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## INTRODUCTION

# Thinking Institutionally about an American Presidency

WHY DO PRESIDENTS behave as they do? When do they succeed? When do they fail? What mark do they leave on our politics?

For answers to these questions, journalists, biographers, politicians, and a good number of scholars look to presidents themselves, in all their complexity. In their personalities, leadership styles, personal backgrounds, and idiosyncrasies, it is presumed, are the keys to unlocking their behavior. It is the individual, many political observers insist, who matters most; and so it is the individual president we must study if we are to understand our national politics.

*The American Presidency* takes an altogether different tack. Rather than scrutinizing the *president*, this textbook analyzes the *presidency*. It illuminates the institutional context in which presidents work, the institutional foundations of executive power, and the institutional incentives that shape and inform presidential decisions and action. Rules and norms, procedures and protocols, incentives and perspectives, and grants and limitations of authority sit at its heart.

To make headway on this project, we will need to define what we mean by “institution” and “institutional approach.” Hold tight: we will do this shortly. First, though, we would do well to recognize an alternative understanding of executive politics. While this textbook assumes—and even argues on behalf of—an institutional approach to the American presidency, the vast preponderance of discussions in the mainstream media fixate on presidents themselves. Therefore, before we turn our attention in earnest to the institutional presidency, let us take stock of the personal president.

### 0.1 The Personal President

*Public servant* does not begin to capture what the president means to us. Not even close. Presidents are part rock star, part parent, and part national icon. No one looms larger in the national consciousness. No one is better recognized, more powerful, or more controversial.

Presidents give voice to and embody the nation's most cherished values. Presidents are repositories for our highest aspirations, symbols of what America is and what it might become. Presidents not only decide what the government should do but define who we are as a people. We turn to them for consolation and strength. We look to them to affirm our national identity. And we evaluate presidential candidates not only on their policy positions, values, and ideological commitments but also, say some, on the basis of the personal relationships we imagine having with them.

Little wonder, then, that the family histories, character traits, and moral convictions of presidents captivate our attention and imagination. By turns, we read deep meanings into Joe Biden's history of personal tragedy, Donald Trump's habits of mind and language, Barack Obama's multicultural heritage, George W. Bush's Texas swagger, Bill Clinton's smooth talk, and George H. W. Bush's World War II service. Indeed, depending on one's ideological and partisan bent, merely watching presidents on television can evoke a deep emotional attachment or boiling indignation.

The concept of the **personal presidency**, which draws our attention to the individual presidents who hold office with all their nuances and complexity, owes its enduring strength to two groups of opinion makers: pundits and academics. In this section we will canvass the views of these two groups and then critique their approach to studying the personal president.

### *0.1.1 The Personal President: Pundits*

Pundits—journalists, talking heads, consultants, and public intellectuals—have long supposed that *what* the presidency is, at any given moment, crucially depends upon *who* the president is—upon the president's leadership style, worldview, sense of self, energy, political acumen, likeability, temperament, demeanor, cognitive skills, and all the rest that make them fully-fledged human beings. If we want to understand what goes on in the White House, pundits tell us, we would do well to scrutinize the person who resides there.

This personal approach to understanding the American presidency dominates print, digital, and televised media, where pundits relate the president's latest political decision, misstep, or scandal to some mix of personality and biography. Again and again, we have been told that the key to decoding presidents' actions lies in their backgrounds, their convictions and biases, and their strengths and weaknesses. To better understand what this personal approach calls our attention to, and what it chooses to omit, let's examine three recent presidents through its lens.

## JOE BIDEN

Joe Biden took office following an election that, even by recent historical standards, was light on policy substance. Among those who supported him, many did so not because of what he promised to accomplish in the White House but because of who he was. The son

of a Delaware car salesman, Biden had garnered a reputation as one of the most down-to-earth, straight-talking members of Congress. A lover of ice cream cones and a dear, grandfatherly companion to former president Obama, Biden's nicknames included "Middle-Class Joe" and "Amtrak Joe," the latter referring to his low-budget train rides home from Washington, D.C. In public, Biden's lighthearted persona concealed his tragic past, including the untimely deaths of his first wife and children. According to his supporters, Biden's personal story, combined with his "maverick" sensibilities, made him a graceful and productive addition to the presidency.

