Determining Presidential Greatness

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Abstract

- *Many scholars have argued that presidential greatness is both hard to determine and most likely impossible to determine, due to the many personal and institutional factors. Presidential greatness is hard to determine, but Historians and Political Scientists believe that there are certain characteristics that a President must have to aid in his success. Among these characteristics, I found that both Historians and Political Scientists, alike, believe that management ability is possibly one of the most important characteristics a President can have.*

Previous Literature

- Arthur Schlesinger's 1948 & 1962
  - Conducted a survey to survey the expert opinions of fifty-five historians in a presidential ranking poll.
  - The top five presidents were Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Thomas Jefferson. The bottoms two were Ulysses S. Grant and Warren G. Harding.

- Thomas Bailey 1966
  - Conduct a similar study surveying history professors from the thirty leading universities at the time.
  - The top three presidents remained as Lincoln, Washington, and Franklin Roosevelt. However, he lowered the ranking of Jefferson to 'near great', Jackson to 'above average', and Polk, Cleveland, and Truman to 'below average'. He also elevated Grant and Buchanan to 'below average'. Despite the many critiques and ranking exceptions, Bailey's rankings reflected that of Schlesinger's, suggesting that there is a consensus building around Schlesinger's framework.

Decision Making

- Graham Allison created a four model decision making theory, that he used when understanding the decisions made during the Cold war by President John Kennedy and his administration.

- Models:
  - *Rational Actor Model*
  - *Organizational Process Model*
  - *The Bureaucratic model*
  - *Group-Think Model*

Decision Making cont.

- James Baber conducted a study, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, to differentiate between four types of presidential characters. He created four categories of presidents.

- Categories:
  - *Active-positive*
  - *Active-negative*
  - *Passive-negative*
  - *Passive-positive*

Methodology

- Survey
  - History and Political Science Professors
  - Seventeen questions
    - Demographic
    - Rating
    - Open-Ended

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* Required

Section II

Based on your knowledge on the Presidency, answer the following questions.

Considering what you know about the office of the presidency, what do you believe makes a President great? *

Select the most important characteristics that a President must have. *
Limit your choices to 5.

☐ Honesty

☐ Persistence

☐ Fidelity

☐ Leadership/Management Ability
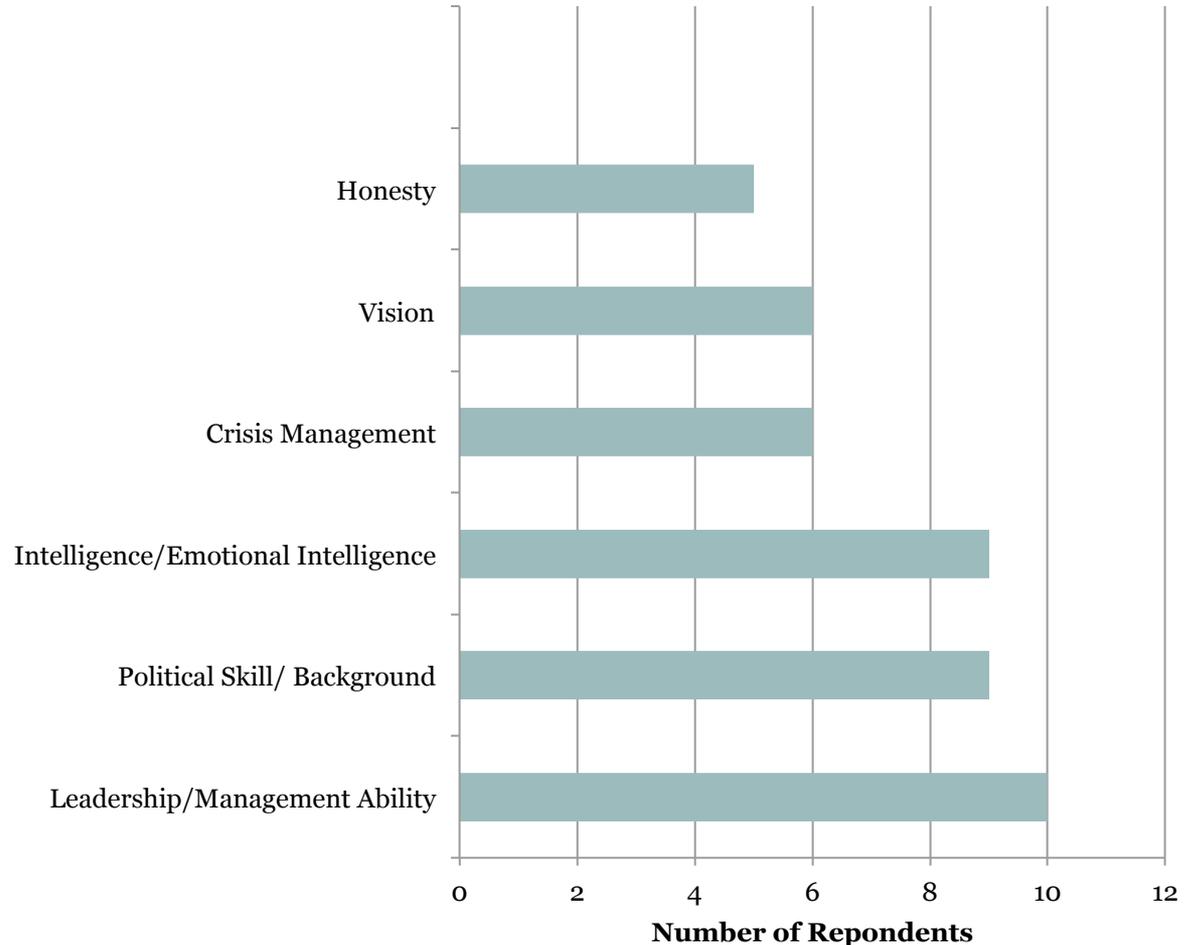
☐ Political Skill/Background

