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Jeffrey E. Cohen: The Presidency in the Era of 24-Hour News

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The Growing Disconnect between Presidential News Coverage and Public Opinion

The news media are no longer as consequential in helping to frame public opinion toward the president as they were a generation ago. This decline in the impact of news media on public opinion about the president is puzzling given the increasing access to news because of such developments as the 24/7 cable news networks and the internet. The aims of this book are to address this puzzle—the declining impact of news on public evaluations of the president—and to provide an explanation that accounts for it.

This initial chapter serves two purposes. First, I demonstrate that news coverage of the president over the past quarter century or so does not affect public attitudes toward the president as much as it did during the previous twenty years. To demonstrate this point, I first turn to the three great scandals of the modern presidency, Clinton-Lewinsky, Iran-Contra, and Watergate. Each episode produced large volumes of negative news, but for a variety of reasons, negative news seemed not to touch Bill Clinton as deeply as Richard Nixon or Ronald Reagan.

Then, using more systematic data, I show that for the period beginning roughly in the mid to late 1970s, no correlation exists between the negativity of presidential news and public approval of the president. This stands in sharp contrast to the twenty-five years prior, roughly the late 1940s until the mid 1970s, when there was a strong correlation between the tone of presidential news and presidential approval—a negative tone is associated with lower approval. Why did the correlation between news coverage and public approval seemingly vanish?

The second task of this chapter is to introduce an explanation to account for this disconnect between the tonality of news and presidential approval. My argument, briefly, is that the presidential news system—the web of relationships among the president, the news media, and the mass public—has evolved in such a way that news coverage about the president no longer resonates so strongly with the mass public. Moreover, these changes in the presidential news system also affect the nature of presidential leadership, which has consequences for the larger political system. The chapters that follow document the evolution of the presidential news system and detail the implications of this evolution for American politics and governing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Three Scandals and the Public Response

The Clinton-Lewinsky Scandal

By almost any standard of presidential scandal, 1998 was a horrible year for the sitting president. On January 19, 1998, the internet site, the Drudge Report, mentioned that *Newsweek* magazine was sitting on a story that President Clinton had an affair with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky.¹ In the ensuing days, the mainstream news media began to run stories on the allegations. This set off the political firestorm that was to become the Monica Lewinsky scandal, which led to the impeachment of President Clinton.

Impeachment proceedings began formally on December 11, 1998, when, after many months of investigation and hearings, the House Judiciary Committee voted on several impeachment resolutions and sent four articles of impeachment to the House.² The House voted to proceed with impeachment on December 19, and the impeachment trial began in the Senate on January 7, 1999. It continued until February 12, when votes on the articles of impeachment were taken, with the president acquitted. On all counts, the vote broke narrowly in Clinton's favor, as Democrats stood steadfast behind him, while from five to ten Republicans also supported his acquittal on the various votes.³

From January 1998 until his acquittal, Clinton received a steady stream of bad press. Clinton was known for having bad relations with the press (Kurtz 1998), but the degree of press negativity escalated to new heights during 1998 and early 1999. Thomas Patterson (2000) has collected some data that gives us a sense of the tone or valence of news in 1998 compared to other years. Patterson randomly sampled five thousand news stories from Lexus-Nexus from 1980 through 1998. These data cast a wide net beyond stories on the presidency, and the number of presidential stories per year is modest, which precludes making definitive statements about news coverage of the presidency. Yet because of the long time span and the random selection of stories, we can gather a sense of the comparative tone of news reporting on the presidency across these nearly two decades.

Figure 1.1 traces the percentage of news stories about the president and various administrations from 1980 that Patterson coded "clearly negative" or "more negative than positive." As the figure demonstrates, 1998 stood out in the degree of negative news reports. Only 1987, the year of the Iran-Contra scandal, produced a higher percentage of negative stories. Even 1994, the year of Clinton's ill-fated health care initiative, itself a bad press year for Clinton at 58 percent, is still less negative than 1998 by nearly 10 percent.

What is so remarkable about these figures is not that Clinton received so much bad press in 1998, but that his job approval polls rose that year. As figure 1.2 shows, Clinton's polls spiked upward in early 1998, as the scandal became public, reaching a high note in February 1998 at 67 percent (based on averaging the Gallup polls of that month). His polls deteriorated somewhat thereafter,

