

From election day to presidential approval: Partisanship and the honeymoon period in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the honeymoon period, the phase between election day and the first quarter of the first year of the presidential term, in which voters form their initial assessment of the new president's administration, a subject understudied by the literature. While different studies highlight that the president's approval is strong during the early phase of the administration, we seek to understand why and which are the most important individual-level predictors of early presidential approval. Relying on data from the 2018-19 Mexican Election Study, we argue that voters' partisanship is key to understanding the attitudes towards the new administration. While co-partisans do not alter significantly their attitudes towards the newly elected President (they already like him), out-partisans are the key group that changed between election day and the honeymoon period: they significantly improved their opinion about the newly elected President. Moreover, as opposed to most studies that identify retrospective evaluations as the most important predictor of presidential approval, this study highlights that, particularly in a honeymoon period—in which election day is still close—expressive postelection attitudes such as satisfaction of democracy or political efficacy are important predictors of early presidential approval, particularly among co-partisans of the newly elected President.

Presidential approval is a desirable feature for any president because popularity enhances a president's mandate and ability to advance campaign promises, in addition to increasing the prospects of legislative success (Bond et al., 2003; Brody 1991). As Stimson (1976) notes in his seminal research, higher presidential approval means, more often than not, more power: "If the real power of the presidency is not directly proportional to the most recent Gallup popularity rating, it is not far from it." In that sense, presidents seek to maintain a high presidential approval during their term. Therefore, a key question is: what shapes citizens' approval of the executive? Past literature highlights that the President's handling of issues, particularly the economy (Alesina et al., 1993a,b; Fiorina 1981; Erikson, Mackuen and Stimson 2002; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2009), is a key component, along with other variables like international crisis, wars or terrorist attacks (Eichenberg et al., 2006; Kriner and Schwartz, 2009). Moreover, different studies have identified different stages of approval in a president's term in which presidential approval tends to vary: a honeymoon period in which approval is strong; a second phase in which presidents lose support; and a final phase that includes a partial recovery as the new election gets closer (Carlin and Martínez-Gallardo, 2019).

This group of studies has analyzed the presidential approval cycle in the United States (Stimson 1991; 2018) and, more recently, in Latin America (Carlin and Martínez-Gallardo 2019). These analyses rely on aggregate level data to uncover the typical approval dynamic. Some

additional studies have focused on the dynamics of the last two phases of the cyclical model when voters begin to polarize along partisan lines (Lebo and Cassino, 2007). In contrast, this study analyzes the honeymoon period, the phase between election day and the first quarter of the first year of the presidential term, a less polarizing moment in which voters form their initial assessments of the new president's administration. This is a largely understudied subject, particularly in Latin America.

While different studies highlight that the president's approval is strong during the early phase of the administration (Mueller 1973; Stimson 1976; Brody 1991), we seek to understand why and which are the most important individual-level predictors of early presidential approval. Prior studies have analyzed the moderating role of partisanship on presidential approval (Baum 2002; Lebo and Cassino 2007). As the presidential term evolves, partisanship polarizes presidential approval causing out-partisans to disapprove of the President's job performance, while co-partisans continue to approve it (Lebo and Cassino, 2007; Donovan et al., 2019). However, we know less about the dynamics of presidential approval during the honeymoon period and how they differ among partisan groups. This study argues that partisanship has differential effects during the honeymoon period, although in a different way from the rest of the president's term. The honeymoon period is a less polarized moment in which the newly elected President usually enjoys a strong support. This means that co-partisans and

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out-partisans face different incentives between election day and the beginning of the newly elected administration: while the former are already aligned with the elected President, some out-partisans face the dilemma between rejecting the newly elected administration or bandwagoning in support of the new President. We pay attention to the asymmetries between in-group and out-group partisans and seek to understand why some voters approve of the job of an out-partisan President during the honeymoon period.

To test our argument, we study the 2018 presidential election in Mexico and rely on data from Mexico's National Electoral Study (Beltrán et al., 2020)—which is part of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). The Mexican Party system experienced a major electoral shock in this election after the left won the Presidency for the first time since the country's transition to democracy in 2000. In his third bid for the Presidency, Andrés Manuel López Obrador and the Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional (Morena), won the presidential election with 53 percent of the vote share, and his coalition won the majority in both chambers of Congress. During the so-called honeymoon period, Lopez Obrador registered a strong presidential approval—up to 75 percent of approval.¹ Given the panel structure of the 2018 National Electoral Study, which was conducted as a four-wave study, we were able to analyze the transition from voters' attitudes on election day to presidential approval. We find that partisanship has differential effects on the attitudes towards the new administration. While co-partisans do not alter significantly their attitudes towards the newly elected President—they already like him—, out-partisans are the key group that changed between election day and the honeymoon period: they significantly improved their opinion about the newly elected President. Moreover, contributing to the literature of presidential approval, we highlight the important role of non-economic attitudes. As opposed to most studies that identify retrospective evaluations as the most important predictor of presidential approval, this study highlights that, particularly in a honeymoon period—in which election day is still close—expressive postelection attitudes such as satisfaction of democracy are important predictors of early presidential approval, particularly among co-partisans of the newly elected President.

The findings of this paper have important implications for the public opinion literature providing nuance to our understanding of the way that presidential approval works. While past research has identified aggregate patterns across different countries and time, we know less about the individual logic of presidential approval during the honeymoon period. To our knowledge, this study represents the first attempt to uncover the microfoundations of the honeymoon period, relying on a panel election study that analyzes voters' behavior from the campaign period to the first months of the newly elected administration. This study also contributes to studies in Latin American political behavior. As shown in this study, in a young democracy like Mexico, presidential approval is filtered through a partisan lens. In doing so, we identify the different behavior that co-partisans and out-partisans have during this period of time.

1. Presidential approval and the honeymoon period

Studies on presidential approval in American Politics have highlighted that presidential popularity follows a cyclical pattern: a post-election honeymoon when Presidents enjoy high approval, a decay period after the first year of the new administration, and an end of term increase as the new election approaches (Mueller 1973; Gronke and Newman 2003). Recent projects based on the Executive Approval Database (EAD) (Carlin et al. 2019) have gathered aggregate data of presidential approval across 18 Latin American countries and found that

this presidential dynamic is not exclusive to the United States, but rather a characteristic of presidential regimes despite contextual differences (Carlin et al., 2018). Moreover, different studies have focused on the last two phases of the cyclical model, when voters begin to polarize along partisan lines (Lebo and Cassino, 2007; Donovan et al., 2019), out-partisans begin highlighting the negative results of the presidential term (Wlezien, 2017), and incumbents begin investing resources as they plan ahead for the next presidential campaign (Samuels 2002)—consistent with the logic of the political-electoral budget cycle (Nieto Parra and Santiso 2012; Kaplan and Thomsson 2017). However, we know less about the honeymoon period and the transition between voters' attitudes on election day and presidential approval during the early months of the newly elected administration.

