



[The Inconsistent Electorate](#)

By Matthew Robinson Posted January 29, 2000

As we settle into the 2000 election season, the average voter and newspaper reader will be pummeled by salvo after salvo of polling results. All of these polls will claim to be the scientific voice of the people. Pollsters often say they do a service for democracy by capturing public opinion at given moment in time. But there is reason to doubt whether they give us reality at all.

In fact, Americans hold inconsistent and often contradictory positions on public policy questions. Most citizens are ignorant of the most basic facts about government. Today, less than 50 percent of Americans can even name their congressmen, with barely one in 10 able to say what he's doing in Congress.

But despite public ignorance, disconnect and disenchantment about government, pollsters and journalists love to trumpet the results of polls as definitive measures of public attitudes. It's instant news. The stories practically write themselves.

How anyone can call evolving, ever-shifting congeries of individual belief "public opinion" is one of the great mysteries of our age. The truth is that polls aren't at all an objective measure of public attitudes. They form opinion as much as they measure it.

Within the academic community, polling results are not seen as the hard-and-fast measure of public opinion portrayed by newspapers and pundits. Results are

rough and inconsistent because many Americans make up their minds depending on how questions are worded or how events are presented or "framed" by the media and pollsters.

"If different frames or different question orders produce different results, it is not because one or the other has distorted the public's true feelings," writes UCLA political science professor John R. Zaller in *The Nature and Origin of Mass Opinion*. "It is, rather, because the public, having no fixed true opinion, implicitly relies on the particular question it has been asked to determine what exactly the issue is and what considerations are relevant to settling it."

Thus, poll results should be viewed with a cold eye. The public's voice, so important to our democratic institutions, is being distorted by the unreflective "self-delusion" that a poll is the last word in public debate.

Abraham Lincoln said that in a free society, "he who molds public opinion goes deeper than he who enacts laws and pronounces decisions. The first task of statesmanship is not legislation, but the molding of that opinion from which all legislation flows." Lincoln's formulation remains true today. But it has been twisted. Lawmakers have largely abandoned the job of molding public opinion. The press have filled the void, leaving lawmakers to bow and scrape before the all-powerful poll.

But polling is not the exact measure pollsters and the media say it is. Polls start with a tainted sample because most Americans do not follow politics very carefully.

When the House Managers launched their impeachment case against Bill Clinton a year ago, they admitted they were swimming against the tide of public opinion. Their Senate colleagues, however, were guided by polls and rejected the case against the President with little deliberation. As the White House told it and the press dutifully reported, Bill Clinton was the big winner.

But a new Gallup poll for USA Today and CNN finds that half of Americans now say they approve of Clinton's impeachment. Another 42% think the Senate should have removed him from office. That's quite a switch.

Just one year ago, the same USA Today-CNN-Gallup poll showed that only 35 percent of Americans supported Clinton's impeachment. Back then, almost two out of three persons surveyed disapproved of the House impeachment vote. Today, fewer than half do.

These new Gallup results sound a warning against interpreting poll results too broadly. Throughout 1998, the media focused single-mindedly on the President's job approval ratings. The result was a day-to-day reinforcement of Clinton's high numbers. In fact, they may have been measures of how well the smear job on the independent counsel and the President's critics was working.

As the rise in support for Clinton's impeachment and removal show, Americans often hold inconsistent positions that are rarely noted in polling reportage. So it should be no surprise that when coverage of Clinton's high approval ratings ended, Americans started to think twice about a president who obstructs justice and lies under oath.

During the impeachment debate, the media produced overnight polls faster than ever. New revelations — Lewinsky's stained Gap dress, her deal with prosecutors, Kenneth Starr's report, Clinton's admission of lying — were tested before they had time to sink in with the public. People were asked to make hasty judgments without taking time to think about the facts.

Don't forget, many Americans expressed serious misgivings about Clinton at the height of the scandal. Many said they were ashamed of Clinton and thought he should consider resigning. Yet they were conflicted. To actually remove Clinton would have felt too drastic.

For most people, the impeachment process and importance of the rule of law were clouded in mystery.

While the press trumpeted "censure" and pointed to widespread public support for such a congressional rebuke, in fact, the public didn't know what it was supporting. The Polling Company found that only 24 percent of likely voters didn't even know what censure meant — never mind that it was an unconstitutional chimera.

Gallup's results represent a change in public perceptions about the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. For now. But the real story is how the media and pollsters affect our democratic institutions. Their impact deserves more careful discussion — and warning labels on poll results that are used for broad-based conclusions about "what Americans really think."

Note from Brushfires: I remember my own moment of awakening on the issue of "public opinion manipulation" several years ago. Listening to Wyoming Public Radio on a trip down a long lonely road, I heard the reporter quote a poll, stating that a very high percentage of Americans supported amnesty for illegals. I remember thinking to myself that something wasn't right. Either I was out of step with my fellow citizens, or I was being manipulated with information that simply wasn't true. I personally knew no one who supported amnesty, were they all out of step too, or was this comment a blatant attempt to move me in the direction of having a more favorable opinion of amnesty.

Who said this?: "If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it." Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda in Nazi Germany.

It is important to understand that manipulation can come from a variety of sources, media, advertising, entertainment, politicians, and even our educators and textbooks.

Google Edward Bernays for more information on the movement to manipulate and mold the public opinion of Americans through the use of propaganda.