

PRESIDENCY RESEARCH GROUP NEWSLETTER



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THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The recent election results shake many political premises. The surprising last minute support for President-elect Reagan testifies to the volatility of the electorate. Coupled with the instability of presidential governing coalitions in recent years, politics increasingly resembles a seesaw. We can recall that a short time ago demands were being made for new restraints on the presidency; today, the clamor is for a strong president. These seesaw demands and expectations are as much at odds with presidential resources and opportunities as ever.

These new developments accent the challenge to presidential scholars to explain the complex relationships between electoral and governing trends in the presidency. The growth in PRG membership testifies to the reawakened interest in research and teaching on the presidency. Much research on the presidency is being conducted. The opportunities to work in presidential libraries open up new resources for scholarly investigation. The availability of polling data also invites inquiry into the relationship between the presidency and public opinion.

The PRG is intent on improving the opportunities and resources of presi-

dential scholars. This year two projects are being launched: the first is the exploration, with the assistance of Tom Mann and APSA, of the possibility of creating presidential internships similar to the successful congressional internships; the second is the expansion of the size and scope of our newsletter. Both will create new opportunities that will stimulate research.

My congratulations to our new editor, George Edwards, on raising the newsletter to a level that can make it a forum for greater communication about research and teaching on the presidency.

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COMMENTS FROM THE FIELD

The Presidency: Learning from Comparison

by
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The study of the presidency is inherently comparative, if it is to be anything more than a collection of biographies. Scholars of the presidency compare the performance of different presidents in order to establish generalizations about the office, true whoever is the incumbent. Comparison is also used to show differences in personality, intention, or performance between presidents. When comparisons show differences emerging across long periods of time, then we speak of innovations or developments in the of the presidency.

Yet the universe for comparison is very small when attention is limited solely to occupants of the Oval Office. Conventionally, generalizations derived about the 'contemporary' presidency are based upon the behavior of the eight persons who have held the office in the 48 years since the inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Arguably, generalizations might better be restricted to the five presidents of the past two decades. Extending analysis back to

to the era of Calvin Coolidge, let alone Rutherford B. Hayes or Zachary Taylor, is likely to reduce the value of any generalizations derived.

Studying how other countries give direction to government is a reasonable and logical way to extend our universe of study, and thus, the basis for understanding what is unique as well as what is politically generic about the presidency. While the presidency is a unique institution, its primary tasks are not unique. The need to give direction to government is universal and persisting. Moreover, the problem is not restricted to democratic regimes. As Jerry Hough showed in oral remarks to a PRG panel at the recent APSA meeting, it is helpful to think of different types of Soviet leaders just as one might construct a typology of contrasting styles of presidential leadership.

From my own experience, the most important points to emerge in comparison are the institutional differences between nations. The thing that makes the presidency unique is not so much the eminence of the individual: after all, the British prime minister, the French president and the German bundeskanzler have no mean conceit of themselves. The uniqueness of the presidency arises from the constraints placed upon it from outside the executive branch: the powers of Congress and the courts; the nature of federalism; the weakness of political parties; and the low status of the senior civil service. Incidentally, one practical implication is that the major need in Washington today is not to strengthen the institution at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, but to strengthen American government in all its myriad ramifications.

Fortunately, political scientists ought to be expert at institutional analysis, and it is relatively straightforward to come to grips with institutional fundamentals through the forcing house of comparison. It immediately throws up some interesting questions. For example, why do we not consider the French president more powerful than the American president, when the former has fewer legislative or administrative constraints? How does a British prime

minister lead a government when he or she has a policy staff of only half a dozen people at hand? What does a Norwegian prime minister learn by leaving school at 14 that is apparently not learned by clever university graduates? And what would you do next if, like General Franco, you seized power by civil war and had the constitution vest supreme political authority in your person?

Insofar as comparison starts from an interest in abstractions--'political skill' or 'leadership'--then conceptual refinement is even more necessary. For example, the skills needed to survive as an Italian premier riding factions of the Christian Democratic coalition may be different from those thought appropriate in Britain. And proponents of 'strong leadership' in the American presidency would wish to differentiate this from the Fuhrerprinzip as applied not so long ago in Germany. Conceivably, cross-national comparisons may conclude that everything a political leader needs to know can be found in Machiavelli--or in Neustadt. But is the lesson the need for political survival, or the desirability of leaving a mark on a nation's history? If it is both, which comes first when the two may conflict?

Whatever the case in the abstract, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Anyone whose appetite is whetted by the above can sink his or her teeth into a first study of comparative political leadership, Presidents and Prime Ministers, edited by Ezra Suleiman and myself, and published by American Enterprise Institute. It includes chapters by national experts on Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, and Franco Spain, as well as lessons drawn by myself about the presidency in comparative perspective.

At the least, the book shows that the presidency is a subject fit for comparison across space as well as time. And I encourage readers of this newsletter to extend our knowledge of government further by extending the base of presidential studies.

CURRENT RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Alexander L. George and Juliette L. George report that they are preparing several articles based on research about Woodrow Wilson in manuscript materials which have become available since publication of Woodrow Wilson and the Colonel House in 1956. They state:

"Our current research confirms us in the interpretation of Wilson which we offered in our book. Indeed, the data now available permits a much fuller delineation of the relationship between Wilson and his father---of the extraordinary bond which existed between them and of Wilson's intense self-doubt, suffering and need for approval. We continue to view Wilson as a great tragic figure whose "tragic flaw"---a ruinously self-defeating refusal to compromise with his opponents---evolved out of low self-estimates which we believe (though, as we have always freely conceded, such a proposition is not susceptible of conclusive proof) he developed as a child in response to his father's demands.

"It is our purpose also, with the help of competent medical authority, to present evidence of the dubious validity of Dr. Edwin A. Weinstein's theory that Wilson's ineptitude in great crises both as President of Princeton and as President of the United States was significantly related to brain damage stemming from a series of strokes which he alleges Wilson suffered starting 1896.¹ This

¹See George and George - "Dr. Weinstein's Interpretation of Woodrow Wilson: Some Preliminary Observations" (The Psychohistory Review, Vol. VIII, Summer-Fall 1979, pp. 71-72). Of course, Wilson's paralyzing thrombosis of October, 1919 is fully documented and is not at issue although we question whether it significantly affected his determination not to compromise with Senator Lodge on amendments to the Covenant of the League of Nations. He took his adamant stand long before October, 1919 and his behavior remained consistent throughout.

