

Effecting a Progressive Presidency: Roosevelt, Taft and the
Pursuit of Strategic Resources

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Abstract

Why did presidential activism appear suddenly in the Progressive Era? Termed “modern-like” by scholars, how was this activism manifested by occupants of an office that was barren of political resources for independent action? Was that activism more than an expression of Roosevelt and Wilson’s “heroic” or “forceful” qualities? And is Taft anything more than a “traditional” throwback sandwiched between precociously modern presidents? Addressing these questions, I compare and contrast Roosevelt and Taft’s policy leadership, using the case of conservation for the former and tariff reform for the latter. Noting evidence of similar political independence and policy activism on the part of both presidents, the paper develops and operationalizes a concept of strategic resources to explain how these presidents effected leadership. The paper then analyzes personal variables affecting strategic resource acquisition. Both Roosevelt and Taft are revealed as policy initiating, “modern-like” so to speak. However, the former was efficacious in the acquisition and use of strategic resources while the latter was not. In conclusion, the paper notes some implications of its conception of resource acquisition for institutionalization in the modern presidency.

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The Progressive Era is an insufficiently examined period in the presidency's development. Presidency research portrays Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson as prefiguring a later, modern presidency. Sidney Milkis writes that the emergence of the modern presidency began in the Progressive Era, "especially as shaped by the statesmanship of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson . . ."¹ William Leuchtenburg observes Franklin Roosevelt's contribution to the modern presidency gave the office "an importance which went well beyond what even Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson had done."² But scholarship has not sufficiently explained why these two Progressive Era presidents were precociously "modern."

Personal vs. Structural Perspectives

Were personal characteristics the cause of these novel presidencies? Michael Beschloss gestured towards that kind of explanation, calling Roosevelt and Wilson's performances in office "heroic."³ In the same vein, John Milton Cooper explained that the presidency grew in importance "through the influence of forceful incumbents such as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson . . ."⁴

Or, was activism in the Progressive Era's presidency related to more fundamental and systemic developments? Was there a "Progressive Presidency"—a change in expectations and possibilities in the office, responding to systemic changes in American politics? Indeed, politics and policy experienced fundamental changes between 1900 and World War One. It seems reasonable to conceive of those changes reshaping the opportunity structure of presidential politics.⁵

Which perspective best explains Progressive Era presidential leadership, personalist or institutionalist accounts? My strategy here for addressing that question, and its implications, is to focus on William H. Taft's place in the Progressive Era story. Taft is an afterthought in the

¹ Sidney Milkis, The President and the Parties: The Transformation of the American Party System Since the New Deal (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 8.

² William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), p. 327.

³ Michael Beschloss, "Imperial Presidency," Newsweek (January 9, 1995), p. 45.

⁴ John Milton Cooper, Jr., Pivotal Decades: The United States, 1900-1920 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), p. xv.

⁵ For examples of the diverse universe of Progressive Era research, on the impulses for Progressive Era reform, see James Morone, The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government (New York: Basic Books, 1990), esp. chaps., 3 & 4; on the economic stimuli to reform, and policy responses, see Morton Keller, Regulating a New Economy: Public Policy and Economic Change in America, 1900-1933 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); the intellectual themes of Progressive reform are treated in James T. Kloppenberg, Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), chap. 9.; and the transformations of the party system that were simultaneous

presidency literature—a brief return to the presidency’s traditionalist norms after Roosevelt’s innovation and before 1912’s political cataclysm. If wholly personal characteristics can explain why Roosevelt and Wilson were “modern-like,” then Taft must be “traditional” because he lacked those presidents’ force of will or heroism. On the other hand, if Taft’s leadership shares with Roosevelt some innovative elements, we have a hint that systemic forces might have acted on all three Progressive Era presidents.

Were there theoretically salient similarities among Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson? As an exploratory effort on this problem, I will focus here on similarities and differences between Theodore Roosevelt and William H. Taft’s leadership. This paper pursues a comparative case approach, comparing and contrasting each president’s policy leadership on a case of policy initiation. Pursuing that strategy, I shall initially conceptualize the institutional limitations that the office imposed on Roosevelt and Taft. How were presidents able to initiate and pursue policy when they lacked sources of information, analysis, and liaison? Second, I shall operationalize a concept of strategic analysis to clarify how these two presidents might identify and acquire resources that were strategically salient to their policy goals. Finally, using the two case studies, I shall analyze Roosevelt’s and Taft’s conduct of policy leadership to assess the nature of their differences. Were they engaged in the same kind of leadership project but achieving different results? Or, were their aims fundamentally different—one innovative and modern-like, the other constrained and traditional?

The Presidency and the Progressives

Progressive Era scholars were expectant of new energy and independence in the presidency. Woodrow Wilson, in his 1880s dissertation had pronounced that the presidency had “fallen . . . because the power of Congress has become predominate.”⁶ Two decades later he assessed the presidency differently: “The president is at liberty to be as big a man as he can.”⁷ And Wilson was hardly alone in this new view. For example, his Princeton colleague, Henry Jones Ford, argued that the Constitution, evolving to meet the necessities of a modern society,

with the Progressive Era are traced by Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1886).

⁶Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1885; 1981 reprint), p. 46.

⁷Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (New York: Columbia U. Press, 1908), p. 70.

now required that the presidency “take care of the government . . . shape its policy, and . . . provide for its responsibilities . . .”⁸

And the views of scholars like Wilson and Ford seemed to fit the unfolding Roosevelt presidency. Succeeding to the office in September 1901, Theodore Roosevelt performed a different leadership script than McKinley performed before him. What is particularly notable about these Progressive Era presidents—Taft included—is that they pursued policy initiatives that were independent of their political parties’ policy commitments. For example, Roosevelt took an independent stance from his party’s 1900 platform and its congressional leadership regarding regulation of business. Taft broke with the strong, mainstream Republican commitment to high tariffs, making tariff reduction his first major policy goal as president. And Wilson parted from Democratic party policy positions with the Federal Reserve act and, later, with the establishment of the Federal Trade Commission.⁹ While writers have enthused over Roosevelt’s and Wilson’s innovations, presidency scholarship not sufficiently explained expanding policy leadership and increased political independence exhibited by all three presidents of the Progressive Era, compared to nineteenth century norms.

The “Modernity” Puzzle

While the Progressive Era presidents exhibited increased independence and initiative, the Progressive Era office they occupied was quite unlike the later “modern” presidency. The modern presidency—the office after Franklin Roosevelt—institutionalized resources of presidential power. By contrast, the Progressive presidency had the organizational scale and limitations of the late nineteenth century office. Aside from a personal secretary or two, and some clerks, these presidents lacked staff, specialized organization, and information on call.¹⁰ The presidency’s formal staff organization did not expand until the onset of World War One and then only temporarily.¹¹ The presidency’s peacetime organizational capacities did not

⁸ Henry Jones Ford, The Rise and Growth of American Politics (New York: Macmillan, 1898), p. 275.

⁹ For excellent profiles of these presidencies, see Lewis Gould, The Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991); Paolo Coletta, The Presidency of William Howard Taft (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1973); and Kendrick A. Clements, The Presidency of Woodrow Wilson (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992).

¹⁰ Herbert Hoover’s White House saw the first attempts at articulating a division of political and policy labor among personnel. See Karen Hult and Charles Walcott, Governing the White House: From Hoover Through LBJ (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

¹¹ Modern war lent its own dynamic for the presidency and the state’s capacities. See Marc Allen Eisner, From Warfare State to Welfare State: World War I, Compensatory State Building, and the Limits of Modern Order (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000).

significantly expand until the budget bureau's establishment in 1921. And the budget bureau's relationship to the presidency was itself compromised until 1939 when it was relocated to the new Executive Office of the President.¹²

In the classic description of the modern presidency, Fred Greenstein wrote "that a modifier such as 'modern' is needed to characterize the post-1932 manifestations . . . that had evolved from the . . . circumscribed traditional presidency."¹³ Modern presidents governed aggressively, institutionalized staffs and advisers, and projected their leadership to Americans, articulating a national policy agenda, affecting popular political views, and shaping legislation. In other words, to observe that the presidents of the Progressive Era were "modern" is to apply a concept to them that belies what made the modern presidency distinctive.

What is most puzzling about the Progressive Era presidency is the large asymmetry between their autonomous policy activism and the political resources of the office they occupied. I assume two prerequisites for effective presidential actions. First, presidents must justify their initiatives with a warrant for that action. Stephen Skowronek writes: "Before a president can formulate a strategy for action, he needs to construe his place in history and stake claim to certain warrants for the exercise of power within it."¹⁴ In an earlier paper in this project I examined how warrant claims by Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson parted from claims of their immediate predecessors.¹⁵

The second element required for presidential action, and this paper's focus, is an instrumental capacity to effect their aims. From this perspective, the theoretical utility of the concept of the modern presidency is that it connects modern presidential leadership with the means through which it is pursued. And, to reiterate the main question addressed here, how did the Progressive Era presidents effect their newly active leadership? If in the context of the Progressive Era, presidents "could be as big" as they wished to be their subsequent problem was how to achieve that expanded role.

¹² Larry Berman, The Office of Management and Budget and the Presidency, 1921-1979 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), chaps. 1 & 2.

¹³ Fred Greenstein, "Toward a Modern Presidency," in Greenstein, ed., Leadership in the Modern Presidency (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 3-4.

¹⁴ Stephen Skowronek, The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 24.

¹⁵ See Peri E. Arnold, "Articulating a Warrant for Policy Leadership: Roosevelt, Taft, Wilson, and the Progressive Presidency," Delivered to the 2001 meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, CA..

Strategic Analysis and Strategic Resources

Facing asymmetry between new opportunities and insufficient political resources, these presidents necessarily undertook what Charles Lindblom termed strategic analysis. Strategic analysis links available and appropriate political resources to the decisions and processes aimed at achieving desired goals.¹⁶ In other words, strategic analysis identifies and applies appropriate, available political means to specified goals. Presidents engage in strategic analysis as they identify the means through which they will attempt to achieve their leadership projects. Over time, and within different kinds of political contexts, the resources available to presidents for those purposes vary, but every president committed to independent initiatives in office must engage in the search for appropriate political resources through strategic analysis. And in every such situation, strategic analysis entails what K.J. Radford terms an “ill-structured decision.” Particularly in the Progressive context of a presidency with minimal institutional resources, the president faced insufficient information, an inability to calculate an optimal outcome, every decision has multiple objectives, and independent actors would be instrumental in shaping the outcome. Radford observes that the best a decision-maker can do in an ill-structured decision is to pursue a subjectively rational course of action. “Two different individuals involved in the same ill-structured decision situation may decide on different approaches . . . may make different recommendations . . . [and] each may legitimately claim to have acted in a subjectively rational manner in the circumstances as he or she perceived them.”¹⁷

The strategic analysis problem that faced the Progressive Era presidents is correlative of Terry Moe’s account of the dynamics whereby organization within the modern presidency is subjected to an incumbent’s quest for power. There is a recurring tension, Moe notes, between a president’s own political goals and the ongoing, inertial organizational setting of the modern presidency. The asymmetry between the incumbent’s goals and the institutionalized presidency triggers organizational change as the incumbent reconfigures the organizations to fit his goals. Moe writes “that that institutional development is driven by the degree of congruence between existing structures, on the one hand, and existing incentives and resources on the other.”¹⁸ In periods of large political change, presidents will experience a gap between their possible

¹⁶Charles Lindblom, “Still Muddling, Not Yet Through,” Public Administration Review (November/December 1979), 517-26.

