

**WOODROW WILSON ON PRESIDENTS,
CAMPAIGNS, CONGRESS, AND GOVERNING**
An Introductory Essay
By Donald R. Wolfensberger
**Seminar on “Presidential Campaigns
and Congressional Agendas: Linkage or Disconnect?”**
The Congress Project, Woodrow Wilson Center
Friday, September 15, 2000

What is it that a nominating convention wants in the man it is to present to the country for its suffrages? A man who will be and who will seem to the country in some sort of an embodiment of the character and purpose it wishes its government to have – a man who understands his own day and the needs of the country, and who has the personality and the initiative to enforce his views both upon the people and upon the Congress. . . . It cannot but be led by him in the campaign; if he be elected, it cannot but acquiesce in his leadership of the government itself. What the country will demand of the candidate will be, not that he be an astute politician, skilled and practiced in affairs, but that he be a man such as it can trust, in character, in intention, in knowledge of its needs, in perception of the best means by which those needs may be met, in capacity to prevail by reason of his own weight and integrity.¹

– Woodrow Wilson (1908)

The American voter, insisting upon his belief in a higher order, clings to his religion which promises another, better life; and defends passionately the illusion that the men he chooses to lead him are of finer nature than he. It has been traditional that the successful politician honor this illusion. To succeed today, he must embellish it. Particularly if he wants to be President.²

– Joe McGinnis (1969)

The lofty ideal of a presidential election campaign is that of a quadrennial conversation of democracy -- a metaphorical national town hall meeting in which the people discuss among themselves and with the candidates how and by whom they want to be governed for the next four years. The political parties lay out their programs, policies and positions in their platforms. The candidates pronounce their major themes, ideas and proposals in debates, stump speeches, position papers, media ads, and, if they win a majority of the convention delegates, in their acceptance speeches.

As all this is going on, candidates for the United States Congress are conducting their own individual campaigns for office. Under our loose party system congressional candidates have no obligation to directly align themselves with the presidential nominee of their party or, for that matter, to endorse the party's platform. Nevertheless, they are guided by the national campaign themes enunciated by the major candidates and are usually asked by voters and the media to explain where they agree or disagree with their own party's presidential nominee.

According to our ideal or textbook election campaign, when the people decide on the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November which candidates they want as their President and representatives and senators in Congress, the die is cast for what kind of government policies will be pursued over the ensuing four years. At least that's what we expect from the promises made during the course of the campaigns by the winning candidates. However, as

experience has amply demonstrated, time and time again, this is not how things play out in reality. For a variety of reasons, there is often a disconnect between campaign promises and governing policies, not the least of which is the very nature of our divided system of government. The Framers of the Constitution intentionally made it difficult to for the Federal government to govern easily and efficiently. And this was even before they imagined the additional complications that the emergence of political parties might portend for national governance, including the possibility of divided party government.

When parties did appear on the scene after George Washington's two uncontested elections as President, it soon became clear that the new parties' fundamental differences would not be subordinated for governing purposes to the country's choice for President – as much as some may have wished it. “We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists,” Thomas Jefferson hopefully proclaimed in his first inaugural.³ He characterized the election campaign just concluded as “the contest of opinion through which we have passed,” marked by an “animation of discussions and of exertions” that “might impose on strangers unused to think freely and to speak and to write what they think”⁴ All that was euphemism, of course, for a very acrimonious and dirty campaign in which both sides unloaded all manner of nasty rumors and untruths on their opponents. Negative attack ads are certainly not an invention of the modern, television age, as the history of American campaigns makes clear.⁵

But how do the election results and issues raised during a campaign translate into the governing policies of a new President and Congress? That has always been a significant question from the earliest days of the Republic to the present because so many variables have always come into play.

Obviously, for much of the first century of American history, presidents did not matter as much as they have since the turn of the twentieth century, the emergence of the United States as a world power, and with it, the growth of the modern presidency and administrative state. In his 1885 doctoral treatise, *Congressional Government*, Woodrow Wilson did not yet foresee the prospect of the strong, modern presidency. Instead, he saw a continuation of the system dominated by uncoordinated congressional committees, and a presidency that was not even an effective agent for administering government, let alone an initiator of its policies.

