

**VARIATION IN CONGRESSIONAL PUBLIC APPROVAL: THE AFFECT OF
ACTUAL CONFLICT VERSUS PERCIEVED CONFLICT ON PUBLIC APPROVAL
OF CONGRESS 1970-2000**

by
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ABSTRACT

LAURA SHAFFER: Variation in Congressional Public Approval: The Affect of Actual Conflict Versus Perceived Conflict on Public Approval of Congress 1970-2000
(Under the direction of Erik Engstrom)

This thesis examines the factors that contribute the public's opinion of Congress. I posit that conflict, whether it is actual conflict or merely the perception of conflict, has the significant negative affect on approval of Congress. Other factors taken into consideration include divided government, presidential approval, and economic expectations. For measures of conflict, I used both a measure of perceived conflict (negative media coverage) and a measure of actual internal conflict (congressional party unity scores.) My results show that perceived conflict can negatively affect opinion. The evidence presented above supports my hypothesis that conflict in Congress makes people uncomfortable and angry with their government producing negative opinions of this branch of government. Media coverage may exacerbate this phenomenon. By overemphasizing conflict that does exist, the media may play a role in the reason Congressional approval is so low in general.

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Introduction

Congress' agenda setting power and ability to write legislation starts the processes of the federal government moving. Its members make the laws that the American public lives by and continue to rule only with the favor of their constituents. As seemingly important as public opinion of Congress is, little has been written about it. It is widely accepted that while the public dislikes Congress as a whole, they inexplicably have a positive view of their own congressman. Beyond this, few have sought to explain the variation in public opinion of Congress over time.

Figure 1 demonstrates that public approval of Congress is generally stays below 50 percent. The notable exception is in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, when it rose to its highest point: almost 60 percent¹. Congress has seen its approval bottom out at around 17 percent in the second quarter of 1992, but the average approval rating over the time period in the table is about 35 percent. This graph illustrates that there is substantial variation in congressional public approval beyond the simple fact that it is typically low.

By understanding how public opinion of Congress changes over time we can gain a better normative understanding of how our democracy works, but also we can gain substantial strategic knowledge of what factors can manipulate public opinion of Congress. Finally as scholars of political science, answering this question will provide us with beginning step to a substantial hole in the public opinion and Congress literature.

¹ The President experienced a much larger "rally around the flag" effect following the same event, jumping from 55 percent in the second quarter of 2001, up to 85 percent in the third quarter of that year.

This thesis proposes and tests a theory of variation in public opinion of Congress as a whole. Using a time series of public opinion over time, I test what factors produce such opinion change. Specifically, I find that conflict, measured by perceived conflict through the media can produce a significant drop in public opinion of Congress.

A Theory of Variation in Congressional Public Approval

Unlike the President, Congress is a large group made up of many individuals with many varied opinions. Each of these individuals has been duly elected by their constituents to represent their interests in Congress. More often than not these interests conflict with one another. Normatively, we can appreciate that Congress must debate and deliberate to find the solution that best meets the needs of the most people. So that even in ideal circumstances, conflict and compromise are central to the legislative process.

Many studies have shown that people do not like political conflict (Festinger 1957, Fabrigar & Krosnick 1995, Huckfeldt & Sprague 1995, Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004.) Conflict, even for a good cause, is upsetting to individuals. So if a certain level of conflict and debate is built in, and individuals find conflict unsettling, it is not surprising that the public holds a fairly negative view of Congress. My theory posits that conflict is the main source of the public's disapproval of Congress. Conflict is an ambiguous term that is rather hard to pin down. It can range from a civilized disagreement over an issue or budget item to a name-calling, mud-slinging tirade on the floor of the House or Senate. Further, the idea of the public being able to discern between the two types, genuine disagreement on issues and vicious personal attacks, seems unlikely given citizens' rational inattentiveness to the inner workings of national politics (Downs 1957.)

Political parties, though not part of the founders' vision of the government, are key players within the government. Created by politicians to help them further their policy agendas and gain re-election, parties also serve to keep politicians in check (Aldrich 1995.)

Parties were initially created as a method for individual legislators with similar opinions to coordinate their votes. Further, groups who found themselves in the minority in the legislature found it useful to band together in order to maximize the power they could wield (Schattschneider 1942.) While bi-partisan politics makes for good photo ops of unity and cooperation, partisan politics have dominated much of our nation's political history. In fact, the increased polarization of the two major political parties in the United States (Jacobson 2000) on many different policy fronts (Layman & Carsey 2002a,b; see also Brewer 2005) has led to partisan politics being the norm rather than the exception. Further, this move to the ideological extremes would also put far more pressure on those who remain towards the middle to vote with the party. With the extremist a forgone conclusion, the fight over the median members intensifies (Krehbiel 1998.) If individuals dislike conflict so much, how does Congress have a positive approval rating at all? The answer lies not with the contentious lawmakers, but with dearth of attention paid to politics by the public.

