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. Suffice to say that among the determinants of a president's job approval or "popularity function" (I will use the two phrases interchangeably), 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 (Ostrom and Simon 1985, Abramowitz 2008, 2010).

In this paper, I proceed as follows. First, I display Obama's popularity function during the first two years of his presidency. Next, I compare it with those of ten previous presidents, broken down by party affiliation. I show that Obama's approval tracks those of four predecessors, three Democrats (Harry Truman, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Jimmy Carter) and one Republican (Ronald 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, using moderately optimistic assumptions about the course of economic recovery during the rest of the presidential term, I project Obama's approval through the next 18 months, to July of 2012, the month in the election year when Abramowitz usually issues a preliminary election forecast with his "time for change" model (Abramowitz 2008).

Figure 1 displays Obama's monthly approval as measured by three highly correlated series of polls posted at Real Clear Politics (RCP), Pollster.com, and the Roper Center. All plots tell the same story. In his first full month in office, President Obama's approval was in the low to mid-sixties. Following the usual honeymoon, approval fell at a steep rate, from 61% in May to 52% in August, then dropped another three points by the end of the year. Between January and May 2010, approval flattened out around 48-49%, then sank another 3-4%. As of the last week of the year, the average of the three series stood at 45%.

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Figure 1 about here
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In sum, in the first half of the presidential term, Obama's approval fell almost twenty percent points. Although, as we shall see presently, this is not unprecedented, it is a fairly sharp drop. As shown in Figure 2, it is generally the case that approval erodes during the first year in the White House. (For the purpose of comparing Obama to previous presidents, the source for the polls in this and in all subsequent figures is the Roper Center.[1]) The all-presidents plot dips half-way through the first year and then briefly bounces back to the honeymoon level before the end of the year, when it resumes a downward slide, but this is because war temporarily boosted both President G.H.W. Bush's and G. W. Bush's approval to extraordinary heights. When the two Bushes are removed from the all-presidents series, it closely tracks that of the pre-Obama Democrats. All three multi-president plots are nearly parallel each other during the second year of the presidential term, as the war-related rally dissipated, and end up at just about the same place, around 53-54% approval.

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Figure 2 about here
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As I said, Obama's fall from grace is not unique. As shown in Figure 3, the popularity function of four previous presidents, three Democrats and one Republican, correlate strongly with Obama's. They are those of Lyndon B. Johnson (Pearson's r=0.87) and Harry Truman (r=0.92), Jimmy Carter (r=0.87), and Ronald Reagan Reagan (r=0.90).[2] No correlation with any other president's popularity path comes close. [3] Johnson and Truman had served for part of the previous term, having been elevated from vice-president to president after the death their predecessor, Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, respectively. So, in effect, they were already on a *de facto* second term. Only Carter and Reagan, like Obama newly-elected presidents in the first term of a party reign, then, are truly comparable. Their starting and ending points sandwich Obama's, Carter from above and Reagan from below. By the end of their second year in the White House, their popularity was only a few points higher or lower than Obama's. It would seem, then, that these two presidents mark out alternate paths for the rest of Obama's presidency: subsequent decline in popularity 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 2 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 included in the Roper series 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.

[2] The presidential terms of Truman and Johnson herein shown are those to which they were elected in their own right, i.e., those of 1949-1953 and 1965-1969, respectively.

[3] After these, the next highest correlations are with Nixon and Eisenhower (ρ=0.60 and ρ=0.58, respectively). Interestingly, the only two negative correlations are with Clinton and G. W. Bush (respectively ρ=-0.35 and ρ=-0.46).

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.[4] The public's response to the two Gulf Wars are cases in point. Economic effects are unambiguous: inflation and unemployment depress approval, while income growth raises it.

Table 1 shows two model estimates of half-a-century of presidential approval data. In the first model, approval is regressed 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), the party of the incumbents (1=Democrat, -1=Republican), 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), Watergate, and cumulative war dead in the Vietnam and Iraq wars. The series begins in 1959 because that's as far back as monthly data on real per capita disposable income from the Bureau of Economic Analysis go. Next, a somewhat different model is estimated that incorporates Newman[5] and Forcehimes' (2010) events data set, except that positive and negative events are aggregated into their respective categories regardless of whether they classified them as domestic, international, or any other finer category. Note that the addition of these variables leaves the coefficients of the economic variables almost undisturbed. In both models, all variables behave as expected, and all are statistically significant at ρ=.05 or better except for Party and Honeymoon, which reach statistical significance only in Model 1, and then at ρ=0.10. The models account 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.[6] C*eteris paribus,* on average approval at t is nine-tenths of what it was at t-1. 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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[4] 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).