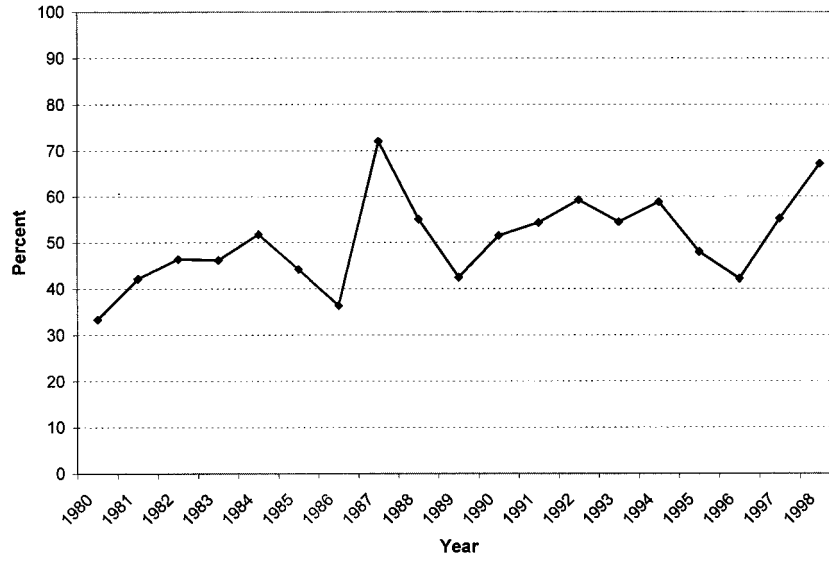


Figure 1.1 Percentage of negative news stories about the president, 1980–98. Source: Patterson (2000).

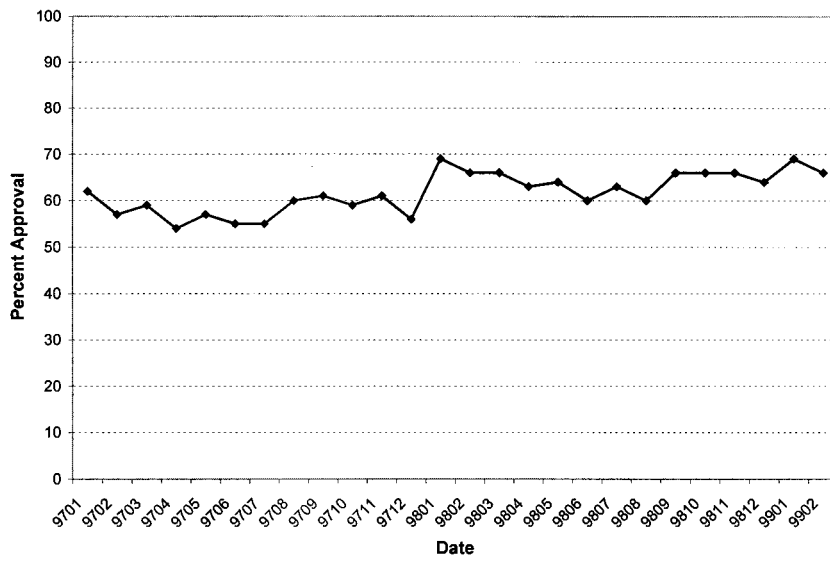


Figure 1.2 President Clinton's monthly approval, 1997–98 (Gallup polls).

sliding to 60 percent by June 1998, but recovered to 65 by the end of the year, reaching a peak of 73 percent in Gallup's December 19–20, 1998, reading. According to Gallup, on February 12, 1999, the day of the Senate vote, Clinton's poll ratings stood at a lofty 68 percent.

We must be careful not to conclude that the scandal helped the president's polls. In a careful analysis, Brian Newman (2002) finds that the scandal depressed Clinton's polls. He estimates (796) that in February 1998, Clinton lost 1.2 points due to the scandal and that poll losses accumulated over the year, cumulating in a 7 percent loss by February 1999. Shah et al. (2002) also find that news about the scandal hurt the president, with the type of scandal news making a difference. While scandal stories that mentioned the president drove Clinton's poll numbers down, stories about his opponents, for instance, Ken Starr, and stories framed as strategic moves by conservatives against the president had the opposite effect, uplifting his polls. Despite the volume of negative press that he received, Clinton was helped during the scandal by the even greater share of negative news about his adversaries, such as Ken Starr.⁴ Other aspects of public opinion, in particular likes and dislikes, also sometimes called favorability, also declined across 1998 (Cohen 1999a, 1999b, 2000).

Overall, Clinton's polls weathered the storms of 1998 and early 1999 quite successfully. Despite the depressing effects that bad news seems to have had (Newman 2002, Shah 2002), Clinton's aggregate poll ratings remained quite high throughout the year. That Clinton's ratings hovered in the 60–70 percent band through the year in a relatively steady pattern suggests that other factors, such as economic performance (Newman 2002) and countervailing news stories that cast the president's antagonists in a poor light offset the negative effects of the scandal on the president's polls. In other words, it appears that scandal news did not dominate thinking about the president (Popkin 1998) despite its volume and tone.

Watergate

The public response to the Clinton scandal and news about the president during 1998 differs considerably from the public response to the other two major scandals of the modern era, Watergate and Iran-Contra.⁵ The Watergate scandal, which led to Richard Nixon resigning from the presidency on August 9, 1974, began nearly three years earlier, in September 1971, when Daniel Ellsberg's doctor's office was broken into. Several months later, on January 17, 1972, Washington police were called when the Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters at the Watergate complex was burglarized. Yet, the scandal did not become a public concern until August 1, 1972, when Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein published their first article in the *Washington Post* tying the break-ins to the administration. We can mark August 1972 as the beginning of the public phase of the Watergate scandal, which ended two years later with Nixon's resignation.

