



## EXPERIENCE AND THE PRESIDENCY

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Did you know that Abraham Lincoln was—from the standpoint of experience—arguably less prepared to become the President than any of the 42 men to assume that office? He was our only President to *never* hold any of these jobs:

- Vice President
- Governor
- Cabinet Officer
- Senator
- General.

Lincoln's highest public position was a two-year stint in the House of Representatives that ended 12 years before he ran for President. Prior to that, he served eight years in the Illinois State Legislature and, of course, he ran for the Senate 1858? . . . but *lost*. That's it for his political experience, yet Lincoln is generally regarded as our greatest President.

The pertinence of this, of course, is that experience—and the significance of it—is a major bone of contention between the Obama and Clinton camps. And it will surely come up in the General Election since McCain is more experienced than Clinton and much more experienced than Obama.

Was Abraham Lincoln our Greatest Exception (as well as our Greatest President), or is experience just not that important? I have decided to try to examine this question by reviewing the (public) job resumé of the 42 men who have served as President of the U.S. to see whether the more experienced

ones were *generally* superior to the less experienced ones. “ExperienceData.pdf” which accompanies this little essay provides the data. Before summarizing the findings, let me explain how I went about this.

## *Methodology*

If you Google “greatest presidents” you’ll quickly find the Wikipedia article on the subject. They, in turn, make reference to 12 separate polls/surveys of “scholars.” Two date from 1948 and 1962 respectively and so (obviously) do not cover a number of modern Presidents. The remainder date from 1982 forward and leave out a decreasing number of Presidents. If you scan the Wikipedia tabulation you may be impressed at how modest the variation in the rankings is over time and from survey to survey. I decided not to make any judgments myself and instead simply relied on the average ranking each President received across all the surveys.

In the Table I prepared I show both the Average Rank and the Rank Order. Let me flesh out the difference. Lincoln is the top ranked President (#1 overall) but his average rank is 1.58. The average is not 1.00 because a number of surveys ranked him as our second greatest President and one ranked him third.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the consensus worst President—Warren Harding—has an average rank (37.33) that doesn’t look quite as bad as his rank order position (42). This is partly because he did not rank last in every survey<sup>2</sup> but mostly because the

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<sup>1</sup> The only Presidents who ranked above Lincoln in any surveys were FDR (four times), Washington (twice) and Jefferson (once).

<sup>2</sup> Harding did manage to rank last in half of the surveys. In the other half, he finished ahead of Buchanan (four times), Andrew Johnson (twice), Pierce and William Henry Harrison (once each). He also finished tied once each with Pierce, Grant and Andrew Johnson. Harding’s best finish was 38th out of 41 in the 1999 CSPAN survey. Finally, I should note that in the seven surveys taken between 1948 and 1994, Harding came in last six times whereas in the five surveys taken since he has never come in last. A new consensus seems to have emerged that Buchanan (Lincoln’s immediate predecessor!) was our worst President.

Presidential Rankings and Years of Experience

	Rank Order	Avg. Rank	Age	Vice Pres	Gov	U.S. Senate	U.S. House	State Legis	U.S. Gen'l	Cabinet	Other—years in parentheses
16	Abraham Lincoln	1	1.58	52			2	8			
32	Franklin D. Roosevelt	2	2.00	51				2			
1	George Washington	3	2.83	57	4			1	8½		Pres. Constitutional Convention
3	Thomas Jefferson	4	4.42	57	2			3		4½	2nd Continental Congress
26	Theodore Roosevelt	5	4.83	42	2						NYC Police Commissioner <sup>2</sup> (2)
28	Woodrow Wilson	6	6.58	56	2						President of Princeton (8)
33	Harry S. Truman	7	7.18	60	¼			10			
7	Andrew Jackson	8	9.00	61	¾ <sup>3</sup>		1½	¾			
34	Dwight D. Eisenhower	9	10.73	62					11		Supreme Allied Commander (2½ <sup>5</sup> )
11	James K. Polk	10	11.08	49	2		14				Speaker of the House (¾)
2	John Adams	11	12.17	61							1st and 2nd Continental Congress
35	John F. Kennedy	12	12.50	43	8						
4	James Madison	13	12.67	57		8	6	4		8	“Father” of the U.S. Constitution <sup>6</sup>
36	Lyndon B. Johnson	14	13.60	55	3	12	12				Senate Majority Leader (6)
40	Ronald Reagan	15	13.88	69							
5	James Monroe	16	14.08	58	8			1		6 <sup>7</sup>	Continental Congress 1783–86
22,24	Grover Cleveland	17	15.00	55	¾	2					Mayor of Buffalo (1)
25	William McKinley	18	16.33	54	4		12				
6	John Quincy Adams	19	16.90	57		5½				8	Multiple Ambassadorships <sup>8</sup>
27	William Howard Taft	20	19.67	51	2½ <sup>9</sup>					4½	U.S. Solicitor General then Judge.
42	Bill Clinton	21	20.67	46	12						
43	George W. Bush	22	21.00	54	6			8+ <sup>10</sup>		2	
8	Martin Van Buren	23	21.58	54	¼				2½		
19	Rutherford B. Hayes	24	22.00	54	5½		2½				
41	George H. W. Bush	25	22.14	64			4		1		DCIA (1), UN Ambassador (2)
21	Chester A. Arthur	26	25.50	51	½						
31	Herbert Hoover	27	26.17	54						7½ <sup>11</sup>	
38	Gerald R. Ford	28	26.30	61	¾		25				House Minority Leader (9)

