Bill Clinton's Presidential Party Leadership:
A Preliminary Assessment

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A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

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Introductory Considerations and Analytical Framework

This preliminary assessment of Bill Clinton's presidential party leadership both updates the author's abiding interest in that elusive role and anticipates a subsequent, more considered, evaluation of Clinton as party leader. As a concept and a phenomenon, presidential party leadership has been relatively neglected by presidential scholars. Nevertheless, several noteworthy contributions have been forthcoming.

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Paradox pervades presidential party leadership. It is peripheral, yet central; divisive, yet integrative. While the role lacks constitutional grounding, it quickly developed with the appearance of national political parties in the 1790s. The status of the presidential nominee at the head of the party ticket thereby enabled the incumbent, first as nominee and later as president, both to claim party leadership and to have that claim generally acknowledged.

Perennially at issue is the substance of that claim. Potentially, party leadership elevates the president's power position. For example, fortified by partisanship, the chief executive can presume to lead fellow partisans in the independent legislature. With the idea and organization of party bridging the constitutional chasm between the executive and legislative branches, presidential party leadership provides the foundation for presidential government. Similarly, partisanship directly connects the president with substantial elements of the general public. With this link, the president can both generate and rely on public support.

However, the American polity presents profound cultural and structural obstacles to presidential party leadership. The political culture views partisanship with considerable suspicion, associating it with distasteful divisiveness and meanness of spirit even while embracing it. An inevitably constraining conflict exists between the presidential roles of party leader and head of state. The latter calls for an elevated, non-partisan, president of all the people, orientation. The constitutional principles of separation of powers and federalism set up structural barriers to responsible party government under presidential leadership.

Burns has identified two general types of leadership: transactional and transformational. He categorizes party leadership as transactional, featuring bargaining and negotiation in exchange contexts, while ascribing to transforming leadership more complexity and potency, along with an elevating, even moralistic quality.\(^3\)

Clearly, presidential party leadership involves diverse arenas of exchange, corresponding with various partisan components: organizational, governmental, and electoral. The former pertains to presidential relations with the membership of the party apparatus, the middle category with other public office-holders who share the party label, and the latter with partisans in the general public.

Further, president-party relations are dynamic; they waver over time in response to shifting power balances between the two institutions. The exchange relationship developed out of mutual needs and expectations that continue to frame it. At minimum, aspirants to the presidency have traditionally required party nominations to legitimize their candidacies. Further, parties are expected to provide their nominees not only with initial electoral assistance but also subsequent support in achieving political and policy objectives. It turn, parties look to the White House for assistance in party building, a developmental enterprise with both organizational and policy components. The point is that both the inclinations and institutional capabilities of president and party to satisfy each other can and do vary over time.

In seeking to characterize and evaluate presidents as party leaders, four factors demand consideration. The first is the attitude of the incumbent toward partisanship in general and the party in particular, developed through background and experiences, but always exercised in the context of presidential role conflict that typically subordinates party leadership. For purposes of comparison, a continuum can be established, with presidential attitudes ranging from positive to negative.

The second is the immediate political setting surrounding the exercise of party leadership by a particular president. Obviously, environmental circumstances vary across and even within presidencies. Relevant but not necessarily consistent features include perceived presence or absence of an electoral mandate, distribution of partisanship in the electorate, party control of Congress, and vitality of party organization. These continua extend from favorable to unfavorable.

The third is the tenor of president-party relations: organizational, governmental, and electoral. In the consideration of presidential relations with the party organization, partisans in the government, and their counterparts in the electorate, the variation runs from congenial to hostile.

Finally, there is an ideological component of party leadership, involving values, visions, and agendas. This addresses the president's goals and objectives of party leadership, the ends to which it is directed. Herein party leadership could manifest itself not merely in transactions, but in transformations as well. At issue for comparative analysis are the extent to which such an ideological factor is present in the presidency under consideration and the success the incumbent has in establishing preferred values.

