The Presidency and the Political Order: In Context


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Keywords presidency; political time; Walter Dean Burnham; George Edwards; Stephen Skowronek

Students of American politics have long wondered about the presidency’s place in the political firmament and about how its location shapes the purpose and effectiveness of presidential leadership. At one time, reform-minded scholars viewed the presidency as “the instrument of the people breaking through the constitutional form” and tried to empower the office so as to maximize the president’s ability to achieve the people’s purposes. Following Stephen Skowronek’s lead, one could call this reform-minded scholarship the “first look” at presidency. The reformers’ projects in effect personalized explanations for presidential success and failure because the reformers optimistically assumed that once a

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I am grateful to both Cyrus Zirakzadeh and Andrew Polsky for their guidance and encouragement, as well as to Polity’s anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions. For comments on various drafts of this article, I would like to thank David Nichols and Dave Bridge.


progressive presidential machine was built, only vigorous action and/or superior individual skills and strategic aplomb were needed to make the office the catchall solution for problems of the day.³ Richard Neustadt’s *Presidential Power*, which focuses on personal persuasion, stands as one of the most influential expressions of this line of thought. It arguably represents the high-water mark of the upbeat reform-minded tradition.

Shortly after the publication of Neustadt’s work, Vietnam, Watergate, and a host of other disappointments made scholars wary and less enthusiastic. While additional powers had been invested in the presidency, its promise remained unfilled.⁴ A “second look” at the presidency resulted. Scholars now deemed the institution imperious, prone to being occupied by dangerous personality types, and invested with expectations that could not be met.⁵ Optimism gave way to pessimism. The office was simultaneously seen as too big for any man and too powerful for the wrong man. Yet, as one of the authors under review notes, this shift did not “offer an alternative history of the office so much as an alternative evaluation of the same history.”⁶ The institutionally fortified presidency remained at the heart of the political order, and highly personalized explanations still accounted for political success (or lack thereof). However, presidents were no longer seen as the solution; they had become a big part of the problem.

Instead of developing highly personalized explanations, there is now a movement to study the contextual determinants of presidential success. This can be seen as an advance toward a more holistic “third look” at the presidency.⁷ This essay reviews three recent books that bear on the emerging third look. Two of the books explore presidential leadership directly, and the third focuses on the changing shape of the American electoral landscape. Individually, they do not fully move past the assumptions of the second-wave literature. When combined, however, they contribute to current thinking by highlighting different dimensions of the political context that limit and provide opportunities for presidential leadership. Together, they help scholars reposition the presidency within the American political order and thereby encourage a better understanding of the nature and potential of the office.

George Edwards’s book criticizes laudatory theories about the persuasive powers of the presidency. It thus pushes the second-look literature to its limits. It also offers a policy-centric understanding of context. While Edwards does not remove the presidency from the center of the political firmament, he enriches existing literature on strategic presidential leadership by arguing that more attention should be devoted to the political context in which the president pursues policy goals. He argues that exploitation of environmentally structured opportunities is the key to presidential success. In doing so, he contends that the most important skills the chief executive can have are those of an excellent facilitator. Edwards also implicitly employs a critical-juncture framework in his analysis of the presidency.8

The volume by Stephen Skowronek is a “reprise and reappraisal” of his path-breaking thesis about political time. The book updates four of his older essays and extends his scholarship in two newer chapters. Comparing leadership problems and presidential performances at similar stages during a political regime’s development, Skowronek now extends his storyline through the Barack Obama presidency. Through this extended historical lens, Skowronek argues that management of the political regime (and not only policy-goal attainment) has been the paramount challenge confronting chief executives. He draws out attention to a second important dimension of context: political time. Skowronek contends that regime management challenges constrain presidents. Most only maintain the regime, or chip away at the periphery of its core attributes, while some get to transform the political order that they inherit. Transforming presidents engage in the practice of reconstructive politics, which some scholars now argue can best be thought of as occurring within a critical juncture.9 Skowronek’s vision prompts questions about the origins of political time (is it determined primarily by the president’s disruptive actions?) and invites deeper interrogation as to whether his ambitious attempt to remove the presidency from the center of the political order and to launch a third wave of presidential analysis has faltered.