¹⁷ K.J. Radford, Strategic and Tactic Decisions (2nd ed.; Toronto: University Press of Canada, 1988), p. 3.

responses to new challenges and the office's existing capacities, paralleling what Moe calls "incongruence." In particular, the situation of the Progressive Era presidents was an extreme of such incongruence because of the traditional presidency's lack of institutional resources and its norm of presidential fealty to party.

Overcoming Incongruity: Comparing Roosevelt and Taft

Personalist explanations depict Roosevelt as "forceful" and Taft as "passive." Explanations of these two presidents, and Wilson as well, have a logical flaw. The activity and relative success or failure of each president occurs in the same political context. The Progressive Era posed the challenges these presidents attempted to meet, and their responses to those challenges should be understood within that political context. Taft's performance in office was measured politically by the same yardstick as Roosevelt and Wilson's. To call the former "traditional" and the latter "modern-like" obscures their shared context and the context's common expectations by which all three succeeded or failed politically. And if Taft is to be understood in the context of Progressive politics, we have to ask how he attempted to gain resources to overcome it.

To set Taft's leadership into context, I shall compare him with Roosevelt, using a signature policy issue for each. For Roosevelt I use his leadership in conservation policy, and for Taft I use his leadership on tariff reform. Both presidents placed a high priority on these respective initiatives at the outset of their presidencies, and in each case the substance of the president's initiative was notably independent of the Republican party's standing policy commitments.

Roosevelt and Taft shared important characteristics. Those similarities ease comparability and allow a tight focus on their respective actions to fulfill their policy goals. They shared partisan affiliation. The congressional leaders they both faced were opposed to reform. They both faced an electorate that stimulated presidential activity through increased demands for reform. Gary Miller proposes: "Presidential leadership has relied on the abnormal politics of social insurgency."¹⁹ And, it is likely that through Roosevelt's own issue priming and increasing

¹⁸Terry Moe, "The Politicized Presidency," in John Chubb and Paul Peterson, eds., The New Direction in American Politics (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1985), pp. 237.

¹⁹Gary J. Miller, "Abnormal Politics" Possibilities for Presidential Leadership." Paper delivered to the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, 1990, p. 44.

“muckraking” by journalists, Taft faced an even more “abnormal” electorate than did his predecessor.

Both policy initiatives to be compared here were similarly novel, independent from party commitment and presidentially initiated. The president was the main proponent in each case. Both presidents also won large electoral victories. Roosevelt’s 1904 margin of victory was larger than Taft’s in 1908, and the resulting divisions in Congress were also somewhat different. In 1904 Roosevelt ran against the drab Alton Parker, winning 56.4 percent of the vote. In 1908 Taft ran against the vibrant William Jennings Bryan, winning 51.58 percent of the vote. The 59th Congress elected with Roosevelt in 1904 had 250 Republicans and 136 Democrats in the House and 57 Republicans and 33 Democrats in the Senate. The 61st Congress elected with Taft had 219 Republicans and 172 Democrats in the House and 61 Republicans and 32 Democrats in the Senate. Roosevelt polled more popular votes than Taft did but against a weaker opponent.

Contrasting Roosevelt and Taft, scholars invariably cite their respective, opposed theories of presidential power, Roosevelt’s “stewardship theory” and Taft’s “strict constructionism.” In his 1913 autobiography, Roosevelt wrote that a president’s powers were limited only by what the Constitution expressly prohibits because it is “his duty to do anything that the needs of the nation demanded . . .”²⁰ Taft responded in 1916 “that the President can exercise no power which cannot be fairly and reasonably traced to some specific grant of power . . .”²¹ I suggest this famous debate is less revealing than it appears at first glance. These remarks were both post-presidential, and they were self-justifying as well as colored by mutual antipathy. Roosevelt and Taft’s competition for the 1912 nomination gave each reason to caricature the other. In some respects Roosevelt and Taft’s basic perceptions of government were different, the former pragmatic and the latter legalistic. However they worked together closely during the Roosevelt administration, and Taft committed himself to carrying through Roosevelt’s reforms during his presidency by perfecting “the machinery by which these standards may be maintained . . .”²² Also, President Taft claimed expansive power when it suited him. For example, in 1912 he

²⁰ Theodore Roosevelt, Autobiography (New York: Scribner’s, 1913), p. 197.

²¹ William Howard Taft, Our Chief Magistrate and His Powers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916), p. 138.

²² William Howard Taft, “Speech of Acceptance,” July 28, 1908, in David H. Burton (ed.), The Collected Works of William Howard Taft (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), vol. 3, p. 7.

insisted it was within the president's authority to submit an executive budget to Congress even though Congress had prohibited that action.²³

Seeing Roosevelt and Taft as similarly situated in their political contexts, how can their strategic analyses and resource acquisition and use be compared? To that end I shall operationalize the concept of strategic resources.

Identifying Strategic Resources

The political resources through which Progressive Era presidents might effect their policy purposes were largely exogenous to the presidency. In a presidency lacking staff organization, and with few delegated powers, incumbents would have to look beyond the office itself to acquire resources to affect the behavior of other salient actors in the Washington community.

Four distinct categories of potential resources are identifiable and were available to a president's strategic analysis. First, some resources were internal to the presidency of that era. Those were based in constitutional authority, statutory delegations to the president, or uses of presidential prerogative. These resources were unmediated by other institutions and available to any incumbent's command. For example, the veto power could be used to affect congressional action on legislation. And an incumbent can attempt to leverage influence through the use of patronage appointments.

Second, there were resources external to the presidency that might be converted into resources "on tap" for an incumbent. This resource category refers primarily to the presidents' changing relationship with the executive departments around 1900. Congressional domination of the administrative departments was a norm of late nineteenth century national government. The departments were conduits through which Congress effected the distribution of pensions, contracts, subsidies and jobs.²⁴ These were concerns of government that were too vital for the parties' interests to leave much discretion in the hands of presidents. As Leonard White notes, at the end of the nineteenth century the president was recognized as the constitutional head of administrative organization. However, "that the president should exercise an initiating and creative influence with respect to the administrative system was . . . foreign both to doctrine and practice . . ."²⁵ The presidency was, instead, "small in scale and limited in power, caught up

²³ Peri E. Arnold, Making the Managerial Presidency: Comprehensive Reorganization Planning, 1905-1996 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), pp. 44-47.

²⁴ Theodore Lowi, The Personal President (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), chap. 1.

²⁵ Leonard White, The Republican Era (New York: Macmillan, 1958), p. 93.

more in the vicissitudes of party politics and patronage than in the formulation and conduct of public policy.”²⁶ However, presidents facing incongruity had possibilities related to their official role at the constitutional center of administration. In short, the growing administrative state at the turn of the century offered to presidents potential capacities for shaping policy and affecting its implementation, if only they could convert bureaucratic capacities such as expert personnel into a strategic resource.

Third, there were potential resources institutionally external to both the presidency and the executive branch. These comprised actors over which the president had no hierarchical advantage. These actors included members of Congress, leading figures within the national political parties, key members of the press, and national business and financial leaders. They were the usual cast of characters advising nineteenth century presidents. A possibility for the Progressive Era presidents was that they might reach beyond the traditional Washington community to new, professional knowledge communities.²⁷

Fourth, at the opening of the twentieth century, public sentiment constituted a potential resource for presidents that had been used only rarely in the latter part of the last century. Presidents of the early “party period,” from Jackson through Andrew Johnson, were prone to policy related public appeals. Presidents after Johnson abided by a norm of constraint in public appeals for policy.²⁸ Relationship to political party is also a factor that seemed to be at work in nineteenth century presidential appeals to public sentiment. Those nineteenth century presidents who appealed to public sentiment “over the head” of Congress, John Tyler, Andrew Johnson, and second term Cleveland, were presidents who were alienated from party and were playing their last political card. The other nineteenth century presidents who went public were likely to be expressing their parties’ policy preferences.

William McKinley’s public rhetoric illustrates the power of partisanship in defining both the president’s public appeal and his warrant for asserting that appeal. Melvin Laracey finds that after Johnson, McKinley was the nineteenth century president most prone to “go public.”²⁹ Yet, unlike Johnson, McKinley’s public policy appeals were tightly confined to the Republican

²⁶ Morton Keller, *Affairs of State: Public Life in Late Nineteenth Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 297.

²⁷ See Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

²⁸ See Melvin Laracey, *Presidents and the People: The Partisan Story of Going Public* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2002), chaps. 2-3.

²⁹ Melvin Laracey, *Presidents and the People*, pp. 134-138.

party's agenda. This is evident in comparing the policy proposals of his 1897 inaugural address with the Republican 1896 platform. This comparison is sufficiently valuable to justify an ungainly digression. Besides demonstrating partisanship as a warrant for McKinley's policy language, this digression will provide a baseline for identifying Roosevelt and Taft's relationship to the party's commitments.

McKinley's inaugural addressed an electorate divided by what Morton Keller termed "the electoral maelstrom of 1896."³⁰ McKinley had the dual tasks of explaining his intentions and giving reasons why the losers of 1896 should consent to Republican leadership. McKinley's address implied a policy-engaged presidency. He spoke to the issues that set 1896's battle lines, but no policy position in the address was at odds with the Republican party's commitment.

He first promised a return to prosperity. The economy had been in contraction under Cleveland, and the Bryant Democrats prescribed the fix of free silver. Promising relief, McKinley called for revising the financial system to assure a stable currency and sound banking system. He proposed that Congress establish a commission to consider "revision of our coinage, banking and currency laws" or it vest in the president the authority to appoint a commission. Additionally, he promised to pursue a policy of bimetallism through international agreements.³¹ The Republican platform differed in purpose and tone from McKinley's healing inaugural address. It indicted the Democrats for creating economic decline by lowering the protective tariff. But the platform's stance against free silver and inflation, and for international agreement on bimetallism, were exactly McKinley's inaugural positions.

The protective tariff was McKinley's next policy topic, and it was his primary solution to existing economic problems. He asserted: "Nothing has ever been made plainer at a general election than that the controlling principle in the raising of revenue from duties on imports is zealous care for American interests and American labor."³² McKinley's tariff language paralleled the platform, which described the protective tariff as the key to American prosperity. It was the

³⁰ Morton Keller, Affairs of State: Public Life in Late Nineteenth Century America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 580.

