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

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Biographies

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Abstract

Debates over presidential greatness have been with us for decades, facilitated in part by numerous systematic surveys of scholars with expertise in American history and politics. Despite this, the voice of political scientists in this debate has been relatively muted compared particularly with the role historians have had in making these determinations. In this article, we introduce and assess the results of a recent effort to capture the attitudes of political science experts on the presidency on presidential greatness. By surveying the membership of the American Political Science Association's Presidency & Executive Politics section, we were able to identify and then compare specifically the attitudes of political scientists against the growing body of ratings and rankings of a phenomenon of long-standing interest and importance.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Steven Schier, for his support in conducting this survey during his term as president of the APSA Presidents & 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 PEP section for contributing their time and knowledge to this study.

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

The subject of presidential greatness, particularly from a modern political science perspective, is the focus of this article. In the pages that follow, we provide brief discussions of the contested concept of presidential greatness and the various scholarly efforts to capture and analyze the phenomenon, before introducing the results of a new study of presidential greatness based upon a large sample of political scientists who are engaged in the ongoing study of the American presidency. The results of this study underscore some of the findings we have come to expect based on now decades of analysis from primarily historians, but also yield some intriguing results potentially related to the distinct disciplinary perspectives political scientists take to the presidency that separates them from members of other fields.

What Is Presidential Greatness?

There are arguably as many perspectives, if not significantly more, on what it means to be a great president as there have been presidents. Indeed, a 2012 CNN story that attempted to wrestle the concept into submission instead further indicated the variety of opinions on the matter, even as they queried a handful of well-known historians with largely similar methodological approaches to the study of the office and the individuals who have held it. 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 notes the nation’s three greatest presidents – George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt – came to office at 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, as he pointed out Andrew Jackson’s involvement of ordinary people into 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 upon election to the position in 1980. Joan Hoff took a different approach to seeing what the greatest presidents all had in common, observing that nearly all of the presidents regularly at the top of scholarly surveys led the nation in time of war (save Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt), though she notes merely conducting a war alone is not sufficient. And Aida Donald invoked a variety of other criteria, ranging from accomplishments to sound decision making to personal character.

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 while presidential greatness is frequently discussed, it is not one that has been entirely nailed down. The fact that psychologists take an equally distinct perspective, then, should not be a surprise. In a paper presented to the American Psychological Association, Steven Rubenzer Thomas Faschingbauer, and Deniz Ones (2000) focused on what the greatest presidents had in common, and rather than identifying factors such as the presence of crisis or successful management of major wars, they focused on presidents’ cognitive processes and behavioral attributes, concluding that factors such as being achievement-oriented and inclined to assert their interests are determinative. Dean Simonton, a psychologist who pioneered much of that discipline’s presidency-focused research, instead identifies factors more likely to resonate with political scientists: number of years in office, number of years as a wartime commander-in-chief, the presence of an administration scandal, assassination, and having entered office with a prior reputation as a war hero (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 (Nichols 2012) also help explain assessments of presidential greatness, whereas one commonly thought explanation, prior experience, does not (Balz 2010).

Conversely, Karl Rove, George W. Bush’s strategist and advisor, sounded at times 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 handful of essential factors: clarity of vision, clarity of direction, the presence of a crisis, emotional intelligence (a phrase 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” (2002). Although many of these phrases may sound as if they come from a George W. Bush stump speech, one he himself would have had a hand in authoring, Rove does a masterful job linking explanations ranging from individual characteristics to institutional context (see also Kenney and Rice 1988) in a rather broad-minded and trans-disciplinary approach to the concept of presidential greatness.

