

Polls and Elections

Character and Political Time as Sources of Presidential Greatness

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Presidency scholars have long debated whether a president's personal traits or the historical circumstances of their presidency have a bigger effect on presidential performance. We contribute to this debate by examining whether historical conditions (i.e., Skowronek's conception of political time) and two important personal traits (intellectual brilliance and character) relate to presidents' standing in polls of "presidential greatness." We find that both historical conditions and personal traits significantly predict historical evaluations of presidents. One's place in political time strongly shapes a president's greatness rating. At the same time, within Skowronek's categories, presidents with greater intellectual brilliance and stronger character tend to rank higher.

Presidency scholars have long debated whether a president's personal traits or the historical circumstances of their presidency have a bigger effect on presidential performance. Stephen Skowronek (1993, 2008) argues that the political conditions a president faces, what he calls "political time," largely defines the president's opportunities and challenges. In contrast, others argue that presidents' personal traits (e.g., personality, political skill, vision, communication skills) profoundly shape presidential behavior (e.g., Barber 1972; Greenstein 2009; Renshon 1996; Wayne 2012).

We contribute to this debate by examining whether historical conditions (political time) and two important personal traits (brilliance and character) relate to president's standing in polls of "presidential greatness." We find that both historical conditions and personal traits significantly predict historical evaluations of presidents. We provide novel evidence

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that presidential character affects presidential greatness. Although many have found that scandals tend to lower presidents' standing in the historical polls (e.g., Cohen 2003; Nichols 2012; Simonton 1987, 1991, 1992, 1993, 2001, 2006), we show that more nuanced differences in character predict historical judgments. Although many have claimed that character is central to effective presidential leadership (e.g., Gergen 2000; Renshon 1996; Wayne 2012; Wilson 1995), Wayne (2012, 3) argues that "unfortunately, the study of character is one of the least analyzed aspects of presidential behavior," partly because such study often precludes the use of quantitative analyses favored by most political scientists. Our analysis is far from a complete statement on the relationship between character and presidential behavior, but it provides some systematic evidence supporting the claim that character (or at least perceptions of it) matters for the presidency. At the same time, the historical context in which presidents serve powerfully shapes their current standing. Our results provide insight into one of the field's core debates and contribute to the literature examining greatness ratings (in addition to Simonton's works cited above, see, e.g., Balz 2010; Cohen 2003; Curry and Morris 2010; McCann 1992, 1995, 2005; Nichols 2012; Simon and Uscinski 2012). These ratings provide one measure of presidents' legacies. Because "speculation about how presidential actions will be viewed by future generations weighs heavily on the minds of chief executives," knowing what predicts historical views of greatness may affect current presidential behavior (Panagopoulos 2012, 719).

In the next section, we review the literature on presidential greatness polls and explain why character, brilliance, and political time may shape presidents' scores in these polls. We then describe our data and methods, both of which build strongly on previous work. We present our results and then draw conclusions.

The Roots of Greatness

Presidency scholars, indeed students of leadership in general, have long tried to identify what makes a great leader.¹ Most of these studies have focused on biographical and historical materials, the best relying on careful qualitative analysis to marshal detailed, nuanced accounts of the great and not so great presidents (e.g., Barber 1972; Landy and Milkis 2001; Felzenberg 2008). Other studies examined the collected evaluations of various groups of "experts" asked to assess the presidents in different ways. Since Arthur Schlesinger (1948) first polled 55 experts (mostly historians), several individuals and organizations have followed suit, asking different collections of experts to evaluate presidents.

Scholars have long discussed, critiqued, and analyzed these ratings. Critics argue that the ratings are biased by the raters' ideology or partisanship (Felzenberg 2008; Lindgren and Calabresi 2000; Uscinski and Simon 2011; but see Bose 2003, 8-9, and Murray and Blessing 1994), that the ratings tell us more about the raters than presidents, and that the ratings are generally "not very rigorous" (Piffner 2003, 23; see also Felzenberg 2008). However, systematic analysis of these ratings has concluded that they "may

1. Nichols (2012) notes that this practice goes back two millennia, dating to Greek and Roman writers.

tell us more than critics admit” (Nichols 2012, 272). Indeed, Dean Keith Simonton (2001, 294), who has analyzed presidential greatness polls for over two decades, concludes “there is a strong *prima facie* case that these greatness assessments reveal how U.S. presidents varied in their effectiveness as the nation’s highest political leader.” Thus, we take the ratings as reflective of two things: the raters’ sense of how we should evaluate presidents and “consistent and unbiased measures for a somewhat nebulous concept,” namely, presidential greatness (Curry and Morris 2010, 522).²

The study of these ratings has been dominated by Simonton’s work, which has culminated in what is now known as the Simonton model. This model is the starting point for recent research on presidential greatness (e.g., Cohen 2003; Curry and Morris 2010; Nichols 2012; Simon and Uscinski 2012) and consists of six variables: (1) number of years in office, (2) whether the president was a war hero, (3) whether the president was embroiled in a significant scandal, (4) whether the president was assassinated, (5) the number of years the country was at war during the president’s tenure, and (6) the president’s intellectual brilliance.

Although the Simonton model has held up well, one recent study argues that taking Skowronek’s theory of political time into account eliminates the importance of intellectual brilliance in presidential greatness (Nichols 2012). However, there are good reasons to believe brilliance, along with another personal attribute, character, should consistently affect presidents’ standing in greatness polls. Greenstein (2009, 5) argues that “six qualities . . . relate to presidential job performance.” Several of them relate to intellectual brilliance. Simonton (2006, 511) argues that intellectual brilliance “is closely associated with the cognitive complexity necessary for meeting the demands of modern life.” Greenstein (2009, 6) argues that successful presidents must adopt a “cognitive style” that allows them to “process the Niagara of advice and information that comes [their] way.” Intellectual brilliance may well lead a president to an effective cognitive style. In addition, Simonton (2006, 512) argues that intellectual brilliance “is associated with other advantageous attributes, such as charisma and creativity,” which, for presidents, seems likely to translate into successful political communication, organizational capacity, political skill, and vision, four more of Greenstein’s six qualities.

In addition, character may be related to presidential greatness. Character is a notoriously difficult concept to define. Felzenberg (2008, 11) defines character as integrity, honesty, and courage. In his book, *The Character Factor*, Pfiffner (2004) argues that a commonsense definition of character encompasses traits like trustworthiness, integrity, reliability, loyalty, compassion, self-restraint, consistency, and prudence. However, he notes that discussions of presidential character often employ different definitions of the term (see Pfiffner 2004, 172n.22). As we discuss below, our measurement of presidential character is inherently nebulous, consisting of experts’ assessments of presidents’ “integrity,” “character,” and “moral authority.” We do not know what exactly the experts have in mind when they use these terms, but as we will see, the experts tend to exhibit a

2. Fewer studies have investigated the mass public’s views of ex-presidents (Cohen 2003; King 1999; Panagopoulos 2012). Cohen (2003) argues that informed citizens tend to use the same criteria to evaluate ex-presidents as the experts.

fair bit of consistency when they evaluate presidents along these lines, suggesting that there is a strong systematic component to the way experts think about character.

