Serious students of the modern presidency warn against a tendency to exaggerate the importance of presidents in American politics. Congress is the Article I branch and it remains the dominant player in routine matters of policy making. The president’s role is by no means inconsequential—the Constitution’s deliberate intermingling of governing authority across separated branches assures this—but his influence is said typically to be felt only “at the margins” of the legislative process (Edwards 1990; Peterson 1990; Jones 1994. For a critical view, see Whittington and Carpenter 2003). This line of argument is widely influential. It serves as a useful caution to those of us who, in our capacity as citizens, find ourselves otherwise awash in the ubiquity of presidential action and imagery, and where casual observation would seem to argue on behalf of that institution’s political preeminence.

On the other hand, this discrepancy between casual perception and rigorous finding is sufficiently jarring to warrant asking whether we miss something deeper about the significance of the presidency in American politics if we confine our attention too narrowly to routine policy processes or if we limit our measures of presidential importance to statistical scorecards of legislative victory. Informal indicators of that
institution’s significance abound in our politics and culture. Scholars regularly periodize American political history around the names and programmatic name-sakes of presidents (“the Jeffersonian Era;” “the Age of Jackson;” “the New Deal Era;” “the Reagan Revolution”). Presidential elections most often set the basic terms of national political debate and define the issues on the public agenda. During moments of national crisis, distraught citizens who seek reassurance wait anxiously for presidents to speak. Scholars and pundits endlessly draw up lists of great presidents and debate their respective merits. It is the iconic representation of presidents that we carve into mountainsides and that populate our national currency.

The list goes on—from the profound to the pedestrian. My only point here is to suggest the possibility that we elide the most distinctive properties of the presidency and its enduring role in American politics by confining our attention to legislative policy outputs. As one scholar has recently argued, the significance of the American presidency may lie less in the policies presidents pass than in the politics presidents make (Skowronek 1996). This essay will argue that historical institutionalism and American political development (APD), as distinctive approaches to the study of politics, offer one particular avenue for those interested to explore the broader significance of the presidency in American politics. Every approach has its limits, but the advantage of these complementary approaches lies in their capacity to throw into relief that institution’s distinguishing features, as well as its unique contribution both to the dynamics of American politics and to the processes of political change. Much has been gained by disciplinary efforts to devise a general theory of institutions—one shorn of the specifics of time and space—and by efforts to subsume the presidency and presidential behavior under its universal rules of action (Moe 1993). However, by their nature, theoretical truths are at best partial, and to the historical institutionalist and the student of APD, absorbing the presidency into a general theory of institutions runs the risk of suppressing its unique and most consequential attributes.

This essay is organized into several parts. First, I introduce historical institutionalism and APD as analytic approaches to the study of politics. Following this, I introduce the presidency as an object of study and assess the institution’s relevant features in light of the precepts identified. Next, I turn to several streams of research in which students of the presidency with an APD bent have made significant contributions. The first research stream examines more closely the presidency’s unique status among American political institutions, a status based on its intimate relationship to “the People.” A second examines the presidency’s distinctive contribution to the politics of regime change. A third stream investigates the historically changing modalities of governance, isolating developmentally significant moments in the evolution of presidential politics. Here we will examine separately the evolution of “plebiscitary politics” and the rise of an “administrative presidency,” two emblematic features of contemporary American politics. Nowhere in what follows do I present full-blown literature reviews, though additional citations for further reading are included in the bibliography to this chapter. Rather, I will concentrate on a smaller set of publications that have made a lasting impact on the literature—mostly...
works within the mainstream of APD, but, where productive, I also include non-APD work with important developmental claims. At each stage, we will consider APD’s analytic take on questions of interest to students of the presidency and American politics, and the fruitful points of dispute that arise as competing interpretative claims impinge upon one another, pointing the way for fresh new lines of enquiry. By emphasizing seminal nodes in a literature, we will sharpen our understanding of the key lines of debate, as well as the central points of contention that drive research in the APD community.

Finally, for reasons I will discuss in detail, my interest in this essay lies not in understanding the political development of the American presidency. Indeed, I will argue that a phrase like “the political development of the American presidency”—or any single institution for that matter—is conceptually misguided. Rather, it is more appropriate to speak of the presidency’s contribution to American political development or American political development’s impact on the presidency. In order to understand why this is a significant difference, we need to understand both what historical institutionalism and political development are and what they are not. Only at that point can we fruitfully fold the presidency into our discussion and explore what it is that APD and historical institutionalism can contribute to its study and vice versa.

**Historical Institutionalism**

What is historical institutionalism? What does it share with the other institutional approaches to politics? Where does it part company with those alternatives? In the discussion that follows, I draw extensively from the work of Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek (1994, 1996, 1998, and 2006), whose writings on historical institutionalism and political development represent major contributions to the subjects and to the advancement of APD as a subfield.¹

Like other institutional approaches, historical institutionalism gives explanatory pride of place to the rules, routines, standard operating procedures, and norms of legitimate action that both enable and constrain political action. Institutions channel political behavior, imparting to individuals in a common organizational setting a shared identity, purpose, and direction. By their operation, institutions make particular actions either more probable or less; in the process, they render political behavior more predictable. Institutional approaches thus emphasize regularities in political action, especially as they arise from the organizational setting of politics. Institutions impart a degree of pattern and orderliness to the tumultuous world of

¹ For a significant alternative formulation to Orren and Skowronek, see Pierson and Skocpol (2002) and Pierson (2004). For additional reading, see also Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth (1992) and Hall and Taylor (1996).
political conflict and, as a result, make an essential contribution to theory-building endeavors at the heart of contemporary social science (March and Olsen 1989; Carpenter 2000, 2001).

What, then, makes historical institutionalism distinctive? First, as the name implies, historical institutionalism is significant because it takes seriously the temporal origins of political institutions. Attention to history contextualizes the process of institution building; it infuses local specificity into the organizational design of politics. By this understanding, institutions are created at precise moments in time, within a delineated political context, and they house embedded sets of cultural assumptions. That context durably defines the purposes to which new institutions are put: the goals they pursue; the values they embody; the norms of appropriate behavior they both adhere to and expect from others. Moreover, because they are institutionalized, these purposes carry forward in time, where they engage with other purpose-driven institutions over the division of legitimate political authority. In essence, historical institutionalism holds that the act of institutionalizing a grant of new authority “freezes” the politics of a given historical moment and, through the formulation of rules, routines, and norms, carries the politics and culture of that historical moment forward in time. Put simply, an institution is a congealed historical remnant; current politics is the dynamic expression of multiple interactions among institutionalized vestiges of a country’s political past. In Orren and Skowronek’s theoretical formulation, the political present is an amalgam of “multiple orders” rooted in a nation’s political history. Developmentally significant politics implicate ongoing relations between institutions; “intercurrence”—political conflict arising from the discordant historical premises that underlie interaction in a multi-institutional setting—is the stimulant to new distributions of governing authority (an excellent recent application is Frymer 2007).

Second, as a corollary, historical institutionalists argue that institutional reform is always partial or incomplete (Tulis 1987; Schickler 2001). Rarely does reform—or even revolution—result in a complete uprooting or transformation of an organization’s initial premises (de Tocqueville 1969). There are no full reversions to square one; rather, reforms layer new politics and new assumptions upon old politics and old assumptions. The partial character of reform creates new points of tension and conflict within institutional settings. It also complicates the constituent bases of institutional support and the coherent articulation of organizational purposes in the external environment of politics.

