

## Chapter 1

# Rating Presidents and Assessing Obama

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### The Rating Game

Evaluating presidents is a challenging and controversial endeavor. Yet, everyone with an opinion seems to get in on the action—whether it is a group of scholars working on a book, a public opinion approval poll taken by the media, a panel of commentators on a television talk show, or a group of co-workers huddled around the office water cooler. Indeed, in America there is a natural inclination to rate and rank all things, whether it is a poll of college football’s “top 25,” a list of the top-grossing movies of the week, or David Letterman’s comedic “top 10” list on television. With the American president being the most visible world leader and a daily focus of countless media outlets and online sources, it is perhaps unavoidable to ask the question, “How is the president doing” and to compare him to his predecessors.

Today, there are numerous opinion polls conducted by polling organizations, universities, and major media outlets examining the president’s approval and disapproval numbers, major policies and speeches, and his handling of the issue of the day, and they are taken on a daily basis. As such, the public is saturated with regular assessments of the American president. However, these public polls are limited in what they offer history in terms of a president’s legacy and rating. For example, C-SPAN, Gallup, and other organizations have polled the American public and asked them to

list their favorite presidents or the greatest presidents. Although these polls are interesting and helpful, they are also suspect. For example, recent such polls have listed John F. Kennedy ahead of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and Ronald Reagan ahead of Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt, results no serious scholar of the American presidency would support. At the same time, one recent poll revealed that 13 percent of the public listed Bill Clinton as the top president, whereas 20 percent of the respondents felt Clinton was the worst president. It is, of course, unlikely that any president could be considered as both the best *and* worst president concurrently, and such results tend to point to the role that time plays in the ratings because the most recent three or four presidents are typically those listed at the top *and* bottom of the public's ratings (C-SPAN 2011).

Such ratings also point to the need to have professional historians and scholars of the American presidency weigh in on presidential performance. And this has been the case. Countless scholarly books and articles are produced every year on the topic and there is growing interest among both scholars and the public in presidential ratings.

### *History*

Perhaps the first systematic and scholarly effort to rate and rank the presidents was in 1948 when noted historian, Arthur Schlesinger, surveyed a group of fifty-five of the nation's leading historians.

In his poll, Schlesinger asked the scholars to place the presidents into categories such as "great," "near great," and so on, all the way to "failure" (Schlesinger 1948). The results were published in *Life* magazine. Ever since this poll, there has been a good deal of interest in such ratings by the general public. Recognizing the fact that new information comes to light that changes how we see the presidents and their decisions, Schlesinger conducted a second poll in 1962. This time, he surveyed seventy-five leading historians (Schlesinger 1962). The results were again available to the wider public, as they were published in the *New York Times Magazine*. When John F. Kennedy, who was in office at the time of the poll, expressed strong interest in the poll (and also took satisfaction in the fact that his predecessor, Dwight Eisenhower, was not rated very highly), the popularity of the rankings, which are listed in Table 1.1, was given a boost (Schlesinger 2003).

Table 1.1. Early Ranking Polls of the Presidents

1948 Schlesinger Poll	1962 Schlesinger Poll
<b>GREAT</b>	<b>GREAT</b>
1. Lincoln	1. Lincoln
2. Washington	2. Washington
3. F. D. Roosevelt	3. F. D. Roosevelt
4. Wilson	4. Wilson
5. Jefferson	5. Jefferson
6. Jackson	6. Jackson
<b>NEAR GREAT</b>	<b>NEAR GREAT</b>
7. T. Roosevelt	7. T. Roosevelt
8. Cleveland	8. Polk
9. J. Adams	9. Truman
10. Polk	10. J. Adams
11. J.Q. Adams	11. Cleveland
<b>AVERAGE</b>	<b>AVERAGE</b>
12. Monroe	12. Madison
13. Hayes	13. J. Q. Adams
14. Madison	14. Hayes
15. Van Buren	15. McKinley
16. Taft	16. Taft
17. Arthur	17. Van Buren
18. McKinley	18. Monroe
19. A. Johnson	19. Hoover
20. Hoover	20. B. Harrison
21. B. Harrison	21. Arthur
22. Tyler	22. Eisenhower
23. Coolidge	23. A. Johnson
<b>BELOW AVERAGE</b>	<b>BELOW AVERAGE</b>
24. Fillmore	24. Taylor
25. Taylor	25. Tyler
26. Buchanan	26. Fillmore
27. Pierce	27. Coolidge
28. Grant	28. Pierce
<b>FAILURE</b>	<b>FAILURE</b>
29. Harding	29. Buchanan
	30. Grant
	31. Harding

