The “Two Mr. Wilsons”: Party Government, Personal Leadership, and Woodrow Wilson’s Political Thought

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[Wilson] thinks our form of government can be changed by personal leadership…

- Colonel Edward M. House (1914)

Abstract

Woodrow Wilson’s political thought on statesmanship and governance reveals a consistent tension between party and personal leadership. I trace three phases of Wilson’s political thought, analyzing this tension under a framework of Edmund Burke’s idea of party government and Henry Bolingbroke’s conception of the “Patriot King.” First, in his early scholarship, Wilson adopted the Burkean notion of unifying the legislative and executive branches to promote effective party government. Second, in his later scholarship and political career, Wilson embraced a view of the president as having the ability to bring about responsible party government through the power of personal leadership – implicitly using Bolingbroke’s means for Burke’s ends. Third, as his presidency came to focus more on foreign affairs, Wilson defended presidential prerogatives for personal leadership akin to a patriot king. This tension influenced Wilson’s presidency and subsequent American political development.

Introduction

“President Wilson’s recent speeches… reveal the existence of two Mr. Wilsons,” wrote the Progressive Herbert Croly (1916, 234) toward the end of Woodrow Wilson’s first presidential

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term, “one actively engaged in an essentially constructive task of national reorganization, and the other still clinging to partisan ideas, antipathies and dogmas which pervert the meaning and compromise the success of his greater enterprise.” What Croly meant was that, like other Progressives of the era, Wilson embraced the possibility of executive leadership being used to stand and speak for the nation as a whole. Yet, unlike many Progressives, including Croly, Wilson sought to embrace the political party system instead of viewing it with disdain. In this pithy analysis, Croly hit on the essence of a core tension in Wilson’s political thought.

Few politicians wrote and spoke so much about the idea of statesmanship as Wilson did in his academic and political career. In the course of thinking about government reform, political parties, and the importance of leadership, Wilson helped shape the office of the presidency and our subsequent expectations for all presidents (Cooper 1983). I argue that Wilson’s idea of statesmanship, while evolving over time, possessed a fundamental tension between the notions of responsible political parties and transformative personal leadership. As Peri Arnold (2009, 133) surmises, “over a quarter-century Wilson’s idea of responsible leadership changed little, but his ideas of how it applied to American government changed markedly.”

To examine this tension between party government and personal leadership, I review two eighteenth century thinkers’ opposing ideas – Edmund Burke’s theory of party government and Viscount Bolingbroke’s ideal of the “Patriot King.” Using this dichotomy as a framework, I show how significant aspects of Wilson’s thought, while evolving over time, corresponded to elements of each thinker’s idea. The justification for comparing Wilson’s views to those of Burke is relatively straightforward. While Wilson most openly relied upon Walter Bagehot’s *The English Constitution* in advocating party government, he also explicitly invoked Burke, the “classic defender” of parties (Rosenblum 2008, 5), who had called for parties that could unite on
great principles and put them into practical effect. Indeed, Wilson said the most about Burke of any American president (Maciag 2013, 143), and he even later made a point of visiting Burke’s grave to pay homage to him (Thorsen 1988, 162).

The rationale for comparing Wilson’s thought to the views of Bolingbroke requires more elaboration. Wilson appears to have never directly invoked the patriot king in his writings, though he was aware of Bolingbroke’s work.¹ But I contend that this is a useful analysis for several reasons. First, Bolingbroke’s standard of a patriot king was a model of personal leadership that directly influenced early American presidents, so expectations of the role as being above party strife were embedded into the office (Ketcham 1984). Second, one of the most direct influences on Wilson’s changing conception of the presidency – Henry Jones Ford’s (1898, 342) *The Rise and Growth of American Politics* – directly connected the notion of presidential representation that Wilson increasingly adopted to Bolingbroke’s ideas: “The ideal president or governor who rises superior to party, and calls all good citizens to his support, is Bolingbroke’s ‘Patriot King’ in republican dress.” Finally, Burke explicitly articulated his views on party government in opposition to Bolingbroke’s earlier advocacy of personal leadership. Thus, because Wilson drew upon Burke’s writings in championing party government and the unification of the executive and legislature, any correspondence of Wilson’s views to the arguments of Bolingbroke – particularly those opposed to Burke – is especially revealing of a tension in his thought. As Wilson’s beliefs about the power of presidential leadership evolved, the self-professed Burkean increasingly adopted notions of a great leader driven solely by patriotism to ensure government worked for the true interest of the whole citizenry. As Daniel Stid (1998, 54) notes, Wilson’s evolving views reflected Bolingbroke in spirit.
I posit that Wilson’s political thought evolved in three phases over the course of his career. First, Wilson began his academic career with a focus on party government, arguing that the separation of powers system had ruined statesmanship in America by preventing responsible parties from contesting great principles of government. Though he wanted to improve the quality of personal leadership, Wilson’s ultimate goal was the improvement of the parties and the unification of the executive and legislative branches through formal constitutional amendment.

Second, from the end of his academic career to the beginning of his political career, Wilson came to view personal leadership in the presidency as having the potential to effect a pseudo-constitutional transformation that could change the American governmental system without a formal structural overhaul. That Wilson’s political thought shifted has been, of course, readily apparent to many scholars. Moreover, Wilson’s changed views have been described as important to the development of the so-called modern presidency (Eidelberg 1974, ch. 8-9). As Scot Zentner (1994, 580) writes, “Wilson’s political theory underlies much of American political practice and is therefore crucial to an understanding of the political developments of our time.” To many scholars, this shift signifies that Wilson sought presidential leadership as his central goal. For James Ceaser (1979, 198), this shift in Wilson’s thought meant that “the party system was the means and leadership the end.” Wilson was influenced by Hegel, argues Zentner (1996, 666), and he “intended the party to be merely an instrument for presidential leadership.” Similarly, Ronald Pestrutto (2005, 181) surmises that Wilson sought greater presidential leadership; responsible parties would be “instruments or tools of leadership.” By contrast, Robert Eden (1995, 500) cautions that Wilson did not simply seek to strengthen the presidency for its own sake; indeed, it took decades for him to come to that position.²
While Wilson definitely sought greater presidential leadership of the nation as a whole – akin to Bolingbroke’s patriot king – he still had a broader Burkean purpose in mind. I argue that presidential leadership was not Wilson’s central aim; rather, a responsible party system was the goal and the presidency was to be utilized to bring about such a transformation. Consider one piece of evidence from a conversation recounted by Wilson’s confidant Colonel Edward House in his diary. House (1926-28, 1:121) took the position that “No matter how great a leader a man was,” House (1926-28, 1:121) thought, “I could see situations that would block him unless the Constitution was modified.” But Wilson, House reported, thought “our form of government can be changed by personal leadership.” For Wilson, personal leadership was a means to bring about more effective party government, layering a more responsible party system relying on presidential rhetorical leadership onto an already existing constitutional structure (Tulis 1987, ch. 5). But these means – a presidency formally separated from Congress and that had been envisioned as standing above party politics (Ketcham 1984) – and ends – a responsible party system with executive-legislative harmony – were in tension with each other.