Studying Presidential Greatness

Virtually all of the aforementioned social science research designed to explain presidential greatness has made use of the growing body of surveys conducted among both experts and the mass public about presidential greatness. Famed historian Arthur M. Schlesinger pioneered the practice of surveying intellectual elites about their attitudes towards our greatest presidential leadership. In 1948, *Life* magazine published the results of his study of fifty-five historians, asking 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 single respondent (see Bose 2003, 5). Fourteen years later, Schlesinger conducted another survey, this time featuring seventy-five historians, that was published by the *New York Times Magazine*. The results across these two studies were largely consistent, with the vast majority of 1962 presidential rankings staying within a couple places of their 1948 counterparts; noteworthy exceptions, however, 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* made it a family affair, recruiting Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., to conduct another expert poll in 1996. Schlesinger Jr. also published an extended report in *Political Science Quarterly* (1997). His method slightly departed from his father's, however, as he dropped the number of respondents to thirty-two and expanded the pool to include politicians Governor Mario Cuomo and U.S. Senator Paul Simon. This makes comparisons imperfect but offers insight into shifting perspectives on presidential greatness and how impressions of presidents have changed. Again, the results of Schlesinger Jr.'s survey were consistent with the two conducted by his father, though provided evidence that several presidents had experienced significant changes in reputation in the half-century since the first Schlesinger poll was released. For example, residents 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 just the Schlesinger family. Between Schlesinger Sr.'s second study and Schlesinger Jr.'s first, there were many other similar efforts, such as a *Chicago Tribune* poll in 1982, and three polls produced by the Siena Research Institute at Siena College in 1982, 1990, and 1994. Since then, they have conducted similar polls in 2002 and 2010. In the years since the last Schlesinger poll, there have also been a pair of *Wall Street Journal*-sponsored studies (2000, 2005), a pair of C-SPAN studies (1999, 2009), and a variety of one-time studies conducted by outfits ranging from Newsweek (2012) and History News Network (2013) to *The Times* of London (2008) and the United States Presidency Centre (2011) in London. Some of these studies have utilized more unorthodox methods or focused only on a segment of presidents, but all have attempted to use experts' wisdom to put presidents in order of greatness.

The net result has been not only a wide range of presidential greatness survey, but a change to the very conversation about presidential leadership itself. Indeed, Mercieca and Vaughn (2014, 6) suggest the rising preponderance of these polls over time has affected the way experts and regular citizens have come to view presidential greatness and our greatest presidents themselves (i.e., great presidents are heroes, not necessarily competent administrators). Even with these decades of influential studies, however, assessments skew to the historical. In order 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

In order to do so, we sent the entire membership of the Presidents & Executive Politics (PEP) section of the American Political Science Association (n=391) an invitation to participate in a Qualtrics-based survey in early June 2014. The survey was closed and data collected on November 1, 2014. During the survey window, 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 conservative, and 6.3% as conservative. Similarly, 53.8% considered themselves a part of the Democratic Party, compared with 16.5% for the Republican Party and 25.3% for Independents. 57% of respondents were affiliated with public institutions, compared to 47% from private institutions,

and 29.4% were affiliated with research institutions, compared with 35% from teaching institutions and 35.6% from institutions that combined research and teaching emphases. The bulk of the respondents were full-time faculty members, with 35% of the pool comprised of 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. Respondent 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 a variety of ways. Respondents were asked on a scale of 1-4 how much information they knew about each president (with “1”= “nothing” and 4= “a lot” about the president). 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, Benjamin Harrison, Zachary Taylor, and Chester Arthur. In general, the earlier the president served, the less information political scientists had about the president in question. Notable exceptions include popular and historically consequential presidents.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Each respondent was also given the opportunity to rate each individual president on a 0 to 100 scale concerning their overall greatness. Importantly, we did not stipulate a particular definition of greatness, beyond 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 while George W. Bush earned the lowest. In between were Ronald Reagan (#11 with 67.5%, Lyndon Baines Johnson (#12 with 67.3), John F. Kennedy (#14 with 64.0), George H.W. Bush (#17 with 60.8), Barack Obama (#18 with 58.2), Gerald Ford (#24 with 50.1), Jimmy Carter (#26 with 44.2), and Richard Nixon (#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 study of the PEP membership and an average rank across the six other major scholar survey studies conducted between 2000 and the 2014 PEP study. This range of years was included because it balances having several studies to average across with having a consistent grouping of presidents in each survey. All presidents through George W. Bush are rated in each of these studies, and Barack Obama is rated in one of them. 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 scholar surveys, we are able to compare the political science perspective, as captured in the 2014 PEP study, with an aggregated representation of largely (though not exclusively) historian-based studies. For most presidents, the 2014 PEP ranking is very consistent with the prior average rank. Indeed, for 32 of the 43 individual presidents (Grover Cleveland is only counted once), the 2014 PEP ranking is within 3 slots (plus or minus) of the prior average ranking; for nineteen presidents it is within 1.5 slots (plus or minus). The eleven presidents where there is 2014 PEP ranking is three or more slots different (plus or minus), however, yield some interesting observations. Bill Clinton is easily the biggest outlier, with the 2014 PEP study ranking him 10.5 slots higher than his prior 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 their prior average ranking. Every other noteworthy disjuncture represents an instance where the 2014 PEP study ranked presidents several points lower than their prior 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, only Richard Nixon and George W. Bush can be considered modern presidents, and both of them are among the most controversial and derided of all presidents in American history. The remaining presidents who compare negatively are pre-modern presidents, with more than half coming from the nineteenth century. From these observations, we tentatively conclude that political science experts in the American presidency, focused as they largely are on the modern presidency, are more likely to penalize pre-modern 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 see the biggest discrepancies between the 2014 PEP study and their prior average, suggesting their

