

Crime and Presidential Accountability: A Case of Racially Conditioned Issue Ownership

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Abstract

Americans are anxious about crime regardless of their actual exposure or risk. Given this pervasive concern, US presidents frequently talk about crime, take actions to address it, and list crime prevention efforts among their top accomplishments. We argue that presidents act this way, in part, because fear of crime translates into lowered presidential approval. However, this penalty is not applied evenly. Given the parties' stances toward crime and the criminal justice system, Whites will only punish Democratic presidents (i.e., Clinton and Obama) when they are anxious about crime, while Blacks will only punish Republican presidents (i.e., Bush and Trump). We examine twenty years of survey data and find evidence consistent with our theory. Our results suggest that the relationship between fear of crime and presidential accountability is conditioned by an individual's race and the president's party.

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Americans are anxious about crime. Although crime rates have halved over the last two decades, solid majorities continually say crime is getting worse at both the national and local level. In annual Gallup surveys from 2000 to 2018, between 60 and 74 percent of Americans expressed such a view. Between 30 and 38 percent of Americans said they were afraid to walk alone at night around the area where they lived. When it came to burglary, between 38 and 50 percent of Americans said they occasionally or frequently worried they would become a victim (Gallup n.d.). Unlike most major issues, there is no substantive partisan divide when it comes to the importance of violent crime as a problem in the United States (Egan 2013). According to a Pew Research Center survey from 2018, 47 percent of Democrats viewed violent crime as a “very big” problem compared to 49 percent of Republicans. Of the eighteen issues Pew asked about, crime exhibited the lowest partisan gap in views of whether it was a serious problem (Pew 2018). Crime remains a rare “consensus issue” (Egan 2013, 5) with broad, bipartisan agreement.

Presidents are keenly aware of the public’s anxiety toward crime. Though presidents have long focused on the issue of crime, it took on new prominence in the 1960s (Calder 1982) and especially during the Nixon Administration, where a highly-racialized version of law and order was “just about the president’s only domestic focus. It was his obsession” (Perlstein 2008, 363). Accordingly, ensuring Americans’ safety from crime is a common theme both on the presidential campaign trail and from the Oval Office. In a 1982 radio address, for instance, Ronald Reagan vowed to “make America safe again” in the wake of the “many moments of fear” brought about by a “crime epidemic” sweeping the nation (Reagan 1982). In announcing his candidacy, Bill Clinton promised to “mak[e] our cities and our streets safe from crime” (Clinton 1991). Once in office, the Clinton White House listed among its “key accomplishments” their “comprehensive anti-crime strategy,” especially as it related to the Clinton crime bill (White House, n.d.). In accepting the Republican Party’s nomination, Donald Trump said his administration’s “first task ... will be to liberate our citizens

from the crime and terrorism and lawlessness that threatens their communities.” Though policing crime is primarily within the purview of state and local authorities, Republican and Democratic presidents have long touted their efforts to protect the country, likely due to bipartisan concern about the issue. President Nixon tried to strike a balance by noting that, while “law enforcement is primarily a local responsibility . . . the public climate with regard to law is a function of national leadership” (Nixon 1968).

In this study, we consider whether and how citizens hold presidents accountable for crime. Like the economy, crime may reveal information to a citizen about the incumbent’s quality of governance or make salient a particular set of policy concerns. In an examination of twenty years’ worth of survey data from 2000 to 2019, we consider the influence of objective indicators of crime on presidential approval. At the same time, perceptions of crime may be driven by factors unrelated to objective reality; accordingly, we also consider how anxiety and fear of crime translate into presidential accountability. We focus on public support of the president because it is the most significant barometer of a president’s ability to “go public” and translate public support into political gains (Kernell 1997; Canes-Wrone and De Marchi 2002; Canes-Wrone 2006). In total, we examine whether and how citizens hold incumbent presidents accountable for local contexts, personal experiences, and individual-level anxiety toward crime.

To preview our results, we find little evidence that objective measures of state or local crime influence presidential approval. However, anxiety toward crime is a consistent predictor of presidential approval. Interrogating this result further, we find that crime-based accountability is conditional on the race of the respondent and partisanship of the incumbent president. Democratic presidents are punished only by White respondents who feel anxious about crime. Republican presidents, on the other hand, are punished only by Black respondents who feel anxious about crime. We hypothesize that racially conditioned issue ownership is at work. While Whites may view Republican presidents as effective at address-

ing perceived threats of crime, Black Americans do not share such a view. Analogously, Black Americans view Democratic presidents as most capable of handling issues pertaining to law, order, and justice; White Americans do not.

This paper proceeds as follows: first, we outline previous work examining the relationship between crime (as well as other issues) and attitudes toward public officials. We then develop a theory about the ways in which fear of crime is associated with lower levels of support for the president at the mass-level. Our theory is conditional in nature. Drawing from the literature on the racialization of issues, as well as the extensive literature on “issue ownership,” our theory argues that White Americans who are anxious about crime will punish only Democratic presidents while Black Americans will punish only Republican presidents. Next, we outline the data and modeling strategy we use to test our assumptions. We conclude with the presentation of our results and a note on the implications of our findings for public opinion and presidential accountability.

