

**Retrospective Presidential Approval:  
How Americans View Former Presidents**

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## **Retrospective Presidential Approval:**

### **How Americans View Former Presidents**

**Abstract:** *Assessments of presidential performance in office are ubiquitous in contemporary America but do not end when the person leaves office. Although conducted less frequently, polls of retrospective presidential approval provide insight into views of former presidents. Using data from Gallup polls, we demonstrate that the forces of peace and prosperity drive presidential approval ratings both during presidents' terms and when out of office but are weighted differently in public assessments of current and past presidents. A former president's popular standing is tarnished more by association with an unpopular war, particularly the Vietnam War, than is enhanced by economic prosperity.*

#### **I. Introduction**

Assessments of presidential performance in office are ubiquitous in contemporary America. Long past are the times when a few professional polling firms—such those founded by George Gallup, Elmo Roper, and Louis Harris—reported periodically on whether Americans approved or disapproved of how the incumbent was handling the job of president. Today, most major news organizations and many academic institutions are engaged in public opinion polling with presidential job performance as a frequent topic. During 2018, the website *realclearpolitics.com*, which compiles polling results from various sources, posted the results of at least 322 surveys from 22 organizations asking Americans if they approve or disapprove of President Trump's performance in office.<sup>1</sup>

Assessments of presidential job performance do not end when the person leaves office. Panagopoulos (2012,719) describes “[p]olitical observers and presidents” as “preoccupied with the notion of presidential legacy,” an obsession that regularly spawns surveys of historians and

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<sup>1</sup> Authors' calculations from [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/president\\_trump\\_job\\_approval-6179.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/president_trump_job_approval-6179.html) (accessed January 2, 2019).

political scientists that yield rankings for past presidents from best to worst. The American public in general also has a fascination with former presidents and occasionally is asked to contribute to the discussion about former presidents' job performance. In many respects, these public assessments of former presidents are more important as they contribute to general support of the political system and enable former presidents to continue wielding influence after leaving office (Jacobs 2018). How do Americans evaluate past presidents? What factors drive these evaluations?

## **II. Approaches for Studying Retrospective Presidential Approval**

Two approaches have been used for understanding Americans' perceptions of former presidents. Panagopoulos (2012) assesses retrospective presidential approval using measures of job performance taken during the president's term, personal factors associated with the individual president, and the current president's approval rating. Most notable among the former are the effects on retrospective approval of a president's mean approval rating for the term and final approval rating. This finding leads Panagopoulos (2012,728) to observe that "even though presidents may be able to rehabilitate appraisals of their performance in office over time, they cannot escape entirely from the conditions that affected levels of public approval during their presidencies." Additional findings of note in Panagopoulos' analysis are that retrospective approval increases the longer a former president has been out of office, decreases after the former president's death, and is positively influenced by the approval rating of the current president at the time of the retrospective poll. (That presidents' retrospective approval ratings decline after their deaths was contrary to expectations and a plausible explanation is not offered.) The link between approval of a former president and the incumbent president perhaps relates to

general attitudes toward government, as public trust in government and presidential approval are interconnected (Hetherington 1999). Perhaps better feelings about the current status of the polity—reflected in the incumbent president’s job performance rating—prompts more favorable assessments of the institution and, by extension, previous holders of the office.

An alternative approach is used by King (1999) and Cohen (2018), who utilize variables known to effect presidential performance assessments in real time for determining factors affecting retrospective presidential approval. There is a rich literature on the influences on presidents’ job approval ratings (Gronke and Newman 2003). A president’s approval ratings decline over the term in office as disappointments mount following the hopefulness of the early months, although a resurgence of popularity often occurs as re-election approaches (Mueller 1970, 1973; Stimson 1976; Brace and Hinckley 1992). International crises yield rally-around-the-flag effects that provide short-time benefits for the occupant of the Oval Office as citizens normally critical of the administration become more supportive of the president (Mueller 1970, 1973; Brace and Hinckley 1992; Edwards and Swenson 1997; Kriner and Schwartz 2009). Conversely, scandal associated with the president or the president’s administration saps public approval (Ostrom and Simon 1985; Brace and Hinckley 1992). For the most part, however, presidential approval ratings respond to two factors. “Peace and prosperity,” Kernell (1978,520) reminds us, “are the foundations of a popular president.”<sup>2</sup> Following this reasoning, King (1999) shows retrospective approval ratings of recent presidents being driven by the proportion of a president’s term during which the United States was engaged in the unpopular wars in Korea and Vietnam and by economic conditions, measured by the misery index that combines

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<sup>2</sup> Kernell’s conclusion regarding the effects of peace and prosperity is echoed in most studies of presidential approval ratings. See Gronke and Newman (2003) for an overview of these findings and Berlemann and Enkelmann (2014) for a summary of research specifically on the relationship between presidential approval and economic conditions.

unemployment and inflation rates. Additionally, King demonstrates that retrospective approval ratings improve with the passage of time, but identifies Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon as exceptions to this generalization. Cohen's (2018) analysis incorporates presidents throughout American history and also indicates an effect of an unpopular war on public perceptions.

Our analysis of the determinants of retrospective approval borrows from both of these approaches. The core of the analysis follows King (1999) and assesses the effects of economic conditions and war on retrospective presidential approval. The former president's time out of office and the popularity of the incumbent president, drawn from the analysis of Panagopoulos (2012), and whether the president was the subject of a serious impeachment investigation by Congress complete the model. We then explore more fully the retrospective approval of three presidents whom Americans consistently rate as the best and worst of recent chief executives.

