Presidential and Party Views of the Presidency and Government: TR to Hoover

I. The Progressive Perspective

A. Origins and Characteristics

1. Late 19th Century technological and economic development, along with the expansion of the U.S. population, created concerns about growing inequality and individual freedom and autonomy.

2. Reaction against party machines and associated partisan corruption, exemplified in the political realm by such measures as the adoption of civil service reform, the Australian ballot, voter registration, and direct election of senators.

3. Concern that large business interests threatened the economic freedom of individuals and that corporations had captured those in government and the policies and actions in government for the benefit of large business interests, leading to populist and progressive calls for regulations on business, transportation, and finance.

4. The U.S. commitment to and tradition of limited government and individual freedom was not replaced, but there was growing recognition that individuals alone were unlikely to be able to maintain justice and individual freedom and autonomy unless government stepped in to provide the conditions necessary to counterbalance the power of privileged private interests.

B. Theodore Roosevelt as President and Progressive

1. T. Roosevelt’s view of the presidency

   a. Exemplified by the “theory that the executive power was limited only by specific restrictions and prohibitions appearing in the Constitution or imposed by Congress in its constitutional powers” (quoted from TR’s autobiography, cited in Milkis and Nelson 1999:196)

   b. TR believed that congressional dominance over the president in the 1800s had limited the actions of the national government and made the political
system subject to capture by special interests, including party bosses and business interests.

c. TR viewed the president as a “steward of the people bound actively and affirmatively to do all he could for the people,” and emphasized that the president had the duty to take all actions possible to serve the public interest and meet the needs of the nation.

d. TR described the presidency as a “bully pulpit,” and Milkis and Nelson (p. 197) attribute the development of the rhetorical presidency to him. TR worked to lead public opinion in support of his policies and advanced the role of the president as a leader of public opinion.

2. Lasting influences of TR’s presidency on the institution of the presidency

a. TR’s success at mobilizing public opinion marked a crucial change in the presidency. Presidents in the 20th Century have increasingly relied on a good relationship with the public rather than Congress or their political party. In fact, public support for the president has made support from Congress and the political party more likely to follow. For example, the Hepburn Act of 1906, which increased the power of the Interstate Commerce Commission to regulate railroad shipping rates and enforce compliance with regulations, was passed in spite of conservative Republican opposition in the Senate, largely as a result of TR’s speaking campaign to mobilize public support.

b. TR’s “Square Deal” program for policy action marked the greatly expanded role of the president as a leader and guide in the formation of public policy.

c. In foreign policy, TR also made great changes in terms of expanding the power of the president to direct foreign policy without interference from Congress and working to develop the U.S. as a world power and the president as a world leader. Although TR’s motives were likely driven more by national interest, the Progressive view of the expansion of U.S. power in the world held that greater power served the purposes of peace and positive outcomes abroad.

3. T. Roosevelt as leader in the Progressive movement
a. Based on his support for Progressive principles, Roosevelt worked “to establish the president as an agent of social and economic reform” (Milkis and Nelson 1999:197).

b. Like most Progressive reformers, TR did not wish to work against business interests, but he believed that government should act to regulate business in the public interest. For Roosevelt, regulation was also in the interest of business. For example, business was more likely to prosper from attention to consumer and worker safety, as businesses providing safer products and working conditions would attract more consumers and more and better employees. Moreover, Roosevelt felt that regulation of business was necessary to avoid the rule of “corrupt and evil” men and, ultimately, the collapse of the U.S. republican system of government.

c. In reaction to Taft’s actions as presidency, which were much more in the tradition of 19th Century congressional dominance, TR ran for the presidency as a Bull Moose Progressive after the Republican Party leadership denied him the nomination in favor of Taft.

