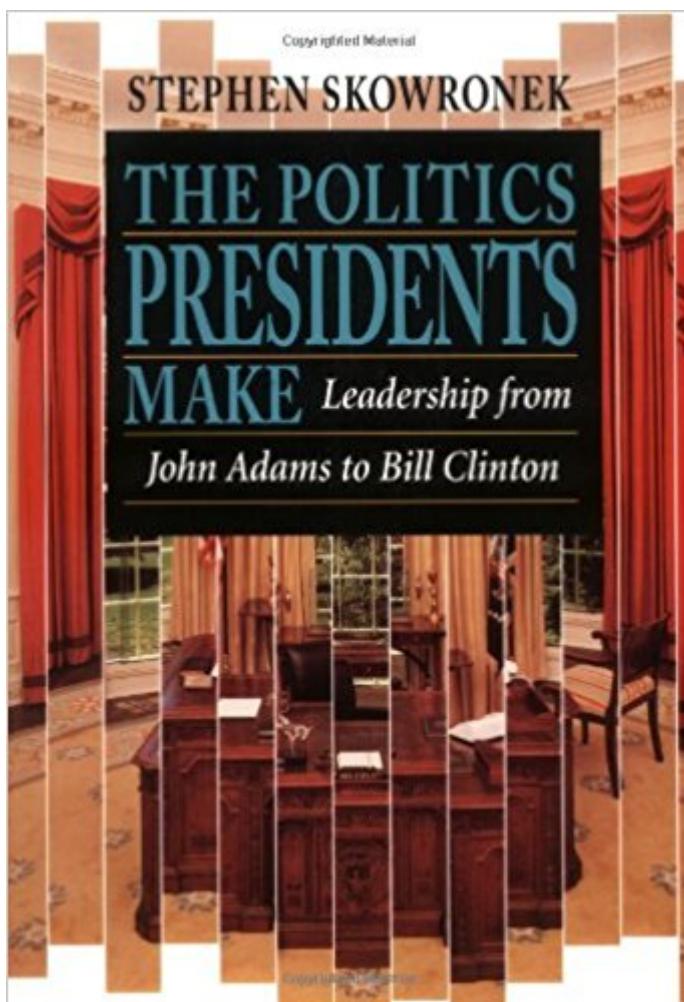


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# The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership From John Adams To Bill Clinton, Revised Edition



## **Synopsis**

Stephen Skowronek's wholly innovative study demonstrates that presidents are persistent agents of change, continually disrupting and transforming the political landscape. In an afterword to this new edition, the author examines "third way" leadership as it has been practiced by Bill Clinton and others. These leaders are neither great repudiators nor orthodox innovators. They challenge received political categories, mix seemingly antithetical doctrines, and often take their opponents' issues as their own. As the 1996 election confirmed, third way leadership has great electoral appeal. The question is whether Clinton in his second term will escape the convulsive end so often associated with the type.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

A magisterial work, one of the most important studies of the presidency--indeed, of American politics--ever written...[Skowronek] comes very close to identifying the root problem affecting presidents...This is the all-important fact that the Constitution is unchanging and nondeveloped, while at all times intersecting with a social, economic, and political world that has undergone incessant development from the beginning. The whole work may be read as an extended, powerful, and penetrating meditation on some of the global consequences of this fact. (Walter Dean Burnham American Political Science Review)In evaluating the field of political authority, Skowronek skillfully and systematically makes use of historical evidence. His approach can only be applauded as it