### **III. Retrospective Presidential Approval**

The principal data for this analysis come from eleven Gallup Polls asking Americans their perceptions of former presidents in the post-World War II era. (Data sources are described in Appendix B.) The polls, conducted periodically between 1990 and 2018, asked respondents a variant of Gallup's standard question on approval or disapproval of the incumbent president's job performance:<sup>3</sup>

*From what you have heard, read, or remember about some of our past presidents, please tell me if you approve or disapprove of the way each of the following handled their job as president?*

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<sup>3</sup> Question wording has varied slightly among Gallup's polls of retrospective presidential approval, primarily regarding the pronoun used in the sentence. The language quoted here was used for the 2018 poll and most of Gallup's earlier polls.

Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower appear only in the 1990 poll.<sup>4</sup> Most polls include all presidents from John Kennedy through the most recent ex-president, although the 1994 poll of retrospective approval included only Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush while the 1998 poll omitted Lyndon Johnson and Gerald Ford.

The results from Gallup's retrospective presidential approval polls are summarized in Table 1 with a complete tabulation provided in Appendix A. Kennedy has the highest retrospective approval ratings, peaking at 86% approval in two polls and having by a wide margin the highest mean across ten polls. Kennedy's popularity also is among the most consistent: his retrospective approval ratings have a low range (ten percentage points) and a low standard deviation. Further evidence of Kennedy's unwavering popularity is found in the fact that his lowest retrospective approval rating of 76% has been matched once, and never exceeded, by the highest retrospective approval rating of another president. The next most popular presidents in the retrospective approval polls are George H.W. Bush—whose retrospective approval rating of 76% in 1999 matched Kennedy's lowest—and Ronald Reagan. The mean retrospective approval ratings of these presidents are in the mid-sixty percent level and both have high retrospective approval ratings in the mid-seventies.

Kennedy's elevated standing in retrospective approval polls are something of a mystery. Attributing this solely to the circumstances of his death would be erroneous as public perceptions of Kennedy during his time in office were highly favorable (Giglio 1991). JFK's mean in-term approval rating of 70.1% is the highest in Gallup poll of the post-World War II era.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt was included in the 1990 poll, receiving a 75% retrospective approval rating. FDR is not included in this analysis, however, because data comparable to those on the other former presidents are not available. For example, Gallup's now-standard job performance question was not asked throughout FDR's term, appearing at various intervals between 1941 and 1943.

<sup>5</sup> Franklin Roosevelt's mean approval rating was 72.3% but Gallup polls asked the presidential approval question only between mid-1941 and the end of 1943.

Understanding Kennedy's high approval ratings, both in office and retrospectively, has always been challenging as objective assessments of his time in office reveal that the policy accomplishments of the Kennedy administration were few and far between. Farrell (2001,175-176) observed that "the great achievements of the Kennedy-Johnson years—Medicare, Medicaid and the civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965—were off-the-self components of long-standing liberal dogma that the Kennedys carried briefly for three years, and left for Johnson to enact." On foreign policy, the triumph of the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 is balanced on the scales by the Bay of Pigs fiasco of 1961 and growing involvement in Vietnam. The former enhances perceptions of Kennedy's leadership while often the latter are overlooked.

Unquestionably Kennedy was successful in projecting an image that Americans welcomed in the early 1960s and apparently continue to welcome. Giglio (1991,25) describes Kennedy as "one of the most image-conscious presidents of this century . . . realizing that personal style could counter political frustration, mask ineptness, and create popularity in a media-oriented society." Miller (1998,241) suggests that "Kennedy's most enduring contribution to national life may well have been to raise the curtain on an age of political imagery." Curiously, later revelations of Kennedy's health issues and frequent marital infidelities have done little to stain his image. A Harris Poll taken in 1988 asked respondents which recent president "Set the highest moral standards." A plurality of 23% identified Kennedy, followed by Reagan (19%) and Carter (15%). When asked which president "made people feel proudest of being an American," 40% of the Harris Poll participants identified

**Table 1**  
**Retrospective Presidential Approval**

|                    | Retrospective approval |     |                                  | Term<br>mean |
|--------------------|------------------------|-----|----------------------------------|--------------|
|                    | High                   | Low | Mean (s.d.)                      |              |
| Harry Truman *     | 68%                    |     |                                  | 45.4%        |
| Dwight Eisenhower* | 70%                    |     |                                  | 65.0%        |
| John Kennedy       | 86%                    | 76% | 82.4% (3.9)<br>(10) <sup>†</sup> | 70.1%        |
| Lyndon Johnson     | 49%                    | 35% | 42.2% (5.5)<br>(9)               | 55.1%        |
| Richard Nixon      | 37%                    | 28% | 32.0% (3.1)<br>(10)              | 49.0%        |
| Gerald Ford        | 71%                    | 50% | 59.7% (6.1)<br>(9)               | 47.2%        |
| Jimmy Carter       | 69%                    | 45% | 55.9% (8.4)<br>(11)              | 45.5%        |
| Ronald Reagan      | 74%                    | 50% | 64.3% (9.4)<br>(11)              | 52.8%        |
| George H.W. Bush   | 76%                    | 56% | 65.9% (7.7)<br>(9)               | 60.9%        |
| Bill Clinton       | 69%                    | 51% | 60.8% (7.4)<br>(4)               | 55.1%        |
| George W. Bush     | 53%                    | 47% | 50.0% (4.2)<br>(2)               | 49.4%        |
| Barack Obama*      | 63%                    |     |                                  | 47.4%        |

\* President included in only one Gallup Poll of retrospective approval.

