THE WHITE HOUSE TRANSITION PROJECT
1997-2021

Smoothing the Peaceful Transfer of Democratic Power

Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy
University of Missouri

Report 2021—08

THE POTENTIAL FOR PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP

George C. Edwards III, *Texas A&M University*
White House Transition Project

WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

The White House Transition Project. Begun in 1998, the White House Transition Project provides information about individual offices for staff coming into the White House to help streamline the process of transition from one administration to the next. A nonpartisan, nonprofit group, the WHTP brings together political science scholars who study the presidency and White House operations to write analytical pieces on relevant topics about presidential transitions, presidential appointments, and crisis management. Since its creation, it has participated in the 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017, and now the 2021. WHTP coordinates with government agencies and other non-profit groups, e.g., the US National Archives or the Partnership for Public Service. It also consults with foreign governments and organizations interested in improving governmental transitions, worldwide. See the project at http://whitehousetransitionproject.org

The White House Transition Project produces a number of materials, including:

- **WHITE HOUSE OFFICE ESSAYS:** Based on interviews with key personnel who have borne these unique responsibilities, including former White House Chiefs of Staff; Staff Secretaries; Counsels; Press Secretaries, etc. , WHTP produces briefing books for each of the critical White House offices. These briefs compile the best practices suggested by those who have carried out the duties of these office. With the permission of the interviewees, interviews are available on the National Archives website page dedicated to this project:
- ***WHITE HOUSE ORGANIZATION CHARTS.** The charts cover administrations from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama and help new White House staff understand what to expect when they arrive and how their offices changed over time or stayed the same.
- ***TRANSITION ESSAYS.** These reports cover a number of topics suggested by White House staff, including analyses of the patterns of presidential appointments and the Senate confirmation process, White House and presidential working routine, and the patterns of presidential travel and crisis management. It also maintains ongoing reports on the patterns of interactions with reporters and the press in general as well as White House staffing.
- ***INTERNATIONAL COMPONENT**. The WHTP consults with international governments and groups interested in transitions in their governments. In 2017 in conjunction with the Baker Institute, the WHTP hosted a conference with emerging Latin American leaders and in 2018 cosponsored a government transitions conference with the National Democratic Institute held in November 2018 in Montreal, Canada .

Earlier White House Transition Project funding has included grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and The Moody Foundation of Galveston, Texas.

The Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy. A central element of the University of Missouri's main campus in Columbia, Missouri, the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy prepares students for lives of thoughtful and engaged citizenship by equipping them with knowledge of the ideas and events that have shaped our nation's history.
https://democracy.missouri.edu .

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE WHITE HOUSE TRANSITION PROJECT
1997-2021

Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy
University of Missouri

Smoothing the Peaceful Transfer of Democratic Power

Report 2021—08

THE POTENTIAL FOR PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP

George C. Edwards III, *Texas A&M University*
White House Transition Project

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although it may be appealing to explain major policy changes in terms of persuasive personalities, public opinion is too biased, the political system is too complicated, power is too decentralized, and interests are too diverse for one person, no matter how extraordinary, to dominate. Recognizing and exploiting opportunities for change—rather than creating opportunities through persuasion—are the essential presidential leadership skills.

Successful leadership is not the result of the dominant chief executive of political folklore who reshapes the contours of the political landscape, altering his strategic position to pave the way for change. To succeed, presidents have to evaluate the opportunities for change in their environments carefully and orchestrate existing and potential support skillfully. To exploit opportunities successfully, the president must have the commitment, resolution, and adaptability to take full advantage of opportunities that arise. When the various streams of political resources converge to create opportunities for major change, presidents can be critical facilitators in engendering significant alterations in public policy. But while the president's power to achieve policy change may hinge on the president correctly sizing up his opportunities, it rarely if ever depends on the power to persuade.

Strategies for governing based on the premise of creating opportunities for change are prone to failure. Presidents— and the country—often endure self-inflicted wounds when they fail to appreciate the limits of their influence. The White House not only wastes the opportunities that do exist but sometimes—as in Franklin D. Roosevelt's Court-packing bill, Bill Clinton's health care reform proposal, and George W. Bush's effort to reform Social Security—presidents also create the conditions for political disaster and undermine their ability to govern in the long-term. The dangers of overreach and debilitating political losses alert us that it is critically important for presidents to assess accurately the potential for obtaining public and congressional support. In addition, presidents may underestimate their opposition and eschew necessary compromises in the mistaken belief that they can persuade members of the public and Congress to change their minds.

INTRODUCTION

The challenges of governing have rarely been greater. The distance between the parties in Congress and between identifiers with the parties among the public is the greatest in a century. The public accords Congress among the lowest approval ratings in modern history, but activists allow its members little leeway to compromise. The inability of Congress and the president to resolve critical problems results in constant crises in financing the government, endless debate over immigration, health care, environmental protection, and other crucial issues, and a failure to plan effectively for the future.

How does a president overcome these obstacles to obtaining support for policy initiatives? Influencing others is central to most people's conception of leadership, including those most focused on politics. In a democracy, we are particularly attuned to efforts to persuade, especially when most potentially significant policy changes require the assent of multiple power holders.

