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Exploiting the Opportunity for Reconstructive Leadership: Presidential Responses to Enervated Political Regimes

Curt Nichols[1] and Adam S. Myers[2]

Abstract

We seek to extend discourse on "the reconstructive presidency" to the edge of new frontiers in two interrelated ways. First, we argue that reconstructive presidents act within critical junctures in which they exploit periodic opportunities to revitalize enervated political regimes, but that failure to exploit such opportunities can also occur. Second, we clarify the tasks necessary for reconstructive success, contending that reconstructive presidents must (a) shift the main axis of partisan cleavage, (b) assemble a new majority coalition, and (c) institutionalize a new political regime. Through conducting typical and crucial case studies, we show how reconstructive dynamics unfold in either a straightforward or protracted manner depending on whether presidents initially handed reconstructive opportunities, via encountering enervated political conditions, succeed in accomplishing the tasks we delineate. In doing so, we depart from previous interpretations and recast the "System of 1896" as a successful reconstruction.

Keywords

American political development, reconstructive presidency, critical juncture, System of 1896, regime theory, institutionalization

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Stephen Skowronek's famous two-by-two typology, through which individual presidents are categorized according to their affiliation with the dominant majority as well as by the strength of the current governing regime's standing in American politics, has become a classic within both presidential studies and the literature on American political development (Skowronek, 1986, 1993). With it, Skowronek demonstrates that presidents separated by great spans of time, who nevertheless share the same context, may have more in common with each other than with either their immediate predecessors or successors. With it he also shows that the most fortunate context for presidents to share is that of being opposed to or unaffiliated with a vulnerable regime. Such a "reconstructive" political context provided presidents like Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Reagan (in a hard case)[1] with the rare opportunity to transform the political order and establish a new "political regime."[2] However, despite the compelling descriptions of these reconstructive presidencies, Skowronek avoids answering two crucial and interrelated questions. First, what is the nature of the reconstructive opportunity? Second, what exactly are the tasks that presidents must accomplish to successfully reconstruct?

Given Skowronek's (1993) own admission that presidents can fail to "exploit reconstructive possibilities," a more rigorous examination of the reconstructive opportunity and its requirements is in order (p. 48). Therefore, following John Gerring's (2003) exhortation for greater methodological self-awareness among historically focused researchers, we present a new model of the politics of reconstruction. The model that we promote draws on two distinct research traditions. The first of these traditions emphasizes the primacy of coalitions and a social cleavage-centered understanding of American politics (Petrocik, 1981; Schattschneider, 1960; Sundquist, 1983), whereas the second examines the formation and evolution of political institutions from a "neo-institutional" standpoint (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Orren & Skowronek, 2004; Steinmo, Thelen, & Longstreth, 1992). Our model can be summarized as consisting of three main claims.

First, we argue that reconstructive opportunities arise when presidents who are unaffiliated with the reigning political regime are elected amidst circumstances in which the regime has matured, lost some of its coalitional cohesion, and failed to keep institutional arrangements functioning effectively under new conditions—what we call "enervation."[3] Although it is not the focus of this essay to delve deeply into the antecedent causes of enervation (which we must leave to future work instead), we nonetheless seek to demonstrate that it constitutes a periodically recurring feature of American politics that can be identified based on a set of indicators. Second, we argue that unaffiliated presidents who encounter enervated conditions find themselves at a critical moment or "juncture" (Collier & Collier, 1991) in which structural constraints posed by the old political regime

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have diminished and "the space for human agency opens" (Katznelson, 2003, p. 282). Within such a context, presidents are challenged to reconstruct, a mission that involves three necessary tasks:

1. shift the main axis of partisan cleavage,
2. assemble a new majority partisan coalition, and
3. institutionalize a new political regime.

Third and finally, we argue that when presidents fail to complete all three tasks, enervation continues and the conditions for reconstructive leadership do not disappear but rather remain available for others to exploit. As a result, we contend that periods of potential reconstruction should not be conceptualized as necessarily brief moments but should instead be seen as windows of opportunity that remain open until all three reconstructive tasks are completed.[4] When an individual president rapidly succeeds in completing all three reconstructive tasks, reconstruction tends to proceed along the relatively straightforward, easily discernable pathways that Skowronek has documented. However, when an individual president fails to complete all three reconstructive tasks, reconstruction tends to proceed along protracted pathways that are considerably longer, more complex, and less immediately discernable. Along these more protracted pathways, we suggest, previously available courses of action may close off and cease to be viable options but newer ones may emerge to take their place. Initial failure to complete the reconstructive tasks can, therefore, allow for multiple presidents to contribute to the completion of the three reconstructive tasks, as well as sometimes allow for one partisan coalition to seize control of the reconstructive opportunity from another.[5]

The article proceeds as follows. First, we provide an overview of the extant literature on Skowronek's "regime theory," discussing its merits as well as the gaps that exist within it through a focus on the reconstructive presidency. Next, we describe our model in greater detail, carefully explaining the nature of (and connections among) the reconstructive opportunity and each of the three tasks we propose. From there we use the model to guide brief analysis of the historical record. We begin by examining Andrew Jackson's presidency, a widely accepted and "typical" case of reconstruction, and demonstrate that this example is entirely consistent with one possible scenario that our model describes—a scenario in which all three reconstructive tasks are completed in a straightforward manner. This particular scenario, we suggest, also accounts for the other non-controversial reconstructive cases in Skowronek's pantheon. Next, we explore an era that Skowronek does not count as containing a successful reconstruction, the hotly debated "System of 1896" case. We argue

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that this "crucial" case demonstrates the superiority of our model by revealing an unexpected result, one indicative of how our central concern in this case, an initial reconstructive failure, can prolong the reconstructive opportunity, sending political development along protracted pathways in which one partisan coalition can lose control of the opportunity to another and the three reconstructive tasks can be completed by more than one administration.

From this perspective, we argue that "The System of 1896" merits consideration as a successful (if admittedly awkward) reconstructive episode since William McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt were together able to complete each of the three tasks that we delineate, taking advantage of the opportunity provided to them by Grover Cleveland's and William Jennings Bryan's previous failures. This interpretation provides the first account of the consequences of reconstructive failure, and demonstrates that our efforts to better explain the nature of the reconstructive opportunity and link the politics of reconstruction to the accomplishment of three substantive tasks add greater rigor and validity to regime theory. Ultimately, this suggests that Ronald Reagan's reconstruction in the 1980s may also have been complicated by reconstructive failures that took place in the decades preceding his arrival to the presidency. We explore this briefly after our case analysis and discuss how our model both alters Skowronek's periodization schema while casting some doubts on the strength of his conclusions about Reagan. We end the article by arguing that our efforts represent an important first step in demonstrating how cyclical theories of American political development can be reconciled with an emphasis on historical contingency and individual agency.

Regime Theory and The Reconstructive Presidency

First published in 1993, Skowronek's *The Politics Presidents Make* presents an elegant and powerful new theory of American governing regimes, thereby simultaneously providing one of the most significant interpretations of the presidency since Neustadt (1960) as well as one of today's leading examples of a cyclical theory of American politics. In the book, Skowronek argues that presidents play a key role in the development, maintenance, and degradation of political regimes, the "distinctive set of institutional arrangements and approaches to policy questions" that distinguish specific eras of American politics. Presidents can therefore be classified, and their leadership challenges understood, according to four recurring contexts within which they govern—reconstruction, articulation, preemption, and disjunction.

Of the four aforementioned contexts, the one with the most dramatic and far-reaching possibilities is reconstruction. According to Skowronek's formulation, reconstructive presidents are those who assume office while opposed to

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or unaffiliated with a vulnerable regime. Such presidents enjoy the rare opportunity to transform the political order and institutionalize new arrangements and approaches to policy questions. Presidents who successfully reconstruct effectively begin a new cycle of presidential governance, one that is characterized by the existence of a new political regime that is organized around new interests and commitments. Reconstructive presidents are therefore followed by articulating presidents (presidents affiliated with a resilient regime, and thus challenged to innovate from within its established orthodoxies), preemptive presidents (presidents unaffiliated with a resilient regime, and thus challenged to disrupt the regime's goals without being able to completely discredit it), and eventually, disjunctive presidents (presidents who are affiliated with a vulnerable regime, and thus struggle to affirm interest and commitments that are being called into question). Disjunctive presidents are followed by reconstructive presidents, who, in constructing a new regime, begin the cycle once again.

