

Citizen Approval of CAOs in Texas Cities: An Exploratory Analysis of Anglo and Latino Attitudes

Thomas Longoria
Texas State University

Lynne L. Manganaro
Texas A&M International University

While there is extensive research on presidential and gubernatorial approval, there is little comparable research on approval of local government chief administrative officers (CAOs). Using data from a random-digit dialing phone survey of Texas residents, with a Latino oversample, we examine whether and to what extent Anglo and Latino CAO job approval are a function of co-ethnic representation; institutional structure; trust; local economic and social conditions; and local population dynamics. Both trust in local government and income are statistically significant predictors of local CAO approval. These findings suggest that local government CAOs should endeavor to promote trust in government if they aim to increase job approval among these sub-groups.

The scholarly literature on citizen approval of federal and state-level chief executives is voluminous. Typically, research finds that citizen approval of the president and governors are explained by similar factors including: partisanship (Cohen and King 2004; Bond and Fleisher 2001; Crew and Weiher 1996), length of tenure (Crew et al. 2002; Brace and Hinckley 1991), personality (Barth and Ferguson 2002; Brace and Hinckley 1991), economic conditions (King and Cohen 2005; Cohen and King 2003; Bond and Fleisher 2001; Hansen 1999; Crew and Weiher 1996; Brace and Hinckley 1991), as well as a host of other characteristics specific to each office (e.g., foreign affairs in the case of the President).

Currently, only a handful of studies are to be found on mayoral approval (Arnold and Carnes 2011; Howell 2007, 2000; Howell and Perry 2004; Howell and McClean 2001).

And no studies on city manager approval, along the *specific lines* of presidential and gubernatorial approval models, appear in the literature. However, many studies have been conducted on citizen satisfaction with local government generally and/or different dimensions of local services (see literature cited in Roch and Poister 2006; DeHoog, Lowery, and Lyons 1990). There are no studies that explore predictors of chief administrative officer (CAO) approval. Local government CAOs, with the exception of those in extremely large cities, are not very visible, a fact that perhaps limits the willingness to apply or modify the elected executive model to this case. For a number of reasons, this reticence is not justified.

As the level of government closest to the people, local government CAOs impact to a significant degree, the quality of life of residents. The mayor-council and council-manager systems represent the two major forms of government in the U.S. (see Svava and Watson 2010). Depending on the city and the adapted nature of form of government (Frederickson and Johnson 2001), CAOs play different roles. While these different local government institutional structures “translate public opinion and needs into public policies in different ways” (DeSantis and Renner 2002, 97), CAOs are political actors in mayor-council and council-manager cities making investigating their public approval relevant. While the original intention of the council-manager form of government was to take politics out of local government, city managers have evolved over the years into political actors (Alozie and Moore 2007; Nalbandian 2000, 1989; Morgan and Watson 1992). City managers are aware of the political aspects of their job performance and accordingly adopt political roles such as policy initiation, adopting the role of community leader, council relations, overseeing the budget process, and appointing key personnel (Hassett and Watson 2002; Nalbandian 2000; Svava 1999; Ammons and Newell 1989; Newell and Ammons 1987; Stillman 1977).

Identifying the predictors of CAO approval is salient because CAOs can utilize this knowledge to increase their approval ratings among the electorate, the city council, or both. Maximizing approval is important because it translates into the political capital needed to mobilize, organize, and get things done (Ferguson 2003; Neustadt 1990). Due to the limited literature concerning this topic, we develop a model of local CAO approval based on the presidential and gubernatorial approval literature, making modifications for the municipal government context. We also follow Howell and Perry (2004) and Arnold and Carnes (2011) and extend their specific focus on mayoral approval to the CAO.

This remainder of this study is divided into four parts. First, we provide a brief discussion of the challenges associated with studying local CAO approval. Second, we discuss the data, methodology, variables and hypotheses and present the descriptive statistics for our dependent and independent variables. Third, we present the results of a logistic regression analysis. Finally, we present our conclusions, discuss limitations of the study, and make suggestion for future research.

