

Do You Want To Be President?

By Karlyn Bowman

In 1980, political scientist Wayne Shannon wrote an amusing advertisement for the job of President of the United States.

“

Wanted, chief executive for large, troubled public enterprise. Must be dignified and capable of personifying the aspirations of all elements of a diverse and extremely heterogeneous organization. Must be a successful manager, capable of supervising several million employees, most of whom cannot be directly rewarded or punished ... Must be skilled in diplomacy and have good knowledge of world affairs. Should be up on military matters as well... Job performance will be reviewed after four years, at which time applicant's record will be compared with promises of numerous aspirants for his position... Applicant must have proper drive but pleasant personality, a good sense of humor, and must be flexible and open to criticism. Must be trustworthy and shrewd. Must be a good speaker and skilled at press relations. Boundless energy is a must.

”

Given the demands of the office, it's a wonder anyone runs at all. If the dozen or so names already in circulation for Campaign 2000 are any indication, there is no shortage of politicians interested in the office. But what about the rest of us? Is the idea of becoming president a winning one?

Pollsters have approached this question by asking adults about the career aspirations they have for their children. Surveys on the question of wanting a son or daughter to become president are surprisingly few in number, but recent ones suggest that the highest office in the land is not highly desired. The deeply rooted belief that politics is a somewhat disreputable pursuit contributes to this disposition, but so, too, do current perceptions of the presidency itself.

An Historical Distaste for Politics

The taint long associated with politics was captured in the earliest public opinion polls. In 1936, two-thirds of those surveyed by Gallup, including majorities of self-described Republicans, Democrats, and Socialists, felt that “politics” played a part in handling relief in their locality. A question asked by the National Opinion Research Center in 1943 found a near majority, 48%, saying it was almost impossible for a man to stay honest if he went into politics. Forty-two percent disagreed. In the University of Michigan's National Election Study, the percentage saying that quite a few of the people running the government are “a little crooked” rose from 24% in 1958 to 51% in 1994. But even in 1958 only 26% said that “hardly any” of the people running the government were a little crooked. A new Gallup poll accentuates these sentiments. Seventy-five percent of those surveyed said that the kind of violations committed by Newt Gingrich are typical of most politicians these days.

This longstanding distaste for politics may explain the consistent responses to a question Gallup began asking in 1945. In that year, only about two in ten said that if they had a son, they would like to see him go into politics as his life's work. In 1955, nearly three in ten felt that way, and, in 1965, two years after John Kennedy's assassination, Gallup found that slightly more than a third would like to see a son in politics. But that is as high as the percentage has ever been.

Gallup began asking about daughters in 1991, and the results are virtually identical to those for sons. Around a third in 1995 said they would like their daughters to choose a political career (see Table 1).

We're often told that teenagers are out of step with their parents, but at least as far as the pull of the presidency is concerned, young and old are in agreement. A recent Gallup poll of teens found that only 8% said they could see themselves running for political office in the future. Even though the overall percentage was small, the question produced a gender split. Twice as many young men as young women could see themselves throwing their hats in the ring.

But even if “politics” is unappealing, might we not expect that the idea of becoming president would elicit a positive response? Shouldn't seeking the presidency be an honored and honorable pursuit? A spate of recent polls suggests that it's not.

In a 1988 Associated Press/Media General survey, 41% of respondents said they would like their child to grow up to be president, while 46% would not. Just four years later, in October 1992, nearly six in ten in an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll turned thumbs down on the idea. Two polls conducted in 1996, one by Princeton Survey Research Associates for Knight Ridder and the other by Yankelovich Partners for *Time* and CNN, found 63 and 61% respectively saying they

Son or Daughter in Politics?

Question: If you had a son/daughter, would you like to see him/her go into politics as a life's work?

	Yes	No
Son in Politics		
1945	21%	68%
1953	20	70
1955	26	60
1962	23	69
1965	36	54
1973	23	64
1991	24	72
1993	22	70
1994	25	71
1995	32	63
Daughter in Politics		
1991	26	70
1993	23	69
1994	26	71
1995	34	61

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of September 14-17, 1995.

would not want a child to pursue the presidency. The partisan affiliation of the current occupant didn't affect interest. Solid majorities of Democrats as well as Republicans and independents in the Yankelovich poll said no.

The lack of appeal doesn't appear to stem from perceptions that the office is out of reach for most Americans. Majorities in the 1988 Associated Press/Media General study and the 1992 ABC News/Washington Post poll believed it was possible that their child *could* grow up to be president.

Unfortunately for students of politics, questions asked before 1988 about presidential aspirations don't appear to exist. It's possible that seeking the presidency, like political office generally, was never very attractive. In our time, polls reveal a public well aware of the rigors of the job and the scrutiny applied to it. A poll conducted by Gallup in 1980 for the Public Broadcasting Service found that three-quarters of those surveyed believed their fellow citizens expected more of a president today than they did in the past. Roughly the same number felt that the problems a president faces were more difficult than in the past (77%) and, separately, that the press had become more critical of the president (76%). In the same poll, three-quarters of respondents said that good people are discouraged from running by what it takes to become president. Americans were evenly divided about whether the men who had been elected recently were less capable than in the past. Forty-nine percent thought they were, but almost as many, 43%, disagreed.