Finally, historical institutionalism recognizes that any institution—be it new or newly reformed—is thrust immediately into an ongoing political universe replete with other institutional actors, each engaged in a fierce combat for jurisdictional authority and political autonomy. It is this ongoing contestation among institutions over the scope of their political authority—and the political conflict that inevitably ensues—that is the central facet of political life and the dynamic element that drives political change. Relations between institutions are prone to conflict, as it is intrinsic to the nature of political institutions to reach beyond their existing sphere of authority in an effort to regulate the behavior of others, and to do so in a manner
consistent with their own purposes and interests. By way of analogy, consider the manner in which, to advance their interests in an anarchical international system, nation-states with distinctive interests, practices, habits, and histories seek stable and predictable relations with other states, even as those relations remain fraught with tension and conflict and are periodically subject to renegotiation over the allocation of authority and control. So too, of necessity, domestic political institutions with historically distinctive ordering principles engage in their own form of “foreign relations” with other institutions, relations continuously rubbed raw by the friction arising from the regular and inevitable exercise of political interest. Because of this, within historical-institutional approaches to politics, concepts like “institutional fit,” “equilibrium institutions,” and “political order” are each subject to criticism for muting the tension and conflict characteristic of institutional relations and the dynamic force that drives political change.

**Political Development**

How does this discussion of historical institutionalism advance an understanding of American political development? What precisely is political development? As an initial statement, I will observe simply that students of political development seek to understand political change, its processes and dynamics as well as its consequences. By *processes* of political change, I mean the operations of mechanisms inherent in the design features of a given political system. Political processes provide channels for political action, enabling and constraining political forces and providing both a strategic and a tactical context for political leadership. By *dynamics* of political change, I refer to the distinctive interaction effects that arise from a historically given configuration of events or sequence of actions. These dynamics may strengthen or weaken established political authorities; they create openings that enhance or diminish political opportunities for political change; and, they may assist or hinder efforts to institutionalize a new status quo in the aftermath of political change.

This initial formulation is a useful starting point. However, absent further elaboration, the “development = change” equivalence quickly runs into problems. Perhaps the most important of these is the overly broad reach of the “change” concept. While all instances of political development are rightly understood as instances of political change, not all instances of political change constitute instances of political development. Political change is a broader and more inclusive term than political development; the latter is at best a subset of the former. Political change takes a variety of shapes and forms: from the small, the incremental, and the incidental to the large-scale, the discontinuous, and the transformative. Political change, for example, can be observed in the massive growth over time in annual expenditures by the US government, the temporal swelling in the volume of legislative bills introduced and processed by a single session of Congress, or the tremendous secular expansion in federal programs like social security. On the other hand, political change is also observed at critical junctures in American political history,
like the New Deal, when new national electoral alignments upend long-standing ruling coalitions, uproot standing policy commitments and their institutional supports, and inaugurate full-scale and durable regime change. Each of the first three illustrations of political change cited above might plausibly be characterized as an institutional trend, an institutional advancement, or even an instance of institutional evolution. They might even be entry points in a search for political development. However, only the final example, or so I will argue, is fairly characterized as an instance of political development.

To proceed further, then, we need to refine our initial formulation. If political development is a specific kind of political change, what kind exactly is it? Following Orren and Skowronek (2006), I will define political development as political change that results in a durable shift in governing authority. Political development occurs when political change reconfigures or reconstitutes the locus of legitimate government action. Durability is achieved when competing sources of authority, power, and influence acquiesce to these changes, adjust their expectations accordingly, and new modes of political interaction—new modalities of governance—arise and stabilize. Political development recasts the formal authority to regulate the actions and affairs of others, altering in its wake the underlying structure of access, influence, and prestige. Political development is systemic: individual institutions do not develop; polities do. Political development is also structural or relational: it is the fruit of conflict over existing lines of political authority that fundamentally recasts governing relations between two or more institutions.

**APD and the Presidency**

These last two points are critical, as they shape the APD approach to the presidency. It follows from the preceding that it is conceptually wide of the mark to speak of “the development of the American presidency” (or any other institution considered in isolation). Rather, it is better to speak of the ways in which the presidency has been implicated in the broader process of American political development, both as a participant in the politics of systemic change and as one of many inheritors of reconstituted governing relations. None of this is meant to suggest that individual institutions themselves remain static over time and that, as such, they offer little of interest to students of APD. Needless to say, institutions may experience change of significant and even historic proportions: they may grow larger or smaller; they may become more experienced or less; they may exhibit improved or diminished capabilities; they may become infused with new leadership or resist such infusions; they may shed old constituencies and commitments or acquire new ones. However, these facets of institutional change only become implicated in political development when, by their actions, they are complicit in the reorganization of governing relations.
among competing institutions. Of course, where change in the structure and function of the presidency (or, again, any other political institution) has implications for change in broader modes of governance and their relations of authority, it becomes critical to understand the causal character of those changes: from where they originated; how they came to grow or diminish in size and influence; their contribution to destabilizing the political status quo; and their contribution to the character of reconstructed governance.

It will be important then to keep in mind the distinction I am making between institutional change or evolution, on the one hand, and political development on the other. The goal of this essay is to identify productive lines of research for scholars interested in exploring the developmental implications of historical struggles over the relative distribution of governmental authority involving the presidency. As we will see, the study of the presidency is a particularly fruitful vehicle for exploring America’s political development, just as the study of APD is an excellent vehicle for exploring institutional change in the presidency. The reason is precisely APD’s systemic vantage point, which focuses attention on relations or modes of governance, the institutionalized authority relations that underpin and legitimize them, and the sources of tension that destabilize them over time and contribute to fundamental political change.

**Governance Versus Leadership**

Issues of governance have long interested students of the presidency. Yet, more often than not, this broad interest in governance has veered toward more practical questions of presidential leadership. From an APD perspective, the problem with the leadership focus is that it draws us toward the strategic and the tactical within a particular mode of governance. As Jeffrey Tulis (1987) has written, the leadership vantage point invites scholars to become institutional partisans. It asks us to look out from over the shoulder of presidents, to see the political world through their eyes. In classic Neustadalian terms, we find ourselves attempting to solve the perennial presidential leadership dilemma: “How can I make the office of the presidency work for me?” A stock of immediately recognizable questions follows: What does the president wish to accomplish? What are the power resources at the president’s disposal to accomplish personal and political goals? What are the stock of arguments, ideas, and imagery that a president can draw upon to persuade interested publics to follow the president’s lead? What types of individual psychology, personal traits, and professional skills do successful presidential leaders tend to possess in abundance?

I have no wish to disparage the leadership focus in presidency studies. Given the presidency-centered character of modern American democracy, questions regarding presidential leadership will and should loom large in the research agenda of presidency scholars. It has been responsible for many important works in the subfield and continues to offer promising lines of enquiry. Nor should I be read to suggest either that leadership is not important to governance or that the governance frame sheds no
light on the challenges of leadership (see, for example, Skowronek 1996). The claim I wish to advance here is that “governance” offers a more productive framework for presidency scholars with an APD bent than does the “leadership” frame. A focus on governance immediately embeds presidential action in a thick network of overlapping institutional relationships, each implicated in relations of functional interdependence, with each nonetheless seeking to subordinate other sources of political authority in order to broaden its own field of autonomous action. In sum, the governance frame draws attention to the allocation of authority within a given political regime and the modalities of regular intercourse that arise within it. It does not ignore matters of leadership. More to the point, it recognizes that institutional leadership is lodged at numerous points in the political system—in Congress and among ally and opposition political parties; with department secretaries and at critical nodes inside the career bureaucracy; and among pressure groups, economic institutions, and other interest-bearing organizations. A governance vantage point recognizes that it is the conduct of normalized relations among competing institutional leaders and the adherence to accepted procedures for resolving disputes among them that diffuse conflict, impart stability and predictability to politics, and allow the political system to function and reproduce itself over time.

