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ABSTRACT

What effect did Donald Trump have within and beyond America? This article assesses the policy impact of the President using the new layered framework for understanding the impact of political leaders, which considers their effect on the connected layers of societal structures, political institutions and policy. Firstly, the article extends the framework with a new typology of change. Secondly, it draws from the empirical articles in this volume to map his effects under the new typology and the layered approach. Trump is found to have largely acted as an accelerant for already existing causal processes in society, rather than providing a radical break with past politics in many areas. By undermining democratic institutions and encouraging hyper-partisanship within political institutions, for example, he was strengthening prevailing causal forces rather than constructing new forces. However, there were some more substantial effects such as the reversal of progress towards racial equality. In the layer of *policy*, he crucially failed to slow or reverse destructive pressures on the economy and public health or even fulfil major campaign promises on healthcare. Overall, Trump illustrates neither the strength nor weakness of the office of presidency, but instead the dangers of poor political leadership to citizens in America and beyond, especially in times of crisis.

To what extent did Donald Trump bring about transformational change? As the introduction to this special issue explained, both his strongest proponents and critics were in agreement that he considerably altered society in America and beyond. The counter-argument, however, is that given the huge complexity of social life and the multiple forces for continuity and change, the office holder of a single governmental office is always likely to have a limited impact. This *limited impact thesis* would hold that Trump was therefore likely to be no different, despite the dramatic tweets, the showbiz and breaks with the conventions of the presidency. No one individual is capable of shaping history in quite this way. They tend to themselves be products of the broader times.

In this article, we test this *limited impact* thesis by drawing upon the research findings delivered in this volume. But first, the article further develops concepts to help us understand the nature of change on policy that political leaders can bring about. The opening

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introductory article to this volume has, of course, already specified a framework for understanding political change (James 2021). A layered framework for mapping change was set out based around critical realism. The argument was that rather than focussing more narrowly on electoral outcomes, the political regime or the personal characteristics of the leader, we should embrace complexity. A layered framework was mapped out where we can separate the impact on societal structure, political institutions and policy areas. The approach then encourages us to identify how each is connected and inter-related through structure and agency relationships. The impact of a political leader in each area can then be mapped.

This helps us to consider *where* we are looking. It also gives clues about *how to look* for change – mixed methods are arguably important given the ontological and epistemological premises of critical realism. But it does not explain *how to measure* change. The article therefore begins by reviewing the literature on policy change, before setting out some preferred conceptual vocabulary for measuring change by drawing and adapting from critical realism. It then draws from the research articles in the special issue to identify the type and nature of change that President Trump instigated.

Existing measures of policy change

There are several existing approaches within the policy sciences that seek to measure the extent of policy change. One approach is to focus on the *de jure* change that takes place in stated policies. The work by Peter Hall (1993) is one of the most commonly cited, who distinguished three layers of possible policy change according to the level of severity. This was based on an analysis of policy change in UK economic policy. First order change involved the adjusting existing levers and instruments with the aim of meeting existing targets. Second order change involved the changing of the policy instruments, but still keeping the hierarchy of goals (282). Third order change involved jettisoning the policy paradigm entirely and a radical shift in their hierarchy of goals. A profound sense of failure can bring about a radical switch in policy beliefs and rules.

This is undoubtedly helpful in identifying a change in tack in the policy levers being used by a leader. It has the weakness that it does not enable the actual *outcomes* of these changes to be measured. A leader might alter their approach to a policy issue, but if it has no effect, then does it matter? An alternative approach has therefore been to focus on the *de facto* changes that have been brought about. Scholars who have done this introduce concepts for characterizing the nature or extent of change within their overall frameworks. For example, the punctuated equilibrium model claims that change is incremental in most cases, but this can then be followed by "seismic" change (Baumgartner and Jones 2010). Theorists using the advocacy coalition framework distinguish between minor and major changes as well. Minor changes are those emanating from "policy orientated learning" while major changes involve a switch in core policy beliefs. This is often the results of external events or a major policy failure (Flores-Crespo and Mendoza Cazarez 2019; Sabatier 1988). Different types of institutional change are identified by Mahoney and Thelen (2010), who distinguish between institutional layering, drift, conversion, and displacement. There is also a separate literature focussing on policy success. This acknowledges that leaders do not have complete control over the world and change does not immediately

result from new policies (Boyne 2003). Marsh and McConnell (2010), for example, differentiate between process, political and a programme success.

