

THE DICHOTOMY OF CONGRESSIONAL APPROVAL

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This thesis seeks to understand how political awareness affects what information one uses to indicate their approval or disapproval of Congress and its members. More concisely, do more and less aware individuals rely on the same pieces of political information to mold their opinions of Congress? The second question of concern is what role does media consumption play in informing survey respondents about Congress. Third, I consider how survey respondents use cues like the condition of the economy and presidential job performance to help formulate their opinion of Congress. Finally, by applying the Congressional approval literature to incumbent level approval, I seek to advance the theory and literature on what motivates the approval of incumbents.

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First, I would like to thank my family for giving me the time and space to complete this thesis. Second, I would like to thank my committee members for investing so much time and energy to make my thesis successful.

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CHAPTER I

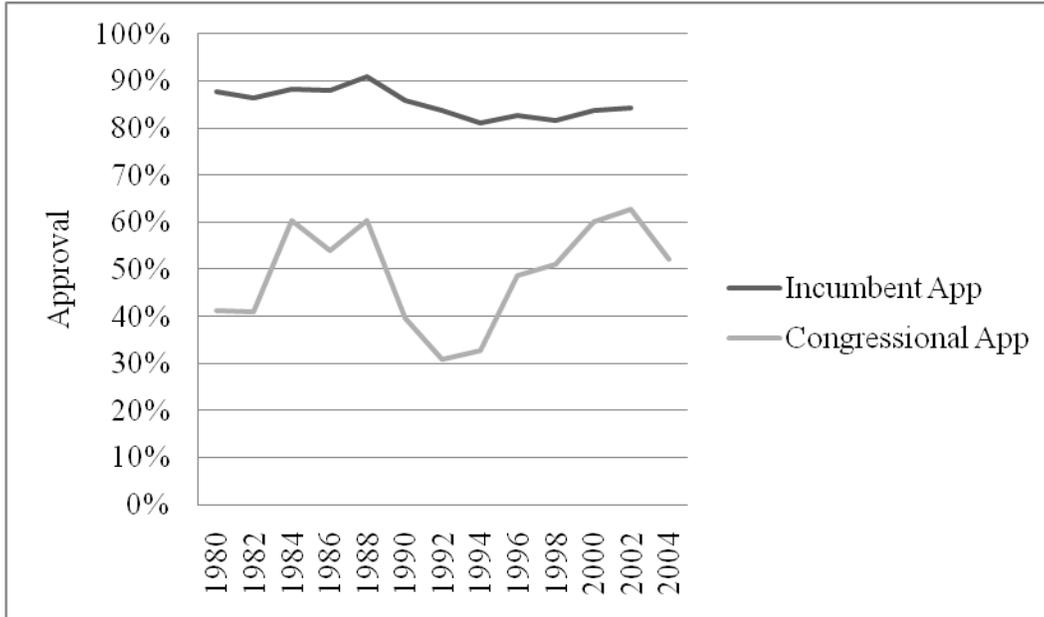
INTRODUCTION

In the United States, we have national elections every two years and countless other sub-national elections between the national elections. Amid these various elections, public opinion polls give us some of the best barometer readings with which to assess the performance of our elected officials. Yet, since 1980, we have seen a gap develop between Congressional approval and the approval of its individual members. One can see in Figure 1 the minimum 20% rift between Congressional approval and incumbent approval of House members from 1980-2004. The focus here is to discover what motivates approval of Congress and its individual members with an emphasis on political awareness. The contribution I tried to make in this thesis was to bridge the disconnect between Congressional approval and incumbent approval by questioning what the people know about the institution when they express such approval or disapproval.

Consider the following two examples of Congressional approval that comparatively highlight how unpopular the legislative branch is. In February 2009, after one of the worst financial disasters in our country's history, the 111th Congress was sworn in. According to *Rasmussen Reports* at that time, the professions still more favorable than members of Congress included bankers, lawyers, stockbrokers, and journalists (Rasmussen 2009).¹ If a thousand lawyers at the bottom of the ocean are considered a "good start," then what are we to make of Congress members?

¹ Favorable ratings by profession according to a Rasmussen survey of 1,000 adults conducted February 15-16, 2009. Bankers, favorable 44% unfavorable 52%. Lawyers, favorable 41% unfavorable 53%. Stockbrokers, favorable 37% unfavorable 56%. Journalists, favorable 38% unfavorable 57%. Members of Congress, favorable 26% unfavorable 68%.

Figure 1. The Dichotomy of Approval between Incumbents and Congress from 1980 to 2004



Source: ANES 1980-2004

In January of 2009, Congressional approval rested at just 19%. After inauguration day, approval moved to 31%, a 17-month high (Jones 2009).² Theoretically, one would expect to see the highest Congressional approval right after the electorate expresses its preferences through the electoral process. But if elections are meant to be the ultimate gauge of voter preferences, then why were survey respondents still so unsatisfied after the swearing in of the 111th Congress? Only 43% of Democrats approved of Congress even after they gained seats in both chambers in the 2006-08 elections. If winning seats in two consecutive elections did not move approval above 50% for even a segment of the respondents, then on what did survey respondents' base their responses? While we know a great deal about approval for Congress in aggregate, the effects of political awareness and the motivation for the approval of the individual members of Congress is less clear.

² Congressional approval based on Gallup's poll of 1,022 adults conducted February 9-12, 2009.

The two previous cases of approval highlight how the *first branch* is still the last branch in terms of favorability and approval (Jones 2008).³ These stories also make one question what the survey respondents know when they express their approval or disapproval of Congress. This question is an important and worthwhile research endeavor because if only 3 out of 10 people approve of Congress, there should be a wholesale shift in the makeup of Congress in the subsequent election. Yet incumbents return to the legislature at almost a 90% rate. This makes one think that the approval of Congress is based on more than the legislative actions of its members. Table 1 shows the average approval rating for incumbents and Congress over time.

Table 1. The Dichotomy of Approval between Incumbents and Congress from 1980 to 2004

Incumbent Approval	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Disapprove	1,854	14	14.49
Approve	10,941	85.51	100
Total	12,795	100	

Congressional Approval	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Disapprove	10,096	52	51.58
Approve	9,478	48	100
Total	19,574	100	

Source: ANES 1980-2004

For example, previous research focuses on economic sources of Congressional approval (Gomez and Wilson 2003; Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Rudolph 2002) and the citizen interpretation of Congressional responsibilities (Durr et al. 1997; Ramirez 2009; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). It suggests that at times, approval is based on factors that Congress cannot entirely control. If the Congress members and the institution of Congress are the source of discontent, then it would seem that all the legislature needs is a good public relations blitz.

³ Gallup poll of 822 adults in June of 2008: Supreme Court approval, 48%; Presidential approval, 30%; Congressional approval, 19%.

Therefore, what is unclear is whether the institution is broken and in need of serious reform or whether the nature of crafting legislation and seeking reelection simply sullies what is generally a body that functions well. These pieces of research hint at the lack of citizens' awareness but do not focus on the differences in approval between more and less aware citizens. In addition, Congressional approval in the aggregate has usually been applied as the dependent variable, but little is known about how the media and citizens' knowledge of national politics affects the approval of individual members of Congress.

It is critical to understand the elements that motivate the consistent disapproval toward the legislative branch. If this disapproval is caused by the genuine failures of the members of Congress, then one needs to sound the alarm for reform. On the other hand, if this disapproval is caused by misunderstandings in the perceived roles and powers of Congress, then an effort to educate the people needs to be made. If individuals conflate the actions of the president or the condition of the economy with their perceptions of Congress, then we can see that approval of Congress is not entirely based on the actions of the Congress alone. Teasing out the effects of Congressional and incumbent approval can help isolate the positive and negative determinants of approval. If there are no significant determinants that help increase approval, then there may be reason to believe that the dislike of Congress is so endemic to the institution that only drastic reform can remedy the situation. Without a clearer understanding of what drives Congressional and incumbent approval, one can only guess whether tweaks or drastic reforms are necessary.

The major question I try to address in this thesis is how political awareness affects what information one uses to indicate his approval or disapproval of Congress and its members. More concisely, do more and less aware individuals rely on the same pieces of political information to mold their opinions of Congress? The second question of concern is what role does media

consumption play in informing survey respondents about Congress. Broadcast and print media provide a low-cost source of political information. However, this information is just as likely to enlighten the people about Congress' problems as much as its successes. The final question I address in this thesis is how political awareness and media exposure affects the approval of individual members. Much of the previous research focuses on Congress in the aggregate, but I seek to apply the research on Congress to the individual members of Congress. I want to know how awareness and media exposure affect incumbent approval. It might be difficult to pin down exactly what motivates the approval of Congress' individual members, but there is value in seeing how well Congressional approval literature explains the approval of the individual pieces that make up Congress. What is not ignored is the role of the incumbency advantage that insulates incumbents from whatever the political environment may throw their way. While I try to explain approval of the incumbent in Congress, it is hard to foresee any determinant that is as powerful as the label of an "incumbent" in the American political system. In short, I believe that approval of Congress and its individual members is mediated by political awareness, cues, and the media. It might be the case that the people consistently express disapproval of Congress because they are consistently ill-informed of its powers and duties. If disapproval is related to a lack of awareness, then one does not need to reform the entire institution of Congress. Rather, one needs to reform the way Congress and its individual members communicate and campaign.

This thesis is laid out in the following manner. First, I review previous literature on party identification, media effects, and political awareness. From this literature, I build my theory on the effects of political knowledge on the approval of the legislature and legislators. Of note is a discussion of what political awareness means and how it is operationalized in this study. Before deriving my own hypotheses from the theory, I first reevaluate some of the traditional

determinants of Congressional approval: party labels, the economy, and the presidential effects. Each hypothesis is considered in conjunction with the data source that tests it. Much of the data was taken from the American National Elections Studies that asks survey respondents about the Congress as well as its individual members. Finally, I discuss the findings and evaluated how this study fits and extends what we know about Congressional approval.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis seeks to build on and extend the wealth of knowledge that examines what affects the electorate's preferences and the proper way to measure these preferences. First, I discuss literature on political awareness or sophistication which provides a foundation for my theory and key independent variable. Second, I review the literature on how party labels and identification affect vote choice. Party labels offer shortcuts to survey respondents when they express their opinions in the same way that voters use party labels to simplify their vote choice. Then, I evaluate how economic considerations affect vote choice, opinions of parties, and its leaders. Economic considerations offer another rubric for voters and survey respondents from which to evaluate the actions of elected officials. There is also a significant body of work that suggested that presidential success and popularity affect how one evaluates legislatures and legislators. Finally, I review how individuals acquire political information with a particular focus on media effects.

In my literature review, in addition to drawing on previous survey research, I also look at research on Congressional elections. I believe, as research indicates (Fenno 1975; Simon et al. 1991; Stimson et al. 1995; Durr et al. 1997), that there are links between the approval of Congress and electoral outcomes. In Stimson et al. (1995) model of dynamic representation, the authors suggest one mechanism that links public opinion to government is through the replacement of political characters in office. The other mechanism suggests that politicians are aware of the public sentiment that they will face in the next election and accordingly adjust their

actions in government. In this way, I believe public opinion is inextricably tied to and manifests itself in elections.

Political Awareness

The early studies that focus on political awareness present an interesting phenomenon. The portion of the electorate that knows the least about politics is also the portion that is most volatile group in terms of vote choice (Converse 1962). The most knowledgeable voters are the most stable voters who ultimately vote for the same party election after election. On the other hand, the least knowledgeable voters are far more volatile and are more likely to switch support for a party from election to election. The conventional wisdom posited that the most knowledgeable voters would acquire more information and therefore would have more cognitive resources from which to base decisions to switch party support. In contrast, Converse (1962) shows that the least knowledgeable voters are far more susceptible to vote switching based on new pieces of information present in public discourse.

The literature does not suggest that those individuals who rely on the economy or the president to help formulate their opinions about Congress are dumb or incompetent. Instead, the argument is that less politically aware individuals rely more on cues or heuristics because that is the most accessible information they have (Sniderman et al. 1991). In contrast, more aware individuals in their decision-making process are better able to incorporate pieces of information that go beyond heuristics to form their opinions about Congress and government in general. Sniderman et al. began to establish the link between awareness, cues, and decision making. The less aware only have these pieces of information, like their perception of the president and the economy, when they are asked to make a decision on their approval of Congress. Therefore, when asked to formulate an opinion, the less aware will reach for the most accessible top of the

mind consideration (Zaller 1992). The more aware have more resources in terms of knowledge about Congress from which to formulate their opinions. The concise version of the argument present in the literature suggests that more-aware individuals process information differently and therefore make decisions differently than less aware individuals (Sniderman et al. 1991).

Before delving in to the literature that addresses the specific components of approval based on party identification, the president, economy, and media, I discuss the literature that specifically links Congressional awareness to approval. First, there is a considerable divide on how political awareness conditions Congressional approval. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) note that people with more education and greater political efficacy are generally more likely to approve of Congress. However, one can make the case that awareness of the legislative branch is more important than the highest level of formal education completed by the survey respondent. Indeed, when Hibbing and Theiss-Morse measure knowledge that is specific to politics, they find that those who are the most knowledgeable about the political process are also the individuals who are the least likely to approve of Congress. But again, the issue here is that Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) measure political expertise or knowledge based on four questions that are anything but specific to Congress.⁴

Similarly, other research that links Congressional approval and awareness does not measure what the survey respondent knows specifically about Congress when this person indicates approval or disapproval. Other research consistently shows that Americans with greater education are more likely to disapprove of Congress (Asher and Barr 1994). I depart from these studies by focusing on what an individual knows about the institution at the time a survey

⁴ “In our survey, we asked respondents four general-knowledge questions, three of which were open-ended: Can you recall who is head of the new Russian republic?; Do you happen to recall who is the secretary of state?; and Who is the secretary of defense? The fourth question asked: Is the current federal budget deficit larger or smaller than it was when Ronald Reagan first took office in 1981?” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995:139)

respondent expresses approval or disapproval. In addition to literature on Congressional approval, I also draw on literature that describes vote choice. It is notable that Congressional approval consistently rests below 50%. What do these unsatisfied survey respondents know or want from government? Truman (1959:9) indicates that people view Congress “as a chaotic, incoherent aggregation of small-minded and shortsighted individuals.” Congress is further cast as the “Public Enemy” when it openly debates, blocks, and compromises on issues (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). What one might call the democratic process of filtering interests and preferences into legislation is commonly perceived as petty politicking by the people.

