

The Presidential Ranking Game: Critical Review and Some New Discoveries

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This study provides critical analysis of ranking surveys, leading to regression analysis that provides fresh insight into the factors that structure presidential rating scores. Results demonstrate that rating scores can be predicted with relative ease. Furthermore, new measures are found to be significant—two operationalizing the latest extension of Stephen Skowronek’s “political time” thesis and one controlling for cultural level preferences favoring “progressive” presidents. This suggests that expert evaluators take note of presidential performance within context. It also suggests that experts of all political stripes are influenced by the milieu in which their evaluation takes place. In the end, while no claim is made that the popular expert surveys used in this study provide a true measure of presidential greatness, it is argued that ranking polls may tell us more than critics admit.

Ever since the results of Arthur Schlesinger Sr.’s first survey of presidential experts were released in *Life* magazine, the presidential ranking game has been a fixture of political journalism (1948). At regular intervals, media titans and research institutes can now be expected to release new poll results updating purported evaluation of presidential greatness (for example see C-SPAN 2009; Siena Research Institute 2010; *Wall Street Journal* 2005). However, despite their popularity with the public, it is probably fair to say that most political scientists feel that expert presidential ranking polls are simply “not very rigorous” (Pfiffner 2003, 23). Indeed, given the Justice Potter Stewart—“I know it when I see it”—subjective standard of evaluation often employed, even the experts who sometimes take part in the polls usually assume that they do not tell us much.

This study investigates this premise—with as much rigor and openness as the source material permits. It thus helps to fill the gap that exists between the public’s

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almost insatiable interest in the presidential ranking game and the comparatively small attention the subject has received in scholarly journals.¹ In doing so, it provides critical analysis of presidential ranking surveys, investigating suspected problems associated with their subjectivity, lack of control for context, and evaluator bias.

This investigation leads to this study's first finding: regression analysis that both overcomes critics' concerns about the predictability of rating scores and provides fresh insight into the factors that structure presidential rating scores—consistently placing George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt at the head of the class while consigning those like James Buchanan and Warren G. Harding to the back of the line. Results of multivariate analysis demonstrate just how easy it is to predict rating scores. This ease is demonstrated in two ways: first by showing how accurately and consistently this study's primary model predicts past rating scores; second, by using the model to show what effect getting reelected and being seen by experts as taking advantage of the opportunity to reorder the political regime would be predicted to have on a President Barack Obama's future rating score. Furthermore, the results of analysis demonstrate the significance of new measures, two operationalizing the latest theory extending Stephen Skowronek's path-breaking "political time" thesis (1993, 2011; see also Nichols and Myers 2010), and one controlling for cultural-level evaluative bias. Together these findings challenges past conclusions about the need for chief executives to possess "brilliance" (Simonton 2006).

This study's second finding demonstrates how context matters in structuring rating scores. This confirms that success in the ratings game is not mainly a function of personality or character traits. Indeed, this study additionally reveals the extent to which expert evaluators reward presidents who succeed in taking advantage of the contextual opportunity to reorder an enervated political regime. It also shows that experts punish those presidents who lead their political regime into enervated conditions, as we might expect, as well as those that new theory suggests fail to take advantage of the context to reorder. And because presidents are rewarded for performance within context in the ranking game, this suggests that they need to possess a measure of the contextual awareness that George Edwards (2009), and others, recommend, as well as a Machiavelian ability to alter one's "mode of procedure [to] accord with the needs of the times" (Machiavelli 1980, 121).

This study's third finding demonstrates that experts in every poll (and apparently of every political stripe) rewarded "progressive" presidents, gauged to be above average in their pursuit of "equal justice for all," with higher ratings. This does not show that experts are simply biased, but rather suggests that evaluation now takes place in a cultural milieu that favors presidents dedicated to equal justice. Consequences of this development are explored. In the end, while no claim is made that the popular expert surveys used in this study provide a true measure of presidential greatness, it is argued that the expert ranking polls—which may help the public define what it looks for in a president—may tell us more than critics admit.

1. Simonton (1986, 2001, 2006), McCann (1992), Cohen (2003), and Pfiffner (2003) are some of the exceptions.

Presidential Ranking Polls—Problems with Subjectivity, Context, and Bias

The ever-popular practice of evaluating leadership through comparative study has roots that go back two millennia, when Greek and Roman writers like Satyrus, Suetonius, and Plutarch first utilized biographical character studies to take stock of prominent leaders and advance theories of statecraft. Yet, it was not until 1948 and the behavioral revolution in the social sciences that Arthur Schlesinger Sr. applied a survey instrument to this task. He asked 55 experts (mostly historians) to judge each president on his “performance in office” by placing them in one of five categories: Great, Near Great, Average, Below Average, or Failure.² He later repeated the well-liked exercise in 1962, publishing the results of his survey in the *New York Times Magazine*. A host of others have tweaked the method while following the tradition of surveying experts to produce presidential rankings (C-SPAN 2009; Murray and Blessing 1988; Siena Research Institute 2010; *Wall Street Journal* 2005).

Despite its long history, evaluating leadership has always been problematic. Back in the first century AD, Cornelius Nepos admitted as much by apologetically opening his *Lives of Eminent Commanders* with acknowledgement that many would judge his type of biographical analysis as “trifling” (1886). Today, three critiques challenging presidential ranking polls predominate in the existent literature (Piffner 2003), while a fourth (less discussed) problem also deserves brief mention. The first critique centers on the seemingly subjective evaluation standards used in some surveys. These are seen to allow each scholar to use their own criteria to rate presidents, and they have given some observers the impression that the presidential ranking game is “one without any real rules” (Dean 2001, 1). The second pertains to context and the still divisive issue of knowing how to fairly compare presidents who face differing historical opportunities and problems (Bailey 1966; DiClerico 1979). Third, expert polls are possibly biased. Here the usual cited threat is the predominance of Democratic partisan preferences within most expert survey samples (Felzenberg 1997, 2009; Lindgren and Calabresi 2000). There is also the possibility, which is not well addressed in the literature, that expert presidential ranking polls are not fully independent of each other.³ However, while it is important to note that

2. In the Schlesinger 1948 poll, Presidents Washington through F.D.R. were evaluated, minus William Henry Harrison and James Garfield who were not included due to their short terms in office. In true academic fashion, respondents were also allowed to place a plus or minus sign next to each evaluation (noted in Murray and Blessing 1998, 6). See: Simonton (1986) for the results of this poll.

3. Three possible sources of endogeneity problems seem to exist. First, while much has been made about the stability demonstrated at the top and bottom of expert polls over time, this has not engendering corresponding debate as to whether earlier polls might be influencing later scholars' evaluations. There is good reason to suspect that this does happen. However, since there is also good evidence that expert evaluations effectively keep pace with the latest scholarship, discovery of new information, and changing cultural preferences over time, this potential problem does not appear too severe. A bit more problematic is the possibility that the same experts may be taking part in multiple surveys. Unfortunately, the names of those that participate in these surveys are sometimes not known (Siena Research Institute 2010) or have been lost (Murray and Blessing 1988). A final possibility is that earlier survey results influenced the construction of the political time theory extended and used in this study to predict outcomes, I, however, conclude that there is little cause for alarm here. Indeed, Skowronek's presidential classification scheme appears to have been constructed independently of poll results, and there is some evidence that expert evaluations have changed in light of his advancements and not the other way around.

this concern has not yet been fully considered, my own analysis suggests that it is also fair to conclude that this issue does not threaten the results of this study.

One obvious way to respond to the critique that suggests presidential ranking surveys are subjective, is to set up measuring rods “specifying meaningful criteria to be used in rating presidents” (Faber and Faber 1997, 4). This is the strategy that C-SPAN, the Siena Research Institute (or Siena), and others have followed. Their ranking polls ask experts to score presidents on multiple equally weighted dimensions.⁴ However, my own factor analysis of the results of the C-SPAN 2009 and Siena 2010 surveys reveals that the vast majority of their measures collapse onto one or two dimensions. In the case of the C-SPAN 2009 poll 9 of 10 of their measures scale on one dimension with a Cronbach’s alpha of .976 and an Eigenvalue of 8.13,⁵ while Siena’s 20 measures have a Cronbach’s alpha of .981 and scale on two dimensions with Eigenvalues of 15.15 and 1.34.⁶ This means that while polls that employ multiple dimensions attempt to use many different criteria to rate presidents, the various measures they employ actually tend to be part of one or two underlying “greatness” dimensions.

