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Power, Performance, and the Political Bases of Presidential Rankings

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ABSTRACT: This article refutes a common assumption among political scientists: that presidential greatness polls cannot be used to study the presidency itself. Using an expert survey of historians that ranked all presidents from George Washington through Jimmy Carter on level of greatness, the study probes personal, economic, and political factors related to the president's tenure which may help determine such judgements. The findings reveal that a president's level of success on the political factors during his time in office had a strong relation to placement on the greatness scale.

Keywords: influences on presidential performance; presidential greatness; presidential rankings; presidential ratings

I. INTRODUCTION

The objective of this research is to improve our understanding of presidential rankings. Initially, the literature is extensively reviewed from the perspective of both experts and the general public. Next, an empirical examination of factors affecting mean rankings of chief executives is conducted. In the concluding section, problems inherent in such research are discussed.

Clearly, both personal and political factors have been explored extensively in terms of their respective influence on presential performance. Previous experience is generally considered a requisite for office, but has been seldom studied for its contribution to popularity while in office, and even less for how it may reflect views of performance after service.

That economic indices have been considered an important measure of effectiveness during incumbency should likewise show promise as a measure of historical comparison. Of course, the standard political measures used for within-term evaluation can and should be used to determine after-tenure success.

As will be demonstrated in this study, presidential rankings research has been plentiful on its own. However, despite the meticulous manner by which many of the greatness polls are conducted, they have been criticized as periodic and unreliable. Accordingly, what is needed is an initial systemic attempt to study what factors—personal, economic, and/or political—may provide an explanation for how presidents are ranked. This is accomplished here by utilizing a greatness poll encompassing all presidents from 1789 through 1980.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON PRESIDENTIAL RANKINGS

Peoples' Choice

Rankings of the chief executives by the public at large are primarily concerned with the "greatness" of the person, judgements which are invariably influenced by accomplishments of a particular president's administration, by revisionist thinking about a historical period or presidency, and by experts' rankings (Bailey [1]; Maranell [2]). Popular stereotypes about whom among the nation's presidents may have been the most outstanding began as early as 1901, when the Hall of Fame for Great Americans was established at New York University. The first election enshrined five presidents among twenty-nine celebrities chosen: George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and U.S. Grant. Later, the Hall of Fame honored other presidents, including John Quincy Adams and James Madison (1905); Andrew Jackson (1910); James Monroe (1930); Grover Cleveland

(1935); Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson(1950). Bailey notes several factors regarding the Hall's election procedure, including the relative ignorance of recent scholarship on the presidency by voters, as well as the criteria used to evaluate nominees.

The selection and sculpturing of busts of four presidents at Mount Rushmore was done by the same person, Gutzon Borglum. Contrary to established premises, Borglum did not claim his choices were either the four greatest presidents or Americans. Rather, he believed the men he chose represented the growth of the United States and its ideals over 150 years: Washington symbolized the founding of the nation; Jefferson exemplified the expansion of the republic; Lincoln represented preservation of the Union; and Theodore Roosevelt reflected the emergence of America as a world power in the 20th Century.

A 1945 Gallup poll asked a cross-section other adult public, "Who do you think was the greater man, George Washington or Abraham Lincoln?" The respondents were not asked to limit their judgement solely to the presidential career. The results were as follows: Lincoln, 42%; Washington, 22%; equally great, 28%; uncertain, 8%. Bailey contends that the findings resemble a mix of fable and fact.

The influence of "presentism," or attitudes conditioned by immediate experience, was certainly strong in a 1945 poll conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Colorado at Denver. It asked a nationwide cross-section: In all the history of the United States, whom do you regard as the two or three of the greatest men who have ever lived in this country?" The findings of the multi-voting procedure were: Franklin Roosevelt, 61%; Abraham Lincoln, 56%; George Washington, 46%; Thomas Edison, 11%; Woodrow Wilson, 8%; Dwight Eisenhower, 7%; Thomas Jefferson, 6%; Douglas MacArthur, 5%; Henry Ford, 4%; Benjamin Franklin, 4%; Harry Truman, 3%. Bailey observes that the public preferences run heavily in favor of men of deeds. This order of finish was repeated in a Gallup poll taken a year later, according to Cantril [4]. The poll asked which president among four named was the greatest; 39% cited FDR, 37% Lincoln, 15% Washington, and 5% Wilson.

