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FDR to Clinton, Mueller to ?: A Field Essay on Presidential Approval

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Since the 1930s, polling organizations have asked Americans whether they “approve or disapprove of the job [the incumbent] is doing as president.” In the early 1970s, John Mueller started an academic industry by asking what drives these evaluations. American politics and the tools available to examine it have changed dramatically since then, inspiring a burst of research on presidential approval in the 1990s. We review this new body of literature, arguing that it builds on but differs importantly from earlier approval studies. Since Mueller’s writing, scholars have expanded his relatively simple model, taking account of presidents’ goals and personal characteristics, other political actors, the ubiquitous media, and an inattentive public. We describe three waves of research, focusing on the most recent wave. We suggest that history, along with new intellectual currents, data, and methods have enabled each wave to incorporate more of political, social, and psychological reality. Finally, we identify the issues most likely to motivate presidential approval research for the next ten years.

In the 1930s, the Gallup organization began asking Americans “do you approve or disapprove of the way [the incumbent] is handling his job as president?” Since then, the question has been asked “with tenacious regularity” (Mueller 1973: 196). In the early 1970s, John Mueller (1970, 1973) sparked something of a political science movement when he treated the Gallup approval ratings as a dependent variable. Coalitions of minorities, rallying around the flag, economic decline, and war, Mueller argued, drove changes in approval over time.

Since then, scholarly studies of presidential approval have been almost equally tenacious and regular. In fact, a conservative estimate finds over 70 books, articles, and chapters that attempt to explain approval ratings.¹ The attention is well placed. In the era of “the public relations presidency” (Brace and Hinckley 1993: 382), approval ratings play a critical role in presidential politics. The president’s performance in this “new referendum” (Brace and Hinckley 1992: 18) is a key to understanding presidential power in the postwar era (Neustadt 1980). In his classic

study of the American presidency, Richard Neustadt (1980: 81, n. 9) argued that reports of these ratings “are very widely read in Washington” and are “widely taken to approximate reality.” Higher approval ratings tend to pay off electorally, both for the president and for his party in Congress (Gronke, Koch, and Wilson 2003; Newman and Ostrom 2002; Sigelman 1979) and also affect the president’s policy-making goals, legislative strategy, and success in promoting his agenda.²

The American political universe has undergone important changes since the early 1970s, and the presidency has not been immune. The office of the president has endured two major crises. Richard Nixon resigned, almost certain to be impeached, and left office with 24 percent approval. William Jefferson Clinton was impeached, yet ended his second term with a 64 percent approval rating, the highest final rating on record. In addition, presidential approval has become increasingly volatile. One President Bush experienced almost universal acclaim after the first Gulf War, only to watch this support wither by over 50 percentage points in a matter of months. A second President Bush was

¹ The actual number is certainly higher. We included only a subset of these studies in the bibliography. We apologize in advance for the many books, articles, and working papers that we have omitted due to space restrictions.

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² These claims are established in the voluminous literature on elections, presidential approval, and presidential leadership. Four recent volumes include Brody (1991), Brace and Hinckley (1992), Kernell (1997), and King and Ragsdale (1988). On how popularity affects legislative strategy, see Canes-Wrone and Shotts (2002); on legislative success, see Canes-Wrone and de Marchi (2002). Additional treatments include Kernell (1997); Peterson (1990); Rivers and Rose (1985); Rohde and Simon (1985). Many argue that those effects are variable and not always substantial (e.g., Bond and Fleisher 1990; Cohen 1997). We consider the debate over approval’s influence on American politics a significant topic, one that makes studying approval as a dependent variable meaningful. However, we cannot do this topic justice in the space provided and focus on literature taking presidential approval as the dependent variable.

catapulted to 90 percent approval just after the terrorist attacks of September 11th and retained remarkably high approval for more than a year afterwards. Further, the “avalanche of opinion polls” (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, xi) provides an almost daily rendering of the president’s approval rating. During the Lewinsky scandal, for instance, John Zaller (1998) examined more than 30 different polls over a 20 day period, all of which dealt with Clinton’s job performance. Presidents’ private polling has also dramatically increased, as has scholarly attention to these activities (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

In the academic world, new analytical tools have shaped approval studies. Longer time series have provided greater leverage on comparisons across administrations. Rich datasets derived from presidential archives have provided a far more detailed treatment of presidential agendas. Increasingly sophisticated analytical methods have been introduced and applied to these new data sources, as well as provided a fresh look at the traditional Gallup series.

Scholarly scrutiny of the presidency and presidential approval has intensified in response to these developments and especially in reaction to the George H. W. Bush and Clinton presidencies. What has not occurred, however, is a comprehensive overview and critical examination of the literature during this same period. We provide this here. We trace the development of the study of presidential approval over the last 30 years, from Mueller through the present. We argue that by and large, students of approval have taken Mueller’s self-described “rather austere representation of a presumably complex process” and put it into a richer context, taking account of presidents’ goals and personal characteristics, other political actors, the ubiquitous media, and a public made up of generally inattentive citizens (1973: 217-18). We describe three waves of research, but focus on the most recent wave, which has emerged over the past decade.³ We suggest that history, new intellectual currents from the broader public opinion field, and new data and methods have enabled each wave to take more of political, social, and psychological reality into account. Finally, we identify the questions and puzzles which are most likely to motivate presidential approval research for the next ten years.