Since the presidencies of Washington, Adams and Jefferson, Wilson wrote, “the prestige of the presidential office has declined with the character of the Presidents.” And “the character of the presidents has declined as the perfection of selfish party tactics has advanced.” When the choice of presidential nominees shifted from individual electors to the party conventions, Wilson observed, it became more and more necessary for parties “to make expediency and availability the only rules of selection,” so that, “when the Presidential candidate came to be chosen, it was recognized as imperatively necessary that he should have as short a political record as possible, and that he should wear a clean and irreproachable insignificance.” A “decisive career that gives a man a well understood place in public estimation constitutes a positive disability,” Wilson wrote, “because candidacy must precede election,” and “the shoals of candidacy can be passed only by a light boat which carries little freight and can be turned readily about to suit the intricacies of the passage.”⁶

Wilson hastened to add that the decline in Presidential character was not the cause of the declining prestige of the office, but “only the accompanying manifestation” of it: “That high office has fallen from its first estate of dignity because its power has waned; and its power has waned because the power of Congress has become predominant.”⁷ Wilson hinted in his 1885 work (and had specified in an earlier essay), that the best way to reconstitute and coordinate government

was to make cabinet secretaries Members of Congress and chairs of the key policy setting committees. He was, to say the least, an Anglophile -- a great admirer of the British parliamentary system.

By the fifteenth edition of *Congressional Government*, published in 1900, Wilson conceded in his new preface that subsequent developments in Congress and the Executive “may put this whole volume hopelessly out of date.” Not only was the Congress acting in a more accountable manner under the centralized party control of the Speaker, but “the President of the United States is now. . . at the front of affairs as no President, except Lincoln, has been since the first quarter of the nineteenth century.” The war with Spain had “greatly increased power and opportunity for constructive statesmanship given the President.” It may be, concluded Wilson in this preface, “that the new leadership of the Executive, inasmuch as it is likely to last, will have a very far-reaching effect upon our whole method of government.”⁸

By the time Wilson wrote *Constitutional Government* in 1908, he was a complete convert to the new reality and potential of Presidential government, thanks in no small part to Theodore Roosevelt’s bold, activist approaches to foreign and domestic challenges. “The President is at liberty, both in law and conscience, to be as big a man as he can,” Wilson wrote. “His office is anything he has the sagacity and force to make it.”⁹

What Wilson saw in TR’s presidency was a robust and aggressive policy innovator willing to work with and on the Congress to achieve his goals, but also to vigorously take his case to the American people if necessary to put pressure on the Congress. Roosevelt may never have publicly used the term “bully pulpit” in referring to the presidency, but that’s exactly how he used it. Presidential scholars have credited Theodore Roosevelt with ushering in “the rhetorical presidency,” that is, of leading public opinion by using popular rhetoric as a primary tool of Presidential leadership.¹⁰

Roosevelt’s progressive view of a more expanded Federal role in solving social problems, combined with his aggressive salesmanship both to the Congress and public, truly did mark a shift in powers between the branches. As one historical account of the presidency puts it, “the executive, not the Congress, assumed the major burden of formulating public policy.”¹¹

For Wilson, the emergence of the modern presidency in the first decade of the twentieth century was a liberating revelation. No longer need the President feel constrained by the Constitution, the Congress, and his party. The same forces that set the President apart from, and weakened by, the rest of the government could also be used to enlarge the office and its powers:

It is the extraordinary isolation imposed upon the President by our system that makes the character and opportunity of his office so extraordinary. In him are centered both opinion and party. He may stand, if he will, a little outside party and insist as if it were upon the general opinion. It is with the instinctive feeling that it is upon occasion such a man that the country wants that nominating conventions will often nominate men who are not their acknowledged leaders, but only such men as the country would like to see lead both its parties.¹²

It is in this recognition that Wilson gave expression to what has come to be known in the Clinton Administration as “triangulation” -- of playing the parties off against each other to serve the President’s (and nation’s) larger interests. “He may be the leader of his party and the leader of the nation,” Wilson wrote, “or he may be one or the other. If he lead the nation, his party can hardly resist him.”¹³

The key to asserting such successful leadership, Wilson recognized, was for the President to lead public opinion. Such an effort begins with the way in which the nominee for President presents himself to the people during the campaign, “. . . because he is at once the choice of the party and of the nation. He is the party nominee, and the only party nominee for whom the whole nation votes.” Members of the House and Senate are only voted for by sections of voters or local bodies of electors, but “there is no national party choice except that of President.” Thus, the Presidential nominee “can dominate his party by being spokesman for the real sentiment and purpose of the country, by giving direction to opinion, by giving the country at once the information and statements of policy which will enable it to form its judgments alike of parties and of men.” Once that nominee wins the admiration and confidence of the country, “no combination of forces will easily overpower him. .

