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**RESEARCH NOTE:  
WHAT DO THOSE EARLY PRESIDENTIAL  
APPROVAL RATINGS TELL US?**

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## ABSTRACT

During the last several presidencies, a great deal of political and media attention has been focused on the approval ratings a president achieves in the very earliest part of his administration. Yet, no evidence has ever been produced to show that early approval ratings are a reliable predictor of the public's long-term verdict about presidential performance, or of how well the incumbent president's party will do in the next presidential election. This article seeks to examine these issues, by looking at the correlation between approval ratings and the outcome of the next election at seven different points in a president's term of office. The results indicate that early approval ratings provide no information at all about the incumbent's success or failure in the next election. Approval ratings do not become a reliable predictor of election outcomes until the summer of the election year itself.

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.

Though a variety of different survey questions are employed in this modern version of water torture, far and away the most commonly cited is a question that has been asked regularly by the Gallup Poll since the mid-1940s: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way \_\_\_\_\_ is handling his job as president?"<sup>1</sup> Let me stipulate, to begin with, that this question is, in general, a valid, reliable, and meaningful survey instrument. As many scholars have shown over the last twenty years, studying presidential approval ratings can tell us much 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 (see especially Mueller 1973; Kernell

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<sup>1</sup>Variants of the question were asked as early as 1937. See Edwards and Gallup 1990, 185-86.

presidential election (see Sigelman 1979; Brody and Sigelman 1983; and Brody 1991). The easiest way to establish this relationship is with a regression equation of the form:

$$\text{INCUMBENT VOTE} = a + b * \text{PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL}$$

The independent variable here is the approval rating of the incumbent president, as measured during June of the election year.<sup>2</sup> The dependent variable is the percentage of the total popular vote received by the presidential candidate of the incumbent president's party.<sup>3</sup> (In seven of the last eleven elections, the incumbent president himself was that candidate.)

Using data for the eleven presidential elections held between 1952 and 1992, the equation turns out to be:

$$\text{VOTE} = 26.87 + 0.47 * \text{PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL} \quad (1)$$

(0.10)

$$R^2 = .70$$

$$\text{Adjusted } R^2 = .66$$

The prediction obviously isn't perfect (it can be sig-

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<sup>2</sup>I use the June figures because in many presidential election years, this was the last month before the November voting in which Gallup asked the question. As indicated below, most scholars who use presidential approval ratings to predict presidential election outcomes also use results from the early summer polls. See, for example, Sigelman 1979; Abramowitz 1988; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1992.

<sup>3</sup>None of the conclusions reached in this article is altered if one uses the incumbent's share of the two-party vote as the dependent variable.

vember balloting. By that time, the voters have generally had a chance to observe the incumbent administration in action for almost three and a half years. They know the general tenor of the president's policies, his personal strengths and weaknesses, how capably he has filled the numerous demands and expectations that confront the modern presidency. Equally important, his policies (or lack thereof) have now been given some reasonable chance to be implemented and take effect. Where early in his term a president may be able to blame a war or a bad economy on his predecessor, such excuses will wear increasingly thin the longer a president is in office. After three and a half years in office, if not a good deal sooner, the voters are likely to decide that they elected a president to solve problems, not to shift responsibility elsewhere.

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 examine this question, I have collected presidential approval ratings at seven different points during each of the last eleven presidential terms:<sup>5</sup> in June of the pres-

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<sup>5</sup>I use the word "term" here to refer to the period of time in between presidential elections. Thus, 1961-64 is treated as a single term even though John Kennedy was president during most of the first three years and Lyndon Johnson served from November, 1963, to January, 1965.



TABLE 1  
 Correlation between Presidential Approval  
 Ratings and Election Results at Seven  
 Points in a Presidential Term, 1949-1992

	<u>All eleven presidential terms</u>	<u>Excluding the 1961-64 and 1973-76 terms</u>	<u>Newly-elected presidents who served a full four-year term then sought re-election</u>
June of 1st year	.08	-.26	-.44
January of 2nd year	.15	-.11	-.37
June of 2nd year	.28	.09	-.20
January of 3rd year	.19	-.03	-.29
June of 3rd year	.19	.12	-.04
January of 4th year	.50	.37	.33
June of 4th year	.84**	.80**	.85*
(N)	(11)	(9)	(5)

\* p < .05  
 \*\* p < .01

Note: Election results are the percentage of the total popular vote won by the candidate of the incumbent president's party. Approval ratings are taken from the Gallup Poll.

in the public opinion profession, for the media, and for presidents.

Over the last sixty years, the best practitioners of survey research have generally believed that their responsibility was not just to conduct polls and analyze data, but to help contribute to and inform the public dialogue about polling. And though progress has been slow on many fronts, those politicians, reporters, and interest group leaders who use polls regularly do seem to have acquired an increasingly sophisticated understanding of their complexities and abuses: the need for proper sampling practices, the nature of sampling error, the important effects of question wording, and so on.

To that list of polling pitfalls, I would recommend adding another: the survey question that, although properly worded, is asked at a time when mass attitudes are insufficiently crystallized, and which therefore tells one little of long-term significance about the disposition of public opinion. For example, it has now become widely acknowledged that questions which ask people how they intend to vote in presidential primaries are highly unstable, being anchored by neither party identification nor extensive information about the candidates (see, for example, Isaacs 1972; Crespi 1988; and Cantril 1991). Such questions are still asked, but the best reporters and commentators generally recognize that the results can change quite quickly, and that a candi-

transitory images with a much larger significance, and pretend that a first-year approval rating says something meaningful about the ultimate success or failure of a particular presidency.

For those in the media, the clear implication is that they ought to pay a lot less attention to early polls that seek to measure presidential approval and disapproval. To spend so much time worrying about a president's approval rating when he has been in office for only six months is, at best, a distraction from far more serious issues and concerns. To have pronounced the Clinton presidency in mortal danger because of his early slide in the polls was a misreading of history and a disservice to the polity.

For presidents, finally, the message in these results is about the inadvisability of trying to govern by polls. For a president intent on getting re-elected, the best thing he can do is to create and implement well-designed programs and try to solve the nation's problems to the best of his ability. And it is precisely these tasks that are likely to be neglected by a president who spends most of his first several years in office comfortably gloating about his 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, in short, is likely to create long-term problems.

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