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What is This?
Security, Clarity of Responsibility, and Presidential Approval

Ryan E. Carlin¹, Gregory J. Love², and Cecilia Martínez-Gallardo³

Abstract
The importance of institutions in shaping citizens’ ability to punish or reward politicians for economic outcomes is well established. Where institutions divide authority, politicians can blame each other and citizens find it harder to assign responsibility for policy failures; where institutions clarify lines of authority, citizens can better hold politicians accountable. However, this argument assumes that citizens perceive policy responsibility as shared among political actors and this is not always the case. Looking at security policy, we argue that when policy responsibility is concentrated in a single actor the effect of institutions on blame attribution is different from what the economic voting literature predicts. Divided government in this context makes blame-shifting less effective and makes it more likely that citizens will punish incumbents. By contrast, the ability of executives to control the narrative around security failures by blaming the perpetrators, especially during unified government, can help them avoid blame.

Keywords
public opinion, accountability, Latin American politics, presidents and executive politics, terrorism

¹Georgia State University, Atlanta, USA
²University of Mississippi, University, USA
³University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

Corresponding Author:
Cecilia Martinez-Gallardo, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 361 Hamilton Hall, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA.
Email: cmg@email.unc.edu
In mid-1999, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) upended peace talks with the government by launching attacks on several towns, national police outposts, and banks, injuring 49 people and killing 81. President Andrés Pastrana’s opponents successfully blamed him for the attacks and his approval ratings tumbled 12 points. Just 3 years later, in 2002, the FARC commemorated their 40th anniversary with a sophisticated bombing campaign that injured 169 and killed 27. Unlike Pastrana, his successor, President Álvaro Uribe, was able to escape blame and his popularity did not budge. Despite comparable economic conditions and the similar nature of the attacks, the public’s evaluation of these presidents was very different.

From the perspective of theories of economic voting and institutions, this is puzzling. Since Powell and Whitten (1993) coined the term “clarity of responsibility,” mounting evidence has suggested that institutions shape citizens’ ability to assign responsibility for policy outcomes and to allocate credit or blame accordingly. Discerning policy responsibility is considered easier under unified as opposed to divided government, which blurs lines of responsibility and allows politicians to blur them further by blaming each other for policy failures (see also Anderson, 2007; Hellwig & Samuels, 2008; Samuels, 2004). But this is not what happened in the examples above. At the time of the 1999 attacks, president Pastrana’s rivals controlled the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. According to the clarity of responsibility hypothesis, this divided institutional environment should have shielded him from blame. Instead, he took a drubbing in public opinion polls. By contrast, president Uribe’s control of both houses of congress left little doubt about where the buck stopped. Yet he emerged from the 2002 attacks unscathed despite an institutional environment that should have made responsibility crystal clear. The puzzle, then, is why does clarity of responsibility in the security domain work differently than in the economic domain?

We argue that there are two reasons. The first lies in how citizens perceive responsibility in each policy domain. In the economic domain, the public tends to see responsibility for policy performance as shared between the executive and the legislature (Duch & Stevenson, 2008), other levels of government (Brown, 2010; León, 2012), and international institutions (Alcañiz & Hellwig, 2011). In the security domain, however, citizens perceive responsibility to fall predominantly on the shoulders of a single actor: the executive (Iyengar, 1989; Nickelsburg & Norpoth, 2000; Petrocik, 1996). Centralized responsibility makes it harder for political actors “to escape attention and shift blame” for policy failures (Anderson, 2007, p. 281). Particularly during divided government, like the one Pastrana faced in 1999, centralized responsibility and the inability to shift blame allow the opposition to attack the executive for policy failures with no fear of being blamed themselves. So while complex environments might shield executives who cannot deliver on the economy, they afford no quarter to those who fail in the security realm.
The second reason clarity of responsibility works differently in the security domain is that unified government gives executives, like Uribe in the example above, privileged access to “economic, political and media resources” (Pan & Kosicki, 2001, p. 60), which they can leverage to control the narrative surrounding the attack. If executives successfully deflect blame for security failures onto the perpetrators of the attack they may even spark “rally-'round-the-flag” effects and, thus, avoid political costs. When government is divided, by contrast, shifting the narrative is more difficult because the opposition has access to the resources associated with legislative office and shares with the executive the claim of representing the nation.

This study makes significant theoretical and empirical contributions. Theoretically, it integrates perceptions of policy responsibility and issue framing into the clarity of responsibility framework. We argue that divergent patterns of blame attribution in economic and national security policy are driven by whether citizens view policy responsibility as shared or as concentrated in a single political actor and by differences in the executive’s ability to control the narrative surrounding a policy failure. A similar logic may function in other issue areas. Our study also contributes to debates over the connections between security crises, terrorism, and democratic governability by exploring the institutional conditions under which citizens are more likely to blame the executive for security failures (e.g., Gassebner, Jong-A-Pin, & Mierau, 2008; Williams, Koch, & Smith, 2013). Empirically, we use a unique data set of quarterly executive approval for 18 presidential countries in Latin America, a region with considerable variance over space and time in the frequency and gravity of national security concerns, clarity of policy responsibility, and economic performance. Hence, this study advances our understanding of how the public responds to policy failures in the security arena beyond the case studies and journalistic accounts that have dominated the literature.

