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The Presidency and the Bureaucracy—A Prelude

“Trust, but verify.” That was the signature phrase of the Reagan administration on arms control. But it could be the watchword for any delegation of authority that involves complex activity, which in turn usually involves the bureaucracy. Leaders need to delegate, yet they also want to have their intentions carried out. Can they ensure that? How large a transaction cost for trying to ensure compliance are they willing to pay? How does a president get others to do what is in his interest?—an issue that Neustadt alerted us to in *Presidential Power* (1960). Neustadt suggested that political acumen helped—that a politically adept president might persuade others to see his choices as ones that would be in their mutual interest. In the hard scrabble environment that presidents ordinarily face, they essentially have two choices. They can work to get others to buy into what they want to do. The task is called persuasion. But persuasion in politics is not always friendly. It requires leverage and the willingness to use it. Presidents, if they are adept, use the tools they have. Neustadt noted, however, that presidents have relatively few tools with which to work. Hence, they needed, through their wits and experience, to optimize those that they had.

A very different perspective on the same problem of how a president manages to get others to do as he would wish is taken by Terry Moe (1985). Like Neustadt, Moe is also convinced that presidents face a difficult environment. To achieve anything in that environment requires a quick and decisive draw. And, according to Moe, all presidents in such an environment will seek to shoot first and ask questions later. Presidents are trying to do things in an environment where many oppose them. They are driven to do what they must, and what they must do is concentrate power—an assumption that ironically says Moe’s president has a lot more tools than does Neustadt’s. Moe’s president is more likely to

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act to affect others by preemption than by persuasion, the implication being that preemptory actions can be made to stick.

These perspectives are at the heart of a fundamental debate about presidential behavior, about short-term interests and longer term interests and which of these will be discounted more. No president consciously acts to diminish his fortunes. We can all agree on that. Presidents want to achieve more rather than less, but their calculations could reasonably differ. In recent times, at least one president (Clinton) took silly risks that weakened his prospects for accomplishment and endangered his presidency; at least one other (Nixon) went full blast in seeking to enfeebled opposition, but in the end it was he who was enfeebled and run out of office. Self-interest motivates behavior, however one’s utilities are calculated. But some people in any environment have better judgment than others, understand the system in which they work better than others, know that optimizing a short term gain may invite longer term losses. That is, we believe, where Neustadt and Moe differ. Neustadt and Moe, the latter self-consciously describes himself as such, are structuralists. Indeed, it is precisely because of the constraining nature of the political system on the exercise of presidential power that Neustadt says individuals may be crucial in making a difference. But individual presidents and their capabilities are Neustadt’s point of departure not his point of origin.

There are underlying differences in Neustadt’s and Moe’s perspectives on the presidency. For example, they differ in regard to the tools the president has to work his will, and the extent to which willfulness is a viable strategy for enabling presidents to get others, including those to whom they delegate, to respond. The fundamental assumption, which is widely shared, is that the structure of the American system makes it hostile to presidential leadership. Fair enough. We think that is the premise from which Neustadt, Moe, and countless others begin.

We believe structure is important but by no means deterministic. Who sits in the office has a lot to do with how it is conducted, the limits to which presidents will push, and the lessons they absorb. Ironically, it is Neustadt, we think, who is the more committed structuralist in the sense that he sees the system as less able to adjust to presidential aspirations than Moe does. The futility of command—the prime lesson of Neustadt’s analysis—expresses the notion that presidents who try to press beyond their legitimate means ultimately will not succeed. Moe, alternatively, thinks that presidents must push the system hard in order to succeed. They may even need to go beyond its constraints. And only by pushing the system hard do they have a chance for success. In this view, since presidents are embedded in a political structure that predisposes them to push the parameters, presidents will do that because “logically” they must. However, in the structurally embedded system, others too have interests to push. There are reciprocities. How symmetric or asymmetric they are is obviously an empirical matter.
Moe has clearly indicated that there is, at a minimum, a lot more responsiveness to presidential pressure than suggested by much of the literature (Moe 1985; Moe and Howell 1999). In our understanding, Neustadt argues that one can go only so far before heading into trouble; hence, the resort to persuasion and bargaining. But Moe implies that presidents can make the system cave by taking initiatives that put others on the defensive because the others, Congress especially, have a collective action problem. The president can act decisively. His opponents are presumably less able to do so. Moe therefore sees presidents as potentially more powerful than Neustadt does, and the system, for all of its structural embeddedness, more yielding.

From the standpoint espoused by Moe, presidents dominate the bureaucracy when policies or personnel are in contest because they must. They will find the means necessary to do that, and in the end cannot be effectively resisted. This structural logic ironically says that willfulness gets you pretty far. That is not our reading of Neustadt, however. Oddly, structure is in the end more constraining for Neustadt than for Moe. Presidents have to find the narrow seams through which they can operate and find bargaining advantages. They cannot command, but they might stir enthusiasms. They also might try to find a balance between inducing uncertainty so as to promote intelligence gathering from a variety of sources and creating conditions conducive to certainty so as to promote compliance. They need political acumen to navigate a system not disposed to jump to presidential command.

Leadership depends on a lot of things. One is who is the leader, what does the leader want, and how does he or she see the possibilities? Another is which are the interests and political constituencies that are critical to the president? These considerations do not fit neatly into a structurally deterministic theory of presidential-bureaucratic relations. But they can be quite helpful if we take the institutional structure and its implied incentives as givens rather than as determinants of presidential behavior. A purely structural theory of presidential behavior has potency as an insight. But it is insufficiently specified to be a causal explanation. It is the equivalent of a Skinnerian conditioned response, and is, in fact, theoryless since it lacks specification of the necessary and sufficient conditions for presidential behavior.

Throughout our chapter, and especially in the latter part, we will return to issues of structure and the extent to which presidents act consistently or variably. We want, however, to take a step back now in order to look at some central issues between executive political leaders and the bureaucracy, indeed even between organizational leaders and their bureaucracies in the ostensibly nonpolitical world. There are some generic issues that we are well advised to understand before coming back to the specific relationship between U.S. presidents and the bureaucracy.
In the sections that follow, we take up the generic tension between leaders and bureaucrats and their different inclinations, the fundamental problem of mediating delegation and control, the extent to which there are differences or similarities between the public and private spheres and across different national/institutional settings in regard to the basic issues of control, delegation, and relationships between leaders and bureaucrats and leaders and institutions. We then examine both the importance and limits of structure in conditioning presidential-bureaucratic relations, problems of connecting the presidency to the executive branch, including its responsiveness to the presidency and presidential behavior toward the bureaucracy. We conclude with a reprise and appraisal of the two models of the presidency with which we began.

**Tensions between Leaders and Bureaucrats**

Change and continuity. This is a central tension between leaders and bureaucrats in any organization setting. There are numerous operational variations drawn from this theme, but fundamentally bureaucracies are about institutionalizing practices while leaders are mainly about deinstitutionalizing them or at least re-institutionalizing them in different ways. Few leaders get to their posts—or at least think they can get to their posts—by saying, “Let’s do more of the same.” This fundamental tension between change and continuity is common everywhere, and so are many of its manifestations. At the same time, many of the manifestations are influenced, at least in their magnitude, by organizational and institutional context and by the nature of institutional decision-making characteristics. These may be thought of as structural determinants in which incentives for behavior are nested. The central tension between change and continuity and its various manifestations is also influenced by the nature of leadership goals and demands, the details (or lack thereof) in the blueprint, and also by leaders’ temperaments. These variables are exogenous to structure and more difficult to pin down, but nonetheless likely to be important.