Clearly, this classification scheme oversimplifies complex realities. The variables are not presented as dichotomous, and an element of imprecision is inevitable. The actuality is not so much "either/or" as "more/less," with classifications based on avowedly impressionistic evaluations.
Applying the Model to Bill Clinton

Orientations toward Party and Partisanship

Let us now apply the model to President Bill Clinton. Prior to his successful presidential bid in 1992, Clinton spent virtually his entire adult life in the arena of electoral politics in his native state of Arkansas. In 1974, a year out of Yale Law School and a newcomer to faculty of the University of Arkansas School of Law, he was the Democratic nominee in an unsuccessful effort to dislodge incumbent Republican John Paul Hammerschmidt from his seat representing the Third Congressional District. Two years later he sought and secured the state-wide elective office of attorney general. In 1978, he was nominated and elected governor. Ousted in the 1980 general election, he immediately undertook a comeback campaign that proved triumphant in 1982; and he held onto that office until his resignation after the presidential election of 1993, winning reelection in 1984, 1986, and 1990.4

His unequivocal self presentation as a partisan Democrat occurred in an electoral setting where traditional Democratic dominance has been encountering a growing Republican challenge. Alone among prominent Arkansas Democratic politicians, Clinton has the dubious distinction of twice having met electoral defeat at the hands of Republicans in general elections. For a Southern Democrat, Clinton came to the electoral arena of presidential politics with an unusually acute acquaintance with two-party competition.

However, in a more time-honored Southern fashion, Governor Clinton worked with an Arkansas Legislature featuring overwhelming Democratic majorities and negligible Republican representation in both houses. He never had to worry about Republican legislators spearheading and energizing a coalition capable of defeating his policy initiatives. On the other hand, neither was party loyalty available to him as an effective cue to generate legislative support. When one party clearly dominates the legislative landscape, "no party politics" effectively ensues.

Organizationally, the Arkansas Democratic party looks to the governor for leadership. Clinton inherited a complacent state party. Long mired in self-satisfied apathy accompanying electoral preeminence, the party's shocking loss of the governorship to the Republicans under Winthrop Rockefeller (1966-1970) had briefly energized it. With the resumption of Democratic dominance in the 1970s came a return to normalcy. In turn, Clinton's 1980 defeat by Frank White similarly encouraged a cyclical flurry of party

4 A 1984 state constitutional amendment changed the term for state constitutional offices from two to four years, so Clinton's victory in 1986 meant he did not seek re-election until 1990.
building activity that abated following Clinton's restoration in 1982, in the absence of competitive incentives for development.5

As governor, Clinton made his presence felt on the national party scene. Following his initial re-election defeat in 1980, he flirted with a run for the vacant chairmanship of the Democratic National Committee before deciding to concentrate on reclaiming his Arkansas electoral base. He played an active role in the National Governors Association, serving as chair in 1986-87. Clinton figured prominently at the 1988 Democratic National Convention. He was the choice of the nominee-apparent, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, to deliver the nomination speech.

In the mid-1980s, he was also a leader in the formation and development of the moderate, centrist Democratic Leadership Council, chairing the body in 1990-91. The DLC promoted itself as a battler for the ideological soul of the Democratic party. Perceiving the party as plagued by a radical, left-wing image and orientation, it undertook to move the party away from its leftist leanings back toward the center.6 Clinton's identification with the Democratic Leadership Council provided the primary institutional foundation for his campaign claim to be a "New Democrat." Moreover, it has relevance for our subsequent consideration of the ideological dimension of his party leadership.

Thus, well before his 1992 run for the party nomination, Clinton was a familiar figure in national party circles. Indeed, he demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to establish and maintain links to and commitments from a wide range of party notables.

In sum, Clinton's background and experiences combined strong positive identifications with and orientations toward the Democratic party with partial exposure to a competitive partisan environment. They provided solid but incomplete preparation for his assumption of the presidential role of party leader.

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President Clinton faces a complex and contradictory political environment for party leadership. While in certain respects, circumstances are more favorable than they have been for his recent predecessors, perhaps even more formidable obstacles stand in his way. The latter call into question the contemporary efficacy of any president's party leadership.