Individuals with greater levels of knowledge are better able to incorporate new pieces of information and use a different set of parameters to evaluate Congress (Berent and Krosnick 1995). Other individuals who do not have greater knowledge or awareness about politics cannot rely on the national political environment and therefore rely on cues that political parties may offer (Kimball 2005). Knowing that more aware individuals act differently (Sniderman et al. 1991), and that better informed citizens process information differently than the less-aware (Berent and Krosnick 1995), gives one reason to evaluate how information and cues are processed to formulate opinions about the Congress.

The discussed literature thus far does little to illuminate how awareness might condition approval for the individual member of Congress. The foremost finding addressing this question suggests that there is a great correlation between approval for the entire Congress and approval for its individual members (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). The literature suggests that those individuals who approve of Congress are more likely to approve of their individual member of Congress than individuals who disapprove. Other literature introduces awareness as an intervening variables and finds that individuals who are less educated are more likely to link

their evaluation of Congress and their evaluation of their individual member of Congress (Born 1990). In this case Born, (1990) suggests that the less educated have less cognitive space from which to offer two independent evaluations of Congress in its entirety and then for their own member of Congress. However, one piece of literature suggests that knowing more about Congressional candidates is not a magic bullet that may lead to greater approval. From 1978 to 2000, survey research consistently shows that as name recognition for House candidates increases, voters are more likely to find both more things they like and dislike about the candidate (Jacobson 2004). Jacobson (2004) also shows that incumbents are more liked than their challengers.

In the same way, one can make the case that those individuals who know little about Congress are less likely to have the political awareness to separate the actions of their individual member of Congress from the actions of the entire institution. Parker and Davidson (1979) suggest that Congress and Congresspersons are evaluated based on different standards, which helps explain why Congress is hated but our own Congresspersons are loved. While Congress as a single unit is held accountable for the general domestic policy, individual members are held accountable for constituency services and personal characteristics (Parker and Davidson 1979). Linking Parker and Davidson (1979) to Born (1990) suggests that only more aware individuals might be able to separate the perceptions of roles and responsibilities between Congress and its members. While less knowledgeable individuals would have less cognitive ability to attribute different roles to different entities. Indeed, the literature shows that the most knowledgeable individuals have the cognitive ability and policy space to recognize when Congress is derelict in its duties (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). The small amount of literature that separates the evaluation of Congress from the evaluations of its incumbents suggests that what individuals

know when they indicate approval or disapproval is an important factor that mediates approval for both Congress and its members.

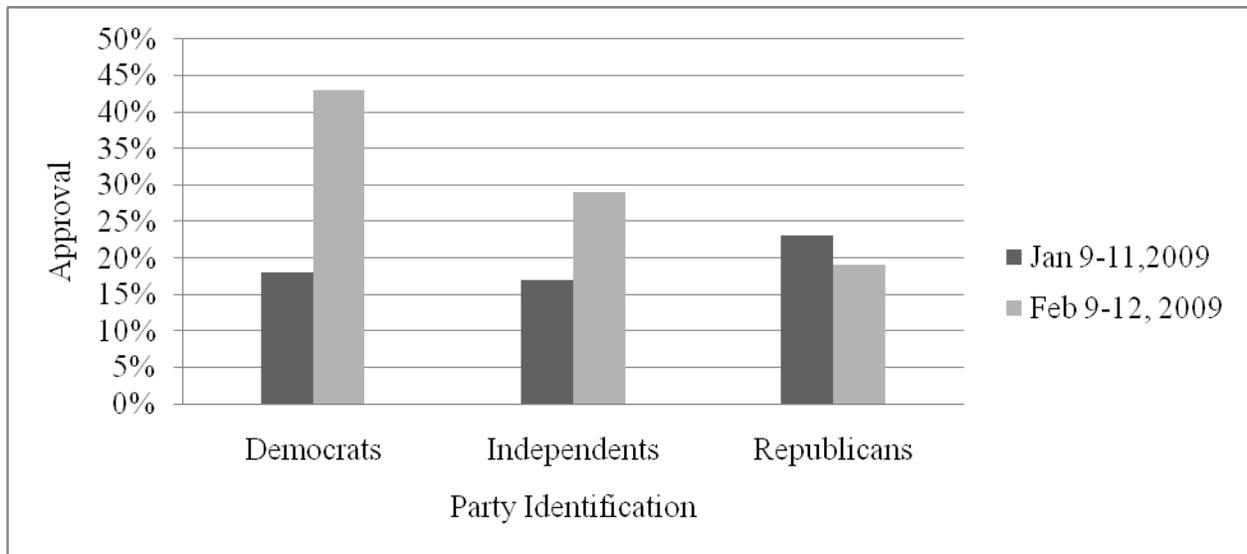
Party Identification and Labels

Party identification is one of the strongest predictors of American voting behavior and consequently the barometer mostly used by survey respondents when they indicate approval of Congress. Although much of this literature focuses on vote choice (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1966; Ferejohn and Fiorina 1974), it also applies quite naturally to survey respondents' answers to political questions. Voters commonly take cues from their evaluation of the economy, the president, and simple partisan labels to simplify their vote choice. Similarly, when one needs to formulate an opinion on a particular issue, approval or disapproval of Congress, the same cues that explain vote choice are relevant. These shortcuts are relevant because, as Downs (1957) points out, there are costs associated with staying informed. It is easier to formulate an opinion through simple shortcuts either from the media or from the cues present in society. Because the same forces that motivate vote choice also motivate survey responses, I continually draw contrasts between vote choice and survey responses in following literature review.

One uses shortcuts like party labels to simplify vote choice when one cannot recall the specifics of a candidate or issue under question (Stokes and Miller 1962). Despite considerable shifts in party loyalty, close to 75% of survey respondents consistently identify with one of the two major political parties (Jacobson 2004; Popkin et al. 1976). Party identification fluctuates based on satisfaction with candidates and parties in general. Identification is also related to electoral returns. Parties who enjoy an advantage in party identification usually find more electoral success. Similarly, as can be seen in Figure 2, electoral returns also influence the approval of parties (Stokes and Miller 1962). One can see that the approval ratings for

Democrats increased after they won additional seats in the House, Senate, and won the presidency. Furthermore, party identification is shown to be durable and a solid predictor of vote choice overtime (Campbell et al. 1960).

Figure 2. Difference in Congressional Approval by Party Affiliation from January to February of 2009



Source: Gallup’s telephone poll of 1,022 adults. Margin of error \pm 3%.

Campbell et al. (1960) establish the Michigan model showing that party labels directly affect vote choice when there is cognitive dissonance or simple ambivalence on the candidates or the issues. The Michigan model is rooted in a psychological approach that explains voting behavior and suggests that once an individual establishes a preference for a political party, this preference is likely to stay stable over time. For the average American voter, issues are abundant and difficult to sort. However, party preferences help funnel issues into an easy decision-making process that leads directly to the support of the preferred political party. Therefore, party labels offer easy cues for the voter to link issues and candidates to the party. When issues, candidates, and parties are all bundled together, this phenomenon yields two political parties or bundles to choose from. Voters in the U.S. elections have to choose from the two viable political parties

who intentionally keep their party platform vague in an attempt to claim the center of the political spectrum and claim a majority in the elections. As party and candidate platforms widen, the average voter is left to decipher what each party stands for. In terms of party identification, parties with ever-widening platforms can create confusion for the average voter who is just trying to simplify the voting process.

When it comes to the actions of the individual members of Congress, the literature suggests that the individual members are better versed at advertising who they are. Early literature indicates that members of Congress are excellent at facilitating their own reelection (Mayhew 1974a). The prowess of the incumbency advantage is expressed in early literature that indicates that over time it has become easier for the incumbents to win reelection (Mayhew 1974b; Fiorina 1977a). Previous literature also suggests that much of the incumbency advantage is attributable to strategic exits by incumbents and strategic entry by quality challengers (Cox and Katz 2002). On occasion, incumbents who feel electorally vulnerable strategically decide to retire rather than face the prospects of being ousted from office by the challenger. At the same time, quality challengers strategically decide to enter Congressional races when they feel that the incumbent is vulnerable or when there is no incumbent seeking reelection. These two cases contribute to the notion that incumbents are electorally safe in their bids for reelection (Cox and Katz 2002). Furthermore, while incumbents find themselves in safe and less competitive races, the policies that Congress as whole enacts has become less responsive to the public sentiment (Ansolabehere et al. 1992). This suggests that while support for the incumbent member of Congress may increase, the collective policy these incumbents enact has not become more favorable. So while individual members are safe in their districts, their actions in office may actually harm the institution of Congress.

As much as parties and their candidates have the ability to simplify vote choice for the American voter, their actions are just as likely to create confusion for voters who try to link issues to individual candidates and their parties (Campbell et al. 1960). It takes a concerted effort on the part of the voter to learn the issues, learn the party platform, and then finally tie parties and candidates to the issues. However, as the *American Voter* notes, this is a cumbersome process that only a small percentage of citizens engage in. Most voters merely evaluate facets of the political environment (the economy, foreign policy, domestic policy) in a retrospective manner without the ability to place blame on one party or another (Campbell et al. 1960). Disconnects between the political elites and the voters are clear in the 1948-1956 presidential elections (Campbell et al. 1960). Based on the presidential elections from 1948-1956, Campbell et al. show that it is difficult for the electorate to link their preferences of issues to the political party that is best fit to represent their views. The voters know little about the specifics of party platforms and government actions while the political elites are increasingly unable inform the voters about what each party has to offer. If this is the case in highly visible presidential elections, then we should expect even lower levels of awareness in Congressional elections where races are more local and affect a smaller constituency. In short, the Campbell et al. story of uninformed voters motivated primarily by party identification should be amplified in a study of Congressional politics where information costs are higher because of less visible political seats.

Party identification and labels are important because they can reduce the information costs that are placed on voters. The early findings indicate that there are costs to staying informed, costs that most would rather not pay (Downs 1957). Information costs are minimized by voters who use incomplete pieces of information as the sole source of their political

awareness. These sources of information include political parties, the media, and one's peers. Not only are these sources likely to be incomplete, but they are also likely to contain some level of bias (Downs 1957). Therefore, Downs suggests that it is not rational to stay informed and ultimately irrational to cast a vote. One can make the case that there are higher costs to staying informed about the Congress because there are multiple members, smaller constituencies, and less salient political battles in comparison to the president (Converse 1964). Therefore, by linking Downs and Campbell et al., we can see that party identification can play an important role in elections and subsequently in survey responses by informing citizens about elected officials. However, in lower level seats and elections, like in Congress, party identification should be a more salient decision-making determinant than the actions of the individual members that make up Congress.

At the individual level, less than 40% of the survey respondents can even identify the incumbent member in their district who is seeking reelection (Stokes and Miller 1962). According to Stokes and Miller (1962), respondents who are able to identify the incumbent are more likely to support the incumbent when that person seeks reelection. However, another study suggests that this advantage is weak and does not explain the incumbency advantage (Ferejohn; Abramowitz 1975). In the case of public opinion, this means that a majority of the respondents who indicate approval or disapproval of the individual member of Congress are likely to know little or nothing about this member. In this situation, where the voter or survey respondent has rudimentary or no knowledge about the actual member of Congress is where I expect party identification and labels to influence approval of Congress and its individual members.

More recent literature that ties in the major elements of this thesis, Congressional approval and political awareness, finds that individuals who are more knowledgeable about the

national political environment are more likely to use their partisan identification to evaluate Congress (Kimball 2005). Kimball shows that more knowledgeable survey respondents are more likely to use partisan information than less knowledgeable individuals when they express approval of Congress. Less knowledgeable individuals lack the awareness of the national political environment to let it influence their evaluations of Congress. In contrast, more aware individuals have some pieces of partisan information, like who is the majority party in the House and the Senate, that allow party labels and the general information about the makeup of the national political environment to influence their appraisal process. Therefore, while more knowledgeable survey respondents indicate approval based on information about parties, less knowledgeable individuals are more likely to take cues from their evaluation of the president and the economy (Kimball 2005). Another explanation suggests that people simply want a functioning economy and moral government officials who do not take advantage of their power or the people (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Indeed, a considerable amount of research finds a relationship between Congressional approval and economic considerations either in the aggregate or the personal pocketbook.

In short, political parties are "a supplier of cues by which the individual may evaluate the elements of politics" (Campbell et al. 1960:128). One's party identification determines which of the two major suppliers of cues a person will turn to when one needs to formulate a decision. In many cases, it is the political parties that characterize the performance of Congress, the economy, and the president. Usually, the out party illustrates a picture of doom while the party in power paints a picture of blue skies. Once an individual associates with one of the political parties, the individual's assessment of the national political environment and specifically Congress is colored by which party supplies the cues (Kam 2005).

Economic Effects

Economic considerations are also shown to affect Congressional elections and approval. Objective measures of the economy, like unemployment rates, track well with Congressional approval (Parker 1977). Subjective measures of the perceptions of the economy also correlate well with Congressional approval (Patterson and Caldeira 1990). Other studies find varying relationships between economic and Congressional approval when considering political sophistication (Gomez and Wilson 2003), and perceptions of the economy based on the personal pocketbook and the general economy (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Rudolph 2002). Looking specifically at Congressional approval, although citizens hold both the president and the Congress accountable for the economy, Congressional approval is clearly contingent on one's assessment of the economy (Rudolph 2002). The notion that the economy affects one's opinion of Congress is so well established that the literature has started to ask whether sociotropic or personal pocketbook evaluations are more relevant and whether subjective or objective measures of the economy are more influential. Rudolph (2002) suggests that Congressional approval is more dependent on how the individual perceives his own economic conditions (personal pocketbook). A further line of research indicates that perceptions of the economy are more influential in shaping Congressional approval than objective measures like inflation and unemployment (MacKuen et al. 1992). Other research further confirms the theory that subjective perceptions of the economy are significant in explaining Congressional approval (Durr et al. 1997). In either case, there is a strong correlation between subjective opinions of the economy and the objective measures of the economy (Gomez and Wilson 2003; Kramer 1971).

