

POLSC332
Guide to Responding to Assessment 2
“Presidential Initiatives and Congress”

1. Describe the president's policy. What was his rationale for introducing it?

In 2000, George W. Bush campaigned for president, in part, as someone who would bring about reform to the education system. In fact, one of his Bush campaign ads pointed out (then Governor) Bush’s success in improving school performance in Texas, promising that he would do the same to improve schools everywhere in the nation should he become president.

President Bush felt so strongly about his education reform bill that he called it the “cornerstone of [his] administration.” He pledged that he would use part of the large budget surplus left over from the Clinton administration to pay for the reforms he proposed in the education act. Shortly after his inauguration in January 2001, he unveiled his plan for education reform—No Child Left Behind.

The NCLB bill incorporated an option for school choice, primarily for parents of those children who were in poorly performing schools. The bill also proposed more autonomy coupled with more responsibility for individual states and local education agencies. The bill would also set a goal of teaching all children to read by the completion of the third grade. A significant increase in mandated testing of children on their proficiency in reading and math was also part of the bill.

2. What was the political context of the time period (e.g., party makeup of Congress, the president’s approval rating, party polarization, “mood” of the country, etc.)?

Bush went on to win the presidency in a highly controversial decision made by the Supreme Court in late 2001 regarding the tabulation of votes in the key state of Florida. Even though his win could hardly be considered a public mandate, President Bush went forward with confidence that he would be able to persuade Congress to pass his policy initiatives. At the beginning of his first term, the 107th Congress had 221 Republicans and 210 Democrats in the House. The Senate had an evenly divided chamber— 50 Republicans and 50 Democrats.

3. Did the president campaign publicly on behalf of the legislation? What was his strategy for garnering support among the American people?

In the first months following his inauguration, President Bush toured the country in hopes of rallying public support for the education reform act and many of his other public policy reforms. He also made a point of introducing his new education secretary, Margaret Spellings, to the public, in addition to presenting an award to the Teacher of the Year in a public White House ceremony. These events were planned by the Bush



administration in order to underline for the general public the president's commitment to education reform.

4. What type of pressure did the president put on Congress? How did Congress respond?

After his initial push for public support, President Bush passed much of the responsibility for persuading Congress to pass NCLB into the hands of his most trusted advisors, Karl Rove and Karen Hughes. Mr. Rove was a chief political aide of Bush and Karen Hughes was his chief communications aide. These highly influential members of the Bush team wielded their influence on responsive members of the House and Senate to support the bill. Nicholas Calio, a leading Bush congressional liaison, and Vice President Dick Cheney, were also instrumental in soliciting support among members of Congress.

The passage of new education legislation was made easier for President Bush due to the fact that, at least initially, the Republican Party was in control of Congress and most members supported his education policy reforms. Moreover, Congress realized the pressing need to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965, the most appropriate legislative vehicle for NCLB.

The congressional committee to which NCLB was referred, the House Committee on Education and Workforce, consisted of a bipartisan panel headed by Republican John Boehner and George Miller, a Democrat. This committee compromised on passage of the bill by reducing the federal grants to states and by removing the option of school vouchers from the plan (both at the insistence of House Democrats). The bill then moved to the Senate.

For the first half of 2001, the Senate was in the hands of the Republican Party. However, due to a decision to switch party affiliation from Republican to Independent by Senator James Jeffords, the disgruntled chairman of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, control of the Senate fell into the hands of the Democratic Party. Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts then became chairman of the committee and proceeded to spend the next six months researching the costs of NCLB and taking chunks out of it. Specifically, he opposed the high cost of the bill at the same time he was fighting for increased funding for special education programs.

5. What compromises, if any, did he have to make with members of Congress in order to get his initiative passed?

In response, President Bush applied some subtle pressure to those Democrats in the Senate that he believed would be favorable in their support of the education reform bill



and who could win over Senator Kennedy. Due to demands for amendments to the bill from different factions in both the Republican and Democratic Party, the President was also put into a position where he was forced to sacrifice some parts of his original plan in order for it to pass the Senate committee. He agreed to an amendment of the parental choice element of his plan in order to save the mandated testing that he believed was essential in bringing about more accountability of schools nationwide.

6. Assess why the president's legislative efforts were successful. Was it through his efforts on behalf of the policy, the result of favorable circumstances, or both?

President Bush benefited from a huge surge in his approval rating after the September 11, 2001, attacks. Members of Congress rallied together to pass the education reform bill in a gesture of support for the president and to show the country that they were capable of working together in times of crisis. NCLB was signed into law on January 8, 2002.