[5] Many thanks to Professor Newman for e-mailing me his data file.

[6] See, e.g., Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson (2002). More recently, this procedure has come under methodological challenge, and more complex methods proposed to deal with the problem. Mindful of this issue, Newman and Forcehimes (2010) estimate approval with alternate methods, and find that the substantive results are not that much different across methods. For the purpose of the present study, the simpler procedure should work well enough.

Next, I used Model 1, which, again, was not estimated with Obama's data, first to see what it would predict for months 3-24 of his term, given his actual approval in month 2 and the given values of all the other predictors. Then, I used the model to project what Obama's approval is likely to be through the middle of 2012, the next presidential year, under moderately optimistic assumptions about an economic recovery. These are that between November of this year and June 2012, unemployment falls at a monthly rate of 0.11 percent points, from 9.8% to 7.7% (slightly above what it was in June, 1984); real disposable income grows an average of 0.20% per month (the same as in the year 1996); and inflation rises no more than 0.20% per month (the same as in 1995-1996).[7]

The results of the simulation are shown in Figure 4. The solid blue line represents actual Approval through the end of Obama's second year in the White House. The blue dashed line has two meanings. Through month 24 (December 2010), it plots the model's predictions, given the known values of the explanatory variables of the model. Again, the only actual approval value used to make the predictions was that of month 2 (February 2009). Note that the dashed line hugs its solid sister fairly closely: the mean absolute error of the predictions relative to the actual values of approval is 1.9% points. Beyond month 24, the dashed blue line projects Obama's popularity through July 2012 under the aforementioned assumptions about the economy. Note that his approval, which the simulation pegs it at 41% in December 2010 (three points below the actual), is expected to dip another point by mid-2011, after which it begins to recover, climbing to around 48% in July of the election year. At that time, Obama's popularity relative to that of Carter and Reagan will again fall in-between where they were in the same month of the presidential term, only the position of Carter and Reagan will have been reversed, with Reagan's 7% points above and Carter's 10% points below Obama.

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Figure 4 about here
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Comparing Carter and Reagan, note that the former's approval hit bottom at around 30% in the summer of 1979, his third year in office. In the fall, the Iranian Hostage Crisis produced a short-lived rally that extended briefly into the next year before approval fell back into the 30s again, foreshadowing his defeat the following November. By contrast, Reagan's nadir fell earlier, in January of his third year, when approval sank into the mid-thirties. After that, however, Reagan's popularity rose more or less steadily, growing 20 points by the winter of 1984. It plateaued in the mid-50s through the summer, presaging his landslide reelection in the fall.

Although it would be hazardous to attempt to account for the contrasting electoral fortunes of presidents Carter and Reagan 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

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[7] 1984 and 1996 were years when Presidents Reagan and Clinton, respectively, were re-elected to a second term.

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.

So, whence Obama? 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. So far, Obama's presidency has been free of shocks, or of events of sufficient magnitude to make a visible impact on his approval path. If this condition continues during the rest of the presidential term, the state of the economy will be decisive to his reelection prospects. If the assumptions about the economy that are built into the simulation displayed in Figure 4 are more or less in the ballpark, one can expect that Obama's approval will recover, as Reagan's did, albeit neither as rapidly nor as vigorously. The simulation has him winning 47% approval by July of 2012. Note, though, that most of the time during the first half of his time in office, Obama's approval has been a little higher than expected by the model. Again, as noted earlier, in December of this year his approval was 3% points higher than what the model predicts (44% vs. 41%). If this persists, his approval rating may very well hit 50 or 51%% by the summer of 2012, still below Reagan's, but probably sufficient at least for squeaking through to reelection.

Again, this assumes a moderately optimistic view of the economic recovery and the absence of shocks. If something were to go terribly wrong in Afghanistan, or a crisis to ensue in the Korean peninsula, or a terrorist attack to succeed at home, or any of a myriad of possible events of a similar nature to occur, one could expect an initial rally effect. As shown in Table 1, Model 2, on average a positive rally adds 5% points to a president's popularity. This approval bonus would dissipate more or less rapidly depending on Obama's response and, perhaps just as important, how the Republicans react to it. It would appear that the GOP have prepared the ground for pouncing on Obama in the wake of any such eventuality, for from the start they have criticized his approach to foreign relations and national security as weak, apologetic, etc. Accordingly, they could very well make political hay by holding him accountable for any disaster that could plausibly be linked to a policy failure. It would be even easier for them to do this should major corruption be uncovered inside the administration.

