

Polls and Elections

**Under the Radar: Public Support for
Vice Presidents**

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Analysis of vice presidential favorability and job approval polling data for the past four vice presidents suggests that there is a mismatch between how scholars and the public perceive the vice presidency. Specifically, data illustrate that vice presidential favorability and job approval ratings are overwhelmingly influenced by presidential favorability and job approval ratings. While vice presidents advise and help their presidents carry out any number of important tasks, most citizens do not seem to form independent opinions about them. The analysis adds to our understanding of the institution and has normative implications, inasmuch as it suggests that there may be a lack of democratic accountability associated with one of the only two nationally elected officials in the United States.

Keywords: vice presidents, public opinion, democratic accountability

There is some consensus among scholars and observers of U.S. government, and of the U.S. presidency in particular, that the vice presidency has come of age. Once viewed by many with scorn and derision, vice presidents are now considered an integral part of a president's administration (see, e.g., Baumgartner 2015; Goldstein 2016; Hite 2013; Light 1984). One account of the transformation of the institution goes so far as to suggest that vice presidents have moved out from the shadow of obscurity into the spotlight (Baumgartner 2015). Another refers to a modern White House vice presidency (Goldstein 2016). The implication of these and other accounts of the modern vice presidency is that the institution is significantly more important to twenty-first-century U.S. politics and government. Does this view square how the American public views the vice presidency and vice presidents?

Analysis of vice presidential favorability and job approval polling data for the past four vice presidents suggests that there is a mismatch between how scholars and the public perceive the vice presidency. Specifically, data show that vice presidential favorability and job approval ratings are overwhelmingly influenced by opinion of the president. While vice presidents advise and help their presidents carry out any number of important tasks, most citizens do not seem to form independent opinions of them.

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The present research extends Cohen's (2001a; 2001b) examination of vice presidential job approval and favorability and, by extension, analyses examining opinion about vice presidential candidates. The findings also add to our understanding of the institution itself.

While students of the vice presidency are quite correct in noting that the institution has grown in importance over the past several decades, this understanding should be tempered by the reality that the public seems unaware of this change. Vice presidents, it seems, still live largely in the shadow of their presidents. The analysis also has normative implications. It might be easy to dismiss the findings by claiming that the vice president is not, after all, the president. In other words, why should we care about public opinion about the vice president? The short answer is that as one of only two nationally elected officials, the lack of meaningful (e.g., independent) public opinion associated with vice presidents suggests they may be less than fully democratically accountable.

The Vice Presidency: Existing Research

Anecdotes that reflect a historically dim view of the vice presidency abound. For example Johnny Carson once quipped, "democracy means that anyone can grow up to be president, and anyone who doesn't grow up can be vice president."¹ This view of the vice presidency has changed dramatically in the past several decades, at least among serious students of the U.S. government.

Scholarly research on the vice presidency is relatively scarce. While there were a few serious works on the institution prior to the 1980s (Harwood 1966; Hatch 1970; Williams 1956; Young 1965), existing sentiment regarding the vice presidency seemed to be echoed in the words of presidential scholar Clinton Rossiter, who wrote, "I trust it will be thought proper in a book of 175 pages on the Presidency to devote four or five to the Vice Presidency, although even this ration is no measure of the gap between them in power and prestige" (Rossiter 1960, 143). Much academic work on the subject seemed to reflect the critical tone taken by nonacademic titles such as "Madmen and Geniuses" and "Crapshoot: Rolling the Dice on the Vice Presidency" (Barzman 1974; Witcover 1992).

This has changed. In the early 1980s two books were published that changed the way presidency scholars and others thought about the institution. In his seminal 1982 work Joel Goldstein chronicled the rise and emergence of a "modern American vice presidency," a more active institution that was increasingly oriented toward the executive. Subsequently, Paul Light (1984) focused on "vice presidential power" and influence in his groundbreaking book examining the vice presidency of Walter Mondale.

