

Nixon and Watergate Revisited

By Everett Carl Ladd

Once again after a quarter-century, there's serious discussion about the possibility of dismissing an incumbent president—whether by forced resignation or House impeachment and a Senate trial. Relatedly, for the first time since Watergate, a president is being strongly criticized for malfeasance in office by some of his own supporters, not just his opponents.

It's hard to imagine two men more different in personality and political style than Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton, and the scandals which have embroiled their presidencies diverge in many ways. We know, of course, the end result of the Nixon scandals; in Clinton's, the jury—American opinion—is still out. Nonetheless, the public now sitting as the ultimate jury is still very much the same as the one that decided Watergate—this despite current questioning about “what has happened to public

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standards?” Upon reviewing polling on Watergate, we are struck by how much the dynamic in public thinking then resembles what we're seeing today. There is, though, one big, related set of differences between the two episodes.

Similarities

For a people who have achieved much politically, Americans have never really liked the game of politics or held most of its players in particularly high regard. When a scandal breaks, we are apt to say, “Well, that's politics!” In April 1973, with the pot really beginning to boil in both grand jury and Senate inquiries, just 31 percent of respondents who had heard of Watergate (83% of the total) described it as “a very serious matter,” while 53% called it “just politics”—the kind of thing that both parties engage in (Figure 1). As the investigations proceeded and new revelations cascaded, the proportions shifted between these two responses, but gradually and moderately. As late as June 1974, two months before Nixon's resignation, 49% called Watergate a very serious matter, 42% “just politics.” Throughout, Republicans were vastly less inclined than Democrats to condemn Nixon (Figure 2).

Rejecting the “game” of politics. During Watergate, as today, much of the public expressed irritation at the extent to which the scandal was drawing attention from the real life of the country. When in mid-June 1973 Harris asked whether “the President was right in saying it is more important for him to spend his time working for the country than to be trying to find out what happened in the Watergate affair,” 52% agreed while only 36% differed. In the same poll, 54% agreed that since Nixon had much of his second term remaining, “it is best to give him the benefit of the doubt in the Watergate bugging and cover-up.” Thirty-four percent disagreed. Responses like these shouldn't be read, I submit, as indifference to the allegations; they reflect a long-

time resignation to politics-as-usual and to the frailty of politicians.

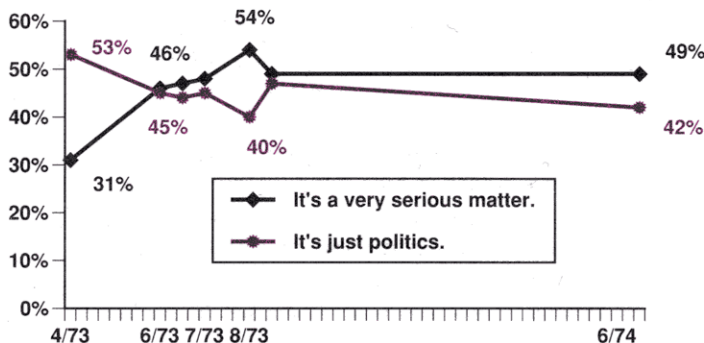
Americans want a free press to scrutinize official performance, but at the same time think coverage is often overwrought. That's so now—and it was the same during Watergate. In late June 1974, 51% of Gallup's respondents said the media “have provided too much coverage” of Watergate, compared to 29%, the right amount, and 15 percent too little. The public rejected the view that the press was out to get Nixon, but pluralities consistently saw him as victim of unfair media attacks.

Arrived at reluctantly. The most striking finding from polling on Watergate is how slowly and reluctantly many Americans came to accept the idea of ousting the president. We wanted an investigation of the scandal, but until very late we really didn't want Nixon kicked out. This reluctance stemmed partly from a reverence for the institution, and partly, I think, from our long-playing aversion to anything that lends more notoriety to the game of politics. In response to questions on whether Nixon should resign or should be impeached and compelled to leave the presidency (Figure 3), substantial majorities said throughout 1973 that he should stay on. Support for Nixon's resignation or forced removal from office grew as the hearings proceeded in 1974—but even then tentatively and uncertainly. In early May 1974, just three months before his resignation, 49% told Gallup interviewers that the President's actions were not serious enough “to warrant his being impeached and removed from the presidency.”

