The effect of public presidential approval on congressional support for the president has been the subject of considerable debate and controversy. Systematic, quantitative studies have been unable to demonstrate convincingly that public approval leads to greater legislative support for the president. The lack of constituency-level public approval data has hindered resolution of the controversy. Studies have relied upon either election results or national-level approval data as substitutes, but both alternatives are problematic as measures of public approval at the constituency level.

In this paper, we use new data gathered from 50 state surveys in September 1996 that asked respondents, among other things, to rate the job performance of the president. We test whether or not public approval in the states affects senators' support for the president and also look at some hypotheses: whether or not minority party status, running for reelection, electoral vulnerability, and presidential coattails interact with constituents' approval of the president to affect senators’ roll-call support for the president. With controls for partisanship and ideology of the senator and the state, analysis indicates no support for the hypothesis that public approval of the president leads to greater presidential support among senators.

Presidents believe that high public approval will enhance their chances of legislative success with Congress.¹ In contrast, among political scientists a diversity of opinion exists on this point. Studies have reported the full range of possibilities: that public approval leads to greater member support for the president, that it has no effect, and even that it has a negative impact!² One source of the controversy among political scientists is the absence of appropriate measures of public approval. In particular, to date no study has been able to use constituency-level measures of public approval.
In place of constituency-level measures of public approval, past studies have relied upon two surrogates: national-level presidential approval and election results. Both alternatives introduce considerable measurement error as indicators of constituency-level public approval for the president. National approval data, even when disaggregated into partisan or other groupings, do not measure opinion at the constituency level and assume no variance in public approval across congressional districts or states (Bond and Fleisher 1984, 1990, 64–65). Election results, while collectable at the constituency level (state or district for senators or representatives, respectively), are not opinion data (Leogrande and Jeydel 1997). Further, they are observed before the president takes office and, thus, before the public has had a chance to observe his or her behavior in office. Moreover, election results may be and are affected by a host of factors that do not enter into the public’s assessment of presidential job performance. “To analyze the effects of public approval on individual members’ presidential support, we need to measure public opinion at the individual level—namely, in each representative’s electoral constituency” (Bond, Fleisher, and Northrup 1988, 55).

Luckily, in this paper, we are able to do just that. We exploit new and unique data—large, representative samples of public opinion in all 50 states—to test directly for the impact of public approval on senators’ support of the president. To our knowledge, this is the first study that has been able to relate congressional support of the president to the public opinion that theory suggests representatives should be most responsive to—the opinion of the constituents who vote for them.

**New Data for an Old Problem:**
**State-Level Presidential Approval Data**

We acquired these data from Mason-Dixon Political Media Research, which conducted 50 separate state surveys in early September 1996. Some 40,000 telephone interviews were conducted nationally, with about 800 respondents per state and sampling errors ranging from 3.5% to 5%. Respondents were asked the following question: “How would you rate the performance of Bill Clinton as president: excellent, pretty good, only fair, or poor?” Unfortunately, Mason-Dixon did not offer breakdowns between voters and nonvoters, nor did they keep the actual survey protocols. Thus, we cannot test whether senators are responsive to voters or to public opinion more generally. Nor can we use these data at the House district level.
The Mason-Dixon data seem to understate Clinton’s popularity when compared to national estimates taken at about the same time. Weighting by state population the sum of “excellent” and “pretty good” produces a national average of 46.1%. This average is lower than two estimates generated by the Harris Poll, which used a similarly worded four-category scale. From August 15 to 19 and September 5 to 8, Clinton was rated positively by 51% and 59% of respondents, respectively. Despite the somewhat lower popularity levels in the Mason-Dixon results, these data have been profitably employed in three published papers to date: one by Binder, Maltzman, and Sigelman (1998) on senatorial home-state reputations, one by Cohen (1998) as a predictor of 1996 state-level presidential elections results, and one by MacDonald and Sigelman (1999) in a study of gubernatorial popularity.

Binder, Maltzman, and Sigelman (1998) and MacDonald and Sigelman (1999) suggest weighting each category (excellent = 1.0, pretty good = .67, fair = .33, and poor = 0.0) and summing the weighted percentages of each category to produce scores. We follow a simpler tack here and merely sum the “excellent” and “pretty good” categories, which gives us a percentage positive score for each state. Practically speaking, it makes little difference which scale is used since the two correlate at .97. Furthermore, results of the analysis reported below are the same no matter which scaling is used. Our percent positive score is, however, easier to interpret with such intuitive statements as “x percent positive leads to y percent increase in senator support for the president.”

Despite the understated popularity levels of the Mason-Dixon surveys, they still appear cross-sectionally valid. Clinton’s state-poll ratings are correlated with other state characteristics that one would expect, such as Clinton’s 1992 and 1996 vote performances in the state (Pearson’s r = .75 and .83) and state citizen ideology (r = .64) and partisanship (r = .62). These correlations indicate that cross-sectionally, presidential approval is rooted in the partisan and ideological makeup of the state.

