Theories of Presidential Decision Making: Wilson, Roosevelt, and the Soviet Union

Jeremy Lloyd
THEORIES OF PRESIDENTIAL DECISION MAKING: WILSON, ROOSEVELT, AND THE SOVIET UNION

Jeremy Lloyd

Abstract

This article presents a case study of Presidents Wilson and Roosevelt in regards to diplomatic recognition that demonstrates personality does have an effect on foreign-policy decision making. In using a comparative study of two decisions regarding diplomatic recognition, this article demonstrates how two facets of presidential personality—worldview and political style—cause the president to see things a certain way and act accordingly. As such, the findings serve as an alternative to theories that utilize rational actor models and discount the importance of the president himself in making foreign policy.

A President's Dilemma

A pressing matter had come to the attention of the President, and on April 12, he wrote his Secretary of State and requested a special meeting to consider the diplomatic recognition of a new regime. The next week the cabinet and President assembled and discussed the current political situation of the country in question. The current leaders of that country were guilty of gross atrocities: executions of the common people occurred daily, prisoners were massacred on a regular basis, basic rights and privileges had been revoked, and church property had been confiscated. The power of the legislature had been severely diminished, the courts ceased to operate, and the only real vestiges of government were dominated by the revolutionary party, with a tyrannical nine-member committee presiding (Walch 1954, 1).
The cabinet debated the situation and reached a unanimous decision: the new regime should be recognized. The Secretary of State defended the decision by explaining: "We certainly cannot deny to other nations that principle whereon our government is founded, that every nation has a right to govern itself internally under what forms it pleases, and to change these forms at its own will; and externally to transact business with other nations through whatever organ it chooses, whether that be a King, Convention, Assembly, Committee, President, or whatever it be. The only thing essential is, the will of the nation" (Walch 1954, 2).

This meeting might have been in 1933. The evidence above certainly holds true for the Soviet Union, whom Roosevelt recognized later that year. This description might also apply to China and any number of Presidents, ranging from Truman and Eisenhower to Nixon and Carter. One might also think of Eisenhower and Cuba in 1959 or other recent examples. Who was the President in question?

The meeting described above occurred on April 19, 1793, and included George Washington, his Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, and other cabinet members. The country was Revolutionary France, which was embroiled in the Reign of Terror. The United States issued a proclamation of neutrality on April 22 and agreed to receive the French ambassador (Genet), ensuring that the new government would be recognized.

The example illustrated above highlights the dilemma of extending diplomatic recognition to certain nations. In many cases the president recognizes truly despicable regimes, those headed by tyrants who oppress their people and whose practices are contrary to U.S. ideals. And while recognition usually reflects merely rubber-stamping a de facto regime, the United States is one of the few nations that uses morality as a criterion for recognition. The example of Washington's recognizing Revolutionary France calls into question the actual reasoning behind the decision. Did Washington believe recognition necessary because of the nature of the international system, that is, that France would prove a desirable balancing mechanism against a possible British threat? Or was the decision the result of compromises between the President and members of his cabinet, such as the former French ambassador and current Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson? Or perhaps the decision resulted from Washington's own predispositions, as a former head of a revolutionary army himself and his memories of vital French aid during the perilous Revolutionary War just a decade earlier.
This article will make the case for the latter: the greatest factor in the case of diplomatic recognition is the president himself. Diplomatic recognition is a constitutional power granted solely to the president and as such the will and mind of the president become important factors in explaining why certain nations are recognized by the United States while others are not.

**Brief Recognition History: The Soviet Union**

In 1917, Vladimir I. Lenin led a successful coup that overthrew the monarchy of Czar Nicolas II and established a new regime led by the Bolsheviks. Embroiled in "the war to end all wars" and suspect of the new communist government, Woodrow Wilson chose to deny recognition to the new Soviet Union. Sixteen years later, in 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt, a newly elected president dealing with the effects of the Great Depression, decided to reverse the decision of his Democratic predecessor, Wilson, and extend recognition.

**Which Level of Analysis?**

Three basic levels exist with which to analyze foreign-policy decisions: individual (first level), state or bureaucratic (second), and systemic (third). These levels can be further distilled to a simple dichotomy of approaches: analytic and deductive. Second- and third-level approaches claim that by examining the structure of an international system or the bureaucracy/state we can deduce how the decision-maker will behave. A first-level approach instead attempts to "get inside the head" of the decision-maker and analyze what prompted his/her actions and behavior. Thus a basic difference exists between the first level and second or third levels of analysis: whether or not the cognition of the decision-maker affects the outcome of foreign-policy decisions. Simply said, will all decision-makers behave the same way under similar circumstances or do variations occur as a result of different manners of thinking, perceiving, and acting on foreign-policy decisions?

