Presidential Approval and Legislative Success

Brandice Canes-Wrone
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Scott de Marchi
Duke University

While a large body of work exists on presidents' public approval, no study identifies the conditions under which approval generates policy influence. This gap is particularly significant since empirical research has produced inconsistent findings on whether popularity affects a president's legislative success. In the following, we argue that public salience and issue complexity determine the extent to which a president can capitalize on approval, and we proceed to test this hypothesis on U.S. House of Representatives roll-call votes between 1989 and 2000. The empirical analysis provides strong support for our hypothesis, which holds across a variety of econometric specifications and estimates of approval.

At the end of the Gulf War a Gallup poll indicated that 89% of Americans approved of President George H. W. Bush's job performance, the highest presidential approval rating ever recorded by the Gallup Organization. Political observers at the time predicted this popularity would translate into policy influence.[1] *Washington Post* headlines declared "President Plans to Capitalize on Popularity Gain."[2] Richard Fenno characterized the moment as "the time for [Bush] to expend some of the popularity he has gained in pursuit of a comparably large cause at home."[3] Bush's performance did not live up to this promise, however. For example, although presidential aides cited his anti-crime bill as a keystone of his agenda, a majority of House members voted against the legislation. In

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[1] Throughout the paper, we employ the terms approval and popularity synonymously.

[2] Ann Devroy and Michael Isikoff, "President Plans to Capitalize on Popularity Gain, Aides Say: Bush Will Push Legislation on Crime, Rights Other Domestic Issues." *Washington Post*. 6 March 1991.

[3] David Broder and Richard Morin, "Bush Popularity Surges with Gulf Victory." *Washington Post*. 6 March 1991.

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fact, Democratic members publicly opposed the bill within the week that Bush advocated it in a nationally televised address. Before long, headlines were proclaiming "Bush Squanders Power."[4]

Within the political science literature, a consistent finding has been that presidents actively seek high approval ratings,[5] and a presumed rationale for this behavior has been that approval facilitates policy success. Yet, those studies that have explicitly examined the relationship between presidential approval and success have not produced a unified finding. Consistent with the assessment that Bush could capitalize on his popularity, Ostrom and Simon (1985), Rivers and Rose (1985), and Brace and Hinckley (1992) all find that a president's public approval is positively correlated with his legislative influence. Similarly, Rohde and Simon (1985) show that approval increases a president's ability to sustain vetoes.

Recent research, however, substantiates the ex-post inability of Bush to convert his popularity into legislative success. For example, Collier and Sullivan (1995) show that approval has no impact on a president's ability to sway congressional members' positions on legislative votes. Cohen, Bond, Fleisher, and Hamman (2000) demonstrate that a Senator's likelihood of voting with the president's position is uncorrelated with presidential approval in his or her state. Similarly, Covington and Kinney (1999) find that approval increases the probability that the floor considers a presidential proposal but does not increase a president's success over roll-call votes.

Yet a third strand of research indicates that the effect of approval varies across members, and even these studies do not produce a unified conclusion among themselves. Edwards (1980) shows that presidential popularity is positively correlated with support from senators but not House members, and Edwards (1989) suggests that approval does not affect the votes of core presidential supporters or opponents. In contrast to the latter, Bond and Fleisher (1990) demonstrate that approval increases presidential support from fellow partisans, but reduces support from other members.

The literature thus does not provide a clear statement about the relationship between a president's popularity and his legislative success. To provide such a statement, we tackle the problem by asking what conditions would allow us to distinguish the legislative items for which presidential popularity should generate influence from those for which it should not. Specifically, we argue that positive changes in presidential approval only increase the probability of success for legislation that meets two criteria:

(1) It holds some degree of salience for the general electorate; and
(2) It involves an issue over which citizens have little technical knowledge and correspondingly do not have easily accessible, entrenched opinions.

[4] David T. Webb. "Bush Squanders Power." *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. 2 March 1992.
[5] See Brody (1991) for a review of this literature.

We refer to such legislation as salient and complex; the latter term is taken from previous research (Kuklinski, Metlay, and Kay 1982; Moore 1987).

A range of work finds that issue salience is a significant determinant of legislative behavior (Hutchings 1998; Kollman 1998; Schattschneider 1960), and that preference stability varies across issues (Carmines and Stimson 1980; Zaller and Feldman 1992). Moreover, previous research suggests the factors jointly affect congressional decision making, with members relatively inattentive to constituency opinion and unlikely to control bureaucratic behavior on issues of high complexity and low salience (Matthews and Stimson 1970; Ringquist 1995). We are the first, however, to argue that the factors jointly determine a president's ability to translate high approval ratings into policy success. Our hypothesis, simply put, is that a president's popularity will afford him influence over the passage of a bill if and only if there exists this combination of public concern and public uncertainty about the bill.