Biden's detractors also had plenty to say about his character. To some, his folksy demeanor belied his deep and sinister ambition; Biden had, after all, either planned or launched a presidential campaign in 1980, 1984, 1988, 2004, 2008, 2016, and 2020. Where some saw a man eager to bond with colleagues and voters, others saw inappropriate physical contact with younger women—an allegation Biden would eventually have to address publicly. Most persistent was the rumor that Biden—seventy-seven years old at the time of his election, and a known stutterer—was lying to reporters about his mental and physical health. For all these reasons and more, detractors presumed that Biden's personal characteristics would doom his tenure in the White House.<sup>1</sup>

#### DONALD TRUMP

If ever a president attracted scrutiny, it was Donald Trump. Indeed, "scrutiny" is the least of it. Every night, it seemed, news anchors and their guests pored over the president's latest tweet or dictate in search of clues into what made this exceptional president tick. And so doing, they evaluated Trump in distinctly personal terms. The descriptors ran the gamut from shrewd and successful "conservative businessman" to "tax-cheating, investor-swindling, worker-shafting, dictator-loving, pathologically lying, attorneys general-bribing, philandering, mobbed up, narcissistic serial con artist."<sup>2</sup> On one essential point, however, there appears to have been some consensus: understanding a Trump presidency required understanding Trump himself—his wants and desires, his personality and style, his hang-ups and foibles. For this president, with so little political experience and so few ties to his putative party, the keys to understanding action and eventual achievement lay in the heart and mind of the man himself.

To better understand the mind and intention of this dealmaker-turned-president, political observers plumbed Donald Trump's childhood upbringing. According to many, the key to understanding Trump was his relationship with his real-estate-mogul father, Fred Trump, who taught him to save every penny and to negotiate fiercely.<sup>3</sup> Trump's father raised his son in the real estate industry and, through mentoring and financial support, laid the foundation for his success. For all the lessons imparted, however, the father-son relationship lacked warmth and compassion. As one family friend noted, the two often "talked right past each other."<sup>4</sup> This toxic blend of parental judgment and indifference, observers argued, sent Donald Trump into adulthood with a cutthroat drive to succeed and total impatience with failure.

Behind all of Trump's antics, said some, lay a deep and nagging insecurity about what others thought of him. For many, Trump's unyielding self-regard and utter preoccupation with personal slights, no matter how petty, betrayed a man ill at ease with himself. His was a world informed by television ratings, crowd sizes, poll results, and electoral returns, which kept at bay the childhood demons that lived within him. When the facts did not cooperate, Trump either disregarded them or made up altogether new ones. And, when others did not join in, Trump—our nation's "toddler in chief"<sup>5</sup>—took to throwing tantrums. Trump's outspoken contempt for the "fake media," political experts, and the DC establishment, at its heart, revealed a sad and lonely man-child desperately longing for approval.

None of this is to say that there was a consensus view about Trump. To the contrary, Americans disagreed vehemently with one another about his motivations and character. Critics saw in Trump little but impulsiveness, immaturity, and self-regard. Supporters saw irreverence, independence, and determination. For most, though, a straight line could be drawn between the personal qualities of the man and the presidency he administered. The relationships he fostered with foreign nations, the political negotiations he charted domestically, and the policy agenda he articulated all flowed—quite naturally—from his own traits, experiences, styles, and obsessions. The origin of Trump's presidency was Trump himself.

#### BARACK OBAMA

The higher the stakes of a topic or debate, the more personal the coverage of presidential actions seems to become. In the summer of 2011, with the country facing a default on its national debt, President Obama's maneuvers to end partisan bickering and avoid default were largely evaluated in personal terms. Conservative commentators opined by turns that the president was being too "chill," too "passive," or possibly too "passive-aggressive" in his handling of the crisis.<sup>6</sup> And in the opinion pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, former Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan explained Obama's inability to reach an agreement with Republican leaders in these terms: "He really dislikes [them], and he can't fake it." Noonan then contrasted Obama to a previous Democratic president with whom Republicans had been willing to negotiate: "Bill Clinton understood why conservatives think what they think because he was raised in the South. He had a saving ambivalence."<sup>7</sup>

Some of the most vitriolic criticisms of Obama's character and temperament, however, came from pundits on the ideological Left. On his *Conscience of a Liberal* blog, commentator and Nobel laureate Paul Krugman spelled out what he found to be Obama's biggest limitation in framing the issue: "At this point, we just have to accept it as a fact of life: Obama doesn't, and maybe can't, do outrage—no matter how much the situation calls for it."<sup>8</sup>

