

*Explaining Presidential Greatness:
Peace and Prosperity?*

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*Explaining Presidential Greatness:
Peace, Prosperity, and the Luck of Following Losers*

In 1948, Arthur Schlesinger Sr. (1948) published a ranking of American presidents based on the results of a poll of eminent historians in *Life* magazine. The results of that poll placed Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and recently deceased Franklin Roosevelt at the top of the list. Bringing up the rear were Franklin Pierce, Ulysses S. Grant, and Warren G. Harding. Since that time, dozens of surveys have tapped into the presidential evaluations of historians and political scientists and the presidential evaluations of the general public. For much of the sixty years since Schlesinger published the first formal poll results on presidential greatness (or executive ineptitude, depending upon your perspective), scholars have made frequent—albeit intermittent—efforts to identify just what factors determine which presidents earn the ranking of “great” and which presidents earn the ranking of “failure”.

In these recent popular polls, Franklin Delano Roosevelt tends to do quite well.¹ In the more academically-oriented polls, FDR also fairs relatively well; he’s rarely at the very top—that position tends to be taken by George Washington or Abraham Lincoln—but he’s always quite near the top. Surveys or polls of perceptions of presidential greatness also have a bottom of the list. Presidents who take the lowest positions include, pre-Civil War president Franklin Pierce, Civil War general Ulysses S. Grant, and early twentieth century Republican Warren Harding. The worst of the modern presidents—at least from the standpoint of these surveys—is nearly always Richard M. Nixon.

¹ Zogby International. 2008. “Roosevelt Holds Top Ranking on Presidential Greatness Scale.” <http://www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=1456>. Last viewed, April 15, 2008.

Somewhat surprisingly, the consistency with which all presidents are ranked—not just those at the very top and those at the very bottom—is substantial.

Research on presidential greatness has a much longer history than the date of Schlesinger's first survey would suggest. Collections of presidential biographies often address the relative success and stature of the presidents. In some cases these relative assessments are somewhat rigorous; in other cases, they are not. Some scholars focus primarily on the set of presidents they consider great—Landy and Milkis's (2001) *Presidential Greatness*, is a prime example—while others focus on a group of presidents that includes the great, not-so-great, and the failures.²

The literature focusing on all of the presidents includes two distinct components. One aspect of this literature involves the construction and development of ratings/rankings of the various presidents—often on multiple dimensions—by the researchers themselves. An excellent example of this type of work is the recent book by Felzenberg (2008), *The Presidents We Deserve*. In this work, Felzenberg ranks each president on a set of six personal or policy-oriented dimensions, including character, vision, competence, economic policy, preserving and extending liberty, and defense policy (broadly understood). While Felzenberg references a variety of data sources (on which these rankings are apparently based), he makes no attempt to calculate scores on any of the individual dimensions, so while the scores themselves are quantitative, they are generated from a qualitative, impressionistic, and individualistic process.

An alternative to this sort of single-author, multi-president evaluation scheme is the examination of the rankings and scores based on the results of public opinion and

² James David Barber's (1992) book on presidential character would fall into this category.

expert polls focusing on presidential greatness or presidential evaluations more generally. Schlesinger's late 1940's poll was only the first of many polls fielded to determine the professional evaluations of historians and political scientists on the issue of presidential greatness. A comparable number of public opinion polls have also been fielded to address just this issue. Research in this vein looks for the common factors which explain the variation in either expert or general public evaluations of the president. A variety of explanations for presidential rankings and scores have been suggested—some a little odd³—but the general consensus in the literature is that a relatively small number of factors actually explain the overwhelming preponderance of the variation in either professional/elite evaluations of presidential greatness or mass public evaluations of presidential greatness. I will discuss these factors in greater detail in the next section.

The research presented in this paper is a contribution to this last component/aspect of the literature of presidential greatness. I identify a surprising gap in the current research on presidential greatness. I suggest a response to that shortcoming and evaluate the empirical support for this response. I conclude with a discussion of the novel results presented in this paper and their significance for our understanding and future study of presidential greatness.

In the next section, I describe the existing literature on professional/elite evaluations and mass public evaluations of presidential greatness and identify and discuss what is generally considered the standard model (the Simonton model) for explaining the variation in presidential rankings and presidential scores. I then highlight the absence of any significant *performance* oriented criteria from the Simonton model, and I suggest a

³ At least one scholar suggested that presidential greatness is largely a function of height (see Sommers 1992). There is some limited empirical support for this position.

potentially important performance criteria—real income growth—that is prominent in presidential election outcome models.⁴ I then provide a rationale for the potential inclusion of this variable in the “standard” model of presidential greatness.