During the honeymoon period, presidents have a higher than average level of support, usually reporting 70 percent or more in presidential approval (Erikson, Mackuen and Stimson, 2002). Some studies have found that a strong honeymoon period depends on the media's news coverage (Farnsworth and Litcher 2011). In the first months, impressions of the president elect are still settling and the media can substantially hinder or benefit presidential popularity. Other research has found that the vote share of the winner of the presidential election has an impact on initial approval ratings, making Presidents with strong mandates enjoy stronger honeymoon periods (Lopez and Cascante, 2019). With some nuances, on average, presidents experience a partial U-shape cycle in their approval, experiencing a strong early approval, which eventually declines and ends with a partial recovery. It is worth noting that there are cases that do not follow this pattern. For instance, George W. Bush's approval numbers enjoyed a weak honeymoon period, but significantly improved after 9/11 (Eichenber, Stoll, and Lebo 2006). Sebastián Piñera, former president of Chile, also enjoyed a strong honeymoon, but his ratings fell quickly due to a disappointing presidential performance (Navia and Perelló 2019). In contrast, Álvaro Uribe in Colombia enjoyed an eight year-long honeymoon (García-Sánchez and Rodríguez Raga, 2019). Despite these exceptions, on average, the honeymoon period tends to last from six to twelve months (Erikson, Mackuen and Stimson, 2002; Carlin et al., 2018).

Considering the expectation of a strong presidential approval in the early days of their administration, an important question relates to which factors are the determinants of such early approval. While most literature has analyzed which factors contribute to a presidents' loss of support after the initial honeymoon—particularly from a macro-level perspective (Mueller 1973; Stimson 1976; Brody 1991)—we focus on the individual-level factors contributing to the observed strong presidential approval during the honeymoon period. The literature identifies both long-term and short-term variables that can predict strong presidential approval over the course of a president's term. Long-term determinants include socio-demographic variables that shape the cleavages of a party system such as race, geography, class, religion, etc. Partisanship and ideology are also expected to be a strong predictor of presidential approval over the course of a term: voters who identify with the president's political party or ideology are more likely to approve their job (Duch and Stecenson, 2008). Moreover, presidential approval is also found to be influenced by the evolution of democratic regimes. As Cabezas and Navia (2019) argue, when democracy has been recently restored, presidents tend to benefit from a "democratic" honeymoon period that can be even stronger than early approval levels found in consolidated democracies.

Regarding short-term variables, the literature identifies the economy as the most important predictor of approval of the president's performance (Erikson, Mackuen and Stimson 2002; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2009). These studies tend to focus on economic variables such as unemployment, inflation, and economic growth, as well as individual-level variables of the evaluation of the economy (Gélineau and Singer, 2015). Other short-term factors associated with presidential approval are perceptions of crime and public safety (Romero et al. 2016), political scandals (Edwards, Mitchell and Welch 1995; Carlin et al., 2015),

¹ According to polling aggregators, presidential approval registered 75 percent during the honeymoon period. In the National Electoral Study, 82 percent reported approving of President López Obrador.

corruption (Rosas and Manzetti 2015), international events that trigger a “rally-around-the-flag” effect (Mueller, 1973; Weyland 1998; Arce 2003), fulfillment of campaign promises (Stokes 2001), etc.

Although previous literature has identified different factors that can shape the public’s evaluation of the president, it is mostly focused on the evaluation of the presidential approval over the course of the term. Moreover, this past research does not consider different individual-level patterns across the phases of the presidential cyclic model, particularly during the so-called honeymoon period. In contrast, in this paper, we analyze the first stage of the presidential approval cycle in which the public forms their initial assessments of the newly elected administration. This is an important period of the presidential approval cycle that can potentially condition citizens’ attitudes toward the President for the rest of their term.

2. Partisanship and the logic of presidential approval during the honeymoon period

In a similar way in which partisanship moderates the public’s perceptions about the economy (Bartels 2002; Evans and Andersen 2006), corruption (Anduiza et al., 2013), political events (Gaines et al., 2007), among other issues, we expect partisanship to influence voters’ evaluation of the President’s performance. As noted by many, public opinion is not a single monolithic entity (Baum 2002; Lebo and Cassino 2007). Therefore, instead of assuming homogeneity, we expect that voters respond differently to the president’s performance according to their own interests and policy preferences (Baum and Kernell 2001; Kiewiet 1983). This study argues that partisanship moderates voters’ perceptions of presidential performance during the honeymoon period.

Partisanship constitutes a “perceptual screen” in information acquisition and processing (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008), which affects the public’s perceptions of presidential performance. As such, a president’s support base is typically drawn from co-partisans and, to a lesser extent, out-partisans and independents. Moreover, given mass political polarization (Layman and Carsey 2002; Levendusky 2009; Mason 2018) the partisan gap on presidential approval is more prominent: while some out-partisans shift approval in response to positive and negative presidential performance, co-partisans’ approval remains almost intact (Lebo and Cassino, 2007; Kriner and Schwartz, 2009). However, in contrast to the solid partisan gap reported during most of the presidential term, we expect the partisan gap during the honeymoon period to diminish—given that optimism tends to increase among voters after election day (Stimson 1976) and political conflict tends to decrease during this period (Brody (1991)—allowing out-partisans to show some support (Baum 2002). Similar to rally-around-the-flag events (Lebo and Cassino, 2007), the president is unlikely to gain approval between election day and the honeymoon period within his/her own party—e.g. voters who already approve him/her cannot upgrade their evaluation of the president, given their esteem of their co-partisan President and his/her policies. As a result, the source of any significant opinion update will come out-partisans. We propose to two different alternatives for these voters.

