ARTICLE

Evaluating the President on Your Priorities: Issue Priorities, Policy Performance, and Presidential Approval, 1981–2016

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This article builds on the satisficing and attribution theories to propose a model of presidential approval where issue priorities moderate the association between presidents' policy performance evaluations and overall approval. The data include aggregate time-series and cross-sectional individual-level data of presidential approval, presidential performance evaluations, and issue priorities from Reagan to Obama. The results demonstrate that people give more weight to the issues they prioritize, and therefore their evaluation of the president's performance on those issues matters more in their overall assessment of the president. The impact of issue priorities on approval varies by topic but is not further moderated by party affiliation. The results advance our understanding of the individual determinants of presidential approval and the role that issue priorities play in public opinion.

Throughout most of his two terms in office, President Barack Obama's approval rating hovered around 50%, showing little variation over time. In comparison, public evaluation of the president's performance on the economy and foreign affairs showed more variation: President Obama enjoyed a relative advantage in performance evaluation for handling foreign affairs during his first term in office but enjoyed a relative advantage in his performance evaluation for handling the economy during his second term. Consider the following two snapshots. In January 2012, overall approval was 48%, and 55% of Americans approved of the president's handling of foreign affairs compared to only 41% support for his handling of the economy. Four years later, in January 2016, overall support remained about the same—50%, but now only 41% of Americans had faith in President Obama's handling of foreign affairs while 48% reported the same about the economy. This variation

demonstrates that, when evaluating the president, Americans differentiate between performance on various issues and overall approval.

Existing work suggests that evaluations of presidents' handling of specific policies affect overall presidential approval (Cohen 2002; Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Gilens 1988; Greene 2001; McAvoy 2006; Newman 2003; Nickelsburg and Norpoth 2000; Ostrom and Simon 1985). Considering the relative variation in policy performance (compared to overall approval), several studies suggest that the effect of each issue on overall approval is conditioned on its salience in the public sphere—issues that dominate the public sphere have a stronger effect on overall approval than issues that are less salient (Cohen 2002; Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995; McAvoy 2006). The logic is straightforward. When the public sphere is occupied with an issue—the economy, for example—individuals are expected to apply more weight to their judgment of the president for handling that issue—the economy—in their overall evaluation of the president. If Americans have a positive evaluation of the president's handling of the economy, overall approval will be high. If Americans have a poor judgment of the president's handling of the economy, his approval ratings will take a downturn.

Existing studies measure the salience of an issue in the public sphere by examining the dominance of the issue in the media. Yet, how people evaluate the president may be affected not by what dominates the media, but by the issue priorities people have from government. First, although media and public attention are undoubtedly correlated, equating media attention with the public agenda may fail to assess correctly the public interest and its association with policy performance. Second, individuals vary in their issue priorities, and this variation can affect how each evaluates the president. For example, during times of economic depression, a person who prioritizes the economy is expected to associate his evaluation of the president's handling of the economy—positive or negative—with his overall rating of the president (positive or negative, respectively). But, under the same political environment, a different person may believe that foreign policy is the most important issue facing the country and, in turn, is expected to associate her evaluation of the president's handling of foreign policy—positive or negative—with her overall rating of the president (positive or negative, respectively).

To test the association of issue priorities and presidential evaluation, I examined data on presidential approval, policy performance—the economy and foreign affairs—and issue priorities from 1981 to 2016. The rich data allow me to test the moderating effect of self-reported issue priorities on the association between policy performance and overall approval. Understanding this process can better our understanding of the rational, policy-focused determinants of public support for the president, an issue that, despite the frequent reference to, and analysis of, presidential approval, has surprisingly generated few and far between scholarly research. By examining individual-level data of issue priorities, the article also advances our understanding of the role that these priorities play in public opinion and political behavior—an issue that has so far defied systematic empirical research.

Presidential Approval, Policy Performance, and Issue Priorities

Presidential approval is the most studied and discussed concept of the American presidency. The survey question asking respondents whether they approve of the way the president is handling his job is the single-most-asked survey question on the presidency; and the measured rate of overall approval (aggregate of all respondents) is widely reported in the news media as an indicator of presidential strength. The interest in this concept is supported by a rich body of scholarly work demonstrating the effect of presidential approval on the presidents' legislative agenda, strategy, and success (Kernell 1997; Neustadt 1990), the public relations efforts of presidents and the impact of their actions on public opinion (Cavari 2017; Cohen 1995; Rottinghaus 2010), and the electoral fortunes of the presidents' party (Newman and Ostrom 2002; Sigelman 1979). It is, indeed, the Dow Jones of American politics: High approval ratings suggest a strong president and a stable political system; low approval ratings indicate public unrest with the president and a fragmented political environment.

Since John Mueller's seminal study in 1970 about presidential approval, hundreds of studies aimed to explain this concept and search for determinants of approval. The majority of these studies examine aggregate approval, demonstrating—and questioning—the effect of several factors such as balance of party affiliation among the American public (Lebo and Cassino 2007), duration in office (Mueller 1970; 1973), the state of the economy (Berlemann and Enkelmann 2014), foreign affairs (Marra, Ostrom, and Simon 1990), the political environment (Newman and Lammert 2011; Nicholson, Segura, and Woods 2002), and major events (Brody 1991; Druckman and Holmes 2004; Edwards and Swenson 1997; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2006; Groeling and Baum 2008; Gronke and Brehm 2002; Kelleher and Wolak 2006; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Peffley, Langley, and Goidel 1995). A surprisingly more limited body of work examines individual evaluations of presidents. These studies demonstrate the heterogeneity in approval across conventional demographic and political divides: gender (Clarke et al. 2005; Gilens 1988), age (Gilens 1988), race (Dawson 1994), occupation (Hibbs, Rivers, and Vasilatos 1982), membership in organized social and political groups (Cohen 2012), and party identification (Goren 2002).

Several studies suggest that presidential approval is also affected by—indeed a by-product of—the way Americans view the president in terms of economic and foreign policy performance (Cohen 2002; Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Gilens 1988; Greene 2001; Newman 2003; Nickelsburg and Norpoth 2000; Ostrom and Simon 1985). A positive evaluation of the president for handling the economy or foreign affairs is associated with high approval ratings. A low evaluation of the president for handling the economy or foreign affairs is associated with low approval ratings. The effect of the two policy domains is comparable (Cohen 2002; Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995), yet the stability and change of the weight of each policy domain on overall approval vary—the effect of economic evaluations is constant, whereas the effect of foreign policy evaluations ebbs and flows (McAvoy 2006).

In a seminal study on the association between performance and approval, Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch (1995) argue that the impact of evaluations of the president's policy performance is conditioned on the salience of the issue in the public sphere. Using media coverage as a measure of salience, they show that evaluations of the president's performance on an issue have more impact on presidential approval when the issue is salient. Yet, consistent with the satisficing theory (Simon 1957), people are expected to meet their needs for cognitive expediency by assessing the president on his performance in only a small number of policy spheres that *matter to them* most. In other words, people are expected to evaluate the president by the issues they prioritize. This should be true for overall trends of public approval—when more Americans prioritize the economy (for example), the president's economic performance would have a stronger effect on overall approval—and for individual preferences—a person who prioritizes the economy would give more weight to economic performance in his evaluation of the president. The same logic applies to foreign affairs.