† Number of polls used in calculating mean and standard deviation.



Kennedy, followed by Reagan (22%) and Franklin Roosevelt (17%).<sup>6</sup> The Kennedy “image machine” continues working its magic.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Richard Nixon. The first retrospective approval poll in 1990 showed only 32% of respondents approving his performance in office. Over the years the thirty-seventh president’s rating has ebbed and flowed the least, peaking at 37%, twice falling as low as 28%, and averaging 32.0%. Nixon’s immediate predecessor, Lyndon Johnson, is the only other president whose retrospective approval rating has never exceeded 50% or has dipped below 40%. In most of Gallup’s retrospective approval polls, Johnson ranks as the second most unpopular former president. However, LBJ’s standing has improved over time and in three of the four most recent retrospective approval rating polls 48% or 49% of Americans approved his performance in office.

Another enigma in the retrospective approval ratings is Ronald Reagan. The fortieth president has the greatest variability in Gallup’s retrospective presidential approval polls with a range of 24 percentage points and the highest standard deviation (Table 1). Reagan’s retrospective approval ratings reflect two distinct plateaus, fluctuating mildly between 50% and 55% in the first four of Gallup’s surveys, jumping to 69% in the 1998 poll, and remaining high, exceeding 70% in five of the six most recent polls. Higher ratings in later polls is not surprising, as retrospective presidential approval typically rises the longer a chief executive is out of office (King 1999; Panagopoulos 2012). The remarkably high ratings of later retrospective polls is unusual, however, in comparison with Reagan’s popularity when in office. Discussions today of Reagan as a patriarch of the conservative movement, an outstanding president, and a very

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Harris & Associates, Harris Poll, November 1988. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL, accessed May 14, 2018. The survey results reported here were obtained from searches of the iPOLL Databank and other resources provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

popular president miss the basic point that Reagan was not especially popular when in office. His job approval rating in Gallup polls during his presidency peaked at 68%, fell to 35% during the recession of 1982-1983, and averaged just 52.8% over the eight years of his administration. Among post-World War II presidents, only Nixon's "high" approval rating while in office was below Reagan's and that was by just a single percentage point (Edwards and Gallup 1990). The mean of in-term approval ratings of "The Gipper" ranks only sixth among the 12 presidents of this era. Jimmy Carter's retrospective approval ratings show a range and a standard deviation similar to Reagan's. Although consistently lower, Carter's retrospective approval ratings, like Reagan's, rose in the polls of the late-1990s and early-2000s but Carter's fell substantially in the two most recent polls. As a result of this drop, Carter's image today and image when in the White House are much more in accord than are those of his successor.

Reflecting earlier studies, a consistent pattern in Table 1 is that post-presidency approval ratings are higher than presidents' mean approval ratings during their terms (King 1999; Morini 2013; Panagopoulos 2012). Most notable are Ford, Kennedy, Reagan, and Carter with mean retrospective approval ratings more than ten points above their mean job performance ratings while in office. Because he was included in only one post-presidency poll caution must be used in assessing Harry Truman's circumstance, but the thirty-third president's 1990 retrospective approval rating of 68% was more than 20 points above his mean job performance rating as chief executive. This surge by Truman reflects a general reassessment of his presidency and achievements three decades after his departure from the White House (Appleton 1986).<sup>7</sup> The only exceptions to this pattern of higher retrospective approval ratings are Johnson and Nixon.

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<sup>7</sup> While the American public lacked enthusiasm for Truman at the end of his administration, scholars of the presidency have rated him highly. Truman ranked eighth in both Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr.'s 1962 poll of historians and in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s 1998 poll. A recent survey of scholars by Rottinghaus and Vaughn (2018) placed Truman sixth among the 43 individuals who have held the presidency.

**Table 2**

**Bivariate Correlations: Retrospective Approval and Contemporary Approval Ratings**

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|                                  | Mean of all polls | 2018 poll |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|-----------|
| Mean approval rating: Term       | .59               | .63       |
| Mean approval rating: First year | .12               | .10       |
| Mean approval rating: Last year  | .76               | .84       |
| First approval rating            | -.02              | .003      |
| Last approval rating             | .66               | .76       |
| High approval rating             | .43               | .24       |
| Low approval rating              | .68               | .78       |
| Number of presidents             | 12                | 10        |

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Johnson had particularly high approval ratings during his first fifteen months as president but public support slid with public discontent for the war in Vietnam; his reputation later was tarnished by disclosures that he pressed forward in Vietnam despite harboring doubts about ability to win the war. Nixon’s approval ratings in office and post-presidency reputation cratered with the Watergate scandal, revelations of abuse of power, and the impeachment inquiry in Congress.

