

# Presidential Greatness and Political Experience

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One of the central questions voters in the 2008 presidential campaign faced was how much value political experience adds to candidate's resume. Senator Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party front-runner last year, made her political life the cornerstone of her campaign strategy. "Ready to lead on day One" was a key line in Clinton's stump speech, stressing her proximity to political power and the lessons she had learned from first-hand observation. "What I believe is that my experience and my unique qualifications on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue equip me to handle with the problems of today and tomorrow," she told the moderator of a Democratic debate in Ohio.<sup>1</sup>

In the end, Democratic voters decided experience - or at least Hillary Clinton's experience - was overrated. In her place, they chose one of the least politically experienced candidates in American history, Senator Barack Obama, who downplayed his political career largely because he barely had one. Voters seemed to care little that three years ago he was an unknown Illinois state legislator. Obama himself asked voters to assess his presidential potential on the basis of his judgment, his promises, his biography, and his experiences outside Washington, or even Springfield, Illinois, for that matter.

In this paper, I analyze the value of experience? More specifically, I ask: Is political experience associated with presidential greatness? If so, what kind of political experience? Legislative, executive, judicial, or civil service administrative experience? Experience at the federal or state

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<sup>1</sup>Transcript of the Democratic Debate in Cleveland, February 26, 2008. New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/26/us/politics/26text-debate.html?pagewanted=all>

and local levels? All of these factors, from presidential greatness to various forms of political experience, are difficult to identify and measure for social scientific purposes. Although I rely on subjective measures for each factor, they represent a consistent and reasonable first-attempt at addressing the question. I use six surveys from 1994-2005, each consisting of more than 100 historical scholars across the ideological spectrum, to measure presidential greatness, perhaps the most subjective factor of all. By using a multilevel approach, multiple assessments of greatness will allow me to maximize the amount of information to be gleaned about the value of political experience.

## Data

I measure experience as the number of years served in 11 broad categories of political positions: 1) Governor, 2) Mayor, 3) Member of U.S. Congress, 4) Member of state legislature, 5) Federal attorney or judge, 6) State attorney or judge, 7) Federal administrator<sup>2</sup>, 8) State administrator, 9) Diplomat<sup>3</sup>, 10) General<sup>4</sup>, 11) Soldier<sup>5</sup>. I also include a twelfth catch-all category for work experience in the private sector.<sup>6</sup> Although a critic may argue that the number of years served does not capture the quality of that experience, underemphasizes a sharp politician's capacity to learn a great deal in a short period, and ignores specific political or private sector achievements, it does provide a consistent benchmark for measuring presidents. In addition, the goal of this paper is to measure the effect of experience - not innate political ability - and the amount of time spent in or away from politics, and in or out of specific political institutions, should be highly correlated with the volume and range of different political issues that are likely to be useful once one becomes president, regardless of political skill.

Drawing from online encyclopedia biographies of presidents, I compile years of experience on the basis of full-time work. I recognize this is problematic for some positions, particularly those in the 19th century when the U.S. government and most state governments had yet to be institutionalized

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<sup>2</sup>I code the Vice President as a federal administrator since he is a non-elected member of government tasked with overseeing his office in the executive branch, and, in recent years, assisting with policy in other offices.

<sup>3</sup>I code the Secretary of State as a federal administrator rather than a diplomat since he is a member of the cabinet

<sup>4</sup>The purpose of the military executive variable is to identify time spent directing organizational military units instead of smaller groups of soldiers. I code all positions including and above lieutenant colonel as military executive experience

<sup>5</sup>I code all positions below lieutenant colonel as a soldier

<sup>6</sup>There is considerable variety of private sector experience among presidents in business, education, philanthropy, and farming. The most common private sector experience, shared by 19 presidents, is as a practicing lawyer.

and professionalized. For example, most 19th century legislators spent only a few months each year legislating in the U.S. or state capitols, and the rest of the time back home in a private profession.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, I treat a two-year legislative term in 1860 the same as one in 1960. I separate political experience at the national or federal levels from political experience gained at the state and local levels.<sup>8</sup> I exclude years spent working or volunteering for political parties because of incomplete records.

## Descriptive statistics and hierarchical model

Among academics, there is a strong consensus about the country's best presidents. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, or Franklin Roosevelt holds the top ranking in all six surveys. Considering the wide range of political experiences between these three men - Washington served 32 years as a soldier, general, and legislator; Roosevelt was elected governor and appointed as an assistant secretary of the Navy; and Lincoln's spent most of his political life in the Illinois statehouse - at first glance it appears that an extraordinary environment of political, social, or economic crises is a prerequisite for greatness. Figure 1, which plots presidential rankings (summarized as an average of all six surveys), makes clear that great presidents have occurred throughout American history. Time has not been a strong indicator of greatness, as is clear from the bivariate regression line of ranking on inauguration year. Disagreement about a president's rank is related to time (as shown in Figure 2) with the ranking variance between the six survey increasing with time. This relationship may reflect the difficulty scholars have in assessing the recent past. Because academic surveys of presidents are relatively new - the first one was in 1942 - it is hard to generate a large sample of presidents whose ranking changes can be analyzed over time.<sup>9</sup>

As the Washington, Franklin Roosevelt, Lincoln example suggests, political experiences vary widely among the 42 presidents. The most common experience is Congressional service, which 27 presidents have. A federal non-elected administrative position is the next most common experience

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<sup>7</sup>To account for professionalization differences across years and states, I could tabulate the number of days in session for each legislature. I leave that improvement for a future paper.

<sup>8</sup>In most situations this division is reasonable. Since there is only one national executive position, the president, I divide executive experience into years served as governor or as mayor.

<sup>9</sup>Ronald Reagan has the largest standard deviation for ranking, and it will be interesting to see if a future scholarly consensus develops around his presidency.

with 24 presidents having served in some civil service capacity, mostly as a member of the cabinet or as vice president. Twenty two presidents were elected to some state legislative post, although the bulk of them were 18th and 19th century presidents, eras it should be noted when the low level of professionalization in state houses equaled those in Washington. The least widely shared political experience is that of mayor. Only Andrew Johnson, Grover Cleveland, and Calvin Coolidge were elected mayors of mid-sized cities. All of the variables have long right tails (shown in Table 1). None of them are strongly correlated (shown in Table 2), positively or negatively.