Expert respondents to the C-SPAN 2009 and Siena Research Institute 2010 polls are therefore clearly not evaluating each president independently on every one of the dimensions. While it is impossible to know exactly why experts fail to make independent evaluations across all the dimensions, one can speculate that they may do so because even they lack the detailed knowledge that is required to accurately rate every president in such detail. Experts may simply work backwards from a general opinion of how presidents score overall and adjust scores on particularly salient measures when they deem it appropriate.⁷ Although this does not prove that these surveys are hopelessly subjective, it

4. The 10 C-SPAN dimensions are (1) Public Persuasion, (2) Crisis Leadership, (3) Economic Management, (4) Moral Authority, (5) International Relations, (6) Administrative Skills, (7) Relations with Congress, (8) Vision and Agenda Setting, (9) Pursued Equal Justice for All, and (10) Performance within the Context of the Times (2009). The Siena Research Institute’s survey has 20 dimensions: (1) Background (Family, Education, Experience); (2) Party Leadership; (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; and (20) Your Present Overall View (2010).

5. Indeed, all nine measures that load on the one dimension correlate very highly with each other—ranging from .965 to .667 at the .001 level of statistical significance. Cartell’s scree test, which drops all further factor components after the one starting the elbow on a plot of the components (on the X axis) and the corresponding Eigenvalues (on the Y axis), suggests that there are two components structuring the 2009 C-SPAN survey results (in general, see Gorsuch 1983). Principle component analysis of a varimax rotated matrix with two components reveals that all measures, except that for “Pursued Equal Justice for All,” converge upon the one factor. All nine components of this factor load very highly upon it from .919 to .809. The “Equal Justice” measure is the single dimension that loads highly on the second factor at .938.

6. Analysis of a Siena Research Institute (2002) survey (not reported on further in this article) reveals that its 20, identical, measures scale on three dimensions with Eigenvalues of 14.59, 1.61, and 1.11.

7. Cohen’s (2003) factor analysis of the 1999 C-SPAN poll supports this interpretation. Indeed, he finds that all 10 measures load on the same factor for that survey. He does not, however, draw the same conclusions about this problematic finding. I, therefore, draw attention to Simonton (2001) who similarly finds that all six dimensions of the Ridings-McIver presidential ranking survey collapse upon one factor. He concludes, as I do here, that this shows that the poll has not overcome the subjectivity critique and meaningful criteria are *not* being used as measuring rods.

does demonstrate that they fail to provide as many distinct criteria for evaluation as they purport to.

Another way to respond to the charge that there are no rules in the presidential ranking game is to use regression analysis to determine, post facto, what (if anything) structures rating scores. Despite the lack of meaningful measurement criteria, if a model accounting for a healthy amount of variance can be specified, and significant determinants can be found, then presidential rating scores can be predicted. This finding would provide evidence in support of a modest claim of internal validity and reliability within these polls.

Construction of a predictive model is problematic because it forces the comparison of presidents serving in historical contexts that provide different opportunities and constraints. Indeed, some argue that “a man cannot possibly be judged a great President unless he holds office in great times” (Rossiter 1960, 138). Still others answer that “the most important determinants of presidential effectiveness come from the ability and personality of the president” (Skidmore 2004, 7). While this debate still rages on, quantitative research has suggested that context matters more consistently than personality traits, skill sets, or character in structuring rating scores (Kenney and Rice 1988; McCann 1992; Nice 1984; Simonton 1986, 1987).

Social Psychologist Dean Keith Simonton’s leading work in this area has demonstrated that a number of contextual factors have held up as consistently good predictors of presidential rankings (1987, 2001; see also Cohen 2003). Substantively and statistically significant variables include years in office, years at war, assassination, and scandal. Simonton’s research also eliminates hundreds of other possible explanatory variables, including most aspects of presidential personality and prior experience and all of those controlling for economic context and legislative success (1986, 1987). He did, however, find that those entering office as a “war hero” or who scored highly on his own “intellectual brilliance” measure were positively impacted (2006). This body of work forms the bedrock of what is known about the ever-popular presidential ranking game. It is therefore the foundation upon which this study is built.

However, Simonton’s research is not without shortcomings. His psychologically oriented work does not account for “political time,” arguably the most important conceptual advancement in the presidency literature on the role context plays in structuring presidential leadership challenges (Skowronek 1993). Also, Simonton does not appear to adequately account for the possibility of bias. Indeed, this study’s addition of a highly significant new measure for cultural-level “progressive” bias challenges Simonton’s most original conclusion about the importance of presidential “brilliance.”⁸ Additionally, it forces us to rethink the assassination bonus. Finally, Simonton’s reliance on stepwise reduction methods to specify most of his six-term predictive model can be criticized. This atheoretical approach appears to have contributed to concept formation problems and measurement issues that will additionally be addressed in this study.

8. In his work, Simonton (1986) has confirmed that the presidential ranking game tells us more about raters than presidents. He concludes that what raters really reward is a president who serves a long time and has “eponymic value” for experts themselves, helping shape their own historical mental maps.

To account for the impact context has on the presidential ranking game, we must consider the effect of “political time.” This concept is the brainchild of eminent political scientist, Stephen Skowronek, who convincingly argues that two dimensions of context interact to structure political possibilities (1993; see also Crockett 2002, 2008). The first relates to whether a president’s partisan orientation positions them as affiliated or opposed to the dominant “political regime” of the era. The second dimension relates to whether this regime is resilient or vulnerable to repudiation (Skowronek 1993, 34–45). Those affiliates encountering a weakened regime, like Herbert Hoover and Jimmy Carter, inherit the weakest leadership position, one where the politics they practice cannot sustain themselves and can be called “disjunctive.” While those opposition presidents, like FDR and Ronald Reagan, lucky enough to follow these presidents are dealt the strongest hand and practice “reconstructive” politics—creating new political regimes. With this conceptualization, Skowronek (1993) demonstrates that presidents who share the same context in political time often have more in common with each other than with either their immediate predecessors or successors. Political time theory suggests that differing historical context can be systematically accounted for in analysis of presidential ranking polls.

New thought on the recurrent waxing and waning of regime strength has recently suggested that the political time phenomenon may be linked more closely to systemic causes than was originally articulated (Nichols 2011; Nichols and Myers 2010). Here, broadly brushed, argument is made that the U.S. Constitution structures political competition in ways that allow those who first gain effective control over government to utilize “path dependent” processes to lock in their partisan preferences and advantage for long periods of time⁹—just as the Jacksonians, New Dealers, and Reagan Republicans (amongst others) did. The stability of the resulting political regime actually causes multiple problems over time.¹⁰ Regime managers are thus challenged to accomplish multiple incongruent goals while simultaneously keeping their party in the majority. This eventually undermines the legitimacy of the political regime managers and strains their heterogeneous coalition to the breaking point. Nichols and Myers refer to the political regime as being “enervated” at this point (2010),¹¹ as it becomes vulnerable to repudiation. A “critical juncture” then opens (Collier and Collier 1991), giving politicians of all stripes the opportunity to reorder politics and return energy to the system.

This extension differs from Skowronek’s (1993) original articulation in a couple of ways that matter for the study of the presidency and for analysis of the presidential ranking game. First, because political time is anchored in systemic roots, the president is no longer viewed as the origins of the phenomenon (Nichols 2011). Ironically, this

9. On path dependence, see especially Pierson (2004).

10. Nichols and Myers leave detailed discussion of the origins of enervation to other work. However, they suggest that the problems leading to enervation will “never look exactly the same,” and indicate a number of indicators will tend to cluster as the “tipping point” is reached. “They include: a) the completion of the substantive program around which a political regime is first organized; b) the decreased cohesion of the majority coalition on which the regime is based; c) the rise of new cleaving issues and problems; d) the rise of an emboldened opposition and advent of a crisis atmosphere that calls into question the regime’s governing philosophy; e) the increased salience of corruption scandals” (2010, 814).

11. Skowronek (2011) now uses this term as well.

diminution as a mainspring increases the importance of presidential agency within political time. As presidents escape from a deterministic life cycle (and rigid categorizations) to a more probabilistic account of political time, they seem to gain an ability to read and respond to context. These skills, as George Edwards similarly stresses at the policy level, must then be thought necessary for leadership success (2009). No longer are politics thought to become disjunctive because of a semimysterious weakening of the political regime, presidents are now seen responsible for pushing or allowing politics to drift into this condition.