The average individual pays little attention to the actions of their government. Certain individual might argue that in an ideal world, the public would watch C-SPAN and read the Congressional Record in order to get information on the activities of Congress. Motivated by a need to make sure their interests are being represented, they would research bills that were under consideration and follow the roll call votes of their members. We do not live in this ideal world however, and the public is far more likely to know the outcome of a college basketball game than the vote on an appropriations bill.

The public's lack of detailed observation makes it more complicated to explain how conflict can drive public opinion. While the average citizen is not reading the congressional record, she is taking cues from the media. Journalists pay attention to politics and relay a

simplified and abbreviated version of the events to the general public, serving as an information shortcut. Further, even those who pay no attention to the media can still get the message via an opinion leader who does have an eye and ear on the media (Popkin 1957.)

The media is at its core a business. Money must be made in order for them to remain in business, and therefore they must sell their product to readers and advertisers alike. Therefore, they cover that which will attract the most attention. The most interesting stories often involve conflict. Covering a bi-partisan bill passing through Congress that will go to re-paving the nations highways is not nearly as gripping as covering a Senator's harsh remarks about a colleague or a Representative's call for an investigation into the dealings of the opposing parties leaders.

Any model of congressional public approval must contain components of both the actual conflict and the perception of conflict generated by the media. This is not to say that there are not other factors to consider, however these factors may be considered as more outside the control of Congress² and therefore must be controlled for. These factors include the public's approval of the president, the performance of the economy, and whether Congress is part of a divided government. These factors may have sway over the public's approval of Congress, yet Congress does not have the ability to control any of these things.

² While the media is technically out of the purview of Congress directly, the media covers that which is put before them. While there is the possibility that the media might create conflict where there is none, it is far more likely that they would exaggerate the importance of a conflict which already existed.

Research on Congress and Public Opinion

The lack of research on congressional approval is surprising when one considers the number of studies that have examined Presidential approval. Many authors have studied the possible trends and contributing factors of presidential approval, (Erickson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002, MacKuen, Erickson, and Stimson 1992, Brody 1991, Mueller 1970,) yet very few have tried to tackle the engine of the federal government and how the public forms opinions about it. The President's approval is interesting to study, given that it is an indicator of whether or not the President may expect to be re-elected. This is not the case with Congress. As previously stated, individual members of Congress are viewed favorably, even while views of Congress as a whole are negative. Since most members who seek re-election win their race, there appears to be a lack of electoral connection with opinions of Congress as a whole (Fenno 1975, Parker and Davidson 1979.)

While scholars of congressional approval agree that it does vary over time, the public rarely holds Congress in high esteem (Parker 1981; Patterson and Magleby 1992.) Scholars have many varied theories as to the underlying cause of the aforementioned anomaly. Some scholars state that it is merely the nature of politics that causes the disapproval. Americans want efficiency and results from their government (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995.) It is the system of democracy, with its free and open debate as well as the time that are the crux of the problem. The reality of that the process of making laws is that it is a complicated and drawn out process. This leads citizens to view Congress negatively. Ideally, Americans want a democratic system of government without having to actually see how exactly that

comes about (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995.) Conversely, others look to the work of Congress itself for an explanation of this rancor. They claim that once legislation gets passed, there are still a majority of people who are dissatisfied with the outcome due to the compromises and deals that have to be made. (Davidson and Parker 1972, Fenno 1975, Parker 1981.) Both versions lead to the same view of the public disapproving of Congress. It also, however, makes the lack of statistical research into congressional approval all the more intriguing.

There are two main reasons for the relative dearth of work on congressional approval. First, many scholars would argue that public opinion of Congress is systematically low but unrelated to electoral outcomes of individual members and is therefore irrelevant (Mayhew 1974.) Second, and more practically, availability of data and consistency of survey questions has plagued previous attempts at quantifying it. While the question wording for the Presidential approval question has changed little since the 1950's, congressional approval was rarely asked before the 1970s and even then, the wordings changed frequently. This rendered the data quite useless for creating a lengthy time series.

As methodology advances, problems that once confounded research can be solved. This was the case with congressional public approval research until 1997, when, Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht (1997) tackled this consistency issue, using Stimson's (1991) "dyad ratios" algorithm. Using this algorithm, they combined over 40 survey items asked on 300 different occasions into a cumulative measure that reflects the general movement of public opinion. The algorithm eliminated the difficulties normally associated with using so many different questions and samples. Not only did this method create a time series of

congressional approval, the frequency of the measure was improved on, going from a yearly number to a quarterly one.

They then use this summary measure to examine various explanatory variables. Their thesis focused specifically on the negative affect that occurs when Congress performs the task assigned to it by the Constitution. That is, when they participate in the legislative process, the public's approval of the institution falls. While this theory seems counter intuitive, the authors' findings back up this claim. The variables that most concern them are ones that are within the control of the legislators, which is a departure from previous literature. Parker (1977) examined "congressional unpopularity" and its relationship to outside factors, such as the economic conditions, the state of international affairs, and the activities of the president. Yet pinning the responsibility for the approval of Congress on these outside sources renders Congress rather impotent. No matter what they do, the fate of their popularity rests with events and activities beyond the scope of their control.

