

THE PRESIDENCY AND THE CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL REGIME BUILDING:
SKOWRONEK REVISITED

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Synopsis

*Stephen Skowronek's study of presidential leadership and recurring patterns of regime development in *The Politics Presidents Make* (1993) has added a significant depth and richness to the scholarship of both the presidency and American political development. However, this line of analysis remains limited because of its inflexibility in regards to the cumulative evolution of the presidential institution. In this paper we reconceptualize the concept of "political time" one of the central constructs of Skowronek's work, by adapting the evolution of the presidency to an approach, termed "challenge and response," introduced by historian Arnold J. Toynbee (1939). In doing so, we better define the dynamics of "regime building" by suggesting that reconstructive presidents have a greater range of challenges and therefore meet them with a greater range of responses than has been previously thought. This allows us to correct for the deficiencies in Skowronek's work that have led him to suggest that we are at the end of "political time."*

In *The Politics Presidents Make* (1993) Stephen Skowronek contributes significant depth and richness to the study of the presidency by highlighting that fundamental leadership problems for presidents have persisted throughout American history. This opens up the possibility that presidents face recurrent political challenges by encountering obstacles similar to those faced by other presidents who were situated at parallel junctures in “political time.” Consequently, Skowronek’s work expands our analytical capacity to explain why someone like Bill Clinton can have more in common with Grover Cleveland or Dwight Eisenhower, than he does with either his immediate predecessor or his boyhood idol, Franklin Roosevelt. Clinton, Cleveland, and Eisenhower were similarly situated in opposition to the dominant political regime.

Skowronek also observes that this cycle is increasingly challenged by ever rising emergent forces, such as “the thickening of American national government,” whose growing resilience threatens to distort and eventually wash out the political cycle (Skowronek 2005, 829; 1993). Because of this, Skowronek predicts that political time is on the wane and concludes that presidents should abandon the leadership premises that are resultant of the cycle (1993, 1996, 2005). We, however, view this line of reasoning with skepticism and argue that consistent application of Skowronek’s own regime theory points to another conclusion.

Skowronek’s fault, as we see it, lies in privileging the great regime reconstruction of a president like Franklin Roosevelt. In doing so, Skowronek inappropriately benchmarks the standard of success for other succeeding “regime building” presidents. He thus falls prey to the bias of “periodization”.¹ In order to correct for this error, we turn to the “challenge and response” approach to historical analysis introduced by

historian Arnold J. Toynbee, which regards the evolution of institutions as the result of a unique response to a cumulative set of emergent and recurrent challenges. This helps explain why regime builders like Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, may have more in common with each other than they do with Presidents Lincoln or FDR. T. Roosevelt and Reagan were both challenged to reinvigorate the engines of government by advancing new power structures while conforming to the crosscutting pressures of their respective political realignments. Thus, through an extension and deepening of Skowronek's own theory we explain the president's role in regime building more accurately, adding further nuance to his depiction of American political development.

The Problem of Evaluating the Presidency

In reviewing the existing literature on the presidency two observations become apparent. First, there seems to be a considerable amount of pessimism about the future of the institution. Second, the scholarship tends to separate into two schools of thought: the presidency as "great man" school (Emmet, 1973; McCullough, 1993, 2002; Morris, 2002) and the presidency as part of a "greater period" school (Schlesinger, 1973; Greenstein, 1978, 2000a, 2000b). We argue that the first observation may be related to misinterpretation of the second.

With titles such as *Twilight of the Presidency* (Reedy, 1970), "An Imperiled Presidency" (Cronin, 1978), *The President as Prisoner* (Grover, 1989), *American Presidency Under Siege* (Rose, 1997) and *The US Presidency in Crisis* (Campbell, 1998), one gets an immediate sense that there is concern about the future of the institution of the presidency. Some scholars argue (Schlesinger, 1973; Tulis, 1987; Patterson, 1990;

Burns, Peltason, and Cronin, 1991) that the office of the president may be overstepping the limited powers upon which it was founded. Other scholars such as Neustadt (1960), Greenstein (1978), Grover (1989) and even Skowronek (1993) himself argue that, in essence, “presidents fail to be politically effective because of the restraints placed on them” (Greenstein, 1978; 68). Thus, for them, the problem is not too much power but too little. With the presidency being perceived as being both too powerful and too weak, perhaps the problem is not so much rooted in the institution as it is in a crisis of expectations – expectations that produce diametrically opposite conclusions.

The “great man” school arrives at its conclusions through a historical emphasis on the individual (Skowronek, 1993: 4). Proponents of this approach seem to expect that morally strong (Sandburg, 1960), strategically inclined individuals, (Lord, 2003) who have nurtured certain other crucial facets of their personality (Buchanan, 1987; Barber, 1992; Greenstein, 2000), are most likely to become successful presidents.

While there are definitely descriptive advantages to such an approach, because the focus of such highly individualistic studies tends to be on the successful cases, the scholarship of the “great man” school tends to suggest that the performance of modern presidents pales in comparison to those of the past. Thus, a source of pessimism within the “great man” school comes from “benchmarking” the standard of presidential accomplishment on the most successful cases, while overlooking contextual factors that may contribute to the lack of success in others.

The methodology the “period” school can be seen as an attempt to address these shortcomings. Proponents of this method tend to group historically congruent presidencies (Pfiffner 1996b; Gould, 2003), which seem to share common characteristics,

in an attempt to show that there are patterns in the challenges across time in the development of the institution (Neustadt, 1960). Thus, the “period” school provides an improved methodology for presidential studies by framing questions within certain historical contexts.

However, this approach is not without shortcomings as well. As Skowronek writes:

(Scholars) 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 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 (1993: 4).

Thus, in the “period” school, once the distinctiveness of the period is identified both the nature of the challenge and the techniques for responding become benchmarked. With context held constant, presidents are, then, rated against this benchmark. This may do violence to the reality as environments change. Therefore, when the “period school” measures presidential performance against an abstract standard of success the tendency is to judge all other presidents as failing to achieve the artificially set, period bound, ‘best’ results.