It is natural for new presidents, basking in the glow of electoral victories, to focus on creating, rather than exploiting, opportunities for change. It may seem quite reasonable for leaders who have just won the biggest prize in American politics by convincing voters and party leaders to support their candidacies to conclude that they should be able to convince members of the public and Congress to support their policies. Thus, they need not focus on evaluating existing possibilities when they think they can create their own.

Campaigning is different from governing, however. Campaigns focus on short-term victory and candidates wage them in either/or terms. To win an election, a candidate need only convince voters that he or she is a better choice than the few available alternatives. In addition, someone always wins, whether or not voters support the victor's policy positions.

Governing, on the other hand, involves deliberation, negotiation, and often compromise over an extended period. Moreover, in governing the president's policy is just one of a wide range of alternatives. Furthermore, delay is a common objective, and a common outcome, in matters of public policy. Neither the public nor elected officials have to choose. Although stalemate may sometimes be the president's goal, the White House usually wishes to convince people to support a positive action.

The American political system is not a fertile field for the exercise of presidential leadership. Most political actors, from the average citizen to members of Congress, are free to choose whether to follow the chief executive's lead; the president cannot force them to act. At the same time, the sharing of powers established by the Constitution's checks and balances not only prevents the president from acting unilaterally on most important matters but also gives other power holders different perspectives on issues and policy proposals.

Nevertheless, the tenacity with which many commentators embrace the persuasive potential of political leadership is striking. They often fall prey to an exaggerated concept of the potential for using the "bully pulpit" to go public or pressuring members of Congress to fall into line with the White House. They routinely explain historic shifts in public policy, such as those in the 1930s, 1960s, and 1980s, in terms of the extraordinary persuasiveness of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and Ronald Reagan. Equally striking is the lack of evidence of the persuasive power of the presidency. Observers in both the press and the academy base their claims about the impact of such leadership on

little or no systematic evidence. There is not a single systematic study that demonstrates that presidents can reliably move others to support them.

In sum, we should not infer from success in winning elections that the White House can persuade members of the public and Congress to change their minds and support policies they would otherwise oppose. Indeed, such assumptions are likely to lead to self-inflicted wounds.

The issue is *not* whether major policy changes that presidents desire occur. They do. The fundamental question is *how* presidents achieve these changes. Do they have the potential to create opportunities for change by persuading others to follow them? Or do successful presidents recognize and exploit the opportunities for change the voters have dealt them.

LEADING THE PUBLIC

Presidents invest heavily in leading the public in the hope of leveraging public support to win backing in Congress. Despite the expectations of new presidents that they will be able to persuade the public to support their initiatives, it is a mistake for them to assume they can change public opinion. There is overwhelming evidence that presidents rarely move the public in their direction, and there are long-term forces that work against presidential leadership of the public. [1]

Most observers view Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton as excellent communicators. Nevertheless, the evidence is clear that pluralities and often majorities of the public opposed them on most of their policy initiatives. Moreover, after they made efforts to lead the public, opinion typically moved *away* from rather than toward the positions they favored.[2]

At the core of Ronald Reagan's policy response to the threat of communism in Central America was an effort to undermine the "Sandinista" government of Nicaragua through support of the opposition Contras. Reagan required congressional support to obtain aid for the Contras, and he made substantial efforts to mobilize the public behind his program. Yet he consistently failed.[3] As Reagan lamented in his memoirs,

> Time and again, I would speak on television, to a joint session of Congress, or to other audiences about the problems in Central America, and I would hope that the outcome would be an outpouring of support from Americans who would apply the same kind of heat on Congress that helped pass the economic recovery package.
>
> But the polls usually found that large numbers of Americans cared little or not at all about what happened in Central America - in fact, a surprisingly large proportion didn't even know where Nicaragua and El Salvador were located - and, among those who did care, too few cared enough about a Communist penetration of the Americas to apply the kind of pressure I needed on Congress.[4]

---

[1] George C. Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003.

[2] Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears*, chaps. 2-3.

[3] Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), pp. 471, 479; Edwards, *On Deaf Ears*, pp. 51-55.

[4] Reagan, *An American Life*, p. 479.

Despite the favorable context of the national trauma resulting from the September 11 terrorist attacks, the long-term disdain of the public for Saddam Hussein, and the lack of organized opposition, George W. Bush made little headway in moving the public to support the war in Iraq, and once the initial phase of the war was over, the rally resulting from the quick U.S. victory quickly dissipated. Bush also sought far-reaching changes in public policy across a broad range of domestic issues. To achieve his goals, he went public as much as any of his predecessors, but from tax cuts and immigration to Social Security, he was not able to move the public in his direction.[5]

Barack Obama and his aides anticipated transforming American politics on the back of his legendary communication skills. Despite his eloquence, the president could not obtain the public's support for his initiatives that were not already popular when he announced them. Most notably, the Affordable Care Act lacked majority support even six years after it passed. Whether it was the fiscal stimulus designed to restart the economy or closing the prison at Guantánamo Bay and transferring prisoners from there to the United States, the president took his case to the public and came away without changing its views.[6]

