

Campaigning to Govern: Presidents Seeking Reelection¹

In the presidential election of 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt refrained from campaigning as it was considered “undignified to campaign from the White House” (Troy 1991, 212 emphasis added). This fear of losing one’s “dignity” had gone by the wayside when President Woodrow Wilson actively campaigned for his 1916 reelection. Since then, there’s been no turning back. Dramatic advancements in telecommunications have made presidents ubiquitous—campaigning on daytime talk shows, MTV, and internet sites have become *de rigeur*. These days, the notion of presidents campaigning for reelection is commonplace. In fact, when presidents claim that they are avoiding the campaign trail to take care of government business, journalists and observers scoff in disbelief.

In their quest for reelection, presidents have tremendous campaign assets: unbeatable name recognition, a coterie of strategists with the greatest incentive to see their candidate win, control of the national party organization, a national network of supporters (and the concomitant success in fundraising), the requisite experience to embark on a national campaign, and ample “goodies” to dole out to key constituents. According to historian Theodore White, “For, besides the majesty of the office, which cows the most hostile citizens to respect and attention, there are the facilities and the command that only a President can enjoy” (White 1965, 354).

Presidents, however, lose the aura of invincibility when faced with an intra-party challenge. Since President Nixon’s reelection campaign, six presidents have sought their party’s nomination, of which half have been contested.² President Ford faced the most formidable intra-party challenge from Ronald Reagan, followed by President Carter (Senator Edward Kennedy) and President George H.W. Bush (former White House speechwriter Patrick Buchanan).³ Though these presidents ultimately received the party nod, all three went on to lose in the general election.⁴

Regardless of the difficulty that an intra-party challenge may pose, many former White House staff members profess that the campaign “overwhelms the White House” and “permeates everything.” In 1992, President Bush himself declared that he would “do what he had to do” to secure reelection (Devroy 1992). Just what is it that presidents “have to do” to get reelected? Given the dual roles of

president and candidate, to what extent does the quest for reelection affect “business as usual” within the White House? This essay addresses these questions, drawing attention to the mechanics of presidential reelection campaigns as well as their impact on the White House.

Trying to Control the Uncontrollable

Given the uncertainty of nomination politics, particularly in the aftermath of the McGovern-Fraser Commission, the White House is wary of nomination challenges and where possible, works to prevent them. In 1977, the Winograd Commission met to revise the Democratic nominating rules. Needless to say, White House advisors were instrumental in producing a set of reforms that would benefit Jimmy Carter’s efforts in 1980 (Lengle 1987, 242). And recall President Clinton’s vigorous fundraising efforts in 1995 and the bold move to finance “issue advocacy.” The strategy of tapping out generous donors early and running campaign advertisements well before election day (more than a year before the election) was not only designed with Bob Dole in mind, but also to repel, if necessary, any challengers from within the Democratic Party.

The quest for reelection has become quite complex. Since 1972, the modern presidential reelection campaign consists of three components: the White House, the national party organization, and the campaign organization. Of these components, the White House is clearly the most influential.⁵ High-level aides are immersed in campaign strategy and maintain frequent communication with campaign leadership. Generally speaking, the Office of the Chief of Staff and the Office of Political Affairs are the genesis of campaign planning, but presidents will often create specialized strategy groups, composed of White House aides, pollsters, and consultants. Within the White House, the chief of staff is the linchpin between the campaign organization and the White House. This aide’s seniority, coupled with his integral involvement with the reelection campaign, reflects the paramount importance of reelection. In addition, the chief of staff’s far-reaching advisory responsibilities point to the inevitable link between policy and politics. A *New York Times* article aptly characterized the campaign as a period in which “the politics will end up driving the policy” (Toner 1991).

While the chief of staff’s office takes over the macro-responsibilities of campaign planning, the White House Office of Political

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Affairs (OPA) typically handles the logistics in the early stages. Former OPA Director during the Carter administration, Tim Kraft handled long-term planning and recruitment before eventually leaving the White House to become the campaign manager. According to President George H. W. Bush's Deputy Assistant for Political Affairs, Ron Kaufman, "In the first two years, your major client, if you will, is the party in Congress and the states. The last two years . . . your major client is the reelection campaign."⁶ In addition to these key offices, a number of senior aides, outside advisers (e.g., Stu Spencer for Reagan and Bob Teeter for Bush), and an occasional cabinet secretary (Attorney General John Mitchell for Nixon) play roles in early reelection planning.

