3. What the American Public Wants Congress to Be

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Congress is designed to be a permeable institution. If it is doing its job, public opinion should be able to enter and affect the policy actions taken by Congress. This reflection of public views in congressional policy decisions is called representation, and Congress is specially designed to facilitate it. Large collections of formally equal officials who are subject to frequent elections and incredibly open operating procedures, and who are all directly responsible for acting in the interests of specific groups of constituents, should generate policy representation if any institutional structure can. Indeed, if Congress were not representative why would we have it? A smaller, more hierarchical body is far better at getting things done, but "getting things done" is not the only goal of government. After all, the cry of the revolution was not "no taxation unless it is enacted by an efficient, hierarchical body"; it was "no taxation without representation."

The question of whether or not Congress is successful in fulfilling its constitutional mission to provide policy representation is one that has occupied observers for quite some time. Although liberals tend to think Congress is too conservative and conservatives tend to think it is too liberal, for the most part the people prefer centrist policies and believe Congress provides centrist policies. Certainly, on some issues, such as gun control, campaign finance reform, and limiting legislative terms, policy is severely out of step with majority public sentiment, but issues of constitutionality hamper the ability of Congress to act in all

three of these areas; moreover, these policy inconsistencies seem to be more the exception than the rule. In general, Congress addresses the issues the public believes to be important and acts on those issues in the moderate ways the public prefers (see Chapter 4).

But public opinion can also affect Congress in a manner quite different from influence on specific policy decisions. The public's opinion of Congress itself can serve as an important institutional constraint on it. If the public strongly disapproves of Congress, sitting members may decide against seeking reelection and prospective candidates may decide against running for a seat in the first place. If members are sensitive to the public's opinion of them and of Congress, they may be reluctant to address new policy initiatives, especially any that are mildly controversial. And solid evidence even suggests that negative views of Congress render people less likely to comply with the laws it passes.[1]

Given these important consequences of public attitudes toward Congress, it is imperative that we understand the factors that lead the public to regard the institution favorably or unfavorably. In this chapter we employ data and arguments from a variety of sources in order to explicate the reasons people feel as they do toward the American Congress. Our presentation is divided into five

main parts. In the first, we look at variations in the public's opinion of Congress since the mid-1970s, asking why attitudes seem to be more favorable at some times than others. In the second, we briefly compare attitudes toward Congress with attitudes toward other institutions, especially political institutions. In the third, we look at public opinion of the many different parts of Congress. In the fourth, we determine the kinds of people who seem most willing to proffer negative evaluations of Congress. These sections are tied together by the hope that determining the situations under which a favorable (or unfavorable) judgment of Congress is returned will permit a clearer view of the reasons the public feels as it does. We then conclude with a summary of our theory of public support for the political system, for political institutions, and especially for the Congress.

Why People Like Congress More Sometimes than Others

Maybe the public simply detests Congress and that is all that needs to be said on the matter. Perhaps it is erroneous to think that Congress under any circumstances could be even remotely popular. As tempting as it may be to jump to this conclusion and as much as popular press coverage encourages such inclinations, the situation is actually much more complex than that. Survey data from across the decades reveal a surprising amount of variation, as is apparent in Figure 3-1, which presents the percentage of people approving of Congress from 1975 through the third quarter of 1999, according to various Gallup polls.

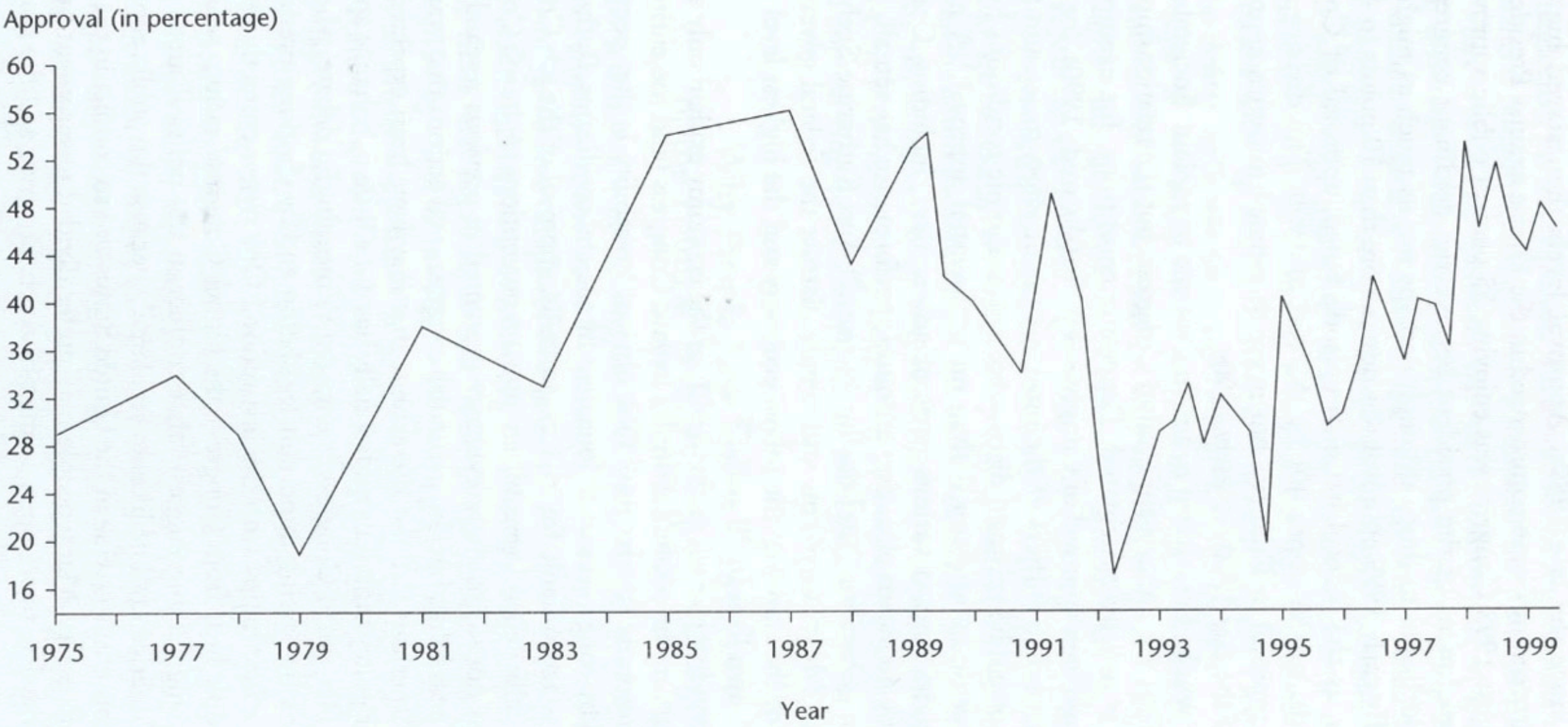
The last quarter of the twentieth century began with Congress (and the rest of the political system) struggling to pull itself out of a trying period. In fact, although soundings were taken much less frequently prior to 1975, the data that are available demonstrate that the mid-to-late 1960s was a period of relative popularity for Congress and for all of government. But starting about 1968 and

continuing into the first half of the 1970s, the public's approval of political institutions and, indeed, societal institutions generally declined precipitously.[2] Thus, the opening data points in the figure, coming on the heels of the Watergate scandal and other societal frustrations, reflect a disillusioned people, and barely one out of four American adults approved of Congress.