Over the ensuing years, the rating polls grew to be something of a “cottage industry,” in that they were conducted every few years, several scholars and organizations participated in the ranking polls, and they generated much interest by scholars and the public, and likely the presidents themselves (Pederson and McLaurin 1987). In the past twenty-five years there have been several efforts to rank the presidents (C-SPAN 2000; Murray and Blessing 1994), including a well-known poll in 1996 by Schlesinger’s son, the two-time recipient of the Pulitzer Prize and former Kennedy aide, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (Schlesinger 1996). This poll was also released in the *New York Times Magazine*. Like the presidential polls, these more recent efforts survey professional historians and political scientists with expertise on the American presidency, however, the more recent polls generally employ larger numbers of respondents (Table 1.2).

The popularity of these presidential rankings has even translated to polls on the first ladies. The Siena Research Institute at Siena College in New York not only conducts periodic polls on the presidents, but also has conducted two ranking polls on the first ladies. Like the presidential rating polls, these rankings also survey leading scholars of the presidency, and ask respondents to either rank their subjects from best to worst or place them into categories similar to those used by Schlesinger—“Great” to “Failure” (Watson 2000). This includes two polls by Robert Watson, who surveyed a few dozen historians and political scientists who had published scholarly works on the first ladies (Watson 1999, 2003).

Although it is far too early to place either Obama or his immediate predecessor in the rankings, the Siena Research Institute asked more than two-hundred scholars of the presidency to do just that in 2010. The poll offered a very preliminary estimate of Obama’s presidency relative to that of other presidents. Unlike George W. Bush, Obama came out on solid ground (Table 1.3, page 8).

### *Challenges and Debates*

Efforts to rate or rank the presidents typically do not include the post-presidential years. Although some presidents have continued their public service after leaving the White House, such as John Quincy Adams and Andrew Johnson, who were elected to the U.S. House and U.S. Senate, respectively, and William Howard Taft, who took a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court, this service is not factored in to the assessments. Likewise, some former presidents have dis-

Table 1.2. Well-Known Recent Polls

1982 Murray– Blessing Poll	1996 Schlesinger, Jr. Poll	2000 C-SPAN Historian Poll
<b>GREAT</b>	<b>GREAT</b>	1. Lincoln
1. Lincoln	1. Lincoln	2. Washington
2. F. D. Roosevelt	2 F. D. Roosevelt	3. F. D. Roosevelt
3. Washington	3. Washington	4. Jefferson
4. T. Roosevelt		5. Truman
	<b>NEAR GREAT</b>	6. Wilson
<b>NEAR GREAT</b>	4. Jefferson	7. Jefferson
5. T. Roosevelt	5. Jackson	8. Kennedy
6. Wilson	6. T. Roosevelt	9. Eisenhower
7. Jackson	7. Wilson	10. L.B. Johnson
8. Truman	8. Truman	11. Reagan
	9. Polk	12. Polk
<b>ABOVE AVERAGE</b>	<b>HIGH AVERAGE</b>	13. Jackson
9. J. Adams	10. Eisenhower	14. Monroe
10. L.B. Johnson	11. J. Adams	15. McKinley
11. Eisenhower	12. Kennedy	16. J. Adams
12. Polk	13. Cleveland	17. Cleveland
13. Kennedy	14. L.B. Johnson	19. J.Q. Adams
14. Madison	15. Monroe	20. Bush
15. Monroe	16. McKinley	21. Clinton
16. J.Q. Adams		22. Carter
17. Cleveland	<b>LOW AVERAGE</b>	23. Ford
<b>AVERAGE</b>	17. Madison	24. Taft
18. McKinley	18. J.Q. Adams	25. Nixon
19. Taft	19. B. Harrison	26. Hayes
20. Van Buren	20. Clinton	27. Coolidge
21. Hoover	21. Van Buren	28. Taylor
22. Hayes	22. Taft	29. Garfield
23. Arthur	23. Hayes	30. Van Buren
24. Ford	24. Bush	31. B. Harrison
25. Carter	25. Reagan	32. Arthur
26. B. Harrison	26. Arthur	33. Grant
	27. Carter	34. Hoover
<b>BELOW AVERAGE</b>	28. Ford	35. Fillmore
27. Taylor	<b>BELOW AVERAGE</b>	36. Tyler
28. Tyler	29. Taylor	37. W.H. Harrison
29. Fillmore	30. Coolidge	38. Harding
30. Coolidge	31. Fillmore	39. Pierce
31. Pierce	32. Tyler	40. A. Johnson
<b>FAILURE</b>	<b>FAILURE</b>	41. Buchanan
32. A. Johnson	33. Pierce	
33. Buchanan	34. Grant	
34. Nixon	35. Hoover	
35. Grant	36. Nixon	
36. Harding	37. A. Johnson	
	38. Buchanan	
	39. Harding	

