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American Politics: A Very Short Introduction

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Abstract

‘The presidency’ explores how presidents communicate with the American public. Presidential activity such as engaging in townhall style meetings, weekly radio addresses or webcasts, or talking to the country via prime-time speeches did not come from the rise of new communications technology but rather from a philosophy of democratic leadership, which over time has strongly shaped the way presidents incorporate communication into the office. But with today’s 24/7 news shows, dozens of channels, and the rise of online communication, presidents now can hardly connect as dramatically, easily, and unilaterally as they once did. They must work much harder than they once did in order to get their explanations across.

p. 18 Of all the offices of the United States specified in the Constitution, the presidency is the one that has been most affected by the discipline of political science. America’s only PhD political scientist to serve as president, Woodrow Wilson, envisioned an attention-focusing role, one that was not described in the original Constitution. The president, Wilson thought, should be rhetorically adept and should strive to explain public affairs to the citizenry on a regular basis.

Somewhat later in the twentieth century, during the Great Depression, public administration experts helped endow the office of the president with administrative and budgetary expertise— again, layering onto the office responsibilities and roles that the initial Constitution did not specify. Presidents institutionalized and broadened their search for and their use of expert advice and policy information.

The presidency also came to depend on public-opinion research, which is a combination of demography, mathematics, and cognitive psychology. Private national polling operations—some for-profit, such as the Gallup Poll, some not-for-profit, such as the American National Election Studies at the University of Michigan—constantly monitor public opinion and how the public views the president. Presidents themselves directly observe public opinion with their own pollsters.

The rhetorical presidency

The twentieth- and twenty-first-century presidents have constantly spoken to the American public—engaging in town-hall style meetings, giving weekly radio addresses or webcasts, or talking to the country via prime-time speeches. That kind of presidential activity is an informal but profound invention, which can be traced to Woodrow Wilson’s impact on the office. It did not come from the rise of new communications technology but came instead from a philosophy of democratic leadership, which over time has strongly shaped the way presidents incorporate communication into the office.

Wilson, while at John Hopkins University, wrote one of the first doctoral dissertations in political science that he later published in 1885 as *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics*. That book emphasized the centrality of dozens of congressional committees in American national government, operating out of view and with little public accountability. Citizens inevitably needed help in following public affairs. Wilson wanted democratic politics to be *educative*.

When Woodrow Wilson became president, he therefore changed how presidents spoke in public. Theodore Roosevelt, at the onset of the twentieth century, anticipated Wilson’s reconceptualization. Roosevelt memorably referred to the office as a “bully pulpit”—by which he did not mean a podium from which to berate others but rather a very good or outstanding soapbox (as in the phrase “what a bully pulpit!”) But it was Wilson who saw that he could institutionalize that very phrase.

Summoning an extra session of Congress to Washington to consider cuts in tariffs, Wilson announced that he would deliver the message by opening the session in person. Not since Washington and Adams had a president personally addressed Congress, but that changed on April 8, 1913, when Wilson briefly addressed a joint session of Congress. Indeed, Wilson personally addressed joint sessions of Congress fifteen times between April 1913 and January 1918—a record that no other president has come close to matching.

Addressing Congress was only part of Wilson’s ideal of a rhetorical presidency. In early 1916 Wilson promoted American preparedness in the face of World War I’s uncertain and dismaying course. His countrywide tour was an enormous success, cementing Wilson’s belief in this sort of communication with the public. The better-known example is his subsequent 1919 tour to explain the Versailles Treaty. He sought to bring the public to his side as he battled a Senate that blocked the treaty. At the height of a circuit that seemed to be replicating his 1916 triumph, Wilson suffered a collapse on his train, and later a near-fatal stroke, effectively ending his presidency and in fact leaving the United States, most ironically, without any presidential government until the election of the ill-starred Warren G. Harding.



2. President Woodrow Wilson personally addresses Congress in 1913 as part of his quest to develop the rhetorical presidency.

Later presidents did not conclude, however, that being explainer-in-chief was bad for their health. When President George W. Bush traveled the nation after his 2004 election to promote the privatization of Social Security, he acted in a perfectly Wilsonian manner—even if he did not have the success that Wilson had in 1916.

One president who dramatically expanded Wilson's rhetorical presidency was Franklin Delano Roosevelt who had served in the Wilson administration as Secretary of the Navy. He communicated with the American public with his "fireside chats" on the radio, as the press dubbed them. (FDR wryly noted that the press insisted on using this term even for those addresses that he gave during crushing summer heat.) Over four consecutive terms in office, Roosevelt gave some thirty-three addresses, all touching on vital public questions, often on Sundays, when citizens had free time to listen to him on their radios. As radio ownership steadily increased, FDR's fireside chats reached more and more citizens.

