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# In Triumph or Tragedy, Views of Trump Don't Waver

President's job-approval ratings have stayed within 9-point range since taking office, a smaller variance than for any modern predecessors

By *Gerald F. Seib* [Follow]
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President Trump arrived at Joint Base Andrews, in Maryland, late last month. KEVIN LAMARQUE/REUTERS

In the topsy-turvy, ever-changing, never-quiet era of President Trump, there is one constant: Americans' views of President Trump himself.

This is a remarkable finding, unusual by historical standards and puzzling considering the turmoil of the times. This picture affects politics today and may be the most important factor affecting the coming 2020 presidential election season.

Almost four years since Mr. Trump announced his presidential campaign, and more than two years since he took office, the public's opinion of him seems locked in, impervious to good news or bad. His base of support appears rock solid—but it also hasn't grown at all. A new Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll finds that his job-approval rating today—43%—is almost identical to the 44% rating Americans gave him one month after he took office.

This phenomenon has been on full display in recent days, when news of the conclusions from the investigation by special counsel Robert Mueller have had little obvious impact on the president's poll numbers. In fact, though, almost nothing does.

By historical standards, this is a highly unusual situation. A look back at poll numbers for the last 13 presidents shows that there has been less variation in public opinion

about Mr. Trump so far than for any of his predecessors.

In Journal/NBC News polling over the 26 months since Mr. Trump took office, the highest job-approval rating he has received is 47% and the lowest is 38%. That nine-point range is smaller than the range for any of Mr. Trump's modern predecessors.

By contrast, there was a 62-point swing in the approval ratings for George W. Bush during his two-term presidency, and a 65-point swing in views of Harry Truman during his nearly eight years in office. Mr. Bush's approval rating ranged as high as 88%, and as low as 26%. In comparable data from the Gallup poll, Mr. Truman's approval was as high as 87%, and as low as 22%.

For other presidents, job-approval ratings over time tended to swing by 30 or 40 percentage points. The previous president whose job-approval constancy was most comparable to Mr. Trump's was his immediate predecessor, President Obama, whose approval ratings moved in a 15-point range.

That finding may say something about the intense polarization of the times, in which people's views of a president are often set—and stay set—more because of the party he represents than the job he is doing.

Indeed, within Mr. Trump's overall poll numbers are essentially constant and diametrically opposed views by members of each party. Self-identified Republicans gave him an 86% job-approval one month into his term; today it's 85%. Just 9% of Democrats approved of his job in February 2017—exactly the same share as today. The little variation that's been seen in Mr. Trump's numbers comes entirely from independents.

## The public's opinion of President Trump appears to be locked in, impervious to good news or bad.

"This is straightforward," says William Galston, a political analyst at the Brookings Institution. "During his campaign and presidency, he has done everything in his power to solidify his base and nothing whatsoever to expand it."

This picture hasn't been altered by events, including news surrounding the investigations into the president and those around him. Mr. Trump's job-approval numbers dipped a bit back in 2017 when he fired FBI Director James Comey but hasn't budged after recent investigation developments. After his former campaign chairman Paul Manafort was found guilty of felony changes, Mr. Trump's job-approval rating stayed steady at 44%. After his former lawyer Michael Cohen was indicted it stood at 44%. After Mr. Cohen pleaded guilty to felony charges it was 43%. In the aftermath of Attorney General William Barr's summary of the Mueller investigation, it stands at 43%.

"These events have very little impact because people already have made their opinions," says Bill McInturff, a Republican pollster who co-directs the Journal/NBC News poll along with Democrat Jeff Horwitt.

That narrow band also provides the baseline for the 2020 presidential campaign. Mr. Trump starts with a solid and unwavering base. That base may expand as the question of re-election gets closer, of course. Job approval isn't the same as support in a campaign, when the president will be stacked up against a rival with his or her own flaws and shortcomings.

But for now, it's a level of support that doesn't appear sufficient to win re-election—at least not in a two-person, head-to-head race, when support of 45% or so of the electorate doesn't spell victory. This picture is why Democrats are so desperate to prevent former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz from entering the race as an independent candidate. In an election where the vote is split three ways, a base as solid as Mr. Trump's might be enough to spell victory.

"Bottom line, Democrats need a broad-based, non-threatening nominee who can wipe out any remaining rationale for a third, centrist candidate," says Mr. Galston.

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