The correlation among the six surveys, however, is strong, ranging from 0.89 to 0.99. The limited variation in scholarly assessment of most presidents may help settle debates about who the good and bad presidents are, but it undercuts the principal advantage of multilevel models, taking advantage of contextual differences that influence the dependent variable. I set up a two-level model with individual presidents serving as the first level, the political and private experiences serving as independent variables, and the surveys themselves serving the second level. I do not include predictors for the second level variable. The mathematical model is shown in matrix algebra form below where  $i$  indicates the 42 individual presidents,  $j$  indicates the six surveys,  $X$  represents an  $i \times 12$  matrix of data, and  $\beta$  represents an  $1 \times 12$  vector of coefficients.

$$\mathbf{Level\ 1} : \text{Ranking}_{ji} = \alpha_0 \text{surveyevaluator}_{j[i]} + X_i \beta + \varepsilon_{ji}$$

$$\varepsilon \sim N(0, \sigma_\varepsilon^2)$$

$$\mathbf{Level\ 2} : \alpha \sim N(0, \sigma_\alpha^2)$$

I estimate a three-chain varying-intercept, varying-slope model, using a Wishart distribution to model the correlation  $\rho$  between variables and slopes. Independent variables are assigned non-informative priors. Calculations are made by WinBUGS called from the software R, with a 12,000 iteration burn-in and a 45,000 iteration simulation. Visual evidence (shown in Figure 3) indicates convergence of relevant parameter estimates. For comparative purposes, I also estimate pooled and unpooled regression models using R software.

## Discussion of results

The parameter estimates for all independent variables are almost identical across the pooled, unpooled, and multilevel models (shown in Tables 4, 5, and 6). The intercept difference between surveys is less than 1, and the range of slopes for each variable is typically within one or two percent of the mean estimate value for a given variable. Another way to measure the group-level variance is through the intraclass correlation  $(\sigma_\alpha^2) / (\sigma_\alpha^2 + \sigma_\epsilon^2)$ , which ranges from 0 - when observations are identical across countries - to 1 when observations from each group are completely different. The estimated intraclass correlation is 0.06., which, like the correlation matrix indicates little cross-evaluator heterogeneity. Because of the strong positive correlation between the surveys, using the pooled regression estimates is an adequate substitute for time-pressed researchers.

Overall, the results suggest that political experience is more of a liability than an advantage. It either hinders or has no effect on presidential greatness. Coefficient estimates for the multilevel model, pooled model, and separate regressions for each survey are shown in Figure 4. Consider the mean value of the multilevel intercept, 14.48, which interpreted literally, means that a president without any experience would be in the top-third of the rankings. Although all presidents have had some public or private sector experience, the assumption of no experience is not implausible - consider the child of a wealthy billionaire who has never held a full-time job and is elected president at a young age - as to ignore.

Political experience appears to be more harmful to a president's ranking than private sector experience. A person who has spent a lifetime in the private sector is more likely to be a better president than one who has spent a lifetime in politics, although private sector experience has a substantively small and statistically insignificant effect. Time spent as a mayor, as a member of Congress, a state administrator, or a soldier leads to a lower ranking.<sup>10</sup> These negative effects are robust to 95 percent credible intervals. The largest of these effects is for mayoral service, with each year in office lowering one's ranking by more than three spots. Since only three mayors ever became president, these findings should be interpreted cautiously. If these results are correct, though, Republican voters did the country a huge service earlier this year by not selecting "America's Mayor"

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<sup>10</sup>Higher ranked presidents are given lower numbers, so negative coefficients mean that rankings improve with additional years of experience.

Rudy Guiliani as their presidential nominee.

In contrast, the negative effect of congressional experience is stronger evidence that the calumnious phrase leveled Senators and representatives, “creatures of Washington,” is not quite so defamatory. Each two-year term in Congress lowers a president’s ranking by more than 1 spot. This effect warns against choosing presidents with long service records in Congress, and validates U.S. voters who have for the last half-century tended to choose governors over Senators for president. On average, experience as a diplomat, soldier, and in the private sector also decrease one’s ranking, although the effect is not robust to 95 percent credible intervals.

Experience as a governor, state legislator, state administrator, and general increase one’s ranking, on average, but are also not robust to 95 percent credible intervals. The largest of these effects is for general, which might be driven by the top-ten rankings of three presidents with long careers as military leaders, George Washington, Andrew Jackson and Dwight Eisenhower. It should be remembered that the president with the most experience as a general, Zachary Taylor, was also one of the country’s worst presidents.

## Posterior predictive checks

In order to assess the overall fit and quality of the multilevel, pooled, and unpooled models, I extract point estimates for each of the variables as well as the individual level variance. I then simulate 1,000 separate rankings for each of the 42 presidents from their respective years of experience in each of the 12 categories. I take the mean and standard deviation for each set of 1,000 simulated rankings, resulting in six  $252 \times 2$  matrices of data. I then plot the simulated rankings, and their 95 percent credible intervals, against the actual rankings from each survey.

Overall, the multilevel model does not do a good job predicting presidential rankings. Because of the strong correlation between surveys, poor performance in each of the six surveys is the norm. The pooled and unpooled models perform equally as poorly, which is not surprising since the point estimates from them are close to those of the multilevel model. The simulated and actual predictions for all three models are shown in Figures 5, 6, and 7. Most of the predictions, shown as blue triangles, are bunched in the 15 to 25 rank range. And while the 95 percent confidence intervals

from the simulated rankings do include the actual rankings, they do so because they extend over the entire possibility of ranking spots. In essence, the model says that any future president with a political experiences similar to those of any of the 42 past presidents has the capacity to be one of the country's best or worst presidents - hardly useful information!

