

Policy 360 – Episode 64 – Presidential March Madness –Transcript

Kelly Brownell (KB): Welcome once again to Policy 360 I'm Kelly Brownell, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, and it's that time of year again: March Madness.

Sports audio: Ties the game! It's unbelievable what's unfolding here! Johnson's hit two enormous threes! This one's good if it goes. Oh it did! Holy cow! Are you kidding me??

KB: Well, today we've got our own version, but instead of basketball, it's all about presidents. We have brackets here, and we're pitting US presidents from throughout the ages against each other. Who will be crowned the best president? Will it be Washington or Honest Abe? Maybe FDR? Or perhaps a Darkhorse will emerge. Our courtside play-by-play analysts are Fritz Mayer and BJ Ruddell. The two are with Duke's POLIS Center, the center for Political Leadership Innovation and Service, and they will be offering a Spring Breakthrough course on exactly this topic. So, welcome BJ and welcome Fritz.

Fritz Mayer (FM): Good to be here.

BJ Ruddell (BR): Thank you.

KB: Fritz, let's start with you. Tell me what this is all about, March Madness for presidents?

FM: Well, it's just such a Duke thing to do, isn't it? But, really, it's about getting students- kind of a creative way to get students to think about the present, think about what kind of a president we should have, what does it really take to be a leader- and I think the basic idea was, "let's a creative way to get people thinking about the history of presidents and all of the different dimensions that might go into making a good leader as a way of kind of holding up a mirror to the present day."

KB: All right, so you've got presidents matched up with each other in brackets like a basketball bracket would be, and then decisions are made between two presidents who were paired against each other, like two basketball games, would compete with each other, about who advances to the next round. Is that pretty much how it works?

BJR: That's exactly right.

FM: Yes and, well, you know, the first task is to figure out, you know- how do we keep score? It's not immediately obvious, unlike a basketball game, and so what criteria should we really be using to think about what makes a great president? Is it honesty? Is that an important characteristic? We've had some more and less honest presidents over time. Is personal morality important or not? Is decisiveness, etc.? So, there's a set- there all kinds of things that we can think about that might go into making a great president.

KB: So, BJ, let me ask you- in your mind, what is it that makes a great president? What sort of criteria might be considered in determining who advances?

BJR: I think what's always fascinated me about the president since I was twelve years old is that it changes over time. So, what made a great president the first twelve to twenty years of our nation's history is far different than it is today. I like answering questions that might change a generation from now, and I think that's part of the fun of doing this.

KB: So then, how do you compare somebody who- George Washington versus somebody who's a modern-day president?

BJR: Well we're all human, and so we start with the things that make us human. Like Fritz was saying, you know, honesty, decisiveness, other factors- racism and sexism are gonna come up in this class. How heavily do we do we weigh racism and sexism? How heavily do we weigh being a jerk versus being a nice person? And maybe through that, we can start to challenge students and they might challenge each other on previously-conceived notions. There might be a liberal in the class who decides that Ronald Reagan exemplified what it means to be president, regardless of ideology. And, similarly, someone on the right might decide that his predecessor, Jimmy Carter, was actually, you know, this noble figure who just- it didn't happen to work out for him. So, to what extent can presidents shape their greatness, and to what extent is greatness thrown on the presidents?

KB: So, Fritz, with basketball one has to do seedings and you decide who the top and bottom seeds are. Does that apply into the way you're doing this?

FM: Well, we have seeded them- there's actually a lot of controversy, as is usual, with the seeding procedures in the NCAA. There's some people who feel the seedings are unfair, but we've seeded them largely based on how- a couple of factors. One is their regionals, so that we have various regions here. So, we have the Great Lakes region, the Southeast region, the New England, Midwest, South- we had to combine a bunch of reasons to make this work, but it's regional. And so, these are- the top seeds are people who are generally thought of as sort of the outstanding presidents from that region. We did a few tweaks though, because -just for fun- to try to get us the best match-ups that we could. So, there were, you know, there were a few sort of tricky, what's in there- speaking of which is, Richard Nixon and Donald Trump for example. I have a first-round match-up that a lot of people are really excited about.

KB: So, I'll come back and ask about that match-up in particular in just a moment, because it is really quite interesting. So, take two early round match-ups. And, Fritz, let's talk with this, and I'll ask BJ about the Nixon and Trump. But, in an early round, you've got Barack Obama paired up against James Garfield. So, what would be the arguments for those two individuals?