Advocates of systemic and state/bureaucratic levels of analysis argue that decision-makers "are cognitively competent to match means to ends and to rank options accordingly" (Stein and Welch 1997, 52). This theory of rational choice thus contends that by examining the systemic and/or bureaucratic factors that influence the decision-maker we can reliably explain and predict the behavior in a variety of contexts (Stein and Welch 1997, 52). This concept is often illustrated with phraseology such as
"states are a black box/billiard ball," meaning that states are unitary rational actors that merely fend for their own interests by logically weighing options and deciding which foreign-policy choices are in their best interests. The rational choice approach thus eliminates the need to examine the life histories, biases, or motivations of decision-makers by replacing them with the abstract idea of the state personified as a single actor. Statements such as “the Soviet Union is becoming too aggressive” or “the United States must protect its allies” reflect this type of thinking.

While rational choice theory is parsimonious (i.e., simple and compact yet yielding great explanatory power) and useful in predicting behavior in certain situations, it has many shortcomings. It fails to explain how two persons faced with similar circumstances arrive at different conclusions (Jervis 1976, 36). Rational choice theory is also inadequate in explaining why decision-makers make irrational decisions. Robert Jervis clarifies this definition of irrationality: “Irrationality’ here describes acting under pressures that the actor would not admit as legitimate if he were aware of them” (Jervis 1968, 456). A first-level approach becomes necessary to account for the influence of these pressures (individual beliefs, biases, misperceptions, etc.) in decision-making that result in irrational decisions.

Why Examine Decision Making in Cases of Diplomatic Recognition?

The case of recognizing the Soviet Union demonstrates clearly the importance of selecting the appropriate level of analysis in order to determine why recognition was extended or denied in each case. Second- and third-level approaches do not fully explain the behavior of the two presidents involved in the case (Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt). Wilson refused to recognize the Soviet Union when nearly all of our allies had already done so (Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs 1979, 2). Yet Roosevelt reversed the decision of a previous president who belonged to his same political party while risking Congressional and public support in order to take what he felt was the correct action. Both of these examples call attention to the fact that systemic and bureaucratic models do not fully detail the rationale behind such occurrences. A first-level approach is needed to lend more explanatory power and take into account the president himself as an important factor. James David Barber, in *The Presidential Character*, gives a compelling argument as to why it is important to focus on individual presidents:

46 SIGMA
Who the President is at a given time can make a profound difference in the thrust and direction of national politics. . . . Even the most superficial speculation confirms the commonsense view that the man [president] himself weighs heavily among other historical factors. A Wilson re-elected in 1920, a Hoover in 1932, a John F. Kennedy in 1964 would, it seems very likely, have guided the body politic along rather different paths from those their actual successors chose. (Barber 1992, 3)

This is the basic argument for utilizing a first-level approach: who the president is does matter. Just as Johnson acted in a singular manner and made decisions that Kennedy would probably have avoided (as many argue of the Americanization of the Vietnam War), so did the behavior of Wilson and Roosevelt deviate from the path other presidents would have taken. Not all presidents behave in the same way under the international and bureaucratic pressures they face, as rational choice theory assumes; therefore, it is impossible to deduce a rational pattern that they will follow. The failure of rational choice requires us to analyze individual psychological and cognitive factors in order to determine why certain behaviors occurred.

The arguments up to this point have explained why second- and third-level strategies are inadequate in analyzing expected presidential behavior. These inadequacies lead us to turn to a first-level approach for adequate explanatory power. In the cases of presidential behavior regarding diplomatic recognition, certain decision-making theories prove helpful in breaking down patterns of action and response. It is useful to examine the development of this decision-making approach in order to assess which tenets of this theory will be most useful in explaining how recognition may be explained. With respect to presidential decision making, especially with regards to the issue of diplomatic recognition, the theories of three political scientists prove particularly useful: James David Barber, and Alexander and Juliette George.

Barber argues in his seminal work, Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House, that decision-makers must be viewed as actual persons, not as nondescript embodiments of state interests. Each president brings “an individual character, a worldview, and a political style” to the office, factors that definitely affect how foreign-policy decisions are made. Presidential character, which Barber defines as “the way the president orients himself towards life,” is posited as the most important
of the three personality aspects. Character types are classified into four categories—active-positive, active-negative, passive-positive, and passive-negative—and Barber explains what tendencies each type causes and predicts what kinds of behaviors logically follow each type. The worldview of the president “consists of his primary, politically relevant beliefs, particularly his conceptions of social causality, human nature, and the central moral conflicts of his time.” Style, on the other hand, refers to how the president fulfills his political roles of speaking to the public, interacting with government officials, and managing the matters that present themselves to him (Barber 1992, 1–11).

The validity of evaluating the decision-maker’s personality to explain foreign policy is echoed by Alexander and Juliette George in *Presidential Personality and Performance*, which devotes an entire chapter to defending the basic premises of Barber’s argument. George and George readily admit the shortcomings of Barber’s work, mainly its lack of theory and methodology, but defend its intentions, and also its successes (George and George 1992, 151). They recognize the need for Barber to define more specifically and operationalize the aspects of presidential character, worldview, and political style. They therefore attempt to clarify and correct aspects of character and worldview in chapter five of their work. The final chapter of the book applies the notion of presidential style to several administrations, beginning with Franklin Roosevelt and ending with Bill Clinton.