The models leave out some key explanatory variables (perhaps a war or an economic depression) that capture the full variance in presidential performance, particularly on the high end. They are consistently unable to identify great, and even, good presidents. No president is ever predicted to be among the top 10. The models are consistently able to identify mediocre presidents only because they predict that most presidents will be mediocre. Occasionally, they can predict a terrible president like Andrew Johnson, whose lifetime in politics, including three years as mayor of Greenville, Tennessee, and 17 in Congress is a kind of perfect storm for lousy presidential performance. They also come close to predicting bottom-tier presidents like Chester Arthur, who served as a state-level civil servant, and Calvin Coolidge, who was mayor of Northampton, Massachusetts. Some of the worst misses for the models are the string of poor pre-Civil War presidents like William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, and James Polk who all spent more than a decade in the U.S. Congress. Their presidential failures run deeper than a legislator's parochial perspective.

## Conclusion

Presidential candidates tout their political experience to voters, claiming that it has prepared them to deal with complex problems and made weighty decisions. This paper has used a multi-level model to analyze the value of national and state political experience on overall presidential greatness, as judged by six surveys of academic historians. Overall, there is no evidence that political experience improves the chances of extraordinary presidential performance, and some weak evidence that certain political positions, most importantly U.S. Congressional member, lead to poorer performance. In the end, great presidents are not great simply because they spent their lives in politics and learned important lessons. Other factors, some of them random perhaps, are more important. Speculating a bit, great presidents are forged from great periods. Greatness is likely to be the product of economic, social, or political crises during a president's term of service,

and and by a president's ability to navigate the difficult decisions required by such times. Political experience may be useful, as it was for George Washington and Franklin Roosevelt, or it may be largely irrelevant, as it was for Abraham Lincoln. Either way, presidential candidates will continue to run on the virtues of political experience. For most of them, it's pretty much all they've got.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Governor	2.28	0	3.30	0	12
Mayor	0.17	0	0.62	0	3
Member of U.S. Congress	6.52	4.5	7.34	0	24
State Legislator	3.45	1.5	4.57	0	16
Federal Judge or Attorney	0.31	0	1.7	0	11
State Judge of Attorney	1.67	0	3.12	0	11
Federal Administrator	3.21	1	4.04	0	15
State Administrator	0.60	0	2.08	0	12
Diplomat	1.33	0	3.51	0	17
General	1.93	0	4.37	0	17
Soldier	2.57	0	5.11	0	24
Private Sector	9.98	7	8.99	0	33

Table 2: Correlation Matrix of Six Scholarly Surveys Ranking U.S. Presidents

	Wall Street Journal 2005	Siena 2002	Wall Street Journal 2002	C-SPAN 1999	Ridings 1996	Siena 1994
Wall Street Journal 2005	1					
Siena 2002	0.94	1				
Wall Street Journal 2002	0.99	0.94	1			
C-SPAN 1999	0.94	0.96	0.94	1		
Riding 1996	0.89	0.96	0.92	0.93	1	
Siena 1994	0.89	0.96	0.91	0.92	0.95	1

## U.S. President Rankings

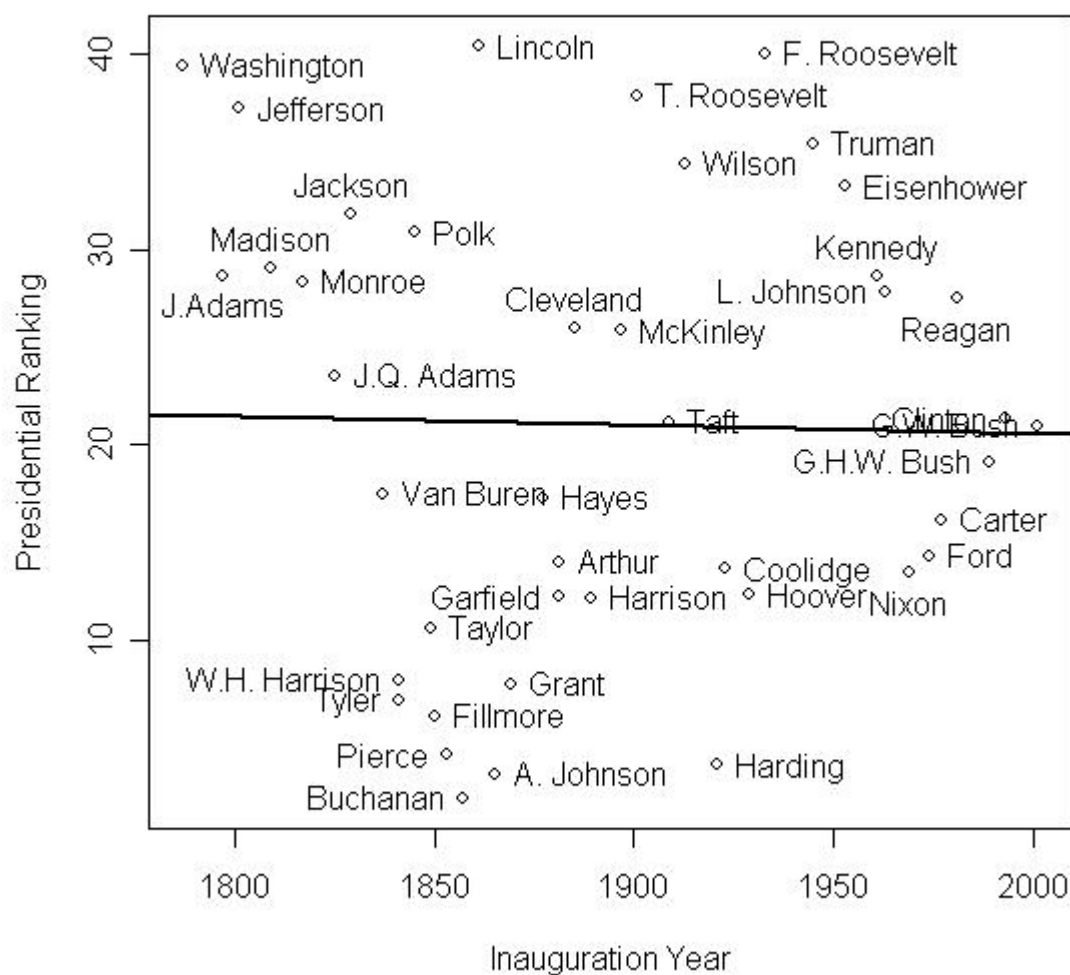


Figure 1: Scatter plot of presidential rankings averaged over the six surveys versus inauguration year. For visual purposes, rankings are reversed so that better presidents received higher numbers. Bivariate regression line is shown with a thick black line.