Most important to the argument of this analysis, these data exhibit considerable variation across states, something that national approval ratings mask. Clinton’s job performance ratings ranged from 29% in Idaho to 58% in Minnesota, with a standard deviation of 7.2. The Mason-Dixon results demonstrate that different constituencies send quite different signals to senators about their approval of the administration. Thus, national-level public opinion data do not provide a valid test of the hypothesized relationship between individual senators’ support for the president and public approval in their constituencies.
Nevertheless, there are important limitations to these cross-sectional data as well. They do not, for instance, allow us to test whether or not senators respond to trends in support of the president, a question that would require longitudinal data to answer. Still, these data provide us with a measure of opinion in the appropriate publics, which permits a direct test of the hypothesized connection between constituency approval of the president and congressional support.

**Electoral Incentives and Congressional Support**

Previous research identifies electoral incentives as one mechanism by which popular approval might affect congressional support for the president (Neustadt 1960). The electoral incentives perspective suggests that members of Congress will support the president if he or she is popular in their districts but distance themselves if the president is unpopular because members fear electoral retribution from voters. This perspective assumes that voters hold members accountable for their support of the president. Such a model is built upon notions of public opinion that emphasize limitations of public knowledge about politics and the primacy of the president in the voters' political world. A more refined version of the electoral incentives perspective focuses on the electoral vulnerability of members of Congress. Thus, vulnerable members are expected to be sensitive to popular opinion about the president, while members who are essentially assured of reelection may be less sensitive to this aspect of public preferences.

Our dependent variable is the percentage support for the president's positions on roll calls on which he took a public position, corrected for absences (Congressional Quarterly, Inc. 1996). Support does not necessarily indicate presidential influence over congressional voting patterns. Presidents may stake out positions to be in accord with congressional majorities, and both members of Congress and the president may be responding to other factors that condition their policy preferences. Nonetheless, variation in support for the president's position across individual senators indicates the president's success in attracting support from that individual, even if that support results from shared preferences or some outside force. As Bond and Fleisher (1990) argue, it is important to study and analyze success regardless of whether it results from presidential influence or from other forces.

Ideally, to test the effects of public approval on legislative support, one should measure approval prior to the behavior being explained. Unfortunately, the polls measuring approval in the states were
conducted in September 1996, and because it was a presidential election year, no Senate votes on which the president took a position occurred in the fourth quarter. To temporally match the public opinion and senatorial behavior indicators as closely as possible, we constructed individual-level presidential support scores based on Senate roll calls during the third quarter (July, August, September) of 1996. During this quarter, 24 pertinent roll-call votes were cast, enough for us to create a reliable indicator of president support. Moreover, senator support of the president appears quite stable over the term, with correlations among the presidential support scores across the quarters topping .9 in each case. Finally, the results reported below seem unaffected by which votes we choose to use. Analysis of presidential support for the entire year or for any of the three quarters is nearly identical, with only minor differences in the size of coefficients. Thus, while our procedure does not completely correct the temporal-ordering problem, it seems a reasonable one to use, given the stability of senator support for the president and our assumption that, during such a short span of time, the cross-sectional variability in state opinion should not vary much, if at all.

We also need to control for other factors that might affect senator support for the president. We identify four such factors: senator party and ideology and the ideological and partisan leanings of the state. Thus, we estimate a five-variable equation, with senator's party and ideological leanings and state partisanship and ideology of the mass public as independent variables, in addition to public approval of the president. We use Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) and American Conservative Union (ACU) ratings to measure the ideological leanings of the senators. Indexes calculated by the ADA (a liberal group) and the ACU (a conservative group) are frequently used indicators of general ideology. Although such indexes have been criticized as direct measures of ideology (Jackson and Kingdon 1992), there is evidence that such indexes are reliable and generally valid proxies of legislators' ideologies (Herrera, Epperlein, and Smith 1995; Hill, Hanna, and Shafqat 1997; Smith, Herrera, and Herrera 1990). Using interest-group ratings to analyze presidential-congressional relations, however, is particularly problematic because some roll-call votes used to construct the indexes are also used to gauge presidential support. To minimize this circularity, we purge from the ideological indexes those votes on which the president expressed a position, and then we recalculate senator's ideology from the remaining votes.

We also use a dummy variable for party, the state citizen ideology, and partisanship measures noted above.
Results of this initial analysis are presented in Table 1. With these controls, public approval of the president shows no statistically significant effect on member support for the president. The only variable that affects senatorial support for the president is senator’s ideology, and its effect is massive. Each percentage point shift in senatorial liberalism translates into a .54% change in support for the president ($t = 6.68$). Party of the senator has no independent effect here, in part because of the strong correlation between senator ideology and party (.95). Finally, the adjusted $R^2$ is .91. Results thus far unearth no support for the hypothesis that state-level public approval of the president affects senator support for the president. However, senators may vary in their responsiveness to public opinion depending on their electoral status. We now turn to this hypothesis.

