

The Partisan Presidency

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A Paper for the 2005 "State of the Parties" Conference

Traditionally, political scientists have tended to see the powerful presidency of the 20th and 21st centuries as the enemy of strong parties. (See Davis 1992; Milkis 1993, 1999; Jones 2002; Greenstein 1978, 1988). Through an “objective” media, presidents appeal directly to voters, over the heads of party leaders, seeking a non-partisan image. They build ad hoc coalitions of support in Congress without regard to party lines. They preside over an executive branch staffed by non-partisan experts, more interested in policy than politics. Presidents show little interest in their party’s performance in down-ballot races, let alone its long-term fate. All of these propositions held true for presidents of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, especially Eisenhower, Johnson and Carter. But since 1980, we have seen the rise of a new kind of presidency – a Partisan Presidency. The following statements apply to the last four presidents, but most especially to Ronald Reagan and, above all, to George W. Bush:

- “Partisan Presidents” have polarized the electorate along partisan lines to an extent unimaginable a generation ago, often experiencing an “approval gap” of 40 points or more. (The “approval gap” is the difference between the approval given to a president by his partisans, as opposed to that given by members of the other party). Relatively few members of the other party have voted for them.
- “Partisan Presidents” have received overwhelming support in Congress from their party. More notably, they have confronted strong – sometimes near-unanimous – opposition from the other party. They have often relied heavily on their party’s

leadership to deliver votes on Capitol Hill, and they have been unable to enjoy the cozy relationship that earlier presidents had with the opposition, e.g. Eisenhower and Sam Rayburn, Lyndon Johnson and Everett Dirksen. Even a president disposed to such a relationship – George H.W. Bush – was unable to have one.

- “Partisan Presidents” have sought to put a stronger partisan imprint upon the executive branch, centralizing personnel decisions, and favoring ideological loyalists or spinmeisters over career civil servants or non-partisan experts. It’s hard to imagine presidents less interested in “neutral competence” than Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush.
- “Partisan Presidents,” particularly Reagan and George W. Bush, have actively campaigned for their party’s candidates and sought to use the national party committees as tools of governance. (Compare to Eisenhower’s apathy towards the GOP, or Johnson’s and Nixon’s distrust of their national party committees). Reagan, Clinton and George W. Bush have all shown an interest in their party’s long-term fortunes that escaped, say, Jimmy Carter.
- George W. Bush, perhaps our most “Partisan President,” has shown limited interest in wooing the conventional, “objective,” media. Instead he has sought to get his message out through arguably more partisan outlets – Fox News, conservative talk radio, the “Christian” media.

We need to move beyond outdated notions of presidents above party politics and instead understand presidents who are passionately engaged in them, and seek to use their parties as tools of governance. This paper begins a project examining the changing relationship between presidents and their political parties, with special emphasis on

George W. Bush. As such, it is concerned less with providing new empirical data than with placing existing information in a new context.

“The Modern Presidency” and Political Parties

Most scholars of the presidency agree that a distinctive “modern presidency” emerged in the first half of the 20th century, first under Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, then, most fully, under Franklin D. Roosevelt. Reflecting this consensus, Greenstein (1978, 1988) describes four defining characteristics of the “modern presidency”:

- The president sets (and is expected to set) the public agenda. Presidents regularly submit legislation to Congress and work for its passage.
- The president accomplishes many of his policy aims through unilateral actions, such as issuing executive orders.
- The “institutional presidency” has grown, through the development of the modern White House staff, and the creation of bodies such as the National Security Council and the Office of Management and Budget.
- “Modern presidents” receive far more media attention than their predecessors. The public looks to presidents for leadership, and presidents regularly appeal to the public for support.

