

Unilateral Action and Presidential Accountability

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How do constituents respond to the president's policy decisions? Theories of democratic accountability posit that voters elect officeholders to advance their policy preferences and punish them for failing to do so. We investigate the accountability mechanism in the context of presidential unilateral action. Data from the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study provide evidence of issue-based presidential accountability, as presidential approval ratings are consistently associated with respondents' evaluations of policies achieved through unilateral action. These findings persist when accounting for respondents' partisan and ideological congruence with the president and across model specifications and measurement strategies. Our evidence indicates that presidents are held accountable for unilateral directives and, in the aggregate, suggests a constraint on presidential action.

Keywords: public opinion, unilateral action, accountability

Modern political science has both celebrated and lamented the emergence of the plebiscitary presidency. On the one hand, echoing Progressives' articulation of the theory of presidential representation more than a century ago (Ford 1898; Wilson 1908), its celebrants argue that the presidency is better suited for governance given the tendency of Congress toward gridlock and parochialism (Howell and Moe 2016; Moe and Howell 1999; Posner and Vermeule 2011). By forging relationships directly with the public and occupying a more central role in American governance, the democratization of the presidency may enable the public to better select presidents who share its values and political beliefs. An alternative view expresses concern that the constitutional power of

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the office is insufficient to meet the public's demands of it (Lowi 1986), which leads presidents to seek extraconstitutional means of responding to their public constituencies (Ackerman 2010; Howell 2013). These incentives, in turn, are argued to render presidents all but unaccountable for the means through which they exercise and expand their powers (Schlesinger 1973).

In this article, we study how constituents respond to the policies presidents achieve through unilateral power. Theories of democratic representation posit that voters penalize officeholders who advance policies they oppose and reward officeholders who advance policies they support. Through this accountability mechanism, elections enable voters to select politicians who share their political views and help ensure some level of political responsiveness (e.g., Fearon 1999; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995). We focus particularly on whether evaluations of the president reflect voters' assessments of the policies implemented through direct presidential action. Identifying the nature of this relationship is a critical component of evaluating whether presidents have the incentives to provide substantive representation.

Despite growing scholarly interest in presidential unilateral power, existing research provides little evidence about whether, and to what degree, voters hold presidents accountable for its use. An impressive volume of scholarship studies the predictors of unilateral action (e.g., Bolton and Thrower 2016; Chiou and Rothenberg 2017; Christenson and Kriner 2019; Howell 2003; Kaufman and Rogowski 2017; Lowande 2014; Mayer 2001; Rogowski 2019), yet considerably fewer works examine how the public evaluates presidential directives. While an emerging literature shows that the public holds mostly negative views toward unilateral power (Christenson and Kriner 2017a; Reeves and Rogowski 2015; 2016; 2019a) and reacts negatively toward its use (Christenson and Kriner 2017b; Lowande and Gray 2017; Reeves and Rogowski 2018; 2019b), this scholarship generally does not study whether presidential action is evaluated on the basis of issue congruence. This omission is surprising given the relatively extensive research on issue accountability in studies of legislatures (Ansolabehere and Jones 2010; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002) and courts (Ansolabehere and White 2018; Bartels and Johnston 2013; Christenson and Glick 2015), the role of issues in presidential vote choice (Jessee 2009; 2010), and the extent to which presidential evaluations are responsive to outcomes rather than issues, such as economic conditions and wartime casualties (e.g., Abramowitz, Lanoue, and Ramesh 1988; Erikson 1989; Karol and Miguel 2007; Kriner 2006; Mueller 1973).¹

We evaluate presidential issue accountability with a nationally representative sample of nearly sixty thousand Americans. Using data from the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, we study the public's evaluations of nine salient unilateral actions from the first two years of the Trump administration. The results provide strong evidence of issue-based presidential accountability, as presidential approval ratings are consistently associated with respondents' evaluations of policies achieved through unilateral action.

1. Our focus in this article is on issue representation. We do not take a normative view about the relative merits of competence versus accountability (see Alt, Bueno de Mesquita, and Rose 2011). However, we acknowledge the importance for future research of distinguishing how voters respond to various aspects of presidential performance and characterizing how those responses shape incentives for presidential behavior.