We proceed as follows. In the next section, we review the literature on institutional clarity of responsibility and make the case that policy responsibility conditions the effect of institutions on accountability. In the third section, we build on this claim to develop a set of arguments about why institutions should condition the degree of public sanctioning for policy performance in national security quite differently than in the economic domain. The fourth section explains our data, measures, and estimation techniques. After we test our expectations and analyze the results, a final section concludes.

**The Institutional Context and Policy Responsibility**

Attribution of responsibility is critical to citizens’ ability to reward or punish incumbent politicians (Przeworski, Stokes, & Manin, 1999). Faced with a policy crisis, the public must decide if the “government produced [the
problem] or [if] it is the government’s job to remedy [it]” (Peffley, 1984, p. 280; see also Iyengar, 1989). If citizens can discern who is responsible for government performance, accountability is at least possible. If they cannot, a basic mechanism of vertical democratic accountability fails.

The public’s ability to assign responsibility for policy outcomes, and to punish or reward them accordingly, varies widely across institutional contexts. Powell and Whitten (1993) use the term “clarity of responsibility” to refer to the features of the political context that shape citizens’ ability to hold politicians accountable. Responsibility for policy outcomes is clearer to citizens where institutions unify policymaking authority. By contrast, where institutions divide power among different actors—that is, where clarity of responsibility is low—politicians can shift blame for policy failures and it is more costly for individuals to identify the responsible actors. They conclude the public can best identify and punish (or reward) politicians for economic failures (or prosperity) when clarity of responsibility is high.

A tacit assumption that the executive and other political actors share responsibility for policy outcomes underlies the two central premises of the clarity of responsibility hypothesis. The first is that the costs to citizens, in terms of cognitive resources and information demands of correctly assigning responsibility for outcomes, increase with the number of actors who share responsibility for a policy domain (Powell & Whitten, 1993; Samuels, 2004). Institutions, thus, matter because they determine whether policy authority is divided or unified. The second premise is that institutions make it easier or harder “for incumbent politicians to diffuse responsibility and blame those with whom they share control of government” (Tavits, 2007, p. 220). Although all executives have incentives to “obscure the weaknesses of their incumbency by blaming them on others who share power” (Powell & Whitten, 1993, p. 399), this tactic is most effective when “responsibility is less clear [and] incumbents (and opponents) have many more opportunities to shape the definition of retrospective evaluation” (p. 410).

Evidence from separation of powers systems bears these expectations out. U.S. presidents, for example, take advantage of divided government to blame Congress for adverse economic policy outcomes (Nicholson, Segura, & Woods, 2002; Sirin & Villalobos, 2011). Such blame-shifting works because most Americans view responsibility for economic policymaking as shared. Rudolph (2003b) reports that while roughly one fifth of respondents to the 1998 National Election Survey attributed responsibility for national economic conditions to the president, around one third attributed it to Congress. In Brazil and Chile, where divided government is the norm, citizens blame both the president and the legislature for adverse economic conditions (Rennó
Similarly in Mexico, Singer (2009) reports only around “42 percent of the electorate [in 2006] credited/blamed the president for changes in the economy” (p. 221). Given the widespread perception of shared executive-legislative statutory authority over economic policy, it is not surprising that clarity of responsibility so powerfully conditions economic accountability.

But, if as we and others (Hellwig, 2014; Hobolt, Tilley, & Banducci, 2013) suspect, public perceptions of policy responsibility vary across policy domains, so should patterns of accountability. Where policy responsibility is not perceived as shared between branches but, rather, as falling squarely on the shoulders of the executive, the role of institutions in shaping the prospects for accountability changes. Below we develop this argument with respect to blame attribution in the security domain. We argue that the widespread attribution of responsibility for national security to the executive means clarity of responsibility, as traditionally conceived, functions differently in this policy arena than in the economic arena.

**Clarity of Responsibility in National Security**

Although most of the work on accountability has focused on the economy, security policy crises are often equally important for the public’s evaluations of government performance both in the United States (Nickelsburg & Norpoth, 2000) and elsewhere (e.g., Kibris, 2011 on Turkey; Berrebi & Klor, 2008 on Israel; Chowanietz, 2011 on Western Europe). Terrorism and drug-related crime shape the dynamics of presidential approval in Peru (Arce, 2003; Holmes & Gutierrez de Piñeres, 2003; Morgan, 2003), Mexico (Romero et al., 2014), and Colombia (Holmes & Gutierrez de Piñeres, 2012). More generally, survey data suggest that terrorism is a salient issue for citizens across Latin America—the proportion of respondents who consider it a grave threat to the country ranges from 64% in Brazil to 87% in Colombia and 76% in Ecuador (González, Schiavon, Crow, & Maldonado, 2010; see also Lagos, 2003; Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009).

