"The Greatest Breakthrough of Anything":

Lyndon Baines Johnson's Push for the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in Light of Neustadt and Skowronek

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1. Introduction

Lyndon B. Johnson's drive for the enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 stands as a pinnacle accomplishment of his presidential tenure. Chronicled in the memoir of the former president, the period spanning from November 3rd, 1964, to August 6th, 1965, portrays LBJ's relentless dedication toward ensuring the passage of legislation that guaranteed African Americans' voting rights in the United States. This study commences from this pivotal juncture, scrutinizing LBJ's advocacy for the Voting Rights Act of 1965 through the lenses of two prominent theories in Political Science: Stephen Skowronek's Political Times Theory and Neustadt's doctrine on presidential persuasion. Ultimately, both frameworks offer valuable insights into comprehending LBJ's unwavering commitment to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, as he adeptly employed direct persuasion tactics during a crucial juncture of his presidency, pivotal for the bill's success.

Prior to delving into the discourse of this essay, an overview of pertinent literature in the field is warranted. The exploration will commence with an introduction to Skowronek's Political Times Theory (PTT), followed by an examination of Neustadt's theory concerning a persuasive president (PP). Additionally, the discussion will encompass the components of persuasion and elements that may hinder a persuasion attempt.

In the subsequent analysis section, LBJ's endeavor to secure the Voting Rights Act will be scrutinized through the prism of the aforementioned theories, with due consideration given to pivotal historical events such as the Selma to Montgomery march, which illuminate the milieu within which President Johnson operated. Within the framework of PTT, an examination of contemporaneous polls, media coverage, and prevailing sentiments regarding racial equality reveals that the political climate during LBJ's presidency distinctly facilitated his efforts toward the enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Similarly, within the ambit of PP, it becomes apparent that LBJ extensively employed persuasive tactics to achieve his desired legislative outcome. Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge that through the lens of PTT, this paper aims to offer a nuanced analysis of President Johnson's actions and motivations within a broader political and historical context. Similarly, with regard to PP, LBJ will be scrutinized, highlighting his wield of presidential authority while emphasizing his adeptness in persuasion and negotiation.

2. Literature Review

Skowronek's Political Times Theory is a foundational framework in Political Science. It revolves around the notion that a president's success is dependent on and tied to the period of time in which they were elected and assumed office. In his study, Peri Arnold explains that "Skowronek's argument contradicts the conventional, 'modern presidency' perspective in the study of presidential politics." This perspective treats presidents as facing essentially identical challenges within the same range of powers and limitation, with each president showing varying degrees of expertise in addressing these difficulties. Skowronek, on the other hand, suggests that each incumbent faces new challenges and have different tools compared to their predecessors or successors. Additionally, Arnold explains that, in Political Times, the "most immediate force

defining the political role that presidents will play is the sequential order they occupy within a presidential leadership regime," which is key to understand a president's role.⁴

In his book, Skowronek presents two theories: Political Times and Secular Times. In Political Times, the author divides a president into four archetypal categories in which they belong: reconstructive, disjunction, articulative, and pre-emptive. First, the "politics of reconstruction" happens when a president is affiliated with a weak regime. 5 On this reconstructive period, the president – and Congress – are opposed to the old regime, which is seen as an obstacle for their agenda. As examples, Skowronek cites Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt. Second, the "politics of disjunction" represents a president who is in an "impossible" situation of leadership by being affiliated with a weak regime. 8 The author explains that a president affiliated with a weak regime "stigmatize oneself as a symptom of the nation's problems and the premier symbol of systemic political failure," seeing in the likes of John Adams, John Quincy Adams, and James Buchanan. ⁹ Third, the "politics of articulation" occurs when a president is affiliated with a powerful regime. ¹⁰ For Skowronek, this is one of the most common types of leadership, being ideal for presidents who want to "continue the good work of the past and demonstrate the vitality of the established order in changing times," seen in James Monroe, James Polk, Theodore Roosevelt, and Lyndon Baines Johnson. 11 Lastly, the "politics of preemption" is seen when a president is unaffiliated with a strong regime. 12 These kinds of presidents go against the grain of the political tendencies of their time. On this, the author explains that "like all opposition leaders," they "have the freedom of their independence from established commitments," but lack authority to gather support for their "political, institutional, and ideological" ideas that the regime maintains. 13 As examples,

Skowronek cites John Tyler, Andrew Jackson, Woodrow Wilson, and Richard Nixon as preemptive leaders.¹⁴

On the "politics of articulation," Skowronek dedicates considerable attention to LBJ.