Little in the preceding paragraph clearly differentiates APD from non-APD scholarship. It is here, or so I will argue, that APD strikes out on its own. In the main, non-APD scholarship on the presidency focuses its attention on the strategic dealings of presidents within a stable institutional context, one in which presidents seek to maximize their returns to purposive action by deploying available resources rationally, subject to the constraints of information, time, and tactical ability. APD scholarship on the presidency, on the other hand, seeks to understand how and why the once-stable modes of governing relations within which presidents are embedded become disturbed and break down. It aims to identify the ways in which presidential action facilitates or impedes that breakdown, and to document the signature elements of new governing configurations, the factors behind their coalescence, and the location of the presidency within them. Often, purposive presidential action will be front and center as the explanation for systemic change. However, in some instances, that institution may simply be implicated in the reconstitution, as changing relations initiated elsewhere in the system reverberate throughout that system. For instance, Stewart (1989) argues that the electoral connection in combination with the parochial character of congressional representation impeded efforts to create a centralized budget authority in the nineteenth-century House of Representatives. The result was a developmentally significant transfer of budgeting authority from that institution to the presidency, formalized in the Budget and Accounting Act of 1920.

**Patterned Development**

A final aspect of APD worth noting is the special place it accords to instances of political development that exhibit overarching temporal patterns, be they particular
historical trajectories or directionalities (Galambos 1970; Orren 1991), or patterns of a
cyclical or recurrent character (Burnham 1970; Skowronek 1996; Smith 1997). Patter-
ted development suggests the presence of deeper truths regarding the meaning
and character of America’s political-historical experience. It directs us toward the
conditions and conjunctures that both occasion and bound systemic change, and
invites us to reflect upon the implications of both the patterns of change and their
limits for the future course of American democracy. Consider, for example, that
during much of American political history, the presidency has exhibited a tremendous
growth in stature, in responsibilities, and in power, often at the expense of
competing political institutional authorities. Its scope of legitimate action has expanded significantly. We might call this the presidentialization of American politics. Indeed, it is difficult to recognize the contemporary presidency in the modest
constitutional grants contained in Article II (for a contrary view, see Nichols 1994).
While scholars and public commentators might reach different conclusions as to
whether the presidentialization of American politics has on balance advanced or
retarded the development of liberal democracy, there is little gainsaying the fact that
citizens have come to expect presidents to supply the primary direction and motive
force to American politics in a way that most of the Framers of the Constitution never envisioned—indeed, in a manner most of the Framers explicitly sought to proscribe.

For students of APD the crucial question is to understand why successive episodes
of political development have, on balance, tended to reinforce and deepen the relative
authority of presidents. Can we ascertain whether historical happenstance or deep
structural dynamics has exerted the greater causal weight on the presidency’s insti-
tutional evolution? Can we assess the implications for the quality of American
democracy of a continuing presidentialization of its politics?

PRESEDETS AND THE SOVEREIGN
AUTHORITY: THE PRIMACY OF
“We the People”

“We are one people in the choice of President and Vice-President.”… This assertion culmi-
nated [Andrew] Jackson’s efforts to redefine the presidency and the relation of the American
people to their government. It was another appeal for recognition that it was the presidential
office—not the legislature… —that embodies all the people. The president is the represent-
tative of the American electorate and directly responsible to them. By his actions and words he articulates and executes their will. (Remini 1984, 20–1)

One of the more arresting explanations for the rise of the presidency in American
politics directs us to the historical construction of the office itself. Both American

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constitutional theory and its practice suggest that those political institutions that can most credibly claim to speak on behalf of the sovereign authority—“We the People”—will find its authority relative to rival institutions enhanced. For that reason, the intimate, long-standing, and unmatched relationship between the presidency and the broad American political community has been at the heart of its significance to students of APD. It goes a long way toward clarifying the rhetorical tendencies that emanate from the office—the constant impulse manifested by presidents both to speak to the American people and to speak for them (Ellis 1998). Unitary in structure and possessing a constituency coterminous with the Union’s geographical boundaries, the presidency, it is argued, is the only political institution structurally capable of representing the nation as a whole, speaking coherently on its behalf, and directly shaping its shared identity, sense of political purpose, and historical mission (e.g., Bellah 1967; Roelofs 1992; Abbott 1990, 1996).

The constitutional design of the presidency was motivated in equal parts by a promise and a fear (James 2005). The promise was of a virtuous executive motivated by national service and insulated from direct constituency pressures and interest-based politics, one free to defend constitutional principle and the permanent national interest against the passions and interests stirring normal politics. The fear was of a people’s presidency, one that would attract ambitious demagogues, harness plebiscitary authority to amass personal power, and subvert the delicate institutional balance and limits on government woven into the fabric of the Constitution. Both the promise and the fear required the Framers to proscribe a direct and unmediated relationship between presidents and the public. The political science of the Founding generation focused intently on the latent political power of the presidential office: presidents were the only elected officeholders with a national constituency, while the quadrennial presidential election was the only institutional setting in which “the people” might regularly congregate as a single community to agitate on behalf of great national questions. Because of this, presidents were uniquely situated to claim both a direct knowledge of and an intimate relationship with the sovereign authority. In the end, by constitutional design, the Founders famously sought to deflate presidential pretensions to speak on behalf of “We the People,” most notably through the erection of an intermediary institution—the Electoral College.

Against this backdrop, arguably the single most important political development in the organization of American governance since the Founding is the forging of an increasingly personal relationship between presidents and the popular will. All manner of presidential scholarship refers to or taps into some aspect of this singular relationship (e.g., Ceaser 1979; Ketcham 1984; Tulis 1987; Skowronek 1996; Bimes and Skowronek 1996; Bimes and Mulroy 2004). To students of American political development in particular, that relationship has been implicated causally both in processes of regime change and in transformations in the basic modalities of governance, as they operate across both the various branches and levels of government. At times it seems as if almost anything important we might wish to say about presidents and their involvement in America’s political development flows directly from this relationship and its peculiar intimacy. Much of the presidency’s own institutional history
tracks successive episodes in the dismantling of barriers impeding direct and unmediated popular leadership: some conceptual (assertions of a special presidential mandate, emergency powers, a unitary executive); others institutional (the displacement of mediating institutions such as the congressional caucus, the political party, the cabinet, and the addition of the permanent bureaucracy); and still others technological (innovations in the speed and scope of presidential travel and communications). In all, episodes fostering ever more intimate linkages between presidents and the people have been critical to the historical reconstitution of American governance, fundamentally altering authority relations between the presidency, Congress, political parties, the courts, the bureaucracy, state governments, and other political institutions.

Much more remains to be explored. APD scholarship on the presidency needs to clarify further the origin and development of that unique relationship and probe its fundamental nature. The presidency has seemingly always been a magnet for public attention. From the Framers on, political elites have worried about its potentialities even as some have sought to unleash them. All of these things are more easily observed than explained. What are the unique properties of the presidency that compel public and elite attention over its alternatives? To some, the presidency derives its salient characteristics from its unitary structure, while for others, its relation to the coercive powers of the state plays the primary role. Some attribute its uniqueness to the institution’s dual nature (the president as both head of government and head of state), while still others point to its prophetic character (presidents as “high priests” of the American civil religion). If it is true that this relationship to “the People” is fundamental—i.e., that it is a principal source of dynamism that drives political development—then it is imperative that we understand this seemingly enduring relationship. Is this relationship a structurally inevitable outgrowth of the Framers’ constitutional design? Is its potency constant or variable—and, if the latter, with what kind of pattern or regularity? Are its effects on American politics truly consequential, and if so, how? Is its institutional growth and prominence irreversible absent fundamental political change?