Even Franklin D. Roosevelt, the president often viewed as the greatest politician of the twentieth century, faced constant frustration in his efforts to move the public to prepare for entry into World War II. His failure to persuade the public regarding his plan to pack the Supreme Court effectively marked the end of the New Deal.[7] George Washington, who was better positioned than any of his successors to dominate American politics, because of the widespread view of his possessing exceptional personal qualities, did not find the public particularly deferential.[8]

Donald Trump came to office with more experience as a self-promoter and public personality than any previous chief executive. Before entering the Oval Office, he had spent a lifetime promoting himself and his real estate ventures and gained fame as a reality television star. Nevertheless, when it came time to govern, he was unable to obtain the public's support for his policies on health care, taxation, immigration, international trade, or his response to the Covid-19 pandemic.[9]

Typically, then, presidential leadership of public opinion fails. Indeed, research has found that public opinion usually moves *contrary* to the president's position. A moderate public usually receives too much liberalism from Democrats and too much conservatism from Republicans.[10]

There are many impediments to leading the public,[11] including:

---

5 George C. Edwards III, *Governing by Campaigning: The Politics of the Bush Presidency*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2007).

6 George C. Edwards III, *Predicting the Presidency: The Potential of Persuasive Leadership* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2016), chaps. 2, 4-8; George C. Edwards III, *Overreach: Leadership in the Obama Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), chap. 3.

7 Edwards, The Strategic President, pp. 26-34.

8 Edwards, *On Deaf Ears*, chap. 5.

9 George c. Edwards III, *Changing Their Minds? Donald Trump and Presidential Leadership* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), chaps. 4-5.

10 Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. MacKuen, and James A. Stimson, *The Macro Polity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). See also Stuart N. Soroka and Christopher Wlezien, *Degrees of Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

11 This discussion relies on Edwards, *On Deaf Ears*, chaps. 6-9.

- the difficulty of obtaining and maintaining the public's attention
- the dependence on the media to reach the public
- the need to overcome the public's policy and partisan predispositions
- the public's misinformation and resistance to correction
- the distrust of the White House created by partisan media
- the public's aversion to loss and thus wariness of policy change

Presidents find it difficult to focus the public's attention on a policy because the White House must deal with so many issues and faces competition in agenda setting from Congress and the media. In addition, the White House finds it increasingly difficult to obtain an audience for its views—or even airtime on television to express them. Moreover, many people who do pay attention miss the president's points. Because the president rarely speaks directly to the American people as a whole, the White House is dependent on the press to transmit its messages, but the media are unlikely to adopt consistently either the White House's priorities or its framing of issues. Moreover, committed, well-organized, and well-funded opponents offer competing frames. As a result, presidents usually fail to move the public to support themselves and their policies.

It follows that it is critical that presidents carefully evaluate their opportunity structures regarding obtaining public support for their policies. If they do not ask the right questions, they certainly will not arrive at the right answers. To answer the questions requires, first, *not* assuming that opinion is malleable. Rejecting the *assumption* of opinion leadership leads one naturally to examine the nature of existing opinion. It also leads one to ask whether one can rely on going public to accomplish policy change.

The success of a strategy for governing depends on the opportunities for it to succeed. There are two fundamental components of the opportunity for obtaining public support. First is the nature of public opinion at the time a president takes office.

- Does it support the direction in which the president would like to move?
- Is there a mandate from the voters in support of specific policies?
- Is there a broad public predisposition for government activism?
- Are opposition party identifiers open to supporting the president's initiatives?

A second facet of the potential for public leadership focuses on the long run. What are the challenges to leading the public that every president faces? We have seen above that public opinion is usually not malleable.

Relying on going public to pressure Congress when the public is unlikely to be responsive to the president's appeals is a recipe for failure, so it is critically important for presidents to assess accurately the potential for obtaining public support. Moreover, adopting strategies for governing that are prone to failure wastes rather than creates opportunities.[12]

[12] See Edwards, *The Strategic President*, chaps. 2-3, 6.

LEADING CONGRESS

Presidents invest an enormous amount of time trying to lead Congress. They know that their legacies are highly dependent on their proposals passing the legislature. Are presidents persuasive with senators and representatives?

The best evidence is that presidential persuasion is effective only at the margins of congressional decision making. Presidential legislative leadership operates in an environment largely beyond the president's control and must compete with other, more stable factors that affect voting in Congress in addition to party. These include ideology, personal views and commitments on specific policies, and the interests of constituencies. By the time a president tries to exercise influence on a vote, most members of Congress have made up their minds on the basis of these other factors.

As a result, a president's legislative leadership is likely to be critical only for those members of Congress who remain open to conversion after other influences have had their impact. Although the size and composition of this group varies from issue to issue, it will almost always be a small minority in each chamber. Whatever the circumstances, the impact of persuasion on the outcome will usually be relatively modest. Therefore, conversion is likely to be at the margins of coalition building in Congress rather than at the core of policy change.

