of unsubstantiated content that it is difficult to address them clearly.

Some Trump supporters try to rationalize the president's falsehoods. Anthony Scaramucci, who for a few days was Trump's White House communications director, told his interviewer on CNN, "Yes, the president is speaking mistruths. Yes, the president is lying." However, he went on to explain, the president was "an intentional liar" who uses "a methodology of mistruth" with the aim of unsettling the mainstream media and the political left and galvanizing his base.[79] Apparently lying is acceptable if it helps the president politically.

Trump seems to agree and even brags about prevaricating. In a meeting with campaign donors in Missouri, the president admitted to intentionally lying to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The president inaccurately claimed that the US had a large trade deficit with Canada. When Trudeau disagreed, Trump said, "Wrong, Justin, you do." Later, in recounting his meeting to the donors, he added, "I didn't even know. . . . I had no idea. I just said, 'You're wrong'."[80] Despite acknowledging that he "had no idea" about the trade balance, he asserted his claim anyway—and to a head of state of America's close ally and largest trading partner— demonstrating his disdain for objective reality and telling the truth.

Whether the president's frequent falsehoods are the result of his general ignorance of public policy, a desire to make himself look good, sloppiness in doing reality checks on his thoughts, or a well-developed cynicism, it did not take long for the public to conclude that he was untrustworthy. After only three months in office, 59 percent of the public felt his administration regularly made false claims. Only 35 percent did not.[81] In September 2018, only 34 percent of the public thought he was trustworthy.[82] By December 2018, 71 percent of the public thought the president regularly made misleading claims. Forty-nine percent thought these claims were "flat-out" false while 22 percent saw them as exaggerations. Seventy-one percent of the public thought it was never acceptable for a president to say things that are false.[83] In the unkindest cut of all for Trump, in December 2018, 59 percent of registered voters had little or no trust in Trump's denial of collusion with Russia in the 2016 presidential election.[84] In March 2019, only 30 percent of the public thought he was honest. Sixty-five percent believed he was not,[85] and 61 percent of the public said the president was not trustworthy. Remarkably, even a quarter of Republicans and Republican leaners would not describe Trump as trustworthy.[86]

The public's evaluations of Trump's truthfulness are a fragile foundation for gaining its support. The president was convinced that his base would believe whatever he told them, and he may have been right. Yet for everyone else, he risked losing credibility. Why would you follow someone you cannot believe?

Distorting the Public's Knowledge

Donald Trump is the most important source of misinformation in the country. His 58 million followers on Twitter and the audiences at his rallies and for his variety of television appearances receive a constant stream of misrepresentations about government, politics, and policy in the U.S. He is not alone in spreading misinformation, of course, but he has the biggest platform, and thus the widest audience, for his rhetoric.

Given the trends in public discourse to which the president is a major contributor, it is not surprising that people—even those generally well informed about politics[87]—are frequently misinformed about policy, and the less they know, the more confidence they have in their beliefs. Thus, they resist correct information. Even when others present them with factual information, they resist changing their opinions.[88]

The increasing array of media choices means that individuals are less likely to encounter information that would correct misperceptions. Moreover, the internet and social media exacerbate the speed at which misinformation diffuses throughout society and this magnifying its negative effects. In addition, in a polarized world people are more likely to accept disinformation as true if it matches their political views. Even stories that are clearly pranks may be believed by willing readers and go viral.[89]

Three scholars at MIT investigated the diffusion of approximately 126,000 verified true and false news stories tweeted by about 3 million people from 2006 to 2017. People were 70 percent more likely to retweet untrue stories than true stories. In essence, falsehoods diffused "significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly" than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information. One reason for the differential diffusion may be that false news was more novel than true news and people may be more likely to share novel information.[90]

Once misinformation is initially encoded in a person's mind, i.e., once it is stored in one's memory and available for later retrieval, it is difficult to change. Research in psychology demonstrates that widespread myths and rumors that originate at the societal level, such as supposed links between vaccines and autism, are often reinforced at the individual level because of cognitive factors. Once such misinformation is accepted, retractions are often ineffective in changing people's minds and may even reinforce the initial errors. Even if people initially accept corrections debunking a false statement, they may eventually misremember false statements as true. [91] Similarly, negations often reinforce the perception they are intended to counter.[92]

Trump is a master at using repetition to reinforce his falsehoods—in tweets, at rallies, and in statements to the press. He has made his false claims about taxes, immigrants, trade, and other important matters dozens or even hundreds of times. Researchers have found that repetition of false information increases the likelihood that recipients accept the information, even if there are warnings of the credibility of the source of the information.[93] The impact of repetition of false statements confirms the common observation that "if people are told something often enough, they'll believe it."[94]

Partisanship and ideology enhance these psychological effects. Even real-time corrections do not have a significant effect on those predisposed to believe the false information.[95] For instance, in 2011, 94 percent of the public had heard that Obama was not born in the United States and did not have a valid birth certificate, and 24 percent, mostly Republicans, agreed or strongly agreed with the misinformation.[96] In July 2012, only 49 percent of respondents correctly thought Obama was a Christian. Among Republicans, the percentage of respondents who incorrectly thought Obama was a Muslim nearly doubled in his first term, increasing from 16 percent in October 2008 to 30 percent in July 2012.[97]

Even strong retractions of encoded misinformation can be ineffective in reversing even weak initial encoding, and incorrect information may continue to affect perceptions, even if individuals recall corrections of misinformation.[98] The Iraq Survey Group concluded that Iraq had destroyed its weapons of mass destruction years before the U.S. invasion in 2003. President George W. Bush and other leading administration officials acknowledged the absence of such weapons. Nevertheless, in December 2014, 42 percent of the public thought that American forces found active weapons of mass destruction. Another 10 percent could not say.[99] These faulty conclusions increased from six years earlier, when 37 percent of the public thought Iraq had the weapons and 9 percent could not say.[100]

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to isolate the influence of Trump's rhetoric on specific aspects of public knowledge. Although he clearly has the loudest megaphone, there are many commentators, including many who amplify his communications. He is not the only person advocating restrictions on immigration, higher tariffs, or healthcare plans.

Some of the president's early exaggerations provide a sense of how he may have distorted public knowledge, however. His talk of an historic electoral victory in 2016 and of millions of illegal voters seems to have influenced some people. Nearly nine months after the 2016 presidential election, 28 percent of all voters and 49 percent of Trump voters believed that he won the popular vote, although he lost it by nearly 3 million votes.[101] In early 2017, nearly 30 percent of registered voters thought that 3-5 million people voted illegally in the presidential election.[102]

There is room for hope, however. Table 6 lists 11 prominent Trump falsehoods. The most widely believed, that military spending is at an all-time high, has only 36 percent of the public sharing the president's view. Interestingly, there were high levels of *disbelief* of Trump's falsehoods regarding central aspects of his presidency, including global warming, immigration, and the role of Russia and fraudulent voting in the 2016 presidential election.

Insert Table 6 here

Nevertheless, the president's falsehoods had impact. More people believed the president than believed elsewise on North Korea, NATO funding, and military spending. Perhaps they paid less attention to national security issues. In addition, for many of the issues, large percentages of the public simply did not know what to believe. On only three of the 11 issues (global warming, the border wall, and Russia's intervention in the 2016 election) did majorities of the public know the correct answer. It is difficult not to believe that the president's prevaricating confused substantial percentages of the public, undermining their ability to assess policy alternatives.

Those most likely to believe the president's falsehoods were those who reported relying on Fox News as one of their main sources of news. Fox News viewers are also highly likely to be Republicans, a majority of whom identified Fox News as one of their two top political news sources.[103]

There is also a warning sign of growing toleration of prevarication. Although 70 percent of Democrats and 66 percent of Independents said it was "extremely important" for presidential candidates to be honest, that view was held by only 49 percent of Republicans.[104]

Corroding Political Discourse

Trump's reliance on falsehoods and his refusal to admit the truth of widely accepted facts corrodes political discourse. Without a common set of facts, and with a blurring of the line between opinion and fact, it becomes nearly impossible to have a meaningful debate about important policies and topics. Immigration is a good example. Decisions regarding securing the borders, addressing the rights and future of undocumented immigrants, determining the need for immigrant workers, and balancing the needs and rights of U.S. citizens and legal residents with those of refugees who seek safety in the United States and of people seeking a better future for their families are important questions and deserve informed deliberation. Such discussion is unlikely to occur if there is no agreement on basic facts.

