

STEPHEN SKOWRONEK

THE POLITICS PRESIDENTS

MAKE *Leadership from*

John Adams to Bill Clinton



THE POLITICS PRESIDENTS MAKE

Leadership from John Adams
to Bill Clinton

Stephen Skowronek



THE BELKNAP PRESS OF
HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

Copyright © 1993, 1997 by the President and Fellows
of Harvard College
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

Third printing, 2000

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Skowronek, Stephen.

The politics presidents make : leadership from John Adams to
Bill Clinton / Stephen Skowronek.

p. cm.

Originally published : Cambridge, Mass. : Belknap Press, 1993.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-68937-2

1. Presidents—United States—History. 2. Political leadership—United States—History.
I. Title.

JK511.S55 1997

352.23'6'0973—dc21 97-7818

Acknowledgments

ABOUT a decade ago, when the Reagan Revolution was afoot, I decided to undertake a general study of presidents as agents of political change. Faith in the transformative capacities of the presidency seemed to be giving rise to ever greater expectations and ever more profound frustrations, but so far as I could tell no one had attempted to analyze those capacities in a systematic way. Such an assessment must deal with a vast and varied record, and that, no doubt, is one reason why thoughts about this matter have tended to remain impressionistic. Yet, anyone inclined to look back through presidential history will discover that a substantial amount of guidance and insight is readily accessible. Each piece of the puzzle is illuminated by many fine biographies, period studies, and administration chronicles. I have made extensive use of these works, and while I have entered the debates that surround individual incumbents with my own more general purposes in view, the story that I tell is in large part a reflection on the great themes that I found running through this literature.

I set to work in earnest on this project as a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and I benefited enormously from the lively forum for interdisciplinary exchange created there by Michael Lacey, the Director of the Division of United States Studies. My opportunity for research in Washington was extended through the courtesy of Paul Peterson and the Brookings Institution.

Whatever merit there is to this book is a credit widely shared. Karen Orren and I began a discussion about American political development when we were colleagues together at UCLA, and the history of the presidents has figured prominently in our conversations ever since. From my first thoughts about this project through the final revision of the manuscript, Karen has sharpened my thinking with keen insights of her own and responded to my efforts with the disarming candor of a stalwart friend.

Acknowledgments

I was fortunate to join the Yale Political Science Department at a moment when its interest in historical work was blossoming. My colleagues have read and reread these chapters, offering patient support as well as careful criticism. Bruce Ackerman, David Cameron, Robert Dahl, James Fesler, Victoria Hattam, David Mayhew, David Plotke, Susan Rose-Ackerman, George Shulman, Ian Shapiro, Rogers Smith, Steven Smith, and Alex Wendt all offered valuable counsel.

Several leading scholars in presidential studies took the time to look at this manuscript in whole or in part and to give me the benefit of their seasoned perspectives and intimate knowledge of the field. Michael Nelson was an early promoter of the project and an astute critic of the results. I also received careful readings from George C. Edwards III, Sidney Milkis, Bruce Miroff, Richard Pious, Jeffrey Tulis, Aaron Wildavsky, and the late J. David Greenstone. Comments from two scholars outside the sphere of presidential studies—Ira Katznelson and Brian Balogh—were especially helpful in probing the broader issues raised by the concept and design of the study.

Aida Donald and Susan Wallace managed the publication of the book with alacrity and consummate professionalism. Mary Whitney provided able office support at Yale. I have had excellent research assistance all along; Mark Harmon, Corey Robin, Adam Sheingate, and Keith Whittington were especially helpful in the final phases. My wife, Susan Jacobs, has hastened this book to completion in every possible way, devoting long evenings to it after a full day at her own work and spending too many weekends alone with our children. For my boys, Michael and Sam, it's pay-back time.

Significant portions of previously published essays related to this project have been incorporated into these chapters. These include: "Notes on the Presidency in the Political Order," *Studies in American Political Development*, Vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 286–302; "Presidential Leadership in Political Time," in *The Presidency and the Political System*, ed. Michael Nelson (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1988), pp. 115–159; "Franklin Roosevelt and the Modern Presidency," *Studies in American Political Development*, Vol. 6, no. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 322–358; and with Karen Orren, "Beyond the Iconography of Order: Notes for a New Institutionalism," *The Dynamics of American Politics: Approaches and Interpretations*, ed. Larry C. Dodd and Calvin Jillson (Boulder: Westview, 1993).