The fundamental characteristic of Skowronek's theory (which we call "regime theory" from this point forward) is that it defines the presidential leadership cycle in terms of repeating sequences rather than in terms of periodicity. There is no fixed interval of time for each turn of Skowronek's "political time" cycle. This means that the cycle is probabilistic rather than strictly deterministic, helping regime theory to avoid one of the most common charges leveled against cyclical theories (Resnick & Thomas, 1990; but see Arnold, 1995; Lieberman, 2000; Milkis, 1995). Having a probabilistic theory also suggests two important corollaries, both of which we focus on later in this article. First, conditions necessary for successful movement from the end of one cycle to the beginning of another can be specified. Second, failure at key points in the sequence can occasionally occur.

Skowronek's regime theory is undoubtedly influential, and has received a good deal of attention. Some have probed the limits of the approach (Hoekstra, 1999; Milkis, 1995; Riley, 2000); others have extended its application within presidential studies (Crockett, 2002, 2008; Harris, 1997); still others have debated structure and agency questions within the theory (Arnold, 1995; Lieberman, 2000). Additionally, the approach has informed both studies of institutional, "partisan," regimes themselves (Cook & Polsky, 2005; Orren & Skowronek, 1998; Plotke, 1996; Polsky, 1997, 2002), as well as a wave of literature that has been especially influential in the public law field (Clayton & May, 1999; Whittington, 2001).

In examining the extant literature, we find that regime theory contains a number of gaps that need to be filled.[6] We therefore seek to shed light on these gaps by focusing on the one aspect of regime theory that we will address in this article—the reconstructive presidency. Stated succinctly, Skowronek's conceptualizations

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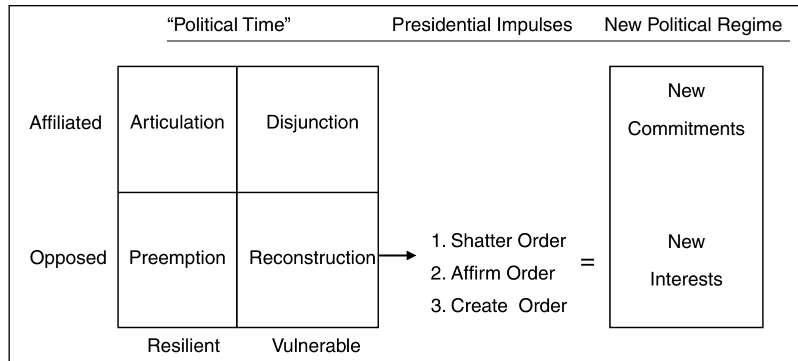

Figure 1. Skowronek's politics of reconstruction

of reconstructive context and the tasks that a reconstructive president must accomplish are simultaneously so abstract and multifaceted that they rob the theory of predictive power. As a result, his theory fails to tell us (or the next reconstructive president) precisely how to identify a reconstructive opportunity or what must be accomplished to successfully reconstruct. Both the elegance and lack of conceptual clarity and causal specificity within regime theory can be demonstrated through our best faith effort to, ex post, construct an explanatory model of reconstructive success from Skowronek's work (see Figure 1).[7]

From this figure several broad conclusions can be drawn. Among these, we focus on two that contain important gaps that we will attempt to fill. First, it appears that presidents who are opposed to a vulnerable regime engage in a "politics of reconstruction." Second, it appears that the politics of reconstruction entails shattering an old order, creating a new order, and affirming elements of previous orders.

However, within these insightful generalizations a number of important matters are not clear. First, despite being provided with vivid descriptions of what reconstructive context looks like, we are not told how to conceptualize regime vulnerability. Indeed, regime weakness appears to be a tautological construction, inferred more from retrospective judgments as to the presence of disjunctive or reconstructive politics than from some independent measure that would predict that a certain kind of politics should be witnessed.

This lack of conceptual clarity does not fatally undermine regime theory, but it does, we argue, contribute to a misreading of the conundrum of the 1890s. Skowronek briefly addresses the events of this era, implying that Lincoln's Republican regime had lost much of its resilience by Harrison's presidency, but concluding that Cleveland's leadership during his second

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stint in the White House was anomalous because he did not reconstruct (Skowronek, 1993, pp. 48-49). Important questions therefore remain unanswered, such as the following: If Lincoln's regime had indeed become vulnerable, how did the Republican regime regain its resilience without the strengthening that, one surmises, can only be achieved by the order-creating efforts of a reconstructive president?

Second, we are also not told what it means to shatter, create, or affirm order (itself a somewhat nebulous concept). Indeed, although it is clear that presidential reconstruction is a complicated process entailing multiple considerations, including dealing with everything from resurrecting past fundamental values, moving the nation past old problems, establishing a new party coalition, and assaulting residual infrastructures to reshape institutions and approaches to policy questions, it is also clear that no necessary tasks for reconstructive success have been established. This lack of causal specificity does not hinder Skowronek's rich descriptive analysis of the clear examples of reconstructive success, like Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. It does, however, give regime theory little leverage for dealing with hard cases, like the era of the 1890s as well as the Reagan case, which Skowronek has difficulty explaining without resort to citing changes in modern conditions.

As a probabilistic theory with no specified set of reconstructive tasks deemed necessary for success, regime theory appears vulnerable to charges of nonfalsifiability. Therefore, specification of the tasks underlying the politics of reconstruction is an important step to take. Although this might lead to interpretations of various historical eras that diverge from those offered by Skowronek, it would ultimately serve to strengthen and deepen the framework that Skowronek has already laid out. For this reason, we now turn to exploring how to more precisely model the dynamics of successful reconstruction.

Modeling the Dynamics of Successful Reconstruction

We begin to attack these puzzles and lay out our model of reconstructive politics by bringing to the forefront an aspect of the phenomenon that has hitherto been downplayed—the role of conflict in dividing partisan coalitions (Schattschneider, 1960). For us, the axis of conflict, which cleaves the political universe into contending partisan coalitions, defines more precisely which, of many, "commitments" are serviced through reconstruction. Likewise, the majority coalition defines more precisely which "interests" are served.

Although these conceptualizations might be inferred within Skowronek's theory, the conceptual clarity provided by explicit reference to the "main axis of partisan cleavage" and the "majority coalition" enables us to specify a causal model of reconstruction. Consequently, our model seeks to combine the insights

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of Skowronek with those of earlier works on the social bases of political parties (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967) and the coalitional bases of partisan realignment (Petrocik, 1981; Sundquist, 1983). We believe that a full understanding of presidential reconstruction is impossible save in terms of these dynamics.

First, in our view, reconstruction is predicated on an opposition president encountering a political regime whose vulnerability is part of and resultant of a polity-wide environment of political "enervation." An "enervated" system is one that has reached a high state of entropy and has low capacity to perform work. The most salient difference between Skowronek's conception of the vulnerable regime and our conception of an enervated one is that enervation implies a necessary reordering once the political system has entered a high entropy state (Nichols, 2009a, 2009b).[8] It then follows that once politics becomes enervated, every president is challenged to reinvigorate through reconstruction (see Figure 2). Otherwise enervation increases.

Although we cannot provide a full accounting of the origins, nature, and consequences of enervation in this work, let us briefly explore these aspects of the concept in some detail: Enervation must be thought to be *systemic* in origins, even as responses to it remain presidentially centered.[9] It is a condition that arises and grows within mature political regimes whose institutional and factional arrangements have declined in efficacy. Under these conditions, the coalition underpinning the regime begins to fracture and resurgent opposition elements begin a national debate about the adequacy of the majority coalition's leadership and the regime's institutionalized preferences. In attempting to maintain their dominance, regime managers respond to these developments in ways that are generally counterproductive (Magliocca, 2009). For example, efforts to revitalize the majority by shifting its focus to controversial secondary priorities tend to exacerbate tensions within the governing coalition and make the regime appear beholden to extremists. The effect of such efforts is almost always to further weaken the regime by calling its efficaciousness into further question. Ultimately then, enervation is mainly caused by endogenous political processes that increase entropy and lead to a dysfunctional environment with the passage of time.[10]

When enervated conditions reach the historically contingent level of intensity necessary to embolden the opposition, they ignite a political crisis that functions like a structural cause in a long term process of change. This "moves the pressure on the status quo to a new, much higher level—very close to the threshold level for major political change" (Pierson, 2004, p. 93). Once this happens, a critical juncture emerges in which the processes and dynamics of reconstruction can begin to play out. Nevertheless, the arrival of a critical juncture does not mean that reconstructive processes will be immediately worked through to their conclusion, or that crisis conditions will end.

