The Partisan Presidency

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Political scientists have tended to see the powerful presidency of the 20th and the 21st centuries as being the enemy of strong political parties. But over the past quarter century, presidents – most notably Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush – have been following a more partisan path. They have been relying on their parties more for support, both in Congress and in the electorate, seeking greater partisan control over the executive branch, and even using the media more to mobilize the base than to reach swing voters. We need to move beyond outdated notions of presidents above party politics and instead understand presidents who are passionately engaged in them, and seek to use their parties as tools of governance.

Traditionally, political scientists have tended to see the powerful presidency of the 20th and 21st centuries as the enemy of strong parties. (See Davis 1992; Milkis 1993, 1999; Jones 2002; Greenstein 1978). Through an “objective” media, presidents appeal directly to voters, over the heads of party leaders, seeking a non-partisan image. They build ad hoc coalitions of support in Congress without regard to party lines. They preside over an executive branch staffed by non-partisan experts, more interested in policy than politics. Presidents show little interest in their party’s performance in down-ballot races, let alone its long-term fate. All of these propositions held true for presidents of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, especially Eisenhower, Johnson and Carter. But since 1980, we have seen the rise of a new kind of presidency – a Partisan Presidency. “Partisan Presidents” have polarized the electorate along partisan lines to an extent unimaginable a generation ago, often experiencing an “approval gap” of 40 points or more. (The “approval gap” is the difference between the approval given to a president by his partisans, as opposed to that given by members of the other party). Relatively few members of the other party have voted for them.

“Partisan Presidents” have received overwhelming support in Congress from their party. More notably, they have confronted strong – sometimes near-unanimous – opposition from the other party. They have often relied heavily on their party’s leadership to deliver votes on Capitol Hill, and they have been unable to enjoy the cozy relationship that earlier presidents had with the opposition, e.g. Eisenhower and Sam Rayburn, Lyndon Johnson and Everett Dirksen. Even a president disposed to such a relationship – George H.W. Bush – was unable to have one.
“Partisan Presidents” have sought to put a stronger partisan imprint upon the executive branch, centralizing personnel decisions, and favoring ideological loyalists or spinmeisters over career civil servants or non-partisan experts. It’s hard to imagine presidents less interested in “neutral competence” than Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush. “Partisan Presidents,” particularly Reagan and George W. Bush, have actively campaigned for their party’s candidates and sought to use the national party committees as tools of governance. (Compare to Eisenhower’s apathy towards the GOP, or Johnson’s and Nixon’s distrust of their national party committees). Reagan, Clinton and George W. Bush have all shown an interest in their party’s long-term fortunes that escaped, say, Jimmy Carter. George W. Bush, perhaps our most “Partisan President,” has shown limited interest in wooing the conventional, “objective,” media. Instead he has sought to get his message out through arguably more partisan outlets – Fox News, conservative talk radio, the “Christian” media.

We need to move beyond outdated notions of presidents above party politics and instead understand presidents who are passionately engaged in them, and seek to use their parties as tools of governance. This paper begins a project examining the changing relationship between presidents and their political parties, with special emphasis on George W. Bush.
Table 1: The “Modern Presidency” and the “Partisan Presidency”

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“The Modern Presidency” and Political Parties

Most scholars of the presidency agree that a distinctive “modern presidency” emerged in the first half of the 20th century, first under Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, then, most fully, under Franklin D. Roosevelt. (Greenstein 1978).
Generally speaking, the heyday of the “modern presidency” (roughly from the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt through those of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon) saw political parties in decline, in the electorate, in government, and as organizations.

Milkis (1993, 1999) identifies 1937-38 as the key period of change in the relationship between presidents and their parties. Roosevelt alienated Southern Democrats through his wages-and-hours bill and his attempt to “pack” the Supreme Court; increasingly, these Southerners aligned with Republicans as part of a “conservative coalition” opposed to expansion of the New Deal. This split only grew over the next generation, making it difficult for Democratic presidents to look to their party to serve as a base of support in Congress and elsewhere. Roosevelt attempted to diminish conservative influence within the Democratic Party through his “purge” of 1938; after he failed to defeat New Deal opponents in primaries, Roosevelt abandoned his goal of a more nationalized, programmatic party. Instead, Roosevelt turned to the politics of administration, seeking to accomplish his liberal policies through executive action. (Milkis 1993, 1999).¹

The Rise of the “Partisan Presidency”

The past quarter century has seen a reversal of the trend toward weaker relationships between presidents and their parties. Beginning with Ronald Reagan, recent presidents have increasingly relied upon their parties for support both in the electorate and in the Congress. They have presented a more distinctively partisan image to voters and have found it difficult to cultivate support from the opposition. They have sought to lead their parties, using the national committees to garner support for their policies,
campaigning extensively for their parties’ candidates, and even seeking to mold their parties’ futures.

