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## **The Politics of the Presidential Medal of Freedom: A Fifty-Year Analysis, 1963-2013**

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### **Abstract**

Established in 1963, the Presidential Medal of Freedom (PMOF) is the nation's highest civilian honor. Presidents award the Medal at their discretion to "any person who has made an especially meritorious contribution to (1) the security or national interests of the United States, or (2) world peace, or (3) cultural or other significant public or private endeavors" (Executive Order 11085). Using an original database of all 1963-2013 PMOF recipients, we analyze how presidents exercise this symbolic unilateral power. In particular, we find that Democratic and Republican presidents differ in their recognition of various categories of achievement. Also, presidents have awarded a greater number of PMOFs annually in recent years, and it has become increasingly common to honor a large number of recipients in a single ceremony. While a strategic objective may be to attract positive media attention, our analysis indicates that PMOF ceremonies do not increase presidential approval ratings.

There are many honors and privileges bestowed on the occupant of this house, but few mean as much to me as the chance to award America's highest civilian medal.... This is a chance for me—and for the United States of America—to say thank you to some of the finest citizens of this country (President Barack Obama, Presidential Medal of Freedom Award Ceremony, August 12, 2009).

### **Introduction**

The Presidential Medal of Freedom (PMOF) is the nation's highest civilian honor. The president of the United States, at his sole discretion, bestows the Medal upon individuals for a variety of meritorious contributions. Because presidents act in an unconstrained manner when recognizing Medal recipients, the PMOF provides a unique opportunity to examine the civic contributions that presidents value most when exercising this symbolic unilateral power. Since the Medal's inception in 1963, U.S. presidents have recognized individuals for their contributions in diverse fields, including athletics, art, business, civil rights, literature, and public service, to name but a few.

PMOF award ceremonies also serve as a forum in which the president can publicly associate himself with a group of successful and talented individuals. Given that PMOF ceremonies generally receive significant media attention, it is possible that presidents could strategically award PMOFs for a variety of reasons, such as shaping the president's historical legacy, increasing the president's approval rating, solidifying support among existing constituency groups, attracting new constituency groups, or signaling preferences to other political actors.

Using an original database of all PMOFs awarded between 1963 and 2013, this study provides the first descriptive and empirical analysis of PMOF award recipients. Among other things, we find that PMOF ceremonies do not increase a president's approval rating.

Furthermore, our findings indicate that the overall number of PMOFs awarded annually has increased over time, and that these Medals are often presented to a large group of individuals during a single ceremony, presumably with the goal of garnering media attention. Additionally, we find that Democratic and Republican presidents differ in terms of what achievements they choose to recognize when awarding a PMOF. Partisan differences are also evident when it comes to awarding PMOFs to racial minorities: Democrats recognize these individuals significantly more often than Republicans. However, we find no statistically significant difference in the rate at which Democratic and Republican presidents award the Medal to women.

We begin this study by discussing the history of the PMOF and its predecessor, the Medal of Freedom, and the award's symbolic and political significance as a unilateral exercise of presidential power. After detailing the methods used to construct our original dataset of PMOF recipients and ceremonies from 1963-2013, we then present and evaluate empirical evidence designed to address several key questions about the awarding of PMOFs. Finally, we conclude by discussing the implications of our findings and offer insights regarding the PMOF's significance in contemporary American politics.

### **Inception of the Presidential Medal of Freedom**

The PMOF's history begins with its predecessor medal, the Medal of Freedom (MOF). President Harry S. Truman established the MOF on July 6, 1945, with Executive Order 9586. According to the executive order, the MOF sought to recognize:

...any person ...who, on or after December 7, 1941, has performed a meritorious act or service which has aided the United States in the prosecution of a war against an enemy or enemies...(or) has similarly aided any nation engaged with the United States in the prosecution of a war against a common enemy or enemies (Executive Order 9586).

President Truman's executive order limited the MOF to 1) contributions to national security performed outside the continental United States, 2) individuals for which another federal medal was inappropriate, and 3) individuals not serving in the military. The MOF could be awarded by the secretary of state, secretary of war, secretary of the navy, designees of these secretaries, and the president.

Nearly seven years later, on April 3, 1952, President Truman issued Executive Order 10336, which amended Executive Order 9586. Under this new order, President Truman expanded the selection criteria for MOF recipients to include those individuals who "furthered the interests of the security of the United States or of any nation allied or associated with the United States" during a time of national emergency as declared by Congress or the president. Furthermore, under special circumstances the president could bestow the MOF upon individuals for furthering the national security interests of the U.S., even in the absence of a state of war or national emergency. Executive Order 10336 also authorized the secretary of the army and secretary of the air force, and their designees, to award the MOF.

Since the MOF's inception in 1945, U.S. presidents only bestowed 23 of these medals—President Truman awarded nine (all in 1946), President Eisenhower awarded 13, and President Kennedy awarded only one. However, because numerous government officials could award a MOF, there was no official record of who received the medal from government officials, other than those awarded by the president. As many as 22,000 MOFs were awarded by government officials between 1945 and 1961 (Wetterau 1996, 9, 11-12).

In an attempt to highlight his administration's focus on the arts, academia, and public service, President Kennedy sought to create a new award to recognize civilian achievement. At

the time, the federal government only awarded specialized civilian medals (e.g., the Distinguished Federal Civilian Service Award, the National Medal for Science, and the National Security Medal), and there was no protocol for awarding these medals on a regular basis (Wetterau 1996, 11). This led the Kennedy Administration to consider reconfiguring or consolidating existing civilian medals, including the MOF.