Explaining Local CAO Approval

Our examination of local CAO approval draws, in part, upon studies examining presidential and gubernatorial job approval. The state of the economy figures prominently in citizen evaluations of the president where a stronger economy is logically associated with higher levels of job approval (e.g., Ostrom and Simon 1985; Norpoth 1984; MacKuen 1983; Mon-

roe and Laughlin 1983). While exceptions exist (see, MacDonald and Sigelman 1999) for gubernatorial approval, national *and* state economic factors are included as independent variables (King and Cohen 2005; Cohen and King 2004; Alt, Lassen, and Skilling 2002; Crew et. al. 2002; Orth 2001; Crew and Weiher 1996; Howell and Vanderleeuw 1990). Economic conditions in the case of presidential approval are measured in a variety of ways, such as: retrospective and prospective evaluations of the economy; inflation; unemployment rate; or the combination of inflation and unemployment, commonly referred to as the economic misery index (e.g. Crew et al. 2002; Nicholson, Segura, and Wood 2002; Clarke and Stewart 1994; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992; Howell and Vanderleeuw 1990). For our purposes, national and state-level economic conditions cannot be logically linked to local approval models. However, localities do impose taxes that affect the economic livelihood of the city, and by extension, its residents.

An individual's evaluation of local CAO job performance is distinct from presidential and gubernatorial performance because an individual resident can potentially make assessments and draw conclusions about performance based on *first-hand* experience (Arnold and Carnes 2011; Howell and Perry 2004). Local officials are "known" to residents and more accessible compared to a governor or the president. Proximity makes descriptive representation more salient at the local level, thus co-ethnic representation needs to be taken into account. Representation theory (Pitkin 1967) suggests that respondents may give higher job approval ratings to an elected or appointed co-ethnic (descriptive representation) because they are assuming that they are substantively represented. For example, Arnold and Carnes (2011) found blacks were less satisfied with white mayors than whites. The election of Mayor Dinkens reversed the relationship as whites were less satisfied with Mayor Dinkens than blacks. On the other hand, Howell and Perry (2004) examine race and job performance of mayors and find that blacks living in majority black cities more harshly evaluate the performance of black mayors. While Howell and Perry's (2004) and Arnold and Carnes's (2011) findings diverge, these findings suggest race and co-ethnic representation matter in mayoral job approval.

Research on mayoral approval has been conducted in a single city either using a cross-sectional analysis of a two public opinion polls (Howell and McLean 2001) or a longitudinal analysis of multiple polls over time (Arnold and Carnes 2011). Comparative analysis of a few selected major cities has also been conducted (Howell and Perry 2004). Approval in single-city studies is also influenced by idiosyncratic local factors (e.g., budget crisis, electoral fraud, corruption, and scandals) a factor that limits generalizability of the findings. In addition, previous research focused on differences between whites and African Americans. Consequently, there is a paucity of research examining another important subgroup, the Latino population. National and state studies often aggregate different Latino sub-populations into a single group, which is problematic due to sub-group differences in partisanship, ideology, and other factors. Partisanship, another common predictor of presidential and gubernatorial approval is not applicable to nonpartisan local elected and appointed office. Since our study was conducted in Texas, we can focus on differences between Anglos and Latinos, the two largest groups in the state in the context of nonpartisan local elections. In 2010, Latinos accounted for 37 percent of the state's total population, with approximately 84 percent of Latinos self-identifying as Mexican American.

Data and Methods

The data used in this study come from a public opinion survey of Texas residents over 18 conducted by the Earl Survey Research Center at Texas Tech University in the summer of 2006. The survey was administered to a statewide random sample (random-digit dialing) of Texas residents with a Latino oversample from south Texas border counties. To conduct a study of this design, a statewide sample with an oversample of non-whites is required to ensure a sufficient number of Latino-led jurisdictions. A Spanish translation of the instrument was used for surveys conducted in Spanish. Latinos comprised 59 percent of our final sample (N=362), while Anglos comprised 41 percent of all respondents (N=252) and our final number of cases is 614. Texas possesses a large number of council-manager cities as well as numerous locales with Latino CAOs. This original survey of Anglos and Latinos residing in Texas is supplemented with city-level data gathered from the International City Manager Association (2006) and 2000 U.S. Census Data. Only 30 African Americans, 3 Asians, and 43 “others” were surveyed and subsequently dropped.

Fifteen of the 143 cities represented in this study have a Latino CAO (10.5 percent). For all the cities represented in the sample, the mean population is 308,534 (range 404 to 1,953,631) and the mean minority population is 60.0 (range 2.5 to 94.3). For cities with a Latino CAO, the mean population is 50,037 (range 3,303 to 176,576) and the mean minority population is 74.6 (range 19.7 to 94.3). For cities with a non-Latino CAO, the mean population is 91,586 (range 404 to 1,953,631) and the mean minority population is 24.4 (range 2.5 to 88.4).

