

Prior Experience Predicts Presidential Performance

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While many assume that “experienced” presidents perform better, citizens do not know which prior experiences help presidents perform successfully, or in what ways. Drawing upon the organizational sciences literature, we argue that prior experiences similar to the presidency will positively predict performance in general; prior experiences similar to an aspect of the presidency will positively predict performance in that particular aspect; and experiences dissimilar to the presidency will either not predict, or negatively predict performance. Contrasting with previous literature, our findings support this intuitive rationale for understanding the effect of prior experience. These findings contribute not only to the long-standing president-centered vs. presidency-centered debate, but also to a growing body of literature explaining how leaders’ backgrounds affect how they govern.

American voters hope to elect presidents who will achieve foreign and domestic success. As a result, presidential candidates frequently discuss their prior experiences eager to convince voters that, if elected, they will perform successfully. While citizens intuitively assume that “experienced” candidates make better presidents, they do not know which prior experiences help presidential candidates excel or falter once in office.¹ Even scholars are unsure what the experience qualifications are for a successful president.

1. Polls show that voters consider presidential candidates’ political, military, and private sector experiences (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2008; Przybyla 2008; Frankovic 2007). Polls also show that presidency scholars prefer “experienced” presidential candidates (Murray and Blessing 1994, 34).

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For example, would a president have more success if she or he had previously served as a U.S. senator or as a state governor? Would prior military experience lead to success as commander-in-chief? While voters may choose presidents largely for their policy preferences, party affiliation, or persona, all of these may amount to naught if inexperience leaves the president too inept to lead.

Unfortunately, we currently have no way of knowing which experiences benefit presidential performance, or in what ways. For example, presidency scholars often provide conflicting accounts when discussing presidents' prior experiences. Furthermore, quantitative comparisons between a president's prior experience and his in-office performance consistently find no link. In fact, the most recent analysis plainly states "there is no evidence that political experience improves the likelihood of strong presidential performance" (Balz 2010, 487).

This leaves us with a conundrum: prior experience is often associated with success, but these accounts frequently conflict. At the same time, quantitative comparisons find no correlation between experience and subsequent performance. Given the high stakes in choosing presidents, it is imperative to resolve this confusion by deriving a rationale for understanding which experiences lead presidents to success. Therefore, we develop theoretical expectations and test these by comparing presidents' prior experiences to their in-office performances.

This article proceeds as follows: we first review the prior studies comparing experience to job performance. We identify shortcomings in their designs and propose remedies for these. Then, based upon Richard Neustadt's work and findings from the organizational sciences literature, we present expectations explaining which prior experiences affect presidential performance and in what ways. We begin by comparing each measure of experience individually to each measure of presidential performance—this provides the most parsimonious method of demonstrating the effect of experience on performance. Then, to buttress this evidence, we provide models that test different measures of experience against each other and include factors commonly thought to affect presidential ratings such as the economy, war, and each president's place in history. In accord with our expectations, we find that several positions, including military and gubernatorial positions, substantively predict performance. Beyond answering a perennial question, we contribute to a greater theoretical understanding of prior experience and the presidency.

Does Experience Matter to a President?

This is a recurring question in American politics.² Presidential candidates frequently discuss their prior experiences in order to convince voters that they can perform

2. The founding documents provide little guidance. The Constitution requires that the president be natural born, 35 years old, and a resident for 14 years. The *Federalist* argues that the president should have "talents" and "merit."

successfully if elected. For example, in 1980, then-candidate Ronald Reagan highlighted his prior experience as governor in attempting to unseat Jimmy Carter:

I have not had the experience the President has had in holding that office, but I think in being Governor of California, the most populous State in the Union—if it were a nation, it would be the seventh-ranking economic power in the world—I, too, had some lonely moments and decisions to make. I know that the economic program that I have proposed for this Nation in the next few years can resolve many of the problems that trouble us today. I know because we did it there. (10/28/1980)³

In the 1960 election against sitting Vice President Richard Nixon, Democratic contender John Kennedy compared his congressional experiences to that of his opponent:

I have been in the Congress for 14 years. I have voted in the last 8 years, and the Vice President was presiding over the Senate and meeting other responsibilities; I have met decisions over 800 times on matters which affect not only the domestic security of the United States, but as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. (9/26/1960)⁴

Regardless of the prior experiences discussed, the public has little guidance in deciphering the validity of these appeals.

Political commentators, for example, often cite presidents' prior experiences, but these accounts appear to be based on little more than the commentator's political preferences. For example, the conservative Charles Krauthammer (2010) argued that President Obama, despite having served in the Senate, was too inexperienced because "he never ran so much as a candy store." Liberal Bill Maher (2011) argued that George W. Bush, despite having served six years as Texas governor, had the "thinnest résumé anyone had ever seen." Traditional news sources do little better than commentators. For example, in 1944, the *New York Times* reported "experience in public service must be an asset to the president." The same article contradictorily said, "the success of our presidents in the past has not depended to any great extent on their . . . previous public service" (Krock 1944). Sixteen presidential terms later, the March 10, 2008 cover of *Time* carried as an open question "How Much Does Experience Matter?" The ensuing article provided ambiguous historical examples intermingled with light quips.⁵ Readers were left thinking that experience might matter; then again, it might not.

Given that news sources provide little direction, one would hope the scholarly literature could. Unfortunately, focus has been invested elsewhere. For example, scholars have studied prior political experience to understand the paths to presidential candidacy, nominations, and victories (Aldrich 1980b; Brown 2009a, 2009b; Burden 2002; Peabody, Ornstein, and Rohde 1976; Schlesinger 1966). These studies have little to say

3. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/debatingourdestiny/80debates/cart4.html> (accessed April 26, 2012).

4. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Ready-Reference/JFK-Speeches/Senator-John-F-Kennedy-and-Vice-President-Richard-M-Nixon-First-Joint-Radio-Television-Broadcast.aspx> (accessed April 26, 2012).

5. For example, the article quipped "Wouldn't it be nice if time on the job and tickets punched translated neatly into superior performance?" (Von Drehle 2008).

about whether those experiences lead to success *after* the election. In another line of inquiry, scholars have examined presidents' success at achieving legislative goals and influencing the national agenda (Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha 2007; Bond, Fleisher, and Wood 2003; Canes-Wrone 2001a, 2001b, 2004, 2006; Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002; Covington, Wrighton, and Kinney 1995; Edwards 2009; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2005; Kernell 2006; Wood and Edwards 1999). This work provides much insight into the policy process. This current article, however, employs a different set of variables, because we seek to explain a broader definition of success.

When scholars have sought to explain presidents' success in broad terms, they have focused on a variety of causes outside of previous experience. These have included the forces of history (Blessing 2003; Nice 1984; Simonton 1984; Skowronek 2008), institutions (Crockett 2002; Hager and Sullivan 1994; Hart, Tindall, and Brown 2009; Hastedt and Eksterowicz 1993; Moe 1993; Pika 1981-82), and personal traits not necessarily linked to prior experience (George and George 1998; Greenstein 2009; Pfiffner 2004; Shogan 2009; Simonton 2006).

When presidency scholars do address the impact of experience on performance, the accounts are often contradictory. On one hand, some presidency scholars argue a president's prior experience is vastly important. For instance, Richard Neustadt (1990, 208) argues

The search [for a president] should encompass his previous employment. Since nothing he has done will be precisely like the presidency, nothing in his past can be conclusive. But, the nearer the comparisons the more suggestive. Hence, the relevance for him—and us—of previous experience, its prime utility, overshadowing acquired skills: it tests his temperament, with luck it strengthens his perspective on himself (and gives us some on him).

On the other hand, other presidency scholars argue that a president's past experience is not so important. For instance, Paul Quirk (2010, 121), while arguing that the president requires a certain expertise that "can be acquired only through substantial and recent experience in Washington," claims that the lack of this experience "need not pose much difficulty for a president. Like any technical skill, which in a sense it is, the necessary expertise can easily be hired." Thus, there exists disagreement about the importance of experience for presidents.

Beyond this general disagreement, scholars frequently provide contradictory accounts linking particular presidents' experiences to their performance. For instance, Richard Neustadt pans Dwight Eisenhower's military service:

[Eisenhower] lacked Roosevelt's experience. Instead he had behind him the irrelevancy of an army record compiled for the most part outside of Washington. (1990, 138)

Fred Greenstein, on the other hand, points to military service to explain Eisenhower's success:

No other chief executive has entered the White House with his organizational experience, and none has put comparable effort into structuring his presidency. (2009, 55)

Stephen Skowronek argues that Lyndon Johnson's successes in civil rights legislation as president stemmed from his legislative experience:

Johnson's firsthand experience of the reconstructive politics under Roosevelt would seem most critical in determining how he handled the practical dissolution of the distinction between articulating and reconstructing, completing and discarding, the received premises of national politics. (2003, 336)

Greenstein, on the other hand, argues that legislative experience did not benefit Johnson's presidency:

Nothing in Johnson's legislative career had provided him with a conception of how to organize the presidency. (2009, 87)

Even authors in the same edited volume, Fred Greenstein's *The George W. Bush Presidency: An Early Assessment* (2003), cannot agree on the value of experience. Hugh Heclo argues that George W. Bush's service as governor left him ill-prepared for the presidency:

Having served less than six years as governor of a state in which that office lacks significant executive power, George W. Bush sought the nation's top job with the scantiest record in public office of any modern president. (2003, 24)

Conversely, John Fortier and Norman Ornstein argue that Bush's experience as governor was valuable to him once in the White House:

Bush demonstrated an understanding of, and sensitivity to the concept of political capital. Winning in the legislature gains an executive political capital, capital that must be spent or it dissipates. That understanding was honed by his gubernatorial experience. (2003, 145)

This small sampling of conflicting accounts indicates that the impact of prior experience on presidential performance remains an open question.