To achieve the administration's goals of recognizing a broad range of civilian achievements, President Kennedy signed Executive Order 11085 on February 22, 1963. This executive order reestablished the Medal of Freedom as the "Presidential Medal of Freedom,"<sup>1</sup> expanded the scope of the Medal, and enlarged the Distinguished Civilian Service Awards Board (hereafter, "the Awards Board").<sup>2</sup> Under Executive Order 11085, the PMOF would recognize "any person who has made an especially meritorious contribution to (1) the security or national interests of the United States, or (2) world peace, or (3) cultural or other significant public or private endeavors." Additionally, the executive order stated that "The President may select for award of the Medal any person nominated by the (Distinguished Civilian Services Awards Board), any person otherwise recommended to the President for award of the Medal, or any person selected by the President upon his own initiative." Executive Order 11085 ultimately gave the president the sole authority to decide who receives a PMOF.

Although the first ceremony was scheduled for July of 1963, President Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy could not agree on the design of the medal (Wetterau 1996, 15). Eventually, the Medal was designed with five gold eagles around a white enamel star, their talons sitting on red triangles that rest where the arms of the star intersect. The center of the star has a blue enamel circle, with thirteen gold stars symbolizing the thirteen original states.<sup>3</sup> The Awards Board provided a list of 31 recipients for the PMOF, and the official announcement of recipients was

made through a White House press release on July 4, 1963. The delay in the Medal's design pushed back the ceremony date to December 6, 1963 (Wetterau 1996, 17).

Although the ceremony was scheduled for December 6, 1963, President Kennedy's assassination on November 22 made it unclear if the ceremony would actually take place. However, President Lyndon Johnson decided to proceed with the ceremony and award the PMOFs that President Kennedy had designated. President Johnson added recipients to this ceremony, including President Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy, but Jacqueline Kennedy declined the award (Wetterau 1996, 18). The first PMOF ceremony was held in the White House's State Dining Room with members of the cabinet, Congress, the Supreme Court, and relatives of award recipients in attendance.

For the next two years, recipients of the PMOF were announced after President Johnson narrowed the list of nominees received from the Awards Board (Wetterau 1996, 21). However, after the PMOF ceremony on September 14, 1965, President Johnson seemed to ignore the PMOF award program and refused to issue any Medals from 1965 through 1967. There were several possible reasons for Johnson's inaction during this two year period, one being that he was preoccupied with the Vietnam War and protests throughout the U.S. Additionally, it is possible that President Johnson did not support at least some of the recommendations offered by the Awards Board. Civil Service Commission Chairman John Macy, who served on the Awards Board, stated in his oral history that Johnson may have refused to grant any PMOFs in 1965 because the list of nominees that the Awards Board provided included Herblock (Herbert Lawrence Block), a cartoonist whose satirical cartoon of Johnson had appeared in the *Washington Post* just a day before his name reached the president's desk. In addition, Macy

believed that Johnson did not appreciate the fact that some individuals began to lobby the White House and the Awards Board to receive a PMOF.<sup>4</sup> However, after 1967, President Johnson once again supported the PMOF and authorized six more PMOF ceremonies/occasions. President Johnson bestowed his last set of PMOFs on his final day in office in 1969, when he mailed the Medal to twenty recipients (Wetterau 1996, 22).

By 1969, all of the members of the Awards Board had served out their terms and President Nixon did not make any new appointments. Despite some pressure to reinstate the Awards Board, Nixon decided to keep the nomination process within his own staff<sup>5</sup> and formally ended the nominating function of the Awards Board in 1970 by issuing Executive Order 11515 (Wetterau 1996, 23). Since that time, presidents may accept recommendations as to who should receive a PMOF from a wide array of individuals, but largely the president bestows the Medal “upon his own initiative” (Executive Order 11515).<sup>6</sup>

Since the Medal’s inception, most PMOF ceremonies have been held at the White House. The most popular location for the PMOF ceremony is in the East Room, but PMOF ceremonies have also been held in other locations including the Roosevelt Room, the Oval Office, and the Rose Garden. There have been several instances of PMOFs being awarded at other locations, such as military bases, banquet halls, or hospitals if the recipient is ill. During a PMOF ceremony, the president usually begins with a speech discussing the significance of the award, and the collective achievements of the recipients. The PMOFs are then presented by the president, one at a time, with a reading of the specific accomplishments made by each individual recipient.<sup>7</sup>



### **Presidential Awards as Tools of Unilateral Presidential Action**

While the executive order creating the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963 could hardly be called an aggressive assertion of presidential authority, it nevertheless added to the tool kit of presidential unilateral powers (Howell 2003). Presidential awards such as the PMOF provide opportunities to recognize achievements that connect to a president's agenda and desired legacy (Light 1998), signal the heroes, values and causes with which a president wishes to be associated, and reward important presidential supporters and constituency groups.

Compared to other tools of the unilateral presidency, presidential awards rarely invite institutional or partisan conflict. PMOF ceremonies have a unifying purpose, drawing attention to individuals whose accomplishments reflect the highest ideals of America and the world. Their symbolic character enables presidents to rise above politics and play the role of chief of state. Furthermore, since the president alone decides who receives the PMOF, he shares the stage with no other political actor.

