PRESIDENTIAL JOB APPROVAL:  BARACK OBAMA AND PREDECESSORS COMPARED

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This is a preliminary exploration of President Barack Obama's job approval. The causes and effects of how the public evaluates a president have been studied extensively since Mueller's (1973) pioneering study, as evidenced by the nearly 100 items included in Gronke and Newman's (2003) review essay. Here I make no attempt to summarize this growing literature, but have appended a selected list in the bibliography. Suffice to say for now that among the determinants of how well a president stands with the public, something to which I will refer as "approval" or "popularity," two stand out: the economy and war. Additionally, short-term ebbs and flows associated with international "rally events," crises, and scandals are also observed. As to effects, a president's popularity is correlated with his prospects for reelection, how well his party does in midterm congressional elections, and the success of his legislative agenda.

In this paper, I proceed as follows. Firstly, I compare Obama's popularity function from month 2 to 14 of his administration to those of ten previous presidents, broken down by party affiliation. I show that Obama's approval tracks those of three predecessors, two Democrats (Truman and Carter) and one Republican (surprisingly, Reagan). Next, with a multiple regression model, I estimate presidential popularity from 1959 (when a key economic variable first becomes available) through December 2008. Then, based on the model, Obama's expected approval is compared to the actual values. Finally, making somewhat optimistic assumptions about the pace of economic recovery for the rest of the year, I use the model to project Obama's approval through December of this year (2010).

Figure 1 displays a ten-poll rolling average of Obama's approval ratings since January of 2009. Real Clear Politics (RCP) is the data source, except that I kept the daily numbers from Gallup and Rasmussen instead of discarding them with the latest posting, as they do. Figure 2 compares Obama's monthly approval averages across three highly correlated series of polls drawn from three sources: RCP, Pollster.com, and the Roper Center. Both charts tell the same story. Following the usual honeymoon, Obama's rating dropped about two points. Then, beginning in May, approval began a steady slide through August, settling somewhere between 51% and 53%. After a two-month pause, his popularity fell another four points. As of the end of February, approval appears to be oscillating around the 48% mark in the RCP daily average.

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Figures 1 and 2 about here
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In sum, in his first 13 full months in the White House, Obama's approval fell fifteen points.  Although, as we shall see, this is not unprecedented, it is a fairly steep drop.  As shown in Figure 3, it is generally the case that approval erodes during the first year in the White House.  The magnitude of Obama's contraction, however, is well above that of the average of all previous presidents since Truman (the purple plot), or of his Democratic predecessors taken separately (the broken blue line).  (The source for the polls in this and in all subsequent charts, unless otherwise indicated, is the Roper Center.[1])  The all-presidents plot is nearly flat, but this is because war temporarily boosted both Bushes' approvals to extraordinary heights.  Thus, the red dashed line omits them from the Republican average.

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Figure 3 about here
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As I said, Obama's approval slide is not unique.  Figure 4 compares his ratings with those of thee other presidents, two Democrats and one Republican.  Other than Johnson,[2] these presidents are the only ones whose approval ratings correlate strongly with Obama's, and look very much like his:  Truman and Carter (Pearson's $r$=0.88 in both cases), and Reagan ($r$=0.79).  No correlation with any other president's popularity path comes close.  Truman's approval started from the same point as Obama's, but fell faster and farther.  Carter's and Reagan's starting points sandwich Obama's, Carter from above and Reagan from below; by the end of their 14th month, they were about the same place as Obama is now.  It would seem that these two presidents mark out alternate paths for Obama's presidency:  continuing decline in approval ending in defeat, as in Carter's case, or a recovery leading up to reelection, as in Reagan's.  I shall have more about this comparison anon.

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Figure 4 about here
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[1] The Roper Center collection of surveys extends all the back to FDR, whereas RCP and Pollster.com do not.  For the earlier presidents, the polls are mostly if not exclusively, Gallup's.  In those days, Gallup conducted surveys about once a month.  Where one or more months are missing, I bridged the gap by linear interpolation.  Surveys are abundant for more recent presidents.  Many organizations other than Gallup now take the pulse of presidential approval, although only Gallup and the Rasmussen Organization do so daily, posting a rolling three-day average on their websites.  Those data are included in the RCP series used in Figure 1, but not in Roper Center's.

[2] At $r$=0.96, Johnson's correlates almost perfectly with Obama's, but this is because in both cases the slide was gradual and steady, without the jerking movements and temporary reversals in direction observed in the other three.  The big difference between the two is that, following Kennedy's assassination, LBJ began with much higher approval; by the end of month 14, it was down only half as many points as Obama's, and well above 50%.

