Our Worst Presidents
A Rough Course Schedule

- Lecture 1: Intro and Methods
- Lecture 2: Post-Jackson: Van Buren, Harrison, Tyler
- Lecture 3: Sectional Tensions: Taylor, Fillmore
- Lecture 4: Impending Crisis: Pierce, Buchanan
- Lecture 5: Reconstruction: Johnson, Grant, Hayes
- Lecture 6: Gilded Age: Garfield, Arthur, Ben Harrison
- Lecture 7: The 1920s: Harding, Coolidge, Hoover
- Lecture 8: The 1970s and Our Times
The Substance of Rutherford Hayes’s Presidency, 1877-1881

- Stalemated election of 1876
- Compromise of 1877
- End of Reconstruction
- Civil Service Reform
- Railroad Strike of 1877
- Chinese Exclusion Veto, 1879
Rutherford B. Hayes: Scholar Surveys

- Schlesinger, 1948: 13 (B)
- Schlesinger, 1962: 14 (B)
- M-B 1982: 22 (C)
- CT 1982: 22 (C)
- Siena 1982: 22 (C)
- Siena 1990: 23 (C)
- Siena 1994: 24 (C)
Hayes: Notable Scholar Surveys

- R-Mcl, 1996: 25 (C)
- Schlesinger, 1996: 23 (C)
- C-SPAN, 2000: 26 (C)
- WSJ, 2000: 22 (C)
- Siena, 2002: 27 (C)
- WSJ, 2005: 24 (C)
Hayes: Notable Scholar Surveys

- C-SPAN, 2009: 33 (F)
- Siena, 2010: 31 (C)
- USPC, 2011: 30 (C)
- APSA, 2015: 30 (C)
- C-SPAN, 2017: 32 (C)
- APSA, 2018: 29 (C)
- Aggregate: 25 (C)
Rutherford B. Hayes: Siena College Criteria

- Background: 29 (C)
- Party Leadership: 33 (C)
- Communication: 30 (C)
- Relations w/ Congress: 29 (C)
- Court Appointments: 29 (C)
- Economy: 26 (C)
- Luck: 19 (B)
Rutherford B. Hayes: Siena College Criteria

- Compromise: 18 (B)
- Take risks: 33 (C)
- Appointments: 33 (C)
- Overall Ability: 33 (C)
- Imagination: 32 (C)
- Domestic Policy: 33 (C)
- Integrity: 28 (C)
Hayes: Siena College Criteria

- Executive Ability: 30 (C)
- Foreign Policy: 30 (C)
- Leadership: 32 (C)
- Intelligence: 30 (C)
- Avoid Mistakes: 24 (C)
- Experts’ View: 29 (C)
- Overall: 31 (C)
Rutherford Hayes: C-Span Criteria

- Public Persuasion: 29 (C)
- Crisis Leadership: 30 (C)
- Economic: 25 (C)
- Moral Authority: 32 (C)
- Int. Relations: 33 (C)
- Administrative: 29 (C)
- Rel. w/ Congress: 30 (C)
- Vision: 32 (C)
- Pursued Justice: 32 (C)
- Context: 28 (C)
- Overall: 32 (C)
Hayes: Historical Assessment

- Hayes biographers Hans Trefousse and Ari Hoogenboom have asserted that he is underrated, citing partial Civil Service Reform, vetoing Chinese Exclusion.

- His administration was certainly far less corrupt than his predecessor (Grant).

- Yet, no one seems eager to make a more aggressive revisionist case that he should be ranked higher than he is: 30th out of 43.
Gilded Age Presidents: More than just “Taxidermal Curiosities”
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As president, Garfield faced some of the same problems as Grant and Hayes: An ascendant Republican Party riven by factionalism (Stalwarts vs. Half-Breeds)

- A national government indifferent to the challenges of the Gilded Age

- An often incompetent civil service made up of non-entities and outright crooks
Throughout his life, his self-confidence was fragile: As a young adult he experienced a prolonged period of depression: his “years of darkness”

He had a “good war”