Crime, Anxiety, Race, and Presidential Accountability

Presidents are held accountable for an array of phenomena including the economy, war and peace, natural disasters, and even local sporting events and shark attacks (Alvarez and Nagler 1998; Fiorina 1981; Lewis-Beck 1985; Mutz and Mondak 1997; Gasper and Reeves 2011; Park and Reeves 2020; Kriner and Reeves 2012, 2015; Achen and Bartels 2016). Though crime is primarily a local matter addressed by state and local officials, presidents have increasingly taken a leading role on the issue. In modern times, the electorate has come to view presidents as “lonely crime fighters, measured only in how much they seem to share the community’s outrage at crime” (Simon 2006, 7–8).

Citizens may view crime as a valence issue in that they may punish an incumbent politician when they perceive crime to be getting worse. Crime may affect one’s perception of

security, which is a “basic need in humans” (Huddy, Feldman and Weber 2007). If citizens feel unsafe as they conduct their day-to-day business, they may also come to blame incumbents for this perceived state of the world.¹ Crime may be an indicator of quality of governance. An effective allocation of governmental resources for fighting crime may suggest competent elected officials. On the other hand, rampant crime may suggest inattentive politicians or ineffective policies. Several studies suggest that incumbent politicians bolster their efforts to address crime when elections are near (Levitt 1997; Kubik and Moran 2003). This evidence suggests that politicians act as if voters hold them accountable for their successes or failures in combating crime.

In addition to or in place of objective indicators, views of crime may be driven by emotion. Fear and anxiety are powerful forces governing political behavior (Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Lerner et al. 2003; Brader, Valentino and Suhay 2008; Achen and Bartels 2016) that shape patterns of news consumption, political trust, and candidate preference (Albertson and Gadarian 2015). Leveraging a series of experiments, Albertson and Gadarian (2015) show that fear and anxiety over issues as diverse as climate change and terrorism cause citizens to self-select into “threatening news” sources and adopt authoritarian positions. Individuals eschew other values in order to seek policies that will offer shelter and protection from social problems.

Despite the potential for crime to be a valence issue, regardless of how assessments originate, many studies posit that crime is an issue that is “owned” by the Republican Party. Voters believe Republicans are better able to handle the issue of crime (Petrocik 1996), and when it is salient for voters, Republican politicians are able to increase their vote share (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Boldt 2017). Accordingly, Republicans have used

¹Relatedly, several studies of terrorism argue that fear of an attack degrades support for incumbents (Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014; Kibris 2011; Aksoy 2018; Bali 2007; Berrebi and Klor 2008; Gassebner, Jong-A-Pin and Mierau 2008; Montalvo 2011). While crime lacks the political motivations of terrorism, its ability to create insecurity, anxiety, and fear is analogous.

the issue “to pillory Democrats in elections since the Nixon era” (Egan 2013, 150). In each decade from the 1970s to the 2000s, when asked which party voters trusted to deal with crime, the Republican Party saw advantages over the Democratic Party of between 4.2 and 8.5 points (Egan 2013, 66). Though higher levels of crime do not necessarily result in greater electoral support for Republicans, the GOP’s tougher rhetoric and policy follow-through has likely contributed to their advantage on this issue (Boldt 2017). As Petrocik (1996) notes, “a Democrat’s promise to attack crime by hiring more police, building more prisons, and punishing with longer sentences would too easily be trumped by greater GOP enthusiasm for such solutions.”

The Republican advantage on the issue of crime has strong racial origins. The issue of crime saw new prominence in the 1964 presidential campaign in the aftermath of the assassination of John F. Kennedy and civil unrest of the 1960s (Calder 1982). During this time, the Republican Party established a law and order approach that racialized the issue of crime (Lerman and Weaver 2013). The Nixon Administration’s linkage of crime and race was coupled with unprecedented federal forays into criminal justice policies (Weaver 2007; Lerman and Weaver 2013), which set the stage for the political dynamics around race, crime, and presidential politics today. According to Nixon advisor John Ehrlichman, the Nixon White House saw Blacks as “the enemy,” and “knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be . . . black, but by getting the public to associate . . . blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing . . . [it] heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news.”²

Given the modern origins of the issue of crime in presidential politics, it is hardly controversial that attitudes around crime and criminal justice are dramatically influenced by race (Valentino 1999; Mendelberg 1997; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Gibson and Nelson

²Dan Bauman, 2016, “Legalize It All,” *Harper’s Magazine*, <https://harpers.org/archive/2016/04/legalize-it-all/>.

2018). Valentino (1999) finds that media coverage of crime has the ability to prime latent racial attitudes among White Americans. Utilizing an experimental design in which subjects were presented with a story about crime committed by either a racial minority or a non-minority, Valentino (1999) argues that the increased salience of crime via media coverage causes Americans to alter their level of support for the president. Crucially, “crime news that explicitly identified minority suspects also boosted the impact of the president’s performance on crime as a criterion for his overall evaluation” (Valentino 1999).