We test this hypothesis on House roll-call votes during the presidencies of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton. Our analysis employs a variety of measures of approval, in addition to multiple econometric models. In particular, we estimate a traditional model on all roll-call votes versus those classified as complex and highly salient, and a second model that examines the interactions among approval, complexity, and marginal increases in salience.

The analysis is divided into four sections: section two details the theoretical argument, section three describes the data, section four discusses the econometric analysis, and section five concludes by discussing the broader implications of our findings for presidential power.

The Theoretical Significance of Issue Salience and Complexity

The literature suggests two types of mechanisms by which presidential approval advances legislative influence; in this section, we outline these mechanisms and argue that they apply primarily to salient and complex legislation. The first mechanism, described by Rivers and Rose (1985), argues that congressional members regard presidential approval as a signal of public preferences on the president's policy agenda. Members are assumed to be seeking reelection and therefore interested in enacting policies that voters desire.[6] Since approval is an indication of these policy preferences, members are more likely to acquiesce to a president's legislative requests the higher is his popularity.

[6] Rivers and Rose base this assumption on the argument that incumbents share a common electoral fate that depends upon the overall performance of the government. In addition, research suggests that members have an incentive to vote with their constituents' preferences (e.g., Brady, Canes-Wrone and Cogan 2000; Fiorina 1974).

In contrast to this first mechanism, which regards approval as a signal of citizens' policy positions, the second mechanism involves the effect of approval on a president's ability to alter citizens' positions. Previous studies find that presidents with approval ratings of at least 50% can change voters' positions on an issue, for example through plebiscitary activity, but that less popular presidents cannot do so (Page and Shapiro 1992; Page, Shapiro and Dempsey 1987).[7] In fact, a highly unpopular president can even turn constituents against a policy by supporting it (Sigelman and Sigelman 1981).[8] Given members' incentives to vote with constituents' preferences, this ability to alter citizens' preferences should affect a president's prospects for legislative success.

Although the signaling and preference-altering mechanisms differ, each suggests that the class of bills for which approval facilitates presidential success possesses two key features: public salience and issue complexity. The importance of salience is relatively straightforward. For the signaling mechanism, a president's approval ratings can signal citizens' preferences over the policies on the executive agenda only if the policies have some degree of public salience.[9] Similarly, for the preference-altering mechanism, citizens must take notice of an issue before a president can change their positions on it.

While issue complexity arguably has a less transparent role in the mechanisms, it is equally critical. For instance, when citizens are informed and have entrenched preferences, members are unlikely to view presidential approval as a proxy for constituency opinion. Even Rivers and Rose (1985), in describing the signaling mechanism, acknowledge that if a member is "confronted by a choice between supporting a popular president and the clear interests of constituents, the president's public prestige is a poor match for his or her constituents' interests" (187). Similarly for the preference-altering mechanism, a president's ability to alter public preferences is greater if citizens are uninformed and/or do not have entrenched positions. As Kuklinski, Metlay, and Kay (1982) show, the more informed citizens are about an issue, the less likely they are to alter their policy preferences as a consequence of outside cues.

Since the two mechanisms suggest the identical set of conditions under which a president's popularity should affect his policy influence, we remain agnostic as to whether one or both mechanisms hold. Our hypothesis is simply that the ability of a president to capitalize on high approval ratings for legislative success depends upon the salience and complexity of the legislative item. In the following sections, we test this hypothesis empirically.

[7] In particular, this research finds that presidents can change mass public opinion by five to ten percentage points through repeated speeches and statements.

[8] Research on elite cues provides confirmation. As Zaller (1991) summarizes, "A persistent finding of this literature has been that cues about the 'source' of a message greatly affect how individuals judge the message" (1217).

[9] Supporting this logic, previous research shows that media coverage of a policy area affects the degree to which the policy area influences voters' evaluations of the president (Brody 1991).

Data and Measurement

We test our hypothesis by analyzing presidential success over roll-call votes. An advantage of examining roll-call voting is that several recent studies find presidential approval does not significantly increase a president's influence at this stage of the legislative process (e.g., Cohen, Bond, Fleisher, and Hamman 2000; Collier and Sullivan 1995; Covington and Kinney 1999). Our analysis is therefore biased *against* finding a positive effect of approval for complex and salient legislation. An additional benefit is that roll-call votes are a standard data source for research on presidential-congressional relations, and our results are therefore comparable to a range of prior work.[10]

The data consist of all House roll-call votes between 1989 and 2000 on the enactment of a bill that involved a social or regulatory issue and on which the president took a position. The Bush and Clinton presidencies are examined because our measure of salience, which we describe below, depends upon regional papers that were not on-line before 1989. We analyze social and regulatory issues because, as also described below, public opinion data suggest that regulatory issues are more complex than social ones. The regulatory issues consist of business, financial, environmental, energy, and trade policy, and the social issues include abortion, crime, drug control, gun control, school prayer, and civil rights.[11] While citizens are generally found to be least informed about foreign policy issues (Page and Shapiro 1992, 281–84), we do not examine them because research suggests that presidents have greater influence over foreign affairs (Canes-Wrone, Howell, Lewis, and Moe 1999; Wildavsky 1966). Notably, excluding these issues on which citizens are least informed should bias *against* confirmation of our hypothesis.