Economic conditions offer individuals an easy resource from which to cast judgment about Congress. One element that may bind the subjective evaluations of the economy to

Congress is the notion that there is a disconnect between what the Congress is and what its function is and what the people wish or want Congress to be like (Kimball and Patterson 1997). Those individuals who are dissatisfied with the makeup of Congress and its actions are far more likely to disapprove of the chamber than those individuals who believe the chamber is efficacious. Tying Kimball and Patterson (1997) to economic expectations, those individuals who think the Congress is responsible for the economy praise the institution when the economy is strong and blame the institution when the economy is weak. Furthermore, because the economy is more of a “fixed target” and easier to evaluate than Congress, opinions about the subjective nature of the economy invariably bleed into one’s perception of Congressional job performance (Lebo 2008). Lebo (2008) makes the case that an individuals’ perception of Congress is likely made up of a mixed bag of concerns that ultimately helps the individual to form an opinion of Congress. One component of this bag is the economy. If the bag is filled with positive considerations like positive evaluations of the economy, when one reaches into the bag to help formulate opinions about the Congress, then more positive contents is likely to yield more positive evaluations of Congress (Zaller and Feldman 1992). Theories on economic voting offer the voter another consideration that the voter can access in determining vote choice in the same way a survey respondent might consider the economy when evaluating Congress.

The national economy’s health is an easy cue from which citizens can evaluate government competency (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981). Evaluating the general condition of the national economy, or sociotropic voting, suggests that voters evaluate more than their personal economic conditions, and look to the conditions of the nation’s economy to evaluate government performance. Kinder and Kiewiet (1981) show that Americans are more responsive to changes in the nation’s economic environment than changes in their personal pocketbook. One possible

reason that explains this phenomenon is that if I am doing well while the nation is losing money, I might feel that I am next. In sociotropic voting, the level of awareness might be important. It is shown that more sophisticated voters are more likely to follow their personal pocketbook (Gomez and Wilson 2001). However, this finding is mitigated when the post-electoral vote is taken in account instead of the pre-electoral vote (Godbout and Belanger 2007). The difference is that the pre-electoral vote measures merely the intention to vote based on an economic referendum, while the post-electoral vote accounts for determination after the actual voting took place. In the end, both Gomez and Wilson (2001) and Godbout and Belanger (2007) agree that sociotropic voting occurs, but there is a disagreement as to how political sophistication and awareness factors in. In this study, I reevaluate this debate by measuring the effect of political awareness and the economic context on Congressional approval. Other research makes it clear that governments do have the ability to stimulate the economy.

Tufte (1978), in his extensive account of the economic cycles, shows how politicians manipulate the economy in the short term to motivate election-year success for the incumbents. His cross-national studies shows that disposable incomes are more likely to increase in election years than in non-election years (Tufte 1978). Similarly, in the postwar era presidential elections, Tufte finds that 8 out of 11 elections coincide with increasing personal incomes. Beyond real personal incomes, unemployment rates are also more favorable for the incumbents in election years. Cycles of election year short-term prosperity suggest that these positive swings in the economy are at least in some part the work of the incumbents in government. Tufte's research helps sketch out how even though the incumbent government does not control all facets of the economy, they have enough influence to raise incomes and lower employment rates, at least in

the short term. Therefore, voters perpetually set up a retrospective screen from which to evaluate the president and the party in power.

It is important to note that Tufte (1978) and Kinder and Kiewiet (1981) largely focus on how the economy affects the fate of presidents in elections. However, the fate of the president is linked with successes and failures of Congress. In a comparison of gubernatorial and Senate races, research shows that the Senatorial candidates are more closely tied to the successes of the president, while gubernatorial candidates are more closely linked to in-state issues (Atkeson and Partin 1995). Atkeson and Partin (1995) show that there is a strong relationship between presidential approval and the approval of Senatorial candidates of the same party. They label this the *national referendum effect*. Therefore, it is reasonable to apply what we know about economic effects on the presidential approval to how the economy affects the president's party and Congress more generally.

Kramer (1971) shows how fluctuations in the economy affect congressional elections. His findings on the economic effects on Congress mirror Tufte's (1978) findings of economic effects on the President. Variations in Congressional reelection rates correlate with the fluctuations in income and unemployment (Kramer 1971). As one might expect, economic prosperity helps incumbent Congress members, while economic downturns are likely to help the challengers. In this way, the fate of the president and Congress are linked to the performance of the economy. The concern with Kramer's (1971) finding is that he hints that economic factors are more influential than the incumbency advantage. However, reelection rates are still around 90% which makes one question how influential economics are in measures of incumbent approval.

Regardless of the actual condition of the economy, there will always be those from the party not in the majority who seek to highlight how troubling conditions are (Fenno 1975). Consider the 1992 presidential election when then Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton and Democratic Congressional candidates successfully framed that the economy was in dismal shape, despite the fact that the economy had turned in a positive direction come election season (Pomper et al. 1993; Hetherington 1996). Therefore, in every election, there is at least one party who rails against the establishment (i.e. the party in power) which in turn lowers esteem for the elective branches of government.

Presidential Effects

In addition to the economy, presidential popularity is also shown to affect Congressional approval and electoral returns. In terms of Congressional approval, it is shown that the least politically knowledgeable survey respondents are more likely to have their support for the president sway their opinion of Congress (Bernstein 2001). Bernstein shows that the individuals with the greatest level of political knowledge are the least likely to have their support for the president influence their opinion of Congress. Once again, individuals with more knowledge have more resources or pieces of information from which to formulate an opinion about Congress. When individuals with less political knowledge are asked to evaluate Congress, more salient and highly visible elements like the president color the opinion-forming process. The Congress is a moving target because it has so many pieces on which one can refer when thinking about the term “Congress” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Lebo 2008).

In general, when survey respondents indicate their distaste for Congress, a majority of these individuals refer to their dislike for the members of Congress and not the Constitutional notion of the Congress (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). The Congress has 535 moving pieces

on which one can refer when expressing their disapproval for the legislative body. However, the president is a single and highly visible figure that is representative of the executive branch. Because the president is more visible than the 535 semi-autonomous Congresspersons, it is easier to single out and formulate an opinion about the president. Since the president is the most visible unitary actor that represents the government, a negative or positive evaluation of the president is likely to seep into the consciousness and play a role for certain individuals when they express an opinion about Congress (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001). Individuals are likely to just lump together the president and Congress as the government in Washington (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001). This means one might expect evaluations of the most visible figure in the government, the president, to affect the less visible and less well-defined Congress. This is similar to the way the economy might influence the way one thinks about the Congress. Since the president is a more visible and more accessible figure, this should be an easily available cue the less aware person might use in forming an opinion about the Congress. While the more-aware person with more information and more considerations might use a different rubric to evaluate Congress (Sniderman et al. 1991). These same forces are shown to affect vote choice in Congressional elections.

It is even suggested that electoral swings in the Congress are more attributable to the actions of the president than the actions of Congress (Mayhew 1974a). Mayhew worked off of Kramer (1971) who suggests that the president's party is rewarded or punished based on the condition of the economy. Mayhew (1974a) makes the case that Congress members achieve their single-minded goal of reelection through advertising (making sure that constituents know the members' names), credit claiming (taking personal credit for they deem is good for their constituents), and position taking (taking positions that are of interest to the members'

constituents). These practices utilized for reelection are contingent on the actions of the president. The president is the primary actor to set the agenda and mobilize public opinion (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Kernell 1993).

Others go as far as to suggest that state-level elections are referendums on presidential performance (Simon 1989; Simon et al. 1991). When people approve of the president, they reward the presidents' party with greater electoral support. In contrast, when presidential popularity is low, voters are more likely to punish the party of the president by supporting the out party or the party not in the White House. An opposing finding suggests that midterm Congressional elections are not about the president and are more attributable to the characteristics of Congress (Ragsdale 1980).

Ragsdale suggests that presidential popularity only explains a tiny amount of variation in Congressional elections. She shows that other Congress-specific variables are far more influential in determining the fate of legislators in midterm elections (Ragsdale 1980). Other factors like party identification and the incumbency advantage are both better predictors of the public appraisal of Congress than is presidential approval. Therefore, Ragsdale rejects the theory that suggests that Congressional midterm elections are presidential referendums. However, this thesis seeks to explain public opinion about Congress and not elections. This means a survey of citizens is likely to capture all of those non-voters not captured in Ragsdale's analysis. Voters and non-voters alike factor into the traditional dislike of Congress. So while there might be a weak relationship between presidential approval and midterm Congressional elections, this relationship might be more robust when non-voters are added to the mix.

The inclusion of non-voters in the measure of presidential effects on Congress includes a wider swath of the citizenry than just counting the voters' evaluations. In Ragsdale's other study,

she creates a list of dominant characteristics shared by nonvoters (Ragsdale and Rusk 1993). This list suggests that non-voters are more likely to be politically ignorant, show indifference towards the candidates, be aware of only a single candidate, be dissatisfied with the candidates' options, and be less active in their communities (Ragsdale and Rusk 1993). If this is the case, then there are huge implications to consider, especially in a study of awareness and approval, when measuring presidential effects on Congressional approval. Just over 44% of the vote eligible population (VEP) participated in the 2006 midterms (McDonald 2009).⁵ This means a sample of only voters, systematically overlooks the majority of the U.S. population, which, as Ragsdale and Rusk (1993) shows, are different than their voting counterpart. This thesis considers both the president as well Congressional level variables that Ragsdale indicates are pertinent like incumbency and party identification. Furthermore, this thesis untangles the effect of the president and party identification on the Congress as a single body and its incumbents.

One may note the fact that the Congress and president are inextricably forced to rely on one another or work together to pass legislation and govern the country. One measure of presidential success is to count the number of victories or Congressional floor votes that promote the president's agenda (Bond and Fleisher 1990). Bond and Fleisher (1990:8) suggest, "Votes, therefore, [in Congress] are the basic commodity of presidential-congressional relations." In other words, presidential "success" is the number of presidential victories in Congress. This definition treats Congress as a monolithic group. Even though Bond and Fleisher (1990) note that support from all incumbents members is not necessary for presidential victories in Congress, legislation that passes by a single vote are victories nonetheless. The concern in this thesis is to discover how the survey respondents parse out government accountability. Survey respondents

⁵ Based on the vote for highest office (Governor, Senate, or House) divided by the voting-eligible population.

may disapprove of the entire Congress or its individual members in light of the presidents' actions.

Flowing in a similar vein as Bond and Fleisher (1990), Kernell (1993) suggests that when presidents *go public* (appealing directly to the people for support on the president's agenda), presidents are actually trying to line up public opinion in their favor, which can be used to motivate Congress to support the president's initiatives. The notion of "going public" further suggests that the president needs the Congress and the Congress needs the president in passing public policy (Kernell 1993). Therefore, the president's successes and failures might be seen as a reflection of Congress. Survey respondents might see Congress or its members in a negative light because they see the president in a negative light. While it is shown that presidents only marginally influence Congress (Edwards 1980), the president is still the most visible face of the government. It might be difficult for survey respondents to disentangle their feelings about the president from their feelings of Congress members.

Despite various measurement concerns, as Cox and McCubbins point out, the Congress does play a role in economic policy as well as presidential popularity (1993). The majority party has the ability to organize themselves as a cartel and monopolize all facets of lawmaking. When this is the case, it is easy for the Congress to leave its stamp on public policy. Whether the people are capable of disentangling the Congress from the president or the economy is under consideration. These pieces of research suggest that it is necessary to include measures of presidential popularity and economic conditions because of their effects on Congress. Recent literature finds a strong positive relationship between presidential approval and Congressional approval (Kimball and Patterson 1997; Lebo 2008).

The literature reviewed thus far suggests that citizens are generally aware of party labels and are capable of evaluating the economy. But where does this awareness come from? The personal pocketbook offers an easy cue from which to evaluate government. However, for certain issues like the sociotropic economy or the economic considerations beyond one's own finances, there must be a source that transmits political information. Similarly, it is not safe to assume that individuals innately know the party affiliations of candidates or the majority party. This is where media plays a role in creating political awareness, but not in the ways one might think.

Media Effects

Political science research finds mixed results on how media affects a person's decision-making process in terms of deciding for whom to vote or how to form an opinion. While more current literature suggests that the media does indeed play a role in shaping opinions and decisions (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Zaller 1992; Kinder 1998b), the early literature finds minimal media effects on the citizenry (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Klapper 1960; Lau et al. 1999). These early findings are built on the notion that individuals seek out information that reinforces the individual's predispositions towards an issue (Klapper 1960). This theory posits that a liberal individual will seek out liberal news outlets, while a conservative person will seek out conservative news outlets. Therefore, the net effect of the media is not to persuade people to change their opinion, but instead the media just serves to reinforce the individual's previous dispositions. This theory is brought into question with the development of better and more valid measurement techniques that find that the media does play a role in shaping a person's opinion.

One of the foremost findings in the literature of media effects suggests that the media does not tell the people how to think, but it tells them what to think about (Iyengar and Kinder

1987; Kinder 1998b). Media exposure also increases the salience of the issues that one is likely to recall (Iyengar et al. 1982; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). After exposure to a news expose about issue x, the viewer is likely to think that issue x is more important than it was before viewing the expose. Therefore, political parties do not try to change the peoples' minds, rather they change the topics the people think about (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). This is considered the priming effect. Like Zaller (1992), Iyengar et al. (1982) suggest that the media elites have the ability to manipulate what viewers think is important and take seriously.

Less aware individuals are more easily influenced by the media's agenda-setting power (Iyengar et al. 1982). The media sets the agenda by placing a single issue in the most prominent section of the newspaper or making it the lead story and giving it considerable time on the air on a nightly news cast. When one issue is placed front and center of a news cast or a newspaper, viewers and readers recognize that this topic is receiving prominent space from the news outlet. This adds to the notion that when a survey respondent is asked to recall information and offer a response, the response is likely to be whatever happens to be on top of the mind (Zaller and Feldman 1992). In other words, the viewer is primed to think about certain issues over other issues anytime this person tries to formulate an opinion on a matter (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Zaller 1992). Whether the matter is vote choice or forming an opinion for a survey, the issues that are at the top of the mind are likely there as result of prominent air space devoted to the topic on a news broadcast.