Even near the end of Watergate, much of the public continued to show sympathy for the beleaguered President and a real reluctance to accept a forced resignation. Fifty-five percent of respondents in a Harris poll of July 17-21, 1974, agreed that Nixon “is trying to do his best in an almost im-

Figure 1
Just Politics

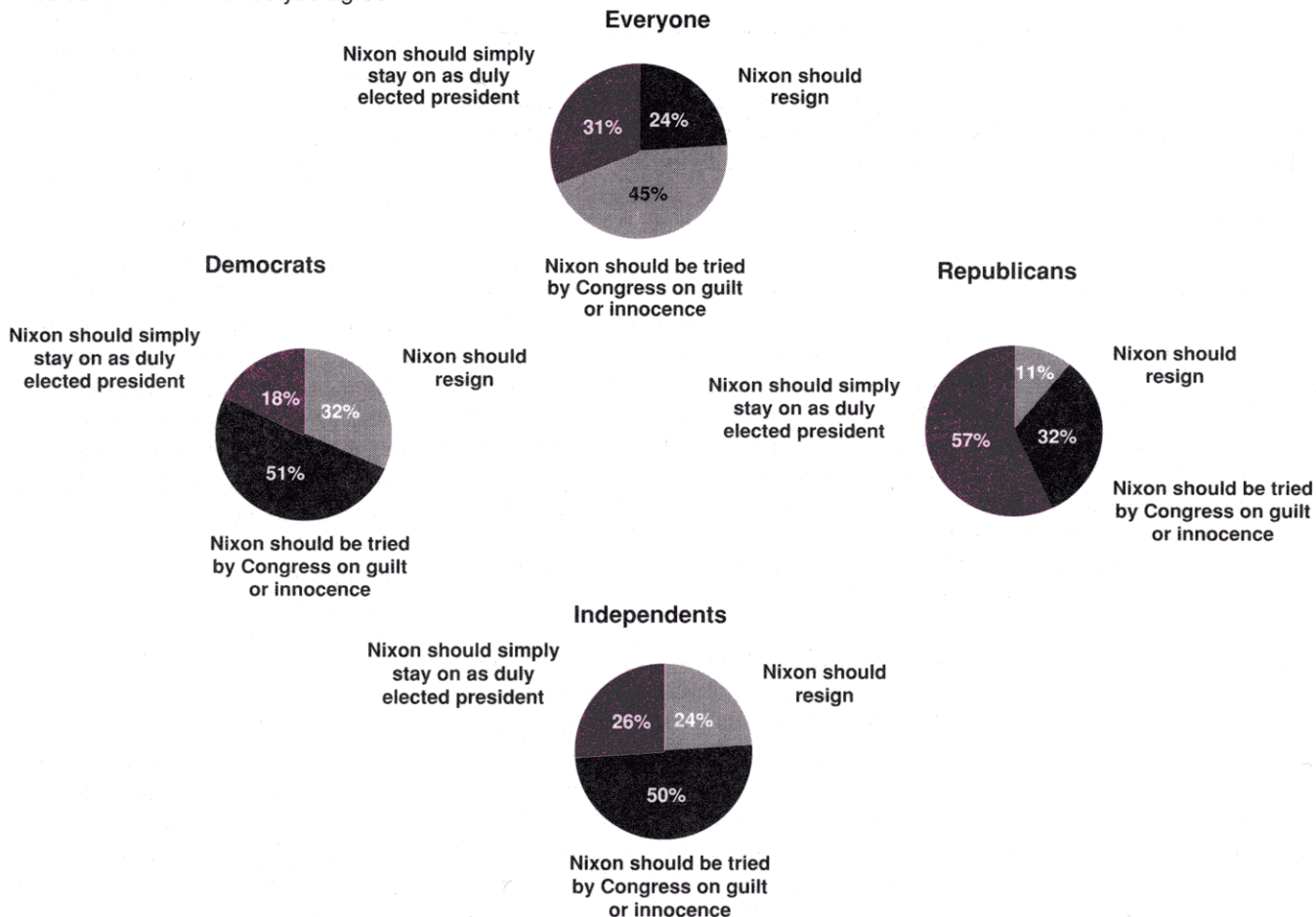
Question: Which of these two statements comes closer to your point of view about Watergate: (a) It's a very serious matter because it reveals corruption in the Nixon administration; (b) it's just politics—the kind of thing that both parties engage in.



Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of June 21-24, 1974.

Figure 2
Normal Partisanship

Question: These are differing views as to what would be the best course to follow now. (a) Some people are saying that as soon as a vice president is confirmed by Congress, President Nixon should resign for the good of the country because he has lost the confidence of the people and can no longer govern effectively. (b) Other people are saying he should not resign but should be investigated and tried by Congress so that the question of his guilt or innocence can be definitely established. (c) Still other people are saying that he has been overcriticized and that he should neither resign nor be impeached but should stay on as our duly elected President. With which do you agree?



Source: Survey by the Roper Organization, February 21-March 2, 1974.

Figure 3

Removing a President From Office Before His Term Ends is Serious Business and Not To Be Broached Lightly: Nixon and Watergate, January 1973-July 1974

Should the President Resign, Be Removed from Office (etc.)?

Organization	Survey Dates	Question	Should	Should not
Harris	6/14-18/73	Should resign? ¹	22%	62%
Gallup	6/22-25/73	Should be forced out? ²	19%	70%
	7/6-9/73		24%	62%
Harris	7/18-22/73	Should resign? ¹	22%	66%
Gallup	8/3-6/73	Should be forced out? ²	26%	60%
	8/17-20/73		23%	69%
Harris	9/23-25/73	Should resign? ¹	31%	56%
	10/73		36%	50%
Gallup	10/19-22/73	Should be forced out? ²	33%	52%
	10/26/73		28%	55%
	10/26/73	Should resign? ³	28%	62%
	11/2-5/73	Should resign? ¹	38%	53%
	11/30-12/3/73	Should be forced out? ²	35%	54%
	1/4-7/74	Should be forced out?	37%	53%
	1/4-7/74	Should resign? ⁴	46%	46%
Harris	1/7-10/74	Should resign? ⁵	47%	42%
Gallup	2/1-4/74	Should be forced out? ²	38%	51%
	2/1-4/74	Should resign? ⁴	42%	48%
Harris	3/3-7/74	Should resign? ¹	44%	47%
Harris	3/24-29/74	Should be forced out? ⁶	43%	41%
Gallup	4/12-15/74	Should be forced out? ⁷	46%	42%
Harris	4/15-20/74	Should resign? ¹	40%	49%
Gallup	5/2/74	Should be forced out? ⁷	38%	49%
Harris	5/4-7/74	Should be forced out? ⁶	49%	41%
Gallup	5/10-13/74	Should be forced out? ⁸	48%	37%
	5/31-6/3/74		44%	41%
Harris	6/1-4/74	Should be forced out? ⁶	52%	35%
Gallup	7/12-15/74	Should be forced out? ⁸	46%	38%
Harris	7/17-21/74	Should be forced out? ⁹	53%	34%

Questions: ¹[Harris] In view of what happened in the Watergate affair, do you think President Nixon should resign as President or not? ²[Gallup] Do you think President Nixon should be impeached and compelled to leave the presidency, or not?; ³[Gallup, 10/26/73] Some people think it would be in the best interests of the country for President Nixon to resign at this time. Others think it would not be in the best interests of the country. What is your opinion? ⁴[Gallup, 1/4-7/74] Do you think President Nixon should resign from the presidency, or not? ⁵[Harris 1/7-10/74] Do you tend to agree or disagree with the statement that President Nixon has reached the point where he no longer can be an effective President and should resign for the good of the country? ⁶[Harris, 3/24-29/74] All in all, do you think President Nixon should or should not be impeached by Congress and removed from office? ⁷[Gallup, 4/12-15/74] Just from the way you feel now, do you think President Nixon's actions are serious enough to warrant his being impeached and removed from the presidency, or not? ⁸[Gallup, 5/10-13/74] Impeachment, as you probably know, involves the following: First, the lower House—that is, the US House of Representatives—must decide whether there is enough evidence to bring a president to trial before the Senate. If the House of Representatives decides that there is enough evidence, the Senate then conducts a trial to determine whether or not the president's actions are serious enough to warrant his being removed from the presidency. Just from the way you feel now, do you think President Nixon's actions with regard to Watergate are serious enough to warrant his being removed from the presidency or not? ⁹[Harris, 7/17-21/74] The House of Representatives can only vote to impeach the president—that is, have him put on trial. Then the US Senate would hold a trial, and either acquit or convict him. All in all, from what you know or have heard, do you think the House of Representatives should vote to impeach President Nixon so he can be tried by the US Senate, or would you oppose such a step by the House?

