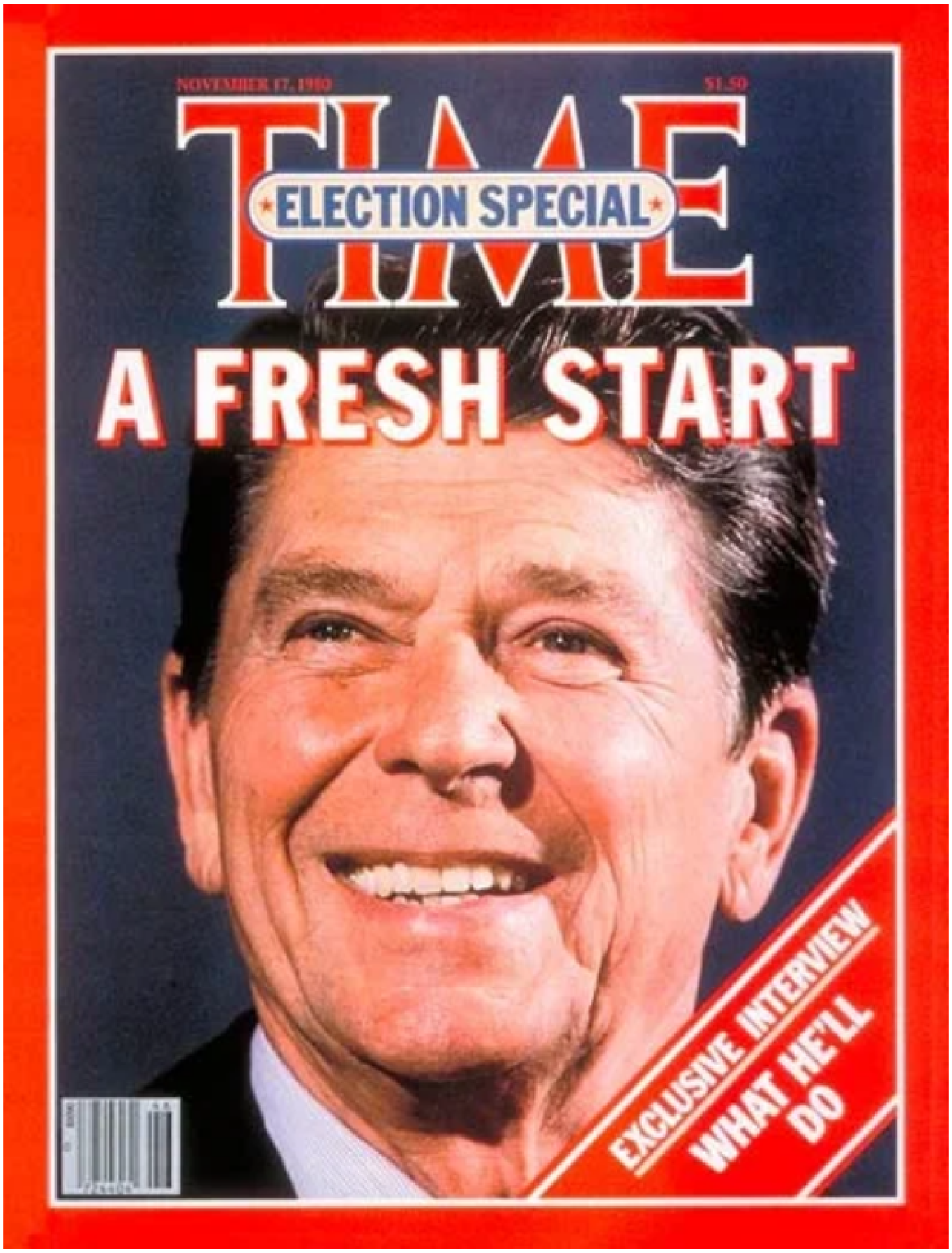
Module Overview: The Presidency in Social and Historical Context



Reagan's 1980 victory over Carter is generally viewed as marking a major shift away from the New Deal era

This week we will continue our big-picture analysis of the presidency and introduce two more scholarly frameworks that extend beyond what was covered in the first module. Week 1 focused on the interaction between different *political* actors and institutions, particularly looking at the presidency in relation to Congress and the rest of the federal government. This is fundamental to understanding the presidency.

But it is important to situate this day-to-day political process in a wider context. Here we will pursue two approaches. First, we will consider how individual presidents might fit into a larger pattern of *historical development* across the entire history of the United States. Second, we will relate the presidency to *economic* and *social* interests that play a major role in shaping the political process.

The aim here is to: a) explore these other dimensions as important factors that help explain the presidency and the actions of different presidents; and b) see how these additional perspectives might fit together with, but also challenge and complicate, the perspectives from Week 1.

Historical Context

We start the week with Stephen Skowronek's particular approach to placing individual presidents in historical context. Module 1 already introduced one way to draw on history to understand the presidency: the idea of a "modern presidency" only makes sense when we trace the historical evolution and growth of the presidency over time.