Such a fusion – essentially using Bolingbroke’s means for Burke’s ends – was not without consequence for Wilson or the presidency itself. In the third phase, Wilson increasingly faced difficulties reconciling personal executive leadership with party government, particularly in foreign affairs. Wilson had always viewed the president as having greater prerogatives in foreign policy, but still viewed party support as crucial to sustaining the president’s authority. But as his administration progressed, Wilson embraced personal leadership and faced the reality that the American people did not reward his conception of responsible party government. Failing to persuade the public to elect a Democratic Congress in 1918 to support him in negotiating the
treaty to end World War I exposed the tension in Wilson’s thought, leaving him only with an isolated personal leadership stance and no party means to accomplish his program.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I briefly review alternative conceptions of statesmanship articulated by Burke and Bolingbroke. Next, I use this framework to trace this tension through three phases of Wilson’s thought. Finally, I conclude by briefly considering how this tension has influenced the development of the presidency, as presidents continue to play the role of party leader but increasingly emphasize their personal image and prerogatives.

Two Opposing Ideals: Bolingbroke versus Burke

The ideas of Bolingbroke and Burke have been significantly influential both in the British and American political traditions. Their conceptions of statesmanship grapple fundamentally over the role of personal leadership and political parties, marking opposing ideal types of government.

Seeking to create a politics based on rationality that would be free from religious prejudice, Henry Bolingbroke hoped to eventually eliminate the need for political parties (Mansfield 1965, 11; Rosenblum 2008, 36). While oversight from an opposition was needed, parties would be eradicated to prevent corruption (Bolingbroke 1997, 216). Instead, government would rely on individuals above the fray who were “born to instruct, to guide, and to preserve; who are designed to be the tutors and the guardians of human kind” (Bolingbroke 1997, 193).

This ideal form of government would be led by a patriot king who would be opposed to corruption and motivated solely by duty and patriotism (Kramnick 1968, 163). “The way of salvation,” Bolingbroke (1997, 221) argued, “will not be opened to us, without the concurrence, and the influence of a Patriot King, the most uncommon of all phenomena in the physical or moral world.” Beginning his reign, a patriot king would end corruption by removing most
existing officials from power and replacing them with those who be not be corrupt. He would
govern as a father of the whole nation, encouraging commerce and behaving with grace. Though
such a figure would be rare, governing for a true patriot king would be an easy task because only
a genuine patriotic spirit was needed for success (Mansfield 1965, 75-83). The patriot king’s
individual character and personality held the key to being esteemed and making government
serve the national interest. Such a leader, Bolingbroke believed, should have greater individual
agency, apart from any parliamentary majority (Nelson 2014, 19).

Unlike the patriot king, political parties did not represent the true interests of the nation
(Kramnick 1968, 153). Instead, to Bolingbroke (1997, 258), parties were merely “men associated
together for certain purposes” and “interests” that were not “those of the community.” While a
patriot king might use different existing parties to his advantage, “he will espouse none”
(Bolingbroke 1997, 263). Rather, he would subdue “faction,” making only the “greatest good” of
the people “the constant object of his government” (Bolingbroke 1997, 273). To be sure,
Bolingbroke (1997, 226-227) believed that hereditary monarchy was necessary for the
establishment of a patriot king. But in eschewing faction and emphasizing character, the patriot
king ideal took hold in America as an initial standard for presidents. It was this “nonpartisan
conception of the presidency” that “most importantly and precisely separated the first six
presidents from their successors” (Ketcham 1984, xi).

Burke described his own views in direct opposition to Bolingbroke. While Burke
famously spoke of the need for a member of Parliament to use independent judgment, potentially
against his constituents’ views, in his 1774 “Speech to the Electors of Bristol,” he did not seek to
entrust government to an individuals’ ability to rise above factional interests. Whereas
Bolingbroke relied on individual character, Burke sought to lessen the dependence on great men
for good governance by utilizing intermediary institutions (Boyd 1999, 482), promoting the idea of party government (Mansfield 1965, 17-18; Rosenblum 2008, 121-126). In Burke’s (1993, 131) summation, Bolingbroke’s plan had required that “party was to be totally done away, with all its evil works,” while power would reside with one who possessed “public spirit.” But trusting in great men was unreliable and posed dangers. Instead, Burke (1993, 185) argued, “connexions [sic] in politicks” were “essentially necessary for the full performance of our public duty.” Without a connection to the principles of a party, one could not have a genuine connection with the people: “These knots or cabals of men who have got together, avowedly without any party principle… have no connexion [sic] with the sentiments and opinions of the people” (Burke 1993, 147). Moreover, only a principled party, rather than an individual, could overcome an unprincipled party: “When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle” (Burke 1993, 184). Like Bolingbroke, Burke sought “to pursue an objective public good,” but the determination of that national interest needed to arise from agreements on principles through party association (Ketcham 1984, 226).

Burke’s plan required both principled parties and executive-legislative harmony. To Burke (1993, 189), a party was “a body of men united, for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed.” Parties were essential both to formulating and implementing policy. A “speculative philosopher” might think only of “the proper ends of Government,” but a “politician, who is the philosopher in action” must determine “proper means toward those ends” and “employ them with effect.” One must agree with the principles of his party “at least nine times in ten,” Burke (1993, 189) argued, or else he should “have chosen some other, more conformable to his opinions.” Crucially, Burke (1993, 145) emphasized that a unified executive-legislative system was necessary for party
government: “Nothing, indeed, will appear more certain, on any tolerable consideration of this matter, than that every sort of Government ought to have its Administration correspondent to its Legislature.” “If it should be otherwise,” he warned, “things must fall into a hideous disorder.”

For Bolingbroke, good governance flowed primarily from the character of the individual. In Burke’s view, political parties would contest great principles, the party in government would have the means to put those principles into effect, and the reliance on individuals would be reduced. These alternative conceptions of statesmanship influenced the American political tradition, and elements of each emerged in Woodrow Wilson’s political thought.

A Burkean Discontent: Wilson as Academic

At the time that Woodrow Wilson began to consider ideas of statesmanship as a student at Princeton in the 1870s, Congress was perceived to be the predominant American political institution, with presidents who were “much at the mercy of the Legislature” (Jennings 1868, 53). Wilson began exploring and debating why, in his view, the U.S. no longer produced great statesmen. As he criticized the American system, Wilson’s proposed reforms corresponded to Burke’s views about political parties and the necessity of an executive that corresponded with the partisanship of a legislature. Wilson’s critique of the American separation of powers would continue throughout his career (Pestritto 2012, 325).

Initially, Wilson seemingly embraced the type of personal leadership more akin to Bolingbroke’s views. In an 1877 speech at Princeton titled “The Ideal Statesman,” Wilson (1966-94, 1:243) boldly stated that “No partizan [sic] can be a statesman… A partizan [sic] follows his own convictions only so long as they coincide with the convictions of his party and with his own interests.” Similarly, in his 1878 essay “Some Thoughts on the Present State of
Public Affairs,” Wilson (1966-94, 1:348-349) complained of partisanship in Congress, asking, “who can characterize in sufficiently denunciatory terms the party, or rather factional, spirit now for so long displayed in the nation’s highest tribunal?” Yet even as Wilson complained of a lack of great individual legislators in Congress, he did not indict the notion of party government itself. Instead, echoing Burke’s “Speech to the Electors of Bristol,” Wilson (1966-94, 1:354) hoped that “personal independence of conviction will be made the basis of allegiance of party.”

