

## September 11th and the Bush Presidency: Rally Around the Rubble

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*Presidential public opinion numbers have become news. How did that happen? Should presidential approval figures be news? Does it matter that they have become news? In this article, which was published in a special publication devoted to the president, the news, and the war on terrorism, Stephen Frantzich of the United States Naval Academy examines these questions.*

One of the most dramatic and measurable influences of 9/11 on the American psyche was the impact it had on George W. Bush's approval ratings. While no slouch when compared to the ratings of previous presidents at similar points in their terms, Bush's 35 percent increase in popularity since the Gallup Poll registered the largest increase in popularity since the regular measurement of presidential approval ratings began in the 1930s. The increase was almost double the previous one-week record of 18 percent, experienced by his father during Operation Desert Storm. A few weeks later, George W. Bush's approval increased to 90 percent, eclipsing his father's record of 89 percent.

The purpose of this article is to explore the causes and ramifications of the changes in presidential approval associated with 9/11 in the context of previous patterns of presidential approval. . . .

### The Origin and Nature of Rallies

The general pattern of presidential approval reflects an immediate post-inauguration "honeymoon" evaluation giving him a higher rate of

approval than in the election in which he was chosen. From there on, it is usually a general downward trend over time, with minor variations usually associated with highly publicized initiatives (especially those associated with foreign policy) or events (such as the assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan) that thrust the president into public awareness. As a presidency proceeds, dashed expectations and tough decisions turn off some past supporters, lowering the overall approval rate. There is an old story around Washington about a president who called in a pollster on inauguration day and asked him how he could leave office with the highest level of approval, and the pollster replied, "That is simple, resign today."

The more atypical, yet relatively common phenomenon, is the presidential rally in which the previous decline is reversed, usually temporarily, by a significant improvement. The size of George W. Bush's rally was unprecedented, making it the "mother of all rallies" to use terminology more associated with his father's term in office.

John Mueller was the first to carefully analyze the rally effect. Mueller argued that rallies were most likely to be associated with dramatic international events directly involving the United States in general and the president in particular. The events of 9/11 could hardly fit the bill more clearly. It is hard to imagine that even in his most optimistic hopes Osama bin Laden could have anticipated two direct hits with maximum damage captured live on television. The dramatic collapse of the World Trade Center and the gaping hole in the Pentagon created images seared into the psyche of the American public.

In our increasingly visually-oriented society, the images of the 9/11 destruction were particularly important in establishing a context to which the public had to react. In an era with an ever-expanding range of media sources and extensive audience fragmentation, it has become less and less likely for Americans to have shared national experiences. Economic considerations require media outlets to compete for "eyeballs" by providing unique content to serve as magnets for television remotes and mouse clicks. In the not so distant past, a limited number of national television networks with constrained and scheduled evening news programs fed similar content to largely passive audiences. In the print realm, all but the most well-endowed newspapers depended on a limited number of wire service stories for information about most national events. With limited choices and less control over content, most people developed "shared islands of understanding" about most major issues. These "islands" were based on virtually everyone receiving the same content at the same time. This was facilitated by the existence of only three major networks all covering stories in similar ways and broadcasting at the same time. It was meaningful water fountain interaction to begin a conversation by asking "What did you feel when you saw John/John Kennedy salute his father's coffin,"

or "Weren't the pictures of Germans chipping away at the Berlin wall dramatic?" The emergence of multiple cable television options (with news 24 hours a day 7 days a week) and a growing reliance on the Internet for news meant that such shared islands of understanding based on the consumption of common stories and images were less likely to form. News consumers increasingly receive different content at different times.

The morning of September 11, 2001 began with media competition, audience fragmentation and content exclusivity and ended with an agreement by the major players to share all generic video. The images of the World Trade Center towers coming down became an icon on network television, cable television, newspapers, and Web sites, summarizing the horror of 9/11 and heightening its drama. In many ways, it was a throwback to a previous era, giving the public a shared national experience with a limited number of interpretations. . . .

#### Presidential Approval as News

Public support for presidents becomes news in and of itself. . . . Regular assessments of presidential popularity become books for media stories.

News by definition is something out of the ordinary. Therefore, stories tend to focus on record-breaking events or major changes. Personal highs or lows for presidents, especially resulting from significant shifts, are likely to generate more news than continuing strings of similar evaluations. Slow increases or decreases are likely to disappear under the radar screen of journalistic observers.

#### Is *Presidential Approval News*?

The Gallup Poll measures presidential approval on an almost monthly basis, and dozens of other polling companies collect and distribute their own measures. Most poll results receive only limited coverage. A LEXIS-NEXIS search of newspaper articles and television news program transcripts indicated a dramatic increase in the coverage of presidential approval figures at rally points and on historic dates (i.e., one year after September 11th). Rallies are news and it makes sense to assume that positive coverage of a rally helps keep it going.

