



Presidential approval in Taiwan: An analysis of survey data in the Ma Ying-jeou presidency[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Presidential popularity is the “causal agent” of presidential effectiveness. High approval ratings mean more power and greater ability to govern. Taiwan’s President Ma Ying-jeou enjoyed high approval ratings when he was elected in 2008, but his popularity declined rapidly soon after, to about 14%. How do Taiwan citizens evaluate their presidents? What factors help to explain the Ma’s declining popularity during his presidency? Consistent with conventional wisdom, this study finds that the country’s overall economic conditions play a vital role in the popularity of Taiwan’s president. Closely following is citizens’ evaluation of the president’s ability in managing cross-Strait relationship, national defense, and diplomacy. Ma’s staffing of key cabinet positions has also had an effect on his popularity, which is unusual in the study of presidential approval. The personal integrity of the president, a trait that Ma has emphasized strongly, has not had a positive effect on his declining popularity in Taiwan.

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Scholarly research on presidential approval in the United States began half a century ago (Mueller, 1970, 1973; Neustadt, 1960), and since then, voluminous studies on the subject have been published in English.¹ The extensive academic attention paid to the subject is understandable. Presidential popularity ratings are not only a manifestation of public sentiment for the president but also “causal agents” of presidential effectiveness (Stimson, 1976: 2).² Indeed, presidential power rests in part on public support. High approval ratings pay off electorally for the president and for the president’s party. Approval ratings also play a crucial role in a national leader’s calculations of decision-making, because widespread public support increases a president’s ability to bargain and to persuade. A

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¹ Gronke and Newman (2003) provide a comprehensive review of the American literature on presidential approval. For more recent studies, see Fox (2009) and Kriner (2006).

² As Stimson pointed out a long time ago, “presidential popularity” and “presidential approval” are two conceptually distinct and empirically separable notions but one is frequently used as a reference to the other. This study shall thus use the two terms interchangeably (1976: 1n1).

popular president is more likely to get his or her policy agenda through the legislature and/or helps his or her partisan candidates’ electoral bids. Approval ratings are more than a snapshot of the public sentiment for the president at any given moment, because higher presidential approval essentially means more power and a greater ability to govern. In the research of American politics, a number of studies have documented the impact of approval ratings on congressional and presidential elections (Gronke et al., 2003; Lewis-Beck and Rice, 1982, 1984; Newman and Ostrom, 2002), presidential policy initiatives and legislative success (Canes-Wrone and Shotts, 2004; Canes-Wrone and de Marchi, 2002; Ostrom and Simon, 1985), and veto politics (Rohde and Simon, 1985). Research on presidential approval thus speaks to important questions rooted in democratic theory.

While research on presidential approval is abundant, very few studies written in English have been conducted on democratic polities other than the United States. The current research is one of the few such studies with data collected in non-US democratic countries.³ Using six waves of survey data collected in Taiwan

³ There are a few studies in English on public support for executive branches in other countries, including Cuzán and Bundrick (1997), Lewis-Beck (1980), Treisman (2011), Weyland (1998, 2000), and Yantek (1988). Several studies were conducted on Taiwan’s presidential approval (Chen and Keng, 2009; Lee and Wu, 2003; Pao, 2010; Sheng and Pai, 2008) and its electoral effects (Hsiao and Yu, 2008; Hsu, 2009; Lim, 2000; Wu and Lee, 2003, 2004; Yu, 2012) but they were published in Chinese.

between September 2012 and December 2013, and aggregate electoral data of the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections at the township level, coupled with information gathered through focus group interviews, this study examines the following questions: How do Taiwan citizens evaluate their president, and specifically the incumbent President Ma Ying-jeou, of the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT)? What factors help to explain the patterns we observe? While the study is limited by the available data and only examines the popularity of one president in Taiwan, our answers to these questions nevertheless have important implications for the young democracy of East Asia, considering that Ma has had low approval ratings during most of his six years in office since 2008.⁴ The findings of the current study will also contribute to a more general theoretical understanding about how citizens of democratic polities use information to govern themselves. It attempts to contribute not just to making sense of Taiwan, but also, more broadly, to the theoretical understanding of democratic theory in general.

