

Module Overview: Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and Domestic Policy



Lyndon Johnson's intimidating approach to "persuasion"? (He's the taller one.)

This module aims to draw on the scholarly frameworks from Module 1 and Module 2 to understand domestic policy developments under Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan (with some related insights on Richard Nixon).

These case studies are also illuminating in terms of considering the history and trajectory of domestic policy in the modern United States. Here we can trace the move from the long New Deal regime that included two major eras of social reform (1930s and 1960s) into Reagan's rejection of some elements of the New Deal order, launching a conservative (sometimes called 'neoliberal') regime and policy agenda that is arguably still dominant up into the Trump years (and some scholars have proposed that Biden might mark at least a partial shift in a new direction).

To understand Johnson and Reagan's domestic policy successes and Carter's struggles, we will combine insights from the various perspectives we have already explored. As a reminder, here's a summary of the frameworks you should be considering as you develop your analysis of these presidents:

1. Constitutional Framework: Consider how ongoing checks and balances that are built into the original design continue to shape the presidency.

2. Modern Presidency: Be clear on how presidents make use of the expanded roles and public expectations of the modern office in pursuit of their goals (Laski, Rossiter, Chap. 1 of Pika et al.). For instance, presidents have come to be the "voice of the people," and they rely on this media relationship to the public to pursue their goals. Presidents are also make use of the expanded "legislative leader" role and their increased executive branch resources (such as EOP personnel) to try to shape policy results.

3. Power to Persuade: Neustadt's argument that presidents have to use an informal process of bargaining and persuasion to get results in their interaction with other political elites, because their formal powers are not typically enough to simply command results/order outcomes. But please also note that presidents can (and must) use these formal powers -- such as the veto -- to help with bargaining and persuasion. The skill and strategies of the individual in office can thus play an important role in shaping success or failure.

4. Imperial Presidency: Schlesinger's argument that the presidency has gained power in ways that allow for unilateral action without much involvement by the other branches. A more modest version of this idea is also helpful for us: even if presidents are not exactly "imperial," they do certainly try to use the executive branch to shape policy results and to some extent go around Congress. For instance, executive orders and the appointment of officials to different agencies in the executive branch (such as the Environmental Protection Agency) can combine to shift policy results without requiring that Congress passes a new law. One example is Trump's efforts to deregulate in relation to existing environmental policies.

5. Political Time: Skowronek's argument that we can partly understand presidents by seeing how they fit into the rise and fall of different governing regimes. For instance, a president who is positioned to launch a new regime (a 'regime builder') might have more opportunity to get major policy results than a president who takes office at the head of a declining regime. Certainly Skowronek argues that presidents have to pursue different goals depending on their position in

'political time' -- one kind of context that goes beyond their own skills and strategies to shape their experience.

6. Structural/Political Economy Framework: Grover's argument that the capitalist economy and the needs and power of business interests put a lot of pressure on presidents to pursue specific policies. At the same time, Grover and Tichenor also help us consider how periods of "social struggle" involving mobilized sections of the public (such as social movements) might effectively push against the conventional power of business and lead presidents and other political elites to embrace policies that would typically be difficult to pass.

FDR and Our Frameworks

To provide an example of how all of this might be helpfully combined to understand a particular president's experiences, we can briefly return to Franklin Roosevelt and the 1930s:

A. Skowronek and Grover's views: On the one hand, it is clear that the domestic policies passed in the 1930s were strongly shaped by historical and economic context. The Great Depression discredited the Republicans who had been dominant when the crisis hit. This opened the space for a New Deal Democratic Party to emerge. Without that crisis, this new political coalition would not have gained so much influence in government. This fits with Skowronek on the idea of FDR as the initiator/builder of a new regime. Of course, crisis creates an opportunity, but FDR (and others) still had to work to build up the new regime -- it was not an automatic outcome of the crisis.

This 'regime building' process included mobilizing a wide range of different voters and interest groups (southern white conservatives, midwest farmers, a diverse urban working class in the north, liberal reformers, a growing shift of black voters to the Democratic Party, etc.). And it also meant pursuing a variety of social and economic policies that reflected the varied aims of these different supporters.

The economic crisis also changed the balance of power among different interests in society (Grover). The old business vision of an unregulated market economy was discredited, and 'normal' business power was diminished. Social upheaval among workers and among the elderly facing poverty also created pressure for various reforms.

Out of this, the New Deal produced Social Security, collective bargaining rights for workers who wanted to unionize (the National Labor Relations Act), new regulations over the economy, job creation programs, and so on. But the coalition also included conservative (white) southern Democrats, who helped to limit the scope of some reforms. For instance, Social Security and collective bargaining rights (the NLRA) excluded domestic workers and farm laborers -- leaving out many black workers and reinforcing the low-wage racialized economy of the South.

