"Presidential Success: a Product of Character or Circumstances?"

by Zachary M. Primrose

4/19/2010

President Franklin D. Roosevelt

President Herbert Hoover
Presidential success is one of the most elusive topics that a scholar of political science could choose to address, but the same issues that make defining presidential success so difficult make it an interesting subject that is open to debate. There are several problems with attempting to define a successful presidency; first, who is defining success? If you conduct a poll of average American citizens you are likely to get a much different perspective than you would than if you had asked political scientists, and if you poll historians than you may get yet another set of conflicting results. When you conduct your poll do you ask an equal proportion of Democrats and Republicans? What about third-party supporters and those who define themselves as apolitical?

The second problem is what constitutes a successful presidency? How do we assess a president like Lyndon B. Johnson who achieved success domestically, but whose foreign policy was ultimately disastrous? Most people would agree that Bill Clinton was an able executive, but when we evaluate the success of his presidency how do we, if at all, factor in his scandalous behavior that ultimately led to impeachment proceedings against him? And what about George W. Bush; a president whose leadership after the September 11 attacks sent his approval rating soaring into the stratosphere, but subsequently received some of the most dismal approval ratings in recent history. An even bigger problem, perhaps, is how do we judge presidents who die after a short stint in office such as James Garfield who only served six months in office, and William Henry Harrison who only served 31 days in office before passing away. Should these presidents get the benefit of the doubt, or receive a low rank de facto?

Finally when we want to make a definitive, historically inclusive, ranking of Presidents and their relative success how do we reconcile conflicting information? For example, Dwight Eisenhower and Harry Truman have fluctuated greatly in the rankings of best and worst presidents throughout the years. Presidential greatness is subjective and can change depending on the values of the era in which the president is being evaluated¹, the information available about a particular president’s time in office, and arbitrary matters.² Some presidents are vindicated by history and others lose status with time. For example, Lyndon B. Johnson seems to fare better in opinion polls as the Vietnam War falls further into
the past, but Andrew Jackson’s treatment of Native Americans has been damaging to his enduring legacy. Should we give greater credence to opinions of the era or those with the benefit of hindsight?³

As difficult as it may be to define presidential success, there are presidents who are consistently ranked near the top such as Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, and those who are consistently ranked near the bottom such as Buchanan, Pierce, Harding, and Hoover.⁴⁵⁶ The fact that some presidents are consistently ranked high and others low begs the question: why do some presidents succeed and others fail? Can a President’s character and political skills alone make his administration a success, or do political circumstances set some presidents up for success and doom others to failure?

Fred I. Greenstein, Professor of Politics at Princeton University and a leading scholar in the field of political psychology thinks that presidential character is the most important determining factor for a successful administration. Greenstein argues that certain Presidents of the past have had personal attributes which have brought about their success in office, or led to their ultimate failure. For example George Washington, in Greenstein’s words “radiated authority” which allowed him to command respect and greater cooperation from congress. In contrast, Greenstein characterized John Adams as “self-righteous, irritable, and contentious,” personal attributes that people generally loathe; consequently Adams’ was a presidential failure.⁷

Presidential character has garnered attention, consciously and unconsciously, ever since George Washington first stepped foot in office in 1789. Whether one agrees with Greenstein or not, there is no denying the importance of a president’s character; after all the definition of character according to the Merriam Webster dictionary is: “The aggregate of features and traits that form the individual nature of some person or thing.” Character influences everything that we as human beings do, and everything that presidents choose to do, or not do, while they are in office. With the belief that character can be assessed and provide valuable predictions about a president’s likelihood of success several prominent figures in political science, including Greenstein, have devised systems of evaluating presidential character.

