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Context, Opportunity, and the Potential for Presidential Greatness

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Abstract

The American Presidency is increasingly considered the cornerstone of successful government. The responsibilities and power of the office are intriguing to presidential scholars and the average American alike. The legacies president's leave are valuable because they affect the way we think about our past and the expectations we put on current presidents. Many polls have been administered to historians and other experts to attempt to rank presidential greatness. These polls, which have been made readily available in the media, provide us with a list of great presidents and presidents who were failure. But they do not provide an explanation for these rankings. All evaluations of presidential leadership must use value judgments to establish standards of comparison. By examining trends within these polls, it becomes possible to gain insight into the particular standards the respondents used in their evaluations. This paper examines reasons for the patterns observed in these polls. Using theories developed by Skowronek, Kernell, and Lowi, it tests a series of hypotheses which explain presidential success using environmental forces independent of personality. The results shed light on the issue of whether political dynamics or individual ability determines presidential success.

1. Introduction

George Washington, Franklin Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln are probably the three most renowned presidents of the United States. Their legacies have survived across time and regime changes and to many they are symbols of American Exceptionalism. On the other hand James Buchanan, Warren Harding, and Franklin Pierce, have been forgotten or worse viewed as failures unworthy of their time as president. All six of these men held the office of president, yet half of them have been honored for their achievements while the others have been discarded as peripheral contributors to history. Why are certain presidents seen as great while others are not?

This study uses historians' and other experts' rankings of presidents' relative greatness as a measure of success and asks: do presidents control their success or failure in office or are their legacies controlled by circumstances beyond their control? That is, is it talent or context that determines presidential success?

2. Literature Review

In his study of presidential greatness, Bailey scrutinized the Arthur Schlesinger polls of 1948 and 1962. In this early study, he was one of the first scholars to discuss the potential influences of political bias in the experts' evaluations. Bailey assumes in the 1962 poll that the ten Democrats and five Republicans who declared their political affiliations were an accurate sampling of the seventy five intellectuals, meaning a heavy Democratic bias. Though he has some skepticism because of the potential bias, Bailey also touts the high standing of these historians.¹ His critique of the

Schlesinger polls does not deem their results any less meaningful. While the liberal tendencies of intellectuals is important to note, by using experts' polls from multiple sources the legitimacy of their results can be assured.

Simonton is one of the most prominent researchers of presidential greatness, doing many studies over the past three decades. In one study, Simonton tested over three variables impacts on presidential legacy. He examines the potential of certain presidential attributes as predictors of greatness. Particularly, he focuses on the years in office, years in war during tenure, scandal, assassination attempts, and whether the president was a war hero.² Using the framework he creates is useful for any study of presidential greatness. While this study tested theoretical shifts and cycles within the institutional context of the presidency, Simonton's work provides a valuable foundation.

Evaluating presidents' relative greatness is incredibly difficult as the literature on them frames each president as unique, unrelated, and incomparable. Rose argues that to overcome these ideographic constraints, presidents must be evaluated with attentiveness to their institutional, historical, and geographical context.³ This study incorporates hypotheses that evaluate greatness through these contextual lenses.

3. Methodology and Data

Arthur Schlesinger Sr. conducted the first presidential greatness poll to be administered to experts. Since then experts of all kinds, primarily historians but also political scientists, presidential scholars, and even politicians have weighed in on the topic. In this paper I use a sample of five polls of experts to analyze patterns in rankings of presidential greatness.

The five polls used in this analysis are the original Arthur Schlesinger Sr. Poll conducted in 1948, another poll administered in 1996 by his son Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a 2005 poll by the Wall Street Journal, a 2010 poll by Sienna College, and a 2011 poll from the US Presidency Centre at the University of London. Each poll used a ranking system to rate every president, except for those who died early in their terms (William H. Harrison and James Garfield) and, in the case of the Schlesinger Sr. poll and Schlesinger Jr. poll those presidents, who hadn't yet served in office. For Schlesinger Sr. the ratings include no presidents after Franklin D. Roosevelt and for Schlesinger Jr. the ratings include no presidents after Bill Clinton. The methods used for each ranking varied. In the Schlesinger Sr. 1948 poll historians were asked to rank presidents on a scale of great, near great, average, below average, and failure. The 1996 Schlesinger Jr. poll used the same scale as the 1948 poll while adding one additional category, high/above average. The Wall Street Journal 2005 poll also used this ranking system, but the Sienna College 2010 poll allowed historians to rate each president's performance in a wide range of facets of the office. This poll used twenty separate indicators for presidential performance using both tangible achievements and more intangible abstract indicators. An overall rating was calculated averaging each president's ranking in each category. The US Centre on the Presidency at the University of London 2011 poll used a different ranking system as well, consolidating the twenty indicators from the Sienna College 2010 poll into five dimensions. Experts rated presidents on a scale from one to ten on their vision/agenda-setting, domestic leadership, foreign policy leadership, moral authority, and positive historical significance of their legacy. A final score was calculated by averaging a president's score in all five categories. Each poll had a distinct system of rating presidents and each yielded slightly different results. To standardize the rankings I measure presidents according to the scores on the final rankings. Thus the highest rated president received a 1, the second highest a 2, and so on. The results of all five of the experts' polls can be found in the Appendices at the end of the paper.

