Another Lesson about Public Opinion
during the Clinton-Lewinsky Scandal

STEPHEN EARL BENNETT
Appalachian State University

Data from Pew Research Center polls from early February 1998 through late February 1999 show that only about a third of the American public followed media accounts of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal "very closely," which is a facet of public reaction that has been largely neglected. Levels of heed paid to media stories about the scandal affected knowledge about key personalities and facets of the imbroglio. In addition, data show that the amount of attention paid to the news about the scandal resonated with opinions about diverse aspects of the scandal. Students of public opinion need to take the public's relative inattention to the scandal into account.

From January 21, 1998—when the Washington Post reported Bill Clinton may have had a sexual relationship with a young woman and lied about it under oath—through February 12, 1999—when the Senate voted not to convict him of impeachment charges—public opinion bemused commentators. Widespread approval of Clinton's job performance covaried with belief he had lied about the affair, distaste for Kenneth Starr's investigation, opposition to ousting Clinton from office, and dislike of how the media covered the scandal.

Since public opinion is considered crucial to the scandal's denouement (Albert 1999; Cooper 1999; Hauck 1999; Pious 1999-2000; Posner 1999), we need to understand reactions to it. Although scholars have learned much about public opinion during the scandal, more can be gleaned. In particular, how much attention did the public pay to the scandal, and how did that affect people's awareness of and attitudes about key figures? Most previous scholarship passed over this topic. The data come from polls conducted on behalf of the Times Mirror/Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in May 1993, June 1995, Sep-

Stephen Earl Bennett is Research Professor of Political Communication at Appalachian State University. He is coauthor of Living with Leviathan: Americans Coming to Terms with Big Government (with Linda Bennett) and author of Apathy in America, 1960-1984. In addition, he coedited a book titled After the Boom: The Politics of Generation X (with Stephen C. Craig).

1. After the Senate failed to convict him, Clinton allegedly exclaimed, "Thank God for public opinion" (Woodward 1999, 513).

Presidential Studies Quarterly 32, no. 2 (June) © 2002 Center for the Study of the Presidency

Public Opinion during the Lewinsky Scandal


Students of public opinion were often puzzled by why Clinton’s approval ratings, after an early dip, remained high throughout the scandal and why a majority of the public opposed removing him from office. Many researchers assumed public reaction to the scandal reflected “sophistication.” Brody (1998) argued, for example, that although many people wished Clinton were a better person, they were satisfied with “his effectiveness, skill, understanding, compassion, and success as a political leader.”

Mostly overlooked has been how much attention people paid to the news about the Clinton-Lewinsky imbroglio. Brody (1998; Brody and Jackman 1999) and Keeter (1999) are exceptions. They believed the public was well aware of the scandal. Brody and Jackman (1999) wrote, for example, that Gallup polls showed roughly 80 percent of the public were following the story either “very” or “somewhat” closely. Keeter concluded that “the public [was] fully engaged and attentive to the detail of the matter.”

There are grounds, however, for doubting that the American public was fully attentive to the Clinton-Lewinsky matter. Polls conducted for the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press do not show an overwhelmingly attentive public.

Attention to the Scandal, 1998-99

An important facet of public opinion during the scandal, one that has been largely overlooked, is how much attention people paid to the Clinton-Lewinsky imbroglio. If sizable portions of the public are “tuned out” of a phenomenon, one is hard-pressed to argue that reaction to it is sophisticated. To be sophisticated about a topic, one has to be knowledgeable about it (Luskin 1987). To be knowledgeable, one must be attentive to news about a topic (Chaffee and Frank 1996; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Weaver 1996).

² The Pew Research Center’s data were released to me by the center. I am indebted to Director Andrew Kohut and his staff (http://people-press.org/). The University of Michigan’s Center for Political Studies conducts the National Election Studies. The Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research releases the data. I am responsible for all analyses and interpretations.
Table 1 depicts the American public’s attention to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal from its earliest days in late January 1998 through February 1999. The data come mostly from nationwide polls conducted for the Pew Research Center. The polls asked respondents how closely they had been following media stories about various facets of the scandal in recent weeks or days.\(^3\)

How should the data be understood? Including those who say they have been following the scandal very closely or fairly closely leaves the impression that most people were attentive to the story (see Pew Center 1998a).

