All elected executives—presidents, governors, and mayors—seek approval from their constituencies. Even though these officials may deny its importance, they almost universally realize that citizen approval is a kind of political capital, which can be enhanced or squandered. Approval ratings are a running tally of how citizens view their elected leaders. A number of political actors carefully watch ratings to judge the range of possibility in political activity. An executive with high approval ratings will find it easier to succeed with the legislature because individual legislators will be reluctant to defy a popular executive. An elected official with high approval ratings will also find it easier to deal with the bureaucracy since individual members of the bureaucracy will perceive the executive as having support for his or her policies. On the other hand, if approval ratings are low or dropping, the executive will find that opponents in the legislature are more aggressive, while supporters are hard to find. Also, in negotiating with the bureaucracy, individual department heads and others will feel freer to make decisions on their own, knowing that the executive’s authority is weakened. In sum, approval simply makes governing easier.

Probably the most famous running tallies of executive approval are the ubiquitous presidential approval ratings put forth by national survey organizations, such as Gallup, CBS/New York Times, and ABC/Washington Post. These numbers are not just presented as raw figures. Nearly every week, the media, public officials, and politically interested citizens analyze these numbers. Approval ratings have a half-life, or echo effect, that permeates discussion of the impact of presidential actions. The president, members of Congress, members of the bureaucracy, state officials, and numerous other actors interpret these approval ratings to the president’s advantage or detriment.

One of the best examples of the power of presidential approval ratings occurred during the Clinton impeachment crisis of 1998. Throughout the
disclosures, hearings, and even after the vote to impeach, sixty percent of the public continued to approve of the president’s performance, and two-thirds opposed his removal from office. Republicans in Congress and elsewhere watched in vain for a drop in the president’s approval ratings. Democrats, too, followed the polls, partly to estimate the political wisdom of standing by the president. The “firewall” of Clinton’s approval ratings sent a consistent message to both parties—the public considered removal from office a disproportionate response to the president’s transgressions. Of course, record economic growth was the primary reason for Clinton’s popularity, but, given the deluge of negative publicity, it is astonishing that his approval ratings were not damaged. Ultimately, impeachment never went beyond the House of Representatives because there was simply not enough support in the Senate. Thus, there is a good argument to be made that approval ratings saved Bill Clinton’s presidency.

Most of the existing research on executive approval ratings is based on a performance model that emphasizes citizen evaluations of conditions in the country or state, most commonly economic. There is ample evidence that economic evaluations directly affect presidential and gubernatorial popularity. Evaluations of economic and other aspects of performance also influence voting for or against an incumbent executive. While this latter research has focused on voting as a dependent variable, it is easy to see the applicability to approval of incumbents.

The key theoretical question in this research is whether the performance model of executive approval applies to the local level. Oddly, this model has rarely been extended down to the third level of executive office: mayors. Consistent with the research on national and state executive approval, a city’s economy can be one basis for judging mayoral performance. However, there are other sentiments about conditions in the city that could also serve as evaluations of performance. Citizens can evaluate cities in terms of crime control, street conditions, housing, parks, public transportation, and schools. In addition, these aspects of urban life can be closely observed in the course of daily life, in contrast to conditions in the state or the nation. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that the performance model of approval could apply to mayors as well as to presidents and governors.

However, there is a major complication to applying the performance model at the local level. Every U.S. president and governor since the Reconstruction has been white, with the exception of Governor L. Douglas Wilder of Virginia. Moving to the local level introduces black executives into the mix. These officials have been studied largely in terms of racial politics, and because of the increasing number of African American mayors and cities where people of color are the majority, race may be a confounding factor in the operation of the performance model in these racially diverse settings.