Further complicating the above conflictual accounts, a series of studies by political scientists, historians, and psychologists comparing measures of prior experience to performance lead to the same conclusion: *Experience does not matter*. Balz' recent statistical analysis concludes "there is no evidence that political experience improves the likelihood of strong presidential performance" (2010, 487). Jones (2009) examines instances where the president had more political experience than their predecessor and finds that the inexperienced president performed better. Murray and Blessing (1994, 35) show that those with the most political experience performed "below average" as president. They claim that "holding political office before running for president did not always benefit the individuals involved." Holmes and Elder (1989, 529) show that "high-level governmental experience generally is the least significant" predictor of success.⁶ Simonton (1981, 306) shows that "education, occupation, and political experiences provided few if any viable predictors" of performance. Likely due to these repeated findings, scholars have yet to develop theoretical expectations regarding experience.

6. They find that male birth order and height are more predictive of success.

While these studies employ varying methodologies (Balz and Simonton use regression; Holmes and Elder employ measures of bivariate correlation; Murray and Blessing and Jones use nonstatistical methods of assessment), they use similar data: objective variables measuring past experience and scholars' subjective assessments of presidential performance. While important, these studies are limited in what they can tell us: the null results suggest only that prior experience has no impact on the *overall* performance of the *whole range* of presidents. We now outline four improvements we make on past designs in order to draw more pertinent conclusions.

Improving on Previous Designs

First, all of the prior studies quantitatively comparing experience to performance use the entire range of presidents. However, we focus this study only on the "modern presidency." Much of the motivation behind examining prior experience is not simply to explain the past but rather to gain some traction on the future. In other words, scholars would like to know which types of potential candidates would likely perform well in the near future. With this said, the presidency has changed drastically since the 1790s and, as such, we argue that the attributes that would make a president successful in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may not necessarily provide a president with a desirable skill set for the current century. Therefore, while including eighteenth- and nineteenth-century presidents provides more observations for quantitative analysis, these early cases may provide only limited explanatory power for the twenty-first century. In addition to this, there is little theoretical motivation to guide the inclusion of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century presidents alongside modern presidents in this analysis: much of the presidency literature makes a distinction between the historical presidency and some form of a "modern" presidency. While there is some disagreement as to exactly when the "modern" presidency began, many major scholars assert this distinction (e.g., Cohen 1982; Gould 2003; Greenstein 1978; Lowi and Ginsberg 1990; Neustadt 1990). Thus, in keeping with these (and many other) scholars, this article only examines the effect of prior experience on modern (twentieth and twenty-first century) presidents.

Second, previous works use assessments of *overall* presidential performance. This may have masked the effects of experiences that help a president perform well in one area of governing but not in another (Schlesinger 1997, 183). For example, President Richard Nixon's prior experiences may have led him to succeed in foreign relations but fail in governing ethically. To address this, we employ not only an overall assessment of each president's performance, but also assessments of performance in ten specific aspects of leadership.

Third, the measures of presidential success rely on *subjective* assessments by academics. Many contend these polls show a partisan bias because academics tend to be liberal and Democratic (e.g., Felzenberg 2003; Mervin 1995; Piereson 1997; Rose 1993, 473-75).⁷ In

7. Academics tend to identify as more liberal than the public (Cardiff and Klein 2005). In the social sciences and humanities (the pool from which most of the raters are drawn), Democratic professors outnumber Republican professors by seven to one (Rothman, Lichter, and Nevitte 2005).

response, some claim that whether conservative or liberal academics rate the presidents, the results of the polls look similar (e.g., Bose 2003, 8-9). However, recent work finds that the ideological distribution of raters significantly affects the subsequent ratings of the modern presidents (Mervin 1995; Uscinski and Simon 2011). For example, when the pool of raters is made more ideologically balanced, as in the 2005 Wall Street Journal Poll, Democratic presidents are ranked on average four places better than Republican presidents. In contrast, when the sample is ideologically unbalanced (as in the Siena or Ridings-McIver polls), modern Democratic presidents are ranked on average 11 places higher than modern Republican presidents (Uscinski and Simon 2011). We do not suggest that raters purposely “bias” their responses to favor a particular party; however, we suggest, as others have, that the ratings tell us as much about the raters as they do about the presidents (Pfiffner 2003, 32; see also Mervin 1995). Prior studies examining the effect of experience do not account for these potential biases; we argue that these should be accounted for. Therefore, we control for the presidents’ party affiliation.

Fourth, prior studies have used a limited number of variables to measure experience.⁸ For exploratory purposes, we employ a wider range of 40 variables measuring political, military, educational, and other experience. This should provide more fine-grained measures. By making these aforementioned improvements, we expect to garner more relevant estimates.

Theoretical Orientation

Given the number of variables explored in this study, space prohibits lengthy theoretical motivation and description of each. However, as we introduce the data, we provide a brief explanation of why the measures of experience we explore may impact performance. We do not expect every measure of prior experience to impact every aspect of performance; instead, we expect some experiences to impact only certain aspects of performance and others to have little or no impact. We also explore some variables (such as age) for which we have little theoretical expectation. We explore these because they are widely discussed in campaign news coverage.

This study is situated within the long-standing president-centered *vs.* presidency-centered debate (Eshbaugh-Soha 2003; Hager and Sullivan 1994; Hecl 1977; Moe 1993; Rockman 2009). If the data show that prior experience, a factor internal to the individual presidents, affects their performance, then this would provide support for president-centered arguments. While there exists a common intuition that more experience, in general, is a good thing; there is unfortunately little established theory in the presidency literature to guide specific expectations.

With this said, we rely on Neustadt’s (1990, 208) assertion about prior experience that “the nearer the comparisons [to the presidency] the more suggestive.” In other words, Neustadt argues that positions similar to the presidency are more valuable than

8. For example, Balz (2010) measures military service as a general or as a “soldier.” However, military service may take place on the battlefield, in the reserves, or on noncombat active duty.

positions dissimilar to the presidency. This reasoning comports with findings from the organizational sciences. Prior experiences relevant to the present task have been found to improve performance (Benor and Hobfoll 1981; Borman et al. 1993; Cormier and Hagman 1987; Singley and Anderson 1989). Conversely, prior experience that varies widely from the present task has a negligible or even negative impact on performance (e.g., Gick and Holyoak 1987). This is because “similar work activities are likely to provide opportunities to develop relevant knowledge and skill that can be applicable to performance in a new context” while unrelated work experiences may be inappropriately applied in new situations such that performance suffers (Dokko, Wilk, and Rothbard 2009, 52-54). Applying this literature to the presidency leads to the following expectations.

First, we expect prior experiences similar to the presidency to positively predict performance. For example, because state governors serve as the chief executives and work within powers and constraints similar to that of the president, we expect gubernatorial service to positively predict performance as president (and, the larger the state, the larger the impact).

Second, we expect experiences similar to a specific aspect of the presidency to positively predict performance in that specific aspect. For example, because serving as a federal administrator provides skills at operating the federal bureaucracy, we expect that serving as a federal administrator will lead to better administrative skill as president.

Third, we expect prior experiences that vary widely from the presidency (or a specific aspect thereof) to not predict, or even negatively predict a president’s performance overall (or in that specific aspect of the job). For example, we expect that having no Washington experience would lead a president to work poorly with both the bureaucracy and the Congress because he or she would have developed little skill in negotiating the federal system. As we introduce the variables measuring experience, we briefly lay out specific expectations where we have them.

Data

Dependent Variables

Our dependent variable is each president’s success in office, broadly defined. To measure this, we employ surveys of academics and experts. We employ these surveys for three main reasons. First, these surveys ask respondents to rate each president based upon a broad definition of success; this provides a direct measure of the concept we wish to quantify. Scholars have noted the difficulties in using other measures to gauge performance; for example, a measure of the number of bills passed or vetoes overridden for each president may not capture the full concept of performance and may also be plagued with flaws (Blessing, Skleder, and You 2011,13). Second, given that ranking polls likely represent the only readily available method of measuring performance broadly defined, these polls represent the judgments of a range of professional scholars of the presidency. Thus, unlike polls that ask the public to rank the presidents, these polls rely on informed

respondents. Finally, polls of presidential experts have been taken for almost 70 years. There are a variety of polls from which to choose, and as such, the results of this study can be replicated with ratings from other polling houses and years. Because these polls have been taken for so long, they have been widely studied by scholars and are frequently used in peer-reviewed research to measure presidential performance (Adler 2003; Balz 2010; Cohen 2003; Curry and Morris 2010; Jones 2008, 2009; Lindgren and Calabresi 2001; Lonnstrom and Kelly 2003; Murray and Blessing 1983; Plischke 1985; Schlesinger 1997; Simonton 1984, 1985, 2001, 2006). Thus, the use of expert polls provides comparability to previous studies.