FM: Well, that's one that's really, really controversial with the selection committee. In fact, Obama's a six seed in this, and I actually have to turn to my selection chair here to ask him what- BJ, why is it Barack Obama's a sixth seed?

BJR: So, the thinking here is that we all have 1 through 5 seeds. There's only 44 people who have been president, so there are no 16 seeds. The worst you could be is an eleven. So, James Buchanan, if you're out there- that goes to James- be proud you're an 11th seed. But, the first five seeds in each region advance automatically to the second round. So, when we take a look at the first round, my thinking was "No recent president should be allowed to get a buy into the second round. Their legacy has not been established." We've even seen with Bill Clinton, how his legacy has shifted dramatically in the last 2, 3, 5 years- and therefore, let's hold off on judging Trump and Obama and the first and second Bush until we really get more time behind us to really see whether they deserve to be among the near-greats.

FM: It'll be interesting to see whether, you know, obviously the students come in knowing a great deal about Obama and probably almost nothing about Garfield, so it'll be a test of whether we can actually get people up to speed enough so that there's actually a serious contest there. I have to say, I think the betting line is on Obama in that first round match-up.

BJR: I'd like to add in there that people like Garfield- who, he was shot after three months in office- William Henry Harrison, who lived only 30 days. A lot would say that well, "They're not going to advance to the next round." But, if we look at greatness, sometimes a lack of badness could be enough to get you to the second round. So, you might see a situation where two presidents are facing off, and one of them hasn't served for very long but didn't really do anything harmful to the country, and that might actually be a good thing for the country.

FM: It's a bit of a low bar, but I agree.

KB: So, BJ, let's go back to the Richard Nixon and Donald Trump pair in the first round.

FM: That's the toughest one.

KB: So, tell me why they're paired together, and where you think that might come up?

BJR: Well, in both instances, the country in some ways- and it's too early to say with Trump, obviously, and even when we created this. I mean, we're not being biased in saying that when these seedings were created about six months ago, no one knew for sure whether Trump would still be President. So, the thinking was, "We have Nixon, who did things that were very positive for the country and did things that were very destructive to the country." And there were elements of Donald Trump in that, without oversimplifying it. So, we wanted to ask students- essentially, we have stark good and stark bad, objectively in each of these individuals on personal and professional levels. How do we evaluate them? And that's- I'm interested to hear, you know, what the students have to say on that.

KB: Fritz, in addition to that particular pairing, are there others that you think are especially fascinating?

FM: Well, there are a number of them that are really fascinating. I like "Lyndon Johnson versus John F. Kennedy" pairing. The two of them did not like each other, although Johnson was JFK's Vice-President and obviously succeeded him. And it's fascinating, because, in our historical

memory, Kennedy is kind of a romanticized figure, perhaps because he was shot. But also, he was handsome, he was articulate- but I think, over time, LBJ's legacy has actually grown in the sense that he actually, you know, did many of the things for which Kennedy is credited, actually, Johnson really did. And so, aside from the tragedy of the Vietnam War, which was profound- I mean, Johnson was really the architect of most of the civil rights legislation of the of the 60's. So, that that's a fascinating one. The other one I would point to as a later round, possible match-up between Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt. So, the Roosevelt's may- if they, you know, they're seeded one and two in their bracket, in their regions-

BJR: It's like the UNC and Duke, isn't it?

FM: It is, although, you know, we need to set it up so they, you know, can make it all the way to the finals. But it's possible- Elite Eight match-up between the Roosevelt's, and they're fascinating, because these are two of the most accomplished American presidents, different styles, but both enormously energetic figures who really put a mark on, a profound mark on the country. But you can only have one Roosevelt in the Final Four, so that's why.

KB: So, BJ you're having presidential historians weigh in on this process- Lynne Cheney a historian and wife of former Vice President Dick Cheney, wrote to argue for James Madison. Lynne Cheney's written a book about James Madison. What was her argument?

BJR: That's right. Well she said that, you know, she looked at it from a historical standpoint of what James Madison meant to the country. You know, father of the Constitution, you know, primary author of the Bill of Rights, first president to take the nation to war- and I'm referring directly to her words here. And, really, this question over- can a nation defend itself without violating the constitutional rights of its citizens? So, really thought-provoking questions about- and really this whole region, the Southeast region, there's always a tough region in every bracket in March Madness, and this one has, you know, the Southeast's got two signers of the Constitution, two signers of the Declaration of Independence. You know, it's gonna be hard to imagine who's coming out of that bracket, but I like the fact that that Dr. Cheney weighed in and really pushed for her president, because the fact is she- and many other historians who have weighed in with their comments- have spent one, two, or more years examining the pros and cons. And often, pros -there's often a lot of, you know, positivity in terms of their research- so, of course they're best equipped to be able to pitch- kind of like a Head Coach for a basketball team- why that team, why that president is gonna go far.

