The Contextual Determinants of Presidential Greatness*

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Abstract

Many presidential scholars have long argued that part of a president's long-term reputation is determined by the environment surrounding his tenure in office; that is, by contextual factors (e.g., war and assassination). In this paper we test this contention and find that presidential greatness is indeed related to certain contextual factors. Moreover, these factors can be combined to predict accurately a president's place in the greatness rankings.

Over the past four decades, groups of scholars have occasionally been asked to rank order past American presidents from best to worst. The first such ranking was compiled by Arthur Schlesinger in 1948, and 1982 saw two such polls completed, one by the *Chicago Tribune* and the other by Robert Murray. In the interim, at least two other major rankings were done, another by Schlesinger in 1962 and one by Richard Maranell and Richard Dodder in 1970.

A quick glance at these polls reveals tremendous consistency in their rankings. All tab Lincoln as our greatest president and Harding our worst. Washington, Jefferson, and F. Roosevelt are always in the top five, while Buchanan, Grant, and Pierce are regularly near the bottom. This stability holds for the more mediocre presidents as well. For example, Hoover is ranked no higher than 18th and no lower than 21st. To be sure, there have been some changes. Eisenhower has risen from 20th in the 1962 Schlesinger poll to 9th in the recent *Chicago Tribune* rankings; and Cleveland has slid from 8th in the 1948 poll to 17th in the Murray poll. But such movement is the exception.

When the rankings are examined more systematically the similarity in their order becomes even more striking. Table 1 reports the correlations between the rankings of the five polls. The coefficients unmistakably show that the ordering of our presidents from best to worst has remained almost unchanged. Not a single coefficient

TABLE 1
Correlations Between Presidential Greatness Rankings

	Sch. '48	Sch. '62	Maranell	Murray	Tribune
Sch. '48	–	.97	.97	.96	.94
Sch. '62		–	.97	.98	.97
Maranell			–	.97	.94
Murray				–	.97

Sch. '48 = Schlesinger 1948 Ranking; Sch. '62 = Schlesinger 1962 Ranking; Maranell = Maranell and Dodder 1970 Ranking; Murray = Murray 1982 Ranking; and Tribune = *Chicago Tribune* 1982 Ranking.

drops below an impressive .94. Such similarities in ratings suggest strongly that the criteria which scholars use to gauge greatness have remained consistent over the past 35 years.

However, the criteria utilized by scholars to determine presidential greatness is somewhat of a mystery. The Schlesinger polls did not require participating scholars to state the rationale they employed in ranking the presidents. For example, his first poll simply required respondents to judge each president on his "performance in office" (Bailey 1966: 24). The other surveys provide more insight into the rationale used for ranking the presidents. Respondents were asked to rate the presidents along dimensions (e.g., accomplishments, leadership, and integrity). From these supplemental rankings, we can glean that great presidents are those who scholars see as: 1) providing strong leadership; 2) possessing great political skill; and 3) taking an active approach in administering government. Thus, presidential greatness seems to be a function largely of personality. The best chief executives are those who have the ability to lead and administer, and also have political suavity.

While it is helpful for a president in search of greatness to possess these personality traits, certain contextual factors are also important in determining his ultimate rank. By contextual factors we mean the environment or setting that a president inherits. As an illustration, part of F. Roosevelt's high rank is surely due to his political and leadership skills, but part must also be due to his being president during two major crises, the Great Depression and World War II. If he had been president during a more complacent period, say the 1870s, he most likely would not be ranked as our second or third greatest leader. Likewise, Arthur would probably be ranked higher if he had presided over a war, or if he had been able to capture the Republican nomination and election of 1884. As it stands, he is often remembered as simply the Vice President who filled in after Garfield was assassinated.