## Standard Deviation of U.S. President Rankings

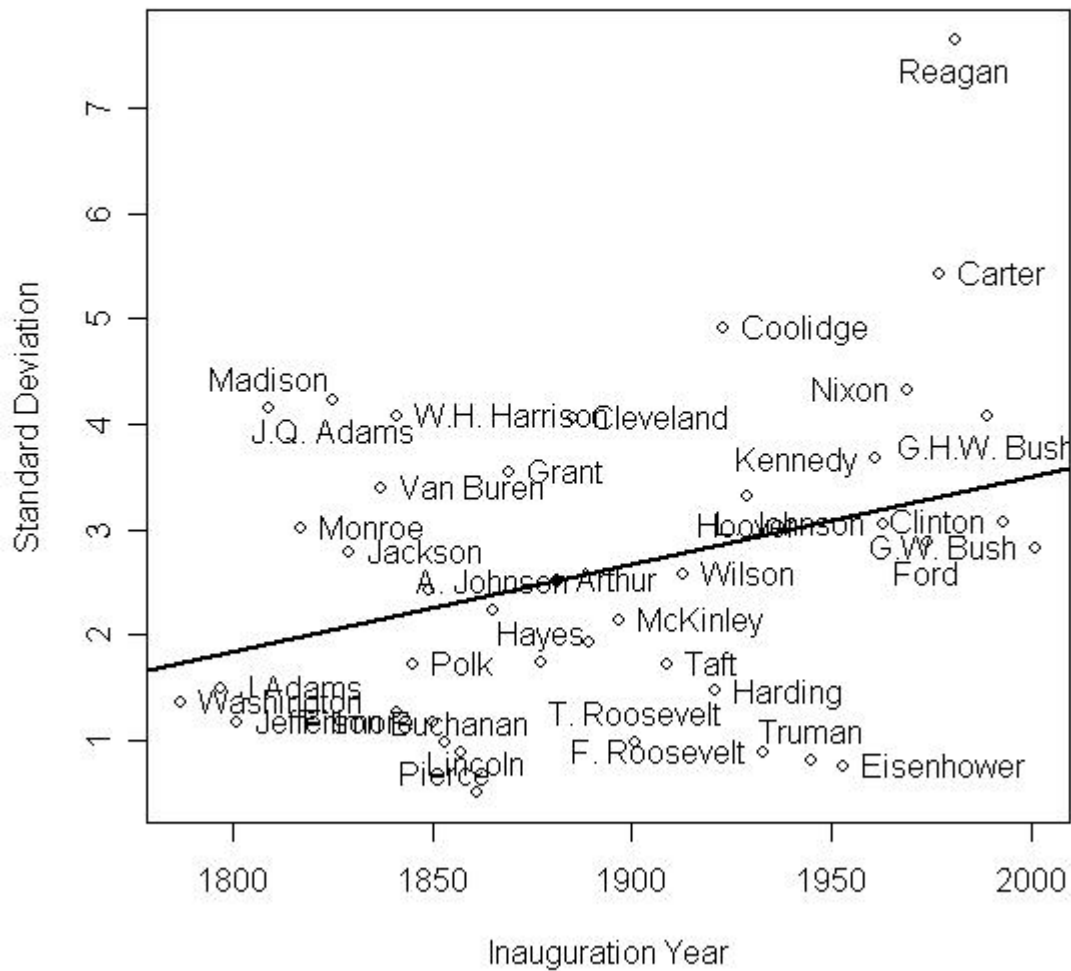


Figure 2: Scatter plot ranking standard deviation across surveys versus inauguration year. Bivariate regression line is shown with a thick black line.

Table 3: Correlations among Independent Variables

	Governor	Mayor	Member of Congress	State legislator	Federal judge or attorney	State judge or attorney	Federal administrator	State administrator	Diplomat	Military leader	Soldier	Private sector
Governor	1											
Mayor	0.28	1										
Member of U.S. Congress	-0.018	-0.06	1									
State legislator	0.05	0.12	0.14	1								
Federal judge or attorney	0.17	-0.08	-0.18	-0.10	1							
State judge or attorney	0.22	0.17	0.04	-0.18	0.19	1						
Federal administrator	-0.22	-0.06	0.04	0.05	-0.11	-0.2	1					
State administrator	-0.04	0.16	-0.19	0.09	0.12	0.02	0.09	1				
Diplomat	0.04	-0.13	0.05	0.09	0.07	-0.10	0.35	-0.07	1			
Military leader	-0.13	-0.15	-0.16	-0.08	0	0.08	-0.25	-0.11	-0.19	1		
Soldier	-0.06	-0.21	0.05	-0.25	-0.09	-0.12	-0.16	-0.3	-0.09	0.22	1	
Private sector	-0.10	-0.18	-0.11	0.01	-0.05	-0.11	-0.15	0.05	-0.01	0.03	-0.15	1

Bugs model at "pres1.bug", fit using WinBUGS, 3 chains, each with 45000 iterations (first 12000 discarded)

