

Role of sexual affairs in electability: then vs. now

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



Society generally frowns upon the subjects of gossip and scandal, whether it be a family member, a coworker, or a known political figure. Sex scandals, like sexual affairs amongst politicians, have long served as campaign cudgels. One of the earliest known sex scandals in American politics was one that involved the first secretary of the U. S. Treasury, Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton, who was married to Elizabeth Schuyler, undid his position in the government and his electability in 1797 when he published a pamphlet about his affair with Maria Reynolds, a married woman, and the payments he made to Reynolds' husband to cover up the affair (Pruitt).

Over the years, from former Presidents like John F. Kennedy to Bill Clinton, there has not been a shortage of sexual affairs. The idea of sexual affairs was never and is still generally not accepted in society, especially not when involving politicians. Thus, when an active politician or public leader is found committing sexual affairs, it generally deters their electability. Electability can be defined as the measure of capability or chance of being elected to public office. As seen with Hamilton, his sexual affairs completely torpedoed his electability; recently, however, the general public seem to find it less shocking than they would have during Hamilton's time, which in consequence, has less effect on their electability.

According to Alexander Todorov, a Princeton psychologist, the electability of particular candidates has "less to do with politics and more to do with basic cognitive processes—in particular, perception" (Konnikova). It entirely depends on the person and how they are depicted in the public eye. People tend to form impressions quickly even if there is not enough information or experience. Todorov explains that these first impressions of people "colors <https://assignbuster.com/role-of-sexual-affairs-in-electability-then-vs-now/>

whatever else we learn about them, from their hobbies to, presumably, their political abilities" (Konnikova). Based on this, it can be assumed that the idea of "electability" is not uniform amongst people and that it not the most reliable.

America's first known sex scandal and "hush money" issue involved Hamilton who had an affair with Maria Reynolds and paid blackmail money to her husband. At the time, Hamilton was Secretary of the U. S. Treasury and had great ambitions to continue climbing up the ladder. Many of his peers also thought that he had a bright and big future ahead of him in the U. S. government. After word got out about the blackmail money he paid, as well as his affair, people started speculating other extremities about what actually happened. People did not give him any sort of "benefit of the doubt" nor any sort of understanding. Instead, when the scandal hit public, they accused him of "misusing public funds" (Weigant). Hamilton then wrote the notorious Reynolds Pamphlet that "successfully refuted the more serious accusations against [him]," but on the other hand "permanently ended any hope he might have had of becoming president of the United States" (Pruitt). From then on, he gradually became less popular, and his electability, then, plummeted.

Fast forward to President John. F. Kennedy's time - it would seem like the public's response to sexual affairs is completely the opposite. JFK was one of the most popular presidents America had. In February 1963, his approval rating was at 70%; "in March 1963, 74% expected him to be reelected - He held a whopping 67% /27% lead over Goldwater in Gallup test election"

(Kohut). But aside from that, JFK was also known to be quite the “ ladies’ man” and that he had countless affairs with other women. According to history. com, the “ Secret Service tackled CBS journalist Marvin Kalb so he wouldn’t get a good look at a woman entering the president’s hotel room” (Little). Moreover, JFK did have verifiable affairs like Mimi Beardsley who was a 19-year-old intern, as well as Mary Pinchot Meyer, JFK’s wife’s friend. What was so surprising about JFK’s case is that his affairs stayed out of the press – not because he was protected by journalists, but because “ they just didn’t consider such things to be news” (Little). The press did not even see it as “ big” news and chose not to write stories on it; the public was well aware of his indiscretions and chose to not focus on them. JFK still remained popular despite it all.

People did not care as much, unlike Hamilton’s case wherein it blew up completely and people went as far as to make false allegations about Hamilton’s work quality and honesty. The public immediately questioned the integrity and honesty of Hamilton as a politician and public figure.

Furthermore, one of the highest profile sexual affairs of recent times would be former President Bill Clinton’s affair with intern, Monica Lewinsky. When the news first broke in 1998, Clinton denied the allegations with fiery (Stezano). Furthermore, Clinton’s case mirrors Hamilton’s since Clinton paid Paula Jones, the subject of a sexual harassment suit, \$850, 000 while still keeping quiet about everything. Clinton lied under oath multiple times. At a press conference, he famously stated, “ I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky,” when he very well did have sexual relations

with her (“ Monica Lewinsky Scandal”). In the end, Clinton was impeached in 1999 for perjury and obstruction of justice after finishing his second term in the White House (Waxman).