Priorities of Americans are routinely collected and examined as a measure of the public agenda. The variation of issue priorities is closely associated with objective conditions such as unemployment, inflation, international tensions, or social conflict. During periods of a crumbling economy, Americans prioritize the economy; during periods of heightened military conflict, Americans prioritize foreign policy; and in other times, Americans present a more heterogeneous agenda (Cavari 2017). For example, a Gallup poll in October 2001, just after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, reveals that a majority of Americans said that foreign affairs, defense, and security were the most important problems facing the nation. In another Gallup poll from February 2008, following the collapse of the housing market, a majority of Americans prioritized the economy over all other problems.[1] A rich body of work also demonstrates the effect of presidential rhetoric on the public agenda directly and indirectly through the media (Behr and Iyengar 1985; Cavari 2017; Cohen 1995; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011; Hill 1998; McCombs 2004; Villalobos and Sirin 2012).

Beyond the aggregate, overall factors that affect the public agenda, priorities vary systematically among individuals. Due to human cognitive limitations, people focus their attention on the few issues they are concerned about, find interest in, or believe to be important. The variation in issue attention is subjectively determined and inherently personal (Berent and Krosnick 1995). As long as prominent events or problems do not focus national attention, individuals come through their own unique personal experiences, and, on the basis of their self-interests, social identification, and values, they care deeply about idiosyncratic sets of policies (Krosnick 1990). Recent work finds strong empirical support for this variation by showing longitudinal differences in issue priorities among race, gender, age, education, and income groups (Cavari and Freedman 2019).
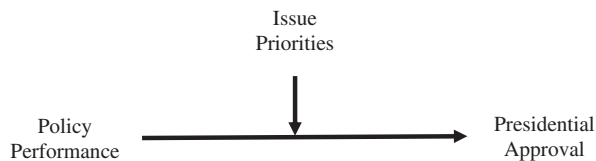
The variation in overall, aggregate issue priorities is linked to presidential approval and government evaluation in existing work. Ostrom and colleagues (2018) demonstrate

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1. Gallup Organization. Gallup Poll, October 2001. USGALLUP.010B11.R04. Gallup Organization. Gallup Poll, February 2008. USGALLUP.08FEBY11.R04. Wording of both questions is identical: "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" Both surveys collected from the Roper Center iPoll, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

that overall, aggregate issue priorities explain the varying effect of objective economic and foreign policy measures on overall approval. When more Americans prioritize the economy, the effect of economic measures such as unemployment on overall approval increases. Similarly, when more Americans prioritize foreign affairs, the relative effect of casualties on overall approval increases. Extending this logic, and consistent with the work of Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch (1995), we should expect that issue priorities will also affect the weight that Americans give to their own evaluation of the president's performance. When an issue draws public interest, people will apply more weight to their evaluation of the president for handling the issue on their overall evaluation of the president. When an issue draws no—or limited—public interest, the public perception of the president's performance on that issue will have a negligible effect on overall approval.

The variation in issue priorities among individuals and our understanding that people approach politics through personal lenses (Krosnick 1990), however, forces us to examine this relationship at the individual level. This focus is supported by work on voting behavior showing that individuals who feel that an issue is important are more likely to rely on their attitudes toward that issue when evaluating candidates and deciding for whom to vote (Krosnick 1988). Fournier and colleagues (2003) assess the association between individual priorities and government evaluation in the Canadian context. They show that individuals who feel that an issue is important are more likely to evaluate the government on that issue.

Consistent with existing work on issue salience and presidential approval and the work on issue priorities and voting behavior, I expect that issue priorities will moderate the effect of evaluations of the president for handling the prioritized issue (performance) on their approval of the president. When a person prioritizes an issue, he will associate his evaluation of the president's performance on that issue with his overall approval of the president. High performance evaluation will translate to high approval, and low performance will translate to low approval. In contrast, when a person does not prioritize an issue, his evaluation of the president's performance on that issue will matter less for his overall assessment of the president (presumably, other issues will matter more). This causal process is illustrated in the following diagram.

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                              Issue
                            Priorities

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                                ▼
        Policy          ────────────────────►    Presidential
      Performance                                   Approval
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The nature and magnitude of the effect of issue priorities on the association between performance and approval may vary by policy domain. Presidents are expected to provide peace and prosperity to the American people, but the responsibility that Americans attribute to the president on each policy domain is different (Sirin and Villalobos 2011). When it comes to foreign policy, Americans view the president as the commander in chief, and as such,

they confer a high degree of deference to the president (Cohen 1995; Schlesinger 1973). The public expects the president to keep the United States safe and to protect Americans' interests in the world. That is, the public expects success from the president and attributes blame when it is not satisfied with the president's handling of foreign affairs. I therefore expect that people who prioritize foreign affairs will attribute blame for poor handling of foreign policy but will not reward success.

The attribution of responsibility is different with regard to domestic issues, where presidents share responsibility with Congress. The public may be satisfied with successful handling of the economy but will not necessarily attribute blame for failure. Therefore, I expect that people who prioritize the economy will reward success for positive handling of economic issues, but will not attribute blame for poor management of the economy.

In addition, any evaluation of political opinion and behavior needs to account for party affiliation. This is especially true concerning evaluations of the president. An extant body of literature shows that in-partisans are more likely than out-partisans to have voted for the president (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Saunders and Abramowitz 2004), be supportive of his policies (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Jacobson 2003), share his ideology (Mayer 2018), and approve of his handling of the job (Lebo and Cassino 2007). The partisan dimension of presidential actions and support has grown over time—rising during the Ronald Reagan administration and escalating even more during the George W. Bush and Obama administrations (Azari 2014; Cavari 2017; Jacobson 2008; Skinner 2008; 2012). In-partisans are therefore predisposed to approve of the president, and out-partisans are predisposed to disapprove of the president, regardless of issue priorities.

Beyond the general effect of partisanship on the strength of presidential approval, I expect partisanship to also affect the association between issue priorities and policy performance and approval. The work on attribution theory suggests that people tend to attribute perceived success to in-group members and attribute perceived failures to out-group members (Fiske and Taylor 1991). Partisans are disproportionally likely to attribute responsibility for favorable conditions to presidents of their party and blame presidents from the opposite party for their failures (Gomez and Wilson 2001; Peffley and Williams 1985; Rudolph 2016). Therefore, I expect that in-partisans who prioritize an issue are likely to attribute perceived success to the president but not blame for perceived failure. Similarly, out-partisans who prioritize an issue are likely to attribute perceived failure to the president but not attribute success to the president.

Data

To test the moderating effect of *issue priorities* or (aggregated) *issue salience* on the association between presidential *policy performance* and *presidential approval*, I collected and analyzed survey data that measure each. The most common survey item that is used to measure *issue priorities* and *issue salience* is the Most Important Problem question.[2] This question,

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2. For a discussion of the differences between issues and problems, see Jennings and Wlezien (2011). For a discussion of "problems" as a measure of public agenda, see Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake (2011), 99–100.

commonly referred to as the MIP question, is one of the few attitudinal survey questions to have been asked consistently since the beginning of public opinion polling. The MIP series offers a dynamic measure of issue priorities for longitudinal studies (Soroka 2002). *Policy performance* is measured with a question asking survey respondents whether they approve of the way the president is handling the economy or foreign policy (asked separately). *Presidential approval* is commonly measured using a general approval question that is routinely asked in surveys that ask about political issues. As detailed below, the three variables of interest are frequently asked and therefore provide rich data for aggregate- and individual-level analysis.