These findings persist when accounting for respondents' partisan and ideological congruence with the president and across a wide range of model specifications and measurement strategies. Additional analyses suggest that this accountability mechanism extends to voter evaluations of the presidents' copartisans seeking other offices. Our evidence suggests that the public evaluates unilateral action based on the substantive issues addressed through its use and points to a potential political constraint on presidential power.

Representation, Accountability, and the Presidency

For more than a century, proponents of executive power have advanced the theory of presidential representation. According to this perspective, because presidents are the only officials elected to represent the entire nation, they are uniquely well positioned to take action in service of public opinion and to advance the national interest (Ford 1898; Howell 2013; Wilson 1908). The theory of presidential representation has been deployed in support of institutional arrangements that shift power to the presidency from the other branches, particularly Congress (see, e.g., Dearborn 2019; Howell and Moe 2016). Given the preeminence of the president in modern American governance, scholars have sought to characterize the nature of representation provided by the president. Theoretical perspectives rooted in Downsian competition suggest that presidents have incentives to advance policies that are popular with the public writ large (e.g., Canes-Wrone, Herron, and Shotts 2001), while other scholarship focuses on the president's role as party leader and argues that the president is disproportionately responsive to partisan, rather than national, interests (e.g., Wood 2009).

As strategic political actors, presidents are responsive to political incentives, and thus the nature of presidential representation depends on the incentives the public provides for presidents' behavior. Existing scholarship presents several competing predictions about the capacity of voters to hold presidents accountable. One perspective emphasizes the limits on voters' ability to induce substantive issue-based representation from the president. According to this view, the public generally lacks sufficient policy knowledge to evaluate a specific action taken by the president (Converse 1964; Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987). Under these circumstances, voters may instead use cues and heuristics, such as party identification, to evaluate presidential behavior (e.g., Stokes and Miller 1962; Zaller 1992). As a result, the American electorate may well lack the capacity to induce substantive, issue-based representation from the president. As Brody (1991, 16) summarizes this perspective, "No well-informed observer would take seriously the proposition that a president is a slave to public opinion."

An alternative perspective emphasizes presidents' electoral incentives and their need to maintain a sufficiently high public standing. According to this view, presidents desire to win reelection (or wish for a copartisan successor to follow them) and have incentives to ensure they are popular enough to do so. Canes-Wrone, Herron, and Shotts (2001) develop a model in which presidents are conditionally responsive to public opinion: while presidents with relatively low or relatively high approval ratings have little incentive to take actions that are consistent with public opinion, presidents with middling approval

ratings have strong incentives to respond to public opinion. The core assumption of this model, therefore, is that voters evaluate presidents based on the substantive policies they advance. While research has found evidence of issue-based accountability in constituent evaluations of members of Congress (e.g., Ansolabehere and Jones 2010) and has shown that presidential vote choice is responsive to the ideological positions endorsed by the candidates (e.g., Jesse 2009; 2010), to date it remains largely unclear whether voters apply similar standards when evaluating presidential performance.

Public Response to Unilateral Action

Unilateral action is a particularly appealing context in which to study presidential accountability because of the clear attribution of unilateral directives to presidents. While presidents routinely express their support for or opposition to legislation pending in Congress, the president plays no formal role in shaping the content of legislative initiatives. Moreover, although the media, political observers, and presidents themselves frequently link the state of the American economy to presidential action, the effect of a particular presidential administration on economic outcomes is murky at best. Because presidents cannot sidestep responsibility for unilateral directives they issued, and cannot claim credit for unilateral directives they did not issue, we study the accountability mechanism in a context in which the clarity of responsibility is especially high.

Somewhat surprisingly, existing scholarship has been mostly silent on investigating how public opinion responds to the use of unilateral power. As Lowande (2014, 729) summarizes this research, “No consensus exists on the role of public opinion in unilateral action.” While research on presidents’ use of unilateral directives has included presidential approval ratings as a predictor (Christenson and Kriner 2019; Deering and Maltzman 1999; Fine and Warber 2012; Krause and Cohen 1997; Mayer 1999; Mayer and Price 2002), this scholarship has generally not considered how the public reacts to the policies created through unilateral action. A key exception concerns recent literature that studies public attitudes toward unilateral power and attempts to distinguish how citizens evaluate policy outcomes on the basis of how they were fashioned (e.g., Christenson and Kriner 2017a; 2017b; Lowande and Gray 2017; Reeves and Rogowski 2015; 2016; 2018). The findings from several of these studies suggest that the public evaluates presidents based on the substantive content of their unilateral directives (e.g., Christenson and Kriner 2017a; Reeves and Rogowski 2018), but this association is not directly tested.

