

BACK TO BACK: The Veto Record of Presidents Truman and Eisenhower

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I. INTRODUCTION

There are a number of ways for the president to persuade Congress to support his position on policies. But when cooperation gives way to conflict, the veto is often invoked. Veto authority of the chief executive has been referred to as “the most important of powers connecting the national executive with the legislature” [1] and one of the “unique American contributions to the theory and practice of government.” [2] How is it that successive U.S. presidents of different backgrounds, political parties, and legislative approaches ended up with similar records in vetoing bills they opposed? This research endeavors to address that question. The paper examines the presidencies of Harry S Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower and how the aforementioned distinctions nonetheless led to parallels in veto behavior. The study assesses the number and type of vetoes issued by Truman and Eisenhower and compares their respective records to other presidents over American history. It also evaluates why President Eisenhower had more success than President Truman in sustaining vetoes.

II. BACKGROUND

Harry S Truman was born in Missouri in May 1884. His family had a Scots-Irish and English heritage. He resided in Missouri for the majority of his life. He was the oldest of three children, with a younger brother and sister. After high school, he had an interest in attending the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, but his poor eyesight prevented his appointment. He did not attend college. During World War I, he earned the rank of major and was known for his organizational prowess. After the war, he held a series of posts, including a farmer, store owner, clerk, and timekeeper. Later, he entered politics, working his way up from a county executive to U.S. senator from his home state. A Democrat, he was tapped by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to serve as vice president in 1944. The FDR-Truman team defeated the Republican team of Thomas Dewey and John Bricker, garnering 56 percent of the popular vote and winning 36 of 48 states. When FDR passed less than three months into his fourth term as president, Truman succeeded to the top office. As Truman took office, he had to learn on the job at a time when the nation was grieving FDR’s passing and World War II was still taking place. [3]

Dwight David Eisenhower was born in Texas in October 1890. His family had a Swiss-German heritage. He was the third of six brothers. His family moved to Abilene, Kansas when Ike was just two years old and he attended high school there. Following high school, Ike earned an appointment to West Point, graduating there in 1915 with a commission as a second lieutenant. During World War I, he served as commander of a tank training school in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, achieving the rank of lieutenant colonel. He continued his military career by serving as a senior military aide and chief of staff to General Douglas MacArthur. After America entered World War II, he held posts as chief of staff to the Third Army, commanding general to U.S. forces in Europe, and supreme commander of all Allied forces in Europe. After U.S. victory in World War II, he served as chief of staff of the U.S. Army and supreme commander of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Europe, with a two-year stint as president of Columbia University in between the latter two positions. While he was recruited by both major parties to run for U.S. president in 1952, he ran as a Republican. Ike and vice presidential candidate Richard Nixon defeated the Democrat ticket of Adlai Stevenson and Estes Kefauver, earning 57 percent of the popular vote and winning 41 of 48 states. As he took office in January 1953, Ike had to confront the Cold War with the Soviet Union and find a way to end the Korean War. [4]

III. LEGISLATIVE APPROACH

At the outset of his tenure as America's 33rd president, Harry Truman encountered a party system in which "many legislators felt that Congress had given up too much of its power to the executive branch, and many Southern Democrats felt that the New Deal had unleashed forces that endangered their values." [5] Hence, President Truman could not automatically count on legislative support for his initiatives, even from his own party. Still, having served a decade in the Senate, "he knew every personality in the Senate and many in the House. He did not overestimate their resolve or underestimate their frailty." [6] Several features of the Truman administration's approach to Congress are apparent. First, while he eschewed meddling in the internal affairs of Congress, Truman chose decisive leadership rather than mediation to accomplish his legislative goals. [7] Second, President Truman "used the telephone a great deal to untangle knots on Capitol Hill." [8] Third, he chose not to punish Southern Democrats who voted against his domestic proposals, a tactic that made progress more challenging due to the latter faction retaining key leadership posts. [9]