On the one hand, consistent with the honeymoon Hypothesis, it is expected for many voters who did not vote for him/her to bandwagon and approve of the newly elected president. This behavior could be explained by different factors. For example, during the honeymoon period, voters have high expectations for what a president can accomplish (Stimson 1976). Voters tend to show outstanding optimism, causing in-partisans and some out-partisans to approve of the job of the newly elected president. Similarly, as argued by Brody (1991), during the honeymoon period, politicians from different parties tend to answer to the new president with some support since they are still disorganized after the electoral defeat and are waiting to mobilize their forces as the presidency evolves. Even the media tends to avoid strong criticism, which makes the news that people receive about the new president fairly positive (Brody 1991). Therefore, we expect a solid early presidential approval and, given the context, the support of many out-partisans.

It is important to highlight that independents can also be an important source of approval for the newly elected president. These voters are less likely to approve of the president than co-partisans of the President but, rather, are more likely to do so than out-partisans (Erikson et al., 2002). Literature on American politics expects that the stronger effect—increased support for the President during the honeymoon period—to be reported by out-partisans (Baum 2002) given that there are typically fewer independents left to improve their presidential approval. However, given the prominence of independents in Latin America, who, according to comparative surveys, represent the majority of the region’s electorate (The AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project LAPOP; Castro Cornejo 2021), we expect an important amount of support for the newly elected president coming from this portion of the electorate.

As an alternative to the honeymoon Hypothesis, there are good reasons to suspect that, under some conditions—particularly highly contested elections or highly polarized party systems—some voters are not going to bandwagon but rather increase their aversion to the elected president. Consistent with the sore loser hypothesis (Anderson et al., 2005), partisanship has a moderating effect for winners and losers, in which the electoral defeat diminishes the legitimacy of the electoral process among out-partisans (Cantú and Ponce, 2015). If this is the case, political losers are unlikely to improve their opinion about the newly elected president; quite the opposite: they will reinforce their negative assessments or even worsen it.

Based on this discussion, the first set Hypothesis of this study is the following:

Hypothesis 1a. (Honeymoon hypothesis). Out-partisans are likely to improve their assessments of the newly elected President between election day and the beginning of the new administration.

Hypothesis 1b. (Sore loser hypothesis). Out-partisans are likely to worsen their assessment of the newly elected President between election day and the beginning of the new administration.

The next step is to not only identify who support the newly elected President, but also understand why. Based on prior studies, it is likely for presidential approval to be a function of retrospective evaluations (Alesina et al., 1993; Clarke and Stewart 1994; Fiorina 1981; Gelpi et al., 2007). During the honeymoon period, even if the governing party has not been in power long enough to substantially affect the economy (Carey and Lebo 2006), it can signal a forthcoming change of policies and, by doing so, it can influence changes on presidential approval. In other words, the honeymoon period can affect economic evaluations even if the economic conditions have not changed much yet (Bartels 2002; Gerber and Huber 2010). The new agenda-setting power of the incoming president can not only change the policy issues that the public will discuss, but also generate new “issue publics” (Krosnick 1990) that are interested in a specific policy beyond collective concerns about the economy. Given the different challenges that a country can potentially face, particularly in young democracies, retrospective perceptions about security and crime (Romero et al., 2016) or corruption (Gómez-Vilchis, 2012a,b) are also likely to influence presidential approval.

Hypothesis 2a. (Retrospective Evaluations). Voters who improve their retrospective evaluations are more likely to report a higher presidential approval.

However, this study also argues that some political variables like satisfaction of democracy and political efficacy — overlooked by most studies in presidential approval— can be connected to presidential approval during the honeymoon period. These variables can be associated with presidential approval given that the election occurred recently and voters might be evaluating presidential performance based on expressive attitudes rather than retrospective evaluations—since there is not much to evaluate yet. In fact, different studies highlight that retrospective evaluations are usually not consequential for incumbent

support early on in a presidency (Carey and Lebo 2006; Singer and Carlin 2013). Instead, retrospective evaluations are likely to gather strength as the President builds a track record (Singer and Carlin 2013)² and the governing party has been in power long enough to substantially affect the economy (Carey and Lebo 2006).³ Only after a few months, voters will have a presidential record to judge and, in consequence, retrospective evaluations will be more consequential on their perceptions about the President.

In this context, we propose that not only the economy or general retrospective evaluations drive presidential approval, but also expressive postelection attitudes—such as satisfaction with democracy and political efficacy—increase support for the incumbent given the proximity of the election. In this process, partisanship is also expected to moderate the influence of these attitudes on early presidential approval. While the elections literature has documented how voters differ in terms of political efficacy and satisfaction of democracy after election day (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Blais and Gelinau 2007; Davis and Hitt, 2017), their influence on presidential approval has been overlooked, mainly because most studies tend to focus on other phases of the presidential cycle when the importance of these variables are likely to fade out. For example, voters' perceived political efficacy—in other words, their faith in their ability to make a difference through their vote—is likely to be relevant, particularly for the winner's co-partisans. While it is expected that winners become less enthusiastic about the government as the term evolves (Davis and Hitt, 2017), given that the elections took place not long ago, it is likely that voters' perception of their ability to elect their co-partisan president can shape presidential approval during the honeymoon period, especially since voters' sense of political efficacy is sensitive to both electoral (Karp and Banducci, 2008) and partisan representation (Merolla et al. 2013). In other words, in-partisans' reinvigorated perceived political efficacy as a result of winning the election is likely to be connected to presidential approval, making them approve of their co-partisan President. On the contrary, the perceived political efficacy of out-partisans and independents is less likely to have an impact on the perceptions about presidential performance since it has not recently improved—their candidate did not win the election—therefore, less likely to be connected to their perceptions of presidential performance.

Similarly, satisfaction with democracy can also drive presidential approval during the honeymoon period. As previous literature finds, those voters who support the winning party are generally more satisfied with democracy than those who vote for the losing parties (Anderson and Tverdova, 2001; Norris, 1999). Satisfaction with democracy is closely related with the legitimacy of the political regime and provides the basis on which the system continues to function (Anderson and Guillory, 1997). This means that among co-partisans of the winning party—who more prominently display faith in the way democracy works as a result of winning the election—their increasing satisfaction with democracy is likely to be connected to the President's performance. Among out-partisans and independents, satisfaction with democracy is less likely to influence their presidential approval since it has not recently improved for them—and their candidate did not win the election.

It is important to highlight that while satisfaction with democracy and political efficacy might predict presidential approval at any point in the cycle, we suspect that their strongest effect on presidential approval shows during the honeymoon period. In the same way in which prior

studies have found that retrospective evaluations are relevant over the presidential term, except the honeymoon period (Singer Mathew and Carlin Ryan, 2013; Carey and Lebo 2006) we suspect that the contrary occurs regarding political efficacy and satisfaction with democracy. The expressive benefits of the election results are still salient during the first months of the presidential terms but will eventually fade out because retrospective evaluations are likely to gather strength as the President builds a track record.

