
A CRITIQUE OF CYCLICAL EXPLANATIONS FOR PRESIDENTIAL INFLUENCE

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ABSTRACT

Theories of presidential power abound. One area which seems to illustrate how presidents interact with entities inside and outside government focuses on cyclical theories of influence. This research identifies popular cyclical theories published between the 1950s and 1990s, including those based on ideology, foreign policy effectiveness, level of activism, and theme of administration. While the study concludes that individual models furnish an incomplete view of presidential power, the author notes that combining cyclical models and adding other explanatory factors may improve the ability to track executive success across administrations.

Key Words: Cyclical Theories, Foreign Policy, Presidential Influence.

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay seeks to identify and critique theories proposing cyclical relations between the legislative and executive branches of our national government. These theories may be divided into two primary types: those which are based on institutional imbalance between the two branches, and those which assert electoral factors lead to differing degrees of influence by the president and Congress. Both types are reviewed; the strengths and shortcomings are appraised; and their contribution to our understanding of the dynamics of presidential power are probed.

2. INSTITUTIONAL IMBALANCE CYCLES

The classic view espousing rotating dominance between Congress and the presidency derives from the works of Woodrow Wilson. In his book *Congressional Government*, he bluntly states (1885, p. 48):

“The decline in character of presidents is not the cause, but only the accompanying manifestation, of the declining prestige of the presidential office. 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.”

Wilson holds that the theoretical balance established by the Constitution has given way to (p. 180) "obedience to the direction of standing committees" of Congress.

Some twenty-three years later, Wilson wrote *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1908), in which he revised his outlook on executive-legislative relations. He mentions the president's messages to Congress, the veto power, the Cabinet, control over the foreign affairs of the nation, and the chief executive's opportunity to lead public opinion as resources for effective

leadership. Far from being a puppet of Congress, Wilson states (p. 71-72) "the personal force of the president is perfectly constitutional to any extent to which he chooses to exercise it, and it is by the clear logic of our constitutional practice that he has become alike the leader of his party and the leader of the nation."

According to Corwin and Koenig (1956, p. 27-28), "taken by and large, the history of the presidency is history of aggrandizement, but the story is a highly discontinuous one." The authors assert that only about one-third of incumbents developed the powers of the presidency, whereas under other chief executives "things have either stood still or gone backward." That is to say, what the presidency is at any particular moment depends in important measure on who is president.

Arthur Schlesinger Sr. describes a similar spiral pattern occurring between eras of American liberalism and conservatism. The years which he identifies belonging to each tendency in government are included in Table 1. Schlesinger finds that revolts against conservatism have found their (1957, p. 88) "initial outlet through the channel of a colorful or commanding personality" or president. The shifts from one governing ideology to another are not pendent since liberal gains remain in force through conservative domination, and because Schlesinger postulates that the ideologies grow progressively stronger. Of the eleven ideological dispensations Schlesinger charts, he figures that the five conservative eras have lasted an average of 18.2 years apiece, whereas the six periods of liberal presidents have lasted about fifteen years each in duration. The author discounts correlations between the liberal and conservative alterations and the incidence of other factors, such as the business cycle, marriage rates, foreign wars, state and local attitudes, and trends in national growth.

Though Stratton (1957) poses cyclical institutional influence of one branch over another, he states that Congress always holds the upper hand. Contrary to Schlesinger, Stratton believes that the power of the presidential office is not increased after executive dominance wanes (p. 11):

"The peaks of presidential influence over Congress during crises are like high-water marks on the banks of a river: they mark past floods, but they add nothing to the volume of the stream. Crises add temporarily to the power of the president against Congress, but there is no evidence that the office retains any of the increase when the crisis is past...Presidents come and go, but congressional leadership goes on forever. Some presidents are strong and some are weak, but there is no such thing as a weak Congress. "All Congresses are strong, not necessarily in statesmanship, but in their ability to oppose the president."