Character may shape greatness ratings for two main reasons. First, public expectations for great presidents include strong character. In his study on public expectations of the president, Edwards (1983, 189–91) found that the public had “high expectations for the president’s official performance, but also had lofty expectations for his private behavior.” Textbooks and the standard readings on the presidency that inform much of the public’s learning about the presidency tend to exaggerate the president’s powers and virtues, leading to idealized views of what presidents should be like: exhibiting “qualities [of] honesty, knowledge, and open mindedness along with not being power hungry, unstable, or weak” (Simon 2009, 140; see also Cronin 1975, 1980). Waterman, Jenkins-Smith, and Silva (1999, 949) report on two surveys that asked respondents to rank how important “high ethical standards” are for being an excellent president. On a 0 to 10 scale, ratings averaged about 8.5. When people evaluate presidents, their views of the president’s character consistently influence those evaluations. Views of the president’s integrity and competence consistently shape the mass public’s evaluations of sitting presidents (Greene 2001; Newman 2003, 2004; see also Goren 2002). Along the same lines, when evaluating presidential candidates, the public relies on its view of candidates’ character (Rahn et al. 1990; Funk 1999). If the public generally expects presidents to have strong character and rewards and punishes current presidents on the basis of their character, experts may evaluate historical presidencies the same way.

Second, many argue that character shapes presidential behavior itself. Stanley Renshon (1996, 184) describes character as “the basic foundation upon which personality structures develop and operate.” He continues, “character shapes beliefs, information processing, and, ultimately, styles of behavior” (Renshon, 1996, 184). Moreover, Wayne (2012, 1) argues simply that “character affects what presidents say and do and how they relate to others. It is a dimension of any behavioral explanation.” He continues, “knowing a president’s character provides a guide to understanding and anticipating their words and actions as president” (Wayne 2012, 2). Along the same lines, Felzenberg (2008, xi) argues that “character, vision, and competence...often determine how a president approached... economic policy, the preservation and extension of liberty, and national security and defense.” In his “seven lessons of leadership,” White House insider David Gergen (2000) argues for the primacy of character in presidential leadership. His first lesson is that “leadership starts from within,” citing Heraclitus’s famous dictum that “character is destiny” (Gergen 2000, 345). Gergen argues that “the inner soul of a president flows into every aspect of his leadership far more than is generally recognized” and that “the character of a leader heavily influences his decision-making—both how and what he decides” (Gergen 2000, 345). Former senator, Alan Simpson, put it with characteristic bluntness: “if you have integrity, nothing else matters. If you don’t have integrity, nothing else matters” (quoted in Gergen 2000, 346).

In his book, *The Character Factor*, Pfiffner (2004, xii) argues that “everyone avers that character is crucial in the presidency.” He contends that character is important because the specific issues, decisions, and even crises the president will be forced to deal with are often unpredictable. In addition, the president typically must handle the most

difficult, complex, nuanced, and consequential situations simply because the easy issues are dealt with at lower levels. Thus, presidents must be ready and able to act effectively within surprising and complex conditions. Presidents with strong character traits are best able to manage these highly difficult, ambiguous, uncertain, and high-stakes issues. As Pfiffner (2004, 7) puts it, “the deeper roots of presidential behavior, that is, character, come into play at the most crucial times in a presidency.” He lists a high-profile instance from each presidency from Franklin Roosevelt to George W. Bush in which the president’s character played a formidable role in a major decision or action that affected the course of the nation. He concludes from this list that “it is hard to deny that the character of the different presidents affected the outcomes of these highly contentious and historic turning points. Their decisions could not be fully predicted from campaign promises or good intentions, and the outcomes were not determined merely by historical forces and circumstances. Character counts” (Pfiffner 2004, 6). Finally, compromised character can lead to lapses in judgment that not only undermine the president’s status as a moral leader, but also force the president and the White House staff to deal with potential or real scandals, taking valuable time and focus away from dealing with the problems of the day.

Pfiffner’s claim that everyone agrees that “character is crucial” may be a bit strong. In his *President as Leader*, Michael Siegal (2011) identifies four qualities that drive excellence in the presidency. Character is not one of them.³ Yet, he argued that “people don’t expect perfection from leaders, they expect honesty.”⁴ Along the same lines, Genovese (2008, 72) argues that “while logic tells us that character is important, in terms of presidential performance, there is virtually no observable correlation between what we understand as high moral character and performance in office. Some of our presidents with checkered backgrounds performed well, and others of the highest private character were disappointments.” Moreover, Genovese (2008, 73) argues that “while the president is, in many ways, a moral or symbolic spokesperson for the nation, must the person who fills the office be personally ‘pure’ to be a good president? History suggests that the answer is ‘no.’” Genovese does not dismiss the importance of character outright, but argues that the president must embrace a paradox: “we demand that our leaders be of the highest personal character and exhibit a commitment to high moral standards, yet we sometimes expect the president to be cunning, guileful, ruthless, and manipulative.” In short, it is not a foregone conclusion that character and greatness are linked. Empirical analysis is needed.

The Simonton model does not completely ignore character. The scandal variable takes it into account to some degree. Presidents with strong character are less likely to find themselves ensnared in scandal. However, the scandal variable may be too blunt. Not all scandals are alike. Ronald Reagan’s complicity in the Iran-Contra affair can be seen as less harmful than Nixon’s actions relating to Watergate. Along the same lines, not every president that managed to avoid what Simonton determined to be a major scandal was an angel, though the scandal variable treats all these presidents alike. For example, John

3. The qualities include compelling vision for the presidency, the capacity to implement that vision, focusing on a few major goals at a time, and a decision-making process.

4. See http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-leadership/what-makes-a-president-a-great-leader/2012/11/06/2f0ef12c-2825-11e2-96b6-8e6a7524553f_story.html (accessed August 13, 2014).

TABLE 1
Summary of Skowronek's Model of Political Time

| | | <i>President's Political Identity</i> | |
|--------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| | | <i>Opposed</i> | <i>Affiliated</i> |
| Regime party | <i>Vulnerable</i> | Politics of reconstruction | Politics of disjunction |
| commitments | <i>Resilient</i> | Politics of preemption | Politics of articulation |

Source: Reproduced from Skowronek (2006, 170).

Kennedy's philandering is now widely recognized, but Simonton (rightly) does not count Kennedy as having a scandal. George W. Bush's false or misleading assertions before and during the Iraq War are well documented (Fritz, Keefer, and Nyhan 2004) but not considered scandalous for purposes of the model. Should Kennedy and Bush be treated the same as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, or even Jimmy Carter in terms of character? The blunt scandal dummy variable treats them the same though we think the variability within categories of scandal and no scandal is important. Thus, we think a more nuanced character variable may improve on Simonton's scandal variable.

