

Shifting Currents: Dwight Eisenhower and the Dynamic of Presidential Opportunity Structure

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The opportunity structure framework has become a cornerstone of presidency research over the past generation. Yet the way scholars have construed opportunity structure has been too narrow. Where they have stressed the partisan regime context in which a president is situated, other contextual elements often weigh more heavily on a president's calculation of what he can and cannot do. Further, the regime context is relatively static within any administration, but the opportunity structure a president faces will change rapidly. These choices are often the consequence of a president's earlier actions. His choices will set in motion new forces to which he will later have to respond. The presidency of Dwight Eisenhower serves to illustrate the value of a broadened and more dynamic conception of the opportunity structure approach.

In May 1960 President Dwight Eisenhower looked forward to a summit meeting with the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and the leaders of France and Great Britain that held great promise for moving beyond the hostility of the Cold War to a new era of détente. For more than seven years the president had been building toward this moment. He had maneuvered between suspicion and anti-Communist hysteria at home and tense confrontations abroad. By escaping the Cold War stalemate, Eisenhower could not only lessen the risk of nuclear war that had hung over his presidency, but also help him reach other cherished goals, such as curbing U.S. defense expenditures and balancing the federal budget over the long term. A rare opening seemed to beckon, a moment when a president could initiate far-reaching transformations at home and abroad.

And then the moment vanished, in the explosion of a high altitude Soviet air defense missile that brought down the U-2 spy plane piloted by Francis Gary Powers. The spy

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flights had been going on since 1956, despite the Soviets' private protests at the violation of their air space. (To denounce the flights in public would also require an embarrassing admission by Moscow that it lacked the capability to shoot down the aircraft.) Eisenhower understood the risk should a plane be downed, but he valued the reassuring information the missions yielded that the Soviet missile program lagged behind that of the United States. So he decided to approve one final flight two weeks before the scheduled summit. When the plane went missing, the president and his advisors hoped at first that it had been destroyed and Powers killed, leaving no evidence for the Soviets to exploit. But Khrushchev soon announced the Soviets held the pilot alive. After initially denying knowledge of the mission, Eisenhower accepted responsibility and called the flights necessary to preserve national security. This acknowledgment in turn placed the Soviet leader in a vulnerable position with his own hardliners, and he adopted the public posture of a man betrayed. The four-power summit came to nothing (Pach and Richardson 1991, 214-19). Once on the verge of a thaw, U.S.-Soviet relations again turned to ice.

The U-2 episode raises questions about how we think about the "opportunity structure" of presidential leadership. The opportunity structure framework has become a cornerstone of presidency research over the past generation. Led by Stephen Skowronek (1993), scholars have emphasized that circumstances facilitate, inhibit, or preclude presidential action. Presidents are agents—they make consequential decisions that others in their shoes might not make—but they operate within a context in which only some actions are possible at an acceptable political cost. To ignore the environment is to court failure. Yet the way scholars have construed opportunity structure, I would argue, has been too narrow. The emphasis, per Skowronek, has been on the partisan context in which a president is situated, based on the problematic framework of partisan regimes. If we consider the U-2 example or, for that matter, a host of other situations Eisenhower faced, a regime focus tells us nothing about what he could or could not do. It did not matter when Powers was shot down that Eisenhower was a Republican president during a Democratic era. Further, the impact of the incident on the summit and on the president's late-term agenda highlights both the fluid character of opportunity structures and how they can be reshaped by a president's own choices.

Drawing on the Eisenhower presidency, I propose to reformulate the opportunity structure approach to presidential leadership in three ways. First, without dismissing the significance of the regime context, I reject the presumption that it always belongs in the foreground when we attempt to make sense of a president's political environment. Other contextual elements enter a president's calculation of what he can and cannot do, and these elements often weigh more heavily on his interpretation of the possible than does his relationship to the dominant coalition. The contextual factors that shape the costs and benefits of action also vary across issues and policy domains. Second, the opportunity structure for a president is always changing. A partisan regime evolves, but the movement within a single presidency is modest; the terrain on which a given president acts shifts much more quickly. We might think of it as a river: though from a distance it appears to follow the same course, those who navigate it realize that it is always changing and thus always requiring adjustments to avoid new hazards. Third, the changes in the opportunity structure may be the consequence of a president's earlier actions. His choices,

ranging from diplomatic maneuvers to key appointments, will set new forces in motion to which he will later have to respond.

Eisenhower demonstrates the complex and dynamic character of presidential opportunity structure. After examining critically Skowronek's opportunity structure concept and developing some of its implications, I apply my expanded framework to the Eisenhower presidency. I first show that, while we cannot neglect Eisenhower's position in a partisan regime context, this sheds light on few aspects of his administration (though they are important ones). When he entered office, other elements were at least as important in his assessment of what his situation allowed, required, or prohibited. I next examine how his opportunity structure changed across several key foreign and domestic policy areas. Then I take a second look at some of these examples to explore the impact of Eisenhower's own agency on the environment he later encountered. I suggest in closing that we can make effective use of the opportunity structure framework as an analytical tool only if we appreciate how multifaceted and shifting a president's environment is.

Broadening the Opportunity Structure Framework

Presidency scholars have long appreciated the importance of context in explaining presidential success. To single out but one noteworthy example, Aaron Wildavsky's classic "two presidencies" thesis recognizes that presidents enjoy significantly greater latitude in the realm of foreign policy than in domestic matters. In foreign affairs, a president enjoys stronger constitutional resources, can anticipate broader domestic backing, and typically faces less legislative opposition (Wildavsky 1966). The vast literature examining patterns of presidents' legislative success also represents an ongoing effort to weigh context. Scholars have considered such factors as the impact of presidential partisan control of Congress and partisan polarization (Eshbaugh-Soha 2005). Other literature on the presidency has explored the importance of other contextual elements that include the national mood (liberal or conservative), public attitudes toward government, and more (Renshon 2008). Suffice it to say that few if any presidency scholars would ignore context.

