The United States: Providing Leadership in an ‘Anti-Leadership Environment’

Presidential Leadership in the Congressional Arena

While it is now common to refer to the president as the ‘chief legislator’ within the American system, this role of the president did not emerge before the 1930s, and became an established feature of American government only after the Second World War. It was clearly not intended by the framers and has to date never been codified in the constitution. For nineteenth-century presidents it was highly unusual even to formally address Congress. Woodrow Wilson, having in mind a model of prime ministerial government for the American presidency, was the first president since the days of Thomas Jefferson to address Congress in person in his 1913 State of the Union message. The idea of a more activist government took shape during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt and his ‘stewardship theory’ of presidential leadership. The real historical turning point in presidential–congressional relations, though, came with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s famous first ‘100 Days’. Since then, there has been a firm expectation among both the political elite and the wider public that presidents consider it one of their foremost duties to provide strong leadership in the legislative arena. However, it took until the late 1960s before it became the norm to expect presidents to expand their policy-making role from the economic sphere to more specific areas of domestic policy, such as social welfare and civil rights measures.

While the Roosevelt presidency marked a sea-change in the history of presidential–congressional relations, it did not establish anything like a permanent structural predominance of the presidency over Congress. Rather, the institutionalization of the modern presidency created the basis for a more balanced relationship between the two branches of
government, which has come to be reflected in the major currents of scholarly debate. The bulk of more recent work on the subject shares a general perspective – the so-called ‘tandem institutions’ approach1 – which emphasizes the dynamic and variable character of presidential–congressional relations. In compliance with the overall focus of this study, this chapter looks at presidential–congressional relations from a presidential perspective.

Apart from plenty of ad hoc public announcements, presidents outline their policy agenda on a number of formal occasions, by far the most important of which is the president’s annual State of the Union Address.2 As the constitution does not give the president the right to initiate any legislation by introducing a bill in Congress, proposals have to be initiated formally by members of Congress (who normally belong to the president’s party). Whereas most congressional work on a bill is done in the committees, much of the wider legislative decision-making process takes place in issue networks in which the president usually does not play a prominent role. This only increases an administration’s need for legislative liaison.

Legislative liaison was first put on a permanent institutional basis under Eisenhower, who created the Office of Congressional Relations, which later became the Office of Legislative Affairs. The Office of Legislative Affairs is headed by an assistant to the president and has a staff of up to thirty-five people. It has historically been divided into those working with the House and those working with the Senate, but there have been special units working in accordance with either the congressional committees being covered or particular issues pending. As the White House has no office of its own at the Capitol, its Office staff regularly use the offices of their party’s leadership at the House, or the vice-president’s suite at the Senate, as temporary command centres (Patterson, 2000: 119–28).3

There have been a number of more recent changes regarding the structural parameters of presidential leadership in Congress. To begin with, despite the marked increase in internal cohesion within both congressional parties and the significant strengthening of the congressional party leadership, political power in Congress has become much more dispersed since the early 1970s. The most important aspects of congressional reform included the weakening of the seniority rule, the considerable increase in the number of sub-committees, and the strengthening of sub-committee chairs and the rank-and-file. As a consequence, the number of possible negotiation partners who are to be persuaded by the president and his staff has increased enormously since the 1970s, making