The Dynamics of Partisan Conflict on Congressional Approval

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Partisan divisions in American politics have been increasing since the 1970s following a period where scholars thought parties were in decline. This polarization is observed most frequently within the debates and deliberation across issues within Congress. Given that most studies of public opinion place the behavior of elites at the center of public attitudes, surprisingly little research examines the effect of partisan conflict on the mass public. This research examines quarterly congressional approval data from 1974 to 2000 to determine the consequences, if any, of party conflict on the dynamics of congressional approval. The findings indicate that over-time changes in partisan conflict within Congress have a direct and lasting effect on how citizens think about Congress.

D oes partisan conflict within Congress decrease public esteem for Congress as a whole? Scholarly and popular accounts point to a growing partisan divide in American politics due to changes in the electorate (Jacobson 2000; Rohde 1991), within Congress (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 1993), and in the demographic makeup of congressional districts (Gimpel 1999; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 1997). America is being described as two nations, one red and one blue. Moreover, Layman and Carsey (2002) document the extension of partisan conflict beyond the dominant left-right policy dimension for government activism into other policy dimensions such as cultural and moral issues. Partisan division and conflict are visible attributes of the American political landscape and more specifically, the policymaking process within the U.S. Congress.

What are the consequences of changes in the partisan behavior among elected officials on public policymaking? The partisan composition of Congress moderates the relationship between the president and Congress (Edwards and Barrett 2000; Sinclair 2000). For instance, Congress is less supportive of presidential initiatives when parties are polarized (Fleisher and Bond 2000). Polarization is also associated with legislative gridlock and policy inaction (Binder 2003) and lead to less civility in the speeches and activities within Congress (Uslaner 2000).

Given that increases in partisanship lead to less civility within Congress, and the public's disdain for conflict surrounding the policymaking process (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995), changes in partisan conflict across time should shape the dynamics of public sentiment toward Congress.

Yet existing scholarship does not show a connection between the dynamics of partisan conflict with how citizens think about the institution. This is surprising given that elite behavior is central to models of public opinion (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Zaller 1992) and that changes in the partisan behavior of the elite lead to changes in the partisan behaviors and attitudes among the mass public (Brewer 2005; Hetherington 2001).

There are several reasons for the lack of attention to this relationship. First, much of the work on congressional approval is cross-sectional and does not allow for tests of the dynamics of the public's sentiment toward Congress. Like most studies of the over-time variation in politics, limitations in the availability of data constrain the study of the dynamics of congressional approval. When scholars have looked at the dynamics of congressional approval, most models borrow from the presidential approval literature and model congressional approval as a function of external factors such as the economy or international crisis (e.g., Parker 1977; Patterson and Caldeira 1990).

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Only recently have scholars looked to the behavior within Congress to determine how citizens think about the institution across time (Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997). Finally, most of the work on partisan polarization and conflict is on its causes and extent rather than its consequences. However, both the causes and consequences of partisan activity should be important for understanding contemporary American politics.

This research examines the relationship between partisan conflict and public evaluations of Congress. Partisan divisions have been growing slowly over the last 30 years, but there are also short-term fluctuations in partisan conflict revolving around the issues of the day. The responsible parties thesis argues that strong, conflictual political parties are a desirable part of a functioning representative democracy (Schattschneider 1942; White and Mileur 2002). When party members unite against the opposition party, representing the interests of their partisan constituents, both the party and the government should be rewarded with public support. Individual-level research, however, suggests public cynicism toward government and Congress is partly a function of their dislike for partisan behavior and conflict (Cooper 1999; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 2002; Kimball and Patterson 1997). Citizens often equate partisan bickering with policymaking sans the public's interest. Given the connection between elite behavior and attitudes and those of the public, we should expect a connection between the over-time movement in partisan conflict and the dynamics of congressional approval. Some scholars have suggested a possible connection between party activity and public evaluations of government (e.g., Davidson 1999; King 1997), but none have shown direct empirical support at the aggregate level of opinion dynamics.

The central argument in this work is that aggregate public approval of Congress reflects the underlying distribution of citizens' normative beliefs about desired congressional performance as well as information about the common outcomes for which they hold political actors accountable (i.e., the economy). Changes in their decision to reward or punish Congress with their approval or disapproval are driven by information they receive about preferred outcomes and performance. Partisan conflict or bipartisan unity is argued to be an important factor that the public uses when making inferences about expected congressional performance. Partisan disputes within Congress are a visible and accessible heuristic that citizens can use to evaluate Congress given the complexity of the legislative process. Consistent with this notion, the results of this study suggest that Congress is punished when one of the key representational linkages between the public and policy, political parties, conforms to models

of responsible parties by representing their partisan constituents against the position of opposing parties—that is, engaging in partisan conflict.

Evaluations of Congress and Partisan Conflict

Public evaluations of government appear to conform to a simple reward-punishment model. Citizens have desires about what governments should do: provide a stable and healthy economy, enact policies for the benefit of the nation, provide security from external threats, and so on. When these desires are fulfilled, governments are rewarded. When the public perceives the government as failing to meet these expectations, the public punishes the government by decreasing its support for the institution. Public approval and disapproval of Congress work in this same manner (Grant and Rudolph 2004; Kimball and Patterson 1997). For instance, scholars have found that perceptions of economic growth increase public esteem for Congress, while perceptions of an economic downturn coincide with decreases in public support toward Congress (Rudolph 2002; Stimson 2004). In addition, Congress is rewarded for positive media coverage and a popular president (Parker 1977; Patterson and Caldeira 1990), but punished by the public when it engages in both interbranch and intra-institutional conflict (Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). The findings from these studies of congressional approval are consistent with a reward-punishment model.

Since citizens dislike political conflict and the majority of conflict within Congress is partisan—often culminating in partisan voting on the House and Senate floor (Patterson and Caldeira 1988; Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani 2003)—there is some expectation that partisan conflict should influence how citizens think about Congress. Indeed, since partisan conflict is such a visible aspect of the legislative process, it should serve as an easy cue that the public can use to evaluate congressional performance.

