

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

PUBLIC OPINION AND POLLING DURING PRESIDENTIAL SCANDAL AND IMPEACHMENT

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What an extraordinary year! A year of White House sex scandal, investigation of the president by the independent counsel, impeachment in the House, and acquittal in the Senate; a year when public opinion was a major force in the politics of this country; a year when the polls that measure public opinion and that help to give voice to the American people had a prominent role to play; a year when public sentiment against removal of the president from office was one of the major factors in Bill Clinton's survival.

Vignettes from Callers, Questioning the Polls

During the past year pollsters received a lot of phone calls, questioning the polls. Calls like these:

Caller 1: "What kind of people do you call for your polls? You must not be polling anyone around here in Texas" ("around here on Long Island" "around here in Western Pennsylvania").

Caller 2: "I heard you only poll liberals on the East Coast and West Coast."

Caller 3: "I don't know anyone who likes Bill Clinton. And I don't know anyone who has ever been polled."

I received so many phone calls like this that I came to refer to them by the one-word shorthand of "whodoyapoll?" Most of the "whodoyapoll" inquiries I received came from individuals who were genuinely upset. The callers questioned the national polls because they disagreed with the polls' findings on the sex scandal and impeachment. Callers looked around themselves and couldn't believe they were in the minority nationwide

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when everyone in their local area or their social circle seemed to think like they did.

Usually I would try to explain random digit dialing to the callers and that they had the same chances of being polled as anyone else, but they didn't seem convinced. These conversations typically ended by the caller inviting us to poll more people in their area so we could talk with more real Americans.

The number of such callers rose during 1998 because the stakes of politics had risen. Public opinion really mattered. And polls came under intense scrutiny. Over the years, poll results have often been used as ammunition by one side or another in political disputes . . . but never more so than in 1998 and early 1999.

Now consider two further vignettes from another source—the political pundits.

Vignettes from Pundits, Misunderstanding the Public

Pundit 1: In January 1998 when the sex scandal first broke, Sam Donaldson of ABC News said, If these reports are true, President Clinton will be gone within a week!

Pundit 2: In December 1998, after almost a year of scandal, William J. Bennett, author of *The Death of Outrage*, said, “I may have been wrong” (in thinking the public would eventually react). “I’m not sure enough people care. For the first time in my adult life, I’m not in sync. I don’t get it. What about all these conferences I’ve been to? I mean, values, schmalues. I don’t get it.”

Many pundits, too, looked around at people like themselves and also misjudged or misunderstood the public’s reaction to the Clinton scandal. What was that public reaction?

In January 1998, after the White House sex scandal first came to light, Bill Clinton’s job approval ratings went . . . up. For most people that was at first a surprise. For many in the news media it then became a paradox or mystery to be solved. And for some, particularly Mr. Clinton’s opponents, it continued to be a vexing frustration.

Pundits were confounded. Pollsters scrambled to figure it out. Mr. Clinton’s opponents grew furious.

Public Criticism of Bill Clinton, the Man

What was going on with public opinion?

The American public made an immediate distinction between Clinton

Table 1. Shift in the Public’s Perception of Bill Clinton, the Man

	Question: “Do you think Bill Clinton shares the moral values most Americans try to live by, or doesn’t he?”		
	Does	Doesn’t	No Opinion
January 1998	41	51	8
	40	46	14
	46	45	9
February	44	41	15
April	35	52	13
June	35	54	11
August	44	44	12
	41	50	8
	36	59	5
September	31	63	6
	28	66	6
	30	65	5
	26	69	5
	29	66	5
October	28	66	6
December	32	63	6
January 1999	30	64	6

NOTE.—Based on all adults in nationwide telephone polls by the *New York Times* and CBS News.

the man on the one hand, and Clinton the president, on the other hand. People could be sharply critical of the man and of his behavior even at the same time they thought that as president he was doing a pretty good job.

For example, consider table 1 in the handout. This was a question asked 16 times during 1998 by the *New York Times* and CBS News that probes public perceptions of Clinton, the man. “Do you think Bill Clinton shares the moral values most Americans try to live by, or doesn’t he?”

In January and February of 1998, just before and just after the news of the sex scandal broke, public views on this question were mixed or fairly closely divided. But by April 1998 the perception of Clinton’s moral values had shifted clearly against him. That shift continued, so that by autumn the balance of opinion was two-to-one that Clinton did not share the public’s moral values. And that continued into 1999.

Table 2. Public Perception of Perjury by Bill Clinton

Question: “From what you’ve heard or read, do you think the claims that Bill Clinton committed perjury in his testimony before the Independent Counsel’s grand jury are probably true, or probably not true, or don’t you know enough about it yet to say?”

