

Trial By Poll

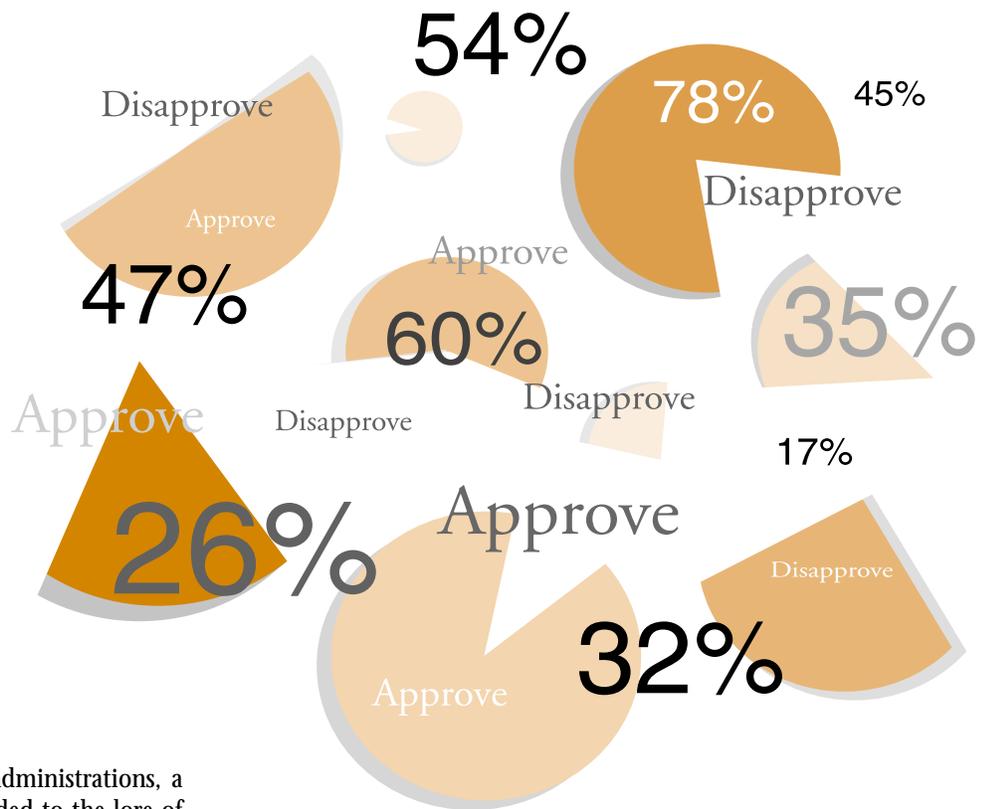
Presidential approval ratings and election outcomes

Over the last several presidential administrations, a new ritual has gradually been added to the lore of American politics, a process best described as Trial by Poll. The ritual begins early in the first term of a newly-elected president. Very shortly after he takes the oath of office—often within a matter of days—some major survey organization will release the results of a poll that claims to measure the new president’s job approval rating. And then, on an almost weekly basis for the next four years, we are given regular updates on this figure.

Since President Bush has only just begun his run through the gauntlet, we must go back to the earliest days of Bill Clinton’s presidency to observe this process in all its garish absurdity. By the end of Clinton’s first one hundred days in office, the standard presidential job approval question—“Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as president?”—had already been asked in 33 different national polls, by eight different survey organizations. In case that wasn’t enough, there were 45 other questions asked during the same period that sought to measure what the public thought about Bill Clinton’s performance in a variety of specific issue areas, ranging from “the economy” and “foreign affairs” to “health care” and “the situation in Bosnia.”

Having collected all these data, it was perhaps inevitable that someone would try to make use of them. By early June—still less than six months into Clinton’s first term—there appeared a remarkable spate of stories, all of which declared the Clinton presidency to be dead or dying, largely on the grounds that his approval ratings were lower than those registered by any other president at a similar point in his first term.

William G. Mayer is associate professor of political science, Northeastern University.



By William G. Mayer

The presidential approval question was pioneered by the Gallup Poll in the late 1930s; it has been asked in its present form since the mid-1940s. And on the basis of these fifty-plus years of experience, there is little doubt that the question is, in general, a valid, reliable, and meaningful survey instrument. As many scholars have shown over the last thirty years, studying presidential approval ratings can tell us a good deal about public views of the presidency, the impact of economic and foreign policy events on public opinion, media effects on mass attitudes, and a variety of other topics.

