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\$13.00

Winter 2008–09

Published since 1886 by The Academy of Political Science

George W. Bush and the Partisan Presidency

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Traditionally, political scientists have tended to see the powerful presidency of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as the enemy of strong parties.¹ Through an “objective” media, presidents appeal directly to voters, over the heads of party leaders, seeking a nonpartisan image. They build ad hoc coalitions of support in Congress without regard to party lines. They preside over an executive branch staffed by nonpartisan 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 Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Jimmy Carter. But since 1980, we have seen the rise of a new kind of presidency—a partisan presidency. And George W. Bush has brought this partisanship to a new extreme—perhaps to the point when practice becomes pathology. Bush is not an exception to the rule or the product of a recent change. Both party loyalty in Congress and ideological constraint in the electorate began to revive in the 1980s.²

¹ James W. Davis, *The President as Party Leader* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992); Sidney Milkis, *Political Parties and Constitutional Government: Remaking American Democracy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Sidney Milkis, *The President and the Parties: The Transformation of the American Party System Since The New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Charles O. Jones, “Presidential Leadership in a Government of Parties: An Unrealized Perspective” in John C. Green and Paul S. Herrnson, eds., *Responsible Partisanship? The Evolution of American Political Parties Since 1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002); Fred I. Greenstein, “Change and Continuity in the Modern Presidency” in Anthony King, ed., *The New American Political System* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1978).

² See David W. Rohde, *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991); also Barbara Sinclair, *Party Wars: Polarization and the Politics of National Policymaking* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006).

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“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, for example, Eisenhower and Sam Rayburn, Lyndon Johnson and Everett Dirksen. Even a president predisposed to such a relationship—George H. W. Bush—was unable to develop 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 nonpartisan experts. It is 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. (In contrast, Eisenhower often displayed apathy toward the GOP and Johnson and Richard Nixon exhibited distrust of their national party committees.) Reagan, Bill 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 conventionally “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.

THE “MODERN PRESIDENCY” AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Most scholars of the presidency agree that a distinctive “modern presidency” emerged in the first half of the twentieth century, first under Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, then, most fully, under Franklin D. Roosevelt.³ 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. Table 1 compares major characteristic of the “modern presidency” and the “partisan presidency.”

³Greenstein, “Change and Continuity.”

TABLE 1

The Modern Presidency and the Partisan Presidency

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Modern Presidency</i>	<i>Partisan Presidency</i>
Congressional relations	President's party often divided; work across party lines	Partisan polarization: president works closely with own party, has difficult relations with opposition
Executive administration	Rely on nonpartisan experts, civil servants; patronage in decline	Administrative presidency for partisan/ideological ends
Policy advice	Nonpartisan experts	Political consultants, ideological think tanks
Public opinion	Gain support across party lines	Polarized public
Media relations	Cooperative; use broadcasting to reach mass public	Antagonistic; use alternative media or partisan press to reach niche publics
Electoral politics	Candidate-centered politics; play down party affiliation; win support across party lines	Increasing polarization; revival of party organizations

Sidney Milkis identifies 1937–1938 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.^{4,5}

⁴ Milkis, *The President and the Parties*, 75–124.

⁵ In the 1970s and 1980s, 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. Presidents could no longer count on their party to provide them with a base in the electorate or in Congress. The weakening of parties and the decentralization of power on Capitol Hill left presidents with few allies able to deliver support. Due to the reform of the nomination process, an “outsider” like Jimmy Carter was able to reach the presidency without gaining the support of traditional party leaders; presidents increasingly “went public” to appeal to voters directly. The executive branch was increasingly dominated by bureaucrats and issue activists detached from party politics. See Greenstein, “Change and Continuity”; Richard Rose, *The Postmodern Presidency*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1994); Richard P. Nathan, *The Administrative Presidency* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1983); Nelson Polsby, *Consequences of Party Reform* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of Governmental Studies Press, 1983); Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2006).