Given the many positive aspects of awarding PMOFs, it would not be surprising to see presidents make increased use of this unique power. The frequency and timing of presidential awards could vary, however. On the one hand, we might see a secular increase in PMOF awards since the 1960s, consistent with increased use of executive orders, executive agreements, presidential proclamations and other prerogative powers (see Moe and Howell 1999; Mayer 2001; Howell 2003; Rudalevige 2005; Rottinghaus and Maier 2007; Krutz and Peake 2008; Dodds 2013). Since PMOF ceremonies are public events, this would coincide with the significant increase in presidential public appearances since the Reagan presidency (Kernell 2006).

On the other hand, the granting of PMOFs could follow a different pattern. Following trends in the use of presidential signing statements (Kelley and Marshall 2008) and recess appointments (Black, et. al. 2007), we might expect presidents to award more PMOFs under conditions of divided government. Conversely, if a president wanted to use presidential awards in a more partisan way, the best time to do so would be when his party controls the executive and legislative branches. Interestingly, Howell found that presidents issued more executive orders involving significant policy changes when the government was unified under one party (Howell 2003). The lame-duck period, when presidential authority is supposedly at its weakest, may provide an optimal time for a president to award PMOFs as a way to stake legacy claims (Howell and Mayer 2005).

Alternatively, presidential PMOF selection may reflect considerations independent of institutional prerogative or politics. The importance of the PMOF rests on the belief that merit, not partisan or personal favoritism, was the sole basis for decisions. Indeed, the unifying nature of the award provides presidents with special opportunities to include political actors of all persuasions in celebration. Similarly, the temptation for presidents to issue more PMOFs may well be countered by the recognition that increasing the number of presidential awards cheapens their value to both the receivers and the giver. Thus, we may see relatively stable patterns in the number and type of recipients across presidencies, as well as routinization of the timing of PMOF ceremonies.

Though our task as political scientists is to look for patterns and possible political factors influencing presidential decision-making, we should not ignore the role of idiosyncrasy and intervening events. Since presidents decide the final list of PMOFs, we can gain insight into what means the most to presidents personally. For example, former naval engineer Jimmy Carter was

able to recognize an influential mentor, Admiral Hyman Rickover, the father of the nuclear-powered submarine fleet. George W. Bush, a former owner of Major League Baseball's Texas Rangers, honored baseball Hall of Famers Hank Aaron, Roberto Clemente (posthumously), and Frank Robinson. In addition, Bush used the PMOF to acknowledge the important role of British Prime Minister Tony Blair in supporting the Iraq War. There can be a multitude of reasons for awarding PMOFs, unique to each president, which adds to the complexity and fascination of this area of study.

### Methods & Data

To construct a database of all PMOF recipients between 1963 and 2013, we relied on three sources of information: Wetterau's (1996) *The Presidential Medal of Freedom: Winners and Their Achievements*; presidential documents made available by The American Presidency Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara;<sup>8</sup> and archival documents housed by U.S. presidential libraries.<sup>9</sup> Using these sources, we created two datasets, one in which the individual PMOF is the unit of analysis (N=528),<sup>10</sup> and another dataset in which the award ceremony/occasion is the unit of analysis (N=102).<sup>11</sup>

These datasets allow us to examine several research questions regarding who receives a PMOF, and under what circumstances presidents award the Medal. The six primary research questions that we seek to answer are:

1. How many PMOFs has each president awarded between 1963 and 2013?
2. What variables predict the number of PMOFs awarded in a given ceremony/occasion?

3. Do presidents experience an increase in their approval rating after a PMOF ceremony/occasion?
4. What achievements do presidents most often recognize when awarding the PMOF?
5. Do Democratic and Republican presidents differ in terms of the contributions they tend to recognize when awarding PMOFs? If so, what are those differences?
6. Do Democratic and Republican presidents differ in how frequently they award PMOFs to women and racial minorities?

To answer Research Question 1, we provide summary and descriptive statistics for all presidents who have awarded a PMOF between 1963 and 2013. As part of this analysis, we also address the number of PMOFs awarded per year and the number of PMOFs awarded per ceremony/occasion for each president.

For the purpose of answering Research Question 2, we estimate a Poisson model to predict the number of PMOFs awarded on a given occasion. A Poisson model employs maximum likelihood estimation to predict a dependent variable measuring the raw count of a given occurrence (see Long 1997, 217-50). Given that a president could be motivated by any number of considerations when awarding a PMOF, we are primarily interested in conducting an exploratory analysis regarding the number of PMOFs awarded in a given ceremony. As such, we do not posit a directional hypothesis for any of the variables in this model. Our analysis accounts for several political variables in this model, including the president's approval rating before the award ceremony, the president's term of office (first versus second term), the presence of unified or divided government (i.e., both chambers of Congress controlled by the opposite political party of the president), whether the PMOF ceremony takes place in a presidential election year (before the election), and the president's political party.

To address Research Question 3, we obtained public approval rating data from the Gallup Organization for each president that awarded a PMOF.<sup>12</sup> We measured the change in public opinion by calculating the difference between the nearest pre-ceremony approval rating and post-ceremony approval rating. We excluded any opinion measures that were more than 14 days before/after a PMOF ceremony/occasion. Given that PMOF ceremonies garner significant media attention, it is likely that presidents and White House officials would expect a positive change in the president’s approval rating following a PMOF ceremony.

