

Donald Trump's presidency will be a stress-test for American politics

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Six weeks from now, Donald Trump will enter the White House as the 45th president of the United States. Ahead of Trump's inauguration, [William G. Howell](#) poses three questions that he argues those who study American politics should be asking: does the political system require a base level of virtue after all; will the office of the presidency discipline Donald Trump; and what awaits the two major parties? Asking such questions will shed light on both Trump and the political institutions we thought we knew.



William Howell will be speaking at the LSE Government Event, 'Thinking about the Trump presidency' on January 17th, 2017. [More information and ticketing.](#)

Like so many others, I am deeply troubled over the recent election of Donald J. Trump. Six weeks out, I also remain unsure about the best way to gather myself and my fellow citizens for the coming four years. And dear Lord, let they only be four.

Smart colleagues of mine insist that we call out every Trumpian offense on the grounds that he not be “normalized.” I applaud their determination, but I’m not confident that either I or the American people can keep pace with a man who provokes daily. I also worry about the dangers of arguing with Trump on his own terms. With insults gleefully fired from his Twitter feed like shrapnel, I’m concerned that we’ll lose sight of the bigger affronts to democracy as we frantically pick off the small ones.

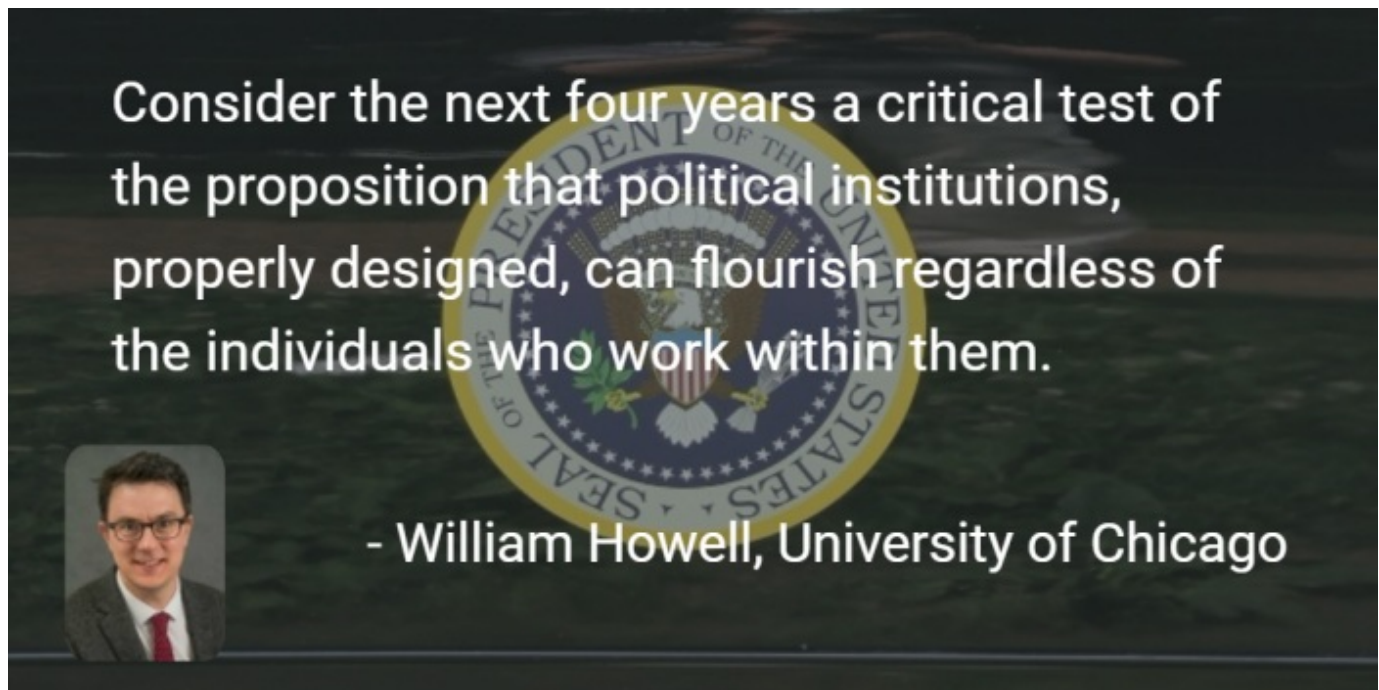
Still, I’m having trouble figuring out what the central object of our resistance ought to be. Attacks on the basic rule of law? The casual scorn directed at the norms of international relations? The self-serving disregard for the truth? The racism, misogyny, and nativism that Trump not only legitimates but emboldens? With so much in play politically, it’s nearly impossible to name the primary threat that this man poses.

As one who studies the American presidency for a living, though, I think I still have my scholarly wits about me. I don’t have answers. To my mind, though, three questions need to be asked; or, more exactly, asked anew.