Walter Dean Burnham’s latest book offers a treasure trove of electoral turnout data. It also, through two framing essays, documents changes in political participation in America since 1788. Noting myriad environmental factors that have structured electoral behavior, Burnham identifies four distinct eras of political participation.10 In doing so, he suggests a third—systemic—dimension of

10. Burnham notes that these four eras are “by no means always identical with ‘moments’ of critical realignment that define the boundaries of historical ‘party systems’ or ‘regime orders’ that lie between them,” *Voting in American Elections*, 36.
political context. His book inspires readers to revisit his earlier theories about the mainsprings of American politics and to recognize broader causes when thinking about the contexts in which presidents operate. His argument implies that political time may have different origins and markings than Skowronek proposes.

A careful reading of all three books under review leads one to the conclusion that the promise of the third-wave literature can be fulfilled only by constructing a complex vision of context. Once context is understood in terms of multiple dimensions and once the presidency is removed from the center of the political universe, scholars will see the presidency afresh.

**Against the Reform-Minded Vision of the Presidency: The Limits of Persuasion**

In *The Strategic Presidency*, Edwards continues his leading role within the second-wave literature that challenges Neustadt’s thesis that presidential power is first-and-foremost the power to persuade. In Neustadt’s reform-oriented conception, presidential leadership arises from inter-personal, persuasive skills, rather than from formal powers or roles. Presidential success depends on shrewd strategic calculations. Therefore, researchers should study the presidency “as if looking over the president’s shoulder” and should focus on how presidents persuade (rather than on whether they can actually do so). As Edwards continues to stress, this has led to “an exaggerated concept of the potential for using the ‘bully pulpit’ to go public.” Additionally, there exists a troublesome “belief in the potential of transformational leadership to change the opinions and behavior of followers in the public and actors in institutions and thus effect major change.” As a corrective, Edwards offers an alternative vision of presidential leadership centered on facilitation.

According to Edwards, facilitation entails recognition and exploitation of environmentally structured opportunities for change. His position seemingly echoes the theories of policy entrepreneurship that both Kingdon and Polsby

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made famous in their earlier studies on policy innovation. It is unclear how far the comparison should be pushed. While both the theory of facilitation and the theories of policy entrepreneurship focus on the importance of taking advantage of windows of opportunity rather than on creatively or heroically manufacturing these openings, Edwards further believes that presidential facilitators can at times illuminate, intensify, or channel their constituencies' aspirations, values, and policy views. Presidents can also work at the margins of coalition building and (sometimes) influence a few critical actors. Yet, for Edwards, presidential facilitators most certainly do not function as either persuasive directors of change or “event-making men,” who can reshape the political landscape and thus create opportunities for change.

When presenting his contextually sensitive theory, Edwards perhaps goes a half step too far in conflating persuasive leadership and transformative leadership. He might be stretching the former concept and saddling it with the extremely high expectations of the latter because he suggests inferences that do not apply equally across the two. Still, even if Edwards’ theory of presidential power calls for more conceptual clarity and causal specificity, his vision of leadership as facilitation successfully launches us towards the investigation of two compelling claims. First, he contends that presidential persuasion is not the key for understanding success in bringing about policy change. Second, he claims that political context and the opportunities it affords are what really matters.

He sensibly employs a best case/difficult case research design to explore both of these claims. He argues that the older theory about presidential persuasion should be jettisoned and replaced by his newer vision if the following two conditions are met: first, persuasiveness is not found to be a key to success in the most likely places; second, facilitation is discovered in the least likely places.

Edwards first asks whether presidents have been able to use persuasion to move public opinion. By looking briefly at Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt, and then in more depth at Ronald Reagan, Edwards concludes that even those presidents most renowned for their rhetorical skills were “rarely (able)
to lead the public and thus reshape the contours of the political landscape to pave the way for change.”19 Instead, they waited for their opportunities and then exploited them. Edwards arrives at much the same conclusion in his investigation of presidential success in persuading the Congress. He argues that the most likely suspects (FDR, Lyndon Johnson, and Reagan) failed to use persuasion to create broad possibilities for policy change, but they succeeded in facilitating policy change. Developmental scholars will rightly complain that modern presidents are overrepresented in these case studies, and specialists of particular administrations may find historical points upon which to disagree. Nevertheless, Edwards largely succeeds in demonstrating that some of the most likely presidents were unable to use persuasion to change minds in the short term.20

