Our “Best” Presidents
A Journey Through American History
Course Schedule

- Week 1: George Washington (#3)
- Week 2: Jefferson (#5), Madison (#10), Monroe (#10)
- Week 3: Andrew Jackson (#15), James Polk (#12)
- Week 4: Abraham Lincoln (#1)
- Week 5: Theodore Roosevelt (#4), Wilson (#8)
- Week 6: FDR (#2)
- Week 7: Truman (#6), Eisenhower (#7)
- Week 8: JFK (#9) and LBJ (#14)
Great by Consensus

Note the remarkable consistency across the surveys, dating back to 1948. An *asterisk denotes a possible, rare, outlier

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## Near Great/Above Average

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<td>James Monroe, VA</td>
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Monroe: Pre-Presidency

- One of the most qualified figures to assume the office
- Revolutionary War service
- Continental Congress
- U.S. Senate
- Gov. of Virginia
- Numerous diplomatic posts
- Two cabinet appointments
Missouri Compromise, 1820
Banning slavery north of 36°30' (Five states joined the nation: Mississippi (1817), Illinois (1818), Alabama, (1819) Maine (1820), Missouri (1821)
1820

ELECTORAL VOTE
TOTAL VOTING: 232
NOT VOTING: 3

Democratic-Republican (Monroe)
Independent Republican (J. Q. Adams)
Monroe Doctrine, December 2, 1823

- Avoided joint declaration with the British
- Annual message to Congress declares the “Monroe Doctrine”
- Repudiation of further hemispheric colonization (Britain, Russia, Spain)
Assessment

- Monroe’s reputation has curiously oscillated
- Strongest assessment was 7th (2010)
- Weakest assessment was 18th (1962)
Monroe: Assessment

- Highest praise for foreign policy (#2 Siena, 2019)!
- Avoided blunders (unlike predecessors Jefferson & Madison, & successors such as Jackson)
- Yet historians are reluctant to credit him: since 1948, earned only 3 “A” grades in 20 polls
Monroe’s middling historical reputation is somewhat baffling

- Appointed strong cabinet
- He had two relatively successful terms (Era of Good Feelings); avoided a major war, favored diplomacy
- Sought consensus, appointed Federalists
- Left the nation better off
Assessment

- Has no monuments
- No palatial home
- None of the celebrity biographers has chosen to champion him
- No rap musical
- Does he deserve better?
Pre-Presidency
The Rise of Andrew Jackson

- Born in Carolinas, 1767
- Tragic Revolution
- Became frontier lawyer in TN
- Fortune in land speculation
- Rachel Donelson Robards, 1794
- Served briefly in US House and US Senate from TN
Characteristics

- Long and lean, 6 feet 1 inch tall, weighed 140 pounds, had a narrow, angular face
- Quick-tempered, impulsive
- Carried two bullets: One, 1806, lodged near his heart, remained, causing illness thereafter
- Another, 1813, permanently disabled his left arm
Characteristics

- As president, old beyond his 61 years
- Chronically plagued by stress-induced headaches, chronic abdominal distress, hacking, bleeding, cough
- Complexion pale, blemished, needed eyeglasses, false teeth
Jackson bought and sold slaves frequently in his lifetime. Once, in 1817, he sold 40 enslaved people in one transaction for $23,000.
Jackson and Slavery

- After one enslaved person fled, Jackson offered a $50 reward for recapture

- And “ten dollars extra, for every hundred lashes to the amount of three hundred.”

- 300 lashes risked beating a person to death! (Revenge outweighed interest)
The Rise of Andrew Jackson, Indian Fighter

- Elected commander of TN militia, 1801
- Creek Indian War, 1813-14, Battle of Horseshoe Bend
- Forced Indian surrender of vast lands in Alabama and Georgia
The Jackson Image

- 1815 Battle of New Orleans transformed him into a national hero, “Old Hickory”
- Subsequent Seminole War, 1817-18, led to the annexation of Florida
- Served as Florida’s first territorial governor
Election of 1824: Jackson won pluralities of popular & electoral vote. No candidate won an electoral majority. House elected John Quincy Adams in a contingent election, 1825.
Presidency
Realignment, 1824-1828