39	Jimmy Carter	29	26.30	52		4	4	
23	Benjamin Harrison	30	27.33	55		6		
30	Calvin Coolidge	31	28.42	51	2½	2	6	
37	Richard Nixon	32	29.20	56	8	2	4	
20	James Garfield	33	29.57	49			18	3
12	Zachary Taylor	34	29.58	64				10
10	John Tyler	35	31.75	51	1 mo.	1½	6	41/4
13	Millard Fillmore	36	32.41	60	1½		8	2
18	Ulysses S. Grant	37	33.42	56				
9	William H. Harrison	38	33.57	68			3¼	21/2
17	Andrew Johnson	39	34.67	56	4	4	4½	13
14	Franklin Pierce	40	34.92	48			5	4
15	James Buchanan	41	36.58	65			10½	10
29	Warren G. Harding	42	37.33	55			6 ⅙	6
44?	John McCain			72			22	4
44?	Hillary Clinton			61			8	
44?	Barack Obama			47			4	8
								Miscellaneous <sup>12</sup>
								7
								4
								Ambassador to Great Britain (3)
								War Hero (long-serving POW)
								First Lady (8)
								Community Organizer

<sup>1</sup> Washington served in the Virginia House of Burgesses for 16 years beginning in 1759 and he was one of the 7 delegates chosen to attend the First Continental Congress.

<sup>2</sup> Formally referred to as "president of the board of New York City Police Commissioners".

<sup>3</sup> Military Governor of Florida Territory for 8 months in 1821.

<sup>4</sup> 6 months on one occasion and 2½ years on another.

<sup>5</sup> Held post in Europe and later also N. Africa and Mediterranean from December 1943 to May 1945. He held post again for 14 months beginning April 1951.

<sup>6</sup> Drafted the "Virginia Plan" which became the basis for the Constitution. Along with Hamilton and Jay he wrote "The Federalist Papers" arguing for ratification. After initially opposing the Bill of Rights he became one of its principal supporters.

<sup>7</sup> Served in Madison's cabinet for six straight years, with two stretches as Secretary of State sandwiched around a 6-month term as Secretary of War.

<sup>8</sup> Netherlands 1794-96, Portugal 1796, Russia 1809-1814, Great Britain 1815-1817.

<sup>9</sup> He was civilian Governor of the Philippines.

<sup>10</sup> A N.Y. State Senator by 1812, he appears to have remained there through the end of 1820 when he was elected a U.S. Senator. He *may* have joined the State Senate before 1812.

<sup>11</sup> Secretary of Commerce from 1921-1928—a period of great prosperity was instrumental in getting him nominated and elected President. Experience hounds might not have guessed that *he* would be the one to preside over the Great Depression. <sup>12</sup> E.g., Secretary of the Northwest Territory and Acting Governor, represented the Northwest Territory in the U.S. Congress, Governor of the Indiana Territory. <sup>13</sup> Served in the legislature for an undetermined amount of time.