Fred I. Greenstein argues that presidents with strong character that radiate authority will essentially manufacture their own presidential success. Along with a Ph.D. from Yale University
Greenstein did a year of postdoctoral study at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. Greenstein’s background enabled him to use psychoanalytical methodology to appraise presidential character by assessing presidents’ strengths and weaknesses in six categories: public communication, cognitive style, organization of the presidency, political skill, policy vision, and emotional intelligence. The late James David Barber is another scholar who focused on the importance of presidential character in predicting success in office. Barber’s methodology was much more simplistic, but received a lot of attention with his 1972 book *Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*. Barber chose character, world-view, and style as the primary character traits and devised a matrix which classified presidents as active or passive in how they performed their job in office, and positive or negative in how much enjoyment and satisfaction they derived from being president.⁸

Greenstein presents a very straightforward argument in support of presidential character being the most important predictor for presidential success. Presidents with a strong character, according to Greenstein, will essentially pave their own path to success.⁹ A president with a strong character suitable for office will be able to better communicate with the public and create popular support for the policies that he is advocating. His cognitive style will allow him to quickly adjust to the learning curve that all new presidents face and enable him to effectively process information and formulate plans of action. Presidents with effective organizational skills will be able to effectively delegate and get their administration running like a smoothly oiled machine. Political skill is an important for any president because it will allow him to effectively build coalitions, reach across party lines if necessary, and ultimately pass legislation. A president with good, clear, policy vision knows exactly what he wants to accomplish from the outset and can foresee the obstacles which he might encounter. Finally, a president with high emotional intelligence will be able to navigate his social environment and avoid scandalous and/or potentially damaging behavior.¹⁰

Stanley Renshon is a professor of political science at the City University of New York, and is also a trained psychoanalyst. Like Greenstein, Renshon incorporates psychoanalysis into his evaluation of Presidents’ suitability for office and how it affects their success.¹¹ Renshon believes that psychological
traits such as character, temperament, ambition, integrity, ideals, self-esteem, relatedness, judgment, decision making, political leadership, and cognition taken in consideration together make up a particular President's psychological suitability, but psychological suitability and overall character must ultimately be considered in conjunction with political suitability. According to Renshon a President's psychological suitability and political suitability can be at odds with each other; in other words a President can be a great political leader, but instability in his personality traits may or may not lead to disaster. Due to its reliance on psychoanalysis and need to ascertain a great deal of knowledge about a president, Renshon’s method of evaluating Presidential character is the most complex and difficult to apply out of all the methods described thus far.

Greenstein’s system of evaluating presidents' character is a useful tool indeed; it is undeniable that a president who is skilled in each of the categories that Greenstein has chosen to evaluate will undoubtedly have an advantage over president that is not as skilled. Greenstein’s system goes further than James D. Barber’s system which has been criticized for being overly simplistic, but is character and skill everything? In every aspect of life whether it be sports, business, music, or politics we have seen giants fall; we have seen heroes and champions flounder due to extenuating circumstances. For the most part our Presidents have been extraordinarily intelligent men with impeccable pedigrees, so how do we end up with “bad presidents?”

Steven Skowronek, professor of Political Science at Yale University, believes that political time and recurring structures of political authority have more to do with determining a successful or unsuccessful presidency than the personal attributes of the president. Skowronek’s theory of political time and recurring structures of political authority is a complex idea that takes into account the regimes that have dominated American politics; for example, the era of Jeffersonian Democracy from 1800 to 1832 and the era of New Deal Liberalism from 1932 to 1980. According to Skowronek, Presidents’ political situations are determined by their affiliation with the dominant regime and the resilience of the regime’s policy commitments, therefore each president’s situation is unique from that of their predecessor. Political time and recurrent structures of authority fit in well with the observed phenomenon
of realignments: the cyclical shifts of power from one political party to another, which have occurred throughout American history. Most importantly, Skowronek’s theory explains how there are some Presidents that, despite their talent and intelligence, fail to achieve success in the White House.