Our first contribution, then, is to propose the character hypothesis, which argues that, all else equal, the more positive expert views of a president's character, the higher the president will be rated. Our second contribution is to add to the Simonton model variables directly related to historical categories derived from Skowronek's (1993) analysis of political time. We are not the first to introduce Skowronek's analysis to presidential greatness studies. Nichols (2012) did this, but we operationalize Skowronek's ideas in a different way.

Skowronek's analysis hinges on the idea of *political time*, based on the delineation of six political regimes in U.S. history: Federalist nationalism (1789-1800), Jeffersonian democracy (1800-28), Jacksonian democracy (1828-60), Republican nationalism (1860-1932), New Deal liberalism (1932-80), and "the conservative regime ushered in by Ronald Reagan in 1980" to the present (Skowronek 2006, 168). At the outset, a regime is fairly resilient, holding the support of most of the public and political actors, but over time, as the regime is unable to meet the challenges of the day, it becomes more and more vulnerable and is eventually replaced by another regime. Skowronek argues that presidents can either be affiliated with the current regime or opposed to it. The president's orientation toward the regime along with the regime's general status work in tandem to create the basic political conditions the president faces, as portrayed in Table 1.

Presidents who are affiliated with a vulnerable political order face what Skowronek calls the "politics of disjunction," while presidents opposed to a vulnerable order enjoy the "politics of reconstruction." The status of the political regime poses major challenges for the disjunctive president, who is tied to an increasingly unpopular regime. Such presidents are often preoccupied with "establishing political credibility" as they continue to champion a regime that is no longer viable (Skowronek 2006, 173). In contrast, a vulnerable regime offers a great many opportunities to the reconstructive president, to whom the public and his party grant considerable license to reshape the political landscape, to do away with the old regime and build another. After a reconstructive president ushers in

a new regime, presidents favoring that regime face the “politics of articulation,” which includes maintaining the majority coalition and finishing the construction of the new regime. When the regime is still resilient, presidents who oppose it face the “politics of preemption,” a task largely of undoing, delaying, or preventing the culmination of the regime, but falling short of replacing the regime altogether.

Skowronek argues that these four basic conditions largely define the challenges and opportunities of a presidency. These categories define “the contextual conditions under which great leaders typically arise and identify the limitations on leadership possibilities imposed by less fortuitous circumstances” (Skowronek 2006, 168). Whether the president has the communication skill of Reagan or Franklin Roosevelt, the outsize personality of Theodore Roosevelt or Lyndon Johnson, or the wisdom of Lincoln, he will be subject to the same political constraints and find similar opportunities to other presidents who took office during the same stage of political time. Reconstructive presidents enjoy the greatest opportunities for major change. Articulation presidents, although somewhat hemmed in by existing regime commitments, also have opportunities to do big things. Preemptive presidents face a challenging political environment in which they must often construct relatively new and temporary coalitions to effect meaningful change. Disjunctive presidents are saddled with a hostile political environment in which most political actors and the public are demanding the destruction of the regime the president is trying to promote or protect.

Consequently, we test the political time hypothesis, which argues that the politics a president faced will significantly affect their greatness ratings. Given that there are only 40 presidents in our models, we do not expect to find significant differences between all four categories. However, based on the opportunities and challenges of each type of politics, we might expect to see a pattern in which reconstructive presidents will have the most favorable ratings, followed by articulation presidents, then preemptive presidents, trailed by disjunctive presidents who face the most challenging conditions.

Nichols (2012) includes Skowronek’s ideas in his model of presidential greatness, finding strong support. We add to his effort in two ways, providing additional empirical tests of Skowronek’s theory. First, we operationalize Skowronek’s thesis in a different way than Nichols did. We simply include dummy variables for each of the categories of political time. He employed somewhat more nuanced variables that identify which presidents “led their political regime into enervated conditions” and those “who succeeded in taking advantage of the contextual opportunity to reorder an enervated political regime” (Nichols 2012, 276). In addition, Nichols based his coding of presidents on extensions to Skowronek’s theory (Nichols and Myers 2010). These extensions alter the coding of Benjamin Harrison, Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and George W. Bush. He notes that “these new interpretations are not entirely uncontroversial” (Nichols 2012, 288). Although we do not critique the new ideas, we classify regimes and presidents following Skowronek as closely as possible. Using Skowronek’s four categories, along with his classification of presidents, provides a direct test of whether political time shapes presidential greatness. Doing so helps us determine whether political time shapes greatness in a way that is not dependent on potentially controversial modifications to Skowronek’s model.

Along the same lines, Nichols made some changes to the Simonton model, adding an indicator for the “founding patrician” presidents, an indicator for progressive presidents, and altering Simonton’s assassination variable. Nichols provides defensible rationales for each decision, rationales we do not critique here. However, it may be that the estimated significant effect for political time was dependent on model specification. We test the political time hypothesis within the confines of the Simonton model to see whether political time has a robust effect. We also employ Nichols’ (2012) model as a robustness check and find that our conclusions are not driven by differences in operationalization or model specification.

Data and Methods

Our basic research strategy is straightforward. We begin by replicating the well-known Simonton model of perceived presidential greatness. We then add a measure of presidents’ perceived character along with variables stemming from Skowronek’s analysis to this model to test our hypotheses while controlling for other factors known to affect greatness ratings. We examine whether models with these additional variable outperform the Simonton model.

Ratings of presidential greatness serve as the dependent variable. Various organizations have conducted surveys of historians and political scientists asking them to assess the presidents. The pool of experts and the format of the evaluations differs some across polls, but these surveys have generated highly correlated results, with correlations between surveys typically in the 0.80s and usually even the 0.90s (see Simonton 2001). We follow Nichols (2012) in focusing on four surveys representative of the many polls others have analyzed: the Murray and Blessing (1994) survey, the 2005 *Wall Street Journal*/Federalist Society survey,⁵ the 2009 C-SPAN survey,⁶ and the 2010 Sienna survey.⁷ As Nichols notes, these surveys serve as a nice group because they employed different methods and samples.⁸ In addition, we report the results using a survey of historians conducted by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (1997). Nichols (2012, 283n.20) reports that neither the Simonton model nor his model fit this survey particularly well. We suspect this is due to a particular coding rule Schlesinger used when creating his overall ratings.⁹ We

5. See <http://www.jamestaranto.com/average.htm> (accessed August 11, 2014).

6. See <http://legacy.c-span.org/PresidentialSurvey/Overall-Ranking.aspx> (accessed July 11, 2014; no longer available).

7. We thank Douglas Lonnstrom for sending us the Sienna data. This survey asked participants to evaluate presidents on 20 different dimensions and created an overall score based on those assessments. Rather than use this constructed score, which imposes the researchers’ notion of what criteria should be used to evaluate greatness, we used one particular assessment, which asked participants for their “present overall view” of presidents. This question allows participants to employ their own criteria. Ultimately, this variable and the cumulative variable are correlated at 0.99. The cumulative data are reported in Nichols (2012).

8. The Murray-Blessings poll included 846 historians, while the *Wall Street Journal*/Federalist Society survey aimed for ideological balance across its participants. The Siena and C-SPAN polls asked participants to assess presidents across various dimensions.

