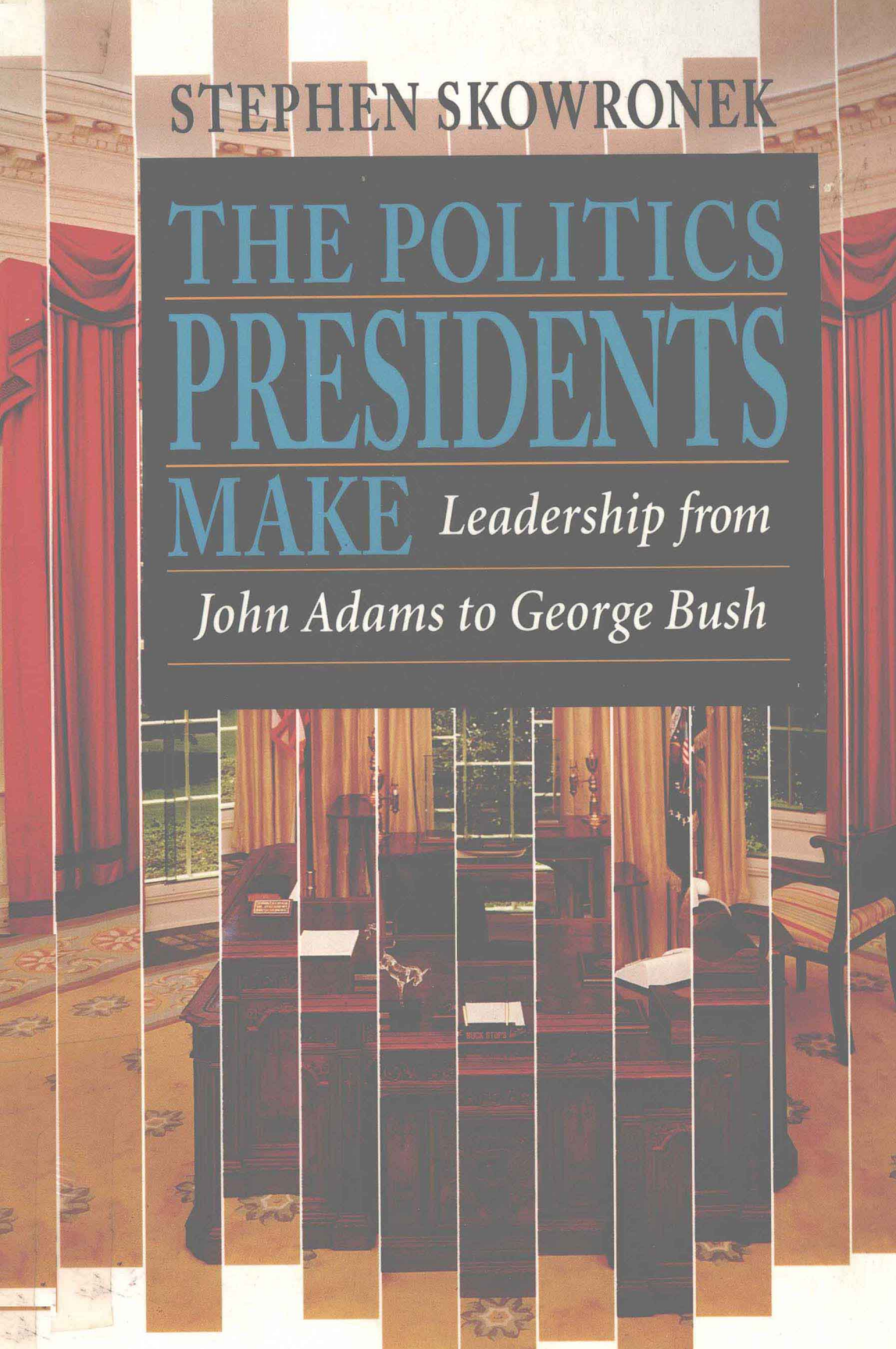
STEPHEN SKOWRONEK

THE POLITICS PRESIDENTS MAKE

Leadership from John Adams to George Bush



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The Politics Presidents Make

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.

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 and to give me the benefit of their seasoned perspectives. Michael Nelson was an early promoter of the project and an astute critic of the results. Hugh Heclo, Erwin Hargrove, and Richard Neustadt reviewed the manuscript for Harvard University Press. 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

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

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I

PLACES IN HISTORY

CHAPTER 1

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

significance is lost on them. Array the stories of the presidents in succession—each in his turn endowed with broad constitutional powers and determined to exercise them in his own right—and the blunt disruptive force of this institution instantly comes to the fore. Together these stories tell of an office that regularly reaches beyond itself to assert control over others, one whose deep-seated impulse to *re*order things routinely jolts order and routine elsewhere, one whose normal activities and operations alter system boundaries and recast political possibilities.