THE THREE WAVES OF APPROVAL RESEARCH

The First Wave—Mueller and Reactions

The first wave of research consists of Mueller’s work and immediate reactions to it. Mueller’s initial article (1970) and his elaboration on it in his book (1973: chs. 9-10) identified much of the agenda that has occupied approval studies in

³ Naturally, breaking the literature into three waves oversimplifies reality and draws sharp boundaries where they do not exist. Many pieces fit imperfectly in this structure, anticipating new trends or hearkening back to earlier questions and methods. We offer this view of the literature not so much as a mutually exclusive and exhaustive categorical analysis, but as a bit of intellectual history and an organizing framework.

the quarter century since. Despite his sparse and self-described “irreverent” approach, Mueller anticipated many of the ways his model would be extended, refined, and enriched. Analytically, he tried to account for the seemingly inevitable decline in approval over each presidential term. He argued that this was most likely the result of a “coalition of minorities” that builds during an administration as the president is forced to act on controversial issues, consequently alienating groups of real or potential supporters. He operationalized the “coalition of minorities” thesis simply as time in office. Second, he noticed that approval increases during foreign crises, the “rally round the flag” effect.⁴ Mueller was the first, but certainly not the last, to realize that measuring rally events is fraught with difficulty. To resist the temptation to find a rally point to match every bump in approval, fitting the model to sample data, he adopted *a priori* criteria for rally events, a recommendation that has been followed irregularly since.⁵ Third, Mueller argued that “an economy in slump harms a president’s popularity, but an economy that is improving does not seem to help his rating” (1973: 215).⁶ Finally, given his interest in public opinion during wartime, he included dummy variables for the Korean War and Vietnam conflict. Ultimately, he found that all of these variables significantly affected approval.⁷

When Mueller initially estimated his model, only the time variable was statistically or substantively significant. The expected relationships with war, the economy, and other rally events appeared only once he added a dummy variable for each administration (or a presidency-specific time counter). This simple finding turns out to be a fundamental issue in the study of approval ratings and in presidency research generally: how do we resolve the tension between elegant models that capture systematic forces active across presidencies and the harsh empirical realities of important idiosyncratic features that characterize individual presidents? Mueller’s position on this debate is clear: he claimed that “*any analysis of presidential popularity cannot rely entirely on the [substantive] variables. . . , but must also incorporate parameters designed to allow for the special character of each administration*” (1973: 222, italics in original). He embraced what he considered the more empirically plausible model, taking into account idiosyncratic and unmeasured effects of each presidency with the lament “so much for beauty” (*ibid.*).

⁴ Mueller cites Kenneth Waltz as the originator of the idea that the public will “rally behind their chief executive” (1973: 208) during crises, but he is the first to our knowledge to use the term “rally round the flag” to describe it. As best we can tell, the term comes from a well-known Civil War song.

⁵ Events had to be international, to involve the U.S. and particularly the president directly, and to be “specific, dramatic, and sharply focused” (1973: 209).

⁶ However, he honestly notes that coding his economic variable so that only increases in unemployment and not decreases could affect approval was “the only way the data can be made to come out ‘right’” (1973: 215).

⁷ Mueller found that approval declined during the Korean War, but not significantly during the Vietnam conflict.

Although his final model explained 86 percent of the variance in approval, Mueller pointed to several puzzles and paths for future research. First, he suggested that the rally variable could be expanded (1973: 238). He experimented with a domestic rally variable, a variable tapping scandals, and splitting events into positive and negative categories. Although he found these experiments unfruitful, he suggested that “more precise social, political, and economic indicators can be sought” (1970: 33). Second, he suggested that greater attention to individual presidents might prove beneficial. Eisenhower’s approval did not fit the coalition-of-minorities thesis and Mueller conjectured that something about him in particular may account for the finding. He argued, tongue in cheek, that “if a president wants to leave office a popular man, he should either (1) be Dwight Eisenhower, or (2) resign the day after inauguration” (1973: 233). He suggested that taking account of individual presidents’ attributes, like their style, integrity, competence, and “personal warmth,” might explain the Eisenhower phenomenon and other differences across administrations (1973: 233). He also suggested that future research examine different economic indicators, group differences, other officeholders, and executives in other countries.⁸ Finally, he points out that serial correlation plagues his analyses, noting that the Durbin-Watson statistic “reached at best only about .70” (1973: 233, n. 28). Impressively, subsequent research has taken up *all* of these puzzles, problems, and suggestions.

The initial reactions to Mueller’s work fill out the rest of the first wave. The two main reactions both addressed Mueller’s “coalitions of minorities” thesis, or more specifically, what it means to include a time counter in a time-series context. Stimson (1976) agreed that approval was trended, but argued that it drifted downward quadratically rather than linearly. Thus, approval immediately declines, but eventually bottoms out and near the end of the term approval rises again (although not to its original level). Stimson gave this decline a different substantive interpretation. He argued that it results from relatively uninformed citizens having exaggerated expectations of the president after a successful election campaign, and their inevitable disappointment after the president took office. The end-of-term boost, Stimson believed, simply indicates another build up of expectations as the reelection campaign begins.⁹

In sharp contrast, Kernell (1978: 521) rejected the view that time dominates approval and argued instead for the impact of “real events and conditions.” Time, Kernell

argued, “as a variable has no inherent meaning” and is simply a convenient statistical shorthand for real world forces, such as the economy, wars, Watergate, and international events (508). After operationalizing these factors in ways that “reflect more reasonable assumptions about the world,” he found approval responds to events and conditions rather than the march of time (521). Similarly, Monroe (1978) argued that Stimson underestimated the effects of economic variables via the use of a time counter. She found that when inflation and military expenditures are included in the model, and their effects estimated in appropriately nuanced ways, approval reacts to these “real world” indicators. Both articles tied approval to elements of the political and economic context and sought to measure and estimate their effects on approval more realistically, efforts that would continue in later waves.