This presidency is partisan in more ways than one. Most obviously, this presidency is partisan through the close ties binding presidents to their parties. But it is also partisan in that the executive branch is used as a tool to support the president’s agenda; advice is valued to the extent that it promotes the party’s platform and the president’s political future, rather than how it fulfills the ideals of “neutral competence.” Finally, this presidency is partisan because the president performs as a partisan in the combat of the “permanent campaign.” The president, rather than floating above the political system as “leader of all the people,” leads the battalions of a partisan army into the battlefield of contemporary Washington. The parties that these presidents lead are not the decentralized, nonideological federations of the 19th century. They are nationalized, ideologically coherent, and headquartered in Washington – ultimately in the Oval Office. (Aldrich 1995).

While some of the elements of the partisan presidency emerged under Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan defined the Partisan Presidency as surely as Franklin Roosevelt did the Modern Presidency. Reagan sought to remake the Republican Party in his conservative image and to vault it into majority status; in this mission, he repeatedly campaigned for Republican candidates. He used the Republican National Committee to win support for his programs; he worked closely with Republican leaders in Congress, especially Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker. He polarized the electorate more than any of his predecessors, even Richard Nixon. Through centralization of policy decisions and appointment of ideological loyalists, Reagan managed to make the executive branch
a tool of conservative governance. Even a skeptic of presidential partisan leadership such as Sidney Milkis admitted that the Reagan era may have “marked the watershed … for a renewed link between presidents and the party system.” (Milkis 1993).

Despite his previous service as chairman of the Republican National Committee, George H. W. Bush harkened back to a less partisan style of leadership with his willingness to work with a Democratic Congress. But the era of détente did not last. Conservative Republicans angrily opposed Bush’s agreement to raise taxes in the 1990 budget agreement; Bush found himself desperately tacking to the right to win back his base as the 1992 election approached. Meanwhile, congressional Democrats increasingly blocked his legislative proposals in anticipation of a Democratic win in November.

Bill Clinton was not as relentlessly partisan as his successor, but he still fits into the post-Reagan paradigm. While he had his own brief period of détente with congressional Republicans beginning in late 1996 and climaxing with the 1997 budget agreement, he usually faced a remarkably united and determined opposition. In 1993-94, Republicans almost unanimously opposed Clinton’s budget and health care plan; in 1995-96, an empowered GOP sought to impose its own agenda, attempting to overturn one of the defining characteristics of the Modern Presidency; and in 1998-9, congressional Republicans attempted to remove Clinton from office, despite widespread public opposition. Clinton deeply polarized the electorate, experiencing an “approval gap” even larger than Reagan’s. Even during his second term, when his overall popularity often soared over 60 percent, he continued to inspire intense loathing among evangelicals and conservative Republicans (the same groups who would later adore George W. Bush).

But George W. Bush has set a new standard for partisanship by a president. If Reagan was the Franklin Roosevelt of the Partisan Presidency, Bush has been the Lyndon Johnson, building upon his predecessor’s legacy to an amazing extent. Unlike Reagan, Bush has been able to work mostly with Republican Congresses, freeing him of the need to win over Democrats. With the exception of the rally period after 9/11, Bush has been intensely unpopular with Democrats. Now that his support among Independents has fallen to about one in three (or worse), Bush is forced to rely almost exclusively on his GOP base. The Iraq War has divided the American public along partisan lines more than any previous conflict in the history of public opinion polling. (Jacobson 2007).

**The President as Party Leader**

“Modern Presidents” placed little priority on leading their party and often found allies across the aisle. Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon showed scant interest in their national party committees; Dwight Eisenhower avoided partisan appeals and distributed patronage to “Citizens for Eisenhower” activists as well as to traditional Republicans. By contrast, “partisan presidents” have served as active party leaders, campaigning for candidates, working with party committees, and even trying to mold their party’s future. Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush both sought to make the Republican party both a majority party and a more clearly conservative party. Bush set a new standard for presidential campaigning through his involvement in the 2002 and 2004 congressional elections, which included for calling for the defeat even of moderate Democrats who had
often supported Bush’s policies. (Nelson 2004; Bass 2004). Bill Clinton, while less disciplined in his commitment, tirelessly raised money for the Democratic Party and outlined a “New Democrat” vision to appeal to the center. (Rae 2000).