Nixon '74 and Clinton '98

possible job.” And in another Harris poll completed just one week before Nixon resigned, only 47% thought Nixon would ultimately be impeached and removed from office, while 40% thought that would not happen.

Finding refuge in “illegality.” Polls now show high levels of support for Clinton’s being forced from office if evidence indicates he *broke the law*—if, for example, he lied under oath about having an affair with Monica Lewinsky, or if he participated in an effort to get her to lie under oath about it. (see p. 24). Similarly, support for Nixon’s forced exodus jumped whenever “ifs” were added about firm evidence of *illegal* action—if he had participated in the Watergate cover-up, or if he refused to hand over subpoenaed documents and tapes. Claims of executive privilege found little support as Watergate reached its denouement. In a Harris survey done April 15-20, 1974, only 30% called Nixon right in asserting executive privilege on tapes of presidential conversations with John Dean, John Ehrlichman, H. R. Haldeman, and Charles Colson, while 56% thought “he is using it as an excuse to keep important information from Congress which might convict him.”

Partisanship. Commentary on the response to Clinton’s scandals typically overlooks the huge role played by partisan loyalties. Democrats are far more inclined than Republicans to defend the President, criticize his critics, and oppose the very idea of removing him from office. It was the same way during Watergate, though here Republicans were cast in the role of defending their man. In a Gallup poll of July 1973, 34% of Democrats favored Nixon’s impeachment and removal from office, compared to just 7% of Republicans. Six months later, in January 1974, the proportion of Democrats favoring Nixon’s removal had climbed 14 points to 48% (with 32% opposed), while among Republicans those who favored forcing the

president out had edged up only 4 points to 11% (and 68% wanted Nixon to stay in office). In early August 1974, seven Democrats in ten (71%) wanted Nixon out, whereas six in ten Republicans (59%) opposed his impeachment and forced removal from office. Now, it’s Democrats who are standing by their man (Figure 4).

Dissimilarities

Richard Nixon’s approval ratings were generally high in 1972 when he won landslide reelection, and they remained high in early 1973. But then they began falling, and in December 1973, according to Gallup, just 29% approved the way he was handling his job as president. That’s pretty much the way things remained until Nixon resigned on August 9. Over his last eight months in office, about one-quarter of the public was found approving his handling of the office, 60% disapproving. In contrast, Bill Clinton’s approval scores have risen significantly in his second term and now stand at their highest level for his time in office. These two diametrically opposite second-term tracks have led many to conclude that Watergate had a major impact, but Clinton’s scandals, just a minor one.

Better a crisis in good times. One factor, though, challenges this conclusion. In 1973 and 1974, Americans saw their country in a terrible mess; now we’re generally upbeat and, with regard to the economy, almost euphoric. Nixon took the blows of Watergate in a political environment where his standing would have been greatly diminished had Watergate never intruded, whereas Clinton has seen the impact of his scandals softened by good times.

It’s easy to forget the intense buffeting the US took in the late 1960s and 1970s. In 1971 and 1972, inflation was a relatively modest 3.4%, but it ballooned to 8.8% in 1973 and 12.2% the next year. Economic unease dominated all other concerns. In August 1974 when Nixon resigned, 80% of respondents to a Gallup poll identified economic matters as the most important problem facing the country, and 70% referred specifically to the high cost of living. In late 1973, retaliating for US military backing of Israel, oil-producing Arab countries announced an embargo of oil shipments to the West. Gasoline prices soared, and many found themselves waiting in line hours each week just to purchase a tank of gas. The embargo helped spur a deep recession. Prolonged dissatisfaction with the conduct of the Vietnam War and the protests it engendered accompanied the economic malaise.

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Of course the nation’s mood was sour. Yankelovich, Skelly, and White found in March 1974, found 71% of respondents opining that things were going badly. In September, 65% said in another Yankelovich poll that the US was “in deep and serious trouble.” At the same time, the Roper Organization recorded 75% believing that things had seriously gotten off on the wrong track. The proportion of the public disapproving Nixon’s handling of the presidency followed exactly the same track as these measures (Figure 5).