Causality in scientific/critical realism

The critical realist approach also has a specific theory of causation (also see: Kurki 2007; Sayer 2010, 103–117). Given that the introduction to this volume has already developed a layered framework for understanding policy change built around critical realism, it is necessary to outline a theory of causation for the layered framework based on critical realism. This can help us understand the causal impact of political leaders. Critical realism claims that:

- Causes exist as real forces in the world as generative mechanisms independent of human knowledge about them. This contrasts with interpretivists and other post-positivists who tend to dispense with causal explanations (see, for example Bevir and Blakely 2018).[1]
- The world and statements about it (ontology) cannot be reduced to our knowledge of it (epistemology), because most can be observed can exist independently of a particular observer. There are therefore a much greater variety and breadth of causal mechanisms than we might initially be aware of and some causal processes may be not readily observable (Bhaskar 2008, 12–56).
- There are complex relationships between objects, causal mechanisms and outcomes, which means that causes do not work on a "when A, then B" manner. Causal mechanisms have generative powers but they are not always activated in a given setting. This is because humans have individual agency and can therefore respond reflectively and engage in strategic learning.
- Causal mechanisms can come in multiple forms including the reasoning of agents, norms, social structures and discourses.
- At any moment, social structure exists prior to agents, but human agency is necessary for the reproduction and transformation of social structure.[2]

Through the critical realist lens, causal mechanisms are crucial to understanding social events. But the situation is much more complicated because human knowledge of causal mechanisms, can, change their nature. Agents are therefore themselves causal forces, involved in an interplay of strategic matrix.

Leadership concepts for the layered framework

Concepts from critical realism provide a meta-theory for understanding the political change that leaders can bring. However, they do not provide bespoke and more applied concepts that can help us to discuss political leaders' causal effects in more concrete situations, such as an analysis of Donald Trump's presidency. We can, however, attempt this here:

- There are already *prevailing causal forces* and currents within a political system. Many of these prevailing forces exist through causal mechanisms that exist prior to and

be independent of the leader. There have been long-term trends towards an ageing society in America (Super 2020), rising economic inequality (Kuhn, Schularick, and Steins 2020) and climate change (IPCC 2018). They would also include discourses, which are ideational in nature, but which still have causal effects (for example, racist discourses have the power to recreate and continue forms of racism).

- Once in office (and sometimes before), leaders will be in structure and agency relationships with existing prevailing forces. The extent to which they can shape them will vary by context. Prevailing causal forces will often be strong and the leader may be almost entirely unable to alter them that they will continue *as if* they are entirely independent of the leader (e.g. a leader of an overseas mirco-state would normally struggle to shape US agricultural policy). In other cases, leaders will have immense opportunities to change prevailing forces because of strategic opportunities and knowledge.
- Many prevailing causal forces are not always observable and mixed research methods are needed to understand them. Alternative causal logics such as that of retroduction could also be applied to help identify existing prevailing causal forces (Belfrage and Hauf 2016).
- Causal forces do not always have the same effect in every context because different actors can adopt different political strategies, understand the situation differently or "play the game" differently. Put more simply, the effects differ precisely because contexts are different; they are not like the closed systems of natural science experiments. Different contexts constrain and enable what can be done, and with what effect. Prevailing forces therefore exist without the leader, but the nature of a causal force may take a different form without their existance.
- The nature of causal forces can also change when leaders and other actors become aware of them. For example, if political leaders begin to think that "globalization" is occurring then they might use the term to justify changes adopt policies to slow it. However, once the idea of "globalization" enters public discourse the meanings that people attach to it and the leader who used the term to instigate those changes can be re-articulated and changed. Leaders may therefore experience causal mechanisms differently (for example, on "globalisation" see: Watson and Hay 2003).
- Causal mechanisms come in many forms including economic, social, political forces, the power norms of behaviour, the effects of institutions, policies but also leaders and other actors too. Leaders are able to have an effect on the causal mechanisms that are causing trends because they have control over certain policy levers and can also encourage changes in behaviours.
- It is commonly the case that social life is characterized by stability rather than change. However, even in stability is itself the result of forces and pressures. *Equilbirums* might be reached or forces for stability. Forces of path dependency and lock in effects can make institutions and policies difficult to change. Analysing whether leaders create new patterns of stability of unlock change are is therefore important.

