OPINION

DAVID BROOKS, ROSS DOUTHAT, JAMES FALLOWS AND BRET STEPHENS

Trump Voters Love Him More Than Before. Four Conservative Columnists Pinpoint Why.

March 21, 2018

Illustration by Elizabeth Brooks, The New York Times

By David Brooks, Ross Douthat, James Fallows and Bret Stephens
Mr. Brooks, Mr. Douthat, Mr. Fallows and Mr. Stephens are Times columnists.

Patrick Healy, the deputy Opinion editor, hosted an online conversation with four Times Opinion columnists about the Trump administration's popularity among Republicans and why so many in the party believe the country is heading in the right direction.

Patrick Healy: David, Ross, David, Bret: Donald Trump is the only president who has seen his approval rating go up since he took office, rising to his first 100 days in office. Trump also has the largest gap in approval ratings in 80 years — 90 percent of Republicans like performance, while only 9 percent of Democrats do. Those Trump supporters also are more optimistic than any other Republicans think America is on the right track and more optimistic than in 2016, according to a new NBC News poll. To be clear, a majority still say America is on the wrong track, and Trump's polling on the economy is sagging. But I want to dig into why voters feel that way about Trump, and why so many Republicans still support President Donald Trump. David, Ross, Douthat, Fallows, the floor is yours.

And I wanted to do an through line on this one, David, from our conservative colleagues. The first of you spoke the ideological apostrophe on the Trump phenomenon, and I wanted to hear from the rest of you why many Republicans like the direction Trump's taking the country. Isn't it about his style or his policies or the mind-set and mood of the GOP or something else?

David Brooks: I'd start with the world we're born into. It for the last decade or so. According to an Ipsos survey last year, 50 percent of Americans think our country is in decline. Sixty percent think our children will be worse off. Republicans are more "political and economic elites don't care about hard-working people." If those are your jokes, then you're going to be happy with a president who wields a wrecking ball.

Healy: So Trump liked to say, when he talked about the elites. Why do you have to have?

Brooks: I'd add another phrase: "Intolerance." This is the Sabol generation, the generation that came of age in the mid-to-late 2002. It's the idea that everything is broken and we just need to burn it all down. Personally, I think some things are broken and some things are OK, but most of my Trump-supporting friends are moderates. They get this from media consumption. Do you remember when Dan Rather was supposedly going to do a media about the Iranian Nuclear building experiment? Rather spoke stress? Does those who were actually at the bombing? There's something about screens that contributes to a conspiracy-minded outlook.

David Brooks: In addition to the tendencies that David talks about, there's a strong undercurrent of some anger among some of our readers. Republicans and Democrats have very negative views of each other, and many Republicans, sadly, want their opponents to suffer. They're actually happy to see people lose their jobs or see Democrats suffer. Many of those people are perceived as part of the "deep state" or BDSs.

So, yes, Republicans want a disruptive president, but which being disrupted really matters — and if it's the government institutions that many Republicans believe are hostile to them, then Trump's actions are pretty well-suited to that end. Republicans dislike foreign aid. I'm battle-also universities. I'm battle-big-law firms. Students and professors at elite universities have a long track record of targeting the free speech rights of their conservative colleagues, and Republicans are contemplating their own constitutional violations as fighting fire with fire.

Healy: That element of gleeful animosity comes through on Twitter and in Trump's speeches. Ross, Bret, David, James, Douthat, striking it is universities or shaking down U.S.C. One of Trump's most effective rallying cries in the last campaign was "I am your mechanism."

Ross Douthat: I think there are all kinds of ways in which Trump's appeal is rooted in a sense that the world has changed over the last 15 years — the trends on both left and right that have boosted populists all over the Western world. But it's also important to stress that part of what Republicans like about Donald Trump is just that Donald Trump is a Republican.

His biggest policy accomplishment so far is shoving down illegal immigration — something Republican voters strongly support. His biggest rhetorical gesture is to promise to make America great — a classic Republican policy goal. He wants to free federal bureaucrats, dereader and dereform the Department of Education, and he's nominated Betsy DeVos, a Republican activist and Reagan's conservative, Ed Meese's Reagan's conservative, to picking fights with liberal judges and liberal universities. And if you told someone in, say, 2004 that a Republican president was stretching the boundaries of civil liberties to deport undocumented immigrants and was trying to kick-start a trade war that nobody wanted signed his paperwork with G.O.P. voters in a position to send of explanation.

There are important ways in which Trump's style and tactics and some of his policy goals — the trade and tariff agenda above all, for example — are not pro-old-school Republican in a political sense. But we shouldn't exaggerate the break or make a deep mystery of why Republican voters would react favorably to much of what he's doing.