Evidence from other domains, however, suggests that presidents are held accountable for a wide range of behaviors and outcomes. For example, aggregate presidential election outcomes and individual-level vote choices are strongly associated with the state of the economy (e.g., Erikson 1989; Fiorina 1978); an economy performing well increases support for the incumbent president (or his copartisan successor), whereas a poor economy decreases support. Midterm congressional elections provide a similar opportunity for voters to evaluate the president’s performance; the state of the economy is associated with the electoral success of the president’s party (Tuft 1975). Presidents also appear to be held accountable for military conflicts; not only did U.S. involvement in Korea

and Vietnam sink the reelection ambitions of Presidents Harry Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson, respectively, but approval ratings and the electoral success of the president and his copartisans also tended to decline as casualties mounted (Karol and Miguel 2007; Mueller 1973). Other research shows that presidents are held accountable for the provision of federal program spending (Kriner and Reeves 2012) and federal assistance following natural disasters (Gasper and Reeves 2011). Presidential evaluations also appear to respond to the ideological content of the president's public rhetoric, as Wood (2009, Chapter 6) shows that presidential approval ratings increase as presidents express positions that more closely align with the public's. The results from this literature suggest that the accountability mechanism may be relatively strong between the public and the president, yet it is unclear from this scholarship whether accountability extends to the substantive content of presidential policies.

We test the proposition that constituents hold the president accountable for the substantive policies they create through unilateral power. Specifically, we evaluate whether approval of the president's job performance reflects the public's issue-based agreement with policies created by the president, independent of constituents' own partisanship and ideological orientation vis-à-vis the president. The extent to which we find support for this hypothesis would provide evidence that the public is capable of holding the president accountable for the use of unilateral action and could suggest that public opinion may create sufficient incentives for presidents to represent the policy interests of a national constituency.

Data and Measures

We assess constituents' evaluations of direct presidential action using data from the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The CCES was conducted as a two-wave panel, with the preelection survey conducted in October 2018 and the postelection survey administered in November 2018, after election day. The survey was conducted over the internet with a stratified sample by state and was designed to be representative of the national population. The design of our study parallels research that has studied constituent evaluations of legislative roll-call voting patterns (e.g., Ansolabehere and Jones 2010). Respondents were asked to evaluate a series of salient policy actions implemented by President Donald Trump and his administration in 2017 and 2018.

Our design satisfies the two key conditions of theories of accountability: that constituents have preferences regarding the policies enacted by officeholders and that they are aware of officeholders' records on those issues. First, each of the actions about which we elicited respondents' opinions received significant media attention, therefore meeting the criterion for "significant" unilateral action established in related scholarship (Chiou and Rothenberg 2017; Howell 2003). Just as almost all survey respondents are able to offer their views on major legislative initiatives (Ansolabehere and Jones 2010), we expect that Americans are most likely to hold preferences on highly salient instances of presidential action. Second, a key distinction between presidential unilateral power and legislative voting behavior is the clarity of responsibility. While constituents may not always know

how their legislator voted on a particular congressional initiative, the president cannot evade responsibility for outcomes that only he or she can bring about. Because respondents were informed that the Trump administration enacted the policies about which they were asked, respondents were aware of the president's position on these issues and could attribute policy outcomes to presidential action.²

Table 1 describes the presidential actions that were included on the CCES and respondents' evaluations of them. The first four items were asked in the preelection wave, and the remaining five items were asked in the postelection wave. Each battery of items was preceded by the following prompt: "President Trump has issued many orders over the first year of his presidency. Do you support or oppose each of the following decisions?" Not only do the nine items represent many of the highest-profile actions announced by the Trump administration, but they also compose a relatively comprehensive set of salient issue areas, including foreign policy, environmental issues, trade, immigration, cultural issues, and government regulation.

