WHAT IS IT ABOUT GOVERNMENT THAT AMERICANS DISLIKE?

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

2001
Indeed, elite strategies focused around political distrust forced Republican leaders to continue their appeals to the more ideological freshmen and public constituencies. These beliefs had provided ideological cohesion to the Republican electoral team (and continued to do so); however, this combination of beliefs and ideological newcomers limited Republican leaders. As Fenno (1977) chronicles, minimal experience in legislating was seen as a badge of honor among the new Republican members of the House, for they were not part of the corrupt Washington establishment. This lack of experience, growing out of many years in the minority and linked to an anti-government ideology, led them to eschew compromise and long-term planning. Republican leaders’ rhetoric and actions in the early days of their majority status helped create a negative image and poor public opinion of their House Speaker, Mr. Gingrich, which the Democrats used in the 1996 and 1998 elections. By early 1999, the Republican Party was increasingly seen as the “impeachment party”; its public standing was in decline, as citizens associated it with attack rather than with proactive policy proposals (Broder and Balz 1999).

Public distrust, of course, has not gone away. Nor will strategic efforts to use and develop further mistrust. Indeed, the rhetoric of distrust is part of our cultural milieu. As such, this mood is not a mere background to action nor simply an effect of other dynamics, but a resource and political enabler, capable (at times) of yielding important benefits. However, while those who seek to use it hope they will gain, the cantankerous public may calm itself or otherwise not cooperate with such plans and thus may turn away from those who wish it to charge.

A Reassessment of Who’s to Blame
A Positive Case for the Public Evaluation of Congress

DAVID W. BRADY AND SEAN M. THERIAULT

That Americans disapprove of Congress is generally as well accepted as any stylized fact in American politics. From 1974 (when Gallup first asked a congressional approval question) through 1997, congressional approval hovered around 30%. The average for 54 Gallup polls taken over the 23 years was 31%. At no point did a majority of Americans approve of the way Congress did its job—approval climaxed in 1974 at 48% amid the Watergate proceedings. Such bleak numbers led Glenn Parker (1981, 33) to conclude, “Congress, like Prometheus, is inevitably doomed to suffer indignities.” Sometimes, however, stylized facts turn out to be fiction. In 1998, Congress enjoyed widespread popular support, reaching a high of 65% in late September.2 Notwithstanding Congress’ current popularity, the causes and consequences of the American public’s disapproval of Congress have been studied in classrooms.

The myriad opinions and explanations of low congressional approval can generally be broken down into two schools of thought. The first argues that the American public’s disapproval of Congress is based on policy or conditions. Low congressional approval is an artifact of either a receding economy or policies inconsistent with the public’s preferences. Sometimes the latter is caused when Congress enacts policies that the public does not like; however, it is more likely caused when Congress does not respond to the public’s demand for policy.

The second school of thought absolves Congress of its doggedly low approval in arguing that low approval stems from the Framers’ institutional design. Fred Harris (1995, 92), a former member of Congress and chief defender of the institution, summarizes:

By its nature, Congress is conflictual, and sometimes confusingly, disturbingly, unattractively so. This is another reason for its seemingly perennial

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unpopularity. We say we like democracy, yet we hate conflict. But dealing with conflict, offering a forum for it and for its resolution—these are essential elements of democratic government.

Parker (1981, 49) takes Harris’ argument a step further by blaming the public: “The public often lacks the basic understanding of the legislative process that would lead to an appreciation of the significance of legislative actions.” Although congressional defenders admittedly place some of the blame on members themselves, they generally conclude similarly to Harris (1995, 143): “The U.S. congressional is today, perhaps more than ever, a place of largely well-motivated, well-prepared, and high-minded professional members.”

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) provide an integrated explanation for low congressional approval. Their comprehensive and systematic argument consists of elements from both schools. They argue that “large staffs, moosback politicians, and oversized benefits packages” (146) lead to congressional unpopularity. Additionally, they demonstrate how the American public unrealistically expects members to legislate without the democratic vulgarities defined as “diversity, mess, compromise, and a measured pace” (147). For them high approval scores would result from both more responsible action by members of Congress and a more informed and understanding American public.

Even though the arguments summarized above represent a number of different explanations for low congressional approval, each, either explicitly or implicitly, contain a common element: low approval is at least partially the fault of the American public. Each explanation suggests that a more informed, educated American citizenry would not evaluate Congress as poorly as it does.