Given that leaders enter political systems where there are already rivers of causation flowing, the critical question for the layered approach is *to what extent are leaders responsible for changing these causal forces, or introducing new forces? What would the world have looked like, if they had not acted?* It is suggested here that we might initially envisage six possible types of change:

- **Birth** – they might create new causal forces which previously did not exist.
- **Accelerate** – they accentrate, strengthen and thicken the force of existing forces.
- **Slow** – they might reduce the power of causal forces.
- **Stop** – they might entirely cease existing causal forces.
- **Reconfigure** – they might qualitatively change the nature of causal forces.
- **Redirect** – they might make a minor adjustment to the nature of causal forces.

Some of these forms of change are more important than others. In the interests of parsimony, it may be possible to further simplify this and consider whether, for each layer a leader has instigated:

- No change
- Minor change – acceleration or slowing of existing forces of causation.
- Major change – change in path and direction of causation in the area.
- Seismic change – the construction of new causal forces.

We should also consider the *strength and importance* of these forces in our assessments. Making minor changes to the causal mechanisms that define how democratic America is or the nature of capitalism is much more significance than more inconsequential changes new forces at the margins of public policy.

Did Donald Trump bring major change?

With the layered framework in mind, and multiple swirling causal forces and actors in place, what was the nature and extent of the Trump effect? This can be discussed using each of the three layers.

Societal structure

The articles in this volume painted a picture of the societal structure and the ongoing causal forces before Trump took the presidency. Democracy and democratic ideals were already experiencing pressures, Foa and Mounk (2021) wrote, through newly established patterns of behaviour including rising polarization, a "tit-for-tat" cycle of constitutional hard balling, denying the mandate of election winners and political intolerance. Trump and his supporters often claimed that there was a "deep state" which sought to work against the President and the reforms that he wanted to instigate. Horwitz (2021) argued that although the American state was never neutral and open to manipulation by powerful parties and capitalist economic system, there was no deep state or administrative state working against his interests as Trump described. For Keck and Clua Losada, the main feature of the state was its capitalist structure, where capitalist political and economic interests have greater sway and the system has causal processes in place to generate greater economic inequalities over time. American society has been increasingly polarizing since the 1980s as a result of patterns of socialization, shifts in identity, economic and technological transformations (Iyengar 2021). The advent of social media has made accessing reliable information challenging and led many to

argue that we have entered an age of post-truth (Hannan 2018). Racism remained a persistent force in America.

The volume showed how Trump accelerated existing causal mechanisms so that they further undermined American social fabric. Trump was often criticized for undermining American democracy. Assessing this claim, Foa and Mounk (2021) pointed to some of the President's actions which did undermine democratic processes. His willingness to violate democratic norms and his provocative personal approach further fuelled a transition in the United States from a clean democracy to what they consider a "dirty democracy". Trump gave signals of endorsement to non-state actors such as "Proud Boys", which encouraged violent vigilantism and gave qualified condemnation of right-wing extremists gathering in Charlottesville. This transition was already in progress before Trump became President, they write. That said, Trump's implicit acceptance and incitement of vigilantism were unique for the presidency. It "may well prove to be his most damaging legacy for American democratic life" (14).

Hodson (2021) argued that Trump strengthened moves towards a post-truth society by showing "an indifference to fact checking" and would commonly make false or misleading claims. He also had "an aversion to policy analysis and disruptive approach to political norms and past policy commitments" (10). But neither was Trump the first post-truth presidency, he noted.

Confidence in government and state institutions was undermined by the president too. Trump's false claims about the "deep state" would "fuel the fury of his supporters and mobilize their partisanship" (4) and "undermined confidence in government and the legitimacy of the state" (1), Horwitz claimed. A majority of Republicans later believed that the 2020 election was rigged against President Trump and enough felt so strongly that they stormed the Capitol building. But trust in government was low before Trump was in office – and it was always lower among members of the party that does not control presidency. But following his departure from office, only 9% of Republican leaning citizens had trust in government (Pew 2021).

