

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
AND  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

**Posc 105**

**LIMITS ON PRESIDENTIAL POWER**

**I. THIS MORNING:**

- A. Limitations on presidential power.

**II. ROLES AND PERSONALITY:**

- A. A president's character is obviously important in explaining his or her successes and weaknesses.
  - 1. But, as argued repeatedly, institutional constraints and circumstances including historical events probably play an even bigger role.
  - 2. So, certainly the film "What Happened to Bill Clinton," has merit. But we also need to look at some of the strengths and weaknesses of the office.

**III. INSTITUTIONAL AND CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS:**

- A. Proposition: the things that are a source of a president's power are also potential sources of weakness.
- B. Public expectations and campaign rhetoric versus the nature of the problems presidents face:
  - 1. Economic transformations and dislocation, behavior of foreign governments, transnational entities, and non-governmental groups
- C. "Control" of the bureaucracy does not give presidents the power one might think.
  - 1. The cabinet
    - a. Nominal under presidential control departments and agencies often have a life of their own.
    - b. Cabinet secretaries have to fight being coopted by the bureaucracies they supposed to supervise.
  - 2. Other "bureaucratic" limitations include:
    - a. Bureaucratic permanence and inertia
    - b. Bureaucratic politics
      - (1) Arms control
      - (2) The "gays in the military" issue
    - c. "Sub-governments" or "iron triangles"
    - d. "Group think" and advisors
      - (1) Example: LBJ and Vietnam?
- D. Separation and fragmentation of power
  - 1. Presidents have to be exceptional to dominate the legislative process.
    - a. Not many have been over long periods of time.
    - b. This observation suggests an inherent weakness in the office.
  - 2. Congress, the Federal Reserve (FED), the Supreme Court, state

governments, and so forth fragment power.

- E. The absence of mechanisms to create and sustain a governing **message**
  - 1. The national party is not gear to generating and sustaining specific political agendas.
  - 2. Political commentators frequently bemoans the lack of “vision” on the part of presidents and presidential candidates.
  - 3. In point of fact, their message can sometimes be read as “elect me and I’ll deal with programs and policy later.”
- F. "Fishbowl" phenomenon: intense media scrutiny
  - 1. Presidents can “command” a nation’s attention.
  - 2. But at the same time they are under ceaseless eye of the media.
- G. The contradictions of general-welfare liberalism
  - 1. Liberalism versus the “positive state”
- H. The bottom line is that the political system and popular culture places enormous burdens on presidents but does not give them the "tools" (e.g., strong party leadership) to carry them.
- I. A final proposition: real reform involves strengthen party discipline and giving the president more influence over legislation.
  - 1. This is the way to maximizing accountability and hence democracy and increasing political capacity.

IV. NEXT TIME:

- A. Second test