Second, never do enervated conditions—like those that Skowronek admits seem to exist during Grover Cleveland’s second, nonconsecutive, term—abate until presidents (like William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt) succeed in reordering and rejuvenating politics (1993, 48). Indeed, new theory suggests that exploitation of the reordering opportunity then requires the completion of four individually necessary and jointly sufficient tasks:

1. gaining effective control over government;¹²
2. shifting the main axis of partisan conflict dividing the electorate/establishing a new governing philosophy;
3. assembly of a new majority coalition;
4. institutionalization of a new governing regime.¹³

In the new formulation, it is thus possible for a president to encounter enervated conditions and fail to complete any or all of the required reordering tasks. This potentiality, which is not fully considered in Skowronek’s (1993) original formulation, means that the politics of reconstruction are not such a sure thing. It also suggests that failure has consequences. If a president fails to reorder, enervation will both persist and deepen, challenging every following president—regardless of affiliation—to reorder politics until someone succeeds in doing so.

The latest extension pushes political time theory to “the edge of new frontiers” (Nichols and Myers 2010), adds a few twists to Skowronek’s carving of political history, and—most importantly for this study—provides a means to control for context in presidential ranking polls.¹⁴ We would expect evaluators to penalize presidents who either push their political regime into an enervated state or allow it to slide there. We would also expect this same penalty to accrue to all those presidents who serve during

12. Contra “critical election” focused realignment theory (Key 1955; Burnham 1970), Nichols argues that as long as “effective” control is gained long enough to accomplish the other reordering tasks and the nascent new majority is able to maintain control of one legislative veto holding institution (presidency or either house of Congress) a new regime can institutionalize its priorities via path dependent processes (2009). He makes the case that this is how Ronald Reagan and the Republicans were able to create and maintain a new political regime at the end of the twentieth century.

13. Nichols and Myers (2010) list only the bottom three tasks as necessary, but they make the opportunity to complete these tasks contingent on the first.

14. Success is not synonymous with reordering in the ranking game. Highly ranked presidents like Polk, Wilson, Truman, and Eisenhower did not reorder. Likewise, failure in the ranking game is not synonymous with experiencing enervated conditions either. Cellar dwellers like John Tyler, Zachary Taylor, Grant, and Harding did not experience these conditions.

enervated conditions but are unable to lift the polity out of crisis by successfully reordering. They too turn their administrations into foils for others to repudiate. Conversely, we would expect that those presidents who are able to take advantage of context and successfully reorder would, as leading authors of the philosophical, partisan, and institutional regimes that tend to shape politics for a generation, earn the acclaim of presidential experts (for example see Landy and Milkis 2000).

These hypotheses suggest how the latest extension of political time theory can be leveraged to investigate whether historical context structures presidential rating scores. But what of the context of the time when the evaluation was made? To answer this requires confronting the third critique of presidential ranking polls. What about bias?

Despite the fact that both Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan were initially evaluated quite harshly,¹⁵ most research has failed to find support for the proposition that ideological bias directly produces unfair presidential rankings (Maranell and Dodder 1970; Pfiffner 2003; Simonton 1987). My own analysis confirms these findings. Multiple coding schema and historical cut points were used to test for the suspected impact of bias in favor of Democratic presidents. None of them produced statistically significant results in the polls evaluated in this study. Nonetheless, because there is concern that expert polls tilt to the left, the *Wall Street Journal* (or WSJ) and Federalist Society have teamed up to conduct their own poll. Their survey includes an equal number of respondents from both sides of the political aisle. While their poll produces a few notably different evaluations,¹⁶ mostly their results reinforce the broad expert consensus about the best and worst presidents.

While evaluators' personal biases do not appear to structure presidential rating scores, there remains the possibility that a wider cultural-level bias may still affect rankings. Historians are acutely aware that all historical evaluation takes place within particular cultural milieus, which can preference one kind of information over another. Therefore, it is always possible to systematically render interpretations that are "misleading by accident" (McCullagh 2000, 39). Fortunately, regression analysis can reveal the existence of cultural-level biases, which might register as fondness for "war heroes" and founding "patricians" (both have done well in past rankings: Murphy 1984; Simonton 1986)¹⁷ and/or "progressives."

Indeed, we might now expect that presidents who are rated above average by experts in their pursuit of "equal justice for all" would be given a "progressive" ratings bonus due to the growing cultural preference for what John Gerring calls universalist

15. Both Eisenhower and Reagan were initially ranked 22nd (Schlesinger 1962; Siena Research Institute 1990; Kelly and Lonnstrom 1990), while they are now regularly ranked in the top 10 (*Wall Street Journal* 2005; C-SPAN 2009). On Reagan, Siena continues to be an outlier, still ranking "the gipper" 17th in 2010.

16. Only three presidents in the *Wall Street Journal* (2005) survey are ranked more than four spots above or below their ranking in both the C-SPAN (2009) and Siena Research Institute (2010) polls. See Table 1. The only remarkable difference is how high the WSJ's experts rated George W. Bush. In fairness, they only had his first term to evaluate.

17. Given the continued popularity of the founding generation, we might expect the cultural fondness for the founding "patricians" to continue to positively structure evaluations. Furthermore, Simonton (2008) suggests that because Eisenhower was the last true "war hero," the explanatory significance attributed to this variable has lost some of its predictive utility (due to diminished variance in the measure). He argues that this does not mean experts have stopped using the factor to evaluate presidents.

values (1998).¹⁸ This trend is suggested by the declining ranking fortune of Andrew Jackson, an unprogressive president who is in danger of sliding completely out of the top ten after being on the cusp of greatness in the Schlesingers' polls—when the preference for democratic populism was more culturally in vogue. Once “progressivism” is controlled for, we can use regression analysis to further explore whether Simonton was right in assigning all assassinated presidents a ratings bonus. In an age that preferences universalist values, it is possible that only “progressive” presidents are seen to have been tragically killed in office—before their promise could be fulfilled. If so, only Lincoln and John F. Kennedy's rating scores would remain positively structured by a measure for “tragic death.” Furthermore, as previously suggested, controlling for cultural-level “progressive” bias might better account for the underlying factor behind Simonton's “brilliance” measure, causing it to lose its statistical significance.

Data and Methods

Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis of four expert presidential ranking polls is conducted to determine the factors that structure presidential rating scores. The four surveys reported on in this study were published by Murray and Blessing in 1988, the *Wall Street Journal*/Federalist Society in 2005, C-SPAN in 2009, and the Siena Research Institute in 2010 (see Table 1). They constitute a highly representative sample of the most salient polls. Their analysis allows direct study of those crucial survey results that the public is most likely to be familiar with. In addition, this quartet has the added advantage of exhibiting variation in methodology and times when their surveys were taken. This enables verification of the suspected typicality of these surveys despite their differences.¹⁹ Also of note, the Murray and Blessing questionnaire is the broadest expert survey yet accomplished [$n = 846$]; the *Wall Street Journal*/Federalist Society oversampled conservative and libertarian presidential experts; and the C-SPAN and Siena surveys ask respondents to evaluate along multiple dimensions.

Comparison of the results of these polls confirm expectations that despite the passing of time, different sampling techniques, and the varied methodologies used, there is both a good deal of continuity in the rankings (especially at the top and bottom of the list) and evidence that experts are updating their evaluations as new information is found.²⁰ Rankings are achieved by comparing the rating scores listed in Table 1, which serves as the continuous level measure used as the dependent variable (DV) in this study's

18. Gerring (1998) finds that the Democratic Party switched its ideological orientation from populism to universalism in the 1950s. This might be interpreted to suggest that today's cultural-level “progressive” bias itself has partisan linked origins.

19. Other surveys analyzed, but not reported due to redundancy, had consistent results. They include *Wall Street Journal* (2000), Siena Research Institute (2002); and C-SPAN (1999).

20. Correlations of the four polls range from .916 to .945 at the .001 level of significance. Their Cronbach's alpha score is .969. In this, they are representative of the wider universe of expert presidential ranking polls taken since 1980. It does, however, bear noting that further investigation is needed to find a predictive model that works as well for the two Schlesinger polls, which neither this study's or Simonton's model performs well on.

