

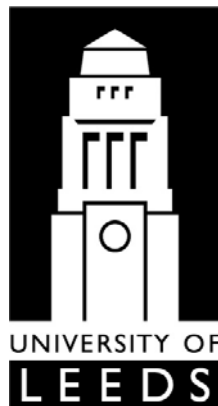
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Rating 20th Century British Prime Ministers

**Professor Kevin Theakston & Mark Gill**

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POLIS Working Paper No. 19  
July 2005



**RATING 20th CENTURY BRITISH PRIME MINISTERS**

**KEVIN THEAKSTON AND MARK GILL**

Kevin Theakston  
School of Politics and International Studies  
University of Leeds  
K.Theakston@leeds.ac.uk

Mark Gill  
MORI  
mark.gill@mori.com

## RATING 20th CENTURY BRITISH PRIME MINISTERS

There have been many surveys, going back to the 1940s, of American academics - historians and political scientists - producing leagues tables of presidential performance in the White House and rankings of the 'best' and 'worst' presidents. First in the field was Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., with his famous polls in 1948 and 1962 (the first surveying the views of 55 experts, the second 75), grading all the presidents since George Washington in categories: Great, Near Great, Average, Below Average, and Failure. A follow-up in 1996, by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., updated the survey on the same basis to poll 32 experts on the presidents from Washington to Clinton.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, many other studies have appeared criticising the whole idea of ranking presidents as meaningless (trying to 'measure the immeasurable'); alleging that such an exercise has a built-in bias towards so-called 'activist' presidents or that the respondents' political orientations skew the results ('a Harvard-eastern elitist-Democratic plot', thundered one critic); or else extending out to survey larger groups with more elaborate methodologies and criteria (e.g. Maranell's 1968 poll of 571 historians, and Murray and Blessing's 1982 study, based on 846 responses from a group of 2000 historians, each sent a nineteen page, 180-question survey, estimated to take more than an hour to complete).<sup>2</sup>

'How the hell can you tell?' was John F. Kennedy's response to Schlesinger's 1962 poll, arguing that only the president himself could know what his real pressures and real alternatives were, and suggesting that what difference a president really made and the quality of presidential performance could in the end only be judged by someone who had held the office.<sup>3</sup> (If a presidential or prime ministerial performance could only be judged by holders of that office, it is disappointing that in the British context we have only 'coffee table' type books by prime ministers on this subject, like Harold Wilson's *A Prime Minister on Prime Ministers* and Harold Macmillan's *The Past Masters*.)<sup>4</sup> The need to take account of 'situational' factors was acknowledged by some studies - wars and

international crises, economic problems, the difficulty of the issues and the overall situation facing the top executive - though these factors were difficult to measure, quantify or compare.<sup>5</sup> The elaboration of yardsticks and criteria of performance may have added to the 'aura of scientific validity' and bestowed 'a veneer of [statistical] precision' but did not eliminate judgement and subjectivity about whether or how far the criteria were met.<sup>6</sup> It is argued that this means that the rankings reveal more about the views and values of the academic respondents than about actual presidential performance. However, whatever the precise methodology, the results of the different US studies have generally turned out to be remarkably similar, rating Lincoln, Washington and Franklin D. Roosevelt at the top and Grant and Harding at the bottom. In the middle of the league table, it is noticeable that ratings have varied over time - Eisenhower, for instance, was ranked in 20th place in Schlesinger's 1962 poll but by 1996 he was seen as more of a success and was ranked in 10th place. Whether presidential performance can be reduced to one overall 'score' or a clear-cut place-order ranking is a further issue: in some cases a president's foreign policy and domestic records and achievements are discordant, and there are presidents who can in different respects be considered both 'failures' and 'successes' or 'greats' or whatever, such as Wilson, Lyndon Johnson, and as an extreme case Nixon.

### **Previous British Ratings of Prime Ministers**

In contrast to the many and regular US presidential surveys, this sort of research has lagged behind in Britain. Historians have been dismissive: 'we play the game of "celestial chief justice" at our peril', warned Peter Hennessy.<sup>7</sup> Trying to comparatively assess prime ministerial performance and rating the leaders of the past was simply 'the ultimate parlour game for political junkies', commented Peter Riddell, Roy Jenkins agreeing that this sort of exercise was a 'game'.<sup>8</sup> A few previous attempts at playing the prime ministerial ratings game can be noted, however.

In December 1999 a poll for BBC Radio 4's 'The Westminster Hour' was

conducted, with a small sample of only 20 'prominent historians, politicians and commentators' (a group which apparently included Roy Jenkins, Barbara Castle, Kenneth Baker, Ben Pimlott and Andrew Roberts). The 19 prime ministers from Lord Salisbury to John Major were ranked, with Tony Blair excluded from consideration as he was still in office.<sup>9</sup> In 2000 the British Politics Group (BPG) - a network of UK and American scholars of British politics - followed up with its own poll, which attracted only 22 responses.<sup>10</sup> Both polls placed Churchill in first place and Eden in bottom place as respectively the best and worst 20th century prime ministers (table 1). The top six prime ministers were the same in both polls but with differences in rank orderings.

**Table 1: BBC and BPG rankings of prime ministers**

Ranking	BBC poll (1999)	BPG poll (2000)
1	Churchill	Churchill
2	Lloyd George	Attlee
3	Attlee	Lloyd George
4	Asquith	Thatcher
5	Thatcher	Macmillan
6	Macmillan	Asquith
7	Salisbury	Wilson
8	Baldwin	Salisbury
9	Campbell-Bannerman	Heath
10	Wilson	Baldwin
11	Heath	MacDonald
12	Callaghan	Callaghan
13	Bonar Law	Campbell-Bannerman
14	MacDonald	Chamberlain
15	Douglas-Home	Balfour
16	Balfour	Major
17	Major	Douglas-Home
18	Chamberlain	Bonar Law
19	Eden	Eden