Despite the higher post-presidency approval ratings, however, Americans remember former presidents by the lows and the final years of their administrations rather than by the highs and early years. Table 2 presents correlations between retrospective approval ratings and various measures from the presidents’ terms in office. The strongest correlations with retrospective approval—both overall and for Gallup’s most recent poll—are between retrospective approval

and the mean approval rating of the final year of the president's term, the president's final approval rating, and the president's lowest approval rating. These findings are not startling as both King (1999) and Panagopoulos (2012) observed this pattern. The weakest correlations are between retrospective approval and a president's mean approval during the first year in office and the first job performance rating a president's term. That first-year approval ratings do not correlate with retrospective approval is not surprising as newly elected presidents often ride a wave of enthusiasm in their first months in office. Similarly, the three former vice presidents who ascended to the presidency through death or resignation of their predecessors—Truman, Johnson, and Ford—enjoyed their highest approval ratings soon after taking office. As King (1999,167) notes, “The euphoria of the first year in office, when public approval of the president's job performance typically is high, has little bearing on how we view presidents once they are out of office.”

#### **IV. Explaining Retrospective Presidential Approval**

Our model for explaining retrospective presidential approval is specified as:

$$Y_{ji} = b_0 + b_1I_j + b_2U_j + b_3W_j + b_4T_j + b_5X_j + b_6A_i + e$$

where:

$Y_{ji}$  is a measure of presidential approval;

$I_j$  is *inflation* during president  $j$ 's term, measured as the mean of annual changes in the consumer price index;

$U_j$  is *unemployment* during president  $j$ 's term, measured as the mean of the annual unemployment rate;

$W_j$  is an unpopular *war*, measured as the percentage of months of president  $j$ 's term that the United States was engaged in the Korean War, Vietnam War, or Iraq War;

$T_j$  is president  $j$ 's *time out of office*, measured in years;

$X_j$  is whether president  $j$  was subject to a serious *impeachment* investigation by Congress, equaling one for Nixon and Clinton and zero for all others;<sup>8</sup>

$A_i$  is the *job approval rating* of the incumbent president at the time of Gallup Poll  $i$ ;

$e$  is the error term.

Models are estimated using ordinary least squares regression. Prior studies of the determinants of presidential approval ratings, both in-term and retrospectively, suggest hypotheses of  $b_1, b_2, b_3, b_5 < 0$  and  $b_4, b_6 > 0$ .

The first three measures reflect the “peace and prosperity” factors so common in studies of presidential approval ratings. Different economic measures are used in studies of presidential popularity with inflation and unemployment frequently incorporated in multi-variate models (Berlemann and Enkelmann 2014). Generally inflation is found to influence approval ratings more than unemployment, perhaps because inflation affects everyone in society while unemployment’s effect is more specific (Ireland 1973). Involvement in unpopular war is measured by the percent of a president’s term (in months) the United States was engaged in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq. While public support for the president and the president’s policy was high at the outset of each conflict, support waned as the engagement continued with few

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<sup>8</sup> Nixon was not formally impeached by the House of Representatives. However, the Committee on the Judiciary adopted three articles of impeachment and several Republicans announced their support for impeachment after release of transcripts of White House tapes revealed that Nixon and chief of staff H.R. Haldeman in June 1972 discussed strategies for using the CIA to impede the FBI’s investigation of connections between the Watergate burglary and Nixon’s re-election campaign. Faced with probable impeachment in the House of Representatives and conviction in the Senate, Nixon resigned the office. Clinton was impeached by the House of Representatives on allegations perjury and obstruction of justice related to his actions concerning a civil lawsuit alleging sexual harassment but was not convicted by the Senate.

indicators that a successful conclusion was near. The Korean War is dated from June 1950 (North Korea's invasion of the South) to July 1953 (the truce signing); the Vietnam War is dated from August 1964 (the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution) to January 1973 (the cease-fire announcement); the Iraq War is dated from March 2003 (initiation of hostilities) to August 2010 (withdrawal of U.S. troops).

The results of a set of regression analyses are presented in Table 3. Estimates are first generated for each president's mean job approval rating during his term using the economic variables and the measure of involvement in an unpopular war (column 1). On the whole, this baseline model performs respectably, explaining approximately half of the variance in presidents' mean term approval ratings and yielding a relatively small error of under seven percentage points. The individual regression coefficients show that inflation rate has a significant effect on mean term approval rating, reducing presidential popularity while unemployment's negative coefficient is not statistically significant. Engagement in Korea, Vietnam, or Iraq also reduced presidents' approval ratings. Most notable is that the standardized regression coefficients indicate near-equal effects of inflation and involvement in an unpopular war on presidents' mean approval ratings, with the economic factor having a very slightly greater effect.<sup>9</sup>

Regressing these same factors on presidents' retrospective approval ratings reveals a different pattern of influences. The foremost influence on Americans' assessments of former presidents is association with an unpopular war (column 2). Rate of inflation remains an

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<sup>9</sup> The each model reported in Table 3 was estimated without the unemployment rate variable. The goodness-of-fit measures indicated no substantial change in each model's capability to explain presidential approval but a slightly greater effect of inflation relative to involvement in an unpopular war. The two economic variables are retained in the analysis since the inclusion of both is customary in studies of presidential approval (Berlemann and Enkelmann 2014).

