



# Americans' Perceptions of **Abraham Lincoln**

Research conducted by Penn Schoen Berland  
on behalf of Participant Media

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# Objectives and Survey Audience Breakdown

## Objective

On behalf of Participant Media, Penn Schoen Berland conducted the following research on President Abraham Lincoln's effect on the nation by exploring Americans' perceptions and knowledge about him, his Presidency and his legacy.

## Methodology



### Online Polling

- November 21 – December 6, 2012
- 1,000 respondents
- General Population
- Margin of Error: +/- 3.08



### Phone Interviews

- November 28 – 30, 2012
- 10 respondents
- US History Buffs

# Key facts and findings

1.

Americans believe Abraham Lincoln is the best and most influential president the US has ever had

2.

More than half of Americans think it's important to learn about Abraham Lincoln, but two thirds say they know little to nothing about him

3.

Nearly half of all Americans think the issues Obama has had to face during his presidency are more challenging than those Lincoln faced

4.

Abraham Lincoln would have won the 2012 election: 2/3<sup>rd</sup>s of Americans would have voted for Abraham Lincoln over Obama or Romney if he could have run

5.

Lincoln would have voted for Obama in the 2012 election - nearly half of Americans think so, while just 1 in 5 say he would have voted for Romney

# Key facts and findings

6.

Most Americans agree Abraham Lincoln would support government assistance programs like welfare and food stamps

7.

Most Americans agree Lincoln would be in favor of hot-button issues like tightening immigration laws and continuing the war on terror

8.

Nearly three quarters of Americans think Lincoln died before he could be reelected for a second term

9.

Americans want Obama to look to Lincoln for guidance – more than two thirds say the country would be better off if Obama were more like Lincoln

10.

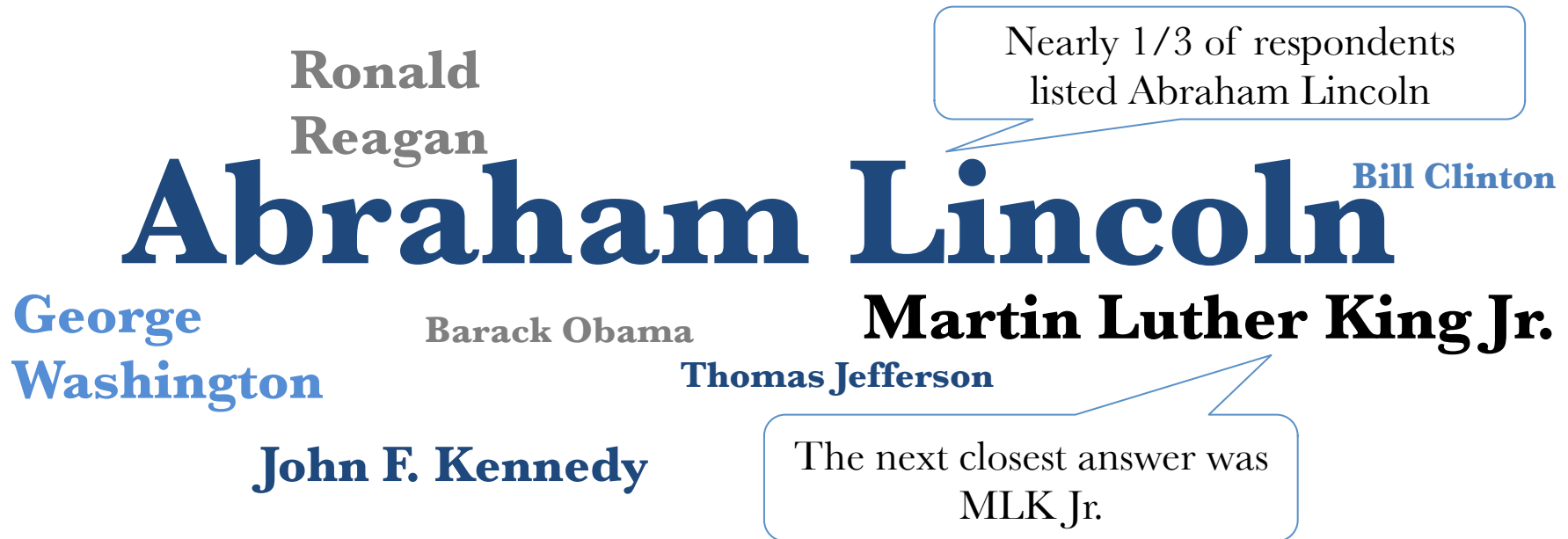
Unprompted, one in three Americans name Abraham Lincoln as the historical figure they most admire