Generally speaking, the heyday of the “modern presidency” (roughly from the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt through those of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon) saw political parties in decline, in the electorate, in government, and as

organizations. Milkis (1993, 1999) identifies 1937-38 as the key period of change in the relationship between presidents and their parties. Roosevelt alienated Southern Democrats through his wages-and-hours bill and his attempt to “pack” the Supreme Court; increasingly, these Southerners aligned with Republicans as part of a “conservative coalition” opposed to expansion of the New Deal. This split only grew over the next generation, making it difficult for Democratic presidents to look to their party to serve as a base of support in Congress and elsewhere. Roosevelt attempted to diminish conservative influence within the Democratic Party through his “purge” of 1938; after he failed to defeat New Deal opponents in primaries, Roosevelt abandoned his goal of a more nationalized, programmatic party. Instead, Roosevelt turned to the politics of administration, seeking to accomplish his liberal policies through executive action. (Milkis 1993, 1999).

Most scholars of the “modern presidency” would agree with the following propositions about presidents and their parties; indeed some would argue that they are still operative:

- Modern Presidents often could not depend upon their congressional parties for legislative support. Those parties were often internally divided; the North-South split within the Democratic Party was most notable, but there were divisions among Republicans as well, such as that between internationalists and isolationists after World War II, which forced Dwight Eisenhower to look to Democrats for support of his foreign policy. (Davis 1992; Milkis 1993; Jones 2002).

- As a corollary, relationships between Modern Presidents and their congressional party leaders were often troubled, e.g., Dwight Eisenhower's famous lack of regard for Senate Republican Leader William Knowland, Lyndon Johnson's frustration with Mike Mansfield's ineffectuality, Franklin Roosevelt's battles with Alben Barkley over wartime tax policy. (Davis 1992; Milkis 1993).
- Not surprisingly, Modern Presidents were often forced to seek support from the other party, especially under divided government. Presidents from Franklin Roosevelt through Lyndon Johnson pursued a bipartisan foreign policy. Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon often worked with conservative Southern Democrats. Eisenhower enjoyed an especially warm relationship with Democratic leaders Lyndon Johnson and Sam Rayburn. John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson found Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen to be a helpful negotiating partner, especially on civil rights. (Davis 1992)
- Modern Presidents led an executive branch where party politics played a diminishing role. Technocrats and personal loyalists replaced patronage hacks in key jobs, especially under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, who centralized many personnel decisions in the White House. But even Roosevelt, after lavishing patronage on a starved Democratic Party during his first term, gradually evolved to favor career civil servants and New Dealers of questionable partisan background. (Milkis 1993). A "Keynesian consensus" superseded ideological differences (Coleman 2000).
- Modern Presidents preferred advisors from policy-oriented backgrounds, even when they come from the opposite party or from outside politics altogether.

Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower relied heavily on the “neutral competence” of the Bureau of the Budget in shaping their domestic policies. John F. Kennedy’s Cabinet and White House famously featured numerous Republicans. Lyndon Johnson had nonpartisan task forces, dominated by academics and other specialists, formulate his leading policy proposals. Richard Nixon appointed as his first domestic policy advisor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Democrat and veteran of the two preceding administrations; his first Cabinet was so ideologically diverse as to lack coherence. (Milkis 1993; Nathan 1983; Moe 1985).

- Modern Presidents appealed to the public through the mass media of their time, whether Woodrow Wilson through newspapers, Franklin Roosevelt through radio, or John F. Kennedy through television. They often wooed journalists in order to obtain more favorable coverage, as both Roosevelt and Kennedy did. Modern Presidents used the media to reach the public as a whole, rather targeting partisan constituencies. Dwight Eisenhower and Lyndon Johnson both sought an image as “leader of all the people,” rising above party lines to speak for a nonideological consensus. (Maltese 1994; Kernell 1997; Davis 1992; Tulis 1988).
- Modern Presidents placed little priority on leading their party and often found allies across the aisle. Franklin D. Roosevelt was often frustrated by the conservatism of traditional Democrats, and turned to administrative means to further the New Deal, particularly by creating the Executive Office of the President. While Dwight Eisenhower did reward Republicans with patronage after two decades in the wilderness, he also worked with Citizens for Eisenhower,

the nonpartisan group that promoted his election in 1952. Both Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy gained their party's nomination by building their own personal organizations before they wooed insiders. Similarly, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon showed little interest in their national party committees; Johnson found himself confronting bitter dissent within the Democratic Party, both from his right and his left. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, partisanship in the electorate and in Congress hit new lows. Eisenhower and Nixon often worked with Southern Democrats; Kennedy and Johnson sought help from Republicans, especially on foreign policy and civil rights. Eisenhower, Johnson and Nixon all won substantial support from voters in the other party; all three downplayed partisan themes in their campaigns. Presidents in this period rarely experienced approval gaps of more than 40 points. (Kernell 1997).