³¹ Until the early twentieth century a world gold shortage was a constraint on the national currencies that were backed by gold. Thus silver was necessary also for the backing of currency, but its far greater availability threatened inflation if there were no international agreements fixing a relationship between the value of gold as an equivalent of a value of silver. See Keller, pp. 376-384.

³² William McKinley, "Inaugural Address," A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, vol. XIII (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1917), pp. 6237.

heart of the Republican party's program.³³ And the platform assured that, contrary to the Democrat's divisive claims, the tariff was beneficial to all Americans.³⁴

McKinley's then demanded: "Immunity should be granted to none who violate the laws."³⁵ He promised that the rule of law also applied to business misbehavior through illegal combinations, or "trusts." McKinley's reference to legality seems at first to be traditional rhetoric about fundamental principles. However, that language provides the context for an important policy assertion. The president's insistence of no immunities from the law for business combinations follows from his demand of respect for law. But there is no reference to business combinations in the 1896 platform, let alone any threats to apply the law to business misbehavior. Was McKinley espousing a policy position independently of his party?

Herein is a test of McKinley's subjective freedom to assert a policy position independently of his party's commitments. Addressing an issue for which the Republican platform gave no guidance, McKinley's rhetoric exhibited how constrained he was by party. Given the 1896 platform's silence on business combinations, McKinley sought authority in an earlier Republican platform. He quoted the 1888 platform, criticizing "all combinations of capital organized in trusts" and recommended "such legislation as will prevent the execution of all schemes to oppress the people by undue charges."³⁶ Aside from the Constitution itself, the 1888 Republican platform is the only document quoted in McKinley's inaugural address.

The Intersection of Political Structure and Personal Idiosyncrasy

An early twentieth century president asserting a policy initiative that was independent of his party had to devise a method for acquiring strategic resources to effect his purpose (after asserting a warrant that legitimated his independent initiative). Here the structure of Progressive Era politics intersected with presidents' personal characteristics of skill and style. Because those resources were not "on tap" within the office, a president's subjective rationality in strategic analysis depended on his own particular experiences and abilities.³⁷ Drawing on modern

³³ See John Gerring, "Party Ideology in America: The National Republican Chapter, 1828-1924," Studies in American Political Development, 11 (Spring 1997).

³⁴ Kirk Porter and Donald Johnson, National Party Platforms, 1840-1956 (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1956), p. 107.

³⁵ McKinley, "Inaugural Address," A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, vol. XIII p. 6240.

³⁶ McKinley, "Inaugural Address," p. 6240, and 1888 Republican platform in Johnson and Porter, National Party Platforms, p. 80.

³⁷ K.J. Radford, Strategic and Tactical Decisions, pp. 3 & 31-32; see also Irving L. Janis, Crucial Decisions: Leadership in Policy making and Crisis Management (New York: Free Press, 1989), chap. 7.

presidency scholarship, four personal characteristics stand out as salient to how a Progressive Era incumbent might identify and acquire strategic resources.

Professional Expertise: Richard Neustadt proposed that “the presidency is no place for amateurs.”³⁸ His insight was that the extent and depth of a person’s professional political experience would affect his ability to understand the political problems inherent in the presidential leadership role. It extends that insight slightly to propose that the incumbent’s professional training and career experiences determine what they recognize as strategic resources and how they use them. *I hypothesize that a president facing incongruity will best identify those strategic resources that are related to professional background.*

Orientation Toward Reform: Erwin Hargrove observed that moral purpose, along with skills, is the making of a president’s leadership. He wrote, “significant achievements in politics and policy require a sense of shared values and goals.”³⁹ This insight sheds light on the Progressive Era presidents precisely because their common context was one of high expectations for the national government’s ability to address new problems arising from business organization as well the complications of immigration and urbanism. A president’s ability to respond to these expectations reflects his own sense of reform’s priority. And the priority he placed on reform, in the Progressive context, would affect his impetus to independent policy leadership and his requirements for strategic resources. *I hypothesize that in the Progressive presidency the degree of an incumbent’s commitment to reform will affect his identification of his strategic resources requirements.*

Information Seeking: Information that is salient to politics and policy is critical to a president’s ability to set goals, evaluate events, and identify and acquire strategic resources. In the modern presidency the institutionalized presidency itself contains the means for information gathering and assessment. In the Progressive Era presidency, the incumbent’s ability to gain useful information depended on his ability to reach out to those who could provide information. This is, ultimately, what John Burke and Fred Greenstein mean by “testing reality.”⁴⁰ Greenstein and Burke propose that traits of mind and personality are determinative of a president’s ability to gain and act upon useful information. And, they stress, in addition to those qualities, “the

³⁸ Richard Neustadt, Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents (New York: Free Press, 1990), p. 152.

³⁹ Erwin Hargrove, The President as Leader: Appealing to the Better Angels of Our Nature (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), p. 2.

⁴⁰ John Burke and Fred Greenstein, How Presidents Test Reality (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1989).

president's interpersonal style in group settings is fundamental."⁴¹ And in a time when the president's information and advice would come largely from outside the office, the incumbent's personal tendencies towards informational networking would be critical for effective "reality testing" in the White House. In particular, it is likely that a president's social networking beyond the traditional Washington community would indicate the breadth of his potential information community. *I hypothesize that the breadth and diversity of a president's interpersonal contacts connotes that president's ability to acquire salient information.*

Rhetorical Propensity: Jeffrey Tulis explained the manner of presidents' rhetoric in temporal and constitutional terms. Where a president is located temporally will determine how a president will communicate.⁴² But it is also likely that, independent of time, a president's personal skills and inclinations would determine his propensities to communicate publicly. Erwin Hargrove observes that public communication is at the heart of the president's role. Ultimately, the president is a teacher and the president's success will be determined by his ability to communicate authentically the society's deepest values.⁴³ A consequence of a president's uses of communication ought to be his capacity for stimulating public support for an initiative. In short, presidents not only teach, they sell. *I hypothesize that the president's willingness to "go public," manifested in press relation as well as speeches, is a requirement for acquiring public support as a strategic resource.*

Do these conceptions of strategic resources, and their uses, illuminate Roosevelt's and Taft's performances in pursuit of their respective policy initiatives? In what follows I compare and contrast their pursuits of a signature policy. I shall examine the fit between the strategic resources acquisition hypotheses above and these presidents' strategic analyses in the two cases.

Roosevelt and Conservation

In his 1901 annual message, Roosevelt introduced a novel conception of national resource policy. He reformulated federal land policy as "conservation," in effect, resolving the dichotomy in late nineteenth-century public discourse between expansionist resource

⁴¹ Burke and Greenstein, p. 266.

⁴² Jeffrey Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

⁴³ Erwin Hargrove, p. 23.

exploitation and a romantic ideology of preservation.⁴⁴ Roosevelt's initiative had no precedent or root in his party's commitments.

In its 1900 platform, the Republican party had mentioned reclamation of arid lands as a means for "further pursuance of the constant policy of the Republican party to provide free homes on the public domain." But, paradoxically, the platform then denied anything more than a distributive policy role for the national government in water policy. Federal legislation dealing with reclamation must reserve "control of the distribution of water for irrigation to the respective States . . ."⁴⁵ William McKinley's 1900 annual message referred to public land and resources in just two paragraphs devoted to reporting the total acreage of national forest reserves. And all the president said of the public lands was: "The results obtained from our forest policy have demonstrated its wisdom and the necessity in the interest of the public for its continuance and increased appropriations by the Congress for the carrying on of the work."⁴⁶

Roosevelt's Conservation Goals and Accomplishments

In contrast to that pattern of Republican silence, Roosevelt's first annual message devoted nineteen paragraphs to conservation. He explained to Congress that: "Public opinion throughout the United States has moved steadily toward a just appreciation of the value of forests. . . . The great part played by them in the creation . . . of the national wealth is now more fully realized than ever before."⁴⁷ A ready explanation for Roosevelt's stress on conservation was biographical; his childhood interests in natural history, and his extensive experiences in the west, sensitized him to the need for conservation. But the president's choice of language suggests that he was reacting as well to signals he perceived in his political environment. He calls Congress's attention to "public opinion" about the importance of forestland, giving evidence that Roosevelt himself perceived a new issue on which to lead.

More than any other issue that Roosevelt initiated, conservation demarcated his distance from the political generation that preceded him. Morton Keller observed that "nothing in the post-1900 public agenda better displays the changing consciousness of modern times than the

⁴⁴ See Dennis C. Williams, God's Wilds: John Muir's Vision of Nature (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2002), and Morton Keller, pp. 384-394.

⁴⁵ Kirk Porter and Donald Johnson, National Party Platforms, 1840-1956, p. 123.

⁴⁶ William McKinley, "Annual Message to Congress," December 3, 1900, Messages and Papers of the Presidents, vol. 13, p. 6452.

⁴⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, "Annual Message to Congress," December 3, 1901, Messages and Papers of the Presidents, vol. 13, p. 6655.

appearance of a concern with resource conservation.”⁴⁸ Roosevelt’s elders envisioned an expanding American society on a wilderness continent. But, Roosevelt saw the frontier’s closing and feared that expanding industries of the industrial core were demanding more and more natural resources, the natural wealth of the periphery.⁴⁹ Roosevelt later wrote that at the time he entered the presidency: “The idea that our natural resources were inexhaustible still obtained, and there was as yet no real knowledge of their extent and condition.”⁵⁰

Roosevelt’s first message made four recommendations for conservation policy. First, all responsibilities over the national forests should be centered in the agriculture department’s bureau of forestry, transferring functions from the general land office and the geological survey. Second, the president should have executive authority to transfer lands into the forest reserves. Third, some of the forest preserves should be designated as wild life sanctuaries. Finally, Roosevelt observed that “forests are natural reservoirs . . . The water supply itself depends on the forests. . .,” and he recommended a national program of water storage for the purpose of providing irrigation on arid lands.⁵¹ Roosevelt’s conservation policy came to life through new laws and organizations during his first, “McKinley,” term.

On reclamation policy, Roosevelt formulated an approach that was wrapped into legislation sponsored by Senator Francis G. Newlands (D-NV). The bill moved quickly through Congress, supported by westerners of both parties, and it passed on June 17, 1902. The Newlands Reclamation Act established a massive federal effort to irrigate the arid lands of the eighteen western states. The program was under the U.S. Geologic Survey until 1908 when Roosevelt reorganized it into the new U.S. Reclamation Service.

Roosevelt’s agenda for the national forests was expressed in the transformation in 1904 of the agriculture department’s old bureau of forestry into a professional agency. That change ended the division of labor regarding national forests, transferring their management from interior’s general land office to agriculture’s forestry bureau, which had responsibility earlier only for studying and promoting forestry. Then in 1905 the administration reorganized the forest bureau, renaming it the U.S. Forest Service. Roosevelt’s impact on the national forests went

⁴⁸ Morton Keller, Regulating the New Economy: Public Policy and Economic Change in America, 1900-1933 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 158.