In light of these this discussion, the last set of Hypothesis are the following:

Hypothesis 2b. (Political Efficacy) Copartisans who increase their perceived political efficacy are more likely to report a higher presidential approval than out-partisans.

Hypothesis 2c. (Satisfaction with democracy). Copartisans who increased their perceived satisfaction with democracy are more likely to report a higher presidential approval than out-partisans.

We test our hypotheses in the 2018 presidential election in Mexico, after which the elected President, Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador, enjoyed a strong presidential approval during the honeymoon period. Following the argument of this study, we expect that voters who identify with the newly elected President are likely to behave in a different way than voters who identify with opposition parties. Moreover, we expect that non-economic attitudes are particularly important as predictors of presidential approval during the honeymoon period.

3. The 2018 presidential election in Mexico

Before the 2018 presidential election, the party system in Mexico was one of the most stable in Latin America (Mainwaring 2018).⁴ Since the transition to democracy in 1997, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), and the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) had remained the main parties in Mexico. The three major parties had fairly strong party organizations, meaningful party labels (Mainwaring 2018), and partisanship was widespread among the electorate (Castro Cornejo, 2019) making partisan in-group, out-group biases more prevalent (Carlin and Love, 2018; Castro Cornejo, 2021b). In fact, excluding independent leaners, 60 percent of the electorate self-identified with a political party during the 2018 presidential election (Beltrán et al., 2020). However, the 2018 presidential election represents a breakdown of the traditional party system. Morena and its candidate, López Obrador, managed to win both the country's presidency and the legislative majority with its partisan allies in Congress.

López Obrador had run for the presidency in 2006 as a PRD candidate, but lost the election to Felipe Calderón, the candidate for the National Action Party (PAN), by less than one percent of the vote share. At the time, López Obrador argued that a corrupt elite, the so-called “*mafia del poder*” (political mafia), had stolen the presidency away from him. In 2012, when López Obrador lost by just over five points to the PRI candidate—Enrique Peña Nieto—the former denounced the electoral result again as a fraud, organized by a corrupt elite through massive vote buying in support of the PRI campaign. After the 2012 presidential election, López Obrador resigned from the PRD and founded, along with his political allies, a new party—Morena—which backed his third bid for the presidency. In 2018, his campaign focused its message primarily on denouncing the corruption of the PRI and PAN governments, energizing

² Singer and Carlin (2013) find that voters' reliance on prospective expectations is more prevalent during the first months of the presidential term. In contrast, retrospective evaluations gains traction as the incumbent's record develops.

³ Carey and Lebo (2006) finds that retrospective valuations play no part in explaining support for the governing party in the first six months of Tony Blair's administration in the UK.

⁴ For the period 1990–2015, the party systems of Mexico, Uruguay, the Dominican Republic, and Chile registered almost perfect stability in the main contenders in their presidential elections. When additional indicators (inter-party electoral competition and stability of the parties' ideological positions) are added, Uruguay, Mexico, and Chile are the most stable party systems in Latin America (Mainwaring 2018).

the internal market, and repealing the neoliberal structural reforms approved by the six-year term of Enrique Peña Nieto (Castro Cornejo et al., 2020).

Unlike the previous years, the 2018 political conditions in Mexico represented an ideal context for López Obrador to mobilize voters against the political establishment. According to the 2018 National Election Study,⁵ the Mexican electorate was quite critical of the situation in the country, registering the most unfavorable opinions since the study was first conducted in 1997: two thirds of voters considered that the economic situation in the country was worse than in the previous term. Likewise, the president's approval ratings were the lowest reported by the CSES: only 18% of voters approved the performance of Enrique Peña Nieto; well below previous presidents such as Vicente Fox (67%) and Felipe Calderón (54%). At the same time, most voters reported being angry with the country's situation. On a scale of 0–10, where 0 is “not angry” and 10 “very angry,” the average is 7.1 (7.5 among independent voters; 7.2 among voters who identify with MORENA; 6.8 among PAN partisans; 6.7 among PRI partisans, CSES 2019).

On July 2020, López Obrador won the presidential election with 53 percent of the vote share and his electoral coalition won the majority in Congress. Since Mexico's transition to democracy in 2000, this was the first time that a presidential candidate received more than 50 percent of the vote share. As Fig. 1 shows, his government was inaugurated on December 1st with a solid presidential approval of between 75 and 80 percent, which remained stable during the first year of his Presidency, according to several polling firms in Mexico. As it is expected, presidential approval is not just made up by the Lopez Obrador voters, but opposition voters as well. To study the composition and changes of presidential approval in this case, we rely on the National Election Study, which included a four-wave panel survey. Consistent with the honeymoon Hypothesis, Fig. 2 reports that most PAN and PRI voters measured in wave 3 (July 2018) approved of López Obrador government in wave 4 (February 2019) of the panel survey. As expected, the vast majority of the Lopez Obrador voters approved of his government in February 2020.

In comparative perspective, as Fig. 3 shows, López Obrador's honeymoon is also higher than previous Mexican presidents such as Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón, who began their terms with a strong presidential approval. In the Latin American context, López Obrador's approval is similar to that of Rafael Correa (Ecuador), Mauricio Funes (El Salvador) and Juan Carlos Varela (Panamá). In other words, while certainly strong compared to the average of the region, López Obrador's approval does not represent an outlier. In fact, Fig. 3 also shows that López Obrador's approval rating is following what it is expected by the presidential cycle literature (Carlin and Martínez-Gallardo 2019): a honeymoon period followed by a decrease after a year in government, in this specific case, of about 15 percentage-points.

In the next section, we explain the operationalization of our research, which seeks to uncover the individual level variables associated with strong presidential approval during the honeymoon period. Moreover, it seeks to identify the factors associated with presidential approval during the first months of the new administration, which are expected to vary across partisan groups.

4. Empirical strategy

This research relies on the 2018 Mexico's National Election Study, which is part of the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems*. The study was conducted as a nationally representative panel survey representative including four waves. This work focuses on the questions that were measured in the last two postelection surveys: waves 3 (July 2018) and 4 (February 2019), which have 6 months of difference between them (see Table 1).