Jackson called for Ending the Electoral College & Supported Direct, Popular, Election of the President
Historical Reputation

- Jackson’s presidential reputation is difficult to summarize
- Political situation was fluid and unsettled
- Era filled with ambiguities & controversies that provoke ongoing disagreements
Jackson’s Presidency, 1829-1837

- Democratic Party origins
- “Petticoat Affair,” 1829-
- Indian Removal, 1830-
- Cabinet resigns, 1831
- Nullification Crisis, 1832
- Gag Rule on Slavery, 1835
The Unsettled Economic Situation

- Land Speculation, 1830-
- Internal Imp. vetoes, 1830-
- Bank of the US veto, 1832
- Debt Retirement, 1835
- Deposit & Distribution, 1836
- Specie Circular, 1836
- Great Depression of 1837
## Jackson’s Congresses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congress</th>
<th>Years</th>
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<th>House</th>
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<td>24-20</td>
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<td>23&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>18-26</td>
<td>145-94</td>
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<td>24&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1835-35</td>
<td>21-24</td>
<td>140-98</td>
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</table>
Unlike other presidents, Jackson defined himself not by enacting a legislative program but by stopping one

- Jackson vetoed twelve bills, more than all his six predecessors combined
- In eight years, Congress passed only one major law at his behest: the Indian Removal Act of 1830
Jacksonian Hostility Toward “Internal Improvements”

- Did the federal government have power to bestow largesse on selected regions?
- If so, how else might it regulate states, for instance, in matters regarding the treatment of Indians or enslaved people?
Blocking the “American System”

- American System sought to bind nation together
- Infrastructure did not keep pace with econ growth; lack of improvements inhibited growth
- Given opposition to internal improvements, US remained largely agricultural, vulnerable to commodity prices, dependent on slavery
The Major Vetoes: Jackson Did Not Limit His Vetoes to Constitutional Grounds:

- Maysville Road, 1830
- Louisville Canal, 1830
- Lighthouses & Harbors, 1830
- Bank of the US Re-Charter, 1832
- Harbors & Rivers Improvements, 1832
- Public Land Sales Proceeds, 1833
- Wabash River Improvements, 1834
- Day for annual meeting of Congress, 1836
- Overturning Specie Circular, 1836
Jackson disliked most of his cabinet. Instead created a “Kitchen Cabinet” of political allies such as Martin Van Buren, Francis P. Blair, Amos Kendall, Andrew Jackson Donelson, John Overton, Isaac Hill, Roger B. Taney
Jackson employed all of his prestige and political leverage to pass the Indian Removal Act of 1830 by a narrow House vote of 102-97.
Chief Justice John Marshall
Indian Removal & Land Speculation

- Indian Removal fueled a land speculation bubble
- Land office sold 2 million acres of public land in 1829; 12 million in 1835!
- No way to facilitate further expansion without sectional tensions
Formation of the Whig Party
# The Second Party System: Democrats vs. Whigs, c.1833-1854

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<td>• Federal Leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Executive Leadership</td>
<td>• Congressional Guidance</td>
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<tr>
<td>• No Int. Improvements</td>
<td>• Internal Improvements</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Agriculture</td>
<td>• Manufacturing</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Rural, some urban</td>
<td>• Urban, some rural</td>
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<tr>
<td>• More Slave Owners</td>
<td>• Fewer Slave Owners</td>
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<td>• Low Tariffs (taxes)</td>
<td>• High Tariffs (taxes)</td>
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<td>• Andrew Jackson</td>
<td>• Henry Clay</td>
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<td>• James K. Polk</td>
<td>• Daniel Webster</td>
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<td>• Stephen A. Douglas</td>
<td>• Abraham Lincoln</td>
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Problems of the “Spoils System”

- Spoils system, not civil service
- Poor quality appointments
- Party loyalty, not ability
- Lent itself to corruption
- Vied for spoils, not principles
- Besieged by office seekers
Jackson’s Economic Policies:
Growing Crises in Banking, Currency, Credit:
Indian Removal/Land Speculation, 1830-
Internal Improvements Vetoes, 1830-36;
Bank Veto, 1830; Debt Retirement, 1835;
Specie Circular, 1836; Deposit & Distribution, 1836
“Bank War” 1832-Deposit & Distribution Act, 1836

