

1 The Fateful Choice

Every four years the American people choose the most powerful person on earth. They do it using a system created by the Founding Fathers in the 1780s based on the theories of Enlightenment philosophers and their knowledge of the Roman Republic.¹ That system has evolved haphazardly ever since, leaving us today with what is at best an imperfect method for choosing the so-called leader of the free world.

The forty-five men—and to date they have all been men—who have held the presidency have varied in party, education, social class, and personality. They present a dizzying array of temperaments, styles, and capabilities. Each, however, triumphed in America's baroque and ever-changing presidential selection process.

It's worth asking, then, how good is that process? How well does it select the best and avoid the worst from among all the people who, in Benjamin Disraeli's immortal phrase, are struggling to "reach the top of the greasy pole"? Given everything we've learned in the more than two centuries since the Constitution was written, can we improve it? Can we do a better job of evaluating candidates so that we elect better presidents? Perhaps even more importantly, can we avoid disastrous ones?

I've been studying how leaders are selected, with a particular focus on the presidency, for more than a decade. My research reveals that the system we have is not even close to good enough. It's far too easy for someone to be elected who is completely unable to do the job. That possibility has always existed, and the United States has suffered greatly when it's happened. Sometimes it's only barely escaped catastrophe. But the problem may be even worse today, and the vast power of the presidency makes the stakes higher than they have ever been.

Fortunately, we can do much better. This book synthesizes a new way of understanding leader selection with research from political science, management, psychology, and other fields, to provide an objective, nonpartisan way to evaluate presidential candidates that anyone can use and that requires only information about candidates that would be widely available before the election. It's a system that American citizens can use to answer the most important question they are ever asked: should this person be president?

We begin by identifying what sort of candidates are likely to become presidents who will make a real difference if they win. Not all presidents do. Some, despite the awesome power placed in their hands, are surprisingly inconsequential. Then, we'll examine some of the best and worst of the forty-five members of history's most exclusive club, which will help us understand what traits are likely to produce failed and successful presidencies, and how to detect them.

Next, we'll use this lens to examine Donald Trump, the modern president who has perhaps inflamed the most intense passions on either end of the political spectrum, and Joe Biden, the president as this book goes to print. Finally, I suggest some plausible reforms to the way we nominate candidates and changes to the powers of the presidency that might help us improve the quality and performance of future presidents. This quadrennial choice, especially in times of crisis, can have an outsize impact not only on the lives of Americans but on inhabitants of the entire globe. For all our sakes, Americans need to make the right choice, and the framework I lay out here aims to help us achieve that lofty goal.

DO LEADERS REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

But do presidents actually matter? And, if so, how much? Candidates and partisans certainly care. But if you aren't actively involved in government or politics, does the identity of the president really make much difference in your life? Modern American political parties are far more ideologically distinct than they were even a generation ago, so Republican presidents will enact different policies than Democratic ones, for sure.² But does it matter *which* Republican or *which* Democrat holds the office?

For instance, if Hillary Clinton had won in 2008 instead of Barack Obama, wouldn't she have pushed for universal health insurance? If Ted Cruz had won in 2016 instead of Donald Trump, wouldn't he have tried to cut taxes? So how large is the impact of an individual president?

Leaders' impact cannot be understood without understanding how they got the job. Consider what I call the "paradox of leader selection": the more effort you put into picking a leader, the less it matters whom you pick. Let's unpack that. The more important people think leadership is, the more effort they will put into picking their preferred leader. The path to power will become so rigorous that it filters out outliers, and the remaining candidates will all resemble one another. When a selection process is perfect, then *which person* it picks doesn't matter. Only the process does.

Think about it this way. When you're buying a car, you probably put a lot of effort into picking the right one. You'll decide on a budget, pick a few finalists, and take those out for test drives. If you're like me, you'll bore all your friends discussing your options until you finally pull the trigger. But, realistically, how much of a difference will it make which finalist you chose? A luxury SUV and a smart car are very different—but they wouldn't both have been in your final few. Instead, all the cars you seriously looked at were probably pretty similar and, whichever one you picked, your life going forward will be basically the same. Your friends definitely will not care.

The same thing happens when candidates for leadership positions are closely scrutinized and the ones who don't fit what the system is looking for are pushed out. Everyone who ends up close to getting the job will be functionally the same. The square pegs will fall by the wayside, and the remaining pegs will all share a striking resemblance.

