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Motivated Reasoning, Public Opinion, and Presidential Approval

Kathleen Donovan¹ · Paul M. Kellstedt² · Ellen M. Key³ · Matthew J. Lebo⁴

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Abstract

Presidential approval is a desirable commodity for US presidents, one that bolsters re-election chances and the prospects of legislative success. An important question, then, is what shapes citizens' approval of the executive. A large body of literature demonstrates that the president's handling of issues, particularly the economy, is an important component. A similarly large literature confirms that evaluations of the president, like most political objects, are filtered through partisan lenses. Due to changes in the US political environment in the last few decades, we suspect that the relative importance of these components has changed over time. In particular, we argue that polarization has increased partisan motivated reasoning when it comes to evaluations of the president. We support this empirically by disaggregating approval ratings from Reagan to Obama into in- and out-partisans, finding that approval is increasingly detached from economic assessments. This is true for members opposite the president's party earlier than it is for in-partisans. While the president has been over-attributed credit and blame for economic conditions, the increasing impact of partisanship on approval at the expense of economic sentiment has generally negative implications when it comes to electoral outcomes and democratic accountability.

Keywords Public opinion · Presidential approval · Motivated reasoning · Polarization

"I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters."

– Donald Trump, 2016

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What Drives Presidential Approval?

Many Americans may not be particularly interested in or pay detailed attention to politics, but almost all can and do form an opinion about the president. In turn, presidents want these opinions to be favorable. Surely, their desire for high approval ratings is, to some degree, an end in itself, but more importantly it is a means to other ends: for one, re-election is usually a motivation for first-term presidents, and approval strongly predicts votes come Election Day (Campbell, 2016). Moreover, congressional candidates of the president's party can ride his coattails when approval is high, increasing the chances of united government and legislative success. Even after the election, high approval ratings can justify a "mandate" and provide political capital for passing policies (Bond et al. 2003). Approval, in other words, is a desirable commodity, and one that presidents actively seek (Brody 1991).

A natural question that arises, then, is what drives presidential approval? A large literature reveals that the answer is the president's job performance, particularly with respect to foreign conflicts (Eichenberg et al. 2006; Mueller 1973) and the economy. As the country prepares to go to war or as a foreign crisis escalates, presidents experience the "rally 'round the flag" phenomenon, with approval spiking in a show of patriotism and solidarity. Similarly, when the economy is booming and consumer optimism is up, presidents typically enjoy high approval ratings. But as casualties start to mount, or the economy begins to slow and consumer confidence dissipates, approval inevitably declines. There are nuances to these general patterns, but they have nonetheless been strikingly consistent over time. Perhaps no one would attest to that more than George W. Bush, who saw his own approval rating go from 90% in the wake of 9/11 to 25% as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan dragged on and the economy descended into the Great Recession.

Though the research examining the effect of economic performance on approval is extensive, this work generally assumes that citizens objectively assess the state of the economy and update their evaluations of the executive accordingly. While some individuals resembling Bayesian updaters presumably exist, we suggest that this assumption is overly optimistic for the majority of the public. For example, citizens have multiple motivations when it comes to opinion formation—accuracy being an important factor, but not the only one. In particular, citizens hold partisan attitudes and are motivated to protect and defend these partisan priors.

What determines which of these two motivations is more likely to dominate? One of the most well documented shifts in American politics over the past few decades is the rise of polarization (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008). Research shows that the impact of partisanship on vote choice has strengthened, and citizens view not only opinions but also facts through partisan lenses (Bartels 2000). Due to this increased polarization, we expect that partisan motivations have become more important than accuracy motivations. As a result, we argue that economic assessments have become more detached from presidential approval over time. In other words, when it comes to presidential approval, the "rational public" (Page and Shapiro 1992) has become the "partisan public" (Lebo and Cassino 2007).

Before testing this hypothesis, we first describe the fundamentals of approval and what shapes these attitudes. We then shift to a discussion of motivations in public opinion, arguing that polarization has increased the saliency—and thus impact—of partisan motivations on approval over time. This is followed by an empirical examination of the over-time relationship between consumer sentiment and presidential approval separately for in-partisan, out-partisans, and independents. The results show that economic evaluations have become less important for presidential approval over time, first among out-partisans, then among in-partisans as well. Independents remain mostly responsive to the economy. We conclude with a discussion of the effects of these developments, but for now note that the implications are mixed. On the one hand, observers have noted the disproportionate amount of credit and blame that is assigned to the president relative to the institution's actual capabilities to shape the economy. On the other, *why* the economy matters less now than it has in the past is problematic. When citizens are more motivated to defend their party than form accurate beliefs, approval becomes an exercise in tribalism rather than a fair and grounded assessment of the executive.

The Fundamentals of Approval

The literature on presidential approval as a dependent variable alone is voluminous. Early research recognized the importance of the economy especially, and tended to focus exclusively on objective economic reality, finding various indicators to be predictive of presidential approval over time. In these studies, the economy usually took the form of inflation, unemployment, or GDP growth (Arcelus and Meltzer 1975; Goodhart and Bhansali 1970; Hibbs 1979; Kramer 1971; Mueller 1970, 1973). Sometimes the variables were used in levels, other times as first-differences, and still others as growth rates (e.g., Kinder and Roderick Kiewiet 1981; Kramer 1983).