These personal criticisms came to a head after the president signed a debt relief bill, hastily put together by Congress at the eleventh hour, which was seen by most as favoring Republicans. For example, a scathing op-ed in the *New York Times* titled "What Happened to Obama?" argued that he "has pursued the [political path] with which he is most com-



fortable given the constraints of his character,” indicating a “deep-seated aversion to conflict.” The problem was not merely political but existential—the president simply did not “know who he is or what he believes in.”<sup>9</sup>

The *Times* criticisms are particularly interesting, given that the character traits under attack—his unflappable demeanor among them—were the same qualities that had, in the eyes of many, made Obama such a compelling presidential candidate. In its 2008 endorsement, the *Times* editorial board praised Obama’s “cool, steady hand.”<sup>10</sup> Before it even began, then, the Obama presidency was thought to be synonymous with the personal characteristics of the man himself; these expressed characteristics, rather than being shaped and informed by larger political, cultural, and racial dynamics, originated from within Obama himself.

#### PRESIDENTS PAST

Biden, Trump, and Obama were hardly the first presidents to be judged by the punditry in strictly personal terms. Both admirers and detractors also referred to George W. Bush as a man whose decisions were based on conviction rather than strategic calculation. A 2004 magazine profile described Bush’s first term in office as an “extraordinary blend of forcefulness and inscrutability, opacity and action.”<sup>11</sup> And a commentator who knew Bush well summed up the widespread assessment of him as president and person: “Those who love him say ‘leader, decisive, passionate.’ His detractors say ‘angry, petulant.’ But everybody agrees that there’s something in his gut, something that’s really driving him.”<sup>12</sup>

Such has been the thinking of past presidents, as well. Though amplified by changes in the media, the nation’s preoccupation with the president’s psychology and personality has deep historical roots. Americans have always remembered our most famous presidents by identifying them with distinct personality traits: Old Hickory (Andrew Jackson), Honest Abe (Abraham Lincoln), the Schoolmaster (Woodrow Wilson), the Big Lub (William Howard Taft), Cautious Cal (Calvin Coolidge), Give ’Em Hell Harry (Harry Truman), Camelot (John F. Kennedy), Tricky Dick (Richard Nixon), and The Great Communicator (Ronald Reagan).

Since its inception, in fact, a veritable cult of personality has dominated discussions of the presidential office. During the Constitutional Convention of 1787, George Washington was widely seen as the obvious choice for president because of his superior personal qualities, especially his humility and aversion to power. Indeed, one convention delegate went so far as to argue that it was these very personal characteristics that had created the office of the presidency: “Many of the members [of the convention] cast their eyes toward General Washington as President and shaped their Ideas of the Powers to be given to a President, by their Opinions of his Virtue.”<sup>13</sup> (See chapter 1 for an assessment of this argument.)

From Washington onward, presidents have been judged not by the success of their policies but by the content of their character. Legendary journalist H. L. Mencken once described Franklin D. Roosevelt as having “an ingratiating grin upon his face like that of a

snake-oil vendor at a village carnival.”<sup>14</sup> And Norman Mailer consistently attributed Lyndon Johnson’s failure in Vietnam to character, calling Johnson an “ugly, tragic man,” motivated by “vanity” and plagued by an “alienation” from himself that underscored the “depths of [his] insanity.” Not that these traits were necessarily all bad. “Better to have a President who is a large and evil man,” Mailer assured us, “than one who is small and ignoble.”<sup>15</sup>

### 0.1.2 *The Personal President: Academics*

Among academics, too, the personal approach to understanding the presidency has held considerable sway. For much of the twentieth century, in fact, this approach dominated scholarly research on the American presidency. Taking their cues from personality theory and cognitive psychology, many authors of books on the American presidency devoted a chapter to each president, typically in chronological order. Prominent presidency scholars developed “types” and “schemata” of presidents on the basis of their emotional predispositions, key moments in their biographies, and leadership styles.<sup>16</sup> Though their conclusions varied, all of these scholars paid close attention to each president and the personal quirks and idiosyncrasies that made the president human.

*Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, the single most influential tract written on the American presidency during the last half century, posits presidents’ “professional reputation” and “public prestige” as the essential determinants of their success or failure. To be sure, its author, Richard Neustadt, recognized that institutions, political actors, and public expectations shape presidential politics. He did not explore the character and design of political institutions at any length, however. Rather, he relegated political institutions to the background, holding that it is the person, ultimately, who must rise above these institutions. As Neustadt put it, the president must be an individual of “extraordinary temperament,” one with “a sense of purpose, a feel for power, and a source of confidence.”<sup>17</sup>

Consider, too, James Barber’s typology of American presidents. In Barber’s view, presidents’ “personalities [are] engaged—not peripherally, but centrally—in fights” over policy; and as a consequence, presidents’ “actions cannot be understood apart from the passions each poured into his task[s].”<sup>18</sup> Barber sought to categorize the types of presidential character that exist, in order to explicate “what in the personal past foreshadows the Presidential future.”<sup>19</sup> Barber illuminated the details of presidents’ personal histories, examining the future implications of, for example, ten-year-old Richard Nixon’s letter to his mother and Jimmy Carter’s reactions upon hearing Dylan Thomas read aloud.

In our survey of scholarship on the personal presidency, we must not overlook Fred Greenstein. In the last quarter century, no one has written at greater length or with more aplomb about the personal president than Greenstein. Documenting the tenures of every president, Greenstein directs our attention to each person’s communicative proficiency, organizational capacity, political skill, policy vision, cognitive style, and emotional intelligence, for in such attributes, he insists, lie the explanations of their accomplishments.<sup>20</sup>

In Greenstein's work, as in so much that is written on American presidents, each president receives his own chapter—for each president must be evaluated and understood on his own terms.

### *0.1.3 The Personal President: A Brief Critique*

Among pundits, the personal president continues to predominate. Among academics, though, its influence is on the decline. Over the last two decades, presidency scholars have focused instead on the formal tools at the president's disposal, the president's place in history, the growth of the "presidential branch" of government, and the efforts of presidents to oversee the bureaucracy. This shift in scholarly attention is eminently justified. For all the attention it receives, the personal president too often fails to deliver a reliable framework for making sense of what presidents do during their time in office and what meaning it has for our politics.

Let's elaborate:

- *The personal approach does not adequately account for the basic fact that the office of the presidency is embedded in a highly institutionalized setting.* This context has grown dramatically over at least the last century, whether measured by the sheer number of federal bureaucrats, advisors, and civil service employees working in the executive branch or by the size and number of its administrative agencies and departments. The structures within the federal bureaucracy crucially define the information presidents have about domestic and foreign policy and thus partially determine their ability to devise new policy solutions. These structures also present extraordinary management challenges with which each president must grapple, as explored in greater detail in chapter 10.
- *The personal approach gives insufficient attention to the judicial and legislative checks that all presidents face when they assume office.* When trying to advance a policy agenda, presidents regularly bargain with members of Congress, and when trying to protect past policy achievements, presidents must find ways to block congressional opponents. Similarly, the fate of a president's policy agenda lies in part within the judiciary, which has ample opportunities to either strike down or legitimate presidential actions and policies. The limits of presidential action are not defined by failures of imagination. Rather, they derive from other political actors deploying their own political authority in the service of altogether different political objectives.
- *The personal approach downplays the extraordinary ways in which public opinion both constrains and informs what any president is able to accomplish while in office.* If we want to understand the positions a president takes on race relations, bank bailouts, or the conflict in Ukraine, it will not do merely to look into the president's eyes and divine his or her deepest beliefs. Nor will it do to attribute the broader class of

presidential actions—the ways in which they communicate with the public, the content of public speeches they make, and the like—to each president’s idea about what it means to be president. Public opinion crucially defines the specific policy proposals that come out of the White House and the routines and rituals that fill the president’s daily schedule.

- *The personal approach fails to grasp the ways in which presidential behavior arises from the institutional structures that presidents confront.* The choices offered to presidents depend on, and are constrained by, other political actors. The terms by which presidents evaluate these choices, in turn, are defined as much by institutional pressures as by what they might independently think. And their ultimate choices reflect, in addition to their personal policy preferences, strategic calculations about what is possible. The incentives, resources, and powers that do so much to shape presidential behavior are not born of the individuals who inhabit the White House. Rather, they are built into the institutions that constitute and surround their temporary place of residence. If we want to understand executive politics—indeed, if we want to understand politics at all—we would do well to put these institutions at the forefront of our attention.