The most effective presidents do not create opportunities by reshaping the political landscape. Instead, they exploit opportunities already present in their environments to achieve significant changes in public policy. Three of the most famous periods of presidential success in Congress illustrate the point.[13]

The Hundred Days

Perhaps the twentieth-century's most famous and successful period of presidential-congressional relations was the Hundred Days of 1933, when Congress passed fifteen major pieces of legislation proposed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. FDR won a clear electoral victory and the Democrats gained large majorities in both houses of Congress. The day after his inauguration in 1933, FDR called a special session of Congress to deal with the economic crisis. All he planned to ask from Congress was to pass legislation to regulate the resumption of banking (he had closed the banks three days *after* taking office), amend the Volstead Act to legalize beer (a very popular policy), and cut the budget. He expected to reassemble the legislature when he was ready with permanent and more constructive legislation.

The first piece of legislation Roosevelt proposed was a bill regarding the resumption of banking. He found that he did not have to persuade anyone to support his bill, which passed unanimously in the House after only thirty-eight minutes of debate and without a roll call vote (although few members had seen the bill—there was only one copy for the chamber) and by a margin of seventy-three to seven in the Senate, which simply adopted the House bill while waiting for printed copies. An hour later, the bill arrived at the White House for the president's signature. The whole affair took less than eight hours.

Much to his surprise, the president found a situation ripe for change. The country was in such a state of desperation that it was eager to follow a leader who would try

---

[13] This discussion relies on Edwards, *The Strategic President,* chap. 4.

something new. Thus, FDR decided to keep Congress in session and exploit the favorable environment by sending it the legislation that became known as the "New Deal."

FDR went on to serve in the White House longer than anyone else, but most of these years were not legislatively productive. James MacGregor Burns entitled his discussion of presidential-congressional relations in the late 1930s "Deadlock on the Potomac." Either Roosevelt had lost his persuasive skills, which is not a reasonable proposition, or other factors were more significant in determining congressional support. By 1937, despite the president's great re-election victory, his coalition was falling apart.[14]

The Great Society

The next great period of legislative productivity for a president was Lyndon Johnson's success with the Eighty-Ninth Congress in 1965 through 1966. The 1964 presidential election occurred in the shadow of the traumatic national tragedy of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and Johnson won reelection overwhelmingly. With it, opposition to his proposals melted. As Lawrence O'Brien, his chief congressional aide, put it, Johnson's landslide "turned the tide."[15] For the first time since the New Deal, liberals gained majorities in both houses of Congress.

Johnson did not have to convince these liberals to support policies that had been on their agenda for a generation.[16] Nor did he have to convince the public of much. His policies were popular.[17] Both congressional leaders and White House aides felt they were working in a period of remarkable unanimity in which, as one member of LBJ's domestic staff put it, "some of the separation got collapsed. It seemed we were all working on the same thing."[18]

No one understood Congress better than LBJ, and he knew that his personal leadership could not sustain congressional support for his policies. The president understood the opportunity the large, liberal majorities in the Eighty-Ninth Congress presented to him, and he seized it, keeping intense pressure on Congress. In O'Brien's words, with LBJ, "Every day, every hour it was drive, drive, drive."[19] It is telling that virtually all the participants in the legislative process during Johnson's presidency agree that his tenaciousness and intensity in pushing legislation and exploiting his opportunities were his great talents, not his persuasiveness.[20] According to then House Majority Leader

---

[14] James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), pp. 310–15, 321, 337–52, 366–70.

[15] Lawrence O'Brien, in Robert L. Hardesty, ed., *The Johnson Years: The Difference He Made* (Austin, TX: Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, 1993), p. 76. See also comments by Nicholas Katzenbach, p. 81.

[16] See James L. Sundquist, *Politics and Policy: The Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Years* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1968).

[17] Randall B. Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 668.

[18] Quoted in Mark A. Peterson, *Legislating Together* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 69–70.

[19] O'Brien, in Hardesty, ed., *The Johnson Years*, pp. 76–77. See also Nicholas Katzenbach, p. 81; Barefoot Sanders, p. 83; and Lee White, p. 84.

[20] Carl Albert, interview by Dorothy Pierce McSweeny, July 9, 1969, interview 3, transcript, pp. 7, 11, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX; Carl Albert, interview by Dorothy Pierce McSweeny, August 13, 1969, interview 4, transcript, pp. 22, 25, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library; Carl Albert interview by Dorothy Pierce McSweeny, June 10, 1969, interview 2, transcript, p. 14, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library;

Carl Albert, Congress was not rubber-stamping the president's proposals, but doing what it wanted to do. "We had the right majority," he recalled. [21]

In the 1966 midterm elections, the Democrats lost forty-seven seats in the House and four in the Senate. Legislating became much more difficult as a result. Sixteen months later, in March 1968, the president declared that he would not seek reelection. Johnson had lost neither his leadership skills nor his passion for change. Instead, he had lost the opportunity to exploit a favorable environment.