To test the hypothesis on the roll-call votes, we analyze whether the effect of approval on presidential success depends upon issue salience and complexity, while controlling for a variety of other potential influences on success. The variables therefore can be divided into two groups—the key variables of presidential success, presidential approval, salience, and complexity, and a set of control variables.

Measurement of Key Variables

PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESS. The dependent variable, ***Presidential Success***, is an indicator that equals one if the House voted with the president's position and zero otherwise. The *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* was used to determine presidents' positions and outcomes. Across the roll calls, the House voted with

[10] See Bond and Fleisher (1990) for a review of this literature.

[11] The significant category of domestic legislation omitted is fiscal policy, which is excluded because these bills commonly encompass both simple and complex issues. For example, the Justice appropriations bill spans crime to antitrust policy. Thus, while we believe fiscal policy constitutes an important component of the legislative process, we leave the analysis of it for future work.

the president 50% of the time, and this percentage was roughly equivalent across the social and regulatory issues. In particular, the president's success rate was 49% for the social issues and 50% for the regulatory ones.

PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL. Like other researchers in this field, we measure approval with the longstanding Gallup poll that asks respondents, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [the current president] is handling his job as president?" Using the poll conducted prior to each roll call, we constructed three estimates of approval and tested our hypothesis on each to ensure that the results are not simply a function of the estimate employed. The first, ***Approval Rating***, equals the percentage of respondents that answer the poll affirmatively. The second, ***Approval 50%***, consists of an indicator for presidential popularity of at least 50%. This variable allows that approval may affect a president's influence in a nonmonotonic fashion, as suggested by the previously discussed finding that presidents need approval of at least 50% to change voters' positions. The third estimate is ***Approval-Disapproval***, which equals the percentage of respondents that profess approval minus the percentage professing disapproval. Brody (1991) emphasizes that approval may stay constant even with large changes in disapproval, and such changes may affect a president's legislative influence.[12]

SALIENCE. A number of previous studies measure public salience using data on media coverage, and we build upon this tradition (e.g., Brody 1991; Maltzman 1995). We conducted content analysis of 36 national and regional newspapers,[13] and base ***Salience*** on the number of stories in which a bill was discussed in either a headline or the leading paragraphs during the six-month radius surrounding the roll call.[14] (For purposes of presentation, the variable equals this number of articles divided by 100). The variable encompasses media coverage both before and after the vote because reelection-seeking members are concerned about publicity following a vote and have press secretaries responsible

[12] We have also analyzed the data using the "shift in range" measure of Collier and Sullivan (1995) to test Neustadt's (1960) argument that a large shift in the president's approval affects his influence and found substantively similar results, which are available upon request.

[13] These newspapers include the *Arizona Republic*, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, *Boston Globe*, *Boston Herald*, *Buffalo News*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Columbus Dispatch*, *Courier-Journal*, *Denver Post*, *Detroit News*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Indianapolis Star and News*, *Journal of Commerce*, *Kansas City Star*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Miami Herald*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer Abstracts*, *Plain Dealer*, *Rocky Mountain News*, *Sacramento Bee*, *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Seattle Times*, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, *St. Petersburg Times*, *Star Tribune*, *Tampa Tribune*, *Times-Picayune*, *USA Today*, *USA Weekend*, *Wall Street Journal Abstracts* and *Washington Post*.

[14] We used the Lexis-Nexis news service to search on the headlines and leading paragraphs. In doing so, we searched not only on the name of the bill and its number, but also on key words associated with the legislation.

for estimating this coverage.[15] The variable is constructed from a broad sample of local and national newspapers because our hypothesis concerns salience to the general populace, and a sizeable percentage of citizens receive their news from local papers. In particular, 53% of Americans report reading their local newspapers daily and 90% at least occasionally; only 4% report reading a national newspaper daily, and 59% report never reading one.[16] Moreover, while overlap exists between the coverage of issues across papers, this coverage is far from identical, even among the national papers. For example, conducting binary comparisons among the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Wall Street Journal* for our set of bills in 1996, we found correlations ranging from 0.4 to 0.7. Our estimate of salience captures such variation.

In coding the variable, we were careful to ascertain whether or not a newspaper article actually dealt with the bill in question and not a related or tangential area of policy. It was in reading these articles that we decided to limit our analysis to roll-call votes over the enactment of bills and resolutions, including votes on final passage, conference reports, and veto overrides. While the newspaper articles discussed the enactment of these legislative items explicitly, procedures and amendments were generally addressed only indirectly, and thus were not comparable.[17]

Among the observations, the median number of articles is 24, and the value of ***Salience*** ranges significantly. A total of 27 observations have no coverage, including the Federal Prison Substance Abuse Treatment Act of 1993 and the Indian Environmental Regulatory Enhancement Act of 1990. In contrast, 39 observations have over 100 articles, and the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1993 and the Omnibus Crime Bill of 1994 each have over 1,000 articles.