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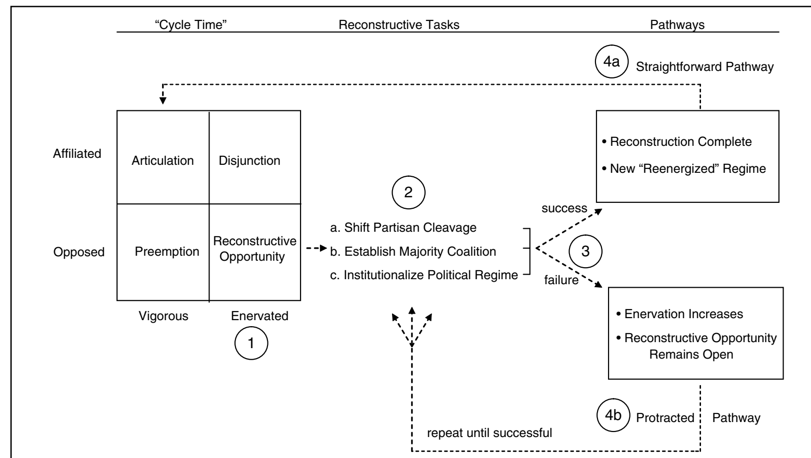

Figure 2. The reconstructive process: opportunity, tasks, and the possibility of failure

To the contrary, when actors working amidst a critical juncture fail to take advantage of their opportunity to reconstruct, the reconstructive opportunity is further complicated and enervation increases. It is therefore only safe to assume that once the reconstructive opportunity has opened attempts to reconstruct are sure to follow.[11]

Because of the distinctiveness of individual historical eras, the "tipping point" of enervation—which opens the reconstructive opportunity—will be crossed in differing ways and at contingent levels. Therefore, periods of enervation never look exactly the same. Nevertheless, enervation as we have described it implies a set of indicators that tend to appear in sequence or together. These include (a) the completion of the substantive program around which a political regime is first organized, (b) the decreased cohesion of the majority coalition on which the regime is based, (c) the rise of new cleaving issues and problems, (d) the rise of an emboldened opposition and advent of a crisis atmosphere that calls into question the regime's governing philosophy and competence, and (e) the increased salience of corruption scandals.[12] These developments help members of the opposition to formulate an alternative vision and act more responsibly in both repudiating the majority coalition and electorally "outflanking" it on the issues (Miller & Schofield, 2003, 2008).

Within an enervated (reconstructive) context shifting the main axis of partisan cleavage is paramount for opposition leaders. Axes of cleavage split the

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electorate along lines of conflict and separate contending groups into rival partisan camps that are themselves united around shared priorities, worldview, and issue/policy area preferences (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Schattschneider, 1960). Shifting the main axis of partisan cleavage is central to successful reconstruction because the dramatic political transformation that reconstruction entails can only be accomplished through the cultivation of a new long-term governing majority. Cleavage shifting is therefore a precursor to, and part of, the assembly of disparate social groups into a broad new partisan coalition. Once a new majority coalition gains power, it then attempts to institutionalize its new preferences and approaches to policy questions, both to overcome enervation as well as to secure its own electoral advantage. If it is successful, then a new political regime is built and the reconstruction is complete.

Our model therefore moves away from concentration on abstract processes such as "shattering," "creating," and "affirming" order. Instead it focuses on the concrete tasks of (a) *shifting the main axis of partisan cleavage*, (b) *assembling a new majority coalition*, and (c) *institutionalizing a new political regime*. These three then become the tasks that must be completed for reconstructive success. It follows that a successful reconstructive president will provide the leadership and energy that helps realize these tasks.

Let us further explore each of the tasks within our model.

1. *Shifting the main axis of partisan cleavage* entails raising the salience of certain conflicts within the social structure over others by focusing on public policy matters related to those conflicts. As Lipset and Rokkan (1967) emphasize in their classic exploration of party system development in Western Europe, numerous "latent strains and contrasts" exist within the social structure of any society. At any given moment, a "hierarchy of cleavage bases" exists, in which certain cleavages are more polarizing than others (pp. 5-6). These cleavages manifest themselves in the political arena when they become the focal points of public policy conflict. We posit that, if a president is to reconstruct, he must raise the salience of a new political cleavage by altering political discourse and focusing on a public philosophy and set of policy issues related to that cleavage (be it support for states' rights, support for capitalism/the free market, or support for federal intervention in economic policy). It is important to emphasize, however, that this does *not* mean that any president, at any time, can necessarily shift the partisan cleavage. Either affiliation with the political regime or a lack of enervated conditions usually prevents presidents from doing so. Nor can presidents succeed by simply focusing on only one policy issue. In a country like the United States, known to be exceptional for both its two-party system and high levels of social differentiation, what is required (when context is favorable) is to

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take a stand on a controversial issue or series of issues, and link it to a broader, more fundamental, but also more nebulous political worldview. As an example, in his effort to shift the axis of partisan cleavage, Reagan linked his stands on matters such as tax policy, regulation of the market, and Cold-War-era foreign policy, to a broader worldview emphasizing that "government *is* the problem." Disputes over this political worldview, in effect, become the dominant partisan cleavage.

2. *Assembling a new majority partisan coalition* is a task that is obviously quite related to shifting the partisan cleavage, and yet is also distinct from it. Whereas shifting the partisan cleavage more specifically involves the ideological and what Polsky (2002) has called the "discursive" basis of a new majority, assembling the actual partisan coalition is primarily concerned with bringing new elements into the fold, converting previous opponents, and uniting disparate wings. It is not enough, in other words, to merely change what politics is about. It is also necessary to do so in a way that builds a new majority by bringing together different groups within the social structure, many of which may not agree with each other on important issues (Axelrod, 1972; Carmines & Stimson 1986; Ladd & Hadley, 1973). This requires a complicated series of considerations. First, a president must be aware of the current social-group profile of his or her partisan coalition, and envision the ways in which it can be expanded. Second, the president must focus on a new dominant partisan cleavage that can bring a new majority of social groups together. Third, the president must also be prepared to compromise on important matters where different wings within the social coalition do not agree. Here, issues of sequence and timing can be very important (Pierson, 2004). In short, constructing a new partisan coalition requires a fair amount of political skill, as well as a willingness to cater to diverse interests.

3. *Institutionalizing a new political regime* is the final, and possibly most variant, task necessary for reordering success. In essence, this final task entails creating or reordering political structures in a way that enables a new partisan majority to promote the policy priorities and political advantage of the social coalition underpinning it. Political regime institutionalization is accomplished via processes that create new institutional and programmatic realities that have the effect of (a) granting democratic legitimacy to the new governing philosophy, (b) uniting the new governing majority around the achievement of a substantive program, and (c) locking in a new axis of partisan cleavage through the creation of long-term social constituencies. Such efforts also set off path dependent processes that can reinvigorate and renew what had been an enervated political system by better bringing institutional capacity in line with societal needs. The most well known example of this method of political regime institutionalization is the creation of the welfare state by Franklin Roosevelt and the new Democratic majority (Plotke, 1996).

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Political regime institutionalization can also entail altering political and electoral structures in a way that helps the new partisan majority maintain an advantage in the electoral arena for an extended period of time. Such efforts either bring new constituents into the political fold, often by changing the "rules of the game," or build new structures of power, thereby cementing dominance. An example of this type of institutionalization of partisan advantage occurred in the 1860s and early 1870s, when Republicans in Congress passed the 14th and 15th Amendments and the Enforcements Acts of 1870-1872 to enfranchise African Americans and thereby expand their electoral coalition (Valelly, 2004).[13]

In all of this, it is important to emphasize that institutionalizing a new partisan regime is neither tantamount to reordering previous institutional relationships wholesale nor is it expected to all happen all at once or at a single pace. The process of partisan regime building is in many cases akin to "layering" a new set of institutions on a mass of others that are already in existence (Orren & Skowronek, 1998, 2004; Schickler, 2001; Tulis, 1987).[14] Therefore, every new partisan regime is a hybrid of new and old elements and, because of a number of varying factors,[15] it may be impossible to predetermine how much institutionalization is necessary to succeed in this task.

