

POLITICAL POLLS

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BILL CLINTON, CEO

The president's support remains strong despite scandal

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ORLAND PARK, Ill. — Anyone baffled about how President Clinton's job-approval ratings could possibly rise during the gravest crisis of his presidency should come here and talk to Beth

and Joseph Mattera. "Don't tell us that we have a bad guy in there. We can see for ourselves that things are better," says Beth heatedly.

"I think this is a travesty," says her husband, Joseph, referring to the intensive press coverage of Mr. Clinton's alleged affair with former intern Monica Lewinsky. "He has kept up the economy."

Human Nature

Like his wife, Mr. Mattera, a 39-year-old personal financial planner, isn't necessarily excluding the possibility that Mr. Clinton had an affair. "That's human nature," he says. It is just that, for the moment at least, the president's personal life pales in comparison with what really counts for them: their financial security.

Nose around this classic Chicago suburb, and something becomes apparent. The global economy, which first reshaped companies, is now reshaping national politics. It is changing the way

voters see their president, and seemingly downsize, to essentials, what they expect from him.

"Voters weren't electing a president. They were electing a CEO," argues Chicago-area pollster Michael McKeon, who has a keen insight into the new suburban psyche.

Viewed in the light of the McKeon model, what voters are telling pollsters seems less inconsistent. Indeed, it seems downright rational. Shareholders, after all, typically don't care much about the CEO's sex life. What they want is one thing only: run the company well.

Of course, hard facts do ultimately matter. And if proof develops that Mr. Clinton lied about an affair, then public opinion here and elsewhere could change swiftly. Polls show that voters regard for him personally has dropped, even as his job approval stays high.

But interviews in this and other Chicago suburbs also suggest voters are perfectly willing — in fact, determined — to wait for the facts to develop.

Indeed, some admit they are in denial. "I suppose I'm the type who likes to put my head in the sand and not know about it," concedes Amy Welzenbach, a

preschool teacher. But she adds: "It just seems like priorities should be put in other places, like running the country." Politics, she laments, has become a game of "smart people chasing after other smart people."

Five years ago, this reporter repeatedly visited these Chicago suburbs in an attempt to view Mr. Clinton's first year through the eyes of ordinary people. It quickly became apparent that people hereabouts were viewing the new president they had just elected not as a moral exemplar, but rather like a plumber they had just hired. Only one thing really mattered: Could he fix the sink?

People then were so alienated from Washington and its political culture that only one thing would move them: results. In this sense, the low expectations that Mr. Clinton would fill some role as a moral leader work to his benefit now, because voters haven't had any high hopes dashed.

Now, people here are still alienated, but a majority of them also believe they have gotten results. Five years ago, Bill Clinton

was a man operating without a safety net. Now he has one.

Five years ago, lawyer Robert Stan, now 48, flatly and angrily predicted Mr. Clinton would be "a one-term president."

He was up in arms then about the president's deficit-reduction proposal, especially its tax increases. Now, Mr. Stan feels differently. "I think he's done some good things," he says, mentioning specifically the almost-balanced budget.

"As a lawyer, I think it's a disgrace to have the president tried and convicted in the media," he adds. "If he's innocent, he should fight this all the

way down the line."

To be sure, there is a sizable minority that has already heard all it needs to hear about the president and the sex scandal.

Donna Baumruk, 50, speaks for this minority in unequivocal terms. "He should step down now," she says, adding that it has always surprised her that he ever got elected in the first place.

These suburbanites exemplify another way the world has changed in just the past decade or so. The delivery of information has fragmented into a multiplicity of television channels, Web sites and talk shows. Given this cacophony of opinion, people are

less likely to rush to judgment.

But even as they wait for the truth to coalesce, these suburbanites are perfectly capable of drawing fine distinctions that make sense to them. True, the distinctions often conflict. But, taken together, they belie the notion of a passive electorate.

Typical is Ann Zajac, a "fortysomething" chiropractor. She reasons that even if it develops that the president perjured himself about an affair, "I don't think it would be an impeachable offense, because it doesn't affect national security."

Mr. McKeon, the pollster, says in fact, the greatest danger

to the president now isn't the moral dimension of the scandal. The great danger is that he will get so bogged down in the crisis that people will no longer see him as an effective CEO.

"Some pundits say the American people are confused," Mr. McKeon says. "They aren't confused. They know exactly what they want."

They aren't closing their eyes and they want the truth to come out, Mr. McKeon adds, but they are setting a very tough test for independent counsel Kenneth Starr and for the press: "Show us that this is something that is relevant to our lives." ♦

How to Read This Chart

The charts below can help you see how events and the economy contribute to people's opinions about the job each president has done during the past 60 years.

The top chart shows consumer confidence, which measures consumers' faith in the American economy in the short and long term; it has been tracked since 1967.

The next two charts display economic data that affect people's perceptions about the health of the economy: the unemployment rate, which has been tracked since 1949; and the consumer price index, a measure of inflation.

The bottom chart shows approval rat-

ings for the presidents from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Bill Clinton (light green represents Democrats; gold, green represents Republicans).

President Roosevelt's first term began in 1932, but the Gallup Organization didn't begin gathering presidential approval ratings until 1938. Also note the gap in 1944 and the beginning of 1945, when Gallup didn't take this poll.

The scales are on the left and right sides of each chart. The years are shown on the bottom. The flags identify economic, social and historical events.

The light-blue shaded areas represent economic recessions.

