US poll shows public disgust with Starr investigation

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An NBC- *Wall Street Journal* poll released Wednesday finds that 83 percent of Americans are tired of hearing media reports on the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal and that three-quarters have little or no confidence in the fairness of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr.

A sizeable majority, 58 percent, of those surveyed would oppose congressional hearings on possible impeachment of President Clinton, even if he were found to have lied about his relationship with Lewinsky and sought to cover it up. Among the 37 percent who would support impeachment hearings--if charges of perjury and obstruction of justice could be proven--the overwhelming majority, 68 percent, said they were not interested in media reports on the alleged sex scandal.

There has been no attempt by the media to explain the divergence between public opinion and their own incessant scandal-mongering. For more than five months, the major networks and newspapers have bombarded the public with sensationalized reports, for the most part damaging to the White House and supportive of Starr.

A recent article by journalist Steven Brill detailed the intimate and unscrupulous collaboration between major media outlets, right-wing Republican elements and Starr in the initial days of the Lewinsky affair. The evidence indicates that Starr and his backers believed the media frenzy over Clinton's alleged affair with Lewinsky would destabilize the administration and quickly force Clinton to resign. However, the scandal failed to provoke the anticipated public outrage against the White House. Rather it has, to date, fueled a widespread reaction against Starr and the media.

The *Wall Street Journal*, a cheerleader for right-wing conspiracy theorists and Clinton's most frenzied media opponent, failed even to report the results of the poll, which it had cosponsored. The *Journal* carried a long article reporting other findings in the poll, dealing with responses to questions on health care and tobacco policy, but said nothing about the findings on Starr and Clinton.

In response to criticism of the media obsession with the Lewinsky affair, spokesmen for the television networks and daily newspapers for weeks sought to blame the American people. They claimed that they were only responding to overwhelming public interest. For some time, however, these assertions have been refuted by their own opinion polls.

Such polls are an extremely inadequate measure of public opinion, conditioned as they are by the kinds of questions asked and the role of the media itself in shaping public discussion. They underrepresent, moreover, a significant minority of poor and working class Americans: those who do not possess telephones, those who are rarely home because they are working multiple jobs, and those who are reluctant to speak to interviewers because of language difficulties.

Normally these distortions help the professional pollsters obtain results conforming to an unstated agenda. Such built-in biases make all the more remarkable the starkness with which the latest polls reveal a divergence between the attitude of the public and that of the media. There is a huge chasm between the thoughts and feelings of the vast majority of the American people and the preoccupations and political aims of the press and media pundits.

The broad mass of the population, in contrast to the media, seems to feel that Clinton's private sexual conduct is his own business. This is coupled with suspicion over the political motives underlying the investigation by the independent counsel. Notwithstanding Clinton's own right-wing social

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policies, millions of Americans sense that the Starr investigation and the accompanying media frenzy have a profoundly antidemocratic content.

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