
Public Opinion Toward Presidential Power

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According to more than a half-century of scholarship, a president's prestige is one of his primary sources of power. In this article, we examine the public's attitudes toward the levers of presidential power. Using data from a nationally representative survey, we show that respondents who provided higher approval ratings of the president were significantly more supportive of presidential powers. These findings provide striking evidence that views toward executive power are shaped by presidential approval and suggest that popular presidents can use their prestige to expand the scope of powers available to the presidency.

Political scientists, legal scholars, historians, pundits, lawmakers, jurists, and the public have long questioned the nature and limits of presidential power. The scrutiny over the limits of the commander in chief has intensified during the Obama administration. In June 2014 the Supreme Court ruled that President Barack Obama exceeded his authority by declaring the Senate to be in recess when he made three appointments in 2012 to the National Labor Relations Board without receiving Senate confirmation. A month later, the House of Representatives voted to authorize Speaker John Boehner to sue Obama for overstepping his legal authority in delaying the employer mandate in the Affordable Care Act of 2010. Still later in 2014, when Obama issued memoranda to direct the Department of Homeland Security to modify its enforcement of deportation laws, key Republican leaders criticized the president's "brazen power grab."¹ Throughout

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1. Michael D. Shear, 2014, "Obama, Daring Congress, Acts to Overhaul Immigration," *New York Times*, November 20. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/21/us/obama-immigration-speech.html> (accessed December 11, 2014).

it all, Obama has cited the unwillingness of Congress to pass legislation to address pressing national issues and repeatedly threatened—sometimes following through, as in the case of immigration reform—to use his executive authority where Congress refused.

At one level, the terms of these interbranch disputes are clear: when power is shared across political institutions and different political parties control those institutions, conflict over the nature of power is inevitable. More fundamentally, however, President Obama and Republican congressional leaders have appealed to different principles in supporting their arguments. Obama has repeatedly referenced his responsibility to carry out the will of the American people in response to the public's expectations of an almost omnipotent presidency. The public, research has found, holds its president accountable for the national economy (e.g., Hibbs 2000), the conduct of foreign wars (Karol and Miguel 2007), and the distribution of federal largesse (Kriner and Reeves 2012, 2015a). Further research shows that the president is blamed for things well beyond his or any human's control, including natural disasters (Gasper and Reeves 2011; Healy and Malhotra 2009; Reeves 2011), shark attacks (Achen and Bartels 2002), and even the performances of local sports teams (Healy, Malhotra, and Mo 2010). House Republican leaders, on the other hand, have accused Obama of subverting the constitutional separation of powers by claiming power that belongs to the legislative branch. Indeed, the public's extraordinary expectations—hallmarks of the modern presidency—stand in sharp contrast with the few formal powers granted to the presidency (Edwards 1989; Neustadt 1990), therefore setting into motion contestation over the limits of presidential power.

In this article, we examine public opinion across a range of presidential powers. Building upon and extending the research by Aberbach, Peterson, and Quirk (2007) in the context of the presidency, we build upon studies of Americans' attitudes toward political institutions. Most studies in this vein focus on Congress (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995) and the courts (Caldeira and Gibson 1992). In contrast with most previous research that has focused on the correlates of public approval of the individual who occupies the White House, we investigate Americans' views toward the powers available to the office of the presidency. Furthermore, we examine the extent to which Americans' support for presidential power is associated with their approval of the president himself.

Executing an original nationally representative survey of U.S. adults, we present results on Americans' attitudes toward the tools of presidential power. While the president's co-partisans are more supportive than members of the opposite party of the powers available to presidents, partisans are substantially more polarized in their evaluations of the president himself than they are when evaluating the powers of the presidency more generally. At the same time, we find that citizens grant greater support for the president's powers as their approval of the person inhabiting the White House increases. The results of this study suggest ways in which public opinion toward the tools of presidential action influences the exercise of presidential power.

The Presidency and the Separation of Powers

Though Article I establishes Congress as the nation's lawmaking branch, the Constitution also prescribes a role in the legislative process for presidents. For instance,

because of the presidential veto, new legislation can be passed only when the president and Congress are in agreement in the absence of congressional supermajorities. Nevertheless, the founders intended for Congress to be the preeminent institution among the branches, as Madison makes clear in *Federalist 51* that “in republican government, the legislative authority necessarily predominates” (Ball 2003, 253). Thus, Article II is limited in the breadth of formal legislative powers belonging to the president. This arrangement is reflected in Neustadt (1990, 30), which argues that “power is persuasion and persuasion becomes bargaining.” According to this view, a president’s ability to influence legislation is due almost entirely to his ability to lead others—most notably, his congressional colleagues—to enact the policies he prefers.

