

Presidential Greatness and Political Science: Assessing the 2014 APSA Presidents and Executive Politics Section Presidential Greatness Survey

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ABSTRACT

Debates about presidential greatness have been with us for decades, facilitated in part by numerous systematic surveys of scholars with expertise in American history and politics. Nevertheless, the voice of political scientists in this debate has been relatively muted when compared particularly with the role that historians have had in making these determinations. This article introduces and assesses results of a recent effort to capture the attitudes of political science presidency experts about presidential greatness. By surveying the membership of the APSA Presidents and Executive Politics section, we could identify and then compare specifically the attitudes of political scientists against the growing body of ratings and rankings of a phenomenon with long-standing interest and importance.

The debate about who our greatest presidents have been is an age-old parlor game that has been played since Americans elected a president not named Washington. Over time, as the number of presidents eligible for entry into the greatness debate grew, various sub-debates also became possible. Not only could disputants present arguments in favor of or against one president or another as the greatest in all history, they also could squabble about which was the greatest commander-in-chief; which had the highest integrity and greatest moral courage; and, of course, which most exhibited a serious lack of greatness. Related to these new arguments, the very definition of presidential greatness has been contestable and contested as American history—and American political values— evolves.

The subject of presidential greatness, particularly from a modern political science perspective, is the focus of this article. The contested concept of presidential greatness and the various scholarly efforts to capture and analyze the phenomenon are discussed briefly. We then introduce results of a new study of presidential greatness based on a large sample of political

scientists who are engaged in the ongoing study of the American presidency. Results of this study underscore some of the findings we have come to expect based on decades of analysis primarily from historians. The study also yielded intriguing results potentially related to the distinct disciplinary perspectives of political scientists about the presidency that separates them from scholars in other fields.

WHAT IS PRESIDENTIAL GREATNESS?

Arguably, there are as many—if not significantly more—perspectives on what it means to be a great president as there have been presidents. Indeed, a 2012 CNN story that attempted to ultimately understand the concept instead further indicated the variety of opinions, even as it queried well-known historians with largely similar methodological approaches to the study of the office and the individuals who have held it (CNN 2012). For example, Richard Reeves stated, “Presidential greatness is determined by being in the White House at the right time—or the wrong time. The presidency is a reactive job and we judge the presidents by their handling of one or two big crises, usually unforeseen.” Similarly, Joseph Ellis noted that the nation’s three greatest presidents—George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt—came to office in times of great crisis. H. W. Brands, however, took a broader approach than Reeves and Ellis’s focus on crisis management, arguing that “great presidents are those who change the course of American History.” He pointed out Andrew Jackson’s

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involvement of ordinary people in the political process, Abraham Lincoln's reversal of secession and slave emancipation, Franklin Roosevelt's founding of the welfare state and defeat of fascism, and Ronald Reagan's dismantling of much of the regulatory state he confronted on election to the position in 1980. Joan Hoff took a different approach to determining what the greatest presidents had in common, observing that nearly all of them regularly at the top of scholarly surveys led the nation in time of war (except Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt); however, she notes that merely conducting a war alone is not sufficient. Aida Donald invoked various other criteria, ranging from accomplishments to sound decision making to personal character.

on the presidents' cognitive processes and behavioral attributes. They concluded that factors such as presidents being achievement-oriented and inclined to assert their interests are determinative. Dean Simonton, a psychologist who pioneered much of his discipline's presidency-focused research, instead identified factors more likely to resonate with political scientists: number of years in office, number of years as a wartime commander-in-chief, an administration scandal, an assassination, and entering office with a reputation as a war hero (Simonton 1986). Other recent political science research has shown that economic performance (Curry and Morris 2010), policy productivity (Rottinghaus and Vaughn 2016), and public demand for progressive leadership

Other recent political science research has shown that economic performance (Curry and Morris 2010), policy productivity (Rottinghaus and Vaughn 2016), and public demand for progressive leadership (Nichols 2012) also explain assessments of presidential greatness, whereas the one commonly believed explanation—prior experience—does not (Balz 2010).

