

CHAPTER 1

Asking the Right Questions

IT IS NATURAL for new presidents, basking in the glow of an electoral victory, to focus on creating, rather than exploiting, opportunities for change. It may seem quite reasonable for leaders who have just won the biggest prize in American politics by convincing voters and party leaders to support their candidacies to conclude that they should be able to convince members of the public and the U.S. Congress to support their policies. Thus, they need not focus on evaluating existing possibilities when they think they can create their own.

Campaigning is different from governing, however. Campaigns focus on short-term victory and candidates wage them in either/or terms. To win an election, a candidate need only convince voters that he or she is a better choice than the few available alternatives. In addition, someone always wins, whether or not voters support the victor's policy positions.

Governing, on the other hand, involves deliberation, negotiation, and often compromise over an extended period. Moreover, in governing, the president's policy is just one of a wide range of alternatives. Furthermore, delay is a common objective, and a common outcome, in matters of public policy. Neither the public nor elected officials have to choose. Although stalemate may sometimes be the president's goal, the White House usually wishes to convince people to support a positive action.

In sum, we should not infer from success in winning elections that the White House can persuade members of the public and Congress to change their minds and support policies they would otherwise oppose. The American political system is not a fertile field for the exercise of presidential leadership. Most political actors, from the average citizen to members of Congress, are free to choose whether to follow the chief executive's lead; the president cannot force them to act. At the same time, the sharing of

powers established by the U.S. Constitution's checks and balances not only prevents the president from acting unilaterally on most important matters but also gives other power holders different perspectives on issues and policy proposals.

PERSUASION AND PRESIDENTIAL POWER

The best-known dictum regarding the American presidency is that “presidential power is the power to persuade.”¹ It is the wonderfully felicitous phrase that captures the essence of Richard Neustadt’s argument in *Presidential Power*. For more than half a century, scholars and students—and many presidents—have viewed the presidency through the lens of Neustadt’s core premise.

In Neustadt’s words, “‘powers’ are no guarantee of power”² and “[t]he probabilities of power do not derive from the literary theory of the Constitution.”³ Presidents would have to struggle to get their way. Indeed, it was the inherent weakness of the presidency that made it necessary for presidents to understand how to use their resources most effectively.

Power, then, is a function of personal politics rather than of formal authority or position. Neustadt placed people and politics in the center of research, and the core activity on which he focused was leadership. Indeed, the subtitle of *Presidential Power* is *The Politics of Leadership*. In essence, presidential leadership is the power to persuade.

To think strategically about power, we must search for generalizations. According to Neustadt:

There are two ways to study “presidential power.” One way is to focus on the tactics . . . of influencing certain men in given situations. . . . The other way is to step back from tactics . . . and to deal with influence in more strategic terms: what is its nature and what are its sources? . . . Strategically, [for example] the question is not how he masters Congress in a peculiar instance, but what he does to boost his chance for mastery in any instance.⁴

Thus, Neustadt encouraged us to focus on the strategic level of power when we examined presidential persuasion. In broad terms, persuasion refers to causing others to do something by reasoning, urging, or inducement. Influencing others is central to the conception of leadership of most political scientists. Scholars of the presidency want to know whether the chief executive can affect the output of government by influencing the actions and attitudes of others.

What did Neustadt mean by persuasion? “The essence of a President’s persuasive task, with congressmen and everybody else,” he argued, “is to

induce them to believe that what he wants of them is what their own appraisal of their own responsibilities requires them to do in their interest, not his. . . . Persuasion deals in the coin of self-interest with men who have some freedom to reject what they find counterfeit.”⁵ Thus, “The power to persuade is the power to bargain.”⁶

In other words, the president is not likely to change many minds among those who disagree with him on substance or have little incentive to help him succeed. Although Neustadt did not focus extensively on public opinion, we can generalize beyond public officials to their constituents. His endorsement of the findings in *On Deaf Ears*⁷ that presidents rarely move the public in their direction reflects his skepticism about changing public opinion.

In his important work on the *Politics Presidents Make*, Stephen Skowronek maintains that the presidency’s capacity to transform American government and politics results from its blunt and disruptive effects. Andrew Jackson forced the submission of the nullifiers and undermined the Bank of the United States, Franklin Pierce deployed the resources of his office on behalf of the Kansas Nebraska Act, and Lincoln bludgeoned the South into submission. All were transformative acts that changed the landscape of American government and politics. I agree. And Skowronek agrees that persuasion was not central to any of these actions.⁸

In addition, Skowronek argues that presidential failures can be as transformative as their successes, with retribution for failure driving political change, jarring loose governing coalitions, opening unforeseen alternatives, shifting the balance of power, and passing to successors an entirely new set of opportunities and constraints.⁹ Again, I agree. My focus, however, is on presidents attempting to obtain support for policies that *they* want.