However, when it comes to annual summaries of Americans’ attention to news stories, the Pew Center has employed a different standard (Pew Center 1997, 1998b, 1999, 2000). In these reports, only those who claim to have followed news stories very closely are considered. Roughly a third of the public paid very close attention to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. Indeed, the scandal ranked tenth among the news stories of 1998 (Pew Center 1998b), and the Senate impeachment trial ranked ninth in 1999 (Pew Center 1999). The House of Representatives’ vote to impeach Clinton ranked eleventh in 1998. Shootings in Arkansas, Oregon, and Washington, DC, were the top stories in 1998, as was the news about the Columbine High School shootings in April 1999. The deaths of John F. Kennedy Jr., his wife, and his sister-in-law was the only other story followed very closely by more than half the public in 1999.

This is more than a matter of a glass “half full” or “half empty.” There are palpable differences between those who say they have been following media accounts of a story very closely or fairly closely. These differences not only include knowledge about a topic, which should be expected, but also opinions. *Times Mirror/Pew Research Center* data illustrate the point.

The *Times Mirror* Center’s June 1995 poll, for example, found that 68 percent of those who said they were following media stories about the crisis in Bosnia very closely knew which ethnic group had conquered most of Bosnia and 29 percent admitted they did not know, compared to 55 percent of those who had followed the story fairly closely who knew which ethnic group had overrun most of the country and 42 percent who said they did not know. Similarly, in April and May 2000, people who said they had been following media stories about the “ups and downs” of the stock market got an average of 2.2 items correct on a 3-item test of knowledge about economic issues, compared to a mean score of 1.7 for those who had been following news about the stock market fairly closely.\(^4\) Finally, the Pew Center’s June 2000 poll found that persons who had been following news stories about the presidential candidates got 1.7 out of 4 questions about presidential candidates correct, compared

---

3. The question has been used by the *Times Mirror/Pew Research Center* since the mid-1980s to tap public interest in kinds of news stories (see Pew Center 1997, 1998b, 1999, 2000).

4. The three items asked who Alan Greenspan is (chairman of the Federal Reserve Board), whether the Federal Reserve Board had recently raised or lowered interest rates (raised), and at what level the Dow Jones Industrial Average was trading (10,000). The three items were coded 0 for don’t know or incorrect answers and 1 for a correct reply. The three-item Knowledge of Economic Affairs Scale had a Kuder-Richardson-20 coefficient of .70; a principal components analysis, rotated to a varimax solution, found that all three items loaded on the same underlying dimension at or above .70.
TABLE 1

Public Attention to the Clinton-Lewinsky Scandal, January 1998 to February 1999 (in percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poll Date</th>
<th>Very Closely</th>
<th>Fairly Closely</th>
<th>Not Too Closely</th>
<th>Not at All Closely</th>
<th>Don’t Know (Volunteered Response)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 26</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 27</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early February</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-^a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-^a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late July</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early August</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-August</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-^a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late August</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early September</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late September</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early December</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late December</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-^a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early January</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late January</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-February</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>-^a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: All polls were conducted for the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press except the January 26, 1998 poll (CBS) and the January 27, 1998 poll (Gallup).

Note: In the early months, the questions asked respondents how closely they had been following allegations that President Clinton had an affair with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky. The question in July 1998 asked how closely respondents were following media stories about Clinton's decision to testify via videotape in the Lewinsky investigation. From August to early December 1998, the question asked how closely people were following media stories about the impeachment inquiry in Congress into allegations against President Clinton. The late December 1998 question asked how closely people were following media stories about the debate and vote in the House of Representatives to impeach Bill Clinton. From January to February 1999, the question asked how closely people were following media stories about the impeachment trial of President Clinton in the Senate.

a. Polls in which the “don’t know” response was given by more than 0 percent but less than 1 percent of respondents.

with a mean of 1.3 for those who had been following media stories about the candidates fairly closely.

