Public Evaluations of Presidents

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Since the 1930s, the Gallup organization has asked Americans “do you approve or disapprove of the way [the incumbent] is handling his job as president?” This is a fundamental question for democratic politics, tapping the public’s evaluation of the nation’s most powerful government official. Public support for the president shapes the give and take of politics in Washington, D.C. High approval ratings can be a powerful resource for presidents as they work to achieve their policy goals while low or eroding ratings can make it harder to move the president’s agenda (see Edwards 2009 for an extended discussion).

Reflective of its normative and political significance, survey measures of presidential approval have become ubiquitous; one website regularly updates an estimate of presidential approval based on results from 17 polling organizations. At the time of this essay, the Gallup organization alone has asked the approval question 262 times during George W. Bush’s presidency. Presidential approval is widely reported in news media, routinely discussed among the chattering classes, and has been analyzed at length by social scientists since John Mueller’s (1970) seminal study. Almost four decades of research has taught us much about public evaluations of the president, but the march of history—new political and historical conditions—
and the march of political science—theoretical and methodological advances—continue to raise novel questions that animate the study of presidential approval.

Three developments have significantly altered the political landscape of the United States and will stimulate new research on presidential approval. First, party polarization has become a central element of American national politics (e.g., McCarty et al. 2006, but see Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006). Second, outlets for news and public affairs have proliferated at a mind-numbing rate with the growth of cable television, talk radio, web-based news sources, and the blogosphere. As a consequence, the news audience has fragmented. Coupled with party polarization, a highly decentralized media market creates ever more possibilities and incentives for individuals to distrust media outlets they deem biased and rely on sources that reflect their own political predispositions, ultimately reducing the president’s ability to marshal public opinion and counter party polarization (Cohen 2008). Third, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror have dramatically affected American politics during the George W. Bush administration, elevating the importance of threat and anxiety in the public’s assessments of presidential power and leadership.

In the midst of these changes, theoretical and methodological advances in political science have altered the focus of presidential approval studies. While the first wave of presidential approval studies following Mueller sought to identify the major factors driving aggregate approval ratings, more recent work has placed the impact of these factors in a richer theoretical and empirical context (see Gronke and Newman 2003 for a description of the field’s historical development).

In many instances, studies have taken these factors, which early research largely took as exogenously determined, and endogenized them, seeking to understand what causes them. These
correlates of approval do not exist outside of the realm of approval but coexist with it, part of a constellation of attitudes that are shaped by things such as partisan predispositions, media coverage, presidential rhetoric, and other elite discourse as much as they are by objective real world conditions. For example, earlier work considered the direct impact of economic indicators such as inflation and unemployment on approval, while more recent work examines how perceptions of economic conditions, although certainly affected by real world conditions, can also be shaped by the president and other political actors (Wood 2007). Much of this research shifted from time series studies of aggregate approval to a new focus on the micro foundations of approval. This shift coincided with a move toward using individual-level survey data because the standard aggregate-level time series studies could not do much to explain how individuals evaluate the president simply because these studies could only test the implications of underlying models (Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995).

This work of endogenizing and contextualizing the foundations of presidential approval has opened broad new avenues of research. At the same time, new data sources have helped the discipline advance the research frontier. As noted above, it is now possible to construct estimates of aggregate approval based on a dozen or more public opinion polls, conducted on a daily (sometimes more often) basis, creating an almost instantaneous (and less error-prone) barometer of public approval. Some have used Stimson’s (1999) algorithm to generate time series measures of concepts that previously could not be included in time series models simply for lack of data (e.g., Kelleher and Wolak 2006; McAvoy 2006, 2008). New survey designs, such as rolling cross sections, more frequent use of panels, and experimental survey studies may also open up new possibilities for examining the underpinnings of presidential approval.

Our purpose here is to review recent research that endogenizes and contextualizes the
aspects of the political and economic environment that drive presidential approval and to identify important questions that should motivate future research. We proceed by describing the forces that shape approval and ways in which polarization, changes in the media market, and the post 9/11 context may alter their impact. We then explore the roots of these forces themselves, explaining how these forces depend on competition among political actors, including the president, and the media environment in which this competition occurs.

Our discussion then turns to the question of how the relative influence of these forces changes over time, sometimes with important consequences for the strength of public support. Research in this area points to a critical theoretical and normative question: who or what can determine the weight or relative influence of these factors? Can presidents and their administrations shape media coverage and public concern for various issues such that they can alter the criteria by which the president is evaluated, thereby enhancing his public standing? We know that presidents attempt and sometimes succeed in doing this (e.g., Cohen 1995; Edwards and Wood 1999; Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004). To what extent is the public a victim and to what extent can the public resist such presidential efforts, bringing to bear its own views of how the president should be evaluated? This is a question with deep implications for democratic accountability and one that recent work has only begun to examine.

