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# Sex, Politics, and Public Opinion: What Political Scientists Really Learned From the Clinton-Lewinsky Scandal\*

Arthur H. Miller, *University of Iowa*

William Jefferson Clinton is only the second president to have been impeached by the House of Representatives. While he was not removed from office, roughly half of the Senate chamber voted him guilty on the perjury and obstruction of justice charges that the House formulated as articles of impeachment in early February 1999. Although Clinton remains in office, numerous politicians, political pundits, and media commentators continue to condemn his extramarital affair with Monica Lewinsky while she was a White House intern as immoral and reprehensible.

Many outspoken Republicans have raised questions about how the American people could continue to have confidence in their political leaders, government institutions, or the rule of law when a president who lied to the public, lied under oath, and obstructed justice remains in office. Others ask how they can explain this immoral behavior and thwarting of the law to their children, especially in light of all the salacious details that were made public in Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr's report on the Clinton-Lewinsky affair.

News of a possible extramarital affair between Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky during the 1995-96 period surfaced in January 1998, coming to light in the course of investigations related to Paula Jones' sexual harassment lawsuit<sup>1</sup> against

the president. Tapes Linda Tripp made of her conversations with Monica Lewinsky and turned over to Starr's office confirmed the allegations. What followed was a year-long exposé as details of the affair gradually tumbled into the public domain. The year ended with the House voting for impeachment on December 19, 1998, and the new year began with the Senate voting not to remove Clinton on February 12, 1999.

The purpose here is not to chronicle the events of that year but to search for potentially broader effects in the immediate aftermath of the scandal. The goal is to scientifically determine to what extent the Clinton-Lewinsky affair may have undermined the American public's trust in government and political institutions.

I first review the relevant literature on trust in government, then assess how the public reacted to various aspects of the affair, Starr's investigation, and the impeachment process in the House of Representatives. Next, I examine change in the public's perception of Clinton's character. Given that the mass media were so prominent in keeping the story before the American people, I also consider how well the media fulfilled their role as watchdogs of the public interest. Additionally, I examine the merits of Hillary Clinton's charge that a right-wing conspiracy lay behind the Starr investigation and impeachment from the perspective of ideological divisions within the public. Subsequently, I assess the impact that public reaction to the affair had on Clinton's ratings, support for Congress and the Republican Party, and trust in government more generally. I sketch the broader implications of my analysis in a brief concluding section.

## Relevant Literature

Government legitimacy is the foundation of every democracy. Concerns about the vitality of democracy arise, therefore, when public trust in political leaders and institutions falls. Generally, Americans' trust in government has been declining since the mid-1960s, with a brief period of rising trust in the mid-1980s. Many researchers have called attention to this long-term trend (see e.g., Citrin 1974; Craig 1993; Miller 1974; Miller and Listhaug 1990, 1993, 1998; Nye, Zelikow, and King 1997). Explanations proposed for this decline include poor government performance, public dissatisfaction with government policy outcomes and procedures, government deficits and general economic hardship, political ideology, and even the rise of post-material values.

When Clinton's affair with Lewinsky became public, it was immediately treated by the news media as a revelation that might potentially drive trust of government even lower. Very few researchers, however, have examined whether the immoral behavior of political leaders leads to citizen distrust of government. For example, none of the authors in the most recent compendium of explanations for declining confidence in American government considers immoral behavior as a causal factor of political discontent (Nye, Zelikow, and King 1997).

Perhaps this oversight stems from the impact David Easton's *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (1965) has had on how social scientists think about diffuse public support of government. Easton argued that dissatisfaction with specific policies or specific leaders would not influence the more generic and fundamental trust that citizens have in government and political institutions.

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There should be no enduring impact because periodic elections provide a mechanism for voting the rascals out, thereby bringing in new leaders and new policies. Such thinking was echoed by Citrin (1974) when he argued that the growing distrust found by Miller (1974) in the early 1970s was most likely just a temporary phenomena caused by Nixon's relatively low personal popularity. Miller (1974), in rebuttal, argued that unfavorable incumbent behavior and dissatisfaction with policies could have an enduring and eroding effect on trust in government if it persisted across elections, or over a series of incumbents, particularly if the incumbents were of different political parties.

As the importance of political parties declined during the 1970s and 1980s, the prominence of the presidency was accentuated, and eventually even Citrin (see Citrin and Green 1986) acknowledged that public dissatisfaction with more profound aspects of presidential character, rather than superficial popularity, could have enduring detrimental effects on trust in government. Miller and Borelli (1991, 170) similarly argued that distrust of government may arise from negative public assessments of politically relevant aspects of presidential character (such as strength of leadership, compassion for others, and morality), but not the mere personal popularity of the incumbent. More recently, Norman Ornstein (1993) argued that declining ethics and honesty among politicians in general have contributed to the growth of political distrust.