COMPLEXITY. A range of research suggests that among policy areas, social issues are those on which citizens are most likely to be informed and have stable preferences. For example, Zaller and Feldman (1992) cite research on moral issues and race (e.g., Converse 1964; Converse and Markus 1979) to develop the argument that citizens' preferences are most stable on the "doorstep" issues that a typical citizen would regularly consider. Similarly, Iyengar (1989) classifies crime as a doorstep issue, and Carmines and Stimson (1980) designate race as the canonical "easy" issue for which citizens have entrenched preferences. In contrast, regulatory policies are not cited as archetypal issues on which citizens are well informed and have stable preferences, but they are often em-

[15] Similarly, Kollman (1998) measures issue salience with data following legislative decisions.

[16] The data are from a survey the Gallup Organization conducted July 13–14, 1998. The questions were: "How often do you get your news from local newspapers in your area?" and "How often do you get your news from national newspapers such as *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *U.S.A. Today*?"

[17] We have run our tests on the amendments and procedural votes, using the same measure of salience, and our results are confirmed. In addition, we have included only the final vote of a bill, so that no bill has more than one roll-call vote and found support for our hypothesis.

ployed as examples of complex policy issues. For instance, Kuklinski, Metlay and Kay (1982) analyze nuclear energy regulation and Lupia (1994) examines insurance reform as prototypical complex issues.

To ascertain that this distinction between social and regulatory issues established in prior research holds for mass public opinion from 1989 through 2000, we compared two types of survey data for the time period: variance in mass opinion, and respondents' reported knowledge. These data are summarized in Appendix Table A, and they confirm the findings of previous work.[18] For any regulatory issue, public opinion is less stable and informed than for any social issue. In addition, the average variance in public opinion is significantly higher and the average level of reported knowledge significantly lower for regulatory issues.[19]

Based on these data and the arguments of previous research, we measure complexity with a binary variable: ***Complexity*** equals one if the roll-call vote involves a bill on a regulatory issue and zero if the vote regards a bill on a social issue.[20]

Control Variables

We include a standard set of control variables to account for influences on presidential success other than approval, salience, and complexity.[21] These variables include:

PARTY %, which equals the percentage of House members in the president's party. Consistent with prior work (e.g., Howell, Adler, Cameron, and Riemann 2000), we expect presidents to achieve more legislative success given a higher percentage of fellow partisans. The variable controls for presidential-congressional preference congruity in addition to any presidential influence obtained through partisan organization.[22]

[18] While the available survey data necessarily involve different question wording for some of the issues, we have included identical wording where possible and have attempted to include non-identical wording only if it biases against a finding of any difference between social and regulatory issues.

[19] The differences are significant at the conventional p-value of 0.05 using a two-tailed t-test.

[20] As an additional check, we compared the number of words in the bills across the two types, hypothesizing that the more complex issues would require longer bills. Conducting a two-tailed t-test, the legislation classified as complex is significantly larger ($p < 0.05$) than the other legislation.

[21] Even though studies of presidential approval do not typically control for the popularity of the president's position, we have conducted our analysis including such a control for observations on which the data is available and found substantively similar results. Appendix Table B describes the details and results of this analysis.

[22] See Krehbiel (1998) for a detailed argument of this point. We have also analyzed the data including a variable, based on the Poole (1998) ideology scores, measuring the ideological distance between the president and median House member, and our substantive results hold. Because the correlation between ***Party %*** and this variable is 0.8, we include only the former to avoid problems of multicollinearity.

POSITIONS, which equals the number of House roll-call votes over which the president took a position that year. Rivers and Rose (1985) find that the larger the president's agenda, the lower his likelihood of success over any given vote. In their analysis, ***# Positions*** was log transformed, and we therefore adopt this transformation.[23]

NEW, an indicator that indicates the first year of a presidency. Previous research suggests that newly elected presidents enjoy a "honeymoon" period of greater legislative success (e.g., McCarty 1997).

CLINTON, an indicator that equals one for observations in which Clinton was president. The variable controls for any difference in legislative skill between Clinton and Bush.

VETO OVERRIDE, an indicator that equals one if the vote regards a veto override. Since an override requires a supermajority of two-thirds, presidents should be more successful on these votes.

Empirical Analysis

We conduct two tests. The first estimates a traditional specification on all votes combined versus votes classified as complex and highly salient. In addition to providing a control model by applying a traditional specification to the pooled data set, this analysis illuminates how the sample of votes analyzed affects the estimated impact of approval. The second test then directly estimates the impact of the interactions among approval, salience, and complexity. This test has the benefits of examining how marginal increases in salience affect the relationship between approval and presidential success and whether only one of the theoretical factors, as opposed to their combination, affects this relationship.