That leading figures from the same discipline at the same moment in time could take such distinct approaches to presidential greatness reinforces the notion that whereas presidential greatness is frequently discussed, it has not been defined entirely. Therefore, the fact that psychologists take an equally distinctive perspective should not be a surprise. In a paper presented to the American Psychological Association, Rubenzer, Faschingbauer, and Ones (2000) focused on what the greatest presidents had in common. Rather than identifying factors such as the presence of crisis or successful management of major wars, they focused

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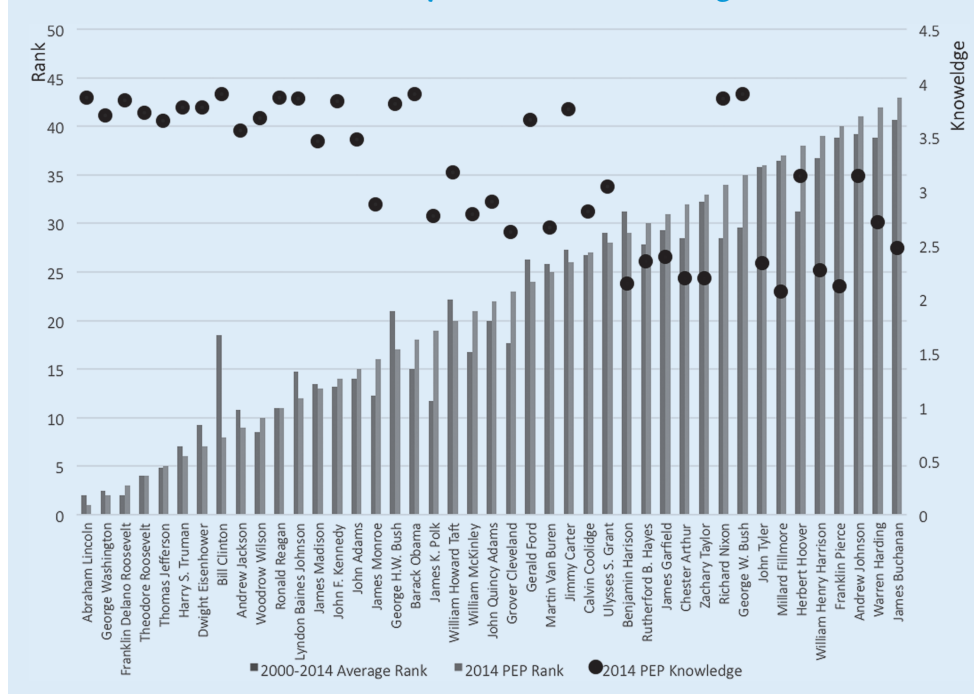
Conversely, Karl Rove, who was George W. Bush's strategist and adviser, sounded more like a psychologist than a political operative when he opined on the subject during a speech at the University of Utah. According to Rove, presidential greatness is a function of a few essential factors: clarity of vision, clarity of direction, the presence of a crisis, emotional intelligence (a phrase that he acknowledged was borrowed from the work

of Fred Greenstein), a respect for public opinion, the presence of a strong team of advisors, and a "readiness to act and a comfort in deciding" (Rove 2002). Although many of these factors may sound as if they are from a George W. Bush stump speech—one he would have participated in authoring—Rove did a masterful job of linking explanations ranging from individual characteristics to institutional context (see also Kenney and Rice 1988) in a rather broadminded and transdisciplinary approach to the concept of presidential greatness.

STUDYING PRESIDENTIAL GREATNESS

Virtually all of the previously mentioned social science research designed to explain presidential greatness used the growing body of surveys conducted among both experts and the mass public. Famed historian Arthur M. Schlesinger

Figure 1
Presidential Greatness Survey Rank and Knowledge



pioneered the practice of surveying intellectual elites about their attitudes toward our greatest presidential leadership. In 1948, *Life* magazine published the results of his study of 55 historians, which asked them to assign each president to one of five categories: great, near great, average, below average, and failure. Abraham Lincoln was the unanimous victor and, indeed, the only president to receive a “great” vote from every respondent (Bose 2003, 5). Fourteen years later, Schlesinger conducted another survey, this time featuring 75 historians, which was published in the *New York Times Magazine*. The results across these two studies were largely consistent, with the majority of 1962 presidential rankings remaining within a couple places of their 1948 counterparts. However, noteworthy exceptions included James Monroe (-6 ranks, from 12 to 18), Andrew Johnson (-4, from 19 to 23), Chester Arthur (-4, from 17 to 21), and Calvin Coolidge (-4, from 23 to 27).