President Eisenhower fought to uphold three principles throughout his inclusion in the legislative process; these included federal restraint, cooperation between the public and private sectors, and fiscal responsibility. [10] Among the political strategies he employed were hidden-hand leadership, instrumental use of language, avoiding direct personal criticism of others, getting others to act based on his assessment of them, selective delegation, and building public support for initiatives. Though Ike adapted to situations involving Congress, his political philosophy remained constant over his time in office. [11] That is, he steered a moderate, pragmatic course, emphasizing bipartisanship in foreign policy matters. [12]

IV. VETO STRATEGY

President Truman regarded the veto as "one of the most important aspects of his authority," [13] and claimed to have given veto messages "more of his attention than any other White House pronouncements." [14] A specific veto strategy for the Truman administration was formulated by political operatives James H. Rowe, Jr. and Tommy Corcoran in December 1946. The memorandum suggested that President Truman make an effort toward bipartisanship in the wake of the Republican takeover of Congress in the 1946 midterm election. But it also recommended increased veto utilization should Republican policies hurt traditional Democrat constituencies. [15] It has been observed that Truman's tag for the ensuing legislative session—the "do nothing Congress," could have emanated from the aforementioned memorandum. [16] Clearly, the Bureau of the Budget played a crucial role in veto actions by the Truman White House, having regained its responsibility for reviewing department and agency recommendations for pending legislation after World War II. [17]

Sherman Adams, President Eisenhower's chief of staff and close confidant in the White House, contends that Ike had to rely on coalitions to get his programs through Congress after the Democrat sweep in the 1954 midterm election. [18] The primary method by which Ike kept the most objectionable legislation from 1955 on from becoming law was through veto use. [19] If not practicing a conscious veto strategy, the Eisenhower team at least put in place procedures which facilitated the veto process. First, the Eisenhower administration established the Office of Congressional Liaison to cultivate links with Congress. [20] Second, the Eisenhower White House continued the procedure of having the Bureau of the Budget evaluate legislation and provide recommendations about passage. Third, President Eisenhower included his cabinet in discussions about the value of legislation more than any contemporary executive. [21] Finally, when discussing bills with Republican leaders in Congress, Ike always asked about the likelihood of override should a veto be invoked. [22]

V. VETO USE

Presidential vetoes have been examined in various ways over different periods of American history. However, one notable element in all such studies is the similarity between Presidents Truman and Eisenhower in number of vetoes issued. For instance, if all types of vetoes are combined and measured in terms of frequency of use since the outset of U.S. constitutional government through the Donald Trump presidency, Truman and Eisenhower rank third and fourth, with 250 and 181 vetoes released, respectively. Only Presidents Franklin Roosevelt with 635 total vetoes and Grover Cleveland with 584 outpaced Presidents Truman and Eisenhower in this regard. [23]

Vetoes can be subdivided by purpose of bill. A public bill pertains to general affairs and impacts a great number of people, whereas a private bill usually pertains to an individual or defined limited group. In a study of public bill vetoes from 1889 to 1989, Hoff finds that that Presidents Truman and Eisenhower rank second and fifth, respectively, in annual number of such vetoes. If only second-term presidents are included, Truman and Eisenhower rank second and third, respectively, in public bill veto issuance, with only FDR releasing more of this type of veto. [24] These rankings are the same if the time frame is expanded through 2020. In analyzing influences on frequency of annual public bill vetoes from 1889-1989, Hoff discovers that later year in office, later term in office, high unemployment, number of public laws passed, and being a succession president all significantly increase such vetoes, whereas majority partisan support reduces veto frequency overall. [25] Applying the latter findings to Presidents Truman and Eisenhower, all of previous variables help explain annual public bill veto

behavior during their tenure, although President Truman actually vetoed more total public bills during unified than divided party government. [26]

Most private bill vetoes by American presidents were released over the century from 1869 to 1969. Hoff's study of private bill veto frequency over that period revealed that Presidents Truman and Eisenhower rank third and fourth, respectively, in total private bill vetoes, with only Presidents Cleveland and Franklin Roosevelt issuing more. Hoff discovers that over the aforementioned century, variables like being involved in a military conflict, election year, number of public bill vetoes, and number of private laws significantly increase likelihood of private bill vetoes, whereas military background, term in office, business failure rate, extensive change in cabinet personnel, and party control significantly reduce likelihood of such vetoes. [27]