Wilson’s first major salvo in his ongoing criticism of Congress and the separation of powers came in his 1879 essay “Cabinet Government in the United States,” which drew primarily on the work of Walter Bagehot but also unmistakably echoed Burke. Bemoaning “a marked and alarming decline in statesmanship, a rule of levity and folly instead of wisdom and sober forethought in legislation,” Wilson (1966-94, 1:493) indicted the separation of powers system as a problem. “In short,” asserted Wilson (1966-94, 1:497-498), “the framers of the Constitution, in endeavoring to act in accordance with the principle of Montesquieu’s celebrated and unquestionably just political maxim – that the legislative, executive, and judicial departments of a free State should be separate, – made their separation so complete as to amount to isolation.” This was in contrast to the advice of both Burke and Bagehot. In The English Constitution, Bagehot (1867, 12) had argued that “the efficient secret of the English Constitution may be described as the close union, the nearly complete fusion of the executive and legislative powers” through the “connecting link” of “the cabinet.” Upon reading the book, Wilson (1966-94, 1:151) exclaimed in his diary, “How far superior that Constitution is to ours!” In meetings of his debating club, he drafted a proposal for a new Constitution that would give the House of Representatives control of an executive ministry (Wilson 1966-94, 1:256-257). The separation of powers, Wilson (1966-94, 1:507) argued, made responsible parties impossible: “Eight words
contain the sum of the present degradation of our political parties: *No leaders, no principles; no principles, no parties.*” Because Wilson believed that the U.S. structure of government violated Burke’s prescription of unity of executive-legislative action, he sought a solution consistent with Burke and Bagehot’s maxims, proposing a change that would give cabinet members seats in Congress. This cabinet would “hold the right of the initiative in legislation,” creating “*responsible Cabinet government*” (Wilson 1966-94, 1:498-499).

Hoping to improve political parties rather than eradicate them, Wilson stood apart from other contemporary thinkers. For example, Albert Stickney (1879, 5) decried all “party and party rule” as “great evils” that should be eliminated. Seemingly channeling Bolingbroke, Stickney (1879, 206) wanted to rely on executive leadership – to “have one man at the head of it all, and hold that one man responsible for it all.” But Wilson sharpened his own ideas in response. Where Stickney (1879, 131) argued in *A True Republic* that “parties do not elect men to put into action certain principles; they use principles as battle-cries to elect certain men” and claimed that “Any other statement is only the theory of party rule as men wish it might be,” Wilson (1966-94, 1:547) wrote in the margins that cabinet government could bring about principled parties: “*Under Cabinet government platforms must mean something.*” “The danger consists not in the existence of parties,” Wilson (1966-94, 2:184) retorted in his unpublished 1882 essay “Government by Debate,” “but in the existence of corrupt parties; and the salvation of the government depends, not upon the abolition of parties, but upon their proper control.”

Elaborating on his cabinet government proposal while in graduate school at Johns Hopkins in his 1884 essay “Committee or Cabinet Government?”, Wilson further emphasized executive-legislative harmony. Just as Burke had argued that a unified legislature and executive was needed to avoid “hideous disorder,” Wilson (1966-94, 2: 638-639) posited that cabinet
government could “at least neutralize” the “antagonisms” of these branches, and might perhaps “harmonize their interests.” Because it would provide “explicit authority” to a majority, Wilson (1966-94, 2:629) argued that cabinet government was the “most straightforward system of party government.” But party government, Wilson (1966-94, 2:639) held, would only be possible with this structural change: “it is idle to talk of steadying or cleansing our politics without in some way linking together the interests of the Executive and the Legislature.” Unlike his contemporary advocate of cabinet government Gamaliel Bradford (1899), Wilson stipulated such a change would require amending the Constitution. While admitting that “the machinery of constitutional amendment is so ponderous and hard to move that none but a truly national sentiment can set it in motion,” Wilson (1966-94, 258-259) cited Burke in appealing to the possibilities of a Congress that better represented the nation: “The key-note of the new movement might well be taken from those noble words of Burke’s: ‘The value, spirit, and essence of a House of Commons consists in its being the express image of the feelings of the nation.’”

However, Wilson differed with Burke’s views on one crucial point. While Burke viewed party government as reducing the reliance on great men, Wilson believed this reform would enhance individual statesmanship (Stid 1998, 18). Cabinet government “rears statesmen,” Wilson (1966-94, 2:236) claimed, “because it assures to statesmanship a place of authority and leadership in the national councils.” Even Wilson’s strongest Burkan argument thus revealed some attachment to the idea of individual character and personal leadership. Greatness would be allowed by new institutional forms. Bolingbroke’s patriot king may not have been an explicit component of Wilson’s original reform scheme, but its implications about the possibilities for transcendent personal leadership were evident.
Congressional Government, Wilson’s 1885 book that built upon his earlier essays, invoked Burke more directly in considering the role of the American president. Indeed, Wilson (1885, 242) chose Burke’s maxim about the need for a unified executive and legislature from “Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents” as the epigraph for his chapter on “The Executive.” The British prime minister “was the leader of the legislature,” complained Wilson (1885, 249), but the American president was merely “the colleague of the legislature.” True to Burke’s views, Wilson (1885, 279-280) argued that the president’s separation from Congress impeded government coherence: “I know of few things harder to state clearly and within reasonable compass than just how the nation keeps control of policy in spite of these hide-and-seek vagaries of authority. Indeed, it is doubtful if it does keep control through all the roundabout paths which legislative and executive responsibility are permitted to take.” Wilson (1885, 282) further pondered how the separation of powers prevented clear assignment of blame: “How is the schoolmaster, the nation, to know which boy needs the whipping?” This “radical defect” defied Burke’s standard of executive-legislative harmony.

Compared to his earlier essays, Congressional Government did focus less openly on advocacy of cabinet government and more on a diagnosis of the problems of the separation of powers. As Wilson (1966-94, 3:465) surmised, “I have abandoned the evangelical for the exegetical.” Nevertheless, he clearly hoped the implied superiority of cabinet government to the existing American system would come across to readers. “If the conclusion to be drawn from the book is so evident and so irresistible,” Wilson (1966-94, 4:254) confessed privately, “why not let the readers draw it for themselves? They will like it much better if it seems to be their own than if it were thrust in their face.”
Notably, Wilson also downplayed the notion that the personal leadership of any president could meaningfully change the American system. “How is it to make any difference who is chosen President?” he asked. “Has the President any very great authority in matters of vital policy?” “It seems almost a thing of despair,” Wilson (1885, 332) maintained, to believe that “any vote [a citizen] may cast will even in an infinitesimal degree affect the essential courses of administration. There are so many cooks mixing their ingredients in the national broth that it seems hopeless, this thing of changing one cook at a time.” In this diatribe, Wilson implicitly contradicted Bolingbroke’s view of personal leadership as the primary mechanism for improving governance in the national interest.

Instead, Wilson had responded to his initial discontent with American politics by embracing a Burkean logic of achieving party government through a unified executive and legislature. A parliamentary system would allow for policy coherence and the proper determination of credit and blame (Pestritto 2005, ch. 4). However, in one key difference with Burke, Wilson viewed party government as enhancing individual statesmanship; Burke had viewed party government as making it obsolete. This small strand, more akin to Bolingbroke’s emphasis on individual leadership, would germinate in Wilson’s subsequent political thought.