A 1956 Gallup Poll asked a national sample of 1385 respondents "What three United States presidents do you regard as the greatest?" The result, reported by Burns [4], was FDR, 69%; Lincoln, 64%; Washington, 47%; Eisenhower, 34%; Truman, 16%; Wilson, 14%; Teddy Roosevelt, 9%; Jefferson, 5%; Hoover, 4%; Coolidge, 2%; and McKinley, 1%. Among the most comprehensive surveys of presidential rankings by the public was a 1975 Gallup Poll [5]. It asked respondents who they regarded as the three greatest presidents, but also requested that they identify ten historical figures and indicate the significance of four dates. The top-rated presidents included John Kennedy, 52%; Lincoln, 49%; FDR, 45%; Truman, 37%; Washington, 25%; Eisenhower, 24%; Teddy Roosevelt, 9%; Lyndon Johnson, 9%; Jefferson, eight; Wilson, 5%; Richard Nixon, 5%. The findings reveal a 20th Century emphasis in ranking the top chief executives; a difference between Democratic and Republican party identifiers as to whom the two greatest presidents were; and some influence of the respondents' age on their top choice. Finally, a recent study by Tannenhaus and Foley [6] demonstrates through laboratory experimentation how different groups can empirically separate attitudes about a president from the office he occupies. Their study involved thirty-six total subjects, from a university and advocacy group. The most important properties identified by both groups are honesty and integrity, sensitivity to racial problems, defending human rights, understanding in international relations, and concern for human welfare. However, the two groups clearly disagreed on the role that a strong religious orientation plays in rating presidential authority.

Experts' Choice

One of the earliest and most laborious exercises in measuring presidential distinction was undertaken by Professor J. McKeen Cattell of Columbia University in 1903. Cattell sought to single out 1000 figures in world history by measuring the space they occupied in six different dictionaries/encyclopedias published in four countries--England, France, Germany, United States. No effort was made to determine how much one source might have been influenced by another. Eight American presidents made Catell's list: Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson appeared among the top 100; John Adams made the second hundred; Jackson the third hundred; and John Quincy Adams placed in the top 500.

More revealing, but still misleading according to Bailey, is line-space accorded chief executives in the Dictionary of American Biography, initially published between 1928 and 1936 and supplemented in 1944 and 1956. Rankings are based on coverage of each man's entire career as well as his presidency. Only deceased figures were eligible; presidents from Hoover on were excluded. The top five presidents in each category included Jefferson, Washington, Lincoln, Wilson, and Madison for career; and Wilson, Lincoln, Andrew Johnson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Grover Cleveland for presidency.

In 1921 newspaperman Arthur H. Vandenberg solicited the views of 108 prominent Americans in a poll inquiring as to who the greatest American was. Fifty of the ninety-eight experts who replied chose Lincoln;

George Washington ran second with 30 votes; Theodore Roosevelt (3 votes) and Jefferson (1 vote) were among other presidents preferred by respondents. Predictably, Washington earned most of his votes from Southern-born respondents, while that region provided only a fraction of Lincoln's total. Despite these findings, Vandenberg proceeded to justify on his own why Alexander Hamilton, not any of the aforementioned men, was the greatest American.

Harvard Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. conducted two highly regarded expert polls on presidential rankings. His 1948 poll [7] used fifty-five experts to rate performance as president; a traditional academic scale (A-F) served as the measuring device. The 1962 poll [8], adding Presidents Truman and Eisenhower (William Harrison and James Garfield were omitted from both polls), employed the same rating technique and was administered to 75 experts. A comparison of the two polls shows minor fluctuations in the great-to-failure ratings, though the five presidents regarded as great and the two categorized as failures remained the same. Bailey claims the respondents in these polls had a pro-Democratic bias, over-represented the Northeastern region, and were fallible in judgement.

