Is Presidential Approval Myopic?*

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Abstract

Recent studies of U.S. retrospective voting have found evidence of "myopia," the tendency to drastically discount past national conditions and vote based only on recent events. However, because this work uses aggregate presidential election results after World War II, sample sizes are small. This paper uses data from the Gallup presidential approval time series to examine whether the public's responsiveness to national conditions is really myopic. It measures how quickly citizens discount past economic performance, deaths in overseas wars, rally events, and foreign terrorist attacks. The results are equivocal, with the strongest evidence for myopia in responses to rally events, and the weakest in responses to casualties and terrorist attacks.

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1 Citizen Competence and Retrospection

Political scientists have long been concerned about the competence of ordinary citizens. Early in the twentieth century, Lippmann (1997, 1927) worried that poor news coverage and uninformed citizens undermined popular sovereignty. In the middle of the century, scholars of American mass political behavior also raised doubts about the competence of the public, finding large portions to be politically uninformed, reflexively partisan, and to lack coherent ideologies or even preferences (e.g. Campbell et al., 1980; Converse, 1964). More recent work on citizen competence has found vulnerability to media influence (e.g. Zaller, 1992, 1996; DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007; Ladd and Lenz, 2009; Gerber, Karlan and Bergan, Forthcoming), low levels of knowledge (e.g. Zaller, 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996), and a tendency to change opinions to rationalize partisan predispositions rather than voting based on issues (e.g. Rahn, Krosnick and Breuning, 1994; Miller, 1999; Achen and Bartels, 2006; Lenz, 2009).

At the same time, another tradition has defended the public's competence. Among the most prominent evidence in favor of citizen competence is the public's ability to retrospectively evaluate incumbent politicians, especially presidents. In different ways, Downs (1957), Key (1968), Kramer (1971) and Fiorina (1981) each argued that rewarding and punishing leaders based on past performance allowed voters to make good choices and democracy to work well. In support of this view, game theorists have shown that retrospective voting can both elect higher quality politicians (i.e. reduce adverse selection) and give those in office incentives to serve citizens' interests (i.e. reduce moral hazard) (Ferejohn, 1986; Austen-Smith and Banks, 1989; Banks and Sundaram, 1993; Fearon, 1999; Banks and Duggan, 2001; Morton, 2006). In United States presidential elections, there is a large body of evidence that retrospective voting does occur (e.g. Kramer, 1971; Fair, 1978; Rosenstone, 1983; Erikson, 1989; Bartels and Zaller, 2001; Hibbs, 2000, 2007), potentially demonstrating that citizens are competent enough to control politicians.

2 Citizen Myopia

However, some recent scholarship questions whether retrospective voting is indicative of citizen competence. Several authors find evidence that voters reward and punish incumbents based on events the government has little or no control over, like shark attacks, droughts, floods, and the performance of local sports teams (Achen and Bartels, 2002; Healy, Malhotra and Mo, 2010). Others find that economic retrospective voting is "myopic." While very recent economic performance is influential, past performance during an incumbent's term receives little weight. For instance, when separately estimating the effect of economic conditions in each year of a president's term, Bartels (2008, 99-104) finds that only the election year affects voting. When estimating the effect of each quarter separately, Achen and Bartels (2004, 17-21) find that only economic performance in the election year's second and third quarters are influential.[1]

This paper examines this claim of citizen "myopia." If voter retrospection is myopic, this could have serious negative implications. First, it may imply that elections are poor barometers of incumbents' overall performance. National conditions can exhibit considerable short term fluctuations that do not directly result from the president's policies. If voters only weight recent conditions, retrospective evaluations may not be a "rational" way of choosing the best politicians. Instead, election outcomes will be essentially determined by random chance and democratic politics nothing more than a game of, in Achen and Bartels (2004)'s words, "musical chairs." Second, it may lead politicians to manipulate policy to produce positive conditions immediately before elections, even when those policies are worse for the country long-term. As Tufte (1978, 143) put it, electoral incentives would induce "a bias toward policies with immediate, highly visible benefits and deferred costs—myopic policies for myopic voters."