**Party Differences**

Members of the president’s party may be predisposed to support the president, regardless of the level of public support for the president within the state. First, party members tend to agree over public
policy options and directions, thus producing agreement in roll-call behavior and support for the president. Second, legislators and the president may feel a sense of loyalty to their shared party, a type of psychological attachment. Such an attachment produces support for the president as a by-product of rallying to the party’s banner, because many members view the president as the party’s leader, or they recognize that many others in the nation view the president this way. Also, presidential copartisans may be supportive of the president because they are responding to electoral coalitions that closely resemble the president’s.

The effect of all these processes is that members of the president’s party are likely to support the president regardless of public approval ratings or, at the very least, that there will be little variance in support for the president among members of the party. High or low levels of public approval for the president should thus have little impact on support from these senators. Because support for the president is high among copartisans, there is a ceiling effect, and strong public support is not likely to increase it. If the president is unpopular, copartisans may rally to his or her support, because their electoral fates are tied to the president’s, and lowering their support is not likely to insulate them from the president’s unpopularity at election time.

In contrast, opposition party members may be more sensitive to levels of public approval in their districts. Opposition legislators may look upon district presidential popularity as an indicator of the political environment with which they must deal. If the president is popular, they may have a hard time resisting public pressures to support him or her. What is more likely, however, is that if they represent a state or district in which presidential approval is low or dives, incentives to resist the president will strengthen.

For example, when the president is unpopular back home, opposition legislators may see an opportunity to undermine him, harming both his and his party’s chances for re-election. One way to harm the incumbent president is to oppose him, thereby weakening the chances that Congress will enact his policies. Research suggests that presidential popularity falls as presidential success in Congress declines (Brace and Hinckley 1992; Ostrom and Simon 1985). Furthermore, the increase in public criticism and opposition by members of Congress undermines the president’s image as a strong leader. A weakened president may have a hard time mobilizing the public when needed. Thus, low levels of presidential popularity may strengthen the incentive for opposition party members to attack the president actively.
We find some initial support for the hypothesis of party differences. Republican support ranges 50 points, from a low of 16.7 to a high of 66.7, with a standard deviation of 12.4. In contrast, Democratic support ranges only 36.7 points, from a low of 59.1 to a high of 95.8, with a standard deviation of 7.9. These data suggest some cross-pressuring in the opposition party—that is, party pushes Republicans to oppose the president, while district constituency opinion pushes those representing states where the president is popular to support him. To test this party effect, we created an interaction term by multiplying opposition party by presidential approval.

Running for Reelection

The electoral incentives perspective also suggests that members of Congress will be responsive to presidential approval in their districts because of potential retribution from voters. Thus, if the president is unpopular, legislators run risks with voters if they are too supportive of the president, and if the president is popular, the risks are in not being supportive enough. The Senate is a fine laboratory to test the impact of electoral threat on support because of the staggered terms of office. Comparing the support of those senators up for reelection with those not so exposed helps us control for other possible factors that might affect legislative support and may be, coincidently, occurring at the same time and/or working in the same direction as the election effects. To test the election-timing model, we created two variables.

The first variable is an interaction term between presidential approval and whether or not the senator was running for reelection. This variable takes on the approval score if the senator is running and 0 if the senator is not running. The logic underlying this variable is that all members up for reelection may feel vulnerable regardless of their objective levels of electoral safety, a possibility supported by at least one study of state legislators (Cohen 1984).

The second variable hones in on those members who are facing tough reelection contests, on the premise that only these members will feel vulnerable and thus be responsive to constituent opinions. We use Congressional Quarterly's preélection assessments of each Senate race to judge the electoral vulnerability of senators running for reelection in 1996 (Greenblatt and Wells 1996). Congressional Quarterly groups races into four basic categories: no clear favorite, leaning Republican (Democrat), favored Republican (Democrat), and safe Republican (Democrat). The four categories are here collapsed into two for the sake of building the interaction terms to be used in the analysis. We
combine "no clear favorite" and "leaning" into one category, which we call vulnerable, and combine "favored" and "safe" into a "not vulnerable" category. Of the 21 senators running for reelection, 10 fall into the "vulnerable" grouping and 11 into the "not vulnerable" grouping.

Model Estimation

Table 1 also presents the results of the analysis that add the conditional (or interaction) effects variables. Again, senator's ideology is statistically significant and quite powerful, repeating the earlier finding: each percentage point shift in senator's ideology corresponds to a .57 shift in senator support for the president. And now, senator's party emerges as a significant variable ($p = .025$, one-tailed test). The regression coefficient indicates that Democrats are more supportive of the president than are Republicans by 23.5 percentage points.