“Partisan presidents” have not shown the apathy that Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter displayed toward their parties. If the “reformed” presidential process of the 1970s produced nominees such as Carter and George McGovern who had had little contact with their party establishments, the “post-reformed” process of the past quarter century has produced nominees backed by party insiders during the “invisible primary.” (Cohen et al 2003, forthcoming; Rockman 2004).

A Partisan Public?

Operating in an environment of declining partisanship, “modern presidents” sought to win over voters across party lines. Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon all won substantial support from voters in the other party; all three downplayed partisan themes in their campaigns. Before 1980, presidents rarely experienced an approval gap over 40 points; Eisenhower and Kennedy enjoyed popularity across party lines; while Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter confronted significant opposition within their own party. “Partisan presidents” have experienced a much larger “approval gap” than their predecessors. (The “approval gap” is the difference between the percentage of the president’s partisans who approve of his performance and the percentage of members of the opposite party who do). From Eisenhower through Carter, no president had an average approval gap of more than 41 points; the approval gap never exceeded 48 points in any quarter. By contrast, Ronald Reagan had an average
approval gap of 52.9 points; Bill Clinton experienced one of 55 points, falling below 50 points in only two quarters. (Jacobson 2002).

But George W. Bush has set new standards for approval gaps. Not only has he experienced the largest approval gaps ever measured, he is the first president to ever exceed 70 points, which he did during most of the 2004 campaign. (Jacobson 2005, 2007; Dimiock 2004). Until recently, Bush has usually received more than 90 percent approval among Republicans, making him one of the most popular presidents ever with his own party; during 2004, his support among Democrats was among the worst ever received for a president within the opposition party.

Independents have tended to be closer to Democrats in their view of Bush, forcing him to rely on his own partisans for support. Consistently, a majority of Democrats disapproved “strongly” of Bush’s performance; similarly, a majority of Republicans “strongly” approved. (Jacobson 2005, 2007). Even before the campaign began, Bush campaign operatives were open in their belief that large numbers of voters would never back the president; instead they emphasized turning out loyal Republicans. In 2006, this polarization came back to haunt Republicans, as they lost six seats in the Senate and 29 in the House. Not only did Democrats vote near-unanimously for their party, but exit polls showed about three-fifths of Independents voting Democratic in House races.

When polarization reaches such an extent, one wonders if the phrase “public opinion” has much meaning, at least as a singular noun. Certainly, with the divergence in electoral constituencies, and the decline in “split-ticket” states and districts, Democratic and Republican officeholders are operating in radically different contexts. (Jacobson 2002).
“Partisan presidents” are also operating in a political system in which public opinion has become much more polarized along party lines. (Jacobson 2000; Bartels 2000; Fleisher and Bond 2001; Hetherington 2001; Layman and Carsey 2002; Lawrence 2001; Brewer 2004). Americans perceive far more ideological distance between themselves and presidents than they did in the 1950s and 1960s; arguably, more and more citizens see an enemy, not a leader, in the White House. (Hetherington and Globetti 2003). According to the National Election Studies, the 2000 and 2004 elections showed the highest level of party loyalty in history; in 2000, 87 percent of voters supported the presidential candidate of their party, in 2004, 90 percent did. (Jacobson 2007).

**Congressional Relations**

Modern Presidents often could not depend upon their congressional parties for legislative support. Those parties were usually divided; the North-South split within the Democratic Party was most notable, but there were divisions among Republicans as well, such as that between internationalists and isolationists after World War II, which forced Dwight Eisenhower to look to Democrats for support of his foreign policy. (Davis 1992; Milkis 1993; Jones 2002). But the period of the “Partisan Presidency” coincides with the rise of polarization and party leadership in Congress. (Rohde 1991; Bond and Fleisher 2000; Cox and McCubbins 1993). In an era of increased partisanship, presidents find more difficult to win support across party lines in Congress. (Sinclair 2000; Jacobson 2002). Opposition parties not only unite against the president’s policies, they may adopt a “no” strategy, refusing to cooperate on virtually anything he proposes, as did Republicans during Clinton’s first two years. Fewer members are likely to support the
policies of an opposition-party presidency, as Southern Democrats had done so frequently for Republican presidents. (Fleisher and Bond 2000).