Yet is the public really this myopic in its retrospective assessments? Existing evidence has an important limitation: the paucity of data. As analyses of post-World War II aggravate presidential election results, Achen and Bartels (2004) and Bartels (2008)'s regression models

[1]Erikson, Bafumi and Wilson (2001) find similar results with parametric models that include a steep discount rate on the effect of economic performance the further away from the election that performance is.

are based on less than 15 observations. This paper sets out to expand on these studies by estimating the public's myopia using Gallup's presidential approval time series. One limitation of this is that it merely measures approval, rather than voting. Despite this, it has the benefit of allowing one to test how the public weights recent versus past conditions with a much larger dataset.

3 Previous Studies of Retrospective Presidential Assessments

While the literatures investigating the causes of presidential voting and approval are vast, both find economic performance and national security to be central. In his seminal study, Mueller (1973, 196-231) found that presidential approval was significantly associated with the unemployment rate, "rally-round-the-flag" events, length of time in office, and entanglement in the Korean War. Kernell (1978) argued that time in office was atheoretical and that its association with approval disappeared when the economy, rallies, and casualties in the Korean and Vietnam wars were included. Most subsequent presidential approval studies continue to find these three variables—the economy, the costs of foreign wars, and rally events—to be of primary importance.[2]

The first major influence on approval is economic performance. Scholars have measured this effect in several different ways. Several prominent studies measure this with the unemployment rate (e.g. Mueller, 1973; Oneal, Lian and Joyner, 1996) or inflation (Kernell, 1978). However, the retrospective voting literature typically uses real (i.e. inflation adjusted) disposable (i.e. after taxes) income (RDI) per capita to measure the economy (Kramer, 1971; Fair, 1978; Tufte, 1978; Rosenstone, 1983; Markus, 1988, 1992; Erikson, 1989; Hibbs, 2000, 2007, 2009).[3]

[2]This has many similarities to the literature on retrospective presidential voting. While a full review of this literature is beyond the scope of this paper, one of the most prominent of these models is the "bread and peace" model developed by Hibbs (2000, 2007, 2009). It, like presidential approval studies and most other models of the aggregate presidential voting, focuses on "structural" variables. It finds that election outcomes are strongly related to the growth rate of real disposable income per capita and the cumulative number of causalities in overseas wars (mainly Korea and Vietnam).

[3]Hibbs (1982) found that the economic variables of real income growth per capita, unemployment, and

In direct comparisons, Bartels and Zaller (2001) and Erikson, Bafumi and Wilson (2001) find that RDI growth is more strongly related to election results than GDP growth.

The second major influence is costly foreign conflicts. Mueller (1973, 224) uses a dummy variable indicating that the U.S. is currently engaged in either the Korean or Vietnam Wars. However, most other models use the more detailed measure of cumulative battle deaths (e.g. Kernell, 1978; Ostrom and Job, 1986).

The third major influence is rallies. Mueller (1973, 209) specified that rally events must be international, directly involve the U.S. and preferably the President, and be "specific, dramatic, and sharply focused." The subsequent literature has refined the definition to "uses of force during U.S. foreign policy crises...in which American decision makers perceived a threat to basic values, finite time for response, and a high probability of military hostilities" (Oneal, Lian and Joyner, 1996, 265) and even generated a consensus list of such events. This list was developed by Blechman and Kaplan (1978), and revised by Zelikow (1987), Oneal, Lian and Joyner (1996), Baum (2002) and Baum and Groeling (2008).

Finally, while few presidential approval studies have included this variable, there is evidence that foreign terrorist attacks on the United States mainland have an important effect on presidential approval. The only major act of foreign terrorism direct at the United States took place on September, 11 2001. While this does not fit the conventional definition of a rally event, the September 11 attacks provoked a large sudden increase in presidential approval (Beck, Jackman and Rosenthal, 2006; Ladd, 2007).

A series of presidential approval and voting studies do not focus solely on structural variables (i.e. objective national conditions), but look at how structural effects flow through other variables. The most influential example of this is MacKuen, Erikson and Stimson (1992), which looks at retrospective and prospective economic assessments from the Index of Consumer Sentiment as "intervening variables between economic conditions and approval" (597). Subsequent studies have debated whether economic conditions affect approval through retrospective considerations, prospective considerations, or directly (e.g. Clarke, Rapkin and Stewart, 1994;

inflation were related to presidential approval, although the effects varied across different groups.

