The Contemporary Presidency: Rating the Presidents: A Tracking Study

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This article, based on four presidential tracking studies by academics conducted over a 20-year period, seeks, through analysis of those studies, to answer five questions:

1. *Is there any correlation between views held about a president early in his term/s or immediately after his term ends, and those held much later?*
2. *Is there a pattern to such rankings as they change over time?*
3. *Can we explain why change occurs?*
4. *Can actions taken by a president after he has left office significantly alter his ranking?*
5. *When might the process of change be, to all intents and purposes, complete? Is there, for example, a 25-year rule? 50?*

In our article, "Rating the Presidents: A Tracking Study," published in the 1997 summer issue of *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, we reported the results and analysis of the Siena Research Institute's first three presidential tracking studies and promised to conduct the fourth in 2002 after a new president had been in office for a year. We now have those results, and this article will continue the analysis with those results added.

The first poll was conducted after President Reagan had been in office for one year. The second was conducted after G.H.W. Bush was in office one year, and hence Reagan was out of office one year. The third and fourth followed the same pattern. It is our intention to continue these tracking surveys, at the same intervals, with each change of administration. The next Siena Research Institute study is scheduled for either January 2006 or 2010, depending on whether G.W. Bush is reelected.

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TABLE 1
Categories of Siena Research Institute Presidential Ranking Survey

1. Background (family, education, experience)
2. Party leadership (political)
3. Communication ability (speak, write)
4. Relationship with Congress
5. Court appointments
6. Handling of U.S. economy
7. Luck
8. Ability to compromise
9. Willing to take risks
10. Executive appointments
11. Overall ability
12. Imagination
13. Domestic accomplishments
14. Integrity
15. Executive ability
16. Foreign policy accomplishments
17. Leadership ability
18. Intelligence
19. Avoid crucial mistakes
20. Your present overall view

The four surveys are based on expert opinion, solicited from academic historians and political scientists throughout the United States.[1] Rather than solicit their views on which president was "great" or a "failure" as has become the custom, we created, in 1980, what we believe to be a more objective rating scale. We established twenty separate categories[2] ranging from foreign policy to party leadership (see Table 1), and asked our responding experts to rank each president in each category on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being poor and 5 outstanding. The resulting responses thus form a matrix of numbers—currently 20 by 42. We then averaged all of the responses, converted the 1-5 scale to percentages, and produced the final rankings[3] (see Table 2).

We thus create an overall ranking for each president, from Franklin D. Roosevelt as first to Andrew Johnson as last in 2002. In addition, we have rankings that are question specific in each category (e.g., "luck" with Teddy Roosevelt first and Herbert Hoover last, in 2002).

Our approach differs from traditional, subjective ratings in two ways. First, if a respondent has a negative/positive overall view of a president, they may give him a good/bad rating in certain categories (Nixon is 26th overall but 11th in foreign policy; Lincoln is 2nd overall but 29th in background). Second, if a president's rating changes

1. We do not choose the respondents. We mail the questionnaire to department heads and ask that they pass it on to their presidential expert if they have one. This eliminates any bias on our part.

2. Each category carries equal (5%) weight. Thus no one category can dominate the others.

3. We multiplied the average score of all twenty categories for each president by 20 (i.e., 3.5 × 20 = 70 rating). The effect of this calculation is that 60 is an average score.

TABLE 2
Results of Siena Research Institute Presidential Ranking Survey

	Rank in Survey Year			
President	*1982 n = (45)**	*1990 (220)*	*1994 (168)*	*2002 (201)*
Washington	4	4	4	4
J. Adams	10	14	12	12
Jefferson	2	3	5	5
Madison	9	8	9	9
Monroe	15	11	15	8
J.Q. Adams	17	16	17	17
Jackson	13	9	11	13
Van Buren	21	21	22	24
W. Harrison	26	35	28	36
Tyler	34	33	34	37
Polk	12	13	14	11
Taylor	29	34	33	34
Fillmore	32	32	35	38
Pierce	35	36	37	39
Buchanan	37	38	39	41
Lincoln	3	2	2	2
A. Johnson	38	39	40	42
Grant	36	37	38	35
Hayes	22	23	24	27
Garfield	25	30	26	33
Arthur	24	26	27	30
Cleveland	18	17	19	20
B. Harrison	31	29	30	32
McKinley	19	19	18	19
T. Roosevelt	5	5	3	3
Taft	20	20	21	21
Wilson	6	6	6	6
Harding	39	40	41	40
Coolidge	30	31	36	29
Hoover	27	28	29	31
F. Roosevelt	1	1	1	1
Truman	7	7	7	7
Eisenhower	11	12	8	10
Kennedy	8	10	10	14
L. Johnson	14	15	13	15
Nixon	28	25	23	26
Ford	23	27	32	28
Carter	33	24	25	25
Reagan	16	22	20	16
G.H.W. Bush		18	31	22
Clinton			16	18
G.W. Bush				23

