Personal and Situational Factors Predicting Greatness Ratings of US Presidents:

A Quarter-Century Quest
Assessing Presidential Greatness

- Two main approaches
  - Surveys of multiple experts
  - Ratings by individual experts
Surveys of Multiple Experts: Part I

- Schlesinger (1948, *Life*): “Historians rate the U.S. presidents”
  - 55 experts; to FDR (minus W. Harrison and Garfield)
  - Lincoln (1) to Harding (29)

- Schlesinger (1962, *NYT Magazine*): “Our presidents: A rating by 75 historians”
  - 75 experts; to Eisenhower (minus H&G)
  - Lincoln (1) to Harding (31)
Ratings of Individual Experts

- Rossiter (1956): The American presidency - to Eisenhower (minus H&G and Taylor)
  - 8 Greats (Washington, Lincoln, FDR, etc.)
  - 5 Failures (Harding, Grant, Buchanan, etc.)

- Sokolsky (1964): Our Seven Greatest Presidents - to Kennedy (minus H&G)
  - 7 Greats (Washington, FDR, Lincoln, etc.)
  - 2 Failures (Grant and Harding)

- Bailey (1966): Presidential greatness - to Eisenhower (minus H&G)
  - Washington (1) to A. Johnson (31)
  - (as interpreted by Kynerd, 1971)
Assessment Consensus: Part I

- Kynerd (1971, *Southern Quarterly*):
  - Schlesingers, Rossiter, Sokolsky, Bailey
  - Ordinal and rank-category measures
  - Correlations .734 to .963
  - If delete Bailey, then .894 to .963
  - Hence, extremely strong consensus on what may be called differential “presidential greatness”

- But what is presidential greatness?
  - Components of greatness
  - Predictors of greatness
Components of Greatness

  - Surveyed 571 historians using interval rather than ordinal ratings (to LBJ - 2)
  - On 7 dimensions: General Prestige, Administration Accomplishments, Strength of Action, Presidential Activeness, Idealism vs. Practicality, Flexibility, Respondents’ Information
  - First 4 correlate .89 to .98, next 2 -.33
Predictors of Greatness: Part I

  - Factor analysis of Maranell (1970): Greatness = strength, accomplishments, prestige, and activeness
  - Greatness correlates with assassination attempts (.59), wars declared or sanctioned by Congress (.57), unilateral military interventions (.48), etc.
  - But no multiple regression analysis, and sample was restricted to elected presidents ($n = 15$)
  - Hence, my 1st inquiry into presidential greatness ...
Simonton (1981, *J. Personality*): “Presidential greatness and performance: Can we predict leadership in the White House?”

Predictors of Greatness: Part I

- Potential predictors
  - Presidential Variables: Transition into presidency, administration events, transition out of presidency
  - Biographical Predictors: Pre-election variables, post-administration variables

- Systematic search of
  - zero-order correlation coefficients
  - partial regression coefficients
Predictors of Greatness: Part I

- Resulting 5-variable equation:
  - Years in office
  - War years
  - Scandal
  - Unsuccessful assassination attempts
  - Pre-election book publication record

- 75% of variance explained
- Equation transhistorically invariant
Surveys of Multiple Experts: Part II

  - 846 heterogeneous respondents
  - Interval scale from Lincoln (1.13) to Harding (5.56)
- Comparisons with two recent surveys:
  - Chicago Tribune (1982): $n = 49$
  - Porter (1981): $n = 41$
- Systematic scrutiny of potential biases
- Leading to ...
Three closely connected studies:

- Simonton (1986, *JESP*): “Dispositional attributions of (presidential) leadership: An experimental simulation of historiometric results”
Simonton (1986, *Political Psychology*):

- Greatness consensus: Factor analysis of all published evaluations from Schlesinger (1948) to Murray-Blessing (1983) yielded single greatness factor
- Systematic examination of 300 potential predictors including new ones suggested from various recent inquiries (e.g., own work on monarchs in 1983 and 1984)
Simonton (1986, *Political Psychology*):

- Resulting 5-variable equation:
  - Years in office
  - War years
  - Scandal
  - Assassinated
  - War hero
- Explained 77-78% of the variance
- Equation again transhistorically invariant across all 3 greatness criteria
Simonton (1986, *JPSP*):

- Potential personality predictors:
  - Anonymous personality profiles
  - Independent ratings on 300 ACL items
  - Factor analysis of 110 reliable ACL items yielded 14 personality dimensions, including Intellectual Brilliance (intelligent, inventive, insightful, curious, interests wide, artistic, sophisticated, complicated, etc.)
  - Intellectual Brilliance only trait correlating with *all* alternative greatness assessments
Simonton (1986, *JPSP*):

- Final 6-predictor equation using Murray-Blessing (1983) ratings:
  - Years in office
  - War years
  - Assassination
  - Scandal
  - War hero
  - Intellectual Brilliance
- 82% of the variance explained
- Again transhistorically invariant
Simonton (1986, *JESP*):

