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# *The Evaluation of Presidents: An Extension of the Schlesinger Polls*

GARY M. MARANELL

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IN 1948 and again in 1962, Arthur M. Schlesinger asked panels of historians and political scientists to rate the Presidents of the United States in categories ranging from "great" to "failure." Although these polls have been subjected to criticism, they have proved useful.<sup>1</sup> But there are serious problems inherent in this type of research.

This essay enlarges upon the Schlesinger polls, as well as updates them. It also introduces crucial methodological changes such as the use of social-psychological scaling methods instead of a simple ranking, the inclusion of additional dimensions of evaluation, the use of a much larger and less biased sample, and the use of a single professional society as a sampling frame. The two Schlesinger studies, which created the interest in this line of inquiry, found the following ordering of Presidents (see Table 1).

A question that might well have concerned many readers of the earlier presidential polls involves the possible alternative meanings and dimensions that may have been employed in the ratings of prestige. It is easy to see that an active President may be seen as prestigious, regardless of the significance of his accomplishments, or that an idealistic President may be more highly regarded than a practical one. To take into account questions like these, it was necessary to include ratings of other dimensions in addition to that of prestige. A total of seven dimensions were used in this study. The use of these additional dimensions allows for an examination of the relationships among them, which, in turn, permits increased understanding of what is involved in (or related to) the rating of presidential prestige.

The present survey employed a standard social-psychological scaling

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<sup>1</sup> The first poll served as background for Morton Borden, ed., *America's Ten Greatest Presidents* (Chicago, 1961), 2. Thomas A. Bailey, *Presidential Greatness: The Image and the Man from George Washington to the Present* (New York, 1966), used both polls and other materials. Bailey discusses the polls and the dilemmas involved in such assessments.

TABLE 1  
SCHLESINGER POLLS OF PRESIDENTIAL GREATNESS

1948 poll (Responses from 55 experts) <sup>2</sup>		1962 poll (Responses from 75 experts) <sup>3</sup>
	Great	
1. Abraham Lincoln		1 Abraham Lincoln
2 George Washington		2 George Washington
3 Franklin D. Roosevelt		3 Franklin D. Roosevelt
4 Woodrow Wilson		4 Woodrow Wilson
5 Thomas Jefferson		5 Thomas Jefferson
6 Andrew Jackson		
	Near Great	
7 Theodore Roosevelt		6. Andrew Jackson
8. Grover Cleveland		7. Theodore Roosevelt
		8 James K Polk
		9. Harry S Truman
9. John Adams		10. John Adams
10 James K Polk		11 Grover Cleveland
	Average	
11 John Quincy Adams		12 James Madison
12 James Monroe		13 John Quincy Adams
13 Rutherford B Hayes		14 Rutherford B Hayes
14. James Madison		15 William McKinley
15 Martin Van Buren		16 William Howard Taft
16. William Howard Taft		17. Martin Van Buren
17. Chester A Arthur		18 James Monroe
18 William McKinley		19 Herbert Hoover
19 Andrew Johnson		20 Benjamin Harrison
20. Herbert Hoover		21 Chester A Arthur
		22. Dwight D Eisenhower
21. Benjamin Harrison		23. Andrew Johnson
	Below Average	
22. John Tyler		24 Zachary Taylor
23 Calvin Coolidge		25 John Tyler
24 Millard Fillmore		26 Millard Fillmore
25 Zachary Taylor		27 Calvin Coolidge
26 James Buchanan		28 Franklin Pierce
27 Franklin Pierce		29 James Buchanan
	Failure	
28. Ulysses S Grant		30. Ulysses S. Grant
29. Warren G Harding		31. Warren G. Harding

procedure to secure scores for the Presidents on each dimension. The process employed is the method of successive intervals<sup>4</sup>—a procedure developed by L. L. Thurstone which takes into account possible inequalities in the intervals of the latent continuum being employed. The latent continuum

<sup>2</sup> *Life*, 25 (Nov. 1, 1948), 65.

