**Understanding and Evaluating Presidents**

Understanding and evaluating presidents poses problems for political scientists because only one president serves at time and since each president faces very different challenges. Political scientists call this the one-n problem. Because the circumstances of a presidency have a tremendous impact on the success and failure of that presidency, determining whether a president was good or bad is difficult, particularly when we start comparing presidents. Only Franklin Roosevelt was president at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, for example, and only Abraham Lincoln was president during the Civil War. How can one judge, then, how Lincoln would have handled Pearl Harbor or FDR the Civil War?

**Factors Contributing to Success and Failure**

Many factors affect how successful a president will be:

* Strong leadership: The ability to rally people behind him
* Congress: The ability to control or persuade members of Congress
* Popularity: The ability to convince others to do as he wishes

**Decision-Making Analysis**

Decision-making analysis explores the methods and circumstances under which key decisions are made. Graham T. Allison’s *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (1971) is a famous example. Allison sought to understand the decisions made by the inner circle of the Kennedy Administration (and to a lesser extent, by the Soviets) during the crisis in 1962. He devised three models, all of which explain parts of the decision-making process:

* The rational actor model: Decision makers act in a rational manner: They gather all the evidence, weigh their options, and make an informed choice.
* The organizational process model: The structure of organizations shapes how decisions are made.
* The bureaucratic politics model: Leaders of different organizations are in competition with one another, and that affects how decisions are made.

Another decision-making model—known as the groupthink approach—examines how group dynamics can affect decision outcomes. According to this model, under some circumstances, group members reinforce one another’s faulty reasoning, leading to disastrous decisions.

**Psychological Analysis**

Psychological approaches seek to understand the inner workings of the president’s mind and how they affect decision-making. Some psychological accounts are simplistic, but others are serious studies of presidential character. James Barber’s bivariate typology is a prominent example. Barber argues that presidents should be evaluated based on how active a role they should play in initiating policies (active or passive) and how they view themselves and their status as president (positive or negative). Combining these two variables, we get four categories of presidents: passive-positive, passive-negative, active-positive, and active-negative. Barber claims that active-positive presidents are likely the best, whereas active-negative can be disastrous.

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|  BARBER’S CATEGORIZATIONS OF PRESIDENTS |
|  | Active  | Passive  |
| Positive  | Franklin Roosevelt, Harry S Truman, John F. Kennedy | Ronald Reagan, William Howard Taft, James Madison |
| Negative  | Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Herbert Hoover, Woodrow Wilson | George Washington, Dwight Eisenhower, George H. W. Bush |

**Historical Comparison**

Some scholars compare presidents by the role they play in history. For example, some see FDR as particularly significant because he framed the terms of debate in the United States for decades to come. Other studies examine the lasting impact a president had by studying how much of what he did survived their presidencies. Again FDR is significant under this criteria because his New Deal still exists.

**The Best and Worst**

Scholars and historians debate about the best and worst presidents in American history. Although there is no consensus, there is a general agreement as to who should be considered great. This list includes Presidents Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Theodore Roosevelt.

**EVALUATING U.S. PRESIDENTS**

U.S. presidents are evaluated in many ways. The major characteristics that academic and public polls use to evaluate the 44 U.S. presidents vary from survey to survey, but the main standards remain consistent.

*It is important to keep in mind that time changes what people consider critical characteristics, and presidential rankings reflect this. For example, early in U.S. history, the United States was isolationist, so foreign policy wasn’t a factor in presidential evaluations. Foreign policy became much more important in the 20th century.*

**POLICY LEADERSHIP**

A president has to make policy, domestic and foreign, for the country. The president outlines his policies in his inaugural address, his annual State of the Union addresses, and especially his budget. The president has a tough battle to conquer: He has to mobilize public opinion to gain the upper hand with Congress.

The president has to be careful when dealing with Congress. If he is pushy and takes a heavy-handed approach, Congress may resent him, and he is not likely to be very successful. Andrew Johnson and Richard Nixon found this out the hard way. If a president is willing to lobby Congress and bargain and deal with its members, he can be very successful. George H. Bush saw most of his legislation pass, even though the opposition Democrats controlled both houses of Congress.

*Leadership skills are necessary for the president to succeed. The more skills a president possesses, the more likely Congress will pass his policies. This is one way that a president is judged and evaluated. The more his policies are passed, the higher his ranking.*

In modern times, a president’s legislation has been judged according to the impact his policies have on social equality in U.S. society. Policies that benefit minorities and the poor enhance a president’s ranking in the polls.

**CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

The U.S. public looks to the president as its political and economic leader. He is held responsible for the political and economic climate, whether times are good or bad. A successful president has to have a program ready to stimulate the economy if necessary, and he has to be able to pass it. If he fails, he will not win reelection. Jimmy Carter and George H. Bush are recent presidents who lost their bids for reelection due to economic decline. At the same time, a booming economy can get a president reelected even if he is facing personal scandals, as Bill Clinton demonstrated in 1996.

