

Two Measures of a Presidency

A historical analysis of presidential misconduct through two distinct lenses: Corruption and Risk to Democracy.



The **Question** You Ask Shapes the Answer You Get

When analyzing presidential history, the **lens** we use defines the lessons we learn.

A common question is: “Who were the **most corrupt presidents**?” This question focuses on indictments, scandals, and financial misconduct—a **critical measure of ethical failure**.

This analysis begins with the conventional view, drawing on historical consensus, documented federal indictments, and political science analyses.

The ranking reflects a weighted consideration of indictments, financial corruption, ethical abuses, and long-term scholarly consensus.



The Conventional Ranking: Top 5 Most Corrupt Presidencies



1. Warren G. Harding (1921–1923). Widespread graft, **Teapot Dome scandal**, numerous indicted cabinet officials. Labeled the "most significant presidential scandal before Watergate."



2. Ulysses S. Grant (1869–1877). **Whiskey Ring**, Crédit Mobilier, systemic patronage corruption. Personally honest but appointed corrupt associates.



3. Richard Nixon (1969–1974). **Watergate**, obstruction of justice, 48 officials convicted or indicted—the most of any administration.



4. Donald J. Trump (2017–2021). High number of convicted aides (34+), **two impeachments**, extensive financial conflicts of interest and ethics violations.



5. Andrew Jackson (1829–1837). Not corrupt in a criminal sense, but known for abuse of power, **spoils system patronage**, and the "Kitchen Cabinet."

But Is Corruption the Greatest Threat?

What if we ask a different question:
Which presidents presented the greatest
risk to **dismantling democracy itself**?

Corruption is about personal gain and ethical violations. Democratic erosion is about weakening the institutions, norms, and checks on power that form the foundation of the republic. They sometimes overlap—but they are not the same thing. By changing the prompt, the lens changes, and so does the insight.

A Framework for Assessing Democratic Risk

Political scientists define democratic erosion not as a single event, but as a **process** driven by specific actions that **weaken institutional checks**. This analysis is based on two core concepts:



Executive Aggrandizement

When a leader **expands their power** beyond the “checks and balances” provided by the legislature and judiciary. Actions include:

Politicizing the independent civil service, using government resources to debilitate political opposition, and **undermining the rule of law**.



Strategic Manipulation of Elections

Actions that make it **harder to vote**, reduce an opposing party’s representation, or subvert the certification of results.

Actions include: Delegitimizing electoral processes, pressuring election officials, and refusing the **peaceful transfer of power**.

Concepts derived from frameworks used by the Brookings Institution, Freedom House, and V-Dem Institute.

The Reframed Ranking: Presidents Who Posed the Greatest Risk to Democracy



1. Donald J. Trump (2017-2021)

Attempted to **overturn the 2020 election** and subvert the peaceful transfer of power; systematically delegitimized elections, media, and courts.



2. Richard Nixon (1969-1974)

Systemic **abuse of intelligence and law enforcement** (CIA, FBI, IRS) for political ends; directed illegal surveillance and covered up criminal acts.



3. Andrew Jackson (1829-1837)

Executive defiance of constitutional checks; ignored a Supreme Court ruling and used the “spoils system” to weaken institutional neutrality.



4. Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921)

Oversaw large-scale **repression of dissent** through the Espionage and Sedition Acts, leading to thousands of political arrests.