Roy Jenkins and Peter Hennessy each attempted to reach more fine-grained judgements. Jenkins, in an article for *The Times*, rated Churchill as 'pre-eminent' in the 20th century (as Gladstone had been in the 19th century, in his view). He personally ranked Asquith in second place, above Lloyd George in third place, on the grounds that he was 'a more constructive and consistent statesman' although admitting that he was not a good war leader. Jenkins believed (in December 1999) that it was too early to make a judgement about Blair, arguing that 'the same could almost still be said' about Thatcher, though he went on to rank hers as a 'major premiership' on the grounds of her length of office, 'forthrightness of style', and as the first and (so far) only woman to hold the post. Attlee ('signally' in his view), Macmillan and Baldwin ('on balance') he judged as having 'achieved successful terms of office'. Heath was 'not in general a success', but was picked out for his achievement in taking Britain into Europe. For the rest, the distinguished statesman-cum-historian rated Balfour, Campbell-Bannerman, MacDonald, Wilson and Callaghan as 'average'; Chamberlain and Douglas-Home as 'below average'; and Eden, Bonar Law and Major were classed as 'failures' (in Major's case, said Jenkins, largely as a result of bad luck, something which he described as 'necessarily always a substantial element in political success or failure').<sup>11</sup>

While sceptical about the possibilities of assessing prime ministerial performance, Hennessy did develop what he called a 'crude taxonomy' of post-1945 prime ministers, which was 'an index of performance' or a 'premiership league'. The 'very top flight' postwar prime ministers were Attlee and Thatcher, in his view (Churchill would have been in this category if his two premierships were treated in combination and account taken of his wartime achievements). These were the 'two great "weathermakers" of the postwar years', he judged, setting the political agenda and transforming British politics, though he muddied the waters by implying that Thatcher could be ranked highest as she 'forged her new consensus' while Attlee 'refined his' as 'the beneficiary of a new weather system' created during the second world war. Described as 'below' those top two was the category of 'nation- or system-shifters', prime ministers who were 'remaker[s] of the country in a significant, substantial and almost certainly irreversible fashion'. Heath was in this category because of British entry to Europe and Blair because of his government's

constitutional reforms. Described as 'a kind of obverse to the scene-shifters' were the 'seasoned copers but not transformers' - Churchill (on the basis of 1951-55) and Callaghan. Macmillan and Wilson, assessed as frustrated would-be modernisers, were placed in the 'promise-unfulfilled' category. Douglas-Home (a 'punctuation mark' between Macmillan and Wilson) got high marks for decency. The bottom two prime ministers in Hennessy's league table were Major and Eden. Major was ranked as 'overwhelmed' ('he succumbed to the political weather rather than made it'), while Eden was described as falling into 'a catastrophic category of his own'.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, it is worth noting the results of a survey of Labour MPs undertaken by the magazine *New Statesman* in February 2000, ranking the leaders of the Labour Party from Keir Hardie to Tony Blair (80 MPs replied, a response rate of about 20 per cent). Putting to one side the rankings of those leaders who never made it to Number 10, Labour MPs rated Labour prime ministers in the following order: Attlee - Wilson - Blair - Callaghan - MacDonald. The ranking was, however, of party leadership rather than prime ministerial performance (different, though overlapping, criteria might be thought to apply).<sup>13</sup>

### **The 2004 MORI / University of Leeds Survey**

Neither the (1999) BBC nor the (2000) British Politics Group surveys included Tony Blair (by 2004 in his seventh year as prime minister) and both were based on such small sample sizes to have little statistical validity. We wanted to see how Blair measured up against other prime ministers (while recognising that he had not yet completed his term of office) and to get the opinions and judgements of a much larger group of experts. We therefore invited 258 academics to take part in an Internet-based survey, with 139 answering the questionnaire in full (a response rate of 54 per cent), making this the first large-scale survey of British academic experts in British politics and/or modern British history, asking them to rate all the 20th century British prime ministers in terms of their success and asking them to assess the key characteristics of successful prime ministers.<sup>14</sup>

Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 0 to 10 how successful or unsuccessful they considered each prime minister to have been in office (with 0 being highly unsuccessful and 10 highly successful). We were then able to calculate the mean score for each prime minister and work out the league table of “performance” (Table 2). As with the US presidential polls, the standard was not 'lifetime achievement' over the full political/ministerial career but performance in the top job, in Number 10 Downing Street.<sup>15</sup> The records of those prime ministers with multiple terms interspersed with periods out of government (Salisbury, Baldwin, MacDonald, Churchill, Wilson) were not disaggregated. We acknowledge - like Hennessy - that the 'scores' for Churchill's two terms of office, 1940-45 and 1951-55, might come out very differently, as might those for the other premiers in this category. Equally, the records of those prime ministers with multiple but consecutive terms of office could in principle be broken down and scored separately - Thatcher 1979-83, 1983-87, 1987-90, or Blair's first and second terms, for example. However, we have not broken down assessments in this way, opting for an overall judgement on, and rating of, the individual prime ministers (again, in line with the practice of US presidential ratings).

**Table 2: The 2004 MORI / University of Leeds rankings**

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Prime Minister</b>	<b>Mean score</b>
1	Clement Attlee (Lab. 1945-51)	8.34
2	Winston Churchill (Con. 1940-45, 51-55)	7.88
3	David Lloyd George (Lib. 1916-22)	7.33
4	Margaret Thatcher (Con. 1979-90)	7.14
5	Harold Macmillan (Con. 1957-63)	6.49
6	Tony Blair (Lab. 1997- )	6.30
7	Herbert Asquith (Lib. 1908-16)	6.19
8	Stanley Baldwin (Con. 1923-4, 24-9, 35-37)	6.18
9	Harold Wilson (Lab. 1964-70, 74-76)	5.93
10	Lord Salisbury (Con. 1895-1902)	5.75
11	Henry Campbell-Bannerman (Lib. 1906-08)	5.01
12	James Callaghan (Lab. 1976-79)	4.75
13	Edward Heath (Con. 1970-74)	4.36
14	Ramsay MacDonald (Lab. 1924, 29-31, 31-35)	3.73
15	John Major (Con. 1990-97)	3.67



16	Andrew Bonar Law (Con. 1922-23)	3.50
17	Neville Chamberlain (Con. 1937-40)	3.43
18	Arthur Balfour (Con. 1902-05)	3.42
19	Alec Douglas-Home (Con. 1963-64)	3.33
20	Anthony Eden (Con. 1955-57)	2.53
<i>Source: MORI/University of Leeds</i>		