The second component in the president's campaign structure is the national party organization—a veritable White House annex staffed with presidential loyalists eager to see the president win reelection. Though they profess impartiality when confronted with an intra-party challenge, it is rather clear where their loyalty lies.⁷ The party organization fulfills critical long-range planning tasks like fundraising and party-building. In terms of financial assistance, the party pays for the president's political expenditures (e.g., polling, travel, presidential Christmas cards, cuff links). The party also conducts research, polling, voter registration drives, grassroots education projects, and outreach. These activities begin immediately after inauguration in an effort to lay the groundwork for a successful reelection campaign.

Once the president's campaign is off the ground, the party assumes responsibility for convention planning, fundraising (so that the party can spend money in addition to the federal allotment received by the nominee), and general assistance to the president's campaign organization. The tasks of the national party organization gradually change as election days nears, resulting in increased White House control and decreased party autonomy.

The third feature of a president's reelection campaign is the campaign committee (e.g., the Committee to ReElect the President [CREEP], the President Ford Committee).⁸ Unlike the White House and the national party organization, this independent campaign organization has a singular function—to insure victory for the president. Though the White House is the strategic campaign headquarters, the independent campaign conducts many activities that the White House cannot legally perform. For example, critical tasks like fundraising, compliance with Federal Election Commission regulations, delegate selection rules, and ballot access are all under the purview of the campaign committee. None would deny the essential role of the campaign organization, but its actions are by no means independent. White House aides carefully monitor and direct the campaign organization.

No Time Like the Present

The technical features of campaign planning begin about half-way through the president's first term. Though some former staff members will say in jest that it begins right after the inauguration as they seek to increase the president's approval ratings, the nuts and bolts efforts generally begin right after the midterm elections. Presidents and their aides interpret election results, discuss campaign staffing, and devise a preliminary strategy. Since Nixon, all incumbents except President George H. W. Bush began gearing up for reelection, on average, 23 months before the election.⁹ The delay in planning for the Bush administration remains a mystery. In light of the fact that President Bush possessed a seasoned group of political advisors as well as guidance from veterans of the successful

1984 reelection campaign, the Bush team should have been well positioned for 1992. Some claim that President Bush's uncertainty about seeking reelection delayed campaign planning, while others contend that the Gulf War, the absence of Democratic challengers, and record-high approval ratings resulted in a dangerous sense of complacency. On the other end of the campaign planning spectrum, President Ford spent almost his entire presidency preparing for the campaign.

On the Republican side, Ford had begun to think about and position himself for a term in his own right almost immediately after his succession and he had spent much of his abbreviated tenure in the White House trying first to discourage Ronald Reagan from challenging him for the GOP nomination and then beating back that challenge (Witcover 1977, 13).

Clearly those presidents fighting back an intra-party challenge are at the greatest disadvantage, affected both by the general impression that they are vulnerable and the potential fallout from a divisive nominating process.¹⁰ Nevertheless, all presidents are focused on the reelection campaign despite their electoral situation.¹¹

No More Business as Usual

The president's quest for reelection has a profound impact on the institution of the presidency. The shifting focus towards the reelection campaign results in staff shuffling and reorganization, alters the substance and amount of staff work, decreases White House policy initiative, further politicizes the decision making process, and modifies presidential activity.¹² Each of these short-term effects illustrates the consequences of a chief executive playing the dual roles of president and candidate.

In terms of staff shuffling, it is no secret that highly controversial aides often resign before the reelection campaign, some senior aides take on new positions within the White House and others leave the White House to work for the campaign. President Nixon asked his Attorney General to leave the Justice Department in order to manage his reelection campaign. During the Carter administration, Secretary of Energy James Schlesinger was clearly caught up in reelection politics. The energy crisis that haunted the Carter administration made Schlesinger a "political liability because of long gas lines"

(Cohen 1979). A less visible, but nevertheless campaign-motivated staff departure was President George H. W. Bush's chief of staff, John Sununu—a casualty of his own public misdeeds as well as being widely disliked by many White House staffers. Perhaps the most stunning staff realignment occurred during the 1992 reelection campaign when President George H. W. Bush asked Secretary of State James Baker to assume the position of chief of staff, replacing Sununu's successor Samuel Skinner. The president's willingness to move a highly respected Secretary of State to the White House in order to provide more hands-on assistance with the reelection campaign reflects its paramount importance. It is also important to note that high level resignations or departures often have a domino effect in that lower level aides will depart with the principal. Such staff shuffling results in temporary disorganization, inefficiency, and a lapse in communications both within the White House and across the executive branch (Dickinson and Tenpas 2002).