The emergence and diffusion of television subsequently aided the Wilson-FDR conceptualization of the presidency. In 1950 about 20 percent of American households had black-and-white TVs; by 1960 that number had risen exponentially to 85 percent. And in 1961 John F. Kennedy became the first president to participate in a live television news conference.

Although JFK is indelibly associated with black-and-white TV because of his apparent ease with the medium, his predecessor had in fact shown the way. As television diffused throughout American society, Dwight D. Eisenhower used television in a thoroughly Wilsonian manner, giving a television address on the signing of the Korean armistice (July 26, 1953) and on the Paris NATO conference (December 23, 1957). Eisenhower's farewell address of January 17, 1961, in which he famously warned Americans about the risks to democracy from being on a constant wartime footing, was broadcast on both radio and television.

But with today's 24/7 news shows, dozens of channels, and the rise of online communication, presidents now can hardly connect as dramatically, easily, and unilaterally as they once did. President Obama's first prime-time news conference attracted nearly 50 million viewers. By his fourth such news conference, concerning the exceptionally important topic of his administration's push for a national health care plan, viewership had dropped by half, to about 25 million.

Presidents must work much harder than they once had to in order to get their explanations across. Not only are they trying to influence the print and broadcast media, but they also must contend with a new era of highly decentralized, segmented but nonetheless consequential digital communications: blogs, Twitter, YouTube, and many others. Thus President Obama gave 129 interviews to the press in his first ten months in office—three times the number that his predecessor, George W. Bush, had. As a story in *Time* put it, "The news cycle that once defined the day at the White House has given way to ... the news cyclone ... that churns constantly and seems almost impervious to management."

Nowhere is the Wilsonian view of rhetorical leadership described in the original Constitution of 1787. But the presidency has gradually fused with the privately owned and operated communication system comprising print, broadcast, and digital media. Presidents constantly use those communication linkages to talk to the public and to send signals to Capitol Hill.

Seeking advice and information

Franklin D. Roosevelt presided over a proliferation of new authorities, administrations, boards, commissions, corporations, and corps, each with a new acronym—AAA, CCC, FERA, NRA, NLRB, NPB, PWA, RFC, SEC, TVA, WPA—the "alphabet soup" of the New Deal. That helter-skelter administrative expansion raised executive organization and managerial efficiency to top rank on the national agenda, but doing so effectively required expert advice.

Among the efficiency experts who came to the fore was Louis Brownlow, director of the Public Administration Clearing House affiliated with the University of Chicago. Working at breakneck speed in 1933 and 1934, and backed by the recently formed Social Science Research Council, Brownlow participated in a "commission of inquiry" that researched the ways public administration actually worked in the United States. Upon publishing the findings and seeing how widely they were read among the public at large, Brownlow decided that his work had clear implications for "problems in the realm of top management." "That," he later remarked, "led us straight to the White House."

Indeed it did. FDR reached out to Brownlow and company to seek advice on how to better run the executive branch. FDR established the Committee on Administrative Management in March 1936, with Brownlow at its head. Brownlow had worked as a journalist before teaching himself public administration on the job as a District of Columbia commissioner; none other than the professor-become-president Woodrow Wilson had appointed him to that position. Brownlow, along with two leading professors of political science from Chicago and Columbia, quickly fashioned a dramatically and clearly written report, which FDR then submitted to Congress in January 1937. It bluntly stated, "The President needs help" and went on to propose, among other recommendations, the creation of six advisory positions reporting directly to the president "to assist him in obtaining quickly and without delay all pertinent information possessed by any of the executive departments so as to guide him in making his responsible decisions"

At first, Congress fiercely resisted the Brownlow Committee and its report. The public administration professors proposed the transfer of the then dozen or so independent regulatory commissions (including the Federal Reserve, America's central bank) into the cabinet. They also suggested that the entire country be

covered by seven regional agencies akin to the Tennessee Valley Authority, reporting to the president and planning natural resource use. In short they proposed a constitutional revolution.

But FDR and the committee still ended up setting the terms of interbranch deliberation—enough for Congress to produce the Executive Reorganization Act of 1939, creating the Executive Office of the President (EOP). It was a major turning point. Today the EOP handles a very broad policy portfolio. It contains both the White House Office and nine additional units (ranging from the Council of Economic Advisers to the U.S. Trade Representative, or USTR, who is the president's principal trade advisor.) Eight of these units give advice about, as well as directly contribute to the making of, policy. In the White House Office, there are ten units, ranging from the Domestic Policy Council to the Office of the First Lady to the White House Military Office. Of these, seven—such as the Homeland Security Council, led by the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, who serves as the president's homeland security and counterterrorism advisor and who sets the council's meeting agenda—are directly focused on policy and policy advice. President Bill Clinton effected a major addition to this advice-giving environment of the presidency by instituting the National Economic Council—and its director serves “as a coordinator of economic policies and the conduit to the president on domestic and global economic issues.”