In the subsequent section, the data and methods section, I describe my dependent variable and my independent variables. Though I have more than one indicator for my dependent variable (in an effort to demonstrate the robustness of my primary result), I also discuss the high level of consistency of elite presidential evaluations across time, mass public evaluations across time, and the consistency of elite and mass public evaluations with each other. Except for my new variable, the independent variables are taken—to the extent possible—from existing work. I describe these variables and discuss, where relevant, the potential implications of differing operational definitions of these variables. Finally, I briefly discuss the estimation procedure used to analyze the data and explain why other apparently reasonable alternatives were not chosen. I present the results in the following section and then end with a discussion of the substantive significance of the results and suggestions for future research along these lines suggested by this work.

Theory

⁴ In an early article on the determinants of presidential greatness, Simonton (1981) examined the relationship between presidential policy actions (i.e. number of major legislative acts passed, number of vetoes overturned, cabinet resignations, and war messages delivered) and found no relationship between these variables and presidential greatness. With the possible exception of number of major legislative acts, these factors are not indicators of *performance*. Even in the case of the number of major legislative acts, that figure does not obviously reflect presidential performance. After controlling for tenure in office (which is closely associated with the number of pieces of major legislation signed into law), there is no *major legislation* effect. Finally, the transformation of the federal government over the past century also calls into serious doubt the appropriateness of the raw total of major legislative acts over the course of an administration for the full historical range of the presidential greatness scores. Simonton concludes that “assessments of greatness cannot be predicted on the basis of major acts signed, vetoes overturned, war messages delivered, cabinet resignations, or even landslide victories at the polls” (1981:320).

What explains presidential greatness? What separates the great presidents from the near-greats, the also-rans, and the failures? Historians and psychologists dominate the literature on the study of presidential greatness. Not surprisingly, explanations of presidential greatness have tended to focus on either (1) historical eras or (2) personalistic criteria.⁵ Schlesinger pioneered the historical era approach (see, for example, Schlesinger (1986). In more recent work, McCann (1992 and 1995) argues that presidential rankings are a function of electoral support and the nature of the political times during which the presidents serve. Presidents who win large electoral victories during what Schlesinger refers to as “public” eras tend to be ranked very highly. Presidents who win by small margins and/or who serve during “private” eras receive lower rankings (McCann 1995).

The more psychologically-oriented strain of research has tended to focus less on the time period (and its social and political characteristics) in which a president served and more on the personal characteristics of a president. Simonton’s work is an excellent example of this aspect of the literature. Simonton, a psychologist, developed a model designed to explain the personal *attachments* to particular presidents and thus, indirectly, the variation in the evaluation of presidents. Simonton argues for the primacy of professional background (war hero), personal attributes (such as intelligence) or faults (such as scandal), and other individualistic characteristics (such as time in office and whether or not the president was assassinated) in explaining the variation in presidential evaluations.

⁵ There is some disciplinary cross-over in this literature. McCann (1992; 1995; and 2005), a psychologist, has made significant contributions to the line of research on the relationship between historical eras and presidential evaluations.

In general, the personalistic models have tended to outperform the historically-based models.⁶ Empirically-speaking, distinctions depend upon only a few significant factors, and the literature focused on explaining presidential greatness opinion poll results (whether for experts or average citizens) is driven by what has come to be referred to as the “Simonton model.”⁷ Over the course of nearly 30 years, Dean Keith Simonton has developed a model of the assessment of presidential greatness that has consistently outperformed alternative models/specifications. As Cohen (2003) argues:

While some important challenges to Simonton’s model exist . . . none of the rival formulations statistically outperform his model In fact, most of these alternatives appear to be components of his fuller model . . . or refinements of points he has [already] made.

Simonton’s model has only a small number of components. Though there is some disagreement about the categorization of these components—i.e. are they indicative of the person of the president or the times in which he governed?—the set of variables has performed quite well over a considerable time period.

Specifically, the Simonton model includes the following six variables:

1. tenure in office
2. scandal
3. assassination
4. war hero
5. war years

⁶ Simonton 1991 and 1992 directly address the historical models and find significantly greater empirical support for the personalistic model. To my knowledge, supporters of the historical orientation have not been able to clearly demonstrate the significant support for era-based variables after controlling for the individual-oriented factors included in the standard Simonton model.

⁷ See Cohen (2003) for a more extensive discussion of the significance of the Simonton model to current research on the assessment of presidential greatness.