The Reagan Revolution

It was the Republicans' turn in 1981. Ronald Reagan beat incumbent Jimmy Carter by ten percentage points, and the Republicans won a majority in the Senate for the first time since the 1952 election. The unexpectedly large size of Reagan's victory and the equally surprising outcomes in the Senate elections created the perception of an electoral mandate. Reagan's victory placed a stigma on big government and exalted the unregulated marketplace and large defense budgets. He had won on much of his agenda before Congress took a single vote.

The new president also benefited from the nature of the times. Although 1981 was hardly a repeat of 1933, there was a definite sense of the need for immediate action to meet urgent problems. David Stockman, a principal architect and proponent of Reagan's budgeting and tax proposals, remembers that when the president announced his "Program for Economic Recovery" to a joint session of Congress in February 1981, "the plan already had momentum and few were standing in the way." Reagan was "speaking to an assembly of desperate politicians who …were predisposed to grant him extraordinary latitude in finding a new remedy for the nation's economic ills… not because they understood the plan or even accepted it, but because they had lost all faith in the remedies tried before."[22]

The president's advisers recognized immediately that they had a window of opportunity to effect major changes in public policy. Like LBJ, the White House knew it had to move quickly before the environment became less favorable. Thus, the president was ready with legislation, even though it was complex and hastily written. Moreover, within a week of the March 30, 1981, assassination attempt on Reagan, his aide Michael

---

Henry Hall Wilson, interview by Joe B. Frantz, April 11, 1973, transcript, pp. 6–7, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX; Mike Manatos, interview by Joe B. Frantz, August 25, 1969, transcript, pp. 13–14, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX; John McCormack, interview by T. Harrison Baker, September 23, 1968, transcript, pp. 20, 39–40, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library; Carl Albert, interview by Dorothy Pierce McSweeny, July 9, 1969, interview 3, transcript, p. 4, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library; Eric F. Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Dell, 1974), p. 68; Charles Halleck, interview by Stephen Hess, March 22, 1965, transcript, p. 27, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston; Lawrence F. O'Brien, *No Final Victories* (New York: Ballantine, 1974), pp. 106, 145–49, 188–89; Richard Bolling, *Power in the House* (New York: Capricorn, 1974), pp. 218, 229; Joseph A. Califano, *A Presidential Nation* (New York: Norton, 1975), p. 155; Manatos, interview by Frantz, pp. 14, 29–30, 57–58 (see also p. 32); James L. Sundquist, *Politics and Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1968), pp. 476–482; Joseph Cooper and Gary Bombardier, "Presidential Leadership and Party Success," *Journal of Politics* 30 (November 1968): 1012–27; Aage R. Clausen, *How Congressmen Decide* (New York: St. Martin's, 1973), p. 146. See also Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power* (New York: New American Library, 1966), p. 364; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (New York: Ballantine, 1978), p. 742.

[21] Albert, interview 4, pp. 23-24. See also Califano, *A Presidential Nation*, p. 155.

[22] David A. Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 79–80; see also p. 120.

Deaver convened a meeting of other high-ranking officials at the White House to determine how best to take advantage of the new political capital the shooting had created.

The Reagan administration also knew it lacked the political capital to pass a broad program. Thus, it enforced a rigorous focus on the president's economic plan and defense spending, its priority legislation. Reagan essentially ignored divisive social issues, and tried to keep the issue of communist advances in Central America on the back burner. By focusing its political resources on its priorities, the administration succeeded in using the budget to pass sweeping changes in taxation and defense policy.

It was wise for Reagan to exploit his opportunities. The going was much tougher the next year as the United States suffered a severe recession, and for the rest of his tenure, commentators frequently described Reagan's budgets as DOA: Dead on Arrival.

Creating Opportunities?

Even presidents who appeared to dominate Congress were actually facilitators rather than directors of change. They understood their own limitations and explicitly took advantage of opportunities in their environments. Working at the margins, they successfully guided legislation through Congress. When these resources diminished, they reverted to the more stalemate that usually characterizes presidential-congressional relations.[23]

Despite the prestige of their office, their position as party leader, their personal persuasiveness, and their strong personalities, presidents often meet resistance from members of Congress to their appeals for support. They can sometimes make side payments to obtain votes, but such actions often depend on resources over which they have little or no control, especially when the opposition controls one or both houses of the legislature. Moreover, there is little the president can do to increase the size of his party cohort. Indeed, it usually shrinks during his tenure.

Presidential persuasion is at the margins of congressional decision making. Personal appeals are more useful in exploiting discrete opportunities than in creating broad possibilities for policy change. Indeed, there is little relationship between presidential legislative leadership skills and success in winning votes. As a result, one-on-one lobbying by the president is the exception rather than the rule. The White House conserves presidential appeals for obtaining the last few votes on issues of special significance to it, recognizing that presidents cannot personally persuade members of Congress with any frequency.

