

1



Introduction

Think for a second: without Googling the question, how many American presidents can you name? 25? 35? All of them? Now think about how many Chief Justices of the Supreme Court you can name? 5? 10? Current Chief Justice John Roberts is number 17. If you were asked to write down all of the Speakers of the House, could you? Could you name half of them? Could you name 5? Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) is the 60th Speaker. Except for scholars who study Congress and the Supreme Court (and even some among them) most Americans know the names of far more presidents than they do Chief Justices or Speakers of the House. We Americans simply have an attachment to our presidents wholly unlike our association with any other individual in government.

We have a national holiday for presidents. Their homes and birthplaces become museums – think of Washington’s Mount Vernon or Andrew Jackson’s home, the Hermitage – and we build monuments to their honor. It is no accident that all of the monuments on the Mall in Washington named for people are named for presidents. For particularly popular presidents, the efforts to honor and remember can become quite extensive – consider the wide array of books and events honoring the recent bicentennial of Lincoln’s birth.

There is no question that Americans have a unique attachment to their presidents. But what is the source of this fascination? It is not a fascination that we share with the Founders. With no more than a handful of exceptions, the Founders plainly considered Congress the more important – and more powerful – branch of government. For example, in *Federalist Paper* #73, Alexander Hamilton, an admitted supporter of a strong executive, speaks of “The superior weight and influence of the legislative body in a free government, and the hazard to the Executive in a trial of strength with that body” (Hamilton et al. 2001). The perspective of legislative dominance is, even today,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89592-7 - The American Presidency: An Analytical Approach

Irwin L. Morris

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 ☆ The American Presidency

common among students of American institutions. As Whittington and Carpenter argue, “Many contemporary scholars ... adhere to a narrative of legislative dominance in American politics, in which Congress is the preeminent branch of government and controls policy outcomes” (2003: 495).

This fascination with presidents has led to a wide array of scholarship on presidents and the presidency. Journalists, biographers, historians, psychologists, and political scientists continue to build on a vast literature directly relating to individual presidents, the presidency, or the executive branch. The ever-growing body of work on Abraham Lincoln alone is striking. One of the most popular subjects for biographers, a recent Amazon search for books on Abraham Lincoln generated over 13,000 entries. For comparison, a search for books on Robert E. Lee – arguably the most famous nonpresident from the same time period – generated fewer than 2,000 entries. At least a dozen journals and periodicals are dedicated solely to Lincoln studies, including the *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*.¹ And Lincoln is not the only president that has generated significant interest. An Amazon search for books on Ronald Reagan generated over 2,400 entries, and a similar search for George Washington generated a list of more than 15,000 entries.

But even with all of this research, there is still a great deal we do not know about the presidency. Consider the following open questions:

1. How much does campaigning influence the outcome of presidential elections? Political scientists have become adept at predicting presidential election outcomes before the beginning of the general election campaign. How is this possible if the electoral outcomes depend upon the particulars of the most expensive campaigns in the world?
2. Is Congress more productive – that is, does it pass more important legislation (including legislation the president supports) – during periods of divided government or during periods of united government? While no one argues that legislative productivity is *enhanced* during divided government, some scholars argue (relatively convincingly) that legislative productivity is unaffected by the partisan relationship between Congress and the president.
3. Can presidents manipulate the Supreme Court through “judicious” use of the appointment power? Supreme Court justices serve life

¹ For a list of these publications, see Abraham Lincoln Online at <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/resource/publish.htm>. Last viewed on December 20, 2009.

terms, and only Washington had the opportunity to fill all of the seats on the Court.² Yet some scholars contend that Presidents George W. Bush's appointments to the Court will be his most significant political legacy. How is this possible given the separation of powers and the system of checks and balances established by the U.S. Constitution (and, ironically, historic Court rulings)?