Krosnick and Kinder (1990) provide an excellent example of how priming through the media may affect public opinion. They show that after the Iran-Contra Affair, the more time the media spent focusing on the affair, the more fixated the public became with the news story. After greater exposure to the news story, more survey respondents considered the affair in their

decision-making process when they indicated approval or disapproval of the president (Krosnick and Kinder 1990). In the same way, greater Congressional media consumption may prime survey respondents to consider certain issues as they indicate approval of Congress. The issues and news stories surrounding the Congress are more likely to be negative issues because we know that Congresspersons have a greater propensity to run away from Congress (Fenno 1975), and that after the Watergate scandal, no issue was too taboo for the press to pursue (Asher and Barr 1994). This can affect whether the survey respondent recalls positive or negative stories about Congress. Consumers continue to turn to various media outlets because these outlets provide one of the least costly sources of information.

There are costs to staying informed (Downs 1957). These costs manifest themselves in terms of dollars, time, and missed opportunities (opportunity costs). Even when the average person chooses to invest time and other resources to staying informed, this information is likely to be second-hand information. Second-hand information, or information gathered by media outlets, all inherently have some bias (Downs 1957). Once the average person finds a news outlet that seems reliable and trustworthy, this person is likely to return to this same outlet to stay informed in the future. Media identified as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television provide low material and time costs for the consumer. In particular, television reporting has mastered the art of condensing salient political and non-political discourse into 30-second snippets that provide the viewer with limited information. From this observation, Downs makes the case that the typical voter expresses *rational ignorance* (Downs 1957). This means that a voter reaches a point where the cost of acquiring greater awareness exceeds any benefit from the information itself.

Of course, there are those individuals who choose to stay more informed and seek out multiple media outlets. Variation in media consumption creates more and less aware citizens who are uniquely impacted by the messages they receive from the media (Zaller 1992). Zaller suggests that the citizens' preferences are malleable and easily influenced by messages from media elites. Congressional elections present an interesting case where campaign seasons attempt to raise awareness and affect opinions and vote choice. However, it is shown that "low-stimulus elections" like for Congress are less effective in reaching the masses than are "high-stimulus elections" for the presidency (Campbell 1960). This means that while the information flow from parties and elites to the masses is greater during campaign season, this information flow is still weak in Congressional elections (Converse 1962). The masses, in contrast to the elites, are simply unable to maintain an accurate depiction of how the two major parties differ on policy or even understand the difference between liberal and conservative ideologies (Converse 1964). Therefore, while the parties and candidates attempt to reduce information costs to attract voters and sway public opinion, the costs of staying informed about Congress are higher than for more salient races like for the president.

Campaign messages are messages from the elite to the masses that may not hold perfectly coherent opinions about parties and their candidates. Less aware individuals are more receptive and more susceptible to elite messages (Zaller 1992). Less aware individuals have fewer considerations from which to contrast messages from the elites. In contrast, more knowledgeable people hold more considerations and therefore offer greater resistance to elite messages. That does not mean that ill-informed voters are destined to make poor decisions when at the ballot box. Just as voters take cues and messages from the media, less informed voters are also capable

of taking cues from their more informed counterparts (Lupia 1994). Lupia (1994) shows that in some cases, the decisions of ill-informed voters are identical to the most-informed voters.

However, it is not safe to assume that these more informed voters are always getting it right (Kinder 1998). There is also no guarantee that the less informed voter is able to parse out the brain trusts that have the voters' interests at heart from the narrow special interests that seek to serve themselves. Savvy interests from the elites know that the average voter is susceptible to cues and are capable of disguising their messages to make them seem that they are from the average Joe from mainstream America (Kinder 1998). The discussed literature offers a great foundation from which to theorize about how political awareness and media effect Congressional and incumbent level approval.

Early literature stands in contrast to more recent literature and contends that the media holds weak persuasion powers over the people (Klapper 1960). One reason for this phenomenon may be that people prefer like-minded news sources (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Katz 1981; Klapper 1960). However, these early findings are attributable to limitations in survey designs as well as imperfect recall memory (Price and Zaller 1993; Prior 2009a). Prior (2009a) points out that self-reported news viewers are significantly higher than the actual number of nightly news viewers. This is because of poor memory and poorly designed survey questions, not because people want to deceive the surveyor. According to Prior (2009a), over self-reporting via survey is prevalent by factors of up to 8 when compared to Neilson ratings. To make matters worse, there is considerable variability in over-reporting by age (Prior 2009a, 2009b). These findings will no doubt need to be addressed in any conclusions drawn from my thesis.

The literature indicates that voters and survey respondents are generally unaware of the functions of government and who runs government. One method used to overcome this lack of

information is to rely on party labels. Party labels simplify decision making by allowing the individual to latch on to the candidates and policies of the preferred party (Campbell et al. 1960; Stokes and Miller 1962). The reliance on parties and party labels to inform citizens lowers the costs associated with staying informed. Cues from highly visible elements like the president and the economy are two additional resources that offer the uninformed survey respondent shortcuts to forming an opinion. Similarly, survey respondents think about the condition of the economy when they consider Congressional performance (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Rudolph 2002; Gomez and Wilson 2003). Finally, the literature indicates the media has the power to influence what the survey respondents think when they express approval or disapproval of Congress (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Zaller and Feldman 1992; Kinder 1998).

In terms of Congress, one can see that the people know little about the institution but continue to demand a lot from it. Greater awareness of Congress is usually reached through easy cues present public discourse like the evaluation of the economy, president, and media frames. In short, the literature suggests that there are multiple factors that inform voters and survey respondents, who in the end might not be as informed as one might normatively want. Being ill-informed and the inability to name the Congressperson that we loath or love does not stop survey respondents from indicating their affection for the institution. In my theory, I extend the previous research as it might apply to how awareness conditions approval of Congress and its members.

Less knowledgeable voters are shown to rely more on their evaluation of the president in their calculation of Congressional approval than more aware individuals (Bernstein 2001). In an analysis of presidential politics, it is shown that the quality of news coverage in the news media has declined steadily since 1952 (Gilens et al. 2007). There is a marked shift away from policy-oriented coverage and a greater emphasis on personal candidate traits and scandals. Where the

free press began to fail its readers and viewers, political parties stepped in bridge the gap on policy-oriented information. Gilens et al. (2007) shows that despite the fact the media are more concerned with scandals and horse race politics, Americans' awareness of relevant policy issues during presidential elections has not declined. Political parties and candidate speeches have become more policy-oriented, which has helped the public form opinions about the president that go beyond personal traits and scandals that the major media outlets have focused on.

Content analyses on local newspaper coverage of local Congressional representatives finds a great variation in the way local newspaper outlets cover their local representatives (Arnold 2004). While national press corps is capable of making Newt Gingrich and Nancy Pelosi household names, it cannot do the same for the other 534 members of Congress. This is where it is important to note how local press agencies cover their local representative. Arnold (2004) shows the great variation in the way local newspaper outlets cover their local representative. The greatest number of articles on the incumbent seeking reelection come in close Congressional races (Arnold 2004). Races where there is not a quality challenger present receive far less attention from the local newspaper. This suggests that the local press is also concerned with horse-race politics like in the presidential case described by Gilens et al (2007). Other areas where the local press deems it necessary to cover the incumbent is on controversial issues concerning the president's agenda and the incumbent's stance on major federal funding programs (Arnold 2004).

Another piece of literature specifically looks at how the media should cover members of Congress. The findings suggest that maybe the reliance on competitive political races and the focus on scandals and ethical violations is not so bad (Zaller 2003). This new standard that Zaller (2003) calls the *burglar alarm model* suggests that citizens may not need to be aware of every

detail concerning their member of Congress. It may be more appropriate to sound the alarm when major infractions occur. Zaller further makes the case that a reliance on political parties and campaign messages is a reasonable thing to do because political parties are perfectly capable of sounding the alarm by placing quality challengers in races to remove the incumbent. When a quality challenger emerges, and races become close, there might be a reason why the incumbent struggles to capitalize on the incumbency advantage (Zaller 2003). Therefore, when citizens get their news from national or local press agencies, or even political parties, they are more likely exposed to the most contentious issues and races (Arnold 2004; Gilens et al. 2007). If the citizenry is exposed to this, then it is likely to lead to a negative perception of the way the Congress and its members are doing their jobs. Even though contentious issues and political races may be the norm in Washington, D.C., the people are likely to perceive that the members of Congress are engaging in petty politics (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 2002).

CHAPTER III

THEORY

I developed my theory by asking what the people know about Congress and then considered whether they approve or disapprove of Congress. The theory led directly to the hypotheses in this section. In theory, people who know more about Congress are more likely to have a positive evaluation of it than individuals who know less. The mechanism here suggests that individuals who take the time to know more about Congress are also likely to understand the power and duties of Congress.

Knowing that the average voter is generally poorly informed about the American government (Luskin 1987), and that Congressional campaigns have trouble conveying messages from the elites to the masses (Converse 1962, 1964), the general knowledge that Congress is disliked is based on input from a largely ill-informed public. My theory contends that survey respondents who know more about Congressional politics are more likely to express approval of Congress. In addition, a theory of how awareness affects individual member approval has not been fully developed. I proceed in this section by extending this general theory as it applies to the economic, presidential, and media effects on Congressional and incumbent level approval. My theory suggests that those individuals who know more about Congress are more likely to approve of Congress and are less likely to be swayed by cues like the economy, president, and the media.

In this analysis, I focus on how political awareness affected my two main dependent variables, Congressional and incumbent approval. My definition of political awareness is in many ways synonymous to the way political *awareness* or *sophistication* is defined in previous

literature. One common definition of political sophistication describes sophistication as a concept that indicates a person's capacity to process political information (Luskin 1987). I use *awareness* and *sophistication* interchangeably as a concept that accounts for how much an individual voter or survey respondent can recall about the state of Congress. In this analysis, I am primarily concerned with what the people know about Congress, as opposed to measuring political awareness based years of formal education or knowledge about other facets of government. In short, in this study, political awareness is the number of correct responses on a series of questions that are specifically related to Congress.

Political Awareness

Consider two types of individuals: one type is politically aware; another type is not politically aware. When it comes to forming an opinion about the Congress, the more aware individuals can rummage through their bag of political knowledge and use these multiple facets to form an opinion about Congress (Berent and Krosnick 1995). The less aware individuals, on the other hand, have fewer considerations in their cognitive bag, of which simple and highly visible cues, like the president and the economy, are more prominent considerations (Sniderman et al. 1991; Kam 2005). The least knowledgeable should be more susceptible to pieces of information from political parties and the media because of the relative impact of these pieces of information is greater on the person who has less considerations to begin with (Kam 2005). On the flip side, more aware individuals are less readily swayed by simple cues because these cues have to contend with the abundance of cognitive resources already available for the more aware individual.

I believe that political awareness affects Congressional approval because it is awareness or the pieces of political knowledge that one utilizes in an attempt to form an opinion. My

theoretical belief stems from Zaller (1992) who wrote that an opinion is composed of two parts: information and predisposition. Predispositions may include a lifelong attachment to one political party. Zaller also suggests that most individuals do not hold well thought out and coherent opinions of the political world. It is the case that most opinions are formed on the fly when one is asked to express their opinion. However, this quick opinion formation is not a haphazard process. The responses span a certain finite range (Zaller 1992). Therefore, I believe that political awareness is a critical component that determines how and why certain opinions are expressed.

Delving deeper into Zaller's (1992) theory, there are certain axioms that help to answer why and how political awareness might condition Congressional and incumbent approval. First, individuals with greater political awareness are exposed to more political messages. Second, individuals are resistant to information that is inconsistent with their own beliefs. This is the predisposition part of the opinion-formation formula. Third, information acquired or thought about more recently is the most accessible consideration that might affect opinion formation. Finally, the responses one might see in surveys are likely to be the average of all salient issues on the top of the survey respondents' mind. Each of these four components contributes to my theory on why political awareness affects approval.

It might be the case that individuals with greater political awareness are exposed to more political messages. However, the second of Zaller's (1992) axioms suggest that individuals who are not able to neatly fit pieces of information into their cognition might be more resistant to these political messages present in political discourse. Therefore, I theorized that individuals who know more about Congress are more likely to pick and choose what pieces of information they put into their cognition and filter out information that is not congruent with their predispositions.

In contrast, less aware individuals who are exposed to less political messages are more likely to be influenced by these messages because for the less aware person, the fewer messages that make it into the cognition find less resistance due to the lack of awareness. In addition, these less aware individuals have fewer cognitive resources at their disposal. So when it comes to opinion formation, the fewer cognitive resources one has the more accessible these resources are likely to be. Whereas the more politically aware person might gather information from a diverse set of news outlets and get selective with the information that may affect an opinion, the less aware person consumes less information and does not have the luxury of being selective with the information. This is where political cues and awareness might come into play.

Zaller (1992) notes that individuals do not hold well thought out opinions of political issues. I make the case that this is so because forming coherent opinions requires too much effort. On the other hand, it takes less effort to subjectively gauge the performance of the economy or the president. In many cases, information about the president and the economy come to the individual, whereas one might have to actively seek out the current affairs of Congress and especially the local incumbent representative. Discussions about the president and the economy are more rampant discussions because both are more politically visible and salient. Concerns about the economy or the president may comprise of what Lebo (2008) calls a mixed bag of perceptions that help form opinions about Congress. Less aware individuals may only have a mixed bag of which only a few concepts may directly relate to Congress.

The politically aware person has a cognition that offers more resistance to political cues like perceptions of the economy or the president and can be picky with the information that affects opinion. In short, less aware individuals cannot recall the components of the national political environment as they pertain to Congress and are therefore almost forced to use cues to

form opinions about Congress (Kimball 2005). My first hypothesis is that individuals with greater awareness are more likely to approve of Congress than less aware individuals.

Theoretically, more aware individuals know that Congress is not solely to blame for the perceived ills in society. Furthermore, those with greater political awareness are also less likely to take cues from the elements like the president, the economy, or messages from a political party (Kam 2005) and offer more resistance to incongruent messages (Zaller 1992). Less politically aware individuals only have a few cognitive resources, which make economic and presidential considerations more prominent considerations. The perceptions of the president and the economy can be cues by themselves, or as Kam (2005) suggests, political parties can try to make them cues from which one can make decisions. In either case, whether cues independently enter the consciousness or filter through party messages, perceptions of the president or economy act as pieces of political knowledge one can use to form an opinion. However, the less aware individuals are forced to use their scant knowledge of political discourse that has a propensity to engage in negative and watered down talk about politicians and political institutions (Gilens et al. 2007).