⁴⁹ See Richard F. Benschel, Sectionalism and American Political Development, 1880-1980 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1984). Like business regulation, conservation gave Roosevelt an opportunity to at least indirectly address issues that were dominated by the Democrats under William J. Bryant’s leadership.

⁵⁰ Theodore Roosevelt, Autobiography, p. 430.

beyond reorganization. He expanded the forests' total acreage in the face of congressional opposition. He created five new national parks, protecting more acreage than any president before him, excepting Grant's creation of Yellowstone National Park. He promoted the establishment of a large number of wildlife preserves and national bird reservations. And in 1906 he successfully promoted passage of the National Monuments Act, giving the president authority to designate locations in the public domain as national monuments to be preserved solely for study and recreation.

In his 1904 annual message Roosevelt returned to an extended justification for forest conservation. "It is the cardinal principle of the forest-reserve policy of this Administration that the reserves are for use."⁵² To elucidate his point in more detail, he explained the two major purposes of forest policy, preservation of water and the preservation of a renewable lumber supply. This explanation for forest policy highlighted the justification for Roosevelt's recommendation, that a forest service be created in the agriculture department and that all responsibilities for the federal forest reserves be placed in that new agency. He noted: "The United States is the only one of the great nations in which the forest work of the Government is not concentrated under one department."⁵³

Roosevelt claimed support for his proposal among "the great organizations of citizens whose interests are affected by the forest-reserves." Then he listed the benefits of that proposed reorganization. First, there would be "better handling of all forest work" because it would occur in a single-headed, unified agency. Second, the management of the forest will be in the hands of trained men on the ground rather than from a distant, administrative office. Third, coherent, professional management of the forest reserves will make them pay for themselves. Even as more funds will be needed in the future for first class forest management, those expenditures "can and should be offset by returns from the National forests."⁵⁴

Roosevelt's initiatives were novel in their breadth and in his overall, integrated approach to America's public domain.⁵⁵ Of course, he was a dedicated naturalist, which prepared him for

⁵¹ First Annual Message, vol. 13, p. 6656.

⁵² Fourth Annual Message, Messages and Papers of the Presidents, vol. 13, p. 6908.

⁵³ pp. 6909-10.

⁵⁴ P. 6910.

⁵⁵ Paul Russell Cutright, Theodore Roosevelt: The Making of a Conservationist (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), p. 238.

initiating a coherent policy regarding public lands and natural resources.⁵⁶ However, a lack of capacities in his office blocked the path to his goal of formulating coherent conservation policy. Roosevelt saw that a potential solution to that problem was at hand not in the presidency itself but within administrative agencies. Developments at that time within the executive branch offered to presidents the potential of a new kind of resource in their administrative environment. The executive branch was expanding in size, professionalizing its personnel, and most fundamentally, changing in the way it related to the governmental process.⁵⁷

The size of the federal service grew by about 50 percent each decade between 1871 and 1901 and then growing 50 percent again between 1901 and 1908.⁵⁸ Government was establishing new activities and founding new agencies to conduct them. Noticing a geologic shift in the ground beneath him, an early administrative law scholar, J.Y. Brinton, wrote in 1913: “A dawning progressive era, with its new conception of federal responsibility to the general welfare, . . . emphasizes the increasing vital importance of the administrative function in the federal government . . . Each succeeding Congress witnesses some new . . . responsibility imposed upon the administrative system.”⁵⁹ Once clerical and routine in its work, the federal public service saw increasing demand for specialists. The early twentieth century public service required technicians and professionals—knowledge specialists.

There was a conceptual change in the role of administrative agencies. The old conception was that administration was the implementation of specifically drawn legislation. And on some legislative topics, Congress would create legislation that would be enforced through suits brought to the courts, where “judges and practitioners . . . seemed too often learned only in archaic rules” producing “decisions that elevated an abstract individual liberty above the alleviation of palpable group distress.”⁶⁰ However, after 1900 new legislation could no longer specify in detail the policy that ought to be implemented to address complicated issues. What

⁵⁶ See Paul Russell Cutright, Theodore Roosevelt: The Making of a Conservationist.

⁵⁷ See Stephen Skowronek, Building a New American State The Expansion of National Administrative Capacity, 1877-1920 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Peri E. Arnold, Making the Managerial Presidency: Comprehensive Executive Reorganization Planning, 1901-1996 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), chap. 1.

⁵⁸ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial times to 1957 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1960), p. 710.

⁵⁹ J.Y. Brinton, from an article in the University of Pennsylvania Law Review (January 1913), quoted in Lloyd Short, The Development of National Administrative Organization in the United States (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1923), p. 23.

did it mean to restrain trade? What were appropriate railroad freight rates? What was entailed in the management of a healthy forest? What technical information would be of greatest aid to farmers? Congress could answer none of these questions. Consequently, increasing discretion was placed in administrative agencies and their professionally trained personnel.

Acquiring Strategic Resources

Theodore Roosevelt made a group of public officials central to his formulation and implementation of conservation policy. In effect, he assembled a network of experts to serve his policy goal. And one of those employees was central to the enterprise, Gifford Pinchot. At the end of his presidency, Roosevelt said: “Gifford Pinchot is the man to whom the nation owes the most for what has been accomplished as regards the preservation of the natural resources of our country.”⁶¹

The template for Roosevelt’s federal conservation policy formed while he was New York’s governor.⁶² In Albany, Roosevelt sought advice about public lands and wildlife, consulting experts he had met through his activities as an amateur naturalist. Gifford Pinchot, at the time America’s only university-trained forester, was the head of the new forestry bureau in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Roosevelt sought Pinchot’s advice initially to help him assess to guide New York’s wildlife and forest commission.⁶³ Governor Roosevelt also used Frederick Newell, a hydraulic engineer with the U.S. Geologic Survey. Newell’s strength, Roosevelt thought, was that he understood the relationship between forest management and water resources.

Pinchot and Newell were at Roosevelt’s side as he entered the presidency, meeting with him on the first day he returned to Washington as president. The new president sought advice from the two experts about launching federal conservation policy. Pinchot pressed on Roosevelt a plan to make the forest bureau fully responsible for management of the national forests.⁶⁴ Newell promoted to Roosevelt his conception of a national irrigation policy for the arid lands.⁶⁵ Roosevelt embraced both proposals for his first annual message.

⁶⁰ William C. Chase, The American Law School and the Rise of Administrative Government (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p. 10.

⁶¹ Theodore Roosevelt, Autobiography, p. 429.

⁶² Theodore Roosevelt, Autobiography, p. 313.

⁶³ Entry for November 27, 1899, Diary, Papers of Gifford Pinchot, Library of Congress.

⁶⁴ Letter, Gifford Pinchot to Henry L. Stimson, September 27, 1901, Theodore Roosevelt—1901, Box 84, Papers of Gifford Pinchot, Library of Congress

⁶⁵ Theodore Roosevelt, Autobiography, p. 429.

The transformation of forest administration was more difficult for Roosevelt to achieve than was reclamation policy. Centralized management of forest policy frightened western lumber interests with the likelihood that their use of the national forests would be limited. When Roosevelt entered the presidency there were 50 million acres in national forest reserves. These had been established by executive orders, under authority of the Forest Reserve Act of 1891.⁶⁶ The forest reserves were drawn from the public domain and offered minimum protection from unlimited exploitation. The 1891 act contained no provision for administration of the reserves, and they remained in control of the interior department's general land office. Mapping the reserves was the geological survey's responsibility. The agriculture department's forest bureau's role was limited to recommendations for the maintenance of the reserves.

In 1902 Congress rejected Roosevelt's request to reorganize the forests. Pinchot then launched a public campaign among westerners for the change. Meanwhile, Roosevelt continued to press Congress for forest reorganization. In the process, Roosevelt and Pinchot worked symbiotically regarding western politics, ranging beyond forest issues. For example, Pinchot worked up information and language for the addresses Roosevelt would give while touring western states in late spring 1903. Roosevelt later told Pinchot that he was the only person who had given him substantial preparation for the speeches.⁶⁷

Roosevelt's goal of forest reorganization was realized with the Forest Transfer Act in early 1905.⁶⁸ It gave full jurisdiction over the forest reserves to Pinchot's bureau of forestry and renamed it the U.S. Forest Service. After that success, Pinchot's service for Roosevelt broadened. A most notable example of that expanded service involved Roosevelt's highly innovative six presidential commissions. Roosevelt acknowledged that Pinchot was the source of the idea for all the commissions, and he was also a member of all six.⁶⁹

Another of Pinchot's support roles for Roosevelt's leadership is evident in a most notable policy coup. In 1907 an amendment was added to the agricultural appropriations bill that would abolish the president's authority to create national forests on any public lands within six northwestern states. Unwilling to veto the appropriation bill, Roosevelt turned to Pinchot for a wish list of potential national forests in these states. Pinchot prepared the order for the president,

⁶⁶ U.S. Stat. L, 26; Paul Russell Cutright, p. 216.

⁶⁷ Entry, June 7, 1903, Diary, Papers of Gifford Pinchot, Library of Congress.

⁶⁸ 33 Stat. L. 628.

⁶⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, *Autobiography*, p. 402.

moving virtually all of those forest tracts of the public domain into protected national forest status. Roosevelt issued the executive order just before signing into law the appropriation bill that also abolished the authority he had just used to create 16 million acres of new national forests.⁷⁰ Roosevelt recognized that Pinchot meant more for his administration than just an effective forest service. As he left the White House, Roosevelt wrote to Pinchot: “For seven and a half years we have worked together, and now and then played together; and I owe to you a peculiar debt of obligation for a very large part of the achievement of this administration.”⁷¹

Analyzing Roosevelt’s Strategic Resource Acquisition

Roosevelt used primarily two resources in the conservation case. First, he depended on the expert knowledge of public officials, and second, he depended on publicity. In the preceding profile of Roosevelt’s conservation initiatives, the role of Roosevelt’s advisers is prominent. And what is notable about these advising relationships is that they did not conform to the characteristic profile of advising in the traditional presidency—cabinet-members, members of Congress, leaders of the president’s party, and business leaders. And, traditionally, presidents reached for information resources through these advisers on an ad hoc basis, what Matthew Dickinson terms a “spot market.”⁷² The transaction costs for this kind of advising was very high, and the range and quality of information that the president could acquire through those traditional advising relationships was limited.

Roosevelt’s primary solution to incongruity in his conservation policy was to establish what I have termed elsewhere a proto-staff.⁷³ Roosevelt’s relationships with Pinchot and Newell had little by the way of formal, hierarchical control and none of the organizational apparatus that would appear later in the presidency. By identifying experts within the federal establishment whose specialized information could inform the president’s policy priorities, Roosevelt secured a kind of information that was unobtainable from traditional sources of presidential advising. And, at the same time, Roosevelt established a continuing advising

⁷⁰ Theodore Roosevelt, Autobiography, p. 440.