It is in part to address this problem that Skowronek presents his corrective theory. By focusing on those recurrent challenges that derive from a president’s relationship to the dominant political regime, *The Politics President’s Make* ‘introduces the concept of

“political time”(1993, 3-15).² Skowronek constructs a framework in which success can be understood within the logic of reoccurring political challenges, with each president facing challenges based on their political relation to the regime and the strength of that regime’s warrants. New insights can thus be gleaned through inter-periodic and intra-periodic comparisons. Indeed, as Skowronek points out, much can be gained by comparing presidents from different times who face similar challenges in “political time.”

Nevertheless, there is a continued strain of pessimism about the performance of modern presidents inherent in Skowronek’s improved methodology. This leads us to suspect that Skowronek himself has fallen victim to an improper benchmark bias. In attributing the inability of presidents to escape the recurrent challenges of political time—and failing to live up to the standard of past ‘great’ reconstructive presidents, such as Franklin Roosevelt-- Skowronek has judged the success of more constrained modern, reconstructive presidents by the benchmark of others who were less (or differentially) encumbered in the past.

This is because in Skowronek’s construct, there is a historical disconnect between regime development and presidential initiated advancement and legitimization of new structures of power (1993, 53). This misinterpretation of the interaction between emergent and recurrent challenges points to the central conceptual problem in Skowronek’s methodology. Since the two types of challenges are categorically distinct from each other, change in institutional presidential power structures are de-linked from the process of ‘regime building.’

Thus, Skowronek appears content to play down the relationship between the development of presidential power structures and the ability that only presidents have to

legitimize their use towards fundamentally new ends. This disconnect, however, does not seem likely given all Skowronek teaches us about the power of the reconstructive presidency and its ability to both disrupt and reorder the regime. It also seems even more unlikely given that the movement between modes of presidential power very closely coincides in time with two of the periods of political time Skowronek finds hardest to describe - the early progressive era, and the modern era, since at least 1980. It appears that Skowronek's miscategorization of Theodore Roosevelt's regime building achievements and his downplaying of those of Ronald Reagan are linked, to the setting of and comparison to improper regime building "benchmarks."

While Skowronek's construct has shed much light on presidential studies, giving scholars a new tool for comparing presidencies, its' failure to adequately address the ongoing development of the institution in relation to regime building points to a weakness of his theory. In the simplest of terms, Skowronek's regime theory isn't cumulative and therefore benchmarks incorrectly. So, even as the "great man" school of presidential studies overestimates the role of agency, and the "period" school corrects for this deficiency but fails to take into account the repetitive, endogenous, nature of the regime challenge. Skowronek's de-linked reading of presidential development has 'fixed' some of the shortcomings of its predecessor theories while presenting a unique set of problems of its own (Lieberman, 2000; Riley, 2000; Hoekstra, 1999; 1999a; Skowronek, 1999).

But presidents *can* be judged by their differing levels of skill and effectiveness, within the context of the interaction between contemporary and repetitive challenges (Bell et.al., 1999; Greenstein, 2000a, 2000b). In this paper we present our own,

historical-institutional model of presidential leadership, one that builds on the advances of Skowronek's work (1988, 1993, 2002) but corrects for the systematic deficiency of his somewhat inflexible categorizations and resultant benchmark bias. By reconceptualizing and broadening the view of regime building, we replace an abstract concept of the reconstructive challenge with a cumulative and particular one. We model our approach, one that captures both the importance of historical-institutional context and the impact of agency, on the work of historian Arnold J. Toynbee.

Toynbee's View of History

Toynbee's multi-volume *A Study of History* (1939) is nothing if not expansive in its exploration of the cyclical and cumulative aspects of the rise and fall of civilizations. The intent of the whole series has, perhaps, best been summed up as a "search for the patterns of genesis, growth, and breakdown of civilization" (Gargan, 9).³ In doing so, Toynbee attempts to do no less than "to reexamine the method of historical study." In *A Study of History*, Toynbee not only tracks the development of over twenty civilizations, he postulates a unified theory of history.⁴ According to Toynbee within every society's developmental cycle, a cumulative series of sub-cycles propel the movement of civilization through time. This cumulative, serial, progression is the process of "challenge and response," which, he describes as the interaction of a multitude of causative variables, and likens to a complex encounter rather than the simple interaction of two inhuman forces (vol. I, 271).⁵ It is this methodological instrument that can be applied to Skowronek's theory to correct for the 'benchmarking bias' in his work.

In some ways, Toynbee's concept of challenge and response is quite compatible with Skowronek's concept of regime theory. Both are focused on institutional transformation from the evolutionary perspective of time. Thus, according to Toynbee, the growth and breakdown of civilizations can be understood only in terms of a cyclical temporal logic that is very close to Skowronek's idea of political time. In addition, Toynbee and Skowronek both form their approaches to address the defects of the overly biographical 'great man' school and the overly myopic 'period' schools of history. However, in his critique of the methodology of "periodization," he calls the propensity to divide progress into 'periods' "oversimplified." History does not develop in a single series of end-to-end sections. Yet, because we often conceive of history as if it does, we are susceptible to what Toynbee calls the "egocentric illusion," or the propensity of modern analysts to judge historical transitions in singular terms of what we view as relevant to today.

Among its many shortcomings, the period perspective misses the fact that development is often cut short by events, only to proceed forward in a myriad of new directions. Most of these new paths lead to failure, while others shoot off at different angles and succeed, only to be cut short and go through the process again. Toynbee asks: "Have we not been guilty of applying to historical thought, which is the study of living creatures, a scientific method of thought which has been devised for thinking about inanimate nature?" (vol. I, 271) Consequently, Toynbee offers an alternate approach to historical analysis that captures the multiplicity of causative factors and developmental paths.

