

RACE, PARTY AFFILIATION, AND UNEMPLOYMENT IN OBAMA'S APPROVAL

Kioko J. Ileri
Joann Wong, Ph.D.
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Introduction

One aspect of American politics that political communication research has focused on regularly is presidential approval. A plethora of studies examining the popularity of a president have been undertaken since 1930s when Gallup Poll started asking Americans, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [the incumbent] is handling his job as president?" Whereas presidential approval ratings occupy an "important place in American politics" (Newman, 2003, p. 338), and are considered "part of America's unwritten constitution" (Pool, 1980, p. 48), work on presidential evaluation "constitutes one of the most progressive research endeavors in political science" (Druckman & Holmes, 2004, P. 756). For example, Gronke & Newman (2003) estimate that there are over 70 books, articles, and chapters explaining approval ratings (p. 501). The ratings which are considered a "cottage industry in political science" (Edwards *et al.*, 1995) are particularly important to a president. This is so because through job evaluation a president learns how the public feel about his leadership. Druckman and Holmes (2004) say that presidential approvals play a critical role in determining the president's power and policy-making success (p. 755). Stimson (1976) argues that presidential popularity ratings are "causal agents" that serve as "indicators of public feeling" (p. 2). In the same vein, Sigelman (1979) adds that ratings can be "used to predict how well incumbent will run in a reelection bid" (p. 534).

Purpose and Significance

This research examines the significance of race, party affiliation and unemployment in approval ratings of President Barack Obama in June of 2010, almost two years after he was popularly elected as the first black president of the United States. A Gallup poll shows that after Obama was sworn in office on January 19, 2009, his popularity nose-dived from a high of 67% in April of 2009 to a low of 47% in June of 2010. The relationship between Obama's ratings and race is important to investigate because the latter remains relevant in many aspects of American life,

including politics. It is also important to understand how Democrats and Republicans politics have affected Obama's popularity, taking into account that party affiliation influences how people perceive their president in relation to his leadership. Since Obama ascended to power, the two parties have sharply differed on many issues of national importance, for example, healthcare reforms. The current unprecedented levels of unemployment in the country also justifies why it is important to investigate whether this economic variable influenced Obama's approval ratings.

Literature Review

Gallup's polling question, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [the incumbent] is handling his job as president?" has been used as a dependent variable in many studies investigating the association between presidential popularity and such variables as economy, gender, race, war, foreign policy, and party affiliation. This research, however, focuses on the relationship between President Obama's approval and three variables, namely: race, party affiliation and unemployment. Studies by Howell and McLean (2001), Citrin *et al.* (1990), Pettigrew and Alston (1988), and Becker and Heaton (1967) have examined the significance of race in approval ratings of politicians in the U.S. Druckman and Holmes (2004), Tatalovich and Gitelson (1990), and Conover (1981) have examined the significance of party affiliation in presidential approval ratings. The effect of unemployed on presidential evaluation has been investigated by Norpoth (1984), Lanoue (1987), Monroe (1978), and Mueller (1970).

Steed *et al.* (1987) point out that questions concerning the status and role of blacks in U.S. society have been intertwined with the broader history of the nation since before the founding of the present constitutional system (p. 1). This might explain why despite an increase in the number of black candidates winning public offices, "race has still not lost its power to influence the outcome of elections" (Pettigrew & Alston, 1988, p. vii). Howell and McLean (2001) compared a performance model to a racial model to explain approval of a black mayor in New Orleans, Louisiana. The racial model stipulates that approval of a black mayor is based on racial

identification or racism. It is the model most commonly used in research on black candidates. The two researchers explain that this model is based on the assumption that voting for a black candidate in a biracial contest is based on racial identity. Though their findings indicate that performance matters when evaluating black mayors, race was also found to be “a powerful predictor in both equations of mayoral approval, even with controls for the four performance measures” (p. 329).