A Traditional Test on Two Samples of Roll-Call Votes

As an initial test, we analyze a basic probit model for each roll-call vote i in year t such that:

$$\begin{aligned} Pr(Presidential\ Success_{it} = 1) = \Phi(&\beta_0 + \beta_1 Approval_{it} + \beta_2 Party\%_{it} \\ &+ \beta_3 Log(\#\ Positions)_{it} + \beta_4 New_{it} \\ &+ \beta_5 Clinton_{it} + \beta_6 Veto\ Override_{it}), \quad \textbf{(1)} \end{aligned}$$

which we estimate for Approval equaling each of ***Approval Rating***, ***Approval 50%***, and ***Approval-Disapproval***. The specification is based on studies that find no effect of approval on a president's influence over legislative voting (e.g.,

[23] Rivers and Rose (1985) conduct instrumental variables analysis in which ***Log (# Positions)*** is endogenous. With our data, the variable is not found to be endogenous ($p = 0.673$ in a Rivers and Vuong (1988) exogeneity test). However, we have conducted analysis in which the factor is assumed to be endogenous, and the results support our hypothesis. Appendix Table B discusses this analysis and the results.

TABLE 1

Presidential Approval and Legislative Success: A Traditional Test on Two Samples of Roll-Call Votes

	Dependent Variable: Pr(Success = 1)					
	Control Model: Pooled Sample			Complex and Highly Salient Sample		
	(1) Approval Rating	(2) Approval 50%	(3) Approval-Disapproval	(4) Approval Rating	(5) Approval 50%	(6) Approval-Disapproval
Approval	0.472	0.065	0.209	3.970*	1.308*	1.841*
	(0.921)	(0.276)	(0.467)	(1.598)	(0.564)	(0.779)
Party%	17.410*	17.372*	17.453*	39.243*	43.901*	38.840*
	(3.820)	(3.838)	(3.847)	(9.392)	(11.057)	(9.003)
Log (# Positions)	−0.927	−0.928	−0.945	−4.210*	−4.084*	−4.055*
	(0.600)	(0.671)	(0.596)	(1.432)	(1.443)	(1.334)
New	−0.178	−0.176	−0.194	−1.172	−1.382	−1.294*
	(0.326)	(0.326)	(0.330)	(0.613)	(0.665)	(0.623)
Clinton	−1.481*	−1.500*	−1.482*	−4.518*	−5.338*	−4.373*
	(0.471)	(0.471)	(0.473)	(1.334)	(1.506)	(1.252)
Veto Override	0.912*	0.890*	0.909*	1.416*	1.387*	1.365*
	(0.432)	(0.430)	(0.431)	(0.575)	(0.560)	(0.556)
Constant	−3.177	−2.924	−2.893	1.799	0.814	3.075
	(3.196)	(3.464)	(3.010)	(5.234)	(5.611)	(4.878)
N	208	208	208	67	67	67
Pseudo R^2	0.142	0.142	0.141	0.331	0.317	0.319
X^2 (6); p-value	33.988; $p = 0.000$	34.132; $p = 0.000$	33.950; $p = 0.000$	30.461; $p = 0.000$	23.534; $p = 0.000$	32.155; $p = 0.000$

Note: Robust standard errors appear in parentheses below probit coefficients. *$p < 0.05$, two-tailed.

Cohen, Bond, Fleisher, and Hamman 2000), and is applied to two samples of the data. The first includes all observations pooled without regard to the complexity or salience of the bills. The analysis of this sample serves as a control model. The second includes only observations that are complex and have a higher value of ***Salience*** than its median, which equals 17. We refer to such observations as complex and highly salient.

Table 1 describes the results of this analysis for each estimate of approval. Because the Lagrange Multiplier test for heteroskedasticity indicates that the errors are not homoskedastic, White's robust standard errors are reported.[24]

Perhaps the most initially striking result is that the three estimates of approval generally have the same effect on presidential success. This consistency

[24] $X^2 = 34.675$, $p = 0.000$. See Godfrey (1988) for a description of the LM test for heteroskedasticity in probit models.

indicates that the divergent findings among previous studies do not derive from variation in the measurement of approval employed. Table 1 does suggest a potential rationale for the diversity of findings, however, by showing that the sample of votes analyzed affects the estimated impact of approval. Consistent with the negligible impact found in recent work, the effect is insignificant in the control model. Regardless of the measure of popularity employed, it does not appear to aid presidents when all roll calls are combined.

Yet for the sample of complex and highly salient observations, the coefficients tell a different story, one in which approval influences a president's prospects for legislative success. Across the three estimates of approval, the effect is positive and significant at conventional levels ($p<0.05$, two-tailed). Interpreting the coefficients at the means of the independent variables, as is standard in interpreting probit analyses, the results suggest that a 10 percentage point gain in a president's approval rating increases his probability of success on complex, salient legislation by 16%. Similarly, the results suggest a 10 percentage point gain in approval minus disapproval increases a president's probability of success on complex and highly salient legislation by approximately 7%. Finally, interpreting the nonmonotonic measure, the results imply that the probability of presidential success on a complex, salient bill is 48% higher if a president's approval is at least 50%.

