In 1948, Harvard professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., asked fifty-five of his colleagues in American history and government to rate the past presidents as great, near great, average, below average, or failures. Thus began the popular academic pastime of ranking the presidents. Also in 1948, Elmo Roper asked the public to rate President Franklin Roosevelt’s performance in office. Roper’s survey, published in Fortune, sought to discover “important clues as to the way the people who lived through [Roosevelt’s New Deal] feel about it, the men who made it, their achievements and failures.”

In the poll, Roper asked people to select words and phrases to describe Roosevelt’s domestic policies. Americans were also asked to rate Roosevelt the man, and to evaluate his efforts to end the Depression. They were asked whether they approved or disapproved of the “centering of more activities in Washington.” A final series of questions asked about FDR’s foreign policy.

While the kinds of questions asked about Bill Clinton’s presidency are broadly similar to those first asked about Roosevelt’s, there are far more of them. Where two pollsters charted Roosevelt’s fortunes throughout his presidency, today more than a dozen national pollsters track Clinton’s on a much more regular basis. Little effort until now has been made to synthesize the results of the thousands of questions asked about this president. Here we attempt to do just that, providing an early assessment of the Clinton legacy.

Success or failure? Judgments about all presidents are complex, and they are no less so about the 42nd president. Gallup has asked the familiar job approval question—“Do you approve or disapprove of the way... is handling his job as president?”—170 times thus far in Clinton’s presidency. This compares with 89 Gallup askings during Eisenhower’s two-term presidency and 135 askings during Reagan’s. In a less adversarial media age, President Eisenhower had an approval rating of 60% or higher during most of his first term (96% of the time); in his second term, accompanied as it was by a recession, he was at 60% or above 55% of the time. Ronald Reagan enjoyed ratings of 60% or higher only 12% of the time in his first term; as the economy improved, impressions of his handling of the presidency improved, too. His approval rating was 60% or higher 40% of the time during his second term. Bill Clinton had a 60% or higher rating only 3% of the time in his first term. Thus far in his second term, he has been there an astonishing 75% of the time.

Questions asked by different pollsters suggest that substantial numbers of Americans view the Clinton presidency as a success. Gallup found in early 1999 that a robust 77% (up smartly from 43% in January 1994) described the presidency this way. A similar question asked by the Pew Research Center...
A pair of questions asked by the Pew Research Center puts in sharp relief the judgments people make about President Clinton’s job performance and his character. Eighty-three percent told Pew in June 1999 that they would like the next president to have different personal qualities than Bill Clinton; only 12% wanted him to have similar qualities. At the same time, people were more evenly divided about his policies and programs. Forty-three percent wanted a president with policies and programs similar to Clinton’s, 50% a president who offers different ones.

As has been said many times, the presidential scandals have taken a serious toll on this president’s standing. Four times in the past three years, the Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll has asked about history’s judgment of Bill Clinton. Two-thirds of respondents in the 1998 and 1999 askings believe Clinton will be remembered as a president under “a constant cloud of scandal” and only 20% as “highly respected leader.” Every polling organization that has asked a variant of this question finds Clinton will be remembered more for scandal than for accomplishment. In many of these polls, majorities of Democrats share the assessment.

Throughout Ronald Reagan’s presidency, around seven in ten said they approved of him personally; far fewer approve of Bill Clinton personally. In both Yankelovich Partners/Times/CNN and ABC News/Washington Post polls, unfavorable judgments of Clinton have risen over his tenure as president, though in both polls, the most recent iterations of this question find majorities with favorable impressions. For the most part, however, the difference between views of Clinton’s performance as president and his personal character amounts to a chasm.

Over the course of the Clinton presidency the public has become more optimistic about the country generally. In July 1999, 77% of respondents in a Yankelovich poll said that things in the country were going very or fairly well. The right track/wrong direction question has shown significant improvement over the past seven years. This sense of wellbeing is based largely upon positive assessments of the nation’s economy.

Nearly every poll that examines perceptions of the nation’s economy or the President’s handling of it shows improvement over the course of the Clinton presidency. In February 1993, for example, just 14% rated economic conditions as good (no one rated them as excellent). When Gallup repeated that question in October 1999, 65% pronounced conditions as excellent or good. A majority say that they are financially better off than they were a year ago, and a quarter say they are worse off.

Although it is clear that Americans are feeling better about their economic situations than they were when Bill Clinton took office, many have yet to appreciate the depth and breadth of this economic expansion. While polls conducted by Harris in the past few years show an increase in the proportion saying that the nation’s economy has grown (32% in April 1996, 55% in May 1999), about 45% believe that it is either staying about the same (37%) or shrinking (7%).

In other areas, assessments of the Clinton presidency are mixed. In one of the few questions we were able to find that looked at U.S. standing in the world, a majority believed that the country is playing a more important role as a world leader than 10 years ago. Clinton has solid majority support now for handling foreign policy, though his ratings in this area have generally been lower than those on the economy.

Only a quarter in the May Harris poll agreed with the statement that “crime rates have been falling rapidly for the past six years;” 72% said that was false. And Americans do not believe, as Bill Clinton suggested in his 1996 inaugural address, that “the era of big government is over.” There has been some slight improvement in people’s views about the federal government, but the level of alienation from Washington is still substantial.