# LINCOLN'S LEGACY

# Lincoln is on the tip of everyone's tongue in terms of most admired historical figures

- This was the very first question asked in the quantitative survey, suggesting an extremely high unaided opinion of Lincoln as an admirable historical figure

Which one historical figure do you most admire?  
(Open end)



Q: Which one historical figure do you most admire? This should be an influential historical figure who has had a major impact on American society. OPEN END (Quant only)

# Lincoln considered our best and most influential president



Roughly **1 in 4** say Lincoln is the **best** and **most influential** president the U.S. has ever had

*"I'm going to have to say Abraham Lincoln because he had what it takes to stand up and see that slavery was incorrect. For his courage and bravery in doing so and then being killed for it – I definitely choose him."*

- Reagan came in just behind him for best president (11%), and JFK for most influential (15%)
- However, only 8% said they'd most like to have a beer with Lincoln – most chose Obama

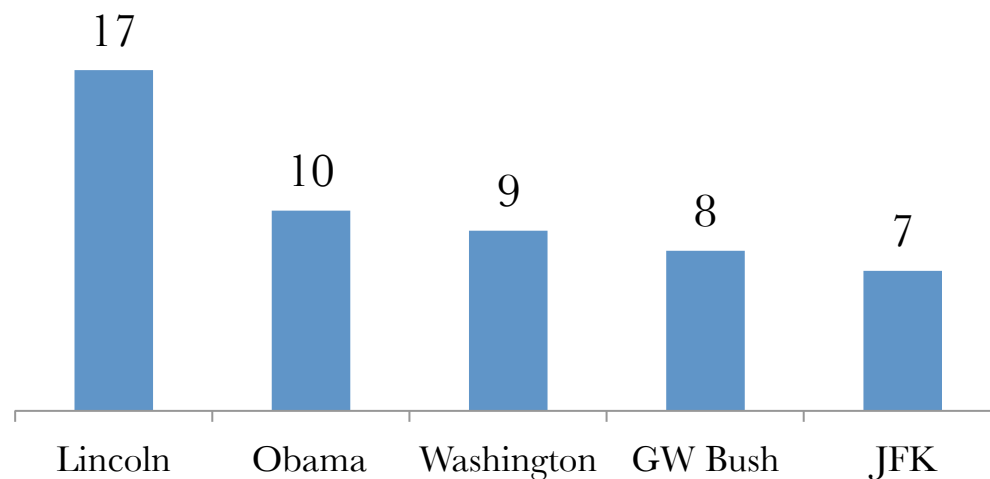
**84%** say Lincoln was a **great leader**

Q: Who do you think is the best president the United States has ever had?  
Q: Who do you think is the most influential president the United States has ever had?  
Q: Which president, past or present, would you most like to have a beer with?  
Q: How would you rate Abraham Lincoln's leadership abilities? Would you say he was... (A great leader, an okay leader, a bad leader)

# Americans recognize Lincoln's sacrifices and his courage



Americans say Lincoln was the **biggest risk-taker** of all the U.S. presidents:



and **78%** say Lincoln **sacrificed his popularity and his safety** to do what was right

Q: Which American president was the biggest risk-taker?

Q: Do you think Abraham Lincoln sacrificed his popularity in order to do what was right?

Q: Do you think Abraham Lincoln sacrificed his safety in order to do what was right?



# Americans feel Lincoln's legacy remains relevant today

**87%** think it's important for U.S. leaders to **look to Lincoln for guidance** in making important decisions

**AND**

**More than half** say the decisions Lincoln had to face in his presidency are still **very relevant** today



Q: Do you think it's important for our nation's leaders to look to Abraham Lincoln's presidency for guidance in making important decisions?

Q: How relevant are the decisions Abraham Lincoln had to face in his presidency in our world today?

# Lincoln's Hard work has been an inspiration to some Americans

Has Abraham Lincoln been an inspiration to you? How?