Durr et al (1997) do incorporate these factors into their model but add to it variables whose control lies entirely with the Congress. The variables that are outside the control of the Congress that Durr et al (1997) included are the nature of media coverage, presidential approval, the nature of the economy, number of presidential vetoes, and non-divided government. The variables that *are* under the control of Congress are the amount of major and minor legislation passed in a given quarter, how many veto overrides occurred, and two measures of internal strife, number of cloture votes in the Senate and votes to raise the Federal debt ceiling. I would argue, however, that a few of the variables do measure what they are purported to measure, particularly the cloture votes and raises in the debt ceiling as indicators of strife aspect of the model. The thinking behind the latter is that it is hard to get

large debt ceiling raises if there is internal strife, so many small increases indicates more strife. The main problem with this is that they only do a count variable and include no measure of how large the increase was. There could be many large increases or a few small increases, there is no way of distinguishing between these cases and what the authors' claim is the case. The cloture vote variable is similar to the debt ceiling variable in that it is a count measure. Yet the problematic issue for this variable has more to do with infrequency. While cloture votes do not occur as frequently as might be expected (see figure 2.) Cloture was invoked only 28 times in the whole session from 1999-2000, and this was the largest number of invocations for the 1970-2000 time period. Cloture votes to end major filibusters are still more rare. The threat of a filibuster occurs more frequently than the actual act. In fact, more often than not, filibusters are used as bargaining tools to force compromises. The infrequency of the event and varying importance of a cloture vote make it ill suited to measure conflict in the Senate. The question then becomes how then to measure internal strife while avoiding the pitfalls mentioned above.

Examining measures of conflict seems to be the most obvious choice, yet as previously discussed with regards to Durr et al (1997), not all conflict measures both make sense and measure something significant to day to day actions of Congress. The measure needs to be pervasive in Congress, or else fall victim to affecting very little to the legislative process.

Binder's work on gridlock in Congress meets these requirements quite well. Binder defines gridlock as the condition where the Congress and the President are unable to reach a compromise position on a policy. The gridlock measure she develops in her book, *Stalemate* (2003,) provides a way to assess how much a Congress accomplishes in a given year taking

into account the amount of legislation passed in comparison to the size of the agenda facing that particular Congress. This keeps congresses with small agendas from being labeled as gridlocked unfairly. To determine both agenda items and their relative saliency, Binder looks to *The New York Times*' editorial page, more specifically the unsigned editorials on that appear on the editorial page. By finding every mention of Congress, the House, or the Senate in these unsigned editorials and then analyzing the issues discussed within, Binder can examine not only which issues are mentioned but also how frequently they occur. The frequency of an issues appearance in the editorials speaks to the saliency of the issue. This is a particularly effective way to measure conflict, but not the only way. Another possible source for an internal strife may be the growing distance between the policy preferences of the two political parties in Congress.

Polarization is a relatively recent and hot topic in political science. Notably, Morris Fiorina addressed the polarized nature of the American electorate in his book *Culture War? The Myth of Polarized America* (2005.) Fiorina claims that news reports in the months leading up to the 2004 Presidential election painted an inaccurate picture of the American electorate. He shows that it is not the American electorate that is polarizing but rather the candidates and, subsequently, the elected officials themselves. He points to the fact that there are fewer conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans than there were in the previous decades. Without these members to pull the whole party back towards the middle, they have moved further to the extremes of the ideological scale. With both parties moving towards their respective policy extremities, it is hardly surprising that there might be more internal strife. The question of how to examine this particular facet of internal strife is not an

easy one³. The variable required here would be the same over time, would consider the whole of Congress, and would need to provide a measure of party cohesiveness⁴. The party unity scores calculated by Congressional Quarterly Weekly (2006) each year provide such a measure. These scores indicate how often Democrats vote with their party on votes where the majority of Democrats voted in opposition to the majority of Republicans. Four data points are available for each year in my data set: The average party unity score for House Democrats, House Republicans, Senate Democrats and Senate Republicans. These scores avoid the problem of changing institutional structure as well as changes in each party's majority or minority status.

³ In an earlier work I explored Poole and Rosenthal's (1991) DW NOMINATE scores from committee chairman and their ranking minority member as a way to examine polarization within committee structure. This attempt did not prove fruitful as an indicator. While the polarization variable did move in the predicted direction, it was not close to significant. Yet this particular approach has the problem of changing congressional rules. With the Republican revolution of 1994, the rules that governed the selection of committee chairman were changed. While previously, chairman had been chosen based on seniority, Gingrich placed the appointments in the hands of the Speaker of the House. This ensured that those who were most favored would get chairmanships, despite the length of another member's tenure on a particular committee. While this would lead to increased polarization of the chairs, it is not an over time indicator as the institutional change altered the nature of those appointments. Further, the term limits placed on committee chairman also provides institutional changes that would affect polarization.

⁴ Cohesiveness can be seen to measure roughly the same thing as polarization. The more the parties move to policy extremes the more cohesive they will appear to be.