Looking at all of the above, we could conclude that it was the larger economic and historical developments that really mattered, explaining FDR's presidency by drawing on Skowronek and Grover's views.

B. But is this the whole story? Or did FDR's day-to-day approach to governing also matter? Can we use ideas of expanded executive power (Rossiter, Schlesinger) and effective skill / persuasion (Neustadt) to also understand what happened? And did FDR still face significant hurdles due to checks and balances built into the system?

Obviously I think this kind of analysis is also useful. For instance:

-- FDR used the mass media (radio) to conduct "fireside" chats that connected him to the public and helped win support for the party and his policy goals. His skill here was crucial to building up the New Deal regime and to redefining the presidency. (So, again, the crisis created an opportunity, but FDR's strengths were important to successfully responding to that opportunity.)

-- FDR still had to persuade and bargain with Congress -- including with his own party -- to get specific policy results. For instance, different members of Congress and different farm organizations (interest groups) wanted different solutions to the agricultural crisis. So FDR helped cobble together the Agricultural Adjustment Act in 1933 that combined a lot of different measures that satisfied different legislators and constituents. In other words, we might conclude that some kind of farm legislation was likely to pass due to the crisis, but it still took considerable skill and strategy to craft the specific policy that emerged.

-- FDR also used the more unilateral power of the executive branch in creative ways. For instance, once the Agricultural Adjustment Act was passed, FDR and his advisors could decide which of its various provisions to emphasize, shaping the real meaning of the law through implementation ("administrative strategy"). FDR often did this, promoting broad laws in Congress that left a lot of room later for the executive branch to define policy details (which effectively means shaping the law).

-- As noted above, the New Deal Democrats also had to bargain with the southern wing of their party to pass major laws. They could achieve reforms under pressure from workers, but they also had to make sure those reforms were acceptable to the conservative white interests that were particularly powerful in the South (so, bargaining and persuasion again).

-- Finally, despite being a powerful 'regime builder' (Skowronek) in a moment of opportunity brought on by economic crisis and social upheaval (Grover), FDR still faced major checks from the other branches. Many key policies were blocked by the Supreme Court (at least for a while), and by the later 1930s a more conservative alliance of legislators in Congress was also an obstacle to the New Deal agenda.

In other words, FDR and his interactions with other political elites still mattered. It is true that some big changes would probably have happened under any Democrat elected in 1932. But we cannot understand the specific results without also considering Roosevelt's priorities, skills, and effective use of presidential resources -- all in interaction with the wider political system.

(Another way to put this: our theories help us to think about both context and skill/individual action -- or structure and agency -- and we need to combine these levels of analysis to understand

presidential success or failure.)

Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan

Please take a similar approach to exploring the presidencies of Johnson, Carter, and Reagan.

For the first part of the week, you will look at Johnson and Reagan, who both had major domestic policy successes (whatever we think of the actual policies that emerged). Then we will turn to Carter to explore a less successful president, considering whether his struggles were a product of the larger context or his own limitations (or both).

Finally, we also read a case study from Grover on OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) that looks at Nixon, Carter, and Reagan. Grover sees this as illuminating the value of his own 'political economy' approach to the presidency. At the same time, I think this case also illustrates how presidents can shape policy inside the executive branch, as both Carter and Reagan tried to shift the functioning of OSHA without involving Congress.

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

August 9 - August 11


1. Pick out a few key policy successes for both Johnson and Reagan. How should we understand these outcomes in relation to our frameworks?

3. Turning to Grover's case study of OSHA, what is OSHA and why is it a good context for examining Grover's approach to the presidency? How does his perspective explain why OSHA passed under Nixon (who was not supportive)? What does Grover see as explaining Carter's mixed approach to implementing OSHA? How does Grover explain Reagan's efforts to weaken OSHA?

4. Beyond thinking about capitalism, business interests, and social movement pressure in relation to OSHA, does Grover's chapter also reveal how presidents might be able to shift policy results through their use of executive branch power (for instance, who they appoint to run OSHA, use of executive orders, etc.)?

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—LYNDON B.



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August 12-14

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[GroverChapter2andChapter3.pdf \(https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/files/79656317/download?wrap=1\)](https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/files/79656317/download?wrap=1)

(Only read Chapter 3 in Grover -- Chapter 2 was assigned in Module 2)

To Complete/Submit:

[Discussion 5: Shaping Domestic Policy -- Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan \(https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/discussion_topics/6506688\)](https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/discussion_topics/6506688)

[Discussion 6: Jimmy Carter as a Case Study of Presidential Failure? \(https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/discussion_topics/6506687\)](https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/discussion_topics/6506687)

Please also complete the short quiz, due by the end of the day on Aug. 10 (see Module 2 for the link)

The second paper assignment is also due this week, end of the day on Aug. 12