The challenges presidents face in communicating with the public in the context of a fragmented media market give rise to new communication strategies that may heighten heterogeneity in the public’s evaluations. Facing considerable difficulty communicating with the entire nation at any given time (e.g., Baum and Kernell 1999), presidents have shifted toward more narrowly defined audiences since these groups can be reached more easily (Cohen 2008). This strategy may have consequences for presidential approval as different parts of the public are
exposed to different information, may understand the world in different ways, hold different political priorities and encounter different primes. Rather than examining the public as a monolithic whole, some research has begun to explicitly consider heterogeneity, primarily focusing on partisanship and political sophistication. We review this research and highlight opportunities for advancing it. After encouraging further exploration of the contingencies of various influences on approval, we close with a call for connecting findings to broader statements about what shapes presidential approval and larger implications for fundamental issues of presidential politics.

**The Factors Shaping Presidential Approval**

Evaluations of the president reflect a combination of relatively durable partisan predispositions that largely account for *levels* of public approval and more variable views of events and conditions that lead to *changes* in approval. We begin with partisanship, a predisposition that affects approval both directly and indirectly, as we discuss below. Most directly, partisanship shapes the level of approval, as Republicans in the public are far more likely than Democrats to approve of a Republican president, and vice versa. This is hardly surprising, but vitally important, especially in an era of party polarization. In the 1950s through the 1970s, approval ratings among Democrats and Republicans in the public differed on average by about 30 points. In the 1980s and 90s, the partisan gap in approval often exceeded 50 points (Bond and Fleisher 2001), an increase of more than two-thirds.

During the George W. Bush administration, party polarization in approval increased even more, exceeding 70 points during much of the Bush presidency, more than doubling the partisan gap of the 1950s to 1970s (Jacobson 2007). Although individuals who identify with the president’s party (in-partisans) have historically provided the president with a remarkably stable
Republican approval of George W. Bush reached record levels of depth and stability when compared to his predecessors. Through 2005, on average, 91 percent of Republicans approved of Bush. Moreover, two-thirds of Republicans said they strongly approved of Bush (Jacobson 2007, 8). In contrast, especially as Iraq war dragged on, Democrats’ approval declined to record lows, reaching a mere 7 points in one November, 2005 Gallup poll. Democrats’ disapproval ran deep as well, as just under two-thirds strongly disapproved of Bush in 2004-2005 (Jacobson 2007, 8). These are not just gaps in approval, but opinion canyons. The impact of such enormous levels of polarization on presidential governance is beyond the scope of this essay but will surely animate retrospectives on the Bush White House.

Despite the relatively stable force of partisanship, public approval varies considerably over the course of a president’s tenure in response to changing conditions, events, and actions. However, only some aspects of the political environment will affect approval. As a group, Americans are notoriously inattentive to politics. Few monitor every new political or economic development. Therefore, only those features of the political and social environment that are salient enough that individuals pay some attention to them and considered the president’s responsibility will affect approval (Ostrom and Simon 1988; Edwards 1990).

It may seem obvious that a condition must be salient to influence evaluations of the president, but much remains to be discovered about the connections between salience and approval. Presidential approval studies that pay careful attention to salience almost uniformly rely on the “most important problem” question as a measure of salience (e.g., Ostrom and Simon 1985, 1988; McAvoy 2006). However, this question is not an ideal measure of salience. For example, after Iraq’s military had been ousted from Kuwait in the Gulf War, the situation in the
Persian Gulf remained salient to many, even though they may no longer have considered it a “problem” (Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995). Developing valid and reliable measures of salience to incorporate into research on presidential approval remains an important task for future research.

Even if a particular aspect of the political environment is salient to the public, the public must consider the president responsible for it in order for that aspect to affect views of the president (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Althaus and Kim 2006). If an individual is concerned about a particular problem such as unemployment because he has lost a job, he still may not hold the president responsible for his lost job. Therefore, the respondent’s opinion about his own unemployment will not affect his opinion of the president. Similarly, the public may not hold a newly inaugurated president responsible for poor economic conditions inherited from the previous administration. A line of new research has just begun to study the ways the public forms attributions of presidential responsibility (e.g., Rudolph 2003a, 2003b; Arceneaux 2006; Malhotra and Kuo 2008) and promises to spark new insights into presidential approval.

Decades of approval studies have identified four features of the political environment that the public tends to find salient and assign as a responsibility of the president. First, every study of presidential approval finds that economic conditions affect presidential approval. Early research focused on the impact of objective economic indicators on approval (e.g., Mueller 1970; Kernell 1978; Ostrom and Simon 1985). Recent economic changes suggest that new aspects of the economy may be more germane now. In particular, economic globalization and increasing interdependence among national economies may make international economic conditions more relevant. In this environment, the president has less power over domestic economic conditions. Will the public punish the president for economic conditions deeply affected by trade disputes,
regional recessions, or a foreign stock market crash? One study found trade conditions with Japan had a significant relationship with Bill Clinton’s approval ratings (Burden and Mughan 2003), but this study represents only the first effort to incorporate global economic realities into approval models.