historical reputations are still quite in flux, something underscored by the fact that two of these presidents (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 on presidential politics focuses on the modern era, several questions were asked to gauge respondent opinions about specific dimensions of presidential leadership concerning only presidents 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 institutionalization of the office took place during Roosevelt's presidency. This also allowed us to narrow the focus to shorten the survey. These questions focused on the following dimensions: legislative skill, diplomatic skill, military skill, integrity, and whether they were a champion of the people. Higher scores mean the presidents rank higher (better) on these dimensions. Figure 2 displays these characteristics by president. Johnson (86) and Franklin Roosevelt (83) score the highest on legislative skill, befitting significant legislative accomplishments while in office. Presidents Eisenhower and Theodore Roosevelt score highest on military skill while both Roosevelts, Eisenhower, and Nixon rank in the top four for diplomatic skill. For integrity, Eisenhower, Truman, and Carter top the list, but Nixon (19) and Harding (28) scrape the bottom – Clinton, impeached by Congress but not removed, scored 42. Cousins Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt are on the top of presidents registered as “champions of the people,” with Franklin receiving the highest score here of any president (90) on any dimension. Truman is third (82) and just below him was Lyndon Johnson (80).

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

In addition to being asked about the knowledge about and assessment of the overall greatness of each president, respondents also 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 presidents should be (hypothetically) placed on the monument next. 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.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Respondents were also asked to identify which presidents were the best/worst, most over/under-rated, and most/least polarizing. For each question, they were asked to drag and then rank multiple presidents over to a box in order 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 5 131 times, followed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt (131), George Washington (127), Teddy 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). Interestingly, the aggregate results of the respondents' attitudes toward a handful of presidents indicated some degree of ambivalence; for example, 22 scholars included Ronald Reagan in their Top 5, though 11 other scholars 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).

[INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Respondents were also asked to identify the five most “over-rated” and five most “under-rated” presidents (Figure 5). John F. Kennedy was included on the most over-rated lists (69), followed by Ronald Reagan (59), Andrew Jackson (47), Woodrow Wilson (40), and Thomas Jefferson (37). Conversely, the most under-rated president was Dwight Eisenhower (55), followed by George H.W. Bush (47), Harry Truman (43), James Polk (25), and John Adams and Gerald Ford (both tied with 20). Although they tied with 20 votes for Most Under-Rated, the presidency scholar respondents demonstrated significantly more ambivalence about John Adams, who also received 15 votes for Most Over-Rated, whereas Gerald Ford did not make any Most Over-Rated lists. Other presidents exhibiting similar patterns

included Barack Obama (22 Most Over-Rated, 13 Most Under-Rated), James Madison (13 Most Over-Rated, 13 Most Under-Rated), Bill Clinton (18 Most Over-Rated, 13 Most Under-Rated), Ulysses Grant (6 Most Over-Rated, 16 Most Under-Rated), and George W. Bush (10 Most Over-Rated, 7 Most Under-Rated).

[INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Regarding the most and least polarizing presidents, we asked respondents to identify the 5 most or least polarizing presidents. Listed in Figure 6, George W. Bush led the way as he 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). George Washington was by far 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 then made the top 5 list for both most and least polarizing presidents, though he was not the only president where the aggregate results indicated scholarly uncertainty; Franklin Roosevelt was viewed as one of the five most polarizing presidents by 40 respondents while also being viewed 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).

[INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Conclusion

Our survey efforts of political scientists of presidential greatness loads political scientists back in to the discussion about presidential greatness. In the judgment of these political scientists, the destiny of some presidents has been altered as compared to similar past surveys: Presidents Clinton and Eisenhower have risen to the top 10 while President Andrew Johnson has sunk to the bottom. A new, expanded Mount Rushmore would have a slightly more Republican flavor: most would add Presidents Reagan and Eisenhower to the list, although this is only after adding Franklin Roosevelt's famous jutting chin. As might be reported in a high school yearbook poll, President Kennedy was judged to be the most overrated while Presidents Eisenhower and George H.W. Bush the most underrated. For the most recent two presidents (Bush and Obama), neither fare well in general but partisanship emerges here too as liberals are more likely to rank Obama higher and conservatives are more likely to rank Bush higher.

As we reflect on the benefaction of presidents past, these results remind 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 esteem of our political science respondents appears to be a compounding of time and longevity in office, peppered with some economic prosperity and effectively handling an international conflict. Presidential greatness in more recent installments appears to be as much about successful management of complex national problems as the promotion of big ideas (although these may be related). This recipe might just get a president's face eternally etched in a future stone monument.

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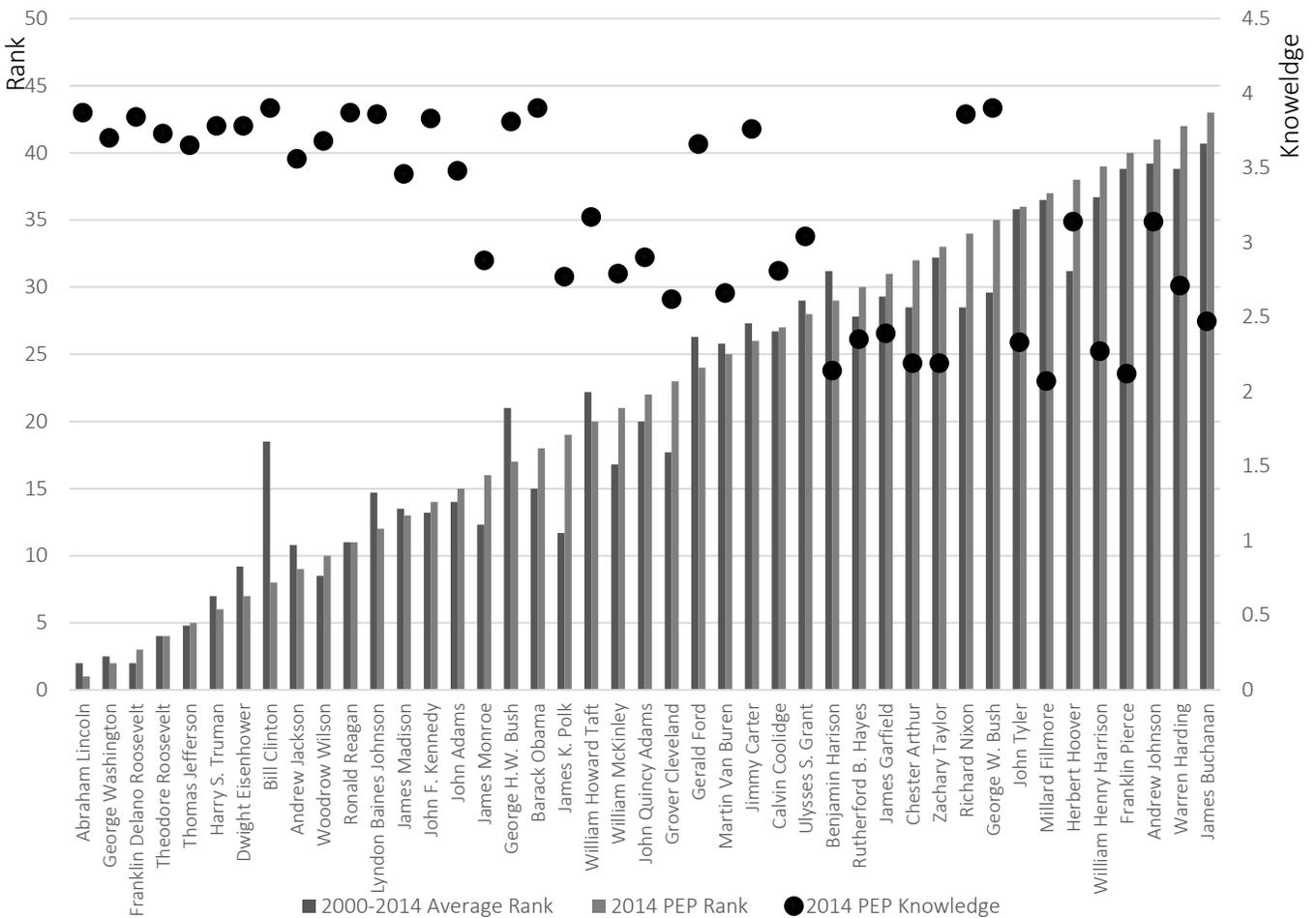
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Figure 1 – Presidential Greatness Survey Rank and Knowledge