Issue Salience and Issue Priorities

The Roper iPoll archive includes 674 surveys that ask the MIP question. Four hundred fifty-five of these surveys are available for full download. The wording of the MIP question in all surveys is relatively similar: "In your opinion, what do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" It is an open-ended question. Following the survey, interviewers ascribed the responses to several issue categories.[3] These issue categories are usually detailed yet not consistent across surveys. For example, problems relating to high taxes may be grouped into a "taxes" category or together with "inflation" or "high cost of living." Problems with the environment are sometimes grouped into one category, but in other surveys, they are separated into several more specific environmental issues such as "water pollution," "air pollution," and "litter and garbage." Similarly, foreign events and defense priorities are grouped into regions—"South-East Asia," "Middle East," and so forth—or are categorized by the priorities that respondents mention—"war," "defense," and "foreign aid." To allow systematic analysis over time, I coded all responses using the codebook of the Policy Agendas Project.[4] I focus here on two major categories that are on the public mind and correspond with broad questions of presidential performance evaluations and voting considerations: macroeconomy (36%) and foreign affairs (16%). For the latter, I combined defense (category 16) and international affairs (category 19). While the two categories can be identified in government policy and actions, research has shown that the public fails to differentiate between the two issue domains (Baumgartner and Jones 2002).

To illustrate the data over time, I aggregated the full series to quarterly means.[5] Because the data include nonidentical wording of questions and inconsistent sampling and timing of surveys, I apply Stimson's dyadic ratios algorithm to reduce the heterogeneity in the series. Figure 1 plots the series of public interest in macroeconomics and foreign affairs. The two trends are consistent with conventional knowledge and research (Cavari 2017).

3. Because all MIP are not recorded verbatim but into categories defined and sorted by the pollster and interviews, the data are not primary data. This, however, is a problem shared by all studies and data sets that rely on the MIP data from commercial surveys commonly used in existing research. It may also be a larger concern in earlier surveys in which pollsters tended to code responses into a small number of categories. As time progressed, coding became more detailed and includes a larger number of categories, allowing greater distinction between responses.

4. See http://www.policyagendas.org/codebooks/topicindex.html.

5. Six quarters have no survey. The average number of surveys in each quarter is 4.7.
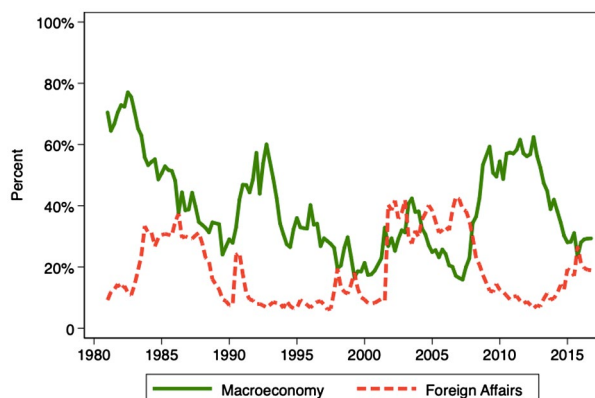
FIGURE 1. Salience of Macroeconomy and Foreign Affairs among Americans.
Note: Data are from MIP topline series (*N* = 674). Collected by author from Roper iPoll. Aggregated to quarterly means applying Stimson's dyad ratios algorithm.

Throughout most of the last four decades, Americans prioritized macroeconomics, with it sometimes occupying most of the public attention—as in the early 1980s, the early 1990s, and the end of the first decade in the twenty-first century. The salience of foreign affairs has lagged far behind macroeconomics, except for several periods of increased attention—during the 1980s; during the early and late 1990s; and, most significantly, following 9/11 and during the Iraq War in the first decade of the twenty-first century, until the economic meltdown in 2008.

Presidential Approval

To assess presidential approval, I use the common approval question that follows a relatively consistent wording by most pollsters: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [name of president] is handling his job as president?" Figure 2 plots the approval series from 1981 to 2016, using all surveys available from the Roper archive that ask this question in the same structure (*N* = 3,394).[6] Because pollsters vary in how they count nonresponse (don't know, refuse, etc.), approval is measured as the percent of respondents approving of the president among all respondents who took a side about the president (approve/[approve + disapprove]). To account for differences in sampling and question wording between surveys, I applied the Stimson dyadic ratios algorithm to this time series as well. Vertical lines represent administration change.

Policy Evaluations

The two measures of evaluations of presidential performance—of handling the economy and foreign affairs—are based on a series of questions that ask respondents whether

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6. To maximize consistency, this excludes questions asking about levels of approval or that offer additional options such as mixed feelings about the president. Because of quarterly aggregation, I removed all surveys in months of administration transition.
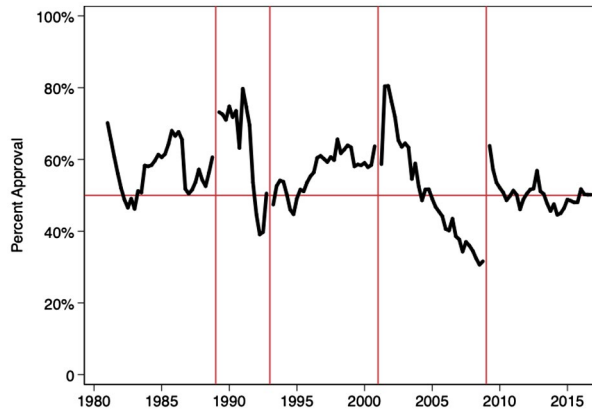
FIGURE 2. Overall Presidential Approval, 1981–2016.
Note: Data include all presidential approval topline questions (*N* = 3,394). Collected by author from Roper iPoll. Aggregated to quarterly means applying Stimson's dyad ratios algorithm.

they approve of how the president handles the economy and how he handles foreign affairs.[7] Figure 3 plots the two series from 1981 to 2016, using all surveys available from the Roper archive that ask these questions in the same structure (economy—1,512 surveys; foreign affairs—1,069 surveys). I applied to these series the same cleaning (removing nonresponse) and smoothing procedure (Stimson) applied to the approval ratings explained above.

The plot demonstrates relatively similar trends across the three series but with different magnitudes. The most substantial difference between the series is for President George H. W. Bush. President Bush, whose tenure was marked by the first Gulf War and the deteriorating economy, enjoyed relatively high approval for his foreign policy performance, but his economic approval was below the red line (leading to the elections of President Bill Clinton, who ran on a strong economic agenda). The overall correlation between the series of the two issues is 0.56 ($p < 0.00$). The correlation of overall approval is stronger with the foreign affairs series, 0.85 ($p < 0.00$), than with the economy series, 0.72 ($p < 0.00$). However, as the figure suggests, the correlations vary considerably by president. The variation between presidents and between issues supports the claim that the causal path is from performance to approval rather than in reverse (see Funk 1996; Greene 2001; Newman 2003).