To this ongoing conversation, Stephen Skowronek added the explicit consideration of what he terms the opportunity structure for presidential leadership. His influential formulation of political time brings to the foreground a contextual element that had received little attention among presidency scholars. What a president can do is shaped not only by the broad constitutional powers of the office or its secular development across history, but also by the vitality of the dominant partisan coalition and the president's relation to it. In Skowronek's formulation, partisan regimes may be resilient or vulnerable, while a given president is either affiliated with the regime or a member of the opposition coalition. This typology gives rise to four recurring presidential opportunity structures: vulnerable/opposed (reconstruction), resilient/opposed (preemptive), vulnerable/affiliated (disjunction), and resilient/affiliated (articulation). Complicating the picture, presidents are also actors in a durable constitutional order and in a political system that has developed over time. The latter, Skowronek argues, has led to a pattern of institutional thickening that has weakened the capacity of regimes to disrupt and uproot the

previous partisan order and led to a waning of political time. Still, the politics presidents make are shaped first and foremost by the partisan context. They will engage—capitalize on, attempt to circumvent, confront, and at times stubbornly deny—the partisan opportunity structure that presents itself. As he puts it, presidents are “willful agents, more or less inclined to test the limits of their power and to act on the political world according to their own beliefs, ambitions, and outlooks” (Skowronek 1993, 46).

Skowronek’s framework has shaped presidency scholarship for the past two decades, but his concept of political time invites a number of questions. To begin with, even for those who accept the opportunity structure approach, the regime construct is problematic. He never defines partisan regimes. Others have done so but in ways that call into doubt the utility of a regime framework for explaining political outcomes across long stretches of American history. I have argued that partisan coalitions operate as strong forces only for a short period after they first attain effective governing power. At most other times, a regime operates largely as a boundary condition, setting the outer limits of what is politically possible but otherwise doing little work to explain specific political outcomes (Polsky 2012b). This in turn leaves open how we might use the idea of a leadership opportunity structure when the vitality of the governing coalition and the president’s relation to that coalition do not function as dominant contextual conditions.

Even if we adhere to the idea that regimes always matter, it is not clear why we should treat them as the most significant feature of the opportunity structure. Many elements shape the political context of a given presidency (Aberbach and Rockman 1999). Indeed, one of the challenges in using the opportunity structure approach is identifying which contextual factors matter. The issues that demand attention may not map neatly along the lines of partisan division; indeed, the issues may have no clear partisan coloration whatsoever. International relations may stand out as a central challenge, especially for modern presidents, yet partisan regimes have formed primarily around domestic concerns. Skowronek recognizes that other pieces contribute to the opportunity structure, but his preoccupation with political time leads him to privilege its influence (Hoekstra 1999, 660). Placing the long cycles of partisan dominance in the foreground tends to push other parts of the context aside or invite us to interpret them through the filter of regime politics. Rather than grant primacy to political time as he defines it, we need to weigh carefully the relative importance of different contextual factors in shaping the opportunity structure for a particular presidency.¹

Political time as employed by Skowronek also takes on a static character in tension with his assertion of presidential agency. Each president inherits a regime-based opportunity structure that he must negotiate throughout his term. The regime itself is either resilient or vulnerable, and his initiatives appear to have little or no impact on its vitality; likewise, he is either affiliated with or opposed to the regime. But presidents *act*—in his words, they “test the limits of their power.” And action itself matters, not just in terms of policy outcomes but also in reshaping the political terrain (Hoekstra 1999, 667). If presidential action rarely alters in dramatic ways the context for subsequent presidential agency, what a president does often changes the opportunity structure at the margin, and the cumulative effect may be substantial.

1. For a contrary view that gives pride of place to the partisan context, see Crockett (2000).

By extension, we need to consider the possibility that other factors may alter the opportunity structure a president faces across his term(s) in office. To take an obvious example, Herbert Hoover's presidency was transformed by the stock market crash in October 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression. Whether we accept Skowronek's characterization of the Republican regime at the time of Hoover's inauguration as vulnerable or prefer an alternative formulation that sees the late 1920s as a postregime period, the political context changed radically when the economy collapsed.² We need only consider the counterfactual of no Great Depression: in that case, there is no basis for assuming an end to Republican presidential success, especially given the huge electoral margins the party had amassed across the previous three presidential elections. Other changes would also alter the opportunity structure within a presidential administration: a shift in party control in Congress or dramatic reform of congressional rules, a scandal that puts an administration under a cloud, an effective or inept response to a natural disaster, an international crisis or war, etc. Opportunity structure, then, should be regarded as a dynamic concept, with the structure of possibilities altered by many forces at work during a president's tenure.³

Finally, a basic question remains about what "opportunity" means when we speak of a leader's opportunity structure. Political time, Skowronek suggests, leaves presidents with a range of possible courses of action, broad in a few cases, very narrow in a few others. Thus one way to understand the context, both in regime and other terms, is to treat it as *permissive* in shaping what a president may choose to do or not do. Permissiveness should also be seen as a matter of degree, and thus variable across issue domains and a president's tenure. Presumably, too, certain things fall outside the realm of the possible; that is, the opportunity structure also *precludes* actions. To cross such boundaries is to assure failure in political and/or policy terms. The opportunity structure may also force a president's hand, *requiring* him to act in some way because the cost (political or otherwise) of inaction would be seen as prohibitive. International crises may compel an American response, the price that comes with the nation's modern superpower status.

