CHAPTER 12 The Presidency

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

* Define the key terms at the end of the chapter.
* List the powers and duties of the president, as set forth in the Constitution.
* Describe other sources that presidents have used to expand the authority of the office.
* Explain why presidential popularity usually declines while a president is in office.
* Outline the process by which presidents are elected.
* Explain why modern presidents are more likely to rely on the White House staff than on the cabinet for advice on policymaking.
* Explain what is meant by referring to the president as chief lobbyist.
* Point out the assets and liabilities a president brings with him or her trying to translate his or her political vision into public policy.
* Describe the special skills presidents need for crisis management.
* Discuss the role of presidential character in evaluating presidential candidates.

# The Presidency and the Challenge of Democracy

President George W. Bush uniquely illustrates the best and worst a president can be. His approval ratings hit record high levels after 9/11, but those approval ratings set record lows by the time he left office. His last two years in office were his least effective, but he had six years of a Republican Congress, which helped him expand the powers of his presidency and set in motion many far-reaching initiatives: No Child Left Behind, the USA Patriot Act, Prescription Drug benefit for seniors, the War on Terror, and others. Presidents are expected to take on a number of different roles, yet they face limits to their formal powers and experience dramatic fluctuations in support from the public.

The president and vice president are the only nationally elected political officials in the United States. As a result, there is strong moral pressure on the president to be the president of all the people. The president is potentially the focal point of majoritarian politics in the American system. He is in a unique position to see that the national interest is not always the sum of all our single or special interests. Following opinion polls may make him aware of the need to appeal to the majority. Yet, the realities of U.S. presidential politics are more pluralistic than majoritarian. Although classical majoritarian theory might put a premium on being responsible to the people, the reality of presidential politics is that people to whom presidents respond are organized in groups.

Chapter Overview

The task of designing the office of chief executive presented the founders with a dilemma. They had just rebelled against a king and were reluctant to concentrate too much power in the hands of one individual. However, their experience under the Articles of Confederation convinced them that they needed strong national leadership, so they established the office of president. The new president would be chosen independently of Congress by an election in the electoral college. To limit presidential power, they relied on two things: the mechanism of checks and balances and their expectation that their first president, George Washington, would set good precedents.

## The Constitutional Basis of Presidential Power

According to the Constitution, the president must be a U.S.-born citizen and at least thirty-five years old and have lived in the United States for a minimum of fourteen years. The president’s two main duties are as the administrative head of the nation and the commander in chief of our armed forces. In addition, the president has the power to convene Congress and to veto their legislation. Among his or her other powers, the president may grant pardons; appoint ambassadors, judges, cabinet members, and other key officials; and make treaties.

## The Expansion of Presidential Power

The list of the president’s constitutional powers does not tell the whole story, however. Presidential power has increased tremendously since the Constitution was adopted. Presidential power increased aggressively through the use of the formal powers and broad claims that the president has certain inherent powers implied by the Constitution. Executive orders are the embodiment of the president’s inherent powers. In addition, Congress has also delegated power to the executive branch, allowing the president more freedom to implement policies.

## The Executive Branch Establishment

The executive branch establishment gives a president substantial resources to translate an electoral mandate into public policy. She or he may call on the executive office of the president, the cabinet, or the vice president or may rely on the presidential staff, including the national security adviser, the Council of Economic Advisers, and the Office of Management and Budget. The methods presidents use to organize their staffs differ from administration to administration and generally reflect the individual chief executive’s own working style. Modern presidents usually rely much more heavily on the White House staff than on the cabinet (the heads of the executive departments and other officials) to make policy. President Carter and later Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush are unusual in that each involved their respective vice president in substantive policy matters; in general, presidents have rarely looked to their vice presidents for assistance on such matters. In theory, the cabinet also acts as a presidential advisory group, but the importance of the cabinet has declined with the increase in the importance of the White House staff.

## Presidential Leadership

In recent years, journalists have paid increasing attention to aspects of the character issue. Scholars, too, have suggested that the electorate ought to pay more attention to a candidate’s formative experiences and basic psychological makeup. Strong self-esteem and emotional intelligence are the key factors needed to make a strong leader and have been present in many U.S. presidents.

