

Professor William G. Howell’s “Thinking about the Trump Presidency”



*MSc student **Karen Lugo Londoño** explores the questions raised at the recent Department of Government ‘**Thinking about the Trump presidency**’ public lecture at LSE on Tuesday 17 January with speaker Professor Will Howell. Listen to the **podcast recording** of the event.*

Ruminating on the Trump presidency can be both a frustrating and frightening exercise. The discourse that characterised President Trump’s presidential campaign, among other things, has left many in the United States and abroad worried. Trump’s speeches, tweets and interviews have confused and scared many observers not only because of their often-vitriolic content, but also because of their glaring lack of specificity regarding his (few and often inconsistent) policy positions.

What *does* the Trump presidency mean for the United States and its citizens? What effect will it have on the state of race relations in America? How will it affect the status and treatment of women? What about the role and freedom of the press? Climate change?

Will he build a wall on the US-Mexico border? How will he manage relations with Russia? With Israel? With Cuba? With the many Americans who have taken to the streets in protest, marching to a rally cry of “**not my president**”?

What a Trump presidency will look like is a question no one can truly answer—perhaps not even the ever-unpredictable President himself.

That being said, however, it would not be surprising if many of those who attended Professor William Howell’s short but thought-provoking public lecture, “**Thinking about the Trump Presidency**,” were expecting to hear such questions answered.

Instead Will Howell, a Professor at the University of Chicago, surprised attendants by choosing to look beyond the immediate realities of the Trump presidency and focus on what he described as ‘more enduring questions.’ His lecture, therefore, concentrated more on challenging his audience

to think long-term and to contemplate the effect that Trump's electoral victory (and all that it symbolises) may have on the future of the American political system.

Dr. Howell's Three Questions:

- *What does the Trump Presidency mean for the Republican Party?*

As Professor Howell and many others have noted, the core tenets of Trump's presidential campaign actually **oppose Republican party orthodoxy** on a variety of issues, such as free trade, limited government and Russia.

Throughout his campaign, Trump showed skepticism regarding free trade, deviating from his party's positive stance on the issue. He has criticised the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as "**catastrophe[s]**" for American manufacturing jobs, promising to renegotiate the former and **abandon** the latter. Trump's **proposals** to increase government spending on infrastructure in order to accelerate economic growth and create jobs, as well as his apparent willingness to intervene in the economy on a selective basis, do not ring strongly of orthodox Republicanism.

In many ways, Professor Howell argued, Trump is really only a Republican in name. What will this mean for the future of the Republican Party? Will it be remade in Trump's image? Will the party be restored to its former image instead? Professor Howell, did not provide answers, pointing only to a time of reflection and change for the Republican Party.

- *What might the Trump Presidency reveal about American political institutions? What is the status of virtue in American politics?*

The President of the United States is not directly elected.

The Founders of the U.S., as Professor Howell described in his lecture and his **article**, were skeptical of the wisdom of the average citizen and wary of unconstrained majority rule. These were men who feared tyranny and the election of a demagogue. This, in turn, affected how they created the American electoral and political system. The **Electoral College** system, which restrains the effect of the popular vote, was put in place in order to prevent an unsuitable candidate from entering office. The Electors, envisioned by the Founders to be a group of enlightened individuals with the ability to make more informed choices, could go against the popular vote and the will of the people if they perceived the President-elect un-befitting.

It is ironic that quite the opposite has occurred. Even more ironic, Professor Howell dryly noted, is the fact that Trump has profited from the very system that he has repeatedly decried as a "**disaster for democracy**," claiming that electoral outcomes do not converge with the will of the people.

According to Professor Howell, the Founders made sure to build a system of government where competition between the separate (but equal) branches of government could restrain personal ambition and better allow for the success of policies that could serve the general public. Since "**ambition would check ambition**," there was a belief that the system would provide enough restraints so as to ensure that the virtue of the individual in office would not much matter in the end.

The Trump presidency, Professor Howell has predicted, will put this system to the test. Does the United States truly have a system that can counteract and correct personal failings, or is some basic level of virtue necessary for the system to work?

- *How much will the Office of the President remake the man?*

To some extent, as Professor Howell argued, the presidency and all it entails has been shown to change a man—to this day, only men have occupied the role. That being said, he wondered in his lecture how much of an effect the presidency will have on Trump since the President, as **his** anti-

establishment campaign and his **many contradicting views** of the country's intelligence agencies show, seems not to deeply respect it nor the institutions that make up the federal government. The Constitution, the established Washington bureaucracy and pre-existing treaties may-well restrain Trump to an extent, but will they change him?

Professor Howell seemed skeptical of the prospects for change in President Trump. After Trump's electoral victory, many hoped that he would become more 'presidential'—something Trump **claimed** he was quite capable of but not yet willing to become, claiming he would do so later-on at "some point." So far, it is difficult (if not impossible) to say that presidential behavior has been demonstrated throughout either his campaign or the two-month transition period.

Will the office change the man? One cannot help but feel an extreme sense of doubt. Considering Trump's inability to receive or internalise any sort of criticism and his apparent preoccupation with **loyalty** over ability or experience (as demonstrated by many of his controversial **nominees** for Cabinet), the prospects for change seem grim.

No Answers

Professor Howell's naming of his lecture as "Thinking on the Trump Presidency" was apt. His lecture was something that left one thinking. Stewing, even. He offered no answers and he made no attempt to. Instead he offered questions—more questions! In some sense, this may have been disappointing to those who feel bereft and seek answers in a time of confusion and pessimism. But in focusing on questions rather than answers, Professor Howell's lecture both demonstrated a great deal of pragmatism and honesty, and reflected the confusing reality in which we are operating today. Furthermore, by highlighting questions regarding American institutions, he urged his audience to look beyond these next four years and to see yet another dimension of the threat Trump poses.

Who knows what the Trump presidency will look like or what effect it will have? There is a great deal of speculation in the media, but no real answers. Trump is inexperienced, unpredictable and has been seen to often flip-flop in his opinions. Credible answers are difficult to come by, now-a-days.

At this moment, no one has the answers to the questions set out at the beginning of this article—much less to the questions set out by Professor Howell. But starting from Friday 20th January 2017 and continuing for four long years, answers will begin to emerge. Trump may yet surprise the world—whether that will be a positive prospect or not, is yet another question.



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Note: this article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Department of Government, nor of the London School of Economics.



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