Political polarization had been an ongoing theme in American politics for some time (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). Keck and Clua Losada argued that Trump extended this, however, by using the border to polarize opinion by appealing to far-right groups in the US that had fears surrounding immigration and are concerned that immigrants threaten traditional (White) culture. This was also brought about by Trump's approach to the Republican party (Espinoza 2021).

Trump further engrained racial inequality into the American social structure. As McClain (2021) noted there is a rich work identifying the structural inequality and injustices in American society, which had long existed prior to Trump coming to office (Sørensen 1996; Young 2010). These ran along dimensions including race, gender, class and across intersectionalities (Crenshaw 2017). Trump made no pretence to reduce racial inequalities, McClain (2021) showed. His actions were instead to reinforce and extend racial inequality, either through his policies, appointments or rhetoric. Moreover, he supported voter suppression efforts which systematically undermined the political power of minority groups and launched a new attack against Critical Race Theory. There was an increase in the number of hate crimes against people of colour and immigrants reported to the police after Trump's election (Edwards and Rushin 2018). There was also an increase in reported hate crimes in counties that hosted Trump rallies

(Feinberg, Branton, and Martinez-Ebers 2019) – and the effects spread across the globe (Giani and Méon 2021). Other actors contributed towards racial inequality and Trump did not birth this causal force, but he was more than an accelerant – he *reversed* progress that had been made and *reconfigured* the nature of racism by introducing new conventions such as not disassociating the presidency from extreme groups and introducing new terminology into public discourse such as referring to covid-19 as the "Chinese virus" (Viala-Gaudefroy and Lindaman 2020).

The Trump effect was therefore divisive and unsettling to social structures and political cohesion. But where Trump was argued to have generated some stability was within capitalist structures. The financial crisis of 2007/8 further open divisions in society, which states sought to respond to with austerity measures. Authoritarian neoliberalism, as Bruff (2014) involved attempts by states to insulate themselves from unpopular austerity decisions. Keck and Clua Losada argue that Trump deepened the form of contemporary US capitalism. Trump introduced measures such as tax cuts which mainly benefitted multi-national companies. There was also a deregulated economy with labour market reforms including the end of US Department of Labor rules on overtime pay. Trump, however, used the border wall instrumentally to focus voter's attention on migrants and the border as a threat to national security and economic wellbeing. He thereby diverted attention away from the effects of the neoliberal reforms. Capitalism is an intrinsically unstable institution and Trump thereby stabilized capitalism and capitalist accumulation. This represented good political statecraft, in some respects.

Political institutions

In the domain of political institutions, Trump's clearest significant impact could be found in the judiciary where he made widespread appointments and re-established a conservative majority in the Supreme Court. Nemacheck (2021) set out how the president was enormously successful at making appointments to the judiciary that would be politically favourable to his conservative cause. This included three justices to the US Supreme Court, 54 United States Circuit Court of Appeals judges, and 174 federal District Court judges. By comparison, Barack Obama, during his eight years in office, only made 55 appointments. The effect would be extended by the fact that Trump appointed many young people to the federal courts. The average age was 47. Lifelong tenure would ensure a long last impact on the judicial system, which would feed through to policy. Given the strength of this arm of the state, this would be dramatic. The appointments were also more brazenly partisan. Conservative groups were used to help Trump shortlist possible candidates, and the appointment process much more politicized with McConnell. Bomberg (2021) noted that the judicial appointments to the supreme court could have lasting environmental effects. The conservative majority-led court could, for example, revisit the 2007 decision *Massachusetts v EPA* which has enabled the EPA to regulate greenhouse gases (5). This tilting of the judicial system therefore birthed a new of causal processes, albeit one that had been present in US politics in the very recent past. The Supreme Court had a 4–4 conservative-liberal split when Trump came to power, after the death of Justice Scalia, before which there was already a 5–4 conservative majority. Trump restored the majority and strengthened it for years to come with a 6–3 balance.

Changes also came in the Whitehouse, Congress and Republican Party. Hodson (2021) noted how pictures revealed extensively male-dominated executive decision-making, as seven male advisors were photographed watching Trump signing an executive order in January 2017 that prevented organizations in receipt of global health assistance from the United States from performing or promoting abortion (11), illustrating patriarchal relations. Decision-making was increasingly dominated by men inside the Whitehouse.