*In-depth interviews*

## The things he accomplished

*"I can't think of anybody who hasn't been inspired in some way or another by both his legacy, the things he attempted to do, and the things that are still relevant in our day."*

*"He took an unpopular view during an unpopular time, and made sure that everybody had those rights, and I'm quite sure there was a lot of push-back and negativity."*

## His determination and hard work

*"He can be an inspiration because you can tell how dedicated he is to change something."*

*"Lincoln had the insight that perseverance and hard work most of the time pays off."*

*"I would say yes [Lincoln is an inspiration to me]... just the realization of how hard, how much he had to fight in order to maintain equality."*

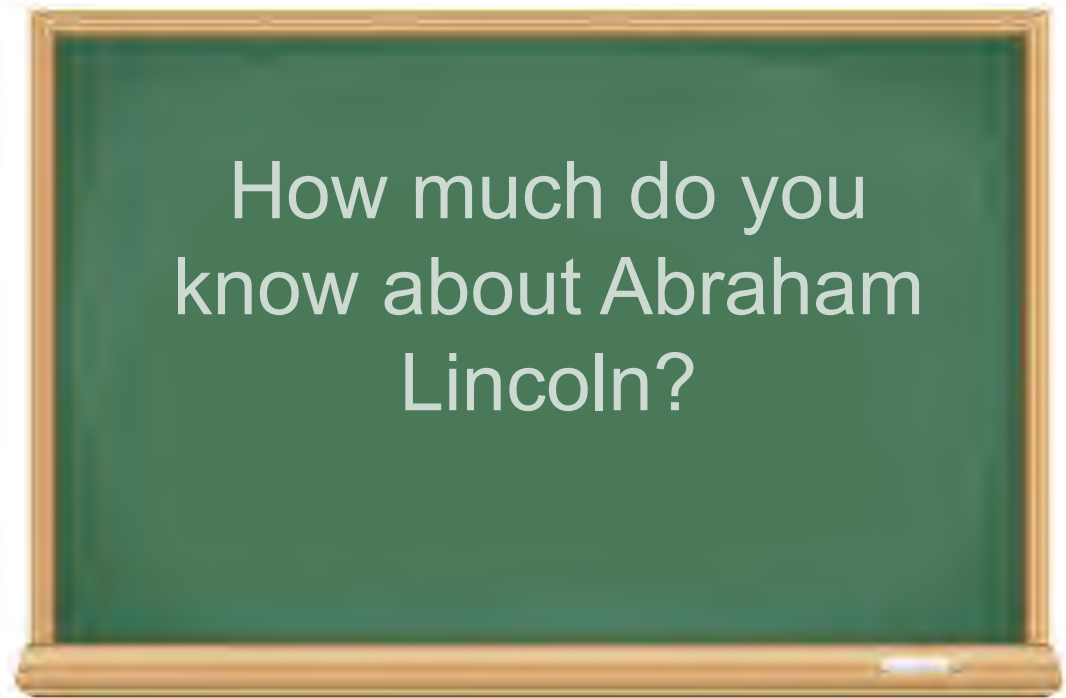
# KNOWLEDGE ABOUT LINCOLN

# Despite Strong Feelings About his Legacy, only One in Three Say They Know a lot about Lincoln

**Only 1 in 3** say  
they know a lot about  
Lincoln

**BUT**

**59%** think it's very  
important to learn  
about Lincoln in order  
to operate in our  
world today



Q: How important do you think it is to learn about Abraham Lincoln in order to operate in our world today?

Q: How much would you say you know about President Abraham Lincoln? (I know a lot about Abraham Lincoln, I know a little about Abraham Lincoln, I don't know anything about Abraham Lincoln)

# Americans have some misconceptions about Lincoln

*Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation declared slavery illegal nationwide.*

**FALSE**

But **83%** of Americans think it's true

*Abraham Lincoln died before he could be re-elected to a second term.*

**FALSE**

But **73%** of Americans think it's true

*Historians agree that Abraham Lincoln's voice was high and shrill.*

**TRUE**

But **63%** of Americans think it's false

# Or aren't totally clear on some details of his life

*Abraham Lincoln liked to keep documents in his hat.*

**TRUE**

**56%** answered correctly

*Abraham Lincoln's famous "Gettysburg Address" was given during the Revolutionary War.*

**FALSE**

**59%** answered correctly

*Abraham Lincoln was a Democrat.*

**FALSE**

**60%** answered correctly

*Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation gave male freed slaves the right to vote.*

