Our Worst Presidents
A Rough Course Schedule

- **Week 1**: Intro and Methods
- **Week 2**: Post-Jackson: Van Buren, Harrison, *Tyler*
- **Week 3**: Sectional Tensions: *Taylor, Fillmore*
- **Week 4**: Impending Crisis: *Pierce, Buchanan*
- **Week 5**: Reconstruction: *A. Johnson, Grant, Hayes*
- **Week 6**: Gilded Age: Garfield, Arthur, *B. Harrison*
- **Week 7**: The 1920s: *Harding, Coolidge, Hoover*
- **Week 8**: Nixon, the 1970s, and Our Times
Sectional Tensions, 1849-1853
“Impending Crisis,” 1853-1861
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Physical Characteristics

- When young, Fillmore was considered strikingly handsome
- With age, he became heavier and his hair later turned white
- Nonetheless, Queen Victoria allegedly said the middle-aged Fillmore was the most attractive man she had ever met
Early Millard Fillmore

- Born in Cayuga County, NY, January 7, 1800; father was a tenant farmer
- Limited education, apprenticed as a clothier, read law with a local judge, admitted to the bar 1823
- In 1828, at age 28, elected to the New York legislature as an Anti-Mason, serving three terms
Fillmore in Congress

- Four terms Whig Rep. 1833-35, 1837-43
- Chairman of Ways and Means, 1841-43
- Selected Whig gubernatorial candidate, 1844, narrowly defeated
- Angrily blamed immigrants and Catholics for defeat
Fillmore represented conservative Whiggery; William Henry Seward the reform faction. Seward cultivated immigrant support; Fillmore certainly did not. Seward was deeply troubled by slavery.
Fillmore was chosen as Taylor’s running mate in 1848 because Fillmore was a loyal Clay man. As with John Tyler, Fillmore was chosen to assuage disappointed Clay supporters. Tyler and Fillmore became vice presidents, and later presidents, because of perceived loyalty to Clay.
Vice President Fillmore

- Tenure as vice president fighting losing battle with Seward over New York patronage
- Meanwhile, the country focused its attention on the growing sectional crisis and Clay’s proposed compromise
Fillmore Takes Over

- Taylor died July 9, 1850
- Fillmore suddenly became the 13\(^{th}\) president
- Fillmore had been marginalized by the cabinet members and he gleefully accepted their resignations
Historical Analysis: Paul Finkelman

- Only vice president, who took over by death or resignation, not to retain, at least initially, predecessor’s cabinet

- His sacking of the entire Taylor cabinet, in the midst of a crisis, is seen by some scholars as impulsive, petulant and short-sighted
The Compromise of 1850
Increasingly ingenious ways to escape: Henry “Box” Brown, Richmond to Philadelphia, March 1849
THE RUNAWAY SLAVES, ANTHONY BURNS AND THOMAS SIMS, RETURNED TO SLAVERY—THEIR MARCH THROUGH THE STREETS OF BOSTON.

With pinioned arms and manacled feet they marched between files of soldiers to a steamer bound for South Carolina from whence they had fled. Vast throngs of men and women watched the procession, many weeping as they gazed.
The Fugitive Slave Act inflamed the debate over slavery

- Fillmore pursued enforcement, regardless of Northern opinion
- For northern African Americans it was a frightening threat: kidnapping by bounty hunters
- Severe penalties for whites, too
Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) 
Sold 300,000 copies in its first year
ELIZA CROSSES THE OHIO ON THE FLOATING ICE.
Texas Threatens New Mexico, and Other Threats of Disunion

- Texas Gov. Peter Bell sent angry letters to Taylor and Fillmore
- Fillmore reinforced U.S. troops in New Mexico and warned Bell
- Fillmore also took seriously southern threats to the union
- On the advice of Gen. Winfield Scott, he reinforced forts in Charleston and elsewhere
1st Ballot, 1852 (149 needed to nominate)

Fillmore: 133 (note N-S delegate split)
Scott: 131
Webster: 29
At any time between the 1{superscript}st and 51{superscript}st ballot, Webster (R) could have thrown his meager 29 delegates to Fillmore (C) and given him, rather than Scott (L), the nomination.
53rd Ballot (149 needed to nominate)

Fillmore: 112
Scott: 159
Webster: 21
1852: Whigs in Jeopardy
Democrats won every state except VT, TN, KY, MA
By 1854, Nativist organizations, such as the Order of the Star Spangled Banner, evolved into the American Party (known as the “Know-Nothings”)
Religious intolerance led to numerous anti-Catholic attacks: burning of churches, random beatings and the killings of Catholics in numerous cities including Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington.
1855 Louisville Bloody Monday Election Riots, 22 murdered by a furious nativist mob
Increased immigration in the 1840s and 50s: Heightened violence against Irish and German Catholics, blamed for urban crime and poverty. Politicians spread lurid rumors about the menace of Catholics, claiming they would never assimilate
1854 Midterm Elections: House of Representatives
Know-Nothings Win 51 seats!