Smith (2021) showed how Trump inflamed hyper-partisanship within Congress, which led to extended government shutdowns. Smith blamed Trump for instigating the 2019 shutdown in support of his campaign pledges, which were a "fringe view and understanding of immigration and border control" (10). Intense partisanship was not new, and followed a pattern set in course since the 1990s in the "politics of anger" during Newt Gingrich's "Republican Revolution", after taking control of Congress in the 1994 midterms. But it reached a new level under Trump. The same was true of the dynamics of the Republican party. Espinoza (2021) argued that Trump's electoral campaigns and term as president were largely a continuation of forces that were already present within the GOP. The evolution of the conservative tradition within the party had been taking part over many years. The Tea Party provided Trump with a congressional base and had already set down similar policy positions on issue such as Affordable Care Act (ACA), immigration and Mexican the border, socio-moral values (e.g. on abortion and gay marriage), hostility towards Muslims and Islam, anti-benefit recipient rhetoric, and questioning the legitimacy of Obama as president. Nonetheless, he pushed the party rightwards, made it more dependent on white support and more openly hostile to democracy. He also gave the more extreme elements of Republican conservatism a major stage in US politics. There was therefore an acceleration of an existing trend.

Domestic policy

In the sphere of domestic policy, the most unprecedented external causal force during the Trump presidency was the spread of covid-19. The virus was first reported in Wuhan, China on 8 January 2020 (Wee and McNeil 2021). On 21 January 2020, the first case was reported in the USA, after a man in his 30s from Snohomish County, Washington, developed symptoms following a journey from the Wuhan region (Rabin 2020). There would be 24,028,007 cases in America by the day that Trump left office (WHO 2021). Kapucu and Moynihan (2021) argued that the US had the "capacity, resources, expertise, plans, and policies to deal with pandemic crises effectively", however, President Trump was an important contributing factor in the failure of the US to do so. He showed a failure of crisis leadership, crisis decision making, communication, a lack of coordination and collaboration, and of crisis control. The result was to undermine the credibility of the federal government and create a false sense of security amongst many of his supporters. This contributed towards the avoidable death of many of the four million people who died of Covid during Trump's time in office. If we were to consider the spread of the virus as a causal process, he did not sufficiently slow this as well as he might have done.

In terms of macro-economic management, he was also ineffective at shaping causal processes. Born et al. (2021) used a synthetic model to evaluate Trump's overall effect

on the economy. Trump came into office with a booming economy and there were there-fore already strong causal forces for economic growth. There were also strong forces for economic turmoil as a result of the pandemic. During his time in office, Trump sought to promote the economy by passing major policy changes such as the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, as well as a major stimulus package in the form of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Their analysis at the aggregate level of the economy (rather than evaluating specific policies) found Trump to have largely had no effect on GDP, employment, the labour force and unemployment rates. The real US economy largely tracked the synthetic doppelganger. This changed, however, during the pandemic. During the end of Trump's time in office, 2020Q4, the real US economy outmatched the synthetic model on GDP, but the situation was dramatically worse for the employment, the labour force, and unemployment rates. The US took a different approach to countries such as the UK who provided furlough schemes. Trump's inaction therefore failed to slow the economic turmoil generated by the pan-demic. In a sense, Trump did nothing to shape economic currents, which swept their way through America as if the President wasn't there.

There were other areas where Trump did little to nothing. As Smith noted, Trump campaigned on the issue of repealing "Obama-care" but struggled in his efforts to over-haul the Affordable Care Act, and hence did little to change health care. The same was partially true of his other campaign pledge to "build a wall". The construction of a "border wall" was potentially a major change in the flows of citizens, but as Keck and Clua Losada noted, the wall was incomplete as he left office and over 1000 km had some form of fencing already in place before his term started (Giles 2021). The number of immigrants continued to rise under Trump, albeit more slowly, although there were also changes in the composition of migrant flows. There were fewer refugees and immigration fell away entirely after Trump announced "complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" as the President used the policy levers available to him (Lowther 2020). As Keck and Clua Losada note, the symbolism and rhetoric may have been more important. But the long-term trends of Americans becoming increasingly be in favour of immigration continued (Gallup 2021). Photographs captured the human impact of Trump's policies, as Hodson (2021) illustrated. The promise to sep-arate parents from children in cases where families had Southwest border illegally dev-astated the lives of many.