1. The literature on presidential approval

Empirical studies on the American presidency have long concluded that the state of the economy is an important factor in presidential approval (Clarke, Rapkin, and Stewart, 1994; Kinder, 1981; Monroe, 1984; Mueller, 1970, 1973; Norpoth, 1985; Stimson, 1976). When economic conditions are good, the president gains public support. The approval rating declines if the economy deteriorates. The crushing defeat of Jimmy Carter by Ronald Reagan in 1980 and the loss of George H. W. Bush to Bill Clinton in 1992 are typical examples of this kind. Reflecting this conventional wisdom, one observer stated that “economics is the fate of politicians” and that “there can be little doubt that the economy matters for presidential popularity” (Norpoth, 1985: 167, 180). Two hypotheses regarding the citizen as evaluator have been developed in this “reward-punishment” model that may underlie the relationship between economic conditions and presidential popularity.⁵ The first hypothesis maintains that when citizens’ personal or household well-being, that is, their pocketbook, suffers they are more likely to punish the incumbent president. The question from Ronald Reagan’s 1980 presidential debate, “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” has been cited as a typical appeal to voters’ personal economic conditions (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007).⁶ An alternative argument to the pocketbook hypothesis is that rather than focusing on personal finances, the public tends to emphasize the economic well-being of the nation. The so-called sociotropic hypothesis thus maintains that it is the state of national economy that plays a central role in the minds of citizens as evaluators. Presidential approval rises as the public perceives a healthy national economy, and the rating declines when the overall economic prospect appears to be gloomy.

Citizens’ assessments of presidential performance in areas other than economy has also attracted scholarly attention. It maintains that the public is mindful of whether the incumbent has the capacity to get the job done in an effective way. In this context, the

international dimension has been added to the analysis of presidential approval. In an era of globalization, foreign policy and domestic agenda are not entirely independent of each other, and frequently the calculus of decision-making in one domain bears important implications for the other, especially the economy. Citing the substantial literature on the effects of “internationalization,” Burden and Mughan (2003) have shown that foreign trade and various international events have important implications for citizens’ reactions to those who govern them in democratic polities. Because modern presidents have a tendency to promise economic benefits from global economic integration, they are held accountable for these promises. Similarly, some observers note that public attitudes about foreign affairs are consequential in presidential elections as “the candidates are waltzing before a reasonably alert audience.” When given a choice, “the public votes for the candidate who waltzes best” (Aldrich et al., 1989: 136). Presidential approval ratings depend just as much on the handling of foreign affairs as they do on the management of the economy. Thus, presidential performance in areas other than the economy, especially in the area of foreign affairs, which may bear both political and economic consequences, are said to affect approval rating (Aldrich et al., 1989; Burden and Mughan, 2003; Marra et al., 1990; McAvoy, 2006; Nickelsburg and Norpoth, 2000).

In addition to presidential performance, the character and integrity of the person in office have also attracted scholarly attention. V. O. Key’s insight on “the role of [a president’s] personality” (1966: 56) provides an intellectual origin of this inquiry. Using Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the thirty-second president of the United States, as an example, Key stated that “his personal qualities may have intensified both hatred and love for him. And the popular image of Roosevelt enabled many persons to support or to oppose him without detailed knowledge of what policies he was for or against; they could accurately regard him as for or against their kind of people” (1966: 56). Later developed in the literature on the relations between character assessment and vote choice (e.g., Kinder, 1986; McCurley and Mondak, 1995; Sullivan et al., 1990), three reasons have been provided to justify the importance of character in the public’s assessment of politicians. First, seeking for and digesting political information is a costly endeavor, which not everyone has the time or ability to engage in. The assessment of presidential character offers the public a useful shortcut without constantly looking for otherwise costly information. Second, judgment of character also serves an instrumental function because it provides a clue as to how the president will run the country. Third, since the presidency usually is the principal position in the government, it has important symbolic meaning and sets public standards for all political behavior (Greene, 2001; Kinder, 1986). Presidential character thus is likely to play an important role in citizens’ evaluation of presidents (McCurley and Mondak, 1995: 865).

Finally, empirical research has demonstrated that political attitude and behavior are affected by contextual factors. Rather than treating citizens as isolated beings, this literature maintains that the circumstances in which individuals are placed are consequential to their decision-making. Through interpersonal communications or personal experience and observation that occur on a daily basis, the public may obtain information in places where they live or work. Ordinary citizens may also be influenced by the distribution of political preferences locally in the form of electoral support for a candidate or a political party. They may be drawn to a given perspective and form a position toward that viewpoint as a result. When individuals are making vote choices or deciding whether to support the incumbent government, they are likely to take cues from their local context and act accordingly (Burbank, 1995; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1987; Johnson et al., 2002; Johnston et al., 2000, 2007; Marsh, 2002). The analysis is thus “built on an

⁴ Ma has been characterized as a “9% president” by Taiwanese media and members of the opposition Democratic Progressive Party. See “Editorial: KMT Distances Itself from Ma” *Liberty Times*, February 20, 2014. <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2014/02/20/2003583910> (January 20, 2015).

⁵ For a concise discussion of the “reward-punishment” model, see Lewis-Beck (1988) and Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2007).

⁶ For the full text of the October 28, 1980, presidential debate between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, see the website of the Commission on Presidential Debates at <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-28-1980-debate-transcript> (January 20, 2015).

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