To calculate a summary measure of a president's greatness across the five polls, I calculated an average ranking or mean for each president and the standard deviation of their scores. These statistics allow for an overall ranking system that shows how presidents performed across polls based on their rating, and measures the degree of consensus across polls.

Table 1 lists the presidents by their average ranking. Abraham Lincoln had the best mean ranking of 1.8, followed by Franklin Roosevelt (2.2), George Washington (2.4), Thomas Jefferson (4.5), and Theodore Roosevelt (5.0). The bottom five presidents from the lowest ranking were Warren Harding and James Buchanan (an average ranking of 37.2 each), Franklin Pierce (35.4), George W. Bush (35), and Andrew Johnson (34.4). Using the average rankings I classified presidents into six groups. Presidents ranked from 1-5.00 were classified as Great, presidents ranked from 5.01-10 were classified as Near Great, presidents ranked from 10.01-15 were classified as Above Average, presidents ranked from 15.01-25 were classified as Average, president ranked from 25.01-34.99 were classified as Below Average, and presidents ranked from 35-41 were classified as Failures. The listing is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean ranking of each president in the five historians' polls

President	Ranking	President	Ranking
Lincoln	1.8	Taft	21.4
Franklin Roosevelt	2.2	George H.W Bush	22.25
Washington	2.4	Van Buren	22.6
Jefferson	4.4	Hayes	24.2
Theodore Roosevelt	5	Arthur	25.2
Wilson	7.2	Coolidge	26.6
Truman	7.75	Grant	27.2
Jackson	8.8	Harrison	27.6
Eisenhower	9.5	Carter	27.75
Polk	11.2	Ford	29.5
Adams	12.4	Hoover	29.6
Monroe	13	Nixon	30.25
Kennedy	13.25	Taylor	31
Madison	13.6	Tyler	32.6
Reagan	14.25	Fillmore	32.8
Lyndon Johnson	14.75	Andrew Johnson	34.4
Cleveland	14.8	George W. Bush	35
McKinley	17.2	Pierce	35.4
Clinton	18.5	Buchanan	37.2
Quincy Adams	18.6	Harding	37.2

Table 2 lists the presidents by the degree of consensus on each president's performance across the five polls, as determined by the standard deviation of their rankings. The ten presidents with the lowest standard deviation, from highest to lowest, were Jefferson, Lincoln, Truman, Eisenhower, Franklin Roosevelt, Washington, George H.W. Bush, Theodore Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Grant. For these presidents there is strong consensus among the experts in all five polls. The ten presidents over whom there was the least degree of agreement were Cleveland, Fillmore, Tyler, James Buchanan, Hoover, Carter, Benjamin Harrison, Hayes, Reagan, and Andrew Johnson. These presidents' rankings varied the most in each of the polls. In the following sections I examine four possible explanations.

Table 2. Standard deviation of presidents across the five historians' polls

President	Standard Dev.	President	Standard Dev.
Jefferson	0.49	Taylor	3.58
Lincoln	0.75	Monroe	3.63
Truman	0.83	George W. Bush	4
Eisenhower	0.87	Madison	4.03
Franklin Roosevelt	0.98	Harding	4.21
Washington	1.02	Van Buren	4.45
George H.W. Bush	1.09	Quincy Adams	4.5
Theodore Roosevelt	1.67	Nixon	4.71
Kennedy	1.79	Arthur	4.79
Grant	1.94	Pierce	4.84
Wilson	2.32	Cleveland	4.96
McKinley	2.32	Fillmore	4.96
Lyndon Johnson	2.59	Tyler	5.61
Ford	2.6	Buchanan	5.74
Polk	2.64	Hoover	5.95
Adams	2.65	Carter	6.18
Coolidge	3.01	Harrison	6.41
Jackson	3.19	Hayes	6.43
Taft	3.2	Reagan	7.69
Clinton	3.35	Andrew Johnson	8.09

4. Four Hypotheses

Stephen Skowronek's explanation of presidential leadership is built around two patterns that he claims predict a president's leadership potential. Skowronek's basic premise is that presidents are formidable political actors that dictate the shape and nature of politics.⁴ He outlines a new way to look at presidential leadership that supersedes the traditional methods historians have used to categorize presidents. Instead of viewing presidents based on their individual skill and competence, Skowronek suggests that a president's success or failure depends on the context in which they govern and, as a byproduct, the politics they are able to make. Skowronek claims

"A search for the typical efforts that presidential action has in differently structured political contexts takes us behind the familiar portraits of individual incompetence and mastery. If it turns out that the 'great' political leaders have all made the same kind of politics and if that politics is only made in a certain kind of situation, then our celebration of their extraordinary talents and skills will be seen to obscure more than it clarifies."⁵

Skowronek frames his study around political context and historical setting, arguing they are more important than individual skill in explaining success. At the center of Skowronek's argument is the balance of two distinct factors of presidential leadership: a president's place in political time and the environment or mode of politics in which he governs.