Describing him as a "master politician" whose narrative encapsulates a saga of extraordinary accomplishments marred by self-destruction atop the political hierarchy, Skowronek illuminates Johnson's role in shattering an overarching political consensus amidst a flurry of achievements, portraying a superpower dissipating its resources in a distant conflict with those on the fringes of modernity. He was, however, a special case. Skowronek elucidates that "Johnson was... one of the several presidents who... felt compelled to synthesize past and future... to affirm orthodoxy in the very act of transforming the nation," which really speaks to LBJ's ambition to continue JFK's legacy. For Skowronek, Johnson was a fusion of three other presidents: a "Monroe-like appeal to a truly overarching national consensus, a Polk-like determination to deliver on each and every commitment," and "the urge of Teddy Roosevelt to act himself like the founder of the regime."

Persuasion is critical for a president. Richard Neustadt's theory on the persuasive president focuses on informal aspects of the presidential power, pushing the narrative that a president must be a master of persuasion if they desire to achieve their goals in office in a consistently and practically. On persuasion, Neustadt explains that "the power to persuade is the power to bargain." It is important to note, however, that efficient persuasion techniques do not ensure successful outcomes. Furthermore, Neustadt shows that only being the chief of the Executive is not enough to guarantee any political success, since to command – invoking the inherent authorities of the office – is not enough. The author shows that there are five key factors that make sure a presidential order gets followed. If one of them is missing, however, it greatly

undermines compliance.²¹ The first is the "assurance that a President has spoken."²² Neustadt shows that orders given by "the man himself, and not only in form but very much in fact" leave no room for doubt on what the president desires.²³ If this first factor is absent, like on the dismissal of MacArthur where the "White House statement... was set aside," compliance crumbles.²⁴ The second is when a president is clear on what he is asking.²⁵ As a historical example, Neustadt alludes to Eisenhower's office, when "a week before the troops were sent to Little Rock, there is no doubt that Faubus knew it was the president who wanted something done."26 The third is direct publicity.²⁷ Here, Neustadt emphasizes the important role of a President informing the public of their actions. In either Little Rock or MacArthur, "the whole country was taken into camp, informed of the president's commitment, invited to watch the response."28 The fourth is when a president's request is actually possible to be followed and completed.²⁹ This, as Neustadt explains, leaves little room for excuses.³⁰ The fifth, is the sense that what the president wants "is his by right." In the seizure of the steel mills during Truman's administration, for example, "the steelworkers assumed... that [Truman] had ample constitutional authority to seize and operate the mills."32

Within the realm of persuasion, scholars are always consistently researching new methods, unveiling the intricate nature of the concept itself. In their study on Neustadt and its applicability to State Chiefs, Hill, and Jochim explain that merely issuing orders is an ineffective method of persuasion.³³ Instead, they advocate for the efficacy of bargaining and coalition-building in yielding optimal outcomes.³⁴ Jeffry Burnam further adds that "arms-twisting, trading favors," and so forth are also productive methods to ensure successful persuasion.³⁵ More importantly, however, scholars emphasize that whatever methods a president decides to use to become more persuasive, one must still rely on them since what matters the most is not the role

of the president per se, but "the performance of those roles." George Edwards, for example, makes it clear that presidential influence has many complex layers. In his paper, the author explains that a president needs to focus on both "governmental institutions and actors, such as the Congress, bureaucracy, and the White House staff," but also "those outside of government, such as the public, the press, and interest groups." For Edwards, the influence the president has inside the White House is as important as the one he has on the outside. 38

