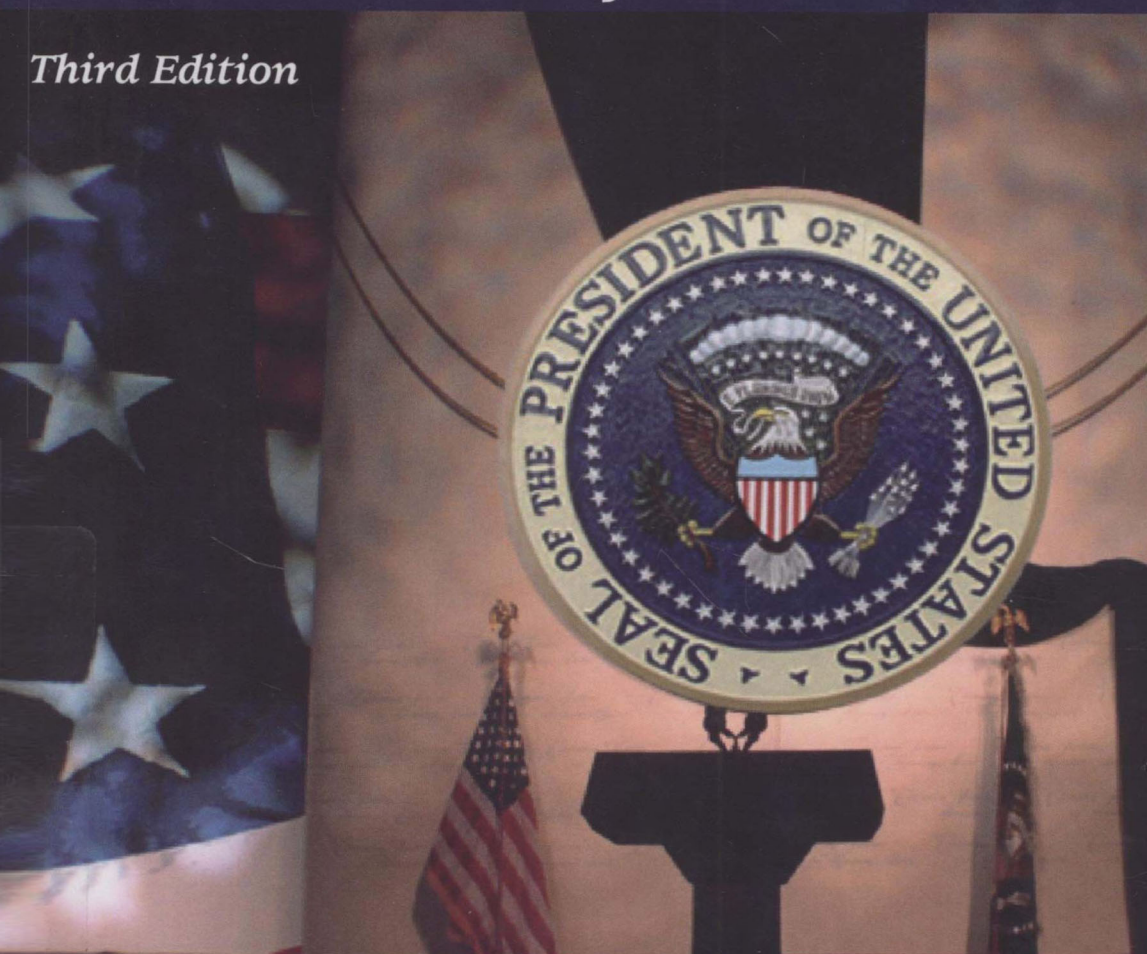


# *The Presidential Dilemma*

Revisiting Democratic Leadership  
in the American System

*Third Edition*



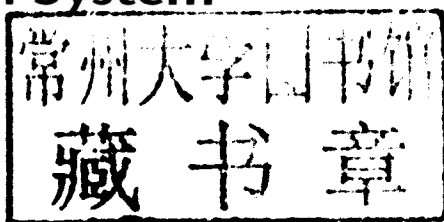
**Michael A. Genovese**

With a new introduction by the author

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**Transaction Publishers**  
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*The*  
***Presidential***  
***Dilemma***