The Second Wave—Advancements in Specification and Estimation

The second wave of research, published in the early to mid-1980s, took up many of the themes outlined in the first wave, attempting to specify more realistically the links between the economy, political events, and approval. Scholars used more sophisticated time series techniques in an effort to determine whether the effects Mueller and others observed were real or just artifacts. They tried to determine how long rally events (MacKuen 1983) and economic conditions affect approval (e.g., Norpoth and Yantek 1983). These efforts spurred methodological debates as scholars offered different model specifications and disagreed about the duration of effects, appropriate lag structures, functional forms, and estimation techniques. Not surprisingly, the period saw a significant advance in the technical nature of the field and many took note of the substantive implications of different statistical approaches (see Ostrom and Smith 1992 and Beck 1991 for summaries of different methods and their implications).¹⁰

Arguments about the duration of various effects were important because the question holds substantive implications. If effects have a relatively short duration, approval at any given time depends mostly on recent conditions, a “what have you done for me lately” assessment rather than a long-term summary evaluation. If effects are more durable, past conditions contribute to overall evaluations, making it more difficult to change approval and to use approval at any give time as an indicator of the public’s reaction to recent actions (MacKuen 1983).

In addition, scholars in the second wave responded to Mueller’s call for a more nuanced treatment of events. Many examined the effects of election campaigns, speeches and

⁸ We will not review the extensive literature on executive approval in other countries, but point to Paldam and Nannestad (1994) for a review. Several studies examine approval of Congress (e.g., Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997), the Supreme Court (e.g., Caldeira and Gibson 1992), state legislatures (Patterson, Ripley and Quinlan 1992), and governors and senators (see a special issue of *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* edited by Niemi, Beyle, and Sigelman (vol.2, no.3, Fall 2002) for six articles).

⁹ Mueller outlined almost identical disillusionment reasoning for the decay of approval over time, but ultimately argued that the coalition of minorities explanation fit the data best.

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that approval models have often been at the methodological frontier in political science. Although immediately discarded in favor of more advanced methods, Mueller (1970) points out that his use of multiple regression was relatively rare in political science.

other public appearances, domestic crises, significant domestic policy accomplishments, scandals and other events involving the president personally, such as the assassination attempt against Reagan (see especially Ostrom and Simon 1985 and MacKuen 1983). They found that domestic events affect approval and that events could boost or depress approval.¹¹

Two important theoretical developments mark the second wave. In both cases, Mueller's initial ideas were put into richer political context. First, scholars began to take account of presidents' incentives to gain and maintain approval. Although presidents may have limited control over the economy, they have both the power and the incentive to create dramatic symbolic events such as speeches, trips, legislative proposals, or even international engagements that boost approval (Ostrom and Job 1986; Ragsdale 1984; but see Simon and Ostrom 1989). By paying more explicit attention to the president's incentive structure and the public's attraction to drama, second wave studies made these models significantly more political and realistic.

Second, some scholars began to think more explicitly about approval at the individual-level. For example, Kernell and Hibbs (1981) and Hibbs, Rivers, and Vasilitos (1982a, 1982b) wrestled with the consequences of the way approval ratings are typically conceptualized and constructed. They took seriously the fact that approval ratings are *aggregations of individual opinions* rather than the opinion of an aggregate. Although data limitations often constrained second wave studies to analyzing aggregate data rather than modeling the individual-level responses directly, some scholars built explicitly micro-level theories and tested their implications for aggregate approval (e.g., Ostrom and Simon 1985; but see Kinder 1981 and Tedin 1986 for two analyses of individual-level data). Conceptualizing approval as an aggregation of individual opinions led some analysts to consider whether different partisan or class groups employed a different mix of considerations when evaluating the president (Tedin 1986; Hibbs, Rivers, and Vasilitos 1982a). Regardless, the distinctive feature of the second wave was an elaboration of the statistical technology used to estimate aggregate models of approval. This wave culminated with several definitive statements, MacKuen's (1983) treatment of "political drama," Hibbs, Rivers, and Vasilitos' (1982a, 1982b) analysis of the economic underpinnings of approval, and Ostrom and Simon's (1985) comprehensive model of approval and legislative success. Little more needed to be said.

By the mid-1980s, then, the presidential approval field had reached something of a standstill. Continued progress was being made, particularly as carefully conceived data collection efforts and increasingly sophisticated attention to design and method enriched our knowledge of the determinants of approval. However, Mueller's original claims largely drove the intellectual agenda.