Before giving in fully to any of these explanations, we think that it is fair to ask if the American public legitimately holds the views that it does. In other words, do populists reasons exist for the public to view Congress negatively? Or, do members explicitly perpetuate the American public’s cynical evaluation? We do not claim to have a definitive answer to these questions, rather we offer several speculative arguments that place the blame of low congressional approval squarely upon the members. We argue that it is because of the decisions made by the political elite that the American public disapproves of Congress. We present four practices members actively engage in that lead to congressional unpopularity. Each practice is briefly mentioned in this introduction before we present the more complete argument.

First, members of Congress avoid difficult votes by engaging in questionable legislative procedures. They employ these procedures to circumvent accountability. In this section, we examine the history of the congressional pay raise. We argue that individual members of Congress sacrifice the integrity of the institution so they can receive salary increases without paying a political price.

Second, members frequently engage in hyperbolic rhetoric. The hyperbolic rhetoric takes two forms. First, they employ Perot’s quick-fix rhetoric in claiming to have easy solutions to hard problems. Unfortunately, the public hears the rhetoric and is left profoundly disappointed when their expectations are not realized. Second, and inversely, divergent proposals are not debated meaningfully; rather, the consequences are overblown and exaggerated in hopes of demonizing the proponents and killing the proposals. Members not only lose credibility when the consequences are not realized, but in the process the practice demeanes the institution. We discuss the rhetoric used by Democrats during the Persian Gulf War debates and Republicans during Clinton’s first budget as examples of this irresponsible rhetoric.

Third, members run for Congress by running against it. A popular campaign tactic in congressional elections is to bash the institution. Challengers try to tie incumbents to the “mess in Washington,” as incumbents try to persuade the voters to send them back so an experienced voice can fight against the “Washington establishment.” Congressional campaigns also intensify other activities disliked by the public such as negative campaigning. In this section, we show that as the elections get closer and more people pay more attention, the American public’s approval of Congress decreases.

Last, and perhaps most important, the public face of Congress distorts the internal workings of the institution. While ideological extremists bash each other on television as well as in newspapers, the moderates are left to negotiate and legislate. We show, through a series of tests, that those who are most influential in passing legislation are least likely to show up in newspapers and television talk shows. Consequently, the public witnesses a higher proportion of fighting and combative rhetoric than actually exists. Those aspects of Congress that Americans like least, according to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, are those that they see most.

QUESTIONABLE LEGISLATIVE PROCEDURES

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995, 61) argue that “the very openness of the legislative process, which might otherwise be thought to endear Congress to the people, is much more likely to have the opposite effect.” They suggest that the public unfairly disapproves of Congress because they dislike the characteristics that are “endemic to what a legislature is” (60). In their analysis, they present a rather benign view of the
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legislative process. Here, we argue that members often subvert the normal process to obtain outcomes that might not otherwise be realized. In doing so, members of Congress make the process appear even uglier than it already is. When the public witnesses a debasement of a process it already views skeptically, can we be surprised that they disapprove?

David Dreier (quoted in Evans and Oleszek 1997, 25), a reform-minded member of the House, argues, “I don’t think it’s mere coincidence that the growing prevalence of restrictive floor procedures has coincided with the decline in public support for Congress.” We show how the politics of congressional pay raises subverted the normal process. We speculate that both the subversion and the enactment of pay raises causes an already skeptical public to express disgust at Congress.

Congressional Pay Raises

Congressional pay raises are an explosive issue. Indeed, as James Madison noted over 200 years ago, “There is a seeming impropriety in leaving any set of men, without control, to put their hand into the public coffers, to take money to put in their pockets” (quoted in 1989 Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 58). Unfortunately for members of Congress, the Constitution reserves for them exclusively the duty to decide their pay. Controversies surrounding congressional pay are nearly as old as the republic itself.

Lest the American public think this controversy of increasing pay is a recent phenomenon, the congressional history is replete with stories surrounding congressional pay raises. In 1816, members changed their pay from a per diem basis to an annual salary. During the next election, many members lost their seats amid the public's rebellion, including nine who resigned even before the election (Congressional Quarterly, February 4, 1989, 210). Perhaps the most audacious pay raise occurred in 1873. Just as the 42nd Congress was drawing to a close, members not only passed a 50% salary increase, but they made it retroactive for two years. Not surprising, the majority party paid dearly for this abuse of public authority. In the next election, 96 members of the Republican majority lost their seats (1989 Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 59).