Disruption of the status quo ante is basic to the politics presidents make and, beyond that, to the dynamics of American political development in the largest sense. Rather than filter it out as background noise, I propose to fashion an institutional analysis that brings it center stage.[4] The first step is to redirect the signposts which we use to make sense of presidential history.

The Limits of Our Search for Order

It is easy to get lost in presidential history. Each story presents itself as baldly idiosyncratic and therefore defiant of any quest for generalization. The subject matter tends at once to wander outward, encompassing the operations of the federal government as a whole, and to collapse in upon itself as a study of individuals. Patterns stretch over long spans of time, more often than not obscured by the immediate twists and turns of personality and circumstance.

To show us the order of things, scholars have divided up the history of the presidents into periods. They have grouped historically contiguous incumbents together and gleaned from the shared elements of their situations a sense of the parameters of the political system at that time. From this they derive the characteristic demands that the system places on the presidency and the characteristic resources available to meet those demands. Once the problem of political action within the period has been set in this way, presidential leadership becomes a function of relative skill at manipulating politics-as-usual.

Take, for example, Richard Neustadt's classic study of the politics of leadership, *Presidential Power* (1960). The centerpiece of Neustadt's analysis was his description of a new political/institutional system that had taken shape in the late 1940s and early 1950s. His portrait of "the presidency at mid-century" identified incumbents after Franklin Roosevelt as a distinct and coherent group facing similar challenges in

political action.[5] Neustadt argued that in this period central direction and control of national affairs had become for the first time a routine imperative. Modern presidents *had* to be leaders. The prior choice of mere clerkship, of simply fulfilling the constitutional responsibilities of the office, had been rendered moot by recent, dramatic events (the New Deal and World War II) that had made crisis management a normal state of affairs and concerted action a matter of striking bargains among independent interests and institutional actors who were themselves possessed of a stubborn tendency toward gridlock. From his portrait of this new system, Neustadt derived the skills and strategies requisite to making it work, and he sustained within that frame a thematic evaluation of the performances of Truman and Eisenhower.

This was no mean achievement. Neustadt's periodization of presidential history—his distinction between modern and premodern contexts for the exercise of power—introduced a sense of coherence into the relentless succession of incumbents and raised the study of leadership efforts above the idiosyncrasies of the case at hand. But simple periodization schemes impose severe limits on the analysis of leadership, and Neustadt's was no exception. Note first that Neustadt set the modern incumbents apart from their predecessors with a mere caricature of the past. The notion of a prior age when presidents did not *have* to be leaders—an age when vital national interests were only sporadically at the fore and most presidents could rest content with mere clerkship—is nothing more than a conceit of modern times. While the imagery groups the modern presidents together on common ground and cordons them off from prior experience, the question of just how different the politics of leadership in modern times is or whether the mid-twentieth-century presidents individually share more with one another than they do with presidents in earlier periods is never really explored.

Second, in describing the system that midcentury incumbents had to manipulate, Neustadt constricted the political significance of the exercise of presidential power to what he called "operational" questions. His concern was with how presidents could make this new system work, and he evaluated their effectiveness accordingly. But Neustadt's presidents do not change the political system in any significant way. The political and institutional parameters of the system appear impervious to the exercise of presidential power; they are transformed by great external forces like economic depression or world war. Indeed, to compare Truman and Eisenhower by the same standard, Neustadt *had* to

assume that Truman did not do anything to alter Eisenhower's political challenge or leadership prospects. This is really the crux of the periodization problem: to sustain comparisons within a given time frame, the systemic political impacts of successive leadership efforts must be filtered out, and no sooner are those impacts filtered out than the standards of evaluation themselves begin to ring hollow. The assumption that a system is given and that presidents make it work more or less effectively is bound to render the requisites of success elusive, for in their most precise signification, presidents disrupt systems, reshape political landscapes, and pass to successors leadership challenges that are different from the ones just faced.