Taken together, we hypothesize that racially-conditioned issue ownership links views of crime and presidential approval. We build on work that examines how issue ownership conditions or defines accountability for issues that are ostensibly valence or performance issues (Bélanger and Nadeau 2015; Park and Reeves 2020; Wright 2012; Smith 2010). Wright (2012) defines a “partisan issue...[where] voters would prefer one party’s policies over the other regardless of which party is in office,” and finds that Democratic candidates benefit from higher unemployment because the “Democratic Party ‘owns’ unemployment” (685).³ In terms of issue ownership, we posit a mechanism very similar to Bélanger and Nadeau (2015, 914), which suggests voters hold an incumbent responsible for retrospective evaluations as a function of the incumbent party’s ownership of that issue.⁴

In our formulation, ownership of the issue shields the incumbent from punishment. If a party is seen to own the issue of crime, then voters do not translate their negative evaluations of, or anxiety over, crime into punishment of the incumbent. Voters do, however, punish incumbents for negative evaluations or anxiety over crime when the incumbent’s party does not own this issue. Departing from most studies of issue ownership, we argue that ownership

³See also Park and Reeves (2020), which presents evidence that local unemployment is both a valence (or performance) issue as well as a partisan issue.

⁴While our conceptual approach to issue ownership is similar to Bélanger and Nadeau (2015), Wright (2012), and Park and Reeves (2020), we acknowledge that there is a “conceptual vagueness about what issue ownership actually means in the first place” (Egan 2013, 51). Several pieces devote significant space to defining what the concept means and clarifying different usages of the term (Stubager 2018; Egan 2013). As such, there are alternative approaches to ours to interrogate the nature of issue ownership and crime.

is further conditioned by race with Blacks and Whites differing in their views of which party owns the issue of crime.

Specifically, we hypothesize that when Black Americans feel concern over crime, they will bring those evaluations to bear on 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 (Gibson and Nelson 2018). For Black Americans, this policy approach may evoke feelings of persecution, threats to civil rights, and biased treatment by the criminal justice system (Valentino 1999). Blacks may be more likely to link concern over crime to failed or misguided policies by Republican presidents. Given the reputation of the Republican Party, Blacks are more likely to view the policies of Trump and Bush as ineffective and even destructive.⁵ Accordingly, we expect Black Americans who are anxious about crime to punish Republican presidents.

We expect White Americans who are anxious about crime to channel that anxiety into diminished approval of Democratic presidents. Unlike Republican presidents, Democratic presidents are perceived by the electorate as being “soft on crime” — a stereotype that has grown in the contemporary era as the party has seen a rise of activists seeking to reform or “defund the police” (see, e.g., Quinn and Tillett 2020; Luscombe 2020). Even those Whites who generally support Democratic policies may blame Democrats for their focus on “prevention” instead of “punishment” (Holian 2004, 95). A weaker perceived commitment to “law and order” may harm Whites’ evaluations of Democratic presidents. At the same time, the reputation of the Democratic Party may constrain Black Americans from translating dissatisfaction over crime into a penalty over presidential approval. Supporting policies that focus on the prevention of crime or reduce the role of the police or weaken the carceral state are likely to be seen favorably by Black Americans as improvements on a system that has

⁵Though we make generalizations here, we note that, “It is not just one’s own encounters that are important; so too are the experiences of similarly situated others, especially co-ethnics” (Gibson and Nelson 2018, 98).

disproportionately affected communities of color (Nellis 2016). Accordingly, Black Americans who are anxious about crime will not lower their evaluations of Democratic presidents.

Data and Methods

Our data come from the Gallup Poll Social Series (GPSS) specifically concerning crime, which was generally asked in October of each year.⁶ Our data include nearly 15,000 respondents spanning from 2000 to 2019, which includes the final year of the Clinton administration, the entirety of the Bush and Obama administrations, and the first three years of the Trump administration. Our primary dependent variable is an indicator of whether the respondent approves of the way the president is handling his job.⁷

Conceptualizing Crime

To conceptualize crime perceptions, we borrow from a robust literature in criminology that conceptualizes the fear of a crime as a distinct psychological construct. One of the critical distinctions in individuals' views toward crime is between risk and fear. Fear measures the extent to which an individual is afraid of a crime happening to them, while risk captures the objective likelihood that one becomes a victim of a crime. Although fear should rise as the risk of being a victim increases, criminology research suggests that this is not the case. While crime rates have declined over time, Americans' fears persist (Rader 2017). Because fear of crime and the risk of becoming the victim of a crime are separate phenomena, we include both of these measures in our empirical models. Our approach is not to draw a distinct line between the two conceptions, but rather, to consider how each is brought to

⁶Since the questions are asked in October, some responses are taken at the height of presidential campaign during election years. <https://www.gallup.com/175307/gallup-poll-social-series-methodology.aspx>

⁷The question is, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [Bill Clinton / George Bush / Barack Obama / Donald Trump] is handling his job as president?"

bear in evaluations of the president.

We conceptualize these views toward crime in a number of ways. First, we examine respondents' levels of anxiety about being the victim of various criminal acts. These acts include being murdered, being mugged, having one's home burglarized while they are home, having one's home burglarized while not at home, and having their car stolen or broken into. From these five items, we construct an additive scale that we refer to as *crime anxiety*. This measure ranges from zero to five, where higher values indicate greater amounts of anxiety.⁸ About 40 percent of our sample expresses no concern about crime. Second, we measure respondents' retrospective views about crime in the US: whether there is more, less, or the same amount of crime as in the previous year. These variables take on values of one if the respondent says there is more crime, zero for the same amount, and negative one for less.⁹

In addition to anxiety about crime and retrospective evaluations about crime, we also include measures of each individual's risk of becoming the victim of a crime. These variables capture objective measures of a respondent's experience with crime. First, respondents are asked whether they or anyone in their household has been the victim of an array of crimes. Over twenty percent of respondents indicated that they had been the victim of a robbery or theft.¹⁰ Additionally, we include the change in state level crime rate as reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting database as a proxy for whether an individual is at a greater or lower objective risk of crime victimization.¹¹

⁸The Cronbach's Alpha for these five items is 0.77 and the Mokken Scale H is 0.57.