- 33rd Congress (1853-55)
  - Democrats: 158
  - Whigs: 71
  - Republicans: 4
  - Know-Nothings: 0

- 34th Congress (1855-57)
  - Democrats: 83 (-75)
  - Whigs: 54 (-17)
  - Republicans: 37 (+33)
  - Know-Nothings: 51 (+51)
83 Democrats (blue) -75 seats
37 Republicans (red) +33 seats
54 Whigs (yellow) -17 seats
8 other (green)
51 Know-Nothings (purple) +51!
Know-Nothing gains in the 1854 midterms encouraged Fillmore

- Know-Nothings won in several Northeastern states and showed strength in the South
- In January 1855, Fillmore published a letter warning against illegal immigrant voting in elections, and joined a nativist organization
He believed his support for the Fugitive Slave Act would win him Southern support, and his anti-Catholicism would win him support in some north and northwestern districts.
At right Fillmore emerges from the mouth of a cave, holding a lantern (a nativist symbol). He confronts Know Nothing founder Ned Buntline. Fillmore complains: “Oh! Ned! Ned! This is all of your doing. After being a popular Whig President, and walking in the footsteps of Clay, Webster & Cass, I am thrown back by the People into the dark & gloomy caverns of Know-Nothingism”
Notable Scholar Surveys

- Schlesinger, 1948: 24 (F)
- Schlesinger, 1962: 26 (F)
- M-B 1982: 29 (F)
- CT 1982: 31 (F)
- Siena 1982: 32 (F)
- Siena 1990: 32 (F)
- Siena 1994: 35 (F)
- R-McI, 1996: 36 (F)
- Schlesinger, 1996: 31 (F)
C-SPAN, 2000: 35 (F)
WSJ, 2000: 35 (F)
Siena, 2002: 38 (F)
WSJ, 2005: 36 (F)
C-SPAN, 2009: 37 (F)
Siena, 2010: 38 (F)
USPC, 2011: 35 (F)
APSA, 2015: 37 (F)
C-SPAN, 2017: 37 (F)
APSA, 2018: 38 (F)
Aggregate: 39 (F)
Millard Fillmore
Siena College Criteria

- Background: 40 (F)
- Party Leadership: 41 (F)
- Com. Ability: 40 (F)
- Rel. w/Congress: 38 (F)
- Court Appts.: 35 (F)
- Economy: 33 (C)
- Luck: 25 (C)
Siena College Criteria

- Ability to Compromise: 25 (C)
- Willing to take risks: 37 (F)
- Appointments: 35 (F)
- Overall ability: 38 (F)
- Imagination: 36 (F)
- Domestic Accomp.: 35 (F)
- Integrity: 36 (F)
Siena College Criteria

- Executive Ability: 38 (F)
- Foreign Policy: 33 (C)
- Leadership Ability: 39 (F)
- Intelligence: 39 (F)
- Avoid Mistakes: 30 (C)
- Experts’ View: 35 (F)
- Overall: 38 (F)
C-Span Criteria

- Public Persuasion: 40 (F)
- Crisis Leadership: 34 (D)
- Economic: 34 (D)
- Moral Authority: 36 (F)
- Int. Relations: 34 (D)
- Administrative: 36 (F)
C-Span Criteria

- Rel. Congress: 36 (F)
- Vision: 39 (F)
- Pursued Justice: 39 (F)
- Context: 37 (F)

Overall: 37 (F)
Historical Assessment

- With 969 days, he had the 7th shortest presidency, between #6 Ford at 895 days, and #8 JFK at 1,036 days

- Ranked 39 out of 43, he’s long been seen by scholars as a failed president: Failing grades (F’s) in all 19 surveys dating back to 1948
Assessing Fillmore

- Susceptible to fringe causes
- His low ratings may be attributable to his support for the Fugitive Slave Act and his association with exclusionary political movements (Anti-Masonic Party; anti-Catholic Know-Nothing Party)
- Michael Holt: “These are not, it may be argued, the choices of an exemplary mind.”
Historical Assessment