Pocket vetoes are permitted under the Constitution when the president has less than ten days left in the legislative session to consider the merits of legislation. Rather than signing, ignoring, or outrightly vetoing a bill, chief executives can simply wait until after Congress adjourns to take action. Under such circumstances, the veto cannot be overridden, although it can be reintroduced at the outset of a new legislative session. If all pocket vetoes are counted over American constitutional history, Franklin Roosevelt and Grover Cleveland rank first and second in total use, followed by Presidents Eisenhower and Truman in third and fourth place, respectively. In a study of catalysts of pocket vetoes from 1889 to 1989, Hoff shows that later year in a term, number of public laws, and high level of unemployment all significantly increase frequency of such vetoes annually. [28]

Overall, the large number of vetoes issued by Presidents Truman and Eisenhower can be traced to both proximate and long-term factors. For one, both presidents followed FDR's administration, which saw the most vetoes issued in American history, 635 in all. Second, both Truman and Eisenhower encountered periods where they faced an opposition party-controlled Congress. Third, private bills still went through the traditional route to passage, making them subject to veto; that procedure changed in ensuing decades. Finally, Presidents Truman and Eisenhower served before the time when chief executives employed tactics which mimicked the veto—such as bill signing statements—and therefore subsequently lessened reliance on formal powers.

VI. VETO OVERRIDES

Veto overrides occur when two-thirds of both chambers of Congress vote to oppose a veto while repeating earlier endorsement for a bill or joint resolution.

From 1789 up to 2021, encompassing the forty-five presidencies from George Washington through Donald Trump, presidential overrides have only transpired on 112 of 1518 regular vetoes, or just 7.4 percent. [29] That the president is seemingly dominant in protecting vetoes from override masks trends which are apparent if both parts of the override process are examined. In his study of influences on veto overrides over the century time from 1889 to 1989, Hoff discovers that while presidents enjoy an 80 percent success rate in having their vetoes sustained by the first chamber to vote on override, the percentage is nearly reversed when the second chamber's action is considered. Indeed, there is a 70 percent likelihood of veto override if the second chamber votes to do so. [30]

As opposed to the several similarities between Presidents Truman and Eisenhower pertaining to veto use, statistics and circumstances pertaining to veto overrides for the two chief executives diverge. For example, Dwight Eisenhower vetoed a total of 73 bills by regular means, of which just two, or 2.7 percent, were overridden. Conversely, President Truman experienced overrides on 12 of his 180 regular vetoes, or 6.7 percent. Further, President Truman is dubiously tied with President Gerald Ford for second place in veto overrides suffered with 12, trailing only the 15 overrides against President Andrew Johnson's regular vetoes. [31]

In a study of veto overrides from 1940 through 1980, Hoff adopts a systemic model to assess probability of second-house override. The results show that while first chamber veto override percentage, frequency of appearances before a joint session of Congress, and involvement in a major military conflict significantly increase probability of final override, positive partisan support and number of executive agreements have a major impact in reducing likelihood of override. Interestingly, the systemic model perfectly predicts veto override actions for President Eisenhower, while correctly predicting second-chamber veto override decisions in 68.8 percent of instances for President Truman. [32]

Of the eleven public bill vetoes and one private bill veto overridden by Congress during the Truman administration, none elicited more controversy than that dealing with the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. The act was designed to outlaw closed union shops, empowering the attorney general to secure an injunction against strikes which affected national health and safety while also barring unions from contributing to political campaigns. President Truman vetoed the aforementioned bill on June 20, 1947, but the veto was overridden the same day by a 331-83 vote in the House of Representatives and a 68-35 vote in the U.S. Senate. The stunning reversal was the first veto override faced by the Truman White House. However, a little more than four years later, President Truman exacted revenge by signing a bill reversing several components of the Taft-Hartley Act. [33]

The two successful overrides against President Eisenhower's vetoes transpired during his final two years in office. One of the public bills which was vetoed dealt with appropriations for various departments and agencies, while the second sought adjustment of compensation for federal employees.