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 a more distinctively 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 presidential era is partisan in more ways than one. Most obviously, this presidency is partisan through the close ties binding presidents to their parties. But it is also 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 nineteenth century. They are nationalized, ideologically coherent, and headquartered in Washington—ultimately in the Oval Office.⁶

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. In an era when many look back to the 1980s as a less divisive time, we must remember what a polarizing figure Reagan himself was in his times. He 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, and he worked closely with Republican leaders in Congress, especially Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker. In response to Reaganism, House Democrats devolved more authority unto Speaker "Tip" O'Neill.⁷ Reagan 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."⁸

⁶ John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁷ Rohde, *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House*.

⁸ Milkis, *Political Parties and Constitutional Democracy*.

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 compromise with Democratic leaders; 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 1993–1994, Republicans almost unanimously opposed Clinton's budget and health care plan; in 1995–1996, an empowered GOP sought to impose its own agenda, attempting to overturn one of the defining characteristics of the modern presidency; and in 1998–1999, congressional Republicans attempted to remove Clinton from office, despite widespread public opposition. Clinton deeply polarized the electorate, 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 (the same groups who would later adore George W. Bush).⁹ Views of impeachment followed the same polarized pattern.¹⁰

But George W. Bush has set a new 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 work mostly 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 barely more than one in four, Bush is forced to rely almost exclusively on his GOP base. The Iraq War has divided the American public along partisan lines more than any previous conflict in the history of public opinion polling.¹¹

⁹ James L. Guth, “Clinton, Impeachment, and the Culture Wars” in Steven E. Schier, *The Postmodern Presidency: Bill Clinton's Legacy in U.S. Politics* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); Nicol Rae, “Clinton and the Democratic Party” in Steven E. Schier, *The Postmodern Presidency: Bill Clinton's Legacy in U.S. Politics* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); Diane Hollern Harvey, “The Public's View of Clinton” in Schier, *The Postmodern Presidency*.

¹⁰ Gary C. Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter: George W. Bush and the American People* (New York: Pearson Education, 2007).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

THE PRESIDENT AS PARTY LEADER

“Modern Presidents” placed little priority on leading their party and often found allies across the aisle. Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon showed scant interest in their national party committees; Dwight Eisenhower avoided partisan appeals and distributed patronage to “Citizens for Eisenhower” activists as well as to traditional Republicans. By contrast, 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 calling for the defeat even of moderate Democrats who had often supported Bush’s policies.¹² After these victories, Bush and Karl Rove openly planned for a new Republican majority that they sought to cement through policies such as Social Security privatization and aid to faith-based charities. 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.¹³ Both Bush and Clinton set new standards for presidential travel and fundraising on behalf of their party’s candidates.¹⁴

A PARTISAN PUBLIC?

Operating in an environment of declining partisanship, modern presidents sought to win over voters across party lines. Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon all won substantial support from voters in the other party; all three downplayed partisan themes in their campaigns. Before 1980, presidents rarely experienced an approval gap over 40 points; Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy enjoyed popularity across party lines; while Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter confronted significant opposition within their own party. Partisan presidents have experienced a much larger approval gap than their predecessors. 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.¹⁵

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 presi-

¹² Harold F. Bass, “George W. Bush, Presidential Party Leadership Extraordinaire?” *Forum* 2. (December 2004); Michael Nelson, “George W. Bush and Congress” in Gary L. Gregg II and Mark J. Rozell, eds., *Considering the Bush Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹³ Rae, “Clinton.”

¹⁴ Kernell, *Going Public*.

¹⁵ Gary C. Jacobson, “The Public, the President and the War in Iraq” (paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 2005).

dent to ever exceed 70 points, which he did during most of the 2004 campaign.¹⁶ Until recently, 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. In 2007, Bush experienced approval gaps in the 60s, with his support among Republicans falling below 75 percent, and with Democratic approval remaining in the single digits.¹⁷ Despite Bush's struggles in his second term, Republicans continue to act as a "floor," preventing his overall approval from falling below 25 percent.