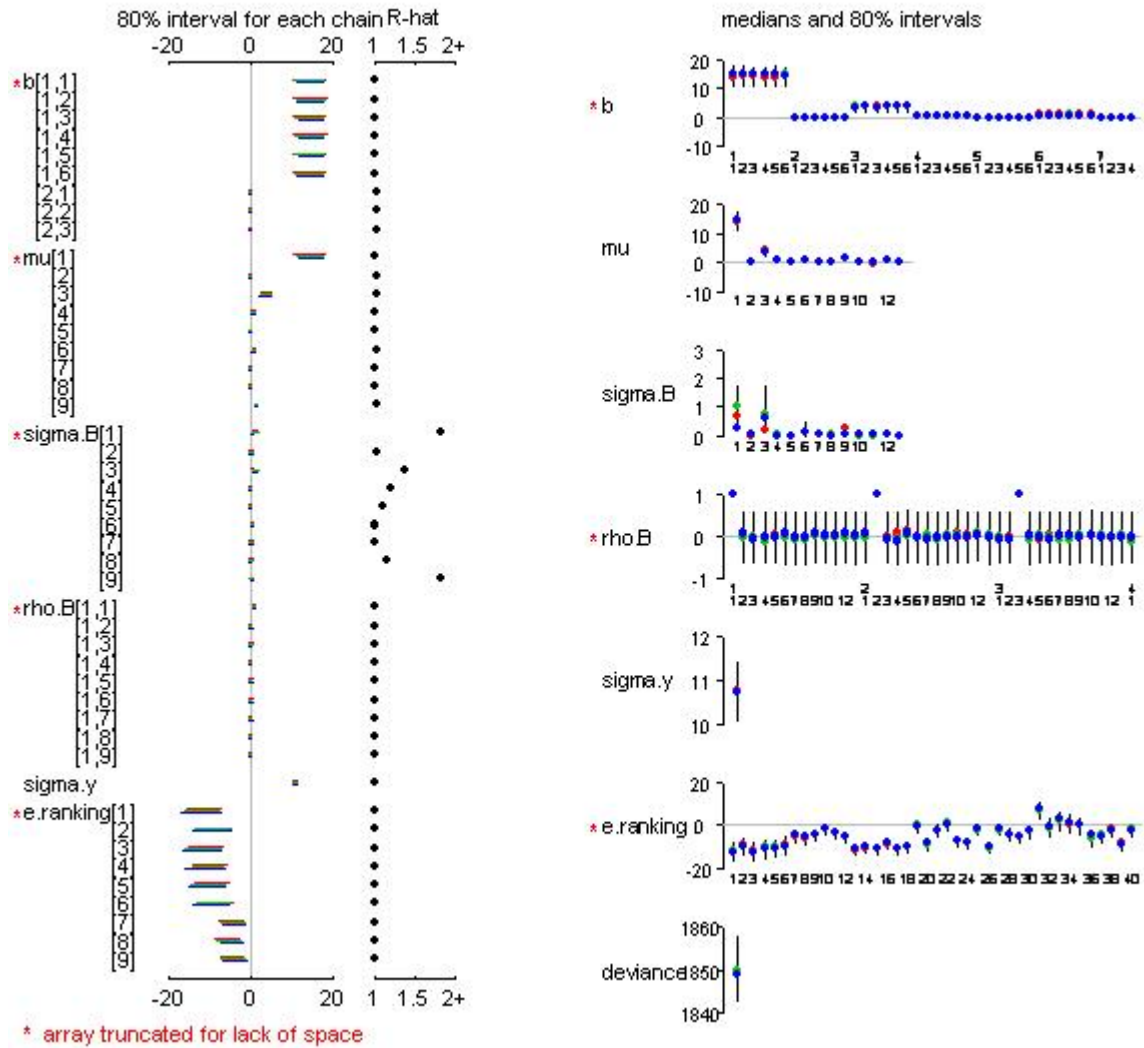


Figure 3: Summary plot of convergence and parameter estimates. Not all variables are shown for lack of space.

Table 4: Pooled regression model

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t )
(Intercept)	14.52	3.33	4.35	0.0000
Governor	-0.06	0.27	-0.24	0.81
Mayor	3.93	1.22	3.22	0.0015
U.S. Congress	0.60	0.12	4.92	0.0000
State legislature	-0.06	0.17	-0.34	0.73
Federal judicial	0.87	0.43	2.02	0.04
State judicial	-0.24	0.27	-0.89	0.37
Federal administrator	-0.21	0.22	-0.98	0.33
State administrator	1.23	0.38	3.25	0.0013
Diplomat	0.06	0.21	0.26	0.79
General	-0.32	0.23	-1.35	0.18
Soldier	0.63	0.23	2.68	0.008
Private sector	0.11	0.10	1.10	0.27
N	252			
R <sup>2</sup>	0.22			
F <sub>(12,231)</sub>	3.89e-08			

Table 5: Unpooled regression model

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t )
Governor	-0.07	0.28	-0.25	0.8
Mayor	3.94	1.23	3.19	0.0016
U.S. Congress	0.60	0.12	4.86	0.0000
State legislature	-0.06	0.18	-0.34	0.74
Federal judicial	0.87	0.44	2.01	0.046
State judicial	-0.24	0.28	-0.88	0.38
Federal administrator	-0.21	0.22	-0.97	0.33
State administrator	1.24	0.39	3.21	0.0015
Diplomat	0.06	0.22	0.26	0.79
General	-0.32	0.24	-1.34	0.18
Soldier	0.62	0.23	2.65	0.0087
Private	0.11	0.10	1.09	0.28
Wall St. Journal 2005	14.42	3.69	3.91	0.0001
Siena 2002	15.20	3.70	4.11	0.0001
Wall St. Journal 2002	13.87	3.71	3.74	0.0002
CSPAN 1999	14.53	3.72	3.91	0.0001
Ridings 1996	14.74	3.72	3.97	0.0001
Siena 1994	14.48	3.72	3.90	0.0001
N	252			
R <sup>2</sup>	0.81			
F <sub>(18,226)</sub>	<2e-16			