The only other variable with a possible significant effect is the interaction between party status and presidential popularity. This variable just crosses the conventional .05 level for statistical significance. Its regression coefficient suggests that, for opposition party senators, each percentage point shift in presidential approval translates into a .41 shift in senator support for the president. Yet the importance of this variable is ambiguous. If we drop this variable out of the equation, the resulting $R^2$ is .9195, which is only trivially different from the fuller equation's .9220. Thus, this variable does not seem to add much to our understanding of the sources of senator support or opposition to the president.

Conclusion

The literature on the impact of public presidential approval on congressional support has been plagued by a lack of data on public approval at the constituency level, among other weaknesses. In this paper, we were able to employ a unique data set, state-level public approval for all 50 states, to address this question. By matching constituency with, in this case, U.S. senators, we have been able to test directly for the impact of constituency approval of the president on legislator support of the chief executive. Moreover, our data allowed us to construct several tests consistent with the electoral incentives perspective of how such constituency opinions might affect legislative behavior.

Results offer little support for the hypothesis that members of Congress respond directly to their constituencies' approval of the
president in deciding whether or not to support the president on roll-call votes. Such results are reminiscent of Pritchard’s (1986) findings that controls for party and district demographics wiped out any effect of presidential elections results on the subsequent roll-call behavior of members of Congress.

Nonetheless, we must be cautious in such generalization because we have only one data point. Replicating this study across other Senates, and to the House as well, is necessary to build confidence that it is presidential popularity as an attribute of presidents in general, and not responses to Bill Clinton in particular, that are driving these results. Moreover, as we are now in an age of heightened partisanship at the congressional level, where the ideological split between the parties is severe, there may be less room for presidential approval to come into play. Senator party and ideology alone account for approximately 90% of the variance in senator support for the president. Moderate and cross-pressured members who share the president’s ideology may be more responsive to the president’s public approval than are members with firm and congruent partisan and ideological preferences. Moreover, our cross-sectional design cannot address the important theoretical issue of the impact of public approval oscillations over time on member support for the president. Only more data points for data like those employed in this paper will help resolve these other nagging questions.

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NOTES

1. For a good review of different administrations’ views, see Edwards 1998.
Other reviews and methodological/theoretical critiques include Edwards 1989; Bond, Fleisher, and Northrup 1988; and Bond and Fleisher 1990.

3. National-level approval data are appropriate when looking at the behavior of Congress as a whole.

4. Bond, Fleisher, and Northrup (1988) use regional approval in place of national approval. Although regional approval does have some cross-sectional variation, it still does not measure approval in each member's constituency.


6. Del Ali, of Mason-Dixon, graciously provided us with the necessary information and assistance.

7. The Harris Poll is worded: "How would you rate the overall job President Clinton is doing as president—excellent, pretty good, only fair, or poor?" Only the combined "excellent/pretty good" and "fair/poor" category results are available. The August 5–8 poll was based on a national sample of adults, whereas the September 5–8 poll reported results based on likely voters. Job approval polls for the period from late August through early September also produce positive readings higher than the Mason-Dixon results: Gallup (mid-August)—53%; Gallup (early September)—60%; ABC News (early September)—57%; CBS News (early September)—57%; Yankelovich for CNN and Time (early September)—61%, and the Los Angeles Times (early September)—57%.

8. The citizen ideology data are described in Berry, et al. 1998. We use the updated 1996 values. The partisanship scores come from the 1996 Voters News Service exit polls, as found in Ladd 1997.

9. However, as Bond, Fleisher, and Krutz (1993) point out, even this model requires that voters know their representative’s level of presidential support, a standard that may be high given the lack of knowledge in the mass public. In response, however, we would point out that all that is truly required is for members of Congress to think that their level of support might affect voters and/or that their level of presidential support might become a campaign issue, an expectation-based model, as suggested in Arnold 1990.

10. We also tried the Poole and Rosenthal D-NOMINATE score for member ideology. In our analysis, we found it makes little difference whether we use the D-NOMINATE or the ADA/ACA scores.

11. Bond and Fleisher (1980) make just the opposite prediction, that members of the president’s party will be more responsive to his level of public approval than will opposition party members. However, the lack of state-level data renders their finding suspect.

12. Borrelli and Simmons (1993) find evidence contrary to their major hypothesis, that marginal members would be more responsive to presidential popularity than safe members would be. However, as they note, “Presidential popularity, after all, is a national-level indicator that may or may not reflect changes in local sentiment for any given member” (107), which reiterates our argument that district-level data are necessary to test for the impact of public approval on the behavior of members at the individual level.
REFERENCES