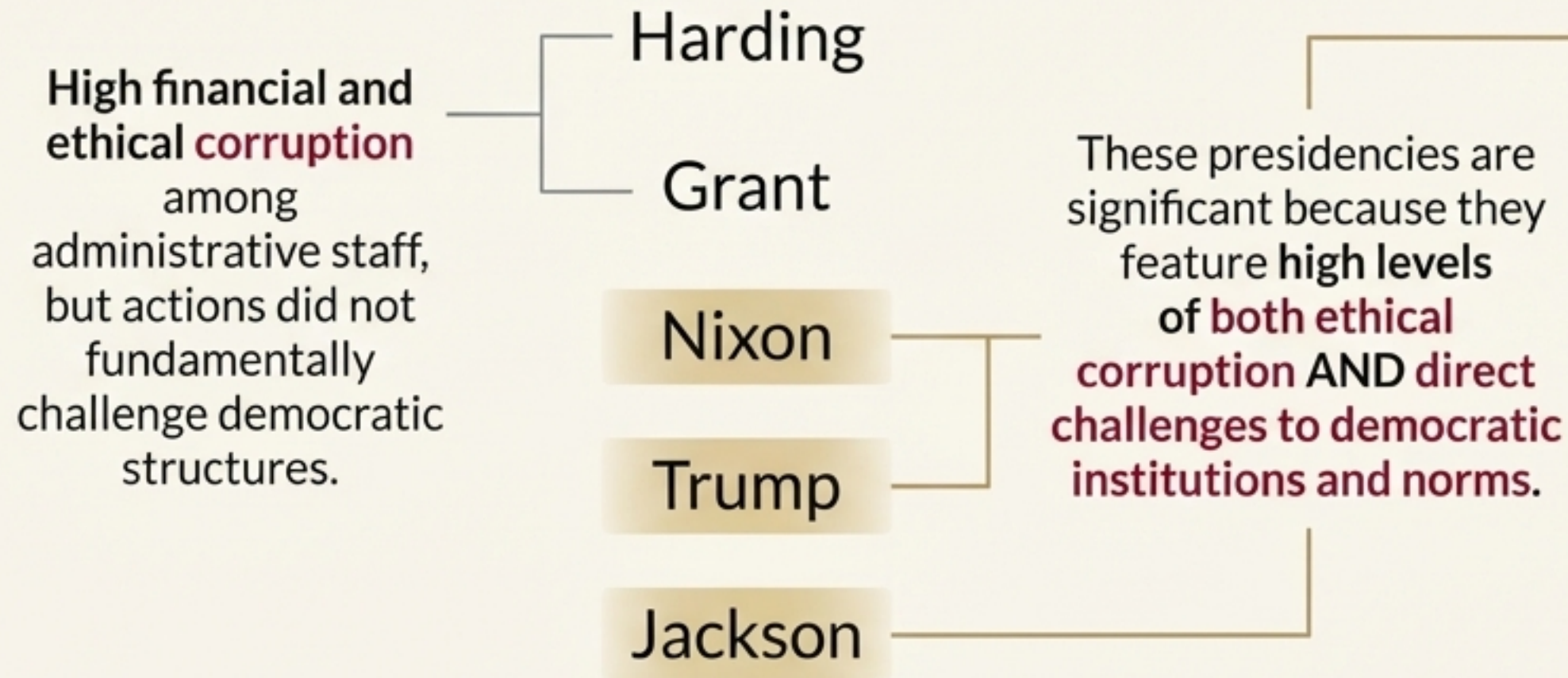


5. John Adams (1797-1801)

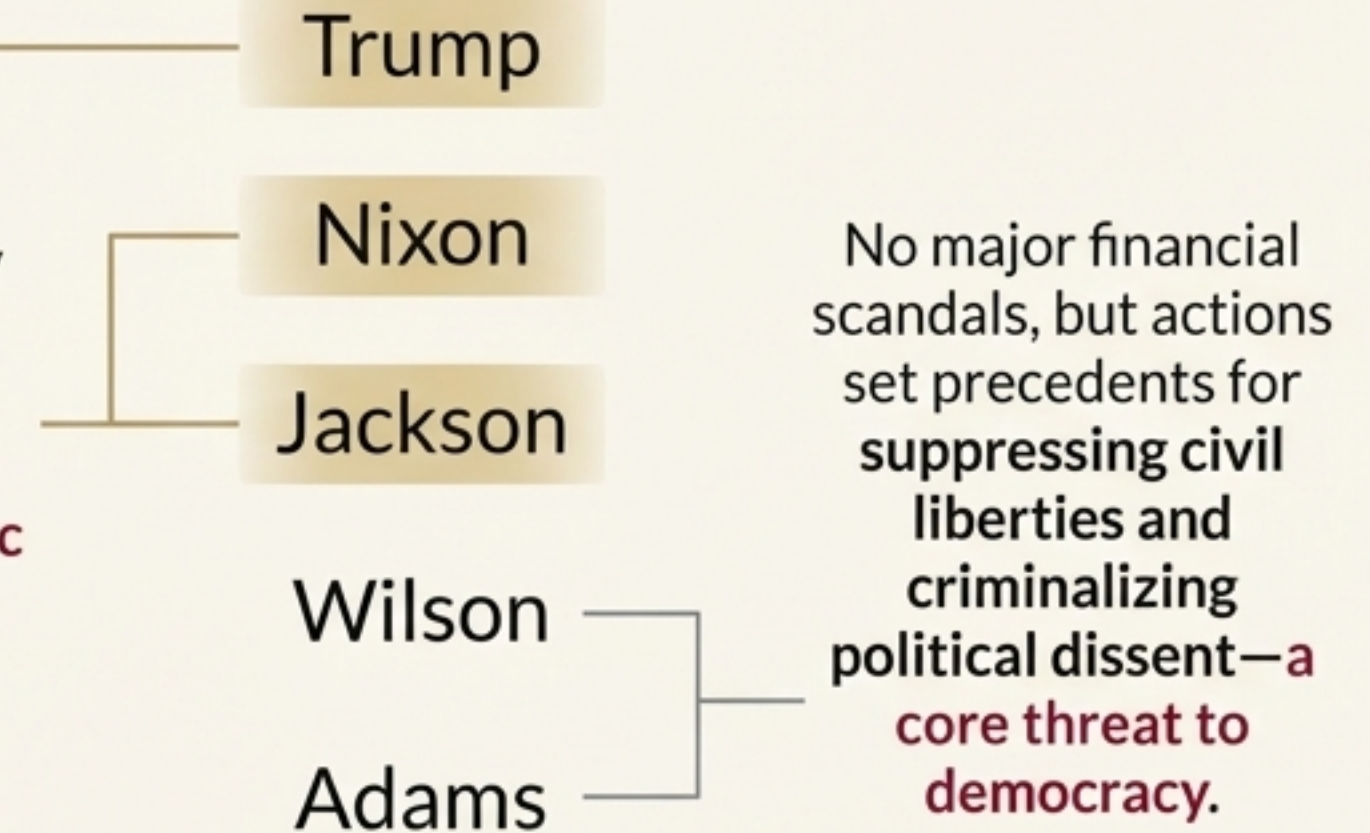
Criminalized political opposition through the Alien and Sedition Acts, using them against opposition newspapers.

Two Lenses, Two Different Histories

Corruption



Risk to Democracy



Case Study: John Adams and the Criminalization of Dissent



Though a Founding Father, Adams's signing of the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798 created one of the nation's earliest crises over executive overreach and civil liberties.

Democratic Risks:

- **The Sedition Act:** Criminalized “**false, scandalous and malicious writing**” against the government. It was explicitly used to prosecute and convict Jeffersonian newspaper owners who disagreed with the Federalist party.
- **The Alien Acts:** Expanded federal power to **imprison or deport non-citizens** deemed “**dangerous**” or a political threat, bypassing due process.
- **The Precedent:** The laws triggered a foundational **debate** about the **limits of executive power** and **freedom of speech**, alarming fellow Founders like Thomas Jefferson, who secretly authored resolutions asserting the right of states to nullify the acts.

Case Study: Richard Nixon, The Modern Benchmark for Overreach



The Watergate scandal was more than a “third-rate burglary.” It revealed how a president could **weaponize the entire apparatus of the state** against democracy itself, **merging financial corruption with systemic abuse of power.**

As Corruption

- **Illegal campaign financing** and secret slush funds.
- **48** administration officials convicted or indicted.