9. Schlesinger (1997, 180) asked participants “to place each president (omitting William Henry Harrison and James A. Garfield because they died so soon after taking office) in one of five categories: Great,

include the Schlesinger poll simply to note that our findings, along with those of earlier studies, generally apply to the Schlesinger poll after application of a relatively minor adjustment. Finally, we take advantage of the high degree of intercorrelation among the surveys and combined them, taking the mean score for each president.¹⁰ We follow Nichols (2012) in rescaling all the surveys to cover a 0-100 scale and estimate models via ordinary least squares.

The six variables constituting the Simonton model are straightforward and relatively easily coded. Remarkably, all of the data are available in print (Curry and Morris 2010). In a period in which research transparency is called for (Lupia and Elman 2014), the free availability of the data employed in analyses of presidential greatness ratings is a model of the kind of data sharing that enables replication and the accumulation of evidence.¹¹ Our exact coding of these variables follows Curry and Morris (2010), who follow Simonton as closely as possible. The number of years in office is four or eight for most presidents but is rounded to the first decimal point when necessary. Presidents were either coded as a war hero (1) or not (0). Although which presidents deserve the accolade is a matter open to interpretation, George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Zachary Taylor, Ulysses Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, and Dwight Eisenhower are coded as “war heroes.” Which presidents’ scandals were sufficient to warrant inclusion is also a matter of debate, but Simonton has opted for a fairly restrictive operationalization of scandal, applying only to Ulysses Grant, Warren Harding, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton. These presidents are coded as 1 for the scandal variable and all others are coded 0. The assassination variable is another dummy variable coded 1 for Lincoln, McKinley, and Kennedy and 0 for all others.¹² The number of war years is “the number of years during which the nation was at war” (Simonton 2001, 298; see Curry and Morris 2010, 523n.18). The measure of intellectual brilliance comes from Simonton (2006, 516).

In addition to Simonton’s six variables, we created four dummy variables representing each of the cells in Skowronek’s two-by-two table. A president is coded 1 if he is in a particular category and 0 if not. Every president is coded into one category. We coded presidents based on Skowronek’s discussion of political regimes and each president’s political party. Skowronek identifies six political regimes, listed above. For each regime, the first president is coded as presiding over the politics of reconstruction. The last president in the regime is coded as serving during the politics of disjunction. The presidents serving between the beginning and end of the regime were coded as having been

Near Great, Average, Below Average, and Failure.” To calculate the average score for each president, he tallied the number of participants placing a particular president in each category. He coded the categories 4, 3, 2, and 1 (for Great, Near Great, Average, and Below Average). He coded rankings of “Failure” as a -2 . This decision creates several very low and even negative scores. Under this coding, Schlesinger’s scores correlate with other polls at around 0.60. Recoding “failure” responses as 0 instead of -2 brings this survey much more in line with other surveys, correlating with the other surveys employed here at 0.90 or higher.

10. Every correlation between surveys is above 0.90. Cronbach’s alpha is equal to 0.98. Principal components factor analysis returns a single factor that accounts for 96% of the variance. We use the mean score rather than the factor analytic score so that we can include all presidents. The factor analytic score can only be used through Reagan. Results with this score are similar to those we report.

11. In addition to the Simonton data being freely available in Curry and Morris (2010), Nichols (2012) included information allowing for easy replication of his model as well.

12. Note that James Garfield was assassinated but is not included in the data set because he served less than a year before his assassination.

president during the politics of articulation if they were affiliated with the dominant political party of the regime (Federalist, Democratic–Republican, Democrat, Republican, Democrat, and Republican, respectively). Presidents who were affiliated with the opposition party were coded as governing during the politics of preemption.¹³

Finally, we created a measure of presidential character based on some of the presidential greatness surveys. Two of the surveys, the C-SPAN and Siena polls, asked participants to answer questions closely related to the notion of presidential character. The Siena poll specifically asked participants to assess each president’s “integrity.” The C-SPAN poll asked participants to rate presidents’ “moral authority.” Although these two items may tap slightly different dimensions of character, in the end the mean scores for each president on the two items correlate at 0.86. We added the two measures (both were based on a 0-100 scale) and divided by two so that the resulting variable is also on a 0-100 scale ($\alpha = 0.92$). Table 1 presents the character score for each president.

We must be careful with this measure of perceived character. People evaluating presidential character may inadvertently allow their overall view of a president color their view of that president’s character. Surveys asking evaluators to rate presidents on various dimensions (e.g., persuasion, relations with Congress, crisis leadership, administrative skill, character) generate results that are highly correlated across dimensions (Cohen 2003; Nichols 2012), consistent with the idea that evaluations on specific traits are colored by evaluators’ overall view of a president. It is difficult to rule out this potential endogeneity. Consequently, we draw conclusions with some uncertainty and employ several robustness checks.¹⁴

Some evidence suggests that evaluators are able to distinguish between their general view of presidential greatness and their view of presidential character. If we take the mean ranking of presidents across the five studies we examine and compare them to the rankings of presidents on the character scale we employ, we find a 0.60 correlation, which is moderately high, but not perfect. On average, presidents’ rankings overall and their character ranking differ by 5.9 places. Seven presidents had mean greatness scores above the mean and character scores below the mean; four more had the reverse pattern. For nine of the 40 presidents we examine, the difference in their overall ranking and character ranking reached double digits. Five of these earned higher overall rankings than character

13. There were six reconstruction presidents: Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Reagan. Four presidents were coded as disjunction presidents: John Quincy Adams, Buchanan, Hoover, and Carter. Ten presidents were coded preemption presidents: Tyler, Taylor, Fillmore, Johnson, Cleveland, Wilson, Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford, and Clinton. The remaining 19 presidents were coded articulation presidents. The coding rules make it difficult to classify John Adams, who is both the second president after a reconstructive president and the last in the political regime. We coded him as an articulation president based on the logic that because the federalist candidates received more electoral votes (130) than the Democratic–Republicans (98) in the 1796 election, the federalist regime was more resilient than vulnerable. Results continue to support our conclusions if we code Adams as a disjunctive president. Because some presidential greatness surveys exclude William Henry Harrison and James Garfield, we cannot include them in our analyses. We coded Andrew Johnson as being a preemption president based on Skowronek’s list of presidents in this category, which includes Johnson (2011, 107-8).

14. In models of the C-SPAN survey some endogeneity is built-in because the overall greatness measure is a combination of ratings on 10 dimensions, including “moral authority.” However, results are very similar if we estimate the models reported below using a dependent variable that is based on the nine non-character dimensions. This is not an issue in the Siena survey because we do not use the cumulative score as the dependent variable. See note 6.

