

Why Reporting of the Polls Has Consistently Understated the Drop in Clinton's Support

By *Everett Carl Ladd*

Discussions of what if any sanction should be imposed on President Clinton—from formal impeachment by the House and trial by the Senate, to resignation, to formal censure, to no further action at all—are being dominated by public opinion poll soundings. What do the American people want done? I agree that on such a matter as compelling a popularly elected president to leave office before his term is up, the public's voice should be an especially loud one. This isn't a technical policy issue where citizens at large may lack necessary information; and it's one that touches a most fundamental element of the American democratic system.

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So while the people aren't supposed to be the only actors in impeachment deliberations, they are, legitimately, important actors, and the message they send through the polls should be given great weight. But what in fact is that message? Unfortunately, the interpretation now being drawn is missing important elements of the polls' findings. The message the public wishes to send is being garbled.

The common interpretation finds the public saying it wants to stick with the President—that while it deplores his behavior, it wants him to remain in office and wants the country to move on to other matters. This even after the long string of allegations of questionable conduct or outright misconduct from Whitewater, to the Clinton White House's securing confidential FBI reports on Republicans (“Filegate”), to the Lewinsky scandal and the Starr Report. And even after elite opinion has shifted sharply: more than 125 newspapers, for example, have called for Clinton's removal from office, including many—such as *USA Today*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, and *The Hartford Courant*—that had never been in the anti-Clinton camp. CNN analyst William Schneider recently remarked on his network that Mr. Clinton would be “gone” from office, given elite opinion, had not public opinion been propping him up.

The “Approval Score” Trap

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question is a fair “bottom line” summary of Mr. Clinton's popular standing, then the latter is indeed so strong as to make impeachment or resignation politically untenable.

But it isn't an adequate summary measure—as lots of survey experience and current data show clearly. For one thing, presidential approval scores pick up sentiment having nothing to do with a president's own standing as such. Some twenty years ago Ben Wattenberg and I, working for *Public Opinion* magazine, developed an index to measure the nation's outlook. We included the presidential approval question as one of the seven index items, not because we were interested in charting a president's standing, but because we had learned that the question is a kind of “general mood indicator.” When public confidence and satisfaction are up—whatever the source—the president's approval ratings often reflect it.

Americans are now unusually well-satisfied with the performance of their country's economy. No one knows precisely how much President Clinton has had to do with the economy's success. But if I applaud the state of the economy, should I tell a pollster that I disapprove of the way the President is handling his job? Many people do, of course, but many others will rate his job performance positively, as another way of indicating their general satisfaction with the state of the nation.

We get further indication of this when we examine the approval scores of the legislature. The question here is an exact parallel to that asked about the president: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Congress is handling its job?” As the country's mood by many measures has climbed over the past couple of years, this has been reflected in Congress's ratings too. In a Gallup poll of May 9-12, 1996, just

The Clinton Presidency

30 percent said they approved of the way Congress is handling its job, while twice the proportion (65 percent) disapproved. But since then, Congress's numbers have been climbing rather steadily: The ABC News/*Washington Post* poll of August 19-21 this year found 55 percent approving congressional performance, only 39 percent disapproving; an NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* survey of September 10-13 recorded 61 percent endorsing Congress's performance, only 28 percent disapproving—among the highest ratings the national legislature has received in the past decade and a half. It's highly doubtful that the proportion of Americans thinking Congress is doing a good job today is twice what it was two and a half years ago. Rather, the rising tide of a generally buoyant national mood has lifted both the President's and Congress's job approval scores.

Fortunately, we don't need to rest on logical inferences to conclude that the high percentages who say they approve Clinton's handling his job are anything like a pure referendum on the Clinton presidency. Poll results show decisively that they aren't. In recent surveys Gallup has posed a number of questions on sanctions that might be imposed. One asks whether "Clinton should or should not be impeached and removed from office"; another asks the respondent whether he or she thinks "Bill Clinton should or should not resign now and turn the presidency over to Al Gore." As the data on p. 28 show, 46 percent and 38 percent respectively in two Gallup September askings indicated they want Mr. Clinton out of office now—either through the formal impeachment process, or by his resigning. The Gallup survey of September 23-24 asked yet a third question on what action, if any, to take against Mr. Clinton: Should Congress censure him, and require that he acknowledge perjury and pay a steep fine. An extraordinary 72 percent of respondents fa-

vored impeachment and/or resignation, or this severe form of censure. What's even more striking, 57 percent of those who said they approved Clinton's handling of his job favored his impeachment, resignation, or censure! With data like these in hand, let's abandon the absurd position that Americans are saying that they're satisfied with Clinton's conduct of his presidency.