These two books set the stage for later work on the vice presidency. While scholarly research on the office and the men who occupy it is by no means plentiful, there are now a number of serious works which examine various aspects of the vice presidency. Some focus on the changing nature and role of the institution. Book-length treatments include

1. See Brainyquote.com, <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/j/johnnycars136765.html> (accessed February 28, 2017).

Natoli's (1985) examination of vice presidential selection and the evolution of the office of the vice president. Kincade's (2000) work focuses on vice presidents from Martin Van Buren to George H.W. Bush and the difficulties vice presidents face in running for the presidency. Walch's (1997) edited collection examines the vice president's role in assisting the president in the twentieth century and includes essays from both academics and practitioners. Other good overviews of the institution include recent books by Baumgartner (2006a; 2015) and Hite (2013), as well as Goldstein's latest effort (2016). Finally, as might be expected, there are now numerous academic articles dealing with the subject (Felzenberg 2001; Goldstein 2008; Kengor 2000; Jones 2008; Light 1983; Moe 2008; Natoli 1982a; Sirgiovanni 1988).

Other research focuses on specific aspects of the vice presidency. For example, Ulbig (2013) examines the role of the media in helping to shape evaluations of vice presidential candidates during election years. Several other researchers look at the various factors that influence the selection of vice presidential candidates (Azari 2001; Baumgartner 2006b; 2012a; Hiller and Kriner 2008; Kiser 1992; 1994; Natoli 1980; Sirgiovanni 1994). Some have formulated forecasting models that predict (*ex post facto*), with some degree of success, who will be selected as vice presidential nominee (Sigelman and Wahlbeck 1997; Baumgartner 2008a; 2012b). The so-called vice presidential home-state advantage (Devine 2010; Devine and Kopco 2013; Dudley and Rappaport 1989) has attracted the attention of several scholars, as has the effect vice presidential candidates have on the presidential vote (Adkinson 1982; Grofman and Kline 2010; Holbrook 1994; Romero 2001; Ulbig 2010; Wattenberg 1995). Particular attention of late has been paid to the vice presidential candidacy of Sarah Palin in this regard (Baumgartner, Morris, and Walth 2012; Brox and Cassels 2009; Court and Lynch 2015; Elis, Hillygus, and Nie 2010; Knuckey 2008).

Another approach to the subject is biographical in nature, yielding books that offer chapters on each vice president (Hatfield 1997; Purcell 2001; Southwick 1998; Waldrup 1996; Witcover 2014). Article-length case studies of various vice presidents include (perhaps predictably, given his controversial tenure in office) overviews of Dick Cheney's vice presidency (Baumgartner 2008b; Goldstein 2010a) and others (Natoli 1977; 1982b; 1988). Rounding out serious scholarship on the vice presidency are articles which look at presidential succession (Adkinson 1983; Schlesinger 1974) and numerous legal analyses of various aspects of the institution (e.g., Albert 2005; Brownell 2010; 2012; 2014; 2015; Goldstein 2010b).

Research examining vice presidential favorability or job approval is largely nonexistent. This is at least partly due to the fact that while polling organizations have been tracking presidential approval since the 1930s, it was only in the 1980s that some firms began asking the same questions about vice presidents—and even then, not with any great frequency or regularity.

Two notable exceptions are studies by Cohen (2001a; 2001b), published more than a decade ago. In the first he examined “trends in poll interest in the vice presidency” and job “approval ratings of Bill Clinton and Al Gore during Gore's tenure” (Cohen 2001a, 142). In the second he turned his attention to public favorability toward Gore (Cohen 2001b). While his research suggested that “factors independent of the president” may have an effect on the vice president's favorability and job approval ratings (Cohen 2001b,

349), in each case he concluded that the president's numbers "[cast] a long shadow on" those of the vice president (Cohen 2001a, 142). Importantly, his research only examined the case of Al Gore. In Baumgartner's (2015) recent survey of the vice presidency he presented job approval and favorability ratings for each of the past three presidents and vice presidents. While his was a simple bivariate descriptive analysis, it did illustrate some degree of congruence between presidential and vice presidential approval numbers.