*This was a pilot survey to establish a base. Because this is an expert opinion survey, it is consistent with the other surveys that have a larger sample size.

over time, because of the twenty categories, we will be able to analyze why the change took place. The "great," "near failure," and "failure" system cannot do this.

It is our judgment that this system not only allows us to track the ranking of presidents, especially recent presidents, over time—testing the idea that the passage of time dilutes passion and increases objectivity—but also permits us to attempt rational explanations as to why those rankings changed.

Our objectives in creating this type of tracking study include the following:

1. To discover whether there is any correlation between the views held of a president early in his administration, almost immediately after he leaves office, and after a longer period of time; might high marks early in the first term bode well for the future or vice versa? Clearly, conventional wisdom and logic would argue against such a correlation, but time and survey data might well alter our view.
2. To determine whether there is a pattern to such rankings as they change over time. We know, for example, that in the 1962 Schlesinger poll of presidential ability, Dwight D. Eisenhower was ranked 22nd of 31 presidents, below Herbert Hoover and Benjamin Harrison, and just above Andrew Johnson. We also know that in recent surveys (including ours), he has risen to the top ten. Is that, then, *a* pattern or even *the* pattern? Do we, even as scholars, tend to be more critical when our judgments are about our contemporaries? Conversely, might some presidents get a "honeymoon" when they leave office, and decline later?
3. Can we explain, if a president's ranking does change well after his term is over, why it changes? One reason might be a result of new revelations. Another might involve new interpretations of former events, which might lead to a fuller understanding of the difficulties that the president confronted or provide greater significance to the decisions taken. Either reason might well alter the historian's view and with it, the ranking.
4. Can the actions taken by a president after leaving office have a significant impact on his ranking—even if such actions have no bearing on his presidency?
5. When is the process, for all intents and purposes, complete? Is there a "50-year rule," or a "25-year rule," at which point a permanent or near-permanent stability is likely? Is it earlier for some than for others, for average rather than above- or below-average presidents? Can such near permanence ever be considered a given?

Prior to attempting answers to these five goals for recent presidents, it seems reasonable to first consider our results in relation to the older, more familiar presidents. If the analysis of our results with regard to that group shows substantial statistical stability in all four surveys, it will go a long way to establishing objectivity and reliability for our system. If that is the case then greater credibility may be assumed for our findings regarding the more recent presidents.

In all four polls to date, the top seven names remain the same. In alphabetical order they are Jefferson, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt, Truman, Washington, and Wilson. Furthermore, four of these presidents have registered exactly the same rankings in all four surveys: FDR first, Washington fourth, Wilson sixth, and Truman seventh. The other three men have fluctuated between second and fifth place. There has, in short, in four surveys of academic experts, been nearly complete stability produced by the system we are using among the highest rated presidents. Changes tend to be marginal at best.

Similarly, the bottom ranks show great consistency. For the first three surveys, Pierce, Grant, Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, and Harding filled out the final five slots in

the same order. In the current survey, Fillmore elevates Grant out of the bottom five, but the bottom three remain the same.

To briefly encapsulate the majority of the list, only one president (Monroe), discounting the most recent half-century, has varied by more than four places in all four polls, excepting William Henry Harrison, in office for so short a time as to be inconsequential. (This assumes the necessary adjustment for the addition of one new president in each poll.) Such variations as do occur are minor and tend to occur in the great gray middle of the pack where a minuscule variation in percentage points can cause a ranking difference.

In short, a consistent stability would seem to argue for professional coherence among the academics responding. There would seem to be wide general agreement as to the positive and negative characteristics assigned to each president in regard to tasks incumbent upon the office and/or opportunities presented to each president by the era in which he served.