**Table 3**

**Determinants of Presidential Approval Ratings**

| Variable                                 | (1)<br><i>Mean term approval</i> |      | (2)<br><i>Retrospective approval</i> |      | (3)<br><i>Retrospective approval</i> |      |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|------|--------------------------------------|------|--------------------------------------|------|
|                                          | b <sup>†</sup>                   | Beta | b <sup>†</sup>                       | Beta | b <sup>†</sup>                       | Beta |
| Inflation                                | -1.59*<br>(.61)                  | -.56 | -2.42***<br>(.33)                    | -.45 | -2.25***<br>(.26)                    | -.42 |
| Unemployment                             | -1.87<br>(2.61)                  | -.28 | -1.20<br>(1.79)                      | -.08 | -.66<br>(1.24)                       | -.05 |
| Unpopular war                            | -.12*<br>(.07)                   | -.52 | -.40***<br>(.05)                     | -.87 | -.37***<br>(.04)                     | -.82 |
| Time out of office                       |                                  |      |                                      |      | .30***<br>(.06)                      | .24  |
| Impeachment president                    |                                  |      |                                      |      | -8.15***<br>(2.07)                   | -.20 |
| Incumbent's approval                     |                                  |      |                                      |      | .17***<br>(.04)                      | .16  |
| Constant                                 | 74.04<br>(16.23)                 |      | 86.11<br>(11.59)                     |      | 67.42<br>(7.91)                      |      |
| R <sup>2</sup> / adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | .513 / .405                      |      | .758 / .752                          |      | .872 / .863                          |      |
| MSE                                      | 6.6                              |      | 8.0                                  |      | 5.9                                  |      |
| N                                        | 12                               |      | 78                                   |      | 78                                   |      |

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\*p<.05      \*\*p<.01      \*\*\*p<.001      (one-tailed tests of significance)

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†Unstandardized regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

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impactful economic factor while rate of unemployment remains not to be statistically significant. The unpopular war variable, however, has nearly twice the impact on retrospective approval ratings as does the inflation variable. Expanding the model of retrospective approval rating to include the length of time the president has been out of office, whether the ex-president was subject to impeachment, and the incumbent president's approval rating has no bearing on our interpretations of the primary influences on public evaluations of former chief executives (column 3). The more fully specified regression model yields stronger goodness-of-fit measures and the added factors significantly impact retrospective approval ratings as predicted. *Ceteris paribus*, a former president's retrospective approval rating rises one point for each three years out of office, the impeached presidents' retrospective approval ratings are eight points lower, and the incumbent president's job performance rating has a very modest effect. But the magnitudes of the regression coefficients—both unstandardized and standardized—for association with an unpopular war and rate of inflation during the president's term change only slightly between the restricted and expanded models, indicating that the added explanatory variables operate independently of the measures of economic conditions and war abroad. "Peace and prosperity" might be "the foundations of a popular president" (Kernell 1978,520), but these factors are not equal in the minds of Americans' as they assess former presidents. Unquestionably, *the absence of peace* is the foundation of retrospective presidential approval.<sup>10</sup>

To explore more fully the impact of war on retrospective presidential approval, the *unpopular war* variable of the model was disaggregated to create separate measures—again, the

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<sup>10</sup> The robustness of the model was tested in two ways. First, to test the effects of individual polls, the model presented in column 3 of Table 3 was re-estimated excluding each poll sequentially. Second, the model was re-estimated with each former president excluded. The results of these estimations were nearly identical to those presented in Table 3. The goodness-of-fit measures and the magnitude of individual regression coefficients varied slightly, yet the substantive conclusion that association with an unpopular war far out-weighted the other explanatory variables did not change.

percent of the president's term during which the U.S. was engaged in the conflict—for the Korean War, Vietnam War, and Iraq War. The regression estimates, presented in Table 4, indicate that each war influences post-White House assessments of presidents, as the regression coefficient is negative and statistically significant. Former presidents' retrospective approval ratings are marred by association with the Korean War and the Iraq War but it is association with the Vietnam War that most damages perceptions of ex-presidents. The standardized regression coefficients for the wars in Korea and Iraq are smaller than those for most other variables in the model. The standardized regression coefficient for connection to the Vietnam War indicates that this war most influences retrospective approval of presidents. Ostrom et al. (2018) show that the influence of economic conditions and war on George W. Bush's approval ratings were conditioned by the saliency of the issue. It appears that the role of issue saliency extends to assessments of former presidents. Unquestionably, the Vietnam War remains a particularly salient event when Americans consider past chief executives and has the greatest impact. A Gallup Poll taken just before the peace accords were signed found 60 percent of Americans responding "yes" to the statement, "Looking back, do you think the United States made a mistake in sending troops to fight in Vietnam?" When the question was repeated in later years, the share of the sample agreeing with the statement never fell below the January 1973 number and raised as high as 74 percent in 1990 (Gillespie 2000). In comparison, a similar question in Gallup Polls regarding U.S. involvement in Iraq found a high 63 percent of Americans (April 2008) believing that sending troops to fight in that country was a mistake (Gallup Poll n.d.). A Gallup Poll taken in 2000 showed 34 percent of Americans believing a mistake was made in fighting the Korean War and 47 percent believing the war was not a mistake (Moore 2000).