Independents have tended to be closer to Democrats in their view of Bush, forcing him to rely on his own partisans for support. Consistently, a majority of Democrats disapproved "strongly" of Bush's performance; similarly, a majority of Republicans "strongly" approved.¹⁸ 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. In 2006, this polarization came back to haunt Republicans, as they lost six seats in the Senate and 30 in the House. Not only did Democrats vote near-unanimously for their party, but exit polls showed 57 percent of independents voting Democratic in House races.¹⁹

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.²⁰

¹⁶ Jacobson, "The Public, The President"; Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter*; Gary C. Jacobson, "Terror, Terrain and Turnout: The 2002 Midterm Election," *Political Science Quarterly* 118 (Spring 2003): 1–22; Gary C. Jacobson, "Polarized Politics and the 2004 Presidential and Congressional Elections," *Political Science Quarterly* 120 (Summer 2005): 199–218; Also see Michael Dimock, "Bush and Public Opinion" in Gary L. Gregg II and Mark J. Rozell, eds., *Considering the Bush Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ For example, in the Gallup Poll taken 14–16 September 2007, 77 percent of Republicans approved of George W. Bush's job performance; only 10 percent of Democrats did. Thus "the approval gap" was 67 percent (29 percent of independents approved), accessed on the website of the Gallup at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1723/Presidential-Job-Approval-Depth.aspx>, 3 November 2007.

¹⁸ Jacobson, "The Public, The President"; Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter*. A debate continues to rage over whether elite polarization has genuinely led to mass polarization, or just simply an ideological "sorting." See Morris Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004); Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders, "Is Polarization A Myth?" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, New Orleans, LA, January 2006).

¹⁹ See Gary C. Jacobson, "Referendum: The 2006 Midterm Elections" *Political Science Quarterly* 122 (Spring 2007): 1–24.

²⁰ Gary C. Jacobson, "Partisan Polarization in Presidential Support: The Electoral Connection" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, MA, August 2002).

Partisan presidents are also operating in a political system in which public opinion has become much more polarized along party lines.²¹ 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.²²

PARTISAN ELECTIONS

Modern presidents, such as Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon, received substantial cross-party support; their campaigns downplayed partisan themes in favor of invocations of national unity. In the postpartisan 1970s, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter struggled to unify their parties, and Carter lost about one-quarter of Democrats in 1980. By contrast, partisan presidents must operate in an environment of increased party loyalty and growing ideological polarization. Candidates find it difficult to win over cross-partisans and may decide that swing voters have become rare. According to the National Election Studies (NES), the 2000 and 2004 elections showed the highest level of party loyalty in history; in 2000, 87 percent of voters supported the presidential candidate of their party; in 2004, 90 percent did.²³ Not surprisingly, the 2004 race also found both campaigns focusing on turning out their core supporters. The NES showed that Republicans expressed toward John Kerry the most negative views of any Democratic candidate since George McGovern; Democrats gave George W. Bush the lowest thermometer rating that they have ever bestowed on a Republican nominee.

In 2006, the partisan presidency may have reached its logical conclusion. Exit polls showed that 91 percent of Republicans remained loyal to their party's House candidates—the base stood firm. But only 7 percent of Democrats

²¹ Jacobson, *A Divider Not Uniter*; Larry Bartels, "Partisanship and Voting Behavior, 1952–1996," *American Journal of Political Science* 44 (January 2000): 35–50; Marc J. Hetherington, "Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization," *American Political Science Review* 95 (September 2001): 619–631; Marc J. Hetherington, "Putting Polarization in Perspective" (paper prepared for workshop on political polarization at the Ash Institute, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge, MA, 1–2 June, 2007); Geoffrey C. Layman and Thomas M. Carsey, "Party Polarization and 'Conflict Extension' in the American Electorate," *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (October 2002): 786–802; David G. Lawrence, "On the Resurgence of Party Identification in the 1990s" in Jeffrey E. Cohen, Richard Fleisher, and Paul Kantor, eds., *American Political Parties: Decline or Resurgence?* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2001); Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics*, vols. 1, 2 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007); Geoffrey Layman, *The Great Divide: Religious and Cultural Conflict in American Party Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); Jeffrey M. Stonecash, *Class and Party in American Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

²² Marc J. Hetherington and Suzanne Globetti, "The Presidency and Political Trust" in Michael Nelson, ed., *The Presidency and the Political System* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2003).

