Presidential Character

Inquire: What is Presidential Character and is it Important to Greatness?

Overview
Presidents have numerous hats to wear — an almost impossible lexicon of roles and responsibilities — all to be performed under the microscopic scrutiny of the American press and the American people. Can someone be everything the American people expect and still be a person who can complete all of their responsibilities effectively and efficiently?

Regardless of the answer, it is what the American people want. So, what are the attributes of presidential character? And, how do we evaluate, even rank, the presidents throughout U.S. history, even though they lived and worked in radically different times and under radically different circumstances?

Big Question: Does character play a part in assessing the success or failure of a president?

Watch: Picking a Winner - Ranking the Presidents
America is fascinated with finding and naming the best. The best restaurants, the best burgers, the best movies, the best sports teams: America finds a way to rank them all.

Presidents are no different. From George Washington, the first president, to Donald Trump, the 45th president, there are numerous lists and rankings trying to quantify and identify the best and worst presidents of all time.

But, how do you judge them? Is it fair to compare a Calvin Coolidge in a time of relative peace and prosperity with an Abraham Lincoln who was faced with slavery, a divided country, and the Civil War?

In 2018, Brandon Rottinghaus, Ph.D. (Political Science) from the University of Houston and Justin S. Vaughn, Ph.D. (Political Science) from Boise State University surveyed 170 current and recent members of the Presidents & Executive Politics Section of the American Political Science Association, the foremost organization of social science experts in presidential politics.

The respondents were asked to rate each president on a scale of 0-100 for their overall greatness: 0=failure, 50=average, and 100=great. The responses were averaged for the ratings for each president and ranked from highest to lowest.
The top five are pretty standard in most surveys:

1. Lincoln
2. Washington
3. Franklin D. Roosevelt
4. Theodore Roosevelt
5. Jefferson

The rankings are solid, but potentially controversial, especially when you consider Lincoln freed the slaves, yet Washington and Jefferson both owned slaves.

The next five are also fairly standard, except for the inclusion of Obama at number eight:

6. Truman
7. Eisenhower
8. Obama
9. Reagan
10. Lyndon B. Johnson

The bottom ten are also pretty usual regarding this and other surveys — with the exception of the person listed as dead last in the 2018 rankings — current President Donald Trump:

36. Taylor
37. Hoover
38. Tyler
39. Fillmore
40. Harding
41. Androhnson
42. Pierce
43. Harrison
44. Buchanan
45. Trump

As with any rankings, there are disagreements and controversies. Also, history teaches us that “time and truth walk hand in hand,” so it may be a number of years before we can truly evaluate the more modern presidents.

Rankings are fun and thought provoking. Still, is it really possible to compare different men at different times and come up with an accurate result? Regardless, Americans will continue to rank the presidents — and argue about the results!

Rottinghaus, Brandon, University of Houston and Vaughn, Justin S., Boise State University
Official Results of the 2018 Presidents & Executive Politics Presidential Greatness Survey (2018); https://sps.boisestate.edu/politicalscience/files/2018/02/Greatness.pdf; Date Accessed: Tuesday, June 12, 2018

Read: A Hunger for a Legacy

Overview

Every president wants to make an impact: to make a mark on the country, and even the world, that will define how they are remembered — their legacy. For example, Washington set the standard for all time; Lincoln freed the slaves; FDR re-created America with the New Deal and then led the United States to
victory in World War II; and Teddy Roosevelt epitomized the rugged American while vastly increasing America’s world-footprint and secured the rights and resources to build the Panama Canal.

Uncontrollable Circumstances

What often shapes a president’s performance, reputation, and ultimately, legacy depends on circumstances that are largely out of his or her control. Did the president prevail in a landslide, or was it a closely contested election? Did he or she come to office as the result of death, assassination, or resignation? How much support did the president’s party enjoy, and is that support reflected in the composition of both houses of Congress, just one, or neither? Did the president face a Congress ready to embrace proposals or poised to oppose them? Whatever a president’s ambitions, it is hard to realize them in the face of a hostile or divided Congress; and, the options to exercise independent leadership are greater in times of crisis and war than when looking at domestic concerns alone.