Over the last several decades, however, scholarship on the presidency and political institutions more generally has developed a more expansive view of the president’s ability to influence policy making. For instance, in contrast with Neustadt (1990), which argues that the president’s use of the veto was a sign of weakness, Cameron (2000) sheds new light on how the veto, one of the president’s few formal powers, enables him to extract policy concessions from Congress. In considering presidential powers not specified in the Constitution, other studies argue that ambiguity in the enumeration of the president’s constitutional responsibilities has led presidents to gradually accumulate unilateral powers that define the modern-day presidency and enable them to more effectively achieve their policy goals (Howell 2003; Moe and Howell 1999a, 1999b; Moe 1993). Not only can presidents threaten to withhold their support from legislation passed by Congress, but they can circumvent Congress altogether by issuing executive orders to create new policies, using signing statements to express their interpretation of the legislation they sign into law, and using their position as head of the executive branch and commander in chief of the armed forces to direct the activities of the vast numbers of personnel in his employ.

Modern presidents have wielded an increasingly expansive set of presidential powers, driven in large part by increased public expectations of the president (Lowi 1986; Neustadt 1990). Despite the profound and enduring debates over the nature and scope of executive power, scholars have paid little attention to public attitudes about these powers. Due to the wide range of phenomena for which presidents receive credit and blame, presidents themselves may view their powers as essential tools for fulfilling their responsibilities to the public. Existing research on presidential responsiveness to public opinion assumes that presidents act in the service of the public’s policy preferences while overlooking the possibility that the public may also possess attitudes toward the tools of presidential power themselves.

The assumption that the public evaluates presidents on the basis of outcomes alone dominates the study of the presidency and to great consequence. Presidents enter office with a variety of objectives and goals, and perhaps chief among them is to secure subsequent electoral support from voters (Kriner and Reeves 2015a, 2015b; Moe 1985). To do so, extant scholarship argues that presidents have incentives to exhibit responsiveness to public opinion (Edwards 1983; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000) and thus bring about policies that the public supports. As a consequence of this singular focus on the *purposes* of presidential action, scholars attribute a wide range of presidential behavior—including vetoes

and veto threats (e.g., Groseclose and McCarty 2001; McCarty 2009), executive orders (e.g., Howell 2003), and public appeals (e.g., Canes-Wrone 2006; Kernell 1997)—to the president’s focus on the public’s policy preferences. Indeed, the public’s demand for increased policy responsiveness from presidents is widely posited to explain the ascendance of the modern presidency (Lowi 1986; Neustadt 1990) and presidents’ increased reliance on unilateral tools (Howell 2003; Moe and Howell 1999). If, however, the public also scrutinizes the *ways* these policy outcomes are achieved, the consequences extend far beyond simply exploring the contours of public opinion. Should the public hold meaningful attitudes about the tools wielded by presidents, these attitudes may affect the incentive structures for presidents to take action.

The Public and the Microfoundations of Presidential Power

In addition to creating a presidency whose formal powers were limited, the founders also viewed the presidency as an institution largely insulated from the public. Instead, they intended for the president primarily to serve as a “guardian against legislative tyranny” (Cohen 1999, 9). Yet the nation’s first president recognized the importance of ensuring that the public supported its president. As Cohen (1999, 9) describes, George Washington’s desire for public support was driven less by his short-term policy goals but more because he recognized the importance of establishing and ensuring the legitimacy of the institution. As Washington acknowledged and many scholars have argued since, the strength of the presidency is measured not only by the formal powers granted to it but also the degree to which the public accepts the president’s authority to advance his policy goals—even if the public disagrees with the president’s preferred policies.

This focus on support for the *presidency* contrasts with public support for the *president*. Commonly measured through the public’s approval of the president’s job performance, a sizable literature investigates the correlates and consequences of presidential popularity (e.g., Canes-Wrone 2006; Canes-Wrone and De Marchi 2002; Edwards 1989, 2003, 2009; Gronke 2003; Ostrom and Simon 1985; Rivers and Rose 1985; Rohde and Simon 1985). This distinction reflects a theoretical claim that presidential success is a function of support for the individual holding the office as opposed to the legitimacy of the initiative itself.² However, more recent scholarship provides reasons to doubt that presidential approval translates neatly and directly into a measure of support for presidential power.³ For instance, as Cohen (2011) argues, presidential approval tends to be quite volatile, and thus a president’s short-term approval rating is likely to be only a noisy measure of the public’s underlying attitudes. As a consequence, Neustadt (1990) and Edwards (1997, 2009) argue that presidential approval does not directly correspond with support for the president. Studying the relationship between approval and legislative success in Congress, Canes-Wrone (2006) and Edwards (2003) find the link between

2. The theoretical claim that presidential success is a function of presidential popularity is also well grounded in literature on voting behavior. A dominant view is that support for a candidate or political party are directly translated into support for the policies, actions, and behaviors of that individual politician or party (e.g., Zaller 1992).

3. See Edwards (2011) for an overview.

popularity and legislative support for a president's initiatives is quite variable. Neustadt (1990) goes on to argue that what the public believes the office of the president *ought* to do to effect policy change is a separate question from the public's evaluation of the president himself.