²³ Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter*.

voted Republican, and fewer than two in five independents did.²⁴ Not surprisingly, a Republican House could not rest only on a foundation of Republican votes. Another unpopular wartime president, Lyndon Johnson in 1966, stayed off the campaign trail so as not to hurt his party's candidates; George W. Bush insisted on stumping actively in 2006—even if some Republicans were reluctant to be seen with him.

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.”²⁵ If Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford, and even Richard Nixon had to confront challengers for renomination, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush had no such grounds for concern. (The only president in the partisan era to face such a challenge—George H. W. Bush—was also the least partisan.)²⁶

CONGRESSIONAL RELATIONS

Modern presidents often could not depend upon their congressional parties for legislative support. Those parties were usually divided; the North–South split within the Democratic Party was most notable, but there were divisions among Republicans as well, such as those between internationalists and isolationists after World War II, which forced Dwight Eisenhower to look to Democrats for support of his foreign policy.²⁷ But the period of the partisan presidency coincides with the rise of polarization and party leadership in Congress.²⁸ In an era of increased partisanship, presidents find it more difficult to win support across

²⁴ Accessed on the website of CNN at <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006/pages/results/states/US/H/00/epolls.0.html>, 3 November 2007.

²⁵ Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Bert A. Rockman, “Presidential Leadership in a Time of Party Polarization—The George W. Bush Presidency” in Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman, eds., *The George W. Bush Presidency: Appraisals and Prospects* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2004).

²⁶ Neither Clinton nor Reagan appeared to be a “lock” for re-election a year in advance. In the Gallup Poll taken one year before the election, Clinton had an approval rating of only 52 percent and Reagan stood at just 49 percent—not much higher than Gerald Ford’s 44 percent standing in the fall of 1975. Despite their potential vulnerability, neither Clinton nor Reagan attracted an in-party challenger. (George W. Bush’s approval rating in November 2003 was 54 percent; his father in November 1991 stood at 59 percent.). Data from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

²⁷ Davis, *The President as Party Leader*; Milkis, *The President and the Parties*; Jones, “Presidential Leadership.”

²⁸ David W. Rohde, *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Richard Fleisher and Jon R. Bond, “Evidence of Increasing Polarization Among Ordinary Citizens” in Cohen, Fleisher, and Kantor, eds., *American Political Parties*; Gary W. Cox and Matthew D. McCubbins, *Legislative Leviathan: Party Government in the House* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

party lines in Congress.²⁹ Opposition parties not only unite against the president's policies, they may adopt a "no" strategy, refusing to cooperate on virtually anything he proposes, as did Republicans during Clinton's first two years. Since 2004, Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid have shown that they have learned a few lessons from Newt Gingrich and Bob Dole, perhaps most successfully in fighting Bush's Social Security reform proposal. Fewer members are likely to support the policies of an opposition party presidency, as Southern Democrats had done so frequently for Republican presidents.³⁰

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 control and divided control matter more in a polarized era than they did a generation ago.³¹ Both George W. Bush and Bill Clinton enjoyed close relationships with the congressional leadership of their parties, and both men had deeply troubled relations with the leaders of the opposition.³² Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson point out how the ability of Republican congressional leaders to control the legislative process allowed the party to pass legislation discrepant with public opinion.³³

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 Charles O. Jones,³⁴ 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. Even after the crushing defeat of 2006, George W. Bush has been able to rely on a solid phalanx of Senate Republicans to block Democratic proposals, especially any effort to restrain his hand in Iraq.