Like foreign policy crises and international wars (e.g., MacKuen, 1983; Mueller, 1973), national security crises often produce “rally-’round-the-flag” effects—quick boosts in executive approval that fade over time (Chowanietz, 2011; Hetherington & Nelson, 2003; Morgan, 2003). Their long-run effect on the public’s policy evaluations may hinge, however, on voters’ political awareness (Ladd, 2007), partisanship (Berrebi & Klor, 2008), or ideology (Arce, 2003); on specific features of the crises themselves, particularly the severity of the attack (Gassebner et al., 2008; Koch, 2011); and on characteristics of the incumbent government (Williams et al., 2013).
In considering how national security events and crises affect the prospects for accountability, “the behavior of policy-making elites, the news media and other opinion leaders” is also important (Aldrich, Gelpi, Feaver, Reifler, & Sharp, 2006, p. 485). Whether directly (Berinsky, 2009) or through the media (Baum & Groeling, 2010), elite rhetoric has been consistently shown to shape public attitudes toward war. When it comes to public opinion on terrorism, studies of the United States show that evaluations of the executive’s security performance, like economic evaluations, are driven in part by the efforts of the executive and other political actors to define the narrative surrounding a security crisis and, when possible, to shift blame for security failures onto others (including the perpetrators of the attack; Entman, 2006; Gadarian, 2010). While these studies do not explore how institutions condition the ability of politicians to shift blame for security crises, our Colombia examples above illustrate at least two good reasons to expect institutional clarity of responsibility to function differently in the security and economic domains.

First, in contrast to economic policy, the public tends to view national security policy as the sole domain of the executive, even when the legislature has considerable statutory power to block, frustrate, or undermine executive policy. In presidential systems, the executive’s “centralized control over the foreign policy domain” is typically codified in the constitution and reinforced by the president’s role as Commander in Chief of the armed forces (Sirin & Villalobos, 2011, p. 340). In the United States, Sirin and Villalobos (2011) note that “the public has become increasingly dependent on presidential leadership when it comes to issues concerning foreign policy, particularly national defense, wherein presidents operate not just as chief executives but also under the moniker of ‘commander in chief’” (p. 340). Consequently, citizens are more likely to hold the president chiefly responsible for security policy outcomes than for economic outcomes.

Along similar lines, research in Latin American presidential systems suggests that the public holds the president chiefly responsible for outcomes of foreign policy, in general, and national security, in particular. For example, at the height of Peru’s struggle with the Shining Path, when asked, “Who, beyond president Fujimori, is responsible for solving the terrorism problem?,” fully 44% of Limeños answered they did not know; the rest were divided between the armed forces (15%), the police (3%), and the interior or defense ministers (13% and 8%, respectively)—all of which depend on the executive (Pérez Crespo, 2010). But perceptions of centralization are not only typical of countries like Peru, with high levels of violence. In Brazil, political elites believe the executive makes foreign policy with little input from congress, business, and public opinion (Amorim Neto & Schiavon, 2010; de Souza, 2008). In the countries of Mercosur, presidents’ dominant
role in negotiating foreign trade and security policy has made them “the only possible suppliers of decisions, enforcement, and dispute resolution”—even when divided government would ostensibly provide them political cover for policy failures (Malamud, 2005; see also Oelsner, 2009). Other case studies, moreover, describe the president’s role in foreign policymaking alternatively as “centralized,” “insular,” “quasi-hegemonic,” and “vertical” (Corigliano, 2011; Latouche & Ángel, 2012; Pimenta de Faria, 2008). The “significant autonomy” of Latin American presidents is backed by strong formal institutional capabilities as well as the prevalence of legislatures with very weak oversight powers (Malamud, 2005, p. 142). In short, Latin Americans appear to assign presidents principal responsibility for security policy.

Whether based on formal powers or public perceptions of power, we argue that the centralization of policy responsibility for national security in the hands of presidents makes it harder for them to shift blame onto other key domestic political actors, typically an opposition-dominated legislature. Given the perception that presidents are primarily responsible for security policies, executives find it difficult to shift blame for policy failures, even when the legislature previously endorsed the failed policy or shaped it via budgetary decisions. Centralization of policymaking authority makes it very hard for presidents to “argue that domestic institutions keep their hands tied, as they have made it clear that no actor stands above the presidential will” (Malamud, 2005, p. 153). Moreover, when responsibility for national security is concentrated in the president, the cost for the opposition in the legislature (or elsewhere) of highlighting the executive’s failures is lower, creating a bully pulpit for the president’s opponents that is unavailable when the economy falters or broad government corruption comes to light. In the economic realm, by contrast, when the opposition disparages policy outputs the executive can deflect the public’s wrath onto the legislature more credibly. Indeed, for an opposition-controlled legislature highlighting economic policy failures is tantamount to highlighting its own failure.

A second reason why clarity of responsibility should be expected to function differently in the national security domain is that security and economic policy failures present different opportunities for executives to create a narrative frame that benefits them. While economic policy failures (e.g., high inflation) generally prevent the executive from spinning a positive narrative, security policy failures produce different options. Faced with a security crisis, it is easier for a president in the context of high institutional clarity, like Uribe in our example above, to craft a narrative frame that blames the attackers rather than the government’s failure to prevent the attack. With regard to terrorism, the executive’s ability to rally the public is reinforced by the media’s tendency to use “threatening information and evocative imagery”
that “increases the public’s probability of supporting the policies advocated by political leaders” (Gadarian, 2010, p. 469). This effect is even more pronounced in countries where the media has a history of biased reporting or collaboration with the regime (see Hughes & Lawson, 2005, on Latin America).

