

Crime and Presidential Accountability: A Case of Racially Conditioned Issue Ownership

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Abstract

Americans are anxious about crime regardless of their actual exposure or risk. Given this pervasive concern, US presidents frequently talk about crime, take actions to address it, and list crime prevention efforts among their top accomplishments. We argue that presidents act this way, in part, because fear of crime translates into a penalty on presidential approval. However, this penalty is not applied evenly. We contend that there is a racial component to this fear. Given the parties' stances toward crime and the criminal justice system, Whites will only punish Democratic presidents (i.e., Clinton and Obama) when they are anxious about crime, while Blacks will only punish Republican presidents (i.e., Bush and Trump). We examine twenty years of survey data and find evidence consistent with our theory. Our results suggest that the relationship between fear of crime and presidential accountability is conditioned by an individual's race and the president's party.

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Americans are anxious about crime. Although crime rates have halved over the last two decades, solid majorities continually say crime is getting worse at both the national and local level. In annual Gallup surveys from 2000 to 2018, between sixty and seventy-four percent of Americans express such a view. Between thirty and thirty-eight percent of Americans said they were afraid to walk alone at night around the area where they lived. When it came to burglary, between thirty-eight and fifty percent of Americans said they occasionally or frequently worried they would become a victim (Gallup n.d.). Unlike most major issues, there is no substantive partisan divide when it comes to the importance of violent crime as a problem in the United States (Egan 2013). According to a Pew survey from 2018, forty-seven percent of Democrats viewed violent crime as a “very big” problem compared to forty-nine percent of Republicans. Of the eighteen issues Pew asked about, crime exhibited the lowest partisan gap in views of whether it was a serious problem (Pew 2018). Although partisanship shapes perceptions of the economy (Jones 2020; Donovan et al. forthcoming), crime remains a rare “consensus issue” (Egan and Mullin 2012, 5) with broad, bipartisan agreement (Pew 2018).

Presidents are keenly aware of the public’s anxiety toward crime. Accordingly, ensuring Americans’ safety from crime is a common theme both on the presidential campaign trail and from the Oval Office. In a 1982 radio address, for instance, Ronald Reagan vowed to “make America safe again” in the wake of the “many moments of fear” brought about by a “crime epidemic” sweeping the nation (Reagan 1982). In announcing his candidacy, Bill Clinton promised to “mak[e] our cities and our streets safe from crime” (Clinton 1991). Once in office, the Clinton White House listed among its “key accomplishments” their “comprehensive anti-crime strategy,” especially as it related to the Clinton crime bill (White House, n.d.). In accepting the Republican Party’s nomination, Donald Trump said his administration’s “first task . . . will be to liberate our citizens from the crime and terrorism and lawlessness that threatens their communities.” Though policing crime is primarily within the purview of

state and local authorities, Republican and Democratic presidents have long touted their efforts to protect the country, likely due to bipartisan concern about the issue. President Nixon tried to thread this needle by noting that, while “law enforcement is primarily a local responsibility . . . the public climate with regard to law is a function of national leadership” (Nixon 1968). Similar comments exist throughout history, suggesting that presidents have long been preoccupied with this issue.

In this study, we consider whether and how citizens hold presidents accountable for crime. Expecting citizens to hold presidents accountable for crime is reasonable because, like the economy, crime may reveal information to a citizen about the incumbent’s quality of governance. In an examination of twenty years’ worth of survey data from 2000 to 2018, we consider the influence of objective indicators of crime on presidential approval. At the same time, *perceptions* of crime may be driven by factors unrelated to objective reality; accordingly, we also consider how anxiety and fear of crime translate into presidential accountability. In total, we examine whether and how citizens hold incumbent presidents accountable for local contexts, personal experiences, and individual-level anxiety toward crime.

To preview our results, we find little evidence that objective measures of state or local crime influence presidential approval. However, anxiety towards crime is a consistent predictor of presidential approval. Interrogating this result further, we find that crime-based accountability is conditional on race and partisanship. Democratic presidents are punished only by White respondents who feel anxious about crime. Republican presidents, on the other hand, are punished only by Black respondents who feel anxious about crime. We hypothesize that racially conditioned issue ownership is at work. While Whites may view Republican presidents as effective at addressing perceived threats of crime, Black Americans do not share such a view. Analogously, Black Americans view Democratic presidents as most capable of handling issues pertaining to law, order, and justice; White Americans do not.

This paper proceeds as follows: first, we outline previous work examining the relationship

between crime (as well as other issues) and attitudes toward public officials. We then develop a theory about the ways in which fear of crime is associated with lower levels of support for the president at the mass-level. Our theory is conditional in nature. Drawing from the literature on the racialization of issues, as well as the extensive literature on “issue ownership,” our theory argues that White Americans who are anxious about crime will punish only Democratic presidents while Black Americans will punish only Republican presidents. Next, we outline the data and modeling strategy we use to test our assumptions. We conclude with the presentation of our results and a note on the implications of our findings for public opinion and presidential accountability.

Crime, Anxiety, Race, and Presidential Accountability

Presidents are held accountable for an array of phenomena including the economy, war and peace, natural disasters, and even local sporting events and shark attacks (Alvarez and Nagler 1998; Fiorina 1981; Lewis-Beck 1985; Mutz and Mondak 1997; Gasper and Reeves 2011; Park and Reeves 2020; Kriner and Reeves 2012, 2015). Though crime is primarily a local matter addressed by state and local officials, presidents have increasingly taken a leading role on the issue. In modern times, the electorate has come to view presidents as “lonely crime fighters, measured only in how much they seem to share the community’s outrage at crime” (Simon 2006, 7–8).