A key premise of democratic governing is that there is some fundamental reality or commonly accepted set of facts that provide the basis for deliberation and choices about governance. James Pfiffner puts it well when he points out that Trump's falsehoods challenge

> the fundamental principles of the Enlightenment, which are premised on the belief that there are objective facts which are discoverable through investigation, empirical evidence, rationality, and the scientific method. From these premises, it follows that political discourse involves making logical arguments and adducing evidence in support of those arguments, rather than asserting one's own self-serving version of reality.[105]

The corrosion of public discourse can be an important factor increasing polarization. As each side develops its own "facts," the opposing sides are likely to move further apart in their beliefs about key issues and even in their perceptions of each other. There is also a decreasing willingness to listen to those with policy expertise. For example, Republicans now think scientists' judgments are as subject to bias as anyone else's judgments.[106]

Undermining Democratic Accountability

Donald Trump's false statements about politics and policy strike at the very heart of democratic accountability. If there are no agreed upon facts, then it becomes impossible for people to make judgments about their government or hold it accountable. In *On Tyranny*, Timothy Snyder argues that, "To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so."[107]

Trump is by no means an autocrat, but his public discourse shares some troubling features with the practices of many authoritarian leaders. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt observed, "Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their

propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of a man who can fabricate it."[108]

If people are to hold government accountable, and thus make democracy effective, they must have a reasonable idea of the impact of the president on governing and the consequences of the presidents' policies. Attaining such an understanding is difficult under the best of circumstances because of the complexity of both policies and their effects.

Often presidents exaggerate their accomplishments or take credit for developments for which they typically bear only modest responsibility, such as a strong economy. Donald Trump is no exception. It is not surprising that he overstated his success with Congress, the size of the 2017 tax cuts and the 2018 defense budget, relative performance of the economy, the number of times he has appeared on the cover of *Time*, the relative size of his electoral college victory, and even the size of the crowd at his inauguration.

Hyperbole is one thing. Grossly misrepresenting reality is something else. If chief executives badly distort depictions of their successes, they increase the information burdens on voters and undermine democratic accountability. On many policies, including the denuclearization of North Korea, an increase in the funds allies contributed to NATO, the building of a wall on the border with Mexico, the handling of disaster relief in Puerto Rico, and the opening of new steel plants in response to his tariff decisions, the president has claimed great success that simply did not occur.

There are plenty of voices pointing out any president's distortions and untruths. However, many, perhaps most, people will never hear them. Information contradicting the president has a difficult time breaking through the psychological barriers of partisanship and motivated reasoning**.** Moreover, selective exposure to an ever more fragmented and insulated media, further less the chances of people confronting information that does not reinforce their dispositions.[109]

Stoking Division

One of the least attractive aspects of President Trump's rhetoric is his stoking cultural divisions and racial tensions and cultivating tribalism. He has likened some Hispanic immigrants to "vermin" who would "infest" America. The president referred to some African nations as "shithole countries." He posited that "both sides" were to blame for the 2017 deadly white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, forwarded tweets from white supremacists, and accused black football players who kneeled during the playing of the national anthem to protest police discrimination of being un-American. Trump also embraced the birther myth long after it was debunked and claimed massive voter fraud by African Americans and Mexican Americans. He called for a ban on all Muslim immigrants, and declared that an American-born judge of Mexican heritage could not be fair to him because of his ethnic background. Midway through his third year in office, the president was still at it. Following his us-against-them political strategy, in a July 14 Twitter harangue he advised four Democratic congresswomen of color to "go back" to the country from which they came, even though three of them were born in the United States.

Sometimes Trump insisted that his critical comments about immigrants referred only to terrorists or members of violent gangs. Whatever his true thoughts and intentions, the president has echoed the words and images of the white nationalist movement to dehumanize immigrants and inflame racial tensions. Trump's descriptions of those trying to enter the country illegally have been so sharp that critics say they dehumanize people and lump together millions of migrants with the small minority that are violent. There is little doubt that the president directly targeted white racial and ethnic fears and reinforced deep social divisions in America.

Before Trump, racial and ethnic differences were potent drivers of political division.[110] Under Trump, their impact has only strengthened. During the campaign and throughout his presidency, he reinforced and exacerbated these cleavages by making explicit appeals to racial resentment and white identity.[111] This rhetoric was so clear that more than half of Americans consistently replied that the term "racist" described him during the 2016 campaign.[112]

Throughout his tenure as president, majorities of the public continued to describe him with the same term.[113] In 2018, 58 percent of voters, including 91 percent of Democrats and 58 percent of Independents—but only 17 percent of Republicans—thought his derogatory comments about immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean were racist.[114] Similarly, substantial percentages of the public felt his immigration policies were motivated by racism,[115] and majorities thought his "go back" language was racist and inappropriate.[116] A Fox News poll in July 2019 found that 57 percent of the public concluded that the president did not respect racial minorities.[117]

Attitudes about racial and ethnic groups helped fuel Trump's capture of the Republican nomination. He performed best among Republicans who held unfavorable views of African Americans, Muslims, immigrants, and minority groups in general. Perceptions that whites were treated unfairly in the United States, and that the country's growing diversity was a bad thing, were also significantly associated with support for Trump in the primaries.[118]

In the general election, the effects of racial attitudes were greater than their historically strong impact on Obama's two presidential elections. Perceptions that whites were being treated unfairly relative to minorities were an unusually strong predictor of support for Trump. There is now a stronger partisan divide than ever between racially sympathetic and racially resentful whites.[119]

Equally important, there is evidence that the president's rhetoric has ushered in a climate that favors expression of prejudices[120] (substantial percentages of the public feel this way),[121] and perhaps encouraged white Americans more likely to hold prejudicial views.[122] (The findings on this matter are mixed.[123]) A majority of the public thinks Trump has made race relations worse and that it has become more common for people to express racist or racially insensitive views.[124] The F.B.I. reported that hate crimes jumped 17 percent in 2017,[125] and there was a 226 percent increase in hate crimes in counties in which the president held rallies in 2016.[126] Many people also have distorted views of the extent of demographic changes. For example, when asked to estimate the percent of the U.S. population composed of Muslims, they responded with an average answer of 17 percent. The correct percentage was one percent.[127]

Tending to the Base

The president also stokes division with his open tending to his base. All presidents like to appear before cheering crowds of supporters, and they make policy choices consistent with their base's broad partisan and ideological orientations. Nevertheless, most presidents make at least an effort to be governing on behalf of all Americans. Emphasizing their desire to bridge differences, George W. Bush declared he was "uniter, not a divider," and Barack Obama proclaimed "There is not a liberal America and a conservative America; There's the United States of America."

Donald Trump is different. He typically pays no rhetorical deference to the notion of the presidency as a national unifier. Instead, he is often explicit in acting to please his base. His narcissism may encourage the president to retreat to people who venerate him, but he has pragmatic motivations as well.

During his first year in office, Trump traveled far less frequently in pursuit of his agenda than his immediate predecessors. "When Trump did leave Washington, he was far more likely to visit Trump-friendly states in campaign-style rallies than to try to broaden his coalition's reach." He held nine "Make America Great Again" rallies, the first less than a month into his first term. Instead of traveling to competitive states to try to increase his support, however, Trump largely rallied in states that he won in 2016. His visits into blue states were largely visits to federal institutions — such as the CIA in Virginia or the Secret Service training facility in Maryland — or visits to his nearby homes, as in New York and New Jersey.[128]

In his second year, the president also traveled less than his immediate predecessors. Of his 97 total trips (excluding vacations and fundraisers), about half were for campaigning to rally his base, to support congressional Republicans before the midterm elections, or both. What's more, on 90 percent of these campaign trips, he visited red states.[129] Although Trump campaigned actively in the 2018 midterm elections, he focused heavily on more rural areas in which he was popular and won in 2016. He mostly avoided suburban areas where he was less popular and ran the risk of energizing Democrats or hurting Republican candidates who have tried to distance themselves from him.[130] He campaigned in only three states he did not win in 2016.