All of these advice-giving, policy-research, and policy-shaping agencies supplement the cabinet agencies, such as the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Treasury. But their location inside the presidency itself means that they compete on better terms than the cabinet secretaries for the attention of the president. The Constitution does not tell presidents to seek expert advice and information. But presidents now avail themselves of the permanent and very broad policy-analytic capacities housed within the Executive Office of the President.

Monitoring public opinion

The third way in which political science has shaped the office of president has been through the rise of the public opinion survey and its incorporation into White House analysis of and deliberation over the public mood. Karl Rove, George W. Bush's political consultant, was so central to the Bush administration that Democrats often demonized him as the dark genius of that presidency. Similarly, David Axelrod, candidate Obama's political consultant, became essential to the Obama administration. In 2009, the *New York Times* noted, “There are few words that come across the president's lips that have not been blessed by Mr. Axelrod. He reviews every speech, studies every major policy position”

The first president to use reliable and representative opinion surveys systematically was FDR, during World War II. FDR sought to ascertain as clearly as he could the public mood at a very dangerous time for the country. He chose to work closely—and secretly—with social psychologist Hadley Cantril of Princeton University. (Cantril, it happened, chose to teach at Princeton because the town in which the university is located was home to one of the founders of opinion research, George Gallup.) As a junior professor, Cantril wrote a pioneering analysis of the mass panic that gripped many CBS radio listeners when Orson Welles broadcast his invasion-from-Mars “War of the Worlds” program on the eve of Halloween, 1938. In his study Cantril identified key personal traits to explain why some citizens panicked when they heard the broadcast while others did not. His work had clear implications for a president weighing how the public mood would help or hinder a transition toward total war. In this instance, the domestic and foreign policy presidencies were deeply intertwined.

The taxpayer never funded FDR's “in-house” polling during WWII—nor has the taxpayer ever paid for any presidential polling. Members of Congress view it suspiciously. Instead, presidential polling is unofficial. It relies on bringing campaign operatives into the White House, and it is paid for by the party of the president (though the staff that analyzes poll results is of course on the public payroll). The precedent that presidential polling is unofficial, informal, and rarely openly discussed was set indeed in the case of Cantril and Roosevelt. A Princeton businessman quietly paid for Cantril's secret analyses for President Roosevelt and for Secretary of State Henry Stimson.

In an assessment that could be applied to the presidents who have used polls extensively—that is, those who have served in the White House since the 1960s—Cantril noted, “President Roosevelt was ... the most alert responsible official I have ever known to be concerned about public opinion systematically. I never once saw him ‘change his mind’ because of what any survey showed. But he did base his strategy a great deal on these results.” The great majority of political scientists who have studied the relationship between presidential polling and public opinion concur. There is little evidence of pandering. Presidents, on the contrary, use polls to find the vocabulary that will resonate with the public. As analysts have noted, they engage in “crafted talk” that seeks to win the public over to the president's view, precisely what Woodrow Wilson would have hoped for. Presidents also use polling to find a way of speaking in public, which will demonstrate presidential awareness of and responsiveness to the public's preexisting concerns.

Political science has, in short, encouraged the activist presidency. That in turn has altered the relationship between the president and the vice president. Vice presidents have necessarily become more involved in governance. Because a vice president must instantly be as activist as his predecessor, should the president die in office, resign, or be removed by congressional impeachment and trial, the vice president must be as aware as possible of what the president knows and does not know. Vice presidents have, in fact, long met with the cabinet and since 1947 have been members of the National Security Council.

Presidents now also set the agenda of Congress, and they demand enactment of the “president's program.” If the president leads by explaining himself regularly, and

if a president is monitoring public opinion and also trying to get good advice on policy problems, then he is inevitably going to have a very full legislative agenda. This seems perfectly natural to us by now; however, that role cannot be found in the Constitution. In fact, article 2, section 3 reads only that “He shall from time to time give the Congress Information of the State of the Union and recommend to their consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.”

Congressional government has become less central in American politics, as Wilson meant it to. But the presidency’s evolution has helped to connect his use of the office to basic democratic standards: the rhetorical presidency enhances government by discussion, and presidential attention to public opinion enhances accountability. Presidential reliance on good policy advice means that executive decisions about “what to do” can be informed by expertise and competence.

These changes have nonetheless complicated the job of being the American president. Because they are constantly speaking to the people, presidents sometimes think that they can decisively shape public opinion—but the public has a mind of its own. Indeed, presidential monitoring of public opinion forces presidents and their advisers to acknowledge that firm public opinion on a wide range of issues already exists. The resort to expert advice on complex policy questions leads to yet another dilemma: the advice from specialists differs from how the public understands policy problems—and for presidents finessing that divergence can be challenging. The presidency’s evolution has been good for American democracy, but its growth and change have resulted in an office that demands the utmost from its occupants.

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