Most large organizations have a selection process which ensures that individual leaders are very similar to their likely alternatives, and this effect gets stronger as you move up the organization. As they increase in rank, “the population of managers becomes more and more homogenous . . . At the limit, one [corporate] vice-president cannot be reliably distinguished from another.” This makes leaders fungible, like dollar bills. While this doesn’t minimize the importance of management as a whole—“It is hard to tell the difference between two different light bulbs also; but if you take all light bulbs away, it is difficult to read in the dark”—it does call into question the importance of individual managers.³

To judge a president’s impact, then, we need to measure them counterfactually.⁴ If Clinton is the equivalent of Obama when it comes to health-care (and other policies), as Cruz is to Trump, then we have a way of understanding any given leader’s “unique impact”—the marginal difference between what did happen and what *could have happened* if the next most likely person had been chosen instead. A president can only have a unique impact if the process that selected him or her was *imperfect*, so that the most likely alternative president would have made substantially different choices than the person who got the job.

If you’re a baseball fan you’ve heard of Wins Above Replacement (WAR), which measures the value of players relative to a “replacement player” who could fill their position. Unique impact measures leaders by comparing them to the most likely replacement leader. Unlike WAR, though, unique impact is a double-edged sword. A higher WAR is always better, but a larger unique impact can be good or bad. If the next most likely winner would have a unique impact by, say, engaging in an unjust and unlawful war, that’s not a positive unique impact. But if you do something that no one else would have and it works, you’re a genius. If it doesn’t, you’re a fool. Unique impact increases *variance* in performance—the higher the impact, the larger the variance, be it good or bad.⁵

Researchers have generally identified three forces that minimize leaders’ unique impact: (1) constraints from the external environment; (2) constraints from the internal dynamics of the organization; and (3) they are selected by a process that tends to homogenize the pool of potential leaders, meaning that outliers who might act differently are not chosen in the first place.⁶

But, under a variety of circumstances, leaders do have significant discretion, despite internal and external constraints.⁷ The more powerful the organization (or country, in the case of presidents), the less it is bound by external factors; the more powerful the individual leader, the less he or she is bound by internal constraints. Whether or not leaders will use their discretion to have a unique impact depends on what they do with it.

THE SPECIAL CASE OF THE PRESIDENCY

Although political scientists pay surprisingly little attention to most leaders, American presidents are the exception. Just as social scientists debate if individual leaders matter, political scientists debate whether individual presidents do. President-centered research has focused on the ways that the traits of individual presidents matter, while presidency-centered research has concentrated on how the context presidents inhabit explains how they behave.⁸

Perhaps the most influential single scholar of the presidency, Stephen Skowronek, has powerfully made the case for context. He found that the vulnerability or resilience of the era's governing institutions is the crucial factor determining a president's opportunities for leadership. Empirical research supports Skowronek's position that the status of institutions, which he calls "political time," strongly affects presidential performance, far more strongly, in fact, than the traits of individual presidents. This conclusion is supported by findings in fields ranging from psychology, where the fundamental attribution error finds that the effects of situation usually swamp those of personality, to management, where CEO effects are generally relatively small.⁹

What models focused on context cannot do, however, is help us select better presidents. However insightful it may be, a model that is solely about context, by its very nature, is purely descriptive. It does not—and cannot—have a prescriptive component, because other than perhaps presidents themselves (and not even most of those), no one has the power to change political institutions enough to improve the next president's odds of success. It removes agency from our politics—that of presidents, and that of voters.

You don't have to believe that context doesn't matter, however, to believe that it's not the *only* thing that matters. Even given situational constraints, it is at least plausible that a more skilled president could perform better—perhaps even vastly better—than a less capable one. To get better presidents, we need to understand how they are chosen, and what individual-level characteristics make someone a successful president of the United States—the driving idea of this book.

Despite the importance of context, researchers, following in the footsteps of James David Barber's book *Presidential Character*, have tried to identify the characteristics that play a role in presidents' successes or failures. Two keep coming up. The first is a president's experience before being elected. This seems logical. Certain jobs (e.g., governor) could be good preparation for the Oval Office. If that's true, then presidents who held those jobs should do better. Surprisingly, however, researchers have found conflicting results on the importance of prepresidential experience, ranging from little to no effect, to weak effects in specific parts of the job, to less experience being superior to more, to experiences similar to the presidency being helpful, while those unlike the presidency hurt.¹⁰

Other researchers have tried to match presidents' personality traits to their performance. They have examined how certain traits affect willingness to use force, use of executive orders, process for making major decisions, and overall performance. The most influential has been the legendary psychologist Dean Simonton, who found that a trait he called "Intellectual Brilliance" strongly predicted presidential performance. While high intelligence contributes to Intellectual Brilliance, they are not the same. Simonton defines it as "an inclusive cognitive propensity that spans broad and artistic interests, a pronounced curiosity and inventiveness, plus more than average wisdom and idealism." Presidents score as having high Intellectual Brilliance if, based on blinded excerpts from historical studies about their lives, evaluators rated them as having wide interests or being artistic, inventive, curious, intelligent, sophisticated, complicated, insightful, wise, and idealistic, but not dull or commonplace.¹¹