The Third Wave—Media, Elites, Individuals, and a Heterogeneous Public

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, presidential approval studies experienced a renaissance, largely in response to the "new look" approach to public opinion (Sniderman 1993). The new look emphasizes the explicit efforts of politicians, parties, and other elites to shape and change political attitudes and behavior. Reflecting the new look perspective, scholars thought beyond the usual theoretical suspects, and considered how the media stand as an intervening force between presidents and the public, and how elite discourse about events and conditions shape public attitudes. This most recent wave of research also wrestles with heterogeneity, explicitly modeling group- and individual-level variations in approval.

Although Brody and Page (1975) cited media coverage as a significant influence on approval, this insight was seldom exploited until recently, when scholars emphasized media's capacity to shape individual reactions to events and economic conditions, thereby affecting aggregate approval (e.g., Nadeau et al. 1999; Goidel, Shields, and Peffley 1997; Mutz 1992, 1994; West 1991). Brody (1991) provided the clearest statement of the way media content shapes approval ratings. He constructed a media-based reinterpretation of empirical regularities like honeymoon periods and rally events (see also Callaghan and Virtanen 1993), arguing that public reactions to events and new presidents were best understood via a two-step process, as events are first interpreted and evaluated among opinion elites, then these interpretations and assessments are transmitted to the public via the mass media. For example, Brody argued that honeymoon periods result from an overwhelmingly positive balance of media coverage at the beginning of a term as most elites tend to offer little criticism, withholding judgment until the president begins to take controversial actions. Once this happens, opponents offer criticism, media coverage becomes more negative, and public support falls as a result. He explained the rally phenomenon similarly.

One psychological process by which media coverage influences public attitudes—priming—has also become an important part of the approval literature. According to Miller and Krosnick (2000: 301), "priming occurs when media attention to an issue causes people to place special weight on it when constructing evaluations of overall presidential job performance." The notion of priming rests on the claim that when individuals make a choice, they rely on salient and accessible information. This tends to be information emphasized "by the prevailing economic, social, and political conditions of the time," which in turn are generally portrayed via mass media (Krosnick and Kinder 1990: 500; see also Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

Media coverage can change the ingredients of presidential support by making some considerations more salient or accessible than others (Iyengar and Kinder 1987) and salient considerations affect approval more than other considerations do (Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995). For example,

¹¹ Competing event coding schemes, however, became a continuing point of controversy, which we discuss below.

Krosnick and Kinder (1990) found that opinions about foreign affairs had greater influence on approval in the wake of Iran-Contra revelations. Similarly, Krosnick and Brannon (1993) found that evaluations of Bush's handling of foreign affairs had greater influence on overall evaluations after the Gulf War than they had previously (see also Goidel, Shields, and Peffley 1997; Peffley, Langley, and Goidel 1995).

The priming literature raises an important question: does the public hold constant expectations of presidents over time? In statistical terms, does one model account for approval at all times? Mueller initially raised this question and concluded that models must take the idiosyncrasies of each president into account. However, Mueller, like almost all after him, estimated a single coefficient for events and the economy, assuming that their effects did not vary over time. Some argue explicitly that the public holds stable expectations across presidencies. Ostrom and Simon (1985: 336) argue that "all presidents are expected to maintain peace, prosperity, domestic tranquility, and both the authority and integrity of the office" (emphasis added). On the other hand, the priming literature finds that they can vary with current conditions. New estimation techniques that allow for time varying coefficients (Wood 2000) or data sets that pool cross sections over time (Gronke 1999) may help solve this puzzle.

History also raises this question on occasion. For example, despite enduring "the worst recession since the Great Depression," a foray into Beirut that cost 265 American lives, a host of scandals involving appointees, and the Iran-Contra Affair, Reagan's approval remained high, resulting in claims that "he is The Man in the Teflon Suit; nothing sticks to him" (Weisman 1984: 39). It seemed that the conventional wisdom regarding public approval no longer applied. Similarly, flying in the face of research finding that approval declines in response to scandal (e.g., Norpoth 1996; Ragsdale 1987; Ostrom and Simon 1985), Bill Clinton's approval remained high during and after the Lewinsky scandal and impeachment, again suggesting that he was evaluated by different criteria. The spectacular rise and fall of Bush the elder's approval after the Gulf War and his son's dramatic and long lasting boost after September 11 also seem to challenge general explanation. Can a single model account for all these presidencies?

Remarkably, the answer seems to be "yes." The same factors that accounted for variations in approval from 1948 through 1980 continue to operate both before and after. For example, Ostrom and Simon (1989) found that Reagan was not made of Teflon after all. The elder Bush's approval followed expected patterns (Clarke, Rapkin, and Stewart 1994). Clinton's approval fits well within the findings of extant research (Newman 2002). Baum and Kernell (2001) even found that the standard set of indicators account for public approval of Franklin Roosevelt. At least some factors consistently affect approval across a wide variety of conditions and presidencies.

Beyond paying greater attention to media and elites, scholars in the third wave explicitly incorporated aspects of

the mass public into their models, including individuals' own assessments of the political and economic environment rather than objective indicators of those environments. This marks a significant departure from the first two waves, which relied on aggregate and objective measures. Several studies, including Brody's, unpack the public's reaction to rally events, examining exactly who rallies—what types of people change from disapproval to approval. They find much more than blind patriotism is behind rallies.¹² In fact, panel studies with waves sandwiching a rally event (Edwards and Swenson 1997; Peffley, Langley, and Goidel 1995) and time series analyses disaggregated by partisanship and education (Baum 2002; James and Rioux 1998) find that individual-level predispositions and attention to media coverage of events shape attitudes toward the event and the president.¹³

Many have taken a similar approach to study the link between economic conditions and approval. Rather than measuring aggregate responses to objective economic indicators, studies examined perceptions of the economy and their links to presidential approval (e.g., Norpoth 1996; Clarke and Stewart 1994; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992). Many of the major disputes in this period shift from the correct statistical specification of the *effects* of the economy to the correct psychological foundations of the way the public *thinks* about the economy. Most notably, scholars sparred over whether individuals are "peasants or bankers," relying on retrospective or prospective assessments of economic conditions when evaluating the president (Norpoth 1996; Clarke and Stewart 1994; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992, 1996).