There are also opinion differences between those who tell Times Mirror/Pew Center interviewers that they have been following a news story fairly or very closely. The Times Mira-
ror Center’s June 1995 poll showed that 60 percent of those who had been following news stories about the Bosnia crisis very closely said they sympathized with the Bosnians, and 12 percent did not know with whom they sympathized. By comparison, 46 percent of those who had been following the news about the crisis fairly closely claimed sympathy for the Bosnians, and 25 percent did not know. The Pew Center’s September 1997 poll found that 44 percent of those who said they had been following the news about Bosnia approved of U.S. policy toward Bosnia, while 53 percent disapproved, and 3 percent did not know. On the other hand, 54 percent of those who said they had been following the news about Bosnia fairly closely approved of U.S. policy in that country, while 34 percent disapproved, and 12 percent had no opinion.

One ought not assume that there are always opinion differences between those who say they follow media accounts very closely and individuals who follow the story fairly closely. It is also true that those who follow the news about a story fairly closely tend to be more knowledgeable than those who pay less heed. Nevertheless, there can be important differences between those who report following a story fairly closely and persons who say very closely. This was the case with the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal.

In the event, sizable proportions of Americans paid little or only some attention to the Clinton-Lewinsky imbroglio from beginning to end. Thus, the Pew Center’s data conflict with assertions made by Brody (1998; Brody and Jackman 1999) and Keeter (1999). As the Pew Center (2000) noted, interest in the scandal peaked in early September 1998, when 36 percent claimed to follow the story very closely.

If the statement seems overblown, consider this. In early and again in mid-January 1999, the Pew Center asked respondents, “How much of the live coverage of the Senate impeachment trial have you watched?” On each occasion, less than 10 percent of the public claimed to have watched “almost all of it,” approximately one in ten said “a lot of it,” roughly a third said “some of it,” about one-fourth said “hardly any of it,” and about one-fifth claimed to have watched “none of it.”

Granted, the outcome of the Senate trial was a foregone conclusion, but an impeachment trial of a president is rare and is a constitutional crisis (Berger 1974). Public opinion polls did not exist during the impeachment and trial of Andrew Johnson (see Benedict 1973), so it is impossible to tell how closely the public followed the story. The televised Watergate hearings during the summer of 1973 were not the same as an impeachment trial, but polls indicate the public may have been more attentive then than in 1998 and 1999 (see also Ladd 1998a; Newport 1999c). According to Stanley Kurtler (1990, 381), for example, “The polls showed that Americans watched the Watergate proceedings in steadily growing numbers, rather evenly spread across [geographic] sections, age groups, and educational backgrounds.” A Gallup poll in early August 1973 found that only 12 percent of the public claimed not to have watched “any of the [Watergate] hearings,” and roughly one-fifth of the public had seen ten hours or more during the proceeding week (Gallup 1978, vol. I, 158, 160). Unfortunately, as the final days of Nixon’s presidency approached during the summer of 1974, pollsters did not plumb attention to the matter (see Lang and Lang 1983). Pollsters evidently assumed widespread public attention to the story.

According to Paul Sniderman and his co-authors (1975, 446), “awareness and concern for Watergate were a virtually universal phenomenon.” As early as May 1973, 53 percent of
the public claimed to believe that Watergate was of "great importance" to the country, while 25 percent said it was of "some" importance, and 15 percent said it was of "very little" importance (Gallup 1978, vol. 1, 117). That is a much higher percentage than that which judged the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal important.

Moreover, from the spring of 1973 to late June of 1974, Gallup polls showed the percentage of Americans believing that Watergate was "a very serious matter, because it reveals corruption in the Nixon administration" increased from a third in April 1973 to about half from June 1973 till June 1974. The percentage believing that Watergate was "just politics, the kind of thing that both parties engage in" fell from slightly more than half in April 1973 to about two-fifths by June 1973, where it remained (Gallup 1978, vol. 1, 114, 128, 134, 139, 157, 289) (Louis Harris polls showed the same pattern between May and August 1973; see Lang and Lang 1983, 310).6

