

Reagan's Ratings: Great Communicator's Appeal is Greater in Retrospect

ABCNews.com analysis

By Gary Langer

June 7, 2004 (Updated: 2/11) – Ronald Reagan is misremembered as one of the most popular presidents, an assessment based more on his skills as a communicator and effectiveness as a campaigner than on public views of his accomplishments while in office.

His job approval ratings, in fact, were mid-tier. Across his tenure an average of 56 percent of Americans approved of Reagan's work as president, tied with Lyndon Johnson and a point below Bill Clinton. Among postwar presidents, John F. Kennedy, Dwight Eisenhower and George H.W. Bush all ran better averages, and George W. Bush has averaged better to date, despite his current slump. (2011 note: Bush, of course, crashed in his second term – the worst on record in modern polling.)

Presidents: Average Job Approval		
ABC News/Washington Post and Gallup polls		
	Approve	Disapprove
Kennedy	71%	17
Eisenhower	65	21
G.H.W. Bush	63	33
Clinton	57	39
Reagan	56	39
Johnson	56	31
G.W. Bush	51	46
Nixon	49	38
Ford	48	35
Truman	47	39
Carter	46	39

Updated from original report.
Pre-Reagan polls by Gallup.

Reagan has done far better in retrospect, as can happen as ex-presidents recede from the fray of day-to-day politics. Asked to think back to when he served, 66 percent in an ABC News/Washington Post poll in 2001 approved of his work, as did still more, 73 percent, in a 2002 Gallup poll. (Jimmy Carter's retrospective rating did the same thing, rising 20 points in the two decades after he left office.)

Reagan's personal ratings also have improved with time. During his presidency an average of 61 percent of Americans reported an overall favorable impression of him, about the same as the career favorable rating for his successor, the first President Bush (63 percent). By 2001, though, more – 69 percent – viewed Reagan favorably.

Events

Reagan's ratings while in office rose and fell sharply with events. Approval peaked at 73 percent after he was wounded in a March 1981 assassination attempt, but tumbled to 42 percent in the early '80s recessions (unemployment hit a 40-year high in 1982). It recovered to 70 percent in

early 1986 as the economy improved, but then dived by 26 points in nine months during the Iran-Contra scandal.

Reagan: Annual Job Approval ABC News/Washington Post polls			
	Average	High	Low
1981	62%	73	52
1982	49	52	46
1983	53	63	42
1984	57	59	54
1985	63	68	54
1986	63	70	49
1987	51	58	44
1988	55	57	50

While Reagan presided over what was characterized as a go-go economy in the second half of the 1980s, consumer confidence from that period pales compared to its level in the late 1990s — one reason he was not insulated from Iran-Contra the way Clinton was protected (in terms of public opinion) from the Lewinsky scandal. Positive ratings of the economy never exceeded 50 percent (reached once) from December 1985 until the end of Reagan's term. In contrast, 71 percent rated the economy favorably, on average, during the Lewinsky days.

Like many presidents, Reagan inspired substantial polarization. The gender gap became evident in his presidency; he did seven or eight points better among men than among women in the 1980 and 1984 elections alike. And his ratings were sharply divided along political lines: At times ABC News polls found a 50-point gap between Republicans and Democrats in their ratings of Reagan's job performance, compared with a 30- or 35-point gap for his successor.

In an example of that polarization, in a poll in the late '90s, Reagan tied for first as "the best president in your lifetime," cited by 23 percent. But he also tied for second, behind Richard Nixon, as the worst president, chosen by 17 percent.

Reagan's reputation for popularity probably rests in part on his landslide victories, boosted by the "Reagan Democrats" who rallied to his side — in ABC News exit polls, he won a quarter of Democratic voters in 1980 and 1984 alike. In addition to his legendary campaigning skills, it helped that the two least-popular periods of his presidency — the recession and the Iran-Contra scandal — didn't coincide with either election. (Running during the hangover from the 1990-91 recession didn't work for the first President Bush, despite his comparatively high average approval rating.)

He also left office on a fairly high economic note, with 42 percent of Americans saying they were better off than when he began. But there were sharp differences in views of which groups benefited: Seventy-two percent said he'd made wealthy Americans better off, but just 26 percent said he'd benefited the middle class financially, and a majority of Americans said the poor had gotten worse off.

His valedictory approval rating was a high 64 percent, a point shy of Clinton's. And 63 percent said they expected history to remember Reagan as an "above average" or "outstanding"

president. But such assessments seem to have been informed more by his personal charisma rather than by specific accomplishments. While optimism rose during his presidency as the economy improved, across his two terms an average of just 44 percent of Americans described themselves as satisfied with the country's direction — no more than the long-term average (45 percent) in Gallup polls from 1979 to present.

In a poll by The Associated Press in November 1988, majorities rated Reagan positively for handling just three of 11 issues tested — relations with the Soviet Union, defense and other foreign affairs. There was an even split on the economy, plurality disapproval on his appointment of judges, and majority disapproval of his work on civil rights, education, ethics, housing, welfare, and the deficit (peaking at 82 percent disapproval on the latter).

More personally, in a 1987 survey half of Americans saw Reagan as "out of touch with what is going on in the government." And in the end-of-career AP poll his strongest ratings were for charisma (77 percent positive), his ability to communicate (74 percent) and leadership (60 percent). Only 45 percent rated Reagan positively for his "judgment as president."

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