But Skowronek offers a very different historical analysis. He argues that US politics have been defined by a series of governing regimes (political coalitions) that rise to power, play a dominant role in political life for a significant period of time, and decline. In his view, all presidents can be placed into this repeating pattern of governing regimes. Each regime consists of various political elites (for instance, members of Congress in the same party as the president) and the public (voters and interest groups) that supports and influences these officials. Every regime also has a set of values/ideas and policy goals that define the political vision of the regime.

For example, Skowronek argues that Thomas Jefferson launched a governing regime that was central to US politics from 1800 until 1828, when Andrew Jackson was elected president and a new regime emerged that lasted until the Civil War. From this perspective, we can better understand individual presidents by recognizing their specific roles in a regime: some presidents are able to launch a regime, others attempt to oversee or manage an ongoing regime, and some take office when their regime is declining. To complicate this analysis, there are also some presidents who get elected as outsiders, who don't fit into an ongoing dominant regime (with the dominant regime remaining powerful in Congress, for example).

The Skowronek reading explains all of this in more detail and uses some specific terminology that I won't elaborate on here. But his central concept is the idea of placing each president in what he calls "political time." For instance, is a given president a regime builder? Or is he a regime manager sustaining an existing regime? Or is he forced to lead a declining regime? If you can identify where a president fits among these different repeating points in "political time" you can understand a lot about his situation and how this shapes his behavior.

As I hope you will see, it can also be useful to take Skowronek's model and ask questions about more recent presidents. For example, is Trump part of the Republican governing regime that started with Reagan? If so, what point in "political time" would you say he occupies? Or do you think he fits into the Skowronek model in some other way? (Or not at all.)

Economic and Social Context

For the second half of the week, we turn to a different kind of context, focusing on Grover's argument (in Chapter 2) about the need to connect US politics to the economy and economic power. To be specific, Grover argues that it might be true that the president looks pretty powerful if you just focus on the relationship to Congress and other government actors. But in his view you **also** need see the presidency in relation to capitalism (the market economy). And once you make that shift, this reveals that the presidency faces important additional constraints.

In Grover's view, the privately owned businesses (giant corporations) that are central to a capitalist economy are often able to shape the behavior of government. In other words, big business is politically powerful, and perhaps the president is in some ways a "prisoner" to the demands and needs of these business interests (Grover's book is titled The President as Prisoner).

I will leave it to the reading to explain why Grover thinks business interests have so much power over the president. Here I will just note that: a) you should focus on what he sees as the two different dimensions of this business power, what he calls "instrumental" business power and "structural" business power; and b) you do not need to worry about all of the scholars he mentions in Chapter 2 (such as Nikos Poulantzas or Fred Block) -- just focus on the ideas.

At the same time, as much as Grover points to business interests as the key economic group that often influences the presidency (and other parts of government), he also discusses the idea that "social struggle" and public demands -- for instance, in the form of social movements -- can also influence government and at times overcome the "normal" power of business. To build on this idea, you are also reading an article by Daniel Tichenor that explores the significance of two earlier 20th Century social movements in shaping the presidency and US politics.

Here's one way to think about this: if the US system is designed to limit the pace of political change (because of checks and balances) and if powerful business interests might also aim to limit certain kinds of government action, why have there nonetheless been important moments of major policy change? And why have presidents sometimes been able to play an important role pushing these policies forward? A possible answer touched on by Grover and explored by Tichenor is to consider how mass movements can promote what Tichenor calls "contentious" change.

Combining Grover and Tichenor, the aim here is to explore how the political process relates back to economic and social conditions and group conflicts in American society. To understand the presidency, we need to think about how different groups/interests potentially exert power over politics, and how the political process responds to (and shapes) those interests.

Hopefully the two parts of this week's module then give you a wider set of perspectives to apply to any given president.

Here are some points to focus on as you do the reading and related assignments for this week:

August 2 - August 4

1. What does Skowronek mean by the idea of "political time" and how does this potentially help us understand the presidency?

2. How does Skowronek use the sequence of experiences from FDR through Kennedy to Carter to illustrate his argument?

3. How does Skowronek's approach potentially complicate the contrast between a traditional presidency and a modern presidency?

4. How does Skowronek's approach potentially challenge Neustadt's emphasis on individual skill and effective persuasion as the key to success or failure in the White House?

5. How might Skowronek's perspective help us to think about the Obama and/or Trump Administrations (not addressed in the reading)?

August 5 - August 6

1. What does Grover mean when he refers to a "structural" approach to understanding the presidency? What structure is he talking about?

2. When Grover discusses business power over politics, he refers to "instrumental" business power and "structural" (or structural-functionalist) business power. What does he mean, and how do these two kinds of power work?

3. When Grover says "social struggle" can complicate the normal advantages business interests have over other groups in shaping politics, what does he mean? How does this work?

4. How does Tichenor's analysis of social movements from the first half of the 20th Century add to our understanding? Does this fit with or challenge Grover's views?

5. How do the perspectives put forward by Grover and Tichenor fit with or potentially challenge other perspectives we have encountered? What does Grover think he is challenging Laski, Rossiter, Neustadt, and Schlesinger?

6. Can you apply Grover or Tichenor's ideas to the Obama or Trump years?

This week there are two graded discussions (due Wednesday and Friday, since the first paper is due Monday and I wanted to give you a little more time to work through the material). There is also the second short paper assignment that will be posted on August 4 and due next week, on August 12.