Additional support for the argument that attention to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal was relatively low comes from Pew Research Center polls conducted in the aftermath of terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 (Pew Center 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2001d). Just days after the attacks, roughly three-quarters (74 percent) of the public said they were following media stories about the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon very closely (Pew Center 2001a). In early October, almost the same percentage (73 percent) said they were very closely following the news about the attacks in New York City and Washington, DC, and about who conducted the attacks and how they did it (72 percent), and more than half the public was very closely following media stories about "what's being done in the U.S. to defend against future terrorist attacks," efforts to form a coalition against terrorist organizations, possible military action against terrorism, and "the economic and financial effects of the attacks" (Pew Center 2001c). A poll in mid-October found a larger percentage of the public following media accounts of "terrorism attacks on the United States" (78 percent) than were following media accounts of "the U.S. military effort in Afghanistan" (51 percent) (Pew Center 2001b). Although there had been a decline in public attention to media stories about the war in Afghanistan and terrorist attacks on the United States by late October and early November of 2001, a larger percentage of the public were following media stories about these topics very closely (45 percent and 63 percent) than paid the same level of attention to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal at any time. Moreover, media stories about the anthrax attacks also garnered a higher level of public attention than did the Clinton-Lewinsky imbroglio (Pew Center 2001d).

Relative indifference to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal raises two questions. First, why were so many Americans disinclined to follow news about the scandal very closely? Second, what connections did levels of attentiveness to the story have with people's awareness of and attitudes about key participants?

6. In 1973 and 1974, partisanship affected reactions to this question. In April 1973, only 13 percent of self-identified Republicans thought Watergate was "serious," while 67 percent believed it was "just politics." Democrats, on the other hand, divided evenly (42 percent versus 42 percent), and independents divided (31 percent to 56 percent). In June 1974, a third of Republicans thought Watergate was serious, while 59 percent still believed it was just politics. Democrats, on the other hand, were inclined to believe Watergate was serious (57 percent versus 33 percent). Independents divided 49 percent to 45 percent (Gallup 1978, vol. 1, 114-15, 289).
Why Attention to the Scandal Was Not Greater

There are many reasons why Americans were not more attentive to news about the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, but several stand out. First, most of the time, most Americans are not very interested in public affairs (Bennett 1986; Lane 1965; Lippmann 1925). National Election Studies between 1980 and 2000 show, for example, that roughly a quarter of the public reported following "what goes on in government and public affairs," whether there is an election going on or not, "most of the time," while slightly over a third replied "most of the time," roughly a quarter said "only now and then," and about 15 percent replied "hardly ever."

The Pew Center’s June 1998 poll, which was the only time the general political interest variable and the query plumbing how closely people were following news about the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal appeared jointly, showed that 41 percent of those who said they followed politics most of the time were following the news about the scandal very closely, compared to 28 percent of those who claimed to follow politics some of the time, 15 percent of those who followed politics only now and then, and only 4 percent of people who said they followed politics hardly at all. The correlation between general political interest and how closely people were following the news about the scandal was \( r = .28 \). In short, although the nexus is not perfect, part of the reason for low rates of attention to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal is Americans’ general indifference to public affairs.

Logistic regression\(^7\) shows that general political interest is a statistically significant predictor of level of attention paid to media coverage of the scandal, even net of other factors that predict heed paid to the news. The data are depicted in Table 2.

A word is in order about the variables included as predictors of how much attention people said they were paying to news stories about allegations of sexual misconduct against Bill Clinton (coded 0 for not following these stories very closely and 1 for following these stories very closely). This variable was asked of half the sample in June 1998. Age (coded as the respondent’s actual age in years), education (coded from 4 for no education through eighth grade to 16 for advanced degrees), family income in 1997 (coded from less than $10,000 to more than $100,000), gender (coded 0 for women and 1 for men), and race (coded 0 for African Americans and 1 for whites) are the usual demographic and socioeconomic status variables included in multivariate models of the type depicted in the table (see Bennett 1986). Also included was strength of partisanship (coded from 1 for respondents who replied don’t know or refused to answer a question about partisanship to 5 for party identifiers), a query asking how important people thought Kenneth Starr’s investigation of the Lewinsky scandal was to the country (coded from 1 for very important to 4 for not at all important), and the National Election Study’s standard question about general interest in public affairs (coded 1 for most of the time to 4 for only now and then). This mix of predictors enables one to plumb the factors that might affect how much attention people were paying to news accounts of allegations against Clinton.