- July 1832 Jackson vetoed the re-charter the Bank of the US (the central bank)
- 1836 Deposit & Distribution Act: revenues to “pet banks”
- Lower reserves: banks scaled back loans (major cause of the panic of 1837)
Specie Circular, 1836

- 1836 Specie Circular: western lands paid for only with gold and silver coin
- Buyers unable to find sufficient hard money
- Circular ignites real estate and commodity crash
Economic Depression, 1837-

- Banks became insolvent
- Money supply constricted
- Business failures surged
- Commodity prices fell
- Unemployment soared
How Scholars Have Viewed Jackson

- Jackson’s historical reputation has oscillated
  - A high of #5 (1996)
  - Dropped to #19 (2019)
  - He most frequently is assessed as #9 (four times)
How Scholars Assess Jackson

Earns praise for:
- Party Leadership (#2, A)
- Risk Taking (#5, A)
- Agenda Setting (#10, A)

Earns criticism for:
- Ability to Compromise (#38, F)
- Pursuit of Justice (#38, F)
- Economic Policies (#28, C)
- Court Appointments (#27, C)
- Administrative Skills (#23, C)
Assessing Jackson

- Polarized contemporaries; continues to divide historians and public
- Once historians concluded that Indians & slaves were “people,” Jackson was due for reassessment
- The Personality Cult continues
- Controversial economic policies
- Did he leave the nation better off?
JAMES K. POLK

JOHN SEIGENTHALER

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS
Pre-Presidency
Rise of James K. Polk

- Born 1795; poor health
- Sarah Childress, 1823
- TN state rep, 1823-25
- Tennessee Gov. 1839-41 (lost in 1841 & 1843)
Recontextualizing: Slave-owning was central to his political identity

- Slave-owner & aggressive defender of slavery ("Gag Rule")
- Owned enslaved people in TN and a Mississippi plantation
- Nominated in 1844 because of the appeal of slaveholding, not despite it
The Making of a President, 1844

- Went to Baltimore convention to scheme for the vice presidency
- “Dark Horse” candidate (?)
- A southern slave-owner, favoring annexation of Texas and Manifest Destiny
Democratic Convention, 1844

- Needed 177 votes (2/3\textsuperscript{rd}s)
- Van Buren led with 146 on 1\textsuperscript{st} ballot (55\%), 31 short of 66\% required
- Polk didn’t have a single vote until the 8\textsuperscript{th} ballot
- He won on the 9\textsuperscript{th}!
**Balloting for President**

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Early use of the telegraph
Anti-slavery Liberty Party takes votes away from Whig candidate Henry Clay in MI, NY. Throws the election to Democratic candidate, and slave-owner, James K. Polk.
Sarah Childress Polk with James K. Polk

- Texas annexation, 1845
- Oregon Treaty, 1846
- Lower Tariff, 1846
- Ind. Treasury, 1846
- War with Mexico, 1846-48
Polk’s Diary, 1845-1849

- No evidence of “goals” (later)
- Dedicated: 12 hours at desk (+2 hours with visitors)
- Spent a total of only 6 weeks outside DC: “No President who performs his duty faithfully and conscientiously can have any leisure.”
Polk and his Cabinet:
Front L-R: John Mason, William Marcy, Polk, Robert Walker.
Back L-R: Cave Johnson, George Bancroft.
(James Buchanan absent)
# Polk’s Congresses

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<td>30th</td>
<td>1847-49</td>
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Admission of Texas, December 29, 1845
Slavery: Texas, the US, and Mexico
The Oregon Treaty, 1846

- Granted US title to territory in NW, all or part of 5 future states (criticized for abandoning 54-40)
- Allowed Britain and US access to Pacific south of Vancouver Island
- Allowed Polk to focus on war with Mexico
Polk as War President

- Astonishingly partisan wartime leader
- Undermined Gen. Taylor and Gen. Scott (seen as threats)
- Politicized war: Gideon Pillow promotion, Benton scheme (broke with Benton)
House of cards, “California,” “Mexico,” “Tariff,” “Oregon,” “Fame”

- War was extraordinarily polarizing at the time
- No consensus about the likely consequences
- Passionate debates: Wilmot Proviso, 1846