One analysis found that Trump traveled nearly five times as often to states he won in 2016 as to those that supported Hillary Clinton. He gave several times more interviews to Fox News than to all the other major networks combined. His social media advertising was aimed disproportionately at older Americans who were the superstructure of his victory in the electoral college in 2016.[131] According to Republican pollster Whit Ayres, "Donald Trump got elected with minority support from the American electorate, and most of his efforts thus far are focused on energizing and solidifying the 40 percent of Americans who were with him, primarily by attacking the 60 percent who were not. That is great for his supporters, but it makes it very difficult to accomplish anything in a democracy."[132]

Most president seek to expand their coalitions. Although they rarely move public opinion very far, all of Trump's predecessors have enjoyed the support of a majority of the public at some points in their tenures. Trump is different. As we have seen, he won election as the least popular major party candidate in modern history. He has never enjoyed the approval of a

majority of the public. Thus, he concluded that he would never persuade most of the public to support either him or his policies. His solution was to fire up his base, mobilizing them to pressure Republican members of Congress and support Republicans at the polls. "This president seems to be operating on 'how do I make my smaller supporters more intensified' as opposed to 'how do I get more supporters?'" said Matthew Dowd, a former top political adviser to George W. Bush. "He's using the power of the presidency, instead of trying to overcome division, he is trying to harden the division."[133]

Trump has catered assiduously to the coalition that elected him. Traditional small government economic conservatives received deregulation and lower taxes, weakened environmental protection, and attacks on the Affordable Care Act. Religious conservatives were happy with his nominations to the Supreme Court, his opposition to abortion, and his transfer of the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. The white working class, especially males, seemed to enjoy Trump's pugnacious style, disdain for conventional norms of civility and respect for the rule of law, hostility to the mainstream news media, racist and misogynistic appeals, anti-immigrant policies, and resistance to free trade.

The most memorable promise Donald Trump made while campaigning for president was to build a wall along the U.S. border with Mexico. The simplicity of the concept—an idea that could be expressed in a single word—made it a powerful sales pitch on the campaign trail. By 2019, he had spent four years — first as a candidate and then as president — whipping his core supporters into a frenzy over the idea of building a wall. Yet in transforming the wall into a powerful symbol of his anti-immigration message, Trump made the proposal politically untouchable for Democrats, even though such leading Democrats as Senators Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, and Chuck Schumer voted for the Secure Fence Act in 2006, which provided for hundreds of miles of fencing along the border.

Thus, the president's discourse helped to undermine the context necessary for negotiation. When political leaders take their cases directly to the public, they have to accommodate the limited attention spans of the public and the availability of space on twitter and television. As a result, the president (and his opponents) often reduced choices to stark black and white terms. When leaders frame issues in such terms, they typically frustrate rather than facilitate building coalitions. Such positions are difficult to compromise, which hardens negotiating positions.

Trump's base was loyal, but he became its captive. At various points, the president seemed to agree to a bargain with the Democrats on immigration policy. In each case, prominent commentators representing his base ridiculed him in the most disparaging terms. In late 2018, when it appeared as though he would forgo funding for a wall on the Mexican border in order to keep the government funded, Rush Limbaugh criticized the deal as "Trump gets nothing and the Democrats get everything." Another conservative firebrand, Ann Coulter, published a column titled "Gutless President in Wall-less Country." The president's rhetoric had painted him into a corner.

In response, Trump immediately recanted, ending negotiations and, in December 2018, prompted a shutdown of the government. Instead of moving toward the political center after

sweeping Democratic gains in the House in the midterm elections, then, the president focused on reassuring his most ardent supporters of his commitment to his signature pledge to build a wall on the Mexican border, declaring that he would be "proud to shut down the government for border security." He no doubt galvanized his base, but doing so made it difficult to appeal to the rest of the country.

Only 28 percent of the public saw a wall on the Mexican border as an immediate top priority, and 50 percent said it was not a priority at all. Similarly, 57 percent thought Trump should compromise to prevent gridlock. However only 29 percent of Republicans felt this way.[134] In general, 62 percent of Americans opposed shutting down the government over funding for a border wall, but 59 percent of Republicans disagreed and supported the shutdown. In addition, the public was more likely to blame Trump and Republicans in Congress than congressional Democrats for the shutdown.[135] Nevertheless, the president saw no choice but to shut down the government.

On January 19, 2019, during the shutdown, the president made a national address in which he tried to reach beyond his base of supporters and speak to a broader swath of Americans. He offered temporary protections for about one million immigrants at risk of deportation in exchange for funding for a wall. Yet in seeking to inch toward the center, Trump alienated portions of his hard-right base while not offering Democrats enough for a compromise. In the end, he had to agree to reopen the government and then declared a controversial emergency to obtain the funds he sought, further alienating a majority of the public.

Appearing too partisan or too narrowly focused on the views of a minority of the public can be disadvantageous in other ways. The president approached governing as zero-sum tribal warfare, deepening the threats people felt from each other and hoped these perceptions would strengthen his supporters' loyalty to him. At the same time, his actions exacerbated the anger and bitterness in American politics. When presidents aggressively promote their policies and themselves, they invite opponents to challenge them.[136] The effect is to trigger motivated reasoning and thus activate existing attitudes and partisan beliefs among the opposition, which in Trump's case helped to produce and reinforce sharp partisan differences in support for his policies. Another result was the most polarized job approval ratings in history.[137] He had strong support from Republicans, little support from Independents, and almost no support from Democrats.

Another problem is straightforward. The president's base was too small for winning the House and perhaps for winning reelection himself. There are more Democrats than Republicans (although the concentration of Republicans in rural states give them an advantage in Senate elections). Even Democrats' tendency toward lower turnout did not hurt them in the 2018 midterm elections. Moreover, they won Independent voters by a 12-point margin and voters who voted for a third party candidate in 2016 by 13 percentage points.[138]

Challenging the Rule of Law

At the core of every democracy is a commitment to the rule of law, the principle whereby "all members of a society (including those in government) are equally subject to publicly disclosed legal codes and processes."[139] Donald Trump has been at war with the rule of law

throughout his presidency. Court decisions overturning many of his administrative efforts involving immigration, environmental protection, and other matters, the FBI and Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation of the president's 2016 campaign's possible collusion with Russia, and the failure of Attorney General Jeff Sessions to protect him from investigation and to prosecute Trump's political enemies have evoked a torrent of criticism from the White House aimed at demeaning the individuals involved and undermining the legitimacy of their work and decisions. He denounced the criminal justice system as a "joke" and a "laughing stock," demanded that a suspect in a terrorist attack be executed, and called a court-martial decision "a complete and total disgrace."

Not a week passed since the president's inauguration without his connection to Russia making front-page news. He complained bitterly and frequently about the investigation of possible collusion between his campaign and Russia in 2016.[140] Some observers thought the president had gone even further and been guilty of obstruction of justice and witness tampering. The investigation turned up violations of the law by Trump's one-time campaign manager, advisers, and one of his lawyers. Sometimes, it distracted him from doing his job.[141]

On May 16, 2017, Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein appointed former FBI director Robert Mueller as special counsel to head an investigation of possible ties between Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and the Russian government. The president began complaining immediately. On May 19, he termed the investigation—which had yet to do anything— "the greatest witch hunt in American history." On June 15, the president sent several tweets criticizing the investigation, including "You are witnessing the single greatest WITCH HUNT in American political history—led by some very bad and conflicted people!"