TABLE 2
Character Measure

| | |
|-------------------|------|
| Washington | 95.9 |
| John Adams | 76.4 |
| Jefferson | 75.5 |
| Madison | 76.9 |
| Monroe | 70.5 |
| John Q. Adams | 73.7 |
| Jackson | 61.4 |
| Van Buren | 49.5 |
| Tyler | 46.0 |
| Polk | 58.1 |
| Taylor | 58.7 |
| Fillmore | 43.2 |
| Pierce | 37.7 |
| Buchanan | 32.3 |
| Lincoln | 96.1 |
| Andrew Johnson | 36.1 |
| Grant | 57.1 |
| Hayes | 50.0 |
| Arthur | 46.6 |
| Cleveland | 64.0 |
| Harrison | 51.2 |
| McKinley | 62.6 |
| T. Roosevelt | 83.9 |
| Taft | 64.0 |
| Wilson | 78.8 |
| Harding | 27.4 |
| Coolidge | 65.4 |
| Hoover | 62.9 |
| F. Roosevelt | 79.8 |
| Truman | 77.3 |
| Eisenhower | 81.9 |
| Kennedy | 60.3 |
| Lyndon Johnson | 53.2 |
| Nixon | 22.2 |
| Ford | 69.7 |
| Carter | 73.8 |
| Reagan | 66.0 |
| George H. W. Bush | 63.7 |
| Clinton | 32.9 |
| George W. Bush | 41.2 |

rankings: Clinton (nineteenth overall, thirty-third character), Polk (eleventh and twenty-fifth), Jackson (eighth and twenty-second), Lyndon Johnson (fourteenth and twenty-seventh), and Kennedy (twelfth and twenty-third). The remaining four were ranked at least 10 places lower overall than their character rank: Carter (twentieth-ninth overall, eleventh character), Coolidge (thirtieth and sixteenth), Hoover (thirty-second and twentieth), and Ford (twenty-sixth and fourteenth).

We also ran several robustness checks with alternative character measures. Recall that we employ a character measure that combines the Siena and C-SPAN surveys. Combining the two presumably eliminates some of the potential endogeneity simply because we compare greatness evaluations from one group (whichever survey provides the dependent variable in a particular model) to character evaluations provided by a different group. We also estimated the models using just the Siena measure and just the C-SPAN measure. This approach enables us to compare overall evaluations compiled from one group of experts to character scores compiled from another group of experts. These models provide similar results to those presented below. In addition, we also used two other polls' ratings of presidential character. Felzenberg (2008) rated each president's "character," while Ridings and McIver (1997) asked participants in their surveys to rate each president's "character and integrity." Because these ratings were collected earlier and only extend through Clinton (and the Ridings and McIver survey was conducted prior to Clinton's impeachment), we do not use them in our main analysis. However, these additional measures of character provide another limit on endogeneity. Felzenberg provides his own evaluations of presidential character. Critical for purposes of limiting endogeneity, he provides evidence for his evaluations, though only for some of the presidents. Presumably, the process of gathering and evaluating evidence pertaining to presidents' character would eliminate at least some of the tendency to work backward from a president's overall standing to form an evaluation of that president's character. In general, adding more evaluators may limit the degree of potential endogeneity. The four character items are highly intercorrelated and results through Clinton that employ a factor score of the items also support the conclusions we draw here.¹⁵ In the end, it is hard to imagine totally eliminating the threat of endogeneity. However, finding consistent results with a variety of measures collected from different samples of experts suggests to us that something other than endogeneity is driving our results.

Results

Table 2 presents the estimates for the Simonton model for the five surveys plus their average scores. The estimates fit nicely with established findings. The model fits the data well, with adjusted *R*-squared coefficients ranging from 0.60 to 0.74. Presidents serving longer periods in office rank significantly higher ($p < .01$ in all models, all tests two-tailed), largely because those who won reelection tend to be rated higher. War heroes rank 12-18 points higher than others ($p < .05$ in all models). The effects of scandals vary quite a bit across the surveys, ranging from costing roughly 35 points in the Murray-Blessing and Schlesinger polls to having no statistically discernable effect in the C-SPAN poll. In the model of mean ratings scandals cost presidents 18.5 points. The assassination effect is more consistent, achieving statistical significance at the 0.05 level in all models.

15. The items measure a single construct. The first Eigenvalue of a principal components factor analysis is 3.26 and accounts for 82% of the variance, while the next factor's Eigenvalue is only 0.44. The factor loadings range from 0.45 to 0.54.

TABLE 3
The Simonton Model

| | <i>Murray Blessing 1994</i> | <i>Wall Street Journal/ Federalist Society 2005</i> | <i>C-SPAN 2009</i> | <i>Siena 2009</i> | <i>Schlesinger 1996</i> | <i>Mean Rating</i> |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------|---|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Years in Office | 4.09 (1.14)** | 4.66 (1.05)** | 3.23 (0.87)** | 3.72 (0.96)** | 5.10 (1.31)** | 4.26 (0.99)** |
| War Hero | 18.10 (6.54)** | 15.74 (6.17)* | 13.26 (5.09)* | 12.47 (5.65)* | 18.11 (7.67)* | 14.83 (5.80)* |
| Scandal | -34.83 (8.44)** | -17.02 (6.69)* | -6.23 (5.52) | -12.11 (6.12) | -34.12 (8.45)** | -18.50 (6.29)** |
| Assassination | 18.69 (8.13)* | 24.41 (7.94)** | 24.45 (6.55)** | 19.65 (7.27)* | 25.38 (9.87)* | 22.82 (7.47)** |
| Years at War | 3.45 (1.72) | 1.29 (1.31) | 0.37 (1.08) | -0.13 (1.20) | 3.05 (1.97) | 0.76 (1.23) |
| Brilliance | 6.99 (2.55)* | 5.50 (2.23)* | 5.31 (1.84)** | 6.68 (2.04)** | 6.68 (2.94)* | 7.09 (2.10)** |
| Constant | 21.78 (5.87)** | 20.73 (5.59)** | 32.52 (4.61)** | 37.49 (5.12)** | 15.46 (6.96)* | 25.77 (5.26)** |
| Adjusted R^2 | 0.74 | 0.65 | 0.61 | 0.60 | 0.67 | 0.68 |
| N | 36 | 40 | 40 | 40 | 39 | 40 |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Standard errors in parentheses.

Assassinated presidents are estimated to rank 18 to 25 points higher than others, all else equal, with a 23-point boost in the mean ratings model. The number of years at war has no consistent statistically significant effect while brilliance consistently registers a statistically significant effect ($p < .05$ for all models).

