

The Experts Choose Chicago's Greatest Mayors

By Melvin Holli

Who has been the best mayor in Chicago's history? This often-asked question was addressed in a survey completed in the spring of 1994. The survey asked experts in Chicago's history and politics to rank all of the city's mayors from the very first in 1837 down to the 1994 incumbent, Richard M. Daley. The results indicate that, according to the experts, one mayor stands head and shoulders above the crowd.

Although expert polls of American mayors are new to the scholarly literature, there does exist a base of experience in ranking other political chief executives. Expert rankings of political leaders originate with a 1948 poll conducted by Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., who asked fifty-five leading historians to rate US presidents on a scale from "failure" to "great," with each historian using his own criteria. Schlesinger repeated his exercise in 1962 with results largely confirming his earlier findings. More recently the Murray-Blessing poll asked American historians to rate presidents, and in 1981 a Steve Neal-*Chicago Tribune* survey queried some forty-nine prominent authors, all of whom had published some "seminal" work on the presidency, for the same purpose. The findings, with a few exceptions, were similar to those of the earlier Schlesinger polls.¹

One surprising result from these national surveys is that the rankings, including those of contemporary presidents, appear to become fixed within a relatively short period of time after they leave office. Whether the same pattern will hold true for Chicago's mayors will be tested in our comparison of the 1994 poll with our similar 1985 survey.²

Rating the Mayors

This recent effort to rate Chicago's

forty-three elected mayors who served since the city's incorporation in 1837 relied upon the same methodology used in the 1985 Chicago survey, and was similar to that employed in the aforementioned presidential polls. The body of experts surveyed was derived from academe, the media, and survey and public affairs firms, all of whom had written, lectured, or broadcast exten-

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sively on Chicago, its mayors, or urban politics. The pool of potential respondents was drawn from *A Directory of Chicago Area Historians, 1984* (ed., Rima Schultz) and more specifically from those persons who listed themselves as specialists in Chicago, urban, or Illinois history. This was supplemented by a telephone survey to identify professors who offered courses with sizable components of Chicago history or politics. To this core of experts were added other scholars who had published articles and/or books on these topics. Also included were journalists and reporters covering politics for the Chicago press, as well as television and radio news analysts and a few free-lance authors. This resulted in a carefully selected list of 110 persons.

Rankings were solicited by a mailed questionnaire sent out between February and May 1994 to all potential respondents. This elicited a response from 55 experts, or a return rate of 50%. A one-half or more response level is considered reliable for mail surveys and compares favorably to other polls of this type.³ It should also be noted that 38 of the respondents in the new poll had also been respondents in the first poll in 1985, for a repeat-percentage of 69%, which is very high for this kind of research. The 55 experts who returned polls clearly seemed qualified for the task, for as a group they had published 58 books and more than 300 articles related to the topic of Chicago and its politics, for an average of six articles and one book per expert.

The Top Ten

Table I lists the experts' choices of Chicago's top ten greatest mayors.⁴ As the table shows, Richard J. Daley (1955-1976) emerges as the clear winner. Daley was picked as the number one all-time mayor by almost half of the experts, being placed in the first ranked position by 23 ballots—over ten times as often as the number two selection. Daley also recorded the lowest standard deviation (a measure indicating the level of consensus/discord among the respondents), suggesting there is more agreement by the experts on his ranking than on any of the others in the list. These results place this famous and controversial mayor in a class by himself—*sui generis*.

In second place on the list is Carter Harrison Jr. (1897-1905, 1911-1915), a five-term mayor who spanned the turn of the century. With only two first-place votes and an average rank over twice that of Daley, it was certainly not a close second place. In an impressive third-place showing is Harold Washington

Chicago's All-Time "BEST" Mayors

Mayors	Average Rank	Number of Times Ranked First
R. J. Daley (1955-76)	2.2	23
C. Harrison, Jr. (1897-1905, 1911-15)	4.5	2
H. Washington (1983-87)	4.7	9
C. Harrison, Sr. (1879-87, 1893)	5.0	2
E. Kelly (1933-47)	6.4	2
A. Cermak (1931-33)	6.9	1
W. Ogden (1837-38)	8.0	5
J. Wentworth (1857-58, 1860-61)	8.3	2
R. M. Daley (1989 to Present)	8.7	0
E. Dunne (1905-07)	8.9	1

Note: Average is calculated using a mean.