⁹As we discuss earlier, views of crime are not strongly driven by objective indicators of crime. Therefore, we hypothesize that voters hold presidents accountable for their perception of crime. We find substantively similar results using measures of anxiety toward crime or retrospective evaluations of crime. As such, we conduct our analyses using both measures.

¹⁰Those crimes included having your house or apartment broken into, money or property stolen from you or another member of your household; a car owned by you or other household member stolen; a home, car, or property owned by you or another household member vandalized; money or property taken from you or another household member by force, with gun, knife, weapon or physical attack, or by threat of force; you or another household member being mugged or physically assaulted.

¹¹We recognize that the change in state crime rate is a rough proxy for one's objective risk of crime victimization. As such, we consider alternative measures of objective risk, such as the difference between the state crime rate and the national crime rate (see Hopkins and Pettingill 2018), the absolute change in

Additionally, we include a number of control variables. We account for the role of partisanship by including an indicator of whether a respondent shares the partisanship of the president, as well as an indicator variable for political independents. In several of our models, we examine approval for individual presidents. In these models, we control for income, gender, age, education, race, and urbanity. For these variables, we have no prediction for how they would drive individual presidential approval, but do for presidents of particular parties.

Results

Origins of Anxiety toward Crime

Following the literature in criminology (for an overview, see Rader 2017), we consider contextual exposure to crime, personal victimization, and a host of individual-level characteristics in understanding respondents' anxiety related to crime. We are especially interested in the extent to which anxiety about crime is related to contextual measures of exposure to crime as compared to demographic characteristics of respondents.¹²

To understand the degree to which one's anxiety about crime is related to objective risk of becoming a victim of crime as well as demographic characteristics, we regress our measure of anxiety described above on a series of sociodemographic variables. This includes measures of an individual's age, educational attainment, income, race, and gender. To account for systematic differences in perceptions and experiences between urban and rural respondents (Gimpel et al. 2020), we include indicator variables for whether an individual lives in a suburban or rural area¹³ and whether an individual has been the victim of a crime. The number of crimes committed at the state level, and the absolute change in the number of homicides at the state level (Arnold and Carnes 2012), in the supplemental appendix.

¹²As reported in the previous section, we utilize state-level measures of crime from the FBI. See Moore and Reeves (2017, 2020) on the challenges of measuring geographic contextual exposure.

¹³These codings come from the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics in 2006 and 2013. We assign

results of this regression are shown in Table 1.

The results in Table 1 show that those individuals who have personally been the victim of a crime have greater anxiety toward crime than those who have not. However, changing crime rates have no relationship with anxiety, consistent with findings from criminology (see Rader 2017). This suggests that, while objective contextual measures do not matter, personal exposure to crime does increase one’s anxiety. The model also replicates previous empirical findings by showing that women are more anxious about crime than men, and those who live in urban areas have more crime related anxiety than those who live in rural or suburban areas. Finally, the model suggests that Whites, those with higher levels of education, and those with higher incomes have lower levels of anxiety.

Crime and Presidential Approval

We now turn to the question of whether anxiety toward crime shapes presidential approval. Table 2 presents results from an individual-level model of presidential approval. The observations in this model are measured on a monthly basis for two decades. The results are from a logistic regression where the dependent variable is a binary indicator of presidential approval. To account for systematic variation in presidential approval, we control for co-partisanship of the respondent with the president and include fixed effects for each survey wave. We present results from two models, each of which includes a different measure of crime perceptions: one based on level or presence of anxiety and one based on a retrospective perception of national crime conditions.

As expected, co-partisans are significantly more likely to approve of the president. Even so, both anxiety and retrospective evaluations of crime are associated with decreased levels of presidential approval; so, too, is the measure of crime victimization. However, the change

these codes at the county level, with respondents being assigned the 2006 code in 2009 or earlier or the 2013 code in 2010 or later. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data_access/urban_rural.htm.

	Crime Anxiety
Crime Victimization	1.00*** (0.03)
Δ Crime Rate	-0.27 (0.33)
White	-0.17*** (0.04)
Male	-0.44*** (0.03)
Income	
Less than \$20,000	0.18*** (0.05)
\$20,00 to \$29,999	0.11* (0.05)
\$30,000 to \$49,999	0.14*** (0.04)
\$50,000 to \$74,999	0.07* (0.04)
Age	
Senior	-0.24*** (0.03)
Under 30	-0.09* (0.04)
Education	
Some College	-0.13*** (0.03)
College Degree	-0.13*** (0.04)
Post graduate degree	-0.09* (0.04)
Urban	
Rural	-0.24*** (0.03)
Suburban	-0.08** (0.03)
Intercept	1.82*** (0.06)
R ²	0.10
Adj. R ²	0.10
Num. obs.	15329

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 1: A Model of Anxiety toward Crime, 2000-2019. Coefficients are from OLS regression where the dependent variable is crime anxiety, a five-question scaled measure capturing a respondents' level of worry about specific types of crime. All significance tests are two-tailed.