Often overcome with a sense of foreboding; complained of severe headaches; began having nightmares of being naked and lost
1880 Republican Convention: 379 needed to nominate. Grant led on the first ballot with 304; Blaine 284. Grant peaked at 313 on the 35th. Garfield had zero delegates as late as the 18th ballot. Garfield had one (1) delegate as late as the 33rd. Garfield nominated with 399 on the 36th ballot.
JAMES A. GARFIELD
REPUBLICAN CANDIDATE FOR PRESIDENT

CHESTER A. ARTHUR
REPUBLICAN CANDIDATE FOR VICE PRESIDENT
1880 Election
214-155 (185 Needed to Win)
Garfield won NY (35 electoral votes) by 2%
Garfield and his “Half-Breed” Cabinet
Garfield’s Troubled Presidency

- Early months consumed by one patronage appointment: Collectorship of the Port of New York
- The greatest patronage plum in the nation: collected more revenue than all other US ports combined
Sen. Conkling tilts at the Garfield windmill; Arthur looks on

- Garfield replaced reformer Edwin Merritt with William Robertson, a staunch Half-Breed

- Stalwarts saw the collectorship as a reward for support during the campaign; they were outraged
For several months, the Senate was tied up with this mess
Charles Guiteau
Guiteau’s Gun

Guiteau’s English Bulldog Pistol, that he used to shoot the President.
Garfield’s Doctors Confer
Garfield has an obscure SF street (Merced Heights) but he does have a SF monument: Garfield Monument, Golden Gate Park
James Garfield: Notable Scholar Surveys

- Schlesinger, 1948: NR
- Schlesinger, 1962: NR
- M-B 1982: NR
- CT 1982: NR
- Siena 1982: 25 (C)
- Siena 1990: 30 (C)
- Siena 1994: 26 (C)
- R-Mcl, 1996: 30 (C)
- Schlesinger, 1996: NR
- C-SPAN, 2000: 29 (C)
- WSJ, 2000: NR
- Siena, 2002: 33 (D)
- WSJ, 2005: NR
- C-SPAN, 2009: 28 (C)
- Siena, 2010: 27 (C)
- USPC, 2011: NR
- APSA, 2015: 31 (C)
- C-SPAN, 2017: 29 (C)
- APSA, 2018: 34 (D)
- Aggregate: 29 (C)
Siena College Criteria

- **Background:** 20 (B)
- **Party Leadership:** (?) 22 (B)
- **Communication:** 22 (B)
- **Relations w/ Congress:** 24 (C)
- **Court Appointments:** 32 (C)
- **Economy:** 23 (C)
- **Luck:** 41 (F)
Siena College Criteria

- Compromise: 27 (C)
- Take risks: 31 (C)
- Appointments: 29 (C)
- Overall Ability: 25 (C)
- Imagination: 28 (C)
- Domestic Policy: 25 (C)
- Integrity: 25 (C)
Siena College Criteria

- Executive Ability: 28 (C)
- Foreign Policy: 25 (C)
- Leadership: 25 (C)
- Intelligence: 26 (C)
- Avoid Mistakes: 22 (B)
- Experts’ View: 27 (C)
- Overall: 27 (C)
C-Span Categories: James Garfield

- Public Persuasion: 21 (B)
- Crisis Leadership: 31 (C)
- Economic: 29 (C)
- Moral Authority: 22 (B)
- Int. Relations: 36 (F)
- Administrative: 32 (C)
- Rel. w/ Congress: 27 (C)
- Vision: 25 (C)
- Pursued Justice: 20 (B)
- Context: 27 (C)
- Overall: 29 (C)
Historical Assessment

- At 199 days, the second shortest presidency (longer than W.H. Harrison’s 31 days and shorter than Taylor’s 492 days), difficult to fairly assess James Garfield

- He would have continued to struggle with the Half-Breed vs. Stalwart split within the GOP (increasingly dependent upon Half-Breed Blaine)
CHESTER ALAN ARTHUR

ZACHARY KARABELL
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President Hayes Kicks Chet Arthur Out of the New York Custom House
Chet Arthur

- Stood 6 feet 2 inches tall; a penchant for late-night feasts brought him up to 225 pounds by the time he became president.
- Most distinctive features were side-whiskers and mustache.
- A fastidious dresser, he had an extensive wardrobe including 80 pairs of pants.
Nicknames