Eventually, MacKuen et al. (1992) shifted the conversation by demonstrating that subjective economic evaluations did a better job explaining approval dynamics than did objective economic realities. In particular, they found that the University of Michigan's Index of Consumer Sentiment (ICS), a monthly survey of citizens' economic assessments, proved to be a superior predictor of approval over time. They further demonstrated that when the ICS was broken down into its components, the portion of consumer sentiment that best predicted approval was forward-looking, sociotropic assessments. This supported one of the earliest formulations by Downs (1957), who believed that voters would be forward-looking in their economic assessments. On the other hand, that sociotropic considerations were more important than so-called "pocketbook" ones contradicted the belief that citizens were focused on personal utility. Nonetheless, this perspective aligns with a large body of research showing that self-interest plays at best a qualified role in public opinion (e.g., Sears and Funk 1991).

Subsequent scholarship has strongly supported the conclusions of MacKuen et al. (1992) with respect to the relative importance of subjective economic indicators (see also Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). More recent studies have made clear that subjective economic assessments affect not just presidential

approval, but also congressional approval (Box-Steffensmeier and Tomlinson 2000; Durr et al. 1997) and even macropartisanship (Erikson et al. 2002). This relationship has also been found to hold up in other established democracies (Cohen 2004) and contexts where accountability for economic performance is clear (Anderson 2000).

With respect to whether these perceptions are forward- or backward-looking, however, scholars have continued to debate. Clarke and Stewart (1994) argued that retrospective considerations are the key to presidential evaluations. A number of other studies have also found the public to be retrospective in its economic evaluations, forming political judgements and making electoral decisions based on past economic performance rather than the promise of future economic change (e.g. Alesina et al. 1993; Fiorina 1978, 1981; Gelpi et al. 2007; Lanoue 1994; Nannestad and Paldam 2000; Nickelsburg and Norpoth 2000; Norpoth 1996). Yet prospective economic evaluations still have their proponents. MacKuen et al. (1992), for example, make a compelling case that prospective voters behave like “bankers,” making their decisions based on economic forecasts (see also Abramowitz 1985; Clarke and Stewart 1995; Erikson et al. 2000; Lock-erbie 1991; MacKuen et al. 1996; Welch and Hibbing 1992). Still others have proposed a mixed model, with some citizens behaving prospectively and others retrospectively (Carey and Lebo 2006; Clarke and Stewart 1994; Kuklinski and West 1981). For example, Kruase and Granato (1998) investigated whether the relationship between economic attitudes and presidential approval is affected by political sophistication, while Box-Steffensmeier et al. (2004) and Clarke et al. (2005) proposed that gender might influence whether past or future economic information is more important.

While the economy is frequently the overriding concern among citizens, certain events can shift the foundation of approval away from economic circumstances to other affairs. International crises, in particular, have a large influence on approval, perhaps as much as the economy (Cohen 2002; Nickelsburg and Norpoth 2000). Beginning with Mueller (1973), scholars have noted that public opinion during wartime specifically responds to rally events (see also Brody 1991; Kernell 1978; MacKuen 1983; Nickelsburg and Norpoth 2000; Ostrom Jr and Simon 1985). For presidents during periods of recession, these events may provide a respite and a chance for approval to rebound (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). Yet rallies typically decay, an effect attributed to the mounting number of casualties (Baum and Kernell 2001; Kriner 2006; Mueller 1973) as well as the perceived likelihood of success (Feaver and Gelpi 2004) in a foreign conflict.

Beyond military actions, presidential approval is also affected by political events such as scandals (Kagay 1999; Zaller 1998). Given the public’s inattention to politics on a daily basis, only the most salient events that the public links to presidential action are incorporated into political evaluations (Althaus and Kim 2006; Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Ostrom Jr and Simon 1988). But when a scandal does reach the public consciousness, it quickly translates into lower approval (Newman 2002; Newman and Forcehimes 2010).

Motivated Reasoning and Presidential Approval

Of course, focusing on the handling of issues overlooks a critical factor in presidential approval: partisanship. Many Americans identify with one of the two major parties, and the president stands as the most visible member of one of these parties. As such, approval of the president is filtered through partisan lenses as much as, if not more so than, his handling of the economy. Indeed, partisanship explains a majority of the variance at the individual-level when it comes to evaluating the president.

But why is partisanship important in shaping approval? When asked for an evaluation of the president, citizens have multiple motivations, or preferences concerning the answer. One motivation stems from the fact that humans are “misers”—we seek to form opinions with a minimum of cognitive effort. Another is more directional, as citizens are also motivated to defend their prior beliefs (Taber and Lodge 2006).