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study is respondent approval of the chief administrative officer based on the following question: “Do you approve or disapprove of the job performance of the Chief Administrative Officer?” (1 = approve; 0 = disapprove). By asking respondents to rate the CAO, we prompt the respondent to impose their assumptions about “who is in charge” of the apparatus of local government. While this operationalization is not ideal in terms of whether the person knows who is actually the CAO, it does lend itself to empirical analysis, varies sufficiently, and expands our understanding of the phenomenon of interest by adding to the limited extant literature. Approval of the CAOs job performance is evenly split between those who approve (49.2 percent) and those who disapprove (50.8 percent). This compares to the overall presidential approval average (57 percent) and gubernatorial approval average (63 percent), based on available data using the approve/disapprove measure (Beyle, Niemi, and Sigelman 2002).

Independent Variables

The following categories of independent variables are theoretically linked to approval of the local government CAO: (1) co-ethnic representation; (2) institutional structure (3) trust; (4) local economic and social conditions; and (5) local population dynamics. We also control for respondents’ demographic characteristics. The conceptual model of CAO approval is summarized in Figure 1. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables. The descriptive statistics are discussed below.

Co-Ethnic Representation

The race of the chief executive has not been particularly salient at the national or state executive level given the paucity of minority representation in these positions. With the exception of President Obama, all past presidents have been white and there have been few minority governors. However, descriptive representation in local elected offices and local bureaucracy is clearly a salient issue. The concept of descriptive representation (Pitkin 1967) has been widely applied at the local government level for mayors as well as city managers (Alozie and Moore 2007). At the local level, research shows that minority electoral gains translate into increased public sector employment, redistributive spending, and minority contracts (Sass and Mehay 2003; Kerr and Mladenka 1994; MacManus 1990; Mladenka 1989; Karnig and Welch 1980). Martinez (1991) found that Latino city managers seek to meet “dual obligations to the general public as well as bring about the institutional change necessary for the advancement of the Hispanic community” (46). City managers, regardless of ethnicity, can and do act as political leaders as discussed above. Latino city managers are also more satisfied with these broader leadership roles than their non-Latino counterparts (Benavides 2006, 115).

Just as with the numerous studies on local government policy and politics, studies examining mayoral approval find race to be significant explanatory variable in terms of co-ethnicity (Arnold and Carnes 2011; Howell and Perry 2004; Howell and McClean 2001). A Latino who holds the position of city manager is likely to be noticed and salient to Anglos and Latinos alike. For Latinos, we expect a respondent served by a Latino should be

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Chief Administrative Officer Approval

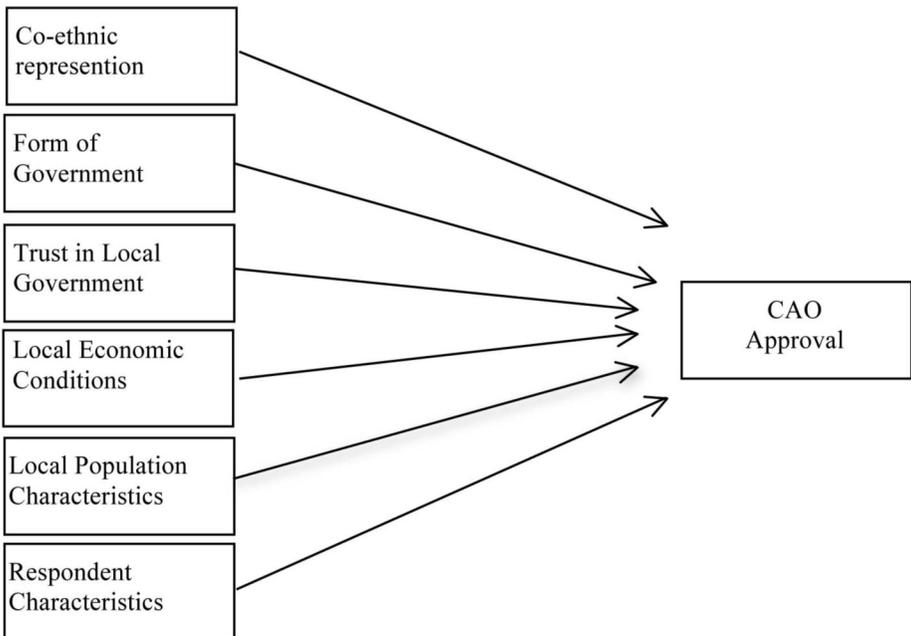


Table 1. Summary of Descriptive Statistics for the Sample

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Approval of CAO	0	1	.49	
Co-ethnic CAO	0	1	.71	
Form of Government (CM=1)	0	1	.80	
Trust in local government	0	1	.42	
Property Crime Rate	1.42	294.72	48.68	19.06
Property Tax Rate	.045	1.019	.574	.157
City population (logged)	5.90	14.49	11.13	1.93
Majority Population	0	1	.72	
Anglo	0	1	.41	
Male	0	1	.55	
Education	1	8	4.58	2.05
Income	1	8	4.26	2.44
Age	18	96	45.55	18.62