<sup>3</sup> *New York Times*, July 29, 1962

<sup>4</sup> Bert F Green, "Attitude Measurement," Gardner Lindzey, ed., *Handbook of Social Psychology* (2 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1954), I, 335-469

in each case is the dimension identified. The procedure demands only a single judgment of each President by each respondent and is, therefore, a relatively undemanding method when the number of objects and/or dimensions is large. The procedure in this study was simply to ask each respondent to indicate the position of each President on an eleven interval scale. The ends of the scale are identified with descriptive labels of the dimension employed. The resulting scale contains meaningful intervals between scaled objects. Therefore, the scores can be graphed on a physical continuum, and the relative distances between Presidents can be observed.

The participants in the present study were asked to rate the Presidents<sup>5</sup> on seven separate scales or dimensions:

1. The general prestige assigned to the President at the present time. The ends of the continuum were identified as high and low.
2. The strength of the role the President played in directing the government and shaping the events of his day. The ends of the continuum were identified as strong and weak.
3. The approach taken by each President toward his administration, an active approach or a passive approach.
4. An evaluation of the idealistic or practical nature of the official actions of each President.
5. An evaluation of the flexibility or inflexibility of the approach each President took in implementing his programs or policies.
6. An evaluation of the significance attached by each respondent to the accomplishments of each President. The ends of the continuum were identified as great and little.
7. An indication of the amount of information each respondent possessed about each President. The ends of the continuum were identified as a great deal and very little.

The sample of informants was randomly drawn from the membership of the Organization of American Historians. This group clearly includes historians who are most interested in American history. The total sample selected was 1,095, and the questionnaire designed to secure the ratings was sent to the respondents in March 1968. A single follow-up questionnaire was employed. The questionnaire was returned by nearly 600 historians, and it was discovered that 571 were sufficiently complete to be included in the analysis. The scores obtained and presented here are the standardized responses of these 571 historians. This sample is more than seven and one-

<sup>5</sup> The respondents were asked to evaluate thirty-two Presidents. Two Presidents, William Henry Harrison and James A. Garfield, were excluded because both served in the presidency less than a year.

half times larger than Schlesinger's larger panel, and it contains no clearly identifiable regional or institutional bias.

The orderings of the Presidents in Tables 2 through 8 include a standard score for each on the dimensions involved. This value indicates the number of standard deviation units each President is above or below the mean, or average, for all Presidents on each of the seven dimensions employed.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the point where the values shift from positive to negative numbers divides those above the mean from those below. A President scoring exactly on the mean would have a score of zero. With the scaling procedures employed and the use of standard scores, the distances between values are meaningful. If the identified points are located on a scale, the relative separations and clusterings can be used to reveal the relative similarity in the perceptions of Presidents.

TABLE 2  
GENERAL PRESTIGE  
(Dimension 1)

Abraham Lincoln	+2 10*	Herbert Hoover	- .09
George Washington	+1 78	Dwight D Eisenhower	- 29
Franklin Roosevelt	+1 57	Andrew Johnson	- .30
Thomas Jefferson	+1 47	Martin Van Buren	- .37
Theodore Roosevelt	+1 18	William McKinley	- 39
Woodrow Wilson	+1 01	Chester A Arthur	- .52
Harry Truman	+ 94	Rutherford B Hayes	- .59
Andrew Jackson	+ 87	John Tyler	- 78
John Kennedy	+ 63	Benjamin Harrison	- .89
John Adams	+ 61	Zachary Taylor	- .96
James K Polk	+ 30	Calvin Coolidge	- .99
Grover Cleveland	+ .25	Millard Fillmore	-1 19
James Madison	+ 23	James Buchanan	-1 28
James Monroe	+ 17	Franklin Pierce	-1.29
John Quincy Adams	+ 16	Ulysses S Grant	-1 50
Lyndon Johnson	+ 06	Warren G Harding	-1 84
William Howard Taft	- 05		

\* A high positive score is high in prestige

A comparison between Schlesinger's 1962 poll (see Table 1) and the present poll (see Table 2) reveals some interesting changes in the ordering of the Presidents. This is especially evident in the rank order of the Presi-

<sup>6</sup> Standard deviation is a measure of the absolute dispersion of scores around a central mean or average. The more closely the scores cluster to the mean the smaller the standard deviation will be. If we wish to compare scores on different measurements we must employ standard deviation units through standard scores for they provide comparability across variables with highly different sizes of scores of cluster patterns.

dents appraised by both studies (excluding John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson). For example, Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt have moved ahead of Woodrow Wilson and Harry S. Truman has moved ahead of Andrew Jackson and James Polk. Numerous other changes have also occurred. Herbert Hoover, Dwight Eisenhower, James Monroe, and Andrew Johnson have moved up; and William McKinley, among others, has moved down. The rank order also indicates that at this point in time Kennedy is listed among the top ten Presidents.