1998	Probably True	Probably Not True	Don’t Know Enough	No Opinion
September	56	10	30	4
	49	21	28	2
October	61	13	23	3
	65	13	19	3
	67	14	17	3
December	57	17	24	2

NOTE.—Based on all adults in nationwide telephone polls by the *New York Times* and CBS News.

Another way the public was willing to criticize Clinton the man is shown in table 2. Six times from September through December we asked: “From what you’ve heard or read, do you think the claims that Bill Clinton committed perjury in his testimony before the independent counsel’s grand jury are probably true, or probably *not* true, or don’t you know enough about it yet to say?”

Five out of the six times a clear majority said the claims about perjury were probably true.

Public Approval for Clinton, the President

But, at the same time that the public criticized Clinton as a man, they expressed approval of the way he was performing his presidential duties.

Table 3 shows the president’s job performance ratings throughout 1998 and early 1999, based on the question format that Gallup originated in the 1930s: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as president?”

Before the sex scandal hit, Bill Clinton’s job approval rating was running in the mid- to high 50s, as it had throughout the previous year since his reelection. In our first reading after the scandal hit (which was also

Table 3. Bill Clinton, the President—His Job Performance Ratings

	Question: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as President?”		
	Approve	Disapprove	No Opinion
January 1998	58	29	13
	56	38	6
February	72	22	6
	66	25	9
	73	23	4
	68	26	6
March	64	28	8
	64	30	6
April	67	28	5
	67	25	8
May	64	30	6
	62	29	10
June	60	34	6
July	64	29	7
	63	29	8
August	67	26	7
	68	27	5
	71	27	2
	65	31	3
September	60	33	7
	62	34	4
	67	28	5
October	63	31	6
	67	28	5
	63	32	5
	65	30	5
November	67	28	5
December	65	30	5
	67	29	4
	72	26	2
January 1999	69	27	4
	65	30	5
	65	30	5
February 1999	66	29	5

NOTE.—Based on all adults in nationwide telephone polls by the *New York Times* and CBS News.

just after his televised State of the Union message to Congress) Clinton's rating jumped to 72 percent approval. It then settled in at the mid-60s for the rest of the year.

The overall impression in table 3 is of a rally-round-the-president just after the scandal broke and then a sustained plateau at the mid-60s level that did not fall back into the 50s until after the controversy ended in February of this year. (Since the NATO air attacks on Yugoslavia began he has had some readings in the 50s.)

Many people wondered: Why the high and sustained job approval rating amid a year of scandalous revelations? And many have asked: What accounts for it?

For one thing, the country seemed to be in pretty good shape. The economy had low unemployment and low inflation, and the public perceived that; overwhelming majorities said the national economy was good. But it was not just the economy. Crime was down significantly, and the public had come to perceive that, too. The federal budget deficit, a seemingly intractable problem, had become a budget surplus. And the nation was at peace. Given so many good reasons to take satisfaction with the way things were going in the country, many people probably asked themselves: Why risk a political crisis that might disrupt things?

So William J. Bennett was partly right and partly wrong: the public did react—just not exactly the way Mr. Bennett assumed they would.

But there were other factors, too, that help to explain the paradox or mystery of Clinton's high job approval ratings during his year of scandal.

A Distinction between Private Matters and Public Matters

One of the other factors is that the American public made another distinction that proved to be crucial—a distinction between private matters, on the one hand, and public matters, on the other. Most of the American public classified Mr. Clinton's sex scandal as being in the private zone. They came to this conclusion quickly and never changed their minds.

Table 4 shows 13 readings throughout 1998 on the question: "Thinking about Bill Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky and the issues surrounding it—Do you think of this whole situation *more* as a private matter having to do with Bill Clinton's personal life or *more* as a public matter having to do with Bill Clinton's job as president?"

The public's view—by a two-to-one majority—was that it was a private, personal matter. This view persisted unchanged throughout 1998—even as more and more information became available month after month, and even as the news media pursued the story at far greater length and in far more detail than the public ever desired.

Table 4. Private Matters versus Public Matters

Question: “Thinking about Bill Clinton’s relationship with Monica Lewinsky and the issues surrounding it—do you think of this whole situation more as a private matter having to do with Bill Clinton’s personal life, or more as a public matter having to do with Bill Clinton’s job as President?”