In the realm of politics, party identification drives both these motivations: it acts as an efficient, directional shortcut for citizens when evaluating information while also generating prior beliefs (Lavine et al. 2012; Leeper and Slothuus 2014). This means that opinions, particularly approval of the head of one of the two major parties, is heavily informed by partisanship. Of course, citizens are also motivated to form accurate opinions (Kruglanski 1989; Taber and Lodge 2006). But when it comes to politics, scholars have found that accuracy is often sacrificed at the expense of partisan concerns (Jerit and Barabas 2012; Kim et al. 2012; Lebo and Cassino 2007; Taber et al. 2009; Taber and Lodge 2006).

Research also shows that there is variation in the relative importance of these motivations among individual citizens. One consistent finding is that politically sophisticated and interested individuals are more likely to be motivated by partisan concerns (Bullock et al. 2015; Lodge and Taber 2005; Slothuus and De Vreese 2010; Taber and Lodge 2006). The tendency toward biased information processing also increases when prior attitudes (Lodge and Taber 2005; Taber and Lodge 2006) and partisan attachments (Campbell et al. 1960; Lebo and Cassino 2007) are stronger (see also Leeper and Slothuus 2014). On the flip side, many citizens are ambivalent about their party, and this appears to reduce the likelihood of motivated reasoning. These ambivalent partisans engage in more cognitive effort when forming their opinions and hold more accurate perceptions of political reality (Lavine et al. 2012).

In the aggregate, much (Erikson et al. 2002; Stimson 2004)—though not all (Althaus 2003; Duch et al. 2000)—of this individual variation cancels out. This means that interpreting the overall level of approval for presidents is a complicated function of individual motivations and the relative composition of individuals. Fortunately, comparing differences in approval provides more solid ground for unbiased inferences. This is because biases in absolute levels are “controlled for” when analyzing changes over time.¹

¹ This would not hold if biases are non-constant over time; for example, if the composition of the parties—and therefore the net effect of partisan biases—has changed over time. Certainly there is evidence of shifting demographics among those who identify as Republican or Democrat (Pew Research Center 2018). But we are unaware of any evidence suggesting that levels of political sophistication or partisan

How Polarization Has Increased Motivated Reasoning in Presidential Approval

We contend that the importance of partisan motivations in presidential approval has increased over time. We attribute this to one of the most important dynamics in American politics over the last few decades: polarization. Early evidence for the rise of polarization came from elites, with the ideology and partisanship of legislators becoming increasingly correlated over time (Hetherington 2001). Although some researchers continue to debate whether the public has also become polarized, a great deal of evidence for mass polarization has accumulated over time (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Layman and Carsey 2002). Much of this work suggests a phenomenon similar to elites, with citizens' party identification and ideology becoming more correlated over time (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Layman and Carsey 2002; Levendusky 2009). Moreover, this sorting drives social polarization, defined as increasing animosity and anger toward out-partisans (Mason 2015, 2018).

Scholars have proposed a number of non-mutually exclusive reasons for why this polarization is occurring. Communication scholars point to changes in the media environment (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Hollander 2008; Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Prior 2013), while social psychologists have emphasized the importance of converging identities (Mason 2015) and affective polarization (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Iyengar et al. 2019). Given evidence that public opinion is elite-led on many issues (Zaller 1992), many political scientists blame deep ideological division at the elite level (Fiorina and Abrams 2009; Hetherington 2001). For instance, a survey experiment by Druckman et al. (2013) found that citizens' responses to elite policy proposals were heavily moderated by cues regarding the political environment: when competing policy proposals were put forward in a non-polarized environment, partisan respondents shifted their attitudes in the direction of the stronger frame. When the environment was described as polarized, however, partisans' opinions shifted in the direction of the frame sponsored by their party, even if it was the weaker of the two (see also Rogowski and Sutherland 2016).

Regardless of the mechanisms, it is clear that the partisan filter has become stronger and more salient in the US over the last several decades. In turn, increasing polarization suggests that the causes of approval may have become less grounded in economic reality over time. In particular, we suspect that polarization has increased the importance of directional motivations, including with respect to presidential approval. This shift in motivations implies that partisanship should be an increasingly strong predictor of approval, and perceptions regarding the handling of the economy an increasingly weak predictor.

Of course, studies have also shown political motivations to affect economic perceptions (Conover et al. 1986, 1987; De Boef and Kellstedt 2004; Norpoth 1996;

Footnote 1 (continued)

ambivalence among Democrats or Republicans has changed over time. Nonetheless, we return to this point in the discussion, particularly with respect to the increasing number of Independents.

Evans and Pickup 2010). For example, Democrats were more likely to believe economic conditions had worsened during the Reagan administration, despite objective economic evidence to the contrary (Bartels 2002). This partisan cheerleading occurs even in the absence of objective economic change, such as when Republican and Democratic supporters adjusted their perceptions of economic performance following Democratic gains in the 2006 midterm elections (Gerber and Huber 2010). This effect extends beyond subjective evaluations, with recent research finding that presidential approval affects consumer spending behavior at both the individual (Enns and Anderson 2009; Gerber and Huber 2010) and aggregate (Key and Donovan 2017; Gerber and Huber 2009) levels.