4. Is the president in a position to control the executive branch or are the departments and agencies populated primarily by career civil servants beyond presidential influence?
5. Does the president exercise significantly more authority in the foreign policy arena than the domestic policy arena? If yes, why and how?
6. How much influence does the president have over the national economy? In desperate times, is the president actually in a position to make a difference and stem the tide of financial devastation?
7. What makes a president great?

And finally, what is the source of presidential power? Is power mainly determined by the president's own personal skills and characteristics? Is it a function of public opinion or partisan dynamics, or does power flow most directly from the institutional prerogatives provided by the Constitution? These broader theoretical questions that underlie many of those above also lack adequate answers.

Why do these important questions remain? An important reason for this is the general absence of a *scientific* orientation to the study of the presidency until very recently.³ Only a small portion of research on the presidency was written from a scientific perspective. Nonscientific presidency research often focuses on one or two presidencies, and when scholars do generalize – draw conclusions about a whole group of presidents (if not all presidents) from information about only one or two – there is little effort to evaluate or justify these claims beyond a reexamination and reiteration of the details of the one or two presidencies on which the conclusions were originally based.

As the scientific perspective toward the study of the presidency began to take shape, it also became increasingly apparent that the more traditional research on the presidency – while valuable in its own

² Two other presidents came relatively close to appointing the entire Supreme Court. Franklin Roosevelt filled eight seats on the Court during more than a dozen years as president, and Andrew Jackson filled five seats on the Court at a time when the Court had only seven justices.

³ I will define and describe a *scientific* orientation – what I will refer to as the *scientific study of the presidency* – in far more detail in the next Chapter. This book is, at least in part, an introduction to the scientific study of the presidency.

4 ☆ The American Presidency

right – suffered from serious limitations. Traditional research on the presidency focused on historical analysis, legal analysis, or biography. There are hundreds of histories of the presidency (or some set of presidents), and a few are justifiably famous.⁴ The best of these works provide interesting analyses of past presidents and presidential history; what this research does not provide are clear answers to questions related to the presidential *present*. Similarly, presidential research focusing on questions of constitutional law can help us understand the formal position of the president within the federal government, but this research does not address questions related to the practical exercise of presidential power, nor does it provide a compelling explanation for actual presidential behavior. And biographies – especially those on a single president – often tell us little about the broader institution of the presidency or, frankly, other presidents. Even Richard Neustadt, in *Presidential Power* – widely considered the most important book ever written on the American presidency – based his original conclusions about the nature of the presidency and presidential power on only three presidencies – one of which, Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency, was arguably unique. As one of political science’s most prominent methodologists concluded over two decades ago:

The traditional presidency literature has accomplished an enormous amount in the area of history and contextual description. However, progress in a social science of the American presidency is far less advanced.

... We need to insist absolutely that any prediction or explanation must come with a fair assessment of its uncertainty. My example of research based on the president as the unit of analysis demonstrates just how uncertain some of our best work is likely to be even in the foreseeable future. (King 1993: 409)

What exactly is the scientific study of the presidency? A scientific study of the presidency is a *theoretically oriented, empirically disciplined* effort to answer the broadest and most significant questions about the presidency, the executive branch, and their role in the national government. “Theoretically oriented” refers to an effort to understand the general relationship between presidential behavior and the most important influences on presidential behavior. Scholars

⁴ *The American Presidency: An Intellectual History* (McDonald 1995), the multivolume *A Ferocious Engine of Democracy* (Riccards various years), and Leonard White’s volumes (1954 and 1959) on the first century of the administrative state are just a few examples.

with a theoretical orientation seek general answers to questions such as the following: What is the relationship between public approval and presidential power? How and when do presidents negotiate with members of Congress? Can the president control the federal bureaucracy? “Empirically disciplined” refers to a comprehensive effort to test our guesses about the answers to these questions with data – and a willingness to use the information from these tests to reject those guesses that are wrong.

