Understanding Public Evaluations of the President

I. Why study presidential approval?

A. Presidents with higher public approval ratings are more likely to get support from Congress for their policy proposals.

B. Presidents with higher approval ratings are more likely to have “coattails.”

C. Popular presidents are less likely to be impeached and/or removed from office.

D. A popular president is more likely to be followed by a president from the same party.

E. Whether or not we think the public makes the best assessment of the president, presidential approval matters.

II. Presidential Approval Assessed

A. Question Wording

Gallup, Wirthlin (Reagan pollster, continued to measure presidential approval after Reagan left office), and other survey houses who poll nationally representative samples:

Do you approve or disapprove of the way President Reagan is handling his job as president? (or similar question wording)

B. Asked at irregular, increasingly frequent, time intervals, at least since the 1960s

C. Why do we take these poll results seriously?

The sampling techniques behind them have been successful at predicting presidential election outcomes for over 30 years. There is a margin of error
(plus or minus 3-4% with a sample of about 1000 or more), but the results are typically within the margin of error.

III. Economic Influences on Presidential Approval

A. Actual economic conditions: e.g. inflation, unemployment, average earnings

B. Perceptions of the economy

1. Retrospective vs. Prospective evaluations

2. Egocentric vs. Sociotropic evaluations

C. Research findings

1. Prospective sociotropic evaluations and NOT actual economic conditions are most closely associated with evaluations of the president

When citizens are more optimistic about the future of the national economy, they are more likely to approve the president's job performance.

2. Reciprocal relationship between economic expectations and presidential approval

At the same time as positive expectations for the economic future lead to more positive assessment of presidential job performance, more positive evaluations of the president lead to a more positive outlook on the national economic future.

Likely explanation: if we perceive the president as competent, we are more likely to have a positive view of his ability to influence the economy, leading to more positive economic expectations.

IV. Honeymoon Effect

There are more positive evaluations of job performance during the president’s 1st year in office, although the length of the honeymoon period
seems to be decreasing.

V. Rally and Other Important Events

A. Rally events, associated with an increase in presidential approval, are typically international in nature and are seen as a "rally 'round the flag" or patriotic reaction to a national threat.

B. Other events can have either positive or negative influences on presidential approval.

These events typically are of great importance and affect either the president (as in a scandal within the administration) or the entire nation.

1. Examples of events having a positive effect:
   assassination of John Kennedy
   attempted assassination of President Reagan
   Oklahoma City bombing

2. Examples of events having a negative effect:
   Watergate
   Iran-hostage crisis
   Iran-Contra

VI. Major speeches and trips abroad

VII. Trust and Confidence in the National Government Overall

A. Trust and confidence are based on evaluations of competency and responsiveness.

B. Competence and responsiveness are reflected in:

1. Policy outcomes: peace, prosperity

2. Policy process: responsiveness, fulfilling fiduciary commitment, placing public interest above personal or party interest
Is the process fair and in the best interest of the public?

Does the public play an important role?

C. When there is greater public trust and confidence in the national government overall, the president is more likely to gain public approval of his job performance.