**Table 4**  
**Determinants of Presidential Retrospective Approval Ratings**

| Variable                                 | (4)                                             |      | (5)                                             |      |
|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------|-------------------------------------------------|------|
|                                          | <i>Retrospective approval</i><br>b <sup>†</sup> | Beta | <i>Retrospective approval</i><br>b <sup>†</sup> | Beta |
| Inflation                                | -2.25***<br>(.26)                               | -.42 | -2.09***<br>(.26)                               | -.39 |
| Unemployment                             | -.66<br>(1.24)                                  | -.05 | -.79<br>(1.39)                                  | -.05 |
| Unpopular war                            | -.37***<br>(.04)                                | -.82 |                                                 |      |
| Korean War                               |                                                 |      | -.30**<br>(.10)                                 | -.07 |
| Vietnam War                              |                                                 |      | -.40***<br>(.04)                                | -.87 |
| Iraq War                                 |                                                 |      | -.21***<br>(.04)                                | -.16 |
| Time out of office                       | .30***<br>(.06)                                 | .24  | .36***<br>(.05)                                 | .30  |
| Impeached president                      | -8.15***<br>(2.07)                              | -.20 | -6.68***<br>(2.06)                              | -.16 |
| Incumbent's approval                     | .17***<br>(.04)                                 | .16  | .20***                                          | .18  |
| Constant                                 | 67.42<br>(7.91)                                 |      | 64.28<br>(8.71)                                 |      |
| R <sup>2</sup> / adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | .872 / .863                                     |      | .887 / .879                                     |      |
| MSE                                      | 5.9                                             |      | 5.7                                             |      |
| N                                        | 78                                              |      | 78                                              |      |

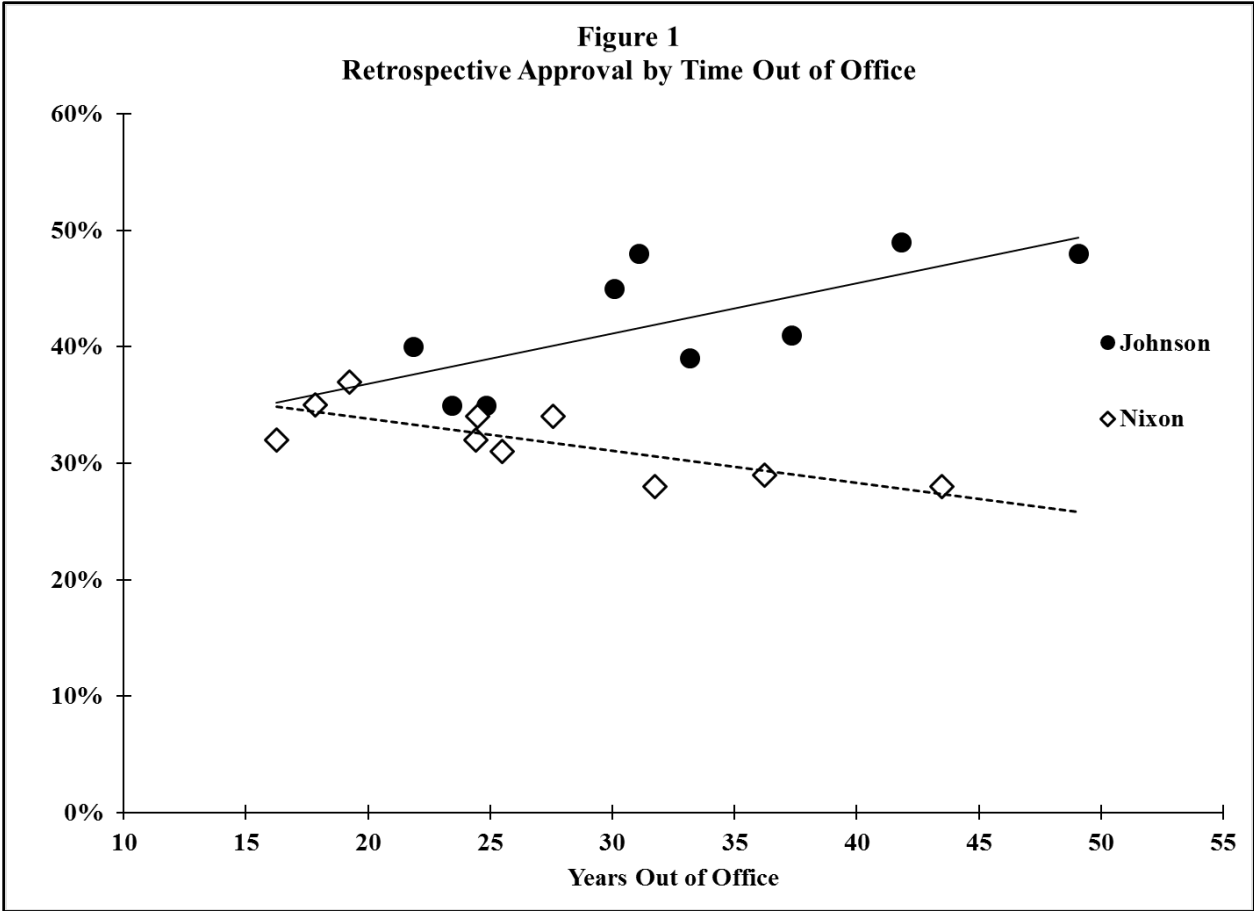
\*p<.05      \*\*p<.01      \*\*\*p<.001      (one-tailed tests of significance)

†Unstandardized regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

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As the two presidents closely associated with the Vietnam War, Nixon and Johnson consistently rank as the least popular among recent ex-presidents. Yet there are differences in perceptions of their performances in the White House over time. The positive, statistically significant effect of the time a former president has been out of office on retrospective approval rating evident in Tables 3 and 4 aligns with previous research. The two exceptions to this pattern in King's (1999) analysis were Johnson and Nixon. Although he does not draw attention to the patterns, Panagopoulos' (2012) illustrations of retrospective approval ratings in polls through 2010 indicate a modest improvement in public perceptions of Johnson but not of Nixon. Figure 1 shows the retrospective approval ratings of these least-popular ex-presidents arrayed against time out of office. The scatterplots indicate that the public views Johnson in a much more favorable light today than in the earliest retrospective approval polls. His ratings of 49% and 48% in the 2010 and 2018 Gallup Polls represent highpoints for Johnson. In contrast, Nixon's lowest ratings—at either 28% or 29%—have come in Gallup's three most recent polls.

