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## Electoral Studies

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# Commander-in-chief or chief economist?: The president in the eye of the public

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## Abstract

While popularity functions stress the influence of the economy, the institutional nature of the American presidency prompts the hypothesis that foreign policy has a more compelling hold on presidential approval. This analysis examines the effects of presidential evaluations in the domains of foreign policy and economy on overall presidential job approval. To avoid spurious claims of influence, we probe the antecedents of each of those policy approvals and employ a two-stage design for overall presidential approval. The data, in the form of aggregate time series, cover a 20-year period, ranging from the Ford Administration to the Clinton Administration. The main finding is that a president's overall job approval depends just as much on his handling of foreign policy as it does on his handling of the economy. In other words, to maintain public support the chief executive must be *commander-in-chief* and *chief economist* in nearly equal measure.



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## Keywords

Popularity function; Economic voting; US presidents; Foreign policy

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