The President, Public Opinion, and the National Agenda:
The Development of the Public Presidency

I. The View of the Authors of the Constitution

James Madison: the framers did not want the president to become “a favorite of the people”

Governmental decisions were best insulated from “every sudden seizure of passion” (in the words of Alexander Hamilton)

A. Electoral College avoided direct popular election

B. Fixed 4-year term prevented president from calling for election at the height of his/her popularity

C. Under George Washington and early presidents (Washington in particular because of pre-party era), custom reinforced these constitutional provisions

1. Washington did not lead a particular faction or political party and did not appeal directly to the people for support in conducting his administration

2. The public did not directly appeal to the president but rather indirectly influenced presidential politics by their votes for the state legislatures, with most states having the state legislature choose presidential electors to the Electoral College

II. Nineteenth Century Modifications of Presidential-Public Relations and Remaining Constraints on Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion

A. Electoral college vote tied to state popular vote

After winning a plurality of the popular vote in 1824, but with no candidate having received a majority of Electoral College votes and the House of Representatives choosing John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson declared that as a matter of political principle the candidate who received the most popular vote should become president.
The country was ready for this idea. By 1828, all states except South Carolina provided that presidential electors would be chosen by popular vote and not the state legislature.

B. Organization of parties and development of party-in-the-electorate

Parties designed to represent alternative views of policy and mobilize voters to support their alternative

Patronage offered to those who supported the party: Jackson’s “spoils system” was designed to help keep government accountable to the people, as the bureaucracy changed to reflect outcome of election, with those supportive of elected officials’ policies put into government positions to help enact those policies

C. However, Constraints on Presidential Attempts to Lead Public Opinion Remained

1. Beginning with Jefferson in 1801, the president did not directly address the Congress to deliver the annual State of the Union but rather sent a written message to Congress.

2. With few exceptions, e.g. Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, presidents in the 1800s did not promote their own legislative agenda or rally their followers on issues pending before the Congress.

3. Although 19th century presidents did make public speeches, there were important differences between these speeches and the types of speeches made by 20th century presidents.

   a. Presidents did not appeal to the public for support for their requests to Congress.

   b. Presidential addresses were patriotic, dealing, e.g., with constitutional analyses of governmental powers or the conduct of past wars, and calm and deliberate rather than emotional.

   c. Presidential addresses were non-partisan, and presidents did not campaign for office.
d. Only 4 presidents in the 1800s defended or attacked specific legislation.

e. Only 2 presidents in the 1800s made speeches aligning themselves with their party on an issue.

f. Only 9 presidents in the 1800s discussed the general direction of their policies when speaking before the public.

g. Presidents in the 1800s held NO press conferences, nor did they allow interviews by newspaper or magazine reporters. Andrew Jackson and later presidents did fund party newspapers until the 1850s, however.

h. When Andrew Johnson violated the conventions of not speaking publicly in support of his policies, the 10th article of impeachment by the House of Representatives charged that Johnson “unmindful of the high duties of his office and the dignity and propriety thereof” did “make and deliver with a loud voice certain intemperate, inflammatory, and scandalous harangues, and did therein utter loud threats and bitter menaces as well against Congress,” all of which “are peculiarly indecent and unbecoming in the Chief Magistrate of the United States,” bringing “the high office of the President of the United States into contempt, ridicule, and disgrace, to the great scandal of all good citizens.”