Politics of reconstruction is the structure of political authority that Skowronek has defined that the vast majority of our presidents that we consider great have enjoyed. Politics of reconstruction provides the best opportunity for political success because it is, politically speaking, the dawn of a new era. Politics of reconstruction occurs when the new president is opposed to the existing regime and the regime’s policy commitments are vulnerable. Thus, the incoming president essentially has a clean slate on which he can begin to make his mark. Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt have been Presidents who have enjoyed the fruits of reconstruction and, according to Skowronek and many other political scientists; they have each defined their own lasting regimes in American politics.  

All of these men came into office at a time when the public had lost faith in the orthodoxies of the previous regime. The outgoing regime’s policies were no longer seen as adequate to meet the needs of the nation; therefore the people began looking elsewhere for the leadership necessary to usher in the changes that they see as necessary. Presidents who enter office during politics of reconstruction have more freedom than presidents in other structures of authority to make drastic reforms because the nation is prepared for, and in need of, great change. In short, the presidents who we consider to be the greatest, although undoubtedly great men, have politically benefitted from being in the right place at the right time.

Politics of Articulation could very well be the second best leadership position for a president to find himself in. Politics of Articulation occurs when a president is affiliated with the existing regime and the regime’s policy commitments are resilient; Skowronek describes these presidents as preachers to the faithful. The regime has already been established and is in no immediate danger of losing its foothold; much of the hard work that involves formulating political doctrines and winning over the public has already been done. Presidents that have been categorized by Skowronek as practicing politics of articulation are Theodore Roosevelt, Lyndon B. Johnson, and both of the Bushes.
Presidents who come to power under the articulation structure are, for the most part, set for smooth sailing politically, but that is not to say that there cannot be pitfalls for these presidents. Due to the fact that these Presidents are expected to carry on with the policies of the regime, Presidents of Articulation feel that they have strong mandates. They are expected to further the policies of the regime that they are affiliated with; therefore, if they get too creative with their own agenda and operate in a manner inconsistent with the regime they can rock the boat within their party and anger their supporters. George H.W. Bush’s presidency was archetypal of politics of articulation; speaking of Ronald Reagan’s previous policies he said “We’re not coming in to correct the ills of the past. We’re coming in to build on a proud record that has already been established.”

Politics of Preemption is a peculiar situation for a President to find himself in. Preemption occurs when a President is opposed to the current regime, but the regime’s commitments are still resilient. Presidents who work within the restraints of preemption must adapt to conform somewhat to the expectations of the regime, yet retain their own political identity. Woodrow Wilson, Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, and Bill Clinton are examples of preemptive presidents. These Presidents need to walk a tightrope, being careful not to alienate their party, the voters, or the regime which has established the political framework of the era.

So why is it that preemptive presidents do not become full blown insurgents like reconstructive presidents? First of all, the opposing regime, which established the political framework that preemptive presidents have to work in, is still valid and resilient; secondly, preemptive presidents’ commitments are very personalized and narrowly tailored to avoid alienating groups with conflicting political interests, which make them hard for a successor to maintain. Due to the fact that Preemptive presidents are usually moderates, they risk losing credibility amongst those in their party and validating the opposition if they pander to the orthodoxy of the established regime too much. The stress of governing from outside the dominant regime and facing constant opposition, according to Skowronek, has led to the destruction of preemptive presidents in the past, a perfect example being Woodrow Wilson’s inability to gain support for the League of Nations.
Politics of disjunction is, by far, the worst structure of political authority for a President to inherit. Politics of disjunction occurs when a President is affiliated with the dominant regime, but the regime's policies are vulnerable. Presidents operating within the framework of politics of disjunction are essentially lame-duck presidents for the entirety of their term and are nearly always remembered as weak leaders. Disjunctive leaders come into office at a time when the established regime's ideology and commitments are becoming obsolete.\textsuperscript{21} Possibly the best example of politics of disjunction is Jimmy Carter. Carter came to office in 1976 at the time when New Deal Liberalism, which had been established by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932, was perceived as outdated. The United States was facing serious problems economically and the oil crisis complicated matters further. The political atmosphere was unstable; the South, which had formerly been a stronghold for the Democrats, was losing ground to the Republicans and radical conservatism was on the rise.\textsuperscript{22} Carter realized the problems that his party and fellow ideologues faced, and he planned to revive new deal liberalism, but ultimately his efforts were futile.

