

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

- Maranell (1970, *J. American History*):
“The evaluation of presidents: An extension of the Schlesinger polls”
 - 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

- Wendt & Light (1976, *European J. Social Psychology*): “Measuring ‘greatness’ in American presidents ...”
 - 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 ...

Predictors of Greatness: Part I

- Simonton (1981, *J. Personality*):
“Presidential greatness and performance: Can we predict leadership in the White House?”
 - Greatness Factor from Maranell (1970):
.94 with Schlesinger (1948), .93 with Schlesinger (1962), .88 with Rossiter (1956), .94 with Sokolsky (1964), and .72 with Bailey (1966)

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

- Murray & Blessing (1983, *J. American History*): “The presidential performance study: A progress report” – to Nixon (-2)
 - 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 ...

Predictors of Greatness: Part II

- Three closely connected studies:
 - Simonton (1986, *Political Psychology*): “Presidential greatness: The historical consensus and its psychological significance”
 - Simonton (1986, *JPSP*): “Presidential personality: Biographical use of the Gough Adjective Check List.”
 - 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)
- ❑ Prediction equation required to replicate across three measures: Murray-Blessing (1983), *Chicago Tribune* (1982), and Porter (1981)

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, *JPSA*): “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*:
 - Kenney & Rice (1988): “The contextual determinants of presidential greatness”
 - Holmes & Elder (1989): “Our best and worst presidents: Some possible reasons for perceived performance”
- Response in Simonton (1991, *PSQ*): “Predicting presidential greatness: An alternative to the Kenney and Rice Contextual Index”

Challenges and Responses: Part II

- ❑ McCann (1992, *JPSPP*): “Alternative formulas to predict the greatness of U.S. presidents: Personological, situational, and zeitgeist factors”
- ❑ Simonton (1992, *JPSPP*): “Presidential greatness and personality: A response to McCann (1992)”

Predictors of Greatness: Part III

- 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

Surveys of Multiple Experts: Part II

- 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

Predictors of Greatness: Part IV

- 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

Surveys of Multiple Experts: Part III

- 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

Predictors of Greatness: Part V

- Simonton (2002, *Advances in Psychology Research*): “Intelligence and presidential greatness: Equation replication using updated IQ estimates”
 - 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)

Predictors of Greatness: Part V

- Simonton (2002):
 - 77% of variance explained
 - Years in office
 - War years
 - Assassination
 - Scandals
 - War hero
 - Intelligence

Predictors of Greatness: Part VI

- Cohen (2003, *PSQ*): “The polls: presidential greatness as seen in the mass public: An extension and application of the Simonton model”
 - 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*
 - Extention of Rubenzer, Faschingbauer, & Ones (2000)
 - Including scores for George W. Bush

Predictors of Greatness: Part VII

- Simonton (2006, *Political Psychology*):
“Presidential IQ, Openness, Intellectual Brilliance, and leadership: Estimates and correlations for 42 US chief executives”
 - 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

| | Years in office | War years | Scandal | Assassination | Intelligence | War hero | R^2 |
|------|-----------------|-----------|-----------|--------------------|---------------------|----------|---------|
| 1981 | .24 | .36 | -.20 | [.30] ¹ | [-.28] ² | - | .75 |
| 1986 | .37/.41 | .37/.45 | -.48/-.48 | .25/.32 | - | .31/.32 | .77/.78 |
| 1986 | .36 | .35 | -.40 | .20 | .26 | .33 | .82 |
| 1996 | .35 | .38 | -.53 | .21 | .16 | .34 | .83 |
| 2001 | .53 | .30 | -.38 | .21 | .21 | .22 | .77 |
| 2002 | .55 | .24 | -.36 | .24 | .29 | .18 | .77 |
| 2006 | .55 | .24 | -.35 | .24 | .29 | .18 | .77 |

¹Unsuccessful assassination attempts.

²Pre-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)