#### *Framing the Story*

Even though poll results are hard data that seemingly leave little room for interpretation, the media have the power to frame the story in a variety of ways. In the abstract, most measurements of presidential ap-

proval do not have an absolute interpretation. A president with fifty percent approval can easily fall victim to the "is the glass half full or half empty" question. Presidential approval is gauged against an incumbent president's previous levels and against the records of previous presidents. Two aspects of framing are possible. Individual writers have the power to frame their stories as they (and their editors) see fit, while headline writers (usually not the article author) have some leeway in encapsulating a story in a few words.

It is widely accepted that many readers see nothing but the headline, others decide to read a story based on its headline, and that headlines create a mindset for readers of an article. The first wave of the Bush rally after 9/11, pushing him to 86 percent, was greeted with numerous stories quoting the Gallup Poll and a spate of positive headlines such as: "Americans Support President in Times of Crisis" (*Buffalo News*, September 23, 2001, p. 11) and "Democrats Unite Behind Bush" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, September 20, 2001, p. A10).

Interestingly, foreign newspapers expressed even more adulation in headlines like: "Bush's Approval Rating Soars: More Popular than his Father During Gulf War," (*Ottawa Citizen*, September 18, 2001) and "Support Surges as Bush Becomes the President the People Have Yearned For," (*The Daily Telegraph* [London], September 17, 2001, p. 2).

When Bush climbed to his record-breaking 90 percent approval, positive reactions to the poll results continued, although some sources began pointing out that significant decline was likely and initiated analysis of the political utility of the current, if temporary, approval level. The headlines read: "Once-in-a-Lifetime Unity Envelops D.C.," (*San Antonio Express-News*, September 19, 2001, p. 11b), "Bush Seems Invincible—For Now," (*Boston Globe*, September 27, 2001, p. A15), and "Bush Uses Support for Long Campaign Against Terrorism" (CNN, 07:00 September 24, 2001).

As the one-year anniversary approached, Bush's approval had dropped to 66 percent (September 5th) and then jumped again to 70 percent a few days after the anniversary. Much of the press coverage emphasized the decline in presidential approval over the previous year with headlines such as: "United We Stood, Until Good Will Gave Way," (*St. Louis Dispatch*, September 11, 2002, p. 6) and "Bush Strives to Re-join Magic; Partisanship Erodes Unity of a Year Ago" (*Houston Chronicle*, September 10, 2002, p. A1).

Using the same poll results, one paper gave its readers two very different perspectives with seemingly contradictory headlines: "A Tragedy that Redefined a President: Despite Slippage in Polls, America Still Sees a Different Bush" (*Hartford Courant*, September 9, 2002, p. A1) and "Bush's Democratic Support Eroding" (*Hartford Courant*, September 13, 2002, p. A8).

A few months later, journalists had more fodder for analysis. In January 2003, George Bush's approval dropped to 58 percent, the lowest level since the attacks of 9/11 and then returned to 61 percent the following week. Even though approval close to 60 percent is a respectable level of approval, the news was the drop. The headlines for three stories reflect their content and express very different interpretations: "As 9/11 Memories Fade, so Does Bush's Luster" (*Baltimore Sun*, January 16, 2003, p. 1a), "Bush Bounces Back in Popularity Poll" (*The New York Post*, January 19, 2003, p. 6), and "Bush Ratings Tumble Amid Iraq, Economy" (*The Times Union* [Albany, NY], January 19, 2003).

Many newspapers rely on news services for their stories. Contracts with news services limit the nature of the editing subscribers can apply, but allow them to write the headlines. A more precise test of the power of framing through headlines emerges from looking at differing headlines on the same news service article. John Hall, senior Washington correspondent for the Media General News Service, wrote an article about George W. Bush and the emerging slate of Democratic contenders. Hall's article is quite positive about the president's approval rating, arguing that "President Bush was bound to begin sliding in the polls . . . it was extraordinary that he kept it rolling through the November election," and "In parlous times, Americans look for a tower of strength. None of the Democratic candidates has yet shown signs of reaching very high, and an incumbent president may have slipped a notch or two. But it is way too early to tell what any of it means." Four outlets, which printed the article in *exactly the same way*, headlined it in quite different ways: "Bush's Shiny Armor Showing Wear" (*Roanoke Review*, January 15, 2003), "For Now Democrats Can Chip Away At Bush's Approval Ratings" (*The Tampa Tribune*, January 16, 2003), "Bush Dips and 2004 Comes Early" (*The News Virginian*, January 16, 2003), and "Earlier Campaigns Mean Less Time for Teamwork" (*The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, January 16, 2003). Readers would clearly expect, and perhaps take away, very different information from articles with such widely varying headlines.

