Will We Screw it Up Again?

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Peggy Noonan writing recently for the Wall Street Journal captured the angst that many feel about their presidential choices this year. "Do you worry," she asked, "that neither of them is up to it? Up to the job in general? Is either Mr. McCain or Mr. Obama actually up to getting us through this and other challenges?"

Noonan is raising one of the most important questions a democracy can ask itself; yet, it’s a question rarely asked. How do we know for sure which candidate, if either, can get the job done? How frequently do we screw it up?

Biographer Irving Stone thought we often got it wrong. In They Also Ran, which surveyed American presidential elections from 1824 until 1940, he estimated that the better candidate lost almost half of the time. Irving judged that presidents such as Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Ulysses Grant, Warren Harding, and Calvin Coolidge were not only poor presidents, but poor presidents who lost to opponents that would have been better presidents.

Not all writers would be as severe as Irving. Modern scholarship, in fact, has determined that voters do a pretty good job most of the time in making voting choices. Fabled political scientist V.O. Key famously declared that "voters are not fools" and few academic studies dispute his observation. According to political scientist Mike Binder, most research on the subject "suggests that by and large voters get it right most of the time. However, most of the time is not all of the time."

One contemporary writer, Daniel Finkelstein, in writing about British elections, judges that the British people have got it right 100% of the time over the past 80 years. But even he demurs from that judgment when considering the American electorate, speculating that Carter over Ford in 1976 was a big mistake, as was electing Roosevelt to a fourth term in 1944.

So, across the span of more than 50 presidential elections, it is a reasonable conclusion that we do get it wrong sometimes - maybe often as Irving believes, maybe less often as Finkelstein believes. But why do we get it wrong when we do?

There are some clues in those elections that produced failed presidencies, according to the ratings of presidential historians. The scholars’ lists include the Schlesinger Survey (1962), The Murray-Blessing Survey (1982), and more recent surveys like the C-Span Survey (1999) and the Wall Street Journal Poll (2005). Their conclusions vary some. But they all tend to agree who were among the worst presidents produced.

For our purposes, we should exclude lowly rated but unelected presidents, such as Andrew Johnson, from our failed presidents list because voters never had a chance to vote for them in the first place. Similarly it seems fair to exclude presidents who died very early in their terms, such as William Henry Harrison, since they didn’t serve long enough to be evaluated.

This leaves on a list of failures or near failures some eight presidents, including Pierce, Buchanan, Grant, Harding, Coolidge, Hoover, Nixon, and Benjamin Harrison.
What stands out about this group is that many of them were in office during times of great national challenge - either economic or political. It was huge political challenges that confronted Pierce and Buchanan, who were caught up in the furious national tumult leading to the Civil War. And it was severe economic challenges that confronted presidents like Hoover and Benjamin Harrison, who were laid low by economic crisis during their administrations. In these cases, times of national crisis didn’t necessarily improve the American electorate’s judgment. Or to put it differently, we sometimes make our worst choices at the worst time.

But that still leaves unexplained some failed presidents who were poor choices even in relatively good times. Harding is probably the pure case here, presiding over the country during a time of peace and prosperity. Coolidge might also qualify as a mediocre president in good times and surely so does Grant.

Clearly prevailing national moods influence presidential choice - not always for the best. In some cases turbulent political or social forces may inhibit better candidates from running. In 1856, for example, on the eve of the Civil War, divisive sectional pressures provided voters with no good choices among John Fremont, former president Millard Fillmore, and winner James Buchanan. Similarly Ulysses Grant’s two disastrous terms illustrate how the prevailing national mood can influence voters. Both of his opponents (Horace Greeley and Horatio Seymour) undoubtedly would have made better presidents. But Civil War weariness and Grant’s enormous esteem led voters to a poor choice.

Similar powerful national trends can lead voters astray during times of strong partisan surges against one party. These typically happen when one party has been in power long enough to incur what has been called "the costs of governing." Voters want a change, and they aren’t always too particular about who it is. The loss of James Cox to Warren Harding may illustrate such a time. According to Irving Stone, "the American people," in choosing Harding, "achieved the feat of electing the worst president in their entire history by the largest majority in their entire history."

Finally there is the matter of close elections. When we have them the odds increase that the voters will get it wrong. Two of the candidates Irving labels as "better presidents," Samuel Tilden and Winfield Scott Hancock, were on the wrong end of very close elections. Tilden, in fact, won the popular vote, and Hancock lost by fewer than 10,000 votes in what is still the closest in American history.

Is there a moral for us in all this? Perhaps!

Certainly V.O Key was right. Voters are not fools. But as history abundantly reveals, neither are they infallible. The voters who elected Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln and Roosevelt also elected Buchanan, Grant, Harding, and Nixon. When the American electorate is good, it is very good. But when it is bad, it can be awful. As we approach still another critical election it’s reassuring to recall our genius for most of the time getting it right – but prudent to also remember our bent now and then for getting it wrong.

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