brings a new and broader understanding of the historical evolution of the presidency. (Birgitte Nielsen American Studies in Scandinavia) Skowronek...brings illuminating insights to each president that he discusses...A major theoretical contribution to the study of the presidency. (Richard M. Pious Political Science Quarterly) The book brings together current ideas of political scientists on the theory of presidential leadership, as well as incorporating the major historical works on the various presidents. It is history from the top rather than from the bottom, and while current historical trends are in the opposite direction, this sophisticated, scholarly analysis of presidential leadership illustrates that the history of political leadership is a subject on which innovative, imaginative approaches can still produce important new perspectives. (Peter G. Boyle The Americas) Stephen Skowronek's much awaited book relating cycles of the US presidency to what the author has previously called "political time" is an instant conversation piece. The Politics Presidents Make is a book that will engage scholars of political leadership and, particularly, those of the US presidency with its categories and its arguments. It is also easy to imagine that this book will evoke theological debates. (Bert A. Rockman Governance) A work of great insight...This is a book that kicks aside all the conventional ways of thinking about presidential leadership and erects a daring, powerful, analytic machine that compels attention. (Hugh Heclo, George Mason University) This is a remarkable book...A skilled practitioner of the use of historical evidence systematically to understand not only the evolution, but also the current nature, of American political institutions, [Skowronek] examines the whole crowded history of the presidency to catalog and organize the two hundred year experience in a fresh and striking fashion. (Joel Silbey Review of Politics) In this pathbreaking work, Stephen Skowronek escapes from "secular time" to view presidents in what he calls "political time," meaning incumbents' relationships to their predecessors and to the status quo...This rich, insightful, resonant volume merits reading and rereading. It is destined to be a classic of presidential scholarship. (Gil Troy Journal of American History)

Stephen Skowronek is Pelatiah Perit Professor of Political and Social Science at Yale University. He is the author of *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920*.

I added this book to curriculum for a Government class group project on Models of the Presidency. It contrasts so clearly with the Barber model of the presidency, that I feel the method of analysis that Skowronek presents is most useful to students.

This was a book required for a PoliSci course. It is not an easy read. Wrought with superfluous vocabulary.

Skowronek's "leadership" is the best book I have studied on the Presidency for the concept of transformative leadership through an overview of the Presidents: Adams through Bush.

This work is brilliant and is so incredibly detailed that after you read this, you will be predicting all the president next move!

I first read this book for a class, and it quickly became a great bedside book. If you have an interest in American political history, this book is a must. Get it now and read it!

Among the many, many charms in this book is that it lives up to the standard that David Herbert Donald set for himself in his biography of Lincoln. This standard is one that, in turn, JFK had set for Donald and his historian brethren: '[Kennedy] voiced his deep dissatisfaction with the glib way the historians had rated some of his predecessors as "Below Average" and marked a few as "Failures." Thinking, no doubt, of how his own administration would look in the backward glance of history, he resented the whole process. With real feeling he said, "No one has a right to grade a President -- not even poor James Buchanan -- who has not sat in his chair, examined the mail and information that came across his desk, and learned why he made his decisions." "The Politics Presidents Make" is a source book for the sort of historian that JFK would have loved to groom. From President Adams through the first George Bush, Stephen Skowronek studies the problems that defined each president's tenure, and finds himself deeply sympathetic to all of them. The trouble in John Quincy Adams's presidential tenure, for instance, is that he was essentially trying to hold together the old patrician order that the founding fathers had established, while a new era of party-centered politics was on its way in. It took Andrew Jackson -- the founder of the spoils system -- to midwife the partisan revolution. Or take Herbert Hoover, the classic (to modern eyes) failed president. First of all, Skowronek reminds us, Hoover tried a lot of things before collapsing into inaction in the midst of the Depression; Skowronek says that modern historians have raised some doubts that the New Deal was very new at all (though he doesn't say this with much confidence). Hoover's big problem, says Skowronek, was that he tried to hold together the strains of his ideology even as he systematically violated its tenets: he came in believing in an American System uniquely combining the free-enterprise system with a limited government, then expanded the government's role little by little

