

# Rising polarization may mean that post-inaugural political ‘honeymoons’ for a president are now a thing of the past



*For much of recent US history, the incoming president has received a popularity boost following their inauguration. But, this bump has become smaller and smaller over the last several decades, with President Trump and Biden respectively having the smallest upticks compared to the post WWII average. [Shane Markowitz](#) writes that this decline is likely fuelled by rising political polarization which sees voters less likely to approve of a president simply because they belong to the opposite party from the one they support.*

The first weeks and months of an administration are typically marked by a significant uptick in support as much of the public rallies behind the new president following their inauguration. This so-called “honeymoon” phase is often [bolstered](#) by a temporary pause of adversarial politics between political parties. The media, meanwhile, tends to show more respect for the Commander in Chief and restrains from overt criticism.

The presidential “honeymoon”, however, appears to be on its way towards becoming a political relic. President Joe Biden’s initial [net approval score](#), which is his disapproval rating deducted from his approval, comes in at only 16 percent according to FiveThirtyEight’s polling average. While above water and higher than any figure ever attained by President Donald Trump, the numbers pale in comparison to [historical presidential averages](#) in the post-WWII era.

The honeymoon has indeed seen a [range of presidents](#) from John F. Kennedy (+66 net approval), Jimmy Carter (+58), and Ronald Reagan (+38) to George W. Bush (+30) and Barack Obama (+43) enjoy widespread public confidence at the beginning of their administrations even following bitterly contested and divisive campaigns.

## What is different now?

The spotlight of attention has turned to President Biden since he entered the White House on January 20<sup>th</sup>. His inauguration was the [third most viewed](#) in television history, second only to Reagan and Obama. And, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis, the media has provided extensive coverage of White House press conferences, briefings, and executive order signings.

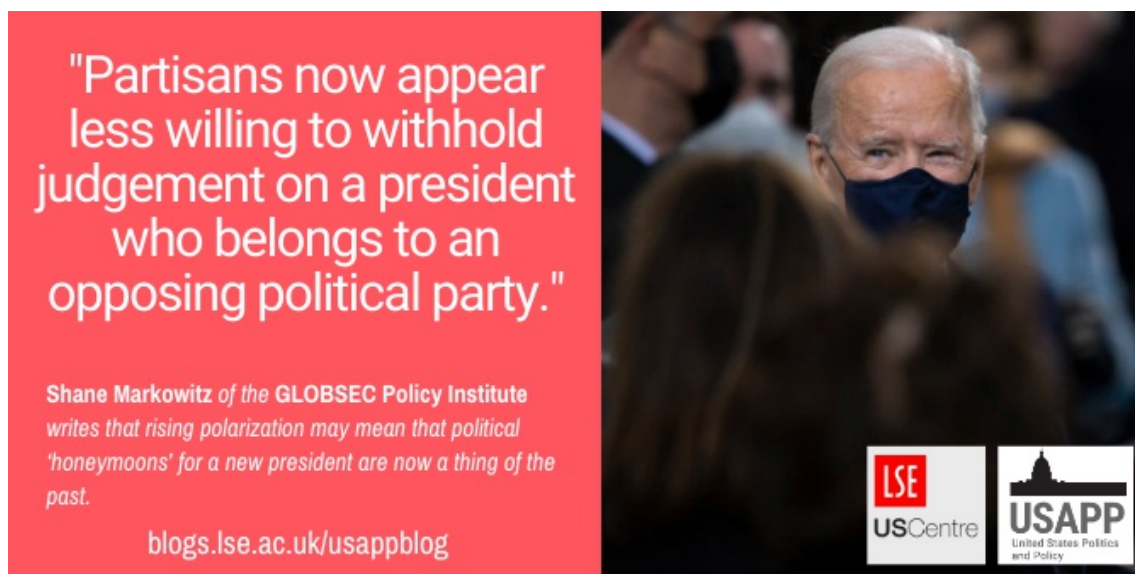
If that’s the case, though, then why is Biden not benefitting from a more sizeable approval surge? Part of it, undoubtedly, is tied to a transition that saw Trump sow doubt in the results of the election, repeatedly refuse to concede, galvanize supporters to attempt an insurrection, and decline to attend Biden’s inauguration ceremony.

