

Presidential Campaigns and the Congressional Agenda:  
Reagan, Clinton, and Beyond

Dr. Colleen Shogan  
Assistant Professor, Government and Politics  
George Mason University  
Email: [cshogan@gmu.edu](mailto:cshogan@gmu.edu)

Presented on November 22, 2004

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, The Congress Project  
Washington, DC

In contemporary politics, presidents cannot escape the task of agenda setting. Like it or not, the president has become the most important single player in the legislative juggernaut of Washington, DC. Although the role of the president as an agenda setter has been explored previously, political scientists know very little about the ability of winning presidential candidates to enact campaign promises. We know that presidents have an incentive to follow through with such promises since the public holds them accountable for unmet expectations. But how often are presidents successful in transforming campaign rhetoric into policy realities? How has campaign rhetoric affected the ensuing legislative agenda? Has Congress adopted a president's campaign program as the basis for its own legislative agenda? In particular, this analysis will compare and contrast the campaign agenda setting strategies of first and second term presidents.

I will analyze four recent presidential campaigns and their subsequent legislative sessions. To explore the first versus second term comparison, I chose Ronald Reagan's 1980 and 1984 campaigns and Bill Clinton's 1992 and 1996 campaigns. In the paper, I systematically outline the policy proposals each candidate advocated during their campaign. I formulated a list of campaign policy proposals by reading numerous campaign "stump" speeches, the party nomination acceptance speeches, and reviewing the relevant academic literature written on the specific campaign. I then examined the following Congress to determine which advertised proposals were signed into law.<sup>1</sup> I used *Congressional Quarterly* as my primary resource for legislative activity, and also consulted various Internet resources for details concerning particular bills and proposals.

### *Reagan's 1980 Campaign*

Reagan kept the message of the 1980 campaign simple: he ran on the platform that lower taxes and decreased federal expenditures would reinvigorate the domestic economy. An analysis of his campaign speeches and 1980 Republican convention acceptance address demonstrates that candidate Reagan repeatedly emphasized these two issues more than any other policy proposal. According to Reagan's campaign speeches, high taxes are inflationary and inhibit Americans from saving, investing, and producing. The reduction of the federal government could be characterized as Reagan's promise to "eliminate waste." Throughout the 1980 campaign, Reagan argued that the federal government's bloated size prevented prosperity, concluding in his convention speech that "government is never more dangerous than when our desire to have it help us blinds us to its great power to harm us."<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, Reagan also emphasized two other policy proposals during the campaign. He offered solutions to the nation's energy problems, by asserting that the United States must work to produce more domestic energy sources. While Reagan did not back away from conservationist principles, the crux of his energy agenda focused on increasing the productivity of America's energy sources through deregulation. In foreign affairs, Reagan promised an increase in pay and benefit levels for the armed services, and a strengthening of the military. Although Reagan made it clear he did not favor a peacetime draft, he argued that his proposals would strengthen the military's numbers by making reenlistment an attractive option for those already serving.

Reagan's 1980 campaign advertised several policy positions that could be pursued as executive initiatives rather than legislative proposals. For example, Reagan's

campaign rhetoric often criticized the United States' relationship with the Soviet Union, contending that "negotiation must never become appeasement." To defeat communism, the United States must recognize its true friends and build relationships with its allies to fortify our international posture. Reagan advocated a "North American Accord" that would strengthen Mexico and Canada's security capabilities. Although some may consider it surprising, Reagan also underscored his commitment to end discrimination against women, calling for a liaison with state governments to repeal discriminatory statutes. Lastly, but certainly not least, Reagan ran on a "moral leadership" platform which promised to reinvigorate and renew a "spiritual revival" in the country. However, the social legislation (school prayer, abortion) that might follow from a values-centered leadership posturing was rarely mentioned in the 1980 campaign. Instead, Reagan's 1980 rhetoric employed a more ambiguous, feel-good approach that advocated an overarching moral reconsideration of American life rather than specific policies.