Recognizing Opportunities for Policy Change

There are several components of the opportunity for obtaining congressional support, aside from existing public support for the president's initiatives. First is the presence or absence of the perception of a mandate for change. Do members of Congress think the public has spoken clearly in favor of the president's proposals? Members of the president's party are much more likely to support his policies than are members of the

---

23 Edwards, *The Strategic President*, chaps. 4-5; George C. Edwards III, *At the Margins: Presidential Leadership of Congress* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), chaps. 9-10; Jon R. Bond and Richard Fleisher, *The President in the Legislative Arena* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), chap. 8; Richard Fleisher, Jon R. Bond, and B. Dan Wood, "Which Presidents Are Uncommonly Successful in Congress?" in *Presidential Leadership: The Vortex of Presidential Power*, ed. Bert Rockman and Richard W. Waterman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

opposition. Moreover, controlling the agenda is critical to enacting legislation. Thus party control of Congress is a key to legislative success. Because party unity is imperfect and because of the need for extraordinary majorities in the Senate, the size of the president's party's cohort is also critical. Another crucial element is the ideological distribution of members of Congress, especially of the opposition. The ideological cohesion of his party and its compatibility with the president's policies tell us the size of his core of support. The number of opposition party members who are moderates will determine the likelihood of the president successfully expanding his coalition on a bill. The orientation of opposition party identifiers in the public is also crucial. Are they likely to be responsive to White House calls for support?

Another important aspect of the president's strategic position with Congress is the structure of the choice facing the legislature. What is the default position if Congress fails to pass legislation? In a typical situation, in which the White House advocates passage, the president loses if Congress fails to act. However, the opposition party may propose legislation the president opposes. In such a case, the default position favors the president. The president has a special advantage when the opposition party wants to avoid the reversion to a policy state it wishes to avoid if Congress does not take positive action. This situation provides the president significant leverage in negotiating new legislation.

PERSUASION IN PERSPECTIVE

Although it may be appealing to explain major policy changes in terms of persuasive personalities, public opinion is too biased, the political system is too complicated, power is too decentralized, and interests are too diverse for one person, no matter how extraordinary, to dominate. Recognizing and exploiting opportunities for change—rather than creating opportunities through persuasion—are the essential presidential leadership skills. As Edgar declared in *King Lear*, "Ripeness is all."

Successful leadership, then, is not the result of the dominant chief executive of political folklore who reshapes the contours of the political landscape, altering his strategic position to pave the way for change. To succeed, presidents have to evaluate the opportunities for change in their environments carefully and orchestrate existing and potential support skillfully. To exploit opportunities successfully, the president must have the commitment, resolution, and adaptability to take full advantage of opportunities that arise. When the various streams of political resources converge to create opportunities for major change, presidents can be critical facilitators in engendering significant alterations in public policy. But while the president's power to achieve policy change may hinge on the president correctly sizing up his opportunities, it rarely if ever depends on the power to persuade.

UNDERMINING THE POTENTIAL FOR COMPROMISE

Strategies for governing based on the premise of creating opportunities for change are prone to failure. Presidents— and the country—often endure self-inflicted wounds when they fail to appreciate the limits of their influence. The White House not only wastes the opportunities that do exist but sometimes—as in Franklin D. Roosevelt's Court-packing bill, Bill Clinton's health care reform proposal, and George W. Bush's effort to reform Social Security—presidents also create the conditions for political disaster and

undermine their ability to govern in the long-term.[24] The dangers of overreach and debilitating political losses alert us that it is critically important for presidents to assess accurately the potential for obtaining public and congressional support.

There is an additional danger to failing to understand the limits of persuasion. Presidents and their opponents may underestimate each other and eschew necessary compromises in the mistaken belief that they can persuade members of the public and Congress to change their minds.

The Framers created a deliberative democracy that requires and encourages reflection and refinement of the public's views through an elaborate decision-making process. Those opposed to change need only win at one point in the policy-making process—say in obtaining a presidential veto—whereas those who favor change must win every battle along the way. To win all these battles usually requires the support of a sizable majority of the country, not just a simple majority of 51 percent. As a result, the Madisonian system calls for moderation and compromise.

The principal mechanism for overcoming the purposefully inefficient form of government established by the Constitution is the extra-constitutional institution of political parties. Representatives and senators of the president's party are almost always the nucleus of coalitions supporting the president's programs. Thus, parties help overcome the fractures of shared powers. Yet, unless one party controls both the presidency and Congress and has very large majorities in both houses of Congress, little is likely to be accomplished without compromise.

When parties are broad, there is potential for compromise because there will be some ideological overlap among members of the two parties. When the parties are unified and polarized, however, they exacerbate conflict and immobilize the system. Critical issues such as immigration, environmental protection, taxation, and budgeting go unresolved.

We expect political parties in a parliamentary system to take clear stands and vigorously oppose each other. Such a system usually works because the executive comes from the legislature and can generally rely on a supportive majority to govern. Partisan polarization has given the United States parliamentary-style political parties operating in a system of shared powers, virtually guaranteeing gridlock. Moreover, minority interests that want to stop change are likely to win, raising troubling questions about the nature of our democracy.