After these initial low ratings, the rest of the figure suggests three phases of congressional approval: high, low, and high again. By 1985 Watergate and perhaps the economic difficulties of the late 1970s and early 1980s were distant memories and the Reagan "feel-good" period had arrived. Well over half of the American public approved of the job Congress was doing in the latter 1980s. But by 1992 approval levels had reverted to 1970s levels or worse, with sometimes just one in five adults approving of Congress. Just before the 1994 midterm election, Congress's popularity bottomed out with a whopping 75 percent of the population *disapproving* of the job Congress was doing.

This high level of dissatisfaction with Congress continued well into the mid-1990s even though by then the economy had long been booming. In fact, it was not until very late 1997 that approval levels turned around. By January

Figure 3-1 Approval of Congress, 1975–1999



Source: Gallup polls, 1975–1988; *Washington Post,* various issues, 1989–1999.

Note: Data were available on a yearly basis between 1975 and 1988, with the exceptions of 1976, 1980, 1982, 1984, and 1986. Between 1989 and 1999 data were available on a quarterly basis, with the exceptions of the following quarters: 1989/4, 1990/2, 1990/3, 1991/1, 1991/3, 1992/3, 1992/4, 1994/2, 1995/2, 1996/4, and 1999/4.

1998 more people approved of Congress than disapproved, a situation that had not been seen since the late 1980s. Approval levels then stayed high until impeachment proceedings were commenced in the House against President Bill Clinton. In August 1998 Congress was enjoying 55 percent public approval, but as soon as impeachment of the president became the dominant congressional issue these marks began to drop, although perhaps not as much as might have been expected. By early 1999 approval was down more than 10 points to 44 percent. And then, as the painful national episode faded, approval of Congress improved slightly, to the upper 40s by the end of 1999. The divisive period reduced public approval of Congress but never threatened to return approval to the low levels of the late 1970s or early 1990s.

Taken as a whole, the pattern is not an easy one to explain. Societal conditions seem to affect the public's approval of Congress, but the relationship is not as powerful as is usually anticipated. Economic conditions, for example, are sometimes strong when approval of Congress is weak (the mid-1990s, for example), and vice versa. The authors of the most systematic effort to account for the ups and downs of public approval discovered that economic conditions have far less of an impact on congressional than on presidential approval.[3] A broader analysis of attitudes toward various parts of government, including Congress, notes that "it is by no means clear that economic performance has actually played a decisive role in generating [the] decline in trust."[4] And Katharine Seelye may have put it best: "Most Americans still deeply distrust the federal government despite the end of the cold war, the robust economy and the highest level of satisfaction in their own lives in 30 years."[5]

If societal conditions such as the health of the economy explain only a small portion of changes in the public's attitudes toward Congress (and the entire polity), then what accounts for the rest? One obvious possibility is that people are

more influenced by congressional actions than by societal conditions. Rather than holding Congress accountable for society generally, approval of the job Congress is doing may actually depend, sensibly enough, on perceptions of the job Congress is doing. Perhaps not surprisingly, evidence presented in previous research finds support for this possibility, but the particular congressional actions that warm the hearts of most Americans are not the actions that may have been expected. Passage of particular policy proposals traditionally has done little to enhance approval of Congress. In fact, when Congress is engaged in meaningful debate, when it is being newsworthy by passing important legislation and by checking presidential power, people are *least* happy with the institution.[6] One writer correctly observes that "the less people hear from Congress, the higher Congress' ratings soar."[7]

This surprising finding suggests that conflict in the political arena is not something the American public likes to see, largely because the public commonly believes that consensus is wide in the United States and so conflict in the political arena is unnecessary. Many people may prefer divided government but this does not mean they like to see open conflict between Congress and the president and between the parties in Congress.[8] The more that parties and institutions are

at odds, the more the people believe the interests of ordinary Americans are being neglected. For most people, the model for how government should work is the balanced budget agreement that dominated the news in the second half of 1997. Here was a case in which the major institutions of government, even though they were controlled by different parties, quietly cooperated in addressing a problem consistently rated as "the most important problem" by the public. People were spared the usual partisan hyperbole and gamesmanship and a reasonable solution was produced (even if the roaring economy made the task of politicians infinitely less difficult). It is probably not a coincidence that approval of Congress went up shortly thereafter, when it became increasingly apparent that the deficit really was trending downward at a brisk rate.

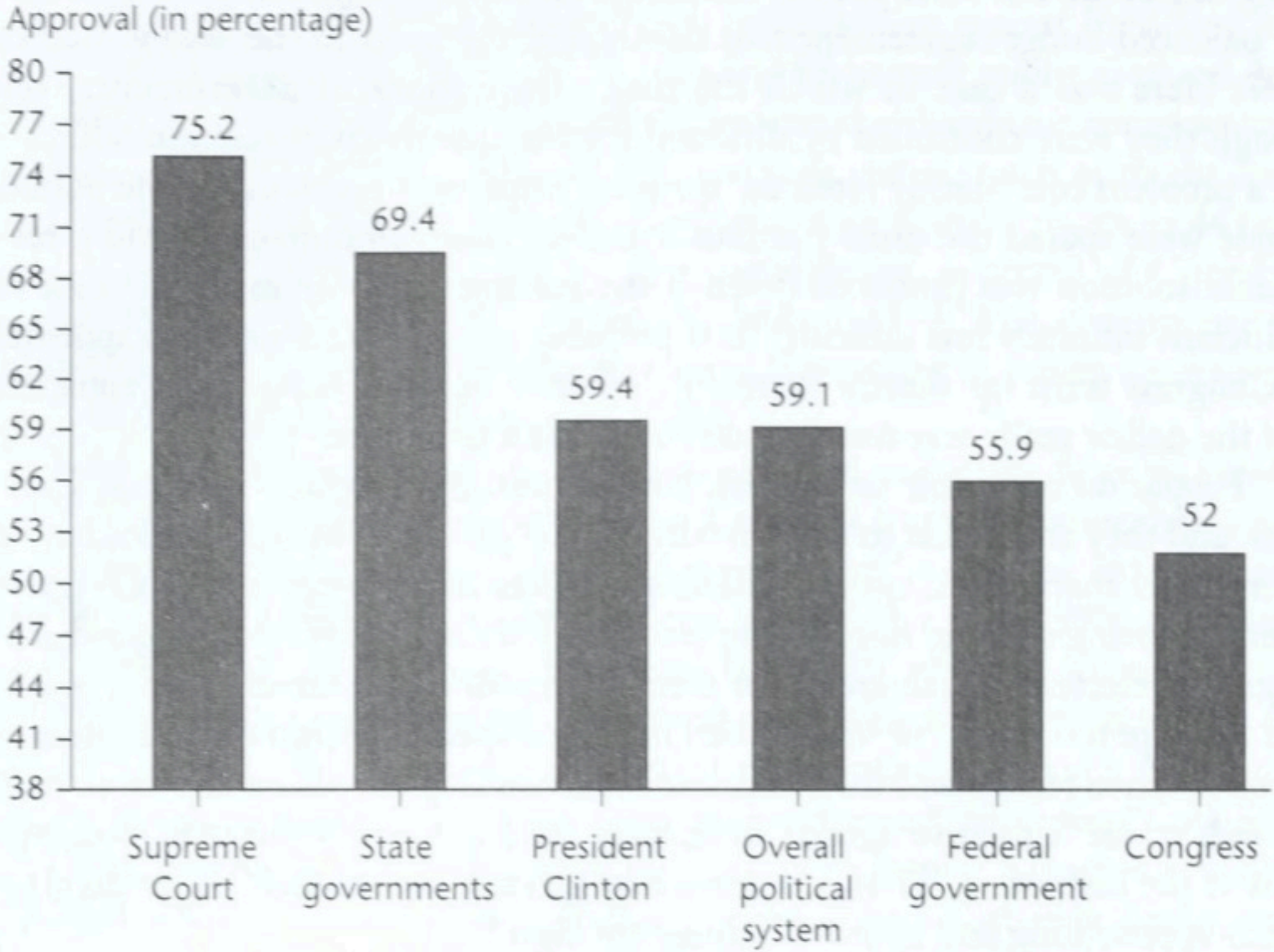
People do not want an activist, contentious, marketplace-of-ideas Congress, and they are unable to fathom why earnest problem-solving cannot be the norm rather than the exception. Citizens are more likely to approve of Congress when it is being still and not rocking the boat. For much of the public, conflict is a sign that elected officials are out of touch with ordinary, centrist Americans and that they are too much "in touch" with nefarious special interests. The leaders of Congress have recognized the public's inclinations and have been known to trim the sails of the legislative agenda when they are concerned about public perceptions of the institution. Thus, Congress may go into "hibernation" when an election is approaching and approval ratings are high.[9]

