

## POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

### *The Presidential Rating Game*

“Rating the Presidents: Washington to Clinton” by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in *Political Science Quarterly* (Summer 1997), 475 Riverside Dr., Ste. 1274, New York, N.Y. 10115–1274; “The Ultimate Approval Rating” by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in *The New York Times Magazine* (Dec. 15, 1996), 229 W. 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036; “‘There You Go Again’” by Alvin S. Felzenberg, in *Policy Review* (Mar.–Apr. 1997), The Heritage Foundation, 214 Massachusetts Ave. N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002.

Ever since historian Arthur M. Schlesinger asked 55 of his colleagues in 1948 to rate the American presidents, scholars and others have continued to play the game. Schlesinger’s son, historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., did so last year for the *New York Times Magazine*. Through the decades, he notes, the polls show a remarkable scholarly consensus.

“There have been nine Greats and Near Greats in nearly all the scholarly reckonings,” he writes. “Lincoln, Washington, and F.D. Roosevelt are always at the top, followed always, though in varying order, by Jefferson, Jackson, Polk, Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson, and Truman. Occasionally John Adams, Cleveland, and Eisenhower join the top nine. The Failures have always been Grant and Harding, with Buchanan, Pierce, Fillmore, Taylor, and Coolidge always near the bottom.”

“The most striking change,” Schlesinger says, “has been the steady rise of Eisenhower.” In a 1962 poll conducted by Schlesinger *père*, Ike finished in 22nd place, near the bottom of the Average presidents; in the 1996 survey by Schlesinger *fil*s, he ascended to 10th, just outside the Near Great ring. (Ten of the 32 jurors thought he belonged among the Near Great; one placed him among the Great.)

“Several factors account for Eisenhower’s ascent,” Schlesinger says. “The opening of his papers showed that the mask of genial affability Ike wore in the White House concealed an astute, crafty, confident, and purposeful leader. . . . Moreover, the FDR model and the yard-



Contemporary critics used Eisenhower’s fondness for golf to suggest he was not a dynamic chief executive.

sticks in earlier polls contained a bias in favor of an activist presidency. After Vietnam and Watergate showed that presidential activism could go too far,

### *One of Their Own*

Woodrow Wilson’s high standing in the eyes of the historians who took part in a 1962 poll mystified President John F. Kennedy, reports historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in *Political Science Quarterly* (Summer 1997).

*Kennedy was surprised that the historians voted Woodrow Wilson a Great, placing him number four after Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, while ranking Andrew Jackson only number six and a Near Great. Though a fine speaker and writer, Wilson, in Kennedy’s view, had failed in a number of cherished objectives. Why did professors admire him so much? (I suggested that he was, after all, the only professor to make the White House.)*

Eisenhower appeared in a better light. . . . The more his successors got into trouble, the better Eisenhower looked. Presidents sometimes do more for the reputations of their predecessors than they do for their own.”

“The most astonishing part of Schlesinger’s poll,” asserts political scientist Felzenberg, who has taught at Princeton University and elsewhere, “was the low assessment” given to Ronald Reagan, who placed 25th (“Average”), just below George Bush and ahead of Chester Arthur. Reagan, Schlesinger writes, “has seven Near Great votes, including some from lib-

eral scholars impressed by his success in restoring the prestige of the presidency, in negotiating the last phases of the cold war, and in imposing his priorities on the country.” But Reagan also received nine Below Averages and four Failures from others on the Schlesinger panel.

Ten graders of a more conservative bent queried by *Policy Review* not surprisingly give Reagan much higher marks. “When passions cool after a generation or so,” predicts Alonzo L. Hamby, who teaches history at Ohio University, “Ronald Reagan will be widely accepted by historians as a near-great chief executive.”

## *A Republican Rainbow?*

“New Bedfellows” by Peter Beinart, in *The New Republic* (Aug. 11 & 18, 1997),  
1220 19th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Many liberal politicians and community activists take it for granted that Jews and “people of color” such as Latinos should stick together in politics. And in city after city, state after state, Jews and Latinos are voting the same way, writes Beinart, a *New Republic* senior editor. “What they do not do—to the great surprise of leaders in both communities—is vote like African Americans.”

Beinart says that the new ballot-box alliance has become evident recently in a number of closely watched elections around the country and been a crucial factor in some of them. In Los Angeles this spring, moderate Republican mayor Richard Riordan, challenged by liberal-left Democrat Tom Hayden, won 70 percent of the Jewish vote, 60 percent of the Latino vote—and only 25 percent of the black vote. In the mayoral contest in Houston in 1991, white businessman Bob Lanier, running against a liberal black state legislator, won 70 percent of the Jewish vote, 70 percent of the Latino vote—and only five percent of the black vote. In New Jersey’s 1993 gubernatorial race, Republican Christie Todd Whitman garnered 45 percent of the Latino vote and 40 percent of the Jewish vote in beating incumbent Democratic governor Jim Florio, who won 75 percent of the black vote. In Illinois in 1994, moderate Republican governor Jim Edgar captured a majority of the Jewish vote and one-third of the Latino vote, to win re-election; his Democratic foe got 85 percent of the black vote.

In many large cities and states, both Latinos and Jews “are proving themselves far more economically conservative than African Americans, and far more conservative on crime,” Beinart says. In Houston, for instance, most Latinos “don’t live the same sort of lives” as most blacks, whom they now slightly outnumber. The Latinos (mostly Mexican Americans) are less likely to be jobless, to work for the government, or to be in single-parent families, and more likely to own their own businesses.

Jewish political identity, too, Beinart contends, is no longer as “liberal” as it once was. A recent survey, for instance, shows that 62 percent of American Jews oppose government redistribution of wealth. In New York City, mayoral aspirant and Manhattan borough president Ruth Messinger “is articulate, wonkish and compassionate—an embodiment of Jewish left-liberalism,” Beinart says. “And, outside of her base on the Upper West Side, she is getting creamed by Republican incumbent Rudy Giuliani—among Jews.” Jules Polonetsky, an Orthodox Jew on Giuliani’s ticket, says that people see Messinger as “the kind of liberal Jewish leftist who’s willing to be mugged because the mugger had a bad childhood.”

Despite the new reality at the state and local levels, Beinart says, both Jews and Latinos are alienated by Republican attacks on immigration, cultural diversity, and minority rights, and “are refusing to follow white ethnics into the national GOP in sig-