KB: So, another example of that is an argument made by Jay Sexton, who wrote a book about President James Monroe called "The Monroe Doctrine". Would you mind reading what he, well, what he said about that?

BJR: I have to. He said, "James Monroe is a three seed you don't want to play. He's solid, makes no mistakes, does not crack under pressure, gets the job done with no drama- unselfish, witnesses original hidden hand style for presidential leadership that was instrumental bringing about the resolution of the Missouri Crisis. And, of course, the Monroe Doctrine- the pillar of American foreign policy for a century in which he successfully synthesized the views of the rising stars in his cabinet, John Calhoun, and John Quincy Adams, and- never to be underestimated- William

Wirt. Andrew Jackson couldn't manage his way out of a paper bag compared to that. I also can see him taking down TJ in the Elite Eight. It would be a protege coach taken it to the mentor à la 'Roy Williams beating Dean Smith, Quin Snyder bringing down Coach K, etc.'" So, you can tell that he really took this seriously in terms of his approach.

FM: Oh, boy, he got into.

BJR: "TJ" is Thomas Jefferson, in case anyone doesn't know.

KB: Beautiful application of how these brackets typically go.

FM: Absolutely.

KB: So, Fritz, let me ask you this- what do you think the students can learn, or people can learn in general, from following a process like this?

FM: Well, I do think it- coming back to the point I made earlier- this was really about the present, and thinking hard about, in our times, what kind of a leader we need, what kind of a leader, we have, frankly- how to evaluate it? We forget how young our students are sometimes, and, you know, their memories go back no further really than Barack Obama. And so, so to be able to be exposed to the long range of presidents, so many different styles, and to think in a fun way about the pros and cons of the factors that go into it, the things that might have been important in one moment in our history and maybe are less important now, I think is really the point of what we're doing. And I would hope, at the end of this, that the students would come out of it with a much clearer sense of their, you know, their own sense of what it takes to be a great president and what our times demand.

KB: And, BJ- if you had to fill out your own bracket- perhaps you've done this- who are you expecting might win and why?

BJR: Truthfully, I haven't filled one out, because I don't want to bias myself in the classroom into steering people in a certain direction. I've always been a fan of Franklin Roosevelt, because I believe that the most challenging times in our history as a country tend to either bring out the best or worst of our presidents- and those for whom it brings out the best need to be lauded. And I can't think of a more difficult time- other than in the Civil War, so, Abraham Lincoln obviously great case, but I have some issues with Lincoln that may not be appropriate to bring up here. But, to say that FDR, in my opinion, really faced the greatest challenges that any president has faced over the full term of 12 years of this time.

KB: Fritz, what about you?

FM: Well, it's easy to go with Lincoln in a lot of ways. And, of course, people do, and BJ put his finger on the issue which is how much of that is a function of the time that you were given. I've always been intrigued with Teddy Roosevelt, and he was someone who had enormous capabilities and really did a lot and in terms of helping America deal with the excesses of capitalism in the late 19th century. And, in some ways, quite timely issues, I think, for today and

another moment in our history- a less dramatic moment, in some ways. But, I'd be intrigued with that, with Teddy and, of course, we'll see what the students decide. We actually have quite a number of other people who are filling out brackets, so we've been distributing brackets to people so there's a, kind of, outside betting line now, I think, on this. But it'll be fascinating to see what the students decide in the end

KB: Well, it's quite a creative way- I mean, I suppose at the end of the day who wins and who doesn't is irrelevant. It's really the students thinking so deeply about what constitutes leadership and how do you evaluate a president on what he or she has accomplished is really very impressive. So, thank you guys so much for describing this and it'll be very interesting to see how it all plays out.

FM: Well, thanks for giving us this chance to talk about. Yeah, we're looking forward to it. Should be fun.

KB: So, my guests had been Fritz Mayer and BJ Ruddell. Fritz is a professor here at the Sanford School and also serves as Associate Dean for Strategy and Innovation. Fritz is also the director of POLIS, the Center for Political Leadership Innovation and Service. BJ is the Associate Director of the POLIS Center. You can find out more about presidential March Madness on our website, policy360.org. While you're there, you might even want to fill out a bracket yourself. That's policy360.org. Until next time. I'm Kelly Brownell.