The data for the individual-level analysis are limited to MIP surveys that ask the general approval question (N = 424 surveys) and the economic and foreign policy performance questions (250 and 212 surveys, respectively). Two hundred five surveys satisfy this combined criterion. To test the validity of this data set for assessing presidential approval, I compared the aggregate responses in the subset of 205 surveys with the full data set described above (using quarterly aggregation). The MIP data are highly correlated for both issues (r = 0.98, $p < 0.00$ for both). Mean differences are insignificant (t[macroeconomy] = 1.9, not significant [ns]; t[foreign] = 0.85, ns). The correlation of

7. The wording is relatively consistent: "Do you approve of the way [name of president] is handling the [economy/foreign affairs]?"
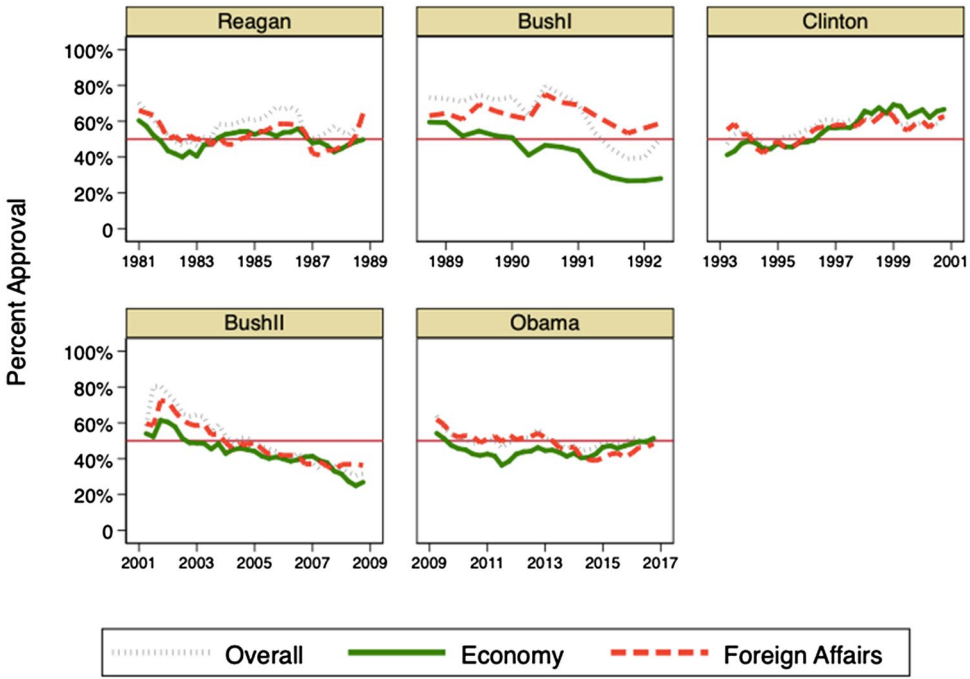
FIGURE 3. Policy Performance, by President.

Note: Data include all presidential approval questions and economy and foreign affairs performance questions (*N*[overall] = 3,394; *N*(economy) = 1,512; *N*(foreign) = 1,069). Collected by author from Roper iPoll. Aggregated to quarterly means applying Stimson's dyad ratios algorithm.

the two presidential approval series is high ($r = 0.97$; $p < 0.00$), and the mean difference is not significant ($t = 0.14$, ns). The correlations of the performance measures are also strong and significant ($r = 0.89$, $p < 0.00$ for both) and differences are insignificant (t[economy] = 0.01, ns; t[foreign affairs] = 0.41, ns).

Method

Using the data described above, I tested the moderating effect of issue priorities on the association between evaluations of policy performance of the president and overall presidential approval ratings, while controlling for personal and environmental factors that have been shown to affect presidential approval: race, gender, age, education, party affiliation, unemployment rate,[8] and indicators for an election year, honeymoon period (first three

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8. Unemployment rate is the number of unemployed as a percentage of the labor force. Data taken from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/UNRATE. See Berlemann and Enkelmann (2014) for a discussion of the macroeconomics measures that best predict presidential approval.

months following inauguration), party control of Congress (divided government), and president in office.

My analysis includes aggregate- and individual-level data. This two-level analysis allows me to engage with existing work on macro trends of approval ratings as well as microfoundations of approval. In both levels, I examined the model for the two main issue domains—the economy and foreign affairs. To examine the moderating effect of party affiliation, I added a three-way interaction model in the individual-level analysis. Finally, I performed several robustness checks to address the possibility of reverse causation—approval affects performance evaluations or approval affects priorities.

The Moderating Effect of Issue Salience

As a first test, I estimated the moderating effect of aggregate issue priorities—that is, issue salience among the American public—on the association between policy performance evaluations and presidential approval. To avoid excessive gaps in the series, especially due to inconsistent surveys asking the MIP item, and bias due to wording and sampling differences between polling houses, I aggregated the data to quarters (three-month periods) and applied the Stimson's dyadic ratios algorithm to generate quarterly smoothed indices for all time-series variables. The dependent variable is the mean presidential approval from all surveys in each quarter. Mean approval has a robust autoregressive component (AR1 = 0.89, $p < 0.00$), and therefore I included a lagged term for approval.[9] The primary explanatory variables are the percent of respondents who prioritize the economy or foreign affairs, and aggregate evaluations of economic and foreign affairs performance. In addition, I controlled for the effect of the political environment—macro-partisanship (percent of people identifying with the party of the president, and of the out-party), unemployment rate, and indicators for an election year, honeymoon period (first three months following inauguration), and party control of Congress (divided government). To control for differences between administrations, I included binary indicators for each president (leaving Reagan as a reference category). Because the data are generated by the Stimson dyadic ratios algorithm, which adjusts for differences in wording and survey administration, I did not add a control for polling houses or survey.[10]

I estimated two models. The first model includes all variables to assess the basic linear additive association of all explanatory variables and presidential approval; the second model adds the interaction terms to account for the moderation effects. The point estimates of the two models are summarized in Table 1.

Model 1 reveals that the evaluations of the president for handling the economy and foreign affairs contribute to presidential approval. The effect is stronger for foreign affairs. Holding all else at its mean, a change from a standard deviation below the mean

9. The strong autoregressive component is enhanced by the smoothing process.

10. An alternative multilevel model that treats presidents as random intercepts produces similar results. This model, however, is less preferable because the data have a small group level (five presidents; Maas and Hox 2005).

TABLE 1

Estimating the Effect of Issue Salience on Presidential Approval (Ordinary Least Squares Model of Aggregate Data)

	(1)	(2)
Performance: Economy	0.43**	0.09
	(0.17)	(0.14)
Performance: foreign affairs	0.31**	0.16
	(0.12)	(0.11)
Public agenda: macroeconomy	0.03	−1.14***
	(0.08)	(0.21)
Public agenda: foreign affairs	−0.06	−0.77**
	(0.18)	(0.23)
Economic performance × Public agenda: economy		1.09***
		(0.00)
Foreign policy performance × Public agenda: foreign policy		0.62**
		(0.00)
Approval rating $(t-1)$	0.33**	0.12
	(0.11)	(0.12)
Macro-partisanship (in-party)	0.13	0.18
	(0.22)	(0.22)
Macro-partisanship (out-party)	0.11	0.12
	(0.13)	(0.14)
Unemployment rate	−0.02	0.07
	(0.67)	(0.75)
Divided government	−0.00	0.04
	(0.76)	(0.89)
Election year	−0.04	−0.01
	(0.88)	(0.72)
Honeymoon (3 months)	−0.02	−0.01
	(0.65)	(0.60)
[presidential indicators are dropped from table]		
N	133	133
R^2	0.895	0.920

Note: Standardized beta coefficients; standard errors in parentheses.
**$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

economic performance to a standard deviation above the mean is associated with a 9 percentage point change in overall approval. A similar change in foreign affairs performance is associated with a 6 percentage point change in overall approval.

As expected, given the strong autoregressive series, the lagged overall approval is a significant predictor of current approval. After controlling for this change and given the effect of a presidential administration, the political environment has no independent effect on approval.