With ever greater frequency, students of the presidency apply the tenets of social science to their research on the presidency. What brought about this change in the study of the presidency? Partly, it was the general development of political science. The growth and diffusion of new perspectives and new intellectual tools caught the attention of presidency scholars (and, at least as significantly, their students). The presidency also caught the attention of scientifically oriented scholars, scholars whose research in other areas of American politics – voting, legislative studies, or public policy – fostered an interest in one or more literatures related to the presidency.

In the time since King (1990) criticized the state of the research on the presidency, the scope and significance of scientific research on the presidency has grown dramatically.⁵ Research published in *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, the primary subfield journal for the study of the presidency, has seen a significant increase in the number of articles incorporating complex statistical analysis, formal models of various aspects of presidential politics, or both. This increasing emphasis on statistical analysis and formal models is a manifestation of the growth of the scientific study of the presidency.

As we study these and other questions related to the presidency, I will demonstrate how a scientific approach to these specific issues opens the door to a more complete and integrated understanding of the politics of the presidency. This scientific approach presumes that our understanding of the general nature of presidential power should inform our specific understanding of the relationship between

⁵ The earliest significant quantitative literature – meaning more than just an isolated article or two – focused on presidential elections. More specifically, it focused on (1) the economic determinants of aggregate electoral outcomes or (2) individual-level vote choice and turnout studies. In the first case, much of the research was conducted by economists rather than political scientists (see Nordhaus 1975, for example). The second literature was an important component of what is known as the “Michigan school,” a name for psychologically oriented research initiated by political scientists at the University of Michigan. This research on presidential elections did not translate quickly into similarly scientific research on the institutional aspects of the presidency.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89592-7 - The American Presidency: An Analytical Approach

Irwin L. Morris

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 ☆ The American Presidency

Congress and the president, or the Supreme Court and the president, or the cabinet-level departments and the president – even presidents' own relationships with their parties. So, for example, a theory of presidential power that focuses on institutions should inform our understanding of the relationship between the institutional structure of the appointment and confirmation process and the relationship between the ideological orientations of Supreme Court justices and the presidents who appointed them. Likewise, if presidential power depends upon the level of public support of the president, then that conjecture should provide insight into the roles the president plays in domestic and foreign policy and the extent to which they are distinctive. In short, useful theories of presidential power provide a wide range of insights about various aspects of presidential politics. A scientific orientation to presidential politics requires that we identify, examine, and evaluate these theoretical connections.

This sort of comprehensive, integrated understanding of presidential politics is quite rare. Just as it is in this text, Neustadt's seminal work on the American presidency, *Presidential Power* (1960), is often the starting point for chapters on presidential power. What is uncommon is an explicit connection between other aspects of the presidency and the original coverage of Neustadt's perspective. In this text, these connections will be explicit. Our discussion of the nature of presidential power will inform our analysis of other dimensions of presidential politics and policy making, from the president's relationship with Congress to the president's role in foreign policy making.

This effort to generate theoretically meaningful and empirically justifiable connections is not costless. It can complicate matters somewhat because these connections are often undeveloped, and we rarely conceive of various aspects of the presidency as a seamless extension of a clear, well established, and fully specified theory. What we actually have is a small number of incomplete theories of the source and use of presidential power. What I intend to elucidate is the way in which our current understanding of the various dimensions and aspects of the presidency depend upon one (or more) broad conceptualization of presidential power. The four primary theories of presidential power are the *bargaining*, *public opinion/bully pulpit*, *partisan*, and *institutionalist* perspectives. Though these perspectives are not perfectly distinct, their foci and emphases are sufficiently different (and different in ways that have important implications for the role the president can play in the American political system) that it is useful and appropriate to treat them as conceptually distinct. At the least, they emphasize distinct sources of presidential power.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89592-7 - The American Presidency: An Analytical Approach

Irwin L. Morris

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The substance of our discussion of the American presidency will be focused on these theoretical perspectives toward presidential power. Evaluating the usefulness of each of these perspectives in helping us understand the various aspects and dimensions of the presidency will be our goal. We will discuss the ways in which the current understanding of the details of presidential politics depends upon these theories of presidential power, and then we will examine and evaluate the extent to which the enhancements or developments of these foundational theories – explicit or not – are consistent with our data (the empirical information we have about presidential politics).

