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EVALUATION NOTE

**TRUMP'S SECOND TERM: A STRESS TEST FOR
AMERICAN DEMOCRACY AND GLOBAL LEADERSHIP**

It's difficult to categorize the first one hundred days of the second term of American President Donald J. Trump — he is different from any other president, and his tenure so far is unlike any other. To some, he is a leader who has undermined the rules-based international system that emerged after World War II. For others, he is the only leader who can restore America's eroding global hegemony and make America great again. Millions both love and hate him inside and outside the U.S. borders.

President Trump's first three months in office signal a broad shift in U.S. engagement with democratic norms and values. He likes to be the center of attention, as he was for over a decade on his reality show, "The Apprentice." He makes decisions unilaterally with a transactional mindset that highly prizes personal loyalty and challenges expectations of transparency, accountability, and respect for institutional checks and balances. His approach devalues those democratic norms and values and gives rise to uncertainty about how resilient American democracy and its influence on international alliances will be in the long term.

Trump's doctrine thus far has flown in the face of long-standing democratic conventions. His appointment of individuals widely regarded as unqualified to key Cabinet positions, like Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, and creating a new government agency free from traditional Congressional oversight, the Department of Government Efficiency, have triggered major controversy. Appointing Elon Musk, a technology entrepreneur and industrialist who leads companies such as Tesla, SpaceX, and X (formerly Twitter), as head of that agency without him even having a security

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clearance yet, allowing him and his young team access to millions of Americans' most crucial data, has sparked significant debate. His budget cuts to the federal workforce — affecting everything from Social Security and Medicare administration to life-saving medical research — have raised alarms about the government's ability to fulfill essential public functions.

To continue, Trump has moved to restrict immigration, including controversial travel bans and tightened asylum policies, prioritizing national sovereignty over openness and humanitarian obligation. He has aggressively used tariffs as negotiation tools, often bypassing multilateral frameworks, shifting away from consensus-based global economic governance. He has criticized universities, portraying them as bastions of political bias rather than institutions of open inquiry. He has cut their federal funding, driving heated debates about free speech and academic freedom. Together, these actions show a president who views democratic norms not as inviolable principles, but as flexible instruments subordinate to immediate, short-term political objectives.

Beyond domestic policy, Trump's dramatic reduction of foreign aid has opened new geopolitical vacuums, particularly in regions where American assistance once underpinned stability and development. In this hectic environment, China, which the U.S. considers its global competitor, is trying to increase its influence by using economic leverage and strategic investments to reshape political alliances. Still, it is unlikely that China will be able to replace America globally, at least in the short term. America has not only woven a web of relationships based on material interests. It has also brought the global community together with a promise that motivated it to prioritize moral norms and universal human rights and to move forward consistently to become its better version, keeping these values intact. Thus, the current shift arising from this unkept promise threatens to diminish America's global standing even more than previous missteps born of arrogance or extremism and threatens to unleash a sense of disorientation in our world. Simultaneously, Trump's trade policies, characterized by aggressive tariffs and brinksmanship, have destabilized key sectors of the American economy and damaged America's reputation as a predictable and reliable economic partner, undermining the global order that the United States helped to create.

The strains on American democratic institutions did not start with Trump, but his leadership has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities. For instance, public trust in the media had already been eroding for years amid perceptions that major news organizations were increasingly detached from broad segments of American society. According to Gallup, confidence in the mass media fell to 32 percent in 2016 — its lowest point at the time — just before Trump's first election. Similarly, trust in the judiciary, historically one of the more resilient institutions, has shown signs of weakening. A 2022 Gallup poll found that public confidence in the U.S. Supreme Court had dropped to 47 percent, the lowest in the history of the survey, following controversial rulings that many viewed through a partisan lens. In this climate, debates over election integrity and institutional legitimacy have sharpened, challenging the foundational assumption that democracy rests not merely on formal rules, but on a widespread belief in the fairness and impartiality of its core institutions.

The path forward for American democracy defies simple narratives. While President Trump's approach to governance raises serious concerns about eroding democratic norms and moral leadership, understanding his rise requires understanding the underlying frustrations that propelled it. Many Americans, particularly those who feel alienated by rapid social changes

and perceive a drift away from traditional community and religious values, see Trump not as a cause of division, but as a response to it. His critique that parts of the political left have grown detached from these foundations resonates beyond his core supporters. Democrats have often focused their energies on criticizing Trump personally without fully addressing the social and cultural anxieties that contributed to his political ascent. In this deeply divided environment, the challenge is not only to defend democratic institutions but to rebuild a sense of shared purpose that respects both the need for progress and the enduring importance of moral and communal traditions. Whether American democracy can successfully navigate this delicate balance remains an open — and urgent — question.