A few decades later, the *New York Times Magazine* recruited Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. to conduct another expert poll in 1996. He also published an extended report in *Political Science Quarterly* (Schlesinger 1997). His method slightly departed from his father’s, however, because he decreased the number of respondents to 32 and expanded the pool to include politicians Governor Mario Cuomo and US Senator Paul Simon. This makes a comparison imperfect but it provides insight into shifting perspectives on presidential greatness and how impressions of presidents have changed. The results of Schlesinger Jr.’s survey were consistent with the two conducted by his father; however, they provided evidence that several presidents experienced significant changes in reputation in the half-century since the first Schlesinger poll was released. For example, presidents whose rankings dropped by more than five places between the surveys included John Tyler (from 22 to 32), James Buchanan (from 29 to 38), Andrew Johnson

(from 23 to 37), Ulysses S. Grant (from 28 to 34), Rutherford Hayes (from 14 to 23), Chester Arthur (from 17 to 26), William Howard Taft (from 16 to 22), Warren Harding (from 31 to 39), and Herbert Hoover (from 19 to 35). Dwight Eisenhower’s rank increased, however, from 22 in 1962—when he had been out of office for less than two years—to 10 in 1996.

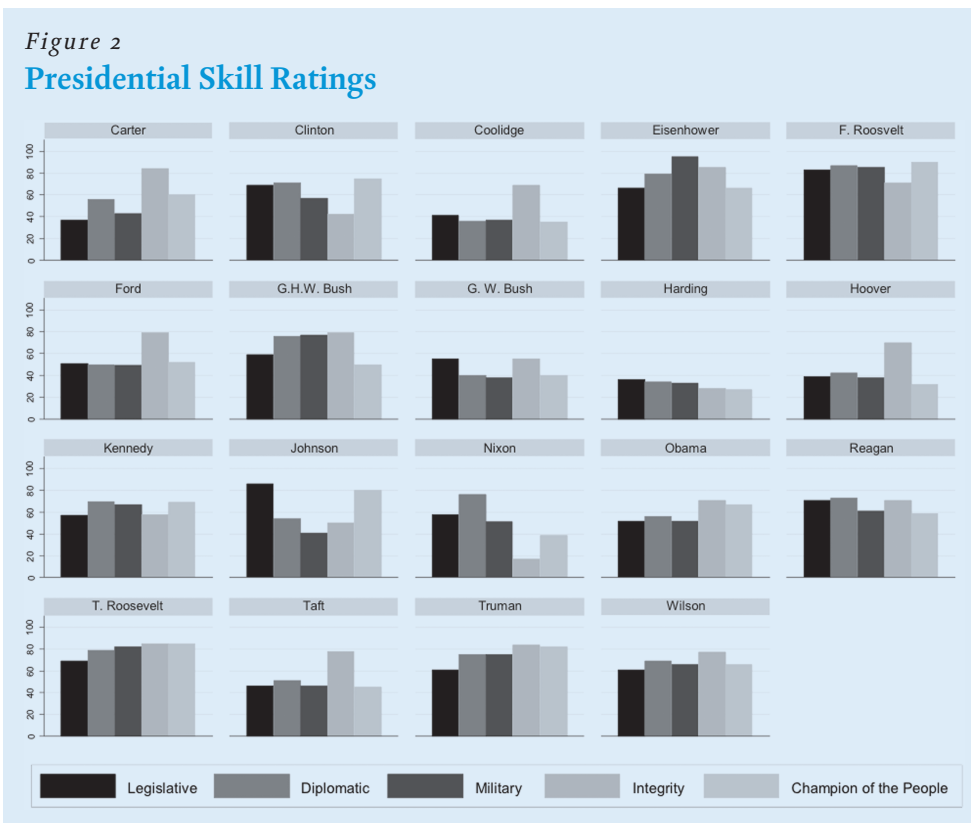
By 1996, the presidential rankings “cottage industry” had expanded to well beyond only the Schlesinger family. Between Schlesinger Sr.’s second study and Schlesinger Jr.’s first, there were several similar efforts, including a *Chicago Tribune* poll in 1982 and three polls produced by the Siena Research Institute (SRI) at Siena College in 1982, 1990, and 1994. Since then, SRI has conducted similar polls in 2002 and 2010. In the years since the last Schlesinger poll, there also have been two *Wall Street Journal*-sponsored studies (2000 and 2005), two C-SPAN studies (1999 and 2009), and various one-time studies conducted by *Newsweek* (2012), History News Network (2013), *The Times* of London (2008), and the United States Presidency Centre (2011) in London. Some of these studies used more unorthodox methods or focused only on a segment of presidents, but all attempted to use the experts’ wisdom to put presidents in order of greatness.