Bailey delineates several factors which most likely influence scholars' ratings of presidents, including partisan bias, morality, political experience, level of information, philosophy of government, recent scholarly findings, sectional subjectivity, economic influences, and current national mood. More subtle factors in presidential ratings range from birthday observances and political cartoon depictions to literary sources, the availability of documents, and presidential library-shrines. Morton Borden's [9] edited work agrees with the top-ten vote-getters in Schlesinger's 1948 poll due to expert consensus.

Maranell overcame many of the methodological problems inherent the Schlesinger polls through the use of social psychological scaling instead of simple ranking, inclusion of additional dimensions of evaluation, the use of a larger and less biased sample, and by selecting a single professional society as a sampling frame. Maranell summarizes his findings by observing that the presidents best known to the panel of American historians appear to combine recent presidents whose administrations they experienced with those chief executives creating a sustained historical interest.

In a subsequent article reporting on the poll, Maranell and Dodder [10] test whether correlations between different dimensions vary among liberal or conservative lines. The researchers establish that: (1) presidential accomplishment is most highly related to presidential prestige among liberals and conservatives; (2) strength and activeness are also highly related to presidential prestige among liberals and conservatives; (3) neither idealism nor flexibility are highly related to prestige for either sub-sample; (4) liberal historians view idealistic and flexible presidents as more prestigious, stronger, more active, and as having accomplished more than those with contrary characteristics.

Parsons' [11] study integrates Maranell's sample with his own to examine cross-discipline variations in ratings of six post-World War Il chief executives: FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. One-hundred twenty political scientists and 146 economists rated the latter presidents along three dimensions: (1) style, or manner of the president; (2) accomplishment; and (3) overall appraisal, a combination of Schlesinger's greatness and Maranell's prestige concepts. Parsons finds almost complete agreement by the disciplines on accomplishment rankings; there was no significant effect of partisan identification or ideological leaning on any dimension.

DiClerico [12] first published results from a 1977 U.S. Historical Society poll, which asked 85 historians to pick the ten greatest presidents. The vote breakdown is as follows: Lincoln, 85%; Washington, 84%; FDR, 81%; Jefferson, 79%; Teddy Roosevelt, 79%; Wilson, 74%; Jackson, 74%; Truman, 64%; Polk, 38%; John Adams, 35%. This order of ranking closely resembles the Schlesinger 1962 and Maranell 1970 polls.

A substantial shift in elite/expert sentiment toward President Eisenhower is evident in a 1982 poll conducted by the Chicago Tribune [13]. Forty-nine leading scholars were asked to rank the ten best and ten worst chief executives. Lincoln, Washington, FDR, Teddy Roosevelt, Jefferson, Wilson, Jackson, Truman, Eisenhower, and Polk were cited as the best presidents. Conversely, two 1970s occupants of the White House, Presidents Nixon and Carter, were among the worst-regarded chief executives.

The most recent expert presidential ranking study covered here is by far the most comprehensive. Murray and Blessing [14] compiled a nineteen-page, 155-question survey and asked 1997 Ph.D. holding American historians to complete it. Eight hundred forty-six respondents completed the survey, a 48.6% return rate. One section of the survey sought rankings of all presidents (except William H. Harrison and Jarnes Garfield) within the general categories of great (a value of one), near great (two), above average (three), average (four), below average (five), and failure (six). Table 1 at back illustrates the category placement and mean rating of 36 American presidents.

Besides analyzing the rankings along demographic and academic lines, Murray and Blessing established a controversial index for presidents by plotting the deviation in the respondent rankings of each one. Those chief executives who received the widest distribution of rankings were Nixon, Lyndon Johnson, Hoover, and Jackson. The researchers regard this measure as an indicator of volatility in views and hence predict that judgements toward the latter four presidents are most likely to change in future surveys. Washington, Lincoln, and FDR were rated as the least controversial presidents. Murray and Blessing draw several conclusions from their study: (1) American historians are in basic agreement about the rank of several presidents; (2) usually the more contemporary a president is, the more volatile his ranking will be; (3) of the total variation in any given president's mean ranking, only a small fraction of it can be traced to characteristics associated with respondents.

