

BROOKINGS

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Four scenarios for a Trump presidency

[Darrell M. West](#) Monday, November 14, 2016

With the election victory of Donald Trump, there are questions concerning the type of president he will be. As I have argued in my new book *Megachange*, we live in an era of large-scale transformation and therefore need to consider a range of possibilities, such as him succeeding as a traditional Republican, becoming a popular rogue, failing as president, or becoming an authoritarian leader. It is hard to predict which one is most likely or whether overtime he will move through several of these stages, but these are perspectives through which to envision his future. Back in early March, my colleague [Philip Wallach wrote presciently on what might happen if Trump were elected](#), and now that the Republican nominee's election is a reality, I offer my take on the four possible Trumps.

Traditional Republican – During the campaign, candidate Trump took a variety of conventional and unconventional GOP positions. Like past leaders of his party, he endorsed tax cuts, deregulation, and Obamacare repeal. He spoke about the need for law and order, and talked tough on terrorism. At the same time, though, he challenged his party's thinking on entitlement reform and free trade, and claimed that past deals have sold out American workers in the Rust Belt.

In coordination with Republican majorities in the House and Senate, a President Trump could resolve this ideological dissonance by emphasizing the GOP orthodoxy of tax cuts, deregulation, and Obamacare, and downplaying his less conventional stances. On trade, for example, he could open World Trade Organization proceedings against countries he thinks are engaging in unfair practices and seek bilateral trade agreements with greater protections for U.S. workers. With the infamous Mexico wall, he could spend years building the initial miles along the border and claim he was meeting his campaign pledge.

Administratively, he could turn policymaking details over to Vice President Mike Pence, House Speaker Paul Ryan, and Chief of Staff Reince Priebus. In this situation, Pence would be the de facto prime minister of the government. The trio surely would move Trump policies

much closer to traditional GOP preferences on many issues. President Trump could pontificate in press conferences and public speeches, but his administration would follow the long-term policy arc of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. Republicans would use their majority power to end gridlock and jam legislation through on a partisan basis. Republican voters would love him for breaking gridlock and taking decisive action, while Democrats would hate him for downsizing government.

Popular Rogue – In the race for the White House, Trump alternated between Teleprompter Trump who stayed on message and was reasonably calm and Bombastic Don who attacked opponents and insulted adversaries beyond measure. On a number of occasions, his personal behavior was insufferable and resulted in rude and demeaning comments about women, minorities, and immigrants.

In a Trump presidency, voters may discount this behavior and see him as a popular rogue, someone who breaks the conventional rules but performs effectively. This scenario would feature a populist Trump who would continue to attack the Establishment and seek to represent the little guy. He would speak out against illegal immigration, push congressional term limits, insult opponents, pass child care deductions, and take meaningful steps to promote opportunities for the voters who elected him. As he promised on the campaign trail, he would protect Social Security and Medicare despite pressure within his own ranks to restructure them or make major cuts. His relations with the GOP would be fraught with tension because some of these positions are anathema to it, but ordinary people would appreciate that he was fighting for them. Overtime, he might remake the Republican coalition and make his party less beholden to large interests.

There are many examples of popular rogues in American history: Governor Huey Long, Mayor James Curley, Governor Edwin Edwards, and Mayor Buddy Cianci. These individuals were flamboyant, outrageous, and sometimes even unethical, yet still popular with their constituents. They tapped the same frustrations Trump does, that elites don't care about ordinary people and the system is rigged against the little guy.

Failed President – Trump starts his presidency as someone who lost the popular ballot by two million votes and stirred great discontent among women, young people, minorities, and immigrants. In this situation, he likely will have no honeymoon and his popular support probably will fall during his term. This could happen in a variety of ways. There could be scandals involving sex or money. After all the campaign disclosures about Trump's personal

behavior, there are questions about whether he can keep his hands off women for four years. In addition, even early in his administration planning, the president-elect seems shockingly oblivious to serious financial conflicts of interest on his transition team. Most of his advisors are corporate lobbyists or have ties to wealthy interests. As I note in my *Billionaires* book, many ultra-rich leaders elected in other countries such as Silvio Berlusconi of Italy practice crony capitalism and see themselves as above the law, and ultimately suffer legal or political recriminations.

Alternatively, there could be a policy backlash against concrete actions he takes. For example, what happens if millions of people lose health insurance following the repeal of Obamacare? What if Republicans privatize Medicare and rates go up or care goes down? What if Trump cozies up to Russian President Vladimir Putin? How will the country react if ordinary individuals lose their jobs because Republican tax cuts direct much of the money to the rich and there is a recession due to limited purchasing power from the middle class? A President Trump would not thrive during an economic slowdown because his business acumen is one of his greatest strengths with voters. President Obama has left his successor with a 5 percent unemployment rate and any major increase would devastate Trump's popularity. In this situation or in cases of major scandals, he likely would become a Jimmy Carter who only serves one term. History would judge him to have been a divisive and transient figure.

Authoritarian Leader – Violent protests or urban riots could destabilize society and lead President Trump to militarize local police, crack down on the opposition, and make it easier to sue dissenting voices. Rather than have Twitter outbursts, he could use law enforcement to get tough on protesters or have his White House chief strategist Steve Bannon orchestrate smear campaigns against opponents. Going even further, he could use the Internal Revenue Service to attack adversaries or provide the FBI with authority to spy on suspicious citizens. This is not without precedent as Lyndon Johnson used the FBI to spy on dissidents, while Richard Nixon employed people who broke into opposition party headquarters. Like these individuals, Trump is overly sensitive and prone to lashing out against perceived adversaries.

Several leading indicators would portend the emergence of an authoritarian Trump. Choosing to prosecute Hillary Clinton on flimsy grounds would violate long-established norms concerning peaceful transitions of power.

Firing top intelligence officials would suggest that Trump wants compliant people who will do his bidding against foreign and domestic adversaries.

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Appointing a partisan person to lead the Internal Revenue Service, FBI, or Department of Justice would signal possible threats to professional management. Restricting media access or making it easier for public officials to sue critics would send a dangerous sign that democracy is slipping and freedom of expression is under attack. Weakening voting rights in ways that disproportionately affects minorities would signal that he doesn't care about race relations and sees his political base mainly as white America. If there are actions like these which undermine democracy or hurt society as a whole, courageous citizens will have to step forward to defend the Constitution and reclaim the United States of America.

*Note: Darrell M. West is Vice President of Governance Studies and author of *Megachange: Economic Disruption, Political Upheaval, and Social Stride in the 21st Century* (Brookings Institution Press, 2016) and *Billionaires: Reflections on the Upper Crust* (Brookings Institution Press, 2014)*