



## Policy popularity: The Arizona immigration law



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### ABSTRACT

As a maker of policy, a president or a governor invites public approval or disapproval for policy decisions. Public reaction is likely to occur for issues of great salience and clear candidate positions. We focus on immigration policy. Illegal immigration has become a hot issue in recent years, especially in Arizona. The state's governor took a clear stance in 2010 by signing a law that gives police sweeping powers to deal with illegal immigration (Arizona SB 1070). Using an aggregate time-series model, we find that this action affected gubernatorial approval ratings. Indeed the gain in approval proved enduring enough to turn a losing race for re-election into a victory for Governor Brewer. Using individual-level survey data, we find that presidential approval also was affected by reactions to the Arizona Law among residents of the state. When elected officials take clear stances on a salient issue - Governor Brewer for, President Obama against the law-policy moves approval.

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It is remarkable that the study of executive popularity has paid scant attention to something that chief executives actually do: *making policy*. Approval models focus on outcomes such as economic conditions, and casualties in war, or on unearned boosts from rally events and the honeymoon following an election. Policy is not a standard variable in popularity models. Vote models, on the other hand, have long accorded issues a significant role. They have also established major conditions for issue voting. An issue must be salient, and the positions of the candidates must be clearly enough staked in public perceptions. By virtue of their office, elected officials have a unique opportunity to take actions that make it clear to the general public where they stand on a salient issue.

There is no question that immigration policy has recently become an immensely salient and contentious issue in American politics. Pressed by the high level of illegal immigration and widespread public concern, Arizona in 2010 adopted one of the broadest and strictest immigration policies in U.S. history, formally known as “The Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act,” or simply as Arizona SB 1070. The law gives Arizona police sweeping powers to question individuals who are suspected to be in the country illegally and arrest those who cannot document their legal status. Governor Jan Brewer signed the bill into law with great fanfare. President Obama, on the other hand, spoke out strongly against the law, with the U.S. Justice Department

challenging the law in court.

We have examined the impact of the law's passage on the job approval of both governor and president, with two different kinds of data and methods. Using a dynamic intervention model for aggregate approval over time, we find that passage of the immigration law greatly boosted Governor Brewer's approval ratings. With controls for unemployment and crime in Arizona, this effect cannot be attributed to an improved economy or a drop in crime. More important, the gain in Brewer's approval proved enduring enough to turn a losing race for re-election into a victory. It must be noted that Governor Napolitano vetoed similar legislation and appeared to suffer little damage to her approval. The difference in public reactions points to qualifications of the policy impact on popularity. The most important is the clarity of the policy stand. Governor Napolitano balanced her vetoes with forceful measures on illegal immigration in other ways, even earning her the title of “The Enforcer of Border Laws”. Balanced position-taking can be expected to mitigate the impact of policy on approval.

To examine if public reactions to the law impinged on President Obama's job approval, we relied on a survey conducted right after the law's passage. Such a test requires control for key variables that influence the reaction to immigration policy and presidential approval. Aside from the usual suspects such as party identification, ideology, the economy, and Hispanic origin, we included a measure of immigration support. With these controls in place, reactions to the Arizona Law prove significant for Obama approval among residents of the state, though not in the country as a whole. Hence in the state where the issue played out strongly, reactions to the law impinged on the approval of both governor and president.

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## 1. Pillars of approval

Since the pioneering work of Mueller (1973), the ups and downs of presidential popularity have attracted intense scholarly scrutiny (Gronke and Newman, 2003). Some of the major “pillars” of approval also help account for the popularity of governors and other elected officials. The economy, whether measured with objective indicators or subjective assessments, has received the lion's share of attention (Clarke and Stewart, 1994; Duch, 2007; Erikson et al., 2002; Kernell, 1978; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Mueller, 1973; Norpoth, 1996; Ostrom and Simon, 1985). How well these findings apply to governor approval is somewhat controversial. Some studies show that state unemployment affects a governor's popularity (Crew et al., 2002; Hansen, 1999; Howell and Vanderleeuw, 1990; King and Cohen, 2005; Leyden and Borrelli, 1995; Orth, 2001), while others claim that governors have less to fear from their state economies (Chubb, 1988; Peltzman, 1987).

Aside from economic performance, international events have proved influential for presidential approval. The “rally 'round the flag” effect, sparked by a dramatic international events, invariably boosts approval, if only temporarily (Edwards and Swenson, 1997; Kernell, 1978; Ladd, 2007; Lai and Reiter, 2005; Kam and Ramos, 2008; Norpoth and Sidman, 2007; Wood, 2009). While international events rarely impinge on state governors, the surge-and-decline pattern of a rally effect may apply to a governor acting in response to a crisis with an international dimension. Illegal immigration is obviously an issue with international policy implications. It involves an influx from foreign countries that calls for federal action. Moreover, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer made quite a spectacle out of signing into law the 2010 bill cracking down on illegal immigration. Her action drew close attention from the national media such as *The New York Times* (Archibold, 2010). So when a governor acts like a president on an international issue, the governor's approval may enjoy a rally effect in approval.