This text describes and communicates not only the new insights produced by the scientific study of the presidency but also the character of the scientific endeavor itself. The nature of the scientific enterprise is inherently methodological, and the distinguishing characteristic of scientific research is its *method*. The definitive aspect of scientists – what makes them different – is what they do and how they do it, not what they study. Social scientists share this same methodological orientation. It is not enough to know what political scientists think about the presidency; it is also important to understand *why* political scientists think the way they do about the presidency. What evidence, for example, convinces scholars that the presidency is a more powerful office today than a century ago? And why do researchers accept the presence of a relationship between national economic conditions and the reelection prospects of an incumbent president? These are just the sorts of questions that concern political scientists who study the presidency, and so they are also the sorts of questions that will concern us.

This is not a conventional presidency textbook. The core of most presidency textbooks is *facts* and *explanations*. By facts, I mean all of the empirical details relating to the presidency, such as tables of historical election results or lists of regulatory agencies, sets of brief presidential biographies or charts of the system of checks and balances. This factual material is important, but it is not the primary focus of this text. Nor is the main focus of this text a detailed description of the various theories and concepts used to understand who becomes president, what powers the president may exercise, what presidents do, and the like. This sort of explanation is an important secondary focus, but it is not the primary focus. While more traditional textbooks tend to focus on information related to the presidency, this text focuses on the process used to generate knowledge. Ideally, this book will help you do the following:

1. Understand what you are learning in other texts (or readings).
2. Evaluate what you are learning from other texts (or readings).

8 ☆ The American Presidency

3. Conduct your own evaluations of the answers and explanations given by others.
4. Evaluate the (often unjustified) claims about the presidency and presidential power made by others.
5. Develop your own answers to the question related to the presidency that you consider most important.

Each chapter will have an explicit theoretical focal point. The study of the presidency has produced a vast and interesting literature. Each chapter topic – for example, presidential elections or the president’s role in foreign policy making – is the focus of a substantial body of scholarship. Whole books have been written and are still being written on each of these topics. To avoid becoming lost in these massive literatures, I focus on one or two particular aspects of each literature – a recent theoretical innovation, an important empirical controversy, or both – in each of these topic areas. By focusing the discussion and analysis, it will be possible to examine the topic in sufficient depth while still remaining within the space constraints of a single, conventionally sized book chapter. By focusing on a “prominent” or significant aspect of each literature, I will be able to discuss the broader literatures because of the important connections between the primary focus and other aspects of the broader literature.

For example, the focal point of the chapter on the president’s role in foreign and defense policy making is Aaron Wildavsky’s decades-old “Two Presidencies” (1966) thesis. The foundation of Wildavsky’s contention that presidents effectively exercise significantly more power in foreign policy making than domestic policy making include institutional, organizational, and situational assumptions that may or may not have been true when he was writing (in the early to mid-1960s) and may or may not be true today. Examining the extent to which the nature of the institutional, organizational, and situational context of foreign and defense policy making has changed since the 1960s provides us with an opportunity to examine the validity of the most recent claims regarding an increasingly *imperial* presidency in foreign policy making (and, some argue, in domestic policy making as well). In effect, Wildavsky’s decades-old argument provides the launching pad for a wide-ranging examination of the nature of presidential power in the realm of foreign policy making.

Each of the chapters following the introductory section has this sort of analytical “launching pad.” In the chapter on presidential

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89592-7 - The American Presidency: An Analytical Approach

Irwin L. Morris

Excerpt

[More information](#)

elections, we look at campaign effects. Do they exist? If yes, are they significant? The chapter on the relationship between Congress and the president begins with a discussion of the impact of divided government, and the chapter on the president and the executive branch examines the way in which multi-institutional models provide us with a means for evaluating if and when the presidential control, congressional dominance, and independent agency models are appropriate. In the last chapter, the chapter on presidential greatness, we have an empirical springboard – the results from a collection of various presidential “greatness” surveys over more than half a century. These chapter-specific focal points provide (1) an *entrée* to the depth and breadth of the modern literature in each of these topic areas and (2) a fulcrum for the subsequent evaluation of the theoretical and empirical foundations of that literature. At the very least, these focal points give us a place to start – ideally, an especially useful place to start in each and every case.