As noted earlier, two principal sets of determinants of presidential job approval are economic conditions and war. The effects of the latter are mixed. Initially, a "rally 'round the flag" effect sends the president's approval higher, if not soaring. But as the war grinds on or the results fail to fulfill expectations, the numbers fall back to where they were before the onset of the conflict or below that, even.[3] The public's response to the Korean, Vietnam, and Iraq wars are cases in point. Economic effects are unambiguous: inflation and unemployment depress approval, while income growth lifts it.

Table 1 shows the results of regressing half-a-century of presidential approval data (January 1959-December 2008) on the previous month's approval, the economy (real growth in per capita disposable income, the seasonally adjusted change in the consumer price index, and unemployment, all lagged one month) and a Honeymoon period (month 2-4 of every first-term president, except for Johnson, to whom I assigned two honeymoon periods, when he first succeeded to the presidency after Kennedy's assassination, and then again in 1965). The series begins in 1959 because that's as far back as data on real disposable income from the Bureau of Economic Analysis go. All variables behave as expected, and all are statistically significant at $\rho=.05$ or better except for Party and Honeymoon, which are significant at $\rho=0.10$. The model accounts for over 90% of the variance in approval. The tight fit is partly an artifact of using lagged approval as one of the predictors (a routine procedure in models of this sort, where auto-correlation is present). C*eteris paribus,* on average, approval at t is nine-tenths what it was at t-1. Again, this means that, absent other effects, displacements of approval in either direction caused by shocks to the polity tend to fade over time.

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Table 1 about here
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Next, I used this model, which was not estimated with Obama's data, first to see what it would predict for months 3-14, given his actual approval in month 2 and the given values of all the other predictors. In months 4-14, I substituted the lagged popularity value generated with the model's exogenous variables for the actual value. Next, I used the model to forecast what Obama's approval is likely to be through the end of 2010 under fairly optimistic economic assumptions. These are that unemployment falls by two percent points in 2010, from 9.7% in January and February to 7.7% in December; that inflation stays tame, rising no more than 0.20% per month for the rest of the year, the same as in January and February; and that real disposable income grows at the fairly robust rate of 0.35% per month, just shy of twice the average for the entire series.

The results of the simulation are shown in Figure 5. The solid blue line represents actual Approval through month 14 of the Obama presidency (February 2010). The blue dashed line has two meanings. Through month 14, it plots the model's predictions, given the known values of the explanatory variables of the model. Again,

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[3] Other events, some positive, others negative, also have fleeting effects on approval. Most of the effect dissipates within a year (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, 2002).

the only actual approval value used to make the predictions was that of month 2 (February 2009). Note how closely this line hugs its solid sister: the mean absolute error of the predictions relative to the actual values of approval is only 1.08 points.[4] Beyond month 14, the dashed blue line tracks the projected values of Obama's popularity for the rest of the year, under the aforementioned assumptions about the economy. Note that his approval is expected to bottom out in month 20 (August) at 45.8%, after which it begins to recover, ending the year at 46.4%. At the conclusion of Obama's second year in the White House, then, his popularity relative to that of Carter and Reagan will again fall in-between where they were at the same month of the presidential term.

Comparing Carter and Reagan, note that the former's approval first hit bottom in month 18. For the next four months, Carter's approval rose steadily, to 52% in November, before reversing direction the following month. Then, approval continued to slide, sinking into the low 30s in the fall before receiving a temporary "rally 'round the flag" boost at the onset of the Iranian hostage crisis at the end of the year. As the crisis dragged on without resolution, the decline resumed, leading to his rejection at the polls in 1980. By contrast, Reagan's approval did not bottom out until January (month 25), which lies just outside the chart. However, it recovered rapidly after that, reaching the mid-50s by the end of the third year. This presaged Reagan's 1984 landslide reelection, when he won all states but one.

Although it would be hazardous to attempt to account for the contrasting electoral fortunes of Carter in 1980 and Reagan in 1984 with variables tapping only one type of influence on the electorate, the fact is that in the second half of their respective presidential terms unemployment and inflation grew and real disposable income stagnated under Carter, while, under Reagan, both unemployment and inflation fell, and income grew at a vigorous rate. To be sure, international factors also had something to do with the outcome of both elections, but the contrast in economic performance under the two administrations was marked enough for one to be justified in surmising that it played a significant, if not a determining role in the defeat of one and the victory of the other.