Edwards has mixed success in demonstrating that presidential facilitation explains policy change in the difficult cases. He is less successful in demonstrating that presidents used existing public opinion as a resource for changing the direction of public policy because he abandons his own research design. Rather than sticking with a straightforward case-study analysis, Edwards presents what is more an extended literature review on public-opinion research. This detailed survey is supported with many historical vignettes that artfully demonstrate points being made. The review also suggests a multitude of ways of incorporating opinion research into presidential studies. However, more might have been accomplished through detailed examination of less favorable contexts, such as the low approval presidencies of Truman or Carter and/or one of the pre-“rhetorical presidency” era administrations.21

This flaw is not fatal because Edwards saves his most original, and in many ways most compelling, case-study analysis for last. In his final empirical chapter, Edwards examines the Bush 41 and Bush 43 presidencies, which represent least likely cases for presidents to find success in dealing with Congress. His deft analysis suggests that presidents can bring about changes in policy even when they lack a persuasive vision, or come into office having almost no electoral mandate with which to persuade Congress. Indeed, as Edwards correctly notes, it wasn’t until George W. Bush stopped relying on his environment to create favorable strategic positions for him (and he instead tried to manufacture support—for both Social Security and immigration reform) that his run of


20. It still remains an open question whether rhetoric and persuasion might be better thought to operate as a causal force that develops over an extended period of time, akin to what Paul Pierson calls “slow-moving causal processes.” Paul Pierson, Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 82. Perhaps the opportunity for transformative change is preceded by short-term causal processes and circumstances, but rhetoric and persuasion (over time) provide the intellectual framework that establishes both the legitimacy for a particular kind of change and the basis for its continuation. I thank David K. Nichols for his insights on this point.

domestic policy successes ended. The two Bush presidencies demonstrate that legislative success can be had under conditions when persuasive skills and clear electoral mandates are absent. Edwards concludes that presidents need to understand that the greatest skill they can master is to learn to recognize circumstances favorable to policy change that they can exploit. Accordingly, presidential scholars should adjust their expectations, should think more clearly about how presidents marshal available resources, and should devote more attention to the contexts in which presidents attempt to lead.

Edwards's book represents the best within the second-wave literature that is critical of the reform-minded view of the presidency. He, however, also keeps the president at the center of the political order. He thus does not replace Neustadt's vision of presidential power as much as he reinterprets its essence. Still, he succeeds in updating our understanding of the strategic skills necessary for presidential success. In doing so, he recalibrates hopes for presidential leadership—downward. Given scholars' often a-contextual focus on the importance of leadership "style"—a legacy of the reform-minded vision of the presidency—this line of criticism is needed. Furthermore, Edwards is onto two things that I will later argue are very useful in the articulation of a third view of the American presidency. First, he rightly insists that we must focus on how context contributes to success and failure in the achievement of policy change, if we are to understand the nature and limitations of presidential leadership. Second, he suggests, without ever explicitly stating it, that presidential facilitation may, at certain times, function within a location in time and space that neo-institutional scholars call a "critical juncture." These are moments in which structural constraints have diminished and "the space for human agency opens." In this way, Edwards prepares us to appreciate our first—policy-centric—dimension of the political context in which presidents act.

The Presidency in Political Time: Attempting to Move Beyond the Limits of Pessimism

In Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal, Skowronek begins where criticisms of the reform-minded view of the
presidency, like Edwards’s, usually end. This is to say, Skowronek immediately confronts the lowered expectations and disillusionment with the office that are prevalent in second-wave writings. Thus, while Skowronek recognizes that “the patina of progress may have been stripped away” from the institution and that we may have lost our confidence in it, he insists that pessimism too has its limits.  

This is especially true since the presidency occupies a pivotal, perhaps transformative, position in the intermittent contests over ideology and long-term policy commitments that shape American politics for generations at a time. For instance, as he pointed out in his earlier path-breaking work, *The Politics Presidents Make*, the United States was (and maybe still is) working its way through a Reagan-led era that advantaged his conservative governing philosophy and coalitional affiliates. Given the lasting importance of presidential leadership, Skowronek wishes to approach the presidency anew by superseding the second-wave critique that remains tied to personalized, reform-minded, views. Rather than exploring the presidency along incrementally developing policy-centric lines, as does Edwards, Skowronek places the presidency along a new contextual dimension: political time.

