

Kids and the Presidency: Assessing Clinton's Legacy

By Diana Owen and Jack Dennis

If there is an established lore about political learning patterns early in life it is that the President of the United States serves as the most prominent point of contact when people are first attempting to make sense of government. Young children are faced with a buzzing, booming amalgam of people, events, policies, and institutional artifacts that constitute what we call "government." In the media, in daily school rituals, and in conversations with family members and associates, the president looms like a colossus, as the foremost figure of societal authority from whom the lesser elements of national or lower levels of government seem at first to derive.

The issues surrounding the Clinton impeachment have triggered concerns about how young people view the political world. We see at least a few signs that may constitute early warnings about the emergent outlook of "Generation Y," the nation's youngest citizen cohort. There are indications that youth attitudes toward the president and the political system are substantially more negative in the wake of the Clinton affair than they have been in the past, even during the Watergate era. In significant ways, these trends buck conventional wisdom.

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We do not have available yet the kinds of extensive studies on political learning patterns that emerged in the 1960s and 70s. However, we can draw upon some recent polling "snapshots" for preliminary assessments of children's and adolescents' current political attitudes.

No Longer the Benevolent Leader

Studies of childhood and adolescent political socialization from the 1950s through the 1970s showed that the average seven or eight year old child in America was likely to imagine that the president was most powerful when compared to others in society, including parents. In contrast to adults, who held more ambivalent or negative opinions, children idealized the president.¹ Overwhelmingly children viewed the chief executive as a benevolent figure, exceptionally vigilant, protective, responsive, and dependable.² The president was perceived in highly personal terms, and was described as being likeable, trustworthy, caring, and not terribly fallible. These idealized views faded somewhat as children aged and new information tempered their enthusiasm. A quote from David Easton and one of the current author's research of children's political orientations characterizes the findings of more than two decades of survey and interview data: "The President flies in on angel's wings, smiling, beneficent, powerful, almost beyond the realm of mere mortals. . . . Although as the children grow older they draw him closer to the position of ordinary mortal, they never quite bring him down to earth."³

These idealized early life span perceptions of the president are not surprising during periods when presidential incumbents generally have been regarded as charis-

matic or heroic, as in the Eisenhower and Kennedy epochs.⁴ Yet, in times when the president has been regarded less favorably, as was the case during the Johnson and Nixon eras, children nonetheless were prone to make an initial assumption of high presidential competence, compassion, and reliability. Idealism, however, was manifested more as favorability in these cases. Attitudes toward government and its chief representative rapidly became more neutral, or even somewhat cynical, across the elementary and middle school years.⁵ Studies conducted in the wake of Watergate found that accompanying the decline in children's benevolent opinions about the president, there was a change in the qualitative nature of these evaluations. For example, children in the post-Watergate era were more likely to state that the president was above the law and would use his status to evade punishment than were children in the pre-Watergate period.⁶

The earlier literature revealed few situations where children began with a hostile image of the president or government, and virtually no instances where children were more pessimistic than their parents. Today, Americans under the age of 18 are unusually negative in their attitudes toward President Clinton as a result of the impeachment experience. In addition, children are harsher in their judgements of the President than are adults. A CNN/USA Today/Gallup survey conducted in February 1999 provides some relevant indications that the "benevolent leader" paradigm does not hold for today's younger generation of citizens.⁷ Only 43% of the youth sample held a favorable opinion of President Clinton, compared to 55% of adults. Parents also perceived that their children had less respect for the president than they themselves did when they were the same age. According to a Pew Research

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Center survey, 55% of parents believed that they were more respectful, while less than 10% felt they were less respectful.⁸ Further, young people held strong beliefs that President Clinton's conduct was wrong. Forty-seven percent of pre-adults in the CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll believed that the Senate should have voted to remove Bill Clinton from office, while only 36% of adults felt this way.