Citrin *et al.* (1990) employed multivariate analysis to examine the role of race in the 1982 California gubernatorial election between Tom Bradley and George Deukmejian. Bradley, the black Democrat lost with a slim margin of 100,000 to Deukmejian, the white Republican candidate. Findings show that racial attitudes “retained a statistically significant influence on voting for Bradley even after controlling for party registration, ideological self-identification, and opinions on crime and the sale of handguns” (p. 90). The researchers say that “anti-black feelings pushed one toward Republican candidates, even if one were registered as a Democrat” (p. 91). In the same election, Pettigrew and Alston (1988) used multiple regression analysis to investigate the voting patterns. They found that racism influenced a significant number of Californians to vote against Bradley for governor. Becker and Heaton (1967) found that racial attitudes had some influence on candidate preference in the November 1966 election in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. During this election, Edward Brooke was popularly elected as the first black senator in the U.S. (p. 355). Findings show that Brooke's support deteriorated among the “most prejudiced” white voters. The above literature review on the influence of race during elections in Louisiana, California, and Massachusetts, leads to this study's hypothesis 1:

HP1: Respondents' race influenced President Obama's approval ratings.

Edwards (1990) identifies party identification as the “single most important influence on the attitudes of Americans regarding the president” (p. 117). He adds that party affiliation “serves as one of the fundamental orienting mechanisms” in American politics. Moreover, Edwards writes:

Those of the president's party tend to attribute their policy positions to him and may change their issue stands to bring them into line with his. They have an incentive to see the chief executive in a favorable light. Conversely, citizens of the opposition party have less need to perceive consistency between their views and those of the president and less need to evaluate him favorably (p. 117).

Regarding the influence of party identification on presidential popularity, Druckman and Holmes (2004) examined the direct impact of presidential rhetoric on approval. Findings indicate that the effect of party identification was not significant. In another study, Tatalovich and Gitelson (1990) measured how secular trends in presidential approval vary by population subgroups across a set of elections. Notable in their findings is that in 50 of the 60 cases, the party and demographic group gave the incumbent more support during the "honeymoon" than it did in preceding election. "Honeymoon" is the period when presidents always enjoy their highest approval ratings, Tatalovich and Gitelson say. Conover (1981) hypothesized that voters make positive inferences based on cues that the candidate belongs to the same party or ideology that they do. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test statistical significance involving party affiliation and political candidates. Findings show that party match variable has a significant main effect on only evaluative scale. Stronger inferences tended to be made from same-party. The above literature review about the role of party identification in presidential evaluation leads to hypothesis 2:

HP2: Party affiliation had an effect on President Obama's approval ratings.

Unemployment has remained one of the major economic variable influencing presidential popularity in the U.S. This is so because "jobless rate is one of the most publicized economic statistics in national news media" (Lonoue, 1987, p. 237). Lonoue makes an important observation that despite the great attention given to unemployment by researchers, the variable has been of only limited value as a predictor of the popularity of the president (p. 237). However, findings from his study titled, "Economic Prosperity and Presidential Popularity: Sorting Out the Effects," show that unemployment had an effect on voters' approval of the president. The effect was not significant, however. He writes that: "This is the first empirical indication that unemployment might be inferior to real disposable income as predictor of presidential popularity" (p. 242). Studies by

Monroe (1978) and Norpoth (1984) also found no significant relationship between unemployment and presidential popularity. Monroe's study, "Economic Influences on Presidential Popularity" found that unemployment, real personal income, and the stock market were not significant on popularity, but inflation and military expenditure were consistently significant (p. 366). Norpoth's study also indicates inflation was significant, but unemployment was not. Though studies show unemployment to have no effect on presidential approval, the current poor state of the U.S. economy justifies the importance of examining its effect on Obama's approval. The U.S. economy is in shambles and has resulted in high levels of unemployment, perhaps not witnessed since the Great Depression in 1930s. A Gall Poll show that the unemployment rate stood at 9.5% in June 2010, the period of focus in this study. This literature review about the effects of unemployment on presidential approval paves the way for hypothesis 3:

HP 3: Unemployment predicted President Obama's approval ratings.