However, certain factors can impede a President's capacity to wield persuasion effectively. Mary Graham, for example, elucidates how technological advancements can be harmful to a President's bargaining capabilities.³⁹ Bailey et al. further add that presidential persuasion is actually a two-way street between him and Congress and not something that the president does alone.⁴⁰ Not only, but David Gerden, an advisor who worked for Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Clinton, believes that a president first needs to establish trust with its voters so that they can then persuade them.⁴¹ In an interview for the *Harvard Business Review*, Gerden explains that "people these days are less willing to defer to authority than they were... a halfcentury ago, partly because they're better educated and partly because in so many realms... they have been lied to and manipulated."⁴² Therefore, leaders cannot presume that people trust them from the start; their trust must be earned beforehand.⁴³

3. Analysis

The examination of Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency through the frameworks of the Political Times Theory and Neustadt's persuasion theory offers a nuanced and often intimate perspective on LBJ's achievements, particularly during the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In this analysis section, this paper will begin a discussion of President Johnson through Skowronek's PPT, pointing out the significance of the time LBJ became a president to his push –

and success – in passing the Voting Rights Act. Here, this paper will rely on two metrics. First, it will go over popular newspapers of the time and see how the Voting Rights Act – and overall voting inequality – was discussed while also addressing the significance of the Selma march in 1965. Second, it will rely on polls done at the time to measure the overall voter's perception of the fairness of the elections and the need for such a bill. Subsequently, the analysis will transition to an examination of LBJ through the lens of Neustadt's theory, delineating numerous instances wherein Johnson's persuasive acumen played a discernible role in shaping his presidency.

3.1 Political Times Theory and LBJ

The timing of Lyndon B. Johnson's assumption of the presidency holds profound significance when contextualizing the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Following the tragic assassination of President Kennedy and the rushed inauguration ceremony where LBJ was sworn in as President, nation found itself amidst a wave of demonstrations advocating for racial equality. Throughout 1964, numerous peaceful marches orchestrated by Civil Rights leaders underscored the urgency of addressing voting rights issues, with the escalation of violence drawing renewed attention to this pressing matter. One of the most important were the Selma marches, a pivotal turning point in the civil rights movement. Not only but because of the powerful impact of the marches in Selma, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was presented to Congress' on March, and then signed on August. In LBJ's words, the Act became his "immediate goal."

The Selma Marches of March 1965 in Selma, Alabama, stand as profoundly poignant events in American history. They took place throughout the month of March 1965 in Selma, Alabama, and were organized to protest African American's lack of access to a fair electoral system and the "racist structure of the Jim Crow South."⁴⁹ The inaugural march on March 7,

spearheaded by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), encountered staunch resistance from Alabama law enforcement at the Edmund Pettus Bridge.⁵⁰ As reported by Roy Reed, "Alabama state troopers and volunteer officers... tore through a column of Negro demonstrators with tear gas, nightsticks and whips... to enforce Gov. George Wallace's orders against a protest march."⁵¹ Leon Daniel reported that "600 Negro marchers" were seen bleeding and screaming through the streets of Selma," with 17 being taken to the Good Samaritan Hospital with injuries "ranging from a possible skull fracture and broken arms to hysteria.⁵²

The second march unfolded on March 9, with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. leading the group, which now counted with twice as many participants.⁵³ As the demonstrators reached the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they once again encountered Alabama troopers. However, in a stark departure from the preceding encounter, King opted for a peaceful resolution, guiding the assembly in prayer before retracing their steps to Selma.⁵⁴ It is important to note, however, that further violence was carried out that evening by members of the KKK, where Reverend James Reeb died from his injured.⁵⁵ The third, on March 21, departed from Brown Chapel AME church, and kept growing in numbers until March 25.⁵⁶ The violence, however, once again afflicted the group. Viola Liuzzo, for example, who had arrived from Detroit to Alabama, was killed by the KKK as the group was marching back to Selma.⁵⁷

