

Introduction

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Second terms have not been good to American presidents. They often are characterized by hubris, burnout, a paucity of new or bold ideas and are plagued by scandal, party infighting, lack of legislative success, and loss of seats in the midterm election.

The Twenty-second Amendment ensures that a reelected president becomes a lame duck, contributing to the diminution of the office in the view of other Washington institutions. But even presidents in office before adoption of the Twenty-second Amendment found that their second terms did not measure up to their first.

George W. Bush has not broken the mold or established a new tradition. He has a bad case of the second-term blues; nearly all of the symptoms are present. This is especially ironic, as the newly reelected Bush, joined by many of his acolytes, argued that the precedents set by second-term presidents did not apply to him. At his second inaugural, he was riding high, pockets filled with political capital, ready to use his election victory to accomplish major

reforms to Social Security and the tax code, poetic in his account of America's capacious role in the world.

Consider Bush's situation in relation to presidents, beginning with Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who were reelected to a second term (excluding Harry S. Truman and Lyndon Baines Johnson, who were not).

Hubris

Virtually all second-term presidents start with a healthy dose of hubris, believing that their reelection has proven their critics wrong, that their priorities were given a rocket boost, and, especially for modern ones, that they were left with immense freedom because they no longer have to worry about petty concerns such as getting reelected. FDR is a good example. With his large Democratic majorities, and at the start of an era of Democratic dominance, he aimed high. His second inaugural famously chronicled a nation one-third "ill housed, ill clad, and ill nourished." He sought to combat these problems, extend the New Deal, and wipe away the constraints on his program by the Old Guard. Most famously, he wanted to reshape the Supreme Court of nine old men. While eventually he did get to appoint new justices, in his second term, the Democratic Congress wanted nothing to do with his court packing plan and defeated it soundly. He also failed in his attempt to replace members of the independent Federal Trade Commission. Even more boldly, he tried to defeat conservative Democrats in the 1938 primaries in order to reshape his party but was wildly unsuccessful, which only emboldened them.

Burnout

Fatigue is nearly universally felt in a second term. The presidency is a big job; added to those pressures is the marathon campaign for

reelection. Not only is the president under stress, so is his staff. Most have gone four years working eighteen-hour days and now must hope for a second wind. Fatigue is a natural phenomenon. Burnout often weighs on the White House in making day-to-day decisions, but it also leads to turnover and shakeups. A second term often begins with a reshuffle, partly spurred by the desire to channel the energy generated by the election victory into accomplishments, but also because there are tired people seeking to move out, move up, or move to a new position. The pace of White House life makes it less stable after four years in office. Nearly every second-term president has replaced his chief of staff in the year or two after the election; Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton did so at the beginning of their second terms, Bush and Dwight D. Eisenhower before the second midterm elections.

Lack of New Ideas

Second terms also are characterized by a paucity of new ideas. If presidents have big ideas, they usually raise them in the first term. Sometimes they succeed. If they fail to implement their grandiose notions in the first term, it is rare that conditions will change to make it more likely that they will succeed in the second. Since reelections are affirmations of the status quo, voters tend not to err on the side of revolutionary change, contributing to an even more unfavorable climate for big ideas. The one striking exception to this rule is Reagan, whose push for tax reform materialized in his second term and became one of his signature achievements. This occurred in part because he laid the political and substantive foundation late in his first term, made the ideas a true centerpiece of his reelection campaign, and built a plan on broad bipartisan support, drawing on the ideas of Democratic icons Bill Bradley, a senator from New Jersey, and Dick Gephardt, a representative from Missouri, and relying on staunch support from the powerful

Democratic chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Dan Rostenkowski of Illinois.

Scandal

Scandal haunts second-term presidents: Sherman Adams's vicuña coat, Watergate, Iran-contra, Monica Lewinsky. It is not simply that scandals occur in second terms because presidents have been around longer, or are more tempted, or simply succumb to the law of averages and find wrongdoing eventually uncovered. First-term scandals are not unknown. But, generally, scandal needs time to germinate, to be uncovered, and to be regarded by the press and public as timely or relevant. Many of the most famous second-term scandals began in the first term and were suppressed successfully by the White House, enabling the presidents to win reelection and avoid embarrassment. But the process of skillful suppression often contains the seed of destruction—the coverup becomes the scandal more than the original offense. Just as important, scandal in the executive branch is highlighted, prolonged, and exploited by congressional investigations. With the exception of FDR, every second-term president since the Civil War has faced a Congress with at least one chamber controlled by the other party. In a second term, let the investigations begin.

Party Infighting

Party unity suffers in second terms. Successful first-term presidents—for example, those who can win reelection—are able to secure the consistent support of their party in Congress, getting factions to muffle their differences, to be team players in order to get things done, and to win reelection. The president's partisans are made to see that their fate, and the fate of the president, is

inextricably linked—if he succeeds, so will they; if he fails, so will they. At the same time, a successful president is able to keep his party’s ideological base inside the tent by convincing the base to cut him some slack so he can win reelection.