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.³⁵ 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

²⁹ Barbara Sinclair, "Hostile Partners: The President, Congress, and Lawmaking in the Partisan 1990s" in Jon R. Bond and Richard Fleisher, eds., *Polarized Politics: Congress and the President in a Partisan Era* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2000).

³⁰ Fleisher and Bond, "Evidence of Increasing Polarization."

³¹ Sinclair, "Hostile Partners"; Polsby, *Consequences of Party Reform*.

³² Stephen Wayne, "Bush and Congress: Old Problems and New Challenges" in George C. Edwards III and Philip J. Davies, eds., *New Challenges for the American Presidency* (Longman: New York, 2004); John E. Owens, "Challenging (and Acting For) the President: Congressional Leadership in an Era of Partisan Polarization" in Edwards and Davies, eds., *New Challenges*.

³³ Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

³⁴ Jones, "Presidential Leadership."

³⁵ Sinclair, "Hostile Partners."

Republicans ended not only because of the Lewinsky scandal, but also because Speaker Newt Gingrich nearly lost his position in an uprising by conservatives who were angry that he had "sold out." Partisan presidents have helped create our polarized system, but they also must operate within it.

PARTISAN ADMINISTRATION

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.³⁶ Modern presidents preferred advisors from policy-oriented backgrounds, even when they came from the opposite party or from outside of 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 appointed Republicans as Secretaries of Defense and Treasury and as National Security Advisor; Jimmy Carter often preferred technocrats or corporate executives to fill top positions. 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.³⁷

While 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.³⁸ The administrative strategy lends itself especially well to an era when party activists are motivated more by ideology than by patronage; there are numerous 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

³⁶ Milkis, *The President and the Parties*.

³⁷ Nathan, *The Administrative Presidency*; Terry M. Moe, "The Politicized Presidency" in John E. Chubb and Paul E. Peterson, eds., *The New Direction in American Politics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1985).

³⁸ Nathan, *The Administrative Presidency*; Moe, "The Politicized Presidency"; Joel D. Aberbach, "The State of the Contemporary American Presidency" in Campbell and Rockman, eds., *The George W. Bush Presidency*.

by continuing power of civil servants and clientele groups, Nixon sought to remake his administration in 1972–1973.³⁹ 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 subcabinet positions, he tried to use the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to rein in regulatory agencies.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ In January 2007, George W. Bush issued an executive order requiring regulatory agencies to create regulatory policy offices staffed by political appointees, who will analyze costs and benefits of new rules. The Reagan and George W. Bush 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.⁴²

Neither Reagan nor 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. During the preparation for the invasion of Iraq, Bush and his allies showed little interest in the concerns raised by career officials in the Central Intelligence Agency, the Pentagon, or the State Department. After the ouster of Saddam Hussein's regime, many positions in the occupation authority were given to Republicans better known for party loyalty than for knowledge of the Middle East.⁴³ The poor performance of the Federal Emergency Management Agency during Hurricane Katrina and the alleged dismissal of U.S. Attorneys for lack of political loyalty show an administration whose approach to governance owes little to progressive notions of disinterested expertise.

Today, presidents are more likely to turn to political consultants or ideologically driven think tanks for policy ideas; this marks a sharp difference from

³⁹ Nathan, *The Administrative Presidency*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Moe, "The Politicized Presidency"; Aberbach, "State of the Contemporary American Presidency."

⁴² Robert J. McKeever, "Presidential Strategies in the New Politics of Supreme Court Appointments" in Edwards and Davies, eds., *New Challenges*; David M. O'Brien, "Ironies and Disappointments: Bush and Federal Judgeships" in Campbell and Rockman, eds., *The George W. Bush Presidency*; David A. Yalof, "The Presidency and the Judiciary" in Nelson, ed., *The Presidency and the Political System*.