TABLE 1
Results of Presidential Ranking Polls (With Rating Scores Converted to Range on a Scale of 0-100 Possible Points)

<i>President</i>	<i>Murray & Blessing</i> 1988 rank	<i>Score out of 100</i>	<i>WSJ</i> 2005 rank	<i>Score out of 100</i>	<i>C-SPAN</i> 2009 [^] Rank	<i>Score out of 100</i>	<i>Siena</i> 2010 rank	<i>Score out of 100</i>
Washington	3	94.60	1	98.50	2	85.45	4	85.5
J Adams	9	63.00	13	58.25	17	54.49	17	68.4
Jefferson	4	86.00	4	80.75	5	69.8	5	82
Madison	14	54.00	17	51.75	19	53.57	6	74.5
Monroe	15	53.00	16	56.00	13	60.53	7	74.3
JQ Adams	16	51.60	25	41.50	21	54.17	19	66.1
Jackson	7	73.60	10	64.50	12	60.59	14	69.8
Van Buren	20	40.60	27	40.75	31	43.48	23	58.3
WH Harrison	—	—	—	—	38	32.38	35	51.3
Tyler	28	27.80	35	30.75	35	37.18	37	49.4
Polk	12	58.80	9	64.75	11	60.63	12	71
Taylor	27	31.00	33	32.50	26	44.24	33	53.2
Fillmore	29	27.20	36	21.25	36	35.09	38	48.6
Pierce	31	21.00	38	18.25	40	28.72	40	44.9
Buchanan	33	17.00	40	7.75	42	22.73	42	39.9
Lincoln	1	97.40	2	91.75	1	90.20	3	86.6
A Johnson	32	18.00	37	18.75	41	25.75	43	38.2
Grant	35	15.00	29	39.25	25	49.00	26	56.4
Hayes	22	39.00	24	43.25	33	40.94	31	54.8
Garfield	—	—	—	—	29	44.46	26	56.4
Arthur	23	35.20	26	41.25	32	42.00	25	57
Cleveland	17	51.40	12	58.50	20	52.33	20	64.4
B Harrison	26	32.00	30	38.50	30	44.24	34	51.6
McKinley	18	44.40	14	58.00	14	59.93	21	64
T Roosevelt	5	81.40	5	77.00	4	78.09	2	86.7
Taft	19	42.60	20	49.25	23	48.50	24	57.8
Wilson	6	78.60	11	60.25	6	68.29	8	73.3
Harding	36	8.80	39	16.25	39	32.69	41	40.5
Coolidge	30	27.00	23	44.25	24	46.93	29	55.6
Hoover	21	39.40	31	37.50	34	38.88	36	50.4
FD Roosevelt	2	95.60	3	85.25	3	83.66	1	88.2
Truman	8	71.00	7	73.75	9	70.77	9	73.2
Eisenhower	11	60.20	8	66.75	8	68.86	10	72.6
Kennedy	13	57.40	15	56.25	7	70.11	11	71.5
LB Johnson	10	62.60	18	51.25	15	64.14	16	68.9
Nixon	34	16.40	32	35.00	27	45.01	30	54.9
Ford	24	33.60	28	40.25	22	50.93	28	55.8
Carter	25	32.80	34	31.00	28	47.38	32	54.7
Reagan	—	—	6	75.75	10	67.14	17	68.4
GHW Bush	—	—	21	48.75	18	54.23	22	59.3
Clinton	—	—	22	48.25	16	60.47	13	70
GW Bush	—	—	19	50.25	37	36.22	39	45.1
Obama	—	—	—	—	—	—	15	69.5
Mean		48.31		50.09		52.96		62.40
std deviation		24.68		20.97		16.29		13.15
min/ max		8.80/97.40		7.75/98.00		22.73/90.20		38.20/88.20
Range		88.60		90.75		67.47		50.00

[^] = modified, see footnote 21.

regression analysis. These scores are all converted to range on a scale of 0-100 for ease of comparability, and the C-SPAN 2009* was slightly modified.²¹

The The Murray and Blessing poll (1988) evaluates presidents up to Carter, while both the *Wall Street Journal* 2005) and C-SPAN 2009* provide coverage through George W. Bush, and Siena Research Institute's poll was released in July 2010 and includes initial assessment of the Obama presidency. Since the Murray and Blessing and *Wall Street Journal* surveys follow Schlesinger's example of using the mean of ordinal measure evaluations to rank presidents, the standard deviation and range of their scaled rating scores are quite similar. However, since the rating scores reported for the C-SPAN 2009* and Siena 2010 surveys are arrived at through summation of multiple equal dimensions of evaluation, the standard deviation and range are correspondingly smaller.

The hypothesized contextual determinants of presidential rating scores are, for the most part, easy to observe and measure. Except for use of a continuous level measure for *years served*, all other independent variables in the explanatory model are scored dichotomously (e.g., whether there was a *scandal*).²² All variables except those for *scandal* and *enervated conditions* should operate to enhance presidential rating scores. The final model specification takes the following form:

$$Y_i(\text{total score}) = B_0 + B_1(\text{years served}) + B_2(\text{war}) + B_3(\text{scandal}) + B_4(\text{enervated conditions}) \\ + B_5(\text{reorder}) + B_6(\text{founding patrician}) + B_7(\text{progressive}) + B_8(\text{tragic death}) + E_i$$

The first three terms in this specification come from Simonton's model (1986, 1987). However, only the *years served* variable follows his coding exactly. The measures used for the second and third terms are modified. This study follows Cohen (2003), who appears to have altered the variable *war* from a continuous measure of the numbers of wartime years a president experienced to a binary measure of whether the president was given the opportunity to demonstrate wartime leadership. While blunting this measure has some drawbacks, the upside of doing so is still greater.²³ First, it corrects for the high correlation that exists between this variable and the highly significant continuous variable: *years served*. Second, it adapts the measure to the new reality that the wars in Vietnam and Iraq/Afghanistan have been as unpopular as they have been long. Therefore, there is no longer reason to think ratings scores should increase with war length—like they might have when the Civil War and Second World War were the longest in the

21. The rating scores reported as "C-SPAN 2009*" throughout this study were modified by subtracting the "pursued equal justice for all" measure from the total, before scaling. This allows this term to be later utilized in operationalization of a control measure for "progressive" across all four surveys. The effect of this subtraction upon the final rating score was minimal, as the reported rating scores correlated at .996 with the unmodified results of the C-SPAN (2009) survey [.001 level of significance, two-tailed test]. The "pursued equal justice for all" measure was the only measure, in factor analysis, that loaded on its own dimension. All nine other measures loaded on one other dimension.

22. Correlation analysis reveals that *years served* is correlated .308 to *war* at the .05 level of significance and correlated .435 to *reorder* at the .01 level of significance. These correlations are not high enough to be judged as problematic.

23. While it is true that a dichotomous measure of *war* ends up equating the result of presiding over a little war (i.e., Spanish-American War) as qualitatively the same as presiding over a big/important one (i.e., Civil War, World War II), a binary measure improves upon Simonton's even more problematic measure, which equates length of war with increasing importance.

nation's history. Yet, since war has long been thought to provide a context in which presidential greatness can be shown (Bailey 1966; Cronin 1980; Nice 1984; however see Adler 2003; Polsby 1977), presidents are still coded positively when given the opportunity to demonstrate effective wartime leadership.²⁴

Like with *war*, the scoring of the variable *scandal* is modified in this study. It is altered to include the two presidents that were impeached, the one that resigned, as well as Ulysses S. Grant and Harding. This is done because additional regression analysis—under an alternate specification controlling for impeachment/resignation and scandal separately—reveals that evaluators are no longer making substantive distinctions between types of scandals (see footnote 32).

The next two “political time” contextual variables in the specification are coded in accordance with the logic of the Nichols and Myers extension (2010; see Table 2). These scholars follow Skowronek in concluding that all the presidents he regards as “disjunctive” served in *enervated conditions* (1993, 2011). Further, they argue that all of Skowronek’s “reconstructive” presidents successfully completed the tasks necessary to *reorder*.

TABLE 2
Comparative Scoring of the “Political Time” Variables

	<i>Enervated Penalty</i>	<i>Skowronek's Disjunctive Penalty</i>	<i>Reordering Bonus</i>	<i>Skowronek's Reconstructive Bonus</i>
George Washington	—	—	1	—
John Adams	1	1	—	—
Thomas Jefferson	—	—	1	1
John Q. Adams	1	1	—	—
Andrew Jackson	—	—	1	1
Franklin Pierce	1	1	—	—
James Buchanan	1	1	—	—
Abraham Lincoln	—	—	1	1
Benjamin Harrison	1	—	—	—
Grover Cleveland	.5	—	—	—
William McKinley	—	—	1	—
T. Roosevelt	—	—	1	—
Herbert Hoover	1	1	—	—
F.D. Roosevelt	—	—	1	1
Lyndon Johnson	1	—	—	—
Richard Nixon	1	—	—	—
Gerald Ford	1	—	—	—
Jimmy Carter	1	1	—	—
Ronald Reagan	—	—	1	1
George W. Bush	1	—	—	—
Barack Obama	—	—	1	—

Sources: Nichols (2009); Nichols and Myers (2010); Skowronek (1993, 2011).