These studies posited different views of how individuals connect their perceptions of the economy to evaluations of the president. One side argues that the public, in the aggregate, acts remarkably sophisticated, punishing or rewarding presidents based on its expectations of future economic performance (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992). Although a sophisticated public defies mountains of research (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson argue that the public lets economic experts make forecasts, which media sources broadcast, and the attentive portion of the public responds, adjusting approval in line with expectations. On the other side, scholars argue that the public evaluates current and past conditions, punishing or rewarding the president accordingly (Norpoth 1996; Clarke and Stewart 1994). As Norpoth (1996: 777) put it, "the requirements for that kind of behavior are far more modest regarding both the average citizens' capabilities and motivations to follow politics." Although

¹² See Edwards (1983) and Hibbs, Rivers, and Vasilitos (1982a) for earlier examinations of partisan differences in response to Watergate and rally events.

¹³ In addition to disaggregating approval by partisanship, James and Rioux (1998) further enrich the study of the rally phenomenon by incorporating insights from international relations theory and taking into account the costs of reactions to international crises.

the precise nature of the links between economic elites, economic news, mass perceptions of the economy, and evaluations of the president remain under debate (e.g., Nadeau et al. 1999), explicitly specifying these links is a significant step forward. All sides of the debate offer a richer view of the American public than that offered in early studies of approval. Rather than models of a public that almost mechanically responds to economic conditions, these works offer more explicit models of the public's interaction with the economic and media environment.

In addition to taking perceptions of rally events and the economy into account, several studies incorporated micro-foundations in a more direct way—they estimated individual-level models. Although studying approval at the individual-level differs significantly from the aggregate, discovering that individual-level analyses largely corroborate the findings of aggregate-level studies lends credence to our general understanding of approval. Individual-level studies consistently conclude that economic conditions and perceptions powerfully affect approval (e.g., Gronke 1999; Gilens 1988; Ostrom and Simon 1988), as do assessments of the way presidents have handled significant international and domestic crises, i.e., rally events (e.g., Greene 2001; Edwards and Swenson 1997; Peffley, Langley, and Goidel 1995). We expect continued efforts to compare and bridge individual and aggregate models of approval.

Beyond corroborating aggregate-level findings, however, individual-level studies have pointed to important factors that affect approval, which aggregate studies cannot isolate. First, these studies are better able to take predispositions like partisanship into account (Fischle 2000). The unsurprising effects of partisanship have important implications. The weakening of partisan ties among the public, ties that stabilize individuals' evaluations, may have made aggregate approval more volatile over time and individual evaluations more uncertain at any given time (Gronke and Brehm 2002; Gronke 1999). Second, individual-level studies find that policy attitudes affect approval (e.g., Gronke 1999; Gilens 1988; see Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002 for a discussion of policy attitudes and approval at the aggregate level). Third, individual-level studies point to the significant role assessments of the president's competence and integrity play in overall evaluations (e.g., Newman 2003; Greene 2001).

Individual level theorizing also highlights significant heterogeneity within the public, raising the possibility that variables have different effects on different segments of the population. This is hardly a new idea, as Mueller disaggregated approval by partisanship in his book (1973: ch. 10; see also Monroe and Laughlin 1983 and Hibbs, Rivers, and Vasilitos 1982a). However, there seems to be renewed attention to differences across the public as recent work has examined heterogeneity across gender, racial, and party groups, across information levels, and at the level of individual attitudes.

Examining group differences in approval provides three important insights that aggregate studies easily overlook. First, studies examining group differences can point to the

sources of those differences and how these differences relate to the political and social positions that these groups occupy in American society (Newman 2003). Group differences can result from two sources, differences in the *levels* of the independent variables (e.g. blacks may perceive, or experience, a different economy than whites) or differences in the *weights* that they attach to variables, or both. For example, in their individual-level studies of approval by men and women, Gilens (1988) and Newman (2003) conclude differences in attitudes (levels of independent variables) explained much of the "approval gender gap." However, Gilens (1988) also found that women weighed their more liberal defense spending views more heavily when evaluating the President (in this case, Reagan) than did men. Furthermore, Clarke et al. (2000) found that approval among men responds more to pocketbook considerations, while approval among women responds more to sociotropic assessments.

Other studies similarly find that independent variables have different effects across different groups. For example, Ostrom and Simon (1988), using three panel waves in 1980, found that news coverage of the Iran Hostage Crisis drove Democrats' approval, inflation was the strongest influence on Republicans' assessments, and unemployment influenced independents. Others have found differential reactions across income and partisan groups (Baum and Kernell 2001; Ragsdale 1987), while Dawson (1994) found that African Americans respond more to economic conditions, particularly unemployment, than do whites. Future work should continue to examine subgroup differences in the weights that groups attach to various economic and political considerations.