The response patterns documented in Table 1 provide evidence to suggest that Americans evaluate presidential actions based on their issue-based agreement with them. Each column shows aggregate public support for each unilateral action along with support among Democrats, Republicans, and independents, respectively.³ Aggregate levels of support ranged from 34.1% for the ban on transgender military service to 60.1% support for moving the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Just as Americans' policy preferences tend to fall along a spectrum, so too do their evaluations of presidential initiatives.

We also find considerable variation across parties. Among Democrats, only 8.8% supported the transgender military ban while 31.4% supported relocating the American embassy in Israel. Evaluations among Republicans varied in similar ways, with 60.1% supporting the transgender military ban and 89.3% supporting the embassy relocation. While partisans reported predictably divergent views of Trump's presidential actions, the magnitudes of these differences also varied. The difference in partisans' evaluations of repealing the Clean Power Plan rules was about 44 percentage points, as 17.2% of Democrats supported this action compared with 60.9% of Republicans. The partisan difference was nearly 1.5 times as large in evaluations of Trump's action to withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement, for which 78.7% of Republicans yet only 11.9% of Democrats expressed support. On each item, independents reported evaluations that fell in between Democrats' and Republicans'. On no item other than the relocation of the embassy in Israel, however, did a majority of independents express

2. Note, however, that this setup examines the relationship between presidential action and public opinion in circumstances in which the public knows what policies presidents have enacted. We do not claim, however, that the public routinely follows and knows the details about presidential action; instead, these beliefs are likely influenced by some combination of the public's own political views and attentiveness, media consumption, and other political figures. Therefore, our analysis does not identify the effect of presidential action on public opinion for actions about which the public does not know.

3. We report results from all respondents who are included in our analyses below and for whom data on key covariates are not missing. Data were weighted to be representative of national population parameters. Partisan classifications are made using the 3-point party identification scale, such that leaners are characterized as independents.

TABLE 1
Summary Statistics: Support for Presidential Orders

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Question text</i>	<i>Support (All)</i>	<i>Support (Dem)</i>	<i>Support (Rep)</i>	<i>Support (Ind)</i>
Israel	Recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.	60.1	31.4	89.3	61.0
Keystone	Allow the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline.	52.9	22.2	84.8	53.1
Paris	Withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement.	44.9	11.9	78.7	45.8
TPP	Withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, a free-trade agreement that included the U.S., Japan, Australia, Vietnam, Canada, Chile, and others.	44.9	15.3	72.9	48.2
Emissions	Repeal the Clean Power Plan rules, which calls for power plants to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 32% by 2030.	38.4	17.2	60.9	37.9
Iran	Withdraw the United States from the Iran Nuclear Accord and reimpose sanctions on Iran.	49.4	21.5	77.4	50.6
Immigrants	Ban immigrants from Iran, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, and Libya from coming to the United States for 90 days. Permanently prohibits Syrian refugees from entering the country.	47.3	18.0	77.4	47.9
Transgender	Ban transgender people from serving in the military.	34.1	8.8	60.1	34.6
Regulations	Requires that with each new regulation enacted, two must be cut. Any new costs created by new regulations must be matched with eliminations.	44.6	18.1	70.2	46.8

support, and on each of them independents reported views that were more similar to Democrats' evaluations than they were to Republicans'. Even in an era of heightened polarization, in which political opinions strongly diverge against partisan lines, Republicans do not express unanimous support for directives issued by a Republican president, nor do Democrats uniformly oppose them. While partisanship is undeniably an important factor in how the public evaluates presidential behavior, Americans do not blindly assess unilateral directives without considering their specific policy content.