People were more skeptical of government than ever because of Richard Nixon's scandalous presidency. The problems that the nation was facing were obviously not caused by Carter himself, but despite the fact that he campaigned as a Washington outsider, he quickly came to be seen as part of the Democratic establishment and, ultimately, part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Carter's difficult presidency, which has never been perceived as particularly successful, became the end of an era in political time which was followed by a meteoric conservative insurgency led by Ronald Reagan, an archetypal reconstructive president.\textsuperscript{23}

Skowronek's theory is best summed up with the adage "if it is not broke, do not fix it." Naturally, those who "fix it", reconstructive presidents, get the lion's share of the glory. Reconstructive presidents are remembered as innovators who brought the country out of a tailspin, but it is giving them too much credit to say that they were the only ones who could have achieved such success. Our reconstructive presidents, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan have, without a doubt, been great men, but the radical changes that they made were not due to their forceful
"take the bull by the horns personalities," but rather to the fact that all of these men came into office at a time when the country was ready for a change. It is no coincidence that the reconstructive presidents, who are considered the greatest presidents, have all dealt with national crises. Lincoln's and Franklin D. Roosevelt are perfect examples of Presidents who got their license to enact sweeping change as a result of unprecedented national crises. Another similarity that reconstructive presidents share is the fact the executive who preceded them had failed in adapting the former regime’s orthodox policies to solve the nation’s problems. Even Stanley Renshon, who believes that presidential character is paramount above all wrote of this phenomenon: “There is no doubt that in such revolutionary circumstances that the times make the man, just as they allow the man to remake the times.” This quote poignantly sums up the relationship between reconstructive presidents and their political atmosphere. The reconstructive president comes in during a time of crisis, when the crisis diminishes the president is hailed as a hero, then he is granted the leeway that is necessary to create a new regime, and thus the insurgency is complete.

Skowronek’s theory follows from logic and human nature and helps to explain the observed phenomena of realignments, that there have never been back-to-back powerhouse leaders, and why the great presidents are preceded by presidents who are perceived to be the greatest failures. The regime structure presented by Skowronek is correlated with the phenomenon of realignment in American party politics; the country has gone through periods where one party or the other gains a foothold on the national level with that party holding a majority of seats in congress and winning a majority of the presidential races during that period. Skowronek’s regimes run parallel with the periods delineated by many realignment theorists with changes occurring every 30 to fifty years. According to Skowronek’s theory, only reconstructive presidents truly have a mandate for sweeping change, their immediate successors are either articulative, or preemptive presidents who are not expected to deviate from the status quo, thus, getting two extremely powerful leaders in a row is highly unlikely. Just as the articulative and preemptive presidents are not expected to fix what is not broken, disjunctive presidents are ridiculed for not fixing what is broken. Jimmy Carter is the archetypal victim of disjunctive politics; when the nation
called for a drastic change Carter failed to deliver. Ronald Reagan capitalized on the failures of the Carter administration; he came into office at a time when the policy commitments of New Deal liberalism were vulnerable and, as a member of the opposition, he was able to lead an insurgency that took the nation in a more conservative direction.  

The aspects of presidential character that Greenstein and Barber evaluate certainly have an effect on a president's success. It almost goes without saying that a president who is a great communicator will be more effective than a president who is an average or poor communicator and a president who is organized will ultimately be more efficient than a president who is unorganized, but for a president to be truly great he must have opportunities to be great. Even though James D. Barber was a scholar who focused on presidential character, he also spoke of the power situation and the climate of expectations surrounding presidents which shares many similarities with Skowronek's theory of political time. In his most popular work *Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, Barber wrote "Presidential character resonates with the political situation that the president faces... expectations at any given time are the political air the President has to breathe."  