Why People Like Other Components of the Political System More than Congress

So, public approval of Congress varies and does so in predictable, if in some respect counterintuitive, ways. If conditions (especially economic) are favorable and Congress is not caught in the unforgivable acts of openly debating tough policy issues, serving as a counterweight to presidential initiatives, representing diverse views, and pursuing activist legislative agendas, Congress is likely to be approved of by more than half of the American public. Still, it is unlikely that even under these conditions Congress will be nearly as popular as just about any other feature of government in the United States. Despite ups and downs over time, relative to other institutions and levels of government, Congress is consistently liked the least. This conclusion is apparent in Figure 3-2.

These results come from a Gallup survey administered in early 1998 to a random national sample of 1,266 adults in the United States.[10] Respondents were asked whether or not they approved of six different aspects of government, including the "overall political system." As may be recalled from Figure 3-1, this particular (pre-impeachment) time period was one in which Congress was relatively popular, so we see that a respectable 52 percent of the respondents approved of Congress. Compared with other components of the political system, however, approval of Congress fares much worse. Specifically, Congress is the least-liked

Figure 3-2 Approval of the Federal Government and Its Parts, 1998

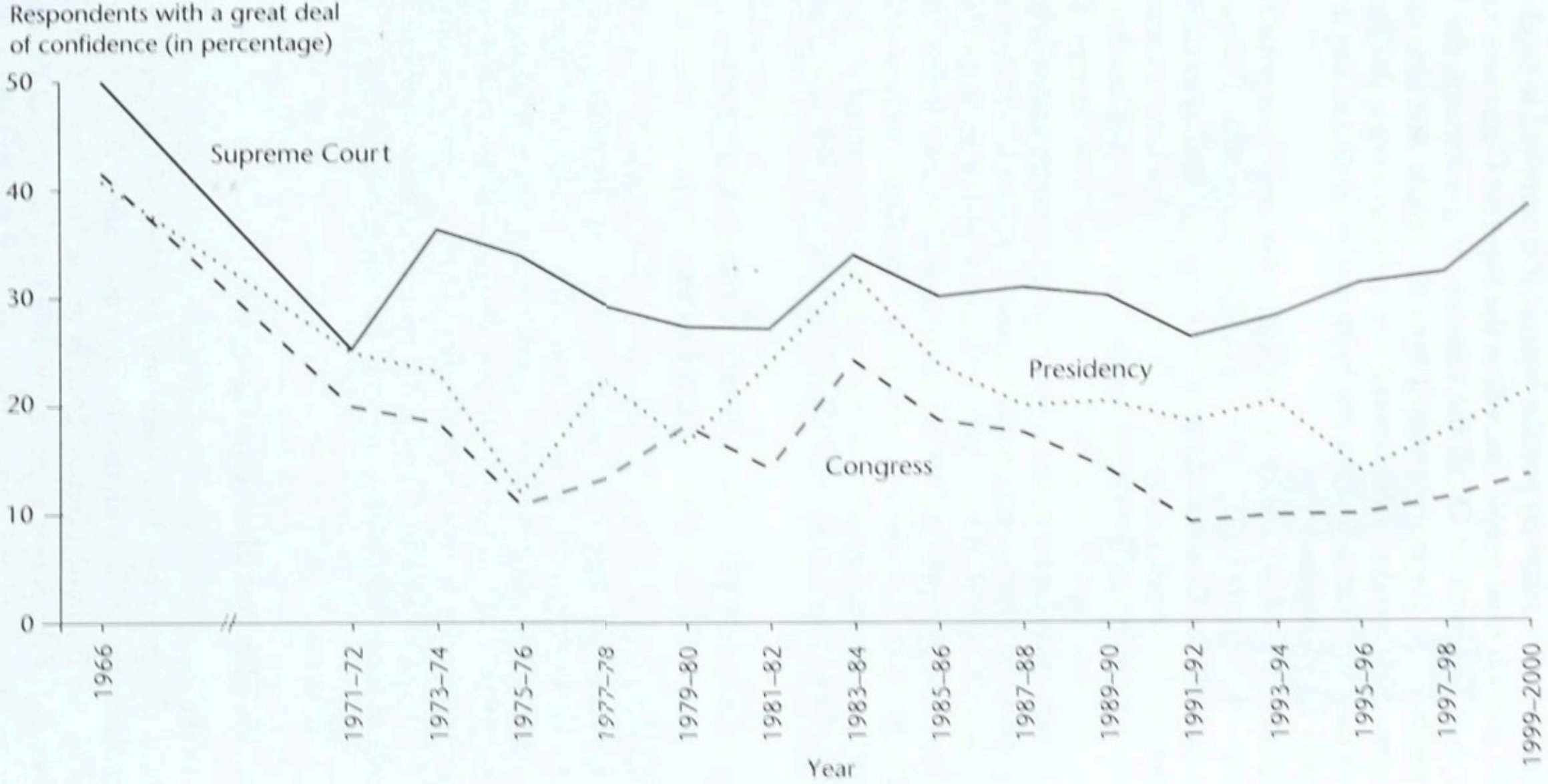


Source: 1998 Gallup Survey on Preferences for Government Processes; see John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (forthcoming).

part of the political system. Even the federal government is more popular (56 percent approval). The overall political system is at 59 percent approval, which is about the same approval level accorded President Clinton at that time (it may be recalled that a few months later, with impeachment proceedings in full swing, his popularity, unlike Congress's, went up several percentage points). Levels of approval for state government are quite a bit higher than for the federal government (69 to 56 percent), and the Supreme Court is easily the most popular political body, with better than three out of four Americans approving of it.