Between the second and third marches, LBJ delivered one of his most iconic speeches. On March 15, 1965, after seeing the devastation of the first march, LBJ released a speech where he borrowed the language of the Civil Rights Act and tied it to American history. He began by explaining that he was there "for the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy," where his mission was to "right wrong, to do justice, serve man." LBJ explained that the U.S. "was the first nation on the history of the world to be founded with a purpose... 'All men are created

equal'... 'give me liberty of give me death." '60 "Those words," he said, "are not just clever words" or "empty theories," but a "promise." He further added that "to apply any other test — to deny a man his hopes because of his color or race,... is not only to do injustice, it is to deny America and to dishonor the dead who gave their lives for American freedom." Then, he laid ground for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 — and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 — by saying that "to those who seek to avoid action by their National Government... who want to and who see to maintain local control over elections, the answer is simple: Open your polling places to all your people..."

According to prominent newspapers and contemporary polls, the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 enjoyed widespread popularity among the American populace. Data from the Roper Center reveals that at the time of the Act's enactment, an overwhelming 86% of individuals surveyed expressed approval for a federal law mandating equal voting rights for African Americans.⁶⁴ In addition, 95% approved "that bill from what you know or have heard of it – voting rights for Negroes."65 While opinions on civil rights issues were somewhat mixed, a substantial portion of the population demonstrated solidarity with the civil rights groups involved in the events at Selma, as opposed to the stance taken by the state of Alabama. 66 As Andrew Kohut shows, a total of 48% of the interviewees sided with the demonstrators, with 95% of the black population interviewed supporting the movement.⁶⁷ Newspaper coverage also reflected the prevailing positive attitudes toward the Voting Rights Act. On May 26, 1964, the *Pittsburgh* Post-Gazette explained that "the refusal of a community to extend voting rights to all its citizens... arouses the conscience of concerned Americans everywhere."68 Moreover, Helen B. Shaffer reported that "the American Negro will have won virtually all of the battles he needed to win to gain legal backing for his claim to the rights and opportunities that are his due as a citizen

of the United States."⁶⁹ Shaffer, however, is conscious of the difficulties that such a thing represents, concluding by saying that "this phase presents more difficulties than the one it follows."⁷⁰ On the same positive note, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported that "the enactment of the Voting Rights Bill this year was one of our greatest milestones of progress in the determined march towards the goal of equal treatment and opportunity for all Americans."⁷¹ Echoing this sentiment, the *Chicago Daily Defender* explained that "it is imperative that every citizen be given the opportunity to vote on all questions… to deny this right will substantially weaken the fundamental strength of our nation."⁷²

3.2 Persuasion and LBJ

Persuasion emerged as a pivotal force in facilitating the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. By recognizing the moral imperative and shifting public sentiment towards equality, President Johnson skillfully employed his persuasive techniques to – in essence – get *his* desired outcome. By examining LBJ's diary, calls, and other documents that outline close interactions between him and his staff, it is possible to understand LBJ's persuasive techniques. While there were many instances where he relied on his team while still being an active president in their discussion, in other moments Johnson used his words – which sometimes could have very strong connotations – to pass his point across. This paper, then, will take all of these as its "meaning" for persuasion while also considering the essence of a persuasive technique, which is – in its core – to change how one thinks. This study will also discuss moments where Johnson's persuasion failed.