The quest for reelection also affects the substance and amount of staff work. Some staff members are forced to take on additional liaison tasks with the campaign organization, while others shift their focus entirely so that they can better respond to a campaign issue. In the case of the chief of staff, he is not only the linchpin between the campaign organization

and the White House, but every decision is made in terms of its potential impact on the campaign. The workload for speechwriters, communications staff, and policy advisers increases significantly in light of the heightened frequency of campaign speeches and events. According to former press secretary, Marlin Fitzwater, "The workload multiplies by tenfold . . . The dynamics of the press office changes in the sense that the press is the messenger of the opposition. It is an adversarial context."¹³

Not surprisingly, the focus on reelection politics drives down policy initiative. One former White House staff member forthrightly stated,

It is very hard to govern and campaign at the same time. Everything changes. Nobody cares about anything except reelection. It is hard to focus on domestic issues. There are no new legislative programs.¹⁴

This statement is supported by an analysis and review of legislative proposals sent to Congress.¹⁵ Between the third and the fourth year of the president's first term, initiatives declined for all presidents from Nixon through Clinton. The single exception was President George H. W. Bush whose numbers increased between 1991 and 1992 (from six in 1991 to 16 in 1992). Such an anomaly is likely a function of reelection politics and the strategic response from a president accused of neglecting domestic issues. During 1992, RNC Chair Clayton Yeutter was recruited to a White House post so that he could focus solely on domestic policy. As he indicated, however, ". . . it was too late . . . You just can't change the policy environment and the general public's perception of your policies and the adequacies or inadequacies thereof in that short period of time."¹⁶

Similarly, the number of executive orders decreased from the third to the fourth year of the term for all presidents since Nixon with the exception of President Clinton. The Clinton numbers can be explained by the presence of campaign consultant Dick Morris and his deliberate efforts to showcase the president's promotion of a number of small issues (e.g., school uniforms, the V chip). The executive order approach was far more attractive than taking on the Republican Congress, risking defeat and expending precious political capital. "Clinton often issued executive orders on small-bore issues to show he was taking action rather than calling on Congress to do something" (Allen 2002, A2). The decline in policymaking is real, and according to one staff member, "During the campaign, things change dramatically because every political story has a reelection dimension and therefore everything you work on has that potential."¹⁷ Decisions or pronouncements that may have

been advantageous, but potentially risky, in year two or three are completely avoided.

A related illustration of politically motivated behavior is the doling out of political goodies. President Carter used a loophole in Civil Service Reform Law to provide thousands of government jobs throughout the country. When James Baker worked for President Reagan, he specifically appointed Richard Darman to oversee the disbursement of government largesse. "Whenever the campaign team saw the need for action by the administration, it was Darman who knew how to get the government machinery moving" (Schieffer and Gates 1989, 183). President George H. W. Bush formalized the process by creating a "funnel" system to coordinate the efforts of various departments and the White House to disburse government resources (Pear 1992). President Clinton, having narrowly won in California, devoted substantial attention to the golden state—it was awarded 25–35% more money than any other state for technology reinvestment (Solomon 1996, 134). The Clinton administration was also known for "selling" nights in the Lincoln bedroom and holding other White House events (movie previews, coffees) to reward generous contributors.

Perhaps a less surprising, but nevertheless noteworthy effect of the reelection campaign is the change in presidential activity. The campaign trail requires substantial attention and is reflected in figures of presidential travel and political appearances.¹⁸ With the exception of President Nixon, who deliberately sought to avoid travel during 1972, Ford, Carter, Reagan, and Bush all witnessed a substantial rise in the frequency of travel—often more than double the third year of the administration.¹⁹ In addition, scholars Gary King and Lyn Ragsdale demonstrate the dramatic rise in presidential political appearances during a reelection year for presidents from Truman through Reagan (King and Ragsdale 1988, 274). During a reelection campaign, governing clearly takes a backseat to campaigning. Given the nature of campaign-induced change within the institution of the presidency, it is no surprise that White House staff members admit that the "campaign overwhelms the White House" or that it "preoccupies everybody."