Variability is not just on the leadership side. Adaptation to change may also vary in accordance with characteristics of the bureaucracy itself. Like most people, bureaucrats are more comfortable doing the status quo because that is what they know and are doing (Rose 1974). But some bureaucracies are up to challenges more than others, depending upon the inducements and resources provided them. Some bureaucracies also can bring greater skills to bear than others. For example, the U.S. federal bureaucracy probably has a lot more human capital resources than its equivalent in, let’s say, Myanmar. Some bureaucracies (Nordic Europe, for example) have honed norms of trusteeship and probity; others, which also have attained high levels of competence and significant prestige in their systems (France and Japan), also have developed, for better or ill, norms
of their indispensability (Suleiman 1974, 1978). Some agencies also acquire sufficient legitimacy and political support so that they are able to provide leadership and resist political intrusions (Carpenter 2001). And, unfortunately, some bureaucracies, indeed a large number of them, have developed norms of corruption and patronage. These perverse norms are usually bred from scarce resources under circumstances in which the state controls those that are available. Political leaders can use the bureaucracy to build loyalty, buy off potential opposition, and auction off state resources for private gain. And they may do so in collusion with corrupted bureaucrats.

While the topic of this essay is the relationship between the president of the United States and the federal bureaucracy, that relationship has a number of elements in common with executive leaders and their bureaucracies in any government or, indeed, in any large and complex organization. There are, however, also a number of elements that are critically distinctive and which potentially can make the relationship between presidents and the bureaucracy especially combative and conflictual. Bureaucracies, of course, do not confront their leadership head-on. But they can find allies outside of the presidential command system to counter presidential plans (something they usually cannot do directly), and they can delay implementing undesirable, unfathomable, or nonpersistent presidential orders, hoping that presidents will eventually lose interest in them or that events will overtake them.

Many aspects of the relationship between leaders and their bureaucracies are common across systems of organization and government. They may be exacerbated to some degree by the unique structures of the U.S. government. But the first objective is to discern what the general tensions and problems are in the relationship between leaders and bureaucracy across organizational settings so as to highlight those that are especially distinctive and characteristic about the executive leadership-bureaucratic relationship in the American system.

**Leadership and Bureaucracy: The Delegation Problem**

In any organizational setting, there is bound to be conflict between its leadership elements and the bureaucracy. Leaders, as noted, often want to do new things and sometimes carry ideas that are averse to existing organizational routines, values, and interests. The bureaucracy, on the other hand, likes continuity and certainty. It must bear the costs of adjustment to change. Moreover, it is apt to be skeptical of novelty because so many novel ideas are either unsound or their costs, along a number of dimensions, insufficiently calculated.

New policy directions may lack political sensitivity to existing constituencies and clienteles organized around present programs. Such programs and their constituencies are often in a stable relationship with the bureaucracy that deals with
them. Frequently, that stable relationship becomes a supportive one. New policies, of course, are often designed not to be sensitive to such existing constituencies but rather to uproot them. From this standpoint, the bureaucrats as well as the political leaders are political. Each has a coalition of support for what they do or want to do.

Leaders, however, are more inclined, at least initially, to want to take giant steps that disturb the prevailing equilibrium. The bureaucracy, on the whole, is more inclined to take measured steps that preserve equilibrium (Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman 1981). When the bureaucracy is a, and especially when it is the key actor in any policy, it is probably safe to say that we have encountered a policy that is essentially in equilibrium. Put differently, in that situation, the policy, for a variety of reasons having to do with information availability perhaps as much as preference, is not highly visible beyond a few key actors and, therefore, not essentially in contest or controversy.

The central tendency is for leaders at the top of organizations to be change-oriented and the bureaucracy, institutionally, to be conservation-oriented, but a good bit of variation may exist. Some organizational leaders and politicians are as cautious as or even more so than the bureaucrats. Cautious attitudes may be induced in leaders by their having spent significant time in large organizations where big strides are infrequent. Collegial forms of decision making also may induce caution. But politicians rarely get elected by saying that they will be only modestly different from their predecessors. And changes in leadership direction may also be increasingly common in the business world as well where once very successful mega-firms have had to adapt their ways, their products, and their markets more rapidly than before. Leaders, political ones especially, are always on the hunt for product differentiation. Their incentives are to look distinctive and to offer something big. Bureaucrats have incentives, however, to be risk averse and not to get too enthusiastic on behalf of any given set of ideas (which they may have to reverse under a different leadership).

Nevertheless, bureaucrats sometimes can be risk takers (Ricucci 1995; Bellavita 1991) and policy entrepreneurs (Heclo 1974a). Furthermore, some bureaucrats can always be found to be backers of a prevailing regime and to support enthusiastically the policy initiatives and causes of that leadership. These bureaucrats may agree with the leadership position and see in it an opportunity to undertake reforms that they favor. They may also see an opportunity to advance when the time comes by having their enthusiasms taken notice of, etc. When such regime supporters are elevated to key positions by displacing those who are less enthusiastic, those who are displaced and their advocates inevitably will cry that politics is at work. But the organizational leader (read also president or prime minister) is likely to conclude that displacing more reticent individuals with more enthusiastic ones is a reasonable way to spur the organizational ma-
chinery to work for the goals of the leadership. This is as true for the Acme Plastics Corporation as it is for the U.S. federal government. All complex organizations share these tendencies.

Another thing in common across complex organizations is that leaders often have incompletely articulated preferences. They have to deal with many matters, some of which they have scarcely thought about. Many matters get brought to their attention only when some interest (generally one favorable to their leadership coalition) gets squeezed by the adverse action of another actor or feels otherwise aggrieved. (For U.S. presidents, the actors doing the squeezing are frequently federal agencies and the aggrieved are frequently interests deemed essential to the president’s leadership coalition.) Leaders learn some of what they want and do not want while they are on the job. Clarification of choices may come only from involvement; hence goals are adaptive rather than fixed (Braybrooke and Lindblom 1963; Cohen and Axelrod 1984). Leaders especially find themselves responding to processes and outcomes that present them with choices they know they do not want. Individual leaders obviously vary in their preferences, the extent to which they spell out their preferences and the constancy or inconstancy of their commitment to them. How much difference leadership variability makes and, above all, how crucial a difference it makes are matters better determined empirically than a priori.

Some generalizations, nevertheless, seem plausible regarding the incomplete expression of preferences. First when leaders are very clear about what they want, it is easier to follow their guidance. But, second, when they are very clear about what they want, they are also likely to stir up opposition. Third, leaders whose firmness and consistency are rarely in doubt may be maladaptive, and unable to learn from their experiences. Their priors, so to speak, get in the way of adjustment and are likely to lead them to what they feel is obviously the correct way of doing things. Fourth, however, no matter how clear or consistent some leaders may be, there are always matters of which they know little, or care little, or on which they fail to see connections between their goals. When the latter conditions exist, ambiguities in the delegation process flourish and, commensurately, so do opportunities for “creative” interpretation of leadership intent.

When Margaret Thatcher proclaimed herself to be a “conviction politician,” she implied that the species was scarce. Most leaders most of the time balance their interest in or indifference to a given outcome with the costs and benefits attached to committing themselves and in taking risks on behalf of what they have committed themselves to do. Reaction is a more characteristic mode of behavior than is proaction. Most of the time, if the implication we draw from Thatcher’s self-characterization is right, leaders have large zones of indifference and have many of their official policy preferences exogenously determined, for example by their parties and allied interests and by the electoral calendar. If they sometimes
lack the courage of their convictions, it may be because they are not always sure just what their convictions are or should be.

When ambiguity abounds, signals from above are likely to be faint or conflicting. There is obviously, then, a lot of room for interpretation from below. And when intentions lack operational expression, as they often do, they are apt to be more opaque than transparent. “What does the boss want?” may evoke discontent but it also first requires discovery. Individuals vary in leadership positions along a number of dimensions, but among the most crucial differences are those having to do with goal-drivenness and certainty. What Ronald Reagan wanted was a lot clearer than what either his predecessor (Carter) or successor (George H. W. Bush) wanted. Yet, leaders such as Carter and Bush the elder (themselves rather different from one another) are a lot more common than those such as Reagan.