Recently, scholars have examined the impact of public perceptions of economic conditions rather than objective economic indicators. This shift sparked a debate over whether prospective or retrospective views of economic conditions are most relevant to presidential approval (see especially MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992; Clarke and Stewart 1994; Norpoth 1996). Although this debate was one of the major substantive questions driving research in the 1990s, it has not been at the core of most recent studies.

Second, since Mueller (1970) first noted the importance of the “rally-round-the-flag” effect on presidential approval, scholars have agreed that major political events drive aggregate approval and shape individuals’ evaluations of the president (see especially MacKuen 1983). However, beyond general agreement that events matter, there is precious little commonality in the ways events are treated. Studies vary widely in the ways they determine which events should be included and how they should be coded. As we noted elsewhere, “a unified event series would save significant labor, ease the temptation to use events to boost model fit, and limit suspicions that others have done so” (Gronke and Newman 2003, 509).

Third, war can have a dramatic effect on presidential approval. It has become standard to tap war’s impact by including the log of the number of deaths (e.g., Kernell 1978; Ostrom and Simon 1985; Hibbs 1987; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Newman 2002; see also Gartner and Segura 1998). Recent research on support for war and the impact of casualty numbers on such support calls this approach into question as we describe below.
Fourth, perceptions of the president’s personal character inform evaluations of the president. Mueller (1970, 27) argued “an analysis of presidential popularity cannot rely entirely on the variables [he included—a time counter, rally events, economic conditions, and war], but must also incorporate parameters designed to allow for the special character of each administration” (emphasis in original). However, most studies of presidential approval over the two decades following Mueller’s writing did not pay great attention to these unique aspects, often simply adding a dummy variable for each presidential administration. More recently, studies have explicitly examined the link between public views of the president’s character and their evaluations of presidential performance, finding that public assessments of the president’s competence, integrity, and favorability are significantly related to presidential approval (Kinder 1986; Greene 2001; Newman 2003, 2004; Kelleher and Wolak 2006; McAvoy 2008).

Some research has pointed to other influences on approval. Policy attitudes or global ideological identification can shape approval ratings at the individual level (e.g., Nicholson, Segura, and Woods 2002; Newman 2003), while aggregate approval tracks the public’s aggregate policy mood (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). We encourage further development of the links between issue positions and presidential approval. We do not discuss approval’s tendency to decline over time or the tendency for presidents to enjoy a honeymoon period of relatively high approval. Elite discourse and media coverage largely explain these trends (see Brody 1991; Edwards 1990, 123-25). To the extent that they are included in future research, we encourage the development of explanations of these tendencies rather than simply including these relatively atheoretical measures in models as controls.

The Factors’ Roots
As scholars turned from trying to isolate the correlates of aggregate approval to attempting to explain “the individual-level processes that lead to aggregate results” (Bond and Fleisher 2001, 530), they began to explore ways the factors shaping approval are themselves shaped by, or are endogenous to, the political environment. Perceptions of political conditions and who is responsible for them are shaped by partisanship, personal experiences, and messages from the president, the president’s political opponents, news media, pundits, friends, family, co-workers among other things. These complex interrelationships create substantive and methodological problems that will drive research in the coming years. In this section, we discuss the ways research has shown these factors to be endogenous to the political environment and the puzzles that should drive future research.

**Party Identification**

Political scientists have long examined the underpinnings of party identification. Most relevant to presidential approval, MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson (1989) found that the proportion of the public identifying with the two major parties responds to perceptions of the economy and aggregate presidential approval ratings (see also Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 1998; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 1998). This finding demonstrates two challenges as we endogenize the attitudes that influence presidential approval. First, these attitudes and approval may influence each other. Just as party identification shapes evaluations of the president, those evaluations in turn may shape partisanship.

Second, the factors affecting approval often shape each other. In particular, an individual’s reaction to conditions and events is colored by partisanship, which acts as a “filter through which changes in the environment are evaluated” (Ostrom and Simon 1988, 1101). Partisans often engage in motivated reasoning, a process of collecting and evaluating information
with the goal of reaching conclusions that are consistent with their party predispositions (Taber and Lodge 2006). In-partisans discount new developments that cast the president in a negative light and emphasize more positive conditions, while out-partisans do the opposite. Thus, out-partisans might consider a sluggish economy a problem of the president’s making, while in-partisans might consider economic conditions not all that poor, not all that important, or may cast blame on someone other than the president (see Bartels 2002; Bond and Fleisher 2001; Rudolph 2003a, 2003b; Malhotra and Kuo 2008).