Political time refers to “when in the sequence of sectarian unraveling the president engages the political-institutional order.” Skowronek notes that presidents who are separated by great spans of calendar time sometimes are similar in terms of the relative strength of their ideological regime’s standing within American politics (as well as their individual affiliation with the regime’s majority partisan coalition). In terms of regime life-cycles, presidents who are far apart in terms of chronological dates may have more in common with each other than with their immediate predecessors or successors. Skowronek illustrates the temporal parallels in a renowned two-by-two table specifying “the recurrent structures of political authority,” which is reproduced on page 85 of the reviewed volume. The fourfold typology conveys the different political regime management challenges that presidents face depending on their placement in their regime’s life-cycle: reconstruction, pre-emption, articulation, and disjunction.

The theory that presidents face recurrently structured problems posed by political time enables Skowronek to engage in the astute comparative historical analyses that lie at the heart of this collection of essays. Its primary goal is to articulate further a theory of leadership in political time and to explain more

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systematically how the changing shape of the political order affects presidential performance.\textsuperscript{29}

An important secondary goal in Skowronek’s research has always been to trace the origins of temporal political struggles to constitutional roots and the contradictory “order shattering” and “order affirming” warrants given to presidents.\textsuperscript{30} While the work under review deemphasizes this theme, Skowronek nonetheless suggests that the chief executive’s constitutional position all but mandates disruptive activities that serve as the ultimate source of the ebb and flow of political time. This opens the question of whether Skowronek’s attempt at launching a “third look” at the presidency has escaped the key assumption of both the reform-minded scholars and their second-wave critics—namely, the idea that the presidency should be seen as the center of America’s political universe.

Skowronek’s second chapter is a nice update of his famous thesis. He compares three pairs of presidents serving in similar contexts. He first plumbs the transformative impact of reconstructive contexts through a study of the presidencies of Andrew Jackson and Franklin Roosevelt.\textsuperscript{31} This is the context that other scholars, working with the critical-juncture framework, have suggested presents itself as an opportunity to reorder, transform, and rejuvenate the political system.\textsuperscript{32} He next examines contexts that call for articulation of established orthodoxies through a comparison of the James K. Polk and John F. Kennedy presidencies. He explores the destructive impact of disjunctive contexts via a comparison of the Franklin Pierce and Jimmy Carter presidencies. Missing from his analysis are paired cases of presidents acting within contexts that call for preemption. Skowronek attends to this typical situation context in the third chapter, which examines Bill Clinton’s presidency among the quartet of presidents who close out the twentieth century. He thus neatly fills out all four cells of his typology.\textsuperscript{33}


\textsuperscript{30} Skowronek, \textit{Presidential Leadership in Political Time}, 11. The attribution of the political-time cycle to presidential agency is reflected in the title of Skowronek’s \textit{The Politics Presidents Make}. It would need to be re-titled as “The Presidents Political Time Makes” if presidents weren’t the ultimate source of the political-time dynamic.


\textsuperscript{32} Nichols and Myers, “Exploiting the Reconstructive Opportunity.”

In the next two chapters, Skowronek insightfully extends his analysis, as did Edwards, to the presidency of George W. Bush. The first chapter on Bush provides additional evidence of the impact that growing constraints and stiffening crosscurrents have on second-generation affiliates.34 The second chapter reengages the literature critical of the reform-minded view of the president and contends that the much discussed return of the imperial presidency under the forty-third president should be understood not in terms of a relentless movement towards unbridled presidentialism. Rather, according to Skowronek, Bush's sometimes imperialistic presidency was the outcome of a confluence of historical currents and of the tendency of late-regime presidential articulators to overreach. Skowronek's fresh interpretation gives him little solace however. He concludes that the impulse to overreach is a recurrent feature of the normal regime life-cycle, and he laments that there may be few options but waiting for periodic overreach to serve as a catalyst for reconstructive recalibration.35

This tone continues in Skowronek's final chapter, which contains reflections on "whether Barack Obama would prove to be a reconstructive or preemptive leader."36 Here, Skowronek is at his subtle and thoughtful (if not very optimistic) best. He first characterizes Obama as a highly pragmatic president, and then considers whether such an individual can lead a successful reconstruction. He also entertains the possibilities that the reconstructive model of political transformation could operate under two other scenarios involving either another (less pragmatic) Democrat or someone on the American Right. His discussion of the low probabilities and many problems of any of these three scenarios creates a semi-dour ambiance, leaving readers with the distinct feeling that Skowronek has low expectations of ever seeing successful reconstructive politics again.