How effectively political actors can impose their narratives, however, is largely determined by the material, institutional, and reputational resources political actors can use to influence how the media portrays an event and to “enlist representatives and endorsers that can more credibly deliver [their] messages to the public” (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 102). Not surprisingly, these resources are unevenly distributed (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Pan & Kosicki, 2001) and disproportionately accrue to those in pivotal offices (including speakerships or chairmanships in the legislature). This puts actors in the minority or outside the government structure at a serious disadvantage. As a consequence, the opposition can better broadcast an interpretation of events that effectively challenges the executive’s narrative under divided government because they can use the resources associated with their leadership positions in congress. Moreover, increased competition between narrative frames—a “process of framing and counter-framing”—makes individuals less susceptible to any single frame (Druckman, 2004, p. 675), and should frustrate executives’ attempts to control the narrative under divided government, especially if the opposition in congress is ideologically distant.

Of course, an opposition-controlled legislature not only has the resources to effectively frame a security crisis as a failure of public policy, it also has the desire to do so. As we have argued, in the security realm the legislature is unlikely to face blame and blowback by highlighting the failures of the government because the executive cannot credibly shift blame. This provides a unique and powerful position for an opposition with resources and media access to criticize the executive’s policies while escaping blame or accountability for those same policies—even if they are in part a function of budgets passed by the legislature. The recent case of congressional investigations of the deaths of U.S. State Department officials in Libya illustrates this dynamic: House Republicans used the resources and access that come with holding chairmanships to successfully push a narrative focusing on executive policy failure.

In sum, the effect of institutional clarity of responsibility on accountability should differ depending on the issue domain. Whereas contexts of low clarity of responsibility should weaken the link between approval and economic performance, they should strengthen accountability for security performance. The combination of the president’s inability to shift blame and an opposition-dominated legislature and the resources that accompany it should bolster
accountability under divided government by making it less costly for the executive’s opponents to highlight security policy failures. In the next section, we test the empirical implications of this argument with data from the presidential countries of Latin America.

**Measurement and Methods**

While most studies of clarity of responsibility have operationalized accountability as the voters’ decision to punish or reward the incumbent at the polls (e.g., Gélineau, 2007; Singer & Carlin, 2013), others have expanded the lens to include ongoing evaluations of government performance by citizens in the streets (Pérez-Liñán, 2007) or in the court of public opinion (Carlin, Love, & Martínez-Gallardo, 2014; Johnson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2009; Morgan, 2003). We follow the latter route which is supported by evidence that presidents modify their agenda and behavior in response to citizens’ performance evaluations. In the United States, low approval ratings constrain presidents’ legislative agendas and policy choices (Canes-Wrone & De Marchi, 2002; Canes-Wrone, Herron, & Shotts, 2001). Latin American presidents do not appear dramatically different. Approval ratings affect their ability to implement policy changes (Calvo, 2007), to negotiate with other parties in congress (Martínez-Gallardo, 2012), or even to finish their terms in office (Pérez-Liñán, 2007). In short, vertical accountability does not take a rest between elections.

Measuring *executive approval* outside advanced democracies, however, is not straightforward: Approval data are very difficult to come by and, even where available, marked differences in question wording, response sets, length of time series, missing data, and temporality frustrate comparative analysis. We resolve these issues with an empirical strategy developed in U.S. macro-opinion research (Stimson, 1991) that allows us to combine approval series from multiple polling firms in Latin America into quarterly time series that are comparable across administrations, countries, and time. This approach uses individual time series to create temporal dyadic ratios of support measures and then computes communalities between the various data sources and time points, generating a time-continuous measure of approval (for a more detailed description and illustration, see online Appendix B).

Using this approach, we generate approval rates for 80 Latin American presidential administrations that span from their most recent transition to 2007. The approval measure is calculated from 184 series that ask questions on “approval” (*aprobar*/*desaprobar*), “favorability” (*favorable*/*desfavorable*), and “ratings” (e.g., *muy bien*, *bien*, *regular*, *mal*, *muy mal*) of the president’s “management” (*gestión*), “job/work” (*trabajo*), “performance” (*desempeño*),
or “image” (imagen). If the response choice is dichotomous, we use the marginal of the positive response. If it is trichotomous with a “regular” or neutral middle category, we only analyze the “positive” marginals. For four-part response choices, we sum all positive responses; if there are five responses, we sum only positive response marginals and exclude “regular” or neutral categories. In total, we use 1,499 survey marginals.

To assure this approach delivers valid and reliable measures of presidential approval, we analyze what proportion of variance in the measurement models is explained by a single dimension, which we assume to be presidential approval. The evidence is reassuring: On average, presidential approval accounts for 84.31% of the variance, ranging from a low of 70.6% in Mexico to a high of 96.5% in the Dominican Republic. Moreover, despite difference in question wordings and response sets, most individual input series load highly on the latent factor, typically over 0.90. These results suggest strongly that despite differences across the data in any given case, this approach generates valid measures of presidential approval.