24. Following data Cohen used in 2003, and graciously shared with this author, 12 out of 44 presidents are simply coded as being noted for providing wartime leadership.

Additionally, Nichols and Myers have deviated from Skowronek by reinterpreting the “System of 1896” era and concluding that it witnessed a successful, albeit protracted, reordering as well (2010, 821–27). In constructing their narrative, they follow the general outline suggested by realignment scholars (Burnham 1970, 1991; Key 1955; Schattschneider 1960; Sundquist 1983) but uniquely begin their case study analysis by suggesting that the political regime became enervated during Benjamin Harrison’s administration. This gave Grover Cleveland an opportunity to reorder when he and a new Democratic majority came into office (in effective control of government) in 1892. Skowronek supports this possibility, but has no response to the question of how politics then became rejuvenated (1993, 48). Nichols and Myers respond to this conundrum by applying their insight that given favorable context, it is still possible for presidents to fail to reorder. Indeed, they argue that Cleveland fell short of completing any additional reordering tasks. Enervated conditions continued, giving McKinley and eventually Teddy Roosevelt the opportunity to successfully reorder and create the “hybrid . . . complex and attenuated” new political regime that rejuvenated politics (2010, 829). This reinterpretation adds Harrison and Cleveland to the list of presidents that brought on or failed to confront *enervated conditions*,²⁵ while crediting McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt for *reordering*.

Following the logic of this example, three additional deviations from Skowronek’s carving of political history are suggested (see Nichols 2009). First, it is argued that Washington reordered after the Articles of Confederation era collapsed into enervated conditions that necessitated constitutional reform and a new, Federalist, political regime. Second, it is argued the “missing realignment/Reagan Revolution” era should be reinterpreted with the concept of reordering failure in mind. In this era enervated conditions are seen to have been reached during Lyndon Johnson’s administration. Despite Johnson’s institutionalization of many elements of a new governing regime, his efforts ended up shifting the axis of partisan conflict in ways that caused the slow motion collapse of the New Deal coalition (Petrocik 1981; Miller and Schofield 2003). Richard Nixon then inherited an enervated political regime, but failed to reorder and rejuvenate politics—as also did Gerald Ford and Carter. Therefore, enervated conditions continued to exist and deepen until Reagan was able to complete the reordering tasks. This new interpretation adds LBJ, Nixon, and Ford to the list (which already includes Carter) of presidents who experienced *enervated conditions* during this era. It also confirms Reagan’s place as a *reordering* president. The third adjustment suggested by fidelity to new theory relates to the current era. Recently, the enervation threshold may have been crossed sometime during George W. Bush’s presidency, giving Barack Obama the opportunity to reorder when Democrats gained effective control of government in 2008.²⁶ While

25. Because Cleveland’s two nonconsecutive terms are, problematically, always rated together in presidential ranking polls, Cleveland is scored as a .5 for the *enervated conditions* measure, signifying that only the second term in office was served in this context.

26. Skowronek (2011) considers whether or not to view Obama as a reconstructive president but is inconclusive as to the answer. However, as one reviewer notes, Skowronek seems most intrigued by the possibility that Obama is actually abandoning the reconstructive stance altogether (Nichols 2011). For this reason George W. Bush is not coded as disjunctive and Barack Obama is not coded as reconstructive in the Skowronek model. Alternate coding for these presidents, matching that of the *enervated conditions* and *reordering* measures did not significantly improve the amount of variance Skowronek’s model explains.

these new interpretations are not entirely uncontroversial, they result from faithful application of the latest extension of political time theory and can be tested against Skowronek's alternate coding for validity in the eyes of expert evaluators of presidential greatness.

The final three terms of the model control for context at the time of the evaluation by accounting for possible sources of cultural bias. First, *founding patrician* applies, as Murphy suggests, to the culturally preferred first group of "patrician" presidents from Washington to John Q. Adams (1984).²⁷ This term is coined here because "founder" is a problematic designation for a group that includes several members not at the Constitutional Convention and one member who was still a teen at the time it convened. Murphy's group of presidents is, however, composed of "patricians" who might be viewed nostalgically by evaluators from a more democratic culture. Second, "progressive" presidents are defined as those fifteen chief executives who scored above average on the "pursued equal justice for all" dimension that was removed from the C-SPAN (2009) poll—and Barack Obama (who was not rating in that survey but must certainly be considered an above-average "progressive").²⁸ This dichotomous measure is conceptually designed to account for a blunt cultural-level bias favoring above-average "progressives," rather than to serve as a true measure of an individual president's progressiveness. Third, the interactive term *tragic death* replaces Simonton's "assassination" measure. As suspected, once *progressive* is controlled for, Simonton's assassination variable loses all predictive value and only assassinated presidents who are also "progressives" are shown to receive a culturally biased bonus.²⁹ Fair or not, James Garfield and William McKinley do not qualify. Additionally, "war hero" and "brilliance" are shown by regression analysis to no longer be significant predictors once political time and "progressive" are controlled for.³⁰ Indeed, "brilliance," which Simonton measures through complex analysis of "personality descriptions from several biographical sources," loses its statistical significance once political time is controlled for (2006, 512).

27. Murphy's (1984) suggestion to consider all presidents prior to Jackson as part of a unified group is confirmed by regression analysis that demonstrates this grouping best account for what evaluators are actually doing. No alternate coding for this measure of cultural bias is as statistically significant.

28. The presidents that had individual evaluations surpassing the mean of the "pursued equal justice for all" measure in the C-SPAN 2009 poll—which was 46.29 (out of 100)—are the "progressive" presidents. To wit, Washington, J. Adams, J. Q. Adams, Lincoln, Grant, T. Roosevelt, F. Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, L. Johnson, Ford, Carter, G. H. W. Bush, and Clinton. For the Siena 2010 poll, I chose to code Obama as being a "progressive" as well.

29. Once *progressive* is controlled for, Simonton's "assassination" variable loses all predictive value, actually serving as a penalty in one survey and never being statistically significant. The construction of the *tragic death* variable accounts for the fact that both Lincoln and Kennedy ratings significantly benefit from some factor that only they share.

30. Regression analysis demonstrates that "war heroes" and "brilliant" presidents do not receive a statistically significant bonus when all the other terms of the new specification are controlled for. Indeed, "brilliance," which varies between -2.0 and 3.1 (see Simonton 2006), loses most of its substantive significance once political time is controlled for (beta as low as 1.35). Perhaps this suggests that "brilliance" mainly manifests itself in assisting/hindering contextual awareness and ability to alter one's mode to fit the needs of the times. In any case, these variables were dropped from consideration in the rest of the analysis.

Findings

The determinants of presidential rating scores are shown in Table 3. The constant represents the y intercept, or the number of rating points every president starts with. These results may surprise critics. The first thing to note is that in all cases a very healthy amount of the variance in presidential rating scores is explained. Adjusted R squares range from .789 to .823. Significantly, the model improves upon Simonton's by up to 26%.³¹ This is the first time that any rival model has ever statistically outperformed his (Cohen 2003). Additionally, at the $\leq .10$ level of significance, all but the variable measuring *energated conditions* act as a statistically significant determinant in every poll. Finally, all variables are also substantively significant, representing the number of points (out of 100) that each context adds to or subtracts from the base presidential rating score.