What exactly do scholars mean when discussing partisan conflict? Partisan conflict is disagreement and contention concerning policies, core principles, courses of action, and desired end states that are split along partisan lines. It can occur almost anywhere in politics—media interviews, speeches, talk shows, mass mailers, and campaign advertisements—but it frequently occurs within Congress or is an extension of the debates surrounding the legislative process. Typically, partisan conflict exists

when the outcome of a debate will benefit one political party over another. In this situation, members of each party have an incentive to defend the position that benefits them and challenge the opposition party, resulting in the reoccurring partisan conflict that is such a visible part of the legislative process. Thus, most partisan conflict within Congress involves attempts by the majority party to pass policies over the dissent of the minority party. However, partisan conflict also arises when partisan members of Congress want to attract public attention to a problem or themselves for either policy or electoral gains. For instance, "special order" floor speeches after the end of a day's legislative work are frequently used for these purposes.

As one might expect, there is variation in both the degree of partisanship and the extent of conflict. Some activities are highly partisan—often characterized by strong party leadership, active partisan whips securing votes, or at least based on considerations that are correlated with partisan membership. Other activities are nonpartisan—associated with factors and considerations uncorrelated with partisanship such as bills that affect a specific region, home industry, or have unanimous support (see Sinclair 1978). Although political parties are the most prominent means to sustain a coalition within the U.S. Congress, other types of coalitions (e.g., universal, geographic, demographic) also exist (Collie 1988). Partisan conflict is also dynamic. Some aspects of politics and policymaking are prone to high degrees of conflict, particularly when costs and benefits are visible (e.g., redistributive policies), while others are predisposed to cooperation (e.g., dealing with a domestic crisis). Research shows that the extent of partisan behavior within Congress varies across time with both low periods of partisan activity (Brady, Cooper, and Hurley 1979) and high periods of partisan activity (e.g., Hurley and Wilson 1989; Rohde 1991).

So what are the expectations concerning partisan behavior in Congress and public evaluations of the institution? Theories of representation suggest that the public should desire responsible political parties—that is, political parties that represent their partisan constituency and differentiate themselves from opposition parties (Schattschneider 1942; White and Mileur 2002). The responsible party thesis looks at parties as an important linkage between what citizens demand and what government achieves. Theoretically, political parties should represent their partisan constituents in government and fight to enact party platforms into policy. The American Political Science Association's report on the status of political parties in America, "Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System," suggests that American political parties should increase their "internal cohesion," increase their "opposition" toward each other, and offer more distinct policy choices to the public (1950, 18–19). In turn, citizens should be supportive of the party that is representing their preferences. One of the implications of this theory is that the public should look upon partisan debate and deliberation within Congress as a positive attribute of partisan representation. When parties conflict, they should be seen as doing their job—being responsive to their partisan constituency and offering clear choices between policy positions. The public viewing the changes in partisan conflict (i.e., representation) during the legislative process should therefore alter their evaluations of the legislative institution itself, rewarding Congress when its members are perceived as representing their preferences and offering distinct policy choices—that is, when partisan conflict is high—and punishing Congress when the public perceives legislators as failing to represent their preferences—that is, when partisan conflict is low.

Scholars of public opinion, however, uncover something quite different. Citizens do not always look at parties as a kindred spirit, representing their interests, but instead view political parties as unresponsive to the public (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Instead of desiring more partisan behavior, a large number of Americans perceive members of Congress as "excessively loyal to their political party" (Kimball and Patterson 1997, 707) and believe that political parties have "too much power" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, 102).

Citizens appear to equate partisan conflict with partisan biases and the notion that members of Congress are avoiding the facts—whatever they may be—when formulating policy. The latter perception is contrary to public expectations that members of Congress should make decisions by considering relevant information about an issue, the merits of various solutions, and do what is in the "best interest" of the nation. Instead, partisan conflict within Congress signals, to many citizens, that less attention is paid to the facts and decisions are made based on irrelevant (i.e., partisan or electoral) considerations. As former Senator Bill Bradley writes, political parties are seen as a mechanism that forces otherwise independent politicians to waffle on their positions rather than call it as they see it (Bradley 1999, xii). In addition, the public perceives partisan conflict as a waste of time and resources that could be spent trying to solve the nation's problems rather than trying to put the other party down for personal or partisan electoral gains.

This view of partisan behavior in Congress is not only held by some members of the public, but is also implied by some members of Congress. Members of Congress have been known to equate partisan policymaking with "bad" policymaking and nonpartisan policymaking with

"good" policymaking. For instance, Manley (1965) quotes one senator who says members of Congress "try to write the best legislation we can in a nonpartisan way," implying that the "partisan way" of legislating does not lead to the best legislation. A congressional staffer is also quoted as saying that "95% of the time the members deliberate the bill in a nonpartisan way, discussing the facts," and suggests that the other 5% of legislation is mired in partisan debate where the facts are ignored (Manley 1965, 929). In a more recent example, Senator John McCain accused Senator Barack Obama of "partisan posturing" during the legislative process to enact a lobbying reform bill, noting that he [McCain] has "been around long enough to appreciate that in politics the public interest isn't always a priority for everyone."[1] The latter suggests that partisan position taking is contrary to the public's interest. Thus, it is not surprising that many members of the public feel the same way about partisan behavior in Congress.

There is a good reason why citizens should rely on the partisan behavior within Congress when asked to evaluate the institution. The legislative process is complex, making it difficult for citizens to base their evaluations on other considerations (Davidson 1999). The high school civics version of how a bill becomes a law is quite uncommon in modern-day legislatures (Sinclair 1997). The modern day legislative process entails multiple committees, multijurisdictions, various working groups, and a complex system of rules regarding debate. Further, many bills are tied to omnibus legislation, making it difficult to follow individual policy proposals through the process. Given the complexities of the legislative process and the public's lack of attention to politics, partisan conflict becomes a heuristic that citizens can use to make inferences regarding congressional performance. When partisan conflict is low, citizens should reward Congress with approval. When partisan conflict is high, citizens should punish Congress with disapproval. Thus, the relationship between partisan conflict and public evaluations of Congress should fit into the broader reward-punishment framework.

Finally, partisan conflict should be a factor that influences both the long-term equilibrium movement of congressional approval and the short-term fluctuations around that equilibrium. Short-term deviations in congressional approval around its long-run equilibrium movement should occur in response to contemporaneous events such as intense floor debate regarding legislation or partisan speeches. As citizens view changes in partisan conflict, they should update their existing evaluation about the institution. For instance, an attempt to pass a controversial bill that leads to multiple floor votes split along partisan lines can attract the attention of the media, interest groups, and the public, leading the latter to alter their opinions about Congress. Similarly, when Congress unites around the passage of a series of bills, the public may view this cooperation as a signal that things are getting done and that they are being done for reasons beneficial to the general public, thus leading to a change in public evaluations toward Congress. This leads to an expectation that Congress should experience short-term changes in its level of public support due to partisan conflict.