A LESS RESTRICTED VIEW

Not everyone has such restrained views of leaders, and few are blessed with the penetrating and nuanced understanding of the presidency of a Richard Neustadt. Many political commentators suggest that all the president has to do to obtain the support of the public or members of Congress is to reach into his inventory of leadership skills and employ the appropriate means of persuasion. Most presidents, at least at the beginning of their tenures, seem to believe them. In other words, these observers and participants believe presidents can *create* opportunities for change.

For example, many liberals could not understand how the White House could fail to win stricter gun control laws following the Newtown massacre on December 14, 2012. They, like the White House, thought the

president could rally the public and twist enough congressional arms to achieve policy change. *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd complained that Obama had “not learned how to govern”—he did “not know how to work the system . . . or even hire some clever people who can tell him how to do it or do it for him.” She advised her readers that the president “should have gone out to Ohio, New Hampshire and Nevada and had big rallies to get the public riled up to put pressure on Rob Portman, Kelly Ayotte and Dean Heller, giving notice that they would pay a price if they spurned him on this.”¹⁰ Thus, the president’s failure was his own fault.

Presidents are not immune from the belief that they can create opportunities for change. For example, Bill Clinton’s aides reported that he exhibited an “unbelievable arrogance” regarding his ability to change public opinion and felt he could “create new political capital all the time” by going public.¹¹ Similarly, Barack Obama believed in the power of rhetoric to rally the public on behalf of policy change. As he proclaimed while running for president in 2008,

Don’t tell me words don’t matter. “I have a dream”—just words. “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal”—just words. “We have nothing to fear but fear itself”—just words, just speeches. It’s true that speeches don’t solve all problems, but what is also true is that if we can’t inspire our country to believe again, then it doesn’t matter how many policies and plans we have, and that is why I’m running for president of the United States of America, . . . because the American people want to believe in change again. Don’t tell me words don’t matter!¹²

It is not surprising, then, that the president dismissed the advice of his top assistants and pursued health care reform in his first year, confident that he could win the public’s support.¹³

The president’s own staff may also buy into the myth of presidential persuasiveness. One White House aide recalled how a few of his colleagues considered highlighting some pages of Robert Caro’s book about Lyndon Johnson as Senate majority leader and leaving it on Obama’s desk. “Sometimes a president just needs to knock heads,” the aide declared. As he saw it, Johnson “twisted their arm, they had no choice—he was going [to] defund them, ruin ’em, support their opponent . . . and the deal was cut.”¹⁴ (I will address this misremembered history of LBJ in chapter 9.)

GETTING IT RIGHT

The underlying premise of such appraisals is that the system is responsive to presidential will, if only the White House exercises it skillfully. Such a

view is naïve, however. An extensive body of research in political science has found that even the most skilled presidents have great difficulty in persuading the public¹⁵ or members of Congress¹⁶ to support them.

Because presidents are not in strong positions to *create* opportunities for success by persuading members of Congress or their constituents to change their minds about supporting their policies, recognizing the opportunities that already exist is particularly significant. For presidents, it may be the most important skill of all, because they typically engender change by exploiting existing opportunities rather than creating them.¹⁷ It follows that understanding the president's opportunity structure is the key to solving the puzzle of presidential leadership.

It is important for all of us to understand how successful presidents actually lead. What are the essential presidential leadership skills? Under what conditions are they most effective? What contributions can these skills make to engendering change? The answers to these questions should influence presidents' efforts to govern, the focus of scholarly research and journalistic coverage, and the expectations and evaluations of citizens. Thus, we must seek a better understanding of presidential leadership in order to think sensibly about the role of the chief executive in the nation's political system.

LEADERSHIP

Influencing others is central to most people's conception of leadership, including those most focused on politics. In a democracy, we are particularly attuned to efforts to persuade, especially when most potentially significant policy changes require the assent of multiple power holders. Thus persuasion seems to lie at the heart of leadership.

Yet, leadership is an elusive concept. James MacGregor Burns's contention that "Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth"¹⁸ is as true now as it was when he asserted it in 1978. Writers and commentators employ the term "leadership" to mean just about everything a person who occupies what we often refer to as a position of leadership does—or should do. When we define a term so broadly, however, it loses its utility.

The Constitution and federal laws invest significant discretionary authority in the president. Making decisions and issuing commands are important, and doing them well requires courage, wisdom, and skill. At times, the exercise of unilateral authority may lead to historic changes in the politics and policy of the country. In the extreme case, the president can choose to launch a nuclear attack at his discretion. The consequences would be vast. Most people, however, would not view such an act as one

of leadership. In exercising discretionary authority, the president, in effect, acts alone. He does not have to *lead* anyone to do something.