TABLE 3
Ordinary Least Squares Regression Results for the Determinates of Presidential Rating Scores
(scaled to 0-100)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Murray & Blessing '88</i>	<i>WSJ '05</i>	<i>C-SPAN '09[^]</i>	<i>Siena '10</i>
<i>Years Served</i>	2.92** (1.03)	3.09*** (.850)	1.90** (.563)	1.74*** (.563)
<i>War</i>	10.31* (4.45)	6.56° (3.70)	5.50° (2.72)	3.72° (2.10)
<i>Scandal</i>	-28.34*** (5.69)	-15.84** (4.85)	-10.29** (3.57)	-9.37** (2.89)
<i>Energated</i>	-7.76 (4.54)	-9.43* (3.80)	-9.38** (2.73)	-8.03*** (2.20)
<i>Reorder</i>	18.89*** (5.33)	17.58*** (4.66)	12.98*** (3.43)	7.07** (2.56)
<i>Patrician</i>	11.64* (4.99)	8.40° (4.54)	6.16° (3.35)	9.83*** (2.72)
<i>Progressive</i>	10.68* (4.33)	9.71** (3.52)	12.35*** (2.59)	8.75*** (2.02)
<i>Tragic Death</i>	17.15° (9.40)	14.67° (8.30)	14.09* (6.00)	9.83* (4.63)
<i>Constant</i>	24.82*** (5.52)	26.82*** (4.69)	37.65*** (2.89)	49.01*** (2.21)
Observations	36	40	42	43
Adjusted r^2	.823	.789	.820	.808

[^] = modified, see footnote 21.

° = $p \leq .10$; * = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .01$; *** = $p > .001$

Standard errors are reported below the coefficients in parentheses.

31. In my own replication of his work, Simonton's model R squares are as follows: .735 for the Murray-Blessing, .651 for the C-SPAN 2009*, .670 for the 2005 *Wall Street Journal*, and .716 for the Siena 2010. Simonton (1986) reports an R square of .74 in his own analysis of the Murray and Blessing poll, and Cohen (2003) reports an R square of .68 for his application of Simonton's model to the 1999 C-SPAN poll.

Each of the three variables derived from Simonton's work remains substantively and statistically significant: *years served* and *scandal* continue to structure presidential rating scores across all four ranking polls, while, *war* drops from the .05 to .10 level of significance after the 1988 survey. Depending on the survey, every year a president serves in office, he gains almost two to three rating score points. As such, any president serving two complete terms is expected to exceed the median rating score in all four polls. Indeed, the only presidents who served two full terms and did not score above the median were enervation threshold crossing George W. Bush and scandal plagued Ulysses S. Grant.

The declining statistical significance of *war* (to the .10 level) may not be too unexpected given its blunt measure and the fact that the variable was only significant at the .05 level before the deeply unpopular war in Iraq occurred. Under such circumstances, negative evaluation of George W. Bush's wartime leadership might have driven the significance of this measure down. Alternately, we might suspect that positive evaluation of the impact of *war* on presidential rankings could be depressed during times of war. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that short-term presidential approval ratings are negatively related to high salience issues like wartime pain and suffering (Adler 2003; Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995; Hibbs 1982; Mueller 1970).

As Grant's case suggests, an administration that witnesses a major scandal of graft is punished by evaluators (as additionally was Harding's). However, because additional regression analysis reveals that experts have both broadened how they define a scandal and lessened what any scandal costs, Andrew Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Bill Clinton are now shown to be equally penalized as well.³² This confirms the propriety of adding impeachments and resignations to the scandal measure. It, presumably, also provides one of the clearest examples of experts updating their evaluation criteria and changing the value of a penalty in light of ongoing developments. What this evidence does not tell us is whether Grant and Harding deserve to have the cost of their scandals substantively reduced, whether Andrew Johnson should now be penalized, or whether Nixon and Clinton deserve only a quarter of the penalty originally given to scandalous presidents in the Schlesinger 1948 poll. We only know that this is how experts are evaluating scandal in the light of Nixon's resignation and Clinton's impeachment.

In the three 21st-century polls, both variables deriving from the extension of political time theory are statistically significant, while only *reorder* maintains this status

32. Originally, Andrew Johnson's impeachment was not viewed as significant in the Schlesinger 1948 survey. Meanwhile scandals of graft cost Grant and Harding 40.5 rating points. By the time of the Murray and Blessing poll, getting impeached/resigning had become statistically significant (presumably due to Nixon's resignation). However, impeachment/resignation remained substantively less significant in the amount of rating points it cost presidents, taxing both A. Johnson and Nixon 17.7 rating points, while Grant and Harding were still penalized 31.8 points for scandals of graft. Now, after Clinton's impeachment, there is little statistical or substantive difference between how impeachment/resignation and scandals of graft are evaluated. Under alternate specification, in the WSJ 2005 survey, impeach/resign costs 16.6 points and scandal costs 15.4 points. In the C-SPAN 2009* survey, impeach/resign costs 12.8 points and scandal costs 8.8 points. In the Siena 2010 survey, impeach/resign costs 9.6 points and scandal costs 9.1 points. All measures are significant at the .05 level.

in the Murray and Blessing (1988) survey. Part of the reason why *enervated conditions* did not quite structure presidential rating scores in the earlier timeframe might be attributed to the fact that evaluators had not yet been influenced by Skowronek's (1993) conception of the disjunctive president, which was not yet formulated.³³ Both new political time variables do, however, always have substantive effects upon presidential rating scores.

Those presidents who are responsible for *enervated* conditions or cannot deal with them are penalized eight to nine rating points in the later trio of polls. Meanwhile, those presidents who successfully *reorder* receive a bonus that can go as high as almost 19 points. In the Murray and Blessing (1988) and *Wall Street Journal* (2005) polls, the reordering bonus provides the single greatest benefit a president can receive. It should also be noted that every reordering president was also reelected, so these individuals are doubly benefited by increasing their *years served*. Furthermore, *reorder* accounts for more variance [adjusted *R* square] than any other variable when it is the only term in the model (between 43 and 47%). Finally, when the political time variables are dropped from the full specification, the adjusted *R* squares drops between 12 and 21%.

Additional regression analysis, with an alternate specification that substitutes Skowronek's two political time measures for those used in this study's primary model, reveals that in no case does the alternate specification explain more variance (adjusted *R* square) than the primary model does (1993; see Table 3.1 in Annex A).³⁴ This superiority also holds true when several other cyclical theories of American Political Development are used to try and better control for context.³⁵ The *reconstructive* variable from the alternate specification is shown to be slightly less statistically significant than the *reorder* variable from the primary specification is for the same survey, while the *disjunctive* variable is slightly more statistically significant than the variable, *enervated*, is for the same survey. This suggests that the addition of presidents like George Washington and Theodore Roosevelt to the reordering list comparatively helps improve this study's primary model's ability to predict rating scores. However, the addition of presidents like Grover Cleveland and Lyndon Johnson to the enervated list comparatively hurts the model.³⁶ Yet, because the addition of presidents to the reordering list theoretically follows from the expansion of the list of presidents experiencing enervated conditions, the new measures cannot be used separately or "mixed-and-matched" in a specification.

33. See Sloan (2009) and Balkin (2010) for evidence from the blogosphere that Skowronek's framework informs public debate today.

34. This is true even if George W. Bush is coded as a disjunctive president, something Skowronek's (2011) own reprise and reappraisal considers but appears to reject. His model performs marginally worse if it does not code the 43rd president as disjunctive.

35. While it may only be appropriate to use variants of political time theory to attempt to control for the effect of context on presidential ratings, alternative coding was utilized to test Burnham's realignment theory (1991 cut-points); Mayhew's realignment critique (2002); Huntington's creedal periods (1981); and Schlesinger's "Cycles of American History" (1986). None outperformed the primary model.

36. Only time will tell if the new parsing of political history suggested by the extension of political time theory will go on to impact how experts evaluate presidents charged with contributing to or failing to overcome enervated conditions.

Controlling for the context at the time of evaluation reveals mixed findings. First, Simonton's "war hero," "brilliance," and "assassination" variables no longer structure ratings at all and have been dropped from consideration (1986, 1987, 2006). Second, the only statistically consistent variable (at the $\leq .05$ level) favors "progressive" presidents rated as being above average in their pursuit of equal justice for all. Third, both the *founding patrician* and *tragic death* variables are only intermittently significant (in two out of four of the polls) at better than $\leq .05$.³⁷

The three cultural-level determinants remaining in the specification are all substantively significant. Founding "patricians" receive a bonus of slightly more than 11 points in the Murray and Blessing (1988) poll and slightly less in the others. The benefit that every "progressive" president receives is also substantial, giving, on average, almost 10 points in three polls and even more in the C-SPAN 2009* survey. Finally, the bonus received for "tragic death" (i.e., assassinated "progressives") is similar in size to (and in two cases larger than) the benefit success in reordering brings to presidents.

