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The Impact of Public Approval of Congress on
Midterm Congressional Election Outcomes

By

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Chapter One

Public Disapproval of Congress and Congressional Elections:

An Overview

Over the past half-century, the United States Congress has become less revered by the American people. The Constitution names Congress as the first branch of government. The framers instituted Congress in Article One of the Constitution to symbolize the importance of the rule of law of the people. Its members were to be chosen members of the public, rather than royalty or nobility, to give the branch a sense of democratic legitimacy. However, during the past fifty years, public opinion of the first branch of government has waned.

The reasons for this diminished respect are complex and numerous. In general terms, the public disapproves of Congress due to low regard for the members of Congress, the legislative process, policy output of the body, dislike of Congress as an institution, and external forces such as the media and the economy which cause people to have a poor opinion of Congress. Since the 1960s, public approval of Congress has remained low, in large part due to the reasons enumerated above.

Congressional elections in general follow predictable patterns. All congressional elections are affected by the incumbency advantage, issues pertaining to campaign finance, gerrymandering and its affect on party identification, national trends, the state of the economy, and the media. Subsequent chapters to this thesis will answer the following question: are congressional elections influenced by levels of public approval of Congress? An examination of a possible relationship between public opinion of Congress and congressional elections will be furthered by case studies of the 1994, 1998, 2002, and 2010 midterm elections. However, the

goal of this chapter is to analyze the appropriate literature pertaining to public opinion of Congress and congressional elections in general.

Why the Public Dislikes Congress

The fact that the public largely disapproves of Congress has been a political reality for the past fifty years. Levels of trust in government as a whole have declined since the 1960s, and have remained below 50% since 1974 (Orren 1997). The lowest level of public trust in government since 1958 was approximately 20% in 1994 (Orren 1997). Disapproval of Congress stems from a dislike of the members of Congress, the legislative process, policy concerns, dislike of Congress as an institution, and external forces such as the media and the economy. Later chapters of this thesis will determine if low approval of Congress affects election outcomes.

Members of Congress

The first reason people dislike Congress is dissatisfaction with its members. Perquisites of being a congressperson, isolation from constituents, and personal scandals lower public approval of Congress and its members. One fear of the public is that the members of Congress abuse their position for self-benefit, instead of helping their constituents. “[The people] believe members of Congress could be using their power for the good of the country, but instead use it for their own self-interested advantage” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 62). Traditional thought dictates that representatives should actively advocate for their constituents in an effort to solve their problems. However, the public fears that representatives are enjoying the perquisites

of office, such as free dry cleaning, meals, transportation, and Washington social gatherings, while disregarding the issues facing everyday people. The people in general approve of their own representatives, but believe that other representatives abuse the privileges associated with holding office (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1999, 2003, 2007; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Part of the reason the public fears congressional isolation from the people is the result of personal and political scandals.

Political scandals cause a loss of faith in the members of Congress (Orren 1997). Since the 1980s, a rise in publicized personal scandals has caused the public to lose respect for members of Congress. A recent election cycle that was riddled with political scandals was the 2006 midterm elections (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2007). These scandals plagued the Republican party during that year. In November of 2005, California Republican Representative Randy “Duke” Cunningham “pleaded guilty to bribery charges and resigned from the House” (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007, 275). In April of 2006, “Majority Leader Tom DeLay of Texas announced that he was resigning from the House” (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007, 275). This came “three days after his former deputy chief of staff had pleaded guilty to conspiracy and corruption charges in an investigation of influence buying by Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff” (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007, 275). Bob Ney of Ohio pled guilty to corruption charges, and resigned from the House of Representatives after initially declining to seek reelection (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007). Perhaps the most damaging scandal was that of Representative Mark Foley of Florida, who “sent sexually suggestive electronic messages to teenage boys who had worked as House pages” (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007, 275). Although Foley resigned immediately, news broke out that House Republican leaders knew about the scandal, causing those leaders to lose influence themselves. Such scandals lead the

public to question politicians' ethics, and presume a "lack of honesty and integrity" among representatives (Orren 1997, 92). Some argue that the subsequent uneasiness felt by the people is part of "a collapse of trust in human nature" itself (Orren 1997, 85). Regardless, the belief of the public that representatives lack moral decency leads to a lower approval rating of the legislators.

Seemingly extravagant perquisites of being a representative or Senator also prompt disapproval of Congress. The public believes that the perquisites of being a congressperson are simply too luxurious. Special perks are perceived by the public as wasteful and symbolic of the belief that the representatives are not hard-working (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). In addition, the public believes that the perquisites of office cause representatives to lose touch with reality. One focus-group participant on the subject raised this fear. "Free haircuts. Free lunch. They've got a free dining room. They get their free dry cleaning. I mean they just lose all sense of reality" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 67). The public's belief that their representatives are out of touch and have lost a connection with their constituents damages the public's perception of the members of Congress. Surprisingly, the people in certain circumstances actually underestimate the perquisites of office. In these cases the perquisites of office are well-hidden by Congress. Thus, if they were told the truth, that the perquisites of some officeholders are greater than widely believed, the people's anger could be exacerbated (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995).

As a complement to the special perquisites of office, the public is wary of the "Washington System," which is believed to corrupt congressional members. Although the people believe that their own representatives adequately respond to their grievances, as a whole they believe Congress is out of touch. "[The Washington System] seduces members away from

fulfilling their responsibility to the public” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 62). The extravagant Washington D.C. scene is one in which power and prestige, along with privileges enjoyed by the representatives, dominate the daily lives of members of Congress. The perceived effect of the Washington System is that representatives are so caught up in the glory and special privileges of being a congressperson that issues pertinent to the people are ignored. The image of a representative sipping champagne in Washington D.C. while citizens are losing their jobs is one which angers the people, especially during uneasy economic times. If the people are suffering economically, yet representatives are enjoying the perks of office and fielding large salaries, the public will become spiteful. This spite can result in popular demands for administrative change. It should be noted that this demand for change rarely includes an individual’s own congressperson. Individuals overwhelmingly approve of their own representatives (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1999, 2003, 2007; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Perhaps John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse (1995, 62) summarize the public’s feelings about the Washington System best:

Members of Congress are quickly corrupted by special interests and lobbyists, by the office perquisites they receive, and by the people who surround and indulge them...The various congressional scandals that [receive attention in] the media simply provide proof that the public judgment is correct.

Although public opinion of Congress is negatively affected by the public perception of the members of the body, it should not be assumed that the people want to take on a larger role in the democratic process. As Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002, 9) note, the people “desire to give decision-making to someone else...as long as [those representatives] are barred from taking advantage of their position for personal gain.” Charges of politicians using their office for personal gain are the driving force behind the public’s disapproval of Congress pertaining to the representatives themselves. However, at most, the people want the power to check their

representatives, but never to have to use that power (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

Unfortunately, representatives simply don't measure up to the public's expectations of them, by personal and policy-output standards (Orren 1997; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). The people want their representatives to conduct themselves in such a manner as to benefit the public, not the representatives themselves. The failure to do so, combined with policies the public finds suspect, can result in a lower approval rating of representatives (Orren 1997; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