\(^7\) For a good, nontechnical discussion of logistic regression, see Menard (2002). I opted for logistic regression, in which the dependent variable is a dichotomy, coded 0 (for not following media stories very closely) and 1 (following stories very closely) because the technique can be understood by persons familiar with ordinary least square regression (see Cohen and Cohen 1983).
TABLE 2
Logistic Regression of How Much Attention People Claim to Be Paying to News Stories about Allegations of Sexual Misconduct against Bill Clinton on Eight Predictors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE b</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>Exp (B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strength of partisanship</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>-.68</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income in 1997</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>6.79</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Starr’s investigation</td>
<td>-.42</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>17.32</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>-.55</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>12.45</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Initial -2 log likelihood = 501.20
Model -2 log likelihood = 436.23
Goodness of fit = 432.28
Model $\chi^2 = 64.97, df = 8, p = .000$
Cox and Snell pseudo $R^2 = .14$
Nagelkerke pseudo $R^2 = .21$
Overall classification = 77.3 percent correct
$N = 418$


The table depicts each predictor’s unstandardized regression coefficient, $b$, and its standard error, $SE b$; the Wald statistic, its degree of freedom, and its level of significance for each predictor; the $R$ statistic, which estimates the partial correlation between heed paid to news accounts of allegations against Clinton and each predictor; and the odds ratio, exp. $(B)$, which indicates the change in the odds for an individual case when the value of the predictor increases by one (Menard 2002). The table also depicts several indicators of model fit, the overall classification result, and the number of cases on which the equation was estimated.

The data show the importance of general political interest and perceptions of how important Starr’s investigation was to the country as predictors of how closely people were following news stories about allegations against Clinton. (Negative coefficients simply reflect these variables’ coding.) The more interested respondents were in public affairs, the more attention they paid to media accounts of the scandal. Similarly, the more important people thought Starr’s investigation was to the country, the more attention they paid to news about the imbroglio. Income also affected level of attention to news stories about the scandal, which should be expected (Bennett 1986).

Gender and strength of partisanship, however, were not significant predictors of how closely people were following the news about Clinton-Lewinsky. Typically, men are more interested in public affairs than women, and persons who identify with one of the major political parties are more politically involved than nonidentifiers. These patterns did not show up, however, in the June 1998 data.
Two facets of the data are jarring, however. First, blacks reported following news about the scandal more closely than whites, which reverses the typical relationship when psychological involvement in public affairs is modeled. Since Clinton was perceived as the nation's "first black president," it should not be surprising if African Americans were following the news about his involvement with Monica Lewinsky more closely than whites.

It occasions a good deal of surprise, however, to find that education—Philip Converse's (1972) "universal solvent" when it comes to political involvement—was negatively correlated with level of attention to the scandal. Bivariate analysis of the June 1998 Pew Center poll also shows that persons with lesser education reported following the scandal more closely than individuals from higher educational backgrounds.

It is possible that the June 1998 data are a fluke. Logistic regression analyses conducted on other Pew Center polls between early 1998 and early 1999 typically show that education is not a significant predictor of attention to the scandal. What the data in Table 2 and other Pew Center polls may reveal, in fact, is why levels of attention to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal were not higher. Persons with exposure to higher education, who typically are more interested in politics (Bennett 1986), did not pay very close attention to the news about this scandal. (This facet needs more attention.)

Another reason for low levels of attention to media accounts of the scandal is that, unlike Watergate, most people did not think the matter was of "great importance" to the nation. The data in Table 2 reinforce this proposition. Although CBS News polls found that two-fifths of the public believed the scandal was of great importance to the nation in late January 1998, Pew Center polls from early February to August of that year found that the percentage believing the matter was of "great importance" sagged to about one-fifth, while the proportion believing it was of "very little importance" to the nation rose to one-half. The Center's early December poll, which was done immediately after the House of Representatives' Judiciary Committee recommended Clinton's impeachment, found that only 28 percent of the public thought impeaching and removing him was "very important" to the country, while 42 percent thought it was "not at all important." It is likely that many people discounted the scandal's importance to the country because they believed it was mostly a private matter (see also Brody and Jackman 1999).