Model 2 adds the interaction terms and reveals the combined effect of salience and performance. The interaction coefficients of performance and salience are positive and significant for both issue domains. A rise in public interest in an issue—the economy
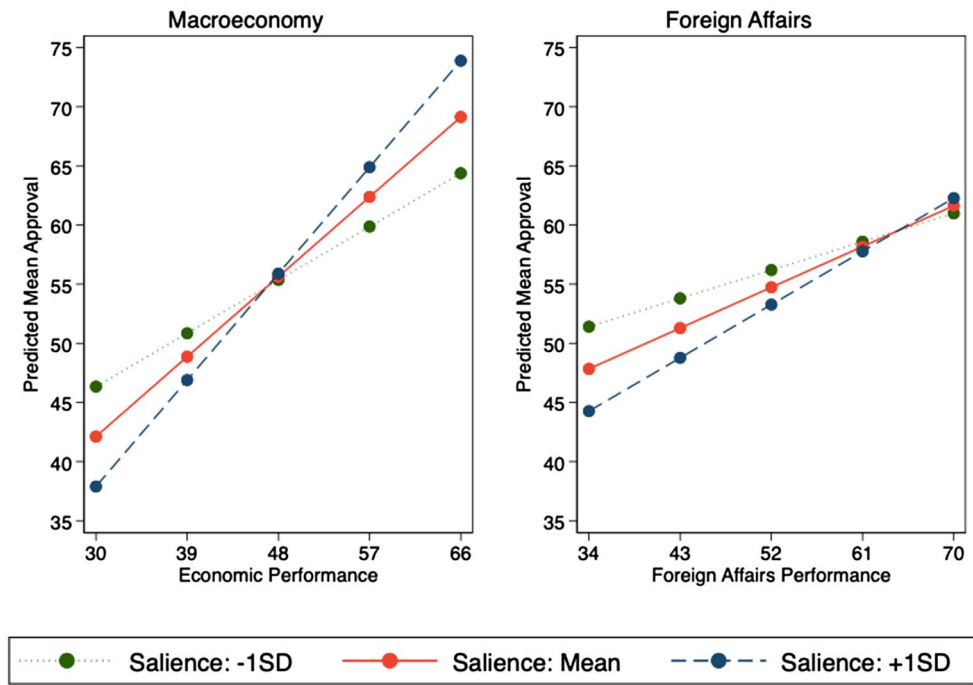
FIGURE 4. **The Moderating Effect of Issue Salience.**
Note: Margins following the interaction model (Table 1, Model 2) using aggregate data. The lines represent the assocation of policy performance (economy or foreign affairs) and overall approval for three levels of issue salience.

or foreign affairs—for which the public has a positive evaluation of the president for handling it—the economy or foreign affairs—contributes to high presidential approval (economy: 1.09, $p < 0.001$; foreign affairs: 0.62, $p < 0.01$).

The coefficients of issue salience of the economy and foreign affairs when policy performance is zero are significant (economy: -1.14, $p < 0.01$; foreign affairs: -0.77, $p < 0.01$). That is, when the public prioritizes an issue and believes the president is not handling the issue well (unattended priorities), presidential approval declines. In contrast, the conditional coefficients of performance (economy or foreign affairs) when priorities are zero are not statistically significant (economy: 0.09, ns; foreign affairs: 0.16, ns). That is, performance has no effect on approval on issues the public has no interest in. Of course, neither performance nor priorities are ever zero, but the coefficients are indicative of the interaction effects.

To assess the conditional effects better, we need to examine the marginal change of approval by performance conditioned on meaningful range of levels of issue salience (Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006; Kam and Franze 2007). Figure 4 plots the margins for three levels of issue salience—mean level of salience and one standard deviation above and below the mean. The range of performance is two standard deviations below the mean to two standard deviations above the mean (for each issue).[11] For each level of salience, for

11. All measures are within the observed range in the data.

both topics, a positive change in the evaluation of the president's handling of the topic is associated with an increase in overall support for the president. Low levels of performance evaluations are associated with low levels of overall approval. High levels of performance evaluations are associated with high levels of approval. As the coefficient estimates suggest, economic and foreign affairs priorities moderate the effect of economic/foreign policy performances, respectively, on overall approval.

Focusing now on each policy domain, with regard to the economy (left panel), when the issue is less salient (one standard deviation [SD] below the mean), the reputation of a president to handle the economy has a low effect on overall approval—moving from 46% approval to 64% approval over the range of five standard deviations of economic performance. That is an 18 percentage point change. In contrast, when the issue is salient (one SD above the mean), a change in presidential reputation is substantial—from 39% approval to 74% approval, a 35 percentage point change.

As the coefficient estimates suggest, the interaction effect is weaker on foreign affairs (right panel). The effect is mostly a negative one—poor handling translates into low public approval, especially when the issue is salient. High presidential performance evaluations contribute to high presidential approval, with little difference between levels of salience. This limited effect, however, may be explained by the relatively weak overall interest in foreign affairs (mean = 19) compared to the macroeconomy (mean = 39), which may dampen the effect of foreign affairs priorities. Assessing the association between priorities, performance, and approval with individual-level data can address this possible bias because it connects one's priorities with one's assessment of the president (performance and approval).

The Moderating Effect of Issue Priorities

To test the moderating effect of issue priorities on the association between performance evaluations and presidential approval at the individual level, I examined individual responses to the 205 surveys that are available for full download.

The dependent variable is presidential approval, coded 1 when approve, 0 when disapprove, and coded as missing when no response is recorded (mean = 0.55; SD = 0.50). The two performance variables—approve handling of the economy (mean = 0.48; SD = 0.50) and foreign affairs (mean = 0.54; SD = 0.50)—are similarly coded. Issue priorities are coded into two binary factors: macroeconomy (mean = 0.38; SD = 0.49) and foreign affairs (mean = 0.15; SD = 0.35). The reference category here is all other issues (nearly 50% of the public agenda).[12]

To account for the dynamics of the political environment, I included binary factors for an election year, honeymoon period (first three months following elections), and party control of Congress (divided versus unified government), and a covariate for the monthly unemployment rate.

12. Replicating the model using only those who prioritize the economy and foreign affairs produces similar substantial results with different coefficients.

Consistent with existing work on presidential approval (surveyed above), I added individual-level variables that are associated with presidential approval—party identification (in-party, independent, or out-party [reference]), race (black), sex (male), age (three categories, 50–64 left as reference category), and level of education (three categories, high school education left as reference category). Given differences between presidents, I included indicators for each president (leaving President Reagan as reference). Finally, I account for systematic differences in wording and sampling between pollsters by including indicators for polling house, and cluster the standard errors by survey to avoid a simple pooling of individual responses.[13]

Similar to the aggregate analysis, I estimated two models. The first model includes all of the abovementioned explanatory variables. The second model adds the interaction terms for issue priorities and issue performance. Table 2 summarizes the point estimates of the two models.

The first model supports existing work showing that approval is a by-product of performance evaluations. Both measures of evaluation have a significant and large effect on overall approval. The predicted probabilities of presidential approval change from 0.39 and 0.42 among people who evaluate the president poorly on the economy and foreign affairs (respectively) to 0.78 and 0.71 among people who have a positive view of the president's performance on those issues (respectively). The effect therefore is sizable for both issues, yet larger on the economy. These results are especially significant given that the model controls for political time and individual political preferences (party affiliation).

The effect of issue priorities varies between macroeconomics and foreign affairs. Holding all else equal, people who prioritize the economy are not statistically different from others in their support for the president. In contrast, people who prioritize foreign affairs are less likely to approve of the president. This latter effect, however, is small. Prioritizing with foreign affairs reduces the probability of approving of the president by 1%.

Other individual-level variables behave as expected. People who affiliate with the party of the president are more likely to approve of the president (compared to out-partisans). Males are less supportive than females. Younger groups are more supportive of the president than older groups. University graduates are less supportive of the president compared to Americans with an average education—those with a high school diploma. During election years support declines. The null findings with regard to all other factors that account for the political environment are typical when including presidential indicators that explain most of the periodical variation.