Presidents are usually selected by campaigns in which they capture a party's nomination and win a general election—although that isn't the only path. Nine vice presidents have replaced a president, eight due to the president's death and one because of his resignation. That possibility

aside, though, capturing a party's nomination and winning a general election may tend to homogenize candidates. Nominations and elections mean that much of the time, those who become president and their counterfactual alternatives are similar enough that many individual presidents have little unique impact. Those are the presidents who make up the belly of the curve spread out between the best and worst. We are more interested in the tails of the distribution.

*The System in Theory: The Presidential Elections
the Founders Intended*

Any well-designed system for selecting presidents has five functions:

- (1) minimizing the harmful effects of the pursuit of office by the highly ambitious;
- (2) promoting effective executive leadership and constitutional uses of executive power;
- (3) securing a capable president;
- (4) ensuring a legitimate succession; and
- (5) providing for the proper amount of choice and change.¹²

These aren't controversial. Minimizing the dangers of ambitious contenders was a major concern in the United States for a century after the Constitution was first established, so much so that Lincoln's first public speech warned that the ambitions of brilliant men were the greatest threat to American institutions.¹³ The need to ensure legitimate accession had been largely obviated by the passage of time, which has strengthened the legitimacy of American institutions, until this was challenged for the first time in American history in 2020 and 2021. The provision of a proper amount of choice and change is perhaps the central issue of politics.

The remaining functions, then, are the subject of this book: how does the system make sure that the United States has a capable president who engages in effective, constitutional executive leadership?

The Founders considered this the *most important* goal of the system they had created. James Madison, the principal author of the Constitution, wrote, "The aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to

obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society; and in the next place, to take the most effectual precautions for keeping them virtuous whilst they continue to hold their public trust.”¹⁴ This is an elitist view of the presidency, to be sure. Madison assumes that the president must be someone special, that the presidency should be reserved only for the wisest and most virtuous, and that even they should be watched lest they be corrupted.

The Electoral College was the Founders’ mechanism for ensuring that only the “best” could become president. Hamilton argued that the electors who made it up would be:

men most capable of analyzing the qualities adapted to the station, and acting under circumstances favorable to deliberation, and to a judicious combination of all the reasons and inducements which were proper to govern their choice. A small number of persons, selected by their fellow-citizens from the general mass, will be most likely to possess the information and discernment requisite to such complicated investigations . . . The process of election affords a moral certainty, that the office of President will never fall to the lot of any man who is not in an eminent degree endowed with the requisite qualifications.¹⁵

Hamilton believed that judging presidential candidates takes “information” and “discernment”—and that most Americans so lacked both that the job should instead be delegated to a “small number” of elites who had the judgment to do what they could not.

Despite some highlights, few would argue that Hamilton’s unvarnished optimism about Washington’s heirs has been borne out. Part of the reason may be that the system has never behaved the way Hamilton intended. The Electoral College has never even attempted to fulfill the role for which it was created. Instead, that task—ensuring that the president was up to the job—fell to the “factions” the Constitution was meant to restrain.¹⁶ Today we call them political parties.

THE SYSTEM IN PRACTICE: THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS WE HAVE

Presidential elections are the central events of American political life. Students of politics have published endless research on presidential cam-

paigns, what is involved in them, and what it takes to win them. Some, exemplified in political science by Samuel Popkin and in journalism by Theodore White and Richard Ben Cramer, focus on what sort of candidate can win. Other research examines voter preferences, how voters make their choice, and what role candidate characteristics play in their decisions.¹⁷

A different stream of work has concluded that campaigns and elections are so unimportant they are best understood through a “minimal effects” model, which holds that candidates and campaigns just don’t matter that much. Vote share is mostly driven by structural factors ranging from the state of the economy to party registration. While some research has challenged this model, by finding that campaigns have greater effects or by arguing that changes in the tools of political communication make its assumptions no longer valid, in general it remains the dominant view.¹⁸

Even if the minimal effects model is true in its strongest form, and candidates don’t matter much during general elections, they can still make a huge difference in the race for the nomination. American political parties have chosen their nominees in many ways, but whichever they used, the only way to get elected president has been via the nomination of a major party.

How effectively has the system for selecting presidential nominees evaluated and homogenized candidates to ensure that the person who occupies the Oval Office and the most likely alternative president are similar? Does the nominating system create candidates who are as fungible as dollar bills? To understand that question, we’ll begin by describing the circumstances in which high-impact leaders can come to power. Then we’ll look at the specific case of how American presidents are, and have been, chosen, to see how that general model applies to the specific case of the presidency.