- Prince Arthur
- The Gentleman Boss
- Elegant Arthur
- Chet
- The Dude President
- The Walrus
The new Stalwart President Chet Arthur confronts his Half-Breed Cabinet. (On the wall: the other former VPs who ascended to the presidency and failed)
Arthur’s Presidency

- Replaces most of the Half-Breeds in the Cabinet with fellow Stalwarts, 1881

- Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882

- Civil Service Reform (Pendleton Act, 1883)
1882 Midterms

- Democrats won 59 seats in the House and gained majority
- Arthur agreed with the Democrats to sign the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act (1883)
- His actions were too late, as the image of the Republican Party as corrupt was already ingrained in the minds of many voters
President Arthur’s Dire Health

- His work habits were affected throughout his presidency by grave illness.
- Diagnosed in 1882 with Bright’s Disease, an often fatal kidney affliction.
- Suffered nausea, depression, fatigue.
# Republican Convention, 1884

## Presidential Balloting

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Notable Scholar Surveys

- R-Mcl, 1996: 28 (C)
- Schlesinger, 1996: 26 (C)
- C-SPAN, 2000: 32 (F)
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- Siena, 2002: 30 (C)
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Notable Scholar surveys

- Siena, 2010: 25 (C)
- USPC, 2011: 32 (F)
- APSA, 2015: 32 (C)
- C-SPAN, 2017: 35 (F)
- APSA, 2018: 31 (C)
- Aggregate: 28 (C)
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- **Background:** 41 (F)
- **Party Leadership:** 31 (C)
- **Com. Ability:** 32 (D)
- **Rel. w/Congress:** 27 (C)
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- Int. Relations: 35 (F)
- Administrative: 28 (C)
- Rel. w/ Congress: 29 (C)
- Vision: 34 (D)
- Pursued Justice: (?) 27 (C)
- Context: 32 (C)
- Overall: 35 (F)
Assessment: Chester Arthur

- Prior to his presidency, Arthur was seen as the epitome of a Stalwart spoilsman: When he became president, he faced perhaps the lowest expectations in the history of the office.

- His biographers believe he exceeded those low expectations, even if he never emerged from “below average”
BENJAMIN HARRISON

CHARLES W. CALHOUN

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS
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Benjamin Harrison: Gilded Age President

- Grandson of William Henry Harrison; Indiana politician, served in the Union Army as a colonel, unsuccessfully ran for Indiana governor in 1876, selected US Senate, 1881-87

- As president, historians highlight his economic policies (protectionism, monetary contraction) which may have contributed to the economic collapse of 1893
Physical Characteristics

- A stocky figure, large paunchy torso, set atop short legs: 5 feet 5 inches tall, sported a full beard
- Brief physical breakdown in 1867 brought on from overwork
- Known as the “human iceberg,” stiff and formal in dealing with people, disliked small talk
- He had a handshake “like a wilted petunia” and an embrace like a “cold fish”
1888 Republican Convention

- John Sherman led with 229 on the first ballot
- Harrison began the first ballot in 5th place with only 80 votes
- Harrison rose to 217 on the 4th ballot; passing Sherman on the 7th ballot, 278-231
- Nominated on 8th ballot
Harrison as a political cipher clothed in ill-suited policies

- Oversized hat of his grandfather’s fits over his own hat: a symbol used by cartoonists to suggest that Ben Harrison did not measure up to William Henry Harrison(!)

- The suit of armor for protecting large corporations links GOP with big business; octopus symbolizes corporations’ grasping reach.
Election of 1888
(note grandfather’s hat)

- John Wanamaker raised GOP funds
- Solicited business contributions; byproduct of civil service reform
- Pendleton Act prohibited assessments
- With assessments prohibited, GOP solicited enormous funds from business
1888 Presidential Election:
Harrison lost the popular vote but prevailed in the electoral college (201 needed to win) 233-168 by winning NY (36). Harrison won NY by only 15,000 votes out of more than 1.3 million votes cast.
The Raven, 1890 Puck cartoon: Harrison at his desk wearing grandfather’s hat, too big for his head, suggesting he’s not fit for the presidency.