Existing studies provide little information about the public's views about the presidency as an institution and, by extension, attitudes toward presidential power. On the former point Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995, 29) write that "in the case of the executive branch, almost nothing exists on public support for the institution itself. Much attention has been devoted to support for the person occupying the position of president, but not so for the institution of the presidency." This is an important omission as scholarship over the last twenty years has moved to a distinctly institutional approach of the presidency, investigating how powers provided to the president by the Constitution and by statute enable him to influence public policy (e.g., Cameron 2000; Howell 2003; Mayer 1999), sometimes without securing the explicit consent of Congress. Thus, examining public support for the powers of the presidency provides an opportunity to examine the incentives for and boundaries of presidential action.

Political Institutions and Public Opinion

In studying public opinion about presidential power, we follow scholarship on the public's view of other American political institutions. Our approach is akin to that of Caldeira and Gibson (1992), which studies the correlates of public support for the U.S. Supreme Court. We examine the public's views toward the institution of the presidency to examine how the public evaluates the exercise of presidential power within a system of separated powers. After all, as Caldeira and Gibson (1992, 637) argue, "No political institution can survive if support for it is contingent upon satisfaction with policy outputs; all political institutions require a 'reservoir' of goodwill." Thus, we separate our examination of support for the powers of the presidency from the study of approval of the president himself.

In many cases, the public's evaluations of political institutions tend to differ from their assessments of the individuals who occupy those institutions (e.g., Caldeira and Gibson 1992; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Just as public opinion toward members of Congress is shaped by factors including partisanship and their perceptions of how well their member represents their interests (e.g., Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 117-18), specific support, which we measure as approval of the president, reflects a combination of partisan attitudes and assessments of the president's handling of the country's business, particularly the economy. In contrast, we consider institutional support, which we define as support for the instruments of power that presidents have at their disposal.⁴

4. Institutional support is related to Calderia and Gibson's (1992) conception of diffuse support, which is in turn based on the definition of Easton (1975). Diffuse support describes the public's willingness to accept an outcome even if they do not support the specific policy. Thus, diffuse support "represents a basic institutional commitment" (Caldeira and Gibson 1992, 643), reflecting the public's deeper beliefs about the proper structure of government. Instead, we use institutional support here to refer specifically to approval of the instruments of power—such as the veto or an executive order—as opposed to broader diffuse support about the legitimacy of decisions reached.

To study institutional support of the presidency, we study a variety of presidential powers that have been prominently featured in recent research and the subject of contemporary political salience, including the use of veto powers (Cameron 2000), signing statements (Conley 2011), executive orders and memoranda (Howell 2003; Lowande 2014; Mayer 1999; Waterman 2009), recess appointments (Black et al. 2007; Corley 2006), and control over the military (Howell and Pevehouse 2007; Kriner 2010).⁵ Existing literature, however, generates conflicting expectations about the level and correlates of public support for presidential power in these areas. On the one hand, American political culture is widely believed to weigh against the concentration of power in a single executive. As Edwards (1989, 14) notes, “Americans are basically individualistic and skeptical of authority. They may admire its exercise, as long as it is over others.” Given the historical and institutional legacies of the colonial experience, political socialization may cultivate skepticism about a more expansive presidency than what the founders proscribed.

In addition, existing research on many of these powers suggests that their use indicates presidential weakness. For instance, research on the issuance of executive orders finds that popular presidents—the same presidents would seem to be in an advantageous position for bargaining with Congress—use them less frequently than unpopular presidents (Krause and Cohen 1997; Mayer 1999; Mayer and Price 2002).⁶ Similarly, Corley (2006) argues that recess appointments may induce public backlash, and Black et al. (2007) show that presidents make fewer recess appointments to independent agencies as their approval ratings increase. Studying the politics of interbranch bargaining, Groseclose and McCarty (2001) demonstrate that, under divided government, presidential approval drops following the issuance of a veto. These findings from disparate research agendas all suggest that many of the tools in the modern presidency’s toolkit are second-best options, or worse, for achieving president’s policy goals and that they may be suboptimal precisely because of how the public may react to their use.

Support for presidential power may also depend on the degree of support for the president himself. Perhaps popular presidents are able to translate their high approval ratings into support for an augmented set of powers. After all, many of the origins of the modern presidency are traced to public demand for a more expansive presidency in the wake of the Great Depression and World War II (Lowi 1986; Neustadt 1990); high levels of support for President Franklin Roosevelt himself would seem to be an obvious prerequisite for such public demand. More generally, though, the importance of presidential prestige plays a leading role in accounts of how and when presidents accomplish their policy objectives. As Neustadt (1990, 77) argues, “Prestige counts in power by establishing some checks upon resistance from the men engaged in governing.” And as Edwards (2003, 4) further elaborates, “Public support is a crucial political resource for the president . . . It is difficult for others who hold power to deny the legitimate demands of a president with popular support.” A large body of research finds that presidents enjoy

5. Note that this conceptualization of diffuse support is a slight variation of the approach taken by Caldeira and Gibson (1992), which asks questions about specific powers as well as general questions about individual-level support for the Supreme Court. In this study, we focus on attitudes toward specific powers.