	Presidential Approval	
	(1)	(2)
Crime Anxiety	−0.08*** (0.02)	
Retrospective		−0.30*** (0.03)
Crime Victimization	−0.26*** (0.06)	−0.28*** (0.06)
Δ Crime Rate	−0.66 (0.75)	−0.28 (0.77)
Co-partisan	3.98*** (0.06)	3.92*** (0.06)
Independent	1.66*** (0.08)	1.63*** (0.08)
White	−0.17 (0.09)	−0.22* (0.09)
Male	−0.04 (0.05)	−0.04 (0.05)
Income		
Less than \$20,000	−0.07 (0.09)	−0.07 (0.10)
\$20,00 to \$29,999	−0.06 (0.09)	−0.03 (0.10)
\$30,000 to \$49,999	0.03 (0.07)	0.05 (0.07)
\$50,000 to \$74,999	0.15* (0.07)	0.17* (0.07)
Age		
Senior	−0.13* (0.06)	−0.12 (0.06)
Under 30	0.01 (0.08)	−0.04 (0.08)
Education		
Some College	0.04 (0.07)	0.04 (0.07)
College Degree	−0.06 (0.08)	−0.11 (0.08)
Post graduate degree	−0.04 (0.08)	−0.14 (0.08)
Urban		
Suburban	−0.02 (0.06)	0.01 (0.06)
Rural	0.08 (0.07)	0.14* (0.07)
Intercept	−0.71*** (0.16)	−0.81*** (0.16)
Num. obs.	14774	14056

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 2: Model of Presidential Approval, 2000-2019. Coefficients are from a logit model where the dependent variable is presidential approval. Indicators for year are included in the model but not presented in the table. All significance tests are two-tailed.

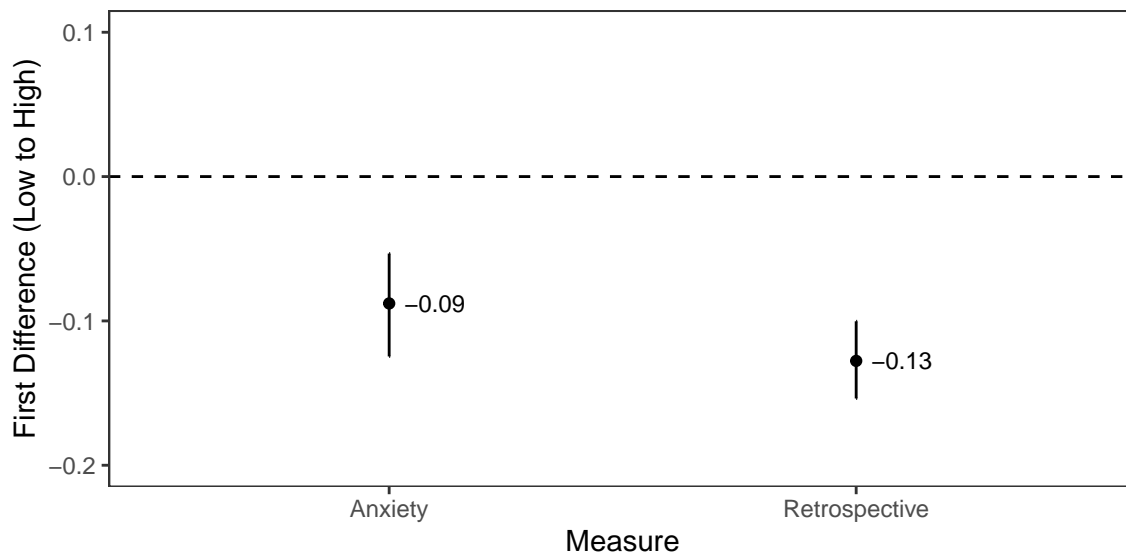


Figure 1: Predicted difference in probability of presidential approval when moving from the minimum to maximum values of crime anxiety and retrospective crime evaluations. The relationship between crime evaluations and presidential approval is negative and consistent across measures. First differences are generated by calculating the differences in predicted probabilities when moving from the minimum to the maximum on each measure, and confidence intervals are generated via bootstrapping. All significance tests are two-tailed.

in the state crime rate—our measure of the objective crime conditions in a given locale—is not statistically significant, indicating that perceptions matter more than reality when it comes to holding presidents accountable for crime.

Figure 1 presents a substantive interpretation of the results presented in Table 2. Figure 1 presents first differences for the two different measures of attitudes toward crime based on the predicted probability of presidential approval. The left side of the figure shows the difference in the predicted probability of approving of the president when anxiety toward crime is at its minimum versus maximum value, holding all other variables at their means. The right side of the figure shows this same difference when one believes that there was more crime in the United States in the last year as opposed to less.

The first differences in Figure 1 indicate that, even while holding partisanship constant,

anxiety toward crime decreases the probability that one approves of the president by 9 percent. Similarly, holding poor retrospective evaluations about crime decreases the probability that one approves of the president by 13 percent. Ultimately, anxiety-based and retrospective perceptions are both associated with a significant and similar decrease in the predicted probability of approving of the president. Objective changes in crime conditions do not appear to be related to one’s views of the president.