**To Gabriela, and a love that has lasted, endured, grown,  
strengthened. You are my everything.**

## Preface

### Office Holders but Not Leaders

*"We give the President more work than a man can do, more responsibility than a man should take, more pressure than a man can bear. We abuse him often and rarely praise him. We wear him out, use him up, eat him up. And with all this, Americans have a love for the President that goes beyond loyalty or party nationality; he is ours, and we exercise the right to destroy him."*

—John Steinbeck, *America and Americans*

In the 1981 movie, *The History of the World, Part I*, Mel Brooks, playing King Louis of France, walks around an opulent garden, insulting his guests by squeezing the backsides of ladies of the court. Is he called to task for this gross behavior? No, in fact after pinching one especially voluptuous woman, Brooks turns to the camera and says with great satisfaction, "It's good to be da king!"

And indeed, it must have been good to be the king, especially in the days when the accepted paradigm was the Divine Right of Kings. Talk about *power*! The king claimed that his authority derived from the "fact" that God had anointed him king. To disobey the king was tantamount to disobeying God. As long as the vast majority of the people were willing to buy into that myth, the king could rule, or command, perched on the shoulders of God and fully expect to be obeyed.

Over time, the divine right of kings gave way to a new myth: the divine right of the people, or democracy. The ground beneath the king's authority collapsed and was replaced by a secular legitimacy based on the will or consent of the people. Few followed the commands of the ruler. Now people had to be persuaded to follow, or they believed that the "elected" leaders were to follow *their* will. The grounds of authority and legitimacy were weakened. If it was good to be the king, it was exceedingly difficult to be the president.

To understand the great difficulty of governing in an age of mass democracy, stripped of the lubricating assistance of divine power, take a short trip with me to the beautiful Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Perched on a hill overlooking the city on one side and the Pacific on the other, the Getty is a gorgeous venue for art and culture.

One of the paintings—James Ensor’s *Christ’s Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888)—holds special interest for students of politics. Believed to be the first “expressionist” painting, Ensor’s painting is mad, magnificent, complex, claustrophobic, confused, confusing, anarchistic, and beautiful. Rich and colorful, it depicts Christ’s entry into the city, but in a way that is unorthodox, even shocking to our sensibilities.

Picture in your mind’s eye what a painting entitled “Christ’s Entry into Brussels” *should* look like: Christ with a halo aglow sits on top of a donkey—the center of attention, with adoring followers lining the streets, bowing in respect, laying palm leaves on the path.

But in Ensor’s dystopian version, Christ is barely visible. Lost amid a garish, cluttered, colorful anarchy of people and puppets, one has to squint and look hard to find Christ, who is lost in the crowd. There is a marching band, clowns, costumed characters, masked figures, performers, self-important officials, skeletons, and clerics. From the pompous to the pitiful, it is a mad cacophony of the leering mob.

This painting is relevant to our understanding of the presidency because Ensor’s allegorical work of art portrays the dilemma of leadership in a mass democracy. Rather than deferring to Christ, the mob barely pays attention to him. There are too many distractions, too many entertaining diversions to pay attention to, not to mention defer to, this leader of the Christian movement. There is a party going on, a carnival—do not bother me with the boredom of authority. If the choice is party or piety—let the parade begin!

In our world today this Christ is not the center of attention, not the recipient of worshipful respect; this Christ must compete with the entertaining party of the human parade. The chaos of fun trumps worship. Self-indulgence trumps hierarchy; individualism trumps obedience; party trumps followership. As James O’Toole notes:

Ensor understood that social chaos would soon arise from the secular democracy then aborning in Europe. A hundred years ago, he foresaw the seeds of the tradition-destroying trend that would eventually germinate and produce, among countless other cultural horrors, seventy-six channels of cable television. The painting forces the viewer to think about the unprecedented obstacles to effective leadership in a world that has grown, in the subsequent century, even more turbulent than Ensor’s frenetic Brussels street scene.... Ensor saw that henceforth leaders would face the

challenge of having to lead without the traditional powers of station, sanction, or threat of suppression. Instead, like Christ, leaders would have to appeal to the minds and hearts of their followers.