We are also pleased to note broad general agreement between our results and those of other presidential polls and ratings.

We are then emboldened to express our confidence in both the rating system we have created and in the utility of our categories. The system was designed to minimize subjectivity, always difficult when making highly qualitative judgments and to thereby produce a more nearly objective result.

When we began to develop the ranking categories in 1980, we had more than fifty areas of judgment. Through focus groups and pilot testing, we reduced that rather unwieldy number to a total of twenty questions, which seemed to be reasonably fair and consistent to all presidents over the 200-plus years of the office. For example, a question on "human rights" was not used because it could certainly have been a disadvantage to at least the first fifteen presidents. "Political party leadership" was included because, with the exception of George Washington, it is a role all other presidents, in varying degrees, have played.

With the categories, even a respondent who loathes a president is presented with questions that tend to enforce a less subjective view. Richard Nixon, for example, while 26th overall in the 2002 survey, still ranked 11th in "foreign policy accomplishments" and "willing to take risks."

Because this approach gives every evidence of working for the "older" presidents on the list, it seems both logical and likely that it works as well for recent presidents. Those who might have chosen other categories (a different rating mode, etc.) must still acknowledge the statistical stability produced—whether for the "top ten," "bottom five," or great middle group. We are, as we intended, measuring change from a consistent base. If, indeed, there are flaws in the survey, they too are consistent and make no real difference in the goal of measuring change, because the results of all four studies are striking in their consistency, allowing for the addition of new presidents.

Let us then proceed to reconsider our objectives or goals in relation to our results to date.

First, is there a correlation between early views or opinions of a presidency and the presumptively more objective view after the passage of a period of time? The only cases reasonably available for analysis are Presidents Reagan, the elder Bush, and Clinton.

Reagan has hovered between 16th and 22nd, returning to 16th in 2002. George H.W. Bush dropped precipitously, from 18th to 31st and bounced back to 22nd in the most recent study. Clinton, 16th after one year in office, was 18th one year out of office. Other than Bush dropping 13 places and then recovering 9, there has been no significant movement by any of these presidents since we began the study in 1982. Reagan was only out of office 13 years when our last poll was conducted. It is our belief that future Siena Research Institute studies will provide the answer. We have taken the first step with which all journeys begin—a start has been made.

Do high or low marks early in the first term bode well or badly for the future? We currently have ratings for four presidents after one year in office. All four are clearly rated in the middle of the pack and reasonably close to one another, with a range of 16th to 23rd. It seems rational to conclude then that academics are not likely to give sitting presidents more than an average score after only one year in office. (Grade inflation appears not to have invaded this area at least.) Barring some triumphant or cataclysmic act, this would appear to represent a norm for anyone's first year in office. At this stage, therefore, we would predict that no correlation exists, if only because our experts are unlikely to rank a president very high or low based on only one year in office. Even George W. Bush, who received a significant instant approval boost from the public in the wake of September 11th received only an average score from academics. Time may challenge our conclusions; but for the moment, after four sitting presidents and 20 years, we are comfortable in denying any direct relationship between early scores and future rankings.

Second, is there a pattern to the change in ranking over time? If we take as a given (see above) the stability of the "older" presidents, the examination of the last ten presidents may be useful, covering as they do 70 years in time and 20 years of our study. (We are excluding William Clinton and George W. Bush in this analysis because there really has not been enough time for change to take place.)

A look at the ten presidents and the changes in rankings will, we believe, serve to illustrate the point (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
Alteration of Placement—Presidents: 1932-92

President	*Number of Places Rating Changed**	*Current Rank*
Roosevelt	0	1
Truman	0	7
Eisenhower	4 [up]	10
Kennedy	6 [down]	14
Johnson	2 [up]	15
Nixon	5 [up]	26
Ford	9 [down]	28
Carter	9 [up]	25
Reagan	6 [down]	16
G.H.W. Bush	13 [down]	22

* Represents the maximum change en toto.

Overall, for ten presidents and 60 years, we see an average variation of 5.4 places. If, however, we subject the table to some variations, the analysis proves more enlightening. If we look at the first 30 years (1932-62), the variation is only 2.5 places. Since 1962 the variation is 7.3 places.