The top six prime ministers in the earlier BBC and BPG surveys remain at the top of our survey - in the top seven, with the addition of Blair (excluded from the 1999 and 2000 polls). The rank orderings are, however, different, with Asquith dropping below Thatcher and Macmillan (and, now, Blair) and, in the top three positions, with Attlee overtaking Lloyd George and Churchill to take first place. Respondents had the opportunity to give their views on the greatest domestic and foreign policy successes and failures of the 20th century, and the majority of those responses singled out the Attlee government's welfare state reforms and the creation of the National Health Service as the key 20th century domestic policy achievements. Churchill and Lloyd George are the two great world war winners, while Attlee helped to make the post-war consensus which Margaret Thatcher 'unmade' and then recast in the 1980s. At the bottom of the league table, Neville Chamberlain is forever associated with the failures of appeasement but in our 2004 poll is rated slightly higher (17th out of 20) than in the BBC poll (18th out of 19), though lower than in the BPG poll (14th out of 19). John Major (15th in 2004) has moved up from 17th place in the BBC league table and 16th place in the BPG rankings, but Douglas-Home (a stop-gap compromise leader who served as prime minister for only a year) has slumped to 19th place (next-to-bottom), compared to 15th place in the BBC and 17th place in the BPG rankings. The 18th place ranking of Balfour (who saw his party split and sent crashing to a landslide defeat) is also lower than in the BBC (16th) and BPG (15th) surveys. Eden comes bottom in all three surveys, his premiership and his reputation both sunk by the Suez crisis.

The profile of the survey respondents help shed some light on the survey findings. In terms of academic specialism, 55 per cent describe themselves as politics experts (n = 77), 37 per cent as historians (n = 51), and 8 per cent as 'other' (n = 11). The top four

prime ministers - Attlee, Churchill, Lloyd George and Thatcher - are ranked in the same order by political scientists and by historians. However, there are some key differences between the two groups (table 3). Political scientists rank Blair as 5th, but historians rank him as 10th (below Baldwin, Macmillan, Asquith, Wilson and Salisbury in that order). Both groups placed Eden in bottom place, but whereas political scientists place Chamberlain in 19th place out of 20, historians put him more towards the middle of the table, in 14th place. Historians place Major in 17th place, but political scientists judge his performance perhaps a little more favourably and place him as 14th.

**Table 3: Rankings by Subject Discipline**

Ranking	Political Scientists	Historians
1	Attlee (mean score 8.26)	Attlee (8.43)
2	Churchill (7.81)	Churchill (7.90)
3	Lloyd George (7.20)	Lloyd George (7.43)
4	Thatcher (6.99)	Thatcher (7.27)
5	Blair (6.60)	Baldwin (6.55)
6	Macmillan (6.45)	Macmillan (6.51)
7	Asquith (6.15)	Asquith (6.27)
8	Baldwin (5.92)	Wilson (6.02)
9	Wilson (5.87)	Salisbury (6.00)
10	Salisbury (5.56)	Blair (5.84)
11	Campbell-Bannerman (4.86)	Campbell-Bannerman (5.16)
12	Callaghan (4.62)	Callaghan (5.08)
13	Heath (4.53)	MacDonald (4.40)
14	Major (3.84)	Chamberlain (4.33)
15	MacDonald (3.41)	Heath (4.27)
16	Balfour (3.40)	Bonar Law (4.10)
17	Douglas-Home (3.28)	Major (3.59)
18	Bonar Law (3.02)	Balfour (3.54)
19	Chamberlain (2.89)	Douglas-Home (3.41)
20	Eden (2.69)	Eden (2.57)
<i>Source: MORI/University of Leeds</i>		

We also asked respondents how they would vote if there were a general election tomorrow – again to provide context to the survey answers. Among those who named a

party, more than half (57 per cent) said they would vote Labour (n = 52), with 31 per cent supporting the Liberal Democrats (n = 28) and 12 per cent the Conservatives (n = 11).<sup>16</sup> When the results are broken down by academics' declared party allegiance, there are some marked differences in overall ratings (table 4). Conservative academics rate Thatcher most highly (in fact nine of this admittedly small group of eleven rate her as either a 9 or 10 out of 10). Blair makes the top five among Labour academics, but the strength of support is not as high as among Conservatives for Thatcher. Among Labour-supporting academics, none give Blair a 10 out of 10 rating, and just nine out of 52 give him a 9 out of 10 rating. Baldwin's highest place in the ratings (5th) comes from Conservative academics, just as Asquith's (6th) comes from Liberal-Democrat supporting academics (the only group to rate him, Macmillan and Wilson above Thatcher). For all groups, the bottom four prime ministers are all Conservatives. But whereas Labour supporting academics rated Heath in 13th place and Major in 14th, Conservative supporting academics were much more critical of them both.

**Table 4: Rankings by Academics' Party Allegiance**

Ranking	Labour Academics	Conservative Academics	Lib-Dem Academics
1	Attlee (mean score 8.48)	Thatcher (9.18)	Attlee (8.32)
2	Churchill (8.00)	Churchill (8.36)	Lloyd George (7.42)
3	Blair (7.35)	Attlee (8.20)	Churchill (7.36)
4	Lloyd George (7.16)	Lloyd George (7.80)	Wilson (6.29)
5	Thatcher (6.94)	Baldwin (7.30)	Macmillan (6.25)
6	Macmillan (6.63)	Salisbury (6.75)	Asquith (6.23)
7	Asquith (6.23)	Macmillan (6.20)	Thatcher (6.07)
8	Baldwin (6.22)	Blair (6.09)	Baldwin (5.70)
9	Wilson (5.98)	Asquith (6.00)	Blair (5.32)
10	Salisbury (5.59)	Campbell-Bannerman (5.50)	Salisbury (5.17)
11	Callaghan (5.29)	Wilson (5.20)	Campbell-Bannerman (5.04)
12	Campbell-Bannerman (4.95)	MacDonald (5.00)	Callaghan (4.89)
13	Heath (4.58)	Callaghan (4.64)	Heath (4.43)
14	Major (3.98)	Bonar Law (4.50)	MacDonald (3.85)

15	Bonar Law (3.87)	Douglas-Home Chamberlain (4.30)	Major (3.43)
16	MacDonald (3.74)		Balfour (3.19)
17	Balfour (3.66)	Major (3.64)	Bonar Law (3.05)
18	Douglas-Home Chamberlain (3.62)	Balfour Heath (3.30)	Chamberlain (2.93)
19			Douglas-Home (2.74)
20	Eden (2.79)	Eden (2.80)	Eden (2.46)
<i>Source: MORI/University of Leeds</i>			

There were too few female survey respondents (n=12) to break down the results, with any statistical confidence, by looking at differences between how male and female academics rate each of the prime ministers. However, indicatively, it seems that female academics were less harsh than their male counterparts in the sense that the women's lowest prime ministerial rating was 3.40 (Chamberlain), compared to 2.43 (Eden) among men; and across all twenty prime ministers, the average female mean score was 5.58 compared to 5.23 from men. It is also worth noting that women rated Thatcher (third place, mean score 7.58) higher than did men (fourth place, mean score 7.09).

