Presidential Politics, Polls, and the Press

Approval Ratings and Public Perception

A new president generally enjoys very high public approval for the first 100 days of his administration. In part, this is because the electorate expects that the new president will address the problems of the nation with vigor and carry out the promises made during his campaign. During this "honeymoon" phase, a president can honestly claim he has the mandate of the people since they have just elected him to office. This claim is often employed to prod a reluctant Congress to pass the new president's favored legislation. The 100 days after Franklin Roosevelt's inauguration in 1933, when Congress passed a substantial portion of his New Deal legislation, stands as the best example of this phenomenon.

Exceptions to the honeymoon period can occur when the Electoral College has elected a president—such as George W. Bush in 2000—even though he did not receive a majority of the popular vote. The mandate theory argument does not work in this case, and the new president must rely on other means to persuade Congress to act on his legislative agenda. Even so, the glow of the first 100 days provides the president with an opportunity to establish his leadership, outline his policies, propose new laws, and generally set the tone of his next four years in office.

To maintain support for his programs, the president tries to gauge the public's response to his policies and proposals. He and his staff will turn to approval polls, which private polling organizations regularly conduct, for this information. The press and news media also watch the presidential approval ratings and report the results back to the people. Polls help the president to shape policy, the media to spot problems in the new administration, and the people to make judgments about the new president.

In the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth century, presidents could also count on a honeymoon period with Congress because legislators wanted to share in the glory of the newly elected president and perhaps "ride his coattails" back into office in the next election. Later in the term, as differences of opinion between the president and Congress often became more serious, the president was likely to find his proposals languishing in committee or stalled by debate.

Modern presidents are no longer automatically granted concessions from Congress during their first 100 days in office. Newly elected presidents now expect to have to negotiate to get their legislative agenda positively considered by Congress. Success in this area carries a high premium, since being able to pass legislation, especially popular programs or those that benefit large numbers of people, can boost a president's approval rating.

In addition to getting legislation passed, a strong economy nearly always translates into high presidential approval ratings. Low taxes and inflation, high employment rates, steady cost of living, absence of recession, and a strong stock market are all elements that encourage a positive view of the president even though he may have little or no influence over these circumstances. On the strength of a booming economy, President Bill Clinton enjoyed positive approval ratings by the public throughout most of his presidency in spite of disapproval of his personal conduct that nearly led to his removal from office.

A national crisis can raise a president's approval rating if he handles it well. Americans traditionally "rally around the flag" and support the president in an emergency. Clinton's approval was given a boost following the Oklahoma City bombing, as was George W. Bush's in the wake of the September 11
tragedy. A president who effectively manages the nation's response to aggression or disaster will score high ratings. Other examples of presidents solidly supported by the people in their handling of a crisis include Roosevelt following Pearl Harbor, Truman after the North Korean attack, and Kennedy in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Foreign travel can boost a president's popularity because a trip abroad can also trigger a "rally around the flag" effect. Americans feel a sense of pride when they see foreign crowds cheering a U.S. president, and they are angry when foreign nationals demonstrate against their Commander-in-Chief. Nixon's China trip where he scored diplomatic victories in the midst of the Vietnam War, as well as his trip to Russia where he negotiated arms reductions agreements and established détente during the Cold War, boosted his popularity to unexpected heights. Likewise, when George W. Bush traveled to Iraq in support of the troops, his approval rating rose.

War can also boost presidential approval. When the United States engages in conflict, Americans support their Commander-in-Chief, at least initially. For war to have this positive effect, it must be short, successful, and have few American casualties. When Reagan ordered troops to Grenada and George Bush Sr. sent armed forces into Iraq in Desert Storm, their approval ratings increased. With Operation Iraqi Freedom, George W. Bush preserved a positive approval rating in spite of an economic recession.

Presidential approval often falls over time, as new programs begin to lose their luster. This approval decline frequently extends to the president's political party, which often loses seats in Congress at the midterm election. Weakness in the economy can produce a further decline in presidential approval. High inflation, a recession, rising unemployment, an increase in deficit spending, rising interest rates, and a drop in the stock market are all circumstances that can hurt an administration's ratings. In spite of the fact that the president often has very little control over these events, people see him as responsible for the economic well-being of the nation. George Bush Sr. suffered a severe decline in public approval and lost his bid for re-election due to a long recession in the late 1980s. This happened even after his successful and popular military victory over Iraq.

Foreign difficulties can depress a president's public approval as well. Public opinion turned against President Clinton when a humanitarian mission in Somalia went disastrously wrong and many U.S. soldiers were wounded and some lost their lives. Likewise, the Iran Hostage Crisis so damaged President Carter in the polls that it contributed to his losing his bid for re-election. A failure in foreign policy can cause the public to extend disapproval to a president's policies in general, thus increasing resistance to his legislative program in Congress.

Scandal can seriously dampen public enthusiasm for a president as well. Clinton's troubles with Whitewater, Monica Lewinski, and Gennifer Flowers are examples of such scandal. In the 1970s, the Watergate debacle forced Nixon to resign the presidency. Though the facts of his involvement with covering up for the perpetrators of the Whitewater break-in were against him, his case was further damaged when tapes of private conversations he had with White House staffers were made public with numerous "expletives deleted." Nixon's use of profanity made him seem inarticulate and desperate.

At one time, the press generally refrained from publishing personal information that would be damaging to a president. Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy all benefited from reluctance of the press to engage in scandal mongering. The American public's appetite for sensational stories along with more intense competition among the many media sources has lead to less restraint in reporting on the personal life of presidents. President Carter's beer-loving brother, Billy, provided ample fuel to the media and weighed on President Carter's approval ratings. Political parties are now more careful to consider the character and complete history of a candidate because of the intense scrutiny that candidates receive.
Perception that a president is unable to fulfill campaign promises can gravely damage his approval rating. During the heat of campaign, politicians often make lofty pledges that are difficult to keep even in ideal conditions. When Herbert Hoover was elected president in 1928, the American economy was approaching a decade of phenomenal boom. No one had any idea that within a year, America—and indeed the world—would be in the grip of a terrible depression. In his campaign, Hoover had promised an end to hunger, poverty, and want for every American. His campaign slogan, "A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage," was turned into a mockery that was used against him before his term in office was over. Though the causes of the Great Depression were beyond Hoover's power to correct, the people remembered the promise and in bitterness blamed Hoover for the Depression.

Prolonged war or overseas conflict that has no foreseeable end can damage a president's approval rating. Though the public will usually give a president high ratings at the beginning of conflict, as war wears on, approval will drop. Especially harmful to ratings are casualties that are out of proportion to the objective. Johnson's thrashing in the polls over Vietnam is a classic example. By 1968, the U.S. had half a million troops in Southeast Asia and had suffered casualties of over 30,000 Americans with Vietnamese losses being many times that number. The political objective of the war remained unclear to most Americans, however, and no end to the conflict was in sight. Public reaction against the war was so severe that Johnson felt his chances of re-election were hopeless, and he consequently withdrew from the race in favor of his vice president, Hubert Humphrey. In contrast to this extreme response to Vietnam, America's intervention in Bosnia did little to harm Clinton because there were few American casualties.

In spite of making every effort to retain public approval, most presidents leave office with lower approval than when they began. Americans maintain extraordinarily high expectations of their presidents—expectations that often exceed a president's ability to fulfill. Americans may feel sorry for a beleaguered president, but they never cease to expect him to achieve the best possible outcome in every situation, and they become angry if he fails to do so. This anger finds its expression in approval ratings that are ever harder to maintain as a presidency wears on. As President Lincoln observed, "You can't please all of the people all of the time."

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