Based on this analysis of the data presented in the table, we see a pattern emerge. Stability of place would not seem to come for 40-plus years. Even at 30 to 40 years out of office, there would still seem to be a likelihood of substantial mobility. Under 20 years, substantial volatility is likely to prevail.

Third, why might a president's ranking change significantly well after the completion of his term? There are a number of responses to this question. One can certainly argue that new historical interpretation, greater objectivity, and/or new revelations about the period or the administration may alter the interpretation. Certainly that would appear to be the case in regard to President Eisenhower—new information, the revelation of events, and the memoirs of "insiders" have tended to make him seem much more involved and "hands on" than the affable but rather above-it-all image projected in his era and immediately after.

The case of President Kennedy's fall in the ratings would also seem to bear out such an analysis. The outpouring of memoirs, television documentaries, etc. would suggest the availability of new insights into that administration and a different reading of the period. On another level, the passage of time, and the passing from the professoriate of partisans and opponents may also have done much to increase objectivity. With whatever emotion one greets the fact, it remains true that the aura of Camelot no longer haunts the history of the Kennedy administration.

The decline of Jefferson, only two places, but within the top five—the elite of the elite, is quite significant. It seems to us that most of this result is owed to recent DNA testing and the research of Joseph Ellis and others, which appears to have greatly increased the credibility of the accusations surrounding the Sally Hemings affair. New revelations rather than new interpretations or increased objectivity would seem to explain this change.

We then conclude, with some confidence, that the conventional wisdom that informed our early analysis is correct. Changes in a president's ranking well after his term are likely to be due to new revelations about the president or his administration and/or to new interpretations. We also conclude that greater objectivity seems to be indicated as "vital political memory" (i.e., those who themselves voted for, or against, that particular president) of an individual president fades with the passage of time.

Fourth, can a president affect his ranking after leaving office? Here, the examples of Presidents Nixon, Carter, and Ford clearly indicate an affirmative response.

In Nixon's case, the results are marginal but clear. By books, articles, and public appearances as well as his availability to later presidents as advisor, he consciously built a reputation as an elder statesman—a "wise man" if you will. He also made available his thoughts and motives in regard to his actions as president. Spin it may well have been but it, along with his clear accomplishments in foreign policy, has helped to raise his general position a couple of points, even as four more presidents have been added to the list.

President Carter has brought the art of the ex-president to an apogee. His quest for the Nobel Peace Prize (recently rewarded), his oversight of elections, his occasional

intrusion upon the foreign policy establishment (Haiti, the North Korean nuclear negotiations), and his house building for Habitat for Humanity have successfully created an imposing and potent image as America's best ex-president.

They have also raised his ranking from 33rd of the 39 men who had then been president to 25th of the 42 men who have been president.

President Ford, on the other hand, by his absence from public life, undoubtedly coupled with the fact that he had never been elected, has gone from 23rd early in Reagan's presidency to 32nd and back up to 28th in our current study.

It would appear to us that former presidents who simply retire run the risk of falling off the radar screen of academic as well as public opinion. Ford, though, is not necessarily an archetype—unelected, the president who pardoned Nixon, and bracketed, by Nixon and Carter, highly active former presidents aching for justification.

Nevertheless, it seems arguable that the post-presidential conduct of Nixon and Carter did alter, in a positive fashion, the way that experts viewed their terms in office. Ford's more conventional departure, on the other hand, seems to have dimmed whatever slight luster his presidency once had.

Fifth, when is a president's place in history final, or nearly so? It seems probable that the truly great American presidents have secured their places almost from the end of their presidencies. "Light Horse Harry" Lee was Washington's contemporary and said he was "First in war, First in peace and First in the hearts of his countrymen." At Lincoln's deathbed, Stanton said, "Now he belongs to the ages." The outpouring of grief at the death of FDR remains awesome, even in old newsreels and radio tapes. The same might be said for the bottom-ranked presidents. Who mourned, or even noticed, the end of the Buchanan administration? Who, other than Hawthorne, cared for Pierce? The 2002 survey would seem to support this contention. The reordering of the "worst" presidents shifts no one by more than three places, and that shift of Grant to 35th still leaves him in the bottom 20%.

The giants and the pygmies will, we submit, rarely vary significantly no matter how many polls or tracking studies are done.