To evaluate the dependent variable of this study, presidential approval, the analysis relies on the following question: “In general, do you agree or disagree with the way President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has governed?”, for which 82 percent of respondents reported approving López Obrador's performance as president.⁶ To measure partisanship, we rely on the following question: “Regardless of the party you have voted for or plan to vote for, do you normally consider yourself *panista*, *priista*, *perredista*, or do you identify with Morena or some other party?” In wave 3 of the panel survey, partisanship is made up as follows: Morena (29%), PAN (17%), PRI (18%), other parties (5%), independent voters (29%), did not know/did not answer (2%). Therefore, we have enough observations to separate the models across the main partisan groups.

In terms of the second dependent variable of this study, while we cannot measure change of Lopez Obrador's presidential approval from wave 3 to wave 4—since he was not president yet in wave 3—we rely on an indirect strategy.⁷ We measure the change of López Obrador favorability relying on the following feeling thermometer, which was included in both waves: “On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means that you don't like him at all and 10 means that you really like him, how would you rate Andrés Manuel López Obrador?”. Subsequently, a new variable was created estimating the difference of the López Obrador's favorability between wave 4 and wave 3 (positive values indicate higher favorability; negative values indicate lower favorability). As Fig. 4 shows, more than 50 percent of the voters in the sample improved their opinion of López Obrador (26 percent lowered their opinion and 14 percent remained the same).

To identify which variables are associated with high presidential approval, similar to the operationalization of Lopez Obrador's opinion favorability, the models that we present in the following section include voters' change in perception of the economy, insecurity, corruption, political efficacy, and satisfaction of democracy. These variables are likely to be affected by the honeymoon period, therefore, we measure the *difference* of voters' responses to these questions between wave 3 and 4 for each variable. This is particularly the case of economic retrospective evaluations, which asks about the state of the economy compared to the prior 12 months (when López Obrador was not president yet) but reports an important improvement.⁸ In that sense, the honeymoon is likely to be responsible for shifts in retrospective economic evaluations. We also include control variables to confirm that our results are not driven by omitted variables. The models contain political variables such as voters' perception about which is the most important problem the country is facing, because presidential approval might not be driven by voters' evaluations of certain issues but the fact that voters might outweigh some issues more than others. Similarly, we include voters' self-reported anger about the situation in the country and an index of populist attitudes based on five questions⁹ included in the survey, since it is possible that instead of partisanship, voters' populist attitudes or anger can explain why voters support the government of a

⁶ See Table A2 in the Appendix for complete question wordings in Spanish and English.

⁷ It is important to highlight that Lopez Obrador favorability is strongly connected to presidential approval. For example, in wave 4, when he was already President, the correlation of such variables was 0.69.

⁸ Table A3 in the Appendix reports descriptive statistics of each variable used in the empirical section of this paper.

⁹ Based on a factor analysis, the following four questions registered a common latent dimension of “Tell me if you totally agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree: Most politicians don't care about the people/Politicians are the main problem in Mexico/The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions/Most politicians only care about the interests of the rich and powerful. Later on, an additive index was constructed. This index reports a high degree of reliability based on Cronbach's alpha (0.72). Subsequently, the index was rescaled from 0 to 1 to facilitate its interpretation.

⁵ See Table A1 in the Appendix for details on the survey design.

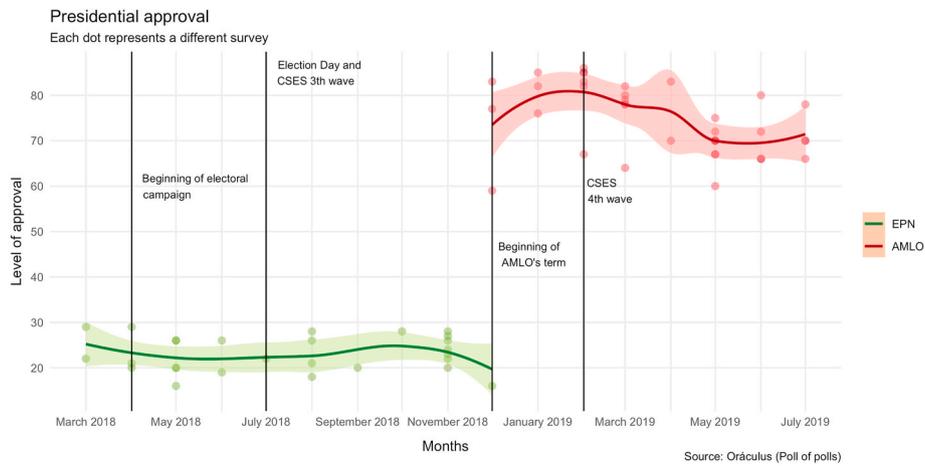


Fig. 1. Presidential approval in Mexico (2018–2019).

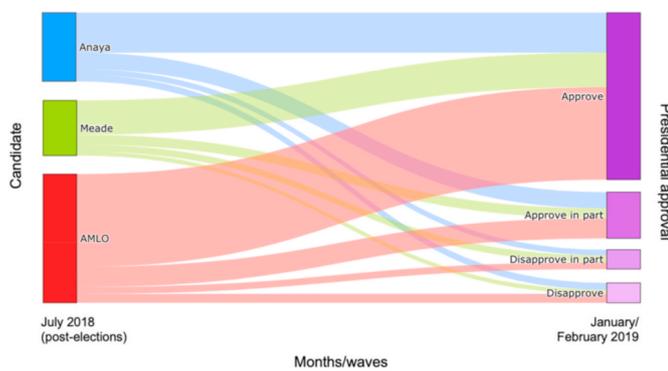


Fig. 2. Transition from vote choice (wave 3) to presidential approval (wave 4).

populist politician like Lopez Obrador (Bruhn, 2012). We also include socioeconomic variables such as age, gender, and level of education to ensure the robustness of our analysis.

5. Results

Table 2 displays the results of the OLS models, in which the dependent variable is the respondent’s change in opinion of López Obrador between waves 3 and 4 of the panel survey. Consistent with the argument of this study, Table 2 shows that the change in Lopez Obrador’s feeling thermometer varies across partisan groups. Interestingly, out-partisans are the most likely voters to improve their opinion of López

Obrador ($p < 0.01$) compared to any other partisan group, even when control variables are included in the model. Consistent with the honeymoon Hypothesis, this means that during this period many out-partisans bandwagoned in favor of the newly elected president, López Obrador. Even though they do not share partisanship, they support his work during the first part of the presidential term. While we expected that independents were also likely to update their opinion of López Obrador, consistent with prior studies in American politics, they improved their opinion in a fairly similar way than Morena partisans. To better understand the substantive impact of partisanship, Fig. 4 presents the probabilities of each partisan group. For example, while PAN and PRI partisans improved about 3 points between waves 3 and 4 of the survey (PAN: 2.8 PRI: 3.3), Morena partisans and independents only improved about 1.5 points. In other words, Table 2 shows that partisanship is key to understanding changes in opinion about López Obrador between election day and the honeymoon period: the main source of opinion update came from out-partisans.