⁴³ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

Jimmy Carter's reliance on technocrats or Lyndon Johnson's task forces of academics. Unlike Dwight Eisenhower or Richard Nixon, George W. Bush showed little interest in hearing different views on policy questions, or in creating procedures to ensure open discussion.⁴⁴ Several veterans of the Bush administration, from John DiIulio to Paul O'Neill, have noted the Bush White House's avoidance of 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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

PARTISAN MEDIA

Many scholars of the presidency see as the model for presidential–press relations as the amiable back-and-forth between reporters and presidents like 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.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ Bush's efforts at "going public," whether on television or on the stump, have usually been aimed more at "rallying the base" than at "reaching out."⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Colin Campbell, "Unrestrained Ideological Entrepreneurship in the Bush II Advisory System" in Campbell and Rockman, eds., *The George W. Bush Presidency*; Hugh Heclo, "Campaigning and Governing: A Conspectus" in Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann, eds., *The Permanent Campaign and Its Future* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2000); Stephen K. Medvic and David Dulio, "Staffing the Permanent Campaign: Political Consultants in the White House" (paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, Atlanta, GA, January 2001).

⁴⁵ Campbell, "Unrestrained Ideological Entrepreneurship"; Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

⁴⁶ O'Brien, "Ironies and Disappointments."

⁴⁷ John Anthony Maltese, *Spin Control: The White House Office of Communications and Management of Presidential News*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁴⁸ For example, the Gallup Poll found that the audience for Bush's address on 27 June 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 E. J. Dionne, "Who's Listening to the President," *The Washington Post*, 1 July 2005; Kenneth Bazinet, "Bush Jumps in Polls After War Speech" *Daily News* (New York), 30 June 2005. At the time, the most recent Gallup Poll showed only 45 percent of Americans approved of Bush's performance as President, with only 42 percent approving of his handling of Iraq.

⁴⁹ Wayne, "Bush and Congress."

Both the Clinton and Bush II administrations 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.⁵⁰ Bush has often “narrowcasted” his message by appearing on the Outdoor Life Network (to appeal to the “hook and bullet” crowd) and by courting the Christian media. Both Bush and Dick Cheney have appeared on Rush Limbaugh’s talk radio program, and have conspicuously favored Fox News.

While most media outlets have audiences that reflect the partisan diversity of the general public, a few have striking tilts in viewership. A 2006 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 34 percent of Republicans “regularly watch” Fox News; only 20 percent of Democrats do. One in ten Republicans regularly listen to Rush Limbaugh’s radio show; only 1 in 100 Democrats do.⁵¹ Twice as many viewers watched the Republican convention on Fox as watched the Democratic gathering (overall ratings for the two events were about equal).⁵² The Project for Excellence in Journalism notes the growth of a “journalism of affirmation” (for example, Republicans watching Fox News) and a “journalism of assertion” (for example, a blogger or talk show host making unsubstantiated charges).⁵³ This contrasts sharply with the progressive ideal of objective, scientific journalism conducted by experts.⁵⁴

This “new partisan press” has real political implications; conservative outlets hyped the “Swift Boat” charges against John Kerry when the mainstream media ignored them. Gary C. Jacobson finds that the failure to find weapons of mass destruction or to demonstrate a connection between Saddam Hussein and the attacks of September 11 undermined the support of Democrats and independents for the Iraq War.⁵⁵ But Republicans continued to accept these justifications and so remained supportive of the war. This differing perception of reality may be due to Republicans’ consumption of conservative media that has consistently supported Bush’s rationales for war.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Maltese, *Spin Control*; Howard Kurtz, *Spin Cycle: Inside the Clinton Propaganda Machine* (New York: The Free Press, 1998).

⁵¹ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Online Papers Modestly Boost Newspaper Readership; Maturing Internet News Audience Broader Than Deep,” 30 July 2006, accessed at <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=282>, 16 September 2007.

⁵² Project for Excellence in Journalism, “State of the News Media,” 2005, accessed at <http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2005/>, 16 September 2007.

⁵³ Project for Excellence in Journalism, “State of the News Media.”

⁵⁴ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: The Free Press, 1997 [1922]).

⁵⁵ Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter*.