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Figure 5 about here
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So, whence Obama? Will his approval continue its downward slide for the rest of the year? Absent a shock to the system, that's what the model projects. Since the president's popularity correlates with his party's fortunes at midterm (Abramowitz 2006, 2010), the question is not whether, but how many seats the Democrats will lose in

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[4] As it happens, Obama's case affords the tightest fit between the data and the model. An analysis of the in-sample residuals of the model estimated with all data reveals that in the case of Obama the mean absolute error (MAE) is 0.94, or only 38% of the average for the entire series (2.49). The simulation would work less well with other presidents where the model incurs larger errors, e.g., Carter, where across the 48 months of his one term, MAE=3.67.

the midterm elections.  What about after that?  Will Obama's approval rating recover in his third year, as happened with Reagan?  Or will it follow Carter's path, experiencing brief upticks or short-lived surges along a declining path, culminating in defeat in 2012?

We know that the economy is a determinant, and that war casualties, as well as how the president reacts to foreign and domestic shocks, also play a significant role.  Neither Eisenhower nor Nixon suffered electorally from additional losses incurred in a war he had "inherited" from a previous administration, so we may expect the same result in the case of Obama with respect to casualties in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.  If the economy recovers and unemployment goes down while inflation remains muted, Obama's approval will rise, making him a strong favorite to win in 2012.  On the other hand, if unemployment stays stubbornly high and disposable income growth remains anemic, or if inflation skyrockets, approval will sink further, putting his reelection at risk.  As for shocks, by their very nature they are unpredictable.  A natural disaster, a terrorist attack, a riot, an epidemic, a scandal, or some other event may cause public alarm, if not panic, requiring an effective response.  If this is not forthcoming, as arguably was the case during the Carter administration, approval will suffer, and with it the prospects for 2012.  To this point, Obama's presidency has been crisis-free.  Whether, or how long, this state of affairs will continue, is anyone's guess.

