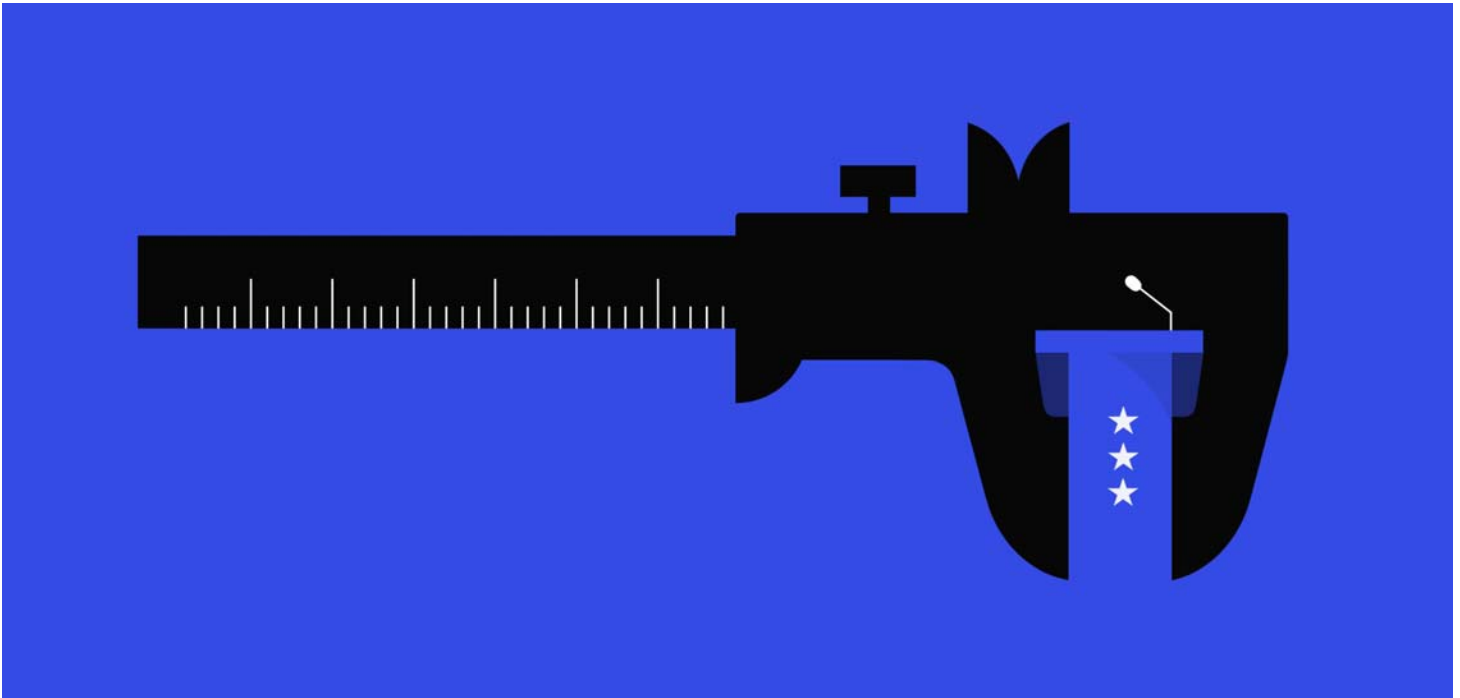


## **OPINION** | OpEd Contributors

# **How Does Trump Stand Up Against the Best -- and Worst -- Presidents?**

Brandon Rottinghaus and Justin Vaughn, ~~The New York Times~~ Online, June 24, 2024  
[originally published February 19, 2018]

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/19/opinion/how-does-trump-stack-up-against-the-best-and-worst-presidents.html?searchResultPosition=3>



Angus Greig

Where does Donald Trump rank on the list of American presidents?

We surveyed presidential politics experts to sketch out a [first draft of Trump's place](#) in presidential history.

Since [our previous survey](#) in 2014, some presidential legacies have soared (Barack Obama's stock has climbed into the Top 10), while others have fallen (Andrew Jackson toppled to 15, out of the Top 10).

