

Book Review: Howell, William and Moe, Terry. *Trajectory of Power: The Rise of the Strongman Presidency*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025. 328 pages. Hardcover, \$39.95.

William G. Howell, Dean of the School of Government and Policy and Professor of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University, and Terry M. Moe, the William Bennett Munro Professor of Political Science Emeritus at Stanford University and Senior Fellow Emeritus at the Hoover Institution, bring formidable expertise to *Trajectory of Power: The Rise of the Strongman Presidency*. Both are leading scholars of American political institutions and executive power, and they use that background to examine how the modern presidency has evolved into an office increasingly susceptible to strongman rule.

The book addresses the development of presidential power in the United States and asks how an office originally embedded within a constitutional system of checks and balances came to pose serious risks to democratic governance. Howell and Moe argue that the rise of a strongman presidency was not an abrupt departure from American political development but the culmination of a long historical process. Their central claim is that conservative backlash against the administrative state led Republicans over several decades to embrace a more powerful presidency as a strategic instrument for controlling, dismantling, or redirecting the federal bureaucracy. Over time, this pursuit of extraordinary executive authority combined with populist pressures to produce a presidency increasingly untethered from democratic norms and institutional restraint.

The authors trace this trajectory across the modern era, emphasizing that presidents of both parties helped build a stronger institutional presidency, but that conservatives eventually took this logic further by seeking unilateral presidential control over the administrative state. Their account highlights the importance of centralization, politicization, emergency-style

justification, and legal theories such as the unitary executive. They argue that this development reached a dangerous culmination in Donald Trump, whom they present not as a historical aberration but as the predictable outcome of long-term institutional and partisan change. The book's broad historical sweep and institutional focus make it especially relevant to social scientists interested in democratic erosion, constitutional development, and the interaction between party strategy and executive power.

One of the book's major strengths is its clarity of argument. Howell and Moe identify a long-range political dynamic that is often obscured by day-to-day commentary on contemporary presidents. Rather than treating strongman tendencies as merely the product of personal authoritarian impulses, they locate the problem in the historical construction of executive capacity and the political incentives that encouraged its expansion. This makes the book analytically valuable. It also situates current debates about democratic backsliding within a specifically American institutional history, thereby extending older conversations about the "imperial presidency" into a new political moment. In that respect, the book productively complements classic and contemporary scholarship on executive aggrandizement and democratic decline.

The book is also highly readable. Howell and Moe write with urgency but generally avoid sensationalism. Their prose is accessible enough for non-specialists while remaining rigorous enough to engage scholars of American politics, public law, political development, and comparative democracy. This balance broadens the book's usefulness across disciplines. Still, the book is not without limitations. Its argument is forceful, but at times too linear. By centering the conservative assault on the administrative state as the main engine of strongman development, the authors risk underplaying the degree to which broader structural forces—media

transformation, racial polarization, public distrust, and institutional dysfunction beyond the executive branch—also helped make presidential strongman politics possible. Their analysis is strongest when explaining elite strategy and constitutional development, but weaker when addressing the social foundations of democratic vulnerability. In addition, the book's interpretive structure leaves limited room for contingency. Trump emerges so squarely as the culmination of prior developments that alternative pathways, interruptions, or countervailing democratic capacities receive less sustained attention than they deserve.

Howell and Moe place their argument within a broader body of scholarship on executive power and democratic erosion. Their work closely aligns with Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die* (2018), particularly in the view that democratic decline usually happens gradually through the erosion of norms and institutional restraint rather than through sudden collapse. However, Howell and Moe focus more directly on the historical expansion of presidential power and its connection to the administrative state. Their argument also recalls Eric Posner and Adrian Vermeule's, *The Executive Unbound* (2011), which emphasizes the modern strength of the presidency, but Howell and Moe are much more concerned with the democratic dangers that accompany concentrated executive authority. Finally, the book resonates with Milan Svobik's, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (2012) by highlighting how weakened constraints and personalized leadership can move political systems in a more authoritarian direction, even within formally democratic institutions.

Overall, *Trajectory of Power* is a compelling and important contribution to the study of the American presidency. Howell and Moe offer a persuasive warning that the danger to democracy lies not simply in one leader, but in the long institutional trajectory that made such leadership possible. Although the book sometimes overstates the coherence of that trajectory and

gives insufficient attention to forces outside elite institutional politics, it remains a significant and timely work. For social scientists concerned with power, governance, and democratic resilience, this is a book well worth reading.

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