**FALSE**

**61%** answered correctly

*There are no audio recordings of what Abraham Lincoln sounded like.*

**TRUE**

**62%** answered correctly

*Abraham Lincoln was shot by Lee Harvey Oswald.*

**FALSE**

**70%** answered correctly

# But they are confident about Lincoln's humble roots and speechwriting skills

*Abraham Lincoln was born and raised in a log cabin.*

**TRUE**

**89%** of Americans answered correctly

*Abraham Lincoln wrote his own speeches.*

**TRUE**

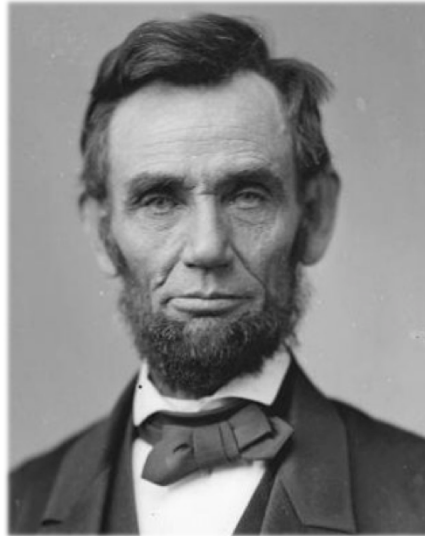
**91%** of Americans answered correctly

# HOW WOULD LINCOLN DO IN 2012 POLITICS?



# Lincoln's legacy makes up for limited knowledge of his life – If he ran for president today, he would win

If Lincoln ran for president in the 2012 election...



Would he win?

**68%**

**say yes**

Would you vote for him?

**66%**

**say yes**

Q: If Abraham Lincoln ran for president in the 2012 election, do you think he would have won?

Q: If the choices in the last presidential election included Abraham Lincoln, for whom would you have voted?

# Nearly half think Lincoln would vote for Obama over Romney

If Lincoln could have voted in the 2012 election...



**48%** think he would vote for **Obama**

Some said Lincoln would vote for Obama based on their similarities:

*“Lincoln would have voted for Obama because he would have seen a lot of himself in Barack Obama.”*



**21%** think he would vote for **Romney**

Q: If Abraham Lincoln could have voted in this year's presidential election, for whom do you think he would have voted?

# Majority say Lincoln would support Government aid programs like welfare

Where would Lincoln stand on these issues?

Majority say he would **support:**

- **Affirmative action**
- **Gender equality**
- **Continuing the War on Terror**
- **Food stamps**
- **Welfare**
- **Campaign finance reform**
- **Tightening immigration laws**



Majority say he would **oppose:**

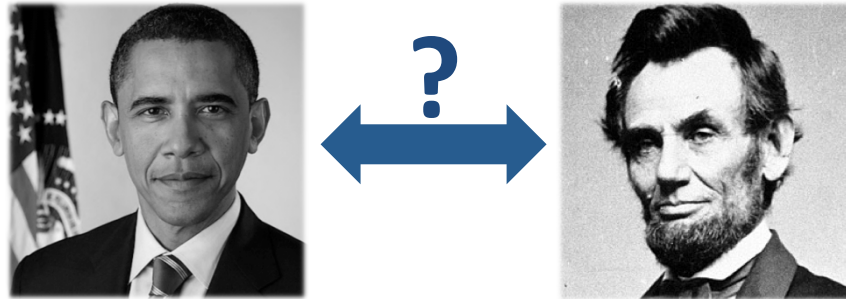
- **Nationwide same-sex marriage**

Divided 50/50 on whether he would support or oppose:

- **Obamacare**

# HOW DOES LINCOLN COMPARE TO OBAMA?

# Nearly half think Obama is similar to Lincoln, but Obama has room for improvement



**How similar are Obama and Lincoln?**

Very      Somewhat      Not very      Not at all

11

34

26

30

**Are the issues Obama has faced more or less challenging than those Lincoln did?**

More challenging      The same      Less challenging

46

26

28

**BUT** **64%** say if Obama were more like Lincoln, the country would be **better off**

# Both presidents have had to lead a divided America during war

What challenges have both Lincoln and Obama had to face?