The net result has been not only a wide range of presidential-greatness surveys but also a change in the conversation about presidential leadership itself. Indeed, Mercieca and Vaughn (2014, 6) suggested that the rising preponderance of these polls over time has affected the way that experts and ordinary citizens view presidential greatness as well as our greatest presidents (i.e., great presidents are heroes, not necessarily competent administrators). Even with these decades of influential studies, however, assessments skew to the historical. To balance the existing body of greatness studies, we developed and implemented a survey designed to capture political scientists’ attitudes toward our greatest presidents.

PRESIDENTIAL GREATNESS, ACCORDING TO POLITICAL SCIENTISTS

To develop the survey, we invited the entire membership of the APSA Presidents and Executive Politics (PEP) section (n = 391) to participate in a Qualtrics-based survey in early June 2014. The survey was closed and data were collected on November 1, 2014. During the survey time frame, we received 162 complete responses, achieving a 41.4% response rate. The resulting respondent pool varies meaningfully across several important indicators. For example, concerning ideology, 29.4% of respondents identified as liberal, 23.8% as somewhat liberal, 27.5% as moderate, 21% as somewhat conservative, and 6.3% as conservative. Similarly, 53.8% considered themselves a member of the Democratic Party, compared

Figure 2
Presidential Skill Ratings



with 16.5% for the Republican Party and 25.3% for Independents. Of the respondents, 57% were affiliated with public institutions compared to 47% with private institutions; 29.4% were affiliated with research institutions compared to 35% from teaching institutions; and 35.6% were affiliated with institutions that combined research and teaching emphases. The majority of respondents were full-time faculty members, with 35% of the pool consisting of

Benjamin Harrison, Zachary Taylor, and Chester Arthur. In general, the earlier a president had served, the less information political scientists knew about him. Notable exceptions included popular and historically consequential presidents.

Each respondent also was given the opportunity to rate individual presidents on a 0-to-100 scale concerning their overall greatness. Importantly, the survey did not stipulate a particular

Of the modern presidents, Bill Clinton earned the highest overall greatness rating and George W. Bush earned the lowest. Between these two were Ronald Reagan (No. 11 with 67.5%), Lyndon Baines Johnson (No. 12 with 67.3%), John F. Kennedy (No. 14 with 64.0%), George H. W. Bush (No. 17 with 60.8%), Barack Obama (No. 18 with 58.2%), Gerald Ford (No. 24 with 50.1%), Jimmy Carter (No. 26 with 44.2%), and Richard Nixon (No. 34 with 37.3%).

full professors, 23.8% associate professors, and 18.8% assistant professors; 2.5% were emeritus faculty; 8.1% were adjunct or instructional faculty; and 11.9% were graduate students. Respondents' pedigrees included 14.4% who received their highest degree from an Ivy League institution compared to 43.1% from a state flagship institution, 25.6% from an elite private institution, and 10.6% from a non-flagship public institution. Finally, 79.9% of respondents were male and 20.1% were female.

In addition to these demographic details, respondents were queried about their knowledge of and opinions about American presidents in various ways. They were asked on a scale of 1 to 4 how much information they knew about each president (1 = nothing; 4 = a lot). The resulting scores were averaged; overall, respondents indicated the greatest familiarity with Barack Obama, George W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, followed by Ronald Reagan, Abraham Lincoln, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon. They were least familiar with Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce,

definition of greatness other than a brief indication that 0 = failure, 50 = average, and 100 = great. The resulting scores were averaged across all respondents. Abraham Lincoln had the highest overall greatness ranking, followed by George Washington and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The next tier of greatness included Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Thomas Jefferson, Harry Truman, and Dwight Eisenhower. The least great president was James Buchanan, followed by Warren Harding, Andrew Johnson, Franklin Pierce, and William Henry Harrison. Of the modern presidents, Bill Clinton earned the highest overall greatness rating and George W. Bush earned the lowest. Between these two were Ronald Reagan (No. 11 with 67.5%), Lyndon Baines Johnson (No. 12 with 67.3%), John F. Kennedy (No. 14 with 64.0%), George H. W. Bush (No. 17 with 60.8%), Barack Obama (No. 18 with 58.2%), Gerald Ford (No. 24 with 50.1%), Jimmy Carter (No. 26 with 44.2%), and Richard Nixon (No. 34 with 37.3%). Figure 1 provides additional information about overall greatness ratings and rankings for each president, including both the rank in the 2014 PEP membership study and an average rank across the six other major scholarly survey studies conducted between 2000 and the 2014 PEP study. This range of years was included because it balances several studies to average across with a consistent grouping of presidents in each survey. All presidents through George W. Bush were rated in each study, and Barack Obama is rated in one study. The six studies include the *Wall Street Journal's* 2000 and 2005 studies; Siena College's 2002 and 2010 studies; C-SPAN's 2009 study; and the 2011 United States Presidency Centre study, which surveyed United Kingdom-based experts in American political history.