The more recent history is also illustrious. In 1953, Congress established the Commission on Judicial and Congressional Salaries in hopes of delegating the duty of setting their pay to a commission. Two years later, upon the recommendation of the commission, Congress voted to increase their salaries from $12,500 to $22,500. In an attempt to keep pace with inflation, members again increased their salaries in 1964 to $30,000. Three years later, they modified the old commission giving it a new name and new powers. The President’s Commission on Executive, Legislative, and Judicial Salaries would meet every four years to make salary recommendations to the president. If the president included them in his budget, then they automatically became law unless either chamber passed a resolution to block them. In this way, members could increase their pay without having to risk public scorn by explicitly voting for it.

The commission was not raising their pay quickly enough, so Congress instituted additional devices. Following the inflationary early 1970s, Congress enacted a proposal that would “make members eligible for the same annual October cost-of-living increases given to other federal employees” (1989 Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 59). It was not until 1981, when Congress rejected four consecutive cost-of-living increases, however, that the procedure became automatic. In 1984, Congress made it even more difficult to prohibit a pay raise increase. In response to a Supreme Court decision against the use of the legislative veto, Congress required both chambers and the president to disapprove of a pay raise within thirty days of the president's submission of his budget in order to stop the automatic increase. In exploiting their newly enhanced rules, members from both chambers passed a resolution to disapprove of the 1987 increase exactly one day after the thirty-day cutoff (which resulted in an almost 20% salary increase). Critics called this the “vote no and take the dough strategy” (Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report 1988, 3523).

The following year, the Senate passed the Grassley Amendment that “prohibit[ed] members from receiving a pay raise proposed by the president unless both the House and Senate explicitly voted for it” (Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report 1988, 2695). When the House failed to pass the same measure, Senate conference on a 5–2 vote agreed to drop it from the conference report. In 1989, the commission recommended a 51% salary increase. The Senate voted to disapprove the pay raise in hopes that the House, where the agenda is more easily manipulated, would save the day. Unfortunately for them, one day before it would have automatically taken effect, Speaker Wright, already under intense scrutiny for his alleged ethics violations, buckled under public pressure and held a vote to kill the pay raise. Before caving in to the pressure, Wright strategized for the increase by both scheduling little

3 Article I, Section 6 of the Constitution mandates: “The Senators and Representatives shall receive a Compensation for their Services to be ascertained by Law, and paid out of the Treasury of the United States.”
4 1989 Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 59.
5 Harris 1995, 18.
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legislative business prior to the thirty-day cutoff and trying to stiff-arm an adjournment vote as an increasing disapproval vote pended on the cutoff date.

Despite the public's rebuke early in the year, Congress was not ready to let their pay raise die. By tying the pay raise to a series of ethics provisions including a reduction in permissible honoraria, a restriction on the amount and kinds of gifts, and a prohibition on the conversion of campaign cash to personal income after retirement, members hoped that a pay increase would be more publicly palatable. These rule changes were coupled with a 10% immediate salary increase for Senators and an 8% immediate as well as a 25% future increase for Representatives. The measure passed in the waning days of the session. In 1993, the Senate brought its pay scale in line with the more progressive House scale so that their salaries were again the same at $125,000.6

Since 1953, members of Congress have tried numerous attempts to increase their pay without politically paying for it. They have delegated the responsibility of setting their pay to a commission. They have linked it to inflation. They have delegated it to the president. They have made increases automatic. Finally, they have hid it amongst a series of reforms.

Have any of these strategies been successful in isolating the members from a public that frowns upon congressional pay raises? No. In each case, the pay raise became public. It invited criticism—not only because of the ends (increasing congressional pay), but also because of the means (perverse legislative procedures) (Hibbing 1983). The following comment from a participant in a Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995, 209) focus group was not atypical, "Well, I think for starters they wouldn't be voting themselves incredible pay raises when the rest of the country is taking pay cuts or layoffs. This, I think, was a slap in the face, a direct slap in the face to every American—that has a job, or wants a job and doesn't have a job." Indeed, over three-fourths of the survey respondents claimed that the pay raise contributed to their dislike of Congress (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995).

Fortunately for members, the public disapproves of the institution for these pay raise debacles. Except for 1816 and 1873, it appears that members have not been individually harmed. In this sense, the strategies devised for increasing their pay without repercussions have worked. A by-product of these questionable legislative procedures is an American public who lacks trust in Congress. Fortunately for members, broken trust in an institution does not typically have adverse electoral consequences for individuals.

6 Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 69.