The Postmodern Presidency

By the late 1970s, the days of the "modern presidency" seemed to be over. Presidents found themselves unable to set the national agenda, get important legislation through Congress, or to secure steady support from the public. Scholars discussed a "postmodern presidency," which could also be called a "postpartisan presidency." This concept most clearly applied to Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter and, to a lesser extent, to Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, particularly at their political nadirs. Some scholars would even apply it to Ronald Reagan and his successors. Presidents could no longer count on their party to provide them with a base in the electorate or in Congress. The following

propositions would describe the relationship of “postmodern presidents” to the party system.

- “Postmodern presidents” could rely on their party leaders to deliver support for them on Capitol Hill. Nor could they strike deals with committee chairmen or the “conservative coalition.” Congressional reform and a generation of individualistic lawmakers had radically decentralized Congress. Party leaders and committee chairmen had lost their previous ability to control the legislative process. Increasingly, power flowed to a disparate group of subcommittee chairmen and “legislative entrepreneurs.” In the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, Congress became increasingly assertive.
- As a result, presidents often found themselves besieged and bewildered when dealing with Capitol Hill. The normal paths to forming coalitions seemed to have disappeared. Nor could political parties help. Nixon and Ford faced hostile, Democratically-controlled Congresses, while Carter was unable to translate united government into governing success. Party voting in Congress fell to its lowest point ever during the 1970s, although it began rising toward the end of the decade. As Rose (1991) writes, presidents found themselves operating in a “no-party system.”
- Political parties also lost their ability to shape the executive branch. Both Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter appointed cabinets legendary for their ideological incoherence; Carter, especially, relied on technocrats much more than party politicians. (Greenstein 1978). The bureaucracy

remained fragmented, impervious to presidential control; increasingly, agencies were responsive to interest groups and liberal activists rather than to the White House or to party leaders. (Nathan 1983; Milkis 1993).

- Presidents no longer owed their election to the political parties. Party loyalty among voters continued to decline in the 1970s; in 1972, Richard Nixon won the support of about two in five Democrats, in 1980, one-quarter of Democrats did not vote to re-elect Jimmy Carter. Party reform allowed outsiders George McGovern and Jimmy Carter to win the Democratic nomination; Carter, Gerald Ford and Lyndon Johnson all experienced challenges to their re-nomination. Ford and Carter experienced very low approval gaps, in part due to their weakness within their own parties. (Ranney 1975, 1978; Polsby 1983; King 1978).
- Unable to rely on political parties to structure the electorate or to win support on Capitol Hill, presidents increasingly “went public,” appealing directly to voters through the media. But the press of the 1970s was far more skeptical than that of the 1940s or 1950s, while declining levels of public trust meant that many voters tuned out what their presidents had to say. (Kernell 1997).

The Rise of the “Partisan Presidency”

The past quarter century has seen a reversal of the trend toward weaker relationships between presidents and their parties. Beginning with Ronald Reagan, recent presidents have increasingly relied upon their parties for support both in the electorate

and in the Congress. They have presented an increasingly partisan image to voters and have found it difficult to cultivate support from the opposition. They have sought to lead their parties, using the national committees to garner support for their policies, campaigning extensively for their parties' candidates, and even seeking to mold their parties' futures.