Crime can affect political attitudes and behaviors through at least three mechanisms. First, crime may affect one’s perception of security, which is a “basic need in humans” (Huddy, Feldman and Weber 2007). One direct result of this lack of security is anxiety, an emotion which exerts substantial effects on political behavior and beliefs (Albertson and Gadarian 2015). If citizens feel unsafe as they conduct their day-to-day business, they may also come to blame incumbents for this perceived state of the world. Relatedly, several studies

of terrorism argue that fear of an attack degrades support for incumbents (Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014; Kibris 2011; Aksoy 2018; Bali 2007; Berrebi and Klor 2008; Gassebner, Jong-A-Pin and Mierau 2008; Montalvo 2011). While crime lacks the political motivations of terrorism, its ability to create insecurity, anxiety, and fear is analogous.

Second, crime may be an indicator of quality of governance. An effective allocation of governmental resources for fighting crime may suggest competent elected officials. Rampant crime may suggest inattentive politicians or ineffective policies. Whether based in reality or on perception, crime may provide insight into whether politicians are performing well in their job. Consistent with this notion is the observation that “[i]ncreases in the size of police forces in large cities are disproportionately concentrated in mayoral and gubernatorial election years” (Levitt 1997, 271). Additionally, gubernatorial election years see increases in executions (Kubik and Moran 2003). This evidence suggests that politicians act as if voters hold them accountable for their successes or failures in combating crime.

Third, there may be indirect effects. Crime may weaken the financial well-being of an individual and thereby factor into retrospective evaluations of an incumbent politician’s performance. As crime increases, property values may decline and homeowners may suffer financial loss if their neighborhoods become less desirable. Just as local economic turmoil may influence perceptions of the national economy (Reeves and Gimpel 2012), perceptions of rampant crime may drive individuals to have a negative view of the state of things.

Although the issue of crime has played a prominent role in presidential rhetoric throughout American political history, we are not aware of any empirical study that explicitly considers the relationship between crime and presidential approval. Studies have considered the influence of crime on retrospective voting for mayors, but have reached divergent conclusions. A study of the approval of the mayor of New York from 1984 to 2009 finds that crime (as measured by the lagged numbers of homicides) depresses mayoral approval in a small but significant way. A one standard deviation increase in homicides decreased approval by

just a “half a percentage point” (Arnold and Carnes 2012, 956). Heberlig et al. (2017) finds similar results, suggesting that mayors who have presided over falling crime rates are more likely to run for re-election and, moreover, that a decrease in a city’s violent crime rate is associated with increased retention rates (see also, McNitt 2010). Similar results have been found in regards to gubernatorial approval, with higher amounts of violent crime lowering the incumbent party’s vote share in subsequent elections (Cummins 2009). Meanwhile, another study of big city mayoral general elections from 1990 to 2011 finds “no clear evidence that [attitudes towards crime] shape support for the incumbent mayor” (Hopkins and Pettingill 2018, 698). Although the president is not directly responsible for local crime rates, it is plausible that voters will still hold him accountable given his centrality in the American system and the widespread belief that he is the “presumed manager of everything” (Erikson, Mackuen and Stimson 2002, 75). Holding the president accountable for local issues is also consistent with the changing behavior of the American electorate as US politics has become increasingly nationalized (Hopkins 2018).

Crime and Issue Ownership

The mass public often associates various policies, as well as competencies in dealing with those policies, with Democratic and Republican presidents. This notion, referred to as “issue ownership,” argues that the mass public perceives Democratic presidents to be more adept at handling issues such as health care, Social Security reform, and lowering unemployment. Republicans are often perceived as more skilled in managing the economy, securing the national defense, and overseeing immigration (Petrocik 1996). While issue ownership is frequently considered in the context of campaigns as an attempt to increase vote share, we consider it in the context of governing as it affects presidential approval, a most valuable political resource for presidents to accomplish their goals (Canes-Wrone and De Marchi 2002).

Crime is an issue that has typically been “owned” by Republicans, who have used the issue “to pillory Democrats in elections since the Nixon era” (Egan 2013, 150).¹ Voters believe Republicans are better able to handle the issue (Petrocik 1996), and when crime is salient in the minds of voters, Republican politicians are able to increase their vote share (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Boldt 2017). Though higher levels of observed crime do not necessarily herald greater electoral support for Republicans, the GOP’s tougher rhetoric and policy follow-through has likely contributed to their advantage on this issue (Boldt 2017). As Petrocik (1996) notes, “a Democrat’s promise to attack crime by hiring more police, building more prisons, and punishing with longer sentences would too easily be trumped by greater GOP enthusiasm for such solutions.” President Clinton’s efforts to take ownership of the crime issue provides evidence of the reputational stickiness of such perceptions. Clinton prioritized federal efforts to prevent crime in his presidential campaign and signed a crime bill in 1994 that his administration touted as one the “key accomplishments” of his presidency.² As president, Clinton shifted the rhetoric over the issue of crime from punishment to prevention, “neutralizing” the Republican advantage on the issue (Holian 2004, 95). Despite these efforts, “ownership of the crime issue quickly reverted back to the Republicans” (Egan 2013, 152). The Republican advantage on the issue of crime is often reinforced through news stories (Marion and Oliver 2012), television reports (Gilliam and Iyengar 2000), and campaign advertisements, which often present crime in a racialized context (Valentino 1999; Mendelberg 1997; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994).

Anxiety and Accountability

Fear and anxiety are powerful forces governing political behavior (Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Lerner et al. 2003; Brader, Valentino and Suhay 2008; Achen and Bartels 2016). Albert-

¹Though see Sides (2006).