With this said, however, this method of measuring presidential performance has its detractors. Since the first polls appeared in the 1940s, numerous criticisms have been lodged against them (e.g., Amlund 1964; Dean 2001). Many have argued that the ratings are subject to the raters' ideological biases (e.g., Felzenberg 2003). Others argue that while most of the raters have extensive knowledge on a handful of presidents, they do not have adequate knowledge to rank all of the presidents (Bose 2003). Others argue that the presidents' ratings are not definitive, as they fluctuate with increasing distance from each presidency (Lonnstrom and Kelly 2003). Still others have claimed that historians, legal scholars, or political scientists are not qualified to rate the presidents.⁹ Even acknowledging these criticisms, expert ratings still represent the best available measure of performance broadly defined.

We utilize the 2009 C-SPAN Historians Survey of Presidential Leadership, which asked 65 political scientists, historians, and other professional observers to rate the presidents' success. This poll and its 2000 predecessor are frequently employed by scholars (Balz 2010; Cohen 2003; Curry and Morris 2010; Jones 2009; Simonton 2006). The 2009 C-SPAN poll is appropriate not only because of its recency, but also because scholars rate presidents' success in 10 attributes of leadership on a scale of 0 to 100. This is useful because presidents may excel at some aspects of the job and not others and because experience may predict performance in some aspects but not others. These 10 attributes are Public Persuasion, Crisis Leadership, Economic Management, Moral Authority, International Relations, Administrative Skills, Relations with Congress, Vision/Setting an Agenda, Pursued Equal Justice for All, and Performance within the Context of Times.¹⁰ C-SPAN also provides an overall score that is the aggregate of the 10 attributes; we divide this by 10. Therefore, in each category and overall, each president could earn a score between 0 and 100.¹¹

9. However, Lindgren and Calabresi (2001) show that the ratings are similar despite the expert's area of study.

10. These categories were designed by C-SPAN's team of academic advisors. Some readers may be concerned that the categories appear to favor liberal or Democratic values and therefore favor Democratic presidents. However, this does not appear to be the case: the results of the C-SPAN polls are similar to other polls which do not use the C-SPAN criteria (Uscinski and Simon 2011). Researchers have employed C-SPAN's ten leadership categories (e.g., Cohen 2003).

11. C-SPAN surveyed 147 scholars and other professional observers of the presidency, drawn from a database of C-SPAN's programming. Sixty-five agreed to participate. The participants used a one ("not effective") to ten ("very effective") scale to rate each president on ten qualities of presidential leadership. Survey responses were tabulated by averaging all responses in a given category for each president and then

While the C-SPAN poll rates all presidents, this study focuses only on the “modern presidency” in order to make inferences more germane to the contemporary era. Thus, we begin with William McKinley because many aspects of the modern presidency began during his term (Milkis and Nelson 2008, 202-03; see also Abbott 2004; Hargrove 2004; Gould 1981; Klinghard 2005). Presidential historian Lewis Gould cites McKinley’s administration as having

a significant increase in the size of the White House staff, a chief of staff to manage the expanded personnel, bureaucratic procedures to handle the interactions with the press, formalized relations with Congress through a White House office, greater power for the president as commander in chief, expanded travel in and out of the United States to build political support, increasing access to and dependence upon both traditional and electronic media, and continuous campaigning to ensure reelection and the success of the president’s party. (2003, xi-xii)

Our sample ends with George W. Bush and provides an *n* of 19.¹² Many disagree about exactly when the “modern” presidency began: beyond McKinley, some argue it began with Woodrow Wilson, others argue Franklin Roosevelt (FDR).¹³ We will address this later, but we note that while this article begins with McKinley, we have also used samples beginning with Wilson and FDR. The results of these alternative conceptions of the modern presidency are resoundingly similar.

Table 1 shows the performance of each president in C-SPAN’s ten leadership categories. The final column shows each president’s overall score which, again, is simply the average of the scores from the ten leadership categories. Table 2 provides this data organized by each president’s rank within the sample (numbers in parentheses indicate each president’s rank out of all forty-two presidents). Table 3 provides the overall range, mean, and standard deviation for the 19 presidents in each leadership category and overall. Table 3 also shows the summary statistics for the 12 Republican presidents and seven Democratic presidents separately. Values in bold print indicate that the minimum or maximum value for that particular party is the minimum or maximum for the entire sample of presidents. A Republican president has the lowest value in every category while a Democratic president has the highest value in every category; this is true for the overall score as well. The bottom row of Table 3 shows the difference in means between the Republican and Democratic presidents. The positive values indicate that Democratic presidents scored more highly than Republican presidents in every category and in the overall score. The differences are most stark in the Pursued Equal Justice for All and Vision/Setting an Agenda categories—these differences were more than 20 points each. In the Overall Score, Democrats fared better than Republicans by fourteen points. The differences are statistically significant in five of the categories and in the overall score. A

transforming them into a scale of 1-100. We attempted to attain each rater’s individual scores from this poll. However, C-SPAN refuses to release these (even without the raters’ names attached); this is to protect the anonymity of the raters.

12. For historical purposes, we are performing an analysis similar in this article on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century presidents to understand how experience impacted the historical presidency.

13. Others differently conceive the modern presidency (Galvin and Shogan 2004; Nichols 1994).

TABLE 1
The Performance of the Presidents on Ten Categories of Leadership and Overall.

	<i>Public Persuasion</i>	<i>Crisis Leadership</i>	<i>Economic Management</i>	<i>Moral Authority</i>	<i>International Relations</i>	<i>Administrative Skills</i>	<i>Relations with Congress</i>	<i>Vision/Setting an Agenda</i>	<i>Pursued Equal Justice For All</i>	<i>Performance within the Context of Times</i>	<i>Overall Score</i>
W. McKinley	61.5	64.0	58.0	58.1	64.5	62.9	62.3	62.9	42.7	32.4	59.9
T. Roosevelt	89.2	80.9	73.6	80.5	80.3	75.2	66.6	85.7	65.3	83.6	78.1
W. Taft	41.9	42.5	51.1	54.4	55.0	59.2	48.5	39.4	43.8	49.2	48.5
W. Wilson	75.6	73.3	68.8	78.0	70.8	68.4	54.0	86.6	38.4	69.0	68.3
W. Harding	39.1	28.2	34.1	22.5	38.8	30.0	41.3	30.5	32.2	30.2	32.7
C. Coolidge	44.8	40.6	50.2	55.2	46.9	53.0	51.6	41.1	37.0	48.9	46.9
H. Hoover	32.1	26.0	24.9	47.4	50.2	65.8	42.7	32.6	36.3	30.8	38.9
F. Roosevelt	95.1	92.5	70.3	83.0	86.2	77.3	81.3	92.7	66.9	91.3	83.7
H. Truman	59.3	83.0	63.5	69.0	80.8	66.9	54.4	73.0	79.2	79.6	70.8
D. Eisenhower	66.6	73.6	63.9	79.5	76.2	74.8	66.6	56.9	59.5	71.0	68.9
J. F. Kennedy	85.0	73.3	70.2	65.3	66.7	62.8	60.2	78.4	70.3	38.9	70.1
L. B. Johnson	60.5	54.4	59.2	50.6	41.9	65.6	79.7	74.4	91.5	63.6	64.1
R. Nixon	45.6	48.6	47.2	18.4	70.6	53.0	39.2	45.2	43.9	38.4	45.0
G. Ford	44.7	54.1	43.6	62.5	52.2	51.9	57.3	37.2	51.2	54.6	50.9
J. Carter	37.1	37.7	36.2	62.1	49.0	48.9	41.8	46.2	70.3	44.5	47.4
R. Reagan	89.4	69.4	54.9	68.6	75.1	48.5	65.4	82.2	45.4	72.5	67.1
G. H.W. Bush	40.8	69.7	46.9	56.9	75.0	59.3	50.2	38.1	48.7	56.7	54.2
W. J. Clinton	74.3	60.5	76.7	28.9	64.1	58.0	51.1	57.4	73.0	60.7	60.5
G. W. Bush	34.8	45.2	25.3	34.4	30.7	34.2	39.7	44.2	39.8	33.9	36.2

Bold print indicates maximum and minimum scores in each category.

