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## Setting New Precedent: Assessing Clinton's Popularity

by Lauren Kofke, CC '00

One year after the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke President Clinton has weathered an impeachment trial and enjoys a healthy six percent job approval rating from the public. Compared to other presidential scandals, such as Watergate and Iran-Contra, the Lewinsky matter is puzzling in its lack of impact on the president's approval rating. In fact, Clinton was more popular at certain points during the crisis than immediately before the allegations surfaced last January. This essay attempts to explain this phenomenon by examining research from the fields of public opinion and political psychology, and by analyzing specific features of the political climate surrounding this particular presidential scandal. The conventional wisdom used to explain Clinton's resilience runs along the lines of, "It's the economy, stupid." In reality, presidential popularity hinges on a constellation of real-world variables, such as the unemployment rate and wartime casualties, as well as public perceptions about the state of the nation. While the economy plays an important role as a major determinant of presidential popularity, the evidence indicates that presidential scandals usually outweigh economic effects. This indicates that there may be some unique aspects of the Lewinsky scandal that account for its negligible effect on public opinion about Clinton, including the prior expectation of voters and the reasoning schemas advanced by the media. Ultimately, it is clear that presidential popularity can not be described solely by the measure of job approval ratings. By deconstructing public opinion about the president into measures of character and personal values, presidential popularity becomes more dynamic and the puzzle of Clinton's persisting popularity can be explained.

### BEYOND THE ECONOMY

An article by political scientist John Zaller that appeared in the June 1998 issue of *Political Science and Politics* attempts to tackle the question of Clinton's untouchable job approval ratings. In the article "Monica Lewinsky's Contribution to Political Science," Zaller examines Clinton's approval ratings in the first few weeks of the scandal and concludes that his high rating "shows not just the power of a booming economy to buttress presidential popularity. It shows, more generally, the importance of political

substance, as against media hype in American politics."<sup>1</sup> Zaller's main contention is that the public supported Clinton on his track record of "peace, prosperity, and moderation" despite the negative slant of most media coverage of the scandal. As a result, Zaller contends that the Lewinsky scandal's effects on presidential approval fly in the face of a vast body of research that gives the media a significant role in shaping public opinion. The media's effect on public opinion is documented by a wealth of public opinion research. In *The Rational Public*, Robert Shapiro and Benjamin Page demonstrate these effects by examining the content of media reports in 1969-1983 and corresponding changes in public opinion. This study demonstrates that "what appears on TV news accounts in large part for the relatively short term (neither instantaneous or glacial) changes in public opinion."<sup>2</sup> The key point of this kind of public opinion theory holds that the public does not respond to objective events, but to events as they are interpreted and conveyed by the mass media.<sup>3</sup> Zaller contends that the Lewinsky scandal's effect on Clinton's approval rating challenges this data. But, Zaller never asks or answers the question of "why now?" or more specifically "why does the public choose 'substance' over 'hype' in this specific scandal while relying on 'hype' at other times?" A closer look at the public's reaction to the Lewinsky scandal indicates that Zaller's explanation doesn't go far enough to explain the puzzle of Clinton's popularity.

### PERCEPTION VS REALITY

Public opinion about the presidency is formed by individuals' perceptions of the world around them, and these perceptions can be more important than objective reality. "It's the economy, stupid" is accurate to the extent that it describes individual's perceptions of economic well being, as distinct from objective economic indicators such as the unemployment rate, real disposable income, inflation, and gross domestic product. Research by Shapiro and Bruce Conforto indicate that perceptions of economic well being move presidential popularity, while objective economic indicators are relevant only to the extent that they influence these perceptions. Shapiro and Conforto examine economic perceptions, as determined by individuals' evaluation of whether their family is "better off" or "worse off" compared to a year ago, and compare these data with objective economic indicators as well as changes in presidential popularity. They conclude that changes in the unemployment rate are correlated with shifts in approval ratings, but changes in inflation and real disposable income are not. The strongest influence on presidential popularity is changes in respondent's opinions of whether they are worse or better off. Changes in the economic indicators are correlated

with changes in economic perceptions. These objective indicators thus affect presidential popularity by affecting public perception, but this perception is not formed solely from economic reality. Shapiro and Conforto find that only 50 percent of the public's economic perceptions can be accounted for by objective economic variables. The other factors in forming this perception probably include media messages, social interactions, personal experiences, and its even possible that the causal relationship moves in the other direction, with presidential approval leading to more optimistic economic perceptions. In terms of Zaller's argument that the public chooses the "substance" of Clinton's political and economic record in spite of media messages, this research demonstrates that public perceptions of "prosperity, peace, and moderation" are not determined in a vacuum.