6. intellectual brilliance

Tenure in Office is simply the number of years (and partial years) of a presidential administration. *Scandal* taps whether or not there was a major scandal during the president's administration.⁸ There is a variable indicating whether or not the president was assassinated (*Assassination*) and another variable indicating whether or not the president had a prestigious military career (*War Hero*). Simonton also includes a counter for the number of years spent at war during a presidential administration (*War Years*), and, finally, there is a measure of presidential intelligence (*Intellectual Brilliance*) that is included in the model. With the exception of scandals, all other factors are hypothesized to be positively related to evaluations of presidential greatness (e.g. the number of years at war is positively related to evaluations of presidential greatness).

Tenure in Office and *Assassination* require little explanation. The expectation associated with *Tenure in Office* is that president with longer service are significantly more likely to be viewed positively. Presidents have a longer period of time to build a legacy, and presidents with long tenures are in a better position to recover from mistakes than those who have no more than a single term (or less) in office. As far as the *Assassination* variable is concerned, there is an expectation that these presidents are honored and remembered in a manner that will tend to enhance their historical stature. This is also, in a sense, a control for the artificially abrupt ending of what would have been a longer political career (and thus resulted in a higher score on the *Tenure in Office* variable).

⁸ A more detailed description of the coding protocol will be presented in the Data and Methods section of the paper.

Scandal is defined as a “the commission of illegal acts by upper-level officials within the executive branch” (Simonton 2001:298). Presidents are expected to be punished for dramatic, high-level scandals and some component of this punishment is diminished historical legacy. To be considered a *War Hero*, a president must have attained a “national reputation” (Simonton 2001:298) as a military figure. In contrast to the negative impact of a scandal, war heroes are assumed to receive additional respect for their previous military service in evaluations of presidential greatness.

The most controversial variable in the Simonton model is *War Years*. Assuming that presidential stature is enhanced by activity in the policy domain most closely associated with the president’s constitutional authority, Simonton argues—and finds evidence for the assertion—that the number of years the country is at war during a president’s administration is *positively* associated with presidential greatness. Significantly, there is discounting associated with less successful military campaigns, so a year of the Civil War is assumed to have the same effect as a year of the war in Viet Nam. Though an admittedly surprising result, previous research suggests considerable support for this relationship (see, most recently, Cohen 2003 and Simonton 2001).

Finally, *Intellectual Brilliance* is a broad measure of intellectual capability. Simonton argues that “no individual-difference variable has more practical consequences than does general intelligence” (2006:511). He goes on to make a detailed and compelling case for the role of intelligence or intellectual capacity in the evaluation of presidents. In short, he clearly documents the associations between (1) intelligence and job performance in a wide array of professional settings, (2) intelligence and leadership, and (3) intelligence and political leadership (Simonton 2006). His own work (and the

recent work of others, such as Cohen 2003) has consistently supported the relationship between intelligence and presidential evaluations (see Simonton 1986, 1991, and 1992).

But what if president evaluations were based on more than personal characteristics, pre-administration professional experience, and the length (and manner of ending) of presidential administrations? What if actual job performance—as president—plays a crucial role in the presidential evaluations of historians and political scientists as well as average Americans? If that were the case, what sort of performance criteria would be *most* likely to influence evaluations of overall presidential greatness?⁹

Given the president's formal constitutional powers, the most likely criteria revolve around the president's foreign policy powers/commander-in-chief powers. Missing from both historical and psychological approaches to presidential greatness are measures of presidential *performance*.¹⁰ What if the evaluations of historians and the general public are in a significant manner based on the performance of the presidents while in office? That must be at least a reasonable possibility. If performance might explain some portion of the variation in evaluations of presidential greatness, what sort of performance is most likely to be most closely tied to presidential evaluations.

A reasonable first guess might well be foreign policy success. Unfortunately, effectively capturing the variation in foreign policy success is very difficult. Although

⁹ The only other effort to clearly assess the impact of policy performance on presidential greatness was Simonton's evaluation of the impact of dummy variable for "the occurrence of a major financial panic or depression" (1981:310). He found no relationship between depressions and presidential greatness and, apparently, did not pursue the analysis of this relationship with other (more recent) data.

¹⁰ One could argue that *scandal* is a measure of performance, but *scandal* is more accurately viewed as an indicator of *malfeasance*. Executive scandals—at least according to the Simonton definition—are extraordinarily rare (about one in 10 presidents, none prior to the Civil War) and avoiding scandals is rarely the focal point of an administration (or presidential campaign). Finally, there is some reasonable expectation of *positive performance*, not simply the avoidance of serious ethical (and potentially legal) crises. For our purposes, *scandal* is not a performance-oriented explanatory variable.

the Simonton model includes a measure of the number of years the U.S. was at war during each president's administration, the variable does not even attempt to account for the success of the armed conflict. For the *War Years* variable, whether the war years occurred during the Civil War, World War II, or the Vietnam War makes no difference. Given the differences in the outcomes of these wars, it would be difficult to argue that the success associated with the outcome of each military conflict could be comparable.