In an accompanying article, Murphy [15] summarizes aspects of the Murray-Blessing study. He develops a rank order of five presidential eras according to the placement of chief executives in the prior poll: (1) Virginia Dynasty (Washington-John Quincy Adams), 10.1 mean ranking; (2) Superpower Era (FDR-carter), 15.8; (3) USA in World Power (Teddy Roosevelt-Hoover), 19.5; (4) Gilded Age (Lincoln-McKinley), 21.7; (5) Jacksonians (Jackson-Buchanan), 23.3. The author claims that the results of the Murray-Blessing poll contradict the widespread claim that Federalist, Whig, or Republican presidents have been slighted in the rankings.

III. PRESIDENTIAL ATTRIBUTES AND PRESIDENTIAL RANKINGS

The comprehensive, quasi-scientific nature of the Murray-Blessing 1983 study provides the opportunity for an empirical examination of presidentially-focused factors which may influence their ranking. Three sets of factors will be assessed: (l) background factors, or how previous general or government experience affects rankings; (2) economic factors, including inflation and civilian unemployment levels; (3) political factors, encompassing aspects of a president's relations with the public and Congress.

Background experience consists of six variables: gubernatorial, cabinet, congressional, vice presidential, and general experience as well as total government experience prior to presidential tenure, with the latter comprised of all of the above. lt is assumed that service in each or all of these positions should lead to a lower mean ranking, denoting more positive evaluations of chief executives on the Murray-Blessing greatness scale.

The economic factors include civilian unemployment levels and the change in the consumer price index, or inflation. Each variable is measured by whole percent; yearly percentages are averaged over the length of a president's tenure and compared to the Murray-Blessing mean rankings. Civilian unemployment figures are available from 1898 to 1981, which spans fifteen presidential administrations. Inflation levels from 1933-1981 are analyzed, encompassing eight chief executives. Unlike the previous set of variables, these factors have more of a proclivity to negatively affect evaluations of greatness. The hypothesis accompanying the economic factors is the higher the aggregate percentage of unemployment or inflation, the higher a president's mean ranking will be.

The first political factor is presidential popularity. A Gallup Poll question inquiring whether respondents approve or disapprove of the way the incumbent president is handling his job is the evaluation device; the percent of a national sample of voters who approve of the president's performance as measured in the final poll administered during his tenure is the variable. Using the last popularity percentage recorded during a president's term of office prevents distortions and is more theoretically and methodologically appropriate than taking the average percentage for this variable. Since it is assumed that the historians in the Murray-Blessing poll must have been guided to some extent by their own most recent recollections of a president's performance, we shall test the proposition that the higher the president's final popularity percentage, the lower his mean ranking on the 1-6 scale. The popularity/approval ratings have been figured over eight presidential administrations.

The president's party support in Congress is second political factor. It is measured partly by the following formula: NHPP + NSPP/N of Congress where NHPP stands for the number of Congress members sharing the president's party affiliation; NSPP refers to the number of senators identifying with the president's party; and N of Congress is the total number of members serving in Congress during each two-year session. The party support figure corresponding to each president is the average of percentages recorded for each Congress during his administration. Watson and Thomas [16] find that congressional support for the president is built primarily on party loyalty. Although a majority of partisans in Congress does not guarantee effective leadership or policy success for a president, it is certainly a contributing factor. This study compares party support with mean rankings over twenty presidential administrations (Grant-Carter), with the hypothesis being the stronger a president's partisan support in Congress during his tenure, the more positive that retrospective evaluations of his performance will be. We utilize the Murray-Blessing greatness poll to test that hypothesis.

Veto success is the third political factor examined for its relation to presidential rankings. The veto success percentage is measured by dividing the number of presidential vetoes overridden by the number of regular vetoes (of public and private bills; excluding pocket vetoes) issued by a chief executive.