Given these various theoretical arguments, it is certainly plausible that Bill Clinton's apparent philandering affected how the public judged him personally and how they felt about government and political institutions more generally. The president is the most visible political actor in the country and if people use his behavior as a heuristic to judge government as a whole, then his perceived immorality may be a significant determinant of broader trust in government. To test this possibility empirically, it is first necessary to ascertain how the public

reacted to various aspects of the affair, the Starr investigation, and the impeachment process.

Empirical evidence from the Heartland Poll conducted by the Iowa Social Science Institute is used for examining public reactions to the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. This regional survey of citizens living in seven Midwestern states has been conducted annually since 1988.<sup>2</sup> The fall 1998 survey was specifically designed to gauge the impact Clinton's affair with Lewinsky had on the outcome of the congressional election and broader assessments of government and political institutions. All interviews took place during the three weeks preceding the November 3 election and again during the two-week period of November 9-21, 1998. While the 1998 Heartland study is the primary source of data, I take data from earlier Heartland surveys for longitudinal comparisons and make occasional references to various media polls.

## **Public Reactions to the Scandal**

Public reaction to the Clinton-Lewinsky affair was often rather skewed. For example, virtually every news poll conducted over the course of the year demonstrated that roughly two-thirds of the people felt that Clinton had, at some point, lied about the affair. Similarly, throughout 1998, in contradiction to the repeated predictions of virtually every media commentator, political pundit, and Republican party leader, Clinton's job approval rating rose after every new revelation of presumably yet-more-damning evidence concerning the affair.

At the beginning of 1998, Clinton's job approval rating hovered just above 50%. By the end of the year, it was approaching 70%, higher than at any previous time in his presidency. Republicans and news commentators alike were dumbfounded at this outcome. A close look at attitudes towards key aspects of the affair, the investigation, and the impeachment reveal that the public's response was quite understandable.

The fact that public opinion became polarized along party lines very early, even before many facts about the affair had been disclosed, goes a long way toward clarifying why people did not become increasingly indignant as the scandal played out. Partisan orientation subsequently became very strongly correlated with attitudes concerning a number of important aspects of the affair and how it was handled, such as whether it was a private or public matter and whether the process of investigation was fair and impartial. For example, 30% of Republicans in the Midwest and 84% of Democrats felt that the Clinton-Lewinsky affair was a private matter and ought not to be dealt with as an impeachable offense. In contrast, a full 63% of Republicans saw the affair as a public issue that deserved investigation. These sharp partisan differences were also evident in responses to survey questions asking about the perceived fairness of the Starr investigation and the impeachment process (see Table 1).

More interesting than the large difference between Democrats and Republicans is the high degree of similarity between Independents and Democrats. As Table 1 shows, Republicans were uniformly at odds with nearly everyone else on virtually all aspects of the Clinton-Lewinsky issue. This is particularly true on the question of whether the Clinton-Lewinsky encounter was a private affair that should have been kept out of the limelight or whether it was a public issue. On this question, 64% of Independents said it was a private matter.

In short, public reactions to the Clinton-Lewinsky affair were deeply divided along partisan lines, but not in the traditional style of Democrats and Republicans on opposite sides and Independents either apathetic or evenly divided. Rather, a cohesive two-thirds of Republicans opposed overwhelming majorities of both Democrats and Independents. That this standoff was already evident relatively early in 1998 helps to explain why the media polls regarding preferences for impeachment remained quite stable throughout the entire year with roughly two-thirds op-

**TABLE 1**  
**Attitudes Toward Selected Elements of the Clinton-Lewinsky Issue by Partisanship**

	Party Identification			Total
	Republican	Independent	Democrat	
Preferred Resolution:				
Clinton Leaves Office	64%	33%	12%	36%
Congressional Censure	21	25	31	25
Drop the Matter	15	42	57	39
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	562	844	603	2009
Opinion of the Starr Investigation:				
Impartial	58	24	10	29
Both Equally	5	4	2	4
Partisan	37	72	88	67
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
Opinion of the House Impeachment Process:				
Impartial	48	25	12	27
Both Equally	15	17	14	16
Partisan	37	58	74	57
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: The University of Iowa Social Science Institute (ISSI), 1998 Heartland Poll (see note 2).

posed and one-third in favor. Despite every new revelation, the polls remained firmly fixed, much to the chagrin of Republicans and media commentators who continually predicted that public opinion would certainly change in light of the most recent revelation. Each time, they were proven incorrect and each time Clinton's job approval would rise a bit more in response to yet another new charge, or what most of the public perceived as yet another "unfair" and "partisan" attack or innuendo.