Clinton's popular vote totaled only forty-three percent, far short of a majority. Indeed, his was the smallest share of the popular vote achieved by the victor since Woodrow Wilson in 1912. Nevertheless, it provided him with a comfortable margin over his Republican opponent, President George Bush, at thirty-eight percent. In the Electoral College, Clinton carried thirty-two states plus the District of Columbia, for 370 electoral votes, versus Bush's eighteen states with 168 electoral votes. This electoral total placed him ahead of Truman (1948), Kennedy (1960), Nixon (1968), and Carter (1976), but behind Eisenhower (1952, 1956), Johnson (1964), Nixon (1972), Reagan (1980, 1984), and Bush (1988). Thus, Clinton's election generated scant bases for an electoral mandate to fortify his leadership claims.

Any discussion of the political environment confronting Clinton must address the Perot factor. Ross Perot's erratic and independent presidential candidacy enormously complicated the electoral arena in 1992, and his looming presence provides an ongoing challenge to Clinton's presidency. Having successfully undertaken the difficult challenge of ballot access, by late spring polls showed Perot to be the choice of about one-third of the electorate. He retreated from an active candidacy on the eve of the Democratic National Convention in July, only to resume his presidential campaign in September. On election day, while failing to carry any states and thus ineligible to receive electoral votes, he nevertheless received nineteen percent of the popular vote. This was the best showing by an independent since Theodore Roosevelt in 1912.

While Perot probably damaged Bush more, his strong ballot showing sabotaged Clinton's hopes for a popular vote majority conveying an electoral mandate. Since the election, Perot has remained highly visible, consistently criticizing Clinton and undermining Clinton's efforts to incorporate Perot's supporters into the Democratic electoral coalition.

Additionally, the Perot phenomenon heightens issues that transcend the narrow issue of Clinton's performance as party leader and threaten the party system itself. The prospect of a Perot presidency without major party sanction nullifies the very notion of presidential party leadership. Short of that, Perot's impressive showing suggests that the major parties can no longer take for granted the support of contemporary mainstream
presidential voters. Long before 1992, modern American voters have been indicating their disinclination to make the enduring partisan attachments that their ancestors apparently did. Electoral dealignment, as demonstrated by declining partisanship in the electorate, diminishes the attraction of partisan appeals.

The substantial increase of self-styled independents notwithstanding, within the constrained setting of two-party electoral competition, Clinton's Democrats continue to hold a narrow lead over their Republican counterparts. For the time being, they appear to have stabilized their plurality position and halted the steady encroachments of the Republicans during the decade of the 1980s. At the outset of the Clinton presidency, public support for the ruling Democratic party was at a two-decade high.\(^7\)

Also more positively, Clinton's election ended twelve years of divided party government in Washington. For the first time since the Carter presidency (1977-1981), the same party controlled the White House and both houses of Congress. Divided party government has proven to be commonplace in the post-World War II era.\(^8\)


Divided government severely compromises the exercise of presidential party leadership. Presidents facing opposing party majorities on Capitol Hill must subordinate party leadership to bipartisan legislative leadership in developing, submitting, lobbying for, and securing enactment of legislative proposals. Further, presidents anxious to accommodate opposition perspectives risk alienating partisan supporters.

Bill Clinton does not face this particular dilemma. In the wake of the November elections, Clinton's Democrats continued their comfortable control of both houses of Congress. Their margin in the House was 258-176-1, a loss of ten seats. In the Senate, the balance remained fifty-seven--forty-three, though a subsequent special election has narrowed it to fifty-six--forty-four, resulting in a one seat loss.

However, united party government generates its own problems for presidential party leadership. Most notably, it establishes inflated and unrealistic expectations regarding party cohesion and discipline. American parties have never been models of responsibility. While they can and do move in that direction, aforementioned cultural and structural barriers preclude responsible party government.