A second-term president faces a very different dynamic. His supporters know that this may be their last chance to get what they want, so there often is impatience with presidents, which is heightened by unrealistic expectations. His partisans in Congress realize that his fate and theirs are now separated—they are up for reelection in the coming midterms, which are historically deeply damaging to the president’s party, while he will not be up for election again. The willingness to get distance from the president—and to intensify that distance if he suffers public disapproval—increases geometrically. The ideological base, at the same time, calls in its chits now that the president no longer has an excuse to move away from its priorities or issues.

With these difficulties, it is not surprising that second-term presidents are less legislatively successful than first-termers. Of course, legislation does get passed; Congress has its own agenda to work on, and there have been notable second-term breakthroughs such as the 1986 tax reform act for Reagan mentioned earlier. But, generally, a second-term president is less legislatively successful and, more important, less in charge of the legislative agenda.

Salvation Abroad

Presidents experience a honeymoon at the start of their first term, when there is at least a greater prospect for party unity and often less vociferous opposition. There is also a sense of urgency for a president to get some things accomplished that he can campaign on for reelection. But a second-term president has diminished command of the domestic legislative agenda. And, for the most part,

presidents realize their predicament and try to seal their legacy with foreign policy accomplishments. They do this because presidents feel more comfortable on the world stage and know they can act in foreign policy more independently of Congress, the news media, and other Washington forces. Reagan and Clinton were more active and more lauded in foreign policy in their second terms. And foreign policy achievements often proceed on a separate track from the president's troubles at home. In 1987 alone, Reagan dealt with a Senate in Democratic hands, faced Iran-contra investigations by both the Tower Commission and Congress, and fired his chief of staff. But he also famously called on Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev to "tear down this wall" in Berlin and negotiated a historic arms control agreement with the Soviets. Clinton's heavy involvement in the Northern Ireland and Middle East peace initiatives, military action in the Balkans, Iraq, and Somalia were juxtaposed with battles with the Republican Congress and the Lewinsky scandal.

Midterm Losses

Finally, a second-term president nearly always faces bad news in the midterm election. For more than 150 years, until 1998, no second-term president's party had gained seats in either the House or Senate at the midterm election. Clinton broke this string in 1998 when Democrats picked up five House seats; the Senate numbers did not change. But there were two peculiar circumstances for Clinton. His party had lost so badly in his first midterm election that there was less to lose, and the impeachment and trial of the president rallied what might otherwise have been a divided Democratic Party.

In general, a loss in the second midterm election has several disheartening qualities for a president. It means a smaller majority, or, in many cases, the loss of a majority in Congress. And bad news

with only two years left in a second term is dispiriting to the president's party. The rosy prospects for the future that marked the beginning of the first term seem like a distant memory for a lame duck president with only two years to go and faced with a less friendly Congress. Scandals are more likely to be investigated by Congress if the opposing party takes control, and the sense of waiting out a president grows. Finally, as political scientist Charles O. Jones has pointed out, midterm elections are usually (although not always fairly) viewed as a referendum on the president, and if the election does not go the president's way, the dominant story in the news is defeat of the president with only two years to go.

Bush: Hubris

Bush's second term already has exhibited most of these distinctions. While partisans may disagree about the use of the term "hubris," clearly Bush has been a confident president, and his confidence about the prospects for his second term far exceeded the reality. In his first term, Bush maintained the reputation of being a strong leader, which was well deserved for his actions under fire in the aftermath of 9/11. But as Bush's popularity has waned, Congress, the news media, and other institutions have been more vocal in arguing that the Bush White House was too strong a defender of executive powers and did not consult Congress on important matters. The perception of strength of leadership also waned because the president was not decisive in responding to Hurricane Katrina and did not dominate the legislative and policy agenda in Washington as he had in his first term.

Bush: Burnout

The Bush team also has faced the burnout issue. Speculation arose that administration lapses over the federal response to Katrina

were exacerbated by an exhausted White House, especially including Chief of Staff Andrew H. Card Jr., who had a longer tenure than nearly all of his predecessors, and Karl Rove, who had full-time portfolios as chief political adviser and deputy chief of staff for domestic policy. A little over a year into his second term, Bush embarked on the first real White House shakeup. Before that, major figures had left the White House—Karen Hughes for Texas, and Condoleezza Rice, Alberto Gonzales, and Margaret Spellings to head executive departments—but no major figure had joined the circle of close Bush advisers. The replacement of Card with Joshua B. Bolten seemed at first a mere reshuffling of chairs. But the subsequent changes involving a new communications director, a new Office of Management and Budget director to replace Bolten, a new Treasury secretary, the reassignment of Rove to focus exclusively on political matters, in particular the 2006 midterm elections, and several other changes made this a real shakeup.