New Haven, April 1993

Preface, 1997

THE PUBLICATION of a new edition of *The Politics Presidents Make* affords me the opportunity to reflect on some of the issues that have been raised in response to the book and to update the text with some thoughts about the Clinton presidency. Like most authors, I read my own text with a keen sense of how I might have made it better. But as nothing in the course of American politics over the past four years causes me to want to modify the book's basic analytic claims or substantive arguments, I have resisted the temptation to alter the original presentation and, beyond a few minor corrections, have limited my additions to this Preface and the Afterword.

Attention has focused on the challenge the book presents to the notion that the modern presidents are a separate and coherent group of incumbents who have little in common with earlier presidents and on its claim that these pre-modern presidents still have much to tell us about how the office is working today. This is altogether appropriate. The book crosses the modern/pre-modern divide with an eye to recurrent patterns in the politics of leadership, patterns that stretch across the whole of presidential history and link the modern presidents back to counterparts acting in earlier periods at parallel moments in "political time."

I hasten to add, however, that my main objective in this book was neither to debunk the "modern presidency" thesis nor to replace it with a "cycle theory." It was, rather, to assess presidents as agents of political change. I was interested in the different premises which presidents bring to the challenge of orchestrating political change, in the capacity of the American presidency to deliver on these different premises, and in the systemic political effects of presidential efforts to do so. The recurrent patterns on which the analysis builds may be striking—they certainly stood out for me as I began thinking about presidential leadership—but I urge readers not to stop with what became a point of departure.

The “cycles” of presidential history are irregular. Jackson’s reconstruction of American politics came 28 years after Jefferson’s; Franklin Roosevelt’s reconstruction came 72 years after Lincoln’s. The length of time between political reconstructions did not concern me. What called for attention were the different types of leadership to be found within the periods bounded by these reconstructions. Each of these seemed to have distinctive political dynamics which played out in similar ways in very different historical settings. Specifying how leadership efforts within periods differ from one another, and figuring out why leadership efforts in different periods have similar political effects, would, I thought, go a long way toward accounting for the history observed, cyclic tendencies and irregularities alike.

The book rests on a set of claims about how the president’s constitutional position organizes the problem of political action. Its central claim is that assuming the presidential office and exercising its powers has an inherently disruptive political effect, and that presidential leadership is a struggle to resolve that effect in the reproduction of a legitimate political order. The struggle is engaged by all incumbents, and the constitutional dynamic underlying it informs all the different pieces of my analysis. The tendency for politics to cycle over broad spans of time is, as I see it, but one of the likely consequences of this dynamic as it gets played out in different ways by successive incumbents coming to power in new situations. Another, more important, consequence is that leadership outcomes turn less directly on the powers or institutional resources of the presidency than on the incumbent’s contingent political authority or warrants for changing things.

The theory of presidential action built on this central claim identifies the typical contextual configurations of the leadership problem. It relates each of these contexts to a characteristic premise or warrant for national leadership, and it links action on each of these premises to a characteristic political contest and systemic political effect. The theory explains why a handful of incumbents has been remarkably effective in orchestrating political change, and it sorts through the political consequences of the difficulties encountered by others. I believe that this is a theory of wide application, not one limited to the cases I chose to analyze in detail. I hope that the cases selected demonstrate the historical robustness of the basic political dynamics postulated and that they convey a clear sense of the potential range and practical limits of the presidency in transforming the American polity. Of course, I also rec-

ognize that a theory which encompasses the whole of presidential history is going to be exposed along a broad front, and I would count the effort a great success if it prompts the promulgation of alternatives of equal scope that explain more of the variance.

Another set of issues raised by this book has to do with the significance of secular change and the emergence of the modern presidency. Presidential leadership has never been an entirely closed system where nothing new of consequence ever happens and the patterns of the past simply repeat in lock step. Much of the analysis of *The Politics Presidents Make* is devoted to an examination of how recurrent patterns in the politics of leadership were reshaped at each of their historical iterations and to a consideration of the direction of these changes over time.