The Limited Explanatory Value of Political Time: Eisenhower as a "Preemptive" President

Skowronek places Eisenhower in the category of preemptive presidents, though with some discomfort. Preemption occurs, it will be recalled, when a president representing the opposition coalition wins office while the dominant coalition retains its vitality. This situation is fraught with peril for the president. He must walk a fine line between the demands of his own coalition, eager to undo the accomplishments of the regime, and the enduring popularity of the regime's programs and commitments. Preemptive presidents, he observes, have often stumbled; indeed, the serious presidential impeachment

2. Compare Skowronek (1993, 260-85), and Polsky (2012b).

3. This point has been recognized by other presidency scholars who do not use the language of opportunity structure. See, for example, Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha (2007).

efforts (Andrew Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Bill Clinton) have all involved chief executives situated in this category of political time. Yet Skowronek goes on to describe Eisenhower as a “hard case,” for he seemed to operate comfortably within his regime-defined political space despite his opposition status (Skowronek 1993, 46). On one side, he resisted demands to dismantle the New Deal state, to the chagrin of conservatives. On the other, Eisenhower pursued a number of conservative policies, yet he remained popular in an electorate that still identified strongly with the Democratic Party and its policy legacy. He represents one of those “willful agents” who act “according to their own beliefs, ambitions, and outlooks” (Skowronek 1993, 46).

A single anomalous case from among 40-odd presidencies would not be fatal to the theory, but there is little reason to set Eisenhower apart as an exception to the general pattern. From the perspective of Skowronek’s political time, Eisenhower was simply very adroit at reading his political situation and the constraints it imposed. As Skowronek observes of Eisenhower,

His was an opposition carefully tuned to its own limits. He successfully cultivated his own personal independence in politics by severely curtailing the disruptive uses of his own powers. Eisenhower was content to prune the radical edge off New Deal liberalism. (Skowronek 1993, 46)

Other scholars concur that Eisenhower fits cleanly into the preemptive category. Douglas B. Harris agrees that Eisenhower operated with a clear grasp of the enduring popularity of the New Deal and contented himself with tinkering at the margins. Rather than seek some kind of reconstructive opening, he settled for curbing the more ambitious Democratic ideas about extending the reach of the national welfare state (Harris 1997). We should examine, then, the explanatory value of political time in the Eisenhower case.

To place Eisenhower in political time requires first that we delimit the New Deal order in which his presidency was situated. The boundaries of the Democratic regime are not self-evident. To be sure, the New Deal encompassed a broad national government commitment to aid those in need, provide social insurance for the elderly and those unable to work, and use the macroeconomic powers of the national state to promote prosperity and full employment. But Skowronek extends the label to encompass Harry Truman’s foreign policy of containment (Skowronek 1993, 46; see similarly Crockett 2000, 256). This seems unwarranted: the New Deal was a domestic project, and some of its strong backers had broken with Franklin Roosevelt over his interventionist foreign policy. A significant wing of the Republican Party, moreover, had adopted an internationalist outlook. In fact, one of the considerations that led Eisenhower to pursue the GOP nomination was his determination not to leave the party to the isolationists. We also should not regard the increasing restiveness and activism of African Americans and their liberal allies during and after the war as expressions of the Democratic regime. Civil rights activism is better seen either in a long historical context dating back to the end of Reconstruction or as an outgrowth of World War II and the demographic changes and political forces the war set in motion (Mayhew 2005).

As an opposition president encountering a still-resilient New Deal order, Eisenhower faced a highly permissive opportunity structure. He certainly could not confront

head-on the pillars of the federal welfare state, notwithstanding the call to do so by some reactionary elements in his own party. In an oft-quoted letter to his brother Edgar, an advocate of dismantling the New Deal, Eisenhower wrote, "Should any political party attempt to abolish social security and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again in our political history" (Greenstein 1994, 50; Harris 1997, 334; Sloan 1991, 61-62). But this tells us little. Few presidents under any political circumstances will challenge popular government programs. No scholar would argue that Ronald Reagan operated within the New Deal order, yet he declined to try to undo Social Security; when George W. Bush did so a generation later after winning reelection in 2004, he earned a bloody nose for his presumptiveness.

Eschewing direct confrontation with the New Deal legacy, Eisenhower found himself with substantial (though by no means unlimited) latitude to make changes at the margins or adopt the more conservative approaches available within the New Deal policy repertoire. His decision to expand the reach of Social Security certainly represents an accommodation to the liberal order. Yet in embracing a broader social insurance program, he also emphasized certain conservative objectives: he aimed to reduce or eliminate other social programs and to highlight the contributory aspect of the program as a way to deflect the Democrats' ongoing push for a more redistributive orientation (Weatherford 2002, 125-28). Over the previous two decades, moreover, a strong consensus had emerged in favor of national government intervention to smooth out the peaks and valleys of the business cycle. This had been codified in the 1946 Employment Act, which made full employment a national policy objective (Wilson 2009, 525). But that legislation also had diluted the commitment to job promotion by recognizing other important economic goals such as price stability. Eisenhower thus faced a macroeconomic policy environment characterized by several possibly conflicting expectations. The policy consensus also left open the question of means. In the event of a recession, a president and his administration might choose from among a variety of policy remedies, ranging from countercyclical spending to tax cuts to monetary expansion. Some would be more popular among Democrats who embraced the use of spending to create jobs, others would be favored by Republicans who thought tax rates excessive, but all were consistent with the New Deal order (Sloan 1991, 4-5).

In certain respects the political climate had turned against the New Deal, at least in its most class-conscious expressions. Organized labor had made enormous gains over the previous two decades, but these advances raised broad popular doubts about whether the pendulum of power in the workplace had swung too far. The clearest indication came with passage of Taft-Hartley in 1947 over Truman's veto. That labor had been unable to reverse Taft-Hartley even after the Democrats regained control of Congress suggested that unions' power had peaked and invited additional moves to tilt the balance back toward capital. As a further indication that the public had wearied of the class-warfare themes of the New Deal, the 1952 Democratic platform marked a turn away from the anticorporate populism that had dominated party rhetoric dating back to the 1890s. John Gerring finds that the party started that year to embrace what he calls universalism (1998, chap. 7). The 1950s, in sum, better fit the characterization of a postregime period: an era in which the terms of political discourse still reflect the themes established by the dominant coalition in its heyday but most politics reflects more immediate issues (Polsky 2012b).