Methods

This study analyzed secondary data from Pew Research Center. The data used was for June 2010 Political Survey, sponsored by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. A total of 1,802 adults living in the United States were randomly surveyed. The survey was conducted from June 16th to June 20th, 2010. The margin of sampling error for the complete set of weighted data was 2.9%. A combination of landline and cellular random digit dial (RDD) samples was used to represent all adults in the continental United States who have access to either a landline or cellular telephone. Both samples were provided by Survey Sampling International, LLC (SSI) according to Abt SRBI specifications. Numbers for the landline sample were drawn with equal probabilities from active blocks (area code + exchange + two-digit block number) that contained one or more residential directory listings. The cellular sample was not list-assisted, but was drawn through a systematic sampling from dedicated wireless 100-blocks and shared service 100-blocks with no directory-listed landline numbers. The response rate for the land line and cellular samples was 4.3% and 10% respectively.

Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan “fact tank” that provides information on the issues, attitudes, and trends shaping America and the world. The Center conducts public opinion polling and social research, by analyzing news coverage and holding forums and briefings. According to a Gallup poll, President Obama's approval ratings stood at 45% during the period when the survey was conducted. This was from a high of 58% in a corresponding period of the year 2009.

The four variables used in the study – presidential approval, race, party identification, and unemployment were all measured at nominal level. Chi-square (χ^2) was employed as a test of significance for relationships involving approval ratings (dependent variable) and the three independent demographic variables - race, party affiliation, and unemployment. Race, assigned five values in the Pew Research survey was recoded into three categories (White = 1, Black = 2, and Other = 3). Similarly, party identification was recoded into four categories – (Republican = 1, Democrat = 2, Independent = 3, and Other = 4). Employment was recoded into (Employed = 1, and Not Unemployed = 2).

Findings

A Chi-square test of significance was employed to establish the relationships predicted in the three hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 predicted that the race of those surveyed influenced President Obama's approval ratings in June of 2010. Results indicate that race (Chi-Square) = 318.616, $p = < .05$) had significant effect on presidential approval. Hypothesis 1 is therefore supported. In addition, results show that 45.4% of those surveyed approved Obama's job performance and 44.6% disapproved. Black respondents with 92.2% had the highest support for the president followed by Other with 54.4%. Only 38.6% of Whites approved how Obama was doing his job. Of those who disapproved, Whites with 50.7% were highest followed by Other with 34.2%. Blacks with 4.4% recorded the least disapproval. See Table 1 below.

Table 1: Obama Approval vs. Race

	Race			Total
	White	Black	Other	
Approve	38.6%	92.2%	54.4%	45.4%
Disapprove	50.7%	4.4%	34.2%	44.6%
Don't Know/Refused	10.7%	3.4%	11.4%	10.0%

Hypothesis 2 predicted that Party affiliation had an effect on President Obama's approval ratings. The results show that party affiliation (Chi-square (6) = 879.558, $p = <.05$) had significant effect on Obama's evaluation. This hypothesis is supported. It means that party affiliation of those surveyed influenced Obama's ratings. Further, findings show that 45.4% of the whole sample approved how the president was handling his job and 45.2% did not. Democrats with 78% gave the highest approval followed by Other with 41.5%. Republicans' approval was 13.7%. On the hand, an overwhelming 79.8% of Republicans disapproved Obama's job performance. Only 14.7% of Democrats disapproved, while Other had 35.8%. See Table 2 below.

Table 2: Obama's Approval vs. Party Affiliation

	Party Affiliation				Total
	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Other	
Approve	13.7%	78.0%	41.2%	41.5%	45.4%
Disapprove	79.8%	14.7%	46.5%	35.8%	45.2%
Don't Know/Refused	6.5%	7.3%	12.3%	22.6%	9.3%

Hypothesis 3 predicted that unemployment influenced Obama's approval. This hypothesis was not supported. This is so because unemployment (Chi-square (2) = 2.063, $p = >.05$) had no significant effect. It means that despite the high unemployment rates in the country, this variable did not predict Obama's popularity. It should be noted that 45.5% of those surveyed approved the president's job performance and 44.7% disapproved. Those employed and unemployed

approved by 45.3% and 45.7% respectively. The disapproval was 45.5% for the employed and 43.7% for the unemployed. See Table 3 below.