Impressions of a president’s performance tend to carry over to views of his party. In the 1992 campaign, when Bill Clinton talked about recapturing the all-important middle political ground for his party, Gallup asked people whether the “political views of the Democratic party were too conservative, too liberal, or about right.” Thirty-seven percent said they were too liberal, and 46% said they were about right. When Gallup last asked that question in February of this year, a virtually identical 36% described them as too liberal, but a majority, 55%, characterized them as about right. Percep-
tions that the Republican party is "too conservative" stayed
the same over the period (39% in 1992 and 1999): the
perception that the GOP's views are "about right" rose from
38 to 45%.

Nationally, views of the Democratic party are more favorable
than unfavorable. Views about the Republican party are more
evenly split. The Los Angeles Times, which asks about the
Republicans and Democrats in Congress, finds that Republi-
cans are rated less favorably than the Democrats there. Gallup's
polling paints a similar picture.

Yet another test of Clinton's success is whether more people
have moved into the ranks of the Democratic party. Both
CBS News/New York Times and Gallup polls record very little
change in partisan identification over the course of the Clinton
presidency. Although some movement of individual groups
might be concealed by the overall stability of partisan identi-
fication, an analysis combining all the Gallup surveys for 1993
and all those from January to July 1999 confirms that, aside
from some small shifts, the 1999 responses solidify the im-
pressions in the 1993 ones. Women in 1999 are about 10
percentage points more likely than men to identify with the
Democratic party, but they are no more Democratic than they
were in 1993. In 1999, as in 1993, the Depression-era genera-
tion—those in the 70-year-old or over group—are
more Democratic than any other age group in the population,
but those a little younger, in the 60 to 69 year old group, are
slightly less Democratic than they were in 1993. The race,
education, and income variables show little movement. New
England has become slightly more Democratic over the
course of the Clinton presidency, the Southwest, a little less
so. At the beginning and the end of the Clinton presidency,
the Rocky Mountain states are less Democratic than their
Pacific coast neighbors.

Pollsters take different approaches to the question of
which party is better able to handle different issues or
problems facing the country. NBC News/Wall Street
Journal, for example, allows people to respond that both
parties would handle the issue in the same way and, separately,
that neither party would handle the issue better than the
other. Neither Gallup nor ABC News/Washington Post
interviewers provide these options, though some people vol-
unteer them nonetheless. The descriptions the pollsters give
of the issues differ, too. NBC News/Wall Street Journal asks
their respondents which party would do a better job "dealing
with health care." ABC News/Washington Post pollsters ask
about "protecting patients' rights in the health care system."
Sometimes one of the organizations asks about "holding taxes
down;" at other times, the same organization asks about
"dealing with taxes." In part because people are pretty evenly
divided about which party would do a better job on some
issues and also because party identification is less strong than
in the past, responses bounce around a lot.

With these cautions in mind, the data suggest that Democrats
retain a substantial advantage on issues such as the environ-
ment, Social Security, and health care, and the Republicans
retain an edge (though not as large a one as they had in the
early 1990s) on foreign policy. In the latest Gallup question
on dealing with foreign policy, the parties are at parity. The
ABC News/Washington Post poll suggests that the Democrats
have a slight advantage on crime, but Gallup and NBC News/
Wall Street Journal give a different impression. The ABC/Post
poll shows the Democrats with a tiny advantage on the tax
issue; Gallup and NBC News/Wall Street Journal show the
Republicans with one. All three organizations show the
Democrats with the advantage on handling the economy.

One final measure of a president's success is the propor-
tion of the public willing to suspend the 22nd
Amendment to allow him to serve another term. In
September 1999, 12% of those surveyed by Pew completely
agreed with the statement "I wish Bill Clinton could run for
a third term," and 19% said they mostly agreed with it. A
harsher judgment came from a Fox News/Opinion Dynamics
question, asked once in 1998 and again in March 1999. Fifty-
eight percent said in 1999 that if the 1992 election were held
over again, they would vote for George Bush. Thirty-seven
percent said they would vote for Clinton. An August 1998
Gallup/CNN/USA Today poll showed that a replay of the
1996 election would favor the President: 46% said they would
vote for Clinton, 34% for Dole, and 13% for Ross Perot.

In a recent interview, Bill Clinton tried to anticipate history's
verdict on his presidency. He told ABC's Carole Simpson that
"I think that history will view this much differently. They will
say I made a bad personal mistake, I paid a serious price for it,
but that I was right to stand and fight for my country and my
Constitution and its principles, and that the American people
were very good to stand with me." He went on to say, "I think
that over the long run, the fact that we accomplished as much
as we did in the face of the most severe, bitter, partisan
onslaught, with the tools that were leveled against us and the
money that was spent, I think will, in a way, make many of
the things we achieve seem the more impressive." The American
people are standing with President Clinton today, giving him
high marks on the job he's doing and pronouncing his
presidency a success. Whether these views will erode the sour
taste of scandal in the long run remains to be seen.

Thanks to Rob Peoples of the Roper Center for conducting combined Gallup Poll
analysis. For more on the Clinton presidency, see data compiled by the author on
pp. 8-13.