It is easy to attribute Johnson's and Nixon's lower approval ratings, both retrospectively and during their terms, to public discontent regarding the Vietnam War. Fifty-eight thousand Americans died in the conflict that lasted almost nine years, twelve thousand more than died during the Korean War. As reported above, Gallup Polls on perceptions of the conflict in Southeast Asia showed strong opposition at the conclusion of American involvement and have shown similar opposition during the subsequent decades. This does not, however, account for changes in how Americans evaluate these presidents. An oddity regarding the Vietnam War and



presidential approval is that annual fatalities among Americans declined during Nixon’s presidency at numbers mirroring the annual increases during LBJ’s presidency.<sup>11</sup> Nixon’s lower standing and decline in retrospective approval polls might in part stem from different perspectives of the two presidents’ roles in the war. Johnson occupied the White House when large-scale American involvement in Vietnam began and American presence in Southeast Asia expanded but with popular support in the nation (Gillespie 2000). While American casualties decreased and direct American engagement ended during Nixon’s presidency, the Nixon years were marked by declining public support and unpopular decisions that fractured further

<sup>11</sup> Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics, Military Records, National Archives. URL: <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics#date> (accessed October 1, 2018).

American opinion on the war: the excursion into Cambodia; the expanded campaign of bombing North Vietnam; the premature announcement of a peace agreement days before the 1972 election; and ultimately a cease-fire agreement that differed little from what was rejected by Nixon at the onset of his presidency (Farrell 2017).

The difference between the thirty-sixth and thirty-seventh presidents regarding retrospective approval no doubt rests with the Watergate scandal and Nixon's resignation. While the term "Watergate" originated with the burglary and wiretapping of Democratic Party offices at the Watergate office complex by operatives of Nixon's reelection campaign and the subsequent cover-up, the scandal extended to encompass revelations that the administration conducted domestic surveillance of American citizens, maintained "enemies" lists, and sought to use the federal government bureaucracy to harass and to punish perceived political enemies. A Gallup review of public opinion related to the Watergate scandal twenty-five years after Nixon left office showed 72% of Americans believing the president's actions were serious enough to warrant his resignation, up seven percentage points from the time when he resigned (Newport 1999). A majority of Americans—54%—considered the charges against Nixon more serious than the charges that resulted in Clinton's impeachment and trial in the Senate less than a year before the poll was taken. (Fourteen percent of survey respondents considered the charges against Clinton more serious and 29% believed the two sets of charges equally serious.) Certainly Lyndon Johnson was no saint and many abuses of the office during his presidency subsequently came to light. But there is little question that Nixon and the Watergate scandal have remained at the forefront of the American psyche and that this scandal continues tarnishing Nixon's reputation. King (1999,170) remarked that "[w]hen it comes to assessing presidential performance, absence makes the heart grow fonder." A disclaimer must be added, however, for

Richard Nixon; the passage time has altered views of neither his performance as president nor the events that caused his presidency to collapse.

## **V. Discussion**

During the 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton's campaign strategists posted a sign at the headquarters that read: "The economy, stupid!" (Germond and Witcover 1993). The purpose of the message—now often misquoted as "It's the economy, stupid!"—was to remind everyone involved with Clinton's pursuit of the White House that voters were most concerned about the economy and wanted candidates to address these concerns, rather than reliving the end of the Cold War or the successful military campaign in 1991 to liberate Kuwait after Iraq's occupation of its neighbor. This focus on the economy helped Clinton win the presidency. Similar attentiveness to voters' anxieties over the state of economy contributed to the successful presidential bids of Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump in 1980, 2008, and 2016, respectively.

When Americans consider former presidents' job performance, the catchphrase seems to be, "It's the war, stupid!" Assessments of former presidents by scholars focus more on economic conditions than on military conflict (Curry and Morris 2010; Morini 2013). And yet unquestionably the public focuses on association with an unpopular war—especially association with the war in Vietnam—when evaluating former chief executives. The obvious question is why association with an unpopular war has such a devastating effect on retrospective approval while war and economic conditions have comparable effects on presidents' popular standing during their administrations.

News coverage of presidents and policies in real time varies by the topic. Coverage of economic performance is fairly systematic with monthly reports on matters such as unemployment, job growth, and inflation. In contrast, war coverage is episodic and, given the media's predilection to war coverage due to professional pressures such as ratings and prestige (Shinar 2013; Wolfsfeld 2004), results in attention given to both successes and failures. For presidents, the coverage of successes and failures do not balance out in public assessments. Adler (2003,467) contends that while uses of military force "are apt to boost a president's public approval rating in the short term, the long-term gain derived from the act is difficult to assess and, in any case, may be negative or negligible." Groeling and Baum's (2008) note that positive rally-around-the-flag effects rarely overcome the negative media coverage of the use of military force that has become commonplace in the U.S. media since the 1960s. "Dovish" coverage of the 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam is offered by Zaller and Chiu (1996) as evidence of typical press behavior in times of "military setback," as journalists reported that the attacks by North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces as representing "a failure of American policy" (p. 385). Our analysis does not treat military engagements that last for brief periods of time and are likely to produce rally-around-the-flag effects. But it is clear that scholars' assessments of the negative effects of war on presidents' reputations are on target. An electorate that has "rallied" appears to take a dim view of president who loses the hill and the electorate retains this view as time passes. Thus, with failures receiving disproportionate attention from the media, any public opinion toll a commander in chief experiences due to engagement in an unpopular war has a lasting impact upon the public's perceptions of that president.