⁷¹ Letter, Theodore Roosevelt to Gifford Pinchot, March 2, 1909, Roosevelt-1909, Box 714, Papers of Gifford Pinchot.

⁷² Matthew J. Dickenson, “Neustadt and New Institutionalists: A New Insight on Presidential Power?” Unpublished paper, Harvard University, May 15, 2000, at: www.cbrss.harvard.edu/events/ppbw/papers/dickinson.pdf

⁷³ For an application of this argument to Roosevelt’s policy initiative in another area, see Peri E. Arnold, “Policy Leadership in the Progressive Presidency: The Case of Theodore Roosevelt’s Naval Policy and His Search for Strategic Resources,” Studies in American Political Development, vol. 10, no. 2 (Fall 1996), pp. 333-359.

relationship with those sources of expert information, greatly reducing transaction costs for his advice and information. As public officials, Gifford Pinchot and Frederick Newell were at least nominally subordinate to the president. More important, their advising relationships with Roosevelt were symbiotic; they were tied to the president's agenda by their own preferences.

Publicity was Roosevelt's second strategic resource to overcome incongruity.⁷⁴ In his annual messages he stressed conservation's priority, elevating natural resources issues to a new level of federal concern. Pinchot and Newell were constant spokesmen for the president's program, publicizing it in professional and trade arenas as well as broadcasting support for it to westerners. A crucial piece of Roosevelt's publicity strategy for conservation issues was his use of ad hoc public bodies to broadcast versions of the conservation message.⁷⁵

Roosevelt aimed to expand public awareness of conservation. On his own authority, he established four commissions to study conservation-related matters and recommend policy and administrative initiatives. The first of these was the public land commission, created by the president in 1903. Its mission was to study and recommend improvements in the administration of public land. In 1907 the president created the inland waterways commission with the mission of examining the development of water resources and recommending means for more efficient use of water resources. In 1908 Roosevelt formed his third group to focus on conservation, the commission on country life. Its assignment was to recommend means for preserving an agriculturally grounded country life in a time of rapid industrialism and expanding cities. As Morton Keller wrote of that commission, it "showed how intertwined were the themes of preservation and land use."⁷⁶ Later in 1908 Roosevelt created a national conservation commission. Simultaneously, Roosevelt called a national conference on the conservation of natural resources which met at the White House in May 1908. In announcing the plan for the conference, Roosevelt said, "the conservation of natural resources is the fundamental problem. To solve it the whole nation must undertake the task through" through state governments and through federal government.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ For an overview of Roosevelt's use of the press, see John Tebbel and Sarah Miles Watts, The Press and the Presidency: From George Washington to Ronald Reagan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 318-349.

⁷⁵ See Stephen Ponder, "Publicity in the Interest of the People," Theodore Roosevelt's Conservation Crusade, Presidential Studies Quarterly, vol. 20, no. 3 (September 1990), 547-555.

⁷⁶ Morton Keller, Regulating a New Economy, p. 159.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Paul Russell Cutright, Theodore Roosevelt: The Making of a Conservationist (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1985), p. 228.

The White House natural resource conference gave conservation a “center court” forum. Among those attending were the governors of all the states, Supreme Court justices, members of Congress, representatives of learned societies and prominent experts on conservation and natural resources. In the conference’s wake, thirty-six of the states created conservation commissions, scientific organizations established conservation agendas for their work, and Roosevelt initiated yet another presidential study group, the national conservation commission. Paul Cutright wrote that the White House conference “gave the conservation movement a prestige and momentum previously unknown . . .”⁷⁸

Roosevelt’s conservation initiative was markedly successful. It was successful in the accomplishment of specific policy goals, creating federal reclamation policy, reorganizing and expanding national forests, and initiating coordinated federal water policy. An even more important kind of success in the longer run is a president’s ability to stamp his policy conception on an issue, controlling its definition in public discourse.⁷⁹ And, Roosevelt’s conception of conservation became the dominant way Americans understood natural resources and public lands.

Finally, how did Roosevelt acquire the resources through which he achieved policy success? As I suggest above, it is in this question that we expect to find a connection of the presidency’s structural characteristics in the Progressive Era and the incumbent’s personal characteristics.

I proposed that four personal characteristics affect the incumbent’s capacity for strategic analysis. The first of these is professional expertise, and I hypothesized that the incumbent will most easily discern and use those resources that are closest to his professional experience. And the Roosevelt’s conservation initiative lends support to that hypothesis. Roosevelt’s career background prepared him to use executive branch expertise. Roosevelt was a different breed of politician than were his major competitors in national politics. He was more a product of reformed public administration than he was a person of the party organization. His first national post was appointment to the U.S. Civil Service Commission. Then he served as police commissioner in New York City, stressing administrative reform and increased competency. Back to the national stage, he served as assistant navy secretary. Through these

⁷⁸ Paul Cutright, p. 229.

administrative experiences Roosevelt learned to appreciate and use the expertise of public officials. It was consistent with those experiences that in the presidency Roosevelt would turn to officials with information salient to his purposes.

Also, in his pre-presidential public career Roosevelt acquired a brilliant talent for self-promotion and issue definition. The rise of the mass distribution, pictorial newspaper and mass-market magazines created new possibilities for the construction of public personalities.⁸⁰

Roosevelt used the new commercial press to turn himself into a public person who was widely known and admired. For example, as New York police commissioner, with reporters at hand, he would himself stalk the roughest neighborhoods at night to ferret out criminals and detect police laxity. The final touch in Roosevelt's construction of his public image was the "Rough Riders" and his self-conscious heroism on in the Spanish American War. As The Nation wrote, in linking Roosevelt's presidency to his wartime celebrity, "his military prominence won him, by steps needless to enumerate, the place he now occupies."⁸¹ He was the self-made, "first great American hero of a new age of mass media."⁸²

The second personal quality I suggest as relevant to strategic analysis is the incumbent's orientation to reform. Reform orientation is an indicator of the president's propensity towards innovation and independent action. To take an independent policy initiative against the grain of presidential norms would require that the incumbent have a preexisting inclination to seek change. Thus, I hypothesize a relationship between the degree of a president's commitment to reform, or change, and his likelihood of seeing strategic resources as relevant to his purposes.

Theodore Roosevelt's general political orientation fits that hypothesis. Throughout his public life he maintained a Janus-faced relationship between party regularity and reform. As Stephen Skowronek characterizes his stance in the presidency, he was an orthodox-innovator.⁸³ There is another sense in which Roosevelt had a propensity for reform regarding natural resources. He was inclined to this direction by his own avocational interest in natural sciences.

⁷⁹ Daniel E. Ponder, Good Advice: Information and Policy Making in the White House (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2000), p. 16.

⁸⁰ John Tebbel and Sarah Miles Watts, The Press and the Presidency: From George Washington to Ronald Reagan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 318-348.

⁸¹ "President McKinley's Death," The Nation, Vol. 73 (September 19, 1901), 218.

⁸² Bruce Miroff, Icons of Democracy American Leaders as Heroes, Aristocrats, Dissenters, and Democrats (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 158.

⁸³ Stephen Skowronek, The Politics Presidents Make, p. 228-233.

Thus he was the first president to be able to knowledgeably think about the relationship of forests to water conservation, to protection from soil erosion, and ultimately, to the vitality of rural life.

The third personal characteristic I connect to strategic analysis is ability to identify and acquire policy salient information. I hypothesize that in a presidency lacking institutional support for advising, an incumbent's ability to garner salient information is related to that president's proclivities and past patterns of social networking.

Theodore Roosevelt's habits of sociability and intellectual curiosity fit well with that hypothesis. He was extraordinarily gregarious and habitually reached out to interesting people, continually expanding his circle of acquaintances. In contrast to the proclivities of most of his peers in professional politics, Roosevelt's conducted his White House social life as something of an intellectual salon. John Morton Blum wrote that "he knew "how to solicit and accept advice. He invited to the White House poets and authors, inventors and explorers, economists There came doers as well as theorists . . . all of whom Roosevelt probed fore information and ideas."⁸⁴

The fourth personal characteristic affecting resource acquisition is the president's inclination towards a "bully pulpit." It is primarily through his own rhetoric that the president could turn public sentiment towards his policy initiative. A necessity for successful leadership is the president's ability to define the public's understanding of the issues. Roosevelt's actions in pursuance of conservation policy demonstrated a strong inclination towards public teaching. Of course, "bully pulpit" is his phrase, and Roosevelt was wholly comfortable using a wide range of communication possibilities, from his informal press conferences through speeches to his formal congressional messages to advocate his position. Furthermore, he directed those, in government and without, who supported his policy initiative to join in a campaign of public persuasion. Thus, Roosevelt's behavior offers a close fit with the hypothesized relationship concerning public sentiment.

Taft and Tariff Reduction

William Howard Taft's initiative for tariff reform invites a comparison with Roosevelt's conservation initiative. A promise to reduce overall the rates of the existing, highly protectionist, Dingley tariff was a strong note in Taft's presidential campaign. It was also a promise that parted company with a traditional Republican party commitment. Tariff reform was an explosive issue

⁸⁴ John Morton Blum, *The Progressive Presidents* (New York: Norton, 1980), p. 28.

for Republicans. John Gerring writes: “National Republicans from the age of Clay to the age of Hoover were solidly on the side of ‘Protection,’ as it was fondly called, creating one of the most consistent and enduring partisan issue-divisions in American history.”⁸⁵ Consequently, tariff reduction marked the fault line between the party's "stand-pat" conservatives and its insurgents. It was the Republican conservatives that solidly controlled Congress. However dissatisfaction with high rates of the Republican protective tariff was abroad in the land. Radical tariff revisionists attacked the Dingley tariff as a protective measure which spawned “trusts” and unfair prices. At the same time, moderate reformers sought reduced tariffs with an eye towards expanding international trade and opening world markets to the dynamic American economy.⁸⁶ Roosevelt had recognized a growing demand for tariff reform among his progressive supporters; and after the 1904 election he initiated discussion with congressional leaders about tariff reform. His inquiry met strong opposition, and Roosevelt decided that tariff reform could not be productively addressed within his party. He wrote: "I feel sure that Congress ought to revise the tariff, not so much from any economical need as to meet the mental attitude of the people; but it is not an issue upon which I should have any business to break with my party or with Congress . . ."⁸⁷

In part because of Roosevelt’s choice to avoid tariff reform, that issue rose in importance by 1908 for parts of the business community as well as progressive reformers. And Taft promised to achieve what Roosevelt had avoided, making that a central commitment of his campaign. In his speech accepting the 1908 Republican nomination, Taft said: “The tariff in a number of schedules exceeds the difference between the cost of production of such articles abroad and at home The excess over that difference . . . offers a temptation to those who would monopolize the production and the sale of such articles this country.”⁸⁸ Thus Taft began his campaign with a heterodox position on tariff policy.