Regarding Research Question 4, we code the primary achievement of each PMOF recipient, as indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1** Primary Achievement Categories of PMOF Recipients

Achievement Categories	
Academia / Science	Conservation / Environmentalism
Athletics	Humanitarianism / Philanthropy
Architecture / Engineering	Journalism / Broadcasting
Art / Acting / Music	Labor
Writing / Literature	Military
Business	Political / Public Service
Civil Rights (Domestic)	Religion

We determine the primary achievement for each recipient by referencing his/her biography in the Wetterau (1996) text and the president’s remarks during the PMOF ceremony. These codes are used to determine what achievements presidents typically recognize when awarding PMOFs. This coding scheme is also used to address differences in achievements recognized by Democratic and Republican presidents (Research Question 5).

Certainly, there are some individuals whose contributions are not limited to a single category. Recipients such as Jackie Robinson (athletics, civil rights), Thurgood Marshall (political/public service, civil rights) Charlton Heston (acting, civil rights), R. Dave Thomas

(business, humanitarianism), and Warren Buffett (business, humanitarianism), are examples of individuals with impressive accomplishments in multiple fields. Furthermore, due to World War II, a number of PMOF recipients were recognized for their military service and an achievement in another field (e.g., John Paul Stevens, Jimmy Stewart, Caspar Weinberger, Byron White, etc.). While an objective observer may recognize an individual's accomplishments in multiple fields, presidents do not always emphasize multiple accomplishments when presenting the PMOF. To determine the primary achievement for individuals with achievements in multiple fields, we rely on the remarks of the president or the president's written citation to determine which achievement is emphasized most by the president. This practice helps to eliminate the subjective practice of coding multiple achievements and determining the relative weight of each achievement in the president's decision calculus when presenting a PMOF.

Finally, we coded a recipient's gender and race to address Research Question 6. Both variables were coded dichotomously: gender (male/female); race (white/non-white). We did not code gender or race for those instances where a joint Medal was awarded (e.g., the Apollo 13 Mission Operations Team) or in those instances where race was not indicated by any available primary sources.

Using these coding rules, in the following section we analyze the PMOF data and address each of our six research questions. Based on the descriptive and empirical findings, we then discuss the implications of our results for presidential political behavior.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

U.S. presidents awarded 528 PMOFs between 1963 and 2013, for an annual average of 10.6 Medals, and on 102 occasions. Most occasions (N=57) have recognized a single PMOF recipient. As a percentage of all PMOFs, though, the vast majority (89.2 percent) are awarded to

multiple recipients at one time, often at highly publicized ceremonies. On average, 5.2 PMOFs are awarded per occasion. Typically, PMOF recipients are living U.S. citizens. However, 9.5 percent (N=50) received an award posthumously and 6.8 percent (N=36) were non-citizens, most of them foreign political leaders.

**Table 2** Summary of PMOFs by President, 1963-2013

President	Term in Office	# of PMOFs	Standardized Annual PMOF Average (Based upon Monthly Averages)	PMOF Award Standard Deviation (for Term in Office)	# of Award Occasions or Ceremonies	# of Occasions with 5 or more Recipients	Average Awards per Occasion
Kennedy	N/A	31	N/A	N/A	1 (LBJ)	1 (LBJ)	N/A
Johnson	5 yr, 2 mo.	57	11.03	35.57	7	2	8.14
Nixon	5 yr, 7 mo.	27	4.84	12.51	15	1	1.80
Ford	2 yr, 5 mo.	28	11.59	23.97	5	1	5.60
Carter	4 yr.	34	8.50	20.31	6	2	5.66
Reagan	8 yr.	86	10.75	26.23	21	7	4.09
G.H.W. Bush	4 yr.	37	9.25	15.34	11	4	3.36
Clinton	8 yr.	86	10.75	28.66	19	7	4.53
G.W. Bush	8 yr.	81	10.13	27.65	12	7	6.75
Obama	5 yr.	61	12.2	28.89	6	5	10.17

As an exercise of unilateral executive power with potential political, symbolic, and historical significance, it is to be expected that presidents differ in their approaches to awarding the PMOF. Table 2 summarizes PMOF awards for each president since 1963, in terms of total awards, standardized average annual awards,<sup>13</sup> PMOF standard deviation for a president's term in office,<sup>14</sup> number of award occasions/ceremonies, number of occasions/ceremonies with five or more recipients, and the average number of awards per occasion.

The total number of PMOFs given by a president varies widely, from a low of 27 for Richard Nixon to a high of 86 for Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. Time in office, unsurprisingly, has bearing on the total number of awards given, with the lowest totals coming from presidents that have served less than two full terms: Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy

Carter, and George H.W. Bush. Therefore, it is important also to examine the average number of PMOFs given annually by each president. Although Barack Obama had just begun his second term in 2013, he had surpassed all other presidents in the average number of PMOFs awarded on an annual basis, at 12.2 Medals per year. And despite having the shortest time in office, Gerald Ford awarded the second-most PMOFs per annum at 11.59. Nixon awarded the fewest PMOFs per annum, by far, at 4.84.

Nixon is unique not only for giving the fewest PMOFs but also for issuing them to a single recipient at a time on twelve of fifteen occasions. Thus, even though Nixon awarded PMOFs on more occasions than all but Reagan and Clinton, the average number of PMOFs awarded per occasion by Nixon is by far the lowest of all presidents, at 1.80. President Obama represents the greatest contrast to Nixon. Although he has held only six PMOF ceremonies between 2009 and 2013, Obama has held the highest percentage of ceremonies with more than five recipients (66.7 percent) and he awards the most PMOFs per occasion, at 10.17. Here we see a clear difference in presidential strategy: Nixon apparently viewed the PMOF as an opportunity to honor a single, targeted contribution, while Obama apparently views the PMOF as an opportunity to honor a wide range of contributions. There are many possible reasons why presidents take such different approaches to PMOF ceremonies. One possible difference is their appreciation for a narrow versus broad field of achievement; another might be different approaches to maximizing publicity and consequent political advantages.<sup>15</sup>

If the president's intention is to use a PMOF ceremony to maximize publicity, it seems that President Reagan was the first modern president to recognize this opportunity. Reagan pioneered the practice of hosting several large PMOF ceremonies where five or more recipients received the Medal. Between December of 1963 and January of 1981 presidents held a total of



seven large PMOF ceremonies where five or more individuals were recognized for their achievements. President Reagan hosted this same number of large PMOF ceremonies in the eight years he served in the Oval Office. Since the end of Reagan's presidency, future presidents have held a large PMOF ceremony on nearly an annual basis.