We capture security policy outcomes with a measure of domestic terrorism. Casualties represents the number of individuals killed or wounded in terrorist attacks and political violence per quarter taken from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD; National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism [START], 2013). Although the GTD includes a wide range of incidents, following the GTD’s definition of terrorism we include only those events that meet at least two of the following three criteria: (a) the act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal; (b) there must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience than the immediate victims; (c) the action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities. That is, the act must be outside the parameters permitted by international humanitarian law, particularly the prohibition against deliberately targeting civilians or non-combatants (see START, 2013, for more details). More than 80% of the events in the dataset meet all three criteria. The resulting data range from the ideologically driven violence of the Sendero Luminoso and the suicide attack on the Jewish embassy in Buenos Aires, to violent militant union activities in Chile and violent acts of protest by coca growers in Bolivia.

Using the number of casualties has two advantages over alternative measures of political violence and terrorism, such as the number of attacks and the cost of property damage. First, the number of attacks does not account for the significance of the attacks. As previous work shows, the public’s interest in, and the media’s coverage of, security crises is greatly contingent on the number of casualties (e.g., Gartner, 2008; Gassebner et al., 2008; Mueller, 1973). Given that events are much more likely to move the president’s
approval if they receive wide coverage in the mass media, we should expect the number of casualties to significantly affect the prospects for accountability. This should be particularly true in Latin America where tabloid newspapers focused on gruesome crimes and violence (prensa roja or crónicas rojas) are common. Second, while property damage, in combination with casualties, potentially also captures the severity of the attack, data coverage is thin and comparability of dollar amounts unreliable.

The spatial and temporal data coverage in the GTD is extensive; yet, there is one significant omission. Daily data for 1993 are absent from the database but annual totals of casualties are provided. Thus, for the models presented in the article we include the annual number casualties divided by 4 for each quarter of 1993. The other two approaches for dealing with the aggregated data, excluding it from the model or restricting the sample to the post-1993 period, produce substantively similar results to those reported below.

Our central indicator of economic policy outcomes is inflation, measured as the annualized quarterly change in the consumer price index from the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) International Financial Statistics database. There are a couple of benefits to using inflation to gauge economic conditions. First, there is some evidence Latin Americans hold incumbents to account for inflation or unemployment but not broader aggregate outcomes such as economic growth (e.g., Carlin et al., 2014; Johnson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2009; Pérez-Liñán, 2007; but see Singer, 2013). Second, unlike other measures of economic performance, such as growth or unemployment, inflation is measured at quarterly intervals in our sample, permitting a much more fine-grained measure of economic performance than the annual measures of gross domestic product (GDP) or unemployment.

Countries in our sample have presidential constitutions but vary considerably in the degree to which the constitutional structure and electoral system ease or constrain the policymaking process. To capture this variation in clarity of responsibility, we use Henisz’s (2010) indicator of the institutional and partisan structures that divide or unify political authority. This measure conceptualizes constraints on policymaking as “veto players” (Tsebelis, 2002)—that is, the parties whose consent is needed to change the status quo—and takes into account both the number of formal checks and balances (e.g., executive, upper house, lower house) and the distribution of partisan power within these institutions. Clarity of responsibility is high when there are few institutional veto players and when they are controlled by the same party. If, by contrast, the preferences of parties do not align across institutional veto players, clarity of responsibility is low.

Henisz’s measure of clarity captures not only whether congress is dominated by the opposition but also the level of party fragmentation. It further
captures the common phenomena in Latin America of parties that are distinct from the president’s party yet ideologically and politically close to the president. It would be inappropriate to treat a congress controlled by parties close to the president as equivalent to the one dominated by long-standing ideological and political rivals. Henisz’s measure helps account for this nuance. Online Appendix C graphs the index by country and illustrates its validity with two examples.

We include three controls. Unemployment is measured as the annualized unemployment rate with data from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. These data are a much noisier measure of economic conditions than inflation as they are more prone to political manipulation and poor survey samples. In addition, some countries in the sample measure national unemployment, others measure it only in urban areas or in the national capital. The results below are unchanged if unemployment is excluded from the model. From the literature on terrorism, we use two common controls. While all the countries in our sample reach a minimum level of democracy (a Polity score of 5 or greater), we include the Polity measure in the model to account for the remaining variance in the quality of democracy. Results using just those administrations scoring greater than 7 on the Polity scale produce substantively similar results. It is also possible that either poorer or wealthier countries experience greater levels of terrorism (e.g., Li, 2005), so we also include GDP/capita (Penn World Tables). Descriptive statistics for the variables are shown in Table A.2 in online Appendix A.