We use responses to the items in Table 1 to evaluate how Americans respond to presidential action. If the accountability mechanism operates according to classic theory, Americans must not only possess evaluations of presidential action but must also apply those views when evaluating the president. Our key independent variable, *Issue agreement*, is the share of presidential actions for which a respondent expressed support; it ranges between zero and one. We denominate the measure of this variable by the fraction of actions for which respondents reported a response. Overall, respondents agreed with an average of 50% of Trump's actions. The average values of *Issue agreement* were 21% among Democrats, 80% among Republicans, and 52% among independents. Below, we report results using alternative measurement strategies in which we focus only on respondents who answered each of the nine questions as well as distinguishing issue agreement for each of the nine presidential actions.⁴

Our primary dependent variable is an indicator for respondents' evaluations of the president's job performance, *Presidential approval*. This question is evaluated using responses to the question, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [President Trump] is doing [his] job?" The question was originally asked along a 4-point scale; for simplicity we collapse it to a binary indicator of approval, but below we report results when using the full point scale. Overall, 42% of respondents approved of Trump's performance as president, which varied from 7% among Democrats to 89% among Republicans and 59% among independents.

Given the binary nature of our dependent variable, we examine issue accountability using logistic regression to regress *Presidential approval* on *Issue agreement*. In doing so, we also estimate models that account for a number of other factors affecting evaluations of the president and which might serve as potential confounders, thus biasing the estimates of the relationship between *Presidential approval* and *Issue agreement*. In our main models, we account for *Partisanship* by including a variable that measures respondents' partisanship along a 7-point scale, ranging from "Strong Democrat" (1) to "Strong Republican" (7). As we discuss below, we estimate additional models distinguishing each partisan group. We also account for respondents' own ideologies, as more conservative (liberal) respondents are both more likely to approve of more conservative (liberal) presidential actions and may also be more (less) likely to approve of a sitting Republican president. We measure *Ideology* using respondents' self-placements on an ideological scale that ranges from "Very liberal" (1) to "Very conservative" (7). For similar reasons, we also control for respondents' perceived ideological distance from President Trump. Along with eliciting respondents'

4. Among respondents who provided answers to all nine questions ($n = 41,958$), the average level of agreement was 51%.

self-placements, the CCES also asked respondents to place Trump along the same 7-point scale. We use the absolute value of the difference between these measures, *Ideological distance*, to characterize respondents' general perceptions of the ideological congruence between themselves and the president. By including these measures, we account for general perceptions of President Trump that may not be related to respondents' evaluations of specific presidential actions but whose exclusion could nonetheless bias estimates of *Issue agreement*. With this full specification, our estimates of the relationship between *Presidential approval* and *Issue agreement* account for the other dominant factors that are likely to explain how individuals evaluate both presidential activity and the president's job performance. Finally, we use survey weights in all analyses.

Before proceeding, we wish to be clear about the limitations of our empirical strategy and their relationship with how we interpret our results. We do not have independent measures of respondents' issue positions on the specific policies implemented by Trump via unilateral action, nor do we have measures of respondents' knowledge about these policies beyond the short description provided to them on the CCES questionnaire. It is possible, therefore, when respondents evaluated each of the unilateral directives they projected their evaluation of Trump onto those items. If this were to be the case, then our dependent variable could be hopelessly intertwined with our main independent variable and possibly induce a strong, yet spurious, positive relationship between them. Though we cannot dispositive rule out this possibility, several components of our analysis attempt to reduce its importance. First, as Table 1 shows, respondents' evaluations of presidential directives vary across items. These patterns suggest that respondents distinguished their evaluations based on their support for the policies contained in the directives rather than simply reporting their attitudes toward Trump. Second, our regression models control for some of the other main factors theorized to influence presidential approval, including partisanship, ideological self-identification, and perceptions of ideological congruence with the president. To the extent the coefficients for *Issue agreement* are positive and statistically significant, this would provide evidence that evaluations of presidential actions have an independent association with evaluations of the president above and beyond the importance of these other factors.

Results

Table 2 shows the results from our analyses. The columns on the left present results for respondents who answered at least one of the questions on presidential action while the columns on the right show results for respondents who answered each of the nine questions. For both sets of respondents, we estimated a minimally specified model, which is a bivariate regression of *Presidential approval* on *Issue agreement*, as well as a fully specified model including the additional controls for *Partisanship*, *Ideology*, and *Ideological distance*.