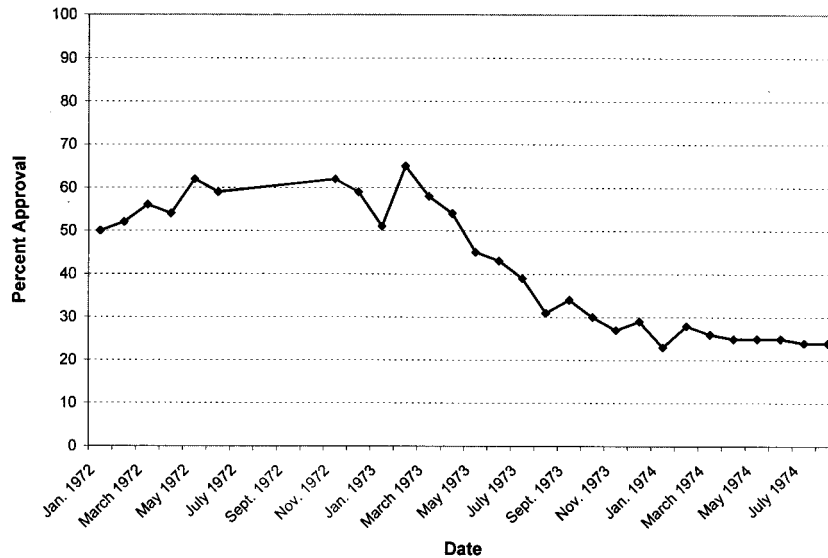


Figure 1.3 President Nixon's monthly approval, January 1972–August 1974 (Gallup polls).

Figure 1.3 plots Nixon's approval polls by month, beginning with January 1972 and ending with his resignation in August 1974. Consistent with the idea that little bad news about the scandal was aired during the remainder of 1972, we see in figure 1.3 that the president's polls remained essentially flat, hovering in the 60 percent range.

However, negative news began to accumulate as events related to the scandal became more common and as Watergate became a major news story. In a content analysis of presidential news in the *New York Times* from 1949 to 1992, Lyn Ragsdale found that in 1973 and 1974 more than 50 percent of the news that the president received could be coded as negative. This was 20 percent more bad news than any president had received up to that time.⁶ Moreover, the volume of Watergate news was quite heavy. Ostrom and Simon (1989, 365) estimate that the *New York Times* ran Watergate-related front page stories on 74.6 percent of days between March 23, 1973, and August 9, 1974, the day Nixon resigned. The effects of the bad news are easily apparent in figure 1.3. After reaching a poll reading of 65 percent in January 1973, Nixon's polls slid steadily over the next twelve months, touching 25 percent by January 1974. His polls never broke 30 percent thereafter. In contrast to Clinton, whose polls rose during his scandal-ridden year, Nixon's sank, and sank deeply, as one would naturally expect.⁷

Iran-Contra

Ronald Reagan's travails in 1986 and 1987, during the Iran-Contra scandal, also seemed to follow the classic story of a major scandal harming presidential approval ratings.⁸ On November 21, 1986, the Justice Department began an investigation of the National Security Council (NSC) over charges that money from an arms sale to Iran were diverted to the Nicaraguan Contras, in violation of federal law. Unlike Nixon, who stonewalled the Watergate investigators, Reagan took swift action once the Justice Department revealed that it held documentary evidence of the Iran-Contra connection, which consisted of a memo by NSC staffer Oliver North.

On November 26, President Reagan convened an independent commission, to be headed by former Senator John Tower (R-Texas), to investigate the allegations, and in mid December the Senate set its own committee to investigate the Iran-Contra affair. The Tower commission submitted its report to the president in late February 1987, criticizing the president for not controlling his NSC staff. In July, the major Iran-Contra participants, Oliver North and John Poindexter, testified before Congress, and in November, Congress issued a report critical of the president. Unlike Watergate and Lewinsky, Congress declined to take further action against the president. Although this ended Iran-Contra as a major news story, its effects on presidential approval persisted for some time afterward.

Figure 1.4 plots Reagan's polls from his second inaugural (January 1985) through the end of his second term. The plot shows a sharp decline in Reagan's approval from 63 percent in October 1986 to 45 percent by March 1987. Ostrom and Simon (1989, 377) estimate that Iran-Contra depressed Reagan's polls by about 12.5 percentage points and that the effects of Iran-Contra persisted well into 1987. Reagan's polls stayed flat, ranging between 40 and 50 percent until late 1988, and only began to rise to the upper 50 percents near the end of his term.

Despite Reagan's label, the "Teflon president," to whom no bad news would stick, news seemed quite negative toward Reagan during this two-year span. Patterson's Lexis-Nexis data (figure 1.1) indicate a bad news spike in 1987 that rivals 1998. Ragsdale's data also indicate a high volume of negative news (figure 1.5). By her count, about 52 percent of news stories in the *New York Times* were negative in 1987 compared to 26 percent the year before and 29 percent the year after. Ostrom and Simon (1989, 365) report that the *Times* ran front page stories about Iran-Contra on 76 percent of days from November 8, 1986, and August 31, 1987, a volume similar to that for Watergate. Again we have some circumstantial evidence that a scandal led to bad news, which seemed to affect presidential polls.