Table 1
Gains and Losses in House and Senate in Presidential Election Years, 1944-1992

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>President</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>House (Majority?)</th>
<th>Senate (Majority?)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>Roosevelt</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>+24 Yes</td>
<td>- 2 Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Truman</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>+75 Yes</td>
<td>+ 9 Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Eisenhower</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>+22 Yes</td>
<td>+ 1 Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Eisenhower</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>- 3 No</td>
<td>0 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Kennedy</td>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>-20 Yes</td>
<td>+ 1 Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>+37 Yes</td>
<td>0 Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Nixon</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>+ 5 No</td>
<td>+ 7 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Nixon</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>+12 No</td>
<td>- 2 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>+ 1 Yes</td>
<td>+ 1 Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Reagan</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>+32 No</td>
<td>+12 Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Reagan</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>+14 No</td>
<td>- 2 Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>- 3 No</td>
<td>- 1 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Clinton</td>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>-10 Yes</td>
<td>0 Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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Clinton campaigned on a theme of ending the gridlock generated by divided government. He promised that the election of a Democratic president sharing power with Democratic Congress would usher in an era of dramatic change in the political order. However, as Table 1 indicates, Clinton lacked presidential coattails. Indeed, the relative position of the Democrats in the House worsened, while the status quo prevailed in the Senate. Clinton's candidacy could not be credited by congressional Democrats as the key to their own electoral successes. This reality bodes ill for his legislative party leadership initiatives.

Clinton inherited a Democratic party organization that had not elected a Democrat president since 1976. Ironically, out-party status appears to enhance the organizational vitality of the national party organization, while electoral victory typically detracts from it.9 Under the able leadership of out-party chairs Charles Manatt, Paul Kirk, and Ron Brown, the national party had been revitalized. Beginning his tenure in 1989, Brown received particularly high marks for his stewardship.10 As noted below, Brown's strong presence at party headquarters continued to be felt throughout the general election campaign. Thus, Clinton began his presidency with a relatively strong national party organization.

President-Party Relations

In surveying and assessing the early returns on the general tone of president-party relations during the Clinton era, we will briefly consider the partisan dimensions of presidential public opinion support and legislative leadership. Then we will focus more fully on the less visible presidential interactions with the national party organization.

In the arena of public opinion, Clinton has faltered. As a minority president, Clinton was vulnerable from the outset, and he did not receive the customary public opinion honeymoon accorded new presidents. Indeed, his popular support has declined since his inauguration. At the end of his first one hundred days, the Gallup Poll placed his job approval rating at fifty-five percent. Among the past nine presidents, only Ford (forty-seven percent) ranked lower at the comparable time. Clinton's corresponding disapproval rating, thirty-seven percent, was the highest. Not surprisingly, his fellow Democrats were strongly supportive, with eighty-two percent approving. Still, this level of partisan approval is below


the high point of all of his recent predecessors except Ford.\footnote{David W. Moore, "The First 100 Days: Clinton's Personal Popularity High," The Gallup Poll Monthly (April 1993): 4-12; Bass, "The National Chairman Becomes President," 127, citing George C. Edwards III and Alec M. Gallup, "Twenty Five Years of Measuring Presidential Approval," The Gallup Poll Monthly (September 1990: 14-15; The Gallup Poll Monthly 1989-91, various issues.} Clinton's inability to generate public support for his policies has been a major shortcoming of his presidential party leadership.

Turning to party leadership in the congressional arena, Clinton has eagerly embraced this role. He has been frenetic in lobbying congressional Democrats on behalf of his policy initiatives, dealing extensively with both leadership and rank and file. In addition to frequent White House sessions and innumerable telephone conversations, Clinton has journeyed to Capitol Hill on several occasions to meet with his fellow partisans. Not since Lyndon Johnson has a president invested so much time and energy in courting Congress, and Clinton's approach so far has been far more partisan.

As yet, the verdict is still out on Clinton's performance. The clearest outcome of his partisan style to date has been unified and unrelenting opposition of the Republican minority to the economic proposals that undergird his legislative agenda. Stalwart Republican opposition means that Clinton requires overwhelming support from his fellow Democrats to secure enactment. Thus far, it has been forthcoming, but by exceedingly narrow margins.

