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US politics

What to expect from President Trump

In his second term, President Trump is taking a far less cautious approach to the role of president than he did in his first term. A huge number of radical executive orders, more far-reaching than any recent president, has created both alarm and excitement, depending on one's political persuasion. Critics claim that Trump is ignoring the Constitution and that the USA is heading towards dictatorship, which is precisely what the Founding Fathers were attempting to prevent.

The Trump cabinet

Nearly all of Trump's appointments have provoked controversy. Many people are concerned that Elon Musk, as head of the Department of Government Efficiency, has major conflicts of interest and will personally benefit from his cuts to spending and personnel. Other appointments include:

- Tulsi Gabbard as director of national intelligence – an appointment warmly welcomed by the Russian media.
- Pete Hegseth as defense secretary – a former television presenter with no political experience.
- Robert Kennedy Jr as health secretary – a renowned vaccine sceptic and conspiracy theorist.

Despite concerns, these appointments have all been confirmed by the Senate.

Relations with Congress

A-level politics students are taught that one of the main powers of the House of Representatives is the 'power of the purse' – the right to set spending levels. Trump is disregarding this through his attempts to control federal spending and by giving Elon Musk the job of cutting spending and drastically reducing the number of federal employees.

So far, Congress seems to be struggling to present any sort of challenge to Trump. Both Houses of Congress have a small Republican majority, creating a united government. However, the Republican Party contains some senators and representatives, such as Lisa Murkowski, who are not fully signed up to the MAGA (Make America Great Again) agenda. So far, they have not mounted any challenges, possibly fearing primaries or a social media backlash.

The Democrats are still recovering from their election defeat. However, there is the distinct possibility of government shutdowns if some Democratic politicians do not support the new spending plans.

Approach to the Constitution

Trump has argued that Article II of the Constitution – the section defining the role of the executive – gives him the ‘right to do whatever I want as president’. Critics argue that this is totally inaccurate, particularly in law-making, where the president’s role is to implement rather than create policy.

Some of President Trump’s executive orders are likely to end up in the Supreme Court, and many have already been blocked by federal judges. For example, the birthright citizenship decree, which aims to limit citizenship rights, has been described by a judge as ‘blatantly unconstitutional’ and a direct breach of the fourteenth amendment.

Trump and Musk’s attack on the civil service can also be seen as an attempt to politicise it. Again, this challenges the constitutional principle of checks and balances by removing officials that oppose their actions on the basis of their legality.

The Supreme Court

By the end of February 2025, around 80 cases had been launched challenging Trump, and some of these will eventually reach the Supreme Court. Although the court includes three Trump appointees and is seen as being conservative, there is no guarantee that the justices will always back him. The sheer volume of executive orders is difficult for the US court system to deal with. Justice systems operate slowly and carefully, so blocking Trump’s actions will take a long time and may be impossible or come too late.

Trump’s aims

The new administration is interested in immigration (far less of it), slashing environmental regulation (‘drill, baby, drill’) and imposing tariffs to grow the US economy. Trump is also committed to ending anti-discrimination measures, known as diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).

Foreign policy is always a focus for presidents and is the area where they have most authority, as commander-in-chief. Under Trump, a clear and dramatic break with post-Second World War alliances is taking place. Trump and his Vice President JD Vance are deeply hostile towards Europe, expansionist towards Canada and Greenland, and there is a diplomatic pivot towards Russia. Consecutive US presidents have been supportive of Israel, but President Trump has taken this far further by calling for the citizens of Gaza to be resettled in Egypt and Jordan, and by expressing an interest in Gaza as a real-estate opportunity.

Use of executive orders

Although they are not mentioned in the Constitution, all presidents make good use of executive orders. However, Trump signed more (around 70) in his first 10 days in office than any recent president in their first 100 days. Critics are concerned that some of these are beyond his constitutional powers. The orders include a ban on transgender members of the army, the imposition of tariffs on China, Mexico and Canada, and a declaration that there are only two sexes.

An imperial presidency?

So far it does appear that President Trump is fitting into the 'imperial presidency' mould. This is the theory, developed by historian Arthur Schlesinger in the 1970s, suggesting that US presidents have too much power, particularly in relation to the office of president and their domination of foreign policy.

In less than 2 years American voters will be able to let Trump know if they approve, at the midterm elections. Approval or not will probably hinge on whether he has managed to meet his promise to improve the domestic economy and make the average American feel better off.

Student task

1 Review Schlesinger's theory of the imperial presidency. How far does Trump appear to be an imperial president?

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