

Identifying Families in C-SPAN's U.S. Presidential Ratings: 2000, 2009, and 2017

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ABSTRACT

Since the inauguration of George Washington in 1789, the United States of America has seen the governance of some 44 individual presidents. Although such presidents share a variety of attributes, they still differ from one another on many others. Significantly, these traits may be used to construct distinct sets of “families” of presidents throughout American history. By comparatively analyzing data from experts on the U.S. presidency – in this case, the C-SPAN Presidential Historians Surveys from 2000, 2009, and 2017 – this article identifies a consistent set of six presidential families: the All Stars; the Conservative Visionaries; the Postwar Progressives; the Average Joes; the Forgettables; and the Regrettables. In situating these categories in history, this article argues that U.S. presidents can be accurately organized into cohesive, like-performing families whose constituents share a common set of criteria.

Introduction

Since the establishment of the executive branch in 1789, the United States of America has seen the administration of some forty-four presidents. Across several metrics, these presidents have differed considerably from one another. From the time in which they served, to the length of their term, to the political party they represented, and to the legislation they passed – each president was a distinct individual with his own achievements, failures, and legacies. Current American historians, however, must acknowledge the central fact that presidents are not created equal.

Some presidents, such as James K. Polk or William McKinley, made their mark on history by resorting to war with foreign nations; while others, such as John Adams and Dwight Eisenhower, chose to avoid it. Some presidents, such as Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson, left a legacy in their attempts to

expand civil liberties for the American citizenry, whereas others, like Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan, were tarnished by their indifference or outright opposition to that aim. Many presidents struggled to maintain the widespread support of the electorate amidst scandal, economic decline, or failures on the world stage, while certain presidents, including Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, were able to sustain their popularity through charisma, public engagement, favorable legislation, and other means.

As political parties search for the particular elements that define outstanding leadership – which we term the *optimal elements* – the goal of this analysis is to identify both the number and composition of those unique groups or families of presidents. That is, whereas all presidents are in their own way unique, many still share a variety of traits with others to form a presidential family. In analyzing these families, this article can provide historians with the necessary guidance to define future presidents and perhaps redefine past ones.

Historiography

In their efforts to identify the optimal elements of presidential greatness, scholars of American history have typically turned to the most celebrated, most controversial, or most recent presidents. Yet the study of the presidents as a collective body can serve as an informative method for determining the metrics of presidential success. Empirical studies on presidential performance are limited and relatively recent; nonetheless, they reveal certain theories that may lead historians to identify the optimal elements of a president.

Jeffrey E. Cohen (2003), professor of political science at Fordham University, for example, argued that the most important predictor of U.S. presidential greatness is the number of years the president served as head of the executive branch. Cohen held that the American public tends to reward presidents with a second term when they meet two criteria: first, they preside over times of prosperity rather than hardship; and second, they are deemed successful in dealing with issues as opposed to being incapable of resolving them. Presiding over good times and successful problem solving can manifest in the forms of effective economic management, keeping the country at peace, or involving the country in a popular war that appears to likely end in victory – all of which are favorable among the American electorate. This explains why multi-term presidents such as George Washington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt are ranked highly by American historians: Washington oversaw a booming economy in the early years of the republic; Theodore Roosevelt maintained peace in a time of growing international tension; and Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared war on Japan after the attack on Pearl Harbor in the Second World War. In Cohen's view,

this factor explains why most of the highest-ranking presidents are ranked the way they are.¹

Another theory on presidential success comes from David R. Henderson and Zachary Gochenour (2013), who considered the relation between the intensity of war and presidential rankings. Hender and Gochenour, professors of economics at the Naval Postgraduate School and James Madison University, respectively, argue that there is a positive correlation between the casualties of war during a president's time in office and the president's relative greatness. That is, as more soldiers are killed in action, the perception of the war's significance increases; in turn, the perception of the acting president's importance increases similarly, leaving historians to judge them more favorably if victory is achieved. Presidents who oversaw major wars – such as Abraham Lincoln with the 360,000 Union deaths in the Civil War, Woodrow Wilson with the 116,000 American deaths in the First World War, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt with the 420,000 American deaths in the Second World War – do, indeed, rank higher than most presidents who stayed out of wars or were only involved in minor ones. This, according to Henderson and Gochenour, indicates why wartime presidents often surpass their peers in presidential rankings.²

Still, another theory comes from Curt Nichols (2012), professor of political science at Baylor University, who contended that the key determinant is neither the length of a president's term nor the number of casualties in war, but rather the cultural context at the time of evaluation. This context determines which attributes historians will emphasize when evaluating past presidents of a different cultural period. That is to say, as the nature of the American political culture became increasingly progressive over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, so too did American historians. In turn, these historians demonstrate a cultural-level bias in favor of the so-called “progressive” presidents. This includes: Abraham Lincoln, who issued the Emancipation Proclamation and championed the Reconstruction Amendments to abolish slavery, ensure due process for all citizens, and grant universal male suffrage; Harry Truman, who passed anti-lynching legislation, guaranteed fair employment practices in the civil service, and banned segregation in the armed forces; and Lyndon Johnson, who spearheaded the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 to challenge discriminatory laws in the areas of voting, housing, and jobs. By pushing for

¹ Jeffrey E. Cohen, “The Polls: Presidential Greatness as seen in the Mass Public: An Extension and Application of the Simonton Model,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2003), 913-924.

² David R. Henderson & Zachary Gochenour, “War and Presidential Greatness,” *Independent Review* 17, no. 4 (2013), 505-516.

the expansion of civil rights within their time, these presidents have come to be seen as uniquely progressive – a reputation that only serves to improve their standing, Nichols argues, among modern presidential historians.³

None of these theories, to be sure, are perfect: Cohen's theory does not account for those presidents who were multi-term but have been deemed failures by historians, such as George W. Bush. Henderson and Gochenour cannot account for the success presidents who stayed out of major wars like Thomas Jefferson. And Nichols cannot account for more conservative presidents who have maintained their status in spite of progressive critiques, most notably Ronald Reagan. Still, these authors provide a useful framework for understanding the determinants and what is missing in evaluations of the U.S. presidency.