4.1 The Recurrent Pattern

Skowronek's theory suggests two distinct hypotheses that could explain the experts' polls on presidential greatness. The first of these is the concept of political time, what Skowronek refers to as the recurrent pattern. The recurrent pattern is dependent on two factors: a president's authority that is derived from his political identity and affiliation to

the party in power, and the strength of that partisan regime and its established commitments at the point at which a president serves. If these established commitments are vulnerable, it is likely that a president of the opposition party could break from these commitments and reconstruct government, establishing a new regime. On the other hand, a member of the party in power could find their authority limited by past commitments.

Using these two factors, Skowronek defined four types of presidential leadership which he labeled reconstructive, articulative, disjunctive, and preemptive.⁶ Reconstructive presidents are those who replace the old worn out regime with a new one of their design. They have expansive authority and are able to make substantial changes to the political system, rebuilding national politics. Because they wield such influence we should expect these presidents will be remembered for their success. Articulating presidents follow a reconstructive leader and find themselves restricted in their authority. They have the regime's support but to maintain this support, they have to uphold the reconstructive leader's commitments. Because these leaders must "articulate" the regime's commitments their influence is limited and they will likely be less memorable than reconstructive leaders. Because the regime's established commitments are still relatively durable, however, the articulating leader does have some leeway to successfully create and engage in politics.

As the regime's established commitments begin to crumble and cease to respond to changing circumstances, however, presidents are faced with what Skowronek calls the "impossible leadership situation". Dependent on the regime for legitimate authority, disjunctive leaders must continue to articulate the established commitments even as these commitments becoming increasingly vulnerable. These leaders find they cannot please their supporters and adapt to changing conditions at the same time making successful politics impossible. Given their limited potential for leadership, these presidents would likely be remembered for their failures.

The last type of presidential leadership that Skowronek defines is preemptive leadership. The preemptive leader is the most amorphous and hard to define. These presidents are similar to the reconstructive leader because they come from the opposition party, the difference is the strength of the established regime and its commitments prevents them from rebuilding national politics. Where the reconstructive leader finds the previous regime weak and crumbling, the preemptive leader is met with a regime that is still resilient. These presidents are difficult to identify and their success or failure in office is difficult to predict.⁷

These four types of presidential leadership embody the recurrent pattern of political time. Political regimes dissolve and politics are reconstructed by a "great" president, the new regime that has been constructed has its commitments articulated until they are so weak and outdated that a disjunctive leader watches the regime fall apart only to be replaced again. This cycle of politics suggests that reconstructive presidents would be ranked the highest by experts, disjunctive presidents would be ranked the lowest, and the articulating presidents would fall somewhere in between.

To test this hypothesis I categorized each president as a reconstructive, articulating, disjunctive, or preemptive leader based on Skowronek's regime cycles. I then calculated a mean score for these president's rankings using the four most recent polls. The average rankings for the four types of presidential leaders are listed in Table 3. As Skowronek's argument suggests, the reconstructive leaders had the highest score in each of the four polls, an average ranking of 5.8. The disjunctive leaders had the lowest score in each poll and an average ranking of 30.7, and the articulating leaders' average ranking of 22.9 falls in between. This clear pattern illustrates a strong correspondence between Skowronek's theory and greatness as measured by the experts' polls. Skowronek argues the preemptive leaders are the most amorphous of the four types of presidential leadership making their success difficult to predict. Interestingly the preemptive leaders scored higher than even the articulating leaders by 4.6 points. This is partially due to the small number of preemptive leaders; Cleveland, Wilson, Nixon, and Clinton were the only four that I identified. However, it also suggests that preemptive leadership provides presidents with increased opportunities for successful leadership than articulating leaders.

Table 3. Mean ranking of presidents based on Skowronek’s Recurrent Pattern leadership types.

Leadership Type	Arthur Schlesinger Jr. 1996	Wall Street Journal 2005	Sienna College 2010	US Presidency Centre at the University of London 2011	Overall Mean
Reconstructive	6.7	4.3	7.5	4.5	5.8
Articulative	21.4	22.9	23.4	24	22.9
Preemptive	19	19.3	17.8	17.3	18.3
Disjunctive	29.5	32.5	33.6	27	30.6

4.2 The Emergent Pattern

The second concept Skowronek develops is the emergent pattern. Where the recurrent pattern deals with changes in the structure of presidential authority based on political support, the emergent pattern examines the changes in the systemic foundations of presidential power.⁸ The mode of politics in the United States is thus shaped by social and economic expectations which change over time.