The parameter estimates on the approval factors thus provide strong support for our hypothesis. However presidential popularity is measured, it generates influence for legislation that is complex and salient, but not for other legislation. In addition, the proportion of votes for which approval has an impact is not trivial; complex and highly salient votes comprise approximately one-third of the observations.[25] This relatively significant proportion suggests that approval is indeed an important determinant of presidential-congressional policy negotiations. Moreover, this proportion is arguably a conservative estimate since the data exclude foreign policy issues, which are those over which citizens are found to be least informed and have the least stable preferences (Page and Shapiro 1992). A random sample therefore would likely include a larger percentage of complex, highly salient issues.

In terms of the other parameter estimates in Table 1, the majority of them comport with our expectations. For each sample and measure of approval, the president's probability of success increases with the percentage of members of his partisan affiliation, and this effect is statistically significant at conventional levels. Also in the predicted direction and statistically significant across the regressions are the coefficients on ***Veto Override*** and ***Clinton***. In particular, the results suggest presidents are more successful on veto override votes and that a difference exists between the average legislative success of the presidents, with Clinton less successful than Bush. The remaining effects, which regard presi-

[25] Among our 208 votes, 67 are classified as complex and highly salient, 36 highly salient but not complex, 74 as complex but not highly salient, and 31 as neither complex nor highly salient.

dential position taking and new presidents, are not consistently significant although those on position taking are always in the expected direction and are significant in the tests on the complex and highly salient sample.

Overall, the results of Table 1 support our argument. Accounting for a range of control variables, popularity is shown to generate presidential influence for the highly salient and complex legislation and not generate influence for other legislation. Popularity is therefore found to be a predictor of presidential success but, importantly, a predictor that depends upon other components of the political environment. To examine this relationship further, we analyze a specification that directly estimates all main and interaction effects involving approval, salience, and complexity.

Interaction of Approval, Marginal Salience, and Complexity

The following test differs from the initial one in two respects. First, building upon research that suggests incremental increases in press coverage should increase the salience of issues (Dalton, Beck, Huckfeldt, and Kaetzle 1998), the analysis examines whether even marginal changes in salience affect the relationship between approval and presidential success. Second, the test controls for the individual interactions of approval with complexity and approval with salience, therefore analyzing whether the relationship between presidential success and approval depends on only one of the factors in our taxonomy rather than their combination. The model is given by Equation (2) for each roll-call vote i in year t:

$$\begin{aligned} Pr(Presidential\ Success_{it} = 1) = \Phi(&\beta_0 + \beta_1 Approval_{it} + \beta_2 Complexity_{it} \\ &+ \beta_3 Salience_{it} + \beta_4 Approval_{it} \times Complexity_{it} \\ &+ \beta_5 Approval_{it} \times Salience_{it} + \beta_6 Salience_{it} \\ &\times Complexity_{it} + \beta_7 Approval_{it} \\ &\times Complexity_{it} \times Salience_{it} \\ &+ \beta_{8-12} Control\ Variables_{it}), \end{aligned} \quad \textbf{(2)}$$

where the control variables are the same as in Equation (1) and as before each measure of approval is analyzed. According to our hypothesis, none of the coefficients on the terms involving approval should have a significant effect except for β_7, the coefficient on the three-way interaction term. The coefficients on the two-way interaction terms ***Approval*** $\times$ ***Complexity*** and ***Approval*** $\times$ ***Salience*** capture the influence from approval given each factor individually, and the coefficient on ***Approval*** estimates the influence of popularity without either factor. Our hypothesis implies that only in combination with complexity *and* salience should approval grant a president influence.

Table 2 presents the results of the analysis.

TABLE 2

Interaction of Approval, Marginal Salience, and Complexity

	Dependent Variable: Pr(Presidential Success = 1)		
	(1) Approval Rating	(2) Approval 50%	(3) Approval-Disapproval
Approval × Complexity × Salience	6.283*	1.320*	3.045*
	(2.507)	(0.386)	(1.180)
Approval × Complexity	−1.261	−0.492	−0.912
	(2.612)	(0.582)	(1.276)
Approval × Salience	−1.887	−0.384	−1.270
	(1.706)	(0.244)	(0.884)
Approval	0.798	0.185	0.676
	(2.391)	(0.531)	(1.173)
Complexity × Salience	−2.811*	−0.166	0.015
	(1.272)	(0.225)	(0.212)
Complexity	0.476	0.089	−0.029
	(1.529)	(0.509)	(0.391)
Salience	0.799	−0.008	−0.023
	(0.875)	(0.120)	(0.159)
Party%	19.122*	18.560*	19.465*
	(4.381)	(4.277)	(4.378)
Log (# Positions)	−0.934	−1.096	−0.924
	(0.613)	(0.693)	(0.609)
New	−0.475	−0.481	−0.538
	(0.358)	(0.358)	(0.372)
Clinton	−1.601*	−1.572*	−1.638*
	(0.521)	(0.514)	(0.521)
Veto Override	0.872	0.797	0.849
	(0.482)	(0.447)	(0.468)
Constant	−3.890	−2.581	−1.746
	(3.538)	(3.539)	(3.115)
N	208	208	208
Pseudo R^2	0.183	0.185	0.179
X^2 (12); *p*-value	42.999; $p = 0.000$	61.236; $p = 0.000$	44.628; $p = 0.000$