To test the contention that clarity of responsibility functions differently depending on the policy domain, we use a dynamic Koyck (autoregressive) model with either country-fixed effects or clustered standard errors to address heteroskedasticity induced by the panel structure of the data. We settled on the Koyck model structure after estimating the more general autoregressive distributed lag (ADL) model and finding no significant direct short-run effect of the lagged exogenous variables on executive approval (De Boef & Keele, 2008; Williams & Whitten, 2012). Furthermore, the $R^2$ of the more general ADL model was only .6% larger than the restricted model. The negligible change in model fit is also reflected in the minimal differences in Akaike’s Information Criteria (AICs; .9%) and Bayesian’s information criteria (BICs; .3%). Thus, all models below feature Koyck specifications as none of the lagged exogenous variables were significant, the model fits are nearly identical, and the ADL model specification induces substantially more multicollinearity and shortens some series.

A dynamic model is theoretically justified by evidence that executive approval is a dynamic process. Keele and Kelly (2006) show that not modeling a dynamic data generating process when one exists can lead to substantial
specification bias. In contrast to Achen (2000), they also show that excluding an autoregressive term is more likely to induce bias than to attenuate it. This argument is further supported by evidence from Beck and Katz (2011). Our diagnostics found that the first lag of the dependent variable accounts for the strong autoregressive properties of the dependent variable series. Arellano and Bond (1991)/Cumby and Huizinga (1992) panel autocorrelation tests show no residual correlation for up to three lags, and a Fischer panel unit-root test suggests that the series are stationary, indicating the appropriateness of an autoregressive model.

Findings

Let us restate the main empirical expectations derived from our argument. Most broadly, we expect the conditioning effect of institutions to differ across policy domains depending on whether the public sees policy responsibility as diffused across multiple political actors or as concentrated in one political actor. Specifically, more complex institutional environments should weaken accountability for economic outcomes but strengthen accountability for security outcomes. Conversely, in contexts of high clarity of responsibility accountability for the economy should be strong but accountability for security should be weak.

Results are displayed in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 shows the short-run direct and conditional effects of terrorism, inflation, and clarity of responsibility on executive approval. At the outset, we wish to note that our analysis reproduces a key inference of previous work on accountability in the economic arena: Adverse economic conditions have a direct negative effect on executive approval. That is, as inflation rises, presidential approval falls. Moreover, in line with the traditional clarity of responsibility hypothesis and our own expectations, citizens are less likely to punish a president for failures in the economic domain in contexts of low clarity of responsibility. In other words, accountability suffers as assigning responsibility for policy outcomes becomes trickier.

While the economic results fit the standard clarity responsibility hypothesis from Europe and the United States, they run counter to a long literature that views Latin American democracies as “delegative” to the executive (O’Donell, 1994). Like other recent work on incumbent support and clarity of responsibility (Johnson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2009; Samuels, 2004), our findings suggest that Latin American publics do not see presidents as solely responsible for policy performance but rather assign legislatures some responsibility for economic policy outcomes.

In the security domain, however, the relationship between clarity of responsibility and accountability works differently. Where the institutional
context is less complex (and clarity of responsibility high), terrorist attacks do not sink presidents’ support. In fact, they produce a slight rally. Such a boost is consistent with our argument that unified government lets presidents control the narrative surrounding the terrorist attack. By contrast, presidential approval is sensitive to breaches in security when the political-institutional environment is more complex. Again, this result resonates with our argument that when perceptions of policy responsibility for security are concentrated, the institutional opposition will more successfully shift blame onto the president. Results in Table 1 hold with clustered standard errors (I) or country-fixed effects (II).

Table 1. Clarity of Responsibility, Terrorism, the Economy, and Executive Approval in Latin America.

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<td>Clarity of responsibility × Inflation</td>
<td>−0.117****</td>
<td>−0.105***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>0.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity of responsibility × Casualties</td>
<td>0.032****</td>
<td>0.029*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>−0.022</td>
<td>−0.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.068</td>
<td>0.091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ln(GDP/capita)</td>
<td>1.444****</td>
<td>0.430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.442</td>
<td>2.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polity</td>
<td>−0.356*</td>
<td>−0.225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.197</td>
<td>0.275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−5.696</td>
<td>1.552</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.701</td>
<td>14.890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1,068</td>
<td>1,068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(R^2)</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Entries in the table are estimates from a Koyck (autoregressive) model. Standard errors in italics. GDP = gross domestic product. 
* \(p \leq .1\). ** \(p \leq .05\). *** \(p \leq .01\).
Table 2 displays the long-run multipliers for the variables in the model estimated via the Bewley (1979) transformation. Because the effects of a change in inflation and casualties in a particular quarter reverberate through the approval time series via the autoregressive term, the full effect of either variable is not immediately observed. The long-run multiplier depicts the full effect of a change in an exogenous variable through all subsequent quarters in the series (De Boef & Keele, 2008; Williams & Whitten, 2012). The results in both model specifications suggest clarity of responsibility conditions the long-run effect of policy outcomes in line with our theoretical expectations and with the short-run effects above.