Variable Description

Congressional Approval

Using Durr et al's (1997) methodology, I extended their summary measure of congressional approval using survey data from the Roper Center. Using their database of survey items, I brought their measure forward from 1994 through 2005⁵. Using survey marginals provided by the authors, I reconstructed their data set and merged it with my own. I did however omit a few questions that they included. Specifically, I omitted questions that asked about congressional leaders by name, which they included because these leaders are the public face of Congress and therefore are an indicator of ones feelings towards Congress as a whole. I omit them for this study due to the high profile and polarizing nature of congressional leaders since 1994. Approval of Newt Gingrich for example, may not accurately relate to overall approval of the Congress or even the Republican majority, but rather be a measure of partisanship. I left in survey questions that asked about congressional leaders as a general group since this avoids the aforementioned problem. I further omitted any questions that asked about specific issues, such as Congress' work on education or on the economy. These questions could be an indicator of the respondent's feelings about the issue, not those setting the policy. I also omitted any survey items with fewer than three time points, which increases the strength of the measure. Finally, I omitted all questions that were posed to only a sample of those surveyed. Some surveys, like the General Social Survey, often used the subpopulation of voters for their items. These were removed as voting is not a

⁵ I will, however, only be using the measure through 2000. This is due to the limited availability of one of the other variables, as well as my wish to avoid adding the issue of September 11 into my model.

prerequisite to form an opinion on Congress. Using Stimson's dyad ratio transformation (1991)⁶, I was able to create a summary measure of Congressional approval stretching from 1970 to 2005, with measures taken at each quarter⁷. Figure 1 shows the general movement of congressional approval across the given time period⁸.

Congressional Party Unity

The party unity scores represent the frequency with which the average Congressman voted with his/her party where the majority of that party voted in opposition to the majority of the other party. Since four scores were given for each year and only one score for each chamber was required, I needed to combine the two party scores for each chamber. I rejected averaging them on the basis that this would give more weight to unity votes of minority parties. To remedy this, I found the percent of each chamber controlled by each party in a given year. I then multiplied the average score for that party by the percent of the chamber it controlled. I repeated this step for both parties, then added the two scores together to get my final chamber party unity score. I added the two weighted unity scores rather than averaging them because the weighting already puts the two parties on equal footing.

For example: 1970 House of Representatives

Democrats - 243 seats (55.9%)
Republicans – 192 seats (44.1%)

Party Unity Scores
Democrats – 58%
Republicans – 60%

Democrats $.559 * .58 = .324$

⁶ To perform the dyad ratio transformation I used the W-CALC program, downloaded from Stimson's website, <http://www.unc.edu/~jstimson/resource.html>.

⁷ A full list of all the survey questions, the polling houses that conducted them, and the dates of the surveys that were added for the post 1994 period are available upon request.

⁸ Also included in this figure is the tracking of Presidential approval and my economic variable.

Republicans $.441 * .60 = .265$

1970 House Party Unity Score = $.324 + .265 = .589$

Since these two scores were highly correlated, (.908) I averaged them to create a congressional party unity score⁹.

Binder's Gridlock Score #1 and #5

The gridlock score is “the percentage of agenda items that failed to be enacted into law by the end of the Congress (38.)” She further breaks down the gridlock score into five levels from gridlock one, which included the widest range of issues all the way to gridlock five, which included only the most salient issues. I will run the model with both of these measures to see if the salience of the issues examined makes the variable a better predictor.

Standardized Media

A portion of the media variable is the quarterly average media variable employed by Durr et al (1997.) The author's had coders who read and coded every mention of Congress in the *New York Times* from 1974-1993 for length, location, and tone. They then averaged these scores by quarter for their measure. However, given that their measure only is available for a portion of the time period I am interested in (1974-2000,) I created a media variable that would bridge the gap and remedy several issues that were questionable about the Durr et al (1997) variable.

First, it took into account one of the things that we know about the way the public follows politics through the media. That is, they pay it very little mind. At best they get the major stories of the day. This means very rarely do they get to the in-depth analysis that occurs in the later sections of the *New York Times*. Therefore, I coded only stories that

⁹ The average congressional party unity score is employed here because in an earlier iteration of this paper both chamber scores were used and they detracted from each other. Since they are highly correlated, averaging them is not problematic and clears up this problem.

appeared in the front section of the *Times*. Even if the *Times* is not their media of choice, the stories featured in its front section represent the major news of the day that will appear in newspapers around the country, either as original pieces by staff writers or as news wire stories.

Second, rather than coding by story, I coded by paragraph. This gives a far more accurate depiction of the nature of a story. For example, if a story is about Clinton negotiating a trade deal with China, Congress will be mentioned, but probably only in passing as a hurdle that Clinton needs to jump in order to give China most favored nation status. This story would be coded as neutral and long and possibly in the front section, yet there may be only one mention of Congress in the first paragraph. Thus I coded each story by paragraph negative or not negative¹⁰.

The final difference between the two variables is that I employed a sampling measure and coded one day's worth of stories per week, 13 days worth of stories per quarter. I randomly selected the day on which the variable would start in the first week of 1993, then rotated the day for each week following. For example in week one, the day of the week that was randomly selected was Tuesday, therefore Wednesday was the day used in week two, Thursday in week three, and so on. Since my measure is quarterly, I took the raw count of the negative mentions. The total negative count measure has a correlation of -.721 with the original Durr et al variable (1997.) This negative sign is expected since the Durr et al (1997) variable is negative while my media variable is positive. To combine the two measures, I standardized both sets of data, and then multiplied the total negative count by negative one in order to rid myself of the negative correlation.

