



Reforming the "President": The Individual as Leader

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# Reforming the "President": The Individual as Leader

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Proposals to reform the presidency fall into three increasingly exclusive categories. The most inclusive are those that focus on reforming the American political system and by doing so altering the balance of power within the government, usually in favor of the chief executive. The effort to strengthen the party system is probably the most prominent representative of this orientation. Other proposals, such as a presidential item veto, would increase the president's power on a more modest scale but still require change in the fundamental rules of the game.

A second class of proposals has the narrower aim of reforming the presidency as an institution. Rather than emphasizing increased power for the president, these recommendations attempt to aid the chief executive in carrying out his responsibilities more judiciously. They often focus on providing the president more or better decision-making resources. Plans for reorganizing or otherwise improving the White House staff system or the Executive Office of the President or for insulating the president from parochial demands through a single six-year term are notable examples of suggestions for institutional reform.

The variety of reformist proposals that is most common and most restricted in scope concentrates on improving the presidency by changing the characteristics of the individuals who occupy the Oval Office. Some would have us pay more attention to the character or personality of candidates for the office, while others stress the importance of choosing presidents who possess the proper skills for governing. To achieve these goals, proponents of change advocate reforms ranging from alterations in the processes by which we select presidents to candidate psychoanalysis.

Certainly the systemic and institutional approaches to reform are significant intellectual undertakings and deserve serious consideration. Yet it is the last category of reform proposals that receives the most attention from political commentators, perhaps because such reforms seem to be the easiest to accomplish. It is not necessary to alter the political system, a strategy requiring an exceptionally long lead time and burdened with a low probability of success. Nor is it necessary to change long-standing institutional arrangements or impose an organizational infrastructure on a chief executive.

Instead, so the argument goes, if we can only find "better" people to become president, then we will be more pleased with the operation of the presidency. The widely held notion that selecting candidates with the proper leadership skills will substantially improve the president's ability to lead the republic is particularly common, especially in the wake of the apparent contrast in skills between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Because of the prominence of this belief and the numerous proposals for change that spring from it, it is important that we carefully examine the argument on which it is based. The image of the dominant president who moves the country

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through his skilled leadership has deep roots in our political culture. Those chief executives whom we revere, from Washington to FDR, have taken on mythic proportions as leaders. Moreover, even though we are frequently disillusioned with the performance of presidents, and even though we recognize that stalemate is common in our political system, we eagerly accept what appears to be effective exercise of leadership skills, as in 1981, as evidence on which to renew our faith in the potential of the presidency. After all, if presidential leadership works some of the time, why not all the time?

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Such an orientation directly influences our expectations and evaluations of the president. If it is reasonable to expect successful leadership from the White House, then failures of leadership are simply personal deficiencies. If problems arise because the president lacks the proper skills, then the solution is straightforward. All we have to do is elect a president who is more skillful at persuasion and manipulation. Since the system is malleable to the appropriate leadership, the ship of state will sail smoothly with the right leader at the helm. Since the blame for failure lies with the individual leader rather than in the environment of leadership, we need not concern ourselves with broader forces in American society that may influence public policymaking. Because these conditions may be complex and perhaps intractable, the focus on the individual leader simplifies both our analysis and our evaluation of the problems of governing (Edwards, 1988a, b).

Implicit in this view of presidential leadership is the premise that skilled presidents are in fact able to create the conditions for change necessary to achieve their goals. If this assumption is not correct, if the president is actually more a facilitator than a director of change, dependent upon the existence of exploitable opportunities in the environment, then the case for reforming the "president" is weakened considerably. Although it may be better to have a skilled rather than an unskilled president exercising influence at the margins, we should expect much less from the president's skills in such circumstances.

If our national preoccupation with the chief executive is misplaced and our belief in the impact of the individual leader is mistaken, a product of a search for simple solutions in an individualistic political culture and a complex and purposefully inefficient system in which the framers' handiwork in decentralizing power prevails over even the most capable leaders, the consequences of choosing presidents with greater leadership skills will undoubtedly disappoint reformers.

Thus, the premise of the impact of leadership skills bears closer scrutiny. In the interest of space we set aside the admittedly important questions of decisionmaking and policy implementation and briefly assess the potential of presidential leadership in relation to two of its primary targets in our decentralized political system: Congress and the public (for an extended discussion see Edwards, 1988a).

## **Presidential Leadership of Congress**

The attribution of significance to presidential legislative leadership skills is a well-entrenched aspect of much of the writing, both popular and scholarly, on presidential-congressional relations. Authors can chronicle and study presidential acts, and it is natural to ascribe importance to them. The tendency of the press to focus on the more unique aspects of these relationships, such as bargaining and even "arm-twisting," implying that what it is presenting is typical, only reinforces the conventional wisdom. Moreover, many journalists, trained to focus on individual personalities and

what is "new" rather than on patterns of behavior, perceive presidential success in Congress as resulting directly from legislative skills.

