Evolution of the Presidency
(outlined from Pious 1996)

I. The Premodern Presidency

A. Washington and Hamilton: The President and the “Prime Minister”

Hamilton: Washington’s secretary of the treasury
Jefferson: Secretary of State

Hamilton acted as a Prime Minister in that he developed an industrial policy for the nation – including high tariffs on imports; subsidies for manufacturing, development of roads, bridges, canals, harbors; creation of a national bank; and imposition of high taxes on commodities such as whiskey – and worked to organize Federalists in Congress to pass this program.

Hamilton relied on Washington’s prestige and support, however, to gain passage of programs. When Washington agreed with Hamilton, policies were likely to be passed, whereas when Washington disagreed with Hamilton, the policies were likely to be defeated.

Thus, ultimately, the president had the power – and Hamilton (as well as Jefferson) was removed from Washington’s cabinet in 1794 – 2 years before the election of John Adams.

NOTE: John Adams had problems controlling his cabinet, after he reappointed members from Washington’s cabinet.

Although Hamilton was no longer a government official, members of Adams’ cabinet looked to Hamilton rather than Adams for guidance. Adams ultimately replaced these members of his cabinet, but not before he lost control of his presidency and suffered damage (largely related to relations with France) that hindered his chances for reelection.

B. Presidential Party Government

1. Associated with the presidency of Thomas Jefferson
2. Attempt by Jefferson to bridge the separation of powers and fuse the executive power of the presidency with the legislative powers of Congress

3. Specific characteristics
   a. Jefferson, as leader of the Democratic-Republicans, presided over meetings with his party’s legislators in Congress.
   b. Jefferson organized congressional committees and made committee assignments to supporters.
   c. Jefferson influenced his supporters to name his close allies to leadership positions in Congress.
   d. Jefferson lobbied members of Congress to pass legislation he favored.

4. Party government failed when members of Congress and the judiciary asserted independence and refused to support Jefferson.

C. Cabinet Government

1. Developed after Jefferson’s failure with party government, during the presidencies of Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and J.Q. Adams

2. Similar to the council of state that Madison had argued for at the 1787 Constitutional convention, designed to serve as an “interior check” on the president’s exercise of power

3. Followed from presidential appointment of cabinet secretaries who were politically powerful (because the president wanted to consolidate power for his positions) and who likely presidential contenders in the future

4. Given the relative equal stature of the president and members of his cabinet, the president did not want to go against cabinet members for fear of loss of support from the cabinet member’s supporters in Congress.

5. Specific characteristics
a. On important issues, the president would express his policy position before the cabinet, and if a majority did not support the president’s position, it would be changed, deferred, or dropped entirely.

b. The president typically did not make or implement policy without discussing the policy with all members of his cabinet, and he was unlikely to act without either consensus or majority support from his cabinet members, with cabinet members having a vote equal to that of the president.

6. Cabinet government ended with Andrew Jackson’s presidency and the beginning of a new partisan era.

As the Federalists disappeared and the Democratic-Republicans became the only party, the presidency became little more than an instrument of cabinet politicians and congressional leaders.

By the 1820s, a weak and ineffective national government faced sectional division and gridlock.

D. The Plebiscitary Presidency

1. Associated with the presidency of Andrew Jackson and Jackson’s efforts to end the practice of presidential nomination by the congressional (“king”) caucus

Jackson had received the plurality of Electoral College votes in a 4-candidate race in 1824. The election was decided in the House in favor of John Quincy Adams. House Speaker Henry Clay, himself a candidate, had worked to gain House support for Adams. When Adams appointed Clay as secretary of state, Jackson and his followers charged there had been a “corrupt bargain.”

Jackson argued that the candidate who received the most popular votes should become president and lobbied on behalf of this proposition. By 1828, all state legislatures except South Carolina had passed laws tying the Electoral College vote to the popular vote rather than the vote of the state legislature.
Between 1824 and 1828, the number of voters quadrupled, and the mass electorate was given greater influence in the choice of the president.