Another reason why representatives don't satisfy the public's expectations is that the people demand that their representatives find and apply solutions to problems. However, a reality of being a politician is that one must often vote along predetermined party lines for political survival. Adherence to a party's general platform is necessary for securing future support in elections. This support comes in the form of official party endorsements and monetary donations. After all, the main goal of a politician is to be re-elected, and without the support of one of the major parties, the chances of election or re-election are diminished. However, voting along party lines is not associated with active problem-solving (Sinclair 2000). The solutions to everyday problems and big issues are often not found in general party platforms, to which representatives are forced to adhere. Luckily for the constituents, the "recorded vote" allows a voter to see exactly how an incumbent voted, or if she/he abstained from a vote (Arnold 2004, 92). Thus, while campaigning for re-election, an incumbent must answer to his/her actions or lack thereof on specific issues. However, although this check is in place, the fact remains that voting along party lines is seen by the public as a sign of poor congressional performance (Sinclair 2000). An additional obstacle for representatives is that solutions to everyday problems are not always clear-cut. The public believes solutions are available, but often this is not the

case. This unwarranted assumption forces representatives into a position where they are set-up to fail (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Complex issues, for which legislation will affect different segments of the population in different ways, make legislating difficult. One policy that may benefit one group could likewise harm another. However, individual constituents are self-serving and demand solutions to their own problems. The gap between individuals' demands and feasible political realities damages public opinion of Congress. Decisions in Congress are often based on compromise, which signals to the public that for many issues complete solutions are nonexistent (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Yet, "the people prefer politics to include minimal debate and compromise, regardless of the groups doing the debating or compromising" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, 136).

The Legislative Process

The second set of reasons why the public largely disapproves of Congress is the legislative process. Approval may be generic to the system, that is, "[it may] respond to the generalized satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the state of things" (Stimson 2004, 154). However, the fact remains that the people dislike the workings of Congress itself, irrespective of policy output, the general state of the economy, or as Stimson (2004, 154) characterized, the "state of things." The public finds the legislative process inherent to Congress quite irksome. "In October 1992...Senator Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.) held the floor for fifteen hours and fifteen minutes to protest the removal from an urban-aid tax bill of a provision he said could have restored jobs at a New York typewriter plant" (Sinclair 2000, 66). This is an example of the filibuster, which is seen as time-wasting, frustrating, and inefficient. Filibusters are used to halt

legislative action, usually by the minority party in protest of the majority-party agenda. “A Republican filibuster killed Bill Clinton’s stimulus package; Republicans used the filibuster or a threat thereof to extract concessions on a number of bills, two being voter registration legislation...and the national service program” (Sinclair 2000, 67). Filibusters and cloture votes, which block debate from even occurring, are a signal to the public of an unwillingness of representatives to work across party lines. In addition, filibusters and cloture votes are the epitome of inefficiency. The use of cloture votes has steadily increased since the 1990s (Sinclair 2000). Through the use of these legal blockades, a minority party can cause gridlock in Congress (Sinclair 2000). This intentional gridlock by the minority party is seen by the public as inefficient and wasteful, and contributes to overall public disapproval.

The use of Unanimous Consent Agreements by the Senate also has the potential to irritate the public, due to an arbitrariness of the rules regarding their use (Evans and Oleszek 2000). A UCA is a “device used to establish procedural ground rules for the consideration of legislation and to impose time limits on debate and amendments” (Evans and Oleszek 2000, 81). UCAs are generally agreed upon by both parties before debate on a specific issue begins. UCAs can institutionally limit the scope of the legislative amendment process or time allotted for discussion on important issues. Thus, issues are not always thoroughly debated, which is worrisome for those members of the public directly affected by the legislation and for representatives who desire more comprehensive debate. This issue has been debated for decades. “In July 1952 Senator Wayne Morse (R-Oreg.) took to the floor to complain that ‘under the modern, postwar practice, unanimous-consent agreements are made to close debate on almost every major bill’” (Evans and Oleszek 2000, 90). UCAs, which are tools for Congress intended to expedite the

legislative process, institutionally limit the ability of representatives to debate the nuances of legislation.

The public in general is irritated by the legislative process inherent to Congress. Hibbing and Theiss Morse (2002) argue that public dissatisfaction with Congress is due only partly, but not mainly, to legislative output from the body. Thus, legislative process is a salient issue when determining public approval of Congress. Legislating in Congress is a cumbersome process (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). “Congress embodies practically everything Americans dislike about politics” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 60). The public is wary of drawn-out and complicated legislative actions on behalf of Congress, because the people believe that practical solutions are available to solve the most complex of issues. The fact that the American people believe that the public generally agrees “on overall societal goals” fuels their feeling that drawn-out debate by representatives, on many issues, is unnecessary (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, 156). Yet, fundamental differences in opinion among members of the public are a political reality, as evidenced by heated debate surrounding issues such as abortion and stem-cell research, among others. Solutions are not always clear to, or quickly enacted by, members of Congress, which by definition represent diverse interests from across the country. The resultant public nature of debate within Congress leads to visible disagreement on the issues, which the public finds distasteful. “The American people want democratic procedures, but they do not want to see them in action” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 19). Rather, the people want members of Congress to conduct themselves in a process that Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995, 2002) label stealth democracy.

Another part of the legislative process of Congress which leads to public disapproval is the prevalence and persuasiveness of special interests. The public believes that the government

is run by “a few big interests” and that “quite a few people running government are crooked” (Orren, 1997, 82). This corruption, the people believe, stems from the willingness of representatives to take favors and bribes from powerful special interests (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Bribes are supposedly offered to ensure that Congress legislates in such a way as to benefit those special interests. As a result, the legitimacy of the democratic system is challenged. If those individuals and groups with the most money to give representatives bribes garner special treatment from those representatives, the prospect of equal representation and equality in voting is threatened. The basic tenet that “all men are created equal” is thus challenged when special interests receive more congressional support than the average citizen. The people want their interests to be equally weighed with those of the special interests, yet the power of special interests can have the effect of precluding this standard of equality. Traditional advocacy is replaced with bribery and corruption. Regardless, the public at large is susceptible to legislation aimed at appeasing special interests. “People’s most intense desire for the political process is that it not take advantage of them by allowing certain entities such as special interests and elected officials to reap personal gains at the expense of ordinary people” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, 130). This desire, when not fulfilled, leads to a lower approval rating of Congress by the people. The belief that representatives are reaping personal rewards at the expense of the needs of the public leads to a lack of confidence in the institution of Congress.

The perception of institutional effectiveness can benefit the party in control of Congress. Coming off of their historic victory in the 1994 midterm elections and the “Republican Revolution,” which will be evaluated in detail in later chapters of this thesis, it was very important for the Republican party to maintain control of the House of Representatives in the 1996 election (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1999). In 1994, the public supported Republican

Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America" (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1999, 207). Within this "contract" was a ten-point plan, which was finished within the promised first one hundred days of the 104th Congress. The fact that Congress completed its proposal was a sign of effective action. After the first one hundred days, Congress moved to reform the budget and appropriations process, wasting no time and signaling to the public a willingness to act (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1999). This ability to legislate effectively gained the support of the public, which disapproves of the normally cumbersome legislative process (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 2002). Public support of Congress due to an effective legislative process, however, is rare. In a recent Gallup poll conducted by Lydia Saad (2010a), Congress ranked last in confidence in institutions. Fifty percent responded with "very little" or "no" confidence in Congress as an institution. The lowest response rate for all of the institutions studied, which included the presidency, the Supreme Court, and the military among others, was Congress, which is troubling for that which is constitutionally the most powerful branch of government. Measured confidence in Congress decreased by six percentage points from 2009 to 2010 (Saad 2010a). This poll was conducted from July 8 to July 11 of 2010, but is indicative of long-term trends of confidence in Congress.

Policy Concerns of the Public

Another basis for why the people dislike Congress is its policy output. In part, the people evaluate Congress based on their personal perception of how they think representatives are doing their jobs, and the degree of sufficient policy representation (Jones and McDermott 2009). This last criterion identified by Jones and McDermott (2009) manifests itself in a specific manner, in

that policies are not debated in the abstract, but in light of the actual effects on the people.