6. Studying memoranda, however, Lowande (2014) finds no evidence of a relationship between their use and presidential approval.

greater legislative success as their approval ratings increase (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Bond, Fleisher, and Wood 2003; Canes-Wrone and De Marchi 2002; Edwards 1980, 1989; Ostrom and Simon 1985; Rivers and Rose 1985; Rohde and Simon 1985), and thus perhaps popular presidents are similarly able to leverage their approval ratings to expand the range of powers available to the presidency. However, an important body of scholarship finds that presidential approval does not directly correspond to increased legislative success (e.g., Cohen 2011; Canes-Wrone 2006; Edwards 1997, 2003, 2009), and other research indicates that a president's success in Congress may be influenced by other events such as war (e.g., Howell and Rogowski 2013). Thus, the relationship between approval and support for presidential powers may be somewhat more limited.

Finally, the president's co-partisans may also express greater support for presidential powers. Their shared partisanship likely indicates a general alignment between policy positions and priorities. Moreover, as partisanship may also serve as an important social identity for citizens (e.g., Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), a president's co-partisans may endorse presidential powers at higher rates because their use results in success for the party. For instance, Aberbach, Peterson, and Quirk (2007) studied the public's view of the presidency under George W. Bush and found that Republican identifiers were significantly more likely to endorse the principle of deference toward presidential decision making and the president's authority to act unilaterally.

In the following sections, we test several hypotheses about the public's support for presidential power. First, we expect that the public grants relatively low levels of support to many of the tools of power wielded by modern presidents. We also hypothesize that citizens distinguish *institutional* support from *specific* support. That is, support for presidential power is distinct from the public's approval of the president. While both quantities are likely to be influenced by some of the same factors, such as partisanship, we expect that Americans are generally in more agreement about the nature of presidential power than they are about the person who occupies the White House. However, we also expect that Americans' support for presidential power increases with their support for the president himself. Finally, we expect the president's co-partisans to be more supportive of presidential powers.

Public Support of Presidential Powers

We evaluated the public's support for presidential powers as part of the 2013 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), fielded in November 2013. The module included 1,000 U.S. adults, and the sample was weighted to reflect the characteristics of the national population. After the respondents answered a series of questions about background demographic and political characteristics, including presidential approval, we asked each respondent to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about a variety of powers granted to or claimed by presidents. Specifically, our questions gauged public support for six dimensions of presidential powers and evaluated whether the public president should be able to exercise unilateral control of the military, keep certain information concealed from Congress and the public, veto legislation passed

TABLE 1
Aggregate Support for Presidential Powers

<i>Question</i>	<i>Percentage support</i>	<i>N</i>
Presidential approval	39.5	950
Unilateral military powers	35.2	996
Executive privilege	71.5	995
Veto powers	46.6	997
Appoint judges without Senate confirmation	33.3	993
Direct agency implementation of bills passed by Congress	54.2	991
Unilaterally enact policy	26.7	993

Data: 2013 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Entries are the percentage of respondents supporting presidential powers. Data are weighted to characteristics of the national population.

by Congress, appoint judges of his choice without Senate consent, direct agency implementation of policies passed by Congress, and create new policies through unilateral action without having Congress vote on them. We avoided using overly technical or obscure language to focus on respondents' evaluations of the scope of presidential power rather than the details of any particular tool. The question wordings are provided in the Appendix.

Table 1 describes the aggregate levels of public support for these presidential powers. On the whole, presidential approval was relatively low, with 39.5% of the sample approving of President Obama's job performance in November 2013.⁷ The summary statistics for public opinion about presidential powers, however, support two claims. First, support for the levers of presidential power varies widely across the specific tools. While a majority of the public supports the president's use of executive privilege (71.5%) and ability to direct the ways agencies implement policies passed by Congress (54.2%), the public is less supportive of the other exercises of presidential power. Only about a third of the public supports the president's unilateral control over the military (35.2%) or believes the president should be able to appoint judges without Senate confirmation (33.3%). The public is even less supportive of direct presidential action; only 26.7% of the public believes the president should be able to make policy without having Congress vote on that policy. Interestingly, only 46.6% of the public believes the president should have the right to veto legislation passed by both chambers of Congress. These data indicate that the public is suspicious of unilateral presidential actions, perhaps instead favoring a consensual lawmaking process. It is also important to note that these survey instruments appear to be reliably measuring respondents' general underlying orientations with respect to presidential power. The items scale fairly well together with a standardized Cronbach's alpha of 0.67.