My work seeks to complement that of James David Barber, and Alexander and Juliette George by focusing on the worldview and style of the president with regards to diplomatic recognition. While character may play an important role in determining patterns of behavior, I believe it just as important to examine how the president views the world around him and how he receives and evaluates information in order to analyze and explain foreign-policy decisions. As Yaacov Vertzberger explains, “the critical input in the decision-making process is thus the perception of the environment rather than the real environment” (Vertzberger 1990, 35).

**My Approach**

My study will utilize the qualitative comparative case study approach in order to analyze the influence of presidential personality on diplomatic recognition. My comparative analysis examines the cases of recognition (or nonrecognition) of the Soviet Union by Presidents Wilson and Roosevelt. My dependent variable is the de jure recognition of a nation by the
United States, while my independent variable is the decision making of the two presidents in question. I examine each president in terms of two independent variables: worldview and political style. My basic hypothesis is that two factors, the way in which the president sees the world and how he receives information from advisors, affect foreign-policy decision making.

The cases I have selected are indeed comparable in the fact that they contain many important similarities. Both presidents were members of the same political party (Democratic) and were described as religious in nature. Presidents Wilson and Roosevelt dealt with the same nation (one which had been formed by a violent revolution that replaced a government the United States had previously supported). Finally, both presidents dealt with widespread distrust among the American public and Congress towards communism. Because the cases share these similarities I can focus on the two aspects of presidential personality—worldview and political style—that do actually vary between the two presidents and evaluate whether these variables affected their decisions to extend or deny recognition to the Soviet Union.

I realize that other factors, such as domestic politics or the balance of power in the world, could also possibly account for the outcome which I seek to explain in my case study. I will control for these variables by focusing primarily on first-level factors. Although I realize other factors also affect the decision-maker, I will assume that presidential personality is the strongest influence in determining foreign policy and that other factors are not as significant.

**Operational Definitions: Worldview and Political Style**

According to George and George, Barber's overemphasis on character as the most important aspect of personality slights the scope and definitions of the president's worldview and political style. I thus employ modified definitions in my thesis because I feel they better express what each should reflect in my treatment of the cases. Categorizing both worldview and political style into set types permits the analysis and explanation of the effects of personality on foreign-policy decision. The main points of my findings are organized into Table 1 and are subsequently detailed in the case study that follows and the conclusion.

I define the worldview of the president in the same manner as James E. Dougherty and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff: factors including education, religion, ideology, belief systems, critical life and historical experiences,
### Table 1: Summary of findings

Findings demonstrate causality in both cases between managerial style and recognition, and causality between worldview and recognition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables/Outcome</th>
<th>Wilson</th>
<th>Roosevelt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worldview</td>
<td>1. Idealism</td>
<td>1. Pragmatic politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(independent variable)</td>
<td>2. Individualism</td>
<td>2. World politics = Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Democracy best form of government</td>
<td>politics writ large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political style</td>
<td>Formalistic</td>
<td>Competitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(independent variable)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition extended?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(dependent variable)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Professional training, foreign travel, mental and physical health, and previous political activities that influence how the president views the world (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 1990, 473). Because of the limited scope of this article, my research will focus on factors that ultimately affect foreign-policy decisions and will not examine domestic factors. I operationalize the worldview of the president by creating three or four main characteristics of how the president perceived his environment. Examples include realist or idealist perceptions of the world, how politics operate in the world and how a politician should act, and the role of the United States in world politics.

For presidential political style I utilize the definition of Alexander George (along with Eric Stern): the way in which the president organizes and manages his cabinet and bureaucracy, the way in which information is received by the president, and how he generally utilizes said information (George and George 1998, 152–54). I classify each advisory system in terms of organization and then describe whether the president’s utilization of that system created diverse opinions and sources of information, and thus significantly influenced his thinking or just acted as a tandem of “yes men,” helping shape new policy and implementation of legislation, etc.

The way in which the president organizes his cabinet and bureaucracy falls into one of two categories:
1. **Formalistic:** Staff and advisors organized so as to provide structure, a rigid hierarchy, and order. This approach stifles dissenting opinions and promotes unity and harmony within the executive branch.

2. **Competitive:** President encourages diversity of opinions and advice by pitting departments and agencies against each other. This results in overlapping jurisdiction, redundancy, ambiguity, etc.

**Case Study: The Soviet Union**

President Woodrow Wilson

*Worldview.* Of all of the forty-three presidents the United States has had, none entered the White House with better academic experience than Woodrow Wilson. Prior to his ascension to the presidency, he spent over three decades studying, analyzing, theorizing, and writing about the dynamics of politics. Religion, education, and political and professional experiences created a truly unique view of how one of the United States' most complicated heads of state perceived the world in which he lived.