Binkley (1962) details historical relations between presidents and legislatures throughout our constitutional history. His analysis includes two chapters on congressional government in which he observes (p. 217), "in the absence of positive leadership on the part of the chief executive the congressional aggrandizement went on apace." The majority study is comprised of examinations of influential presidents such as Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Truman. Binkley concludes that (p. 383) "presidents with a capacity for leadership ought not to be unwelcome even in 'normal' times."

Egger contends that (1967, p. 137) "the country seems to swing with some certainty, but not much regularity, between presidentialism and congressionalism." He subdivides these categories into dominant and modified variations. Table 2 illustrates which years from 1789 to 1965 fit into each of the four pattern.

Dunn (1975) coins the ebb-and-flow theory of power between the executive and legislature from the Taft through the Ford administration. Dividing presidents into either active or passive types, as shown in Table 3, Dunn hypothesizes that (p. 339) "Congress has generally been a much more forceful and effective institution during the tenure of passive president such as Taft and Eisenhower." Dunn maintains that presidential powers (p. 338) "remain largely the same" during periods of congressional reassertion.

Dodd's (1980) investigation of congressional organizational cycles clearly defines the characteristics and length of a cycle, though his analysis seems to describe a spiraling of executive power. According to the author, cycle is composed of five stages and occurs at approximately thirty-year intervals. In the twentieth century, there have been two power cycles—one from 1920 to 1950 and another from 1950 to the present. The stages within cycle include (1) period of decentralization and immobilization; (2) electoral realignment and presidential government; (3) renewed immobilization and decentralization; (4) renewed presidential government, constitutional crisis, and congressional recentralization; and (5) an era of quiescence, in which the president is uncertain and ineffective in his relations with the legislature. As opposed to Koenig and Corwin, Stratton, and Dunn, Dodd ventures the following (p. 84):

"In each cycle, presidential roles and responsibilities are legitimized that previously were nonexistent and ambivalent, and the presidency's power base is expanded...In the next generation, therefore, we can expect that a president or presidents, in building on the expanded power base of the office, will provide a much greater assertion of presidential power during a national crisis and act with still greater disdain for the constitutional division of power between Congress and the presidency."Dodd warns that Congress must be strengthened so as to prevent presidential imperialism.

Sundquist (1981) traces alternating institutional dominance in the nineteenth century. Whereas he depicts the first three decades of that century as one of balanced competition, he postulates that the inauguration of Andrew Jackson brought an abrupt change in the balance of power between the two institutions. Conversely, the last third of the nineteenth century is referred to as the (p. 25) "golden age of congressional ascendancy." The next power shift, occurring at the outset of the twentieth century, was a product of expanding roles of the chief executive, which encompassed being the general manager of the executive branch, the chief overseer of the economy, foreign policy leader, and legislative initiator.Sundquist expands on his view that presidential power had grown sequentially in this century (p. 20):

"What distinguishes the twentieth century from the nineteenth--and has brought about what appears as a permanent shift of some measure of authority from the legislature to the executive—is the disappearance of the type of president who believes as a matter of conviction that the

presidency should be weak...So the era of the strong president—strong in aspiration if not always in achievement—has unquestionably arrived to stay, carried on by the force of trends as irreversible as anything can be.”

Skowronek (1984) contends that there are observable patterns of presidential leadership within historical period and across time, depending on the coalition of forces at work at a particular juncture. Presidents such as Andrew Jackson and Franklin Roosevelt have been elected when there is an (p. 88) "abrupt change from long-established political order," and must build a new institutional infrastructure. Other chief executives must manage an "established regime" by preventing factional strife on the one hand and satisfying political commitments on the other. James Polk and John Kennedy are examples of presidents who served during this stage of a political system cycle. At the last stage, the legitimacy of an existing political order is being threatened, and incumbents are unable to manage coalition interests. Jimmy Carter and Franklin Pierce are two presidents whose (p. 90) "affiliation with the old order in a new age turned their respective bids for leadership into awkward and superficial struggles to escape the stigma of their own irrelevance." Skowronek emphasizes the interaction between the incumbent and the political environment in which he operates. As a result of systemic changes, presidential influence is subject to generational disintegration. In other words, (p. 128), "the clock at work in presidential leadership keeps political rather than historical time."