The literature suggests that those with greater awareness or knowledge process information differently than those individuals with less knowledge or awareness (Born 1990; Sniderman et al. 1991; Asher and Barr 1994; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Less aware individuals are more likely to negatively assess Congress as an institution because they perceive the political process of legislation as petty politicking (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). The institution of Congress is large and therefore seen as sluggish and unresponsive; it is powerful and has very public disputes, and it is based on compromise which means everyone does not get everything they want (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). The people continue to disapprove even

when the Congress serves within its Constitutional powers and enacts major pieces of legislation (Durr et al. 1997). The literature suggests that individuals dislike Congress because it is slow and unresponsive, and they continue to dislike it when it passes major of legislation. It seems that both action and inaction on the part of Congress are at least two sources of disapproval. However, it may be that more aware individuals are capable of understanding the political environment and are better able to incorporate political knowledge (Sniderman et al. 1991).

Economic Cue

While the people would like unemployment rates to rest below 5%, those who know more about Congress are likely to understand that Congress cannot unilaterally stimulate the business cycle to create millions of jobs. Those who know less about Congress are likely to take shortcuts by evaluating the economy and imposing their view of the economy on Congress. The opinion from a less aware individual would posit that the economy is performing poorly and attribute this poor performance to the actions of those in power: the president and Congress.

History has repeatedly shown that the party of the president suffers in Congress once the president loses some of his favorability rating. Like Mayhew (1974a) and Kramer (1971) discussed earlier, when the economy performs poorly, individuals look at who is in charge, the president and the majority party, and blame them. I believe this relationship is mediated by political awareness. Those who know less about Congress are more likely to use their evaluation of the president and the economy as an easy way to evaluate Congress (Kam 2005). Kam (2005) finds that awareness conditions who is most likely to use party cues. These findings are based on an experiment conducted on students at large “Midwestern university” where the political awareness of a subject is based on their knowledge of certain political figures.⁶ Through this

⁶ Kam (2005) asks her subjects to identify the positions held by four political figures: Trent Lott, William Rehnquist, Tony Blair, and John Ashcroft (p. 197).

measure of awareness, Kam determines how the aware and less politically aware toe the party line.

Individuals who know more about Congress are more likely to understand that there are elements outside the powers of Congress, like foreign economies and exogenous shocks that may influence the business cycle. Therefore, individuals not satisfied with Congress are more likely to have expectations that Congress cannot or does not meet (Kimball and Patterson 1997). Knowing that perceptions of the economy commonly factor into evaluations of Congress (Lebo 2008), when economic perceptions are positive, this is likely to contribute to a more positive evaluation of Congress. An evaluation of the economy in a less politically aware mind will more easily reach prominent space in the cognitions of these individuals. However, it would not be surprising if more aware individuals also take cues from the economy because their level of awareness allows them to access economic information outside of their personal pocketbook (Gomez and Wilson 2001).

The second hypothesis contends that more aware individuals are less reliant on cues like the economy (Kimball 2005). Not only are less aware individuals more likely to use cues but I believe they are more likely to use cues to negatively evaluate Congress because of the propensity negative news and political discourse. For the purposes of this thesis, an economic cue was the survey respondents' subjective evaluation of the condition of the economy. The rationale for economic conditions affecting Congressional approval is that the economy is a highly visible salient issue that individuals have some subjective notion of (Patterson and Caldeira 1990; Rudolph 2002). Furthermore, individuals believe to some extent that the Congress is responsible for producing a strong economy (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 2002). With the economy being highly visible, and the perception that the Congress is

responsible for maintaining a burgeoning economy, when survey respondents were asked whether they approve of Congress, some individuals could not help but let their evaluation of the economy bleed into their evaluation of the Congress. This situation should be the most pronounced for individuals with lower levels of awareness because they lack other pieces of information that require them to actively seek and integrate less visible political knowledge (Sniderman et al. 1991; Berent and Krosnick 1995).

Presidential Cue

In the same way as the economy, the president is another highly visible element that affects how one thinks about the Congress (Bernstein 2001). The rationale for presidential evaluations affecting Congressional approval is that the president is a highly visible figure who has been seen as the single representative of the government (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001). Therefore, when one thinks about any part of the government, the most visible figure in the government, the president, is likely to sway opinions of Congress (Kimball and Patterson 1997; Lebo 2008). Furthermore, Lebo (2008) shows that independent of awareness, evaluations of the president affect Congressional approval. Others go as far as to write that in many cases, state-level elections are referenda on the president's jobs performance (Simon 1989; Simon et al. 1991). In short, approval of the president may affect the approval of Congress because it is easier to form an opinion about a single highly visible figure of government than the hundreds of members that make up Congress. So when the survey respondent needs to form an opinion about Congress, this opinion may not already coherently exist waiting to be accessed at will. In contrast, it is safer to assume that more individuals have opinions about the president because the president not only represents the entirety of the executive branch, but is also representative of the nation as whole. Therefore, these preexisting notions about the president may color the opinion-

making process on Congress. It is also likely that the less aware individuals cannot separate one branch of government from another, which would cause these individuals to lump all elected officials into the government in Washington (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001).

My third hypothesis is that less aware individuals are more likely to rely on their evaluation of the president when they evaluate Congress, such that for less aware individuals only, if they approve of the president, they are more likely to approve of Congress. For the purposes of this analysis, the presidential cue was the survey respondents' assessment of the president's job performance. Tying together the literature on political awareness and knowledge, it should be the individuals with the least amount of knowledge or political awareness who are the most likely to rely on the presidential cue. (Sniderman et al. 1991; Berent and Krosnick 1995; Krosnick and Kinder 1990). Individuals with greater political awareness have the cognitive resources that they may access that go beyond simple cues (Kam 2005).

Media Effects

The media affects how one thinks about the Congress because it puts certain issues front and center in a person's cognition. We know that the media is capable of priming an issue and making it a more prominent issue that one is likely to think about when evaluating their political environment (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). We also know that political parties and campaign ads are capable of increasing awareness in the public during campaign season (Gilens et al. 2007). While the news has had a propensity to cover scandalous issues (Asher and Barr 1994), political campaign ads have helped increase awareness in the public. Additionally, it has been suggested that even though the local press' coverage of the incumbent member in a district tends to focus on the horse race and the most contentious issues (Arnold 2004), this method of covering Congresspersons may still be a valid method of coverage (Zaller 2003). Covering the tightest

Congressional races and the most controversial members might just be a form of the burglar alarm oversight where the press focuses only on the biggest grievances during campaign season (Zaller 2003).

When the local and national media focus on the most controversial issues, and when campaign ads continually draw contrasts that illuminate the flaws in one candidate or the entire institution of the Congress, the typical survey respondent is likely exposed to the most unflattering issues surrounding the Congress. Furthermore, one might know that even Congresspersons have a propensity to blame “Congress” while the individual Congressperson seeks reelection. This culminates into a political environment where at first glance Congresspersons are forsaking their duties at the expense of the institution (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). It may be the case that the more aware person is capable of seeing that the process of legislation and election seeking is less than a clean, streamlined process, and are better able to process this information (Berent and Krosnick 1995; Sniderman et al. 1991). Therefore, I theorize that those who consume more campaign ads are more likely to have a negative evaluation of Congress. This is one reason to separate Congress from its individual members. While Congress is unpopular, its individual members are generally more popular than the entirety of the institution. This also explains why reelection rates are consistently around 90% and makes one wonder how the economy, president, and media affect individual members.

Early literature indicates that the media has the ability to shape what the people think (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Kinder 1998). In addition, media exposure increases the salience of the issues that one thinks is important (Iyengar et al. 1982; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). This priming effect, in conjunction with the local media’s tendency to focus less on policy issues and more on horse race and scandalous politics (Asher and Barr 1994; Arnold 2004; Gilens et al.

2007), suggests that the information that permeates during the campaign is likely to frame Congress and its members in less than a positive frame. Furthermore, the Congress is a public arena, where unlike the Supreme Court, its battles and tensions are televised for all to judge (Durr et al. 1997). With all of the negative sources of media coverage, greater media consumption is likely to promote a more negative evaluation of Congress and its members.

In this thesis, I focus on campaign messages in the media. The use of campaign messages before the elections is further justified in light of Zaller's findings from the Lewinsky scandal (Zaller 1998). He found that people were more receptive to campaign messages during elections season than with the allegations that had been strewn about before the election. This suggests that campaigns were effective in retrospectively setting the record straight on Clinton's economic and domestic policy accomplishments. In sum, Zaller (1998) shows that the people are capable of focusing on the *bottom line* on issues like *peace, prosperity, and moderation* (p. 186). Zaller (2003) shows that campaign messages are effective in informing the citizens about the relevant issues, even while the newspapers fixate on soft news or issues surrounding the candidates' personal traits. In addition, political parties and campaign ads are capable of increasing political awareness even as the media focuses on more soft news stories (Gilens et al. 2007).

Regardless of the source and message, I believe that more aware citizens are better able to process campaign messages and put them in context with what one generally knows about Congress (Zaller 1992; Kam 2005). Again, Kam's measure of political awareness is contingent on an experiment that asks students to identify four globally-known political characters and is not concerned with the specifics of any American institution. More aware citizens should theoretically know that the out-party runs away from the establishment of Congress and the majority party seeks to preserve its power. Therefore, there is at least one source of campaigning

that casts Congress in a negative light. I believe that less aware individuals are more susceptible to these negative messages via the media because they have less information with which to contrast the campaign message (Zaller 1992; Kam 2005). Knowing that Congress is consistently unpopular makes it strategically easy to paint Congress and its members with a broad brush that depicts it as out of touch and made up of self-serving politicians.

I believe that the media plays a role in generating political awareness, but the literature is mixed on how this might affect opinions. Early literature suggests that the media plays a minimal or no role in influencing the people (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Klapper 1960; Lau et al. 1999), while other literature suggests the media has the power to shape opinions (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Zaller 1992; Kinder 1998). It may be the case that media consumption leads to lower approval because of the propensity of campaigns to have a consistent negative message. Theoretically, it may also be the case that more aware individuals are more aware because they consume more media. Therefore, two possible correlations between awareness, media, and approval are first that individuals who consume more media know more about Congressional politics because of their media consumption. And second, individuals who consume more media and know more are also likely to have a negative evaluation of Congress because of the news media's propensity to follow stories that are critical of the legislature.

In this thesis, I focus on campaign messages in the media. Here media means television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. The fourth hypothesis posits that those individuals who consume campaign messages through the media, as opposed to those who consume no campaign media messages, are more likely to disapprove of Congress. In campaigns, there is at least one side that strategically makes the decision to run away from the institution of Congress. Both members in the majority and the minority parties' find it strategically valuable to blame

Congress the institution while deflecting any personal responsibility they may have. Extending this hypothesis, I believe that individuals with greater political awareness are less likely to use the media to negatively evaluate Congress. Zaller (1992) notes that those individuals with greater political awareness also offer more resistance to each political message. Therefore, an interaction between awareness and media consumption would measure the presence of any sort of resistance to campaign messages in the media, for the more aware person. This resistance might also reject the negative campaign messages that spread across the media. Noting Congress' propensity to publicly air its battles (Durr et al. 1997) and the news media's propensity to focus on non-substantive policy based issues (Gilens et al. 2007) suggests that the information that infiltrates the public is more likely to show how the Congress fails than how it succeeds.

Approval of Incumbents

What the literature left underdeveloped was how certain variables affect the approval of individual members of Congress. It is easy for one to take a cue from the economy, president, or the media, and blame "Congress," whatever that means to each individual. From the previous literature, the only factors that may contribute to individual level approval are how one feels about Congress (Born 1990), how much media one consumes (Arnold 2004; Gilens et al. 2007), and the incumbency advantage (Mayhew 1974a; Ragsdale 1980). Ragsdale (1980) shows that for Congress the incumbency advantage explains more Congressional electoral outcomes than does the presidential cue. Incumbents are in a position to cater to needs of their constituents by conducting case work and bringing federal dollars into the home district, which in turn helps to build name recognition for the incumbent.

The challenger, on the other hand, does not have the Congressional resources like a professional staff to conduct case work, and the franking privilege to build name recognition and

remind the constituents of the beneficial goods associated with the Congress person. In turn, the resulting incumbency advantage essentially creates a brand or a cue in terms of name or incumbent label recognition. Judging by the high incumbent reelection rates, I believe that matters like political awareness, presidential, and economic cues can have little or no impact on incumbent approval. The high reelection rates already indicate how insulated incumbents are in terms of approval that is expressed via the elections. The high reelection rate is one reason why I believe that cues are not significant determinants of incumbent approval. The attribution of blame to a single member in the local district requires too much effort on the part of the voter or survey respondent. Plus, any linkages between the condition of the economy or the actions of the president and the local incumbent would be at best tenuous.

Consider the fact that Congress members act in a manner where they bring back to their districts particularized benefits with dispersed costs (Mayhew 1974a). So a home district can enjoy pork projects that benefit the district and, at the same time, deride the process of pork barrel politics when particular benefits do not reach home. Incumbent campaigns capitalize on this process during elections season by reminding their constituents what the incumbent has brought to the district (Jacobson 2004), while at the same time reminding the constituents how the incumbent is not a part of the broken system in Washington (Fenno 1975). The growth in the American bureaucracy helps to provide incumbents with greater resources to conduct constituency services that ultimately lead to the vanishing marginal elections (Fiorina 1977a). As the bureaucracy grows, there is ample room for incumbents to pursue pet projects that benefit only a small constituency who may recognize that the tangible benefit is the work of the incumbent. Jacobson (2004) shows that while greater name recognition of the House candidate

leads to both more likes and dislike about the candidate, incumbents are generally better liked than their challengers.

