

The Effect of Political Scandals
on Presidential Approval Ratings

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I. Introduction

The United States has long touted itself as a leader of the free world, championing morality through global governance. Over the last century, the nation has strayed from its former ideals time and time again, embroiling itself in a wide array of controversies.

While these controversies are not unique to any one office or level of bureaucracy, their increased frequency within the walls of the White House cannot be ignored. The onset of the first widespread modern political scandal was met with a precipitous decline in public trust, suggesting a correlation between the two (Pew Research Center, 2024). While the direct cause of this failing trust is hard to pinpoint, increasing media coverage brought on by technological advancement has brought political scandals to the forefront of the American mind in a way that had never been possible before, intertwining presidential power and public trust in an unprecedented manner. In this study, I intend to unpack the effects of political scandals in the chief executive office on public trust through the examination of four political controversies for sitting presidents from 1969-2021.

II. Literature Review

A scandal, as defined by Oxford Dictionary, is “an action or event regarded as morally or legally wrong and causing general public outrage”. This definition relies on the acknowledgement of general societal values, something increasingly difficult to establish in a country as diverse as the United States. Within the nation’s foundational documents, however, one can begin to decode the expectations of a democratic leader, providing a benchmark for evaluation. Emblazoned atop the Constitution sits the phrase,

“We the People”, denoting America’s closest-held democratic ideal: accountability. The phrase, though a mere three words, speaks volumes of the dreams of the dejected, abandoned colonists who built the nation from the ground up. Gone were the days of despotic rule and silenced voices, and in their place stood a desire to make something great, together. This need for accountability in governance has continued to strengthen the nation, catalyzing fights for a more equitable democratic society that embodies the ideals upon which it was founded.

The American psyche is expansive and often contradictory, suggesting a disparity between established ideals and their application, demonstrated by political scandals. A key example of this can be seen through the rule of law, or the belief that no individual, including those in power, is above the law. This idea guides foundational documents and is the basis for invaluable democratic systems, namely the separation of powers (Merrill, 1978). The importance of this ideal is exhausted in foundational documents, appearing in the Federalist Papers and the Constitution alike. In Federalist Paper 51, James Madison makes a clear case for the importance of this idea stating “the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself” (Madison, 1788), building upon and defending the idea’s constitutional basis. However, scandals directly thwart this ideal, suggesting that leaders deem themselves above the law and their fellow citizens.

Political scandals are no new phenomenon, as America’s founders certainly reckoned with their own controversies in the nation’s infancy, beginning with none other than the Father of America, George Washington. In the nation’s foray into representative rule, Washington quickly became the subject of public outcry for providing voters with

alcohol in exchange for their vote in the election of 1792, relegating the “voice of the people to the voice of grog” (Long, 2008). Political scandals continued to present themselves throughout America’s foundational years, but their publicity was limited by print media to urban centers and their literate populations (Long, 2007). The preponderance of political scandals beginning in colonial days emphasizes their ever-present nature in relation to democracy, and democracy’s ability to adapt and survive, nevertheless.

While scandals have always been an omnipresent force in American democracy, the modern age and its technological advancements have changed their effects on citizens. In the modern age, many media outlets have elected themselves as society’s sentinels, intent on “informing citizens about any improper conduct by those in power”, believing they would otherwise go unreported (Puglisi & Snyder, 2008). Many researchers recognize the role of media in escalating a political faux-pas into a full-blown scandal, seeing media recognition as the exacerbator of things that would otherwise be “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind” for the general public (Lippmann, 1992). The sensationalization of everyday political missteps is dangerous, undermining the sense of authority and trust that successful governments rely upon. The role of media biases has also become increasingly prevalent in political reporting, oftentimes spinning, amplifying, or downplaying scandal coverage based on the outlet’s political affiliation, further contributing to rising rates of political polarization. Scandal reporting prefers “to employ titillation rather than scrutiny, and as a result, its political coverage produces trivialization rather than enlightenment,” creating a misinformed population in exchange for a quick buck (Morris, 1991). Morris muses about this relationship, denoting a shift

from “lap-dog” to “watchdog” journalism that characterizes the field today. Gone are the days of dutiful reporters licking the hands of the political elites, behaving and bowing for any bone that might be cast in their direction; in their place sits a new breed, watching and waiting to launch from their haunches and into a perfectly-linked attack at the first sign of political weakness. The catalyst for this change is hard to pinpoint, as scholars of all backgrounds wonder when “journalists became such nihilists with an appetite for destruction” and worry that they have abandoned their duty to guide the American people in the process (Morris, 1991). Politics and journalism exist at odds with one another, making their relationship and shared responsibility impossible to articulate, but necessary as America struggles to confront an exceedingly misguided population.

Political polarization is the process of divergence and extremization of political beliefs, leading to decreased cooperation across party lines. Rates of political polarization began to attract widespread attention in the 1970s as divisive subjects, such as abortion and union status, emphasized party differences (Grumbach, 2018). As polarization continues to increase, trust is broken down between politicians and the citizens they serve, undermining democratic institutions from education to election legitimacy. Studies have indicated that this disestablishment of trust is an issue more prominent across party lines, as many citizens question the ability to serve without partisan bias (Klar & McCoy, 2021). Fears of out-group antagonism continue to color party relations, with the majority of Americans deeming politicians of opposite parties embroiled in scandal are viewed more critically by subjects than those of their own party, due to a principle known as partisan-motivated reasoning (Klar & McCoy, 2021). Partisan-motivated reasoning is influential in shaping citizens’ opinions on their leaders in an array of areas, such as

perceived qualifications to hold office to presumed guilt during scandals. In 2022, a poll conducted by Pew Research Center found that “72% of Republicans regard Democrats as more immoral, and 63% of Democrats say the same about Republicans”, which was nearly double the same statistic in 2016 (2022).

As the partisan chasm grows, citizens’ faith in government is challenged, resulting in falling public trust ratings. Understanding public trust ratings is essential to creating satisfied citizens and upholding democratic ideals, as public trust encapsulates everything from a person’s confidence in the president to their trust in institutions like healthcare and education. Public trust in the federal government began to decrease significantly in the 1970s, mirroring the widespread disapproval the Vietnam War garnered (Pew Research Center, 2024). However, failing public trust is not unique to any American era, as it remains low even today. This is exemplified through the 2023 public trust ratings completed by the Pew Research Center, which found that only 16% of Americans said they “trusted the government just about always or most of the time”, one of the lowest measures in over seventy years. Its persistent challenges indicate its ubiquity to the American government. Low levels of public trust seriously threaten a developed democracy, allowing skepticism to infiltrate every facet of day-to-day life. Parents may grow wary of sending their children to public schools for fear of ideological bias, while voters become disillusioned, believing their voices no longer matter, leading to decreased civic participation and weakened foundations of representative government.