Though these results indicate that anxiety toward crime reduces one’s probability of approving of the president, we do not expect crime and accountability to affect all presidents equally. As discussed above, we expect anxiety about crime to translate into differing levels of presidential approval through a mechanism of issue ownership conditioned on race. Accordingly, we expect to see differences in presidential approval between White and Black Americans by party of president.

To better understand the ways in which anxiety about crime is linked to presidential approval via the mechanism of racially-conditioned issue ownership, we run a series of logistic regressions using the five-point anxiety scale as our independent variable.¹⁴ These regressions are shown in Table 3. Column 1 presents our baseline model of crime and presidential approval, allowing for the relationship between crime anxiety and presidential approval to vary between racial groups. Because our estimation is restricted to White and Black Americans and we include an indicator variable for Black respondents, the constituent term for anxiety can be read as the relationship between crime anxiety and presidential approval among White respondents. The results from the model in Column 1 indicate that those individuals who are anxious about crime are less likely to approve of the president.

In Columns 2 and 3, we estimate these same models separately for Democratic and Republican presidents. Here, we see evidence in favor of racially conditioned issue ownership.

¹⁴In the supplemental appendix, we present results from a similar model where the independent variable is the retrospective crime evaluation. The coefficients for the constitutive terms and the interaction are consistent with the anxiety results and are statistically significant.

	Presidential Approval		
	All	Clinton / Obama	Bush / Trump
Crime Anxiety	−0.07*** (0.02)	−0.13*** (0.03)	−0.04 (0.02)
Black	0.29* (0.13)	1.90*** (0.26)	−0.58** (0.19)
Crime Anxiety × Black	−0.07 (0.05)	−0.03 (0.10)	−0.21** (0.08)
Co-partisan	3.98*** (0.06)	3.89*** (0.09)	3.85*** (0.08)
Independent	1.66*** (0.08)	1.71*** (0.12)	1.53*** (0.11)
Crime Victimization	−0.26*** (0.06)	−0.22* (0.10)	−0.27*** (0.08)
Δ Crime Rate	−0.67 (0.75)	−2.06 (1.19)	0.87 (0.99)
Male	−0.04 (0.05)	−0.13 (0.08)	0.01 (0.07)
Income			
Less than \$20,000	−0.07 (0.09)	0.17 (0.15)	−0.24 (0.13)
\$20,00 to \$29,999	−0.06 (0.09)	0.16 (0.15)	−0.27* (0.12)
\$30,000 to \$49,999	0.03 (0.07)	0.15 (0.11)	−0.03 (0.09)
\$50,000 to \$74,999	0.15* (0.07)	0.11 (0.11)	0.19* (0.09)
Age			
Senior	−0.13* (0.06)	−0.17 (0.09)	−0.07 (0.08)
Under 30	0.01 (0.08)	0.36** (0.13)	−0.21* (0.11)
Education			
Some College	0.04 (0.07)	0.25* (0.11)	−0.08 (0.09)
College Degree	−0.06 (0.08)	0.47*** (0.12)	−0.39*** (0.10)
Post graduate degree	−0.04 (0.08)	0.78*** (0.12)	−0.56*** (0.10)
Urban			
Rural	0.09 (0.07)	−0.12 (0.11)	0.27** (0.09)
Suburban	−0.02 (0.06)	−0.22* (0.09)	0.13 (0.07)
Intercept	−0.89*** (0.13)	−1.20*** (0.18)	2.05*** (0.18)
Num. obs.	14774	5942	8832

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 3: Models of Presidential Approval, 2000-2019. Coefficients are from logit regressions where the dependent variable is presidential approval. Indicators for year are included in the model but not presented in the table. All significance tests are two-tailed.