Lest it be thought that the spring of 1998 was unusual, we present Figure 3-3. According to those data (taken from the Harris poll's annual "confidence" battery), the Supreme Court is always the most popular institution and that Congress is almost always the least popular. Even through the Watergate scandal, the public expressed more confidence in the presidency than in Congress, although confidence in Jimmy Carter late in his term did momentarily dip below confidence in Congress. Thus, the relative popularity of governmental institutions is quite consistent over time and may be growing even more distinct. Notice that in the late 1990s the gap between confidence in Congress and confidence in the Supreme Court reached unprecedented proportions (nearly 30 percentage points).

Figure 3-3 Confidence in Political Institutions, 1966–2000



Source: Harris polls, various years.

Note: Data for the years between 1966 and 1971 were unavailable.

The variations in approval displayed in Figure 3-2 are not easy to explain. The two most popular referents are two of the most different. State government, we might speculate, is relatively popular because it is perceived to be close to the people. But if this is what people like, why is the Supreme Court even more popular than state government? Of all the elements of government, the Supreme Court is undoubtedly the most detached from the people: just nine justices, all with life terms and no real representational role and who seem to delight in being distant and insular. What is it about the Supreme Court that makes it so much more popular than Congress?

The answer offered in the previous section—that people are put off by political conflict—fits equally well with the results in this section. Compared with Congress, the Supreme Court has developed an amazing capacity to cloak its conflict. If open warfare occurs among the justices, it is hidden behind curtains and a vow of secrecy; and if conflict occurs between the Court and another political institution, it is not typically the stuff of front-page news stories. Thus, the Supreme Court is popular for all the reasons Congress is not; particularly, its ability to keep the people from seeing what is going on inside. Contrary to common interpretations, political popularity is not enhanced by openness, by democratic accountability, and by representation of diverse popular views. Rather, it is often enhanced by processes that move to some kind of resolution without a lot of fuss and blather, even if some measure of accountability is sacrificed in the process. Congress is relatively unpopular with the public precisely because it is so public.

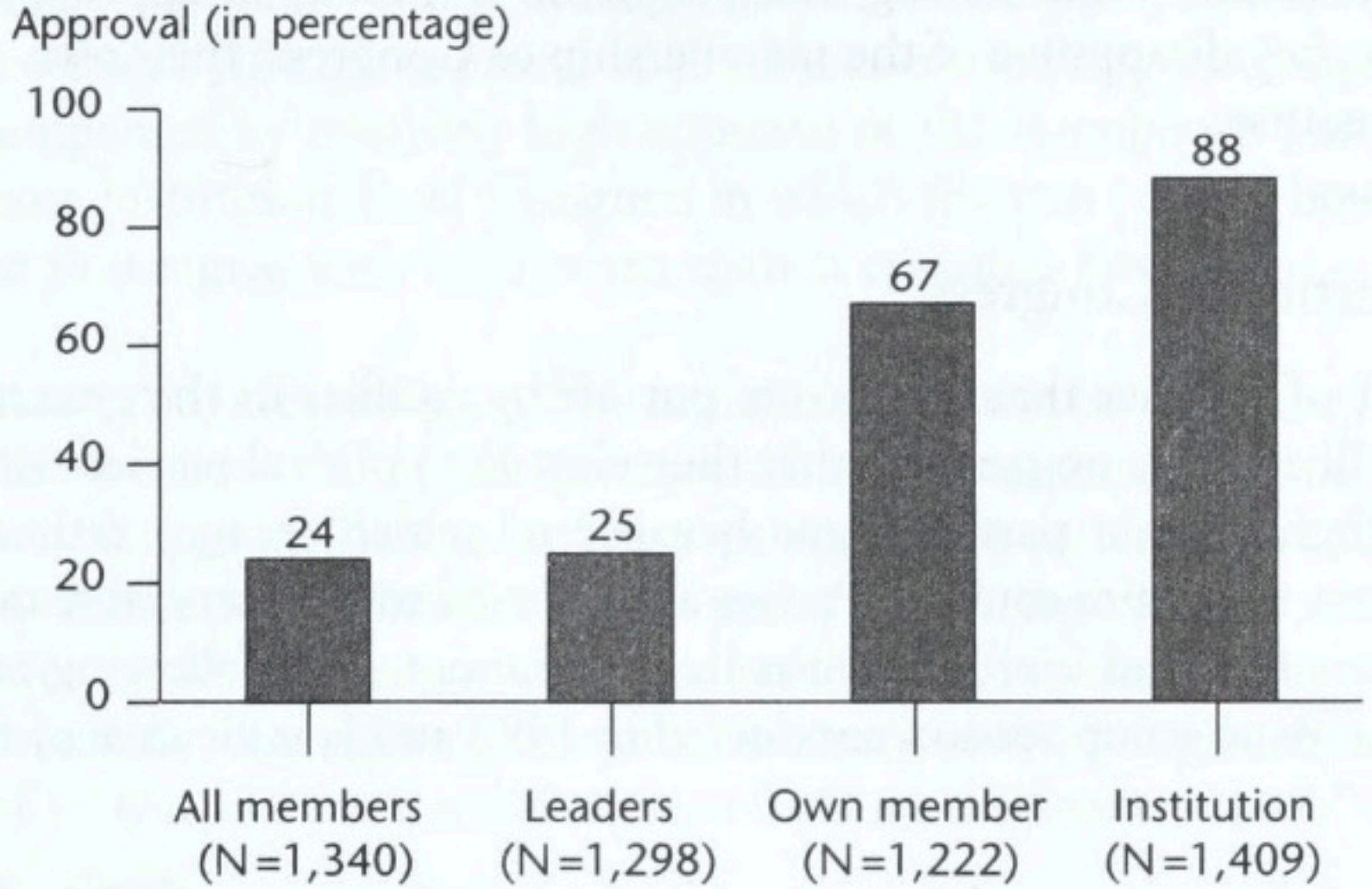
Why People Like Certain Parts of Congress More than Others

Further information on the reasons people feel as they do about Congress can be obtained by paying careful attention to the aspects of Congress they do and do not like. Congress, of course, is an amazingly multifaceted institution. It is not just organized into many different parts but it is organized along many different lines: parties, committees, caucuses, delegations, leadership structures, staffs, and two separate houses all play important roles in congressional organization, and it is quite likely that, just as the people like some components of the political system more than others, they also like some components of Congress more than others.

Love Our Member but Hate Our Congress?

One of the most oft-repeated points about congressional popularity is that people "hate Congress but love their own member of Congress."[11] Survey research consistently provides support for this observation. According to polling conducted by the National Election Studies at the University of Michigan in 1980, 88 percent of the people approved of their own member of the House but only 41 percent approved of Congress itself. By 1998 this gap had diminished a

Figure 3-4 Evaluations of Congressional Referents, 1992



Source: Perceptions of Congress Survey, 1992, conducted by the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska; see John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Congress as Public Enemy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

little but was still quite large, with 82 percent approving of their own member and 51 percent approving of Congress. People clearly distinguish between their own member and a generic "Congress."

