

The Key to Presidential Success: Looking into the Presidency of James Monroe

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Presidents don't get to travel through time. Some are elected during eras of reconstruction, poised to build a new political order, while others take office amid disjunction and decline. In *The Politics Presidents Make*, political scientist Stephen Skowronek argues that presidential authority is structured by "political time," the cyclical relationship between presidents and dominant governing regimes that shapes their opportunities for action. This framework has a "pivotal place in the dynamic of systemic political change," yet it struggles to account for variation within the intermediate categories of articulation and preemption (Skowronek 1986, 51). This paper argues that while political conditions may shape possibilities, effective leadership ultimately determines presidential success. Skowronek's model remains essential for mapping these structural opportunities and constraints, but Fred Greenstein's leadership framework in *The Hidden-Hand Presidency* (1982), which emphasizes organizational capacity, political skill, and emotional intelligence, helps explain how presidents navigate those constraints. James Monroe best demonstrates this, as the Monroe Doctrine represented the culmination of his unifying and disciplined control, exemplifying effective governance in a less transformative era.

Skowronek's political time theory is especially compelling when tested against patterns of presidential rankings and historical reputation. The 2009 C-Span Poll places reconstructive presidents like Abraham Lincoln (1), Franklin D. Roosevelt (3),

and Ronald Reagan (10) at the top, while grading dysjunctive presidents like James Buchanan (42) and Franklin Pierce (40) at the bottom¹ (C-SPAN 2009). However, the mixed success of articulating and preemptive presidents suggests that political time alone cannot explain presidential outcomes, implying that other variables beyond structure influence success.

While political time can "suggest the ways...political structure delimit[s]...political capacity," it doesn't propose the performance of a leader during his presidency as a defining factor, leaving outliers as "exceptional" to his generalized equation (Skowronek 1993, 49). Skowronek even admits that a preemptive president's "aggressive leaders[hip]" can lead to success in hostile political landscapes, revealing that an exclusive focus on political time pushes "individual variation...to the margins," limiting his framework's ability to explain how leadership shapes outcomes (Skowronek 1986, 56; Hoekstra 2003, 660). Dwight D. Eisenhower (8), for example, who "experimentally test[ed]" his context, is viewed merely as "an exception in support of the more general rules," despite other preemptive presidents like John Tyler (35) and Andrew Johnson (41) being viewed as failures (Skowronek 1993, 49). If presidents in less formative environments can achieve success through strategic leadership, they are

¹Throughout this paper, the number in parenthesis next to a president will refer to his 2009 C-Span Poll ranking

not exceptions, but evidence of a broader pattern, in which leadership strategy, as described by Greenstein, ultimately determines whether presidents succeed or fail.

This interplay between political time and effective leadership is exemplified in Eisenhower's preemptive presidency, where his success stemmed from "six strategies"² that emphasized abilities such as organization, discretion, and emotional restraint (Greenstein 1982, 57). Through "adjusting his supervision" from behind the scenes and only participating in policy when he deemed necessary, Eisenhower "exercise[d] influence over other leaders" without visibly engaging in political confrontation (Greenstein 1982, 81, 99). Eisenhower's "hidden-hand" leadership preserved his popularity and effectiveness, as reflected in his 69 percent average approval rating (Spokesman-Review 2024). While political time defines the playing field, skilled leadership under Greenstein's model is the determining factor for presidents to navigate these constraints effectively. A similar dynamic emerged more than a century earlier in the articulating presidency of James Monroe (14), whose strategic and unifying leadership guided the creation of the Monroe Doctrine and exemplified comparable success in navigating political time.

Entering office at a rare moment when the union wasn't "preocup[ie]d with the survival of the Republic," Monroe focused on articulating the Virginia dynasty (Skowronek 1993, 86). Drawing on his experience as a "soldier, legislator, governor,

diplomat, and cabinet secretary," he entered the presidency as one of the "most qualified individuals" to assume office, well prepared to lead the nation (Greenstein 2009, 67; White House Historical Association). His "popularity rose" after the War of 1812, during which he uniquely held both roles of Secretary of War and Secretary of State under Madison (Miller Center 2023). Once elected, Monroe worked to maintain that reputation through inclusive and unifying leadership.

To cement this vision in the public mind, Monroe opened his presidency by calling the nation "one great family with a common interest" (Avalon Project). He began to fulfill that promise by building an "exceptionally strong cabinet" (Greenstein 2009, 71), breaking from the Virginia dynasty by recognizing "New England Republicans as full-fledged partners in his national coalition" (Skowronek 1993, 90). After being unopposed and reelected in 1820, Monroe's presidency culminated in the Monroe Doctrine, "the biggest part of (his) legacy," a product of his unifying leadership and vision through which he "declared the Western Hemisphere off-limits to new colonization" (Mr. Beat 2025, 27:55; Greenstein 2009, 70).

The enduring relevance of the Monroe Doctrine, even being invoked symbolically during crises such as the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, underscores how Monroe's leadership choices produced a durable vision of American independence (National Archives 2022). Tim McGrath described the doctrine as "the third major document of our country's birth," highlighting Monroe's bold vision for U.S. engagement (Mr. Beat 2025, 28:48).

²All six strategies are (1) Effectiveness as a public communicator, (2) Organizational capacity, (3) Political skill, (4) Vision, (5) Cognitive style, and (6) Emotional intelligence. This paper will not focus on every strategy, but they are all nevertheless prevalent.

Monroe's organizational capacity provided the mechanism through which his leadership translated vision into policy, ensuring the stability necessary for the Monroe Doctrine's creation. His disciplined, low-turnover cabinet functioned as a cohesive team; he convened meetings only when productive, reinforcing efficiency and control (Greenstein 2009, 71). This structure enabled effective collaboration, as he and John Quincy Adams jointly prepared the message to Congress, with Adams even authoring most of it, illustrating how Monroe's managerial leadership empowered skilled subordinates to realize his vision (American Battlefield Trust). Even Skowronek concedes Monroe's exceptional skill, observing that he "did more than any other incumbent" in cabinet building (Skowronek 1993, 87).

Capitalizing on his organizational effectiveness, Monroe's political skill in public communication sustained and expanded his popularity during the Era of Good Feelings. There, he built goodwill with former partisan adversaries, even in Boston, "where the most determined opposers of the administration" resided, as press coverage of his over one hundred visits expanded his popularity (Greenstein 2009, 71; Miller Center 2023). Running "uncontested" in the 1820 election best evidences Monroe's success, missing only one electoral vote (Miller Center 2023).

Taken together, Monroe's administrative discipline and communicative skills laid the groundwork for the Monroe Doctrine. While James Madison (20) also governed as an articulating president in the Jeffersonian Era, Monroe (14) "was a more effective president" because of his organizational capacity, political skill, and emotional intelligence (Greenstein 2009, 63, 71–72). By "not

endors[ing] any candidate," Monroe triggered a chaotic four-way race that ultimately resulted in the election of John Quincy Adams (19) (Miller Center 2023). Viewed through Greenstein's model, Monroe's articulation shows that individual effectiveness, rather than structural circumstance alone, determines presidential success.

Monroe and Eisenhower each governed in different eras but both under constrained political conditions, and by navigating their environments through effective leadership, they forged lasting legacies. While political time may shape possibilities, Monroe's presidency proves that it is how presidents unify, communicate, and govern within political time's limitations that determines enduring success. It isn't solely because of the time they served, but because of how they led.

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