*In-depth interviews*

## Leading a divided America

*“I think Lincoln and Obama have both had to deal with an American public that are looking in two entirely different directions. And they’re both facing extreme challenges to our American security.”*

*“We are at a point where the country can go one way or another — at a fork in the road if you will... For Obama and for Lincoln it’s a crossroads point in our history. So I think it’s just about on par with each other as far as difficulty.”*

## Keeping America together during war

*“They’ve had similar problems, like managing a war, being the civilian commander-in-chief, and keeping a nation committed to a war.”*

*“[Obama and Lincoln] are both leading during true hard times. Just as the civil war was a hard time, with the current recession right now are hard times... They are having to make very hard decisions, and they are doing what they think is best.”*

# Obama and Lincoln are both intelligent, determined, and committed to all Americans

What traits do Obama and Lincoln have in common?

*In-depth interviews*

## Intelligent, but humble

*"Both [Lincoln and Obama] are intelligent men, but they don't have to flaunt their intelligence. Both of them are very down to earth, they don't come across arrogant... both of them came from humble beginnings."*

## Dedicated to doing what they feel is right

*"Their dedication to change something and make America better. I think that's what [Obama and Lincoln] have in common."*

*"Both of them had challenges that they had to face that were not popular with everybody, but it was time for the change."*

## Invested in all Americans

*"Abraham Lincoln, just like Barack Obama, is president to everybody. Not just a select few or 53% of the people. He's represented everybody."*

*"[Obama and Lincoln] are for the people. Not a certain group, not a certain demographic group or economic group... They're both for the people."*