## 0.2 The Institutional Presidency

Today, the most prominent scholarship on the American presidency embraces this institutional approach. Some of this scholarship is historical in nature. Some employs game theory to examine the strategic behaviors of presidents. Still other scholarship relies upon large data sets to uncover basic patterns in the presidency. Despite differences in methodology, however, nearly all of this scholarship puts the institutions that compose and surround the presidency at the center of its analysis.

In keeping with this approach, *The American Presidency* puts you, the reader, in the position not of the psychologist, journalist, or biographer but of the institutionalist. An **institutionalist** takes as a starting point the facts that the presidency is embedded within institutions and that presidential power is mediated by those institutions. As we shall soon see, however, the institutionalist does not merely recognize the existence of institutions. The institutionalist also thinks in distinctly institutional terms.

### 0.2.1 What Is an Institution?

What exactly is an institution? Most of us would agree that libraries (as well as churches, universities, and banks) are “institutions,” and, for most of us, the buildings in which they are housed speak to their institutional nature. Take away the walls, roof, front desk, and even the books, however, and the notion of a library as an institution still has meaning. Its institutional quality is a step removed from its physical embodiment—at once more durable and abstract than what we can see and touch. Properly considered, an **institution** consists of a well-ordered set of practices, rules, and relationships that play

a well-defined role in governing the actions and choices of individuals working within them.\*

How exactly institutions “govern” individuals’ actions and choices can vary from case to case. Rules and even laws may stipulate the range of acceptable choices put before some individuals in an institutional environment. But so, too, might norms, values, and historical precedent.

Just how “well ordered” must a collection of practices and relationships be to qualify as an institution? The dividing line between the *institutional* and *non-institutional* is not always neat. For example, emerging democracies are regularly governed by “weak institutions,” that is, political bodies that may exert a tremendous amount of power but do not either constitute a “well-ordered set of practices” or perform a “well-defined role.”

Just how strongly do institutions govern individual behaviors? Here, too, it depends. Institutional actors are not defined exclusively by the institutions in which they operate, and institutions themselves evolve over time, the subjects of both purposeful reform and sheer happenstance.

The durability, shape, and strength of institutions assuredly vary over time and place. Institutions are at once malleable and persistent, and the dividing line that separates an institution from its environment often more closely resembles a poorly attended hedge than a fortified brick wall.

But for all their variability, institutions powerfully and persistently shape the behaviors of those who work within them, including presidents and their staff. Indeed, as we shall see, institutions make presidents as much as presidents make institutions.

### 0.2.2 *What Is the Institutional Presidency?*

If the presidency is understood as an institution, we, as analysts, must steadfastly reject Woodrow Wilson’s famous declaration that “the president is at liberty, both in law and in conscience, to be as big a man as he can. His capacity will set the limit.”<sup>21</sup> How big a president can be depends on all sorts of factors, but the ones that matter most have little to do with the person in office. The possibilities afforded to each president are baked into the office of the presidency and the larger political context in which it is situated, not into the officeholder alone.

When thinking about the **institutional presidency**, we must offer an account not only of the initial creation of the presidency but also of its subsequent evolution. Panning outward, we must recognize other key institutions—Congress, the judiciary, and the federal bureaucracy—with which the institutional presidency must work. Further, we must rec-

\* This definition closely adheres to that of Avner Grief and David Latin, who note that “we define institutions as a system of human-made, nonphysical elements—norms, beliefs, organizations, and rules—exogenous to each individual whose behavior it influences that generates behavioral regularities.” Avner Grief and David Latin, “A Theory of Endogenous Institutional Change,” *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 4 (2004): 633–52, 635.

ognize other institutions, such as the media, state election boards, lobbying organizations, and interest groups, all of which influence elections, public opinion, and political culture. All these institutions shape the resources, incentives, and opportunities that define the institutional presidency. We will not always manage to distinguish the exact boundaries that separate the presidency from all the other institutions with which it interacts, nor will we always be able to parse the distinct influence that presidents wield in this expansive institutional environment. An institutional approach to studying the presidency, however, provides a focal point for a deeper institutional examination of American politics as a whole.

### *0.2.3 What Is an Institutional Approach to Studying the Presidency?*

What does an institutionalist do? What does it mean to take an institutional approach to studying the presidency? The work of institutional analysis proceeds at three levels.