**Bolingbroke’s Means for Burke’s Ends: Wilson as Scholar-Politician**

As his political thought matured, Wilson began to view presidential leadership as holding the promise of bringing about the reforms he had earlier suggested would require formal institutional change through constitutional amendments to achieve. This shift has been widely noted, but the significance of it remains debated (Eden 1995; Zentner 1996; Stid 1998, ch. 2-3; Pestritto 2005, ch. 5). I argue that while Wilson still held the Burkean goal of uniting the executive and
legislative functions of government, he came to believe a powerful president’s personal leadership could serve to unite the government under a single responsible party. Wilson’s reliance upon a great individual leader to effect such a transformation envisioned something resembling Bolingbroke’s conception of an individual leader acting solely in the true interest of the nation. To be sure, Wilson’s notion of an executive’s unique connection to public opinion went beyond Bolingbroke’s eighteenth-century conception of individual leadership, but their ideas shared a focus on the prerogatives and individual agency of an anti-factional executive to force rest of governing system to respond.

Under Wilson’s original formulation, the president would have been a nonpolitical figure. A cabinet lodged in the House of Representatives would have held power. But Wilson began to think visionary leaders would better serve in the presidency, deciding that the Speaker of the House could not be a true prime minister because of the need to unify the push for legislation with the actual administration of laws (Stid 1998, 34-39). Making plans in 1898 to teach a new course on “Constitutional Government” at Princeton, Wilson (1966-94, 11:15) wrote that there could be “no leadership operating throughout the course of affairs, without a single leadership embracing both the Presidency and Congress.” Otherwise, the public would “not know whom to trust or whom to blame.”

Several developments around the turn of the twentieth century influenced Wilson’s adjustment in views. Wilson feared that sectional tensions among U.S. regions hampered national governance, viewing regional appeals made by politicians as a threat to national stability and contrary to the need for principled responsible parties (Bimes and Skowronek 1996). Frederick Jackson Turner (1920), Wilson’s friend, pointed to the importance of the closing of the frontier to American political development. Wilson recognized this as a fundamental change to
the polity, interpreting the development as requiring more nationally focused leadership. The president, Wilson came to believe, could be a more national figure than the more parochial Congress. To Wilson, Grover Cleveland’s presidency, featuring an active role in policy initiation, suggested that executive leadership could effect change, even though Cleveland had lost significant Democratic support (Arnold 2009, 136). American entry into the Spanish-American War in 1898 meant, to Wilson, that a more active foreign policy would strengthen the presidency as an office. Furthermore, Theodore Roosevelt soon came to demonstrate newly emergent possibilities for presidential leadership (Clements 1992, ch. 1; Stid 1998, 40-43).

Another direct influence on Wilson was the publication of Henry Jones Ford’s *The Rise and Growth of American Politics*. Ford (1898, 188) agreed with Wilson about the need for responsible parties, but he argued that parties needed the presidency to implement their programs: “Unless it is able to control the presidential office, no party can accomplish its purposes.” The president, Ford (1898, 190) asserted, was “the direct representative of the people as a whole.” As noted earlier, Ford (1898, 342-343) directly connected this notion of executive leadership with Bolingbroke’s patriot king. While such a statement of presidential representation was not a new claim (Bailey 2014), it was being reformulated for new purposes, seeking to make the president the nation’s primary legislative agenda-setter. Importantly, this development was occurring without formal constitutional change. “The greatness of the presidency,” Ford (1898, 292-293) proclaimed, “is the work of the people, breaking through the constitutional form.” So influenced by Ford’s book that he ultimately recruited him to teach at Princeton, Wilson (1966-94, 14:13-14) began suggesting that *Rise and Growth* should be read as a companion with his own *Congressional Government*. 
The idea of a president’s national leadership bringing about responsible party government served as a major theme of Wilson’s *Constitutional Government in the United States*. Consistent with his Burkean views, Wilson (1908, 54) argued that “the whole art of statesmanship is the art of bringing the several parts of government into effective cooperation for the accomplishment of particular common objects, – and party objects at that.” Now, however, Wilson asserted that Burke’s party responsibility required the personal leadership of a president essentially in the mold of a patriot king. Strikingly, Wilson (1908, 57) held that a president’s individual personality alone shaped the office: “the presidency has been one thing at one time, another at another, varying with the man who occupied the office and with the circumstances that surrounded him.” A president’s individual capacity for leadership was virtually unlimited, Wilson (1908, 70) claimed: “The President is at liberty, both in law and conscience, to be as big a man as he can.” Merging personal leadership with party responsibility, the president, Wilson (1908, 60) emphasized, had “become the leader of his party and the guide of the nation in political purpose.” Furthermore, Wilson (1908, 68) directly echoed Ford: “No one else represents the people as a whole.” This embrace of the president’s purported national perspective was an especially noticeable contrast with Wilson’s (1966-94, 2:246) earlier conception of the president in his 1882 “Government by Debate” essay: “Presidents are not even any longer, if any true sense of the word, representatives of the people.”

Though largely focused on how the president could bring about responsible party government, Wilson distinguished presidential power in foreign affairs from domestic politics, reflecting the implicit tension between personal and party leadership. Though Congress possessed formal powers in foreign affairs, especially with the Senate’s treaty approval power, Wilson nonetheless emphasized personal presidential leadership. “The initiative in foreign
affairs,” Wilson (1908, 77) claimed, “which the President possesses without any restriction whatever, is virtually the power to control them absolutely.” Wilson’s argument predated the “two presidencies” thesis, which posits that the president has greater ability to enact change in foreign affairs than in domestic policy (Wildavsky 1966; Canes-Wrone, Howell, and Lewis 2008). In foreign affairs, Wilson conceived of the president as essentially a patriot king.

Though other contemporaries came to view the president as a strong figure, Wilson was at odds with many Progressives and commentators by promoting responsible parties as a goal (Pestritto 2005, 178). James Bryce (1909, 114), for example, warned of “that Party Spirit which everywhere distracts men’s minds from the real merits of the questions before the country.” The “perversion of the party system,” lamented Yale President Arthur Twining Hadley (1915, 121), resulted in governance “in the interest of special classes rather than in the interest of the whole body politic.” One Progressive closer to Wilson’s thinking on the importance of parties was his future 1916 Republican opponent. “The paradox,” Charles Evans Hughes (1910, 74) noted, “is that the influence of the non-partisan who abhors party, must in the main be exercised through party.” “Condemnation of party organization,” Hughes (1910, 81) concluded, “is absurd.”

Throughout this period, Wilson essentially advocated using Bolingbroke’s conception of a patriot king to achieve Burke’s end of effective party government. However, in carving out a broader individual role for the president, especially in foreign affairs, Wilson foreshadowed the later exposure of this tension in his political thought.