While it is important to distinguish between Reagan's executive and legislative agenda, it would be incorrect to conclude that Reagan ran on a presidency-centered platform. In fact, Reagan kicked off the fall campaign in September 1980 with a rally on the front steps of the Capitol, accompanied by many Republican congressional candidates. The message was clear: elect Republicans if you want considerable change in American politics. As much as possible, Reagan emphasized that all Republican candidates endorsed the same policies and proposals.

In summary, Reagan's 1980 campaign can be described as a repudiation of the nation's direction. All of his advertised policies signified a departure from Carter's leadership agenda, and in part, from the liberal "New Deal" and "Great Society" regimes

which preceded him. There was no blurring of distinction between the two candidates in 1980, which facilitates a precise examination of how well Reagan succeeded in enacting his campaign promises.

### *Reagan and the 97<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1981-1982*

At his official announcement of candidacy in 1979, Reagan clearly articulated that he believed in the existence of electoral mandates. At the New York Hilton, he stated:

If I am elected, I shall regard my election as proof that the people of the United States have decided to set a new agenda and have recognized that the human spirit thrives best when goals are set and progress can be measured in their achievement.<sup>3</sup>

In 1980, Reagan secured the presidency in an Electoral College landslide (489-49) but only won a little over half of the popular vote (50.7%). However, given his strong defense of electoral mandates, it was not surprising that he pursued his campaign agenda aggressively in Congress.

The zenith of the Reagan Revolution occurred in 1981. The campaign promises Reagan advertised served as the basis for Congress's first session agenda. Of the four major policy issues Reagan emphasized during the campaign (tax cuts, reduction in spending, energy, defense build-up), three were addressed in 1981 alone. Congress passed a tax cut, reconciliation legislation that cut \$35 billion from spending, the removal of dairy price supports, an increase in military pay, resumption of B-1 bomber production, and continued funding of the MX missile. Additionally, Congress raised the debt ceiling to \$1 trillion, enabling Reagan to move forward with his tax cuts, which he claimed would stimulate the economy.

Despite these victories, Reagan did lose on a few important items. His proposal to cut Social Security benefits was met with stiff resistance in Congress, and the House strongly rejected the proposed abolishment of the Legal Services Corporation. Although the first session of the 97<sup>th</sup> Congress largely followed Reagan's direction, Congress did muster its own limited agenda. Both houses passed a revision of the Clean Water Act, and an omnibus farm bill which continued price supports for tobacco. The House authorized an extension of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, while the Senate banned Medicaid funding of abortions in non-life threatening situations. However, these policy initiatives were minor compared to the dominance of the Reagan agenda in 1981.

Perhaps as his 1980 electoral victory became more of a distant recollection in the memory-challenged atmosphere of the Beltway, Reagan's legislative leadership waned in 1982. Congress did not deviate from Reagan's pro-military, anti-government growth agenda, but did reject many of Reagan's specific proposals. In particular, Congress balked at Reagan's overtures to reduce the size of government, convinced him to support a tax increase, reduced requests for military spending, and denied production funds for the MX missile. After overriding his veto of the supplemental appropriations bill, Congress reasserted its authority in determining budget priorities, and secured \$5.4 billion in new spending initiatives. Reagan did convince Congress to pass his version of an energy preparedness bill, fulfilling a campaign promise. Despite the newly found independence of the second session, Congress did not originate much of its own legislation, and instead concentrated on defending already existing domestic programs. In that sense, even though Reagan found Congress much less hospitable to his proposals in 1982, he did achieve his campaign promise of minimizing the size of government.

Simply by putting Congress on the defensive, the creation of new government programs became an unlikely prospect.

There is no doubt that the 97<sup>th</sup> Congress was the “Reagan” Congress. Even after scouring legislative report cards for the 97<sup>th</sup> Congress, there is little evidence to substantiate the notion that Congress had its own political program in 1981 and 1982. Furthermore, Reagan succeeded in passing legislation in all four of the policy areas (taxes, reduction of government, energy, military build-up) he ran on in 1980. This being said, Reagan also suffered several policy defeats in 1982, which dampened support for the claim that his “Revolution” lasted beyond the brief one-year honeymoon of 1981.