These data also indicate that, in the aggregate, evaluations of the president are largely distinct from the public's evaluation of the presidency. As Table 1 attests, large majorities of the public approved—or, in some cases, *disapproved*—of certain powers, even though their evaluations of President Obama's job performance were lukewarm at

7. This figure compares favorably with the level of presidential approval (41%) found in a Gallup poll fielded October 28 through November 3, 2013.

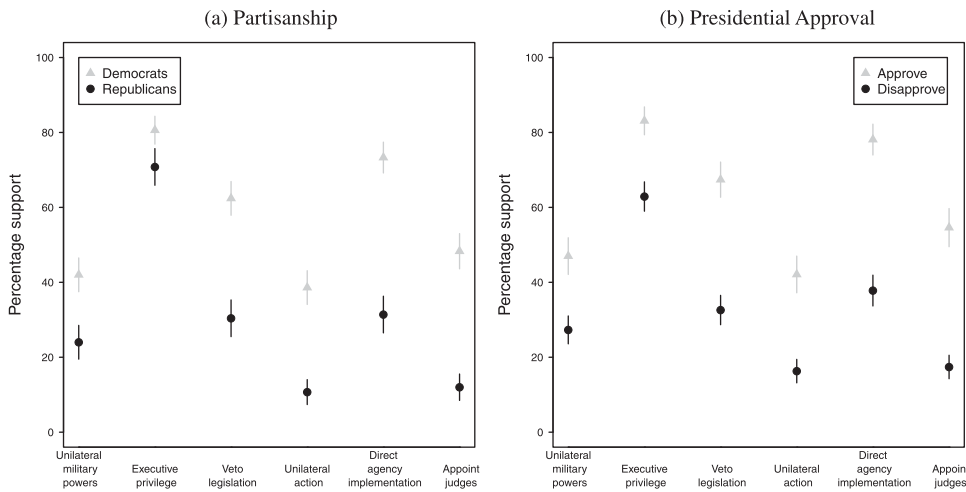


FIGURE 1. Differences in Support for Presidential Powers: Differences between Democrats and Republicans and Approvers and Disapprovers.

Note: Plotted points indicate the percentages of respondents who supported presidential powers, and the vertical lines are the 95% confidence intervals. The left plot shows support for presidential powers among Democrats and Republicans, and the right plot shows support for presidential powers among respondents who approved and disapproved of President Obama's job performance.

best. Whatever Americans may think about the person occupying the White House, these attitudes do not directly translate into the public's support for presidential power.

In Figure 1, we explore how support for presidential powers is associated with partisanship and presidential approval. Each plot shows support for presidential powers and the associated standard errors. The left panel of the figure presents support for presidential powers across party lines.⁸ The presidential powers along the x-axis are ranked in decreasing order of the partisan differences in support. Across each of the six presidential powers, the plots show that Democratic identifiers grant significantly higher support than Republican identifiers. At the same time, however, the partisan differences in support for these presidential powers are substantially narrower than partisan differences in evaluations of President Obama, where 76.2% of Democrats approved of Obama's performance as president compared with only 3.2% of Republicans. The largest partisan differences over presidential powers are found in support for the president's ability to direct agency implementation of policies passed by Congress. While nearly three-quarters of Democrats (73.3%) support the president's ability to direct how agencies implement policies, less than a third (31.4%) of Republicans agreed. Though partisans may have different views about the powers presidents should wield, they are in substantially greater agreement about the scope of presidential powers than they are about the job performance of the president currently in office. Majorities of both Democrats and Republicans oppose

8. Following Keith et al. (1992), we classified *leaners* as partisans.

unilateral policy making by presidents (38.6% and 10.7%, respectively) and unilateral control of the military (42.0% and 23.9%, respectively), while large majorities of both parties (80.6% and 70.8%, respectively) support the president's authority to keep certain kinds of information confidential. Thus, on the whole, while the president's co-partisans support presidential powers to a greater degree than members of the opposite party, the partisan differences over presidential power are smaller than they are for presidential approval and vary across a range of different powers.

As the right panel of Figure 1 shows, we find similar results when comparing support for presidential powers among people who approve and disapprove of the president's job performance. Respondents who approve of President Obama were significantly more supportive of each of the presidential powers. Moreover, the differences in support for presidential powers among people who approve and disapprove of Obama closely mirror the patterns shown in the left plot. As with partisanship, the largest differences were found when comparing support for the president's authority to direct agency implementation of policies. The smallest differences were found in levels of support for the president's unilateral control of the military, where minorities of both approvers and disapprovers indicated support for this power. These two sets of results suggest that, while the public may disagree over presidential approval, there is far more consensus about the institutional powers belonging to the presidency. While partisan commitments and evaluations of the president himself do indeed appear to color citizens' evaluations of presidential power, these evaluations are largely distinct from their assessments of the president's performance.

