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## Second-term mandates

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## Second-term mandates

How is a mandate for an elected or re-elected president determined, and how much claim does President Bush have to govern with a mandate in his second term?

Your question is apt considering what is happening in Washington, DC, today: Congress has gathered to certify the votes of the Electoral College. (And you thought the election was over?)



### "MANDATE" DEFINED

Does President George W. Bush enjoy a mandate, as he and his supporters claim? First, let's look at the definition: "mandate" comes from the Latin words *mandatum* or *mandare*, literally "to put hands on" as if to send someone on a mission, or "to order" someone who has been dubbed to do something. [1] The way you are using the word refers to the strong measure of approval or support that voters give to their representatives when elected by a sizeable majority. Political scientist Thomas Dye defines a mandate even more specifically, as the "perception of popular support for a program or policy based on the [large] margin of electoral victory won by a candidate who proposed it during a campaign." Frequently the winner in even close elections will claim the voters' overwhelming support -- i.e., a mandate -- for their policies and programs. "But," as Dye notes, "for elections to serve as policy mandates, four conditions have to be met:

1. Competing candidates have to offer clear policy alternatives.
2. The voters have to cast their ballots on the basis of these policy alternatives alone.
3. The election results have to clearly indicate the voters' policy preferences.
4. Elected officials have to be bound by their campaign promises." [2]

### PRESIDENT BUSH'S RE-ELECTION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Using Thomas Dye's criteria, we see that true mandates rarely exist. To the question of whether President Bush's re-election represents a mandate in some meaningful sense of the word, it might be argued that being re-elected is almost by definition a mandate, since the voters are confirming what they already know and sending the signal that they want more of that person's leadership. In addition, there are two other facts that encourage Bush and his followers. First, he got the largest percentage of the popular vote in decades. Second, his coattails helped GOP candidates build leads in both houses of Congress.

And yet, President Bush's re-election was by the smallest margin since 1824, when the popular vote began to be counted. The following analysis, written by Dr. Sheldon Stern (who was the historian at the JFK Library from 1977-1999), appeared in the *Boston Globe* after the election:

"In their victory statements on November 3, President Bush and Vice President Cheney tried to spin the election outcome as a 'historic' and 'broad' mandate for their administration. The media largely swallowed this interpretation. Television, newspaper and Internet commentary proliferated declaring that the GOP had triumphed on a red tide of votes.

"In fact, the historical record proves precisely the opposite. President Bush won the popular vote by 2.7% -- the smallest winning percentage by a second term president since popular vote statistics were first recorded in 1824:

- Jackson won by 16.8% in 1832;
- Lincoln by 10.1% in 1864;
- Grant by 11.8% in 1872;
- Cleveland by 3.1% in 1892;
- McKinley by 6.2% in 1900;
- TR by 18.8% in 1904;
- Wilson by 3.1% in 1916;
- Coolidge by 25.2% in 1924;
- FDR by 24.3% in 1936;
- Truman by 4.4% in 1948;
- Eisenhower by 15.4% in 1956;
- LBJ by 22.6% in 1964;
- Nixon by 23.2% in 1972;
- Reagan by 18.2% in 1984;
- Clinton by 8.5% in 1996.

"Similarly, Bush won by only 34 electoral votes, with 53.2% of the total electoral vote. Wilson is the only president to win a second term with a smaller electoral vote margin (23 votes) and percentage (52.2%). Second term presidents between 1804 and 1996 have, on average, won 78.7% of the electoral vote. History would clearly trump spin if media commentators knew more history." [3]

Although President George W. Bush was re-elected, which in itself reflects a kind of mandate, he does not enjoy the overwhelming support many of his predecessors have, especially with regard to domestic issues. This is not to say that he cannot govern effectively or increase the approval ratings for his policies and programs. But it is to urge caution before waxing enthusiastic about a mandate from the voters.

*(Question from Michelle W., of Cambridge, MA)*

[1] *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (2000) and *Merriam-Webster Dictionary of Law* (1996), s.v. "mandate."

[2] Thomas R. Dye, *Politics in America*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), pp. 229-30.

[3] Sheldon M. Stern, letter to the *Boston Globe*, December 21, 2004.