**Table 3** Number of PMOFs Awarded Per Ceremony/Occasion

Variables	Coefficients (Standard Error)
Term of Office (1=First Term; 2=Second Term)	-0.023 (0.120)
Unified Government (0=No; 1=Yes)	-0.162 (0.161)
Divided Government (0=No; 1=Yes)	-0.471* (0.128)
Presidential Election Year (0=No, 1=Yes)	0.013 (0.133)
Approval Rating Before Ceremony/Occasion	0.0001 (0.005)
Party of President (0=Democrat; 1=Republican)	-0.305 * (0.116)
Constant	1.981* (0.368)

N = 79  
Pseudo-R<sup>2</sup>: 0.0355

\* p < 0.05, two-tailed test

To better understand why presidents sometimes issue a higher number of PMOFs at one time, we estimate a Poisson model with the number of PMOFs issued per ceremony as the dependent variable. We present the results of this analysis in Table 3.

Our empirical model identifies two statistically significant predictors of the number of PMOFs awarded per ceremony: divided government and party of the president. Since it is difficult to gauge the substantive effects of raw maximum likelihood coefficients, we employ the SPOST commands in STATA (Long and Freese 2014)<sup>16</sup> to develop probability estimates for changes in each of these statistically significant variables reported in Table 3. Assuming that the

president's approval rating is held at its average value of 52.16, and all other independent variables are held at their modal values, divided government reduces the average number of PMOFs awarded by 1.97. While the Poisson model indicates that the average number of PMOFs per ceremony decreases in times of divided government, it is also the case that presidents tend to hold more PMOF ceremonies/occasions under such circumstances. Of the 102 PMOF ceremonies/occasions held between 1963 and 2013, 43.1 percent (N=44) were held in times of divided government, while 27.5 percent (N=28) were held in times of unified government and 25.5 percent (N=26) were held when one chamber of Congress was controlled by a party other than the president's. It may be the case that presidents spread out their PMOF selections in times of divided government, thereby opting for more PMOF ceremonies as opposed to PMOF recipients. Such a practice affords the president more opportunities to appear before the media in a highly publicized ceremony and garner positive national attention. This may indicate the strategic use of PMOF ceremonies by the White House in times of divided government. With respect to partisan differences, Republican presidents award 1.87 fewer Medals on average after controlling for the other variables in the model, consistent with the descriptive statistics presented in Table 2.<sup>17</sup>

Do presidents gain politically from awarding Presidential Medals of Freedom? We have hypothesized that this is the case, primarily because presidents seem to view the award, at least in part, as an important strategic opportunity. To test the empirical effects of PMOFs on presidential popularity, we conduct a one-sample t-test on Gallup approval levels before and after a PMOF ceremony. The mean difference in presidential approval ratings is *negative*, at -0.67, and attains statistical significance at  $p = 0.051$ , in a two-tailed test. Thus, presidential approval ratings *decrease* by 0.67 percent, on average, after a Presidential Medal of Freedom

ceremony. What might explain this negative effect? The most direct explanation, that awarding PMOFs actually *causes* a president to become more unpopular, is utterly implausible. A far more plausible explanation is that presidents become more likely to award PMOFs when their popularity is declining for other reasons; unable to control the larger political environment, they seize upon the PMOF as one among few unilateral tools by which to exercise control, and in a positive direction. In this case, a negative coefficient on the approval rating variable in our model may capture trends in the political environment to which presidents respond by awarding PMOFs rather than the direct effects of that action. Such a possibility may explain why Richard Nixon held so many PMOF ceremonies—three of which occurred between March and July of 1974; it may be the case that Nixon sought to leverage the PMOF ceremony as a way of counteracting coverage of the Watergate Scandal, which ultimately led to his resignation in August of 1974.

Of course, presidential approval is not the only plausible strategic motivation for awarding a Presidential Medal of Freedom. Presidents might also award PMOFs to help shape their historical legacy, and to exercise power before it slips from their grasp. To that end, we might suspect that presidents award a disproportionate number of PMOFs during the “lame duck” period between the early November election of a successor and their scheduled exit from office on January 20. Most, but not all, of the presidents since 1963 have identifiable lame duck periods, with the exception of Richard Nixon, who left office by way of resignation in August 1974, and Barack Obama, who just entered his second term in 2013. The remaining seven presidents each had lame duck periods of approximately 2.5 months each, for a total of 17.5 lame duck months. As a percentage of all presidential months in office since Lyndon Johnson succeeded John F. Kennedy in November 1963 through the end of 2013 (601 months), lame

duck periods represent about 2.9 percent of a president's term of office. Thus, we have a standard for evaluating proportionality: if the impending loss of office had no effect on awarding PMOFs, approximately 2.9 percent of them would have been issued during lame duck periods.