III. Theoretical Framework

This study aims to understand the relationship between political scandals and public trust, conceptualized through presidential approval ratings. While the scope of this study is limited to political scandals in the office of the chief executive, its analysis seeks to understand how citizens feel about government as a whole. The president's visibility as the physical and symbolic head of the nation allows his approval ratings to function as a metric for broader public opinion on government. Because of this, fluctuating approval ratings reveal much more than favor or disfavor, and instead tell the story of greater citizen perceptions of government legitimacy, credibility, and efficacy.

The heart of this research is a desire to understand public trust, an increasingly complex concept in the modern age. Many factors influence individuals' opinions on the government, such as education, race, and socioeconomic status, making its holistic understanding virtually impossible. For the purposes of this study, people's opinions on government leaders are shaped by their perceived integrity and accountability to democratic ideals. This metric is selected for its adherence to the accountability theorem, a crucial aspect of American democracy that calls for political accountability to citizens and other government institutions.

From this study, I hope to understand the effect of political scandals on presidential approval ratings and, subsequently, what this reveals about greater political attitudes.

IV. Sitting Presidents

1. Richard Nixon (1969-1974)

Political scandal: Denied his administration's involvement in the illegal entry and bugging of the Democratic National Committee headquarters. The House of Representatives opened an impeachment investigation following claims of the involvement of his committee for re-election, but Nixon's resignation ended the proceedings before a decision was reached.

Timeline of Scandal and Subsequent Approval Ratings

In January of 1972, Attorney John Mitchell recruited G. Gordon Liddy for the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP) to assist in espionage plans against the Democratic Party. At the time, President Nixon held a 49% approval rating. Over the following months, Nixon's closest allies recruited a team of former CIA and FBI operatives to break into the Democratic National Committee Headquarters at the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C, hoping to bug staff phones and gain insider intel. The first break-in occurred at the Watergate complex on May 28, 1972. Nixon held a 62% approval rating and had his sights set on re-election. On June 20, the Watergate burglars return to the Democratic National Committee Headquarters; however, this time they are caught and arrested when spotted by building security, in their possession, they have numerous bugging devices. The White House immediately denies knowledge or any association with the break-in, though Nixon's approval rating falters to 56%.

Suspicious of the White House, two *Washington Post* reporters begin investigating the Watergate break-in independently, uncovering a check for \$25,000 designated for Nixon's re-election campaign that was deposited in one of the Watergate burglars' accounts. On August 1, 1972, *The Washington Post* published this story, creating the first notable public link between Nixon and the Watergate break-in, though Nixon's approval rating rose slightly to 58%. Hoping to reduce suspicion surrounding his administration's role in Watergate, Nixon assigned White

House Counsel John Dean to investigate the break-in internally, and no White House involvement was found as of August 30, 1972. Though these findings are not reported, Nixon's approval rating continues to rise, reaching 60%. Unfettered, *The Washington Post* continues its investigation, uncovering that while Attorney General John Mitchell controlled a secret fund for intelligence gathering on Democrats. Hoping to gain insight, a reporter contacts Mitchell for a comment on the finding; however, the call ends in Mitchell threatening multiple staff members at *The Washington Post*, as chronicled in the following day's paper on September 29, 1972. Nixon continues to steadily increase his approval rating to 61%. A direct connection is established between Nixon aides and the Watergate break-in on October 10 by *The Washington Post*, but Nixon maintains his upward trajectory, securing a 62% approval rating.

Despite the growing controversy surrounding his administration, Nixon is re-elected for a second term in a landslide victory, receiving 60.7% of the popular vote and securing 49 states on November 7, 1972. His approval rating holds steady at 62% approval rating. To kick off his second term, the Watergate trial began on January 8, 1973, cutting his approval rating to 51%. The trial concluded on January 30, seven men associated with the Watergate break-in were found guilty, among them were former CIA and FBI agents and the former security director of CREEP. In the wake of the trial, Nixon's approval rating reached an all-time high of 67%. However, this is not the end of the Watergate trial. On March 23, a letter by one of the Watergate burglars is read aloud in court, acknowledging a greater conspiracy at hand, reigniting the suspicion that surrounds the White House. From here, Nixon's approval rating enters a downward trajectory, falling to 57%.

Continuing its dogged coverage of the break-in, *The New York Times* reports that one of the burglars told the Senate Watergate Committee that CREEP had paid off the Watergate

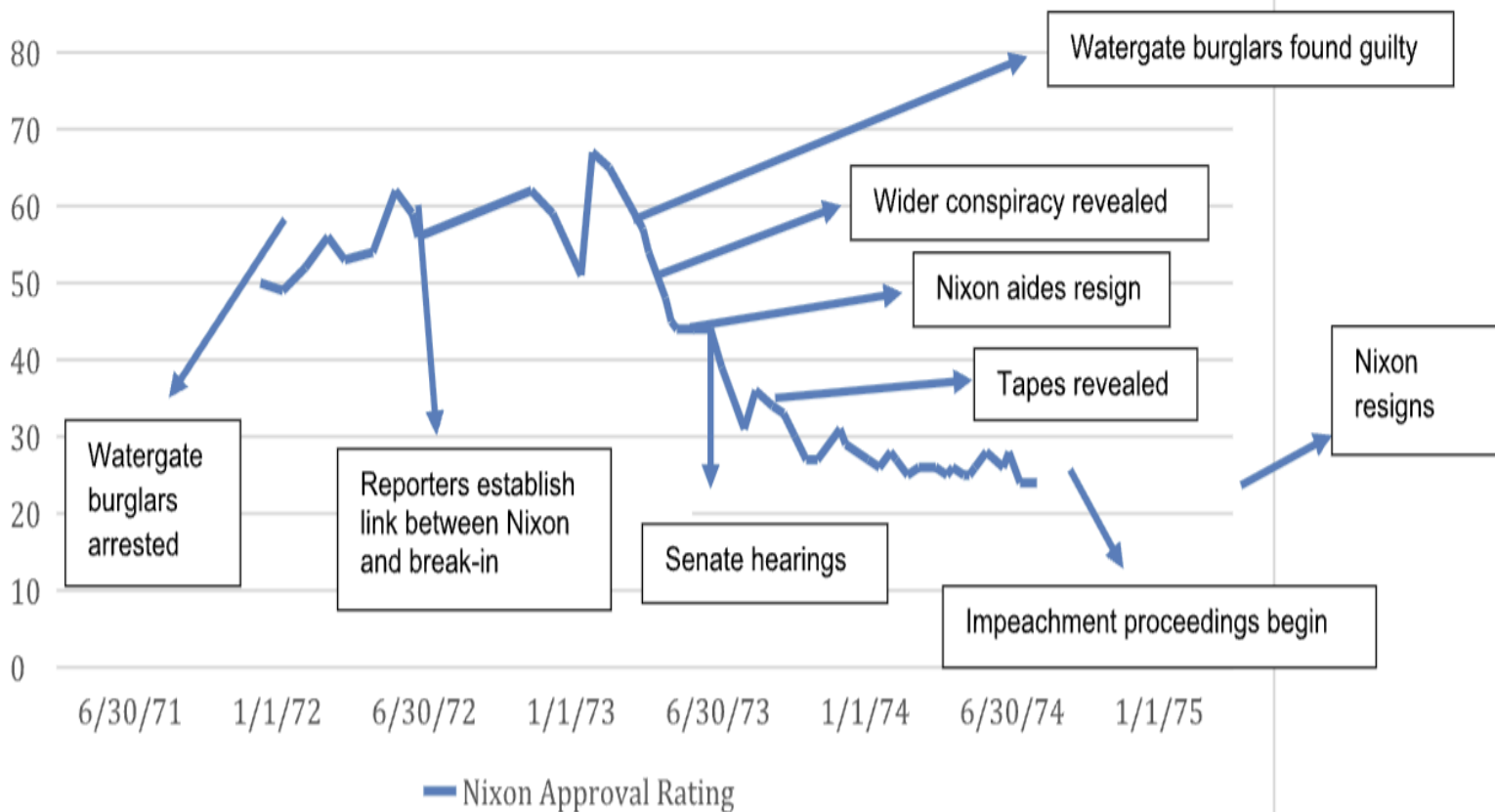
burglars. This prompts John Dean to begin working with prosecutors on April 6, as Nixon's approval rating continues to decrease to 54%. Accusations fly about the White House as two White House aides resign and John Dean is fired on April 30. That night, Nixon took to national television to stress his innocence on the Watergate break-in as his approval rating fell to 47.5%.