As our key theoretical relationship of interest is the conditioning effect of clarity of responsibility, we calculate the marginal effects of economic (inflation) and security (casualties) policy outcomes at different levels of clarity of responsibility. Figure 1 graphs the long-run multipliers for inflation (and corresponding 90% confidence intervals) across the observed range of clarity of responsibility. It clearly illustrates how, as clarity of responsibility decreases, the effect of inflation on presidential approval shrinks. When clarity is at .12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clustered SE</td>
<td>Fixed effects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clarity of responsibility</td>
<td>16.210</td>
<td>19.760*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>13.630</td>
<td>11.840</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inflation</td>
<td>0.056</td>
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<td>0.092</td>
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<tr>
<td>Terrorism casualties</td>
<td>−0.100***</td>
<td>−0.072*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity of responsibility × Inflation</td>
<td>−1.059**</td>
<td>−0.760***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.404</td>
<td>0.366</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clarity of responsibility × Casualties</td>
<td>0.289***</td>
<td>0.207*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td>0.112</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>−0.201</td>
<td>−0.345</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.607</td>
<td>0.654</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ln(GDP/capita)</td>
<td>13.060***</td>
<td>3.126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.849</td>
<td>14.520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polity</td>
<td>−3.226*</td>
<td>−1.632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.816</td>
<td>1.964</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in italics. GDP = gross domestic product.
*p ≤ .1. **p ≤ .05. ***p ≤ .01.
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(about one standard deviation below the mean), inflation no longer has a significant long-run effect on approval. As clarity decreases, the linkage between economic policy performance and approval breaks down. Thus, in a political system in which policy responsibility is unclear, executives are not punished for a failed economy but neither do they typically reap the rewards of economic good times.

Figure 2 graphs the marginal effects of casualties across the observed range of clarity of responsibility. This figure supports our contention that the conditioning effects of clarity of responsibility on executive approval in the security domain are quite different than in the economic domain. Presidents who operate with a unified and politically aligned congress see their approval ratings rise with terrorism casualties. We argue that this happens because presidents can better focus the narrative surrounding the event on the attackers, rather than on their own policy failures, in a highly unified political context. However, the public punishes presidents who govern in a highly constrained policymaking environment when terrorist casualties mount. At below-mean levels of clarity of responsibility, executive approval decreases with more casualties.

These results closely fit the Peruvian public’s response to terrorist attacks by Sendero Luminoso that wounded or killed 60 people in mid-2007. Incumbent president, Alan García, faced an opposition-controlled congress.
with few allies. Despite the relative peace Peru enjoyed over the previous decade, García’s approval sunk 7.1 points after the attacks, slightly less than the model’s prediction of a 7.4-point drop.

To assess the results’ sensitivity and robustness, we ran several additional sample specifications. Compared with our clustered standard errors approach, we find substantively identical results if we drop Colombia and/or Peru from the sample (highest levels of violence) or Brazil (highest inflation). In fact, the sequential exclusion of any country does not change our inferences. Furthermore, excluding administrations that score below 7 on the Polity scale does not affect the results, nor does excluding cases that fit the GTD’s definition of transnational attacks (in which foreign nationals are victims or the target of the violence is foreign). While a selection effect between clarity of responsibility and the nature of attacks is a potential concern (Young & Dugan, 2011), we find no evidence that political violence is more likely to occur where clarity is lowest—clarity of responsibility and casualties are uncorrelated ($r = -.01, p = .7$).

In sum, the evidence is consistent with our main argument: Institutional arrangements theorized to govern responsibility attribution for the economy work dramatically differently in the security arena. Whereas the public can better hold presidents accountable for economic performance under conditions of unified government, these same conditions can benefit presidents and

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**Figure 2.** Long-run effect of casualties on approval, conditional on clarity of responsibility. LRM = Long-run multiplier.
even allow for a bump in approval when there are security failures. Conversely, the public is less likely to sanction presidents who face an opposition-controlled legislature for poor economic performance. But this logic does not travel to the security domain. Indeed, because the public views national security as the sole responsibility of the executive, by losing control of the legislature the executive loses command over the narrative and the ability to deflect blame for security policy failures onto the attackers.

**Conclusion**

Identifying impediments to the democratic ideal of accountability is a theoretical as well as a normative imperative. If citizens will not or cannot use the levers of accountability at their disposal, democracy’s promise of citizen control of the agenda (Dahl, 1971) is rather empty. Scholars have therefore tested the institutional conditions under which the electorate is most likely to punish or reward incumbents for their performance in different policy areas and in different parts of the world. It is clear from this work that where responsibility for policy outcomes is perceived by voters to be shared, institutions can clarify or obscure who is responsible for policy and thus, who voters blame or credit for policy failures or successes. But policy responsibility is not always seen as shared. Working from this observation, our theory suggests that differences in the public’s perception of policy responsibility ought to result in different patterns of accountability. More concretely, we argue that when the executive is perceived to be solely (or largely) responsible for policy, high clarity of responsibility can subvert accountability by allowing the executive to control the narrative surrounding the policy failure. Low clarity situations, instead, might strengthen accountability, especially when the executive faces an oppositional legislature who can point to the executive’s policy failures without the fear of being blamed itself.