### Clinton's Shifting Character Image

Given that the public's reaction to the continuous stream of allegations about the affair was strongly influenced by the partisan lenses they wore, one might expect that Clinton's overall image remained relatively stable despite the scandal. The empirical evidence reveals the opposite. Certain aspects of public judgments regarding Clinton's character shifted dramatically over the course of the year, even among Democrats. Considerable media attention focused on Clinton's character

throughout the year-long scandal. However, most of this discussion equated character with morality. News commentators and media pundits constantly expressed amazement at how 80% of people asked said they believed that Clinton had lied, and nearly the same percentage approved of how Clinton was doing his job as president. How, the commentators wondered, could the public support a president of questionable character?

A major factor here, which the media commentators did not seem to realize, is that "character" is multidimensional. Aristotle pointed out centuries ago that character is comprised of, at least, good sense, good will, and good morals. More contemporary scholars have similarly described presidential character as an amalgam of leadership, compassion for others, and morality (Kinder 1986; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986).

One might have expected, as the media commentators clearly did, that the scandal would undermine the public's judgment of all aspects of Clinton's character. Yet the empirical evidence demonstrates that the public is very capable of differ-

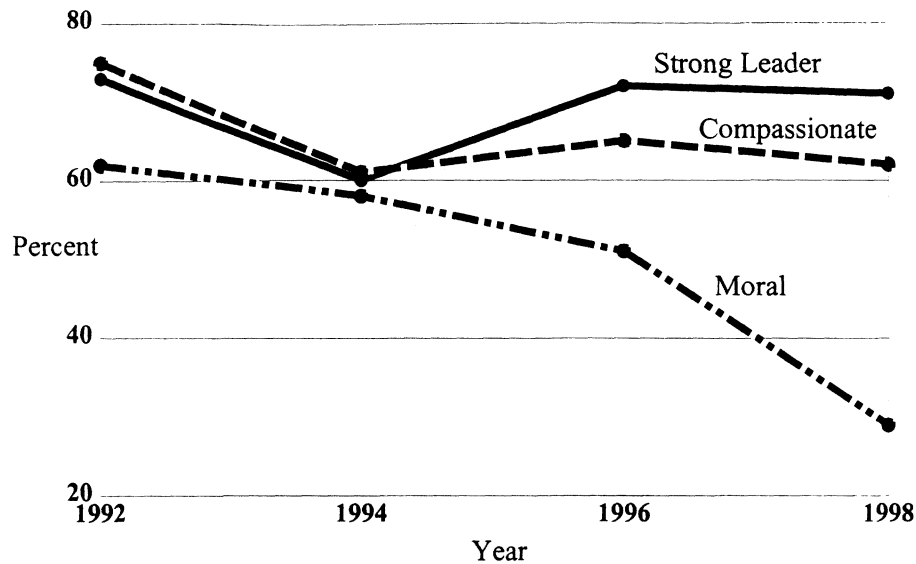
entiating how they evaluate the various aspects of character. As Figure 1 vividly demonstrates, the public's estimation of Clinton's leadership abilities was not diminished at all by the scandals of 1998. The percentage of Midwesterners seeing Clinton as a strong leader in 1998 was virtually the same as when he was first elected in 1992 and reelected in 1996 (see Figure 1).

On the other hand, revelations of his affair and proof that he lied about it did diminish people's regard for Clinton's compassion for others and his morality. At the time of his 1992 election, Bill Clinton was perceived as a caring and compassionate person by 75% of Midwesterners; by the end of 1998, that figure had fallen to 62%. While only a fraction of that decline can be attributed to his affair with Lewinsky, because most of the drop occurred by 1994, the scandal may possibly account for the drop between 1996 and 1998.

Much more pronounced is the decline in the percentage of Midwesterners who saw Bill Clinton as moral. Although public judgments of Clinton's morality had already soured significantly by 1996, the change from 1996 to the end of 1998 was dramatic among all partisan subgroups (see Figure 1).

Relatively few Republicans had ever thought of Clinton as a moral individual (25% in 1996 and only 12% in 1998). More than three-fourths of Democrats (77%), and roughly half of Independents (49%), on the other hand, thought of Clinton as moral in 1996, but less than half of the members of these groups judged him as moral toward the end of 1998 (49% and 26% respectively). Clearly, the revelations of Clinton's scandal-related behavior provided an initial disappointment for many Democrats while it simply confirmed what most Republicans already felt. Despite earlier stories about Clinton's involvement with Gennifer Flowers, Paula Jones, and even other women, many Democrats had continued to think of Clinton as a moral individual, thus suggesting that what constitutes moral behavior for these individuals involves some-

**FIGURE 1**  
**Perceptions of Clinton as a Strong Leader, Compassionate, and Moral**



Source: ISSI Heartland Poll (see note 2)

thing other than casual sex or marital infidelity.