Born into a poor family in the heart of the South, Wilson knew much about overcoming hardship and adversity. Most scholars agree that the young Wilson suffered from dyslexia, a condition that would cause him not to be able to read until the age of eleven. Wilson conquered his condition, however, and became an apt pupil, devouring dozens of books and writing prolifically on a variety of subjects. Wilson studied history and politics and received his doctorate from Johns Hopkins University in 1886 for his treatment of cabinet government in the United States. After teaching at various universities, Wilson landed a job at Princeton University in 1890, and twelve years later he was appointed its president in part because of the fame he garnered for promoting progressive ideals. In 1910 Wilson accepted the invitation to run for governor of New Jersey, and after winning he enacted several reforms, such as laws limiting monopolies and labor abuses: These reforms propelled him into the national spotlight and provided the foundation for his successful presidential candidacy in 1912 (Braeman 1972, 1–15). Wilson's religious upbringing furnished him with a clear sense of right and wrong within the world and what role he should play in order to correct the evils that existed. His education allowed him to explore and articulate these views, while professional and political experience gave him a chance to propose ideas and work for the good of humanity. Wilson's outlook can be categorized into four elements: idealism,
individualism, the superiority of democracy, and the role of the United States as righteous leader.

Idealism, the first general theme of Wilson's worldview, stemmed from his Presbyterian roots and became the unifying force in his political life. Wilson believed that the only way to secure peace in the world was through a policy of liberal internationalism, that is, one in which self-governing democratic nations would peacefully negotiate conflicts instead of resorting to war. This idealism was later explicitly manifested in the formation of the League of Nations. Wilson believed that foreign policy should not be defined in terms of materialism but should instead be "more concerned about human rights than about property rights" (Trani 1958, 443). This differed greatly from past administrations' hardheaded realism that sought to ensure the security and economic well-being of the United States first and foremost.

Individualism stands as another pervasive feature of Wilson's perception of the world. As a wholehearted believer in the Presbyterian faith, Wilson adopted a Calvinistic view towards the individual: that one could achieve both the approval of God and earthly success through hard work and concentration on goals. Wilson embodied this principle himself, overcoming poverty and dyslexia to receive a Ph.D. and also attain positions of influence and importance. Subsequently, Wilson felt that because God had blessed him and permitted him to become president of the United States, his ideas about politics and government were also supported by God and were morally right (Latham 1958, 91). Wilson felt he should work tirelessly to ensure that such ideas were implemented, and not compromise in the face of conflict or adversity.

The third aspect of Wilson's worldview is the belief that democracy is "the most humane and Christian form of government" (Latham 1958, 153). Wilson's entire adult life was spent studying, theorizing, and practicing the essential aspects of democracy, the only form of government built upon principles of equality and freedom, and the only one that can guide men to achieve peace. Placing democracy on a philosophic pedestal was coupled with similar positive beliefs in the inherent goodness of man (Christian optimism) and the progressive nature of organic life (social Darwinism). These three beliefs led him to the conclusion that democracy must some day achieve its potential as the universal rule of political life. As a corollary of this belief, Wilson deduced that the only hope for a
peaceful world community would be one in which democracy had triumphed and public opinion reigned as the means of guiding the people. It was therefore his responsibility “to make the world safe for democracy.”

The final aspect of Wilson's worldview was perhaps a culmination of the other three in that he defined the role of the United States through the lens of idealism, individualism, and democracy. Wilson believed that the U.S. should form relationships with the world that reflected our unique contributions to humanity. The United States and its political system embodied the principles of equality, freedom, and morality while societies in Europe and Asia were still mired in the results of class divisions and ethnic quibbles. Wilson saw America's ultimate goal not as the attainment of wealth and power, but rather as the fulfillment of its noble obligation to advance peace and world brotherhood. Scholar Harry Notter summarized Wilson's worldview:

[America's] mission was to realize an ideal of liberty, provide a model of democracy, vindicate moral principles, give examples of action and ideals of government and righteousness to an interdependent world, uphold the rights of man, work for humanity and the happiness of men everywhere, lead the thinking of the world, promote peace-in-sum, to serve mankind and progress. (Notter 1937, 653)

Wilson felt that as leader of the only moral and free nation on the face of the earth he must promote this idealistic vision in order to advance the causes of God and promote the well-being of all humanity. Wilson's interpretation of this divine role of the presidency led him to judge nations as either moral or immoral. Moral regimes were legitimate because they promoted the interests of their citizens and helped other nations to accomplish the same.

Political style. Woodrow Wilson came to office with extensive experience as an administrator, having already presided over Princeton University for over a decade and having spent two years as governor of New Jersey. Wilson had definite policy aims in mind and structured his advisory system to give him a free hand in developing foreign policy and personal projects. His system also permitted progressive cabinet members to shepherd programs such as tariff reform, child labor laws, and the creation of the Federal Reserve and a graduated federal income tax through Congress. Cabinet members, however, were chosen either for their political value
in helping support Wilson’s ideas or for their progressive accomplish­ments. This fact became most evident in Wilson’s selection of a Secretary of State: William Jennings Bryan. A reformer and perennial presidential candidate, Bryan received Wilson’s nomination because of his reputation as the Democratic Party’s leading reformer and because Wilson was afraid he might oppose potential legislation if left out of the administration (Clements 1987, 90).

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1: The formalistic model under Wilson.** This system filters information and opinion through clear hierarchy of advisors, especially preferred ones.