Regarding the second set of hypotheses, Table 3 displays the results of the OLS models, in which the dependent variable is Lopez Obrador’s

Table 1
2018 national electoral study (CSES).

	Type	Date	N
Wave 1	Preelection	May 24 – Jun 4, 2018	2600
Wave 2	Preelection	Jun 22 – Jun 28, 2018	1540
Wave 3	Postelection	Jul 12 – Jul 18, 2018	1239
Wave 4	Postelection	Jan 26 – Feb 5, 2019	1018

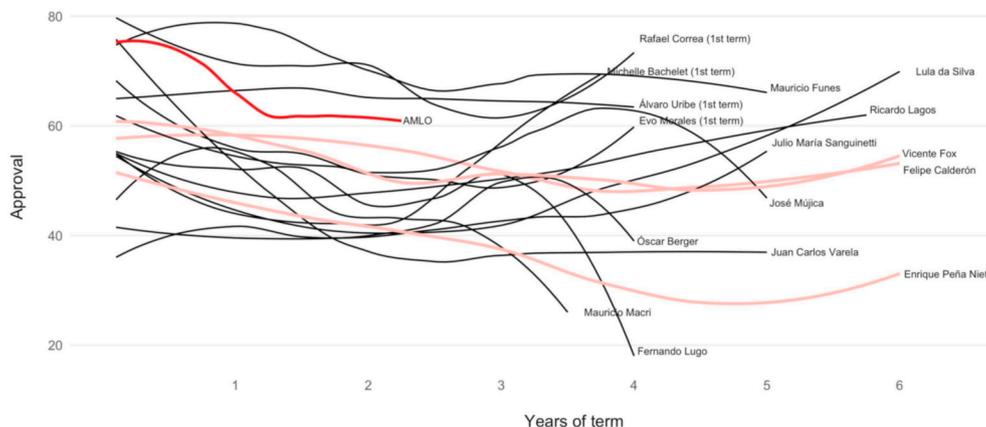


Fig. 3. The presidential cycle in Latin America. Source: Executive approval project (Carlin et al., 2016) and Oraculus.

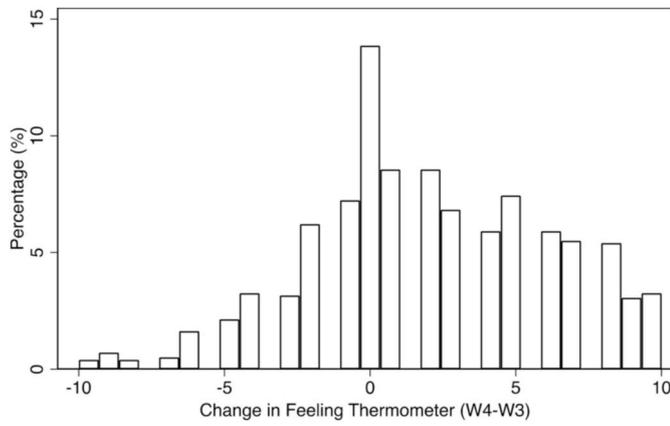


Fig. 4. Change of Lopez Obrador's opinion favorability (wave 4 – wave 3).

Table 2
Lopez Obrador favorability ratings.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Public Safety (Change W4–W3)	–0.08 (0.10)	–0.04 (0.10)	–0.05 (0.10)
Economy (Change W4–W3)	–0.08 (0.11)	–0.10 (0.11)	–0.09 (0.12)
Corruption (Change W4–W3)	0.27* (0.16)	0.29* (0.16)	0.30* (0.16)
Satisfaction with democracy (Change W4–W3)	0.10 (0.13)	0.06 (0.13)	0.03 (0.13)
Political Efficacy (Change W4–W3)	0.20** (0.09)	0.22** (0.09)	0.22** (0.09)
Country's Most Important Problem (Base = Insecurity)			
- Economy	0.08 (0.37)	0.16 (0.37)	0.12 (0.38)
- Corruption	0.53 (0.39)	0.58 (0.40)	0.64 (0.41)
- Other	0.09 (0.43)	0.32 (0.44)	0.39 (0.45)
Partisanship (Base = MORENA)			
Party ID: PAN		1.23*** (0.45)	1.27*** (0.45)
Party ID: PRI		1.68*** (0.47)	1.76*** (0.47)
Party ID: Independent		0.38 (0.37)	0.44 (0.37)
Populist Attitudes Index (0–1)			0.83 (0.63)
Age			0.02 (0.17)
Education			–0.11 (0.15)
Female			0.07 (0.30)
Constant	1.85*** (0.28)	1.14*** (0.38)	0.65 (0.83)
Observations	826	772	769
R-squared	0.02	0.04	0.05

Standard errors in parentheses; ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1

DV = Change in feeling thermometer W4–W3 (–10 to 10).

presidential approval during the honeymoon period (wave 4). It is important to highlight that presidential approval does not vary significantly across partisan groups ($p > 0.10$). As previously discussed, the honeymoon period is characterized by a strong support for the newly elected president and a more depolarized political context—which tends to fade out as the presidential term evolves. However, consistent with the argument of this paper, when the analysis separates voters by partisanship, there is a relevant substantive variation, which the aggregate analysis tends to hide.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2c, among winners of the election, the

Table 3
Presidential approval across partisanship.