Model 2 adds the interaction terms of issue priorities with performance to test the moderating effect of issue priorities on the association between issue performance and overall approval. The conditional coefficients of performance evaluations of the economy and foreign affairs when issue priorities are held at zero are positive and significant. The conditional coefficients of issue priorities—the economy and foreign affairs—when

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13. An alternative multilevel model that treats presidents as random intercepts produces similar results. This model, however, is less preferable because the data have a small group level (five presidents) (Maas and Hox 2005).

TABLE 2
Estimating the Effect of Issue Priorities on Presidential Approval (Logistic Regression of Individual-Level Data)

	(1)	(2)
Performance: economy	2.67***	2.50***
	(0.05)	(0.04)
Performance: foreign affairs	2.16***	2.06***
	(0.06)	(0.05)
Issue priorities: Macroeconomy	−0.03	−0.19***
	(0.03)	(0.03)
Issue priorities: foreign affairs	−0.12***	−0.45***
	(0.04)	(0.05)
Party: in-party	1.62***	1.61***
	(0.04)	(0.04)
Party: independents	0.72***	0.72***
	(0.04)	(0.04)
Performance: macroeconomy × Issue priorities: macroeconomy		0.56***
		(0.06)
Performance: foreign affairs × Issue priorities: foreign affairs		0.84***
		(0.06)
Black	−0.02	−0.02
	(0.06)	(0.06)
Male	−0.06***	−0.06***
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Age: 18–29	0.22***	0.23***
	(0.03)	(0.03)
Age: 30–49	0.14***	0.14***
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Age: 65+	−0.08*	−0.08*
	(0.03)	(0.03)
Education: no high school	−0.00	−0.01
	(0.04)	(0.04)
Education: college or more	−0.24***	−0.23***
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Election year	−0.24*	−0.24*
	(0.11)	(0.11)
Honeymoon period	−0.16	−0.15
(first quarter following elections)	(0.16)	(0.15)
Divided government	−0.22	−0.20
	(0.11)	(0.11)
Unemployment rate	−0.04	−0.04
	(0.03)	(0.03)
[presidential and polling house indicators are dropped from table]		
Constant	−2.04***	−1.94***
	(0.30)	(0.30)
N	163,264	163,264

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.001$.

performance is held at zero are both significant and negative. And, finally, the interaction factors—when issue priorities and performance are both at 1—are positive and significant.

Taken together, the role of issue priorities on overall approval is consistent with our expectations: People who prioritize the economy and foreign affairs but do not have a positive evaluation of the president's handling of those issues have an overall negative view of the president. Yet, when a person has confidence in the ability of the president to handle a problem the person prioritizes—the economy or foreign affairs—he translates it into a positive view of the president (interaction effects).

To illustrate the interaction effect, Figure 5 plots the predicted approval as a function of policy performance for people interested in the issue and people who are not. The figure is divided into the two policy domains. The left panel summarizes the predicted probabilities (and confidence intervals) as a function of economic evaluations; the right panel does the same for foreign affairs. Each panel includes the four possible combinations of performance and priorities. The first two rows plot the predicted probabilities of people who approve of the way the president handles the issue domain, first for those who prioritize the issue followed by people who do not prioritize the issue. The bottom two lines in each panel plot the predicted probabilities of people who do not approve of how the president handles the issue. For example, the predicted probabilities of people who approve of the way the president handles the economy and prioritize the issue (first row) is 0.81. The predicted probabilities of people who approve of the way the president handles the economy but do not prioritize the issue (second row) is 0.77.

The gaps between groups are small, but the consistent effects confirm our expectations. Naturally, for both issues, when a person approves of the way the president handles a policy, she is more likely to also approve of the president's overall handling of his job than when she does not approve of the way the president handles a policy (comparing the top two rows and bottom two rows of each panel). Yet, in both issue domains, we see a difference between individuals who prioritize the issue and people who do not (comparing each pair of rows). People who prioritize the economy or foreign affairs and have confidence in the president's handling of the issue will be more likely to have a positive view of the president. People who prioritize the economy or foreign policy and do not have confidence in the president's handling of the issue will be less likely to have a positive view of the president (compared to those who do not prioritize the issue).

The larger interaction coefficient for foreign affairs (foreign affairs: 0.84, $p < 0.00$; economy: 0.56, $p < 0.00$) suggests that the moderating effect is stronger on foreign affairs compared to the economy (difference is significant; χ^2 = 10.92). Most of this difference, however, is among people who do not have confidence in the president's handling of foreign affairs. Among people who do not approve of how the president handles the economy, the gap of predicted probabilities between people who prioritize the issue or not is 0.03. Among people who do not approve of how the president handles foreign affairs, the gap of predicted probabilities between people who prioritize the issue or not is 0.06. Both gaps are significant at the 0.01 level. Though small, this comparison is consistent with my expectation that people attribute blame for mishandling foreign affairs more than they do for mishandling the economy.
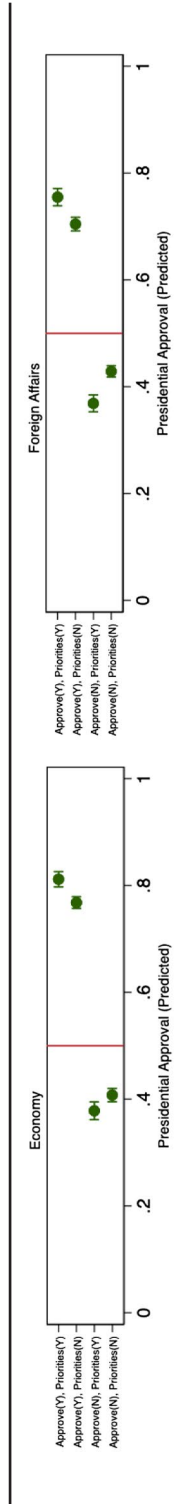
FIGURE 5. The Moderating Effect of Issue Priorities.

Note: Margins following the interaction model (Table 2, Model 2) using individual data. Each line is a different combination of the interaction between performance and priorities.

Finally, I examined the moderating effect of partisanship on the association between the three variables of interest by adding a three-way interaction term: performance–priorities–party. For party, I use a three-category variable: in-party (individual identifying with the same party as the president), independents, and out-party (individuals identifying with the party that is not the party of the president; to allow a direct comparison of in-partisans and out-partisans, this is the reference category in the model). I estimated the model for each issue domain separately (while controlling for the effect of priorities and performance) and for both domains together. The coefficients are summarized in Table 3.

In all models, the two-way interactions of performance and priorities—for both issues—are positive and significant (macroeconomy: 0.57, $p < 0.00$; foreign affairs: 0.77, $p < 0.00$). This supports the main argument in this article—that priorities moderate the association between performance and approval, regardless of party affiliation.

The conditional effect of party on the association among priorities, performance, and approval is not significant (except for one path—foreign affairs, in-partisans—in the combined model). Contrary to my expectation, the null findings suggest that party does not further moderate the effect of priorities on the association between performance and approval. That is, priorities matter across partisan groups, with little differences between them.

To illustrate the similarity of conditional effects across partisan groups, Figure 6 plots the predicted probabilities of each partisan group (in-partisans, independents, and out-partisans), for each level of performance evaluation (yes/no for each topic), and issue priorities (yes/no for each topic). This creates 12 groups for each issue domain. The first six are of people who approve of the way the president handles the issue, followed by people who do not approve of the way the president handles the issue. Within each group, the first two are for out-partisans, divided by their issue priorities (yes/no for that issue domain), followed by independents and then in-partisans. For example, the first row plots the predicted probabilities and confidence interval of people who approve of the way the president handles the economy, identify with the out-party, and prioritize the economy as the most important problem facing the nation (0.74). The second row plots the predicted probabilities and confidence interval of people who approve of the way the president handles the economy, identify with the out-party, but do not prioritize the economy as the most important problem facing the nation (0.68).