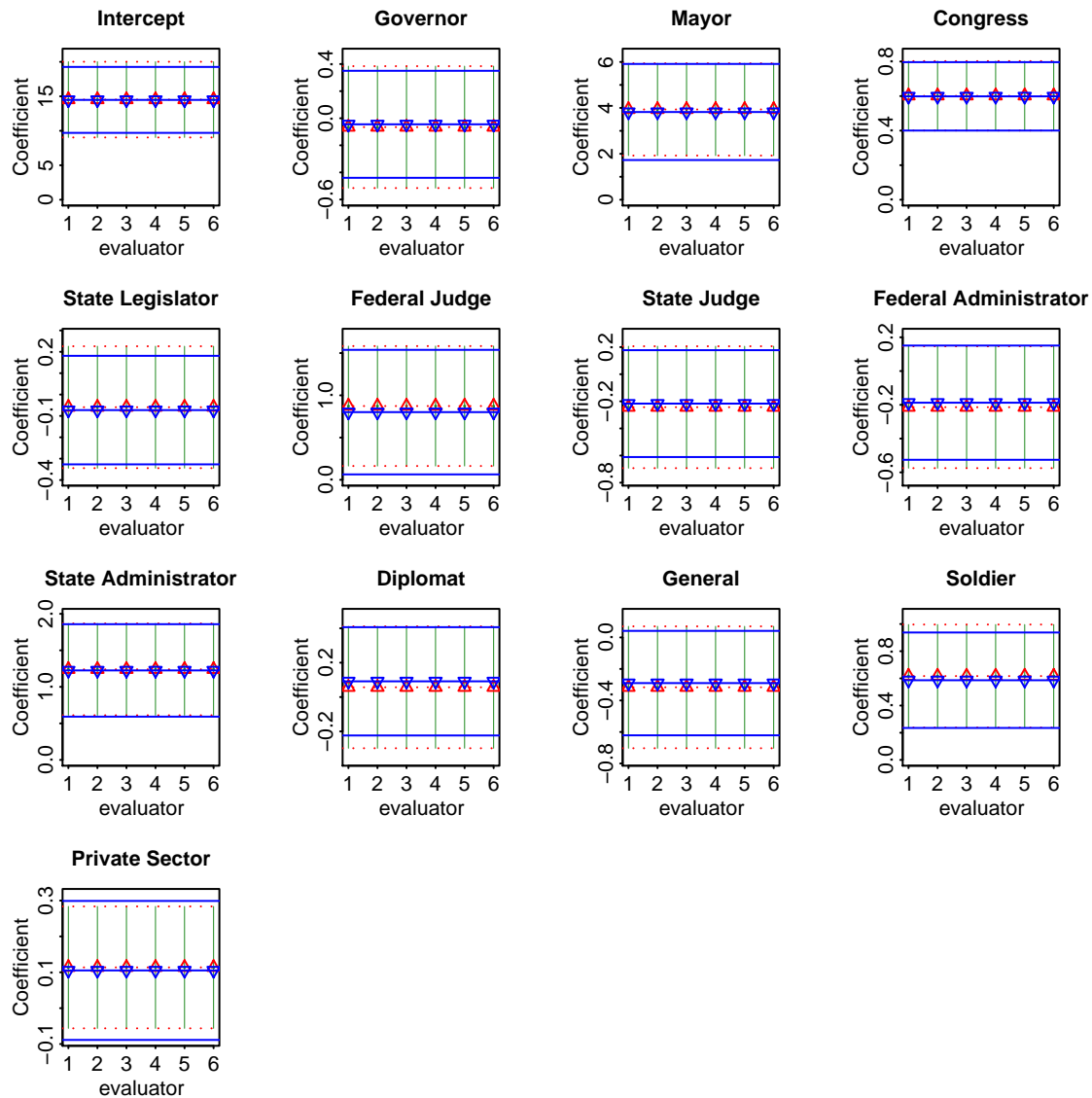


Figure 4: Estimated coefficients (and 95 % intervals) for the regression of presidential ranking on political and private sector experience, as fit separately for each of survey. The dotted red lines and triangles represent pooled coefficient estimates with 95 % intervals. The solid blue lines and upside down triangles represent multilevel estimates with 95 % intervals.

Table 6: Multilevel regression model (Mean values)

	Estimate	Std. Dev.	95 % credible interval	High estimate	Low estimate
Governor	-0.045	0.24	[-0.55, 0.41]	-0.299 (Ridings)	-0.06 (CSPAN)
Mayor	3.82	1.27	[1.26, 6.33]	3.97 (Sienna 1994)	3.68 (WSJ 2002)
U.S. Congress	0.60	0.12	[0.36, 0.83]	.604 (Sienna 2002)	0.596 (Ridings)
State legislature	-0.07	0.15	[-0.39, 0.22]	-0.066 (CSPAN)	-0.0795 (Ridings)
Federal judicial	0.8	0.45	[-0.004, 1.71]	0.817 (CSPAN)	0.782 (Ridings)
State judicial	-0.22	0.24	[-0.71, 0.21]	-0.20 (Ridings)	-0.23 (WSJ 2002)
Federal administrator	-0.19	0.21	[-0.62, 0.19]	-0.17 (WSJ 2005)	-0.20 (Sienna 1994)
State administrator	1.225	0.38	[0.5, 1.97]	1.24 (Ridings)	1.2 (CSPAN)
Diplomat	0.09	0.19	[-0.29, 0.44]	0.096 (CSPAN)	0.079 (Sienna 1994)
General	-0.29	0.2	[-0.72, 0.04]	-0.286 (Sienna 1994)	-0.297 (WSJ 2005)
Soldier	0.59	0.21	[0.16, 1]	0.594 (Ridings)	0.575 (CSPAN)
Private sector	0.105	0.118	[-0.059, 0.31]	0.11 (Sienna 1994)	0.105 (Wall St. Journal 2005)
Survey evaluator (Intercept)	14.48	2.9	[8.68, 19.7]	14.61 (Sienna 2002)	14.42 (WSJ 2002)
$\sigma_\epsilon^2$	10.75	0.51	[9.8, 11.83]		
$\sigma_\alpha^2$	0.73	.49	[0.2, 2]		
N		252			
Deviance		1850			