Several of the top-rated prime ministers are given higher scores by the older academics, including Churchill (+0.81), Thatcher (+0.79), Lloyd George (+0.75) and Macmillan (+0.60). Chamberlain also performs better among this group, being placed in 15<sup>th</sup> place compared with 19<sup>th</sup> place among academics aged under 55 years. While there is little difference in the ratings for the other prime ministers, the key exception is Tony Blair whose score falls from 6.67 among under 55 year old academics to 5.81 among those aged over 55 years. We can only speculate about how mean scores and prime ministerial rankings might shift as the profession changes over time. With the aging of contemporary cohorts and the inclusion of newer, younger academics, will Blair's overall rating improve or Churchill's fall as the older groups of academics leave the scene? Equally, how far would the presence of significantly more women in the pool of expert academics affect Thatcher's overall score and ranking?

**Table 5: Rankings by Age of Respondents**

Ranking	18-54 (n = 80)	55+ (n = 59)
1	Attlee (8.35)	Churchill (8.34)
2	Churchill (7.53)	Attlee (8.32)
3	Lloyd George (7.00)	Lloyd George (7.75)
4	Thatcher (6.80)	Thatcher (7.59)
5	Blair (6.67)	Macmillan (6.83)
6	Macmillan (6.23)	Asquith (6.27)
7	Baldwin (6.15)	Baldwin (6.22)
8	Asquith (6.13)	Blair (5.81)
9	Wilson (6.09)	Wilson (5.71)
10	Salisbury (5.91)	Salisbury (5.55)
11	Campbell-Bannerman (4.95)	Campbell-Bannerman (5.08)
12	Callaghan (4.71)	Callaghan (4.80)
13	Heath (4.35)	Heath (4.37)
14	Major (3.80)	MacDonald (3.98)
15	Balfour (3.57)	Chamberlain (3.78)
16	Bonar Law (3.61)	Major (3.49)
17	MacDonald (3.55)	Bonar Law (3.36)
18	Douglas-Home (3.51)	Balfour (3.25)
19	Chamberlain (3.17)	Douglas-Home (3.09)
20	Eden (2.63)	Eden (2.39)
<i>Source: MORI/University of Leeds</i>		

It was beyond our scope to determine the actual extent and depth of knowledge of the individual respondents about each prime minister. As with the US presidential ratings surveys, we had, for instance, no way to determine what historical/political science

literature the respondents had been exposed to about each premier and how that had affected their scoring.<sup>17</sup> There may be an element of circularity: more famous or more popular prime ministers commanding more scholarly interest which in turn reinforces their reputation and feeds in to academic evaluations in this sort of survey exercise. (Academics, in other words, could themselves be vulnerable to the way in which 'greatness may be attributional', as one critic of the US presidential polls has argued: certain leaders 'are great because we call them great'.)<sup>18</sup> We did allow a 'don't know' option for the prime ministerial ratings, and the spread of this response among the different prime ministers and among some of the respondent sub-groups is revealing (table 6), with some significant percentages unwilling or unable to score prime ministers in the first quarter of the 20th century. (Extending the survey back to ask for ratings on all 51 prime ministers from Walpole to Blair would probably have produced large 'don't know' figures from political scientists for many of the 18th and 19th century prime ministers.) Political scientists' qualms about scoring some of the earlier 20th century prime ministers were not, however, matched by historians' inability or reluctance to evaluate more contemporary figures.

**Table 6: Ranking Prime Ministers: Don't Knows (%)**

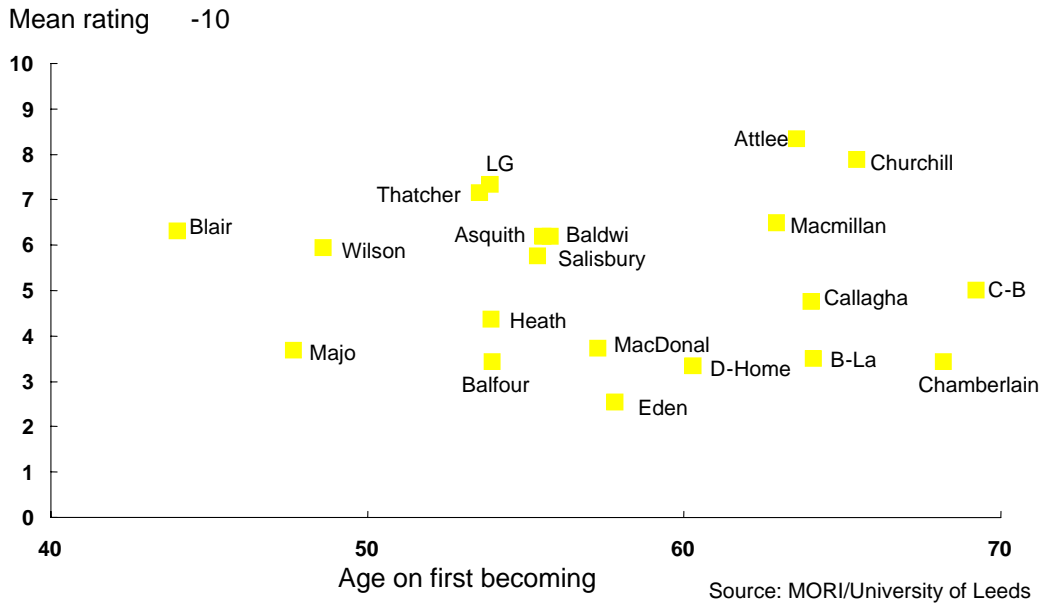
Prime Minister	Average Don't Know	Female	18-54 (-34) age group	Political scientists	Historians
Salisbury	25	50	29 (44)	35	10
Balfour	20	42	25 (38)	29	6
Campbell-Bannerman	17	33	20 (38)	25	2
Asquith	10	33	14 (31)	16	0
Lloyd George	5	17	6 (19)	8	0
Bonar Law	17	42	8 (38)	25	4
Baldwin	5	33	8 (25)	8	0
MacDonald	4	17	4 (19)	4	2
Chamberlain	2	17	3 (13)	3	0
Churchill	1	8	1	3	0
Attlee	1	8	1	0	0
Eden	1	8	1	0	0
Macmillan	1	8	1	0	0

Douglas-Home	1	8	1	1	0
Wilson	1	8	1	0	0
Heath	1	8	1	0	0
Callaghan	0	0	0	0	0
Thatcher	0	0	0	0	0
Major	0	0	0	0	0
Blair	1	0	0	0	2

### **Successful and Unsuccessful Prime Ministers**

What prime ministerial characteristics or other factors might be related to prime ministers' ratings and rank-orderings in this survey? Personal/background factors such as height, age and education seem to make little difference in US presidential rankings nor to be useful indicators of presidential performance and success or failure in the White House.<sup>19</sup> In the British case too there is no correlation between age on first becoming prime minister and ranking (figure 1). Three of the top five prime ministers (Attlee, Churchill and Macmillan) were in their sixties when they first became prime minister, as were two of the bottom five (Bonar Law and Chamberlain), while the two youngest to enter Number 10 in the 20th century were the sixth-placed Blair (aged 43) and the fifteenth-placed Major (aged 47).

