



# SIX DECADES ON THE JOB

Virtually all the Gallup presidential approval data on one page, plus insight from one of the original pollsters.

Since the 1930s, no question has been asked of more people than the one put to Americans about how well the president is doing his job. The doing-his-job part is crucial to understanding the data presented on the opposite page: The intent from the beginning of The Gallup Poll was to ensure that the "approval" in presidential approval concerned job performance, not likability or goodness-as-a-person.

The data covering 11 presidencies over six decades reveal some fascinating patterns. The first and most obvious, says Alec Gallup, Chairman of The Gallup Poll and a pollster since 1959, is "the tendency to fall during the course of a president's administration." The reason for this drop in approval rating is not solely the president's performance; the fall reflects the fact that Americans are disposed—despite a native distrust of government—to give the newcomer the benefit of the doubt at the beginning of his tenure. Almost every presidency begins with a honeymoon.

The most dramatic exception to the tendency to fall was the presidency of FDR, who enjoyed mostly rising approval until polling was halted for "patriotic" reasons relating to World War II, a decision Alec Gallup rues for the historical gap it created. The presidents who generated the least variance in approval were Eisenhower (war hero in an era of prosperity) and Clinton (baby boomer in an era of prosperity), the latter case demonstrating in Alec Gallup's view the rigor with which Americans can separate personal feelings from job assessment. Clinton left the presidency with the highest approval rating recorded for any

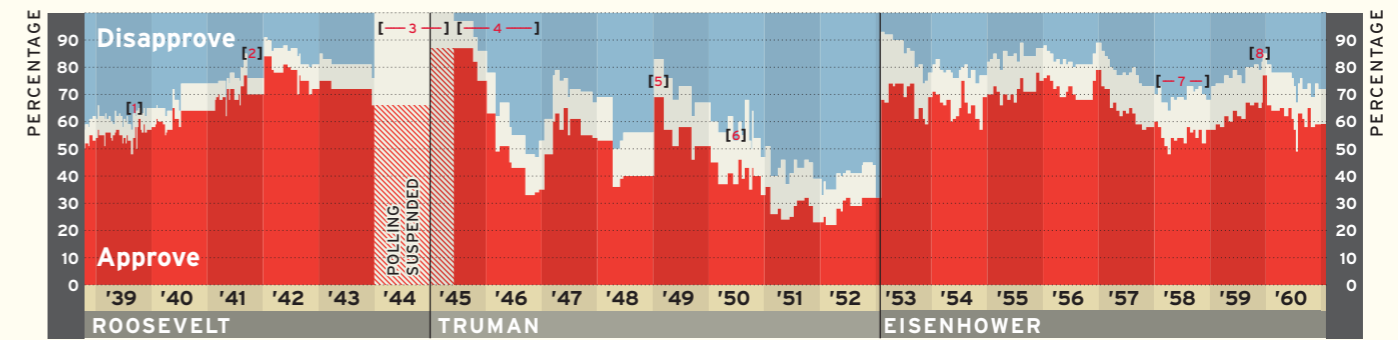
president during his final three months in office. Similarly, despite the national wounds of Vietnam, Nixon seemed to be on his way to bucking the downward trend until he rode the Watergate scandal off a cliff.

On the opposite page, a few key events in the presidencies have been noted. Some of these are "rally events," which are defined by a rise in approval ratings of 5% or more. In a 1990 book entitled *Presidential Approval*, Alec Gallup and George C. Edwards III noted that most presidents can bank on a rally event about every 18 months. Kennedy's approval rose after the Bay of Pigs invasion; the Iran hostage crisis initially boosted Carter's approval; and former President George Bush Sr.'s spiked with the Gulf War. But the authors also observed that not only are rally events unpredictable, they are often followed by equally dramatic plunges in approval—consider Carter as the hostage crisis dragged on or Bush's plunge after his Gulf War triumph.