Bret Stephens: Patrick, Alexander Hamilton supplied one part of the answer in Federalist No. 70: "Energy is the essential to the leading character in the definition of good government." So here's a piece of good news about Trump's presidency: A lot of Americans notice is that Trump is doing. Assisting the Nashville tariffing our neighbors, strong-arming President Valodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine, denouncing Hannes, attacking G.E.O.S. He's the guy supporters and opponents alike struggle to keep pace with. He's the guy who's in charge.

A second part, and this is especially important for Trump critics, like me to acknowledge, is that at least some of what he's doing is succeeding. It is important that we finally have organized control over the southern border — proving, if nothing else, that we aren't a country that can't do anything anymore. The tax reform bill and G.E.J. programs that had become a pervasive system of social governmentes is, by my tallies, another achievement. Demandine also Columbia University has been covering media and enforce meaningful discipline on remaining and disruptive pro-Palestinian protesters on campus. The Department of Justice has been acting on a good conclusion. And I really don't think the status will stress the Department of Education when it goes.

Brooks: But, you see Ross in a country in which "tariffing" is a verb, I feel like this signifies the end of Western civilization. It signifies the end of Western civilization. "Energetic" is a noun. The path to perdition is done but accepting.

Stephens: It's a high verb, David. For real.

French: I'm glad Bret brought up the border and the Hamilton quote, because I think the Trump phenomenon can't be understood without context, and the more with which Trump proved to a different and better course highlights that many Democrats still don't quite understand how purely the Biden administration performed in its approach to border.

Trump's base, and the wider Republican base that the Democratic Party is at a loss to penetrate, it broke down to Iraq, Iran and Israel.

Brooks: I'd offer up one more word in consideration: Intolerance." Progressives really have spent the last few decades excluding conservative and working-class voices from a lot of institutions. Trump has gone after these institutions big time — the universities, the bureaucracies, the media, the Justice Department. Of course, the NGLA crowd feels justified revenge.

Stephens: An important point, David. I know liberals love to point out that NGLA politicians like Ted Cruz, Sam Coman, Jeff Sessions and Elise Stefanik all went to Ivy League schools, as did Donald Trump. But that doesn't mean they weren't victims of a campus conservatives were always ideological intolerance in elite colleges, and it's where they learned to loathe the contempt they felt coming from liberal professors and peers.

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Douthat: Fortunately, all of us have learned to tolerate it. Bret, I mean.

Stephens: At the University of Chicago, Ross, I was almost a liberal. Almost. Relatively speaking.

French: I never did, Ross. That's why I used so many universities in my example. Intolerance, but always with an eye toward institutional rights, not denying them to my political opponents.

Brooks: A lot of elite conservatives continue to struggle with what I call the near abstract problem. They may dislike NGLA, but they — or — are mostly actual progressives or moderates on a day-to-day basis. They don't want to be rude to their colleagues or make our teeth hurt. Yet many seem strongly to sense some of the people across campus that the major one of the people far away. This is something I'm working on.

Healy: I want to hear down on the idea that more American think the country is on the right track with Trump. I have more discussion to stress-test with you, or I want to hear your view.

Our Authoritarians are popular, until they aren't. That's how I see it.

Tim: The enthusiasm is a honeymoon stemming from the November election, when Democrats got a big comeuppance from Trump.

Tim: A lot of American think Trump is generally right in both his diagnosis and fix of government — that nothing terribly bad is going to happen, that the State Department can run foreign aid, that the Treasury and the states can run Education Department programs, that the Justice Department can run civil rights, that the Fed can run the economy, and the president was manifestly incapable of doing his job. So while you can make a plausible case that Trump's actions have made the world more dangerous, and therefore more dangerous, you should still expect many Americans to wait for proof of that in their daily lives before they immediately re-endorse his foreign policy.

Brooks: I'd take you back to a 1971 Clint Eastwood movie, "Dirty Harry" or a 1971 Charles Bronson movie, "Death Wish." Both of those were produced in a time of social decay, and they're both about a guy who's fed up with the decay and who takes matters into his hands. To this day, there is a large chunk of Americans who think the system is so broken, we need someone who will break the rules. That's what's happening.

Plus, the unfortunate fact is that there is almost always a kernel of truth in the Trump critique. Yes, the Obama administration has been done in my view a recession G.S.A.E.D. Millions will die. But it was true that G.S.A.E.D. was a bureaucratic nightmare. A generation of administrators there tried to fix it. The system — which the Trumpies don't understand — is that a lot of the bureaucrats who tried to fix it were Republican appointees and they not be renewed. Trump politics are not 100 percent wrong; they are just irrestructive. Destroying an agency rather than fixing what is wrong and saving what is right.