As much as or more than his position in Skowronek's political time, the opportunity structure Eisenhower encountered in 1953 reflected other contextual elements. Several involved international developments and events. Of immediate concern were the military stalemate and protracted truce negotiations in Korea (Pach and Richardson 1991, 17, 45-46). Eisenhower had acknowledged the central importance of the war with his campaign promise to go to Korea. As a president inheriting an ongoing conflict that has reached a stalemate, he would have greater latitude than his predecessor but only for a short period of time. He would still be expected to bring the war to a conclusion (Polsky 2012a). Although some in the military believed victory might still be won, Eisenhower quickly grasped that the cost would be prohibitive and the risks enormous. His actions would be guided, then, by the strategic imperative to find a way out of the war at an acceptable cost. Where the New Deal legacy represented a permissive factor in the opportunity structure, the Korean War stood as a mandatory one, requiring action within a limited range of possibilities.

The international context defined the opportunity structure in 1953 in other ways. Eisenhower inherited a powerful international expectation of American leadership in sustaining the security of the West and forestalling the expansion of Soviet influence. Not all Americans accepted this responsibility; indeed, Eisenhower had run in part because he feared the isolationist impulse in the Taft wing of the Republican Party. Still, both at home and abroad, people looked to Washington to assume the burden for defending Western interests and values. Over the course of the Truman administration, the United States had accepted the need to conduct a Cold War against the Soviet Union and had established a broad strategic goal of containing Communist expansion (Hogan 1998). No other non-Communist nation, moreover, had the resources needed to resist what was widely perceived as an aggressive global Communist movement (Friedberg 2000). Truman had laid the foundation for postwar American leadership through such initiatives as the Marshall Plan and his June 1950 decision to intervene in Korea. For Eisenhower, American leadership in the Cold War meant that no global conflict or confrontation could be ignored, though the imperative to respond left open the choice of how and when to act.

An opportunity structure is also shaped in part by the tools available to a leader. Much has been said of the legacy of the New Deal domestic state, the scale of which alarmed Eisenhower. But he also inherited a large permanent national security apparatus, with problematic implications. On one side, the state-building that preceded him would complicate his efforts to achieve antistatist policy goals such as reducing taxes and challenge his desire to bring expenditures into balance with revenues (Sloan 1991, 52-53). On the other, he had at his command potentially useful policy instruments such as the new Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

One additional piece of the Cold War context would weigh heavily on Eisenhower. During the previous administration, the United States had lost its monopoly on nuclear weapons. Any confrontation with the Soviet Union might well escalate into a nuclear conflict, with nearly unimaginable consequences for the United States and human civilization. This possibility, without historical precedent, would need to be considered in any situation in which the United States and the Communist superpower found themselves

on opposite sides (Greenstein 1994, 47-48). For the first time, a president had to deal with the sobering prospect that a diplomatic or military misstep or miscalculation might spiral out of control and result in a calamity before leaders could appreciate the danger.

Cold War tensions also helped define the domestic political context in which Eisenhower would operate. Fear of communism extended to domestic politics, sparking demands for loyalty tests and investigations of subversive influences and individuals at all levels of government and in other American institutions (Pach and Richardson 1991, 46-47). During his run for the White House, Eisenhower had already encountered the difficulty that the red scare would pose for his administration. He had bungled a chance on a campaign stop in Wisconsin to distance himself from Senator Joe McCarthy, the rabid hunter of imagined Communists in high places. Pressure from McCarthy and others of his ilk would force the new president to move carefully in a climate marked by investigatory zeal on Capitol Hill (Greenstein 1994, chap. 5).

Many other domestic factors entered the calculation of the presidential opportunity structure at the start of Eisenhower's term. The United States was experiencing a period of rapid family formation and a high birth rate (the Baby Boom), demographic forces that would push certain policy matters, notably housing and school classroom construction, to the front of the national agenda (Sloan 1991, 49). As incomes rose and families moved from city to suburb, moreover, the need to upgrade the national road infrastructure became more urgent. Politically, the Republican Party held a razor thin advantage in both chambers of Congress (Pach and Richardson 1991, 50-51). Both party coalitions, however, contained large factions that cooperated on few matters beyond the basic imperative of preserving chamber control. The era would be described by James MacGregor Burns a few years later as one of four-party democracy, with liberal northern Democrats often at odds with their conservative southern co-partisans and antistatist Republicans warring with moderates and liberals in that party's ranks (Burns 1963). Cross-party coalitions would have to be built to achieve legislative results on many issues. Interestingly, despite the increased visibility of racial divisions, civil rights had played little role in the 1952 presidential contest, and there was no particular urgency to take on the issue when Eisenhower assumed office. As David A. Nichols puts it, "Given his popularity, the new president could have ignored racial issues" (Nichols 2007, 22). On the other hand, in a nation in which black family income was barely more than half of white family income, it would be shortsighted to assume that questions of racial inequality would remain quiet for long (Pach and Richardson 1991, 47).

From this discussion of the many elements that constituted Eisenhower's opportunity structure at the beginning of his presidency, two conclusions emerge. First, although political time matters, other situational factors may exercise a larger and/or more immediate effect on a president's opportunity structure. Eisenhower would have to navigate a post-New Deal political order, yes, but the foreground of his political environment would be dominated instead by Korea, the Cold War, Soviet nuclear weapons, McCarthyism, and the problems arising from postwar prosperity and growth. To speak of him as a preemptive president may be correct, but it is also of very limited significance. Second, it makes more sense to conceive of opportunity structure in the plural rather than the singular. Presidents do need to be mindful of a range of considerations each time they act, but

the foreground will be populated by different ones across different issues. As Eisenhower contemplated the future of Taft-Hartley or Social Security, doubtless the enduring popularity of the New Deal, its shaping influence on political discourse, and the political power of Democratic constituencies would shape his approach. When his attention shifted to Korea, though, his calculations would begin with such contextual elements as the risk of provoking a Soviet response or American vulnerability to Soviet countermoves in Europe. Other pieces of the opportunity structure do not disappear entirely in either case. But presidents, like any rational decision maker, must economize on the number of variables they take in account when they make choices. The practical effect is to balkanize the full opportunity structure into domain-specific subsets.