Empirically, it is also necessary to unpack more fully the politics of the Founding generation and the presidency’s place within its constitutional practice. Political scientists know much more about the Founders’ theoretical vision for American government than its regular day-to-day operations (Ceaser 1979; Tulis 1987). Theories of American political development stand on the shoulders of close historical work covering and detailing the daily routines and practices of governance. No discipline is as well equipped as political science to do the necessary spade work to acquire and analyze the information on governing practices needed for the theoretical advancement of APD. While important early work has been done in this area (e.g., Young 1969; Cunningham 1978), conceptual and methodological advances in the discipline of political science since this time make it an area ripe for productive scholarly engagement. Such findings will provide a crucial empirical baseline against which to gauge the degree, the character, and the direction of subsequent change in the structures of governance, and thus for evaluating its developmental significance.
Precisely how was American governance configured in the years immediately following constitutional ratification? What, in practice, were the appropriate relations of authority among governing institutions that arose under that document? What did presidential practice look like within that setting? What were the typical sources of tension and conflict that arose? What were the mechanisms for resolving those disputes? What types of conflict could not be contained by the regular mechanisms of dispute resolution, and what developmental effects did they have over time? The more precisely we are able to specify the character and practice of governance in the early Republic, the more exact our theories of subsequent change will be.

**Presidents and the Politics of Regime Change**

If questions of origin are a constant preoccupation of APD, so too are questions of fundamental change. In this section, we will observe the tenets of historical institutionalism and APD applied in ways that offer insight both into the presidency as an institution and into that institution’s causal role in the dynamics of developmentally significant politics. Stephen Skowronek (1996) and Bruce Ackerman (1991, 1998) have made major contributions to the study of regime change, both partisan-programmatic and constitutional (also see Whittington 2007). Squarely situating both the governance frame and the presidency–public nexus at the center of their analyses, their research significantly advances our understanding of presidents as transformative agents in American political development. Skowronek’s analysis highlights the presidency’s discordant presence within the routine operations of American governance. An inherently disruptive office, when situated within the right historical conjuncture, this institutional dissonance opens the door for fundamental political change. Ackerman links presidential action to “constitutional moments.” Locked in battles with institutional rivals over the allocation of governmental authority, Ackerman shows how, by reaching out to “We the People” in critical national elections, presidents have ratified new substantive readings of the Constitution and pressed their adoption upon reluctant courts by dint of these election-centered ratification processes.

**The Presidency and Partisan-Programmatic Regime Change**

For better or worse, then, the American presidency has proven itself more effective politically as an instrument of negation. Too blunt in its disruptive effects to build securely on what has come before, it has functioned best when it has been directed toward dislodging established
elites, destroying the institutional arrangements that support them, and clearing the way for something entirely new... The presidency is a battering ram, and the presidents who have succeeded most magnificently in political leadership are those who have been best situated to use it forthrightly as such. (Skowronek 1996, 27–8)

In *The Politics Presidents Make* (1996), Stephen Skowronek elaborates a theory of regime change in which presidential action is the decisive catalyst. Regimes in Skowronek's analysis are constellations of policies, governmental machinery, and patterns of authority that define a historical era and give direction and purpose to political action. Regimes are fortified by explicit ideologies and sustained by electorally dominant coalitions; they are purposive, programmatic, and partisan in nature. Regimes are also historical constructions of finite duration. They are founded, elaborated, and ultimately prone to political exhaustion, as a changing public agenda increasingly calls into question a regime's basic commitments and justifications, and as vested partisan interests splinter over questions regarding the necessity or scope of reform. Finally, regimes are sequential: the construction of one follows upon the prior collapse of another. Skowronek identifies six regimes in American history: a brief Federalist regime (1789–1800); the Jeffersonian regime (1801–28); the Jacksonian regime (1829–60); a long Republican regime (1861–1932); the New Deal regime (1933–80); and a current Republican regime starting with Ronald Reagan (1981–present).

Presidents are the dynamic element that advances regime politics forward; by their actions and mobilization efforts they continually alter the basic terms on which politics is contested. For this reason, Skowronek characterizes the presidency as an intrinsically disruptive institution; the very nature of presidential action makes it hostile to the status quo. The presidency, in his conception, is a battering ram—a bull in a china shop; it is a more effective engine for upending the old than for nurturing the new. During moments of pronounced regime decay, an opposition president (one tied neither to the regime party nor to its programmatic commitments) can provide the necessary energy to displace ideological critics and dismantle their institutional supports. They can articulate new governing visions and assemble new partisan majorities dedicated to their realization. However, even during periods of national peace and prosperity, the disruptive impulse of the presidency is hard at work, challenging orthodox regime commitments, disturbing institutionalized policy settlements, and otherwise undermining the sources of party unity. Firmly ensonced in the routine processes of governance, each successive president challenges anew the terms of American politics, rendering a given regime less resilient over time and more vulnerable to challenge by opposition partisans, until once again the restless and disruptive energies of the presidency can be trained on an exhausted partisan regime to transform the direction of American politics.

The disruptive nature of presidential action derives in large part from its historical-institutional origins. The office's independent seat of action is written into the text of the Constitution, as is its mandate to employ that independence in defense of higher-law principles and the general welfare. Such constitutional obligations encourage incumbents to stand outside the normal currents of politics; each new president is invited to emulate the determined insistence of James K. Polk "to be
myself president of the U.S.” (Skowronek 1996, 12). As Alexander Hamilton famously observed in Federalist No. 72, owing to its design, the presidency would be a magnet for the nation’s most politically ambitious, those individuals seeking to procure fame and cement for themselves a place in the nation’s unfolding historical narrative (Madison, Hamilton, and Jay 1987, 412–16). As a consequence, each successive president takes office seeking to place his own unique stamp on the direction of American government. This persistent impulse to start anew rubs hard against the demand that presidents faithfully embrace the orthodox paths of their party and leads to presidential actions that challenge the status quo as a matter of course.

Skowronek’s great achievement is to explain why, if all presidents desire to remake politics to their liking, i.e., to be regime founders, only a handful have been able to do so without undercutting the bases of their own partisan and public support—in Skowronek’s terms, without losing control over the meaning of their own actions. In Skowronek’s most important formulation, only those presidents most fortuitously situated in “political time”—those who are historically positioned to practice “the politics of reconstruction”—possess the structural preconditions necessary to recast national governing commitments without ceding control over the meaning of political change to their partisan and ideological opponents. Skowronek also posits a “waning of political time,” an important component of which is the attenuating impact of the reconstructive energy. It is a legitimate question therefore to ask whether this additional move renders Skowronek’s theory of political time largely retrodictive. Although subsequent writings appear to vindicate the theory’s continuing predictive power (Skowronek 2008), no reconstructive presidency has been observed since 1981. If this phenomenon is largely a thing of the past, it begs the fundamental question: if not the presidency, from what institutional location is the energy for fundamental political change likely to come? Or does the possibility of fundamental political change still remain within the confines of America’s traditional constitutional order?

The Presidency and American Constitutional Regimes

[T]he Presidency and the system of national elections had begun to interact together to generate a powerful legitimating dynamic. . . . [T]he president’s unconventional [emancipation] proclamation had catalyzed a broad-ranging national debate that had already shaped the meaning of two general elections. When sustained leadership finally met with decisive voter response in 1864, the Republicans could claim that there was something more than a normal political victory involved. (Ackerman 1998, 134–5)

It is a staple of American political thought that ordinary citizens, when speaking in their collective voice as “We the People,” are the authoritative source for constitutional change. Article V of the Constitution lays out one particular method by which that sovereign voice may be actuated to legitimize authoritative alterations to that document. However, as Bruce Ackerman (1991, 1998) demonstrates, some of the most
important changes to the Constitution have taken place extra-constitutionally—that is, by the political efforts of institutional actors working outside of Article V's formal stipulations. Indeed, the actions of presidents and the conduct of presidential elections have been central to the politics of constitutional change.