C. Woodrow Wilson as President and Progressive

1. Wilson’s view of the presidency

a. Before becoming president, Wilson (as a student and then political scientist) had argued for institutional change to make the U.S. more like a parliamentary system, with closer ties between the president and Congress.

b. By the time he became president, Wilson argued in favor of a strong president that would lead Congress in a manner reminiscent of Thomas Jefferson’s attempt at party government, which would involve the president working closely with his party members in Congress and party members acting in unison.

c. Wilson differed from TR in his emphasis on the president as party leader, able to command the support of his party in Congress. Wilson thought that executive leadership would be either ineffective or dangerous unless ties to fundamental change that made the president the leader of his party in Congress.
d. Wilson expanded the rhetorical presidency, also differing from TR in his view of public leadership as the most important element of presidential leadership. Wilson began the practice of having regular press conferences and reinstituted the practice of delivering the State of the Union address and other important messages in person to the Congress.

e. Wilson’s failure to gain Senate support for the League of Nations (in contrast to TR’s success with the Hepburn Act) illustrates the flip side of the rhetorical presidency: when the public does not support the president on a policy opposed by Congress, the president is likely to lose.

2. As a Progressive, Wilson supported party reforms such as the direct primary, which he saw as taking power from party bosses and state and local party interests and allowing for a nationalization of the party vision, with the president as the leader of that vision.

3. Wilson’s support for progressive principles was also part of his foreign policy goals, as in his attempts to gain support for the League of Nations.

D. Following Wilson, the next president to adopt Progressive principles in governing was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose policies of social welfare and an active government on behalf of regulation of the economy became central to the Democratic Party platform.

II. The Conservative Reaction to Progressive Expansion of Government Action

A. The Harding presidency

1. As a senator, Warren Harding had opposed the League of Nations, and the 1920 election in which Harding became president, the league was a central issue.

2. Harding represented the desire for an end to the change and reform of the Progressive Era. The major theme of the Republican campaign was a call for a “return to normalcy.”

3. As represented by Milkis and Nelson (p. 243), Harding’s “expressed intention was to reign rather than rule.”
4. Harding proposed a policy of lower taxes and higher tariffs to address the problems of the post WWI economy, but he did not work to get his proposals past by the Congress, where disagreement led to inaction.

5. As a reaction against the Wilson’s administration activism in foreign affairs, Congress worked to regain influence in foreign affairs, and the foreign policy accomplishments of the Harding administration resulted largely from congressional initiatives.

6. Scandals associated with the Harding administration were a consequence of a return to party patronage, which Harding supported, following the civil service reforms of the Progressive Era. Harding was not personally implicated in these scandals, and he died in office with a positive public reputation. This reputation was damaged with the revelations of scandal that became public after his death.

7. Despite the conservative nature of the Harding administration, the first national budget system was created, giving the president greater oversight authority for the spending of the executive departments and agencies. As part of the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921, the Bureau of the Budget was established to support the president’s oversight authority. For the first time, the president gained legal oversight authority for the allocation of funds in the executive branch.

B. The Coolidge Presidency

1. As vice president, Coolidge assumed office as president upon the death of President Harding.

2. Although less partisan than Harding, Coolidge shared Harding’s view that the federal government was already too large and that the president’s job was to oversee the operation of government economically and efficiently.

3. Like Harding, Coolidge was a popular president who cultivated a positive relationship with the press. He was also an inspiring public figure who was particularly effective in his radio addresses. As the first president to give radio addresses, he was also the first president whose voice was heard by millions of Americans.
C. The Hoover Administration

1. Like Harding and Coolidge, Hoover held the view that the federal government should be limited to those things for which there was clear constitutional authority.

2. Hoover, however, also shared the Progressive view of government having a role in improving social and economic conditions in the country.

3. Rather than expanding government programs, Hoover believed that the President and the executive branch should work to encourage private institutions to work for social and economic improvements.

4. Given Hoover’s perceived inaction in the face of the Great Depression, likely exacerbated by his lack of skills in gaining support either in Congress or from the public, he lost his 1932 bid for reelection to Franklin Delano Roosevelt.