**Economic Conditions**

The task of endogenizing the factors shaping presidential approval has advanced furthest in the realm of economic perceptions. Where approval studies once considered economic conditions as essentially fixed and exogenous, now presidential approval models treat them as potentially malleable, conditioned on other aspects of the political environment and on an individual’s prior political predispositions. Besides objective economic indicators, public perceptions of economic conditions and whether the president is conditioned by partisanship, media coverage, and elite discourse—including presidential rhetoric (e.g., Hetherington 1996; Nadeau et al. 1999; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001; Rudolph 2003a, 2003b; Evans and Anderson 2006; Lewis-Beck 2006). As Wood (2007, 119) puts it, “when evaluating the economy, citizens take cues and receive information from a variety of sources…. presidential rhetoric, manifest through a stream of speeches and other public comments that are widely reported in the news, is one of those sources of cues and information.” Thus, presidents are able to enhance their standing in the polls via an adroit use of communications, a finding with potentially negative implications. Although it may not be easy to shape perceptions of the economy, doing so may be far easier than improving the economy itself. Consequently, presidents have incentives to focus
their administration’s resources on strategic communication rather than solving real life problems (Waterman, Wright, and St. Clair 1999).

Wood’s (2007) book presents the strongest evidence to date that the sustained communication efforts of presidential administrations do in fact alter public views of economic conditions. Wood’s book is exemplary in dealing with the challenge of estimating how perceptions of the economy shape evaluations of the president and how evaluations of the president shape perceptions of the economy. Using time series data, he conducts Granger causality tests that uncover the direction of causality, demonstrating the continuing utility of aggregate time series methods even as scholars increasingly probe individual-level data to develop ever more elaborate models of approval.

Major Events

Efforts to explain the rally phenomenon (boosts in aggregate approval after a major event) raise two important questions. First, when do rallies occur? Early studies argued that rallies were the result of a reflexive surge of patriotic support for the president in a time of crisis. However, we now know that rallies are not automatic; they depend in part upon the political and media environment. After a major event, elite discourse about the president’s handling of the event, media coverage of the event, and individuals’ predispositions to approve of the president shape the size of any potential rally (see especially Brody 1991). For example, Peffley, Langley, and Goidel’s (1995) study of the 1986 air strike against Libya found that those who watched Reagan’s televised speech announcing the strike were more likely to rally than those who did not watch the speech. Similarly, Edwards and Swenson (1997) found that among those most predisposed to rally, individuals who paid attention to foreign policy news were the most likely to rally after Clinton’s 1993 missile strike on Baghdad. Most recently, Baum and Groeling
(2008) demonstrate that reactions to military use of force, one of the most important types of rally events, depend on media coverage of elite messages.

Thinking of rallies as contingent on the environment raises a second question: do party polarization and the proliferation of news outlets affect the size of rallies? Party polarization may influence who rallies and therefore the size of the rally. Presumably, individuals who were generally favorable toward the president but disapproved prior to the event are most likely to rally (Kernell and Hibbs 1981). For example, after Clinton’s missile strike on Baghdad, in-partisans and independents who held generally favorable views of the president were most likely to rally (Edwards and Swenson 1997). Gronke and Brehm (2002) found that the impact of events differed according to the underlying "volatility" of public opinion, which was determined in part by the strength of partisan sentiments.

In a polarized world where in-partisans almost uniformly strongly approve of the president and out-partisans are cohesive in their strong disapproval, rally effects may be minimal simply because there is little room for movement. Out-partisans are especially unlikely to rally in a media context that is increasingly prone to broadcast critical commentary during a potential rally event. Although politicians may be hesitant to criticize the president during a crisis, talking heads and bloggers are always ready to do so. In addition, such criticism may make its way into mainstream news because of journalistic preferences for drama and presenting two sides to stories (Baum and Groeling 2008). Thus, although criticism of the president during a rally event was at one time relatively muted (Brody 1991), now those who wish can easily find criticism of the president. In the end, then, rallies in the midst of partisan polarization depend almost entirely on unaffiliated citizens. If presidents adopt a general strategy of mobilizing, catering to, and depending on their base support as George W. Bush has, they may find few independents willing
to rally. On the other hand, a media strategy targeted at unaffiliated, and often disinterested, citizens seems highly problematic. Future research should continue to think through the complex interactions of the political and media environment, partisan predispositions, and the shape, size, and frequency of future rallies.

**War**

As we noted earlier, recent research on support for war has raised problems with the standard inclusion of troop deaths as a measure of war’s impact on presidential approval. Although most of this work takes some measure of support for a particular war as its dependent variable, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler (2005/06) briefly explored the impact of war casualties on approval for George W. Bush. Rather than leading inexorably to declines in approval, the impact of casualties depended on the military and political context. Over the whole period studied (January of 2003 to November of 2004), the log of American deaths in Iraq was unrelated to aggregate approval. However, casualty counts did negatively affect approval over some time periods. Despite the increase in deaths during the major combat phase, presidential approval actually increased with the onset of military action and the fall of Baghdad. In contrast, after Bush declared an end to major combat, his approval dropped as troop deaths rose. Then, after the transfer of sovereignty to the Iraqi government, deaths once again showed no relationship with Bush’s approval ratings.

