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Donald Trump and the Prospect for American Democracy (Book Review)

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Donald Trump and the Prospect for American Democracy (Book Review)

Abstract

Reviewed Title: *Donald Trump and the Prospect for American Democracy: An Unprecedented President in an Age of Polarization* by Arthur Paulson. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. 180 pp. ISBN 9781498561723.

Keywords

book review, Donald Trump and the Prospect for American Democracy, President, polarization, Arthur Paulson

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had approval ratings below 50 percent for most of his presidency, but because trust in government was significantly lower, his IPL was often high. This example illustrates the need for complementary qualitative case studies, as Ponder concludes, to examine how presidents, their staffs, and Congress build upon public approval and trust in government to pursue policymaking opportunities (p. 160). The theoretical framework, empirically rich analysis, and thoughtful assessment presented in this book provide a foundation for future scholarship on executive leadership, public opinion, and policymaking.

MEENA BOSE
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Donald Trump and the Prospect for American Democracy: An Unprecedented President in an Age of Polarization by Arthur Paulson. Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. 180 pp. \$90.00.

Despite its title, this book contains very little about Donald Trump. He is almost incidental to the narrative, which concerns the historical, institutional, and ideological context of the 2016 election. A reader may suspect that the book would have been called *Hillary Clinton and . . .* if a few states in the Electoral College had turned out differently. The discussion of Trump is largely confined to the beginning and end, and it is not particularly insightful.

No admirer of the current president—his behavior is called “tasteless, immature, and divisive,” and he is condemned for promoting ignorance, disunity, and great danger—Arthur Paulson has a habit of using the word *certainly* in a way that does not encourage dialogue with those who do not share his loathing (pp. 136, 150). Trump was “certainly the least experienced presidential candidate ever,” Trump “certainly aggravates” the threat to American democracy, and Trump “certainly” has done “visible harm to both freedom and democracy” (pp. 75, 145, 149).

Right or wrong, the 63 million Americans who voted for Trump in 2016, and the more than 40 percent of the citizenry who approve of his presidency, have a different perspective, and it should not be dismissed out of hand in a scholarly book. Paulson does concede that our current political problems cannot all be attributed to Trump, writing that he is “much more a product” of contemporary “political polarization than its cause” (p. 7).

The excellence of this book is found in its deep contextual themes, not in its glib criticisms of Trump. Understandably, Paulson’s summaries of party history and electoral trends are marked by greater breadth than depth, but they are perceptive overviews. The book is bolstered by two dozen tables,

graphs, and maps, including an interesting “modern” versus “traditional” values alignment-with-issues table (p. 89).

Paulson makes an important point when he writes, “To those who argue that Trump violates American values, the answer is that he violates one corner of our culture while upholding another” (p. 8). His placing of Trump in a historical stream of populism and nationalism (“isolationism”) is on target (pp. 8–9). Citing pluralist theory, Paulson points out that American democracy is not all that democratic. We get a sense that he likes it this way, preferring an “intervening structure of elites” rather than “majority rule” (p. 135). As a centrist, Paulson is suspicious of Trump’s link to “extreme” manifestations of populism within the two-party system (pp. 2, 141–145). To his credit, the author acknowledges that “the question of social class inequality” is seldom addressed in U.S. politics (p. 146).

In addition to the misleading title, there are a few small errors in the book. Examples include the anachronistic label “segregationist” when describing George Wallace in 1972 (p. 28). The book incorrectly downplays the role of ideology within the early twentieth-century southern Democratic Party (p. 20). Theodore Roosevelt is inaccurately called an example of the “Main Street faction” of the GOP when, in fact, his 1904 and 1912 campaigns were thoroughly backed by Wall Street (p. 31).

The surprising thing is not that Paulson makes an occasional error, but rather that he makes so few, given the breadth of his subject matter. He has a near-encyclopedic grasp of American political history. The book is a sweeping overview while still being succinct—no small feat when working within the confines of 150 pages of text. Regardless of its sometimes tenuous link to Trump, the book is well worth reading.

JEFF TAYLOR
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Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism: U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security, 1920–2015 by Melvyn P. Leffler. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2017. 360 pp. \$39.95.

This collection of essays, including the eminent diplomatic historian Melvyn P. Leffler’s first in 1972 up to his contemporary scholarship, is a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Covering everything from the Herbert Hoover administration to the post–September 11 world, Leffler traces the interplay between the forces and impulses of capitalism and democracy through U.S. foreign policy. Typical of Leffler’s work, these essays are deeply researched, engagingly written, understanding of the complexity facing the policymakers of the past (that is to say, empathetic), and contemporarily relevant. This is a