- Experimental Simulation of Results
  - Mediational hypothesis: Greatness function of strength, activity & goodness
  - Hypothetical profiles (presidents/leaders)
  - Naïve students
    - Reconstruct the greatness ratings (.84)
    - Impact mediated by strength, activity & goodness evaluations
    - Assigned roughly the same weights to the predictors as found in historiometric work
The Aftermath

- Simonton (1987): *Why presidents succeed: A political psychology of leadership* – tested new variables, but same 6-variable equation

- Simonton (1988, *JPSP*): “Presidential style: Personality, biography, and performance” – assessments of creative, charismatic, deliberative, and interpersonal styles; but same 6-variable equation still survived
Challenges and Responses: Part I

- Two alternative attempts in *Presidential Studies Quarterly*:

- Response in Simonton (1991, *PSQ*): “Predicting presidential greatness: An alternative to the Kenney and Rice Contextual Index”
Challenges and Responses: Part II

Simonton (1996, *Sex Roles*): “Presidents’ wives and First Ladies: On achieving eminence within a traditional gender role”

- Greatness: 10-item weighted composite
- 83% of variance explained by
  - Years in office
  - War years
  - Assassination
  - Scandal
  - War hero
  - Intellectual Brilliance
Ridings & McIver (1997). *Rating the presidents: A ranking of U.S. leaders, from the great and honorable to the dishonest and incompetent*

- Survey of 719 experts
- *All* presidents from Washington to Clinton
- Overall rankings plus separate evaluations of leadership qualities, accomplishments, political skill, appointments, character, and integrity
Simonton (2001, *JSP*): “Predicting presidential greatness: Equation replication on recent survey results”

- Greatness = overall presidential performance on ordinal scale
- 77% of variance ascribed to
  - Years in office
  - War years
  - Assassination
  - Scandal
  - War hero
  - Intellectual Brilliance
Rubenzer, Faschingbauer, & Ones (2000, Assessment): “Assessing the U.S. presidents using the revised NEO Personality Inventory”

- Used presidential experts (at least 3 per president) to obtain ratings on the Big Five ($N = 31$),
- including Openness to Experience,
- which correlates .71 with Intellectual Brilliance

- All presidents from Washington to Clinton ($N = 41$)
- 12-item greatness measure (alpha = .99)
- Intelligence in IQ units estimated from Intellectual Brilliance and Openness to Experience and scaled using Cox (1926)
Simonton (2002):
- 77% of variance explained
  - Years in office
  - War years
  - Assassination
  - Scandals
  - War hero
  - Intelligence

- 2000 CNN poll of 58 experts plus 1145 viewers yields two measures of greatness
- Replicated the 6-variable equation on both assessments, with very similar regression weights across both (unstandardized; standardized not given)
Surveys of Multiple Experts: Part IV

- Rubenzer & Faschingbauer (2004): *Personality, character, & leadership in the White House: Psychologists assess the presidents*
  - Extension of Rubenzer, Faschingbauer, & Ones (2000)
  - Including scores for George W. Bush

- Intellectual Brilliance scores for all former presidents reconstructed using Openness to experience scores (EM imputation); correlates with alternative indicators
- Greatness defined using a 12-item composite (reliability .99)
Predictors of Greatness: Part VII

- Simonton (2006):
  - Greatness correlates with survey ratings of presidential leadership (.93), accomplishments (.94), political skill (.90), and appointments (.90)
  - 77% of variance explained by
    - Years in office
    - War years
    - Assassination
    - Scandal
    - War hero
    - Intellectual Brilliance
### Predictors of Greatness: Parts II-VII

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Years in Office</th>
<th>War Years</th>
<th>Scandal</th>
<th>Assassination</th>
<th>Intelligence</th>
<th>War Hero</th>
<th>( R^2 )</th>
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<td>.24</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>[.30](^1)</td>
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<td>.75</td>
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\(^1\) Unsuccessful assassination attempts.
\(^2\) Pre-election book publication record.
But What About the Other Correlates of Presidential Greatness?

- Numerous studies have identified individual and situational correlates (e.g., Wendt & Light, 1976; Winter, 1982; Nice, 1984; Winter, 1987; Kenney & Rice, 1988; Holmes & Elder, 1989; McCann, 1990; Spangler & House, 1991; McCann, 1992; Deluga, 1997, 1998; Rubenzer, Faschingbauer, & Ones, 2000; Emrich, Brower, Feldman, & Garland, 2001)

- However, these do not contribute to the prediction of greatness once the impact of the 6 predictors is already accounted for
But What About the Other Correlates of Presidential Greatness?

- Two alternative causal models can explain these consistently null results
  - The zero-order correlation represents an indirect effect mediated by one or more of the direct effects
    - e.g., n Power -> War years -> Greatness
  - The zero-order correlation represents a spurious association with the direct effect variable as the source of spuriousness
    - e.g., Charisma <- Intellectual Brilliance -> Greatness
Final Observations

- An exceptional consensus exists regarding the differential greatness of US presidents
- Greatness is highly predictable given a consistent set of 6 predictors
- Attempts to identify additional or alternative predictors have failed
- These 6 predictors correspond with performance indicators in other forms of leadership (e.g., monarchs)