To this end, the book traces the intercurrency of the basic types of political leadership found throughout presidential history with the expansion and diversification of the institutional universe of presidential action. It shows how the proliferation of national institutional authorities and the growing independence of these authorities from one another has worked at once to make established governing arrangements more resilient and to loosen the constraints imposed on presidents by prior political affiliations. Gradually since the time of Jackson, and with increasing effect over the twentieth century, these developments have facilitated a fraying of the boundaries distinguishing the basic types of leadership. Thus, the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, which in the standard literature marks a categorical shift to a new leadership position for presidents, appears in my analysis to mark a historical compounding of institutional resistance to presidentially led political reconstructions of American government. As the analysis extends further into the contemporary period, the significance of "the modern presidency" is revealed in a general moderation of the historic differences in the political capacities of successive incumbents.

I speculated in the last few pages of the book about what such a waning of political time might imply, but none of this is meant to suggest that patterns drawn from the more distant past no longer have anything to tell us about the politics of the present or near future. If presidential leadership, as I present it, has never been an entirely closed system, I think it has some way to go before we escape the old patterns altogether, and I harbor doubts as to whether complete escape is even a constitutional possibility. Perhaps this is where conclusions drawn from an analysis of intercurrent patterns in presidential history differ

most starkly from conclusions drawn from the “modern presidency” thesis as it is found in the standard literature. I am as willing as anyone to recognize the political significance of the new institutional forms associated with “the modern presidency,” but my approach to their development made me wary of the claim that they altered the politics of leadership categorically, and it led me to challenge the assumption that the institutional changes of the last fifty years are uniquely determinative of presidential politics in contemporary America. Notwithstanding all the current manifestations of the long-term trends at work muting differences among the recurrent types of leadership, I believe now, as I said then, that the most remarkable thing about presidential leadership from Carter through Clinton is how prominent these older patterns still are. By drawing forward the basic types from the beginning, my goal was not simply to trace a subtle convergence in their evolution but to reveal the extent to which our recent leaders have continued, despite all these complications, to recapitulate themes and patterns evident at the start.

A third set of issues raised by this book concerns the place of presidents in politics more generally. For some, the depiction of presidents as a blunt, disruptive force in politics misses the presidency’s close connections to the other institutions of government and society and overstates its significance relative to other factors driving political change. It would, of course, be foolish to claim that presidents are the sole source of change in American politics, or to deny that a full explanation of any particular change has to take other factors into account. Wars, demographic trends, social movements, economic developments, interest pressures, and the like may, depending on the change in question, be judged as important or more important than presidents. Other political institutions—parties, courts, Congress, and so on—have also played an important part in transforming American politics. My case for the presidency is that it has been a singularly persistent source of change, a transformative element engrained in the Constitution itself. In the presidency, change is generated routinely by incumbents trying to legitimate themselves. A better understanding of these dynamics as they shift *over* time should, I think, enhance our understanding of any particular president and the factors working to define *his* times.

Far from describing some towering, all-powerful position, the depiction of the office as a blunt, disruptive force opens onto an analysis of ever-shifting leadership capacities and often paradoxical political

effects. No president can avoid the problem of reconciling the order-shattering implications of the exercise of presidential power with the order-affirming purposes of the institution itself, but this means no more or less than that the negotiation of change has always been an integral part of the president's job description, a logical consequence of each incumbent's constitutional charge to assume responsibility for his own administration. Nor should this characterization be read as an endorsement of some presidential "will to power" or as a lament over the obstacles in its path. I was after some common ground upon which an institutional analysis of our perceptions of success and failure, greatness and mediocrity, might proceed, and having found it, I became both more skeptical and more appreciative of presidential leadership in all its various manifestations.

The opposite concern has also been expressed: that the book's characterization of presidents in politics is too subtle rather than too strong. Here the question is whether the analysis overstates our presidents' perceptions of their different places in the historical sequences in which I find them. All can agree, I think, that presidents are practical politicians with eyes riveted on the moment at hand, and that we should not expect them to think about history the way social scientists do. But I did not have any sense of shoehorning my examples into analytic categories. By and large, I proceeded inductively on our presidents' own quite candid articulations of their authority claims and leadership premises. The analysis assumes only that presidents will have a rudimentary understanding of their political identity as affiliated or opposed to the basic commitments of ideology and interest institutionalized by the last reconstruction, and that they will make a contingent evaluation of the current prospects for acting on that relationship. As practical and engaged politicians, presidents have an instinctive sense of these things; we hear them making such assessments constantly as a matter of course. The history that I sketch whole was fashioned incrementally, and in the moment, by successors who grappled with the legacy of their immediate predecessors and brought their own political identities to bear on new leadership situations.