Since the early 1970s there has been a good amount of scholarly research published examining presidential approval (both job approval and favorability). For the most part, because of the nature of the data (time-series public opinion polling data) these studies are aggregate-level analyses, although some scholars have employed individual-level data in their research (e.g., Kinder 1981; Tedin 1986). Although a fair amount of this research has been devoted to methodological issues surrounding how to model these time-series data, a consensus has emerged regarding factors that seem to drive presidential approval. These include various measures of economic performance (e.g., inflation, unemployment); foreign policy and, in particular, the president's handling of "rally-around-the-flag" events; and, to a lesser extent, domestic policy and symbolic activity by the president (see Gronke and Newman 2003, for an excellent review of this literature). Later research has also shown that media coverage of the president also plays a role in shaping presidential approval, especially with regard to coverage of salient issues (Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995). Notably absent in these studies is the idea that any of these factors might directly affect vice presidential approval.

In fact there is good a priori reason to suspect that people do not make judgments of the vice president independent of the president. For example, a sizable minority of Americans are unable to identify who the vice president is at any given time. A Gallup poll from January 2000 found that 10% of the sample could not identify Vice President Al Gore, then in the eighth year of his vice presidential tenure and running for the Democratic presidential nomination. A 2008 poll found that 15% could not name Vice President Dick Cheney in his seventh year in office. In a 2012 poll, 21% could not identify Joe Biden as vice president (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research 2016). Public opinion polls from 1988 through 2013 measuring favorability and job approval show that the percentage of respondents claiming they did not know enough about the individual to answer the question was almost three times higher for vice presidents than for presidents (19.7 vs. 7.5%; Roper Center for Public Opinion Research 2016). These data are not inconsistent with other studies about levels of Americans' civic knowledge, but the fact remains that many people seem to be unaware of who the vice president is.

An examination of American National Election Studies feeling thermometer scores of presidential and vice presidential candidates from 1968 through 2012 paints a similar picture. Missing data (those who refused to answer, claimed they did not know enough to answer, claimed they could not make a judgment, did not recognize the name, and others) for vice presidential candidates are on average 12.3 points higher than those for presidential candidates. While individual elections show some differences based on incumbency and whether the vice president was running for the presidency, in no case are missing data for presidential candidates as high as those for vice presidential candidates.

Moreover, these differences persist into the era of the modern vice presidency (post Mondale; see Goldstein 2016). People are less familiar with vice presidential candidates than with their presidential running mates.

Research into the effect that vice presidential candidates may have on voting behavior further points to the idea that opinion about vice presidents may not be independent of opinion of the president. “Most research . . . suggests that the vice presidential candidate has—at most—a marginal effect on voters’ choices” (Baumgartner 2015, 115; see Adkinson 1982; Grofman and Kline 2010; Holbrook 1994; Romero 2001; Wattenberg 1995). A recent partial exception to this was the case of Sarah Palin (Brox and Cassels 2009; Knuckey 2008), who may have had a small (and negative) effect on the vote choice of some (see also Ulbig 2010). In most cases, people focus on and vote for the top of the ticket, which is completely consistent with Richard Nixon’s claim that “the Vice President can’t help you . . . he can only hurt you” (Natoli 1985, 43).

The point is that while there are almost no studies examining the factors that drive vice presidential approval, it seems reasonable to expect that it is largely dependent on presidential approval and little else. Based on this, the following hypotheses are tested:

H1: Vice presidential favorability is dependent on presidential favorability.

H2: Vice presidential job approval is dependent on presidential job approval.

Data, Method, and Analyses

Data on vice presidential and presidential job approval and favorability were obtained from the iPOLL Databank provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research (www.ropercenter.uconn.edu) as well as from the website pollingreport.com. While there are minor variations in how different polling organizations ask these questions, all took a form similar to “Do you approve or disapprove of the way [NAME] is handling his job as vice president?” (for job approval ratings) or “Is your opinion of [NAME] favorable, not favorable, undecided, or haven’t you heard enough about [NAME] yet to have an opinion?” (favorability ratings). The data cover the vice presidencies of Dan Quayle, Al Gore, Dick Cheney, and Joe Biden. In all there were 834 polls measuring (generic) ratings for vice presidents and 3,699 for presidents from various survey research firms from January 1989 through May 2015. Table 1 lists the first and last poll dates (both favorability and job approval), the total number of polls, and the number of months in which there were no data for each vice president and president included in the analysis.