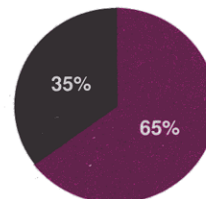
We Don't Relish Forcing a President Out of Office

Americans, quite appropriately, often approach momentous decisions with a good bit of ambivalence. In the years immediately preceding our entry into World War II, Gallup and Roper repeatedly asked respondents whether they favored our going to war with Germany at the time. And every time up to Pearl Harbor, large majorities said no. But in answers to other questions, respondents said they believed a world in which Hitler controlled Europe would put American democracy at the gravest risk, that in general we should do everything necessary to prevent Hitler's winning, and specifically that we should give Britain whatever assistance it needed, including the commitment of American troops, to prevent its fall. We knew the prospects of war were terrible and drew back from them, but well before Pearl Harbor we saw no recourse. The findings of the question on whether we should go to war with Germany "now" were, by themselves, a

Vox Populi

Question: ...Do you think members of Congress should stick closely to American public opinion when deciding what steps to take next—including the results of polls like this one—or should members of Congress do what they think is best regardless of what the American public thinks?

Do what they think is best



Stick close to public opinion

Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, September 11-12, 1998.

highly unsatisfactory measure of an evolving public sentiment that, terrible as entry into the War would be, circumstances were in fact dictating it.

Even the question of impeachment of a president pales in comparison to that on going to war, but the two share one important element: they involve decisions that few want to take but where many see important factors pushing us toward action. A large "floating middle" gropes for a resolution of the tensions it feels imposed by the choices thrust upon it, even as minorities dig in firmly on one side or the other.

From June of 1963 through June of 1974, the Gallup Organization periodically asked respondents whether Richard Nixon should be impeached and compelled to leave office. As the data on p. 31 (top) show, it wasn't until well into the Watergate crisis, and after extensive hearings in the Senate and the formal impeachment inquiry of the House Judiciary Committee—that a majority said that Nixon should be forced to go. Even in mid-June of 1974 just under two months before Nixon's forced resignation, only a bare

majority (52 percent) said they wanted him forced out.

We don't know how the proceedings against Mr. Clinton will conclude. We do know that the proportions responding in questions comparable to the Gallup question shown on p. 31, that they favor Clinton's forced removal from the presidency, are roughly twice as great now as they were in January and February, and that they are fluctuating quite considerably from poll to poll—depending on differences in question wording and immediate developments (see p. 30).

Removal From Office is One Thing; Withdrawal of Trust Another

Impeachment, forced resignation, or formal censure by Congress aren't the only types of sanctions, of course. Withdrawal of public trust and confidence is another. Observers have long noted that a president draws his strength from the general prestige of the office and from his own moral standing. Without public trust, a president may remain in office, but his capacity to lead is greatly diminished.

Throughout his eight years as president, Ronald Reagan got job approval scores that were on the whole "good but not great." The compilation of askings brought together on p. 27 (middle graph) shows approval percentages ranging from the mid-forties to the mid-sixties. Events such as the recession early in Reagan's term and Iran-Contra in the latter part of it, and as well the controversial nature of some of his program initiatives, appear to have held these ratings down. But at every point, Reagan was buoyed up by the public's strong approval of him in personal terms. Clinton's recent ratings are mirror opposites. His job approval scores have been high. But the proportions of the public saying they approve of Clinton "as a person" has lagged well behind, and now stands at just 25 percent. (I present here all of the "approve of him as a person" questions asked about Reagan and about Clinton that I could locate in

the Roper Center archives. The coverage shown on p. 27 reflects the availability of the personal approval question.)

Virtually every measure of Clinton's standing in moral or ethical terms shows it dropping off sharply over the course of his presidency and now near rock bottom. The data on pp. 24 and 25 contrast his robust job approval scores—which as noted reflect many things beyond a direct judgment—and whether he is "honest and trustworthy," or evinces "high personal moral and ethical standards." Only 19 percent in an ABC News/Washington Post poll of August 21, 1998, said that "high ethical standards"

“*Forty-six percent and thirty-eight percent respectively in two Gallup September askings indicated they want Mr. Clinton out of office now—either through the formal impeachment process, or by his resigning. The Gallup survey of September 23-24 asked yet a third question on what action, if any, to take against Mr. Clinton: Should Congress censure him, and require that he acknowledge perjury and pay a steep fine. An extraordinary 72 percent of respondents favored impeachment and/or resignation, or this severe form of censure. What's even more striking, 57 percent of those who said they approved Clinton's handling of his job favored his impeachment, resignation, or censure! With data like these in hand, let's abandon the absurd position that Americans are saying that they're satisfied with Clinton's conduct of his presidency.*”

applies to the President. Other polls have picked up this same widening gap between job approval scores—with their large input from the public's satisfaction with the state of the nation—and Clinton's personal reputation. A Gallup survey of August 21-23 of this year, for instance, found 62 percent giving him a favorable job approval score but only 31 percent describing him as honest and trustworthy. CNN analyst William Schneider has characterized the widening distance between these two measures as "Clinton's character gap." Even Richard Nixon near the end of the Watergate scandal didn't drop as low on the integrity dimension as Clinton has (p. 31, bottom).

Contrary to the prevailing interpretation, the public hasn't "stuck by Clinton." His standing by all measures has eroded since January. On New Year's Day 1998, his impeachment or forced resignation, or formal censure with other sanctions, were contemplated only by a small minority of critics. Now, at least one of these actions is endorsed by a huge majority of the public and even by a majority of those who say they approve Clinton's handling of the job as president. Most of the public regret the scandal, wish it were not upon us, and have no desire to "draw blood." But the verdict on the Clinton presidency, as shown in the polls, is already a harsh one.



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