An examination of the arrangement and scores of the Presidents on the second dimension demonstrates that general prestige and strength of role played by the President, although similar, are not the same thing (see Table 3). Therefore, general prestige is not simply a reflection of strength of role played. Some interesting observations include the fact that Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jackson, and Lyndon Johnson secure much higher scores on strength than prestige, and that Washington has a much higher prestige score than strength score. Franklin D. Roosevelt is also seen to be the most

TABLE 3  
STRENGTH OF ACTION  
(Dimension 2)

Franklin D. Roosevelt	+1 98*	Herbert Hoover	- 23
Abraham Lincoln	+1 74	William McKinley	- 30
Andrew Jackson	+1.37	Martin Van Buren	- 34
Theodore Roosevelt	+1 36	Andrew Johnson	- 40
Woodrow Wilson	+1 35	Dwight Eisenhower	- .43
Thomas Jefferson	+1 18	Chester A Arthur	- 68
Harry Truman	+1 06	Rutherford B Hayes	- 69
Lyndon Johnson	+1 00	John Tyler	- .716
George Washington	+ .89	Zachary Taylor	- .72
John F Kennedy	+ 68	Benjamin Harrison	- .97
James K Polk	+ 55	Calvin Coolidge	-1.17
John Adams	+ 41	James Buchanan	-1 19
Grover Cleveland	+ 18	Millard Fillmore	-1.22
James Madison	+ .05	Franklin Pierce	-1 33
James Monroe	- .02	Ulysses S Grant	-1 36
William Howard Taft	- 17	Warren G Harding	-1 66
John Quincy Adams	- .22		

\* A high positive score is strength; a high negative score is weakness

active as well as the strongest President (see Table 4). Lyndon Johnson is also found to score high on this dimension—much higher, in fact, than he scored on general prestige.

Idealism is not highly related to general presidential prestige (see Table 5). The idealists include Kennedy and Wilson who were high on prestige,

TABLE 4  
PRESIDENTIAL ACTIVENESS  
(Dimension 3)

Franklin D. Roosevelt	+2.06*	Herbert Hoover	- 14
Theodore Roosevelt	+1.61	William Howard Taft	- 16
Andrew Jackson	+1.51	Martin Van Buren	- 24
Lyndon Johnson	+1.39	William McKinley	- 34
Harry Truman	+1.25	John Tyler	- 56
John F. Kennedy	+1.06	Dwight D. Eisenhower	- .59
Woodrow Wilson	+1.05	Chester A. Arthur	- 69
Abraham Lincoln	+ .93	Rutherford B. Hayes	- 74
Thomas Jefferson	+ .91	Zachary Taylor	- 86
James K. Polk	+ .59	Benjamin Harrison	- 95
George Washington	+ .44	Millard Fillmore	-1 22
John Adams	+ .34	James Buchanan	-1 26
Grover Cleveland	+ .20	Franklin Pierce	-1 29
Andrew Johnson	+ .12	Ulysses S. Grant	-1 37
James Madison	+ .03	Calvin Coolidge	-1 37
John Quincy Adams	+ .01	Warren G. Harding	-1 66
James Monroe	- .06		

\* A high positive score is active; a high negative score is passive

but also seen as idealistic were Hoover, Andrew Johnson, and Millard Fillmore who were substantially less prestigious. Similarly, the practical Presidents include Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt who have high

TABLE 5  
PRESIDENTS ON IDEALISM OR PRACTICALITY  
(Dimension 4)