Taft's commitment to lead his party to abandon its high tariff orthodoxy was courageous. At the same time, that commitment begged the question of how he would accomplish what

⁸⁵ John Gerring, “Party Ideology in America: The National Republican Chapter, 1828-1924,” Studies in American Political Development, 11 (Spring 1997), 57.

⁸⁶ Paul Wolman, Most Favored Nation: The Republican Revisionists and U.S. Tariff Policy, 1897-1912 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992, chap. 1.

⁸⁷ Theodore Roosevelt to James Ford Rhodes, November 29, 1904, Elting Morison (ed.), The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt, Vol. 3, p. 1049. Morison suggests that Roosevelt raised the tariff issue with Congress as a bargaining instrument, gaining support for railroad legislation in trade for abandoning the quest for tariff reform. p. 1028.

⁸⁸ David H. Burton (ed.), The Collected Works of William Howard Taft, vol. 3, p. 16.

Roosevelt feared could not be accomplished successfully for the party. In his speech accepting the nomination, Taft also promised that after his inauguration he would call Congress into special session for the purpose of tariff revision. At least superficially, the 1908 Republican platform seemed to support Taft's own policy initiative. It stated "unequivocally for a revision of the tariff by a special session of Congress," and the platform also embraced the principle that tariff rates ought to reflect relative costs of production here and abroad.⁸⁹ Subsequent events would demonstrate the hollowness of the Republican promise of tariff reform. Henry Pringle said of that platform language that it was cynical and that the Republican congressional leaders had no intention of reducing tariffs.⁹⁰ In contrast, Taft was clearly committed to revising tariffs downward and repeatedly said so during the campaign.

In his inaugural address Taft became the first Republican president ever to support reductions of tariff rates.⁹¹ He announced that tariff reform is "a matter of most pressing importance . . ." He continued on to explain that the tariff's purpose was to "secure an adequate revenue" and to equalize the costs of production between American goods and imported goods. These principles, he claimed, will "permit the reduction of rates . . ."⁹² Additionally, Taft described the tariff's proper purpose as revenue, committing the grave sin of turning away from Republican theology of protection while embracing the Democratic party's conception of proper tariff policy.

Taft's Reformed Tariff Policy

Taft called Congress into special session on March 15, 1909, demanding that it focus on tariff reform. The special session created the arena in which Taft would have to demonstrate his capacity to leverage congressional preferences with his own political resources. That Roosevelt had avoided tariff reform suggests that he possessed a sense of the limits of his own strategic resources in addressing that issue. As events would reveal, Taft had less skill at resource acquisition than did Roosevelt.

As Taft prepared for the special session he considered the possibilities of overthrowing the imperious speaker, Joseph Cannon (R-IL). Cannon had vehemently opposed mention of tariff reform in the 1908 platform and thought the idea smacked of "the Democratic tariff for

⁸⁹ Kirk H. Porter and Donald Johnson, National Party Platforms, p. 158.

⁹⁰ Henry Pringle, The Life and Times of William Howard Taft, vol. 1 (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1939), p. 421.

⁹¹ Paolo Coletta, The Presidency of William Howard Taft, p. 57

⁹² David H. Burton, The Collected Works of William Howard Taft, vol. 3, pp. 45-46.

revenue and anti-trust rhetoric.”⁹³ Taft met with insurgent congressmen who sought Cannon's defeat in the organization of the new Congress. However, in a sudden shift, confounding reform-minded Republicans, Taft struck a deal with Cannon. After a meeting with Cannon and Senator Nelson Aldrich (R-RI), the “stand pat” Senate majority leader, Taft gained the promise that they would support tariff reform. Taft then announced publicly that he supported Cannon's reelection to the speakership.⁹⁴ Taft later wrote to one of the House insurgents explaining his decision: “I think I can accomplish what we desire, and that is such rules in the House as will prevent Cannon's blocking the legislation”⁹⁵

Taft's choice to cooperate with the Republican congressional leadership was an instrumental decision to use conservative politicians to reach progressive goals. Despite the liberals' dismay, Taft's actions were reasonable. He could count votes, and it was clear that the House Republican insurgents by themselves did not have the numbers to overthrow Cannon.⁹⁶ Also, Theodore Roosevelt's own earlier advice to Taft suggested that cooperation was possible with the conservatives. In a February 1903 letter to Roosevelt, Taft had criticized those conservatives. Roosevelt answered: “You are unjust to Senator Aldrich. My experience . . . has made me feel respect and regard for Aldrich . . . who, together with men like the next Speaker of the House, Joe Cannon, are the most powerful factors in Congress.”⁹⁷ What the tactical choice to work with Cannon and his peers accomplished was to limit Taft's range of options. The insurgents felt betrayed, and the old guard held a strong hand once Cannon managed to shake-off the challenge to his speakership.

The tariff bill worked through both houses of Congress between April and August of 1909, and Taft signed the Payne-Aldrich tariff act at the Capitol on August 6th. The new law was arguably a real revision. On average it slightly lowered rates from the record high levels of the Dingley tariff act. While keeping rate setting firmly in congressional hands, the law gave to the president discretion to raise rates by 25 percent of the value of an imported article if it was shown that its country of origin was discriminating against U.S. goods. The law also established a tariff commission to gather and analyze data relevant to relative costs of production and the

⁹³ Quoted in Paul Wolman, *Most Favored Nation*, p. 93.

⁹⁴ Donald F. Anderson, *William Howard Taft*, p.96-104.

⁹⁵ Taft to Joseph L. Bristow, quoted in Donald F. Anderson, p. 100.

⁹⁶ Paolo Coletta, *William Howard Taft*, p. 58-60.

⁹⁷ Letter, Roosevelt to Taft, March 19, 1903, in Elting Morison (ed.), *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* vol 3 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U. Press, 1952), p. 453.

effects of tariff rates. Finally, the law also included a modest tax on corporation incomes. And Taft was particularly pleased that in the end he had won on several issues to which he had given high priority. He demanded and got a large reduction in the rates set by the legislation for lumber and gloves. And he succeeded in retaining through final passage the provision for corporate taxation.⁹⁸ Yet, the reality that would shape the politics of the Payne-Aldrich act was that the public saw its reductions as too small and covering too few products.

Taft's Role in Tariff Reform

Tariff reduction was Taft's foremost concern as Congress worked on the Payne-Aldrich tariff bills in spring and summer of 1909. Indeed, it was not for lack of the president's attention that the resulting Payne-Aldrich act was politically harmful to the president and his party.

Taft had made a strong case for downward revision of the tariff in his inaugural address, and he opened Congress's special session with a short message stressing the issue's importance. Taft did not reiterate his inaugural's stress on the principles of comparability of production costs and the tariff for revenue. Instead, he told Congress that it was "not necessary . . . to repeat what I then said."⁹⁹ But the message did raise a new and pressing prospect that was pertinent to the tariff's place in U.S. fiscal policy. Taft announced that the current tariff no longer supplied sufficient income to pay for government's expenses.¹⁰⁰ This was a far cry from a couple of decades earlier when, as Morton Keller, noted: "The most pressing fiscal problem of the 1880s was the large revenue surplus generated by rising tariff receipts."¹⁰¹ The punch line of Taft's message to Congress was the news of the tariff's inadequacy for supplying government's fiscal needs. If the tariff was no longer adequate to supply a fiscal surplus to government, then the options facing Congress in its tariff revision were stark. Either the Republicans could follow their traditional inclinations and raise tariff rates to even higher levels. Or, the party could break with its past commitments and effect tariff reduction while also accepting the need for some form of federal taxation to make up for the fiscal slack. Thus, even this brief message to Congress implied a stark demand, and it suggested that the Republican party's long time commitment was no longer adequate for government's fiscal needs or the American economy's health.

⁹⁸ Paolo Coletta, William Howard Taft, pp. 68-70.

⁹⁹ David H. Burton, The Collected Works of William Howard Taft, vol. 3, p. 57.

¹⁰⁰ David Burton, p. 56.

As part of his deal with Cannon and Aldrich, Taft agreed to remain on the sidelines as the committees of each house worked to produce bills. They advised Taft that it was the conference stage at which he should weigh in with his recommendations regarding the legislation.¹⁰² However, Taft may have not understood that to leave to the committees in each house the discretion to set tariff rates was to submit to eventual rates that would be within the ranges established by the respective House and Senate bills. By tradition, the conference committees on tariff bills took the rates within the bills of the two houses set as creating the lower and upper limits for rates on specific items, negotiating a rate between the two. In his biography of Taft, Donald F. Anderson wrote: "Taft cannot be completely blamed for having adopted this strategy . . . he possessed only superficial information about the tariff."¹⁰³ Taft's contemporary, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge had that same view. He wrote to Theodore Roosevelt at the time of Taft's call for the special session that: "Taft wants a tariff that will strike the country favorably . . . but knows little of the question . . ."¹⁰⁴

While Taft had found Cannon and Aldrich initially amenable to supporting tariff reform, he was wary enough of his partners in reform to want to communicate to them during the spring that unacceptable legislation would cause a veto. In conversations and correspondence during the spring, the president was quick to mention his concerns about the congressional leaders and his willingness to veto an unacceptable tariff bill. An early instance of that behavior was a conversation Taft had with his navy secretary on April 4, 1909. In the hearing of his military aide, Archie Butt, the president told Secretary Meyer that he distrusted Aldrich's intentions and that he would readily veto a bad bill. Reflecting on Taft's language, Butt observed that he "does not hesitate to tell each person he meets that he does not fear to veto a bill . . . I think he is giving it out . . . so as to frighten the high tariff people . . ."¹⁰⁵.

The House's eventual tariff bill passed by a vote of 217 to 161 on April 9th. It was, in fact, a shift from past Republican practice. Representative Sereno Payne (R-NY) chaired the ways and means committee and was a strong protectionist. But, like Cannon, he was willing

¹⁰¹ Morton Keller, Affairs of State Public Life in Late Nineteenth Century America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977). p. 381.

¹⁰² Paolo E. Coletta, The Presidency of William Howard Taft, p. 61.

¹⁰³ Donald F. Anderson, William Howard Taft, p. 105.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Judith Icke Anderson, William Howard Taft (New York: Norton, 1981) p. 179.

¹⁰⁵ Archie Butt, Taft and Roosevelt: The Intimate Letters of Archie Butt (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1930), p. 40.

now to moderately reduce some tariffs. The House bill dealt with about 4000 imported products and raised the rates on about 75 of these while reducing rates on another 400 items.¹⁰⁶

As the Senate took up the tariff legislation Taft chose a more aggressive stand than he had used while the House worked. He advised progressive Republican senators to stand up strongly for reform in their body. He told Senator La Follette (Rep.-WI) that he and his colleagues should “amend the bill, cut down the duties . . . I will keep track of your amendments . . . and when they lay that bill down before me, unless it complies with the platform, I will veto it.”¹⁰⁷ Additionally, Taft used White House hospitality in an attempt to exert his influence on the Senate. Archie Butt observed that Taft “intends . . . to use the White House as a means to an end.”¹⁰⁸ And in late spring and the summer till August 2nd, Taft breakfasted and dined with members of the Senate to make his case for reduced rates.