Skowronek would absolutely agree, expectations at any given time are the air the president has to breathe, and no matter how much character a particular president has, he cannot change that air. On that note an otherwise great president who has poor political air to breathe may not perform as well as an otherwise mediocre president with political air of high quality may perform extremely well. The President does not act in a vacuum, and even scholars of presidential character cannot ignore that a president's success depends on many factors beyond his control.  

Although James D. Barber focused a great deal of his energy on studying presidential character he also placed emphasis on political climate; not to do so would be absurd. With all of the emphasis that Fred I. Greenstein placed on presidential character, even he could not ignore the fact that presidents have to work within the political framework that is dictated to them by the times. In Greenstein's 1982 book, *The Hidden - Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader*, he retrospectively assessed the character Dwight D. Eisenhower and discussed the influence of Eisenhower's character on his time in office. When he
discussed the lessons to be learned from Eisenhower's leadership style he wrote "We have to take account of factors apart from the style itself that influence his leadership. One is the political climate and the context in which he operated. Would his style be effective in a different political environment?"²⁸

Greenstein goes on to say:

"In addition, although my concern is not with the content of his policies, their scope must be considered in assessing the transferability of his style. Since Eisenhower was not seeking sharp departures from existing policies, it is plausible that a style that fit his incrementalist goals would not be useable by a president bent on effecting major policy change."²⁹

These statements by Greenstein essentially put the ball in Stephen Skowronek's court. They allude to the fact that presidents, despite their character, have to adjust their policies to fit with not only the political time and climate, but also with the existing structure of political authority. Skowronek would absolutely agree with Greenstein's assessment of Dwight D. Eisenhower; Eisenhower was not seeking a sharp departure from existing policies because he was operating within the confines of politics of preemption. Eisenhower was the first Republican president to be elected during the era of New Deal Liberalism. He was opposed to the regime, but the regime's policy commitments were still very resilient. The preemptive structure of political authority did not call for, and would not have allowed, a conservative insurgency so Eisenhower was smart to play it safe with small incremental changes that served the needs of the country without betraying the orthodoxies of Franklin D. Roosevelt's political regime. By not overstepping his bounds, Skowronek would say that Eisenhower had correctly calculated his warrant for power within the historical context of his presidency.³⁰

To the question posed by Greenstein concerning the transferability of Eisenhower's style to another time period, Skowronek would, quite unsurprisingly, say that it depends on political time and climate along with the existing structure of political authority. For other presidents who operated within the confines of politics of preemption, such as Bill Clinton and Richard Nixon, small incremental changes that neither conflicted with the established orthodoxies of the regime nor offended the sensibilities of their
political base achieved success. For Presidents operating in another time and another within a different structure of political authority, the same style would most likely lead to disaster. For example, a president in office at a time that calls for politics of reconstruction would be harshly criticized for not doing enough if they used Eisenhower's style because new presidents who are opposed to a vulnerable regime are expected by their political base to make sweeping changes and devise solutions that are substantially different from those of the obsolete orthodoxy. Herbert Hoover, who is frequently regarded as one of the nation's least successful presidents, is a good example. While the Great Depression was wreaking havoc on the United States Hoover waited for the storm to blow over instead of taking action which angered the American people and opened the door for Franklin D. Roosevelt's insurgency.

Lance Blakesley of Loyola Marymount University took on the task of rating modern presidents from Dwight D. Eisenhower to Bill Clinton. Blakesley shied away from trying to quantify character due to the difficulty of ascertaining accurate information and defining exactly what character is in the context of the presidency. Blakesley, like nearly every other author that has tried to tackle the complex problem of rating presidents, recognized that presidential success is determined in large part by contextual circumstances. Blakesley summed things up with the statement "Under unfavorable contextual conditions, a highly skilled president may fail and a president who demonstrates relatively inept leadership behavior may achieve success because of favorable conditions."