Yet the evidence does not support such conclusions. Comparing the support for the president of various groups within Congress from 1953-1985, we find that there is little variance between presidents such as Lyndon Johnson, who had highly developed legislative skills, and others, such as Jimmy Carter, who had reputations for more modest skills. It is important to note that these findings are not the result of overly blunt indicators of presidential support. Whether we measure congressional support for the president with a broad index such as all the nonunanimous votes during a year or a much more exclusive index of only nine or ten key votes annually, the results are the same. There is no systematic relationship between presidential legislative skills and congressional support for the White House.

Others have found similar results. Legislatively skilled chief executives are no more likely to win votes than less skilled presidents. Moreover, they are *not* more likely to win close votes, on which skills might play the crucial role in obtaining the last few votes needed to pass a program (Fleisher and Bond, 1986).

How can we explain these findings? A useful place to start is to examine the potential impact of skills. Presidential legislative skills must compete with other, often more stable influences on congressional voting, such as party, public opinion, ideology, personal views and commitments on specific policies, and constituency interests. Skills are likely to be a critical factor only for those members open to persuasion after other influences have had their effect. Although the size and composition of this group varies from issue to issue, it will almost always be a minority in each chamber. Sometimes the number will be large enough to make a notable difference, but often it will not. At times a few votes will be crucial in affecting the outcomes on issues. Whatever the circumstances, the impact will usually be on a relatively modest scale. Thus, although potentially important, conversion is not likely to be at the core of policy change.

We can also investigate the potential of legislative skills by focusing on individual elements of skills to probe both their advantages and, equally important, the constraints on their use. This is especially important because implicit in the commentary of those who criticize presidents for their lack of skill and urge that they be more adroit in their leadership is the notion that skills are always available for use and all the president has to do is reach into his inventory and employ the appropriate means of persuasion. But are things really so straightforward? If so, why do presidents fail to exploit these devices and end up so frequently in stalemate with Congress?

Legislative skills come in a variety of forms. Some, such as bargaining, personal appeals, and consultation, are oriented at obtaining one or a few votes at a time. Other skills, such as setting priorities, exploiting "honeymoon" periods, and structur-

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ing votes, may have broader consequences because they affect most or all members of Congress at the same time. Space limitations prohibit consideration of all these components of skill, but briefly examining a commonly discussed element of legislative skill will illustrate the limitations on their use.

An important aspect of a president's legislative strategy can be establishing priorities among his legislative proposals. If the president is not able to set the agenda of Congress and focus attention on his priority programs, they may become lost in the

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complex and overloaded legislative process. Moreover, presidents and their aides can lobby effectively for only a few bills at a time, and, as the president's capital is inevitably limited, it is sensible to focus it on the issues he cares most about.

Jimmy Carter has been widely criticized for failing to set legislative priorities, especially in light of the scale, diversity, complexity, and controversial nature of his initial legislative program. Without guidance on priorities, the proposals clogged the congressional pipeline and stretched his prestige too thin. The fact that so much of his program fell within the jurisdiction of the House Ways and Means and Senate Finance Committees further aggravated the problem.

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There are fundamental obstacles to focusing congressional attention on a few top-priority items, however. In 1981 Ronald Reagan highlighted his priorities by asking for relatively little, but in the first year of his second term the budget, tax reform, the MX missile, farm credit, sanctions against South Africa, aid to the contras, and much more crowded the congressional agenda.

The White House can put off dealing with the full spectrum of national issues for a period of months at the beginning of the term of a new president, but it cannot do so for four years. Eventually it must make decisions about them. By the second year the agenda is full and more policies are in the pipeline as the administration attempts to satisfy its constituencies and responds to unanticipated or simply overlooked problems.

Moreover, the president himself will inevitably be a distraction from his own priorities. There are so many demands on the president to speak, appear, and attend meetings, that it is impossible to organize his schedule for very long around focusing attention on his major goals, especially when he has been in office for long. For example, President Reagan wanted to focus attention on tax reform in 1985. Yet during a trip to Alabama to stimulate support for his bill, he had to react to a Senate vote that day on his funding request for aid to the contras and to the Supreme Court's decision on an Alabama School prayer case. Thus, it was Nicaragua and school prayer that received coverage, not tax reform.

The president must also contend with the fact that Congress is quite capable of setting its own agenda. A list of the major legislative actions of the Ninety-ninth Congress includes the reauthorization of the Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, and the "Superfund" hazardous waste cleanup bill, sanctions against South Africa, reorganization of the Pentagon, an anti-drug abuse bill, a major revision of immigration law, the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings antideficit bill, revision of the law on gun control, the first authorization of water projects in a decade, an extension of daylight savings time, and extended protection against age discrimination. On none of this legislation did the White House take the lead. Instead, it reacted to congressional initiatives. Even the historic Tax Reform Act of 1986 was as much a product of long-term congressional momentum and committee leadership as it was of presidential agenda setting.

Finally, presidents may not want to concentrate attention on a few items. Lyndon Johnson is often viewed as being careful to set priorities for Congress, but upon close examination we find a different pattern. Johnson and his aides such as Lawrence O'Brien, Mike Manatos, and Wilbur Cohen make clear that the president was pushing five or six dozen bills at the same time in 1965. Instead of focusing congressional and public attention on a few bills, LBJ was more concerned about moving legislation through Congress rapidly to exploit the favorable political environment of a liberal majority in Congress.