Political Time

Then, there is what political scientist Stephen Skowronek calls political time.

As Skowronek explains, some presidents take office at times of great stability with few concerns. Unless there are radical or unexpected changes, a president’s options are limited, especially if voters hoped for a simple continuation of what had come before. Other presidents take office at a time of crisis or when the electorate is looking for significant changes. Then, there is both pressure and opportunity for responding to those challenges. Theodore Roosevelt openly bemoaned the lack of any such crisis, which Roosevelt deemed essential for him to achieve greatness as president.

People in the United States claim they want a strong president. What does that mean? At times, scholars point to presidential independence, even defiance, as evidence of strong leadership. Thus, vigorous use of the veto power in key situations can cause observers to judge a president as strong and independent. That kind of strength, however, is far from effective in shaping constructive policies. Nor is such defiance and confrontation always evidence of presidential leadership skill or greatness, as the case of Andrew Johnson should remind us. When is effectiveness a sign of strength, and when are we confusing being headstrong with being strong? Sometimes, historians and political scientists see cooperation with Congress as evidence of weakness. For example, Ulysses S. Grant may have been far more effective in garnering support for administration initiatives than scholars have given him credit for.

Domestic policy-making requires a lot of give and take and a fair share of cajoling and collaboration. National emergencies and war offer presidents far more opportunity to act vigorously and, at times, independently. This phenomenon often produces the “rally around the flag effect” in which presidential popularity spikes during international crisis.

According to Otto von Bismarck, politics is the art of the possible. A president must always be aware of this, even as it is his or her duty to increase what might be possible by persuading both members of Congress and the general public of what needs to be done.

Lasting Legacies

Some, but not all, presidents do leave a legacy that lasts far beyond their time in office. Sometimes, there are long-term implications of policy decisions. Critical to the notion of legacy is the shaping of the judiciary, specifically the Supreme Court and the federal courts. Long after John Adams left the White House in 1801, his appointment of John Marshall as Chief Justice shaped American jurisprudence for over three decades. The Supreme Court’s major decisions changed America no less than FDR’s or
Lincoln’s presidencies, though Adams is not usually listed in their company. No wonder confirmation hearings have grown more contentious in the cases of highly visible nominees.

Other legacies are more difficult to define, although they suggest that some presidents cast a long shadow over their successors. It was a tough act to follow George Washington. In death, Abraham Lincoln’s presidential stature grew to extreme heights. Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt offered models of vigorous executive leadership, while the image and style of John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan influenced, and at times haunted or frustrated, successors.

Nor is this impact — this legacy — limited to chief executives deemed successful. Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam and Richard Nixon’s Watergate offered cautionary tales of presidential power gone wrong. These presidents left behind legacies that include terms like Vietnam syndrome and the tendency to add the suffix -gate to scandals and controversies.

Sometimes, the legacy gets overlooked in the business of other events. James K. Polk is never listed in the top ten presidents, or even top 20. However, no president expanded American territory more than Polk, not even Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase. Polk negotiated with Great Britain and solidified the claims and boundaries to the Washington and Oregon Territories, but that was only the beginning. He essentially forced Mexico into a war — the Mexican-American War — for which the United States was very unprepared. After a resounding victory by the American forces, Polk then forced a treaty on Mexico that allowed America to pay a paltry $15,000,000 for a clear title to much of Texas and what became all or parts of Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and California. Now, that’s a legacy.

The question of slavery in the new territories, and the fact that the whole southwestern expansion was one part extortion and one part land grab, overshadows Polk’s achievements in office. Polk is never mentioned as a great president. Still, where would America be without Washington, Oregon, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, Texas, and California?

Reflect: Which President is Your Favorite?

Poll
Select which president you think is the best from the list of the top five and which president you think is the worst from the list of the bottom five.