Realizing that the public conceives of character as comprising traits other than just morality helps to clarify and make sense of how individuals evaluated Clinton. If media commentators had attributed more sophistication to the public than they did, they too would have realized that viewing the president as immoral but a strong and capable leader who cared about others was not a contradiction for many.

### Evaluating the Watchdogs

The discussion thus far suggests that the performance of the mass media in reporting on the Clinton-Lewinsky affair and its aftermath was less than exemplary. When the story first broke, a number of news commentators made predictions that if Clinton did indeed have an affair with Monica Lewinsky he would most likely resign soon or else be summarily impeached and removed from office. The mass media frequently released information supposedly leaked from authoritative sources that they subsequently had to retract or that was proven false. One frequently got the impression that the journalists were all Wood-

ward and Bernstein wannabes, but that they did not want to put any effort into checking out their sources.

Public opinion surveys conducted over the course of the scandal continually revealed that a majority of citizens held views that ran counter to those expressed by most media commentators. Commentators in general favored impeachment and removal, which was clearly not what the public preferred (see the CBS News/*New York Times* or CNN/*Time* polls conducted over the course of the year and available from ORS Publishing). Eventually, therefore, the commentators started to attack the polls for being misleading and inaccurate. On October 8, 1998, for example, Cokie Roberts claimed on *This Week* that the polls were underestimating the negative sentiment against Clinton. Her argument was that the national polls were dominated by East and West coast people who are more favorable toward Clinton whereas the people in the Midwest, who she claimed were largely in favor of impeachment, were underrepresented in national polls. Clearly, the Heartland Poll data presented above demonstrate that Ms. Roberts' on-the-air analysis was quite inaccurate.

Moreover, news media were constantly filled with stories about the scandal even though the public overwhelmingly reported that the affair was receiving too much coverage. Even 73% of Republican Midwesterners said there was too much coverage.

The conclusion that the media's orientation was predominately anti-Clinton and pro-impeachment is supported by the differences in how Democrats and Republicans judged the performance of the media in covering the issue. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the Democrats rated the media coverage as poor to very poor, whereas only 44% of Republicans rated the coverage negatively (56% said it was good to very good). Given the media's predominantly negative assessments of the president, it would be plausible to expect that the heavy media coverage may very well have had some impact on whether the scandal influenced the public's trust in the president, the Congress, the Republicans, and even government more generally. I return to this topic below.

### A Right-Wing Conspiracy?

A favorite media pastime was debunking Hillary Clinton's assertion that the Starr investigation, the Paula Jones lawsuit, and much of the gossip surrounding the Clinton-Lewinsky affair were given impetus by a Republican right-wing conspiracy against her husband.

Excluding the conspiracy notion, the First Lady's statement raises a hypothesis worthy of examination. As demonstrated above, it was primarily Republicans who favored an investigation into the personal sexual behavior of the president and impeachment for his transgressions. Yet, it may very well be the case that not all Republicans shared the same views of the investigation and impeachment. If Hillary was correct, we should find that it was predominantly right-wing Republicans who wanted Clinton punished.

Indeed, as the data presented in Table 2 reveal, the far right-wing conservative Republicans were most critical of Clinton in 1998.<sup>3</sup> Members of the far right wing, which rep-

resents roughly 40% of all Republicans, almost uniformly perceived Clinton as immoral, a weak leader, and lacking compassion for others. They also overwhelmingly believed that Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky should be a public issue open to investigation, that the Starr inquiry and the impeachment process were free of partisan motivation, and that Clinton should definitely leave office either through resignation or impeachment (see Table 2).

The difference between far right-wing views and those of "middle-of-the-road" Republicans (about one-third of the party) is tremendous. The only item on which a majority of moderate Republicans agreed with the far right wing of the party was the question of Clinton's morality. Roughly 60% of moderate Republicans felt that Clinton was an immoral individual. Yet, even on the morality question there is a substantial difference between the views of moderate and far right wing Republicans (see Table 2). On all the other items in Table 2 the difference between moderate and far right wing Republicans was even greater. While these huge ideological divisions with regard to the scandal occurred among the Republicans, liberal-conservative ideology was only weakly related to attitudes toward the scandal among Independents and Democrats.