This criticism continued unabated through the remainder of the investigation. For example, on April 26, 2018, Trump called into Fox News Channel's *Fox and Friends* for a long, and at times furious, interview. In it, the president reiterated several of his primary themes regarding the Mueller investigation.

> They have this witch hunt going on, with people in the Justice Department that shouldn't be there, they have a witch hunt against the president of the United States.
> The people that are doing the investigation, you have 13 people that are Democrats, you have Hillary Clinton people, you have people who worked on Hillary Clinton's foundation.

> Similarly, on August 20, 2018, the president tweeted that "Bob Mueller and his whole group of Angry Democrat Thugs" was a "National Disgrace!" Trump and his lawyer Rudolph Giuliani repeatedly disparaged Mueller and his team on social media and in television interviews, accusing the lawyers of bias and conflicts of interest and claiming that they were trying to frame the president. There is little doubt that the whole effort was aimed at delegitimizing the investigation.

Related to the White House raising questions about the whole Mueller investigation was its fostering skepticism about the institutions supporting it, principally the FBI and the Department of Justice. The president routinely disparaged the leaders of both organization as

well as what he viewed as the biases of the FBI agents directly involved with the investigation. He questioned their integrity and mercilessly mocked Jeff Sessions, his own attorney general.

In addition, constant conflicts with the courts have characterized the Trump presidency. Judges have struck down or delayed his travel bans, his barring of transgender troops in the military, his cutting funds for sanctuary cities, his ending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, his approving of the Keystone SL oil pipeline, his holding migrant families in long-term detention, and his plans for blanket detention of asylum seekers and refusal to accept asylum claims from migrants who entered the United States illegally.

Trump, as is his wont, has responded pugnaciously, venting his frustration with complaints about the judges making decisions he did not like. As early as February 5, 2017, the president tweeted "Just cannot believe a judge would put our country in such peril. If something happens blame him and the court system." Six days later, he declared, "Our legal system is broken!" A year and a half later, on November 22, 2018—Thanksgiving Day, he declared the Ninth Circuit of Appeals to be "a complete & total disaster," prone to making political decisions, and threatened to break it up.

In March 201, at his confirmation hearings, Neil Gorsuch, the president's first nominee to the Supreme Court, called Trump's attacks on federal judges "disheartening" and "demoralizing."[142] The next year the president's criticism prompted Chief Justice John G. Roberts, Jr. to direct a rare and pointed shot at him. "We do not have Obama judges or Trump judges, Bush judges or Clinton judges," Roberts declared. "What we have is an extraordinary group of dedicated judges doing their level best to do equal right to those appearing before them." Roberts added, "That independent judiciary is something we should all be thankful for."[143]

The Trump administration has also flouted the rule of law and run into pushback from the courts in its efforts at deregulation. From his first days in office, Trump's appointees have directed federal agencies to draft regulations meant to delay or reverse policies of the Obama administration. Courts have overturned or stayed most of these regulations, generally for violating the Administrative Procedure Act. One study found that by the beginning of 2019, there were challenges to 30 major regulations, and the courts had found for the challengers 28 times.[144]

In his Farewell Address in 1796, George Washington warned of the "insidious wiles of foreign influence" because "foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government." Similarly, in *Federalist 68* Alexander Hamilton cautioned about "the desire in foreign powers to gain an improper ascendant in our councils." Donald Trump took another view, however, and declared he would accept help from a foreign government in an election.[145] He added that his own FBI director, Christopher A. Wray, was "wrong" when he said during congressional testimony that campaign aides should always report offers of assistance from foreign entities to the bureau.[146] (Later, he backtracked on this point after facing widespread criticism.)[147]

Laws prohibit foreign contributions to American political campaigns, although it is not clear whether information, rather than money, falls under the legal exclusion. What is less ambiguous is that the president's willingness to accept help from a foreign government upended the norm of American politics that such outside assistance is inappropriate. Moreover, not reporting offers of information could harm national security by depriving law enforcement agencies of tips about foreign interference in U.S. affairs.

In June 2019, the Office of Special Counsel recommended that the president White House counselor Kellyanne Conway for repeated violations of the Hatch Act, which bars federal employees from engaging in political activity in the course of their work. The president simply ignored the law and told Fox News, "it looks to me like they're trying to take away her right to free speech."[148]

Most presidents face negative court decisions, and many suffer through investigations of themselves or their administrations, but no modern chief executive has so openly flouted the norm of upholding the rule of law or been so active in questioning the legitimacy of judicial and executive officials. Has Donald Trump's harsh rhetoric weakened trust in American legal institutions and the public's allegiance to the rule of law?

On one level, it has not. In 2016, 70 percent of the public said it was important to respect the rules, even if it was more difficult to get things done. Two years later, in February 2018, that number had risen to 79 percent, including 79 percent of Democrats and those leaning Democratic and 82 percent of Republicans and those leaning Republican.[149]

However, historian Jon Meacham argues that "The effect on the life of the nation of a president inventing conspiracy theories in order to distract attention from legitimate investigations or other things he dislikes is corrosive." "The diabolical brilliance of the Trump strategy of disinformation is that many people are simply going to hear the charges and countercharges, and decide that there must be something to them because the president of the United States is saying them."[150] Some research supports Meacham's conclusion. Authority figures can have a strong effect on social norms by creating a false impression that a social consensus exists in support of behavior such as expressing prejudice or evading the law.[151]

Mueller Investigation

Of all the legal irritants to Trump, the one evoking the most frequent and bitter criticism from the White House has been the Mueller investigation. Polling organizations did not start asking questions about the investigation until the fall of 2017. In general, approval of the investigation declined starting in mid-December 2017 (Table 7). Once that decline occurred, however, opinion stabilized throughout the remainder of the period. Moreover, at no time did a plurality of the public disapprove of the investigation. Interestingly, the highest approval ratings are found in the Fox News polls (June and August 2018) that only questioned registered voters.

Insert Table 7 here

At the core of Trump's criticism of the Mueller investigation was the assertion that it was unfair, a witch-hunt run by partisan Democrats. Most people disagreed (Table 8). Typically, a majority, and always a substantial plurality, of the public thought the investigation was fair.[152]

Insert Table 8 here

Two polling organizations asked the question about the fairness of the Mueller investigation a little differently, focusing on the confidence people had in the fairness. The results show that most people were confident, with little change over time until Mueller announced the results, at which point confidence increased (Table 9).[153]

Insert Table 9 here

What about Republicans—and Trump's leadership of them? From the beginning, approval of Mueller's appointment evoked a partisan response (Table 10). Within two weeks of the announcement of the probe, only 63 percent approved of Mueller's appointment, and after a month, that approval dropped to 49 percent. Lacking long-term views of the issue, it is entirely likely that Republicans in the public turned to the president for guidance on the appropriate view of the investigation.

Insert Table 10 here

Similarly, there were large differences between partisans in views of the fairness of the investigation (Table 11) and confidence in that fairness (Table 12). Large majorities of Democrats viewed it as fair, as did majorities of Independents. Republicans, however, saw it quite differently. Only small percentages viewed it as impartial until the Mueller report was made public in mid-April 2019. Again, the signals from the White House and many other Republican officials very likely influenced Republicans' views.[154] The increasing skepticism of Republicans after mid-March 2018 may be in response to Trump mentioning Mueller by name in a tweet for the first time on March 17. After mid-April, however, when the report did not find evidence that the Trump campaign colluded with the Russians, Republicans dramatically switched their opinions of the fairness of the investigation and became much more positive.

Insert Tables 11 and 12 here

Partisan differences were even starker when people were asked about the legitimacy of the investigation (Table 13). Democrats overwhelmingly thought it was legitimate, as did a majority of Independents. Very few Republicans agreed, however.