Our study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it identifies the conditions under which certain institutions facilitate performance accountability. We agree with the central premise of the clarity of responsibility hypothesis—that institutions shape accountability by clarifying or obscuring lines of responsibility. But we show that this mechanism is not the same across all policy areas. Research to date has assumed that institutional conditions with a multiplicity of veto players (divided government, more parties, coalitions, etc.) hamper accountability because they raise the cost to voters of identifying who is responsible for economic policy outcomes. However in the security domain, where policy responsibility is centralized and the executive cannot effectively shift blame, this is not the case. Instead, more veto points have the opposite effect—they give the opposition incentives to criticize the executive and offer alternative narratives on security policy failures to the public.
Second, although we develop this argument with respect to security policy, we expect it to apply more generally to policy areas in which the public views responsibility as concentrated in one institutional actor rather than shared among actors. Most obviously, our argument should apply to foreign policy crises such as wars, which, as we have noted here, the public tends to see as largely under the control of the president. Although there is a vast literature on how elites in general, and the executive in particular, influence public attitudes toward war, the question of whether institutions shape this relationship is still very much open. Beyond foreign policy, we would expect to observe similar dynamics in other areas where policy responsibility is concentrated in the executive such as regulation or crime. Thus, the present study seeks to contribute to a growing body of research about executive accountability in different policy areas.

Finally, we also contribute to an expanding cross-national literature on performance accountability in Latin America (e.g., Carlin et al., 2014; De Ferrari, 2014; Gélineau, 2007; Johnson & Ryu, 2010; Johnson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2009; Lee, 2014; Lewis-Beck & Ratto, 2013; Pérez-Liñán, 2007; Singer, 2013; Singer & Carlin, 2013). Performance evaluations give us a window on the exercise of accountability throughout presidents’ term in office by allowing us to connect changes in public opinion with changes in policy conditions. To date, research into accountability throughout the executives’ term in Latin America has been stifled by lack of presidential approval data that are comparable across countries and over time. Existing case studies have clearly established the importance of executive approval as a measure of accountability, but they lack the necessary variation to test hypotheses about how the institutional context conditions the exercise of accountability. The cross-national dataset we use here gives us that opportunity.

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Notes
1. Rudolph (2003a) finds a similar pattern at the state level.
2. Existing data also imply that the public associates security policymaking with the president more closely than economic policymaking. When asked to evaluate the administration’s performance on security and the economy, fewer respondents in the 2010 and 2012 waves of AmericasBarometer claimed that they “didn’t know” with regard to security than with the economy ($p < .01$).
3. The number of input series varies by country—from a high value of 33 (Mexico) to a low value of 5 (Dominican Republic). Dates vary by country; see Table A.1 in the online appendix.
4. See Table A.7 in the online appendix.
5. Adopting Palmer and Whitten’s (1999) strategy, the quarterly indicator of unemployment was calculated on the basis of the following formula: $\rho = [\rho(t-1) \times (4 - \sigma(t)) / 4] + [\rho(t) \times (\sigma(t) / 4)]$, whereas “$\rho$” is the annual economic indicator, “$\sigma$” the quarter of interest, and “$t$” the year of reference. For example, to compute a value for the first quarter of 1996, we multiply the 1996 annual indicator by 1/4 and add it to the 1995 annual indicator multiplied by 3/4. We followed the same process for gross domestic product (GDP) and calculated growth as the percent change in quarterized GDP.
6. See Table A.5 in the online appendix.
7. Likewise, a time series cross-section (TSCS) Lagrange multiplier test for autocorrelation in panel data (Beck & Katz, 1996) reveals no remaining autocorrelation. Furthermore, models estimated with an additional lag of the dependent variable are substantively identical, and the coefficient on the additional lag is insignificant, indicating that the ordinary least-squares (OLS) estimates of the Koyck specification are unbiased by residual serial correlation (Table A.8 in the online appendix). And, as Beck and Katz (2011) highlight, all dynamic models implicitly or explicitly include a lagged dependent variable. Finally, our fixed-effects estimates are unlikely to suffer from “Nickell bias” (1981) because the series are sufficiently long and the results do not differ substantially from the pooled (clustered) analysis.
8. We also estimate the model using unemployment as the measure of economic conditions. While correctly signed, neither the direct nor the conditional effects are significant. This is not entirely surprising, given the well-known problems of unemployment measures discussed above. Similarly, Latin America’s extreme levels of inequality make aggregate growth a poor indicator of the medium voter’s economic condition (see Carlin, Love, & Martínez-Gallardo, 2014).
9. See Tables A.3 and A.4 in the online appendix.
10. See Table A.6 in the online appendix.
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Author Biographies

Ryan E. Carlin is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at Georgia State University. His research focuses on democratic attitudes, trust, and accountability in comparative perspective. Most recently, his work has appeared in The Journal of Politics, Political Behavior, Political Research Quarterly, and Comparative Politics.

Gregory J. Love is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Mississippi. His research focuses on social preferences, political behavior, and democratic quality in comparative contexts. His recent work appears in Political Behavior, Political Research Quarterly, Electoral Studies, and Comparative Politics.

Cecilia Martínez-Gallardo is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her work focuses on the political and institutional factors that affect executive politics, especially government formation and change and executive accountability. She has contributed articles to the American Journal of Political Science, the American Political Science Review, and Political Behavior, among other journals.