



What have you done for me lately? Charisma attenuates the decline in U.S. presidential approval over time

James W. Beck ^{a,*}, Alison E. Carr ^b, Philip T. Walmsley ^a

^a Department of Psychology, University of Minnesota, United States

^b Department of Psychology, University of Akron, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 September 2011

Received in revised form 9 April 2012

Accepted 3 June 2012

Available online 21 June 2012

Keywords:

U.S. presidential approval

Charismatic leadership

Honeymoon/hangover effect

ABSTRACT

Using archival data for a sample of U.S. presidents, evidence was found for a honeymoon and hangover effect in approval ratings over time. That is, presidential approval tended to be high early in the president's term and decrease over time. The effect of time on approval persisted even when military and economic indicators were included as predictors of presidential approval. More importantly, the effect of time on approval was moderated by charisma, such that charismatic leaders better maintained their approval rating over time. We take this as evidence that the honeymoon/hangover effect on presidential approval is substantively meaningful from a psychological perspective.

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1. Introduction

Approval for U.S. presidents tends to start high and decline over the course of the president's term (e.g., Eichenberg, Stoll, & Lebo, 2006). However, the importance of the effect of time-in-office on approval rating has been called into question (Kernell, 1978). In this article we contend that the honeymoon/hangover effect (HHE) characteristic of U.S. presidential approval rates is a meaningful phenomenon resulting from psychological processes. To test this assertion, first we statistically controlled for alternative sources of variance in presidential approval, including military spending, inflation, and unemployment. Second, we went beyond showing that the time effects persist in the presence of statistical controls by actually predicting the nature of these trends for different presidents. Drawing on the theory of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) we predicted that highly charismatic presidents would experience less of a drop in approval over their time in office compared to their less charismatic counterparts.

2. Is the decline in presidential approval over time a meaningful phenomenon?

Presidential approval starts high and declines over time, but the reasons for this pattern are unclear. It could be that changes in presidential approval are not due to any meaningful psychological processes unfolding over time but rather are simply a statistical artifact such as regression to the mean (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Furthermore, it could be that presidential approval is a function of the political and economic environment, and “time in office” has little or nothing to do with approval rates. For instance, Kernell (1978) argued that presidential approval is largely a function of “peace and prosperity,” meaning citizens are more likely to approve of the president when the country is not losing people in battle and when the economy is functioning well, arguments for which Kernell provided empirical support. Subsequent research supports Kernell's predictions. Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2000) showed that a variety of economic indicators, including subjective ratings (e.g., “Are business conditions better or worse than a year ago?”) and objective indicators (e.g., unemployment and inflation rates) predict presidential popularity.

* Corresponding author at: Psychology Department, University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G1.
E-mail address: James.Beck@uwaterloo.ca (J.W. Beck).

Likewise, “peace,” or a lack thereof, is an important predictor of the electorate’s satisfaction with the government in general. Benson (1982) found that between 12 and 40% of Americans surveyed between 1973 and 1982 thought the U.S. was spending too much on defense, Hartley and Russett (1992) found that public opinion regarding military spending significantly influenced subsequent military spending (collected from 1965 to 1990), and Wlezien (2005) showed that military spending was consistently identified as one of the most important issues to Americans (surveyed between 1945 and 2000).

Nonetheless, despite evidence that presidential approval is subject to the political and economic environment, there is reason to believe that there are also psychological sources of variance in the HHE as well. These sources of variance are important, as they may provide insight into how presidents can maintain support over the course of their term and avoid (or at least mitigate) the HHE. Investigations of psychological mechanisms driving the HHE add to the literature on presidential approval beyond the previous focus on political and economic factors.

3. A psychological explanation for the decline in presidential approval over time

3.1. *The honeymoon*

While campaigning, presidential candidates work to establish themselves as the best person for the job, playing up their positive attributes and making promises for the future. This sets the stage for positive expectations from the electorate once the candidate takes office. Additionally, the honeymoon period may arise due to the desire to reduce cognitive dissonance. Specifically, individuals are motivated to have their choices and circumstances align with their cognitions (Festinger, 1957). When a discrepancy exists, reduction strategies often involve altering one’s cognitions to fit the circumstances (Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Knox & Inkster, 1968). Indeed, Beasley and Joslyn (2001) found that voters who supported a losing presidential candidate had more *negative* attitudes about the losing candidate following the election, and these voters had more *positive* attitudes toward the winning candidate following the election. In other words, people seemed to realign their attitudes to fit the situation. Thus, there is reason to believe that the popularity that presidents experience early in their terms, dubbed the “honeymoon” period, has meaningful psychological underpinnings.

3.2. *The hangover*

Although overt persuasion tactics and post-decision dissonance can lead voters to have unrealistic expectations, inflated positive post-decision feelings are not typically maintained over time (Hom & Griffeth, 1991; Meglino & DeNisi, 1987). For instance, Vroom and Deci (1971) proposed that post-decision dissonance reduction cannot be maintained over time if newer information fails to support the conclusions drawn when initially rationalizing. Evidence for this process comes from the job satisfaction literature. For example, Boswell, Shipp, Payne, and Culbertson (2009) found that job satisfaction decreased as organizational newcomers became more aware of undesirable aspects of their job. We expect that a similar process will occur as followers of U.S. presidents collect information about that president’s performance, as performance is unlikely to meet expectations generated as a function of rationalization or campaign rhetoric. This may be especially likely to occur for high level leaders like U.S. presidents, as there tends to be an aura of “romance” surrounding leadership, such that followers expect leaders to have more influence than is realistically possible (e.g., Bligh, Kohles, & Pillai, 2011). Over time, voters may perceive presidents to be ineffective (or at least less effective than expected), leading to decreased approval.

We predict that this pattern of presidential approval – starting high and decreasing over time – will be observed even when other sources of variance – specifically, military spending and economic indicators – are statistically controlled. That is, presidential approval is expected to start off relatively high, given that the positive personal attributes emphasized during the campaign are still active on voters’ minds, and voters who chose the *losing* candidate are expected to go through a process of dissonance reduction. Yet, as time passes, voters have a chance to observe more of the president’s behavior. Information that does not fit with voters’ initial impressions (e.g., forgotten campaign promises) is likely to lead to decreased approval.

Hypothesis 1. Controlling for military and economic indicators, the amount of time the president has been in office will be negatively related to approval.

3.3. *The role of charisma*

The HHE described above is a well documented phenomenon for U.S. presidents – popularity does tend to decline over time (e.g., Eichenberg et al., 2006; Kernell, 1978). While showing that this effect persists after controlling for military and economic indicators lends more support to the substantive importance of the HHE, it could still be that this effect is a statistical artifact and thus is not particularly meaningful or interesting from a psychological or political science perspective. That is, if approval ratings start high as a function of campaigning and dissonance reduction, it should be expected that these ratings would regress to the mean (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). However, if this decline in approval ratings were due to psychological processes occurring in the minds of the electorate, there should be predictable variance in this decline across presidents. In other words, individual differences should act to accentuate or attenuate the decline in approval over time in a predictable manner. In the current study we identify charisma as one such moderator of the HHE.

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