1998	Personal Life	Job as President	Both Equally	No Opinion
February	61	31	5	3
	62	29	4	5
	64	29	4	3
March	62	31	3	4
April	61	36	...	3
July	64	28	...	5
August	66	29	...	5
	64	31	...	5
	62	34	2	3
September	58	37	4	2
	58	35	5	2
	65	29	4	2
December	66	31	...	3

NOTE.—Based on all adults in nationwide telephone polls by the *New York Times* and CBS News

Investigation, Hearings, Impeachment All Seen as Partisan Attacks

There was also another factor that helps explain Clinton’s high job performance ratings amid a year of scandal. Much of the public viewed Mr. Clinton’s accusers as partisans who were attacking the president out of political motivations and not acting as impartial investigators.

Table 5 shows 21 readings during 1998 on the question: “Do you think Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr has mostly conducted an impartial investigation to find out if anything illegal occurred or has mostly conducted a partisan investigation to damage Bill Clinton?”

At the beginning of 1998 Kenneth Starr’s investigation consisted of Whitewater, Filegate, the death of Vincent Foster, and other matters he had been looking into for several years. Starr’s investigation of these mat-

Table 5. Shift in Public Perception of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr

Question: "Do you think Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr has mostly conducted an impartial investigation to find out if anything illegal occurred, or has mostly conducted a partisan investigation to damage Bill Clinton?"			
1998	Impartial	Partisan	No Opinion
January	30	47	23
	36	45	19
	34	54	12
February	30	55	15
	26	55	18
	31	55	14
March	27	59	14
	27	57	16
	31	58	11
April	27	56	17
	30	58	13
	27	53	20
May	29	52	19
June	29	56	16
July	23	66	11
August	25	61	14
	32	58	10
	29	60	11
September	29	60	11
	32	55	13
	27	64	10

NOTE.—Based on all adults in nationwide telephone polls by the *New York Times* and CBS News.

ters, exacerbated by a campaign against Starr by the White House, had already created a public image of him that was more negative than positive.

But as the independent counsel took on the White House sex scandal as an additional part of his investigations, his image worsened—with public perceptions of his partisanship rising from the 40s, through the 50s, into the 60s by September—a two-to-one balance of negative over positive sentiment.

In the end, Republican legislators in both the House and the Senate also came to be perceived by the public in a negative way.

Table 6. House Hearings, Impeachment Vote, and Senate Trial Seen as Partisan Attacks

Question: “Do you think the Republicans in Congress voted to begin an impeachment inquiry of Bill Clinton mostly because they think the charges in the Independent Counsel’s report are serious enough to warrant a formal investigation or mostly because they want to damage Bill Clinton and the Democrats?” (October)

Question: “Do you think the Republicans in Congress voted to impeach President Clinton mostly because they think the charges are serious enough to warrant impeachment or mostly because they want to damage Bill Clinton and the Democrats?” (December, after House Impeachment Vote)

Question: “Do you think the Republicans in the Senate have mostly conducted an impartial trial to find out if any serious crimes occurred, or have mostly conducted a partisan trial to damage Bill Clinton?” (January/February, during trial)

	Serious, Impartial	Damage Bill Clinton	Both	No Opinion
October 1998	34	57	4	5
	31	63	2	4
December 1998	36	60	...	3
January/February 1999	28	60	...	11

NOTE.—Based on all adults in nationwide telephone polls by the *New York Times* and CBS News.

Table 6 shows that the public perceived, first, the House Republicans and, later, the Senate Republicans as mainly out to damage Clinton for partisan reasons . . . and by about the same two-to-one negative balance that we found in the case of Kenneth Starr.

This public perception of a partisan vendetta against Clinton, I think, permitted many members of the public to discount a lot of the charges against Clinton during 1998. It was an election year, after all, and partisan attacks, negative campaigning, charges of perfidy, and general mudslinging were to be expected. In the minds of many voters, a lot of the charges against Clinton may have been seen as “just politics” and therefore deserved to have the usual discount applied to them.

All the national polls demonstrated these patterns in one fashion or another. And the public's view of Clinton and the scandal proved to be a robust one; even though different polls used different question wordings, all of the polls agreed in their general findings during the past year. While I am drawing on *New York Times*/CBS News poll data because I am most familiar with it, I believe that each of the national polling organizations could tell a pretty similar story. Indeed, in an earlier panel at this conference, Frank Newport presented Gallup data showing a number of parallel findings.

An Electorate That Already Knew Bill Clinton

It is likely, too, that President Clinton's job approval ratings stayed high because the American electorate already knew Bill Clinton.

Clinton had a reputation as a philanderer, or suspected philanderer, back in 1992. Recall the Gennifer Flowers episode. And George Bush raised the so-called character issue in that year's campaign. But Americans elected Clinton president anyway in 1992—an election year when the economy swamped all other issues.