Note: CM = council-manager

more likely to approve of the job performance of the CAO. Similarly, in the context of racialized politics, Anglo respondents may be less likely to approve of the job performance of a Latino CAO if the respondent suspects that the CAO has adopted or assumed to have adopted a more representational/community role. Thus, co-ethnic descriptive representation is the best way to operationalize this concept rather than simply controlling for the race of the respondent and CAO.

Hypothesis 1: Co-ethnic CAOs will receive higher job approval ratings than non co-ethnic CAOs.

The ethnicity of the CAO is determined using data books, city websites, and phone calls to city clerks (Blodgett 2008; ICMA 2006). If the ethnicity of the CAO and respondent are the same, the variable is coded 1 for co-ethnic and 0 for non co-ethnic. Seventy-six percent of respondents are served by a co-ethnic CAO.

Institutional Structure

Form of Government. Forms of local government translate public opinion and needs differently (DeSantis and Renner 2002, 97) and respondents may pick up on these differences and perceive a more political context in mayor-council cities versus a more professional/neutral context in council-manager cities. Research suggests that Latino city managers feel "that the council-manager form of government is more responsive to the needs of minority groups" (Benavides 2006, 117; see also Mulrooney 1971) in part because of

these assumptions about the council-manger form of government. As a result, form of government is an important predictor of CAO approval.

Hypothesis 2: CAOs in council-manger cities will receive higher levels of approval than CAOs in mayor-council cities.

Although many variations exist (DeSantis and Renner 2002; Frederickson and Johnson 2001), we treat form of government as a dichotomous variable where 1 = council-manger and 0 = mayor-council. While this operationalization ignores many of the subtleties in the forms of local government; however, it does capture the basic differences and we do not expect that respondents would have an especially precise notion of their form of government. Eighty percent of the respondents in this study live in cities with the council-manger form of government compared to 20 percent who live in cities with a mayor-council system. Two respondents lived in cities with a commission form of government and these were omitted from the study.

Trust

Trust in Local Government. In presidential approval studies where trust is included, trust is a positive and significant predictor of job approval (Hetherington 1998). As political trust “likely affects assessments of the government's component parts, namely, incumbents and institutions” (Hetherington 1998, 791), we include it in our model. Moreover, Rahn and Rudolph's (2005) finding that the council-manger form of government is positively related to political trust also suggests that trust figures prominently in assessment of the job performance of the CAO. Accordingly, we propose:

Hypothesis 3: Respondents with high levels of trust will rate CAOs higher than respondents with low levels of trust.

Trust is operationalized using the question, “How often do you trust local government to do the right thing.” The response categories ranged from 1 to 4. But due to the small number of “never” and “just about always” responses, we collapsed trust in two categories: high trust = 1 and low trust = 0. Forty-two percent of the sample can be categorized as high trust and 58 percent as low trust. Trust and approval are not perfectly correlated. In other words, people who distrust local government in general may also approve of the job performance of the CAO.

Local Economic and Social Conditions

Property Tax and Property Crime Rates. Models of presidential and gubernatorial approval typically include economic performance data (see, for example, Crew et al. 2002; Howell and Vanderleeuw 1990). Gubernatorial approval is influenced by national as well as state economic conditions (King and Cohen 2005; Cohen and King 2004; Crew et al. 2002; Hansen 1999; Howell and Vanderleeuw 1990). In the case of local CAO approval, statistics that capture tangible aspects of both local economic and social conditions that can be linked to the major expectations of the CAO are more likely to be relevant. Accordingly, we include the crime rate and the city's property tax rate.

Crime is a highly salient factor in the local community (Trounstine 2009) and Arnold and Carnes (2011) utilize a homicide measure in their analysis of New York City. However, subjective perceptions of crime may bear little resemblance to actual conditions, given local media's focus on crime, particularly violent crime, in the community. The survey instrument did not include a question on perception of crime; we thus utilize the property crime rate for each jurisdiction because it would be more evenly distributed across cities with varying populations. In other words, a smaller city may not have as much violent crime as a larger city, but they may still possess a fair share of property crimes. Property crime rate is measured in 2006 as reported by the FBI Uniform Crime Reports.