The economy is not the only factor that influences presidential popularity. Before attributing Clinton's resilience at the polls to a booming national economy, one must examine the relative importance of economic factors in determining a president's approval rating. In particular, what is the significance of economic performance relative to presidential scandal? Evidence indicates that, contrary to what one may expect from the Lewinsky situation, scandal usually is correlated with larger approval shifts than changes in the economy. In a study of the movement of presidential popularity from 1963 -1980 indicates that "citizen evaluations are as heavily affected by the president's action in the symbolic political arena as they are by fluctuations in economic conditions."<sup>4</sup> Kinder examines the relative effects of "high drama" on the political stage and individual perceptions of economic well being. He examines both changes in presidential approval as well as the how long these changes persist. In particular, Kinder finds that "presidential authority events" cause more lasting changes in public opinion than economic conditions. To have this lasting change, an "authority event" must provide striking evidence about the president's ability to control political outcomes and must give a clear indication that things were different than previously imagined. An event like Iran-Contra, where Reagan's knowledge of executive branch activities and personal credibility were called into question, would fit into this category. Seemingly the Lewinsky scandal would fit as well, with political outcomes spinning out of control in an impeachment trial and the president accused of adultery, perjury, and obstruction of justice. If the state of the economy is no more relevant than scandal in presidential approval, then Clinton's persistent popularity cannot be explained solely by continued prosperity. Kinder's research would lead one to predict that the Lewinsky scandal would have at least some effect on Clinton's approval ratings, but this is not the case. So, what is it about the Lewinsky scandal that sets it apart from other similar events?

## AN EXPLANATORY MODEL

Charles W. Ostrom's and Dennis M. Simon's comprehensive model of presidential popularity offers some insights into the uniqueness of the Lewinsky scandal. According to their model, "citizens evaluate the president in light of their own preferences and... such decisions are a function of a comparison between expected and actual presidential performance."<sup>3</sup> Ostrom and Simon describe 12 types of "presidentially relevant events." The events are divided according to whether they are unanticipated or anticipated, institution-based or occupant based, and domestic, international, or personal. The Lewinsky scandal would fall into the institution-based, unanticipated, personal category, which encompasses scandals and other events that "challenge the integrity of the president and his administration."<sup>6</sup> The model is based on the notion of a rational citizen that evaluates the president across all twelve categories and adds these discreet evaluations to create an overall level of approval. Individual opinion within any of the twelve categories is expressed by the following equation (where O is the outcome, O(e) is the expected outcome and N is a constant determined by the amount of attention focused on the issue).

$$X = (O-Oe)N$$

Simon and Ostrom's model of presidential approval hinges on the relationship between outcomes and expected outcomes. The greater this difference, the more impact an event will have on public opinion.

This has huge relevance to the Lewinsky scandal. The public's expectations of outcomes are formed by the politician's actions and by the characteristics usually associated with the presidency. On both levels, the Lewinsky scandal can not be described as unexpected or surprising in any way. From Arkansas to Washington, from Gennifer Flowers to Kathleen Wiley, Bill Clinton has been dogged by allegations of womanizing, adultery, and sexual harassment. On the basis on his history, including an ongoing sexual harassment suit, the fact that he might have an affair with a White House intern cannot accurately be called "unexpected." On a larger level, the notion that the institution of the presidency and sexual reserve go hand in hand has been debunked by presidents from Jefferson, to Roosevelt, to Kennedy. Thus, the Lewinsky scandal is not an unexpected outcome from the perspective of the institutional history of the presidency. If the difference between outcomes and expectations is small, then an event will have little impact on presidential approval. If that difference is effectively zero, then no matter how much the media focuses citizens' attention on the event (represented by N) the resultant change in public opinion will be insignificant.