Wilson created an extremely formalistic advisory system, one in which all valuable foreign-policy advice, and to a certain extent domestic advice as well, was funneled through a few advisors (see Figure 1). Wilson’s exclusive relationship with one such advisor, Colonel Edward House from Texas, has been well documented by political scientists and biographers alike and cannot be overstated (George and George 1998, 67–89). House and Wilson became acquainted during the summer of 1909 as Wilson was gearing up for his gubernatorial campaign. The two men developed a mutual friendship and respect that would culminate in House’s unofficial placement as Wilson’s personal confidant in the White House. During the transitional phase as president-elect, Wilson consulted exclusively with House in determining potential candidates for all of the cabinet and advisory positions and even offered House his pick of any of these positions.
House refused to have his influence narrowed to a single area of policy, preferring rather to be a "free-lance" and "to advise with him regarding matters in general, and to have a roving commission to serve wherever and whenever possible" (Clements 1987, 91). House became the President's key advisor on many issues. Wilson, he observed, "never seems to want to discuss things with anyone, as far as I know, excepting me. Even the Cabinet bore him with their importunities, and he often complains of them" (cited in Latham 1958, 18). Even William McAdoo—the trusted Secretary of Treasury who would later become Wilson's son-in-law—complained of the faithlessness of the executive in the judgment of any of his official advisors (Latham 1958, 18).

The clear hierarchy that developed within the administration, coupled with Wilson's quirky behavior, served to limit the amount of information the President received. Wilson generally detested meeting with cabinet members, congressmen, and lobbyists and thus created a rigid meeting system. All interested parties were required to solicit an appointment with his main White House aide, Joseph Tumulty, who effectively screened unwanted visitors. All appointments were kept to ten or fifteen minutes, so that the President could play golf in the afternoon, as he was accustomed to doing. When support was needed for bills, Wilson would either strong-arm the necessary congressmen or appeal to the public or party faithful in order to garner the necessary votes.

Wilson's system did have an interesting side effect, however: it gave an unprecedented amount of power to his cabinet members because he largely ignored them. Secretaries with progressive ideals were provided a free hand to promote their reforms. McAdoo, for example, was able to provide the blueprint of the Federal Reserve System to Wilson, who later aggressively promoted its passage, because he was afforded freedom by an aloof executive. Secretaries provided many key ideas and initiatives to the President but were largely excluded from the decision-making process. Wilson did have many policy programs and ideas for reform, but these were usually very narrow in scope. In general, Wilson concentrated on large domestic reforms, such as child labor laws and tariff reductions, and more particularly on matters of foreign policy. Wilson consulted with his Secretary of State occasionally, in order to keep up appearances, but, as one can imagine, Wilson's formalistic system put matters of foreign policy largely into the hands of the executive and his most trusted advisor, Colonel House.
**Explanation.** Wilson held particularly strong worldviews with regards to issues of sovereignty and involvement in world politics. His idealism led him to desire a world in which nations fairly represented the interests of those they ruled, one where all mankind could benefit from superior types of political and economic systems like the ones the United States had implemented. Wilson felt that he played an important role in forming this new world order: he led the most moral nation on earth and held divinely approved ideas about politics and government. As such, he had the ability to make important judgments and declare nations moral or immoral. Not only did Wilson affix this stamp of illegitimacy to various regimes, he also fought against these nations in order to secure their downfall.

As previously mentioned, Wilson's advisory system allowed him a free hand in conducting foreign policy. His formalistic system gave him very few inputs; again, evidence supports the notion that Colonel House and nearly no one else was consulted in the question of recognizing the Soviet Union. Wilson had his mind made up on the Soviet Union long before the revolution of 1917. Wilson was a rabid anti-tsarist who hated the repressive actions of Tsar Nicolas II. When the Bolshevik Revolution occurred Wilson was originally hopeful that the new regime might be an improvement over the previous rulers. Wilson was sorely disappointed when he realized that gross atrocities were being committed by Lenin and his cohorts in order to stay in power (Trani 1976, 443-44). He subsequently wrote the regime off as immoral and refused to extend recognition. Wilson would even go as far as sending in troops to attempt to overthrow Lenin's government and establish a legitimate one in its place (Latham 1958, 25).

This was not an isolated incident. In 1914 Wilson was faced with a similar situation when Victoriano Huerta violently overthrew the established government in Mexico. Wilson was indignant that a moral regime had been overthrown by an immoral one and declared, "I will not recognize a government of butchers." Wilson's comments to the American people on the subject of recognition are especially pertinent because they represent his views towards all peoples of the world, and not just one nation (e.g., Mexico) in particular:

> The peace, prosperity, and contentment of Mexico mean more, much more, to us than merely an enlarged field for our commerce and enterprise. They mean an enlargement of the field of self-government and the realization of the hopes and rights of a nation with whose best aspirations, so long...
suppressed and disappointed, we largely sympathize. (Dallek 1982, 352)

Robert Dallek states poignantly the implication of Wilson's remarks, that "in a word, [he] had enunciated the proposition that, for all practical purposes, Mexico's internal affairs were subject to the same standards applied in the United States" (Dallek 1982, 352). Wilson, as the leader of the nation that was a "light on a hill" for all of the world, thus set a standard for extending recognition and did not hesitate to pass judgment on regimes that he felt failed to represent the interests of their citizens.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt

Worldview. The presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt offers a marked contrast to the ideological approach taken by Wilson and the laissez-faire style of Roosevelt's Republican predecessors. Roosevelt felt entirely at ease in his position of great authority and believed that his skills and competence were a perfect fit for the office of president. His time in office would be characterized by optimism, involvement, courage, and progress, all of which reflected the personality of the President, especially his perception of the world around him.