Even if we were willing to limit our consideration of foreign policy success to the results of armed conflict, it would be no easy task to disentangle the role of military victories in the determination of presidential greatness. According to the Simonton model, the longer the armed conflict during a presidential administration—regardless of the significance or character of the outcome—the more positively the evaluations of the president. So, Jefferson's five years fighting the Barbary Coast Pirates and Johnson's Vietnam years should result in more positive evaluations—all else equal—than Lincoln's Civil War years or Roosevelt's performance during the Second World War. If it is performance that matters, then this traditional result is difficult to justify. Given these complexities, and the prominence of Simonton's *War Years* variable in the literature, we will leave the development and assessment of foreign policy-based performance criteria for another day.

Another policy area in which presidents might reasonably be evaluated is economic policy or economic policy outcomes. In the burgeoning literature on presidential elections, economic circumstances/variables have a privileged position. In the most recent issue of *PS: Political Science and Politics*, nearly all of the models designed to predict the 2008 presidential election included one or more aggregate

economic indicators or aggregate public evaluations/expectations of economic circumstances. The most common variable in these models—and the most prominent economic indicator in presidential election models more general—is a measure of income (normally gross domestic product) growth. Generally, it is the change in *real* gross domestic product that is included in the models. In an effort to refine this measure to most closely approximate relative changes in household income over a time period in excess of two centuries, my measure of economic performance is the percentage change in the *real per capita* gross domestic product. Details on the source of the data and the by administration calculations are provided in the data and methods section.

My contention is that presidents are assessed—in an historical context—on their performance in office, just as this performance influences their prospects for re-election (see Campbell 2008a and 2008b and Abramowitz 2008). Economic outcomes play a crucial role in the evaluations of sitting presidents. I suggest that the same type of evaluative dynamic is at work in the historical evaluation of presidential greatness. More specifically, I hypothesize that *growth in per capita real gross domestic product will be positively associated with evaluations of presidential greatness. Ceteris paribus*, presidents who generate more income will be evaluated more positively.

One could easily argue that presidents are not in control of the American economy; that would seem to be obvious from the daily news from the last few months. But it is also incorrect to suggest that presidents have little or no *influence* over economic outcomes—especially the size of the national economy. If the president plays an important role in monetary policymaking—influencing an “independent” Federal Reserve’s policy actions (see Morris 2000)—then the president’s role in fiscal policy is

even more significant. The president does play a very important role in the management of the national economy. More importantly for our purposes, there is little question that presidents are held responsible for economic outcomes.

Does this contention necessarily imply that historians (and to an even lesser extent, the general public) have the information (and incentive) to evaluate the economic performance of all 43 presidents? No, certainly not. But there are still several reasons to expect a relationship between economic outcomes and presidential evaluations. First, some presidents are famous for dramatic economic growth (e.g. Franklin Roosevelt) while others are infamous for dramatic economic downturns (e.g. Hoover, Carter, . . . G. W. Bush?). Second, economic performance/growth is indirectly related to policy activism which might well be associated with presidential evaluations. Without economic growth, would the New Deal and the Great Society have been possible? Similarly, a contracting economy makes it particularly difficult to initiate important policy programs (and, in some important cases, to win wars). Third, economic growth may be at least partially responsible for the most prominent result in this literature—the relationship between tenure in office and evaluations of presidential greatness. For much of the twentieth century, incumbents faced with a stagnant or contracting economy have failed to win re-election (such as Carter and George H. W. Bush). There is some limited evidence that this effect goes back almost to the Civil War (see Lynch 1999). So, some proportion of the variation in evaluations currently attributable to tenure in office may actually be the result of economic fundamentals.¹¹ So, there are several plausible rationales for a relationship between economic outcomes and evaluations of presidential

¹¹ Cohen (2003) suggests the possibility of this relationship between economic circumstances, tenure in office, and evaluations of presidential greatness.

greatness. I now move to a description of the data and methods used to test this hypothesis.