And President Trump? Let's say that, according to the 170 members of the American Political Science Association's Presidents and Executive Politics section who filled out our survey, he has at least three years to improve on an [ignominious debut](#).

## Presidential Greatness Rankings

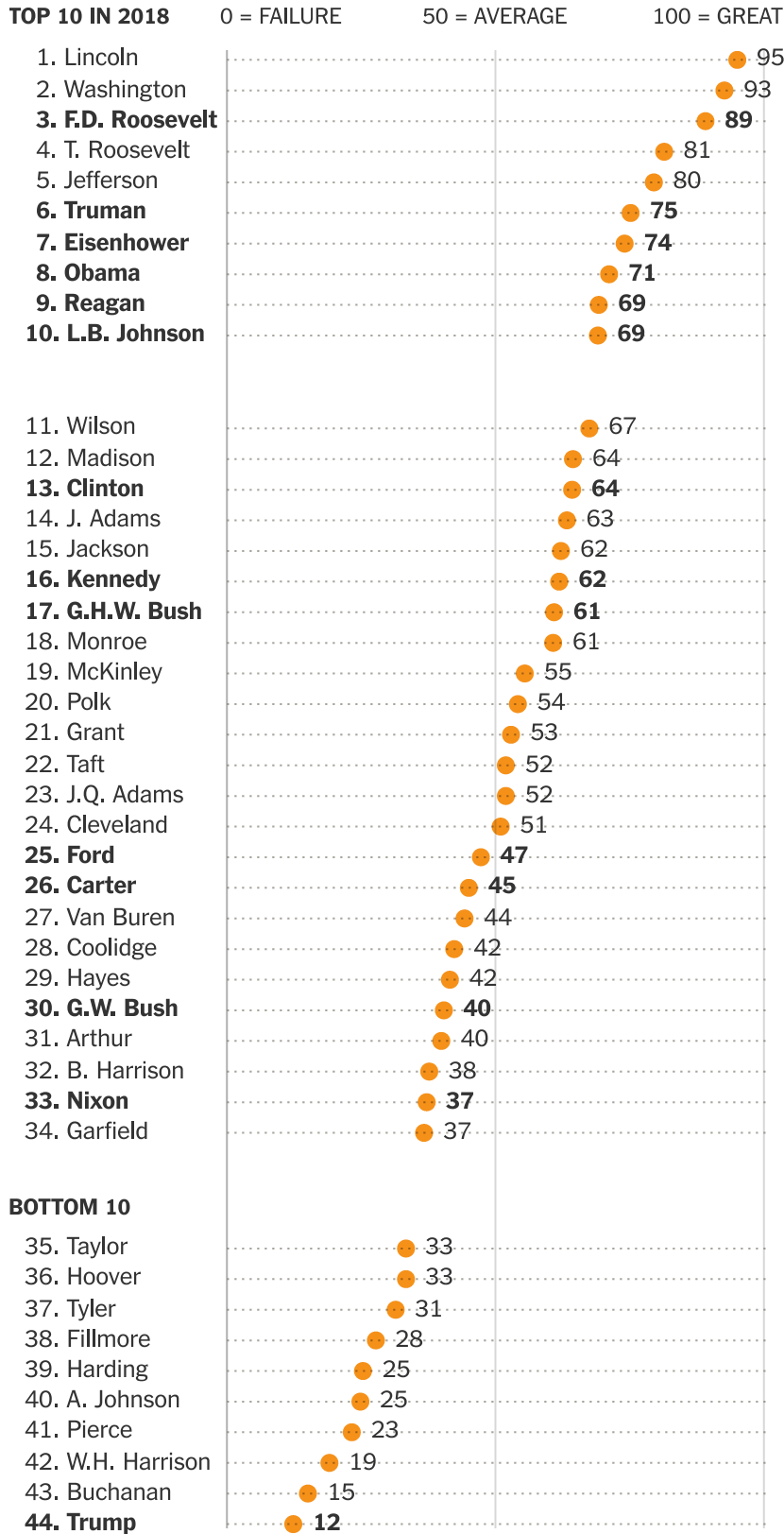
James Buchanan, who was at the helm as the United States careened into civil war, was dislodged from his position as our nation's worst president by our current president, Trump.