	(1) Aggregate	(2) Out-partisans (PAN and PRI)	(4) Co-partisans (MORENA)	(5) Independents
Public Safety (Change W4–W3)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Economy (Change W4–W3)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.06*** (0.02)
Corruption (Change W4–W3)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)
Satisfaction with democracy (Change W4–W3)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Political Efficacy (Change W4–W3)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)
Country's Most Important Problem (Base = Insecurity)				
- Economy	–0.07*** (0.03)	–0.06 (0.05)	–0.06 (0.04)	–0.05 (0.05)
- Corruption	–0.00 (0.03)	–0.03 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	–0.01 (0.05)
- Other	–0.08*** (0.03)	–0.06 (0.05)	–0.13** (0.06)	–0.05 (0.06)
Populist Attitudes Index (0–1)	0.09** (0.04)	0.09 (0.07)	0.04 (0.07)	0.14 (0.09)
Age	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	–0.01 (0.02)
Education	–0.03** (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	–0.04* (0.02)	–0.05** (0.02)
Female	0.05*** (0.02)	0.03 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	0.09** (0.04)
Anger	–0.02*** (0.00)	–0.03*** (0.01)	–0.02*** (0.01)	–0.01 (0.01)
Partisanship (Base = MORENA)				
Party ID: PAN	–0.02 (0.03)			
Party ID: PRI	–0.02 (0.03)			
Party ID: Independent	–0.06** (0.03)			
Constant	0.87*** (0.06)		0.91*** (0.09)	0.76*** (0.12)
Observations	823		246	234
R-squared	0.19		0.23	0.23

Standard errors in parentheses; ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

DV = Approval (0 Disapprove a lot – 1 Approve a lot).

most important predictor is a postelection attitude such as satisfaction with democracy (*change* between wave 4 and 3, $p < 0.01$); in other words, improved satisfaction with democracy constitutes the key predictor of high presidential approval among co-partisans of the new president.¹⁰ In contrast, among out-partisans, more traditional

¹⁰ While it is possible that, among in-partisans, an increase in satisfaction with democracy is causing a higher level of job approval of the president, it is also possible that partisanship increases both satisfaction and approval. Relying on Structural Equation Models (SEM), Appendix C tests such a possibility. Consistent with the argument of this paper, we find that partisanship and satisfaction with democracy are not independently affecting presidential approval and that the effect of partisanship on presidential approval is moderated by satisfaction with democracy. Appendix C also shows that—among out-partisans, partisanship and retrospective economic evaluations are not independently affecting presidential approval.

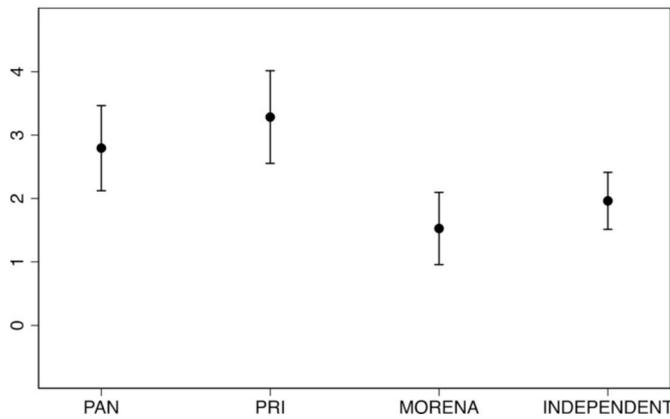


Fig. 5. Lopez Obrador Favorability Ratings. DV = Change in feeling thermometer (−10 to 10).

retrospective evaluations predict their approval of the performance of the new President (e.g. change between wave 4 and 3: economy $p < 0.05$ and public safety $p < 0.10$).¹¹ Interestingly, among independents, both the evaluation of the economy and political efficacy represent the most important predictors. This last result is probably an outcome of the strong support that Lopez Obrador enjoyed among independents. As opposed to the previous two presidential elections, in which López Obrador lost the independent vote, in 2018, he finally won a strong majority of the independent vote (Aparicio and Castro Cornejo, 2020).

To understand better the substantive impact of both retrospective evaluations and postelection attitudes across partisan groups. Figs. 5–7 present the probabilities of approving President López Obrador’s job during the honeymoon period. As previously explained, negative values mean that the evaluation of the economy or public safety became more negative or the respondent reported to be less satisfied with democracy or reported less perceived political efficacy between wave 3 and 4; positive values mean that those attitudes became more positive between those months. As highlighted before, co-partisans’ presidential approval is associated with expressive postelection attitudes: among Morena partisans, their approval of López Obrador increases when their satisfaction with democracy improves between wave 3 and wave 4: reporting an improved satisfaction with democracy (from −4 to 4) make them to shift their probability from around 0.56 to around 1.00 (+44 percentage points increase, $p < 0.01$). In contrast, retrospective evaluations drive approval among out-partisans: perceiving that the public safety improved (from −4 to 4) make them shift their probability from around 0.71 to around 0.86 (+15 percentage point, $p < 0.10$). The effect of retrospective evaluations of the economy is stronger: perceiving that it improved (from −4 to 4) make them change their probability from around 0.66 to around 0.93 (+27 percentage points, $p < 0.05$). In the case of independents, both the economy and political efficacy report a positive association (see Fig. 8).

Overall, these results highlight the importance to study the individual logic of presidential approval. Even in a depolarized moment like the honeymoon period, partisanship is key to understanding the different incentives that voters face during this period of time. First, co-partisans do not change much their opinion about their co-partisan President—they already have a positive opinion, the most important change between election day and the honeymoon period is registered among out-partisans. Second, a postelection attitude like an increased satisfaction with democracy, rarely studied as a predictor of presidential approval in the literature, is strongly associated with their presidential approval among co-partisans of the new president. In turn, out-partisans

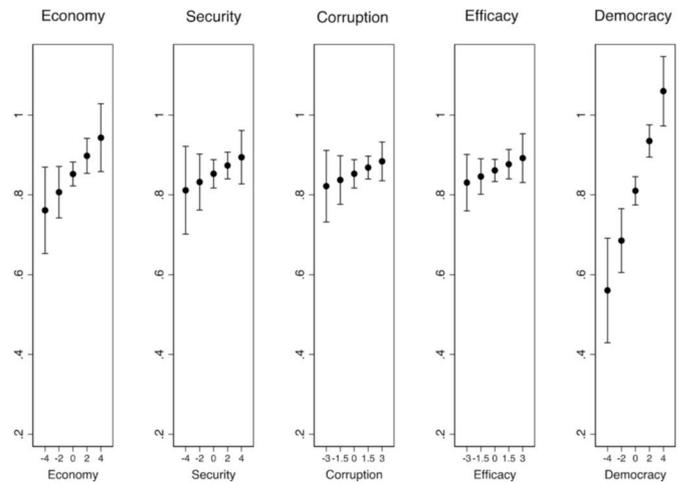


Fig. 6. Presidential approval across MORENA partisans.

