How Presidents Govern: Crash Course Government and Politics #14

Crash Course: U.S. Government and Politics
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Hi, I'm Craig and this is Crash Course Government and Politics, and today we're going to talk about government. I know what you're thinking: Craig we've been talking about government for thirteen weeks. To that I say: "You got me." But let's talk about actual governing. In particular the executive branch tools and strategies that the President uses to try to get things done.

I mean, the President's just one person, for now; who knows what sort of animal-human hybrid will be President in the future, but there's a lot of presidenting to be done in the United States.

[Crash Course Intro]

So we usually just talk about the President as if he's the entire executive branch. But obviously there's more to it than that. Technically the entire federal bureaucracy is part of the executive branch. But it's really big and complicated. For today let's just look at the top levels, the big wigs, the Hank Greens, the head honchos, the ones that deal most directly with the President. Hank Green doesn't work for the government.

At the top of the organizational pyramid is the President of course. And I suppose just below him is the Vice President, ready to break a tie in the Senate, or step in if the President dies, or go to a shopping mall opening on the behalf of the President. To paraphrase Truman's desk, the buck stops with the President, meaning he has the ultimate decision in important matters and therefore takes the blame when they go wrong.

George W. Bush once called himself the Decider, and there's a lot of truth to that description. But many, probably most, policy decisions, are made at lower levels, because there are just too many of them for the President to make them all. The President is served directly by the White House staff, which is made up mostly of trusted policy and political advisors called "special assistants." Special assistant, I need more coffee!

Other than television versions, we don't see much of the White House staff, except for the Press Secretary, who's the public spokesperson for the President. And maybe the Chief of Staff can be a public figure as well.

Next, in terms of proximity to the President and influence on his decisions, is the Executive Office of the President. It's staffed by various advisors and policy experts. They're selected by the President and his office, rather than by rising through the ranks of government employment, or they're chosen for political reasons, like many Cabinet secretaries. The officials in the EOP give important advice to the President on specified topics. Although there are a lot of different departments in the EOP, probably the most important are the National Security Council, the Council of Economic Advisors, and the Office of Management and Budget, the OMB.

The Cabinet used to be very important in advising the President, and it's still can be, but that depends on the President. Some Presidents rely a lot on the heads of Cabinet departments, and usually the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense play a significant role in the administration, especially if there's a lot of foreign policy issues to deal with.

The Cabinet secretaries tend to become prominent when bad things happen. For example, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the Treasury Secretary was in the news a lot. You sometimes hear a lot about the Attorney General, who heads the Justice Department, when civil rights issues crop up, like same-sex marriage or affirmative action. And if there's a terrorist threat, you might be seeing a lot more of the Secretary of Homeland Security.

There are also independent agencies and government corporations, which, historically speaking are relatively new, with the exception of the postal service. The postal service is one of the oldest functioning government agencies, although it's now a government corporation, which means it's supposed to earn money and be self-funding. My fiancée's dad works for the postal service, so postal workers are awesome, sir.

Sadly, the Post Office isn't doing that great financially, so buy a stamp once in a while! Send a letter to an old friend, or something. How else are you going to send it without the Post Office? An eagle? No!

Amtrak's the other well-known government corporation, and it isn't profitable either. How else are you going to get around? Eagle isn't big enough to take you! Unless you're Gandalf.

Independent agencies and regulatory commissions appear in the news a lot, usually in stories buried in the back pages, or whatever the digital equivalent of back pages are. Your uncle's blog? But they're rarely called independent agencies. NASA's probably the best known independent agency, because everyone knows space travel is awesome. Watch Crash Course Astronomy. As well as SciShow Space. But for now, keep watching Government and Politics, thank you.

But other, more down-to-earth agencies include the Federal Trade Commission, the Securities and Exchange Commission, and the Federal Communications Commission. It's easy to remember those three are regulatory commissions because they have the word "commission" built right in, so that's helpful. And for most of us, even if we don't realize it, the most important independent federal agency is the Federal Reserve system, which manages banking and monetary policy, and which will get its own episode later, because it's really important and kind of mysterious.

Will I get my own episode later? How Craig relates to the government? I'm kind of mysterious.

So that's the structure of the executive branch, more or less. These agencies are the tools the government has to make policy and to implement it. They are the heart and soul of actual governing. But they aren't all that fun, especially when you look at what strategies the President uses to actually govern.