Atop a bust of William Henry Harrison, a raven with the head of James G. Blaine gawks down, a reference to the Edgar Allan Poe poem.
Billion-Dollarism Hole

$100,000,000 Surplus Left by Cleveland in 1882
1890 Midterms
A stagnant economy became worse; large majority to the Democrats anticipating Harrison’s defeat in 1892

- 51st Congress (1889-91)
  - Republicans: 179
  - Democrats: 152

- 52nd Congress (1891-93)
  - Republicans: 86 (-93)
  - Democrats: 238 (+86)
1888 compared with 1892: 444 electoral votes; 223 a majority; Cleveland returned to the presidency 277-145 by taking back his own NY (36) and Harrison’s IN (15)
Benjamin Harrison: The First Post-President Buckraker

- Represented clients who could afford the former president’s huge fees
- Represented Venezuela (for a huge fee) in a boundary dispute with British Guiana
- In 1896 he married a much younger woman, Mary Dimmick, the niece of the late Caroline Harrison
Harrison: Notable Scholar Surveys

- Schlesinger, 1948: 21 (C)
- Schlesinger, 1962: 20 (C)
- M-B 1982: 26 (C)
- CT 1982: 25 (C)
- Siena 1982: 31 (F)
- Siena 1990: 29 (C)
Harrison: Notable Scholar Surveys

- Siena 1994: 30 (C)
- R-Mcl, 1996: 31 (C)
- Schlesinger, 1996: 19 (B)
- C-SPAN, 2000: 31 (C)
- WSJ, 2000: 27 (C)
- Siena, 2002: 32 (C)
- WSJ, 2005: 30 (C)
Harrison: Notable Scholar Surveys

- C-SPAN, 2009: 30 (C)
- Siena, 2010: 34 (F)
- USPC, 2011: 34 (F)
- APSA, 2015: 29 (C)
- C-SPAN, 2017: 30 (C)
- APSA, 2018: 32 (C)
- Aggregate: 31 (C)
Benjamin Harrison: Siena College Criteria

- Background: 39 (F)
- Party Leadership: 32 (C)
- Com. Ability: 34 (D)
- Rel. w/Congress: 28 (C)
- Court Appts.: 30 (C)
- Economy: 35 (F)
- Luck: 29 (C)
Siena College Criteria

- Compromise: 30 (C)
- Take risks: 39 (F)
- Appointments: 36 (F)
- Overall Ability: 36 (F)
- Imagination: 34 (D)
- Domestic: 32 (C)
- Integrity: 31 (C)
Siena College Criteria

- Executive Ability: 35 (F)
- Foreign Policy: 28 (C)
- Leadership: 34 (D)
- Intelligence: 35 (F)
- Avoid Mistakes: 23 (C)
- Experts’ View: 32 (C)
- Overall: 34 (D)
Benjamin Harrison: C-Span Criteria

- Public Persuasion: 32 (C)
- Crisis Leadership: 33 (D)
- Economic: (?) 32 (C)
- Moral Authority: 30 (C)
- Int. Relations: 27 (C)
- Administrative Skill: 30 (C)
- Rel. w/ Congress: 26 (C)
- Vision: 31 (C)
- Pursued Justice: 24 (C)
- Context: 31 (C)
- Overall: 30 (C)
Assessment: Benjamin Harrison

- Consistently rated a below average or failed president
- Perhaps unsuited for the political arena, uninspiring: he lost the popular vote in both 1888 and 1892
- Economic calamity followed his presidency (1893-)
- No historian has yet stepped forward to argue his case
Our Worst Presidents
The 1920s: Harding, Coolidge, Hoover
A Second “Impending Crisis”?
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In 19 polls since 1948: Who’s Dead Last?
Harding has finished last 9 times (47% of polls)
Buchanan has finished last 7 times (37% of polls)
Andrew Johnson 2 times (11% of the polls)
Trump 1 of 1 (100% of the polls he’s appeared in!)
1920
The Year of the Six Presidents

David Pietrusza

Warren G. Harding
John W. Dean
Warren G. Harding

- Six feet tall, considered darkly handsome, thick head of white hair
- Bushy black eyebrows gray eyes, a rich, pleasant voice, dressed impeccably
- Took no exercise, smoked and drank, health often very poor
Early Warren Harding