The president’s ability to persuade is one of the most important factors determining how much power he or she has. Persuasiveness is often related to personality but may also result from reputation and prestige. These attributes, in turn, spring from such things as past successes (at the polls or with Congress) and popularity. Presidential popularity may be affected by many factors, including economic conditions, wars, and unanticipated events. Presidents usually are at the peak of their popularity during the honeymoon period of their first year in office, and they monitor their popularity closely as a kind of report card. Good communication can serve to rally the public to the president’s side, but the ability to form congressional and interest group coalitions should not be overlooked.

One reason why presidents have trouble sustaining popularity is found in the difference between what it takes to win the presidency and what it takes to do the president’s job. Winning the election involves assembling a winning coalition of voters in enough states to provide a majority vote in the electoral college. Candidates are often tempted to be vague on issues, to avoid alienating voters on either side. But a candidate who is too vague may appear wishy-washy. Once in office, a winning candidate may try to claim a mandate for her or his policies on the basis of majoritarian backing from the voters. Divided government, with the presidency and Congress controlled by different parties, has made it more difficult in recent years for presidents to translate perceived mandates into policy, though polls suggest that the public prefers to have the control of government divided between Democrats and Republicans, and scholars are divided in their assessment of the productivity of divided government.

## The President as National Leader

Presidents have differed considerably in their views of what government should do. Some, like Lyndon Johnson, emphasized the value of equality, while others, including Ronald Reagan, stressed freedom. The political agendas they set grow out of their general political ideologies, tempered by the realities of political life in Washington. Those who enter office after serious upheavals or political crises may have great opportunities to reshape the political agenda. In the modern era, presidents have assumed significant leadership in the legislative process. Departments and agencies clear their budgets and proposed legislation through the president. Presidents also act as chief lobbyists, trying to win support in Congress for their proposals. In this role, presidents may rely on their own personal contact with legislators, on contacts by their legislative liaison staffs, or on the aid of interest groups. Presidents may also use the threat of a veto as leverage to prevent Congress from passing measures of which they disapprove.

## The President as World Leader

Presidents are concerned with three basic foreign policy objectives: national security, international stability and peace, and protection of U.S. economic interests. The collapse of the Soviet Union forced recent presidents to redefine foreign policy goals. One persistent question has been the extent to which we act in concert with international allies or go it alone to pursue our foreign policy objectives. The U.S. president must be able to handle a national crisis but also be able to deal with world crises. Presidents usually take a four-step approach to a crisis: Draw on the opinion of many advisers, not act with unnecessary haste, have a well-designed formal review process, and rigorously examine all assumptions before analyzing and developing a solution.

Key Terms

veto

inherent powers

executive orders

delegation of powers

Executive Office of the President

cabinet

divided government

gridlock

mandate

legislative liaison staff

# Research and Resources

For up-to-date printed information on the president’s policies and actions, the best official source is the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), which is published every Monday by the Office of the Federal Register. For documents dating from 1993 on, you may wish to check online at <<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/wcomp/index.html>>.

In addition to this resource, the Federal Register also issues an annual bound volume entitled *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office). These volumes are useful for researching the presidency from Truman’s administration to the present.

If you wish to study earlier occupants of the White House, you should turn to *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789–1927* (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1928). This is a twenty-volume set containing official utterances of presidents from Washington to Coolidge. These volumes include presidential proclamations, addresses, annual messages, veto messages, and other communications to Congress, as well as articles about the issues that faced each president.

For the interim period not covered by either of the two works above, you will find the following two privately published works useful:

* Hoover, Herbert C. *The State Papers and Other Public Writings of Herbert Hoover*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1934.
* Roosevelt, Franklin D.. *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt.* New York: Random House, 1938–1950.

For researching topics related to the presidency, another valuable resource is a four-volume work edited by Leonard Levy and Louis Fisher, *Encyclopedia of the American Presidency* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1994). You could also try *The American Presidency* website, which has information from four different encyclopedias for every U.S. president, online at <<http://ap.grolier.com/splash>>.