Biographers classify President Franklin Roosevelt as the most cosmopolitan president the world had ever seen, perhaps with the exception only of his cousin, former president Theodore Roosevelt. Like his older cousin, Franklin came from the upper class, graduated from Harvard, practiced law, and served in the Navy. Roosevelt became involved in politics soon after a short career as a lawyer, winning a seat in the New York State Senate. His progressive ideals garnered the attention of President Woodrow Wilson, who appointed him assistant secretary of the Navy. After successfully fulfilling this duty during the turbulent years of the First World War, Roosevelt ran for vice-president on the ticket of James Cox. After losing in the landslide victory of Herbert Hoover in 1920, Roosevelt struggled to stay in the center of the political scene of the Democratic Party. In 1921, Roosevelt was taken ill with poliomyelitis, which robbed him of his ability to walk. Always the warrior, Roosevelt fought against the illness and continued to practice politics from his wheelchair, a remarkable feat considering the stigma present during the time period that handicapped persons were unfit for political leadership. FDR's historic battle with polio left him a different person, someone with greater understanding for the
underdog: in essence the type of people the Democratic Party claimed to represent. He successfully reentered politics in 1928 by launching a successful gubernatorial campaign in New York. Four years later he parleyed his popularity and success in the Empire State into the new hope of the nation as president.

Franklin Roosevelt had a truly unique perspective of the world, the presidency, and his role in both. Roosevelt’s worldview may be classified into three broad categories: pragmatic politics, world politics as local politics writ large, and politics of inclusion. Roosevelt stated clearly what the president of the United States would have to do to meet the crises of 1932 and all other future crises as leader of the nation: press forward with “bold, persistent experimentation” (Barber 1990, 287). Critics are quick to point out that Roosevelt had no “grand design” or overarching political philosophy, but he instead based his presidency on the simple fact that “our nation is in trouble and it is the responsibility of the government to do something about it” (Dallek 1995, 35). Roosevelt was a man of action, one who inspired hope and optimism because he was willing to take risks in order to help others.

Secondly, Roosevelt believed that politics should be practiced the same at the world level as at the local level. Alliances, power, and personality should play into the equation for the interaction of the president as well as every mayor, councilmember, etc. Just as the leader of a town or city could take extraordinary measures in order to deal with crises, FDR took matters into his own hands upon ascending to the presidency. He shut down the banks the day after he stepped into office, passed an amount of legislation previously thought unimaginable to curb the effects of the Depression, and asked Congress for all power possible to fight poverty, the same as if a foreign invader had threatened the liberty and freedom of the United States (Dallek 1995, 25). Roosevelt viewed crises as his time to shine, and he employed the same tactics that got him into the White House to fight against the problems that plagued society.

Finally, Roosevelt also viewed politics as a process in which everyone should be included. Support for his programs and initiatives were always gathered through coalitions, in order to include as many people as possible. In the international sphere, Roosevelt felt the same way about other peoples and cultures. During his presidency four essential human freedoms became the clarion call for aiding persons of all nations: freedom of
speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Roosevelt once stated that “our liberty is linked to the destiny of the world,” and as such “democracy must be supported in all corners of the earth” (Dallek 1995, 79). Roosevelt’s vision included the idea of collective security and international cooperation. The United Nations was Roosevelt’s brainchild, his manner of creating peace for all members of the earth by including them in the decision making, the security, and the economic stability of the entire world.

**Political style.** Experts classify Franklin D. Roosevelt as the first president to utilize a modern system of bureaucracy. My analysis of Roosevelt’s managerial style concentrates primarily on his first year in office, 1933, because the Soviet Union received official diplomatic recognition later that year. Though his later modifications to the advisory system (e.g., creation of the Executive Office of the President) would most clearly reveal his political style, his managerial trends were evident even from the very beginning.

Roosevelt’s organization of White House aides and cabinet secretaries is basically the prototype for competitive models (see Figure 2). As George and George eloquently state, Roosevelt “deliberately exacerbated the competitive and conflicting aspects of cabinet politics and bureaucratic

---

**Figure 2: Competitive model employed by Roosevelt.** It encourages variety and multiple sources of information and permits the president to consult anyone.
politics” (George and George 1998, 204). In a conversation with Frances Perkins, his Secretary of Labor, Roosevelt revealed how he thought cabinet members should relate to each other: “A little rivalry is stimulating you know. It keeps everybody going to prove he is a better fellow than the next man. It keeps them honest, too” (George and George 1998, 205). Roosevelt denied the collective importance of the cabinet, preferring instead to consult with individuals on various policy issues. Cabinet meetings, though held weekly, discussed little of substance and were basically only a venue for individuals to find the President afterwards and discuss issues face-to-face.