His Oval Office predecessor, Barack Obama, shot into the Top 10, up from 18th in the previous survey. Ulysses S. Grant also got a bump, up seven places from 2014, perhaps owing to a strong assist from [Ron Chernow's recent masterpiece](#).

The biggest declines were for Bill Clinton, arguably the result of contemporary scorn for his treatment of women, and Andrew Jackson, for evolving attitudes on his treatment of Native Americans.

Overall rankings.  
 Presidents since World War II in **boldface**.

Presidents whose rank  
 changed since last survey



2014 RANK	CHANGE IN RANKING UP OR DOWN
8.	<b>Clinton</b> -5
9.	Jackson -6
10.	Wilson -1
11.	<b>Reagan</b> +2
12.	<b>L.B. Johnson</b> +2
13.	Madison +1
14.	<b>Kennedy</b> -2
15.	J. Adams +1
16.	Monroe -2
18.	<b>Obama</b> +10
19.	Polk -1
20.	Taft -2
21.	McKinley +2
22.	J.Q. Adams -1
23.	Cleveland -1
24.	<b>Ford</b> -1
25.	Van Buren -2
27.	Coolidge -1
28.	Grant +7
29.	B. Harrison -3
30.	Hayes +1
31.	Garfield -3
32.	Arthur +1
33.	Taylor -2
34.	<b>Nixon</b> +1
35.	<b>G.W. Bush</b> +5
36.	Tyler -1
37.	Fillmore -1
38.	Hoover +2
39.	W.H. Harrison -3
40.	Pierce -1
41.	A. Johnson +1
42.	Harding +3

Methodology: Each expert was invited to rate each president on a 0-100 scale, with 0 = failure, 50 = average, and 100 = great. Scores were then averaged for each president, with presidents then ranked in order of highest average to lowest.

## Greatness Rankings by Party

On partisan-votes lines, Democrats ranked Ronald Reagan nine places lower than Republicans, while Democrats place Obama 10 places higher.

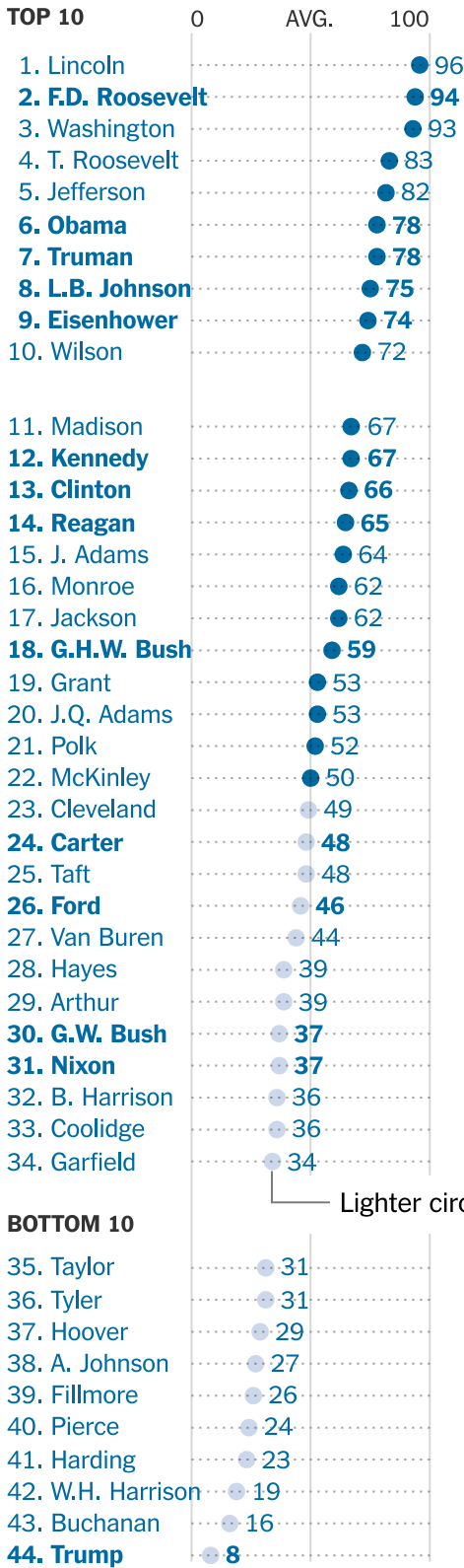
Counting only Republican votes, William McKinley — best known for winning the Spanish-American war, for defeating William Jennings Bryan twice in contests for the White House and for being [assassinated by the anarchist Leon Czolgosz](#) — holds a spot in the Top 10.