Although the legislative process is important in people's evaluations of Congress, policy output also affects public opinion (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Jones and McDermott 2009).

Indeed, "at a minimum, one can safely conclude that policy compatibility with Congress, variously measured, significantly and consistently correlates with an individual's approval of Congress" (Jones and McDermott 2009, 21). "When Americans register their disapproval with the performance of Congress, they do so in part because they are unhappy with the policy actions of Congress as run by the majority party" (Jones and McDermott 2009, 13). In short, if a person agrees on an ideological level with the legislation Congress passes, he or she will support further measures of Congress, while those who disagree will be more suspicious of any future legislation. These feelings are a product of which of the two major parties holds the majority.

More broadly, "public confidence in institutions is subject to short-term political events," including scandals, but certainly the passage of landmark legislation (Gronke, Hicks and Cook 2010, 209; see also Stimson 2004). Legislation passed by Congress is usually in line with the party ideology of the majority party. The party that has a majority of votes is better able to pass legislation than the minority party. Thus, those members of the public who share the majority party's overall ideology are more likely to approve of that specific Congress' legislation. Jones and McDermott (2009) evaluated public opinion of the Republican controlled 108th Congress, taking into account respondents' ideology. They found that "only 34 percent of liberals [approved] of Congress, 57 percent of moderates [approved], and 66 percent of conservatives [approved], as one would expect in reaction to a Republican-controlled Congress with a relatively conservative policy agenda" (Jones and McDermott 2009, 26).

Traditional literature assumed that the public is largely unaware of the policy decisions enacted by Congress. However, Jones and McDermott (2009) show that the public has greater knowledge of policy issues than has traditionally been presumed. They characterize public knowledge as fleeting, but evident. Citizens may not remember the specifics of policies or legislation enacted, but they do use policy information to “update their general impressions of Congress” (Jones and McDermott 2009, 7). This is what is known as “online processing” (Jones and McDermott 2009, 44). Online processing allows the people to form quick opinions about a particular policy or action of Congress to alter their general perception of the representatives and the institution. Often, the people thereafter forget the particular details of congressional action, but their initial opinion serves to update their overall perception of Congress. Another means for forming opinions on policy matters is knowledge derived from social networks. Schools, places of worship, peers and other networks enable people to internalize different opinions on varied topics.

Indeed, the public can distinguish between clear-cut ideologies. Parties are becoming increasingly polarized on an ideological level (Jones and McDermott 2009; Mansbridge 1997). Ideologically, “both parties...continue to be influenced by their extremes” (Mansbridge 1997, 177). As a result, citizens’ knowledge of which party controls Congress informs them of the general political leaning of a particular Congress. They can therefore indirectly form opinions about the institution (Jones and McDermott 2009). The people have sufficient knowledge of which party is in power, and it is not too much to ask of citizens to know, in general terms, the altering major-party ideologies. Thus, incorrect answers to specific factual questions about policy, traditionally thought to indicate public unawareness, do not “automatically indicate political ignorance” (Jones and McDermott 2009, 38).

External Forces Affecting the Public's Opinion of Congress

The media is an external force which can negatively affect the public's approval of Congress. As Clawson and Oxley (2008, 91) note, "the media influence what citizens think about, what issues citizens bring to bear when evaluating candidates and officeholders, and what considerations shape their thinking on political issues." The media transmits stories to the public, and often emphasizes negative aspects of individual members of Congress and the legislative process. "Coverage of the democratic legislative process—which includes extensive conflict, compromise, debate, cooperation, partisanship, and procedural wrangling—is frequent in congressional news" (Morris and Clawson 2005, 298). The press is "decidedly commercial and adversarial in its orientation" (Patterson 2000, 241). As Patterson (2000, 241) describes, "disputes [between and among politicians] are prominently displayed" by the media. News stories often emphasize "legislative maneuvering," such as the use of filibusters (Morris and Clawson 2005, 308). The news media also transmits stories on specific issues in addition to their coverage of legislative processes. Indeed, "issue-based stories, rather than scandals and personality driven articles, are prominent mainstays of congressional coverage" (Morris and Clawson 2005, 298). Seventy-nine percent of the stories analyzed by Morris and Clawson (2005) were issue-based stories. Yet, ninety-one percent of the stories they analyzed mentioned an aspect of the legislative process. Morris and Clawson (2005, 306) note that "conflict between political parties and between Congress and the executive branch were frequently involved in congressional news stories." As noted previously, conflict among representatives is cause for public disapproval of Congress (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 2002). Yet, "multiple conflicts in a single story were more common than multiple compromises" (Morris and Clawson 2005, 309). The coverage of conflict by the media can foster public disapproval of Congress.

The other main external force perpetually endangering public opinion of Congress is the state of the economy. The effect of the economy on election outcomes will be analyzed in a future chapter to this thesis. The public believes that Congress is economically inefficient and wasteful. The decline in trust of government and Congress more specifically is a result of a lower quality of life and economic health of the public (Gronke, Hicks and Cook 2010). High levels of unemployment and periods of economic stagnation and struggle cause the public to blame Congress (Gronke, Hicks and Cook 2010). This blame, in part, is attributable to the public's perception of a luxurious lifestyle and perquisites afforded to representatives. The public may have stronger disapproval of economic inefficiency in a tougher economic environment. Thus, the external factor of the state of the economy, in concert with inefficiency on behalf of Congress, can increase public disapproval of the legislative branch. Economic waste is perhaps best symbolized by the seemingly perpetual government deficit, save a few years of surplus. The people believe that, in light of the perquisites of congressional office, it is no wonder why Congress cannot balance the national budget. "Does the public cut Congress any slack? The answer is basically no" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 71). One counterargument to the citizens' anger of the failure of Congress to balance its budget is that the public has unreasonable expectations. Citizens are unreasonable in that they have enormous expectations about what they want government to provide, yet don't want to pay more in taxes to make those services economically feasible (Orren 1997). Indeed, "governments...must propose unpopular costs in order to produce popular benefits" (Mansbridge 1997, 134).

Congressional Election Outcomes

The multiple dimensions of public evaluations of Congress are necessary for predicting election outcomes (Jones and McDermott 2009). Later chapters of this thesis will evaluate the extent to which the reasons people dislike Congress, including dislike of the members of Congress, the legislative process, policy-output, and external forces such as the state of the economy and the media, affect the results of elections. Congressional election outcomes are affected by a multitude of variables. In any given election year, issues specific to that year will shape outcomes. However, in general, six main variables—incumbency, campaign finance, gerrymandering and its effect on party identification, national trends, the media, and the state of the economy—affect congressional elections. It is essential to keep in mind these six variables in analyzing congressional elections, which will be the focus of subsequent chapters of this thesis.