Hillary Clinton may have been wrong in suggesting a concerted right-wing conspiracy against her husband, but it is clear that the far right wing of the Republican Party was most opposed to Clinton and was most in favor of removing him from office. The data in Table 2 also imply that the impeachment in the House represented only the wishes of the right wing of the Republican Party faithful. Given that impeachment proceeded, it is quite clear that the right wing was controlling the Republican Party agenda in Congress.

## Impact of the Scandal

While the public's reaction to issues of Clinton's moral behavior, the Starr investigation, and the impeach-

**TABLE 2**  
**Attitudes Toward Clinton and Various Aspects of the Lewinsky Scandal Among Republicans by Ideological Orientation**

	Middle of the Road	Moderate Right-Wing	Far Right-Wing
<b>Attitudinal Assessments:</b>	<b>n = 197</b>	<b>n = 152</b>	<b>n = 213</b>
Clinton is not at all Moral	63	74	86
Clinton is a Strong Leader	65	51	34
Clinton is Compassionate	48	37	17
Affair with Lewinsky is Public Issue	44	65	80
Starr Investigation is Impartial	45	56	79
Starr Investigation is Partisan	52	39	12
House Impeachment Process is Impartial	40	45	64
House Impeachment Process is Partisan	44	39	23
Clinton Must Leave Office	48	64	87

**Note:** Table entries are the percent of each ideological group giving the particular survey response.

**Source:** ISSI Heartland Poll 1998 (see note 2).

ment process are interesting in their own right, my real purpose is to determine if these reactions influenced political behavior or attitudes, particularly trust in political parties, Congress, or government in general, as well as assessment of Clinton's job performance. During the year-long scandal, media commentators regularly explained Clinton's high job approval ratings by saying that they reflected only people's satisfaction with the performance of the economy. According to this argument, the booming economy gave people a reason to overlook Clinton's moral indiscretions. It is important to examine this hypothesized outcome because the normative implication of the argument is that Americans will follow immoral leaders as long as they provide economic prosperity. Empirically, what this suggests is that a multivariate analysis of Clinton's job approval rating should reflect how the public assessed the performance of the national economy more than how it evaluated the events and outcomes of the scandal.

Seventy percent of respondents in the fall 1998 Heartland survey approved of Clinton's job performance (an approval rating comparable to that found in national surveys at the time). A multivariate analysis of his

approval rating demonstrates rather convincingly that individual assessments of the national economy had relatively little impact on how the public rated Clinton (see Table 3). Only among Independents did evaluations of how the economy was doing currently relative to a year earlier have a statistically significant impact on ratings of Clinton's job performance. Similarly, the respondents' income had no effect on how they rated the job Clinton was doing. In large part, this absence of an economic impact on ratings of Clinton's job performance arose because Republicans and Democrats alike agreed that the national economy was strong.

What did differentiate ratings of the president's performance were largely judgments about the president's character and reactions to his affair with Lewinsky. In general, the public's perceptions of Clinton as a strong leader who was caring and compassionate about others had a greater impact on Clinton's job approval ratings than did evaluations of his immorality (see Table 3). Among Republicans, however, their evaluations of Clinton's morality had the greatest relative impact of all the predictor variables. This confirms earlier analysis suggesting that Republicans were far more fixated

**TABLE 3**  
**Multivariate Analysis Predicting Clinton's Job**  
**Approval Ratings**

Prediction Variables	Total	Republicans	Independents	Democrats
Party Identification	-.07*	—	—	—
Evaluation of National Economy	.04*	.03	.08*	.01
Clinton Moral	.09*	.31**	.12**	.04
Clinton Strong Leader	.23**	.11**	.20**	.15**
Clinton Compassionate	.18**	.16**	.18**	.25**
Media Coverage of Scandal	.02	.01	-.08*	-.06*
Affair Private/Public Issue	.17**	.14**	.19**	.11**
Starr Investigation Impartial	-.14**	-.15**	.16**	-.10**
Impeachment Process Impartial	.02	.04	.01	-.05
Resolution of Scandal	-.19**	-.29**	-.08*	-.26**
Education	.01	-.04	.04	-.03
Income	.01	.01	-.02	.01
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.61	.64	.51	.46
N	1537	430	645	462

\*p < .01

\*\*p < .001

Note: Table entries are standardized regression coefficients. The dependent variable ranged from 1 = strongly approve of the job Clinton is doing as president to 5 = strongly disapprove. Party identification is coded 1 = Republican, 2 = Independents, 3 = Democrats. Evaluation of the national economy now compared to a year ago is coded 1 = better, 2 = same, 3 = worse. Clinton moral, strong leader, compassionate are all coded 1 = great deal, 2 = somewhat, 3 = a little, 4 = not at all. Media coverage evaluation ranged from 1 = positive to 6 = negative. The affair was a private matter = 1, both = 2 or public = 3 issue. Perception of Starr investigation and impeachment process are coded 1 = impartial, 2 = both, 3 = partisan. The preferred resolution of the scandal is coded 1 = Clinton leaves office through resignation or impeachment, 2 = censure Clinton, 3 = drop the matter entirely. Education and income run low to high.