Hargrove and Nelson (1984) delineate a similar three-stage cycle, though their analysis is restricted to the twentieth century. The authors identify presidents of preparation, presidents of achievement, and presidents of consolidation, whom are distinguished by electoral factors (popular and electoral vote victory margins), the success of ideas in relation to moral sentiments and in confronting social discontent, and level of personal skill. However, since Hargrove and Nelson contend that cycle is recurring rather than inevitable, and can be broken due to a system-threatening political crisis, they label a deviant administration as either one of stalemate (Taft, Truman) or stasis (Ford). Their complete categorization of modern chief executives appears in Table 4.

The stage of the cycle where the executive is most influential and successful according to Hargrove and Nelson is the presidency of achievement (p. 57), "in which great bursts of creative legislative activity occurred that altered the role of government in society in the service of some combination of purpose values of liberty and equality and process values of higher law and popular sovereignty." These types of administrations are succeeded by presidents of consolidation, who seek to rationalize and legitimate earlier gains, but whom are more concerned with present consistency than change. Consolidating administrations are replaced with presidents of preparation, whom begin a new cycle. These chief executives lack clear electoral mandate and the political resources necessary for major policy reform. Instead, they build the foundation for presidents of achievement. If the president is the center of the political system in the achievement stage, it seems clear that Congress is the dominant branch in the presidency of stasis—the Ford tenure—and quite likely by the end of the presidencies of consolidation and those of stalemate as well.

Rockman's work (1984, p. 84) "distinguishes between three type of cyclical pattern: (1) long-term and epochal; (2) metacyclical—those of more modest duration but independent of the presidential term; and (3) termcycles—short-term cycles dictated by the logic of a presidential term." Rockman admits his cyclic conceptions are more descriptive than predictive, and does not attempt to interrelate the cycles into a single theory of presidential success. Of the three cycles, epochal ones deal most directly with the relationship between Congress and the executive, and are best employed to assess presidential leadership potential.

Rockman analyzes presidential-congressional balance in four long-term periods cited by Dodd (1981): the era of confrontation (1789-1860), the era of expansion (1876-1910), the era of consolidation (1920-1965), and the age of protest (1960's and 1970's). According to the author (p. 87), "for large parts of American history, especially throughout the nineteenth century, Congress has been the dominant political institution eclipsing the presidency for all but rare interludes." But as the power of individual members of Congress was augmented, institutional influence as a whole declined. This led to presidential dominance in four decades of the twentieth century, although Rockman holds that (p. 97) "when Congress has given way before assertive presidents, the decision had been, in the final analysis, its own choosing." The most recent phase in the struggle for institutional supremacy has seen no winner, but rather is characterized as "unrelievedly adversarial."

Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s 1986 book offers different view of trends in American history than that of his father's treatise almost thirty years ago. Whereas his father describes development through liberal and conservative dispensations, Schlesinger Jr. defines a thirty-year cycle of national involvement between public and private interests. He propounds a cycle is not automatic yet is self-generating. The private interest stage of cycle stresses the principle that (p. 40-41) "the individual, in promoting his own interests promotes the general interest." On the other hand, public interest periods imply presidential dominance in that they represent action over respite, have a detonating issue which usher them in, and (p. 33) "each of these (public purpose) leaders molded a new political generation in own image. The administrations associated with the alternating purposes are presented in Table 5. Schlesinger compares his domestic cycles to a theory of foreign policy cycles put forth by Klingberg (1952). While there may not be a direct correspondence between the two cycles, Schlesinger proposes that (p. 45) "each phase of the domestic cycle defines the national interest in terms of its own values."