In conclusion, assuming that no major significant shocks materialize for the next two years and the economy experiences a moderate recovery, the model displayed in Table 1 suggests that the stage is set for President Obama's approval, presently around 44%, to fall a point or two before bouncing back into the high 40's or even hitting 50-51% by the summer of 2012. This would bring him within reach of winning a second term in a close election.[8] Neither Carter's nor Reagan's scenario but something in-between is what the model predicts. Needless to say, should the recovery falter or be stronger than projected, the forecast for the election would be revised accordingly.

[8] The fiscal model also predicts a close election in 2012 (Cuzán 2010).

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Table 1. Estimating Presidential Approval, Monthly Averages
(t-statistics in parentheses)

Predictor	Model 1 1959-2008 N=579	Model 2 1959-2006 N=555
Job Approval$_{t-1}$	0.90 (59.44)	0.89 (64.49)
Change in Real Disposable Income $_{t-1}$	0.45 (2.13)	0.49 (2.51)
Unemployment $_{t-1}$	-0.41 (-3.09)	-0.34 (-2.88)
Change in Seasonally Adjusted Consumer Price Index $_{t-1}$	-1.25 (-2.39)	-1.20 (-2.38)
Cumulative Vietnam War Dead (logn)	-0.41 (-2.49)	-0.32 (2.20
Cumulative Iraq War Dead (logn)	-0.81 (-4.41)	-0.54 (-2.91)
Watergate	-4.65 (-4.98)	-3.96 (-4.75)
Honeymoon	1.27 (1.77)	0.89 (1.39)
Party (Democrat=1; Republican=0)	-0.64 (-1.75)	-0.32 (-0.99)
September 11		24.90 (7.85)
Positive Events		4.51 (10.28)
Negative Events		-1.55 (-3.05)
Constant	8.54 (5.89)	7.73 (5.87)
SEE	3.55	3.14
Adj. R-sq.	0.92	0.93
Durbin-Watson	1.98	2.07