By calculating the average rank of each president across the past six scholarly surveys, we could compare the political science perspective, as captured in the 2014 PEP study, with an aggregated representation of largely (although not exclusively) historian-based studies. For most presidents, the 2014 PEP ranking is consistent with the previous average ranking. Indeed, for 32 of the 43 individual presidents (i.e., Grover Cleveland is counted only once), the 2014 PEP ranking was within three slots (plus or minus) of the previous average ranking; for 19 presidents, it was within 1.5 slots (plus or minus). The 11 presidents for which there was a 2014 PEP ranking of a three or more slots difference (plus or minus), however, yielded some interesting observations. Bill Clinton is easily the main outlier, with the 2014 PEP study ranking him 10.5 slots higher than

Figure 3
Who Should Be the Next President on Mount Rushmore?

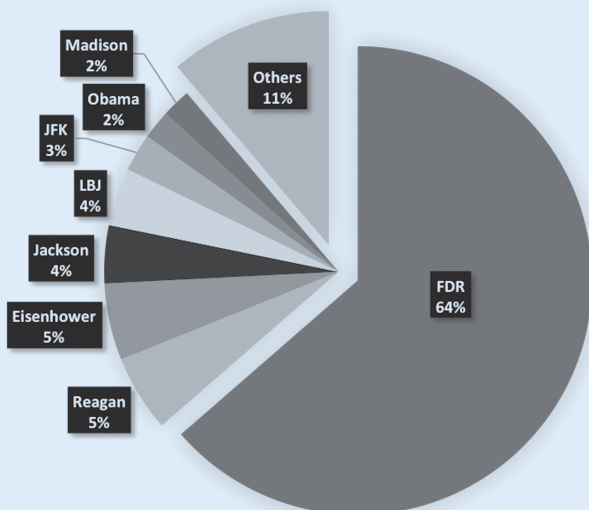


Figure 4
 “Best” and “Worst” President Total Votes

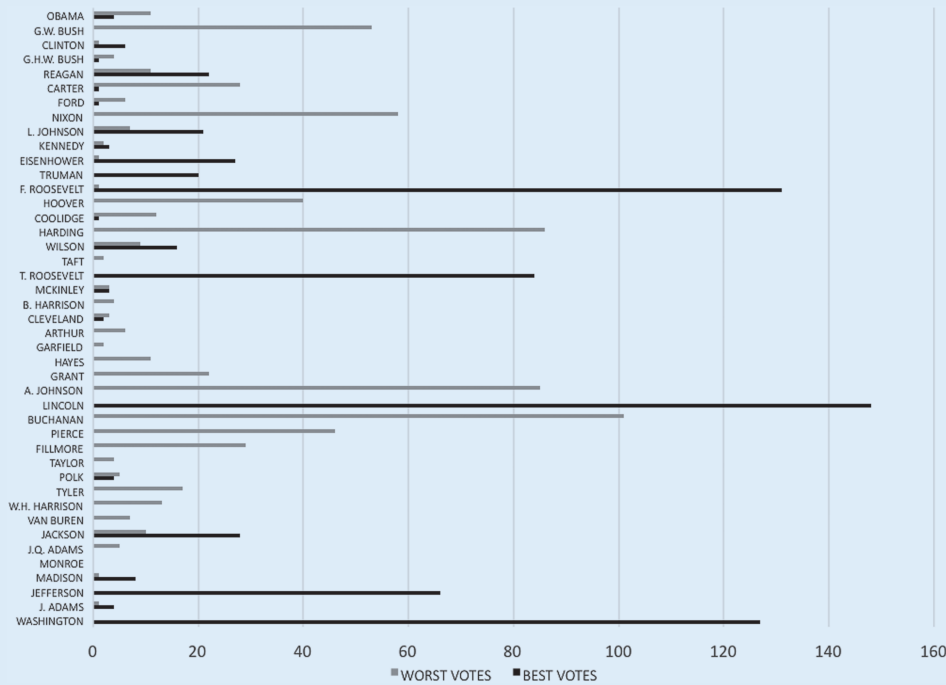
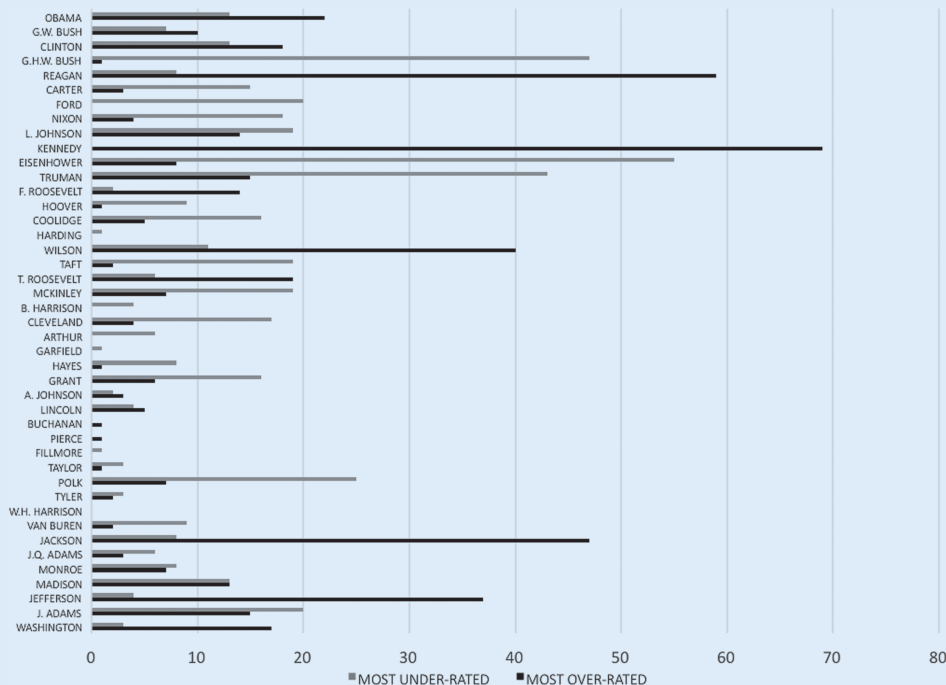


Figure 5
 Most “Underrated” and “Overrated” President



his previous average. His predecessor, George H. W. Bush (+4), was the only other president in this group to rank higher in the 2014 PEP study than the previous average ranking. Every other noteworthy disjuncture represents an instance in which

the 2014 PEP study ranked presidents several points lower than their previous average ranking, including James Polk (-7.3), Herbert Hoover (-6.8), Richard Nixon (-5.5), George W. Bush (-5.4), Grover Cleveland (-5.3), William McKinley (-4.2), James Monroe (-3.7), Chester Arthur (-3.5), and Warren Harding (-3.2). Moreover, of these nine presidents, only Richard Nixon and George W. Bush can be considered modern presidents, and both were among the most controversial and derided of all presidents in American history. The remaining presidents who compared negatively are premodern presidents, with more than half from the nineteenth century. From these observations, we tentatively concluded that political science experts on the American presidency—focused as they largely are on the modern presidency—were more likely to penalize premodern presidents for their lack of centrality to the contemporary institution in the form of lower greatness ratings. Conversely, four of the most recent eight presidents have the biggest discrepancies between the 2014 PEP study and their previous average, suggesting their historical reputations are still in flux. This is underscored by the fact that two of the four presidents (i.e., Bill Clinton and George W. Bush) were still in office when one or more of the studies included in the comparison average were conducted.