until his original beliefs were hardly recognizable. Yet he insisted that his policies weren't the least bit innovative, and that they still conformed to the American System. As Skowronek puts it, "Hoover himself would never accept the notion that his actions were opening the door to the displacement of the old order and thus he could never link his initiatives with the promise of constructing a new one." The grand arc connecting every president, says Skowronek, is the relation they bear to the existing order, and how durable that order is. A president like Hoover, who's a defender of the existing vulnerable regime, is a "disjunctive" president. Hoover's successor, there to overthrow the vulnerable regime, is a "reconstructive" president. After the reconstructive presidents, we typically get a line of "articulating" presidents; after Roosevelt, these are presidents like Eisenhower and Johnson who rule at a time when the electorate supports the given order; they innovate atop what they're given. The president's relation to the existing order forms the basis for essentially the entire book. (Those drawing a little matrix at home will have noticed something missing from the reconstructive/articulating/disjunctive division: those presidents who oppose an existing order that the electorate supports. These presidents are few, and include men like Richard Nixon. They are a hard lot to categorize; Skowronek sets them to one side near the start of the book, basically never to return to them.) We proceed from Thomas Jefferson, the first reconstructive president (overthrowing the Federalists), all the way through to the most recent disjunctive president (Jimmy Carter), then to the latest reconstructive president (Ronald Reagan), and one articulating president (George Bush). Skowronek has released another edition that extends the story to Bill Clinton; I have to imagine that Clinton counts as an articulating president, largely taking the New Deal as given except for the bits that Reagan had made distasteful (like welfare). Reagan is an interesting case, exemplifying the trend to which Skowronek draws our eye: the revolutions are getting smaller. Skowronek says it's been this way almost from the start. Thomas Jefferson could basically reinvent the entire U.S. government. By the time we get to Andrew Jackson, he had banks to fight off. Lincoln had strong parties -- the fruits of Jackson's revolution -- to contend with. The New Deal was a big deal, but now FDR had to appease labor unions and corporations before he could get anywhere. And when Reagan tried to kill the New Deal, he couldn't slay the beast of Social Security. In fact he couldn't even come close. To use the term that Skowronek attaches: the institutions have thickened. The more power centers there are, the harder it is to push any one of them. Skowronek pulls off a really neat trick in *The Politics Presidents Make*: lay out a political theory while telling each president's story grippingly. It's the most condensed biography imaginable of the first 41 presidents. You hardly need to read it as a work of theory; Skowronek's presidential typology works just as well as a narrative frame for 41 life stories. Finally, it's not a small virtue in *The Politics Presidents Make* that it

is copiously footnoted. I circled 27 references that look like winners. I've not felt this sort of intellectual exhilaration in a long while. *The Politics Presidents Make* is one of the best books I've read this year.

Stephen Skowronek wants to change how we judge the success of our Presidents. His major contribution to that understanding is to turn our attention away from the individual holding the office. Instead he wants us to focus on a combination of political, social and institutional factors. Perhaps the best way to introduce his theory is to start off with his observation that in general, "power has been less of a problem for presidents than authority" (p.17). In other words, it is easier to get things done than to sustain the justification of the action taken. In fact, Skowronek (hereafter called S.) feels that it is the ability of a president to "control the political definition of their actions" that will determine "the terms in which their places in history are understood" (*ibid.*) Furthermore, S. sees that the power and authority have changed over the span of American history according to different arcs of development. S. sees the power of the presidency as being in the resources available to the office at any one moment and distinguishes that history of change (toward more resources and toward more independent use of those resources) as occurring in secular time. Authority refers to the way a president is expected by his contemporaries to use the resources of his office. The historical arc of change of authority structures, S. sees as taking place in political time (p.30). The final key to understanding S.'s theory is his insistence on the inherently disruptive and creative nature of the office of the presidency. This is something that he insists on time and time again throughout the book (the first instance is on p.xii). Every president imposes themselves on the office in such a way as to change (disrupt) the current political order. How they frame doing so greatly determines the extent to which their authority to do so is challenged. Here is where it gets interesting. Some presidents have been elected with a clear warrant for radical change in the political order. Some are elected to continue down an established path. S. imposes order on all this with a simple two by two box on p. 36. A president arrives in office either affiliated with or opposed to the current regime. That regime is either vulnerable or resiliant. A president who arrives opposed to a current regime that is vulnerable has a chance to practice what S. calls the politics of reconstruction. S. examines as examples the presidencies of Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, F.D.R., and Reagan. This is the politics of greatness. If they arrive opposed to a current regime that is resiliant, the president is mired in the politics of preemption. S. sees as examples of this situation to be the presidencies of John Tyler, Andrew Johnson, (maybe) Grover Cleveland, (maybe) Woodrow Wilson, Richard Nixon and (somewhat) Bill Clinton. If a president arrives affiliated with a resiliant regime, he is an exemplar of

