**How Do We Judge Presidential Leadership?**

Presidents have shaped the course of American history through war and peace, prosperity and crisis, scandal and reform. But **what makes a president “great”**—and who gets to decide? Scholars, journalists, and the public all have different views, but leadership qualities like **integrity**, **crisis management**, and **vision** often rise to the top.

Every few years, **C-SPAN surveys a panel of presidential historians** to rank U.S. presidents using ten leadership characteristics. These categories provide a useful framework for evaluating how well presidents fulfill their roles—not just based on party or popularity, but on skills and outcomes.

As citizens, learning how presidents are judged helps us think more critically about **what we value in leaders**, and what expectations we should have of the people who hold the most powerful office in the nation.

**Key Terms and Definitions**

| **Term** | **Definition** |
| --- | --- |
| Executive Leadership | The ability of the president to guide the direction of the country and manage the executive branch. |
| C-SPAN Historians Survey | A periodic ranking of U.S. presidents by scholars based on ten leadership qualities. |
| Crisis Leadership | A president’s ability to manage emergencies, wars, or national traumas. |
| Moral Authority | The extent to which a president is seen as ethical, just, and committed to the public good. |
| Vision/Setting an Agenda | A president’s ability to articulate goals and mobilize national support to pursue them. |
| Administrative Skills | The ability to effectively manage the executive branch and coordinate government functions. |

**Orienting Question**

**What qualities make someone a good president, and how should we measure presidential leadership?**

**Reflective Assignment: Presidential Characteristics**

Please answer each of the following questions in **2–3 complete sentences.** You may refer to the [C-SPAN Presidential Historians Survey](https://www.c-span.org/presidentsurvey2021/) to guide your response.

1. **In your opinion, what characteristics should a good president have? Why?**
2. **C-SPAN’s survey ranks presidents based on ten leadership characteristics:**
   * Public Persuasion
   * Crisis Leadership
   * Economic Management
   * Moral Authority
   * International Relations
   * Administrative Skills
   * Congressional Relations
   * Vision / Setting an Agenda
   * Pursued Equal Justice for All
   * Performance Within the Context of the Times

Of these ten leadership characteristics:

* + Which one do you think is the **most important** for a president to have? Why?
  + Which one do you think is the **least important**? Why?

**Optional Extension:**

Choose one U.S. president you admire (or criticize), and briefly explain how they did or did not demonstrate the leadership characteristics you identified as most important.

**Review Questions**

1. Why might historians use a range of characteristics to evaluate presidents rather than just ranking them by popularity or achievements?
2. How can presidential leadership during a crisis reveal strengths or weaknesses that are otherwise hidden?
3. Should moral authority matter as much as policy success in judging a president? Why or why not?
4. What leadership skills would you personally value most in a future president?