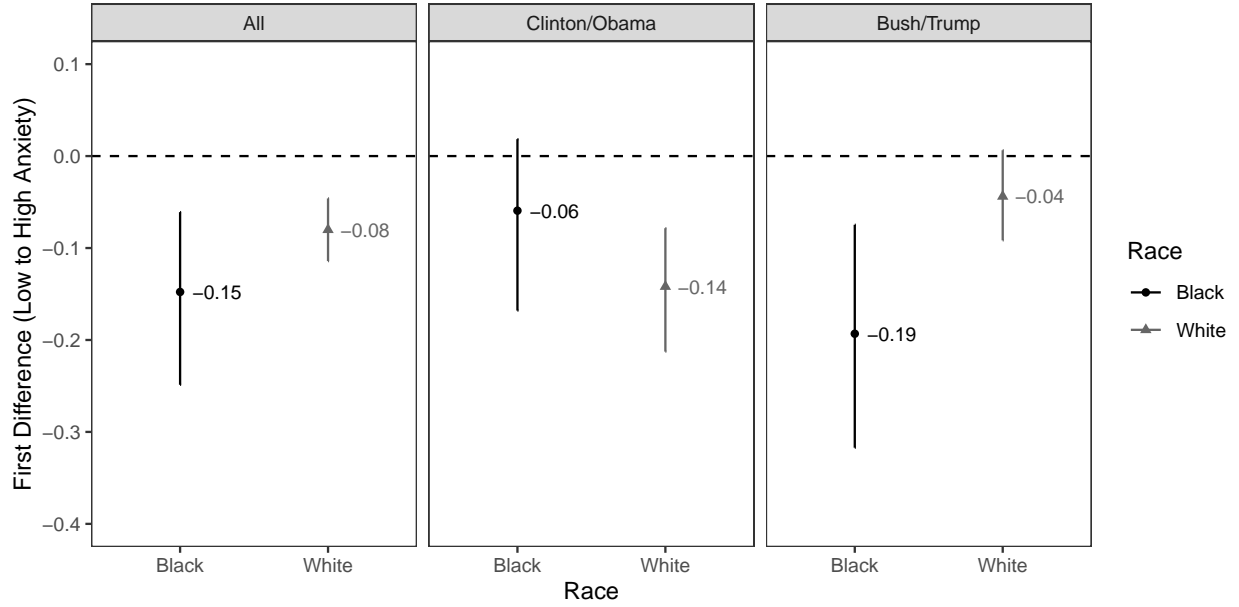


Figure 2: Predicted difference in the probability of presidential approval when moving from the minimum to maximum amount of crime anxiety, by race and presidential administration. Confidence intervals are generated via bootstrapping. All significance tests are two-tailed.

Indeed, the results of our model predicting approval of Democratic presidents (Column 2) suggest that higher levels of anxiety about crime are associated with a lower likelihood of approving of the president’s job performance among Whites. By contrast, the coefficient for crime anxiety in the model predicting approval of Republican presidents (Column 3) is close to zero and statistically insignificant. Nevertheless, we see that Blacks who are anxious about crime are less likely to approve of Republican presidents. Taken together, these results suggest that Whites who are anxious about crime are less likely to approve of Democratic presidents while Blacks translate their anxiety about crime into a lower likelihood of approving of Republican presidents.

To make the results from Table 3 more readily interpretable, in Figure 2 we generated first differences in the predicted probability of approving of the president when moving from no anxiety to the maximum amount of anxiety on our scale. Additionally, we show how these first differences vary as a function of the party of the president.

The leftmost panel in Figure 2 shows the first difference in the predicted probability of approving of the president for White and Black respondents, regardless of the president’s party. The first difference in our crime anxiety measure is associated with an 8 percent decrease in the predicted probability of approving of the president for White respondents. For Black respondents, this same difference is associated with a 15 percent reduction.

The middle panel in Figure 2 shows the predicted probability of approving of a Democratic president’s job performance. Similar to our results from the full sample, we find that White anxiety about crime predicts a 14 percent decrease in the likelihood of approving of the president’s job performance, but no statistically significant reduction for Black respondents.

Finally, the rightmost panel in Figure 2 shows the first difference in predicted probability of approving of Republican presidents. Unlike the pattern for Democratic presidents, White respondents who are anxious about crime do not translate this anxiety into disapproval of Republican presidents. Indeed, the 95 percent confidence interval on our predicted probability estimate overlaps with zero. By contrast, Black respondents who are anxious about crime are 19 percent less likely to approve of Republican presidents.

Collectively, Table 3 and the predicted probabilities of presidential approval shown in Figure 2 provide strong evidence in favor of our theoretical expectations. Anxiety about crime can and does lead individuals to lower their evaluations of the president. However, our results indicate that this relationship is dependent upon both the race of the respondent and the party of the president. Anxiety about crime translates into presidential (dis)approval through a mechanism of racially conditioned issue ownership. Black citizens who are anxious about crime appear to punish only Republican presidents. By contrast, Whites who are anxious about crime appear to lower their evaluations of Democratic presidents but not Republican presidents.

One potential concern with these results is that they might be driven by some set of unmeasured policy preferences pertaining to crime and, accordingly, do not reflect true racial