In fact, 80 of 528 PMOFs were awarded during the identified lame duck periods, or 15.2 percent of all PMOFs. Thus, presidents are approximately five times more likely to award PMOFs at the scheduled end of their tenure than at any other equivalent time in office. A useful comparison for this tendency is another unilateral exercise of presidential power, the issuing of pardons and reprieves. Presidents issue pardons and reprieves sparingly during most of their tenure and then issue a disproportionate number during their last days in office. However, whereas pardons and reprieves tend to come with minimal publicity and *in spite of* legacy concerns, PMOFs are often awarded in highly-publicized events that speak to the values and associations for which a president hopes to be remembered.

To better understand how presidents exercise the unilateral power of awarding PMOFs, we must also examine the distinctive contributions of recipients. Table 4 presents the primary contributions of PMOF recipients, by number and percentage. Those individuals whose primary accomplishments related to politics or public service were the most frequent recipients of the PMOF (26.9 percent), followed next by those whose accomplishments related to art/acting/music (14.8 percent) and academia/science (13.6 percent).

**Table 4** Frequencies of Primary Achievement Categories

Achievement Category	N (% of Total)
Political / Public Service	142 (26.9%)
Art / Acting / Music	78 (14.8%)
Academia / Science	72 (13.6%)
Civil Rights (Domestic)	46 (8.7%)
Humanitarianism / Philanthropy	34 (6.4%)
Military	34 (6.4%)
Journalism / Broadcasting	31 (5.9%)
Writing / Literature	23 (4.4%)

Athletics	20 (3.8%)
Labor	15 (2.8%)
Business	13 (2.5%)
Religion	9 (1.7%)
Conservation / Environmentalism	7 (1.3%)
Architecture / Engineering	4 (0.8%)

Note: Percentages rounded to one decimal place. Categories listed in descending order of frequency.

Next we compare the contributions most recognized by Democratic versus Republican presidents. Our objective in doing so is to identify differences in the contributions most valued by presidents of different parties, and to evaluate another possible motivation in awarding PMOFs: attracting or bolstering support from important constituency groups. Table 5 presents the number and percentage of awards given by Democratic versus Republican presidents to contributors in each category.

**Table 5** Achievements Recognized by Democratic and Republican Presidents

Achievement Category	Democratic President N (% of Total)	Republican President N (% of Total)
Political / Public Service	73 (13.8%)	69 (13.1%)
Art / Acting / Music	32 (6.1%)	46 (8.7%)
Academia / Science	35 (6.6%)	37 (7.0%)
Civil Rights (Domestic)	40 (7.6%)*	6 (1.1%)*
Humanitarianism / Philanthropy	26 (4.9%)*	8 (1.5%)*
Military	9 (1.7%)*	25 (4.7%)*
Journalism / Broadcasting	9 (1.7%)*	22 (4.2%)*
Writing / Literature	10 (1.9%)	13 (2.5%)
Athletics	6 (1.1%)	14 (2.7%)
Labor	13 (2.5%)*	2 (0.4%)*
Business	4 (0.8%)	9 (1.7%)
Religion	4 (0.8%)	5 (0.9%)
Conservation / Environmentalism	6 (1.1%)	1 (0.2%)
Architecture / Engineering	2 (0.4%)	2 (0.4%)

Note: Percentages rounded to one-decimal place. Categories listed in overall descending order of frequency, as noted in Table 4.

\* Z-test significant at  $p < 0.05$ , two-tailed test

To determine whether Democratic and Republican presidents differ significantly in terms of the types of accomplishments that they recognize with PMOFs we employ a z-test when computing the cross-tabulation of awards. Of the 14 categories of achievement listed in Table 5, Democratic and Republican presidents only differ in five categories: Democratic presidents are significantly more likely to award PMOFs to recipients whose primary contributions are in the areas of civil rights (domestic), humanitarianism, and labor, while Republican presidents are significantly more likely to award PMOFs to recipients whose primary contributions are in the areas of military service and journalism/broadcasting.

In most cases, these partisan differences are what one might expect. The Democratic Party is more closely associated with civil rights and the labor movement than the Republican Party, and perhaps humanitarianism if defined as promotion of international human rights. The Republican Party, meanwhile, is more closely associated with the military. Perhaps most surprising is Republicans' more frequent recognition of journalists/broadcasters, since Republicans tend to view journalists, in general, as biased toward liberal and Democratic viewpoints (Groseclose 2011, 99-110) due in large part to their pronounced tendency toward Democratic over Republican party identification (Cillizza 2014). Certainly, there is not a coordinated strategy among Republican presidents to achieve such a result, and so we can only speculate as to why we observe this trend. A plausible explanation is that Republicans wish to reward their allies in the media, precisely because they are a conspicuous minority, in order to enhance their national prestige and influence. For example, Republican presidents have recognized the journalistic contributions of conservative *Wall Street Journal* editors Vermont C. Royster (Ronald Reagan) and Robert L. Bartley (George W. Bush), as well as conservative

commentator and *National Review* founder William F. Buckley, Jr. (George H.W. Bush). It is also plausible that presidents in both political parties use the PMOF to recognize important constituency groups, and perhaps Republican presidents use the PMOF to recognize “friendly” members of a group that is otherwise viewed as hostile to their political beliefs and agenda. Perhaps more surprising than this counterintuitive partisan difference is the fact that there are *no significant differences* in most cases, including categories commonly associated with the Democratic Party (e.g., Artist/Acting/Music, Conservation/Environmentalism) or Republican Party (e.g., Business, Religion). This evidence suggests that the awarding of PMOFs is not as politicized as one might suspect given increasing partisan polarization in recent decades.