Some might be tempted to attribute low levels of attention to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal to negative views of media coverage. Although media coverage was initially hostile to Clinton (Isikoff 1999; Kalb 2001), the tone quickly shifted, and most analyses consider media handling of the story as relatively balanced (see, for example, Fischle 2000; Zaller 1998). Virtually from start to finish, public opinion lamented how the media were covering the scandal. The 1998 National Election Study shows, for example, that 64 percent of the public strongly disapproved of how the media had covered the scandal; 17 percent disapproved, but not strongly; while 11 percent approved, but not strongly; and only 7 percent strongly approved how the press had handled the matter.

In the early going, hostility toward media coverage covaried with lack of attention to news about the scandal. The Pew Center's March 1998 poll showed, for example, that although 41 percent of those who gave the media "excellent" marks for covering the imbroglio also said they were following news about the scandal very closely, only 31 percent of persons who thought the media's coverage was "poor" were also following news about it very
closely. However, by the time the Senate was debating the House’s impeachment motion, the correlation between views of how the media had covered the scandal and attention to news about it was virtually nil. The Pew Center’s poll from January 1999 shows, for example, that the correlation between opinions about how the news media were handling investigations of charges against Clinton and how closely people were following news stories about the scandal was a paltry $r = .07$.

One other factor merits mention. Writers such as Suzanne Garment (1991) and Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter (1999) have asserted that “scandal” has become almost ubiquitous in American politics. Ginsberg and Shefter argued that both political parties have practiced the politics of R.I.P. (Revelation—Investigation—Prosecution) and that “politics by other means” has supplanted electoral struggles as the chief means for “institutional combat.” One consequence of politics by other means has been demobilization of sizable portions of the American public (Ginsberg and Shefter 1999, 187-91).

Even before he became president, Bill Clinton was charged with personal malefiasance and corruption (Edwards 1996), and those charges were a recurring feature of his presidency (Maraniss 1996; Sabato and Lichter 1994; Stewart 1997). Ironically, one reason for low levels of public attention to the Lewinsky matter could be that a substantial segment of the public had been desensitized by repeated instances of R.I.P. against Clinton.

**Covariates of Attention Paid to the Scandal**

If there were no connections between the degree of attention paid to media accounts of the scandal and key facets of public opinion, the enterprise would be purely academic. Pew Center polls show, however, that the amount of heed paid to the scandal resonates with important attributes of public opinion. Among them are knowledge of major personalities who were involved in Clinton-Lewinsky as well as opinions about the scandal. I will first look at the nexus between attention paid to media stories about the scandal and knowledge about it. Then I trace the relation between how closely people said they were following the news about Clinton-Lewinsky and opinions about the scandal.

**Knowledge of Key Figures**

One correlation of limited attention to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal was with relatively low awareness of key figures. The Pew Center’s March 1998 poll showed, for example, that the more people paid attention to media coverage of the scandal, the more they knew about key personalities (and probably other scandal-related material as well). Among those reporting they followed media stories about allegations of sexual misconduct by Bill Clinton “not at all closely,” 37 percent knew who Kathleen Willey was, and 59 percent admitted they did not know who she was. Almost exactly half of those who were following Clinton’s sex scandal “not too closely” knew who Willey was, and 44 percent did not know her. Nearly

---

8. Willey was a minor player in the scandal, yet the media covered her charges against Clinton thoroughly (see, for example, O’Connor and Hermann 2000, 52-53, 56). Even so, knowledge about Willey covaried with how closely people were following media stories about the scandal.
three-fifths (58 percent) of those who claimed to be following the news about the scandal "fairly closely" knew who Willey was, and 35 percent did not know her. Two-thirds (67 percent) of those who were following media accounts of the scandal "very closely" knew who Willey was, and 28 percent did not know her. The March 1998 poll also showed that attention paid to the scandal covaried with familiarity with Monica Lewinsky, Vernon Jordan, Betty Currie, and Linda Tripp.

Table 3 depicts the results of an ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression model estimated on the Pew Center’s March 1998 poll. (Since the dependent variable ranged from 0 to 4, OLS regression is an appropriate data analysis technique [Cohen and Cohen 1983].) A four-item Knowledge of Lewinsky Scandal Personalities Scale was regressed on age, gender, race, family income, education, strength of partisanship, and reports of how closely respondents were following media stories about allegations of sexual misconduct against Bill Clinton. The table depicts each predictor’s unstandardized regression coefficient (b), its standard error (SE b), a t-statistic and level of significance for each predictor, two indicators of model fit (adjusted R² and the standard error of the estimate), and the number of cases on which the regression model was estimated.