Although Ostrom and Simon's model offers an explanation for Clinton's persistent popularity, it is not wholly satisfactory. For instance, the public may not have expected Clinton might lie under oath, lie to the public, obstruct justice, or be impeached and tried. Most studies, including those discussed above, rely only on the president's job approval rating when analyzing the effects of various events. An examination of public perceptions of Bill Clinton demonstrates that public opinion is much more nuanced than approval ratings indicate. The public's general approval of Clinton's job performance masks some unflattering opinions about his personal characteristics. According to Gallup polls, a majority of the public thinks that "honest and trustworthy" does not apply to Clinton. According to Gallup Polls from Feb. 1999, only 35 percent of Americans say they have a positive opinion of Clinton as a person. A majority also thinks he is not trustworthy and honest, doesn't have good judgement, and doesn't share their values. While a majority has persistently opposed impeachment, a majority has also felt he is guilty on all four articles of impeachment. Just examining Clinton's job approval disguises the fact that the nation's attitude toward its president is ambiguous and contradictory.

To explore this puzzling public attitude, it is necessary to examine the predominant reassigning schemas surrounding the scandal. Schemas are defined as "mental prototypes, images, metaphors, scripts, or categories that provide a frame of reference against which experience is compared and interpreted."<sup>7</sup> A schema is a mental framework that "tells people how to reason about the matter at hand."<sup>8</sup> For example, the "Vietnam War schema" leads people to question the consequences of engaging in military action in a far-off nation where U.S. interests are not clearly manifest. According to Glynn et al., schemas provide "a useful way of understanding why many political debates seem to restate a few arguments over and over. These debates often hinge not on 'new ideas' but on efforts to persuade people to apply one widely held schema instead of another."

In the case of the Clinton scandal, much of the public discussion centered on three distinct schemas: the Conspiracy schema, the Nixon schema, and the Private Life schema. The Conspiracy schema, first advocated by Hilary Clinton on Good Morning America and later expounded by various media elites, holds that the Lewinsky matter is the product of a "vast right wing conspiracy" led by politically-motivated independent council Kenneth Starr. In this schema, Clinton is the victim of an unfair attack by his enemies. In the Nixon schema, largely advanced by Republican members of Congress and echoed by their supporters throughout the media, Clinton is guilty of illegal conduct—perjury, obstruction of justice, deceit—that is particularly heinous because he is the nation's 'chief law enforcement

officer.'. In this schema, Clinton, like Richard Nixon, has violated the public trust by violating his constitutional duty as president to "see that the laws are faithfully executed." In the Private Life schema, advanced by Clinton and his media supporters, the Lewinsky matter is part of Clinton's private conduct, and has nothing to do with Clinton in his public role as president. Clinton, in his infamous mea culpa speech, declared "even presidents have private lives." In this schema, public punishment or retribution should not befall a president for actions he takes as a private man.

By ascribing to either the Conspiracy schema or the Private Life schema, individuals could reconcile the contradiction between Clinton's record of "peace, prosperity, and moderation" and his unappealing conduct. Cognitive dissonance theory offers some insights as to the mechanism by which conflicting attitudes can be brought into balance. In *Persuasion and Politics*, Michael Milburn applies the theory of cognitive dissonance to explain the public's reaction to the Iran-Contra scandal as well as Reagan's attempts at public relations damage control. A similar analytic framework can be applied to the ambiguous public opinion surrounding the Lewinsky scandal. According to cognitive dissonance theory, an uncomfortable state of cognitive dissonance occurs when two attitudes or beliefs come into conflict. For example, the notion that God is good but allows evil to exist. Or, in this case, the notion that one respects or likes Bill Clinton, but he is an adulterer or perjurer. In this context, one must recall that Clinton was a popular president, at about 60 percent approval rating, before the scandal broke. The public, in order to continue support of Clinton, had to reconcile increasingly damaging revelations about Clinton's conduct with their prior attitude of approval. There are four ways that cognitive dissonance can be alleviated: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Transcendence, differentiation, and denial epitomize the reasoning schemas advanced by Clinton's supporters.