¹⁰ This was done due to the relative scarcity of positive stories about Congress or Congressmen.

Media Switch and Standardized Media Variable X Media Switch

There is still the question, however, of whether or not the change in coding methods has any affect on the variables impact. To deal with this issue, I created an interaction variable between the standardized media variable and a media switch variable. The latter is merely a dummy variable that is coded as 0 when the original media variable was from Durr et al (1997) and 1 when it was from my media coding. This variable will indicate whether or not the source of the standardized media variable made a difference in the impact of the media variable. I hope that this will be a small and non-significant coefficient, which would indicate that the two versions of the media variable are very similar.

Presidential Approval

To measure presidential approval, the time series was constructed from survey data provided by the Roper Center. This is a standard measure and the data used ranges from quarter 1 of 1970 through quarter 4 of 2005. I expect to see this measure have a positive affect on congressional approval, as an increase in presidential approval should mean a positive increase in congressional approval. Figure 1 shows the general movement of presidential approval across the given time period.

Economic factors

Similar to Durr et al (1997) I am using the University of Michigan's Index of Consumer Sentiment (ICS) to measure economic expectations. They theorize that Congressional approval will rise when economic expectations improve. Since this seems to be a reasonable expectation, it will be integrated into my model. In order to isolate the portion of the ICS that is caused solely by economic factors, I regressed the ICS on the unemployment rate as well as the inflation rate. I then created my economic variable using

the predicted values from this regression¹¹. Since unemployment and inflation are two measures of the objective economy that are released by the government monthly, they were ideal for isolating which portion of the ICS is due to actual economic change. Figure 1 shows the general movement of economic expectations across the given time period.

Divided Government

A dummy variable will be employed to indicate divided government, with 1 indicating united government and 0 indicating a divided government¹². In the few instances where the Congress itself was divided, this was coded as divided government. Divided government would be far more likely to be contentious and thus should have a negative effect on congressional approval. This variable will help eliminate variance due to strictly to the rancorous nature of divided government.

Divided Government X Presidential Approval

In general, we can expect that the affect of divided government is more negative than positive. Yet a united government may be reasonably expected to have a positive affect. If a popular Democratic president is working with a Democratic Congress, his popularity might have a positive affect on the public's impression of Congress. To test for this, I created an interaction variable between the divided government and presidential approval variables. I naturally expect to see a positive coefficient for this variable.

¹¹ I had previously used the leading, lagging and coincident indicators (Erickson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002,) however the government has changed their method of reporting these figures, which caused the economic variable to behave badly.

¹² They were coded this way to facilitate an interaction variable to be created between divided government and Presidential approval. For further description of this variable, see next paragraph.

Method and Results

Using these variables to test my theory, I performed two distributed lag time series models. My dependent variable is a measure of congressional approval over time. Running an OLS model would prevent me from examining changes in the data that can only be observed when time is controlled for. Time series analysis does this and is therefore an excellent tool to use. Further using a lag in my model allows me to assert that approval of Congress at time $(t-1)$ should have an effect on congressional approval at time t . For one model, I included the party unity scores, while I used the Binder gridlock scores for the other. Subsequently I ran the Durbin-Watson h test on both models. This tests for autocorrelation similar to the Durbin-Watson test except that it allows for some of the regressors to not be strictly exogenous. This is, of course, the case for my model as I have included the lagged value of congressional approval at time $t-1$. I have included a correlation matrix, figure 3, for all of the relevant variables. My results can be found in figure 4, along with the findings of the test statistic.

The test statistics for both models were found to not be significant. Therefore we can not reject the null hypothesis that there is no serial correlation. Further, I specified that the test be robust against unspecified heteroskedasticity. While the f statistics in the regression models are high, this is to be expected from the two time series models. While neither model produces stellar results, the model that features the party unity score, model 1, yields more significant variables than the gridlock variable model, model 2.

Since model 1 performed much better than model 2, I will focus my analysis on that model. As expected, the lagged congressional approval variable was significant at the .001 level and showed a coefficient of .7775. This means that a one unit increase in the previous congressional approval increases current congressional approval by .7775. Finding that this was not the case would have been extremely unexpected. Further, this coefficient leads me to believe that my choice of a lagged model was the correct one, as congressional approval appears to be highly autoregressive in nature. Approval of Congress at time t is highly affected by the approval of Congress at the previous time period.

The first of my truly independent variables is presidential approval. It was significant which is not surprising, although the strength of the affect was. When presidential approval increased by one unit, congressional approval at time t increases on average by .0971, when all other variables in the model are held constant¹³. More practically speaking, for every standard deviation increase in presidential approval (10.81), we should expect to congressional approval to increase by 1.05 units. The idea that they move in relatively the same direction is observable on a graph of the two series (see figure 1.) The positive relationship supports my theory of conflict negatively affecting approval. Good will towards the government, it seems, is contagious. Yet the fact that such a large increase in presidential approval indicates a much smaller movement in the dependent variable is surprising. This seems to indicate that congressional approval, while typically lower, is less prone to large fluctuations. Again, this too can be observed visually in figure 1.