Roosevelt successfully created an atmosphere of chaos in the administration, one that only he could sort through. He purposefully made ambiguous and duplicitious assignments to secretaries in order to promote competition and blur the lines of jurisdiction between departments. Under secretaries received their nomination not from the secretaries of their departments, but from the President himself, thereby forcing cabinet heads to accept Roosevelt’s nominees instead of their own men. Presidential aides from the White House were forced into cabinet positions as well and often drew themselves into conflict with their superiors, whom they were supposed to support. Roosevelt operated without a chief of staff and preferred selecting White House aides and cabinet secretaries who held general rather than specific knowledge of issues (with a few notable exceptions of course, such as Secretary of State Cordell Hull). Anonymity became the preferred attribute of those who advised him (Hess 1988, 32).

Roosevelt drew on a large network of friends and acquaintances inside and outside of the bureaucracy. Drawing on contacts made in his years as a state senator and governor of New York, and as assistant secretary of the navy under Woodrow Wilson, he consulted whomever he pleased on a given issue. Samuel Rosenman, for example, served as an integral part of Roosevelt’s gubernatorial administration and was solicited often for advice on policy issues. Rosenman eventually began writing all of Roosevelt’s speeches and had to quit his job as a New York Supreme Court Justice in order to keep up with the workload. Friends and acquaintances, such as William Bullitt and Frances Perkins, quickly found themselves with influential positions within the new administration (Ambassador to the Soviet Union and Secretary of Labor, respectively) and as such were consulted more frequently than their peers. Even Franklin Roosevelt’s wife, Eleanor, was a prominent figure in advising the President (Barber 1990, 279).
Roosevelt had little respect for institutional boundaries or ideological differences between subordinates. Several instances have been recorded in which Roosevelt took different cabinet secretaries or aides who were at loggerheads and made them come to a unified decision. Instances also arose in which Roosevelt would force strict, overbearing timetables upon those around him in order to whip up competition and conflict and resolve tough matters quickly.

All of these items served to create an atmosphere of controlled chaos in the administration—controlled at least until the pressures of war strained the system almost to the point of breaking. Roosevelt was able to employ his office effectively as a “bully pulpit,” just like his rough-riding cousin, in part because of this atmosphere he created. It served to give him multiple sources of information and create unity around only one person, himself. While this created enormous problems in implementing policies and procedures, it did prove effective in permitting Roosevelt to push his own projects with minimal interference, whether it was New Deal legislation or the recognition of the Soviet Union.

Explanation. Roosevelt viewed the issue of recognizing the Soviet Union as something that could only help, and not hurt, the United States. He thought it absurd that our nation should reject a country just because of its ideologies: “purely doctrinaire ideas, as, that communism automatically outlaws interacting with a nation, should be discarded” (Bennett 1985, 6). He believed that he should end the “abnormal relations” between the two nations and that “frank, friendly conversations” could have that effect by eliminating misconceptions and promoting a new chapter in U.S.–Soviet relations (Greer 1958, 162–63). Roosevelt believed in including all nations of the world in politics, and he hoped interacting with the Soviet Union would promote a peaceful world order and create benefits for both nations. Roosevelt mentioned often the huge potential for trade between the two nations and thought that such a benefit was worth overlooking the conflicting ideals of communism with capitalism (Maddux 1980, 13).

Roosevelt’s advisory system served to reinforce the idea that he should extend recognition to the Soviet Union. As was his nature, Roosevelt consulted with many persons inside and out of the administration to understand fully the situation and its implications. One advisor pointed out “... he could not go forward until he had tested the ground, studied
all the reactions, and weighed all the risks” (Maddux 1980, 11). Having consulted many sources of information, most of whom expressed support for the idea, Roosevelt moved ahead with plans and contacted Stalin’s representatives. The negotiators that represented the United States in these discussions on recognition briefed the President personally and even brought Soviet representatives to the White House so that Roosevelt could further persuade the Soviets to come to terms with the demands of the United States. In the end, Roosevelt’s personal lobbying proved a decisive factor in ultimately convincing the Soviet Union to establish formal relations with the United States (Maddux 1980, 14).

Advisors of the President pointed to the growing threat of Germany and Japan as the primary motives in Roosevelt’s ultimate decision to recognize the Soviet Union (Bennett 1985, 5–6). While these were certainly factors in the Roosevelt’s thinking, it appears that other factors weighed just as heavily on his mind. Roosevelt genuinely desired a new world order where all nations would be included and violent confrontations could be avoided. These plans would later come to fruition in the creation of one of Roosevelt’s ideas: the United Nations. Increased trade would benefit citizens of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. alike and would hopefully lead to even better relations in the future. Roosevelt, as a popular leader who knew he could garner the necessary support at home and abroad for the idea, used his bully pulpit of the presidency and made the necessary arrangements to extend recognition.