- Born near Blooming Grove, Ohio; attended Ohio Central College
- At 24 suffered a nervous breakdown: spent several weeks in a sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan
- Four years later, and sporadically thereafter, he returned for treatments
Harding’s Rise

- Owner-editor of the Marion Star, 1884
- In 1891 he married Florence DeWolfe, who helped him make the newspaper a commercial success
- They had no children: it was rumored he was sterile(!)
- Affiliated with Ohio’s Old Guard Republicans, elected lieutenant governor (1904–1906)
A Mediocre Senator: “The best of the second-raters”

- Had few illusions about himself: he liked to golf, drink, and play cards
- Opposed TR and the Progressives in 1912; elected to the U.S. Senate in 1914; opposed the League of Nations and Treaty of Versailles
- Noted for affability, party loyalty
- Politics bored him: Demonstrated few leadership qualities, no legislation identified with his name
The Inevitability of Harding

- In 1920, Harding was not a dark horse nominated by some “Senate cabal”
- He was THE choice of the Republican establishment
- Effusively backed by the rank-and-file Republican Party
- And, subsequently elected in one of the largest popular landslides in American history
The Harding Image

- Strong presidential candidate
- He looked like a president: voters could draw their own conclusions
- Packaged as an all-American family man
- In fact, as it turned out, Harding was so pro-family he had several of them
Creating the Harding Image

- After decades of high drama under TR and Wilson, Harding’s very blandness and vagueness was seen as an asset.

- That he had not taken a leadership role on any issue, that he could not speak on issues with any specificity, was seen as an enormous asset.

- He was the perfect candidate: marketed to different audiences as whatever they liked, with a look that seemed to come from central casting.
Progressive GOP Sen. Hiram Johnson and conservative former president William Howard Taft campaigning for Harding in 1920
Crowded GOP Field in 1920

Johnson: 7 states, 970,000 votes (30%)

L. Wood: 8 states, 700,000 votes, 22%

F. Lowden: 1 state, 390,000 votes (12%)

Hoover: 0 states, 300,000 votes (10%)

Harding: 1 state, 145,000 votes (4.5%)
“Smoke-Filled Room”
Blackstone Hotel, Chicago
Wood led with 287 on the first; Wood peaked with 314 on the 4th ballot; Lowden with 311 on the 7th; Harding had only 65 on 1st ballot (6th place); he won on the 10th

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THE NATIONS CHOICE

LAW & ORDER

AMERICA FIRST

MARCH 4, 1921

Henry Lichtenherr©
1920 GOP Landslide

Harding’s victory begins decade of GOP dominance, conservative governance and economic policy.

Coattails: GOP picks up 10 Senate seats (59-37) and 63 House seats (303-131)
Harding’s Presidency

- Revenue Act of 1921: Taxes lowered, especially on high incomes and corporations

- Railroad Strike of 1922 (The “Daugherty Injunction”): injunction against striking, assembling, picketing, and a variety of other organizing activities -- one of the most extreme pronouncements in American history violating constitutional guarantees of free speech and free assembly
The Harding Presidency

- Immigration was restricted in ways that discriminated against “undesirable” immigration from southern and eastern Europe, particularly Italians and Jews
- Release of political prisoners
- African Americans
Harding, Nan, Elizabeth
His personal life was a mess

- Nan Britton, Nan’s baby (Elizabeth)
- Carrie Fulton Phillips
- Torrid affair with staffer, Grace Cross
- Impregnated Rosa Cecilia Hoyle (a son, whereabouts unknown)
- Affair with another woman, Augusta Cole, resulted in an abortion
The war made Carrie unstable. Sympathizing with Germany, she threatened to expose Harding if he supported the war. Their affair continued: “I love your mouth, I love your fire I love the way you stir desire I love your size and daintiness, love every thread in which you dress, I love you garb’d, but naked MORE! Love your beauty to thus adore.”
Carrie Fulton Phillips and Harding and the mysterious “Jerry”
As more scandals have been conclusively confirmed in recent years, *Politico* recently anointed Harding “America’s horniest president.”

So, he’s now #1 at *something* – Siena College take note!