

NEW DIRECTIONS IN AMERICAN POLITICS

# New Directions in the American Presidency

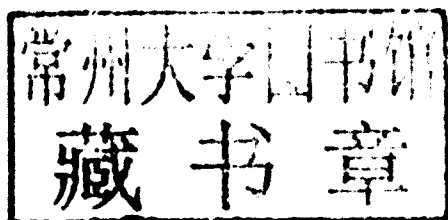
Edited by  
Lori Cox Han

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# New Directions in the American Presidency

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Lori Cox Han



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# New Directions in the American Presidency

The study of the American presidency, both in terms of the institution itself and the men who have held the office, is one of the most fascinating and dynamic fields within American politics. *New Directions in the American Presidency* takes a current look at the various issues facing the presidency and provides a “state of the art” overview of current trends in the field of presidency research.

The original essays collected here give students concise, engaging, and accessible discussions of a broad range of topics within presidency research, organized to fit easily into courses on the presidency. Leading figures in the field bring their perspectives on key disciplinary debates and give students a compelling account of what political scientists know about the presidency. The insights gleaned from this book will provide a strong framework for understanding current issues and real-world developments in the American presidency and American politics more broadly.

**Lori Cox Han** is Professor of Political Science at Chapman University. She is the author of *A Presidency Upstaged: The Public Leadership of George H.W. Bush, Governing From Center Stage: White House Communication Strategies During the Television Age of Politics*, and *Women and U.S. Politics: The Spectrum of Political Leadership*. She is also co-editor of *Rethinking Madam President: Are We Ready for a Woman in the White House?*, *The Presidency and the Challenge of Democracy*, and *In the Public Domain: Presidents and the Challenges of Public Leadership*.

## **New Directions in American Politics**

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**To the memory of Tom Foerster**

# Acknowledgments

The study of the American presidency is constantly evolving, and it is never boring. As the president and his administration continue to dominate so much of the day-to-day political life as well as the policy agenda in our society, political scientists (as well as scholars in many other academic disciplines) find themselves confronted with numerous questions about the president as a political actor and the presidency as a political institution. The most recent presidencies of Barack Obama, George W. Bush, and Bill Clinton in and of themselves have provided seemingly endless avenues of research to explore as part of the complex world of national and international governing and politics. As this volume shows, cutting-edge, innovative research has become the mainstay in presidential studies. Each of the contributors is a leading expert in his or her respective field, and each is also an accomplished classroom instructor. As a result, the perspectives and analyses provided in each chapter show the depth and breadth of our current understandings of the presidency, as well as future areas of research in this dynamic subfield. In addition, each chapter is written with the student of the presidency in mind, as a way of introducing the topic to students at all levels and letting the reader know that “this is what political scientists know” about each relevant topic.

As with any book project, the finished product represents the hard work of many people from start to finish. First and foremost, I wish to thank the contributors who made this volume possible by generously sharing their time, as well as their knowledge and expertise on the presidency. Their work, here and in numerous other venues, sustains the subfield of presidential studies and has enlightened countless students and colleagues alike. I would also like to thank Michael Kerns at Routledge for his continued enthusiasm and support for this project, as well as Mary Altman for her support along the way. Chapman University, and especially the Political Science department, is a better place because of Nadia Arriaga, whose help and support is always appreciated. Two of my Chapman colleagues, Drew Moshier and Chuck Hughes, also deserve thanks for their continued support and friendship. Finally, and as always, my husband Tom; my daughter, Taylor; and my son, Davis deserve more thanks than mere words on a single page can communicate. Nothing would be possible without their continued patience, support, and love. Thanks for always reminding me that nothing is more important than family.

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# Contents

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x
<i>Contributors</i>	xi
<b>1 Introduction: Studying the Presidency</b>	<b>1</b>
LORI COX HAN	
<b>2 The Presidency and the Constitution</b>	<b>12</b>
DAVID GRAY ADLER	
<b>3 Presidential Campaigns and Elections</b>	<b>33</b>
RANDALL E. ADKINS	
<b>4 The Public Presidency: Communications and Media</b>	<b>54</b>
MATTHEW ESHBAUGH-SOHA	
<b>5 The Presidency and Public Opinion</b>	<b>71</b>
DIANE J. HEITH	
<b>6 The Presidency and Congress</b>	<b>83</b>
BRANDON ROTTINGHAUS	
<b>7 The Presidency and the Courts</b>	<b>103</b>
NANCY KASSOP	
<b>8 White House Staff</b>	<b>120</b>
JUSTIN S. VAUGHN AND JOSÉ D. VILLALOBOS	
<b>9 The Presidency and the Executive Branch</b>	<b>136</b>
MATTHEW J. DICKINSON	
<b>10 The Presidency and Domestic Policy</b>	<b>166</b>
DAVID SHAFIE	

