Presidential Rankings and Skowronek's (1993) Regimes

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Introduction

The motivation for this blog post arose from preparing course materials for POL 322 (U.S. Presidency) at Stony Brook. The lecture topic was about presidents as individuals and presidential personality. One of the readings, from a book titled *Debating the Presidency* (Ellis and Nelson 2020), presented the following idea: Presidential success and failure are better explained by political time and the strength of governing coalitions than by a president's character and leadership qualities.

Stephen Skowronek (1993) questions how presidents, as leaders of the executive branch, shape politics around them. He presents an argument in the reading for there being four (4) structures of presidential leadership: politics of reconstruction, politics of disjunction, politics of preemption, and politics of articulation. These four quadrants are split by two axes: whether or not the existing political regime is vulnerable or resilient, and whether or not the president is opposed to or affiliated with the existing regime.

Skowronek contends the politics of reconstruction, which encapsulated the tenures of Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan, provides presidents with the greatest opportunity to reshape politics in their vision. As such, these aforementioned presidents serve at the start of long-lasting political regimes. Skowronek provides a great deal of information explaining these areas of presidential leadership. The focus of this blog post is to examine whether presidents who serve at the start of ideological regimes are ranked better (i.e., lower) than their successors – some of whom were aligned with that new regime and some of whom were not.

Data

The information about political regimes comes from Skowronek (1993) and Skowronek's writing in Ellis and Nelson (2020). Data about the historical rankings comes from C-SPAN's Presidential Historians Survey 2021. The survey organizers reach out to experts (e.g., historians, professors, biographers, etc.) on the U.S. presidency. Each participant grades presidents on qualities of presidential leadership. I use the overall

ranking for this project. The survey has been fielded a total of four times: 2000, 2009, 2017, and 2021. There were 142 participants in the 2021 survey.

For more details on the C-SPAN survey see https://www.c-span.org/presidentsurvey2021/?page=overall.

Plotting Presidents Over Time

The first section of code presents a line plot of presidential rankings over time. The code plots the presidents using base R commands. I switch over to ggplot in the following section. The x-axis shows years and the y-axis shows the overall ranking of the president based on the C-SPAN survey.

```r
# Read in data
dat <- readODS::read_ods(path = '/Volumes/SDCARD/President_Project.ods')


# Format dates
dat$Term_Start2 <- as.Date(dat$Term_Start, format = '%m/%d/%Y')
dat$Term_End2 <- as.Date(dat$Term_End, format = '%m/%d/%Y')
dat$Term_Days <- dat$Term_End2 - dat$Term_Start2


# Add in presidents who were first VPs and took over after POTUS passed or left office
dat$Year_Elected2 <- car::recode(dat$Year_Elected, "NA=0")


dat$Year_Term_Start <-ifelse(dat$Year_Elected2 != 0, dat$Year_Elected2,
                     ifelse(dat$President == 'John Tyler', 1841,
                     ifelse(dat$President == 'Millard Fillmore', 1850,
                     ifelse(dat$President == 'Andrew Johnson', 1865,
                     ifelse(dat$President == 'Chester Arthur', 1881,
                     ifelse(dat$President == 'Calvin Coolidge', 1923,
                     ifelse(dat$President == 'Harry S. Truman', 1945,
                     ifelse(dat$President == 'Lyndon B. Johnson', 1963,
                     ifelse(dat$President == 'Gerald Ford', 1974, NA)))))))))


# First line plot to show relationship
plot(dat$Year_Term_Start, dat$`C-SPAN_Rank2021`, type = 'b', ylim = c(0,50),
     xlab = 'Year', ylab = 'C-SPAN 2021 POTUS Ranking',
```
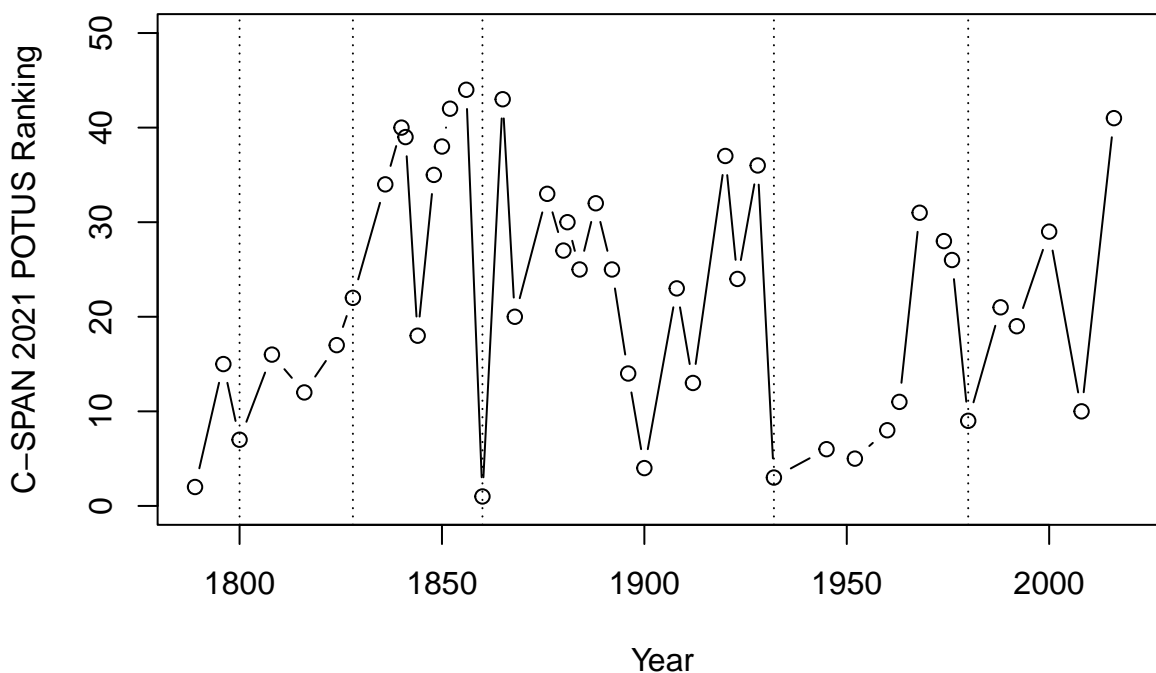
```
    main = 'C-SPAN POTUS Ranking across Time
(Vertical Bars Denote Skowronek\'s Regimes)')
abline(v = 1800, lty = 3)
abline(v = 1828, lty = 3)
abline(v = 1860, lty = 3)
abline(v = 1932, lty = 3)
abline(v = 1980, lty = 3)
```