For current information online, the White House maintains a website at <http://www.whitehouse.gov>. There you can read about the president and vice president, search presidential documents, check out current press releases, listen to speeches, and even tour the White House from your desktop. If you are interested in historical information on individual presidents, including sound and video clips, check out C-SPAN’s “American Presidents: Life Portraits” at <http://www.americanpresidents.org>; also, see the Internet Public Library site at <http://www.ipl.org/ref/POTUS>.

# Using Your Knowledge

1. Using the resources suggested above, try to learn the president’s position on the bill you researched in Chapter 10. Are there speeches or press conferences where he indicates his views on the bill? Is there a public ceremony where he delivered remarks as he signed the bill into law? Was there a veto message?

2. Use the Gallup Poll or other survey data to construct a graph showing the percentage of respondents who approve of the way President Clinton handled his job from 1993 to the end of his term. Do you observe any trends in your graph? How do the trends in your graph compare with the usual trend in presidential popularity sketched out in the text? Try the same exercise for Presidents Reagan and George W. Bush.

3. Have you ever wanted to tell the president what you think? Send an e-mail to the president, using the e-mail address <president@whitehouse.gov>. Of course, you are extremely unlikely to find the occupant of the Oval Office responding to his own e-mail, but you can register your opinion on issues that are of significance to you. The White House does use this as one method of keeping track of public opinion. You could also call the White House at 202-456-1414.

# Getting Involved

Ironically, perhaps, one accomplishment of the Clinton administration was the addition of the now-famous White House internship program. The program gives some six hundred interns a year the opportunity to work in one of twenty-two White House offices, handling a range of chores from advance planning to staffing the visitors’ office. Internships are available for twelve-week sessions in spring or fall or for six-week summer sessions. For further information, see the White House website, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/wh-intern.html>>.

Sample Exam Questions

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. What’s the *main* reason President George W. Bush was so ineffective during his second term in office?

a. The vice president was too vocal.

b. There were too many scandals.

c. Scooter Libby was convicted and pardoned.

d. Democrats regained control of Congress in 2006.

e. All of the above.

2. Which of the following is one of the president’s checks on Congress?

a. veto power

b. appointment power

c. ability to grant pardons

d. commander-in-chief power

e. administrative head of the nation

3. Although our founding fathers wanted a strong government, what were they *most* wary of?

a. powerful Congress

b. powerful Court

c. powerful electorate

d. powerful military

e. powerful president

4. Which of the following actions of our president is *not* empowered by our Constitution?

a. to act as administrative head of the nation

b. to act as chief of his or her political party

c. to act as commander in chief of the military

d. to make treaties

e. to appoint federal officers

5. Approximately how many vetoes were issued by our first sixteen presidents, from the time of Washington to Lincoln?

a. almost 60

b. about 75

c. just shy of 100

d. just a few more than 125

e. over 150

6. When government is unable to act on policy issues, how do we describe that situation?

a. congressional quagmire

b. presidential fault line

c. gridlock

d. congressional veto

e. congressional stalemate

7. Which of the following would *not* be considered a part of the Executive Office of the President?

a. White House chief of staff

b. Office of Management and Budget (OMB)

c. national security adviser

d. secretary of state

e. all of the above

8. According to the Constitution, what entity has the power to declare war?

a. Congress

b. president, with the advice and consent of the Senate

c. Supreme Court of the United States

d. president, on the advice of the National Security Council

e. president

9. What term is used to describe an endorsement from voters for the winner of a presidential election and her or his policies?

a. congressional delegation of power

b. home rule advantage

c. inherent power

d. pardon power

e. mandate

10. Which of the following has *not* been a major factor in increasing presidential power?

a. constitutional amendments expanding presidential power

b. theory of inherent presidential power

c. crises such as war or depression

d. congressional delegations of power

e. increasingly aggressive use of formal powers

11. When contemporary presidents face resistance from Congress, what do they typically do?

a. bargain with a small number of party and committee leaders

b. promote their objectives to a small group of party loyalists

c. rally broad coalitions of public support to pressure Congress to act

d. rely exclusively on fate and circumstance to win key votes

e. rely on the power of the veto

12. Lyndon B. Johnson used to use *justice* and *injustice* as code words for the values of

a. freedom and incarceration.

b. punishment and freedom.

c. order and chaos.

d. equality and inequality.

e. sharing and hoarding.