<b>11 The Presidency and Foreign Policy</b>	180
MEENA BOSE	

<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	198
<i>Index</i>	215

# List of Figures and Tables

## Figures

3.1	Public Funding in Presidential Elections, 1976–2008	37
3.2	Cumulative Percentage of Delegates Selected by End of Fourth Week and End of Eighth Week During the Primary Season by Party, 1972–2008	40
3.3	Total Contributions and Spending by Presidential Candidates, 1976–2008	42
4.1	Number of National Addresses (non-SUA), 1960–2009	56
4.2	Total Number of Yearly Non-major President Speeches, 1949–2009	57
6.1	Unilateral Presidential Actions in First 100 Days	95
9.1	Growth in Federal Outlays and Executive Branch Civilian Employment, 1940–2009	143
9.2	Relative Rate of Growth in Federal Outlays, Executive Branch Civilian Employment, and Number of Pages in the Federal Register, 1940–2009	143
9.3	Growth of Federal Outlays, 1940–2009	144
9.4	Ratio of Federal Outlays to Executive Branch Civilian Employees, 1940–2009	144
9.5	Growth of Total Outlays for Grants to State and Local Governments, 1940–2009	145
9.6	Growth in Federal Contracts, 2000–2009	145
9.7	“Real” White House Staff Growth, 1945–2009	157

## Tables

3.1	Results of Democratic and Republican Caucuses, 2008	46
3.2	Democratic and Republican Primaries, 2008	47
3.3	Electoral College Vote by State, 2004 and 2008	50
6.1	Percentage of Majority Party Seats in Congress in Presidents’ First Year in Office, 1969–2009	86
9.1	Executive Branch Employment Figures	140
9.2	Executive Branch Positions	158
9.3	Executive Branch Positions (Non-cabinet)	158

# 1 Introduction

## Studying the Presidency

*Lori Cox Han*

On January 20, 2009, Barack Obama took the oath of office as the forty-fourth president of the United States. Given that Obama became the first African American president, the extraordinary attention given to his inauguration within the United States, as well as around the world, was not surprising to even the most casual of political observers. Historically, a presidential inauguration represents an important political ritual for American citizens, serving as a time of renewal of faith in the U.S. constitutional system of government by witnessing the peaceful transition of power from one leader to the next. It is also the one day on the political calendar on which partisanship is mostly set aside, and the events surrounding the incoming president are filled with optimism.

Presidents look to the inauguration, and in particular the inaugural address, as an opportunity to set the tone of their tenure in office for the public and other political actors. Most also use the event as an opportunity to talk about broader political principles and their vision for the country. In addition to the constitutional requirement that a president must take the oath of office, an inauguration is one of the many symbolic acts in which a president engages, and it is the first opportunity to address the American public—the national constituency that he uniquely represents within the political system—as president. Each president also faces unique circumstances on the day he takes office, and therefore, may have different strategies and goals that he and his advisors are attempting to achieve.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the political, constitutional, and symbolic significance of presidential inaugurations, the start of a new presidential administration also represents a milestone for those who study the presidency—a brand-new president and his administration to assess and analyze. The study of the American presidency, as both a political institution and the man who holds the office, is one of the most fascinating and dynamic fields within political science. While the framers of the U.S. Constitution may have envisioned coequal legislative, executive, and judiciary branches, the powers of the presidency have expanded throughout the past century as contemporary American presidents, for better or worse, have often been the driving force behind policymaking at both the national and international levels. As such, the actions of the current administration of President Barack Obama, as well as previous administrations, raise numerous questions for scholars to

consider about the powers of the office, the complex nature in which presidents shape policy agenda, and various other aspects of governing.

