



Paradoxes in presidential approval

Love the Sinner

By David M. Alpern

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First of two parts

Without taking anything away from the strong leadership demonstrated by President Bush in the nation's new war on terrorism, the 31-point jump in his job-approval rating immediately after September 11, and its subsequent rise to the 90% zone, is unprecedented in quantity but not in kind.

A rally-round effect following international crises has boosted the poll ratings of previous presidents, including Bush's father, who gained 14 points after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. President Kennedy gained 13 points during the Cuban missile confrontation. And even Jimmy Carter's rating rose 19 points at the start of the Iran hostage crisis. This phenomenon is well-documented and much discussed by political scientists and commentators.

Arguably more remarkable, I find, is the rise in approval ratings for President Bill Clinton after the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke in mid-January 1998, and their continued cruising at that altitude throughout the long process leading to and through impeachment. After an initial drop, from 61% to 54% in a January 22-24 *Newsweek* survey, Clinton's job rating rocketed 17 points to 70% in one week, as shown by a January 29-30 poll.

It remained in the 60% zone, with most Americans at most times opposing his resignation or removal from office. And that, our polls showed, was despite the fact that the nation saw him as an adulterous perjurer without the moral character they expected in a president.

Both these periods of recent presidential history have been trying in different ways for many Americans, not just the chief executives involved. But polling has also shown a notable sophistication of public opinion as events have forced people to evaluate complex issues and their own reactions.

With Clinton, beyond the tantalizing trivia of unlit cigars and stained dresses, there were serious questions of private morality, public effectiveness, legal rights, and journalistic sensationalism.

John Zaller wrote a good study of the period, "Monica Lewinsky's Contribution to Political Science," which appeared in *Political Science and Politics* in 1998.

Today with President Bush we are grappling with questions of national

security, personal safety and civil liberties, the roots of terrorism, and the not always predictable consequences of waging war against it, at home and abroad.

Both stories are revealing in what they have to tell us about Americans' relationships with their presidents.

What with the scuttlebutt about Gennifer Flowers and Paula Jones, Bill Clinton was already seen as a flawed character in January 1998. Opinion had long been almost evenly divided on whether he had the honesty and integrity people expected in a president. In our first (January 22-24) poll after the Lewinsky story broke, that balance shifted definitively against Clinton.

A year later, however, after the impeachment trial ended in acquittal, Clinton's job approval rating stood at 66%, having never dropped lower than 58%, though a plurality of more than four in ten in that February survey said the year's developments and disclosures made them think less of the president; fewer than half that number thought more of him. Sixty-four percent thought he had committed perjury in his federal grand jury testi-

mony, and a five to three plurality thought he had obstructed justice in the Paula Jones case.

Still, fewer than a third of those surveyed during the impeachment trial believed Clinton should be convicted and removed from office. In a *Newsweek* poll conducted January 28-

29, 28% thought so, and only about the same number wanted to see him indicted and tried in court after his second term had ended. Three in ten said he should simply be censured, and four in ten said impeachment itself was punishment enough.

Indeed, 71% in a February 11-12 poll said the Lewinsky scandal and impeachment were what Clinton would always be remembered for, that there was nothing he could do as president to give himself a more positive legacy.

The explanation for such a paradoxical view of Clinton came, I think, in our earliest poll on *L'Affair Lewinsky*, the January 22-24, 1998 survey. In general, we asked, is it more important to you that the president is someone whose personal character you and your family can respect, or someone who can effectively carry out policies that are good for the country? A plurality of more than two to one said effectiveness was more important. By the time of our August 13-14 survey, an absolute majority (53%) thought so.

Focusing more sharply on character and morality issues a month into the scandal, we asked in a February 5-6

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survey about marital infidelity, and found a virtually even split on whether Americans should even consider it in judging how well a president is handling his job. Interestingly, foreshadowing Clinton's enduring female support, most women (52%) were *against* taking adultery into account in evalu-

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ating a president, while most men (52%) were in favor.

In that same survey we found that nearly two-thirds of Americans thought the increased attention being given to the private lives of public officials was a “bad thing.” That was the first such lopsided majority ever on a question that had split the public about evenly through the personal controversies that plagued other high-profile polls such as Charles Robb, Barney Frank and Jim Wright.

Some conservative social critics said that the acceptance of Clinton’s personal lapses was not a sign of political maturity but of moral decline. We tested that theory in the same survey, but found four in five Americans saying extramarital sex was “always wrong”—a record high for that view in polling over the past twenty-five years. What had changed was the public’s perception of how often presidents have had affairs in the past. Forty-two percent of respondents in the February 5-6 poll said it was very common, compared with only 24% who thought so ten years earlier.

Another factor in Clinton’s favor was the public’s conclusion that Lewinsky was more aggressor than victim. By the time of Monica’s March 1999 TV interview with Barbara Walters, Americans by two to one saw her as going after the president, not Clinton using his position to take advantage of her. And, surprisingly, women held that view even a bit more strongly than men.

The president also benefited from the unpopular impression made by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, unlike the impression made by his predecessors during Watergate. By the end of February 1998, nearly half those surveyed in our poll said Starr had gone too far in his investigating methods, and that *he* should be removed from office. By August, a 57% majority disapproved of Starr’s methods.