Furthermore, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler found that the effect of casualties on support for the war depends on expectations of success and views of whether it was right to go to war with Iraq. Those who considered the war the right course of action and especially those who thought the US would ultimately succeed were casualty tolerant (see Berinsky and Druckman 2007 and Gartner 2008 for critiques of this work). In addition, the impact of casualties was muted for
those who viewed the objective as the defense of the US and its allies, those who perceived elite consensus supporting the war, and those who were not concerned about multinational support for the conflict. Each of these factors conditioning the impact of casualties is, of course, shaped by elite debate, media coverage, and individuals’ partisan predispositions. Elites hotly contested the justification for the war (especially as no weapons of mass destruction were found), the wisdom of building a broader coalition, and the likelihood of success, while most Republicans viewed the war’s aims as right and were optimistic about success and most Democrats were at odds on both counts. Consequently, casualties may have had a larger effect on Bush’s approval rating among Democrats than among Republicans. Although most studies on support for war do not examine the effect of casualties on presidential approval directly, their findings open avenues for future scholarship on approval during foreign conflicts.

This research questions the standard practice of simply including the log of the number of casualties as a control for the effect of war. Such a variable is too crude to capture the complex and contingent effects of casualties. Since at the time of this essay we remain in the War on Terror, American troops will remain in Iraq for at least the near future, and Americans face the possibility of future military intervention across the globe, it is important to incorporate the nuances and contingencies uncovered in research on presidential approval, military conflict, and war casualties.

Perceptions of Presidents’ Personal Character

Our understanding of views of presidential character remains in its infancy. While we are well aware that character matters, we know little about the source of these perceptions. Some evidence suggests that media coverage of presidential character shapes the public’s perceptions (Shah, et al. 2002), but this is an area ripe for further development. Presidents try to shape views
of their character (e.g., Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004), but are they successful? To date, scholars have not adequately dealt with this question. The studies of character perceptions assume, but do not show definitively, that perceptions of the president’s character affect evaluations of his performance rather than the reverse. Although some experimental evidence provides indirect evidence that perceptions of character really do have some causal effect (Funk 1996), this is a vital direction for future research.

In addition, we know little about how the context in which character perceptions are shaped will alter those perceptions, even though new scholarship indicates that context is crucial. For example, Merolla, Ramos, and Zechmeister (2007) found that in a context of crisis—like a heightened threat of terrorist attack—the public views the president as more charismatic than when under less threatening conditions. This highlights both the importance of considering the context and the potential that alternative dimensions of the broad construct “character” are relevant. Considering the context in which perceptions of character are formed may be especially critical since 9/11, and the ongoing War on Terror may induce a sense of crisis in the public.

**The Factors’ Variable Influence**

The first generation of approval research implicitly assumed that the impact of various factors on approval was constant over time (Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995; Wood 2000). However, the issues, events, and conditions the public cares most about and the extent to which the president is held responsible for them change over time. Much of the theoretically and methodologically novel presidential approval research over the past two decades has found that the criteria used to evaluate the president varies depending on the context in which the evaluation occurs. At least four contextual factors can alter the evaluation calculus: divided versus unified
government, individuals’ level of anxiety, the longer presidential campaign, and messages from political actors reported in news media.

Divided government alters the degree to which the president is held responsible for negative economic conditions, ultimately decreasing the impact of such conditions on approval (Nicholson, Segura, and Woods 2002). Under divided government, it is more difficult for the public to award credit or assign blame for economic conditions to the president or to Congress, so presidential approval is decoupled from economic conditions. Under unified government, information and elite cues about economic conditions squarely implicate the president, whose approval ratings are therefore more sensitive to economic changes.

A growing body of research on emotion highlights the ways anxiety shapes political decisions (e.g., Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Brader 2006; Ladd and Lenz 2008). Much of this research argues that anxious individuals rely less on partisan cues and other cognitive short cuts, and instead seek more information and process it more rigorously. This process may make new features of the political environment salient to the public and ultimately relevant for evaluations of the president. As yet, scholars have not studied the role of anxiety or other emotions in presidential approval, but future research should do so, particularly since the potential of future terrorist attacks may have increased the public's anxiety levels.

The presidential campaign season may also prove a unique context for evaluating presidents. As two candidates, one of whom may be the sitting president, compete for votes, they inevitably try to make some conditions more salient than others and make arguments about who is responsible for current conditions. Do such campaigns alter the criteria of evaluating the president’s current performance? This is an important question for substantive reasons since presidential campaigns are now over a year long, meaning that sitting presidents may have just
over two years to govern in non-election mode. Methodologically, many of the surveys that enable individual-level studies of presidential approval are in the field during presidential campaigns (e.g., the National Election Studies and the National Annenberg Election Studies). If the criteria of evaluating presidents are unique during the period in which these surveys are conducted, conclusions drawn from them will be limited to this particular context.