There are surely other factors that can make or break a presidency such as international crises and White House scandals. International events beyond a president's control or enduring crises inherited from previous administrations can have an overwhelmingly positive effect on a president's legacy, or a devastatingly negative effect. Even wars have this dichotomous effect depending on how the president handles the war and how it ultimately turns out. Franklin D. Roosevelt's legacy benefitted from World War II which helped the United States climb out of the Great Depression, demonstrated his leadership, and established the country as a superpower. Vietnam tarnished Lyndon B. Johnson's image and hindered his domestic agenda, despite the fact that the escalating situation in Vietnam was inherited from the Kennedy administration. Would Johnson have come out a loser in World War II and Roosevelt a
winner in Vietnam? No one can say for sure, but it is quite unlikely, which is why events that are beyond a president’s control are such a conundrum when it comes to evaluating presidential success.

Yet another conundrum is the fact that modern presidents are under a much more powerful microscope than their predecessors. With the ubiquitous and ever-increasing media of the late 20th and early 21st century modern presidents need to be much more careful about their public and private actions before, during, and after their tenure in office. FDR had a questionable relationship with Lucy Mercer from the 1920s until the time of his death34, During World War II Dwight D. Eisenhower had an affair with Kay Summersby and reportedly helped her get a job after the conclusion of the war35, LBJ was also no stranger to extramarital affairs36, and John F. Kennedy’s womanizing made the allegations against Bill Clinton in the 1990’s look mild.37 Most people know little about Roosevelt, Eisenhower, and Johnson’s affairs, and, compared to Bill Clinton, Kennedy’s image was left relatively unscathed by his transgressions, but due to the inescapable reach of the modern media Clinton was nearly removed from office. With the internet and twenty-four hour cable news networks presidential scandals have become tabloid material and even the slightest presidential faux pas has become common knowledge to the average American.

So, where does President Barack Obama fit in Skowronek’s theory of political time and recurring structures of political authority? First we have to look at the state of the current regime. The current conservative regime was begun by Ronald Reagan’s insurgency in 1980. Jimmy Carter’s politics of disjunction effectively put an end to the, four-plus decade, era of New Deal liberalism. Reagan served two successful terms which ushered the nation in a more conservative direction. After Reagan stepped down he was succeeded by his vice president, George H.W. Bush, who served one term in which he articulated Reagan’s policy commitments. In the unusual general election of 1992, due in large part to Ross Perot’s third party candidacy, Bill Clinton won the election with the smallest percentage of the vote since Woodrow Wilson, a fellow preemptive president who was elected under similar circumstances in 1912.38 Clinton, a moderate Democrat, served two tumultuous, yet successful terms, and then George W. Bush, won a narrow election in 2000. Bush served a successful first term which was boosted by his post
9/11 leadership, but after winning another narrow election in 2004 his approval ratings plummeted to the lowest levels in recent times.

This is where the prediction becomes tricky; Bush’s first term would be categorized as politics of articulation. Bush’s second term, however, could be classified in future as either a failed attempt at articulation, or politics of disjunction depending on the resiliency of the conservative regime’s policy commitments. The difference between failed articulation and disjunction is somewhat superficial as far as its effect on the president’s legacy, but there is a major difference when it comes to the political implications it will have on the next president. Failed articulation would mean that the regime is still sustainable, in other words George W. Bush could have just overstepped his bounds and been “the wrong man for the job.” If this is the case, then the conservative regime begun by Reagan in 1980 may not have politically crashed and burned quite yet. If this is true then President Obama would be considered a preemptive president operating as a political outsider within the conservative regime. In this case Obama would not leave a lasting political legacy to be articulated by future presidents and the conservative regime will rebound.