Woodrow Wilson	+4.23*	William McKinley	- .25
John Quincy Adams	+1.18	Rutherford B. Hayes	- 29
John F. Kennedy	+1.14	Benjamin Harrison	- 33
Herbert Hoover	+1.00	George Washington	- 41
Thomas Jefferson	+ .81	Harry Truman	- .44
Andrew Johnson	+ .66	Chester A. Arthur	- 45
James Madison	+ .55	Martin Van Buren	- 47
James Monroe	+ .40	Ulysses S. Grant	- 55
Millard Fillmore	+ .36	Theodore Roosevelt	- 57
Dwight D. Eisenhower	+ .13	Abraham Lincoln	- 61
John Tyler	+ .09	Franklin D. Roosevelt	- 62
Grover Cleveland	+ .08	Andrew Jackson	- 74
Zachary Taylor	+ .01	Warren G. Harding	- 81
James Buchanan	- .017	Lyndon Johnson	-1 01
John Adams	- .02	Calvin Coolidge	-1 41
William Howard Taft	- .04	James K. Polk	-1.44
Franklin Pierce	- .17		

\* A high positive score is idealistic; a high negative score is practical.

prestige, but also Warren G. Harding who is lowest in general prestige.

The flexibility dimension is also strikingly different than both general prestige and idealism (see Table 6). Wilson, who was seen to be the most idealistic President is seen to be the most inflexible; and Kennedy, who ranked third in idealism, is seen to be the most flexible. Lincoln, the second ranking President in flexibility, is seen to be more practical than idealistic. The simultaneous examination of flexibility and idealism reveals an interesting pattern of presidential similarity. There are four clear patterns of these two dimensions: flexibility coupled with idealism, flexibility coupled with practicality, inflexibility coupled with idealism, and inflexibility coupled with practicality. Each of these patterns is associated with a set of Presidents. This mode of analysis reveals similarities that are often, but not always, anticipated. For example, the findings reveal Wilson to be idealistic and inflexible, Jackson to be practical and inflexible, Lincoln to be practical and flexible, and Kennedy to be idealistic and flexible. It is not always immediately apparent, even to well-informed historians, which other Presidents share these combinations of characteristics. It is easy to see and suggest correctly that Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt share similar positions as practical and flexible. The similarity of Kennedy and Jefferson on these dimensions, as well as that of Jackson and Lyndon Johnson, is also not too surprising. However, the combination of Wilson and Hoover as in-

TABLE 6  
Flexibility  
(Dimension 5)

John F Kennedy	+1 61*	Franklin Pierce	+ .16
Abraham Lincoln	+1 50	Rutherford B Hayes	+ 14
Thomas Jefferson	+1 35	James Buchanan	+ 01
Franklin D Roosevelt	+1 31	William Howard Taft	+ 01
Dwight D Eisenhower	+1 21	James K Polk	- 19
Warren G Harding	+1 17	Lyndon Johnson	- 47
James Monroe	+1 03	Zachary Taylor	- 76
Ulysses S Grant	+ 59	Calvin Coolidge	- 83
James Madison	+ 576	John Adams	- 85
George Washington	+ 57	Grover Cleveland	- 88
William McKinley	+ 49	Herbert Hoover	-1 01
Harry Truman	+ 31	John Tyler	-1 09
Millard Fillmore	+ 27	John Quincy Adams	-1 15
Martin Van Buren	+ 19	Andrew Jackson	-1 40
Theodore Roosevelt	+ 186	Andrew Johnson	-2 18
Benjamin Harrison	+ 186	Woodrow Wilson	-2 23
Chester A Arthur	+ 18		

\* A high positive score is flexible, a high negative score is inflexible

TABLE 7  
ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THEIR ADMINISTRATIONS  
(Dimension 6)

Abraham Lincoln	+2 07*	John Quincy Adams	- .24
Franklin D. Roosevelt	+1 91	Herbert Hoover	- 29
George Washington	+1 72	Dwight D. Eisenhower	- 32
Thomas Jefferson	+1 31	Andrew Johnson	- 40
Theodore Roosevelt	+1 26	Martin Van Buren	- 46
Harry Truman	+1 12	Chester A Arthur	- 52
Woodrow Wilson	+1 11	Rutherford B Hayes	- 64
Andrew Jackson	+ 83	John Tyler	- 80
Lyndon Johnson	+ 53	Benjamin Harrison	- 86
James K Polk	+ 50	Zachary Taylor	- 99
John Adams	+ 37	James Buchanan	-1 136
John F Kennedy	+ 36	Millard Fillmore	-1 14
James Monroe	+ 13	Calvin Coolidge	-1 20
Grover Cleveland	+ 11	Franklin Pierce	-1 25
James Madison	+ 10	Ulysses S Grant	-1 38
William Howard Taft	- 01	Warren G Harding	-1 61
William McKinley	- 21		

\* A high positive score is great accomplishment, a high negative score is little accomplishment.

flexible idealists is usually unanticipated; and it is only after some consideration that historians can recognize Hoover-Wilson similarities and appreciate that their major differences are on other, unrelated dimensions, such as their political ideologies.