What explains young people's more acrimonious attitudes toward Bill Clinton during Monicagate when compared with earlier cohorts' feelings about Richard Nixon during Watergate? Fred Greenstein has noted that children were remarkably insulated from the turmoil of the 1960s. When parents discussed President Nixon with their children, they tended not to condemn him completely. Further, children did not have a detailed understanding of the complex issues of political malfeasance that surrounded Watergate, even at the height of the hearings.⁹

The pervasive, sensational, entertainment-style media coverage of the Clinton affair made it difficult to shelter children from the scandal. Some young people were drawn to the news coverage because of its similarity to television and film dramas. Pew Research Center data indicate that close to 60% of parents reported that their offspring got most of their information from watching television news, a figure that increased with the child's age. Further, children's interest in the affair may have been piqued by the ability to talk openly about a normally taboo subject. The Clinton impeachment also was framed as a matter of personal malfeasance, and involved issues to which even very young children could relate. Perjury, treated in the press as presidential lying, was rendered accessible to youngsters. In fact, 40% of the 11 to 17 year olds in the CNN/USA Today/Gallup survey stated that Bill Clinton's behavior in the Monica Lewinsky and impeachment matters made them feel that they could lie and get away with it. Some young people took President Clinton's lying as a personal affront. This impression is in line with conventional findings that preadults personalize their relationship with the chief executive, and were likely exacerbated by Clinton's personal "I feel your pain" style. A young man interviewed by *The Washington Post* articulated this sentiment: "When it came out he was lying, I was angry, like he lied to me!" *The Post* also discovered that teenagers expressed very complicated feelings about the President's conduct, especially as many of them have first hand experience with parental marital difficulties.¹⁰

Presidential Personality Versus Role

Children's views of the president have significance beyond what they say about the popularity of individual leaders. However, the exact nature of this relationship is still something of a mystery. The earlier socialization studies posited that children's impressions about the president played a central part in constructing their images of government, and formed the

basis of general support for the political system. This assumption led to speculation that lofty evaluations of the person preceded knowledge of the role of the president, setting the stage for positive perceptions of the office later in the life course. However, even during the "benevolent leader" era, scholars discovered that children make rather clear distinctions between the presidential personality and presidential role.¹¹ Idealized views of individual presidents in childhood do not translate directly into long-term support for the system, as evidenced by the protesters of the 60s generation. It follows, as well, that highly negative opinions about a particular incumbent will not necessarily result in a lack of support for the office or for the political system more generally. In fact, this appears to be the scenario surrounding the Clinton impeachment at this point in time.

Two questions from the CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll provide patterns of response similar to what earlier political socialization studies had discovered about children's attitudes toward officials and government generally. The first of these asked, "Do you personally think most public officials today are liars; or do you not feel this way?" The majority of adults in the sample (55%) answered that they thought officials were liars, compared to only about a third (34%) of 11-17 year olds. When these same respondents were asked a more standardized political trust item—"How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?", 55% of the youth sample answered either "just about always" or "most of the time", but only 34% of the adults did so. Thus, a more sympathetic vision of government is apparently present among young citizens, which is consistent with the established lore.

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Encouragement derived from these data should be tempered, however. While young people are more favorably disposed toward government than they are toward President Clinton, their attitudes are decidedly more negative than during the Watergate period. These findings do not bode well for the future, as individuals' support for political institutions and processes tends to decline over the life course. In addition, young people have come to expect that scandalous behavior is normal for politicians. As such, the dream of growing up to be President is not appealing for "Generation Y". Only 26% of young people interviewed by CNN/USA Today/Gallup aspire to hold the nation's highest political office.

More Youth Than Adults Are Critical of Clinton's Conduct

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

	Adults	Youth
Approve	65%	42%
Disapprove	33	52

Question: As you may know, the House has now impeached Clinton and the case has been sent to the Senate for trial. What would you want your Senators to do?

	Adults	Youth
Convict Clinton and remove him from office?	36%	47%
Vote against convicting Clinton?	62	50

Question: As of today do you lean more to the Democratic Party or to the Republican Party?

	Adults	Youth
Democratic	50%	39%
Republican	40	45
Neither/Other/DK/Refused	10	16

Question: ...I'd like to get your overall opinion of some people in the news. As I read each name, please say if you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of this person—or if you have never heard of him or her....