However, short-term changes in congressional approval should not move entirely in sync with changes in partisan conflict. Citizens will err when deciding how much their approval of Congress should change, thus creating a disequilibrium between approval and partisan conflict that will reequilibrate across future time periods. This error could come about from individual-level perceptual biases (see Kimball 2005), a lack of information, or heterogeneity in the population such as differences in political awareness or partisan strength that lead different segments of the public to adjust their evaluations of Congress at different times. All of these could lead to a lagging relationship between approval and partisan conflict. Since other aspects of the legislative process are fairly complex, citizens should continue to use their perceptions of past partisan conflict when making subsequent evaluations of Congress. However, the influence of past partisan conflict on evaluations of Congress should be discounted in future time periods as new information and changes in the political and social environment occur. The latter should lead to a long-run, but not permanent, relationship between partisan conflict and congressional approval.

Measuring Congressional Approval

Limitations in data have hampered the study of the dynamic movement of congressional approval. A reliable measure of congressional approval is difficult to obtain because survey questions about public attitudes toward the legislative branch are asked irregularly. Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht (1997) overcome this problem by gathering over 300 administrations of over 40 different survey items regarding public evaluations of Congress and extract a single latent dimension of public sentiment toward Congress using Stimson's (1999) WCALC algorithm. Beyond the work of Stimson (1999) and colleagues (Erikson, Mackuen, and Stimson 2002), this

FIGURE 1 The Dynamics of Congressional Approval (Quarterly), 1974–2000
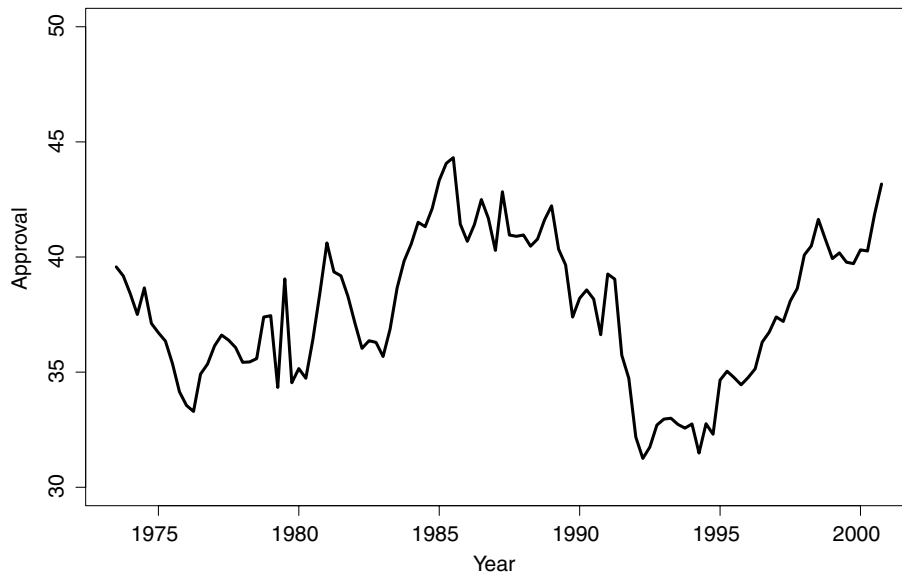
measurement strategy has been used for other aggregate analysis to study the relationship between public opinion and political institutions (Durr 1993; Durr, Martin, and Wolbrecht 2000; Keele 2005, 2007). This study extends the congressional approval series to include 584 administrations of 50 survey items creating a quarterly time series of public sentiment toward Congress stretching from 1974 to 2000 (n = 108).[2] The WCALC algorithm extracts the shared component among each item from the idiosyncratic component of each indicator. The index is a measure that is more general than approval/disapproval, containing indicators of both evaluations of the performance of Congress and long-term faith in the institution. Thus, although the term "approval" is used throughout the remainder of this research, the extracted series is not "approval" per se in the sense that scholars analyze presidential approval from, for example, Gallup surveys, but instead refers to a latent favorable to unfavorable evaluation of Congress as a whole.

Figure 1 shows the quarterly movement of congressional approval from 1974 to 2000. Consistent with conventional wisdom, the public does not view Congress in

high regard. Instead, the series shows movements around a mean value of 38.79 (s.d. = 3.65). Approval decreases following Watergate in the 1970s, but begins to show a slow ascent during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The series reaches its peak around 1984 to 1985, which is consistent with studies using annual Harris and GSS data (see Patterson and Caldeira 1990; Patterson and Magleby 1992). Extending the series beyond Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht's (1997) initial analysis of approval from 1974 to 1993 shows a dramatic decline in public sentiment occurring several years prior to the historical Republican electoral gains in the 1994 election. However, public approval of Congress remains low during the next several years—coinciding with intense partisan fighting within Congress that led to several government shutdowns. The series then moves upward for the majority of the late 1990s, tracking the positive approval ratings of President Clinton and the growing economy. Short decreases occur in the series as it moves upward during quarters of intense partisan fighting (i.e., late 1998 during the Clinton impeachment trial). However, these relationships are only speculations. To uncover the extent that evaluations of Congress actually respond to these phenomena requires a more robust, multivariate analysis.

Model and Data

The model of congressional approval below makes the assumption that there exists an approval equilibrium that responds to internal and external events. The observed

[2]The original survey marginals obtained from Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht (1997) plus the new survey marginals from each question were inputted into the WCALC algorithm to derive the new series. The correlation between the previous and new series is .94. The failure to derive a series perfectly correlated with the previous measure despite using the same methodology and data for the years 1974 to 1993 could be a result of improvements in the WCALC algorithm (i.e., Stimson 1994) and/or the additional survey marginals providing more information about the relationship among the different indicators to the latent variable.

level of approval represents the rewards and punishments associated with internal congressional actions and the external political-economic environment. Approval equilibrium moves when expected institutional and external outcomes do not match public expectations (Grant and Rudolph 2004; Kimball and Patterson 1997). Moreover, citizens may err when making their judgments about the immediate amount of rewards or punishments to levy Congress. In the aggregate, these errors will create disequilibrium between approval and political-economic outcomes. However, these errors will be corrected as citizens receive new information about the current state of affairs. A single-equation error correction model (ECM) is used to test the hypothesis that increases in partisan conflict decrease congressional approval. The ECM simultaneously estimates both short- and long-run relationships (Davidson et al. 1978). The ECM model is shown in equation (1) for the bivariate case.