Clinton's amoral private life is positively related to his behavior in the Lewinsky situation. However, the public Clinton, or Clinton as president, does not approve of his private mores or his behavior in the Lewinsky matter. The public, along with the Clinton in his public role, both believe that his private conduct was reprehensible. The relationship was achieved by Clinton's repeated apologies and expressions of regret, as well as actions like meeting with ministers, which appear to put him on the path of reforming his reprehensible private conduct. As he said himself, his relationship with Lewinsky was "inappropriate" and "wrong." Through differentiation and the Private Life schema, the public can have a positive attitude about Clinton in his public role—i.e. support his policies, believe he does well for the nation—yet believe that Clinton is privately dishonest and amoral, and disap-

prove of his conduct with Lewinsky. This balanced relationship can account for Clinton's high job approval ratings in the face of public opinion that sees him as dishonest and not sharing their values. Because, the Lewinsky matter is seen as part of Clinton's private life, it is also not obvious that the public punishment of impeachment is appropriate. In fact, according to this schema, Clinton as president is a distinct entity from Clinton as father or Clinton as husband. In this case, the public can also believe that Clinton is guilty on the four articles of impeachment but not believe that his actions warrant impeachment.

Transcendence could also play a role in reconciling the conflicting elements of public opinion. In transcendence, two items are grouped together as a single entity and related to a third attitude. In this case, a positive evaluation of Clinton can be dissonantly linked to a negative evaluation of his behavior in the Lewinsky scandal. However, as a unit, this set of beliefs can be positively related to a belief that this single mistake on Clinton's will not affect a generally positive future for Clinton and the nation:

agenda for future [+] — { [+] — [-] } past mistake balance achieved

In this case, Clinton's apologies and public remorse could be taken as indications of "learning and moving on." In this situation, balance is achieved because the Lewinsky scandal is seen as a one-time incident that will not marr the positive prospects of Clinton's future in office, as indicated by his policy agenda, or other factors. Several of Clinton's actions portrayed by the media during the scandal could have reinforced this harmony. For example, Clinton's public apologies play a key role in creating balance in this situation. Also, television images of Clinton walking hand in hand with his wife and daughter evoke a sense that, for them, Clinton's past mistakes have been dealt with such that they can move on as a family. Also, Clinton's public church attendance, meetings with ministers, and prominent bible-carrying, all point toward a reformed president. These actions can even be considered an implicit schema of their own, the Moving On schema.

The final mechanism, bolstering, fits with Zaller's contention that the public chose "substance" over scandal in the Lewinsky situation. In this scenario, the public's positive appraisal of Clinton is linked in an unbalanced manner with his behavior in the Lewinsky scandal. However, this imbalanced situation is rectified by adding other positive elements to the disapproval of Clinton. Zaller proposes that the public's approval of Clinton's policies bolster their negative appraisal of his behavior and brings the attitudes into balance:

positive view of Clinton [+] — [-] —[+] — [+] — [+] bolstering,

balance achieved

The negative appraisal of Clinton's behavior [-] is bolstered with positive evaluations of his policies [+], such as the nation's economic performance. This brings the attitude relationship into balance.

Did the public really choose "substance" over scandal, or did they ascribe to the Private Life and Moving On schemas? It is, of course, impossible to explore the intricacies of public psychology in this situation simply on the basis of poll data. However, Zaller's contention that the public came to a decision in spite of media messages is hasty at best. Using content analysis of news broadcasts, Zaller determined that the media messages about Clinton were largely negative in the first days of the scandal, and later media coverage became essentially balanced. In the first few days of the scandal, Clinton's approval rating dropped in accordance with negative media messages. In the period of balanced coverage, public approval of Clinton rebounded. If the public was simply following media messages, Zaller concludes, then Clinton should not have experienced a bounce in the polls during the period of balanced coverage. However, if the public internalized either the Private Life, Conspiracy, or Moving On schemas then their resulting support may have resulted from siding with political and media elites that advocated these schemas. In the case of the Private Life or Moving On schemas, negative media messages would be present in any content analysis because these schemas encompass negative attitudes about Clinton's behavior in the scandal. If the public accepted one of these schemas, then their deliberations and resulting support for Clinton was not as independent of media influence as Zaller contends.