Leaders’ ideological commitments are sometimes tamed by operational complexities and feasibilities, although the latter are often viewed by leaders as simply the means by which bureaucrats create resistance and seek to deflect leaders’ goals. In any organization, bureaucrats have vested interests to protect, are more likely to see things through their own experiences than their bosses’, and are likely to treat skeptically those ideas and missions with which they are uncomfortable. In other words, in any setting, there is reason for leaders to be suspicious of their subordinates, especially those endowed with permanent status. And there is equal reason for the bureaucrats in any setting to be skeptical of the initiatives of new leaders.

When leaders’ signals are strong and persistent, they have greater potential to be followed. Who wants what is less in doubt. And when hierarchy exists, the opportunity for others to send conflicting signals is lessened. Since strong and persistent signals are also more likely to redirect course than incrementally adjust it, they are, therefore, more likely to set off resistance and stimulate coalitions to offset that course even in hierarchical settings. Strong signals and manifestations of will also may rub up against the limits of the possible—or the lawful. What is possible or lawful, however, often becomes a matter of contention or perception. Those who want compliance perceive generous boundaries for the possible or lawful. Those asked to comply or implement, understandably, are likely to apply more restrictive bounds on these issues.

Ambiguity, by definition, means something is obscure and difficult to follow. Leaders often like to exercise discretion by keeping resources and options close to their belts. They are wary about having others take away their options, yet ambiguity virtually invites others to fill in the blanks. Ambiguity, one might conjecture, provides more opportunities for agents to make judgments and induces more ex post sanction (McCubbins 1985). Alternatively, clarity from above provides fewer opportunities for resistance and leads to stronger ex ante controls. What is
easy to follow, however, may be off-putting for those charged with implementation. Clarity has greater potential (by no means always realized) to be fulfilled in strictly hierarchical situations. Committed leaders (delegators) like to sharpen hierarchies; agents (delegatees) like to flatten them. Committed leaders (delegators) want transparency; agents (delegatees) tend to prefer opaqueness.

To sum up, whenever there is delegated responsibility—and that is precisely what administration is about—there is potential distrust between those who must delegate and those responsible for implementation. The higher up one goes, the more coordination, control, and flexibility are prized. But obviously there are limits to these managerial instruments. In fact, flexibility at the top may work against the ability to coordinate and control. Flexibility (or discretion) is a hedge against uncertainty. Everybody wants it. But the question is where resources of various sorts, including information, flow. Underlings may reduce leadership resources, for example, by revealing what the leadership’s options or policy predilections are—or by sending signals as to what is preferable before the leadership decides to act. All of these tactics are ways of increasing the underlings own policy leverage by circumscribing the feasible set of policy options.

If flexibility at the top is a hedge against uncertainty, coordination and control require certainty and clear signals. Signaling what the leadership wants is a crucial part of its management, assuming that leaders know what they want. The notion of coordination implies certainty of preference. Certainty appears to be a necessary but far from sufficient condition to generate coordination. And, indeed, certainty is not the common situation. Leaders send mixed messages for many reasons. They may not really know what they want, or they may be readily persuaded by a different array of facts or calculations, moving back and forth between options. They may want to placate some set of constituents without overtly repelling others. They especially may not want to have their discretion to make choices lessened by having made prior commitments until they absolutely must do so. Leaders know that those to whom they must delegate may well wind up constraining their choices as they seek to commit the leader to their projects and perspectives. Those to whom authority is delegated may prove, from the perspective of the leadership, to be injudicious or indiscreet in ways, minor or major, that embroil the leadership in political controversy. Leaders are apt to feel uncomfortable unless the delegatees have the political interests of their boss in mind and are exclusively loyal to the leader’s ideas.

Generally, corporate leaders try to have their people at the top as well as on tap. But they can’t always have that since a new CEO inherits other executives (who also may have supporters in high places) and, in any event, other executives, no matter how they have been brought in, have their own ambitions. Boards also want to leverage their authority by splitting up responsibilities in the top executive positions. Presidents in the United States also want to build in
loyalty. They can do so through strong ideas (Reagan). They can also do so through loyalty to the person (Nixon and Bush the elder). And they can try to achieve this by altering the mechanisms of control so that the White House vets agency activity at the microlevel or seeks to parallel department structures within the White House (Nixon). This all begs another question, which is why top executive political leaders in parliamentary systems tend to rely on people (civil servants) over whom they have limited control and who they did not appoint? Although some structural answers have been offered to this question (Moe and Caldwell 1994), we are less certain that they are the whole story or even the most decisive parts of the story, as we will note in the next section.

Public-Private and System Differences

Obvious tensions inhere in the relationship between principals and agents in complex organizational (and political) systems. The tensions between them may be exacerbated or moderated by the nature of the organizational and institutional environment. On the whole, the public realm is more complicated than the private realm because of its greater complexity regarding lines of authority, accountability, and expectations about responsiveness, ethics, and constitutionality. In many respects public and private organizations are alike. That is what organizational theory should tell us. But in other respects, the public sphere is different and more complex in all of the aspects just noted (Allison 1999).

Equally, and in spite of an adeptly conceived argument by Moe and Caldwell (1994), leadership and delegation have commonalities across governmental systems as well as differences. The nominal distinction between parliamentary systems as a category and the American system of separated powers is less clear in reality than in concept (Weaver and Rockman 1993). Very few parliamentary systems experience the sweeping executive authority enjoyed by the Westminster majority party governments. Most systems involve complex coalitions from which there are many possible outcomes ranging from particular parts of the governing coalition colonizing particular elements of the bureaucracy (Sbragia 1979), to some form of proportional representativeness within the bureaucracy (Moulin 1975; Lijphart 1984), to a tendency for the bureaucracy to dominate weak and fragmented governments (the French Fourth Republic). A parliamentary system by itself does not necessarily make for clear lines of authority. Nor does it eliminate veto points, even though these may operate less through formal rules than in the United States and more from the need to keep political coalitions intact. Majority party government is a rarity and is becoming even more rare.

Few parliamentary systems fit a neat, electorally arranged, seemingly unified principal-agent model for political-bureaucratic relations. Still, there is no doubt that American governing institutions are purposefully pluralistic and often con-
conflicting. A big part of the delegation problem in the United States has to do with the fact that the supposed CEO (the president) and the activist board of directors (the Congress) often represent competing interests, are frequently divided by party and policy preference, and often demand responses from the bureaucracy favorable to their own interests. Each actor seeks in some measure to control the resources of the bureaucracy—personnel, laws and programs, and budgets. Yet, unlike a nongovernmental organization, the board of directors cannot fire the CEO, and the CEO cannot stop the board from attempting to micromanage operations. The CEO, however, may intervene during midterm election campaigns to alter the composition of the board more favorably to his interests, though the results of these interventions are usually modest.

Politicians in many parliamentary systems have had close connections to the bureaucracy in their rise to leadership positions. Especially in systems such as France and Germany, a significant minority of politicians had been bureaucrats themselves. Certainly, however, ministers deal much more directly with bureaucrats than they do in the United States where the civil service system came late and patronage developed early. As a result, executive politicians (those appointed to departmental ministerial posts) and bureaucrats in parliamentary systems tend to feel more comfortable with one another than in the United States where they rarely know one another.

Parliamentary systems ordinarily also have some means of coordinating policy at the highest level (the cabinet) which typically involves a process of negotiation. (This, however, frequently means that the outcome is determined by the least common denominator.) The U.S. separation of powers system lacks this central point of coordination, although the Office of Management and Budget performs some of these functions within the executive, and often steps on congressional toes in enforcing its edicts. To a lesser degree, Congress also sets some parameters for itself through the budget process whose main features have been in place since 1974. Parliamentary systems do not generally have significant intrusions from an independent legislature. They are, in fact, best thought of as cabinet systems, and they come in a wide variety of models. They are, however, executive-dominant systems.

