

CLINTON

Assessing the 42nd President



By Seymour Martin Lipset and Karlyn H. Bowman

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

Seymour Martin Lipset is Hazel Professor of Public Policy, George Mason University, and Karlyn H. Bowman is resident fellow, American Enterprise Institute.

for the People & the Press gave respondents the option of answering “too early to tell.” In August of 1993, 60% felt judgment was premature, 13% called Clinton successful and 25% said he was unsuccessful. By January 1999, 44% pronounced him a successful president and 24% an unsuccessful one. Nearly three in ten were still withholding judgment.

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 a “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.

Ten times during 1998, ABC News and the *Washington Post* asked whether the statement “He has high personal moral and ethical standards” applied to Bill Clinton. No more than three in ten ever said that it did. A CBS News/*New York Times* question asked 14 times in 1998 and once in 1999 found that on only one occasion did a majority think the President “shared the moral values most Americans try to live by.” In January 1999, only 30% said he did. A Gallup question asked in 1997 found that majorities thought Clinton’s ethical standards were lower than Bush’s, Reagan’s, and Carter’s. Although 47% said they were higher than Nixon’s, 30% said they were lower.

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/*Time*/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 US 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 last 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 Republicans 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 identification, 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 impressions 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 generation—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 volunteer 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 environment, 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 proportion 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 erase the sour taste of scandal in the long run remains to be seen. ●

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