A final example of cyclical dominance of power between the president and Congress is expressed in Koenig's updated book, *The Chief Executive*, in which he propagates that (1986, p. 203):

"clearly a cycle or rhythm is present in foreign policy making, fluctuating between presidential and congressional ascendancy. Each branch has a large capacity for self-assertion. . . The cycle's dynamic springs from the circumstances that power is shared between the executive and Congress, but the precise patterns of sharing are tentative and unclear, and after nearly two centuries of constitutional practice they remain puzzling and largely unpredictable. Also contributing to the erratic swings of power are shifts in public mood from high ideals and

willingness to sustain heavy burdens, to disillusionment and resignation, occurring when foreign policy falters and the country resorts to withdraw and isolation.”

Table 6 displays the administration which were either superior or weaker in relation to Congress in the foreign policy realm.

3. ELECTORAL CYCLES OF POWER

Whereas electoral factors are viewed as contributing to alternating institutional dominance in some of the aforementioned theories, they are fundamental to conceptions of presidential leadership in others. For instance, Barber's examination of presidential election campaigns in the twentieth century finds that (1980, p. 3) "three themes have dominated successive campaign years: politics as conflict, politics as conscience, and politics as conciliation." The cycle runs for twelve years and then repeats. Barber contends that a particular stage of the cycle actually includes all of the latter elements, though one stands out. The presidential election years corresponding to each stage are listed in Table 7.

In the politics as conflict stage, the election centers around a battle for power. The elements which Barber associates with the politics as conflict stage appear to have the greatest potential for shifting the balance of power between the presidency and Congress— Toward the executive. At the next electoral juncture, according to Barber, (p. 4) "a call goes out for a revival of social conscience, the restoration of the constitutional covenant, the cleansing of the temple of democracy. Matters of principle dominate; missionary zeal emerges." This stage affects the issue emphasized by the incoming administration, but does not cure national problems. In time (p. 4),

“moral uplift strains the fabric of our sense of ourselves as one people...The public yearns for domestic tranquility, for the politics of conciliation...Give that four years to settle in and the time for a fight will come around again. We itch for adventure once more.”

Sundquist's (1984) theory of electoral realignment in American politics assumes that one of the causes for the establishment of a new party system and its prolonged effect on presidential politics is the component of leadership. According to the author (p. 44),

“in the American governmental system, power is dispersed, and many rivals are in a position to block a president. Then it is the strength of the issue that determines which leaders will ultimately prevail. In some episodes of history events appear inexorable; leadership could influence only the timing and form of the inevitable upheaval.”

The five realigning elections mentioned by Sundquist—in 1800, 1828, 1860, 1896, and 1932—take place during declining presidential influence over Congress. Two other studies elaborate on the Sundquist theme. Beck conjectures that major policy changes are related to the electoral cycle, such that there are (1984, p. 537-538)

“three periods of comprehensive change in the programmatic thrust of the national government since the 1820's, an each of these periods came during a realignment of the electorate. The most far-reaching and familiar changes came during the early years of the Roosevelt administration in

the 1930's. Changes of similar scope appeared during The Civil War...The Civil War realignment made possible what had been restricted some thirty years before by the Jacksonian realignment.”

Along these lines, Rockman states that the (1984, p. 101) "cyclical tides of the realignment process...produce conditions during which political capacity can be marshalled on behalf of expansive agendas."

4. PROBLEMS AND POTENTIAL OF CYCLICAL THEORIES

There are several benefits and hindrances of the heretofore examined cyclical studies. One problem which is evident is the differing definitions of cycles offered by the aforementioned researchers. Goldstein submits that cycles conceived in terms of a fixed external time frame are (1988, p. 176) "not appropriate to the social world... Complex social phenomena are not well described by physical laws of mechanical motion." Resnick and Thomas suggest that while cyclical theories (1990, p. 19) "hold out the prospect for easy prediction of the future," they "often appear to be overly deterministic."