☐ Patriotism

Findings

Historians and Political Scientists agree that one of the most important characteristics a 'great' president must have is management ability.

Data suggests that management ability is the most favorable characteristic, especially when put to use to "lead the nation through a crisis, without creating long-term difficulties for the country".

Important Presidential Characteristics

Bar chart showing Number of Respondents for each characteristic:
- Honesty: 5
- Vision: 6
- Crisis Management: 6
- Intelligence/Emotional Intelligence: 9
- Political Skill/ Background: 9
- Leadership/Management Ability: 10

X-axis: Number of Repondents (0 to 12)
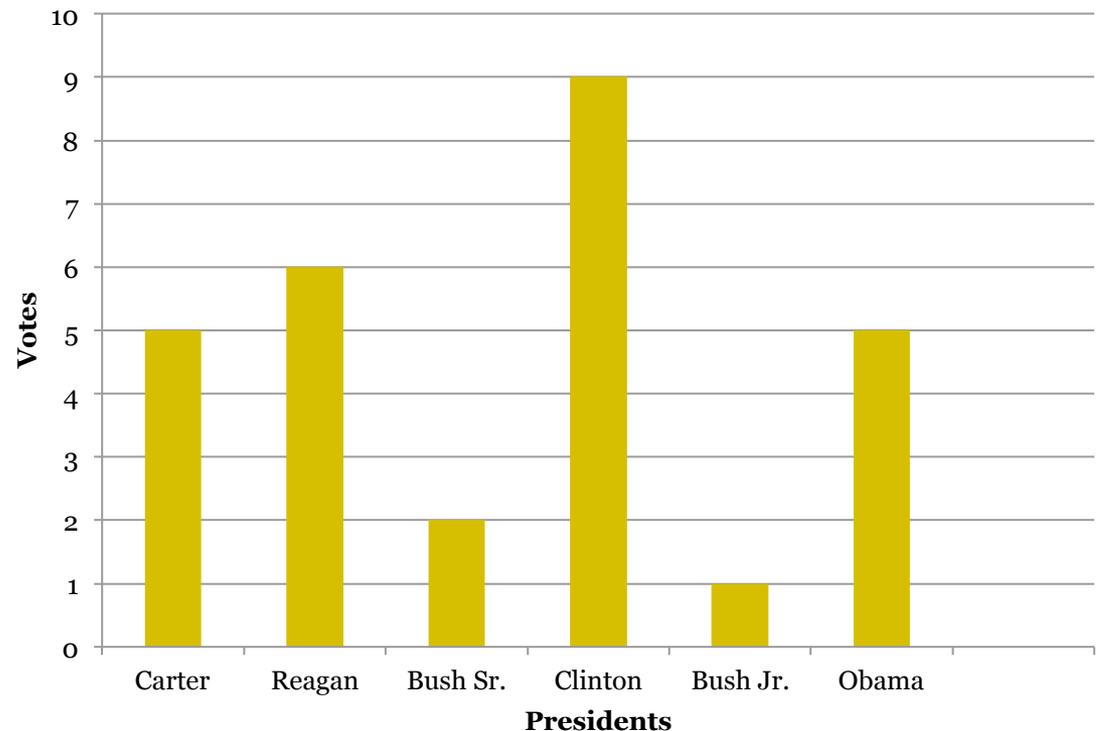
Findings cont.

Ronald Reagan was ranked as 'near great'.

In the 'above average' category were Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.

In the 'below average' category is George H. Bush.

In the 'failure' category, respondents placed George W. Bush.

Greatest Presidents of the 20th and 21st Centuries

Implications

- *Data suggests that personal characteristics are determinates of a great president; most notably a president's management ability seems to be the best determinate. This seems to be the case because management ability can easily be applied to both foreign and domestic crises that may arise during a president's term in office.*

Questions?