Discussion

These findings suggest three major things. First, ratings are not, as some critics charge, helplessly subjective. This is demonstrated by the large amount of variance accounted for in every poll, and the many statistically significant determinants of each. Therefore, despite poorly structured or completely lacking evaluation criteria, the ever popular presidential ranking game appears to have greater internal validity than many in the academy have assumed. As such, rating scores can be predicted with relative ease.

Just how well the model performs in this capacity can be demonstrated by plugging actual historical conditions back into the specification and "predicting" rating scores with only eight crude pieces of information about each president. In fact, by my calculations, when actual survey scores are subtracted from predicted scores—reported herein as residual scores—the model predicts scores better than Simonton's model would (i.e., residuals more tightly cluster around the mean of zero). As the residual scores in Table 4 reveal, only a handful of presidents' rating scores exceed the scores that this study's primary model predicts for them by more than a tenth of the surveys' range. These presidents' residual scores are highlighted in **underlined bold**. Similarly, only a handful of presidents' rating scores fail to reach the score predicted for them by more than a tenth of the survey's range. They are indicated by **underlined bold**.

Residual scores may provide some insight into the handful of presidents that evaluators have judged to be over and underachievers.³⁸ A quick scan of those presidents

37. Except for in the Siena 2010 poll, the statistical significance of founding *patrician* appears to have declined over time. Meanwhile, the statistical significance of *tragic death* may be increasing. However, both variables meet the $\leq .10$ threshold consistently.

38. We must, however, remain cautious and remind ourselves that at this point, it is only conjecture that suggests that evaluation of presidential over/underachievement explains the gap between predicted and actual survey result. Furthermore, we must view the simple method used for obtaining these results as a work in progress. This study's primary model could still be improved upon to ensure that unexplained variance is minimized. Additionally, there are practical problems that follow from using political time variables that are

in Table 4 whose residual score is underlined and in bold reveals an interesting group—including James Polk, Woodrow Wilson, and Richard Nixon.³⁹ These presidents rating scores tend to exceed what might otherwise be expected of them. One possible explanation for this is that evaluators judged these presidents to have overachieved given their context. Similarly, on the other end of the spectrum, those presidents whose negative residual score is underlined and in bold tend to have rating scores that to fall below expectations. This group includes James Madison, Millard Fillmore, James Buchanan, and Ulysses S. Grant. It is, once again, possible that evaluators judged these presidents to have underachieved given their context.

This comparative exercise demonstrates a couple of things, none of which may be more important than how easy it is to predict rating scores with accuracy and consistency. Rather than revealing the limits of a model that does not include any economic or policy achievement measures and is bereft of nuanced variables accounting for personality or character traits—such as intellectual “brilliance”—the seven binary measures used in this study’s model just seem to work in helping to predict rating scores. Along with one continuous variable, they account for, on average, about 80% of the variance in the four surveys and produce predictive results that always correlate with actual scores at greater than ninety percent (at .001 level of significance).

The ease at which rating scores can be predicted allows the importance (within the ranking game) of certain presidential accomplishments to be clearly demonstrated. For example, the model can be used to estimate what effect getting reelected, serving a full second term, and being judged a successful reordering president would have on president Barack Obama’s rating score—in a hypothetical Siena Research Institute ranking poll of the future.⁴⁰ Were Obama to succeed in these endeavors, while maintaining his status as a “progressive,” being credited for wartime leadership, and avoiding scandal and “tragic death,” his predicted rating score of 82.47 would exceed that of Thomas Jefferson’s and place him fourth on the list. Conversely, if Obama were to fail to be reelected and consequently be categorized as a president who failed to overcome enervated conditions, this would leave him with a predicted rating score of 61.41—putting him just above George H. W. Bush in Siena’s 2010 ranking pantheon at 22nd on the list.

The second major finding of this study is that historical context—especially that associated with the challenges and opportunities identified in the latest extension of political time theory—does matter in structuring ratings. This reaffirms that success in the ratings game is not mainly a function of presidential personality, character, or

dependent upon presidential performance for final categorization. Simple comparison of predicted and actual survey rating score might obscure some of the greatest examples of over and under achievement. For example, presidents who either helped bring on enervated conditions unnecessarily (perhaps like Lyndon Johnson) or failed to reorder (like Grover Cleveland) might have underachieved, while those who unexpectedly inherited an opportunity to reorder and succeeded (like McKinley and T. Roosevelt) might have overachieved. These possibilities are not accounted for using a simple comparative method that builds achievement into the predictive model. I thank a reviewer for their insights on this topic.

39. Richard Nixon is widely thought to pose a hard case for evaluators due to the dichotomous nature of his presidency (Faber and Faber 1997; Felzenberg 2009).

40. The Siena poll is the only one used to predict Obama’s future rating score because it is the only survey instrument that has already been used to evaluate this president.

TABLE 4

Predicted Scores and Comparative Results: Δ = Residual Scores ~ Actual Survey Results less Predicted Scores

<i>President</i>	<i>Predicted Murray Blessing Score</i>	Δ <i>M&B 1982</i>	<i>Predicted WSJ Score</i>	Δ <i>WSJ 2005</i>	<i>Predicted C-SPAN* score</i>	Δ <i>C-SPAN 2009*</i>	<i>Predicted Siena Score</i>	Δ <i>Siena 2010</i>
Washington	89.40	5.20	87.20	<u>11.30</u>	84.30	4.96	88.58	-3.08
J Adams	52.06	<u>10.94</u>	47.85	<u>10.40</u>	54.35	0.82	66.52	1.88
Jefferson	78.72	7.28	77.49	3.26	71.95	0.56	79.83	2.17
Madison	70.14	<u>-16.14</u>	66.47	<u>-14.72</u>	64.46	<u>-9.71</u>	76.48	-1.98
Monroe	59.83	-6.83	59.91	-3.91	58.97	4.02	72.76	1.54
JQ Adams	52.06	-0.46	47.85	-6.35	54.35	-0.66	66.52	-0.42
Jackson	67.08	6.52	69.09	-4.59	65.79	-2.01	70.00	-0.20
Van Buren	36.50	4.10	39.17	1.58	45.23	-1.11	55.97	2.33
WH Harrison	—	—	—	—	37.80	-4.99	49.15	2.15
Tyler	36.27	-8.47	38.92	-8.17	45.08	<u>-6.50</u>	55.83	<u>-6.43</u>
Polk	46.81	<u>11.99</u>	45.72	<u>19.03</u>	50.72	<u>13.29</u>	59.69	<u>11.31</u>
Taylor	28.70	2.30	30.92	1.58	40.17	5.31	51.32	1.88
Fillmore	32.62	-5.42	35.06	<u>-13.81</u>	42.71	<u>-6.71</u>	53.66	<u>-5.06</u>
Pierce	29.74	-8.74	29.74	<u>-11.49</u>	35.85	-6.16	47.94	-3.04
Buchanan	29.74	<u>-12.74</u>	29.74	<u>-21.99</u>	35.85	<u>-12.39</u>	47.94	<u>-8.04</u>
Lincoln	93.89	3.51	88.07	3.68	90.38	-0.64	85.56	1.04
A Johnson	7.81	<u>10.19</u>	22.96	-4.21	34.71	<u>-8.80</u>	46.39	<u>-8.19</u>
Grant	30.53	<u>-15.53</u>	45.38	-6.13	54.86	<u>-7.32</u>	62.31	<u>-5.91</u>
Hayes	36.50	2.50	39.17	4.08	45.23	-3.37	55.97	-1.17
Garfield	—	—	—	—	38.67	6.04	49.95	<u>6.45</u>
Arthur	34.93	0.27	37.50	3.75	44.20	-1.72	55.03	1.97
Cleveland	44.81	6.59	46.80	<u>11.70</u>	48.12	5.61	58.92	<u>5.49</u>
B Harrison	29.74	2.26	29.74	8.76	35.85	<u>8.63</u>	47.94	3.66
McKinley	67.16	<u>-22.76</u>	64.85	-6.85	64.65	-2.81	67.63	-3.63
T Roosevelt	76.29	5.11	77.26	-0.26	77.19	2.32	77.88	<u>8.82</u>
Taft	36.50	6.10	39.17	<u>10.08</u>	45.23	3.79	55.97	1.83
Wilson	58.50	<u>20.10</u>	58.07	2.18	58.30	<u>13.31</u>	66.65	<u>6.65</u>
Harding	3.54	5.26	18.45	-2.20	31.94	0.80	43.85	-3.35
Coolidge	41.12	<u>-14.12</u>	44.04	0.21	48.22	-0.19	58.72	-3.12
Hoover	29.74	<u>9.66</u>	29.74	7.76	35.85	3.32	47.94	2.46
FD Roosevelt	100.48	-4.88	98.48	<u>-13.23</u>	91.68	-6.16	89.87	-1.67
Truman	68.45	2.55	67.01	6.74	70.18	-0.34	74.97	-1.77
Eisenhower	58.87	1.33	61.22	5.53	65.16	4.75	71.68	0.92
Kennedy	60.91	-3.51	59.93	-3.68	69.45	0.64	72.51	-1.01
LB Johnson	57.07	5.53	52.70	-1.45	57.80	3.30	64.19	4.71
Nixon	16.33	0.07	25.34	<u>9.66</u>	34.04	<u>11.09</u>	45.04	<u>9.86</u>
Ford	35.80	-2.20	34.57	5.68	45.20	5.70	53.94	1.86
Carter	40.42	-7.62	39.45	-8.45	48.19	-3.36	56.69	-1.99
Reagan	—	—	69.09	6.66	65.79	3.77	70.00	-1.60
GHW Bush	—	—	55.43	-6.68	63.07	<u>-8.23</u>	68.44	<u>-9.14</u>
Clinton	—	—	45.38	2.87	54.86	4.22	62.31	7.69
GW Bush	—	—	48.65	1.60	48.92	<u>-13.10</u>	58.62	<u>-13.52</u>
Obama	—	—	—	—	—	—	71.16	-1.66