#### CONCLUSION

Clinton's persisting popularity is a complex and puzzling phenomenon. A review of relevant public opinion and political psychology research indicates that its causes may go beyond a public choosing "substance" over scandal, or a public made apathetic by prosperity. Certainty, prosperity, peace, and moderation played a role in Clinton's persisting popularity. But, public expectations about Clinton's sexual behavior, and norms about presidential conduct in this realm probably also contributed to the Lewinsky scandal's negligent effect on Clinton's job approval ratings. Going beyond simple job approval ratings, one finds that public opinion about Clinton is not so uniformly positive as it first seems. In fact, the majority of Americans thinks Clinton is guilty as charged on all four articles of impeachment, and generally sees him as a person of low moral character. Yet, they want him to

remain president and approve of his public performance in office. The schemas advocated by politicians, including the president, along with media elites, all correspond to various means of bringing dissonant attitudes into harmony. Adopting certain schemas may have enabled the public to separate Clinton's behavior from his job performance or see him as an innocent victim of a right wing conspiracy. Clearly, the public's reaction to this long and harrowing political drama demonstrates a complex relationship between attitudes, real-world variables, public perceptions, and the messages of media and political elites. In the end, whatever the mechanism, the public rallied to the president's defense, and ultimately the public will was served.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Zaller. "Monica Lewinsky's Contribution to Political Science," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, (June 1998): 182.

<sup>2</sup> Zaller 344.

<sup>3</sup> Zaller 345.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Kinder, "Presidents, Prosperity, and Public Opinion," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 45:187.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Ostrom and Dennis Simon, "Promise and Performance: A Dynamic Model of Presidential Popularity," *American Political Science Review* 79.2: 336.

<sup>6</sup> Ostrom and Simon 345.

<sup>7</sup> Glynn, *Public Opinion* (Colorado: West View Press, 1999) 286.

<sup>8</sup> Glynn 286.

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## Legal Challenges to the Distribution of Popular Music

By Yonina Halpern, BC '00

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution guarantees that, "Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech or of the press."<sup>1</sup> In a letter to Mr. A. Coray, Thomas Jefferson expressed that this principle, among others, is "vitaly essential to the protection of the life, liberty, property, and safety of the citizen."<sup>2</sup> However, the civil right of freedom of speech is not absolute. The courts have ruled that "all speech ... is not entitled to the same degree of protection at all times and in all circumstances."<sup>3</sup> Speech constituting slander, libel, "fighting words," or obscenity does not receive First Amendment protection.<sup>4</sup>

### THE HISTORY OF ATTEMPTS TO RESTRICT ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

When rock-and-roll was introduced in the 1950s white, adult Americans immediately feared its possible effects on American society.<sup>5</sup> Sensing a "link between rock-and-roll and teenage rebellion," many Americans began censorship campaigns to prevent the corruption of the American teenage population by the devil's music.<sup>6</sup> Censorship efforts included the sanitation of lyrics and the prohibition of rock-and-roll parties.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1960s, American censorship groups targeted, "socially conscious sons and drug-oriented lyrics."<sup>8</sup> There were those who wanted to silence music groups like "Peter, Paul, and Mary" who snag out against the Vietnam War and called attention to the serious problem of poverty and America.<sup>9</sup> Then, during the late 1960s and continuing through the 1970s, other censorship groups advocated the removal of the "dope menace."<sup>10</sup> They were disgusted with songs like "Don't Step on the Grass" and "Cocaine Blues," which promoted substance abuse." These individuals succeeded in pressuring radio stations to refuse airing records with lyrics promoting drug use.<sup>12</sup> This in turn compelled many record companies to change the lyrics of such songs.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, local governments were encouraged to, and did use, zoning laws and ordinances to prohibit rock concerts.<sup>14</sup>

With the release of rock videos in the 1980s, rock music became a medium that one not only listened to, but one also watched. This new phenomenon, with videos like Madonna's "Like a Virgin," inspired another wave of censorship endeavors.<sup>15</sup> Censorship groups began to fight for a