Suspicion grows across the nation from legislator to layman, prompting the creation of the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities into the Watergate incident on May 17th. Nixon's approval rating is reported to be 44%. *The Washington Post* reports that John Dean told Watergate prosecutors that he reviewed the Watergate cover-up with Nixon over 35 times. The Senate Select Committee calls Dean before them to testify about Nixon's role in Watergate on June 25, while Nixon's approval rating sits at 41%. Prosecution learns that all conversations in the Oval Office have been recorded on tape on July 13. Hurriedly, Nixon orders the removal of all taping devices, hoping to expunge records of any conversation regarding the cover-up of Watergate between July 13 and July 18. His approval rating is 35%. Over the following months, Nixon continues to refuse to hand over the Oval Office tapes.

Nixon returns to the air for the third time on November 17 and utters the famous line "I am not a crook" in a Florida press conference when faced with accusations regarding tax fraud. Americans express their skepticism via a 27% approval rating. On March 1, 1974, indictments were handed down for the seven men associated with the Watergate break-ins. Nixon is spared any legal ramifications, but is deemed an "unindicted co-conspirator" in the Watergate break-in. His approval rating sees a slight increase to 28%. This mercy is short-lived, as on April 30, more than 1,200 pages of edited transcripts of the Nixon tapes were released by the White House, resulting in Nixon's approval rating falling again to a mere 25%.

Overwhelmed with evidence, the House Judiciary Committee began impeachment proceedings against Nixon on May 9, and his approval rating held steady at 25%. Three articles of impeachment were debated and approved by the House Judiciary Committee against Nixon: obstruction of justice, misuse of power, and contempt of Congress between July 27 and 30. His approval rating falls to 24%, which will stay for the rest of his term. On August 8, Nixon resigned in a publicly televised speech, proclaiming, “I have never been a quitter. To leave office before my term is completed is abhorrent to every instinct in my body. But as president, I must put the interest of America first...Therefore, I shall resign the presidency effective at noon tomorrow.”

Richard Nixon Approval Rating: 1971-1974



Nixon resigned on August 8, 1974, with Vice President Gerald Ford finishing his term out on January 20, 1977. His lowest approval rating during this time was 24%, and his highest was 67%, averaging a 46.3% approval rating during this period.

2. Ronald Reagan (1981-19189)

Political scandal: Reagan became involved in the National Security Council's illegal selling of arms to Iran while under an arms embargo to jointly fund the Nicaraguan Contra rebel group and negotiate the return of seven American hostages. Initially, Reagan denied his involvement in the illegal arms trading, but retracted the statement one week later, prompting a Congressional investigation. Formal charges were never brought against Reagan, but a number of his cabinet members faced legal consequences.

Scandal Timelines and Approval Ratings

On January 4, 1982, Reagan signed the National Security Decision Directive 17, authorizing the CIA to aid the Contras, an anti-communist rebel group, in overthrowing the Sandinista government. During this time, he held a 49% approval rating. Over the next year and a half, unrest continued to dictate the region, though the Reagan administration did little about it publicly. Worries about Communist influence usurping democratic progress across the globe mounted in the summer of 1984 as Israel and Iran faced inconclusive national elections, garnering national attention. In response, National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane implored other government agencies to reevaluate restrictions on Iran on August 31, 1984. Reagan's approval rating fluctuated between 54% and 57% throughout this process.

On October 12, Congress amended the Boland Amendment, specifically banning the support of the Contras via military aid. The initial Boland Amendment was passed on December 8, 1982, as part of the Department of Defense Appropriation Act, prohibiting the use of American money to usurp the Nicaraguan government by supporting any rebel organization. Throughout this process, Reagan's approval rating increased to 58%.

On December 3, 1984, an American working at a university was kidnapped. Reagan, though not revealing the White House's methods of doing so, repeatedly expressed a dedication to returning all American hostages home safe, garnering him an approval rating of 59%. Faced with an increasing number of hostages and overwhelming media pressure, Reagan instructed McFarlane to communicate with Iran in early July of 1985. In these communications, McFarlane **contacted** Manucher Ghorbanifar, an arms dealer, who offered to contact the United States with moderates in Iran and to serve as a middleman for the transfer of arms for American hostages. Reagan's continued public dedication to abating the issue resulted in his approval rating rising to 65%. On August 20, the United States sent its first round of missiles to Iran, but no hostages were released despite the agreed-upon exchange, and Reagan's approval rating faltered to 59%.