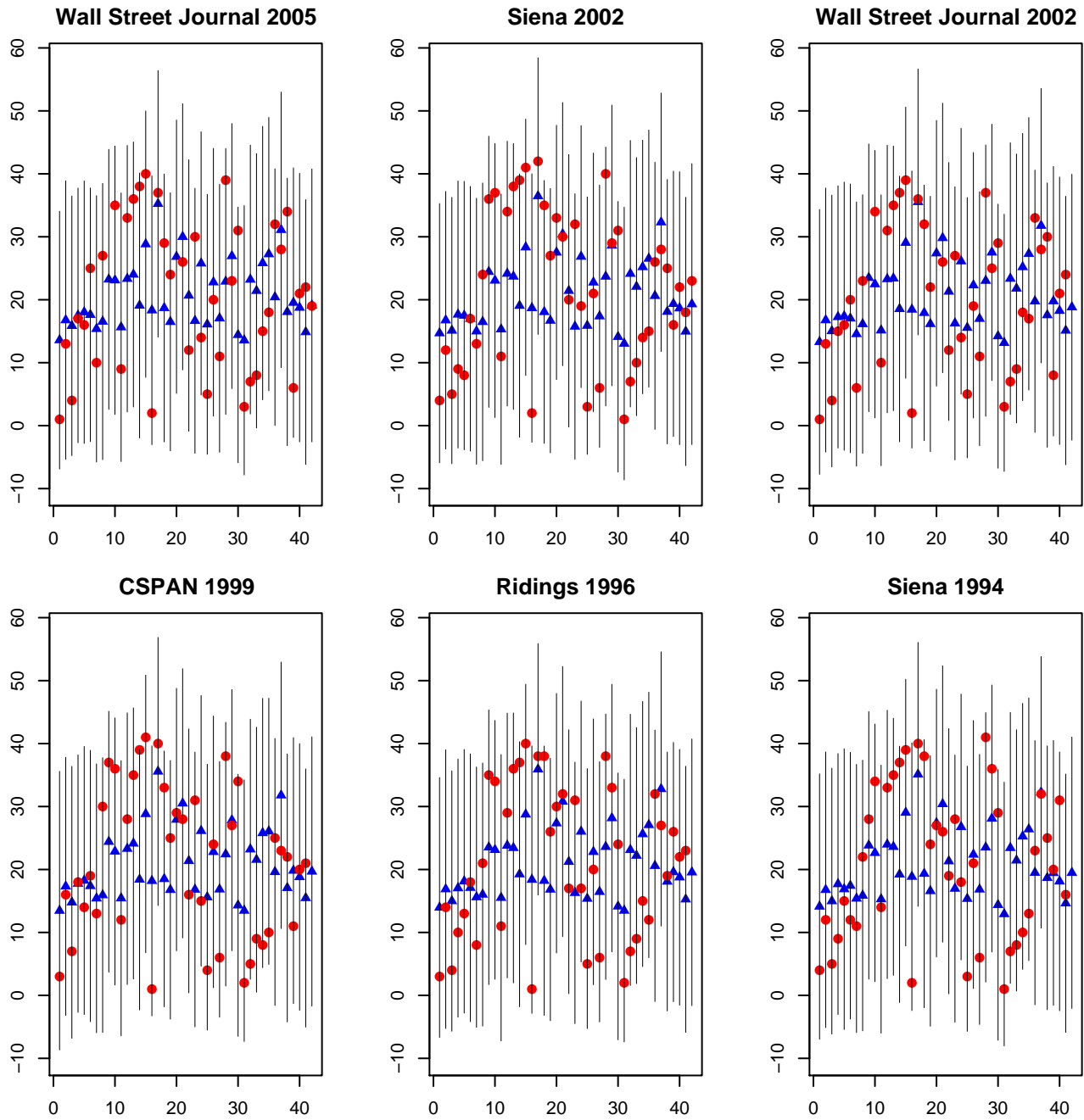


Figure 5: Predicted versus simulated presidential rankings for each survey based on multilevel estimates. Actual ranking is shown with a red dot. Simulated ranking is shown with a blue triangle. The black vertical bars represent 95 % confidence intervals for each of the simulated rankings.