The domination of executive power in the parliamentary democracies tends to give the bureaucracy a fair amount of deference in policy making. The European Union may be especially reflective of this level of deference. When it comes to the EU, but often even in their own national systems, Europeans sometimes speak of a “democratic deficit,” implying that technocrats wield a good bit of nonaccountable power. Whether this is good or bad is another matter. But, on the whole, the executive political authorities and the bureaucracy seem to work together more uneventfully than in the United States. Authority is more deeply institutionalized. A prime minister’s spouse, whatever his or her credentials or
intellect, would be most unlikely to head a major policy reform commission as Hillary Rodham Clinton did in the United States when she was the presidential spouse. For the most part, the bureaucracy and its officialdom has wielded greater power and authority in northern European parliamentary systems, and the bureaucracy in northern Europe (also Japan) traditionally has been accorded much greater prestige than has the U.S. federal bureaucracy.\(^2\) Democracy, however, may be at odds ultimately with powerful and elitist bureaucracies. Demands arise for greater democratization, accountability, and reform of the bureaucracy, especially when times are not so good, as is presently the case in Japan. Institutions that are presumed to wield power, especially what is widely seen as arbitrary power, often bear the brunt of reformist impulses.

What explains the curious outcome by which democratic leaders in parliamentary systems allow power to be wielded by bureaucrats over whom they have limited control? Is it purely or even mostly structure-induced? Is it the experience of political leaders in working with the bureaucracy? Does it have to do with the fact that the professional (bureaucratized) state almost everywhere but the United States preceded the onset of democracy and democratic political institutions and is therefore path dependent? Is it the greater prestige of the bureaucracy (the older state-building profession) than of politicians (the more recent, though some might facetiously say, the \textit{oldest} profession)? Prestige engenders the view that the brightest minds go into the civil service. Does the exalted role of the bureaucracy in Europe derive from more settled views regarding the role of the state itself? Whatever the case, norms, and traditions to limit direct political interference over the bureaucracy are a lot stronger in northern Europe than in the United States. But they are also a lot stronger in northern Europe than in the nations of southern Europe that also have parliamentary systems or in Israel.

Annoying as it may be to discover this, there is likely no single answer. And if power, in principle at least, is more clearly defined in a parliamentary system (which we know is not necessarily the case), the political executive would presumably be more rather than less capable of politicizing the bureaucracy. The extent to which this actually occurs is at the very least debatable, and it obviously occurs more in some countries than others (for example, more likely in, say, Greece than in Sweden). It is possible that history and culture are at work here. It is reasonably clear, however, that northern European parliamentary democracies are less overtly politicized than in the United States. Neutral competence does seem to be a more important consideration to European politicians. Or at least they fear violating the norms of civil service professionalism and the civil servants’ discretion to implement policy. Historical experiences and, especially, a more settled role for the state (a higher degree of policy consensus) are probably at least as important as governmental structures.
The Importance and Limits of Structure

Complexity of structure inevitably makes for differences of perspective. But differences can be overcome in the presence of a greater commitment to shared values (Olsen 1983). Conflicts in policy preference and in the representation of diverse interests are inevitable and healthy. Deep disagreements about the basic vision of society, however, reinforced by sharpened cleavages between interests and parties, make it difficult to detach administration from partisan politics. Administration, under these conditions, becomes a tool for the political domination of one side.

The advent of the New Deal and its political alignments sharpened the edges of the role of the federal government in American life and placed them in the context of class cleavages—issues that have not fundamentally receded since that time even as others have been added. The Roosevelt administration, according to Sidney Milkis (1987), worked to establish a Hamiltonian presidency turned on its head—centralizing presidential control of the executive branch not to resist populism and egalitarian ideas but to organize an agenda around social reform. By centralizing resources in the presidency and by making the bureaucracy more exclusively responsible to it, the Roosevelt administration found ways to circumvent Congress when the latter became increasingly recalcitrant. It is not surprising that later Republican administrations in opposition to the New Deal (Nixon and, especially, Reagan) elaborated, to put it mildly, on these earlier efforts to develop an administrative presidency. When there are conflicting principals and significant policy disagreement, there is apt to be heightened conflict over control of the bureaucracy. That is especially so in a country like the United States in which the regulatory powers of the state remain a continuing and central source of political contention, and the bureaucracy itself has become synonymous with the positive state and the political alliances associated with its establishment. The American bureaucracy, in short, has come to be seen not as neutral between the parties but decidedly embedded in the New Deal coalition.

The extent to which that perception is real is a different matter (Aberbach and Rockman 1995; 2000). But the rhetoric in opposition to bureaucracy and big government is very real and is located largely on the American political right. In Europe, it is largely located on the left, especially the new left of Green parties, etc. Bureaucracies in Europe and other settings were often identified as a bulwark of conservatism and elitism in service to the crown. Market liberalism, which challenges the state and its bureaucracy, was never as strong outside of the United States, even though emphasis on expanding markets and minimizing the state has recently enjoyed greater support across the world. Market liberals (conservatives in the political parlance peculiar to the United States) have argued that bureaucracies everywhere are conservative, maladaptive, and focused on the preservation of
privilege. That perspective is greeted with skepticism by most U.S. social democrats (liberals in our unique parlance) because the U.S. bureaucracy and the major expansion of the federal state largely arose from an agenda of both political reform to create a modern state and left-leaning social reform to create a new political coalition. Nowhere else was the bureaucracy so identified with controversies over social and economic policies that remain divisive.

This very sweeping rendition of course, simplifies things a lot and sacrifices some accuracy. Robert Maranto (1993) notes, for example, that how bureaucrats saw the Reagan administration had a lot to do with where they were situated in the government. After all, some agencies did very well under the anti–New Deal Reagan presidency. Those in defense and law enforcement especially found the Reagan administration’s policies favorable to their interests. The bureaucracy is no monolith. Whose policies favor whom differentiates perspectives. Democrats do best in social welfare and regulatory agencies, Republicans in law enforcement and defense. The key for any president is to control the agencies and the people in them most likely to want to subvert their policies. That is not to say that such bureaucrats will actually act to subvert a president’s policies but they may be constantly under suspicion of plotting to do so.

These suspicions are fueled by the nature of the American political system and its loosely jointed and often conflicting structures of authority. Political actors all seek to lay claim to administrative territory especially relevant to them. But there is often competition over these claims. Sometimes the president may mediate the claims of other actors, other times he may be fending off many of the claimants while staking his own claims. What the president often wants of agencies, however, is frequently dictated by what it is that critical constituencies in the president’s political coalition want.

The pluralistic buzz of American politics creates uncertainty over the extent to which presidents can make the choices they desire. The structural characteristics of the system heighten competition and this deepens presidents’ suspicions about their ability to control what they perceive to be their turf. There is no doubt that such a system can lead presidents to try to secure as much control over the executive establishment as they can through a variety of means. The courts generally have been permissive toward the exercise of executive (presidential) authority since the end of the anti–New Deal Supreme Court when it comes to contests with Congress about exerting influence over executive agencies. This, we imagine, has a lot less to do with general principles, however, than it does with the political leanings of the courts and which party happens to hold the presidency and which the Congress. Under such circumstances, presidents are better positioned to win discrete battles because of their tactical advantages. Winning over the longer run may be a different matter. But Ken Mayer (2001, 220) argues in this regard that because “it is the president who is better posi-
tioned to expand institutional boundaries and legal authority . . . , the inevitable result appears to be a steady concentration of power within the executive branch.” Mayer writes in the context of increased presidential use of executive orders and notes the inability or, more properly, unwillingness of Congress to successfully contest all but a few of them.

On the surface, evidence suggests that presidents get their way. But, as we note later in the chapter, a lot may have to do with how broadly or narrowly the arena of presidential-congressional interaction is defined and also the relevant time line for the extent to which executive orders and other unilateral presidential initiatives really stick. The more narrow the arena of interaction and the shorter the time line for it, the more awesome the power of the presidential prerogative will seem. Protagonists across political institutions are likely to play to their comparative advantage, not their comparative disadvantage. It is possible that retribution is exacted elsewhere under conditions in which Congress enjoys an advantage.