Institutional and electoral cycle theorists generally fail to separate the power of the office from the political beliefs and skill of the individual. Kessler recognizes the flaws involved with juxtaposing the governing philosophy of chief executives with the influence and dynamic of the office (1982, p. 21):

“Some presidents have taken a highly legalistic view of their roles, contending that they were empowered to do only what the Constitution or statute law specifically authorized. The presidents who espoused these views have come to be known as literalist or weak presidents... The very words are negative judgements. Some presidents have compassion for checks and balances and did not think it was right for the president to muscle in on congressional territory.”

Cunliffe (1968) observes that some presidents have been weak out of conviction, not inability to handle their position. Sundquist states that strength in a president should be assessed according to two actors (1981, p. 20) : "one has to do with his conception of the office, the other with his ability to realize that conception."

DiClerico (1983) argues that the acquiring of new information and events which have transpired since a particular chief executive served are agents which shape our perspective of how and administration performed. An alternative to cyclical studies which concentrate on single decision makers are those which attempt to uncover patterns in policies and issues across administrations. The work of Gleiber and Shull (1989), for instance, analyzes cycles in civil rights policymaking.

From another perspective, studies proposing electoral or institutional power cycles between Congress and the president neglect to adequately explain the effect which situational actors, other actors and institutions in the political system, or unanticipated events (foreign or domestic crises) have on the incumbent chief executive. Resnick and Thomas claim that such theories (1990, p. 19) "threaten explanation by neglecting a wide range of other causal factors." Most of the above research rejects the potential of the president to manipulate circumstances to his advantage in the congressional dominant stages, and equally denies the stabilizing impact which

the courts, bureaucracy, media, and other factors have on the executive branch in the presidential dominant states. Too often, these theories fail to detect the contribution to the augmenting of presidential power which incumbents make when they successfully react to an issue, or rush to credit the president for initiating a policy when others may have laid the foundation or forced the incumbent's hand. However, there is a constant interaction between the president's position and other forces within the political system; these elements need to be taken into account when examining presidential power (DiClerico,1983; Hoff, 1984).

Cyclic power theories, by their very nature, tend to ignore the sequential yet positive growth in the institution of the presidency. Arguing against fashionable cyclic conceptions of presidential-congressional relations, Cronin notes that (1979, p. 394-395) "the responsibilities of the presidency in this modern era coupled with the complexities of foreign and economic policy did not really permit any weakening of the presidency." Holcombe (1978) believes that permanent expansion in executive power is attributable to the office's adaptation to changes in the environment, whereas short-term concentrations of power often emanate from attempts to renegotiate the social contract. Ford (1898) and Barber (1975) propagate that presidential power had steadily increased due to Congress's ceding of procedures and authority to the executive branch. Of the various cyclical models discussed above, only the Schlesinger (1957), Dodd (1980), and Sundquist (1981) studies illustrate that presidential power had grown proportionately in the twentieth century. Other scholars argue against the proposition that the future development of the executive branch will upset the stability of the political system. Rossiter contends that in a (1960, p. 294) "constitutional system of diversity and antagonism, the presidency looms up as the countervailing force of unity and harmony." Hirschfield holds that (1961, p. 375) "though president's determination to provide effective leadership cannot alone decide the nation's destiny, it nonetheless constitutes our best hope that the challenges will be met successfully."

In conclusion, while cyclical models have many shortcomings, they may be valuable if utilized properly. Such theories by themselves provide a limited and incomplete view of presidential-legislative power relations. However, if they are accompanied by other factors, or if several cyclical power theories are combined, they could assist in explaining change in executive influence from one administration or political era to another.

