

Sex Scandals Are Survivable

By Keating Holland

When Gary Hart re-entered the presidential race in December 1987, he immediately shot to the top of the polls. Why did Mr. Monkey Business win more support from rank-and-file Democrats than any other Democratic candidate? “It must be name recognition,” we pollsters said confidently. “No one could be elected president with a sex scandal hanging over his head.”

When Gennifer Flowers suddenly became a household word in 1992, the public repeatedly indicated that the alleged affair would not affect their vote. In a CNN/*Time* poll, for example, 70% said that information about the private lives of presidential candidates should remain private. “Oh, they don’t really mean that,” we pollsters said. “They’re just telling us what they think we want to hear.” When the Monica Lewinsky story broke at the start of this year, pollsters—along with nearly everyone else—assumed that Bill Clinton’s ratings would go down as the American public’s age-old distaste for scandal settled in.

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We Were Wrong

Clinton’s approval rating went up, and stayed up, even though a majority of the public believed from the start that he and Monica had had an affair. The public opposed impeachment from the beginning and stood firm despite additional, salacious revelations. And all along the public said that whatever Bill and Monica did was a private matter.

One of the oldest and most widely-accepted rules of American politics has been that sex scandals are (you should pardon the expression) the kiss of death. Even before the mid-term elections, this year’s polls proved that truism false.

I was as surprised as anyone, and it has led me to consider past polling data—not to mention political history—in a whole new light. Bill Clinton has proven that a sex scandal—indeed, even an admission of an extramarital affair—is survivable in today’s political climate.

Did the rules change this year? Go back through historical polling data, and the message is clear: Americans have not

wanted to learn about candidates’ private lives and have been prepared to ignore such information on election day no matter how much of it was thrust at them. We might not have believed them at the time, but we have convincing evidence today that they were telling us the truth.

This isn’t a recent phenomenon. Look back at American political history with Monica-induced 20/20 hindsight and separate fact from fiction. *Fiction*: Charles Foster Kane lost an election when a rival tabloid tracked him down to a seamy love nest and splashed his picture across the front page. *Fact*: William Randolph Hearst won two elections to the US House while openly living with a chorus girl half his age. When Hearst later ran for governor (the same position Citizen Kane aspired to) he lost because of his stand *on the gold standard and other issues*—far too prosaic for the kind of elections Hollywood likes to run.

Name a politician who lost an election as a result of a sex scandal involving a consenting adult. Gary Hart doesn’t count; he dropped out of the presidential race before the voters had a chance to cast judgment on him. In retrospect, it looks like he panicked and pulled the plug too early. When he got back into the race and immediately regained his front-runner status, it was probably a signal from voters that they just didn’t care about Donna Rice. But Hart had no money or organization when he threw his hat into the ring a second time. Who knows how well he would have done if he had held his ground and ridden into New Hampshire sitting on a big bankroll and a well-oiled political machine?

Okay, what about Wayne Hays and Wilbur Mills? Like Hart, they never stood for election after their sex scandals. What about those guys who were linked to blonde bombshell/lobbyist Paula Parkinson in the late 1970s? Nope, all of them won re-election. One—Dan Quayle—even became vice-president. Dan Crane of Illinois is about the only officeholder who comes to mind who faced the voters after a sex scandal and lost. I’m sure there are others, but the very fact that it is difficult to think of sex-tainted losers indicates that elections in which scandals influenced the outcome are exceptions rather than the rule.

Now name the politicians who have survived sex scandals. Bill Clinton did it this year, but Monica Lewinsky is so overshadowing that it’s easy to forget that he won the White House in 1992 under a similar cloud. Don Riegle won a Michigan Senate seat after admitting to an affair. Gerry Studds and Barney Frank survived gay sex scandals. In fact, not a single gay congressman who has been “out-ed” has lost an election. You will recall that three Republican members of the

House admitted to adultery this year. All were re-elected.

Granted, not all sexual practices are forgiven by the voters, although most of those cases involve sex that breaks the law in some way. But the message embedded in this year's

polls and election returns appears to be that the public is dismissive of—if not openly hostile to—“gotcha” politics. Does that mean dishing dirt on political opponents will fade away? Hardly. But maybe some candidates will think twice before doing so in the future.

Remembering Old Lessons

By Neil Newhouse

Voters tend to look forward, not backward. Despite the tendency of many campaigns and politicians to campaign in the rearview mirror, telling voters of their achievements and their opponents' missteps, voters are more interested in the future. They more or less understand what's happened in the past (after all, they lived through it), but they want to know what's at stake in the future and how the candidates will address those issues. The most effective campaigns link candidates' past achievements with their goals for the future.

Americans are eternally optimistic and believe that their leaders should continue plugging ahead to address the problems facing the country. Just because the economy is doing well, for instance, doesn't mean that politicians can rest on

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their laurels. Voters' priorities change, and politicians should not misinterpret voter satisfaction in one key area (such as the economy) as evidence of a sanguine electorate—it simply means their issues have become re-prioritized.

Voters Dictate the Issues

One old lesson that had to be relearned in 1998 was that the top issues are what the voters say they are. Certainly politicians can shape the agenda, but in the end, it's what voters believe is important that carries the day. And the priorities for voters are those issues they believe affect them personally. For example, education has been a significant and pressing concern on the state level for years, and has only recently surged as an issue voters want addressed on the federal level. They simply won't be satisfied with politicians whose first response is to try to hand it back to the states.

Conversely, once voters tire of hearing about an issue, it loses its traction. Medicare in '96. Monica in '98. By Election Day, voters had had it with those issues. They'd been discussed, debated and demagogued by candidates to such an extent that they ceased being effective. Voters were weary and no longer moved by what were thought early on to be *the* issues of the cycle. Put simply, they wanted politicians to address the issues they themselves were most concerned about.

This speaks to the complacency demonstrated by the Democrats in '96 and the GOP in '98. Believing that voter concern over issues such as Medicare and Monica would bear fruit on Election Day, politicians found instead that both had limited staying power, and repeated incantations and exhortations did little to bring them back to life in the absence of a strong agenda.

The Democrats, specifically labor unions and African Americans, did a terrific job motivating their voters to go to the polls in November—an effort that Republicans could not match. But these “get-out-the-vote” operations were not simply tactical victories; such efforts were more often than not driven by compelling messages targeted to specific voter groups. Tactics only helped implement the ground game; it was the message that made it effective.

Another old lesson reinforced by the 1998 elections was that what voters hear at the end of the campaign is often more important than what they hear at the beginning. Average voters tend to pay more attention to political campaigns when they perceive themselves as being actively in the market to make a voting decision (the last two weeks of a campaign). In essence, while the '98 campaigns believed they'd been talking to voters for months, it was only during the last few weeks that the voters were actually listening.

Going Negative

How the campaigns did their talking was very nearly as important as what they talked about and when. Recently, voters have become more passionate about their disdain for negative campaigns in principle, but they are still easily moved by them in practice. Focus group participants across the country have agreed that negative campaigns are bad, and they share their