The vast majority of studies examining the varying influences on presidential approval involve media coverage and elite discourse, particularly as they relate to the psychological phenomenon of priming. Miller and Krosnick (2000, 301) explain “priming occurs when media attention to an issue causes people to place special weight on it when constructing evaluations of overall presidential job performance.” For example, individuals who view news stories about US defense preparedness tend to place more weight on their views of the president’s handling of national defense when evaluating the president’s overall performance than individuals who have not seen these stories (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Studies of priming have found time and again that exposure to stimuli (e.g., media coverage, elite messages, or real world events) emphasizing a particular consideration increases that consideration’s influence on presidential approval evaluations (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Miller and Krosnick 2000). In addition, Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch (1995) found that the impact of economic or foreign policy considerations depends on the salience of each at a given time, as measured by the amount of media coverage of each. Studies demonstrate varying impacts for several aspects of the political and economic environment, including perceptions of economic conditions (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Kelleher and Wolak 2006), views of the Gulf war (Kronsick and Brannon 1993) and the Iraq war (Ladd 2007), and character perceptions (Kelleher and Wolak 2006). Major events can also prime specific considerations, which can
Who or What Can Determine the Factors’ Influence?

Research has convincingly demonstrated that the criteria of evaluation change in different contexts and in response to new information. We know less about the extent to which specific political actors, media content, or real world events alter the influence of particular factors on approval. In their initial priming study, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) concluded that “priming is greatest when the news frames a particular problem as if it were the president’s business, when viewers are prepared to regard the problem as important, and when they see the problem as entangled in the duties and obligations of the presidency,” once again highlighting the importance of salience and attribution of responsibility to the president. Since then, studies have begun to explore which political actors, news sources, or events can alter the impact of the main factors on approval, what types of considerations can be amplified or depressed in evaluations, and which individuals in the public are open or resistant to these effects. These efforts to define the extent to which the evaluative criteria are open to change should continue be at the forefront of the next wave of research. They are important to our theoretical understanding of priming, an important concept in the study of public opinion, and they relate to a fundamental question for scholars of presidential approval: how much can presidents control their own public support?

In thinking about who or what can shape evaluative criteria, Chong and Druckman’s (2007) recent work on framing is instructive. Their definition of framing makes their theory directly applicable to efforts to change evaluative criteria. As they put it, (2007, 637) “a speaker ‘frames’ an issue by encouraging readers or listeners to emphasize certain considerations above others when evaluating that issue.” This is precisely what scholars refer to when describing the
ways some stimulus increases the influence of the particular consideration in evaluations of the president. Recent priming and framing research finds that not everyone can alter the public’s evaluative criteria. Trusted and credible sources are especially effective at priming and framing (e.g., Miller and Krosnick 2000; Chong and Druckman 2007). Can presidents alter the criteria by which they are evaluated? They certainly have incentives to convince the public to weigh favorable considerations more and unfavorable considerations less. Several studies demonstrate that presidential candidates attempt to prime considerations that generally favor them over their opponents in the hope that voters will make decisions based on those favorable considerations (e.g., Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004). Experimental evidence indicates that presidents can alter the public’s evaluative criteria, at least under some conditions. Watching the president’s 2002 State of the Union address primed perceptions of Bush’s leadership and handling of terrorism among some viewers (Druckman and Holmes 2004). However, presidents often compete with opposition political actors who have incentives to emphasize considerations unfavorable to the president and downplay considerations favorable to the president (Althaus and Kim 2006; Chong and Druckman 2007). Thus, presidents and their surrogates, opposition leaders, and news coverage may all be sending different messages that could potentially shift the standards of evaluation. Much more research is required to demonstrate presidents’ power to influence the criteria by which they are evaluated and to delineate the limits of that power in the real world.

As presidents, other political actors, and news media compete to define evaluations, some messages may be more effective in altering evaluative criteria. Iyengar and Kinder (1987, ch. 9) found that news stories that highlighted the president’s responsibility for a particular problem produced greater priming effects than stories about the same problem that did not draw such a
link. Recent studies have expanded on this finding, showing that, at least under some conditions, individuals must view considerations as salient and applicable to evaluations of the president in order to change individuals’ evaluative criteria (Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995; Miller and Krosnick 2000; Althaus and Kim 2006).

In addition, Chong and Druckman (2007) argue that effective framing requires that the audience can understand both the consideration presented in the frame and its potential link to the president. Along these lines, Kelleher and Wolak (2006) found that from 1981 to 2000, familiar and easily understood considerations like economic perceptions were more open to priming by news coverage than less familiar and more complex issues like foreign policy. An important implication of message limits is that even if presidents are viewed as a credible source, they may not be able to prime any consideration they like, especially when other actors and conditions offer alternative evaluative criteria.

When presented with information that might alter their evaluative calculus, some individuals may reject these framing messages and retain their own calculus. For example, Democrats in Congress may argue that George W. Bush should be held responsible for soaring gas prices, while Republicans may argue that presidents have little influence over gas prices. Individual citizens consider these claims in light of their own political leanings and past information they have about gas prices, sometimes rejecting them, again limiting the power of the president and other actors to shape the criteria of evaluation (Zaller 1992).