Iran, communicating through Ghorbanifar, promised that with the delivery of 400 more missiles, they would release all American hostages, and the United States complied. However, only one hostage was returned to America on September 14, resulting in an approval rating of 60%. McFarlane continued to attempt to negotiate with Ghorbanifar and Iran in exchange for the return of American hostages, however, cooperation broke down, and McFarlane resigned from his position at the White House. He was replaced by John Poindexter, who immediately took to the project, resolving to cut Ghorbanifar out of the deal and communicate directly with Iran on December 4. On December 6, Poindexter had Reagan sign the document authorizing the

exchange of approximately 3,000 missiles. Reagan later stated he has no recollection of this event. Poindexter destroyed the documents following this exchange. Unaware, the American public continued to support the Reagan administration as seen through the period's 63% approval rating.

Poindexter returned to Reagan to sign another document allowing the sale of missiles to Iran directly on January 17, 1986. The following months see an increase in arms exchanges between the United States and Iran. However, the hostages are still not released. Reagan maintained a 64% approval rating throughout January and February of 1986. On April 3, 1986, Ghorbanifar agreed to meet with American agents and Oliver North, a national security advisor, at a hotel in Washington, D.C., where he offered the United States a "final deal" to receive missile repair parts while finally returning all hostages. However, when Americans arrived with their parts in Iran, the deal was rescinded as Ghorbanifar had shared inaccurate information with each side regarding the exchange, and the Americans returned home with nothing but their spare parts. Reagan's approval rating grows increasingly between April and May, peaking at 68%.

The following months continued to prove unsuccessful in returning American hostages home, as North and McFarlane's negotiation efforts failed. On November 3, *Ash-Shiraa*, a prominent Lebanese magazine, reported that the United States had sold weapons to Iran in exchange for hostages, undermining Reagan's promise to never negotiate with terrorists. On November 6, American intelligence confirmed the accusations made by *Ash-Shiraa*, highlighting its violation of the arms embargo placed on Iran. Unsurprisingly, Reagan's approval rating took a significant hit as this spread to American publications, plummeting to 47%.

Attorney General Edwin Meese announced the missile sales connections to funding the Contras rebel group, sparking outrage across Congress for usurping the Boland amendment and

the American stance on Nicaragua on November 25. Reagan created the Tower Commission to investigate the role of the National Security Council in the illegal sale of arms to Iran and funding of the Contras on November 26. The Commission comprises former Senator John Tower, former Secretary of State Edmund Muskie, and former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft; together, they work to understand the rationale behind the arms deal. This process has little effect on his approval rating, raising it to only 48%.

Lawrence Walsh, a decorated lawyer and Republican party member, was named Independent Counsel for the Investigation into the Iran-Contra affair on December 19. This had no impact on Reagan's approval rating. However, when the Tower Commission reported on February 26, 1987, they heavily criticized Reagan's lack of control within the White House and careless behavior surrounding international affairs. Reagan's approval rating subsequently fell to 43%.

On May 5, Congress opened a televised investigation into the Iran-Contra Affair. Much of the attention was shifted away from Reagan's role in the scandal, focusing on prominent members of his staff instead, as the Congress claimed "the country did not need another Watergate. [We] were urgently hoping to avoid a crisis". Questions about Reagan's mental capacity and failing health further deterred Congress from pursuing Reagan, though it did little to help his 47% approval rating. Congressional Hearings concluded on August 3, with Walsh reporting that neither Reagan nor Vice President George Bush violated any laws, but acknowledged their role in enabling the behavior. Reagan's approval rating slightly recovered, swinging back up to 53%. The Investigation Committee followed suit, publishing its final report on November 18 that assigned the brunt of the Iran-Contra scandal to Reagan's advisors.

Following this, Reagan finished his term peacefully, recovering his approval rating to 63% and transitioning Vice President Bush to preside over the White House as the 43rd president.

Ronald Reagan Approval Rating: 1984-1988



Reagan finished his term on January 20, 1989. His lowest approval rating during this time was 43%, and his highest was 68%, averaging a 56.29% approval rating.

3. Bill Clinton (1997-1998)

Political scandal: Denied affair with White House intern, Monica Lewinsky, while under oath in a lawsuit surrounding other claims of sexual misconduct. The House of Representatives later

opened an investigation on this claim, leading to Clinton's impeachment in December of 1998 for "high crimes and misdemeanors" (lying under oath and obstruction of justice).

