

The Presidency (3): The Modern President and the Public: A Twin-Edged Sword

Module 8, Lecture 3

The Modern Presidency

- Federal programs to create a national constituency: the “plebiscitary” presidency
- Mechanism: Using the media to speak to a national constituency
 - “Spin Control”
 - The 24/7 presidency
- The Trump presidency challenged some of these norms

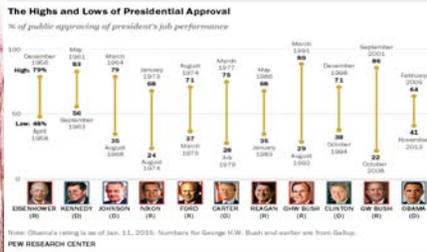
Plebiscite

- “a vote by which the people of an entire country or district express an opinion for or against a proposal especially on a choice of government or ruler”
- In this sense: Presidents depending on votes (to get elected) *and* public opinion between elections (to dominate the policymaking process)

Can Presidents Build Popular Support?

- Yes, particularly in foreign policy
 - Rallying effect
 - Richard Nixon: détente with Russia and China
 - George W. Bush: Afghan War
 - Donald Trump: Outreach to North Korea
- Less easily on domestic policy
 - Lyndon Johnson: The Great Society
- Congress limits possible new presidential constituencies

Presidential Performance Ratings: from Eisenhower in the Late 1950s to Trump



President Trump (mid-2018)
 Low: 35 (several times)
 High: 45 (inauguration week)

The Media and the Plebiscite

- News management
- New technologies
 - Roosevelt and radio
 - Kennedy and television
 - Clinton and the talk show
 - Trump and social media
- Presidents cannot always shape their media images
 - Gerald Ford on *Saturday Night Live* (as well as subsequent presidents)
 - See "Saturday Night Live: A Message from Gerald Ford"
 - Bush (I) and "read my lips"
 - See "1988: When Bush Said Read My Lips"
 - Donald Trump / Alec Baldwin and Saturday Night Live

Limiting the Plebiscitary Presidency

1. Revelation
 - Use of the media to reveal errors, wrongdoing, or mismanagement
 - Usually orchestrated by interest groups seeking Congressional intervention
2. Investigation
 - Use of Congressional oversight authority to investigate the errors reported in the media
3. Prosecution
 - Use of the courts to prosecute wrongdoers
 - Rarest of the three

☞ Victim: citizen trust in government

President Obama and the Plebiscite

- Overall – few scandals
- First two years in office
 - Democratic majorities in Congress
 - Significant legislative accomplishments
- Remaining six years
 - Republican majorities unwillingness to work with the administration
 - Increasing reliance on Executive Action without Congressional approval
 - Limited
 - Easy to reverse
 - Congress' low approval ratings limit the damage to Obama initiatives
- Contributed to Washington gridlock / popular distrust of government

President Trump and the Plebiscite

- Loss in the popular vote
- Poorly articulated legislative agenda
 - Republicans in Congress operating independently early in the Trump administration
 - Challenge in getting laws passed
 - Use of executive action to reverse Obama policies
- Immediate scandal / investigation
 - Little Trump concern about building *new* popular support
- Low levels of popular support put Congressional majorities at risk



In Sum

- Power of individual 20th / 21st Century presidents (rather than the presidency as an office) shaped by each president's ability to win ongoing popular support
- Scandal reliably undercuts presidential authority
- Long-term consequence? Diminished popular trust in government as a whole