While Taft immersed himself in continuing consultation with Senators and then the conference committee’s members, representatives of industries seeking to retain high rates beset him. One consequence of the president’s deep involvement in what had been a wholly congressional policy process was that he too was pulled into the log rolling politics of tariff making. As the conference committee’s work came near an end, Taft expressed confidence in the intent of the congressional leaders to achieve real reform. In a letter to his wife on July 11th he said of Cannon: "He is rather hard to get down to definite views, but I don't think he is obstinate."¹⁰⁹ About the Senate's majority leader, Nelson Aldrich, Taft observed in the same letter, he "will look at the matter largely from my standpoint, and he will not hold out to the uttermost." A week later Taft again asserted in a letter to his wife that he trusted the Republican congressional leaders, but his language also conveyed some self doubt: "What I am anxious to do is to get a bill passed that I can defend. I am dealing with very acute and expert politicians, and I am trusting a great many of them and I may be deceived; but on the whole I have the whip hand."¹¹⁰

Congress finally passed the conference committee's bill in early August and Taft immediately signed it. Taft celebrated the act as a triumph for his leadership. He welcomed the

¹⁰⁶ Paolo E. Coletta, The Presidency of William Howard Taft, p. 62.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Paolo Coletta, p. 63.

¹⁰⁸ Archie Butt, Taft and Roosevelt, p. 63.

¹⁰⁹ Letter, Taft to Nellie Taft, July 11, 1901, Papers of William Howard Taft, Series 7, (microfilm edition), Library of Congress.

¹¹⁰ Letter, Taft to Mrs. Charles Taft, July 18, 1909, Papers of William Howard Taft.

act for its reductions of rates on a number of items. And he prided himself on the act's inclusion of a corporate income tax, which he had forced on a resistant Republican congressional leadership.¹¹¹ However, public evaluations of presidential leadership do not work with such nuance. The problem for Taft was that his success in tariff policy was very modest, and his claim for success was large. And it was in the public perception of the gap between his claim and the reality of the legislation that the president lost control of the tariff issue. But that was not for his attempting to control the issue's definition in public discourse and political perceptions.

After vacationing at his summer home in Beverly, Massachusetts, Taft set out on a speaking tour to defend Payne-Aldrich. At the early stops of the tour he praised the Republican congressional leaders and the new tariff act. In Boston in mid-September he heaped praise on Senator Aldrich for his leadership on financial policy. Then at Winona, Minnesota on September 17th he escalated his claims of success. He said of Payne-Aldrich that it was "the best tariff bill that the Republican party every passed."¹¹² And he praised Representative Tawney (Rep.-MN) who was under attack in his Minnesota district for his positive vote for the tariff bill. Despite Taft's best rhetorical efforts, he was not able to control the definition of the Payne-Aldrich tariff bill in public discourse. Instead of being defined in Taft's terms as, on the whole, a success, the Payne-Aldrich act was painted by much of the press, Republican progressives, and many Democrats as a victory for "standpatism" and a defeat for Taft's promise of real reform. It is a clue to Taft's inability to understand public sentiment that he thought his speaking tour was a great success. He drew large, friendly crowds, and thought that proved support for him and the Payne-Aldrich act. For example, Taft's military aide, Archie Butt, quoted Taft as finding the crowds of children who met him in Chicago as a confirmation of good feeling towards him: "We can sometime doubt the motives of adults, but the cheers of children are sincere."¹¹³ The reality was quite the opposite. About the outcome of Taft's efforts to convince the American people of his success in tariff reform, Paolo Coletta writes "while the people had generally upheld and praised him before his Winona address, they were now turning away from him . . ."¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Message to Congress, June 16, 1909, in David H. Burton, *The Collected Works of William Howard Taft*, vol. 3, p. 133. For Taft's planning of this tax initiative, see, letter, Herbert Knox Smith to Taft, July 19, 1909, case file 3, Papers of William Howard Taft, series 5.

¹¹² Richardson, *Messages*, XVII, p. 7783

¹¹³ Archie Butt, *Taft and Roosevelt*, vol. II, p. 198.

¹¹⁴ Paolo Coletta, *The Presidency of William Howard Taft*, p. 75.

Taft's goal in pursuing tariff reform was consistent with the claim that the Progressive Era constitutes a period of expanded presidential opportunities and challenges, for which Roosevelt's presidency offers an illustration of a successful response. In that respect, Taft's initiative was Rooseveltian. He articulated a policy goal that was independent of his party's commitments. In this case, Taft's failure is not a failure of ambition. It is not that Taft's leadership vision was small or "traditional." Rather, Taft's was a failure of politics; he failed to effect his policy goal. And that failure can be seen as a failure of strategic analysis.

There is solid evidence suggesting that Taft was frequently ill informed about, or misunderstood, the purposes of other actors in tariff making process. For example, as Congress was voting on the conference report, Taft dismissed the western and midwestern Republicans voting against the bill as simply a number of politicians "who felt that for home consumption they would have to vote against the bill."¹¹⁵ And those whose advice Taft was most attentive themselves possessed little by way of salient information. His closest political adviser was his brother, Charles Taft, a wealthy, Cincinnati newspaper publisher. Charles's own political naivete is demonstrated by his belief that he was the main cause of his brother's election, and he resented the suggestion that Theodore Roosevelt was responsible for Taft's nomination and election.¹¹⁶ As an example of what the president was receiving from his closest adviser, in the face of evidence that the Payne-Aldrich act would be widely criticized, Charles Taft wrote to the president right after he signed it: "We have all followed the course of the conference committee . . . I am tremendously proud of your success. I was confident you could turn the trick."¹¹⁷

Had Taft been more cautious in working with the Republican congressional leadership, and more aware of the political utility of information, he might have followed advice given him in late June that appears, in retrospect, far wiser than his guidance from his brother or wife. Illustrating the availability of more critical information than that which he received from his normal sources, an acquaintance of Taft's teaching at the Harvard Law School, J.D. Brannon, wrote Taft about the tariff bill. He told the president that many informed people saw the Senate's version as unfair. Brannon advised Taft that "to let such a bill . . . become law will be regarded as reactionary . . . and a surrender to the . . . interests against whom you have been

¹¹⁵ ¹¹⁵William Howard Taft to Charles Taft, August 1, 1909, Papers of William Howard Taft, Series 7, microfilm edition, Library of Congress.

¹¹⁶ Arche Butt, Roosevelt and Taft, vol. 2, pp. 102-104.

¹¹⁷ Charles Taft to William Howard Taft, August 3, 1909, Papers of William Howard Taft, series 7.

fighting with Roosevelt." He added: "It will be argued to you . . . that a veto would divide the party A veto would be applauded by the whole country and Congress would come back with a warrant from the people to stand by the President."¹¹⁸

Taft's Use and Misuse of Strategic Resources

Taft's tariff initiative was a strong progressive presidential initiative—Rooseveltian, one might say. But Taft's pursuit of his policy goal was badly flawed and resulted in only very modest substantive policy change while allowing opponents of Payne-Aldrich to dominate the issue discourse.

In the tariff case, Taft's seemed to rely on two kinds of strategic resources to effect his initiative. His primary reliance was upon actors beyond the institutional bounds of the presidency and executive branch, primarily, members of Congress. His secondary reliance was on resources at his command within the presidency, primarily the threat of the veto. As for the two other categories of resources, executive branch expertise and public sentiment, the evidence is that Taft gave little thought to either resource. He began pursuit of his policy initiative in March 1909 with little knowledge of tariff making, and there is no evidence that he sought to educate himself by reaching out to experts. Furthermore, having stimulated public expectations for tariff reform in his campaign and inaugural address, Taft then retreated from publicly advocating his version of tariff reform while Congress was at work. He delivered ten speeches, and published two long articles in McClure's, in the period between the start of the special session and signing the Payne-Aldrich act. One of his magazine articles explained Panama Canal construction, and the other decried political criticism of the judiciary. In none of the addresses or articles did Taft reiterate his tariff reform themes for the public. It is telling that Taft missed a natural opportunity for repeating his tariff policy aim in a suitably bi-partisan and elevated setting. On March 18, 1909 Taft spoke at a memorial service for former President Grover Cleveland. In his speech, Taft described Cleveland as standing for "an affirmative idea, that of a reduction of the tariff, so as to make it a tariff for revenue." But instead of using this opportunity to connect his policy initiative to Cleveland's "affirmative idea," Taft simply said that Cleveland's tariff views were "in accordance with the ancient traditions of [his] party."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ J.D. Brannan to William Howard Taft, June 29, 1909, Papers of William Howard Taft, series 7.

¹¹⁹ David H. Burton, The Collected Works of William Howard Taft, vol. 3, p. 60.

Throughout Congress' work on the Payne-Aldrich bill, Taft's effort to affect congressional decisions focused on members of Congress. Thus, the president chose to attempt to use a resource over which he had no control to effect his goals. The congressional leaders, with whom Taft dealt most consistently in that period, had little stake in fulfilling the president's goal. Furthermore, Taft posed no direct threat to them. Finally, their own policy commitments regarding tariffs were opposed to the president's. They had little incentive to cooperate with him.

Taft understood that he was putting great trust in the congressional leaders' apparent agreements to cooperate with him. Yet, he only half-heartedly gestured through the period to another resource that could have disciplined them and provided motivation for cooperation. Taft's veto power was wholly at his control, of course. But, when the conference committee was at its final stage of work, and when Taft might have shifted the final bill towards more reductions, he shied away from threatening a veto. He feared such a veto would split the party and alienate Congress.¹²⁰ As he had explained to his friend John Hammond, "I could veto this . . . bill. Perhaps such an action would make me popular . . . but it would mean a hostile Congress for the rest of my term."¹²¹ Thus, at that critical stage of the conference committee the success of Taft's policy initiative depended on the trustworthiness of the Republican congressional leaders. That Taft's faith was misplaced was demonstrated by Senator Aldrich's comment that he did not understand the party to be pledged to revision downward of the tariff.¹²²

How did Taft's personal characteristics affect his choices about strategic resources? I hypothesize that a president's professional expertise—education and career—affects the choices he makes about strategic resources. Taft's example provides support for this hypothesis, largely in the sense that his legal career into 1901 left him with few experiences that would be relevant to the strategic resources that were potentially available to a president. Taft had graduated law school in 1880 and for the next two decades was occupied with a legal and judicial career. In 1900 he became the first civil governor of the Philippines and returned to Washington in 1903 to become Roosevelt's secretary of war. Taft had very little experience with the game of politics; his only elective experience prior to the 1908 presidential election was a retention vote for the Ohio Superior Court. He had also had no administrative experience prior to taking his post in the

¹²⁰ Paolo Coletta, *The Presidency of William Howard Taft*, p. 68.