Second, focusing on differences across the public can help to isolate stability and change among the public. Not everyone in the public is equally likely to change his or her evaluation (Kernell and Hibbs 1981). Focusing on *who* changes and *why* will provide insight into approval at the aggregate level. For example, Tatalovich and Gitelson (1990) found that out-partisans who initially support the president fall into disapproval over time, leading to a decline in approval over the term.¹⁴ Further, Tedin's (1986) analysis of panel data found that out-partisans were the most unstable in their opinions (see also Ostrom and Simon 1988; Ragsdale 1987).

Other approval studies focused on whether the most sophisticated (Miller and Krosnick 2000; Krosnick and Brannon 1993) or the least sophisticated (Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Tedin 1986) are most likely to alter their evaluations of the president, and what the implications are for the quality of the public's judgments. These studies have primarily explored whether priming is more powerful at different levels of political knowledge. Some found that the least knowledgeable were most susceptible to priming

¹⁴ Again, Mueller outlined almost identical reasoning for the decay of approval over time, but argued that the coalition of minorities explanation fit the data best.

(Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Iyengar et al. 1984), while others found no knowledge-based differences (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Most recently, Krosnick and Brannon (1993) and Miller and Krosnick (2000) found that priming is most likely among those with greater stores of political knowledge. While previous work suggested that political novices were helpless against the tide of media coverage, more recent work argues that considerable sophistication is required to “interpret, store, and later retrieve and make inferences from news stories” (Miller and Krosnick 2000: 312). The responsiveness of presidential approval to elite and media priming, the relative stability or instability of approval compared to other political opinions, and differences between sophisticated and less sophisticated respondents remain open questions. Nevertheless, raising these questions has enriched the study of presidential approval.

The Development of the Three Waves

We believe four factors drove this broad trend toward richer, more contextualized models, and we suspect that many of these factors will continue to shape the research agenda in the future. First, as already mentioned, events of the past 30 years forced scholars to extend, elaborate, and challenge conventional wisdom. For example, George H. W. Bush’s rapid rise and decline in the polls during and after the Gulf War prompted studies of priming (e.g., Goidel, Shields, and Peffley 1997; Krosnick and Brannon 1993) and volatility (Gronke and Brehm 2002; Brace and Hinckley 1992). Likewise, many scrambled to make sense of Clinton’s rising approval in the face of scandal (e.g., Shah et al. 2002; Fischle 2000; Miller 1999; Rozell and Wilcox 1999; Zaller 1998).¹⁵ The simple passage of history will continue to force the literature forward.

Second, changes in the field of public opinion—the emergence of the “new look”—encouraged scholars to consider political competition, elite discourse, media coverage, and heterogeneity in their studies of presidential approval, thus pointing the way toward the individual-level and group-centric analyses of approval cited above.

Third, rapid advances in methodological techniques and the accumulation of richer data sources undoubtedly stimulated, and were stimulated by, these trends in opinion and approval research. The first wave’s focus on aggregate approval was in large part due to the availability of a sufficiently long, systematic, and consistent Gallup time series. While some disaggregated data were available as early as Mueller’s (1973) writing, disaggregated time series data and cross-sectional studies only recently became available. Today, the Gallup time series, disaggregated by major demographics and party identification, is easily obtainable in both printed (Ragsdale 1998) and electronic form (the Gallup

and Roper archives). Several individual-level surveys have built up considerable time series. The National Election Studies began to ask a presidential approval item in 1972. Unlike the Gallup survey, the NES allowed respondents to “strongly” approve and disapprove from 1980 on, providing a scale with twice as many response categories. In addition, NYT/CBS polls, administered roughly on a monthly basis, have included a presidential approval item since 1976 and are available. These data have not been tapped to their full potential to study presidential approval.¹⁶

Fourth, methodological advances—the growing popularity of experimental and quasi-experimental research designs, the increasing sophistication of time series analysis, and the development and popularization of discrete response models—have enabled scholars to model processes more precisely and have strengthened our inferences about cause and effect. Experimental techniques have led to greater attention to the individual-level processes underpinning evaluations, helping us understand public reactions to rally events and the assignment of reward and blame for economic change.¹⁷ Time series advances have allowed scholars to test when and for how long independent variables affect approval.¹⁸ Discrete response models (e.g., binomial, ordered, and heteroskedastic probit and logit) make individual-level modeling of approval feasible (Gronke 1999). Students of presidential approval have a far more varied set of data with which they can explore various questions and a dramatically more sophisticated toolkit with which to test their ideas.

PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

These innovations have been far more than data-fitting exercises. Presidential approval research speaks to larger

¹⁵ Many of these pieces fit nicely into the third wave, focusing on individual level changes, emphasizing media coverage and elite debate, and examining differences in reactions across groups.

¹⁶ Approval data are readily available over the worldwide web and electronic databases. Various websites like pollingreport.com offer aggregate-level results. The “polls and surveys” section of Lexis-Nexis can be used to accumulate a large number of survey observations, although only at the aggregate level. Gallup recently announced a feature, available to subscribers to the “Tuesday Briefing,” which will allow downloading of individual level survey data. The Roper Center’s “Poll” service has long been a way to access individual Gallup studies, although the cost to assemble a large number of individual polls can be prohibitive. Scholars and students affiliated with the Inter University Consortium for Political and Social Research can obtain NES surveys, as well as media polls (ABC, NY Times). Individual level Harris surveys, from the 1960s-1990s, are available at the University of North Carolina.