Independents admire George H.W. Bush, ranking him higher than Obama.

Trump doesn't get much of a lift from Republican-only vote: Even in their eyes, he's a bottom-five president.

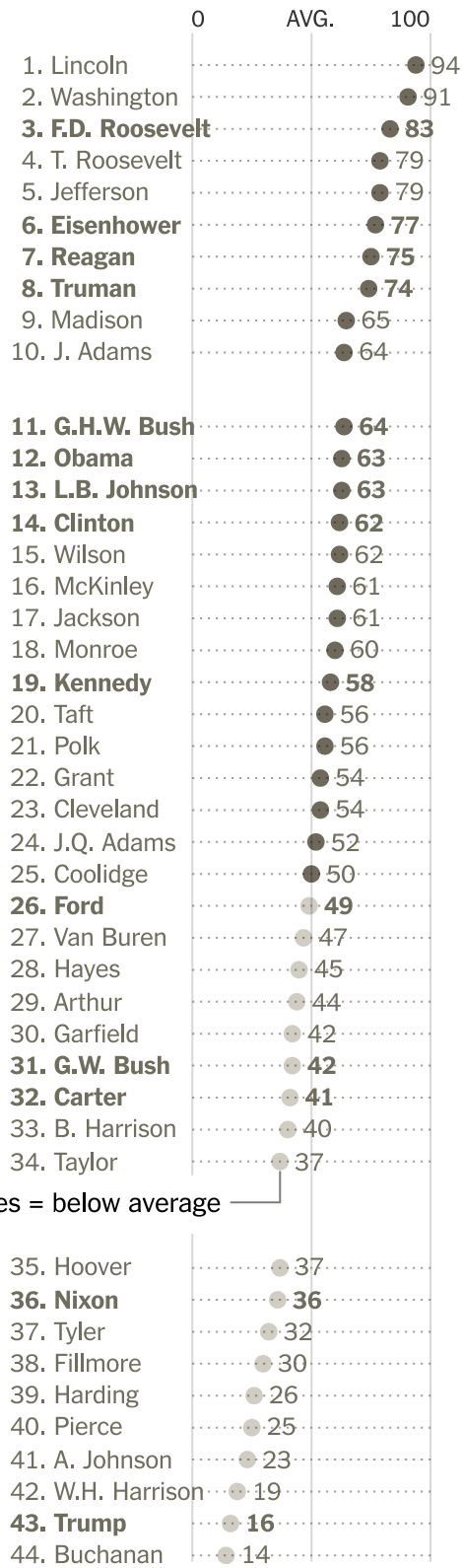
### Democratic scholars

Presidents since World War II in boldface.