Beyond the theories on determining presidential greatness, other scholars have attempted to formulate a framework for evaluating U.S. presidents. The most famous scholar in this field was the noted presidential historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, a biographer and special advisor to President John F. Kennedy in the early-1960s. In his survey of American presidents, Schlesinger (1997) asked historians to designate each president from George Washington to Bill Clinton (save for William Henry Harrison and James Garfield) in one of five categories: *Great*, *Near Great*, *Average*, *Below Average*, and *Failure*. In ranking the presidents, historians designated Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, both Roosevelts, and others as *Great* or *Near Great*. Alternatively, presidents such as Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Harding, Hoover, Nixon, and others were designated as *Failure* or *Below Average*. Between these two was the *Average* category, which had all of the remaining presidents, including Madison, Carter, Ford, and others.⁴ Schlesinger's study served as not only as an important benchmark for ranking past presidents, but also in creating a system for ranking by later scholars.⁵

³ Curt Nichols, "The Presidential Ranking Game: Critical Review and Some New Discoveries," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2012): 275-299.

⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "Rating the Presidents: Washington to Clinton," *Political Science Quarterly* 112, no. 2 (1997), 179-90.

⁵ For other studies of the U.S. presidency, see John Balz, "Ready to Lead on Day One: Predicting Presidential Greatness from Political Experience," *American Political Science Association* 43, no. 4 (2010), 487-92; Meena Bose, "Presidential Ratings: Lessons and Liabilities," *White House Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003), 3-19; George C. Edwards III, *Predicting the Presidency: The Potential of Persuasive Leadership* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); James P. Pfiffner, "Ranking the Presidents: Continuity and Volatility," *White House Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003), 23-34; Richard M. Pious, "Reflections of a Presidency Rater," *White House Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003), 63-70; Brandon Rottinghaus & Justin S. Vaughn, "Presidential Greatness and Political Science: Assessing the 2014 APSA Presidents and Executive Politics Section Presidential Greatness Survey," *Cambridge* 50, no. 3 (2017), 824-30; and Arthur M. Simon & Joseph E. Uscinski, "Prior Experience Predicts Presidential Performance," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2012), 514-548.

The present analysis addresses a unique facet concerning the question of presidential greatness, arguing that U.S. presidents may be accurately grouped into cohesive, like-performing “families” whose constituents share a common set of criteria. We utilize the C-SPAN Presidential Historians Surveys from 2000, 2009, and 2017 to identify the fewest yet still comprehensive set of families of U.S. presidents, so grouped according to similar profiles of performance indices. By this, we do not seek to identify the optimal elements of presidential greatness, but rather combine as many professional rankings of presidents so as to highlight the statistical patterns in each family that is observed. The result will be a tidy set of presidential families that should inform the designation of future presidents and offer a deeper understanding of past ones.

Method

For this analysis, we used the U.S. presidential rankings as provided by C-SPAN’s Presidential Historians Surveys, as assessed by 91 presidential historians and other experts. Each of ten indices were ranked using a ten-point Likert scale (1 = ‘not effective’ to 10 = ‘very effective’); scores were averaged across the raters, and each of the ten scores were summed to derive a total score for each president. The ten indices – complete with historical examples – are as follows:

1: *Public Persuasion (P)*. This metric involves expressing integrity, such as Washington’s record as a Commander and Founding Father; expressing competence, such as Lincoln’s management of the Civil War; expressing relatability, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his fireside chats; expressing patriotism, such as Reagan in speaking on “American values”; reflecting the voice of the people, such as Reagan reading letters from citizens on national television; speaking eloquently, such as Kennedy in his Inaugural Address or his Address at Rice University; and maintaining high approval ratings, such as Kennedy in maintaining a 70 percent average approval rating through his term.

2: *Crisis Leadership (CL)*. This metric involves leading the country through war, such as Polk in the Mexican-American War; recovering the country from economic hardship, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the Great Depression; and effectively responding to uprisings, natural disasters, epidemics, and other issues requiring leadership, such as Washington’s response to the Whiskey Rebellion.

3: *Economic Management (E)*. This metric involves establishing or maintaining institutions to develop the economy, such as Washington’s charter of the First National Bank; reducing the deficit, such as Clinton;

reducing unemployment, inflation, or inequality, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson, respectively; stimulating growth during a recession, such as Obama amidst the Great Recession; and initiating economic modernization, such as Lincoln's transition to an industrial economy in the Civil War.

4: Moral Authority (M). This metric involves avoiding scandal – the opposite of Nixon with Watergate; expressing support for social justice, such as Eisenhower's confrontation with Governor Orval Faubus in the Little Rock Crisis; and demonstrating compassion and empathy, such as Lincoln visiting Union soldiers in the hospital.

5: International Relations (I). This metric involves supporting allies in times of crisis, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt's intervention in the Second World War; normalizing relations with strategic countries, such as Nixon's visit to China; mediating peace between countries, such as Theodore Roosevelt in the Treaty of Portsmouth; conducting just interventions, such as Truman in the Korean War; challenging authoritarianism abroad, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt with Germany and Italy; and attaining or maintaining a positive perception of America throughout the world, such as George H.W. Bush in the aftermath of the Cold War.

6: Administrative Skills (A). This metric involves choosing competent advisors, such as Lincoln's appointment of Edwin M. Stanton, William H. Seward, and Salmon P. Chase; maintaining transparency, such as Theodore Roosevelt inviting reporters to the White House; limiting turnover in Cabinet, such as Wilson; and avoiding scandal.

7: Relations with Congress (RC). This metric involves respect for Congressional power, such as Washington's limited use of the presidential veto; securing bipartisan support for legislation, such as Lyndon Johnson with the Great Society; and avoiding legislative deadlock, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt through the New Deal.

8: Vision / Setting an Agenda (V). This metric involves visions related to unity, such as Washington calling for unity among the states of the new republic; equality, such as Lyndon Johnson calling for racial equality; freedom, such as Lincoln calling for abolition; and setting a clear agenda to do so, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt outlining his economic reforms in his first one hundred days.

9: Pursuit of Equal Justice for All (J). This metric involves the pursuit of equal rights for women, such as Lyndon Johnson's passage of Executive Order 11375 (to ban discrimination on the basis of sex for employment in

the U.S. federal workforce and by U.S. federal contractors); workers and low-income individuals, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt's enactment of Social Security; racial minorities, such as Lincoln's advocacy of the Reconstruction Amendments; religious minorities, such as Washington's ratification of the Bill of Rights; and the LGBTQ community, such as Carter's opposition to the Briggs Initiative.

