

Politics and Personal Conduct: The Clinton-Lewinsky Scandal and Public Trust

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ABSTRACT

The Clinton-Lewinsky affair was a highly publicized scandal during the late 1990s that left a lasting mark on the public's trust in the presidency. This paper contextualizes Clinton's scandal in the framework of presidential scandals and their repercussions. This study analyzes public approval polls, media coverage, and impeachment articles to explore how the fallout of the scandal influenced public perceptions of Bill Clinton's authority as president. The findings suggest a complex dynamic wherein public trust in President Bill Clinton's personal character declined while his job approval ratings remained relatively stable. This dichotomy of low trust and high approval suggests a disparity between personal misconduct and professional performance in the eyes of the public. Furthermore, this paper investigates the long-term implications of the scandal for subsequent presidencies and the evolving expectations of presidential conduct. This study's goal was to analyze public approval in the president over history in the context of Bill Clinton's historical scandal.

Introduction

As the highest elected official in the nation, the president embodies the principles and values on which the country was built. Public trust in the executive branch is important because it increases participation in government and leads to compliance with policy. While Congress casts the vote for impeachment, the legislative branch is one part of a dynamic system that ultimately represents the people. The political sphere of the United States. Public trust in the government has had its ups and downs, with many incidents damaging the fragile relationship between the president and the people. Presidential decisions that have resulted in economic decline or unpopular military action have been most damaging to public trust in the government.

In 1929, when the Great Depression first ravaged the economy and caused millions of Americans to lose their jobs, people looked towards President Herbert Hoover to solve the crisis. His lackluster response and weak policies resulted in public outcry, causing many Americans to question the man's policies and general efficacy. Later, as the U.S. sought to contain the spread of communism, President Lyndon B. Johnson escalated the fighting in the Vietnam War, using the power granted to him under the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to order hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops to join the battle. The ensuing conflict caused hundreds of thousands of Americans to die in an effort to stop the Viet Cong, a development that led many in the U.S. to believe that Johnson was sending their husbands and sons to die in what many perceived to be a futile war.

However, while the U.S. public has historically been very critical of their presidents' unpopular policies, citizens have been relatively forgiving of moral indiscretions on the part of their president. Although the exact number is difficult to determine with certainty due to varying historical records, it is believed that upwards of ten United States presidents have had affairs while in office, with notable examples such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. Despite the scandalous nature of many of the affairs, none of the presidents were overly criticized by the public, both back then and today. These men were able to continue their presidencies without losing the support of the public. In 1998, the most infamous presidential affair was exposed after Bill Clinton was accused of having a secret affair with Monica Lewinsky, a White

House intern. His following impeachment trial sparked debates on the legality of his actions, and threatened the trust the public held in him. Overall, while the scandal and impeachment shifted the American public's assessment of Clinton's character as a man, their trust in him as a politician remained largely unchanged.

Separation of Politician and Civilian

Although the scandal ultimately involved a consensual affair rather than an attempt to hide illegal activities, Bill Clinton still deliberately misled the American people while under oath. His direct and bold claim to the public that he "did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky" (Figure 1) was undermined by the fact that multiple news sources confirmed that Lewinsky "wrote long love letters to President Clinton" and that there was indeed a "relationship between the president and the young woman" (Figure 2). The audacity of his lie to the public in a weak effort to preserve his reputation generated feelings of resentment and disgust in the public.

However, the American public proved capable of judging Clinton an immoral man while still accepting the reality of Clinton as an effective politician. The affair was salacious and morally repulsive, but not egregious enough to negate the effect of his having created millions of jobs or the signing of NAFTA. The American public simply found it easy to believe that a good leader could be a bad husband. Clinton's decision to cheat on the First Lady and then boldly deny the accusations led the public to deem him and his party as lacking in "moral authority" and he became a laughing stock to many people (Figure 3). As a public figure, Clinton-like any celebrity—was at the mercy of the American media and moral outrage. However, the American public was also quite familiar with celebrities behaving badly.

Despite all the criticism and disapproval surrounding his infidelity, the public never hated him enough to want to remove him from office. The public was able to see this scandal as a sign of his despicable nature, and not as a reflection of his office. It is in this way that although the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal may have forced the public to reevaluate their feelings towards Clinton as a man, it did not majorly change their attitudes towards his abilities as the President of the United States.