Time Does Not Stand Still: Eisenhower across Eight Years

Presidents operate within different kinds of time, which interact with each other. As noted, Skowronek's approach stresses—indeed, privileges—one expression of temporality, the regime cycle. Regime cycles are “long waves,” running a generation, perhaps longer. But other time patterns shape the presidential opportunity structure, too, including protracted secular political developments (such as voter dealignment or sectional shifts in a party's center of gravity) and short-term fluctuations driven by events. A president's opportunity structure evolves in response to the multiple temporal forces at work over four or eight years. For Dwight Eisenhower, as for any president, what he might do, had to do, or could not do changed continuously. In addition, we need to combine this dynamic understanding of his opportunity structure with the notion that such a structure is domain specific. As we assess a president's possibilities to exercise agency, we should expect that the situational constraints that fill the foreground in any given policy area will shift over the course of his term. I will illustrate the dynamic character of the presidential opportunity structures by considering briefly a number of examples from the Eisenhower era: on the foreign policy side, Korea, the Middle East, and Indochina; in domestic policy, economic recessions at different points during his two terms and civil rights.

The Korean situation changed overnight when Josef Stalin died on March 5, 1953. The Soviet dictator, though he did not want war with the United States over Korea, had seen prolonging the conflict there as in the Soviet interest. Stalemate tied down U.S. military forces and put a strain on the American economy, while also linking the new Chinese Communist regime closely to Moscow. Had Stalin lived, Eisenhower might well have been forced to choose one of the unappetizing options for limited escalation, with the attendant risk of wider war. Instead, new Soviet leaders emerged who were eager to reduce tensions, and they instructed both Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung to push for an armistice agreement. Within weeks the Chinese indicated their willingness to make concessions on issues, such as terms for prisoner repatriation, that had stalled negotiations since August 1951. Although it still required threats of escalation and pressure on the South Korean regime of Syngman Rhee to close the deal, Stalin's death represented a necessary condition for bringing the war to an end (Rose 2010, 133-37).

Next the Middle East: the region was volatile throughout Eisenhower's eight years in office, and volatility translates into a shifting opportunity structure. Some disruptions resulted from American actions, such as the CIA-guided 1953 coup that overthrew the Mosaddegh government in Iran. More generally, political turmoil marked the period. The military coup in Egypt in July 1952 that brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power set in motion a series of events that forced Eisenhower to expand the American role in the region. Nasser's decision to nationalize the Suez Canal in response to Western reluctance to back his Aswan Dam project in turn precipitated the coordinated Israeli and Franco-British attacks on the Sinai Peninsula and the canal just before the 1956 presidential election. Eisenhower was required to take a stand on a key issue that was certain to alienate important nations on either side—and to make his decisions at a delicate political moment when he might also antagonize a significant domestic constituency (Nichols 2011). The attack and its aftermath also thoroughly discredited the old colonial powers in the Arab world. Their retreat left a power vacuum in the Middle East that, combined with the ongoing Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, gave rise to a new opportunity structure that compelled the president to expand American commitments in the region. It became impossible then to stand aside as continuing instability in Iraq and Lebanon threatened to undermine regimes and open new opportunities for the Soviet Union to expand its influence (Hahn 2006).

In Indochina, Eisenhower first encountered a narrow opportunity structure that left open few options. He inherited a strong American commitment to finance the ongoing and increasingly futile French effort to retain colonial control against a strengthening Viet Minh nationalist-Communist challenge.⁴ Despite receiving American equipment essential to continue the war, the French dismissed American pleas to grant real independence to the Indochinese states under non-Communist governments. Convinced of the strategic importance of Indochina, especially the Red River delta in northern Vietnam (then Tonkin), in the global struggle against communism, Eisenhower lacked leverage over his French allies. He was hemmed in by other actors, too. With the French position at Dien Bien Phu on the verge of collapse in March-April 1954, Eisenhower started to weigh direct U.S. intervention. The only option that seemed likely to stave off French defeat without risking nuclear confrontation was the use of American troops on the ground. Having just extricated the United States from Korea a few months earlier, however, American leaders understood that the public would be very reluctant to embrace another Asian land war. Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, learned from congressional leaders that they would bless intervention only as part of a multinational effort that included Great Britain, France, and possibly other allies. But British Prime Minister Anthony Eden refused to join such a venture. At that point Eisenhower was left with no possible course of action.⁵

4. The most complete account of the American role in Indochina in this period is Logevall (2012).

5. An argument can be made that Eisenhower, leery of seeing the United States involved in another ground war in Asia so soon after Korea, framed political conditions for intervention that he knew to be unachievable. He realized that neither Congress nor the British would agree to direct ground reinforcements for the French (Saunders 2011, 73). By that interpretation, Eisenhower had some freedom of action, though the political cost of intervention would have been quite high. However, Logevall (2012, 697) sees Eisenhower and Dulles as ready to intervene to save the French, only to be inhibited by other actors.

Within a matter of months, the opportunity structure in Indochina became far more permissive. The Geneva agreement resulted in the partition of Vietnam, supposedly a temporary measure pending a national election to reunify the country within two years. This outcome effectively liberated American policy from the earlier constraints. With France exhausted by the war and seeing no benefits from further political and military investment in Indochina, the United States could proceed without reference to French interests. Moreover, partition allowed for the creation of a new government in the southern half of Vietnam under Ngo Dinh Diem, who needed an outside patron as he sought to consolidate his control (Logevall 2012, chap. 25). Unbound by the terms of the Geneva agreement, which the United States refused to sign, the Eisenhower administration suddenly found itself with new possibilities: it could ignore the election timetable, back Diem or (if he proved wanting) some rival, build an independent non-Communist state, replace the French as the primary backers of the new regime, and do any or all of these things without the approval of fickle allies in London or Paris.

