



UK Survey of US Presidents: Results and Analysis

Franklin D. Roosevelt comes first;

George W. Bush is in bottom ten; Barack Obama is highly rated

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In 1960, US political scientist Richard Neustadt began his seminal book, *Presidential Power*, with the observation: “In the United States we like to ‘rate’ a President. We measure him as ‘weak’ or ‘strong’ and call what we are measuring his ‘leadership.’” In the half century since then, systematic presidential rating has become a regular exercise for US scholars. Over the same period, study and research of US history and politics expanded dramatically in UK universities. Until now, however, there has been no UK poll of US presidents.

The United States Presidency Centre [USPC] of the Institute for the Study of the Americas (part of the University of London’s School of Advanced Study) has made good this omission by conducting the first ever UK scholarly survey of US presidents from George Washington to George W. Bush, with an interim assessment of Barack Obama.

The survey

In total, 47 UK specialists on American history and politics took part in the poll that was conducted in September/October 2010. They were asked to rate the performance of presidents (*) in five categories: (i) ***vision/agenda-setting*** – did the president have the clarity of vision to establish overarching goals for his administration and shape the terms of policy discourse? (ii) ***domestic leadership*** – did the president display the political skill needed to achieve his domestic objectives and respond effectively to unforeseen developments? (iii)

foreign policy leadership – was the president an effective leader in promoting US foreign policy interests and national security? (iv) *moral authority* – did the president uphold the moral authority of his office through his character, values, and conduct? (v) *positive historical significance of their legacy* – did the president’s legacy have positive benefits for America’s development over time?

*The survey was confined to 40 of the 42 holders of the office from 1789 to 2009. William Henry Harrison (1841) and James Garfield (1881) were not rated because they died shortly after taking office.

Methodology

Participants were asked to score the presidents in each category, which was equally weighted, from one (“not effective”) to ten (“very effective”). They were guaranteed that individual survey results would remain confidential. Survey responses were tabulated by averaging all the responses in a given category for each president (i.e. blank scores were not counted) and aggregate scores were multiplied by ten to give the final overall score.

Analysis of results

Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945) was placed first overall in the poll, with *Abraham Lincoln* (1861-1865) second and *George Washington* (1789-1797) third. Roosevelt came first in three categories: vision/agenda-setting; domestic leadership; and foreign policy leadership; Washington came first for moral authority; and Lincoln did so for the positive significance of his legacy.

Only one president who has held office since 1960 – *Ronald Reagan* (1981-1989) – made the overall top ten, coming at No 8. Most of the recent presidents held middling positions in the poll: *Jimmy Carter* (1977-1981) was placed at No 18, *Bill Clinton* (1993-2001) at No 19, *George H. W. Bush* (1989-1993) at No 22, *Richard Nixon* (1969-1974) at No 23, and *Gerald Ford* (1974-1977) at No 24. However, *George W. Bush* (2001-2009) at No 31 came in the bottom ten and was the lowest rated president of any who has held office since the scandal-hit *Warren Harding* (1921-1923), placed at No 38.

Other than Harding, the bottom five presidents held office just before and just after the Civil War (1861-1865). These were: *Andrew Johnson* (1865-1869) at No. 36, *John Tyler* (1841-1845) at 37, *Franklin Pierce* (1853-1857) at No 39, and *James Buchanan* (1857-1861), the last placed at No 40.

Significantly, *Barack Obama* (2009 -) is held in high esteem by British scholars. He received an interim assessment that would have put him in eighth place overall had he been fully included in the poll. His total score was higher than for any post-1945 president excepting *Harry S. Truman* (1945-1953), who was placed seventh.

The results show some interesting differences between UK and US presidential rankings. US polls habitually place *Abraham Lincoln* first because of his achievements as Civil War leader in restoring the Union and ending slavery. In addition, they often put *George*

Washington second ahead of FDR because of his significance in establishing the authority of the presidency. UK scholars, by contrast, have elevated **Franklin D Roosevelt** to first place in recognition of the breadth of the challenges he faced as president during the Great Depression and World War II, his confident and inspirational leadership in both of these crises, and the enduring significance of his New Deal legacy. It is also likely that Roosevelt's stock rose because the poll was conducted against the background of the worst economic troubles since the 1930s.

