

Analysis

Trump makes fewer public trips than recent presidents. Will that hurt the Republicans in November?

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President Trump meets with members of the U.S. Coast Guard on Dec. 29. He invited them to play golf at his Trump International Golf Club in West Palm Beach, Fla. (Evan Vucci/AP)

Unlike recent past presidents, Donald Trump is a homebody. Over the course of his first year in office, Trump traveled far less frequently in pursuit of his agenda than any president has since Ronald Reagan. When Trump does leave Washington, he is far more likely to visit Trump-friendly states in campaign-style rallies than to try to broaden his coalition's reach.

Here's how we did our research

To calculate the frequency of presidential travel we rely on the “Daily Compilation of Public Documents” and the “Public Papers of the Presidency” to count the number of trips the president

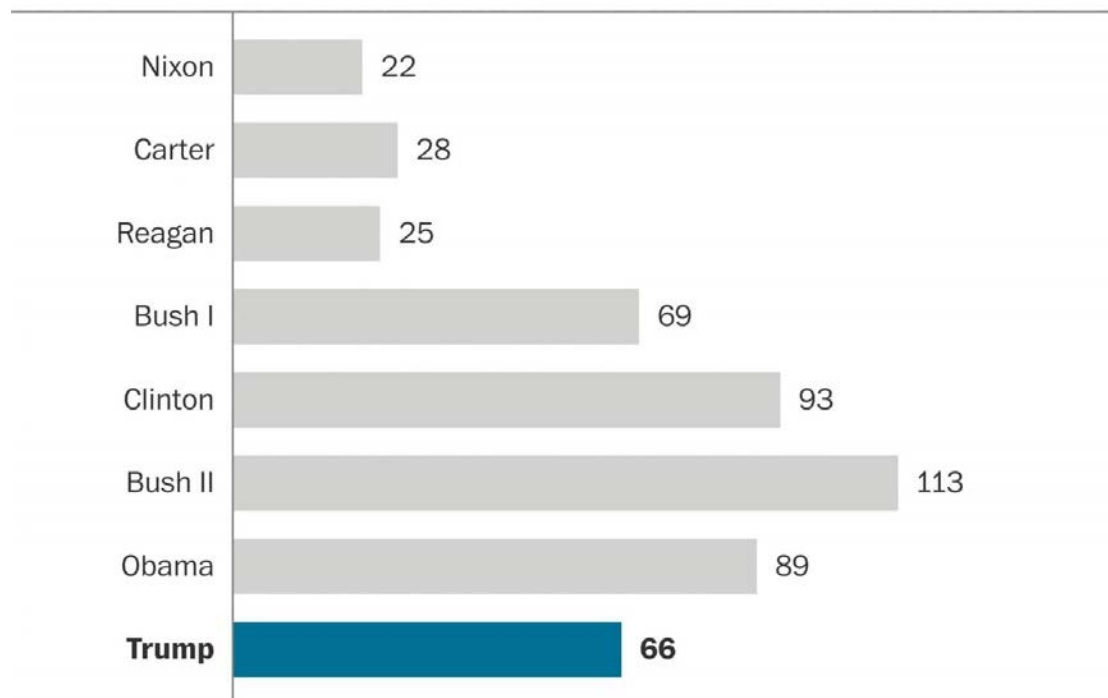
takes outside of Washington during his first year in office. Both offer essential information on presidential trips going back decades. We also rely on news reports to confirm trips or to round out details about the president’s travel activities.

For this purpose, we count any presidential appearances that happen on the same day as different trips. For instance, one day may include presidential visits to Los Angeles and Santa Barbara to attend ceremonies or give speeches. We count these as two trips, because the day includes public events in two distinct cities. We exclude private presidential vacations and fundraisers. But if the president makes a public appearance while staying at his private residence — such as visiting with troops or children — we count such events as trips.

Trump may say D.C. is a swamp, but he often stays put

As you can see in the chart below, the president took 66 trips out of Washington. That’s substantially fewer than those taken by his immediate predecessors. During their first years in office, Obama took 89, George W. Bush 113 and Clinton 93. Based on the generally rising trend in first-year travel back to Nixon’s first year in office in 1969, we would have expected Trump to take at least 80 work-related trips.

The number of domestic trips each president took outside of Washington DC during his first year in office



Source: Daily Compilation of Public Documents and the Public Papers of the Presidency

THE MONKEY CAGE

Trump's reduced travel schedule is curious. As we've shown in [earlier work](#), not only has presidential first-year travel been rising, but a similar pattern has also emerged for past presidents over the course of their first full terms. Richard Nixon took 158 trips outside of Washington during his first four years in office; Barack Obama took 585 trips, nearly four times as many.

The substantial increase in trip-taking reflects the increasingly public nature of presidential governance — what some observers label a “permanent campaign” for popular support. Travel gives presidents the chance to promote their agendas and prepare for their next campaigns.

Why does Trump travel so less often than recent presidents? Trump takes pride in his use of [social media](#). Maybe he believes he can engage the public without venturing outside the White House — reducing the need for physical travel and avoiding unfriendly crowds who might protest an historically unpopular president.

Trump's [proclivity](#) for spending weekends at Trump-owned properties might also cut into time otherwise spent on the road on public trips.

Trump gives new meaning to the permanent campaign

Trump conducted nine “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) rallies, a level of campaign mobilization unprecedented during any president's first year in office. In fact, on the day he was sworn into office, Trump took the unusual step of setting up his reelection campaign committee with the Federal Election Commission. This allowed him to raise money legally for his reelection. Less than a month into his first term, on Feb. 18, Trump held his first “MAGA” rally. In contrast, Trump's predecessors typically waited until their third or fourth year in office.

Further, Trump's travel map is divorced from the logic of the electoral college. Instead of traveling to competitive states to try to increase his support, Trump last year largely rallied in states that he won. He favors states he won both comfortably (Tennessee, Kentucky, Iowa, Ohio and West Virginia) and narrowly (Florida, Pennsylvania and Arizona). He largely ignores swing states he lost.

In fact, out of the five states Trump lost by 5 percent or less of the two-party popular vote, Nevada is the only one he's visited. In contrast, he has held rallies in or visited six of the seven states he won by within 5 percent. Overall, Trump has spent three-fifths of his entire travel in states that he won.

His forays into Hillary Clinton territory, meanwhile, have largely been visits to federal institutions — such as the CIA in Virginia or the Secret Service training facility in Maryland — or visits to his nearby homes, as in New York and New Jersey.

All this is quite different from the travel patterns of previous presidents

Elections also mattered to recent presidents. But they've typically taken overt campaign trips only in the third and fourth years of their first terms. Even then, presidents tended to travel more to the larger “swing” states needed to win the electoral college rather than to states that were comfortably theirs. These visits often included rally-like events, especially as Election Day neared.

While presidents have increasingly been reaching out directly to the public from their first days in office, electoral college considerations become more important later in their terms. Trump has begun his campaign far earlier than his predecessors, but has not yet shown the sensitivity to electoral college considerations we might expect.

Call it the Trump way

So what's guiding Trump's travel map so far? Trump may be working on a new strategic framework for presidential travel, aiming at consolidating his base. Or maybe he is simply taking "victory laps," traveling to reward his base and himself. That seems more likely, given widespread reports about a disorganized White House political operation and lack of preparation for the [2018](#) midterm elections, when his party's control of Congress will be at stake.

Whatever the reasons, one year of Trump travel suggests the "public presidency" is changing shape. Perhaps concern over the 2018 elections will result in more strategically oriented travel. If not, the president and his aides are squandering the president's most valuable asset: time.