Here’s the first: *Does our political system require a base level of virtue after all?* The Founders looked rather dimly upon the capacity of average citizens to govern. The Founders also deeply distrusted the propensity of anyone to promote the general welfare once in office. They therefore built into our system of government all sorts of protections—separation of powers, staggered elections, the indirect election of presidents and Senators—against the twin evils of mob rule and tyranny.

The Founders did not think that public service would turn good men—and then, they were only men—into great. Nor did the Founders vest much hope in the possibility that only exceptional men would rise to power. Instead, they devoted their energies to building a system of government that would intermittently check and redirect the impulses of flawed, self-regarding men toward something that approximated the common good. Rather than holding out hope that vice might be transmuted into virtue, the Founders accepted human nature as immutable. They then set the vice of one against that of many—letting ambition check ambition, in James Madison’s words—in the conviction that the general public might yet be served by imperfect people.

But perhaps this isn't quite right. Perhaps a Republic, if it is to be kept, requires that its stewards exhibit a modicum of magnanimity. In that space where rules give way to norms and when history offers no clear guidance, our polity may require persons of at least some character, skill, and spirit. In this most modern age, virtue may yet be required.



We'll soon find out. Never before has the United States elected a less experienced or more egotistical man to the nation's highest office. Never before has someone so impulsive inhabited the White House. Never before have the powers of the presidency been vested in someone like Trump. Consider the next four years a critical test of the proposition that political institutions, properly designed, can flourish regardless of the individuals who work within them.

Second: *Will the office discipline the man?* Over the last quarter century, most presidency scholars in political science have given up trying to read into personal biography vital lessons of leadership. Rather, their attention has shifted to the office of the presidency—its powers, constraints, and location within a larger governing system.

This scholarly turn was well warranted. The presidency is not made and remade with each passing election. Rather, the men who assume its powers are. Like it or not, presidents must conform to other people's expectations; their high-minded policy aspirations are trimmed by Congress and the courts; their daily schedules are filled with obligations not of their own choosing; their pronouncements are channeled through departments and agencies not of their making; and their legacies are ultimately forged by events not of their controlling. Rather than burrow into the heads and hearts of men, scholars rightly focus on the design of political institutions. While each president leaves his own mark on history, each also is humbled by the institutions that shape and define his time in office.

I still think this is true. The open question, however, is *how* true it is. Trump, after all, does not hold the presidency, and certainly not the other legislative, judicial, and bureaucratic institutions that make up the federal government, in especially high regard. To the contrary, his entire campaign was fueled by an open disdain for most anything that resembled establishment or expertise.

Trump's rhetoric, though, is not the real source of uncertainty. It's the lessons he himself has drawn from this past year. Trump made a mockery of those extra-constitutional institutions—parties, interest groups, and the media—that are meant to discipline presidential candidates. And he won. Without any significant endorsements, with a relatively small war chest, and lacking significant support from his own party, Trump rose first to prominence and then to power. During the transition period, he then eschewed the counsel of the nation's intelligence corps,

surrounded himself with loyalists, and laid waste to all manner of governing conventions, one Tweet at a time.

When he eventually settles into the White House, Trump may yet change. But we have no assurances that he will do so to anyone's satisfaction. Contrary to the claims of many, Trump certainly didn't adopt a more "presidential" persona when he became the Republican nominee or when he won the election. Who is to say that the office of the presidency—much less Congress or the courts—will finally set things right?

Third: *What awaits the two major parties?* In the near term, of course, Democrats have the most to answer for. Since 2008, they have ceded to the Republican Party a majority of state legislatures, governorships, and both chambers of Congress. In this last presidential election, Democrats put forward their most prominent member to run against a reality television star whose disapproval ratings held persistently above 60 percent. And then she lost.

Republicans, however, face a reckoning of their own. Demographic changes continue to drain the core of their party: whites, who in this last presidential election voted at a rate of more than 2-to-1 in favor of Trump, make up a diminishing proportion of the electorate in these not-especially-united states. According to some projections, whites will lose their majority status by 2044.

But Republicans confront a more immediate challenge. They just elected a president who does not care a lick about their party, and who relishes every opportunity to dispense with Republican orthodoxies: that Russia is a major threat to the United States; that markets are best left alone; that free trade contributes to growth; and that our leaders should uphold basic standards of decency and morality. In many ways, Trump is a Republican in name only. For most of his adult life, he courted the approval of Democrats, not members of his only recently adopted party. Those faithful Republicans who measure success by the advancement of key principles rather than the latest electoral returns have every reason to be vigilant this coming presidential term.

In the months and years ahead, there will be more to watch (not to mention oppose, decry, and fear). But these three questions are a start. Asking them, we may learn about more than the man we just elected president. We may also learn something about the political institutions we thought we knew before Trump ever came on scene.

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