A Tarnished Image

As the data cited above show, between 1988 and 1992 there was, roughly, a 15-percentage point increase in the number of respondents saying they would not want a child to be president. While it is dangerous to draw sweeping conclusions from limited poll evidence, recent developments may have degraded the pursuit during this time. Scandals are ubiquitous. One doesn't need to be Miss Manners to know that the decorum associated with the presidency has suffered. Revelations about personal peccadilloes of presidents are commonplace. Late night talk show hosts think nothing of making jokes about this President's appetites—sexual or other. In our therapeutic age, presidential candidates have joined our confessional chorus, discussing aspects of their personal lives—boxers vs. briefs—that would have been unthinkable decades ago. The president is one of us, for worse rather than better. To borrow a title from a recent book, the *Repeal of Reticence* may have reduced reverence for the office.

For these and other reasons, the responses to a question posed by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman in 1992 aren't surprising. When asked, "Which one of these would you most like to see one of your children grow up to be?" 38% chose president of a university, 28% head of a large corporation, 11% a sports star, 7% President of the US, and 4% a movie star (see Table 2). A much more extensive list in a poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates for Knight Ridder in September 1996 confirms the findings. In it, people were asked whether they would rather their child grow up to be president or any one of 10 other occupations. As the results in Table 3 show, almost any job was preferable to that of president. College professors, doctors, and ministers tend to rank very high when pollsters measure occupational prestige. In this survey, these careers were much more desirable than serving as president. Six in ten said they would rather their

Table 2
President of a University...NOT the Country

Question: Which one of these would you most like to see one of your children grow up to be: President of the United States, head of a large corporation, president of a university, a sports star, or a movie star?

President of the US	7%
Head of a large corporation	28
President of a university	38
Sports star	11
Movie star	4

Source: Survey by Yankelovich Partners for Time/CNN, June 3-4, 1992.

Table 3
Rather Have Your Child Be President or...?

Question: If you had a child today, would you rather see your child grow up to be...?

	President	Other Profession
President or a doctor	16%	76%
President or a lawyer	34	54
President or a police officer	43	46
President or a professional athlete	37	55
President or a minister	24	70
President or a carpenter	33	61
President or a movie star	49	41
President or a college professor	18	77
President or your state's governor	26	63
President or the mayor of your town or city	33	59

Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for Knight Ridder, September 3-15, 1996.

child be a carpenter than president. And smaller majorities wanted to see their child be a lawyer or professional athlete.

Americans have greater confidence in state and local governments than they have in Washington, and they apparently also find becoming governor or mayor more attractive than becoming president. Twice as many people said they would prefer their child to be a governor rather than president; and the ratio was almost that high for mayor.

People were split about whether they would rather see their child be a police officer (46%) or president (43%). The risks associated with the job of chief executive are real, of course. The ever-present Secret Service and the ambu-

lance in the presidential motorcade are daily reminders of the dangers.

The only career in this list that was less desirable than president was movie star, a finding which says as much about Hollywood as it does about 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Falling Admiration

Another perspective on the attractiveness of the presidency comes from a question Gallup has asked regularly since 1948. In that year, Gallup began asking what man and, separately, what woman, "living today in any part of the world," respondents admire most. In 1986 National Opinion Research Center senior researcher Tom Smith took a systematic

look at how selections have changed over time.¹ He found that for the period 1948-1984, domestic political leaders were the most admired (with incumbent presidents and ex-presidents making up most of the political category.) Religious leaders, foreign political leaders, and military men followed, with business, labor leaders, and the press coming in at the bottom.

In the period Smith examined, domestic politicians lost some of their luster. The proportion of those surveyed who selected elected officials showed a decline in the period of almost 3-4% per year.

Perhaps because of their high level of recognition, presidents often take the top slot, though admiration for them ebbs over the course of their terms. President Clinton has been the "most admired man" every year he has served in office. Yet, the percentage who rated him most admired in 1996 (12%) was less than half the percentage who rated Eisenhower that way in 1955 (26%). The gentler media age of the 1950s, the character of the man then president, and prevailing standards of decorum may explain the higher rating.

Available data make it difficult to say too much about the desirability of the office of president overtime. Clearly, attitudes about seeking the presidency aren't positive now. Restoring respect for the pursuit of the presidency adds yet another dimension to the staggering job description Wayne Shannon offered 15 years ago.

Endnote

1 Tom W. Smith, "The Polls: The Most Admired Man and Woman," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, (Winter 1986), p. 573.



*Karlyn Bowman is resident fellow,
the American Enterprise Institute
for Public Policy Research*