Ackerman sorts American politics into two distinctive species. The first, “normal politics,” is the more typical. It is characterized by a host of infirmities that empirical political scientists take for granted, infirmities that limit the signaling potential of most American elections: issueless campaigning, voter inattention, depressed levels of voter turnout, the prevalence of insider and pressure group politics, and assorted collective action problems. The other species, “extraordinary politics,” is, as the name implies, a rare occurrence. It is characterized by the presence of salient issues of high public import, citizen attention riveted to national politics and elite partisan debate, and high degrees of voter mobilization. Elections of this sort are analogous to ratification events, citizen judgements rendered in the solemn sovereign voice of “We the People,” deliberative judgements with the authority to recast fundamental constitutional understandings.

Ackerman characterizes these moments of extraordinary politics as “constitutional moments,” authoritative acts of higher law making transacted through the medium of presidential elections. Constitutional moments and the extraordinary politics they spawn pit the nation’s governing institutions—Congress, the presidency, the Court, political parties, state governments, organized pressure groups, and ordinary voters (acting collectively through the institution of national elections)—in sustained public dialogue and fierce political struggle over the fundamental lines of legitimate political authority and the relative status of institutional rivals within those lines of authority. Judicial authority ultimately acquiesces to these reconstituted understandings—though not without considerable resistance—codifying them as part of the Constitution’s formal commitments.

Like Skowronek, Ackerman adopts a governance framework. A constitutional regime is a stable governing arrangement with roles assigned to each institution. Ackerman also relies heavily on the presidency–public nexus, identifying presidents as critical players in “extraordinary politics” because of their intimate relationship to the national body politic. It is most often a president’s challenge of the status quo and the ensuing pushback by challenged institutional rivals that drives political conflict, frames national questions, and fuels public debate over alternative constitutional futures. One example will suffice to illustrate Ackerman’s broader argument regarding the potency of the presidency as an engine of political development. It involves the constitutional transformations of the 1930s, fundamental changes that legitimized Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal.

“Constitutional moments” are multi-election events. It is the sustained character of public deliberation over several years that makes “extraordinary politics” distinctive. Thus to understand the presidency’s place in the development of New Deal constitutionalism, we begin with Franklin Roosevelt’s election in 1932. A classic change election, that contest sent a clear signal that the nation demanded aggressive action to confront the effects of the Great Depression. However, even as Roosevelt
took office in March 1933, the contours of that change remained ill defined. The 1932 election was, in the language of modern political science, more retrospective than prospective in character—more a repudiation of the past than the affirmation of a particular course of future action. As it subsequently evolved, the New Deal vision of activist federal government would pose a fundamental challenge to long-standing constitutional orthodoxies—a set of jurisprudential principles predicated on laissez-faire and a delimited sphere of action for the central government, especially in the areas of economic regulation and social welfare provision. By May 1935, Roosevelt had on several occasions stood by as the Supreme Court struck down New Deal policies as unconstitutional. Finally, on May 27, 1935, in *ALA Schechter v. US*, the Court struck at the National Industrial Recovery Act, the corporatist-inspired centerpiece of Roosevelt’s “First New Deal.” In light of the *Schechter* decision, core elements of Roosevelt’s “Second New Deal”—most notably the Wagner Labor Relations Act and the Social Security Act—also seemed ripe for Court attack.

Roosevelt threw himself into a vigorous electoral defense of his “Second New Deal,” seeking a popular mandate for his constitutional vision of regulatory capitalism in his reelection bid of 1936. A key bone of contention was the meaning of the Commerce Clause. A narrow reading limited the regulatory authority of the national government to not much more than the conveyance of goods and services across interstate lines. Roosevelt sought a more expansive interpretation, one that would read a de facto national police power into the Constitution and, with it, greatly expand the scope and reach of federal regulatory power. As Ackerman recounts it, Roosevelt declared the Court’s *Schechter* ruling to be “more important ‘than any decision of my lifetime . . . more important than any decision probably since *Dred Scott*’” (Ackerman 1998, 297).

In Ackerman’s analysis, political success required both that Roosevelt mount a public defense of his constitutional course of action and that he mobilize broad public support for its continuation, even “in the face of a withering constitutional critique led by the Court” and a Republican presidential candidate who “energetically called the People to rise up in defense of their traditional Constitution.” “While Republicans might conscientiously believe that their fellow citizens had made a tragic mistake,” Ackerman writes, “they could hardly deny that the People had given decisive support to the Democrats with their eyes wide open. By raising the question of constitutional principle so eloquently during Roosevelt’s first term of experimentation, the Supreme Court had

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2 The NIRA had sought to break the downward spiral of wage and price deflation and reinflate the economy by suspending the antitrust laws and cartelizing American industry.
played a key role in establishing, even to New Deal opponents, that the People were indeed supporting a change in their governing philosophy” (Ackerman 1998, 311).

Sustained presidential action and broad electoral mobilization had engendered a revolution in American constitutionalism. In the wake of Roosevelt’s 1936 landslide reelection victory, as well as his determined, if misguided, efforts to pack the high tribunal with several new justices committed to the president’s programmatic vision, the Court retreated, upholding the important elements of the Second New Deal. A reconstitution of governing authority had been ratified, along with a new and enhanced role for the presidency.

**Changing Modalities of Governance and the Emergence of a Plebiscitary Presidency**

In assessing the work of Skowronek and Ackerman on regime change, one is struck by the largely non-problematic status of what I have referred to as the presidency–public nexus. In their work that relationship is taken largely for granted, operating as an independent variable, especially in Ackerman’s account. It provides the motive force; in conjunction with presidential action, it makes fundamental change both possible and seemingly irresistible. In light of the historical sweep of their research, one might reasonably infer that the relationship between presidents and the public has been, in the main, mostly a constant. In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that these authors identify no prerequisites or antecedent conditions necessary to activate this latent popular authority; they do. Nevertheless, the essential relationship seems to be assumed. The relationship between presidents and the people simply lies dormant, awaiting ignition.

That inference, however, is at odds with a second body of scholarship that treats the presidency–public nexus as a dependent variable—something with a discernible point of origin; something with a history of its own; something, in itself, that needs to be accounted for. Instead of positing a constant, these scholars observe a change of significant proportions, directing their research energies toward uncovering its origins and assessing its developmental consequences. Many labels have been attached to the phenomenon in question: “the people’s presidency,” “the public presidency,” “the ‘going public’ presidency,” “the plebiscitary presidency,” “the personal presidency,” “the rhetorical presidency,” and “the mandated presidency” (Peirce and Longley 1981; Edwards 1983; Lowi 1985; Kernell 1986; Tulis 1987; Ellis and Kirk 1998; italics added). Each of these attests to the popular (as opposed to the constitutional) roots of modern presidential authority. However, as we will see shortly, these works diverge in their specific theoretical and historical claims, and
they do so in ways productive for students of APD. Several questions still seek consensual answers: When and why did such a relationship first emerge? How has the character of that relationship evolved over time? What impediments to its full realization had to be (or perhaps still need to be) marginalized or dismantled? What has been the developmental impact of these changes upon the central modalities of American governance?

It is worth noting that most of the works we will consider in this section were published late in the presidency of Ronald Reagan and, it would at least seem, written in reaction to it. In light of the widely perceived failures of the Johnson, Nixon, and Carter presidencies, many academics and public commentators had concluded that the modern presidency was incapable of supplying the effective leadership to national government that its supporters had initially promised (the promise of presidential government is well expressed in Burns 1965; its disillusionment is exemplified by Schlesinger 1973 and Heclo 1981). The Reagan presidency suggested that the critics and pundits might be wrong, especially in light of Reagan’s victories against a Democratic House of Representatives in the budget battles of 1981. Many observers noticed the effective manner in which Reagan systematically cultivated public support for his policies. The president was widely touted as a “great communicator.” David Gergen, Reagan’s first communications director, would later observe, “For the first time in any presidency, we molded a communications policy around our legislative strategy” (Maltese 1992, 193).