These data provide the first glimpse of public opinion on how Americans view various powers that presidents have claimed and scholars have studied. By and large, Americans do not support powers that presidents exert, but with some exceptions. For example, they support the president's decisions to keep certain kinds of information confidential and about how executive agencies should implement policies. Interestingly, even though the Constitution provides for a president's veto powers, Americans are more conflicted about whether the president should be able to reject legislation passed by both chambers of Congress. And finally, Americans exhibit less support for presidential powers that have more direct implications for the balance of power across the branches. In general, large majorities of Americans oppose a president's ability to appoint judges without Senate confirmation or enact new policies via unilateral action. To systematically evaluate the degree to which support for the president translates into support for presidential power, we next model these attitudes directly.

Presidential Approval and the Public's Attitudes Toward Presidential Power

Can presidents leverage high approval ratings for public support for a more powerful presidency? We study this question by examining how increased presidential approval is associated with support for presidential powers. For each of our six presidential powers, we regressed support for presidential power on respondents' presidential approval (measured on a four-point scale ranging from "strongly disapprove" to "strongly approve") and partisanship (measured on a seven-point scale that ranges from "strong

TABLE 2
Modeling Support for Presidential Powers

Independent Variables	Unilateral					
	Military Powers	Executive Privilege	Veto Powers	Unilateral Action	Direct Agency Implementation	Appoint Judges
Party identification	0.09 (0.05)	-0.08 (0.06)	0.22* (0.05)	0.16* (0.06)	0.13* (0.05)	0.03 (0.06)
Presidential approval	0.40* (0.10)	0.64* (0.11)	0.35* (0.10)	0.68* (0.11)	0.79* (0.11)	0.96* (0.12)
Education	-0.03 (0.05)	0.22* (0.06)	0.19* (0.05)	-0.15* (0.06)	0.22* (0.05)	-0.09 (0.06)
Ideology	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.00 (0.06)	-0.05 (0.06)	0.02 (0.06)	0.07 (0.06)
Intercept	-1.67* (0.25)	-0.54* (0.26)	-2.45* (0.26)	-2.77* (0.31)	-2.87* (0.28)	-3.05* (0.30)
N	886	886	886	886	886	886
Log-likelihood	-533.37	-483.32	-539.74	-419.68	-492.10	-450.71

Data: 2013 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variables are listed at the top of each column. Data are weighted to national population parameters. *Party identification* is measured on a seven-point scale ranging from “strong Republican” (1) to “strong Democrat” (7). *Presidential approval* is measured using a four-point scale ranging from “strongly disapprove” (1) to “strongly approve” (4). *Education* is coded from 1 (no high school diploma) to 6 (postgraduate degree). *Ideology* is measured with a seven-point scale that ranges from “very conservative” (1) to “very liberal” (7). * indicates significance at $p < .05$.

Republican” to “strong Democrat”). We also included an indicator for respondents’ education levels, as individuals with higher education levels may have a more sophisticated understanding of the separation of powers and thus have different views about the scope of presidential power than people with lower levels of education. Finally, we include a measure of respondent ideology, where larger numbers indicate increased conservatism. We used logistic regression because the dependent variable is binary and weight the data to national population parameters.

The results are shown in Table 2. Across each of the six measures, respondents who provided higher approval ratings of the president were significantly more supportive of presidential powers. These findings provide striking evidence that views toward executive power are shaped by the degree of support for Obama himself. The other covariates, however, have more limited associations with presidential power. For instance, Democratic partisanship was associated with greater support for the president’s veto powers, use of unilateral action, and authority to direct agency implementation of policy. The coefficients for partisanship do not reach statistical significance when evaluating support for unilateral military powers and authority to appoint judges without Senate consent, and the coefficient for partisanship is in fact negative (though not statistically significant) when examining support for executive privilege. Support for executive privilege, veto power, and overseeing agency implementation significantly increases with education level, but greater education is associated with significantly decreased support