Source: ISSI, 1998 Heartland Poll (see note 2).

on the issue of morality than were Democrats or Independents.

Turning to the various aspects of the scandal, one finds more similarity in the equations for the partisan subgroups. For both Republicans and Democrats the preferred resolution of the scandal (basically remove Clinton versus dropping the matter) was a major factor explaining presidential job approval whereas perceptions of the impeachment process as impartial or partisan had no impact among either partisan group or Independents (see Table 3). Perceiving the Starr investigation as partisan and the affair as a private matter, on the other hand, contributed to higher job approval ratings for Clinton among all subgroups.

Responses to how the Lewinsky affair was handled also had a significant impact on how individuals felt

about the Republican party. Over the course of 1998 and on into 1999 various polls (see ORS Publishing for results of these polls including Gallup, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, CBS and ABC, etc.) revealed roughly a 10-point decline in general support for the Republican party (from 48% to 37%). A separate multivariate analysis of the 1998 Heartland Poll predicting affect toward the Republican party reveals that when the public perceived the Starr investigation and the House impeachment process as partisan rather than impartial it undermined their support for the Republican party.<sup>4</sup> The media may have reinforced this movement away from the Republican Party: Those who evaluated the media coverage negatively were less supportive of Republicans. At the same time, sup-

port for the Republican party was clearly hurt by how Kenneth Starr handled the investigation and by how the Republican Judiciary Committee members handled the impeachment.

Increases or decreases in support for a presidential incumbent or a political party, while important to the current functioning of government, could have rather short-lived effects. No enduring damage to public support for the political regime, therefore, should necessarily be expected to result from a decline in support for the Republican Party, or even a decline in Clinton's job approval, if it happens to fall in the aftermath of the scandal. It would be far more profound and disturbing if the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal was found to have had an impact on how the public evaluated such political institutions as the Judiciary Committee, Congress as a whole, or the government in general. The empirical evidence, however, strongly suggests that there appears to be very little immediate impact of the scandal on broader feelings of public trust in government. Those who perceived the Starr investigations and the House impeachment proceedings as fair and impartial were far more supportive of Congress than were those who saw these proceedings as reflecting partisan motivations (see Table 4). Similarly, evaluations of the media coverage of the scandal also had a significant impact on support for Congress. Respondents who saw the coverage in a positive light were more favorable toward Congress. One always needs to be cautious when interpreting correlations involving media evaluations and outcome variables such as ratings of Congress. Nevertheless, in this case, given all the other control variables entered into the equation (such as partisanship, education, ratings of Clinton, etc.), it does appear that the media were having a direct impact on the emerging evaluations of Congress. The impact of the media coverage was strongest among Republicans and noticeably weaker among Independents and Democrats. Once again, the variable measuring public reactions to Clinton's morality was far more important

**TABLE 4**  
**Multivariate Analysis Predicting Support for Congress and Trust in Government**

Predictor Variables	Support for Congress	Trust in Government
Party Identification	-.05	.01
Evaluation of National Economy	-.01	.03
Clinton Moral	.08*	.08*
Clinton Strong Leader	.01	.03
Clinton Compassionate	.01	.20**
Media Coverage	-.15**	.04
Affair Private/Public	.03	.03
Starr Investigation Impartial	-.09*	.01
Impeachment Investigation Impartial	-.20**	.01
Resolution	.01	.03
Education	-.08*	-.12**
Income	.01	.03
Support for Congress	—	-.28**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.15	.14
N	1529	1525

\*p < .01

\*\*p < .001

Note: Table entries are standardized regression coefficients. Support for Congress is measured as the average thermometer rating of the Judiciary Committee and Congress. The scale ranges from 0 = most negative, 50 = neutral to 100 = most positive. Trust in government combines responses to: "how often do you trust the government in Washington to do what is 'right'" and do you agree/disagree with the statement "public officials don't care much about people like you." The trust scale ranges from 1 = most trusting of government to 6 = most distrusting of government. The predictor variables are defined in Table 3. Source: ISSI, 1998 Heartland Poll (see note 2).

among Republicans than among Independents or Democrats. For Democrats, the overriding factor in their assessment of Congress was their perception that the House proceedings were partisan rather than impartial and fair (see Table 4).

