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Presidential Communication

Explain how communication technology has changed the president's relationship with the national constituency and the other branches.

Even Abraham Lincoln understood the power of his brand. "Perception is everything," he said. "One of the most conspicuous trends in the development of the modern presidency," according to political science, "is the emergence and growth of the plebiscitary presidency...Contemporary presidents engage in a permanent public campaign to promote legislative priorities." Teddy Roosevelt called it his bully pulpit. Whatever you call it, today's presidents rely upon public speeches, polls, extensive travel around the country and social media to set the national agenda. The ever-present need for rhetorical appeals along with communication technology have changed the president's relationship with the national constituency and the other branches of government.

Edward Corwin, noted political scientist, rooted presidential authority in the rather limited formal powers as found in the text of the U.S. Constitution. In contrast, Richard Neustadt, another noteworthy scholar, posited presidential power and authority in the ability to master certain informal powers. This meant presidents could successfully dictate policy priorities through the art of persuasion. Presidents, therefore, greatly influence government outcomes through strategic bargaining with policy makers and gaining public approval through high profile events. Recent presidents have traveled more, given more speeches, made appearances on highly rated television programs and utilized a variety of social media platforms. Public approval, it has been argued, gives presidents leverage but not control. Such leverage, however, has made the modern president more powerful. It has dramatically changed the relationship with both national constituents and players in the other branches.

The Constitution requires presidents to give an annual State of the Union address. Traditionally this was an important agenda setting moment. It still is. Yet today a 24/7 media cycle has allowed presidents to promote a different agenda each and every day. All types of media cover presidential travels. Speeches are televised and posted on social media. Other modern technologies like Facebook and Twitter make presidential movement and statements ubiquitous. All of these communication outlets allow the president to become a first responder. They also let the president mold and make stories. These pseudo-events go a long way in explaining how presidents today build public approval and therefore advance their political agendas.

Examples are plentiful of presidents practicing this type of agenda setting. Woodrow Wilson, even before he entered the White House, considered that if a president could "rightly interpret national thought and boldly insist upon it, he (would be) irresistible." Ronald Reagan's ability to master these skills earned him the title, "The Great Communicator." Few presidents, however, were as intentional about employing public

opinion as an empowering agent as Bill Clinton. During his campaign in 1992, a “war room” was created to coordinate activity. A similar “war room” was set up in the White House to coordinate agendas, legislative priorities, political battles and administrative rule making. In Clinton’s “war room” the rules of engagement were designed to fight critical budget battles as well as fights for NAFTA, Health Care and the Reinvention of Government. The Clinton Administration did not win all of these battles but they were able to call upon high public approval to ward off Republican inquisitors seeking to remove him over a sex scandal. Demonstrably presidents use communication technologies to influence critical constituencies.

Michael Novak has written, “If we are to reform the presidency, the heart of the matter is the president’s power over reality, his symbolic power. The social reality of the U.S. cannot be left to definition by one man alone.” Teddy Roosevelt had his bully pulpit. Obama had Snapchat. Trump Twitter. Presidents are uniquely positioned to move political agendas by drawing attention to national priorities and therefore pressuring policy makers to act accordingly. The Founding Fathers may have envisioned an energetic chief executive but they never would have imagined a plebiscitary presidency. Nor would they have understood what a recent Google executive stated, “If you want to liberate a government, give them the Internet.” Communication technologies along with social media have changed the relationship between “we the people” and their government. Not sure who has the upper hand. Google it.