Ensor causes us to wonder how anyone could lead from the middle of an inattentive crowd of individualists, each a political and social equal, and every last one bent on demonstrating that fact. Though people have always resisted efforts to bring about changes, even those in their own self-interest, Ensor suggests that modern times would be characterized by widespread resistance to being led at all.<sup>1</sup>

The emergence of democracy as the new social and political paradigm, the imposition of the Divine Right of People, undermined authority and legitimacy. No longer would subjects automatically follow; now citizens had to be persuaded. They could choose to follow or not, they might give to a leader their authority and power, or not. It was no longer automatic but had to be earned, won.

And in a world of mass consumerism, those wishing to lead seemed to have precious little to offer by way of inducement. Why follow the leader when the carnival was going in the other direction? Why sacrifice for the cause when my comrades offer intoxication? Why give to the community when I can further my own pocket? And so, instead of kings commanding, in the new world elected officeholders had to “lead.”

Yes, as the Mel Brooks character told us, it truly must have been good to be the king—commanding is so much easier than persuading. But democracies are not like that—and herein rests the difficulty of leading in a world where the deference, hierarchy, authority, and legitimacy of the old order have evaporated, and the new order requires this thing call *the consent of the governed*.

Presidents can rarely command. They have to generate and maintain support, build coalitions and consensus, persuade, influence, coax, cajole, push, and prod. And even then Congress might say no. The people might turn a deaf ear. Interest groups might actively oppose. Business interests might seek to counter. Courts might demur.

Although the president has some constitutional authority, it does not match the high expectations and expressive demands placed upon the office. Is it any wonder that we are so often disappointed with our presidents?

We live in an age of weakened leaders and troubled leadership. In politics, business, religion, and education, those who hold positions of status and power very often seem to let us down. As our problems grow, our politicians seem to shrink. As circumstances call for leadership, we may instead get pandering and petty rankling. Why? What is wrong?



This book is an effort to understand and explain the failure of the American presidency to meet the needs, expectations, and responsibilities placed upon leaders in the past forty-five years. The goal is to evaluate the modern presidents, examine the reasons why their performance has been underwhelming, discuss how presidents might maximize their opportunities for leadership, and ask a key question: Can presidents be powerful and accountable? The book follows a clear format and tries to show why our office holders have so rarely been leaders, and how—within the bounds of democratic accountability—presidents can become leaders instead of mere office holders.

Three decades ago David Mayhew presented an elegant theory of congressional behavior in his book *Congress: The Electoral Connection*<sup>2</sup>: Members of Congress seek to maximize their chances for reelection. Since that time Mayhew's "theory" has become all but accepted wisdom in political science. I would like to suggest a "theory" of presidential politics, less elegant but hopefully as persuasive as Mayhew's: *Presidents, facing a system of multiple veto points, seek ways, both constitutional and extraconstitutional, to maximize power and influence.*<sup>3</sup> Successful presidents use their power and influence to serve the public good. That they usually fail reflects the strength of the president's rivals, the limited resources at his disposal, and the many veto points a president must overcome to gain power. This book is about the roadblocks presidents face, the (limited) avenues of power available to them, and how the presidency "fits" into the American political system. Thus, the "presidential dilemma" is that expectations and demands are high but resources and power are limited. With demands so high, but resources so limited, it should not surprise us that presidents so often "fail"—fail to meet our exceedingly high expectations of what they should deliver.

While this theory of presidential behavior focuses on power (the ability to get others to conform to your wishes), in a democratic political system, *power* cannot be divorced from *purpose*. The American president is not simply a leader. To be seen as successful, he must be a *democratic leader*. Merely focusing on power might mean that presidents who got their way—for example, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon—were successful presidents. But power must be linked to purpose in a democratic arena, which means that success is more than merely accumulating power; it also includes the *ends* to which power is used.