Jackson [17] postulates that by employing the veto a president emphasizes, for the most part, a positive position in government. Researchers such as Corwin [18], Polsby [19], Binkley [20], Egger and Harris [21], and Egger [22] contend that the veto is an indicator of the president's power, influence, and leadership vis-a-vis Congress. A high veto success percentage generally increases a president's prestige--it follows that retroactive evaluations of performance, or greatness, would be positive as well. Presidential vetoes and congressional veto overrides did not occur with regularity until the Civil War. The relation between veto success and rankings of presidents is assessed over the twenty-two administrations from Lincoln through Carter employing the Murray-Blessing greatness findings.

The aggregate percentage of success a president had on congressional votes where the administration took a clear-cut stand is another political factor. Congressional Quarterly calculates annual legislative success scores based on the following guidelines: (1) only issues which receive a roll-call vote on the House and Senate floor are counted; (2) the president's support or opposition for proposed legislation must be both public and clear; (3) all votes receive equal weight--no distinction is made between the size of vote outcomes or whether the bills originate from Congress or the executive branch. Yearly success rates are summed and divided by the number of years a president serves, furnishing an average percentage for each president.

The Congressional Quarterly legislative success rate has been computed annually since 1953; its aggregate tenure wide effect will be compared to the mean rankings of six presidents (Eisenhower through Carter). lt should be noted that President Ford's average percentage of success on pertinent legislative votes includes a 1974 measurement which is independent of the annual stand success rate achieved by President Nixon during the same year. Just as with popularity, partisan support, and veto success, the assumption here is the higher a president's average success rate on congressional votes where the administration took a clear-cut position, the lower his mean ranking on the Murray-Blessing scale.

The final two political factors are measured numerically. They consist of the length of a president's tenure measured in years and instances where a president committed American troops to military conflicts abroad without prior congressional consent or a declaration of war. Consistent with all of the variables described above, we posit a linear relationship between the above factors and mean rankings. For tenure, there should be a tendency for those presidents who have served more than one term to be evaluated positively on the Murray-Blessing greatness scale. This hypothesis takes account of the fact that leadership, competence, and policy success will be rewarded through reelection.

The source for measuring foreign military conflicts undertaken by an administration is a chart drafted in 1973 by senators considering the War Powers Act [23]. A total of 202 recorded conflicts from 1789 through Lyndon Johnson's presidency are included. It is theorized that those presidents who employed their power as commander-in-chief more than others were instrumental in structuring the role; because these executives augmented the power of the presidency as a whole they are most likely to be regarded as great, near great, or at least above average presidents on the Murray-Blessing scale.

IV. METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of our introductory analysis of factors affecting mean rankings of presidents, correlation analysis is the most appropriate statistical procedure. A correlation coefficient indicates the degree or strength of relationship between two variables; it is a measure of a linearly-specified hypothesis [24]. The range of the gauge runs from 1 to -1, where a value of 1 indicates a perfect positive relationship; a value of -1 denotes a perfect inverse association and a value of 0 is interpreted as either no relationship or a curvilinear relationship.

As the value of the correlation coefficient increases in either direction, more variance is accounted for. The Murray-Blessing findings are applied to all of the aforementioned variables in order to assess the impact which individual factors or a set of measures have on judgements of presidential greatness.

V. RESULTS

Table 2 furnishes findings from the correlation procedure.

With the exception of gubernatorial experience, background factors do not appear to be strongly related to or influence presidential rankings. The correlation between service as governor and mean presidential rank is -.18. The negative sign denotes an inverse relationship, which is intuitively correct: being a governor generally decreases mean rankings, and the Murray-Blessing scale classifies great presidents as a one (1), but those chief

executives who receive mean rankings approaching six (6) as failures. The remaining background coefficients are positive in direction; these results dispel the hypothesis about the significant effect of this set of variables.

In evaluating the manner by which economic factors impact presidential rankings, it must be admitted that these factors and political factors often overlap: both administration policy and environmental conditions contribute to unemployment and inflation levels. The results show that as the aggregate tenure-long percentage of each increases, so does a president's mean ranking, though inflation (.58) is much more highly correlated with rank than unemployment (.08) using the Murray-Blessing scale.