THE LEADERS WHO MATTER: LEADER FILTRATION THEORY

Instead of asking *if* leaders matter, we should ask *which* leaders do. Reframing the discussion that way helps us understand—and even predict—which leaders have a large unique impact.

Predicting unique impact is not just an academic exercise. High-unique-impact leaders can change a country—or even the world. Leaders have a unique impact when they do things that others who plausibly could have been in their shoes would not have. This might be in their choice of policies or the skill with which they are implemented, but unique impact is only possible if the leader has effects that likely alternative leaders would not have.

Unique impact produces *high-variance outcomes*. Most people would not play Russian roulette no matter how high the reward for victory. If you chose to play for stakes of a billion dollars, though, you might end up as one of the wealthiest people on earth. Or you might end up dead. That's a high-variance outcome.

My explanation for which leaders are likely to have a high unique impact is Leader Filtration Theory (LFT).¹⁹ When we think about how a leader got the job, instead of thinking of the winner as being selected from a pool of candidates, we should think of him or her as the product of a filtration process, which lets some kinds of candidates through while blocking others.

Filtration isn't purely random. It works to identify the person who is most like an ideal leader—the kind of leader who will move through the filter. In this context “ideal” doesn't mean “best.” It just means the candidate best suited to making it to the end of the process, a hypothetical candidate with the characteristics most likely to pass through the filter. We should think of characteristics in the broadest possible terms. Intelligence and managerial skill help candidates in most filtration processes. But often so does height. When he polled half the Fortune 500, Malcolm Gladwell found that almost a third of their CEOs were men 6'2” or taller, even though fewer than 4 percent of American men are. No one would argue that tall people are better leaders, and companies put enormous effort into CEO selection. Yet American companies seem to implicitly value height. In other words, for most companies, the “ideal leader” is tall.²⁰

The ideal leader usually isn't explicitly described, but there is always some set of characteristics that maximizes the odds of passing through the filter. The closer a candidate is to that ideal, the more likely it is that they will stay in the pool. This means that over time the pool of candidates becomes more homogenous. If the filter is tight enough, then the differ-

ences between the winner and likely alternate leaders will be negligible, making them fungible.

Such interchangeable leaders are *Modal*. In a statistical distribution, the “mode” is the most common outcome. Imagine if you could replay history a million times over, keeping all the candidate characteristics the same but allowing the random elements (like the weather on Election Day) to change. Some candidates—the ones who are ideal, or nearly so—would win many, many times. They are, or are close to, the mode of possible outcomes. Imagine picking prizes from a bowl, where most of the prizes are packets of M&Ms. A few of them, though, are mystery prizes, one of which is a winning lottery ticket, while the rest are live grenades. The bag of M&Ms is the modal prize, and it doesn’t matter which bag you get. But, of course, it matters a great deal if you grab the lottery ticket—or the grenade.

Other candidates might win only once because they are very different from the set of ideal candidates and need lots of lucky breaks to make it all the way. The further they are from the mode, the more luck they need. These leaders are at the extreme of the possible outcomes of the process, so I call them *Extremes*. While Modal leaders are likely to take actions largely indistinguishable from those of other Modal leaders, an Extreme leader is more likely to take actions that are very different, and because they are different, these Extreme leaders can have a large unique impact—a life-changing jackpot or an explosion.

You can never know with certainty if candidates or leaders are Extremes (especially contemporaneously), but the best way to tell is to see how Filtered they are. Think of this as getting a chance to examine all the different items in the prize bowl and eliminate the mystery prizes before picking. Since most mystery prizes are bad, most people would eliminate all of them, forsaking their chance at the lottery ticket to avoid the grenades, and instead take the small but certain win of the M&Ms. That means that if you were watching the drawing, you could guess the odds M&Ms were going to be picked by knowing how well the prizes were examined first. Filtering candidates is like examining prizes with the goal of eliminating everything that’s not a bag of M&Ms.

Filtration has two parts: *evaluation* and *decision*. Evaluation requires gathering information about a candidate. Decision is the use of that

information to decide if a candidate can continue in the filtration process. For a candidate (or leader) to be Filtered, both components are necessary.

Evaluation is the process of gathering information about a candidate's true capabilities and intentions to judge what he or she will do if given power. Evaluation is tough. Many characteristics that make people likely to fail are difficult to detect.²¹ Candidates have every incentive to seem as close to the ideal as possible. After all, they want the top job.

