

# PRESIDENCY RESEARCH



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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE AMERICAN POLITICAL  
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NEWS AND NOTES

PRG PANELS AT THE APSA

The PRG is co-sponsoring a panel on White House chiefs at the 1986 American Political Science Association meetings in Washington. Dom Bonafede will be the panel chair. In addition, Roger Porter is assembling a panel on presidential advising that (so far) consists of William Seidman, Stuart Eizenstadt, and Richard Wirthlin.

A social note: the American University Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies is hosting a cocktail party at APSA for PRG and the Legislative Studies section.

CALL FOR PAPERS

John Kessel, who is organizing the executive politics panel for the 1987 Midwest Political Science Association meeting, would like to hear from persons who have research that they would like to present. According to Kessel, "Preference will be given to papers adhering to the normal canons of political science research: those characterized by explicit research goals, collection of appropriate data, and rigorous analysis."

TEACHING THE PRESIDENCY

I am considering organizing a panel for an upcoming APSA or Regional Political Science meeting to be entitled Teaching the Presidency. Do you have a particular sub-area of your presidency course which works especially well? Do you have a unique way of approaching any particular aspect of presidential politics which your students find particularly interesting?

For example, I have developed a way of teaching about Watergate which gets excellent response from students. I would like to share my approach with others who teach courses on the presidency. If you have a section of your presidency course which you feel works very well and would like to

share it with others, please contact me. Enclose a very brief description of your area and approach. If enough interest is generated I will try to organize a panel in this area.

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LIBRARY RESEARCH AND ELITE INTERVIEWING: A COMPARISON

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The upsurge in presidency studies over the past decade has been accompanied by wider use of two traditional research methodologies: elite interviewing and documentary research. Essays have appeared on the conduct and value of each method,<sup>1</sup> but a more explicit comparison also provides a useful perspective. The following observations are based on my own experience conducting interviews with White House aides from each of the administrations during the "modern" era and research visits to the Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson libraries. My comments cover two general

areas: constraints on research and the nature of the materials,

### Constraints on Research

Researchers using either interviewing or documents confront constraints in four major areas: access, time pressures, required preparation, and necessary personal skills. On the surface, the two methods appear to differ markedly in terms of access. Presidential libraries, after all, are available for research on a permanent basis, subject only to the vagaries of working hours and staff vacations, while interview subjects, often pursuing active professional careers, are far less readily available. Each, however, poses similar logistical problems.

Library research requires researchers to meet expenses of travel and personal maintenance that are multiplied if one's research extends beyond a single administration. Money, as ever, can offer alternatives: it is possible for researchers to "shop by mail," that is, request library staffs to xerox large portions of documentary records for their use at home. Materials of maximum interest and value can be indentified during a brief exploratory visit, or it is possible to make requests based on the libraries' "finders aids," which often are available through inter-library loan. Even at the current rate of 35 cents per page one might find this cheaper than the combined costs of travel, food and lodging for an extended period. But researchers sacrifice ready access to cross-referenced materials and face the prospect of receiving large volumes of useless documents, which are inevitably mixed in with those of value.

Similar options confront the interviewer. Some scholars have made extensive use of telephone interviews to minimize the costs of on-site interviewing,<sup>2</sup> but most have preferred the customary face-to-face mode, which necessitates travel. However, once in the vicinity (Washington offers the

greatest concentration of potential subjects), one must overcome the subjects' resistance to being interviewed (best determined before departing) or accommodate oneself to the subjects' busy schedules. Disappointments, disruptions, and the unexpected are inevitable. As with library research, there are distinct advantages to being on location for an extended period.

In my experience, the time pressures associated with the two methods are strikingly different. The elite interviewer must make the most of an encounter that has ordinarily been scheduled for a fixed and relatively brief length of time. This one-shot opportunity to gather information stands in marked contrast to a library visit where, even if time is limited, the pressures are less intense. One can always adjust work schedules over, say, a five-day period even though the pace quickens as the day of departure approaches.

Researchers can adopt means to facilitate their work in both settings. Many interviewers rely on tape recorders (with the subject's sufferance) to reduce the pressure of note-taking; the xerox machine serves much the same purpose at most libraries, which allows one to devote maximum attention to culling through files rather than allocating any more time to written records than is absolutely necessary for later identifying materials. (On-site xeroxing, by the way, also must be completed by library staff but at the current bargain rate of 25 cents per page.) The costs of using these technological facilitators are also quite comparable: researchers commit themselves to extensive work after the field research has been completed. Transcribing tapes is no less burdensome than sorting through the reams of copied documents which arrive shortly after returning home. In both cases, delay in final processing may also delay "mastering" the data one has collected.

Preparing for both interviews and library visits is critical. It is important to steep oneself in the context of the period involved: review the names of critical actors both in and out of the administration, become familiar with the issues that were active at the time. It is crucial to achieve a measure of contextual sensitivity, which probably is easier to attain for recent administrations that are in one's memory. Preparing to use library materials, in my experience, requires heavier preparation, although this depends, of course, on the breadth of one's topic. Consulting with archivists before the visit and using the sometimes extensive finding aids beforehand can improve productivity considerably.

The two methods require somewhat distinctive research skills, although certainly such general qualities as determination and physical stamina are important for each. Obviously, but also importantly, elite interviewing requires special facility in interpersonal interaction. One must be responsive to nonverbal as well as verbal cues from a subject and must be able to adjust readily to different situations. It is possible to encounter subject reactions ranging from hostility (seldom encountered since such people are unlikely to agree to be interviewed in the first place) to suspicion, cooperativeness, manipulativeness, and domination. One can obviously attempt to place some limits on subject variability by imposing greater structure on the interview session, such as using closed-ended questions or even asking subjects to perform a card sort. John Kessel has gone farthest in using these techniques.<sup>3</sup> Ordinarily, one must develop the capacity to be a careful listener and skillful conversationalist, adjusting the subject's responses but returning to one's own list of priority topics.

Library research places a premium on both concentration and what might be termed "puzzle-solving skills," the ability to constantly reconceptualize