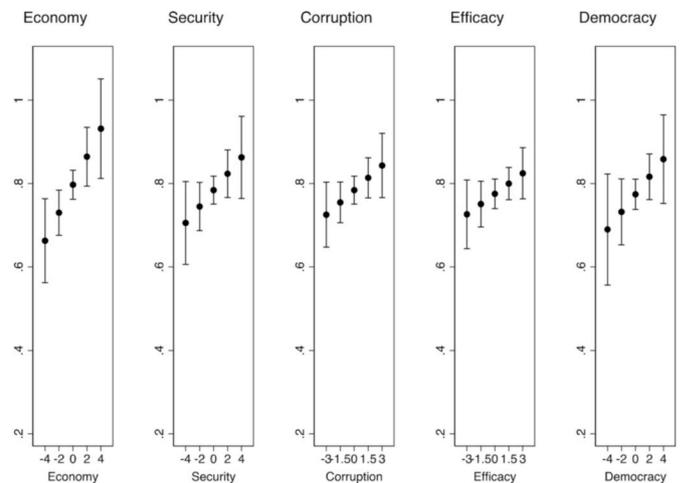


Fig. 7. Presidential Approval across out-partisans.

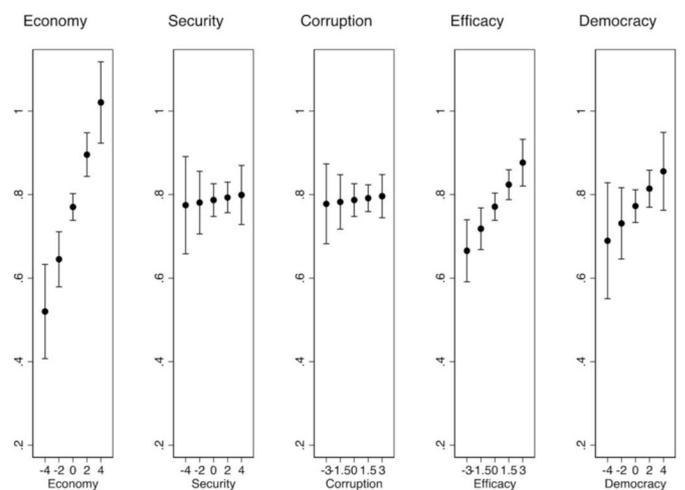


Fig. 8. Presidential Approval across independents.

¹¹ In Table A4 in the Appendix, the PAN and the PRI are reported in separate models.

face different incentives in response to the newly elected administration. They bandwagoned and improved their opinion of the elected President and their approval tends to rely on retrospective evaluations.

6. Discussion

This study makes an important contribution to the literature on presidential approval and opinion formation by accounting for the ways individuals form their judgments during a period of time understudied by the literature: the honeymoon period. The evidence presented in this paper shows that voters form their assessment of the newly elected president with a partisan bias, but in a rather different way that prior studies have found. As the presidential terms evolves, partisanship tends to polarize co-partisan and out-partisans in their assessment of the President. However, during the honeymoon, a depolarized moment of the presidential term, out-partisans are the ones who increased their favorability of the newly elected president compared to their evaluations on election day. The results of this paper are in line with [Singer and Carlin \(2013\)](#) and [Carey and Lebo \(2006\)](#): at the beginning of the presidential terms, incumbents are not held responsible for outcomes yet, making retrospective evaluations weakly consequential on presidential approval. In contrast, we find that non-economic variables are the most important individual-level predictors of presidential approval during the honeymoon among co-partisans: their increased satisfaction with democracy is strongly associated to high levels of approval.

While this research has focused on presidential approval in Mexico, the moderating role of political predispositions like partisanship during the honeymoon period is likely to travel to Latin America and elsewhere. While the results of this study highlight that partisanship moderates attitudes like presidential approval in Mexico, in other contexts where partisanship is less prevalent, other variables like ideology or prior vote choice are likely to moderate responses to the newly elected president. For example, in countries in which ideology is more prevalent than partisanship, we should observe the same logic. If a conservative president is elected, the new president is unlikely to gain more approval from conservative voters during the honeymoon period, since they already approve him/her. In turn, liberal voters are likely to be the ones who improve their evaluations of the president between election day and the honeymoon period. In weakly institutionalized parties, where party roots in society are weak ([Mainwaring and Scully, 1995](#)), prior vote choice will be likely to moderate voters' reactions to the president. Voters who did not vote for the new President are likely to be the source of new support during the honeymoon period. In other words, the out-group is the key group to understand the strong support that the new President enjoys during the honeymoon period.

Similarly, we should expect that political predispositions, like partisanship, influence opinion formation beyond the evaluation of the president. We should observe partisan perceptual bias whenever there are facts or events with partisan relevance ([Jerit and Barabas, 2012](#)), as learning causes partisans to process information differently. This means that partisan bias can exist on a wide variety of issues and it is not confined to presidential approval. Any event or fact motivating people to defend their preexisting opinions can bias subsequent information processing (e.g., corruption, vote buying, evaluations of the economy, etc.).

Some features of presidential approval and partisan bias not investigated in this paper may also turn out to be influential if examined in future studies. Future studies should analyze the interaction between political attitudes like satisfaction with democracy and economic evaluations. For instance, some studies find that retrospective evaluations are not consequential on presidential approval during the honeymoon period but rather find that prospective evaluations do influence voters' evaluation of the new president ([Carey and Lebo 2006](#); and [Singer and Carlin 2013](#)). In that sense, future studies should try to identify if political attitudes are mediating/moderating the association between prospective evaluations and presidential approval or each variable has an independent effect. Moreover, future studies should consider

analyzing elections—relying on panel data—in which the results are contested. In the case of the 2018 presidential election, López Obrador won with a very comfortable margin and political opposition parties accepted their defeat without delay—the very same day of the election. If this study is replicated in elections in which candidates did not accept their defeat or the election was delegitimized, out-partisans are less likely to bandwagon in favor of the winner of the election. In these contexts, the honeymoon period might be a more polarized moment than the election studied in this research.

Similarly, another characteristic that can be further investigated in future studies is the length of the transition period—days between election day and inauguration day—, which is particularly long in Mexico. As mentioned in the previous sections, in the 2018 presidential campaign, the election took place during the first week of July and inauguration day took place on December the 1st, a six-month presidential transition. For this reason, the results of this paper are likely to be conservative. If these study is replicated in countries with short transition periods, it is likely that postelection attitudes like satisfaction with democracy have even a stronger influence on presidential approval during the honeymoon period.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102438>.

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