(1983-87). Washington's standard deviation score is higher than Daley's or Harrison's, indicating a wider range of disagreement by the experts on his rank than the others in the top three. Without a doubt, having prevailed through two stormy elections and winning the prize as the city's first black mayor attracted favorable votes from many of our experts.

In fourth place is Carter Harrison Sr. (1879-87, 1893), another five-term mayor. In fifth place is three-term mayor Ed Kelly (1933-1947), who is credited with having honed the political skills of the Kelly-Nash machine and beginning a long half-century run of Irish-American mayors for Chicago.

In sixth we find Chicago's only foreign-born mayor, Anton Cermak (1931-33). A rough and ready bruiser and anti-prohibitionist, Cermak put together a multi-ethnic political organization which, over time, would bring about Democratic one-party dominance of Chicago. The city's first mayor, William Ogden (1837-38), won a solid seventh place, securing five first-place votes. Being first and putting his personal credit on the line to save the young city's reputation were achievements that doubtlessly carried Ogden into the ten "best" mayor category. Civil War mayor John Wentworth (1857-58, 1860-61), garnered eighth place. Known as a pro-Union and War Democrat, he eventually switched parties and guided the city through the turbulent times of the secession crisis of 1861.

Our ninth- and tenth-place mayors are from the 20th century. Ninth-place Richard M. Daley, known as the "son of Boss" by his detractors, was at the time of the poll completing his second elected term. The younger Daley is perceived as having restored some political calm after a decade of red-hot racial squabbling that had characterized Chicago politics in the 1980s. The city's only "Progressive" reform mayor, Edward Dunne (1905-1907), completes the top ten list. Dunne was also notable in that at a time when Irish Catholic politicians excelled

in running political machines, he was a clean-elections, civic-minded reformer. He was also the only mayor in Chicago's history to experience upward mobility from City Hall, being elected governor of Illinois in 1912.

Observations

Several interesting observations can be made of this top ten list. Seven of the ten served more than one term. Long term office holders include the two father-and-son teams: the Harrisons served five terms each, and the elder Daley was elected six times, the younger Daley twice thus far. Multiple-term office holding is clearly an advantage that helps mayors attain high rank in this survey. For starters, having multiple terms in office is probably a good indication that the mayor is doing a pretty good job, and

long tenure also provides the mayor with time to achieve his/her goals. The Democratic party claimed nine of the top ten and one, Wentworth, switched to the Republican party over the slavery and pro-union issue. Four were Roman Catholics. Chronologically, three came from the nineteenth century, one spanned both centuries, and five came from the twentieth century.

Although controversial in life and still somewhat so in death, Richard J. Daley's appeal has to be viewed as more than a contemporary phenomenon. He clearly emerges as the winner even when matched against a sizable body of blue-ribbon founding fathers and nineteenth century political worthies.

As with presidents, a mayor's reputation also benefits by what happens

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after she/he leaves office.⁵ In the light of the three post-Daley administrations (Byrne, Washington and Sawyer), which experienced political turmoil—falling bond ratings, “council wars,” ugly racial battling and less than city-wide leadership—it seemed likely that the apparent stability of the six-term Daley would have some appeal to the experts. Of the three post-Daley mayors, only Washington salvaged high ranking among the experts, probably because he was the city’s first African-American mayor, was an outstanding campaigner and speaker, and helped to move blacks from the periphery into the center of politics for at least two elections.

The younger Daley’s high ranking, ninth on the historic list, is somewhat surprising at this early point in his career. This relatively high placement probably came about, in part, because he has been widely perceived as having calmed the troubled waters of political turmoil and returned politics to a cooler, saner political equilibrium.⁶ As with all careers that get ranked in mid-course, junior Daley’s ninth rank should be viewed as tentative and with caution. His subsequent performance in office, of course, will significantly affect his future rankings.

Comparing the 1994 and 1985 Polls

Overall, the results of the 1994 survey are similar to those of the 1985 poll and reflect great agreement with the earlier benchmark rankings. The difference between the two surveys can be accounted for almost wholly by two mayors: Harold Washington and Richard M. Daley. The repositioning of one mayor, Washington, and the entry of a new mayor, Richard M. Daley, into the mix explain more than 90% of the small change in rankings.