The Incumbency Advantage

The single greatest factor affecting election outcomes in the presence of an incumbent, or a candidate who currently holds office and is seeking reelection (Jacobson 1980, 1987; Krasno 1994). In 2004, 98% of Democratic incumbents and 99% of Republican incumbents in the House of Representatives won re-election (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2007). In 2006, only 0.5% of incumbents in both the House of Representatives and the Senate were defeated in the primaries (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007). This accounts for two out of 404 incumbents running in the House and zero out of 28 incumbents running in the Senate (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007). In the modern era, “from 1974 through 2006, only 4 percent of House

incumbents who sought reelection were defeated on election day” (Jones and McDermott 2009, 114). From 1974 to 2004, incumbent Senators were reelected, on average, 84 % of the time (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2007). Both rates are impressive, but one may ask, why is the reelection rate for incumbents even greater in the House of Representatives than in the Senate? Indeed, “incumbent senators are far more likely than incumbent representatives to be defeated” in reelection (Krasno 1994, 1). One theory is that Senators enjoy more press coverage than representatives. Although this is beneficial during economically prosperous times and when the public is generally content, this exposure results in Senators being held more accountable during tough times (Krasno 1994). In addition, challengers of Senate incumbents are generally better candidates than challengers of House incumbents. “In every respect...the survey data portray Senate challengers as more formidable candidates than their counterparts who run for the House” (Krasno 1994, 99). In short, challengers for the Senate enjoy greater popularity and are more qualified than challengers for the House.

Incumbency is the most important variable in determining who wins congressional elections in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Some argue that the incumbency advantage undermines public accountability, in that “once they become incumbents—representatives and senators are unbeatable, free to ignore the will of the people” (Krasno 1994, 5). According to this argument, the advantages afforded incumbents outweigh the ability of the people to simply vote them out of office (Krasno 1994). Others argue that incumbency gives voters cues as to which candidate is more qualified, the incumbent or the challenger. “Incumbency has replaced party as a positive cue for voters” (Jacobson 1980, 26). In the past, voters would choose candidates in large part based on party affiliation. However, given the rise of the popularity of incumbents after World War Two, incumbency seems to be a positive

qualification for candidates. Incumbents can, in effect, campaign year round, using their accomplishments in office as evidence of their success (Jacobson 1987). This campaigning often takes the form of advertising in the media. Incumbents advertise more often and more effectively than do challengers (West 2010).

Incumbents are also at an advantage due to the “highly decentralized committee and subcommittee structure [which] allows members to specialize in legislative areas where they can best serve local interests” (Jacobson 1987, 35). Due to the institutional organization of Congress, representatives can focus their energies on serving interests unique to their own constituents. For example, a representative from Harlem, New York, would not bother becoming an active member of a committee debating agricultural practices, because his/her constituents are not directly affected by the accompanying legislation. However, that same representative would find it helpful to become part of a subcommittee addressing urban issues, a position that could be used to garner support from voters in that particular district. Incumbency and working as a member of Congress allows representatives to focus on issues pertinent to their specific constituents. “What counts is the member’s ability to deliver services, which increases with his tenure in Washington and his consequent seniority and familiarity with the administrative apparatus” (Jacobson 1987, 41). This experience coupled with greater popularity and name-recognition among constituents gives incumbents an almost insurmountable advantage in elections. The power of incumbency is unmatched as a variable for determining election outcomes. The number of close elections involving incumbents decreased from the 1960s through the 1980s (Jacobson 1987). However, this trend reversed in the 1990s, as “many incumbents were subjected to vigorous competition for the first time in many years” (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007, 229). Yet, “now, in the twenty-first century, competition is again at a

low point, largely due to the deliberate crafting of safe districts for both parties' incumbents" (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007, 229). Overall, the lack of serious competition further exemplifies the far-reaching influence of incumbency.

In addition, incumbency is an advantage because of greater donations to campaigns from interest groups than those enjoyed by challengers. Interest groups are more likely to donate to incumbents than to their challengers (Jacobson 1987). This is a function of the desire to influence legislative outcomes on behalf of special interests. Interest groups are more likely to fund incumbents' campaigns than those of challengers because the mid-ninety percent reelection rate of incumbents ensures that interest groups will be more likely to garner influence with those in office. Even though special interests are an important source of campaign funds, "generally, about two-thirds of all campaign money comes from private individuals" (Jacobson 1980, 56). Therefore, candidate recognition is an important variable in raising campaign funds. Incumbents, since they are more widely known than challengers, in general enjoy more donations from private individuals than do challengers. Incumbency also offers candidates pre-election exposure through their previous tenure in office. Therefore, incumbents, all else being equal, do not have to spend as much money as do challengers to receive recognition as a viable candidate (Jacobson 1987). Gary C. Jacobson (1987) expresses the difficulty of challenging an incumbent member of Congress. Challengers are only successful when both that challenger is "vigorous" and the incumbent is unpopular (Jacobson 1987, 134). In addition, "winning challengers are much better known by voters" than losing challengers (Jacobson 1987, 134). Thus, a successful challenge to an incumbent most probably necessitates a forceful, popular, and well-known challenger along with an unpopular incumbent.

Campaign Finance

Trends in campaign finance are also determining factors in election outcomes. Tip O'Neill, former Speaker of the House once stated "there are four parts to any campaign. The candidate, the issues of the candidate, the campaign organization, and the money to run the campaign with. Without money you can forget the other three" (Jacobson 1980, 33). Money is not a sufficient, but is most definitely a necessary condition, for successful campaigns (Jacobson 1980). "Challengers raise the least amount of money and find it difficult to win, no matter what they spend" (Jacobson 1987, 50). From 1972 to 1984, any challenger who spent less than \$100,000 was not competitive in their election. Challengers were only competitive, defined as having at least a one in four chance of winning, once they spent \$250,000 (Jacobson 1987). In 2004, challengers spent an average of \$269,000, while incumbents spent on average slightly greater than \$1 million, which "yielded an increased incumbent-to-challenger ratio of 3.85 to 1" (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007, 230). Thus, an extremely large amount of money is needed to run a viable campaign, and even more is needed if one is running as a challenger to a seated incumbent.

A recent controversy on the topic of campaign spending was a January 2010 Supreme Court ruling that the government could not ban campaign donations from corporations.¹ In *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, a 5 to 4 split decision deemed that banning corporate spending on political campaigns was a violation of the First Amendment right of free speech. This ruling represents an ideological shift in that the court previously ruled that corporations, in large part, do not enjoy the same political rights as individuals. This ruling overruled the precedent set in the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, more commonly

¹ Adam Liptak, "Justices, 5-4, Reject Corporate Spending Limit," *The New York Times*. 21 Jan. 2010.

known as the McCain-Feingold Act, which limited campaign donations and advertisements supporting a party or candidate from corporations leading up to an election.² The McCain-Feingold Act had previously banned ‘soft money,’ or “unlimited donations from corporations, unions, and wealthy individuals supposedly for party-building activities and not directly linked to the election of individual candidates” (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2007, 231). The ruling in *Citizens United* has the potential for major implications regarding campaign finance, as there may be a large influx of corporate donations to specific candidates, who it is feared would thereafter legislate in such a way as to benefit those corporations. A ninety-page dissent argues that speech by a corporation should not be conflated with human speech.³ The *Citizens United* case exemplifies the potential importance of campaign finance for congressional elections.

Gerrymandering

Gerrymandering and the redrawing of congressional district lines also impact elections. Gerrymandering is a cause for political upheaval, debate, and public condemnation by the party negatively affected by the redrawing of district lines. Every ten years after the census, congressional district boundaries are re-drawn to account for shifts in the population. Thus, a state can gain or lose seats in the House of Representatives, the number of which has been fixed at 435 representatives since the 1910 census (Jacobson 1987). Gerrymandering is the process by which congressional districts are redrawn, often by the majority party in state legislatures, to “maximize the number of seats the party can win, given the number and distribution of its usual voters” (Jacobson 1987, 12). As Jacobson (1987, 12) explains:

² Adam Liptak, “Justices, 5-4, Reject Corporate Spending Limit,” *The New York Times*. 21 Jan. 2010.

³ Adam Liptak, “Justices, 5-4, Reject Corporate Spending Limit,” *The New York Times*. 21 Jan. 2010.

