



# THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

## Thinking Institutionally about an American Presidency

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Why do presidents behave as they do?  
When do they succeed? When do they fail?  
And what mark do they leave on our nation?

# The Personal President

- Presidents are part rock star, part parent, and part national icon.
- Presidents give voice to and embody the nation's most cherished values.
- We look to them to affirm our national, racial, ethnic, and religious identities.
- Yet for all the grandeur of the presidency, our relationships with presidents are curiously personal.

# Among the Pundits

- Personal Approach
  - dominates the media
- Barack Obama
- Presidents Past
  - George W. Bush
  - George Washington



# In the Academy

- James Barber, Alexander George, and Erwin Hargrove
  - developed presidential “types” and “schemata.”
- Neustadt
  - “professional reputation” and “public prestige” are the essential determinants of his success or failure.
- Barber
  - create an informed understanding of the types of presidential character that exist, in order to explicate “what in the personal past foreshadows the Presidential future.”
- Greenstein
  - focus on the attributes that shape presidential leadership, the “personal impact on government actions.”

# A Brief Critique

- The personal approach downplays the extraordinary ways in which public opinion and public expectations of presidents both constrain and inform what any individual president is able to accomplish while in office.
- The institutional environment in which presidents must work has simultaneously expanded and thickened.
- There are remarkable continuities across presidential administrations that one cannot explain by reference to the individuals who occupy the office.
- Scholars of the American presidency have taken notice. Over the last 20 years, they have turned their attention away from the psychological explanations for presidential behavior and instead focused on the underlying incentives that shape and inform the actions of all presidents.

# The Institutional Presidency

*An institutional approach* puts the student in the position not of the psychologist, journalist, or biographer, but of the institutionalist.

An institutionalist takes as her starting point the basic and undeniable fact that the presidency is embedded within a larger institutional framework and presidential power is mediated by those institutions. But the institutionalist does not merely recognize the existence of institutions. She also thinks in distinctly institutional terms.

# What Is an Institutional Approach to Studying the Presidency?

- The **first** level of institutional analysis is purely descriptive, in which the institutionalist takes stock of:
  - the agencies, departments, and commissions that surround and, in various ways, serve the president.
  - the adjoining branches of government that do so much to constrain and check the exercise of presidential power.



# What Is an Institutional Approach to Studying the Presidency?

- The **second** level at which the institutionalist understands politics is by investigating how observed presidential behaviors arise from basic facts about the role that presidents assume in the federal government; and how, in turn, that position structures presidents' relationships with others—be they current members of Congress, bureaucrats whom the president can freely hire and fire, today's public, or tomorrow's elected politicians.

# What Is an Institutional Approach to Studying the Presidency?

- The **third** level at which the institutionalist understands politics is by evaluating how the very objectives articulated by presidents derive from the unique position that they inhabit. Works on two levels:
  - The president as national leader;
  - who must navigate Congress and the courts.

# Outline of the Forthcoming Textbook

- Standard Fare
  - Constitutional foundations
  - Process of Nominating & Electing a president
  - Inter- and Intra-branch political struggles
  - Shaping foreign & domestic policymaking
- What Sets it Apart? – the distinctly institutional view of the American presidency
  - Impacts *HOW* we discuss the topics

# Textbook Features

- “Thinking Institutionally”
  - Considered one aspect of the larger institutional argument
    - Do facts about the personalities of current or future presidents shape the institutional design of the presidency?
    - Does the president inherit the political universe, or is he able to remake?
    - What are the stakes of presidential elections?
    - To what extent does a policy proposal represent the sincere preferences of a sitting president?
    - Are there any domains of presidential politics (e.g., diplomacy) that are fundamentally personal in nature?
- “Historical Transformations in the Institutional Presidency”
  - Identifies historical events that have played an important role in the original design and, more frequently, subsequent evolution of the institutional presidency

# Questions?