

in brief...

American Idol: 65 years of admiration

Every year for over half a century, the US opinion pollsters Gallup have asked Americans to say which person they most admire. **Alan Manning** and **Amar Shanghavi** consider what their answers reveal about how public attitudes have and have not changed since the late 1940s.

Almost every December since 1948, Gallup has conducted an opinion poll in which it puts this question to Americans: 'what man/woman that you have heard or read about, living in any part of the world, do you admire most?' The winner is very rarely a surprise: the male competition is almost always won by the US president and the female competition has been won by Hillary Rodham Clinton for 15 of the past 17 years.

But the winning share of the vote is often low. For example, in 2013, Barack Obama won with 16% of the vote and Hillary Rodham Clinton won with 15%. Not only are votes widely spread, but about a quarter of respondents say they don't know or vote for no one.

It has not always been like this, as our analysis of 65 years of data reveals. Events cause large variations from year to year and most presidencies start with a high vote share and end with a low one. George W Bush won with 38% in 2001 after 9/11, while Barack Obama won with 30% in 2008. But through this 'noise', we can also observe long-term trends in the type of people admired. And because this is probably the longest consistently asked question in opinion polling, this gives us an insight into the ways that society is changing.

One very marked change is that women have grown in prominence in the eyes of respondents. Where the most admired woman once tended to be the wife of the president (think Jackie Kennedy), it is now someone who is famous in their own right. And the fraction of people saying that they don't know which woman they admire or that they admire none has fallen over time, perhaps reflecting the fact that women have come to play more active roles in society.

But in the admiration of men, perhaps the most striking fact is that the 1950s and the 2000s are very similar in the types of responses given. In both periods, about 35% of

respondents named a politician, 25% named no one or said that they did not know, 10% named a religious leader and 8% named a family member or friend. Business people and celebrities are rarely mentioned, which seems to suggest that, perhaps contrary to expectation, Americans have not become more obsessed with money and celebrities.



But between the 1950s and about 1980, there was a dramatic fall in the admiration of politicians and a rise in the proportion of people who said that they did not admire anyone. From 1980 to the early 2000s, there was a recovery in the admiration of politicians, but since 2000, we are again in a period when admiration of politicians is falling and the admiration of no one is rising.

What do we learn from this? We provide evidence that admiration of politicians is linked to trust in government, and admiration of no one is linked to distrust of people in general. It is probably not a surprise to learn that

politicians are not greatly admired at the moment, but it is not so clear why given that today's admiration levels are only slightly above those recorded in the dark days of the Vietnam War and Watergate.

The data also support concerns that the general level of trust in people is on a downward trend – a problem since other research suggests that both society and the economy work better when trust is high. All in all, a fascinating insight into how attitudes have and have not changed over 65 years.

This article summarises 'American Idol – 65 Years of Admiration' by Alan Manning and Amar Shanghavi, CEP Discussion Paper No. 1320 (<http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1320.pdf>).

Alan Manning is professor of economics at LSE and director of CEP's community research programme. **Amar Shanghavi** was a doctoral student at LSE and is now based in Tanzania.