Clarke and Stewart, 1994; Norpoth, 1996; Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson, 2000; Voeten and Brewer, 2006; Lebo and Box-Steffensmeier, 2008). Other studies use public opinion variables such as economic approval and foreign policy approval of the president to predict overall approval (e.g. Nickelsburg and Norpoth, 2000; McAvoy, 2006; Voeten and Brewer, 2006). In addition, some scholars argue that structural variables effect approval through news coverage (Brody, 1991; Nadeau et al., 1999). However, for now I set aside questions about the mechanisms through which structural variables influence approval, and just look at the structural effects themselves.

4 Data and Methods

As the dependent variable, I use the percentage of respondents approval of the president in Gallup polls from 1950 through 2008, as supplied by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. I start in 1950 because at that time Gallup moved away from quota sampling and adopted more modern probability sampling.[4] I measure quarterly economic performance with the annualized percentage growth rate in RDI per capita, as reported by the Bureau of Economic Analysis of the Department of Commerce. I measure cumulative war casualties as the total number of Americans killed in action by hostile forces in the current overseas military conflict. I specify three distinct overseas military conflicts in the dataset: Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan/Iraq. In quarters when the U.S. is not evolved in one of these wars, this variable takes the value of zero. To accommodate nonlinearity in its effect, I log the cumulative casualties variable.[5] Casualty data for the Korean and Vietnam Wars are from the National Archives. Casualty data for the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq are from icasulaties.org, which compiles data from the Department of Defense. I use the literature's consensus list of rally events, as described above. Rallies are measured at the month level, taking the value of 1 in the first full month following a rally, and 0 otherwise.

[4] But see (Berinsky, 2006) for details on methods for analyzing quota-controlled sampling data from the 1930s and 1940s.

[5] This is calculated as ln(cumulative casualties + 1).

To estimate how the effect of each of these variables fades over time, I employ a "partial adjustment" error correction model (De Boef and Keele, 2008, 186-190). This entails regressing presidential approval on each independent variable plus a series of lagged versions of that variable. To account for the multi-level structure of the data—approval at the poll level, economic performance and casualties at the quarter level, rallies at the month level, Sept. 11 at the quarterly level—I cluster the standard errors at the quarter and month level. I also exclude from the analysis the first four quarters when each president held office. This is both to eliminate "honeymoon" effects and to exclude times when it may be especially unreasonable to hold presidents accountable for national conditions.

5 Results

Table 1 shows the results. There is some evidence of myopia. Similar to Achen and Bartels (2004)'s finding that the second and third quarter of the election year have the only significant effects on voting, I find that economic performance in the present quarter has a strong effect, but influence drops off after that. Four percentage-points higher growth in the current quarter is associated with 1.2 percentage points higher presidential approval. Economic growth one and two quarters in the past has no detectable effect. However there is also a puzzling result that the influence of past economic performance reemerges for three quarters after that. The effects of three and four quarters ago are notable in size—A four percentage-point increase in the growth rate in each of these quarters is associated with 0.8 percentage-points higher approval—and just below standard levels of statistical significance (p=.078 and p=.095). And economic conditions 5 quarters ago have a substantial statistically significant effect, with a four percentage-point change in the growth rate associated with 1.0 percentage points higher approval. Economic effects then finally drop off 6 quarters in the past.

Cumulative casualties are also significantly related to presidential approval. Each one percent increase in the total number of American deaths in the current war through the current quarter reduces approval by 0.9 percentage-points. Otherwise, the only other significant ca-

sualty effects are the fairly anomalous effects three and four quarters in the past. The total number of casualties that occurred in the current conflict through three and four quarters in the past appear to be significantly related to current approval. Each one percent increase in the total number of American deaths through three quarters in the past is associated with 1.7 percentage-point lower approval, while the total number of casualties through four quarters in the past actually appears to have an effect in the opposite direction. Each one percent increase in the total number of American deaths through this point is associated with 1.9 percentage-points higher approval.

However, it is not clear whether responsiveness to *cumulative* war deaths should be considered myopia at all. These variables incorporate past casualties in the current war. The fact that people respond to cumulative casualty levels through the current quarter means that, while sensitive to recent events, people have not forgotten about past costs incurred in the conflict.

