
Reviewed by Jason Friedman, History Department, Wasatch Academy, Mount Pleasant, Utah.

“Leadership is the essence of the presidency. But effective presidential leadership must balance national demands against partisan pressures” (p. 4). This is the leadership dilemma that editors Julia R. Azari, Lara M. Brown, and Zim G. Nwokora were thinking about when they compiled The Presidential Leadership Dilemma: Between the Constitution and a Political Party. Not since this reviewer first read Arthur Schlesinger’s The Imperial Presidency (1973) has he been as enthused to read a book on the presidency. Azari, Brown, and Nwokora gathered a diverse array of scholars who examine presidential leadership from approaches that span various topics and methodologies. They conclude that while presidents are the product of context and circumstance, the strongest leaders are able to shape their context and control their circumstances to some degree. All presidents are subject to the events that unfold around them and the rest of their political surroundings. Ultimately, “while circumstances may have heavily influenced which leadership decisions are the “right” ones, the success of presidential leadership ultimately came down to a president’s political perception, skill, and wisdom” (p. 217-218). Those best aware of this balance are in the best position to navigate through the leadership dilemma.

The core theme of their book, carried through the arguments of each of the contributing essays, is the tension between the demands put on the president to serve as a national leader and to serve as a party leader. The president is both head of state and party leader. As the only nationally elected official (the Vice-President notwithstanding), presidents face pressure to lead with policies and decisions they believe to be best for the entire country, their constituency. However this often is at odds with the pressure to tow a party line – the line of the party that nominated them and helped them get elected in the first place. The leadership dilemma manifests because what is best for one is often not best for the other.

With chapters on topics ranging from primary nominations to electoral mandates, the contributors in this volume explore the challenges presidents – and presidential candidates – face as they balance their political agenda and political allegiances with their need to bring groups together (i.e. build coalitions) and rise above politics. As the contributing authors of this book prove, this is no easy task. Azari, Brown, and Nwokora divide the analysis of the book into three broad categories: the president as coalition-builder, chief executive, and “bully pulpit” communicator (p. 8). With a strong balance between quantitative and qualitative analyses, the interior chapters focus on the last three presidents though there were many of tie-ins to older examples, including Zim Nwokora analysis of the often overlooked Democratic presidential primary of 1924. It is impractical to go into detail about each of the individual essays, but a synopsis of two chapters provides the gist of the book and how the essays adeptly tie back into the larger picture of modern presidential leadership.

Chapter three is by Lara M. Brown. “Playing for History: The Reelection Leadership Choices of Presidents William J. Clinton and George W. Bush” addresses how the decisions made in the president’s third year in office affects their ability to secure re-election to a second term. Examining two different leaders and leadership styles, President Bill Clinton (national leadership) and President George W. Bush (party leadership), Brown demonstrates how strong presidents seize upon opportunities they create themselves. Both presidents positioned themselves to capitalize on their leadership potential and maximize their incumbency advantage. Specifically, she explored each president’s third year in office and demonstrated how they positioned themselves relative to their circumstances. She demonstrated a corollary between their strategic positioning and their ability to create support, build momentum, and ultimately win re-election.

Chapter six by Benjamin A. Copeland and Victoria A. Farrar-Myers, “The Paradoxes of Presidential Leadership in Pursuing Policy Goals: Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and the lifting of the Ban on Gays and Lesbians in the Military” compares President Bill Clinton and President Barack Obama in the context of the notably different results of their campaigns to end sexual preference discrimination in the military.
Both presidents floated the idea during the election but Clinton failed to translate promise into success. Unable to garner adequate support from his party, the military establishment, or the public, he failed as both a national leader and as a party leader. He broke a promise to the American people and his party. Rather than lift the ban as promised, Clinton delivered the compromise measure, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” Seventeen years later, the moment was right for Obama to take up the issue again. Obama and his administration learned from the Clinton administration’s mistakes. A shift in public mood made Obama’s efforts easier, but Copeland and Farrar-Myers present a persuasive case that it was his leadership decisions that carried the day.

This book is replete with well-conceived essays that would be a welcomed addition to any undergraduate or graduate political science or political history course. Azari, Brown, and Nwokora provide a balance between “classic and contemporary” examples, i.e. contemporary presidents facing classic dilemmas (p. 215). The authors in this compilation, build on canon favorites such as Richard Neustadt’s *Presidential Power and Modern Presidents* (1991) and Stephen Skowronek’s *The Politics Presidents Make* (1993) in a way that smoothly continues the ever important discussion of presidential power, presidential decision making, and of course, presidential leadership.

**REFERENCES**