### *Reagan’s 1984 Campaign*

Reagan’s 1984 campaign retained the similar themes of lower taxes and smaller government while broadening its issue agenda. In his 1984 campaign speeches, Reagan listed a number of policy goals, including continued support for the space shuttle program, enterprise zone legislation, education reform, a crime bill, increased military spending, a balanced budget amendment, a line-item veto amendment, a voluntary school prayer amendment, private school tuition tax credits, simplification of the tax code, and funding for the eventual construction of a permanently manned space station. During the campaign, Reagan mentioned these particular policy promises repeatedly.

The overwhelming majority of Reagan’s rhetoric focused on domestic policy proposals rather than foreign policy. When he talked about international concerns, Reagan defended the invasion of Grenada, the United States’ continued relationship with Israel, and the strengthening of NATO alliances. Nonetheless, the crux of Reagan’s 1984

message remained domestic in nature, and appeared to build upon the policy achievements of his previous administration. Lee Atwater, the deputy director of the 1984 Reagan campaign, strategically focused reelection efforts on the record of the past four years rather than a coherent policy message for the second term.<sup>4</sup>

It would be fair to characterize the tone of Reagan's 1984 campaign as optimistic and buoyant, perhaps reflecting the campaign's theme, "It's Morning Again in America." Although Reagan continued to run on the conservative principles he advertised in 1980, the 1984 campaign seemed to stray from the austerity of his earlier bid by providing a litany of policy proposals the president now endorsed. Without a doubt, the 1984 Reagan campaign did not promote the anti-government message as stridently as the previous effort.

#### *Reagan and the 99<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1985-1986*

Quite simply, 1985 was not a repeat of 1981. Reagan failed to enact almost all of the proposals he advertised during the 1984 campaign, except for tax reduction legislation. On the remainder of issues, Congress dominated the political arena with its own agenda. In *Congressional Quarterly's* legislative summary, American Enterprise Institute (AEI) scholar Norm Ornstein observed that 1985 was the closest we had come in a "long time to congressional government" in the United States. Ornstein speculated that Reagan lost control of the 1985 agenda because he had "exhausted most of his ideas by the time he got to his second term."<sup>5</sup> However, an analysis of the 1984 campaign speeches suggests otherwise; Reagan elaborated and extended his domestic agenda in his second presidential campaign. It is more likely that personnel changes inhibited



Reagan's leadership of Congress. Reagan's new chief of staff, Don Regan, was not known for maintaining cordial relations with Congress, and new Senate majority leader Robert Dole seemed more willing to oppose the president on key domestic issues. At the end of 1984, Dole concluded that presidential-congressional relations had changed. According to Dole, in 1981, "We knew we had to stick together." But by the end of the first term, Dole stated, "Now the bloom is gone."<sup>6</sup>

Congress pushed its own issues in 1985, and with the exception of tax legislation, these issues were distinct from those Reagan promoted during the 1984 campaign. In opposition to Reagan's policy preferences, Congress passed a new omnibus farm bill, kept defense funding increases under the rate of inflation, cut CIA and intelligence appropriations, reauthorized the National Institute of Health, continued to fund Amtrak, and preserved the Small Business Administration. Congress also rejected a number of proposals that Reagan advocated. They blocked the line-item veto amendment, Reagan's restrictions on college student aid, military aid to Central America, the balanced budget amendment, the voluntary school prayer amendment, and Reagan's export-promotion program. Also, Congress orchestrated deficit reduction legislation that altered budgetary procedures, Gramm-Rudman-Hollings.

Reagan had more success with Congress in 1986, particularly with the tax reform act which reduced tax rates while eliminating loopholes. This legislation fulfilled Reagan's 1984 campaign promise, in which he vowed to simplify the tax code and lower taxes. Congress also approved support for the Nicaraguan contras, the first time in three years the House agreed with Reagan's request. In more oppositional moves, Congress continued to slash Reagan's budget requests for defense and the strategic defense

initiative (SDI), terminated economic ties between the United States and South Africa, and blocked production of chemical weapons in the United States. Once again, much of Congress's time was spent in reaction to Reagan's proposals, which prevented the orchestration of an independent congressional policy agenda. The most important congressional initiatives in 1986 were immigration reform and a relaxation of the nation's gun control laws.