Before you trust someone with power, you want to know who they really are, not who they appear to be. Once you give them power, after all, they no longer need to pretend to be someone they are not to get it—and if you try to take that power away from them, they can use it against you. Power lets people do what they have always wanted to do and be who they have always wanted to be.

For most people, power's effect is to make them worse—what's called the "power paradox." Power gives most people a false sense of control, increases their self-esteem, and makes them more optimistic and oriented towards taking action. For most of us, power decreases inhibitions and empathy. The powerful are "more likely than other people to engage in rude, selfish, and unethical behavior."²²

Some people, however, become better when they have power. While people who place low importance on morality become more likely to break rules when they become powerful, people who place acting morally at the center of their identity become less likely to behave poorly. Similarly, people who have community orientations become more likely to help others as they became more powerful, even while those who are low in their focus on community became less willing.²³ Either way—positive or negative—power is a *liberating* force. It gives you the ability to be the person you really want to be underneath, when you no longer have to worry about convincing other people to give you power.

This means that in making the decision to give someone power, it is crucially important to understand who they truly are, not just who they seem to be. On superficial examination all you will see is the face they present to win the approval of those around them—to make it through the filter. The more someone wants power, the more they will be willing to be inauthentic. Only a thorough evaluation can discern their true self.

Thorough evaluation requires extensive knowledge of candidates to assess their capabilities, intentions, and character. Such knowledge comes only from prolonged close contact. It cannot be acquired easily, because “true knowledge of another person is the culmination of a slow process of mutual revelation. It requires the gradual setting aside of interview etiquette and the incremental building of trust . . . It cannot be rushed.”²⁴

Evaluation takes time. It requires close examination of someone when they have power. Leader Filtration Theory inverts our normal view of experience. We usually see experience as a developmental process. We ask, “What did you learn from your experience?” That’s important. People should learn from experience. Experience changes them.²⁵ But experience is also a revelatory process. Just as experience provides you an opportunity to learn, it provides others the opportunity to learn about you.

Filtered candidates are experienced because their experience gives observers—like party leaders—the opportunity to evaluate them. Not all experience, however, is equally valuable. The more someone’s past predicts their future, the more relevant that past is to evaluation. It’s not always obvious what information about someone’s past predicts their future behavior. Research on employee performance has found, surprisingly, that people who do well in one company may do poorly in another, even if the two are similar.²⁶

Experience within an organization can tell you a lot about how well someone will perform within that organization. Experience in a similar but distinct organization will tell you much less, both because of the differences between organizations and because the sort of information you want to know is personal. It’s basically gossip, and gossip has difficulty crossing organizational boundaries.²⁷ Experience in a different field tells you almost nothing.

Those two requirements of evaluation, experience within an organization and prolonged close contact with candidates, mean that it is primarily conducted by organizational elites. If a candidate has risen through an organization over the course of years with a career that gives those elites ample opportunity to evaluate him or her, then evaluation can occur. The less elites know about a candidate, the less Filtered he or she is.

The second component of filtration is decision. If a candidate is fully evaluated but the evaluation's results play little part in the choice of leader, then that new leader is still Unfiltered. If you inherit ownership of your family's company, then it doesn't matter what the board thinks. If the president dies, the vice president moves up no matter what. The less elites' evaluation of candidates matters, the less Filtered the leader.

When McKinley made Theodore Roosevelt his vice president, partly in response to pressure from the New York political machine that wanted his reform efforts there stopped, Mark Hanna, McKinley's enormously powerful campaign manager, warned, "There's only one life between that maniac and the presidency." When McKinley was assassinated, Hanna's fear became a prophecy. If he could have stopped Roosevelt from ascending to the White House Hanna would have, but his wishes no longer mattered.²⁸

The importance of close contact with organizational elites and, even more, the critical importance of the decision component of filtration, means that *filtration and experience are very different*. Experience is necessary, but not sufficient, for filtration. If experience is viewed as purely developmental, then the linkage between experience and performance would be relatively simple. Enough of the right kinds of experience will predict (and produce) success. If experience is also revelatory, however, we need to add how others have evaluated the president's or candidate's behavior while they were accruing that experience and whether that judgment was incorporated in the candidate's elevation to the presidency.

If leaders are thoroughly evaluated and the results play a decisive role in the choice to give them the top job, then those leaders are highly Filtered and therefore likely to have little unique impact. Their performance will tend to be average or pretty good, but it is unlikely to be great or disastrous. Even if huge events happen while they're in office, Filtered leaders will generally do what likely alternative leaders would have done. They might succeed or fail, but they are unlikely to be distinctive; any other Filtered candidate would have done the same. They're fungible.