Figure 4
Partisan Responses to Political Scandals

**Republicans Stayed With Nixon
on Watergate**

	Yes	No	No opinion
7/6-9/73	Question text below.		
Everyone	24%	62%	14%
Republicans	7%	84%	10%
Democrats	34%	50%	16%
Independents	29%	33%	29%
1/4-7/74	Question text below.		
Everyone	32%	46%	22%
Republicans	11%	68%	21%
Democrats	48%	32%	19%
Independents	30%	44%	26%
5/31-6/3/74	Question text below.		
Everyone	44%	42%	14%
Republicans	19%	70%	11%
Democrats	58%	27%	14%
Independents	43%	42%	15%
8/2-5/74	Question text below.		
Everyone	57%	31%	11%
Republicans	31%	59%	10%
Democrats	71%	19%	10%
Independents	55%	31%	14%

**Democrats Have Stayed With Clinton
During His Scandals**

	Yes	No	No opinion
2/4-5/98¹	Question text in note 1.		
Everyone	19%	73%	8%
Republicans	31%	55%	14%
Democrats	9%	88%	3%
Independents	20%	68%	12%
3/18-19/98¹	Question text in note 1.		
Everyone	21%	71%	8%
Republicans	41%	48%	11%
Democrats	9%	86%	5%
Independents	19%	75%	6%
3/18-19/98²	Question text in note 2.		
Everyone	49%	47%	4%
Republicans	71%	26%	3%
Democrats	35%	61%	4%
Independents	49%	48%	3%
3/18-19/98³	Question text in note 3.		
Everyone	47%	49%	4%
Republicans	68%	28%	4%
Democrats	33%	63%	4%
Independents	46%	51%	3%
3/16/98⁴	Question text in note 4.		
Everyone	24%	71%	5%
Republicans	51%	44%	5%
Democrats	4%	94%	2%
Independents	21%	73%	5%

Question: Do you think President Nixon should be impeached and compelled to leave the presidency, or not?

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization.

¹ Survey by Yankelovich Partners, Inc., for *Time/CNN*. **Question:** Based on what you have read or heard, do you believe that President Clinton should be impeached and removed from office, or don't you feel that way?

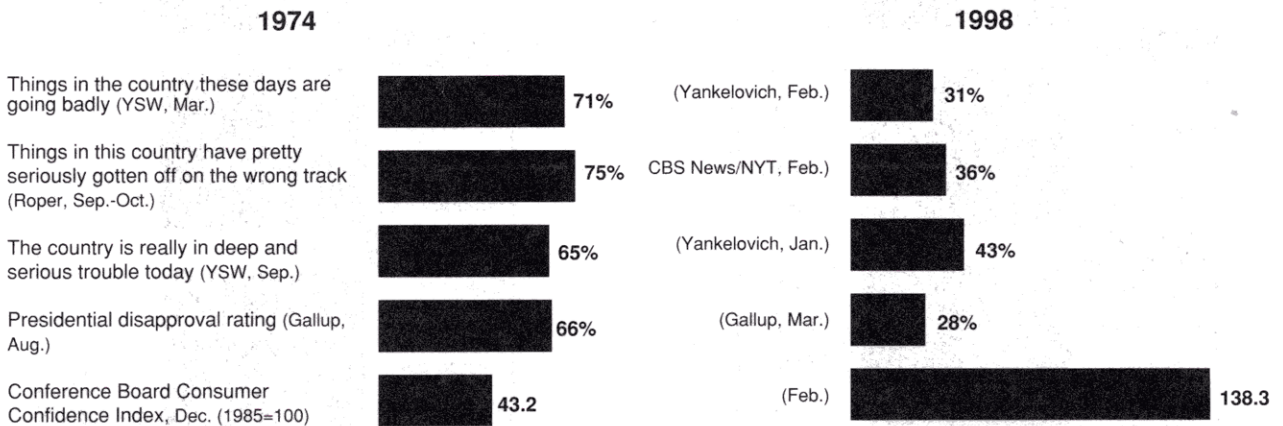
² Survey by Yankelovich Partners, Inc., for *Time/CNN*. **Question:** If the evidence shows that Bill Clinton lied under oath about having an affair with Monica Lewinsky, do you think that Clinton should be impeached and be removed from office for this, or don't you feel that way?

