

INFORMAL CHECKS ON PRESIDENTIAL POWER

Listed below are various 'informal' checks on Presidential Power.

Below each factor are several examples that show how this has influenced Presidential Power across time.

1. Public Opinion

The ultimate check of public opinion is at the ballot box. Informally, White House staffs and independent news agencies poll Americans regarding the President's job performance, stand on issues, etc. which often forces presidents to change course in policy.

Examples:

- 1) LBJ chooses not to run for re-election after public opinion turns against him and the Vietnam War following the Tet Offensive in 1968.*
- 2) Jimmy Carter lost the 1980 election in part due to his failure to secure the release of Americans hostages in Iran which led directly to deteriorating public support for his presidency.*
- 3) George W. Bush's first nominee to replace retiring Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O'Connor, Harriet Meyers, withdrew her name from consideration largely due to negative public opinion against her nomination.*

2. The Media

The press wields considerable influence over public opinion by choosing what stories to cover, reporting the facts, and expressing opinions.

Examples:

- 1) Woodward and Bernstein expose the Watergate cover up which ultimately led to Nixon's resignation.*
- 2) The media reported President Ford's gaffs (ski accidents, falling down steps of Air Force I) which contributed to Ford's image as a bungler.*
- 3) The press widely reported Bill Clinton's "indiscretions" with Monica Lewinsky and attempt to "spin" the scandal without admitting responsibility.*

3. Partisan Politics

The opposition party scrutinizes and criticizes the policies and decisions of a president and his administration.

Examples:

- 1) Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, a republican, clashed with President Clinton over the federal budget in 1995 resulting in a government shutdown.*
- 2) Chairman of the Democratic National Committee, Howard Dean, criticizes President Bush over the war in Iraq.*

4. Investigative Role of Congress (hold hearings)

In the age of television, public investigations carried out by Congressional Committees serve to check the president. These investigations support Congress's constitutional role of oversight of the executive branch.

Examples:

- 1) Congressional investigation of the Iran Contra Affair (Reagan administration), White Water Scandal (Clinton).*
- 2) Congressional committees investigated intelligence failures after 9-11;*

5. Interest Groups

These groups attempt to influence and check the president's power through monitoring the President's programs and policy, endorsing or opposing presidential candidates, contributing money to campaigns, etc.

Example:

- 1) The National Right to Life Counsel and other pro-life interest groups opposed President Clinton's veto of the ban on partial birth abortion.*