Washington experienced the most dramatic upward movement, soaring from a lowly eleventh-place rating in the 1985 survey to a third-place rank in 1994. At the time the 1985 evaluation was conducted, Washington was still in his first administration and was locked

into a political and legislative stalemate dominated by “council wars.” After the 1985 survey had been completed and by the spring of 1986, Washington, with the help of the courts and aldermanic redistricting, had taken control of the city council and handily won reelection in 1987. Success in the last 18 months of his public life as well as his effort to remake himself as mayor of the entire city, probably helped pull Washington into high ranking in the survey.⁷

In summary, we can see that nearly all of the variance in 1994 from 1985 can be accounted for by the entry of one new name, Richard M. Daley, and one rapid political climber, Harold Washington. Subtracting those two names would have left the 1994 survey almost a mirror image of the 1985 poll, which lends credence to its reliability.⁸

Clearly, a strong consensus is emerging among the experts on who are Chicago’s ten “best” mayors. Further, Richard J. Daley’s commanding position in both surveys and the relatively low standard deviation that characterizes his vote suggests that expert opinion has crystallized on who has been the greatest mayor in Chicago’s 150-year history.

Endnotes:

¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., *LIFE*, November 1, 1948, pp. 65-66, 73-74; “Our Presidents: A Rating By 75 Historians,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 29, 1962, pp. 12-13, 40-43; Robert F. Murray and Tim Blessing, *Greatness in the White House: Rating the Presidents, Washington Through Carter* (University Park, 1989), pp. 10-24; Steve Neal, “Our Best and Worst Presidents,” *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, January 10, 1982, pp. 9-18.

² For a complete examination of the 1985 poll, see M. Holli, “Ranking Chicago’s Mayors...” in P. Green and M. Holli, eds., *The Mayors: The Chicago Political Tradition*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987).

³ For example, see Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, “The Presidential Performance Study: A Progress Report,” *Journal of American History*, Vol. 70, December 1983, p. 538.

⁴ For biographical information on these mayors, see Peter O’Malley, “Edward J.

Kelly” in Melvin G. Holli and Peter A. Jones, eds., *The Biographical Dictionary of American Mayors, 1820-1980* (Westport, CT, 1981), (hereafter cited as “*BDAM*”). See also Roger Biles, *Big City Boss in Depression and War: Edward J. Kelly of Chicago* (Dekalb, IL, 1984) and Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge, 1984); Edward H. Mazur, “Carter Harrison I” and Andrew K. Prinz, “Carter Harrison II,” in *BDAM*, pp. 151-152; Peter J. O’Malley, “Anton J. Cermak,” in *BDAM*, pp. 60-61; Alex Gottfried, *Boss Cermak of Chicago* (Seattle, 1962); Roger Biles, “John Wentworth,” in *BDAM*, p. 387; see also Don Fehrenbacher, *A Biography of Long John Wentworth* (Madison, WI, 1957); Andrew K. Prinz, “Edward F. Dunne,” in *BDAM*, pp. 106-7; John D. Buenker, “Edward F. Dunne: The Urban New Stock Democrat as Progressive,” *Mid-America*, January 1968; Paul M. Green, *The Chicago Democratic Party, 1840-1920*, (Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1975); and Richard Becker, *Edward Dunne: Reform Mayor of Chicago*, (Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1971); John R. Schmidt, *The Mayor who Cleaned up Chicago*, (DeKalb, IL, 1990); Douglas Bukowski, “William Dever and Prohibition,” *Chicago History*, Summer 1984; Paul Barrett, “Joseph Medill,” in *BDAM*, pp. 251-2; Thomas R. Bullard, “William B. Ogden,” in *BDAM*, pp. 251-2.

⁵ For example, ex-President Eisenhower was placed on the ten “worst” list in 1962 by his contemporaries, but after his successors had stumbled through the Bay of Pigs, the Vietnam War, burning cities, Watergate, and “malaise” speeches, Eisenhower skyrocketed to ninth best in the 1982 Neal *Tribune* poll.

⁶ See M. Holli, “Daley to Daley” in P. Green and M. Holli, eds., *Restoration: Chicago Elects Another Daley*, (Chicago, Lyceum Books, 1991), pp. 193-207.

⁷ See “Requiem for a Heavyweight,” in M. Holli and P. Green, *Bashing Chicago Traditions: Harold Washington’s Last Campaign* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), pp. 181-195.

⁸ For the stability that often emerges in leadership polls, see Robert Murray and Tim Blessing, *Greatness in the White House: Rating the Presidents* (University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 23-24.



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