Bush had intended his second term to be marked by two big domestic agenda ideas, but not new ideas: Social Security reform and tax reform. Bush had made these issues part of his campaign agenda in 2000, but, once elected, it became clear that these were tough issues to tackle, particularly Social Security. So they were put off until after the reelection. Bush surprised Washington pundits by being able to campaign successfully on allocating a portion of Social Security payroll taxes to private accounts. Social Security was once called the “third rail” of politics: touch it and you were dead.

But while he was twice able to campaign on the issue, Social Security reform was not ready for congressional action. Unlike the start of his first term as Texas governor or his presidential start in 2001, when new key issues moved from the campaign immediately into the legislative process, Social Security reform had been studied and talked about until 2005. But it still did not have enough of

a constituency on Capitol Hill, even among Republicans. So the issue sat while Bush tried to go directly to the country with his message. But it never gained the legislative traction that moved the issues he emphasized in his first term.

Bush: Scandal

In Bush's second term, scandal was also in the air in Washington. As Republicans controlled the presidency and Congress, it is not surprising that the lion's share of scandals was in their camp. Most notable were congressional scandals, and the one involving lobbyist Jack Abramoff was the most significant. Abramoff connections led to the resignation of House Majority Leader Tom DeLay and the conviction of GOP congressman Bob Ney of Ohio.

In addition, there was the case of Republican congressman Duke Cunningham of California, who pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit bribery, among other charges. His acceptance of favors and maintaining a cozy relationship with lobbyists who dealt with military construction led the FBI to investigate other members of Congress. Finally, the scandal involving congressman Mark Foley of Florida, while more of a congressional matter, hit Bush's Republican colleagues in the House hard because it added to other doubts voters had about Republicans and surfaced only about a month before election day.

The Abramoff scandal also touched on the Bush administration, especially in the case of the executive director of the General Services Administration, David Safavian, who was convicted of having received favors from Abramoff, his former boss, and having provided insider information on contracts that might have been helpful to the former lobbyist.

But the scandal that hit the White House hardest was the Joseph Wilson/Valerie Plame affair pursued by Special Prosecutor Patrick

Fitzgerald, which raised questions beyond the allegations of improper release of classified information. Critics have asked whether this is an example of an administration trying to silence its critics on the war in Iraq. I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby Jr., the former chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney, was indicted. The scandal also threatened to implicate Rove, the president’s closest political adviser, although he was not ultimately targeted by the prosecutor.

Bush: Unity

Republican Party unity in the Bush administration has swung wildly from the Dr. Jekyll–like reflexive loyalty of the first term to the Mr. Hyde–like declared congressional independence from the White House in the second term. Few who studied the Bush administration would have predicted that congressional Republicans with such a small majority would be able to hold together as regularly as they did in Bush’s first four years. The unity was extraordinary. For Republicans to win on a party line vote in the House of Representatives in 2001, they could only afford five defectors from their ranks. The Senate began with a 50-50 tie, broken by the vice president, but soon turned to a one-seat Democratic majority when Senator Jim Jeffords (I-Vt.) left the Republican Party. In all of the forty years that Democrats controlled the House, they never had a working majority as slim as the 2001–02 Republican Congress.

And Bush more or less relied on his Republican majority. After the initial No Child Left Behind Act, which was passed with significant support from key Democratic leaders, most of Bush’s agenda was accomplished along partisan lines, sometimes attracting some Democratic votes but often relying on arm-twisting of key Republican House members to achieve one-vote majorities on

important issues. The reasons for the unity on the Republican side were many. It was the first time Republicans had controlled the presidency and both chambers of Congress since the 1950s. September 11 added to the sense of national purpose. House leaders were extremely skilled in counting votes and pulling out close votes, sometimes with tough tactics such as holding open votes for long periods or cutting generous deals to sway wavering Republicans. Also, significantly, the two political parties have become extremely polarized over the past thirty years. Where once there were many conservative southern Democrats and liberal northeastern Republicans, today there is nearly perfect separation between the parties, with few moderating voices. This was different from the situation Governor Bush faced in Texas, where he had to govern with a legislature partly controlled by conservative Democrats and where he often worked across party lines.

The unity of the first term makes the dissent of the second even more striking. Democratic opposition was stiffer to Bush as political allegiances hardened, and Democrats began to make many of the arguments that Republicans had made in the final days of their minority status. Still, despite their unity, Democrats had little input, especially in the House, where Republicans governed with their own narrow majority.