James Stimson’s *W-Calc* was employed to create a single measure of both job approval and favorability (for presidents and vice presidents) from the different forms of questions asked by various polling organizations to measure these concepts. Used by many researchers faced with similar constraints in time-series public opinion data, this application allows for the construction of a single measure (e.g., job approval, favorability) based on multiple survey questions, each of which might be somewhat different but

TABLE 1
Structure and Distribution of Vice Presidential and Presidential Favorability and Job Approval Polling Data

	<i>First Poll Date</i>	<i>Last Poll Date</i>	<i>Number of Polls</i>	<i>Missing Months</i>
<i>Dan Quayle</i>				
Favorability	Jan. 1989	Jan. 1993	73	22
Job Approval	March 1989	Jan. 1993	25	30
<i>George H.W. Bush</i>				
Favorability	April 1989	Jan. 1993	123	18
Job Approval	Jan. 1989	Jan. 1993	363	0
<i>Al Gore</i>				
Favorability	Jan. 1993	Nov. 2000	279	26
Job Approval	March 1997	Nov. 2000	76	9
<i>Bill Clinton</i>				
Favorability	Jan. 1993	Jan. 2001	462	0
Job Approval	Jan. 1993	Jan. 2001	752	0
<i>Dick Cheney</i>				
Favorability	Jan. 2001	Jan. 2009	146	39
Job Approval	Feb. 2001	Jan. 2009	114	28
<i>George W. Bush</i>				
Favorability	Jan. 2001	Jan. 2009	268	0
Job Approval	Jan. 2001	Jan. 2009	664	0
<i>Joe Biden</i>				
Favorability	Jan. 2009	May 2015	105	30
Job Approval	March 2009	Sept. 2013	16	30
<i>Barack Obama</i>				
Favorability	Jan. 2009	July 2014	260	0
Job Approval	Jan. 2009	May 2015	807	0

Source: The iPOLL Databank and other resources provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut (www.ropercenter.uconn.edu) and pollingreport.com.

which clearly capture the same concept (Stimson 1991). The algorithm also interpolates missing data points, allowing for a more complete analysis. The final data set includes monthly vice presidential and presidential favorability and job approval ratings for Quayle/Bush (favorability, $n = 38$; job approval, $n = 38$), Gore/Clinton (favorability, $n = 94$; job approval, $n = 44$), Cheney/Bush (favorability, $n = 95$; job approval, $n = 148$), and Biden/Obama (favorability, $n = 76$; job approval, $n = 53$).

In this analysis vice presidential ratings (job approval and favorability) are treated as the dependent variable, while the primary independent variable of interest are presidential ratings. It is unclear what else should be included in the model beyond these two variables. As noted, there is very little empirical work or theory that might serve as a guide in developing an aggregate-level model of vice presidential approval. Cohen's (2001b) analysis of Gore's favorability ratings is the only research, which might be useful in this regard. His model included several dummy variables corresponding to particular periods in office. For example, he included a dummy variable for Gore's term in office (1 = first term, 0 = second term). This variable was included in the present analysis on the assumption that the vice president would, like the president, benefit to some degree

from a honeymoon effect and, similarly, suffer somewhat as the second term wore on. An ordinal variable measuring whether the president’s party had a majority in either or both houses of Congress (0 = neither, 1 = majority in one house, 2 = majority in both houses) was included as well, based on the idea that it might help capture residual favorability toward the president and vice president’s party.