As the coefficients for the second multivariate equation in Table 4 reveal, public judgments of the Starr investigation and the House impeachment process were not directly connected with the extent to which people expressed a general distrust of government. Judgments about the investigation and impeachment process may have had some indirect effect on trust in government, because ratings of Congress as an institution were significantly related with trust, but there certainly was not any direct impact of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal on political trust as of November 1998 (see Table 4).

What did have a direct bearing on

trust in government more generally were various judgments that the public formulated regarding Clinton's character. Most important for the public as a whole were judgments focused on whether Clinton was a compassionate and caring individual (see Table 4). That these concerns are related with trust in government makes sense because a government absent leaders who care about others would not be a responsive government people could trust to act in their best interests.

Judgments about Clinton's morality were also significantly related with attitudes on political trust. Again, however, this measure was much more strongly related with trust among Republicans than for either Democrats or Independents. Republicans who perceived Clinton as immoral were substantially less likely to trust the government than

were those who took a more tolerant stand on his morality.

The analysis presented in Table 4 refers only to the end of 1998 and it may very well be that the scandal had a cumulative eroding effect on trust more noticeable later. Moreover, Midwesterners as a whole had become more negative towards Congress between 1996 and 1998 (the mean thermometer dropped from 54 to 51). Thus, it is possible that the Clinton-Lewinsky affair only indirectly undermined trust in government.

The longitudinal evidence on trust in government among Midwesterners, however, strongly refutes the hypothesis that the scandal precipitated any generalized distrust of government. Although the 1997 Heartland Poll did not include any items for measuring trust in government, the comparison of 1998 trust levels with those in 1996 and earlier years demonstrates vividly that the Clinton-Lewinsky affair had not undermined political trust (see Figure 2). Despite the scandal, trust in government actually increased among Democrats, Independents, and even Republicans between 1994 and the end of 1998.

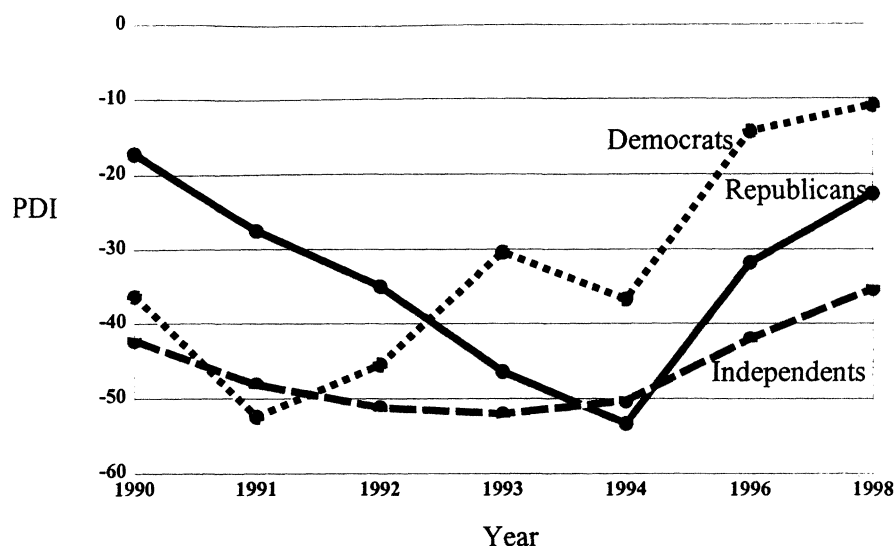
## Conclusion

Throughout the year of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and subsequent impeachment, a large majority of the American public, while not condoning his behavior, remained firmly fixed in their support of President Clinton. This episode and the reaction of the public tell us a great deal about the current fault lines of American politics, the nature of public opinion, and the deprofessionalization of the mass media in the United States.

From the very outset of the scandal, a large majority of Americans perceived Clinton's behavior, including lying to conceal the affair, as immoral. Yet, that very same majority positively evaluated Clinton's job performance and opposed his removal from office. These reactions were not simply a reflection of economic good times or confusion on the part of an uninformed public. Rather, they represented Americans'



**FIGURE 2**  
**Trust in Government among Partisan Subgroups**



Note: The Percentage Difference Index (PDI) reflects the preponderance of distrusting relative to trusting attitudes. It is computed by subtracting the percent distrusting from the percent trusting when using the two item trust index defined in Table 4. Trusting is defined as giving zero trusting responses. The range of the PDI is +100 to -100, where a positive value reflects a preponderance of trust while negative values reflect a preponderance of distrust.