. . . He is the representative of no constituency but of whole people.” If he rightly interprets the national thought and insists upon it, “he is irresistible; and the country never feels the zest of action so much as when its President is of such insight and caliber.” The country’s instinct “is for unified action, and it craves a single leader. . . . A President whom it trusts can not only lead it, but form it to his own views.”¹⁴

In these lines Wilson captures not only the idealized notion of modern Presidential leadership, but the key to it as being someone who can both read and lead public opinion and create a mandate for his programs and policies. As Wilson made clear in the excerpt used at the beginning of this essay, a Presidential nominee who possesses these traits, who understands “the needs of his country and has the personality and the initiative to enforce his views both upon the people and upon the Congress,” will be seen by the country as having the “capacity to prevail by reason of his own weight and integrity.”

On the one hand, Wilson can be credited with great perspicacity and prescience in anticipating the modern Presidential campaigns that would flow from the stronger, and more independent presidency -- campaign organizations operating separately from the national party organizations; campaigns driven by public opinion; candidates promising to meet the needs of all the people; the dual importance of both issues and character; and Presidents who view the success of their presidency (and reelection) as being dependent on waging a “permanent campaign” for public approval throughout their four year term.

On the other hand, he can be faulted for being too naive and idealistic in not considering how placing so much trust and confidence in a single individual might affect public opinion when the promises and expectations of a campaign are dashed on the rocks of political reality. His own failure as President to win Senate ratification of the Treaty of Versailles over the issue of the League of Nations, despite his month long speaking tour through the West in 1919 to win the battle of public opinion, is evidence of his over-confidence in the persuasive powers of the modern President to prevail. It is also evidence of his failure to take into account how divided party government might throw a monkey wrench into his model of a Presidentially-led party government. Republicans had retaken control of both houses of Congress in the 1918 elections. Moreover, new fissures were appearing in his own party over his attempts in that same election’s primaries to replace Democratic incumbents who had opposed his war policies.¹⁵ Finally, his conception of Presidential dominance of government failed to anticipate the possibility that one day it might lead to an “imperial presidency,” against which the public and Congress would revolt.

Still, one cannot overlook Wilson’s successful first term (1912-1916) during which he was able to work effectively with a Congress controlled by his own party in enacting an impressive number of progressive programs. Just as Theodore Roosevelt was the first to adopt

practice of attaching a label to his panoply of proposals, the “Square Deal,” Wilson followed suit by calling his political platform the “New Freedom.” This in turn led to FDR’s “New Deal,” JFK’s, “New Frontier,” and LBJ’s, “Great Society.”

Packaging and personalizing a President’s programs in appealing labels and rhetoric was commonplace long before Madison Avenue (and its imitators) began to take over the management of Presidential campaigns. This trend also highlights the extent to which Presidential candidates run on their own platforms rather than their party’s platform. When the 1996 Republican Presidential candidate, Robert J. Dole, was asked about a plank in his party’s platform with which he was at odds, he responded that he hadn’t read the platform and doubted that he would have time to do so.

Wilson’s grasp of the potential of the rhetorical presidency led him to restore the practice of appearing before Congress to deliver the what is now called the State of the Union Address (until 1947 it was called the “annual message”). The practice had been abandoned by Jefferson because he thought it smacked too much of the British monarch’s address from the throne. Wilson delivered six such annual messages to joint sessions of Congress between 1913 and 1918. He liked the venue so much that he also inaugurated the practice of delivering other Presidential messages on domestic and international matters before joint sessions of Congress. He made 18 such appearances between 1913 and 1919 – the first, a tariff message, and the last, a “cost of living message.”¹⁶ At first, he shocked some of his own Democratic members who held the Jeffersonian view that it was too regal in aspect. But the personal appearances proved popular with most members and the public alike. Wilson was also the first President to hold regular press conferences, notwithstanding his disdain for the press.