Abraham Lincoln was a very close second overall in the UK poll. His historical achievement is further highlighted by the presence of very lowly rated presidents before and after him (as is the case in most US surveys). Clearly, the United States was fortunate to have a president with his immense skill, vision, and humanity to maximize the leadership potential of the office at the moment of greatest crisis in American history.

There are also significant differences between US and UK rankings of individual presidents outside the trio of universally rated greats. The most notable case is that of **John F. Kennedy** (1961-1963), ranked sixth in the detailed poll of American historians conducted by C-Span in 2009, but placed fifteenth in the UK survey. UK academics seemingly faulted JFK for the gap between his rhetoric and his substantive achievements as president. **Bill Clinton** (1993-2001), who has fared well in recent US polls (coming 15th in the C-Span survey), slipped somewhat in the UK survey – mainly because of a very low rating for moral authority but also because his legacy, particularly his economic achievement, looks less robust ten years on from the time he left office.

One of the criticisms often levelled against US presidential surveys is that the participants are driven by liberal bias to give high ratings to presidents who expanded the role of government. At first sight the UK survey looks to have a similar leaning. **Franklin D. Roosevelt**, the architect of the modern state, is ranked first. **Theodore Roosevelt** (1901-1909) and **Woodrow Wilson** (1913-1921), the early twentieth century Progressives whose agendas foreshadowed the New Deal, are placed fifth and sixth respectively. FDR's legatees, **Harry Truman** and **Lyndon Johnson** (1963-1969), come seventh and eleventh respectively – the latter would have been placed much higher in recognition of his civil rights achievement but for the corrosive effect of Vietnam on his foreign policy and moral authority scores. Nevertheless, countering possible charges of bias, the UK survey places some small government advocates higher than recent US polls have done. **Thomas Jefferson** (1801-1809) was ranked fourth, **Ronald Reagan** was eighth, and **Andrew Jackson** (1829-1837) was ninth (compared to their C-Span 2009 rankings of 7th, 10th, and 13th respectively).

Of course, complete objectivity in surveys of this kind is impossible. No less than their US counterparts, the views of UK scholars are influenced by not only their own times but also their perceptions of how America's leaders have represented that nation's best values both at home and abroad. The passions of the present have evidently affected the lowly position of **George W. Bush** and **Barack Obama's** high interim score. Memories are still raw regarding Bush's Iraq war policy and his expansion of the 'imperial presidency,' but his position in the bottom ten arguably underestimates the strength of his vision/agenda setting and his success

in achieving his domestic objectives. Obama's score reflects his substantive legislative achievements, his different style of leadership from Bush's, and what he symbolically represents as the first African American president. Nevertheless, it is well to note with regard to his ultimate (rather than interim) rating that no president in the UK survey top ten failed to win re-election to a second term.

Regardless of differences between the UK and US surveys, one similarity of great significance stands out – the relatively low position of the most recent presidents compared to the earliest ones. Of the five presidents who held office from 1977 to 2009, only **Ronald Reagan** makes the top ten and no one else makes the top 15 in the UK poll. In contrast, the nation's first five presidents (who held office from 1789 to 1825) made a much stronger showing. Two of these, **George Washington** and **Thomas Jefferson**, were placed at No. 3 and No. 4 respectively, and the other three made the top 15 – **John Adams** (1797-1801) at No. 12, **James Monroe** (1817-1825) at No. 13, and **James Madison** (1809-1817) at No. 14. It might be concluded from this that the early republic simply possessed a superior political leadership class. The more likely explanation for the discrepancy lies elsewhere, however. The massive political, organizational, and policy challenges of the modern presidency make it a far more difficult job than in the past. Our expectations as to what recent presidents could achieve may well be unrealistic when set against the many obstacles that inhibit their success.

Presidential surveys will in all likelihood continue to hold a fascination for scholars on both sides of the Atlantic for many years to come because of the presidency's position as the focal point of the US political system. Presidents are expected to be strong leaders and to use their leadership qualities for doing good – so rating them is one way of assessing their performance. This first UK scholars' survey testifies to the enduring British interest in American politics and history in general and US presidents in particular.