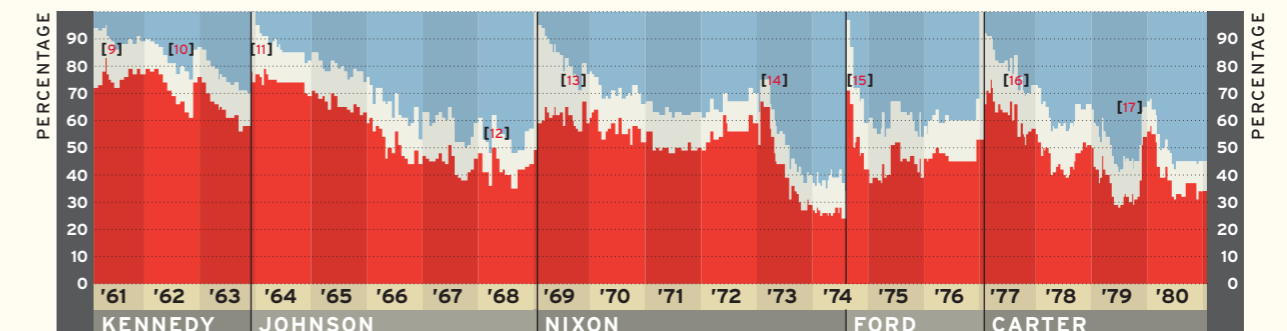
Indeed, the current president may look to his father's record with some interest: Few recent presidents have endured such sharp ups and downs over four years. "Truman, Carter and Bush were really the roller coaster guys," Alec Gallup says.

As to the poll itself, it is now institutionalized as a national barometer of presidential job approval and is interpreted by presidents and their handlers "as a kind of political intelligence," according to Gallup. It was not always so. "In the early years, the media roughed us up a bit. A lot of people didn't really believe in polling at all." ●

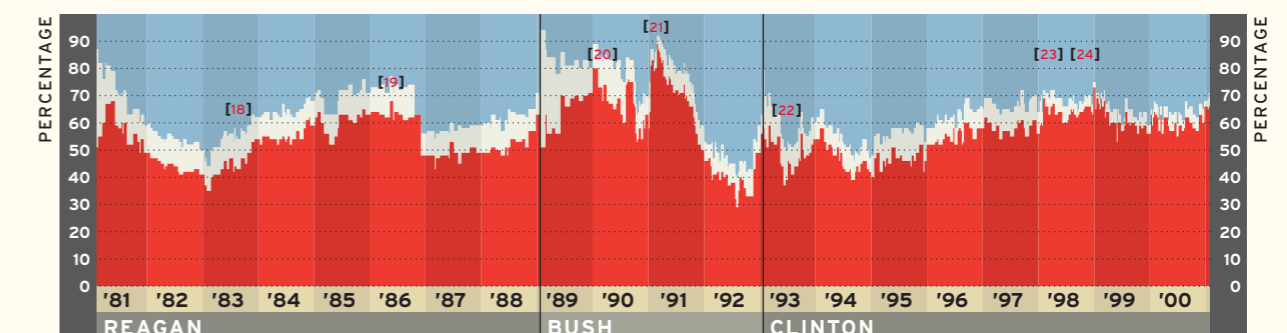
## [ THE GALLUP PRESIDENTIAL POLL (1938 TO 2000) ]



**ROOSEVELT** [1] SEPT. 1939: WWII BEGINS [2] DEC. 1941: PEARL HARBOR [3] 1944-45: POLLING SUSPENDED (CONSIDERED UNPATRIOTIC DURING WARTIME) **TRUMAN** [4] 1945-1946: LABOR DISPUTES [5] JAN. 1949: TAKES OFFICE AFTER SURPRISE WIN AGAINST DEWEY [6] JUNE 1950: KOREAN WAR BEGINS **EISENHOWER** [7] 1958: RECESSION YEAR [8] DEC. 1959: GOODWILL TOUR BEGINS



**KENNEDY** [9] APRIL 1961: BAY OF PIGS INVASION [10] OCT. 1962: CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS **JOHNSON** [11] NOV. 1963: TAKES OATH OF OFFICE AFTER KENNEDY'S ASSASSINATION [12] MARCH 1968: DECISION NOT TO SEEK REELECTION **NIXON** [13] NOV. 1969: VIETNAM SPEECH [14] MARCH 1973: WHITE HOUSE IMPLICATED IN WATERGATE **FORD** [15] SEPT. 1974: PARLONS NIXON **CARTER** [16] SEPT. 1977: PANAMA CANAL TREATIES SIGNED [17] NOV. 1979: IRAN HOSTAGE CRISIS BEGINS



**REAGAN** [18] OCT. 1983: MARINES KILLED IN BEIRUT, U.S. INVASION OF GRENADA [19] APRIL 1986: U.S. AIR ATTACKS LAUNCHED ON LIBYA **BUSH** [20] JAN. 1990: NORIEGA SURRENDERS TO U.S. AUTHORITIES [21] JAN. 1991: GULF WAR **CLINTON** [22] JULY 1993: DEBATE REGARDING GAYS IN THE MILITARY [23] JAN. 1998: LEWINSKY CHARGES SURFACE [24] DEC. 1998: IMPEACHMENT VOTING STARTS, U.S. BOMBS IRAQ AGAIN

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