In the same figure I have graphed the economic expectations variable, which seems to move roughly with presidential approval and congressional approval¹⁴. We therefore might

¹³ This statement is true and applicable to all independent variables that follow.

expect the two to have similar effects on the dependent variable. For a unit increase in economic expectations, I would expect to see a .1282 unit increase in congressional approval. The coefficient is once again positive, meaning that as the economy improves, approval of Congress will go up. For every standard deviation increase in economic expectations (7.42), we expect to see an increase of .9512 in congressional approval. The size of this effect is roughly the same as Presidential approval. What is interesting to note about the economic expectations variable is that it is not significant. The idea that the economy does not have a significant effect on Congressional approval leads me to conjecture that the public really does give most of the credit, either positive or negative, to another more visible member of the government: the President. It is important to remember, however, that both of these variables are not the ones of most interest to me. The party unity scores are more important to my theory of conflict's adverse affect on congressional approval.

Since the party unity scores from both chambers are highly correlated (.908), I averaged them and use this average in my model. The congressional party unity score indicated a 14.022 unit decrease in congressional approval for a one unit increase in the congressional party unity variable. For a one standard deviation increase in House party unity (.092), we will expect to find a decrease in congressional approval of 1.291 units. This variable was significant and in the expected direction. This supports my conflict theory, as a higher party unity score means that the parties are voting increasingly along partisan lines. This would lead to conflict and contention in Congress, with neither party willing to try and hammer out compromises. Of course, no one would know about these instances of partisan bickering and rancor if not for the media bringing it to the attention of the public.

¹⁴ This is particularly true prior to the economic boom of the mid to late 90s.

Negative coverage by the media, as represented by the standardized media variable, should have a negative effect on congressional approval. However, with this particular variable, a positive coefficient is actually a negative, meaning that smaller numbers indicate more negative coverage. Therefore an increase in standardized media should mean an increase in congressional approval. This was the finding of my model, with a one unit change in standardized media, congressional approval at time t increases on average by 1.17 units. Further, this variable was significant at the .10 level which lends weight to finding. In more practical terms, we should expect to see an increase in congressional approval of 1.66 units for every increase of one standard deviation in standardized media variable (1.01.) This fits very well with my theory of conflict in Congress. These findings point once again to the negative affect of conflict on Congress. Though media coverage is strictly out of the control of the media, more conflict will provide more fodder for negative stories than a period of bipartisan cooperation or united government.

There was, however, an issue that needed to be addressed where my media variable is concerned. There is concern, and rightly so, that the switch in the media variables source will change the impact of the variable on congressional approval. By creating an interaction variable with the standardized media variable and a switch variable to indicate either who coded the original media variable, I can examine whether the coding change had an effect. Unfortunately this seems to be the case. The switch variable's coefficient, which was coded as 0 when the Durr et al (1997) media variable was the source and 1 when my own data was the source, indicates that a 1.12 unit change in congressional approval can be attributed to the switch in source material. This means that for a one standard deviation change in the switch variable (.44), an increase of .49 units can be expected in congressional approval. The

coefficient for the interaction term indicates that a -1.64 unit change in congressional approval can be attributed to the switch in source material. This means that for a one standard deviation change in the interaction term ($.52$), a decrease of $.86$ units can be expected in congressional approval. The coefficient was also significant at the $.10$ level, lending more weight to the finding¹⁵. What all of this adds up to is the finding that post 1994, the time where my variable began, the media had relatively little effect. Now this seems preposterous indeed, given the extremely negative tone of coverage in the mid 1990s. Instead I would recall that the two variables that were combined were different. This may be the actual source of its trouble, not the method itself. This combined with the shorter time frame that my variable was used may also contribute to this confusion. In the end, it is a question best left to future research, where a more homogenous media variable can be created. What is certain however, is that negative coverage during the Durr et. al (1997) variable does negatively affect congressional approval. There are features of Congress that, when present, can give the media more opportunities to highlight negativity within the branch. Divided government is one such instance.

Divided government in model was coded in such a way, with 1 indicating united government, that a positive coefficient is the expected direction. United government would provide the press fewer opportunities to highlight partisan bickering among and within the branches. While not significant, the coefficient behaves as predicted. For a one unit increase in divided government, congressional approval at time t experiences an increase of 1.31 . This means that for a one standard deviation change in divided government ($.40$), we should

¹⁵ Lending further credence to this finding is that, in model 2, the results for this variable were similar. Both the standardized media variable and the interaction term were significant at the $.1$ level and the standardized media coefficient was positive. Further, the interaction was negative roughly the same size as the party unity model.

expect to see .52 unit change in congressional approval. This seems like a rather small number, yet it is in the predicted direction and might be attributable to the relatively few times that the United States has experienced united government in the time period under observation¹⁶. Another explanation may be that some of the power from the divided government variable was used up in the interaction variable between divided government and Presidential approval. This coefficient for this variable was not positive, as I had predicted. The coefficient showed a -.06 unit change in congressional approval for every unit change in the interaction variable, or a -11.75 unit change for every standard deviation change in the interaction variable. This would indicate that Congress does not benefit from a popular President of the same party. This is extremely curious seems counterintuitive. However, as previously mentioned, there have been relatively few instances of united government in the sample and this could be causing the model to get inaccurate results. More data points for united government are needed in order to test this particular theory.

