Second Term Troubles
June 19, 2007

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There’s good news and bad news these days for the Bush Administration. The bad news is that President Bush’s anemic approval rating is hovering around 30 percent. The good news is that it probably can’t go much lower. But, what may be news to the Bush administration isn’t new in American politics. In fact, Bush’s slow but inexorable erosion of political support is a depressingly old pattern in modern American politics.

Since mid 20th century, the phenomenon of re-elected presidents losing their effectiveness late in their second term has become the norm. Bush’s fall from grace may be the worst recent example, but it’s also typical of the fate suffered by most two-term presidents.

Consider the record. The last two years of second termers have brought almost unrelieved woe for presidents since Dwight Eisenhower. Lyndon Johnson was elected overwhelmingly in 1964, but by 1968, the Vietnam quagmire forced him to withdraw as a presidential candidate. Nixon trounced his opponent in 1972, but by 1974, he resigned to avoid impeachment. Clinton won reelection convincingly in 1996, but was impeached in 1998, virtually ending his presidency. Now, Bush, a 500,000 popular vote winner in 2004 is crowding Truman for claim to the most unpopular president in modern times. Even Reagan struggled with Iran Contra --to have his second term redeemed only by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Each two term president encountered unique problems: for LBJ it was Vietnam; for Nixon, Watergate; for Clinton, personal behavior in office; and now for Bush, Iraq.

But underneath the surface differences lie the common denominator that has united all modern presidents: they have each worn out their welcome with the American people--a phenomenon scholar Larry Sabato has referred to as the "Six Year Itch."

The origins of the six year itch have been identified by a number of writers; one prominent causal factor is simply incurred time in office. The longer an administration is in power, the more it incurs the inevitable political costs of governing. Poor decisions, policy miscues, and bad behavior tend to bear their bitterest fruit in second terms.

Yet another factor bearing down on ebbing presidencies is the absence of a substantial second term agenda. This lack of exciting proposals is almost endemic to second terms. The big ideas--such as Reagan’s tax cuts, Clinton’s deficit fighting and Bush’s tax cuts--mostly come in first terms.

Other factors also contribute to the six year itch. Among these is the climate of unprecedented partisanship in America today. One consequence of which is that second term presidents receive less cooperation from Congress than their predecessors--while they must withstand a barrage of withering criticism from political rivals seeking the presidency.
So, if four years is not enough for a successful president, eight years is too much for most presidents. Is there not a happy compromise—a term long enough to be effective, but short enough to avoid painful death watches like the country now endures while waiting for the Bush presidency to expire?

There is, and it’s the six year term: a proposal that would require amending the US Constitution to provide a single six year term for the president and vice president.

The six year term arguably is a good idea, but it’s not a new idea. It was originally proposed in the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and has been advanced intermittently throughout American history. At least nine former presidents have endorsed it, including Andrew Jackson, Andrew Johnson, Rutherford Hayes, William Harrison, and William Taft. In modern times, the six year term has been advocated by Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter.

Traditionally, arguments favoring the six year term have emphasized its public policy payoffs. Relieved of the need to run for re-election after four years, presidents could tackle those complex national problems which seem so often to elude serious solutions. In short, the six year term would tend to take electoral politics out of policy.

But today, the even stronger argument for the six year term is that it harmonizes with the natural rhythms of modern presidential politics—rhythms that resonate to a normal cycle of rise and fall of presidential effectiveness over about six years. Executive influence tends to rise in the early years of power, but then gradually declines in later years, finally reaching a level that precludes the effective exercise of power.

Undoubtedly, one of the reasons so many former U.S. presidents have advocated the six year term was their personal experience with this inevitable erosion in effectiveness that marks the second term.

With these arguments favoring a six year term, why don’t we already have one? Sheer inertia is part of the answer. Major institutional change triggers resistance until the need is urgent. We muddle through painful periods like the present Bush interregnum until rescued by a new president and a new day—then we promptly forget our chagrin until, without fail, it happens again. Probably nothing illustrates this American perversity better than our failure to fix the Electoral College after the 2000 horrors.

Beyond inertia, the six year term has also drawn criticism from some academics who have argued against it on a number of grounds. Most notable of these, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in the Imperial Presidency (2004), called the six year term proposal "a profoundly anti-democratic position" to take. Labeling the six year term as undemocratic has undermined support for it.

However, Schlesinger and other critics of the six year term proffer a false choice—between the "democratic" system we have and the "undemocratic" six year term. But the choice is not between our present democratic system and an alternate undemocratic system; both systems are in fact democratic. The choice instead is between two systems, neither of which is perfect and both of which carry significant costs.

To make that choice, we need to have in this country a considered discussion of the costs and benefits of both systems. Regrettably, we never have had that discussion. Consequently, the current four year system is the devil we know, and we prefer it mainly for that reason.
As we labor through the final days of the Bush Presidency, we should reflect on whether we can still afford eschewing the benefits of the six year term or still longer pay the costs we are incurring with the current system.

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