Data and Methods

Since the original Schlesinger poll in 1948, an increasingly large number of both professional/elite polls and mass public polls have tapped opinions on presidential quality/greatness.¹² These surveys range over decades in time, they vary in format, and they focus on different target populations/samples. However, the consistency of the results (rankings/scores) across the various surveys is striking. Simonton (1986) highlights the consistency of contemporaneous mass and elite rankings and mass and elite rankings over time. Correlations of survey rankings over time—whether elite or mass surveys—tend to range from the low 80s to the upper 90s; and contemporaneous elite and mass surveys rankings tend to produce correlations in the high 90s. There have been attempts to dimensionalize presidential greatness. Maranell (1970), for example, argues that there are at least seven distinct dimensions upon which presidential greatness may be evaluated. In a factor analysis of all available scores and rankings in the mid-1980s, Simonton (1986) identified a single primary “greatness” factor and that all scores/rankings easily loaded on this factor.¹³ Finally, there is no evidence of respondent bias (i.e. more liberal historians tend to evaluate more liberal presidents more positively)

¹² For example, Schlesinger polled scholars again in 1962, and his son polled scholars in 1996 (see Schlesinger 1997). The Sienna Research Institute of Sienna College has periodically surveyed on presidential greatness since 1982. The *Wall Street Journal* has conducted (in collaboration with the Federalist Society) at least two scholar surveys on presidential greatness, and Zogby International has conducted at least five surveys focusing on assessments of presidential greatness. Aside from these individuals/organizations that have fielded multiple presidential greatness surveys, there are also one-off surveys/assessments of both scholars (Murray-Blessing survey in 1982 and Ridings-McIver survey in 1996) and the mass public (from a *Chicago Tribune* survey in 1982 to a C-SPAN survey in 1999-2000).

¹³ This factor accounted for 85% of all explained variance and 72% of all variance.

in the presidential rankings (Maranell and Dodder 1970; Murray and Blessing 1983; and Simonton 2001). Simonton's authoritative conclusion is simply put, "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" (2001:294).

Though there is considerable consistency in scores/rankings, not all scores/rankings are equally useful for my purposes. Because of the nature of this analysis, I have chosen the presidential greatness scores based on the *Wall Street Journal*/Federalist Society survey of professional scholars (historians) from 2000. These are the most appropriate scores for the following reasons:

1. It did not solicit opinions on President George W. Bush and so, at least in a formal sense, the other evaluations/rankings were not affected by the inclusion of Bush.
2. Neither were respondents asked for evaluations of William Henry Harrison or James A. Garfield. Since they are also excluded from my analysis—due to their extraordinarily short tenures in office, this also eliminates another potentially corrupting influencing.
3. The survey is sufficiently recent to include Clinton evaluations based on his full administration.

To my knowledge, no other available set of rankings satisfies all of these criteria.

However, as an additional test of the robustness of the results based on the *WSJ* scores, I report the results from identical models using the Simonton scores (give cite). Not surprisingly, there is a high degree of substantive and statistical consistency between the scores.

Most of the independent variables in the analysis are coded in a straightforward and sensible manner. *Years in Office* is simply the number of years of an individual president's administration. In an effort to maintain consistency with the Simonton standard, time is recorded to the first decimal place where necessary. *Assassination* is a dummy variable coded 1 for presidents who were assassinated (Lincoln, McKinley, and Kennedy) and 0 otherwise.¹⁴

Both *Scandal* and *War Hero* are certainly open to interpretation. Nearly every presidential administration must deal with some set of situations which opponents would consider scandals, whether with Franklin Roosevelt's court-packing plan, the XYZ Affair during John Adam's administration, or the Bert Lance affair during the Carter presidency. Simonton has, however, chosen a very restrictive definition of scandal—probably not inappropriately—so the only presidents who are coded 1 on the *Scandal* dummy variable are Grant, Harding, Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton. *War Hero* is coded 1 for Washington, Jackson, W. H. Harrison, Taylor, Grant, T. Roosevelt, and Eisenhower.

The definition of *War Years*, while relatively straightforward, is not uncontroversial. Simonton's definition of *War Years* is simply "the number of years during which the nation was at war" (2001:298).¹⁵ A more formal operational definition of "war" is not provided, and it is clear from the descriptive statistics provided for this variable, it is not a particularly restrictive definition. The mean that Simonton reports in

¹⁴ Note that Garfield, who was also assassinated, is not in the sample of presidents.