$$\Delta Y_t = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Y_{t-1} + \beta_0 \Delta X_t + \beta_1 X_{t-1} + \epsilon_t \quad (1)$$

Equation (1) models the changes in congressional approval (ΔY_t) as a function of a constant (α_0), the past value of approval ($\alpha_1 Y_{t-1}$), the changes ($\beta_0 \Delta X_t$) and lagged levels ($\beta_1 X_{t-1}$) of a weakly exogenous variable, and an error term (ϵ_t); Δ is the difference operator. The error correction coefficient α_1 indicates the speed of return to equilibrium of approval after a deviation from its equilibrium with X, β_0 reflects the immediate relationship between a change in X and a change in Y, and β_1 indicates the long-run effect of changes in X on Y.[3] De Boef and Keele (2008) show that the ECM is really just a reparameterization of the more familiar Autoregressive Distributive Lag (ADL) model. Further, they argue that the single-equation ECM is appropriate for stationary time series and is not prone to spurious inferences when data are highly autoregressive or "near-integrated" (195; also see Davidson and Mackinnon 1993).[4] The ECM also pro-

vides direct estimates of both short-term and long-term relationships of interest. The latter is important since there is reason to believe that partisan conflict—as well as other covariates—should have both immediate and long-term consequences for congressional approval.

Scholars have devised numerous ways to measure various concepts related to the amount of partisan activity and organization within Congress. Unfortunately, there is no direct measure of partisan conflict. In addition, a measure is needed that can be broken down into quarters during the period under study. Measures such as ideal point estimates or related indicators of partisan polarization are typically aggregated for each two-year session of Congress. Although these can be transformed into quarterly measures, partisan conflict is more than the preferences of Democrats and Republicans, but the unified expression and the differences among those preferences.

Instead, scholars have used party votes as a measure of partisan conflict within Congress (e.g., Bond and Fleisher 1990; Brady, Cooper, and Hurley 1979; Rohde 1991).[5] The idea behind the measure is simple. When political parties disagree on an issue or a bill, conflict ensues. Conflict on party-dividing issues ultimately manifests itself in the form of a unified party vote. A party vote is when a given percentage of Democrats vote against a given percentage of Republicans on the House or Senate floor. *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* defines a party vote as when 50% of Democrats vote against 50% of Republicans. However, we might expect that the greater the number of partisans voting with their party and against the other party, the greater the amount of partisan conflict on the floor vote. Therefore, *partisan conflict* is measured as when 75% of Democrats vote against 75% of Republicans on a roll-call vote divided by the total number of roll-call votes per quarter. The 75% figure ensures these votes contain a high level of within-party unity and external party opposition. The denominator ensures the level of party voting is not a simple function of Congress considering more legislation during a given quarter.

Consistent with past research, the number of *cloture and debt ceiling votes* per quarter are included to capture internal congressional conflict and the number of *presidential vetoes* and congressional *veto overrides* are used to capture conflict between the president and Congress. All of these actions are expected to drive approval down.

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[3]For other applications of the single-equation ECM in political science, see Durr (1992), De Boef and Kellstedt (2004), and Keele (2007).

[4]Direct estimation of the memory of the approval series using Robinson's (1995) semiparametric estimator of d (ARIMA (p, d, q)) shows $d = .71$ (s.e. $= 0.10$), which is consistent with estimates from previous research (Box-Steffensmeier and Tomlinson 2000). Estimation of a fractionally differenced congressional approval series in the ECM framework does not alter forthcoming conclusions, providing some assurance that the findings are not spurious. Since there is an expectation that partisan conflict influences both the long-term and short-term changes in congressional approval, the ECM is estimated in its normal form with first differences, which directly estimates these effects and has a clear interpretation. Additional diagnostic tests do not show any signs that the first differenced approval series is over-differenced or results in a new series that is fractionally integrated.

[5]Similar measures include party unity scores that measure the amount of intraparty cohesion and the Rice index (Rice 1924) that measures the amount of interparty conflict and intraparty unity. However, the concept of interest in this study is limited to interparty conflict, which historically has been measured by party votes.

Although these institutional obstacles to policymaking are frequently partisan tools, they also are tactics for non-partisan conflict such as regional, bipartisan, or intra-party opposition to legislation. For instance, in October of 1999 the Senate was debating both the McCain-Feingold Campaign Finance Reform bill and a controversial bill banning partial birth abortions. Despite the immense partisan conflict and debate surrounding each of these bills, the McCain-Feingold bill encountered one cloture vote split largely along partisan lines (48 Republicans voting nay, 46 Democrats voting yea). The highly partisan abortion bill did not encounter a single cloture vote despite nine floor votes in the Senate that were split along party lines. In contrast, a less controversial bill regarding trade with sub-Saharan Africa encountered two cloture votes at the end of October. In one instance, 90 senators (47 Republicans, 43 Democrats) voted yea to end debate on the bill, while eight senators (two Democrats, six Republicans) from the same region voted nay on the motion. Thus cloture votes can sometimes capture conflict between nonpartisan coalitions and at other times fail to capture important variation in partisan conflict. The correlation between cloture and debt ceiling votes and party votes is .14, suggesting some distinction between partisan voting as a measure of party conflict and cloture and debt ceiling votes. In addition, filibusters and cloture votes arise only in the Senate, ignoring conflict that occurs within the House of Representatives.

Good economic times are also associated with positive ratings of Congress (Box-Steffensmeier and Tomlinson 2000; Parker 1977; Rudolph 2002). Public *economic expectations* are taken from the University of Michigan's Survey of Consumers. Sociotropic prospections are included because it is likely citizens use past and current information to make projections about the future and use those considerations when evaluating Congress (but see Rudolph 2002).[6] Sociotropic prospections are measured by the question "Looking ahead, which would you say is more likely—that in the country as a whole we'll have continuous good times during the next five years or so, or that we will have periods of widespread unemployment or depression, or what?" Consumer sentiment, however, is endogenous to politics (De Boef and Kellstedt 2004). To isolate the *economic* portion of consumer sentiment, the sociotropic prospections series is regressed on the leading, lagging, and coincidental economic indicators. The predicted values represent the economic portion, purged of the political determinants of economic expectations.

