

Presidency Module

1. Introduction to the Presidency

Please read Chapter 12 of our online textbook (<http://openstax.org/details/books/american-government-2e/>). We basically covered all of 12.2 in our elections unit, so you can skip it if you would like.

Make sure you are familiar with the following key terms:

The Constitution and the President

Electoral College

Impeachment

Growth of the Executive Branch

Office of Management and Budget (OMB)

Appointment Process/Recess Appointments

How the president influences policy?

Bully pulpit and going public

Direct presidential action – domestic policy

Direct presidential action – foreign policy and war

Executive actions

Signing statements

2. How much power does the president really have?

The president started out without much to do. The Congress did all the interesting work, like writing new laws. The president was supposed to make sure these laws were executed, but because of the small size of the federal government there was not a lot to do. Can you think of an important thing that George Washington did while he was president (not much is a reasonable answer to this question – “he quit” used to be a popular student response when face-to-face classes were still allowed)?

As the textbook points out, the presidency has increased in power throughout the history of the US. We now think of the presidency being the most important branch of government. Our textbook talks a lot of the president’s power to persuade. Most current scholars (myself included) view this as a somewhat dated vision of the president. The president has formal tools that allow him to accomplish a lot without the help of Congress or the courts. We call this set of powers unilateral powers. No need to persuade when you can do it yourself.

Please read the attached Wehle chapter on the powers of the president. She does a great job summarizing the formal powers of the president. After reading the chapter, please be able to explain the following:

How does the Take Care Clause help the president build power?

How do agencies and the bureaucracy help the president to be powerful?

What are executive orders?

What are the president’s commander-in-chief powers? Are there any checks on the president’s war power (hint: there aren’t many – hopefully future presidents don’t decide to destroy Quebec – we might not really be able to stop a Quebecois-hating president from blowing Quebec up)

What are the limits of a president’s power?

I would also like you take a look at this article: www.govexec.com/defense/2020/01/trump-obama-tests-limits-presidential-war-powers/162366/. It is a nice look at how Trump and Obama both have pushed the limits of their war powers.

Final thought

The president can do a lot of their own, but unless they pass a bill the next president can change everything back. Obamacare became a law after passing the House and Senate; it is still law today despite Trump’s best efforts to repeal it. Obama took a lot of unilateral actions during his presidency; Trump has undone the vast majority of those unilateral actions with unilateral actions of his own. Much of what Trump has accomplished can be quickly undone by the next Democratic president. Durable policy change still requires the president and Congress to work together.

Also, the president can kind of do whatever he wants in terms of war powers. Obama ordered a drone strike that killed a U.S. citizen without any kind of approval from Congress or the courts (<https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/06/23/drone-memo-assassination-us-citizen-anwar-al-awlaki-released>). Trump got pretty close to starting a war with Iran (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/11/us/politics/iran-trump.html>). Should one person have this much power?

Short Assignment

Attached is a list of unilateral actions that Trump in his first year as president (www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38695593). Pick one of these actions and consider the following:

Why would Trump want to use unilateral action to change this policy?
Could he have changed this policy by having Congress pass a new bill?
Do you agree with this action? Why or why not?

Please write this up in a half to a full page and email it to me. The due date for this assignment is April 13. You may turn it in earlier if you would like.

Let me know if you have any questions about the assignment. I really like this stuff and will be happy to help.