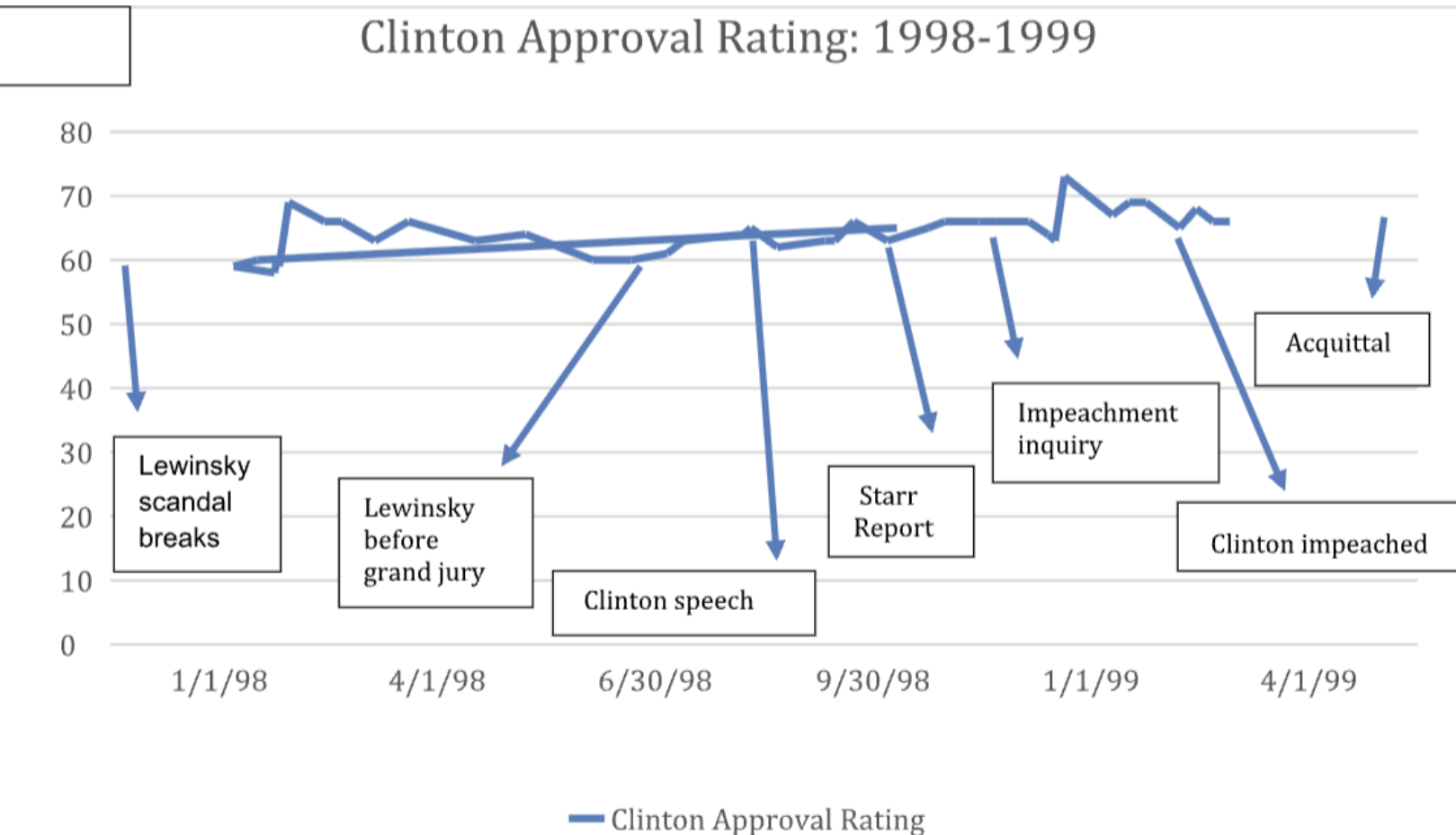
Scandal Timelines and Approval Ratings

The Lewinsky scandal broke via Drudge Report on January 17, 1998, when Clinton held a 60% approval rating. In a televised remark on January 26, Clinton says the infamous statement: "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Ms. Lewinsky." Following this, Clinton's approval rating jumps from 59% to 69%.

On July 28, Lewinsky delivered a grand jury testimony about her involvement with Clinton and turned over relevant evidence to investigators; in response, Clinton's approval rating decreased to 64%. Called before the same grand jury on August 17, Clinton admits to engaging in an "inappropriate physical relationship" with Lewinsky. That night, he delivered a nationally televised statement that their relationship was "not appropriate", and his approval rating climbed to 65%.

On August 20, Clinton ordered a missile strike in Afghanistan and Sudan. Media outlets accused him of using this as a distraction from the ongoing scandal, resulting in a downward tick in his approval rating to 62%. The investigation continues to fascinate the public, as Congress released the Starr Report detailing the relationship between Lewinsky and Clinton to the public on September 11. Despite being presented with a preponderance of evidence on the Lewinsky scandal, most Americans viewed Clinton favorably as he touted a 63% approval rating amid his heavily televised affair. On October 8, an impeachment inquiry was initiated by the House of Representatives, emphasizing the ethical concerns surrounding the issue. Unperturbed, Americans supported Clinton, as seen by his 65% approval rating. This unrelenting support continued as Clinton was impeached by the House of Representatives on December 19,

manifesting as a career-high approval rating of 73%. On January 7, 1999, the Senate received the two articles of impeachment, perjury and obstruction of justice. Clinton's approval rating was 67%. Clinton was eventually acquitted on both accounts, as neither reached the required $\frac{2}{3}$ majority vote, allowing him to finish his term in office with a 68% approval rating.



Clinton finished his term on January 20, 2001. His lowest approval rating during this time was 53%, and his highest was 73%, averaging a 59.28% approval rating.

3. Donald Trump (2016-2020)

Political scandal: Charged with four counts related to the overturning of the 2020 election after encouraging his followers to travel to the United States Capitol to prevent the certification of the

results of the 2020 election. The House of Representatives later impeached Trump for “incitement of insurrection”, though the Senate subsequently acquitted him of this charge.

In a press conference on July 30, 2020, Trump implied the illegitimacy of mail-in ballots and the speed at which the winning candidate was determined in previous elections, while holding a 42% approval rating. Trump’s disdain for mail-in ballots continues as he declares, “The ballots are a disaster...there won’t be a transfer, frankly. There’ll be a continuation. The ballots are out of control,” at a press briefing when asked whether or not the power transition will be peaceful on September 23. His approval rating slightly increased to 43%. Later in the month, Trump instructed the Proud Boys, an American far-right, neo-fascist militant organization, to “stand back and stand by” when asked during the presidential debate if he would “condemn white supremacists and militia groups” on September 29. His 43% approval rating remains.

On October 31, Former Chief of Staff Steve Bannon described Trump’s election strategy in a leaked tape, telling others, "What Trump's gonna do is just declare victory. Right? He's gonna declare victory. But that doesn't mean he's a winner. He's just gonna 'say' he's a winner." Trump’s approval rating saw a slight increase to 46%. Continuing his scheme to declare victory simply, Trump speaks before a group of supporters, claiming to have already won the election on the evening of November 4. However, many unaccounted-for votes are being actively counted across the nation, and the following morning, he declares these ballots illegitimate. Trump’s approval rating returns to 43%, boding poorly for his hopes of re-election, and the declaration of Biden’s victory confirms this.

Hoping to overturn his loss, Trump takes to court with claims of illegal votes being cast in Arizona. This is proven false, and Trump’s legal team concedes, acknowledging that he has lost the 2020 election on November 13, his approval rating stays steady at 43%. Undeterred,

Trump appoints Rudy Giuliani, a member of his legal team, to try to overturn the election results again. They begin to target Arizona specifically, calling and threatening the state's House Speaker. Publicly, they express indignation at the state's ability to pass off fraudulent votes with such ease. In hopes of minimizing public fallout, United States Attorney General Bill Barr meets with Trump and tells him there is no proof of fraud in the election. This occurred between November 22 and 23 and did not affect Trump's 43% approval rating.

Despite being heavily advised not to, Trump posted a video on Facebook describing his fight against the fraudulent election to ensure "Americans can have faith in this election, and in all future elections," on December 2. His approval rating falls to 39%. The following weeks bring Biden's confirmation via the vote of the Electoral College. Trump and his associates continue to denounce the results, pressuring leaders in Georgia and Arizona in public and private. Ideas surrounding the use of martial law to "reclaim" the election begin to swirl throughout Trump's confidants from December 8 to 18. Trump's approval rating is 39% throughout this process.