Yet a great deal of evidence also demonstrates that citizens are not blindly evaluating the economy. Indeed, the partisan gap in economic assessments is reduced or outright eliminated under unambiguous economies (Enns and Mcavoy 2012), and particularly unambiguously bad economies (Bisgaard 2015; Dickerson and Ondercin 2017; Parker-Stephen 2013; Stanig 2013). Thus, while the importance of directional motivations may have increased with respect to both presidential approval and economic perceptions, the latter is clearly bounded by reality. This guardrail on the strength of partisan motivations in economic perceptions means that we should observe a diminishing relationship between the two over time.

Some early support for this hypothesis comes from Lebo and Cassino (2007), who found that the partisan gap in approval has increased inexorably over time. Moreover, they found that while out-partisans shifted approval in response to positive and negative economic information, in-partisans remained approving regardless. While intriguing, these results leave our central question unanswered. For one, their analysis employed objective economic indicators, specifically unemployment and inflation, choosing to “measure the beginnings (objective measures) and ends (approval) of the process and infer the middle (subjective evaluations)” (Lebo and Cassino 2007, p. 728). Here we are interested in the middle, given that subjective assessments are the driving force of approval. In addition, their analysis grouped recent Republican and Democratic presidents together. Thus it is unclear whether economic conditions have remained a constantly important factor or, as we hypothesize, become increasingly divorced from approval.

Economic Expectations and Presidential Approval over Time: An Empirical Test

We examine the presidential approval time series beginning in the administration after monthly data become available for the ICS—January 1981—and ending in December 2015. We are interested not only in the national series for presidential approval but also for the series separated by partisan affiliation and disaggregated into the in-party and out-party subsets.

For the three approval series we use data from Lebo and Cassino (2007) and update it using Gallup’s monthly values. Figure 1 shows the origins of the partisan series: approval by Democrats and Republicans going back to 1953. The lower panel of Fig. 1 demonstrates the growth in the partisan gap over time: what seemed

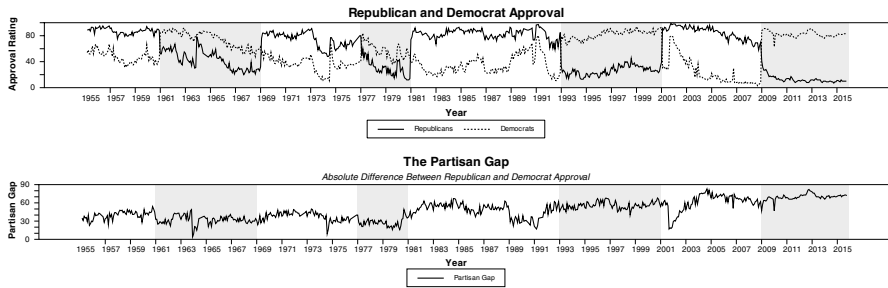


Fig. 1 Presidential approval and the partisan gap. *Note* These are the raw monthly approval numbers prior to transforming the series into in-party and out-party and removing effects of interventions

like unusually high levels of polarization during the presidency of Bill Clinton, for example, were commonplace for President Obama.

Before testing our hypotheses, we need to control for the level of autocorrelation in these time series. Although they are not unit-root series, they do contain a lot of persistence from month to month. Following Box-Steffensmeier and Smith (1996) and Lebo and Box-Steffensmeier (2008), we estimate the degree of fractional integration and find that $d=0.71$ for the in-party series and $d=0.69$ for the out-party series. Given the length of the series we can be confident in these estimates: the series are clearly not $I(1)$, but the degree of persistence may cause problems for model estimation. Thus, we use fractional differencing to create versions of each series that are $(0, 0, 0)$. This makes for $I(0)$ balanced equations that are safe for making inferences (Lebo and Grant 2016; Pickup and Kellstedt 2018).

Our independent variable of interest is the 5-Year Business Expectations series that is a component of the ICS.² We follow the advice of Kellstedt et al. (2015), who show that using a single component of the Index is preferable to using the full Index when investigating specific theoretical linkages, including the one we examine here, between expectations of the economic future and presidential approval is one such case.³ These data are collected by the Survey of Consumer Attitudes and Behavior at the University of Michigan, and is the monthly percentage of people who respond positively to the question “Looking ahead, which would you say is more likely – that in the country as a whole we’ll have continuous good times

² The results are substantively unchanged when the full index is used rather than the single component we employ here.

³ Unfortunately, the Michigan Survey of Consumers does not collect data on partisanship. This leaves us unable to disaggregate consumer sentiment by party. Because of the endogenous nature of political and economic evaluations, it is likely that in- and out-party economic evaluations would look very different from the aggregate, national measure. While we would expect to observe polarization of economic perceptions, we do not believe this would lead to an increased correlation between subjective political and economic evaluations. Rather, we expect this effect to be conditional on objective economic conditions. During extraordinary economic times, partisan economic evaluations resemble each other, with in- and out-party identifiers making similar economic judgments (Parker-Stephen 2013). This should not lead to an increased correlation, however, because partisans will differ in the attribution of responsibility for these economic conditions (Bisgaard 2015). In other words, polarization weakens the likelihood of voters to reward or punish presidents for (perceived) economic conditions.

during the next five years or so, or that we will have periods of widespread unemployment or depression, or what?" We also want to control for autocorrelation in this series, and find that its fractional integration parameter is $d=0.76$. After fractional differencing, which ensures $I(0)$ equation balance, we are set to examine the relationship between the approval series and the subjective economic evaluation series.