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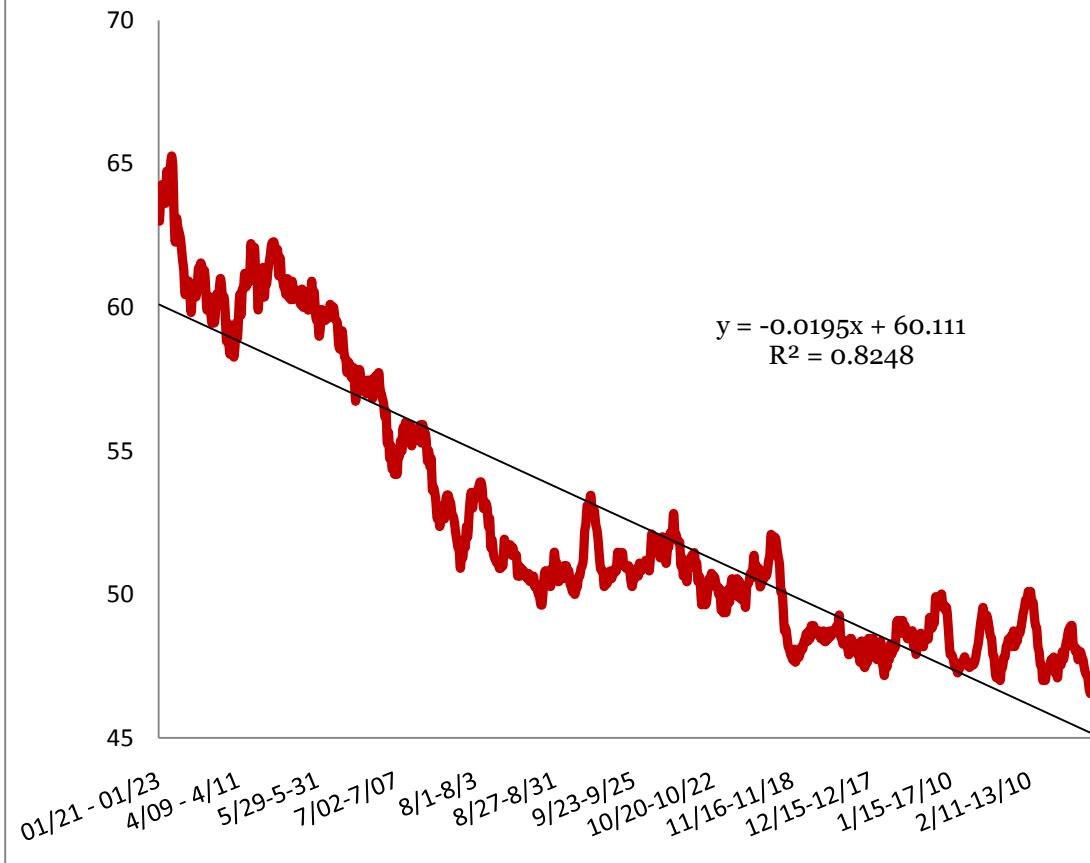
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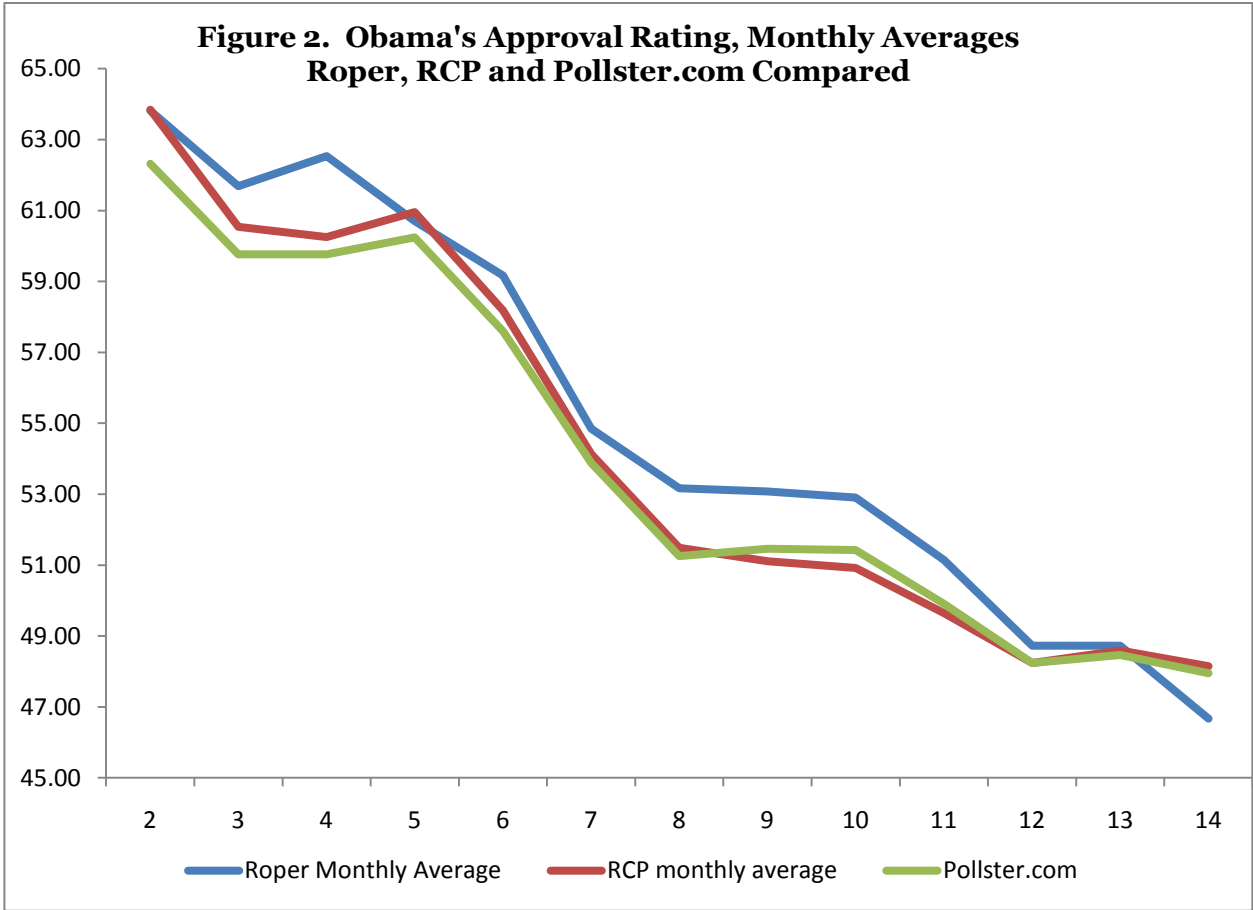
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Table 1. Estimating Presidential Approval Ratings, Monthly Averages, 1959-2008
(N = 579; t-statistics in parentheses)

| Predictor | Job Approval |
|---|---|
| Job Approval$_{t-1}$ | 0.90 (60.02) |
| Change in Real Disposable Income $_{t-1}$ | 0.45 (2.15) |
| Unemployment $_{t-1}$ | -0.41 (-3.09) |
| Change in Seasonally Adjusted Consumer Price Index $_{t-1}$ | -1.10 (-2.38) |
| Cumulative Vietnam War Dead (logn) | -0.40 (-2.46) |
| Cumulative Iraq War Dead (logn) | -0.79 (-4.36) |
| Party (Democrat=1; Republican=0) | -0.65 (-1.77) |
| Watergate | -4.69 (-5.05) |
| Honeymoon | 1.35 (1.88) |
| Constant | 8.44 (60.02) |
| SEE | 3.55 |
| Adj. R-sq. | 0.92 |
| Durbin-Watson | 1.99 |