As others have found when estimating multivariate statistical models on political information levels (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996), race, gender, age, family income, education, and strength of partisanship affect what Americans knew about key personalities in the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. Men, whites, the middle-aged and elderly, the well-to-do, persons with higher levels of formal schooling, and partisans knew more about personalities connected to the scandal than did women, African-Americans, the young, persons with lower family incomes, those with less educational attainment, and nonpartisans. For our purposes, it is also noteworthy that the more people followed the news about the scandal, the more they knew about persons connected to the scandal.

The Pew Center’s January 1999 poll showed that levels of attention paid to the Senate’s impeachment trial covaried with knowledge of who was presiding over the trial (Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist) and knowledge of who had offered cash rewards for stories about sexual liaisons with Republican legislators (Hustler Magazine publisher Larry Flynt). Only 10 percent of those who said they had not followed the news about the Senate impeachment trial “at all closely” got the question about Rehnquist right, as did 20 percent of those who said they were not following the trial “too closely,” 21 percent of those who were following stories about the trial “fairly closely,” and 32 percent of those who claimed to have followed the news about the trial “very closely.” Just over a third (36 percent) of those least attentive to the trial knew about Flynt, as did 48 percent of those who said they were not following the trial “too closely,” 54 percent of those who were following the trial “fairly closely,” and 65 percent of those who were following media accounts of the trial “very closely.”

9. The four individuals were Jordan, Willey, Kenneth Starr, and Linda Tripp. The Jordan and Willey items are knowledge variables. It is more accurate to state that the Starr and Tripp variables tap awareness. A principal components factor analysis revealed that awareness of Lewinsky and Betty Currie did not load on the same factor as the other four variables. The four-item scale, which ranged from 0 to 4, had an average score of 2.4 and a Kuder-Richardson-20 coefficient of .74.
TABLE 3
Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Knowledge of Lewinsky Scandal Personalities on Seven Predictors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE b</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>7.70</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income in 1997</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>7.78</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of partisanship</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How closely respondent follows the news about allegations against Clinton</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>7.43</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adjusted $R^2 = .25$
Standard error of the estimate = 1.23
$N = 971$


Knowledge about personalities calls for less engagement than awareness of more abstract and complex political phenomena (Neuman 1986). Hence, it is likely that inattention to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal limited knowledge of more demanding facets of the imbroglio. In light of generally low levels of attention to the scandal, one is hard-pressed to argue that public reaction to it was sophisticated.

**Political Opinions**

This statement would lose much of its significance if there were little or no connection between heed paid to the scandal and opinions about key personalities and facets. That is not the case. Pew Center polls showed that the amount of attention people said they were paying to media stories about the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal covaried with a wide variety of opinions about personalities involved in the imbroglio and issues connected to it.

To avoid bogging down in endless detail, I concentrate on six data points: two from early in the scandal—March and May 1998—one midway through—late August, after Clinton’s admission of “an inappropriate relationship” with Lewinsky—and three later on—in December 1998, January 1999, and February 1999. I shall also limit the number of opinions in the interests of brevity.

Two methodological caveats should be made. First, cross-sectional polls do not permit causal statements. There is no assertion that the amount of attention paid to the scandal “caused” opinions. Second, persons who replied “don’t know/refused” were excluded from the analyses. Inclusion of “don’t knows” would bias the results; typically, persons who said they were paying little or no heed to the scandal also replied “don’t know” when opinions were elicited.
One opinion that was correlated with the amount of attention people said they were paying to the scandal was how important the matter was to the country. Pew Center polls show that from March 1998 through February 1999, the more likely people were to say the scandal was of “great” importance to the country, the more attention people said they were paying to the scandal (again, see Table 2). (The more important people think a story is to the country, the more attention they will pay to media accounts of it [see Bennett 1986].) In late August 1998, for example, the correlation between how important people thought the scandal was and the amount of attention they were paying to media accounts of investigations into allegations of sexual misconduct against Bill Clinton was \( r = .26 \). Multivariate logistic regression analyses in which attention paid to media stories about the scandal were regressed on gender, race, educational attainment, reported family income, age, party affiliation, and perceptions of how important the allegations against Clinton are to the country show that the latter variable was a statistically significant predictor. Perceptions of how important the scandal was to the country was also a statistically significant predictor of attention paid to media stories about the scandal in March 1998 and January 1999.