This presents us with a puzzle: Why didn't the Lewinsky scandal and impeachment hurt Bill Clinton's standing with the public more than it did? Al-

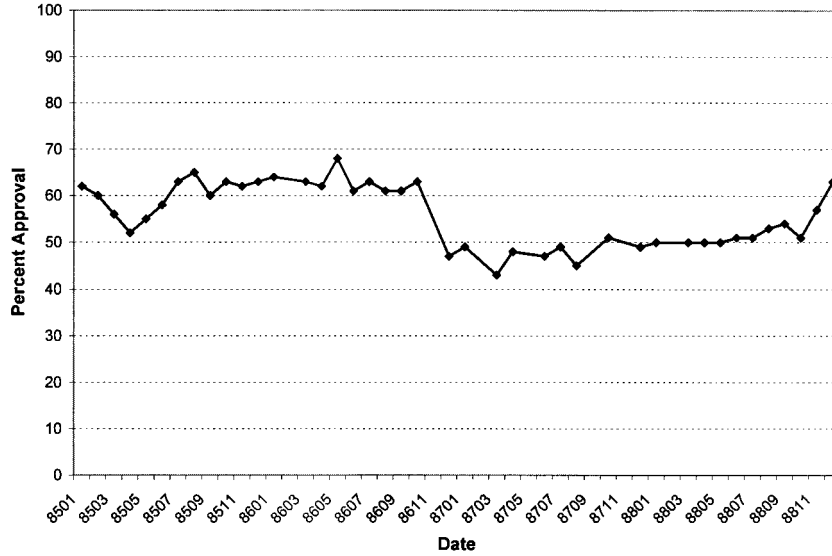


Figure 1.4 President Reagan's monthly approval, January 1985–December 1988 (Gallup polls).

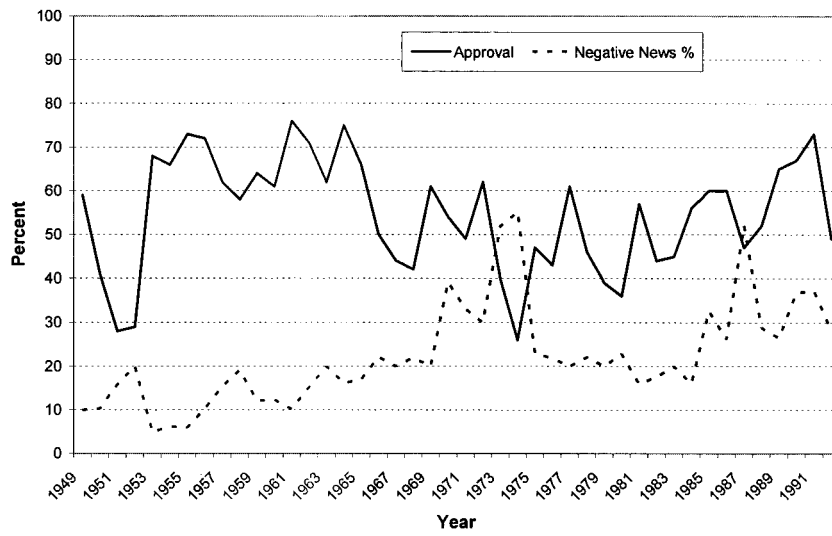


Figure 1.5 Trends in presidential approval and news tone, *New York Times*, 1949–92.

though one may argue that Reagan defused the Iran-Contra scandal by admitting responsibility and taking action, Reagan's poll loss of 12.5 points (Ostrom-Simon 1989 estimate) resembles Nixon's poll loss from Watergate (16–17 percent, Newman 2002) more than the 6–7 percent loss that Newman (2002) estimates Clinton suffered.⁹ One may even claim that Clinton's stonewalling resembled Nixon's behavior in the face of scandal. Another distinguishing factor is that Congress refused to take any action against Reagan, unlike the impeachment processes that targeted Nixon and Clinton. By refusing to act against Reagan, Congress may have minimized the damage done to Reagan in the public's eyes. Still, it is puzzling that Clinton did not suffer more with the public than he did.

This book is not an attempt to understand public reactions to these three scandals. They serve merely as illustrations of the larger point that I will try to make, that the structure of the relationships between the president, the news media, and the public fundamentally changed during the years from the mid to late 1970s to the present. News during this period may not have had as big of an impact on public thinking toward the president as it had during the two decades or so before.

First let us review some of the more common explanations for the relatively mild public reaction to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. As I will show, while each makes a useful point, none can account for the differing public reaction across these three major scandals.

The Lewinsky Scandal: Explanations of the Public Reaction

The Monica Lewinsky scandal and impeachment of Bill Clinton stand in sharp contrast to the Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals. Where presidential approval fell during the two earlier scandals, Bill Clinton's polls rose in the aggregate. And even if we prefer Newman's (2002) finding that the scandal depressed Clinton's polls, it did so less severely than Nixon's and Reagan's poll losses as a result of Watergate and Iran-Contra.