In his memoir, Lyndon B. Johnson's persuasive prowess had already become a hallmark of his leadership. On a public instance, Senator Russell acknowledged that "I have no doubt but that [the President] intends to throw the full weight of his powerful office and the full force of his

personality... to secure the passage of this program."⁷³ However, a closer examination of LBJ reveals a nuanced approach, where his words sometimes belied his actions in pursuit of his objectives. For example, on December 18, 1964, LBJ said during a meeting at the White House that "this voting thing is just going to have to wait" and "this administration is going to set this aside for a while."⁷⁴ His tapes, however, show the opposite. Four days before the meeting mentioned above, Johnson ordered Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach to 'undertake the greatest midnight legislative drafting" since the New Deal, and that he needed it "pretty quick."⁷⁵ On another conversation with Martin Luther King Jr. almost 2 months before the events in Selma, President Johnson was very careful when mentioning what he thought MLK should do. He explained that:

"I think it's very important that we not say that we're doing this... just because it's Negros or Whites, but we take the position that every person born in this country, when they reach a certain age, that he have a right to vote... and number two, we don't want *special* privilege for anybody."⁷⁶

On another, LBJ persuaded Roy O. Williams, when it came to the appointment of more African Americans to federal positions, that "you get me the top ones that are like Bob Weaver or like Carl Rowan." Moreover, during a conversation with Katzenbach revolving around the fact that "liberals are complaining that LBJ's voting rights bill is not strong enough," especially when it comes to "critics who say that he should have included a measure banning local poll taxes," which would be unconstitutional. This prompted LBJ to respond by saying "Why don't we get somebody up there to offer a constitutional amendment resolution?... I would sure put them on the spot." LBJ was also incredibly assertive with the Attorney General during this conversation, saying:

"Let's get some of this political image off of us... We're not running for any office. You don't even have to be elected to nothing. You already made it... Now, on this [voting rights] bill up there... I want fifty-fifty... but I damn sure don't want to be in the second car in the caravan"80

Johnson's private conversations offer a glimpse into a leader who valued input and relied heavily on his team while maintaining a firm resolve in pursuing his objectives. While Johnson often took decisive actions independently, documented interactions with the President underscore his profound appreciation for his team's counsel and expertise. In a conversation with Katzenbach, for example, after a short discussion, LBJ asks Katzenbach, "Now, what do we do about our pickets at Justice and across the White House?"81 On another, shortly after Selma, LBJ asked Katzenbach, "did we take every precaution we could have?" LBJ's memoir also provides us with many other examples. Related to the drafting of the Voting Rights bill, LBJ wrote that by March 14, "the Justice Department had completed most of its work on" the bill... What was the best way to transmit the message to Congress – in person or in writing?"83 Johnson proposed said question to the bipartisan leadership of the Congress, where Johnson first stated that he thought he should go to the people first, then Congress. 84 Here, we see LBJ getting different feedback. Senator Mansfield, for example, suggested that LBJ should avoid making a public presentation, with Senator Dirksen agreeing. 85 Speaker McCormack, however, disagreed, saying that the President should head to Congress and "present the bill to a Joint Session" while also making it public. 86 Upon hearing this, LBJ wrote that "his words, and the decades of experience behind them, had an immediate impact on the rest of the leadership... by the end of the meeting the leadership was unanimous in recommending that I address Congress before a Joint Session."87

It is pertinent to acknowledge that LBJ's persuasive techniques were not infallible. One notable instance, as recounted in the First Lady's memoir, illustrates Johnson's inability to achieve his objective despite employing a range of persuasive tactics. On November 15, 1964, Lady Bird mentioned that LBJ was meeting with a quartet of people, and he needed to select one to participate in his Cabinet.⁸⁸ Among the four, it seemed that President Johnson preferred Don Cook, one that Lady Bird described as a "capable lawyer, first-class brain."⁸⁹ After Cook, their second choice was Tom Watson, the "head of IBM," one whom LBJ asked to be the new Secretary of Commerce.⁹⁰ Don Cook, however, seemed to be a difficult nail to bend. After lunch, Lady Bird had a conversation with him, explaining how much she wanted him to join the Cabinet since they needed "some good troops."⁹¹ Cook, nonetheless, explained that "We'll find them. We'll have to find a way," clearly denying such invitation.⁹² After this conversation, Lady Bird remarked that LBJ was incredibly frustrated since he could not get anyone to accept, which, for her, was "one of the hardest problems a President faces."⁹³