There is no doubt that Reagan's influence upon Congress diminished in his second term. This is not to say that Reagan failed to enact his policy agenda. However, it is important to note that Reagan's policy proposals in his second term did not follow his campaign promises as closely as they did in 1981 and 1982. Proposals such as the manned space station, the creation of enterprise zones, education reform, a crime bill, and private school tuition tax breaks fell off the radar screen as soon as the 1984 campaign ended. Reagan policy achievements declined in his second term, and therefore, so did his ability to fulfill his campaign promises. However, the failure to enact his campaign agenda may not have damaged Reagan politically, since voters largely selected Reagan in 1984 because they thought he had done a good job in his first term of office.<sup>7</sup> When the electorate engages in "retrospective voting," it is altogether possible that the issues emphasized by the candidates recede into the background.

### *Clinton's 1992 Campaign*

Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign promised significant change regarding the organization of the American economy. Almost all of Clinton's campaign proposals revolved around his economic priorities and job growth plans. Clinton's message in 1992

was straightforward and succinct: the fundamental principles of our nation's economy were outdated and broken. Clinton pledged to alter national priorities, put "people first," and establish a "new covenant" for America's future. Clinton's stump speeches made it clear that a vote for George Bush represented "more of the same" whereas a vote for Clinton signaled a mandate for significant change.

Although Clinton's 1992 campaign rhetoric has been criticized as too abstract, he did advertise a number of concrete policy proposals.<sup>8</sup> Clinton aggressively campaigned on family leave, an overhaul of the nation's health care system, the earned income tax credit for the working poor, a national service initiative, motor voter, increased federal aid to schools, a reduction in defense spending, and more money for Head Start. He also frequently mentioned protecting abortion rights, a reduction in the federal bureaucracy, gun control legislation, a more comprehensive student loan program, a crime bill, the line-item veto, and the creation of an apprenticeship program after high school for young people who pursue a trade rather than college. Clinton also endorsed at least two controversial policies during his campaign—free trade and lifting the ban on gays in the military. Clinton did mention his positions on these two issues during the campaign, but did not make them the focal point. In fact, he mentioned neither gays in the military nor free trade in his 1992 convention acceptance speech in New York City.

Since the dominant theme of Clinton's 1992 campaign was the need for noteworthy changes in policy goals and direction, it placed significant pressure on the President in 1993 to fulfill the promises he made during the campaign. Even if citizens couldn't articulate the laundry list of policy proposals Clinton made during the 1992 campaign, they understood clearly that he represented reform and rejuvenation. The

activist themes Clinton emphasized during the campaign determined his governing style. He had to hit the ground running. Anything less than aggressive legislative leadership would have been a disappointment. In this sense, Clinton's 1992 campaign put him between a rock and a hard place. Without a doubt, his emphasis on "change" catapulted him into the White House and enabled George Bush's defeat. But Clinton's campaign theme also prevented him from moving slowly and cautiously at first, as Richard Neustadt in *Presidential Power* suggests a president should. There was no time to build a professional reputation inside the Beltway that could facilitate larger policy successes down the road. Change is what brought Clinton to Washington, DC, and he moved immediately to fulfill expectations.

#### *Clinton and the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 1993-1994*

Clinton's legislative record with the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress is a mixed bag. Most scholars and pundits remember Clinton's first two years in office as disastrous and poorly planned. After the mid-term elections and the Gingrich "Revolution," the story usually is that Clinton learned how to govern inside the Beltway. That characterization of Clinton is a half-truth, at best. Health care reform was a debacle in 1994, but during the previous year, Clinton enjoyed remarkable success with Congress.

Clinton's legislative approach in 1993 differed from Reagan's in 1981. Whereas Reagan focused almost all efforts on tax reduction and budget issues, Clinton pursued several policy goals that didn't necessarily cohere as a policy program. Clinton's desire to effect change in a number of policy realms is reflective of his campaign promises, which ranged across the entire spectrum of domestic issues.