From Theory to Practice: The Governorship and 1912 Presidential Campaign

Wilson carried his conception of personal leadership being the linchpin of party government with him from the academic world to practical politics. Being recruited to run as a Democrat for
governor of New Jersey in 1910, Wilson stuck to his Burkean goal, emphasizing a party program during the election and interpreting his electoral victory as providing the opportunity to put responsible party government into practice. The upcoming “sequence of reforms,” Wilson (1925-27, 2:279) told his gubernatorial inauguration audience, would be the result of “an actual direct choice by the people” to “organize alike their parties and their government.” Moreover, as governor, Wilson initially fulfilled his vision of personal leadership pushing for action from principled responsible parties, passing with the legislature the four main agenda items of his campaign – laws for a direct primary, prohibition of corrupt practices, workmen’s compensation, and a stronger public utilities commission (Stid 1998, 75).

Yet despite the seeming realization of his academic vision, Wilson soon faced a Republican legislature, as voters rejected New Jersey Democratic legislators the following year at the polls. Wilson was stunned: despite the “successful execution of his mandate, he – the prime minister – now faced the prospect of having to deal with a legislature controlled by the opposition” (Stid 1998, 79). With his Burkean vision crushed, Wilson “seemed disarmed,” losing interest in leading the Democratic minority, issuing more vetoes, and avoiding pushing many legislative initiatives (Arnold 2009, 155). This served as an early practical warning that personal leadership and responsible party government might not always be so compatible.

Still, Wilson was soon freed from having to think through this setback, becoming the 1912 Democratic nominee for president and asserting anew his understanding of statesmanship. Titling the last section of his nomination acceptance speech “It is a Contest of Principles,” Wilson (1925-27, 2:474) argued that “men are instruments” to the party cause. Without party responsibility, Wilson (1913a, 40) argued, the nation had lacked a sense of direction: “All progress depends on how fast you are going, and where you are going, and I fear there has been
Repeating his long-standing criticisms of Congress, Wilson (1913a, 90) emphasized that the legislative branch had lacked debates on great principles: “Congress has become an institution which does its work in the privacy of committee rooms and not on the floor of the Chamber; a body that makes laws, – a legislature; not a body that debates, – not a parliament.”

The unified Democratic government that emerged from the 1912 election owed its existence to the split between the Republican and Progressive parties. Only in the South had Wilson and the Democrats received a majority of the vote (James 2000, 134-135). Nevertheless, having sought to create a political alignment along more responsible party lines, “Wilson understood his own victory and the Democratic capture of both houses of Congress… as a profound historical confirmation of his ideas” (Stid 1998, 85-86). In his ambition to use personal leadership to enforce responsible party discipline, Wilson would find initial success.

**Leading a Responsible Party: Wilson’s First-Term Domestic Policy**

Beyond believing his victory confirmed his academic views, Wilson actively sought to impress upon the nation that this was the case. In his inaugural address, Wilson (1913b) emphasized that “there has been a change of government,” rhetorically asking “What does the change mean?” The answer was that the Democrats must behave as a responsible political party: “It means much more than the mere success of a party. The success of a party means little except when the Nation is using that party for a large and definite purpose.” Americans, Wilson explained, had explicitly decided they wanted the 1912 Democratic campaign platform enacted: “No one can mistake the purpose for which the Nation now seeks to use the Democratic Party. It seeks to use
it to interpret a change in its own plans and point of view.” The Democratic Party would show that it could be the “spokesmen and interpreters” of the people.

Setting up his presidency as a test of his Burkean faith in party government, Wilson sought to impose his own personal leadership to make Congress enact the Democratic Party program (Clements 1992, ch. 3). Colonel House (1926-28, 1:127) noted Wilson’s confidence in himself: “The President does get a lot of information and suggestions from others, but it mostly comes gratuitously and not by his asking.” But despite Wilson’s self-centeredness, he made a crucial decision that stuck more closely to his Burkean views by choosing to work through the Democratic Party, rather than developing a potential progressive coalition across parties (James 2000, 139; Arnold 2009, 168). In Congress, the tool to ensure party leadership worked would be the binding caucus resolution, which was used during Wilson’s first term on “legislation deemed critical by Democratic leaders to vindicate the party as a responsible instrument of progressive reform” (James 2000, 143) – the Underwood-Simmons Tariff Act, the Federal Reserve Banking Act, the Clayton Antitrust Act, and the Federal Trade Commission Act (Sanders 1999, ch. 7).

With tariff reform as the first agenda item and test of his leadership of a responsible party, Wilson set a new precedent. Having called a special session of Congress to revise tariff rates, Wilson decided to appear in front of Congress to speak in favor of tariff reform. In doing so, Wilson (1913c) emphasized that, through his personal leadership, he sought to bridge the separation of powers. “I am very glad indeed to have this opportunity to address the two Houses directly and to verify for myself the impression that the President of the United States is a person, not a mere department of the Government hailing Congress from some isolated island of jealous power.” Wilson explained how the tariff was a test of responsible party government, saying he had “called the Congress together in extraordinary session because a duty was laid
upon the party now in power at the recent elections which it ought to perform promptly.”

Moreover, Wilson sought to personally direct Congress’s agenda: “it is best, indeed it is necessary, to begin with the tariff.” The significance of Wilson’s action – a decision even “[Theodore] Roosevelt had earlier feared to make” (Cooper 1983, 225) – could not be overstated. This key moment in the development of the “rhetorical presidency” (Tulis 1987) that emerged in the twentieth century was a direct result of Wilson fusing together his goal of accomplishing responsible party government with his profound belief in his own personal leadership. It was, Henry Jones Ford (1916, 175) believed, “the mark of a new era.”

Having passed a tariff measure that reduced tariff rates and established the longstanding Democratic priority of an income tax, Wilson sought to replicate his success to address banking. Following his new precedent, Wilson (1913d) again spoke directly to Congress and impressed upon legislators how the banking legislation connected with tariff reform to form an overall partisan program, asking rhetorically, “Shall we hasten to change the tariff laws and then be laggards about making it possible and easy for the country to take advantage of the change?” Implicitly invoking the notion of the patriot king, Wilson emphasized his own personal leadership as the means to bring about responsible government: “I have come to you, as the head of the Government and the responsible leader of the party in power, to urge action now.” Once again, Wilson’s legislation was enacted, as Congress passed the Federal Reserve Act.

Thus far, Wilson had achieved astonishing success, seemingly unifying aspects of both Burke and Bolingbroke’s ideas of governance in achieving legislative victories. New anti-trust legislation would pose a more difficult challenge, with regional divisions between the agrarian periphery and urban core constituencies in the Democratic Party hampering party unity. Facing difficulty securing party agreement, House Majority Leader Oscar Underwood (D-AL) asked for
an adjournment of Congress, but Wilson chose to keep Congress in session, believing it imperative that the party fulfill all of its major platform promises (Arnold 2009, 182-185). The resulting Clayton Antitrust Act and Federal Trade Commission Act would show that, essentially, Wilson sought to attain the illusion of responsible party government above all else, even core Democratic policy principles. On both fronts, Wilson essentially preempted the positions of the Progressive Party in a bid to rob them of an issue, rather than embracing long-standing Democratic agrarian antagonism against big business. Speaking to Congress again, Wilson (1914) connected his policy proposals directly with public opinion, declaring that the new antitrust provisions and trade commission establishment “must of course be undertaken if we are to square our laws with the thought and desire of the country.” The electoral needs of the Democratic Party in the 1914 midterm elections led them to support the proposals (James 2000, 125-126, 194-199). These domestic achievements would be followed up in 1916 with further significant legislation establishing rural credits for farmers, an independent tariff commission, a shipping board, restrictions on child labor (which the Supreme Court soon struck down), an eight-hour workday, increased income tax rates, and an inheritance tax (Cooper 1983, 254).

