The Presidency

Is the office of President that of a dominant, imperial chief executive or that of a weak executive restrained by Congress?

Legislative Dominance Thesis

- Due to the Constitutional restraints of checks and balances, the President cannot unilaterally make policy on his own; must seek cooperation from Congress (Article I gives Congress much of the powers of the Federal Govt.)
- Congress has been able to control the policy agenda and the President has been limited by Congressional policy initiatives
- When Congress has abdicated to the President, it’s been because Congress has voluntarily chosen to give way to the President’s wishes
- When Congress has wanted to step up and assert resistance to the Pres. in foreign affairs, it has done so and many times done so successfully – Boland Amendment (1984), pressure on Somalia (1993)

Executive Dominance Thesis

- In the last century, the President has expanded his powers and become more active in initiating policy
- President has used the advantage of the “bully pulpit” to forge support, alliances and coalitions with not just key members of Congress and the public, but also with key interest groups and lobbies that have had the President’s same policy goals
- Article II of the Constitution gives the President the authority as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces
- This has led to the President initiating foreign policy for the majority of the last century – especially with regard to military conflicts
- The majority of military conflicts have not been declared, official acts of “war” by Congress; Instead, they have been “disputes” or “conflicts” unilaterally initiated by the President
- Also, some very significant domestic policy has been initiated and advanced, not by Congress, but by the President: Creation of the Bureau of the Budget - now called the OMB (1921), The New Deal (1933-1939), Creation of a domestic Natl. security apparatus (1930's), “Great Society” policy (1964-1968, Civil Rights (1964-1965), Budget Reform Act (1974), Americorp, Family Medical Leave Act, Brady Bill (1993), tax cuts (1981 and 2001), Post 9-11

Models of White House Organization

(1) **Pyramid Model**

- Based on a distinct **structure and hierarchy**
- There is a definite “**chain of command**” and “pecking order”
- White House staffers answer only to the staffer to the level immediately above them
- Mid and lower level staffers rarely have contact with the President
- Only senior level staffers have direct access to the Pres.
- The top senior staffer – the **Chief of Staff** – is critical to the success of White House organization
- CS take the President’s agenda and makes it his own
- CS is responsible for planning specific policy agenda setting, specific political strategy, etc.
- CS issues policy and political directives down to the rest of the staff; the instructions of the CS are filtered down through the rest of the pyramid
- Pyramid model is for Presidents who are naturally more detached and prefer to delegate authority from their CS downward – Presidents who are more “hands-off”
- Creates more accountability, discipline and loyalty to the Pres.

(2) **Circular Model**

- Based on a more **open-ended** WH organization
- All WH staffers have **open** and **equal** access to the Pres.
- The Pres. is more “**hands-on**” and prefers to handle policy matters himself personally; Pres. tends to be more of a “micro-manager”
- Due to the lack of structure and a distinct hierarchy, there is also a **lack of accountability**
- This leads to a lack of discipline and loyalty to the Pres.
- Staffers will often have the tendency to go off on their own (especially when they disagree with the President’s view on an issue) and **leak** internal problems and disagreements to the media
- This helps to **undermine** the President’s authority and credibility with Congress, the public and within WH staff
- These internal differences help make the external political environment (the economy, any int'l. crisis occurring, etc.) look much worse
- Also, the lack of discipline and organization makes it likely that the Pres. will try to achieve his policy agenda all at once – this can expend and waste the President’s **political capital**
Presidential Leadership Strategies

(1) The “Bargaining” President

- Based on the idea that the Pres. has to have the power to persuade, not command
- The Pres. must bargain, negotiate and compromise with Congress to achieve his policy goals
- Pres. must sacrifice at times some parts of a bill to get the rest of what he wants
- Pres. can offer political and legislative favors to key members of Congress (i.e., key committee chairs & members, party leaders from both parties, key “fence-sitters” whose votes on a bill are crucial, etc.)
- Pres. can also use the threat of the VETO as a way to get Congress to create and pass legislation closer to the President’s position and preference – sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t

(2) The “Going Public” President

- Based on the President being able to circumvent Congress and take his policy agenda straight to the public
- The strategy is to achieve favorable public opinion and then get the public, in turn, to put pressure on their elected members of Congress (both U.S. Senators and House members) to support the President’s policy
- This strategy is effective if:
  - (A) The Pres. has high job approval/favorability ratings (55% or higher); this gives him the “political capital”, or leverage, to effectively go public
  - Public will then support the pres, not so much for his policy as much as for the Pres.
  - (B) strategy is also effective with members of Congress who were elected by their constituency on the strength of the President’s “coattails”...
  - or members of Congress whose constituency was carried and won by the President during the last Presidential election
  - Pres. has “gone public” more frequently during the era of the “modern presidency” (starting with FDR)
  - Pres., during this time, has taken advantage of the expansion of mass media
  - Pres. can “go public” by way of “road trips” (knowing that there is constant TV, media coverage on the Pres. during every speech away from the White House), WH addresses in the Oval Office, Rose Garden and during Press Conferences