²<https://clintonwhitehouse5.archives.gov/WH/Accomplishments/eightyears-01.html>.

son and Gadarian (2015) argue that fear and anxiety shape patterns of news consumption, political trust, and candidate preference. Leveraging a series of experiments, their work shows that fear and anxiety over issues as diverse as climate change and terrorism cause citizens to self-select into “threatening news” sources and adopt authoritarian positions on issues. Individuals eschew other values in order to seek policies that will offer shelter and protection from social problems.

Related work shows that fear about terrorism causes citizens to become more pessimistic in their beliefs about the country’s ability to prevent another terrorist attack from occurring. Moreover, experimentally-induced fear about terrorism pushed survey respondents to express a higher level of support for government “investment in broadly applicable precautionary measures” designed to prevent the occurrence of future attacks (Lerner et al. 2003, 150).

Fear and anxiety also affect citizens’ attitudes toward immigration. Brader, Valentino and Suhay (2008) finds that responses to immigration were shaped by the immigrant’s country of origin, skill level, and whether or not news coverage focused on the costs or benefits of immigration. Crucially, these findings were mediated by an individual’s level of anxiety. Thus, “group cues and the emotions they triggered proved critical to changing attitudes and behavior” (975). Such a mechanism is likely to have been the driving force behind the results in studies providing evidence that issues can become divided along racial lines (e.g., Tesler 2012, 2016; Schaffner, Macwilliams and Nteta 2018).

Though the president is not responsible for local crime rates, citizens may still hold the president accountable for their own anxiety over crime. Such an expectation is grounded in psychological studies that argue that perceptions trump reality when individuals assign blame. This notion, commonly referred to as *appraisal theory*, argues that when people experience some perceived unfortunate event they experience negative emotions—emotions which are oftentimes directed toward the individual or group of individuals that is responsible (or perceived to be responsible) for the situation (Averill 1982; Allred 1999). Roseman,

Spindel and Jose (1990) succinctly describe such an occurrence, noting that “evaluations and interpretations of events” matter more than factual reality. Why citizens would hold the president accountable (rather than, or in addition to, state and local officials) redounds to the fact that voters expect “the man in the White House to do something about everything” (Neustadt 1991).

Like terrorism and immigration, we suggest that crime drives political evaluations given the fact this is an issue where perceptions are especially divorced from reality. Despite the rapid decline of crime rates in the mid-1990s, which have leveled off at historic lows (Beckett 1999; Roeder et al. 2015), voters believe crime is always rising, no matter the true nature of the issue (Roberts and Stalans 1997). These biased assessments are due, in part, to media coverage, which over-represents and sensationalizes violent crime committed against individuals (Romer, Jamieson and Aday 2003; Graber 1980), and tends to highlight the racial dimensions of crime (Russell-Brown 2008). As a result, White Americans in particular tend to overestimate their risk of victimization (Quillian and Pager 2010). As people seek shelter from social ills, they focus attention on the foremost authority figure, the president, who represents safety and security in the wake of danger (Hess and Easton 1960). Thus, while the president is unlikely to be directly responsible for the amount of crime in a given locale, individuals’ cognitive biases and the nature of emotional reactions do not preclude the possibility of Americans blaming the president when they are anxious about crime.

Race and Accountability

Race is an influential lens through which individuals view politics (Tesler 2012; Benegal 2018; Winter 2006). Though race has always been an organizing principle in American politics, the election of Barack Obama, an African American, intensified its role (Tesler 2012; Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2018). Moreover, issues of crime as well as law and order have long been divided along racial lines (e.g., Valentino 1999; Mendelberg 1997; Ansolabehere and Iyengar

1994; Gibson and Nelson 2018). For example, Valentino (1999) finds that media coverage of crime has the ability to prime latent racial attitudes among White Americans. Utilizing an experimental design in which subjects were presented with a story about crime committed by either a racial minority or a non-minority, Valentino (1999) argues that the increased salience of crime via media coverage causes Americans to alter their level of support for the President. Crucially, “crime news that explicitly identified minority suspects also boosted the impact of the president’s performance on crime as a criterion for his overall evaluation” (Valentino 1999).

Clinton’s attempt to take ownership of or at least reframe the crime issue highlights its racially contingent nature. The micro-foundations of views of the police and the criminal justice system *writ large* are well-documented (Gibson and Nelson 2018; Peffley and Hurwitz 2010; Lerman and Weaver 2014; Epp, Maynard-Moody and Haider-Markel 2014; Holian 2004). As Democratic politicians have pursued African American voters in presidential elections, candidates such as Bernie Sanders, Joe Biden, and, especially, Hillary Clinton, have had to defend their support of the 1994 Clinton crime bill. Multiple headlines have noted that the twenty-five year old legislation continues to “haunt” Sanders, Clinton, and Biden among others.³ In 2016, one commentator argued in a headline that “Hillary Clinton Doesn’t Deserve the Black Vote,” in part because the crime bill “decimated black America” (Alexander 2016).

Race and crime interact in a complex way to shape political behavior and public opinion. We expect these interactions to persist as voters bring evaluations of crime to presidential approval, especially in the wake of the large-scale racial realignment precipitated by the passage of various pieces of legislation during the Civil Rights era (Black and Black 2002). Because Whites may view Republican presidents as “owning” the issue of crime, they may not punish Republican presidents for crime. Republican presidents’ promises to be tough

³Fandos (2015); Williams (2016); Kilgore (2018).

on crime may evoke feelings of safety and security among White citizens concerned about crime. These promises, and the legacy of the Republican party on crime, imply that Whites who are anxious about crime should not lower their approval of Republican presidents.