Two considerations that go beyond structural issues have made the bureaucracy a crucial battleground for a president’s agenda. One is the explosion of governmental programs and how, and in whose interests, these programs operate. There is simply more policy turf to fight over, and the fight is carried on in administrative territory where a lot of policy gets made. Despite rhetoric, Democrats and Republicans each seek governmental activism in some areas but not in others. This leads to the second consideration, which is about how far apart the parties are in where they want the government to do more and where they wish it to do less, and how they want it to be done when they happen to agree that something should or must be done. While consensus becomes harder to build in these circumstances, its absence makes it difficult for the bureaucracy to operate coherently. Sharply different policy perspectives in the absence of conclusive political power would prove exasperating for any bureaucracy.

**The Presidency and the Bureaucracy: Conflicting Perspectives and Roles**

The governing problem, of course, looks very different from where presidents sit than from where the bureaucracy does. The literature covering each role also understandably looks quite different from the literature covering the other. There is a natural tendency for scholars covering institutional actors to adopt an empathetic understanding of their problems and, to some degree, the assets they bring to the governing process. From this angle, a good bit of the presidency literature is focused on how power should be optimized from the presidential vantage point and how the unruliness of a complex and centrifugal system might be tamed, even though scholars of the presidency may have different views about
the manner in which one might optimally and legitimately go about getting the system to respond (Neustadt 1960; Moe 1985).

While the presidency literature often focuses on optimizing the president’s chances to lead, or on overcoming the impediments to leading, its counterpart literature on the bureaucracy tends to focus on the role of the bureaucracy as the guardian of continuity, knowledge, and stability, and as the trustee of national interests. Independence, accountability, and responsiveness are the mantras of the administration literature, but the terms in which the latter two are invoked frequently imply that the first of this triad of values—-independence—is the most important one. The public administration literature is often normative. It is faced with trying to define an appropriate role for an unelected elite whose tenure in office presumably rests on its competence rather than its popularity. In this respect, the bureaucracy shares with the judiciary the need to develop an intellectual doctrine for its role that has both external credibility and legitimacy (political acceptance) and some measure of consistency (standards). Significant elements of the literature also tend to emphasize concerns about conditions likely to erode competency and neutrality in the civil service. One reason for these concerns is that the public administration community is more closely connected to its subject—its members often having served in the public sphere or instructed those who will. This normatively driven public administration literature, Jonathan Bendor (1994) notes, is distinct from the organization theory literature or the new “institutional” approaches to bureaucracy. That it is, however, is because it is dealing with applied problems of government, and undergirding those applied problems are very fundamental issues of normative political theory.

Writing in the public administration tradition, one scholar observes that “many studies of bureaucratic responsiveness have tended to adopt a narrow definition of responsiveness that overlooks the more complex aspects of the concept as it applies to bureaucracy.” She goes on to note that the complexity of bureaucratic responsiveness is “partly a function of the strong tradition of public interest responsiveness that permeates administrative theory in America” (Saltzstein 1985, 301). In other words, while politicians may find it convenient to discount the future for present gain (and we are not assuming that all politicians do that), bureaucrats’ conceptions of responsiveness must, to some extent, discount the present for both the past (continuity) and also the future (expert guidance).

To the extent that the presidency literature focuses on the bureaucracy (and this is not by any means one of the main tributaries of presidency scholarship), it tends to focus on strategies to get the bureaucracy to comply (Nathan 1983; Moe 1985; Weko 1995). How does a president get others to do as he would wish them to do? Even more important, perhaps, how does he get them not to do what he would wish them not to do? Much of the scholarship on the subject tends to view the problem in these terms, and, therefore, mainly from the presi-
dent’s perspective. The emphasis is on how to get the bureaucracy to respond to the president rather than on why the president might need to interact with the apparatus of government.

Colin Campbell (1983, 1986, 1998), however, emphasizes that how a president makes use of the bureaucracy and the executive branch is an important determinant in a president’s governing success, other things being equal. Organizing for success is key, but success is not purely a matter of getting others to do the president’s bidding; instead, organizing for success means making use of the knowledge within the bureaucracy, and finding ways to coordinate both presidential goals and knowledge. It assumes that presidential success hinges on effectively using the resources of government in staying out of trouble and on course. It also assumes that presidents pay dearly for policy mistakes that blow up when they might have been prevented, and it assumes that presidents who work at communicating and coordinating and bringing the agencies into the picture will generate support from within the executive apparatus—at least up to a point. In short, Campbell does assume that one of the president’s hats is that of manager, a view not necessarily widely shared among many presidential scholars. And he assumes that for presidents to get their policies to really work and take hold, they need to connect to, not merely seek to dominate, the bureaucracy.

The fact is that we do not really know whether a president can experience more success through attention to management, staffing, and incorporation than through pure power aggrandizement. That depends a lot on what we define as success, and how durable that is. One can conjecture that effective management brings longer term benefits to a presidency inasmuch as it may help a president to institutionalize policy and possibly to guard against some forms of adverse risk. But good or bad fortune (which is erroneously taken to be the definitive sign of good or bad management) often overwhelms “the best-laid plans...” While presidents can’t manipulate a lot of other things, management is one of the things they can do. As a general matter, however, presidents (Hoover, Carter, and possibly Eisenhower, excepted) are stunningly disinterested in management issues unless they can see a direct payoff for their political and policy prospects.

Nevertheless, that has not deterred a substantial presidency literature on staffing and advising from arising (Hult 1993; George 1972; Hess 1988; Dickinson 1997; Pfiffner 1996; Janis 1982; Arnold 1989; Hult and Walcott 1995). However, the “organizing the White House” literature does not always hook up with the agencies of the executive branch that Campbell tends to see as two separate gears that must each be engaged in order to move the machinery of government. How does one get the presidency set up to work for a given president of given predilections and policy ambitions and to connect that presidency to the larger bureaucracy in Washington? Campbell (1986) suggests that the Reagan
presidency, if not the president himself, was effective at harnessing the horses and providing both monitoring and interagency coordination. The Reagan administration may not have been a bureaucrat’s dream, but it knew what it wanted to do, developed a road map for it, and staffed and organized around it. Surely Reagan was not at the heart of its organizational skills, but he knew that his administration needed such skills and that his main role was to provide direction and inspiration to the troops.

As to organizing the presidency itself, is there a preferred model? Should the White House be sparsely staffed (Dickinson 1997) or have a large staff necessary to keep tabs on the agencies? Should the White House be hierarchically organized around a strong chief of staff or should it be based on a spokes-in-a-wheel system? Should the president engage his senior officials collectively or in one-on-ones? Should the president engage with the written or the spoken word? The answer is that there generally is not a single preferred model since arrangements need to accommodate presidents of different temperaments, styles, and goals.

In fact, a president’s party, which is, after all, another way of talking about a president’s goals, is likely to coincide fairly closely with presidential staffing and organizing modalities. Republicans generally like hierarchy, strong chiefs of staff, and clearer reporting lines; Democrats tend to put the president not at the top of the lines of communication but at their center (Rockman 1993). These notions follow respectively along conceptions of the president as a chief executive (largely the Republican view) or, alternatively, as a chief involved directly in spurring policy initiatives (largely the Democrats’ view). These views of organization are, in turn, largely derived from the parties’ distinctive views about the role of the federal government as a policy engine.