A leader who was not thoroughly evaluated, or whose evaluation played little or no role in his or her elevation, on the other hand, is Unfiltered and therefore more likely to be an extreme leader. Such leaders are much more likely to have a large unique impact by taking actions that likely alternative leaders would not have. Note that "much more likely," in this case,

does not mean “likely” in absolute terms. The general dominance of circumstances means that most of the choices made by even the most out-of-the-ordinary leader will be identical to those made by a normal leader, and some extremes may never get the opportunity to act in ways that produce a high unique impact. The less Filtered a leader, however, the more likely he or she is to stretch those constraints, or even to simply decide that they are not bound by them in the same way. They are much more likely to do extremely well or poorly. To be the lottery ticket. Or the grenade.

Where does this leave us? Most leaders—even the least Filtered ones—have a relatively low impact most of the time. Conventional theories of leader behavior, particularly those that weight context more heavily than individuals, will usually be the best way to analyze them. Leader Filtration Theory is not in competition with those theories. It is prior to them. They work perfectly well in explaining Modal leaders. But when a filtration process allows an Extreme leader to come to power, those traditional theories no longer apply, because such leaders are so different from the norm that their underlying assumption that leaders are roughly interchangeable is simply no longer true. Those situations might be relatively rare, but when they occur, they are extremely important.

FILTERING THE PRESIDENTS

Just as Leader Filtration Theory attempted to resolve the question of which leaders matter, it can help us understand which presidents, despite the importance of context, really mattered, for better or worse.

This could improve presidential performance in several ways. It could show when a highly or less Filtered president is best suited to the moment. Most importantly, it could improve our odds of preventing disastrous presidents from taking power by allowing us to identify those most likely to do great harm—the grenades. Most hopefully, by synthesizing the insights from Leader Filtration Theory with other research on both presidents and leaders more broadly, it might help select presidents who are likely to succeed once in office.

To apply the theory to presidents, we need to examine how they have been Filtered. Presidential systems create the theoretical (and, in the case of Donald Trump, real) possibility that someone could become president

Table 1 Levels of Filtration

		<i>Political elites had enough information and supported the candidate?</i>	
		YES	NO
Political elites had major role in choice?	Yes	Filtered	Less filtered
	No	Less filtered	Unfiltered

without any time in government or politics, or through some other path that exposes them to virtually no filtration at all.

In assessing a president’s level of filtration, we need to begin by identifying if political elites play a major role in the choice of nominee. Since only political elites have enough close contact with candidates to filter them effectively, if they do not have a large say in picking the nominee, even highly experienced nominees will be less Filtered. If elites do play a significant role, then we can assess how much information they had about a president when he was still a candidate, and if he was the preferred choice of those elites or if something forced them to accede to a nominee they did not otherwise want. This handy 2×2 can help assess the level of filtration (table 1).

THE HISTORY OF PRESIDENTIAL FILTRATION

The American system for choosing presidents has little resemblance to the one that existed when the Electoral College voted for George Washington unanimously in 1789. Despite this transformation, one thing has remained constant. Party elites have retained significant influence over the nomination process. For most of American history their influence was extremely strong. Since the 1970s rank-and-file voters have had a louder voice through state primaries and, to a lesser extent, caucuses. Party elites, however, are usually still able to assert their preferences, influencing, but not controlling, whom the party selects.²⁹

The framers of the Constitution meant for the Electoral College to choose presidents, with no provision for political parties. This, however,

happened only with Washington.³⁰ Any filtering by the College was irrelevant. Washington was the only choice for however long he was willing to serve.

From 1796, upon Washington's retirement, through 1828, nominations were handled by a caucus of party officials, usually members of Congress. The caucus, however, never became fully institutionalized, partly because it excluded state-level politicians, but even more because every president through 1820 so dominated his party as to render the caucus's formal nomination largely ceremonial.³¹ The presidents of the era were well known to political elites, who had judged them over the course of tumultuous decades, and those elites chose the nominees—and, after the collapse of the Federalist Party briefly rendered general elections functionally meaningless, the president—based on those evaluations. During this period, therefore, every president was highly Filtered.

The legislative caucus system was criticized for violating the separation of powers, as it gave the Congress a role in selecting the president and was used by members of Congress in 1812 to pressure James Madison into declaring war on Britain by threatening not to renominate him if he didn't. After the election of 1824 between John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson went to the House of Representatives, the modern two-party system emerged, with Jackson heading the Democratic-Republican Party. At the same time, the caucus system was collapsing. The fading Federalists were unable to even nominate a candidate to oppose James Monroe in 1820, and William Crawford, the treasury secretary, received the caucus's nomination in 1824 even though he had been paralyzed by a stroke, simply because none of the more popular contenders bothered to pursue it.³²