Figure 1: Age on first becoming PM vs. Ranking



Nor can birth-order be correlated with prime ministerial ranking: Attlee (1) was seventh-born out of eight children, while first-borns included Churchill (2), Heath (13) and Douglas-Home (19), with Thatcher (4), Blair (6), Asquith (7), Wilson (9) and Callaghan (12) among the second-born. Lloyd George (3), Macmillan (5) and Balfour (18) were third-borns, with Chamberlain (17) also being counted in this group as the third of his father's six children though the only son of his (Joe Chamberlain's) second marriage. Fourth-born prime ministers were not a particularly successful group, it has to be said, accounting for Major (15), Bonar Law (16) and Eden (20). In the rankings, Baldwin (8), an only child came ahead of fifth-born Salisbury (10), and sixth-born Campbell-Bannerman (11), but another only child, MacDonald (14) trailed them.

More than half of these 20th century prime ministers can be described as 'tall' - 5 feet 9 inches or over.<sup>20</sup> Salisbury was probably the tallest prime minister, standing at 6 feet and 4 inches, with Douglas-Home's height being recorded as 6 feet and one inch. Only three 'tall' prime ministers (Macmillan, Blair and Salisbury) make the top ten. Asquith, Baldwin, Wilson and Thatcher have been described as being of 'medium height' - all of them in the top ten ranked prime ministers. But it is striking that the three 20th



century British prime ministers who can be described as 'short' are the top three in the rank-orderings: Attlee, Churchill (5 feet, six and a half inches), and Lloyd George.

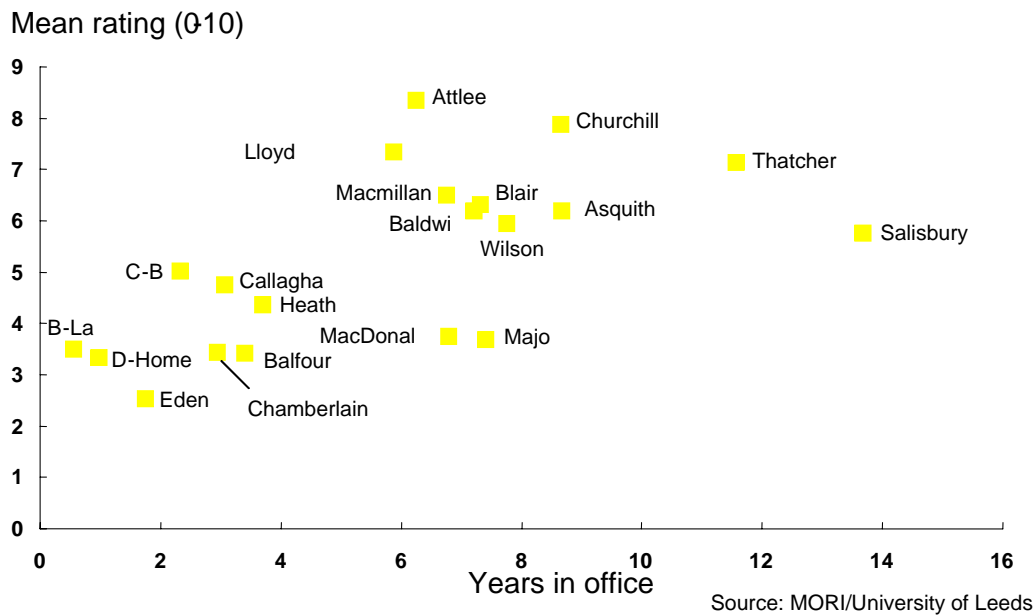
Ten of these twenty prime ministers had attended Oxford University and three Cambridge (one of them, Campbell-Bannerman, after a spell at Glasgow University), however the seven prime ministers who did not attend university included two of the top three (Churchill and Lloyd George) as well as more low-ranked figures (Major [15], Bonar Law [16], Chamberlain [17]). Thirteen attended fee-paying public schools, including the top two prime ministers Attlee and Churchill. A quarter (five) of the 20th century prime ministers attended Eton, the highest-ranked being Macmillan (5). Of the top ten prime ministers overall, seven were public school and eight were 'Oxbridge' (six were both), with only two non-university. Of the bottom ten in the league table, six were public school and five were 'Oxbridge' (four were both), with five being non-university. However, it is worth noting that the bottom three-ranked prime ministers (Balfour, Douglas-Home and Eden) were each products of lengthy and expensive educations at Eton and 'Oxbridge'.

There is no clear relationship between prime ministerial ratings and previous ministerial experience. Two prime ministers (MacDonald [14] and Blair [6]) had no previous ministerial experience before becoming prime minister. Counting all posts held (including service as whips, junior ministers and Cabinet ministers), Thatcher (4), Asquith (7) and Salisbury (10) had held just two ministerial posts before reaching the top of the greasy pole, and Wilson (9) three. Attlee and Eden were more experienced, with six previous posts each, but are placed respectively at the top and the bottom of the league table. Similarly Macmillan (5) and Major (15) had each held seven previous posts. Churchill (2) had the most extensive previous experience, totalling nine posts and over 20 years in ministerial office before becoming prime minister.<sup>21</sup>

Roy Jenkins was convinced that 'it is essential to have a cumulative period in office of at least five years to rank as a prime minister of major impact. No-one of the last one hundred years [he wrote in the 1980s] who does not fulfil this criterion has achieved

the front rank.' In the specific case of Eden, apart from the disaster of Suez, Jenkins argued that 'twenty-one months is too short a period on which to establish a prime ministerial reputation'. 'There is only Campbell-Bannerman, at least since 1800', said Jenkins, 'who has much enhanced his reputation with less than four years in Downing Street, and he hardly left a major imprint.'<sup>22</sup> Figure 2 does indeed indicate a correlation between tenure as prime minister and mean score/ranking. In terms of league-table rankings, none of the top ten prime ministers served less than five years in Number 10, while only two of the bottom ten (MacDonald and Major) clocked up more than four years, and seven of the bottom ten served as prime minister for three years or less.