TABLE 2a
Presidential Performance by Rank

<i>Rank within Sample</i>	<i>Public Persuasion</i>	<i>Crisis Leadership</i>	<i>Economic Management</i>	<i>Moral Authority</i>	<i>International Relations</i>
1	F. Roosevelt (1)	F. Roosevelt (2)	W. J. Clinton (3)	F. Roosevelt (3)	F. Roosevelt (2)
2	R. Reagan (2)	H. Truman (4)	T. Roosevelt (4)	T. Roosevelt (4)	H. Truman (4)
3	T. Roosevelt (4)	T. Roosevelt (5)	F. Roosevelt (5)	D. Eisenhower (5)	T. Roosevelt (5)
4	J. F. Kennedy (6)	D. Eisenhower (7)	J. F. Kennedy (6)	W. Wilson (6)	D. Eisenhower (6)
5	W. Wilson (9)	J. F. Kennedy (8)	W. Wilson (7)	R. Reagan (8)	R. Reagan (8)
6	W. J. Clinton (10)	W. Wilson (9)	D. Eisenhower (8)	H. Truman (9)	G. H. W. Bush (9)
7	D. Eisenhower (11)	G. H. W. Bush (11)	H. Truman (10)	J. F. Kennedy (11)	W. Wilson (10)
8	W. McKinley (13)	R. Reagan (12)	L. B. Johnson (11)	G. Ford (13)	R. Nixon (11)
9	L. B. Johnson (14)	W. McKinley (14)	W. McKinley (13)	J. Carter (14)	J. F. Kennedy (13)
10	H. Truman (16)	W. J. Clinton (15)	R. Reagan (17)	W. McKinley (17)	W. McKinley (15)
11	R. Nixon (21)	L. B. Johnson (18)	W. Taft (19)	G. H. W. Bush (19)	W. J. Clinton (16)
12	C. Coolidge (22)	G. Ford (19)	C. Coolidge (20)	C. Coolidge (20)	W. Taft (19)
13	G. Ford (23)	R. Nixon (23)	R. Nixon (22)	W. Taft (22)	G. Ford (23)
14	W. Taft (26)	G. W. Bush (25)	G. H. W. Bush (23)	L. B. Johnson (25)	H. Hoover (25)
15	G. H. W. Bush (29)	W. Taft (27)	G. Ford (26)	H. Hoover (27)	J. Carter (27)
16	W. Harding (31)	C. Coolidge (32)	J. Carter (35)	G. W. Bush (34)	C. Coolidge (30)
17	J. Carter (34)	J. Carter (35)	W. Harding (36)	W. J. Clinton (36)	L. B. Johnson (35)
18	G. W. Bush (35)	W. Harding (37)	G. W. Bush (40)	W. Harding (38)	W. Harding (37)
19	H. Hoover (37)	H. Hoover (38)	H. Hoover (41)	R. Nixon (41)	G. W. Bush (42)

Numbers in parentheses represent each president's rank out of all forty-two presidents. The C-SPAN rankings include forty-two presidents as President Obama is excluded. Grover Cleveland, while serving two separate terms, appears only once.

TABLE 2b
Presidential Performance by Rank

Rank within Sample	Administrative Skills	Relations with Congress	Vision/ Setting an Agenda	Pursued Equal Justice for All	Performance within the Context of Times	Overall
1	F. Roosevelt (3)	F. Roosevelt (1)	F. Roosevelt (2)	L. B. Johnson (2)	F. Roosevelt (3)	F. Roosevelt (3)
2	T. Roosevelt (4)	L. B. Johnson (2)	W. Wilson (4)	H. Truman (3)	T. Roosevelt (4)	T. Roosevelt (4)
3	D. Eisenhower (5)	D. Eisenhower (6)	T. Roosevelt (5)	W. J. Clinton (4)	H. Truman (5)	H. Truman (5)
4	W. Wilson (7)	T. Roosevelt (7)	R. Reagan (7)	J. F. Kennedy (5)	R. Reagan (7)	J. F. Kennedy (6)
5	H. Truman (9)	R. Reagan (8)	J. F. Kennedy (8)	J. Carter (5)	D. Eisenhower (8)	D. Eisenhower (8)
6	H. Hoover (10)	W. McKinley (10)	L. B. Johnson (11)	F. Roosevelt (7)	W. Wilson (10)	W. Wilson (9)
7	L. B. Johnson (11)	J. F. Kennedy (12)	H. Truman (12)	T. Roosevelt (8)	J. F. Kennedy (11)	R. Reagan (10)
8	W. McKinley (13)	G. Ford (13)	W. McKinley (13)	D. Eisenhower (10)	L. B. Johnson (14)	L. B. Johnson (11)
9	J. F. Kennedy (14)	H. Truman (16)	W. J. Clinton (15)	G. Ford (12)	W. McKinley (15)	W. J. Clinton (15)
10	G.H.W. Bush (16)	W. Wilson (17)	D. Eisenhower (16)	G.H.W. Bush (14)	W. J. Clinton (16)	W. McKinley (16)
11	W. Taft (17)	C. Coolidge (18)	J. Carter (21)	R. Reagan (17)	G.H.W. Bush (19)	G.H.W. Bush (18)
12	W. J. Clinton (20)	W. J. Clinton (19)	R. Nixon (22)	R. Nixon (18)	G. Ford (21)	G. Ford (22)
13	C. Coolidge (23)	G.H.W. Bush (20)	G. W. Bush (25)	W. Taft (19)	W. Taft (23)	W. Taft (24)
14	R. Nixon (23)	W. Taft (22)	C. Coolidge (27)	W. McKinley (21)	C. Coolidge (24)	J. Carter (25)
15	G. Ford (26)	H. Hoover (30)	W. Taft (31)	G. W. Bush (23)	J. Carter (29)	C. Coolidge (26)
16	J. Carter (29)	J. Carter (32)	G.H.W. Bush (33)	W. Wilson (26)	R. Nixon (33)	R. Nixon (27)
17	R. Reagan (30)	W. Harding (34)	G. Ford (35)	C. Coolidge (30)	G. W. Bush (36)	H. Hoover (34)
18	G. W. Bush (37)	G. W. Bush (36)	H. Hoover (37)	H. Hoover (31)	H. Hoover (37)	G. W. Bush (36)
19	W. Harding (41)	R. Nixon (37)	W. Harding (38)	W. Harding (34)	W. Harding (38)	W. Harding (38)

Numbers in parentheses represent each president's rank out of all forty-two presidents. The C-SPAN rankings include forty-two presidents as President Obama is excluded. Grover Cleveland, while serving two separate terms, appears only once.

TABLE 3
Summary Statistics of Dependent Variable

	Public Persuasion	Crisis Leadership	Economic Management	Moral Authority	International Relations	Administrative Skills	Relations with Congress	Vision/ Setting an Agenda	Pursued Equal Justice For All	Performance within the Context of Times	Overall Score
All Cases (n = 19)											
Minimum	32.1	26.0	24.9	18.4	30.7	30.0	39.2	30.5	32.2	30.2	32.7
Maximum	95.1	92.5	76.7	83.0	86.2	77.3	81.3	92.7	91.5	91.3	83.7
Mean	58.8	58.8	53.6	56.6	61.8	58.7	55.5	58.1	54.5	58.4	57.5
<i>s.d.</i>	20.8	19.0	15.8	19.3	16.0	12.7	12.6	20.6	17.0	17.9	14.5
Republicans (n = 12)											
Minimum	32.1	26.0	24.9	18.4	30.7	30.0	39.2	30.5	32.2	30.2	32.7
Maximum	89.4	80.9	73.6	80.5	80.3	75.2	66.6	85.7	65.3	83.6	78.1
Mean	52.5	53.6	47.8	53.2	59.6	55.7	52.6	49.7	45.5	52.7	52.3
<i>s.d.</i>	19.8	18.0	14.6	19.9	16.3	13.9	10.7	18.5	9.6	17.5	14.0
Democrats (n = 7)											
Minimum	37.1	37.7	36.2	28.9	41.9	48.9	41.8	46.2	38.4	44.5	47.4
Maximum	95.1	92.5	76.7	83.0	86.2	77.3	81.3	92.7	91.5	91.3	83.7
Mean	69.6	67.8	63.6	62.4	65.6	64.0	60.4	72.7	69.9	68.2	66.4
<i>s.d.</i>	19.1	18.4	13.3	18.2	15.9	8.9	14.8	16.2	16.1	14.7	11.1
Difference (Dem.-Rep.)	17.1*	14.2	15.7*	9.2	6.0	8.3	7.7	23.0*	24.5*	15.5*	14.1*

* indicates $p \leq .05$ in one-tailed difference of means test.

correlation matrix between the 10 categories and the overall score is included in Online Appendix A.¹⁴ Several categories are highly correlated; others clearly measure different concepts.