Many theories have been offered to account for Clinton's ability to weather the storm of scandal and congressional attack in 1998. As the literature is voluminous, here I only address the major explanations, which can be roughly categorized into accounts that look at presidential character and the public response, the policy success of the Clinton administration, and public disdain for the news media's reporting of the Lewinsky scandal and impeachment.¹⁰

First, some argue that the public distinguishes between the public performance of president and the person in office and that the public does not care much about personal character. As Kagay argues, "The American public made an immediate distinction between Clinton the man on the one hand, and Clinton the president, on the other hand. People could be sharply critical of the man

and his behavior even at the same time they thought that as president he was doing a pretty good job” (1999, 450–51). Zaller makes the point even more forcefully, “The public is, within broad limits, functionally indifferent to presidential character” (1998a, 188), and goes on to point out that the public elected Richard Nixon despite concerns that the public had with Nixon’s character.

There are limitations to this perspective. One, proponents of this perspective spend little time discussing what they mean by presidential character. Character is complex and multidimensional. Pfiffner (2004), for instance, sees three different, although related, aspects of character—lies, keeping promises, and sexual probity. It is possible that the public cares about some character traits more than others: for example, that lying may matter more than sexual probity. Then why did the public disregard the numerous instances of Clinton’s lies (assuming that he in fact lied), as Renshon (2002a, 2002b) asserts? Moreover, if Nixon’s character mattered so little to the public, why did his polls fall in the wake of Watergate? Last, several studies, using survey evidence, find that character affects approval of the president even when controlling for a variety of other factors (Greene 2001, Newman 2003), results that contradict the position that character does not matter.

This leads to a related argument—when it comes to personal behavior or character, the public distinguishes between public and private matters. Thus the public could have viewed Watergate as a public matter but the Clinton scandal as a private matter, which could account for the different public reactions to the two scandals. Kagay (1999, 454–55) presents evidence that the public viewed the Lewinsky scandal as a private matter and that the public tolerated Clinton’s lying about the affair, even to a grand jury, as what one might expect of any man caught in a similar circumstance. No comparable evidence exists on whether the public viewed Watergate as a public matter, leaving us unable to test this hypothesis.

Another character-related hypothesis contends that the public was used to scandal stories about Clinton, that it knew that Clinton had character issues, and thus the revelations about Lewinsky were old hat, adding nothing new to people’s assessment of the president (Kagay 1999; Kulkarni, Stough, and Haynes 1999). But if the public had character issues with Nixon, as Zaller (1998) argues, why should the Watergate revelations have had such a deep impact? By Zaller’s reckoning, the public should have discounted Watergate, basing its support for Nixon on his policy performance.

A second set of arguments, which are not inconsistent with the above, is that the public cares more about performance than character. Several studies point to the high marks that the public gave to Clinton for the state of the economy and other policies (Andolina and Wilcox 2000, Kagay 1999, Miller 1999, Newman 2002, Zaller 1998a). While this might explain why Clinton’s polls were higher than Nixon’s, it fails to account for the plunge that Reagan’s

polls took during Iran-Contra, a period when the economy was also riding relatively high and the public thought well of Reagan as president.

Nor does this performance perspective answer why the Clinton scandals hurt so little compared to Nixon and Reagan. Recall that Newman's (2002) analysis controlled for the state of the economy and still found that Clinton's scandal had less impact on his poll ratings than Watergate and Iran-Contra had on Nixon's and Reagan's. Perhaps, as some suggest (Kagay 1999), the public did not want to lose Clinton's leadership and thus rallied to his side. But the same could be said of Reagan, yet Reagan's polls took a deep slide.

Another set of ideas looks to the public reaction to news reports on the scandal. Polls during the period indicate that the public disliked the way that the media reported on the scandal, which the public thought was overly critical of and unfair to the president (Kagay 1999, Miller 1999). In contrast, during the Watergate period, the public gave the press relatively high marks. For instance, a Roper poll of June 1974 found 47 percent saying that the news media were properly balanced in their treatment of Nixon, 14 percent thought them to be considerate to the president, and only 30 percent saw the news media as unfair.

The media perspective may help us address why the public reacted less sharply to the Lewinsky scandal than Watergate, but in making this point, we need to ask what accounts for the shift in public reactions to the news from Watergate to Clinton-Lewinsky? Is there something different about the two scandals or about the way that the news media reported on the two scandals that led to these differing public reactions? Studies, reviewed in more detail below (e.g., Bennett et al. 1998; Cook and Gronke 2001, 2002; Cook, Gronke, and Ratliff 2000; Robinson and Kohut 1988), show that public regard for the news media drastically declined from the 1970s to the 1990s. Perhaps the explanation for the changing public reaction resides more in factors that affect public evaluations of the news media than any differences in the Watergate, Iran-Contra, and Lewinsky scandals.