Note: Robust standard errors appear in parentheses below probit coefficients. *$p < 0.05$, two-tailed.

Perusing the table, it is immediately apparent that our hypothesis is maintained. For each measure of approval, the coefficient on the three-way interaction term is in the expected direction and statistically significant. Moreover, this is the only significant effect involving approval, complexity, and salience.

Specifically, interpreting the coefficients at the means of the independent variables, the effect of ***Approval Rating*** suggests that if approval increased 10 percentage points, salience increased by 10 articles, and legislation were complex, the president's probability of success would increase by 3%. The results in the second and third columns, for ***Approval 50%*** and ***Approval-Disapproval***,

suggest a comparable impact. Assuming that legislation was complex and salience increased by 10 articles, the president's probability of success would increase by 5% if his approval were above 50%, and by 1% if approval minus disapproval increased by 10 percentage points.

Notably, these increased probabilities of success do not occur for legislation that involves a simple issue, nor do increases in salience unto themselves facilitate success. As indicated by the coefficients of the two-way interaction and individual terms, presidential approval does not facilitate policy influence for legislation that is salient but not complex, that is complex but not salient, or that lacks either quality. Moreover, the effects of ***Complexity***, ***Salience***, and ***Complexity*** × ***Salience*** suggest that presidents do not simply achieve greater success on policies that are complex and/or salient; if Congress was generally more likely to follow presidents on complex or salient issues, then the individual factors would have an impact. The three-way interaction effect is therefore not a consequence of presidents having greater leadership abilities in different policy realms.[26] Rather, presidential success differs among the policies only in the way our hypothesis predicts.

The results on the control variables are relatively similar to those in Table 1, the key exception being that the effect of a veto override vote drops in significance (from $p<0.05$ two-tailed to $p<0.10$ two-tailed). Most important, the inclusion of the control variables shows that even accounting for a range of other possible influences on presidential success, approval has the predicted effect. For publicly salient legislation on a complex issue, high approval ratings facilitate success; moreover, the greater the salience, the greater this impact. For legislation that lacks these qualities, however, presidential popularity does not affect a president's prospects for influencing Congress.

Conclusion

Ever since Neustadt (1960) characterized public prestige as a keystone of presidential power, political scientists have been interested in whether approval ratings facilitate presidential success in Congress. Our main contribution has been to establish the necessary conditions for this relationship. In particular, we find that only for legislation that is *both* complex and salient will popularity translate into policy influence. That different researchers have found varying results when considering bills in the aggregate is thus not surprising. It is only when these attributes are taken into account jointly that the role of presidential approval is explained. This finding resurrects approval as a significant resource for presidents in the legislative arena. Furthermore, our explanation is useful

[26] Moreover, given that ***Complexity*** is based on whether the vote involves a social or regulatory issue, the negligible impact of ***Complexity*** and ***Complexity*** × ***Salience*** imply that empirical support for our hypothesis is not a consequence of presidents exerting greater leadership in the economic realm.

not only for post hoc analysis but also for predicting a president's chance of capitalizing upon approval for a given legislative item.

Moreover, while highly popular presidents may bemoan the finding that approval does not facilitate influence over all types of legislation, a good deal of reassurance can be offered. First, the class of legislation over which approval does facilitate influence is not at all trivial. Even focusing exclusively upon the complex and highly salient sample, it comprises one-third of our data, and we have excluded foreign policy issues, which are generally complex. Second, presidents can increase the salience of issues through plebiscitary activities such as speechmaking (Canes-Wrone 2001; Cohen 1995). Given that even marginal increases in salience augment the impact of approval for complex issues, this capacity offers a valuable means by which presidents can translate popularity into legislative influence.

Finally, although presidents cannot alter issue complexity, they have some degree of choice over the legislation that they promote. In the example with which we began this paper, Bush was not forced to expend his historic approval ratings on the simple issue of crime. Our results indicate that a president *can* capitalize on such popularity if he champions legislation that is salient and complex. Thus, our analysis not only has implications for the relationship between a president's approval and legislative success, but also for the type of policy agenda that a popular president should adopt.