Toynbee invites us to view historical development as a series of encounters. What is distinct about each encounter is that, within it, the reaction of actors to their environment is in part decided by psychological factors that are inherently impossible to “weigh and measure” (vol. I, 300-301). The only way, then, to capture the essence of the encounter is to think of it in terms of what Toynbee terms “challenge and response.” In describing his idea of challenge and response Toynbee writes:

The effect of a cause is inevitable, invariable, and predictable. But the initiative that is taken by one or other of the live parties to an encounter is not a cause; it is a challenge. Its consequence is not an effect; it is a response. Challenge-and-response resembles cause-and-effect only in standing for a sequence of events. The character of the sequence is not the same. Unlike the effect of a cause, the response to a challenge is not predetermined, it is not necessarily uniform in all cases, and is therefore intrinsically unpredictable. (Toynbee, 1972; 97)

Thus, challenge and response is about the growth that carries an institution from challenge through response to further challenge. It is a process, echoing a language similar to Skowronek’s, which cycles an institution from differentiation, to integration, to differentiation again.⁶

What is especially important to note is that the challenge and response sequence has both cumulative and relative properties. Consequently we can say that the challenge of a particular day may be similarly situated to the challenge of the preceding day but it is not exactly the same challenge (Vol. III, 125). Furthermore, the nature and relative severity of a challenge greatly affects the nature and extent of the corresponding

response. Thus any evaluation of a particular response must take into account the particular challenge(s) that inspired it.

Integration

It is this cumulative logic of challenge and response corrects Skowronek's de-linked methodology. Paradoxically, where Skowronek's logic fails is in its conception of the regime in ahistorical terms. In his focus on the rhythm of the recurrent challenges of political time, Skowronek ends up treating a political regime as a reoccurring but fundamentally abstract entity (Orren and Skowronek, 1998). He therefore ends up "periodizing" the development of the regime, arguably falling prey to Toynbee's 'egocentric illusion'.⁷ This suggests that any corrective analysis of political regimes would interpret their development in terms of the cumulative responses and relative challenges of history. A preceding political regime may leave a great challenge for the following reconstructive president, resulting in the exogenous shock of a looming civil war or of an intractable economic depression. While, at other times, a merely enervated regime may limit the nature of the subsequent challenge (and opportunity); leaving a reconstructive president with a lesser, but still imposing task of perfecting the apparatus of power. Thus, the 'would be' regime builder of Skowronek's presidency model may not always be challenged to repudiate all major aspects of the previous political regime.⁸ Based on the logic of Toynbee's challenge and response methodology, it may be enough for a reconstructive president to provide a 'course correction' that fundamentally reenergizes the ability of the president to manage both the new political regime and the new engine of government.

Given the expectation of an interactive effect between emergent and recurrent challenges, we hypothesize that the “regime building” challenge may, at times, require another broad type of response *within* Skowronek’s reconstructive framework.

Borrowing from Skowronek’s own observations as to the nature of the challenge that faced President Jimmy Carter in 1976, we predict that a president may be challenged to “save the old regime from its own self-destructive impulses... restoring viability by making the engines of power (of government) run more smoothly” (1988: 152).

Paramount to this problem, and hence paramount to the solution, is overcoming the tensions created by outmoded approaches to problems that encumber and distort a ruling regime’s ability to govern. This ‘incongruence’ between a president’s means of restoring vitality to the regime and their need to do so, is an emergent challenge, which seems only to be able to be met through a regime building response.

It therefore takes the work of a regime builder to shatter the legitimacy of the old mode of government operations and reestablish a new one. Using this conceptual approach compels us to adjust Skowronek’s dating of the beginning of the distinct modes of governance in at least two instances (Chart 1). The beginning of the pluralist mode of operations should be dated 1904, not 1900, when Theodore Roosevelt was elected in his own right and began to use his reinvigorated power structures to legitimize the new but “never quite progressive” Republican agenda (Orren and Skowronek 1998, 699).

Similarly, the beginning of the plebiscitary mode of operations should be dated 1980 and not 1972, when President Reagan, not Nixon, was the first to use institutional innovations *successfully* to build a comprehensive legislative program to reenergize the presidency⁹ and construct the beginnings of a new political regime.

Chart 1.
Skowronek's
Emergent Structures of Presidential Power

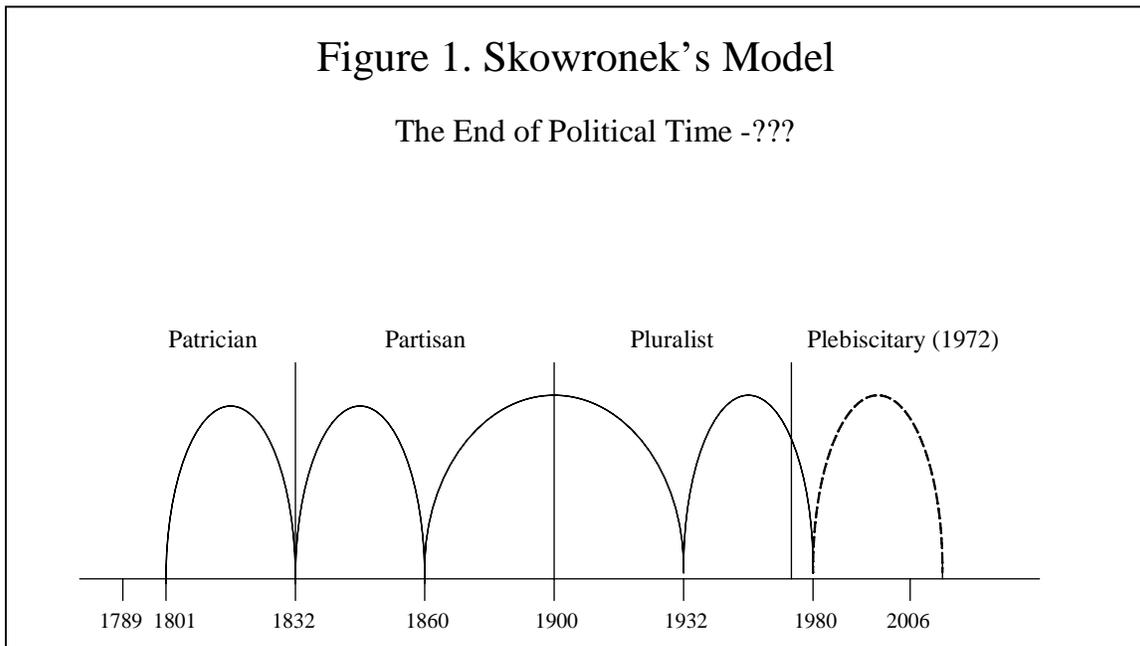
Mode of Governmental Operations	Period of Prominence	Characteristic Presidential Resource	Typical Presidential Strategy
Patrician	1789-1832	Personal reputation among notables	Stand as national tribune above faction and interest
Partisan	1832-1900	Party organization, executive patronage	Manipulate distribution of executive patronage to party as broker
Pluralist	1900-1972	Expanding executive establishment, attending to new nationalized interests	Bargain with leaders of all institutions as steward of national policymaking
Plebiscitary	1972-	Independent political apparatus and mass communications technologies	Appeal for political support over heads of Washington elites directly to the people

Skowronek, Stephen, The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush
The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993, 53.

