

Controcorrente: Richard Neustadt's Legendary Book on Presidential Power and Its Enduring Impact

Richard Neustadt's seminal work, "Controcorrente," published in 1960, revolutionized the study of the American presidency and has remained a cornerstone of political science for over half a century. Neustadt's insights into the nature of presidential power and the complexities of governing in a modern democracy continue to resonate with scholars and practitioners alike. This article explores the key ideas presented in "Controcorrente" and examines its enduring impact on the understanding of presidential power.



Controcorrente by Richard E. Neustadt

★★★★☆ 4.7 out of 5

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Neustadt's Model: Power through Indirect Persuasion

Central to Neustadt's analysis is his model of presidential power, which he argues is not based on formal authority or constitutional prerogatives but rather on the ability to persuade others. Neustadt famously coined the phrase "power is the ability to get things done" and emphasized the

importance of informal influence, negotiation, and bargaining in the exercise of presidential authority. According to Neustadt, the president's power stems from their control over the agenda, their ability to mobilize public opinion, and their capacity to build coalitions.

The Presidential "Arsenal of Persuasion"

Neustadt identified several key tools that presidents can use to persuade others:

1. **Expert advice:** The president can draw upon the expertise of advisors and staff to provide information and analysis to support their positions.
2. **Personal appeal:** The president can leverage their charisma, personal relationships, and reputation to build support for their agenda.
3. **Negotiation and compromise:** The president can engage in negotiations and make concessions to gain support from others.
4. **Public opinion:** The president can appeal directly to the public through speeches, media appearances, and other means to build popular support for their policies.
5. **"Force of publicity":** The president can use their position to bring attention to issues and influence public opinion.

The Limits of Presidential Power

While Neustadt emphasized the importance of presidential power, he also recognized its limits. He argued that presidents are constrained by constitutional law, institutional norms, political realities, and the balance of power with other branches of government. Moreover, presidents must

navigate competing demands from interest groups, political parties, and the public, which can limit their ability to achieve their goals.

Bureaucracy and Interest Groups

Neustadt paid particular attention to the role of bureaucracy and interest groups in shaping presidential power. He argued that the vast bureaucracy of the federal government can both support and hinder presidential initiatives. While bureaucrats provide expertise and administrative capacity, they can also be resistant to change and may pursue their own agendas. Similarly, interest groups can exert significant influence on presidents by providing support, resources, and information but can also constrain presidential freedom of action.

The Relevance of Controcorrente Today

Despite being written over 60 years ago, "Controcorrente" remains relevant in understanding the dynamics of presidential power in the 21st century. Neustadt's emphasis on indirect persuasion, coalition-building, and the limits of formal authority continues to resonate with scholars and practitioners in an era of heightened partisanship and political polarization.

Neustadt's model has been applied to analyze the presidencies of numerous leaders, from Lyndon Johnson to Barack Obama. His insights have shaped the way we think about the presidency's role in shaping policy, navigating political conflicts, and responding to crises.

Richard Neustadt's "Controcorrente" is a landmark work that transformed the study of presidential power. Neustadt provided a nuanced understanding of how presidents wield influence and navigate the complexities of American government. His insights have stood the test of

time and continue to inform our understanding of the presidency and its role in shaping the course of the nation. Neustadt's legacy as a pioneering political scientist and an astute observer of American politics remains secure.



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