The idea is to concentrate the opposing party's voters in a small number of districts which that party can win by large margins, thus 'wasting' many of its votes, and to create as many districts as possible where their own party has a secure, though not overwhelming, majority.

One example of gerrymandering occurred in 1980 by the Republican party in Indiana (Jacobson 1987, 13). Republicans, with the explicit intent to hurt the Democrats in future elections, "produced one new district that contained the homes of three Democratic incumbents. Two Democrats had their districts chopped up and redistributed to four new districts" (Jacobson 1987, 13). Redistricting also served to the Republicans' advantage in the 1996 elections, as more Republican state governors were elected in 1994. In addition, "new district lines were drawn for Florida, Louisiana, and Texas before the November 1996 elections" following a series of Supreme Court rulings declaring the redrawing of district lines in these states after the 1990 census unconstitutional (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1999, 205). Republican governors were able to institute and maintain majority Latino districts (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1999). Maintenance of these "majority minority districts," a classic example of gerrymandering, allowed the Republican party to undermine the traditional Democratic stronghold of the Latino vote (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1999, 204). In effect, redistricting in this example, "disrupted [the] established patterns of political support" of the Democratic party (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1999, 204).

The effectiveness of gerrymandering is a result of the existence of voting blocks. Homogeneous groups tend to support particular political parties as a cohesive unit. For example, low-income voters tend to vote for the Democratic party (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1999). Redistricting in this fashion sparked controversy, culminating in the 1995 Supreme Court ruling in *Miller v. Johnson*, which "declared Georgia's redistricting plan unconstitutional because it had responded to the Justice Department's pressure to create three majority-minority districts without

constitutional justification” (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1999, 205). Previously, in 1993, the Supreme Court in *Shaw v. Reno* “expressed concern about ‘bizarrely-shaped’ districts that had been drawn for racial purposes...[and thus] could violate the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment” (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1999, 205).

Party identification, which is reinforced on the community level by gerrymandering, affects election outcomes, particularly in the House of Representatives. Gerrymandering yields stronger individual ties to one political party. Those within a district redrawn to be a safe haven for one of the major political parties will more strongly identify with that party as the district will most likely be comprised of like-minded voters. “Voters who [are] willing to label themselves Democrats or Republicans [identify] with the party in the same way they might identify with a region or an ethnic or religious group: ‘I’m a Texan, a Baptist, and a Democrat’” (Jacobson 1987, 104). The process of gerrymandering groups together like-minded citizens who vote for the same party, reinforcing their party affiliation over time. For these voters, party affiliation is a “shorthand” way to simplify voting decisions (Jacobson 1987, 105). For example, much of the electorate in 2000 voted along partisan lines in the congressional elections as well as the presidential election. Indeed, “party identification has a significant effect on voters’ decisions” (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2003, 243). Thus the effect of gerrymandering to reinforce party identification has the potential to impact congressional election outcomes.

National Trends

Congressional elections are “highly sensitive to national issues” (Jacobson 1987, 139). One dominating national trend in Congress in the 1990s was the Republican majority from 1994

to 2006. The 1994 election was known as the Republican Revolution. Newly elected House Speaker Newt Gingrich and the Republican “Contract with America” gained the support of the American public. The result of the emergence of Speaker Gingrich and the conservative tide was that the Republicans were able to take away the “backbone” of the Democrats in 1996, thus reassuring their control of Congress (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1999, 203). Although the Republican Revolution was considered historic, divisions in the Republican party developed, causing House Speaker Newt Gingrich to resign in 1998. Thus began the fall of the Republican party after the highest of highs (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1999). A case study of the 1994 midterms will be studying in greater detail in future chapters of this thesis. President Clinton, noting the divisions within the Republican party developing by 1996, championed a more moderate agenda as the Republican Revolution became too extreme for the public (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1999). The Republicans’ triumph was short-lived, as evidenced by the party’s inability to concretize their hold on Congress in 1996 and 1998. The national trend benefitting the Republican party continued in 2002. The maintenance of control of Congress by the Republicans in 2002 was more a factor of high approval ratings for the way in which the Bush administration handled the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. The focus on national security hurt the Democratic party in 2002, as it was perceived to be soft on terrorism. This was a strong issue-based concern of the public. National security was indeed the biggest issue in the 2002 election cycle. The public thought that the Republican party had a clearer plan for the country pertaining to national security (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2003).

The 2004 election cycle symbolizes the importance of individuals’ political preferences on voting, as Jones and McDermott (2009) hypothesize. In 2004, the liberal-conservative scale impacted the congressional election. That year, voters seemed to be particularly “affected by

their perceptions of where candidates [stood] on the issues” (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007, 255). Indeed, 92% of voters who self-identified as a “Strong Democrat” voted for the Democratic party candidate for the House of Representatives (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007, 257). This comparatively high percentage, the highest such percentage since 1966 save the 2002 election, indicates a strong level of party identification among voters (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007).

In 2006, the Democrats regained control of both chambers of Congress, for the first time since 1994. “The number of seats that shifted between the two parties in 2006 was [the largest] in both chambers...in over a decade” (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007, 265). Part of the reason for this shift was a greater number of competitive Republican districts in 2006 than in prior elections. Republican districts were more competitive overall than Democratic districts (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007). The Republicans’ loss of the majority was also in part due to the fragile state of the economy in 2006. Beginning in 2006, the economy resurfaced as an issue of paramount importance. The Republican party couldn’t emphasize its work on the economy because of its fluctuation throughout the election year (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007). Rather, the Republicans continued to emphasize national security through the media, led by the vocal White House political strategist Karl Rove. However, support for the Iraqi conflict had waned by the 2006 midterm elections. A shift in national focus from national security to the economy had occurred. One Gallup poll in October of 2006 “indicated that 55 percent of respondents said that the situation in Iraq was ‘out of control’” (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007, 273). Thus, the Republican strategy for winning the election and their collective policy agenda failed to garner support from the electorate due to a shift in what the public deemed most important, and therefore a shift in national trends. Another poll by Gallup noted that “only 23

percent of respondents approved of the job Congress was doing, which was the same level of approval the public registered just before the GOP takeover of Congress in 1994” (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007, 275). An additional issue that hurt the Republican party was the lack of a unified message on immigration (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007). Without a coherent party platform, the public viewed the Republicans as unable to solve this growing problem. A Pew Research Poll in October of 2006 indicated that “41 percent of respondents believed that this Congress had accomplished less than usual, whereas only 6 percent thought they had done more” (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2007, 275). Thus, the polling figures demonstrate that the Republican Revolution of 1994 was officially over in 2006. The national trend of Republican party dominance of Congress had subsided. The 2006 election cycle also began three straight elections in which the party holding control of Congress or the presidency changed. In 2006, the Democrats gained a majority in both houses of Congress for the first time in twelve years. In 2008, Democratic President Barack Obama assumed office after Republican President George W. Bush. In 2010, the Republican party regained control of the House of Representatives. This pattern of elections for which the majority party was replaced is an ongoing and developing trend in national elections that may well impact future congressional elections.

