

Trump's Diminishing Power and Rising Rage

PS project-syndicate.org/commentary/weaker-trump-more-unstable-and-dangerous-by-jeffrey-d-sachs-2018-11

Nov 12, 2018 Jeffrey D. Sachs

12 novembre 2018



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The coming months may be especially dangerous for America and the world. As US President Donald Trump's political position weakens and the obstacles facing him grow, his mental instability will pose an ever-greater danger.

NEW YORK – The drama of Donald Trump's presidency has centered around whether an extremist president would be able to carry out an extremist policy agenda against the will of the majority of Americans. So far the answer has been no, and the midterm elections make it far less likely. Yet Trump's rising frustrations could push him over the edge psychologically, with potentially harrowing consequences for American democracy and the world.



Nov 12, 2018 [Jeffrey D. Sachs](#) worries that the result of the US midterm elections is exacerbating the president's mental instability.

None of Trump's extremist policy ideas has received public support. The public opposed last year's Republican-backed corporate tax cut, Trump's effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), his proposed border wall with Mexico, the decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear agreement, and the imposition of tariff increases on China, Europe, and others. At the same time, contrary to Trump's relentless promotion of fossil fuels (coal, oil, and gas), the public favors investments in renewable energy and remaining in the Paris climate agreement.

Trump has tried to implement his radical agenda using three approaches. The first has been to rely on the Republican majorities in the two houses of Congress to pass legislation in the face of strong popular opposition. That approach succeeded once, with the 2017 corporate tax cut, because big Republican donors insisted on the measure, but it failed with Trump's attempt to repeal Obamacare, as three Republican senators balked.

The second approach has been to use executive orders to circumvent Congress. Here the courts have repeatedly intervened, most recently within days of the election, when a federal district court halted work on the Keystone XL Pipeline, a project strongly opposed by environmentalists, on the grounds that the Trump administration had failed to present a "reasoned explanation" for its actions. Trump repeatedly and dangerously oversteps his authority, and the courts keep pushing back.

Trump's third tactic has been to rally public opinion to his side. Yet, despite his frequent rallies, or perhaps because of them and their incendiary vulgarity, Trump's disapproval rating has exceeded his approval rating since the earliest days of his administration. His current overall disapproval rating is 54%, versus 40% approval, with strong approval from around 25% of the public. There has been no sustained move in Trump's direction.

In the midterm elections, which Trump himself described as a referendum on his presidency, the Democratic candidates for both the House and Senate vastly outpolled their Republican opponents. In the House races, Democrats received 53,314,159 votes nationally, compared with 48,439,810 for Republicans. In the Senate races, Democrats outpolled Republicans by 47,537,699 votes to 34,280,990.



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Summing up votes by party for the three recent election cycles (2014, 2016, and 2018), Democratic Senate candidates outpolled Republican candidates by roughly 120 million to 100 million. Nonetheless, the Republicans hold a slight majority in the Senate, where each state is represented by two senators, regardless of the size of its population, because they tend to win their seats in less populous states, whereas Democrats prevail in the major coastal and Midwestern states. Wyoming, for example, elects two Republican senators to represent its nearly 580,000 residents, while California's more than 39 million residents elect two Democratic senators. Democrats win more votes, but Republicans win more seats.

Without control of the House, however, Trump will no longer be able to enact any unpopular legislation. Only policies with bipartisan support will have a chance of passing both chambers.

On the economic front, Trump's trade policies will become even less popular in the months ahead as the American economy cools from the "sugar high" of the corporate tax cut, as growing uncertainty about global trade policy hampers business investment, and as both

the budget deficit and interest rates rise. Trump's phony national-security justifications for raising tariffs will also be challenged politically and perhaps in the courts.

True, Trump will be able to continue appointing conservative federal judges and most likely win their confirmation in the Republican-majority Senate. And on issues of war and peace, Trump will operate with terrifyingly little oversight by Congress or the public, an affliction of the US political system since World War II. Trump, like his recent predecessors, will most likely keep America mired in wars in the Middle East and Africa, despite the lack of significant public understanding or support.

Nonetheless, there are three further reasons to believe that Trump's hold on power will weaken significantly in the coming months. First, Special Counsel Robert Mueller may very well document serious malfeasance by Trump, his family members, and/or his close advisers. Mueller kept a low profile in the run-up to the election. We will most likely hear from him soon.

Second, the House Democrats will begin to investigate Trump's taxes and personal business dealings, including through congressional subpoenas. There are strong reasons to believe that Trump has committed serious tax evasion (as the *New York Times* recently outlined) and has illegally enriched his family as president (a lawsuit that the courts have allowed to proceed alleges violations of the emoluments clause of the Constitution). Trump is likely to ignore or fight the subpoenas, setting the stage for a major political crisis.

Third, and most important, Trump is not merely an extremist politician. He suffers from what author Ian Hughes has recently called "a disordered mind," filled with hate, paranoia, and narcissism. According to two close observers of Trump, the president's grip on reality "will likely continue to diminish" in the face of growing political obstacles, investigations into his taxes and business dealings, Mueller's findings, and an energized political opposition. We may already be seeing that in Trump's erratic and aggressive behavior since the election.

The coming months may be especially dangerous for America and the world. As Trump's political position weakens and the obstacles facing him grow, his mental instability will pose an ever-greater danger. He could explode in rage, fire Mueller, and perhaps try to launch a war or claim emergency powers in order to restore his authority. We have not yet seen Trump in full fury, but may do so soon, as his room for maneuver continues to narrow. In that case, much will depend on the performance of America's constitutional order.

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