Table 3: Obama's Approval vs. Unemployment

	Employment		Total
	Employed	Unemployed	
Approve	45.3%	45.7%	45.5%
Disapprove	45.5%	43.7%	44.7%
Don't Know/Refused	9.2%	10.6%	9.8%

Discussion and Conclusion

The results from the relationship between Obama's approval and race confirm how the latter remains a core factor in American politics, more so when it comes to job approval ratings of black public office holders. The findings also reveal how race remains a big hurdle for black public servants. This means that President Obama is not an exception, because based on results from this study, his popularity is seen through the lens of race. As mentioned earlier, Howell and McLean (2001), Citrin *et al.* (1990), Pettigrew and Alston (1988), and Becker and Heaton (1967) – all found race enjoying a healthy influence on the evaluation of black candidates or office holders in Louisiana, California, and in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

This is true for Obama because there are variations in the way Whites and Blacks evaluate him. For example, the president's evaluation varies from 38.6% (White) to 92.2% (black) for those approving his work. The evaluation also varies from 50.7% (White) to 4.4% (Black) for those who think the president is not doing enough to address problems facing Americans. This means that race was a predictor of Obama's approval ratings. The findings also show how Whites and Blacks are racially divided when evaluating a president who is black. The huge difference in the way Whites and Blacks evaluate Obama is politically not good for the president. These approval patterns are likely to replayed come the 2012 election. For instance, the Whites' approval ratings

should be something to cause the president sleepless nights ahead of the next election. From these approval ratings, there is also no doubt that Obama faces a harlequin task in convincing Whites to vote for him as they did in 2008. Of course, he cannot rely on black voters, their overwhelming support notwithstanding. This is so because Blacks are a minority group with no real political clout in American politics.

As it has been the case before where party supporters tend to evaluate their candidate favorably, majority of Democrats gave Obama thumbs up on his job performance - 78% approval. Republicans hugely disapproved the president's performance - 79.8%. There is a huge difference in the way Democrats and Republicans gave Obama approval. The approval varies from 13.7% (Republican) to 78% (Democrats), indicating that party identification was a predictor in Obama's job ratings in June 2010. On the other hand, the disapproval varies from 79.8% (Republican) to 14.7% (Democrat). These variations confirm the openly seen divisions involving the two parties on issues of national importance such as healthcare reforms, the Bush-era tax cuts, and DADT (Don't Ask Don't Tell) policy. Therefore, party identification comes out as an important factor when evaluating Obama. As the 2012 election draws closer, it means the president has to maintain his hold on Democratic supporters. Failure to do so, they might defect and vote for whoever will be the Republican presidential candidate. Realistically, and based on the findings from this study, the president should expect a run for his money from Republicans come the 2012 election.

One interesting finding from this study was about the influence of unemployment on Obama's evaluation. Taking into account the soaring rate of unemployment in the U.S., one would expect this factor to have a huge impact on Obama's popularity. This was not the case, however. There were very slight variations in the way those employed and unemployed approved Obama's job performance. For those approving his leadership style, the evaluation varied from 45.3% (employed) to 45.7% (unemployed), a difference of 0.4 that is almost negligible. Similarly the evaluation for those unemployed varied from 45.5% to 43.7%, another minimal difference of 1.8. It means that unemployment was not a predictor in Obama's approval. This is really interesting

because some previous studies (e.g. Monroe, 1978), and Norpoth, 1984) found unemployment having no influence on presidential approval. The findings lend credence to Lonoue's (1987) assertion that, though researchers have given great attention to unemployment, this demographic has proved to be of finite value in predicting presidential popularity. A layman could have reasoned that because of the high levels of unemployment in the country, unemployed Americans would highly disapprove Obama's job performance. This can be interpreted that Americans don't associate unemployment with their presidents – Obama included. It means that they link unemployment to other factors.

In conclusion, this study examined the significance of three demographics – race, party affiliation, and unemployment in the job approval of President Obama in June of 2010. One of the interesting findings is that jobless rate had nothing to do with the president's evaluation ratings. The unemployment effect was not significant. The other two variables had significant effects. Based on the outcome of this research and other studies with similar findings about the role of unemployment in presidential approval, future research should consider employing qualitative approach. Focus groups of unemployed people can be a good starting point. Using in depth interviews, unemployed people might shed more light why joblessness is not associated with presidential evaluation. Because most of studies on job approval have focused on presidents, more research should be conducted at lower levels of governance such as in individual states, for example, Indiana. By doing so, it will reveal whether unemployment influences approval ratings of such public figures as governors and mayors.

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