# APPENDIX

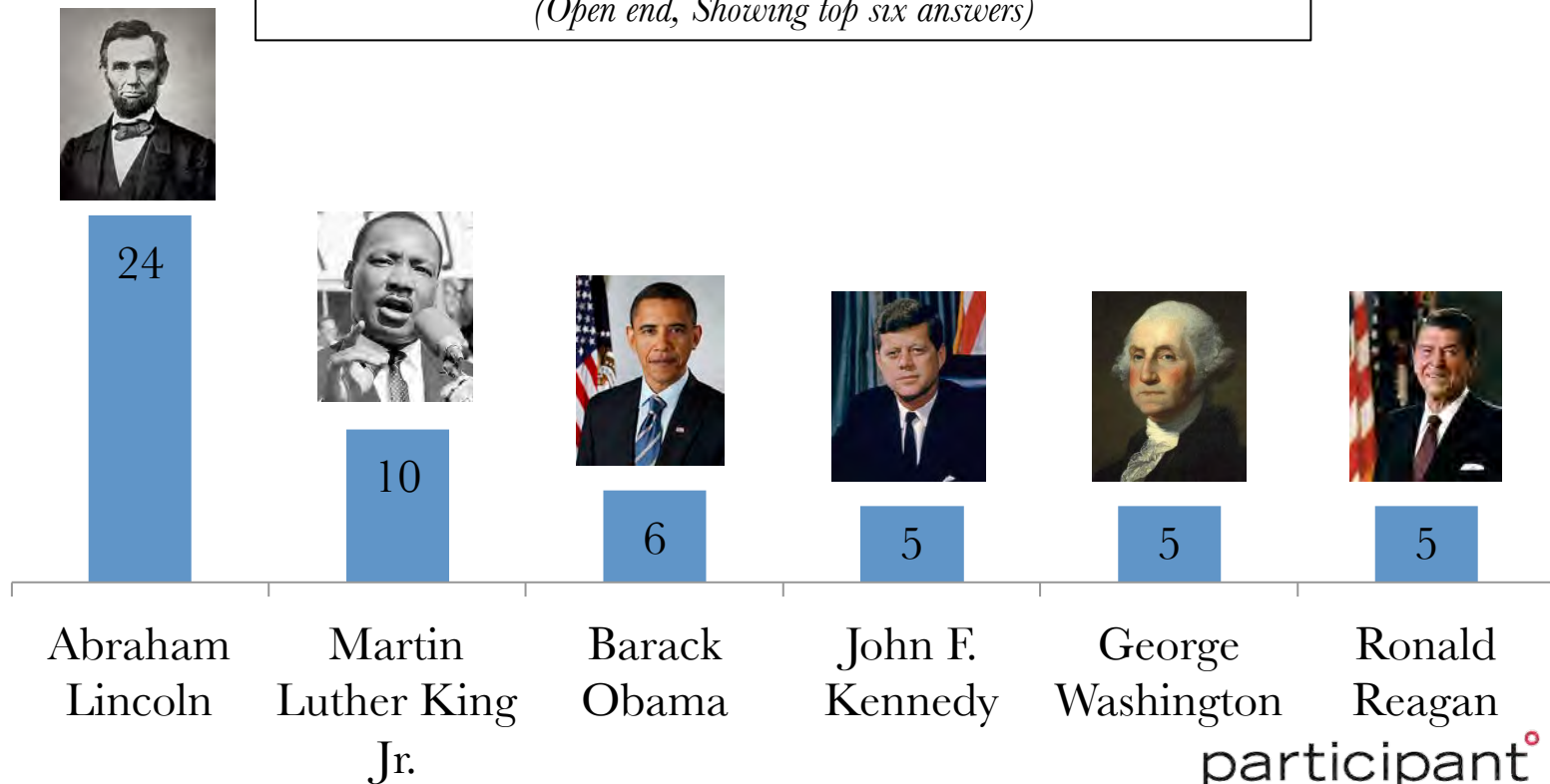


# Abraham Lincoln takes the top spot again in terms of person who has had the biggest impact on American society

- The most common answers were all men, and almost all presidents

What well-known figure, living or dead, do you feel has had the biggest positive impact on American society?

*(Open end, Showing top six answers)*



# Freedom and the emancipation proclamation are the first thoughts that comes to mind when asked about Abraham Lincoln



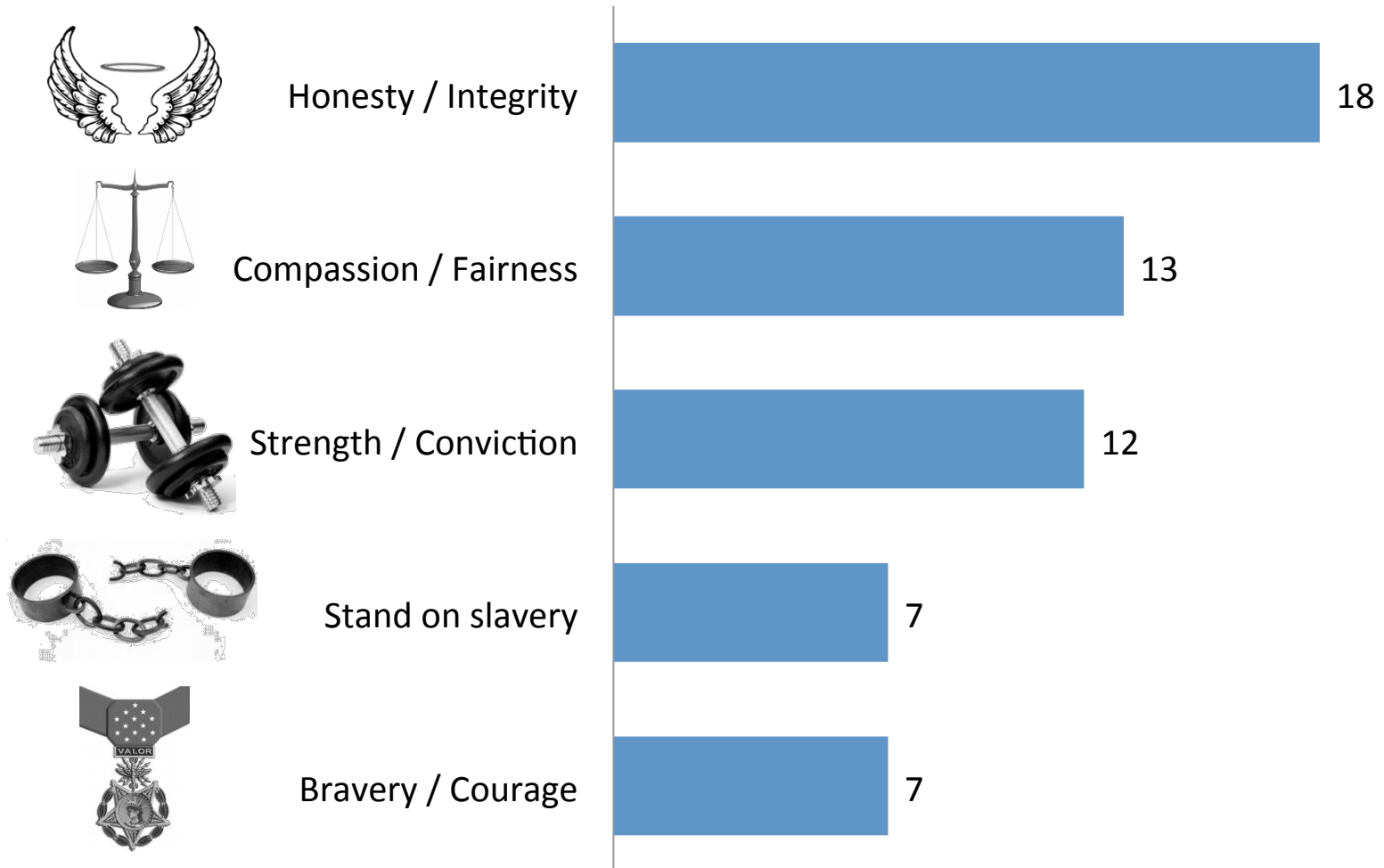
Nearly half first thought  
of “freedom” and/or “the  
Emancipation Proclamation”