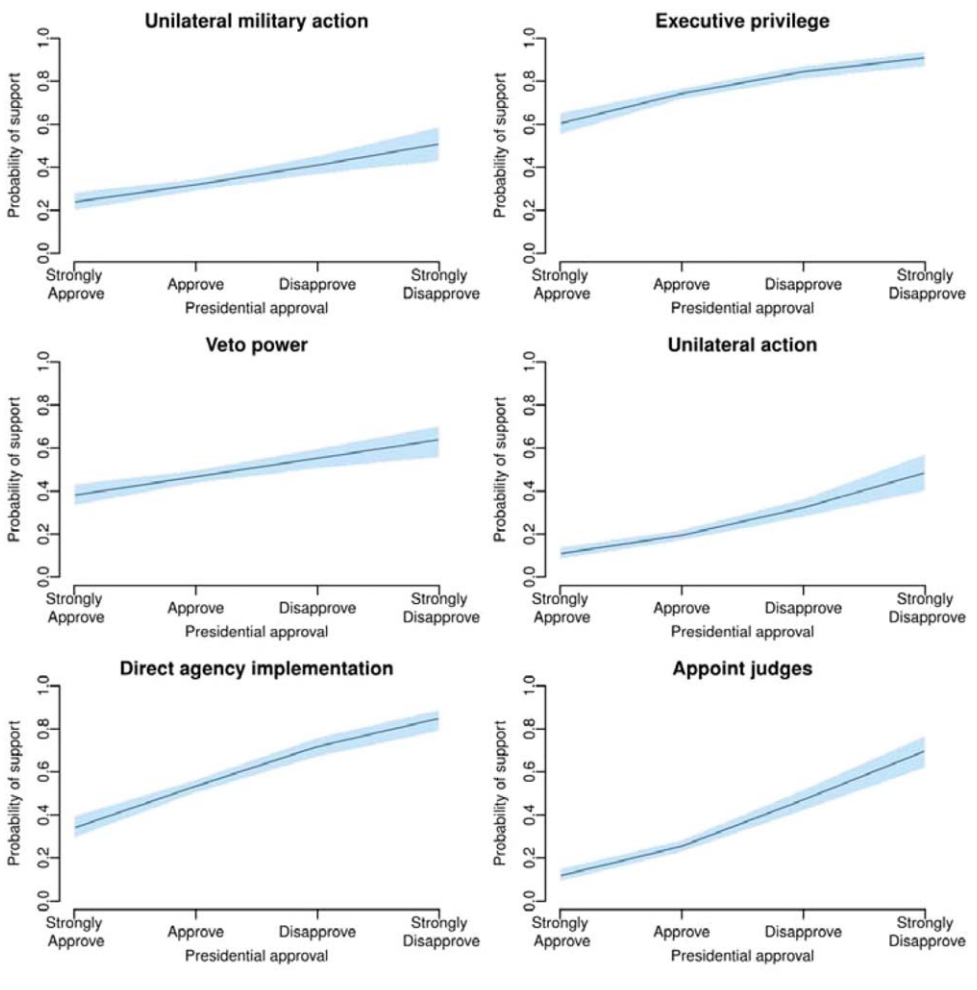


FIGURE 2. Presidential Approval and Support for Presidential Powers.

Note: Each of the plots shows the predicted probability of supporting presidential powers across the range of values of presidential approval. The plotted lines are the predicted probabilities and the shaded regions are the 95% confidence intervals, as obtained from the models shown in Table 2.

for unilateral action. That we see a positive relationship between education and support for, for instance, veto powers, but a negative relationship between education and support for unilateral action could indicate that people with greater political sophistication exhibit a more nuanced understanding of the boundaries of the separation of powers. Finally, we find no evidence that ideology is systematically associated with support for presidential powers.

We examine the substantive relationship between presidential approval and support for presidential powers more closely by presenting the results graphically in Figure 2 below. We estimated the predicted probability of supporting each indicator of presidential power across

the range of values of presidential approval, ranging from 1 (“strongly disapprove”) to 4 (“strongly approve”), holding the other covariates at the mean values.⁹

Figure 2 confirms our earlier findings that people who approve of the president’s job performance are significantly more supportive of presidential power than people who disapprove of the president. Interestingly, Figure 2 also reveals variation in the strength of the relationship between presidential approval and support for presidential power. For instance, respondents who “strongly disapprove” of President Obama’s job performance were about equally likely (around 20%) to support the president’s veto powers and his ability to direct how agencies implement policy. Support for veto powers increases at a much lower rate as approval increases, however, compared with support for directing agency implementation of policy. Similarly, while support for unilateral action and appointing judges without Senate consent both increases with the level of approval of the president, support increased for unilateral action at a lower rate compared with support for judicial appointment powers.

The results displayed in Figure 2 suggest that presidents who curry favor with the public can expect to expand their levers of power. Members of the public who approve of the president also support his ability to use the tools of office—including, in some instances, tools not typically afforded to presidents—to affect the behavior, policies, and composition of the federal government. At the same time, citizens who disapprove of the president’s performance are most likely to oppose the exercise of presidential power. While this disapproval may be rooted in political disagreement, it also suggests that the people who disapprove or of disagree with the president serve as the key checks against the concentration of political power in the person who inhabits the White House.

Conclusion

Our survey results provide a detailed characterization of the public’s attitudes toward presidential power. Building on previous work on public opinion toward other political institutions, such as the Supreme Court (e.g., Caldeira and Gibson 1992) and Congress (e.g., Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995), but in contrast with a large literature on public approval of the president, we evaluate the public’s level of support for powers of the presidency.