In fact, he appears intrigued by another provocative possibility—one that he has hinted at for years. Namely, he suggests that it is possible that "the reconstructive model of transformational leadership is (now) irrelevant."37 Here, he moves beyond his previously environmental-based arguments and conjectures that reconstructive leadership may have been "superseded" because of an underlying misfit between the ideational tenets of American "progressivism" and the disruptive necessities of reconstructive politics. Allegedly, the Left's commitment to "programmatic development, social experimentation and pragmatic adaptation" leaves it generally ill-suited to "a starkly repudiative posture" or a

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35. Skowronek, Presidential Leadership in Political Time, 155, 161.
36. Ibid., 167.
37. Ibid., 181.
“strong dismantling impulse in leadership.” In his view, at the heart of progressivism is “a philosophical skepticism about reconstructing power in any durable fashion, [and] a studied resistance to the whole idea of anchoring government and politics in firm foundations.”38 He concludes that pragmatic progressives, like Obama, may be prone to abandon the reconstructive stance altogether.

In the end, whether or not we fully accept Skowronek’s characterization of modern progressivism or agree with his description of the forty-fourth president, we are left with the pessimism that Skowronek had attempted to transcend at the beginning of his book. Such was also the case with The Politics Presidents Make, which ended on a slightly different note (Skowronek foresaw an increasingly constricted universe for political action and the “waning of political time”39). Now, however, the reasons for Skowronek’s persistent (but now more nuanced) glumness about the future of reconstructive politics are clearer: he has not made a clean break with the second-wave literature. Most fundamentally,40 Skowronek has not abandoned the assumption that the presidency is, for better or worse, the center of the political order. Indeed, as was noted earlier, Skowronek places the presidency at the political epicenter from the constitutional beginning. This is clearly done to promote the idea that disruptive presidential agency is the main driver of the political time cycle. Skowronek therefore does not need to rely on reform-minded progressives and scholars to move the institution to the center of the political universe around the turn of the twentieth century. For him, it was always the hub. It may thus be argued that he has unconsciously embedded first-wave ideals into his conception of the origins of political time. With such a beginning, we should not be surprised that pessimism eventually comes to dominate his reappraisal of the future of reconstructive leadership. Indeed, it is instructive that Skowronek now locates the origins of the demise of the political-time dynamic in ideational tenets held at the individual presidential level—exactly where second-wave scholars often locate their personalized, and not

38. Ibid., 181–84.
39. Skowronek still suggests that political time might be waning, but he now intimates that new presidential management tools (associated with party government) might be strong enough to overcome this problem (Presidential Leadership in Political Time, 32, 148–49, 161).
40. It could also be argued that, like Edwards and other second-wave critics, Skowronek does not actually abandon the focus on presidential power. Rather, he reinterprets its essence and brilliantly explains its effectiveness as varying within the broader context of political-regime management. Even though Skowronek continually eschews framing his findings in terms of Neustadt's understanding of the skills/tasks necessary for successful exercise of presidential power (in political time), other scholars have adapted his political-time framework in ways that do so. See: Crockett, The Opposition Presidency and Running Against the Grain; Nichols and Myers, “Exploiting the Reconstructive Opportunity,” and Keith Whittington, Political Foundations of Judicial Supremacy: The Presidency, the Supreme Court, and Constitutional Leadership in U.S. History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).
particularly optimistic, critiques. It looks as if Skowronek’s view of political time is eventually swamped by the second-wave pessimism he constructed it against.

We may, however, ask ourselves: does this have to be the end of the story? Isn’t it true that if a way could be found to keep political time from collapsing, then Skowronek’s own initial goal of moving presidential studies beyond the personalized views of reform-minded scholars and the pessimism of second-wave critics could be realized? In the remainder of this essay, I shall therefore argue that it is possible to salvage Skowronek’s vision of political time. To accomplish this goal, it appears necessary to reconceptualize the presidency and remove it from the center of the political universe. This entails viewing the presidency as existing within the context of a larger political system, which is the ultimate source of the political-time dynamic that recurrently compels presidents to reorder politics. For more insight on this theoretical move, we need to look briefly outside the presidency literature and become aware of a third, more systemic understanding of context.