The public knew Clinton even better by 1996—after years of investigations, lawsuits, and coverage in the media concerning Whitewater, the FBI files episode, the Paula Jones lawsuit, and so on. Yet Americans elected Clinton for the second time in 1996.

So, when the sex scandal began in January of 1998, I think the allegations were blunted in their effects because sex—and lying about sex—were things people already associated with Bill Clinton—things people had already folded into their consideration of him. People knew what they had in Bill Clinton.

Moreover, the fact that the scandal involved sex, and lying about sex, made it all much easier for the public to understand and to form an opinion quickly. The public may need more information and lectures from experts when an unfamiliar issue like Bosnia or Kosovo comes along. Americans don't think they need pundits to explain things to them if the issue involves sex.

Public Preference for Censure of Clinton

But the American public did not want Clinton to get off scot-free. Throughout the autumn and winter there was a majority (or near majority) of the public in favor of Congress censuring Clinton.

Table 7. Public Preference for Censure of Clinton

Question: “Given what you know right now, do you think Congress should censure President Clinton—that is, should Congress vote to publicly reprimand President Clinton for what he has done—or don’t you think Congress should censure him?”

	Should Censure	Should Not Censure	No Opinion
September 1998	52	37	11
	57	33	10
	46	43	11
October	51	38	11
	54	34	12
	51	38	10
	49	40	10
November	49	40	11
December	54	37	9
	58	32	10
January 1999 ^a	52	39	9
	52	38	10

NOTE.—Based on all adults in nationwide telephone polls by the *New York Times* and CBS News

^a Question wording in 1999 substituted “the Senate” for “Congress.”

Table 7 shows a dozen readings on the question: “Given what you know right now, do you think Congress should censure President Clinton—that is, should Congress vote to publicly reprimand President Clinton for what he has done—or don’t you think Congress should censure him?”

Public preference for censure exceeded 50 percent in nine out of the 12 readings. And in nine out of the 12 readings, preference for censure was at least 10 percentage points higher than opposition to censure. Moreover, the opposition to censure came from both those who wanted something tougher, like impeachment, and those who wanted something more lenient, like dropping the entire matter.

So public backing for some kind of compromise way to punish Clinton was always there, if the political leadership in Congress had wanted to use it and build on it.

Public Opposition to Removing Clinton from Office

But there was never much public enthusiasm for removing Clinton from office.

Table 8 shows nine readings through the autumn and winter on the question: “Just from the way you feel right now, do you think President Clinton’s actions are serious enough to warrant his being impeached and removed from the presidency, or not?”

Public opinion was clear on this question. At least 60 percent always said Clinton’s actions were not serious enough to warrant removal from office.

Public opinion remained steady on this question over the course of all the debate in the House Judiciary Committee, all the speeches on the floor of the House itself, and all the arguments during the trial in the Senate.

(Incidentally, the same pattern held when we asked about resignation. Would it be better for the country if President Clinton resigned, or better if he finished out his term of office? Opinion was two-to-one against resignation, and it never shifted.)

Table 8. Public Opposition to Removing Clinton from Office

	Question: “Just from the way you feel right now, do you think President Clinton’s actions are serious enough to warrant his being impeached and removed from the presidency, or not?”		
	Yes	No	No Opinion
October 1998	36	60	4
	31	64	5
	37	60	3
	30	68	3
November	26	70	4
December	34	64	2
	35	62	2
January 1999 ^a	34	62	4
	37	61	2

NOTE.—Based on all adults in nationwide telephone polls by the *New York Times* and CBS News.

^a Question wording in 1999 substituted “convicted by the Senate” for “impeached.”

Did Public Opinion “Save” Clinton?

So, did public opinion save Bill Clinton?

Well, Clinton was not saved at all from being impeached. Clinton’s status as the second president to be impeached, and the only elected president to be impeached, will mar his historical record and reputation forever. In a way the public got the censure it said it desired. Impeachment without conviction may be the most severe kind of censure that is possible.

In the immediate sense, Clinton was saved from removal because the U.S. Constitution requires a two-thirds majority for conviction in the Senate—a two-thirds vote that was probably never there—since the Republicans held 55 seats but needed 67 votes.

That constitutional requirement means, in effect, that it is almost impossible to have a partisan removal of a president. A significant number of votes from the other party would almost always be needed to reach two-thirds in the Senate. Some kind of bipartisan coalition would almost always be necessary.