It is considerably easier for a president with a short legislative agenda, such as Ronald Reagan, to set priorities than it is for one with a more ambitious agenda. It is also an advantage if the opposition party is in disarray and lacks alternatives to the president's, a situation enjoyed by the Republicans in 1981 as the Democrats were reeling from Reagan's election and their loss of the Senate.

### **Leading the Public**

The public is the president's ultimate source of influence, and there is widespread consensus that the chief executive must be able to lead public opinion. Based on the need for public support and misperceptions of the success of presidents in using the "bully pulpit," commentators often imply that successful leadership of the public is something we can reasonably expect from the White House—if only the president has the appropriate skill.

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The issue of the effects of presidential leadership on public opinion is a very complex one, and we are just beginning to investigate it in a systematic fashion. Experimental evidence and a few before and after comparisons in polls indicate potential, at least in the short run, for the president to move a segment of the public to support him, especially in the foreign policy realm. Yet the experience of presidents should make us cautious about assuming that even a president skilled at communication will have much success in leading the public.

John Kennedy pointedly expressed his wariness about presidential leadership of the public in his sardonic suggestion of an exchange from *King Henry IV, Part I* as an epigraph for a textbook on the presidency:

Glendower: "I can call spirits from the vasty deep."  
Hotspur: "Why, so can I, or so can any man.  
But will they come when you do call them?"  
(Sorensen, 1965, p. 293).

Ronald Reagan's sobriquet of "the great communicator" is well deserved from the standpoint of his skill in the presentation of himself and his views. Moreover, he has gone to unprecedented lengths to attempt to influence public opinion. It would be a mistake to conclude that he has been especially persuasive with the public, however. We should remember that his average approval level in the Gallup Poll in his first term was just two percentage points higher than Jimmy Carter's and at 49% did not achieve even the simple majority level (Edwards, 1985).

Similarly, on policies central to the Reagan administration, the public seems to have been unaffected by the president's persuasive efforts. Numerous national surveys of public opinion have found that support for regulatory programs and spending on

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health care, welfare, education, environmental protection, urban problems, and other social welfare programs has *increased*, not decreased, during Reagan's tenure. On the other hand, support for increased defense spending is decidedly lower than when he took office (Lipset, 1986; Schneider, 1985; Supporting a Greater Federal Role, 1987). In the foreign policy realm, in late 1986 only 25% of the public favored

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Reagan's cherished aid to the contras in Nicaragua (CBS News/The New York Times Poll, 1986).

Sometimes merely changing opinion is not sufficient, and the president wants the public to communicate its views directly to decisionmakers. The Reagan administration's effort at mobilizing the public on behalf of the 1981 tax cut is significant not only because of the apparent success of presidential leadership but also because it appears to be a deviant case—even for Ronald Reagan. His next major legislative battle was over the sale of AWACs planes to Saudi Arabia. The White House determined it could not mobilize the public on this issue, however, and adopted an "inside" strategy to prevent a legislative veto.

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In the remainder of his tenure the president has gone repeatedly to the people regarding a wide variety of policies, including the budget, aid to the contras, and defense expenditures. Yet he has never again been able to arouse many in his audience to communicate their support of his policies to Congress. Most issues hold less appeal to the public than substantial tax cuts.

Leading the public, like leading Congress, is leading at the margins. *At best* the White House can usually do no more than move a small portion of the public from opposition or neutrality to support for the president or an even smaller segment from passive agreement to active support. Occasionally this may have a critical impact, as when it is enough to influence a few wavering senators or representatives to back the president. More typically, however, the consequences of attempting to lead the public will be of modest significance.

## Conclusion

Although no one seriously disputes that the White House can make a difference in Congress or with public opinion, there is substantial reason to doubt that this impact is typically of great magnitude. Similarly, if Congress or the public is sometimes responsive to the president's leadership, we should not assume that even a skilled chief executive can exercise such influence at his discretion.

The issue is not whether presidents vary in skills or whether it is better to have skilled or unskilled leaders in the White House. The issue is what leadership skills bring to the presidency. Equally important, the question is the type of skills that are likely to be most useful. Since presidents typically operate at the margins of coalition formation, skills suitable for exploiting rather than creating opportunities for change seem most appropriate.

Given the president's strategic position, we should concentrate less on reforming the "president" and devote more attention to the context in which the chief executive seeks to achieve his goals. The personalization of politics can distract our attention from factors that play a larger role than presidential skills in explaining policymaking in American politics.

It does not follow, of course, that failures of presidential leadership may never be traced to the White House or that we should patiently accept the outcomes of the president's relations with the public or Congress. We cannot deny, for example, that the Carter administration sometimes shot itself in the foot (often when it was in its

mouth). The modest impact of skills does mean that we must better understand presidential leadership if we are to think sensibly about reforming the presidency.

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