When we regress approval on the economic measure for the entire length of the time series, we see that economic perceptions has an impact for in-partisans, but not out-partisans. However, when we look at this relationship one presidency at a time we see that the effects of polarization, particularly for out-partisans, are very recent. Following the common approach to modeling the approval series, we include major events and US military casualties during wartime as independent variables (De Boef and Kellstedt 2004; Eichenberg et al. 2006; MacKuen et al. 1992).⁴ The results are shown in Table 1.

First, during the Reagan–Bush-41 era we see a forward-looking electorate that was willing to reward or punish the president according to economic sentiment, regardless of party affiliation. The coefficients for the in-party are 0.232 and 0.128 contemporaneously and with a 1-month lag, respectively. Naturally, Republicans during this period were supportive of their presidents, but the large coefficients and their statistical significance points beyond blind devotion: these presidents saw their approval among their partisans rise and fall with economic sentiment. The out-party was not as strongly tied to economic sentiment, but they also could be persuaded to approve of a president as the long-term economic outlook improved (the coefficient at time $t=0.282$, $s.e.=0.064$).

During the Clinton years, the rewards and punishments based on economic sentiment continued but were doled out more modestly. In this case, the effects were noticeably stronger for out-partisans (1-month lag coefficient=0.175) than for in-partisans (contemporaneous coefficient=0.075). For out-partisans, this indicates a willingness to reward Clinton with approval as the economy steadily improved, despite the concurrent impeachment proceedings. Again, we see a forward-looking electorate that reacted to economic sentiment.

Then the dynamics change, and markedly so. During George W. Bush's two terms, we continue to see in-partisans using economic sentiment (contemporaneous coefficient=0.097) as they evaluate the president. Bush presided over both good and bad economic periods, and Republicans were willing to adjust their approval accordingly. On the other hand, Democrats during this period were disconnected from economic sentiment. The rise and fall of long-term business expectations did not affect their judgments of a president they clearly

⁴ The events include honeymoon periods for presidents Clinton and Obama, as well as Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, the 2001 terrorist attacks and the rally that followed, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. We also found similar results using the Koyck (1954) model but given papers such as Box-Steffensmeier and Smith (1996) and Lebo et al. (2000), treating the dependent variables as fractionally integrated is a safer assumption than treating them as stationary AR processes in the Koyck model. We also ran models using objective economic indicators such as unemployment and inflation (see Appendix Tables 3, 4, 5, 6).

Table 1 Consumer confidence and presidential approval for in- and out-partisans, 1981–2015

	RWR–GHWB In	RWR–GHWB Out	WJC In	WJC Out	GWB In	GWB Out	BHO In	BHO Out
Economic Expectations _t (s.e.)	0.232** (0.053)	0.282** (0.064)	0.075 (0.050)	– 0.032 (0.065)	0.097* (0.049)	0.038 (0.073)	0.039 (0.052)	0.060 (0.057)
Economic Expectations _{t-1} (s.e.)	0.128** (0.053)	0.027 (0.064)	0.027 (0.051)	0.175** (0.066)	– 0.065 (0.048)	– 0.037 (0.070)	0.042 (0.052)	0.022 (0.058)
Desert Shield 1 (s.e.)	5.632 (4.533)	8.950 (5.472)						
Desert Shield 2 (s.e.)	5.689 (4.540)	7.304 (5.480)						
Desert Storm 1 (s.e.)	20.647** (4.474)	31.005** (5.400)						
Desert Storm 2 (s.e.)	4.124 (4.516)	4.133 (5.450)						
Honeymoon (s.e.)			– 1.282 (1.893)	3.458 (2.451)				
9/11/2001 (s.e.)					4.534 (4.297)	38.868** (6.326)		
Iraq Invasion (s.e.)					5.275 (3.481)	14.248** (5.125)		
Casualties (s.e.)					– 0.013 (0.009)	0.010 (0.014)		
Post-9/11 (s.e.)					3.161 (2.500)	7.587* (3.681)		
Reelection (s.e.)					6.884* (3.601)	– 0.546 (5.302)		
Honeymoon (s.e.)							5.758** (1.426)	3.258* (1.565)
Constant (s.e.)	– 0.087 (0.377)	– 0.601 (0.455)	0.302 (0.351)	– 0.283 (0.454)	– 0.064 (0.618)	– 1.763* (0.909)	– 0.112 (0.422)	– 0.362 (0.463)
N	142	142	96	96	96	96	80	80

*p ≤ 0.05, **p ≤ 0.01 both tests one-tailed; Ljung–Box Q is 21.51 (in-party) 18.53 (out-party)