¹⁵ In response to a question about this measure, Simonton responded (via email) that "a year counted as having a war if U.S. troops were engaged in actual combat against an organized military opponent (i.e. an independent nation-state) with well defined battle lines demarcating 'enemy territory.' Military actions against informal insurgents did not count (e.g. in the Philippines), but undeclared wars like Vietnam did as well as the Civil War." This would seem to suggest that the aftermath of the war in Iraq and the military conflict in Afghanistan would not count. In fact, this definition poses a fairly serious problem for the proper coding of the war on terrorism, but that is a topic for future work.

his (2001) replication study is nearly one (0.95), so given the number of administrations, that figure implies 40+ years of war.¹⁶ That sum includes not only Lincoln's Civil War years and Roosevelt's World War II years but also Polk's Mexican War years and Jefferson's five year conflict with the Barbary Coast pirates. There are certainly reasonable alternatives to this handling of *War Years*, but this is the current standard, and so we will follow it.¹⁷

Intellectual Brilliance is derived from a factor analysis of over a hundred evaluations of the full sample of presidents (through George W. Bush). The evaluations were based on data generated by coding "personality descriptions" for each president. Note that multiple coders participated in the project and all identifying information was removed from the descriptions in advance of coding. The scores used in this analysis were taken directly from the full table of scores in Simonton (2006).

The sources for the presidential greatness scores used in this analysis are the *Wall Street Journal/Federalist Society* (hereafter, *WSJ*) presidential greatness survey and Simonton's own presidential greatness scores. The *WSJ* scores were generated from a survey of 78 historians, political scientists, and legal scholars. Survey respondents were asked to rate every past president (except W. H. Harrison and Garfield) on a scale from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating higher (better) rankings. The greatness score for each individual president is that president's mean score on this survey scale. For a list of the scores and more information about the survey see

¹⁶ Note that this figure is pre-Iraq War.

¹⁷ I experimented with other, generally more restrictive, definitions of "war," and the results with these operationalizations were consistently inferior to those with the Simonton *War Years* variable. Still, to his credit, Simonton admits that the variable *War Years* might warrant some improvement (see Simonton 1992 and 2001).

<http://www.opinionjournal.com/hail/rankings.html>.¹⁸ We have been unable to locate a published source for the Simonton scores, but Prof. Simonton was gracious enough to provide the scores in response to our request.

Finally, the *Real GDP* measure is based on result generated from the Measuring Worth website (see www.measuringworth.com).¹⁹ The website provides a set of useful economic “calculators,” one of which calculates per capita real GDP growth for the U.S. from 1790 to 2007 (see Officer and Williamson 2008). As the growth rate estimates are based on changes in end-of-year real per capita GDP figures, the growth rate associated with a particular president’s administration was calculated from the year prior to taking office to the final “full” year in office.²⁰ So, for Lincoln, the growth calculation is based on the difference between real per capita GDP in 1860 and real per capita GDP in 1864. The specific algorithm for calculating annualized real per capita GDP from this data is described in detail on the Measuring Worth website.²¹

Descriptive statistics for all variables are provided in Table 2. The multivariate results presented below are OLS estimates with robust standard errors. There is no trend in presidential evaluations over time, and at least from the standpoint of a visual inspection, there is no evidence of any significant rigidity or stickiness in the shift of evaluations over time. Likewise, the variation in evaluations does not appear to have a

¹⁸ Last viewed on November 4, 2008. For more detailed information on the survey and the survey results, see Project Director James Lindgren’s report at <http://falcon.arts.cornell.edu/govt/courses/F04/PresidentialRankings.pdf>. Last viewed on November 4, 2008.

¹⁹ Thanks to John Wallis for suggesting this website for historical economic data.

²⁰ Presidents serving a portion of a year get credit for a full year if they serve 183 or more days during that year.

²¹ There are various ways to calculate annualized growth estimates, and the Measuring Worth website provides an excellent and straightforward introduction to the various technical issues (see www.measuringworth.com).

temporal component (i.e. the variance in evaluations is not significantly greater in one century than in another). A more rigorous statistical assessment of the data confirms these initial impressions.²² Based on the results of various diagnostic tests, there is no evidence that heteroskedasticity, multicollinearity, or autocorrelation compromised the results.

Results

Before moving to any type of multivariate model, let us consider the first-order evidence for a relationship between economic performance (as measured by annualized percentage change in per capita real gross domestic product) and evaluations of presidential greatness. For example, if we split the sample of presidents—remember we have dropped William Henry Harrison, Garfield, and George W. Bush—into two groups based on greatness rankings (top 20 vs. bottom 20), is there any evidence that the presidents in the top set have generated better economic performance than the presidents in the bottom set? The answer is “yes”. Based on our measure of economic performance, the presidents in the top set have performed almost twice as well as the presidents in the bottom set. Presidents in the top-half of the greatness rankings (based on the ordinal *WSJ* rankings) averaged an annualized increase in real GDP that exceeded 2%. Presidents in the bottom half of the greatness rankings had an average annualized

²² We can easily reject the null hypothesis of the presence of a unit root (at any conventional level of significance) in the augmented Dickey-Fuller test, so there is no evidence that the time series is nonstationary. The ADF test value for the *Wall Street Journal* Score variable is -6.031 (critical value for $p < .01 = -3.675$), and the ADF test value for the Simonton Score variable is -5.590 (critical value for $p < .01 = -3.648$).

increase in real GDP of just over 1%. Though the sample sizes are tiny (19 and 20), this difference in means is significant at the .10 level. See Table 2.