APD scholars have grappled with how best to understand both the origins and the ramifications of Reagan’s popular leadership. Does it represent a recent and qualitative break with past governing practice, or is it the culmination of a sequence of changes with deep historical roots? In what follows, I will arrange a small sampling of seminal works on this question. Each author locates the origin of contemporary presidential practice differently. By arranging them in reverse historical chronology we can observe the outlines of a patterned developmental sequence, with contemporary popular leadership arising out of both a series of contingent institutional changes and a prior set of conceptual innovations and normative adjustments.

In Going Public (1986), Samuel Kernell argues that contemporary popular leadership constitutes a clear break with past practice, the displacement of one mode of governance by another in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Of particular interest here, Kernell argues that these changes prompted profound adjustments in the routine ways in which presidents interact with other governing institutions. Systemic changes to the organization of the polity forced the demotion of an older set of practices—summed up in the concept of “the bargaining presidency”—with those better suited to the emergent modalities of contemporary American politics—the “‘going public’ presidency.”

The significance of Kernell’s analysis for us lies in its governance focus. Kernell details the central institutional characteristics of the bargaining era: its committee
system, with influence concentrated in powerful committee chairs; its insulated deliberation process, in which a small number of powerful individuals could strike deals and mobilize the support required to sustain them; its smaller and more homogeneous pressure group system; and its palpably less polarized partisan context. The cumulative effect of this institutional environment was to facilitate quiet backdoor deal making among elites, consensus building, mutual accommodation, and incrementalism. Richard Neustadt is perhaps the most important presidential scholar of the bargaining era. His seminal book *Presidential Power* (1960) details the strategic necessity of effective bargaining to successful presidential leadership.

Kernell details a confluence of institutional changes in the 1970s, the aggregate effect of which was to ignite a revolution in governance and erode the utility of bargaining tactics: the subcommittee revolution and rapid growth in congressional staff, which together expanded policy influence to many more legislators; the explosion in the number and diversity of organized interests in the pressure group system, which made congressional policy making more conflictual and pluralist deals harder both to strike and to enforce. Add to this the increasing prevalence of divided government and passage of congressional "sunshine" laws, which pried open quiet backroom deliberations to scrutiny by powerful interests, and the traditional practices of the bargaining era became increasingly ineffectual, with diminishing returns to presidents who employed them.

Presidents responded to the new rules of governance by trading the quiet negotiations of the bargaining regime for the more public and confrontational tactics of "going public"—going directly to the constituents of opinion-sensitive Congressmen and Senators, mobilizing their support, and pressuring legislators to embrace presidential positions or risk electoral punishment. Changes in the mode of governance resulted in changes to its character and temperament. The techniques of governing and electioneering grew increasingly indistinct; compromise and mutual adjustment between co-equal branches of government gave way increasingly to institutional confrontation and zero-sum struggle.

Kernell dates the emergence of popular leadership to the last quarter of the twentieth century. Theodore Lowi (1985), by contrast, pushes the timeline for the rise of "the plebiscitary presidency" further back, to the 1930s, and the "second constitutional regime" inaugurated by Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Lowi argues that the constitutional and governmental revolution wrought by the New Deal required a corresponding political revolution to sustain it. Prior to the New Deal, American government was, as it had historically been, Congress-centered government. Congress, in turn, was organized and operated by decentralized and heterogeneous patronage parties oriented toward patronage and distributive policy. The new programmatic government introduced by the New Deal required a degree of ideological homogeneity and partisan discipline that congressional patronage parties were structurally incapable of providing. Consolidating and sustaining the New Deal therefore necessitated that Roosevelt break free of congressional dominance and reliance upon patronage parties as intermediaries for mobilizing political support.
Roosevelt’s political revolution was at its core a communications revolution, end-
running traditional intermediaries like political parties and the institutional press. It
embraced the new mass communications technologies, like polling, which allowed
Roosevelt to probe more fully the opinion structures of his national constituency,
and radio, which for the first time allowed presidents to reach into the living rooms
of average citizens and forge a direct and unmediated relationship—a personal
relationship—with the American people. In the end, Lowi sees the rise of plebiscitary
governance as flowing seamlessly from the decision by Roosevelt to cultivate an
intimate relationship between him and the mass public, a relationship institutional-
ized and subsequently developed by successive presidents.

Jeffrey Tulis (1987) locates the origins of plebiscitary governance—“the rhetorical
presidency,” in his terms—back further still in the American historical past. One of
Tulis’s many insights is the observation that antecedent conceptual and normative
revolutions were required before presidents could publicly embrace the new oppor-
tunities and technologies that figure so prominently in Lowi and Kernell. To para-
phrase Tulis, before presidents could act anew, they first required a new cognitive
road map to tell them how to proceed. Additionally, any new plan of action also had
to be judged legitimate by others—it had to be seen as appropriate in light of settled
practice and norms of acceptable presidential behavior. Tulis identifies the ferment
of the Progressive Era as the locus for this ideational revolution in the norms of
appropriate action between presidents, Congress and the public, and he sees in the
writings of Woodrow Wilson that revolution’s most coherent theorist. Wilson would
provide the most detailed blueprint for fundamental change in the relations of
American governance, change that would relocate the presidency to center stage in
national politics.

Woodrow Wilson indicted the Framers’ “Newtonian” constitutional design, its
reliance on the mechanical operation of oppositional forces—checks and balances—
and its failure to provide the requisite energy and purpose required by modern
democracies. “You cannot compound a successful government out of antagonisms,”
Wilson wrote in Constitutional Government in the United States. “Leadership and
control must be lodged somewhere” (1908, 60, 54). Years earlier, Wilson had similarly
taken Congress to task for its parochialism and domination by special interests,
conditions that systematically undercut its ability to provide coherent direction on
national issues (Wilson 1973). Wilson identified the presidency as the only institution
capable of infusing American government with both programmatic direction and
political discipline on matters of national policy. The presidency is the one truly
national institution in American politics. Presidential elections are the only occasions
in which the nation congregates to reflect on the state of the union; presidential
candidates are the only aspirants to national office with an incentive to engage this
national audience, to deliberate openly on national problems, and to put forward a
vision of national policy direction and the public interest; only presidents, so elected,
can claim an issue-based mandate to lead the country in new directions; and only a
mandate-born presidency can engage Congress as first-among-equals and prod the
legislative branch to embrace executive leadership and national goals.
Ellis and Kirk (1995, 1998) agree with Tulis to this extent: the rise of the presidential mandate, and the conceptual shift it represents, was a critical developmental moment in American politics. However, they take issue with Tulis’s account of its historical origin, pushing its emergence much deeper into the nineteenth century. The invention of the mandate is a significant event in American political development because, prior to this moment, informed opinion held Congress, not the presidency, to be the people’s branch. Against this, mandate theory posits an immediate and rivaled relationship between presidents and the public. For the first time, public opinion would be explicitly harnessed to executive action through the institution of presidential elections. Once accepted as legitimate—and this becomes critical—claims by rival institutions to a privileged understanding of the public interest were necessarily subordinate to presidential claims. Through the mandate, the nation at large provided explicit direction to presidents regarding their official course of action, a charge presidents were obligated to take up, directing their institutional energies against any and all obstructions that may be thrown up by Congress, the bureaucracy, the courts, and any other institutional source of opposition.