Table 1.3. 2010 Siena Research Institute Poll (with a Ranking of Obama)

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1. F. D. Roosevelt
  2. T. Roosevelt
  3. Lincoln
  4. Washington
  5. Jefferson
  6. Madison
  7. Monroe
  8. Wilson
  9. Truman
  10. Eisenhower
  11. Kennedy
  12. Polk
  13. Clinton
  14. Jackson
  15. Obama
  16. L.B. Johnson
  17. J. Adams
  19. Reagan
  20. J.Q. Adams
  21. Cleveland
  22. McKinley
  23. G.H.W. Bush
  24. Van Buren
  25. Taft
  26. Arthur
  27. Grant
  28. Garfield
  29. Ford
  30. Coolidge
  31. Nixon
  32. Hayes
  33. Carter
  34. Taylor
  35. B. Harrison
  36. W.H. Harrison
  37. Hoover
  38. Tyler
  39. Fillmore
  40. G.W. Bush
  41. Pierce
  42. Harding
  43. Buchanan
  44. A. Johnson
-

tinguished themselves in other ways that ended up improving their public image. This includes Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton. However, even if such service helps to offset the impact of Watergate, the 444-day Iranian hostage crisis, or the Monica Lewinsky scandal, respectively, the post-presidential years are not factored in to the ratings.

One of the inherent challenges of assessing presidents is that there is but a small “N” to study. At the time of this assessment of Barack Obama, only forty-three men have served in forty-four presidencies (Cleveland was both the twenty-second and twenty-fourth president), and there is much variation among the presidents. It is exceedingly difficult to compare presidents across time, as the challenges facing John Adams and the nature of the office itself were quite dissimilar to those facing Barack Obama.

One of the sources used by scholars to assess presidents is the president’s own writings. Fortunately, all presidents serving from Herbert Hoover onward have presidential libraries. Administered by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), these libraries house the president’s papers. These papers are made available to scholars and the public a few years after the president leaves office, in compliance with the 1978 Presidential Records Act. So too are there numerous edited and published collections of presidential papers and some of the presidents have written memoirs. Sadly, some of the great presidents, such as Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt, did not survive their terms and history has thus been denied their memoirs. Other presidents chose not to pen accounts of their time in office, while still others wrestled with imperfect and selective memories. But, there are excellent and insightful memoirs, such as those by Harry S. Truman. At the same time, presidents have worried about their standing in history. Several, most notably Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, Richard M. Nixon, and Bill Clinton, have been quite conscious of how their legacies might be understood and shaped over time, whereas Ronald Reagan’s supporters continue to actively promote his legacy (Pierson, 1997).

As to be expected, there is much disagreement about how to attempt to assess, much less rank, presidents. Although Schlesinger and his son favored asking scholars to place the presidents into categories such as “great,” “near great,” and so on, other polls have asked respondents to simply list the presidents chronologically from best to worst, whereas still others have used categories such as the ability to communicate and foreign policy accomplishments

and had the respondents rate each president according to the category. As such, some of the aforementioned polls have approached the endeavor by using “holistic” ratings, whereby scholars simply try to offer an overall assessment of the president rather than do so based on narrow facets of the presidency, seen as a “mechanistic” criteria (Schlesinger Jr. 2003). These types of polls consider an array of issues and components of the presidency, including the ability to communicate effectively; the ability to compromise; relations with Congress; party leadership; handling of the economy; foreign policy accomplishments; domestic accomplishments; court appointments; and integrity, to name a few (SRI 2010).

Typically only leading scholars participate in the polls and they are usually professional historians and political scientists with expertise in the presidency. As to the number of scholars polled, the range varies from thirty-two to seventy-five, however, the Siena Research Institute poll surveyed 238 and the Murray–Blessing poll employed a whopping seventeen-page instrument and polled 953 scholars (Murray and Blessing 1982; SRI 2010). There remain questions not about how many or which scholars should participate in the enterprise of assessing presidents, but about which presidents can be ranked. For example, many of the polls fail to include William Henry Harrison (who served only thirty days) and James Garfield (who was assassinated during his first year in office), on account of their abbreviated presidencies (Pious 2003). The same might even be said of Zachary Taylor, who passed away midway into his second year in office.