While each case is unique, they share the same logic and thus Reagan's example serves to outline our argument. Although Presidents Nixon through Carter had access to the same plebiscitary mass communication technologies as did Ronald Reagan and attempted use them to 'go over the head of Congress,' they were not fully effective in doing so.

President Reagan earned the moniker ‘great communicator’ not simply because of his rhetorical skills but because he established, through reconstructing the existing political regime, that plebiscitary power structures would become the ‘new’ dominant instruments of authority. Reagan, as did Nixon, Ford and Carter, may have found the plebiscitary power structures lying at his feet, but only his regime building response structured and legitimized their use and made them an indispensable and lasting feature of the modern presidency.

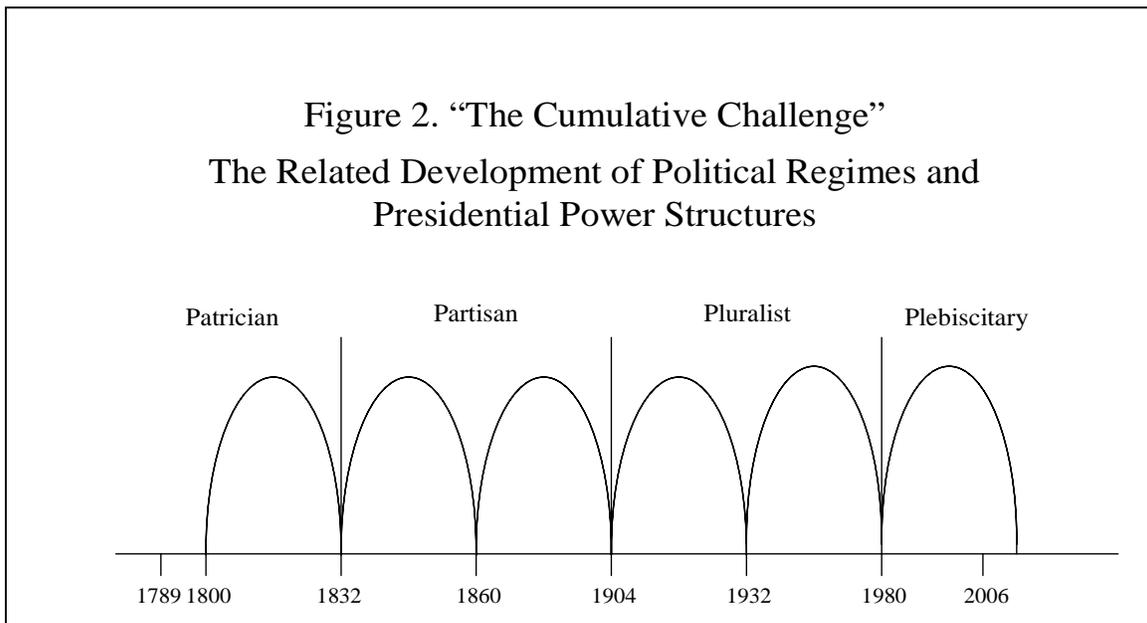
Figure 1. is our illustration of Skowronek’s abstract view of how presidential power structures develop outside the influence of presidential regime building. Arches represent individual political regimes and perpendicular lines divide the different power structure ‘eras.’ Figure 2 represents our modification of the continuum. Accordingly,



Theodore Roosevelt should be considered a regime builder whose efforts legitimized the advance of power structures between the partisan and pluralist modes. Similarly, Ronald

Reagan should be seen as the regime builder whose efforts legitimized the advance of power structures from the pluralist to the plebiscitary mode.

The failure, in Skowronek’s eyes, of these two presidents to found dominant, new, partisan regimes on a par with the presidencies of a Lincoln or FDR, is attributable—in our view— primarily to their lack of the challenge to do so. They were instead challenged to find new ways of making the engines of government run more smoothly and to make limited changes to previous commitments and ideologies. Their response to this cumulative challenge was to perfect new institutional power structures in pursuit of new regime interests.



A Cumulative View of Challenges~ Case Studies

Regime building, therefore, is better conceived of as a recurrent, but always particular, political response to the accumulated set of emergent and recurrent challenges. When a presidential ‘regime builder’ is challenged to advance power structures, he tailors

his response in an effort to deal with the unique order shattering, order establishing, and order enshrining obstacles of his era.

Theodore Roosevelt-- Challenged!

There are conflicting strands of evidence concerning the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt promised to both “continue absolutely unbroken” the policies of his predecessor while simultaneously attempting what one paper of the day called, “the most amazing program of centralization that any President of the United States has ever recommended” (Gould, 1991, 159). This suggests that Roosevelt’s response was greatly complicated by the fact that he was challenged, as a member of the partisan coalition that was already in power, to partially repudiate this regime in order to establish new commitments.

To understand the elemental shift that resulted from Roosevelt’s regime construction we must go back to at least the late 1880s when pressures from industrialization, immigration, and urbanization were beginning to strain the capacity of the political system (Clubb, Flanigan, Zingale, 1980; McCormick, 1985).¹⁰ Republicans, as regime affiliates, felt the brunt of this dissatisfaction more pointedly at first. Between 1890 - 1892 they lost the House, the Senate, and the Presidency. Consequently, many scholars have concluded that, with discontent running high and the Democrats leading their first united government since before the Civil War, Cleveland had the opportunity to exercise what we now term reconstructive politics (McSeveney, 1972; Clubb, Flanigan, Zingle, 1980; Crockett, 2002). Even Skowronek accepts this possibility (1993, 48).