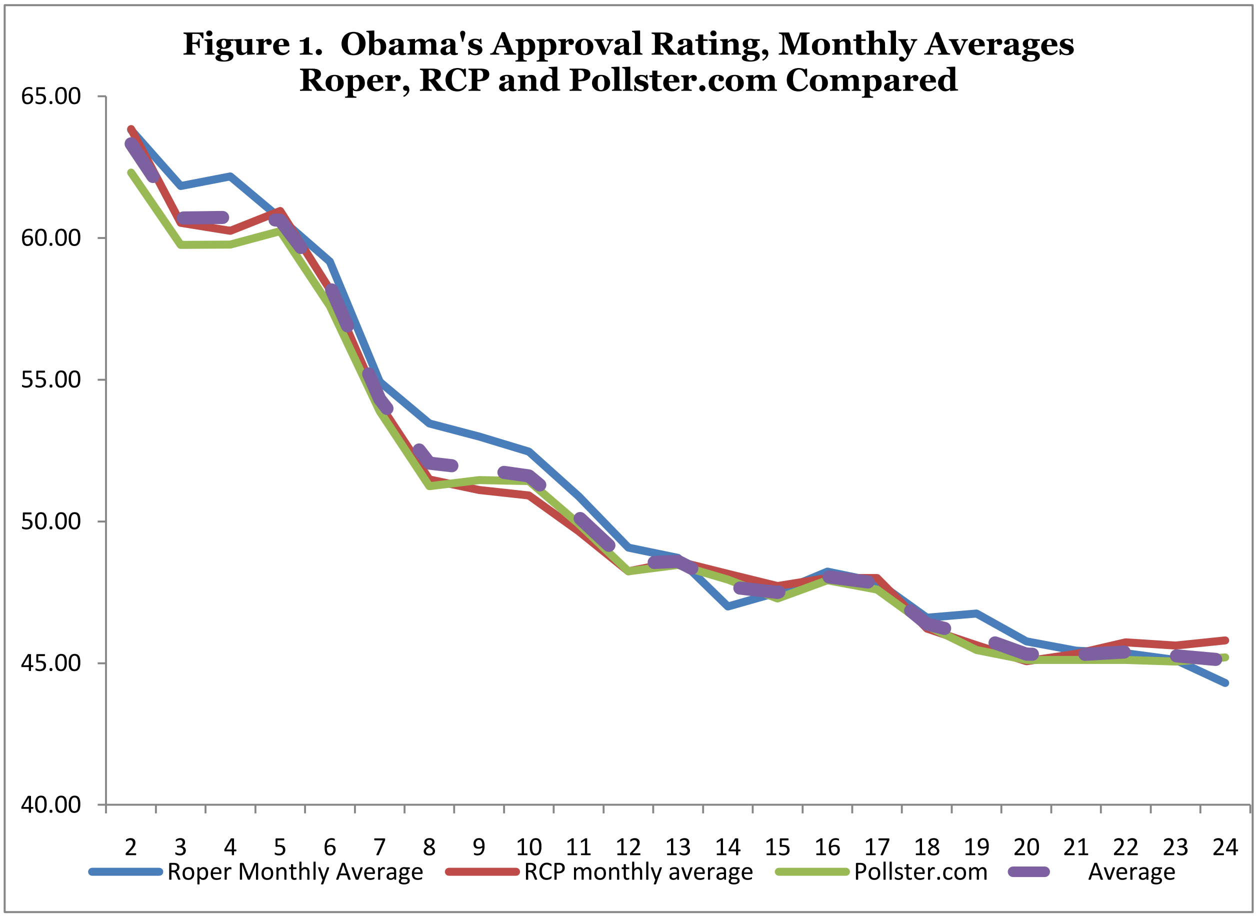

Figure 1. Obama's Approval Rating, Monthly Averages
Roper, RCP and Pollster.com Compared
65.00
60.00
55.00
50.00
45.00
40.00
2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24
Roper Monthly Average
RCP monthly average
Pollster.com
Average