A factor in the up-and-down nature of presidential approval associated with war might be that the source material for media coverage of conflict comes from *inside* an administration.



Bennet (1990) argues that press coverage of foreign policy events is “indexed” or linked to the range of views within any given presidential administration, particularly officials perceived as decision-makers and key presidential advisors. Early stages of a conflict typically feature unified support of the president’s policy from within the administration but this unanimity dissipates as foreign engagements endure and perceptions of military success and setback change (Mermin 1999; Sigal 1986; Hallin 1986; Gans 1979). After the president leaves office, memoirs of former administration officials and analyses utilizing archives from the administration often paint uncomplimentary portraits of the president and the president’s choices regarding military and foreign policy. Publication of such treatises refreshes the public conscience and revives debate. Thus, critical media coverage of unpopular war is not only contemporaneous to the conflict but occasionally resurfaces to the detriment of the former president viewed as responsible for a national setback.

Many factors influence how Americans regard their former presidents. Our analysis confirms that Americans remember the lows of administrations, as evidenced by the strong bivariate correlations between retrospective approval and approval rating during presidents’ final years in office, lowest approval ratings, and final approval ratings. For presidents other than Richard Nixon, the passage of time either heals wounds or allows people to put presidents’ legacies into perspective as, *ceteris paribus*, retrospective approval ratings improve the longer they are out of office. Our most significant conclusion, however, is that while peace and prosperity equally affect presidents’ mean term approval ratings, the absence of peace is the foundation of retrospective presidential approval.

**Appendix A: Gallup Polls of Retrospective Approval of U.S. Presidents**

|                               | Poll Year   |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |  |
|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--|
|                               | <i>1990</i> | <i>1992</i> | <i>1993</i> | <i>1994</i> | <i>1998</i> | <i>1999</i> | <i>2000</i> | <i>2002</i> | <i>2006</i> | <i>2010</i> | <i>2018</i> |  |
| Harry Truman (1945-1953)      | 68%         |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |  |
| Dwight Eisenhower (1953-1961) | 70%         |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |  |
| John F. Kennedy (1961-1963)   | 84%         | 76%         | 78%         |             | 77%         | 85%         | 86%         | 83%         | 84%         | 85%         | 86%         |  |
| Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969) | 40%         | 35%         | 35%         |             |             | 45%         | 48%         | 39%         | 41%         | 49%         | 48%         |  |
| Richard Nixon (1969-1974)     | 32%         | 35%         | 37%         |             | 32%         | 34%         | 31%         | 34%         | 28%         | 29%         | 28%         |  |
| Gerald Ford (1974-1977)       | 55%         | 56%         | 50%         |             |             | 71%         | 66%         | 60%         | 60%         | 61%         | 58%         |  |
| Jimmy Carter (1977-1981)      | 45%         | 48%         | 45%         | 51%         | 65%         | 69%         | 64%         | 60%         | 61%         | 52%         | 55%         |  |
| Ronald Reagan (1981-1989)     | 54%         | 50%         | 52%         | 55%         | 69%         | 71%         | 66%         | 73%         | 71%         | 74%         | 72%         |  |
| George H.W. Bush (1989-1993)  |             |             | 58%         | 58%         | 74%         | 76%         | 74%         | 69%         | 56%         | 64%         | 64%         |  |
| Bill Clinton (1993-2001)      |             |             |             |             |             |             |             | 51%         | 61%         | 69%         | 62%         |  |
| George W. Bush (2001-2009)    |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             | 47%         | 53%         |  |
| Barack Obama (2009-2017)      |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             | 63%         |  |

## Appendix B: Data Sources

Gallup Poll retrospective approval data:

- 1990: Gallup and Newport (1990).
- 1992, 1993, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2006: Jones (2006).
- 1994: Gallup Poll (1994).
- 1998: Moore (1998).
- 2010: Saad (2010).
- 2018: Jones (2018).

Gallup Poll historical data

- Mean presidential approval rating for the president's term, high approval rating, and low approval rating: <http://news.gallup.com/poll/116677/Presidential-Approval-Ratings-Gallup-Historical-Statistics-Trends.aspx> (accessed January 22, 2018).
- First approval rating, last approval rating, and incumbent president's approval rating: The American Presidency Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara ([www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)) for Harry Truman. Edwards and Gallup (1989) for Dwight Eisenhower through Ronald Reagan. Saad (1993) for George H.W. Bush. Gallup Poll website (<http://news.gallup.com/poll/trends.aspx>) for Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama.
- Mean approval ratings for a president's first and last years in office: authors' calculations from above sources.

Economic data

- Annual inflation rate: Economic Report of the President 2017 (Table B-10)
- Annual unemployment rate: Economic Report of the President 2017 (Table B-11)

<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/ERP-2017/pdf/ERP-2017.pdf> (Accessed January 22, 2018)

Vietnam War casualties: <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics#date> (accessed January 2, 2019).

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