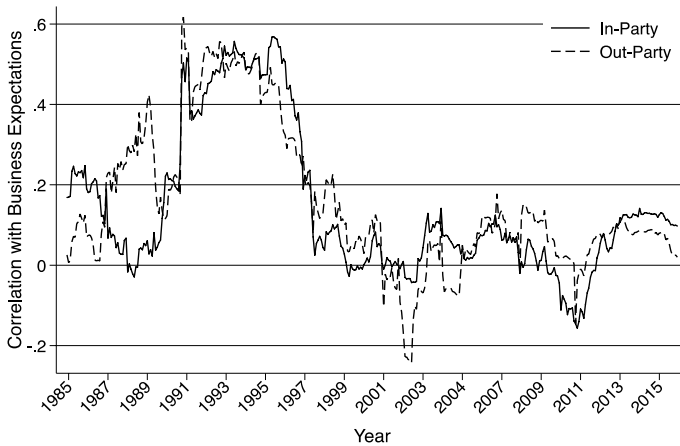


Fig. 2 Moving window regressions of in- and out-party coefficients

disdained. With coefficients of 0.038 (contemporaneously, with $s.e. = 0.073$) and -0.037 (with a 1-month lag, with $s.e. = 0.070$) the out-party was unmoved by economic sentiment. The Bush 43 presidency did include some large and long-lasting rallies when overall approval soared, thanks to bipartisan support. But once these effects are controlled for, Democrats reverted to their default position of disapproval.

The Obama presidency represents a further step beyond even the polarized electorate of George W. Bush. Not only were out-partisans unswayed by the economic outlook (coefficients are 0.060 and 0.022 contemporaneously and lagged, respectively), in-partisans were as well. The coefficients for the in-partisans of 0.039 (contemporaneously, with $s.e. = 0.052$) and 0.042 (1-month lag, with $s.e. = 0.052$) indicate a positive relationship, but are not statistically significant and, even if they were, would not be as large as under the other presidencies. The outlook for the economy may rise and fall, but this was divorced from the politics of presidential approval.

In Fig. 2 we show the changing relationships in a different way—using a 48-month wide moving window regression. We regress our approval measures on Economic Expectations and relevant control variables for 48-month periods beginning with the first 48 months, then months 2 to 49, and so on. For the in-party and out-party lines on the figure, each data point represents the sum of the two Economic Expectations coefficients (times t and $t - 1$). The pattern we find in the analyses of presidencies is again evident—Economic Expectations were important predictors of presidential approval during the Reagan–Bush years and the Clinton years. However, the link between the economy and approval has substantially weakened over time.

In Table 2, we show the effects among independents for each of the four periods separately. The effects of the economy are statistically significant during the Reagan–Bush and Obama presidency but not quite so during the Clinton and

Table 2 Consumer confidence and presidential approval for independents, 1981–2015

	RWR–GHWB	WJC	GWB	BHO
Economic Expectations _t (s.e.)	0.207** (0.058)	0.102 (0.098)	0.062 (0.061)	0.105* (0.061)
Economic Expectations _{t-1} (s.e.)	0.141** (0.058)	- 0.150 (0.099)	0.041 (0.587)	0.013 (0.061)
Desert Shield 1 (s.e.)	7.418 (4.999)			
Desert Shield 2 (s.e.)	12.078** (5.006)			
Desert Storm 1 (s.e.)	20.279** (4.933)			
Desert Storm 2 (s.e.)	5.278 (4.979)			
Honeymoon (s.e.)		- 0.170 (3.690)		
9/11/2001 (s.e.)			25.377** (5.290)	
Iraq invasion (s.e.)			19.596** (4.285)	
Casualties (s.e.)			- 0.001 (0.012)	
Post 9/11 (s.e.)			8.430** (3.078)	
Reelection (s.e.)			- 0.960 (4.433)	
Honeymoon (s.e.)				7.556** (1.650)
Constant (s.e.)	- 0.482 (0.416)	0.309 (0.683)	- 1.560* (0.760)	- 0.375 (0.488)
N	142	96	96	80

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$ both tests one-tailed; Ljung–Box Q is 16.49

George W. Bush presidencies—although the size of the coefficients is roughly the same.

Figure 3 shows the results of moving window regressions for the independents' time series. In this case we can see that the connection between the economy and independents' judgements about the president has waxed and waned over time.