Thus far, most research on resisting priming has focused on individuals’ level of sophistication. Unfortunately, the research has not yet reached a consensus about the relationship between sophistication and susceptibility to priming. The early presidential approval studies of priming found that the least sophisticated were the most affected by priming.
(Krosnick and Kinder 1990), yet later work has found the opposite, that more sophisticated individuals are more open to priming (Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Miller and Krosnick 2000). This recent work contends that it requires significant sophistication to “interpret, store, and later retrieve and make inferences from news stories” and other potential primes (Miller and Krosnick 2000, 312). A potential path to resolution between these two positions is work that shows that sophistication interacts with message content such that individuals with lower sophistication levels are open to some primes while individuals with higher sophistication levels are open to different primes. For instance, among individuals with limited political knowledge, watching the 2002 State of the Union address increased the impact of Bush’s leadership qualities on overall evaluations of his performance, while among individuals with higher knowledge levels, watching the speech increased the influence of views of the president’s performance on terrorism (Druckman and Holmes 2004, see also Ladd 2007).

Beyond political sophistication, we would expect that partisanship would moderate the power of priming. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) found that Republicans were more open to priming on the traditionally Republican issues of inflation, defense, and arms control, while Democrats were more open to priming on traditionally Democratic issues of the environment, unemployment, and civil rights. Thus, “television news primes most effectively those viewers who are predisposed to accept the message in the first place” (93). Presumably, today’s greater party polarization would continue to make partisanship an important force in resisting or amplifying the power of potential primes. We encourage future study of the impact of partisanship and party divisions on the power of priming.

Most of the work on priming has occurred in the experimental context. Many of the avenues we suggest for future research will require experimental studies as well. However, as
scholars continue to study varying effects on approval, we encourage them to do the challenging work of applying new theoretical insights to the aggregate time series context. Althaus and Kim (2006) argue that experimental studies of priming ignore the influence of cumulative exposure to messages and urge examination of priming in the complex information environment of the real world. Some work has tested for priming effects in time series models, allowing the impact of several factors to vary over time (see Wood 2000; Holian 2006; Kelleher and Wolak 2006; McAvoy 2006). These studies demonstrate that aggregate studies can be sensitive to changes in the public’s evaluative calculus. Such studies increase our confidence in the experimental research by demonstrating that the significance of priming extends beyond the laboratory and into aggregate approval.

As we close our discussion of altering standards of evaluation, we note that the new media environment may be another element that alters presidents’ power to prime the public. The proliferation of media outlets poses significant challenges to the executive branch’s ability to set the news agenda. Presidents reach fewer people via a prime-time nationally televised speech because viewers uninterested in politics have many alternative entertainment outlets (Baum and Kernell 1999). In addition, critics of the president have many more venues through which to voice their criticism. They can convince smaller media outlets with more narrowly defined markets to carry their message or simply post their views online. Furthermore, any statement from the administration can and will be scrutinized, challenged, and critiqued in the blogosphere or on talk radio. The new media environment makes it much more difficult for any political leader to shape the information individuals are receiving.

Cohen (2008) argues that in this context presidents have an incentive to communicate with smaller, more defined groups. Thus, the presidents’ partisans and those groups that share
the president’s policy views are likely to receive greater attention while the president will spend less time communicating with opposition groups. This communications strategy will advance polarization since the president’s messages are crafted for his party’s base, while critics of the president are not exposed to the president’s communications and instead turn to sources critical of the president. This move toward segmented communication highlights the importance of examining heterogeneity in the ways the public learns about and evaluates the president.

**Heterogeneity in Presidential Approval**

Although most studies, especially in the early decades of presidential approval research, examined the public as a relatively undifferentiated whole, we would not expect everyone in the public to care about the same issues or conditions, so we might expect various groups in the public to differ in their evaluations of the president. Heterogeneity across groups can affect approval in two ways, via different perceptions of political and economic conditions (e.g., Democrats may view the economy more favorably than Republicans or vice versa) and via different impacts of those conditions (Republicans may weigh their views of the economy more heavily than do Democrats). For example, Gilens (1988) found that differences in women’s and men’s attitudes on various issues explained much of gender gap in approval of Ronald Reagan. However, women also put greater weight on their more liberal views of defense spending than did men when evaluating Reagan. Along the same lines, from 1978 to 1997, women’s views of economic conditions were generally less positive than men’s and they weighed their economic perceptions differently than men when evaluating presidents (Clarke et al. 2005).