In the early years of the republic the primary challenge facing the new government was establishing legitimacy and presidents relied on their personal reputation to govern. Their primary task was to stand above the conflicts of factions that threatened instability.⁹ Skowronek labels this era which spanned from 1789 to 1828 “patrician politics”. The remainder of the nineteenth century was characterized by what Skowronek calls the era of “partisan politics”. Beginning with the election of Andrew Jackson, this period was characterized by the rise of party organizations and the distribution of services. Presidents were expected to distribute patronage to their party supporters, keeping their coalitions united. The responsibilities of presidents during this period were simple, suggesting that few of these presidents will rank among the greatest or most memorable presidents. At the turn of the century, Skowronek claims politics entered another era, the era of “pluralist politics” which dominated from 1900 to 1972. Presidents in this era had to respond to rapid industrial expansion, population growth, and America’s entrance on the world stage. Given these circumstances, they faced increasing responsibilities and were expected to be more active in the nation’s politics. Politics in this era required bargaining with other national leaders. As mass communications technology expanded after 1972, the mode of presidential politics shifted again and entered the era of “plebiscitary politics.” New communications technologies put presidents under more scrutiny from the public, limiting bargaining between elites. Plebiscite president’s had to rely on direct appeals to the American public. This strategy required presidents to speak for and to the people.

Skowronek claims that the evolution of the emergent pattern has made successful presidential leadership more difficult,

“the political foundations of presidential action have become increasingly independent over time, the incumbent drawing upon resources that are ever more directly tied to the executive branch itself; the institutional universe of political action has gotten thicker all around- at each stage in the development of the office there are more organizations and authorities to contend with, and they are all more firmly entrenched and independent.”¹⁰

Faced with these institutional restrictions, effective reconstructive leadership would be more difficult to achieve. Thus Thomas Jefferson’s reconstructive leadership in 1800 was more effective at creating new politics than Franklin Roosevelt’s reconstructive leadership in 1932 because there were far fewer barriers in his path, fewer expectations, and more easily administrable resources. Thus it is reasonable to infer that as the emergent pattern develops it is more difficult for presidents to achieve success, even when the leadership situation they are in is favorable.

The emergent hypothesis then would suggest that presidential greatness rankings would diminish through each era with patrician presidents receiving the highest scores and plebiscitary presidents the lowest ones in the expert polls. To test this hypothesis, I categorized presidents based on the era during which they were in office and calculated an average ranking for each era. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Mean rankings of presidents based on Skowronek's Emergent Pattern of historical time.

Political Era	Arthur Schlesinger Jr. 1996	Wall Street Journal 2005	Sienna College 2010	US Presidency Centre at the University of London 2011	Overall Mean
Patrician	11.2	13	9.7	11	10.7
Partisan	22.7	26	28.1	28	24.5
Pluralist	16.8	16.2	17.3	15.8	16.3
Plebiscitary	26.7	23.8	26	22.1	24.6

As Skowronek's hypothesis of the emergent pattern suggests, the patrician era's presidents ranked the highest in every poll, with an average ranking of 10.7. The partisan era's presidents ranked significantly worse with an average of 24.5. Presidents of the pluralist era, however, didn't follow the expected downward trend. Instead the rankings of these presidents were higher on average than those from the partisan era. The presidents of the plebiscitary era ranked about the same as the partisan era with an average ranking of 24.6. Instead of a consistent downward trend in presidential rankings as Skowronek's Emergent Pattern argument suggests, the data show an alternating pattern. Presidents' rankings rise for one era and fall in the next. This indicates that Skowronek's emergent pattern outside the patrician era doesn't explain the rankings of presidents as well as his concept of political time. Skowronek's concept of political time claims that the most important indicator of a successful presidency is the type of leadership situation they face, suggesting that the recurrent pattern has a larger impact on presidential greatness than the historical environment in which presidents govern.

It is possible though, that leadership situation vary in different times. To test this possibility I analyzed how the reconstructive leaders of each era fared in the experts' polls. Skowronek's emergent pattern suggests that reconstructive leaders from the patrician era would rank the highest, followed by those from the partisan era, than the pluralist era, and lastly the plebiscitary era. Table 5 shows that approaching Skowronek's hypothesis of the emergent pattern by controlling for leadership type provides further evidence that the experts' rankings are unrelated to the emergent pattern.

Table 5. Mean ranking of reconstructive presidents in different historical eras.