Permissiveness in this opportunity structure proved transient. Per the common dynamics of path-dependent processes, in which investments in a course of action invite additional investments while the cost of a significant departure rises, Eisenhower's actions from 1954 onward began to narrow his options. The American support for Diem began to legitimize him in the eyes of the American public, while praise from American leaders and media fostered an impression of his effectiveness as a bulwark against communism. Thus, even as his deficiencies became more obvious, the price for abandoning him mounted. He faced down an early challenge to his rule, when Eisenhower and his advisors equivocated about whether another South Vietnamese leader might prove more effective and compliant (Logevall 2012, chaps. 25-26). By 1957, however, Diem was receiving the red carpet treatment in Washington from the administration, leaders in both parties, and the press. His regime became increasingly repressive, provoking the Communists who had remained behind in the south to take up arms again. Having thrown in with Diem without conditions, the Eisenhower administration saw no alternative but to boost its military backing for his regime (Logevall 2012, chap. 27).

Domestic issues during the Eisenhower era also illustrate the dynamic character of a president's opportunity structure. Eisenhower faced three recessions across his eight years in office, in 1953-54, 1957-58, and 1960-61. As noted, the New Deal and World War II generated clear expectations for any president in Eisenhower's shoes: he had to be, in Clinton Rossiter's phrase, "the manager of prosperity." (Sloan 1991, 4). John Sloan points out that although inflation was Eisenhower's foremost concern, "he quickly learned that the most politically sensitive indicator was a rise in the unemployment rate." This held true especially for the first Republican since Herbert Hoover (Sloan 1991, 133). The first recession, which followed the end of the Korean War, struck at a time when Eisenhower was very popular, and his party enjoyed control of Congress. Despite increasing criticism as the recession worsened, he felt he was in a strong enough position to withstand pressures for deeper tax cuts than were already planned (Sloan 1991, 134-37). The context of the 1957-58 recession differed in several respects—Eisenhower was a lame duck, Sputnik had scared the public, the president's approval rating fell below 60% for the first time, and the cost of living continued to rise despite higher unemployment (Sloan 1991, 145).

Add to this a Congress that had become significantly more liberal, not just within the ranks of the Democratic majority but also among Republicans, and thus more distant from the president (Weatherford 2002, 17). Sloan captures the different forces at work across time:

Eisenhower did not comprehend that the standards against which his performance as manager of prosperity was measured were rising during the 1950s. What was considered successful in the early 1950s was viewed as inadequate by 1960. The president's initial successes generated not satisfaction but demands that more and fairer prosperity {be} guaranteed. (Sloan 1991, 154)

Much the same can be said about civil rights. When Eisenhower took office, he faced an opportunity structure that permitted him to decide whether to act or not. He had been elected without making many firm commitments on the issue. Moreover, although some of the obstacles that had checked Truman remained, such as legislative veto points, there were also openings for the new president to exercise agency, grounded in his authority as commander in chief and chief executive. He could (and did) move to complete the desegregation of the military, to curb discrimination in federal employment and by government contractors, and to integrate Washington, DC (Nichols 2007, 274). Eisenhower's flexibility did not last, however. When the Supreme Court decided to hear rearguments on *Brown*, Nichols observes, the action "guaranteed that the Eisenhower administration would become involved" (Nichols 2007, 51). Likewise, the Court's two *Brown* decisions forced the president to comment, knowing full well that anything he said would disappoint if not openly alienate constituencies he valued.

After *Brown*, the administration found itself caught between "rising expectations in the black community and growing violence in the South" (Nichols 2007, 112-13). The option of doing nothing disappeared, making action in some form obligatory. At the same time, although the president retained discretion over exactly what to do, the political cost of every possible alternative rose, so all were unappealing. Consider civil rights legislation: in response to mounting political pressure in his second term, Eisenhower chose to support the introduction of a civil rights measure in Congress. This meant he would have to navigate a legislative labyrinth over which he exercised scant control, caught between the demands of northern liberals and moderates who wanted a measure with teeth and southern lawmakers holding key positions. The president also could not sidestep the Little Rock school crisis in 1957, lest he embolden southern segregationist resistance to the very federal judiciary on which he relied. His tepid words that he must uphold the rule of law disappointed African Americans, eager for a signal of support as they faced violence and repression, even as his decision to send federal troops set off alarms among whites. Despite a better civil rights record than his predecessor, Eisenhower by the late 1950s found himself hard-pressed to satisfy civil rights advocates who had praised his first-term efforts (Nichols 2007, 217-18, 221). The political ground had shifted beneath his feet.

As these examples demonstrate, presidential opportunity structure(s) change, often abruptly, over the course of an administration. The political world Eisenhower faced in January 1953 looked very different from the one he encountered as his term ended after

the 1960 election. The former was dominated by Korea, the Cold War, Joe McCarthy, a Middle East in which Great Britain and France were still key players, the ongoing effort of the latter to maintain colonial control of Indochina, how best to curb what conservatives and business saw as the excesses of the New Deal, and freedom to act or not act on civil rights. Eight years later, Korea had disappeared in the rear view mirror, McCarthy had been discredited (and soon after had died), steps had been taken to ease Cold War tensions, the United States had become the dominant outside power in the Middle East and Southeast Asia and had committed itself to back a new independent South Vietnam, the public demanded more rapid and vigorous responses to recession, and civil rights could no longer be sidestepped or managed in ways that would appease both sides. We can discern in some of these changes the play of political time, an opposition president steering a path between the expectations of his own coalition and a still-potent regime party. To a much greater degree, however, the dynamic opportunity structure that Eisenhower negotiated reflected other forces.