C–SPAN POTUS Ranking across Time
(Vertical Bars Denote Skowronek's Regimes)

The vertical bars denote the start of Skowronek's regimes – when one political party/faction recedes to another. There is some evidence that presidents who usher in new political regimes in American politics are ranked better than their successors, however, the plot is messy and there is a lot of variance.

We see presidents who served early in the United States' history are ranked much better than the group of presidents serving in the middle-to-late 1800s. With the exception of Abraham Lincoln, many of these presidents viewed their role as being clerks. Their time in office was mainly focused on ensuring government moved smoothly, rather than taking an active role in shaping legislation and public perceptions.

However, the start of the 1900s ushered in a new era of presidential action. Presidents viewed their role as the chief executive in a new way – what some call the rise of the "rhetorical presidency" – when presidents became increasingly active in the public sphere and in the pursuit of legislative action.

Many of the presidents in the 20th century through today have expanded the powers of the presidency. We see a mixture of well ranked and less well ranked presidents in the 20th-21st centuries.

Trends Within Regimes

The argument, based on the plot above, appears plausible. Presidents serving at the start of new ideological regimes do appear to be ranked more favorably by the survey respondents than those who follow.

To better illustrate this relationship, I break the plot below into segments. Each "regime" receives a line of best fit (OLS regression), colored in red, which shows the trajectory of the relationship from regime beginning to regime end. Like the plot above, the x-axis presents years and the y-axis shows the overall ranking of the president based on the C-SPAN survey. I discuss the findings below the figure.

```
# Switching to ggplot as breaks are easier
library(ggplot2)


ggp <- ggplot(dat, aes(Year_Term_Start, `C-SPAN_Rank2021`)) +
  geom_line() + geom_point() +
  theme_classic() + ylim(0,50)


# Store points within each regime time
ggp_info <- ggplot_build(ggp)$dat[[2]][ ,1:2]


ggp_info_range1 <- ggp_info[ggp_info [ , 1] >= 1789 &
                            ggp_info[ , 1] < 1800, ]
ggp_info_range2 <- ggp_info[ggp_info [ , 1] >= 1800 &
                            ggp_info[ , 1] < 1828, ]
ggp_info_range3 <- ggp_info[ggp_info [ , 1] >= 1828 &
                            ggp_info[ , 1] < 1860, ]
ggp_info_range4 <- ggp_info[ggp_info [ , 1] >= 1860 &
                            ggp_info[ , 1] < 1932, ]
ggp_info_range5 <- ggp_info[ggp_info [ , 1] >= 1932 &
                            ggp_info[ , 1] < 1980, ]
ggp_info_range6 <- ggp_info[ggp_info [ , 1] >= 1980 &
                            ggp_info[ , 1] < 2020, ]
```
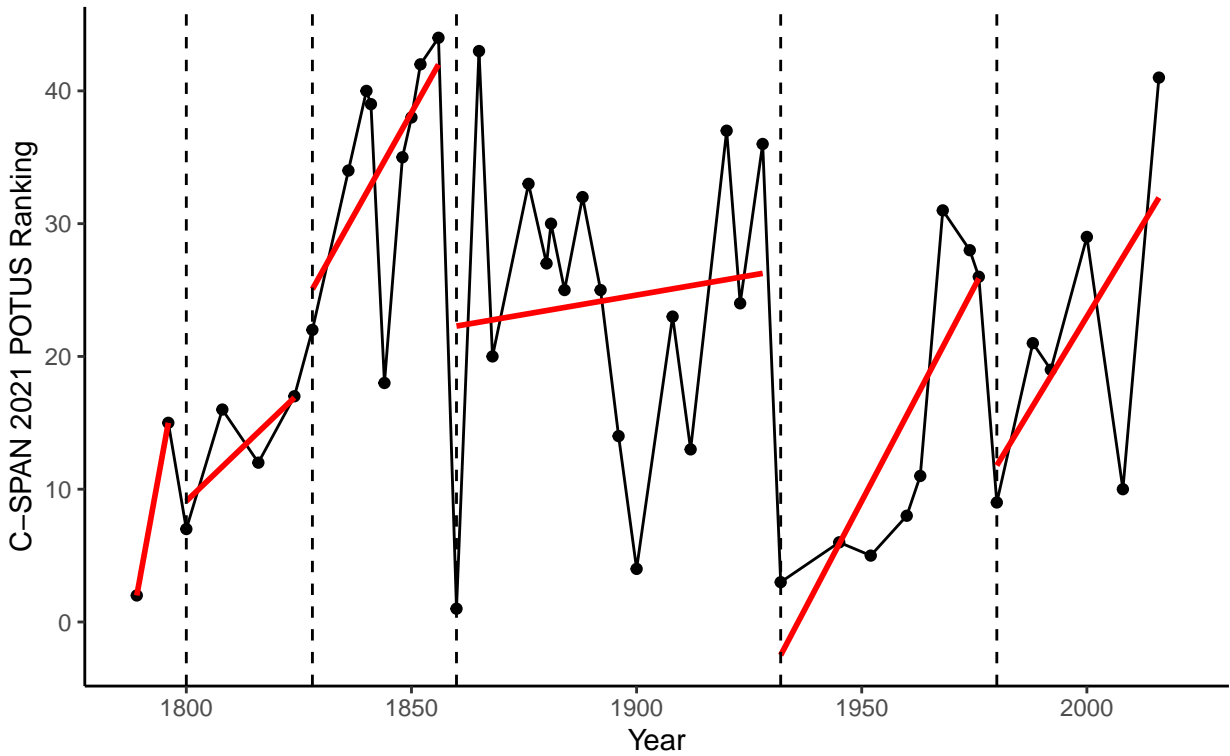
```r
# Plot again but add OLS line to each regime
ggp2 <- ggplot(dat, aes(Year_Term_Start, `C-SPAN_Rank2021`))+
  geom_line() + theme_classic() +
  geom_point() +