The Media and Congressional Elections

The media strongly influences voters’ perceptions of the issues, of candidates, and thus of elections in general. The media transmits evaluations of members of Congress (Arnold 2004). Incumbents’ prospects for re-election are often linked to what the voters are exposed to in the media, including personal scandals (Arnold 2004). According to Douglas Arnold (2004), the

media transmits four useful types of information to the public, which uses this information to form opinions about members of Congress, the institution itself, and policy output. First, the media informs the public of the positions taken by members of Congress on various issues. More popular and the best-known legislators, as well as those who publicly sponsor legislation, will receive greater media coverage than an unknown congressperson. Second, the media conveys how individual legislators have been innovative in the legislative process. The people, who can identify many problems, would rather a representative be innovative than be consumed by party-politics as usual. Innovation, as long as it is not destructive to the whole nor offends the people, is welcomed by the public as evidence of active problem solving. Thirdly, the media offers information relating to how other officials, media personalities, and citizens evaluate an individual legislator. People often form opinions about a representative based on their popularity among other groups. Politicians considered widely popular and conveyed as such in the media are more likely to receive high praise from the public than an unknown representative or one portrayed in a negative fashion. Finally, the media informs citizens of who is running for political office and describes their personal characteristics and political platforms. This information is useful throughout election season, during which the people obtain a great majority of their information about candidates from the media. Rarely do the people gather such knowledge from personal interactions with a candidate or word of mouth. The broadcasting of these four categories of information allows the people to acquire knowledge about a legislator that they otherwise would not gather were it not for the media.

Candidates running for office use the media to portray themselves and opponents in the best way as to ensure election (Arnold 2004). The adversarial system, whereby candidates highlight their own successes and emphasize their opponents' shortcomings may yield the truth

about a candidate's performance. This information, once publicized, allows the people to make informed decisions while voting. Throughout campaigns candidates utilize political advertisements as a means of mobilizing the voting population. One downside to politicians' use of the media in this regard is that the people disapprove of negative campaigning, which has become a staple of contemporary elections (Orren 1997). The advent of television and the Internet has inundated the public with negative messages about candidates, which the public finds distasteful. The media can explicitly question a legislator or candidate on how they intend to vote on an upcoming and important issue (Arnold 2004). This information is targeted and useful for those issues that dominate the news cycle, and thus the psyche of the people. Rich coverage of the issues yields higher awareness among the electorate (Arnold 2004). The role of the media has evolved over time. Since the 1950s, the media has changed from "narrator to actor" (Orren 1997, 96). Before the mid-twentieth century, the press simply relayed information to the public. However, the press has enhanced its role to include debate of the issues, grading representatives, and adding journalists' own opinions about the issues. As a result, public knowledge of the most important contemporary issues during the election season and of the candidates running in an election has widened.

State of the Economy

The general state of the economy is a continual variable in congressional elections. Midterm elections are in part a referendum on the "performance of the president and his handling of the economy" (Jacobson 1980, 28). Negative associations with the president in general, and more specifically with his handling of the economy, yield higher turnout among those who will

vote against the president's party (Jacobson 1980). A salient issue in the 2002 election cycle was the economy, which was perceived to be performing poorly. The poor economy was blamed on the presidency of George W. Bush and the Republican-controlled Congress (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2003). Some posit that the Republicans were able to maintain a majority in Congress in 2002 because of a public relations campaign by Bush showing that he cared about the economy (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2003). Given the fact that Congress controls much of the economy through a federal budget, the people expect Congress to safeguard against tough economic times. This is true even for economic episodes outside of the direct control of Congress. According to a Gallup poll from February of 2009, 64% of respondents favor government "aid to homeowners who are in danger of losing their homes to foreclosure" (Newport 2009). In addition, 83% of respondents favored government funding for programs to create new jobs (Newport 2009). This expectation of governmental aid for downtrodden people during tough economic times could be linked to the memory of federal action under President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Great Depression. Although individuals differ in what they deem to be the appropriate level of governmental safeguarding of the economy, most agree that the government has some duty in "providing economic security" (Yeric and Todd 1983, 67). In a related matter, public trust in government is in part dependent upon the economic health of the nation, demonstrating the power of the economy over the mindset of the people (Clawson and Oxley 2008).

Conclusion

Public opinion of Congress has been consistently poor over the past fifty years. Historically, Congress was revered as the most powerful legislature in the world. However, over the last half-century, public opinion of Congress has fallen to dismal levels. Our legislative branch, created by the first article of the Constitution, has fallen from the most powerful branch of government, to arguably the least. Public disapproval of Congress stems from disapproval of the representatives in Congress, poor regard for the legislative process, popular disagreement over policy output, dislike of Congress as an institution, and external forces such as the media and the economy which damage the prestige of Congress and its members.

Congressional elections in general have followed consistent trends over the past few decades. Incumbency is the single most important factor in determining election outcomes, and incumbents' reelection rate in both houses of Congress is within the mid-ninety percent range. Campaign finance also affects election outcomes, as elections cost hundreds of thousands if not millions of dollars to fund, and there are ongoing disputes about whom and what organizations can make donations. Redrawing district lines and gerrymandering directly impact congressional elections. Gerrymandering has the distinctive effect of intensifying party identification, and both have implications on congressional elections. National trends dominate congressional elections, such as which issues are paramount in importance at a given time and which of the two major parties have more influence. The media influences congressional elections in that its "narrator" role serves to inform the public of, and persuade the people about, the most important issues (Orren 1997). Finally, the state of the economy affects every election cycle, as a poor economy will serve as a catalyst for a negative reaction to the majority party.

Later chapters of this thesis will determine if there is a connection between public approval of Congress and congressional elections. The goal of this chapter was to review the existing literature on public disapproval of Congress and congressional elections in more general terms. Chapter Two will highlight my own hypotheses about a link between public approval of Congress and congressional election outcomes. Subsequent chapters will focus on testing the hypotheses formed in Chapter Two, initially through appropriate data analysis. In addition, a closer look at the elections of 1994, 1998, 2002, and 2010 will provide the opportunity to test my theories about the role of public approval of Congress in midterm election outcomes. I chose to focus on midterm elections because those years in which the President of the United States is elected, the public is preoccupied with the candidates and campaign for the role of chief executive. Midterm elections allow for the highlighting of Congress away from the importance of a presidential election. It is my hope that a link between public approval of Congress and congressional election outcomes is uncovered to broaden the scope of knowledge in the area.