The political factors show the most promising and consistent relationship with judgements about presidential greatness. Stand success is correlated with mean ranking -.87; presidential popularity and length of tenure share a-.59 correlation with Murray Blessing rankings; the relation between veto success and mean ranking is at -.45; military conflict is insignificantly related to evaluations of greatness at -.03. Except for the latter variable, the findings for the political factors underscore the sustained impact which public support and effective relations with Congress have on the degree of success achieved by a president's administration, hence on positive retrospective evaluations of power, prestige, and overall performance. The results here support research by several presidential scholars—including Neustadt [25], Kellerman [26], and Hoff [27] among others—who argue that theories of presidential power cannot be devoid of political considerations and still claim to comprehensively explain actions.

VI. DISCUSSION

Many scholars reacting to research on presidential rankings criticize the placement of chief executives into superficial categories as well as certain biases held by experts and the public. DiClerico cites several problems encountered when evaluating presidential performance, including the question of what constitutes achievement or greatness; the fact that achievement is in the eye of the beholder; situational and perspective-based problems; the matter of unintended consequences; and the difficulty in determining who gets credit for actions. Murphy questions the accuracy of subjective evaluations. Bailey observes that the powers and responsibilities of the executive office have increased enormously in the 20th Century. Finally, Amlund [28] asserts that there has been more description than analysis in this particular area of study.

This pioneering research effort has sought to respond to Amlund's charge by empirically testing the relation between attribute, environmental, and political-type variables and rankings, rather than limiting the analysis to assessing the impact of which respondents' personal characteristics may have on presidential rankings. With the advent of more studies like the Murray-Blessing poll, researchers will be able to hone statistical techniques used to test catalysts on rankings, thereby transforming what has previously been considered trivia into a subject for scholarly scientific investigation. Moreover, if the results of this work are replicated in subsequent studies, it could be that retrospective evaluations of chief executives will furnish a foundation for predicting power and performance during a president's tenure.

Table 1: Results of 1983 Murray-Blessing Poll on Presidential Greatness

President	Category	Mean Ranking
Lincoln	1	1.13
F. Roosevelt	1	1.22
Washington	1	1.27
Jefferson	1	1.70
T. Roosevelt	2	1.93
Wilson	2	2.07
Jackson	2	2.32
Truman	2	2.45
J. Adams	3	2.85
L. Johnson	3	2.87
Eisenhower	3	2.99
Polk	3	3.06
Kennedy	3	3.13
Madison	3	3.30

Monroe	3	3.35
J.Q. Adams	3	3.42
Cleveland	3	3.43
McKinley	4	3.78
Taft	4	3.87
Van Buren	4	3.97
Hoover	4	4.03
Hayes	4	4.05
Arthur	4	4.24
Ford	4	4.32
Carter	4	4.36
B. Harrison	4	4.40
Taylor	5	4.45
Tyler	5	4.61
Fillmore	5	4.64
Coolidge	5	4.65
Pierce	5	4.95
A.Johnson	6	5.10
Buchanan	6	5.15
Nixon	6	5.18
Grant	6	5.25
Harding	6	5.56

Category: 1=Great, 2=Near Great, 3=Above Average, 4=Average, 5=Below Average, 6=Failure

Table 2: Relation Between Personal, Economic, and Political Factors and Greatness Rank*

Factor	#Presidents Included	Correlation Coefficient
PERSONAL		
Vice President	36	.09
Cabinet	36	.09
Congress	36	.25
Governor	36	-.18
General	36	.09
All Experience	36	.20
ECONOMIC		
Unemployment	15	.08
Inflation	8	.58
POLITICAL		
Popularity	8	-.59

Veto Success	22	-.45
Party Support	20	-.26
Length of Tenure	36	-.59
Stand Success	6	-.87
Military Conflict	33	-.03

*Presidents ranked according to findings in 1983 Murray-Blessing study, which uses a 1-6 greatness scale, with 1 being best and 6 worst.

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