Reconstructive Presidents	Political Era	Arthur Schlesinger Jr. 1996	Wall Street Journal 2005	Sienna College 2010	US Presidency Centre at the University of London 2011	Overall Mean
Washington	Patrician	2	1	4	3	2.5
Jefferson	Patrician	4	4	5	4	4.3
Jackson	Partisan	5	10	14	9	9.5
Lincoln	Partisan	1	2	3	2	2
Franklin Roosevelt	Pluralist	3	3	1	1	2
Reagan	Plebiscitary	25	6	18	8	14.3

Lincoln (Partisan era) and Franklin Roosevelt (Pluralist era) each scored higher than Washington even though they held office during a later era. Jefferson and Jackson were both ranked lower than Franklin Roosevelt even though they served in the eras that preceded him. The only reconstructive president who didn't receive a top ten average ranking from the experts was Ronald Reagan, which fits Skowronek's claim that reconstructive presidents in later eras will have a more difficult time successfully reconstructing politics. The emergent pattern doesn't explain these presidents' rankings even when the effect of the recurrent pattern is neutralized by using presidents of the same leadership situations.

5. The Mode of Operation

Skowronek's emergent pattern separates presidents into four eras based on the way politics works shaping the resources presidents have at their disposal. Skowronek claimed that presidents became more independent facing more obstacles as the eras progressed. Suggesting that presidential success would be most attainable in the patrician era and progressively harder to attain in each era following. I propose an alternative analysis of these eras based on arguments developed by Samuel Kernell and Theodore Lowi. Their arguments suggest historical context is an essential contributor to the experts' rankings because the context determines the way presidents operate. The way president's operated in the partisan or traditional era was more constraining and thus would yield less success, lowering their ranking in the experts' polls. Presidents in the latter half of the pluralist era, who governed in what Kernell labeled as the "Institutional Pluralist" setting, however, would have a higher ranking. Plebiscitary presidents, who operated in Kernell's "Individual Pluralist" setting, also governed in an era that isn't likely to translate to success in the experts' polls.

The premise of the mode of operation hypothesis is that differences in government's role, resources, and responsibilities yield different outputs. This alternative hypothesis redefines the four historical eras. The Founding era includes presidents from Washington to John Q. Adams while the traditional era encompasses presidents from 1828 to 1933. Lowi's claims the Traditional Era encompasses 1800-1933. However, he also suggests that Andrew Jackson was largely responsible for the introduction of the patronage state, which clearly distinguishes the founding presidents.¹¹ The Institutional Pluralist setting began in 1932 with Franklin Roosevelt and continued to the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976. The Individualized Pluralist era began with Jimmy Carter and has continued to the present day.

Distributive policy, better known as patronage was the federal government's primary concern in the traditional era. Constitutionally delegated powers to the national government centered on Article I, the legislative article and the integral role of legislation in the distribution of patronage created a system of congressional dominance and the presidential selection process only reaffirmed this dominance.¹² Because political parties were the dominant institutions, presidents had to be responsive to their parties. Their expected role and the determinant of their success was to be a loyal partisan who delivered patronage. According to Lowi,

"The Presidents produced by the party-dominated selection process were very ordinary people with very ordinary reputations in the job precisely because they preside (in the sense given by Pious) over a patronage party in a patronage state dominated by a legislature. As long as the national government was doing nothing but patronage, no great demand was placed on the presidential office, for either performance or stature."¹³

Lowi's argument suggests presidents during this era would not likely be memorable or great as there was no demand for creative or energetic presidential leadership. In fact, Lowi argues, "The scant few exceptional presidents between 1824 and 1932 can be explained in largest part by two unusual circumstances- war and regime crisis." Another way of defining regime crisis is as an opportunity for reconstructive leadership.¹⁴

We can expect the presidents of the traditional era to rank low in the experts' polls because the legislative-dominated patronage state demanded little of presidents and gave them few opportunities to be energetic leaders. Lowi claims that by the end of the nineteenth century the traditional system was already being challenged by social and economic changes such as industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of the United States as a world power. The political response, however, didn't occur until 1933 during the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, which marked the emergence of the institutional pluralist setting described by Kernell.

The institutional pluralist setting was characterized by a stable and insular bargaining community. Members followed established norms and folkways including: abiding by agreements, restricted access to the community, and avoiding coercive tactics, the community thrived on a system of bargaining, compromise, and reciprocity. According to Kernell institutional pluralism was characterized by two features,

"First, political exchange occurs within a dense milieu that allocates resources among actors and identifies the relevant bargaining partners. Second, a stable bargaining society may be expected to institutionalize informal rules of the marketplace that regulate behavior and reduce uncertainty."¹⁵

The bargaining nature of the institutional pluralist setting applied to all political actors in Washington but only the president had the vantage point and resources that made construction of bargaining coalitions across the broad landscape of Washington's political elites possible.¹⁶ The shift from the traditional era of patronage to the institutional pluralist era of bargaining demanded a new kind of president that relied on bargaining skill to exercise leadership.

Bargaining presidents were more active than the patronage distributing presidents of the traditional era. Forming bargaining coalitions and presiding over negotiations on divisive issues could also produce tangible results for presidents. Their rankings in the experts' polls are expected to be higher than the traditional era presidents because their achievements are easier to observe and more remarkable than the mere distribution of resources. Because the demand for presidential bargaining resources was so high, presidents could choose endeavors that would maximize their authority. Kernell claimed, "Institutionalized pluralism offers the virtuoso bargainer in the White House the opportunity for real leadership."¹⁷ Because the community was insular, presidents didn't have to worry about their methods so long as they met the expectations of the public. When the community ceased to be insular the mode of operation again changed.