All in all, our polls showed that Americans distinguished between what they found extraordinarily interesting—albeit in a “Don’t-you-hate-to-look” sort of way—and what they felt to be really important for the country. By

September 1998, and by about five to four, the public had concluded that the charges against Clinton were primarily a partisan effort to discredit him rather than a calling to account for high crimes and misdemeanors—the only constitutional basis for impeachment.

But Republican foes were not about to put public opinion polls above their deep-seated distaste for Clinton’s politics and personality. Or, if they were concerned about what the polls were showing, it can only be assumed that in their zeal to have Clinton removed from office they misread the public’s complex views of the scandal. Their continued attacks not only solidified the president’s support but raised questions about the GOP.

In our survey of December 10-11, 1998, 53% of respondents said House Republicans were too partisan in dealing with impeachment, versus 47% who thought that of House Democrats. After Clinton’s Senate acquittal, a four in ten plurality in a Febru-

Figure 1
Parting of the Ways

Questions:

Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as president?

I’m going to read you some statements. After each, please tell me whether or not each applies to [President Bill] Clinton. How about... he has high personal moral and ethical standards?



Source: Surveys by ABC News/Washington Post and ABC News, latest that of August 23, 1998.

	Approve	Yes, high moral standards
October 27-31, 1994	48%	44%
April 4-5, 1995	46	51
March 14-17, 1996	53	44
June 27-30, 1996	—	40
August 1-5, 1996	59	45
September 3-4, 1996*	—	39
October 7-8, 1996*	59	—
January 13-15, 1997	60	40
June 5-8, 1997	59	41
January 28-29, 1998	68	—
February 17-18, 1998	67	28
March 16, 1998	63	28
May 12, 1998	64	24
July 9-12, 1998	63	29
August 19-21, 1998	66	—
August 23, 1998	—	19

*Asked of registered voters

ary 11-12 poll felt less favorably about the Republican Party, while just over a quarter were less favorable toward the Democrats, and 50% said they thought less favorably of the political process generally.

But there were many losers in the public esteem as a result of the scandal. Although only 20% said that because of the trial and acquittal they were less likely to vote for Clinton's vice president, Al Gore, in the 2000 presidential election, that was still a problem Gore didn't need in a race that proved so close.

As for Clinton, a January 18-19, 2001 poll showed his job approval still at 68% on the eve of his departure from office, despite new scandals involving eleventh-hour pardons and the removal of White House gifts. A 78% majority approved his handling of the economy and 66% his handling of foreign policy.

But despite his high approval ratings, it's questionable that Clinton retained enough magic to have won himself, had he been able to run for a third term. Gore actually did better than his boss in a trial heat against Bush that we ran in our April 8, 2000 survey. Each of the Democrats drew 44% of the sample, but Bush only matched Gore—foreshadowing the final vote—while he beat Clinton with 49%.

How will history remember President Bill Clinton? A Pew survey conducted January 3-7, 2001, found a remarkable disparity. By 60% to 27%, respondents thought that, in the long run, the accomplishments of his administration would outweigh its failures. Yet 74% still said he would be remembered most for the scandals.

The largest losers, though, were the news media. In the February 11-12, 1999 *Newsweek* poll, barely 5% felt more favorable toward the media, and 56% were less favorable. A similar majority had said in a July 1998 poll that at best they believed only some of what they saw,

majority said Clinton's failed peace efforts just before leaving office deserved only a little blame or none at all for the subsequent explosion of Israeli-Palestinian violence. (Only 14% said they deserved a lot of blame; 26% said some blame.)

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heard or read in the media; 11% said they believed very little.

Seven in ten in that same survey believed journalists today are more influenced than their predecessors by pressure from competitors to get a good story, by pressure from media owners for higher profits, and by the desire for celebrity and personal wealth. Even more said that in the search for ratings and profits, the news media had gone too far in the direction of entertainment and away from traditional reporting.

Of course, the clear implication is that such sensationalism *does* win audience, ratings and financial rewards—meaning Americans themselves, as willing consumers, are at least part of the problem.

In 2002, top Republicans with the off-year elections in mind tried to blame Clinton for violence and terror spilling out of the Middle East, and for corporate scandals undermining confidence in the stock market and the economy generally. The public was not so sure. In a *Newsweek* poll taken March 21-22, 2002, a 53% ma-

As for the corporate scandals, in July 2002, 25% said Clinton and his administration deserved a lot of blame, compared with 69% for corporate executives, 59% for corporate boards of directors and 49% for accounting firms.

Only 18% in that poll said George W. Bush and his administration deserved a lot of blame. But as the problems of Wall Street and the economy drew more attention in subsequent months, doubts about Bush's concern and capability to handle the situation grew, and his job approval ratings slipped from the stratospheric heights to which they had been taken by the September 11 attacks—from 86% at their peak down to 61% in the *Newsweek* poll of August 28-29, 2002—raising the question of which issue, terrorism or the economy, would be key to the elections of 2002 and 2004. ●

In the next issue of Public Perspective: Changing challenges for George W. Bush.