We hypothesize that when Black Americans feel concern over crime, they will more forcefully bring those evaluations to bear on Republican presidents. While Whites may view Republican promises of “law and order” and tough-on-crime policies as reassuring, Black Americans likely take a different view. For Black Americans, this policy approach may evoke feelings of persecution, threats to civil rights, and biased treatment by the criminal justice system (Valentino 1999). Blacks may be more likely to link concern over crime to failed or misguided policies by Republican presidents. Given the reputation of the Republican party, Blacks are more likely to view the policies of Trump and Bush as ineffective and even destructive.⁴ Accordingly, we expect Black Americans who are anxious about crime to punish Republican presidents.

We expect White Americans who are anxious about crime to channel that anxiety into diminished approval of Democratic presidents. Unlike Republican presidents, Democratic presidents are perceived by the electorate as being “soft on crime” — a stereotype that has grown in the contemporary era as the party has seen a rise of activists seeking to reform or “defund the police” (see, e.g., Quinn and Tillett 2020; Luscombe 2020). Even those Whites who generally support Democratic policies may blame Democrats for their focus on “prevention” instead of “punishment” (Holian 2004, 95). A weaker perceived commitment to “law and order” may harm Whites’ evaluations of Democratic presidents. At the same time, the reputation of the Democratic party may constrain them from translating dissatisfaction over crime into a penalty over presidential approval. Supporting Democratic policies that focus on the prevention of crime or reduce the role of the police or weaken the carceral state

⁴Though we make generalizations here, we note that, “It is not just one’s own encounters that are important; so too are the experiences of similarly situated others, especially co-ethnics” (Gibson and Nelson 2018, 98).

are likely to be seen favorably by Black Americans as improvements on a system that has disproportionately affected communities of color (Nellis 2016).

Data and Methods

Our data come from the Gallup Poll Social Series (GPSS) specifically concerning crime, which was generally asked in October of each year.⁵ Our data include nearly 13,500 respondents spanning from 2000 to 2018, which includes the final year of the Clinton administration, the entirety of the Bush and Obama administrations, and the first two years of the Trump administration. Our primary dependent variable is an indicator of whether the respondent approves of the way the president is handling his job.⁶

Conceptualizing Crime

To conceptualize crime perceptions, we borrow from a robust literature in criminology that conceptualizes the fear of a crime as a distinct psychological construct. One of the critical distinctions in individuals' views toward crime is between risk and fear. Fear measures the extent to which an individual is afraid of a crime happening to them, while risk captures the objective likelihood that one becomes a victim of a crime. Although fear should rise as the risk of being a victim increases, criminology research suggests that this is not the case. While crime rates have declined over time, Americans' fears persist (Rader 2017). Because fear of crime and the risk of becoming the victim of a crime are separate phenomena, we include both of these measures in our empirical models. Our approach here is not to draw a distinct line between the two conceptions, but rather, consider how each is brought to bear in evaluations of the president.

⁵<https://www.gallup.com/175307/gallup-poll-social-series-methodology.aspx>

⁶The question is, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [Bill Clinton / George Bush / Barack Obama / Donald Trump] is handling his job as president?"

We conceptualize these views towards crime in a number of ways. First, we examine respondents' levels of anxiety about being the victim of various criminal acts. These acts include being murdered, being mugged, having one's home burglarized while they are home, having one's home burglarized while not at home, and having their car stolen or broken into. From these five items, we construct an additive scale that we call *Crime Anxiety*. This measure ranges from zero to five, where higher values indicate greater amounts of anxiety.⁷ About forty percent of our sample expresses no concern about crime. Second, we measure respondents' retrospective views about crime in the US whether there is more, less, or the same amount of crime as in the previous year. These variables take on values of one if the respondent says there is more crime, zero for the same amount, and negative one for less.⁸

In addition to anxiety about crime and retrospective evaluations about crime, we also include measures of each individual's risk of becoming the victim of a crime. These variables capture objective measures of a respondent's experience with crime. First, respondents are asked whether they or anyone in their household have been the victim of an array of crimes. Over twenty percent of respondents indicated that they had been the victim of a robbery or theft.⁹ Additionally, we include the change in state level crime rate as reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting database to capture whether an individual is at a greater or lower objective risk of crime victimization.

Additionally, we include a number of control variables. We account for the role of partisanship by including an indicator of whether a respondent shares the partisanship of the

⁷The Chronbach's Alpha for these five items is 0.77.

⁸As we discuss earlier, views of crime are not strongly driven by objective indicators of crime. Therefore, we hypothesize that voters hold presidents accountable for their perception of crime. We are agnostic as to whether the preferred measure should be anxiety over crime or retrospective evaluations of crime. As such, we conduct our analyses using both conceptions of the measure.

⁹Those crimes included having your house or apartment broken into, money or property stolen from you or another member of your household; a car owned by you or other household member stolen; a home, car, or property owned by you or another household member vandalized; money or property taken from you or another household member by force, with gun, knife, weapon or physical attack, or by threat of force; you or another household member mugged or physically assaulted.

president, as well as an indicator variable for political independents. In several of our models, we examine approval for individual presidents. In these models, we control for income, gender, age, education, race, and urbanity. For these variables, we have no prediction for how they would drive individual presidential approval, but do for presidents of particular parties.

Results

Origins of Anxiety towards Crime

Following the literature in criminology (for an overview, see Rader 2017), we consider contextual exposure to crime, personal victimization, along with a host of individual-level characteristics in understanding respondents' anxiety related to be a victim of crime. We are especially interested in the extent to which anxiety of crime is related to contextual measures of exposure to crime as compared to demographic characteristics of respondents.¹⁰

To understand the degree to which one's anxiety about crime is related to objective risk of becoming a victim of crime as well as demographic characteristics, we regress our measure of anxiety described above on a series of sociodemographic variables. This includes measures of an individual's age, educational attainment, income, race, and gender. To account for systematic differences in perceptions and experiences between urban and rural respondents (Gimpel et al. 2020), we include an indicator variables for whether an individual lives in a suburban or rural area¹¹ and whether an individual has been the victim of a crime. The results of this regression are shown in Table 1.