This suggests that a possible mechanism that drives individual member approval is the incumbency advantage. One concern in this analysis is that the ANES data I utilized only measures approval of incumbents who seek reelection. Theoretically, this means that all of the members of Congress in this analysis enjoy the incumbency advantage. It also means that I was unable to measure how the approval of the incumbent is different from the approval of the challenger. Mayhew (1974a) outlines how well Congress members advertise, credit claim, and take positions to help their reelection bids. It may be the case that Congress is perfectly organized to facilitate reelection and that Congresspersons are single-minded in their goal of reelection (Mayhew 1974a), but while the incumbents are preening themselves for reelection, who takes care of the institution of Congress? It is hard to find the crusader who campaigns on behalf of how great the Congress is and how successful it has been in representing the people. In contrast, it is much easier to find members of Congress who are concerned with the upkeep of their image for reelections sake. In short, the literature suggests that the simple incumbency advantage as well the institutional makeup of Congress that helps facilitate reelection are both elements that foster positive individual member approval but do little to polish the image of Congress as a whole. It may be the case that incumbency itself is a cue to the survey respondent like economic and presidential approval. The literature also suggests that there is a correlation between the approval of the incumbent member of Congress and the approval of Congress in its entirety.

One who feels positively about Congress is more likely to feel positively about their individual member. Even though Congresspersons do an excellent job claiming credit and

actively seeking to solidify reelection even in non-election years (Mayhew 1974a), the local press is more concerned with how the local Congressperson votes on the president's agenda or major funding programs that may affect the incumbents district (Arnold 2004). Furthermore, there are those incumbent Congresspersons who blame Congress for all of the ills in society while they seek reelection (Fenno 1975). Finally, the national press is increasingly covering soft news stories and shying away from focusing on Congresspersons' records (Gilens et al. 2007).

Looking at the literature developed thus far, we can see that there are more explanations for what does not motivate individual member approval than what does motivate approval. Durr et al. (1997) note that the divide between incumbent and Congressional level approval has led some scholars to assume that the electoral returns for the incumbent members of Congress are independent of how the people feel about Congress more generally. In terms of public opinion, some also believe that public opinions on the individual member of Congress do not affect approval of the entire chamber or vice versa. However, Born (1990) shows that there is a positive relationship between the approvals of one's own member and the approval of Congress. These findings are further supported by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) who find that opinions of Congress are generally linked to the approval of one's own member. Durr et al. (1997) also suggest that Congressional public opinion is tied to the opinion of one's own legislator.

Similarly, it may be that opinions of one's local incumbent may affect the approval of Congress.

Following the lead of Fiorina (1977b) and Cox and McCubbins (1993), I believe that Congress members are invariably tied to the track record of their party. Whereas Cox and McCubbins measure the effects of party on reelection chances, I hold that the party track record is also a factor in approval. I submit that public opinion of the legislature and legislators hinges on one's evaluation of the *party record*: beliefs and outcomes that go into the evaluative process

(Cox and McCubbins 1993). This definition holds that one's depiction of a party is as much a function of beliefs and characteristics attributed to the party as it is a systematic evaluation based on Congressional outputs. Therefore, while it may simply be the case that Democrats approve of Democrats and Republicans approve of Republicans, I believe that the process is more complicated. As Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) point out, it may seem on the surface that simple partisanship motivates approval, but controlling for party does not eliminate their findings that show that more-educated individuals are also more likely to dislike Congress than the less-educated individuals. In the end, they believe that even while controlling for party identification the more-educated individuals are more demanding, critical, and aware of Congressional mistakes. In addition, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) shows that more-educated Democrats are more likely to approve of Congress than less-educated Democrats. Therefore, I believe that partisanship is an important component of Congressional approval, but there are other pieces to this puzzle.

My fifth hypothesis holds that approval of the incumbent member of Congress is driven by how one feels about Congress as whole. Economic evaluations and presidential approval should not be the significant inputs that affect approval while the media may still be influential in forming opinions of incumbents. It is harder for one to attribute blame for the condition of the economy and the actions of the president to one's local incumbent. Specific attribution of blame to one member of Congress from the home district would require considerable effort. In addition, Zaller (1992) mentions the lack of coherent opinions present on grander issues that go beyond a single member from the House. While there is great variability in the way the national and local media outlets cover campaigns, they create greater awareness that may prime stories that highlight the failures of individual members. Furthermore, the theory suggests that determinants

that drive Congressional approval for the entire legislature do not operate the same way when it comes to individual-level approval. Traditional literature tells us that the president factors into Congressional approval (Kimball and Patterson 1997; Bernstein 2001; Lebo 2008), and so does the economy (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Patterson and Caldeira 1990; Rudolph 2002); however, how much impact can these factors have when one considers the roughly 90% reelection rate for incumbents?

Summary

This theory first built on the literature that indicates how individuals process information. Different levels of political awareness lead individuals to use information and assess situations differently (Born 1990; Sniderman et al. 1991; Asher and Barr 1994; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Second, the in-depth look at Zaller's (1992) theoretical axioms helps justify and explain how and why political awareness should affect Congressional approval. Individuals with greater awareness offer more resistance to issues that enter their cognition. The resistance to information and the ability to hand-pick information that one wants to hold or reject based on the issue and predisposition compatibility allows the more aware individuals to consume a wealth of political information beyond simple and salient cues. Less aware individuals have less information and less resistance to the few pieces of information that do come their way and therefore are more susceptible to be swayed by simple and salient cues.

The economic and the presidential cues are influential in affecting Congressional approval because these two elements are more accessible for the person who is less politically aware. For the less aware person, a quick sampling of what one has in their cognition to form an opinion about Congress is likely to be influenced by the salient cues. The literature goes back and forth on how the economy and the president may or may not affect Congressional or

incumbent approval. The theory links awareness to the economy and president and predicted that more aware individuals are likely to use information that goes beyond perceptions of the economy or president.

The theory on media effects highlights the varying methods of covering members of Congress and how this may affect how one is influenced by the media. Arnold's (2004) first major study of how the local press covered the incumbent member of Congress shows that some local news agencies do a solid job while other local agencies lack the resources to cover anything more than the horse race. While the more aware person has cognitive resistance to the information presented in the media, the less aware person is more susceptible to the campaign coverage that focuses on scandals and ignores policy issues (Asher and Barr 1994; Arnold 2004; Gilens et al. 2007). Thus, the less aware person is more likely to disapprove of Congress because the most readily available political information in public discourse is cynical and highly critical of elected officials.

The last section of theory looks at how political awareness affects approval of the incumbent members of Congress. The literature on approval of the entire Congress is thick, but theories about the incumbent member are less developed. One important strand in the previous theories on the incumbent member of Congress highlights the strength and value of the incumbency advantage (Mayhew 1974a). I theorize that there are a few determinants that can overcome the influence of the incumbency advantage. Therefore, while cues may not contribute to incumbent approval, the approval of Congress may help foster approval for the incumbent and vice versa.

CHAPTER IV

DATA

The data for this thesis was taken from the American National Elections Studies (ANES) data acquired from the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) (Sapiro and Rosenstone 2007). This cumulative data set yields thousands of respondents from biennial surveys conducted from 1980 through 2004.⁷ 1980 is the start date for the data I used because this is the first time that all of the relevant variables (Congressional approval, incumbent approval, and awareness measures) were included in the survey. The ANES conducts a biennial, cross-section survey of the entire nation. This yields an equal probability sample, simply meaning that every person in the country has the same chance of being selected for the survey. Since 1980, each biennial survey has telephone surveyed at least 1,212 individuals in a single year, with the maximum number surveyed occurring in 1992 with 2,485 respondents. The ANES is a great resource because it allows one to measure change in opinions over time at the individual level. I used the pre-election survey questions because this is the time when one is likely to find the most amount of campaign messages in the media. Furthermore, this is also the time candidates attempt to make them known and try to draw contrasts between them and the opposition. As these contrasting campaign messages infiltrate the sources of media, print and broadcast, one is more likely to learn about Congress and its membership.

The two main dependent variables for this study are Congressional and incumbent approval from 1980-2004. Surveys from this period ask respondents do you approve of Congress

⁷ In the multiple models that I run, the sample size is consistently less than 2,000 survey respondents. This is the case because some respondents cannot or do not answer each question. If there is a survey respondent who does not have an incumbent member who seeks reelection, they are not asked if they approve of the incumbent and therefore are excluded from the awareness variable I construct. This helps explain the smaller sample sizes.

and do you approve of the House incumbent who is seeking reelection. I made both of these survey questions into dichotomous variables by taking only approve and disapprove responses. Responses like no answer and no incumbent running were omitted. All of the survey questions used in this study are available in Appendix A. It may be problematic to survey only individuals who have incumbents seeking reelection in their district. There are times when Congresspersons strategically choose to retire after a scandal breaks and they can sense they are vulnerable. Furthermore, noting the research by Cox and Katz (2002), much of the incumbency advantage is attributable to strategic entry and exits by both the incumbents and the challengers. For these reasons, I was unable to capture survey respondents who have incumbents who are very unpopular and still seeking reelection. Because of this data limitation in the ANES, my research analysis was almost bound to this shortfall. I suspect that this limitation might have offered more bias findings that show that incumbents are more favorable or supported than they really are. However, considering the low Congressional turnover rate, this limitation should not meaningfully skew the findings. One can note the descriptive statistics in Table 1. This figure clearly shows that over time disapproval for Congress (52%) is consistently greater than disapproval for individual members in the House (15%). This makes one question what the survey respondents know when they express approval or disapproval and how this affects the opinion formation process.

Awareness is the first critical concept that I operationalized. To do this I created an 8-point political awareness variable. This variable incorporated four questions: name the majority party in the House, name the majority party in the Senate, recall of the House candidates seeking election (up to 3), and recall of Senate candidates seeking election (up to 3) (shown in Appendix A). If one was able to name the majority in the House and recalled a single House candidate

seeking election in their district, then the awareness variable equaled two. If one could not recall the majorities in either House or Senate and could not name a single candidate for the House or Senate, then awareness equaled zero for that individual survey respondent.

The second critical concept I operationalized is media consumption. It is important to note that media consumption in this study means the sources from which one consumes campaign media messages. Negative campaigns are common and criticize both the individual candidates and the institution of Congress. The ANES created a 5-point index based on the number of sources from which a respondent consumes campaign information. For example, if one gets campaign information from television and radio, then this individual has a media score of two. Another way to operationalize media consumption is to separate individuals who get at least one campaign message from the media from those who get no information from the media. The separate media dichotomy variable is necessary because there might be a greater difference between those individuals who get some campaign messages from the media, versus those who get no campaign messages through the media. The difference in impact of consuming campaign ads from one source to two sources may be less than the impact from consuming no media sources to consuming at least one message. The dichotomous media variable was used to check for robustness in comparison with the multi-tiered measure of media exposure. Furthermore, there is not a distinction between a person who gets four campaign messages from four sources, and a person who gets ten campaign messages from a single source. One reason to account for the variability between media consumption in the 5 ordered levels, and the dichotomous media variable may be, as Prior (2009a, 2009b) mentions, is the over reporting of media consumption. With a 5-point ordered variable that allows the respondent to add up the number of sources of campaign information, there is greater room for over reporting. However, in the dichotomous

media variable, all levels of media consumption greater than zero equal one. This limits the potential effects of over-reporting.

The income control variable breaks down the respondents' household income into 5 brackets from 0-16% as the bottom bracket to 96 -100% income as the top bracket. Previous research indicates that the poor are more likely to approve of Congress (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Theoretically, there might be relationships between those who earn more, media consumption, and awareness. A person with greater income is more likely to be able to afford and therefore have greater access to print and broadcast media. It may also be the case that those with greater incomes have more time to devote to learning about politics. The presidential approval variable asked whether the survey the respondent approves of the president's job performance. Only approve and disapprove responses are used in the study. Economic considerations are gauged by asking the survey respondent how bad or good the economy was over the past year. Responses used to gauge one's opinion of the economy include: better, stayed the same, or worse. This variable is in line with previous literature and the theory that suggests that individuals take cues from elements like the economy when assessing Congressional approval (Gomez and Wilson 2001; Kam 2005). A year dummy variable is a part of the analyses that coincides with all biennial elections from 1980-2004.

To compare these operationalized concepts I ran some correlation tests to observe the interaction between the variables. First, it might be the case that there is some correlation between individuals who consume more campaign messages through the media and political awareness. It is entirely likely that more aware people are more aware because of increased media consumption. I found moderate to low correlation, less than .41 on the correlation matrix of coefficients between awareness and media consumption indicating that these variables do not

vary together. Similarly, I ran a correlation test between my political awareness variable and education that was commonly the traditional political awareness variable in other literature. Here the correlation is less than .36 on the correlation matrix of coefficients. This provides leverage to the argument that political awareness is more than just the number of years spent in school.

The models were ran in a probit regression because my two dependent variables, Congressional approval and incumbent approval, are both dichotomous variables. The samples were quite large (around 1000) for each model. Furthermore, the approval and disapproval responses were given frequently enough so that the no response was considered a rare event. I modeled Congressional and individual member approval in two different ways. For both Congressional and individual member approval, I measured how cues like party identification, economic evaluations, and presidential evaluations directly affect approval (Appendix B) and at the same time, I measured how awareness has an interactive effect on these variables. This model has party identification, economic effects, and presidential effects as the variables the show the relationship between these cues and awareness. The next section outlines how these theories were tested and shows the findings.

The model for Congressional approval is:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Congressional Approval} = & \text{Awareness} + \text{Media Consumption} + (\text{Awareness} \times \text{Media}) + \text{Party} \\ & \text{ID} + (\text{Awareness} \times \text{Party ID}) + \text{Economic Cue} + (\text{Awareness} \times \text{Economic Cue}) + \text{Presidential} \\ & \text{Cue} + (\text{Awareness} \times \text{Presidential Cue}) + \text{Income} \end{aligned}$$

The model for incumbent approval is:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Incumbent Approval} = & \text{Congressional Approval} + \text{Awareness} + \text{Media Consumption} + \\ & (\text{Awareness} \times \text{Media}) + \text{Party ID} + (\text{Awareness} \times \text{Party ID}) + \text{Economic Cue} + (\text{Awareness} \times \\ & \text{Economic Cue}) + \text{Presidential Cue} + (\text{Awareness} \times \text{Presidential Cue}) + \text{Income} \end{aligned}$$

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

In this chapter, I discuss the findings and evaluate alternative methods of measuring my models. First, I share some descriptive statistics that illuminate the measurement techniques utilized in this thesis. Second, the general model on Congressional approval describes the relationship between awareness and the other variables of interest. At the same time, there is a discussion of potential multicollinearity issues raised by including awareness and media in the same probit regression. Next, there was a discussion of post-estimation measures and how they contribute to our understanding of how awareness and media exposure effect approval. Finally, I discuss the general model of incumbent approval.