Contemporary observers recognized that Wilson was attempting a broader transformation beyond policy achievements. “President Wilson,” noted a New York Times editorial, “is making a determined effort to establish an effective leadership of his party in Congress… our legislative system has long suffered from something of the sort, has lacked responsible guidance.” The Times even noted the stakes of Wilson attempting to use personal leadership to enact a more substantial party government transformation. To fully emulate the British system, “a radical change in the Constitution” would have been required. “Mr. Wilson, it seems,” the editorial continued, “is inclined not to wait for [such a change], but to do what he can to guide and
influence Congress… It is an important and intensely interesting experiment” (“Federal Leadership” 1913, 6). Herbert Croly (1914, 337), while still wary of parties, praised Wilson for conferring “upon his party unprecedented powers of effective action” through his executive “leadership of his partisan associates.”

Wilson saw significant success in carrying out a domestic policy program in his first term. Emphasizing his own personal leadership of congressional Democrats, Wilson himself, House (1926-28, 1:119) recounted, believed “the Executive [was] becoming the leader in putting into law the desires of the people.” At this point, the tension between personal leadership and party government appeared to be resolved. However, Herbert Croly (1914, 344) ominously predicted that Wilson’s use of personal leadership to establish party government would “become increasingly less effective.”

**Personal Leadership in Foreign Policy**

Wilson did not plan to focus on foreign affairs in his presidency. As Robert Eden (1995, 501) notes, foreign affairs inevitably posed a challenge to Wilson’s vision for a party-based system of government. Far from bridging the separation of powers, presidential focus on foreign policy “threatened to strengthen the Framers’ Constitution and the separation of powers.” Yet in considering questions of foreign policy, Wilson acted in ways consistent with his view that the president should have expansive prerogatives in that domain. While in domestic policy he had sought to use his personal leadership to establish responsible party government, in foreign affairs he essentially sought to dominate the scene alone.

U.S. relations with Mexico soon intruded into Wilson’s focus on domestic policy. The crisis in Mexico in the aftermath of a coup troubled Wilson, who did not want to recognize
Victoriano Huerta’s government and preferred to support Venustiano Carranza as an alternative. In deciding to use U.S. forces to occupy the port of Veracruz, Wilson took actions just short of war. Wilson (1913e) addressed Congress in person again, but the emphasis on his own role and leadership was markedly different. Whereas Wilson proposed what the government should do in domestic policy addresses, Wilson now emphasized instead what his government had done as a result of his own decisions. It was his “duty to speak very frankly of what this Government has done… in fulfillment of its obligation to Mexico.” Concluding his address, Wilson cited his own executive prerogatives, deeming it his own “duty” to ensure U.S. neutrality in the conflict.

More problematic for Wilson was the major congressional opposition he encountered after the outbreak of World War I in 1914 (Clements 1992, ch. 7-8). Wilson was successful in passing legislation for a preparedness program to bolster U.S. national defense, but he had to overcome a severe lack of party unity in Congress and could not impose his will in national security as he saw fit. In advocating preparedness, Wilson had to confront and assuage Democrats who held longstanding skepticism about the idea of a standing army in America. Arguing that American citizens needed to “be fitted to play the great role in the world, and particularly in this hemisphere, for which they are qualified by principle and by chastened ambition to play,” Wilson (1915) requested an enlargement of the army and navy. Moreover, he hinted at the potential for more active government powers: “the industries and resources of the country should be available and ready for mobilization.” Facing significant resistance from Democrats, including congressional leaders, Wilson agreed to a compromise on revenue, with southern Democrats successfully advocating for increased income tax rates and the establishment of an inheritance tax in 1916 (Brownlee 1985). While Wilson managed to achieve his goal, the struggled pointed to increased interbranch tensions that were to come.
A more explicit confrontation centered on the issue of Americans traveling on merchant ships overseas that could come under German U-boat attack. Many Democrats in Congress wanted to pass a bill warning Americans that they assumed the risk for traveling on those merchant ships. Opposing the measure, Wilson succeeded in getting the bill voted down, but only after publicly urging Democrats to vote against it over the objections of congressional leaders and asking an individual Rules Committee member for an early vote (Stid 1998, 123). The implications of Wilson making direct demands of Congress, rather than attempting to find party unity, did not escape unnoticed. “As a precedent,” noted the Nation, “the incident of the past week does not carry us towards, but rather away from, the approximation of the role of the President of the United States to that of a Prime Minister of England” (Stid 1998, 124).

Approaching the 1916 election, the momentum of the Wilson administration toward responsible party government was fading due to the burgeoning conflict with Congress. Troublingly, a major source of this tension came from fellow Democrats. A distressed Wilson became more aware of the tension in his own political thought between his desire for responsible party government and his reliance on personal leadership to achieve it. In Daniel Stid’s (1998, 103) estimation, Wilson became “more and more convinced that at least so long as the separation of powers was in place, the president could not transform his party through personal leadership.”

**Party Responsibility Rewarded? The 1916 Election**

Though Wilson himself began to doubt whether he could achieve his Burkean goal of responsible party government through his own leadership, he nevertheless approached the 1916 election with the goal of getting the public to reward the Democratic Party for achieving the promises of its party platform. Accepting the nomination, Wilson (1916) expressed confidence
that the American people were “not in the habit of rejecting those who actually served them.”
The party had “merely done its duty” in fulfilling “its explicit promises.” “The people of the United States do not need to be assured now” that Democrats would view their platform as “a definite pledge” because they had “proved to them that our promises are made to be kept.”

Yet even as Wilson ran on a record of fulfillment of responsible party principles, his vision was frustrated by the centrality to the campaign of World War I and the question of whether the U.S. would enter the war. A revealing insight into Wilson’s thought comes from his secret plan to resign office immediately had Republican Charles Evans Hughes won the election. The repudiation of losing would have made Wilson feel unable to represent the country in matters of foreign policy at a time of world turmoil, even though Wilson had asserted strong personal prerogatives throughout his first term (Stid 1998, 117). Despite his desire for personal leadership in foreign affairs, Wilson was forced to confront the reality of needing the public’s approval to have effective party government. Thus, his plan in case of electoral loss was to appoint Hughes as Secretary of State. Then he and the Vice President would resign to allow Hughes to assume office earlier than the start of his formal term. Concluding his provisional resignation letter to Secretary of State Robert Lansing, Wilson (1966-94, 38:617-618) reflected on his lifelong belief in party government: “All my life long I have advocated some such responsible government for the United States as other constitutional systems afford as of course, and as such action on my part would inaugurate, at least by example. Responsible government means government by those whom the people trust, and trust at the time of decision and action.”

In a moment of clarity, Wilson recognized an implication of the tension in his conception of personal leadership and party government, given the possibility of rejection by the electorate. Had this action come to pass, perhaps it would have changed how presidential successions work
in America. But with his reelection over his Republican challenger, that scheme never came to fruition, though Wilson’s narrow margin of victory fell short of the party realignment he desired.