However, Grover Cleveland missed his chance to construct a new Democratic regime. Perhaps, due to his inability to adapt the leadership style that had served him

well as an opposition president from 1884-1888, and as a consequence of the Depression of 1893, Cleveland's presidency self-destructed (Welch, 1988; Crockett, 2002). In 1894 control of the House returned to the Republicans. Additionally, droves of new voters from the Midwest swelled the Republican ranks (Merill, 1957; Wanat and Burke, 1982) after William Jennings Bryant was nominated by Democrats on a non-compromising, inflationary, 'free-silver platform' in 1896. In that year the Democrats lost the presidency, the Senate, and the Midwest's vote for a generation (McCormick, 1986).

Thus, a 'disjunctive period' did occur just before Roosevelt assumed the presidency. However, the particular turn of events of the 1890s left the nation with an odd political configuration. While the elections of 1894 and 1896 reconfirmed the political dominance of the Republican Party, consigning the Democrats to minority status again, they did not provide much of a substantive response to the emergent challenge of new socio-industrial realities of the early 20th century (McCormick 1986, 328-329, Tulis, 95-116). In a very real sense, the realignment of 1896 merely won the Republicans a challenge to reconstruct the values of an old party for a new set of challenges.

Thus, the contradictory nature of Roosevelt's presidency must be evaluated in the context of this particular set of circumstances. Roosevelt was challenged both to maintain the hegemony of the Republican party, while at the same time to change the status quo in response to emergent and recurrent pressures. Therefore while Roosevelt did many things to reinforce the old partisan order, his equally important efforts to advance new power structures accomplished a lot more than just rearticulating established commitments and interests.

Consequently, it is hard to support Skowronek's assessment that Roosevelt's efforts, while helping create the modern nation state, were, otherwise, mainly full of sound and fury (Skowronek 1993; 259, Orren and Skowronek 1998; 699).¹¹ Within the context of a wider concept of 'regime building' many of Roosevelt's actions can be better understood as tactical efforts, to wield the disruptive authority of the reconstructive presidency. As much as Roosevelt strained to maintain Republican hegemony, he also sought to establish a new order, whereby weaker elements of society were protected through the restraint of corporate power (McCormick 1986, 329). For Skowronek this does not amount to a change in government's basic commitments of ideology and interest. However, evaluating regime building isn't just a matter of judging the results against stylized benchmarks, but rather of evaluating the response in context to a challenge.

A good example of this occurred when Roosevelt took on the issue of railroad regulation. Railroad regulation was both an emergent challenge of the new industrial reality and, as one of the chief concerns of the block of new Mid-western coalition members (Wanat and Burke, 1982), was part of the recurrent challenge of reconstructing regime values as well. Clearly, the issue was seen as "a moral issue" which prompted fundamental "regime-level debate" (Tulis, 102). And because of this issue pitted eastern, old guard Republicans-- the owners of the railroads-- against Midwestern, Progressive Republicans, who were shippers, this battle became symbolic of the entire struggle of old versus new interests. Since railroads themselves symbolized, "more than any other industry of the day, the popular apprehension regarding the impact of business consolidation on the nation," (Gould, 1991; 150) Roosevelt's focus on the railroads had

major significance in promoting what the Roosevelt Administration called a ‘Square Deal’ for all (Tulis; 102-106).

Unlike Truman and Kennedy who acted before any clear political realignment to rearticulate regime values and modestly rebalance power between two established components of FDR’s coalition-- in his case the Liberals and Southerners, Theodore Roosevelt acted after a realignment to secure new power relations between significantly new power blocks. Indeed, Roosevelt was trying to add a new set of values (and voters) to a Republican coalition that had completely lost its southern wing and had been dominated by ‘old-guard’ eastern conservatives. Additionally, in trying to at least rhetorically recapture the radical roots of the Republican Party; Roosevelt was essentially inventing new commitments because the earlier ones were pre-industrial in their outlook and scope. Thus, by proposing that the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) be given the power to arbitrate and reset disputed railroad rates, Roosevelt was clearly siding with Midwestern shipping interests and placing the burden of challenging ICC rulings on the rail owners. He, himself, spelled out the realigning importance of this bill by stating that:

(the country would no longer) ...tolerate the use of vast power conferred by vast (corporate) wealth... without lodging somewhere in the Government the still higher power of seeing that this power is also used for and not against the interests of the people as a whole (Quoted in Gould 1991, 152).

Thus, through railroad regulation Roosevelt set out to shatter the values of the old order, and construct new ones that would preserve Republican partisan dominance.

Here we see how new power structures secured Roosevelt's new regime. The invigoration of the ICC represented a means of expanding Roosevelt's authority through administrative fiat. While TR certainly did not invent presidential commissions and executive agencies, Roosevelt's full term marks an assertive use of executive agencies to achieve new ends, both in scope and in function. Roosevelt was able to overcome the incongruence between his means and ends by adapting the growing administrative state and converting it into a presidential resource for shaping policy (Arnold, 1986; 24). Roosevelt's efforts narrowed the gap between the constraints of the nineteenth century office and the president's ability to implement his agenda. Therefore, Roosevelt's use of administrative innovation, not only advanced future presidents' means of responding to challenges; it advanced the progressive values embedded in many of the new executive agencies (Carpenter, 2001).

Skowronek questions Roosevelt's credentials as "steward against the interests," (1993, 249) in all of this because conservative elements within the Senate did originally scuttle and eventually forced a compromise on Roosevelt's attempts to pass a railroad regulation bill, the Hepburn Act. While Roosevelt did not get all he wanted, and this did give many at the time the impression that he had failed to "lick the Senate" (Gould, 1991; 163), Roosevelt, himself, saw it differently. He believed that what was significant about the process was "the demonstration of how a president could utilize the power of his office to push legislation through congress," (Gould, 1996; 80). As Jeffery K. Tulis suggests, the Hepburn Act was the forum that Roosevelt used to frame and respond to the 'crisis' of his times, and therefore it must be considered a resounding success (1987, 113).

In terms of pure policy it was a compromise. In terms of advancing the new regime-level principles, the passage of the Hepburn Act was a watershed event. As seen as a response to the particular emergent challenge of ameliorating socio-industrial pressures through expanding governmental commitments, Roosevelt's efforts in railroad regulation are seen as representative of his success in legitimizing the modern presidency as the first administration to support the values of the welfare state.