The next closest answer was  
“unity” with 15%



Q: What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think about President Abraham Lincoln? (Open end)

# Americans say Honesty and Integrity are what made Lincoln a great leader



Q: What would you say was the primary characteristic that made Lincoln a good leader? (Open end – only showing responses above 6%)

# Americans describe Lincoln as Honest, Intelligent, Strong, and brave

- Not surprisingly, Americans immediately associate Abraham Lincoln with honesty – given the “honest Abe” epithet he’s typically known by

What three characteristics would you use to describe President Abraham Lincoln?



# Overwhelming Majority of Americans agree: There is no current public figure who can hold a candle to Lincoln

- The most popular answer – outside of “no one/none” was Barack Obama (16%)

What current public figure do you think is most like Abraham Lincoln? (Open end)

## “No one / None”

“I don’t think anybody can be compared to Lincoln.”

“I don't know of anyone alive today who I would regard with such esteem.”

Q: What current public figure do you think is most like Abraham Lincoln? This could be a well – known political leader, head of a company or organization , or a celebrity. (Open end)

# Just like today's politicians, Most say Lincoln would be most concerned with the economy



**29%** say if Lincoln ran for president today, he would be most concerned about the economy and employment

**But a sizable number say he would still be focused on equality**



**15%** say Lincoln would be most concerned about the civil rights and equality

# Majority say Lincoln would support Government assistance programs

- When asked why, those who gave in-depth interviews cited Lincoln's compassion and understanding of people's real need for help

**62%** say Lincoln would support food stamps

*I think he would have supported it, because people are in need, and he was a compassionate man.*

*In this day and age he'd probably support it, because he realizes that the playing field isn't level for everybody.*

**60%** say Lincoln would support welfare

*He would support social security income that is needed for those who truly need it. He truly would.*

*Because he would understand what it is to suffer, and what it is to need to eat, and what it is to build the body up to go forth and be that leader.*



# Most Americans think Lincoln would be in favor of gender and racial equality

- Those who gave in-depth interviews see gender and racial equality issues as an extension of Lincoln's belief that all people should have freedom

**84%** say Lincoln would support gender equality

*If he were put in modern times, I think that he would feel that if women went out and worked, we should also have a say in how the government's run; we should also be paid equal.*

**74%** say Lincoln would support affirmative action

*Without laws in place to make sure there's a level playing field, it will never get level. And the gap between certain races in money and education would only get wider.*

*He believes that every man is created equal, and back then they had problems with slavery, so the playing field wasn't level for everybody.*



# Americans think Lincoln would oppose same-sex marriage, are divided on Obamacare

- Many who gave in-depth interviews think Lincoln lived in too different an era to support same-sex marriage

**71%** say Lincoln would oppose nationwide same-sex marriage

*I know that he would have definitely been opposed to it. Because this is totally a different era, so I don't think that he would have accepted it during that time.*

*He came from an era with more conservative values, so I don't think he would be in support of it. He wouldn't necessarily want them to have fewer rights, but he wouldn't support the idea of it being called a marriage.*

**50%** say Lincoln would oppose Obamacare

*I think that he wouldn't support the government taking over such a large part of the economy... I don't think he would support government taking that much power and assumption of control over people's lives.*

*My first thought would be that he would support it. There's not a level playing field. As far as healthcare in this country, it's greedy and cutthroat.*