But there is, as some have observed, a third side to this. One may accept my description of our presidents' political positions and leadership premises and still question the book's own premise. I say that the book is about "the politics that presidents make," but some have argued that it is really about "the presidents that politics make." The

question, as I understand it, is whether an analysis so deeply contextualized can sustain any claims about the significance of the individual presidents themselves.

This is a delicate matter for anyone interested in understanding presidents systematically. Let me venture a few brief thoughts. First, I am not sure there is as much to the difference as might first appear. *The Politics Presidents Make* offers an analysis of the leadership patterns that are repeatedly produced through the American constitutional system by the peculiar structure and operation of its presidential office. In this sense, it is about the politics that the American *presidency* makes. This is, to be sure, a more awkward formulation, but it is one compatible with my original formulation and one less starkly at odds with the proposed alternative.

That said, I think there is good reason to steer away from an alternative that submerges the importance of individual actors altogether. Clearly, my analysis is meant to challenge the old myth that each president is equally at liberty to be “as big a man as he can” and that differences among leaders are simply matters of character and skill. But I believe that understanding leadership contexts ultimately enhances our appreciation of human agency, that we end up with a truer measure of each individual effort—of its novelty and of the broader significance of that novelty—when we take into account basic differences in the way the leadership problem gets configured and understand what is entailed in trying to master each configuration. I think that Grover Cleveland’s significance as a leader is sharpened when we consider the potentially reconstructive opportunity opened to him at the outset of his second term, that Theodore Roosevelt’s creativity in office is underscored when we consider the classic problems of orthodox innovation with which he had to grapple, that Jimmy Carter’s ingenuity in meeting the challenges that came his way is most fully revealed when we consider the precarious political position of the late-regime affiliate. Cleveland quashed the portends of a great departure; Roosevelt made political orthodoxy the premise for a major breakthrough in American state-building; Jimmy Carter stretched the boundaries of an impossible leadership situation. These men may not have escaped the logic of their circumstances, but neither were they mere creatures of circumstance, and their efforts had long-term consequences for how these logics would be played out in the future.

Finally, I think that the image of presidents as mere creatures of the

contexts in which they act misses the formative role of the individuals who reach the presidency in constituting context itself. I am sometimes asked whether I think that any Democrat elected to the presidency in the late 1970s would have wrestled himself into the same corner that Jimmy Carter did. The point, it seems to me, is that Carter reached the presidency by defeating all the other Democrats contesting the office at that time. His political genius was to discover and articulate a set of premises for national action that took account of his party's difficult situation in those years and still resonated with the electorate sufficiently to carry a Democrat into office. Notwithstanding the fact that other late-regime affiliates have hit upon similar premises, there was nothing in this situation to dictate that Carter had to appear on the scene to articulate them or that a Democratic candidate had to win in 1976. I sought to show that the leadership pretensions which Carter carried into the presidency infused his tenure in office with political purpose, that they informed his actions at crucial junctures and lent political meaning to unfolding events. Carter's premises for leadership in the 1970s set up a classic case of disjunctive politics, but that remains, to my mind at least, a politics of his own creation.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge in closing the most obvious omission in the original text: while the book presents a typology of four kinds of leadership, it only deals in detail with three. The preemptive leaders were set aside for special treatment for both practical and theoretical reasons. The most important is that preemptive leadership does not seem to me to evolve in response to secular changes the way the other types do; it seems, rather, to be the type toward which developments in the others are tending. Be that as it may, our current incumbent has offered such a striking example of preemptive leadership that I won't try to put off the task of drawing out its characteristic elements any longer. Although the new Afterword may not substitute for a full treatment of this important subject, I hope that it serves to situate Clinton's "third way" within the book's more general analytic frame and to articulate more fully all the comparisons and contrasts contained in the original text.

