
AMERICAN POLITICS

No Blank Check: The Origins and Consequences of Public Antipathy towards Presidential Power. By

Andrew Reeves and Jon C. Rogowski. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 321p. \$99.99 cloth, \$34.99 paper.

doi:10.1017/S1537592723001196

— Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha , *University of North Texas*
Matthew.Eshbaugh-Soha@unt.edu

Within days of their inauguration, presidents typically sign a flurry of executive orders to direct policy and satisfy campaign pledges. Although these orders require no approval from others in government, presidents may still face reprisal. After all, scholars who have studied the essence of presidential power without persuasion show how the legislature, the courts, and even the bureaucracy restrain the president's strategic use of their unilateral authority. These checks may be insufficient to thwart presidents, however, because presidents still rely on their executive authority to act even when these institutions may oppose it. Only recently has research begun to explore how public opinion may also constrain the president's unilateral powers. Yet the predominant view of this scholarship is that partisanship dictates the public's support or opposition to executive power, meaning that the public is unlikely to offer a reliable constraint on the abuse of executive action.

Andrew Reeves and Jon C. Rogowski seek to revisit this conclusion. Just as they recognize the immense authority associated with presidential power without persuasion and the risk to democracy should it go unchecked, they wonder whether partisanship is truly the dominant factor in the public's assessment of executive authority. They argue, instead, that the public acts as an enduring check on the abuse of executive power. Particularly when the president's desire to use executive action is contested by Congress, the authors explore how the public may hold the president accountable and contend that unilateral action is constrained by a public that is inherently skeptical of executive authority.

In contrast to scholarly views that Americans perceive presidential power through a partisan lens or that they support assertive presidential leadership (Chapter 1), Reeves and Rogowski maintain that "Americans harbor negative evaluations of presidential power and hold presidents accountable by withholding their support following its use" (p. 17). Foundational to American political culture, this view is consistent with the Founders' warnings about concentrated political power and the tyranny that may follow. Indeed, as they show in Chapter 3, Americans' overwhelming view "more power" as risky (p.70), a finding not affected by citizens' partisan affiliation or the party

of the president in power, although these variables still predict public approval of the president's job performance.

It is through this lens of public skepticism that the authors show the limits to public support for executive action, utilizing both experiments and thorough analysis of available survey data. One of the authors' most compelling findings concerns the strong relationship between support for the rule of law and less support for heightened unilateral authority (Chapter 4). Robustly, the rule of law constrains public support for unilateral action regardless of a respondent's public approval of the president. Its impact is largest over those with lower levels of political knowledge, or those who may be most persuadable by elite rhetoric. The effect also persists across several surveys conducted during both the Obama and Trump presidencies and for unilateral actions in policymaking, judicial appointments, and agency implementation. As reinforced in Chapter 5, respondents did not shift their opinion of executive action in response to their approval of the president's job performance, or as the presidency transitioned from Obama to Trump.

As Reeves and Rogowski demonstrate, presidents who act unilaterally on policy may face serious public costs to their presidencies and policies (Chapter 6). For instance, presidents enjoy higher levels of public support, at times, when they choose not to issue an executive order. Since the public prefers that presidents work with Congress rather than use unilateral action to achieve their policy goals, moreover, presidential candidates who advocate policy solutions through executive action lose public support. Public support decreases for presidents who prefer unilateral action across multiple other dimensions, as well, including public perceptions of presidential leadership and support for the rule of law. Nevertheless, presidents may receive greater support from the public when they pursue popular policies through executive action.

The remaining chapters serve several purposes. First, Chapter 7 extends the authors' experimental evidence for the public's skepticism of executive power in the abstract to specific examples of presidential action, which adds external validity to their findings. Respondents' level of support for an actual policy is strongly associated with support for executive action. For example, the likelihood of support for an executive action to close the "gun-show loophole" is 20% lower among those who disapprove of presidents using executive orders (p. 176). Thus, it is not just the policy, but the means presidents use to attain that policy that matters to a large portion of the public. Second, public concerns about executive power are not recent phenomena; they extend at least to the Franklin Roosevelt Administration with survey evidence for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), desegregation of the military, and steel seizure. Third, the authors show that their findings generalize beyond the U.S. context to other forms

of executive governance in the rest of the Americas and Africa (Chapter 8). Much like in the U.S. context, for example, an increase in support for the rule of law decreases support for executive power. Moreover, public support for democracy correlates with less support for unilateral power, although the finding weakens among those who approve of the current executive office holder, at least in the Americas (p. 210).