The results are consistent across samples of respondents and model specifications. Across each model, *Issue agreement* is positive and statistically significant, indicating that respondents who provide more positive evaluations of the president's unilateral directives are also more likely to report approving of the president's job performance. Based on the coefficients from column (4), we estimate that an 11 percentage point increase in *Issue*

TABLE 2
Presidential Approval and Evaluations of Unilateral Action

	<i>Answered ≥ 1 question</i>		<i>Answered all questions</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Executive order agreement	7.632* (0.103)	5.042* (0.122)	8.775* (0.111)	6.155* (0.135)
Partisanship (+ = Republican)		0.520* (0.019)		0.536* (0.022)
Ideology (+ = conservative)		0.231* (0.029)		0.157* (0.034)
Ideological distance		-0.484* (0.025)		-0.468* (0.029)
(Intercept)	-3.913* (0.060)	-4.749* (0.151)	-4.533* (0.066)	-5.122* (0.186)
Observations	47,927	47,927	41,560	41,560

Note: Dependent variable is a binary measure of presidential approval. Estimates are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests).

agreement, which corresponds to supporting one additional presidential action over the mean value of this variable (0.50), is associated with a 16 percentage point increase in the probability that a respondent approves of the president's job performance.

The coefficient estimates for the other covariates are as we might expect. The coefficient for *Partisanship* is positive and statistically significant, indicating that the probability of approving of the president's job performance increases among respondents who identify as more Republican. *Ideology* is also positive and statistically significant, showing that more conservative respondents are more likely to approve of the president. And finally, *Ideological distance* is negative and statistically significant, indicating that respondents who perceive the president as more ideologically distant from their own political views are less likely to approve of his job performance.

As mentioned above, the results shown in Table 2 are robust to a variety of other measurement choices and modeling strategies. First, we find substantively identical patterns when modeling the dependent variable as a 4-point scale using ordered logit.⁵ Second, our results are robust to the inclusion of all respondents in the data rather than only those for whom all covariates were available.⁶

Table 3 presents results when estimating fully specified models separately for respondents who identify as Democrats, Republicans, and independents. Perhaps surprisingly, given the preeminence of partisanship in analyses of contemporary American politics, the results indicate that respondents' issue agreement with the president's unilateral actions are strongly and significantly associated with evaluations of the president's job performance among each partisan group. However, the magnitudes of the associations vary across partisan groups. An 11 percentage point increase in *Issue agreement* relative to the mean value of this variable increased the probability of approval by 4 percentage points among

5. See Table 1 in the supporting information.

6. See Table 2 in the supporting information.

TABLE 3
Presidential Approval and Evaluations of Unilateral Action by Party

	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Republicans</i>	<i>Independents</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Executive order agreement	4.300* (0.218)	4.935* (0.219)	5.210* (0.205)
Partisanship (+ = Republican)	0.450* (0.113)	0.915* (0.124)	1.051* (0.077)
Ideology (+ = conservative)	0.196* (0.047)	0.212* (0.053)	0.221* (0.049)
Ideological distance (Intercept)	-0.481* (0.039)	-0.514* (0.050)	-0.458* (0.044)
	-3.976* (0.329)	-7.081* (0.743)	-7.112* (0.352)
Observations	17,309	14,797	15,821

Note: Dependent variable is a binary measure of presidential approval. Estimates are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

**p* < .05 (two-tailed tests).

TABLE 4
Presidential Approval and Evaluations of Unilateral Action: Variation by Issue

	<i>All</i>	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Republicans</i>	<i>Independents</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Emissions	0.488* (0.072)	0.263* (0.134)	0.754* (0.128)	0.465* (0.117)
Iran	0.477* (0.082)	0.400* (0.154)	0.214 (0.143)	0.645* (0.132)
Immigration	1.197* (0.078)	0.933* (0.158)	1.236* (0.126)	1.328* (0.126)
Transgender	0.618* (0.076)	0.654* (0.150)	0.543* (0.128)	0.578* (0.121)
Regulations	0.281* (0.075)	0.355* (0.141)	0.201 (0.137)	0.258* (0.117)
Israel	0.985* (0.083)	0.868* (0.145)	1.045* (0.159)	0.957* (0.125)
Keystone	0.556* (0.074)	0.716* (0.135)	0.217 (0.130)	0.606* (0.121)
Paris	0.839* (0.085)	0.527* (0.163)	0.961* (0.160)	0.840* (0.133)
TPP	0.716* (0.080)	0.629* (0.153)	0.797* (0.155)	0.749* (0.120)
Partisanship (+ = Republican)	0.532* (0.022)	0.495* (0.132)	0.938* (0.127)	1.146* (0.080)
Ideology (+ = conservative)	0.152* (0.033)	0.112 (0.062)	0.145* (0.061)	0.137* (0.050)
Ideological distance (Intercept)	-0.470* (0.029)	-0.460* (0.050)	-0.518* (0.53)	-0.448* (0.046)
	-5.130* (0.195)	-4.359* (0.457)	-7.424* (0.815)	-7.900* (0.394)
Observations	41,560	14,946	13,023	13,591