Source: Clinton, Bill. Response to the Lewinsky Allegations. January 26, 1998

Now, I have to go back to work on my State of the Union speech. And I worked on it until pretty late last night. But I want to say one thing to the American people. I want you to listen to me. I'm going to say this again: I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie, not a single time; never. These allegations are false. And I need to go back to work for the American people. Thank you.

Figure 1. Bill Clinton's response to the public in the wake of the Lewinsky Allegations

After news of Bill Clinton's alleged affair with Monica Lewinsky emerged, he made a public press statement denying the allegations.

Source: "Newsweek Kills Story On White House Intern", DrudgeReportArchives. January 17th, 1998.

The young intern wrote long love letters to President Clinton, which she delivered through a delivery service. She was a frequent visitor at the White House after midnight, where she checked in the WAVE logs as visiting a secretary named Betty Curry, 57.

The DRUDGE REPORT has learned that tapes of intimate phone conversations exist.

The relationship between the president and the young woman become strained when the president believed that the young woman was bragging about the affair to others.

NEWSWEEK and Isikoff were planning to name the woman. Word of the story's impending release caused blind chaos in media circles; TIME magazine spent Saturday scrambling for its own version of the story, the DRUDGE REPORT has learned. The NEW YORK POST on Sunday was set to front the young intern's affair, but was forced to fall back on the dated ABC NEWS Kathleen Willey break.

Figure 2. Newsweek article exposing the truth of the relationship between Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky.

Newsweek's article exposing the truth of the relationship between Clinton and Lewinsky undermined Clinton's bold-faced lie to the press and discredited Clinton in the eyes of the public. The public could see Clinton lying through his teeth.

Source: Varvel, Gary. "Varvel's cartoon history of Bill Clinton", IndyStar. November 15th, 2017.



The Paula Jones sexual harassment case along with the Monica Lewinsky scandal caused many to question Bill Clinton's character.

Gary Varvel

Caption: The Paula Jones sexual harassment case along with the Monica Lewinsky scandal caused many to question Bill Clinton's character.

Figure 3. Political cartoons emerged as a result of the public finding out about the President's scandal.

Many people began to question Clinton's character and it led to people also starting to question his authority as well. It was mostly Bill Clinton's character, not his political ability, that was attacked.

Republican Overreach

Public judgment of Clinton was also mitigated by Republican overreach as the scandal unfolded. Clinton was impeached by the House of Representatives on December 19, 1998, under charges of obstruction of justice and perjury (Figure 4). The subsequent impeachment trial saw him acquitted on both counts, in spite of a Republican majority in the Senate. The House—which at the time also had a Republican majority—tried to shape the affair into a political weapon, aiming to turn the public against the democratic president.

In doing so, however, the Republicans overplayed their hand. The impeachment debate proceeded along sharply divided party lines, and its content quickly became a vitriolic partisan attack as opposed to a

momentous and solemn consideration. The fact that impeachment proceedings lacked any semblance of bipartisan support suggests that political considerations played a central role in driving the process forward. This divide influenced public perception, reinforcing the notion that the impeachment was driven more by political vendettas than genuine concerns about presidential misdemeanors. This public scrutiny refocused the spotlight on the initial allegations of perjury, calling attention to the fact that Clinton's actual deceit was ultimately a lie about his private life rather than about a crime. Republican efforts to frame the affair as an abuse of political power did not hold up under this scrutiny. Newt Gingrich, a well-known Republican, argued for Clinton's resignation, citing the "different standard" for resignation. Such arguments for less stringent standards ultimately weakened legal arguments for impeachment. The public was able to differentiate Clinton's political career from his personal issues, and they were only emboldened by the Republicans' actions. As the trial went on, Republican "meanness" backfired; the Democrats actually gained five seats in the Senate during the mid-term elections on November 3, 1998. Despite their feelings about Clinton's moral failings, the public ultimately passed political judgment against the Republican Party.

Source: Congress of the United States of America, In the House of Representatives. December 19, 1998

Resolved, That William Jefferson Clinton, President of the United States, is impeached for high crimes and misdemeanors...