¹⁶ The two time periods in the sample are 1977-1980 under the Carter administration and 1993-1994 under the Clinton administration. It is also important to note that approval for these two Presidents was never especially high during the times of united government. While Carter started off with a relatively high approval rating (70.8) it quickly dropped off, hitting a low of 31.2 in the third quarter of 1979. Clinton's numbers during this two year period were not as bad as Carter's, neither, however, was he overwhelmingly popular. His numbers during this period hovered in the mid 40s and 50s.

Conclusion

The model I have presented here provides an informative and essential first step to understanding congressional approval. This model showed that perceived conflict, measured by media's coverage of congressional conflict, can negatively affect opinion. This finding not only gives us information about Congressional approval, it illustrates the importance of media coverage of politics. Media coverage can explain variation that divided government, the economy, and Presidential approval can not alone explain. The evidence presented above supports my hypothesis that conflict in Congress makes people uncomfortable and angry with their government producing negative opinions of this branch of government. Media coverage may exacerbate this phenomenon. By overemphasizing conflict that does exist, the media may play a role in the reason Congressional approval is so low in general.

While this thesis does not conclusively explain every aspect of public opinion and Congress, it provides a framework for future research on this topic and a theory of conflict that earlier researchers did not address. With more data on congressional approval over more years, researchers will be able to produce better behaving models and perhaps even better indicator variables.

On a larger scope, a better understanding of the nature of congressional approval has many applications beyond the advances it brings to congressional research. It can improve the approval research being conducted about the other branches, particularly the emerging topic of public approval of the Supreme Court. It is just one small piece that may lead to a

better understanding of how the public evaluates its leaders. By examining aggregate congressional approval we can better understand the seemingly counterintuitive findings that approval of Congress is low, while approval of individual members is high. This goes to the heart of representation. How can a group elected by the people to represent their political views be effective when those same people hold them in such low regard? A better understanding of how the public views and relates to the organization that sets the national political agenda is an extremely valid and important line of research that will be studied for many years to come. My theory of conflict and perceived conflict presented in the media helps us to understand a conundrum in political science and also provides a crucial first step to future research on public opinion of institutions