What concerns me here is the fact that, in recent presidencies, so much attention has been focused on this question at such an early point in a president’s term—and that so much significance has been attached to the results. Current practice notwithstanding, there has been, so far as I can tell, no real effort to determine just how meaningful early approval ratings are. At what point in a president’s term do his approval ratings become a reliable predictor of the next presidential election?

It is now well-accepted that presidential approval ratings, when taken shortly before a presidential election, can serve as a very good indicator of how the election will turn out. What needs to be emphasized, however, is that when forecasting models use presidential approval ratings to predict an election they invariably take these ratings from polls conducted during the summer of the election year. These polls, in other words, were in the field no more than about five months before the actual balloting. By that time, the voters have generally had a chance to observe the incumbent adminis-

tration in action for almost three and a half years. They know the general tenor of the president's policies, his personal strengths and weaknesses, and how capably he has filled the numerous demands and expectations that confront the modern presidency. Equally important, his policies (or lack thereof) have had some reasonable chance to be implemented and take effect. Where early in his term a president might be able to blame a foreign mishap or a bad economy on his predecessor, such excuses will

“We must go back to the earliest days of Bill Clinton’s presidency to observe this process in all its garish absurdity.”

wear increasingly thin the longer the chief executive is in office. But when do approval ratings acquire this kind of solidity? More specifically, at what point during a president's four years in office do his approval ratings begin to say something meaningful about his party's chances of success in the next presidential election?

To answer this question, I have calculated the president's approval rating at the end of every quarter for each of the last thirteen presidential terms (i.e., for every year from 1949 through 2000). When one correlates these figures with the vote eventually achieved by the incumbent president's party, a striking pattern emerges. It shows that through most of a president's term in office, his approval rating is, at best, only weakly related to the outcome of the next election. As a predictor of who will win the next election, current approval ratings, for a president's first three years in office, do only a little better than flipping a coin. Not until March of the fourth year do approval ratings provide a reasonably good forecast about the verdict the voters will render.

There are a number of ways one might seek to “improve” or “correct” these predictions—but none of them makes any difference to the basic point just made. For example, one might argue that we should exclude the 1961-64 and 1973-76 presidential terms from the analysis, on the grounds that two different men occupied the White House during each of these four-year intervals (John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson in the first case, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford in the second), and that the second came into office with a substantially higher approval rating than the final one recorded by his predecessor.

But with these two terms excluded, the predictive value of early approval ratings actually falls even lower. Even if we limit ourselves to the six instances where a newly-elected president served a complete four-year term and then sought

re-election, the conclusion remains the same. Early approval ratings still tell us little or nothing about the outcome of the next election. In these six presidencies, in fact, there is some evidence that the relationship between early approval ratings and election results is actually negative. Presidents who had comparatively low approval ratings early in their term were actually more likely to get re-elected.

The moral of this story should be clear by now: presidential approval ratings from early in a president's term are not an especially meaningful piece of information. If one survey organization or another wishes to take a few early soundings on this matter, fine. Academic analysts, in particular, generally need a baseline against which subsequent changes can be assessed. And when cumulated over a six- or twelve-month time span, the general trend in approval ratings can provide one—though definitely not the only—source of feedback for the incumbent administration as to how its performance is playing with the American people. But the current obsession with presidential approval ratings vastly exceeds what academic analysts—or anybody else—could possibly make use of.

For presidents, this finding offers both good and bad news. On the one side, it suggests that presidents who struggle during their first months or even years in office need not run up the white flag. If low approval ratings perhaps offer some cause for concern, they should not be a source of despair. The claim that Bill Clinton's presidency was in mortal danger because his early approval ratings were low was frankly ridiculous.

But these results also contain a useful warning for presidents who are more favorably situated. High approval ratings, especially at the beginning of a president's term, are no guarantee of continued success. I am particularly intrigued by the finding, admittedly based on only six cases, that for first-term presidents, the relationship between early approval ratings and the results of the next election is actually negative. For it suggests that early popularity may have an important downside, tempting presidents and their advisors to rest on their laurels and ignore the real work before them.

For a president intent on getting re-elected, the best thing to do is create and implement well-designed programs and try to solve the nation's problems to the best of his or her ability. And it is precisely these tasks that are likely to be neglected by a president who spends most of the first two or three years in office comfortably gloating about high approval ratings, or who cautiously scrutinizes each new poll for advice about what to do next. An excessive concern with short-term poll results is likely to create long-term problems. ●

The author would like to thank Lois Timms-Ferrara and Amy Logan for their help with this article.