Each chapter following the introductory chapters is also designed to provide an understanding of the logic of the scientific study of the presidency. As we will discuss below, a scientific orientation is inherently *methodological*. Science is much more a process and logic of inquiry than it is a body of knowledge. In this case, we will not only discuss what scholars think about various aspects of presidential politics; we will also discuss why they think the way they do. We will discuss the relationship between theory and evidence, the limitations of both, and what is to be done in those all-too-common situations in which our theoretical expectations are not borne out by the data used to test them.

Finally, each chapter following the introductory chapters includes a short set of *guided research exercises*. In some chapters, the exercises focus on the analysis of a large number of cases. In other chapters, the analysis focuses on a more detailed examination of a significantly smaller number of specific cases. Both types of exercise provide you with the opportunity to “get your hands dirty” by (1) collecting data relevant to the topic of the chapter, (2) analyzing that data, and (3) drawing specific inferences from that analysis.

Each set of guided research exercises includes *bivariate* exercises and *multivariate* exercises. Bivariate exercises involve the analysis of the relationship between two variables (one independent variable and one dependent variable) at a time. Multivariate exercises involve the analysis of the relationship between a dependent variable and multiple independent variables simultaneously. In most cases, the multivariate analyses include no more than two independent variables.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89592-7 - The American Presidency: An Analytical Approach

Irwin L. Morris

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 ☆ The American Presidency

Both bivariate and multivariate sections include *descriptive* exercises and *inferential* exercises. The descriptive exercises will provide information about relationships in the sample of data that is analyzed. So, if I want to evaluate the contention that there is a positive relationship between income growth and the percentage of the vote received by the incumbent president (or the candidate from the incumbent president's party) during the 1932–2008 time period, I can examine a scatter plot, calculate a correlation coefficient, or calculate a regression coefficient. If, however, I want to make a more general claim about a relationship between income growth and the percentage of the vote received by the incumbent president (or the candidate from the incumbent president's party), then I would need to consider my data (say, from the time period 1932–2008) as a sample of the larger population of past, present, and future economic circumstances and presidential elections, and to provide a specific test of the likelihood that my result for the 1932–2008 time period occurred by chance. *Inferential statistics* provide these types of tests. The descriptive exercises may be done with little preliminary instruction (and certainly would not require a prior class in statistics), but the same cannot be said for the inferential analyses.⁶ By providing both sets of exercises, all readers have a chance to participate in scientific examinations of various aspects of the presidency at a level of statistical sophistication that is appropriate for their own prior training.⁷

The bivariate descriptive analyses will focus on the relationship between one independent and one dependent variable at a time. There will be no need to estimate any inferential statistics to complete the descriptive component of the bivariate analyses exercises. The inferential bivariate analyses will involve the calculation of one or more inferential statistic. These statistics might include a difference of means test or a bivariate regression.

The multivariate descriptive analyses will focus on the relationship between an independent variable and a dependent variable while *controlling* for an additional independent variable. So, in the case of

⁶ All of the bivariate exercises may be completed with pencil and paper, but it will be much easier (and more efficient) in most cases to use spreadsheet software (such as Excel) or statistical software (such as SPSS or STATA). The multivariate exercises require, at least practically speaking, familiarity with a statistical software package. Students who have completed a standard undergraduate research methods course in political science should have no trouble with the technical demands of any of the multivariate exercises. The technical demands of the descriptive bivariate exercises require no statistical background.

⁷ *The Fundamentals of Political Science Research* (Kellstedt and Whitten 2008) is an excellent methodological reference book for the guided research exercises.