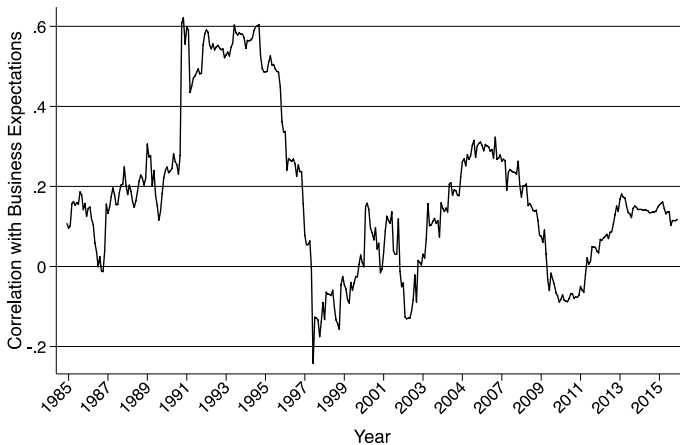


Fig. 3 Moving window regressions of independents coefficient

Discussion and Conclusion

The literature on motivated reasoning in political attitudes is growing quite quickly, and the range of phenomena viewed through partisan lenses has been shown to be extensive. As early as Kramer (1983), we have been told to view economic evaluations as “partisanship, thinly disguised.” Nevertheless, it is still impressive to see that current levels of polarization are strong enough to negate what has traditionally been one of the primary movers of leadership evaluations: subjective evaluations of the economy.

We looked at the ever-decreasing effects of long-term economic evaluations on presidential approval and found that, in the Obama era, neither Democrats nor Republicans responded. Seemingly, good economic evaluations cannot help the president’s approval ratings. Either the out-party cannot be convinced that the economy is improving, or they cannot bring themselves to give the executive credit for the improvements. And the in-party has gone all-in on the president already, leaving little room for their approval to grow.

This has not always been the case. Under President George W. Bush, we saw Republicans gradually lower their ratings of the president as the economy faltered late in his second term. And President Bill Clinton was able to gradually close the partisan gap during what Parker-Stephen (2013) refers to as a “glorious” economy. But President Obama’s standing among out-partisans was immune to positive economic news, and the new President Trump’s approval rating appears outright divorced from it. Indeed, roughly 1 year into the new administration, Trump’s approval rating is much lower than would be expected based on economic performance.

Economists might celebrate this news, thinking that citizens finally understand that presidents have less control over the economy than commonly assumed. A number of commentators have similarly noted the undue and misplaced influence of economic perceptions on presidential fortunes. To be sure, presidents can appoint members to the Federal Reserve Board and influence fiscal policy, but monetary policy, demographic forces, the global market, and a host of other factors also matter for the economic fortunes of a country.

Nonetheless, we suspect that the vanishing link between economics and presidential approval is occurring because citizens are increasingly engaging in motivated reasoning. This growing emphasis on partisan goals is, we suspect, spurred by increasing levels of polarization and media fragmentation. Thus, rather than de-emphasizing the economy and increasing the weight placed on other policy areas in which the president has influence, citizens are increasingly substituting in partisanship for approval.

One alternative interpretation of these changes is due to the composition of the parties themselves. In particular, surveys show that the number of self-identified Independents has grown dramatically over time. Scholars have also noted that many of these Independents are party “leaners,” and behave similarly to partisans. Thus, it is possible that polarization in presidential approval appears not because the public as a whole has become more motivated by partisan concerns, but because those identifying with the party are increasingly likely to already have partisan concerns.

Though we cannot directly test which of these two interpretations is correct, we do note that Independents appear less immune to polarization. That is, the disconnect between economic and political attitudes may also be a function of partisan identifiers being an increasingly partisan-motivated group.

The notion that citizens increasingly rely on partisan goals when evaluating the president is troubling to some. Of course, partisanship is often an efficient and effective heuristic for citizens. Moreover, some scholars argue that requiring accuracy from citizens is not only counter-intuitive given our system of representative democracy (in which we have delegated informed decision making to select individuals), but also unrealistic, given that opinions are shaped by mass communications, such as party cues from elites (Druckman 2014). Rather than becoming enmeshed in the important debate regarding normative standards, we instead agree with Druckman (2014), who suggests that when evaluating the public, less focus should be placed on the substance and more on the motivations (see also Druckman 2012). We further agree that when setting a normative standard, one should be explicit: in this case, our standards are that citizens evaluate the economy objectively, and incorporate these evaluations into presidential approval. An abundance of research calls the first standard into question, and the present study suggests that the second standard is also not being met.

Thus, even if the credit and blame for economic conditions is unfairly placed on the executive, it at least suggests that citizens are holding presidents accountable for their quality of life. Indeed, any introductory government textbook highlights the importance of security, in terms of both physical safety and economic stability. From this perspective, it is quite reasonable for citizens to approve of their executives based on handling of foreign conflicts and economic performance. It is far less reasonable for evaluations to be motivated by party affiliation alone.

What does the future hold, then, for approval? Under the current administration, it seems likely that partisan gaps of 80 percentage points are here to stay, and polarization shows no immediate sign of reversing. Social scientists may be able to induce more accurate perceptions in specialized settings, but citizens typically do not possess these accuracy motivations when navigating the political world. Until this trend begins to reverse, we expect approval to become increasingly a reflection of partisanship, and thus a weaker predictor of other political outcomes, such as legislative success.