The second scenario is that George W. Bush’s second term was true politics of disjunction. In this case Bush was not necessarily “the wrong man for the job,” but the conservative policy commitments of the regime have become obsolete. This would render anyone affiliated with the conservative regime elected in 2004 politically impotent and almost certainly doom them to what would come to be remembered as a failed presidency. In this case President Obama’s structure of political authority coming into office would be politics of reconstruction and he will have a chance to begin a new liberal regime. The future will tell whether President Obama is able to capitalize on the perceived failures of George W. Bush and the conservative regime, but during his presidential campaign his theme was change and his policies in office have been much more liberal than those of his conservative predecessors and Bill Clinton’s relatively moderate administration. President Obama’s political situation is roughly analogous to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s. Both presidents inherited troubled economies and the presidents who preceded them were harshly criticized for not doing enough to solve the country’s problems. Can
President Obama achieve the presidential success that Franklin D. Roosevelt did and begin a liberal regime that dominates the United States' political atmosphere for decades? Only time will tell.

If the conservative regime still has political momentum left President Obama's character and political skill will allow him to better navigate the choppy waters left by the wake of the conservative regime. Several preemptive presidents have been elected to second terms, but in a majority of those cases their second term in office has been tumultuous and difficult as demonstrated by Woodrow Wilson, Richard Nixon, and Bill Clinton. Political skill is certainly a precious asset for any politician, but if a President, or any other politician, finds himself in a political climate where he is unable to fully utilize his political skill, due to conflicting expectations and policy commitments, then it is of secondary importance. The political climate will ultimately be the key to whether President Obama will be remembered as a great political insurgent, or a president who did his best to work within a difficult political framework.

Presidential success has countless factors and the president's character is certainly one of them. Scholars of presidential character have done plenty of enlightening work and they deserve a lot of credit for their evaluations of presidents. Of course a president who is a superior communicator, a better organizer, a man of great political skill, etcetera, will perform better under identical circumstances than a man who is less capable in those areas. Every president has possessed strengths and weaknesses when categorically compared to other presidents. For example, President Obama is much better at speaking to large crowds than George W. Bush, but George W. Bush had a unique ability to appear folksy and appeal to the common man despite being born into wealth. With that said, all of our presidents have been skilled men that have achieved great success in life prior to ascending to the presidency, but no two presidents have ever had exactly the same political circumstances, which makes it very difficult to make head to head comparisons and determine the viability of the connection between presidential character and success in office.

Skowronek's theory focuses on the political atmosphere as the best predictor of performance in the White House. The most compelling evidence in support of political time being the best predictor of presidential success is the fact that Greenstein, Barber, and several other political scholars of presidential
character speak of the importance of political time/atmosphere. Greenstein himself admitted that “We have to take account of factors apart from the style itself that influence his leadership. One is the political climate and context in which he operated.” Accordingly, Barber wrote that “expectations at any given time are the political air the President has to breathe.” These quotes would have fit more comfortably in Skowronek’s work than in Greenstein’s or Barber’s. A race car driver can only drive as fast as the conditions on the track will allow him and the world’s greatest jockey will finish near the rear of the pack on the world’s poorest horse. Perhaps Lance Blakesley said it best “Under unfavorable contextual conditions, a highly skilled president may fail and a president who demonstrates relatively inept leadership behavior may achieve success because of favorable conditions.” We have all been victims or benefactors of circumstances in our lives, we have all experienced times when the cards fell our way and periods where everything has gone disastrously wrong, but the president is, perhaps, the only person in the nation who experiences these extremes for four years with the weight of the American people on his shoulders the entire time. Perhaps, we, the American people, should look at a president’s circumstances more carefully before we condemn him as a buffoon or laud him as a hero.

---


4 Ibid.


12 Ibid., 145.

13 Ibid., 175-6.


16 Ibid., 100.

17 Ibid., 99.

18 Ibid., 107-108.

19 Ibid., 107-113.


22 Ibid., 89.


29 Ibid. , 230.


36 Ibid. , 80.

37 Ibid. , 74-80.


41 Lance Blakesley. *Presidential Leadership: From Eisenhower to Clinton.*, 274.
Works Cited