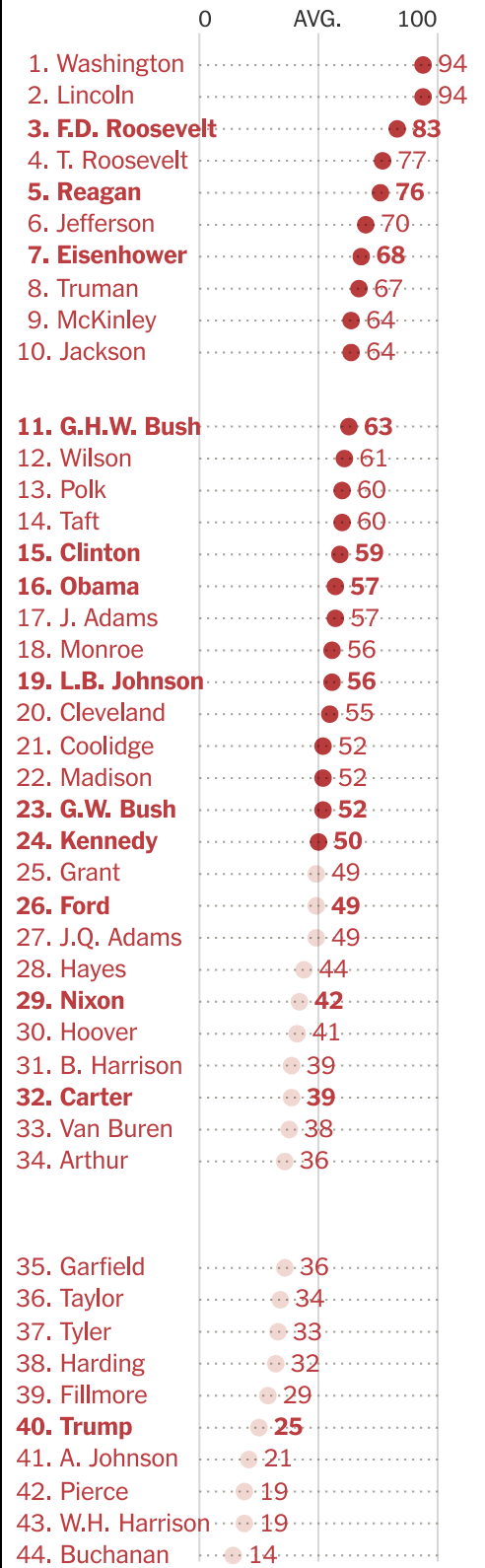


### Independents/other

These scholars skew somewhat to the right.



### Republican scholars

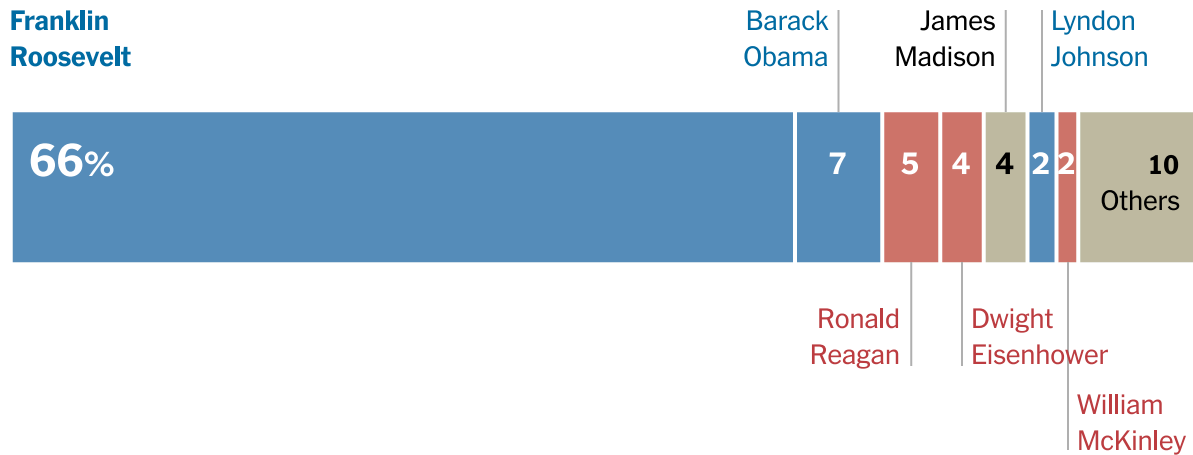


Lighter circles = below average

Methodology: Each expert was allowed to self-identify as either Republican, Democrat, Independent, or Other. The results of those who self-identified were later analyzed independently to allow comparisons across partisan groups.

## Next on Mt. Rushmore

Which president deserves to have his likeness carved next into Mt. Rushmore’s granite cliff? Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the overwhelming favorite, selected by two-thirds of our respondents.



Methodology: Respondents were asked if they were to add one president to those currently represented on Mt. Rushmore, who would it be, and then allowed to select any past or current president. The number and percentage of times each president was selected was then calculated.