Appendix Table A
Variance in Aggregate Public Opinion and Citizens' Reported Knowledge

	Policy Position		Information	
Issue	Question and Response	Variance over Time	Question and Response	Average % Responses
Social Issues				
Abortion	..should be possible for any reason.. yes	5.35	..how much information about the abortion issue.. very little	20%
	..if woman's health seriously endangered.. yes	2.65		
Crime	..courts deal not harshly enough with criminals.. not harshly enough	9.28	..how much information about crime.. very little	11%
Gun Control	..require a person to obtain a police permit.. yes	2.73	..how much information about gun control.. very little	23%
Prayer in School	..the Lord's prayer in public schools.. approve	3.53		
Race	..spending on assistance to blacks.. too little	10.29	..how much information about race.. very little	20%
	Average Variance	*5.90*	*Average % Ill-Informed*	*19%*

Appendix Table A *continued*

	Policy Position		Information	
Issue	Question and Response	Variance over Time	Question and Response	Average % Responses
Regulatory Issues				
Business/Financial			..how informed in business/ financial news.. not informed	32%
Environment	..spending on the environment.. too little	54.16	..how informed in area of environment.. not informed	51%
Energy	..government should determine fuels.. no	80.40	..how informed do you feel about nuclear energy issues.. not too informed/not at all	60%
Trade	..trade restrictions are necessary.. yes	39.00	..how much do you feel you know about the issue of trade.. no knowledge	62%
	Average Variance	*57.85*	*Average % Ill-Informed*	*51%*

Note: We included all years of our time series in which the surveys were conducted. We could not locate surveys on citizens' information for some of the issues during these years, and in these cases we include polls dating back to 1982. Below we state the years of each survey and the organization that conducted it. For space reasons, we provide other details upon request. Policy Positions: Abortion (General Social Survey; 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998), Crime (General Social Survey; 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998), Gun Control (General Social Survey; 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998), Prayer in School (General Social Survey; 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998), Race (General Social Survey; 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998), Environment (General Social Survey; 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998), Energy (*Cambridge Reports*; 1989–1995), Trade (CBS News, *New York Times*; 1989–1991, 1996). Information: Abortion (General Social Survey, 1982, 1984); Crime (General Social Survey, 1984), Gun Control (General Social Survey, 1984), Race (General Social Survey, 1983), Business/ Financial (Yankelovich Partners Inc., 1996), Environment (Yankelovich Partners Inc., 1996), Energy (Bruskin, Goldring Research, 1995), Trade (EPIC-MRA, 1998).

Appendix Table B
Alternative Specifications

	Popularity of President's Position	Instrumental Variables
Approval Rating × Complexity × Salience	25.559*	6.496*
	(8.948)	(2.551)
Popularity of President's Position	14.407*	—
	(4.133)	
Approval × Complexity	−1.922	−1.559
	(10.140)	(2.478)

Appendix Table B *continued*

	Popularity of President's Position	Instrumental Variables
Approval × Salience	−19.193*	−1.933
	(6.740)	(1.824)
Approval	4.261	1.062
	(8.225)	(2.466)
Complexity × Salience	−10.511*	−2.946*
	(4.087)	(1.262)
Complexity	0.596	0.654
	(6.104)	(1.602)
Salience	7.261*	0.828
	(2.901)	(.968)
Party%	48.860*	18.427*
	(14.859)	(3.990)
Log (# Positions)	3.661	—
	(2.033)	
Log (# Positions)**	—	−1.267
		(.788)
New	−3.177*	−0.398
	(1.762)	(.355)
Clinton	−7.344*	−1.574*
	(2.149)	(.491)
Veto Override	4.901*	0.899
	(1.142)	(.473)
Constant	−34.448*	−2.249
	(13.935)	(4.315)
N	58	208
Pseudo R^2	0.830	0.184
X^2; p-value	$X^2(13) = 54.26$; $p = 0.000$	$X^2(12) = 47.58$; $p = 0.000$

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses below probit coefficients. * $p<0.05$, two-tailed. To conserve space, the results are presented only for ***Approval Rating***. The other estimates of approval produce substantively similar findings, which are available upon request. For the analysis in column (1), data on the popularity of the president's position were collected through Roper's RPOLL database. For each observation on which there exists a poll on the specific policy issue of the vote within a one-year radius of it, ***Popularity of the President's Position*** equals the percentage of respondents that agreed with the policy position taken by the president minus the percentage that disagreed with his position. For the Instrumental Variables analysis, ***Log(# Positions)**** equals the fitted values from a 1st-stage regression based on the Rivers and Rose (1985) analysis (the 2nd-stage standard errors were adjusted for this instrumental variables estimation by the Rivers and Vuong (1988) method). The predictors in the 1st stage include the president's success rate in the previous year (interacted with an indicator for whether the president was in office last year), an indicator for election years, and the exogenous factors in the primary equation except for approval.

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Brandice Canes-Wrone is assistant professor of political science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA 02139 and Visiting Assistant Professor of Political Science, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA 91125.

Scott de Marchi is assistant professor of political science, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708-0204.