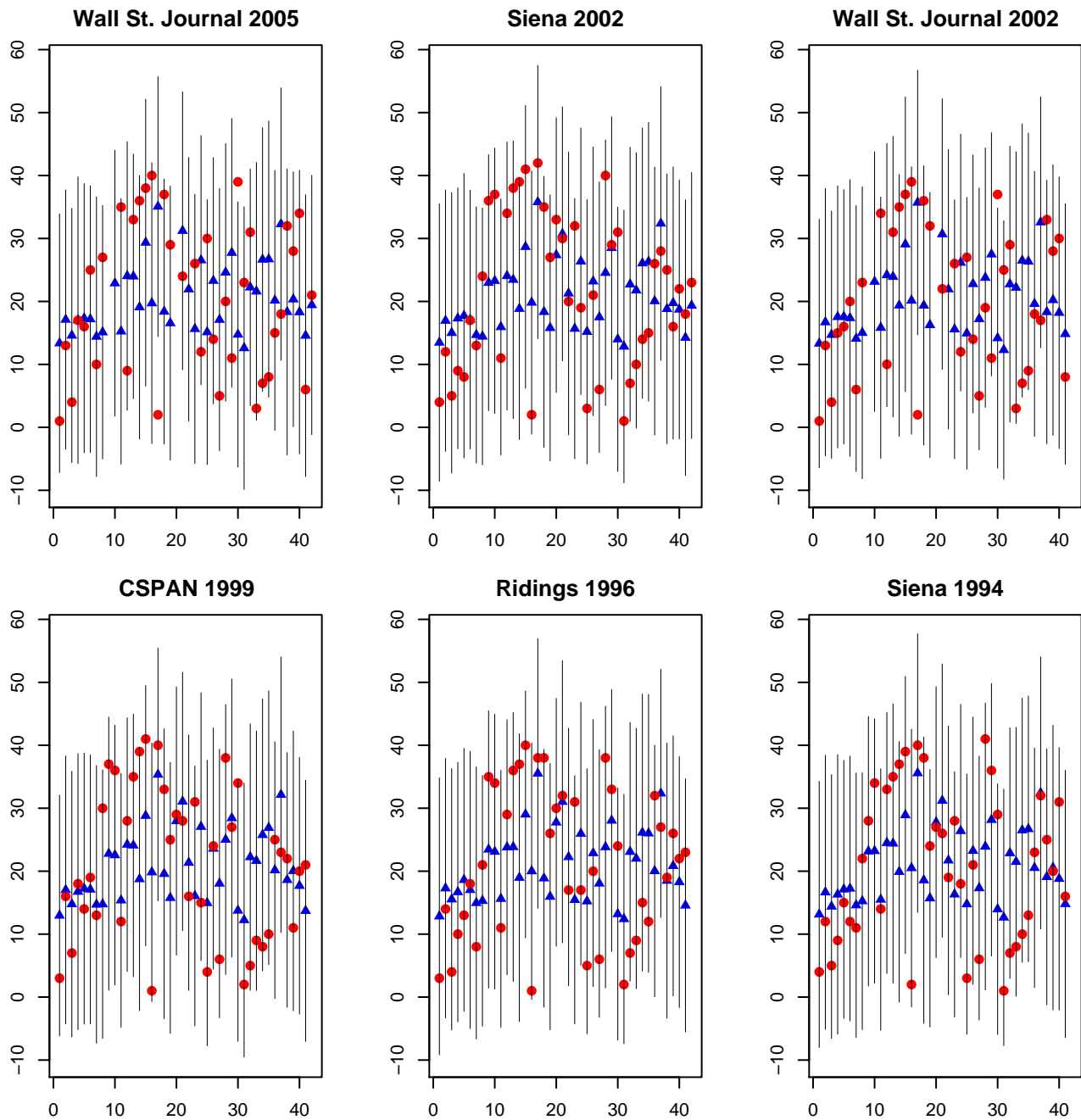


Figure 6: Predicted versus simulated presidential rankings for each survey based on pooled estimates. Actual ranking is shown with a red dot. Simulated ranking is shown with a blue triangle. The black vertical bars represent 95 % confidence intervals for each of the simulated rankings.

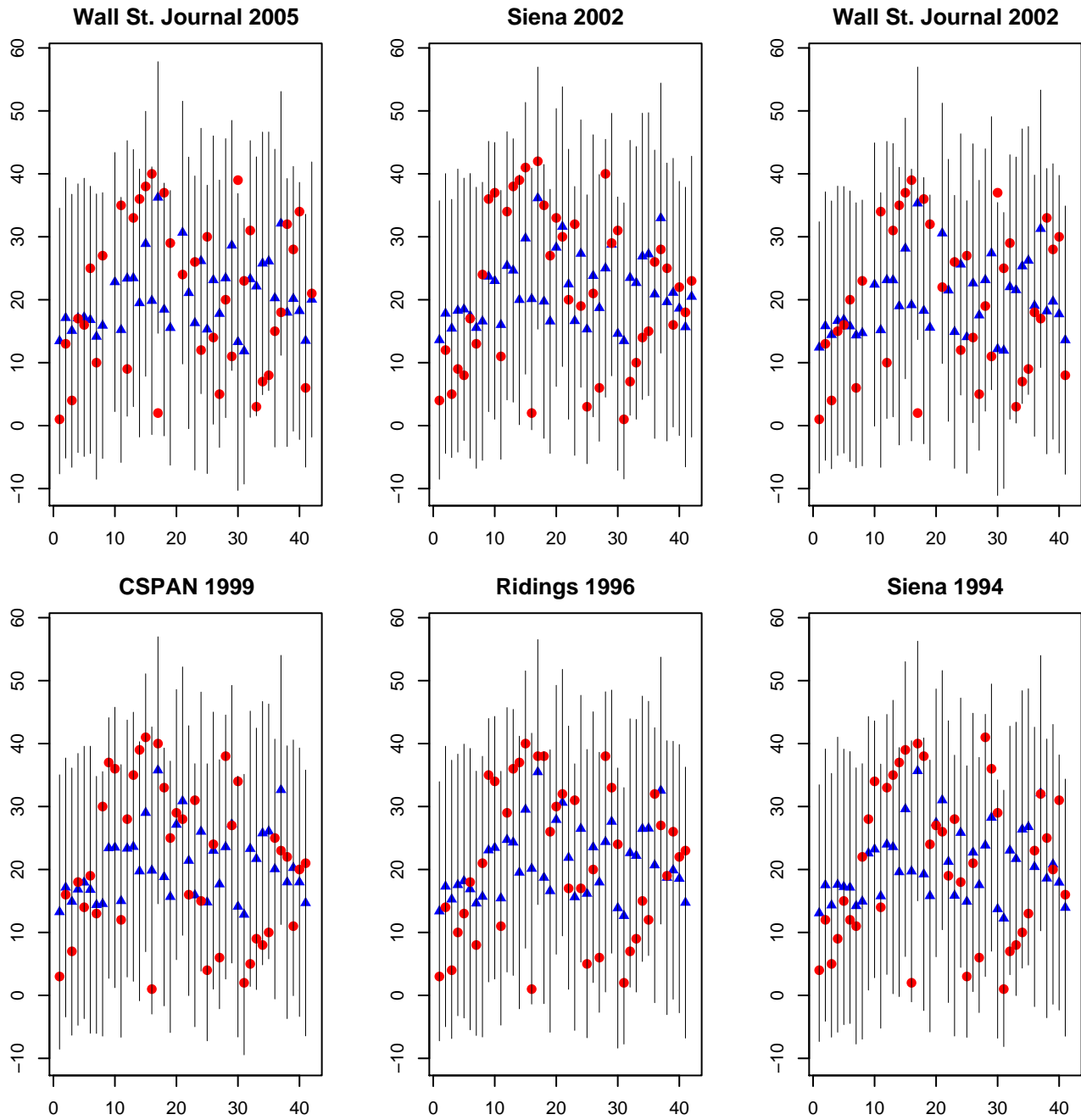


Figure 7: Predicted versus simulated presidential rankings for each survey based on unpooled estimates. Actual ranking is shown with a red dot. Simulated ranking is shown with a blue triangle. The black vertical bars represent 95 % confidence intervals for each of the simulated rankings.