10: Performance within Context of Times (C). This metric involves effectively governing with few or no precedents, such as Washington as the first president; effectively governing in the context of military challenges, such as Polk in the Mexican-American War; effectively governing in the context of economic challenges, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the Great Depression; effectively governing in the context of political challenges, such as Lincoln during the secession of the Confederate States; and effectively governing in the context of social challenges, such as Theodore Roosevelt during the Anthracite Coal Strike.

Results

For each of the three years, we conducted a family analysis of the data, using Ward's method with squared Euclidean distances, so as to group similar presidents' profiles according to their average ratings on the ten indices.⁶ The precise number of families evident in the data is subjectively determined by visual inspection of the dendrogram – a diagram or tree of entities who join to similar entities sooner than dissimilar entities. The dendrograms in this study suggested six families, whose constituent members shared a common set of derivative index scores. More specifically, there were two main families that were each divided into three sub-families (see dendrogram Figures 1, 2, and 3). At the end of this article, Table 1 outlines (for each of 2000, 2009, 2017) the overall membership of liked-grouped presidents – including relative differences. For each family, in addition to constituent members, we note the average scores for *Persuasion (P)*, *Crisis Leadership (CL)*, *Economic Management (E)*, *Moral Authority (M)*, *International Relations (I)*, *Administrative Skills (A)*, *Relations with Congress (RC)*, *Vision (V) or Setting an Agenda, Pursuit of Equal Justice for All (J)*, and *Performance in Context of Times (C)*. We further provide a visual radar chart of the various families so as to facilitate discussion (Figures 4, 5, 6), wherein families whose indices occupy the outer ring of the chart are considered superior presidents.

⁶ See Brian S. Everitt, *Cluster Analysis, 3rd Edition* (London: Edward Arnold, 1993) and A.D. Gordon, "A Review of Hierarchical Classification," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 150, no. 2 (1987), 119-137.

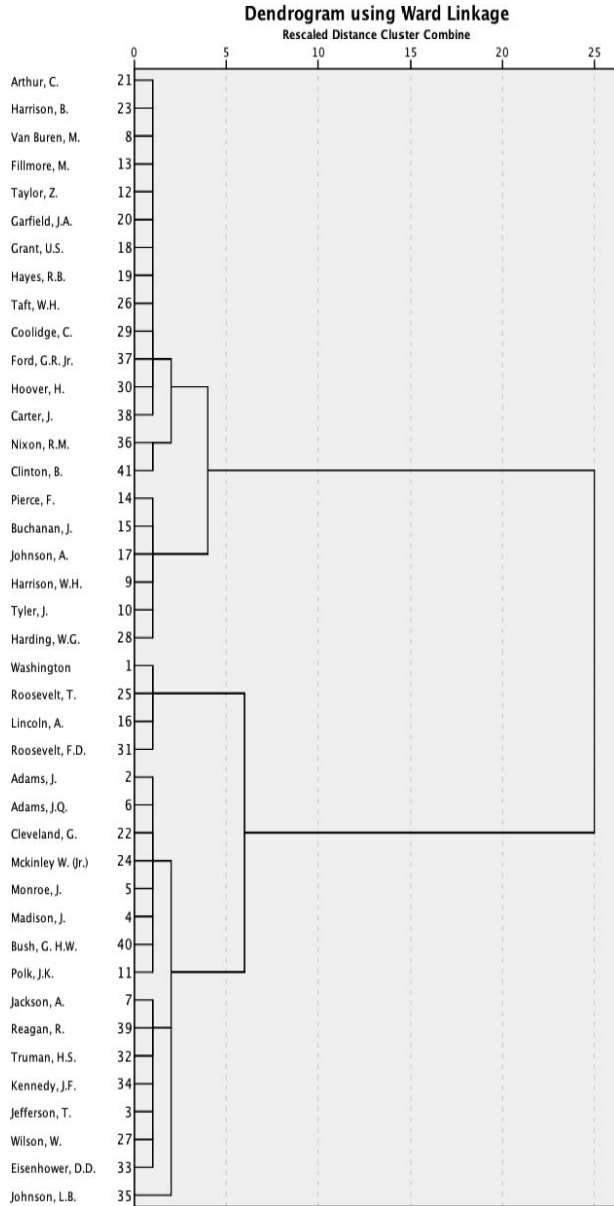


FIGURE 1. Family Analysis Dendrogram, 2000.

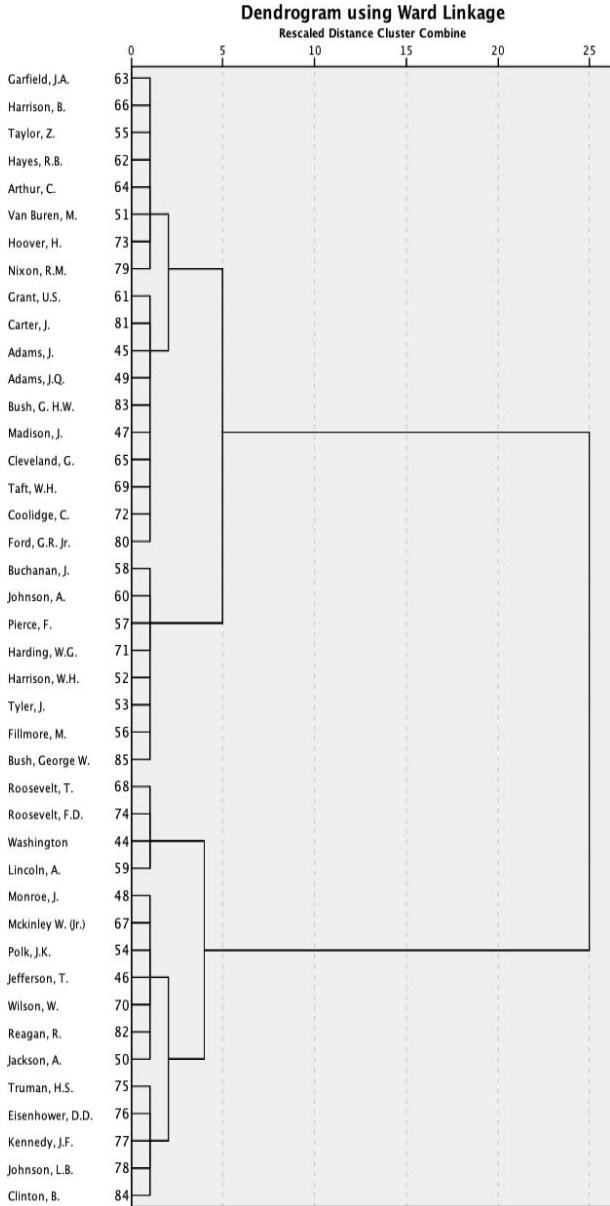


FIGURE 2. Family Analysis Dendrogram, 2009.

