

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
AND  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
Posc 150**

**THE PRESIDENCY**

I. CONTENTS:

A. The presidency: power and limits on power

II. OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY:

- A. ✱The expectations gap: difference between what the public wants and what a president can do.
1. Americans expect presidents to be all things to all people.
  2. Today people accept without question the idea that the presidency is the most important, most powerful office (political or otherwise) in the world.
- B. ✱Yet one can argue that power of the presidency is overstated.
1. Presidents themselves often come to feel frustrated and disappointed.
  2. They frequently run into a stone wall when confronting Congress
  3. These feelings have led to enormous antagonisms and brought many presidents into bitter conflict with the media, the Congress, voters, and parties.
  4. Indeed, given expectations and beliefs about presidential power, the office has surprisingly limited power.
    - i. Many of the very institutions, structures, practices, and traditions that seem to give presidents their influence and authority actually limit what they can do.
    - ii. ○Sources of strength are simultaneously sources potential sources of weakness.
    - iii. ✓Note, for example, how commonly president “drift” into foreign affairs, an area in which they come to feel more comfortable. Why? Because they may feel they have greater control over foreign policy than domestic politics.
  5. Some evidence: Note that presidential popularity frequently declines the longer a president is in office.
    - i. ✓See “Presidential Approval Ratings” on the web site.
    - ii. The trend shown in the figure summarizes, I think, the American political experience.
- C. We’ll examine this argument in the context of attempts to explain presidential successes and failures.

III. A CITIZEN’S GUIDE TO THE PRESIDENCY”

- A. How to evaluate or measure presidential performance.
1. ○Personal characters

- i. In the last campaign an inordinate amount of attention was placed on issues of character as a result of Clinton’s travails with Monica Lewinsky (“Monica-gate”).
    - ii. An example if time.
  - 2. \*Institutional and political context.
    - i. But don’t be fooled. Being a successful president takes more than character.
    - ii. The institutions of modern government are in some senses stacked against the occupant of the White House.
- B. Moreover what should matter most is the president’s stands on issues and how those positions relate to you and your interests.

IV. 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. Presidents tend to claim credit for things they cannot really control.
  - 2. 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
    - i. Nominal under presidential control departments and agencies often have a life of their own.
    - ii. Cabinet secretaries have to fight being coopted by the bureaucracies their supposed to supervise.
    - iii. Independent agencies.
  - 2. Other “bureaucratic” limitations include:
    - i. Bureaucratic permanence and inertia
    - ii. ○Bureaucratic politics
      - 1) ✓Iraq, the UN, allies, and smoking guns
    - iii. ○"Iron triangles"
      - 1) ✓Farm lobby
    - iv. ○"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.
    - i. Not many have been over long periods of time.
    - ii. This observation suggests an inherent weakness in the office.
  - 2. Congress, the Federal Reserve (FED), the Supreme Court, state governments, and so forth have independent powers.
- 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

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- 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 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.
  - H. ○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.
- V. NEXT TIME:
- A. The federal budget.
  - B. Reading:
    - 1. Required: Finish Drew and Tucker books..  
(<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/polibig/postmod.htm>).
    - 2. Recommended: Matthew Cahn, *Public Policy: The Essential Readings*, Chapter 22,” The Players: Institutional and Non-Institutional Actors in the Policy Process,” in the Cyber Reserve Room or directly.  
<http://www.csun.edu/~vcpol00c/essential.html>
    - 3. Required: Michael Lind, “A Radical Plan to Change American Politics,” in the Cyber Reserve Room or directly.(<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/congress/lindf.htm>)
      - i. This provides a good discussion of the structure of American government.
    - 4. Strongly recommended Joel Aberbach, “Sharing Isn’t Easy,” 128.97.210.114/papers/976.pdf. (This is a PDF document.)