Top Five:
- Lincoln
- Washington
- Franklin D. Roosevelt
- Theodore Roosevelt
- Jefferson

Bottom Five:
- Andrew Johnson
- Pierce
- Harrison
- Buchanan
- Trump
Expand: Presidential Character

Overview

Harry S. Truman — man of the people. John F. Kennedy — bold, articulate leader with a great deal of charisma. Richard Nixon — introspective, with a deep knowledge of and interest in foreign policy. Each person who has held the office of president has brought to it a unique style. Each style reflects a president's character.

Barber's Research

James Barber published a well-known study of presidential character in which he studied personalities in order to predict presidential performance. Barber believes presidents can be categorized as having positive or negative attitudes, and as being active or passive. His findings indicate that positive/active presidents are more successful than passive/negative ones. For example, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt had positive/active personalities. According to Barber, their personalities caused them to approach the presidency with enthusiasm and a drive to lead and succeed.

This research is controversial, but it is based on the assumption that presidential character and personality are extremely important in determining how successful a president is in office.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
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<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>ADAPTIVE: These presidents are confident &amp; flexible; they create opportunities for action; they enjoy the exercise of power &amp; do not take themselves too seriously; they emphasize the &quot;rational mastery&quot; of their environment; power is used as a means to achieve beneficial results.</td>
<td>COMPULSIVE: power is used as a means to self-realization; they expend great energy on tasks but derive little joy; they are preoccupied with whether they are failing or succeeding; they have low self-esteem; they are inclined to rigidity &amp; are highly driven; they have a problem managing aggression.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>COMPLIANT: superficially optimistic they seek to be loved; they are easily manipulated; they have low self-esteem which is overcome by an ingratiating personality; they react rather than initiate.</td>
<td>WITHDRAWN: they respond to a sense of duty; they avoid power; they have low self-esteem which is compensated by service to others; they respond rather than initiate; they avoid conflict and uncertainty; they emphasize principles and procedures and have an aversion to politicking.</td>
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*Dr. Vincent McGuire, University of Colorado, summarized Barber’s ideas into a chart which he used in his classes.*
Rating the Presidents

Most Americans have their own ideas about which presidents deserve to be called great and which were failures. Historians even get into the ratings game. Harvard Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger started the modern game with his invitation to 55 prominent historians to rate the presidents. Although the lists have varied over the years, some presidents consistently rate at the top. Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and Franklin D. Roosevelt have locked up the top three spots in nearly every ranking survey. Others with high scores are Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Harry Truman. Usually near the bottom are James Buchanan (who did nothing to prevent the Civil War), Ulysses S. Grant (considered inept and incompetent), and Warren Harding (many of his closest associates were crooks and were convicted of bribery and/or misuse of their power). Historians are reluctant to rank modern presidents, because not enough time has passed to assess their legacies.

Some common leadership qualities that good presidents appear to have are the following:

- A strong vision for the country’s future
- An ability to put their own times in the perspective of history
- Effective communication skills
- The courage to make unpopular decisions
- Crisis management skills
- Character and integrity
- Wise appointments
- An ability to work with Congress

All Americans have different ideas about the importance that character plays in the job performance of the president. Considering all of the hats a president must wear, perhaps the symbolic role that the president plays is most affected by character. Presidents must somehow symbolize what American citizens believe to be the essence of their country. They must represent what is valued now and in the past. But, even more importantly, they embody the direction of America’s future.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Presidential Character: A Short Film (AP US Government)
- A video discussing what presidential character is and giving examples of it
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7gQkG-B80c

Title: Presidential Character: An Ethical History
- A video drawing on a wealth of stories to bring to light the issue of presidential character
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BluURSkDEKA

Title: David Brooks and Ronald C. White - Character and the Presidency
- A video discussing the past, present, and future of the American presidency
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A11It4EuO7o
Lesson Glossary

None

Check Your Knowledge

1. James Barber found in his study of presidential character that positive/passive presidents are more successful than active/negative ones.
   A. True
   B. False

2. United States citizens claim they want a strong president, but the meaning of the word strong is often hard to define.
   A. True
   B. False

3. Typically, presidential popularity spikes during international crisis.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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