This conclusion may be only part of the story, however. When people are asked to evaluate "Congress," what comes to their mind? Most of them probably envision a tumultuous collection of 535 members, and they often do not approve

of this facet of Congress. But when the public actually thinks of Congress less as a collection of inevitably flawed human beings and more as an important institutional component of the nation's governance, reactions are likely to change noticeably. This speculation is supported by the results obtained from a 1992 survey and that are presented in Figure 3-4.

In the battery of questions used to compile this figure, respondents were asked whether or not they approved of four different congressional referents. The first was "all members of Congress." The second was "the leaders of Congress." The third was "their own member of Congress." And the fourth was "Congress as an institution of government, no matter who is in office."[12] The different reactions evoked by these various referents are noteworthy. Dissatisfaction is certainly generated by mention of "all members" and of "congressional leaders." Only one in four Americans approved of these groups at the time the survey was taken. Approval levels of the respondent's "own member" were, as previous research has consistently demonstrated, much higher, with two of three responding favorably. But people were even more approving of Congress "as an institution," with a remarkable 88 percent approving. Although it is not tremendously surprising

that people would respond positively to a question that weeds human foibles out of the mix, it is still worth noting that people do not really disapprove of Congress; rather, they disapprove of the membership of Congress, their own member excepted of course.

Political Parties in Congress

In light of the fact that people are put off by conflict in the governmental process, it will come as no surprise that they view the political parties with disfavor. People believe that parties argue because of selfish reasons rather than a desire to better the entire country. Parties are believed to be a central reason there is so much conflict and ineffectiveness in government. The following exchange occurred in a focus group session conducted in 1992 and is indicative of the public's stance.

> Bob: I think that there has to be major communication between . . . the Democrats and Republicans and the Senate and the House, you know, everybody. Just have to say, "There's a problem. We won't leave this room until it's fixed."
> Lisa: They never could do that.
> Barb: Take them all to Camp David.
> Lisa: No, they don't deserve anything that good. They need to be put in small spaces in the summertime that is not air conditioned, and say, "Get on the ball and do something!" And they'd do it.[13]

Although people do not think highly of parties in Congress generally, perhaps they are more favorable to their own party and any dissatisfaction stems from reaction to the "other" party. For the most part, this expectation is unfounded. Democrats tend to be more pleased with Congress when there is a Democratic majority (as was the case for most of the second half of the twentieth century) and Republicans are more pleased when there is a Republican majority (as has been the case since 1994), but for many people party control is either unknown or irrelevant. Approval of Congress is influenced by partisanship, but not heavily.

After the Republican takeover of Congress in late 1994, many polling organizations began asking new questions. Rather than just asking people to evaluate the job of Congress (see Figure 3-1), they asked people to evaluate the job "the Republicans in Congress are doing," and, separately, the job "the Democrats in Congress are doing." By asking distinct questions about the two major parties, it has become possible to determine if evaluations of them move together or move in more of a zero-sum fashion. In turn, it has become possible to draw inferences about the manner in which people view the parties' role in Congress. If one party's demise in the eyes of the public is accompanied by the other party's rise, it would suggest that people credit (and blame) just one party, with the other

party becoming an automatic counterbalance to the touchstone party (presumably the majority party). But if evaluations of the two parties in Congress move together—that is, if high approval of the Democratic Party in Congress is typically accompanied by relatively high approval of the Republican Party—it suggests a more institutionalized Congress in which the two parties, however much they seem to disagree with each other, share a common fate.

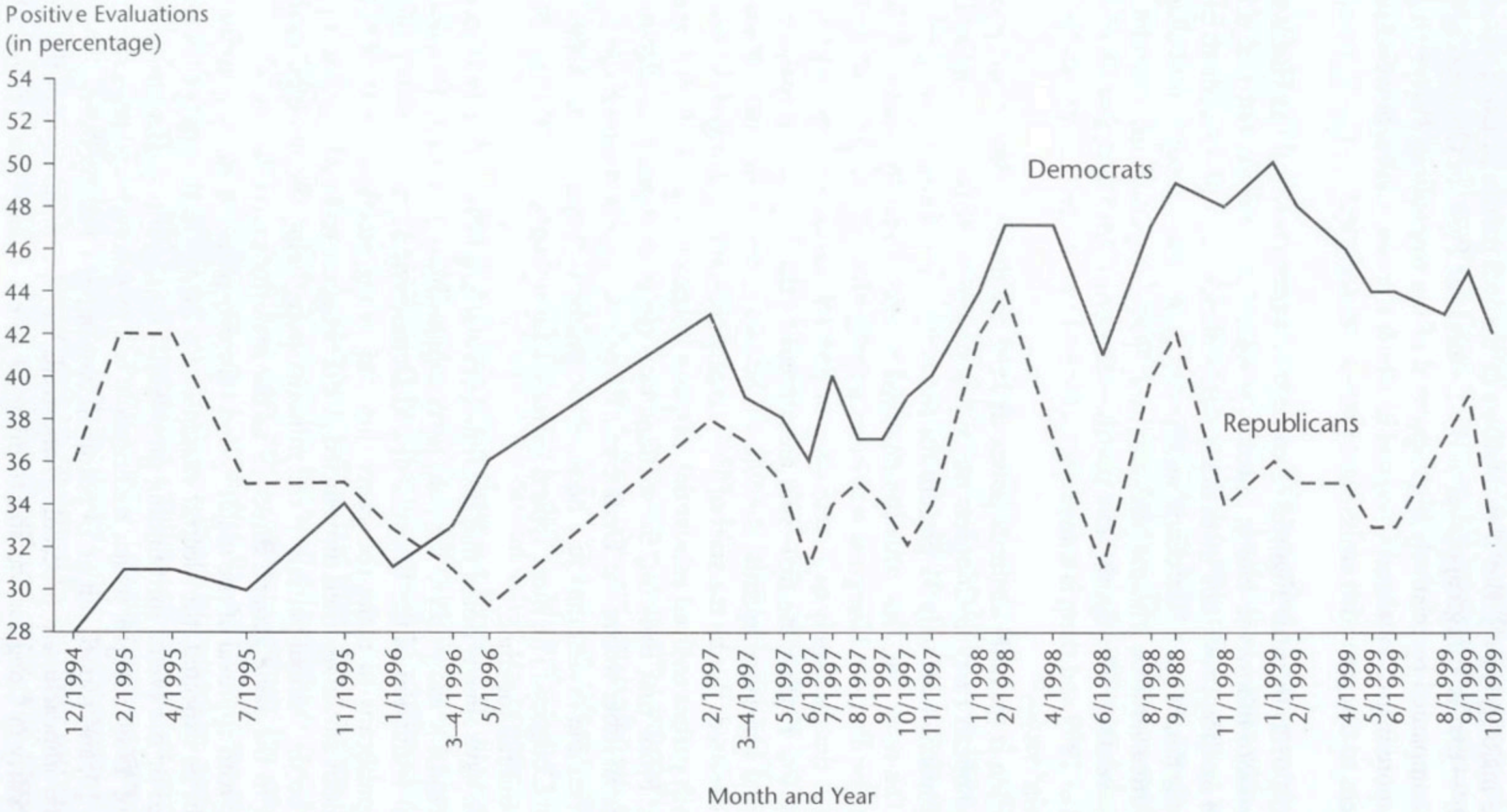
THE DATA USED to create Figure 3-5 come from various issues of the Harris polls and therefore follow the Harris practice of asking respondents not just if they approve or disapprove but to evaluate performance as either excellent, pretty good, only fair, or poor. "Excellent" and "pretty good" responses are then collapsed into positive verdicts, whereas "only fair" and "poor" responses are collapsed into negative verdicts. The figure plots positive reactions from December 1994 until the end of 1999 and there is some support for both the "teeter-totter" and "joined at the hip" views.[14]