¹⁷ For instance, Krosnick and Brannon (1993) took advantage of well-placed panel surveys before and after the Gulf War to develop a quasi-experimental design to assess the way the political environment shapes the criteria of evaluation. Other studies (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Miller and Krosnick 2000) set up explicitly experimental designs to assess the degree to which media coverage may prime the public to evaluate the president in particular ways, or how the State of the Union boosts approval (Druckman and Holmes 2003).

¹⁸ E.g., Box-Steffensmeier and Smith (1998, 1996); DeBoef and Granato (1997); see also a special edition of *Electoral Studies* (Lebo 2000) and volume 4 of *Political Analysis* (Freeman 1992), which summarizes various techniques.

questions rooted in democratic theory. Does the president have any power to improve his standing? The answer to this question, positive or negative, has implications for democracy. In a perfect world, if higher approval means greater power, the public would reward the president for meeting realistic and appropriate expectations. Then the president would have an incentive to meet those expectations and would benefit from doing so. However, if the public holds the president accountable for outcomes that he has little control over, or has unrealistically high expectations, then the president's power depends on the whims of the economy and history, setting up the presidency for almost inevitable failure. On the other hand, if presidents have *too much* control over approval, they could boost it without meeting appropriate expectations, manipulating their way to power.

Scholars have tried to assess the president's ability to control approval since the first wave's debate over the decline of support. Mueller, who argued that presidents face the "inexorable descent" of their approval, offered a bleak view of the presidency, an office almost doomed to failure (Mueller 1973: 213). Similarly, Stimson's analysis led him to suspect that "presidential approval may be almost wholly independent of the President's behavior in office, a function largely of inevitable forces associated with time" (1976: 1). The only way presidents *can* shape approval is by running for reelection and "using their office to control events, *particularly symbolic events*" to boost approval (1978: 10, emphasis in original).

For his part, Kernell contended that presidents are judged on the basis of "outcomes in the form of current events and conditions" rather than what the president actually does in office (1978: 515). Kernell argued that holding presidents responsible for outcomes "should prompt the system's most powerful actor to engage in problem solving" (*ibid.*). Others, however, would later argue that holding the president responsible for outcomes he can do little to control leads inevitably to public disillusionment and cynicism, and ultimately, presidential failure (e.g., Waterman, Wright, and St. Clair 1999; Lowi 1985).

Studies in the third wave offer more hope for the president, finding that perceptions of the political and economic environment, not just objective indicators, drive approval. Perceptions do not always perfectly follow objective indicators (e.g., Nadeau et al. 1999), and can be cultivated more easily than objective indicators can be altered. Furthermore, the priming literature suggests that presidents may have an even subtler tool. Rather than changing citizens' minds, presidents may be able to change how they make them up. If presidents can shape media coverage, which they sometimes succeed in doing (e.g., Edwards and Wood 1999), they may be able to affect approval indirectly.¹⁹ Thus, public expectations may be met more easily than previously thought.

However, these features also hold darker prospects. Faced with impossible expectations, presidents may be left little choice but to create the image that they are fulfilling expectations, using the powers of office to stage symbolic events, public relations derbies to effect favorable perceptions, resulting in nothing more than an "image-is-everything presidency" (Waterman, St. Clair, and Wright 1999; see also Brace and Hinckley 1992). In the extreme, some fear the possibility that the president may use his power in the international sphere in hopes of creating a rally event to divert attention from other less favorable considerations, trying to induce the so-called "wag the dog" effect (see James and Rioux 1998 for an overview of literature on the "diversionary hypothesis").

In the end, it appears that presidents are neither entirely at the mercy of outside forces nor in total command of their approval. As usual, the truth is somewhere in the middle. Sorting out when and to what extent the president shapes approval and under what conditions the public resists presidential efforts to boost approval will provide insight into the nature of presidential power and the character and quality of accountability in the American system.

QUESTION AND PUZZLES FOR THE FUTURE

Although the general flow toward greater contextualization has taught us much, this trajectory has left important questions unanswered. First, who or what determines the criteria the public uses to evaluate presidents? The first two waves took these criteria as largely exogenous, while the priming literature of the third wave suggests that they are endogenous to the political, economic, social, and media environments. Extant literature does not tell us much about the conditions under which the public will resist priming, but there appear to be some. For example, in his analysis of the Lewinsky scandal, Zaller (1998: 185) argued that the public ultimately returns to "bottom line politics" and is concerned with "political substance." As he put it, "however poorly informed, psychologically driven, and 'mass mediated' public opinion may be, it is capable of recognizing and focusing on its own conception of what matters" (1998: 186). Still, the bases of expectations about presidential performance remain surprisingly unexplored (see, for example, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's 1995 penetrating analysis of Congressional approval).

Second, while research to date has demonstrated the importance of the two pillars of presidential approval—the economy and foreign affairs—little research has considered whether and how the changing international environment may affect presidential politics, presidential approval, and ultimately the power of the presidency. In the economic realm, globalization and economic interdependence has reduced the ability of the president to control macroeconomic forces (if the president ever had such control in the first place). If American economic conditions are deeply affected by a regional recession, trading disputes, or the crash of a foreign stock market, will the president be held accountable?