This result also manifests in other ways that might be less sensitive to the potential effect of a single significant outlier or two. For example, eight presidents have realized an overall decrease in per capita GDP during the course of their administrations. Of those eight, five were from the bottom set of presidents. The three from the top set—Jefferson, T. Roosevelt, and Truman—arguably had other characteristics or accomplishments to recommend them. Of the ten presidents with the highest annualized real GDP growth, seven were from the top set, and only three were from the bottom set. Clearly, there is some initial evidence for the presence of a relationship between economic performance and presidential evaluations.

Next, I evaluate the quality/fit of the standard/traditional model of presidential greatness—the Simonton model—with our data. Though we are focusing on the two most prominent aggregate measures of presidential greatness, I am unaware of any assessment of the Simonton model with these particular measures and this particular set of presidents.²³ See Table 2. The results clearly suggest strong general support for the Simonton model. Five of the six variables are clearly significant and all are signed in the proper direction. This is true for both sets of model estimates; the estimates based on the WSJ presidential greatness scores and the estimates based on the Simonton presidential greatness scores. The only problem with the Simonton model is the insignificance of the

²³ Again, remember that Harrison, Garfield, and George W. Bush are not included in the analysis. Also, while Grover Cleveland was president on two separate occasions, he is only a single observation in this data set. In Cleveland's case, the value for real GDP growth is a simple average of the values for his two noncontiguous terms.

War Years variable.²⁴ We cannot be certain about the reason for the poor performance of this variable. It may be a function of the use of a dataset with a longer time frame than some previous work or the exclusion of the Harrison and Garfield presidencies. In any case, because of the poor performance of the *War Years* variable in this analytical context, it is excluded from subsequent models.²⁵

The next set of estimates provides a test for the hypothesis that greater economic performance is positively associated with higher presidential evaluations. For both the *WSJ* and the Simonton scores, there is clearly a positive, statistically significant relationship between real per capita GDP growth and presidential greatness. So, we have evidence that actual policy performance has an influence on historical evaluations of presidential greatness. See Table 4.

However, the statistical significance of *Real GDP* provides us with relatively little information about the *substantive* significance of this variable.²⁶ Since the results presented in Table 4 are unstandardized OLS coefficients, it is relatively easy to interpret the impact of a change in *Real GDP* on president's greatness score (whether on the *WSJ* or Simonton scale). But the scores themselves are not easily interpretable—except in direct relation to each other. So to illustrate the substantive significance of the *Real GDP* variable, I have calculated the effect of a hypothetical change in *Real GDP* on the

²⁴ *War Years* is insignificant at the .05 level in the *WSJ* model, and fails to reach the .10 level of significance in the model using Simonton's own scores.

²⁵ It should be noted that the *Real GDP* variable always outperforms the *War Years* variable when they are included in the same model, and the *Real GDP* variable is always significant at the .10 level or greater. Results available from the author.

²⁶ Obviously, if there were no evidence of a statistically significant result, the question of substantive significance would be moot.

greatness *rankings* of several prominent presidents.²⁷ I have constructed several hypothetical presidential scenarios and shown the change in presidential greatness score associated with a one standard deviation shift (above and below) the mean For *Real GDP*. I then translate these shifts in scores to presidential rankings (based on the scores) to provide the most straightforward and most easily interpretable measure of shifting evaluations.

For example, if a hypothetical president served one term, had no scandal, was not a war hero, was of average intelligence, and produced average economic growth, that president's predicted *WSJ* score would be 2.64, good enough for 27th place. A one-standard deviation increase in *Real GDP* would move that president into a tie for 23rd place (a qualitative shift from "below average" to "average"). A one-standard deviation decrease in *Real GDP* would result in drop to 30th place, still in the group of "below average" presidents. For presidents nearer the bottom of the initial rankings (4 years in office, a scandal, not a war hero, not assassinated, and of average intelligence), the shift in *Real GDP* has a somewhat lesser effect on the change in rankings. With average economic growth, this hypothetical president is ranked 35th (just ahead of Millard Fillmore). A one-standard deviation increase in *Real GDP* results in an upward shift of only a single place (to 34th); a one-standard deviation decrease in *Real GDP* results in a drop of only a single spot. For presidents on the high end of the scale (8 years in office, no scandal, war heroes, no assassination, intellectual brilliance score one-standard deviation above the average), a one-standard deviation increase in economic output results in a move from 6th to 5th, and a one-standard deviation decrease results in a move