Insert Table 13 here

It is possible that the president was able to create some skepticism among the public about the Mueller investigation, but he could not convince it of the correctness of his opposition to it. Despite Trump's torrent of tweets, statements to the press, and declarations at rallies, the public did not approve of Trump's response to the investigation (Table 14). Opinion was remarkably stable, and it appears that only his Republican base—less than a third of the public—approved of his handling the issue.[155] In January 2019, 60 percent of the public were not confident Trump was handling the investigation appropriately.[156] When asked in February 2019 whose version of the facts they were most inclined to accept, Trump's or Mueller's, only 32 percent chose Trump. Fifty-six percent were more inclined to believe Mueller.[157] After the

results of the investigation were announced, 45 percent of registered voters said they had more trust in Mueller to tell the truth; only 27 percent had more trust in Trump.[158]

Insert Table 14 here

By late-August 2018, 63 percent of Americans supported Mueller's investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 election, with 52 percent saying they supported it strongly; 29 percent opposed the probe. Unsurprisingly, opinions on Mueller's work broke on partisan lines, with 61 percent of Republicans opposing the probe but an even larger 85 percent of Democrats expressing support. A two-thirds majority of Independents backed the investigation.[159]

The public did not change its distrust of Trump after the Mueller report was made public. Most people concluded that the president had committed crimes before he became president, and 46 percent thought he had committed crimes while in the White House.[160] Majorities or pluralities concluded that Trump had attempted to obstruct the Mueller investigation, and majorities did not think the special counsel's report exonerated Trump of all wrongdoing.[161] Moreover, they were nearly twice as likely to believe Mueller than Trump on the question of exoneration.[162] A majority thought the president had lied to the public about matters under investigation.[163] Equally important, a majority remained concerned about the mount of contact between Trump's associates and Russians during the 2016 presidential campaign, and nearly half thought the president had committed serious wrongdoing.[164]

FBI and Department of Justice

Donald Trump's relationship with the FBI was tumultuous. He fired FBI Director James Comey on May 9, 2017, and two days later told NBC News that "this Russia thing" factored into his decision. Ever since, he has done his best to belittle and delegitimize the FBI's role in the Mueller investigation. Did the public follow the president's lead?

When asked whether they had a favorable opinion of the FBI, people generally responded in the affirmative (Table 15). Similarly, they were much more like to express positive than negative views of the organization (Table 16). Although there is some variability in the figures in both tables, support for the FBI was resilient and favorable. There is no clear increase in unfavorable opinions over Trump's presidency. There is more variability in the "favorable" ratings. This fluctuation seems to be a product of the question prompting a "have not heard enough" response. Nevertheless, favorable and positive views of the FBI were not overwhelming, reflecting the long-term decline in approval of institutions in the U.S. In April 2019, Gallup found that although 57 percent of the public felt the FBI was doing a good or excellent job, 41 percent rated its performance as only fair or poor.[165]

Insert Tables 15 and 16 here

We see the same patterns on the issue of confidence in the FBI (Table 17). Most people expressed confidence in the organization, but many did not. Our data is only from 2018, so we lack a trend throughout Trump's tenure. However, the figures in Table18 show that confidence of Republicans and Trump supporters fell steadily over the first three polls and then rebounded substantially for Republicans in October (the support of Trump supporters is not available).

Insert Tables 17 and 18 here

Gallup found the percentage of the public (58 percent) rating the job the FBI was doing as excellent or good in December 2017 was the same as in in November 2014—except that opinion was weighted more heavily on the "excellent" side in 2017. This stability in overall opinion masked significant shifts among partisan groups. Only 49 percent of Republicans said the FBI was doing an excellent or good job, down 13 percentage points from 62 percent in 2014. By contrast, Democrats' assessments of the job the FBI does were up nine percentage points, with 69 percent saying the FBI was doing a good or excellent job.[166] The Pew Research Center found a similar decline in Republicans' evaluation of the agency, from 71 percent favorable in January 2017 to 49 percent favorable in July 2018. Democratic opinions were little changed.[167]

When asked whether the FBI was biased against the president, most people responded "no" (Table 19), but a third of the country found the nation's premier law enforcement agency acting in a biased manner against the president. As Table 20 shows, most Republicans, and two-thirds of Trump supporters, saw the FBI as biased.

Insert Tables 19 and 20 here

In February 2018, pollsters asked the public who they were more likely to believe if President Trump and the FBI disagreed. Sixty-six percent of the public choose the latter. Only 24 percent said they would believe the president.[168] In July 2018, NPR/*PBS NewsHour* asked "With regard to the concern that Russia meddled in the 2016 US election, are you more likely to believe? US intelligence agencies such as the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) and the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) who say there was Russian interference, or Russian President (Vladimir) Putin who President Donald Trump says strongly denies his government was involved." Seventy-two percent of the public said they would believe US intelligence agencies such as the CIA and FBI, while only 15 percent would believe Putin and, by implication, Trump.[169]

The president was also unsparing in his criticism of the Department of Justice, even making public and humiliating criticisms of his attorney general, Jeffrey Sessions. Trump was especially angry with Sessions recusing himself from overseeing the investigation of Russian activity in the 2016 election and not overseeing the Mueller investigation. Nevertheless, when asked in August 2018 whether they took Trump's side or Session's, the attorney general won 62 percent to 23 percent. Similarly, 65 percent of the public thought Trump should not fire Sessions. Only 19 percent thought he should.[170]

We have much less information about views of the Department of Justice than we do about other components of the Mueller investigation. What we do know is that the public maintained its favorable view of the department (Table 21). Over the January 2017 to July 2018 period, Republicans increased their favorability from 47 to 60 percent while Democrats decreased theirs from 74 to 57 percent. Ironically, after more than a year of the president's critical rhetoric, identifiers with the two parties ended up at the same place.

Insert Table 21 here

Courts

President Trump yearned for a more supportive judiciary and made it a priority to nominate conservative judges and justices. He was much more concerned with loosening

constraints on his actions than with populating the federal bench with dispassionate, highly qualified jurists, occasionally nominating judges that even his own party was loath to support.

Most Americans seemed to agree about the importance of an independent judiciary, however. In February 2017, 97 percent of the public thought a fair judicial system and the rule of law was important to the United States' identity as a nation.[171] In March, only 22 percent thought it would be good for a strong leader to be able to make decisions without interference from the legislature or courts.[172] Thus, the public approved of the courts blocking Trump's executive order creating travel bans.[173] In June 2017, only 22 percent favored giving the president more power at the expense of Congress and the courts.[174]

Table 22 provides additional insights into the public's views of congressional and judicial checks on presidential power over time and Trump's possible impact on them. Between August 2016 and March 2018, there was very little change in the view that it was too risky to reduce the constraints of the other branches on the president. Indeed, there is evidence of the public pushing back against the president. In September 2018, only 37 percent of the public thought "respect the rule of law" applied to Trump.[175]

Insert Table 22 here

Not all poll findings are so supportive of the courts, however. In June 2017, only 34 percent of the public felt judges were fair and impartial, while 64 percent said they were more likely to try to shape the law to fit their own ideologies.[176] In January 2018, only 51 percent of the public responded that they had confidence in the courts, with 45 percent replying that they did not. However, among registered voters there was little variation among party groups (Republicans had the most confidence), although Trump supporters were slightly less likely to express confidence than were any of the party groups.[177] In March and June 2018, at least 60 percent of the public said they trusted the courts (Table 23). Nevertheless, 37 percent of the public said they did not. In the June poll, 67 percent of Democrats, 58 percent of Republicans, and 55 percent of Independents trusted the courts. Only 49 percent of Trump supporters did, however.[178]

Insert Table 23 here

Donald Trump did not convince most people that the Mueller investigation was a politically-motivated witch-hunt, that the FBI was biased against him, and that the Department of Justice and the courts were not to be trusted. Yet a substantial percentage of the public did not express positive views about these core institutions in the administration of justice. Republicans were especially critical. Even more so were the overlapping set of Trump supporters. These citizens may have responded as they did even without the vituperative rhetoric of the president, simply adopting views consistent with their political preferences. It is reasonable to conclude, however, that Trump's effort to lead opinion reinforced and probably strengthened these proclivities.