Another significant instance, warranting deeper scrutiny, is the tumultuous relationship between Johnson and Governor George Wallace. By reading Johnson's memoir, as well as listening to phone conversations, it becomes clear that the relationship between President Johnson and Governor George Wallace was a rocky one, and it would all crumble by the time Bloody Sunday happened. On March 13, 1965, Wallace met with the President at the White House where, as Brian Sweany explains, LBJ planned to put Wallace under the "Johnson treatment." Over three hours, both parties discussed on the issue of race, where LBJ "not to let the governor play the martyr for states' rights... cajoled and flattered him." Johnson's patience, however, would quickly run short when Wallace replied that he had no power to integrate the schools and let African Americans vote on the state of Alabama, prompting Johnson to scream

"George, don't you shit me as to who runs Alabama." More specifically on Selma, and the need for the President to send in troops, LBJ explained that he "believed the only way to handle the demonstrators was to respond to their grievances." Furthermore, Johnson did believe that troops should be used, "but not like they were in Little Rock," with Wallace agreeing. However, on March 18, after it was confirmed that there would be a march on March 21, Wallace called LBJ and asked for his help. Only five hours afterward, Wallace double-crosses LBJ during a televised speech saying that "this state cannot afford to activate the guard. Placing the onus on Johnson, he has demanded that the President send federal civil authorities to Alabama instead," infuriating LBJ, who called him a "son of a bitch," and "treacherous."

4. Conclusion

The Political Times Theory and Neustadt's theory on the persuasive president offer crucial frameworks for understanding President Johnson's success in advancing the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As seen, the Political Times Theory played a major role in LBJ's Voting Rights Act. After JFK's assassination, the United States was subjected to many protests for racial equality. With Civil Rights leaders merging into the political scene, people began to see equality of all races as something not only necessary for the country, but an unnegotiable right of all Americans. One of the most crucial events in the Voting Rights history was the Selma marches, credited as a key moment in the fight for civil rights. Taking the violence that unfortunately resulted from said marches and the revolutionary speech LBJ delivered on March 15, 1965, LBJ's push for the Voting Rights Act became known to many. Moreover, when looking at public sentiment through newspapers and polls, we see that the public also backed up LBJ's fight for voting equality. As already presented, a huge majority of people supported a bill that would give African Americans access to the voting polls. Moreover, an even greater majority approved the

Voting Rights Act specifically. Newspapers also had positive views on the Voting Rights Act, with many defending the need for voting equality.

As per Neustadt's theory on a persuasive president, LBJ's persuasive prowess becomes evident when analyzing his writings and those close to the President. In his memoir and private phone conversations, we see a president who was already well-known for being persuasive and being able to insist adequately on what he wanted. Moreover, President Johnson was also a man who knew how to take advice and highly valued his team and their feedback. This paper must point out, however, that LBJ's persuasive techniques were not bulletproof. As seen in his tumultuous relationship with Governor Wallace, where Wallace – in essence – betrayed the President, his selection to a new member of Cabinet, and his private conversations with Lady Bird, it becomes clear that even though prolific at persuasion, LBJ also met with defeat on some occasions in his life. Nonetheless, it must be stressed that – taking into consideration the range of this paper – LBJ proved himself to be an excellent persuasive president, facing walls on many instances that – though clever words – crumbled down at his fee

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² Arnold, "Determinism," 497.

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⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 57.

⁶ Skowronek, *Politics*, 57.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 60.

¹⁰ Ibid., 57.

¹¹ Ibid., 62.

¹² Ibid., 64.

¹³ Ibid.

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- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 361.
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 - ³⁷ Edwards III, "Neustadt," 10.
 - 38 Ibid
- ³⁹ Mary Graham, *President's Secret: The Use and Abuse of Hidden Power* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017): 10.
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 - ⁴³ Ibid.
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https://dayton247now.com/news/local/journalist-tours-presidential-plane-he-was-aboard-when-lbj-was-sworn-in-after-jfk-killed.

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