Hypothesis 4: Respondents from cities with lower crime rates will be more likely to approve of the job performance of the CAO.

The property tax rate imposed by the city is also a good measure of local conditions because it comprises the lion's share of a resident's tax burden (particularly in Texas where the lack of a state income tax drives property taxes higher). Renters also pay for higher property taxes through higher rents. Property tax rate is measured as the local property tax rate in 2006 as reported by the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts.

Hypothesis 5: Respondents from cities with lower property tax rates will be more likely to approve of the job performance of the CAO.

Local Population Dynamics

City Size. Population dynamics have been included in studies of gubernatorial approval. King and Cohen (2005) explore whether governors face difficulties in maintaining popularity in larger states and found that total state population exerted a small positive effect on gubernatorial approval (see also Cohen and King 2004). The inclusion of population at the state level attempts to capture two dynamics: size and diversity. However, aggregating rural with urban residents and minority populations may confound and thus temper the effects of population in state level analyzes. At the local level, however, city size is likely an important factor that impacts local governance. The issues facing larger cities are naturally more complex than smaller jurisdictions, moreover they are "more heterogeneous, and the media magnify political affairs" (Svara 1999, 45). Higher diversity increases overall demand, as well as competition among sub-groups, for city services and crime rates are, likewise, higher in larger jurisdictions. Finally, CAOs in smaller cities are more likely to interact with residents than in larger cities.

Hypothesis 6: Respondents living in smaller cities will be more likely to approve of the job performance of the CAO.

Population is the total population in 2000 to maintain congruence with the survey period. City population ranged from a low of 365 to a high of 1,953,631 (mean = 308,533, s.d. = 524,148). Total population was log transformed because of the wide variation in city population.

Population Resources. Based on theories of group power, population is a political resource. In the context of racially polarized local politics, the population proportion of each ethnic or racial group is an important aspect of the political context. When minorities become a sizeable percentage of the population, expectations for descriptive and substantive representation increase. In cities where there is relative balance of population resources, political conflict is more likely to occur as different groups vie for representation and limited public resources. As a result we propose that:

Hypothesis 7: Respondents living in cities where their ethnic group is in the majority will be more likely to approve of the job performance of the CAO.

If the respondent lives in a jurisdiction where their ethnic group comprises the majority (over 60 percent of the total population) then the variable, majority population, is coded 1, if not the variable is coded 0. Seventy-two percent of the respondents reside in cities where their ethnic group is the majority population.

Demographic Control Variables. We also include common control variables in the model including: race, gender, income, education, and age. Race is coded as a dummy variable where Anglo = 1 (41 percent) and Latino = 0 (59 percent). Gender is a dummy variable with males = 1 (54.8 percent) and females = 0 (45.2 percent). Income ranges from 1 = \$14,999 and below to 8 = \$100,000 and above. Education ranges from 1 = elementary through 9th grade to 8 = Ph.D./M.D./J.D. Finally, age ranges from 18 to 96.

There were no Pearson's r bi-variate correlations among the independent variables above .70 suggesting no major problems with multicollinearity.

Findings

In the bi-variate context, we find that co-ethnic CAOs are more harshly rated than non-ethnic CAOs, a finding that supports the black mayoral approval literature (see, for example Howell and Perry 2004) (Chi Square = 16.52; Sig = .000). Overall, forty-one (41.4) percent of those respondents with a co-ethnic CAO approve of his or her job performance compared to 58.6 percent who disapprove. Sixty-five (64.6) percent of those not represented by a co-ethnic approve compared to 35.4 percent who disapprove. In the case of Latinos, five percent of Latinos represented by a co-ethnic CAO approve of the CAOs job performance compared to 58 percent for Latinos not represented by a co-ethnic.

The results of the logistic regression analysis are presented in Table 2. The co-ethnic effect is not found when controls are introduced. However, few Anglos live in jurisdictions with a Latino CAO (5 percent) compared to 47 percent of Latinos that are served by an Anglo CAO. One must also consider that the socioeconomic context for minorities may be a factor. In other words, the conditions under which minorities have a co-ethnic CAO are overwhelmingly Latino cities with very low income and high unemployment leading to lower approval. Thus, the effect may be masked by these conditions.