  geom_smooth(data = ggp_info_range1, aes(x, y),
            col = 'red', method = 'lm', se = F) +
  geom_smooth(data = ggp_info_range2, aes(x, y),
            col = 'red', method = 'lm', se = F) +
  geom_smooth(data = ggp_info_range3, aes(x, y),
            col = 'red', method = 'lm', se = F) +
  geom_smooth(data = ggp_info_range4, aes(x, y),
            col = 'red', method = 'lm', se = F) +
  geom_smooth(data = ggp_info_range5, aes(x, y),
            col = 'red', method = 'lm', se = F) +
  geom_smooth(data = ggp_info_range6, aes(x, y),
              col = 'red', method = 'lm', se = F)


# Final plot -- adding titles and vertical lines
ggp2 + labs(title = 'C-SPAN POTUS Rankings Across Time
(Vertical Lines Denote Skowronek\'s Political Regimes)',
            x = 'Year', y = 'C-SPAN 2021 POTUS Ranking') +
  theme(plot.title = element_text(hjust = 0.5)) +
  geom_vline(xintercept = 1800, linetype = "dashed",
            color = "black", linewidth = .5) +
  geom_vline(xintercept = 1828, linetype = "dashed",
            color = "black", linewidth = .5) +
  geom_vline(xintercept = 1860, linetype = "dashed",
            color = "black", linewidth = .5) +
  geom_vline(xintercept = 1932, linetype = "dashed",
            color = "black", linewidth = .5) +
  geom_vline(xintercept = 1980, linetype = "dashed",
            color = "black", linewidth = .5)
```

C–SPAN POTUS Rankings Across Time
(Vertical Lines Denote Skowronek's Political Regimes)

There is a positive relationship for every period. Presidents serving at the start of a political regime are ranked better than their successors. Five of the six periods reveal subjectively steep increases in the overall rankings of presidents in those regimes (i.e., they are ranked worse later in the regime). The one regime with some mixed findings centers around the Republican regime ushered in by Abraham Lincoln (1861). President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909), another Republican, is ranked positively by the panel of experts, which attenuates the line in that period. However, the positive slope persists even with Theodore Roosevelt.

This quick analysis lends support to Skowronek's (1993) assertions that political time is highly related to the "success" (i.e., ranking/historic favorability) of presidents. Presidents at the start of ideological regimes are always, at least through 2020, ranked better relative to successors serving at the end of the regime.

Skowronek's conceptualization of the politics presidents make also calls into question when the next presidential ideological regime shift will occur in American politics. Even though we may not know when that transition will take place, there is historical evidence that that president will likely be well ranked and will dramatically reshape the political landscape.

References

Ellis, Richard J., and Michael Nelson. 2020. *Debating the Presidency: Conflicting Perspectives on the American Executive (5th Edition)*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

Skowronek, Stephen. 1993. *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.