- A conservative Whig and “Doughface” to the end
- During the Civil War, Fillmore opposed Lincoln’s policies, supported Democrat George McClellan in the 1864 election and, during Reconstruction, supported Andrew Johnson
Our Worst Presidents
## The Very Bottom

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Assessment of Pierce

- Personal and public tragedy plagued Pierce’s presidency and may have contributed to his drinking problem.
- Most significant: his support for the Kansas-Nebraska Act and his determination to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act further polarized the sections.
Early Franklin Pierce

- Born November 23, 1804
- Father Benjamin led the local militia in the Revolution
- At fifteen, he enrolled in a small college in Maine where he made many friends, including a budding young writer named Nathaniel Hawthorne
His wife, Jane Appleton, thought her family socially superior to his and disapproved of politics. His marriage was frequently under strain, perhaps owing to his heavy drinking.
Path to the Presidency

- US House of Representatives, 1833-1837
- US Senator from New Hampshire, 1837-1842
- BG of Volunteers in the Mexican war
1852 Democratic Convention: 200 votes needed
First Ballot: Cass Leads Out of the Gate
Lewis Cass: 116
James Buchanan: 93
William Marcy: 27
Stephen Douglas: 20
22nd Ballot: Buchanan Peaks; Douglass Surges
Lewis Cass: 43
James Buchanan: 104
William L. Marcy: 26
Stephen A. Douglass: 77
30th Ballot: Douglas Takes the Lead
Lewis Cass: 33
James Buchanan: 91
William L. Marcy: 26
Stephen A. Douglass: 92
34th Ballot: Cass Resurgence at Douglas’ Expense
Lewis Cass: 130
James Buchanan: 49
William L. Marcy: 33
Stephen A. Douglass: 53
35th Ballot: Pierce Appears for the First Time

Lewis Cass: 131
James Buchanan: 39
William L. Marcy: 34
Stephen A. Douglass: 52
Franklin Pierce: 15
46th Ballot: Marcy Headed for a Breakout
Lewis Cass: 78
James Buchanan: 28
William L. Marcy: 98
Stephen A. Douglas: 32
Franklin Pierce: 44
49th Ballot: Pierce Nominated with 282
Franklin Pierce: 282
Strong Candidate, Weak President

- Compelling presidential candidate: Touted as “Young Hickory of the Granite Hills”
- A genuine Dark Horse: He could be fashioned and presented in any way suitable to the electorate in 1852
Candidate Pierce

- Pierce commissioned the great Nathaniel Hawthorne, his former classmate, to write a campaign biography

- Some quipped that if Hawthorne succeeded in writing an inspiring biography of the undistinguished Pierce, it would be “the greatest work of fiction he ever wrote.”
1852: Whigs in Jeopardy
Democrats won every state except VT, TN, KT, MA
Presidency of Franklin Pierce, 1853-1857

- Kansas-Nebraska Act, 1854 (a fiasco of epic proportions)
- Bleeding Kansas, 1854- (grossly mishandled, another fiasco)
- Fugitive slave controversies
- Ostend Manifesto fiasco, 1854
- Massive Party Upheaval, 1854-
Party Upheaval During the Pierce Presidency (seats: 234/118)

- Death of the Whigs, 1854-(116 seats in 1848, 0 by 1856)
- Democrat splintering, 1854- (158 seats in 1854, two parties in 1860, 45 seats by 1860)
- Rise of Know-Nothings, 1854- (won 51 seats in 1854!)
- Rise of Republicans, 1854-) (won 53 seats in 1856!)
The Kansas-Nebraska Act, 1854
1854 Midterm Elections: House of Representatives
Know-Nothings Win 51 seats!

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1856 Democratic Convention First Ballot

James Buchanan 135.5
Franklin Pierce 122.5
Stephen A. Douglass 33
Lewis Cass 5
15th ballot, Pierce’s delegates bolted to Douglas: For the first and only time in history, an elected president denied re-nomination after seeking it. 

James Buchanan: 168.5
Franklin Pierce: 3.5
Stephen Douglass: 118.5
Lewis Cass: 4.5
Notable Scholar Surveys

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- Crisis Leadership: 41 (F)
- Economic: 41 (F)
- Moral Authority: 39 (F)
- International Relations: 40 (F)
- Administrative Skills: 39 (F)
C-Span Criteria

- Rel. w/ Congress: 40 (F)
- Vision/Setting agenda: 41 (F)
- Pursued Equal Justice: 42 (F)
- Context: 41 (F)
- Overall: 41 (F)
Historical Analysis

- Ranked 40 out of 43 presidents. By every historical methodology, Pierce has been seen as a failed president.