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Appendix

See Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Table 3 Objective economic indicators and presidential approval for in- and out-partisans, 1981–2015

	RWR-GHWB In	RWR-GHWB Out	WJC In	WJC Out	GWB In	GWB Out	BHO In	BHO Out
Inflation _t (s.e.)	-0.154 (1.661)	-0.937 (1.961)	-0.695 (1.174)	-1.330 (1.560)	-0.207 (0.458)	-0.423 (0.669)	0.079 (0.611)	1.105 (0.606)
Inflation _{t-1} (s.e.)	-0.595 (1.632)	-2.582 (1.927)	-0.562 (1.168)	-1.571 (1.552)	-0.763* (0.457)	-0.506 (0.668)	-0.360 (0.573)	-2.503* (0.569)
Unemployment _t (s.e.)	2.351 (2.200)	2.437 (2.598)	1.792 (2.742)	1.151 (3.645)	-1.482 (2.574)	-0.721 (3.760)	3.533 (2.606)	2.100 (2.586)
Unemployment _{t-1} (s.e.)	-5.826** (2.172)	-6.279** (2.565)	-2.401 (2.731)	-2.286 (3.630)	-1.467 (2.643)	-0.100 (3.861)	-0.486 (2.724)	-0.603 (2.703)
Desert Shield 1 (s.e.)	3.009 (4.960)	6.551 (5.858)						
Desert Shield 2 (s.e.)	3.535 (4.927)	8.893 (5.818)						
Desert Storm 1 (s.e.)	18.906** (4.860)	28.117** (5.739)						
Desert Storm 2 (s.e.)	5.959 (4.790)	8.279 (5.656)						
Honeymoon (s.e.) 9/11/2001 (s.e.)			-1.154 (1.902)	3.924 (2.528)	2.198 (4.243)	38.132* (6.198)		
Iraq invasion (s.e.)					6.869* (3.523)	14.780* (5.146)		
Casualties (s.e.)					-0.013 (0.011)	0.012 (0.015)		
Post-9/11 (s.e.)					3.827 (2.555)	7.621** (3.733)		
Reelection (s.e.)					8.479** (3.568)	0.019 (5.213)	4.775* (2.148)	2.745 (2.131)
Honeymoon (s.e.)							0.203	0.202
Constant (s.e.)	0.290 (0.749)	0.814 (0.885)	0.828 (0.633)	0.865 (0.842)	0.380	-1.445		
N	142	142	96	96	96	96	81	81
Ljung-Box Q	24.51	18.53	24.51	18.53	24.51	18.53	24.51	18.53

*p ≤ 0.05, **p ≤ 0.01 both tests one-tailed

Table 4 Objective economic indicators and presidential approval for Barack Obama post-recession

	2010–2015	
	In	Out
Inflation _t (s.e.)	– 0.643 (0.652)	– 0.104 (0.288)
Inflation _{t-1} (s.e.)	0.851 (0.652)	– 0.128 (0.288)
Unemployment _t (s.e.)	1.246 (2.892)	– 0.601 (1.275)
Unemployment _{t-1} (s.e.)	– 1.174 (2.900)	– 0.511 (1.279)
Constant	– 0.074	– 0.269
N	69	69
Ljung–Box Q	24.51	18.53

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$ both tests one-tailed**Table 5** Objective economic indicators and presidential approval for independents, 1981–2015

	RWR–GHWB	WJC	GWB	BHO
Inflation _t (s.e.)	1.752 (1.791)	– 2.279 (2.276)	– 0.306 (0.566)	1.494** (0.641)
Inflation _{t-1} (s.e.)	– 3.518* (1.760)	2.084 (2.264)	0.015 (0.565)	– 2.704** (0.601)
Unemployment _t (s.e.)	1.197 (2.371)	– 1.386 (5.318)	1.244 (3.180)	3.450 (2.732)
Unemployment _{t-1} (s.e.)	– 5.126* (2.342)	– 4.524 (5.300)	1.457 (3.266)	– 0.268 (2.857)
Desert Shield 1 (s.e.)	3.997 (5.348)			
Desert Shield 2 (s.e.)	10.933* (5.312)			
Desert Storm 1 (s.e.)	16.927** (5.239)			
Desert Storm 2 (s.e.)	8.407 (5.164)			
Honeymoon (s.e.)		– 0.640 (3.687)		
9/11/2001 (s.e.)			25.538** (5.243)	
Iraq invasion (s.e.)			19.913** (4.353)	
Casualties (s.e.)			0.004 (0.013)	
Post-9/11 (s.e.)			7.401** (3.157)	
Reelection (s.e.)			– 1.547 (4.410)	
Honeymoon (s.e.)				6.198** (2.253)
Constant (s.e.)	0.299 (0.808)	0.254 (1.228)	– 1.874	0.301
N	142	96	96	81
Ljung–Box Q	16.49	16.49	16.49	16.49

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$ both tests one-tailed**Table 6** Objective economic indicators and presidential approval for independents, Obama post-recession

	2010–2015
Inflation _t (s.e.)	0.266 (0.434)
Inflation _{t-1} (s.e.)	– 0.528 (0.434)
Unemployment _t (s.e.)	– 1.026 (1.924)
Unemployment _{t-1} (s.e.)	– 1.661 (1.930)
Constant (s.e.)	– 0.249 (0.364)
N	69
Ljung–Box Q	16.49

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$ both tests one-tailed

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