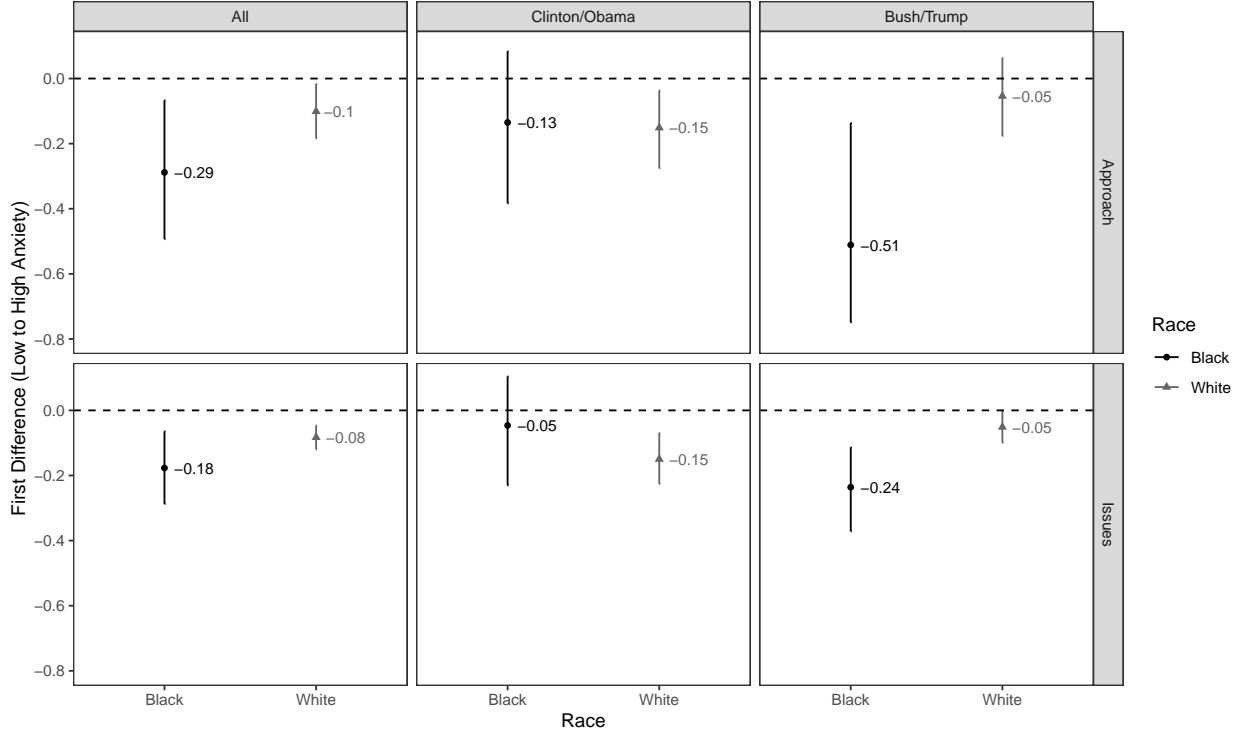


Figure 3: Predicted difference in the probability of presidential approval with policy controls. This figure shows the predicted difference in the probability of approving of the president for White and Black respondents across various administrations when controlling for one’s preferences in dealing with crime—economic support or police (approach), or one’s opinions on gun control and the death penalty (issues). First differences are created by calculating the difference in predicted probability of presidential approval, and confidence intervals are generated via bootstrapping. All significance tests are two-tailed.

differences in how anxiety about crime translates into presidential approval. To test whether this is the case, we re-analyzed the models shown in Table 3 but included variables that capture individuals’ policy preferences about how crime should be handled. Here, we draw upon respondents’ views on three specific issues, which we then collapse into two distinct measures: first, whether crime is an issue best solved by more education and community investment or by increasing funding for the police and prisons (*Approach*); and, second, two items capturing attitudes on gun laws and the death penalty (*Issues*). The results of these regressions are shown in Figure 3.

The top row of Figure 3 shows the predicted probability of approving of the president

as crime anxiety increases while controlling for preferences on the trade-off between community investment and increasing funding for the police. The bottom row presents the same predicted probability but instead controls for respondents’ attitudes on gun control and the death penalty. Across both specifications, the racially-conditioned issue ownership theory that we have described previously holds. Indeed, White respondents who are anxious about crime only punish Democratic presidents; by contrast, Black respondents who are anxious about crime only punish Republican presidents. Thus, the results shown in Figure 3 suggest that our results are robust to the inclusion of controls for individuals’ policy preferences pertaining to crime.

Conclusion & Discussion

In this paper, we demonstrate that anxiety toward crime affects presidential approval. Spanning twenty years and four different administrations, our results indicate that when individuals are anxious about crime they are less likely to approve of the president. However, we find that this pattern is dependent upon an individual’s race and the party of the president. Black respondents punish Republican presidents when they are anxious about crime while White individuals only lower their evaluations of Democratic presidents in similar circumstances.

We have argued that this relationship is an example of racially conditioned issue ownership. Though previous studies argue that the Republican Party “owns” the issue of crime, the story is not so simple. Like so much in American politics, race shapes perceptions of which party is superior at addressing crime. White Americans who are anxious about crime are unlikely to decrease their support for Republican presidents. On the other hand, Black Americans who are anxious about crime are likely to lower their support for Republican presidents. At the same time, Democratic positions toward criminal justice are likely seen by Black Americans as attempts to reform a system that has disproportionately affected

communities of color. As such, Black Americans are less likely to decrease their support for Democratic presidents when they are anxious about crime. Republicans, who may see these polices as “soft on crime,” will be more likely to disapprove of Democratic presidents when anxious.

While the results presented here show a link between crime and presidential approval, future empirical analyses could improve upon our work. Our study presented observational data to show that higher anxiety toward crime is associated with a lower presidential job approval. While such an empirical approach does not allow us to say for certain that heightened anxiety *causes* citizens to lower their approval of the president, theorizing that the causal arrow runs from crime anxiety and toward presidential approval is more logical than the other way around. Nevertheless, future work should consider experimentally inducing anxiety about crime to more firmly establish the causal nature of the results we have presented here.

Additionally, future work should consider that issue ownership may systematically vary across subgroups of the population. Although Democrats are viewed more favorably on healthcare and Republicans have an advantage on the economy, existing theories of issue ownership do not consider how these heuristics might break down along racial or other identity-based cleavages. Consistent with theories of issue ownership, we have emphasized the long-standing racialization of crime as a possible driver of the patterns we find. Extending this logic, issue ownership over other historically racialized issues such as drug policy, poverty and welfare spending, and ballot access may similarly produce racially-conditioned issue ownership. Meanwhile, decades-old debates about family policy—between traditional “family values” versus government support to working families (Elder and Greene 2012)—could produce gender-conditioned issue ownership. However, other valence issues, like increasing veterans benefits, providing for national defense, and assisting the elderly, which lack pervasive racial, ethnic, or gendered frames, are unlikely to produce similar conditional

patterns. 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.

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