Campaigns and Governing Today

Wilson was the first President to use Congress as both a backdrop and medium for shaping and influencing public opinion (if one excludes inaugural addresses). His Republican successors, Harding, Coolidge and Hoover, only rarely appeared before Congress other than to deliver their annual messages. FDR of course, mastered the “fireside chat” to address the Nation by radio. And John F. Kennedy became the epitome of the televised presidency with his popular and entertaining press conferences and nationally televised addresses from the Oval Office. Congressional Democratic leaders felt so shut out by President Nixon’s direct TV appeals to the Nation that they filed suit to gain equal time. Failing that, they threatened to legislate equal time for themselves. The televised Senate Watergate hearings and House impeachment deliberations in 1973-74 gave them more than the equal time they had sought and ended Nixon’s presidency.¹⁷

Just as television was altering the office of the presidency, it was also transforming the ways in which Presidential campaigns were waged, with great emphasis attached to televised debates and multi-million dollar media advertising campaigns by the candidates, parties, and independent groups and organizations. Joe McGinnis captured this development in his best-seller, *The Selling of a President, 1968*. Richard Nixon had been burned by his appearance in the televised debates with John F. Kennedy in 1960 (though persons listening to the debates on radio thought Nixon had won). Not wanting to be burned again by the klieg lights, Nixon allowed himself to be literally repackaged as “the New Nixon” by Madison Avenue type advertising men. “With the coming of television,” wrote McGinnis, “and the knowledge of how it could be used to seduce voters, the old political values disappeared. Something new, murky, undefined started to rise from the mists.”¹⁸ He goes on to quote media guru Marshall McLuhan:

In all countries, the party system has folded like the organization chart. Policies and issues are useless for election purposes, since they are too specialized and hot. The shaping of a candidate's integral image has taken the place of discussing conflicting points of view.¹⁹

McGinnis fills a 60-page Appendix to his book with a fascinating array of internal memos circulated among Nixon's 1967-68 campaign staff, including excerpts from McLuhan's *Understanding Media* which was the basis for several memos about what is "hot" and what is "cool." In one memo, Len Garment picks up on the McLuhan theme quoted above regarding the downplaying of policies and issues because they are too specialized and hot:

The campaign should be set at the level of statecraft, rather than politics. This means a philosophical thrust, in which issues and program discussion is extremely selective and is used to *illustrate* points of philosophy, rather than as ends in themselves. The main areas are the functions of the modern-day President; the functions of government; how to marshal and coordinate the domestic resources of the nation. . . and foreign policy in the next decade. . . . It is not RN's business to have a "political" point of view toward everything under the sun (legalized abortion, drugs, hippies, miniskirts, jazz and so on). . . . An effort to be all things to all men, or to have an "answer" to every question, tends toward a disastrous, boiled-down homogeneity – i.e., the stereotype of a politician.²⁰

Garment's memo reminds one of Woodrow Wilson's description in 1885 (quoted earlier in this essay) of many nineteenth century Presidents who were chosen by their party conventions not because of their public records and decisive careers, but because of the lack of such a record so that they would have "a clean and irreproachable insignificance."

Another instance of this attitude came to light recently when it was revealed that Richard Cheney, the current Republican vice Presidential nominee and former White House chief-of-staff under President Ford, told an interviewer in 1977 that he thought Jimmy Carter's "lack of programs, his failure to introduce programs" during the 1976 Presidential campaign helped him to win the election. Instead, Carter ran his campaign on character ("I'll never lie to you") and on promising a government as good as the American people.²¹

At the time Wilson wrote of such inoffensive candidates and issueless campaigns, it was the old-time party bosses who dictated the selection of candidates and direction of their campaigns. Today it is more the political consultants who, aided by their polls and focus groups, who shape the candidates' images and their approaches to the issues. One such consultant of some notoriety is Dick Morris who has worked both sides of the political street – for Senator Trent Lott (R-Miss.) and for President Bill Clinton. Morris stoutly defends the use of polling while recognizing the criticism of some that it is being used as a substitute for leadership and a way to buy votes by spouting back to voters only what they want to hear.

According to Morris, Clinton uses polling for a different purpose – "as a tool for governing, as a technique to facilitate progress in a democracy," and as "a way of conducting an extensive dialogue with the public." He never used polling to determine what his position on an issue should be, Morris writes, but rather to choose which of his current or contemplated positions were popular. If Clinton found that one of his positions was unpopular, "he would usually ask for a study of how he could convince people of his point of view."²²

Nevertheless, a large segment of the American people look with disgust on the use of polling to shape political messages that come across as directly pandering to public opinion. One of George W. Bush's big applause lines on the campaign trail this year has been that if elected President, he will not have a "pollster-in-chief" running his White House, nor will he use his office "as a mirror to reflect public opinion."²³ "I believe great decisions are made with care, made with conviction, not made with polls," Bush said in accepting his party's nomination.²⁴

Notwithstanding such pledges, both candidates for President in 2000 seem to be emphasizing the same issues that voters consider to be "very important" to their vote. According to a Washington Post, ABC News poll conducted September 4-6,²⁵ the top five issues and the public's opinion as to which candidate they trust to do a better job on them are as follows:

Issue	Gore	Bush	% Who Consider Issue Very Important
Improving Education & Schools	50%	38%	77%
Handling national economy	48	43	72
Protecting Social Security	48	40	71
Improving health care system	49	38	69
Encouraging high moral standards and values	44	44	69

Not only are these issues the ones driving both Presidential campaigns, but they also are the ones that are dominating the most contested races for seats in the House of Representatives. According to political reporter David Broder, "Interviews with managers and candidates in those four dozen districts [most hotly contested] last week found that the same issues that are framing the Presidential race are shaping these key House contests: taxes, education, prescription drug benefits, Social Security and Medicare."²⁶

And, perhaps more so than any other presidential campaign in recent times, both candidates are being pressed to provide more specifics on how they would handle these problems, and are doing so. Vice President Gore's acceptance speech, for instance, was likened by some commentators to a State of the Union Address because of its laundry list of programs and promises.

The question remains, however, whether these campaign promises and prescriptions will be translated into legislation that can be enacted in the next Congress. At the beginning of the current Congress for instance, both President Clinton and the Republican leaders in both Houses listed fixing Social Security and Medicare as their top priorities. Yet, nothing happened.

Whether a national election campaign and the public attention that goes with it will provide the additional momentum needed to truly put these tough issues squarely before Congress to be acted upon will be the major test of whether campaign rhetoric and governing agendas can be joined or are hopelessly disconnected.

Woodrow Wilson would at least be pleased that the two candidates and their parties are not ducking the issues with meaningless platitudes and instead seem to understand the concerns of the voters and are attempting to address them with specific solutions. Whether the candidates are leading public opinion or merely following it might not concern Wilson so much today provided that whoever prevails is able to convert that opinion into an effective and popularly successful governing strategy for the next four years.

Notes

¹ Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States*, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Arthur S. Link, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), Vol. 18 (1908-1909), 112.

² Joe McGinnis, *The Selling of a President, 1968* (New York: Trident Press, 1969), 26.

³ Thomas Jefferson, "First Inaugural Address," Washington, D.C., March 4, 1801, *Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States: From George Washington, 1789, to George Bush, 1989* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), 15.

⁴ *Ibid*, 14.

⁵ See, for instance, Joseph J. Ellis, "The First Democrats: How the Two-party System Was Born Amid Backroom Deals, Lying Politicians, and a Scandal-hungry Press," *U.S. News*, August 21, 2000 (Vol. 129, No. 7), 34+.

⁶ Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1885; 1981 edition), 47-48.

⁷ *Ibid*, 48.

⁸ *Ibid*, 22-23.

⁹ Wilson, *Constitutional Government*, op. cit., 118 and 117.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Sidney M. Milkis and Michael Nelson, *The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776-1998* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1999), 195-212.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 204.

¹² Wilson, *Constitutional Government*, op. cit., 114-115.

¹³ *Ibid*, 115.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 114.

¹⁵ Milkis and Nelson, op. cit., 236-38.

¹⁶ "Joint Sessions, Joint Meetings, and Inaugurations, 1st-105th Congresses, 1789-1997," *Congressional Directory, 1997-98* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1997), 522.

¹⁷ For a further discussion of the attempt by Congress to secure equal television time with the President, see Donald R. Wolfensberger, *Congress and the People: Deliberative Democracy on Trial* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 103-110.

¹⁸ Joe McGinnis, op. cit., 28.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 199-200.

²¹ Al Kamen, "Who's No. 2? A Dozen Got One," "In the Loop" column, *The Washington Post*, August 8, 2000, A23, quoting A. James Reichley, who worked for Cheney in the Ford White House and who has written books on the Nixon and Ford Administrations.

²² Dick Morris, *Behind the Oval Office: Getting Elected Against All Odds* (Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1999), 338.

²³ George W. Bush, "Bush for President Announcement," Cedar Rapids, Iowa, June 12, 1999, from the Bush-Cheney 2000 web site.

²⁴ George W. Bush, "Acceptance Speech," Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, August 3, 2000, from the Bush-Cheney 2000 web site.

-
- ²⁵ Dan Balz and Richard Morin, "Polls Shows Bush, Gore Dead Even, *The Washington Post*, September 8, 2000, A1, 4.
- ²⁶ David Broder, "Parties Narrowing Efforts to True Tossup Districts," *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2000, A1, 19.