Note: Dependent variable is a binary measure of presidential approval. Estimates are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

**p* < .05 (two-tailed tests).

Democrats, 4 percentage points among Republicans, and 14 percentage points among independents. Even among respondents whose partisan identities are strongly associated with attitudes (either positive or negative) toward President Trump, presidential approval is responsive to their agreement with Trump’s presidential actions. Absent a partisan identity, the relationship is even stronger in magnitude among political independents.

Table 4 presents results when distinguishing the relationship between presidential approval and constituents’ evaluations of each of the nine unilateral actions. The results

in column (1) show that respondents' evaluations of *each* of the nine directives are significantly associated with presidential approval. The coefficients for each unilateral action are positive and statistically distinguishable from zero. However, their magnitudes vary in substantively interesting ways. Overall, respondents' evaluations of Trump's so-called "travel ban" directive were mostly strongly predictive of their approval of Trump. This relationship is two to three times as strong as it is for Trump's actions on regulations and revocation of the Iran deal and emissions standards.

Columns (2) through (4) distinguish the results for Democrats, Republicans, and independents, respectively. The patterns are substantively similar, as all of the coefficient estimates are positively signed and the vast majority of them are statistically significant. Among Democrats, the magnitude of the association with presidential approval was largest among the immigration and Israel directives and smallest with the emissions and regulations directives. Similarly, among Republican identifiers, the magnitude of the relationship between unilateral action and presidential approval was largest for the immigration and Israel directives. Interestingly, however, while all of them are positively signed, none of the coefficients for the Iran, regulations, or Keystone directives were statistically significant. Finally, presidential approval among independents was most strongly predicted by evaluations of the immigration directive and most weakly predicted by evaluations of the regulations directive.

The results presented above provide consistent evidence that public evaluations of the president are responsive to the policies presidents have enacted. As we argued, presidents cannot shy away from the policies they advance through unilateral action, as they have a particularly high degree of "traceability" (Arnold 1990). Our results show that voters react to the policy content of these directives and express a greater level of approval for the president when they are more supportive of the policies presidents advance through unilateral means. Moreover, the results in Table 4 suggest that the accountability mechanism may be stronger for some directives than others, perhaps reflecting differences in political salience and/or the nature of the issue area.

Presidential Accountability in Congressional Elections

Finally, we explore the political implications of the patterns shown above. Presidential politics often looms large in congressional elections, both by affecting candidate entry decisions (Jacobson 1989; Lublin 1994) and serving as a referendum on the president's management of the country (Erikson 1988; Tufte 1975). Moreover, recent research has documented the increasing nationalization of American politics, particularly the connection between Americans' evaluations of the president and their choices in other electoral contexts not involving the president (Hopkins 2018; Rogers 2016; Sances 2017). Building upon this research, we examine whether respondents' evaluations of presidential action are associated with their vote choices in the 2018 midterm congressional elections.

Table 5 displays the results of regressions of vote choice in the 2018 House and Senate elections on their evaluations of President Trump's unilateral actions. The dependent

TABLE 5
Evaluations of Unilateral Action and Vote Choice in Congressional Elections

	<i>Senate vote choice</i>		<i>House vote choice</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Executive order agreement	7.204* (0.105)	4.179* (0.138)	7.580* (0.097)	4.228* (0.133)
Partisanship (+ = Republican)		0.550* (0.022)		0.693* (0.021)
Ideology (+ = conservative)		0.272* (0.030)		0.326* (0.029)
Ideological distance		-0.249* (0.028)		-0.238* (0.026)
(Intercept)	-4.278* (0.063)	-5.823* (0.161)	-4.036* (0.054)	-6.137* (0.161)
Observations	23,645	23,645	30,974	30,974