For example, in the key May 27, 1993, vote on the administration-sponsored budget reconciliation bill, the House version passed 219-213, with thirty-eight Democrats defecting. When the Senate version came to a vote on June 25, Vice President Albert Gore cast the decisive vote in favor of the Clinton plan, breaking a forty-nine--forty-nine tie that saw six Democrats breaking ranks. When the House-Senate conference compromise approved by Clinton came to a vote on August 5, Clinton prevailed in the House by the even narrower margin of 218-216. The vote in the Senate the next day was a fifty-fifty tie, again necessitating Gore's vote to secure passage.

Clinton's dependence on extraordinarily unified party support has emboldened Capitol Hill Democrats to advance their own special interests in negotiations with the White House. The perception has developed that they, and not the president, hold the high cards. This situation is particularly acute in the Senate, where the Democratic margin is smaller and procedural rules provide the Republican minority with more power. Moreover, Clinton and his legislative liaison assistants have been criticized for tactical errors in dealing with the various factions that divide the
congressional Democrats, as well as for their inability to attract any bipartisan support.

Clinton's shortcomings can be attributed in part to inexperience and lack of focus. In addition, he has simply blundered on occasion. His lack of an electoral mandate and unimpressive poll support are also contributing factors. Finally, the congressional Democrats are themselves awkwardly adjusting to the presence of a fellow partisan in the White House after twelve years of Republican rule.

Still, aggregate figures portray a more optimistic picture. Four months into his presidency, Congressional Quarterly's presidential success study indicated that Democratic lawmakers were willing to support the president with their votes an impressive ninety-six percent of the time in the House and eighty-seven percent in the Senate. CO's corresponding party unity study indicates that party unity is on the rise for both parties, with members supporting their party on about ninety percent of the partisan votes that are themselves becoming more frequent.  

With regard to president-national party organization interactions, they typically center on the role assigned the national party chair in the presidential campaign and in subsequent presidential party management. A half-century ago, this role was central. Since then, it has receded to the periphery.

The nomination campaign can set the stage for future interactions. Clinton's preconvention relations with the party organization were positive. He began his presidential quest with noteworthy support from the membership of the Democratic National Committee. When the campaign faltered in the wake of allegations involving womanizing and draft-dodging, the party chair, Ron Brown, offered reassurance. As the convention neared with Clinton in control of sufficient delegate support to guarantee his nomination, the party machinery embraced and accommodated him. For example, in the development of the party platform, Clinton's "New Democrat" centrist perspectives were clearly present, alongside more standard liberal planks.  

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Traditionally, new party nominees initially asserted their leadership over the national party organization by designating their preference as national party chair. The national committee then met immediately following the nominating convention to ratify that choice, authorizing the new party chair to manage the upcoming general election campaign. This is no longer the case. Not since 1972 has a Democratic presidential nominee exercised this selection prerogative. Indeed, the Democrats appear to be doing informally what their Republican counterparts have done through formal rules changes: setting the term of the national party chair to begin in January following the presidential election. Thus, nominee Clinton retained incumbent party chair Ron Brown for the fall campaign. Brown had received positive reviews for his leadership of the party during the Bush presidency, and his relations with the Clinton campaign had been very amicable.

Similarly, not since 1968, when Hubert Humphrey's presidential campaign manager Lawrence O'Brien became party chair, has the campaign organization been integrated into the national party headquarters. Clinton maintained the modern pattern of separation. After the convention, the Clinton campaign organization, managed by David Wilhelm, maintained its separate identity from that of the national party. The national party's primary contributions to the fall campaign were in the areas of fund raising, where it proved spectacularly successful, and voter registration.

Shortly after the victorious election, the DNC assumed additional financial responsibilities for the Clinton campaign by placing about five hundred Clinton campaign staff members on its temporary payroll. Subsequently, the DNC sponsored a controversial job fair, inviting lobbyists, special interests, unions, and corporations to consider the credentials of the now-unemployed Clinton campaign workers.

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organization activists and observers, this is a fascinating turn of events. Once, the national party organization claimed prolific government patronage in the wake of electoral victory. With patronage resources now vastly diminished, and the national party organization denied direct access to the remainder, it undertakes job placement activities for the campaign faithful in the private sector.