Another challenge of assessing presidents is to be free from bias. Of the ranking polls, some critics have suggested a “Harvard yard bias” (Bailey 1967). These criticisms maintain that the professors who rate presidents are liberals with a natural preference for activist presidents (Felzenberg 1997, 2003). To counter this alleged bias, some conservative groups such as the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) have “stacked” polls with conservative pollsters. The ISI ranking polled thirty-eight conservative scholars and, not surprisingly, found that Democratic presidents fared far worse than in other polls, with Clinton and Lyndon B. Johnson even listed as “failures” (Pierson 1997). However, scholar Tim Blessing (2003) argues that bias is not an issue in most scholarly polls. He points to the poor presidencies of such Republicans as Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover, who served consecutive terms and the scandalous presidencies of other Republicans including Ulysses Grant and Richard Nixon, as accounting for the reason



why Republicans tend to be rated slightly lower than Democrats. Yet, the scholarly ranking polls have been fair in placing weak Democratic presidents—James Buchanan, John Tyler, and Franklin Pierce—toward the bottom of the polls, while such Republicans as Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln are nearly always in the top five spots.

Criticisms of the ratings have also centered on concerns of “maleness” (Burns 1973, 1984). The celebrated scholar, James MacGregor Burns, noted that men assessed presidents, from male perspectives, and according to male traits. Matters such as war and other “force” issues have been made priorities. The old question of whether the “times makes the man” (or, it might be said, whether the man makes the times) is pertinent here. Teddy Roosevelt, for instance, even worried whether his presidency would be seen as achieving greatness because he believed he did not have the requisite war or crisis to allow him to transcend to such lofty status. However, Roosevelt ended up commanding his times and transforming the office and nation.

One final challenge of assessing presidents is the matter of when to rate them. There are convenient milestones in a presidency—the end of the “first 100 days” and the midterm election—which compel scholars and the public to examine a president’s progress. But, such assessments—including this book—are only initial examinations, as it often takes years to get a full appreciation for a presidential legacy. Consider the cases of Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower, both of whom landed in unimpressive positions in the polls during the initial years after their presidencies. Although Truman’s difficult decisions regarding the rebuilding of Europe, desegregation of the military, the establishment of the state of Israel, the firing of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, and more were often panned during his presidency, today they are hailed as among the most courageous and proper decisions in presidential history. Truman is consistently rated today as one of the country’s best presidents and Eisenhower’s standing has risen dramatically.

Indeed, there is much movement in the polls over time. A president’s standing is not fixed; rather, it varies as new information comes to light, additional documents are available to scholars, and as we look back at history from the vantage point of time (and with closer to 20-20 vision). NARA releases presidential papers through the presidential libraries it administers, but it often takes ten or more years before all the documents are available. At the same time, in 1999 Washington scholars took advantage of the

bicentennial of the great general's passing to reassess his standing. The "Father of His Country" had slipped a position or two in some of the polls, and traveling museum exhibits, academic conferences, and numerous publications during the bicentennial celebration restated the case for Washington. Likewise, the year 2009 marked the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth, and Lincoln scholars celebrated with a variety of bicentennial programs and festivities, as well as the opportunity to reexamine the great emancipator's legacy (Watson, Pederson, and Williams 2010).

As such, there is the need not only for frequent re-evaluations in the years after a president leaves office, but initial assessments and guidelines to be offered during a president's time in office.

### Assessing Presidents and Assessing Obama

A subfield of presidency studies has emerged devoted to assessing presidential performance. A variety of mechanisms exists to assist in such assessments, including the number of vetoes sustained, the quality of judicial and executive appointments, the state of the economy, the number and quality of bills and treaties signed, a president's ability to deliver on his campaign pledges, and so on. So too do scholars employ a wide array of frameworks in examining presidential performance: Constitutional, legislative-based, quantitative, public opinion, and so on.

The assessment in the chapters to follow employs a wide array of perspectives. Stephen J. Wayne, a leading voice in presidency studies, provides a list of the perspectives used by scholars to assess presidents (Wayne 2003). Such approaches appear in this book and include the following: presidential use of power (Neustadt 1980, 1991); leadership style (Burns 1973, 1984; Greenstein 1988, 2000); democratic leadership (Burns 1973, 1984); political leadership (Milkis and Nelson 2007); effectiveness in modeling contemporary beliefs about leadership (Edwards and Wayne 2009); how well presidents overcame the paradoxes inherent within the challenging office (Cronin and Genovese 2009); the historic and cyclical periods in which presidents serve (Skowronek 2011); and the rhetorical style used by presidents and their ability to motivate people (Kernell 2006).