In Table 3, we see evidence that political time and views of presidential character also predict greatness ratings, above and beyond the elements of the Simonton model. In three of the five models and the mean ratings model, presidents serving in the politics of preemption were rated significantly higher than those in the politics of disjunction, who constitute the omitted category for comparison.¹⁶ In every model, presidents presiding over the politics of articulation were rated significantly higher than those in the politics of disjunction at the 0.10 level or better. As expected, the politics of reconstruction presidents were rated significantly higher at the 0.05 level or better in every poll. Note that in every model, we see a progression from lowest to highest rated, all else equal, from presidents in the politics of disjunction, to the politics of preemption, to articulation presidents, to reconstruction presidents, although the differences in coefficients from one category to the next are not often statistically significant. The models also show strong support for the character hypothesis. In each model, views of presidential character are significant at the 0.01 level. The magnitude of the relationship is remarkably consistent across models, with parameter estimates ranging from 0.55 to 0.63. The brilliance

16. In the Schlesinger poll model, the estimate is close to statistical significance as well, $p = 0.11$.

TABLE 4
The Simonton Model with Political Time and Character

| | <i>Murray Blessing 1994</i> | <i>Wall Street Journal/ Federalist Society 2005</i> | <i>C-SPAN 2009</i> | <i>Siena 2009</i> | <i>Schlesinger 1996</i> | <i>Mean Rating</i> |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------|---|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Years in Office | 1.49 (0.99) | 2.00 (0.76)* | 1.20 (0.67) | 1.48 (0.72)* | 2.73 (1.36) | 1.88 (0.78)* |
| War Hero | 5.06 (5.79) | 2.86 (4.40) | 2.24 (3.86) | 0.63 (4.12) | 5.18 (7.98) | 2.61 (4.49) |
| Scandal | -18.00 (7.47)* | 1.27 (5.21) | 10.25 (4.57)* | 5.78 (4.88) | -15.27 (9.79) | -1.07 (5.31) |
| Assassination | 3.85 (6.75) | 8.38 (5.48) | 12.70 (4.80)* | 6.09 (5.13) | 11.99 (9.63) | 8.86 (5.59) |
| Years at War | 1.98 (1.40) | 0.91 (0.85) | 0.33 (0.74) | -0.26 (0.79) | 1.25 (1.86) | 0.53 (0.86) |
| Brilliance | 4.88 (2.03)* | 3.22 (1.55)* | 3.02 (1.35)* | 4.59 (1.45)** | 5.75 (2.77)* | 4.74 (1.58)** |
| Preemption | 6.27 (6.21) | 13.36 (4.92)* | 9.29 (4.31)* | 12.52 (4.60)* | 14.40 (8.81) | 11.98 (5.01)* |
| Articulation | 10.57 (5.62) | 17.56 (4.58)** | 9.49 (4.02)* | 14.27 (4.29)** | 15.48 (8.08) | 13.62 (4.67)** |
| Reconstruction | 25.59 (8.13)** | 28.00 (6.08)** | 14.44 (5.33)* | 17.54 (5.69)** | 25.29 (11.00)* | 22.00 (6.20)** |
| Character | 0.55 (0.14)** | 0.59 (0.11)** | 0.58 (0.10)** | 0.63 (0.10)** | 0.56 (0.20)** | 0.59 (0.11)** |
| Constant | -5.19 (9.09) | -15.00 (7.24)* | 0.36 (6.35) | -0.34 (6.78) | -18.37 (13.16) | -8.45 (7.38) |
| Adjusted R^2 | 0.85 | 0.86 | 0.82 | 0.83 | 0.74 | 0.84 |
| N | 36 | 40 | 40 | 40 | 39 | 40 |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Standard errors in parentheses.

variable is also statistically significant at the 0.05 level or better in each model. We discuss the magnitude of these estimated effects below.

The addition of these variables amounts to a significant improvement over the Simonton model. The adjusted R -squared coefficients increase by 0.07 to 0.23 across the models. Wald tests demonstrate that the expanded models fit the data significantly better than the original Simonton model ($p < .001$ for all models except the Schlesinger poll, where $p < .05$). In addition, the original scandal variable is no longer statistically significant in four of the models, including the mean ratings model, and has an unexpected sign in a fourth model. We conclude from this that the character variable outperforms the scandal variable, suggesting that evaluators are sensitive to smaller differences in character than the scandal variable provides (results are similar if we drop the scandal variable from the model).

Before we discuss the substantive import of these findings, we note that our two main results, supportive of the political time and character hypotheses, are durable across

TABLE 5
The Simonton Model with Political Time and an Alternative Measure of Character

| | <i>Murray Blessing 1994</i> | <i>Wall Street Journal/ Federalist Society 2005</i> | <i>C-SPAN 2009</i> | <i>Siena 2009</i> | <i>Schlesinger 1996</i> | <i>Mean Rating</i> |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------|---|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Years in Office | 2.04 (1.05) | 2.36 (0.81)** | 1.87 (0.74)* | 2.21 (0.72)** | 3.17 (1.35)* | 2.44 (0.84)** |
| War Hero | 8.20 (6.15) | 4.66 (4.73) | 6.69 (4.32) | 5.65 (4.20) | 7.68 (7.91) | 6.16 (4.90) |
| Scandal | -22.35 (7.89)** | -1.00 (5.71) | 3.24 (5.22) | -2.13 (5.06) | -18.83 (9.54) | -6.47 (5.92) |
| Assassination | 6.75 (7.25) | 10.44 (5.80) | 15.90 (5.30)** | 9.40 (5.14) | 14.28 (9.69) | 11.63 (6.01) |
| Years at War | 2.31 (1.53) | 0.85 (1.13) | 1.49 (1.03) | 1.41 (1.00) | 1.56 (1.89) | 1.33 (1.17) |
| Brilliance | 5.52 (2.20)* | 3.94 (1.68)* | 3.13 (1.54) | 4.39 (1.49)** | 6.25 (2.81)* | 5.01 (1.74)** |
| Preemption | 6.01 (6.83) | 14.28 (5.43)* | 7.61 (4.96) | 10.31 (4.81)* | 14.51 (9.07) | 11.15 (5.62) |
| Articulation | 11.24 (6.20) | 19.13 (4.99)** | 9.54 (4.56)* | 14.18 (4.42)** | 16.54 (8.33) | 14.19 (5.17)* |
| Reconstruction | 26.65 (8.94)** | 31.09 (6.81)** | 13.75 (6.22)* | 15.97 (6.03)* | 27.13 (11.36)* | 22.52 (7.05)** |
| Character | 0.27 (0.09)** | 0.35 (0.08)** | 0.26 (0.07)** | 0.30 (0.07)** | 0.31 (0.13)* | 0.30 (0.08)** |
| Constant | 9.34 (7.73) | -1.74 (6.24) | 16.85 (5.70)** | 17.36 (5.53)** | -4.70 (10.41) | 6.94 (6.46) |
| Adjusted R^2 | 0.83 | 0.84 | 0.78 | 0.82 | 0.73 | 0.83 |
| N | 36 | 39 | 39 | 39 | 39 | 39 |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Standard errors in parentheses.

various robustness checks. If we omit the character variable, the estimates for political time variables are a bit smaller and less precise, but many remain statistically significant (i.e., the parameter estimates for reconstruction presidents are always statistically significant, while other estimates are less consistent).¹⁷ If we omit the political time categories, the estimate for character remains highly significant both statistically and substantively. As noted above, our character measure may be open to some endogeneity. As discussed above, we estimated the models using an alternative character measure based on a combination of four surveys (see Table 5). One of the surveys was conducted before the George W. Bush presidency, limiting the sample size to 39. The results in Table 5 are similar to those in Table 4. The character variable remains statistically significant, though the point estimates are smaller than in Table 4. We also see the same general pattern of coefficients for the Skowronek variables, most of which retain their statistical significance. In

17. The parameter estimates for reconstruction presidents are significant in every model.

addition, we estimated each model with the “moral authority” scores from the C-SPAN poll. Then we estimated each model with the “integrity” scores from the Siena poll. In both cases, the results were similar.