Stephens: Unless you happen to live within a few miles of Capitol Hill, David, the idea that Trump's tariffs are a disastrous mistake — foreign aid is distributed via a semiautonomous agency called G.S.A.E.D. or directly through the State Department. You also probably think it's an tragedy that government workers should experience the periodic layoffs that the rest of American experience in the ordinary course of business. But the Trump-bashing reflexes mean that the political earthquakes in a certain bubble of Washington number how Trump voters somewhere between indifferent and pleased.

The other point that can't be emphasized enough. Trump wouldn't have been the GOP nominee if the party's leaders and conservative progressives weren't so unpopular with most voters of the country. Just the fact that he drives the Rachel Maddow of the world into fits of rage and despair and thoughts of European exile is reason enough for many Americans to support him. Sometimes even including me.

French: Those of us who believe policies clearly always were to Trump's left on issues like trade and immigration, and that the average rank-and-file Republican even knew about some of these early controversies. If you're watching Fox News or other right-wing outlets, you're hearing a lot of stories about strange, weird programs funded by G.S.A.E.D. They don't know about the fees Trump's administration is charging.

That means they won't know much, from now, about your political controversy until it affects them personally.

Healy: I want to return to a word I used in the last question: "Dignity" Democrats and plenty of independents and not a few judges see dignity as evidence of it in some of Trump's actions on federal spending, agency dismantlement, deportations, defense of the military. Why do some conservatives see dignity differently?

Douthat: First, some of these moves are not obviously illegal and exist in a zone of contestation over presidential and constitutional interpretation where a normal partisan naturally takes his own side's side.

Healy: We'll get to some specific moves a bit later. Go on.

Douthat: Second, I would emphasize that many Americans experienced the recent period of liberal power, especially under Obama, as a period in which the Democratic Party was actively feeling its ex-everyday impact — schools closed and masks mandated, ideological double standards for different forms of public performing and protest, ideological speech codes enforced or explicitly imposed — that anything they experienced under Trump, so far.

The sense of things may change as Trump qualifies the envelope of presidential power as at the right embraces its own forms of constitutional. Indeed, already you can see some factions that aligned with Trump because they were anti-wake start to break away or critique NGLA revisions.

But it's still important to grasp that for many Americans, the fights over the last decade or so have been about the government and its much more distant from their own liberties than Democratic social agenda did.

Stephens: What I see is a president doing things that are, if not outright illegal, genuinely scary, like trying to go after the Washington Post because it's owned by Jeff Bezos, a political enemy. At a minimum, Trump represents an almost unprecedented stress test to the judicial system and the separation of powers. And I'm surety quietly delighted that Justice Gorsuch is Justice Jackson, that's when you'll find out at the barricades.

That said, some of what Trump is doing is simply a Republican version of what his liberal predecessors did while the mainstream media looked the other way. Obamacare was a form of unilateral and unlawful action through the back door of the Internal Revenue Service. Jeff Sessions's decision to rescind the Department of Justice's decision to rescind the Department of Justice's decision to rescind the Department of Justice

Douthat: Trump's rhetoric against his opponents, judicial or otherwise, always goes too far. But I think elected officials aggressively attacking judges who make aggressive rulings is a completely normal part of democratic politics in a country with a powerful judicial branch, and I would say the same about many sweeping liberal attacks on the Roberts court and its conservative justices in the last few years.

Brooks: Atrocious. As usual, Trump is being patrimonialist — treating the U.S. government like his own family business.

French: It's not just dreadful, but it's also part of a calculated attack on the role of the judiciary in the constitutional order. Russell Vought, Trump's influential head of Office of Management and Budget, has said that the right "needs to throw off the precedents and legal paradigms that have wrongly developed over the last 200 years and to study carefully the words of the Constitution and how the founders would have responded in modern situations to the encroachments of other branches."

Healy: Trump's confidence in Elon Musk as an essential partner in reinventing government, to use an old Al Gore phrase.

Douthat: Let's just say I was more optimistic about this experiment two months ago than I am today.

Brooks: Musk knows as much about the government as I know about rocketry. But deregulation could be my favorite thing Trump accomplishes. There is a pretty compelling link between overregulation and economic stagnation. See: Europe.

French: Government inefficiency and overregulation are very real and very serious problems, and Musk is the wrong person to take on the challenge. He's a perfect illustration of the reality that accomplishment and expertise in one field do not translate into every field. Or, to put it another way, focus on getting us to Mars, Elon. You're out of your depth on the budget.