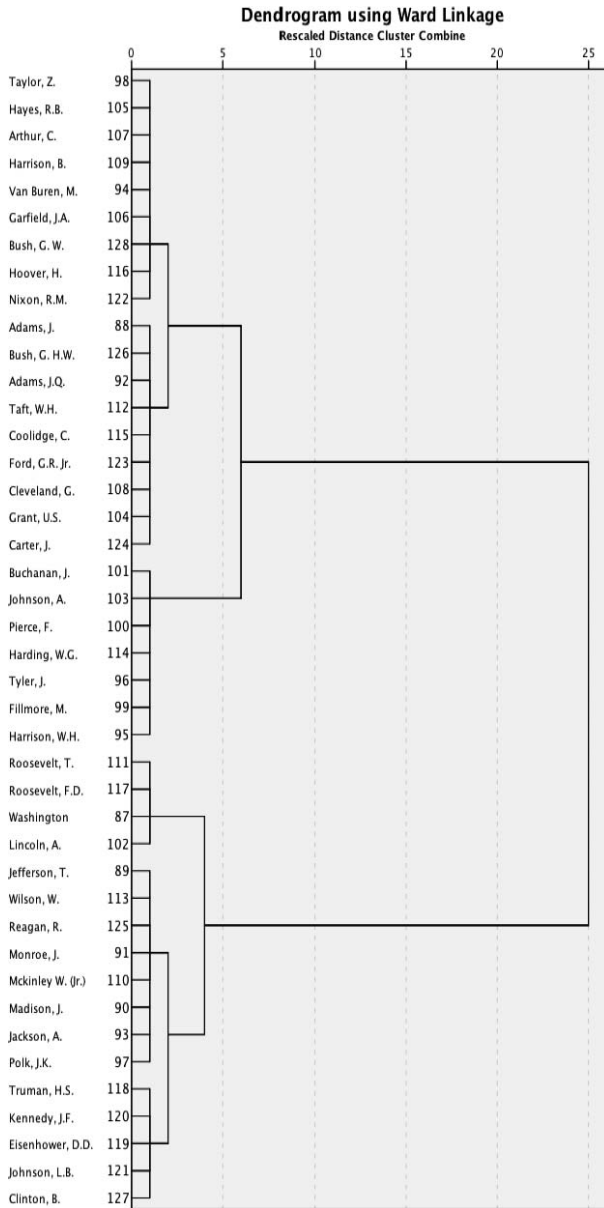


FIGURE 3. Family Analysis Dendrogram, 2017.

TABLE 1. Historian Presidential Average Ratings by Cluster Family: 2000, 2009, 2017.

C-SPAN Presidential Historians Survey, 2000										
Family	P	CL	E	M	I	A	RC	V	J	C
Family-1a	92	93	80	92	87	80	75	93	71	93
Members: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt										
Family-1b	55	61	55	64	68	60	54	61	48	60
Members: John Adams, James Madison, James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, James K. Polk, Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, George H.W. Bush										
Family-1c	79	73	62	70	67	64	64	77	60	72
Members: Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan										
Family-2a	43	41	41	51	48	48	47	41	43	44
Members: Martin Van Buren, Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James Garfield, Chester Arthur, Benjamin Harrison, William Howard Taft, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter										
Family-2b	34	27	34	31	39	33	30	27	27	27
Members: Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton										
Family-2c	57	49	64	20	65	58	41	48	61	46
Members: William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Warren G. Harding										

TABLE 1. (Continued)

C-SPAN Presidential Historians Survey, 2009										
Family	P	CL	E	M	I	A	RC	V	J	C
Family-1a	91	90	77	89	84	81	76	92	69	93
Members: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt										
Family-1b	73	68	58	64	67	63	63	76	39	69
Members: Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, William McKinley, Woodrow Wilson, Ronald Reagan										
Family-1c	69	69	68	59	66	66	62	68	75	69
Members: Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Bill Clinton										
Family-2a	46	50	48	59	57	54	49	47	50	53
Members: John Adams, James Madison, John Quincy Adams, Ulysses S. Grant, Grover Cleveland, William Howard Taft, Calvin Coolidge, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush										
Family-2b	41	40	41	40	49	52	45	41	38	41
Members: Martin Van Buren, Zachary Taylor, Rutherford B. Hayes, James Garfield, Chester Arthur, Benjamin Harrison, Herbert Hoover, Richard Nixon										
Family-2c	32	30	32	29	38	33	34	38	27	30
Members: William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Warren G. Harding, George W. Bush.										