This presidency is partisan in more ways than one. Most obviously, this presidency is partisan through the close ties binding presidents to their parties. But it also is partisan in that the executive branch is used as a tool to support the president's agenda; advice is valued to the extent that it promotes the party's platform and the president's political future, rather than how it fulfills the ideals of "neutral competence." Finally, this presidency is partisan because the president performs as a partisan in the combat of the "permanent campaign." The president, rather than floating above the political system as "leader of all the people," leads the battalions of a partisan army into the battlefield of contemporary Washington. The parties that these presidents lead are not the decentralized, nonideological federations of the 19th century. They are nationalized, ideologically coherent, and headquartered in Washington – ultimately in the Oval Office. (Aldrich 1995).

The President as Party Leader

"Partisan presidents" have served as active party leaders, campaigning for candidates, working with party committees, and even trying to mold their party's future. Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush both sought to make the Republican party both a majority party and a more clearly conservative party. Bush set a new standard for

presidential campaigning through his involvement in the 2002 and 2004 congressional elections, which included for calling for the defeat even of moderate Democrats who had often supported Bush's policies. (Nelson 2004; Bass 2004). Bill Clinton, while less disciplined in his commitment, tirelessly raised money for the Democratic Party and outlined a "New Democrat" vision to appeal to the center. (Rae 2000). "Partisan presidents" have not shown the apathy that Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter displayed toward their parties. If the "reformed" presidential process of the 1970s produced nominees such as Carter and George McGovern who had had little contact with their party establishments, the "post-reformed" process of the past quarter century has produced nominees backed by party insiders during the "invisible primary." (Cohen et al 2003, forthcoming; Rockman 2004).

A Partisan Public?

"Partisan presidents" have experienced a much larger "approval gap" than their predecessors. (The "approval gap" is the difference between the percentage of the president's partisans who approve of his performance and the percentage of members of the opposite party who do). From Eisenhower through Carter, no president had an average approval gap of more than 41 points; the approval gap never exceeded 48 points in any quarter. By contrast, Ronald Reagan had an average approval gap of 52.9 points; Bill Clinton experienced one of 55 points, falling below 50 points in only two quarters. (Jacobson 2002). But George W. Bush has set new standards for approval gaps. Not only has he experienced the largest approval gaps ever measured, he is the first president to ever exceed 70 points, which he did during most of the 2004 campaign. (Jacobson

2005; Dimiock 2004). Bush has usually received more than 90 percent approval among Republicans, making him one of the most popular presidents ever with his own party; during 2004, his support among Democrats was among the worst ever received for a president within the opposition party. Independents tended to be closer to Democrats in their view of Bush, forcing him to rely on his own partisans for support. (Jacobson 2005). Even before the campaign began, Bush campaign operatives were open in their belief that large numbers of voters would never back the president; instead they emphasized turning out loyal Republicans.

When polarization reaches such an extent, one wonders if the phrase “public opinion” has much meaning, at least as a singular noun. Certainly, with the divergence in electoral constituencies, and the decline in “split-ticket” states and districts, Democratic and Republican officeholders are operating in radically different contexts. (Jacobson 2002).

“Partisan presidents” are also operating in a political system in which public opinion has become much more polarized along party lines. (Jacobson 2000; Bartels 2000; Fleisher and Bond 2001; Hetherington 2001; Layman and Carsey 2002; Lawrence 2001; Brewer 2004). Americans perceive far more ideological distance between themselves and presidents than they did in the 1950s and 1960s; arguably, more and more citizens see an enemy, not a leader, in the White House. (Hetherington and Globetti 2005). According to the National Election Studies, the 2004 elections showed the highest level of party loyalty in history.

Congressional Relations

The period of the “Partisan Presidency” coincides with the rise of polarization and party leadership in Congress. (Rohde 1991; Bond and Fleisher 2000; Cox and McCubbins 1993). In an era of increased partisanship, presidents find more difficult to win support across party lines in Congress. (Sinclair 2000; Jacobson 2002). Opposition parties not only unite against the president’s policies, they may adopt a “no” strategy, refusing to cooperate on virtually anything as did, as did Republicans during Clinton’s first two years. Fewer members are likely to support the policies of an opposition-party presidency, as Southern Democrats had done so frequently for Republican presidents. (Fleisher and Bond 2000).