Issues of staffing and organizing the White House have consequences for how presidents relate to the executive branch more broadly. Hierarchical systems are best designed for control over the activities of others, especially agents likely to stray from the presidential mission. Hierarchical systems are also useful as command systems, but command systems can command only simple things. (The former communist states, for example, could do the police state function well but virtually no others.) Spokes systems are better for brainstorming and discussing ideas in the hope that these might be activated throughout the executive. The spokes model fits Democrats’ enthusiasm for active, program-oriented government; the hierarchical model fits Republicans’ interest in constraining government. Presidents of each party will find more than their share of frustrations with the bureaucracy, but their frustrations are the result of what each will likely interpret as different forms of unresponsiveness. Bureaucracies tend to do what they have been doing until they see clear signals that they should be doing something else. Presidents get frustrated when they expect responsiveness to changes for which they have not taken the necessary prepara-
tions. The question remains as to whether only the president can make these preparations for himself or whether others can act on his behalf.

Management or Domination—Connecting the President to the Executive Branch

Although bureaucrats like to think of themselves as being at the service of the government and of the presidency rather than in the service of any particular government or president, presidents often perceive things differently. Presidents generally want things done immediately when and once they know what it is they want to have done. Civil servants do not serve presidents as candidates on the long campaign trail; outsiders provide the candidates with policy advice. Because the bureaucracy has not been with them, it is frequently seen as being against them and hence viewed as an impediment more often than as a resource. And, of course, it can be both depending upon the level of presidential engagement, as well as the nature and reality of presidential goals.

Candidates, even after coming to office, but especially on the campaign trail (though being in office, as many have noted, is more and more a continuation of campaigning), often harangue against the bureaucracy as a symptom of governmental intrusion and lack of democratic control. Few politicians campaign on behalf of creating or retaining a bureaucracy of high quality and capability. And when they do, it is often done in a way that depicts the existing bureaucracy as maladaptive, and evokes concern within the bureaucracy that administrative reform is simply a surrogate for presidential domination (Light 1997; Lowery 2000). Consequently, at best we have a government of strangers (Heclo 1977), and its personnel are, indeed, frequently estranged from one another.

Paul Light (1995) shows that there has been a powerful tendency for presidents to build cushioning (less charitably, barriers) between themselves and the bureaucracy and between the cabinet secretaries and the senior career service. This has been going on for a very long time and across presidencies of varying political stripes. Presidents want their people in charge; the same is true for the people they put in charge. They want their subordinates to be answerable and loyal to them. The relevant question is whether the thickening actually makes it any less complicated (and perhaps more) for presidents to generate compliance from the bureaucracy. The fact of the matter is that we do not really know for sure.

The qualities that presidents can bring to the table are leadership and new ideas, enthusiasm based on the energies generated by political campaigning, and a particular ideological take on matters reflected in their party constituencies. They may also believe that they have a positional perspective at the apex of the system that is unique. This often leads them to the belief that others have only
particularistic perspectives. Presidents are also likely to feel that having been elected by a national electorate, they thereby have received a unique mandate and this fuels an insatiable demand for responsiveness to them. Moreover, as chief executives, presidents quite naturally feel the bureaucracy should belong to them.

Alternatively, the bureaucracy brings the past to the table, something that most leaders realize they need to know about if only in order to overcome it. And part of that past, as presidents fear, is that the bureaucracy is connected to all sorts of constituencies that presidents often want to overcome—in Congress, among interest groups, etc. Like everyone else, the bureaucracy has a partial view of things within each of its units, and indeed presidents often have to settle the differences between them. While everybody thinks their priorities are the most important and should be at the center of things, the president is best positioned to decide which of them will be.

Bureaucrats themselves can be policy enthusiasts or mission-driven once they are given a mission. Overall, however, the bureaucracy has a tendency to dash politically motivated policy enthusiasms with sober doses of caution, which often is seen as nay-saying by presidents wishing the executive branch to get with the(ir) program. Appointees often get into trouble politically and legally from not heeding the red flags. One of the tools that career bureaucrats are likely to use against particularly objectionable appointees is to let them get into trouble when they insist on moving ahead anyway. Finally, while presidents often believe that their position gives them a unique vantage point to define the public interest and to command responsiveness to it, the bureaucracy also adheres to its credo that the public interest is served by the idea of neutral competence. This idea implies that the bureaucracy should never be too responsive to anyone’s agenda.

Presidential experiences play a role in the relations a presidential administration has with the bureaucracy. Bush the elder came to office with the famous vita emphasizing experience in government. He knew the bureaucracy, at least parts of it, and right away he set out to communicate to civil servants that he understood their world even down to the personnel forms. He wanted quite clearly to say that he was not Ronald Reagan nor Jimmy Carter, that he was not going to abuse them verbally, nor make their lives more difficult. He also appointed veteran officials savvy in the ways of Washington to many cabinet and subcabinet posts.

Ultimately, however, while Bush knew not to alienate the bureaucracy (partly because he himself was disinclined to push for much movement off of the status quo), it is less clear that he actively sought to engage it to work with him. In fact, the Bush administration, exemplified in extreme form by its secretary of state, James Baker, was largely remote from the bureaucracy, not overtly antagonistic to it but hardly actively engaged with it. Later in the Bush administration’s tenure, it developed the Council on Competitiveness, chaired by Vice-President
Dan Quayle, to ride herd on regulations emanating from federal agencies and subject them to review by the administration.

It was the Reagan administration that came to Washington, perhaps uniquely, with an organized and well-developed plan on many fronts (aided by conservative think tanks) to milk responsiveness from the bureaucracy and to coordinate and communicate policies across agencies (Campbell 1986; Pfiffner 1996; Aberbach and Rockman 1995). The Reagan administration’s people knew their minds, organized the administration on behalf of their agenda, and shaped the bureaucracy to respond to it. Not perfectly, of course, but in comparative terms quite effectively. Knowing what you want is obviously an imperative for organizing to get what you want. The Reagan presidency wasn’t much interested in alternative answers (as the predecessor presidency of Carter was). It was organized for doing, not listening, since it already had the answers.

There is certainly a lot of talk (and writing) about how presidencies should be organized. But organized for what is the central question. Presidencies organized to achieve, and with certainty in their minds, want others merely to comply. Of course, presidencies do not have equally intense or certain preferences about everything, and where the picture is incomplete, others, such as the bureaucracy, will fill it in. Presidencies, on the other hand, that are organized to listen and consider options may have difficulty generating clarity of direction and therefore experience difficulty being followed.

One problem is that presidencies mainly organized around listening to and debating options may be insufficiently organized or lack the teamwork to stimulate and make use of alternatives arising from within the bureaucracy. But for a director type of presidency, such as Reagan’s, the risk for presidents comes from the possibility of sabotage. Sabotage may be overtly manifested through appropriately placed leaks and other such tactics; more likely, it will be manifested simply by withholding information and advice that presidents or their appointees need to know, thereby inviting political and/or legal trouble.

So the conundrum is whether there is, in fact, an optimal way for presidents to deal with and connect to the governmental apparatus. Strongly directed presidencies that send clear and persistent signals have a better chance than others of getting coordination and some measure of policy consistency. They do better on the implementing side no doubt than on the advisory one. Their vulnerability is that they may get into trouble by not listening. But presidential administrations that are organized around listening will have more difficulties implementing unless they focus their priorities clearly and act upon them with certainty.

For the most part, however, the career bureaucracy in the United States is destined to remain out of the main policy advising action, its input for the most part filtered through a chain of command that may work its way through to a departmental agenda. The senior bureaucrats are simply farther from the executive
leadership than is the case in parliamentary systems. Should they be brought closer? That is a question that many have asked (Lowery 2000; Light 1995; Aberbach and Rockman 2000). Certainly, the appointment process has become more burdensome and political while the thick belt of political appointees has widened. Yet the in and outer system of appointees, many of them policy experts or analysts, also has unique advantages. Novel ideas, which may be less likely to pop up from the bureaucracy, are more likely to come from policy advisers brought in from other pastures. On the other hand, their ideas are less likely to be vetted than if they emanated from the bureaucracy. In all likelihood, practice for ill or good probably has settled the matter. When presidents really seek advice, they go to those whom they trust and who have been advising them for some time. When they need to make a show of seeking advice, administrations of either party can reach into their parties’ archives of “respectables” to produce the requisite notables, civic leaders, and intellectuals. Occasionally someone pops up from the career service (e.g., Frank Carlucci) who has earned his or her spurs across different presidential administrations, and is now seen as a wise person who should be brought into the inner sanctum. Clearly however, the U.S. senior federal executive collectively will never be in the same proximity to the political leadership as are its counterparts in many parliamentary democracies.