Chapter Two

The Link Between Public Disapproval of Congress and Congressional Elections

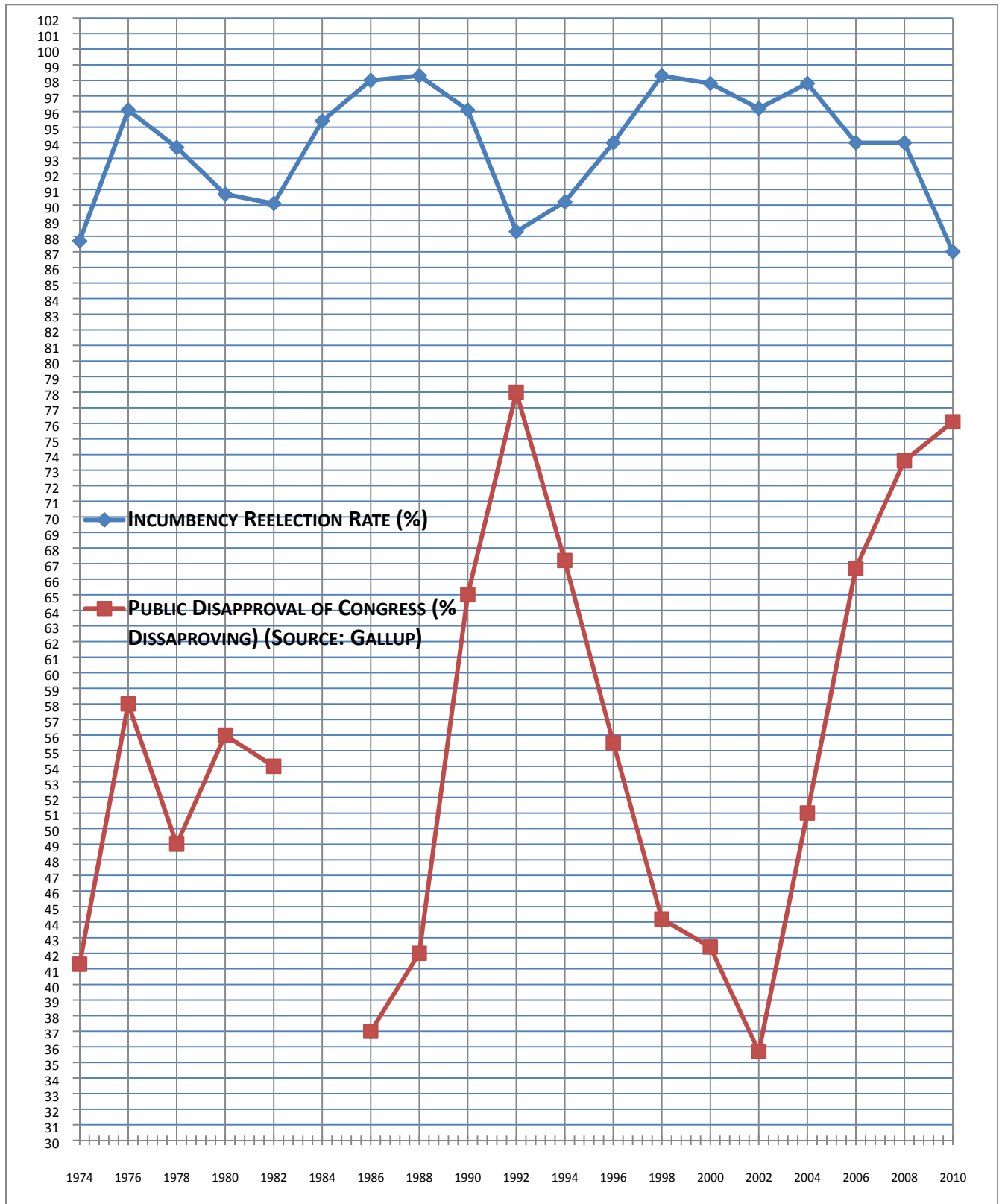
An essential step in exploring whether or not public disapproval of Congress impacts congressional elections is to determine under what circumstances such a relationship would manifest itself. The key question of this chapter is when is it especially likely that public disapproval of Congress impacts congressional elections? The high incumbency reelection rate and the ever-low approval rating of Congress as an institution might lead one to conclude that public disapproval of Congress in fact does not negatively impact congressional elections. One would expect low approval ratings to steadily and negatively impact the reelection of incumbents. Yet, in both houses, incumbents enjoy a mid-ninety percent reelection rate. Thus, it is not simply public disapproval of Congress that leads to majority party turnover. Rather, specific issues to each election cycle which inform public opinion have the potential to cause incumbents to lose their seats. In this chapter, I posit that specific temporary and pressing issues have the power to inform a person's choice of candidate and mobilize the voting population to a higher degree than if these issues weren't urgent. The low public approval of Congress is thus combined with these pressing issues to negatively impact incumbents' chances of reelection. I believe that the overlap between the factors leading to low public approval of Congress and the variables impacting all congressional elections, analyzed in Chapter One, is essential to explaining the negative impact of specific issues pertinent to an election cycle on reelection rates. During those cycles when these issues serve as a particularly strong mobilizing force, public disapproval of Congress has a greater potential to significantly impact congressional

elections. For example, the economy, when particularly potent in its influence over voters, has the potential to disrupt the incumbency advantage. In addition, midterm elections can serve as a grading of the president. If the people believe the president isn't living up to their expectations, they are more likely to oust the president's party during the midterm congressional elections. Low approval regarding these issues has a greater effect on reelection rates than does static disapproval. Other, more pressing issues, such as a newfound disenchantment with "big government" leading to the emergence of the "Republican Revolution" in 1994 and national security in 2002, have the potential to considerably impact voters' decisions, and may outweigh issues not deemed as urgent. As is the case in 2002, these external issues may not have a negative impact if they do not intensify low approval ratings of Congress. Yet, exploring these issues can give insight into when it is particularly likely that public disapproval of Congress impacts congressional elections. During this study, I will focus on midterm election cycles in that I believe the preeminence of a presidential election during applicable years trumps all other issues. Thus, determining which factors influence congressional elections specifically is best done by analyzing midterm elections, for which the distraction of a concurrent presidential election is a non-issue.

Analyzing Figure 2.1, reproduced below, comparing incumbent reelection rates and levels of public disapproval of Congress for each congressional election year confirms that a relationship between the two variables exists. I obtained the percentage for public disapproval of Congress from the Gallup organization, which has tracked the rates of approval and disapproval of Congress. The question posed to respondents is, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Congress is handling its job" (Gallup 2011a)? Respondents answer either "Approve," "Disapprove," or "No Opinion." This data from Gallup dates from 1974 and omits the 1984

election year, but regardless provides ample evidence of a relationship. In the graph, I included only reelection rates of the House of Representatives in that I believe election outcomes in the House are more likely to be impacted by public opinion than in the Senate. In addition, I excluded losses in primaries, as I believe the incumbency advantage is most pronounced when the incumbent runs in the general election. For those years when public disapproval was relatively low, incumbent reelection rates were higher than in those years when public disapproval of Congress was relatively high. In other words, when the public was more likely to approve of government, incumbents were more successful in their reelection bids. The pronounced opposite dip between the two variables from 1992 to 2010 is the most convincing evidence for a relationship between public disapproval of Congress and incumbent reelection rates. A negative correlation between disapproval of Congress and incumbent reelection rates, which is visible in the following graph, demonstrates that public approval levels of Congress most probably in some manner impact elections. In the remainder of this chapter, I put forth a few hypotheses to further explore this relationship.

Figure 2.1



The Economy

The economy influences both public disapproval of Congress and congressional elections in general. There is perhaps no greater factor contributing to public disapproval of Congress than a poor economy. I hypothesize that an especially weak economy will more likely upset the status quo than a stable economy. I hold that members of the public will be more likely to vote against the majority party in Congress if it is perceived that their personal economic prospects are worsening. The public holds Congress responsible for many of the problems facing the nation, including the economy. If the people believe that a majority in Congress is not working toward, or is ineffective in fixing the economy, I argue that they will be more likely to oust that majority party from Congress. Incumbent reelection rates would thus decline under these circumstances. I believe that if the people deem their economic standing to be threatened, they will be more likely to oust sitting members of Congress than if they feel their economic position is protected. It is widely believed that the economy was one of the major reasons the Democratic party lost control of the House of Representatives in 2010. Unemployment “declined from 8.8% at the end of November – down from 9.2% in mid-November, and 9.4 % at the end of October” (Jacobe 2010a). Although unemployment, a key statistic the public is aware of when determining the overall economic health of the country, is beginning to fall, the 9.4% rate leading up to the November 2nd election most probably hurt the Democratic party, which held the majority in both houses of Congress. Unemployment has the potential to impact all sectors of the economy, and I argue that the people become worried with the onset of widespread unemployment. In 2010, rising unemployment rates, combined with the recent banking crisis and the mortgage crisis, negatively impacted the public’s confidence in the economy (Jacobe 2010b). I hypothesize that the 18% approval rating of Congress measured by Gallup in

September of 2010 was due in part to a poor economy (Saad 2010b). Thus, the low approval rating of Congress, a staple of modern politics, became relevant in the majority party turnover in 2010 partly due to the worsening health of the overall economy. I posit that disapproval of Congress became pertinent to the election outcome in 2010 once the state of the economy became an urgent issue.