Crisis management also refers to international crises. The way a president reacts to major foreign crises, such as a war or a terrorist attack, greatly affects his standing with the public and his rankings in the polls. Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, two presidents who always rank in the top five, rank high mainly because of their crisis-management skills. Lincoln reacted forcefully during the Civil War and kept the Union intact. Franklin Roosevelt guided the United States through World War II and turned the country into a superpower.

Lyndon Johnson, on the other hand, couldn’t deal with the conflict in Vietnam. This inability lowers his ranking, despite his major domestic accomplishments. More recently, President George W. Bush, who was not doing well in the polls as late as August 2001, turned himself into a great crisis manager after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. His handling of the situation brought new life to his presidency.

**PRESIDENTIAL APPOINTMENTS**

Presidents are also measured by the people they appoint to public office. This area of evaluation includes appointments to the Supreme Court and the presidential cabinet.

Presidents Harding and Grant destroyed their presidencies with inept, corrupt appointments, and their rankings reflect this. Appointing good, skilled people reflects positively on a president. George C. Marshall and Henry Kissinger, both Secretaries of State, reflected positively on the presidents that appointed them, increasing Truman’s and Nixon’s standings, respectively. Today, diversity has become an issue. Presidential appointments should reflect the ethnic composition of the country. The more minorities, including women, a president appoints to high-level positions, the higher his ranking. Both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have done well in this area, with their cabinets containing a fair number of minorities.

**FOREIGN STANDING**

*Foreign policy is a recent addition to the criteria for ranking U.S. presidents. Most 19th century presidents can’t be ranked on this issue because, during that period, the United States was isolationist and didn’t get involved in world affairs. But ever since Theodore Roosevelt and his active participation in international affairs, foreign policy has been a major part of the presidency. Today a president deals with many other nations: How he deals with these nations, as well as how these nations perceive him, contribute to his ranking.*

Major foreign policy success can make up for domestic failure. President Nixon ranks low on many lists, but he had major accomplishments in the area of foreign policy. These accomplishments elevate him into the middle of the presidential pack. President George H. Bush was a great foreign policy president: During his term, the Soviet Union collapsed, the Gulf War was won, and major arms control took place. These accomplishments push him into the top 15 of U.S. presidents.

Respect from foreign nations is very important. President Nixon was widely respected by foreign nations. After his resignation, he continued to be treated as a successful president by most of the world, which led to a rise in his rankings.

**CHARACTER AND INTEGRITY**

The attributes of character and integrity are important when judging presidents. A president who promotes corruption, lies to the public, or is involved in scandals will obviously be ranked lower than an honest president.

President Nixon single-handedly destroyed his presidency and his place in history with the Watergate scandal. President Clinton undermined a successful presidency with many personal scandals, including lying to the public. President Clinton’s scandals continued even after he left office. President Harding destroyed what was left of his presidency with continuous extramarital affairs.

At the same time, a president who wasn’t very successful in office, such as Jimmy Carter, can restore his reputation and rise in the rankings for being a true humanitarian and an honest person. James Polk was another honest, dedicated individual. He worked so hard that it cost him his life. There were no scandals during his presidency, and he even kept his campaign promise not to run for reelection.

**PUBLIC PERSUASION**

The ability to persuade the public to his point of view is one of the most powerful weapons a president possesses. It’s also one that he most needs to succeed. How a president uses this power and how successful he is with it affects his standing in the ranks of presidents.

Some of the masters of public persuasion are

* Theodore Roosevelt,whoused his position and influence as president to persuade citizens to his point of view. He was able to get much of his legislation passed, despite having to deal with a hostile Congress.
* Franklin Roosevelt,who went straight to the public with his fireside chats and not only reassured the public after the Great Depression, but also gained support for his New Deal legislation.
* Ronald Reagan,who is known as the “Great Communicator” because he possessed a special ability to connect with the U.S. public.

The public loved Reagan and the way he dealt with the average person. This adoration translated into support for his policies. Congress enacted a large part of Reagan’s agenda because the public backed him — not necessarily, because Congress agreed with him and his proposals.

Other presidents haven’t fared as well. Jimmy Carter had a tough time connecting with the public. For this reason, much of his presidential agenda never made it through Congress, even though his own party controlled Congress. Richard Nixon failed in similar fashion. He couldn’t relate to the public. By the time the Watergate scandal came around, it was too late to gather public support for his presidency.

**PRESIDENTIAL VISION**

Some presidents come into office without a vision of what they want to accomplish as president: This usually results in a failed presidency. Without a master plan, a president is at the mercy of Congress, which can then take over and make policy for the country.

The more successful presidents have a vision; they want to use the office of president to change the United States. Franklin Roosevelt wanted to bring about changes to protect the average citizen from the brutal effects of the Great Depression. Reagan wanted to restore the United States to greatness and decrease the size of the federal government. With a vision to guide them, presidents tend to be active, as they try to implement their agenda. Even if they’re not successful, they still get credit for having a vision.

*A president without a vision accomplishes nothing, because there is nothing he wants to accomplish. Without a vision, a presidency results in failure.*