TABLE 1. (Continued)

C-SPAN Presidential Historians Survey, 2017										
Family	P	CL	E	M	I	A	RC	V	J	C
Family-1a	83	82	79	91	87	82	79	93	70	93
Members: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt										
Family-1b	75	70	61	67	68	64	64	75	41	70
Members: Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, William McKinley, Woodrow Wilson, Ronald Reagan										
Family-1c	75	74	70	63	68	68	66	73	76	73
Members: Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Bill Clinton										
Family-2a	49	55	52	63	61	56	52	51	54	56
Members: John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Ulysses S. Grant, Grover Cleveland, William Howard Taft, Calvin Coolidge, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush										
Family-2b	46	44	43	46	50	52	47	44	42	45
Members: Martin Van Buren, Zachary Taylor, Rutherford B. Hayes, James Garfield, Chester Arthur, Benjamin Harrison, Herbert Hoover, Richard Nixon, George W. Bush										
Family-2c	35	30	37	31	41	36	34	32	27	32
Members: William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Warren G. Harding										

Discussion

Using three years of the C-SPAN Presidential Historians Survey, the present analysis sought to determine the number and composition of empirical families of U.S. presidents; we consistently uncovered six families. While the data produced certain modest deviations, there remained a relatively stable composition of presidential families, as follows:

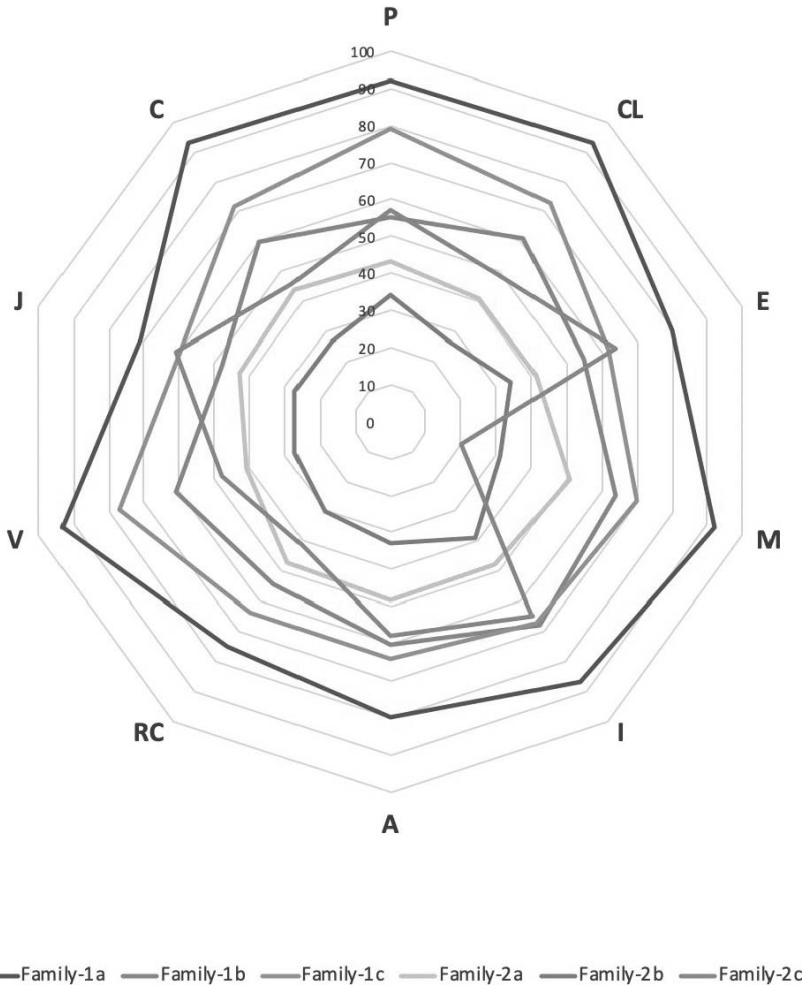


FIGURE 4. Family Comparison Radar Chart, 2000.

The *All-Stars* consisted of Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln and appeared in all three sets of analysis. In his theoretical analysis, Schlesinger (1997) identified this same family as the *Great Presidents*. Though none of these presidents were infallible, the consistency of the performance metrics speaks for their rankings. Specifically, these presidents were typified by high scores on all indices, but a moderate score on *Justice*. Other presidents with high rankings – including Eisenhower, Truman, and Jefferson – maintain noticeably lower scores, indicating their separation from the *All Stars*. A

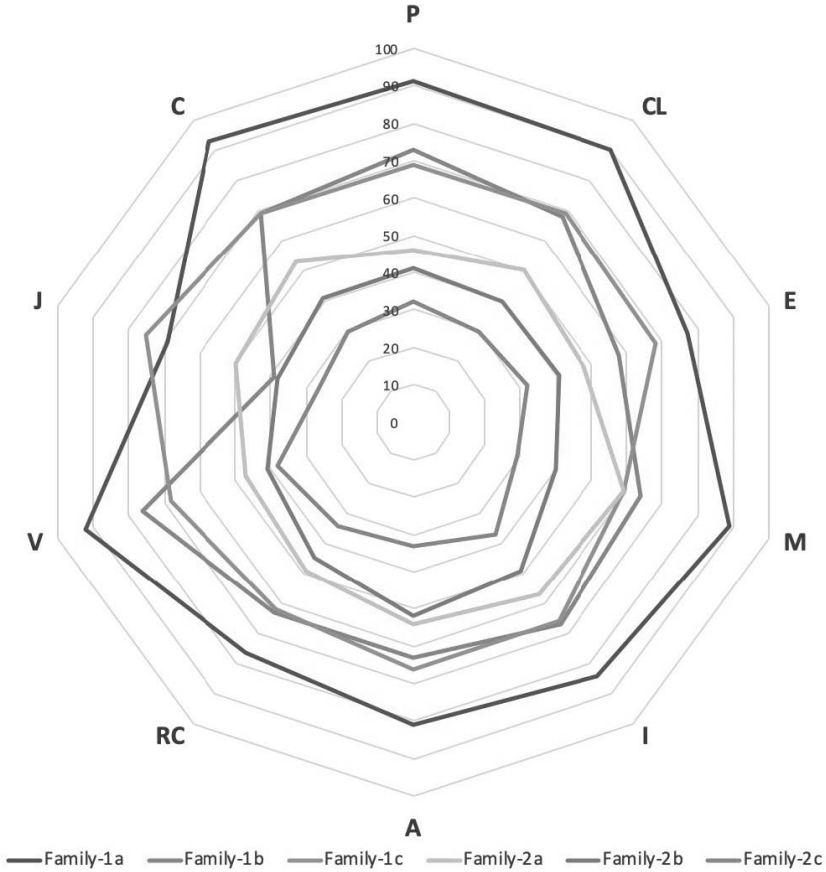


FIGURE 5. Family Comparison Radar Chart, 2009.

review of the accomplishments from members of this elite category may underline the optimal elements of performance:

Recognition for George Washington is centered on how he established the tradition of the two-term limit; checked the power of Congress and the executive branch by establishing the Supreme Court (*viz.* Judiciary Act, 1789); instituted the cabinet system and appointed skilled politicians in cabinet (e.g., Alexander Hamilton to the Treasury, Secretary of State John Jay, and War Secretary Henry Knox); suppressed the Whiskey Rebellion; encouraged unity between political factions; built a strong relationship with Britain (*viz.* Jay's Treaty, 1795); maintained neutrality in the French Revolutionary Wars (*viz.* the Proclamation of Neutrality, 1793); protected American shipping from Barbary pirates by strengthening the Navy (*viz.* the

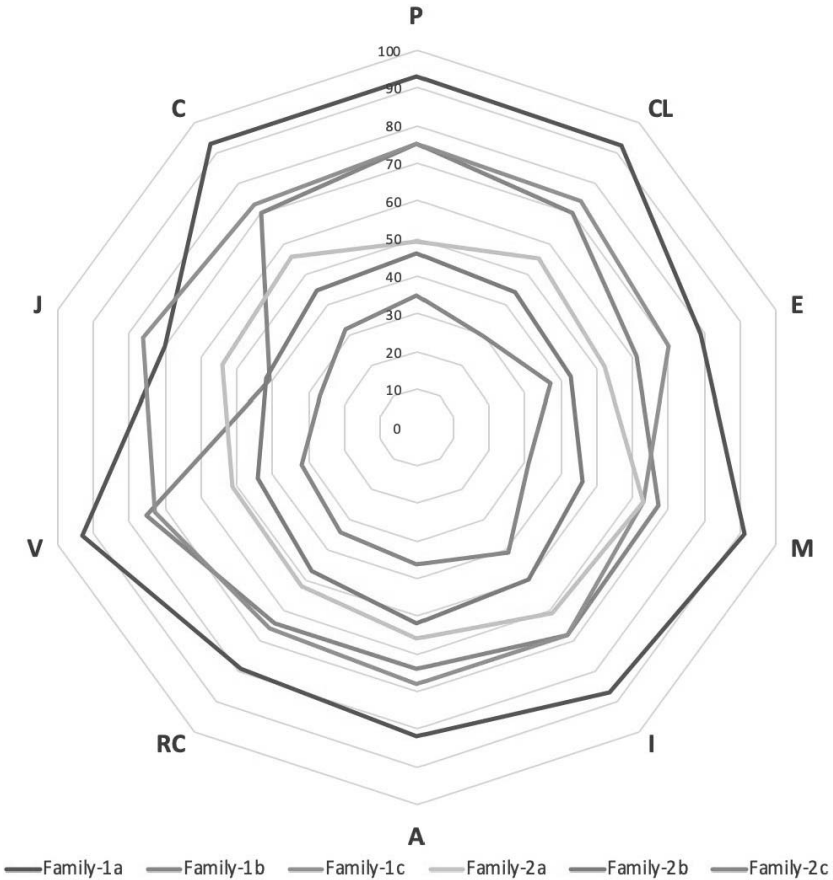


FIGURE 6. Family Comparison Radar Chart, 2017.

Naval Act, 1794); expanded into the Ohio Valley (viz. the Treaty of Greenville, 1795); secured the right for ships to sail on the Mississippi River free of duties (viz. Pinckney’s Treaty, 1795); founded American values (viz. First Inaugural Address, Second Inaugural Address, and Farewell Address); and set a precedent for high moral character in the office.⁷

For Abraham Lincoln, recognition is centered on how he led the country through the Civil War; secured the emancipation (viz. the Emancipation Proclamation and the Reconstruction Amendments); established the

⁷ For biographies on George Washington, see Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 2010); Joseph E. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004); and David S. Heidler & Jeanne T. Heidler, *Washington’s Circle: The Creation of the President* (New York: Penguin, 2016).

national banking system (viz. the National Banking Act, 1863); stimulated economic growth and transformation; promoted the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad (viz. the Pacific Railroad Acts, 1862); provided settlers with tracts of land to facilitate Westward Expansion (viz. the Homestead Acts, 1862); introduced the first federal income tax; redefined American values (viz. the House Divided Speech, the First Inaugural Address, the Gettysburg Address, and Second Inaugural Address); and maintained high moral character in the office.⁸

Theodore Roosevelt, meanwhile, is praised for having curbed the monopolistic power of big business (viz. the Elkins Act, 1903 and Hepburn Act, 1906); limiting the power of industrial managers in labour disputes (viz. the Square Deal); spearheading conservation efforts (viz. The Newlands Reclamation Bill and the United States Forest Service); implementing laws to check adulteration and misbranding (viz. the Pure Food and Drug Act, 1906 and Meat Inspection Act, 1906); mediating the resolution of the Russo-Japanese War (viz. Treaty of Portsmouth); overseeing the construction of the Panama Canal; expanding the U.S. Navy; and maintaining high moral character in the office.⁹

Lastly, Franklin Delano Roosevelt is recognized for having led the country through the Second World War; providing crucial aid to the Allies before the war; helping found the United Nations; pulling the country out of the Great Depression by initiating the New Deal and mobilizing for war; implementing sweeping relief programs (viz. the Civilian Conservation Corp, 1933; the Civil Works Administration, 1933; and the Farm Security Administration, 1937); passing legislation to improve working conditions (viz. Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, the forty-hour work week, the national minimum wage, the time-and-a-half pay system for overtime in certain jobs, and the prohibition of child labour in most industries); introducing Social Security (viz. Social Security Act, 1935); signing the first national program directed against employment discrimination (viz. Executive Order 8802); instituting laws to promote financial security (viz. the Glass-Steagall Act, 1933; the Emergency Banking Act, 1933; and the National Industrial Recovery Act, 1933); redefining American values (viz. the First Inaugural Address, Arsenal of Democracy Speech, Four Freedoms

⁸ For biographies on Abraham Lincoln, see David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005); and James M. McPherson, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

⁹ For biographies on Theodore Roosevelt, see Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Modern Library 2001); Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (New York: Modern Library, 2002); and Edmund Morris, *Colonel Roosevelt* (New York: Modern Library, 2010).