Bomberg (2021) outlined how Trump set out to make major changes to environ-mental policies. There were organizational reforms and policy changes which restricted funding for scientific research and appointed key personnel who were hostile towards environmental protection. In terms of our model, Trump therefore acted as an accelerant to global warming by taking some of the brakes off. Many of his reforms could be quickly flipped once Biden took office, Bomberg argued. However, in the domain of ideas, Trump had a more profound change. Trump sort to undermine confidence in science, expertise and government; he painted environmental protection as "job killing"; stressed the importance of America; and encouraged white male grievance in rust-belt states to be directed at environmental protection. Trump thereby disrupted *discursive* institutional processes, which were cutting the brakes on global warming and environmental degradation.

Trump had a significant impact in the area of LBGTQ policies. Pepin-Neff and Cohen (2021) argued that Donald Trump acted as a moral entrepreneur by sending tweets claiming transgender Americans could not serve the US military. This not only triggered a moral panic and set the issue onto the agenda, but also acted to change policy, they argue. In so doing, a new causal process could have been argued to have been set off by the President because the moral panic "spread exclusion, fear, untrue stereotypes, and second-class citizenship in ways that boost transphobia and mobilize transphobic extremism" (1). At the same time, exclusion, fear and transphobia were already present in American society, and Trump's actions seemed to have served as more of an accelerant than have given birth to transphobia. But the effects would reach into societal structure.

International policy

International policy has been central to the study of the presidency because of the might of American superpower and the widely held view that this is where the president holds greater power. The power that the US holds, however, has often been thought to be diminishing in relative terms because of the rise of powers such as Brazil, Russia, India and China (Nadkarni and Noonan 2013; Xinbo 2018). Trubowitz and Harris (2019) have instead pointed to the role of domestic level factors: (i) the rise of hyper-partisanship in Washington which has eroded confidence in the president (ii) the absence of a compelling foreign policy narrative to unite the country and (iii) the erosion of the social contract because of the increasing vulnerability for workers. A crucial component of power, Kim and Knuckey (2021) argued in this volume, is soft power. The president thereby added to already existing causal forces that were threatening US supremacy by reducing US soft power through his leadership style. They argued that Trump's leadership style was very different from previous presidents with many unexpected actions such as unconventional speeches, offhand remarks and unilateral foreign policies. They traced Trump's popularity overseas, as well as attitudes towards America. Respondents tended to view Trump's leadership negatively, with perceptions about his personality, and his policies on the environment, immigration, Iran deal, trade relations, and religion being important in determining citizens' views. This undermined American soft power. Winning over "hearts and minds" has often been a key pillar of foreign policy with foreign aid and cultural exchange programmes often being used to support this goal. A more recent survey, reported by Pew in January 2020, reported that 64% had no confidence in Trump and 38% had unfavourable views of the US in Pew Research Center (2020, 3). This compared to 23% having no confidence in Obama and 26% having unfavourable views of the US when citizens were polled in 2016 as the former President's 8-year term in office began to draw to a close (Pew Research Center 2017, 3). Given that many citizens overseas will associate the US with the president, even after he departed office, this seems likely to bring a lasting legacy.

Trump also reshaped relationships with the wider world. Rolf (2021) showed that Trump developed a foreign policy which borrowed from the old, in that it drew from Jacksonianism and Jeffersonianism and had some continuities with Obama. However, it was also something new in that it involved a unique combination of both traditions. Ashbee and Hurst (2021) argued that there was a paradigmatic shift in the US

relationship with China after Trump assumed power in January 2017. Trump took a more hostile approach towards China, which involved imposing trade tariffs. There was, however, support for this across both sides of the political aisle and the public had become more critical too. There were also signs of continuity in the early days of the Biden administration. Discursive institutional forces had changed considerably – with Trump partially responsible for this. There were fewer clear-cut changes in the power balances over policy and institutional architecture for policymaking. He also deepened the US–India defence relationship, Ashbee and Hurst (2021, 11) argue. However, the transatlantic relationship was threatened with trust undermined by his actions. Although there had been problematic trends and periodic crises in the past, Nielson and Dimitrova (2021) argued, Trump's whole approach to transatlantic relations created a crisis of trust unlike any seen before and set America on a path further away from European powers.