Author of Opportunity: Eisenhower Refashions His Possibilities

Something more stands out when we consider how Eisenhower's opportunity structure changed across eight years. As I noted, Skowronek (1993) recognizes presidents act in ways that, at least at the margins, reshape the constraints they face. I suggested, too, that the effects over the course of an administration may be substantial. The impact of presidential action on the possibilities for subsequent action should be incorporated into our concept of presidential opportunity structure. Much of what changed in the political context in which Eisenhower operated was the result of his own actions. Further, the changes were often inadvertent—he certainly did not anticipate the effects that his decisions might have on his own capacity for action. To put it another way, although we might view a president as the author of his own opportunities, he sometimes writes himself into a corner.

Let us consider again some of the examples I discussed in the previous section on the dynamic character of Eisenhower's opportunity structure. As I noted in the case of Indochina, decisions made by the president after the Geneva accords were signed in 1954 influenced what he could do next. By backing an independent South Vietnam under Diem and supporting his decision to reject the reunifying election that the agreement required, Eisenhower made a commitment to sustain a fragile political entity with minimal independent capacity to defend itself against either internal or external enemies. Before 1954, French national credibility was at stake in Indochina; thereafter, American prestige was on the line. (This is not to say in either case that the cost of credibility should override other considerations, but it weighs on decision makers.) Eisenhower also rejected an early opportunity to shed Diem before he became entrenched in power. This decision, too, tied the American leader's hands, because the price of ousting Diem would only increase over time.

The Middle East illustrates vividly how Eisenhower was compelled to respond to the consequences of his own decisions. In 1955 and early 1956, the administration

negotiated with the Egyptian government to provide Western financing for the Aswan High Dam project, in large measure to forestall increasing Soviet influence in the region. Nasser also entertained an offer from the Soviets to support the project, but he preferred aid from the West. Meanwhile, under domestic pressure to back Israel, the administration (especially John Foster Dulles) became frustrated with the Egyptian leader's refusal to negotiate a peace agreement. The secretary of state persuaded Eisenhower, quite ill at the time, to withdraw the earlier offer to help build the dam. In late July, to Washington's surprise, Nasser announced he was nationalizing the Suez Canal and would use the proceeds to pay for the Aswan project. The subsequent Franco-British attack on and seizure of the canal, in connivance with the Israeli attack in the Sinai Peninsula, thus were clear if indirect by-products of Eisenhower's earlier choices (Nichols 2011). Beyond that, when he decided to oppose the actions by the French and British, he assured their demise as effective external players in the region. This left him with little choice but to declare the Eisenhower Doctrine, which embraced American responsibility to prop up pro-Western rulers (Hahn 2006, 39).

Presidential actions that can reshape the opportunity structure extend to presidential appointments. That is, who serves the president will influence the possible course of action. As a case in point we might examine the different personnel involved in shaping economic policy in the recessions that Eisenhower faced in his two terms. Scholars differ over whether he became more conservative across his two terms,⁶ but he certainly had more conservative economic advisors around him in the second (Wilson 2009, 540). When an economic downturn followed the end of the Korean War in 1953, Eisenhower leaned heavily on Arthur Burns, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA), to design a response. Burns was prepared to use a range of tools, both monetary and fiscal, to stem the decline, though he held back on more dramatic interventions as a last resort. Under his guidance, the administration leaned on flexible monetary policy rather than increased spending or accelerated tax cuts (Sloan 1991, 134-36). The 1957-58 recession hit under different political circumstances, as I noted, and saw both rising unemployment and price inflation. The latter fed the president's belief that inflation represented the greater threat to prosperity. But another key difference, as Sloan points out, was that Burns was now an outsider, having left the CEA, and he could not persuade key insiders, such as his successor Raymond Saulnier, of the urgent need for a tax cut as a stimulus measure. Other influential second-term advisors, including Treasury Secretary Robert Anderson and Federal Reserve Board Chairman William Martin, shared the president's preoccupation with inflation (Sloan 1991, 144-48). To overcome Eisenhower's fixation on prices and persuade him to focus on unemployment would have required a different economic team.

Appointments also had a profound impact on the evolving context of civil rights. The first may have been the most crucial—Eisenhower's selection of Herbert Brownell, Jr., to serve as his attorney general. Brownell would do much to elevate the visibility of civil rights during his tenure. He pushed hard for desegregation of the District of Columbia and played a major role in the selection of several Supreme Court justices and federal

6. On this point, compare Sloan (1991) and Weatherford (2002).

court judges in the south (Nichols 2007, 27-29). The president also selected Earl Warren as chief justice, knowing full well that this meant a ruling in *Brown* that segregationists would oppose. As Eisenhower himself noted several years later, the *Brown* decision dramatically altered the context for his administration by putting much greater responsibilities on the federal government for assuring citizens' rights (Nichols 2007, 57-58, 107-8). Brownell also pushed the president to reject recommendations by southern lawmakers to appoint segregationist jurists to the region's federal courts (Nichols 2007, chap. 4.). The Eisenhower-Brownell approach to judicial appointments recast the terrain on which the civil rights struggle would play out. Eisenhower appointees then began to reach decisions that reshaped the president's civil rights opportunity structure. As I earlier observed, he had no alternative but to respond to key cases such as *Brown* or the federal judge's desegregation order in Little Rock.

