The Nature of a President

Qualifications and Qualities

To become president of the United States, a person does not need to meet a long list of qualifications. In fact, the Constitution outlines only three requirements; a president must be 35 years old, a natural-born citizen of the United States, and must live in the United States for 14 years prior to taking office. The Constitution does not require that the 14 years be consecutive. For example, Dwight Eisenhower had spent many years living outside of the United States during the 1940s, but was elected in 1952.

The term "natural-born citizen" raises the issue of whether a person born outside the United States to an American mother or father qualifies as natural born. To date, this scenario has not been tested, but the first nine presidents were born in the colonies before the United States was formed. Since then, all of the presidents have been born in the United States.

A sitting president must satisfy three audiences: politicians, party activists, and the public. Gaining the approval, cooperation, and support of all these groups takes highly developed leadership and management skills. Several political scientists and historians have studied and developed theories about the characteristics of a good president and what skills are required to fulfill the duties of office.

Political scientist and historian Richard Neustadt asserted that the president's real, most vital power is the power to persuade. Although the president is one of the most powerful people in the world, he cannot simply issue a series of orders to carry out his agenda. Harry Truman once said that he spent all of his time trying to get people to do what they were supposed to do in the first place. Truman's experience supports Neustadt's theory.

Another political scientist, Clinton Rossiter, notes that the president must be able to fill many different roles as well as excel at multi-tasking. The president has at least five roles—head of state, chief executive, commander-in-chief, diplomat, and legislator—each of which carries significant responsibility and demands on time. Even if a president is good at all but one role and accomplishes several objectives while in office, people and history might judge him harshly for failure in one role.

Presidential biographer James MacGregor Burns suggests that a great president has a clear, focused agenda that can be achieved during his term. Of course, fulfilling objectives requires cooperation from Congress and other parties. The more objectives achieved during his tenure, the greater the president's success.

Another political scientist, James David Barber, studied the personalities of the presidents. In doing so, he analyzed whether each president had a clear agenda and purpose and whether he was active or passive. Additionally, he looked at whether each president had a positive or negative perception of the job. Presidents who have a clear agenda and purpose, are active, and have a positive perception of the position are more likely to be seen as strong leaders.
Warmup

What makes a good President?

The President of the United States leads the world's richest, mightiest country. For that reason, the person who holds the presidency must be able to handle both vast power and massive pressure. In Unit 4, you will explore the scope of this remarkable job and consider the possible answers to the Essential Question above.

A. What qualities must a President have? Review the list of leadership qualities. Then check the top five most important.

- thoughtful
- outgoing
- charming
- trustworthy
- decisive
- intelligent
- tough
- open minded
- cooperative
- modest
- kind
- consistent
- inspiring
- experienced
- honest
- politically astute
- brave
- decent
- well-informed
- independent
- diplomatic
- farsighted
- other __________

B. Choose a past or current President. What five categories from the list above best describe this President? Explain your choice.