**The Tension Exposed: Wilson’s Second Term**

The tension inherent in Wilson’s political thought between the president serving as responsible party leader – a Burkean conception of leadership – and the president being the only unique representative of the country with the interest of the nation in mind – reflecting Bolingbroke’s patriot king – had been present throughout his time in office. In the midst of World War I, more cracks appeared in the edifice of Wilson’s formulation for how responsible governance should occur. Later, the fight for Senate approval of U.S. entry into the League of Nations in 1919 would expose the problems in Wilson’s conceptions of leadership (Clements 1992, ch. 10-11).

Wilson’s (1917b) second inaugural address, while praising party accomplishments, signaled a change in leadership emphasis. The previous years had been “full of significant changes in the spirit and purpose of our political action,” but “other matters have more and more forced themselves upon our attention.” Americans, Wilson argued, needed to “realize that the greatest things that remain to be done must be done with the whole world for stage.” Moving beyond an emphasis on partisan responsibility, Wilson instead proclaimed to speak for the nation as a whole. He would “count upon” the “unity of America – an America united in feeling, in purpose and in its vision of duty, of opportunity and of service.” Wilson’s conception of himself as standing for a united nation soon would meet pushback from Congress.

*Entering and Executing the War*
Wilson quickly came into open conflict with Congress over the arming of American merchant ships. The Zimmermann telegram, intercepted in 1917, with Germany advocating for Mexico to attack the U.S., had led Wilson to advocate for American merchant ships to be armed and able to potentially combat German U-boats in the Atlantic. But Wilson’s proposal faced a filibuster in the Senate, and when Congress adjourned, Wilson went ahead with the action anyway. More generally, Wilson’s personal domination of foreign policy had a significant impact even before U.S. entry into the war, leading to William Jennings Bryan’s resignation as Secretary of State in 1915. Ultimately, after the German government decided to resume unrestricted submarine warfare in January 1917, Wilson made the decision himself to cut diplomatic ties and greatly increased the likelihood of war (Stid 1998, 125-126). In these tests of who would control foreign policy decisions, Wilson no longer had any patience for his own conception of responsible party government. He viewed himself as able to make decisions with the true interest of the country in mind.

When it became clear that the U.S. would enter the war, Wilson thought deeply about how he would request action from Congress. In this critical moment, he again departed from his views of responsible party government that had influenced his domestic policy actions. Instead, Wilson decided to change how a president would ask Congress for a declaration of war (Stid 1998, 127). Wilson’s (1917c) speech was famous for his declaration that “the world must be made safe for democracy,” influencing American foreign policy for decades after. But Wilson also departed from precedent by requesting Congress to accept that a state of war already existed, asking it to “formally accept the status of belligerent which has thus been thrust upon it.” His decision further showed his evolution toward a focus on personal leadership and prerogative.
As the war progressed, Wilson continued to increasingly guard and attempt to enforce personal presidential prerogatives, adopting an attitude that Congress should passively approve his own measures. In response, some in Congress attempted to form a committee to investigate the conduct of the war, though this plan was defeated (Stid 1998, 128-143). Involvement in the war hampered Democratic Party unity, which would have momentous consequences for Wilson’s leadership.

*The Battle over the League of Nations*

In attempting to gain the establishment of a League of Nations and Senate approval of U.S. entry into the organization, Wilson attempted to utilize both conceptions of leadership. He impressed upon Congress his role as the instigator of U.S. foreign policy, but also returned to portraying himself as leader of a responsible party. But the two roles ultimately did not prove compatible.

Addressing senators about his League plan, Wilson (1917a) acknowledged that he “owed it” to the Senate, “as the council associated with me in the final determination of our international obligations,” to explain his plan. But he also told senators it would be “inconceivable that the people of the United States should play no part in that great enterprise” after the war. “I am speaking as an individual,” Wilson stated, “and yet I am speaking also, of course, as the responsible head of a great government, and I feel confident that I have said what the people of the United States would wish me to say.” With U.S. entry into the war, Wilson (1918) grew more strident about his expectations for a peace settlement, asserting that Americans were fighting for his specific conception of peace: “to the vindication of this principle [Americans] are ready to devote their lives, their honor, and everything that they possess.”
In going abroad just after the war to partake directly in negotiations over the Treaty of Versailles, Wilson made an essential choice about his leadership. Forsaking domestic leadership opportunities, Wilson relegated himself to foreign policy. The issue was ultimately exacerbated by Wilson’s decision to appoint no Republican senators to the U.S. delegation (Stid 1998, 134). Wilson did make a last gasp attempt to fuse his personal leadership with party government, intervening successfully for his preferred candidates in several Democratic primaries (Schurin 1998) and calling for the election of a Democratic Congress in 1918. But the election of Republican majorities left him repudiated and facing a hostile legislature. Wilson could not proceed with his League plan on the basis of party government.

Nevertheless, Wilson insisted on his League policy and was unwilling to reach a compromise to ensure its approval in the Senate. Paying no deference to Wilson’s longstanding belief in the power of a president’s treatymaking authority, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (R-MA) and others rejected Wilson’s claim that entry into the League would not affect Congress’s constitutional war powers. In reaction, Wilson began to question the very role of the Senate. Besides for the “unwisdom of the Senate’s changing the Treaty,” Wilson (1966-94, 61:251-252) argued at a 1919 press conference, “there is the further question of the Senate’s right to change the Treaty.” Though the Senate could “advise and consent as to treaties,” the “actual making of the Treaty” was “distinctly an executive function.” Far from seeking to bridge the separation of powers, Wilson now fully embraced his personal leadership prerogatives: “It would be well for the Senate to keep to its own proper functions, and leave the executive to his functions.” Wilson used an example of roosters to illustrate his point:

There was a place in Virginia where they had a lot of hens, and two big roosters in the midst of the hens. The roosters had fought each other until one of them had no tail
feathers left, and the other had just one solitary tail feather remaining. But with all their fighting, neither of the roosters had been able to establish dominion over the place, and so they decided on a truce. There was a brick wall running through the middle of the yard, dividing it into two sides. By common consent one of the roosters took the other side of the walk. Each was supreme on his side of the walk. But if either of them ventured on the dividing line or across the line, then there was war.

The same man who had long embraced Burke’s maxim on unifying executive and legislative action now sharply insisted on the separation of powers.

Once the impossibility of reconciling his expansive views about his own prerogatives to craft a treaty with the need for Senate approval was clear, Wilson attempted a popular appeal to the American people through a national tour in 1919. But this appeal was based almost entirely on his own personal leadership, a far cry from his years of emphasizing responsible party governance. Claiming that American entry into the League was what the U.S. had “dreamed at our birth” and that rejecting it would “break the heart of the world,” Wilson believed he must oppose any reservations to the treaty (Link 1979, 107, 113). Suffering a massive stroke that ended his tour, Wilson (1920) grew more stubborn, concluding his last message to Congress with a statement of his own conviction in his personal leadership: “I have not so much laid before you a series of recommendations, gentlemen, as sought to utter a confession of faith, of the faith in which I was bred and which it is my solemn purpose to stand by until my last fighting day.” At the expense of his League plan, Wilson had decided to stick to his vision of what was right instead of compromising with the Senate on treaty reservations.