Enraged by Biden's confirmation, Trump tweets, "Statistically impossible to have lost the 2020 Election. Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!" on December 19. Immediately, the January 6 Rally continues to be promoted by Republican leaders across social media. In a Christmas Day call to Trump, Pence is asked to reject electoral votes, which he refused, saying, "You know, I don't think I have the authority to change the outcome." Trump supporters continue their preparations for January 6 as the Ellipse to Women for America First Rally applies and receives a permit from the National Park Service for a 5000-person rally. On January 3, Trump announced on Twitter that he would attend this rally, sparking the registration of numerous more rallies and marches surrounding the Capitol. Tensions grow high across the

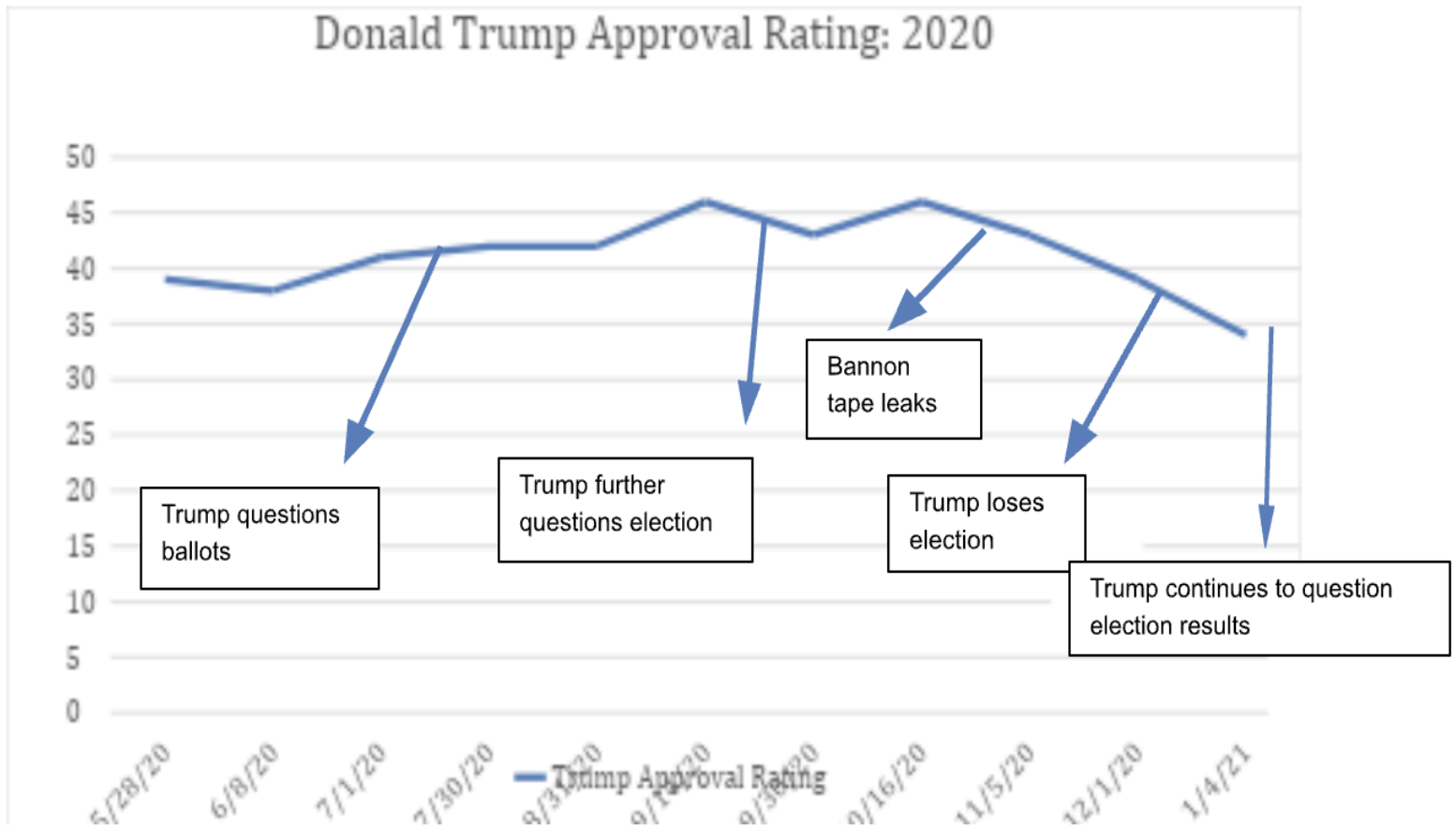
police and security teams for the Capitol, resulting in multiple requests for National Guard support. However, all requests are denied. No public opinion poll is conducted between the dates of 12/18/20 and 01/04/21.

The following day, January 5, D.C. National Guard Commanding Major General receives orders that all requests must now be approved by the Secretary of the Army and the Secretary of Defense; previously, no approval was required. The morning of January 6, Trump continued to tweet that the election was fraudulent and asked first Mike Pence to delay the election results and then all Republican leaders. Reports of armed individuals bypassing security are filed by members of the National Park Service and the Secret Service. At noon, Trump spoke before the Ellipse rally for over an hour. During this speech, he says, “I know that everyone here will soon be marching over to the Capitol building to peacefully and patriotically make your voices heard”. During the speech, multiple pipe bombs were discovered by police, including one in the garage where Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris would enter. At the end of his speech, he issues a call to action for his supporters, warning them that “If you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore”.

At 2:13 pm, rioters gained access to the Capitol, breaking in through glass windows after overtaking a fence approximately two hours prior. Violence ensues, and Trump is reported to watch Fox News coverage from the Oval Office while tweeting as Congress is evacuated. At 4:37 pm, Trump tweets an unscripted video, ascertaining that the election was stolen, but it was time to head home. Notable quotes from the video include “We had an election that was stolen from us”, and “So go home. We love you. You're very special.”. At 3:10 am on January 7, Mike Pence declared the results of the election and Joseph Biden the next president. Congress then

impeached Trump for the second time on January 13, 2021, for the incitement of an insurrection.

His approval rating is reported to be 34% between the dates of January 4-15.



Trump finished his term on January 20, 2021. His lowest approval rating during this time was 34%, and his highest was 46%, averaging a 41.5% approval rating.

V. Analysis and Conclusion

While distinctly unique, the presidential scandals involving Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and Donald Trump all resulted in decreased approval ratings. The duration and extent of the approval rating decline differed significantly from president to president, likely due to differing political attitudes of the time, the extent of media coverage they received, and existing levels of polarization within society.