However, because many institutional and policy continuities are expected, we argue that it is a mistake to judge institutionalization of a new governing majority by only the magnitude or immediacy of change it brings, or the fact that institutional regimes appear to hang together better than they fit together (Orren & Skowronek, 1998; Polsky, 2009). Evaluative focus should rather concentrate on how institutionalization decreases enervation and reinvigorates/renews the polity by changing the direction of political development (or at least its rate of change).[16] Therefore, although institutionalization processes are continuous and more research is needed on this topic, we suggest that this task should be considered complete for purposes of creating a new governing majority when a new status quo is created by successfully locking in new preferences and partisan advantage. This may occur at a fairly obvious point in time, like it did in many eyes during the New Deal, when the Supreme Court "switched in time to save nine," or it may occur at a very difficult to pinpoint time, like it did whenever Reagan's sociomarket conservatism became the late 20th century status quo.

The Possibility of Failure

Reconstruction, we believe, is most easily recognized when all three reconstructive tasks are successfully and rapidly completed by one president. But what happens when a president handed a reconstructive opportunity (enervation + opposition status) does not succeed in completing all three tasks?

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Unlike Skowronek, we contend that American politics under such circumstances remains in an increasingly enervated state. The opportunity to complete the three tasks and to reconstruct a new political regime thus remains open, but it does not remain exactly the same. Indeed, there are legacies of failure as well as success, and the reconstructive opportunity is altered in important ways.[17]

First, failure to reconstruct amidst a favorable context results in the loss of control over the reconstructive opportunity to new leaders who are able to recognize the opportunity's existence and take advantage of it. In the process, those who did not successfully reconstruct are often discredited, while control over the opportunity may shift to unlikely quarters (i.e., dark horse candidates or affiliates of the old political regime). Second, failure closes off possibilities that might have existed before. Options to select specific cleavage lines, coalitional configurations, and institutional/policy solutions may be lost. Third, failure creates problems that did not exist before. Failure thus complicates the reconstructive process by adding to the sense of crisis, deepening enervation, and bringing to the fore new challenges that must be overcome. This can make accomplishing the reconstructive tasks more difficult and it can also open whole new avenues of advance. Consequently, initial reconstructive failure causes the reconstructive sequence to proceed along protracted pathways that may be far less elegant or distinct than in situations in which initial reconstruction is successful.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from our extended understanding of the reconstructive episode. They are depicted in Figure 2. At Point 1, a reconstructive opportunity arises when a president who is unaffiliated with a governing political regime is elected amid enervated political conditions. At Point 2, reconstruction entails the completion of all three reconstructive tasks that we have delineated. When these tasks are successfully completed in a straightforward manner (at Branch Point 3) then enervation ends and a new political regime is constructed (Pathway 4a). However, when reconstructive failure occurs at Branch Point 3, enervation is prolonged, the window of opportunity remains open, and development proceeds on more protracted pathways (Pathway 4b). Any number of failures can occur at Branch Point 3, but until all three reconstructive tasks are completed enervation will not end.

Our model, therefore, suggests that it would be possible for reconstruction to proceed quickly and smoothly via the completion of the three reconstructive tasks by one president not affiliated with an enervated political regime (indeed, these are the sorts of reconstructions that Skowronek and others have already described in detail). And our model also suggests that it would also be possible for reconstruction to proceed in a much more complex fashion, as initial reconstructive failure results in the eventual completion of the

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three reconstructive tasks by either *affiliates of the old political regime or multiple administrations . . . or both!* Political regimes created along protracted pathways would certainly look very different from those that were created in a straightforward fashion. But because the three reconstructive tasks are accomplished in each scenario, we argue that both scenarios must be considered examples of successful reconstruction.

Methods and Cases

In the previous section, we laid out our model of the dynamics of reconstruction, attempting to follow methodological exhortations to political scientists engaged in historically oriented research by emphasizing conceptual clarity and causal specificity (Gerring, 2003; Goertz, 2006). What follows are two subsections that use this model to guide brief analysis of one noncontentious, "typical," case of reconstruction and one unexpected or "crucial" case of reconstructive success (Brady & Collier, 2004; Gerring, 2001). The model is thus used within this research framework to both provide evaluative criteria within each case and to demonstrate congruence across cases. Because of space restraints, the analysis reported here necessarily remains at a relatively low level of historical detail.

This research design is intended to resonate within Skowronek's established regime theory framework, demonstrating the analytic utility of our conceptual clarifications, and providing initial evidence suggesting that our model better handles the tough reconstructive cases. It is additionally expected to lend support to our claim that reconstruction presents itself as an opportunity, rooted in a systemic enervation that does not go away, rather than as a brief moment based on the transient vulnerability of the outgoing political regime. Significantly, the design also enables us to offer the first regime theory interpretation of an important era within American political development, which explores the possibility of reconstructive failure.

Andrew Jackson: Typical Case of Reconstructive Success

Out of the five presidencies that are considered reconstructive by Skowronek, we elect to examine Andrew Jackson's as the most typical of the group. Unlike Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, whose more transformative impact can plausibly be attributed to the extreme national crises each faced, and unlike Reagan, whose efforts were blunted (in Skowronek's telling) by the "thickening" of the mature welfare state, Jackson's challenge was moderate and his success median. Because the Jackson presidency constitutes a "typical" case, we expect that the central aspects of our model should fit it well.

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Table 1. Typical Cases: Straightforward Reconstructive Success

Chief Contributors	Reconstructive Opportunity (Enervation)	Shift Cleavage	Assemble Coalition	Institutionalize Political Regime	Final Assessment
Jefferson	X	X	X	X	Straightforward Success
Jackson	X	X	X	X	Straightforward Success
Lincoln	X	X	X	X	Straightforward Success
FDR	X	X	X	X	Straightforward Success

More specifically, the case should conform to our expectations of what happens when a president encounters enervated conditions and then succeeds in accomplishing the three reconstructive tasks. In short, analysis of Jackson should reveal straightforward success in political regime reconstruction.

Additionally, because the Jackson case is also one of the main cases that Skowronek uses to support his theory, we believe that the general contours of this case can also apply to all the other reconstructive presidencies that Skowronek discusses, save Reagan—whom we discuss later. Examining each of these presidencies through the prism of our model would require more space than this article allows. However, in Table 1, we do summarize how each of the "typical" presidents, all of whom were handed a reconstructive opportunity, were able to quickly and convincingly complete the reconstructive tasks in much the same way as Jackson—through moving directly from Branch Point 3 down Pathway 4a in our model without ever venturing down Pathway 4b.

A host of scholars have agreed that a Jacksonian Democratic "party system" (or political regime) was established through the ascent of "Old Hickory" to the presidency (Magliocca, 2007; McCormick, 1966). Jackson assumed office at a time when there were signs that the political system had entered highly enervated conditions (Point 1 in our model). By John Quincy Adam's administration, the Jeffersonians had completed much of their substantive program. They also were suffering from intracoalitional strife and struggled to contend with new problems arising within a rapidly expanding and democratizing nation. Indeed, Jackson's was spurred to break with past partisan political practice by both the successful rise of a new nationalist oriented elite within Republican ranks, and the failure of the Jeffersonian system to remain representative within a rapidly expanding country.[18]

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Already, a regionally based, north–south line of political conflict was deepening. Jackson and his surrogates (particularly Martin Van Buren) understood this, and went about the task of shifting the main axis of partisan conflict to a position that cross-cut the slavery issue and north–south axis of cleavage (Brown, 1966). Commensurate with our model (Point 2a), Jackson accomplished this task through linking a series of critical policy issues with a broader governing philosophy, centering on "reform and retrenchment," that would eventually demarcate the scope of partisan conflict for a generation.[19]

Jackson next pursued the task of uniting a new majority coalition (Point 2b). He did this, interestingly, beginning with his first major political move as president—tackling the infamous Indian removal "problem" (Rolater, 1993), which forced him to exercise leadership and unite friendly northern, southern, and western elements. Jackson later institutionalized a political regime that both advanced his coalition's policy preferences and secured its political advantage (Point 2c). He advanced the first goal most famously through his veto of the recharter of the National Bank and secured the second by helping to create the world's first mass political party. In this way, a Jacksonian Democratic political regime was successfully formed (Point 3). Through this straightforward success, the political system was reenergized, the opportunity to reconstruct closed, and a new political regime was created along Pathway 4a.