Kernell identified three clear causes for the decline of institutionalized pluralism: the growth of the welfare state which increased the size of the community creating formidable and interested constituencies across the nation, communication and transportation technologies which brought the business of the Washington community to the attention of the public opening the insular community, and the decline of political parties which were prominent in the traditional era and remained formidable in the institutional pluralist setting.¹⁸ In addition, reforms to the electoral process removed power for presidential nominations from state party leaders and changed the audience that presidential hopefuls had to satisfy. Instead of selling their bargaining skills to the party leaders, candidates had to actively campaign to the public to build national coalitions. The election process changed from an insular bargaining process to a public process, Kernell noted that with bargaining as the critical skill for presidential selection, the middle decades of the twentieth century were dominated by presidential candidates who came from a class of politicians with established careers among political elites.¹⁹ Thus as the selection process changed the skills required to be elected president it also changed the skills presidents used to govern.

Kernell argues that the forces that contributed to the shift from institutional to individual pluralism produced a new political community "constituted of independent members who have few group or institutional loyalties and who are generally less interested in sacrificing short-run, private career goals for the longer-term benefits of bargaining."²⁰ In an environment where the past structures of the insular, bargaining communities were crumbling, presidents began relying on new strategies to gain the resources needed to govern successfully.

"The limited goods and services available for barter to the bargaining president would be quickly exhausted in a leaderless setting where every coalition partner must be dealt with individually. When politicians are more subject to 'environmental' forces, however, other avenues of presidential influence open up. No politician within Washington is better positioned than the president to go outside of the community and draw popular support... the president's hand in mobilizing public opinion has been strengthened. For the new Congress- indeed for the new Washington generally-going public may at times be the most effective course available."²¹

The individualized pluralist setting thus contributed to a new type of president. Public Presidents cultivated public support as their primary political resource finding that it provided opportunities for leadership in an era where bargaining no longer succeeded.

The mode of governance hypothesis predicts an ebb and flow model of presidential success in the experts' polls from one historical era to the next. I expect the founders and the institutional pluralist presidents will rank significantly higher in the experts' polls than the traditional and individual pluralist presidents because of the varying opportunities presidents have to produce concrete results in each of the four eras. In the founding and institutional pluralist era, there were far more opportunities to deliver on expectations than in the traditional and individual pluralist era.

I expect the individualized pluralist mode of governmental operation won't produce high rankings in the experts' polls for two reasons. First, a continuous public campaign is essential to election and governance for president in the era of going public. As a mechanism for attaining office the continuous campaign is an invaluable resource, however, as a resource for delivering the services expected of the president it is inadequate. The opening of the insular bargaining community to media and the public has created a wide range of independent, self-reliant political actors who are more concerned with short-term private interests than establishing a professional reputation among other insiders for bargaining.²² Compromise among political actors must generally satisfy the interests of everyone involved, contributing to an environment where the obstacles confronting a president outweigh the resources at his disposal. Secondly, the increased frequency of divided government has replaced negotiation with public conflict and confrontation. Of the public presidents, from Carter to Clinton, the only president who was not faced with divided government was Carter. Kernell argues that when government is unified, leaders will resolve agreements harmoniously to reach compromises. However, when party control of government is divided, public conflict

increases in the plebiscite system and the focus of both parties shifts to gaining control of Congress and the Presidency in the next election. Divided government will thus limit a president's leadership opportunity because, "Conflict and confrontation can serve a party's electoral purposes even when its policy goals are the casualty."²³ To test the mode of operation hypothesis, I categorized presidents as founders, traditionals, bargainers, or publics and calculated the mean rating across the experts' polls for each group. The results are presented in table 6.

Table 6. Mean ranking of presidents using redefined historical eras.

Historical Era	Overall Mean
Founders	11.2
Traditionals	24.7
Bargainers	15.3
Publics	22.6

This redefinition of historical eras indicates that the mode of government operation and particularly the role, resources, and responsibilities of presidents does affect their rankings. As expected the founders had the highest average ranking and the presidents who governed in the traditional era had the lowest. But even their score is misleading because Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Wilson governed in the traditional era and they all were ranked in the top six in the experts' polls. Excluding them from the calculation raises the average score of traditional presidents to nearly 28. As Lowi argued, war and regime-crisis were the only factors that created exceptional presidents in the traditional era and Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Wilson epitomize this claim.

The bargaining presidents ranked second highest as expected suggesting this era had presidents capable of delivering tangible, concrete results. The insular community bargaining presidents worked in had fewer barriers to skillful presidents. The public presidents didn't rank as low as the traditional presidents, partially because they have more responsibilities and expectations placed on them. While the barriers they faced often outweighed the resources at their disposal, these presidents still had more opportunities for leadership than traditional presidents even if they paled in comparison to bargaining or founding presidents.