Presidents: Variability and Commonality

We began by talking about different ideas of how presidents need to operate in a hyperpluralized political system, particularly with respect to effectively utilizing the bureaucracy and influencing it. One view holds that structure determines role and that determines behavior, i.e., we would all behave similarly under the same role constraints. The other view emphasizes variability in the role occupant. Yet variability as well as predictability may be introduced through the president’s party. Variability may also be the product of other forces, such as situational conditions and the time of a president’s term in office. Michael Link (2000) argues that three variables affect the nature of presidential advisory networks—the individual who is president, the time line of a presidency, and the nature of situations, such as crises. Presidents tend to start out differently, whereas crises and time tend to make them look more similar. Over time and in crises advisory networks shrink.

Beginning with a focus on party as a source of patterned variability, party is apt to be, if imperfectly, a surrogate for goals. There are always, of course, outliers or, more commonly, partial exceptions. Richard Nixon, whose previous career had been marked by intense Republican partisanship, in the early part of his presidential administration sometimes acted surprisingly like a Democrat in proposing government-based programs to deal with public policy problems (Hoff
While presidents obviously vary in regard to individual style and temperament, we have the least purchase on that from a predictive standpoint (Hargrove 1993; Moe 1993). But with party added to the equation, we are likely to gain greater ability to predict presidential behavior in relation to the executive branch. We have suggested that party shapes the range of individual variability in office. It matters, after all, in indicating what you want to do, or even if you want to do anything at all. Imagine, for example, Eisenhower’s style or Bush’s as Democrats. Alternatively, imagine FDR, Johnson, or Clinton as Republicans. These don’t compute. The evidence suggests that style and temperament and White House organization and staffing practices are neither random nor purely individualistic. Even when Republicans have an active agenda, it is generally designed to make the government less active (see Reagan, even George W. Bush). But when Democrats have an active agenda, it is typically in the direction of making government more active. This means that while all presidents have a bureaucracy problem, they have different kinds of bureaucracy problems depending on their party and the extent to which they seek to suppress or energize governmental activity. This also means that the bureaucracy experiences a different kind of leadership problem, depending upon the party and agenda of the president. Different sectors of the bureaucracy, as we previously observed, also stand to benefit or lose depending upon the president’s agenda and party, the two being intimately connected to each other. How do presidential agendas match agency missions, goals, experiences, and program clienteles? Viewing the presidential role vis-à-vis the executive branch without the benefit of differences in agendas and party is to miss a great deal of the most important interaction between the president and the bureaucracy.

But individuals still matter irrespective of party, although we are less certain as to just how. Since Carter and Reagan will probably be joined to the hip historically as the “how not to” and the “how to” contrasts of leadership, it is worthwhile examining those styles a bit further. Carter was a president who could be described as “a bureaucrat without a bureau” (Rockman 1985). He loved detail and analysis, and was addicted to information. He knew the details and he understood that is where things could go wrong (or less frequently right). That was probably part of the engineer’s training. The obsession with detail led
him to micromanagement; micromanagement, in turn, led him to focus on process issues and led him to pay insufficient attention to coalition building, especially from his party base where he needed it most. The result, whether fair or not, was that he was said to lack vision and political competence. Where is he going? What is he about? Where is his constancy? A stereotypically rational individual will have a minimum of preconceptions and be open to the arguments of others. Unfortunately, such an individual soon gets a reputation for inconsistency, inconstancy, and opaqueness when it comes to direction. And although such traits occasionally may be necessary to lead by indirection or even to rescue decisionmaking from dogmatism, they do not typically lead to perceptions of effective leadership.

By contrast, as Aaron Wildavsky (1988) noted, no one was ever in much doubt as to where Ronald Reagan stood. And that was both the secret of his leadership as well as the source of its liabilities. Reagan may have been mostly filled with preconceptions and relatively inoculated against arguments that countered them, but unlike Carter’s administration, Reagan’s was designed to do his will, not to consider a broad array of alternatives. At least on the matters central to his administration, which he clearly defined, there was no doubt where he stood, and his administration was organized to achieve its articulated goals. A big part of the Reagan strategy was to deinstitutionalize, to the extent possible, as many of the bureaucracy’s links to Democratic clienteles as his administration could. His administration was ready from day one and achieved many of its ambitious goals, though inevitably fewer than the Reagan administration’s supporters would have wished and more than its political opponents had feared. In dealing with the bureaucracy, the Reagan administration went for the jugular. It knew where the programs were that it wished to eliminate or weaken. And it found ways, bequeathed to it by Carter’s Civil Service Reform Act, to send many of its likely opponents, or at least recalcitrants, in the bureaucracy off to the bureaucratic equivalent of Siberia (Aberbach and Rockman 2000). Nixon had asked his then Treasury Secretary George Schultz to send a less than eager civil servant “to the Guam regional office” (New York Times July 20, 1974). Figuratively, Reagan accomplished it.

Reagan not only knew what he wanted, but what he wanted was relatively simple. It mostly came down to less (taxes, social spending, social and business regulation) and more (defense spending, criminal justice tools for prosecutors, and personal regulation). Keeping it simple is vital, yet advantageous to Republicans more than to Democrats, who usually have big plans for generating public goods and regulating private activity on behalf of their vision of what is in the public interest. The fundamental parameters of the leadership problem are relatively less complicated for Republican presidents than for Democrats. As a broad generalization, Republican presidents play defense, sometimes quite
aggressively; Democratic presidents play offense, and that requires more coor-
dination and political support. In sum, party may help us to understand a lot about
how presidents relate to the executive on the occasions that they do.

However, presidents of both parties make ample use of unilateral initiatives
such as executive orders. In fact, according to Mayer (1999, 462), Democrats
issue more. Despite a reasonable expectation that divided government should
lead to a greater use of executive orders in an effort to overcome the structural
impediments of an opposition Congress, there is no evidence, according to
Mayer, to sustain that view. In fact, the opposite is true. There is more unilateral
initiative taken by presidents during periods of unified rather than divided gov-
ernment. This unexpected result leads Mayer to conclude that presidential uni-
lateralism is not a tool for overcoming opposition so much as it is a mechanism
for preempting opposition under conditions of ambiguity, uncertainty, and in-
completely formed preferences in Congress. The executive order allows the
president to establish position, so to speak, rather than to directly counter a con-
gressional position. Essentially, it is part of the presidential tool kit to gain con-
trol over agency actions.

Because of the complicated collective decision-making process by which
Congress goes about producing legislation, in the short run Congress is disad-
vantaged once a president has established an executive order. When the issues
separating congressional majorities and the president are sufficiently stark or in-
tense, however, Congress is more likely to produce legislation to counter presi-
dential executive behavior. But presidents can veto such legislation, forcing
Congress into overriding a veto. This leaves the congressional majority to play
largely for symbolic position in an attempt to acquit itself favorably in the eyes
of its key political constituents. The executive order is thus a powerful tool that
presidents have in their arsenal to gain the upper hand in directing federal agen-
cies. But opponents may wreak their vengeance on those matters where they are
better positioned to alter the presidential course, such as personnel nominations,
appropriations, micromanagement through restrictive legislation, and so forth.