The "System of 1896": Crucial Case of Protracted Reconstructive Success

As discussed previously, in his assessment of the political events of the 1890s, Skowronek (1993, pp. 48-49) argues that this decade witnessed a "rare opportunity" for a new leader to "press the reconstructive possibilities," but that because Grover Cleveland refused to take advantage of this opportunity, no presidential reconstruction occurred during this time. As a result, the events of this era constitute a "crucial" test case for our extension of regime theory.[20] According to conventional case study methodology, a case may be considered crucial if it "reveals a result that is unexpected" or "deviant" with respect to established theory (Gerring, 2001, p. 220). With respect to regime theory, finding that a successful "System of 1896" reconstruction occurred would constitute such an unexpected result. Using our new model to guide analysis and return a positive finding that there was indeed a successful reconstruction during this time, would then confirm that our theory is superior to Skowronek's in handling this tough case while suggesting that other cases of protracted reconstruction are also possible.

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As we have noted, previous accounts of the politics of reconstruction (most notably, Skowronek, 1993) do not think of reconstructive presidents as operating within windows of opportunity that only close when specific tasks are completed. As a result, these accounts have failed to view the enervated conditions in late-19th and early-20th century America as creating a "critical juncture" or opening for agents to impact the course of political development (Collier & Collier, 1991).[21] Therefore, they have not recognized that a very different but ultimately successful reconstruction did indeed occur, and a new political regime was indeed created, during this time.

More specifically (see Figure 2), the events of this time period exemplify how a president initially handed a reconstructive opportunity—in this case, Grover Cleveland—can fail to complete the reconstructive tasks (2a, 2b, and 2c). This forces the reconstructive opportunity to proceed along protracted pathways (4b in our model) in which enervation continues to increase, one partisan coalition can cede control of the reconstructive opportunity to another and the reconstructive tasks can be subsequently completed under the leadership of more than one individual—in this case, William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt (Table 2). However, once all tasks are completed, the reconstruction is successful (3), the system is reordered, enervation drops, the window closes, and a new political regime (albeit, in this case, a very hybrid one) is created.

To begin with, ample evidence suggests that, by the end of the 1880s, American politics had reached a state of enervation (Point 1 in our model). By the time of Benjamin Harrison's administration, a Republican regime spanning several decades had largely achieved its goals of maintaining the Union and shepherding the country through a period of large-scale industrialization (Sundquist, 1983). Cracks within the Republican coalition, centering on differences over issues such as the gold standard, tariff reform, and "morality" legislation, had grown to a critical size under the aggressive House leadership of Thomas Reed and could not be mollified (Williams, 1978). Additionally, industrialization, immigration, urbanization, and growing economic pressure on the agrarian sector had created new conditions (and advocates) that were screaming for reform. Amid these developments, Republicans suffered a mostly self-inflicted cataclysmic loss in the 1890 midterm election,[22] in which they lost 93 seats and ceded control of the House as well as numerous governorships to the Democrats.[23] All of this suggests that levels of enervation had reached the opposition-emboldening tipping point that opens a reconstructive window, thereby setting the stage for the emergence of a transformational leader to usher in a new era of American politics.

It was within this context that Grover Cleveland won the 1892 presidential election and Democrats captured control of the Senate, thereby achieving unified control of the federal government for the first time in a generation.

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Table 2. Crucial "System of 1896" Case of Protracted Reconstructive Success

Chief Contributors	Reconstructive Opportunity (Enervation)	Shift Cleavage	Assemble Coalition	Institutionalize Partisan Regime	Final Assessment
Cleveland	X	No	No	No	Failure
Bryan	X	X	No	No	Failure
McKinley	X	X	X	Partial	Protracted success
T. Roosevelt	X	X	X	X	

Even Skowronek (1993) acknowledges that Cleveland, as the leader of a nascent Democratic majority, enjoyed a "reconstructive moment" under these circumstances (p. 48). Thus, we assert that, on his arrival to the presidency, Cleveland assumed the onus of establishing a new political regime through completion of the three reconstructive tasks (Points 2a, 2b, and 2c). Unfortunately for the Democrats, Cleveland probably was the wrong man at the right time. He seems to have had neither the desire nor the political skills necessary to take advantage of the reconstructive opportunity. Cleveland's political ineptitude, coupled with the unfortunate coincidence of the Depression of 1893 with his presidency, resulted in a failure to form a new, Democratic political regime in the early 1890s.[24]

Cleveland's reconstructive failure begins with his inability to successfully complete the first of the three reconstructive tasks: shifting the major axis of partisan cleavage dividing the electorate (Point 2a). In the elections of 1890 and 1892, an axis of partisan cleavage portending an era of Democratic dominance seemed to emerge. Ostensibly tied to the protective tariff, this axis was actually linked to broader concerns about federal government support for industrial interests (Knoles, 1942; Williams, 1978).[25] Indeed, through emphasizing his strong support for lowering the tariff, Cleveland managed to unite disparate wings of the Democratic Party to support his 1892 presidential bid. After he became president, however, Cleveland abandoned his focus on the protective tariff and instead attempted to ideologically reshape the Democratic Party over an issue about which the Democratic Party was starkly divided—repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890 (Hollingsworth, 1963; Welch, 1988). Hence, Cleveland discarded the one issue over which he might have been able to shift the axis of partisan cleavage and forge a new dominant coalition and instead focused on an issue over which an enduring Democratic majority had little chance of being created.

Cleveland's emphasis on securing the gold standard is also vital to understanding why he failed in the second reconstructive task: assembling a new majority partisan coalition (Point 2b). Cleveland's most fundamental mistake

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in this task relates to the *sequencing* of his policy objectives. Cleveland could have initially focused on a party-unifying issue like the tariff, and then used the intraparty goodwill resulting from the efforts over this issue to lead the party through more contentious matters. Instead, he chose to initially focus on the most explosive intraparty issue he could find (and refused to compromise on details related to this issue), thereby immediately alienating crucial coalition members and dividing his party (Crockett, 2002; Williams, 1978). Cleveland continued to alienate fellow Democrats for the rest of his term while making little to no attempt to bring people from outside the party in. In doing so, he repeatedly shrank the size of the coalition supporting him.

Because Cleveland both lacked the desire to advance new policy initiatives and spent much of his time as president without a supportive Democratic coalition, he did not even come close to completing the third reconstructive task—institutionalizing a new political regime (Point 2c). In short, then, because of his staunch adherence to principle, his refusal to compromise for the sake of what he considered his party's long term interests, his overall lack of political skills, and some unfortunate economic timing, Grover Cleveland completely failed to take advantage of the reconstructive opportunity that was handed to him by history (Branch Point 3).

Cleveland's reconstructive failure had important consequences. The possibility for a straightforward reconstruction, tethered as it was to Cleveland's presidency, had passed. Consequently, levels of enervation in the political system continued to increase and the reconstructive opportunity did not close but rather proceeded via protracted pathways (4b). Along these pathways, control of the reconstructive opportunity eventually transferred from the nascent Democratic majority coalition established in 1890-1892 to a new Republican majority coalition, and multiple individuals had a hand in fulfilling the three reconstructive tasks.

The events along these protracted pathways began at the 1896 Democratic convention in Chicago. Here, William Jennings Bryan won the Democratic nomination for president and, in the process, dramatically shifted the axis of partisan cleavage on which American politics was based. He did so through his fiery and polemical embrace of free silver. This issue explicitly reflected Bryan's dominant political worldview—that corporations had gained too much power at the expense of the "teeming masses" (Sundquist, 1983). Thus, Bryan's 1896 campaign was an attempt (like Jefferson's, Jackson's and Lincoln's before it) to raise the salience of new issues, only this time they reflected a political worldview that saw class conflict as at the core of American politics. Through mobilizing agrarian populists to his cause and alarming eastern industrialists to the threats he posed, Bryan succeeded in accomplishing the first reconstructive task (Point 2a) by changing the fundamental scope of conflict in American politics and shifting the line of cleavage.