To understand Theodore Roosevelt's regime is to understand how he met his multiple challenges through the advancement of new commitments and power structures. Thus, the true legacy of his presidency was the legitimization of the path towards expanded governmental interests and commitments. While not a total departure from the partisan past, this new direction clearly represents a new regime.

Ronald Reagan— Challenged!

Even allowing for some degree of separation between subject and observer, Ronald Reagan's legacy and the assessment of his success remains controversial. In 1993 Skowronek asserted that Reagan offered a "gross caricature" of classic leadership postures, while at the same time admitting:

Whatever the limits of Reagan's reconstruction, no president in recent times has so radically altered the terms in which prior governmental commitments are now dealt with or the conditions under which previously established interests are served (1993, 409).

Yet, again, the key to understanding Reagan's response, and to fairly evaluating him as regime builder is to first determine the cumulative nature of the challenge he confronted. Reagan's challenge both derived from the emerging rise of global capitalism, which

brought with it new economic realities that began to corrode and enervate Franklin D. Roosevelt's political regime, and a recurrent but prolonged political realignment which left him trying to reconstruct under divided government. Therefore, whatever one thinks of his policy prescriptions; Reagan's response did seem to meet the particular challenge of the day and certainly legitimized new plebiscitary power structures.

Skowronek's analysis of Jimmy Carter's presidency contains within it enough evidence to document the 'disjunctive episode' in the late 1970s from which Reagan's reconstruction gained its impetus (1988, 1993). At the time he became president, Reagan faced the challenge of emergent oil shocks, unusually slow rates of productivity growth, high inflation and unemployment, in addition to ever increasing federal outlays and taxes. Consequently, it is easy to understand the perception that the presidency had grown too big for any man to handle the 'malaise' (King, 1983; Spitzer, 1983; Genovese, 1993) – Furthermore, these were only part of the unmet challenges to which Reagan had to respond.

At the same time he was forced to respond to the challenge of dealing with and cobbling together support from a party system that was undergoing a protracted and shifting partisan realignment (Clubb, Flanagan, Zingale, 1980; Sundquist, 1983; Aldrich and Niemi, 1996, Burnham, 1999). Thus, Reagan was the only regime builder in history to work without support of both chambers of Congress while reconstructing a regime centered on new market, military, and social values. Finally, in order to do all of this, he also had to overcome the emergent institutional challenge of 'power incongruence.' The partisan mode of operations seemed to have become hopelessly deadlocked. The political debates of the day led primarily to battles over pork (Lowi, 1979).

Consequently, Reagan was primarily challenged to alter the context of long standing debates. All other progress was dependant on finding new ways to make government work.

Reagan's presidency therefore must be evaluated in the context of this unique set of cumulative and interacting challenges. The fact that Reagan offered what many progressives consider retrenchment does not make his approach less distinctive or less deserving of the status of regime builder. Reagan most certainly did set out, from the beginning, to propose an alternative public philosophy to that of FDR's. His civics extolled the virtues of less generous social insurance and greater discretion for business. This followed from his core belief that centrally administered government tended to weaken a free people's character, and that the "real destroyer of liberties of the people is he who spreads among them bounties, donations, and benefits" (Scaife, 1983, 4-5).

Thus, when Reagan announced, in his first inaugural address, "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem," he was proclaiming his order shattering warrants (Nelson, 1999). However, in context to his challenge, this statement is more accurately read as an annunciation of principles, and rallying cry, rather than as an actual plan to eliminate government. But because of the very real constraints of his particular cumulative challenge, he would be forced to focus his efforts on tactically winnable battles that would nevertheless reset commitments and interests.

Like Theodore Roosevelt before him, Reagan sought to construct new power structures. He would use innovations in administrative resources and refurbished plebiscitary communication techniques to attack the old order and establish a new regime. Perhaps the best example of how he did this was Reagan's revision of the 1981

budget. While his fiscal accomplishments may not have matched his rhetoric, they did aim at more than just the standard trimming expenditures while boosting defense spending that Republican presidents under FDRs regime had sought. Since it sought fundamental reformation of entitlement formulas, the recalibration of regulatory relationships, and significant changes in monetary and tax policy Reagan's budget and administrative proposals did match the scope of his challenge. Thus, Skowronek's arguments notwithstanding (1993, 32), Reagan's politics were more than rhetorically reconstructive.

Once elected Reagan immediately sought to use new tactical procedures, in conjunction with reconstructive warrants, to gain hold of the budget and its' inherent agenda setting powers. This two-pronged approach relied heavily on the new 'plebiscitary' mode of using 'administrative strategies' (Nathan 1975, 1983; Moe 1985; Hogan 1988; Waterman 1989, Pfiffer 1996a) and 'going public' (Kernell, 1986; Schick 1982). Reagan therefore relied upon the inherent strengths of the presidential institution; namely its formal powers (Rossiter, 1960) and the rhetorical potential it had been developing since Theodore Roosevelt's day (Tulis, 1987).

Reagan's 'administrative strategy' centered on using the Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974 in a unique way. His advisers recognized that by using the Act's rescission procedure Congress could be forced to vote on an overall budget policy at just the time the President was at the height of his popularity. Of paramount importance to using the Act in this way was regaining bureaucratic responsiveness to the president's initiatives. That is why use of centralized management tools internal to the White House, through the OMB, were maximized. Additionally,

there was a new focus on personnel issues, aimed at appointing those who were ideologically committed to his agenda (Turner 1988, 40; Nathan 1983, 72). Furthermore, the President purposely delaying other appointments, using changes in the Civil Service Act of 1978 to control Schedule C appointments, and ordered agency ‘Reductions in Force’ (RIF’s) to ‘behead’ agencies that could not be entirely cut—all to overcome bureaucratic resistance to the proposed budget and new order.

Then, after March 10th 1981 when the Administration sent a detailed budget revision proposal to the Congress asking for \$48.6 billion in cuts for FY’82 alone, Reagan’s ‘going public’ strategy kicked in. The public strategy for pushing his package through was relatively simple. First, he would capitalize on the just won majority status of the Republicans in the Senate, and second, he would overcome the 52-seat deficit that his party faced in the House of Representatives through a ‘southern blitz.’ Key to this tactic was to build support by applying local pressure on Southern Democrats that had run behind Reagan in their own districts (Schick 1982, 18).