A Return to the Mainsprings of American Politics

In Voting in American Elections, Burnham presents the fruits of a lifetime of data accumulation. One might read this work simplistically as “the tally of votes actually cast in elections.” However, its multi-level, historical approach and framing essays also reflect Burnham’s fascination with the determinants of voter turnout and his ongoing search for the mainsprings of American politics. His long quest for these mainsprings points us towards a third, systemic, level of context; and his book suggests a way of placing the presidency within a larger systemic view and salvaging the concept of political time, without explicitly doing either itself.

As Tom Ferguson points out in an introductory essay, one of Burnham’s lasting contributions to political science has been his ongoing attention to the importance of voter turnout in defining the political universe. Burnham has long argued that a close connection exists between the percentage of the population actually voting and the public policy that is pursued. To secure their goals, social, political, and economic groups have attempted to influence turnout. Burnham therefore discerns four eras of democratic participation: the deferential-participant period (1788–1827), the “golden age” (1828–1900),

the great demobilization (1890–1930), and the “ups and downs” of modern times (1932–2008).

Until this volume, scholars had almost nowhere to turn to if they wished to fully exploit state-level data to explore turnout as an explanatory variable. Due to the notoriously decentralized nature of American voting records, it has taken a battery of researchers nearly three quarters of a century to overcome hurdles to the accumulation of basic data and to come up with vote tallies across most federal elections. And this provides just the turnout numerator! One of Burnham’s major contributions is to supply all the denominators, or potential electorate estimates, which enable voter turnout statistics to be created. Burnham also fills in many other blank spots on the electoral map. He provides complete data on all the federal elections before 1824, turnout estimates for state gubernatorial elections (including the high frequency Massachusetts races), and—for the first time ever—turnout statistics for southern primaries as well as data on the number of people paying poll taxes during much of the period of one-party dominance. With rich multi-level and longitudinal data in just over four hundred pages, this work promises to supply “the Holy Grail of American national election studies: a continuous run of data on electoral turnout since the foundation of the republic.”

Not surprisingly, a volume dedicated to a monumental data assembly task ends up being light on explicit analysis. However, even if the production of voting-turnout statistics can be likened to accounting for thousands upon thousands of trees, it certainly is not the case that Burnham has failed to consider what this forest of information tells us. In his introductory essay, he discusses the diverse social, institutional, and behavioral determinants that over time give turnout both its shape and stability. His periodization scheme also shows that the shape of the political universe changes only periodically. According to Burnham, voter turnout cannot be explained only by the incrementally evolving preferences of socio-economic and political actors. Indeed, as some readers no doubt have already noted, all three shifts between eras of democratic involvement (centering on the elections of 1828, 1896, and 1932) occurred during periods of party system realignment. This suggests that Burnham has a vision of political time that resembles yet departs from the theory of regime life-cycles that Skowronek propounds. Let us explore Burnham’s idea more deeply by recalling arguments from his earlier work.

While most attention (and debate) within the realignment literature has centered upon the “critical election” theme in Burnham’s 1970 classic, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics*, the book’s title also refers to a broader topic beyond critical elections: the uncoiling forces that drive American

According to Burnham, the mainsprings of American politics arise from the combination of a stasis-prone political system with a dynamic socio-economic one. The former system cannot permanently stay in alignment with the latter. Over time, the growing tensions are periodically relieved through an “electoral earthquake,” which serves as a reoccurring critical juncture in the development of new party systems. This rapid change allows new political forces to emerge, and the two systems momentarily are made compatible with each other. Then, the cycle starts anew. Additionally, during these critical reordering periods, political groups and economic interests are sometimes able to systematically alter voter turnout.

Because of Skowronek’s theories, we no longer need to accept the final (and most controversial) step within Burnham’s line of argument, which is that critical elections drive these cyclical processes. A few scholars have argued that we should choose instead to view Skowronek’s reconstructive presidency as the prime mover within the dynamics of party system or “regime order” change. Stated differently, Burnham’s and Skowronek’s work could be synthesized in a way that both relocates the source of regime change to a non-presidentially centered mainspring, while retaining the institution as its reordering mechanism. Such a synthesis would allow admirers of Skowronek’s approach to avoid the idea of a collapse of political time by removing the presidency from the center of the universe and by giving the life-cycle dynamics of regimes a systemic origin.