2. Characteristics

a. Based on popular base, Jackson expanded presidential powers.

Vetoed legislation on policy grounds rather than on constitutional grounds

Extended presidential supervision over the Treasury Secretary, who previously had been accountable largely to Congress

With end of king caucus, cabinet members no longer had influence on nomination process nor were they seen as leading contenders (with shift to focus on state rather than national leaders), weakening their potential to damage the president

b. Jackson treated his cabinet members as subordinates, and for most of his first term, he ignored his cabinet. (His cabinet members had ostracized Peggy Eaton, the new wife of Jackson’s secretary of war, as an adulteress in her first marriage. Jackson, himself married to a woman who was divorced – and not legally until after she and Jackson married – was particularly sensitive to this issue.)

Jackson issued orders to cabinet members, rather than consulting them on policy.

c. Jackson appealed directly to the public and organized party newspapers to publish his ideas and defend his actions. Reporters for these papers gathered information at the state level and reported back to Jackson.

d. Jackson effectively altered the relationship between the president and Congress with all of his actions, taking more power for the president.

e. Jackson supported a 2-party system that would allow citizens a clear choice and began process of party conventions.

f. Jackson developed the patronage system to a much greater extent than previous presidents, viewing patronage as legitimated by election outcome and creating a more responsive government.
g. Jackson and his supporters directly worked to mobilize voters.

3. The plebiscitary presidency broke down after Jackson left office – the nation was clearly not ready for a strong central government, and without Jackson’s leadership and institutional change, a powerful president could not be sustained.

Exception: Lincoln

E. The Whig Presidency

1. Developed as an explicit reaction to Jackson’s presidency and Jackson’s view of a strong president. Note that Jefferson’s Democratic-Republican party split under the leadership of Andrew Jackson, with the supporters of Jackson uniting under the label of the Democratic party, and opponents of Jackson (such as John Q. Adams) uniting under the label of the newly-formed Whig party.

2. William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor were the only 2 Whig presidents elected to office (Whig President Millard Fillmore became president after the death of Taylor and was never elected as president in his own right). Both died in office (which Pious identifies as exemplifying the Whig idea of the presidency).

3. Characteristics

a. Opposition to principles of Jackson’s plebiscitary presidency

b. Belief that presidents should serve a single term

c. Belief that presidents should not try to influence Congress on legislation or lead a party in Congress

d. Belief that congressional party leaders should write presidential Inaugural Addresses and State of the Union speeches, and that the president should take direction from congressional party leaders rather than the other way around
e. Belief that the president should only remove executive department officials when requested to do so by congressional leaders

f. Belief that the president should essentially act as a figurehead, seeing that the laws were faithfully executed, but allowing Congress to control the government and decisions about legislation

F. The Weak Presidency and Congressional Government (with the crucial exception of Abraham Lincoln)

1. Between the period of Jackson’s presidency and the Civil War, Democratic presidents were unable or unwilling to take on the Jacksonian position of a stronger presidency and greater powers for the president. Each of the presidents between the Jackson and Lincoln presidencies served a single term, either failing to gain renomination or reelection or (as President Polk) pledging to serve a single term.

2. Congress took the lead in policy making, with the issues of the time concerning currency, commerce, slavery and sectionalism, tariffs and taxation.

3. Abraham Lincoln was the only exception to the weak presidency and congressional government during the period between Jackson’s presidency (late 1830s) and the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt (beginning in 1901 when President McKinley was assassinated and Vice President Roosevelt assumed the office as president).

a. Lincoln started his national political career as a congressional Whig.

b. Lincoln helped to form the Republican party when the Whigs disintegrated over the issue of slavery in the 1850s.

c. Lincoln was elected as the first president of the Republican party, and he took office in 1861, just after 8 of the southern states had seceded from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America.

d. Lincoln took powers that previous presidents had never attempted, some of which (such as the raising of the army and navy) were expressly granted in the Constitution to the Congress.
Following the April 1861 fall of Fort Sumter to Confederate forces, Lincoln issued a proclamation calling forth the state militias and requesting 75,000 volunteers to assist in enforcing national laws (after which Virginia and the remaining states of the upper South seceded).