Reassessment of Who's to Blame

EASY SOLUTIONS—DIRE PREDICTIONS

Through CSPAN members of Congress can speak directly to the American public. With this privilege comes a responsibility to lead, inform, and educate. Unfortunately, the hallowed chambers of Congress sometimes bear a striking resemblance to an elementary school playground. In this section, we argue that politicians engage in hyperbolic rhetoric to the detriment of the public's approval of political institutions, generally, and of Congress, specifically. The hyperbolic rhetoric of politicians is manifested in two ways. The first is the simplification of complex public policy problems. Instead of outlining the difficulty of rigorously and systematically solving complex problems, political actors frequently simplify the problems not so much to solve them but to gain politically. When the quick-fix solutions fail, the process is demeared, and the American public reacts negatively. Second, politicians exaggerate policy implications in hopes of not only defeating the policy but also humiliating the policy's proponents in the process.

That politicians engage in hyperbolic rhetoric cannot be disputed. In this section we offer several case studies as proof. That this leads directly to public disapproval of Congress is speculation, albeit speculation with just cause. Funk (this volume) finds that “the presence of animosity in political debate leads to negative reactions.” This is consistent with the Hibbing-Theiss-Morse (1995, 18-19) argument:

To put it simply, Americans tend to dislike virtually all of the democratic processes described above. They dislike compromise and bargaining...they dislike debate and publicly hashing things out, referring to such actions as haggling or bickering... They want democratic decision-making processes in which everyone can voice an opinion, but they do not prefer to see or to hear the debate resulting from the expression of these inevitably diverse opinions.... The American people want democratic procedures, but they do not want to see them in action.

They suggest that even when Congress acts responsibly as it did in passing the first real attempt at deficit reduction in 1990, “The people were angry at the haggling, the bargaining, the delays, and the visible politicking that was involved.” We submit that the hyperbolic rhetoric of politicians exacerbates these negative feelings. Should we be surprised that the American public disapproves of an institution that it hears engaging in behavior that it purports to despise?

The Persian Gulf War

Members engaged in hyperbolic rhetoric in the Persian Gulf War debate. Instead of discussing the simplicity of the problem, they proffered drastic
predictions. In what *The New York Times* (January 13, 1991, i) described as “the plainest choice between war and peace since World War II,” members could not refrain from exaggerating the consequences. Members who opposed President Bush’s attempt at the “practical equivalent” of a declaration of war frequently debated the resolution on its merits, discussing the finer points of economic sanctions versus military action; however, more than a couple of members could not resist the temptation to humiliate their proponents by exaggerating the consequences of military action.

Even though *The Washington Post* (January 13, 1991, A1) characterized the debate as the “most intense, solemn, and emotional debate seen in the Capitol in many years,” mean-spirited debate reared its ugly face. In addition to her “Armageddon” prediction if we went to war, Senator Barbara Mikulski (quoted in *The Washington Post*, September 8, 1998, A10) predicted that our declaration would “produce terrorism that would wreak havoc” on the United States. Senator Carl Levin (*Congressional Record*, January 11, 1991, S303) also predicted widespread terrorism: “The aftermath will be a volcanic explosion of radicalism and fundamentalism which will engulf the region with an unpredictable outcome, and a reign of terrorism which will be felt worldwide.” Representative Cardiss Collins’s (*Congressional Record*, January 11, 1991) remarks in the House were even more draconian: “War is not just a word. In today’s world it refers to massive death, destruction, and annihilation; hardship, food and medical shortages; economic disability, and countless other forms of disaster.”

In comparison to these end-of-the-world prophesies, Representative Nancy Pelosi’s prediction of environmental disaster seems understated:

Some of the consequences could be—according to the United Nations Environment Program—oil spills equal to a dozen Exxon Valdez spills coursing through gulf waters; oil fires raging for weeks and perhaps months; smoke and debris blocking sunlight, causing temperatures to drop and altering crop seasons which could result in widespread famines; toxic plumes ascending to the upper atmosphere and falling as acid rain; millions of fish, dolphins, sea birds and other marine life washed onto Gulf shores; chemical contamination of air, water, and vegetation; the Persian Gulf as a dead sea. [*The New York Times*, January 13, 1991, 10]

Lastly, members could not help but compare a potential Gulf War to Vietnam. Congressman Jim Traficant (*Congressional Record*, January 12, 1991, H401) made this parallel, “If Members think the gulf cannot turn into a Vietnam, let me tell Members something: Yitzhak Shamir and King Fahd are both singing ‘Onward Christian Soldiers.’ I assure Members that it can happen.”