The results also suggest that neither local economic or social conditions play a role in CAO approval. This may be a function of the cross-sectional design of the research.

Table 2. Logistic Regression of CAO Job Approval

Variable	<i>B</i>	Sig	Exp(B)
Co-ethnic CAO	-.666	.506	.514
Form of government (CM=1)	.402	.366	1.495
Trust in local government	1.386	.000	4.001
Property Crime Rate	.006	.655	1.006
Property Tax Rate	-.632	.596	.532
City population (logged)	-.011	.927	.989
Majority Population	.676	.213	1.966
Anglo	-.664	.491	.515
Male	-.197	.579	.821
Education	.150	.123	1.162
Income	.246	.005	1.279
Age	.003	.792	1.003
Constant	-1.007		
Model χ^2	36.176***		
<i>N</i>	217		

Note: CM= council-manager.

*** $p < .001$.

Arnold and Carnes (2011) time series analysis did find change in homicide rate to be statistically significant, however, New York is not a typical city. Regarding local economic conditions, Arnold and Carnes (2011) were also able to replicate a wide range of economic indicators used in presidential and gubernatorial studies. Our findings also suggest that form of government, local population dynamics, and individual respondent characteristics were not statistically significant predictors of CAO approval.

The strongest predictor of CAO approval, controlling for other variables, is trust in local government ($b = 1.39$; $\text{Sig} = .000$). Holding other independent variables constant at their mean values, the probability that a person who has low trust approves of the CAO is .74 compared to a .92 probability of a person who has high trust in local government. This finding supports past research that those with higher levels of trust in government, in general, are more likely to approve of the job of the executive (Hetherington 1998). Interestingly, 48.6 percent of those represented by a co-ethnic CAO trust local government compared to 29.2 percent of those who are not represented by a co-ethnic CAO (Chi Square = 11.84; $\text{Sig} = .001$). The results propose that descriptive representation increases trust, but perhaps not job approval.

Respondents with higher levels of income are also more likely to approve of the job performance of the CAO ($b = .246$; $\text{Sig} = .005$). Holding other independent variables constant at the mean, a respondent with the lowest level of income has a .69 probability of approving of the CAO compared to a .93 probability of approval for respondents with the highest level of income. Other studies of executive approval also find that income is a sta-

tistically significant predictor of approval (Howell and Perry 2004). Taking the two statistically independent variables and varying them by their range, holding other variables constant, suggests that respondents with low income and low trust have a .56 probability of approval compared to a .97 probability for respondents with high income and high trust.

Discussion

This study identifies trust in local government and income as predictors of approval of the job performance of the local CAO controlling for co-ethnic representation, institutional structure, local economic and social conditions, local population dynamics, and respondent characteristics. The findings suggest that a respondent's ethnicity and being served by a co-ethnic CAO do not matter, controlling for other variables. While we do not argue, as a result, that race and representation do not matter, the findings suggest that one's economic status and trust in local government are more important predictors of CAO approval. Future research should develop more precise measures of trust and approval as well as better measures of ethnicity. A nominal variable does not measure ethnic identity or the salience of ethnicity for the respondent.

Given the absence of partisan cues in the nonpartisan nature of local government elections, it is not surprising that trust is the most important predictor of CAO support. The impact of trust on local governance has important consequences. From the standpoint of local government CAOs seeking higher levels of approval, this finding suggests that adopting tangible measures to enhance public trust is a better way to build approval than improving the local economy or reducing crime. When the public trusts government, residents are less likely to demand transparency (Piotrowski and Van Ryzin 2007, 306). Perhaps when a jurisdiction has many residents with low levels of trust, governments that adopt transparency policies can increase trust in government. This increased trust may translate to higher approval of the CAO.

One major difference in our study is the use of a statewide sample. As a result, the study does not have a representative sample of opinion in each city but we do gain the advantage of generalizability. Our cross-sectional analysis versus a longitudinal design may account for the differences between our findings and those of other scholars. In addition, the dependent variable is conceptualized as a "generalized approval" and we do not include as independent variables measures of satisfaction with city services and other salient policy issues.

However, this is the only study to our knowledge that examines local government CAO approval in multiple jurisdictions. This study raises several theoretical and measurement issues that could be addressed in future research. For example, citizens may not be able to accurately identify who the CAO is in their city, but can speak to who they think is in charge. This raises the question of what is more important--whether they know who is formally "in charge" or if they are satisfied with the individual who they perceive to be in charge?

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