The predicted values from the consumer sentiment model are used in the analysis of approval.[7]

Positive movements in presidential approval have also been associated with positive assessments of Congress (Patterson and Caldeira 1990). *Presidential approval* is measured as the percentage of "approve" responses to the Gallup monthly poll question "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [. . .] is handling his job as president?" To obtain the political component of presidential approval, the approval series is regressed on the economic component of the sociotropic prospections series and the leading, lagging, and coincidental economic indicators to purge the presidential approval series of its economic determinants. The residuals from the presidential approval model are used in the analysis as a measure of the noneconomic component of presidential approval. The model posits a simple, positive relationship between presidential and congressional approval that reflects a general evaluation toward government.[8]

In addition, the model includes a host of both internal and external factors shown by other studies to shape the dynamics of congressional approval. The model controls for legislative productivity using Mayhew's (1991) count of the number of important bills passed each quarter by Congress. Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht's (1997) find that when Congress passes major bills, its support decreases due to the conflict surrounding the bill and the legislation's inability to please policy extremists. Media coverage of Congress is controlled for using Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht's (1997) measure of *New York Times* coverage of Congress with an expectation that positive stories about Congress will increase the public's approval of Congress and more negative stories will decrease the public's approval of Congress. Finally, dummy variables for periods of divided government and congressional scandals are included in the model as control variables.[9]

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[6]The models were also run with a measure of egocentric retrospections without altering the results.

[7]Running the congressional approval models with the raw consumer sentiment variable does not alter the forthcoming results.

[8]See Durr (1993) and Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht (1997) for further details of extracting the noneconomic component of presidential approval and the nonpolitical component of consumer sentiment.

[9]Dummy variables are included for Koreagate (1976–78), AB-SCAM (1980–82), House speaker Jim Wright's downfall (1989), the Keating Five scandal (1990–91), the House banking scandal (1991–92), Newt Gingrich's ethics probe (1995:4–1996:4), the Monica Lewinsky scandal (1998:3–1999:1), and a multiscandal indicator of more minor events. The multiscandal indicator consists of the following events: the Gulf Oil campaign funds scandal (1975:4, 1976:3, 1976:4); the first revelation of ABSCAM (1980:1); Wilson resignation (1982:1); Page sex scandal and cocaine ring (1982:3, 1982:4); Studds and Crane, drug investigation of Dellums, Wilson, Goldwater (1983:3); Studds and Crane, Dellums and Wilson (1983:4); Daniel and St. Germain (1985:3);

Results

The analysis begins with a validation of the partial adjustments model reported in Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht (1997), henceforth DGW, using their original data except a strict p < .05 level of statistical significance is reported rather than p-values for each coefficient. The point of this exercise is to gradually extend this model to include the updated data and then the addition of the partisan conflict variable in order to understand precisely what leads to any differences between this and previous research. The validation estimates in column 1 match those reported in DGW, which is not surprising given the use of their data. The second column estimates the exact same model for the years 1974–93, but replaces the original approval series from DGW with the updated approval series. Note, the survey marginals used in the updated series for the years 1974–93 are taken directly from DGW, but the updated series is extracted from all available survey marginals for the years 1974–2000. Although the statistical significance and direction of the coefficients in column 2 are similar to those in column 1, there is a notable decrease in the size of the parameter estimates in column 2 relative to column 1. The only other changes between models 1 and 2 are both veto measures lose statistical significance while the cloture/debt ceiling vote measure now reaches statistical significance. Since the only difference between models is the use of the updated approval series, the change is likely due to changes in the construction of the dependent variable—the public's latent sentiment toward Congress. Despite using the exact same survey marginals for the years 1973–93, four changes in the construction of the approval series, unavailable to past researchers, might explain the differences in the estimates: (1) the new approval series is scaled via the WCALC algorithm on a 0–100 scale rather than a 0–200 scale, (2) the use of both backward and forward recursion in the WCALC algorithm increases the reliability of the estimated latent variable, (3) the addition of an exponential smoother in the WCALC algorithm contains random fluctuations in the sampling error of individual survey marginals, increasing the validity of the approval series, and (4) an increase in the administration of survey items provides more reliable information about the relationship among indicators and their relationship

to the latent construct.[10] Column 3 reports a replication and extension of DGW using the entire updated approval series from 1974 to 2000. The estimates closely resemble those in column 2, suggesting the extension of the data from 1993 to 2000—a 25% increase in the number of observations—has very little influence on the parameter estimates. The final partial adjustments model shown in column 4 adds the partisan conflict variable. Partisan conflict shows a negative and statistically significant relationship with congressional approval, which is consistent with the primary hypothesis. Also note that there is very little change in the other coefficient estimates between the model in column 3 and the model in column 4, suggesting that most of the differences between the results reported here and previous work are due to the aforementioned changes in the construction of the latent approval series rather than the extension of the data or the addition of the partisan conflict variable.

Table 2 moves beyond the partial adjustments model to estimate the ECM of approval equilibrium. Model 1 of Table 2 shows an ECM of approval replicating the analysis of De Boef and Keele (2008)—which itself uses a similar model specification as the partial adjustments model of Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht (1997)—except this model estimates approval for the years 1974–2000. Unlike the partial adjustments model, the ECM uncovers both long- and short-term relationships among the variables. The estimates from model 1 are consistent with De Boef and Keele (2008) in regard to the direction and statistical significance of the coefficients. For instance, economic expectations have a lagged effect on approval, while presidential approval has a contemporaneous relationship with public evaluations of Congress. In addition, media coverage of Congress maintains both a short- and long-term positive relationship with approval. The size of the coefficients is different from De Boef and Keele (2008) for reasons discussed above.

Using the specification of model 1 in Table 2 as a baseline, model 2 in Table 2 adds partisan conflict to the model of congressional approval. The error correction coefficient (α_1) captures the rate at which approval returns to equilibrium from a shock. The relatively small error correction estimate from model 2, -0.17, indicates a slow rate of return to equilibrium from changes in the independent variables. Specifically, disequilibrium is corrected at a rate of approximately 17% per quarter, leaving 83% of a disequilibrating shock present after two quarters, 69% present after three quarters, and 57% present

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illegal use of offices (1986:1); St. Germain, Wright (1987:2); Wright, Boner (1987:4); Biaggi/Wedtech (1988:3); Garcia/Wedtech (1988:4); Coehlo (1989:2); initial Keating Five revelation (1989:4); Dan Rostenkowski indictment (1994:2, 1994:3); Bob Packwood sex scandal (1994:4, 1995:3); Bud Shuster investigation for illegal lobbyist contributions (1997:4, 1998:2); and the Jay Kim campaign finance scandal (1998:3). Source: Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht (1997) and *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*.