Some, like Eisenhower, on the other hand, need time and objectivity to join with interpretation before we can see beneath the veneer to the true forms of their presidential style and their achievements. It took nearly 40 years for Eisenhower to move from Arthur Schlesinger, Sr.'s 1962 ranking (see above) into the top ten American presidents.

It is probably safe to say that he and Harry Truman, seventh in all four of our surveys, have now (barring displacement by new "great" presidents or some cataclysmic revelations) reached their basic, quasi-permanent ranking. After all, a full generation and more has passed since they left the White House. Once again, the 2002 survey would seem to reinforce this contention.

It is probably too early to suggest that Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and their more recent successors are yet enshrined wherever they may be. Another effort, or two or three, will probably begin that resolution. If the alteration in Kennedy's ranking by scholars should continue, or even conclude with a mid-teens rating, it would seem another argument that presidents departed from office a generation or more may still see considerable volatility in their rankings (see objective #2). Something closer to a 50-year rule

than a 25-year rule (see objective #5) may be standard. Such volatility, as illustrated by our examples, may be either positive or negative and would seem to reinforce the concept that the passage of time does delete passion and increase objectivity.

It seems to us that, with the usual caveats, the giants are virtually immediately recognizable. So too are the failures. It is in the second rank of achievement or of failure that time needs to pass before a valid statement of status can be made. Perhaps a generation or more, a period of about 35 to 40 years, is necessary. For tracking studies of college professors, we probably need that long to weed out the impact of vital political memory. Our overall results, both in stability and in change, would seem to support these contentions.

Summary

After the passage of eight years since our last survey and the additional data from our new survey, we are prepared to offer the following conclusions:

1. There is no relationship between a president's ranking after one year in office and his future ratings.
2. It seems to be true that a president's ranking will change with the passage of time. Such a rating seems likely to move, either up or down, for about 40 years and then stabilize.
3. New information about a president can affect his rating after he leaves office.
4. A president can affect his rating by his own actions after leaving office.
5. A president's rating is permanent or near permanent about 50 years after leaving office, always barring some startling new revelation.

Finally, it is of course necessary to recognize that the man and the era, or events, must meet if true greatness is even to be possible. It is self-evident that Washington, Lincoln, and FDR all faced enormous challenges. To succeed was to triumph, to fail was to be politically inept or ignoble. Similarly, if the challenges that faced Jefferson and TR were slightly less daunting, they were nevertheless very real and each of them (rounding out the consistent top five in our surveys) led the country not only into a new century but into a new era of highly significant change. It would seem clear that the shift of TR from 5th to 3rd and of Jefferson from 3rd to 5th is closely associated with the increased credibility accorded the so-called "Hemings Affair" (see above). Theodore Roosevelt's concomitant rise, we believe, owes something to the vacancy created by Jefferson's decline, but perhaps more to the recent (and ongoing) centennial celebrations of the "Republican" Roosevelt.

It would probably be true to suggest that one or more "average" presidents might have emerged as an exceptional president had his era furnished him with dynamic challenges or unusual opportunities. In their absence, talent, intellect, ability, and skills—none are adequate.

In ranking great presidents, one is compelled to keep in mind the old cliché of political conventions, "The man and the moment have met."

Appendix

Results of Siena Research Institute Presidential Ranking Survey

President	*Average Ranking {All 20 Categories} 2002*	*Your Present Overall View {Category 20} 2002*
Washington	04	03
J. Adams	12	09
Jefferson	05	05
Madison	09	12
Monroe	08	13
J.Q. Adams	17	17
Jackson	13	08
Van Buren	24	25
W. Harrison	36	38
Tyler	37	35
Polk	11	11
Taylor	34	33
Fillmore	38	37
Pierce	39	39
Buchanan	41	42
Lincoln	02	01
A. Johnson	42	40
Grant	35	36
Hayes	27	28
Garfield	33	30
Arthur	30	27
Cleveland	20	19
B. Harrison	32	31
McKinley	19	17
T. Roosevelt	03	04
Taft	21	23
Wilson	06	07
Harding	40	41
Coolidge	29	31
Hoover	31	29
F. Roosevelt	01	02
Truman	07	06
Eisenhower	10	09
Kennedy	14	15
L. Johnson	15	16
Nixon	26	34
Ford	28	26
Carter	25	24
Reagan	16	14
G.H.W. Bush	22	21
Clinton	18	20
G.W. Bush	23	22