Some scholars have extended Burnham’s argument on systemic origins. Gary Miller and Norman Schofield, for instance, contend that the changing shape of the American political order can be understood in terms of two-party political competition taking place within instable multi-dimensional space. This systemic context recurrently encourages “outflanking” appeals to broaden
coalitions, after which the party system eventually realigns and the prominent values of the regime change.\textsuperscript{49}

If this argument is true, several things follow. First, because two-party competition ostensibly derives from electoral rules,\textsuperscript{50} political time would arise from the full constitutional structure of the United States, which encourages the use of first-past-the-post electoral races. And since the dominant feature of this structure is its separation-of-powers design, competition for control over the multiple institutions of government must play an important but, as of yet, unarticulated role in the origins of political time.\textsuperscript{51} Secondly, if a regime arises, matures, and dies in the context of constitutionally structured political competition, then the impact of political time would be felt outside the presidency.\textsuperscript{52} Finally, and perhaps most importantly, if political time is a consequence of political competition, challenges to the life of a regime may exist independently of secular developments within the regime. Neither the thickening of the welfare state nor a president's hesitance to reconstruct would bring about the end of the life-cycle-like sequence of political time. These events would only further complicate movement within the cycle.

While explication of this proposed synthesis lies beyond the scope of this review, the proposal is exciting because it promises to account for political time without the presidency, yet keeps the institution front and center in the story of how the office is recurrently used to respond to problems that have deeper structural and political roots. This leads to the question: what exactly is “context”? No definition emerges from Burnham’s current work or from the other books under review. Most writers employ vague terms like “environment” when attempting to clarify the concept.\textsuperscript{53} However, Burnham’s approach suggests a conceptual framework that might be used to think more rigorously about this important question.

\textsuperscript{49} As Aldrich has, in effect, argued, political competition “rightly understood” includes not only the office-holding goals of elites, but the resolution of fundamental issues due to the instability of majority rule. John Aldrich, \textit{Why Parties: The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 67.


\textsuperscript{51} One critique of Miller and Schofield’s work could be that it does not adequately address issues of timing. Why have coalitions tended to collapse with cyclical regularity? The answer may lie in the fact that two-party competition in multidimensional space also occurs in a system of separated powers.

\textsuperscript{52} Keith Whittington’s work has already begun to demonstrate this idea nicely; see \textit{Political Foundations of Judicial Supremacy}.

\textsuperscript{53} True, the case studies in Edwards’s book include such contextual factors as public opinion, strategic position, and party strength in Congress. However, he usually employs the term “environment” in the opening chapter.
Like V.O. Key and E.E. Schattschneider before him (and, implicitly, Skowronek after him), Burnham focuses on systems of action. Actions are conceived of as occurring within a framework whose structure shapes results. Sometimes the actions aim to alter the system itself; but more often agency is directed at objects within a system. The causal force of “context” does not normally flow from the objectives or processes of agency. Rather, it emanates from the system of action in which agents, objects, and processes are embedded.

A “systems approach” to context offers several insights to an analyst. A “systems approach” to context offers several insights to an analyst.54 For starters, context might be provisionally conceived as a set of independent variables emanating from a system of action that shapes outcomes of interest within it. So, for example, Burnham focuses on party systems of action and understands the contextual set in terms of two variables: a static political system that exists side by side with a dynamic socio-economic system. Electoral outcomes are shaped by the disequilibrium that periodically develops between these two contextual variables.

Given this approach, context will vary from system of action to system of action. While it is possible to identify the elements of a particular contextual set and thus determine its domain, context has no universal specification. This explains why the concept is often vaguely alluded to in particular cases rather than given a clear, universally applicable definition.

Furthermore, context alone does not explain outcomes. It only helps one explain. Agency, contingency, and other determinants will play roles in the story, and it is the job of the researcher to untangle these relationships. However, context itself originates from mainsprings that, by definition, are external to actors.

Burnham’s systemic view brings these possibilities to light. His current book therefore accomplishes more than the herculean feat of compiling a complete set of American electoral data. It invites us to return to the foundations of his thought and gain important insights about the origins of political time and the meaning of context. In short, it confirms Burnham’s first-order place among social scientists of the last century and verifies that the pursuit of an overarching account of U.S. developmental history remains a worthy undertaking.