But it is also true that presidents are now better able to rely on their congressional party for support than their predecessors could. There is some evidence that united and divided control matter more in a polarized era than they did a generation ago (Sinclair 2000a, 2000b; Nelson 2004). Both George W. Bush and Bill Clinton enjoyed close relationships with the congressional leadership of their parties; both men had deeply troubled relations with the leaders of the opposition. (Wayne 2004; Owens 2004). John F. Kennedy refused to campaign against Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen in 1962, even though he faced a tough race in a state that had voted for Kennedy; in a similar situation in 2004, Bush led a successful Republican drive to oust Tom Daschle. (Davis 1992). Hacker and Pierson (2005) point out how the ability of Republican congressional leaders to control the legislative process has allowed the party to pass legislation discrepant with public opinion.

In late 2002, the Bush White House, dissatisfied with Trent Lott’s leadership and dismayed by the uproar over the senator’s remarks at Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday party, helped engineer his removal as Senate Republican Leader. Contrary to Jones (2002), not only are Dick Cheney and Karl Rove familiar figures at meetings of Capitol Hill Republicans, representatives of the Bush White House regularly attend the gatherings of conservative activists hosted by Grover Norquist. Given congressional Republicans’ unwillingness to challenge Bush on most issues (with the notable exception of immigration), one wonders how separated our powers really are today.
But congressional partisanship, of course, goes far deeper than the personalities of particular presidents. The voting records and constituencies of congressional Democrats and Republicans increasingly diverge; party leaders wield more clout than they once did. (Jacobson 2002; Sinclair 2000a, 2000b, 2004). Even a president who wanted an old-fashioned bipartisan relationship with Congress, George H. W. Bush, was ultimately unable to have one. Clinton’s brief period of détente with congressional Republicans ended not only because of the Lewinsky scandal, but because Speaker Newt Gingrich nearly lost his position in an uprising by conservatives angry that he had “sold out.”

Partisan Presidents have helped create our polarized system, but they also must operate within it.

Partisan Administration

Modern Presidents led an executive branch where party politics played a diminishing role. Technocrats and personal loyalists replaced patronage hacks in key jobs, especially under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, who centralized many personnel decisions in the White House. But even Roosevelt, after lavishing patronage on a starved Democratic Party during his first term, gradually evolved to favor career civil servants and New Dealers of questionable partisan background. (Milkis 1993). Modern Presidents preferred advisors from policy-oriented backgrounds, even when they came from the opposite party or from outside politics altogether. Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower relied heavily on the “neutral competence” of the Bureau of the Budget in shaping their domestic policies. Lyndon Johnson had nonpartisan task forces, dominated by academics and other specialists, formulate his leading policy proposals. Richard Nixon appointed as his first domestic policy advisor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a
Democrat and veteran of the two preceding administrations; his first Cabinet was so ideologically diverse as to lack coherence. (Milkis 1993; Nathan 1983; Moe 1985).

While Nixon’s “administrative presidency” strategy was often interpreted as a means of a president “governing alone” without the support of a political party, it can also be a means of turning the executive branch into a tool of partisan governance, as both Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush have shown. (Nathan 1983; Moe 1985; Aberbach 2004; Waterman 1989). The administrative strategy lends itself especially well to an era when party activists are motivated more by ideology than by patronage; there are numerous professionals who are committed to the president’s agenda and are competent enough to enact it. Yet one cannot dismiss the role of material incentives entirely; today, a prominent government position can open the door to a lucrative lobbying career – perhaps a new kind of patronage.

Richard Nixon set the pattern for presidents taking greater control of the executive branch. Frustrated by the tendency of appointees to “go native” and by continuing power of civil servants and clientele groups, Nixon sought to remake his administration in 1972-73. (Nathan 1983). He centralized power in the White House and in a handful of trusted aides; he increased the power of the White House Personnel Office; he appointed loyalists to cabinet and sub-cabinet positions; he tried to use the Office of Management and Budget to rein in regulatory agencies. (Nathan 1983). While Nixon’s efforts were thwarted by Watergate, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush showed that his methods could reorient government in a more conservative direction. Both presidents selected ideologically sympathetic subordinates, centralized policy and personnel decisions in the White House, and used the OMB to curb regulatory excess. Bush took the
“administrative presidency” a step further by seeking to curb the power of public employee unions. (Moe 1985, 2003; Aberbach 2004; Bass 2004). These administrations also sought to secure greater partisan/ideological control of the judiciary, by creating recruitment processes that emphasized philosophy as much as competence or political connections. (McKeever 2004; O’Brien 2004; Yalof 2004).