*Rejecting a Budget System*
Wilson’s emphasis on his own executive prerogatives also intruded into domestic policy by this time. His veto of an attempt by Congress to establish a presidential budget process in 1920 perhaps best illustrates the striking shift in his thought. The legislation sought to make the president responsible for submitting a budget to Congress each year and provided the president with a new Bureau of the Budget. While not the same as cabinet government, the legislation took a significant step towards formalizing an institutional link between the presidency and Congress.

Wilson could have been enthusiastic about this possibility. He had once focused on budgeting as a key case for why the separation of powers should be bridged, complaining of the “many-headed masters” of the budget under committee government (Wilson 1966-94, 2:198). However, Congress also sought to have an independent audit of the budget, and therefore wanted to make a new Comptroller General removable by concurrent resolution, which would not be subject to presidential approval. As a result, Wilson defended executive prerogatives by vetoing the bill, asserting it infringed on the president’s removal power (Calabresi and Yoo 2008, 255-256). (Modified budget legislation, giving the president more influence over the potential removal of the Comptroller but still not respecting a firm presidential removal power, would pass in 1921 under Wilson’s successor.) Wilson (1966-94, 2:245-246) had once hoped that the presidential veto would “fall into disuse,” claiming Congress’s collective views would better reflect the nation than those of a president: “to preserve [the veto] is only to prefer the judgment of a single representative to the judgment of the Senate and House of Representatives.” Now, rather than take the significant opportunity to formally bridge the separation of powers with a budget system, he used the veto to preserve that separation.

The president who had once sought to establish responsible party government ended up isolated and defending independent presidential authority. By his presidency’s end, Wilson had
forsaken the Burkean transformation he had once sought. Like a patriot king emphasizing his executive prerogatives (Nelson 2014, 19), Wilson instead subscribed to a vision of himself as acting alone in the nation’s interest.

Conclusion: Presidential Leadership, Party Government, and American Political Development

Wilson’s political thought, I have argued, proceeded through three stages in his academic and political career, always centering on a tension between party government and personal leadership. At first, Wilson explicitly embraced Burke’s idea of party government and unifying the executive and legislature. Over time, Wilson gave up on formal structural change, viewing the president as holding the potential to force responsible party government onto the existing American system through his own force of leadership. In spirit, Wilson moved more toward Bolingbroke’s idea of a patriot king. Finally, after substantial initial success in domestic affairs seeking to lead a responsible party government, Wilson’s challenges in foreign policy led him to claim more executive prerogatives and focus on his own personal leadership.

Undoubtedly, Wilson’s personal leadership has affected the presidency subsequently. His focus on the president having a legislative program and speaking to Congress in person have been enduring contributions to American government. Yet Wilson, like many politicians, also consistently overestimated his own agency. To be sure, his dream of cabinet government via constitutional amendment was very unlikely. But the early Wilson had a key insight. Formal institutional change would have provided a firmer foundation for the ideal of responsible party government compared to any personal leadership. That many reformers – political scientists chief among them (Rosenblum 2008, 133; Wickham-Jones 2018) – complained for decades about the lack of responsible parties in America highlights the limits of individual agency. In
fact, rising polarization in contemporary politics – yielding much more diametrically opposed parties than in Wilson’s time – ironically only accentuates the difficulties of achieving party government under the separation of powers. Despite more polarized parties, the president and Congress are only rarely in a state of executive-legislative harmony.

The experience of two other Democratic presidents highlights the continued tension that plagued Wilson and shows the increased possibilities for independent presidential action. Like Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt entered office with a unified Democratic government and achieved substantial legislative success with the New Deal. But facing opposition from the conservative wing of his party, and with the failure of his attempted purge in 1938, FDR sought to enhance the president’s administrative capacity for action. While an ambitious executive reorganization effort floundered in 1937 and 1938 (Skowronek 1992), FDR used the compromise Reorganization Act of 1939 to establish the Executive Office of the President. Now, presidents could exercise more “power autonomously through rule making and [policy] implementation” (Milkis 1993, 134). FDR did not simply succumb to the difficulty of leading a political party; he developed another avenue for his leadership. But even this solution, promising greater executive independence, only further embedded the tension between these standards of leadership in the presidency.

More recently, another Democratic president enjoying initial large congressional majorities, Barack Obama, implicitly reflected the patriot king model by attempting to take a leadership stance of rising above partisanship. But far from transcending partisan politics, Obama found that he was forced to rely on party government alone to pass major legislation such as the stimulus package and Affordable Care Act. Still, when Republicans took control of Congress, Obama had an alternative path open to him for personal leadership thanks to the administrative presidency. In taking unilateral action on policy goals, such as environmental
standards and immigration, Obama justified his moves as being in the public interest and acted as “more the president he always wanted to be” (Isaac-Dovere and Brown 2014).

All presidents are torn between the roles of party leadership and political independence over the course of their terms (Azari, Brown, and Nwokora 2013). The opposed views of Bolingbroke and Burke about independent leadership and the desirability of political parties are ideas that are firmly immersed in the modern presidency. Bolingbroke’s notion of the patriot king has long been a standard of expectations for presidents (Ketcham 1984). Indeed, the increased responsibilities placed on presidents by Congress in the early-twentieth century assumed that the president would uniquely act in the national interest (Dearborn 2019). And even isolated presidents have a significant capacity for independent action (Cash 2018). At the same time, Burke’s notion of party government has similarly contributed to expectations that presidents would effectively lead their party in Congress to achieve a legislative program. In our contemporary polarized politics, the role of the president as a partisan actor is more salient than ever (Azari 2014; Rosenfeld 2018). What has emerged are different repertoires of tools and strategies for presidential action in different political contexts. The “two Mr. Wilsons” comment of Herbert Croly still holds; the ideal standard of presidential leadership remains ambiguous.

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1 Wilson (1966-94) was aware of Bolingbroke and his work, but his writings always mention Bolingbroke in relation to other figures, including Edmund Burke (1:95; 8:323-324), Walter Bagehot (6:342), and John Wesley (14:505).

2 “Had his bent been to strengthen executive power (as most interpreters have assumed), the opportunity would have been more welcome to Wilson, and one he was keener to seize” (Eden 1995, 500).

3 Wilson read and took extensive notes on Burke’s speech in 1876 (Wilson 1966-94, 1:111-112).

4 Bradford attempted to persuade Wilson that “it is best to push for the admission of the cabinet officers to Congress under the constitution as it is rather than attempt the far harder and more uncertain task of getting the constitution amended” (Wilson 1966-94, 4:250).

5 Prior to the adoption of the Twentieth Amendment, there were approximately four months between a presidential election and inauguration day.

6 Issuing the Sussex pledge in May 1916, Germany had promised to end unrestricted U-boat attacks on merchant and passenger ships in response to Wilson’s threat to break off diplomatic relations.

7 During the Civil War, Congress had established a Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, investigating the war effort and challenging the President Abraham Lincoln’s role as Commander-in-Chief.

8 Wilson’s intervention helped to defeat several legislators, including Senator Thomas Hardwick (D-GA), James Vardaman (D-MS), and Representative George Huddleston (D-AL) (Schurin 1998, 412-413).