

## Editor's Note

# Presidential studies: From history to political science and back

Welcome to this special issue of *American Studies in Scandinavia*, devoted to the study of the American Presidency and Presidential elections.

The American presidency is frequently referred to as the most powerful office in the world. Whether or not that is true, the current occupant in The White House, President Donald J. Trump has challenged traditional norms of presidential behavior, thus making sure that the office has become front and center in most public debates about the state of American democracy and political culture. Our aim with this special issue is to present eleven fresh contributions to the study of the presidency and its cultural and political roles. The articles draw on a variety of different theoretical and methodological approaches from within the fields of American Studies.

For decades, historical studies of the American presidency were in decline because political history in general and “great man history” in particular were seen as being against the grain. Of course, there were still famous historians writing best-selling biographies of American presidents, but otherwise, research related to the institution of the presidency was generally not seen as a great career move, as interest moved to a bottom-up approach to history in the fields of social and cultural history.

However, as historians were losing interest, political scientists stepped into the breach. While some were preoccupied with regression analysis and attempts to create statistical models for predicting presidential behavior and

the outcome of future elections, the emergence of the field of “American Political Development” (APD) created a new interest in the historical development of the institution of the presidency. APD offered new analytical tools and methodologies, and invited historians to renew their interest in politics and the history of public policy.

In recent years, the interest in all aspects of the presidency, presidential elections and the role of the president in American popular culture has continued to grow, and the field of presidential studies has attracted scholars with a diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches. While some have studied “the administrative presidency” and analyzed the executive branch as a collective, others have taken a psychological approach to the study of presidential character and behavior or analyzed presidential rhetoric and communication strategies. The focus on “celebrity presidencies” - and most recently a cult-like “reality presidency” has also made it even more relevant to draw on theories from the fields of cultural studies and social psychology.

The placement of modern American presidents and the presidency in the public imagination are not merely shaped by academic historians, but just as much by interest groups, the media, and the entertainment industry. Likewise, family members, political allies, memorial societies, hometown boosters, foundations, and the political parties of former presidents are just some of the actors who engage in virtual commemoration crusades in order to create a dominant narrative of past presidents. Understanding the nature of these forces and the role they play in the creation of public memory can likewise make important contributions to presidential studies. Two of the contributions to this special issue do just that.

### **Presidential power and the norms of the office**

The nature of executive power and the structural constraints on the institution of the presidency are for obvious reasons major issues within the field. The modern presidency has been characterized by ongoing attempts to expand the reach of the office, as evidenced by the George W. Bush administration’s attempt to use the theory of the “unitary executive” to vastly expand the president’s formal powers in the War on Terror after 9/11.<sup>1</sup> The

1 See Steven G. Calabresi and Christopher S. Yoo, *The Unitary Executive: Presidential Power from Washington to Bush* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

presidency of Donald J. Trump has been characterized by a previously unseen attempt at presidential aggrandizement, albeit of a very different nature than the Bush administration's constitutional approach. It has most of all been characterized by an all-out assault on the *norms* of the American presidency.

Apart from President Trump's own repeated claims that Article II in the U.S. Constitution gives him the power "to do whatever I want as president," the administration as such has not been engaged in many constitutional arguments about executive power.<sup>2</sup> More often, president Trump has simply shredded norms of presidential behavior. No doubt, his willingness to do this has been part of his appeal to a certain segment of American voters, who seemingly like the idea of seeing a "non-politician" display his contempt for the strictures of the office. In the process, however, Trump's behavior may have inflicted severe damage to the presidency as an institution.

As Alexander Hamilton noted in Federalist No. 76: "The institution of delegated power implies, that there is a portion of virtue and honor among mankind, which may be a reasonable foundation of confidence..."<sup>3</sup> The goal of Donald Trump has never been to instill confidence in the executive branch of the federal government: It has been to instill confidence among his supporters in him as their personal guardian – even if it meant branding parts of the federal government as "the deep state". In this capacity, President Trump has drawn energy from separating the American people into in-groups – those who support him – and out-groups – those who do not. As such, he is the first president who has not pretended to represent the country at large.

What makes Donald Trump different from all previous presidents is not merely that he has failed to live up to the standards set by the Founding Fathers – other presidents have also done so from time to time – but rather that he has so explicitly made it part of his appeal to his supporters that he was violating the normative expectations of the office. It has been a central part of Trump's appeal to his core constituency that the weight of the office hasn't modified his behavior, but that he in reverse has transformed

2 Michael Brice-Saddler, "While bemoaning Mueller probe, Trump falsely says the Constitution gives him 'the right to do whatever I want'", *The Washington Post*, July 23, 2019 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/07/23/trump-falsely-tells-auditorium-full-teens-constitution-gives-him-right-do-whatever-i-want/>).

3 [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/fed76.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed76.asp)

the nature of executive power in the American political system. As Susan Hennessey and Benjamin Wittes have noted in their book *Unmaking the Presidency; Donald Trump's War on The World's Most Powerful Office*:

It turns out that one doesn't need to push the limits of executive power to become an abusive president. One need only personalize and abuse the powers the presidency indisputably holds. The Trump presidency is rethinking the institution not at its edges, but at its core, transforming it from the inside out, as it were.<sup>4</sup>

### **The articles in this issue**

This special issue of *American Studies in Scandinavia* presents an array of new research on American presidents and the presidency as an institution. In "Region and the American Presidency: Jimmy Carter as the "Southern" President," D. Jason Berggren analyzes the role of region as a key variable in U.S. presidential studies by using Jimmy Carter's use of his Southern identity as a case study. He argues that Carter in some ways challenged expectations that a president is supposed to symbolize the nation by transcending its parts.