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Unfortunately for the Democrats (*again*), this new line of cleavage cut across the electorate in a way that made forming a new majority coalition nearly impossible for them. McKinley and his chief advisor Mark Hanna were quick to realize this, and used Bryan's fiery rhetoric to assemble a diverse new majority coalition oriented around "economic nationalism" and the "advancement of urban-industrial society" (Williams, 1978, p. 119). In doing so, they completed tasks 2a and 2b for a new Republican coalition. This new majority coalition was made up, like Jackson's, of a hodge-podge collection of supporters. It included traditional party stalwarts such as northern business interests, but it also included members of the urban working class, established farmers, and immigrant ethnic groups (Brady & Stewart, 1982; McSeveney, 1972; Nardulli, 1995), some of whom had been driven out of the Democratic party by Bryan's call for class warfare (Kleppner, 1970).

After winning the election, McKinley was still challenged to complete the third reconstructive task—institutionalizing the policy preferences and political advantage of the new Republican majority coalition. Even though the Republicans were able to cobble together a new majority coalition in the campaign of 1896, the cohesion of this new coalition was far from guaranteed—enacting this new coalition's priorities to ensure its durability became paramount. This, however, would prove to be a far more complicated task to complete than usual because McKinley was affiliated with the old Republican majority and did not have a previous political regime to repudiate as a way of justifying his efforts. He only had an economic depression, a failed Democratic predecessor (Cleveland), and a radical Democratic alternative (Bryan) against which to forge his reconstruction, and was therefore often severely cross-pressured.

Because he was affiliated with the old political regime but also elected amidst enervated conditions, McKinley was simultaneously pushed to adhere to past Republican orthodoxies (such as support for the tariff) as well as to reconstruct through new approaches (such as advancement of reciprocity trade agreements; Williams, 1978). As a counterfactual to distinguish how previous reconstructive failure and protracted pathways of development impacted McKinley's actions, we suggest that had Bryan been in office tariff reform probably would have proceeded much more quickly and been more punctuated in character. Therefore, though McKinley took the first steps in responding to enervation through institutionalization of new policy approaches, the nature of his political context necessitated a compromising, mixed-bag approach.

As it was, Republicans themselves finally began to question if the tariff had outlived its usefulness in enabling American industrialization in the late 1890s, and McKinley was making his first big stop on a public relations tour to promote a switch to reciprocity when he was shot in Buffalo, New York.

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As a result, he never had the opportunity to use the clout he had garnered as a result of his administration's victory in the Spanish–American War or his creation of the presidential "Bully Pulpit" to push through his desired institutional changes (Phillips, 2003). Thus, he did not complete the third task, reconstruction was not complete, and development continued to proceed by protracted pathways (4b).

The responsibility for completing the reconstruction thus fell into the able hands of McKinley's successor, Theodore Roosevelt. He too was cross-pressured in his efforts to institutionalize new approaches to policy questions but succeeded in breaking ranks with the past in significant ways. One example of this was in achieving railroad reform. Railroad regulation was seen by contemporaries as "a moral issue," which prompted fundamental "regime-level debate" (Tulis, 1987). And because the issue pitted old guard Republican owners, against more progressive Midwestern Republican shippers, the ensuing battle over it became symbolic of Theodore Roosevelt's battle to institutionalize the interests of a new majority coalition. Sensing that the people 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. (Gould, 1991, p. 152)

Roosevelt used the Hepburn Act to institutionalize a new approach to the relationship between industry and the state.

In terms of pure policy innovation this Act was a compromise, giving some (including Skowronek) the impression that Roosevelt failed to beat the conservative elements of his party. Yet we argue that, in terms of responding to enervation and reconstructing politics, it was a watershed event. This policy success (along with others) responded to a newly emergent problem by reinforcing a new axis of cleavage, which legitimized the many, often uncoordinated, efforts of lower level bureaucrats to bring government outputs into line with new expectations (Carpenter, 2001). Importantly, it made progressive reform part of what the substantially revised "System of 1896" Republican coalition's politics was initially about and prevented this faction from permanently bolting the party until 1932. Finally, it demonstrated how inelegant reconstructive success can be when it moves along protracted pathways of development (4b).

We therefore argue that viewing McKinley and Roosevelt as reconstructive presidents is more accurate than viewing them as "articulators," or innovators within orthodox parameters, as Skowronek suggests. It is surely true

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that the force of much of their reconstruction was blunted by the fact that, as Republicans, they were in many ways hamstrung by their affiliation with the old status quo of the Lincoln regime. However, we reiterate that what, in our view, distinguishes a reconstructive episode is evidence of the shifting of the axis of partisan cleavage, the assembly of a new majority coalition, and the institutionalization of new arrangements—all in order to overcome enervated conditions. Because all these events happened in the 1890s-1900s, we argue that these two presidents successfully reconstructed.

No doubt this era's reconstruction would have looked very different and been far more distinguishable had Bryan succeeded in building a new Democratic political regime. However, both he and Cleveland before him did not respond successfully to the underlying problem of enervation, and consequently they forfeited the opportunity to reconstruct to others. This demonstrates that the ultimate contours of a reconstruction may depend at least as much on the actions of those who failed to reconstruct as on the decisions made by those who succeeded.[26] Indeed, in this case, the direction in which the axis of cleavage shifted was driven by the miscalculation of the loser of the 1896 presidential election more than anything else.

That it was affiliates of the old political regime who were able to take advantage of this opening and (however awkwardly and obscurely) complete the three reconstructive tasks, should not preclude us from judging these efforts as successful. As Capoccia and Kelemen (2007) argue, events occurring within a "critical juncture" can result in the establishment of an outcome similar to the status quo that existed beforehand. That politics was reequilibrated to a similar outcome does not mean that no critical juncture occurred. In the case of the regime cycle in American politics, the fact that Republicans reemerged as the dominant party after 1896 does not mean that a reconstruction did not occur during this time, or that a new political regime was not established. As we argue, because all three reconstructive tasks that we outlined were accomplished during this time period, a new regime *indeed was* created. American politics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries can therefore be characterized as operating within two back-to-back Republican regimes, one existing from 1860 to 1896 and the other existing from 1896 until 1932 (Burnham, 1970; Key, 1955; Polsky, 2003; Schattschneider, 1960; Sundquist, 1983).

Discussion

In this article, we have sought to make a number of theoretical and substantive contributions. To begin with, through clarifying important concepts in regime theory and developing a model of the requirements for reconstructive

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success, we have sought to more adequately specify the causal mechanisms underlying the reconstructive process. Through reevaluation of the nature of the conditions underlying the reconstructive opportunity and careful specification of the tasks that presidents must complete to reconstruct, we *better explain reconstructive success*, and provide the *first account of the consequences of reconstructive failure*. This sheds substantive new light on regime reconstruction, extends theory to the edge of new frontiers, and gives several historical periods of development fresh interpretation.

In creating our new model of the politics of reconstruction, we have sought to link regime reconstruction more closely with the substantive realities that leaders confront in dealing with enervated conditions, political conflict, and coalitional politics.[27] Each of the three reconstructive tasks that we have outlined flows directly from the challenge to reinvigorate politics and is intricately related to an aspect of coalitional stewardship, whether that aspect be the coalition's formation and orientation around a specific axis of conflict (Task 1), its assembly (Task 2), or its institutionalization of policy preferences and political advantage (Task 3). Moreover, through conceptualizing reconstructive success as the product of the three tasks that we have delineated, we show how failure to reconstruct can cause the tasks to be completed via protracted pathways not previously acknowledged by Skowronek or other regime theory scholars but anticipated by comparative historical researchers working within the critical juncture framework (Capoccia & Keleman, 2007).