Speech, and Second Bill of Rights); and further maintaining high moral character in the office.¹⁰

In reviewing these accomplishments, we argue that the presidents of the *All Stars* all shared common traits with one another. Each president maintained genuine admiration from the public; responded to crises with courage and determination; worked to mitigate material hardship among the citizenry; expressed principle, integrity, and honor in their leadership; enhanced the nation's status on the world stage; respected the limits and responsibilities of their position; implemented lasting legislation while in office; articulated an inspiring vision for their country; and performed well within the context of their times. Part of this success is merely due to the circumstances the presidents were given. Their response to those circumstances, however, is also significant. For example, Washington's response to the crisis of the French Revolution was one that many historians agree to have been beneficial to the national interest, but this response was in no way inevitable. Washington, with the assistance of his advisors, had to determine what course of action was most favorable for the country – a calculation that required talented leadership. Had another president been in office, it is not certain that the country would have fared as well in its earliest – and most vulnerable – years as it did under Washington. As such, the high performance of the *All Stars* was just as much, if not more, the result of individual leadership as it was the conditions that confronted them.

Beyond such presidents, the *Conservative Visionaries* consisted of Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, James Polk, William McKinley, Woodrow Wilson, and Ronald Reagan. Across the measures, they averaged moderate to high scores on all 10 indices except *Justice* (mean of 40). The defining characteristic of these presidents was their political vision, which called for a transformation of politics and society to mark a “new era” in American history. This can be seen in the decisive shifts defined by the agrarian populist agenda associated with Jackson, the liberal internationalist agenda associated with Wilson, and the neoliberal agenda associated with Reagan, all of which marked a departure from the supposed faults of previous administrations. More specifically, this vision often emphasized strength, assertiveness, and force for the purpose of national power. Expressions of this vision can be seen in such examples as Monroe's issuance of the Monroe Doctrine, McKinley's declaration of the Spanish-American War, or Jackson's opposition to the Central Bank of the United States. However,

¹⁰ For biographies on Franklin Delano Roosevelt, see H.W. Brands, *Traitor to his Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (New York: Penguin, 2009); Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994); and Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

we observe that despite relative consistency among its presidents, this family nonetheless includes Woodrow Wilson, whose record stands out as an anomaly compared to his counterparts. Certain historians would be inclined to view Wilson as too progressive to fit into this category and instead place him in the *Postwar Progressives*. This is demonstrated by Wilson's history of progressive policies: while in office, he implemented a new federal income tax, a federal estate tax, and dramatically raised the top income tax rate; he increased regulations on trusts through the Federal Trade Commission Act (1914) and Clayton Antitrust Act (1914); he secured the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1919) to codify women's suffrage; and he attempted to create a peaceful international order through his pronouncement of the Fourteen Points during the First World War. Nonetheless, Wilson's progressive reputation has been contradicted by his less-than-progressive measures, including the suppression of First Amendment rights through the Espionage Act (1917) and Sedition Act (1918), his crackdown on socialists in the First Red Scare, his resegregation of the Civil Service, and his bellicose foreign policy in the Caribbean and Latin America. In that sense, therefore, Wilson stands out as less of an exception to the *Conservative Visionaries* than many observers would be led to believe.

The third family, the *Postwar Progressives*, consisted of Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Bill Clinton. Schlesinger similarly identified this family as the *Near Great Presidents*. Although the rating of historical context was premature in 2017 for Obama, a reanalysis using just nine indices (excluding *Context*) would also place Obama within this group. These presidents are broadly related by their progressive policies, particularly with regards to domestic matters. Aspects of those policies centered on the metrics of *Economic Management* and *Justice*, in which presidents attempted to expand the scope of the welfare state and the rights of marginalized groups. On the former, examples include Eisenhower's expansion of Social Security, Kennedy's support for anti-poverty legislation, and Johnson's initiation of the Great Society. On the latter, examples include Truman's endorsement of the Employment Act (1946), Johnson's passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and Voting Rights Act (1965), and Obama's issuance of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act (2009), all of which intended to broaden the rights of workers, Blacks, and women, respectively.

Curiously, we note that Eisenhower scores lower among family members on *Justice* (61 within a family average of 76). This becomes clear when accounting for Eisenhower's record on civil rights: despite declaring racial discrimination a national security issue, signing the Civil Rights Act of 1957, and challenging segregation in the Little Rock Crisis (1957), these measures were principally performative and limited in practice. In other

cases such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1954), the murder of Emmett Till (1955), and the Greensboro Sit-ins (1960), Eisenhower had the opportunity to intervene, yet chose not to act on the side of the Civil Rights Movement. At the same time, other members in the *Postwar Progressives* have been undermined by their own policies that were far from progressive: for example, Truman established loyalty review boards to prosecute suspected communists within executive departments through Executive Order 9835; Clinton adopted a “tough approach” on crime through the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (1994); and even Obama – considered one of the best presidents on *Justice* in the 2017 survey – has been criticized for overseeing the deportation of undocumented immigrants, failing to adequately confront the prison-industrial complex, and maintaining a hawkish foreign policy in the Libya, Syria, and Yemen, among other charges. Indeed, many so-called progressive presidents have passed conservative laws that undermine their reputation as true progressives. Thus, while we identify the more conservative Eisenhower as an outlier, he remains relatively comparable to most of his peers in the *Postwar Progressives*.

The fourth family, *The Average Joes*, consisted of John Adams, James Madison, John Quincy Adams, Ulysses S. Grant, Grover Cleveland, William Howard Taft, Calvin Coolidge, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and George H.W. Bush. Schlesinger similarly identified this family as the *Average Presidents*.¹¹ Their indices, as a family, reside chiefly at the 50 percent benchmark, but rarely exceed it. Their records, therefore, are neither exceptionally successful nor unsuccessful; they are strictly mediocre. This does not mean, however, that these presidents were devoid of achievements: Grant established the Department of Justice, prosecuted the Ku Klux Klan, and appointed Black and Jewish Americans to federal office; Carter negotiated the Panama Canal Treaties (1977), the Camp David Accords (1978), and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (1979); and George H.W. Bush pushed for German reunification, supported democratization in Eastern Europe, secured a decisive victory in the Gulf War (1990-91), and signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty II (1991). Nor does this mean that these presidents were without their failures: John Adams was tarnished by the Alien and Sedition Acts (1798); Grant was undermined by his inability to prevent the Crédit Mobilier and Whiskey Ring scandals (1872-75); and Ford was tainted by his decision to pardon President Nixon. Rather, it is that the legacies of these administrations, when taken together, result in a rating that is overall average.