[10]See Stimson (1994) and the appendix in Stimson (1999) for details regarding changes in the WCALC algorithm relevant to points one, two, and three.

TABLE 1   Partial Adjustment Models of Congressional Approval

Predictor	DGW Validation[†]	Rescaled Approval[†]	Approval 1974 to 2000[‡]	Party Conflict Model[‡]
Congressional approval$_{t-1}$	0.80*	0.80*	0.84*	0.81*
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Economic expectations$_t$	0.07*	0.02*	0.02*	0.02*
	(0.03)	(0.1)	(0.01)	(0.01)
NYT coverage$_t$	0.21*	0.06*	0.06*	0.06*
	(0.07)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Koreagate$_t$	−1.29	−0.52	−0.03	−0.17
	(1.09)	(0.48)	(0.41)	(0.26)
House banking scandal$_t$	−4.69*	−1.63*	−1.64*	−1.81*
	(1.70)	(0.74)	(0.62)	(0.33)
Presidential vetoes$_t$	0.24*	0.03	0.03	0.01
	(0.09)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.02)
Veto overrides$_t$	−0.99*	−0.10	−0.05	0.01
	(0.55)	(0.24)	(0.21)	(0.19)
Cloture/debt ceiling votes$_t$	−0.17	−0.11*	−0.07*	−0.06*
	(0.12)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Major bills$_t$	−0.44	−0.07	−0.03	−0.06
	(0.28)	(0.12)	(0.10)	(0.08)
Partisan conflict$_t$	–	–	–	−0.05*
	–	–	–	(0.01)
Intercept	9.38*	6.30*	4.62*	5.99*
	(3.33)	(2.18)	(1.65)	(1.59)
LM Test χ^2	4.41	4.24	4.24	7.48
p-value	0.92	0.93	0.93	0.75
$\bar{R}^2$	0.87	0.83	0.85	0.87
RMSE	2.97	1.30	1.19	1.15
N	79	79	108	108

[†]Data are quarterly from 1974 to 1993. [‡]Data are quarterly from 1974 to 2000. *p < .05 (one-tailed test). Standard errors are in parentheses. These models are estimated with all covariates described in the text. All excluded estimates are statistically indistinguishable from zero.

TABLE 2   Error Correction Models of Change in Congressional Approval

Predictor	Model 1	(s.e.)	Model 2	(s.e.)
Congressional approval$_{t-1}$	−0.12*	(0.05)	−0.17*	(0.05)
Δ Presidential approval	0.04*	(0.02)	0.04*	(0.02)
Presidential approval$_{t-1}$	−0.01	(0.01)	−0.01	(0.01)
Δ Economic expectations	0.02	(0.02)	−0.01	(0.02)
Economic expectations$_{t-1}$	0.02*	(0.00)	0.02*	(0.00)
Δ *NYT* coverage	0.06*	(0.01)	0.06*	(0.01)
NYT coverage$_{t-1}$	0.06*	(0.02)	0.06*	(0.02)
Δ Partisan conflict	–	–	−0.05*	(0.01)
Partisan conflict$_{t-1}$	–	–	−0.07*	(0.01)
Major bills$_t$	0.01	(0.07)	−0.02	(0.07)
House banking scandal$_t$	−1.08*	(0.38)	−1.32*	(0.32)
Cloture/debt ceiling votes$_t$	−0.05	(0.03)	−0.04	(0.03)
Presidential vetoes$_t$	0.01	(0.02)	−0.01	(0.02)
Veto overrides$_t$	0.02	(0.16)	0.08	(0.16)
Intercept	3.35*	(1.82)	5.37*	(1.74)
LM Test χ^2	8.04		13.24	
p-value	0.88		0.65	
Mean VIF	1.66		1.77	
$\bar{R}^2$	0.20		0.26	
RMSE	1.16		1.13	

Note: Data are quarterly from 1974 to 2000, $N = 107$. *p < .05 (one-tailed test). Standard errors are in parentheses. These models are estimated with all covariates described in the text. All excluded estimates are statistically indistinguishable from zero. Chow, Hansen's, and CUSUM tests are all consistent with parameter stability. Lag length is determined by a series of F-tests, AIC, BIC, and t-tests of individual parameter restrictions.

after a year. The rate of error correction is relatively slow, suggesting that current evaluations of Congress are dependent on past evaluations of Congress, but not permanently. Instead, the influence of past evaluations on current evaluations decays slowly over time as indicated by the direct estimate of the memory (d) of the series.

The ECM provides direct tests of both the long- and short-run effects of partisan conflict on approval. The expectation is that increases in partisan conflict will correlate with both short- and long-run decreases in congressional approval. Therefore, the coefficient estimates on the contemporary changes in partisan conflict and the lagged levels of partisan conflict should both be negative and statistically significant. The results from

model 2 show that the coefficients for the contemporaneous changes and lagged levels of partisan conflict are statistically significant and negative. Consistent with expectations, partisan conflict within Congress decreases public esteem for the institution. A single party vote results in an immediate −0.05 point change in approval. At time $t + 1$, that same partisan vote will have another −0.07 point change in approval with a total 0.41 (s.e. = 0.12) decrease in approval across future time periods.[11] These results show that the consequences of partisan conflict extend

[11]The total effect or long-run multiplier is calculated by taking the lagged levels coefficient estimate and dividing by the rate of error correction $\frac{\beta_1}{\alpha_1}$. The standard error is calculated via the formula for the variance of a ratio (De Boef and Keele 2008, 192).

beyond the halls of Congress and into how citizens evaluate the institution. Finally, with the exception of the error correction coefficient, none of the other coefficient estimates change from model 1 in Table 2 when partisan conflict is added to the model.

Presidential approval maintains a contemporaneous relationship with congressional approval. When presidential approval changes, congressional approval also changes in the same direction. A percentage increase (decrease) in presidential approval results in an immediate 0.04 point increase (decrease) in congressional approval. Notice that the relationship between presidential and congressional approval occurs entirely in the same period. The lag estimate of presidential approval on changes in public evaluations of Congress is statistically indistinguishable from zero.