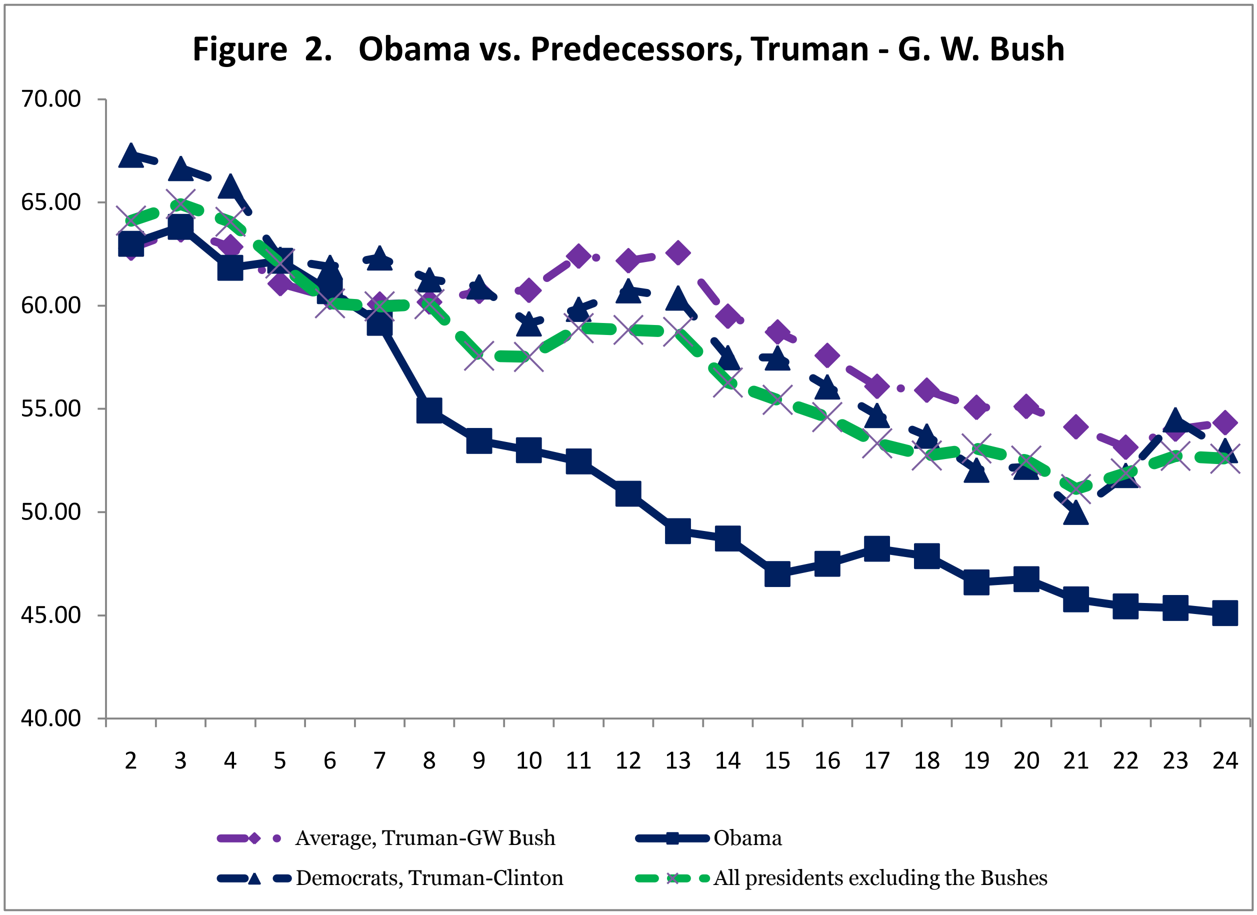

Figure 2. Obama vs. Predecessors, Truman - G. W. Bush
70.00
65.00
60.00
55.00
50.00
45.00
40.00
2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24
Average, Truman-GW Bush
Obama
Democrats, Truman-Clinton
All presidents excluding the Bushes

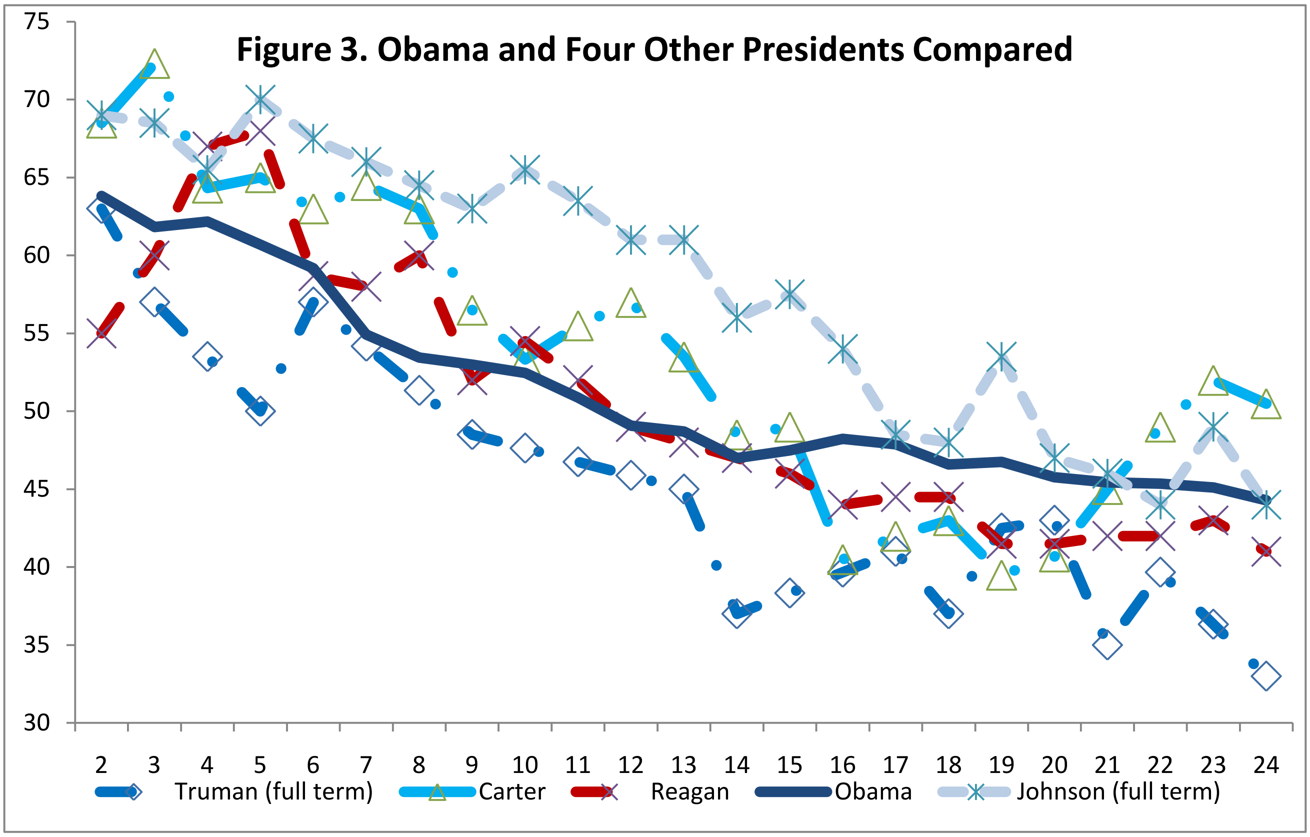
Figure 3. Obama and Four Other Presidents Compared
75
70
65
60
55
50
45
40
35
30
2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24
Truman (full term)
Carter
Reagan
Obama
Johnson (full term)