Reassessment of Who’s to Blame

Hindsight, of course, is always perfect. Certainly, few military experts expected our victory in the Gulf War to be as clean and quick as it was. We do not doubt that these members believed in their dire predictions. Our argument, quite simply, is that when the American people hear these frightening predictions and then observe something different, it is not surprising that they loathe the public debate and “bickering” and consequently evaluate Congress negatively.

1993 Budget Reconciliation

Democrats in Congress are not the only ones guilty of offering dire predictions. President Clinton’s first budget in 1993 is a perfect representation of everything Americans do not like about democracy in action. Partisanship, bickering, multiple stages, slowness, and seemingly debate ruled the day. Republican opposition to the budget was unanimous. Their rhetoric was exaggerated at best, and irresponsible at worst. From the floor, Republican after Republican promised economic devastation if the Clinton budget was adopted. Representative Jim Bunning (quoted in *The Washington Post*, August 6, 1993, A13) argued, “It is a tax-and-spend bill, pure and simple. It won’t reduce the deficit, but it will injure the country and decimate the economy. It’s a job-killing bill from the word go.” Representative Dick Armey’s analysis (quoted in *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* 1993, 2122) was taken from the same page, “This plan is not a recipe for more jobs. It is a recipe for disaster . . . taxes will go up. The economy will sputter along. Dreams will be put off, and all this for the hollow promise of deficit reduction and magical theories of lower interest rates.”

The Republican leaders’ predictions were not any less drastic. Then–Minority Whip Newt Gingrich (quoted in *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* 1993, 2122–3) “predicted that the package would lead directly to a ‘job-killing recession.’” The ranking Republican on the Budget Committee, John Kasich, offered, “We’ll come back next year and try to help you out when this plan puts the economy in the gutter.” Once again, hindsight is perfect. Nonetheless, when predictions are so clearly off-the-mark, how can we expect the American public not to disapprove of Congress?

In this section we do not offer any direct evidence that the hyperbolic rhetoric of members causes low congressional approval. Instead, we suggest that the bickering that is detested by the American people exacerbates their malevolence toward Congress. Indeed, even members of Congress criticize the absurdity of this hyperbolic rhetoric. Ironically, Congressman Ron Dellums (*Congressional Record*, January 11, 1991, H214), a former flame thrower, commented during the Gulf War debate,
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"I simply want to express my frustration with the process, not designed to challenge any Member. However, if Members observe these proceedings, to use the term ‘debate’ is a euphemism. It really stretches the definition, because there is literally no exchange taking place here. Maybe that is a product of how we are here, but we are simply parading into the well, giving each other speeches.” Given that even members are frustrated, how can we demand more from the American public?

RUNNING FOR CONGRESS BY RUNNING AGAINST IT

When Richard Fenno (1977, 914) soaked and poked over twenty years ago, he stumbled across a phenomenon that has become one of the most universally accepted and recognized congressional campaigning tactics. He found:

The diversity of the House provides every member with plenty of collegial villains to play before supportive constituents at home. Individual members do not take responsibility for the performance of Congress; rather, each portrays himself as a fighter against its manifest shortcomings. Their willingness, at some point, to stand and defend their votes contrasts sharply with their disposition to run and hide when a defense of Congress is called for. Congress is not ‘we’; it is ‘they.’ And members of Congress run for Congress by running against Congress. [Italics in original.]

Although a new discovery for Fenno in the late 1970s, the ability of incumbents to win reelection by blasting the institution is unquestioned today. Congress has become the popular punching bag for politicians of both political parties and every ideology. Indeed, Senator William Proxmire (quoted in Patterson and Caldeira 1990, 26) lamented from the Senate floor, “No one and I mean nobody ever defends the Congress. In more than thirty years in this branch of the Congress, and in literally tens of thousands of conversations back in my State with people of every political persuasion I have yet to hear one kind word, one whisper of praise, one word of sympathy for the Congress as a whole.” If members of Congress view their place of employment so negatively, why are we surprised that the American public also expresses negative attitudes about Congress? We submit that the relationship between members of Congress and Congress is one of the strangest relationships in employment history. When was the last time Bill Gates ridiculed Microsoft to keep his job?