Neither Reagan nor Bush II showed much regard for “neutral competence” or disinterested expertise. Both men pursued policies widely denounced by scientific “experts”: supply-side tax cuts; opposition to efforts to curb environmental dangers such as acid rain and global warming; support for socially conservative policies such as abstinence-based sex education, teaching “intelligent design” and opposition to the “morning-after” pill. During the preparation for the invasion of Iraq, Bush and his allies showed little interest in the concerns raised by career officials in the CIA, the Pentagon, or the State Department.

Today, presidents are more likely to turn to political consultants or ideologically driven think tanks for policy ideas; this marks a sharp difference from Jimmy Carter’s reliance on technocrats or Lyndon Johnson’s task forces of academics. Unlike Dwight Eisenhower or Richard Nixon, George W. Bush has shown little interest in hearing different views on policy questions, nor has he created procedures to ensure open discussion. (Milkis 1993; Heclo 2000; Bowman 2000; Campbell 2004; Medvic and Dulio 2001). Several veterans of the Bush Administration, from John DiIulio to Paul O’Neill, have noted the Bush White House’s avoidance of domestic policy and the president’s dislike for substantive debate; even Bush loyalist David Frum has admitted that the “faith-based” initiative was pursued primarily to woo religious voters, rather than
to remedy social problems. (Campbell 2004; Frum 2003; Suskind 2004) The disdain for “neutral competence” extended to judicial nominations, with the administration ending the practice of submitting nominees to the American Bar Administration for evaluation. (O’Brien 2004).

Partisan Media

Many scholars of the presidency see as the model for presidential-press relations as the amiable back-and-forth between reporters and Franklin D. Roosevelt or John F. Kennedy; they may also envision the reliance of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan on televised addresses, presumably aimed at the nation as a whole. Neither paradigm fits the reality of media relations in this partisan era. Since Nixon, administrations have tried to actively manage the news through the White House Office of Communications. (Maltese 1994; Kernell 1997). With the rise of the Internet and cable television, the audiences for presidential addresses, except in crisis situations, have been declining; there is some evidence, at least for George W. Bush, that those audiences have also become partisan. Bush’s efforts at “going public,” whether on TV or on the stump, have usually been aimed more at “rallying the base” than at “reaching out.” (Edwards 2004; Wayne 2004).

Both the Clinton and Bush II Administration have had notably testy relationships with the White House press corps. Both have sought to bypass the conventional media: Clinton by using the “alternative media” (such as the Internet and cable television), and Bush by using conservative media outlets such as Fox News and conservative talk radio. (Maltese 1994; Kurtz 1998; West 2001; Hacker and Pierson 2005).
While most media outlets have audiences that reflect the partisan diversity of the general public, a few have striking tilts in viewership. A 2004 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 35 percent of Republicans “regularly watch” Fox News; only 21 percent of Democrats do. One in seven Republicans regularly listen to Rush Limbaugh’s radio show; only 1 in 50 Democrats do. (Pew Research Center 2004). Twice as many viewers watched the Republican convention on Fox as watched the Democratic gathering (overall ratings for the two events were about equal). (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2005). 77 percent of Limbaugh listeners call themselves conservative. (Pew Research Center 2004). The Project for Excellence in Journalism notes the growth of a “journalism of affirmation” (e.g., Republicans watching Fox News) and a “journalism of assertion” (e.g., a blogger or talk show host making unsubstantiated charges). (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2005). This contrasts sharply with the Progressive ideal of objective, scientific journalism conducted by experts. (Lippmann [1922] 1997).

This “new partisan press” may have real political implications; conservative outlets hyped the “Swift Boat” charges against John Kerry when the mainstream media ignored them. Jacobson (2007) finds that the failure to find weapons of mass destruction or to demonstrate a connection between Saddam Hussein and the attacks of September 11 undermined the support of Democrats and Independents for the Iraq War. But Republicans continued to accept these justifications, and so remained supportive of the war. This differing perception of reality may be due to Republicans’ consumption of conservative media that has consistently supported Bush’s rationales for war.