In accordance with this logic, we have reinterpreted the events of the 1890s-1900s and argued that the enervated conditions that had arisen by 1890 did not disappear until a new, "System of 1896," political regime was forged via protracted pathways of development. Our interpretation of these events may be questioned by other scholars of the era, some of whom may argue that, in claiming that McKinley and Roosevelt should be considered reconstructive presidents, we ignore the many ways in which these two presidents do not fit neatly into Skowronek's framework.[28] Indeed, we do not deny that our reinterpretation of the events of the 1890s-1900s is in some respects inconsistent with Skowronek's claims about the politics of reconstruction. We suggest, however, that these differences do not ultimately point to inherent problems with our approach; instead, they point to the limitations of Skowronek's "institutionally partisan" view of the presidency (Tulis, 1987). In focusing excessively on the ways in which individual presidents define themselves against other presidents to whom they are linked by the regime cycle, Skowronek fails to sufficiently embed the presidency within the larger political system of which it is a part. Consequently, Skowronek loses sight of the ways in which the cycles of presidential governance that he describes are indicative of larger, more systemic patterns involving the entire American polity. When the cycles of presidential

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leadership are viewed from this more holistic perspective, it becomes apparent that the reconstructive president merely plays the starring role, as leader of a partisan coalition, in formulating a response to a set of periodically reoccurring challenges encompassing the whole American political system. In essence, these challenges are tantamount to the new concept that we have introduced in this article–political enervation.

We therefore believe that, more than anything else, what unites such disparate presidencies as those of Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Reagan is that each of these presidencies resulted in the reinvigoration of an enervated political system. Because the presidencies of McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt ultimately accomplished the same thing (albeit with complex and attenuated results), we argue that these two men should also be considered reconstructive presidents, the important differences between them and the non contentious reconstructive presidents notwithstanding.

Because our analysis argues that a reconstruction did indeed occur during the 1890s-1900s, it also suggests that successful reconstructions map more congruently with realignment eras—and possibly realignment theory—than Skowronek's reading admits (Nichols, 2009b). Further synthesis along these lines would certainly require additional work (as well as a consideration of alternative interpretations, such as Sundquist's)[29] that is beyond the scope of this article (see Note 9). We will note, however, that many of the concepts and ideas that we have considered or introduced here should apply to other cases and may prove transportable across these literatures. In particular, our conceptualizations of "enervation," "reconstructive opportunities," and "protracted pathways" may be helpful to scholars interested in understanding the "missing" realignment of the 1960-1970s (Mayhew, 2002; Shafer, 1991).

We also believe that the concepts that we have introduced in this article can be used to shed further light on Ronald Reagan's somewhat unusual reconstruction as well. Indeed, we speculate that a fuller account of Reagan's attenuated but now widely accepted reconstruction can be achieved through consideration of the role he played in helping complete the three reconstructive tasks, as well as the impact that multiple failures to reconstruct may have had in shaping the protracted pathways leading up to his presidency. In suggesting this, we do not wish to dismiss Skowronek's (1993) hypothesis that the unusual nature of Reagan's reconstruction may be a consequence of a thickening of the welfare state (p. 31; see also Cook & Polsky, 2005). Rather, we contemplate whether the effect of institutional thickening on the regime cycle may be more properly understood through considering its interaction with (and inducement of) protracted pathways of development. In other words, a thickened state might make reconstructive failure more likely, and it

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might make the completion of reconstructive tasks more difficult or prolonged, all without changing the necessity of completing the tasks in order to overcome an enervated political environment. Ultimately then, we suggest that a full investigation of Reagan's reconstruction would largely comport with our model, demonstrating both the crucial role he played in creating a new majority coalition and institutionalizing a new political regime, as well as the constraints and difficulties he faced as a result of the reconstructive failures that preceded him.

Conclusion

We conclude this article by emphasizing what we believe to be our broadest contribution to the literature—our efforts to demonstrate how cyclical theories of American political development can be reconciled with an emphasis on historical contingency and individual agency. As we have detailed, both Skowronek's theory of the cycles of presidential leadership as well as the realignment synthesis have been criticized as overly deterministic and insufficiently attuned to the importance of contingency and agency in affecting political outcomes. But whereas some scholars have responded to these criticisms by concluding that cyclical theories are therefore too broad and should be abandoned, our response has instead been to take an even wider systemic view in an attempt to show how historical contingency and individual agency can fit within such theories. Through conceiving of the reconstructive opportunity as a critical juncture in which contingency is heightened and the space for system revitalizing agency grows, we argue we have advanced in this direction. Much work remains to be done, however, and we invite other scholars to join us in thinking about cyclical theories in light of advances in neo-institutional and regime centered research.

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Notes

1. Skowronek does not lump Reagan fully into the category of successful reconstructive president. Indeed, he makes the case that a general "thickening" of the welfare state has made reconstruction exceedingly difficult, causing political time to "wane" and Reagan to be "the least effective leader to wield what historically has been the most potent form of presidential authority" (Skowronek, 1993, p. 413).
2. We use Skowronek's "political regime" terminology throughout this article to provide continuity for our readers. Some have argued that the term *order* is superior to *regime* (Plotke, 1995), whereas others prefer the modifier *partisan* to *political* (Cook & Polsky, 2005; Polsky, 2002). Although these disagreements do suggest the need for greater conceptual clarity within this research area, we choose not to engage the discussion around this particular concept for this paper.
3. Leadership within the reconstructive opportunity is mainly presidency centered because presidents are de facto party leaders and holders of the only nationally elected office. However, enervation is a systemic quality rather than one specifically related to presidents, as we detail later in this article.
4. Generally, we prefer the term *reconstructive opportunity* to *window of opportunity* as we argue that this specific opportunity may last longer than the brief windows of policy opportunity that Kingdon (1995) made famous. We reference the familiar term here to differentiate ourselves conceptually from Skowronek, who seems to suggest that reconstructive context can be there one moment and then gone the next (as in the Cleveland case). The possibility of a protracted reconstruction after failure becomes evident when conceiving of the opportunity in terms of events within a critical juncture (see especially Capoccia & Keleman, 2007).
5. We suggest that cases of reconstructive failure thus provide the first articulated American case examples of what Capoccia and Keleman (2007) refer to as "near misses" within a critical juncture. "Near misses" are associated with historical periods that, although not especially notable for the amount of change that is wrought in their wake, nevertheless warrant classification as critical junctures because they exhibit high levels of "structural fluidity and heightened contingency"

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(p. 352). In short, these are cases where the final outcome produced can represent a mere change in the rate of change of a number of indicators, resulting in a mixed-bag modification of the pre–critical juncture status quo. Capoccia and Keleman go further and argue that it is possible that there may be no change resultant of actions within a critical juncture. We do not disagree that, in some cases, a full restoration of the pre–critical juncture status quo is possible. However, because we link the phenomenon of reconstruction to the amelioration of enervated conditions, we argue that a restoration of the pre–critical juncture status quo would leave the underlying problem unsolved and the critical juncture open for others to exploit.

6. We would like to emphasize that our critique is *not* intended to tear down previous work. As self-admitted acolytes of regime-centered analysis we do not downplay the substantive advances made by earlier scholars. Our critique is primarily intended to identify areas to build on—in the best tradition of cumulative social science.
7. Also see Skowronek's (1993, p. 36) diagram.
8. Nichols and Franklin (2004) appear to have pioneered use of the term *enervated regime*. We note, however, that Skowronek (2008) has also begun to use the term (p. 61), substituting it where he previously referred to "disjunction" (Skowronek, 2003, p. 138). It appears as though no conceptual change has accompanied Skowronek's switch from using "vulnerable" (1993) to "enervated" (2008) to describe the conditions that foster regime reconstruction. We, however, argue that "enervation" describes a systemic, periodically recurring, condition of the American polity that is tied to rising entropy and that necessitates a presidentially led response. Our conceptualization of "enervation" pushes regime theory to new frontiers (see Nichols, 2009a).
9. This systemic vision differs significantly from Skowronek's institutionally partisan account. Skowronek (1993) traces the origins of the regime cycle back to a constitution that motivates presidents to "shatter order" in exercising the powers of their office while simultaneously, and paradoxically, legitimizing these actions by "affirming" elements of previous orders." From this a third leadership task—"creating" order"—is somehow derived (pp. 19-21). The problem of synchronizing these "impulses," as Skowronek calls them, is compounded by the fact that presidents act within a "political time" not necessarily of their own choosing. Presidents thus find that there are very real contextual limits on the politics they are able to make. Our systemic account is more closely aligned with (though by no means identical to) Burnham's (1970) macro vision. In his realignment paradigm, electoral behavior periodically, and abruptly, oscillates in response to a disequilibrium that develops between the dynamic American socioeconomic system and its constitutionally structured—and static—political counterpart. Realignments are thus seen to "arise from emergent tension in society which, not adequately