The results in Table 1 show that those individuals who have personally been the victim

¹⁰As reported in the previous section, we utilize state-level measures of crime from the FBI. See Moore and Reeves (2017, 2020) on the challenges of measuring geographic contextual exposure.

¹¹These codings come from the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics in 2006 and 2013. We assign these codes at the county level, with respondents being assigned the 2006 code in 2009 or earlier or the 2013 code in 2010 or later. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data_access/urban_rural.htm.

	Crime Anxiety
Crime Victimization	1.00*** (0.03)
Δ Crime Rate	-0.10 (0.12)
White	-0.16*** (0.05)
Male	-0.43*** (0.03)
Income	
Less than \$20,000	0.19*** (0.05)
\$20,00 to \$29,999	0.10* (0.05)
\$30,000 to \$49,999	0.15*** (0.04)
\$50,000 to \$74,999	0.09* (0.04)
Age	
Senior	-0.24*** (0.03)
Under 30	-0.12** (0.04)
Education	
Some College	-0.14*** (0.03)
College Degree	-0.14*** (0.04)
Post graduate degree	-0.10* (0.04)
Urban	
Rural	-0.25*** (0.04)
Suburban	-0.09** (0.03)
Intercept	1.82*** (0.06)
R^2	0.10
Adj. R^2	0.10
Num. obs.	14144

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 1: A Model of Anxiety toward Crime. Coefficients are from OLS regression where the dependent variable is crime anxiety, a five-question scaled measure capturing a respondents' level of worry about specific types of crime.

of a crime have greater anxiety toward crime than those who have not. However, changing crime rates have no effect on anxiety, consistent with findings from criminology (see Rader 2017). So while objective contextual measures do not matter, we see that personal exposure to crime does increase one’s anxiety. The model also replicates previous empirical findings by showing that women are more anxious about crime than men, and those who live in urban areas have more crime related anxiety than those who live in rural or suburban areas. Finally, the model suggests that Whites, those with higher levels of education, and those with higher incomes have lower levels of anxiety.

Anxiety and Presidential Approval

We now turn to the question of whether anxiety towards crime shapes presidential approval. Table 2 presents results from an individual-level model of presidential approval. The observations in this model are measured on a monthly basis for nearly two decades. The results are from a logistic regression where the dependent variable is a binary indicator of presidential approval. To account for systematic variation in presidential approval, we control for co-partisanship of the respondent with the president and include fixed effects for each survey wave. Since we are agnostic as to the best individual-level measure of assessment of crime, our model includes two measures based on level or presence of anxiety along with two retrospective measures of national crime.

As expected, co-partisans are significantly more likely to approve of the president. Even so, both anxiety and retrospective evaluations of crime are associated with decreased levels of presidential approval; so, too, is the measure of crime victimization. However, the change in the state crime rate—our measure of the objective crime conditions in a given locale—is not statistically significant, indicating that perceptions matter more than reality when it comes to holding presidents accountable for crime.

Figure 1 presents a substantive interpretation of the results presented in Table 2. Figure 1

	Presidential Approval	
	(1)	(2)
Crime Anxiety	-0.08*** (0.02)	
Retrospective		-0.30*** (0.03)
Crime Victimization	-0.26*** (0.06)	-0.28*** (0.06)
Δ Crime Rate	-0.34 (0.23)	-0.26 (0.24)
Co-partisan	3.90*** (0.06)	3.84*** (0.06)
Independent	1.63*** (0.08)	1.61*** (0.09)
White	-0.25** (0.09)	-0.31*** (0.09)
Male	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)
Income		
Less than \$20,000	-0.08 (0.10)	-0.08 (0.10)
\$20,00 to \$29,999	-0.07 (0.10)	-0.04 (0.10)
\$30,000 to \$49,999	0.06 (0.07)	0.07 (0.07)
\$50,000 to \$74,999	0.14 (0.07)	0.15* (0.08)
Age		
Senior	-0.16* (0.06)	-0.16* (0.06)
Under 30	0.06 (0.08)	0.01 (0.09)
Education		
Some College	0.05 (0.07)	0.05 (0.07)
College Degree	-0.05 (0.08)	-0.10 (0.08)
Post graduate degree	-0.01 (0.08)	-0.11 (0.08)
Urban		
Suburban	-0.02 (0.06)	0.02 (0.06)
Rural	0.07 (0.07)	0.13 (0.07)
Intercept	-0.59*** (0.16)	-0.70*** (0.16)
Num. obs.	13613	12918

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 2: Model of Presidential Approval, 2000-2018. Coefficients are from a logit model where the dependent variable is presidential approval. Indicators for year are included in the model but not presented in the table.