Although there was general consensus among President Eisenhower's staff to veto the compensation bill, records indicate that there was disagreement on whether to veto the appropriation legislation. In both instances of override, the House and Senate acted the same day and just one day after the veto was issued. [34]

VII. CONCLUSION: SIMILAR ACHIEVEMENTS AND LEGACY

Presidents Truman and Eisenhower enjoyed similar accomplishments in the domestic area. For Truman, the Fair Deal demonstrated his commitment to reducing unemployment, raising the minimum wage, expanding public housing, and protecting workers and veterans. Too, President Eisenhower supported expanding social security benefits and an increase in the minimum wage. While President Truman favored new public works programs, President Eisenhower backed legislation creating the interstate highway system and the St. Lawrence Seaway. Even if to a different degree, both chief executives helped to advance civil rights. In the foreign policy realm, both presidents ended a hot war and managed the Cold War with the Soviet Union. [35]

Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower were friends before 1952. They parted over a series of misunderstandings, which were later forgiven. That is a good thing, because just as the successive chief executives demonstrated similar veto behavior, so they are regarded in terms of presidential performance and popularity. In 2017 and 2021 surveys of historians by Sienna College, Eisenhower and Truman ranked fifth and sixth respectively among all chief executives in U.S. history up to Joe Biden. [36] Back to back, in more ways than one.

Table 1: Rankings of Presidents in Veto Use

A. Ranked Total Number of All Vetoes, 1789-2021

1. FDR=635
2. Cleveland=584
3. **Truman=250**
4. **Eisenhower=181**
5. Grant=93

B. Ranked Total Public Bill Vetoes, 1889-2021

1. FDR=105
2. **Truman=55**
3. Ford=46
4. Reagan=37
5. **Eisenhower=35**

C. Ranked Total Public Bill Vetoes by Second-Term Presidents, 1889-2021

1. FDR=84
2. **Truman=26**
3. **Eisenhower=22**
4. Reagan=20
5. Wilson/Clinton=19

D. Ranked Total Private Bill Vetoes, 1869-1969

1. Cleveland=295
2. FDR=187
3. **Truman=84**
4. **Eisenhower=27**
5. Grant=25

E. Ranked Total Pocket Vetoes by Presidents, 1789-2021

1. FDR=263
2. Cleveland=238
3. **Eisenhower=108**
4. **Truman=70**
5. Grant=48

NOTES

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- [3] William DeGregorio. 2005. *The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents*. Norwalk, CT: The Eason Press; David C. Whitney and Robin Vaughn Whitney. 2005. *The American Presidents*. New York: Reader's Digest Association.
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] William E. Pemberton. 1989. *Harry S. Truman: Fair Dealer and Cold Warrior*. Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, p. 62.
- [6] Robert H. Ferrell. 1994. *Harry S. Truman: A Life*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, p. 184.
- [7] Pemberton, 1989.
- [8] Robert J. Donovan. 1977. *Conflict and Crisis: The Presidency of Harry S Truman, 1945-1948*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, p. 271.
- [9] Donald R. McCoy. 1984. *The Presidency of Harry S. Truman*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.
- [10] Chester J. Pach and Elmo Richardson. 1991. *The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.
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- [20] Robert E. DiClerico. 1990. *The American President*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- [21] Michael Foley and John E. Owens. 1996. *Congress and the Presidency in a Separated System*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- [22] Watson, 1993.
- [23] "Presidential Vetoes." 2022. Washington, DC: U.S. House of Representatives: History, Art, and Archives.
- [24] Samuel B. Hoff. 1991. "Saying No: Presidential Support and the Veto Process, 1889-1989," *American Politics Quarterly*, 19:3, July, p. 310-323.
- [25] Ibid.
- [26] Samuel B. Hoff. 2001. "Presidential Vetoes Amid Party Majorities," *National Social Science Journal*, 17:1, p. 1-20.
- [27] Samuel B. Hoff, 2003. "None for One: Examining Influences on Private Bill Vetoes," *New England Journal of Political Science*, 1:1, p. 1-33.
- [28] Samuel B. Hoff. 1994. "The Presidential Pocket Veto: Its Use and Legality," *Journal of Policy History*, 6:2, p. 188-208.
- [29] "Presidential Vetoes," 2002.
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- [36] "American Presidents: Greatest and Worst." 2022. *scri.sienna.edu*, June 22.