Making tough decisions, establishing an administration's priorities, and appointing able people to implement policy are core functions of the presidency. Yet these activities differ substantially from obtaining the support of the public and the Congress for the president's policies.

Similarly, an important element of a chief executive's job may be creating the organizational and personal conditions that promote innovative thinking, the frank and open presentation and analysis of alternatives, and effective implementation of decisions by advisers and members of the bureaucracy. We may reasonably view such actions as leadership, and there is no doubt that the processes of decision making and policy implementation are critical to governing. For purposes of this book, however, I focus on leadership of those who are not directly on the president's team and who are thus less obligated to support his initiatives.

DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

We have seen that there are contrasting perspectives on presidential leadership. One emphasizes creating opportunities for success through persuading others to change their minds and support the president. The other perspective is more modest and puts exploiting opportunities for success that already exist at its core. Each perspective leads analysts to ask different questions about presidential politics. We will see in chapter 4 that each perspective also leads to different answers for explaining the results of presidential leadership.

The belief that presidents not only need to persuade but that persuasion will be central to their success has encouraged journalists, commentators, some scholars, and other observers of the presidency to focus on the question of *how* presidents persuade rather than the more fundamental question of *whether they can do so*. In other words, there is more emphasis on description than analysis and too little attention given to the essential question of, what difference do efforts at leadership make?

An emphasis on the personal in politics, based on the assumption of the potential success of persuasion, has led some to overlook the importance of the context in which the president operates as well as his institutional setting. Doing so encourages ad hoc explanations and discourages generalizations about the strategic level of power. Reaching such generalizations should be central to our enterprise, however.

If the fundamental premise underlying one's approach to presidential leadership is that presidents can persuade the public or members of Con-

gress to support of them, then it follows that certain questions will be at the core of research. One set of questions would deal with the impact of the president's characteristics on his persuasiveness. Such questions might focus on the president's personal persuasiveness, skill as a public speaker, and ability to relate to both average Americans and members of Congress. Other questions would focus on the means of persuasion such as the use of various rhetorical devices, the quality and frequency of speech making, the venues of speeches, and the investment of time in socializing with members of Congress.

If the core of presidential power is not the power to persuade, however, scholars should ask a different set of questions. Understanding the nature and possibilities of leadership puts us in a better position to evaluate both the performance of presidents and the opportunities for change. Equally important, we have a better sense of where to look for explanations of the success and consequences of presidential leadership. If there are significant limits on presidential persuasion, it follows that major changes in public policy will not necessarily turn on a president's persuasive skills or his willingness to use them.

Exploiting opportunities requires a different set of skills than creating them. If exploiting opportunities to steer true believers is more critical to engendering change than persuading the skeptical, much less converting the opposition, it follows that we should focus more on maintaining and managing coalitions and less on the verbal dexterity or interpersonal persuasiveness that is hypothetically necessary to expand coalitions and thus transform the political landscape.¹⁹ As a result, we will ask different questions about the president's personal characteristics, focusing on how presidents actually marshal forces to bring about change. Relevant questions include the degree of the president's analytical insight regarding his opportunity structure and his skill in exploiting his opportunities. We will also want to know if he has the commitment, resolution, strength, and resiliency to persevere and take full advantage of opportunities that exist.

Moving beyond the president as an individual, we will want to study the president's strategic position, his opportunity structure. Regarding the public, we want to know where it stands independent of the president and the potential for attracting nascent support. We will see in chapter 2 that the core questions are:

- Did the public provide the president an electoral mandate for his policies?
- Does the public support the general direction of the president's policies?

- How polarized is public opinion?
- How malleable is public opinion?

By answering these questions, we are in a strong position to predict the likelihood of the president obtaining the public's support for his programs. We do not need to ask about the president's personal characteristics or means of persuasion because persuasion is not the key to the president's success. Instead, following Neustadt's recommendation to concentrate on the strategic level of power—the chances of winning in any instance—we should focus on the president's broad strategic position regarding the public.

If we wish to focus on the president's leadership on a particular issue, as I do in chapter 4, we can supplement our strategic analysis with answers to more specific questions such as:

- Is the president's initiative already popular with the public?
- If so, is it also salient to the public?
- How does the public evaluate the president's job performance?

Personalizing politics can distract our attention from factors that play a larger role in explaining presidential success in Congress as well as with the public and thus greatly oversimplify our understanding of executive-legislative relations. If presidents typically operate at the margins of coalition-building and exercise their legislative skills primarily to exploit rather than create opportunities for leadership, we should devote more effort to examining broader influences on Congress and less on personal skills. In chapter 3 I specify six key questions:

- Is there a perception in Congress that the president received an electoral mandate on behalf of specific policies?
- Does the president's party enjoy a majority in a chamber? If so, how large is it?
- What is the degree of ideological polarization in Congress?
- Are there cross-pressures among the public in constituencies held by the opposition party that would counter these members' ideological predispositions?
- How ideologically coherent is the president's party in Congress?
- Does the structure of the decision facing Congress favor the president?