Starting in 1831, the caucus system was replaced by nominating conventions, a system whose essentials lasted more than a century. The first convention was held by the short-lived Anti-Masonic Party in Baltimore in 1831, but its advantages were so apparent that the National Republican and Democratic-Republican parties followed within months. These conventions—particularly the Democratic-Republican one, because the soon-to-be-renamed Democrats continue to be a major party today—set the template for all the ones that followed. Every president since 1832 has been nominated by a convention.³³

Delegates to a convention are the paradigmatic example of party elites. Some candidates could muster so much elite support before the convention that the balloting itself was merely a formality or concluded after the first ballot. Other conventions were so divided they took dozens of ballots before they decided on a winner. In all cases, however, the nominee was chosen by party elites, with the average voter having essentially no voice in the outcome, except to the extent that party elites surmised that one or another candidate would have a better chance in the general election.

Beginning in the early twentieth century in response to pressure from the Progressive movement, both Republicans and Democrats began to select delegates through direct primaries, a change that is probably “the most radical of all the party reforms adopted in the whole course of American history.” Primaries might seem to have eliminated party elites’ power to control the identity of the nominee, but this was far from true. In 1968, for example, Hubert Humphrey did not enter a single primary, while Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy entered every available one. The race culminated with Kennedy’s victory in the California primary and his assassination the same day, June 5, 1968. But on that day, despite Kennedy’s triumph, it was Humphrey who had captured enough delegates to win the Democratic nomination on the first ballot. Through 1968, primaries were virtually “irrelevant to the outcome of the old-fashioned nominating contest.”³⁴

Primaries were initially important not because of the delegates they elected, but because they allowed candidates to demonstrate to party elites that they could garner enough popular support to win the general election. The most famous example of this phenomenon is the 1960 Democratic primary, when John F. Kennedy’s relatively strong performance in West Virginia convinced the leadership of the Democratic Party that, despite his Catholicism, he could gain the support of Democratic constituencies.³⁵

Through 1968, then, party elites had virtually complete control over presidential nominations in both parties. The elites, and only the elites, played a major role in filtration. This control did not mean that all candidates, and therefore all presidents, were thoroughly Filtered. Party elites represent and derive their strength from interest groups within the party.

They will tend to prefer Filtered candidates because interest groups tend to support the electable candidate whose policies most closely match their preferences. Candidates, knowing this, attempt to present a maximally appealing profile to those interest groups, which respond by “try[ing] mightily to judge who is authentically committed to their goals and who is merely pretending to be committed.”³⁶ That judgment is only likely to be reliable if it is made of a Filtered candidate, one whose prolonged time in senior government offices enables an accurate judgment of their preferences and abilities.

The fact that party elites will generally prefer a Filtered president, however, does not mean that they always get what they want. A vice president can ascend to the presidency, of course, and be completely Unfiltered. A candidate could have such overwhelming popularity (e.g., Grant or Eisenhower) that party elites could feel they had no choice but to defer to popular sentiment. The elites could, for whatever reason, have settled on a candidate whose career did not offer them the opportunity to accurately assess him. Or major figures in the party could split elite support and make it impossible for any of them to capture a majority, leaving them to settle on a dark horse candidate whose experience has left them judged to be not of presidential timber, only to be resurrected by the fluke circumstances of a convention deadlock.

The disastrous 1968 Democratic convention, which was marred by riots and saw Eugene McCarthy’s antiwar campaign defeated by the power of the party establishment, led party nominee Hubert Humphrey to support revamping the nominating process that he had just won. This resulted in the creation of the McGovern-Fraser commission, which reformed the rules by which the Democratic Party selected its nominee. These reforms were soon effectively adopted by Republicans as well. This moved the choice of nominee from the convention to the primaries. In 1968 only 36 percent of delegates went to either party’s convention officially committed to a candidate. Four years later, 58 percent of Democratic delegates were committed before the convention, a figure that increased in the following years.³⁷

Primaries created a new path to the nomination. Instead of being forced to gain the support of party elites, a candidate could appeal directly to party voters and win enough primaries to capture a majority of

delegates before the convention began. Since meaningful filtration is done primarily by those elites—because only they have the close contact with candidates that allows them to accurately discern their true intentions and capabilities—such a candidate will be less Filtered than his or her political experience might indicate.