Political scientists will tell you, and I'm not going to argue with them, (they're scientists; they went to college) that the President has three main strategies at his disposal: party leadership, mobilizing public opinion, and administrative strategies. One of these is much more important than the other two. Which one is it? Can you guess? Which one? It's not party leadership, but the President is the leader of his political party, and can use it to create and manage policy, especially in Congress, where party matters a lot. The President usually appoints members of his own party to head agencies, and once appointed, party affiliation doesn't matter much to an agency head, because he's not running for office. Control of the party makes it easier for the President to get choices through Congress, though. This strategy doesn't work when there's divided government, but when one party controls both chambers of Congress and the White House, it's easier for the President to use his position as party leader as leverage to accomplish his policy goals. When they're in different parties? Not so much. Whoo. Eee. It's more like this. That was my third eagle punch of the video. Hat trick!

Mobilizing public opinion is also not the most important tool in the President's tool box, but going public is what I'm going to talk about right now. The President's access to the media is almost limitless. Now that doesn't mean he gets free Netflix, although he might,

especially if he just shares a log-in with the Vice President or something. But if he wants a press conference or a speech on national TV, he gets it. This use of the media is sometimes called the bully pulpit, and it sounds like a big policy stick, but it has a downside. Basically, it's not really going to work if the President isn't popular, and his approval rating almost always declines the longer he is in office.

This leaves the third tool that the President can use to get things done, administrative strategy. Yes! That's the most important one: using administrative agencies to make and carry out policies. Who-ha, yeah, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

There are a number of different ways the President can use his administrative offices to bring about the objectives he wants. Overtime the President has expanded the size and capacities of the executive office of the President, especially since the new deal. This enlarged EOP gathers information about policies, plans programs, communicates with constituents including Congress and interest groups, and it can supervise other agencies and check up on how they're working.

One of the most important examples of this is the expanded reach of the Office of Management and Budget, or OMB, to plan the budget and exercise huge influence over how government money is spent. Another administrative strategy that the President can use is regulatory review.

Federal agencies are usually required to make rules for how they operate. The President's office can review these rules, make suggestions or even order agencies to adopt certain rules. This can have enormous direct and indirect influence over how the rule is implemented.

To give an example, President Bill Clinton ordered the FDA to make rules so that tobacco companies couldn't advertise to children. So you don't see cigarette ads on kid's TV or any TV, actually, and that's why teenagers never smoke. Ever. They just ride their Heelys around, and play Pokemon.

The President can also try to influence the way a law is implemented by issuing a signing statement, when he signs a bill into law. This is the White House's interpretation of what the law means and they become part of the legislative history that courts can use if the laws are challenged. Although it's not clear that they have any real legal weight and they might violate separation of powers because courts are supposed to decide what a law means, not the President.

The most important administrative strategy that the President has at his disposal is the executive order. These are presidential directives that have the force of law and presidents have used them for major policies that would have been difficult to get through Congress. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

When I say that executive action has been used to push through major policies, I mean major policies, like purchasing Louisiana, annexing Texas, emancipating the slaves, interning Japanese Americans during World War II, desegregating the Army, creating the Peace Corps, and implementing affirmative action. Presidents increasingly rely on administrative strategies for a number of reasons, but especially because they work.

Administrative strategies usually happen outside of the public eye which makes it easier for the President to act. Courts usually defer to administrative actions, especially in the area of national defense. And administrative action can be much more efficient than having to wait for a majority of 535 members of Congress to agree on something, especially if it's something important.

But the increasingly large and powerful executive branch is controversial and critics have worried about the growing power of the President since FDR, or maybe even since Jackson. There's an argument that the founders of the country preferred a weak executive branch, and not because all that administration is expensive, but there are also a few arguments in favor of an expanded presidency that you should know about.

The first is that in emergencies the nation needs a leader who can act fast, and the President is the best suited to be that leader. Maybe Captain America as well, but he's fictional. Of course this could potentially give him an incentive to create emergencies and further increase his power but how 'bout let's not get cynical, okay? The second argument holds that the President's more able to act in the public interest because he's the center of public attention and thus easily held accountable. And because he only has to run for reelection once. The third argument in favor of a powerful president is that he's the only nationally elected official and thus the most democratic one. The only nationally elected official? Really? What about uh... oh yeah, you're right.

The idea is that since most people pay attention to the presidential elections, by choosing one person over another the majority of the public is implicitly endorsing his policies. I mean, everyone loves the President's policies, everyone. Do you buy it? I'm not sure that I do. Maybe you do. But increasing the complexity of our understanding is kind of what we do here at Crash Course. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

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