BASICSPLAINER – THE PRESIDENCY

Article II of the U.S. Constitution states that "the executive power shall be vested in a president of the United States of America." The Constitution is vague about the nature of the executive power, however – especially in comparison to the long list of specific congressional powers in Article I. The president serves a four-year term, is **commander in chief** of the armed forces, and can make treaties with foreign nations, as well as appointments to judicial and executive offices, with the consent of the Senate.[1] The president may also **veto**, or reject, bills passed by Congress, although a two-thirds majority in both houses of Congress overrides the veto. Unlike the governors of most states, presidents cannot veto specific portions of a bill – they must approve or disapprove of each bill in its entirety.

Over time, the president's powers have expanded as individual presidents have tested the limits of executive power, and as Congress has seen fit to enact laws delegating certain powers to the president or to the president's designees. For example, the president now submits a proposed budget to Congress each year, setting the agenda for the official budget process.

Today, the president sits atop an executive branch of roughly two million civilian employees. Most of these employees work in either the fifteen cabinet departments, which are led by cabinet secretaries appointed by the president subject to **confirmation** by the Senate, or in the many other independent agencies and commissions lodged in the federal government. A few thousand work in the **Executive Office of the President**, which includes not only the White House, but also the Office of Management and Budget, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, and others. A few hundred people serve on the **White House staff** itself, the president's closest aides and advisors.

Each president organizes the White House staff differently, but the most important White House staffer is usually the **Chief of Staff**, whose responsibilities often include managing the president's time, guarding access to the Oval Office, and ensuring that the president hears a variety of viewpoints on an issue prior to making a decision.[2] Other important White House aides include the **Communications Director** (who handles the media), the **Director of Legislative Affairs** (who coordinates with Congress), and the **National Security Advisor** (who coordinates foreign and defense policy).

Although cabinet departments may play a role in crafting policy positions, over the course of the 20th Century it became more common for key policy proposals to originate in the White House itself.[3] Presidents have also sought to use their command of the national stage, what Theodore Roosevelt called the "Bully Pulpit", to mobilize public support in cases when Congress might appear reluctant to act.[4] These efforts have not always been successful, however.

The Constitution provides for the removal of a president in cases of "Treason, Bribery, or other high Crimes and Misdemeanors." Removal requires a majority vote in the House of Representatives to **impeach**, a trial in the Senate, and a two-thirds vote in the Senate to convict. No president has ever been removed this way, although Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton were impeached, but not convicted, and Richard Nixon resigned in the face of almost certain impeachment and removal.

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[1] A treaty ratification requires a two-thirds vote of the Senate; appointments require only a majority.
[2] For an account of the evolving role of the Chief of Staff, see Chris Whipple, *The Gatekeepers: How the White House Chiefs of Staff Define Every Presidency* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2017).
[3] See Andrew Rudalevige, *Managing the President's Program: Presidential Leadership and Legislative Policy Formulation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
[4] A major argument about how presidents do this can be found in Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2006).