Trump’s failure to embrace his political rival represents a departure from recent elections that have seen candidates like [Vice President Al Gore](#) and [Senator John McCain](#) call for unity in their concession speeches.

These conciliatory moves helped [Bush](#) enter office with 32 percent approval from Democrats and [Obama](#) with 41 percent from Republicans according to Gallup. By contrast, a Monmouth University poll finds Biden [garnering](#) just 11 percent approval from Republicans.

Biden’s [disapproval numbers](#) – currently just below 37 percent – notably, are also considerably higher than those of recent presidents, apart from Trump, whose disapproval stood at about 44 percent in February 2017. Partisans now appear less willing to withhold judgement on a president who belongs to an opposing political party.

Yet it is worth noting that Biden’s modest public honeymoon may be part of a trend. Though it is the second lowest net approval, bar Trump, ever recorded at this point of a presidency, there has been a [steady decline](#) in honeymoon bumps since the 1950s.



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## Political polarization is likely to blame

This trend dovetails with rising levels of political polarization in US society. A 2019 [Pew Research](#) survey indeed found that divisions between Americans have increased, indicated by growing “negative sentiments among partisans towards the members of the opposing party”.

The percentage of political partisans disapproving of their children marrying someone with different political party membership, for example, has [more than tripled](#) since the 1960s. And now more than [40 percent](#) of Americans view the opposing political party to their own as evil. According to [Gallup](#), Trump experienced the largest gap between presidential support from Republican and Democratic voters in US history.

Growing partisanship is also evidenced in the withering away of political phenomenon like the “rally around the flag” effect which typically sees the populace [unite behind the president](#) during national crises like the Cuban Missile Crisis under Kennedy and the September 11, 2001 attacks under Bush.

Trump, however, [received only a minimal spike](#) in approval during the first COVID-19 wave, unlike other world leaders. Lest we conclude crisis bounces merely to be a matter of competent governance, it is worth noting that President Obama also received little bump following two major events during his watch: [Hurricane Sandy](#) in 2012 and the [Osama bin Laden](#) raid in 2011. And this was despite the bipartisan [praise heaped](#) on Obama for his management of those two situations.

The US political structure is partially to blame where the two-party system leaves little incentive for political leaders to tone down their partisan message. Some multi-party systems in Europe, by contrast, have witnessed [declining societal polarization](#) over the past several decades as political parties turn to cordial relations given that they often must govern together in grand coalitions.

US party polarization is also undergirded by a rapidly evolving media environment. In the 1970s, most Americans [consumed](#) their news from a few select newspapers, magazines, and television news broadcasts that largely abided by journalistic standards. Since then, a proliferation of news sources, however, has ensured that the public can seek out information from a range of outlets whose perspectives may more closely align with their own beliefs.

An increasingly [competitive struggle](#) between Fox News, One America News Network, and Newsmax to gain traction among conservative viewers is emblematic of this “echo chamber” effect. So too is the turn of some to largely unmoderated alternative social media platforms like [Parler](#) that are known for hate speech, vitriolic rhetoric, and disinformation.

## What lies ahead

Despite a [conciliatory tone](#) struck early in his presidency, Biden is unlikely to benefit from a significant uptick in public opinion without a change in the structural factors underscoring rising political polarization. Conservative news media has already [adopted](#) an “opposition role” as indicated by reports from Media Matters for America, a non-profit media watchdog group. Partisans, in other words, are experiencing a different presidency, even during the honeymoon phase, depending on the news sources they consume.

This doesn’t mean, however, that Biden can’t remain a popular president. He currently [strikes](#) 90 percent approval among Democrats and 47 percent among independents. Relying little on Republican support, Biden is also less likely to experience the often-substantial post-honeymoon dip that most presidents suffer. Numerous challenges, nevertheless, abound including vaccine distribution and economic recovery.

Job approval has historically impacted a president’s ability to [influence congressional action](#) and [secure re-election](#). How Democrats and independents perceive the administration’s handling of these crises could, consequently, prove pivotal in determining the fate of Biden’s agenda and his prospects for winning another term in 2024.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.*

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