Independent Variables

We collected political, military, campaign, and background experiences using biographies, online sources, and history texts. Tables 4a and 4b provide summary statistics for these measures. We provide the variable type, range, mean, median, and standard deviation. For the dichotomous variables, we provide the number who served in that position in the Notes column. For the variables measuring the number of years each president served in a position, we include in parentheses the statistics for just those who held that position. For example, seven presidents previously served as vice president with years of service ranging from 0.3 years to 8 years. But, for the sample of all 19 presidents (12 of whom did not serve as vice president), the range is from 0 to 8. Because we examine only 19 presidents, some experiences could not be examined because of lack of variation.¹⁵

National Executive Positions. We first measure if each president previously served as vice president and how many years they served. Recently, the vice presidency has gained in prestige and power (Baumgartner 2006; Goldstein 2008; Nelson 1988). With this said, the vice presidency is vastly different than the presidency. Vice presidents impact policy only at the discretion of the president, rarely have access to the national stage the way presidents do, and are rarely called upon to make single-handed consequential decisions (Neustadt 2000, 131-32; see also Abbott 2005; Cooper 1997). Some are unsure if the vice presidency is even an executive position (“Biden and Palin on the Vice Presidency” 2008; Malone 2007), and many have called for the position to be abolished due to its impotence (e.g., Ackerman 2008; Schlesinger 1974). In accordance with previous research (e.g., Adkison 1983), we do not expect service as vice president to predict performance.

We measure if the presidents previously served as a high-ranking federal administrator and how many years they served.¹⁶ While high-ranking federal administrators do not have the vast decision-making power or public prominence that presidents have, they do manage massive bureaucracies at the national level (Neustadt 2000, 116; Nicholls 1991, 154; see also Anderson 1986). We expect this to provide more administrative skill as president.

National Legislative Positions. We measure if each president previously served in the Senate, House of Representatives, or as a leader in either house, and the years served

14. Online Appendices are posted online at <http://www.joescinski.com/appendices>.

15. For example, prior works examine service as mayor and general; but, there is only one of each in our data. In other instances, we merge similar positions that lack variation for inclusion.

16. This includes positions such as cabinet secretary, territorial governor, ambassador, and other high-ranking federal administrative jobs.

TABLE 4a
Summary Statistics of Presidents' Prior Experience

Variable Name (n = 19)	Variable Type	Range	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Notes
<u>National Executive Positions</u>						
Vice President	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	0	<i>n.a.</i>	7 served as V.P.
Years as Vice President	Continuous	0-8 (0.3-8)	1.2 (3.1)	0 (1.5)	0.5	
Federal Administrator	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	0	<i>n.a.</i>	5 served a Federal Public Administrator
Years as Federal Public Administrator	Continuous	0-9 (1-9)	1.5 (5.6)	0 (6.3)	2.9	
<u>National Legislative Positions</u>						
Senator	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	0	<i>n.a.</i>	5 served as Senator
Years as Senator	Continuous	0-12 (3-12)	2.0 (7.6)	0 (7)	3.8	
Representative	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	0	<i>n.a.</i>	6 served as Representative
Years as Representative	Continuous	0-24 (4-24)	3.2 (10.2)	0 (9)	6.3	
Congressional Leader	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	0	<i>n.a.</i>	3 were Congressional Leaders
Years as Congressional Leader	Continuous	0-20 (4-20)	1.7 (11.7)	0 (8)	4.8	
<u>Military Experience</u>						
Military Service	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	1	<i>n.a.</i>	12 served in the Military
Years in Military	Continuous	0-38 (1-38)	4.7 (7.4)	3 (4)	8.6	
Active Duty During Peacetime	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	0	<i>n.a.</i>	9 were on Active Duty in Peacetime
Years on Active Duty During Peacetime	Continuous	0-38 (1-38)	3.2 (6.7)	0 (3)	8.6	
Active Duty During War Time	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	1	<i>n.a.</i>	10 were on Active Duty in War Time
Years Active Duty During War Time	Continuous	0-4 (1-4)	1.5 (2.8)	1 (3)	1.6	
Combat	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	0	<i>n.a.</i>	7 took part in Combat Operations
Years in Combat	Continuous	0-4 (1-4)	1.1 (2.8)	0 (3)	1.6	
Reserves	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	0	<i>n.a.</i>	5 served in the Reserves
Years in Reserve	Continuous	0-6 (2-6)	1.2 (4.6)	0 (5)	2.2	

TABLE 4b
Summary Statistics of Presidents' Prior Experience

Variable Name (n = 19)	Variable Type	Range	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Notes
<u>State Executive Positions</u>						
Governor	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	0	<i>n.a.</i>	9 served as Governor
Years as Governor	Continuous	0-11 (2-11)	2.2 (4.8)	0 (4)	3.1	
Governor of a Big State	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	0	<i>n.a.</i>	7 were Governors of Big States
<u>State Legislative Positions</u>						
State Legislator	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	0	<i>n.a.</i>	5 served as State Legislators
Years as State Legislator	Continuous	0-5 (2-5)	0.8 (3.2)	0 (3)	1.6	
<u>Total Political Service</u>						
Years in National Office	Continuous	4-32	13.5	12	7.5	
Years in State Office	Continuous	0-13	3.8	3	3.7	
Years in Local Office	Continuous	0-8	0.8	0	2.2	
Years in Public Office	Continuous	8-30	32.0	13.5	12.0	
<u>Campaigns</u>						
Elected to Presidency	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	1	<i>n.a.</i>	14 entered Presidency by Election
National Campaigns	Continuous	1-14	4.1	3	3.2	
State Campaigns	Continuous	0-6	1.6	1	1.9	
Local Campaigns	Continuous	0-4	0.5	0	1.3	
Total Campaigns	Continuous	2-14	6.2	5	3.3	
<u>Background</u>						
Age	Continuous	42-69	55.2	55	6.9	
Years in Private Sector	Continuous	0-24	10.3	11	8.3	
J.D./Law Profession	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	0	<i>n.a.</i>	8 were Lawyers or held Law Degrees
Graduate Degree	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	0	<i>n.a.</i>	7 held a Graduate Degree
Professor or University President	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	0	<i>n.a.</i>	4 were Professors or Univ. Presidents
Washington Outsider	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	0	<i>n.a.</i>	4 were Washington Outsiders
Party (1 = Republican)	Dichotomous	0,1	<i>n.a.</i>	1	<i>n.a.</i>	12 were Republicans

in each of these capacities.¹⁷ Many view Congress as a training ground for the presidency (e.g., Burden 2002). However, congressional positions are not executive positions and therefore do not provide a work environment similar to that of the presidency (Neustadt 2000, 151). As such, we do not expect that congressional service will positively predict presidential performance in general. However, congressional service should provide a working knowledge of the body, the members, and the legislative process (Bond and Fleisher 1990, 30). Thus, congressional service should increase a president's ability to work with Congress. In addition, we expect congressional service to negatively predict performance in International Relations. While Congress shares some responsibility, the executive branch generally manages diplomatic relations (Canes-Wrone, Howell, and Lewis 2008).

Military Experience. We measure if the presidents served in the military and the number of years they served. We then provide a dummy variable measuring if the president served on active duty during peacetime and a variable measuring the number of years of service. Next, we provide a dummy variable measuring if the president served on active duty during war time and a variable measuring the number of years of service. We also provide a dummy variable denoting whether the president saw combat and a variable measuring the number of years in combat. Finally, we provide a dummy variable denoting service in the reserves and a variable measuring the number of years of service in the reserves.

Given that the president's first stated duty in the Constitution is to act as commander in chief, the burdens of national defense and war consume much of the presidency (Greenstein 2000, 1-4; Ostrom and Job 1986). Military service provides many skills and a unique perspective on power and force (see, e.g., Gelpi and Feaver 2002; Sarkesian 1972). Thus, we expect prior military service to help presidents succeed generally. Specifically, because of the highly regimented structure of the military, we expect prior service to positively predict performance in Administrative Skills. Because the military prepares soldiers to act in crisis situations, we expect service to positively predict Crisis Leadership. Since the military is trained to invade, occupy, or defend against other nations, we expect former military personnel to perform better in International Relations given that much of International Relations are belied by military concerns (Francona 2008). Finally, we expect that reserve service will not predict performance as well as full-time service; this is because reserves generally serve part time ("Military Service a Nuanced Issue" 2004).

State Executive and Legislative Positions. We measure if the presidents served as state governors and how many years they served. We also include a variable measuring if each president served as governor of a "big" state.¹⁸ Next, we measure if the presidents served as state legislators and how many years they served. We expect former governors

17. "Congressional Leader" was intended to include committee head, Speaker of the House, party leader, whip, or President Pro Temp of the Senate. Some of these, such as Speaker of the House, had no variation since the presidents in this sample did not serve in these capacities.

18. A state is "big" if it had more electoral votes than the average state at the time they served.

to perform better as president because governorships are executive positions (Hamman 2004). We expect the positive effects of gubernatorial experience to become more acute in relation to the size of the state. Governing a larger state should provide a more similar experience to the presidency than governing a small state (Barnes 2006). We do not expect experience as a state legislator to impact presidential performance. This is because state legislators represent small constituencies and also because state legislatures vary widely in professionalism (King 2000).

