

FACT SHEET ON THE PRESIDENT'S DOMESTIC AGENDA

Paul C. Light
New York University
Brookings Institution

October 12, 2004

Even as President George W. Bush outlines his domestic agenda for a second term, he is ending his first term with one of the smallest domestic agendas in recent history. Compared to the eight presidents who preceded him, Bush ranks ninth, or last, in the number of major legislative proposals on his domestic agenda. Past experience suggests that his second-term agenda would be even smaller.

These and other findings come from a detailed assessment of domestic agendas dating back to 1961. A given proposal such as Medicare, tax cuts, or social security reform was counted as part of a president's agenda if it meets three criteria. First, the proposal must have been mentioned in a State of the Union address (or, in Nixon and Carter's case, a detailed first-year legislative message), which signals a presidential embrace. Second, the proposal must have been converted into a serious legislative proposal, which signals its significance as a substantive, not symbolic idea. Third, the proposal must have been covered by the *Congressional Quarterly* coverage as major legislation, which distinguishes it from the typical "laundry-list" of less significant initiatives that appear on the agenda from time to time.

Defined by these three criteria, the president's agenda is best viewed as a list of hopes for the future, some of which become law, others of which languish for a lack of support. Presidents rarely get everything they ask for, of course, but they can always dream.

(This fact sheet builds on my prior research on the president's agenda published in *The President's Agenda: Domestic Policy Choice from Kennedy to Carter* (Johns Hopkins, first edition, 1984), and *The President's Agenda: Domestic Policy Choice from Kennedy to Clinton*, (Johns Hopkins Press, second edition, 1999). The methodology used to assess the George W. Bush agenda is the same used in both earlier efforts. Readers are forewarned that the tabulations reflect my own judgments regarding the items on the agenda, and the relative size and scope of each individual proposal.)

Overview

Bush continues a trend toward smaller agendas begun in the wake of the 1981 tax cuts, which sharply constrained the amount of federal funding for large-scale, new programs. He also continues a trend among Republican presidents toward a "less-is-more" philosophy of domestic policy. His agenda is half as large as Richard Nixon's first-term agenda in 1969-72, a third smaller than Ronald Reagan's first-term agenda in 1981-84, and a quarter smaller than his father's first-term agenda in 1989-92.

Although less ambitious than his predecessors, Bush's limited number of large-scale, new proposals have been undeniably bold. His tax cuts, education reform, social security revisions, prescription drug coverage, and homeland security reorganization are easily classified as large-scale, new proposals, and match up with the large-scale, new proposals of the past such as civil

rights, voting rights, and Medicare under presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, environmental protection, revenue sharing, and national health insurance under Richard M. Nixon, energy and social security reform under Jimmy Carter, tax cuts under Ronald Reagan, budget reform under George H. W. Bush, and national health care, Americorps, and welfare reform under Bill Clinton.

However, what sets George W. Bush apart is the relatively shallow depth of his agenda. Whereas Kennedy and Johnson pursued 54 large-scale, new proposals in their two first terms, and Nixon another 18, Bush has pursued just five in his. Simply put, George W. Bush has placed all of his domestic policy proposals in a very small basket. Half of his agenda consists of small-scale, conventional proposals, including expanded drug treatment, pension reform, and an energy package that pales in comparison to the energy bills of previous administrations.

Specific Findings

The tables attached to this fact sheet suggest five general patterns in the evolution of the president's agenda.

1. The president's agenda continues to shrink. The absolute number of proposals on the agenda hit a contemporary high under Lyndon Johnson in 1965-68, and has been declining ever since. Although the decline was disrupted slightly during the Clinton administration in 1993-2000, even Democrats have little appetite, or at least little funding, for the kind of sweeping domestic change of the 1960s and 1970s. Although Clinton had twice as many proposals as the first president Bush, and almost three

times as many as the second, his domestic agenda runs a distant fourth among the four post-New Deal Democratic presidents covered in this analysis. (See Tables 1 and 2 for the year-by-year and administration-by-administration trend.)

2. As already noted, George W. Bush produced the smallest first-term domestic agenda in recent history. Although the war on terrorism certainly distracted Bush from domestic policy during his second-fourth year in office, it is not clear he would have presented a deeper agenda under any circumstance. His seven first-year proposals mark the fewest number of first-year, first-term proposals in the database, trailing previous presidents by substantial margins at similar points in their administrations. (Most first-year proposals are made well before the end of the first summer, with Clinton's national health care package a rare exception.)
3. Although it is not clear how much Bush could or would ask from Congress in a second term, the term-by-term comparisons suggest that his next domestic agenda would be smaller than his first. Second terms generally produce fewer proposals, especially following closer elections, which suggests that the nation may have seen the high point of the Bush domestic agenda already. (See Table 3 for the first-term comparisons.)
4. Bush's first-term not only produced the smallest domestic agenda in the database, it contains relatively few large-scale or new proposals. Having promised to reverse course toward smaller government in a number of policy areas during the 2000

campaign, Bush nonetheless concentrated most of his domestic energy on modest expansions of existing federal programs, confirming a “first-do-no-harm” philosophy in keeping government small. Clinton followed a similar path, but for a different reason. His relatively high percentage of small-scale, old ideas appears to be rooted in his early decision to devote the bulk of his political capital to national health insurance, as well as his commitment to reducing the budget deficit. (See Tables 4-6 for these comparisons. The scale of a proposal is judged by its budgetary, regulatory, and public impact, while newness is judged by its degree of departure from previous policy.)