A number of scholars have indicated a sensitivity to the impact that contextual factors can have on presidential rankings. Polsby (1977) contends that many great presidents have been in office during wars, have avoided scandals during their administration, and have been able to achieve major legislative success. Obviously, avoiding scandal and winning support in Congress (and even becoming involved in war) are in part due to personality traits, but not entirely. Neither Grant, Harding, nor Nixon were responsible for all the shenanigans associated with their administrations. And much of F. Roosevelt's and L. Johnson's success with Congress must be attributed to the large Democrat majorities in the body during their terms. Such realizations led Polsby

to say that "the factors that go into presidential greatness appear to boil down to being in the right place at the right time" (1977: 63). Bailey (1966) and Murphy (1984) also recognize the importance of contextual influences. Murphy divides our 200 year history into five eras, arguing that, on average, presidents out of the "Virginia Dynasty" (Washington-J.Q. Adams) rank highest and those from the "Jacksonian Era" (Jackson-Buchanan) rank lowest. Here the context of the era influences the ratings. Bailey chats about dozens of contextual factors, from war to marital status, and also concludes that the presidential setting has an impact on greatness.

Agreement is widespread, then, that contextual factors influence presidential rankings. In this paper, we seek to confirm systematically this belief. Specifically, we take eight major contextual factors, four associated with a president's entry or departure from office and four associated with events during his administration, and relate them to presidential greatness. We also test how well these eight factors combine to account for the variance in presidential rankings. Results show that contextual influences are indeed important determinants of greatness rankings.

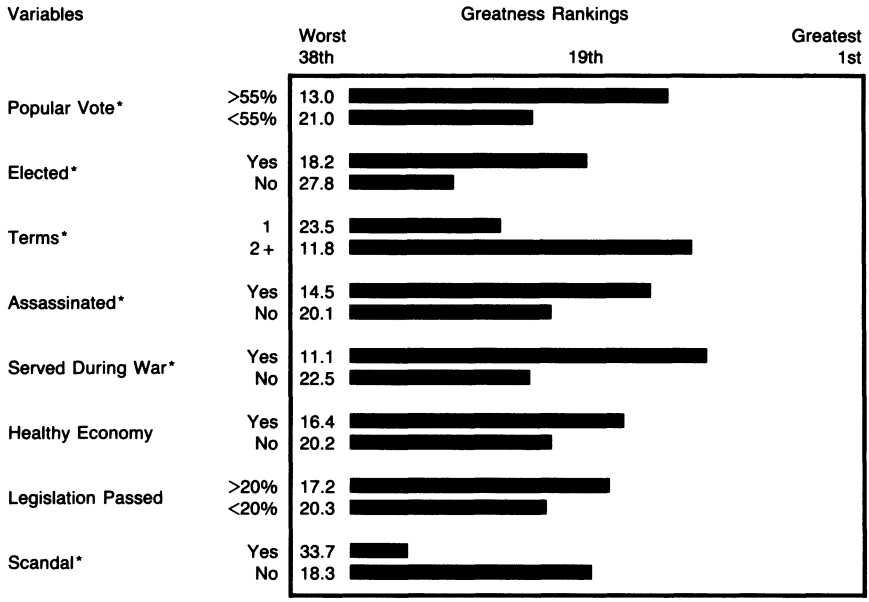
The 1982 *Chicago Tribune* poll was selected for use in this study because of its recency and because of the five rankings it is the only to include all of the presidents through Carter. Many of the other polls chose to exclude Garfield and W. Harrison due to their brief tenure in office. The *Tribune* poll, conducted by Washington correspondent Steven Neal, represents the cumulative judgments of 49 of the leading presidential scholars and biographers (Neal 1982; Cronin 1982). The poll rankings are listed in Appendix A.

Presidential Greatness: Arriving and Departing

According to our analysis, how a president arrives and leaves the Chief Executive post says much about his eventual greatness ranking. Let us begin by examining the relationship between the popular vote won by the president and his rating. Bailey argues that "[m]ost of the Greats and Near Greats . . . could boast a majority of the popular vote" and that landslides "in particular add luster to a presidential reputation" (1966: 92–93). He goes on to claim that the "landslide victories of Andrew Jackson and the two Roosevelts no doubt added further sheen to already illustrious names, and may in some degree sway experts who give them high rankings" (Bailey 1966: 93). Our examination confirms Bailey's contention. Figure 1 illustrates that the average ranking of presidents who achieved at least 55 percent of the popular vote is considerably higher than those who won with less (if a president served more than a term his popular vote percentage was averaged across terms). The seven presidents carried into office with at least 55 percent of the vote had an average ranking of 13.0, compared to 21.0 for the other 31 presidents.[1] Clearly, popularity at the voting booth is related to greatness.