A Broad Picture

When the books by Edwards, Skowronek, and Burnham are considered together, a new picture emerges. Contrary to what both the early reform-minded scholars and second-wave critics presume, the presidency does not stand fixed at the center of a narrow theoretical framework. Rather, the cumulative thrust of

the three reviewed books suggests that the entire American constitutional system constitutes a mural sized arrangement and is itself the mainspring of political time. Meanwhile, the presidency appears sketched in the mural as if in motion, because the separation-of-powers design simultaneously empowers and constrains the chief-executive, commander-in-chief, and de facto party leader. The motif thus appears and reappears in different moments of the composition, as context allows. This enables the institution sometimes to dominate parts of the enormous composition, most notably during policy windows and reconstructive critical junctures. In other points of the mural, the presidency occupies a secondary but still important location near the center of action. This dynamic, complex, yet balanced picture provides the basis for a broader, richer, theoretical framework of analysis.

Fortunately, not only do the three books under review intimate that development of this broad picture is necessary to advance presidential studies. They provide the critical-juncture conceptual building block necessary, I believe, for the production of the composition. All three books implicitly use this framework (as policy windows, reconstructive opportunities, and realigning moments), which suggests that the critical-juncture framework could be employed more rigorously by presidential scholars who hope either to understand the processes and dynamics that structure policy and regime-management outcomes, or to articulate a systemic theory of the origins of political time. It is conceivable that scholars of the presidency even could take a leading role in understanding how critical junctures work in general.55

Together, these books correct longstanding and conflicting deficiencies in the literature. At one end of the research spectrum, extant scholarship has failed to account for presidential leadership at the regime-management level and has ignored the fact that periodic opportunities for meaningful reordering are possible. At the other end of the spectrum, research has failed to maintain (or make) links with systemic causes. Those who originally considered systemic mainsprings sometimes became mired in narrow debates over critical elections and failed to account for the role the presidency plays in the reordering dynamic. Meanwhile, those who traced the mainsprings of political time back to the presidency itself appear to have planted seeds for the whole dynamic to collapse.

By highlighting the importance of context, the books under review can help scholars appreciate the nature of presidential leadership and its political

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55. Presidential scholars could take advantage of the fact that exploitation of policy windows and political-regime reconstruction are recurrent phenomenon. Their determinants can be more readily isolated and studied than those in the highly differentiated case studies that dominate the comparative literature on the subject. For example, see Collier and Collier's excellent work on labor incorporation in eight South American countries, _Shaping the Political Arena_.

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possibilities. Their combined insights will enable academics to fulfill Skowronek’s original call and move beyond the assumptions of the reform-minded scholars and their second-wave critics. When combined, the books make clear that while the president can be a central political player, the presidency is not the center of the political universe. Successful presidential leadership cannot be easily reduced to or understood simply in terms of whether an individual president possesses a specific array of character traits or political skills. Context matters too much. It structures opportunities and pitfalls, which renders futile attempts to simply reduce successful presidential leadership to the multi-element sets by which some scholars and journalists judge presidents. The effectiveness of particular (and important) skills and character traits varies with circumstances.56

Edwards is certainly on the right track by innovatively conceiving of leadership as the ability to recognize and exploit environmentally structured opportunities. Presidents need both contextual awareness and the Machiavellian ability to alter their “mode of procedure [to accord] with the needs of the times.”57 However, as Skowronek points out, presidents not only concentrate on policies, but need to focus on higher level issues of regime management. Therefore, we cannot dismiss the need for the study of presidentially led transformative change. Burnham reminds us that the political universe recurrently produces impetus for this sort of change because of broad systemic forces and that, therefore, reconstructive presidential leadership must be exercised periodically.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of these books is that they bring the health of the polity back to the study of presidential leadership.58 They prompt us to think about how the president addresses system-wide problems. From the new third view, presidents appear neither responsible for the origins of these problems nor capable of preventing them from unfolding. However, even though the presidency no longer appears as the source of political time, the institution still appears uniquely placed within the constitutional system to facilitate policy innovation and lead political-regime reconstructions. At the very least, this ensures that presidents are recurrently given the opportunity to respond to

56. As Grover Cleveland’s two presidencies highlight, different skills may be needed at differing times. Cleveland’s failure to adapt his leadership style to the changing political and economic context helps account for how his first non-consecutive term could be so successful and his second so awful.


systemic problems. The institution therefore remains a key to the challenge of periodically renewing the American polity. Taken together, the three books add to this essential understanding of American politics.

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