Fenno (1977, 914) found that the “villains” blamed by the seventeen members that he traveled with ranged from “the old chairmen” to “the inexperienced newcomers” and from “the tools of organized labor” to “the tools of big business.” All the possible different characteristics of members were vilified by someone. Instead of attacking specific members through unflattering descriptions, members often focus their wrath upon the entire Washington system. An example of this strategy is when Barbara Mikulski, a twelve-year veteran of the Senate who is notoriously adept at using the rules to her advantage, “portrays Congress as an entrenched and wily enemy. Her speeches are laced with the gunpowder terms of combat: She is forever ‘doing battle,’ a ‘scrapper’ waging war along with other ‘tough fighters’” (The Washington Post, September 8, 1998, A10).

Frequently, the Congress-bashing lines are the ones that receive the best response from a member’s audience. Consider three examples. First, former member Dewey Short’s (quoted in Davidson, Kovenock, and O’Leary 1966, 18) description of the House was “that supine, subservient, soporific, supercilious, pusillanimous body of nitwits.” Incidentally, Short has the rare distinction of losing two congressional elections as an incumbent. Second, Representative Pat Schroeder (quoted in Harris 1995, 1) jokes, “Please don’t tell my mother I’m a politician. She thinks I’m a prostitute.” The third example is from Senator Don Nickles (quoted in Harris 1995, 1), “I’m going to tell you some good news: Congress is out of session.” When members score such easy points by ridiculing Congress in front of the folks back home, why should we expect the folks back home to have anything other than a negative impression of Congress?

This Congress-bashing rhetoric is just one activity that intensifies during congressional campaigns. In addition to criticizing Congress, competing congressional candidates also engage in personal attacks, irresponsible rhetoric, and negative campaigning. How does the public react to these activities that we know they dislike (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Funk, this volume)?

We provide an answer by analyzing approval numbers. As congressional elections become more imminent, ignoring Congress becomes more difficult for the American public as news coverage and political ads become ubiquitous. What happens when the American mind is more focused on politics and when the political arena is intensified by elections? Using data from three different polling firms (Gallup, New York Times/CBS News, and The Washington Post/ABC News) over twenty-four years, we analyze 114 different polls to hazard a guess. The dependent variable is the percentage of poll respondents who approve “of the way the U.S. Congress is doing its job?” The independent variable of interest is the number of months before an election the poll is conducted. What happens to approval when elections near? With a simple specification of including only the independent variable of interest, we see (from column one of Table 10.1 that for each month away
from an election Congress' approval increases by more than a quarter of a point. To ensure that this simple specification is not acting as a proxy for a general increase or decrease in congressional popularity overall, the second model includes a time trend. The results from this specification show that each month away from an election increases popularity by about the same amount even though there is a general trend toward a more popular Congress. The third model ensures that these results are not an artifact of aggregating different polling firm's numbers. The coefficient in this specification increases to almost one-third of a point for each month. According to these numbers, congressional approval is seven points higher just after an election than it is just before an election.

The 1998 congressional election cycle is unique due to the timing of President Clinton's testimony before the grand jury and Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's report to Congress. For the first time since Fenno's discovery, members of Congress have a more appealing punching bag than their place of employment. Members have turned their wrath from Congress to the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, much as they did in 1974—the previous high point in congressional approval. This switch in strategy provides us with a good test of our hypothesis. If congressional approval decreases even as members refrain from bashing it, our argument is called into question. If, however, approval increases as members focus their indignation upon another political actor, we will have further evidence supporting our hypothesis. As such, the fourth model includes a dummy variable for the 105th Congress and an interaction term to see how this new strategy systematically affects congressional approval. The results are striking! The coefficient on the length variable increases to 0.38, while the indicator variables show that approval is up twenty-seven percentage points and increasing 1.34 points per month as the 1998 midterm election nears. When we restrict our sample to those polls taken after 1988, we find even stronger relationships (column five).

Once again, we cannot say with absolute certainty that our argument is correct, only that it is highly suggestive that the American public is making a rational decision when it is confronted with the behavior of members of Congress.

Policy Is Centrist. Commentary Is Extreme

We believe that the strongest case for the people and against the political elite arises when the former are systematically and persistently presented with a skewed view of the legislative process. That is, policy is made via compromises wherein the major actors are ideologically moderate senators and representatives who reach agreements acceptable to majorities of the House and Senate. These individuals like Sam Nunn (D-GA) and Nancy Kassebaum (R-KS) are reasonable left-of-center and right-of-center senators whose policy views are well within the mainstream. Yet, in general it is not the moderates' voices that are heard discussing major policy issues; rather, the public hears the left and right. Clearly, this point is true when one thinks of shows such as Crossfire and The McLaughlin Group where left and right are paid to yell at each other. If the informed public does not hear from the center but only the left and right then we could explain some of the Hibbing-Theiss-Morse thesis via an induced distortion of the legislative process. In order to test this thesis—policy is made in the center and the public hears the ideologues thus exaggerating the amount of bile in the system—we examine a couple of different dependent variables.