³ Survey by Yankelovich Partners, Inc., for *Time/CNN*. **Question:** If the evidence shows that Bill Clinton lied under oath about making a sexual advance toward Kathleen Willey, do you think that Clinton should be impeached and be removed from office for this, or don't you feel that way?

⁴ Survey by the Gallup Organization for *CNN/USA Today*, March 16, 1998. **Question:** Do you think there is or is not enough cause right now for Congress to begin hearings into whether or not President Clinton should be impeached?

Figure 5

One Reason Bill Clinton's Approval Scores Have Held So Strongly, Whereas Richard Nixon's Plummeted in 1973 and Remained Low Right Up to His August 1974 Resignation, Is That the National Mood is as Upbeat Now as It Was Sour Then; Economic Woes Dominated Public Thinking in '73-'74



What's the Most Important Problem Facing the US Today?

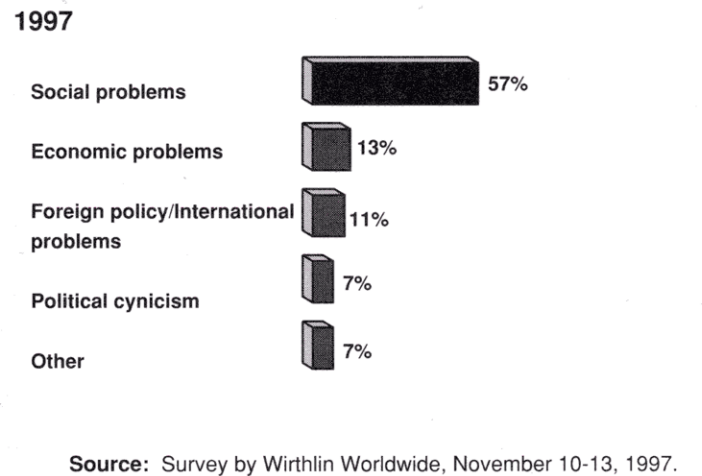
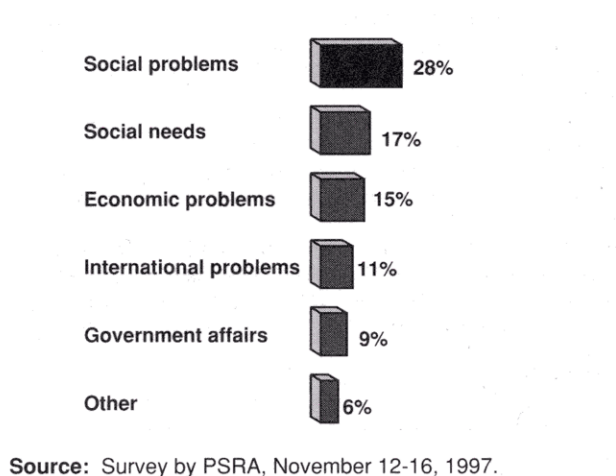
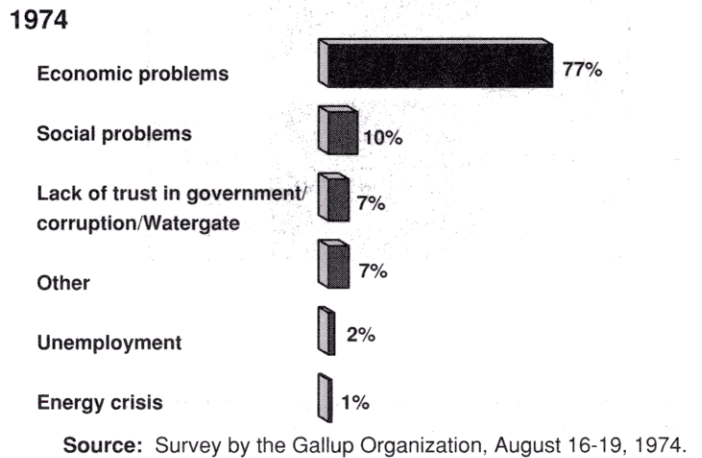
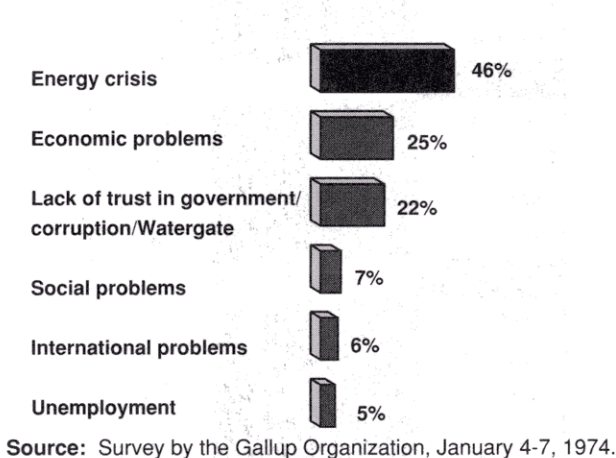
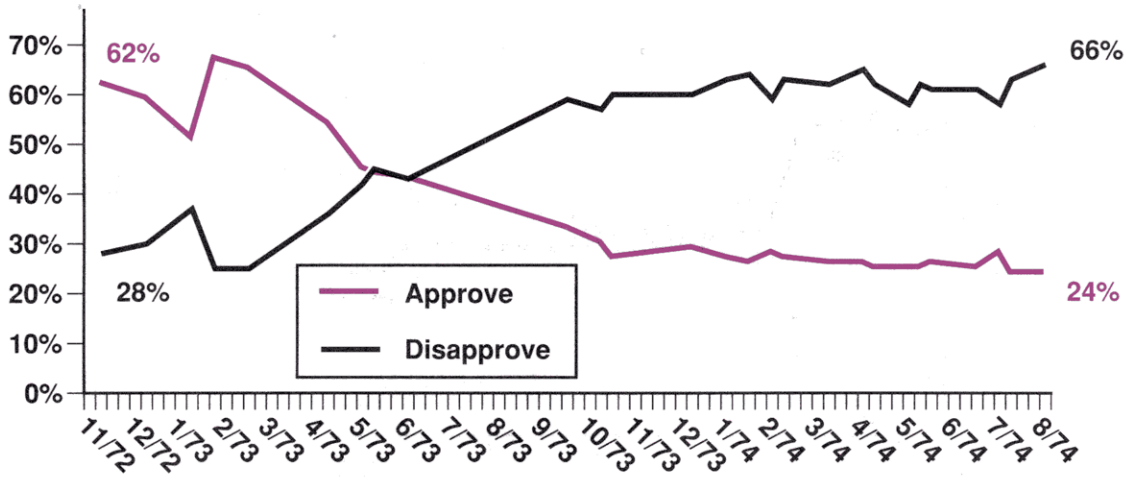