Note: I have not counted *assistant* or *deputy* Cabinet Posts. Some lengths' of service figures—especially for state legislatures and for U.S. General are approximations based on incomplete data. I've rounded to the nearest 1/4 year where possible. Source: Wikipedia.

average number of Presidents ranked by the 12 Surveys was 38.<sup>3</sup>

After showing the Presidential rankings and the age the day they became President (age is surely not a bad summary measure of experience), I go on to list various kinds of “important” experience—service as Vice President, Governor, Senator, Member of the House of Representatives, State Legislature, Military (Generals only) and “Other.” It is, of course, debatable how these different types of experience should be “rated” relative to each other.

### *What Kind of Experience Counts?*

I believe that the *consensus* view goes something like this:

- 1) *Executive* experience is (much) more important than Legislative. When you are “in charge” your feet are held to the fire (“the buck stops here”). Governors propose, appoint, veto etc. Generals and Cabinet Officers do that too—although in a non-elective context.
- 2) It’s not clear to me how much more valuable some of these executive jobs are relative to one another. And surely the particulars of the situation matter. An “involved” VP gets much more important experience (both executive and political) than one kept out of the loop. A high Cabinet Officer that has the ear of the President is surely getting more experience than a lesser one. The Governor of a large State is learning

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<sup>3</sup> Five of the 12 polls chose not to rank William Henry Harrison and Garfield because the former died just one month after taking office and the latter was assassinated just 6½ months into his term. More importantly, the earlier polls (obviously) left out Presidents who had not yet been elected or (in some cases) were only partway through their first term. As a result, Truman and Eisenhower only show up in 11 of the polls, JFK, LBJ, Nixon, Ford and Carter show up in 10, Reagan, George H.W. Bush and Clinton appear in 8, 7 and 6 respectively, and George W. Bush is ranked in only two of the polls.

more how to be a President than the Governor of a small state.

- 3) Within the legislative possibilities, I believe it is clear that most people these days (especially since Senators became popularly elected in 1913, rather than elected by their State Legislatures), think the Senate counts more than the House of Representatives and that both count a great deal more than State Legislatures.

### *A Digression on Greatness*

What if Richard Nixon had not inherited the Vietnam War (and not prosecuted it throughout his Presidency)? What if the Watergate break-in had not been discovered?<sup>4</sup> Richard Nixon might, today, be thought of as one of our better Presidents (instead of being ranked 32/42). In case you forget, Nixon was the one that (a) normalized relations with China, (b) negotiated the first Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with the USSR, created the Environmental Protection Agency and was the first (and last!) Republican President to embrace Keynesian economics.

There's some luck involved here—not to mention how history is written . . . and re-written.

### *Well . . . Does Experience Matter?*

It's not very easy to make that case. Let's start by examining what types got to be President. There were . . .

- 1) 14 ex-VPs, 8 of which took over when the President died;

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<sup>4</sup> Note: I did NOT say "what if Nixon had not done various sleazy things?" Given his moral failings I don't think he could have refrained entirely from doing some very bad things. However, it is of course possible that he might never have been caught doing them.

- 2) 19 ex-Governors;
- 3) 14 ex-Senators;
- 4) 16 ex-Representatives;
- 5) 16 ex-State-Legislators;
- 6) 8 ex-Generals; and
- 7) 8 ex-Cabinet members.

Obviously, many people served in more than one capacity. Interestingly (to me) there was never a President who did *not* serve in at least one of those capacities. (Ross Perot would have been the first of his kind.)

Another interesting tidbit: Those who have served in both legislative and executive roles before become President have almost always served in an executive role *after* serving in the legislature. The only exceptions are two of our lowest-rated Presidents—Garfield and Pierce. Fully 22 Presidents spent some time either in Congress, a State Legislature or both before “moving up” to an executive role (VP, Governor, Cabinet, General or more than one of those). Only after that did they become President.

Do people with certain kinds of experience (and/or “more” experience) make better Presidents than others? Not really. There were great Presidents, mediocre Presidents and terrible Presidents with every type of background. For example:

- 1) Vice-Presidents—Ex Vice Presidents show up all through the list—from Jefferson (#4) to Andrew Johnson (#39). On average they were a tad below average (average rank 22.6). If we exclude the Presidents who inherited the Presidency owing to the death of the President the results are virtually identical (22.3).
- 2) Governors—Range from FDR (#2) to Andrew Johnson (#39) and have an average rank of 18.2. (This is a better average than any other category but, obviously, is not much better than the grand average of 21.5 among all 42 Presidents.)