*Implications of the Partisan Presidency*
The “partisan presidency” may have some positive effects on our political system. Turnout has increased in the past two presidential elections, which both featured strikingly polarized views of the candidates among voters. Voters report clearer images of the two parties, images with greater ideological coherence than in the past. The 2004 National Election Studies showed the highest number of voters ever who cared who won the election and who tried to influence someone else’s vote. The decline of the Progressive doctrines of “objectivity” in journalism and “neutral competence” in administration may have undermined the credibility of the mass media and the authority of the federal government. An “objective” media, however, can also demobilize voters, turning citizens into spectators, while turning over government to unelected experts can undermine democratic control.

But citizens also report greater ideological distance between themselves and presidents, which may be associated with increased distrust (Hetherington and Globetti 2004). (Political trust has fallen substantially since the mid-1960s; one effect has been to suppress presidential approval ratings; see Hetherington 2005). Both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush generated unusually intense support and opposition, often distorting the national debate. The relentlessness of the “permanent campaign” makes it difficult for politicians of opposite parties to work together.

United government in this partisan era may lead to greater productivity, but may also lead to the adoption of policies out of sync with public sentiment. Politicians may then respond more to ideological (or interest-group) currents within their party than to public desires or to objective expertise; many of George W. Bush’s legislative proposals – the faith-based initiative, private accounts for Social Security, estate tax repeal – seem
to reflect such thinking. (See Hacker and Pierson 2005). Divided government may lead to Bush I-era gridlock or to Clinton-era political warfare. Combining contemporary partisanship with a shouting-head media culture can make it impossible to develop solutions across ideological lines.

Even in this polarized era, our political system continues to restrain presidential partisanship. The separation of powers often produces conflict that does not follow party lines; it also allows for divided government that can force cross-partisan coalitions, although they have become more difficult to form in recent years. The numerous counter-majoritarian features of our system – ranging from the Supreme Court to the Senate filibuster – continue to make party government only a limited possibility. Individual politicians concerned with their own political futures may choose to break with an unpopular presidents; even the quintessential “Partisan President,” George W. Bush, has found congressional Republicans to be cool to his plan for Social Security private accounts.

Some potential 2008 presidential candidates, such as John McCain and Mark Warner, might govern in a less partisan fashion; although one should remember that George W. Bush campaigned in 2000 as a “uniter, not a divider” who would end the ferocious conflict of the Newt Gingrich era. Party factionalism, dormant in recent years, could revive: perhaps the Iraq War will heighten divisions among Democratic hawks and doves, perhaps the long-awaited, rarely-seen rupture between social and fiscal conservatives will finally split the GOP. (Reiter 2005). But most of the factors contributing to the Partisan Presidency appear to be long-term, not short-term; we are not
likely to see a return to the above-the-fray style of the Eisenhower Administration any time soon.
References


Notes

1 In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars discussed a “postmodern presidency,” which could also be called a “postpartisan presidency.” This concept most clearly applied to Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter and, to a lesser extent, to Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, particularly at their political nadirs. Presidents could no longer count on their party to provide them with a base in the electorate or in Congress. The weakening of parties and the decentralization of power on Capitol Hill left presidents with few allies able to deliver support. Due to the reform of the nomination process, an “outsider” like Jimmy Carter was able to reach the presidency without gaining the support of traditional party leaders; presidents increasingly “went public” to appeal to voters directly. The executive branch was increasingly dominated by bureaucrats and issue activists detached from party politics. See Greenstein 1978; Rose 1991; Nathan 1983; Ranney 1975; Polsby 1983; King 1978; Kernell 1997).

2 For example, the Gallup Poll found that the audience for Bush’s address on June 27, 2005, in which he defended his Iraq policy, was 50 percent Republican, 27 percent Independent and 23 percent Democratic – a much more Republican group than the nation as a whole. Not surprisingly, three-quarters of viewers approved of the speech. A similar partisan pattern has prevailed for many Bush addresses. See Dionne 2005 and Bazinet 2005. At the time, the most recent Gallup Poll showed only 45% of Americans approved of Bush’s performance as president, with only 42% approving of his handling of Iraq.