To publicize his agenda over the next two months Reagan would speak to reporters nine times and address the nation on television, directly, twice and one more time in front of a joint session of Congress. Telling the country that they faced “the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression,” Reagan relentlessly used his own version of the bully pulpit to pound home his vision of budget and tax cuts (Kernell 1997, 144-154; Edwards, 2003)¹². Then over the Easter break, after Reagan had been shot and received a groundswell of support, members of the Republican National Committee and other ‘inside players’ spread out at the grassroots level traveling to the targeted districts to work up local pressure to support the president. This culminated in Reagan’s triumphant

return to the spotlight, after his brush with death, in a nationally televised address to a joint session of Congress on April 28, 1981, where he pounded home his message again. Passage of the budget package known as “Gramm-Latta,” with the support of 63 Democrats, came one week later. Finally, on June 26th the House voted 232 to 193 in favor of an omnibus reconciliation package that cut \$35.1 billion from the budget for FY’82. Reagan’s (albeit somewhat watered down) budget had passed.

In budgetary terms there is still considerable debate if Reagan’s budget cuts represent a victory or as Budget Director David Stockman later put it, “less there than meets the eye” (quoted in Schick 1982, 33). If rolling back entitlement programs was the intent of the budget battle, one may conclude it represented a shallow victory. However, in an evaluation that takes Reagan’s cumulative and particular set of challenges into consideration, the importance of Reagan’s budget battle did not lie in purely budgetary terms. It would be more accurate to conclude:

Reagan’s battle in 1981 was not really against the federal budget or against the deficit. His target was an active, meddling federal government that got into matters it should not have. (Thus) he would rather have a smaller government with a larger deficit. He would rather have the government spend more as long as it did less domestically. He was not against helping the poor but really believed that they would do better by casting their lot with an expanding economy than with an expanding bureaucracy (Schick; 42).

In essence, the budget was just an instrument of the new mode of power structures that was used to advance new values and to build a new-right, conservative, regime.

Whether through intent, or serendipitous flaw, by altering spending priorities and generating a massive deficit, Reagan slowed the growth of entitlements, further limited the ability of government to regulate business, and essentially guaranteed that government could no longer afford new social welfare initiatives. This not only united Republicans in the short term, but it also accelerated the polarization of American politics, driving conservative southern Democrats into the Republican Party, where their conservative military and social values were better represented. Finally, the budget controversy gave Reagan the issue by which he could assault the old order through the use of power structures that highlighted his patriotic and economic values along with the use of tactics that took advantage of his own comfort and adeptness in engaging the public through the use of spectacles (Miroff 2003, 284).

Therefore, in response to Skowronek's conclusion that Reagan's use of the budget and new power structures to reconstruct was a "corruption" --that amounted to a "subversion" of their normal operations, and a "trashing" of their standards of legitimacy (1993, 423), we offer a different interpretation. Reagan's advancement of innovative power structures was part of a successful response to the challenge presented by the interaction between emergent and recurrent trends. Reagan overcame the inability of previous presidents to act in an enervated regime; he enacted reforms by embracing new values and created new means to transmit this order.

Case Study Coda

Our emphasis on analyzing how particular responses are related to cumulative challenges expands and deepens the concept of "regime building" and affords a more

parsimonious and nuanced reading of Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan's presidencies. Both presidents responded to the same general set of cumulative challenges. They met:

1) The recurrent challenge of the disjunctive era / emergent immediate crisis;

--Roosevelt: Began reordering business / governmental relations to account for new industrial realities.

--Reagan: Began reordering business / governmental relations to account for the new realities of global capitalism

2) The recurrent regime building challenge associated with realignment;

--Roosevelt: Expanded interests to include Midwestern elements.

--Reagan: Polarized interests to build a majority conservative coalition.

3) The emergent challenge of overcoming incongruence, through power structure advancement-- which gave them the means to reconstruct;

--Roosevelt: Legitimized the dominant use of the Pluralist mode.

--Reagan: Legitimized the dominant use of the Plebiscitary mode.

Thus, Roosevelt initiated the 'modern' departure and Reagan initiated the modern 'course correction.'

This demonstrates how the cumulative nature of history renders every new regime building "moment" unique, and makes evaluation of reconstructive success based on abstract "benchmarks" biased. Our cases show that while all the reconstructive presidents may have shared the challenge of building a new regime, the context of each challenge was particular and differing. It makes perfect sense then that their responses differed as well. Therefore, it is not a sign of 'waning political time' that Ronald Reagan failed to construct the same kind of regime as did FDR. The fact that his regime, like that of Theodore Roosevelt's, did not totally repudiate the dominant political structure is not

evidence of Reagan's failure, but of the great success of FDR's response to the challenges of his day.¹³

Therefore, regardless of their limitations, both Roosevelt and Reagan's responses had anything but minor results. Changes that were thought nigh impossible, such as expanding the scope of government to balance the power of business under Roosevelt and reversing the trend in growth of government under Reagan, became possible as a result of their respective efforts. So, whatever the limits of these regime builders may be, it is difficult to conceive of the presidency or the political order after them outside the terms of the ideological commitments, interests, and power structures they established.

Skowronek is unable to properly categorize the Roosevelt and Reagan presidencies because his standards of evaluation are bias in favor of an ideal response to the recurrent, but abstract, challenge of political regime building. He therefore ends up viewing the challenge of 'political time' as existing temporally separate from the challenge of emergent, or secular, time. While he sees that political challenges often crosscut and burden emergent ones, Skowronek fails to appreciate that challenges are cumulative and produce an interactive dynamic between the two. It is the lack of appreciation of the cumulative effect that both results in unduly pessimistic evaluations and recommendations.