NOTE: Prior to the 2014 PEP survey, there was only one survey that included Barack Obama. The 2010 Siena study ranked him at #15.

Figure 2 – Presidential Skill Ratings

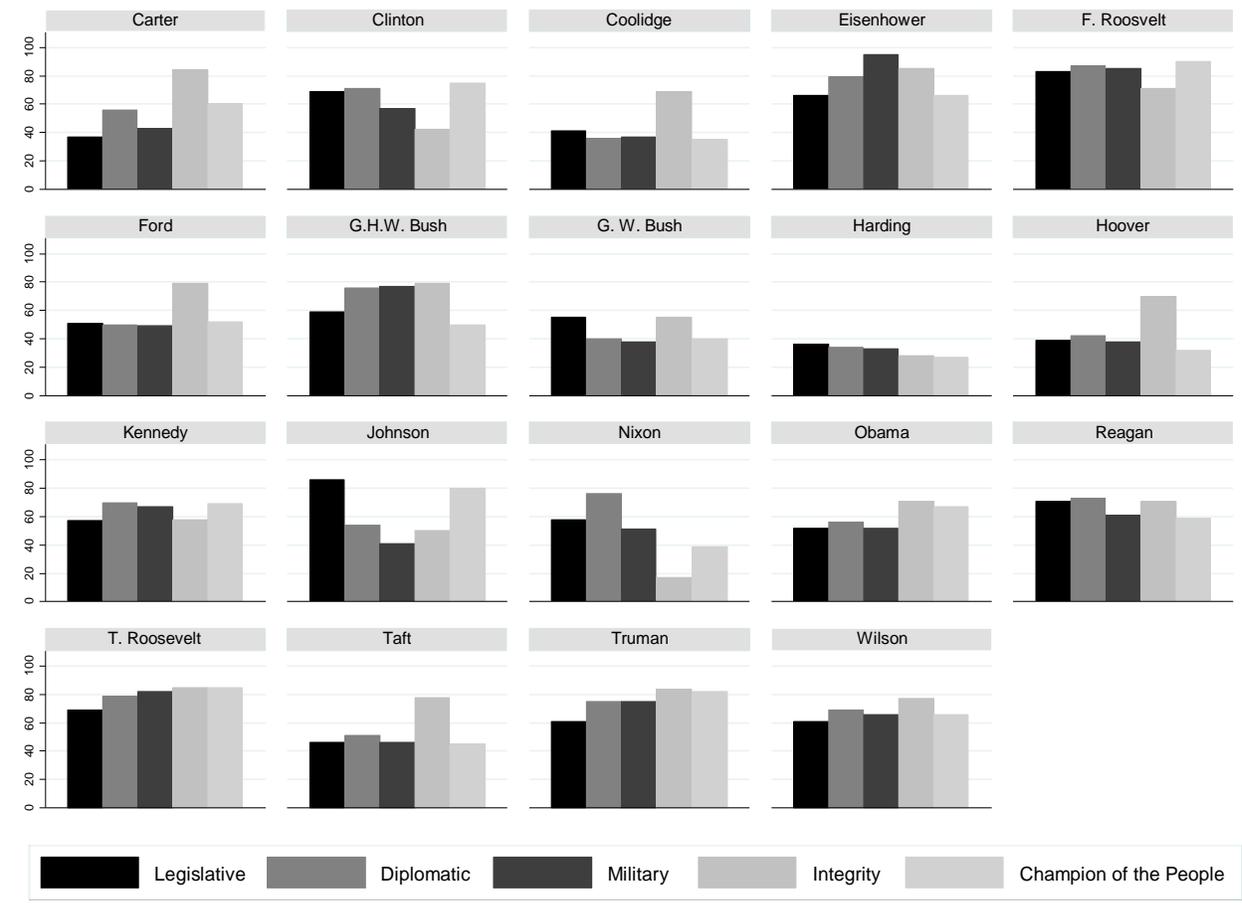


Figure 3 – Who Should be the Next President on Mt. Rushmore?