But it is also true that presidents are now better able to rely on their congressional party for support than their predecessors could. There is some evidence that united and divided control matter more in a polarized era than they did a generation ago (Sinclair 2000a, 2000b; Nelson 2004). Both George W. Bush and Bill Clinton enjoyed close relationships with the congressional leadership of their parties; both men had deeply troubled relations with the leaders of the opposition. (Wayne 2004; Owens 2004). John F. Kennedy refused to campaign against Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen in 1962, even though he faced a tough race in a state that had voted for Kennedy; in a similar situation in 2004, Bush led a successful Republican drive to oust Tom Daschle. (Davis 1992). Bush has done little to reconcile Democrats to his leadership, instead relying on the GOP leadership to deliver victory on vote after vote.

In late 2002, the Bush White House, dissatisfied with Trent Lott’s leadership and dismayed by the uproar over the senator’s remarks at Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday

party, helped engineer his removal as Senate Republican Leader. Contrary to Jones (2002), not only are Dick Cheney and Karl Rove familiar figures at meetings of Capitol Hill Republicans, representatives of the Bush White House regularly attend the gatherings of conservative activists hosted by Grover Norquist. Given congressional Republicans' unwillingness to challenge Bush on virtually any issue, one wonders how separated our powers really are today.

But congressional partisanship, of course, goes far deeper than the personalities of particular presidents. The voting records and constituencies of congressional Democrats and Republicans increasingly diverge; party leaders wield more clout than they once did. (Jacobson 2002; Sinclair 2000a, 2000b, 2004). Even a president who wanted an old-fashioned bipartisan relationship with Congress, George H. W. Bush, was ultimately unable to have one. Clinton's brief period of *détente* with congressional Republicans ended not only because of the Lewinsky scandal, but because Speaker Newt Gingrich nearly lost his position in an uprising by conservatives angry that he had "sold out." Partisan Presidents have helped create our polarized system, but they also must operate within it.

Partisan Administration

While Richard Nixon's "administrative presidency" strategy was often interpreted as a means of a president "governing alone" without the support of a political party, it can also be a means of turning the executive branch into a tool of partisan governance, as both Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush have shown. (Nathan 1983; Moe 1985; Aberbach 2004; Waterman 1989). The administrative strategy lends itself especially well

to an era when party activists are motivated more by ideology than by patronage; there are numerous well-qualified professionals who are committed to the president's agenda and are competent enough to enact it. Yet one cannot dismiss the role of material incentives entirely; today, a prominent government position can open the door to a lucrative lobbying career – perhaps a new kind of patronage.

Richard Nixon set the pattern for presidents taking greater control of the executive branch. Frustrated by the tendency of appointees to “go native” and by continuing power of civil servants and clientele groups, Nixon sought to remake his administration in 1972-73. (Nathan 1983). He centralized power in the White House and in a handful of trusted aides; he increased the power of the White House Personnel Office; he appointed loyalists to cabinet and sub-cabinet positions; he tried to use the Office of Management and Budget to rein in regulatory agencies. (Nathan 1983). While Nixon's efforts were thwarted by Watergate, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush showed that his methods could reorient government in a more conservative direction. Both presidents selected ideologically sympathetic subordinates, centralized policy and personnel decisions in the White House, and used the OMB to curb regulatory excess. Bush took the “administrative presidency” a step further by seeking to curb the power of public employee unions. (Moe 1985, 2003; Aberbach 2004; Milkis 1993; Bass 2004; Kelley 2005). These administrations also sought to secure greater partisan/ideological control of the judiciary, by creating recruitment processes that emphasized philosophy as much as competence or political connections. They also centralized this process in the White House and the Justice Department, seeking to regain control away from the Senate. (McKeever 2004; O'Brien 2004; Yalof 2004).