None of the above explanations provides a totally satisfying answer to the question of why the public reaction to the Lewinsky scandal pales in comparison to its reaction to Watergate or Iran-Contra. For the most part, analyses of public reactions to the Lewinsky scandal are case studies of that event and not comparative analyses across the scandals. An answer to the question of differences in public reactions to Watergate, Iran-Contra, and the Lewinsky scandal requires a comparative analysis, but few such studies exist.¹¹

There is a second and, for my purposes, perhaps more important limitation of analyses of the public reaction to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. The puzzle that I seek to address is why bad news about that scandal did not greatly affect public evaluations of the president. Analyses of public reactions to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal assume that there is something unique about that scandal, the time period, and possibly other factors that somewhat immunized the public from the bad news. But as demonstrated in the next section, for the past

twenty years or so, bad news *in general* does not seem to affect public evaluations of the president very strongly, at least compared to its effects on public thinking two decades ago. In fact, there does not seem to be a correlation between bad news and lower approval. The analyses of the public reaction to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, inasmuch as they view that event as unique, cannot explain this more general tendency of the last several decades.

The Disjuncture between News and Presidential Approval: The Puzzle Generalized

My argument is that structural changes have occurred in the president–press–public sector of the political system, what I will call the *presidential news system*. These structural changes began to emerge in the mid to late 1970s, fully embedding into the body politic by the 1990s. Because of these changes, news and public opinion about the president decoupled. In other words, news reporting about the president lost some of its ability to shape public opinion toward the president. If this structural argument is correct, then Bill Clinton’s experience in 1998 is not an isolated case, but merely an extreme example of the nature of the relationship among the president, the press, and the public in the 1990s.

Figure 1.5, already noted, plots two series that will help sort out the relationship between presidential news and public opinion. The first series plots the percentage of negative news stories about the president as reported in the *New York Times* from 1949 to 1992.¹² The second series plots the president’s annual approval level from the Gallup poll. There are important limitations in using these data. First, the news tone data end with 1992. Thus we cannot say much about the years following 1992. But it appears safe to assume that the processes that changed the relationship between news and approval, which began in the 1970s, are likely still present, and perhaps more firmly embedded in the political system after 1992 than before. Second, and perhaps more important, the data are highly aggregated. Thus we cannot be very precise about the relationship between news tone and presidential approval. But still these data allow us to see if the two series are related as one would expect.

Our simple expectation is that the higher the volume of negative news, the lower the president’s approval (Brody 1991). Visual inspection of the two series reveal that the two tend to diverge for the first half of the series, but sometime in the mid to late 1970s, negative news and approval began to track together. Across the 1950s and 1960s and into the 1970s, when presidential approval is high, negative news is low, and *visa versa*. After the mid 1970s, except for a few time points, like 1987 (Iran-Contra), when presidential approval moves up, so does the percentage of negative news.

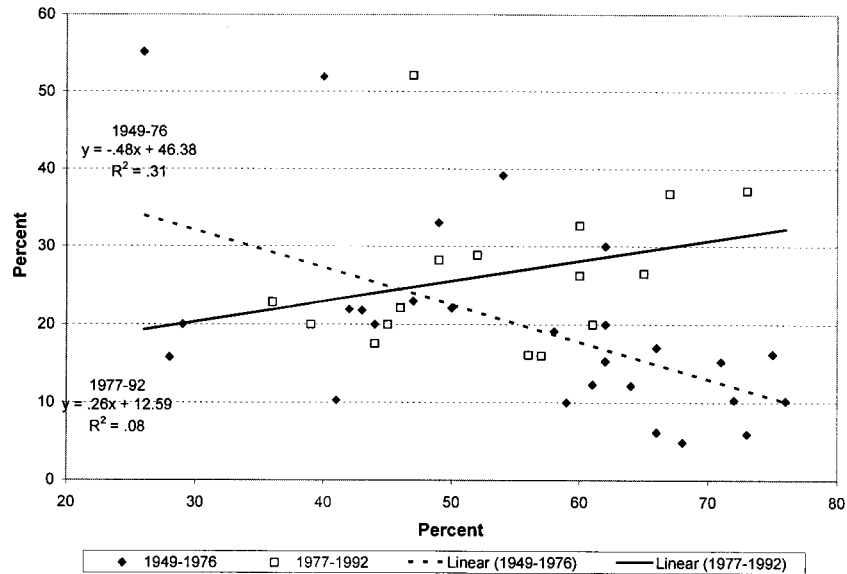


Figure 1.6 Scatter plot of presidential approval and news tone, *New York Times*, 1949–92. Source: News Tone, Ragsdale (1997); Approval, Gallup poll.

Visual inspection is fraught with all sorts of problems, although it is useful in providing a feel or sense of the data. Regression analysis reveals that the two series are, as one would expect, negatively related.¹³ Based on the regression analysis, each 1 percentage increase in negative news will lower the president's approval rating by about 0.4 percent. This result is statistically significant and indicates that approval is highly responsive to news tone. But when we bisect the series into two subperiods, 1949–76 and 1977–92, the relationship between news tone and approval differs. Figure 1.6 plots presidential news tone and approval, separating the two periods. Filled diamonds represent the 1949–76 years, while white boxes represent the 1977–92 years.¹⁴ Separate regression lines for each time segment are overlaid in the figure.