Conclusion

Two days before taking the oath as a new U.S. senator, Mitt Romney published an op-ed in which he argued, "A president should demonstrate the essential qualities of honesty and integrity, and elevate the national discourse with comity and mutual respect. . . . it is in this

province where the incumbent's shortfall has been most glaring."[179] The former Republican presidential candidate was correct. Donald Trump's public discourse has been characterized by making *ad hominem* attacks aimed at branding and delegitimizing critics and opponents, exaggerating threats or offering inappropriate reassurance, blurring the distinction between fact and fiction, stoking cultural divisions and racial and ethnic tensions, and challenging the rule of law. This rhetoric was both consistent with his pre-presidential expressions and a clear deviation from the norms of the presidency.

Rather than being an asset for the president, his public discourse has diminished his ability to govern. His rhetoric has not aided him in expanding his supportive coalition. Incivility has not proven useful in attracting those not predisposed to support him, and he has not been able to brand policies effectively. Nor has he convinced most people to distrust his critics, including the media, and he has not persuaded them with either his exaggerations or minimizing of threats. His prevaricating has not won him additional adherents. Instead, the public finds him untrustworthy and not someone to whom they should defer. His public discourse and his playing to his base has brought him low and highly polarized approval ratings. Most Americans considered his rhetoric to be divisive and polarizing.[180] In the end, Trump's rhetoric has made it even more difficult to govern effectively.

Equally important, there is reason to conclude that Trump's discourse has been deleterious for American democracy. His rhetoric has encouraged incivility in public discourse, accelerated the use of disinformation, legitimized the expression of prejudice and increasing the salience of cultural divisions and racial and ethnic tensions, and undermined democratic accountability. Although most people reject both the tone and substance of the president's rhetoric, many Republicans do not. Especially for his co-partisans, he has distorted the public's knowledge about politics and policy, warped their understanding of policy challenges, and chipped away at respect for the rule of law.

Table 1
Trust in Media

Date	% Trust Trump	% Trust Media	% No Opinion
2017			
February 16-21	37	52	10
March 2-6	37	53	10
May 4-9	31	57	12
May 17-23	34	53	13
August 9-15	37	55	9
August 17-22	36	54	10
October 5-10	37	52	11
November 7-13	34	54	12
2018			
April 20-24	37	53	10
June 14-17	36	53	11
July 18-23	34	54	12
September 6-9	30	54	16
November 14-19	34	54	12
2019			
April 26-29	35	52	13

Source: Quinnipiac University Poll

Question: "Who do you trust more to tell you the truth about important issues: President Donald Trump or the news media." Asked of registered voters.

Table 2
Trust in Favorite News Source

Date	% Favorite News Source	% Trump	% No Opinion
October 15-17, 2017	65	26	9
January 8-10, 2018	58	29	14
July 19-22, 2018	62	28	10

Source: Marist Poll for 2017; NPR/*PBS NewsHour* Poll for 2018.

Question: "Who do you trust more? Your favorite news source or Donald Trump?"

Table 3
Is Climate Change a Threat?

Date	% Major Threat	% Minor Threat	% Not a Threat	% No Opinion
January 4-9, 2017	52	32	14	2
February 16-March 15, 2017	56	26	16	2
October 25-30, 2017	59	24	15	1
May 15-June 15, 2018	59	23	16	2
July 10-15, 2019	57	23	18	2

Source: Pew Research Center Poll.

Question: "Do you think that global climate change is a major threat, a minor threat, or not a threat to the well-being of the United States?"

Table 4
Approval of Vladimir Putin

Date	% Approve/ Favorable	% Disapprove/ Unfavorable	% No Opinion/Neutral
2015			
February 8-11[7]	13	72	16
February 18-22[4]	12	70	18
October 15-18[1]	7	66	27
2016			
May 15-19[1]	8	59	33
August 5-8[2]	9	54	26
September 15-19[3]	10	52	37
September 16-19[1]	6	65	28
2017			
January 4-9[4]	16	69	13
January 5-9[5]	9	68	23
January 12-15[6]	12	71	16
January 12-15[1]	7	67	27
January 20-25[5]	9	70	21
February 1-5[7]	22	72	6
February 16-21[5]	7	72	21
February 17-21[8]	6	49	46
February 28-March 12[4]	15	77	8
June 7-11[7]	13	74	12
June 27-July 19[9]	18	79	3
July 8-12, 2017[2]	15	65	21
2018			
January 10-15[4]	16	68	16
March 8-11[8]	5	56	20
May 2-5[6]	11	77	12
June 14-17[6]	11	72	17
July 18-23[5]	6	72	21
July 15-18[1]	5	65	30
August 1-12[7]	13	76	11
August 5-8[2]	10	64	26
September 17-October 1[10]	10	80	10
2019			
April 14-16, 2019[11]	9	74	16

[1] NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* Poll. "I'd like you to rate your feelings toward each one as very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative, or very negative. Vladimir Putin." Asked of half the sample in September 2016 and January 2017.

[2] Bloomberg Poll. "For each, please tell me if your feelings are very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable. Vladimir Putin, president of the Russian Federation."

[3] Associated Press Poll. "Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Russian President Vladimir Putin?"

[4] Pew Research Center Poll. "Is your overall opinion of Vladimir Putin very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?"

[5] Quinnipiac University Poll. "Is your opinion of Vladimir Putin favorable, unfavorable, or haven't you heard enough about him?" Asked of registered voters.

[6] CNN Poll. "Please say if you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Russian President Vladimir Putin."

[7] Gallup Poll. "Please say if you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Russian president, Vladimir Putin?"

[8] CBS News Poll. "Is your opinion of Russian President Vladimir Putin favorable, not favorable, undecided, or haven't you heard enough about Vladimir Putin yet to have an opinion?"

[9] Chicago Council on Global Affairs Poll. "Do you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable view of Russian President Vladimir Putin?"

[10] PPRI Poll. "Please say whether your overall opinion of Russian President Vladimir Putin is very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable.

[11] Fox News Poll. "Please tell me whether you have a generally favorable or unfavorable opinion of Vladimir Putin." Asked of registered voters.

Table 5
Partisans' Views of Vladimir Putin

	% Favorable			
	February 2015	**January 2017**	**June 2017**	**August 2018**
All	13	22	13	13
Republicans	12	32	24	27
Independents	12	23	12	9
Democrats	15	10	4	4

Source: Gallup polls, February 8-11, 2015, February 1-5, 2017, June 7-11, 2017, and August 1-12, 2018.

Question: "Please say if you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Russian president, Vladimir Putin?"

Table 6
Public Belief in Trump Falsehoods

False Statement	% Believe False Statement	% Don't Believe False Statement	% No Opinion
U.S. Steel Opening New Plants	12	22	65
Russia did not intervene in 2016 U.S. presidential election	15	65	20
Democratic senators support "open borders"	15	39	45
Global warming results from natural, not human, causes	19	65	16
2017 tax cut was largest in history	24	26	50
Millions of fraudulent votes were cast in 2016 election	25	44	31
Construction has begun on a wall on Mexican border	26	51	24
Separating children at border in 2018 was required by U.S. laws	30	41	28
North Korean has done more to end its nuclear weapons program in the last 6 months than in the previous 25 years	34	39	27
U.S, funds most of NATO budget	35	27	38
U.S. military spending at record high	36	27	36

Source: *Washington Post* Fact Checker poll, November 29-December 10, 2018.