Throughout this book I refer to presidents with the pronoun "he" because all presidents to date have been men. Increasingly, women are rising to positions of political power and have served as chief execu-

tives of a number of nations,<sup>4</sup> but thus far, the United States has lagged behind in affording women equal opportunity to rise to the top position of political leadership.

The first edition of this book was published at the midpoint of the Clinton presidency. Since that time we have witnessed sex scandals, the collapse of House Speaker Newt Gingrich, impeachment, the 2000 election and its bizarre aftermath, the beginnings of a new Bush presidency, and the tragedy of September 11. This third edition is written at the end of President Barack Obama's first year in office. It covers the tumultuous years of the presidency of George W. Bush, and the early days of the Obama presidency.

This new edition includes all of these events and more. It has also benefited from a careful reading and critiques from presidency scholars in the field who have been using the book. The book is designed to present an argument, perhaps even to start an argument. It has a point of view. While I am not objective, I have tried to be fair. Readers will find their favorite presidents praised for one thing, then called to task for another. I play no favorites but try to let the theme—that presidents of the past forty-five years have overall been underwhelming partially due to their own faults but largely due to the weak conditions or circumstances for leadership—drive the analysis.

I am indebted to many people who have been of help in the completion of this work. Typists and research assistants Heather Brandi-Maurer and Brian Whitaker performed magnificently, especially given the grumpy nature of their boss. As always, I owe a debt to friends and colleagues in the Presidency Research Group of the American Political Science Association, who have been welcoming and supportive over the years, especially Thomas E. Cronin and the late William Lammers. To all of you, my deepest thanks. But most of all I wish to thank Gaby for being the true love of my life. I hope every reader of this book is fortunate enough to find a love half as sweet as this.

## Notes

1. I am indebted to James O'Toole for bringing the Ensor painting to my attention; see James O'Toole, *Leading Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), p. 1-5.
2. David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1974).
3. The power maximizing part of this theory is drawn from the pioneering work of Richard Neustadt, whose book, *Presidential Power* (New York: Wiley, 1960), is still considered a classic work on presidential politics. The second part of the theory concerning the limits of power is drawn from Thomas E. Cronin's discussion of

Neustadt's work which appears in *The State of the Presidency* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), pp.121-136.

4. Michael A. Genovese, ed., *Women as National Leaders* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993).

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## **Introduction**

# **Madison's Curse or Madison's Blessing? The Presidential Dilemma Revisited**

The casual observer of politics should be forgiven the mistaken impression that the American presidency is an all-powerful office. After all, in the post 9/11 period the Bush presidency both appeared to be, and was, quite powerful. But the crisis presidency is not the presidency. It is the exception to the rule of presidential limitations. Under normal or routine conditions, the presidency is—by design of the Framers—quite constrained and limited. Thus, most presidents feel weak because in many ways, they are. And weakness leads to failure.

We live in an age of weak or failed presidents. From John F. Kennedy to the second term George W. Bush, each president left office either under a dark cloud or in circumstances less than favorable. Presidents—with an eye on their historical reputations are not unaware of this dilemma.

President Kennedy was assassinated. Lyndon Johnson was compelled not to seek reelection during the Vietnam War when faced with the certainty of electoral defeat if not humiliation in 1968. Richard Nixon resigned in disgrace when faced with the certainty of impeachment and conviction as a result of the Watergate scandal. Gerald Ford was defeated in the 1976 election. Jimmy Carter was defeated in the 1980 election. Ronald Reagan left office with the cloud of the Iran-Contra scandal and huge budget deficits marring his reputation. George H. W. Bush was defeated in the 1992 election. Bill Clinton was impeached by the House but not convicted by the Senate as a result of the Lewinsky/perjury scandal, and George W. Bush left office with an approval rating at historic lows, two ongoing wars, and an economic tsunami that devastated the U.S.

