

PERIODICALS

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POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Presidential Greatness

“‘Greatness’ Revisited: Evaluating The Performance of Early American Presidents in Terms of Cultural Dilemmas” by Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky, in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (Winter 1991), Center for the Study of the Presidency, 208 E. 75th St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

Historians have been playing the game of grading the presidents ever since 1948, when Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., asked a panel of colleagues to award them all A's (great), B's (near-great), and so on, down to the ignominious E's (failure). No standards of evaluation were specified, however, and the criteria of later surveys often favored activist presidents. But now Berkeley political scientists Ellis and Wildavsky think they've come up with an improved game board and set of rules.

All presidents, they argue, face various dilemmas arising from the fact that America has what in reality are three competing political cultures, each with a different outlook toward leadership. The relatively strong *individualist* culture wants leaders only when they are really needed. The *egalitarian* culture, whose strength in America waxes and wanes, does not want leaders at all, since leadership implies inequality. And the relatively weak *hierarchical* culture expects leaders to lead, and shores up authority at every opportunity.

How well presidents do in resolving the cultural dilemmas society presents them, Ellis and Wildavsky say, provides a standard for judging their performance. Thus, presidents in the “hierarchical” mold such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln—who both still get A's, under the new rules—had to reconcile their own preferences with the dominant anti-hierar-

chical ethos. Operating in a society in which individualism predominated, Washington faced “severe limits on the substance of power,” and so had to make do with the appearance of power. To enhance the government's image, he used a military force far larger than necessary to put down the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion, a force which, behind the impressive façade, was just “a disorganized conglomeration of state militias.”

Washington was so successful at this sort of deception that his successor, John Adams, was left with the false impression that he was in a hierarchical political system. He consulted no one before announcing his decision early in 1799 to reopen negotiations with France in the hope of avoiding war, and so threw his party into an uproar. Adams has often been rated “near-great” in past surveys, but he fares less well in the new game. Ellis and Wildavsky say that like his son, John Quincy Adams, and, indeed, like President Jimmy Carter, Adams was a “hierarchically disposed [leader] unable or unwilling to make allowances for the anti-leadership nature of the American political system.” All three served but a single term.

In contrast with the hierarchs' sort of conflict is the type faced by presidents such as Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson (who both also still get A's). These presidents, harboring individualist and

egalitarian propensities, have had "to square their own and their followers' anti-authority principles with the exercise of executive authority." Jefferson used the "hidden-hand" style of leadership later employed by Dwight Eisenhower. Jackson solved the dilemma by justifying presidential activism "in the name of limiting the activities of hierarchical institutions," such as the "monster" National Bank of the United States.

Although Ellis and Wildavsky give the modern presidents no formal grades, they do note that the performances by chief executives in recent decades have provided grounds for praise as well as criticism. "Reports of failed presidencies have risen along with egalitarian movements (civil rights, feminism, environmentalism, children's rights, and the like) because dedication to reducing differences among people leads to rejection of leadership."

Limitation's Limits

"The Uncharted Realm of Term Limitation" by Jeffrey L. Katz, in *Governing* (Jan. 1991), Congressional Quarterly, 1414 22nd St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037.

Launched last year, the movement to limit the number of terms congressmen and state legislators can serve has already scored successes in citizen initiatives in three states: California, Colorado, and Oklahoma. But the reality of term limitation in the states may not turn out to be all that its proponents hope, warns Katz, a *Governing* staff writer.

Reformers such as Lloyd Noble II, a Tulsa oilman who led the fight for Oklahoma's new law, contend that term limitation is needed because incumbents' fundraising ability and other advantages make them almost invulnerable at the polls, with the result being row upon row of lifetime legislators badly out of touch with the public. With term limitation, reformers promise, fresh citizen-legislators will sweep into

state capitals and legislatures will at last behave rationally. Legislative leaders will be chosen on the basis of ability, not seniority, and the lawmakers will keep lobbyists and bureaucrats where they should be kept—at arm's length.

Not everyone finds this idealistic vision plausible. "This notion that you're going to get citizen-legislators is silly," Gary C. Jacobson, a University of California political scientist, told Katz. "You're going to get those people who can afford to interrupt their careers for a few years, and that precludes people who have a normal job or family life."

It's also possible, Katz points out, that instead of *more* turnover in the term-limited legislatures, there will be *less*. Over the 12-year period from 1977 to 1989, according to a study by the National Conference of State Legislatures, the lower houses of California, Colorado, and Oklahoma all experienced membership turnover of 89 percent or more. With term limitation, however, much of the competition for legislative seats within the prescribed period of terms could dry up, as potential challengers simply wait for the seat to open up automatically.

Nor will selection of legislative leaders necessarily be as "rational" as reformers imagine, with more competition and people chosen for their abilities and stands on issues. With nobody having much seniority, Katz says, it might become *more* precious. "Awarding key positions on an auto-



In the 1990 election, 97 percent of incumbent U.S. senators seeking new terms and 96 percent of incumbent congressmen were reelected.