#### THE FIRST LEVEL OF INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

This level is purely descriptive: the institutionalist inventories the agencies, departments, and commissions that surround and, in various ways, serve the president. A good portion of this task, therefore, simply involves cataloguing the various components of the executive branch. But there is more. Acknowledging that institutions are not static entities, the institutionalist recognizes the ways in which administrative structures arise, adapt, and sometimes cease to exist. The executive branch has undergone incredible transformations over the past two centuries. The institutionalist must offer some kind of explanation for these changes, tracing the presidency from its constitutional origins through the Progressive Era, FDR's New Deal, Truman's Fair Deal, and on to contemporary calls for its reform.

#### THE SECOND LEVEL OF INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

Institutionalists are not content to merely describe the institutions, past and present, that make up the executive branch. They also are committed to identifying how these institutions shape presidential behavior. To do so, the institutionalist pays less attention to the idiosyncratic characteristics and personal histories of individual presidents and more to the office's underlying incentives and overriding institutional contexts, as well as to the resources the office makes available to all presidents. The institutionalist follows political scientist Terry Moe's counsel to "stop thinking of the presidents as people, and to start thinking about them generically: as faceless, nameless, institutional actors whose behavior is an institutional product."<sup>22</sup>

The effect of this approach, in the main, is to downplay the unique qualities of individual presidents and to emphasize instead continuities across presidential administrations. Where variation in presidential behavior is observed, the institutionalist looks for changes in the institutional environment in which presidents work.

This is not to say that all presidents are alike or that the consequences of presidential elections are trivial. Democratic and Republican presidents can be expected to have radically different policy agendas; and for that reason alone, elections matter greatly. The psychological origins of their choice of agendas, however, lie beyond the institutionalist's purview. The institutionalist does not try to decipher why some presidents would prefer to see deeper federal investment in oil exploration versus alternative energy technologies. Rather, the institutionalist either takes these policy preferences as given and tries to make sense of presidents' efforts to act upon them or clarifies how these policy choices reflect strategic considerations about how best to navigate a system of government in which power is perennially divided and contested.

Nor is this to argue that all aspects of presidential behavior have institutional origins. A president's manner of speaking or reading habits, for example, may have little to do with political institutions (though, in fact, they just might). For the most part, however, such aspects of presidential behavior neither bear upon the doings of government nor invite coherent and verifiable explanation.

For the institutionalist, then, the focus of study is presidential decisions rather than the president. The institutionalist does not investigate what lies hidden within the deepest recesses of a president's head or heart. The institutionalist studies actions, broadly defined, that bear upon a president's performance in office. Institutionalists train their attention on the observable features of a president's tenure in office and ignore the childhood insecurities, foibles, varieties of faith, and personal ambitions that make up the chief executive's internal life.

#### THE THIRD LEVEL OF INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

Institutional thinking also occurs at a third and deeper level—and it is here that things get really interesting. The institutionalist takes seriously the notion that institutions do not merely constrain behavior but also inform it. Consequently, the institutionalist scrutinizes political factors that encourage judges to avoid antagonizing the president, the ways in which congresspersons' concerns about reelection allow the president to exert more power over foreign policy than over domestic policy, and the conditions under which presidents pursue a legislative versus a unilateral policy strategy. In each of these scenarios, the institutionalist recognizes the ways in which a president's observed behaviors reflect not only the president's preferences but also the preferences, powers, and anticipated actions of other political actors with influence and autonomy of their own.

### o.3 Outline of the Book

For the most part, the topical coverage of *The American Presidency* is like any other textbook on the presidency. It examines all of the main subjects that routinely show up in undergraduate courses on the American presidency: constitutional foundations, the processes of nominating and electing a president, the various inter- and intrabranch political

struggles that constitute executive politics, and presidential efforts to influence the contents of foreign and domestic policy.

What sets this title apart from others is its distinctly institutional view of the American presidency. While this perspective has some implications for *what* topics are examined, the bigger effect is on *how* they are examined. Hence, we examine the presidential veto not simply as a tool of presidential power but as an institution unto itself—one with its own rules, norms, and ability to shape policy outcomes. When discussing presidential vetoes, *The American Presidency* does not merely define vetoes, identify where they are mentioned in Article I, describe how their usage has changed over time, and then discuss a handful of high-profile examples of interbranch showdowns. It analyzes the logic of veto bargaining and blame-game politics, the ways in which veto threats can elicit concessions from Congress, and the conditions under which bare majorities within Congress will send a bill over to the White House fully expecting the president to veto (and thereby kill) it.