When it formally assumed power in 1995 for the first time in forty years, the Republican Party in Congress was riding high with 42 percent approval ratings compared with only 31 percent for the Democratic Party in Congress. But within the next year, this situation changed markedly and by March 1996 the Democratic Party in Congress was more popular than the Republican Party in Congress, thanks largely to a rapid drop of positive ratings to 31 percent for the Republicans. During the first-year adjustment to the Republican majority and its pointed legislative agenda, the fate of the two congressional parties was not strongly related. But by the start of 1997, that situation had changed dramatically, as both parties enjoyed substantial increases in the percentage of positive evaluations. From that time on, fluctuations in these evaluations generally moved together. In other words, the Democratic Party in Congress is unlikely to receive more favorable evaluations just because the public is down on the Republican

Party in Congress. The more typical pattern is for evaluations of the two parties to rise and fall together.

We have already noted that the time between late 1994 and early 1995 is an understandable exception to the joint party responsibility pattern. In fact, the differential evaluation of the Republican and Democratic Parties probably allowed the Republicans to make the gains they did in the elections of 1994.[15] This Republican advantage then diminished as the situation reverted to what we predict to be the normal pattern of the minority party being the more popular but moving in the same general direction as the majority party. But the size of the gap between approval of the majority and minority parties is not a constant and, as might be expected, the clearest example of a change in the size of the gap is provided by the events surrounding presidential impeachment. Beginning in the spring of 1998, the gap, which traditionally is 3 to 6 percentage points, grew to 8, then 10, and topped out at 14 points in November 1998. By the end of 1999, well after impeachment proceedings and trials had faded, approval of the Democratic Party in Congress was still running 10 points higher than approval of the

Figure 3-5 Evaluations of the Parties in Congress, 1994–1999



Source: Harris polls, various years.

Note: Questions were posed at uneven intervals, only during the months listed on the horizontal axis.

Republican Party. Whether this larger gap will persist is difficult to say. We think it probably will not.

Interest Groups

Political parties may not be viewed very favorably by the American public but they are not viewed nearly as unfavorably as interest groups or, as they are usually called by the people, "special interests." Whereas parties have an institutionalized place in the organization of Congress, it may seem that interest groups are not actually a part of Congress and thus not appropriate for this section. Although this is technically true, the American public sees an intimate and unseemly connection between Congress and special interest groups. In the 1998 Gallup survey mentioned earlier, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "interest groups should be banned from contacting members of Congress." This proposal clearly violates first amendment rights to "petition" the Congress, but an amazing 45 percent of all respondents agreed with it, thus suggesting the extent to which interest groups are viewed with suspicion. In another item from the same survey, 69 percent of all respondents felt special interests had "too much power," far higher than any other aspect of the political system.

Focus group comments concerning interest groups and their allegedly undeserved influence are no less favorable.

> Maria: They [politicians] think about who's in power, who's the dominant group. And they do the laws according to who's going to benefit from it. And they forget about the people down here, you know. . . . It doesn't work for the benefit of all the people, which it should.

Robert: I think interest groups have too much control of what our elected officials say in our government. And Congresspeople are basically just like, well this guy gave me ten million dollars so no matter what I think, I've got to vote this way. They're bought, you know, bought by the interest group.

Sally: I don't like the way they [members of Congress] seem so easily influenced by lobbyists. I don't. . . . there should be a better way that money and influential groups that have a lot of money shouldn't be, shouldn't be able to influence the decisions . . . so easily.

The basis for this intense suspicion toward interest groups is easier to understand if we recall earlier references to the tendency of people to believe that real Americans are generally in agreement and thus to believe that noisy special interests must be a part of something else and must want to benefit only themselves and not the country as a whole. If this is people's perception, it is not surprising that they would see interest groups and the connection they have with members of Congress as the root of all that is evil in the political system.

Staffs and Other Features of the Institutionalized Congress

Because people tend to think members of Congress are acting to benefit themselves rather than ordinary Americans, they tend to be skeptical of the perquisites associated with the office and there is an accompanying public desire to reduce the level of those perquisites. Thus, proposals to reduce the salary of members of Congress, to reduce the staff assistance of members of Congress, and to shorten the length of stay permitted members of Congress (term limits) are wildly popular with the American public. Typically, about 75 percent of the adult population wants to lower congressional salaries and limit terms of service. Questions measuring public support for congressional staff reductions are asked less frequently but, when they are, receive endorsement from almost as many people as term limits and salary cuts.

Lest it be thought that people's enthusiasm for these reforms is driven by an overestimation of the actual salary, staff support, and mean length of service in Congress, results obtained from a survey in late 1992 found that people do misperceive the salary and staff available to members of Congress, but they tend to underestimate, not overestimate these benefits. On average, respondents guessed that members of Congress had 7.5 personal staffers, when at the time of the survey representatives averaged 17.4; and they underestimated the congressional salary by about $30,000. Finally, respondents also underestimated the typical length of career in Congress, guessing (on average) eight years when the real answer was eleven. Thus, providing the public with accurate information on salary, staff, and service would not put out the flames of public unrest with Congress but would actually fan those flames.[16]

It is difficult, but not impossible, to find aspects of Congress the public likes. Most people view the institution of Congress and their own member in favorable terms, but offsetting these positive feelings are strong negative feelings toward

political parties, special interests, and the membership of Congress.[17] Moreover, the public does not seem to like the activities in which Congress is typically engaged. Fifty-six percent of respondents in the 1998 Gallup survey said they believed that compromise was just "selling out on principles." Eighty-four percent agreed that "elected officials would help more if they stopped talking and took action." And 69 percent expressed the belief that "the current system does not represent the interests of all Americans." If debate and compromise are viewed negatively and if it is believed that Congress is not representing the interests of the people, it is no wonder that the overall reactions to the body are often negative.

Why Do Some People Like Congress More than Others

It is easy to lose sight of the fact that many people do approve of Congress—over 50 percent, in fact, in the last years of the 1990s. Just as Congress is more popular at some times than at others, so too is Congress looked upon more favorably by some people than by others. Identification of the kinds of individu-

als most likely to either approve or disapprove of Congress should allow us to say more about why Congress generates the kind of public reaction that it does. Thus, first, we compute the mean score of various demographic groups on our standard question regarding approval of Congress. Respondents were asked if they strongly approved, approved, disapproved, or strongly disapproved of "the way Congress has been handling its job lately."[18] "Strongly approve" responses were coded 4; "approve," 3; "disapprove," 2; and "strongly disapprove," 1. A group's mean score of 2.5 indicates that approving and disapproving answers were perfectly balanced. The larger the number, the more approving the group. We computed mean approval scores for several demographic groups and report them in Table 3-1.