Note: bold positive Δ scores = exceed actual by >.1 range of actual survey; underline negative Δ scores = lag by >.1 of actual survey range.

“brilliance”—as these terms are normally defined. Experts do, however, reward presidents who succeed in taking advantage of the opportunity to reorder—while also punishing those presidents helping to bring about enervated conditions as well as those failing to overcome them. This, once again, highlights the importance of new theory, which makes us aware of the possibility and costs of presidential failure to reorder when context calls for it.

How then do we best conceptualize the skills that are required to succeed within context? This study’s primary model cannot provide direct insight into this question because it does not include any variables exclusively measuring presidential skills. However, the significance of the political time variables affirms that performance within context is important to presidential rating success. Furthermore, there is scholarship on the skills that may be important for performing within context (Hargrove and Nelson 1984; Rockman 1984; Sheingate 2003). It may be logical to deduce that in order for there to be well-exercised agency within the context of regime management, presidents must possess the same sort of contextual awareness that they need in the policy realm (Edwards 2009). It may also follow that performance within context is dependent upon possession of the Machiavellian ability to alter one’s “mode of procedure [to] accord with the needs of the times” (Machiavelli 1980, 121).

One brief example may demonstrate the importance of both skills. The first two years of Bill Clinton’s presidency can fairly be critiqued for demonstrating what happens when a president mistakenly reads his/her place in political time. It was only after Democrats lost control of Congress in the 1994 election that Clinton was able to “tell what time it was.” He then demonstrated the ability to alter his mode of procedure by switching to a triangulating strategy that was well suited to his opposition presidency. In ultimately exhibiting an ability to read context correctly while maintaining operational flexibility, Clinton became a successful “Eisenhower Democrat” who is often rated slightly higher in presidential ranking polls than context alone would predict.

The third, and final, take away of this study is that the context at the time of evaluation also matters in structuring presidential rating scores. This is because ranking polls have not escaped bias working at the cultural-level of discrimination. Whether this bias manifests itself as the preferential treatment the founding “patricians” appears to receive,⁴¹ or the bonus above average “progressives” get, it is apparent that historical evaluation is not escaping the milieu in which it is formed. This tells us both about the ranking game and about the raters themselves. It should, however, be stressed that this is different from concluding that individual partisan preferences directly structure evaluations. They do not appear to do so consistently, at least in the long run, after initial evaluations are subjected to the normal give and take of review processes.

41. It may also be the case that many of the presidents from the founding era deserve a bonus for the extra value their precedents set in the course of institutional and national development. Regression analysis suggests, however, that everyone from Washington through J. Q. Adams earns the same bonus. This undercuts the need for a more nuanced measure by suggesting that expert evaluators are indeed granting culturally biased collective credit to patrician presidents such as Madison and J. Q. Adams—whose presidential performance might not earn it.

This study does, however, demonstrate that a cultural-level bias in favor of “progressive” presidents exists in every survey, including the 2005 *Wall Street Journal* that oversampled conservatives to better control for potential Democratic partisan bias. For some presidents, like Lincoln, a substantial bonus for above-average “progressive” accomplishment may be well deserved, as it is closely connected to substantive policy achievement in the realm of “pursued equal justice for all.” However, in some cases, there is reason to question whether a large “progressive” bonus is warranted for lesser deeds.⁴² Indeed, while above-average pursuit of justice for all does not correlate highly with great overall success in the presidential ranking game, it does, however, help explain why several presidents who either encountered enervated conditions or were beset with scandal were not as badly hurt in the rankings as might otherwise be expected.

The issue of cultural-level “progressive” bias becomes more problematic in light of the discovery that a “tragic death” bonus is also only awarded to “progressives.” Undoubtedly, Abraham Lincoln and John Kennedy’s presidencies were tragically shortened before their full measure could become known. However, so were the presidencies of James Garfield and William McKinley. Perhaps this suggests that it is time to reconsider the fairness of the bonus given only to some assassinated presidents. Indeed, maybe the findings in this third section should be read as invitation to question the accuracy and propriety of evaluating presidents by holding them up to standards drawn from today’s cultural preferences.

Conclusion

This study ends with summary of advancements achieved through critical analysis of the ever-popular presidential ranking game. First, the ease by which rating scores can be predicted has been shown. While expert ranking surveys have many problems, using totally subjective standards of evaluation is not one of them. Second, it has shown that presidential performance—understood simply as maximizing one’s time in office, reordering when given the opportunity, and providing wartime leadership—tends to be rewarded within the game. This suggests that performance within context affects rating scores. Further, this study has demonstrated that blundering into scandal or enervated conditions takes rating points away, as does not being able to reorder when required by context. This additionally suggests that possession of contextual awareness and operational flexibility may be necessary for presidential success within the game. Finally, it has revealed that gaining membership into a culturally preferred group—such as founding “patricians” or “progressives”—helps a presidents’ rating score a lot. Indeed, only “progressives” will be given the benefit of the doubt if they are tragically assassinated during their term. Therefore, evaluators may want to give thought to how cultural-level biases impact their thinking.

42. While the issue is certainly open to debate, one can question whether the substantive deeds of presidents, such as Ford and Carter, qualify them for the same “progressive” bonus as Lincoln, Truman, and L. Johnson.

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Annex A

TABLE 3.1
Ordinary Least Squares Regression Results for the Determinates of Presidential Rating Scores—Alternate Skowronek Specification

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Murray & Blessing '88</i>	<i>WSJ '05</i>	<i>C-SPAN '09</i> [^]	<i>Siena '10</i>
<i>Years Served</i>	2.78** (1.16)	3.05** (.984)	2.00** (.677)	1.74*** (.552)
<i>War</i>	9.25° (4.80)	3.45 (4.05)	2.84 (3.15)	1.93 (2.40)
<i>Scandal</i>	-31.09*** (6.15)	-19.71*** (5.23)	-13.07** (4.06)	-10.88** (3.23)
<i>Disjunctive</i>	-11.25° (5.80)	-18.76*** (5.33)	-14.91*** (2.73)	-10.61** (2.20)
<i>Reconstructive</i>	21.38** (7.40)	14.92* (6.17)	10.78* (7.74)	6.92* (3.16)
<i>Patrician</i>	14.33* (5.48)	12.56* (5.03)	9.26* (3.91)	11.83*** (3.11)
<i>Progressive</i>	13.22** (4.33)	12.43** (3.93)	14.02*** (3.05)	9.75*** (2.27)
<i>Tragic Death</i>	12.99 (10.73)	13.25 (9.53)	14.32° (7.23)	9.92° (5.28)
<i>Constant</i>	26.21*** (6.00)	28.54*** (5.28)	37.80*** (3.38)	48.92*** (2.21)
Observations	36	40	42	43
Adjusted r ²	.794	.753	.764	.759

[^] = modified, see footnote 21.

° = $p \leq .10$; * = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .01$; *** = $p \geq .001$

Standard errors are reported below the coefficients in parentheses.