Richard Nixon and Watergate

The Watergate scandal was truly disastrous to the reputation of Richard Nixon and continues to define his presidency today. Though Watergate lives on in the minds of Americans, Nixon's accomplishments before the scandal cannot be understated. When Nixon assumed office on January 20, 1969, he faced uniquely difficult circumstances as American disdain for the Vietnam War reached a boiling point. Americans had grown wary of America's proclaimed altruistic involvement in the East and were ready to see their sons and brothers returned home safely, and Nixon promised to do so. While the war's end was painful and seemingly unattainable, Nixon nevertheless persisted, finally withdrawing the final American combat troops from Vietnam in early 1973. Though the war's conclusion was highly controversial, Nixon ended a war that five previous presidents seemed only to aid and abet, securing him a decisive victory in the minds of many. Other significant accomplishments of his tenure include ending the draft, leading the integration of southern schools, lowering the voting age to 21, engaging in diplomatic

conversations with China, negotiating an arms agreement with the Soviet Union, and beyond. Yet despite these accolades, Nixon's presidency is still reduced to Watergate.

Watergate was a scandal unlike any other the United States had ever seen; gone were the days of extramarital affairs and market manipulation, and in their place stood a total abuse of executive power. The break-in of the Democratic National Headquarters undermined everything Americans thought to be true about democracy, leaving an already fragile nation reeling. The end of segregation and the Vietnam War shone as a beacon of social progress, but when undercut by Watergate, America's hope for a better tomorrow faltered.

Watergate was a perfect storm of questionable morality and nonexistent accountability, as Nixon proved his willingness to lie, cheat, and steal to maintain power. However, the true pain of Watergate lies not in its break-in, but rather its subsequent cover-up. The release of the White House tapes solidified Nixon's role in Watergate, directly conflicting with his pious public claims of innocence. Americans, rightfully, felt lied to. They experienced firsthand the disparity in expectations between the average citizen and those in power, and saw the cracks forming at the base of democracy. Democracy lives and breathes by accountability, but when that falls away, it is nothing but the despotic dredges our forefathers dared to defy. In the wake of Watergate, the nation had to learn how to adjust to this new age, creating more precise parameters of responsibility for the executive and legislative branches.

Before his entanglement in the Watergate controversy, Richard Nixon held relatively stable approval ratings at around 60%. Americans seemed to approve of his work within the walls of the White House, reaffirmed by his landslide victory in his race for reelection in 1972. But Watergate almost instantly dissolved this network of supporters, indicating the direct correlation between political scandals and presidential approval.

Ronald Reagan and Iran-Contra

Though free from the Cold War era, the United States still harbored a silent fear of Communist influence usurping democratic progress worldwide. People of all backgrounds and walks of life, including President Ronald Reagan, held this fear. The Iran-Contra Affair illustrated the lingering uncertainty surrounding Soviet power and manifested itself clearly in the actions of the Reagan administration.

When the Iran-Contra affair became public, it shifted America's perception of Reagan, fading his seemingly effortless mass appeal. Understanding the Iran-Contra affair was exceedingly difficult at the time, as top political officials scrambled to destroy evidence and bury leads, complicating coverage of the event. For many Americans, understanding Iran-Contra entirely seemed outlandish, so they held onto the one fact they knew to be true: Reagan had violated both United States law and his promise to the American people.

The Iran-Contra affair continued the legacy of Watergate by eroding trust in democratic ideals and disparaging government authority. One of the first things taught about our democracy is its desire to hold itself accountable, primarily through a system of checks and balances, ensuring America never returns to the despotic days of yore. Yet, Reagan violated this ideal in its entirety, going above Congress' explicit demands not to meddle in Nicaraguan affairs and subsequently entrenching the nation in terrorist negotiations. Reagan continued to bend government agencies, like the FBI and CIA, to his will, thwarting accountability on every front. However, blame was quickly shifted away from Reagan, perhaps to spare his rapidly deteriorating health, America's slowly recovering faith in institutions, or even just to set the record straight and prevent wrongful conviction.

Though absolved from guilt, Reagan's declared innocence brought its challenges, raising questions about Reagan's ability to lead and mental capacity. Throughout his re-election campaign, Reagan faced heavy criticism for his age, with his mental acuity and tumultuous physical health coming under fire. These challenges continued throughout his second term and are highlighted by the Iran-Contra affair, particularly in instances where Reagan cannot recall events due to general forgetfulness or by being incapacitated while hospitalized. The accuracy of these statements is debated, with many wondering whether these convenient lapses of memory are nothing more than a half-hearted attempt to shirk blame. Regardless, Reagan's portrayal as an innocent third party in the affair implies an inability to manage the White House effectively, let alone the nation, and undermined his presidential authority.

The Iran-Contra Affair opened the Reagan administration to heavy criticism, with Reagan's approval ratings dropping nearly twenty percentage points when the scandal broke. However, unlike Nixon, Reagan escaped the legal ramifications of his scandal and continued his term in office, allowing him to regain American favor, as quantified by his 63% approval rating upon exit. Today, Reagan's presidency is remembered fondly by Americans, shining as a beacon of American might in the face of communist oppression, proving once and for all the seeming infallibility of democracy. Still, the Iran-Contra scandal reignited skepticism about the integrity of American leaders, reaffirming many of the negative citizen attitudes fostered during Watergate. Increasingly negative views about leaders bleed over into many areas of civic life, stifling voter participation and undermining institutional faith, an issue America is all too familiar with.

Bill Clinton and the Lewinsky Affair

The Lewinsky scandal ushered in a new age of American politics, merging the political and the personal in a highly publicized manner. By the 1990s, Americans were no stranger to extramarital affairs within the presidential office; however, never before had such a scandal played out so publicly. The Lewinsky Affair was the golden standard of journalistic dreg with its licentious nature and never-ending gossip fodder, and thus it emblazoned every headline and magazine imaginable. However, the object of journalistic fascination was not Bill Clinton and his abhorrent abuse of power, nor was it his betrayal of the First Lady, but rather a gross fascination with the sexuality of Monica Lewinsky, a twenty-two-year-old White House intern.

The Lewinsky Scandal proved to be just as disastrous as its predecessors, but this time, the president involved seemed to emerge entirely unscathed. As the media titillated readers with detailed accounts of the affair, they honed in on Lewinsky as a target entirely, describing her as a “ditzy, predatory White House intern” (Dowd, 1998). Clinton, however, was portrayed as nothing more than a man who made a mistake and was now having his private life put on display. Clinton preyed upon this sympathy, using it as leverage to enforce his bully pulpit and stifle calls for greater accountability. While likely unintended, Clinton’s actions had resounding impacts, setting movements for workplace equality and sexual harassment awareness back decades. However, the Lewinsky Affair seems to have done little to mar Clinton’s reputation, as he remains a prominent figure across the Democratic party. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of Monica Lewinsky, whose public perception is still relegated to her once inappropriate involvement with President Clinton today.