Table 7
Approval of Mueller Investigation

Date	% Approve	% Disapprove	% No Opinion
2017			
October 30-November 1[1]	58	28	14
November 7-13[2]	60	27	13
December 6-11[2]	58	29	13
December 14-17[2]	47	34	19
2018			
January 14-18[2]	47	33	20
January 15-18[1]	50	31	19
February 20-23[2]	47	33	21
March 22-25[2]	48	35	17
May 2-5[2]	44	38	18
June 3-6[3]	55	37	8
June 14-17[2]	41	39	21
June 27-July 2[4]	49	45	5
July 9-11[3]	48	40	12
August 9-12[2]	47	39	13
August 19-21[3]	59	37	4
August 26-29[5]	63	29	8
September 6-9[2]	50	38	12
September 16-19[3]	55	39	7
October 4-7[2]	48	36	16
December 6-9[2]	43	40	16
December 9-11[3]	56	37	7
December 12-17[7]	45	38	17
2019			
January 20-22[3]	49	34	17
January 30-February 2[2]	44	41	15
February 6-10[6]	51	34	15
March 26-29[6]	53	30	17
April 24-29[8]	54	26	20
April 25-28[2]	59	30	11
May 11-14[9]	46	32	22

[1] ABC News/*Washington Post* Poll. "A special counsel at the US Justice Department, Robert Mueller, has been investigating possible ties between Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and the Russian government. Do you approve or disapprove of the way Mueller is handling this investigation?"

[2] CNN Poll. "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Robert Mueller is handling the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election?" April 2019 poll replaced "is handling" with "handled."

[3] Fox News Poll. "Do you approve or disapprove of Robert Mueller's investigation of the 2016 Trump presidential campaign's ties with Russia and potential obstruction of justice charges against members of the Trump administration?" Asked of registered voters.

[4] *Washington Post*/Schar School Poll. "Do you approve or disapprove of the way US Justice Department special counsel Robert Mueller is handling the investigation into possible ties between Donald Trump's presidential campaign and the Russian government?"

[5] ABC News/*Washington Post* Poll. "Do you support or oppose the investigation of (Donald) Trump and his associates by Special Counsel Robert Mueller?"

[6] *Washington Post*/Schar School Poll. "As you may know, special counsel Robert Mueller is investigating Russia's role in the 2016 election and its possible ties with Donald Trump's presidential campaign. Do you approve or disapprove of the way Mueller is handling this investigation?"

[7] Quinnipiac University Poll. "Do you approve or disapprove of the way that Special Counsel Robert Mueller is handling his job?"

[8] NPR/PBS *NewsHour* Poll. "Do you approve or disapprove of the job Robert Mueller did as special counsel investigating possible wrongdoing and Russian interference in the 2016 election?"

[9] Fox News Poll. "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Robert Mueller handled the Russia investigation (on interference in the 2016 presidential election)?"

Table 8
Fairness of Mueller Investigation

Date	% Fair	% Not Fair	% No Opinion
2017			
July 17-August 1[1]	64	25	11
August 3-6[2]	58	27	15
November 7-13[1]	60	27	13
December 6-11[1]	58	29	13
2018			
January 5-9[1]	59	26	15
January 8-10[3]	48	28	23
February 2-5[1]	56	28	16
February 5-7[4]	53	28	20
March 3-5[1]	58	28	14
March 5-6[4]	51	26	23
March 19-21[4]	48	26	27
April 6-9[1]	52	32	17
April 10-13[3]	45	30	26
April 20-24[1]	54	31	15
May 31-June 5[1]	50	35	15
July 18-23[1]	55	31	13
July 19-22[3]	46	32	21
August 9-13[1]	51	33	16
September 6-9[1]	55	32	13
December 12-17[1]	48	38	13
2019			
March 1-4[1]	54	27	19
March 21-25[1]	55	26	19
April 22-25[6]	51	21	28
April 24-29[3]	57	30	14
April 26-29[1]	72	18	10

[1] Quinnipiac University Poll. "As you may know, Special Counsel Robert Mueller was appointed to oversee the criminal investigation into any links or coordination between President Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and the Russian government. Do you think that he is conducting a fair investigation into this matter, or not?" For April 2019, "conducted" rather than "is conducting." Asked of registered voters.

[2] CBS News Poll. "As you may know, Robert Mueller is the Special Counsel investigating Russia and the 2016 Trump presidential campaign. From what you have seen or heard so far, do you believe Robert Mueller will conduct a fair investigation into the matter, or won't he?"

[3] NPR/*PBS NewsHour* Poll. "From what you have heard about Robert Mueller, the special counsel in the Russia investigation of interference in the 2016 presidential election, do you think the investigation is fair or not fair?"

[4] Marist College Poll. "From what you have read or heard about Robert Mueller, the special counsel in the Russia investigation into alleged interference in the 2016 election, do you think the investigation is fair or not fair?"

[5] NPR/*PBS NewsHour* Poll. "Do you think Special Counsel Mueller´s investigation into possible wrongdoing and Russian interference in the 2016 election was fair or not fair"? April 2019 poll replaced "is" with "was."

[6] ABC News/*Washington Post* poll.

Table 9
Confidence in Fairness of Mueller Investigation

Date	% Confident	% Not Confident	% No Opinion
2017			
November 29-December 4, 2017[1]	55	36	8
2018			
January 10-15[1]	54	37	8
March 7-14[1]	61	37	3
April 40May 14[2]	48	37	12
May 14-30[3]	46	41	13
June 5-12[1]	55	38	5
July 23-August 9[3]	47	41	13
September 18-23[1]	56	37	7
October 17-25[3]	50	39	12
December 11-19[3]	49	39	12
December 13-16[4]	57	42	1
2019			
January 9-14[1]	54	41	5
March 11-14[4]	62	36	2
April 11-14[4]	70	28	1
July 10-15[1]	65	31	4

[1] Pew Research Center Poll. "How confident, if at all, are you that the Justice Department special counsel Robert Mueller is conducting a fair investigation into Russian involvement in the 2016 election?" July 2019 poll replaced "is conducting" with "conducted."

[2] Democracy Fund Voter Study Group 2018 VOTER Survey. "How confident are you that the special counsel Robert Mueller is conducting a fair investigation into Russian involvement in the 2016 election?"

[3] GW Politics Poll. "How confident are you that the special counsel Robert Mueller is conducting a fair investigation into Russian involvement in the 2016 election?"

[4] AP Poll. "How confident are you that the Justice Department's investigation of Donald Trump's ties to Russia led by former FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) Director Robert Mueller is fair and impartial?" April 2019 poll had "was" in place of "is."

Table 10
Partisan Approval of Mueller Appointment

	% Approval	
Group	May 31-June 6, 2017	June 22-27, 2017
All	73	64
Democrats	81	78
Independents	73	64
Republicans	63	49

Source: Quinnipiac University Poll.

Question: "As you may know, former Director of the FBI Robert Mueller has been appointed as a special counsel to oversee the criminal investigation into any links or coordination between President Trump's campaign and the Russian government. Do you approve or disapprove of this appointment?" Asked of registered voters.

Table 11
Partisan Views of Fairness of Mueller Investigation

Date	% Fair		
	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
2017			
July 17-August 1	73	64	54
November 7-13	76	63	41
December 6-11	79	58	34
2018			
January 5-9	75	61	37
February 2-5	77	57	35
March 3-5	80	57	36
April 6-9	75	50	30
April 20-24	79	58	26
May 31-June 5	73	51	25
July 18-23	80	59	23
August 9-13	72	53	29
September 6-9	77	55	30
December 12-17	73	49	21
2019			
March 1-4	75	56	33
March 21-25	65	53	47
April 26-29	77	78	65

Source: Quinnipiac University Poll.

Question: "As you may know, Special Counsel Robert Mueller was appointed to oversee the criminal investigation into any links or coordination between President Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and the Russian government. Do you think that he is conducting a fair investigation into this matter, or not?" Asked of registered voters.

Table 12
Partisans' Confidence in Fairness of Mueller Investigation

Date	% Confident	
	Democrats/Leaners	Republicans/Leaners
November 29-December 4, 2017	68	44
January 10-15, 2018	65	45
March 7-14, 2018	75	46
June 5-12, 2018	70	38
September 18-23, 2018	76	33
January 9-14, 2019	72	39
July 10-15, 2019	71	60

Source: Pew Research Center

Question: "How confident, if at all, are you that the Justice Department special counsel Robert Mueller is conducting a fair investigation into Russian involvement in the 2016 election?" July 2019 poll replaced "is conducting" with "conducted."