²⁷ Determining the shift in rankings only requires a comparison of the new hypothetical greatness score with the estimated scores for the other presidents. For example, Thomas Jefferson's estimated *WSJ* greatness score is . . .

from 6th to 8th. So, in these hypothetical scenarios, we see that the greatest effects of differing levels of economic policy performance are, not surprisingly, for those presidents in the middle of the greatness rankings.

Consideration of a couple of historical counterfactuals might further our understanding of the substantive impact of economic growth on evaluations of presidential greatness. Had economic growth during Hoover's administration been merely average, his ranking would have improved fifteen places moving him from lower end of the "below average" to the "above average" group. James K. Polk, on the other hand, would have dropped three slots moving from "near great" to "above average". Economic policy performance clearly matters; it simply matters more for some than for others.

Conclusion

The quantitative study of presidential greatness goes back at least 60 years to the initial Schlesinger survey. Surprisingly, the role of policy *performance* in the analysis of presidential greatness has been quite limited. Current models of presidential greatness tend to focus on personal characteristics, period effects, or administration-specific factors (such as length of administration or years at war) that are not directly related to performance in office. The inclusion of a variable relating to the occurrence of a scandal during an administration is the only prominent component of the standard model related to performance, and, as I argue above, it is more an indicator of malfeasance than a proper indicator of performance.

Unexpected (give the tenor of previous work), the findings presented above suggest that the standard *War Years* result is suspect. It is no longer clear that time spent at war during a presidential administration will always result in an enhancement of presidential prestige, a more favorable evaluation, and a higher ranking. The cultivation of peace may not enhance a president's stature, but we can no longer be confident it is a serious shortcoming.

In this paper, I argue that presidential policy performance—specifically, the presidential economic policy performance—plays a role in the historical evaluation of presidential administrations. *Great* and *near great* presidents tend to generate more positive economic outcomes than *average* and *below average* presidents. The results presented here provide the first empirical support for this contention. Just as the evaluation of sitting presidents depends upon the performance of the economy, the historical evaluations of past presidents is at least partly a function of the performance of the economy during their administrations.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for All Variables Included in the Analysis

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum
<i>WSJ</i> Scores	3.400	.903	1.33	4.92
Simonton Scores	.001	.901	-1.62	1.64
Years in Office	5.418	2.361	1.3	12.1
War Hero	.153	.366	0	1
Scandal	.128	.339	0	1
Assassination	.077	.270	0	1
Years at War	1.00	1.606	0	5
Intellectual Brilliance	-.154	1.009	-2	3.1
Real GDP Growth	1.622	2.364	-6.6	8.05
N = 39				

Table 2: Split Sample Results on Real GDP and Presidential Greatness

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum
19 Greatest Presidents	2.14	2.05	-.47	8.1
20 Most Mediocre Presidents	1.19	2.57	-6.6	5.9

Table 3. Explaining Evaluations of Presidential Greatness—The Simonton Model

	WSJ Scores	Simonton Scores
Years in Office	.197** (.031)	.176** (.031)
War Hero	.646** (.225)	.474* (.207)
Scandal	-.720* (.323)	-.998** (.277)
Assassination	.936** (.351)	.848** (.281)
Years at War	.096 (.068)	.086 (.066)
Intellectual Brilliance	.211** (.080)	.306** (.081)
Constant	1.797** (.193)	-1.045** (.184)
R ²	.702	.753
(N)	(39)	(39)

Notes: The coefficients presented above are OLS estimates. Robust standard errors are reported.
*p<.05, **p<.01, one-tailed test of significance.

Table 4. Estimating the Impact of Economic Prosperity on Presidential Greatness

	WSJ Scores	Simonton Scores
Real GDP Growth	.052* (.030)	.051* (.027)
Years in Office	.207** (.032)	.183** (.032)
War Hero	.584** (.203)	.422* (.186)
Scandal	-.710** (.285)	-.992** (.237)
Assassination	.880* (.462)	.766* (.364)
Intellectual Brilliance	.282** (.070)	.373** (.070)
Constant	1.774** (.205)	-1.065** (.194)
R ²	.699	.753
(N)	(39)	(39)

Notes: The coefficients presented above are OLS estimates. Robust standard errors are reported.
*p<.05, **p<.01, one-tailed test of significance.

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