Lincoln accepted 188,000 volunteers to the militias and raised 60,000 men for the army and navy, violating legal limits at the time.

Without congressional approval or appropriation of funds (as in above actions), Lincoln authorized the construction of 19 warships and sent weapons and $2 million in gold from the federal treasury to Union loyalists in northern Virginia, allowing them to set up the state of West Virginia.

Lincoln issued proclamations suspending the privilege of writ of habeus corpus, permitting thousands of Confederate sympathizers and supporters of secession in the border states and Florida to be arrested by the military and tried in military courts.

Lincoln called Congress into special session on July 4, 1861 and told legislators that he believed he had acted according to “popular demand and public necessity,” avoiding the issue of whether he had acted contrary to the Constitution. Congress passed a spending bill that supported Lincoln’s actions and made them equivalent to actions that had been taken with the prior approval of Congress and within the law. In later years, Congress passed further legislation in support of other actions by Lincoln.

Lincoln’s freeing of slaves during the Civil War was constitutionally suspect. Slavery was explicitly protected by the Constitution and its regulation was assigned to Congress. Further, the Supreme Court (in the case of Dred Scott) had found that slaves were property, so that freeing slaves without due process of law was in violation of the 5th Amendment’s protection of private property.

Lincoln’s extra-Constitutional actions were a key issue in the presidential election of 1864. The Republican party platform supported all of Lincoln’s actions, whereas the Democrats in northern states were critical of Lincoln and argued that his actions threatened the restoration of the Union and the future of government based on the consent of the governed.
Lincoln clearly fused presidential and congressional powers early in his presidency. However, his actions were not typical of those of a dictator. He called Congress into session, whereas dictators usually dispense with the legislature. Fair and honest national elections were held in 1862 and 1864, whereas dictators usually forgo elections (or hold elections with a foregone conclusion).

Congress could have impeached Lincoln at any time, and the public had the opportunity to replace him in 1864. Rather, Congress supported Lincoln’s actions and the people reelected him. As stated by Lincoln’s Secretary of State William Seward, “We elect a king for four years, and give him vast powers, which after all he can interpret for himself” (cited in Pious 1996:83).

Lincoln’s actions provide examples of prerogative powers, powers taken by the president that are not explicitly granted by the Constitution or law.

4. 19th Century presidents following Lincoln returned to the pattern of congressional dominance. There was also a fair amount of corruption in national politics at this time, with party bosses and interest groups involved in making deals with cabinet members and legislators and having great influence over legislation and federal appropriations.

Presidents Hayes, Cleveland, and McKinley sought to curb the excesses of this corruption (e.g. using veto power when legislation simply went too far in violation of the public interest), but presidential conceptions of their powers were limited. Lincoln’s powers were viewed as an exception appropriate only for a period of national crisis, and the weak presidency and congressional dominance resumed following Lincoln’s assassination.

II. The Modern Presidency

As with the premodern presidency, there are a number of distinct versions or styles within the modern presidency. As Pious (1996:57) emphasizes

“The presidency was transformed at the beginning of the twentieth century, in large measure because of the changing place of the United States in world politics, the development of the United States as a modern industrial economy with an expanded social welfare state, and the continuing democratization of the electoral system.”
Also as with the premodern presidency, note how the differences in the personality and style of individual presidents and their views of the presidency interacted with the context and events of their presidency to create differences in the modern presidency.

A. Steward of the People (an example of the public presidency)

1. Theodore Roosevelt (TR) believed that the president was a steward: someone who acts in the best interests of those he represents.

2. Roosevelt thought that the president should engage in strong leadership at all times, and similar to the view held by Alexander Hamilton, TR argued that the president could take any action that was not expressly prohibited by the Constitution.