The figure strongly illustrates the effect of partisanship on overall approval. In-partisans are more likely to approve of the president, followed by independents and out-partisans. This is consistent among respondents who have a positive view of the president's performance of the economy/foreign affairs and among those who do not.

Differences in approval for each performance–party pair indicate the moderating effect of issue priorities, across partisan groups and with little variation between them. In most partisan pairs, the difference between people who prioritize an issue and people who do not is significant. The four exceptions are the three partisan pairs of people who do not approve of how the president is handling the economy (again, similarity across partisan groups), and independents who approve of the way the president is handling foreign policy. The null results of the three-way interactions (Table 3) and the illustrated similarities in the

TABLE 3

Assessing the Moderating Effect of Party Affiliation on the Association between Performance, Priorities, and Approval (Three-Way Interaction, Individual)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Economy	Foreign	Combined
Performance: macroeconomy	2.42***	2.68***	2.42***
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Performance: foreign affairs	2.17***	1.97***	1.98***
	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Issue priorities: macroeconomy	−0.21***	−0.02	−0.18
	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.04)
Issue priorities: foreign affairs	−0.11**	−0.38***	−0.34
	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Party: in-party	1.58***	1.60***	1.56***
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)
Party: independents	0.64***	0.57***	0.51***
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)
Performance: macroeconomy × Issue priorities: macroeconomy	0.57***		0.54***
	(0.08)		(0.07)
Performance: foreign affairs × Issue priorities: foreign affairs		0.77***	0.71***
		(0.08)	(0.08)
Performance: macroeconomy × Issue priorities: macroeconomy × Party: in-party	0.01		0.03
	(0.09)		(0.09)
Performance: macroeconomy × Issue priorities: macroeconomy × Party: independents	0.07		0.11
	(0.12)		(0.12)
Performance: foreign affairs × Issue priorities: foreign affairs × Party: in-party		0.22	0.25*
		(0.13)	(0.13)
Performance: foreign affairs × Issue priorities: foreign affairs × Party: independents		0.14	0.15
		(0.17)	(0.16)
Performance: macroeconomy × Party: in-party	0.11		0.12
	(0.06)		(0.06)
Performance: macroeconomy × Party: independents	0.14		0.18*
	(0.08)		(0.08)
Performance: foreign affairs × Party: in-party		0.04	0.05
		(0.05)	(0.05)
Performance: foreign affairs × Party: independents		0.34***	0.36***
		(0.08)	(0.08)
Issue priorities: macroeconomy × Party: in-party	−0.01		−0.03
	(0.06)		(0.06)
Issue priorities: macroeconomy × Party: independents	0.05		−0.03
	(0.07)		(0.06)
Issue priorities: foreign affairs × Party: in-party		−0.17	−0.18*
		(0.09)	(0.09)
Issue priorities: foreign affairs × Party: independents		−0.17	−0.19*
		(0.09)	(0.09)
Black	−0.03	−0.03	−0.03
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Male	−0.06***	−0.06***	−0.06***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Economy	*Foreign*	*Combined*
Age: 18–29	0.22***	0.23***	0.23***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Age: 30–49	0.14***	0.14***	0.15***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Age: 65+	−0.08*	−0.08**	−0.08*
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Education: no high school	−0.00	−0.01	−0.01
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Education: college or more	−0.24***	−0.23***	−0.24***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Election year	−0.24*	−0.25*	−0.24*
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Honeymoon period	−0.16	−0.16	−0.16
(first quarter following elections)	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.15)
Divided government	−0.20	−0.21	−0.20
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Unemployment rate	−0.04	−0.04	−0.04
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
[presidential and polling house indicators are dropped from table]			
Constant	−1.96***	−1.97***	−1.89***
	(0.30)	(0.30)	(0.30)
N	163,264	163,264	163,264

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

interaction effect of priorities among partisan groups (Figure 6) demonstrate that the association between performance and priorities is not further moderated by party affiliation.

Robustness: Reverse Causation

Consistent with existing work, the analysis in this article assumes that performance affects overall approval. However, it is possible that the causal process is in reverse. Approval may be endogenous to performance or to priorities (or both)—people may first make up their overall assessment of the president (approve or not), which in turn affects their evaluation of the president's policy performance or their policy priorities. I discuss each below.

Approval Endogenous to Performance

People may have a positive overall view of the president, which may affect how they evaluate the president on specific policies. This possibility is partly accounted for by
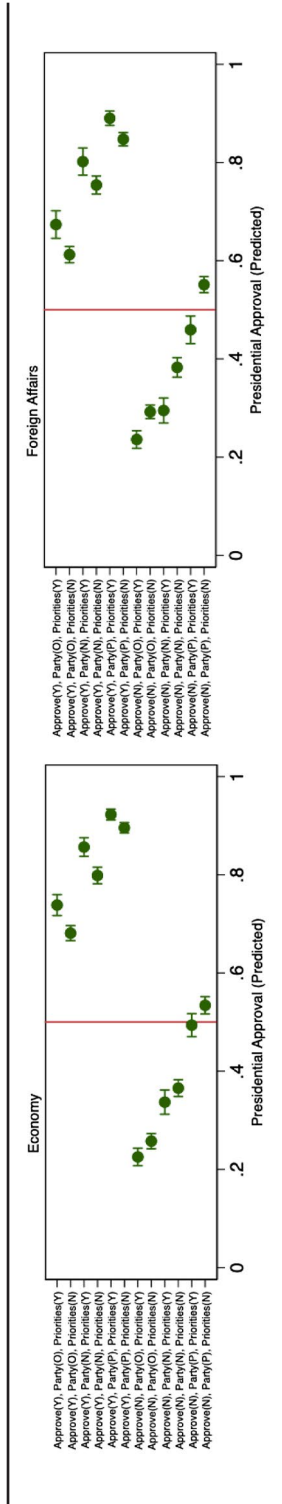
FIGURE 6. Partisan Differences in the Effect of Issue Priorities.

Note: Margins following the three-way interaction models using individual data (Table 3, Models 1–2 for the economy and foreign affairs, respectively). Party(O) = out-partisans; Party(N) = independents; Party(P) = in-partisans.

including party identification as a strong predictor of approval (in aggregate and individual models). Furthermore, if approval explains performance evaluations, we should find little difference between the two performance measures—the economy and foreign affairs. This seems to have little empirical support in the data. Although the overall correlation between the two performance measures is high (Cramer's V = 0.51, $p(\chi^2) < 0.00$), it does not suggest that approval explains both, especially given that the bivariate correlation of each performance measure with overall approval is significantly higher (0.67 and 0.63 for the economy and foreign affairs, respectively).

I statistically tested this possibility further. First, I reestimated the aggregate models with an additional vector of the mean correlation between the two performance measures (taking the average of the Cramer's correlation coefficients from all surveys in every quarter). If overall approval affects performance, we should expect that high approval will be associated with high performance on both, which will result in a positive coefficient of the correlation vector. If, on the other hand, approval does not independently affect performance, we should expect no statistical relationship between the correlation vector and approval. The results (not presented here) indicate that the vector of the correlation between the two performance measures is not significant, adding support for the assumption that approval is a by-product of policy evaluations and not the other way around.