	Bill Clinton	Hillary Rodham Clinton	Al Gore	Ken Starr
Adults				
Favorable	55%	66%	61%	30%
Unfavorable	43	31	31	61
DK/Refused	1	3	8	9
Youth				
Favorable	43%	67%	47%	23%
Unfavorable	53	23	26	39
DK/Refused	5	10	27	39

But Youth Are Still Generally Less Cynical

Question: Do you personally think most public officials today are liars, or do you not feel this way?

	Adults	Youth
Yes	55%	34%
No	41	62

Question: Do you think George Washington ever lied to the public while he was President?

	Adults	Youth
Yes	72%	49%
No	18	46
DK/Refused	10	5

Question: Do you think Abraham Lincoln ever lied to the public while he was President?

	Adults	Youth
Yes	65%	44%
No	26	53
DK/Refused	8	3

Source: Survey of 1,022 national adults and 365 youth, 11-17 years of age, by the Gallup Organization for CNN/USA Today, February 4-7, 1999.

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Shifting Patterns of Childhood Politicization

Lacking extensive data, the picture painted here is speculative, although highly suggestive. The pattern emerging is that the upcoming political age cohort is more hostile toward Clinton relative to the kinds of evidence we have for earlier incumbents of the White House. This negativism does not appear to have been generalized as yet, however, to government and public officialdom more broadly.

The forces that influence younger citizens' experience with the political realm have evolved significantly from those discovered in the heyday of political socialization research two decades ago. Family structures and dynamics have changed, altering the nature of communication relationships. The mass media's role in initiating young citizens to politics has been enhanced, especially as media outlets proliferate and political content resembles entertainment fare. The present and future consequences of these factors deserve careful and systematic consideration.

Endnotes:

¹ Fred I. Greenstein, "The Benevolent Leader: Children's Images of Authority," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 54, December 1960, pp. 934-43; Robert D. Hess and David Easton, "The Child's Changing Image of the President," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 24, pp. 632-44.

² There is evidence that the benevolent views of the president found in the majority of studies did not pertain for particular subcultures in American society, especially those in which parental views of authority were highly negative. See, for example, Dean Jaros, Herbert Hirsch, and Frederic J. Fleron, Jr., "The Malevolent Leader: Political Socialization in an American Subculture," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 62, June 1968, pp. 564-75; Dean Jaros and Kenneth L. Kolson, "The Multifarious Leader: Political Socialization of Amish, 'Yanks', Black," in Richard G. Niemi and Associates, *The Politics of Future Citizens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974) pp. 41-62; Howard J. Tolley, Jr., *Children and War: Socialization to International Conflict* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1973).

³ David Easton and Jack Dennis, *Children in the Political System: Origins of Political Legitimacy* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1969), pp. 171, 173.

⁴ Fred I. Greenstein, *Children and Politics*

(New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1965).

⁵ Jack Dennis and Carol Webster, "Children's Images of the President and of Government in 1962 and 1974," *American Politics Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 4, October 1975, pp. 386-405; F. Christopher Arterton, "The Impact of Watergate on Children's Attitudes Toward Political Authorities," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 89, June 1974, pp. 269-324; Stanley W. Moore, James Lare, and Kenneth A. Wagner, *The Child's Political World* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985).

⁶ Fred I. Greenstein, "The Benevolent Leader Revisited: Children's Images of Political Leaders in Three Democracies," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 69, September, 1975, pp. 1371-1398.

⁷ The survey of 1,022 adults and 305 young people aged 11 to 17 was conducted by the Gallup Organization, February 4-8, 1999.

⁸ "White House Scandal Has Families Talking," Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. "Survey of Parent Reaction to Scandal" was conducted September 19-23, 1998. The sample consisted of 597 parents with children between the ages of 8 and 17.

⁹ Greenstein, 1975.

¹⁰ Dale Russakoff and Cindy Loose, "At High Schools, Affair Surprises Few," *The Washington Post*, September 18, 1998, A1.

¹¹ See Easton and Dennis, 1969.



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