For the U.S. system to work, then, requires a favorable orientation toward compromise. Such a temperament is found in the very roots of the nation. Recalling the events of the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention, James Madison observed that "the minds of the members were changing" throughout the convention, in part due to a "yielding and accommodating spirit" that prevailed among the delegates.[25]

A reliance on persuasive leadership may not only threaten the disposition to compromise but also undermine the context necessary for negotiation. Presidents' persistence in emphasizing persuasion may increase both elite and public polarization and thus decrease their chances of success in governing. When political leaders take their cases directly to the public, they have to accommodate the limited attention spans of the public

---

[24] Edwards, *The Strategic President*, pp. 192-199.

[25] Quoted in Max Farrand, ed., "CCCLXVII, Jared Sparks: Journal, April 19, 1830," *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, vol. III, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 578-579.

and the availability of space on television. As a result, the president and his opponents often reduce choices to stark black and white terms. When leaders frame issues in such terms, they typically frustrate rather than facilitate building coalitions. Such positions are difficult to compromise, which hardens negotiating positions.

Too often persuasive discourse revolves around destroying enemies rather than producing legislative products broadly acceptable to the electorate. Frightening people about the evils of the opposition is often the most effective means of obtaining attention and inhibiting support for change. Such scare tactics encourage ideologically charged and harsh attacks on opponents while discouraging the comity necessary for building coalitions. When people are sorted into enclaves in which their views are constantly and stridently reaffirmed, as they often are today, neither the public nor members of Congress is likely to display a compromising attitude. How can you compromise with those holding views diametrically opposed to yours and whom your party leaders and other political activists relentlessly vilify?

When presidents launch aggressive public promotions for their policies and themselves, they invite opponents to challenge them. Business and professional associations use paid advertising, orchestrate events to attract press coverage, and finance think tanks to offer analyses that can serve as sources for reporters and editorial writers seeking to "balance" the administration's case.[26] Public campaigns to propel health reform into law by Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, for instance, provoked wide-ranging and expensive counter-mobilizations by business associations, the insurance industry, and others threatened by reform.[27] The effect was to trigger motivated reasoning and thus activate existing conservative attitudes and partisan beliefs among Republicans, which helped to produce and reinforce sharp partisan differences in support for the Affordable Care Act.[28]

More broadly, an emphasis on persuasion is at the core of the permanent campaign and is fundamentally anti-deliberative. Campaigning focuses on persuasion, mobilization, competition, conflict, and short-term victory. Leaders wage campaigns in either/or terms. Conversely, governing involves deliberation, cooperation, negotiation, and compromise over an extended period. Campaigns prosecute a cause among adversaries rather than deliberate courses of action among collaborators. Campaign communications by partisan officials are designed to win elections rather than to educate the public. Thus, the incentives for leaders are to stay on message rather than to engage with opponents and to frame issues rather than inform their audience about anything in detail.[29]

---

[26] Mark Smith, American Business and Political Power: Public Opinion, Elections, and Democracy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[27] Lawrence R. Jacobs and Theda Skocpol, *Health Care Reform and American Politics*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness* **(**Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2000); Darrel West and Burdett Loomis, *The Sound of Money: How Political Interests Get What They Want* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

[28] Lawrence R. Jacobs and Suzanne Mettler, "Why Public Opinion Changes: The Implications for Health and Health Policy," *Journal of Health Policy, Politics and Law* 36 (No. 6, 2011): 917-933; April A. Strickland, Charles S. Taber, and Milton Lodge, "Motivated Reasoning and Public Opinion," *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 36 (No. 6, 2011): 935-944.

[29] David Brady and Morris Fiorina, "Congress in the Era of the Permanent Campaign," in *The Permanent Campaign and Its Future*, eds. Norman Ornstein and Thomas Mann (Washington, DC: American Enterprise

In the permanent campaign, political leaders do not look for ways to insulate controversial or difficult policy decisions from their vulnerability to demagoguery and oversimplification. Campaigning requires projecting self-assurance rather than admitting ignorance or uncertainty about complex issues and counterattacking and switching the subject rather than struggling with tough questions. It is better to have a campaign issue for the next election than deal with an issue by governing.

In sum, the tendencies in the permanent campaign are for civility to lose out to conflict, compromise to deadlock, deliberation to sound bites, and legislative product to campaign issues. None of these characteristics of contemporary politics promote the resolution of long-standing issues.

STAYING PRIVATE

How, then, can the president encourage an "accommodating spirit" among opposition members of Congress? There is no silver bullet. However, it might be profitable to focus more creating a context for compromise. While public efforts at persuasion are not helpful, quiet negotiations may be.

It is no secret that negotiations are best done in private. James Madison remembered that in writing the Constitution

> It was ...best for the convention for forming the Constitution to sit with closed doors, because opinions were so various and at first so crude that it was necessary they should be long debated before any uniform system of opinion could be formed. Meantime the minds of the members were changing .... Had the members committed themselves publicly at first, they would have afterwards supposed consistency required them to maintain their ground, whereas by secret discussion no man felt himself obliged to retain his opinions any longer than he was satisfied of their propriety and truth, and was open to the force of argument. Mr. Madison thinks no Constitution would ever have been adopted by the convention if the debates had been public.[30]

The same principles of successful negotiation hold more than two centuries later. Examples of the White House and Congress strategically engaging in quiet negotiations to produce important legislation include the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990, the budget agreement of 1990, and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Polarization, of course, is even greater now than it was during the Bush presidencies, which should encourage the president to be all the more open to alternative strategies for governing.