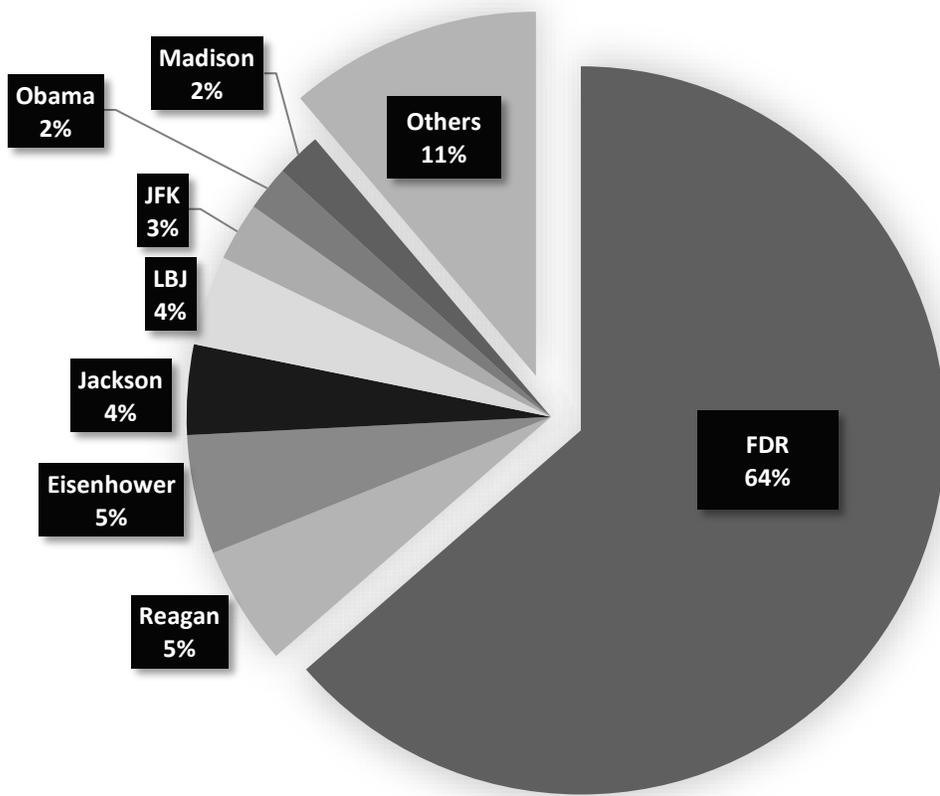


Figure 4 – “Best” and “Worst” President Total Votes