For presidents in the post-reform era, the reelection campaign imposes a delicate balancing act upon the White House; one in which the focus shifts from governing to campaigning. Despite this shift, the tasks of governing cannot be neglected without dangerous electoral repercussions. Presidents must manage their dual roles of president and candidate. Unless and until the rules of the game change, we will see future presidents slogging through the snow and sleet of Iowa and New Hampshire, overwhelmed by the tasks of governing and campaigning, and longing for the days of TR.

Notes

1. An expanded version of this article will appear in William G. Mayer, ed., *The Making of the Presidential Candidates 2004* (New York: Chatham House, 2003).

2. This article focuses on presidential reelection campaigns in the post-1970 electoral reform era. Most scholars agree that the new candidate-centered system emerged in the aftermath of the McGovern-Fraser Commission. The Commission's recommendations ultimately transformed the rules pertaining to presidential nominations and national conventions. The election of 1972 was the first year in which the rules changes affected the presidential nominating process (see Hagen and Mayer 2000, 1–55).

3. The viability of intra-party challenges is based on their overall percentage of primary votes. Atkeson defines a competitive nomination contest as one in which there are two or more party hopefuls receiving at least 15% of the primary vote (Atkeson 2000, 308). As such, Nixon's challenges by Ashbrook (5%) and McCloskey (2%) were not characterized as competitive. The competitive intra-party challengers include: Reagan,

who received 46% (of the primary vote) in 1976; Kennedy, who received 37% in 1980; and Buchanan, who received 23% in 1992.

4. Though a challenger's motivations may vary, all perceive that the president is somehow vulnerable. In the case of President Ford, the controversial pardon of his predecessor, his status as an "unelected" president, a souring economy and an abbreviated term in office created an opportunity for Ronald Reagan. President Carter not only confronted stagflation, but an international crisis. His inability to negotiate with Iran for the return of American hostages created a powerful perception of weakness and ineptitude. President George H.W. Bush also suffered from an economy in recession and a reputation for ignoring pressing domestic concerns. In addition, a tax increase in late 1990 angered the conservative wing of the party as well as others who remembered his "Read my lips. No new taxes!" pledge.

5. The increasingly centralized and politicized role of the White House mirrors a similar trend in policymaking noted by Terry Moe (Moe 1985, 235–271).

6. Interview with Ron Kaufman, May 25, 1994.

7. Note that no rule or law requires the party machinery to remain neutral, nor is there a precedent in congressional elections. Nevertheless, challengers to sitting presidents like Ted Kennedy and Pat Buchanan have criticized the party organization for its favoritism.

8. Prior to President Nixon's reelection campaign, presidents relied more heavily on the party organization to fulfill campaign tasks. President Eisenhower, in particular, was more than happy to delegate campaign responsibilities to the Republican National Committee. Since Eisenhower, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson steadily moved away from the party-dominated reelection model until it was completely abandoned in favor of the establishment of an independent campaign organization (Tenpas 1997, 3–18).

9. There is an important distinction between formal and informal planning. This nearly two-year time frame refers to informal planning that occurs in White House strategy meetings. Another means of identifying the start of campaign planning is identifying the date that the campaign filed with the Federal Election Commission. This effort generally occurs the year prior to the election. In order to establish the informal planning time-frame, I relied on interviews with former White House staff and party officials, archival resources and relevant secondary sources.

10. There is a rich literature on the divisive primary hypothesis as well as the revisionists' arguments. See Atkeson, especially pp. 287–294.

11. Interestingly, the only president who delayed reelection planning (Bush) was perhaps in the most electoral danger (plummeting poll numbers and a weakening economy).

12. These findings are based on a systematic examination of eight presidential reelection campaigns, including archival sources and interviews (Tenpas 1997).

13. Interview with Marlin Fitzwater, May 19, 1994.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Data revealing the frequency of legislative proposals transmitted to Congress by the president were found in Light (1999, 42). After the Carter administration, data were obtained from The Office of Management and Budget, Legislative Reference Division Clearance Record.

16. Interview with Clayton Yeutter, May 25, 1994.

17. Off-the-record interview.

18. See Tenpas (1997, 88) in which the author calculates presidential travel based on a review of the *Public Papers of the Presidency* from Eisenhower through Bush. Travel within Washington, DC as well as to presidential retreats like San Clemente and Kennebunkport was omitted from totals.

19. Scholars Paul Brace and Barbara Hinckley found that foreign and domestic travel increase during the reelection year, and reveal that foreign trips occur in the spring of the election year while domestic trips reach their peak in the fall.

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