Total Political Service. We measure the total number of years served in elected, appointed, or high-ranking positions at the national, state, and local levels. We also include a variable measuring each president's combined political experience at the three levels. The conglomeration of public service over time should provide a president with experience working within governmental bodies (e.g., Goldberg 1992). Thus, we expect presidents with greater governmental experience in general to work better with Congress and perform better as an administrator.

Campaigns. We measure if the president initially entered the White House through election (e.g., Abbott 2005; Simonton 1985). Then we provide three variables measuring the number of national, state, and local campaigns in which each president ran before entering the presidency. We also provide an index of the total number of campaigns in which each president ran. Recent presidential candidates have argued that running a large political campaign provides the requisite experience to serve as president (York 2010). And, as John Aldrich argues, successful candidates possess a variety of desirable skills:

The successful candidate tends to be one who is personally ambitious, who is politically experienced, who can develop a powerful campaign organization, who can learn the rules and procedures of a complex campaign, who is a good decision maker, whose approach is flexible as circumstances rapidly change, and, who, in the final analysis, is most adept at reading the preferences of the electorate, who can present himself with the least error throughout a long and difficult campaign, and who can do so in a competitive situation in which the opponents are attempting to reach the same goals. (1980a, 214)

Despite this, we do not expect campaign experience to predict performance because of the vast differences between campaigning and governing and the (sometimes slight) role that candidates play in campaign management (Ambrose 2010). Furthermore, as Aldrich and Weko also argue, some successful campaign strategies run the risk of leaving the victor without political capital to expend once in office:

The successful campaign frame shapes the possibilities facing the victor in office. A campaign frame that features relatively specific policy proposals will give the victor considerable leverage with Congress, at least on those proposals. A frame that does not have relatively specific content yields the victor little leverage. (1995, 267)

This can leave the successful candidate wanting for success as president. As such, a wealth of campaign experience may not be the best experience for the presidency.

Background. Presidential candidates' ages are often a concern (e.g., Jackson 2008); thus, we measure the presidents' ages at the time they took office. We provide a variable measuring how long each president worked in the private sector. Business and private sector experiences are often discussed during campaigns (Tuohy 2008), and there is a popular belief that business experience leads presidents to perform better economically (Dillin 1992). However, the private sector is vastly different than the public sector: the private sector lacks a separation of powers system and is far more flexible than the federal bureaucratic apparatus. Therefore, we do not expect private sector experience to increase presidential performance in economic management or otherwise. In fact, we expect private sector experience to negatively predict congressional relations and administrative ability because of the vast differences between the autocratic nature of the private sector and the shared powers of the federal system (e.g., Howlett 1992). We also provide dummy variables measuring educational attainment: we first measure whether each president had a law degree or was admitted to practice law (Green and Pederson 1985; Schlesinger 1957). We then measure whether each president has a graduate degree or not.¹⁹ Delving further into education, we measure whether each president taught university courses as a professor or served as a university president (e.g., Holmes and Elder 1989). Finally, we use a dummy variable to denote if each was a Washington "outsider" or not (e.g., Jones 2009, 7; Hager and Sullivan 1994, 1082).²⁰

We use a dummy to measure each president's party affiliation (1 = Republican). During the time frame under study, there were 12 Republican and seven Democratic presidents. Given that C-SPAN did not ensure that its pool of raters was ideologically balanced, we assume that the pool tilted Democrat. We therefore expect this coefficient to be significant and negative.

Methods

To begin, we employ 11 separate dependent variables (ten leadership attributes and the overall score). Each of these is continuous on a scale of 0-100 and represents the raters' averaged scores which underlie the rankings.²¹ Therefore, *ols* regression is appropriate. Because of the number of presidents in the study ($n = 19$), we begin by including only two independent variables in each model: the party affiliation dummy and one variable measuring experience.

$$\text{Performance} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Party Affiliation}) + \beta_2(\text{Experience})$$

Thus, the results speak to the effect, controlling for party, of one measure of experience at a time. The 11 dependent variables and 40 independent variables provide 440 *ols* models. Some may question the results of this initial analysis because of the small n . To mitigate these concerns, we will later buttress this with a larger n multivariate analysis

19. This measure included formal law degrees, master's degrees, and doctorates.

20. We define this as not having worked in a federal political position.

21. Shapiro-Wilk tests show the dependent variables are reasonably normally distributed.

that tests different measures of experience against each other and includes relevant control variables.

Findings

For space and readability, we report only significant coefficients for the experience variable (β_2) in Tables 5a and 5b. We will, however, make available the entirety of the models for interested readers. As expected, in all 440 models the party affiliation dummy was negatively signed; in the vast majority of models, it was statistically significant. This indicates that Democratic presidents were, on average, rated higher than Republican presidents. Of the 440 models, 91 show that experience significantly predicts performance. Seventy-six of those models show that experience positively correlates with performance; 15 show that experience is negatively correlated with performance. Significant coefficients can be interpreted directly as adding (or subtracting) points from a president's score in each category. We include the standard deviation of each dependent variable so that readers can judge materiality.

National Executive Positions. In Tables 5a and 5b, as predicted, service as vice president does not predict performance in most aspects of the presidency (or overall). It does positively predict performance in Pursuing Equal Justice, however. Working as a federal administrator, as predicted, positively predicts only Administrative Skills. Serving as a federal administrator increases administrative performance by 14.3 points; each year as an administrator raises performance by 1.6 points.

National Legislative Positions. Only partially meeting our expectations, one measure of congressional service negatively predicts performance in International Relations: years as a congressional leader. However, this is a minor effect. Also partially meeting our expectations, only service as a congressional leader positively predicts success in Relations with Congress. This effect is larger than one standard deviation. In addition, each year spent as a congressional leader increases Relations with Congress by 1.1 points. Each year as a congressional leader or senator positively predicts performance by more than 1 point in Pursuing Equal Justice for All. Excepting these isolated effects, national legislative experience is not a consistently strong predictor of performance.

Military Experience. The results suggest that, as predicted, prior military experience positively predicts performance in many aspects of the presidency. Notably, the omnibus variable, Military Service, is not a consistent predictor; this is because not all types of military service predict performance. For example, service in the reserves, as expected, is less predictive than forms of active service. Thus, service in the armed forces is not, without further specification, a consistently significant predictor of performance. With this said, certain aspects of military experience appear to be the most consistent predictors of presidential performance as expected.

Going across the leadership categories in Tables 5a and 5b, Active Duty during War Time positively predicts performance in Public Persuasion. As expected, military

TABLE 5a
Regression Coefficients Showing Effect of President's Prior Experience Controlling for Party

<i>Variable Name (n = 19)</i>	<i>Public Persuasion</i>	<i>Crisis Leadership</i>	<i>Economic Management</i>	<i>Moral Authority</i>	<i>International Relations</i>
<u><i>National Executive Positions</i></u>					
Vice President					
Years as Vice President					
Federal Administrator					
Years as Federal Administrator					
<u><i>National Legislative Positions</i></u>					
Senator					
Years as Senator					
Representative					
Years as Representative					
Congressional Leader					
Years as Congressional Leader					-1.3*
<u><i>Military Experience</i></u>					
Military Service		12.4*			
Years in Military				0.8*	
Active Duty During Peacetime		16.0**			17.7***
Years on Active Duty During Peacetime		0.7*	0.5*	0.8*	0.6**
Active Duty During War Time	14.3***	20.0***	12.0**		15.0**
Years Active Duty During War Time	4.2***	5.2**	3.3**		4.0*
Combat		22.0***	12.3**	18.6**	15.3**
Years in Combat		5.2**	3.1*		3.3*
Reserves					
Years in Reserve					
<u><i>State Executive Positions</i></u>					
Governor	13.1*	14.4**			
Years as Governor					
Governor of a Big State	20.4**			15.4*	
<u><i>State Legislative Positions</i></u>					
State Legislator					
Years as State Legislator					
<u><i>Total Political Service</i></u>					
Years in National Office					
Years in State Office					
Years in Local Office					
Years in Public Office					
<u><i>Campaigns</i></u>					
Elected to Presidency					
National Campaigns					
State Campaign					
Local Campaigns					
Total Campaigns					
<u><i>Background</i></u>					
Age					
Years in Private Sector			-0.7**		
J.D./Law Profession					
Graduate Degree				-13.0**	
Professor or University President			12.2*		
Washington Outsider					
<i>s.d.</i>	20.8	19.0	15.8	19.3	16.0

* = .10; ** = $p \leq .05$; *** = $p \leq .01$ based upon one-tailed tests.