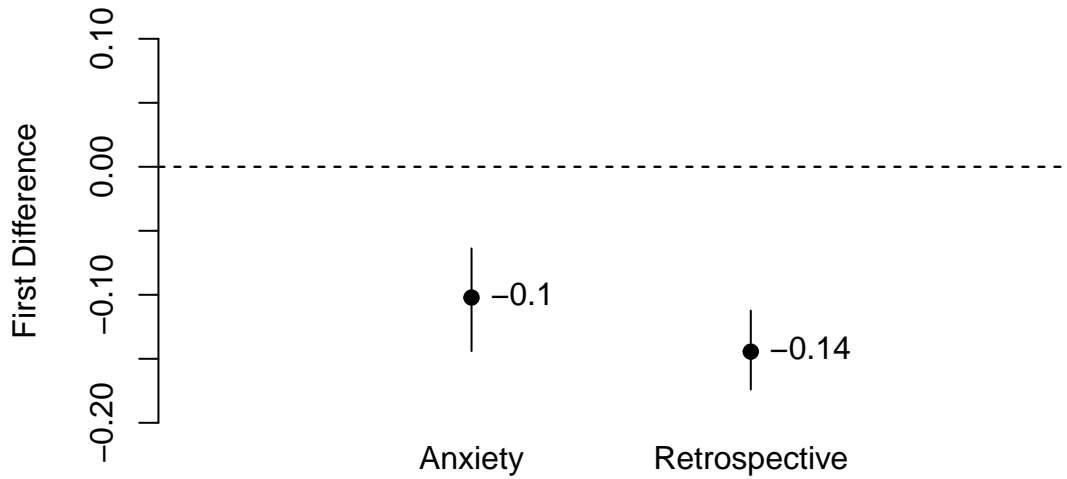


Figure 1: First Differences for the minimum and maximum values of crime anxiety and retrospective crime evaluates. The point estimates in both specifications are negative and statistically significant but not statistically distinguishable from one another. The effect of crime on presidential approval is negative and consistent across measures.

presents first differences for the two different measures of attitudes towards crime based on simulated probabilities of presidential approval. The left side of the figure shows the difference in the predicted probability of approving of the president when anxiety toward crime is at its minimum versus maximum value, holding all other variables at their means. The right side of the figure shows this same difference when one feels that there is more crime in the United States than the last year as opposed to less.

The simulations in Figure 1 indicate that, even while holding partisanship constant, anxiety towards crime decreases the probability one approves of the president by 10 percent. Similarly, holding poor retrospective evaluations about crime decreases the probability one approves of the president by 14 percent. Ultimately, anxiety-based and retrospective percep-

tions are both associated with a significant and similar decrease in the predicted probability of approving of the president. Objective changes in crime conditions have no effect.

Though these results indicate that anxiety towards crime reduces one’s probability of approving of the president, we do not expect crime and accountability to affect all presidents equally. As discussed above, we expect anxiety about crime to translate into differing levels of presidential approval through a mechanism of issue ownership conditioned on race. Accordingly, we expect to see differences in presidential approval between White and Black Americans by party of president.

To better understand the ways in which anxiety about crime is linked to presidential approval via the mechanism of racially-conditioned issue ownership, we run a series of logistic regressions using the five-point anxiety scale as our independent variable.¹² These regressions are shown in Table 3. Column 1 presents our baseline model of crime and presidential approval, allowing for the relationship between crime anxiety and presidential approval to vary between racial groups. The constituent term for anxiety, then, can be read as the relationship between crime anxiety and presidential approval among White respondents. The results from the model in Column 1 indicate that those individuals who are anxious about crime are less likely to approve of the president, regardless of race.

In Columns 2 and 3, we estimate these same models separately for Democratic and Republican presidents. Here, we see evidence in favor of racially conditioned issue ownership. Indeed, the results of our model predicting approval of Democratic presidents (Column 2) suggests that higher levels of anxiety about crime are associated with a lower likelihood of approving of the president’s job performance among Whites. Although the lack of statistically significant interaction effects in this model indicates that anxiety about crime and a lower probability of approving of the president does not significantly vary as a function of an

¹²In the supplemental appendix, we present results from a similar model where the independent variable is the retrospective crime evaluation. The coefficients for the constitutive terms and the interaction are consistent with the anxiety results and are statistically significant.

	Presidential Approval		
	All	Clinton / Obama	Bush / Trump
Crime Anxiety	-0.08*** (0.02)	-0.13*** (0.03)	-0.04 (0.02)
Black	0.38** (0.13)	1.91*** (0.26)	-0.58** (0.20)
Crime Anxiety × Black	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.10)	-0.22* (0.08)
Co-partisan	3.90*** (0.06)	3.89*** (0.09)	3.70*** (0.08)
Independent	1.63*** (0.08)	1.70*** (0.12)	1.46*** (0.12)
Crime Victimization	-0.26*** (0.06)	-0.22* (0.10)	-0.27** (0.09)
Δ Crime Rate	-0.34 (0.23)	-0.40 (0.40)	-0.23 (0.29)
Male	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.13 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.07)
Income			
Less than \$20,000	-0.08 (0.10)	0.17 (0.15)	-0.29* (0.13)
\$20,00 to \$29,999	-0.06 (0.10)	0.15 (0.15)	-0.31* (0.13)
\$30,000 to \$49,999	0.06 (0.07)	0.15 (0.11)	-0.00 (0.10)
\$50,000 to \$74,999	0.14 (0.07)	0.11 (0.11)	0.16 (0.10)
Age			
Senior	-0.16* (0.06)	-0.17 (0.09)	-0.11 (0.09)
Under 30	0.06 (0.08)	0.36** (0.13)	-0.16 (0.11)
Education			
Some College	0.05 (0.07)	0.25* (0.11)	-0.07 (0.09)
College Degree	-0.05 (0.08)	0.47*** (0.12)	-0.39*** (0.10)
Post graduate degree	-0.01 (0.08)	0.77*** (0.12)	-0.56*** (0.10)
Urban			
Rural	0.07 (0.07)	-0.14 (0.11)	0.28** (0.09)
Suburban	-0.02 (0.06)	-0.23* (0.09)	0.16* (0.08)
Intercept	-0.85*** (0.13)	-1.13*** (0.17)	2.08*** (0.18)
Num. obs.	13613	5942	7671

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 3: Models of Presidential Approval, 2000-2018. Coefficients are from logit regressions where the dependent variable is presidential approval. Indicators for year are included in the model but not presented in the table.

individual’s race, the confidence interval on the marginal effect overlaps zero. By contrast, the coefficient for crime anxiety in the model predicting approval of Republican presidents (Column 3) is close to zero and statistically insignificant. Nevertheless, we see that Blacks who are anxious about crime are less likely to approve of Republican presidents. Taken together, these results suggest that Whites who are anxious about crime are less likely to approve of Democratic presidents while Blacks translate their anxiety about crime into a lower likelihood of approving of Republican presidents.