The fact that such a path exists, however, does not mean that it is well-trodden. The most influential book on how parties pick their nominees is *The Party Decides*, published in 2008. It argues that despite the major changes in the nomination process:

parties remain major players in presidential nominations. They scrutinize and winnow the field before voters get involved, attempt to build coalitions behind a single preferred candidate, and sway voters to ratify their choice. In the past quarter century, the Democratic and Republican parties have always influenced and often controlled the choice of their presidential nominees.³⁸

Even in the postreform era, parties (construed broadly to include all the political elites who have power within the party) work hard to choose their nominee. They usually succeed via an “invisible primary” in which candidates compete for the support of members of the party coalition based on their ability to unite the party, their ability to triumph in the general election, and their fealty to the agenda of powerful interest groups within the party. *The Party Decides* found that while Carter was able to capture the 1976 Democratic nomination as a party outsider without great support from party elites, by 1980 those same elites had adapted to the post-McGovern environment and learned how to regain control of the nomination process.³⁹

Elites were able to regain control because winning a nomination means competing across the country, which requires resources exceeding those of any individual candidate. Instead, they have to win financial resources and staff support in the “invisible primary,” which forces them to build alliances with party elites across the country. The candidate who does so most successfully has a large, but not insurmountable, lead in the race for the nomination. In the ten primary contests between 1980 and 1996, party elites’ preferred candidate won the nomination every time. Although modern communications technologies may have weakened party elites’ control in more recent elections, they retain substantial influence.⁴⁰

Scoring the Presidents—Elites' Information and Choice

While party elites in the postreform era do not have total control over the nomination system, they still retain a very loud voice that is overridden only under exceptional circumstances. This means they can filter candidates, even if their power to do so is limited. But that doesn't mean they always will. Party elites may sometimes choose an Unfiltered candidate for any number of reasons, even if their ideal preference might be otherwise.

Since gathering information about candidates requires proximity to them, we can start our assessment of how Filtered a president is by seeing how much time they spent in offices where political elites could evaluate them—as a member of Congress, senator, cabinet secretary, vice president, governor, national or state Supreme Court justice, or general.⁴¹

Once we assess a president's level of evaluation, the next step is to see if that evaluation played a decisive role in his assumption of the presidency. The less important that evaluation was, the less we should weight his years in filtering offices. For example, if he became president because he was vice president when the president died, then the evaluation was unimportant, leaving such a president Unfiltered except for under two specific circumstances.

First, if he was made vice president in the knowledge that he would soon replace the president (as in the case of Ford and, as we'll see, Truman). Second, if the vice president replaced a Filtered president and was an equally Filtered alternative who might plausibly have gotten the job, then we are comparing one highly Filtered Modal president to another. Had John Hinckley's 1981 assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan succeeded, for example, he would have been replaced by George H. W. Bush—another highly Filtered Republican. If Reagan had not run for office in 1980, Bush would have been one of the most likely alternative presidents. We should assess Lyndon Johnson the same way—as a Filtered product of the Democratic Party establishment, however tragic his path to the White House.

Similarly, several nineteenth-century presidents were “dark horses”—relatively minor figures whose nomination was a surprise, usually because of a deadlock between more prominent party leaders. Dark horse presidents are less Filtered than their level of experience suggests. Although

they were evaluated, the result of that evaluation was that party elites did not consider them a leading contender for the presidency. Because of some set of fluke circumstances, however, usually because they were the only person left when the real contenders knocked each other out, they still won the nomination. Presidential candidates who had towering national stature, usually because of their status as a war hero, are also less Filtered because their popularity can swamp elites' judgment.

The less Filtered a president is, the more likely it is that he performed either extremely well or extremely poorly. When presidential performance was assessed using historians' rankings of presidents—a standard practice in both the political science and psychology literature—and presidents were coded as Filtered or Unfiltered, Unfiltered presidents showed more variance in their rankings (see the appendix). When this test was done using an average of presidential rankings conducted before 2012, this finding was statistically significant at higher than the 99 percent level.⁴²

Since the end of the Obama administration, three more broad rankings of presidential performance have been conducted: a 2017 C-SPAN survey of presidential historians, a 2018 survey of members of the American Political Science Association (APSA) who study the presidency, and a 2018 survey of experts on the U.S. presidency by the Siena College Research Institute.⁴³

I have adjusted their results to eliminate William Henry Harrison and James Garfield when necessary, because both died so early in their terms that they had little or no opportunity to have an impact, and Donald Trump because his term has ended so recently. This leaves forty-one presidents, beginning with Washington and ending with Obama. Twenty-one are Filtered and twenty are Unfiltered. Table 2 shows the results of these surveys, along with a consolidated ranking of presidents that represents a meta-survey, synthesizing the results of twenty-one rankings of presidential performance.

The results of the three most recent surveys are similar to one another, and to the meta-ranking. The specific ranks (e.g., Theodore Roosevelt at 4) are often the same. If we just look at top- and bottom-quartile presidents, they agree on seven of the top ten (Lincoln, Washington, Franklin Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Truman, and Jefferson) and seven of the bottom ten (Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Pierce, Harding,