In the end, a supercharged political polarization was created by the impeachment process, first in the House and then in the Senate. Only a handful of Democratic representatives in the House joined their Republican colleagues on impeachment. And not one Democratic Senator joined the Republicans in voting for conviction and removal.

But, in a larger sense, I think it can be said that public opinion was one of the major factors in Bill Clinton’s survival (see table 9). The public’s willingness to distinguish the man from the president, their separation of the private zone from the public zone, their perception of Clinton’s opponents as mainly partisan, and the continued high job approval ratings they gave Clinton were picked up early by all the polls and widely reported by the news media.

Table 9. Public Views Immediately after Impeachment

Question: “Today/yesterday, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to impeach President Clinton and send articles of impeachment to the Senate for a trial. Do you approve or disapprove of the House voting to impeach President Clinton?”

	Approve	Disapprove	No Opinion
December 1998	38	60	2

NOTE.—Based on all adults in a nationwide telephone poll by the *New York Times* and CBS News.

And those public sentiments surely acted as a brake on some members of Congress. Public opinion gave pause to some Republican senators, several of whom defected from the rest of their party. And public opinion allowed all 45 Democratic senators to hold firm. Now, I have not interviewed any of these senators, and I am sure they would cite many reasons for their vote, but I feel confident that the state of public opinion would be one major factor they would cite.

Could it have all been different?

Well, the polls would have quickly picked up on a different public opinion if it had existed. If Clinton's behavior had been perceived by the public as a betrayal of the public trust, if his critics and investigators had been viewed as more impartial or bipartisan, if the public's ratings of Clinton's job performance had plunged—the polls would surely have scrambled to measure those attitudes accurately, and the news media would have fallen over themselves to report those findings.

The Disconnect between Elites and the Public in 1998–99

During the past year there was a “disconnect” between the public, on the one hand, and many elites on the other hand—including political leaders and journalists. Pundits kept assuming that public opinion would eventually turn against Clinton—after one more piece of evidence, after the release of the Starr Report, after Clinton's TV confession, after the release of Clinton's videotaped grand jury testimony, after impeachment was voted in the House.

Rep. Henry Hyde, for instance, said in December that he had hoped the hearings and debates would have an educational effect on the public and change their opinions, and that his reason for ignoring the polls was, to quote him: “Look, if Jesus Christ had taken a poll, he would never have preached the gospel.”

And pollsters, naturally, had to keep polling to detect whether or not the “turn” eventually happened. There were several points during the year when it looked as if it might be starting to happen.

But the American public never did turn.

So the pundits were flabbergasted, confounded, flummoxed . . . by public opinion . . . as revealed through results of the polls.

Some Speculation on the Future of Citizen Clinton

It is interesting to engage in a bit of speculation about the future.

Once Bill Clinton finishes his second term and becomes citizen Clinton, will there be more scandal, lawsuits, and even indictments?

If so, will the American public still care?

The public may or may not care much what happens to Bill Clinton once he is out of office. While Clinton serves as president, the public has been clear in its preference that things go along without disruption. The nation has been in too good shape to risk a political crisis.

But once the state of the union is in some other president's hands? It will be ironic if the American public finally does turn on Clinton, once he is only Clinton the man and no longer Clinton the president—that is to say, once the public has no further need to, or incentive to, protect him.

That would confound and flummox the pundits, too, wouldn't it?

A Major Role for Polling

In conclusion, a major role for polls and surveys, a major contribution of polls and surveys, is to bring the views of typical Americans into the rooms where elites reside and decide:

- into boardrooms, so that business executives and corporate directors can know the voices of customers and stockholders,
- into political back rooms (formerly smoke-filled rooms) so that political leaders can hear the voices of citizens and voters,
- into newsrooms so that reporters and editors can understand the voices of the public and can broadcast them and publish them for a wider audience.

A poll can amplify the voices of typical Americans, can get their views treated with respect, and can force elites to look beyond the Washington beltway, to look outside midtown Manhattan, to look more broadly than the usual news sources.

I think polls performed that function very well in the past year.

Some people did not like what the polls found. They formed the minority point of view on impeachment, which pollsters always faithfully reported, too.

But each national polling organization did so many polls and reported them so often because public opinion was genuinely important and because the results of each poll mattered.

So, the stakes of politics rose in 1998 and early 1999, and both public opinion and the polls that measure that opinion played a major role, sustained across the entire year.

In my professional lifetime I think 1998–99 is perhaps the most sustained time period I have ever seen for such a role.

And that's why we got all those phone calls—asking “WhoDoYou-Poll?—whodoyapoll?” and “Why don't you call more people around here and talk to some real Americans?”

What an extraordinary year!

Thank you very much.