¹⁹ For example, just days after revelations of the Lewinsky scandal, Bill Clinton tried to refocus the nation's attention during his State of the Union address, not once mentioning the scandal, a strategy that may have worked to boost his approval (e.g., Zaller 1998).

Perhaps future models of approval will have to include international, as well as national, economic conditions.

Another revolutionary change has taken place in foreign affairs. In the last decade, since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. military has been engaged in frequent, low-level international conflicts. Under the conventional model, these should result in a series of “rally events.” Foreign affairs, however, have always had something of a contradictory impact on approval. International conflict is supposed to boost approval, even if just temporarily, while ongoing conflict tends to undermine it. This provides little insight into how we should expect the public to react to military activity in the Gulf War, Somalia, Haiti, or at the time of this writing, possibly Iraq. Does the public receive these differently than peacekeeping missions in Kosovo or Bosnia, or an ongoing, undefined war on terrorism? There are some indications that the public does see some nuance in foreign affairs. The public, both at the mass and elite levels, have displayed far less consensus with respect to foreign affairs in the post Cold War era (Holsti 1996). Thus, presidential action in the international sphere may produce more divided responses than has historically been the case. To our knowledge, there have been few scholarly attempts to examine the impact of these changes on presidential approval, beyond simply coding these conflicts as foreign policy “events” (e.g., Gronke and Brehm 2002; Brace and Hinckley 1993). If nothing else, these changes in the economy and foreign affairs open up a rich new avenue of research for the next ten years.

Third, while we are considering revolutions, future research must be sensitive to the changing media universe. Mass media are undergoing tremendous change, as newspapers merge and disappear, cable television stations proliferate, and the Internet continues to revolutionize the way information is disseminated and viewed. The rapid diffusion of the *Starr Report* provided just a glimpse of this future: information that disseminates at “warp speed” during the 24-hour news cycle (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999). How this may affect the president’s ability to marshal public opinion remains unclear. Some have begun to tackle this question, finding that the growth of cable television has diminished the president’s ability to dominate the news (Baum and Kernell 1999). Furthermore, trust in media has decreased, potentially altering its affects on approval. Miller and Krosnick (2000) found that trusted media sources were more effective in priming viewers (see also Druckman 2001). Future research must take these changes into account.

Fourth, most studies have contextualized approval in different ways, resulting in a patchwork of increasingly rich models that do not fit together easily. We have surveyed studies of individual-, group-, and aggregate-level approval, some of which focus on economics, others on dramatic events, and others on media effects. Future research will have to bring together the various features of media behavior, the economy, events, presidential drama, and individuals’ predispositions and long-term expectations. Furthermore, it will have to deal with significant heterogeneity across the public. This work of

synthesis will prove difficult but is essential for progress toward a general model of approval.

Fifth, most studies have ignored problems of simultaneity bias that often creep into analyses of presidential approval and presidential governance. Analyses of single wave surveys certainly suffer from this as individuals may first decide whether they approve of the president’s job performance, and then use that judgment to inform their other responses. In addition, some have argued that presidents are more likely to score legislative victories when their approval ratings are high, and then these same accomplishments enhance their approval ratings (see Ostrom and Simon 1985 for an example of dealing with this issue).²⁰ From a very different direction, Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) argue that the popular view of the presidency and the polls is backwards. Superficially, it seems like presidents are slaves to public opinion, but Jacobs and Shapiro demonstrate that, in fact, presidents have a specific political agenda, and use the polls as a guide to achieving that agenda. Often thought to be a data issue, these examples show that simultaneity is more broadly an issue of research design and causal interpretations. To date, no simple solution presents itself. It seems that careful conceptual and theoretical thinking, along with using a variety of data sources and analytical techniques, are the best strategies available.

Finally, we think the field would benefit from greater unity in data and measures. We have reviewed a large number of studies and very few of them draw upon the same set of survey data or event series. Each new scholar seemingly builds the dataset anew. Selection of events is especially inconsistent across studies.²¹ We realize that different substantive questions may call for different operational approaches, but we echo Mueller’s initial call for developing better measures to capture political realities. 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. Further, a unified and available dataset, containing Gallup, Harris, and New York Times polls, would be a boon to the field.

In the end, we think much has been gained by 30 years of pushing, refining, and contextualizing the basic arguments Mueller advanced. Our understanding of how and why the economy, events, time, individual citizens, and individual presidents affect approval is more rich, realistic, and comprehensive. Future research must continue to deepen our understanding, bringing together insights that currently remain somewhat in isolation. Doing so will lead to greater

²⁰ This particular issue is moot if approval really does not affect the president’s power in congress (e.g., Bond and Fleisher 1990).

²¹ Comparing two careful operational rules for identifying events (Brace and Hinckley 1992; Ostrom and Simon 1985; Ostrom and Smith 1992) is illustrative. Over the 1953-1988 period that each study examined, the Ostrom, Simon, and Smith strategy identified 122 events and the Brace and Hinckley strategy identified 98. *Only 42 events were identified by both strategies, less than half of the events identified.* Further, 17 of the 42 commonly identified events were coded as affecting approval in different months.

understanding of that “unfocused” but politically important question of whether individuals approve or disapprove of the president’s performance in office (Neustadt 1980: 81).

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