Kirk and Ellis locate the origins of the presidential mandate in the 1830s and Andrew Jackson’s war against the second Bank of the United States. Jackson and the Congress were locked in a confrontation over the issue of the Bank’s rechartering. The Whigs supported recharter and Jackson opposed it. With the 1836 presidential election fast approaching, Whig leaders struck on a plan to force early passage of congressional reauthorization. They would force a presidential veto, stir public indignation against the popular Jackson for his willful disregard of the People’s Branch, and thus improve Whig chances for electoral victory. Instead, to the chagrin of Whig leaders, the electoral outcome vindicated the president’s position and, as confrontation deepened over Jackson’s decision to remove federal deposits from the national Bank, Jackson made explicit use of the mandate claim, using it to justify executive actions that explicitly defied the will of Congress, the official discretion of cabinet secretaries, and even settled constitutional understanding. Pressed to justify his course of action, Jackson turned to the recently concluded elections, the pattern of clear partisan contestation on the Bank issue, the personal mandate given Jackson’s position by his reelection victory, and the duty he possessed in its wake to continue fearlessly his previous course of action.

While each of these scholars offers a competing interpretation for the origins of plebiscitary governance, none views positively its developmental consequences. Ellis and Kirk view “the mandated presidency” as having promoted the displacement of traditional political party organizations and the rise of plebiscitary mass politics. Tulis criticizes executive rhetorical leadership for subverting the deliberative processes of Congress, and advocates a “middle way” between modern rhetorical leadership and the pre-Wilsonian model. Kernell argues that “going public” has stoked the fires of a new politics of confrontation and interinstitutional political polarization. Lowi concludes that “the plebiscitary presidency” has nurtured presidential arrogance and encouraged the abuse of power.
The governance focus of APD and historical institutionalism also lends itself to a topic of considerable recent scholarship: the actions by recent presidents to assert greater institutional control over the policy actions of the federal bureaucracy, actions that have challenged traditional relations of authority among presidents, Congress, assorted clientele groups, and career administrators themselves. This struggle over bureaucratic control has been accompanied by a much noted temporal dynamic: (1) an increasing centralization of bureaucratic oversight inside the White House itself, and (2) an increasing politicization of bureaucratic rule-making and enforcement processes by government officials acting at the behest of presidents. Strategic presidential appointments, executive orders, and signing statements are some of the modern-day instruments of so-called “direct” or “unilateral” executive action (Howell 2003; Cooper 2002; Mayer 2001; Moe 1985; Tiefer 1994; Weko 1995). In Nathan’s (1975, 1983) classic formulation, they are emblematic of the modern “administrative presidency.”

As I have noted throughout this essay, APD seeks to understand historical origins of contemporary political patterns. In the case of the administrative presidency, the current institutional confrontation over bureaucratic authority might fairly be traced back to the Founding itself. The constitutional text seems virtually to mandate periodic showdowns between presidents and other institutional actors over the legitimate control of bureaucratic authority. To borrow Edwin S. Corwin’s (1941, 200) apt phrase, it is “an invitation to struggle.”

Article II of the Constitution vests “the executive power” in a president of the United States. It also obligates presidents to “take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed,” “to faithfully execute the Office of the President,” and to “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States.” Institutional struggle over the meaning of these provisions and their relative pecking order was inevitable. Does a proper reading of the vesting clause grant plenary authority to presidents over the actions of the executive branch? Are cabinet secretaries discretionary officers in the performance of their jobs? Do presidents act legitimately when they imprint their own policy objective on the rule-making and enforcement functions of expert career bureaucrats? Alternatively, what precisely does it mean to execute “faithfully” the laws of the United States? What is the appropriate yardstick by which to measure the faithfulness of presidential actions? Faithfulness to what: the statutory letter of the law, the best interests of the nation, or the higher law obligations enshrined in the Constitution? Faithfulness to whom: the intent of the originating Congress, the political sentiment of the current Congress, the judgement of experienced bureaucratic experts, the current climate of public opinion, or the mandate of the last presidential
election? And what about the president’s own conscience and discretionary judgement as an elected leader responsible to the nation at large?

As this suggests, the APD impulse is to locate the deep structural tensions that propel forward the institutional struggle over bureaucratic authority and its resulting path of development. This impulse, however, is usefully leavened with respect for political contingency. It is the contingent character of politics that makes political development a fundamentally historical process. Underlying constitutional tensions may be ever present, but like plate tectonics, only periodically do they erupt into large seismic events. Under what political conditions have such conflicts exploded into the open? What confluence of explanatory factors is observable at these moments? Which factors are patterned (i.e., which recur over time), and which are historically delimited? What are the developmental consequences for relations of governmental authority?

In what follows below, I once again present a small handful of seminal writings on the historical origins of “the administrative presidency.” Utilizing both APD and non-APD scholarship, we will identify some of the critical issues and themes, as well as important interpretative disagreements over how best to account for contemporary patterns. I have again chosen to arrange the materials in a manner that emphasizes the historical chronology. This will allow us better to observe how working backwards temporally helps to bring into view deeper issues regarding the historical construction of American politics, implicating the separation of powers, federalism, political parties, and the substantive and ideological content of reform movements in the enduring struggle to define the legitimate organization of governing authority.

Richard Nathan coined the term “the administrative presidency.” In The Plot that Failed (1975) and later in The Administrative Presidency (1983), Nathan identified Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan as the originating forces behind contemporary presidential efforts to wrest greater control from the federal bureaucracy. In Nathan’s analysis, the administrative presidency was a bureaucratic strategy for reforming or turning back New Deal and Great Society programs with strong support in Congress. Nixon focused his animus on the social welfare bureaucracy, while Reagan targeted key institutions of business regulation, most prominently EPA and OSHA. An administrative approach was required because divided government and partisan polarization made congressional reform of these programs beyond presidential reach. Unilateral bureaucratic action was the most feasible strategy for moving the policy status quo in the face of legislative stalemate. Nixon’s “administrative presidency” was ultimately cut short by Watergate. Reagan’s efforts, however, proceeded apace. As one of his first official acts, Reagan issued Executive Order 12991, which transformed the newly created Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs into a White House clearinghouse for proposed regulatory rules. Henceforth, all new environmental and workplace regulations would have to pass presidential scrutiny before they could have the force of law. In addition, Reagan utilized his appointment power to apply strict political and ideological tests to applicants for cabinet, sub-cabinet, and agency administrator positions. Once installed, these presidential agents used the bureaucratic tools at their disposal—budget and staffing authority,
personnel policy, and enforcement policy—to bring bureaucratic output closer into line with White House policy objectives.

Nathan's explanation emphasizes the structure of American politics since the 1960s. Terry Moe (1985), by contrast, pushes the origins of the administrative presidency deeper into America's historical past, to the era of the Great Depression and Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. In Moe's account, a deeper structural transformation lies behind the presidential impulse to centralize administrative oversight and colonize bureaucratic processes. To paraphrase him, the most important facet of "the Roosevelt Revolution" may well have been a revolution in public expectations. Prior to FDR, the federal government did not play a central role in the daily lives of citizens. Moreover, when federal action was required, Congress was expected to play the leadership role. Roosevelt's New Deal and the consolidation of a modern activist state redrew the lines of public expectations. From that point forward, voters would expect the federal government to be on the front line, managing the nation's social welfare and economic prosperity. Moreover, within this enlarged sphere of federal responsibility, presidents would assume the predominant leadership role. Henceforth, citizens would hold presidents accountable for the performance of government. Recognizing their limited ability to affect governmental performance, Roosevelt and his successors would respond by devising new strategies to imprint their objectives on bureaucratic operations. The effect was a historically distinctive pattern of presidential behavior, one that led to centralized bureaucratic oversight in the White House and to politicized governmental operations through the use of presidential appointments (see also Weko 1995).