In particular instances, we may also wish to know the answers to contextual questions such as:

- Are there slack resources in the budget or is the deficit a major constraint on initiatives?

- In which congressional constituencies, if any, is the president high in the job approval polls?
- Does the president's proposal deal with national security policy?
- Is the president serving during wartime or highly salient crisis?

In his sweeping and insightful analysis of presidents, Stephen Skowronek also emphasizes the context of a presidency, particularly the vitality of the dominant partisan coalition and the president's relation to it. The president's situation in "political time" establishes the parameters of the possibilities for change.²⁰ Thus, each president inherits a regime-based opportunity structure that he must negotiate throughout his term. Perhaps because of the comprehensive nature of his study, Skowronek discusses the opportunity structure in general terms. My analysis specifies which contextual factors matter and explains why they do so.

In addition, I view opportunity structure as dynamic. Party cohorts, public polarization, and other core features of a president's strategic position change over time. Often these changes are gradual, but sometimes there are dramatic alternations in opportunity structure within a single presidency.²¹

Finally, the model is not time-bound. Even though the values of strategic elements change over time, the variables themselves do not. They are always relevant to explaining the success of presidential leadership.

THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

Asking different questions produces different explanations for the success of presidential leadership. If we ask the right questions, we can predict the success of efforts of presidents to lead, increasing our confidence in the importance of those questions. In part I, I show how we can explain—and predict—presidential success in Congress by answering the right questions.

To illustrate the advantages of focusing on the president's existing opportunity structure, in chapters 2, 3, and 4, I focus on the first two years of Barack Obama's second term. In chapter 2, I examine Obama's strategic position—his opportunity structure—with the public to explain why he faced such difficulties in obtaining the public's support. In chapter 3, I focus on the president's opportunity structure in Congress, again explaining why he was not more successful.

In chapter 4, I show how adopting the strategic position perspective is considerably more useful in explaining the outcomes of important issues in these years than employing a perspective based on the potential of

presidential persuasion. The strategic perspective leads us to ask different questions regarding presidential leadership—and encourages us to arrive at different, and better, answers.

If changing opinions is not central to presidential leadership, how can presidents lead? Within the parameters of the president's opportunity structure, what is the role of persuasion? If we turn our attention to exploiting opportunities, we can make headway in understanding the role of presidential leadership in American politics.

There are those in Congress and the public with a general predisposition to support the White House but who have yet to agree with a specific policy stand. Others may need to have their existing support reinforced. If persuasion is going to work, it is likely to be with such people. Others, especially members of Congress, may find it in their short-term self-interest to give the president what he wants, even if doing so is contrary to their orientations to public policy. Such conditions provide the president opportunities for success, and in part II, I analyze the possibilities of the president exploiting potential support in the public and in Congress.

Much of the president's efforts to exploit his environment focus on public opinion. The White House wants public support primarily to encourage members of Congress to back the president's proposals. Chapter 5 examines the president benefiting from motivated reasoning to reinforce and guide the opinions of those predisposed to support him. Chapter 6 looks at the president exploiting existing opinion on policies by showing the public how its views are compatible with his policies or by increasing the salience of White House initiatives that are popular with the public. I also address the president leading on issues on which opinion has yet to develop.

Chapter 7 analyzes the more complex but often important circumstance of the president cross-pressuring his co-partisans by supporting policies contrary to their predispositions. In addition, the president may cross-pressure identifiers with the opposition party by supporting policies they are inclined to favor or by offering a broad orientation to policy that encourages them to change their party identification. Chapter 8 focuses on using the technological advances of new forms of media to reach and potentially mobilize supporters.

Chapter 9 turns to Congress. Presidents are unlikely to change many congressional minds, but they can take advantage of members' ideological predispositions or their proclivities to support their party leader. Sometimes the structure of the decision before Congress favors the president's position. The key to successful leadership for the president is understanding his strategic position and then making the most out of it.

In the concluding chapter I take a broad view of presidential leadership. First, I stress the importance of strategic assessments in presidential

leadership and the leverage they give us in evaluating the likely success of strategies for governing. I also explore how what we have learned about presidential leadership should affect presidents' attempts to govern. Before a president can fashion a strategy for accomplishing his goals, he must rigorously analyze the most significant features of his environment to understand the opportunity structure of his administration. Ideally, such appraisals will influence how much and what types of change presidents seek and the strategies they choose for achieving it. Finally, I suggest that the mistaken belief in the potential of persuasion undermines the potential for compromise necessary for governing in America.