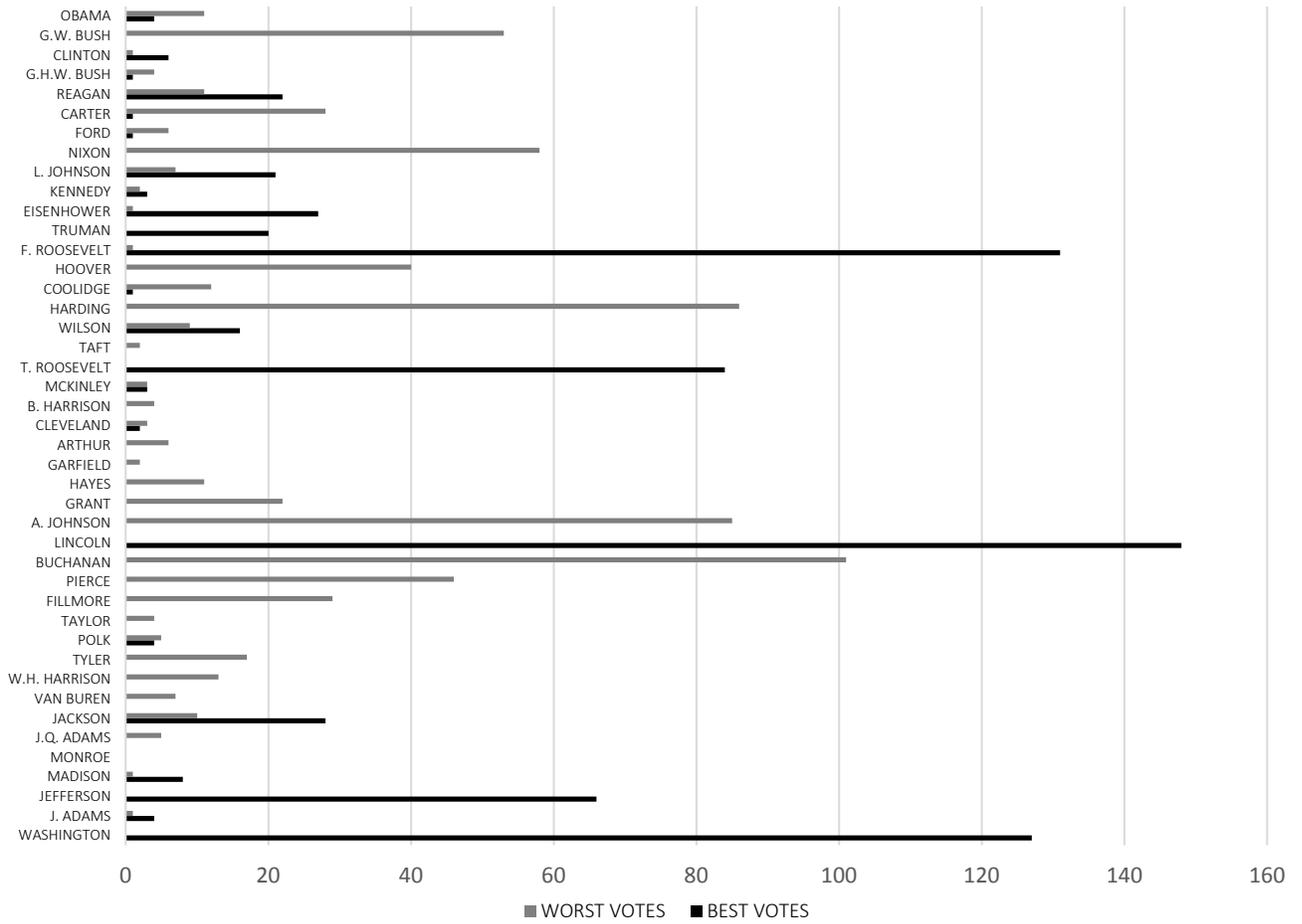


Figure 5 - Most “Underrated” and “Overrated” President