13. What other major country attacked Iraq at the same time the United States did in March of 2003?

a. Russia

b. China

c. Great Britain

d. France

e. Germany

14. President George W. Bush named three countries as the axis of evil in today’s world. Besides Iraq and North Korea, Bush also named

a. China.

b. Afganistan.

c. Myanmar.

d. Syria.

e. Iran.

15. What did the Articles of Confederation provide for?

a. no head of state

b. parliamentary government

c. powerful head of state

d. president similar to the one defined in the Constitution

e. weak head of state

16. What was President Ford’s most controversial act in office?

a. replacing Nixon

b. pardoning Nixon

c. defeating communism

d. ending the Vietnam War

e. initiating daylight savings time

17. Which president first required that all major legislation by an agency or department be cleared by the White House?

a. Abraham Lincoln

b. Teddy Roosevelt

c. Woodrow Wilson

d. Franklin Roosevelt

e. Dwight Eisenhower

18. What do we call the situation in which one party controls Congress while the other party controls the White House?

a. pluralism

b. divided government

c. cabinet government

d. checks and balances

e. separation of powers

19. Which of the following is *not* a constitutional requirement to become a presidential candidate?

a. be a U.S.-born citizen

b. be at least thirty-five years of age

c. believe in the pursuit of happiness

d. have lived in the United States a minimum of fourteen years

e. None of the above; all are constitutional requirements.

20. Who is third in line to become U.S. president if the sitting president becomes incapacitated?

a. secretary of state

b. attorney general

c. secretary of defense

d. Speaker of the House

e. president pro tempore

21. How would we best describe the contemporary role of the president in the legislative process?

a. The president proposes and Congress disposes.

b. Under the separation of powers, the president distances himself from the process.

c. The president may serve as chief lobbyist and be active in all stages of legislation.

d. The president is active only if his party controls Congress.

e. The president can largely determine the content of legislation passed by Congress.

22. What is the major communications link between the president and Congress?

a. legislative liaison staff

b. vice president

c. cabinet

d. Office of Management and Budget

e. Government Accountability Office

23. Which of the following is *not* one of the chief roles of the U.S. president?

a. commander in chief

b. chief diplomat

c. chief lobbyist

d. chief lawmaker

e. chief law enforcer

24. What is the dilemma of majoritarianism versus pluralism for the U.S. president?

a. The president must please a few people, while ignoring the masses.

b. The president must please the masses, while catering to Congress.

c. The president must do what is good for the whole country, while pleasing many constituencies.

d. The president must please the justices, while catering to Congress.

e. The president must do what is good for a few, in order to get a little for everyone.

25. Executive orders

a. require the approval of Congress.

b. carry the weight of law.

c. require the approval of the Supreme Court.

d. are explicitly described in the Constitution.

e. none of the above.

Essay Questions

1. Does divided government mean we must suffer through gridlock? Draw on research discussed in the chapter in formulating your answer.

2. Explain the constitutional role of the vice president and how that position has changed according to the will of the president that he or she serves under.

3. Explain the dilemma that U.S. presidents have in that they must do what they think is right but they still have to please most of the people most of the time.

4. What factors influence the level of presidential approval? Discuss both factors that tend to reduce approval ratings and factors than tend to drive up approval ratings.

5. How did the events of September 11 affect the power of President George W. Bush. Are these changes a new direction, or do they continue trends that were observed prior to the attacks?

Answers to Multiple-Choice Questions

1. d

2. a

3. e

4. b

5. a

6. c

7. d

8. a

9. e

10. a

11. c

12. d

13. c

14. e

15. a

16. b

17. d

18. b

19. c

20. e

21. c

22. a

23. d

24. c

25. b