In 1993, Clinton passed many of the initiatives he advertised during the campaign. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) became law sixteen days after Clinton took office. Other policy successes included the Brady bill, motor voter, a reduction in spending on Ballistic Missile Defense, the establishment of an earned income tax credit for the working poor, the student loan reform act, and the creation of a national service program, Americorps. Through the budget process, Clinton also achieved two (tax increases and spending cuts) of his three proposed economic initiatives.

Clinton did suffer a few defeats in 1993. His economic stimulus package died in a Senate filibuster, and congressional Democrats were unable to overturn the Hyde amendment blocking the federal funding of abortions. Furthermore, two of Clinton's 1993 policy achievements became highly controversial. Clinton promised in the 1992 campaign to remove the ban on gays in the military, but found formidable opposition when he tried to reverse the policy. Clinton finally settled on compromise language now known as "don't ask, don't tell." Clinton also supported the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which created division within his own party.

1994 is usually considered Clinton's downfall due to the mismanagement of health care reform on the Hill. Without question, Clinton emerged in 1994 with a strong legislative record (getting his way on 86.4% of roll call votes, according to *Congressional Quarterly*) and decided to spend his political capital on health care. Despite failing on his main initiative, Clinton still managed to score several impressive legislative wins in 1994. Although frequently overshadowed by health care, Congress and President Clinton passed a compromise crime bill, a School to Work apprenticeship program, a strengthening of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), an

education bill advocating more federal involvement in schools, and increased funding and expansion of Head Start. In short, the common public perception that 1994 represented a complete policy failure for the Clinton administration is a misnomer. Clinton lost politically in 1994, but his policy record was far from disastrous.

Taken as a whole, Clinton's first two years in office showed significant policy success, especially on the issues he ran on in 1992. Besides health care, the only campaign promise Clinton did not fulfill during the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress was the line-item veto, which passed subsequently in 1996 and then was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1998. Also, the failure to rescind the Hyde amendment was a policy disappointment for Clinton, although Congress did pass the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances (FACE) Act in 1994, which prevented the intimidation of clinic workers or women seeking abortions.

The more subtle question is whether these achievements were Clinton's to claim. After all, several of the successes of the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress were actually initiatives held over from previous legislative sessions. Clinton did campaign on many of these policy proposals, but earlier versions had been introduced years before in Congress and failed, usually because of a veto threat. For example, the Brady Bill, FMLA, and the Hatch Act were longtime congressional initiatives that Clinton subsequently supported. It is clear that Clinton had measurable success in implementing the proposals he advertised in 1992. In that sense, the president's policy program largely dominated the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress. It might also be said that part of Clinton's legislative success can be attributed to his skillful "capture" of key congressional agenda components. Clinton's

legislative leadership lends support to the hypothesis that the policy process is best described as continuous, and not necessarily segmented by presidential administrations.<sup>9</sup>

### *Clinton's 1996 Campaign*

Capitalizing on Republican candidate Bob Dole's inopportune reference about building a "bridge to the past," Bill Clinton framed his entire 1996 reelection campaign on his pledge to build a "bridge to the future." Knowing that it was likely he would face a Republican Congress in his second term, Clinton kept his campaign proposals modest in scope and ambition. More than emphasizing a coherent policy agenda, Clinton's 1996 strategy involved distinguishing himself from the Republican Congress and running on his first term record of peace and prosperity. New and original policy ideas ranked third, often appearing at the end of his typical stump speech. In short, Clinton's 1996 campaign resembled Reagan's 1984 effort, focusing on optimistic themes with little policy innovation or excitement.