The contemporaneous effect of economic expectations and congressional approval is statistically insignificant. It is the lagged levels of economic expectations that are significant and positive. A percentage change in consumer perceptions about the economy results in a lagged 0.02 change in approval, suggesting it also is a useful cue for the public to use to evaluate the legislative branch. However, when the public views the economy as changing, it takes a quarter for the public to readjust its view of Congress. Although Congress has little formal responsibility over the economy, the public does evaluate the institution partly on economic concerns. The estimates also show that more positive stories about Congress in the *New York Times* correlate with more positive assessments of Congress among the public. The relationship occurs both in the short term and in the long run with equivalent coefficient estimates on both the changes and lagged levels of media coverage. Finally, the estimates on the dummy variable for the House banking scandal shows an expected 1.08 point decrease in congressional approval. The House banking scandal is the only scandal variable to obtain statistical significance.

Contrary to previous research (Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997), the passage of major legislation does not have a statistically significant relationship with approval in any of the models. This result is consistent with more recent models of congressional approval (e.g., Rudolph 2002) suggesting theories about the relationship between approval and legislative policymaking might need a revision. It might not just be the productivity of legislation that shapes evaluations of Congress, but the congruence between policy and public preferences or the degree Congress fails to meet the public's policy demands (Binder 2003).

An important assumption of the single-equation ECM is weakly exogenous regressors. A variable x_t is said to be weakly exogenous when the marginal distribution of x_t contains no information about the conditional distribution of the dependent variable y_t given x_t (Engle, Hendry, and Richard 1983). In the congressional approval models, changes in presidential approval, media coverage, economic perceptions, and partisan conflict are specified as having a contemporaneous and lagged influence on evaluations of Congress. This is only appropriate if these variables are weakly exogenous to changes in public sentiment toward Congress. Monte Carlo evidence shows that under conditions similar to those in this research, violation of this assumption results in biased estimates of the long-run effects, although the bias in the short-run and error correction estimates appears minimal (De Boef 2000). A more substantial problem in violating the assumption is a large reduction in the coverage rates of the confidence intervals of the estimates.

As previously mentioned, economic perceptions have been purged of their political determinants and presidential approval is purged of its economic determinants prior to estimating the models of congressional approval. This should limit the most likely sources of endogeneity within the model. Testing for weak exogeneity in an ECM is equivalent to testing for zero correlation of the error terms from the conditional and marginal models (Charemza and Deadman 1997, 264–66). First, the innovations from univariate ARIMA models of each of the possible endogenous variables show little correlation with the residuals from the ECM of congressional approval shown in Table 2 (model 2): partisan conflict (-0.05), economic expectations (-9.25 e-16), presidential approval (-2.31 e-16), and *New York Times* coverage (5.20 e-17). All of these correlations are consistent with weak exogeneity. Next, the congressional approval model is reestimated with the inclusion of the innovations from the ARIMA models as covariates. Using individual t-tests, the innovations from this model are all statistically insignificant, which is also consistent with an assumption of weak exogeneity.[12]

[12]Several other tests were implemented. A Granger causality test from a VARX model is consistent with an assumption of strong exogeneity although there is some indication that congressional approval Granger causes presidential approval (p < .10; the specification is from Table 2, model 2 with two lags of each possible exogenous regressor determined by Lagrange Multiplier tests). A Sim's causality test is also consistent with strong exogeneity for the joint model estimates $F(22, 41) = 1.36$, p = 0.19. Neither strong exogeneity nor Granger causality, however, is required for unbiased and consistent estimation of the ECM with OLS (Charemza and Deadman 1997; Durr 1992; Engle, Hendry, and Richard 1983). Finally, a Hansen (1991) test (Joint coefficient test statistic = 2.28, p = 1.00) and the CUSUM test of the congressional approval model show no signs of parameter instability, which may be consistent with—but not proof of—the weak exogeneity assumption (Granato 1991; Granato and Smith 1994).

FIGURE 2   Estimated Lag Distributions (Absolute Change) in Approval from a Standard Deviation Change
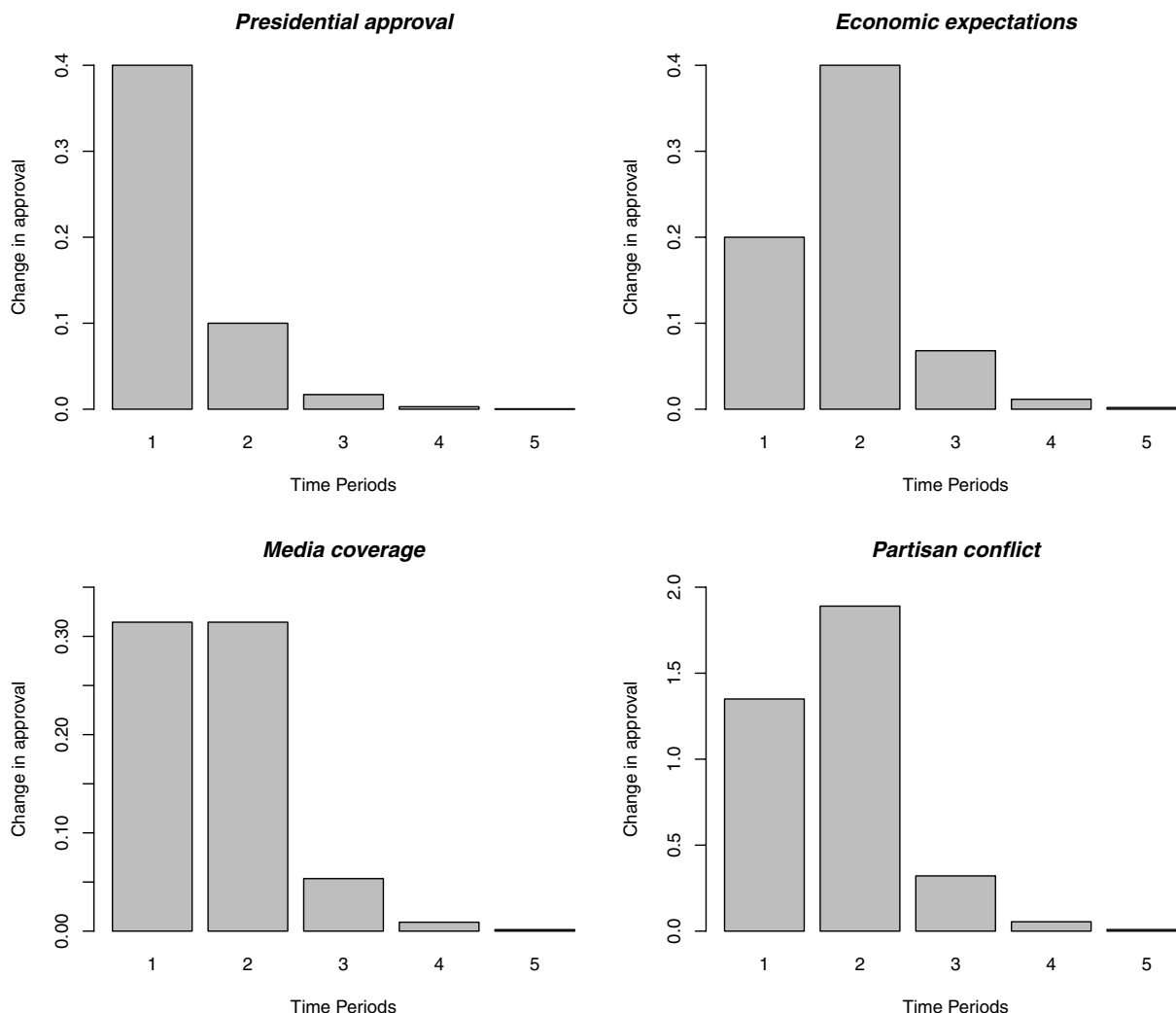
Substantive Results