Americans’ response to Clinton’s involvement in the Lewinsky affair indicates the greater change in political attitudes associated with the turn of the century. Questionable morality was no

longer seen as a nonstarter to political power, as Clinton's approval survived amid a scandal, indicating a greater emphasis on political performance in shaping public opinion. However, the increased coverage of the Lewinsky scandal and its subsequent dramatization reduced the perceived political legitimacy of the president's office and further severed partisan cooperation. Clinton's election to office in 1993 returned the Democratic Party to power for the first time in nearly two decades, making his approach to the presidency crucial to turning the tide of a struggling party. Reaganism's acceptance into mainstream political thought changed the expectations and hopes of the American voters, creating a desire for conservative thought and economic deregulation that directly contradicted Democratic ideals. Yet, Clinton forayed into his administration with a zeal for his party's values, pushing for equality in military service and healthcare while targeting unemployment and fortifying social welfare programs. While well-received across the population, these programs sparked outrage in Republican leadership, which was fully displayed during the Lewinsky trial. The Lewinsky trial became a grounds to air out all partisan anger, and bring the Democratic Party down in the process. The resulting legal frays impacted the opinions of many Americans, feeding polarization and alienation in a haphazard manner.

However, unlike his predecessors, Clinton did not suffer from the substantive impact on his approval rating due to his political scandal. Along every step of the scandal timeline, Americans responded positively to Clinton, most notably on the day of his impeachment when his approval rating shot up to 73%, a career-high. This seeming forgiveness is most likely attributed to the financial prosperity the nation enjoyed under his administration, even throughout his tumultuous personal affairs. Similarly, Clinton's positive perception following the

Lewinsky scandal suggests a variance in stances on scandal types, with personal scandals, like that of Clinton's, being far less impactful on approval.

Donald Trump and January 6

Dreams of the twenty-first century have taken many shapes in the decades leading up to it, with some fearing a descent into dystopian madness reminiscent of Orwell and Huxley, while others dreamed of the flying cars and shiny gadgets our society surely would have achieved in this futuristic age. The reality falls somewhere in between, as incidents like the January 6th Capitol Attack illustrate, bringing unprecedented challenges to time-honored democratic principles.

The January 6th Capitol Attack highlighted the effects of rising polarization and haphazard partisanship, as democracy crumbled into tyranny. For practically the nation's entire history, transitions of power had been peaceful and diplomatic, even when tensions between incoming and outgoing parties were high. Instead, Trump's exit reminded America of its darkest days, emulating the divides that characterized the nation pre-Civil War. But January 6 did more than just parallel history; it made it. Following the January 6 proceedings, Trump became the first president ever to be impeached twice. Americans also experienced a political scandal in a completely different manner, watching January 6 play in real-time through social media and news reports. The day is defined by images of unprecedented violence within hallowed halls of democracy, and undercut by a never-ending narrative exhausted by Trump on Twitter. Encouragements from Trump to "fight like hell" stand in stark contrast to photographs of lawmakers, cowering beneath chamber desks, fearful of what the mob outside their doors would do upon entry. The imagery of this day puts America's growing divide on display painfully, emphasizing the importance of reducing polarization and returning to partisan cooperation.

Public perception of Trump's role in January 6 elucidates the growing divide that characterizes Washington today, as seen through his impeachment and subsequent acquittal. Congressional conversations surrounding Trump's struggle to reach a consensus on his guilt in the Capitol Riot. Republicans argued that the impeachment proceedings were little more than a politically motivated "witch hunt", while across the aisle, Democrats argued that Trump had done irreversible damage to constitutional foundations. This disparity in opinion suggests a fundamental disconnect between America's two major parties that inhibits meaningful cooperation. All Americans distinctly feel the loss of partisan cooperation, as the country reckons with national challenges that are sure to shake an increasingly fragile society further. Big ticket issues like health care reform or an impending economic downturn cannot be effectively managed by one party alone, necessitating multi-level bureaucratic compliance. Furthermore, the belief that America is a great country, that it is a beautiful country, emerges from democracy and the unity it brings. Never has the United States of America completely agreed with itself, but this has cultivated a land where voices are heard and opinions are respected, a belief that Trump's presidency destroys. By attacking vital institutions, such as voting and Congress, Trump amplified existing skepticism and undermined authority, leaving little room for speaking out against his administration and destroying public trust in the process.

Donald Trump's presidency seems to fly in the face of scandal, using it as fuel to recruit supporters and retain power. Trump consistently engaged in behavior before and during his presidency that would be a guaranteed political death sentence to any other politician, suggesting a nonsensical infallibility of his public persona. Yet, Trump was not and continues to be an unpopular president, as seen through his inability to ever achieve a 50% or higher approval rating. While his involvement in the January 6 Capitol Riot did result in a decrease in his

approval ratings, it has not disenfranchised him from Washington in the way one would expect. It is impossible to understand why he seems immune to the same political pitfalls as his predecessors, but many attribute it to his stance as an outsider in Washington. While Trump touts many of the benefits of his peers, belonging to the college-educated upper class, he is deemed relatable to the everyman for his divergence from presidential norms. Americans' acceptance of Trump and his scandal indicates the decreased morality that citizens have come to expect of their leaders, continuing trends established by Clinton of placing policy before the person when evaluating presidential approval. Despite this, Trump's scandal hatched public trust and set the nation off on a dangerous trajectory, emphasizing his resounding impact on democracy.

Conclusions

Following the analysis of four sitting presidents and their associated scandals, it is clear that involvement in political controversy decreases public approval ratings. This impact differs significantly across the board, but in most cases, its effects were short-lived, with approval ratings rebounding. Scandals associated with personal matters, like Clinton's extramarital affair with Monica Lewinsky, were viewed the least critically by citizens, as many deemed it irrelevant to job performance than those involving presidential authority. Positive country performance, particularly economic health, appears to minimize political fallout the most, as Reagan and Clinton's final approval ratings suggest. Surprisingly, having articles of impeachment drafted does little to sway public opinion, perhaps indicating a greater skepticism for congressional authority. Contempt for Congress has become increasingly prevalent across society, a phenomenon that can, at least partially, be attributed to presidential scandals. Throughout these scandals, the president illustrated a contempt for Congress, whether by bypassing embargos, lying under oath, refusing to release evidence, or undermining election certification, setting a

precedent that society seems to have upheld. This undermining of longstanding institutions is one of the most significant challenges presidential scandals pose to public trust by fostering cynicism and discouraging civic engagement. Fears surrounding presidential authority and governmental accountability impact the population similarly. These attitudes are dangerous and are not conducive to the healthy democracy America has long dreamed of, leaving the nation a mere shell of the place it promised to be. The relationship between political scandals and public trust is complicated, but its understanding is essential to ensuring that democracy prevails.

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