The Balanced Budget Act of 1997 provides an especially telling illustration. The residue of first-term budget battles—and of the ensuing fall 1996 elections, in which Democrats tarred Republicans as Medicare killers—was a deep bitterness that seemed likely to poison the relationship between the Clinton White House and Congress indefinitely. Yet within a few months both sides reached an historic agreement on achieving a balanced budget within five years.

There was a dramatic shift from the rancorous partisan warfare that had dominated the consideration of the budget in the 104th Congress. Low-keyed, good faith negotiations began shortly after the president submitted his FY 1998 budget, and senior White House

---

Institute and Brookings Institution, 2000); Hugh Heclo, "Campaigning and Governing: A Conspectus," in *The Permanent Campaign and Its Future*; Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann, "Conclusion: The Permanent Campaign and the Future of American Democracy," in *The Permanent Campaign and Its Future.*

[30] Quoted in Farrand, ed., "CCCLXVII, Jared Sparks: Journal, April 19, 1830," pp. 578-579.

officials held a series of private meetings with members of Congress. Unlike the political posturing in late 1995 and early 1996, *neither side focused on moving the negotiations into the public arena*.

Staying private made it easier for both sides to compromise, and they each gained from doing so. For Republicans, the budget agreement capped a balanced-budget and tax-cutting drive that had consumed them since they took over Congress in 1995. They won tax and spending cuts, a balanced budget in five years, and a plan to keep Medicare solvent for another decade. Thus, although they did not win a radical overhaul of entitlement programs, they did make substantial progress toward their core goals.

For Clinton, the budget agreement represented perhaps his greatest legislative triumph. He left the bargaining table with much of what he wanted, including an increased scope for the child tax credit, a new children's health initiative, restoration of welfare benefits for disabled legal immigrants, increased spending for food stamps, and a host of other incremental increases in social spending.

These compromises did not satisfy everyone, of course. Clinton had to walk a fine line between compromising with Republicans and maintaining the support of Democratic liberals, who did not like budgetary constraints and did not want to hand the Republicans a positive accomplishment. Some Democrats were upset that they were not included in the negotiating process. Similarly, Republican leaders had to deal with die-hard conservatives, who did not want to compromise at all with the president.

The decision of President Clinton and the Republican congressional leaders to seize on the opportunity provided by the surging economy and the groundwork laid by the budgets of 1990 and 1993 and quietly negotiate and compromise, letting everyone claim victory, made the budget agreement possible. In addition, the success of these executive-legislative negotiations paved the way for additional talks of a similar nature on Social Security and Medicare that may have ultimately proved fruitful if it were not for the confounding influence of the impeachment inquiry in 1998.

Why would the White House attempt to stay private in the face of inflammatory provocations from the opposition? There are three good reasons. First, going public does not work. Second, if elites can make deals, and the agreements result in successful outcomes, the public is likely to reward them for doing so. Although the polarization we see in Washington has its roots in local elections and constituency politics,[31] the public is less polarized than its elected representatives.[32] Moreover, it wants elected officials to compromise, as we saw in the 2013 government shutdown.[33]

Finally, keeping negotiations private may make it easier for each side to compromise in reaching a broader deal because each side can view the entire package more favorably than it views each of the component parts. The lack of transparency in the negotiating process—as opposed to in the results of the negotiations—allows leaders some freedom from the inevitable pressures not to compromise on any part of the deal.

---

[31] Gary C. Jacobson, "Partisan Polarization in American Politics: A Background Paper," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43 (December 2013): 688-708.

[32] Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Morris P. Fiorina, with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture Wars? The Myth of Polarized America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2011).

[33] Gallup poll, October 14-15, 2013; Pew Research Center poll, October 3-6, 2013; CBS News poll, October 1-2, 2013.

"Staying private" will not change the electoral incentives to defeat opponents. Nor will it narrow the ideological differences between the parties or produce unified government.

Similarly, the White House will not unilaterally disarm in the face of virulent criticism. Presidents will sometimes conclude that they must go public just to maintain the status quo. Maintaining preexisting support or activating those predisposed to back him can be crucial to a president's success. Consolidating core backers may require reassuring them as to his fundamental principles, strengthening their resolve to persist in a political battle, or encouraging them to become more active on behalf of a candidacy or policy proposal. When offered competing views, people are likely to respond according to their predispositions, so the White House will act to reinforce the predispositions of its supporters.

Nevertheless, promotion of policies and reaction to criticism can take a wide range of forms. It is possible to assert values and policies without incendiary rhetoric, and it is not necessary to begin negotiations with the other party by excoriating its elected officials in a cross-national speaking tour. Staying private *is* likely to contribute to reducing gridlock, incivility, and public cynicism and deserves a more prominent role in the president's strategic arsenal.