¹¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., “Rating the Presidents,” *Political Science Quarterly* 112, no. 2 (1997): 189.

The fifth family, *the Forgettables*, consisted of Martin Van Buren, Zachary Taylor, Rutherford Hayes, James Garfield, Chester Arthur, Benjamin Harrison, Herbert Hoover, and Richard Nixon. This category was not defined by any particular successes or failures; rather, it was defined by the lack of those features. Most of these presidents retain a marginal status in the popular narratives of American history, with few accomplishments that have lasted the test of time. The position of *the Forgettables* is largely due to their historical distance (Taylor), the length of their terms (Garfield), or the lack of association with serious accomplishments for their time (Arthur). The notable exceptions to this definition, however, are Hoover and Nixon – neither of which follows the conventions of a “forgettable” president. Both governed within the last century; both served for at least one full term; and both presided over notable events in American history, the former over the Great Depression and the latter over the Vietnam War and the Watergate Scandal. It is apparent, therefore, that Nixon and Hoover do not neatly fit in this category despite the results of the data. Instead, we believe these two presidents would be better situated in the *Conservative Visionaries* or the *Regrettables* given their political ideology and performance.

And finally, *the Regrettables* consisted of William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Warren Harding, and George W. Bush. Schlesinger identified a combination of the *Forgettables* and *Regrettables* under the label *Below Average to Failure*.¹² While the *Forgettables* are largely linked by their collective lack of significant actions, the *Regrettables* are a different case. Here, the presidents in question are linked by their glaring failures in office. Some presidents, such as Pierce and Buchanan, were tarnished by their inability to resolve secessionist tensions and challenge the “Slave Power” in the years leading up to the Civil War. Some, such as Andrew Johnson, were tainted by their abuse of federal power and their opposition to the expansion of political and civil rights. Still, others such as George W. Bush were undermined by their blunders in foreign policy, economic management, and administrative order. Certain presidents within this category, such as Taylor and William Henry Harrison, may be deemed inappropriate for this category due to the length of their terms. However, for the sake of uniformity, we maintain that both figures, like all other presidents, must be still evaluated on their performance. Through this evaluation, it becomes evident that neither president performed well, regardless of their time in office. Importantly, we observe that each of the presidents in the *Regrettables* are fairly situated – much like their counterparts in the *All Stars* – with no particular outliers among them.

¹² Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., “Rating the Presidents,” *Political Science Quarterly* 112, no. 2 (1997): 189.

This suggests that the evaluation of presidents tends to be easier for those near the top and the bottom, but difficult among those in between.

Conclusion

This article faces certain limitations that restrict our understanding of U.S. presidents within their empirical families, four of which warrant mention. First, our analysis was based only on the C-SPAN Presidential Historians Surveys, which excludes rankings from other historians, political scientists, and organizations that may provide an alternative picture on U.S. presidents. Whereas measurement variability and reliability was likely minimized due to the large sample of experts ($N = 91$), the derivative families were reasonably consistent across the three years. Second, our analysis depended on some sources with a clear bias towards “progressive” presidents when composing their presidential rankings, including Clinton, Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and other figures. As a result, these presidents may be ranked higher than they deserve, and placed in the wrong presidential family. However, other scholars such as James Lindgren downplay this bias, noting that whereas more progressive (and usually Democratic) presidents tend to rank higher than more conservative (and usually Republican) presidents, this metric is not statistically significant in the overall rankings; as such, this limitation may be negligible. Third, our analysis is limited in its evaluation of more recent presidents such as Clinton, Bush Jr., and Obama, whose long-term successes and failures in the economy, international conflicts, and other matters have yet to be fully realized. Finally, we acknowledge our use of a data-driven methodology that rested on the outcome of the family analysis was based on the available data rather than comparing the data to an *a priori* (theory-driven) template. This route is common in both natural and social sciences, but it lacks the rigour of a theory-based hypothesis established prior to examining the data.

The study does not require any further measures of presidential greatness, nor should it remove any of the present measures. The present measures provided a comprehensive set of criteria in evaluating American presidents: *Public Persuasion* covered presidential integrity, competence, reliability, eloquence, patriotism, and popularity; *Crisis Leadership* covered war, financial panics, rebellions, natural disasters, epidemics, and other catastrophes; *Economic Management* covered the deficit, unemployment, inflation, economic growth, and economic development; *Moral Authority* covered scandals, professional behaviour, compassion, honesty, religiosity, and support for social justice; *International Relations* covered diplomacy, military interventions, the mediation of peace, and global standing; *Administrative Skills* covered the management of the executive branch; *Relations with Congress* covered respect for congressional jurisdiction and the

attainment of bipartisan support; *Vision* covered the imagination, innovation, and long-term objectives of a given president; and *Justice* covered the protection of rights for marginalized demographics, including women, workers, racial minorities, religious minorities, and the LGBTQ community.

Future research will require historians to seek additional data on the optimal elements of past presidents. To acquire this data, historians should turn to two main sources: First, presidential libraries can provide new documents to re-evaluate the successes and failures of more recent presidents whose legacies are still under review. This includes the William J. Clinton Library and Museum in evaluating Clinton, the George W. Bush Presidential Center in evaluating Bush Jr., and the Barack Obama Presidential Center in evaluating Obama. Second, presidential historians can be consulted to further inform our understandings of past presidents, particularly with regards to evaluating *Justice*. This includes such historians as Douglas Brinkley, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and Jon Meacham – among other experts in the field. We believe that these recommendations provide the necessary information to evaluate the performance of American presidents in history, both then and now.

Future American historians would do well to pose new questions to better understand the composition of U.S. presidential families: Which factors carry the most weight in determining presidential families? What is the relationship among different families? Which presidents would be considered “ill-defined” and what other families could they belong to? Lastly, upon the conclusion of their presidencies, which family will Donald Trump and Joe Biden be placed in and why? As transitions continue, the answers to these questions will further our understanding on the U.S. presidency and the factors of presidential performance.

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