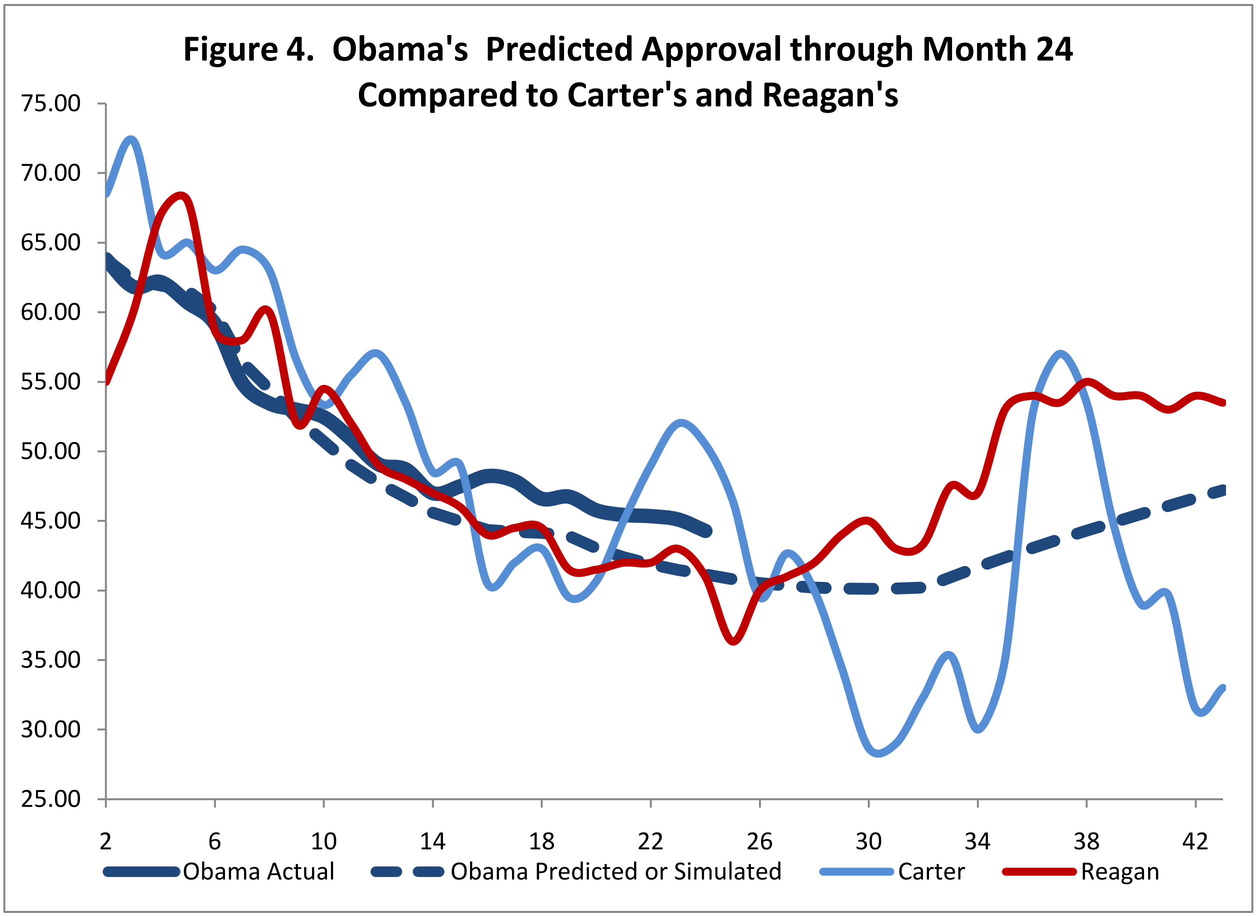

Figure 4. Obama's Predicted Approval through Month 24
Compared to Carter's and Reagan's
75.00
70.00
65.00
60.00
55.00
50.00
45.00
40.00
35.00
30.00
25.00
2
6
10
14
18
22
26
30
34
38
42
Obama Actual
Obama Predicted or Simulated
Carter
Reagan