Table 1

Liberal and Conservative Periods in American History

1765-1787: Liberal

1787-1801: Conservative

1801-1816: Liberal

1816-1829: Conservative

1829-1841: Liberal

1841-1861: Conservative

1861-1869: Liberal

1869-1901: Conservative

1901-1919: Liberal

1919-1931: Conservative

1931-1947: Liberal

Source: Schlesinger Sr. (1957)

Table 2

Presidentialism and Congressionalism

1789-1817: Presidentialism-Dominant

1817-1829: Presidentialism-Modified

1829-1837: Presidentialism-Dominant

1837-1861: Congressionalism-Dominant

1861-1865: Presidentialism-Dominant

1865-1885: Congressionalism-Dominant

1885-1889: Congressionalism-Modified

1889-1893: Congressionalism-Dominant

1893-1909: Presidentialism-Dominant

1909-1913: Congressionalism-Dominant

1913-1921: Presidentialism-Dominant

1921-1933: Congressionalism-Dominant

1933-1953: Presidentialism-Dominant

1953-1961: Congressionalism-Dominant

1961-1965: Presidentialism-Dominant

Source: Egger (1967)

Table 3.

Active and Passive Presidents

Theodore Roosevelt: Activist

William Taft: Passive

Woodrow Wilson: Activist

Warren Harding: Passive

Calvin Coolidge: Passive

Herbert Hoover: Passive

Franklin Roosevelt: Activist

Harry Truman: Activist

Dwight Eisenhower: Passive

John Kennedy: Activist

Lyndon Johnson: Activist

Richard Nixon: Activist

Gerald Ford: Passive?

Source: Dunn (1975)

Table 4

Presidents and Policy Making Success

Theodore Roosevelt: Presidency of Preparation

William Taft: Presidency of Stalemate

Woodrow Wilson: Presidency of Achievement

Warren Harding: Presidency of Consolidation

Calvin Coolidge: Presidency of Consolidation

Herbert Hoover: Presidency of Consolidation

Franklin Roosevelt: Presidency of Achievement

Harry Truman: Presidency of Stalemate

Dwight Eisenhower: Presidency of Consolidation

John Kennedy: Presidency of Preparation

Lyndon Johnson: Presidency of Achievement

Richard Nixon: Presidency of Consolidation

Gerald Ford: Presidency of Stasis

Jimmy Carter: Presidency of Preparation?

Ronald Reagan: Presidency of Achievement?

Source: Hargrove and Nelson (1984)

Table 5

Cycles of Public and Private Purpose

1901-1921: Public Purpose

1921-1933: Private Purpose

1933-1953: Public Purpose

1953-1961: Private Purpose

1961-1981: public Purpose

1981-Now: Private Purpose

Source: Schlesinger Jr. (1986)

Table 6

Cycles of Foreign Policy Effectiveness

Washington: Ascendancy

Adams: Decline

Jefferson: Ascendancy

Madison-J.Q. Adams: Decline

Jackson: Ascendancy

Van Buren-Buchanan: Decline

Lincoln: Ascendancy

A» Johnson-Grant: Decline

Hayes: Ascendancy

Garfield-Arthur: Decline

Cleveland: Ascendancy

Harrison-McKinley: Decline

T. Roosevelt: Ascendancy

Taft: Decline

Wilson: Ascendancy

Harding-Hoover: Decline

F. Roosevelt-Nixon: Ascendancy

Ford-Carter: Decline

Reagan: ?

Source: Koenig (1986)

Table 7

Electoral Cycles

1900: Politicsas Conflict

1904: Politicsas Conscience

1908: Politicsas Conciliation

1912: Politicsas Conflict

1916: PoliticsConscience

1920: Politicsas Conciliation

1924: Politicsas Conflict

1928: Politicsas Conscience

1932: Politics as Conciliation

1936: Politics as Conflict

1940: Politics as Conscience

1944: Politics as Conciliation

1948: Politics as Conflict

1952: Politics as Conscience

1956: Politics as Conciliation

1960: Politics as Conflict

1964: Politics as Conflict

1968: Politics as Conscience

1972: Politics as Conciliation

1976: Politics as Conflict

1980: Politics as Conciliation

Source: Barber (1980)

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