

Daniel E. Ponder, Presidential Leverage:
Presidents, Approval, and the American State

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- 1 Daniel E. Ponder, *Presidential Leverage: Presidents, Approval, and the American State*
- 2 Stanford University Press, 2018. Pp. 222. ISBN: 9781503604063
- 3 Marcus Walsh-Führung
- 4 In the United States, the polling of data has become the method for the analysis of the public's political leverage in the constraining of government actions. Political scientists and pundits measure the success of presidents by analyzing public opinion of the administration and the trust in the government to demonstrate effectiveness of its policy agenda. The book, *Presidential Leverage: Presidents, Approval, and the American State*, by Daniel E. Ponder creates a strong case for the theoretical claim that the fluctuation in public opinion of the president and trust in the government determines the President's political leverage in implementing his/her policy agenda.
- 5 The book analyzes the developments of exogenous pressure on the institutional relationship between the president and Congress in the political system. In his analysis, the author brings the state back into the political science discussion by expanding on the mechanisms used by the executive branch to consolidate power. In doing so, the author places the president at the center of the discussion when it comes to limiting political discontent and addressing demands from society. As such, the president becomes synonymous with the political and policy direction of the country. This leads the author to pose the following question: What mechanisms lead to the president's control of power in maintaining the administration's policy agenda?
- 6 To compete for power and relevance, the president uses both formal and informal sources of leverage over the legislative branch of government through Article 2 of the Constitution and his leverage on public approval. The fragmentation that has occurred in politics has changed the dynamics of how the president absorbs and distributes power.

Ponder challenges the political science literature claiming that unilateral decision making weakens presidential power while, in fact, veto power, executive orders, proclamation, and directives centralize political autonomy. While constitutional powers are important to understand the full scope of how the president forms policies, the most important factor in selecting policies to implement is the public opinion of electorates. Pressure from the public provides administrations the insight on which policy initiatives have a high success rate of passing. High presidential approval ratings give administrations the political leverage to formulate their policy agendas by insulating the executive branch from government institutions and the courts through political appointments. On the contrary, if the president is successful in confirming his political appointments, challenges to his policy agenda can be offset despite low public opinion.

- 7 To strengthen his claim on presidential leverage, the author analyzes all presidents in modern history from Kennedy to Obama. Since the Kennedy administration, the trust in government by the public has maintained a high percentage compared to a volatile public approval rating of the president. The high trust rate allowed Congress to implement its constitutional powers in Article 1 as political leverage to constrain the policy agenda of the executive branch to avoid political outcomes such as economic stagnation and an unsuccessful foreign policy agenda. For example, the book shows that the Carter administration lost a high approval rating because of the Iran Hostage Crisis. The inability of the Carter administration to end the international incident and the duration of the negotiations allowed Congress to use public approval ratings as leverage to stop the president's domestic housing initiative. While every post war president from Kennedy to Nixon faced political opposition which challenged their public approval, the majority of the electorate still expressed high trust in its governmental institutions.
- 8 Ponder identifies a shift of public opinion and trust in the events of Watergate and the Vietnam War. The author argues that the pardoning of Richard Nixon by Gerald Ford and the impact of Vietnam on the national psyche presented a new insight on that of a self-serving political and economic motivation of the elite in Congress. During the start of the Ford administration, public approval was at 46 percent and dropped to the mid-30s in 1975 after pardoning Nixon. Since the Nixon administration, public trust consistently has been very low in relation to presidential approval. In the post Nixon era, George W. Bush has been the only president to have the public's high trust in government and, consequently, a high approval rating due to the events surrounding the attacks of 9/11 which allowed the president to change the political discussion on domestic politics to focus on national security and safety of the state. This was short-lived and, by the time the Bush administration had declared the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, partisan politics had taken over and trust in government fell to post Nixon levels.
- 9 Ponder concludes with an assessment of the state of public opinion and trust in the final months of the Obama administration. The author validates his hypothesis that high presidential approval ratings and low trust in government provide presidential leverage to push through policy agendas through the Obama administration as an example. Obama's high approval ratings allowed him to pass legislation through executive order and solidify his policy legacy. On the other hand, Obama's administrative strategy to pass public policy through executive orders in a Republican congress has created deeper distrust in government and the polarization of the national political discussions. In the current political landscape of partisan politics, the president consolidates political power through unilateral action and stacking the courts.

- 10 The polarization of American politics from the rise of the Tea Party to the ideological divide over Citizens United has forced presidents to utilize their veto power to contribute to the political discussion. The book, *Presidential Leverage: Presidents, Approval, and the American State*, demonstrates that the lack of public trust in the government provides the president political leeway to force moderate congressmen to alter their political positions in the case of unintended consequences of public opinion on congressional reelection campaigns. The changing political landscape since Watergate has culminated in the effectiveness of the Trump administration's agenda of "Draining the Swamp" which highlights the distrust that the American people have had about its government for generations. In the current political climate, Ponder's historical analysis demonstrates the president's role and political power in modern politics.
- 11 Marcus Walsh-Führung