

President I

I get the impression (primarily from the first paragraph of Moe and Howell) that Neustadt's work was a revelation when it was first published. And certainly, his exploration of the informal powers of the presidency was thorough and incisive. I have to say, though, that I spent a fair amount of the reading thinking "well, duh." What I needed, and what I don't believe Neustadt provided, was an explanation of how the presidency had *changed* to become what he observed. Given that his thesis started with the idea that demands on "midcentury" presidents had fundamentally changed the institution, I expected more comparison to pre-WWII executives. In what ways did the presidency change? Why was this change irreversible (as Neustadt seemed to suggest) rather than just a product of the times and/or the particular presidents he studied? The fact that he was able to update his work with information on more recent presidents (and, admittedly, my "well, duh" reaction) indicates that Neustadt may have been correct in his assumption that these changes were permanent, but I don't think he made his case within the reading we did.

I also felt Neustadt spent insufficient time explaining what the benefits of presidential power were. In many ways, Neustadt seems to assume this as a goal of presidents, without justifying this belief. Indeed, he is fairly explicit that Eisenhower did not actively seek such power. In the tail end of our reading, Neustadt does claim that a powerful president will lead to improved policy outcomes, but I did not see clear evidence for that claim. For example, Neustadt spends a lot of time contrasting Eisenhower in 1957, when he was apparently bungling the budget process, with Eisenhower in 1958, when he was more decisive about his budgetary goals. Other than more successfully implementing a budget, what was the outcome of Eisenhower regaining his prestige? Could it be simply that Eisenhower was unsure of what to do in 1957, but had a clear vision in 1959, and was therefore able to implement it? I wanted to see a non-budgetary impact, such as Eisenhower being able to pass unrelated legislation without strong-arming Congress, or something similar.

Moreover, Neustadt's three cases of presidents imposing their will were not necessarily taken at times of great presidential prestige—Truman's firing of MacArthur, in particular, was later shown to have happened at a time when the president had put his prestige at serious risk. If presidents are still able to impose their will when their reputation is called into question, why must they be so attentive to popular prestige and professional reputation? Neustadt's focus on prestige and reputation also had me questioning whether he would allow for president's to make decisions on moral or policy grounds, even if they knew such a decision would imperil their reputation.

One quick final and unrelated comment on the Moe and Howell piece, which I largely thought presented a nice model for understanding some aspects of the presidency. The authors put a lot of stake in the implementation/enforcement role

of the president, citing this role as leading to significant power over both Congress and the Court. However, it felt like they were treating the executive branch as a monolithic entity designed to do the president's will. Given both the Neustadt reading as well as some sense of the federal bureaucracy, this characterization seems far from realistic. I'm interested to see what the bureaucracy readings later in the semester have to say about this relationship.

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