Sidney Milkis (1993) also locates the origin of "the administrative presidency" in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. However, where Moe identifies the electoral connection as his explanatory variable, Milkis stresses long-standing institutional impediments to national programmatic leadership and, consequently, the need for presidents to embrace new forms of administrative action. A primary interest is the creation of the Executive Office of the President—the "institutional presidency"—the existence of which is widely said to herald the emergence of "the modern presidency" (Greenstein 1978). Milkis maintains that a presidency with enhanced institutional capabilities was rendered necessary by deep incompatibilities between Roosevelt's brand of programmatic liberalism and the configuration of traditional political party structures. The strong national and ideological thrust of the New Deal ran headlong into the decentralized organization of the Democratic Party and its substantively heterogeneous coalition. Indeed, enactment of the New Deal had been possible in the first instance because of the emergency conditions of the Depression and Roosevelt's charismatic leadership. The president's programmatic gains were therefore vulnerable to reversal with a return to normalcy. Roosevelt's first solution to this problem was to try to impress a more national and ideologically liberal direction upon his party. Rather than work through traditional party channels like the congressional caucus to formulate policy and build political support, Roosevelt forged links to the public, using press conferences and the radio to press the Democratic Congress into action. Roosevelt also intervened in Democratic primaries
in twelve states in an ill-fated attempt to defeat conservative Democrats and make the party more ideologically liberal. More successfully, Roosevelt also led the fight to end the two-thirds vote requirement for selecting Democratic presidential nominees, weakening Southern control over candidate selection.

The two-thirds rule notwithstanding, Roosevelt’s efforts to remake the Democratic Party were unsuccessful. Frustrated, he turned instead to a build-up of institutional capabilities inside the presidency itself. The Executive Reorganization Act of 1939 created the Executive Office of the President and, within it, a staff of loyal advisers dedicated to presidential political and policy success. It also moved the powerful Bureau of the Budget from the Treasury Department and into the new EOP, strengthening its budgeting and programmatic capabilities as well. Additionally, Roosevelt broke with traditional party rules governing administrative appointments, relying instead on tests of personal and programmatic loyalty in staffing his New Deal. In Milks’s account, the passage of the Executive Reorganization Act ushers in the era of the modern presidency by giving birth to an institutional presidency, one with enhanced capabilities both for overseeing executive administration and for providing it with ideological direction. Of equal developmental significance, as the Executive Office of the President grew in both complexity and resources, it increasingly came to duplicate a number of the functions traditionally performed by the party system, including communications and mobilization functions, electoral management, legislative liaison, and policy development. In sum, the institutional presidency would give ideologically sympathetic presidents the capacity to protect and expand on Roosevelt’s programmatic legacy with less reliance upon traditional party organization, to the latter’s long-term institutional detriment.

Stephen Skowronek (1982) and Peri Arnold (1986) press their analyses even further into America’s past, locating the historical origin of modern bureaucratic politicization in the early twentieth century and the politics of the Progressive Era. Each observes in this period an incomplete wresting of administrative control away from a localist and patronage-seeking Congress by administrative reformers intent upon building a new American state. These reformers aspired to dismantle a traditional executive branch organized on patronage principles and to replace it with a modern Weberian state—centralized, hierarchical, expert, and professional—under the direct managerial control of the president. In keeping with the principles of the new science of public administration, these reformers would institutionalize a formal separation of politics and administration, with the latter organized along rationalist principles, insulated from legislative and partisan manipulation.

The road to a “managerial presidency” was first realized with the passage of the Budget and Accounting Act of 1920, the high point of Progressive Era administrative reform. That act created the Bureau of the Budget, the forerunner of today’s Office of Management and Budget and the cornerstone of the modern Executive Office of the President. In passing the Budget and Accounting Act, Congress gave the president

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4 Roosevelt also extended merit service protection to first-term appointees in the several newly created New Deal agencies.
both the responsibility and the resources to intervene directly in the day-to-day operations of executive bureaus and agencies. However, of equal political significance, Congress would cede neither its own traditional authorization and oversight responsibilities, nor its prerogative to kill executive reorganization plans that ran counter to the political needs of legislators. The result was institutional stalemate. The structural preconditions for contemporary “centralization and politicization” were sewn into the basic fabric of this Progressive Era settlement, with presidents and Congress locked in permanent conflict over the authority to define the budgetary, staffing, and policy goals of bureaucratic programs, along with the basic lines of authority governing executive branch organization.

Nathan, Moe, Milkis, Skowronek, Arnold—for students of APD, the hard work lies not simply in choosing from among these competing interpretations, but in the exercise of historical judgement that brings order to the succession of explanatory forces that move the historical construction of American politics forward. The achievement exists not merely in the isolation of a critical moment, but in making cumulative sense of a sequence of patterned and contingent causal factors, the sum of which is important not merely because it recounts something significant about our political past, but because it provides fresh insight into our current political condition. Historical institutionalism is a critical component of the APD approach. As we have seen, it instructs its practitioners to privilege the institutional arrangements of governance in a given period setting, to understand both the regular operations that reproduce period status quo and the sources of conflict made manifest by their routine interactions. APD itself calls on us further to probe the sources of instability inherent in these institutional arrangements, as well as the processes and dynamics that push American politics beyond tension-filled governing order and toward full-fledged political disorder and reconstitution. By applying these methodological strictures with discipline we not only acquire insight into the historical origins of contemporary politics, we advance further the cause of a political science of American political development.

**Conclusion: Beyond “Nameless” and “Faceless” Institutionalism**

Writing in 1993, Terry M. Moe issued the call to serious students of the presidency “to stop thinking about presidents as people and to start thinking of them generically: as faceless, nameless institutional actors whose behavior is an institutional product” (Moe 1993, 379). This essay has in part agreed with Moe’s recommendation and in part disagreed. Like Moe, I would renew the call to researchers to embed presidential action in an institutional context, one that situates the presidency in an unending
struggle with other institutions over the control of legitimate governing authority. The presidency is a formal constitutional role; attached to it are responsibilities and expectations, and a grant of powers to meet them. It interacts in a regularized fashion with a multitude of other institutional actors similarly understood. Both the responsibilities of the president and his powers have expanded dramatically since the Founding. But the former has greatly outpaced the latter, with predictable consequences for the contest to control the actions of others. We advance our theoretical understanding of the presidency where we build upon this basic insight.

On the other hand, I have strongly argued against viewing the presidency in strictly generic fashion—as a nameless, faceless institution possessing only those properties it shares in common with all complex organizations. Such an approach runs the risk of stripping individual institutions of their most defining attributes. It boils them down to their shared residue of sameness. A historical institutionalism does not invite us to return to a political science of idiosyncratic individuals. It does, however, open the door to the possibility that the specificities that distinguish individual institutions have explanatory significance. The presidency, I have maintained, is an institution with particular properties and a particular history, and it is only by understanding its unique attributes that we can assess its particular contributions to the unfolding politics of change in the United States and the development of its modalities of governance.

The study of the presidency is a gateway to some of the most significant aspects of our politics. Not only has that institution always been a focal point for political actors seeking purposeful political change, but presidential action has time and time again also made an indelible impact upon the direction, the character, and the temper of American politics. Historical institutionalists and students of APD have an opportunity to reach beyond the confines of the policy process and its estimations of presidential “agenda success” and delve more deeply into the historical construction of American politics. The presidency is an obvious entry point for such questions. By understanding more fully its unique properties and political standing, and by examining its changing interface with other rivals for political authority, we will better position ourselves to theorize its manifold contributions to political change. And by better understanding the hows and whys of political change, we better position ourselves to understand, not only where as a country we have been, but also “where we are, and wither we are tending” (Lincoln 1992).

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