In his conduct while President of the United States, William Jefferson Clinton... has willfully corrupted and manipulated the judicial process of the United States for his personal gain and exoneration, impeding the administration of justice,... and has to that end engaged... in a course of conduct or scheme designed to delay, impede, cover up, and conceal the existence of evidence and testimony related to a Federal civil rights action brought against him in a duly instituted judicial proceeding...

In all of this, William Jefferson Clinton has undermined the integrity of his office, has brought disrepute on the Presidency, has betrayed his trust as President, and has acted in a manner subversive of the rule of law and justice, to the manifest injury of the people of the United States.

Figure 4. Congress Articles of Impeachment against Bill Clinton

Congress's statement in their Articles of Impeachment against Clinton reveals that they believed his affair with Clinton manipulated the judicial process and subverted law and justice.

Public Love of Gossip

Clinton's fortune to escape the scandal with his political career largely can be attributed to the public's relationship with celebrity gossip. Newspapers went wild with the story, with headlines such as "Debate reflects era of meanness" (Figure 5), showing how the media spun the scandal to become a sensational story about illicit relationships and high-stakes maneuvering. The media spread the story far and wide, and even when the public heard the story, Clinton's approval ratings remained high. In fact, according to a report from the Pew Research Center demonstrates the fact that Clinton's impeachment "barely dented his public support" (Figure 6). As the media kept reporting more and more about the story, the public became desensitized to the whole affair, making them more intrigued and less critical of Clinton. It helped that Clinton and Lewinsky's relationship was entirely consensual.

Finally, Hillary Clinton's attitude played a large role in staving off public condemnation of her husband. As the affair's "victim," Hillary's decision to remain committed to the marriage implied her own continued trust of Clinton as a man. Her crucial endorsement of their relationship ultimately curtailed the momentum

of declining public opinion. It became almost like a soap opera to the public, an engaging drama that they were able to enjoy.

In similar fashion, they found an antagonist in the form of the Republicans. Many people viewed the Republicans as an unjust party latching on a matter of personal affairs and shaping it into an attack with a political agenda. By making the Republicans out to be the offending party, Clinton was able to sidestep the public distrust. Even though the way he was viewed by the public took a hit, it ended up sparing his political career. The public's fascination with the story made them separate the Clinton they saw in the newspaper headlines from President Bill Clinton, so even though his public persona took a hit, his approval ratings remained high.

Source: Mitchell, Alison. "Debate reflects era of political meanness", The New York Times. December 19th, 1998

WASHINGTON — As the acrid, rueful and righteous debate went on throughout Friday, the House stood poised to do what once was unimaginable, even to its Republican leaders: impeach a Democratic president on a near party-line vote, against the will of the electorate.

This was not the way something as momentous as impeachment was supposed to take place. It was not what Rep. Henry Hyde, the Illinois Republican presiding over impeachment, had once described when he said, "This has to be a bipartisan exercise. It's important that we have the confidence of the American people."

On Friday, with the partisan gulf seemingly unbridgeable in the House, Hyde was left insisting that impeachment was not "the ravings of some vindictive political crusade" but was about protecting "the basic structure of our freedoms — the rule of law."

Figure 5. New York Times article about the reasons behind Bill Clinton's impeachment

The New York Times published an article regarding how many representatives in Congress believed that the impeachment process was beginning to move along bipartisan lines.

Conclusion

Clinton's continued support from the public and the nature of his impeachment trial can be viewed as being largely ineffective in altering the public's perception of his legitimacy in office, as the impeachment charges were administered by a house majority of opposing Republicans. In Clinton's case—and in the case of leaders before him and many since—Americans have shown that they do not necessarily equate personal integrity with public trust.

Ironically, former president and current Republican front runner Donald Trump is enjoying widespread approval despite a long history of allegations of sexual and financial indiscretion. With all of the information and evidence of presidential wrongdoings available on the internet for everyone to see, it is difficult to imagine why people like Trump can remain in power. At some point, it boils down to whether this type of behavior has become acceptable or if it is practically accepted for a president to be this way.

In the end, presidents are still politicians, who have to climb the political ladder to earn their spot, and in turn it may be inevitable for them to have dirty secrets hidden. It ultimately comes down to whether or not the public can find it within themselves to ignore it and focus on their potential as the leader of the United States.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

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