As might be expected, presidents who never achieved victory at the polling place scored poorly in the rankings. Five presidents served never having won an election. Four of these completed the term of a president who died in office, the last of these being Arthur (T. Roosevelt, Truman, and L. Johnson all served after a president's death, but all also later won an election), and one, Ford, served out the term of a

FIGURE 1
Average Presidential Greatness Rankings Across Eight Contextual Variables



* = significant difference at .05

president who resigned before the completion of his term.[2] Figure 1 shows that the average ranking in the *Tribune* poll of these five was 27.8, compared to 18.2 for the other 33 presidents. Winning an election appears to be a prerequisite to a high ranking.

How many elections a president wins was also found to be related to greatness. As Figure 1 reports, presidents winning two or more terms ranked on average 11.8, while those sitting just one term (or less) ranked 23.5.[3] Thus, the president popular enough to capture more than a single term improves substantially his opportunity for a high rating.

Lastly, presidents who depart the White House at the hands of an assassin's bullet appear to rank high. The sense of tragedy and loss seems to lead the public and scholars alike to forget the president's weaknesses and failures and exaggerate his strengths and successes. As Bailey (1966: 116) writes, the assassinated president "is regarded as a martyr to the public weal. . ." Our analysis is congruent with this observation. Figure 1 shows that the four assassinated presidents rank an average of 14.5, compared to 20.1 for the others.[4]

Presidential Greatness: Events During the Term

Perhaps the most widely recognized 'event' associated with presidential greatness is war. Polsby (1972: 62) writes that "[o]ur greatest presidents were reputedly Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt. The service of all three is ultimately associated with three incidents in American history when the entire polity was en-

gaged in total war." And Bailey (1966) argues that to be considered a great, a president should be 'lucky' enough to serve during a major crisis, like a war. Wars allow presidents to benefit from an outpouring of patriotism, an often united and supportive citizenry and Congress, and the reachable goal of victory. In short, war seems to rally the nation behind the president in the short-run (Mueller 1973) and enhance his reputation in the long-run. Figure 1 offers support for the latter. The ten presidents presiding over a lengthy military conflict ranked an average of 11.1 in the *Tribune* poll.[5] The other 28 presidents 'unlucky' enough to serve during times of peace achieved an average rank of 22.5. Thus, involvement in war will move a president up 11 places in the rankings on average.

On the domestic front, a healthy economy is regularly cited as vital to a president's reputation. This is certainly true in the short-run, as scholars have found low unemployment, growing personal income, and a rising GNP related to higher presidential popularity (Mueller 1973; Stimson 1976; Kernell 1978). But does an improving economy result in higher greatness ratings? This is difficult to ascertain. The common economic indicators of today (e.g., unemployment, inflation, personal income, GNP) were not calculated during the early presidents' terms. As such, we had to settle for a less common, though still sensitive, indicator of economic health. The average annual change in per capita exports was figured (adjusting for inflation after 1900) for each president's tenure in office. In general, increasing exports were associated with a healthy economy. For example, the economic boom years of the Eisenhower administration saw an annual increase in exports of 7.6 percent, 13th highest among the 38 presidents. And, the sour economy Hoover oversaw included an annual drop in exports of 16.4 percent, worst among the presidents. In total, only six presidents saw average annual per capita exports drop during their term.[6] The average rank of these six was 20.2, while the other 32 presidents fortunate enough to serve during more healthy economic times averaged a 16.4 ranking. This suggests that an improving economy can contribute to a high greatness rating.