In particular, Obama and his two most recent predecessors—George W. Bush and Bill Clinton—have opened myriad avenues of analysis regarding a broad spectrum of issues for presidency scholars, including presidents as individual political actors as well as institutional implications of their actions while in office. For example, Obama took office at a time of economic crisis, as the United States faced the most daunting economic downturn and recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s. In addition, the new commander in chief inherited two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, both initiated by his immediate predecessor as part of the “War on Terror.” While it may be too soon to provide an adequate assessment of Bush’s legacy, one major component of his eight years in office will forever be linked to the expansion of presidential war powers in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

In addition, the Bush years will also be remembered for an increasing budget deficit, the prominence of a socially conservative policy agenda, and an escalation of partisanship at the national level. While Bill Clinton may have left office with a budget surplus, his time in office was marked by six years of divided government, an impeachment, and his ability to out-maneuver his opponents through strong political and communication skills (which also contributed to the partisan divide in Washington).

These topics and how they relate to the specific occupants of the Oval Office are just a sampling of issues that animate current research on the American presidency. That research, in turn, also defines how presidency courses are taught at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. While presidential studies itself is considered a subfield within the discipline of political science, numerous subfields within presidential studies have also emerged in the past three decades as part of the growing literature on both presidents and the presidency. For example, presidential-congressional relations, presidential powers, the executive branch as a political institution, and the public aspects of the presidency are just a few areas where scholars have focused their attention in an effort to better understand (and sometimes predict the actions of) the president, his staff, and other relevant political actors within the executive branch. In addition, interdisciplinary research on the presidency has merged the growing literature in political science with that of psychology, history, communication, economics, and sociology, among others. As a result, both the quality and quantity of research devoted to the presidency continue to grow.

This chapter provides an overview of presidential studies and the current state of presidency research. Having a better understanding of such topics as the different eras usually associated with the presidency, or the methods of study used by presidency scholars, can aid students in learning about the various facets of the institution of the presidency as well as the men who have held the office.

First, we will consider the general categories used to organize presidents and their presidencies by historical eras, which provides a sense of how the institution itself—along with the day-to-day job responsibilities of the president—have



evolved throughout U.S. history. Second, we will look at the state of presidency research and how the various methodological tools now available to presidency scholars have greatly expanded our understanding of presidents as political actors and the presidency as a political institution. Finally, we will consider the plan of the book, how the essays in this volume illustrate the new and emerging trends within presidential studies, and how that research provides a guide and basis for analysis for studying the presidency.

## **Studying the Presidency: Presidential Eras**

The American presidency remains one of the most fascinating institutions in history, and the powers and intricacies of the office seem to defy comparison to anything before or since. Individual presidents have come and gone, serving their country with varying degrees of success, but the presidency as an institution remains a focal point of political power, nationally and internationally. The presidency of the eighteenth century, as outlined by the framers of the U.S. Constitution, may seem weak compared to the powers that have emerged with the office throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, but the essential characteristics of the American presidency are as recognizable today as they were more than 200 years ago.

Despite wars, scandals, economic turbulence, and even assassinations, the presidency has endured and is one of the most resilient political structures ever created. Still, the powers of the office, along with the public presence of the president himself, have varied at times due to differing circumstances (political and otherwise). According to presidential scholar Louis W. Koenig, the history of the presidency can be divided into three principal eras: the traditional presidency, the modern presidency, and the postmodern (diminished) presidency.<sup>2</sup>

The traditional presidency encompasses the office-holders from the late eighteenth century until the turn of the twentieth century who “performed within modest limits and largely with unmemorable results.” The most notable presidencies during this time include George Washington (1789–1797), Thomas Jefferson (1801–1809), Andrew Jackson (1829–1837), and Abraham Lincoln (1861–1865), all of whom are “towering exceptions” of an era when presidential powers remained modest and limited.<sup>3</sup> Truth be told, the presidency was not a coveted prize for most founding-era politicians, nor was the associated role of commander in chief. Particularly during the late eighteenth century, talented public officials had little incentive to seek an office whose risks and uncertainties outweighed the potential benefits. The presidency offered modest prestige, narrow authority, and meager resources. In most cases, governors of politically prominent states, such as New York, Massachusetts, and Virginia, wielded more real power and prestige than the nation’s president.

Although American presidents of the early republic were honored and respected by their fellow Americans, not least because of their service and contributions prior to 1789, they occupied an office that was unassuming and limited, especially with respect to national defense and foreign policy, which is just what the framers