6. The War Hypothesis

Presidents who govern during war are given a unique opportunity for successful leadership as commander-in-chief. War is the area of Presidential action least encumbered by legal and political restraints. Success is not inherent to war presidents however. War presidents who achieve victory should rank higher in the experts' polls while war presidents who don't lead the country to victory and presidents who govern during peace time will rank lowest. The distinction between victory and defeat is not the only determinant of a war president's success. The scale and nature of war should also affect a president's ranking in the experts' polls. Based on the scale and nature of war, I classified each notable war in American history as either a "Major" or "Minor" war. The major wars and presidents were: Abraham Lincoln during The American Civil War, Woodrow Wilson during World War I, Franklin Roosevelt during World War II, Harry Truman during The Korean War, and Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon during The Vietnam War, The minor wars and presidents were: Thomas Jefferson during the Barbary Wars, James Madison during The War of 1812, James Polk during The Mexican-American War, William Mckinley during the Spanish-American War, George H.W. Bush during the Gulf War, and George W. Bush during the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

To test the war hypothesis I isolated the two variables, the type of war and the outcome and calculated a mean expert poll ranking for presidents based solely on the type of war fought during their term. Surprisingly, the minor war presidents ranked slightly better with an average ranking of 12.7. The major war presidents were in between with an average ranking of 15.3 and Non-war presidents fared less well than either type of war presidents with an average ranking of 22.8. The results are presented in Table 7. These data suggest that minor war presidents have the greatest opportunity for success in the experts' polls which is contrary to my expectation. The reason for these unexpected results could have been that judging war based only on its scale discounts another important variable, the outcome.

Table 7. Mean ranking of presidents based on the level of conflict during their terms.

Nature of Conflict	Overall Mean
Major War	15.3
Minor War	12.7
Peace Time	22.8

To determine the importance of winning I classified the outcomes of war into two categories, the first was victory and the second was indecision or defeat. The victorious presidents were Jefferson, Madison, Polk, Lincoln, Mckinley, Wilson, George H.W. Bush, and Franklin Roosevelt. The defeated or indecisive presidents were Truman, Lyndon Johnson, George W. Bush and Nixon. The victorious presidents had an average ranking of 8.9 while the defeated or indecisive presidents had an average ranking of 17.2. The disparity between the major war presidents, the minor war presidents, and non-wartime presidents is paralleled by the disparity based on the outcome of war. Using both these variables I constructed four classifications: victorious-major war presidents, indecisive-major war presidents, victorious-minor war presidents, and indecisive-minor war presidents. Victorious-major war presidents ranked the highest with an average ranking of 4. The Victorious-minor war presidents ranked significantly lower with an average ranking of 13.7. The data are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Mean ranking of presidents based on the level of conflict during their terms and the outcome of the conflict.

Type of War and Outcome	Overall Mean
Victory in Major War	4
Victory in Minor War	13.7
Indecision in Major War	26.7
Indecision in Minor War	N/A (Only one President)

These data show that the type of war and the outcome have an impact on presidents' rankings in the experts' polls. It also supports the war president hypothesis. War provides presidents an opportunity and emphasizes their primary constitutional responsibility. As commander in chief the glory of victory and burden of failure have vast implications on their legacy. War gives presidents clear cut expectations, lead the nation to victory and reap the rewards, or fail in your duty as commander in chief and suffer the consequences. For major war presidents the stakes are higher, if they are victorious their average ranking is 4. If presidents fail their average ranking drop to 26.7, a decline of 22.7 points, indicating that the data show how important the outcome is. The impact of victory or defeat matters much more when a president faces major war. Major war has a more dramatic impact on presidents winning the experts' approval than simply leading during a minor war.

The varying success of reconstructive presidents across historical eras outlined by the emergent pattern indicated that the emergent pattern didn't determine reconstructive presidents' rankings in the experts' polls. (See Table 5) The data did suggest, however, that reconstructive leadership is influenced less by the historical era, as Skowronek suggests, and more on the individual circumstances a president must deal with. When a reconstructive leader is faced with war, they have an even greater opportunity to reshape politics. War provides president's with an opportunity to construct politics and shape the direction of the nation. The data suggest that reconstructive presidents who were faced with war were able to exploit this chance and fulfill increased expectations producing even higher rankings in the experts' polls. The reconstructive war presidents Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Jefferson all ranked significantly higher than Jackson and Reagan, the two reconstructive presidents who were not wartime presidents. While Washington was not a wartime president, his legacy as the general of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, is consistent with the demands on war time presidents. The data suggest that reconstructive presidents' success in the experts' polls depends on war to a greater degree than historical era. Victory in a major war is a compelling explanation of presidents' rankings and there is a clear link to the recurrent hypothesis.