From 1949 through 1976, negative news clearly depresses presidential approval. The two series are correlated at -0.56 ($p = .00$) and the regression line slopes downward sharply. Regression analysis indicates that each 1 percentage point increase in negative news leads to a 0.66 percentage point loss in presidential approval. This simple relationship accounts for nearly one-third of the variance in presidential approval. News tone for these years varies from a low of about 5 to a high of 55. This fifty-point range in negative news tone can account for as much as a 33 percentage point shift in presidential approval ($50 * 0.66 = 33$). A change of one standard deviation in negative news tone (9.6) translates into about a 6.4 percentage point shift in presidential approval. The

average yearly shift, however, is quite small at 0.4 percentage points. Still there are some large year-to-year shifts in news tone (1972–73, 1974–75). Thus while year-to-year shifts in presidential news tone tend to be small in this early period, occasionally massive changes in news tone do occur. By all accounts, presidential approval, even highly aggregated into annual units, appears quite sensitive to the tone of presidential news, again highly aggregated.

The relationship between approval and news tone for 1977–92 differs. Figure 1.6 indicates relatively little impact of news tone on approval. The regression line is flat ($b = 0.31$, $t = 1.10$). Moreover the two series correlate at 0.28, which is not significant ($p = 0.28$), and only a small amount of the variance is accounted for when regressing approval on news tone.¹⁵ In contrast to the strong impact of news tone on presidential approval in the pre-1977 era, from 1977 to 1992 news tone appears to have no impact on presidential approval. Strangely, if we remove 1987 from the analysis, the year that the Iran-Contra scandal became public and began to affect public opinion toward Ronald Reagan, we find a strong *positive* relationship between the amount of negative news and presidential approval, just the opposite of what one would expect. The regression slope is 0.90 without 1987 included, which is statistically significant ($p = 0.02$) despite the small n (15) and accounts for about one-third of the variance in approval (equation $F = 6.65$, probability of $F = 0.02$). It makes little sense to argue that bad news about the president lifts his approval. Instead, it appears that bad news during the years since about 1977 has little impact on presidential approval, except under certain circumstances.¹⁶

Other evidence also points to the decoupling of news tone on presidential approval. In a recent paper, Gaines and Roberts (2005) construct a weekly measure of presidential approval for George W. Bush from January 21, 2001, to February 27, 2005, 215 weeks. Their analysis includes a weekly news tone measure based on *Newsweek's* reporting of the president, as well as controls for events, major presidential addresses, the honeymoon effect, and the economy. They find, consistent with the analysis of annual data presented above, that news tone has no effect on George W. Bush's approval during his first four years in office.

This book is an attempt to understand why news has lost its ability to affect public attitudes toward the presidency. Clinton's experience in 1998 is not an isolated incident. Rather, it is but an extreme example of processes at work beginning in the last quarter of the twentieth century and seemingly present as we enter the twenty-first century.

The Argument

The decoupling between the tone of the news and presidential approval from approximately the mid to late 1970s to the present challenges many widely held assumptions about the role of news in shaping opinions. Brody's (1991)

seminal study, *Assessing the President*, argues that the balance of positive and negative news about the president will affect public attitudes toward the president. When the news leans in a negative direction, presidential approval should dip (also Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). The Brody approach suggests that Clinton's approval should have declined in 1998, yet it rose! Our existing theories and understandings of the relationship among the news, the presidency, and public opinion cannot explain why Bill Clinton's approval rose in 1998 or apparently did not suffer very much (Newman 2002).

The world has changed considerably over the past twenty to twenty-five years. In this book I will discuss several interrelated changes that have implications for the role of news in politics, opportunities for presidential leadership, and public opinion, especially with regard to the presidency. These changes are (1) the structure of the news industry, (2) the content of news about the president, (3) the audience for news, and (4) public regard toward the news media.

The news industry is now more competitive than it was two decades ago. Competition has accelerated the trend away from objective reporting toward a more interpretative and cynical news style (West 2001). Political commentary, which is often disguised as news, is now also more prevalent than was once the case. The public has reacted to these changes, too. The audience for news shrank.¹⁷ West, for instance, reports that the percentage of households that watched the ABC, CBS, and/or NBC evening news declined from about 60 percent across the 1960s to 30 percent by the late 1990s (2001).¹⁸ Availability of entertainment programming on cable has peeled away a large segment of the broadcast news audience (Baum and Kernell 1999). Partially as a reaction to the new style of news, public regard for the news media has plummeted.

During the "golden age" of presidential television, roughly the 1960s through mid to late 1970s, the press tended to be deferential to the president (Clayman et al. 2002, 2006).¹⁹ Thus, when the press reported news to the public that was critical of the president or indicated a problem associated with the president, what we might consider negative news, the public paid heed and began the process of reevaluating its views of the president. In other words, because the media tended to be deferential to the president, negative news, which was rare or unexpected, was also credible to the public. Patterson's Lexis-Nexis data, discussed above (figure 1.1), and Ragsdale's 1949–92 time series (figure 1.5), indicate that presidential news has gotten more negative from the 1980s through the 1990s.

Furthermore, the news media was highly concentrated, with the three major networks not only dominating people's news, but providing essentially the same news and same tone as their competitors. Last, the news audience was abnormally large during the precable television era because of the limited viewing choices. Thus the negative news signal reached a large audience. The combination of strong credible news signal and the large audience meant that negative news could affect public support for the president.