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controlled by the organization or outputs of party politics as usual, escalate to a flash point . . . (and eventuate) sharp reorganizations of the mass coalitional bases of the major parties" (Burnham, 1970, p. 10). These shifts are seen to work through V. O. Key's (1955) "critical election" tension management mechanism, which, as other scholars stress, changes the axis of partisan conflict and brings a new coalition to power (Petrocik, 1981; Schattschneider, 1960; Sundquist, 1983). In place of tension build up, we suggest that systemic enervation eventuates the need for reconstruction. We thus drop realignment's mass behavioral focus but integrate its constituent parts into the first two tasks that reconstructive presidents must accomplish (see also Nichols, 2009a). In so doing, we reposition the president as the principal, among many, actors involved in dealing with the systemic condition of enervation. Although it is beyond the scope of this work to detail how institutions and players such as the Congress, Court, bureaucracy, party managers, and interest groups relate to one another and interact within this systemic environment, we acknowledge that this is critical to future development of our theory. For now, we focus on presidents because, as party leaders and the only nationally elected officeholders, they are constitutionally positioned to have the greatest motivation and ability to accomplish the nationally focused reconstructive tasks (see Hamilton, 1961). They do not, however, act in a vacuum.

10. From a systemic perspective it appears to us that loss of institutional capacity can be linked to the stubborn, but necessary, maintenance of partisan lines of cleavage and the loss of coalitional cohesion. In the first case, institutional capacity suffers from a kind of "hardening" and in the second case it suffers from a kind of "drift." Therefore, in our minds, it is endogenous political processes that eventually follow from successful reconstruction and not exogenous shocks or crises (a la realignment theory; Burnham, 1970, or regime theory Polsky, 2002; Magliocca, 2009) that are the primary cause of enervation—and hence reconstruction.
11. This certainty can be traced back to enervation's conceptual grounding in entropy (see Nichols, 2009a, 2009b), or the measure of a system's inability to do work, and the thermodynamic requirement to address increasing entropy through systemic reordering (second law of thermodynamics). We readily concede that not all politicians will respond to the challenge to reconstruct and that some may fail in their efforts. Indeed, only optimism persuades us to hope that American politicians will continue to be able to succeed in their efforts to respond to enervation.
12. See Burnham (1970, pp. 6-10) for thoughts on this topic that inspired ours, and Polsky (2002) who has thought deeply about our first point.
13. Although most of the attention about the meaning of the 14th Amendment focuses on issues surrounding the incorporation doctrine and the meaning of various rights protecting clauses (e.g., see Antieau, 1981), we remind that as the instrument that guaranteed citizenship to former slaves it also created a lot of new Republican voters. This partisan advantage extending aspect of the 14th and 15th

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Amendments was not lost to those in the 1860s and 1870s and is unequivocally reflected in the electoral record.

14. In addition to the sedimentary layering process, institutionalization is wrought through "path-dependent" processes (Mahoney, 2000; North, 1990; Pierson, 2000) in moments of "punctuated change" (Burnham, 1999; Eldridge & Gould, 1972) and also through institutional "conversions" (Carpenter, 2001; Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Thelen, 2003).
15. Our initial thoughts suggest that these factors include the severity of problems needing addressing, the state of previous institutional configurations, the amount of resistance opponents can bring, and the availability and amount of new sources of energy.
16. This formulation was suggested to us by Jill Nichols. Whereas political science likes to conceive of things in terms of "right direction/wrong direction," calculus is the mathematics of rates of change. In this context, it is theorized that the formation of a new governing majority brings about significant shifts in the rates of change of a whole host of factors, which corresponds to a change in direction in political terms. See Aldrich and Niemi (1996) for one attempt to compile a composite measure of change in similar terms.
17. Our formulation of the concept of "reconstructive failure" was inspired through discussions with Jeff Tulis. His own "legacies of failure" work focuses on how failure to accomplish *X* at Time 1 can influence the accomplishment of a better version of *X* at Time 2 (Mellow & Tulis, 2007). Our formulation differs in focusing on how failure to accomplish reconstruction at Time 1 closes off possibilities and complicates a very different (and not necessarily better) reconstruction at Time 2.
18. The western states contained less than 3% of the population in 1790 and 28% in 1830. The need to assemble a new majority coalition in 1828 was as much as anything resultant of this demographic shift.
19. These issues included Indian removal, internal improvements, tariff reform, and of course Jackson's famous opposition to the National Bank. See, for example, Russo (1972) and Remini (1981).
20. In a book review, Polsky has suggested that there were indeed two separate Republican regimes between 1860 and 1932. However, he does not argue that there was a successful reconstruction linking them. Nor does he consider the possibility that there was a Democratic failure to reconstruct during this time frame. For his very thoughtful analysis of this period, see Polsky (2003).
21. We stress that the tipping point that opens the critical juncture does not correspond to the highest point of enervation. It is rather the point at which the amount of enervation becomes sufficient to open the reconstructive opportunity. Following Nichols (2009a, 2009b), we suggest that enervation will most spike after it reaches

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the historically contingent tipping point. Furthermore, we argue and demonstrate that enervation continues to increase in cases of reconstructive failure.

22. Williams (1978, pp. 21-53) contends that although the passage of Reed's Rules in 1890 did accomplish its intended task of expediting House business in the short term, it also produced unintentional consequences that were disastrous for the Republicans in the midterm. Buttressed by their regain of unified control of government and, perhaps, drunk with their new power to pass legislation, Reed's Republicans proceeded to overreach and offend with their heavy handed tactics at almost every turn. In doing so, they passed a great deal of legislation but became sitting ducks for a backlash against activist government. The GOP proceeded to lose 93 seats (the most in history up to that point) in November. Thus, Reed's Rules were important in the long term only because the Democrats subsequently failed to reconstruct and the GOP was able to return to power. Had they not, we argue that Reed's Rules would likely have been remembered in infamy as one of the primary ways by which an enervated political regime overreached in its efforts to maintain power.
23. Only the admission of six new western states in 1889-1990 stopped the Republicans from losing the Senate in the 1890 election.
24. Given the Democrats' substantial intraparty divisions, which lurked immediately below the surface of their 1892 victory, completion of these three reconstructive tasks would have been a remarkable achievement for anyone in Cleveland's position. That completing the tasks would have been difficult does not, however, mean that it would have been impossible. We contend that, through making different choices than Cleveland had and acting with greater political finesse than Cleveland did, another individual in Cleveland's position could have blamed the depression on the failed policies of his Republican predecessors and taken advantage of the crisis to successfully reconstruct.
25. It is certainly true that Cleveland's victory over Benjamin Harrison in 1892 should be primarily understood as the result of widespread disgust with Harrison and the Republicans, not widespread support for Cleveland and all of his policy preferences. See Williams's, *Dry Bones and Dead Language*; Knoles (1942) *The Presidential Campaign and Election of 1892*. We do not argue in this article, however, that shifting the partisan cleavage requires complete agreement among a partisan coalition on a large set of policy issues. Rather, we argue that it entails focusing on one or two priority issues and linking them to a broader, unifying, governing philosophy. Our argument with respect to Cleveland is that the protective tariff was indicative of a potential line of cleavage that, even if faint, could certainly have been exploited further than he chose to do as president.
26. We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this framing.
27. Our systemic approach to understanding the dynamics of American politics may

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be transferable to macro-level studies of party system change in cases other than the United States. However, the various aspects of the reconstructive process that we have outlined are likely endemic to the unique institutional context of the United States (namely, a two-party system that operates within a separation of powers scheme).

28. For some alternative interpretations of the events of this era, see Skowronek (1982), Bensel (2000), and James (2000).
29. In short, we argue that our interpretation of the "System of 1896" does not run counter to Sundquist's (1983) interpretation, but rather could be read as providing a perspective on the role that presidents and presidential candidates play in the realignment dynamic that has until now been absent. In doing so we risk taking on too much in this paper and can do no more than suggest that our theory may also provide a framework for filling certain gaps in realignment theory, particularly with respect to the role of elite behavior. Paradoxically, understanding elite behavior has the potential to further undermine realignment's mass electoral foundation (see Mayhew, 2002; Shafer, 1991), while simultaneously helping to explain tough cases.

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