Source: ISSI Heartland Poll (see note 2)

ability to differentiate a private act from a public concern and their realization that character is comprised of more than just morality. Thus, contrary to what John Zaller (1998, 188) previously concluded, employing a multidimensional concept of character is critical if one is to understand public reactions to political scandal.

For most, the scandal was not about the rule of law or punishing a president who had lied under oath or obstructed justice; it was about a zealous special prosecutor who had spent many of their tax dollars doing the dirty work of the far right wing of the Republican party. The fact that the majority of the public remained steadfast in this belief throughout the year, despite the barrage of negative press and Republican charges against the president, is quite remarkable. Critics of public opinion research often argue that public opinion is volatile and that attitudes are frequently uninformed and, hence, easily changeable. Public reaction to the Lewinsky matter not only proved these critics wrong, but also demonstrated the impotence of the mass media. While the House

Republicans and even most of the Senate Republicans elected to ignore how a majority of the public wanted the Lewinsky matter handled, in the end it was the public's position that prevailed.

The credibility of both the Republican Party and the mass media appear to have suffered as a consequence of the scandal. While it is not possible to provide a definitive assessment of the media's coverage of the scandal without a content analysis of that coverage, the survey data suggests that the public was quite critical of the role that the media played. For the most part, the public perceived the media, especially television, as promoting the removal of the president. Often, television commentators appeared almost gleeful at the possibility that the president might be removed from office. It appears that the public's negative reaction to the media's coverage added to the stability of public opinion over the course of the year-long ordeal. Given that the public came to question the credibility and impartiality of the media, the potential impact of the media's coverage was reduced.

The standing of the Republican party among the public also suffered as a consequence of how they handled the affair. Whether the Republican Party will be able to recoup the respect of American voters remains to be seen. The Republican response to the Lewinsky matter reinforced an already emerging image of the party as an organization controlled by far right-wing zealots. In addition, the agenda that the public has come to associate with the Republicans is more one of promoting a particular version of morality rather than specific policies that deal with various areas such as social security, education, and health care.

Although the Clinton-Lewinsky affair may have resulted in a weakened presidency (due to the Supreme Court decision to allow a civil suit to proceed against a sitting president), it has not undermined public confidence in government more generally. Some may speculate that this is probably because, in the end, the constitutional process yielded an outcome the public preferred. This certainly is not the reason why the affair had no impact on trust in government, at least as of the end of 1998. The explanation hinges far more on the fact that most people saw the investigation into the president's behavior and the impeachment as partisan and as an invasion of the president's right to privacy. Moreover, as previous research has demonstrated (see Miller and Listhaug 1999), the degree of trust that citizens place in their government is a reflection of how the public judges broader, more profound aspects of government performance and not simply how they feel about a particular official, even the president.

## Notes

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1. On May 27, 1997, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of allowing Paula Jones' attorneys to proceed with their civil lawsuit against Clinton. The suit arose out of an alleged sexual encounter between Clinton and Jones that supposedly occurred while Clinton was governor of Arkansas. Because of this ruling, the Paula Jones case went forward. Evidence of an affair between Clinton and Lewinsky was made public when Jones' lawyers tried to demonstrate a pattern of predatory sexual behavior by Clinton.

2. The seven states include Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wisconsin, and the survey usually

involves 300 respondents from each state. Each state sample is collected in a fashion that makes it self-representing. The states are then properly weighted when the data are combined to reflect the region. The survey is conducted by phone using random-digit dialing to select the phone sample and then the Kish method is used for the within-household respondent selection. Roughly 2,100 respondents are interviewed for about 25 minutes in each Heartland survey.

There is a sampling error of  $\pm 2.2\%$ . Response rates for each survey fall in the 67–70% range. For more information on the Heartland Poll, please contact me at Arthur-miller@uiowa.edu.

3. Ideological grouping of Republicans depends on individual respondent's self-placement on a 7-point scale that ranges from 1 = extremely liberal to 7 = extremely conservative, with 4 = middle of the road. The distribution was trichotomized by combining 6 and

7 into a far right wing category, 5 into a moderate right wing category, and 1–4 into a middle-of-the-road category. Only 4% of Republicans placed themselves in the 1–3 range of the scale. For my purposes, 35% of Republicans claimed to be middle-of-the-road, 27% identified themselves as moderate right wing, and 38% claimed to be far right wing.

4. This regression, which is not presented in a table, utilized the thermometer rating of the Republican Party as the dependent variable. The thermometer ranges from 0 = most negative to 100 = most positive. The independent variables were the same as those included in Table 3. The amount of explained variance was 35%. The predictors having the largest impact, other than party identification, were evaluations of the media coverage, perceptions of the affair as a public or private matter, and assessments of the Starr investigation and House impeachment process as partisan.

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