the politics of articulation. S discusses as examples of this James Monroe, James Polk, Teddy Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. Finally, if the president is affiliated with a vulnerable regime, he will be an example of the politics of disjunction. S.'s examples are John Quincy Adams, Franklin Pierce, Herbert Hoover and Jimmy Carter (pp.17-57).A couple of points need to be made about this scheme. The different types of politics unfold in a cycle in political time. There is a reconstructive president who usually arrives as the leader of a party realignment and with a mandate to change the corrupt and inept politics of the current regime. Utilizing this warrant for change they are able to make full use of the current powers of the president to change the regime (usually increasing both those powers and the independence of their use). One of their typical rhetorical tropes will be making the claim that they are returning our politics back to its first principles.The presidents who follow are usually affiliates whose warrant is to continue along the new path. They do so initially as articulators but increasingly as disjunctivists (my own term and an ugly one, I acknowledge). This is due to the disruptive and individual nature of the office. In imposing their own style, ideas and appointees upon reaching office, the affiliates inevitably expose schisms in the party structure and ideology. This type of president will try to run a full-service presidency that pleases all factions of the party but the competition for the resources to do so will begin the unraveling of the coalitions created by the reconstructivists.Even solid policy success will create problems for the affiliates who are claiming the mantle of the favorite son. Their own implementation of policy to solidify the success of their predecessor begins a debate on the history and the future of that's predecessor's reconstruction.(p.327).Finally, in the politics of disjunction, the president will tend to resort to the reification of technique. This occurs when the president begins to lose control over the framing of the divisive issues of the day. They then attempt to use a standard of behavior as a justification for their actions. These standards of political behavior were usually introduced by the reconstructive president and have since become "politically vacuous" by the development of events. J. Q. Adams attempted to shore up his appointments by claiming that they were chosen solely on the basis of ability (the standard of patrician politics championed by Jefferson). But the politics of the moment demanded a balancing of political interests that were pressing upon him due above all to the circumstances of his election. Playing the patrician only made him seem duplicitous (see chapter 4, part 3).Occassionally non-political events (e.g., the assisination of Lincoln) throws into office someone who is opposed to a resiliant regime and we experience the politics of preemption.There is nothing regular or predetermined about these cycles. My qualifications about what type of president Cleveland and Wilson were shows that S. is sensitive to the difficulties with typing many of the individuals who have held the office. I think his chosen and discussed examples are probably best

seen as Weberian ideal types. But I also think that S. feels that his typology can be usefully and clearly imposed on the great majority of our presidents. Another qualifier on the theory is that the presidency is not the only governmental branch that has developed in secular time. Both Congress and the judiciary became increasingly independent from the presidency and developed increasing resources for expressing that independence. Just as important, the last century has seen the rise of other institutions that are independent of the three branches (the Federal Reserve Bank) or outside of government all together (large unions, religious organizations, PACs, etc.) These factors along with others make it increasingly difficult to successfully pull off a reconstructive presidency. S.s organizes his case studies in chronological order. They are in sections that are led off by study of the reconstructive presidents, followed by studies of affiliates and disjunctive presidents. They are very impressive essays that could easily stand alone. Part of what impressed me about them is the amount of archival research that S. has done. I would have expected him to rely on secondary studies and for the most part he has. But he has also read deeply in the writings of the individual presidents. For example, he makes good use of the letters of Franklin Pierce. There is an extraordinary amount of research that went into this book. There is also a certain amount of hyperbole. I feel that S. sometimes makes his argument through his rhetoric. S. wants to emphasize the powerful nature of the office. So S. tells us that Polk's attempts to manage Jacksonian orthodoxy unleashed "schisms so destabilizing that it would take a civil war to resolve them."(p.162). I am going to suggest that those schisms were unleashed long before Polk did much of anything on the political scene. Polk's actions made things worse at most by accelerating a process already well developed. Finally, S. feels that the political reality exposed in his theory is breaking down in various ways in the post-modern plebescitary presidency (his terms- don't look at me). I have gone on far too long to even begin to go into why he feels that is. What I hope I have done is to make you want to read the book. This is as important and insightful a scholarly work as I have read in a long time. It has several flaws but scholarly timidity is not one of them. If you are an American politics or history reader, you simply must read this book. And then write a comment to me explaining how S.'s theory applies to Bush. I am still working on that one.

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