In "Human Rights and the 1980 Presidential Election," Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard analyzes the central role that the concept of human rights policy came to play in the 1980 presidential election, as the Republican candidate Ronald Reagan challenged the foreign policy of the incumbent, Jimmy Carter. The election was, according to Søndergaard, a watershed moment in the creation of a conservative human rights policy that rather than aiming to move beyond Cold War contestation, was to be employed as an ideological weapon to defeat the Soviet Union.

In "Trouble with the Transition: The Transfer of Power from Carter to Reagan," Nicole Anslover follows up with an analysis of the transition of power after the 1980 election. Regardless of ideological differences, incoming administrations have a recognized interest in maintaining a certain level of continuity from the previous administration. The goal is for the incoming president to "hit the ground running. Nicole Anslover uses the experiences from the transfer of power after the 1980 presidential election to make some valuable observations about the political importance of well-organized and respectful transitions.

4 Susan Hennessey and Benjamin Wittes, *Unmaking the Presidency; Donald Trump's War on The World's Most Powerful Office* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), p. 15.

The following four contributions all deal with perceptions of the American presidency in public memory and in popular culture. In “Misremembering Reagan: A Decade of Cultural Dissent,” William M. Knoblauch looks at the memory of the Reagan presidency in popular culture, and on the forces that have helped shape his legacy. He sees a discontinuity between historical fact and interpretation and argues that is to a large extent the product of “an active misremembering of the 1980s.” That the legacies of former presidents improve over time is not surprising, but Knoblauch’s analysis serves as a warning against the political consequences of memories that are not merely selective but distorted.

In “From the Hood to the White House: The Cultural Imaginary of Presidential Blackness in the Comedy *Head of State* (2003),” Atalie Gerhard analyzes a movie about a fictional first black president (five years before the Obama presidency) as a tale of an alternative version of “the American dream.” It is a version in which the president’s blackness and hood origins paradoxically makes him the embodiment of the struggles of the mainstream of America, thus reinforcing the notion of “American exceptionalism.” The article discusses the role of such cultural imaginaries for the general perception of the American presidency.

Antje Dallmann picks up the theme of fictional presidential candidates and their road to The White House. In “The air of impossibility has been removed”: Realist Political Drama(dy) and the Trope of Becoming President,” she analyzes political fiction as a means to understanding some of the flaws and shortcomings in the American political system. However, she also points out some of the inherent dangers in the presidential drama(dy) as a form – not least the cynicism and proneness to conspiracy thinking that may emerge from equating politics with corruption, self-service and ineptitude.

Erika Cornelius Smith’s article “Madame President: changing depictions of female candidates and female presidents in American popular culture” draws on literature from political science, communication studies, and women’s and gender studies in order to analyze how popular culture depictions of female presidents evolved between 1980 and 2008, as well as how these depictions attempted to challenge prevailing national attitudes about gender and the American presidency.

The last section of this special issue deals with US presidential electoral campaigns and the evolution of presidential rhetoric. In “Delegitimization and US presidential electoral campaign, 1896-1980,” Raffaella Baritono

analyzes how the discursive strategy of delegitimization was used in presidential elections from 1896 to 1980, as well as how the political contexts and predominant themes fueled it.

Using Jeffrey K. Tulis' *The Rhetorical Presidency* (1987) as a point of departure, Magne Dypedahl's "Presidential Rhetoric in a Historical Perspective" explores developments of rhetorical leadership over the past century. Special attention is given to the changing nature of State of the Union Addresses. These are used as vivid illustrations of how leadership over time has evolved into a permanent campaign, where the president goes public in order to appeal directly for support.

With Anne Mørk's "From boots on the ground to followers in the sky: Populism and volunteer mobilization in the presidential campaigns of Barack Obama and Donald Trump," we turn our attention towards the use of populist rhetoric in presidential campaigns. The article explores the notion of populism in order to compare the strategies employed by two candidates, who otherwise occupy opposing positions on the political spectrum: Barack Obama and Donald J. Trump. Despite the ideological differences, Anne Mørk finds similarities in their ways of mobilizing by addressing a growing distrust of political and economic elites.

Finally, Thomas J. Cobb fittingly concludes this volume with an article that addresses the frequent comparisons between the current President Donald J. Trump and his nineteenth century predecessor Andrew Jackson. In "Donald J. Trump: Jacksonian Minoritarian?" Cobb examines the "Jacksonian culture and politics" of the 1820s and the historiography of Andrew Jackson's impact on modern partisan politics. Comparing Trump's 2016 campaign to the electoral sweep of Jackson's brand of populism, he finds a need to qualify the comparisons between the two presidents, not least because they fail to acknowledge the minoritarian foundation of Trump's presidency.

Please enjoy these eleven contributions to the study of the American presidency and presidential campaigns. A crucial one is just around the corner.

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