Nonetheless, Clinton did have some new ideas to advertise in 1996. In his convention acceptance speech and on the campaign trail, he advocated new educational benefits, including a retraining tax credit program for workers who need to acquire new skills, the creation of a HOPE scholarship tax credit, and a tax deduction of \$10,000 in tuition costs for families. In addition to tax breaks on education costs, Clinton proposed repealing the capital gains tax paid on home sales. He also supported amendments to existing legislation, including an extension of the Brady Bill to prevent anyone who commits domestic violence from legally owning a gun, and a change to the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) which would give workers time off to take aging parents or

children to medical appointments or attend teacher conferences. Other proposals included a flex-time law that would allow employees to take overtime pay in money or time off, and campaign finance reform. Clinton's 1996 agenda focused almost solely on domestic programs, with only fleeting references to foreign policy concerns.

### *Clinton and the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1997-1998*

Several of the proposals Clinton advertised during the presidential campaign did not see the light of day in the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress. The Brady bill and FMLA were not amended, and campaign finance reform was not passed. Clinton did manage to enact the HOPE scholarship credit, the Lifetime Learning credit, and a reduction in the taxation of home ownership sales, which were prominently featured in his 1996 campaign rhetoric. Flex-time legislation was also considered, but suffered a defeat when Clinton and the House could not agree upon the details of the legislation. Even though many of Clinton's 1996 proposals never made it off the cutting room floor, the ramifications were not serious. Since the race wasn't competitive, the campaign received less media coverage than previous campaigns.<sup>10</sup> Fewer Americans followed the race closely, and therefore Clinton's agenda was less publicized than his highly publicized focus on the economy four years earlier.

Clinton's main achievement was his ability to moderate, rather than dictate, the congressional agenda of the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress. House Republicans attempted to enact their own conservative agenda, but fell short on almost all key votes. In 1997, the GOP failed on private school vouchers, tax free savings accounts for private school tuition, the elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts, the reconsideration of the



Endangered Species Act, the balanced budget amendment, and the ban on partial birth abortion (vetoed by Clinton in 1997).

The policy agenda of the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress belonged neither to President Clinton or the legislature itself. 1997 was not a watershed year for legislation. The hallmark achievement was the budget agreement, which satisfied everyone due to the tax cuts and selective spending increases fueled by the vibrant economy. The other significant piece of legislation in 1997 was the chemical weapons treaty. Despite the important nature of the treaty, it was not marquee legislation for either Clinton or Congress and did not figure prominently in the 1996 campaign.

In 1998, the Lewinsky affair, which culminated in impeachment, pulled both time and resources away from most legislative efforts. Despite Clinton's weakened status in 1998, he did manage to restore food stamps for legal immigrants, expand NATO, and obtain funding for 100,000 new teachers. Congress also scored a few victories, including the overhaul of public housing system. The bottom line is that neither the president's nor Congress's advertised agenda dominated the legislative results of the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress. Instead, Clinton and Congress both moved away from signature "liberal" or "conservative" issues and focused on policies that could result in a reasonable agreement or compromise.

#### *Analysis: First Term Versus Second Term Legislative Strategies*

Several conclusions can be drawn from the Reagan and Clinton case studies presented above. First, there is no doubt that presidents are more effective in implementing ambitious policy programs during their first term of office. Clinton and

Reagan were far from irrelevant in their second terms, but neither pushed forward a policy agenda that aggressively pursued innovative ideas or concepts. The Twenty-second Amendment clearly limits the policy capacity of a second term “lame duck” administration. Furthermore, this finding questions Richard Neustadt’s analysis in *Presidential Power*, which suggests that if presidents play their cards correctly, they can build their political authority and increase their legislative success over time. Neustadt’s optimism about the accumulation of power may be misplaced. Both Reagan and Clinton suggest the opposite: that power dissipates over time, and opportunities for legislative reform diminish. The evidence is more supportive of Paul Light’s *The President’s Agenda*, which argues a president’s influence decreases over time, even though his informational base increases throughout his administration.<sup>11</sup>

Second, these case studies imply that presidential campaigns are substantially relevant. For as much as scholars question the effectiveness of the current electoral system in the United States, the bottom line is that campaigns provide presidential candidates an opportunity to showcase their policy preferences, and if elected, presidents usually follow through on the policies they advertised when running for office. It is important to note that presidents often introduce policy proposals they emphasized during the campaign, but are sometimes unable to enact legislation with Congress on the issue. Nonetheless, campaign rhetoric serves an agenda-setting function. Voters who have the patience to listen the candidates during campaigns can learn a great deal about the policies that will most likely capture the headlines for the next several years. Even though Americans do not like campaigns, they are a source of reliable information about the candidates’ political goals.