There is, however, reason to believe that PMOFs often have political connotations. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in awards given to politicians and public servants, whose singular contributions are recognized more often than any other group. While Democrats and Republicans do not statistically differ in how often politicians and public servants are recognized for their achievements, further analysis indicates that presidents have a strong tendency to award PMOFs to politicians and public servants from within their own political party. Of the 104 politicians/public servants with identifiable domestic party affiliations (54 Democrats and 50 Republicans), only 23 received a PMOF from a president who was a member of the opposite party. A z-test indicates that Democratic and Republican presidents are statistically more likely ( $p < .05$ ) to recognize members of their own party with a PMOF, as opposed to members of the opposite party. While this finding may not be surprising, it does help to further demonstrate that presidents view the PMOF as more than a means of recognizing objectively meritorious human achievement. The PMOF can also function as a tool to reward

political allies or recognize those individuals responsible for past policy achievements that the party base holds dear. Awarding the PMOF is apparently an expression of a president’s particular values and goals that could be exercised in the pursuit of strategic objectives.

**Table 6** PMOF Recipients by Gender and Race

Recipient Demographic	Democratic President N (% of Medals Awarded by Democrats)	Republican President N (% of Medals Awarded by Republicans)
Male	217 (81.0%)	220 (85.6%)
Female	51 (19.0%)	37 (14.4%)
White	208 (77.3%)*	215 (83.7%)*
Non-White	61 (22.7%)*	42 (16.3%)*

\* T-test significant at  $p < .10$ , two-tailed test. To be read as Democratic presidents are statistically more likely to award the PMOF to racial minorities as compared with Republican presidents, for example.

Table 6 depicts the differences between Democratic and Republican presidents when awarding the PMOF to women and racial minorities. While Democrats awarded more PMOFs to women and racial minorities in this time period, the difference between Democrats and Republicans is only statistically significant in the case of racial minorities. The difference between Democratic and Republican presidents for women recipients does not attain conventional levels of significance when employing a difference of means t-test ( $p = 0.156$ , two-tailed test), but does attain statistical significance at  $p = 0.067$  (two-tailed test) in the case of racial minorities. Given that Democrats are more likely to recognize achievements in the field of civil rights, and that the vast majority of recipients of PMOFs for civil rights achievements are members of a racial minority group, this finding may be somewhat expected. This finding may also be an indication that Democratic presidents employ the PMOF as a tool to recognize and reach out to an important constituency group (Freeman 1986) for their political party when exercising this unilateral power.



## **Conclusion**

The Presidential Medal of Freedom has served as the nation's highest civilian honor since 1963. In that time, who receives a Medal and how the Medal is bestowed has varied substantially in relation to the personal preferences of individual presidents. President Kennedy originally established the PMOF to recognize contributions in the arts, academia, and public service. However, the types of achievements that presidents recognize have grown to include athletics, business, civil rights, and religion, to name but a few. Our analysis reveals significant differences in the recipients recognized by Democratic and Republican presidents in its 50-year history.

Although there is no empirical evidence to demonstrate that presidents receive an increase in approval rating following a PMOF ceremony/occasion, there is reason to believe that presidents use the PMOF to shape their presidential legacy (as evidenced by the number of lame duck PMOFs) and/or to garner support among various constituency groups (as evidenced by the partisan disparity in PMOFs awarded to racial minorities). In addition, presidents have varied in how they bestow the Medal to worthy recipients. Some presidents sparingly awarded the PMOF (e.g., Nixon and Carter), while others preferred large ceremonies in which they recognized numerous recipients at a time (e.g., Reagan and Obama). Since the Reagan administration, it appears that awarding a large number of PMOFs in a single ceremony has become an institutionalized and routine practice of sitting presidents. In fact, although occurring after the PMOF's 50th anniversary in 2013 and thus not included in our data, it is worth noting that in 2014 and 2015 President Obama continued this trend by honoring 16 and 17 recipients, respectively, in a single annual ceremony.<sup>18</sup> While it remains to be seen if future presidents will

follow suit, given recent trends it seems likely that PMOF ceremonies will be a permanent and anticipated fixture of the White House publicity apparatus.

Perhaps the most important insight one can gain from the Presidential Medal of Freedom is a better understanding of what achievements presidents, individually and collectively, value most. By bestowing a PMOF, the president publicly and permanently associates himself with an individual who he feels has made an invaluable contribution to American society. Untold numbers of individuals have embodied the highest forms of citizenship, but the president of the United States has the opportunity to recognize a select few with the PMOF. By examining who receives a PMOF and under what circumstances, presidency scholars can gain a broader understanding of U.S. presidents as individuals who wish to communicate their vision of ideal civic contribution. Such an examination of this unilateral presidential action provides greater insight regarding a president's values, preferences, and motivations as the most important political actor in the American system of government

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<sup>1</sup> The other names considered included The Presidential Award of Honor, The Presidential Emblem of Oak, The Presidential Laurel, The Presidential Constellation Award, The Presidential Society of Distinction, The Presidential Accolade, The Presidential Award for Achievement, The Presidential Emblem of Distinction, The Presidential Liberty Award, The Presidential Society of Merit, The Presidential Commendation Award, and The Presidential Laurel of Acclaim (Wetterau 1996, 12).