To make the results from Table 3 more readily interpretable, in Figure 2 we generated first differences in the predicted probability of approving of the president when moving from no anxiety to the maximum amount of anxiety on our scale. Additionally, we show how these first differences vary as a function of the party of the president.

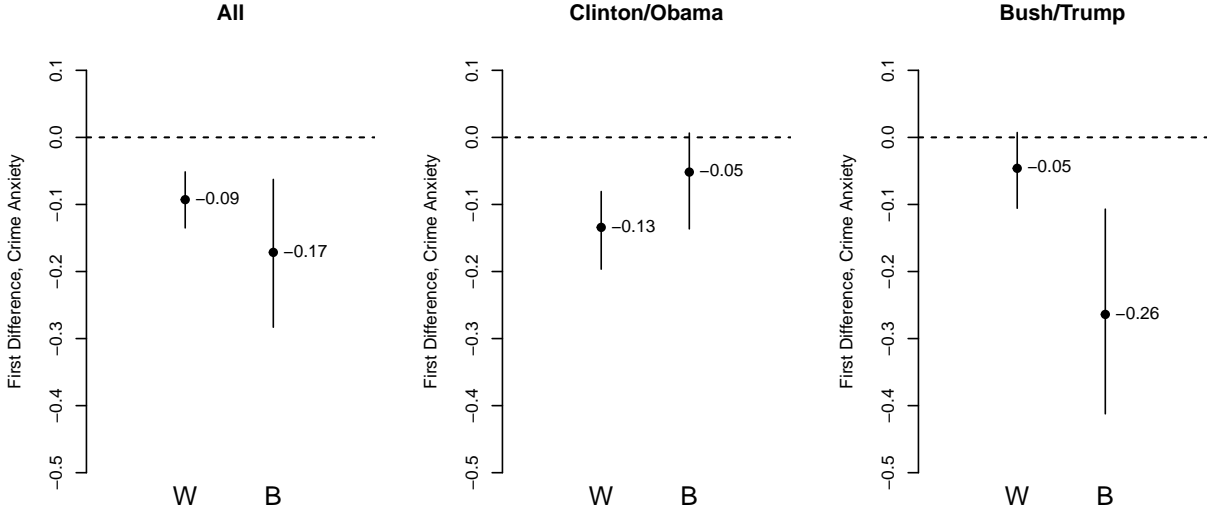


Figure 2: Predicted Probabilities of Presidential Approval. This figure shows the predicted probability of approving of the president for White and Black respondents across various administrations (Democratic or Republican). Predicted probabilities are generated by calculating the first difference on our crime anxiety measure.

The leftmost panel in Figure 2 shows the first difference in the predicted probability of

approving of the president for White and Black respondents, regardless of the president's party. The first difference in our crime anxiety measure is associated with a 9 percent decrease in the predicted probability of approving of the president for White respondents. For Black respondents, this same difference is associated with a 17 percent reduction. Nonetheless, these differences are not statistically distinguishable from one another.

The middle panel in Figure 2 shows the predicted probability of approving of a Democratic president's job performance. Similar to our results from the full sample, we find that White anxiety about crime predicts a 13 percent decrease in the likelihood of approving of the president's job performance, but only a 5 percent reduction for Black respondents, which is not statistically significant.

Finally, the rightmost panel in Figure 2 shows the first difference in predicted probability of approving of Republican presidents. Unlike the pattern for Democratic presidents, White respondents who are anxious about crime are no less likely to approve of Republican presidents than Whites who are not anxious about crime. Indeed, the 95 percent confidence interval on our predicted probability estimate overlaps with zero. By contrast, Black respondents who are anxious about crime are 26 percent less likely to approve of Republican presidents.

Collectively, Table 3 and the predicted probabilities of presidential approval shown in Figure 2 provide strong evidence in favor of our theoretical expectations. Anxiety about crime can and does lead individuals to lower their evaluations of the president. However, our results indicate that this relationship is dependent upon both the race of the respondent and the party of the president. Anxiety about crime translates into presidential (dis)approval through a mechanism of racially conditioned issue ownership. Black citizens who are anxious about crime appear to punish only Republican presidents. By contrast, Whites who are anxious about crime appear to lower their evaluations of Democratic presidents but not Republican presidents.

Conclusion & Discussion

In this paper, we demonstrate that anxiety toward crime affects presidential approval. Spanning twenty years and four different administrations, our results indicate that when individuals are anxious about crime they are less approving of the president. However, we find that this pattern is dependent upon an individual's race and the party of the president. Black respondents punish Republican presidents when they are anxious about crime while White individuals only lower their evaluations of Democratic presidents in similar circumstances.

We have argued that this relationship is an example of racially conditioned issue ownership. Because crime is an issue that Republicans “own,” and because White individuals are likely to support “tough on crime” candidates, White Americans who are anxious about crime are unlikely to decrease their support for Republican presidents. Yet, these same stances are likely to decrease Black support for Republican presidents when they are anxious about crime. At the same time, Democratic positions toward criminal justice are likely seen by Black Americans as attempts to reform a system that has disproportionately affected communities of color. As such, Black Americans are less likely to decrease their support for Democratic presidents when anxious. Republicans, who may see these policies as “soft on crime,” will be more likely to disapprove of Democratic presidents when anxious.