After the election, Clinton rewarded Chairman Brown for his impressive performance by moving him into the Cabinet as Secretary of Commerce. During the first half of the twentieth century, several party chairs simultaneously held the Cabinet position of Postmaster General, whence they integrated the party's interests with those of the administration in attending to presidential party management. While the Cabinet assignments to other offices for national party chairs occasionally still occurs, the simultaneous holding of two positions does not. Thus, Brown vacated the chairmanship to enter the Cabinet.

Clinton's choice as Brown's successor was his campaign manager, David Wilhelm, and the Democratic National Committee routinely ratified that decision. The choice of Wilhelm reinforced the venerable tradition of naming the campaign manager as national party chair. This once commonplace practice indulged in by the likes of William McKinley, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt, had been largely abandoned in the past half-century. George Bush reinvigorated it with his 1989 designation of Lee Atwater. Wilhelm is in the Atwater mold in two other noteworthy respects. The first is his youth. At thirty-six, he is a year

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20 George Cortelyou (R, appointed in 1905); Will Hays (R, 1921); James Farley (D, 1933); and Robert Hannegan (D, 1945) all retained the party chairmanship upon becoming Postmaster General. Frank Walker (D, 1943) reversed the process when, while serving as Postmaster General, he took on the additional title of national party chair. Two other campaign party chairs became postmaster general but resigned the party post: Frank Hitchcock (R, 1909), and Arthur Summerfield (R, 1953).

21 In 1949, President Truman named his Democratic party chair, Senator J. Howard McGrath, Attorney General. Following the 1970 congressional elections, President Nixon designated the Republican party chair, Representative Rogers Morton, Secretary of the Interior.

younger than was Atwater, previously one of the youngest in memory. The second is his vocation as a professional political consultant, representing a new wave in American politics, supplanting old-style party bosses in managing campaigns.

During Wilhelm's brief tenure to date, he has established and linked party building and providing political support for the president as his major priorities. Wilhelm enthusiastically advocates utilizing modern technologies in his party building efforts, seeking to "apply new techniques to old ways of building a party." He has sought to position the DNC as "the principal vehicle for how President Clinton can communicate beyond the beltway." To this end, the DNC has attempted to mobilize public support for the president's legislative initiatives.

Key considerations in assessing White House-national party organization interactions are the access afforded the national party chair to the president and the national party's role in presidential politics. Fifty years ago, the national party chair typically served as the president's chief political lieutenant. Since the inception of the modern White House Office under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, White House staff assistants have

23 Dean Burch (R, 1964) and Fred Harris (D, 1968) were also thirty-seven when elected.


supplanted the party chair in the management of party affairs and the conduct of political operations.\textsuperscript{29}

On the eve of his election as party chair, Wilhelm indicated that he would attend the White House morning staff meetings each day and work closely with Rahm Emanuel, the White House political director.\textsuperscript{30} He also participates in a daily 5:00 P.M. meeting in the Ward Room of the White House mess where the president's top political advisers and agents evaluate the political scene in light of their goal, in Emanuel's words, "to make Clinton the first Democratic president since Roosevelt to be re-elected."\textsuperscript{31} Structurally, like his modern predecessors, Clinton has organized the White House as the central location for presidential party management. While Wilhelm is not serving as the president's primary political operative, nevertheless he is more prominently positioned than most of his recent counterparts.

A traditional presidential prerogative in party organization relations has been to place personal loyalists in key staff positions at the party headquarters to attend to presidential interests. Clinton built on this convention when he named longtime aide Craig Smith as the national committee's political director.\textsuperscript{32}

Thus, Clinton's party relations to date have been relatively congenial. Certainly, he has both sought and relied on his fellow Democrats in pursuit of popular and congressional support. Under his leadership, the national party organization's role in presidential politics is well above the modern norm.

The Ends of Party Leadership

From a presidential party leadership perspective, one of candidate Bill Clinton's most intriguing aspects was his self-identification as a "New Democrat." He entered the presidential

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
campaign as an avowed centrist, seeking to lead his fellow Democrats back into the moderate mainstream of American politics. Presumably, as president he would make use of his "bully pulpit" to redefine and redirect the party.