3. TR proposed a program that he called the “Square Deal,” arguing that his policies represented the public interest (as opposed to partisan or business interests).

4. Unlike earlier presidents, TR held occasional press conferences, gave interviews to his favorite press reporters, and encouraged “muckraking” journalists and writers to investigate and publicize poor working conditions, unsafe products (as in Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle), and other dangers to the public from the actions of business.

5. TR wanted public outrage to help him gain congressional support for reform proposals that were designed to better conditions for workers and consumers, and he used what he termed the “bully-good pulpit” to argue directly to the people on behalf of his favored policies.

6. TR’s technique of bypassing Congress and directing his arguments to the public has become known as “going public.”

7. The precedents set by presidents such as TR – holding press conferences, reaching out for public support for policy proposals – have become necessary elements of the modern, public presidency. The distinct styles of different presidents, however, have led to variations in the modern presidency.
B. Chief Magistrate

1. William Howard Taft, TR’s vice president and choice to succeed him as president, had a style much more similar to the weak presidency of the 1800s.

2. Taft, who wanted to become a Supreme Court justice, believed that the president should act as a judge in situations of differences of opinion within the executive administration.

3. Taft, in contrast to TR, believed that a president could exercise only those powers expressly granted by the Constitution and laws.

4. Taft proposed reforms in the national budget process, but he did not propose major policy initiatives or reach out to the public as TR had done.

C. The Rhetorical Presidency (another example of the public presidency) versus the Taciturn Presidency

1. Woodrow Wilson believed in the use of political rhetoric and effective argument as a means for the president to lead both his party in Congress (as in Jefferson’s party government) and the public (as with TR’s bully good pulpit).

2. As Jefferson had done, Wilson took a leading role in congressional appointments. With a Democratic majority in Congress, Wilson believed that he could avoid Jefferson’s failure by also persuading the public to support his policies.

3. Wilson, as had Washington and Adams, delivered his State of the Union speeches directly to Congress and would also present major policy initiatives directly to Congress.

4. Wilson targeted his speeches and messages to Congress to both Congress and the public. He believed that press coverage of his proposals would encourage public interest in his policies and gain public support for them.
5. Wilson believed that the public was capable of making decisions that best served the public interest, with the most effective arguments gaining public support.

6. Wilson’s direct appeals to the public failed in his efforts to gain Senate support for the Treaty of Versailles (ending World War I) and U.S. participation in the League of Nations. Wilson broke with precedent in negotiating the Treaty by including only one Republican senator and no influential leaders from the Senate in the delegation that he took to the treaty negotiations.

7. In the midterm election of 1918, during Wilson’s second term as president, Wilson appealed to the public to elect a Democratic majority in Congress. Instead, the elections yielded a Republican majority in the both the House and Senate.


10. Calvin Coolidge, who became president after Harding’s death in 1923, provided the model that succeeded Wilson’s rhetorical presidency. Termed the “Taciturn Presidency” by Pious, Coolidge’s presidency was marked by a president of few words.

11. Coolidge’s presidency was followed by the failed presidency of Herbert Hoover.

12. Following Wilson’s presidency and the passage of the 17th Amendment providing for direct election of senators, Congress regained legitimacy as the more democratic and powerful institution.
D. FDR’s Open Hand vs. Eisenhower’s Hidden Hand (and the development of the Institutionalized Presidency)

1. Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), president from 1933 to 1945, drew on the techniques of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson as models for his presidency.

2. FDR was not always successful in gaining congressional support, particularly after his failed court-packing attempt, but he was an extremely popular president who had great influence on the modern presidency, particularly in terms of the creation of the Institutionalized Presidency.

3. …

4. …

III. The Postmodern Presidency?

A. Seen as beginning with Jimmy Carter

B. A weakened president, with insufficient resources to meet international responsibilities and no longer able to impose will on allies or adversaries