This reason for the public's condemnation of Congress is different from the previous three. In each of the first three, members alone engage in behavior that the American public dislikes. The display of political hollering that occurs on most political shows is caused by the member, the media, and even the public. We do not think that any one of the three is exempt from criticism; rather, the first two use each other to appeal to the third. Members use extreme rhetoric to gain the spotlight. The media offer the spotlight because they have concluded that the American public is more likely to watch a fight than it is a meaningful discussion of the issues.

Although the extremists get the coverage, the moderate's role in a legislative body is crucial. Indeed, Weingast, Gilligan, and Marshall (1989),
we included a variety of control variables. First, we included three indicator variables for the senators from the states that immediately surround and include New York City (Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York) so that the results are not biased by local news stories. Second, we include institutional variables: whether the senator was a Democrat, was the majority or minority leader, or was a chair or ranking member of a committee. We decompose the last variable into the most and least important committees as defined by Hess (1986). We also include the member's age and seniority in addition to a measure of his or her ideological extremity. For the last variable, we operationalize it as the distance between the member's ideology and the mean legislator's ideology, so that extreme liberals and extreme conservatives have the same score.

Table 10.2 shows the results from the multivariate regression. Certainly evidence exists to support Hess's and Cook's findings. Being party leaders increases their New York Times mentions by over 250. Serving as chair of a major policy committee increases mentions by almost 80. When controlling for these measures, however, age and seniority have little influence upon press coverage. The results also support the conventional wisdom. For each point away from the median that a legislator is, she receives roughly one more mention in The New York Times even while controlling for institutional position. Mavericks, it seems, still get a disproportionate amount of coverage.

The results described above from the multivariate regression contradict the conclusions reached by both Hess and Cook. Two possible explanations could account for this contradiction. First, the more sophisticated methodology of multivariate regression could detect an undercurrent of the media's preference for ideological members that Hess and Cook did not observe. Or second, times might have changed. The media might now prefer to give coverage to mavericks whereas in the 1980s and before they sought comments from the leaders in the Senate. To test which of these explanations account for the difference between this study and the earlier studies, we perform a similar multivariate test on the data collected by Hess from the 98th Congress (1983–4).7

The data from the earlier congress does show that position remains a good predictor of media coverage. In addition to position, the

Table 10.2. Who Gets Media Coverage? A Multivariate Regression Answer

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<td>&quot;A&quot; Committee Chairs</td>
<td></td>
<td>182.28**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(39.72)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(36.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;B&quot; Committee Chairs</td>
<td></td>
<td>37.95**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(18.23)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(12.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.38</td>
<td>(0.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniority</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>(0.62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>0.98*</td>
<td>0.67*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>27.32</td>
<td>9.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(31.57)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(11.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-value</td>
<td>14.44</td>
<td>28.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * p < .05, ** p < .01.

ideological extremity of the senators does indeed influence media coverage. For each ideological point away from the median member in the Senate, a senator receives two-thirds of a mention. Given that the media coverage index for the 98th Congress has a mean of forty-nine, this effect is quite substantial. In sum, this reanalysis of Hess's data shows, perhaps, that an undercurrent of media favoritism toward extreme senators was present all along, at least in the latter part of Hess's study.

How do these results relate to our thesis that the public should not be blamed for disapproving of Congress? In concluding their study, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995, 147) argue, "People do not wish to see uncertainty, conflicting options, long debate, competing interests, confusion, bargaining, and compromised, imperfect solutions. They want government to do its job quietly and efficiently, sans conflict and sans fuss. In short, we submit, they often seek a patently unrealistic form of democracy." The results from the Hess and Cook study would suggest that the media depict a realistic version of law making. Our results suggest that the public are subject to an overrepresentation of those things that they like least in the legislative process. They may be, in part, given the car wreck that they really want; however, the members and the media glorify the fight and downplay the meaningful debate. Is it surprising that the public disapproves of an institution that they see engaged in unnecessary and ideological bickering when it is this "messy debate" that they loathe the most?