Our research generates several novel conclusions. First, public support for various types of presidential power varies considerably. Americans strongly support the president’s prerogatives to conceal certain information from Congress and the public, but are opposed to the president’s making policy unilaterally without the approval of Congress. These findings clarify the political dynamics surrounding several events in the Obama administration. For instance, congressional Republicans stoked the controversy surrounding Operation Fast and Furious, which led to Attorney General Eric Holder being held in contempt of Congress in 2012 while President Obama invoked executive privilege to withhold key documents from Congress. To the chagrin of congressional Republicans, the Fast and Furious controversy never gained much traction with the public. Our

9. To generate the predicted probabilities, we used the software developed in Imai, King, and Lau (2007, 2008).

data indicates that, on the whole, the public believes the president should have the ability to keep certain kinds of information confidential while running the government if he believes it is in the best interests of the country to do so. At the same time, however, while President Obama has repeatedly threatened to use unilateral action to address key policy priorities, he has been hesitant to do so. At this juncture, he appears likely to issue *fewer* executive orders than most of his predecessors. Our data indicate that the public bristles at unilateral policy making by presidents—perhaps because it violates their norms about the legislative process. To the extent that presidential action is conditioned on public support, then, may explain why Obama has not been more aggressive in the use of unilateral action.

Importantly, we also find that these attitudes about presidential power—what we term *institutional support*—are distinct from their evaluations of the person who inhabits the White House. While partisanship, presidential evaluations, and attitudes toward the institution of the presidency are related, these attitudes are not synonymous. Democrats and Republicans agree far more about the boundaries of presidential power than they do about the president's performance in office. Thus, while citizens may disagree about the relevant merits of the president currently in office, the public holds more fundamental attitudes about the nature of presidential power.

Third, we have offered suggestive evidence that presidents may be able to increase public support for presidential power when the president is held in warm public regard. Members of the public who approve of the president exhibit strong support for presidential power, while citizens who disapprove of the president then in office, however, oppose the exercise and expansion of presidential power. The implications from these findings suggest that popular presidents are able to expand the reach of their powers, while unpopular presidents prompt public discussion about proper limits on presidential power. To the degree that presidents rely on public support to accomplish their political objectives, these findings indicate that citizens who oppose the president are best positioned to institute checks on the exercise of presidential power. This also raises an intriguing paradox insofar as presidents often appear to be reluctant to use their unilateral powers early in their terms, when their approval ratings may be at their highest, though this may be the ideal time for them to do so. Leveraging their high approval ratings, presidents may be able to stretch the institutional boundaries of their office not long after assuming it.

Though our survey results provide a snapshot of attitudes toward presidential power at a single point in time, our findings complement, reinforce, and extend the results of a survey about the president's formal authority that was conducted during the George W. Bush administration (Aberbach, Peterson, and Quirk 2007). In their study, the authors find that Bush's co-partisans—Republicans—granted strong support for tenets of unitary executive theory, while Democrats were almost unanimously opposed. Our results are generally consistent with these findings but with respect to President Obama, which suggests that disagreement over presidential power reflects partisan differences more than it reflects debates over the merits of any particular president. Moreover, our findings indicate that public attitudes toward presidential power do not appear to directly reflect whether that power is part of established constitutional doctrine. A majority of our sample opposed a president's use of the veto, one of the only formal powers

granted to the president in the Constitution, while a third of our sample expressed support for allowing the president to circumvent the Senate altogether when appointing judges.

These results have important implications for research on public opinion, the presidency, and democratic accountability. In contrast to what many public opinion scholars argue (e.g., Converse 1964; Zaller 1992), the public appears to have attitudes toward presidential power that exist apart from their partisan proclivities. At the same time, however, the results here raise questions about the public's capacity to constrain presidential behavior and the incentives for presidents to expand the bounds of their power. For instance, are there conditions under which the public grants greater support for presidential power? Do voters grant greater support for presidential power when the president attempts to effect policy change in line with (rather than opposed to) their policy preferences? How does public knowledge about the constitutional issues associated with presidential power affect their support for those powers? From an institutional perspective, how do these attitudes shape the incentives for the configurations of actors in the separation of powers system? And what do these attitudes reveal about citizens' preferences for democratic processes and policy outcomes: might citizens have more favorable evaluations of policies obtained, for instance, through a consensus between Congress and the president as opposed to unilateral action by presidents? Future work could interrogate how these views of the presidency translate into evaluations of particular presidential actions and the policies achieved with these tools, a task we begin to take up in Reeves and Rogowski (forthcoming).

Appendix: Question Wording

Below, we provide the prompt that our respondents were given. The types of powers were randomly presented across two prompts. In parentheses, we include the labels that we use in the main text of the manuscript.

Thinking about the Office of the Presidency—and not any particular president, please indicate whether you agree or disagree with each of the statements below.

- The ability of a president to take unilateral military action should be more strongly limited by Congress. (unilateral military powers)
- The president has the right to keep certain kinds of information confidential if he determines it is in the nation's best interests to do so. (executive privilege)
- The president should not be able to veto legislation that has been passed by both chambers of Congress. (veto powers)
- The president should be able to appoint judges of his choosing regardless of whether the U.S. Senate agrees with his selections. (appoint judges without Senate confirmation)
- The president should have the authority to decide how executive branch agencies will implement bills passed by Congress. (direct agency implementation of bills passed by Congress)
- The president should have the right to enact policies without having those policies voted on by Congress. (unilaterally enact policy)

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