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Fickle voters abandon the man they made president

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM January 19, 2018

With Donald Trump's first year as 45th President of the United States drawing to a close, America's economy is growing strongly, the unemployment rate is at an 18-year low (and that for black Americans is lower than at any time since data began to be collected in 1972), consumer and business confidence are high, and the stockmarket has reached new peaks.

As for America's democracy, which pundits claimed would collapse into authoritarianism, it is as vigorous as ever; and although the world remains a dangerous place, the administration's foreign policy, which avoids the errors made by Trump's immediate predecessors, seems focused and credible. However, none of that is showing up in the opinion polls.

Many presidents have lost ground in their first year; but while Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama suffered much greater losses than Trump has, they enjoyed far higher ratings to begin with, leaving them near or above 50 per cent approval scores at the year's end.

In contrast, Trump started his term with the lowest approval ratings on record, and the subsequent drop — from about 43 per cent to 35 per cent — has taken him to levels no other president has reached so early in the life of an administration.

It would be easy to blame the President himself for his crumbling popularity and for the growing threat the Republicans face in November's midterm elections.

But the commentariat's obsession with the President's persona is profoundly misleading. What it ignores is the longer-term trend of which Trump's rise to the presidency is itself a symptom: a trend in which Americans, as they become increasingly dissatisfied with the choices on offer, turn ever more quickly and savagely on their elected officials.

Brilliantly analysed in new books by the eminent political scientist Morris Fiorina and the University of Maryland's Frances Lee, that trend, which began in the early 1990s, has seen average approval ratings fall and become more volatile at almost every level of the American political system.

At the same time, the incumbency advantage, which used to slow turnover in positions open to re-election, has declined and on the most widely used metric, completely disappeared.

As a result, almost a century of relative political predictability has given way to incessant turmoil, both in public opinion and in the outcome of electoral contests.

The extent of the change is readily highlighted. With two political parties and three elected institutions — the presidency, the House of Representatives and the Senate — there are eight possible patterns of institutional control, ranging from complete control by the Republicans of all three institutions through to complete control of the three by the Democrats, with six mixed permutations in between.

Of those eight possible patterns, only four prevailed in the 34 years between 1896 and 1930, during which the Republicans dominated national government; only two in the 20 years of Democratic dominance that began in 1932; and only three in the near 40-year period of split control that stretched from 1954 to 1992.

In contrast, the eight elections held since 2000 have generated six patterns of control, as Republicans and Democrats have cycled through increasingly fleeting holds on each of the presidency, the house and the Senate.

The sole precedent in American history for instability on that scale is the so-called Period of No Decision that stretched from the readmission of the secessionist states to congress in 1868-70 through to the landmark election of 1898.

The resemblance between that period and today is hardly a coincidence. Those were years of breakneck change. The US emerged as the world's greatest industrial power; dramatic reductions in transport and communications costs gave birth to giant corporations and shattered the barriers protecting local markets; immigration soared, intensifying competition for jobs; and the fortunes accumulated by the "robber barons" allowed the rapidly expanding mass press to throw the gap between rich and poor into sharp relief.

The political system was stretched to breaking point, with five successive elections generating five different patterns of control.

It took the shock of the emergence of the American populists, and the capture of the Democratic Party by the populist William Jennings Bryan, to induce the Republicans to forge a broad national majority that endured until the Depression.

History does not operate by analogy any more than it follows a predetermined libretto. While the 2016 election may have been an earthquake on the scale of the populist revolt of the 1890s, neither party has rebuilt its foundations, as the GOP did at the turn of the 20th century.

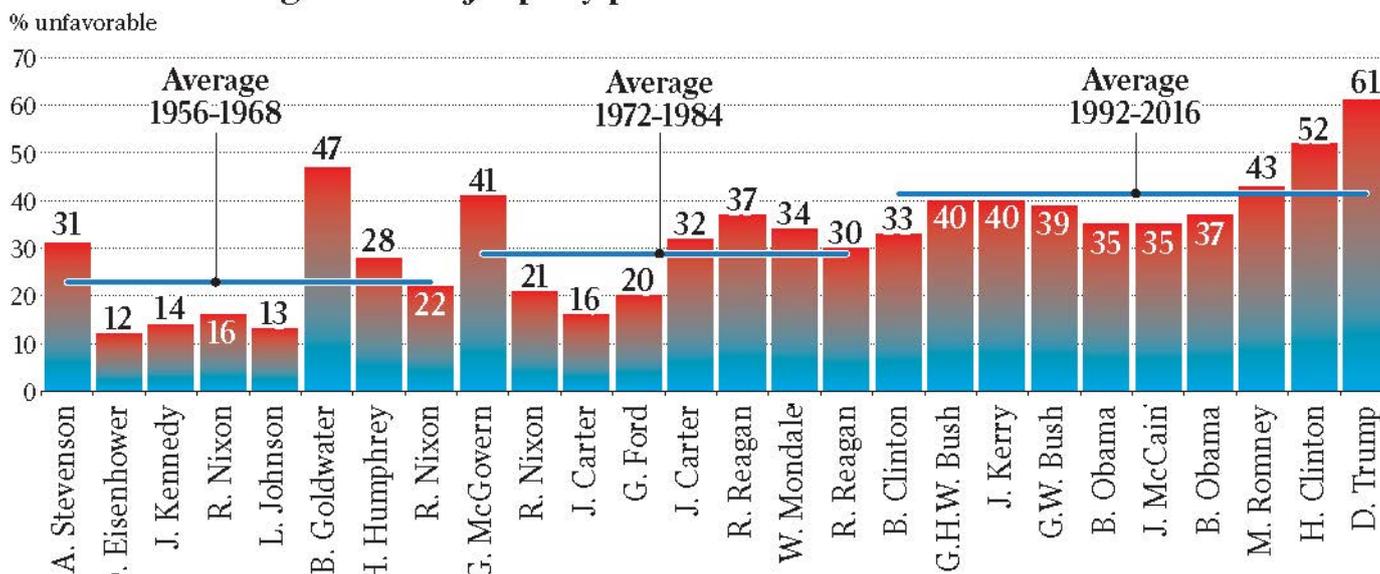
The congressional Republicans' problems are obvious: although they delivered on tax reform, PolitiFact reports that they have stalled 32 of the 101 specific promises Trump made in his campaign and simply ignored many others, leaving most of those promises unfulfilled.

Nor have the Democrats fared much better. Yes, they scored significant wins by running centrist candidates in recent by-elections; but they remain captive to an activist base that — according to James E. Campbell, a leading scholar of American public opinion — has moved them, on a 10-point scale, two points further out to the left of the median voter than the GOP has moved to the right.

High volatility is therefore likely to persist, compounding the pressures on the parties and on the President as the midterms approach. And while those pressures make domestic and international crises more likely, they must also make them harder to manage.

Abraham Lincoln reminded Americans that as freedom's "last, best hope", they "hold the power and bear the responsibility", if only they will seize it. With 1099 days and 10 hours left, at the time of writing, in Trump's first term, discharging that responsibility seems as fraught as it has ever been.

Unfavorable ratings of US major party presidential nominees: 1956-2016



Source: Gallup (no data for 1988, 1996 and 2000)