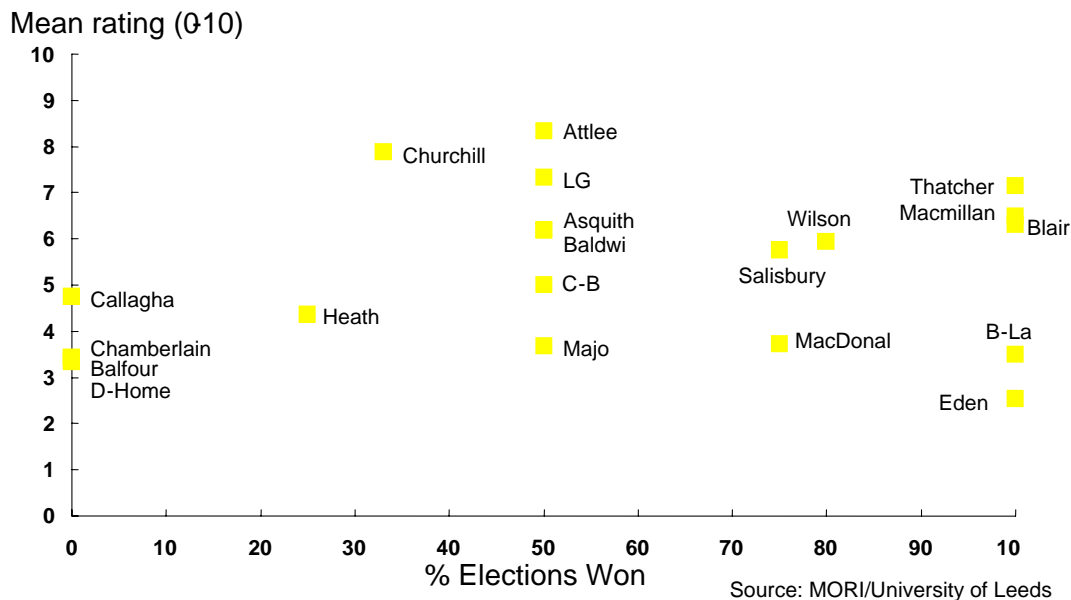
Figure 2: Length of tenure vs. Ranking



To analyse prime ministers' election records in relation to mean scores/ranking, figure 3 tracks the percentage of general elections won or lost as prime minister or party leader/opposition leader against mean scores (not counting elections after 1922 in the case of the two Liberals, Lloyd George and Asquith). Nine of the top ten prime ministers won at least half of the elections they fought as prime minister or opposition leader, the only exception being Churchill (who won one general election and lost two). In contrast,

only five of the bottom ten prime ministers won at least half of their general elections and four (Callaghan, Chamberlain, Balfour and Douglas-Home) won no general elections at all. That the lowest ranked prime minister (Eden) has a one hundred percent 'clean sheet' in general election victories (winning his only contest in 1955), suggests the need for caution in terms of this indicator, however. It might be argued that multiple election victories are a weightier measure of achievement under this heading than single one-off victories: Thatcher's and Blair's records being more impressive than Macmillan's (though all have a one hundred per cent election success score). Cabinet minister Peter Hain has even argued that Blair is more successful than Attlee because the latter only 'won two elections and then lost. He didn't get two full terms.'<sup>23</sup>

Figure 3: Electionrecord vs. Ranking



In addition to rating individual prime ministerial performance, respondents to the survey were asked to select up to three out of a list of twenty-two characteristics that they thought were most needed for a prime minister to be judged successful (table 7). By far the most important is leadership skills (selected by almost two in three of our specialists), and chosen 50 per cent more times than the next most desirable quality – sound judgement. Between one in five and one in four see having a stable parliamentary

majority, decisiveness and luck as key attributes for successful prime ministers – the latter reinforcing Jenkins’ belief that luck is 'necessarily always a substantial element in political success or failure'.

Perhaps more striking are those characteristics least likely to be selected as most important. Not a single one of our specialists felt that patriotism was one of the three most important characteristics for a prime minister to be judged successful, and only one per cent selected understanding economics, being down to earth or honesty!

**Table 7 Characteristics of Successful Prime Ministers**

	<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Percentage choosing</b>
1	leadership skills	64
2	sound judgement	42
3	good in a crisis	24
4	Luck Decisiveness	23
5		
6	stable parliamentary majority	20
7	good quality colleagues	18
8	understands problems facing Britain	16
9	Integrity	11
10	practices Cabinet government	10
11	Charisma	9
12	in touch with ordinary people	8
13	Ruthlessness	6
14	poor opposition	5
15	strong convictions / ideology	4
16	high-level ministerial experience	3
17	understands world problems	2
18	understands economics down-to-earth honesty	1
19		
20		
21	Other	6

22	Patriotism	0
<i>Source: MORI/University of Leeds</i>		

Breaking down the data about the top ten prime ministerial characteristics by sub-group (tables 8-10), the key differences between political scientists and historians is the greater emphasis given to sound judgement by political scientists, and the higher rating given to decisiveness by historians. Perhaps with Thatcher in mind, the highest percentage score and the highest rank-ordering for 'strong convictions / ideology' comes from Conservative-supporting academics. However, no Conservatives chose 'stable parliamentary majority' despite Major's problems under this heading.