Stephens: In 2018, I wrote a column calling Musk "the Donald of Silicon Valley." Not bad, except that I completely misjudged where Tesla's stock price was heading. Musk is off to a bad start in his government career, but I sincerely wish him success. The federal government isn't just too big; it's obese. Musk may yet be its Ozempic.

Healy: Trump trying to ban transgender people from serving in the military, which a federal judge ruled as unconstitutional on Tuesday.

Brooks: Pure cruelty. This is one of those issues where anecdotes prevail over reality. We need to be able to defeat China in a possible naval confrontation. Is this really what we should be thinking about?

Stephens: I don't think the military was cruel when transgender people were barred from military service for the first seven and a half years of Barack Obama's presidency. This is an example of the deep disconnect between the moral certitudes of the part of the country that rarely serves in the military and the cultural convictions of the part of the country that often does — and on whom we all depend for our safety.

French: I see the matter primarily as a question of readiness, not rights. Medical transitions can be very physically challenging, sometimes including physically debilitating treatments. That can affect readiness a great deal. In that circumstance, the question is less about transgender status and more about the physical realities of complex medical procedures.

Douthat: I will just say that the policy seems to be obviously within the commander in chief's constitutional powers, and the judicial ruling to the contrary is a good example of why many conservatives don't feel they need to take the wider run of anti-Trump rulings all that seriously.

Healy: Here's my last question — I've been asking a lot about specific policies. A lot of Republicans like what they are seeing. But are they missing the forest for the trees? Do the individual policies matter if America's economy tanks, if there's a constitutional crisis over defying court orders, if there's geopolitical upheaval in Ukraine or Eastern Europe or Taiwan?

Douthat: We are two months into the presidency, and we just lived through four years of dramatic global and domestic upheaval under a Democratic president whose manifest incapacity was deliberately concealed from the country. I have a million concerns about where this administration is going, but it's a bit soon to attack the president's supporters for being irrationally loyal.

Brooks: Personally, I think Trump has set the world record for overreading his mandate. I think his incompetence and bad character will drag him far lower this term than they did in his first. This term, Trump is actually trying to do things. But I wake up each morning and ask: What if I'm wrong? What if Trump wins the next four years? We're entering an era of junkyard dog politics. Maybe Trump is the guy to stand up to Xi Jinping. Maybe governments need a pummeling cleanse before they can reinvent themselves. Maybe the vibe shift is permanent, and the progressive march through the institutions is over. Maybe the American economy is a wonder to behold and it survives what Trump is throwing at it while our allies continue to stagnate.

If people like me focus on all the Trump failures that make us feel good, we may once again get run over by reality.

French: The big disasters or big triumphs always swamp individual policies, and most people judge presidents through the prism of their own situation. That's exactly why Jan. 6, 2021, didn't end Trump's political career. Very few voters liked it, but they didn't see it as relevant to their lives — at least not nearly as relevant as the price of groceries or disorder in the streets.

I completely agreed with the Democratic message that the rule of law was on the ballot in 2024, but I also know that voters will put up with an enormous amount of scandal and misconduct if the economy is strong and have no patience for corruption when the economy is weak. The rule of law is abstract. The price of eggs is concrete.

That's why Trump's incompetence is a greater threat to his presidency than his cruelty. A malicious man can win over the masses if jobs are plentiful and gas is cheap.

Stephens: On most days since Trump took office, the line that has run through my head is from the movie "Airplane!": "Looks like I picked the wrong week to quit sniffing glue." It's just one damn thing after another.

But like David Brooks, I am a chastened Trump critic. I viewed his first term as a national embarrassment culminating in the epic disgrace of Jan. 6. Clearly, plenty of Americans didn't see it my way, or they noticed things to which I was mostly indifferent: growing prosperity, a new attentiveness to the proverbial forgotten man — and the vapid, arrogant, hypocritical awfulness of many a Trump scold.

So, to adapt Larry David, I'm going to curb my nausea. Just please pass me the Dramamine, will you, Patrick?

From the comments

JR
New York City

Except for Trump's open disregard for the judiciary, I don't care about his other actions. No one is going to care about pronouns or foreign aid if the constitution is dismantled without a vote.

David French
Opinion Columnist

@JR I'm reminded of my friend Yuval Levin's observation that he's more concerned with constitutionalism than policy. The structure of our republic is far more important than any given policy change. What's especially disturbing is that Trump is attempting a constitutional revolution while his party controls both houses of Congress. He has more than enough political power to change American policy in conventional ways, through lawmaking rather than executive decrees. But he's choosing a direct attack on the constitutional order.

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