5. The Reagan tax cuts appear to be the single most important explanation for long-term shrinking domestic agenda. If the 1981 tax cuts were, indeed, designed to “strangle the beast” metaphorically, they did the job. The number of domestic proposals on the Reagan agenda was less than half as large as the Nixon agenda, and consisted entirely of repeats in the second term. The rise of the “derivative-agenda” is particularly clear when the Reagan, Bush 41, Clinton, and Bush 43 agendas are compared as a whole against the Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter agendas. Before 1981, less than a quarter of the president’s agenda consisted of small-scale, old ideas; after 1981, the number more than doubled to just over half. (See Table 7 for a pre-post assessment of how Reagan changed the domestic agenda.)

Whatever Kerry or Bush might do in 2005, the days of bold domestic agendas may be gone for now. The federal budget deficit will clearly constrain new spending far into the future,

just as it did in the late 1980s and 1990s, even as Medicare and Medicaid absorb an increasing proportion of available revenues and congressional attention. As a result, Congress and future presidents may be forced to choose between creating new programs or repairing the old, protecting government's greatest achievements of the past or forging government's greatest achievements of the future.

Given the budgetary realities, presidents may have little choice but to tinker with school uniforms and steroid abuse rather than design the grand new initiatives of tomorrow. Much as Americans may be captivated by calls for great new initiatives such as prescription drug coverage, they also expect continued access to the Great Society programs of the 1960s, and remain addicted to the promise, if not the reality, of middle-class tax cuts. It is a recipe for an ever-shrinking domestic agenda.

TABLE 1: REQUESTS FOR LEGISLATION, ALL YEARS

President	Year	Total Requests	Total Repeats
Kennedy	1961	25	0
	1962	16	8
	1963	6	12
Johnson I	1964	6	11
Johnson II	1965	34	4
	1966	24	7
	1967	19	8
	1968	14	12
Nixon I	1969	17	0
	1970	12	9
	1971	8	12
	1972	3	14
Nixon II	1973	20	3
	1974	5	11
Ford	1975	10	3
	1976	6	7
Carter	1977	21	0
	1978	8	3
	1979	8	5
	1980	4	7
Reagan I	1981	8	0
	1982	7	1
	1983	11	3
	1984	4	5
Reagan II	1985	0	7
	1986	0	5
	1987	0	5
	1988	0	4
Bush 41	1989	8	0
	1990	7	5
	1991	6	6
	1992	4	5
Clinton I	1993	17	0
	1994	5	5
	1995	5	5
	1996	6	9
Clinton II	1997	6	3
	1998	7	4
	1999	2	6
	2000	6	5

Bush 43	2001	7	0
	2002	5	1
	2003	3	2
	2004	3	3

TABLE 2: TOTAL NUMBER OF DOMESTIC PROPOSALS

President	Number of requests	Average per year
Kennedy/ Johnson	47	12
Johnson	91	23
Nixon	65	11
Ford	16	8
Carter	41	10
Reagan	30	4
Bush	25	6
Clinton	54	7
Bush	18	5

TABLE 3: TOTAL NUMBER OF FIRST TERM DOMESTIC PROPOSALS

President	Number of requests	Average per year
Kennedy/Johnson	53	13
Nixon	40	10
Carter	41	10
Reagan	30	7
Bush 41	25	6
Clinton	33	8
Bush 43	18	5

TABLE 3: PRESIDENTIAL REQUESTS FOR LEGISLATION:
LARGE PROGRAMS VERSUS SMALL PROGRAMS

President	<u>Large Programs</u>		<u>Small Programs</u>		Percent Large Programs
	Total	Yearly Average	Total	Yearly Average	
Kennedy/ Johnson	28	7	25	6	53%
Johnson	50	12	41	10	55%
Nixon	23	4	42	7	35%
Ford	8	4	8	4	50%
Carter	22	6	19	5	54%
Reagan	13	2	17	2	43%
Bush 41	4	1	21	5	19%
Clinton	22	3	32	4	41%
Bush 43	7	1	11	3	39%

TABLE 5: PRESIDENTIAL REQUESTS FOR LEGISLATION:
NEW VERSUS OLD PROGRAMS

President	<u>New Programs</u>		<u>Old Programs</u>		Percent New Programs
	Total	Yearly Average	Total	Yearly Average	
Kennedy/ Johnson	33	8	20	5	62%
Johnson	55	14	36	9	60%
Nixon	46	12	19	5	71%
Ford	6	3	10	5	44%
Carter	25	6	16	4	61%
Reagan	18	2	12	2	60%
Bush 41	7	2	18	4	28%
Clinton	17	4	37	9	31%
Bush 43	7	1	11	3	39%

TABLE 6: LARGE/SMALL PROGRAMS VERSUS NEW/OLD PROGRAMS

President	<u>Large-New</u>		<u>Large-Old</u>		<u>Small-New</u>		<u>Small-Old</u>	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Kennedy/ Johnson	19	36%	14	26%	9	17%	11	21%
Johnson	35	39%	20	22%	15	17%	21	23%
Nixon	18	28%	5	8%	28	43%	14	22%
Ford	4	25%	4	25%	2	13%	6	39%
Carter	16	39%	6	15%	9	22%	10	24%
Reagan	11	36%	2	6%	7	23%	10	33%
Bush 41	3	12%	1	4%	5	20%	16	64%
Clinton	13	24%	9	17%	4	7%	28	52%
Bush 43	5	28%	2	11%	2	11%	9	50%

TABLE 7: THE REAGAN EFFECT: PRESIDENTIAL REQUESTS FOR LEGISLATION, PRE- AND POST-REAGAN'S FIRST INAUGURATION

Policy Difference	Pre-1981	Post-1981
Large/New	35%	25%
Small/New	24%	14%
Large/Old	18%	11%
Small/Old	23%	51%

Pre-Reagan sample = 266 cases (Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter)

Post-Reagan sample = 127 cases (Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Bush)