To assess the substantive implications of partisan conflict on approval, the mean number of party votes each quarter for the period under study ($\mu = 51$, s.d. $= 27$) is multiplied by the coefficient estimates of partisan conflict. Thus, in the average quarter, partisan conflict results in a 2.55 point decline in approval (51×-0.05). However, approval will continue to be out of equilibrium after the initial increase in partisan conflict. Approval will move an additional -3.57 points—almost an entire standard deviation of the approval series—during the next quarter and continue to adjust back to equilibrium at a rate dictated by the error correction coefficient. These results suggest that partisan conflict has a substantial and lasting impression on congressional approval.

Another way to show the substantive implications of these results is to illustrate the movement of congressional approval when each predictor moves a standard deviation away from its mean. This provides a general sense of the relative magnitude of the effects of presidential approval, economic expectations, media coverage, and partisan conflict on public evaluations of Congress. Figure 2 shows the estimated lag distributions from a standard deviation change in each predictor to the absolute change in public evaluations of Congress.

The first barplot shows what happens to approval after a standard deviation (10 point) change in presidential approval. Congressional approval changes immediately by 0.40 points in the first quarter, 0.10 points in the second quarter, and so on, until it changes a total of 0.58 points. Most of the effect of presidential approval occurs during

the same quarter as the initial change, fading away relatively quickly afterward, suggesting that presidential approval contributes more to the short-term fluctuations of congressional approval than its long-term equilibrium movement. A standard deviation (20 point) change in public expectations about the economy will have a contemporaneous 0.20 change in public evaluations toward Congress, but most of the change (0.40) will actually occur in the next quarter. A standard deviation change (5.24) in the valence (positive or negative coverage) of *New York Times* stories about Congress results in a 0.30 contemporaneous change in approval and is followed by another 0.30 change in the next quarter. Finally, a standard deviation change in partisan conflict, that is 27 partisan votes within a quarter, will correlate with an immediate 1.35 point change in public evaluations toward Congress and another 1.89 point change in the next time period. Thus, it appears that partisan conflict exhibits a substantial influence on the dynamics of congressional approval relative to other factors such as presidential approval, media coverage of Congress, and public perceptions of the economy.

Conclusion

A great deal of scholarship is being written describing the nature and origins of partisan conflict in contemporary American politics. Recently, some scholars have concluded that partisan behavior at the elite level has few consequences on the attitudes of the mass public (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005). However, this latter scholarship is confined to the issue positions among Americans rather than how they evaluate their leaders and institutions. Examining the latter leads to a different conclusion regarding the effects of partisan conflict on public opinion. The results here show a link between partisan conflict among members of Congress, and public evaluations of the institution across time and are consistent with the reward-punishment model of how the public evaluates government institutions. It appears citizens are able to make informed choices when forming their evaluations of Congress, relying on both external factors such as the economy and the behavior of members of Congress. These results also substantiate the importance of studying the changing partisan dynamics in contemporary American politics.

The findings also have implications for representative governance. Key argues that "political parties are the basic institutions for the translation of mass preferences into public policy" (1967, 432). It appears the mass public fails

to view political parties in a similar positive light. Public esteem for Congress diminishes when political parties unite in Congress to represent their partisan constituencies. The findings here support the notion that the public views political parties as a means to dilute the independence of otherwise good-willed legislators and respond to partisan behavior by reducing their support for the legislative branch. Thus, the public may not want "responsible" political parties and instead desire, at least in appearance, more bipartisan cooperation and policymaking. The latter may not occur among all subsections of the public, since the findings here examine the relationship in the aggregate, but the relationship is substantial enough to shape the dynamics of congressional approval. Given the great deal of heterogeneity at the individual level, future research may uncover more complex relationships among subaggregates of the public.

These findings also have important implications for campaigns and elections. There is growing empirical evidence that congressional approval has electoral consequences. Low levels of approval have been shown to decrease the reelection rate of incumbents (Born 1990) and members of the majority party (McDermott and Jones 2003; Patterson and Monson 1999). Diminishing levels of public approval also attract higher-quality candidates to campaign against incumbent legislators, also contributing to changes in the composition of Congress (Fowler and McClure 1990). Research also shows individual citizens rely on congressional approval when voting in congressional elections (Hibbing and Tiritilli 2000; Jones and McDermott 2004). Finally, members of Congress admit their approval ratings matter (Lipinski 2004) and are more likely to retire when public esteem for the institution is low (Wolak 2007). Thus, members who desire reelection may want to moderate their partisan behavior as elections near—something empirical research suggests occurs within Congress (Grossback, Peterson, and Stimson 2006).

Yet, it remains to be seen the extent that negative public evaluations of Congress lead to substantial institutional changes. Thomas Jefferson writes in the Declaration of Independence that when a government fails to meet its ends, "it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it." Although public discontent toward Congress is usually lower than the other branches of government, the low levels of approval rarely lead to public support to abolish or substantially alter the institutional structure of the legislative branch. Instead, the public seems to support marginal changes that regulate the behavior of members of Congress, such as campaign finance reform and limitations on accepting favors from organized interests. Whether support for these

policies is directly connected to approval is yet to be seen.

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