¹²¹ Quoted in Paolo Coletta, *The Presidency of William Howard Taft*, p. 70.

Philippines, and that experience as a colonial viceroy gave him little that was transportable to the domestic U.S. governmental arena.

Taft's legalist thinking was a compass orienting his view of strategic resources. He was insufficiently skeptical of congressional process because it was the machine that made law. He was inclined to a jaundiced view of his natural allies in the tariff fight—the Republican insurgents—because they were also prone to criticize judicial decisions. Taft's June 1909 McClure's article on "Judicial Decisions as an Issue in Politics" suggests that defense of judicial prerogative was a touchstone for him. In that article, he claimed that the Republican party's appeal in the 1908 election "against the weakening of the power of the court . . . was . . . as strong a vote-getting argument as the . . . party had in the late campaign."¹²³

A second personal characteristic relevant to strategic analysis is one's orientation toward reform. I hypothesize that the intensity of a president's personal commitment to policy change will affect his use of strategic resources for change. Taft's tariff reform initiative is a particularly interesting case in light of this hypothesis. In this instance Taft had made reform a major commitment of his early presidency. However, upon examination of the case, we notice that Taft was notably moderate, even in pursuit of his own policy initiative.

Taft began his acceptance speech for the presidential nomination with an embrace of reform. He said, "the strength of the Republican cause . . . is in the fact that represent the policies essential to the reform of known abuses . . ."¹²⁴ But Taft's idea of reform was constrained and legalistic. Looking back at Roosevelt's administration, Taft could see that reform had often been haphazard and even messy. But, Taft's vision of himself continuing the Rooseveltian commitment to reform was "to complete and perfect the machinery by which" Roosevelt's reforms could be institutionalized.¹²⁵ The tariff reform initiative shows Taft as a reformer with only lukewarm commitments to the reform process. He wanted tariff reform, but he was inclined not to pressure congressional leaders inordinately to get reform.

The third personal characteristic relevant to using strategic resources is a president's ability to identify and use information that is salient to his policy goal. I hypothesize that in a presidency lacking institutionalized staff resources, a president's access to information will be an

¹²² Paolo Coletta, The Presidency of William Howard Taft, p. 66.

¹²³ David H. Burton, The Collected Works of William Howard Taft, vol. 3, p. 130.

¹²⁴ David H. Burton, The Collected Works of William Howard Taft, vol. 3, p. 5.

¹²⁵ David H. Burton, p. 7.

effect of his established patterns of social and informational networking. And Taft's patterns of consultation and correspondence during the spring and summer of 1909 reveal a very narrow circle of informational contacts. In Washington, Taft's substantive interchanges about the tariff were limited primarily to members of Congress, and there is no evidence that Taft sought out either government or academic experts to educate him on tariff policy during that period. And his correspondence during the same period implies that Taft's major source of advising was members of his family, none of whom were skilled in policy or political matters. Paolo Coletta describes Taft's family centered propensities for advising: "He did not gather a broad sample of opinions . . . Mrs. Taft, his brothers Charles, and Henry, [along with] Aldrich and Cannon apparently gave Taft most of the advice he heeded"¹²⁶

During the course of tariff reform, Taft's most forthcoming and voluble correspondences about tariff issues and his work with Congress are with his brother Charles Taft, his wife Nellie, and his daughter Helen. He corresponded with them from Washington during the summer of 1909, as the conference committee worked on the tariff bill. What they gave Taft was emotional support and not useful information. Whereas Roosevelt had sought multiple sources of information in his correspondence and relationships, Taft seems to have sought comfort. Consequently, Roosevelt's personal style worked quite naturally as a means for acquiring strategic resources. In contrast to that, Taft's personal style insulated him from salient information. Therein was a central limitation in Taft's strategic analysis. He was committed to tariff reform, but he could not affect the legislative process of tariff making to produce what he had promised.

A fourth characteristic I hypothesize as relevant to one's assessment of strategic resources is a president's willingness to go public. Public appeals, directly or through relations with the press, are the most effective means for a president to affect public sentiment towards his priorities. To his disadvantage, Taft was not comfortable or skilled with the requirements for going public. His predilections in this regard were formed by personal discomfort with public speaking, his distrust of the press, and a fear that he would alienate Congress were he to advocate his position publicly. Taft had to look no farther than Theodore Roosevelt's presidency to observe the benefits of public communication for presidents. Yet, Taft almost systematically

¹²⁶ Paolo Coletta, The Presidency of William Howard Taft, p. 53.

reversed Roosevelt's practices of public communications. He ceased his predecessor's practice of frequent conversations with reporters and avoided them for the most part.¹²⁷

Taft was also uncomfortable with speechmaking. For all of his capacities as a craftsman of judicial opinions, as a speechwriter Taft was both clumsy and slothful. As he said to Archie Butt before setting out on his speaking tour in September 1909: "If it were not for the speeches, I should look forward with the greatest pleasure to this trip."¹²⁸ And during the trip Taft would put off writing his speeches until the last possible minute, resulting in poorly crafted language. His Winona, Minnesota speech defending the Payne-Aldrich act was a case in point. He intended to defend the act by explaining the way it was an improvement over earlier tariff acts. His speech was approximately 7,500 words in length. It was filled to an extraordinary degree with mind numbingly technical details about the tariff schedules. Paolo Coletta writes that in the speech Taft "revealed his lack of preparation in drafting . . . and ignorance of certain aspects of tariff making . . ."¹²⁹

Roosevelt, Taft and the Progressive Presidency

Taft is the problematic case for any attempt to understand Progressive Era presidential politics in terms other than personal idiosyncrasy. The challenge is to answer the question; in what respects does Taft's presidency exhibit factors that shaped his predecessor's presidency?

My pursuit of Taft has taken three, logically related steps. The first aim was to conceptualize the problem of resource acquisition by incumbents whose policy goals overreach the office's capacities. That conception provides the terms of analysis for comparing Roosevelt and Taft's policy initiatives. And the capacity of those terms to reveal Taft's responses to a Progressive agenda, in turn, implies a structure of presidential politics affecting Taft as well as Roosevelt.

The analysis offered here reveals Taft as president responding to a Progressive political context but lacking sufficient skills to acquire the resources to effect his policy initiative. Like Roosevelt's before him, Taft's goals were independent of party commitments and novel, but the means he chose to achieve those goals were insufficient. Those means—rhetorical restraint and

¹²⁷ See John Tebbel and Sarah Miles Watts, *The Press and the Presidency*, pp. 349-363.

¹²⁸ Archie Butt, Archie Butt, *Taft and Roosevelt*, p. 185.

¹²⁹ Paolo Coletta, *The Presidency of William Howard Taft*, p. 74.

a constrained circle of advisers--seem “traditional.” But to conceive of Taft as a “traditional” throwback after Roosevelt’s presidency is to miss what was new about his policy leadership and to misunderstand in what terms he was a failure. Taft’s leadership project failed, in 1912 if not earlier. But the criteria by which he failed were not those of the traditional presidency but rather, the criteria posed by a new, progressive presidency.¹³⁰

Comparing Roosevelt and Taft within a Progressive context, we can see that they faced similar challenges and opportunities. However, contrasting them, we find that one succeeds and one fails for reasons linked to personal style and skill characteristics. What is the value added by my analysis, beyond the conventional personalist explanations that I rejected at the paper’s outset? My aim is not to wholly dismiss personalist factors in favor of structural variables in explaining Progressive Era presidential leadership. Rather, I hope this paper demonstrates that personal factors must fit into a context—what I am calling a structure of politics—to be understood in shaping a president’s leadership. In effect, I envision an historical analysis of the presidency that merges Neustadtian analysis of personalist factors with Skowronek’s conception of context.

A last question, why did Taft not learn lessons of resource acquisition from Roosevelt? Conceivably, a successor might learn skills of resource acquisition from a predecessor’s example. However, the impulse for some differentiation by a successor from even a president of the same party might make such learning less likely. More important, the stark problem facing presidents as the structure of politics expanded presidential possibilities was that their coping with incongruence depended wholly on their personal skills and style. Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson also, had to invent their own ways of acquiring strategic resources to sustain their purposes. In this respect, learning was possible but unlikely because a predecessor’s model of resource acquisition was a solution formed from idiosyncratic capacities. It was that “under-institutionalization” of the office that was a barrier to a presidency of expanding activity and independence.

A presidency that was increasingly active and independent in the changing political structure of secular time was paradoxical. Its institutional capacities were at odds with

¹³⁰ The historian Martin J. Sklar, working from the framework of the Progressive Era presidents’ stances toward anti-trust, comes to a similar view regarding Taft’s fit within a Progressive political structure. See Sklar, The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 333-382.

expanding expectations of the office. Each incumbent would be faced anew with the challenge of construing and acquiring resources required for governance, some would improvise brilliantly, such as the first Roosevelt and Wilson, others, such as Taft and Hoover, would be less skillful improvisers and less capable of distancing themselves from the Republican regime's constraints.

Coda: Looking Forward from the Progressive Presidency

Looking forward towards modernity from the perspective of the Progressive presidents, the presidency's eventual institutionalization can be understood as a response to the paradox of great demands and few resources in the presidency. Establishing resources "on tap" within the presidency through institutionalization would greatly reduce the stark incongruity between goals and capacities that faced presidents prior to the era of institutionalization. In the standard developmental story of the modern presidency literature, presidents beginning with Franklin Roosevelt first institutionalized resources and then inexorably expanded those capacities over time. Alternatively, my story of the Progressive presidents implies a more contingent account of institutionalization and the "modern" presidency. In this story, the explanation of institutionalization, and change within it, would invoke presidents' strategic analyses as processes through which the elements of what would become institutionalization are identified and acquired. For example, Franklin Roosevelt's aim for the Brownlow committee, and the eventual establishment of the Executive Office, was not "institutionalization;" it was resource acquisition.¹³¹ Roosevelt's successors discovered both the utility of the routines and organizations he established and the adaptability of them to their uses.¹³² Thus, their impulses were rooted in individual efforts at acquiring resources while they were also expanding and institutionalizing practices and organization in the presidency. Finally, my story suggests a basis for a fundamental dilemma of the institutionalized, "modern," presidency. Has institutionalization, as a secular solution to presidents' needs for strategic resources become a straight jacket that while serving most presidents' resource needs, limits their uses of individual political skills to attain strategic resources while also insulating them from salient information?

¹³¹ I draw this insight from Matthew J. Dickinson, Bitter Harvest: FDR, Presidential Power and the Growth of the Presidential Branch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹³² Terry Moe, “The Politicized Presidency.”