

How do you Oppose a President like Trump? Lessons from the 115th Congress

ALEX GARLICK | UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT

In January 2017, I began my Congressional Fellowship in the office of Rep. Joe Kennedy, III (D-MA) as Donald Trump was poised to enter the White House for the first time. Eight years later, the country has endured a turbulent period featuring a pandemic, attempted insurrection, two presidential impeachments, and the entire Biden administration; yet once again, Donald Trump is in the White House. The only certainty about the next Trump administration is that it will be unpredictable.

For Democrats, despite the uncertainty of what the next Trump administration will bring, the context in Washington is similar to what it was in 2017: they are the opposition party with minorities in both chambers of Congress. And without knowing exactly what will be on the agenda, there are lessons to be taken from the 115th Congress, specifically how Trump dealt with his Republican allies in the 115th Congress, how the media covers Trump and how he attempts to manipulate it, and how Democrats have more freedom to take political positions in opposition to his leadership.

MANAGING THE MAJORITY

When Donald Trump took office in 2017, Republicans began the 115th Congress with 241 seats in the House of Representatives, and resoundingly elected Paul Ryan as Speaker of the House. Ryan promised to enact an ambitious agenda featuring tax cuts, regulatory rollbacks and repealing the Affordable Care Act (ACA). They first set their sights on repealing the ACA, an effort that faltered in the House before failing in the Senate (Garlick 2018).

Faced with dissension in his ranks, Trump showed little interest in using the soft powers of his office that the political scientist Richard Neustadt (1960) argued were useful for quietly

persuading his allies into reaching mutual goals. Instead, Trump often chose instead to antagonize stragglers publicly, such as when he [attacked](#) Sen. Bob Corker (R-TN) for opposing portions of Trump's tax cut bill in 2017. During "repeal and replace," a member of the conservative [House Freedom Caucus](#) [said](#): "The last time someone ordered me



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to do something, I was 18 years old. And it was my daddy. And I didn't listen to him, either."

Trump's combative style offers an opportunity for Democrats. In 2025, Republicans began the 119th Congress with just 219 seats in the House of Representatives, and Mike Johnson was barely elected Speaker of the House by a divided Republican majority conference. This slimmer margin is going to put more pressure on the Trump White House to manage their majority and avoid each and every defection. If a wedge can be driven between Trump and Republican Congressmen, as Democrats were able to do in "repeal and replace" over such provisions as the protection of pre-existing conditions, the Trump legislative agenda could stall out before it ever starts.

THE PERPETUAL BREAKING NEWS CYCLE

At the end of July 2017, the Trump administration was reeling. Attorney General Jeff Sessions had recused himself from the Department of Justice's investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 election, and Robert Mueller had been appointed as a special counsel to investigate the affair. In the early morning of July 26, Donald Trump attempted to curtail the day's news cycle [by tweeting](#): "After consultation with my Generals and military experts, please be advised that the United States Government will not accept or allow... Transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the US Military." (sic) This threw the media, and all of Capitol Hill, for a loop. Reporters began questioning if policy could be made through a tweet, and what the implications of such a policy would be for military readiness. Rep. Kennedy began preparing for a news conference, as he was the chair of the House Democrats' Transgender Equality Task Force at the time.

While a form of this policy would eventually survive legal challenges, the initial tweet did not actually change policy but did serve its purpose of being a distraction. The journalist Mark Leibovich would later label this behavior "[the perpetual breaking news cycle](#)," and we saw both its capacity and limitation during Trump's first term. Trump used it to deflect attention to several political scandals that would have brought down any number of conventional politicians. Trump's approval during his first term was below historical averages, but it never plunged the way Richard Nixon's did during Watergate, or George W. Bush's did at the end of this term, in part due to Trump's ability to divert the media to something new.

So how do Democrats combat this tactic? They can borrow another tactic from their "repeal and replace" playbook and find issues that unify their caucus, divide the majority and keep these issues on the agenda. Trump thought repealing the ACA

would be easy, he told *The Washington Post* in January 2017 his replacement would have “[lower numbers, much lower deductibles](#),” and “it’s very much formulated down to the final strokes. We haven’t put it in quite yet but we’re going to be doing it soon.” But as early versions of the legislation were debated, the Congressional Budget Office estimated that 24 million Americans would lose their insurance under the plan. Congressional Democrats hammered that number over and over. Even though later estimates varied, Trump and his allies could never escape that reality.

It was no accident that the bill became unpopular, and most of the ACA emerged from the first Trump administration unscathed because of how Democrats kept the public focused on an issue that united their coalition and that the public agreed with them on. Their communications discipline showed that if they could not take Trump’s bait, public disapproval would follow.

UNBURDENED

Being in the opposition party will liberate Democrats politically. I saw this first hand in 2017 in Rep. Kennedy’s office. My issue portfolio included foreign affairs, and in my first week on the job the House had a [floor vote](#) (H. Res 11) to criticize the outgoing Obama administration’s foreign policy regarding Israel. This was a very complex task for a new staff member to make a recommendation on, as it had to take into the member’s previous positions on Israel-Palestine, but also a desire not to contradict the foreign policy of a president of their own party. The political scientist Tim Groeling (2010) also notes how the media highlights any intra-party disagreements, so it was usually hard to miss.

But after Trump replaced Obama in the White House, the politics of foreign affairs were clarified. Rep. Kennedy was free to comment on foreign affairs based on the merits, and could articulate his [own vision](#) of American foreign policy without worrying about stepping on the toes of his party leader. Today’s

Democrats will be in a similar position. No longer will they have to worry about defending Joe Biden’s foreign policy stances, and can articulate their own policy positions.

In general, the opposition party spends more time criticizing the president, essentially throwing stones at an elephant. And when they’re not responsible enough to stick together and iron out their differences to pass legislation, they can throw stones from any direction. It makes it much easier for the party to build and maintain coalitions.

OUTLOOK

Trump’s second administration will be informed by his first. Democrats saw how Trump managed his coalition and the media in his first term, and can pursue the political vulnerabilities identified above. While they are sure to face policy setbacks, there are political opportunities. Passing legislation is like building a house of cards. Each member of the coalition is like a card, and they all rest on one another. It’s a fragile structure. With the slim majorities Republicans will have in the 119th Congress, nearly every member will have to play nice with one another to do even basic tasks like passing a budget or keeping the government open. Eight years ago, Democrats showed a few ways to disrupt this process and that playbook can work again. ■

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