TABLE 5b
Regression Coefficients Showing Effect of President's Prior Experience Controlling for Party

<i>Variable Name (n = 19)</i>	<i>Administrative Skills</i>	<i>Relations with Congress</i>	<i>Vision/ Setting an Agenda</i>	<i>Pursued Equal Justice For All</i>	<i>Performance within the Context of Times</i>	<i>Overall Score</i>
<u><i>National Executive Positions</i></u>						
Vice President				11.4**		
Years as Vice President						
Federal Administrator	14.3**					
Years as Federal Administrator	1.6**					
<u><i>National Legislative Positions</i></u>						
Senator						
Years as Senator				1.3*		
Representative						
Years as Representative						
Congressional Leader						
Years as Congressional Leader		13.4**		1.1**		
<u><i>Military Experience</i></u>						
Military Service						
Years in Military				14.6***		
Active Duty During Peacetime			11.2*	0.5*	12.1*	10.3**
Years on Active Duty During Peacetime	0.6**			9.0*	0.6*	0.6*
Active Duty During War Time	8.5*	11.3**	14.8**	15.0***	16.8**	13.8***
Years Active Duty During War Time		3.1**		3.0**	3.9*	3.5**
Combat	11.0**	7.8*		11.4**	17.7***	13.5**
Years in Combat	2.7*	2.4*			3.8*	3.1*
Reserves						
Years in Reserve	-1.8*					
<u><i>State Executive Positions</i></u>						
Governor						
Years as Governor			12.0*			
Governor of a Big State		8.5*	23.4***		14.2**	10.6**
<u><i>State Legislative Positions</i></u>						
State Legislator						
Years as State Legislator						
<u><i>Total Political Service</i></u>						
Years in National Office		1.0***		0.8**		
Years in State Office	-1.4**	1.0**				
Years in Local Office	0.5*					
Years in Public Office				1.0**	1.0*	
<u><i>Campaigns</i></u>						
Elected to Presidency						
National Campaigns		-8.4*		-13.0**		
State Campaign	-2.1*	1.3*		1.2*		
Local Campaigns						
Total Campaigns						
<u><i>Background</i></u>						
Age						
Years in Private Sector		-0.05*		-0.7**		
J.D./Law Profession				-8.7*		
Graduate Degree				-8.0**		
Professor or University President						
Washington Outsider	-13.4**	-10.1*		-10.0*		
<i>s.d.</i>	12.7	12.6	20.6	17.0	17.9	14.5

* = .10; ** = $p \leq .05$; *** = $p \leq .01$ based upon one-tailed tests.

service strongly predicts performance in Crisis Leadership; presidents who saw combat scored more than a standard deviation higher than those who did not. Five indicators of military service positively predict Economic Management. Three indicators of military service significantly predict a president's performance in Moral Authority. As expected, military experience positively predicts success in International Relations. For example, Active Duty During Peacetime, Active Duty During War Time, and Combat raise the score by about a standard deviation each. As predicted, several aspects of military experience positively predict Administrative Skills; Combat and Active Duty during War Time are the most potent predictors. Also as expected, Years in the Reserves negatively predicts Administrative Skills. Four indicators of military experience positively predict success in Relations with Congress. Two indicators of military experience positively predict Vision/Setting an Agenda by more than 10 points. Six indicators of military experience positively predict success in Pursuing Equal Justice. Six indicators of military experience positively predict Performance within the Context of the Times. Combat and Active Duty During War Time positively predict performance by about a standard deviation. Finally, on the Overall Score, six indicators positively predict performance. Combat and Active Duty During War Time positively predict performance by about a standard deviation each.

State Executive and Legislative Positions. As expected, gubernatorial experience positively predicts presidential leadership. Former governors fare better in three categories of leadership. (Years spent as governor is not predictive, however.) Serving as Governor of a Big State, as expected, more acutely predicts performance: this positively predicts performance in five of the leadership categories and overall. For example, Governor of a Big State predicts the scores of Public Persuasion and Vision/Setting an Agenda by more than a standard deviation. It also impacts the overall score by almost 11 points. As expected, state legislative experience does not predict performance.

Total Political Service. As predicted, Years in National Office positively predicts success in Relations with Congress. Years in National Office also predicts success in Pursued Equal Justice for All. Years in State Office negatively predicts administrative performance but positively predicts Relations with Congress. Years in Local Office positively predicts Administrative Skills. Total years in public office positively predict Pursued Equal Justice and Performance within Context of Times.

Campaigns. Path to the presidency has an impact on performance: entering the office through election leads to lower scores on both Relations with Congress and Pursued Equal Justice. The number of national campaigns that presidents previously ran in positively impacts both Relations with Congress and Pursued Equal Justice. The number of state campaigns that presidents previously ran in negatively predicts scores in Administrative Skills.

Background. Despite the frequency with which age is discussed in presidential campaigns, age does not appear to predict presidential performance. Years in Private

Sector, as expected, negatively predicts Economic Management. Private sector experience also has no impact on Administrative Skills. Years in Private Sector also leads to lower scores in Pursued Equal Justice for All. Working in the law profession or having a law degree has little impact on performance excepting a negative impact in Pursued Equal Justice for All. Having a graduate degree negatively predicts performance in both Moral Authority and Pursued Equal Justice for All. Serving as a University President or Professor positively predicts Economic Management. As expected, Washington Outsider negatively predicts scores by about a standard deviation in both Administrative Skills and Relations with Congress. Washington Outsider negatively predicts Pursued Equal Justice.

Generalizability to Other Polls

Some may be concerned that the analysis only utilizes the C-SPAN poll. To address this, we replicate the models using the 2010 Siena poll in Online Appendix B (compare to Table 5).²² This supports the findings from the C-SPAN poll. For example, we again see that military and gubernatorial service (especially in a big state) positively predict performance. Private sector experience again decreases economic performance. Service as a congressional leader again positively predicts relations with Congress and negatively predicts performance in international affairs. Regardless of the polling house or the experts polled, the results persist across polls.

Removing the Controls for Party Affiliation

Some may be concerned that the models thus far include the dummy variable controlling for the presidents' party affiliation. To assuage these concerns, we have run all of the aforementioned models without the party dummy. We show examples in Online Appendix C. These show that the effect of experience remains significant and varies in magnitude only slightly.

Multivariate Models

Thus far, the models have had a small number of observations ($n = 19$). This may lead some to question the results thus far (unfortunately, we are limited by the number of prior American presidents). We attempt to mitigate this problem by merging the 10 leadership categories into a single variable.²³ A similar strategy is employed in recent literature: Balz (2010) combines the results of several polls to increase the n . This

22. The 2010 Siena poll asked 238 presidential scholars to rate the presidents in 20 categories. These ratings were aggregated into scales of 1-100. While the Siena poll utilized different categories, four of the categories were similar enough to C-SPAN to make replication possible. President Obama was included by Siena but not in this analysis for purposes of replication.

23. Because our study includes only 19 cases, there is a heightened potential for Type II errors in more complex *multiple regression* models. In order to test the effect of multiple measures of experience on *overall* presidential performance, we create a comprehensive variable consisting of all 190 separate ratings (10 scores for each of the 19 presidents in the dataset—each one representing the president's score in one of the ten

TABLE 6
Sample Models Showing Effect of President’s Prior Experience in Relation to Objective Conditions

<i>Variable Name</i>	<i>Model #1</i>	<i>Model #2</i>	<i>Model #3</i>	<i>Model #4</i>
Federal Administrator	9.95***	10.65***	9.92***	10.63***
Years as Congressional Leader	-0.51**	-0.45	-0.39	-0.45
Governor of Big State	12.42***	9.07***	7.26***	8.90***
Active Duty During War Time	18.06***	19.95***	21.88***	20.07***
Washington Outsider	-0.53	5.55*	4.10	5.55**
Party (<i>GOP</i> = 1)	-23.32***	-21.70***	-21.91***	-21.73***
Recency		-0.10**	-0.11**	-0.10**
Number of Years in a Major War as President		-0.53	0.30	-0.59
Average National Unemployment		-0.11	0.26	-0.13
Average Percent Change in GDP		0.71***	0.61***	0.70***
Active Duty During War Time * Number of Years in a Major War as President			-1.94**	
Governor of Big State* Number of Years in a Major War as President				0.12
<i>Constant</i>	57.18***	59.11***	61.33***	59.32***
<i>R</i> ²	0.52	0.56	0.57	0.56
<i>n</i>	190	190	190	190
<i>Standard Deviation D.V.</i>	17.13	17.13	17.13	17.13

* = $p \leq .10$; ** = $p \leq .05$; *** = $p \leq .01$ based upon two-tailed tests. Standard errors are clustered.

provides 190 observations (10 leadership categories \times 19 presidents). Accounting for this, we cluster the standard errors by categorical poll in the following multiple regression models.²⁴ With an n of 190, we are now able to simultaneously test the effect of several experiences as well as control factors on performance in general. It would be ideal to present a model which includes all 40 experience indicators; however, given the colinearity, such a model cannot retain estimates. In Online Appendix D, we motivate and interpret a model to compare with recent literature, the Balz model (2010).

To test the impact of experiences against each other and also against the impact of objective conditions, we provide a small sampling of multivariate models in Table 6. Model #1 provides an example multivariate model that the researchers were a priori interested in (other models can be provided to readers upon request).²⁵ We see that serving as a federal administrator, a governor, or on active military duty significantly predict performance. These findings are substantively similar to those in Tables 5a and 5b but differ slightly because of the increased n and different model specification. Model #2

leadership categories). We then replicate the independent variables for each president 10 times. In effect, we merge 10 separate $n = 19$ datasets—one for each categorical poll—into a comprehensive $n = 190$ dataset.