In the case of both economic performance and casualties in foreign wars, it is difficult to know how to interpret the significant coefficient on quarters well in the past, occurring after several quarters with no detectable effects. It could be that these effects are real. On the other hand, it could be that he results are driven by the high multicolinearity between the variables and the large number of parameters being estimated. These factors could cause several coefficients to be statistically significant by chance, even in the absence of true causal relationships. Another (related) possibility is that there is an interaction between measurement error in the variables and their high multicolinearity. When highly correlated variables are included in the same regression, it can cause the variable with the least measurement error to have the larger coefficient, and variables with more measurement error to have the wrong sign (Achen, 1983, 1985). This could possibly explain the aberrant economic and casualty effects in far past quarters, as well as the effect of cumulative casualties 4 quarters ago which appears to be in the "wrong" direction.

Responses to rallies show the clearest evidence of straightforward myopia. Rally event are associated with 2.7 percentage-points greater presidential approval. If a rally event occurred

one month ago, the rally has decayed to 2.3 percentage-points (p=.074). After that, I cannot find a significant effect.

Finally, foreign terrorist attack on the United States mainland (or at least as represented in the September 11, 2001 attacks) have an especially large and long-lasting effect. The initial quarter following the attacks is not in the dataset because it occurred in the fourth quarter of George W. Bush's term as president. Still, one quarter after that, presidential approval was 28 percentage-points higher than one would otherwise expect. Two quarters after, it was 23 percentage-points higher. Three quarters after, it was still 17 percentage-points higher. There was still a significant effect six quarters after the event (in the second quarter of 2003), when approval was 17 percentage-points higher than expected. Response to foreign terrorism seems not myopic at all, with large effects lasting years after the event.

6 Conclusion

Recent scholarship has questioned whether retrospective evaluations of the president are indicative of citizen competence. One way it has done this is by arguing that the public is myopic in its retrospective assessments, giving too much weight to recent events. I test retrospective myopia regarding economic performance, overseas wars, rallies and terrorist attacks. In the economic realm, I find some evidence of myopia, although the statistical results are equivocal. In the case of overseas wars, voters seem to respond to the cumulative number of casualties through the current quarter, indicating that the public weighs both recent and past war deaths. Rally effects seem to be quite ephemeral, dissipating after two quarters. However, reactions to the September 11 terrorist attacks were very long-lasting. Overall, the evidence for retrospective myopia in presidential approval is mixed.

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Table 1: Estimating the Effects of Past Conditions on Presidential Approval

RDI Per Capita Growth	**0.29***
	(0.12)
RDI Per Capita Growth	**0.01**
(1 quarter ago)	(0.11)
RDI Per Capita Growth	**-0.02**
(2 quarters ago)	(0.12)
RDI Per Capita Growth	**0.20**
(3 quarters ago)	(0.11)
RDI Per Capita Growth	**0.20**
(4 quarters ago)	(0.12)
RDI Per Capita Growth	**0.26***
(5 quarters ago)	(0.11)
RDI Per Capita Growth	**0.00**
(6 quarters ago)	(0.12)
Casualties (Logged)	**-0.88***
	(0.36)
Casualties (Logged)	**-0.65**
(1 quarter ago)	(0.51)
Casualties (Logged)	**0.19**
(2 quarters ago)	(0.57)
Casualties (Logged)	**-1.66***
(3 quarters ago)	(0.69)
Casualties (Logged)	**1.92***
(4 quarters ago)	(0.52)
Rally Event	**2.66***
	(1.22)
Rally Event	**2.30**
(1 month ago)	(1.29)
Rally Event	**0.30**
(2 months ago)	(1.22)
Rally Event	**1.60**
(3 months ago)	(1.29)
September 11	**28.49***
(1 quarter ago)	(4.66)
September 11	**22.76***
(2 quarters ago)	(4.20)
September 11	**17.35***
(3 quarters ago)	(4.22)
September 11	**18.88***
(4 quarters ago)	(4.71)
September 11	**10.75***
(5 quarters ago)	(3.75)
September 11	**16.90***
(6 quarters ago)	(4.70)

Constant	**53.25***
	(0.81)
Adjusted R^2	
Standard Error of Regression	
n	

*p<.05 for two-tailed hypothesis tests.
Note: Entries are ordinary least squares regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Economic data are from the Bureau of Economic Analysis of the United States Department of Commerce. Causalities data include those killed in action (KIA) by hostile forces. Casualties data for the Korean War and Vietnam War are from the United States National Archives. Casualties data for the Afghanistan War and Iraq War are from icasualties.org, which compiles data from the Department of Defense. Rally list is from Oneal, Lian and Joyner (1996) and Baum and Groeling (2008). Percentage approving of the president's job performance in Gallup polls is from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.