Upon taking office, a governor, like a president, may also benefit from an early-term honeymoon, especially after a change of party control (Dominguez, 2005; Kernell, 1978; Lewis and Strine, 1996; Mueller, 1973; Norpoth, 1996). As Arizona Secretary of State in 2009, however, Jan Brewer (Republican) automatically succeeded Janet Napolitano (Democrat) as governor when Napolitano resigned to join the cabinet of President Barack Obama. Since Arizona does not have a lieutenant governor, the secretary of state is first in the line of succession to the governorship, as stipulated by the Arizona Constitution. A purely administrative transition lacking any time for-a-change clamor, is not likely to generate a honeymoon effect for the new chief executive as Fig. 1 shows. To the contrary, given Napolitano's high approval ratings on leaving the governorship, Brewer may have started with a handicap in approval.

## 2. Policy approval

Policy issues have been largely ignored in approval studies. This might seem odd in light of the attention issues have received in studies of vote choice. A classic in this field, *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960) found that attitudes toward foreign and domestic policy were two factors, along with attitudes toward the major-party candidates, social groups, and government management that shaped individual vote decision in presidential elections.<sup>1</sup> This

finding was based on responses to open-ended questions about likes and dislikes of candidates and parties. The responses made up a rich canvass of attitudes toward economic management, social welfare policies, as well as war and peace that provided motivations for voters to cast their presidential votes. (Campbell et al., 1960, Chapters 3 and 4). Not only did these issue attitudes affect individual vote choice, but they had a palpable impact on the partisan division of the vote in the aggregate. As far as domestic policy was concerned, the balance of attitudes moved the vote division in a Democratic direction, while in the foreign policy domain it favored the Republicans (Campbell et al., 1960, Chapter 19). Replications of this type of analysis have confirmed those findings, with much consistency, for subsequent elections (Kagay and Caldeira, 1980; Kessel, 2004; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008, Chapters 3,4 and 14).

Moreover, a good portion of the electorate meets key requirements of issue voting in a stricter sense (Campbell et al., 1960, Chapter 8, as updated by Lewis-Beck et al., 2008, Chapter 8; Abramson et al., 2010, Chapter 6). A voter must take a position on the issue; must know the government's action on it; and must see a difference between the parties' positions on it. According to findings of the 2004 National Election Study, between four and six in ten Americans met all those criteria, depending on the issue (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008, 181). With measurement error posing a threat to gauging true policy preferences through surveys, a study correcting for such error found that issue preferences had nearly as much influence on the presidential as did party identification (Ansolabehere et al., 2008).

Turning from vote choice to presidential approval, there is no question that at the individual level attitudes about both the economy and foreign policy sway approval of the president (Hurwitz and Peffley, 1987; Wilcox and Allsop, 1991). While some claim that at the aggregate level “policy initiatives or changes rarely generate visible ripples” in approval (Erikson et al., 2002, 67), others have shown the imprint of domestic and foreign policy on the approval of presidents from Ford to Clinton (Nickelsburg and Norpoth, 2000; Cohen, 2002a, 2002b). Policy effects are bound to vary with the salience of the issue as well as media priming of issues (Kelleher and Wolak, 2006). At times when the economy is the most salient concern, economic attitudes will trigger bigger ripples in approval than when it is not, and likewise for foreign policy attitudes (Edwards et al., 1995).

Moreover, the general public has proved quite capable of responding to high-profile actions of political sovereigns, whether presidents, legislatures or even courts. In the old South any action that challenged racial taboos was liable to end an elected official's career. A famous case involved Representative Brooks Hays of Arkansas, who lost his seat in Congress over his actions in a school-integration case in the 1950s (Miller and Stokes, 1963). In the case of a terminally ill patient (Terry Schiavo) both the president and Congress paid a political price for taking a stand that was at odds with public opinion (Haider-Markel and Carr, 2007). Long before Teddy Roosevelt coined the term, American presidents have used their office as a “bully pulpit” to sway public opinion (Kernell, 1986). With regard to the issue of gays and lesbians serving in the military, Clinton 1993 proposal had some persuasive influence with the public (Bailey et al., 2003). Even support for the U.S. Supreme Court—an institution supposed to be above politics—is not immune to fallout from the public's pleasure or displeasure with the court's rulings (Hoekstra, 2003).

Furthermore, elected officials and candidates for office may seize on salient issues for strategic reasons. Lagging poll numbers would give them a special incentive to embrace popular positions while popular incumbents can afford to take unpopular policy initiatives without great fear of backlash (Erikson et al., 2002), short of breaking a taboo like segregation in the old South. Jan Brewer entered the governor's office as a little known figure, having previously served as Arizona Secretary of State and without a gubernatorial victory to her

<sup>1</sup> It may be surprising to see *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960) cited in support of issue voting. This work is widely regarded as the main exhibit for the claim that voters are unconcerned with and incapable of handling policy issues. However widespread, such a view clearly ignores the evidence about partisan attitudes laid out in Chapters 3 and 4 of *The American Voter*.

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