Roosevelt best expressed these sentiments himself in his first Inaugural address in 1933:

In the field of world policy I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the good neighbor—the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others—the neighbor who respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors. (Greer 1958, 158)

Roosevelt hoped that mutual trust and aid could become the core of international relations, instead of mere power politics and conflict. As the leader of an influential nation, Roosevelt tried to pursue policies that would promote this type of cooperation. The recognition of the Soviet Union in 1933 serves as a quintessential example of how Roosevelt’s views of the world thus influenced his foreign-policy decision making.

62 SIGMA
Conclusion

My research supports the notion that studying the role of the decision-maker in foreign policy has merit. By examining two facets of a president's personality, his worldview and his managerial style, in relationship to diplomatic recognition, I was able to establish a degree of causality. Table 1 summarizes my basic findings, showing first that both presidents had certain aspects of their worldview in common, namely a belief in American exceptionalism and a desire to become more involved in the politics of the world. In other words, each president believed that America enjoyed the benefits of the very best economic, political, moral, and military systems and should help other nations of the world progress towards that point as well.

This similarity in ideology between these two democratic presidents begs one to question why Wilson refused to extend recognition if he, like Roosevelt, wanted to include other nations in the political process and help them to attain the same prosperity the United States enjoyed. The answer lies in one particular aspect of worldview: labeling. Wilson set clear distinctions (i.e., "labeled") between nations he viewed as legitimate or not. For Wilson this litmus test was one of morality. Legitimate nations were moral if they permitted their citizens basic freedoms and worked towards their development and livelihood. On the other hand, regimes that deprived their own citizens of these basic rights could not be trusted and must be shunned by the international community as a whole, and especially the United States as the moral leader of the world. This would force such regimes to correct their erroneous behavior and adapt to the superior ways of the United States and its allies. Wilson's view that God had implicitly placed him in the presidency because of his hard work and moral lifestyle reinforced the view that he alone had the responsibility to deny recognition to immoral foreign regimes. Wilson's divisive worldview was complemented with an advisory system that severely limited the amount of dissenting information he received in matters of foreign policy. These factors boil down to a simple fact: that Wilson's labeling of the Bolshevik regime, one he felt had usurped power and was depriving citizens of their rights, placed them in the realm of illegitimacy. He thus felt it his duty to refuse recognition.

Roosevelt, however, saw potential benefits in extending the official recognition that their predecessors had denied. He felt that if lasting peace
was to be created in the world, then all nations, regardless of regime type, must necessarily be included. Roosevelt used an extraordinary amount of political capital—even lobbying personally with representatives of the U.S.S.R.—working out a deal behind closed doors to extend recognition. Although Roosevelt might have agreed with the categorizations that Wilson had made, he refused to let his own personal beliefs and ideologies stand in the way of recognition.

My findings show that worldview affected the decision to extend or refuse recognition to the Soviet Union. Worldview, especially the labeling mechanism previously described, is the primary factor in how presidents come to make decisions on recognition. Presidential style, while not the primary factor in the question of recognition, cannot be ignored. How the president sets up his advisory system and how he receives information concerning foreign policy act as a reinforcing mechanism and should thus be categorized as an intervening variable.

Table 1 illustrates this point: Wilson created a formalistic system to simplify the process of receiving information. The few advisors he trusted were given inordinate amounts of power in influencing the president, yet these advisors largely reported information that would reinforce the previously held views of the president. Thus when Wilson labeled the U.S.S.R. as immoral there were no advisors to dissent from this opinion. Had Wilson set up a competitive model of advisement the outcome might have been altered. Forceful aides and secretaries might have aided Wilson in removing the labels they had placed on the U.S.S.R. and might have helped him realize that the political inclusion they desired required the recognition of all types of regimes as a starting point from which to work.

Roosevelt, on the other hand, had such a system in place. His advisory systems were largely competitive, and as such provided a wide array of opinions and information on any given topic. Rather than merely reinforcing ideas of the president, these systems forced the president to decide from among many given options. This also served as a reinforcing mechanism, in that Roosevelt initially considered the idea of recognizing the Soviet Union and then found support from within his own cabinet. Roosevelt found many within his administration who supported his ideas, which reinforced his views enough to ignore the protests of the State Department and influential members of Congress.
My case study of Presidents Wilson and Roosevelt in regards to diplomatic recognition demonstrates that personality does have an effect on foreign-policy decision making. My research supports the idea that "who the president is matters" in cases of diplomatic recognition. The United States is one of the few nations on earth that makes recognizing another country a matter of moral approbation (rather than mere reflection of which regime is in power). This tends to make the issue of recognition a matter of the conscience of the president rather than a vital national security interest. I believe that utilizing personality or other first-level approaches in such cases is highly beneficial. My work complements that of James David Barber, and Alexander and Juliette George by focusing on the worldview and style of the president. In using a comparative study of two decisions regarding diplomatic recognition, I have proven the claim that presidential personality affects foreign-policy decision making. I demonstrate how two facets of presidential personality—worldview and political style—cause the president to see things a certain way and act accordingly. My findings serve as an alternative to theories that utilize rational actor models and discount the importance of the president himself in making foreign policy.
Works Cited