One of the main approaches suggested by Wayne and other scholars is to assess presidents according to character-based leadership qualities (Barber 1992; Renshon 1975). It has often been

said that, in the presidency, character is king (Shogun 1999). Character transcends personality insofar as presidents like Kennedy and Reagan benefited from their charm and likeability, but were made of something more. But it is an altogether more challenging task to try and define character and examine its impact in the White House. For instance, would the fact that George H. W. Bush went back on his pledge, “Read my lips, no new taxes” be a betrayal and character flaw or would it be better understood as being flexible in the face of the realities of the situation? Nor is character simply a matter of being ethical. Jimmy Carter and Calvin Coolidge were ethical individuals but neither one is rated highly by scholars or has been said to have been made of the “right stuff” for presidential greatness. On the other hand, FDR could be coldly calculating and disingenuous but he is rated as one of the nation’s greatest presidents and is sometimes held up as the standard by which all presidents in modern times are judged.

Indeed, character transcends a lack of scandal or a penchant for honesty. Yet, many presidents, such as Nixon, have been ruined by scandal. Others such as Clinton and Reagan had their legacies blemished by scandal, but ended their presidencies quite popular. Scholars are still deciding on the proper impact of the Lewinsky and Iran-Contra scandals on the Clinton and Reagan legacies, just as the debate continues over Johnson’s impressive legislative record (that included the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and Medicare in 1965) versus the Vietnam War and Clinton’s budget surpluses and economic growth versus the lies surrounding the affair with his intern, Monica Lewinsky. Marital infidelity has not harmed other presidents, just as being slave owners has not denied Washington and Jefferson from their lofty rankings. To be sure, not all scandals are created equal; a case in point is the nature of the differences between the scandals associated with President Nixon—which were crimes of *commission*—and the scandals of President Grant—which were crimes of *omission*. At the midpoint of his presidency, President Obama managed to avoid a serious scandal or ethical brouhaha. Careful analysis is needed of the nature and extent of his character—that is to say, his judgment, disposition, worldview, and personal style (Barber 1992; Renshon 1975).

### *Momentous Presidency*

The size, scope, and roles of the federal government have grown under Obama’s presidency, largely in response to the extraordinary

array of domestic, fiscal, and international challenges he faced upon assuming the office. However, the course of action taken by the president also reflects his philosophical views and personal experiences. But, even before Obama, the office can safely be said to scarcely resemble the office held by Washington, Lincoln, or even the Roosevelts. Despite the limitations imposed on the presidency by the cautious Framers, the office has grown to become the most dominant force in the American political system. The evolution and growth of the office have been in response to crises and changes in society, as well as presidential character and viewpoints. This continues to be the case under Obama who, like so many of his predecessors, used the “bully pulpit” and an enlarged reading of the powers discussed in Article II of the Constitution.

So too has Obama faced impossibly high expectations from the public and the legacy of the “imperial presidency” described by Schlesinger, whereby the sheer array of interest groups, rising expectations, and both the array and complexity of challenges pose nearly insurmountable obstacles for the president (Schlesinger Jr. 2004). As President Carter admitted, “When things go bad you get entirely too much blame. And I have to admit that when things go good, you get entirely too much credit” (Hodgson 1980: 25). The inherent paradoxes of the presidency seem to be more challenging than ever. As Cronin and Genovese (1998/2009) noted, the public has impossible and unrealistic expectations, wanting the president to address every problem while distrusting the centralized power necessary to do so; the clamor for nonpartisan and bipartisan approaches is more prevalent than ever while society struggles with the most bitter partisanship and venomous political tone in decades; and the “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” aspect of the Oval Office is more pronounced than ever. At the same time, Obama was confronted with challenges on par to the Great Depression faced by FDR, the Cuban Missile Crisis faced by Kennedy, the social upheaval faced by Johnson and Nixon, and the threat of terrorism faced by George W. Bush.

It is difficult to evaluate a president at midterm. So much remains in his administration and often the first two years are dramatically different than the next two years, just as first terms are often different than second terms. Such was the case with Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush. Scholars have not yet had the advantage of reading the Obama papers or the benefits of hindsight. Accordingly, this evaluation does not pretend to be the definitive word. Far from it; years will pass before a conclusive account can

be forwarded. However, this book does offer a relatively comprehensive account of numerous significant policy issues faced by Obama, a dispassionate historical examination of the events surrounding the Obama presidency, and a preliminary assessment of the major facets of his presidency, character, and administration.

Washington and Lincoln continue to loom large in the pantheon of the presidency, just as all modern presidents continue to serve—and struggle—with the shadow of FDR about them. As the yardsticks by which all presidents are measured, many have fallen short, just as there have been successes and failures in the history of the office. It is hard to say where Obama will end up in the presidential ratings, but the bar has been set high and the moment in history that faced him has been among the most challenging ever.

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