Presidents of the United States

1. George Washington	1789–1797	Federalist
2. John Adams	1797–1801	Federalist
3. Thomas Jefferson	1801–1809	Democratic-Republican
4. James Madison	1809–1817	Democratic-Republican
5. James Monroe	1817–1825	Democratic-Republican
6. John Quincy Adams	1825–1829	Coalition
7. Andrew Jackson	1829–1837	Democratic
8. Martin Van Buren	1837–1841	Democratic
9. William Henry Harrison	1841	Whig
10. John Tyler	1841–1845	Whig
11. James K. Polk	1845–1849	Democratic
12. Zachary Taylor	1849–1850	Whig
13. Millard Fillmore	1850–1853	Whig
14. Franklin Pierce	1853–1857	Democratic
15. James Buchanan	1857–1861	Democratic
16. Abraham Lincoln	1861–1865	Republican
17. Andrew Johnson	1865–1869	Union
18. Ulysses S. Grant	1869–1877	Republican
19. Rutherford B. Hayes	1877–1881	Republican
20. James A. Garfield	1881	Republican
21. Chester A. Arthur	1881–1885	Republican
22. Grover Cleveland	1885–1889	Democratic
23. Benjamin Harrison	1889–1893	Republican
24. Grover Cleveland	1893–1897	Democratic
25. William McKinley	1897–1901	Republican
26. Theodore Roosevelt	1901–1909	Republican
27. William Howard Taft	1909–1913	Republican
28. Woodrow Wilson	1913–1921	Democratic
29. Warren G. Harding	1921–1923	Republican
30. Calvin Coolidge	1923–1929	Republican
31. Herbert Hoover	1929–1933	Republican
32. Franklin D. Roosevelt	1933–1945	Democratic
33. Harry S. Truman	1945–1953	Democratic
34. Dwight D. Eisenhower	1953–1961	Republican
35. John F. Kennedy	1961–1963	Democratic
36. Lyndon B. Johnson	1963–1969	Democratic
37. Richard M. Nixon	1969–1974	Republican
38. Gerald Ford	1974–1977	Republican
39. James Earl Carter	1977–1981	Democratic
40. Ronald Reagan	1981–1989	Republican
41. George Bush	1989–1993	Republican
42. William J. Clinton	1993–	Democratic

Contents

Preface, 1997	xi
I. PLACES IN HISTORY	1
1 Rethinking Presidential History	3
2 Power and Authority	17
3 Structure and Action	33
II. RECURRENT AND EMERGENT PATTERNS	59
4 Jeffersonian Leadership: Patrician Prototypes	61
<i>Part One: Thomas Jefferson's Reconstruction</i>	62
<i>Part Two: James Monroe's Articulation</i>	86
<i>Part Three: John Quincy Adams's Disjunction</i>	110
5 Jacksonian Leadership: Classic Forms	129
<i>Part One: Andrew Jackson's Reconstruction</i>	130
<i>Part Two: James Polk's Articulation</i>	155
<i>Part Three: Franklin Pierce's Disjunction</i>	177
6 Republican Leadership: Stiffening Crosscurrents	197
<i>Part One: Abraham Lincoln's Reconstruction</i>	198
<i>Part Two: Theodore Roosevelt's Articulation</i>	228
<i>Part Three: Herbert Hoover's Disjunction</i>	260
7 Liberal Leadership: Fraying Boundaries	287
<i>Part One: Franklin Roosevelt's Reconstruction</i>	288
<i>Part Two: Lyndon Johnson's Articulation</i>	325
<i>Part Three: Jimmy Carter's Disjunction</i>	361
III. THE WANING OF POLITICAL TIME	407
8 Reagan, Bush, and Beyond	409
Afterword	447
Notes	467
Index	535

I

PLACES
IN
HISTORY

Rethinking Presidential History

SUCCEED or fail, presidents are formidable political actors. They are continually remaking our politics, changing the terms of debate and the conditions of maneuver. The wonder is that we so seldom think about them this way. We know far more about the obstacles that frustrate presidents' efforts to become masters of American politics than about what those efforts do *to* American politics. The ineffectiveness of our leaders has become a consuming preoccupation; there is little stepping back to take stock of their political effects. We approach each new administration flush with ideas about what is wrong but short on explanations for the variation in what is wrought.

Taking the alternative tack, I found that historical examination of the presidency's political impact has a lot to tell us about where things stand today. My objective in this book has been to understand the different kinds of politics that presidents make. I treat leadership efforts, shortfalls and all, as politically formative; my interest lies in how they shape the American political landscape and drive its transformation. From this has come a different view of past experience and what we need to be concerned about now.

The book ranges the whole course of presidential history, retelling along the way the leadership struggles of a dozen or so incumbents.¹ I returned to the old stories to rethink fundamentals in light of what I saw as the limitations of familiar analytic strategies. The tendency has long been to compartmentalize the study of government institutions on the side of order, system, and routine in politics, to identify them with "politics-as-usual" and look outside of them for the "real" forces of change.² But the presidency has never fit this frame very well.³ It conflates these categories and distinctions, and much of its political