Table I illustrates the number and percentage of campaign proposals which are both attempted and enacted. The data in Table I is comprised of a list of policy proposals described in the case studies above. An “attempted proposal” was introduced as legislation but failed to receive a favorable vote, either in committee or in a full session. An “enacted proposal” is a policy promise that actually became law, in a format reasonably similar to what was described during the campaign. Table I demonstrates

**Table I: Presidential Campaign Proposals and Their Legislative Outcomes**

Campaign	Total Proposals	Proposals Attempted	Proposals Enacted
Reagan 1980	4 main issues	4 (100%)	4 (100%)
Reagan 1984	12 proposals	7 (58%)	3 (25%)
Clinton 1992	15 proposals	15 (100%)	13 (87%)
Clinton 1996	8 proposals	5 (63%)	3 (38%)

that first term presidents are more successful in getting their campaign proposals enacted by Congress. They also attempt to enact their proposals at a higher rate than second term presidents, but the difference is less pronounced. In all four cases, presidents attempted to pass legislation similar to their campaign promises for the majority of proposals they advertised. In this sense, campaign rhetoric does matter. It provides a blueprint of the policy agenda presidents pursue if elected. In spite of the frivolity, mindless photo-ops,

and ridiculous pancake breakfast appearances, campaigns are a substantive democratic exercise.

Lastly, Reagan's 1980 campaign stands out as an interesting alternative. The other three campaigns featured a litany of policy proposals constituting a laundry list of wonkery. In contrast, Reagan in 1980 focused on four main policy issues—tax cuts, reduction of domestic spending, an increase in military spending, and energy legislation. The 1980 campaign had a thematic approach that emphasized major policy areas in which Reagan wanted to effect change. It lacked specificity, but stressed the overarching new direction Reagan wanted to lead the country. George W. Bush's 2000 campaign followed in this vein, focusing on four broad policy issues: Social Security reform, a Medicare prescription drug benefit, tax cuts, and significant education reform. The advantage of emphasizing fewer proposals is that four years later, a president running for reelection can claim legitimately that he fulfilled all of his promises. In 1984, Reagan certainly ran a "retrospective" campaign based upon his first term record. Bush also ran a retrospective campaign in 2004, but surprisingly enough, neglected to call significant attention to his 75% fulfillment of domestic policy campaign promises. Since the September 11 terrorist attacks radically changed the focus of Bush's presidency, it may be that Karl Rove felt that highlighting the implementation of the 2000 campaign agenda would be misplaced. But it is hard to believe that it could have hurt Bush to emphasize that he delivered many of the goods he promised in 2000. After all, the advantage of running a pared-down policy campaign is being able to credit-claim in the future with confidence. Reagan's 1980 campaign provides an alternative model that might prove a

good fit for first term presidential hopefuls, especially if they plan to run a retrospective reelection campaign four years down the road.

*Conclusion: What to Expect from George W. Bush, The Sequel*

With history as our guide, we can make some educated predictions about President Bush's second term in office. Bush's policy agenda includes an overhaul of the tax system, Social Security reform, cutting the deficit in half, expanding No Child Left Behind to high schools, limiting medical malpractice lawsuits, and a continued prosecution of the war on terrorism in Iraq and beyond. The million dollar question is not *which* policies Bush will pursue, but *how* he will achieve them. Specifically, will Bush govern from the center in an attempt to unite the country, or will he govern from the right?

