



Who Are Our Greatest Presidents?

Intended Grade Level: High School

Lesson Purpose: The President of the United States receives media coverage on a daily basis and is often ranked against or compared to past presidents. This lesson will help students actively develop their own conclusions rather than passively absorb ideas generated by the media or other outside influences. It will provide them with a systematic, analytical method to compare past presidents with current or potential future presidents, and to determine their own research-based ranking system.

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will reach consensus within their group regarding the five most important categories/criteria needed to rank or rate a President of the United States.
- Students will analyze how their selected categories/criteria apply to past Presidents of the United States.
- Students will rank U.S. Presidents based on their selected categories/criteria.
- Students will apply their selected categories/criteria to our current U.S. President and/or presidential candidates.

National Standards:

NSS-C.9-12.2 FOUNDATIONS OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

- What are the Foundations of the American Political System?
- What is the American idea of constitutional government?
- What are the distinctive characteristics of American society?
- What is American political culture?
- What values and principles are basic to American constitutional democracy?

NSS-C.9-12.3 PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY

- How Does the Government Established by the Constitution Embodiment the Purposes, Values, and Principles of American Democracy?
- How are power and responsibility distributed, shared, and limited in the government established by the United States Constitution?
- How is the national government organized and what does it do?



- How are state and local governments organized and what do they do?
- What is the place of law in the American constitutional system?
- How does the American political system provide for choice and opportunities for participation?

NL-ENG.K-12.7 EVALUATING DATA

Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

NL-ENG.K-12.8 DEVELOPING RESEARCH SKILLS

Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

Materials:

- Handouts “Generalship” and “Candidate for Commander in Chief”

Timeframe: Approximately three class sessions

Procedures:

1. Students will brainstorm criteria that could be used to rank leaders. Begin by considering an example of a type of leader with which students are familiar, such as Student Council President, Coach, Scout Troop Leader, Mayor, School Principal, or Governor. Classify student responses into categories such as organizational skills, personality or attitude, motivational skills, communication or interpersonal skills, thinking or problem-solving skills, personal accomplishments, talents, etc. Then ask: *Do these categories also cover attributes that the President of the United States should have?* Discuss.
2. Brainstorm additional or different categories that could be used to rank Presidents of the United States.
3. Introduce, define, and discuss Arthur M. Schlesinger’s presidential rating criteria (or any other similar criteria you may wish to use):
 - Background
 - Party Leadership
 - Communication Ability
 - Relationship with Congress
 - Court Appointments
 - Handling of U.S. Economy



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- Luck
 - Ability to Compromise
 - Willing to Take Risks
 - Executive Appointments
 - Overall Ability
 - Imagination
 - Domestic Accomplishments
 - Integrity
 - Executive Ability
 - Foreign Policy Accomplishments
 - Leadership Ability
 - Intelligence
 - Avoid Crucial Mistakes
 - Your Present Overall View
2. Divide students into small groups and ask each group to select and agree upon five presidential leadership criteria they find most important.
 3. Student groups will then research their five selected criteria as they apply to President George Washington and two other past presidents from the following suggested list: Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt, and Thomas Jefferson. (Explain that these men are frequently ranked as the top five Presidents of the United States.) Have students make a chart that organizes and presents their findings neatly.
 4. Students should analyze their research findings to create and support their own ranking of their three selected presidents. (This first exercise serves as a formative assessment and can be repeated throughout the study of United States history or civics. As a summative assessment, students can choose additional presidents they wish to compare and apply the same categories to reach their own conclusions.)
 5. Students should add the current President of the United States to their chart and develop a research-based conclusion about how this president will rank in United States history. This lesson could be extended or varied during an election year, in which students could be required to evaluate presidential candidates.



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6. Students can discuss how their conclusions agree and disagree with rankings of past presidents and media coverage of the current U.S. President and/or roster of presidential candidates.
7. Teachers could also alter this lesson to focus entirely on general leadership skills or on worldwide leaders throughout history.



This has been adapted from a lesson by Marcia Applen, Teachers Institute 2006.