For example, there has been much talk lately about "angry, white males." Is it the case, then, that males and whites are less approving of Congress? Table 3-1 suggests there is little difference between males and females and between whites and nonwhites in attitudes toward Congress. The anticipated patterns are in evidence, but barely. Males are a little less approving of Congress than females (2.42 to 2.50) and whites are a little less approving than nonwhites (2.45 to 2.50), but differences of 0.08 and 0.05 on a 4-point scale are quite modest. The findings for most of the other demographic variables are similar. More education, perhaps surprisingly, does not bring much improvement in attitudes toward Congress. The pattern across income levels is not consistent. The youngest age bracket (eighteen to twenty-five) is the most approving of Congress, but after that there is no apparent pattern. And those who scored well on a four-question political knowledge test were not any more approving of Congress than their less-informed compatriots.[19]

Once we move to the area of simple political attitudes and identifications, relationships are only marginally more visible. With regard to party identification, even though Republicans controlled both houses of Congress at the time the survey was administered (1998), respondents identifying with the Democratic Party were more approving (but only slightly) than Republicans (2.57 to 2.53). The only real difference is produced by "independents." They are more negative toward Congress than either Democrats or Republicans (2.32) and, in fact, are the most negative of virtually any group. With regard to political ideology, the pattern is the opposite of the one that might have been expected on the basis of party identification. Whereas partisan independents are the least supportive of Congress, ideological moderates are the most supportive (2.54), and whereas Democrats are the most supportive of Congress, ideological liberals are the least (2.35). Conservatives, like their closest partisan equivalent, Republicans, are in the middle (2.47). Independents may dislike Congress, but this should not be taken to mean that moderates do.

But the more important point is that the differences across all these standard demographic groups are surprisingly modest. If one attempts to describe the type of individual who is most likely to disapprove of Congress, it is clear that basing a description on people's age, gender, skin color, income, education, polit-

Table 3-1 Approval of Congress by Various Demographic Groups, 1998

	Mean Approval (1–4)	*N*
Gender		
Male	2.42	590
Female	2.50	620
Race		
White	2.45	1,008
Other	2.50	203
Age		
Less than 26	2.57	196
26–39	2.47	362
40–54	2.40	325
55–69	2.41	204
More than 70	2.49	123
Education		
Less than high school	2.43	144
High school	2.44	465
More than high school	2.47	312
4-year college	2.51	165
More than college degree	2.50	92
Income		
Less than $10,000	2.60	70
$10–20,000	2.50	115
$20–30,000	2.36	147
$30–40,000	2.49	199
$40–50,000	2.43	226
$60–100,000	2.53	167
More than $100,000	2.31	63
Political knowledge (answers correct)		
0	2.40	90

1	2.55	270
2	2.45	485
3	2.42	349
4	2.46	18
Party identification		
Democrat	2.57	377
Independent	2.32	327
Republican	2.53	298
Ideology		
Liberal	2.35	275
Moderate	2.54	342
Conservative	2.47	569

Source: Computed by the authors from a 1998 Gallup Survey; see John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (forthcoming).

ical knowledge, and even party identification and ideology will not be particularly helpful. To the extent that there are predictable patterns in who likes and dislikes Congress, we must look beyond demographics toward more specific political attitudes and preferences.

One reasonable expectation is that those who are satisfied with the policies government produces, other things being equal, will be more likely to approve of one of the most important shapers of those policies, the United States Congress.[20] The specific survey item we employ asked if respondents strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the statement that they were "generally satisfied with the public policies the government has produced lately." But one of the themes that has surfaced throughout this chapter is that people's attitudes toward Congress are influenced by more than just the policies produced; they also seem to be influenced by people's attitudes toward certain processes of making policy.

For example, as alluded to earlier, two central activities in Congress are debate and compromise. Congress is designed to give voice to an incredible variety of opinions from across the country and then to negotiate some type of brokered solution from this welter of preferences, so debate and compromise occupy much of the time of members of Congress. But, as indicated by the survey results referred to above, some ordinary people are not particularly tolerant of debate and compromise. In light of this fact, one obvious expectation is that those people who are less persuaded of the importance of debate and the necessity of compromise will also be disapproving of an institution as heavily invested in debate and compromise as Congress. The item we selected to measure people's perception of the necessity of compromise reads as follows: "the American people disagree with each other so much that politicians need to compromise in order to get anything done." The hypothesis is that the more strongly people

agree with this statement, the less likely they will be to approve of Congress. To measure people's attitudes toward debate, we used this item: "Elected officials would help the country more if they would stop talking and just take action on important problems." We expect that the more strongly people agree with this statement, the less likely they will be to approve of Congress.

To test these hypotheses, we use regression analysis. Although the numbers generated by this technique seem confusing at first glance, a major advantage of regression is that it is possible to "control" for the other variables included. If we relied only on results such as those presented in Table 3-1, we would not know, say, if young people (eighteen to twenty-five years old) were more favorable toward Congress because they tend to be ideological moderates or if ideological moderates tend to be more favorable toward Congress because many young people tend to be in the ideological middle. Thus, in Table 3-2 we present the results obtained when approval of Congress is regressed on all the variables in Table 3-1 plus the one policy and two procedural variables just described.

The top portion of the table indicates that most of the conclusions implied in Table 3-1 hold up in a more complete, multivariate specification. Age, gender,

Table 3-2 Causes of Approval of Congress, 1998

Independent Variable	Regression Coefficient	Standard Error	Significance Level
Age	−0.01	0.02	.63
Gender	0.05	0.04	.24
Nonwhite	0.01	0.06	.87
Education	0.01	0.01	.16
Income	0.00	0.01	.47
Party identification	0.01	0.01	.38
Political knowledge	−0.08	0.03	.00[a]
Ideology	0.08	0.03	.00[a]
Like recent policies	0.34	0.04	.00[a]
See little value in debate	−0.10	0.03	.00[a]
See little need for compromise	−0.11	0.03	.00[a]
Constant	2.16	0.20	.00[a]

Source: Computed by the authors from a 1998 Gallup Survey; see John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (forthcoming).