Because most political science research regarding presidential politics focuses on the modern era, several questions were asked to gauge respondents’ opinions about specific dimensions of presidential leadership concerning presidents only from Theodore Roosevelt to Barack Obama. Scholars debate the onset of the modern presidency, but Roosevelt’s expansion of the influence and power of the office and roots of institutionaliza-

tion of the office took place during his presidency. This allowed us to narrow the scope to shorten the survey. These questions focused on the following dimensions: the president’s legislative skill, diplomatic skill, military skill, and integrity and whether he was a champion

of the people. Higher scores mean that the presidents rank higher (better) on these dimensions. Figure 2 displays these characteristics by president. Lyndon Johnson (86) and Franklin Roosevelt (83) score the highest on legislative skill, befitting their significant legislative accomplishments while in office. Presidents Eisenhower and Theodore Roosevelt scored highest on military skill, and both Roosevelts, Eisenhower, and Nixon ranked in the top four for diplomatic skill. For integrity, Eisenhower, Truman, and Carter topped the list, whereas Nixon (19) and Harding (28) were at the bottom.

the monument. The next highest choices were Ronald Reagan and Dwight Eisenhower (5.3% each), followed by Andrew Jackson and Lyndon Johnson (4% each), John F. Kennedy (2.6%), and Barack Obama and James Madison (2% each). Other presidents receiving votes included John Adams, James K. Polk, Woodrow Wilson, Bill Clinton, Ulysses S. Grant, William McKinley, Calvin Coolidge, Harry Truman, Richard Nixon, and George W. Bush.

Respondents also were asked to identify which presidents were the best/worst, most over/underrated, and most/least polarizing.

We then asked respondents to identify the five most and least polarizing presidents. As shown in figure 6, George W. Bush was included in the list of most polarizing presidents 93 times, followed by Barack Obama (84), Andrew Jackson (62), Abraham Lincoln (56), and Richard Nixon (49).

Clinton, impeached by Congress but not removed, scored 42. Cousins Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt were at the top of those presidents deemed “champions of the people”—FDR received the highest score of any president (90) on any dimension. Truman was third (82) and immediately below him was Lyndon Johnson (80).

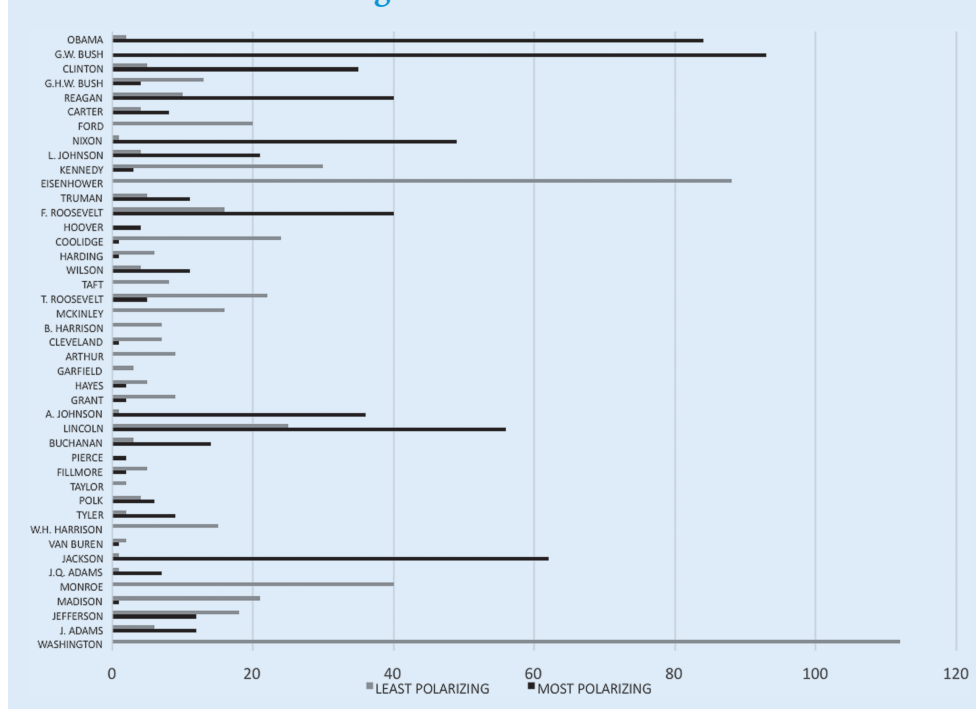
In addition to being asked about their knowledge and assessment of the overall greatness of each president, respondents replied to several other questions designed to approach the idea of presidential greatness from multiple perspectives. For example, one question asked which president they would add to Mount Rushmore. As depicted in figure 3, the overwhelming choice was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was selected by 63.6% of respondents when asked which president (hypothetically) should be placed next on