Ultimately, we believe that concluding that political regimes are reaching the end of their development is analogous to a determination that the process of 'challenge and response' is ending. As this only occurs when the growth phase of an institution ends, we disagree strongly with Skowronek's assessment that it may be time to 'discard' the reconstructive premise of leadership (1993, 443).¹⁴ For, as Toynbee reminds, to abandon

the process of challenge and response is to succumb to the internal failure of nerve that results in the loss of self-determination (vol. IV, 245-261). Therefore, under the current Constitutional structure, presidents *must* periodically attempt to respond to their cumulative array of challenges by rebuilding the political regimes that connect governing institutions to the people.¹⁵

And, if the governing and policy web is too ‘thick’ to allow change through reconstructive politics-- because of interests, authorities, and defending institutions, then this Byzantine-like thickness has itself become the penultimate challenge of the modern presidency. This is also true, if the commitments and interests served by the regime make its Romanesque benefits too ‘precious’ to reform or disturb. Therefore, it is the potential for an abdication of responsibility that we confront through our expanded conception of presidential leadership. For if our presidents believe they can do nothing, nothing will get done.

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NOTES

¹ In his critique of ‘period’ scholars Skowronek notes that after they initially determine the parameters of the era they often establish a “politics as usual” bias towards evaluating leadership (1993, 4). We argue Skowronek also sets parameters for successful reconstruction that establish a politics as usual bias. This incorrectly “benchmarks” the standard of success for other “regime building” presidents, and contributes to unduly pessimistic evaluation.

² See Skowronek, 1993, 36 for his typology of the cycle. We have borrowed the conception of the ‘political regime’ and the phrase ‘regime building’ from Orren and Skowronek’s (1998) ‘Regimes and Regime Building in American Government: A Review of the literature on the 1940s.’ The work draws heavily from the insights of *The Politics President’s Make* (1993) but does not resolve the issue over the regime building status of Theodore Roosevelt or Ronald Reagan. Thus, we work from the idea that the regime is an institution that “facilitates some higher level of management... accommodating the simultaneous operation of several incongruous orderings of authority” (1998, 701) while trying to better explain the interactive effects of such an institution with the presidency.

³ In Toynbee’s ‘plan of the book’ he subtitles volumes: II= The Geneses of Civilizations, volume III = The Growths of Civilizations, and volume IV = The Breakdowns of Civilizations.

⁴ A good treatment of Toynbee’s place within the literature and tradition of universal history is provided in Friedrich Engel-Janosi’s essay: “Toynbee and the Tradition of Universal History” in *The Intent of Toynbee’s History*, Ed. Edward T. Gargan, 1961, Loyola University Press. (47-72).

⁵ We note the affinities between Toynbee’s view of causation with those of the ‘new’ historical institutional school who stress that path dependencies, unintended consequences, and highly interactive variables make cause and effect much more complex than is sometimes assumed (Pierson and Skocpol, 2002; 710-713).

⁶ Regime building depends on the cycle of disruption or breaking away from long-established political-institutional regimes, followed by consolidation of new forms of control; whose effectiveness eventually dissipates and gives cause for the next disruption... ie: Toynbee’s ‘differentiation, integration, and differentiation’ (Skowronek 1988,118-119; 1993, 4-17, 49-52; 1998).

⁷ Egocentric bias: Skowronek defines the regime using limited (non-cumulative) temporal parameters that are narrowly constructed and are derivative of his own main focus on the disruptive character of presidential leadership. A less narrow view judges challenges on the level of those facing the polity, not just the presidency. This gets us beyond reconstructive ‘politics as usual.’

⁸ Orren and Skowronek come to a similar conclusion in 1998, however, they still show considerable inconsistency in defining just when regime construction has occurred. They variously include and exclude episodes of regime building in their ‘set’ of occurrences without ever settling the issue, demonstrating that the problem with Skowronek’s interpretation of the presidential role in regime building still lies at the theoretical level (699-701).

⁹ In a sense Reagan consolidated Nixon’s ‘administrative presidency.’ Yet he, probably like every other regime builder, also used new power structures in order to break with old governmental systems (primarily economic ones). The simultaneous regime building efforts of Reagan’s presidency, consolidating gains and breaking with the past, are just another example of the effect of what Orren and Skowronek call the ‘tortured, often stalemated course of regime construction over the last few decades’ (1998, 770).

¹⁰ We do not ignore Skowronek’s view of Theodore Roosevelt as a master ‘state builder’ (1982), nor argue against Orren and Skowronek’s observation that “for all (the early 20th century reformers) creativity in rearranging institutions (they) never dismantled any important one” (1998, 699), we merely suggest that the incremental building and lack of deep breaks with the past can be explained in the context of the partisan continuity of power. This partisan continuity obscures the fact that a whole new layer of progressive values

were added to the mixture. That they were not dominant is of less import than the fact that they were added.

¹¹ Even sympathetic biographers have concluded that T. Roosevelt's presidency was 'a lot of sound and fury signifying nothing.' (Morison, 1954) However, too much ink has been spilled investigating this 'nothing' to convince us that anyone has pronounced the final word on the subject. We suggest that appraisal based on 'challenge and response' rather than an assessment of effort and effect is the only way to get beyond this glass is 'half-full' versus 'half-empty' debate.

¹² In his book *On Deaf Ears* (2003), Edwards points out that in general the president's ability to move public opinion is modest at best. However, at least in the short term, in the early years of his administration, Reagan *did* move public opinion, even according to Edward's own data (30, 230). But once the tax cuts and other reforms were in place, they were difficult to reverse regardless of declines in Reagan's popularity and clout. Furthermore, Edward's assertion that Reagan, in the main, was "brilliantly exploiting his opportunities as facilitator" of existing trends (98) is completely commensurate with our theory.

¹³ As Toynbee suggests, robust challenges evoke robust responses and limited challenges evoke limited responses. However, this does not mean that the challenge of managing change in a mature welfare state will always be a lesser challenge.

¹⁴ As long as the American political system is subject to the cycle of stasis and change (Burnham, 1970, 1991, 1999; Aldrich and Niemi 1996), the president will be forced to respond to its challenge.

¹⁵ Overcoming stasis without dealing with recurrent 'political' issues of regime building raises serious questions as to the nature of presidential leadership and democratic accountability in a system of separated powers. While everyone may agree that we want the government to deal effectively with emergent problems, and we may also agree that issues of regime management often get in the way of this, how, in Skowronek's 'regimeless vision,' is the presidency to be able to keep the government synchronized on emergent problems (including the Supreme Court), while simultaneously being kept accountable, through staggered elections, to multiple constituencies?