Table 2 shows the range of awareness present the sample. There is decent variation in the survey respondents' political knowledge. The findings on political awareness are in accord with what one might expect how much the public is attuned to politics. About 28% of the respondents cannot correctly answer any of the 8 political awareness questions presented to them. One can see the distribution of media consumption in a 5-point scale and a dichotomous scale in Table 3. There is also decent variation in the consumption of campaign messages in the media. Less than 8% of the survey respondents indicate that they have consumed no campaign messages in the media. About 65% of the survey respondents indicate that they have consumed campaign messages from more than one form of media.

Table 2. The Range of Correct Responses Given by Survey Takers (Political Awareness Variable)

No. of Correct Responses	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
0 Responses	1,727	28.25	28.25
1 Responses	967	15.82	44.06
2 Responses	1,091	17.84	61.91
3 Responses	809	13.23	75.14
4 Responses	827	13.53	88.67
5 Responses	466	7.62	96.29
6 Responses	219	3.58	99.87
7 Responses	8	0.13	100
Total	6,114	100	

Source: ANES 1980-2004

Table 3. Range of Campaign Consumption through Types of Media Outlets

Range of Sources	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
0 Sources	1,764	7.74	7.74
1 Source	4,301	18.88	26.63
2 Sources	6,675	29.3	55.93
3 Sources	6,745	29.61	85.54
4 Sources	3,293	14.46	100
Total	22,778	100	

At Least One Source	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
No Campaign Media	1,764	7.74	7.74
At Least One Source of Campaign Media	21,014	92.26	100
Total	22,778	100	

Source: ANES 1980-2004

Table 4. Probit Model of the Determinants of Congressional Approval

	Ordinal media measure	Dichotomous media measure
Awareness	-0.12 (0.06)	-0.13 (0.11)
Media Consumption	-0.10* (0.05)	
Awareness x Media	0.02 (0.02)	
Dichotomous Media		-0.38* (0.19)
Awareness x Dichotomous Media		0.05 (0.10)
Party ID	0.03 (0.13)	0.04 (0.13)
Awareness x Party ID	0.11* (0.05)	0.10* (0.05)
Presidential Cue	0.54** (0.13)	0.54** (0.13)
Awareness x Presidential Cue	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)
Economic Cue	0.35** (0.09)	0.34** (0.09)
Awareness x Economic Cue	-0.07* (0.03)	-0.07* (0.03)
Income	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Constant	69.61** (13.95)	63.93** (13.60)
PRE (%)	32.78%	33.31%
% Correctly Predicted	67.46%	67.71%
Observations	1601	1601

Standard errors in parentheses

* significant at $p < 5\%$ (two-tailed t-test); ** significant at $p < 1\%$ (two-tailed t-test)

In Table 4, one can see that the presidential cue and the economic cues are both positive and significant. This suggests that positive evaluations of the president and the economy lead to more positive evaluations of Congress. Interestingly, the interactive effect of awareness on the economic cue leads to more negative evaluations of Congress. In contrast to what other literature theorized, more aware individuals use the economic cue to negatively appraise Congress. In this

instance, greater awareness of Congress and a positive evaluation of the economy lead to decreased approval of Congress. So while previous theories correctly predict that the economic evaluations affect Congressional approval (Patterson and Caldeira 1990; Rudolph 2002), the awareness component suggests that political knowledge makes one use economic information differently (Sniderman et al. 1991; Berent and Krosnick 1995). On the surface, it seems odd that more aware individuals think the economy is doing well and but are likely to indicate disapproval of Congress. But theoretically, this makes sense. The theory suggested that more aware individuals are likely to look beyond the economic cue and use other information in their cognition to evaluate Congress. This could be a situation where more aware individuals are optimistic about the economy but use a different rubric to evaluate Congress.

Appendix B has the results from running additional probit regressions, where for one model, I excluded awareness, and for the other model, I excluded media consumption. When awareness is present without media consumption, we see that awareness is significant with a negative coefficient. Similarly, when media consumption is present without awareness in the regression, media consumption is significant with a negative coefficient. This suggests that even with moderate or low correlation, conceptually awareness and media consumption are tapping into the same phenomenon. Individuals who know more might be high demanders who are perfectly aware of Congress' missteps (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). At the same time, individuals who consume more campaign messages in the media are likely exposed to more negative information. In short, independent of the source of the message, the information that infiltrates public discourse casts Congress in a negative light.

In the theory section, I first suggested that individuals with greater political awareness are more aware because they consume more media. Secondly, I hinted that individuals who know

more because of their media consumption might also increasingly disapprove of Congress. The findings show that greater media consumption leads to greater Congressional disapproval. However, interacting awareness and media consumption diminishes the negative and significant impacts of media consumption. This suggests that individuals with greater political awareness are able to use pieces of information beyond what one might get from the media. The null finding interacting awareness and media consumption also suggests that more aware individuals offer greater cognitive resistance to campaign media messages. Therefore, there is some evidence to suggest that political awareness is more than an artifact of greater media consumption.

Table 5. Marginal Effects of Awareness and Dichotomous Media Consumption

	Congressional Approval	Incumbent Approval
Awareness	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)
Dichotomous Media	-0.15* (0.07)	-0.08 (0.07)

Marginal effects; Standard errors in parentheses

* significant at $p < 5\%$ (two-tailed t-test);

** significant at $p < 1\%$ (two-tailed t-test)

Additional analysis using CLARIFY allows one to run thousands of simulations with the data. The marginal effects reported in Table 5 show that increases in political awareness and media exposure decrease Congressional and incumbent approval, but both have insignificant affects (King et al. 2000). This translates into a one-unit increase in awareness or media consumption, with the other variables at their means, decreasing Congressional approval by .05 for awareness and .15 for media. Small increases in awareness similarly and negatively affect both Congress and incumbents. However, the move from no campaign consumption to consuming at least one source has two times the negative impact on Congress than on its incumbent members.

Table 6. Predicted Probabilities Varying Awareness⁸

	Congressional Approval	Incumbent Approval
Minimum Awareness	0.47 (0.11)	0.95 (0.06)
Maximum Awareness	0.19 (0.13)	0.47 (0.24)

Predicted probabilities; Standard errors in parentheses

The predicted probabilities presented in Table 6 also support the previous findings that suggest increasing awareness decreases Congressional-level approval. In this analysis, awareness ranged from the minimum value to its maximum with the other independent variables held at their means. One can see the probability of approval of Congress decreases by about 28% from a person with no political awareness to a person with maximum awareness. The effect of awareness at the individual level is actually more severe. At the incumbent level of approval, as awareness ranges from its minimum to the maximum, the predicted probability of approval decreases by 48%. It was remarkable to see that 95% of the least aware individuals are likely to approve of the incumbent member of Congress. This rate is almost halved as we move toward the most-aware individuals. Despite this decrease, about half of the respondents still approve of the incumbent. While for Congress in its entirety, no level of awareness raises approval above 50%.

⁸ Probit models with all variables held at their mean unless otherwise noted: Congressional Approval = Awareness (from its minimum to its maximum) + Dichotomous Media Consumption + (Awareness x Dichotomous Media) + Party ID + (Awareness x Party ID) + Economic Cue + (Awareness x Economic Cue) + Presidential Cue + (Awareness x Presidential Cue) + Income
 Incumbent Approval = Congressional Approval + Awareness (from its minimum to its maximum) + Dichotomous Media Consumption + (Awareness x Dichotomous Media) + Party ID + (Awareness x Party ID) + Economic Cue + (Awareness x Economic Cue) + Presidential Cue + (Awareness x Presidential Cue) + Income

Table 7. Predicted Probabilities Varying Dichotomous Media⁹

	Congressional Approval	Incumbent Approval
Minimum Media	0.48 (0.07)	0.91 (0.08)
Maximum Media	0.33 (0.01)	0.85 (0.01)

Predicted probabilities; Standard errors in parentheses

The predicted probabilities when ranging the dichotomous media variable are similar to that of the probabilities of ranging awareness (Table 7). For Congress as a whole, as one moves from no media consumption to at least some campaign media consumption, approval decreases by about 15%. At the incumbent level, ranging media decreases approval by about 6%. On the graph, we can see the change in approval as awareness and media consumption change from their minimum to their maximum in Figure 3 and Figure 4. These tables and figures underscore how differently awareness and media exposure affect Congress and its incumbents. They also highlight that even though increases in awareness and media exposure decrease approval for both Congress its members, approval remains relatively high at the incumbent level.

⁹ Probit models with all variables held at their mean unless otherwise noted: Congressional Approval = Awareness + Dichotomous Media (ranging from its minimum to its maximum) Consumption + (Awareness x Dichotomous Media) + Party ID + (Awareness x Party ID) + Economic Cue + (Awareness x Economic Cue) + Presidential Cue + (Awareness x Presidential Cue) + Income

Incumbent Approval = Congressional Approval + Awareness + Dichotomous Media Consumption ranging from its minimum to its maximum) + (Awareness x Dichotomous Media) + Party ID + (Awareness x Party ID) + Economic Cue + (Awareness x Economic Cue) + Presidential Cue + (Awareness x Presidential Cue) + Income

Figure 3. Graphed Predicted Probabilities Ranging Awareness from its Minimum to its Maximum

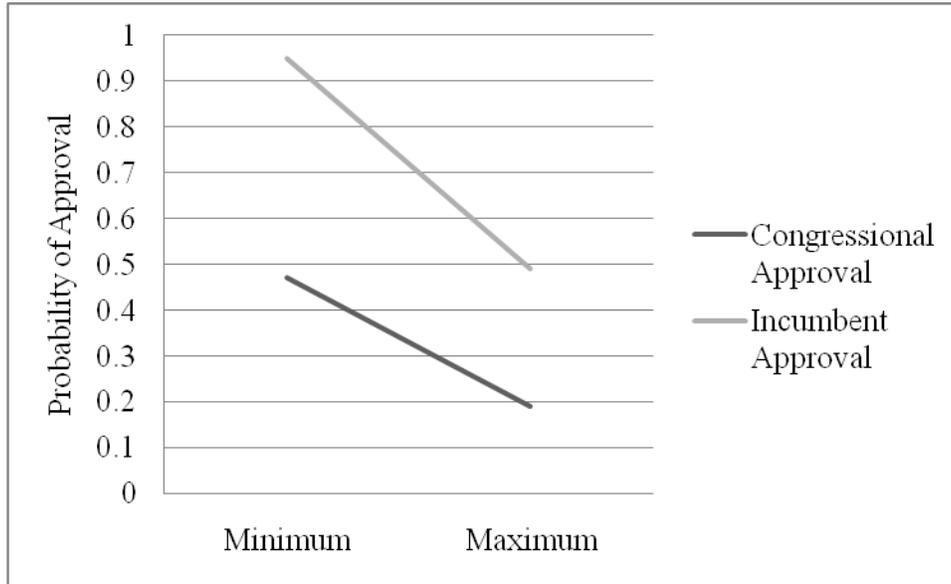
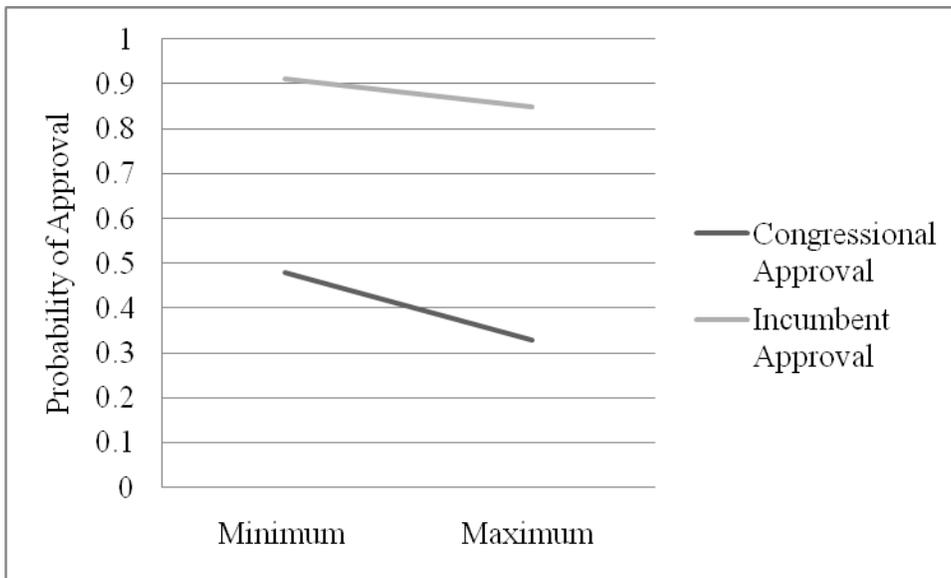


Figure 4. Graphed Predicted Probabilities Ranging Dichotomous Media from its Minimum to its Maximum



Party identification is an instance where the conditional effect of awareness made party identification significant. The results suggest that the more-aware Democratic individuals are more likely to approve of Congress. This finding in line with Hibbing Theiss-Morse (1995) who show that Democrats with greater education are more likely to approve of Congress. During

most of the time covered in this analysis, the Democrats were the majority party in the House, so it makes sense that Democrats approve. In terms of education and awareness, it seems that it takes a certain level of political or general knowledge for one to use their party preferences to approve of Congress. Party identification absent the interaction with awareness reveals no significant effects.

At the individual level, the same forces that motivate approval for Congress have null effects on individual members of the House (Table 8). According to the model at the individual level, only Congressional approval significantly affects incumbent member approval. Even variables like, economy, income, and partisan identification do not motivate individual approval. The only variable that holds explanatory power over incumbent approval is Congressional approval. If one approves of Congress in the aggregate, then one is more likely to approve the incumbent member in their district. This suggests that there is something to be gained by the individual member of Congress in attempting to remove the ire and contempt held for the Congress in the aggregate. If the incumbents expend some effort crafting a cleaner image of Congress, increased approval of Congress can trickle down to increase support for the incumbent.