<sup>2</sup> The Distinguished Civilian Services Awards Board was originally established by President Eisenhower in Executive Order 10717 (1957). At the time, this board consisted of five members, appointed by the president, and was charged with advising the president on potential recipients of the President's Award for Distinguished Federal Civilian Service. President Kennedy's Executive Order 11085 added five members to the Board, and charged it with making recommendations regarding the PMOF. The president could ultimately add or delete names of recipients as he saw fit.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://millercenter.org/ridingthetiger/medal-of-freedom> (June 1, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> See "John W. Macy, Jr. Tape #2" Oral History. Available from <http://transition.lbjlibrary.org/files/original/911d5b7e5ad97666297636a2b46ee847.pdf> (June 1, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Former Civil Service Commission Chairman John Macy urged President Nixon to abandon the Distinguished Civilian Service Awards Board because he thought its nominating process was subject to too much external pressure and took away control from the president. Chairman Macy believed this was likely the main reason President Johnson neglected the awards from 1965 to 1967 (Wetterau 1996, 22).

<sup>6</sup> Since the Johnson Administration, White House staff have taken the lead in formulating or compiling an initial list of PMOF recipients. The office responsible for initiating review of PMOF candidates can vary from administration to administration. For example, speechwriter Aram Bakshian, Jr. oversaw the vetting process and made recommendations to the president in the early years of the Reagan Administration. See "Interview with Aram Bakshian, Jr.," available from <http://millercenter.org/president/reagan/oralhistory/aram-bakshian> (June 1, 2015). Recently, Juliet Eilperin (2015) wrote in the Washington Post that the selection process tends to be rather informal among advisors to the president. For example, Joshua Bolton, former-White House Chief of Staff to President George W. Bush, claimed that when vetting potential recipients, "We all come up with names and we argue over them. That's the process." Joe Lockhart, former press secretary to President Bill Clinton, likened the process to "sitting in a bar talking about who your favorite artist is, who your favorite musician is, (and) who your favorite writer is." However, in the Obama Administration, Senior Advisor Valerie Jarrett insists that selecting PMOF recipients "is something the president is directly involved with, from beginning to end.... The president looks for heroes who have made not just an enormous contribution to society, but people who have touched him in a profound and meaningful way." Whatever role other actors may play in the process, it is important to note that the president, alone, ultimately has sole discretion over the awarding of PMOFs.

<sup>7</sup> The White House maintains online video footage of recent PMOF ceremonies, which largely follow this protocol. See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/medal-of-freedom> (June 1, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/> (June 1, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> The authors wish to extend their sincere thanks to the staff of the John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton Presidential Libraries for their help in providing primary source documents pertaining to PMOF recipients.

<sup>10</sup> Presidents sometimes bestow a joint PMOF—that is, a single PMOF that is given to multiple individuals for a given accomplishment. For example, in 1970 President Richard Nixon presented the Medal to the Apollo 13 Mission Operations Team for their work in returning the Apollo 13 crew safely to Earth. We code each Medal as its own observation. As such, the Medal presented to the Apollo 13 Mission Operations Team is counted as a single observation in our dataset.

<sup>11</sup> We use the term “ceremony/occasion” because not all PMOFs were presented as part of a formal ceremony. As noted earlier, the last set of recipients recognized by Lyndon Johnson received their Medals through the mail (see Wetterau 1996, 141-68).

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/124922/presidential-approval-center.aspx> (June 1, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> The annual PMOF average is calculated by dividing the total number of PMOFs awarded during a president’s term by the number of months served in office. We then multiply this number by 12 to arrive at an annual average.

<sup>14</sup> We calculated the standard deviation of PMOFs awarded during a president’s term in office (based upon the number of months in office) using a variation of the annualized standard deviation equation. Specifically, we employ the following equation to calculate this statistic for each president:  $\sigma_{\text{PMOF Term in Office}} = \sigma_{\text{Monthly PMOF Awards}} \times \sqrt{\text{Months in Office}}$ .

<sup>15</sup> Take, for example, President Jimmy Carter. Carter expressed a general preference to award PMOFs sparingly during his presidency (Wetterau 1996, 28) and instead only recognize a few outstanding achievements. Carter, in fact, had the second-lowest annual average of PMOFs and only Gerald Ford held fewer PMOF ceremonies. From January 20, 1977, through June 7, 1980, Carter awarded just four Medals. According to Wetterau (1996, 29), Carter “finally relented” to his staff and held his first large-scale PMOF ceremony during the Iranian Hostage Crisis. This ceremony took place on June 8, 1980—just five months before that year’s presidential election—and included fourteen PMOF recipients. Carter would not hold another PMOF ceremony until after the 1980 election. Carter’s second large-scale ceremony, in which he awarded 15 Medals, took place on January 16, 1981, just four days before he left office.

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.indiana.edu/~jslsoc/spost.htm> (June 1, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Understandably, one should be cautious in drawing inferences from maximum likelihood analysis when the sample size is less than 100 (see Long 1997, 54). However, despite these concerns regarding sample size, we have good reason to believe that the results of the Poisson model are valid. First, as Hart and Clark (1999) note, small sample sizes in maximum likelihood analysis do not significantly increase the chances of Type I errors. Instead, Type II errors are more likely to occur with smaller sample sizes. Second, the partisan differences that we find in this model are consistent with the descriptive statistics presented earlier in this article. In each case, we find that Republican presidents generally award fewer PMOFs than their Democratic counterparts.

<sup>18</sup> Notably, this raised Obama’s total number of PMOFs awarded to 94, the most of any U.S. president to date.

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