From the beginning of presidential approval research, scholars have examined partisan differences in evaluative criteria (Mueller 1973, ch. 10). Most notably, several studies have found that Democrats’ approval is most sensitive to unemployment and Republicans’ approval
tends to respond to inflation (Hibbs, Rivers, and Vasilatos 1982; Ostrom and Simon 1988; Lebo and Cassino 2007), while partisan groups often respond to major events in different ways (Baum 2002; Baum and Groeling 2008). In addition, partisans appear to use motivated reasoning to incorporate new information into evaluations of the president in ways that reinforce their partisan predispositions. In-partisans generally approve of the president even in the face of negative perceptions of the president’s character or economic downturns, while out-partisans typically weigh negative perceptions of character traits and economic woes more heavily (Goren 2002; Lebo and Cassino 2007). Although research on heterogeneity has focused on partisanship, a few studies have examined differences related to sex (e.g., Gilens 1988; Clarke et al. 2005), race (Dawson 1994), and occupation (Hibbs, Rivers, and Vasilatos 1982), while many of the priming studies we cited above have explored heterogeneity across levels of sophistication.

We have much to learn about differences in the foundations of approval across the major groups in the American public. Some dimensions of American society have largely been ignored in this literature, such as income and religion. It may be worth exploring whether lower income earners base their views of the president on different aspects of the economy than do higher income earners. As we learn more about which groups weigh factors differently, larger questions of why heterogeneity exists in some instances, but not others, may arise. Here again we see a plethora of research questions drawing scholars ever deeper into the nuances of what drives presidential approval.

**Pulling it all Together**

After spending several pages pointing to ways to explore ever more nuanced details of what was once a relatively basic model, we want to highlight the importance of pulling these details together to tell us something general about presidential approval. As we move toward
understanding the micro foundations of approval by delving deeper into particular aspects of the model, contextualizing each factor, demonstrating how the levels and impact of various forces differ across the public and depend on elite discourse, news coverage, and other aspects of the political environment, we must continue to ask how these nuances affect our larger understanding of presidential approval. If men and women or Republicans and Democrats weigh their views of war differently, for example, what does this mean for the president’s overall standing in the public? If in-partisans are more open to the president’s attempts to prime them, what do we learn about aggregate approval ratings? How do the micro foundations we uncover translate into the macro-level trends that can affect the president’s leverage in Washington?

The best work has effectively drawn connections between detailed individual-level analyses and aggregate approval ratings. For example, Ostrom and Simon (1988) worked through a series of simulations to illustrate how the individual-level effects their analyses identified would alter aggregate approval levels, while Krosnick and Kinder (1990, 510) note important consequences of their finding that the least knowledgeable are most susceptible to priming. In their words, “our findings suggest that change over time in popular approval—and thus the waxing and waning of presidential power—may depend the most on the citizens who know the least.” Although their conclusion about who is most open to priming have since been challenged, we applaud their application of detailed findings to broader questions of the ways aggregate approval moves. In addition, some recent time series studies have enriched their models by explicitly including insights from individual-level studies, especially as they note the varying impact of particular factors over time (e.g., Kelleher and Wolak 2006; McAvoy 2006; Wood 2007). As we continue to develop ever more nuanced models, we must also continue the challenging work of integrating these advances into our comprehensive understanding of
Beyond linking findings to our general understanding of presidential approval, scholars must continue to connect their findings to the central questions of democratic politics that motivate the study of approval ratings. Many of the questions we identify ultimately relate to the fundamental issue of the public’s competence in playing its democratic role. If citizens are susceptible to presidential priming strategies, they may overlook areas in which the president has failed and not hold him accountable for that failure. However, if citizens are capable and willing to reject such strategic messages and base their evaluations in part on more negative considerations presidents do not prime, perhaps the public may be checking its representatives effectively (see Zaller 1998).

In a related way, many of the questions we raise here relate to the degree to which presidents can shape opinion about themselves. Edwards (2009) discusses the president’s ability to shape opinion more broadly, but we briefly highlight the issue here as well. As views of character, the economy, events, and war are shaped in part by elite debate, the president remains a central voice in this discourse and may therefore indirectly shape approval ratings. Moreover, if presidents can influence the criteria by which they are evaluated, they may have subtle tools to boost their public standing.

These questions relate not only to the public’s ability to resist elite manipulation and hold the president accountable to what it sees as the president’s chief duties, but also to the ability of other political actors to check presidents. If Congress, the press, or other political actors can work successfully against presidents’ efforts to shape the criteria of presidential evaluation, if these other actors can convince the public to hold presidents accountable for failure in fundamental aspects of presidential performance, the system will provide a check on the
executive. However, if presidents win the competition over framing the relevant criteria for evaluating themselves, they may avoid punishment for poor performance on particular dimensions.

Therefore, as Chong and Druckman (2007) emphasize, it is vital to study the president’s power to set the public’s evaluative criteria in a competitive context. They note that not all political actors have the same ability to frame an evaluation; some will be advantaged because they have the resources “to develop and disseminate their messages” (639). The president generally has ample resources to do so. Thus, presidents may be advantaged in competitions over the criteria by which they are evaluated. However, these other political actors, who often have incentives and capacity to frame evaluations of the president in different ways, may still limit presidents.

In the end, then, we see research exploring the extent to which the president, other political actors, and individuals in the public shape presidential approval as theoretically, empirically, and normatively important. Presidential approval research has always touched close to the heart of democratic politics. We are optimistic that future research will continue to do so.
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Notes