For each question, they were asked to drag and then rank multiple presidents into a box to identify their corresponding assessments. The results of how frequently each president was specified as “best” or “worst” for each question are reported in figure 4. We then examined the “Top 5” for both the best and worst presidents. Regarding which presidents were the best and which were the worst, Abraham Lincoln was included in a respondent’s Top 5 list 148 times, followed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt (131), George Washington (127), Theodore Roosevelt (84), and Thomas Jefferson (66). Conversely, James Buchanan made the Worst 5 list 101 times, followed by Warren Harding (86), Andrew Johnson (85), Richard Nixon (58), and George W. Bush (53). It is interesting that the aggregate results of the respondents’ attitudes toward a few presidents indicated a degree of ambivalence;

for example, 22 scholars included Ronald Reagan in their Top 5, whereas 11 others included him in their Worst 5. Similar patterns emerged for Andrew Jackson (28 best, 10 worst), Woodrow Wilson (16 best, 9 worst), Lyndon Johnson (21 best, 7 worst), and Barack Obama (4 best, 11 worst).

Respondents also were asked to identify the five most “overrated” and five most “underrated” presidents (figure 5). John F. Kennedy was included on the most overrated list (69), followed by Ronald Reagan (59), Andrew Jackson (47), Woodrow Wilson (40), and Thomas Jefferson (37). Conversely, the most underrated president was Dwight Eisenhower (55), followed by George H. W. Bush (47), Harry Truman (43), James Polk (25), and John Adams and Gerald Ford (tied at 20). Although they tied with 20 votes for most underrated, the respondents demonstrated significantly

Figure 6
Most and Least Polarizing Presidents



more ambivalence about John Adams, who also received 15 votes for most overrated, whereas Gerald Ford did not make any most overrated list. Other presidents exhibiting similar patterns included Barack Obama (22 most overrated, 13 most underrated), James Madison (13 most overrated, 13 most underrated), Bill Clinton (18 most overrated, 13 most underrated), Ulysses S. Grant (6 most overrated, 16 most underrated), and George W. Bush (10 most overrated, 7 most underrated).

We then asked respondents to identify the five most and least polarizing presidents. As shown in figure 6, George W. Bush was included in the list of most polarizing presidents 93 times, followed by Barack Obama (84), Andrew Jackson (62), Abraham Lincoln (56), and Richard Nixon (49). By far, George Washington was the least polarizing president, making that list 112 times, followed by Dwight Eisenhower (88), James Monroe (40), John F. Kennedy (30), and Abraham Lincoln (25). Lincoln made the Top 5 list for both most and least polarizing presidents, but he was not the only president in which the aggregate results indicated scholarly uncertainty: Franklin Roosevelt was viewed as one of the five most polarizing presidents by 40 respondents and also as one of the five least polarizing presidents by 16 different respondents. Similar patterns emerged for Ronald Reagan (40 most polarizing, 10 least polarizing), Thomas Jefferson (12 most polarizing, 18 least polarizing), John Adams (12 most polarizing, 6 least polarizing), and Harry Truman (11 most polarizing, 5 least polarizing).

CONCLUSION

Our survey of political scientists regarding presidential greatness puts them back into the discussion about presidential greatness. In the judgment of our respondents, the destiny of some presidents has been altered as compared to similar previous surveys: Presidents Clinton and Eisenhower rose to the Top 10 whereas President Andrew Johnson sank to the bottom. A new, expanded Mount Rushmore would have a slightly more Republican flavor: most scholars would include Presidents Reagan and Eisenhower but only after adding Franklin Roosevelt's famous jutting chin. President Kennedy was judged to be the most overrated whereas Presidents Eisenhower and George H. W. Bush were the most underrated. For the two most recent presidents (i.e., Bush and Obama), neither fared well in general but partisanship emerged because liberals were more likely to rank Obama higher and conservatives were more likely to rank Bush higher.

Reflecting on the benefaction of presidents past, these results reminded us that history is always shaping and reshaping the legacy of former presidents. As new problems and policies emerge, we are obliged to reassess presidential greatness in the context of

those who are currently making history. Rising historical greatness in the opinion of our political science respondents appears to be a compounding of time and longevity in office, combined with economic prosperity and effectively handling an international conflict. Presidential greatness in more recent surveys appears to be as much about successful management of complex national problems as the promotion of big ideas (although these may be related). This combination just might result in a president's face being etched for eternity in a future stone monument.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank Steven Schier for his support in conducting this survey during his term as president of the APSA Presidents and Executive Politics section; David Lewis and Jennifer Mercieca for their feedback on a beta version of the survey discussed in this article; and the many members of the APSA section for contributing their time and knowledge to this study. ■

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