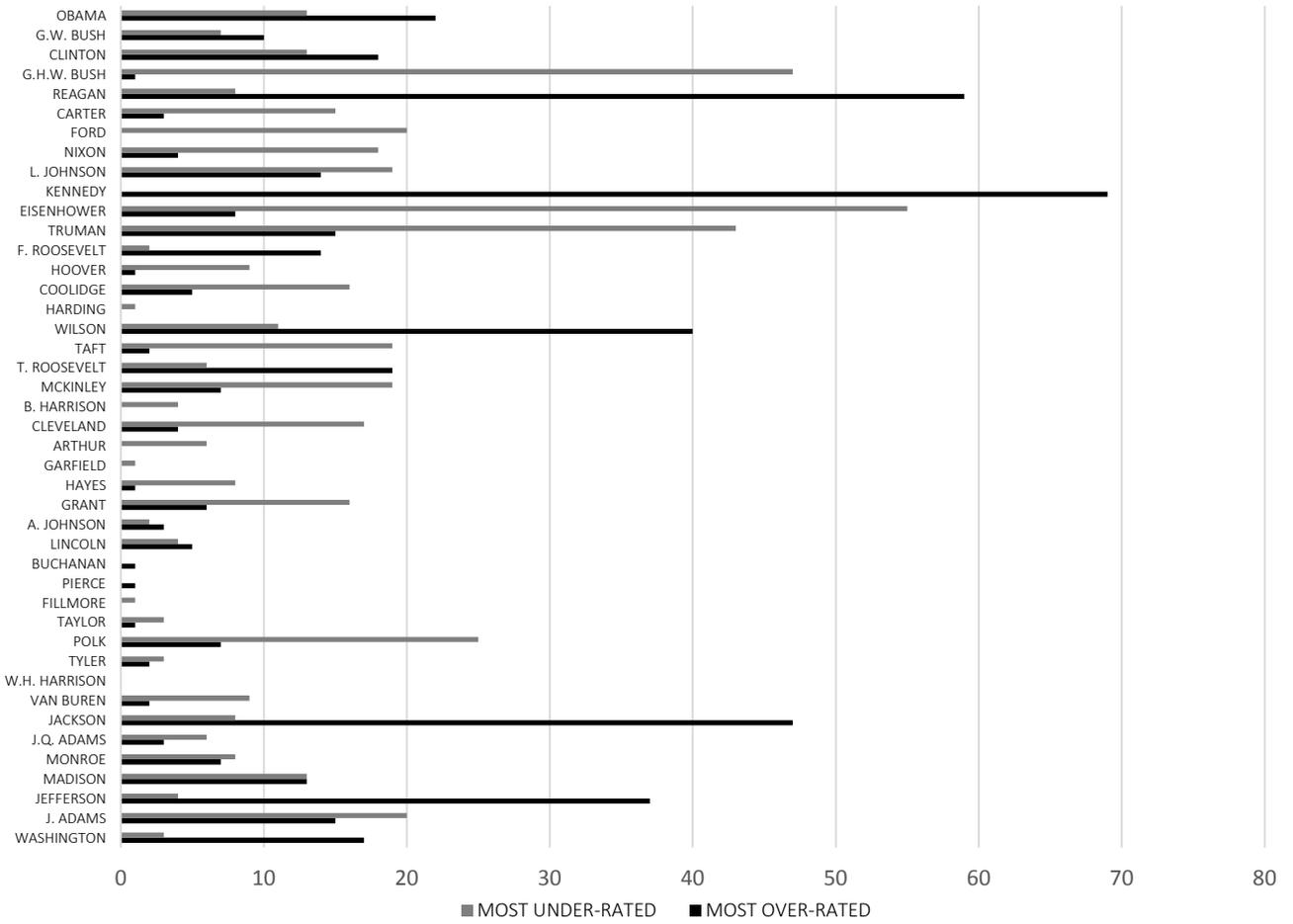


Figure 6 - Most and Least “Polarizing” Presidents