All of this changed with the advent of cable television and other communication media, including VCRs and the internet. The news audience shrank as other viewing choices became available. The news media, because of greater competition and declining audience shares, as well as other factors, became increasingly negative toward the president (see the data on figures 1.1 and 1.5, also Patterson 2000). Rather than being deferential, cynicism, and sometimes outright hostility, became the norm of the media toward the president (Clayman et al. 2002, 2006; West, 2001). The norm of negative or critical news had important implications for the public. It meant that the public could no longer tell, when faced with negative news, if that news was truly bad or if it was just typical journalistic reporting. In other words, the news signal to the public became noisy and unreliable. This noisiness, coupled with the smaller news audience, meant that news in general will have a smaller impact on public opinion.

In the “new media” era that began sometime in the mid to late 1970s, one last process also transpired.²⁰ The variety of news choices allowed viewers to find news and other programming that fit their tastes. Talk radio, which emerged as an important forum in the mid 1980s, seemed to attract conservative listeners. Some cable networks became known for a brand of news, like Fox, which began broadcasting only in 1996, with its reputation for conservatively slanted news.²¹ Moreover, entertainment values entered into some news formats, such as *Crossfire* and other programs, where political pundits of obvious ideological and partisan leanings presented their opinions. People tuned into programs with compatible political leanings. These shows often merely reinforced preexisting political values.

Pure entertainment programs also began to present some political content, whether the comedy routines of the late night talk shows or daytime talk shows. Political information in typically nonpolitical, nonnews shows may have high credibility among some viewers. Thus where traditional news may have lost its impact on public opinion, these other niches in broadcasting may be able to influence their audiences’ political attitudes (Baum 2003a).

Thus the declining news impact on public thinking about the president resulted because the news media provided less news about the president than it once did, the audience for news is smaller, the public is less trusting of the news media than it once was, and the regularity of negative news makes it hard for the public to tell if the bad news reflects truly bad conditions that it should pay attention to or if it merely reflects the agenda of journalists. As detailed below, some of these same factors also limit the president’s ability to lead the public writ broadly. As their ability to lead the mass public has eroded, presidents have altered their leadership style, increasing the amount of effort used to mobilize special interests, narrower publics, and/or their own partisan base, while decreasing their engagement with the broad mass public. These changes in presidential leadership style have important implications for our democracy.

Plan of the Book

The presidential news system—the interrelationships among the president, the press, and the public—serves as the organizing concept for this research. In chapter 2 I present and discuss the presidential news system concept, and then trace the evolution of the presidential news system from the golden age of presidential television of the 1950s through the mid 1970s to the new media age of the mid 1970s to the present.

In the next four chapters I look at trends in news coverage of the presidency, one of the major changes that occurred from the golden age to the new media age. In chapter 3 I chart the decline in the amount of news coverage of politics and the presidency using a variety of indicators across different news media.

In chapter 4 I present and analyze a new data series on presidential news coverage in the *New York Times* that stretches back to the mid nineteenth century. That series not only documents the drop off in the amount of presidential news over the past quarter century but puts this decline into context of trends in presidential news coverage across a century and a half, in which, up to the mid 1970s, the amount of presidential news steadily climbed. The analysis presented in this chapter indicates that something unique to the new media age seems to account for this relatively recent decline in the amount of presidential news.

In chapter 5 I document the increasing negativity in the tone of presidential news from the golden age to the new media age, using a variety of data sources, including the Patterson and Ragsdale series presented in figures 1.1 and 1.5 in this chapter. In chapters 5 and 6 I assess why presidential news has turned so negative in the age of new media. In chapter 5 I analyze the Ragsdale series, based on the *New York Times* from 1949 through 1992. Again we find that something about the rise of the new media age accounts for this trend in presidential news.

In chapter 6 I analyze the Patterson data, which is based on a sample of five thousand news stories from 1980 to 1999. All of these years are in the new media age, obviating any attempt at comparison between the golden age and the new media age. But here we have data on individual news stories, not aggregates of stories, like the Ragsdale series. This allows us to paint a more refined picture of the content of presidential news in the new media age.

In the next two chapters I shift gears and look at the mass public. In chapter 7, relying heavily on American National Election Studies data, but also reporting the results of other data collections, I outline and analyze the decline in news consumption in the mass public, another important trend. As other analyses reveal, something intrinsic to the new media age seems to help explain the decline in the size of the audience for news, at least of the traditional and major news media.

The public's regard for the news media has also eroded. In chapter 8 I document this erosion by presenting data from a number of sources while also analyzing the sources of the decline in regard for the news media. That analysis uses General Social Survey data from the mid 1970s to the late 1990s, as well as more recent American National Election Study data. Again something about the new media age seems implicated as a source of this trend.

In chapter 9 I look at the impact of these changes on the presidency. Due to the changes in news coverage of the presidency and public use of the news, the style of presidential leadership of the public has changed. In the new media age, presidents devote more time to mobilizing specialized constituencies and less time to engaging the broad mass public than they did in the broadcasting age. I test this notion in this chapter.

Finally, in chapter 10 I conclude by assessing the impact of this new media system on the democratic linkage role of the news media, the style of presidential leadership, and the quality of American democracy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.