Level of attention being paid to the scandal also correlated with approval or disapproval of how key players were handling the investigation into charges against Clinton. In December 1998 and January 1999, the more attention people said they were paying to news about the scandal, the more likely they were to approve of how Republicans in Congress were handling the investigation. The Pew Center’s December 1998 poll found that the more attention people said they were paying to news about the scandal, the more likely they were to approve of Representative Henry Hyde’s handling of the investigation. The January 1999 poll found the same pattern when respondents were asked to approve or disapprove of how Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist was handling the Senate trial. Conversely, the less attention people said they were paying to the scandal in January 1999, the more likely they were to approve of how Clinton was handling the charges against him.

Finally, from the spring of 1998 through January 1999, level of attention to media stories about the scandal was correlated with approval or disapproval of how Clinton was performing his job as president. In August 1998, for example, 83 percent of those who said they were “not at all closely” following stories about the scandal approved of how Clinton was performing his job, compared with 57 percent of those who were following the news about the scandal “very closely.” The February 1999 poll found, however, that after the Senate voted not to convict Clinton, the amount of attention being paid to news about the affair was only very slightly correlated with approval or disapproval of Clinton’s job performance.

It is possible, of course, that previously held opinions about Clinton affected how closely people followed media stories about the scandal. Persons predisposed to favor Clinton tuned out of the scandal, while those hostile toward him “soaked up” scandal coverage. This is, at bottom, Fischle’s (2000) argument.

But this is not the same as arguing that reaction to news coverage of the scandal was sophisticated. As Luskin (1987) argued, to be sophisticated about a topic, one must be knowledgeable about it; and to be knowledgeable, as researchers have shown (Chaffee and Frank 1996; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Weaver 1996), one must pay heed to the news about a topic.
Conclusions

Students of public opinion have focused on why Clinton’s job performance ratings remained high, despite revelations of inappropriate personal conduct and in the face of declining assessments of his ethics and honesty. National Election Studies show that between 1996 and 1998, assessments of whether Clinton was “moral” and “honest” fell substantially, while perceptions that he “provides strong leadership,” “really cares about people like you,” and is “knowledgeable” were essentially unchanged. This facet of the scandal’s fallout has been given rather short shrift (however, see Edwards 2000, 42-43; Ladd 1998b; Keeter 1999; Miller 1999).

Some observers have noted that public assessments of Clinton’s job performance remained relatively unchanged—after an early dip and a quick rebound—throughout 1998 and into early 1999 (see, for example, Keeter 1999; Miller 1999). Keeter (1999) rightly noted that part of the reason for “a modest public reaction to scandal stories” was that after six years as president, opinions about Clinton’s personality and performance acted as “ballast” against substantial shifts in opinions about him (see also Fischle 2000).

Nevertheless, a neglected factor for essentially stable opinions is that most of the time, most people did not pay a great deal of attention to the scandal. According to Pew Center polls, for most of the period between late January 1998 and mid-February 1999, only about a third of the public followed the story very closely. Level of attention paid to media accounts of the scandal resonated with general political interest, how important Americans believed the matter was to the country, what they knew about it, and opinions about diverse facets of it. When people are essentially tuned out of a scandal, it is not hard to understand why opinions about a president appear relatively impervious to news about it. (It is also well to recall that Clinton and his allies launched a vigorous defense of his actions [Kurtz 1998] and that many in the media were loath to contribute to Clinton’s undoing [Ginsberg and Shefter 1999].)

Persons familiar with Americans’ generally lukewarm interest in public affairs will not be surprised by the Pew Research Center’s data (Table 1). Nearly eighty years ago, Walter Lippmann (1925) commented on the average American’s habitual indifference to public affairs. Students of public opinion about the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal need to relearn Lippmann’s observation.

References

Albert, J. L. 1999. Factors that have kept Clinton alive. USA Today, February 12, 2A.