Table 13
Legitimacy of the Mueller Investigation

Date	% Mueller Investigation Legitimate Investigation		
	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
2018			
January 12-16	79	55	12
February 2-5	78	54	14
March 3-5	83	54	15
April 20-24	88	53	14
May 31-June 5	82	48	12
July 18-23	85	55	16
November 14-19	87	47	12
2019			
March 21-25	84	49	11

Source: Quinnipiac University Poll.

Question: "Do you think that the investigation into any links or coordination between President Trump's 2016 election campaign and the Russian government is a legitimate investigation, or do you think it is a political witch hunt?" Asked of registered voters.

Table 14
Approval of Trump Handling of Mueller Investigation

Date	% Approve	% Disapprove	% No Opinion
2017			
June 25-27[1]	37	53	9
August 3-6[2]	31	59	9
December 14-17[2]	32	56	13
2018			
January 14-15, 17-18[2]	31	54	15
February 10-13[1]	33	56	11
February 20-23[2]	30	55	15
March 22-25[2]	32	56	11
May 2-5[2]	31	55	14
June 14-17[2]	29	55	16
July 9-11[1]	36	54	10
August 9-12[2*]	34	55	11
September 6-9[2]	30	58	12
October 4-7[2]	33	54	13
December 6-9[2]	29	57	14
2019			
January 16-20[3]	30	66	30
January 30-February 2[2]	31	59	9
February 6-10[4]	35	52	13
April 25-28[5]	41	51	8

[1] CNN Poll. "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election?

[2] Fox News Poll. "Do you approve or disapprove of the way the Trump administration is handling investigations into Russian involvement in the 2016 presidential election?" Asked of registered voters.

[3] AP Poll. "Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling...the Russia investigation (into interference in the 2016 election)?"

[4] *Washington Post*-Schar School Poll. "Do you approve or disapprove of the way President Trump has responded to the Mueller investigation?"

[5] CNN Poll. "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump has handled the release of (Robert) Mueller's report on the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election?"

* Asked of half the sample.

Table 15
Favorability of FBI Performance

Date	% Favorable	% Unfavorable	% No Opinion
2016			
August 23-September 2[1]	71	21	8
2017			
January 5-8[1]	69	21	15
July 8-12[2]	60	19	12
2018			
February 5-7[3]	65	28	7
February 7-11[1]	66	23	11
April 2-18[4]	54	24	22
May 31-June 5[5]	49	29	22
June 21-29[6]	39	33	32
July 11-15[1]	65	26	9
July 18-23[5]	49	25	25
September 15-October 1[7]	65	29	7

[1] Pew Research Center Poll. "Is your overall opinion of the FBI very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?"

[2] Bloomberg Poll. "For each of the following, please tell me if your impression is very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable. If you don't know enough to give your feelings, just say so.... The FBI**."**

[3] Marist Poll. "Overall, do you have a favorable or an unfavorable impression of the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation)?"

[4] Suffolk University/*USA Today* Poll. "For each, please tell me if your opinion of them is generally favorable or generally unfavorable. If you are undecided or if you have never heard of someone, just tell me that.)...The FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation."

[5] Quinnipiac University Poll. "Is your opinion of the FBI favorable, unfavorable or haven't you heard enough about it?"

[6] TIPP/*Investor's Business Daily* Poll. "Generally speaking, is your opinion of the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) favorable or unfavorable or you are not familiar enough to say one way or the other?"

[7] PRRI Poll. "Please say whether your overall opinion of each of the following is very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable....The FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation)."

Table 16
Positive Views of FBI

Date	% Positive	% Neutral	% Negative	% No Opinion
2016				
June 19-23	48	33	16	3
July 9-13	40	31	27	2
December 12-15	37	35	27	1
2017				
April 17-20	47	34	18	1
May 11-13	52	30	16	2
June 17-20	55	30	14	2
December 13-17	47	32	19	2
2018				
January 13-17	53	25	19	3
March 10-14	48	30	20	2
June 1-4	50	30	18	2
October 14-17	52	29	18	1

Source: NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* Poll.

Question: "I'd like you to rate your feelings toward each one as very positive somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative, or very negative. If you don't know the name, please just say so.)...The Federal Bureau of Investigation, or FBI." Asked of half the national sample in June 2016, December 2017, and January and June 2018.

Table 17
Confidence in the FBI

Date	% Confident	% Not Confident	% No Opinion
January 8-10, 2018	57	39	5
April 10-13, 2018	54	41	5
July 19-22, 2018	56	39	6
October 1, 2108	59	36	5

Source: NPR-*PBS NewsHour* Poll.

Question: "Do you have a great deal of confidence, quite a lot, not very much confidence, or no confidence at all in the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation)?"

Table 18
Confidence in FBI by Party Identification

	% Confident			
Date	Democrats	Republicans	Independents	Trump Supporters
January 8-10, 2018	63	54	55	44
April 10-13, 2018	68	44	51	36
July 19-22, 2018	73	34	56	32
October 1, 2018	71	58	55	NA

Source: NPR-*PBS NewsHour* Poll.

Question: "Do you have a great deal of confidence, quite a lot, not very much confidence, or no confidence at all in the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation)?"

Table 19
FBI Bias

Date	% Not Biased	% Biased	% No Opinion
2018			
February 2-5[1]	53	34	12
February 5-7[2]	71	23	6
April 10-13[3]	61	31	9
July 18-23[1]	53	34	12
July 19-22[3]	59	33	8

1 Quinnipiac University Poll. "Do you think that the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) is biased against President (Donald) Trump, or not?" Asked of registered voters. (Numbers reversed to match Marist Poll and NPR/*PBS NewsHour* poll.)

[2] Marist Poll. "Do you think the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) is just trying to do their job, or biased against the Trump Administration?"

[3] NPR/*PBS NewsHour* Poll. "Do you think the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) is just trying to do their job, or biased against the Trump Administration?"

Table 20
FBI Bias by Party Identification

Date	% Seeing FBI Bias			
	Democrats	**Republicans**	**Independents**	**Trump Supporters**
February 5-7, 2018[1]	10	49	20	51
April 10-13, 2018[2]	12	56	30	63
July 19-22, 2018[2]	10	55	36	65

[1] Marist Poll. "Do you think the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) is just trying to do their job, or biased against the Trump Administration?" Data represent registered voters.

[2] NPR/*PBS NewsHour* Poll. "Do you think the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) is just trying to do their job, or biased against the Trump Administration?" Data represent registered voters.

Table 21
Opinion about the Department of Justice

Date	% Favorable	% Unfavorable	% No Opinion
2016			
August 23-September 2	56	37	7
2017			
January 5-8	61	30	9
2018			
February 7-11	59	32	10
July 11-15	58	35	7

Source: Pew Research Center

Question: "Is your overall opinion of the Justice Department very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?"

Table 22
Support for Checks on Presidential Power

Date	% More Effective	% Too Risky	% No Opinion
August 9-16, 2016[1]	23	72	5
February 17-12, 2017[2]	17	77	6
March 7-14, 2018[2]	21	76	3

Source: Pew Research Center Poll.

[1] "Which comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right? "Many of the country's problems could be dealt with more effectively if U.S. presidents didn't have to worry so much about Congress or the Supreme Court. [or] It would be too risky to give US presidents more power to deal directly with many of the country problems."

[2] "Which comes closer to your view--even if neither is exactly right?...Many of the country's problems could be dealt with more effectively if US presidents didn't have to worry so much about Congress or the courts. [or] It would be too risky to give US presidents more power to deal directly with many of the country problems."

Table 23
Trust in the Courts

Date	% Trust	% Not Trust	% No Opinion
March 22-27, 2017[1]	61	37	2
June 21-25, 2017[2]	60	37	3

[1] McClatchy Poll. "How much do you trust the courts: a great deal, a good amount, not very much, not at all?"

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