#### *What Difference Does News Media Coverage Make?*

The importance of news reports of presidential approval lies in the fact that they become one more piece of data the public uses in determining their own level of approval. For most individuals, presidential approval is not an article of faith or deep commitment impervious to outside forces. Emerging conventional wisdom of a highly effective president or a floundering one is likely to push less interested and less committed citizens to follow the lead of their fellow citizens as reflected in the polls. It is instructive to note that the record breaking 35 per-

centage point surge of George W. Bush bringing him to 86 percent approval, was followed a week later with another increase to 90 percent approval. If Bush's approval was simply an outpouring of nascent patriotism, we should not have expected the second wave of the rally. This phenomenon adds some credence to the fact that elite opinion leadership and/or the publication of previous poll results play some role in the level and duration of approval ratings. Bush maintained his atmospheric 80 percent plus support for sixteen weeks. Individuals wavering in their support were faced with disagreeing with the vast majority of their fellow citizens.

The media and the conventional wisdom it spawns not only affect the public, but also impinge on the evaluations of other politicians as well. Politicians use approval ratings as surrogate measures of whom it is safe to criticize and whom it is wise to give a pass. In reality, the relationship is interactive. By holding back their criticism, other public officials make it more acceptable for the public to approve of a president's performance, opening the door to higher approval ratings, which in turn discourage those same public officials from taking a swipe at the president. Active support by other politicians and the media gives the wheel another spin, allowing further increases in presidential approval among the public. The process, of course, can also go the other way. Low or declining approval makes a president fair game for criticism by other politicians and the media. Negative comments by other politicians and the media can then speed the downward spiral.

#### What Presidential Approval Buys

Presidential approval easily gets caught up in the political jockeying associated with promoting one's party, issues and political future. . . .

It has been shown empirically that popular presidents have more influence with Congress. Along with his extraordinarily high public approval ratings, George W. Bush also secured a near record high rate of legislative victory in Congress. By stating a clear preference on a very narrow agenda and using his popularity, Bush was successful with Congress 87 percent of the time in 2001 and 88 percent in 2002. Only Lyndon Johnson in 1965 surpassed that record with a 93 percent support level. While a lot more than presidential approval goes into legislative success, Bush did much better than many previous presidents who had larger party majorities in both houses of Congress.

. . . Bush's popularity certainly did not hurt his party's fortunes in the 2002 midterm elections. . . . no president since 1934 had gained seats in both houses. . . .

### Conclusion

George W. Bush's 9/11 rally was an historic event the likes of which we hope we will never see again. While it could be viewed as an historical anomaly linked to a tragic enigma, it allows us to apply our analytical tools to events and behaviors occurring at the margins of political reality. . . . The more impressionistic analysis of the media justifies the fact that far from simply reflecting reality like a mirror, the media refracts it like a prism. In its power of framing, the media has the potential for consistently changing the nature of perceived reality, especially under conditions where the new rules of media competition and audience fragmentation are at least temporarily rebuffed. While analysis of presidential popularity as a cause of the behavior of other political actors is less precise, it is clear that presidents do need to be concerned about their level of approval from a political perspective. Garnering public approval is clearly better than engendering disdain. Leadership and followership are closely intertwined phenomena, each influencing the other.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Are public opinion numbers news? Should they be news? In what ways do they matter?
2. Consider how phenomena about the media described in other selections in this book might help explain how and why presidential approval ratings have become news.
3. What do you think higher public approval ratings for presidents really measure? Is it the public's true expressions of support or does the public take its lead from elites in public life and in the media who may influence public opinion?

### "Rally Around the Rubble" Article Questions

1. What is the period of time after a president is elected where he has high approval ratings called?
2. Describe "shared islands of understanding."
3. Have "shared islands of understanding" grown more prominent or less? Explain your answer.
4. What role of the media is being displayed when they report presidential approval ratings?
5. Explain how media can frame presidential approval ratings. Give two examples!
6. How does the drop in President Bush's approval rating over time allow for the media to frame the story?
7. How does framing affect shared news stories? Give two examples of this from the article.
8. Explain why President Bush had a higher approval rating two weeks after the attacks than just one week after.
9. Explain what is meant by "the relationship [between criticism and polls] is interactive"?
10. What does a high presidential approval get for a president?
11. Are public opinion numbers news? Should they be news? In what ways do they matter?
12. What do high public approval ratings really measure? Is it truly the public's expression of support or does the public take its lead from political elites and the media? Explain your answer.