Opposition

But more significant than an invigorated opposition was the willingness of a Republican Congress to oppose a president of its own party. The criticisms began in earnest in the summer of 2005, when conservative budget hawks, concerned with the rise in domestic spending, flexed their strength and let the leadership know that their votes would come at the cost of restraining spending. This independent Republican populism surfaced again in the case of

Supreme Court nominee Harriet Miers, immigration reform, and the Dubai ports deal. Moderate Republicans found they could oppose their leadership on issues such as drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The administration also angered House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert of Illinois with the treatment of Porter Goss, a former member of Congress from Florida who was dismissed as CIA chief, and the FBI's raid on the congressional offices of Representative William J. Jefferson (D-La.).

Bush: Midterm Losses

With the midterm elections came expected losses. The loss of thirty seats in the House was not as large as the more than fifty that Republicans and Newt Gingrich gained in 1994. But examining these elections more carefully, 2006 looked a lot like 1994. All of the major political indicators (for example, the president's job approval rating, the generic ballot test, and polls showing whether the public thought the country was on the right or wrong track) significantly favored Democrats all year long. And the smaller number of House seats lost can be explained: the Republicans defended fewer open seats, ran fewer freshmen, and had fewer Republicans sitting in Democratic districts than did Democrats in 1994.

The election was an across-the-board loss for Bush and the Republicans. No incumbent Democrat lost in the House or Senate. In fact, in the House, only six incumbent Democrats won less than 55 percent of the vote. Democrats netted six governorships and large numbers of state legislators and state houses.

Bush's Blues

Bush's second-term blues are evident and to some extent could be predicted based on the history of past second-term presidents. But it is striking how Bush defined himself and set out a governing

strategy that was to overcome inherent second-term problems. In his own words, Bush reiterated his theory of “political capital” and how he could spend it to overcome these larger second-term forces.

As far back as his time in Texas, Bush defined his governing style in terms of “political capital.” For Bush, this meant that a leader could not sit on his popularity or bask in his triumphs but had to put that capital to work on other policy endeavors or else that capital would waste away.

The negative example that illustrates the use of political capital is the presidency of George H. W. Bush, who reached the stratosphere of public approval after the U.S. victory in the 1991 Gulf War. From a 90 percent favorable rating in the polls, Bush dropped like a stone and eventually lost the presidency to Clinton. Bush’s Republican critics called him the “in-box” president because he dealt with issues that were put on his agenda but did not have a forceful political agenda of his own. For George W. Bush, the sin of the father was that he did not use his popularity after the Gulf War for political and policy purposes.

George W. Bush has followed the motto that “winners win.” When he was given accolades for his initial policy successes as governor, when he finally was elected to his first term as president (even in a controversial election), in the aftermath of 9/11, after his victory in the 2002 midterm elections, and after the initial successes of the Iraq War, Bush used these victories to press for more of his agenda. Whether it was a new school financing plan in Texas, tax cuts, or a Department of Homeland Security, Bush did not sit on his laurels.

It was this theory of political capital that informed his plans for a second term. Two days after his reelection, Bush said:

Let me put it to you this way: I earned capital in the campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it. It is my

style. That's what happened in the—after the 2000 election, I earned some capital. I've earned capital in this election—and I'm going to spend it for what I told the people I'd spend it on, which is—you've heard the agenda: Social Security and tax reform, moving this economy forward, education, fighting and winning the war on terror.

Bush's understanding of his own political capital was astute. But it also relied on his always having been a somewhat popular governor or president. Before his 2004 reelection, Bush did not suffer the wild ups and downs that Clinton did throughout his governorship and presidency. When Bush's popularity began to drop significantly in 2005, the theory of political capital, his grip on narrow Republican majorities, and the public's perception of his strong leadership began to suffer.

Perhaps under different circumstances, Bush might have been able to keep his string of victories going, expending political capital to get more from his accomplishments. But the end of that string means that Bush must confront a phenomenon more common to second-term presidents—dealing with Congress, the public, and other institutions from a position of weakness, struggling to regain past popularity.

This book looks at how Bush governs, especially through the lens of his governing style in a second term. There are, of course, stylistic continuities, but the challenge to understanding how a president governs is a combination of his own governing qualities meshed with the circumstances before him. How Bush governs in a second term is about Bush and his environment.

The authors in this book are political scientists and journalists, but not ordinary ones in the least. Political scientists Fred Greenstein and Charles O. Jones are thoughtful historical and institutional thinkers, but they are also intimately familiar with the day-

to-day governing of Bush and other presidents. Our journalists, Dan Balz, Carla Anne Robbins, and David Sanger are not only filing stories to make deadlines, but they have a long record of thinking more broadly and comparatively over different presidencies. They have the knowledge and personal access to presidents and their staffs and a longer-term understanding about governing. All of the essays in this collection trace Bush's governing in a second term through domestic and foreign policy issues, in relation to his first term and to other presidents, and show a deep understanding of how presidents operate with the many other actors and institutions in Washington that matter.