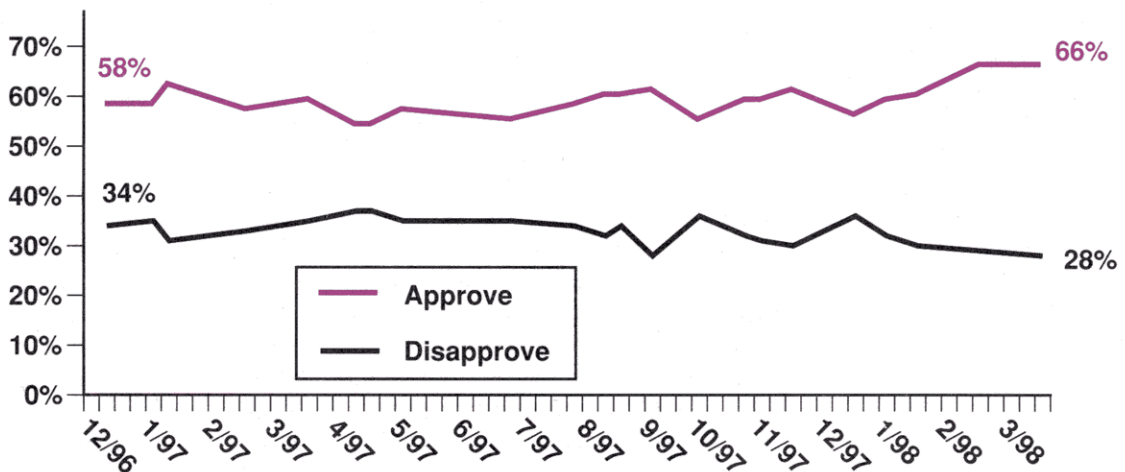
Figure 6

Nixon's Approval Ratings During His Second Term



Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of August 2-5, 1974.