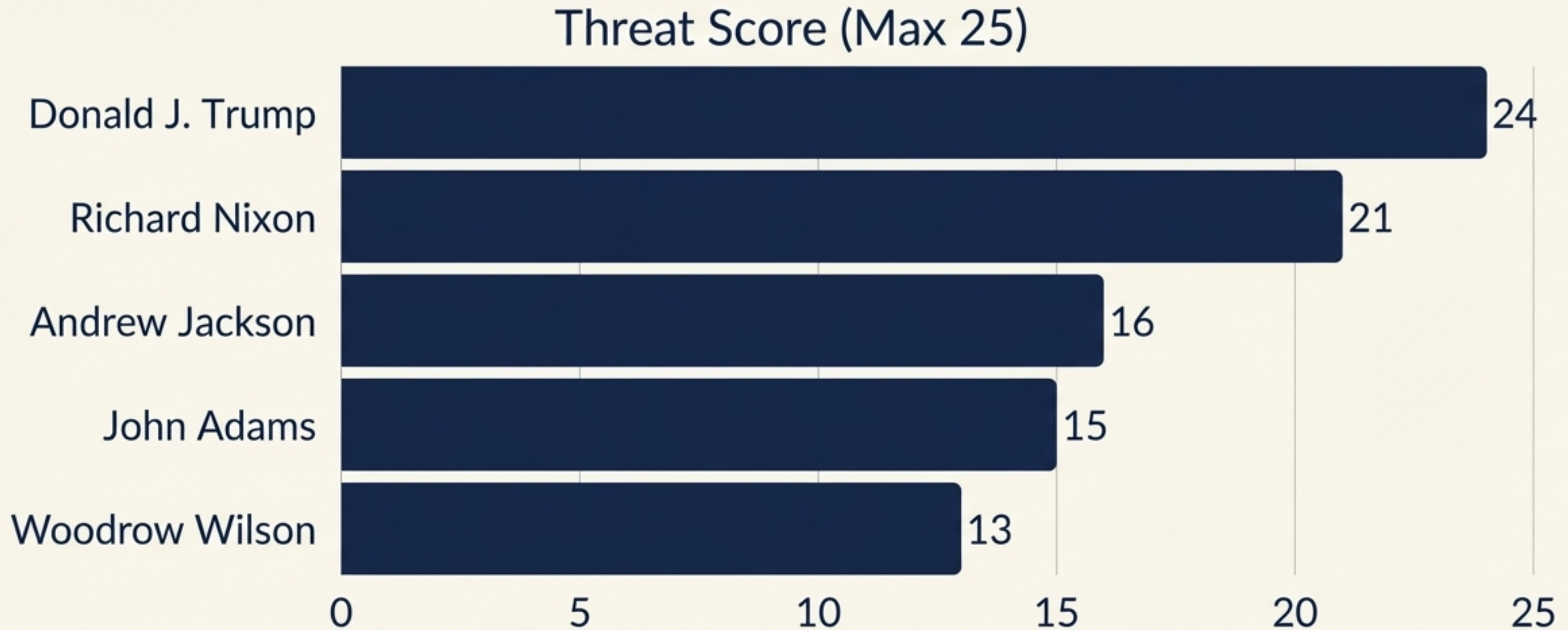
As a Risk to Democracy

- Directed **illegal surveillance** on journalists and **political opponents.**
- Used the **CIA, FBI,** and **IRS** against perceived enemies.
- **Systematically obstructed justice.**

Historical Significance

Watergate led directly to major reforms intended to check executive power, including FISA courts and independent counsels.

Quantifying the Threat: A Weighted Score for Risk to Democratic Institutions



This matrix assigns numerical scores (0-5) based on historical consensus across five key risk criteria. Higher scores indicate a more sustained and severe challenge to democratic norms and institutions.

The Five Criteria of Democratic Risk

The 'Threat Score' is a composite measure based on scholarly definitions of democratic backsliding and executive aggrandizement. Each criterion is weighted to reflect its impact on institutional health.



Attack on Electoral Norms

Efforts to **change vote certification**, refusal to accept electoral defeat.



Judicial/Legislative Defiance

Direct **challenges to courts** or undermining **congressional** authority.



Rule of Law Undermining

Obstruction of investigations, use of government resources against opponents.



Civil Liberties Suppression

Restrictions on speech, press, protest, or dissent.



Executive Power Expansion

Structural consolidation of control over the federal government.

Why the Right Question Matters

Corruption is about leaders breaking the rules for personal or political gain.

Democratic erosion is about leaders attempting to rewrite the rules to entrench their own power. The first is a betrayal of public trust. The second is an **attack on the system itself**.

Understanding this distinction is not just a historical exercise. It provides a critical framework for evaluating the actions of leaders today. Learning to ask the right questions is where real understanding of the health of our democratic institutions begins.