This title also goes to greater lengths than most to lay out a variety of theories of presidential power, each of which has well-defined institutional foundations. By drawing upon these theories and investigating the critical debates among political scientists and presidency scholars, this volume goes beyond the broad institutional concepts that it champions in order to assess specific predictions about the particular conditions under which *all* presidents will exert more or less influence.

*The American Presidency* also devotes greater attention to some of the topics that make a regular, albeit brief, appearance in standard undergraduate courses. Chapter 16, for instance, focuses exclusively on the wartime presidency. It does so for reasons that relate directly to the overarching theme of the book: major wars have had a profound influence on the design of the modern presidency by inviting presidential involvement in new policy domains, expanding the size of the administrative state, and fundamentally altering aspects of the president's relationship with Congress and the judiciary. Moreover, the relationship between war and the American presidency has been the subject of renewed scholarly interest over the past decade. It is about time, then, for this topic to receive its due in a book on the American presidency.

To be sure, there are some features of American politics generally, and executive politics in particular, about which the institutional approach has very little to say. For that reason, the lessons from psychology, leadership styles, presidential character, and the like receive significantly less coverage here than in other books on the American presidency. When these topics do appear, they are critically evaluated rather than merely described in order to illustrate the ways in which political observers too often misattribute the sources of presidential successes and failures.

Two boxed features appear in every chapter and are explicitly designed to encourage institutional thinking that is at once incisive and reflective:

- Thinking Institutionally boxes address a variety of foundational questions: Do facts about the personalities of current or future presidents shape the institutional design of the presidency? Do presidents inherit the political universe, or are they



able to remake it? 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? Each Thinking Institutionally box either illustrates or challenges key aspects of this title's institutional argument and encourages critical reflection on the larger thematic issues at play.

- Historical Transformations boxes identify historical events that have played an important role in the original design and, more frequently, subsequent evolution of the institutional presidency. Institutions are neither handed down from on high nor set in stone. They are created and adapted by men and women responding to the challenges, demands, and interests of their day. Thus, the Historical Transformations feature pays special attention to the circumstances surrounding institutional change. These case studies cover such topics as the influence of Shays' Rebellion on the thinking of the Framers of the U.S. Constitution, the immediate and lasting impacts of the riots outside the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, and the profound changes wrought by foreign wars.

It should now be clear that this is a title with a definite point of view. It is not, however, intended to be dogmatic. Quite the contrary. It is meant to foster critical engagement with arguments about executive politics, clarify what the institutional approach adequately explains, and own up to what it does not. The institutional approach to studying the presidency can only take us so far in explaining why some candidates win presidential elections, why some presidents make mistakes early in their administrations while others hit their stride right away, why some Supreme Court nominees are chosen rather than others, and why some presidents appeal to the public through some media outlets and not others. Nor does the institutional approach resolve, once and for all, deep and long-standing debates about presidential powers. Indeed, as we shall see right away in chapter 1, while the Framers of our Constitution were committed institutionalists, they disagreed vehemently about just how the presidency ought to be designed and what powers ought to be conferred upon it. In the chapters that follow, other blind spots will be noted and investigated.

## Conclusion

Whereas most discussions surrounding the president and presidential politics focus on the personalities that either occupy or seek entrance to the White House, *The American Presidency* assumes a distinctly institutional approach: it focuses on the office of the presidency rather than the identities of presidents.

An institutional approach proceeds at multiple levels. First, it shines a bright light on the institutions that constitute the executive branch, as well as the other institutions—Congress, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, the media, and interest groups—that intermittently constrain and support presidents. At a deeper level, though, it illuminates the ways in which institutions shape presidents' behavior and the very goals they pursue, for where

presidents sit in American government crucially defines what they see and how they act. In short, this title holds that the foundations of presidential power are institutional, not personal, in nature.

## Key Terms

<b>personal presidency</b>	<b>institution</b>
<b>institutionalist</b>	<b>institutional presidency</b>

## Questions for Discussion

1. What kinds of things does an institutional approach to studying the presidency ask us to ignore? At what cost do we do so?
2. Does an institutional approach to studying the presidency require us to take a deterministic view of American politics and political development? If so, why? If not, why not?
3. Are there ways in which the personal and institutional approaches to studying the presidency can be reconciled with each other?
4. Many voters profess a preference for “outsider” candidates for the presidency, ones who promise to shake things up and disrupt politics as usual. To what extent can the institutional presidency be expected to temper the influence—and ambition—of these candidates upon assuming office?

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