The relationship between a president and Congress may also influence a president's place in the rankings. Polsby (1977: 63) contends that greatness is associated with "a flurry of action, like FDR's hundred days, or Wilson's first term." Seemingly, then, a president who presides over a period when tremendous amounts of legislation were passed has a ticket to greatness. To test this proposition we first summed the number of pieces of legislation enacted as law under each president and then divided this by the number of years he served, giving us the average annual number of pieces of legislation passed during each president's tenure. Next, we figured the percentage change in annual average legislation passed for each president over his predecessor.[7] For example, during Grant's term the average annual amount of legislation enacted increased 9.1 percent over the average annual output under his predecessor, A. Johnson. Thus, Grant scored a 9.1. Similarly, Hayes, who followed Grant, succeeded in passing 13.2 percent less legislation annually than Grant, thus scoring a −13.2. Under this scheme, 10 presidents passed 20 percent more legislation annually than the previous occupant of the office.[8] As Figure 1 shows, on average, these ten ranked about three

places higher than the others, 17.2 to 20.3. Evidently, success with Congress relative to your predecessor can enhance a president's rating.

A final event which can shape a president's reputation is a serious scandal. According to Polsby (1977: 62), "Harding, Grant, and one surmises, Nixon, lurk somewhere near the bottom" of the presidential rankings because of the "large-scale scandal attache[d] to the administration of each." Indeed, as Figure 1 illustrates, when we separate these three presidents from the others we find they have an average ranking of only 33.7. The other 35 presidents average an 18.3 rating. Thus, while the absence of a major scandal cannot guarantee a high ranking, the presence of one is clearly devastating to a president's reputation.

In sum, the above tests reveal that certain contextual factors are related to presidential greatness rankings. Specifically, high rankings were found to be associated with landslide popular vote victories, multiple-term presidencies, assassinations, wars, an improving economy, and success in passing legislation. Low rankings were correlated with presidents who never achieved an election victory and those involved in serious scandal. To be sure, there are other contextual factors which might influence a president's greatness rankings, like the reputation of his predecessor and his relationship with the Supreme Court (Bailey 1966). But the above eight do a particularly good job of discriminating between the reputations of presidents. Moreover, as the analysis below illustrates, when these eight factors are combined, they can forecast quite accurately the greatness ranking for most presidents.

Predicting Greatness from Contextual Factors

The above contextual influences on presidential greatness have the advantage of being easily observable (e.g., number of terms, whether there was a war, and so on). As such, they can be utilized to predict, albeit after the fact, the ranking of each president. To do this we scored each president 0 or 1 on the eight contextual factors: 0 if the factor should operate to lower his rating and 1 if it should enhance his rating.[9] Each president's score on the eight factors was then summed to form a contextual index (reported in Appendix A), which was then regressed on the actual *Tribune* rankings. As Equation 1 demonstrates, the contextual index performs admirably as a predictor of greatness.

$$\hat{R} = 38.68 - 5.06\ CI \qquad \text{(Equation 1)}$$
$$(-4.95)$$
$$R^2 = .41$$

Where $\hat{R}$ = predicted presidential rating; CI = the contextual index score; R^2 = the coefficient of determination; and the value in parenthesis = the t-statistic. The R^2 indicates that over 40 percent of the variance in the rankings is accounted for and the coefficient states that on average a one unit increase in the index translates into a 5 unit jump in the rankings (the coefficient is negative due to the greatness rankings being coded 1 for the greatest president, 2 for the second greatest, and so on). The average prediction error is a modest 6.75 (Appendix A reports the prediction error for each president).

Let us finish by prognosticating President Reagan's greatness ranking. As of this writing, Reagan would score a five on the contextual index: he has been elected, he achieved an average of 55 percent of the popular vote, he will serve two terms, annual per capita exports have increased over the Carter years, and he avoided serious scandal. When this score is entered into Equation 1 the resulting greatness estimate for Reagan is 13.38 [(5 × 5.06) − 38.68)]. If the Iran/Contra affair had become considerably more serious, i.e., directly involving President Reagan, then the President's estimate would have been 18.4 [(4 × 5.06 − 38.68)]. Increasing his future ranking beyond 13.38 would require: 1) he be assassinated; 2) the United States be involved in a major military conflict; or 3) he and Congress enact substantially more legislation. None of these seems especially likely. Thus, according to Equation 1, Reagan can expect to be ranked somewhere in the low teens. This would put him in company with the likes of L. Johnson (12th), Cleveland (13th), and J. Adams and Kennedy (both 14th). He would be well ahead of his three predecessors, Carter (26th), Ford (23rd), and Nixon (34th). There remains one other factor which could eventually place him even higher in the greatness category: the success of his negotiations with the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