Second, I reestimated the individual models with the approval of handling the economy and approval of handling foreign policy as the dependent variables. I then compared the fit of these models to the one with approval as the dependent variable (DV). The latter (DV = approval) offers the best fit compared to the performance models (DV = performance economy; DV = performance foreign policy): Pseudo R-squared is highest (0.53, compared to 0.42 and 0.35, respectively), and Akaike and Schwartz information criteria (AIC and BIC) are lowest (104663, 104923 for original model compared to 131708, 131968 and 145904, 146164 for performance on the economy and foreign policy, respectively).

While both tests do not nullify the possibility of endogeneity, they provide support for the suggested path—that performance affects approval.

Approval Endogenous to Priorities

Approval may also explain issue priorities. A person may prioritize issues based on her view of the president. If she supports the president, she would prioritize issues she believes the president handles well; if she does not support the president, she will prioritize issues the president does not handle well. By including a lagged approval measure in the aggregate model, I relax some of this concern. Beyond trends in overall approval, the public associates priorities with approval.

To test this further using individual-level data, I estimate another model, which includes issue focus in the State of the Union addresses as a proxy for presidential attention. Data are from the Policy Agendas Project.[14] Each quasi-sentence is human coded for

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14. *State of the Union Addresses.* The Policy Agendas Project at the University of Texas at Austin, 2018; www.comparativeagendas.net.

policy using the Policy Agendas Codebook (used above for coding the MIP). For each State of the Union, I generated a measure of presidential attention by calculating the percent of quasi-sentences mentioning a topic among all sentences that mention a policy (removing all nonpolicy sentences).

If approval determines priorities, we should expect fans of the president to prioritize issues the president is attentive to and critics of the president to prioritize issues the president is not attentive to. My dependent variable is, therefore, the issue priorities of each respondent (macroeconomy, foreign affairs, or else), and the main explanatory variables are presidential approval, presidential attention (percent of attention to the economy or foreign affairs), and an interaction between the two. To account for differences between administrations, I include indicators for each president. I also include indicators that have been found to affect issue priorities (Cavari and Freedman 2019)—party affiliation, race, gender, age, education—as well as the unemployment rate. Given the pooled sample, I include indicators for polling house and cluster the errors by survey. Because the dependent variable takes three categories (economy, foreign affairs, or else), I estimate a multinomial logistic regression. The results show no significant effect for the interaction term on economic priorities and an extremely small effect on foreign policy (odds ratio of 0.99).

Again, this test for endogeneity of approval and the results does not sufficiently nullify the possibility of a reverse causation. Using the State of the Union Address as a measure of attention may fail to represent the public view of presidential attention accurately (Cavari 2017). It is also an aggregate measure of attention that may not represent how each respondent views the president and his issue priorities. And yet, together with the results from the aggregate models, these results confirm that issue priorities are at least somewhat exogenous to presidential evaluations.

Conclusions

In the American political system, presidential approval is key to government success. I propose here that an important factor in presidential approval is the issues a person prioritizes and expects the president to handle. Americans vary in the issues they prioritize—a variation that can be attributed to personal or group interests, political ideology, or a range of other reasons. In turn, these priorities affect how one views the political system and evaluates it. When a person prioritizes the economy, he is tuned to the actions of government on that issue and evaluates government based on his assessment of these actions. The same is true for foreign affairs. I demonstrate that both affect presidential approval. Specifically, issue priorities moderate the relationship between policy performance evaluations and overall approval. In contrast to my expectations, the association among priorities, performance, and approval is not further moderated by party affiliation. While party affiliation affects presidential evaluations, the moderating effect of priorities is relatively constant across partisan groups.

The average predicted gap in presidential approval between people who prioritize the economy and people who do not is 3.5%. The average gap is 5.5% among the two

foreign policy groups. Given the wide range of factors that affect presidential approval—especially party identification—this is not a marginal effect.

Issue priorities are especially important because people, and government, cannot address all problems at all times. Due to human cognitive limitations, people focus their attention on the few issues they prioritize, find interest in, or believe to be important. In turn, the scarcity of resources and information overload limit the capacity of government to attend to all problems at once (Adler and Wilkerson 2013; Bevan and Jennings 2014; Jones 1994; 2001; Jones and Baumgartner 2004). Therefore, if political elites are interested in matching the priorities to the public, they must be attuned to the public's changing priorities.

In combining issue priorities and policy performance, the article focuses on presidential approval as an individual assessment of government rather than an aggregate, general measure of the pulse of the political system. This is consistent with a rational learning model of government—people are exposed to new information that may lead them to update the importance attached to particular policies and how to evaluate government based on them. The public as a whole can, therefore, learn or adapt (Gerber and Green 1998).

The article makes three important contributions to our understanding of presidential approval. First, the article builds on and extends existing work that examines the relationship between policy performance and presidential approval. Most of this work uses aggregate trends to suggest—and test with various time-series techniques—that despite some endogeneity, performance explains approval (Cohen 2002; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; McAvoy 2006; Ostrom and Simon 1985). Several studies examine this relationship using individual-level data but limit their analysis to specific administrations. The results here extend this work by examining the relationship between performance and approval with cross-sectional individual-level data over five different presidents.

Second, the article is the first to examine more directly how issue salience (aggregate) and issue priorities (individual) affect presidential approval. Several studies suggest that a relationship exists—that issue salience affects how Americans view the president and how Americans connect performance and approval. These studies attribute general trends to individual actions. The analyses here avoid this ecological fallacy by using self-reported, individual issue priorities and presidential assessments.

By testing this more directly, I reveal here that one factor in presidential approval is the issues a person prioritizes and expects the president to handle. Americans vary in the issues they prioritize. The variation in issue priorities among individuals can be attributed to personal or group interests, political ideology, or a range of other reasons. The findings here demonstrate that these priorities also affect how one views the political system and evaluates its leaders. When a person prioritizes the economy, he is tuned to the actions of government on that issue and evaluates government based on his assessment of these actions. The same is true for foreign affairs. Both affect presidential approval. In other words, issue interests moderate the relationship between policy evaluations and overall approval.

Third, the difference between the two policy domains reveals that not only do issue interests matter, but what the issue interests *are* also matters. As the individual-level model shows, a president may benefit from performing well on the economy but may suffer from performing poorly on foreign policy, an area where his authorities and responsibilities are greater. Existing research suggests that presidents can prime the public to emphasize specific policies (Druckman and Holmes 2004) and that presidents gain advantage for focusing on foreign affairs (Baker and Oneal 2001; Kernell 1978; Lowi 1985; Mueller 1973). But the evidence here suggests that presidents can gain from priming issues for which they are viewed favorably, be it the economy or foreign affairs. Regardless of the policy domain, presidents receive support from people who believe an issue is important and are satisfied by the way the president handles the issue. This moderating effect is an encouraging finding for democratic theory. People evaluate the government on the issues that matter to them most.

The study focuses on the two most dominant policy domains—the economy and foreign affairs. This focus is empirical and data-driven, rather than theoretical. Consistent with the argument that individual issue priorities matter, we should expect a similar process on other issues. People who prioritize immigration, for example, are expected to take more careful note of what the president does on this issue, evaluate his performance on it, and apply that to their overall assessment of the president. While data to examine this process, as on other issues such as energy, education, and civil rights, are not as rich; future work can and should examine them. Moreover, as these issues are increasingly occupying a more dominant share of the presidential and public agendas, their effect on overall approval may matter more.

Finally, one of the strengths of the current study is that the results are based on a rich cross-sectional data set across five presidents. The findings, however, can be strengthened using panel data asking each respondent about presidential approval, policy performance, and issue priorities over several waves. While such panel data would be limited to a specific snapshot referring to a particular president, it may further advance our understanding of the causal mechanism among the three components.

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