Finally, and to bring this full circle, by assigning priority to those aspects of the political situation that Truman and Eisenhower shared, Neustadt elided obvious differences in the political purposes they brought to action in the moment at hand. He speaks of the "tasks" of leadership at midcentury in generic terms, but Truman and Eisenhower set out with manifestly different objectives in view. After all, one was a Democrat, the other a Republican. Truman was politically affiliated with his predecessor and out to elaborate upon the received agenda, while Eisenhower, the first Republican to come to power since the advent of the New Deal, was the leader of a resurgent opposition out to find an alternative course that could still stand the test of legitimacy.[6] To think thematically about tasks such as these, we have to be willing to break down the historical demarcations which Neustadt's analysis sets up and look back to presidents his analysis would seem to consign to irrelevance. Martin Van Buren, Andrew Jackson's vice president and successor, might be a better reference for Truman's political dilemma than Eisenhower; William Henry Harrison, the popular general who took the Whigs to their first victory over the Jackson Democrats, a better guide to Eisenhower's political situation than Truman.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the method, simple periodization schemes and modern-traditional dichotomies structure most of what we think and write about presidential leadership today. Indeed, a sampling of current opinion suggests that we are taking our period constructs more and more seriously. One leading authority describes the changes made in American government during the New Deal as the founding of a "Second Republic," a system of government so radically different from what preceded it that all prior presidential experience pales into insignificance.[7] Another writes in a similar vein that "the transformation

of the office has been so profound that the modern presidencies have more in common with one another in the opportunities they provide and the demands they place on their incumbents than they have with the entire sweep of traditional presidencies from Washington's to Hoover's."[8] This segmentation of presidential history is reinforced on the other side by scholars working on earlier periods: "The conceptions of leadership of the pre-1829 presidents," writes a leading authority, "largely distinguish them from . . . latter day models. Because the first six presidents, quite simply, had different valuations of partisan motivation and of the reality of the public interest, they had different standards of executive leadership."[9]

By calling attention to the historical demarcations that currently order this field, I do not wish to dismiss the important insights that have been gained. What we have learned about the distinctiveness of the presidency in different periods and about how changes in the office have accommodated transformations in the nation at large is in fact integral to the analysis to be undertaken here. My point is simply that the politics of leadership is neither as coherent within these periods nor as disparate across them as our current approach to the subject matter would suggest, and that we stand to sharpen our insights into what is actually going on inside these periods if we resist caricatures of those outside the time frames given. Indeed, leaving the history of presidents in pieces—with incumbents in one period having little in common with, or relevance to, those in the others—would seem to be counterproductive on its face. There are only some forty-odd cases in all, and with the experience as varied as it is from one incumbent to the next, none can be dismissed out of hand as a potential source of insight into the significance of the rest.

Consider some recent incumbents. Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush may be distinguished as a group of late-century presidents sharing certain resources and constraints and pursuing certain characteristic strategies.[10] But just how similar were the leadership tasks these presidents undertook? Was Reagan simply a better politician than the others, more skilled than they at using the tools of the modern presidency? Or was he, at some yet unattended level, engaged in a different kind of politics altogether, a politics more like Andrew Jackson's than either Carter's or Bush's?

Similarly, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson shared a set of institutional resources and presumptions about leadership that distinguish

them in important ways from presidents in later periods. Yet, Adams's presidency ruptured the political regime and shattered the previously dominant governing coalition, while Jefferson forged a new regime, one that would stand as the font of political legitimacy for decades to come. More curious still, Adams's shattering effect came in a rather desperate attempt to avoid national disaster and prevent his own compatriots from usurping the basic constitutional powers of his office, while Jefferson exercised extraordinary prerogatives throughout his tenure and passed power along to a hand-picked successor in the midst of a national disaster of his own making. These are stark differences in the politics presidents make. Are they idiosyncratic? Or are there other patterns at work, patterns that cut across our periods, which might help us specify the range of political possibilities further?

Multiple Orders and Political Mixes

Certainly it is no accident that the presidents most widely celebrated for their mastery of American politics have been immediately preceded by presidents generally judged politically incompetent. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson, James Buchanan and Abraham Lincoln, Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan—this repeated pairing of dismal failure with stunning success is one of the more striking patterns in presidential history, and accounting for it forces us to alter the way we have been thinking about that history. In the first place, we are prompted to think about what incumbents in very different historical periods have in common with one another and not with their immediate predecessors or successors. What conditions for leadership did the latter presidents in each of these pairs share; what could they do that their predecessors could not? Conversely, what conditions for leadership did the first presidents in each pair share; what did they do to open the door to greatness for their successor?

Note further that by accounting for the pattern in this way, we place the leaders themselves in a different light. A search for the typical effects that presidential action has in differently structured political contexts takes us behind the familiar portraits of individual incompetence and mastery. If it turns out that the "great" political leaders have all made the same kind of politics and if that politics is only made in a certain kind of situation, then our celebration of their extraordinary talents and