R^2 = .15

Adj. R^2 = .14

F = 12.63 (p < .00)

N = 795

[a] = significant at (.01)

race, education, income, and party identification exert minimal or no effect on approval of Congress.[21] This leaves only two variables from Table 3-1 with significant coefficients. Other things being equal, conservatives are more likely to approve of Congress (which had a Republican majority at the time of the survey) than are liberals and, more surprisingly, the more political knowledge a person possesses the *less* likely that person is to approve of Congress. Although observers might have expected that political knowledge would lead to an understanding of the challenges of governing and, therefore, a more approving attitude toward institutions such as Congress, this is not the case. In fact, more knowledge seems to lead to higher expectations of government and, inevitably, disappointment with the actual performance of government. Knowledge of government does not equal an appreciation of the difficulties of arriving at a decision in the face of tremendously divided public opinion on most issues. This seems to be why variables tapping education and political knowledge tend to be either insignificant or in the unexpected direction. This is true of the findings we report here as well as the findings reported in much previous work.[22]

Certainly, people are more likely to approve of an institution if they are pleased with the policies it helps to produce. This is apparent to some extent in

the results for ideology and even more directly in the coefficient for "like recent policies." In fact, this is the most powerful variable in the equation. People who like recent governmental policies are substantially more likely to approve of Congress, although with a question such as this there is always the danger that many people who approve of Congress are merely projecting desirable traits (such as agreeable policy choices) to it. In any event, approval is undeniably connected to policy satisfaction.

What may be more surprising for some readers (but perfectly consistent with our expectations) is that even when controlling for the influence of policy satisfaction, people's attitudes toward the desirability of debate and the need for compromise are important predictors of attitudes toward Congress. These general attitudes toward abstract activities are unlikely to be the product of the kind of reverse causation described in the previous paragraph. Although a favorable attitude toward Congress may lead people to like recent policies, it is less likely to lead them to have positive attitudes toward compromise and debate. But these attitudes toward compromise and debate certainly are related to approval of Congress. The more that people believe "the country would be helped if elected officials would stop talking" the less likely they are to approve of Congress. And the more that people believe "compromise is unnecessary because of Americans' level of agreement with each other" the less likely they are to approve of Congress. These two relationships are strong and statistically significant.

This means that if more people realized the extent of policy disagreement in American society and the resultant need to discuss our differences and to reach a mutual accord by being willing to compromise with those holding divergent views, Congress would then be a more popular institution. But when people view all debate as bickering and see compromise as selling out, they naturally are less likely to approve of an institution that spends much of its time bickering and sell-

ing out. Even if people were given the exact policies they want, the results in Table 3-2 suggest that some of them would still be unhappy with Congress, assuming Congress continued to rely, as any representative institution in a divided society must, on open presentation of diverse opinions, discussion of those opinions, and brokered solutions.

Summary

When is Congress unpopular? Not surprisingly, when negative economic and other societal conditions exist, but also when Congress is particularly active and newsworthy in proposing and debating important legislative matters and balancing presidential power. Why is Congress less popular than other parts of government? Because more than those other parts, Congress is charged with giving voice to tremendously varied interests from across the country and then, in full public view, coming to a single policy decision in the face of that diversity. Which parts of Congress are particularly unpopular? Any part that can be seen as serving an interest narrower than the entire country whether that interest

belongs to a political party intent on winning an election, a special interest intent on securing a benefit for that particular group, or members of Congress (other than one's own member) intent on getting reelected so they can continue to lead the high life at the expense of hard-working American taxpayers. What kind of person is most likely to disapprove of Congress? Not surprisingly, someone who dislikes recent policy actions, but also someone who dislikes debate and who believes there is little need for politicians to compromise.

Taken together, these findings make it difficult to deny that the processes by which decisions are made matter. People are not consumed solely by the desire to obtain a certain policy outcome. Indeed, on an amazing number of issues, most people have weak or, more likely, nonexistent policy preferences. But even when people do not have a pre-existing preference on a policy issue, government action can still affect attitudes. In fact, it is precisely when people see governing officials spending copious amounts of time arguing about what the people regard to be trifling issues that they become most disgusted with government. Moreover, whether or not people have a pre-existing stake in a particular policy outcome, they have a standing preference that all policies result from a process designed to benefit the general welfare of all Americans rather than the specific welfare of fractious, overly influential, individual interests. The public unquestionably errs by assuming there is a reasonably consensual general will in as heterogeneous a country as the United States, but the fact remains that congressional popularity is damaged when the institution is perceived to act on the basis of narrow, selfish interests. And because virtually every congressional action is perceived by the people in precisely these terms, the most popular Congress is usually the most inert Congress.

Notes

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1. On choosing to retire, see Sean Theriault, "Moving Up or Moving Out: Career Ceilings and Congressional Retirement," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 23 (August 1998): 419–34; on deciding against running for Congress in the first place, see Linda L. Fowler and Robert D. McClure, *Political Ambition: Who Decides to Run for Congress* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); on avoiding controversial issues, see David Hess, "Congress Hibernating till Fall," *Houston Chronicle,* March 19, 1998, A8; and on not complying with the law, see Tom Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
2. See Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, *The Confidence Gap* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
3. Robert H. Durr, John B. Gilmour, and Christina Wolbrecht, "Explaining Congressional Approval," *American Journal of Political Science* 41 (January 1997): 195.
4. See Robert Z. Lawrence, "Is It Really the Economy, Stupid?" in *Why People Don't Trust Government,* ed. Joseph S. Nye Jr., Philip D. Zelikow, and David C. King (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 111.

5. Katharine Q. Seelye, "Americans Take a Dim View of the Government, Survey Finds," *New York Times,* 10 March 1998, A15.
6. See John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Congress as Public Enemy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht, "Explaining Congressional Approval."
7. Hess, "Congress Hibernating till Fall."
8. On the public's preference for divided government, see Morris Fiorina, *Divided Government,* 2d ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996).
9. Hess, "Congress Hibernating till Fall."
10. For more details, see John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (forthcoming).
11. Richard F. Fenno Jr., "If, as Ralph Nader Says, Congress Is 'The Broken Branch,' How Come We Love Our Congressmen So Much?" in *Congress in Change: Evolution and Reform,* ed. Norman J. Ornstein (New York: Praeger, 1975).
12. For more information, see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, *Congress as Public Enemy,* 42–46.
13. Ibid., 97.
14. It would be instructive to have this information extending back before the 1994 elections and resulting switch in majority party, but these questions were not asked before December 1994.
15. John R. Hibbing and Eric Tiritilli, "Public Disapproval of Congress Can Be Dangerous to Majority Party Candidates," in *Change and Continuity in House Elections,* ed. David W. Brady, John Cogan, and Morris P. Fiorina (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).
16. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, *Congress as Public Enemy,* 72–74. The national survey was commissioned by John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse and funded by the National Science Foundation. It was conducted by the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska.
17. We wish we had questions on committees, but the only one available comes from the 1998 Gallup survey and merely asks whether or not respondents agree that "Congress needs to have committees to get its work done." Better than 70 percent agreed that it did.
18. This national survey was commissioned by John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse and was funded by the National Science Foundation. It was conducted in 1998

by Gallup.

19. Only the bivariate relationships for age and gender are significant at the 0.05 level.
20. In fact, respondents view Congress as a more important shaper of policy than the president. See Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, *Congress as Public Enemy,* 51–53.
21. A separate code for "independent" would have shown a small but statistically significant negative effect.
22. See Roger H. Davidson, David M. Kovenock, and Michael K. O'Leary, *Congress in Crisis: Politics and Congressional Reform* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1968). For an extended discussion of the relationship between high expectations of Congress and subsequent evaluations, see Samuel C. Patterson and David C. Kimball, "Living up to Expectations: Public Attitudes toward Congress," *Journal of Politics* 59 (August 1997): 701–28.