While the results presented here are, to our knowledge, the first to show a direct link between crime and presidential approval, future empirical analyses could improve upon our work. Our study presented observational data to show that higher anxiety towards crime is associated with a lower presidential job approval. While such an empirical approach does not allow us to say for certain that heightened anxiety *causes* citizens to lower their approval of the president, theorizing that the causal arrow runs from crime anxiety and toward presidential approval is more logical than the other way around. Nevertheless, future work should consider experimentally inducing anxiety about crime to more firmly establish

the causal nature of the results we have presented here.

Additionally, future work should consider that issue ownership is not monolithic. Although Democrats are seen as more competent on healthcare and Republicans are perceived to be more skillful economic managers, it is possible, given our findings, that these heuristics break down along racial or other identity-based cleavages. As immigration, race, and crime become increasingly salient in American politics, we believe the importance of work along these lines will only increase.

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Supplemental Appendix for Crime and Presidential Accountability

Contents

[1 Additional Results](#)

1

1 Additional Results

	Presidential Approval		
	All	Clinton / Obama	Bush / Trump
Retrospective	-0.29*** (0.03)	-0.51*** (0.05)	-0.11** (0.04)
Black	0.39*** (0.11)	2.07*** (0.28)	-0.65*** (0.16)
Retrospective × Black	-0.14 (0.12)	-0.18 (0.29)	-0.51** (0.17)
Crime Victimization	-0.28*** (0.06)	-0.26** (0.10)	-0.29*** (0.08)
Δ Crime Rate	-0.27 (0.24)	-0.34 (0.41)	-0.19 (0.30)
Male	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.14 (0.08)	-0.00 (0.07)
Co-partisan	3.84*** (0.06)	3.78*** (0.09)	3.67*** (0.08)
Independent	1.60*** (0.09)	1.65*** (0.13)	1.45*** (0.12)
Income			
Less than \$20,000	-0.08 (0.10)	0.22 (0.15)	-0.32* (0.13)
\$20,00 to \$29,999	-0.04 (0.10)	0.20 (0.15)	-0.30* (0.13)
\$30,000 to \$49,999	0.07 (0.07)	0.18 (0.12)	0.01 (0.10)
\$50,000 to \$74,999	0.15* (0.08)	0.13 (0.12)	0.18 (0.10)
Age			
Senior	-0.16* (0.06)	-0.16 (0.10)	-0.11 (0.09)
Under 30	0.01 (0.09)	0.29* (0.14)	-0.20 (0.11)
Education			
Some College	0.05 (0.07)	0.21 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.09)
College Degree	-0.10 (0.08)	0.34** (0.13)	-0.41*** (0.11)
Post graduate degree	-0.11 (0.08)	0.63*** (0.13)	-0.62*** (0.11)
Urban			
Rural	0.14 (0.07)	-0.04 (0.11)	0.30** (0.10)
Suburban	0.02 (0.06)	-0.14 (0.09)	0.17* (0.08)
Intercept	-1.01*** (0.13)	-1.35*** (0.17)	2.00*** (0.18)
Num. obs.	12918	5643	7275

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table A1: Models of Presidential Approval, 2000-2018. Coefficients are from logit regressions where the dependent variable is presidential approval. Indicators for year are included in the model but not presented in the table.

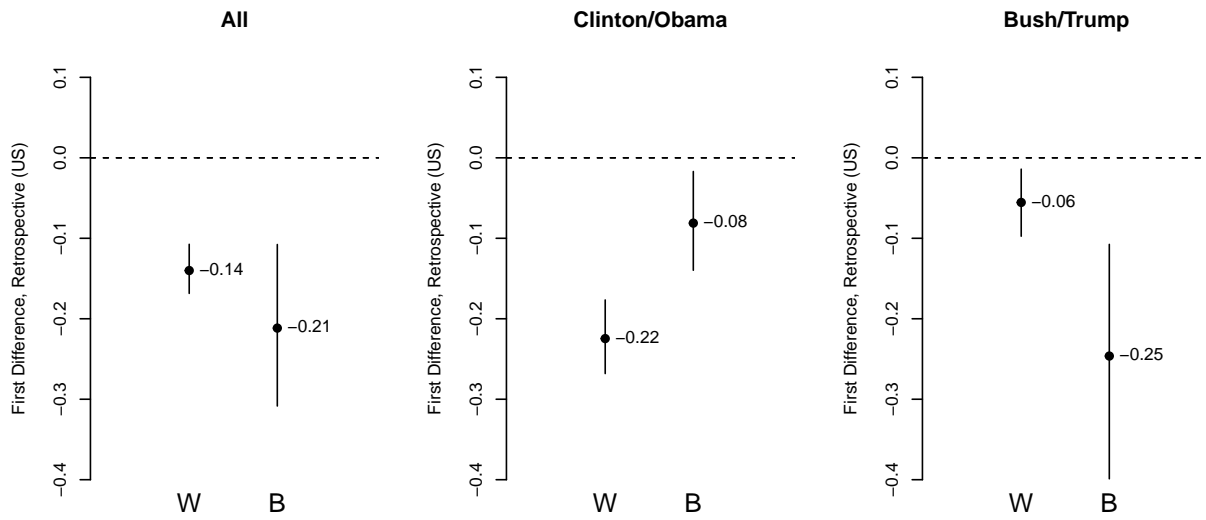


Figure A1: Predicted Probabilities of Presidential Approval. This figure shows the predicted probability of approving of the president for White and Black respondents across various administrations (Democratic or Republican). Predicted probabilities are generated by calculating the first difference on our retrospective crime evaluation measure.