Rather than lighting the torch of leadership recent presidents have produced the dim bulb of disappointment or failure. If we take a step back however, we soon realize that rather than the disappointing exceptions,

these presidents conform to the norm of presidential performance. For, from a longitudinal perspective, most presidents, most of the time have exercised very limited leadership; most disappointed scholars and the public alike; and few were able to achieve greatness.<sup>1</sup>

We must, of course, distinguish between the crisis presidency—a powerful engine of change and authority, and the normal or routine presidency—resembling a Gulliver enchained. The crisis presidency opens doors to power; the routine presidency is constrained by a variety of checks and balances.

What is different about the modern era is perhaps, first, the expanded scope and scale of problems a president is expected to solve; second, the raised level of expectations, and third, the consistency of disappointment over time. The demands and expectations of the office have increased; media focus and attention is directed at the president as a problem-solver-in-chief; the system of separate institutions sharing overlapping power grows increasingly fragmented and divisive; and the president simply does not have the resources necessary to meet the demands placed upon the office.<sup>2</sup>

We expect more of presidents, demand to see them (warts and all) more closely than ever, and yet, we have not enlarged the resource capacity of the presidency to meet these excessive responsibilities.

This is not without its own logic. After all, the presidency as invented by the framers of the Constitution was left somewhat limited in constitutional authority, yet in other ways, the powers remain vague and ambiguous. The powers of the office were not clearly spelled out. Yes, it was an office with *limited powers* within the framework of the *rule of law*, as part of a *separation of powers* designed to provide *checks and balances*, but each of those elements suggest *limits*—what are the powers or resources available to the president?

Perhaps the most useful way to understand office is that it is *elastic*. It is bendable, pliable, elastic enough to expand when a highly skilled, strong-willed individual occupies the office during periods of great need or crises. But it also bends back to narrower proportions when a less able, less ambitious president assumes power during normal times. Presidential power is thus dynamic, not static.

But what is its “natural” state? Left to its own devices, the presidency is relatively weak, especially when compared to the Congress. In effect, an anti-leadership system was established by the framers, a system which—except under crisis and/or national security matters—limits and inhibits presidential power and leadership. Yet, the presidency has



emerged as the focal point of government with enormous demands and unreachable expectations.

Given the limited (if elastic) state of a president's power, and given the high demands and expectations we impose on the office, it should not surprise us that the recent presidents have so often disappointed us.

Of course, disappointment leads quickly to the public turning on presidents, which leads to increased difficulty governing. It is a vicious cycle. If presidents do not have the power resources to meet public demands and expectations, yet failing to meet those expectations affects one's ability to govern, what's a president to do?

This is a problem endemic to all separation-of-power systems. By way of contrast, a parliamentary democracy with a fusion of power, such as exists in Great Britain, has no such problem. In a fused system, the executive, or prime minister is selected by the Parliament and serves at its pleasure (at least literally). When a party is elected with a majority in Parliament, the majority party selects the prime minister. He or she is then empowered with a built-in majority to attain the party's legislative agenda. In Great Britain, elections grant the majority the power to act. There is no expectation-resource gap because to be elected is to be granted the power to govern.

In the United States, elections do not settle the governing problem. All elections do is determine who will hold particular offices. These officeholders must then compete for power. It is not automatically granted but must be won. And given that power is transitory, each day means fighting new battles to gain power. Thus, the fleeting nature of power in the U.S. makes governing difficult, and accountability problematic.

### **Madison's Curse**

And what is the cause of this leadership dilemma? Many scholars<sup>3</sup> point directly to the handiwork of James Madison and the creation of the separation-of-powers. True, Madison's creation impeded leadership, but we must remember, that was his (their) intention. The Framers feared centralized executive power and wanted to enchain the new executive in a web of laws and constraints that, while limiting leadership opportunities, protected freedom and liberty. But was this gift to us a curse or a blessing?

### **Presidential Power and Asymmetrical Warfare**

Initially, the government established by the framers placed congressional power above presidential power. A comparison of Articles