In the wake of his declaration of candidacy, events have conspired to impede this endeavor. In the preconvention campaign, the Clinton rival who personified the traditional, liberal Democratic image, Tom Harkin, failed to catch fire. In turn, Paul Tsongas, who outflanked Clinton on the center-right, achieved conspicuous early success. These developments encouraged Clinton to pursue his opening to the left, thereby successfully securing crucial delegate support for his nomination. Subsequently, the independent Perot candidacy altered the anticipated electoral equation and preempted some of Clinton's projected appeal to centrist voters, forcing him to rely essentially on the core Democratic party constituency that remained on the left of the political spectrum. Still, he never abandoned his "New Democrat" theme. To the contrary, it remained an integral part of his campaign rhetoric and contributed to his general election victory.

Since his Inauguration, Clinton has been ineffective in articulating his new vision for the Democratic party. As such, he has been unable to impose it on the party. This shortcoming is of no small consequence. His reelection prospects may well hinge on his capacity to do so.

Clinton's Party Leadership in Comparative Perspective

Assessing the early returns on Bill Clinton's presidential party leadership, we find him holding strongly positive partisan orientations as president. He shares them most clearly with recent predecessors Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, John Kennedy, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush. Toward the other end of the spectrum reside Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Jimmy Carter.

Roosevelt and Johnson operated within the most favorable political environments for party leadership. At the other extreme, Nixon and Ford faced the most unfavorable circumstances. Clinton belongs with the rest between the two poles, but leaning in the less favorable direction.

Clinton's intraparty relations have been generally positive, placing him once again in the company of Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, Ford, Reagan, and Bush. In contrast, Johnson, Nixon, and Carter all experienced and contributed to rather antagonistic intraparty relations. Eisenhower occupies an ambiguous position somewhere between, but leaning toward the positive pole.

Few presidents have undertaken to offer a transforming vision for party leadership. Roosevelt most clearly succeeded, with the
New Deal, and Johnson merits recognition for articulating the Great Society in muted partisan terms. In contrast, Eisenhower was unable to express effectively his definition of or commitment to what he called Modern Republicanism. So far, Clinton is more akin to Eisenhower. Still, in comparatively evaluating his party leadership, he stands out by merely proclaiming his commitment.

The first term example of earlier twentieth century Democratic president affords Clinton an attractive party leadership model to emulate. Like Clinton, Woodrow Wilson entered office as a minority president, having triumphed in a three-way race in 1912. Nevertheless, he ably led loyal Democratic majorities in Congress to enact the New Freedom, a substantial progressive legislative agenda. He went on to secure re-election narrowly in a more conventional contest in 1916.\(^{33}\)

Returning to the present, Clinton's first few months in the White House find the president frustrated in his party leadership role. Having eagerly and energetically espoused it, he has failed to mobilize popular support, despite an extraordinary effort to that end undertaken by the Democratic National Committee. His noteworthy successes in Congress have overcome implacable Republican opposition and damaging Democratic defections. He has paid a high price for the party support that has been forthcoming, with many legislators coming on board only after exacting their pound of presidential flesh. At this writing, in the wake of his narrow and perhaps Pyrrhic budget victory, he is discovering new virtue in bipartisanship.\(^{34}\)

Can a contemporary president establish and maintain potent party leadership amid internal role conflict, ineffective sanctions to enforce party discipline, and declining party identification in the electorate? Franklin Roosevelt set the standard for modern presidents as party leaders, and even he experienced prominent failures. His successors have fallen well short. Clinton appears poised to swell the ranks of presidents at the second level who have willingly embraced the role but have failed to surmount the formidable obstacles placed in their way by an inhospitable political environment.

\(^{33}\) Wilson's party leadership proved less felicitous in his second term. The Democrats lost control of Congress in the 1918 midterm elections. Wilson proved incapable of dealing effectively with the opposition Republican majority, and his presidency ended in failure.

\(^{34}\) Tom Raum, "Clinton Calls for End to Partisan Rancor," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, 10 August 1993, 1A.