- He has achieved the rare feat of earning F grades in all 19 surveys since 1949.

- He has also received failing grades in nearly every category of assessment from both Siena and C-Span.
Historical Analysis

- Is there *anything* that can be said about Pierce that is not critical?

- Well, compared to his successor, James Buchanan, Pierce ran a relatively clean administration.

- Also, in the current day of cabinet musical chairs, Pierce held his original cabinet together for all four years – the only president to have done so.
Historical Assessment: Franklin Pierce

- He lacked political leadership skills and never grew into the job
- He believed he could lead through his narrow base in the party, with little regard for the larger country
- To wit, he never understood the intensity of Free Soil feeling in the North
- Thus, the Kansas fiasco which ruined his presidency
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Highly unsuccessful Performance, by Dismal Jemmy.
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James Buchanan: A Strong Contender for Worst President

- In 19 polls since 1948, Buchanan has finished last 7 times (37% of polls he’s appeared in)
- Harding has been last 9 times (47% of polls he’s appeared in)
- Andrew Johnson 2 times (11% of the polls he’s appeared in)
- Trump 1 of 1 (100% of the polls he’s appeared in!)
Physical Characteristics

- He stood a bit over 6 feet tall and had a sizable paunch.
- He had small feet for a man his size and took very quick steps: He liked to wear small, tight, high-heeled, leather pumps.
- He cocked his head forward to one side in conversation, squinting to compensate for a vision problem: he was near-sighted in one eye and far-sighted in the other.
Physical Appearance

- Moreover, the left eyeball was pitched higher in the socket than was the right.
- To compensate, he developed the habit of cocking his head and closing one eye.
- If he were talking to someone, he would wink shut the farsighted eye; if gazing in the distance, he closed the nearsighted one.
Historian Garry Boulard:

- Wispy white hair came to a point on a pale white head that sometimes appeared concave.
- Cartoonists liked him: He was often drawn to look like a rodent or a sheep or a pig.
Buchanan was 65 years old in 1856

- Even as a younger man, he behaved like a much older man.
- “Because he was fussy and prim, because he had always been fussy and prim, he was often portrayed as a dowdy old maid.”
- He was certainly old in a society where the median age was 19: In 1850 only 4% of the population was over sixty!
Garry Boulard on Buchanan’s Eccentricities

- In truth, Buchanan was entirely odd: He had “The look of a man watching a street riot from behind a curtain in an upstairs window.”
Buchanan’s Eccentricities

- For no apparent reason he had taken to shaking hands by offering only two fingers
- This gesture, one reporter noted, “has been the occasion of considerable private speculation”
- When he caught the eye of a woman, he would kiss his fingertips three times in a roll
Throughout his life, Buchanan characterized himself as “anti-matrimony”

- Tall and stout, flowing white hair, meticulously dressed
- Diplomatic service at the courts the Czar Nicholas and Queen Victoria provided him with a rich store of anecdotes
- An excellent raconteur
A wealthy bachelor with Epicurean tastes, he was known for serious drinking.

- Enjoyed good liquor, spent long evenings conversing.
- His drinking was prodigious and legendary.
- Would begin with cognac, and end with old rye (three bottles might be consumed at one sitting!)
Buchanan’s Slow Political Rise

- Early controversy around his courtship of Anne Caroline Coleman; and his lifelong friendship will Alabama’s William Rufus King.

- Started as a moderate Federalist; entered Congress in 1821 as a Clay man; soon gravitated toward Jackson.

- Jackson appointed him Minister to Russia, 1832-33; upon return became Senator from PA, 1834-45.
William Rufus King
Buchanan’s Pro-Southern Bias

- A Northerner in name only: He openly despised abolitionists, whereas Southerners and slave-owners were his political and social friends and he sided with Southerners.

- Became known for romantic pro-Southern views (Relationship with Alabama’s King)
The Slow Political Path

- He spent his entire life in public office

- 42-year-long path: PA legislature; US Congress for 10 years; US Senate for 11

- High-level diplomatic appointments to Russia, Britain
Path to the Presidency

- Sought Dem nomination in 1844: blocked Van Buren (rewarded with Secretary of State in Polk cabinet)
- Declined Polk Supreme Court offer: might defer presidential ambitions
- Polk confided in his diary, “Mr. Buchanan is an able man, but in small matters is without judgment and sometimes acts like an old maid”