In recognizing how Eisenhower reshaped his own opportunity structure, I have stressed his actions rather than his words. George Edwards III argues compellingly against the myth that presidential speeches transform the political environment. Rarely do presidents move the bar with what they say (Edwards 2009). Eisenhower certainly appreciated the limited power of his words and not simply because he lacked brilliant rhetorical gifts. (Indeed, it seems likely that a president who has a sense of modesty about his talents as an orator will accept that he cannot use language to move mountains.) By contrast, a president's decisions to act (or, sometimes, to refrain from action) may alter the circumstances he faces going forward, foreclosing avenues he might have embraced, opening new possibilities, or compelling him to respond when he might prefer to do nothing. Eisenhower repeatedly found himself coping with the consequences, often unforeseen, of his own agency. He had to operate within a different opportunity structure in the Middle East, Indochina, economic policy, civil rights, and more because he had made it so.

Conclusion

If politics is the art of the possible, then understanding the opportunity structure—what is possible—becomes critical in explaining political outcomes. Presidency scholars have long appreciated that context matters. Stephen Skowronek (1993) advanced the conceptualization of presidential opportunity structure by framing it within the long cycle of partisan regimes. Although useful for certain cases and for delimiting the outer boundaries that constrain presidents, his notion of political time serves us less well when we try to identify the immediate opportunity structure in which most presidents operate most of the time. Their everyday world is circumscribed by a range of historically specific conditions that we should approach through their eyes, not filtered first through the regime construct. The regime framework, by prioritizing a historical dynamic that takes a generation or longer to play out, also slights the swiftly changing character of the opportunity structure within a single presidential term. Time, as a president actually experiences it, moves far more quickly than a regime cycle leads us to appreciate. Finally, building on a point largely implicit in Skowronek's work, presidents do not merely

occupy an opportunity structure. They actively shape what is possible, precluded, or required. Often unintentionally and in ways they rue, presidents refashion the context for their own leadership.

Eisenhower illustrates the complexities of presidential opportunity structure. He was keenly aware of the place he occupied in political time. For him, a direct confrontation with popular New Deal programs would have meant political suicide, both personally and for his party. He realized that the federal government, the president in particular, had become the manager of prosperity and was expected to use the variety of policy instruments available under the Keynesian macroeconomic consensus. Still, he had plenty of room to tinker at the margins with the New Deal legacy, and the tools of the modern presidency lay at his disposal to do so. More importantly, across a range of issues central to the Eisenhower presidency, the New Deal defined neither the constraints on nor the possibilities for action. Other considerations, ranging from the Cold War to struggles against colonialism to Joe McCarthy, filled the foreground. The opportunity structure changed, too. Indeed, it is safe to say that in no policy area were the possibilities the same at the end of Eisenhower's two terms as at the outset.

As with any broad theoretical argument that draws its evidence from a single case, we need to assess the case's representativeness. We ought to entertain the possibility, for example, that even if we grant that Eisenhower was weakly bound by the New Deal, he enjoyed a flexibility in relation to regime constraints that is rare among presidents. Only by considering other cases can we conclude that political time typically plays a modest role in defining presidential opportunity structure. But there is also no reason to presume that Eisenhower's situation was exceptional. I maintain that we should approach the problem of understanding presidential opportunity structure without privileging one particular situational factor. Nor do I mean to suggest that Skowronek dismisses the other elements that may shape the possibilities for presidential action. Rather, in attempting to build the case for the explanatory value of the political-time framework, he had to place the president-regime relationship front and center and thus could not avoid a degree of distortion. I seek now to rebalance the equation, to make the role of political time a question instead of the default setting.

A complex and dynamic understanding of opportunity structure also illuminates two core challenges of presidential leadership. First, if a single factor (such as a president's relationship to the dominant party coalition and the vitality of that coalition) largely established the opportunity structure, how simple matters would be for presidents and their advisors! They would find it easy to assess the prospects for effective action. In reality, though, multiple elements define the setting, and the factors vary across issue domains. Navigating the complexities may be likened to the task that confronts a boat captain operating on a river with odd currents, abrupt changes in depth, and very sharp rocks. Second, the opportunity structure is never the same from one moment to the next—like some rivers, it changes course, cutting new channels while others fill and clog. Yesterday's charts of the shoals and deep water passages quickly become outdated.

Eisenhower usually demonstrated a keen sensitivity to what his political environment allowed, though it was far from infallible. Some elements were obvious, others less so. He could not continue the Korean War, dismiss presidential responsibility for managing

prosperity, or remain silent on school integration after *Brown*. The terrain in the Middle East, by contrast, was complex: rulers out of touch with popular opinion, fading colonial powers clinging to influence, an opportunistic Soviet Union seeking openings, and an Israel commanding popular domestic support in the United States versus Arab states commanding oil resources essential to American prosperity. Eisenhower's response during the Suez crisis in 1956 reflected an astute reading of the changing patterns of external influence in the region. Yet even a leader attuned to what the context allowed could misread it. After all, the president's failure to appreciate how Nasser saw things contributed directly to the Egyptian leader's deep frustration at being denied help for the Aswan project and his subsequent unexpected move to nationalize the Suez Canal. Any president, even the most astute, will sometimes miss contextual signals, underestimate constraints, or see openings where none exist. The very complexity of the opportunity structure and its dynamic character make errors inevitable.

Beyond its analytical value as a point of departure for explaining presidential outcomes, an enriched opportunity structure approach points to a prescriptive conclusion. Amid the Eisenhower revival of the past generation, much praise has been heaped on his "hidden hand" leadership style. As recent presidents have stumbled when they pursue their goals with hyped speeches and elaborate public relations campaigns, Eisenhower enthusiasts sometimes suggest that his low-visibility, low-drama approach may prove more effective. Some accounts have Barack Obama turning in this direction in his second term, sadder but more realistic about how little brilliant oratory accomplishes (Baker 2013). So much has changed in American politics, however, that whether a president today can style practice Eisenhower's "hidden hand" leadership style is very much in doubt. I would look elsewhere in the Eisenhower record for a useful takeaway. He was, to recall the boat captain metaphor, remarkably adept at keeping off the hidden rocks and adjusting to the new channels. For any president, knowing how to read the river of opportunity is a skill that will never go out of style.

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