## Mt. Rushmore by Party

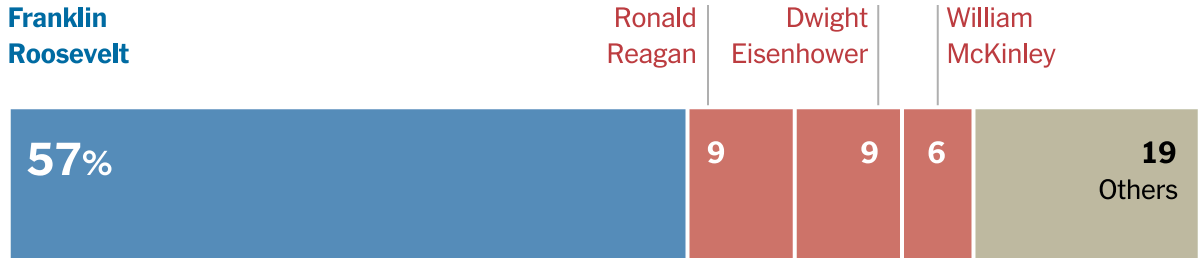
It wasn’t just Democratic support that would carve F.D.R. on Mt. Rushmore: All groups, including Republicans, named him as most deserving of that honor.

Roosevelt, the godfather of presidential liberalism, received more than twice as many votes from Republicans as Ronald Reagan, his conservative counterpart.

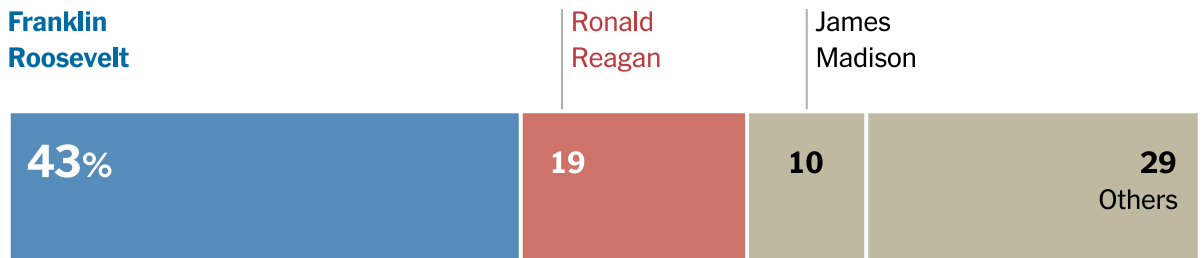
### Democratic scholars' vote:



### Independent/others' vote:



### Republicans' vote:



Methodology: Using the previously discussed self-identified partisanship breakdowns, the number and percentage of times each partisan group selected each president was calculated in the same way as the overall results.

Trump’s initial rating places him in an ignominious category, but dozens of presidents have had slow starts and have course corrected to improve their public esteem. Beyond his reputation or ranking, Donald Trump’s very presidency may alter perceptions of presidential legacies as his [unique approach to the office](#) continues to surprise.

*Brandon Rottinghaus is a professor of political science at the University of Houston. Justin S. Vaughn is an associate professor of political science and director of the Center for Idaho History and Politics at Boise State University.*



# PRESIDENTIAL HISTORIANS SURVEY 2021

## SURVEY LINKS

- All Presidents
- Total Scores/Overall Rankings**
- Survey Participants
- Survey Advisors
- Methodology
- Press Room