Table 1. Public Approval and the Economy by Quarter, 1970-2005

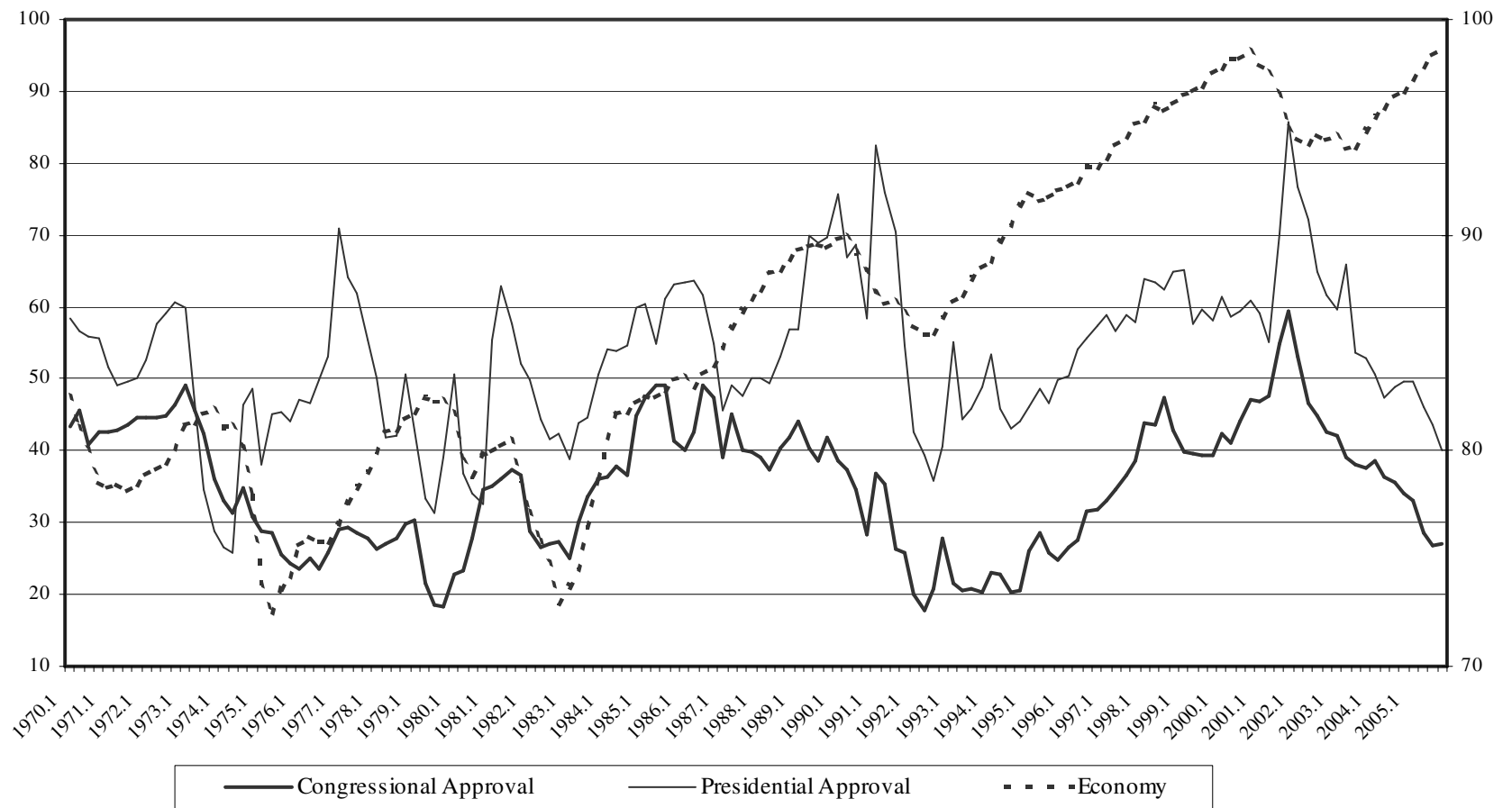


Table 2. Senate Action on Cloture Votes: 1970 – 2000

Congress	Years	Motions Filed	Votes on Cloture	Cloture Invoked
106	1999-2000	71	58	28
105	1997-1998	69	53	18
104	1995-1996	82	50	9
103	1993-1994	80	46	14
102	1991-1992	59	47	22
101	1989-1990	37	24	11
100	1987-1988	53	43	12
99	1985-1986	40	23	10
98	1983-1984	41	19	11
97	1981-1982	31	30	10
96	1979-1980	30	20	11
95	1977-1978	23	13	3
94	1975-1976	39	27	17
93	1973-1974	44	31	9

Table 3. Correlation Matrix for Dependent and Independent Variables in Model

	<i>House Party Unity</i>	<i>Senate Party Unity</i>	<i>Binder Gridlock #1</i>	<i>Binder Gridlock #5</i>	<i>Congressional Approval</i>	<i>Presidential Approval</i>	<i>Economy</i>	<i>Economy X Presidential Approval</i>	<i>Standardized Media</i>	<i>Divided Government</i>	<i>Standardized Media X Switch</i>	<i>Divided Government X Presidential Approval</i>
House Party Unity	1.0											
Senate Party Unity	.91	1.0										
Binder Gridlock #1	.47	.53	1.0									
Binder Gridlock #5	.30	.47	.50	1.0								
Congressional Approval	.18	.29	.00	-.09	1.0							
Presidential Approval	.34	.42	-.91	.12	.56	1.0						
Economy	.82	.84	.35	.41	.34	.42	1.0					
Economy X Presidential Approval	.54	.62	.05	.25	.58	.95	.67	1.0				
Standardized Media	.14	.06	.06	.29	.12	-.01	-.08	-.04	1.0			
Divided Government	-.16	-.31	-.25	-.03	-.52	-.30	-.17	-.32	-.05	1.0		
Standardized Media X Switch	.17	-.01	-.06	-.26	-.24	-.14	-.05	-.14	.52	.03	1.0	
Divided Government X Presidential Approval	-.15	-.30	-.32	-.06	-.49	-.19	-.18	-.23	-.04	.97	.03	1.0

Table 4. Results for Both the Party Unity and the Gridlock Distributed Lag Time Series Models and their Durbin-Watson h Test Statistic

	Model 1 Party Unity Variable	Model 2 Binder Gridlock Variable
	<i>Coefficient (Standard Error)</i>	<i>Coefficient (Standard Error)</i>
Congressional Approval (at t-1)	.7775 (.0589)***	.7791 (.0620)***
Presidential Approval	.0971 (.0450)**	.0947 (.0457)**
Economy	.1282 (.1190)	.0208 (.0929)
Congress Party Unity	-14.0224 (8.2656)**	
Binder's Gridlock #1	-----	.0144 (.0678)
Binder's Gridlock #5	-----	-.0390 (.0330)
Standardized Media	1.1647 (.3990)**	.9075 (.4060)**
Media Switch	1.1155 (1.2593)	.9512 (1.3597)
Standardized Media X Switch	-1.6429 (.7483)**	-1.8863 (.7955)**
Divided Government	1.3091 (3.9974)	2.0206 (4.1735)
Divided Government X Presidential Approval	-.0619 (.0818)	-.0697 (.0882)
Constant	2.0649 (6.2868)	1.6001 (7.6193)
*** > .001 **>.10	N=108 R-squared = 0.8581	N=108 R-squared = 0.8413
Durbin-Watson h statistic	F = 2.102 Probability = 0.1504 Not Significant	F = 1.094 Probability = 0.2982 Not Significant

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