The effects are also robust to various changes in model specification. Nichols (2012) argued for a different operationalization of Skowronek’s conception of political time, as noted above. Using the “enervated” and “reorder” variables he presented (see Nichols 2012, 286, tbl. 2) rather than the three categories we employed continues to generate support for the political time and character hypotheses. Nichols (2012) also argued for additional changes to the Simonton model, including the addition of a variable for “patrician” presidents, “progressive” presidents, and an alteration of the assassination variable. We estimated his model and added the character variable. Views of presidential character remain statistically significant in all models.

Finally, the significance of political time and character are robust in the face of additional controls, including economic and legislative performance and presidents’ party and ideology. We present a summary of results in Table 6, using mean greatness ratings, but we also estimated each of the models with each survey and generally found similar results. Economic performance during a presidency has been shown to affect both greatness ratings by experts (Curry and Morris 2010) and the public’s approval of ex-presidents (King 1999). Column 1 shows that adding growth in per capita gross domestic product over the course of a presidency to the model (following Curry and Morris 2010) makes only slight differences in estimates for the character and Skowronek variables. Brilliance and character continue to predict greatness at statistically and substantively significant levels while articulation and reconstruction presidents rate significantly higher than deconstruction presidents (the p value for preemption presidents is 0.06).

We also controlled for a measure of presidents’ success in Congress. The C-SPAN study and the Siena study asked participants to evaluate presidents’ success with Congress. We took the average of these two ratings, creating a 0-100 scale.¹⁸ It is important to note that Skowronek argues that views of presidents’ success in Congress may reflect presidents’ place in political time. That is, reconstruction presidents may be especially successful with Congress simply because the public and Congress are open to big changes.¹⁹ Even when we include this measure, the character variables remain statistically significant, although the character estimate is slightly attenuated. The Skowronek variables are a bit more attenuated, but the preemption and reconstruction coefficients remain statistically significant.²⁰

18. The two items are highly correlated ($R = 0.97$).

19. In fact, the Skowronek variables predict success with Congress scores at high levels. Controlling for years at war, brilliance, and integrity, articulation and reconstruction presidents are estimated to have success with Congress scores 13 and 20 points higher than disjunction presidents, respectively ($p < .01$ for both).

20. We also used a measure of legislative success derived from Clinton and Lapiniski’s (2006) measure of legislative significance. They rely on contemporary and retrospective assessments of the importance of each piece of legislation that was signed into law from 1877 to 1994 to generate a measure of legislative significance. We used these measures to create a score for each president’s legislative achievements. Unfortunately, the data only exist for about half of the presidents. The measure itself fell well short of statistical significance. Its inclusion made little difference in the estimates for the character or Skowronek variables, though the Skowronek variables were somewhat attenuated in this half sample compared to the full sample.

TABLE 6
Robustness Checks

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
|------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Years in Office | 1.97 (0.78)* | 1.47 (0.70)* | 1.36 (0.81) | 0.94 (0.96) |
| War Hero | 3.67 (4.58) | 1.85 (3.96) | 2.99 (4.42) | 3.47 (5.23) |
| Scandal | -2.38 (5.44) | -3.28 (4.74) | 1.40 (5.32) | -0.63 (5.63) |
| Assassination | 7.85 (5.65) | 6.20 (5.00) | 7.51 (5.34) | 6.66 (5.84) |
| Years at War | 0.49 (0.86) | 0.02 (0.78) | 1.01 (0.83) | 1.18 (0.92) |
| Brilliance | 5.30 (1.66)** | 4.38 (1.39)** | 4.47 (1.52)** | 3.59 (1.63)* |
| Preemption | 10.16 (5.27) | 9.88 (4.47)* | 11.90 (5.29)* | 17.08 (6.05)* |
| Articulation | 11.90 (4.92)* | 8.43 (4.45) | 14.20 (4.46)** | 17.51 (5.50)** |
| Reconstruction | 18.38 (7.03)* | 14.50 (5.99)* | 21.91 (6.02)** | 27.28 (7.25)** |
| Character | 0.58 (0.11)** | 0.41 (0.11)** | 0.65 (0.11)** | 0.61 (0.12)** |
| Gross Domestic Product | 0.54 (0.50) | | | |
| Success in Congress | | 0.46 (0.15)** | | |
| Democratic | | | -8.36 (4.70) | |
| Republican | | | -5.98 (6.29) | |
| Whig | | | -6.41 (2.87)* | |
| Republican | | | | -10.41 (3.79)* |
| Common Space Score | | | | |
| Constant | -7.36 (7.43) | -16.23 (6.99)* | -6.37 (7.29) | -8.45 (8.18) |
| Adjusted R^2 | 0.85 | 0.88 | 0.86 | 0.84 |
| N | 40 | 40 | 40 | 33 |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Standard errors in parentheses.

Dependent variable: mean greatness ratings.

In addition, we controlled for presidents' party affiliation and ideology. The model in Column 3 includes party affiliation, with Democrats serving as the comparison category. Republican presidents were rated on average 6 points lower than Democrats ($p < .05$). Controlling for this effect resulted in very little change in the estimates for brilliance, character, and political time, each of which remains statistically significant at the

0.05 level. The model in Column 4 includes presidents' ideology, as measured by "Common Space" DW-NOMINATE scores, which range from -1 to 1 with higher scores indicating more conservative tendencies.²¹ The data are not available for all presidents, and their creators urge analysts to use them with caution because some presidents' estimates are based on limited information. That said, the estimates show that more conservative presidents tend to have lower ratings. A president a standard deviation more conservative than the mean on these scores is predicted to have a greatness rating about 8.5 points lower than a president with a score one standard deviation more liberal than the mean. In the face of this control, brilliance and character continue to predict greatness, while preemption, articulation, and reconstruction presidents are predicted to have greatness scores about 17, 17.5, and 27 points higher than disjunction presidents, respectively.

Our findings are robust, but what do they tell us about presidential greatness ratings? First, character can make a big difference. In substantive terms, all else equal, a president one standard deviation above the mean character rating (78.6) is estimated to rate about 21 points above a president with an character rating one standard deviation below the mean (42.6).²² Consider Richard Nixon, who ranks lowest on the character measure with a score of 22.2. The mean greatness model predicts a rating of 30, placing him thirty-seventh. If Nixon's character score had been only fairly bad instead of terrible, one standard deviation below the mean, his score would have jumped about 12 points, moving him up 11 places to twenty-sixth. Had Nixon ranked even average on character, his overall score would be about 23 points higher, moving him into seventeenth place. Along the same lines, if Bill Clinton's character score (32.9) had been average, his predicted rating would improve by about 16 points, moving him from twenty-eighth (just below Jimmy Carter and Chester A. Arthur) to fourteenth (above James Monroe and William McKinley and just behind John Adams and John Kennedy). If Clinton had scored one standard deviation above average, his predicted rating would be in the top 10.