There were also elements of continuity in international policy, however. Shively (2021) argued that Donald Trump's election to the position of commander-in-chief could have marked a major break with past policy. The reality, however, was that cybersecurity policy was constrained by existing strategic frameworks. Trump developed a "defend forward" cybersecurity policy, which aimed to be pre-emptive against emerging new cyber threats. But ultimately, he reached for more traditional military and economic policy tools when threats emerged. This was "a modification of, rather than a break with, prior cybersecurity policies" and this highlighted the unlikelihood of change.

Conclusion: the impact of Donald Trump

To conclude and summarize, we can now return to some of the opening questions of the volume. We asked whether the Trump administration marked a radical departure in American government, policy and governance? Was the Trump administration transformationalist in any area? What were the consequences of the Trump administration's policies?

It has been argued that the answers that we derive are dependent on the frameworks that we use. A layered approach was introduced at the outset to try and capture the full complexity of the effects and how they might interact. Individual articles have set out his effects across many areas across and within the layers. There was undoubtedly a change in the style and tone of presidential leadership, with many of the norms of the office cast aside. There was also the development of a series of alternative policies to his predecessor. But the key test is what effect this all had.

At the level of societal structures, Trump was found to have largely acted as an accelerant for already existing causal processes in society, rather than providing a radical break with past politics. Nonetheless, his actions undermined democracy, truth and confidence in state institutions amongst much of the American population. He further polarized social cleavages and inflamed race relations. Although he was only an accelerant, these are not small forces to be playing with and it is difficult to foresee the longer-term effects. Like adding petrol to fire, there is a point at which the blaze becomes very difficult to control and there could be a longer-term degradation in America's social fabric, especially if Trumpist movements push the cause further, the Republican base continue to generate new leaders of a similar vein and use the same rhetoric, or

Trump himself returns to office. His effects on racism and racial inequality were also more profound, where he reversed and reconfigured causal forces.

Trump also consolidated and accelerated partisan norms of behaviour within political institutions. Debates with Congress became rawer and more raucous. Appointments for the judiciary more explicitly partisan in nature. The rigidity of the American constitutions protected political institutions from further change, however. In the layer of policy, he failed to slow or reverse causal pressures on the economy and public health. His economic policies didn't have the effects of promoting growth that it aimed to – and the economy struggled to recover during the pandemic without the stronger support found in many European states. He also contributed towards America being unable to slow the pace of the spread of the virus. Major campaign promises failed to turn into law because of his poor congressional relations and leadership. Many other policies may be short-lived in their effects because of the power of the Biden administration to repeal them. Internationally, he undermined US soft power and fractured trust with strategic transatlantic partners. This might be partially changeable by alternative leaders, but Trump would be remembered.

What are the broader lessons of the nature of presidential power over policy in America and beyond? It is important to note that although this volume has been extensive in covering many policy areas, it has not been exhaustive. As the layered framework set out, there will have been many effects around the world and not everything can therefore be captured in a single volume. For example, it has been well documented that Trump's rise was used politically by parties of the far-right in other countries. Those parties also were hit by a negative impact when Trump lost (Turnbull-Dugarte and Rama 2021). What of his effects on Africa? This volume has also not been a comparative study which would have enabled us to measure impact against another president. Furthermore, it is also difficult to know the longer lasting effects of a president because, although immediate evaluations are important, hindsight will give the advantage to future authors.

We can, however, specify the nature of the Presidential impact based on the case study areas surveyed. This was mostly to accelerate existing causal forces. But the effects on racism were more profound, and his failure to contribute towards successful management of the pandemic show that, even though executive office holder is not necessarily provided a strong set of levers, poor leadership does have profound effects.

Moreover, his presidency does also demonstrates the utility of using the layered framework for understanding the impact of political leaders. Political leaders' effects can be diverse are not limited to political regimes or electoral politics. Capturing the complexity of these effects should be a central concern for policy studies. The conceptual tools developed in this volume should be therefore be helpful to assess the effect of other political leaders, within and beyond America.

Notes

1. There is a contradiction in focussing on the role of ideas, but not considering how these ideas take the form of discourses to become causally efficacious, in affecting how people think and act. It follows that critical realists should identify how these discourses become widespread, who (if anyone) creates them and for what purposes.

2. It is important to note that there are more detailed steps in the conceptual development of the structure and agency relationship in the strategic relational approach. See Jessop (2005, 48–53). This is deliberately simplified here.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

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