Measures of aggregate public favorability toward the president and vice president’s political party were also included in the model. The vice president (like the president, who is the informal head of the party) is clearly a partisan figure, in some cases more obviously than the president (see Baumgartner 2015; Goldstein 1982). This variable, like the presidential and vice presidential opinion variables, was tracked monthly and smoothed with W-Calc.

Finally, a variable tracking the percentage of negative news about the vice president was employed. The logic here was that news about the vice president goes largely unnoticed by most people unless that news is negative. A scandal, gaffe, or controversial statement might make people notice the vice president and potentially prime negative opinions. This variable was constructed by first archiving all stories mentioning the vice president in both the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, by month. Each month’s stories were then processed through the Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary, a freeware application “designed to capture the sentiment of political texts” (see <http://www.lexicoder.com>). The results allowed for a calculation of the monthly percentage of negative news about the vice president.

Because several of the variables were time series data (presidential favorability and job approval, vice presidential favorability and job approval, and party favorability) it was necessary to test for stationarity in each. Dickey Fuller unit root tests for all indicated the presence of nonstationarity. One solution to this problem involves using first differences, subtracting the value of each variable at time one from the value at time two, for each point in time. The resultant value is then used as the variable. Dickey Fuller unit root tests on these new variables showed that this first differencing corrected the problem of nonstationarity (results not shown).

TABLE 2
Individual Vice Presidential Favorability (Quayle through Biden)

	<i>Quayle Favorability</i>	<i>Gore Favorability</i>	<i>Cheney Favorability</i>	<i>Biden Favorability</i>
Pres. Favorability	.17 (.06)***	.52 (.19)**	.07 (.07)	.05 (.16)
Party Favorability	-.16 (.43)	.13 (.18)	.13 (.08)	.20 (.12)*
Party in Congress	-	-.09 (.50)	-.04 (.14)	-1.21 (.51)**
Term in Office	-	.05 (.83)	.18 (.25)	.90 (.55)
Negative Media	-.10 (.58)	-.10 (.59)	.08 (.13)	-.82 (.36)
Constant	.59 (1.92)	.390 (1.77)	-.48 (.55)	3.23 (1.23)*
Adj. R ²	.108	.093	-.005	.142
Durbin Watson	1.6	2.11	2.27	1.80
N	38	93	95	76

Note: Because there was no variation in the “Party in Congress” and “Term in Office” variables, these were dropped in the Quayle favorability model.

p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001 (one-tailed).

TABLE 3
Individual Vice Presidential Job Approval (Quayle through Biden)

	<i>Quayle Job Approval</i>	<i>Gore Job Approval</i>	<i>Cheney Job Approval</i>	<i>Biden Job Approval</i>
Pres. Job Approval	.08 (.07)	.45 (.22)**	.22 (.05)***	.51 (.30)*
Party Favorability	.12 (.28)	.26 (.22)	-.02 (.09)	-.08 (.12)
Party in Congress	-	-	.07 (.19)	-.20 (.38)
Term in Office	-	-	-.19 (.31)	-1.01 (.49)*
Negative Media	-.21 (.37)	-.35 (1.03)	-.24 (.16)	.04 (.25)
Constant	.87 (1.25)	1.09 (3.00)	.76 (.66)	1.02 (.94)
Adj. R^2	-.022	.085	.094	.079
Durbin Watson	1.99	2.16	2.24	2.03
N	37	43	147	53

Note: Because there was no variation in the “Party in Congress” and “Term in Office” variables, these were dropped in the Quayle and Gore job approval models.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (one-tailed).