Second, these results suggest that it is premature to eliminate brilliance from models of presidential greatness. The coefficients vary across models, such that the difference between ratings of a president one standard deviation above (0.97) and below (-1.03) the mean ranges from 6 to 12 points. If we consider brilliance as a rough proxy for some of the traits we think make presidents successful (e.g., communication, political skill, vision, persuasiveness, leadership), our results suggest that such traits predict success in office, at least as defined by these polls. Take, for instance, Jimmy Carter, who scored 0.9 points lower than Franklin Roosevelt on the brilliance scale (which ranges from -2 to 3). Had Carter been as brilliant as Roosevelt, his rating would have increased by about 5 points, enough to move him up about six places, depending on the model.

Third, a president's place in political time goes a long way toward predicting greatness ratings. The magnitude of the estimated effects vary across models, but the models predict that presidents during the politics of reconstruction would be rated roughly 15 to

21. Scores were obtained from http://voteview.com/dwnomin_joint_house_and_senate.htm on February 17, 2015.

22. The difference ranges from 19.8 to 22.7 across the five models.

25 points higher than presidents saddled with the politics of disjunction. Take Carter and Roosevelt again. Had Carter benefited from the politics of reconstruction like Roosevelt, instead of the politics of disjunction, the mean greatness model's estimated 22 point boost in his rating is enough to move him from twenty-seventh to thirteenth in that poll, just below John Kennedy and Andrew Jackson.

Ultimately, both political time and presidents' personal traits play a big role in shaping presidents' positions in the ratings game. Presidents who experts rate highly on character tend to get higher ratings than those who are seen as lacking character, but even presidents with high character can be pulled down in the polls by the challenges of their own political time. Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan have roughly the same above-average character scores, but Ford was a preemptive president while Reagan was a reconstruction president. Ford typically ranks more than 10 places (often more) below Reagan. George H. W. Bush, Herbert Hoover, and Andrew Jackson all have slightly above average character scores. Hoover, the disjunction president, usually ranks just above the real scoundrels of office, usually between thirtieth and thirty-fifth. Bush, the articulation president, is often just making the top half. Jackson, the reconstruction president, is often in or near the top 10.

At the same time, competent and morally authoritative presidents can take advantage of the opportunities and minimize the political dangers their place in political time presents. Presidents facing similar conditions of political time, but with more brilliance and character, fare better. Eisenhower and Nixon were both preemption presidents. Eisenhower has an above-average character score, unlike Nixon. Eisenhower often cracks the top 10; Nixon is near the bottom. Lincoln and Jackson both benefited from the politics of reconstruction. Lincoln scores high on both character and brilliance. Jackson's character score is about average, and his brilliance score is below average. Lincoln often tops the list, while Jackson is often about 10 places below him.

Conclusion

Both historical conditions and presidents' personal traits affect their standing in presidential greatness polls. Adding perceptions of presidential character and a president's place in political time to models of presidential greatness improves on the widely accepted Simonton model. Nichols (2012) found that a revised view of Skowronek's model of political time systematically affected presidents' greatness ratings. We find the same result taking Skowronek on his own terms: the combination of the state of the political regime (vulnerable or resilient) and the president's orientation toward it (opposed or affiliated) strongly predicts presidents' greatness ratings. Consequently, it appears not every president can be great. A disjunctive president who managed to get reelected to serve eight years and had well above-average brilliance and character (one standard deviation above the mean for each) is only predicted to rank thirteenth to nineteenth, depending on the poll.

History is not determinative though, as presidents' intellectual brilliance and perceived strength of character also relate strongly to presidents' historical ratings. We find

that intellectual brilliance continues to predict greatness controlling for character, political time, and the other Simonton variables, suggesting that calls to eliminate brilliance from the presidential greatness model (Nichols 2012) may be premature. In addition, finding a systematic effect of character holds important implications. To the extent that greatness ratings are a valid measure of actual presidential greatness, our results support the conclusion that presidents with strong character are better presidents. Taken this way, the results provide systematic evidence supporting the many analyses of presidential leadership that highlight the role of character (e.g., Felzenberg 2008; Gergen 2000; Pfiffner 2004; Renshon 1996; Wayne 2012). Of course, our results tell us nothing about *how* character leads to greatness. This remains an important ongoing task for future research. Along the same lines, future research should continue to develop measures of presidential character that can diminish the threat of endogeneity. As noted above, the potential for endogeneity requires some caution in drawing conclusions.

Even if greatness ratings do not measure true greatness, but only the expectations and biases of the historians, political scientists, and other expert evaluators, our results tell us something important. First, presidents concerned about their legacy would do well to display strong character. Second, if we see greatness polls as merely reflecting experts' expectations, our results provide systematic evidence showing that experts tend to think presidents with admirable character were better presidents. Even if perceptions of character are colored by overall evaluations of presidents, the linking of the two suggests that exhibiting strong character is part of the definition of what it means to be a great president. Likewise, lacking strong character is part of what it means to be a less than great president. In this regard, the polls we examine give us a glimpse into the historical legacy of Bill Clinton. After the Lewinsky scandal broke, Clinton's approval ratings remained high and even increased, leading some to conclude that the public did not care about his compromised character. However, at least one analysis argues that the public did not ignore Clinton's character, suggesting that his approval ratings would have been even higher had he avoided the scandal (Newman 2002; see also Newman 2003). Here we have seen that Clinton's historical standing appears to have suffered as a result of his tarnished character. While Clinton does reasonably well in the three polls we examined that were conducted after his impeachment, the models estimate that he would have ranked significantly higher had he not been weighed down by negative views of his character.

Finally, our results suggest that voters and presidents can make a difference. Skowronek eloquently points out the attractiveness of the view that presidential greatness is simply the result of personal traits—it means any president can be great. He contends (2006, 167), “so long as performance is tied to the personal attributes of the individual president, success is always a possibility; it awaits only the right combination of character and skill. So long as the presidency is a true test of the person, its incumbents are free to become as great as they can be.” As noted above, this conception is too simplistic according to our results. Not every president can become great. However, if brilliance and character also shape greatness, voters can elect into office women and men who can make the most of circumstances. Even presidents presiding over the politics of disjunction are not destined to absolute failure. As we pointed out above, our models suggest that a highly

intelligent president with strong character serving eight years as a disjunctive president could still rank in the top 20.

Moreover, most presidential elections will be contested during periods when a particular regime is resilient. Thus, voters choose between potential articulation and potential preemptive presidents. The differences between these two categories in terms of predicted greatness is not all that large and never statistically significant in our models. However, the difference between candidates with strong or weak character and intellectual brilliance can be substantial. A preemptive president with character and brilliance scores one standard deviation below the mean is estimated to rank about thirtieth. An equivalent articulation president ranks only slightly higher between twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth. However, a preemptive president with brilliance and character levels one standard deviation above the mean would rank about tenth. An equivalent articulation president would only rank one place higher, at ninth. Thus, in most elections, the quality of the character and intellect of the elected candidate can have a profound effect on presidential greatness.

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