

Perception matters: How fear about crime impacts presidential approval

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Credit: Brett Sayles from Pexels

Only one in three Americans, or 36%, approve of President Joe Biden's handling of crime, according to a December 2021 poll by ABC News and Ipsos. An ABC News story tied the low approval to "historic jumps"

in the nation's murder rates. However, new research from Washington University in St. Louis suggests that other less objective factors may be contributing to Biden's low approval rating.

The research, published in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, offers a more nuanced understanding of how anxiety about [crime](#), race and the [president](#)'s political party influence whether Americans hold presidents accountable for crime.

Using Gallup survey data from 2000-2019 spanning across four presidential administrations—Clinton, Bush, Obama and Trump—Washington University researchers found that objective measures of state and local crime did not influence presidential approval, which is consistent with previous work in other disciplines.

However, they did find evidence that anxiety about crime—or one's belief that crime has gotten worse in the U.S.—is a significant predictor of presidential approval. Individuals who were worried about crime in their communities were more likely to punish presidents for it. The data also showed that crime anxiety is associated with socioeconomic and demographic characteristics as well as past victimization. White people, those with higher levels of education and individuals with higher incomes were less likely to be worried about crime.

This penalty is not applied evenly, though. The data showed that white and Black respondents hold different parties accountable for crime, which researchers labeled "racially conditioned issue ownership." In particular:

Black respondents who are anxious about crime punish Republican presidents (Bush, Trump) more harshly than Democratic presidents (Clinton, Obama). Specifically, Black respondents who are anxious about crime are 19% less likely to approve of Republican presidents.

Black respondents reported no significant difference in approval for Democratic presidents, though.

White respondents who are anxious about crime do the opposite—punishing Democratic presidents more than Republican presidents. White respondents were 14% less likely to approve of Democratic presidents if they were anxious about crime. But they did not translate that anxiety into disapproval of Republican presidents.

"While whites may view Republican promises of 'law and order' and 'tough-on crime' policies as reassuring, Black Americans take a different view," said Andrew Reeves, professor of political science in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis and incoming director of the Weidenbaum Center on the Economy, Government, and Public Policy.

"For Black Americans, this policy approach may evoke feelings of persecution, threats to civil rights and biased treatment by the criminal justice system. Blacks may be more likely to link concern over crime to failed or misguided policies by Republican presidents."

Benjamin Noble, a political science Ph.D. student at Washington University, and Steven Webster, assistant professor of political science at Indiana University, co-authored the research with Reeves.

Issue ownership, presidential approval

U.S. presidents are held accountable for a number of issues, including the economy, natural disasters, war and crime. Ownership of an issue shields presidents from punishment, said Reeves, whose research focuses on political accountability and public policy in the United States.

When presidents demonstrate their ownership of an issue—through

rhetoric and/or policy decisions—they are less likely to be punished regardless of the outcome. The opposite is also true. When the incumbent's party does not own an issue, such as crime, voters will punish the president for perceived failures in addressing the issue.

Crime is a nonpartisan issue that the majority of Americans say is a "very big problem," despite the fact that actual crime rates have halved over the last two decades, according to Noble.

Not surprisingly, U.S. presidents frequently talk about crime, take actions to address it and list crime efforts among their top accomplishments. Republicans—with their "tough on crime" policies—have long held an advantage on this issue. The data shows the story is not so simple, though.

"Like so much in American politics, race shapes perceptions of which party is superior at addressing crime," Noble said.

"Democratic solutions that are labeled 'soft' by white Americans may be seen as attempts to reform a system that has disproportionately affected communities of color by Blacks."

New way of thinking about presidential accountability

To ensure the findings were the result of true racial differences in how anxiety translates into presidential approval, the researchers reanalyzed the models to include variables that capture individuals' policy preferences about how crime should be handled, such as community investment or by increasing funding for the police and prisons. They also measured attitudes on gun laws and the death penalty. Even with these additional measures, their theory held. The data confirmed that this effect was not simply the result of partisan or racial differences in crime-related issue opinions.

Noble hopes that these findings lead other researchers to consider how issue ownership may vary by racial or other identity-based subgroups on other issues.

"Think historically racialized issues like ballot access or drug policy or gender-based issues like family leave or child care," he said.

"As the two parties continue to polarize across various identity-based cleavages, and immigration, race and crime become increasingly salient in American politics, we believe the importance of work along these lines will only increase."

More information: Benjamin S Noble et al, Crime and Presidential Accountability, *Public Opinion Quarterly* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/poq/nfab074](https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab074)

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