Clinton's Approval Ratings During His Second Term

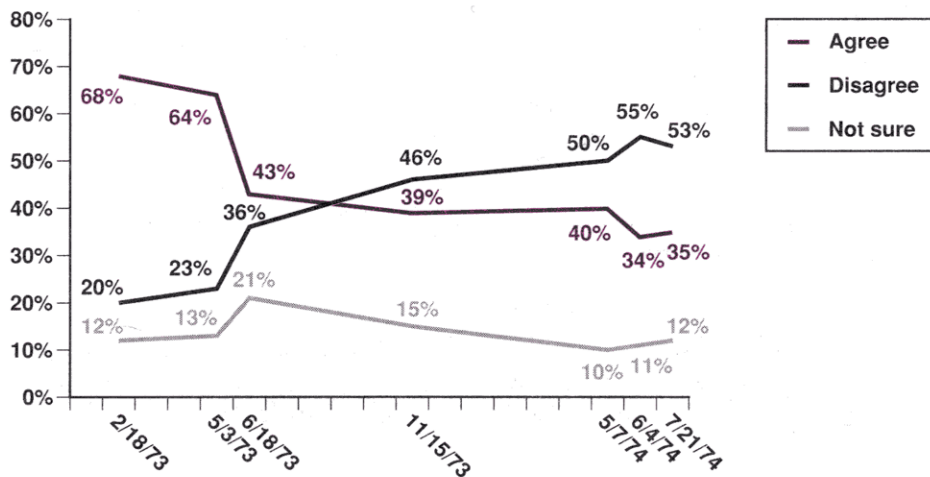


Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of March 20-22, 1998.

Figure 7

Nixon—Man of Integrity?

Question: Do you tend to agree or disagree that President Nixon is a man of high integrity?



Source: Survey by Louis Harris and Associates, February 1973-July 1974.

Nixon's low approval ratings and Clinton's high approval scores don't establish the relative impact of the two scandals. Instead, they point to the profound dissimilarity between the two periods: In 1973-1974 Richard Nixon held the weakest hand of any modern American president; whereas, in 1997-1998 Bill Clinton has held the strongest (Figure 6.) Today a rising tide is lifting all presidents. In a survey taken by Gallup in early February, 74% said that, looking back, they approved of the way George Bush handled the presidency. Sixty-nine percent retrospectively approved Ronald Reagan's conduct of the office, 65% Jimmy Carter's.

A man of honor? The proportion approving the incumbent's handling of the presidency is usually a "general mood indicator": While it reflects assessment of the *president's own performance*, it is

heavily influenced by thinking about the *country's position*. Today, other measures better reflect the extent to which the recurring scandal has diminished Clinton's public standing. An ABC News survey of February 17-18 recorded 66% saying that "high personal moral and ethical standards" does *not* apply to Bill Clinton, just 28% that it does. A Yankelovich Partners poll of mid-January found only 37% calling Clinton "a leader you can trust (p. 21)." In a Princeton Survey Research Associates study of late January and early February, 69% approved Clinton's policies (reflecting general satisfaction with the nation's position), but only 42% said they liked Clinton personally. Asked by Opinion Dynamics in December of last year whether they would rather have their child grow up to be like Bill Gates or Bill Clinton, 47% picked the Microsoft CEO, and 24% the President, while 20% hoped to avoid both possibilities.

A number of polls over the last several years have asked respondents to compare Clinton's performance to that of his predecessors. He usually trails everyone except Carter in leadership and everyone save Nixon in honesty and integrity. But even in the latter comparison, Clinton's position is not secure. A Harris survey of early May 1973 found 64% agreeing with the statement that "President Nixon is a man of high integrity," while 23% disagreed (Figure 7). As Watergate unfolded, Nixon's reputation for probity fell, but as late as May 1974, 40% of respondents called Nixon a man of integrity. In a survey of July 17-21 of 1974, just over two weeks before he was forced to resign, 35% still saw in Richard Nixon a man of high integrity, a greater proportion than so credits Bill Clinton today.