So how did this affect his electability? One might think, that like Hamilton, this horrid sexual affair would affect Clinton’s electability for the worse, but it did not. In fact, according to polls done by CNN, USA Today, and Gallup during that time, Clinton’s approval rating increased to 73%, which was “ the highest rating of his administration, and one of the higher job approval ratings given any president since the mid-1960s” (Newport). Although these high ratings might be attributed to the ongoing issue with Iraq during that time and how Clinton handled it, that just goes to show that the sex scandal was not a deal-breaker for Americans. They were much satisfied with Clinton’s work as President that they were able to neglect his personal indiscretions and still consider him highly electable despite his affair with another woman.

Based on these three snapshots of sexual affairs in American politics, which happened in 1797, 1963, and 1998 respectively, it can be seen how the trend changed. At one point, the public cared deeply enough about sexual affairs in politics to deter one’s electability, but now it appears as if the public does not care enough for it to affect a candidate’s electability. If we really want to talk about what’s happening today, our current President, Donald Trump, was able to win the election despite the fact that a leaked tape recorded him describing groping women without their permission. It

would appear that sexual affairs aren't impossible to overcome for public figures like politicians.

The general trend of the role of sexual affairs in electability today is that – it doesn't exactly have a role; “ many voters say infidelity won't affect their choice on the ballot” (Dallas). According to a survey conducted by Desert News on attitudes about adultery, 54% of Americans say that sexual affairs in political candidates won't necessarily affect their decision or support. It was a different time back then when Hamilton was involved in a sexual affair and “ came clean” about it. Time's have changed, but I'm not sure if it's for the better.

Works Cited

- Dallas, Kelsey. “ The Trump Effect: Do Americans Still Care If Public Figures Have Affairs?” DeseretNews. com, Deseret News, 14 Apr. 2017, [www. deseretnews. com/article/865677600/Do-Americans-still-care-if-public-figures-have-affairs. html](http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865677600/Do-Americans-still-care-if-public-figures-have-affairs.html).
- Kohut, Andrew. “ JFK's America.” Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, 7 Feb. 2014, [www. pewresearch. org/fact-tank/2013/11/20/jfks-america/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/11/20/jfks-america/).
- Konnikova, Maria. “ On the Face of It: The Psychology of Electability.” The New Yorker, The New Yorker, 19 June 2017, [www. newyorker. com/tech/annals-of-technology/on-the-face-of-it-the-psychology-of-electability](http://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/on-the-face-of-it-the-psychology-of-electability).

- Little, Becky. "Historic Presidential Affairs That Never Made It To the Tabloids." History. com, A&E Television Networks, 7 May 2018, www. history. com/news/presidential-affairs-jfk-lbj-fdr-harding-clinton-trump.
- "Monica Lewinsky Scandal." History. com, A&E Television Networks, 20 Dec. 2017, www. history. com/topics/1990s/monica-lewinsky.
- Newport, Frank. "Clinton Receives Record High Job Approval Rating After Impeachment Vote And Iraq Air Strikes." Gallup. com, 24 Dec. 1998, news. gallup. com/poll/4111/clinton-receives-record-high-job-approval-rating-after-impeachment-vot. aspx.
- Pruitt, Sarah. "The Sex Scandal That Ruined Alexander Hamilton's Chances of Becoming President." History. com, A&E Television Networks, 20 Apr. 2018, www. history. com/news/alexander-hamilton-maria-reynolds-pamphlet-affair.
- Stezano, Martin. "The Biggest Political Scandals in American History." History. com, A&E Television Networks, 24 May 2018, www. history. com/news/shocking-political-scandals-united-states.
- Waxman, Olivia B., and Merrill Fabry. "Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky Scandal-Timeline of Key Moments." Time, Time, 4 May 2018, time. com/5120561/bill-clinton-monica-lewinsky-timeline/.
- Weigant, Chris. "America's First Political Sex Scandal: The Reynolds/Hamilton Affair." The Huffington Post, TheHuffingtonPost. com, 7 Dec. 2017, www. huffingtonpost. com/chris-weigant/americas-first-political-_b_1080813. html.