## INDIVIDUAL LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

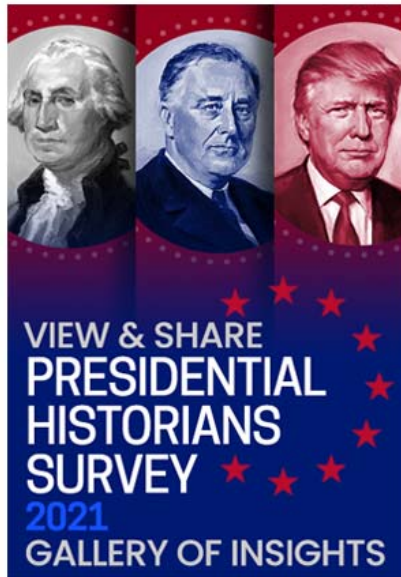
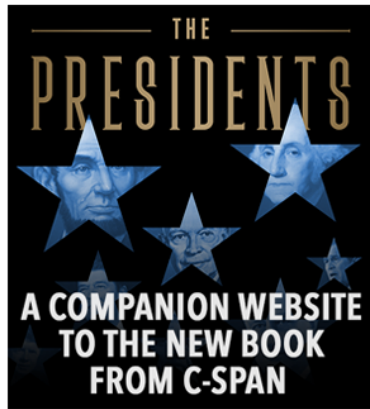
- Public Persuasion
- Crisis Leadership
- Economic Management
- Moral Authority
- International Relations
- Administrative Skills
- Relations with Congress
- Vision / Setting an Agenda
- Pursued Equal Justice For All
- Performance Within Context of Times

## HISTORIANS SURVEY RESULTS CATEGORY

### TOTAL SCORES/OVERALL RANKINGS

President	2021 Final Score	Overall Rankings			
		2021	2017	2009	2000
Abraham Lincoln	897	1	1	1	1
George Washington	851	2	2	2	3
Franklin D. Roosevelt	841	3	3	3	2
Theodore Roosevelt	785	4	4	4	4
Dwight D. Eisenhower	734	5	5	8	9
Harry S. Truman	713	6	6	5	5
Thomas Jefferson	704	7	7	7	7
John F. Kennedy	699	8	8	6	8
Ronald Reagan	681	9	9	10	11
Barack Obama	664	10	12	NA	NA
Lyndon B. Johnson	654	11	10	11	10
James Monroe	643	12	13	15	14
Woodrow Wilson	617	13	11	9	6
William McKinley	612	14	16	16	15
John Adams	609	15	19	17	16
James Madison	604	16	17	20	18
John Quincy Adams	603	17	21	19	19
James K. Polk	599	18	14	12	12
William J. Clinton	594	19	15	14	21
Ulysses S. Grant	590	20	22	23	33
George H. W. Bush	585	21	20	18	20
Andrew Jackson	568	22	18	13	13
William Howard Taft	543	23	24	24	24
Calvin Coolidge	535	24	26	26	27
Grover Cleveland	523	25	23	21	17
Jimmy Carter	506	26	27	25	22
James A. Garfield	506	27	29	28	29
Gerald R. Ford	498	28	25	22	23
George W. Bush	495	29	33	36	NA
Chester A. Arthur	472	30	35	32	32





Richard M. Nixon	464	31	28	27	26
Benjamin Harrison	462	32	30	30	31
Rutherford B. Hayes	456	33	31	33	25
Martin Van Buren	455	34	34	31	30
Zachary Taylor	449	35	32	29	28
Herbert Hoover	396	36	36	34	34
Warren G. Harding	388	37	40	38	38
Millard Fillmore	378	38	37	37	35
John Tyler	354	39	39	35	36
William Henry Harrison	354	40	38	39	37
Donald J. Trump	312	41	NA	NA	NA
Franklin Pierce	312	42	41	40	39
Andrew Johnson	230	43	42	41	40
James Buchanan	227	44	43	42	41

## RESOURCE LINKS

- Watch the *Washington Journal* segment announcing the 2021 survey results
- Watch the four survey advisers discuss the 2021 survey on the *Washington Journal*
- Listen to *The Weekly* podcast discussing the 2021 survey
- View full results from C-SPAN's 2021 Survey of Presidential Leadership
- View full results from C-SPAN's 2017 Survey of Presidential Leadership
- View full results from C-SPAN's 2009 Survey of Presidential Leadership
- View full results from C-SPAN's 2000 Survey of Presidential Leadership
- Compare category rankings from all four C-SPAN surveys

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OPINION

# Opinion: We know how voters feel about Trump and Biden. But how do the experts rank their presidencies?



Wax figures of American presidents at Madame Tussauds in Washington. Scholars rated Trump even worse than Andrew Johnson, front row, right, William Henry Harrison and James Buchanan, back row, fourth and fifth from left, respectively. (Jacquelyn Martin / Associated Press)

BY JUSTIN VAUGHN AND BRANDON ROTTINGHAUS

FEB. 18, 2024 3:30 AM PT

Presidents Day occurs at a crucial moment this year, with the presidency on the cusp of crisis as we inexorably shuffle toward a rematch between the incumbent and his predecessor. It's the sort of contest we haven't seen since the 19th century, and judging by public opinion of President Biden and former President Trump, most Americans would have preferred to keep it that way.