CONCLUSION

In what for us is an unusually normative paper, we have attempted to redirect some of the criticism that has been placed at the feet of the Congress-disdaining American public. Scholars, journalists, and politicians have been making "if only the American public understood" arguments since the political process began opening up in the 1960s. We have suggested that the American public has in fact understood the cues, signals, and messages sent by members of Congress, the political elite, and the media. Indeed, they have understood them too well. In this chapter, we presented four arguments that restore some faith in the public's ability to reach rational evaluations of Congress.

First, the American public sees members of Congress avoiding difficult issues by placing them in perverse legislative procedures. We have shown that members have employed questionable legislative practices when it is in their interest. By doing so, the politicians escape accountability. We showed how the members of Congress have been willing to risk institutional approval to secure pay raises.

Second, the American public sees members of Congress engaged in hyperbolic, highly symbolic, and meaningless rhetoric in their debates. Politicians either promise easy solutions that are necessarily incapable of solving complex problems or engage in draconian predictions not only to defeat a proposal but to humiliate its proponents. These rhetorical practices debase the practice of debate. Consequently, the American public impugns what it sees as "bickering."

Third, the American public sees members of Congress bashing Congress. If those who make up the institution are unwilling to defend it, how can we expect the public to approve of it? Instead, each electoral
cycle the public sees veteran legislators—many of whom have spent more of their life in Washington than they have in their district—running from the “Washington system.” Not only do members run against Congress, but they also run negative campaigns and engage in the exact behavior that the American public loathes. We show that as elections near, the American public increasingly disapproves of Congress.

Fourth, the American public sees extremists talk, yell, and debate on television—unfortunately, they do not see moderates legislate. We have shown that when controlling for a variety of factors, ideologically extreme members are more likely to appear on television and in newspapers than their moderate counterparts. Because ideologues are more resolute in their desire to be visible and the media are predisposed to cover conflict, the American public is rarely exposed to the moderate give-and-take that results in mainstream government policy.

We understand that Congress is faced with difficulties inherent within the Constitution. It mandates that representatives be popularly elected by the represented. Consequently, 435 members in the House are elected by 435 different constituencies and 100 senators are elected by 50 different constituencies. This electoral set-up provides incentives for members of Congress to act with a keen eye toward their districts that at times can be detrimental to the nation.

In addition to the particularistic focus of members, we must recognize that the legislature is only one of three branches in the federal system established by the Constitution. This separation of powers system provides a number of veto points at which policy initiatives die. The system was designed to be slow, unresponsive, and lethargic. As such, the decisions made by members of Congress may be rational, but so too may be the evaluations made by the American public.

We also recognize that as parties have gotten stronger, the distribution of preferences in Congress has become more bimodal. This causes party leaders to be further left and further right, which bears directly upon our argument. Nevertheless, it has been our purpose to claim, even if not in the strongest sense, that the American public has legitimate reasons to hold Congress in low esteem not because of policy or the legislative process but because of the behavior of political elites.

We have not argued that the American public is absolved from all blame in perpetually poor approval ratings for political institutions, nor have we argued that members of Congress or the media should accept all the blame. Furthermore, we do not claim to have the definitive answer on why the American public disapproves of Congress. Rather, we have only suggested that a Congress-disapproving public is simply reacting to what it sees being played out by the political actors on the political stage.

Public satisfaction with government is commonly thought to reflect the performance of government leaders. For the most part, however, performance has been defined in terms of policy outcomes or economic conditions. Defined in these ways, leader performance has, indeed, been shown to have an important effect on public attitudes toward the leader, government institutions, and government in general (see Citrin and Green 1986; Citrin, this volume; Fiorina 1982; Owen and Dennis, this volume). Performance evaluations are also made about the behaviors of leaders during the process of governing, however.

The processes of government are increasingly visible to the public at large. More information about the political process is available to a wider audience than ever before. In the last ten years, there has been an explosion of new outlets that relay the workings of government to the public. A wide array of cable and Internet sources give frequent “behind the scenes” portrayals of the political process. As with any television audience, the public is (for the most part) a spectator to the performance carried out by elected officials and their aides. It’s only common sense to hypothesize that the behavior of elites engaged in the processes of governing influences public views toward government. Remarkably little is known about public reactions to these aspects of leader performance, however (see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 1998).

The present study seeks to understand how elite behavior in carrying out the processes of governing contributes to overall support for government and its institutions. This analysis is limited to performance evaluations of the process and not outcomes. This is not to deny the importance of outcomes in explaining public satisfaction toward government. Down the road, it will be important to integrate findings on attitudes toward governmental processes with attitudes toward outcomes. As a first step in that direction, I evaluate the sources of public attitudes toward processes in isolation from outcomes.