

This Nation: Presidential Leadership

The President of the United States of America is granted significant powers by the Constitution and exercises others by tradition and precedent. However, success exercising these powers have varied widely from one President to the next. Harnessing the powers of the presidency and managing the sprawling executive branch take a great deal of skill and determination.

Indeed Presidents face a host of challenges as they attempt to lead the nation and its people. They must work with others in the separated system of American government. They must constantly deal with a wide range of complex domestic and foreign policy problems which tend to arise at the worst possible times. They must try to organize and lead an executive branch which often does not want to follow (see "[Bureaucracy](#)"). And they must try to lead a nation with an aversion to strong leadership.¹ That some Presidents are strong and effective leaders in spite of these obstacles is a testament to their talents, skills and determination.

The Transition from Campaigning to Governance

Perhaps one of the most difficult transitions in politics is from the campaign trail to holding office and governing. Many observers and scholars of the American Presidency have suggested that the skills required to run a successful campaign are quite different from those required to be a successful President.

To win an election, a presidential candidate must win a majority of Electoral College votes. There have been several Presidents who have won the electoral college vote with less than a majority of the popular vote, including Bill Clinton who won 43% of the vote in 1992 and just under 50% in 1996. (See Presidential [QUICK FACTS](#) for a table of Presidential candidates and their electoral and popular vote totals.) Leading the nation, especially on controversial matters, often requires broader public support than the bare minimum required to win an election. *(PHOTO at Right: President Clinton Visiting with Veterans)*



A President must also be careful in the transition from campaign to governance to avoid the temptation to simply convert the campaign organization and staff into a White House staff. The people that are successful and effective campaign personnel are very often not good White House staff material. President Clinton, whose victory was a surprising upset in 1992, faced particularly harsh criticism from both Republicans and Democrats for appointing energetic but inexperienced campaign workers to significant White House positions. Said one Democrat, "Working in the White House should not be your first job."²

Despite the difficulties that attend the transition from the campaign trail to the White House, most newly-elected Presidents enjoy broad popular support during the first few months after the election that eases the transition considerably. During this so-called "honeymoon" period, the public is generally more forgiving of Presidents than they are later in their terms. The people are inclined to, at least for a short time, allow the new President to get acclimated and implement his agenda. However, as will be discussed below, there are pitfalls even during a President's honeymoon.

Governance through Delegation and Coordination

Much like the Chief Executive Office of any large corporation, the President cannot personally oversee every activity and program of the Executive Branch. The President must rely on a large number of people, many of whom are presidential appointees, to implement the President's goals and programs.

Among the President's most trusted advisors are the members of the President's "Cabinet," which consists of the Vice-President, the appointed heads



of each major Executive Branch Department and a handful of other leaders (see below).

Most Presidents work closely and meet regularly with at least some Cabinet members.

Presidents are free, however, to entirely ignore particular cabinet members if they choose, and may have in fact done so. *(PHOTO at Right: President Bush at a Cabinet Meeting)*

In addition to the members of the Cabinet, the President is also advised by the Council of Economic Advisers, the National Security Council, the Council on Environmental Equality, the Office of National Drug Control Policy and several other councils and agencies.

Managing the Cabinet and the White House staff can be a time consuming and distracting job for a President. Each occupant of the Oval Office has adopted his own style of managing the people who work for and advise him. Generally the President's Chief of Staff is the most important enforcer of the President's chosen management style, including who gets access to the President and how often. Whatever arrangement is settled on, the way a President organizes and manages the White House staff will, to a large extent, determine the overall effectiveness and success of his or her tenure in office.³

Because Presidents, by virtue of the office they hold, tend to intimidate most people who come into their presence, Presidents often go out of their way to encourage candor and criticism from their staff. There is a fine line, however, between being a trusted, outspoken advisor and a disloyal critic. It has not been unusual for a President to fire a staff member who spoke out too much, especially in public.

The President's Cabinet

The Vice-President
Secretary of State
Secretary of Treasury
Secretary of Defense
Attorney General (Justice Department Head)
Secretary of Interior
Secretary of Agriculture
Secretary of Commerce
Secretary of Labor
Secretary of Health & Human Services
Secretary of Housing & Urban Development
Secretary of Transportation
Secretary of Energy
Secretary of Education
Secretary of Veteran Affairs
Chief of Staff of the White House
Director of the Office of Management & Budget
Legal Counselor to the President
U.S. Trade Representative

In addition to managing the Executive Branch, the President must also work closely with the Congress to build support for his or her legislative agenda. To be effective, the President must also maintain good relations and open communication channels with the Press and with the people. To accomplish these objectives, the White House staff also includes legislative affairs personnel, a Press Secretary and a Public Affairs office.