No Blank Check is an impressive book. It details how public skepticism about unilateral authority constrains the president's efforts to affect policy change through executive action and contrasts with the view that partisanship drives public support for unilateral action. The book covers the topic from virtually every angle save one: how is the public to know about a president's abuses? The public's check on the abuse of unilateral action is greatest when all voters are fully informed (p. 158). Thus, public skepticism of executive action alone may be insufficient to limit the abuse of executive power absent a dependable source of information about executive action. Unfortunately, the reliability of a public check on executive authority may depend upon news media that do more to entertain than to inform, and that report the official line more than they investigate. Moreover, if presidents can strategically downplay their executive actions (p. 158), then they may be able to deflect public skepticism and abuse their authority, anyway. Elections provide another way for the public to punish an abusive executive, even though they, too, may be ineffective. The 2020 election suggests, after all, that partisan politics will trump voters' purported preference for the rule of law. These concerns about whether Americans will constrain executive abuses, especially at a time when both political parties contend that their version of democracy is under attack, are left to future research to investigate.

Reeves and Rogowski have written a book accessible to all students of political science. As a sophisticated evaluation of the public's role in limiting the excesses of unilateral action, though, it is most appropriate for scholars and graduate students of executive politics and public opinion. The findings are robust and compelling, and the conclusions hopeful. That public support for the rule of law appears to be an enduring and stable check on presidential power is reassuring when one may presume that a polarized public would support the abuse of executive power so long as it was their president who abused it.

Democracy's Child: Young People and the Politics of Control, Leverage, and Agency. By Alison L. Gash and Daniel J. Tichenor. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.

259p. \$27.95 cloth.

doi:10.1017/S1537592723001718

— Zoe Oxley , Union College
oxleyz@union.edu

A bill was introduced in the US Senate that would prohibit social media usage for children under the age of 13. A nine-

year-old was killed in a mass shooting. A Montana legislator was barred from the floor of the state house after she spoke against a bill that would prevent minors from receiving gender-affirming health care. Legislation that would loosen regulations on child labor had been passed in multiple states.

That is a sampling of items that were in the news during one week in the spring of 2023. There was nothing particularly unusual about that week's news topics. Throughout the 2020s, children and issues affecting children have featured prominently in social and political discourse. In that regard, there is nothing particularly unusual about the 2020s, as Alison Gash and Daniel Tichenor compellingly argue in *Democracy's Child*. "Children are a regular focal point of democratic politics," they write, and controversies involving children are not only "waged in legislatures, courts, government agencies, and elections but also in schools, boardrooms, hospitals, churches, athletic fields, and bathrooms" (p. 14). Gash and Tichenor present a wealth of evidence in support of their conclusions, organized around the themes of control, leverage, and agency.

Governing children often requires delineating when and how young people should be controlled, protected, or granted autonomy. Indeed, there are a dizzying array of laws, policies, and court cases pertaining to children. To help navigate among them, Gash and Tichenor classify policies along two dimensions: whether a policy aims to control children or expand their autonomy and whether the policy advances the interests of children or of others. The resulting four categories include two that place controls on young people. On the one hand, paternalistic laws do so in furtherance of children's best interests, such as regulating child labor and providing social welfare benefits to minors. On the other hand, the subjugation category includes policies that limit the interests of children while promoting others' interests (e.g., ending a child's formal education due to parental religious preferences and parental consent requirements for abortions). Similarly, practices that enhance children's autonomy can be designed to further children's interests (protecting student speech on school grounds) or can instead result in abandoning children while serving the goals of others (treating children as adults in the criminal justice system). This conceptual framework is one of the major contributions of Gash and Tichenor's book. It helpfully illuminates differences across various policies, identifies which policies are best placed in the blurry boundaries between their categories, and allows scholars to trace historical changes in both our understanding of childhood and in who is thought to be best positioned to protect children (for instance, fathers or the state).

Beyond the realm of policies that focus on children, young people can be leveraged in political debates regarding policies that tangentially, if at all, pertain to them.