Neither Reagan or Bush II showed much regard for “neutral competence” or disinterested expertise. Both men pursued policies widely denounced by scientific “experts”: supply-side tax cuts; opposition to efforts to curb environmental dangers such as acid rain and global warming; support for socially conservative policies such as abstinence-based sex education, teaching “intelligent design” and opposition to the “morning-after” pill. Few economists or scientists would have endorsed these stances; but these presidents did not care. (Some of George W. Bush’s critics have accused his administration of being hostile to scientific expertise or even to the notion of truth itself. See Marshall 2003 and Mooney 2005). During the preparation for the invasion of Iraq, Bush and his allies showed little interest in the concerns raised by career officials in the CIA, the Pentagon, or the State Department.

Today, presidents are more likely to turn to political consultants or ideologically driven think tanks for policy ideas; this marks a sharp difference from Jimmy Carter’s reliance on technocrats or Lyndon Johnson’s task forces of academics. Unlike Dwight Eisenhower or Richard Nixon, George W. Bush has shown little interest in hearing different views on policy questions, nor has he created procedures to ensure open discussion. (Milis 1993; Hecl 2000; Bowman 2000; Campbell 2004; Medvic and Dulio 2001). Several veterans of the Bush Administration, from John DiIulio to Paul O’Neill, have noted the Bush White House’s lack of interest in domestic policy and the president’s dislike for substantive debate; even Bush loyalist David Frum has admitted that the “faith-based” initiative was pursued primarily to woo religious voters, rather than to remedy social problems. (Campbell 2004; Frum 2003; Suskind 2004) The disdain for “neutral competence” extended to judicial nominations, with the administration ending

the practice of submitting nominees to the American Bar Administration for evaluation. (O'Brien 2004).

Partisan Media

Many scholars of the presidency see as the model for presidential-press relations as the amiable back-and-forth between reporters and Franklin D. Roosevelt or John F. Kennedy; they may also envision the reliance of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan on televised addresses, presumably aimed at the nation as a whole. Neither paradigm fits the reality of media relations in this partisan era. Since Nixon, administrations have tried to actively manage the news through the White House Office of Communications. (Maltese 1994; Kernell 1997). With the rise of the Internet and cable television, the audiences for presidential addresses, except in crisis situations, have been declining; there is some evidence, at least for George W. Bush, that those audiences have also become partisan.¹ Bush's efforts at "going public," whether on TV or on the stump, have usually been aimed more at "rallying the base" than at "reaching out." (Edwards 2004; Wayne 2004).

Both the Clinton and Bush II Administration have had notably testy relationships with the White House press corps. Both have sought to bypass the conventional media: Clinton by using the "alternative media" (such as the Internet and cable television), and Bush by using conservative media outlets such as Fox News and conservative talk radio. (Maltese 1994; Kurtz 1998; West 2001)

¹ For example, the Gallup Poll found that the audience for Bush's address on June 27, 2005, in which he defended his Iraq policy, was 50 percent Republican, 27 percent Independent and 23 percent Democratic – a much more Republican group than the nation as a whole. Not surprisingly, three-quarters of viewers approved of the speech. A similar partisan pattern has prevailed for many Bush addresses. See Dionne 2005 and Bazinet 2005. At the time, the most recent Gallup Poll showed Bush to have an approval rating of 45%, with only 42% approving of his handling of Iraq.

While most media outlets have audiences that reflect the partisan diversity of the general public, a few have striking tilts in viewership. A 2004 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 35 percent of Republicans “regularly watch” Fox News; only 21 percent of Democrats do. One in seven Republicans regularly listen to Rush Limbaugh’s radio show; only 1 in 50 Democrats do. (Pew Research Center 2004). Twice as many viewers watched the Republican convention on Fox as watched the Democratic gathering (overall ratings for the two events were about equal). (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2005). 77 percent of Limbaugh listeners call themselves conservative. (Pew Research Center 2004). The Project for Excellence in Journalism notes the growth of a “journalism of affirmation” (e.g, Republicans watching Fox News) and a “journalism of assertion” (e.g., a blogger or talk show host making unsubstantiated charges). (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2005). This contrasts sharply with the Progressive ideal of objective, scientific journalism conducted by experts. (Lippmann [1922] 1997).