24. Readers should note that the *overall performance* score provided by C-SPAN is simply an index comprised of aggregated scores from the ten categorical polls of performance.

25. In addition to the models shown in Table 6, we constructed different models using varying combinations of independent variables; the results support our main conclusions. These are available upon request. Forms of active military and gubernatorial experience produced the most substantial results across specification. These models suggest past experience can explain much variance: the adjusted R^2 is greatly increased over a model that includes only the party dummy.

adds to this model by including (1) the recency with which each president served,²⁶ (2) the number of years each president presided over a major war while in office, and (3) measures of the economic conditions (average change in GDP [gross domestic product] per year and average unemployment each year) during each president's time in office. The effects of experience remain robust despite the inclusion of these objective indicators.

Some may wonder if the conditions that presidents encounter in office mediate the effect of experience. For instance, would a president's military experience have a greater impact on their performance if they presided over a war as president? We provide two sample interactions between each president's prior experience and the conditions they encountered. Models #3 and #4 interact active service and service as Governor of a Big State with the years each presided over a major war as president, respectively. Overall, the interactions we tested were either insignificant or nonsubstantive after accounting for the base terms. Not finding evidence of mediating effects, we conclude that prior experience operates independent of conditions.

Alternate Conceptions of the Modern Presidency

Though many argue that the modern presidency begins with McKinley (e.g., Gould 1981), some conceive the modern presidency beginning with Woodrow Wilson (e.g., Tulis 2010) or with FDR (Greenstein 2009, 1978; Neustadt 1990). We performed all of the analyses in this article using samples beginning with each of these presidents (see samples in Online Appendix E). Whether the sample begins with McKinley, Wilson, or FDR, the main findings are robust.

Conclusions

In stark contrast to previous studies, we show that certain experiences are potent but also nuanced, predictors of presidential performance. The strongest predictors of success across specification include certain forms of military service and service as a governor of a big state. These findings support a president-centered approach: factors internal to the individual president appear to affect performance. More broadly, the findings contribute to a more general paradigm arguing that leaders' backgrounds substantially affect how they govern (e.g., Burden 2007).

These results also move toward a more theoretical understanding of experience. We rely on Neustadt's (1990, 208) assertions as well as findings from the organizational sciences. This literature suggests that the similarity of prior experiences to the job of president determine if and how that experience predicts performance. We derive and generally support three expectations.

First, we expected experiences similar to the presidency to positively predict performance in general. For example, we find that service as governor (especially of a large

26. This is the difference between the median year of each president's tenure and the median year of McKinley's tenure. Thus, McKinley is 0, Teddy Roosevelt is 6, and George W. Bush is 106.

state) or in the military (especially on active duty) provide the strongest positive predictors. We expected these experiences to show strong effects because of the similarities that these positions have to the presidency. Governors set political agendas, work with legislative and judicial branches, interpret public opinion, and receive focused media attention. These aspects of governorships are not much different than the responsibilities of the presidency, excepting on a smaller scale. In addition, it is telling that governors of large states appear to benefit more from their gubernatorial experience than governors of smaller states: being the chief executive of a large state is likely the closest simulation to the enormous task of the presidency. For example, several large states have populations and economies akin to many developed nations. In terms of military experience, the president's first stated responsibility in the Constitution is that of commander in chief; much of the president's job focuses on waging war, providing for the national defense, and negotiating with armed competitors. Presidents must be aware of how militaries operate, what militaries are and are not good at, and when the use of military force is necessary. Serving in the active duty military appears to provide a great deal of this understanding to presidents. In addition to providing understanding of these specific aspects of the job, military service likely provides a more general set of skills that can likely benefit presidencies. For example, military training and service teaches about effective organization and leadership; both skills are necessary for managing the White House apparatus and leading the nation as a whole.

Second, we expected that experiences similar to a specific aspect of the presidency would positively predict performance in that specific aspect. For example, we find that serving as a leader in Congress leads to better relations with Congress and serving as a high-ranking federal administrator leads to better administrative skill as president. Serving as a leader in Congress provides broad contact with its ranking members, a strong working knowledge of its procedures and norms, and an ability to read congressional preferences. These are experiences that rank-and-file legislators may not receive, or receive only in lower quantities. Thus, presidents with previous leadership experience in Congress are likely well equipped to negotiate initiatives, push legislation through, and keep good relations with chamber and party leaders. In terms of prior experience as a federal administrator, modern presidents manage a massive bureaucracy. Service as a federal administrator likely provides presidents with a hands-on understanding of how bureaucracies operate and what bureaucracies do well (and not so well). Federal administrators likely learn organizational skills and learn the type of leadership that is necessary to motivate bureaucratic action.

Third, we expected experiences dissimilar to the presidency to have no impact on performance. For example, we find that positions providing little executive experience, such as vice president, senator, representative, or state legislator, do not impact performance. As we argued, these positions do not simulate the responsibilities or duties of the presidency adequately enough to impact performance. With the vice presidency specifically, vice presidents have little unilateral power, take on few tasks not at the discretion of the president, and have little independent power to work with Congress, the media, the military, and foreign powers. Thus, while the position of vice president would seem a likely training ground for the presidency, our analysis suggests that little is gained. We

also expected positions dissimilar to the presidency (or a specific aspect thereof) to hinder performance. For example, serving in the private sector leads to inferior economic performance; being a Washington outsider leads to inferior administrative skills and relations with Congress. These results suggest, intuitively, that not only government experience, but also Washington experience, are likely to help presidents lead the government from Washington. While outsider status and private sector experience often seem desirable to voters, these experiences are so different from the work done in the White House that the transference of prior lessons is likely to hamper success.

This study is limited by imperfect measures of performance and a lack of presidents to observe. We have mitigated these problems where possible by controlling for potential biases in the measures of success, validating our findings with other polls, and testing our conclusions in larger n settings to include controls and multiple predictors. While the data support the main conclusions consistently across specification, we point out that some of the results are not predicted. For instance, former vice presidents are found to perform better at pursuing Equal Justice for All. In other instances, our expectations were not completely met. For example, we expected that any service in Congress would lead to better Relations with Congress; we find however that only former congressional *leaders* were so advantaged as president. Even noting these exceptions, these results make a strong step forward in gaining both a theoretical and empirical understanding of prior experience and the presidency.

Further work should begin by delving into some of the experiences highlighted in this article to better understand the specific mechanisms that allow those positions to impact performance. A strong starting point would involve a focus on those experiences shown here to be most predictive: military and gubernatorial experiences. A series of case studies comparing the performance of presidents who have these experiences to presidents who do not could shed some light on the mechanisms that allow past experience to transfer from task to task. What is it about prior experience that can help or hinder presidents' performance? Is it learning? Is it making interpersonal connections? Is it something else? To answer these questions more fully, several cases may offer leverage. To name one example, Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama both lack military experience, but Clinton has gubernatorial experience (albeit from a small state) while Obama lacks gubernatorial experience. Both presidents faced similar circumstances: both lost party control of the House of Representatives in their first term, and both faced budget battles that shut down, or threatened to shut down the government. Given that governors must work with legislatures to pass budgets, examining the differences between Clinton's handling of the budget battles of 1995-96 and Obama's handling of the budget/debt ceiling battles of 2011 could isolate the effect of gubernatorial experience on presidential performance.

Other avenues for future research should focus on experiences that (1) are not found to be significant predictors of performance but (2) are generally thought to be training grounds for the presidency. These positions include vice president, senator, and representative. Many presidential candidates have these prior experiences and cite them as evidence of their ability to be president. For example, one comparison might be made between Presidents McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. Both previously served as gov-

ernors of large states, but, McKinley served in the House of Representatives while Roosevelt did not. Given that this article's results suggest that national legislative experience in general does not predict performance, this case could show why experience as a representative appears not to matter much. (In the Relations with Congress category, Roosevelt, despite not serving in Congress, performs four points better than McKinley.)

In the end, this article encourages the consideration of candidate's prior experience with a simple question, "Is the experience similar to the job of president?" In 1992 and 1996, many assumed that H. Ross Perot's private sector experience and Washington outsider status would lead him, if elected, to improve the economy and make the federal bureaucracy more efficient. This is despite the fact that running a private company is vastly different than any form of public service. In the current election cycle, many have assumed this about candidates and almost-candidates Mitt Romney, Herman Cain, and Donald Trump. This article's findings appear to contradict many of the assumptions made about the value of their private sector experiences. With this said, however, the country is not guaranteed a successful four years simply because a president enters office with the "proper" experiences. Indeed, there is something to be said for the slings and arrows of outrageous political fortune. Thus, we agree with John F. Kennedy who said in 1960, "There is no certain road to the Presidency. There are no guarantees that if you take one road or another that you will be a successful President."²⁷

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