Since it is counterintuitive, it is interesting to note that divided government,
so prevalent over the course of the last five decades, has no greater incidence (in
fact less) in the wielding of executive orders by presidents than under unified
government. There may be a lot of “text” to be examined underneath these data
that would explain this anomaly, but Mayer’s findings do generally indicate that
presidents wield executive orders to establish initiative and position. They also
demonstrate a timing pattern for their exercise, namely early, when a new ad-
ministration needs to make a splash, and late, when it is being pressed to fulfill
elements of its agenda. The data also indicate that presidents of both parties use
the executive order, but that there is some party difference. Finally, the data say
one of two things (as yet indeterminate) about the president and Congress: (1)

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conditions of potential peak confrontation (divided government) may be ones in which presidents conclude they can least successfully govern unilaterally, or (2) institutional differences are reflected in different constituencies—the president and Congress being responsive to different ones as Madison thought—and these frequently override constituencies based upon party lines. The first point says counterintuitively that presidents are least likely (though perhaps because they are least able) to govern alone when conditions dictate that they ought to under a pure aggrandizement motive. The second point suggests the possibility that presidents frequently wield executive orders to counter congressional constituency tending. As we indicated above, though, the number of executive orders do not equate to their political importance or controversy. More examination is clearly necessary to delve into these issues with greater acuity.

As with Mayer’s evidence on executive orders, McCarty and Razaghian (2000) show the presidential appointment process having both common tendencies (nominations have been taking more time across successive presidencies) and variability—indeed, even a fair amount of idiosyncrasy. They claim that their “strategic expectations” model of the appointment process works fairly well, i.e., presidents adjust to the level of opposition they have and react, not by seeking to steamroller it (which they can’t) but by avoiding risky battles which would harm their future prospects. Still, they confess (355) that they find substantial variation across individual presidents that they cannot explain. They, like most of us, find a unified theory of the presidency inviting but not yet within reach.

Concluding Comments

Although the topic of our paper has to do with the presidency and the bureaucracy, on the whole, the bureaucracy seems more interested in presidents than presidents are in them. The modal presidential outlook toward the bureaucracy has been indifference, distance, and remoteness. Presidents get upset about leaks, which they assume come from outside their own staff. Presidents, like any of us, deal with what is in front of them and what is salient to them and in their immediate environment and cognitions. So, they don’t ordinarily think much about the bureaucracy, and therefore, may not utilize the opportunities they have to exercise their influence over it (Noll 1971). As programs have expanded, however, and as the bureaucracy became more of a player, it was inevitable that presidential attention would perk up, although typically only episodically. The major exceptions to this generalization in recent years—Nixon (in his administrative presidency period) and Reagan (in the latter case, we refer to his top associates)—have been the subjects of much analysis, in large part because their administrations were so unusual in their sustained attention to the bureaucracy. But in fact, presidents or candidates (Carter, Gore, Dukakis) who pay a lot of
attention to administrative details are frequently derided as wonks. Presidents are supposed to provide direction and inspiration, not details.

For the most part, presidents have tended to be reactive in their relations with the bureaucracy. And they have normally been unprepared to engage it or follow up on matters. As the bureaucracy and programs grew more expansively, however, it became ever more complicated for presidents to deal with an institution subject to multiple authorities and competing policy claims. So how do, and, inevitably, therefore, how should, presidents deal with the bureaucracy? We noted that this has a lot to do with the nature of presidential goals and it also has a lot to do with the potential forces of resistance.

We began this essay with a tale of two presidencies or, more accurately, two models of the presidency. In one model, the president needs to exercise strong leadership and must bargain hard, yet ultimately accommodate to the pluralistic nature of the system he seeks to lead. He does his best to overcome obstacles, even to manipulate his own agents to his benefit. But he knows or believes that there are costs attached to circumventing the rules even when those costs may not be immediate. In the second model, the president also seeks to exercise strong leadership and he too is a hard bargainer, but the demons of maximization force him to do whatever he can to overcome his adversaries. The first president moves the bureaucracy at times by clearly articulating direction, but more often by bargaining, wheedling, making side payments, and targeting for influence those he especially wants to affect. The second president also seeks to inspire and target, but his aim is to remove obstacles and make his subordinates do what he wants. Responsiveness is prized above all.

The two presidencies we have depicted, and which are fundamentally portrayed in the literature, have quite different implications for the way the presidency is organized and for the nature of the relationship between the president and the bureaucracy. The first president holds his own interests tightly and is the best judge of his own power prospects. He is an entrepreneur, not a CEO. He is central to the management of his presidency. The second president is surrounded by a set of like-minded advisers who are charged with pursuing the president’s interests. The first president expects to bargain with his cabinet and subcabinet appointees who represent a variety of interests vying for the president’s attention. The second expects a tightly knit team. The first president casts a wary eye at the bureaucracy but, despite sometimes difficult struggles with it, knows that it will pursue interests not always coincident with his own, especially his own political interests. The second president takes on the bureaucracy and insists that it serve his interests and does what he wants it to do. The first president lives with a system of mutual frustration, a condition deemed unacceptable by the second. The second president expects to get his way with the Congress and the bureaucracy. If he cannot get Congress to go along—and often he can’t—he
expects the bureaucracy to do his bidding and structures his administration with this in mind.

These two perspectives on the presidency frame many of the major research questions on the relationship between American presidents and the bureaucracy. How much responsibility can/should the president delegate, and to whom? What is the nature of the tension between the president and the rest of the executive branch, including both career bureaucrats and appointees, and how can and should this tension be handled? What is the impact of divided government on the relationship between the president and the bureaucracy? What conditions these relationships? How does (and should) the president organize the White House, deal with the appointment of political executives, and relate to the career bureaucracy in the departments? How coincident or independent of one another are party and philosophies of governance? How does party affect the way things are done? Obviously, we think a good bit. Has there been a trend towards the type of White House-agency relations predicted by Moe and others? What are the advantages and disadvantages of executive governance and conditions promoting executive power? Waterman (1989), for example, suggests that executive unilateralism largely turns out to be counterproductive in getting support within the agencies for presidential goals.

Finally, what are the normative issues in presidential-bureaucratic relations? Does the system of separate institutions sharing power require that the president act in accord with the strictures of the first presidency model, or do the expectations of the public and the dynamics of the executive branch force the president to act in accord with the second presidency model in order to have any hope of success? We may also need to focus more on the resources that bureaucrats possess, their strategies and tactics and comparative advantages. But again, from a normative angle, we need to ask what happens to governing when the bureaucracy is left out of the equation. Neustadt and others have strongly hinted that when presidents fail, our system also risks failure. What happens when the bureaucracy is pushed from the picture?

One thing we can be sure about. Definitive answers to questions such as those posed above are few and hard to come by. Assumptions, however, are plentiful.

Notes

1. This essay was presented in an earlier version at the 2001 American Political Science Association meeting in San Francisco. We are grateful for the comments provided there by Charles Cameron, Matthew Holden Jr., Terry M. Moe, Richard E. Neustadt, and Stephen Skowronek. We are especially grateful to Dick Sisson for his very gentle, but in the end highly persuasive, prodding to finish the chapter.
2. Actually, as judged by the citizenry in general, the U.S. bureaucracy fares a good bit better than the country’s politicians (Aberbach and Rockman 2000, 175).

3. See Richard Rose (1977) for the distinction between the idea of chief executive in the presidency and the role of chief. Neustadt’s (1960) critique of Eisenhower’s presidential style was based mainly on his view that the president must be mainly a chief rather than a chief executive.

4. We posed a question to U.S. senior civil servants about options they would undertake if they thought a policy was wrong or inadvisable. While the vast majority indicated they would give voice to their objections but abide by decisions taken above, about one-eighth of our sample during the Reagan years indicated that they would be prepared to undermine the recommended policies. A similar question was put to senior civil servants in Germany where only one percent would go as far as their American counterparts in resisting superordinate authority (Aberbach, Derlien, and Rockman 1994). We can also attest to being regaled, although by a relatively small number of officials, with stories of their efforts to undermine what they regarded as inappropriate actions of the presidential administration or its appointees.

5. The question is often the subject of congressional oversight research. For example, see Epstein and O’Halloran (1999), among others.