Polsby (1977), Bailey (1966), and other presidential scholars have long contended that part of a president's long-term reputation is determined by the setting he inherits; that is, by contextual factors. In this study we put this to the test, examining whether eight commonly cited contextual factors are actually related to the presidential greatness rankings of the 1982 *Chicago Tribune* poll. Results show that all eight factors are associated with greatness as expected. In short, a president can expect a higher greatness ranking if he is an elected president, wins a large majority of the popular vote, serves two terms, is assassinated, serves during a war, presides over a healthy economy, works smoothly with Congress, and avoids major scandals. Furthermore, these eight contextual factors can be combined to quite accurately predict a president's place in the greatness rankings.

* *The names of the authors appear in alphabetical order and imply that this paper is in every way a collaborative enterprise.*

Notes

1. The seven presidents gaining an average of 55 percent of the popular vote in their successful quests for the White House were Jackson, T. Roosevelt, Harding, Hoover, F. Roosevelt, Eisenhower, and L. Johnson. All presidents prior to J.Q. Adams were considered to have achieved 51 percent of the popular vote since accurate records were not kept.
2. The five presidents who were never elected were Tyler, Fillmore, A. Johnson, Arthur, and Ford.
3. The presidents who won two or more terms were Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Jackson, Lincoln, Grant, Cleveland, McKinley, Wilson, F. Roosevelt, Eisenhower, and Nixon.
4. The four assassinated presidents were Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, and Kennedy.
5. The ten presidents serving during a major military conflict were Madison, Polk, Lincoln, McKinley, Wilson, F. Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, L. Johnson, and Nixon.
6. The six presidents who saw average annual per capita exports drop during their terms were Jefferson, Monroe, J.Q. Adams, Tyler, Harding, and Hoover.

7. It was necessary to compare each president with a temporally neighboring president since the output of legislation increased steadily throughout most of the 19th century.
8. The ten presidents who passed 20 percent more legislation annually than their predecessors were J. Adams, Jackson, Pierce, Arthur, Cleveland, McKinley, T. Roosevelt, Harding, Coolidge, and F. Roosevelt.
9. A president was scored a 1 if: he achieved an average of 55 percent of the popular vote or more; was an elected president; served two or more terms; was assassinated; served during a war; annual per capita exports did not drop; 20 percent more legislation was passed annually over his predecessor's annual output; or he avoided serious scandal. Thus, the possible high score is eight.

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APPENDIX A

Presidential Greatness Rankings, Contextual Index, and Prediction Errors

President	Chicago Tribune *Rankings*	*Contextual Index Score*	*Prediction Error*
Washington	3	4	-15.43
J. Adams*	14	4	-3.93
Jefferson	5	3	-18.50
Madison	17	5	3.63
Monroe	16	3	-7.50
J. Q. Adams	19	2	-9.56
Jackson	6	6	-2.31
Van Buren	18	3	-5.50
W. Harrison	38	3	14.50
Tyler	29	1	-4.62
Polk	11	4	-7.63
Taylor	28	3	4.50
Fillmore	31	2	2.44
Pierce	35	4	16.57
Buchanan	36	3	12.50
Lincoln	1	6	-7.31
A. Johnson	32	2	3.44
Grant	30	3	6.50
Hayes	22	3	-1.50
Garfield	33	4	14.57
Arthur	24	3	.50
Cleveland	13	5	-.37
B. Harrison	25	3	1.50
McKinley	10	7	6.75
T. Roosevelt	4	5	-9.37
Taft	20	3	-3.50
Wilson	7	5	-6.37
Harding	37	3	13.50
Coolidge	27	4	8.57
Hoover	21	3	-2.50
F. Roosevelt	2	7	-1.25
Truman	8	4	-10.43
Eisenhower	9	6	.69
Kennedy*	14	4	-3.93
L. Johnson	12	5	-1.37
Nixon	34	4	15.57
Ford	23	2	-5.56
Carter	26	3	2.50
			Mean = 6.75

* J. Adams and Kennedy tied for 14th.