⁵⁶ Diana C. Mutz and Bryon Reeves, “The New Videomalaise: Effects of Televised Incivility on Political Trust,” *American Political Science Review* 99 (February 2005): 1–15. Audiences for commentary-based shows, however, remain much smaller than those for evening newscasts. See Hetherington, “Putting Polarization in Perspective,” and Markus Prior, “Any Good News in Soft News?: The Impact of Soft News Preference on Political Knowledge,” *Political Communication* 20 (2003): 149–171. As such, given

GEORGE W. BUSH AND THE PARTISAN PRESIDENCY

While he did not create the partisan presidency, George W. Bush was elected as a partisan and has governed as a partisan, but paradoxically, his very partisanship may have undermined his political party. Bush won the 2000 nomination as the candidate of the Republican establishment, drawing support from his fellow governors, the congressional leadership, and longtime party donors. He won key Republican primaries, especially South Carolina and California, by winning the support of party regulars, especially religious conservatives. By contrast, John McCain's victories in New Hampshire and Michigan depended upon the votes of independents and Democrats; in New Hampshire, independents can vote in either primary, while in Michigan, where there is no party registration, there is no barrier to Democrats or independents voting in the Republican primary. Bush proved to be an extraordinarily popular figure among Republicans during the 2000 campaign, beginning a love affair that continued through his re-election and well into his second term. In neither election, however, did he attract much support from Democrats, and as president, with the exception of the post-9/11 rally, he polarized the public to an unprecedented extent. In 2004, he won re-election by mobilizing the Republican base; two years later, he was abandoned by everyone but that base.

Bush not only campaigned as a partisan, he governed as one. In many fields, he pursued policies that had little support from elite or mass opinion. His justifications for tax cuts changed from year to year, but his commitment to them never waned. On environmental issues such as global warming and the development of public lands, he took little heed either of scientific expertise or public sentiment. Both his Social Security reform plan and his stance on the Terri Schiavo affair brought huzzas from conservatives, but Bronx cheers from everyone else. There had been little public demand for his invasion of Iraq—indeed opposition was unusually high even before troops entered the battlefield—and the war soon divided the electorate more sharply than even Vietnam.

Bush's communication strategy often seemed aimed more at rousing the base than appealing to the general public. His televised addresses attracted disproportionately Republican audiences.⁵⁷ The White House even welcomed conservative talk show hosts to the South Lawn during the 2006 campaign. But the strategy appears to have reached its natural limits, since its focus on Republican voters does little to sway the alienated majority. A new liberal "partisan press" has arisen to counteract its conservative equivalent; this in-

their politically skewed audiences, such programs are more likely to mobilize existing supporters, rather than convert new ones. Indeed, one could argue that the communications strategy of George W. Bush and the Republican Party may have relied so heavily on mobilization that it has neglected conversion.

⁵⁷Kernell, *Going Public*.

cludes MSNBC's Keith Olbermann and author-talk show host-Senate candidate Al Franken.

Ironically, this most partisan of presidents appears to have done serious damage to his own party. Surveys in 2006 and 2007 showed a significant decline in Republican Party identification.⁵⁸ Polls asking voters which party they want to win the presidency in 2008 produced double-digit leads for the Democrats.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PARTISAN PRESIDENCY

The partisan presidency may have some positive effects on our political system. Voter turnout has increased in the past two presidential elections, which both featured strikingly polarized views of the candidates among voters.⁵⁹ Voters report clearer images of the two parties, images with greater ideological coherence than in the past. The 2004 NES showed the highest number of voters ever who cared who won the election and who tried to influence someone else's vote. The decline of the progressive doctrines of "objectivity" in journalism and neutral competence in administration may have undermined the credibility of the mass media and the authority of the federal government. An "objective" media, however, can also demobilize voters, turning citizens into spectators, while turning over government to unelected experts can undermine democratic control.