Evolution of the Partisan Presidency

While some of the elements of the partisan presidency emerged under Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan defined the Partisan Presidency as surely as Franklin Roosevelt did the Modern Presidency. Reagan sought to remake the Republican Party in his conservative image and to vault it into majority status; in this mission, he repeatedly campaigned for Republican candidates. He used the Republican National Committee to win support for his programs; he worked closely with Republican leaders in Congress., especially Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker. He polarized the electorate more than

any of his predecessors, even Richard Nixon. Through centralization of policy decisions and appointment of ideological loyalists, Reagan managed to make the executive branch a tool of conservative governance. Even a skeptic of presidential partisan leadership such as Sidney Milkis admitted that the Reagan era may have “marked the watershed ... for a renewed link between presidents and the party system.” (Milkis 1993).

Despite his previous service as chairman of the Republican National Committee, George H. W. Bush harkened back to a less partisan style of leadership with his willingness to work with a Democratic Congress. But the era of *détente* did not last. Conservative Republicans angrily opposed Bush’s agreement to raise taxes in the 1990 budget agreement; Bush found himself desperately tacking to the right to win back his base as the 1992 election approached. Meanwhile, congressional Democrats increasingly blocked his legislative proposals in anticipation of a Democratic win in November.

Bill Clinton was not as relentlessly partisan as his successor, but he still fits into the post-Reagan paradigm. While he had his own brief period of *détente* with congressional Republicans beginning in late 1996 and climaxing with the 1997 budget agreement, he usually faced a remarkably united and determined opposition. In 1993-94, Republicans almost unanimously opposed Clinton’s budget and health care plan; in 1995-96, an empowered GOP sought to impose its own agenda, attempting to overturn one of the defining characteristics of the Modern Presidency; and in 1998-9, congressional Republicans attempted to remove Clinton from office, despite widespread public opposition. Clinton deeply polarized the electorate along partisan and cultural lines, experiencing an “approval gap” even larger than Reagan’s. Even during his second term, when his overall popularity often soared over 60 percent, he continued to inspire intense

loathing among evangelicals and conservative Republicans. (Guth 2000; Rae 2000; Harvey 2000).

Despite his occasional efforts at “triangulation,” Clinton showed more interest in the role of party leader than did his Democratic predecessors Jimmy Carter and Lyndon Johnson. He worked closely with the Democratic congressional leadership, especially during his first two years. His “New Democrat” philosophy showed his interest in the future of his party. (Rae 2000).

But George W. Bush has set a standard for partisanship by a president. If Reagan was the Franklin Roosevelt of the Partisan Presidency, Bush has been the Lyndon Johnson, building upon his predecessor’s legacy to an amazing extent. Unlike Reagan, Bush has been able to mostly work with Republican Congresses, freeing him of the need to win over Democrats. With the exception of the rally period after 9/11, Bush has been intensely unpopular with Democrats. Now that his support among Independents has fallen to about one in three, Bush is forced to rely almost exclusively on his GOP base.

Implications of the Partisan Presidency

The “partisan presidency” may have some positive effects on our political system. Turnout has increased in the past two presidential elections, which both featured strikingly polarized views of the candidates among voters. Voters report clearer images of the two parties, images with greater ideological coherence than in the past. But citizens also report greater ideological distance between themselves and presidents, which may be associated with increased distrust (Hetherington and Globetti 2004). Both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush generated unusually intense support and opposition,

often distorting the national debate. The relentlessness of the “permanent campaign” makes it difficult for politicians of opposite parties to work together. United government in this partisan era may lead to greater productivity, but may also lead to the adoption of policies out of sync with public sentiment. Politicians may then respond more to ideological currents within their party than to public desires or to objective expertise. Divided government may lead to Bush I-era gridlock or to Clinton-era political warfare. Combining contemporary partisanship with a shouting-head media culture can make it impossible to develop solutions across ideological lines.

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