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Siena College Poll: Historians Give Good Grades To Clinton Presidency

Loudonville, NY. "Clinton Climbs; Bush Bashed" might well be the headline on a story reporting the findings of the latest survey of U.S. Presidents conducted by the Siena Research Institute (SRI) at Siena College.

"National polls, the news media and Newt Gingrich have given President Bill Clinton low marks on a variety of subjects," said SRI co-director Tom Kelly, "but the scholars we surveyed were much kinder to him."

They ranked Clinton third in ability to compromise, eighth for court appointments, ninth for both communication ability and handling of the U.S. economy, and 16th overall among all 41 presidents.

College professors gave Clinton a very low rank in two categories: 39th in foreign policy accomplishments and 38th in integrity.

"It's interesting that Clinton, who so admires President Kennedy, so closely parallels him in both strength and weakness in the "I" categories," Kelly said. Kennedy is sixth and Clinton seventh in Imagination; Clinton is eighth and Kennedy 12th in Intelligence; Kennedy is 35th and Clinton is 38th in Integrity.

This third SRI survey of U.S. presidents was sent to college professors of history and political science after Clinton had been in office one year. The second survey, in 1990, was done after President George Bush had been in office one year. The first survey was done in 1982, one year after President Reagan was in office. The questions in all three surveys are identical.

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Siena College Poll – January 15, 2018 – Page 2

Bush did not fare well this time. He fell from 18th to 31st overall. Other dramatic drops were in his relationship with Congress (15th to 37th), ability to avoid crucial mistakes (9th to 31st), luck (6th to 26th), and handling of the U.S. economy (24th to 40th). Bush improved in only one of the 20 categories surveyed: He moved up in foreign policy accomplishments from 17th to 13th.

The on-going SRI studies are intended to provide a means of "tracking" the opinion of scholars regarding Presidents, their successes and failures over an extended period of time. As SRI co-director Doug Lonnstrom and Kelly hoped, the surveys illustrate changes in opinions, particularly for recent Presidents, as time provides greater objectivity of different views. They note President Carter's improvement from 33rd overall in 1982 to 23rd today.

The rankings for the top ten have shown little change over time. Franklin Roosevelt has been No. 1 in all three surveys with Jefferson, Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt and Washington rounding out the top five in all three studies. The second five have also been very stable. (Wilson, Truman, Eisenhower, Madison and Kennedy). In fact, the only newcomer to the top ten (from the 1982 survey) is Eisenhower, who replaced John Adams.

The bottom five have also remained unchanged in all three surveys. These "presidential pillars" are Harding (last), Andrew Johnson, Buchanan, Grant and Pierce.