The President as Party Leader

In addition to the President's duties as the formal head of the Executive Branch, the President is also the leader of his or her political party. As the highest elected leader in the land, the President becomes both a symbolic and functioning party leader. Presidents routinely work more closely with members of their own party in Congress than they do with members of the opposite party. They also work to support members of their own party in congressional elections by making appearances at campaign rallies and fundraisers. For Presidents to succeed in the separated system, they generally recognize the need to win and keep the support of members of their party. Presidents who do not have good working relationships with the members of their party in Congress, or those who are forced to work with congressional majorities of the opposite party, generally have more difficulty enacting their policy agendas.

The Power of Persuasion

For all the powers of the Presidency, the most important power of all may be simply the power to persuade. Given the numerous obstacles to the exercise of presidential power, from the separation of powers to a recalcitrant bureaucracy to public opinion, Presidents that cannot persuade others in the political system to support them and their agendas are likely to have little, if any, success.

Indeed, noted presidential scholar and historian Richard Neustadt has observed that presidential power is the power to effectively bargain with other political actors and to persuade them to support the President's agenda.⁴ During a presidential campaign, a candidate must persuade the public that the agenda he or she offers to the nation is the best being offered and that he or she is best prepared to implement it. Once elected, a President must persuade members of Congress, the public (again) and even members of the Executive Branch that the agenda he or she campaigned on ought to be made law.

The Bully Pulpit

The Framers were fearful that a particularly popular but ill-intentioned President might whip the masses into a frenzy and instigate a tyranny of the majority. The checks and balances and auxiliary precautions built into the Constitution were, at least in part, aimed at limiting a President's ability to do so.⁵ The rough and tumble Teddy Roosevelt (as well as many Presidents since him), however, purposely sought to use the office of the Presidency and the "bully pulpit" of the White House to build public opinion for the policies he supported.



How do Presidents acquire the power to persuade? Presidents who win by large margins or those who have consistently high public approval ratings are bound to be more persuasive than those who do not. When Ronald Reagan won by a large margin in 1980, he utilized his overwhelming popular support to persuade the Democratic majority in the House to cut taxes and increase defense spending. Presidents who have won by smaller margins have had more difficulty enacting their agendas.

While electoral and popular support are indispensable, Presidents who truly hope to be great, and not just liked, must also be able to convince people to see things their way, to support their goals and plans for America. Doing so is far from easy, especially when tough decisions must be made. Matters are further complicated by the fact that persuading politicians and bureaucrats is generally and entirely different matter from persuading the public. Some Presidents have been good at one but not the other and have stumbled through their presidencies. Lyndon Johnson, the consummate "inside

the beltway" persuader, ultimately chose not to run for reelection because he felt he had lost the ability to persuade the public. A rare few Presidents, like Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, have been skilled at persuading both politicians and the people and have been overwhelmingly successful. An unfortunate handful have been adept at neither and have gone into the history books as "failed" Presidents.

The American political system in which the American President is situated is complex and filled with barriers to the exercise of power. Presidents who want to lead cannot simply coast on their electoral successes. As Lyndon Johnson appropriately observed:

Every President has to establish with the various sectors of the country what I call "the right to govern." Just being elected to the office does not guarantee him that right. Every President has to inspire the confidence of the people. Every President has to become a leader, and to be a leader he must attract people who are willing to follow him. Every President has to develop a moral underpinning to his power, or he soon discovers that he has no power at all.⁶

NOTES

1. Thomas E. Cronin and Michael A. Genovese. *The Paradoxes of the American Presidency* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 4.
2. Quoted in Charles O. Jones. *Passages to the Presidency*. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1998), 106.
3. See John P. Burke. "The Institutional Presidency," in *The Presidency and the Political System*, Michael Nelson, ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1998), 429-32.
4. Richard E. Neustadt. *Presidential Power*. (New York: Wiley, 1960).
5. Jeffrey K. Tulis. "The Two Constitutional Presidencies," *The Presidency and the Political System*, Michael Nelson, ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1998), 93-6.
6. Quoted in Charles O. Jones. *The Presidency in a Separated System*. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1994), 1.