- 3) Senators—None of our very greatest Presidents has ever served in the Senate. The best were Truman and Jackson (#7 and 8 respectively) and there is a whole slew at the bottom of the list. Indeed, our five worst-rated Presidents all served in the Senate. Not surprisingly then, this is the category with the lowest overall average—27.1. (Buckle up everybody, our next President is going to be an ex-Senator, none of whom has ever held any kind of executive position.)
- 4) House of Representatives—Results run the gamut from Lincoln (#1) to Buchanan (#41) and the average rank is 24.7.
- 5) State Legislature—Similar to the House with an average rank of 24.4 but much more extreme. Our four greatest Presidents and our five lowest-ranked Presidents all served in their State Legislatures.
- 6) Generals—We find #3 (Washington) and #40 (Pierce) with an average of 25.8.
- 7) Cabinet Officers—Jefferson was #4 and Buchanan was #41; the average is 20.4.
- 8) Age—The average age of our Presidents upon assuming office was 55½.<sup>5</sup> As it happens, there is a slight negative correlation between age and ranking (i.e., younger is better) but it is not even close to being statistically significant. The youngest to become President (age 42) was one of our highest ranked Presidents (Theodore Roosevelt—#5). But the oldest man to become President (Reagan—age 69) also ranks modestly above average (#15).
- 9) Total Years of Experience—If you think the President with the least total experience (Arthur—1½) ranked below average (#26) for that reason, you'll have a tough time explaining why our most experienced

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<sup>5</sup> I should note that I used the normal convention on age—namely to measure age as of one's last birthday. Hence someone who was 55 years and 11 months upon assuming the Presidency would be listed as 55 in the table.



President (Buchanan—30 years) ranks #41. Among all 42 Presidents, the average number of years of experience is 11.6 but once again, the correlation between years of experience and Presidential ranking has the “wrong” sign—i.e., there is a slight tendency for those with more experience to rank lower on the list. (Again, the correlation is FAR from being statistically significant.)

The above tabulation may *seem* silly. (I can picture some readers rolling their eyes wondering if there is *anything* that I’m *unwilling* to quantify.) But how else to examine the validity of a notion that most people simply *take for granted*—namely that experience (measured by years spent in political office and/or being a military leader) is a good thing?

### **But Doesn’t Experience *Have To* Matter?**

Yes, of course it does. When Clinton says “experience” and Obama counters “judgment” they are both laying claim to the same thing—namely, the political skill set needed to be President. We can summarize it in a word (“leadership”) which in turn depends on some combination of qualities like intelligence, wisdom, courage, vision, and the communication skills that enable one to *get one’s way*. Given our separation of powers, it is vital to keep one’s political allies in line and one’s political opponents at bay.

In 1952, Truman, skeptical that Eisenhower would make a good President, famously said that if he managed to win the election “He’ll sit here [in the Oval Office] and he’ll say, ‘Do this! Do that!’ And nothing will happen. Poor Ike—it won’t be a bit like the Army. He’ll find it very frustrating.” Except that it seems that Eisenhower, despite zero experience in the political realm, managed to learn enough about leadership as Supreme Allied Commander to become rated a well-above average President. And speaking of well-above-average Presi-

dents, Truman—*far* from the sharpest knife in the drawer, the Prendergast-machine-“appointed” Senator from Missouri, the accidental Vice President (who somehow beat out William O. Douglas after FDR decided to sack Henry Wallace), who inherited the Presidency after just three months as Veep, also is rated a well-above-average President.

How can we know in advance that a particular Presidential candidate has enough of the right kind of experience to hone their intelligence into the skills that will make them a great leader? It’s obviously difficult to predict. But we know one thing for sure: “raw” measures of experience of the kind I’ve used here (i.e., measuring the length of service in the jobs that have historically led to the Presidency) do not seem to matter.

I think it comes down to this: People who aspire to be President and manage to become candidates, have generally been thinking about public affairs for their entire adult lives. They have all held important jobs and made important decisions. They have all made mistakes (to learn from, hopefully). They all have at least some of the skills that are needed to be President. This is true of all three of the people who remain in the thick of the 2008 Presidential race.