**Table 8: Characteristics of Successful Prime Ministers by Subject Discipline**

	<b>Political Scientists (%)</b>	<b>Historians (%)</b>
1	leadership skills (62)	leadership skills (65)
2	sound judgement (53)	decisiveness (31)
3	good in a crisis (27)	sound judgement (27)
4	stable parliamentary majority (25)	luck good quality colleagues good in a crisis (22)
5	luck (22)	
6	decisiveness (19)	
7	good quality colleagues (18)	stable parliamentary majority (18) understands problems facing Britain
8	understands problems facing Britain (13)	
9	charisma (12)	integrity (16)
10	practices Cabinet government (9)	practices Cabinet government (12)
<i>Source: MORI/University of Leeds</i>		

**Table 9: Characteristics of Successful Prime Ministers by Academics'**

	<b>Labour Academics (%)</b>	<b>Conservative Academics (%)</b>	<b>Lib-Dem Academics (%)</b>
1	leadership skills (71)	sound judgement (55)	leadership skills (61)
2	sound judgement (48)	leadership skills understands problems facing Britain (45)	sound judgement (43)

3	good in a crisis (29)		decisiveness stable parl. majority (29)
4	stable parl. majority (23)	luck decisiveness (36)	
5	good quality colleagues (21)		good in a crisis (21)
6	decisiveness (19)	practices Cabinet government good in a crisis good quality colleagues (18)	integrity good quality colleagues (18)
7	integrity (15)		
8	luck (13)		luck (14)
9	charisma (10) understands problems facing Britain	integrity in touch with ordinary people strong convictions / ideology (9)	practices Cabinet govt. ruthlessness (11)
<i>Source: MORI/University of Leeds</i>			

**Table 10: Characteristics of Successful Prime Ministers by Age of Respondents**

	18-54 (%)	55+ (%)
1	leadership skills (61)	leadership skills (68)
2	sound judgement (36)	sound judgement (51)
3	luck (26)	decisiveness (29)
4	stable parl. Majority (25)	good in a crisis (25)
5	good in a crisis (24) good quality colleagues (24)	understands problems facing Britain (20)
6		stable parl. Majority (14)
7	decisiveness (19)	integrity (12)

8	understands problems facing Britain (13)	luck (19)
9	integrity (10) in touch with ordinary people (10) practices Cabinet govt. (10)	Charisma (10) practices Cabinet govt. (10)
<i>Source: MORI/University of Leeds</i>		

Cross-tabulating individual prime ministerial ratings against the general valued prime ministerial characteristics throws up some interesting variations. Lord Salisbury (overall mean score: 5.75) was given a significantly higher score (7.50) by those respondents picking out high-level ministerial experience as important in a prime minister, but a much lower score (4.0) by those selecting 'in touch with ordinary people'. Asquith (overall mean: 6.19) was marked down (4.60) by those selecting strong convictions/ideology as important. Lloyd George (overall mean: 7.33) was rated more highly (8.0) by those selecting 'high-level ministerial experience' and 'understands world problems', but lower (6.0) by those valuing honesty and strong convictions/ideology. Chamberlain's score of 6.0 from those considering high-level ministerial experience necessary for prime ministerial success is much higher than his overall mean score of 3.43. Churchill (overall mean: 7.88) was marked down (5.50) on 'understands economics', but higher (8.33) against 'understands world problems'. The matchstick-using Douglas-Home (overall mean: 3.33) was scored at 5.0 by those picking out 'down to earth' among the three necessary characteristics of successful premiers, but only 1.5 by those respondents selecting 'understands economics'. Major also slumped on that criterion, being graded as 1.00 compared to an overall mean of 3.67. In contrast Wilson's score was higher among those picking out economic knowledge and understanding (up from 5.93 overall to 7.50), as was Heath's (up from 4.36 overall to 5.50). Blair (overall

mean: 6.30) was rated more highly (mean score: 8.50) by academics selecting 'down-to-earth' as important, but his score was lower among those selecting as important high-level previous ministerial experience (5.25) and economic understanding (4.00).

### **Conclusion: the need for a broader assessment of prime ministerial performance**

Inevitably, when initial survey results were announced (November 2004) the mass media seized upon Blair's failure to make the top five in the 20th century prime ministerial league table: 'Blair fails to make grade in historians' survey' was *The Independent's* headline (1 December 2004). Peter Riddell in *The Times* argued that Attlee's first place was 'odd' because he was 'a very skilful manager, not a commanding leader'. Riddell personally rated Churchill, Lloyd George and Thatcher above Attlee, felt that Blair's sixth-place was 'about right', but found academics' rating of Campbell-Bannerman ahead of Callaghan and Heath 'perverse'.<sup>24</sup> Anthony Sampson, in contrast, applauded the selection of Attlee, arguing that while the charismatic Churchill and Lloyd George were the right men for wartime, 'peacetime, in many ways, requires more subtle leadership and judgement'. He praised Attlee's ability to keep together a team of powerful but difficult ministers, his decisiveness, ability to delegate, and his understanding of 'how to get things done' - drawing pointed comparisons with what he saw as Blair's failings under those headings.<sup>25</sup>

Interviewed on Channel 4 News (30 November 2004), Lord (Roy) Hattersley argued that Churchill was in a special category as a great wartime prime minister and 'the greatest figure of the 20th century', but that he was 'an awful peacetime prime minister'. The way to judge prime ministers, said Hattersley, was 'the way John Arlott judged batsmen . . . Good batsmen contribute to the game, great batsmen change the course of the game'. Attlee, he insisted, 'changed the course of the game' - not only domestically but internationally as well, citing his role in giving independence to India and starting the process of decolonisation. Extending the cricket metaphor, Hattersley acknowledged that Blair was 'still at the crease, still at the wicket': he could go up the table if he could notch



up 'something significant in terms of historical achievement', such as a durable settlement in Northern Ireland, 'if he does more on the domestic front', or 'solidifies our position in Europe'. Up to now, thought Hattersley, Blair had been 'batting slowly', like 'Boycott at his worst and his most determined to stay there rather than do anything spectacular'. Thatcher should have been number two in the league table, Hattersley argued, because she 'changed the weather, and that's what makes a great prime minister' - she 'changed our view of society'. Lloyd George was rated too highly, he said, because his historic achievements came before he was prime minister, as a pre-first world war social reformer and Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Hattersley also dismissed Asquith as 'immensely over-rated', largely because of Roy Jenkins's biography. Hattersley believed that Wilson and Callaghan should be rated above the two Liberal prime ministers. Reputations can go up as well as down, was the lesson drawn in the *Independent's* editorial column (1 December 2004): 'Who would have thought in the 1920s that the corruption-stained Lloyd George would score so highly now? Or that Harold Macmillan, rebuffed over the Common Market, would be judged so successful a mere half-century later? There is hope yet for John Major.'