TABLE 4
Combined Vice Presidential Favorability and Job Approval (Quayle through Biden)

	VP Favorability		VP Job Approval	
	Random Effects	Fixed Effects	Random Effects	Fixed Effects
Pres. Favorability	.20 (.05)***	.20 (.05)***	-	-
Pres. Job Approval	-	-	.17 (.04)***	.18 (.04)***
Party Favorability	.14 (.08)*	.14 (.08)*	.05 (.08)	.06 (.08)
Party in Congress	-.25 (.16)	-.25 (.22)	-.06 (.14)	.09 (.22)
Term in Office	.22 (.29)	.20 (.34)	-.03 (.24)	-.23 (.38)
Negative Media	-.12 (.17)	-15.17	-.21 (.15)	-20.54 (16.10)
Constant	.46 (.60)	(19.07)	.75 (.51)	.73 (.60)
Adj. R^2	.075	.58 (.66)	.070	-
Overall R^2	-	-.09		.09
Durbin Watson	1.96	-	2.10	
Sigma_u	-	.08		.22
Sigma_e	-	2.32		1.71
Rho	-	.00		.02
N	301	302	228	228

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (one-tailed).

Tables 2–4 present the results of the regression models testing H1 and H2. Table 2 shows findings from individual tests of vice presidential favorability for each of four vice presidents, while Table 3 presents individual tests of vice presidential job approval. Finally, Table 4 shows tests for the vice presidential favorability and job approval for the four vice presidents combined.

Table 2 shows partial, though not overwhelming, support for the idea that vice presidential favorability is dependent on presidential favorability. Results show that presidential favorability is both positive and significant in the cases of Quayle and Gore. This is not the case for Cheney or Biden. Biden’s favorability does seem to have been positively

affected by party favorability scores and Democrat control of Congress. Results in Table 3 are more convincing. Presidential job approval is positively and significantly related to vice presidential job approval in the case of three of the four vice presidents (Gore, Cheney, and Biden) under examination.

In Table 4 the models are run with scores for all four administrations, and here the evidence seems to definitively support both hypotheses. Vice presidential favorability (column two) and job approval (column three) are tested in both random effects (similar to the analyses in Tables 2 and 3) and fixed-effects models, the latter of which checks the robustness of these cumulative models by accounting for differences between the four administrations. There are no appreciable differences in the results of each approach in either analysis. Presidential ratings exert a positive effect on the respective vice presidential rating scores, and in each case this effect is highly significant. No other variable in any of the models in Tables 2–4 consistently demonstrates an effect on either vice presidential rating measure. Durbin–Watson tests of each model result in values close to 2, suggesting no autocorrelation.

Discussion

A fairly large and established body of research exists that examines the factors which influence presidential job approval and favorability. This is not the case with respect to vice presidential job approval and favorability. This essay, following Cohen's (2001a; 2001b) research, focused on public support for Al Gore, partially remedies this situation. An examination of both job approval and favorability ratings for the past four vice presidents (individually and collectively) shows that public support for vice presidents is heavily dependent on support for the president.

While recent research on a more active vice presidency has correctly captured changes in the institution, the present research clearly suggests that vice presidents still fly under the radar of American public opinion. As such, the analysis serves as a partial corrective on recent scholarship on the modern vice presidency and is consistent with research on most vice presidential candidates. In the aggregate, citizens seem to have no independent opinion of vice presidents. At minimum this raises the distinct possibility that surveys measuring public support for vice presidents may be capturing nonattitudes.

The analysis raises substantive and normative questions as well. Modern vice presidents occupy a paraconstitutional netherworld. On the one hand they are a legislative officer, while on the other they clearly work for their president. But who is the vice president answerable to in the end? In practice, of course, the answer is the latter. Vice presidents have as much power, and only as much power, as their president allows. But as one of two nationally elected officials vice presidents are ultimately answerable to the American people. If, however, the public's view of the vice president is almost wholly dependent on how the president is viewed, are they truly democratically accountable?

One limitation of this study concerns the nature of the data itself. Aggregate data cannot yield individual-level explanations of public support of the vice president. These might be explored using survey data which capture not only vice presidential but

presidential approval scores as well, ideally at various points in time throughout the presidential term. This would be a fruitful avenue to explore, particularly given the fact that the explanatory power of the models presented in Tables 2–4 is relatively weak (in only one case did the adjusted R^2 exceed .10).

The modern vice presidency is clearly more integral to the twenty-first-century American republic than it was 50 years ago. However the public seems largely unaware of this development. Vice presidents, it seems, still live largely in the shadow of their presidents.

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