Table 8. Probit Model of the Determinants of Incumbent Approval

	Ordinal media measure	Dichotomous media measure
Congressional Approval	0.38* (0.12)	0.36* (0.12)
Awareness	0.03 (0.10)	-0.28 (0.19)
Media Consumption	0.08 (0.10)	
Awareness x Media	-0.03 (0.03)	
Dichotomous Media		-0.45 (0.53)
Awareness x Dichotomous Media		0.23 (0.18)
Party ID	0.11 (0.25)	0.10 (0.25)
Awareness x Party ID	-0.02 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.08)
Presidential Cue	0.06 (0.24)	0.07 (0.25)
Awareness x Presidential Cue	0.08 (0.07)	0.07 (0.08)
Economic Cue	-0.03 (0.17)	0.00 (0.17)
Awareness x Economic Cue	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)
Income	0.00 (0.05)	0.00 (0.05)
Constant	-20.93 (22.58)	-21.93 (21.91)
PRE (%)	-2.99%	
% Correctly Predicted	85.08%	
Observations	918	918

Standard errors in parentheses

* significant at $p < 1\%$ (one-tailed t-test)

This raises question of causality or the identity of the first mover. Does the incumbent member act first to improve Congressional approval, or does Congress act as a single body to raise approval for its members? Running the Congressional model for approval with incumbent approval as an independent variable suggests that those who approve of their individual member

of Congress are also more likely to approve of Congress in general.¹⁰ Therefore, in both cases, using incumbent approval as an independent variable on Congress, and using congressional approval as an independent variable on incumbent approval reveals a positive relationship. However, a poor Congressional approval rating only marginally affects the approval for incumbents. Therefore, in terms of elections, incumbents do not need to be too concerned about how individuals appraise Congress in its entirety. It also seems more fruitful for the incumbent member to worry more about the incumbent's reelection than the fate of Congress in its entirety.

The effect of awareness on the use of party labels makes the coefficient negative but insignificant. In the same way, the coefficient on awareness and the economic cue is insignificant but positive. However, if the original Congressional model is run with media consumption and without awareness in the model, media has a significant negative coefficient, while the signs and significance on the other coefficients is the same as the original model of Congressional approval (Appendix B.1). Similarly, if the original incumbent model is run with media consumption and without awareness, the results are similar to the original model of individual member approval: signs and significance on media do not shift (Appendix B.2).

On theoretical and methodological grounds, one might suggest that it is problematic to include Congressional approval in a model with incumbent approval as the dependent variable because the other independent variables in the model theoretically affect both Congress and its incumbents. Separate models are tested to check for the multicollinearity issue raised by including Congressional approval in the model with incumbent approval. A model for incumbent approval that excludes Congressional approval does not change the sign or make any of the other independent variables significant. Similarly, checking for the reverse relationship, including or

¹⁰ Incumbent approval as an independent variable on Congressional approval reveals a coefficient of 0.427 and standard error of (.132), significance at $p < 0.01$ level.

excluding incumbent approval as an independent variable in the model for Congressional approval, does not change the direction of the coefficient or change what variables are significant.

Alternatively, a model of Congressional approval, shown in the Appendix B, with awareness and without media consumption suggests that party identification is significant with a positive coefficient (B.3). The other variables of interest have little change when awareness is included and media consumption is excluded from the model. For incumbent member approval, when I included awareness and removed media consumption, we see that Congressional approval and the presidential cue have a positive significant relationship (Appendix B.4).

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

The findings indicate that the most hated branch of the federal government is hated even by those who are more knowledgeable about the legislative branch. Increased political awareness or media consumption leads to greater Congressional disapproval, as shown in the appendix. This relationship is also present in Table 4. Awareness is significant at the p-value $< 10\%$.¹¹ This relationship is somewhat mitigated or weakened when both awareness and media consumption are in the same regression model. However, awareness and media consumption consistently show a negative coefficient in all of the probit models and in the modeled marginal effects. It is likely that theoretical and conceptual ties between awareness and media consumption are driving this relationship. These findings, although not as concrete as I would like, point us in the right direction in terms of what motives incumbent approval. Furthermore, there is room for refining the theory so that it may better explain and predict the drift between Congressional and incumbent approval.

The word “Congress” itself is likely to trigger a less than pleasant top of the mind consideration in the survey respondent. Measuring only awareness or media consumption in the regression model revealed findings that are consistent with previous research that measures education as proxy for political awareness. My direct measure of political awareness suggested that the more one knows about Congress, the more one is likely to disapprove of it (Asher and Barr 1994; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). I anticipated finding that individuals who knew more would process information differently than those who knew little. The literature suggests

¹¹ P-value for awareness in the 5 levels of media consumption is 0.071

that those with more knowledge or information are better able to incorporate new pieces of information (Sniderman et al. 1991; Berent and Krosnick 1995). However, the information that survey respondents receive about the Congress is likely to be less than positive news as evidenced by the fact that increased media exposure decreases Congressional approval for all levels of awareness.

On the other hand, awareness and media exposure did not influence how one felt about their individual member of Congress. One reason may be the fact that while the national media outlets do a great job of making certain political characters household names, chances are that most incumbents only receive the limelight from their local press agencies (Arnold 2004). While the national press and Congresspersons themselves have had the propensity to blame Congress (Fenno 1975; Asher and Barr 1994), I speculated that individuals would have trouble linking a disgraced lawmaker in “Washington” to their local incumbent. Indeed, it seems that while knowing and observing more about politics made one dislike the Congress more, this distaste hardly trickles down to the incumbent in one’s home district. While the aforementioned literature suggested that well-informed citizens process information differently than less informed citizens, previous research also said that the well-informed and the less-informed citizen may act that differently (Lupia 1994). While the ill-informed citizen may see Congress “as a chaotic, incoherent aggregation of small-minded and shortsighted individuals” (Truman 1959:9), the well-informed might see Congress the same way expect with more expert knowledge to pin on Congress.

The presidential and economic cues were the other elements that helped motivate Congressional approval, but they had no affect on the incumbent. The president and economy are highly visible cues that are expected to influence opinion formation on Congress (Kam 2005).

Evidence from this thesis suggests that these cues affect Congress but do not trickle down into the decision-making processes for incumbent evaluations. The president and the economy are two additional areas from which the incumbent is safe, but the Congress as single unit is not.

The only variable to impact how one felt about the incumbent was how one felt about Congress in its entirety. Those who approve of Congress are more likely to approve of their individual member. And those who approve of their individual member are more likely to approve of Congress. The findings at the individual level are likely driven by the incumbency advantage. This analysis is limited because I was able to only look at incumbents who seek reelection. The first problem was that incumbents strategically choose to leave Congress when they feel the most vulnerable. Therefore, I was not able to capture the opinions of what are likely to be the least favorable incumbents. Second, I was limited in this analysis because everyone observed in the House is an incumbent. While I am not able to pin down exactly what drives incumbent level approval, I am able to show that literature developed thus far on Congress are not able to fully address the actions of the 535 moving pieces that make up Congress.

This leaves room for future research that specifically asks the respondent what comes to mind when one offers an evaluation of Congress. It is reasonable to assume that more-aware individuals would access different information that is not present in the less-aware person and that might mediate Congressional approval. However, this thesis shows that those individuals who know more and consume more media are even more likely to offer negative evaluations. This may be the case because while they can recall a greater quantity of information about the makeup of Congress, they may also be able recall a greater amount of negative information.

A possibility is that those who know more are more likely to make more demands of Congress (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). However, the findings showed that the well-

informed will not hold to account the individual member of Congress in the House. While it can be said that Congress is organized in a manner to perfectly facilitate the reelection needs of its members (Mayhew 1974a), it may be more accurate to say the incumbents have set up Congress to take the heat for the wrong doings of its members, while the its individual members can abscond without any responsibility.

This thesis yields three implications. First, disapproval of Congress is so deeply entrenched that greater political exposure in the media only serves to exacerbate the problem. However, can the problem really be that severe if almost 90% of this disliked institution is returned to office? It would make more sense to look at Congressional approval in terms of the approval of individual legislators or in terms of reelection rates. After all, Congresspersons with no unethical allegations against them do not say that they are a product of Congress or Washington. Well-liked Congresspersons take personal credit for all that goes well and run from all that may stain their reputation (Mayhew 1974a). A measure of approval based on all individual approval scores combined into one score to reflect a single measure for all of the legislators would be an interesting measure because it would limit certain national elements like the president, economy, and scandals in Washington from seeping into the decision-making process. One can see in this thesis that evaluations of the president, the economy, and media campaigns are not enough to significantly hurt public opinion on the incumbent.

The second implication is the need to specifically ask survey respondents what they think of and why is it they approve or disapprove of Congress and its members. This implication leaves room for future work in this area. The survey work available now hints at these questions in an indirect way. The ANES asked respondents what they like and what they dislike about Congress, but this is question is just as likely to yield responses that are out of the control of

individual members or even Congress in general. Furthermore, a direct survey that asks respondents “Why do you feel that way?” after gauging for approval could allow us to know what the people are thinking about as they indicate their opinions. Similarly, a survey response could ask in an open-ended question for the respondents to identify from where they acquire their political knowledge. In addition to new survey data, there is room to refine the theory that I developed here. There is significant theoretical and quantitative overlap between the concept of awareness and media exposure. A more refined theory could separate the effects of media and awareness. In sum, this thesis only moves the ball forward and does not settle the matter of awareness and incumbent approval.

Finally, this thesis sheds light on whether the institution of the Congress needs major reform or just tweaks. This thesis shows that the elements that motivate negative approval for Congress do not motivate approval for the incumbents that make up Congress. Therefore, the incumbents are doing something that the Congress as an entity is not doing. Year round, incumbents groom their image and prepare themselves for election season. At times, incumbents from both parties are willing to refine their image at the expense of the Congress as whole. Incumbents make it clear to their constituents the benefit of reelecting the incumbent. However, Congress’ constituents are the entirety of the American people. So while incumbents serve their local constituents well in the eyes of many Americans, Congress does not serve the entirety of the American people.

I suggest two potential tweaks to remedy this phenomenon. First, incumbents need to take it upon themselves to see the larger constituency of Americans, not just their home constituency. This notion might be rather incredible considering that one of the most important things incumbents care about is reelection and that single districts decide who will represent

them and not the nation. Second, individuals need to be more aware that Congress and its incumbent members are not two distinct entities. It is odd to keep blaming “Congress” for the perceived ills in society without holding to account the individuals who make up Congress. The Congress is a construct of the Constitution that prescribes the structure of the government. Without elected representatives who comprise the legislative branch, the term “Congress” is just a word. When incumbents start to serve the entirety of American interests in addition to their home districts, and when individuals see incumbents as a part of a larger construct, then one may begin to see the erosion of the dichotomy of Congressional approval.

APPENDIX A
SURVEY QUESTIONS USED FROM THE ANES

Questions on approval:

Do you approve or disapprove of the way the U.S. Congress has been handling its job?

In general, do you approve or disapprove of the way [running U.S. House incumbent Representative] has been handling his/her job?

Questions on political awareness:

House Majority

1958-1968: Do you happen to know which party had the most Congressmen in Washington before the election this/last month?

1970 AND LATER: Do you happen to know which party had the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington before the elections (this/ last) month?

Senate Majority

Do you happen to know which party had the most members in the U.S. Senate before the election this/last month?

Recall House Candidates

Summary: number of correct recalls-- U.S. House candidates

Recall Senate Candidates

Summary: number of correct recalls-- U.S. Senate candidates

Questions on campaign media consumption:

Television

1952-1972,1976:

We're mainly interested in this interview in finding out whether people paid much attention to the election campaign this year. Did you watch any programs about the campaign on television?

Radio

How about radio--did you listen to any speeches or discussions about the campaign on the radio?

Magazines

How about magazines-- did you read about the campaign in any magazines?

Newspapers

Take newspapers for instance--did you read about the campaign in any newspaper?

Question on economic evaluation:

How Bad/Good Was Economy in past year?

Question on presidential evaluation:

Do you approve or disapprove of the way that [the president] is handling his job as President?

APPENDIX B

ADDITIONAL PROBIT MODELS TO ADDRESS MULTICOLLINEARITY

B.1. Congressional Approval Without Awareness

	Ordinal media measure	Dichotomous media measure
Media Consumption	-0.06** (0.01)	
Dichotomous Media		-0.21** (0.06)
Party ID	0.05 (0.03)	0.06 (0.03)
Economic Cue	0.16** (0.02)	0.15** (0.02)
Presidential Cue	0.26** (0.03)	0.27** (0.03)
Income	-0.03* (0.01)	-0.04* (0.01)
Constant	11.75** (4.10)	9.40* (4.03)
PRE (%)	13.73%	15.39%
% Correctly Predicted	58.23%	59.03%
Observations	6842	6842

Standard errors in parentheses

* significant at $p < 5\%$ (two-tailed t-test); ** significant at $p < 1\%$ (two-tailed t-test)

B.2. Incumbent Approval Without Awareness

	Ordinal media measure	Dichotomous media measure
Congressional Approval	0.40** (0.05)	0.41** (0.05)
Media Consumption	-0.01 (0.02)	
Dichotomous Media		0.01 (0.11)
Party ID	0.02 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)
Economic Cue	-0.05 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.03)
Presidential Cue	0.08 (0.05)	0.08 (0.05)
Income	-0.04 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.02)
Constant	17.11**	16.81**
PRE (%)	-1.97%	-1.97%
% Correctly Predicted	85.22%	85.22%
Observations	6842	6842

Standard errors in parentheses

* significant at $p < 5\%$ (two-tailed t-test); ** significant at $p < 1\%$ (two-tailed t-test)

B.3. Congressional Approval Without Media

Awareness	-0.10** (0.01)
Party ID	0.32** (0.05)
Economic Cue	0.25** (0.03)
Presidential Cue	0.26** (0.05)
Income	-0.01 (0.02)
Constant	72.83** (12.21)
PRE (%)	51.58%
% Correctly Predicted	61.23%
Observations	4238

Standard errors in parentheses

* significant at $p < 5\%$ (two-tailed t-test);

** significant at $p < 1\%$ (two-tailed t-test)

B.4. Incumbent Approval Without Media

Congressional Approval	0.43** (0.07)
Awareness	-0.03 (0.02)
Party ID	0.08 (0.08)
Economic Cue	0.06 (0.05)
Presidential Cue	0.27** (0.08)
Income	-0.02 (0.03)
Constant	-34.68 (19.65)
PRE (%)	9.19%
% Correctly Predicted	86.84%
Observations	2774

Standard errors in parentheses

* significant at $p < 5\%$ (two-tailed t-test);

** significant at $p < 1\%$ (two-tailed t-test)

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