The similarity of the ordering and scores of the Presidents on the dimension of accomplishments (see Table 7) and the general prestige dimension (see Table 2) suggests that this is a major area in the evaluation of general prestige. The fact that presidential accomplishment is of major importance in (or highly related to) presidential prestige should add confidence to an assessment of the meaningfulness of the initial evaluations. An examination of the correlations between dimensions reinforces this evaluation (see Table 9).

The Presidents best known to the panel of American historians appear to combine the recent Presidents whose administrations have been in their personal experiences and the Presidents who have the greatest continuing historical interest (see Table 8). This is obviously not a surprise to anyone.

Finally in order to compare the evaluations of the Presidents on the different dimensions the correlations between the seven sets of scores have been calculated (see Table 9). When two dimensions are highly correlated this means that the respondents evaluated the Presidents very similarly on

TABLE 8  
RESPONDENTS' AMOUNT OF INFORMATION  
(Dimension 7)

Franklin D. Roosevelt	+1 52*	John Quincy Adams	- .14
Woodrow Wilson	+1 421	Warren G. Harding	- 15
Abraham Lincoln	+1 417	James K. Polk	- 26
Theodore Roosevelt	+1 20	Grover Cleveland	- 29
John F. Kennedy	+1 18	James Monroe	- 31
Lyndon Johnson	+1 12	William McKinley	- 33
Thomas Jefferson	+1 11	Calvin Coolidge	- 37
Harry Truman	+1 08	Martin Van Buren	- 56
Andrew Jackson	+1 08	James Buchanan	- 98
George Washington	+ .86	Rutherford B. Hayes	-1 06
Dwight D. Eisenhower	+ 82	John Tyler	-1.29
John Adams	+ 26	Chester A. Arthur	-1 32
Herbert Hoover	+ 24	Zachary Taylor	-1 38
William Howard Taft	+ .09	Benjamin Harrison	-1 52
Andrew Johnson	+ .03	Millard Fillmore	-1.72
James Madison	+ 02	Franklin Pierce	-1 73
Ulysses S. Grant	- 05		

\* A high positive score indicates possession of a great deal of information about the president, a high negative score is very little information.

these aspects. A low correlation indicates that the two sets of evaluations are different and that no systematic similarity of evaluation exists. An inverse or negative correlation indicates that persons systematically judge the same Presidents high on one dimension and low on others and vice versa. The correlation coefficients of .98 and .95 show that the most similar dimensions are general prestige and presidential accomplishment, and strength of the role played by each President. The activeness of presidential role was also highly related to these three dimensions.

TABLE 9  
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE SEVEN EVALUATIONS  
OF THE PRESIDENTS

Dimension	Prestige	Strength	Active- ness	Idealism	Flexi- bility	Accom- plishment	Infor- mation
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Prestige	—						
2 Strength	.95	—					
3 Activeness	.89	.97	—				
4 Idealism	.17	.14	.13	—			
5 Flexibility	.13	.07	-.005	-.33	—		
6 Accomplishment	.98	.97	.91	.11	.16	—	
7 Information	.79	.84	.81	.17	.15	.81	—

Idealism and flexibility are very different from prestige, accomplishment, and strength of role and are in general inversely related to them. Knowledge of the Presidents is generally related to the presidential prestige, strength, activeness, and accomplishment.

How are our Presidents evaluated by American historians? Why are some Presidents highly regarded by historians and others not? This article attempts to answer these questions by discovering what is related to presidential prestige. It also ascertains how the Presidents are rated on general prestige and on other dimensions including: idealism, accomplishments, flexibility, activity, and strength of control and action of their administrations. The results indicate the existence of interesting shifts of opinion and provide some index of the contemporary evaluations of our most recent presidents.