'Ranking games' are 'an amusing pastime', according to the American writer David A. Crockett, but they do indicate what academic respondents think about presidential (or prime ministerial) success. However, they can be superficial or flawed because they tend to 'ignore the contextual aspect of politics' and to impose a 'single standard' by which to judge leadership performance. The problem with comparative scoring exercises, he suggests, is that no two leaders are ever 'dealt the same hand'. Rather, they face a wide array of historical and political contexts, and operate in widely differing situations or environments: 'the playing field of power is not equal'. Ranking leaders can degenerate into comparing the incomparable, as he puts it. Government leaders should be 'graded based on how well they understood and reacted to their context'. There was thus a need for a 'more multifaceted view of leadership', producing 'several standards of greatness' or different criteria of success, recognising that government leaders faced differing tasks and problems.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of evaluating or rating British prime ministers, as it has been argued, 'can the range of problems faced by the various competitors [sic] be ignored? . . . Are we measuring good fortune, success or survival?'<sup>27</sup> We would argue that a favourable match of skill and context is crucial in determining the effectiveness of prime ministerial leadership. High-level skill(s) deployed in a favourable situation make major achievements possible; accomplished statecraft and political astuteness in an unfavourable context may account for the difference between political survival and disaster; political misjudgements, a lack or loss of feel for the situation, or ineptness, can aggravate problems and make a difference for the worse.<sup>28</sup> To argue that the great or successful prime ministers 'make the weather' is only a half-truth in that sense because, as Len Tivey has warned, they do not make 'the political climate'. 'A Thatcher could not have carried her programme in Attlee's time, or vice versa', as Tivey puts it.<sup>29</sup> In a wider sense, however, while survey ranking exercises may be great fun for the respondents, generate press column-inches and tell us much about who the "judges" are; they probably raise more questions than they answer about what makes for effective or successful leadership in government by prime ministers or presidents. We also need a broader, more historically nuanced and contextualised analysis of individual leaders, the ingredients of political / governmental effectiveness, and the conditions for success or failure.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., 'Rating the Presidents: Washington to Clinton', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 112, no. 2 (1997), pp.179-190.

<sup>2</sup> Curtis A. Amlund, 'President-Ranking: A Criticism', *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1964), pp.309-315; Thomas A. Bailey, *Presidential Greatness: the Image and the Man from George Washington to the Present* (New York, Appleton-Century, 1966); Gary M. Maranell, 'The Evaluation of Presidents: An Extension of the Schlesinger Polls', *Journal of American History*, vol. 57 (June 1970), pp.104-113; Gary M. Maranell and Richard A. Dodder, 'Political Orientation and the Evaluation of Presidential Prestige: A Study of American Historians', *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 51, part 2 (1970), pp.415-421; Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, *Greatness in the White House: Rating the Presidents*, Second Edition (Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Max J. Skidmore, *Presidential Performance: A Comprehensive Review* (Jefferson, N.C., McFarland, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Schlesinger, 'Rating the Presidents', p.180.

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<sup>4</sup> Harold Wilson, *A Prime Minister on Prime Ministers* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson and Michael Joseph, 1977); Harold Macmillan, *The Past Masters* (London, Macmillan, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> David C. Nice, 'The Influence of War and Party System Aging on the Ranking of Presidents', *Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 37 (1984), pp.443-455; Elizabeth J. Ballard and Peter Suedfeld, 'Performance Rating of Canadian Prime Ministers: Individual and Situational Factors', *Political Psychology*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1988), pp.291-302.

<sup>6</sup> Skidmore, *Presidential Performance*, pp.4-5.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Hennessy, *The Prime Minister: The Office and Its Holders Since 1945* (London, Penguin, 2000), p.527, quoting David Marquand.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Riddell, 'Winner of the nation's best prime minister is...', *The Times*, 1 December 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Lucy Ward, 'Premier League', *The Guardian*, 27 December 1999;  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/the\\_westminster\\_hour/1015740.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/the_westminster_hour/1015740.stm) (accessed 11.9.03).

<sup>10</sup> *British Politics Group Newsletter*, no. 101 (Summer 2000), p.2, no. 103 (Winter 2001), pp.9-10.

<sup>11</sup> Lord Jenkins of Hillhead, 'Gladstone - a leader without equal', *The Times*, 27 December 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Hennessy, *The Prime Minister*, pp.527-533.

<sup>13</sup> 'Wilson is still rated higher than Blair', *New Statesman*, 28 February 2000, p.27.

<sup>14</sup> . The sample of 248 academics was developed by searching university departmental websites and directories of specialist academics working in British higher education institutions, cross referenced with lists available from the Political Studies Association. The 248 academics therefore form the "population" for the purposes of this survey. The survey was conducted online between 27 September and 5 November 2004

<sup>15</sup> Schlesinger, 'Rating the Presidents: Washington to Clinton', p.179.

<sup>16</sup> In calculating voting intentions, it is standard to base the results on all those respondents naming a party, thus excluding people who say they are undecided, don't know or refuse to say. For the academics covered here, 66% named a party.

<sup>17</sup> Murray and Blessing, *Greatness in the White House*, pp.22-23.

<sup>18</sup> David A. Crockett, *The Opposition Presidency* (College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2002),

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p.241.

<sup>19</sup> Murray and Blessing, *Greatness in the White House*, pp.25-36; Schlesinger, 'Rating the Presidents: Washington to Clinton', pp.185-6.

<sup>20</sup> Dermot Englefield, Janet Seaton and Isobel White, *Facts About the British Prime Ministers* (London, Mansell, 1995), p.374.

<sup>21</sup> Englefield, Seaton and White, *Facts About the British Prime Ministers*, p.401.

<sup>22</sup> Roy Jenkins, *Gallery of 20th Century Portraits* (Newton Abbot, David & Charles, 1988), pp.78, 204.

<sup>23</sup> *New Statesman*, 31 January 2005, p.25.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Riddell, 'Winner of the nation's best prime minister is...!', *The Times*, 1 December 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Sampson, 'Is there any politician in office today with the qualities of Clement Attlee?', *The Independent*, 4 December 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Crockett, *The Opposition Presidency*, pp.239-242.

<sup>27</sup> 'A moon among the lesser stars', *The Economist*, 23 September 2000, p.153.

<sup>28</sup> Kevin Theakston, 'Political Skills and Context in Prime Ministerial Leadership in Britain', *Politics & Policy*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2002), p.316.

<sup>29</sup> Leonard Tivey, review of Peter Hennessy, *The Prime Minister*, in *Political Quarterly*, vol. 72 (2001), p.262.

<sup>30</sup> Fred I. Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership style from FDR to Clinton* (New York, The Free Press, 2000); Kevin Theakston, 'What Makes for an Effective Prime Minister?' (forthcoming).