American history tells us that despite Republican jubilation, Bush does not enjoy an enviable leadership situation. In particular, Bush must be wary of the factional strife which may emerge from within his own party. Presidential scholar Stephen Skowronek has argued persuasively that when the governing commitments of a political party are stretched too thin, it falls apart.<sup>12</sup> James Monroe couldn't decide whether to support internal improvements, which led to an ambivalent decision concerning the Cumberland Road that precipitated the downfall of the Jeffersonian dynasty. During his second term, Teddy Roosevelt's forceful leadership and persuasive rhetoric couldn't keep a splintered Republican Party together to pass tariff reform. Lyndon Johnson failed to maintain the pledge of "guns and butter" which subsequently led to the weakening of the New Deal regime. Earlier presidents in Bush's position have often adopted a "hair-splitting"

strategy to appease all factions within their parties. Bush should pay attention to these historical lessons and figure out how he can minimize dissent in the ranks. At this point, Bush's potential enemies are not the Democrats, but his fellow partisans. If Bush avoids a centrist approach and leads from the right, he will run the risk of alienating certain segments of his electoral coalition that could endanger his hopes for a lasting political legacy.

On the bright side for President Bush, it appears that staffing changes will not inhibit his legislative leadership. As stated earlier, Reagan's second term policy goals may have suffered due to imprudent staffing and leadership changes. It is unlikely that Bush will follow in Reagan's footsteps. Bill Frist will remain the Republican Senate majority leader, and his allegiance to Bush's agenda is unquestioned. The challenge for Frist is his ability to appease factional GOP strife within the Senate ranks. The retention of Andy Card in the chief of staff position is fortunate for Bush, since Card seems to enjoy solid relations with members of Congress and legislative staff. Any additional personnel changes should be made while keeping Reagan's second-term difficulties in mind. The desire to shuffle positions must be tempered by a careful consideration of political skills.

I conclude with one final historical consideration. In 1796, Thomas Jefferson could have made an aggressive bid for the presidency against John Adams. Rather than push his candidacy, Jefferson decided to hold back. He believed that George Washington's successor would have a tumultuous administration, and would be forced to deal with impossible problems of governance and politics. Jefferson allowed John Adams to struggle for four years, and then emerged as the obvious political alternative in

1800. The analogy cannot be pushed too far; there is no doubt that John Kerry wanted to win in 2004. But tried and true Democrats (known formally as “liberals”) can take solace in the lessons of history. Despite his rhetorical claims, Bush does not have a clear mandate. With a nagging deficit and increasing problems in the Middle East, the Republicans’ recent victories may turn into a silver lining for the Democrats.

## NOTES

I would like to thank Jonathan Tonkovich for his work as a research assistant on the Reagan portion of this paper.

---

<sup>1</sup> I did not analyze both Congresses (four years) of an administration, since it seemed as though a campaign’s agenda could only realistically have a two year shelf life. In years three and four of an administration, we would expect presidents to set new agendas and priorities, which may deviate from the presidential campaign agenda they previously articulated.

<sup>2</sup> “Acceptance Speech at the 1980 Republican Convention,” The National Center for Public Policy Research, Date accessed: 9/21/2004.

<http://www.nationalcenter.org/ReaganConvention1980.html>

<sup>3</sup> “Announcement for the Presidency,” The Reagan Legacy Online, Date accessed: 9/20/2004. <http://www.thereaganlegacy.com/version2/speechesdetails.asp?sID=2>

<sup>4</sup> Paul Abramson, John Aldrich, and David Rohde, *Change and Continuity in the 1984 Elections*, (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1986), p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> “On Balance, a Year of Taking the Initiative,” *Congressional Quarterly*, December 29, 1985, p. 2727.

<sup>6</sup> George Edwards, *At the Margins: Presidential Leadership of Congress*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, p. 187.

<sup>8</sup> Dave Mathemy, “Do Stump Speeches Get a Passing Grade?” *Star Tribune*, 11 June 1992, 1E.

<sup>9</sup> Charles O. Jones, *Separate But Equal Branches*, (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1995), p. 97.

<sup>10</sup> Marion R. Just, “Candidate Strategies and the Media Campaign,” in *The Election of 1996*, Gerald Pomper, ed., (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers), p. 97.

<sup>11</sup> Paul C. Light, *The President’s Agenda: Domestic Policy Choice from Kennedy to Reagan*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 36-37.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).