**Figure 1. Obama's Job Approval**
**10-poll rolling average**

$y = -0.0195x + 60.111$
$R^2 = 0.8248$

**Figure 2. Obama's Approval Rating, Monthly Averages Roper, RCP and Pollster.com Compared**

**Figure 3. Mean Monthly Approval, Obama vs. Truman - G. W. Bush**

Legend:
- Average, Truman-GW Bush
- Obama
- Democrats, Truman-Clinton
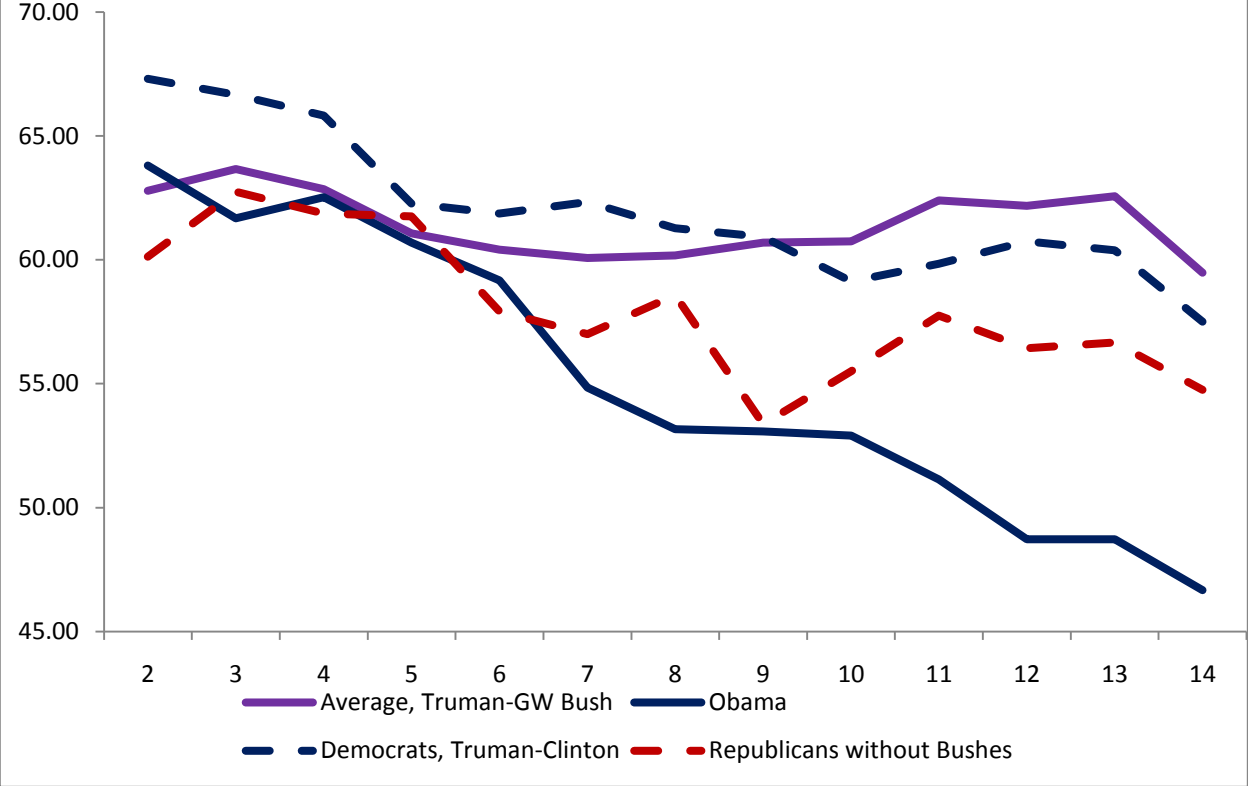- Republicans without Bushes

Figure 4.  Obama and Three Other Presidents Compared

Figure 5.  Obama's Predicted Approval by month 24 Compared to Carter's and Reagan's