7. Conclusions

The individual talents and competency of a president can't be discounted as fundamental means to craft a successful legacy. However, this analysis demonstrates that the abilities of the individual in the office only matter so much as there are opportunities for successful leadership. The historical and political circumstances that presidents confront generate varying levels of opportunities that shape legacies as measured by how historians rate their performance. I examined four ways that environmental factors could influence perceptions of presidential greatness.

The test of the recurrent hypothesis showed that reconstructive presidents ranked highest in the experts' polls while disjunctive presidents' ranked lowest. That the rise and fall of regimes and the strength of the regime's commitments affect a president's legacy indicates that the political circumstances facing a president have implications for their historical reputation.

The emergent hypothesis failed to explain the experts' rankings. While this pattern suggested a steady decline in a president's ability to lead successfully, the rankings of presidents in the experts' polls indicated a different pattern. The patrician era yielded the highest ranked presidents overall, however presidents in the pluralist era ranked higher than presidents in the partisan era although the partisan presidents preceded them. This inconsistency doesn't indicate that historical context played no role on president's rankings in the experts' polls. Because less was expected of partisan presidents, that historical era was less likely to produce presidents who left a strong legacy. That environmental demands matter for a president's ability to create opportunities for leadership is illustrated by the institutional pluralist era where presidents had vital resources for bargaining that allowed them to identify and negotiate with political elites to produce tangible results. The results for pluralist presidents are a product of the historical context of each era and the leadership opportunities each presented.

The war hypothesis is the simplest explanation of presidential success in response to expectations. The opportunities for leadership are never higher for presidents than during war especially a major one, as commander in chief is one of the few clearly defined powers of the office. Because of the constitutional authority wielded by war presidents, they can act with limited restraint which creates a situation where presidents can claim responsibility for victory, the clearest example of successful leadership. No issue is as clear cut as winning a war, especially a major one, in determining presidential success.

The concept of opportunity is most clearly illustrated when compared across all the hypotheses. Listing the possible circumstances a president could face using the recurrent, mode of operation, and war hypotheses, reveals the ideal opportunity for achieving greatness: a president engaged in a reconstruction of government's commitments after the crumbling of an old regime, and winning a major war during the pluralist or founding era. Coincidentally, the president ranked second in the experts' rankings, Franklin Roosevelt, faced these exact circumstances. Clearly, the ideal situation doesn't occur often as, Franklin Roosevelt is the only president who faced all these fortuitous circumstances.

Anomalies in one test were almost always explained by the other hypotheses. Lincoln, for example, governed in the traditional/partisan era, suggesting that he would rank poorly in the experts' rankings. Yet the experts' ranked him as the greatest president. While the historical context fails to explain Lincoln's high ranking, his place in political time as a reconstructive leader and the major war he faced offset those forces. In fact, though the traditional era presidents ranked, on average, lower than presidents of any other historical era, Lincoln experienced extraordinary opportunities not generally available to others during that era. Table 9 shows the top ten presidents by average ranking in the experts' polls along with their leadership opportunities.

Table 9. Top ten ranked presidents in the historians' polls classified by the hypotheses in this paper.

President	Mean	Rank	Recurrent Pattern	Mode of Operation	War
Lincoln	1.8	1	Reconstructive	Traditional	Major-Victory
F. Roosevelt	2.2	2	Reconstructive	Institutional Pl.	Major-Victory
Washington	2.4	3	Reconstructive	Founder	None (Major-Victory)
Jefferson	4.4	4	Reconstructive	Founder	Minor-Victory
T. Roosevelt	5	5	Articulator	Traditional	None
Wilson	7.2	6	Preemptive	Traditional	Major-Victory
Truman	7.75	7	Articulator	Institutional Pl.	Minor-Indecision
Jackson	8.8	8	Reconstructive	Traditional	None
Eisenhower	9.5	9	Articulator	Institutional Pl.	None
Polk	11.2	10	Articulator	Traditional	Minor-Victory

Certain political and historical circumstances breed opportunity, opportunity provides presidents a chance to succeed. Success is a simple, common sense explanation for presidential legacy, but the circumstances that allow for success are more complex. My findings suggest personal talent may be an important indicator of a president's success or failure but it isn't meaningful if the opportunity is not there.

8. References

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9. Endnotes

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- 3 Richard Rose, "Evaluating Presidents," in *Researching the Presidency: Vital Questions, New Approaches*, ed. George C. Edwards, John H. Kessel, and Bert A. Rockman, Pitt Series in Policy and Institutional Studies (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993)453-455.
- 4 Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 8-9.
- 6 Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*, 36.
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- 8 Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*, 52.
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- 10 *Ibid.*, 55.
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- 12 *Ibid.*, 30.
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- 16 Kernell, *Going Public*, 17.
- 17 Kernell, *Going Public*, 13-14.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 39.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 34.
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- 23 *Ibid.*, 47-48.