Note: Dependent variable is a binary measure of presidential approval. Estimates are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests).

variable is a binary indicator for whether respondents reported voting for the Republican candidate in the respective election. We include only respondents who reported voting in the 2018 elections. Across all four regressions, the coefficients for *Issue agreement* are positive and statistically significant, indicating an association between approving of Trump's executive actions and the probability of supporting his copartisan candidates in House and Senate elections. An 11 percentage point increase in issue agreement, which corresponds to supporting one additional presidential action over the mean value of this variable (0.50), is associated with a 12 percentage point increase in the probability of voting for Republican House candidates and a 10 percentage point increase in the probability of voting for Republican Senate candidates.

The results in Table 5 suggest that presidential policy making has important consequences not only for a president's own standing with the American people, but also for his copartisans' electoral fates. Respondents who are more supportive of the president's unilateral actions are more likely to support the president and the president's copartisans in elections for other offices. These findings are suggestive of the interdependence between presidents and their parties in contemporary American politics. Not only does the accountability mechanism work through Americans' evaluations of presidents, but voters may also hold the president's party accountable for actions taken by the president.

Conclusion

The growth and centralization of presidential power over the last century, and particularly in recent years, has led many observers to express concern about its implications for democracy. Chiefly, these worries center on the nature of presidential accountability.

For instance, in 2014, Republican Speaker John Boehner justified taking legal action against President Barack Obama because “the President has circumvented the American people and their elected representatives through executive action ... as if daring the American people to stop him.”⁷ During the 2016 presidential election campaign, Republican Senator Mike Lee criticized both major-party candidates for endorsing the exercise of executive power and argued for Congress to reclaim its role in American governance: “That’s why the Founders made Congress so powerful in the first place: to protect the American people from exactly the kind of arbitrary, unaccountable government-without-consent that Congress now for its own selfish reasons enables the executive branch to practice.”⁸

The results shown in this article provide evidence that the American public may provide a form of political accountability on the president’s exercise of power. Though political scientists, legal scholars, and historians have expressed concern that presidents wield unilateral authority without accountability to the public (e.g., Ackerman 2010; Rudalevige 2005; Schlesinger 1973), our evidence suggests that the public does in fact judge presidents based on their substantive agreement with their unilateral initiatives. In this respect, presidents do not escape public scrutiny for their behavior any more than legislators can hope to avoid the political backlash that often accompanies controversial votes. Our findings therefore present some empirical evidence in support of the argument advanced by Posner and Vermeule (2011), who argue that public opinion can constrain presidential behavior even when formal and legal checks on presidential power are absent. Moreover, our results imply that the public can and does meaningfully distinguish actions taken by the president based on their substantive agreement with them and uses their assessments of these actions to evaluate the president. At minimum, and consistent with Rogowski (2019), the findings suggest that the incentives exist for the president to consider public opinion before taking action and that these incentives may produce patterns of presidential representation envisioned by the Progressives.

Finally, our results have several important limitations and raise questions for future scholarship. First, our results are firmly in the camp of observational research. We cannot randomly assign unilateral actions, or voters, to presidents; as such, our research design lacks an exogenous source of variation that would allow us to credibly estimate the effect of substantive agreement with unilateral activity on presidential evaluations. While our chosen approach has the benefit of querying Americans on actual presidential directives, additional experimental research may be useful for providing better causal identification. Second, and relatedly, all unilateral directives are not created equal; while some are relatively salient, as were those in our study, others are much less salient and do not receive much media attention. Additional research is necessary to study what Americans know about actions taken by the president and the degree to which these actions produce similar effects. Third, and finally, while our study linked unilateral action to presidential approval ratings and vote choice in congressional elections, the aggregate

7. See <https://www.cnn.com/2014/07/06/opinion/boehner-obama-lawsuit/index.html>.

8. See <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2016/07/11/legislative-judicial-branch-powers-warped/>.

electoral implications of these findings are unclear by design. Future research would be useful for understanding how dissatisfaction with presidential activities may translate into decreased electoral success.

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