But the third installment of our [Presidential Greatness Project](#), a poll of presidential experts released this weekend, shows that scholars don't share American voters' roughly equal distaste for both candidates.

Biden, in fact, makes his debut in our rankings at No. 14, putting him in the top third of American presidents. Trump, meanwhile, maintains the position he held six years ago: dead last, trailing such historically calamitous chief executives as James Buchanan and Andrew Johnson. In that and other respects, Trump's radical departure from political, institutional and legal norms has affected knowledgeable assessments not just of him but also of Biden and several other presidents.



OPINION

**Opinion: Panicking over polls showing Donald Trump ahead of President Biden? Please stop**

Jan. 24, 2024

The overall survey results reveal stability as well as change in the way scholars assess our nation's most important and controversial political office. Great presidents have traditionally been viewed as those who presided over moments of national transformation, led the country through major crises and expanded the institution of the presidency. Military victories, economic growth, assassinations and scandals also affect expert assessments of presidential performance.

The presidents at the top of our rankings, and others like ours, reflect this. Hallowed leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and George Washington consistently lead the list.

Our latest rankings also show that the experts' assessments are driven not only by traditional notions of greatness but also by the evolving values of our time.



OPINION

**Op-Ed: Worst. President. Ever.**

Jan. 13, 2021

One example is the continuing decline in esteem for two important presidents, Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson. Their reputations have consistently suffered in recent years as modern politics lead scholars to assess their early 19th and 20th century presidencies ever more harshly, especially their unacceptable treatment of marginalized people.

More acutely, this survey has seen a pronounced partisan dynamic emerge, arguably in response to the Trump presidency and the Trumpification of presidential politics.

Proponents of the Biden presidency have strong arguments in their arsenal, but his high placement within the top 15 suggests a powerful anti-Trump factor at work. So far, Biden's record does not include the military victories or institutional expansion that have typically driven higher rankings, and a family scandal such as the one involving his son Hunter normally diminishes a president's ranking.

Biden's most important achievements may be that he rescued the presidency from Trump, resumed a more traditional style of presidential leadership and is gearing up to keep the office out of his predecessor's hands this fall.

Trump's position at the bottom of our rankings, meanwhile, puts him behind not only Buchanan and Johnson but also such lowlights as Franklin Pierce, Warren Harding and William Henry Harrison, who died a mere 31 days after taking office.

Trump's impact goes well beyond his own ranking and Biden's. Every contemporary Democratic president has moved up in the ranks — Barack Obama (No. 7), Bill Clinton (No. 12) and even Jimmy Carter (No. 22).

Yes, these presidents had great accomplishments such as expanding healthcare access and working to end conflict in the Middle East, and they have two Nobel Prizes among them. But given their shortcomings and failures, their rise seems to be less about reassessments of their administrations than it is a bonus for being neither Trump nor a member of his party.

Indeed, every modern Republican president has dropped in the survey, including the transformational Ronald Reagan (No. 16) and George H.W. Bush (No. 19), who led the nation's last decisive military victory.

Academics do lean left, but that hasn't changed since our previous surveys. What these results suggest is not just an added emphasis on a president's political affiliation, but also the emergence of a president's fealty to political and institutional norms as a criterion for what makes a president "great" to the scholars who study them.

As for the Americans casting a ballot for the next president, they are in the historically rare position of knowing how both candidates have performed in the job. Whether they will consider each president's commitment to the norms of presidential leadership, and come to rate them as differently as our experts, remains to be seen.

*Justin Vaughn is an associate professor of political science at Coastal Carolina University.*

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