But citizens also report greater ideological distance between themselves and presidents, which may be associated with increased distrust.⁶⁰ (Political trust has fallen substantially since the mid-1960s; one effect has been to suppress presidential approval ratings.)⁶¹ 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 (or interest-group) currents within their party than to public desires or to objective expertise; many of George W. Bush's legislative proposals—the faith-based initiative, private accounts for Social Security, estate tax repeal—seem to reflect such thinking.⁶²

⁵⁸ Pew Research Center, "Online Papers."

⁵⁹ Alan I. Abramowitz and Walter J. Stone, "The Bush Effect: Polarization, Turnout, and Activism in the 2004 Presidential Election," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36 (June 2006):141–154; Marc J. Hetherington, "Turned Off or Turned On?" The Effects of Polarization on Political Participation, Engagement, and Representation" in Nivola and Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation?* vol 2.

⁶⁰ Hetherington, "Resurgent Mass Partisanship."

⁶¹ Marc J. Hetherington, *Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of American Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). While this decline occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, the polarization of the current era may have retarded a rebound in trust.

⁶² Hacker and Pierson, *Off Center*.

Divided government may lead to Bush I-era gridlock or to Clinton-era political warfare. Nor do strong parties in our era produce processes of collective decision making that might restrain presidents; instead they often serve as cults of personality adoring the occupant of the Oval Office.

Has the twenty-first century produced a throwback to the politics of the nineteenth? Party loyalty has replaced individualism, patronage (of a sort) has replaced good-government progressivism, and a new partisan press has replaced objectivity. But today's highly centralized, ideologically coherent, presidency-centered parties bear little resemblance to the decentralized, philosophically diverse parties of 150 years ago.

Are we perhaps seeing the Europeanization of American politics? Legislatures with tight party discipline, an openly biased media, and ideologically fervent partisanship were all once seen as characteristic of the politics of Great Britain or France but not that of the United States. European parties once famously drew upon divisions of class and religion (for example, the support of industrial workers for Socialists or that of practicing Catholics for Christian Democrats), while American parties could not rely on such loyalties. But the support that African Americans give to Democrats or that white evangelicals give to Republicans show exactly that sort of commitment. Indeed, the talk of "Red States" and "Blue States," itself reflecting the increasing geographic polarization of American politics, brings to mind the historic differences between "White Bavaria" and "Red Berlin" or "White Veneto" and "Red Emilia-Romagna."⁶³ But the United States retains too many elements of its weak-state heritage for this thesis to hold for long.

Even in this polarized era, our political system continues to restrain presidential partisanship. The separation of powers often produces conflict that does not follow party lines; it also allows for divided government that can force cross-partisan coalitions, although they have become more difficult to form in recent years. The numerous counter-majoritarian features of our system—ranging from the Supreme Court to the Senate filibuster—continue to make party government only a limited possibility. Individual politicians concerned with their own political futures may choose to break with an unpopular president, although George W. Bush maintained a surprising hold over congressional Republicans, especially on the issue of the Iraq War.

Perhaps future presidents will seek to reach across the aisle more often (although one should remember that George W. Bush campaigned in 2000 as a "uniter, not a divider" who would end the ferocious conflict of the Newt Gingrich era). Party factionalism, dormant in recent years, could be revived: perhaps the Iraq War will heighten divisions among Democratic hawks and doves, and perhaps the long-awaited rupture between social and fiscal conservatives will finally split the GOP (indeed each faction found a different

⁶³ David A. Hopkins, "Geographic Polarization in American Presidential Elections" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 2005).

presidential candidate to despise—Rudy Giuliani and Mike Huckabee, respectively).⁶⁴ But most of the factors contributing to the partisan presidency appear to be long term, not short term; we are not likely to see a return to the above-the-fray style of the Eisenhower administration anytime soon.*

⁶⁴ Howard L. Reiter, "Party Factions in 2004" in John C. Green and Daniel J. Coffey, eds., *The State of the Parties*, 5th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

* The author wishes to thank Harold Bass, James MacGregor Burns, Susan Dunn, John C. Green, Robert Lowry, Sidney Milkis, and Barbara Sinclair for their comments and suggestions.