The Emergence of Pressing Issues

Although the economy may be the most important issue to have the potential to upset the incumbency advantage, specific contemporary issues have the ability to trump the economy. In 2002, the country was again suffering from a poor economy, and according to my hypothesis above, the majority party, the Republican party in 2002, should have been vulnerable to seat losses. Frank Newport, in an article for Gallup in 2002, reported that “consumer confidence and optimism about the national economy [were] at low levels” (Newport 2002). However, I believe that one particular issue, national security, superseded the state of the economy as the most important issue to the public. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, one of the nation’s top concerns was national security. The Republican party, despite a fluctuating economy, held on to the majority due to a more consistent platform for dealing with national security (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2003). The poor economy was largely blamed on President Bush and the Republican-controlled Congress. Yet, the Republicans’ clearer plan for national security, in comparison with that of the Democratic party, saved the Republican majority in the 2002 elections. This clear plan combined with high regard for the way in which

President Bush responded to the terrorist attacks enabled the Republican party to sidestep the potentially damaging effects of a poor economy on maintaining a majority.

For the election cycles since the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, national security has been a steadily declining issue in terms of the importance placed on it by the public. Immediately after 9/11, 46% of Americans polled named terrorism at the nation's top issue (Newport 2010). In the nine years since, terrorism and national security has become less urgent an issue from the perspective of the American public in general. In January of 2010, Gallup reported that "1% of Americans [mentioned] terrorism as the most important problem facing the country" (Newport 2010). I posit that national security was the most important issue for the 2002 election cycle, but has since become less of an issue, especially in comparison with the economy, which the public has found increasingly important (Newport 2010). In the most recent election cycle, national security ranked behind jobs, the budget deficit, healthcare, and taxes as issues the public deemed crucial for Congress to address in 2011, according to a Reuters poll (PollingReport.com 2010) conducted in October and November of 2010. These four broad issues are all economic in nature or have economic implications, in the case of healthcare. Thus, it seems that national security, an issue of great importance to the public in the immediate years after September 11th, has become relatively less urgent an issue to the American public. To be sure, national security is still an important and multi-faceted issue, considering problems in Iraq, Afghanistan, North Korea, Iran, Israel and the Palestinian territories, and the Wikileaks scandals. Yet, for the American public, the economy has emerged as the most pressing issue. The reemergence of the economy as an issue of paramount importance illustrates the relative significance of national security for the 2002 election, regardless of its short shelf-life as the most important issue.

The impact of urgent issues is also evidenced, I argue, by the outcome of the 1994 midterm elections. John R. Hibbing and Eric Tiritilli (2000) argue that in 1994 public disapproval of Congress indeed did impact the election. The “Republican Revolution” that resulted was the product of the emergence of Newt Gingrich and the “Contract with America.” Although not one specific issue, leading up to the 1994 elections, a conservative tide swept the United States under the leadership of future House Speaker Gingrich. Neither the economy nor negative evaluations of the president can explain the change in majority party control since “economic conditions were quite strong and the Democratic president’s popularity was not all that low” (Hibbing and Tiritilli 2000, 117). Yet, I posit that a newly emerging dissatisfaction with “big government,” as well as the Democratic party and its perceived more liberal agenda became the most pressing issue for the 1994 election. This issue mobilized the public and supplemented low approval ratings of Congress to lead to a majority party turnover.

Knowledge of the political parties was particularly high among members of the public in 1994, and party identification is central to this example. During that year, three out of four citizens, when asked, were able to state that the Democratic party held the majority in Congress (Hibbing and Tiritilli 2000, 112). Hibbing and Tiritilli (2000, 115) argue that the case of 1994 was special because of the “public’s willingness to attribute responsibility for the problems of Congress to the majority party, and, then, to vote on the basis of that attribution.” The midterm vote of 1994 is an example of how an emerging issue can become paramount in an election and affect its outcome. I hypothesize that the performance of the Democratic party, in 1994, became a more pressing issue than in other years. The issue was spurred by the emergence of a grassroots movement backed by a popular Republican platform and leadership core, and thus negatively impacted Democratic incumbents’ chances for reelection. Newt Gingrich was the key

to the majority party turnover as he successfully characterized the performance of the Democratic party as a pressing issue. Gingrich led the “enthusiastically aggressive minority party leadership” in denouncing the majority party to the extent of making it an urgent issue from a popular perspective. To achieve this end, Gingrich emphasized process concerns of the public, namely that Congress under Democratic leadership was too large and cumbersome. This echoes the argument put forth by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995, 2002), that process concerns on behalf of the public can lead to lower approval ratings of Congress. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995, 2002) argue that the public disapproves of the way in which Congress goes about its business. Inefficiency, fear of corruption, compromise, and the slow grind that is modern congressional politics draw the ire of the public. Thus, process concerns, or public disapproval of the workings of Congress, negatively impacts public opinion of and confidence in the institution (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 2002). In 1994, Gingrich seized upon this source of public disapproval to mobilize the public against the Democratic majority.

Midterm Elections as a Referendum on the President

Midterm elections often serve as a referendum on the performance, or perceived performance by the public, of the president. I argue that a particularly polarizing officeholder of the presidency has the potential to negatively impact public opinion, as well as the reelection rates of incumbents if they are of the same political party as the president. If the president’s party holds a majority in Congress, that majority would thus be threatened. For example, I believe that the majority party turnover in 2010 was due in part to, along with a poor economy, negative reactions to the Obama administration. President Obama successfully mobilized voters

during his campaign, but the practical means of doing business in Washington, characterized by compromise, debate, and strong partisanship, do not match Obama's campaign rhetoric. The president's rhetoric was characterized by bipartisanship, compromise, transparency, and change. President Obama ran on such a platform, but has been unable to satisfy the desire of the public to change politics as usual. For example, President Obama pledged to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, yet has to this date failed to do so due to political obstacles. Many of his supporters disfavored the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but President Obama has increased the number of troops in combat in Afghanistan and remains loyal to the cause in Iraq. In addition, he has continued the Bush-era practice of drone attacks in Afghanistan and has currently forged a compromise with Republican leadership to extend the Bush-era tax cuts. Part of the reason I hold that Obama has failed to meet expectations is that the media inflated public expectations of the president. Media coverage was so positive of the energizing young Senator during the campaign that the public most probably expected too much of President Obama.

A referendum on the job performance of the president, which has implications for midterm elections, can also have positive effects on incumbent reelection. I believe that the performance of the economy impacts public evaluations of those in power, including the president. I argue that a poor economy will lead to negative evaluations, and a healthy economy to positive evaluations, of officeholders. In 1998, the economy was performing "remarkably well" which bolstered the approval ratings of Democratic President Bill Clinton as well as the Republican majority in Congress (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1999, 254). Were it not for a prosperous economy, I hypothesize that the 1998 election cycle outcomes would have been worse for the Democratic party as backlash to President Clinton. Although Clinton was not up for reelection in 1998, the prosperous economy helped to downplay the Monica Lewinsky

scandal. Many believed that “the president’s sex scandal would finally damage his standing with the public, and that the negative reaction would spill over to his party in the congressional elections” (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1999, 254). However, that negative reaction never manifested itself. I believe that the maintenance of Clinton’s high approval rating was due in part to a successful economy. Thus, the public’s assessment of the Clinton presidency was more impacted by the healthy economy than by the personal scandal. The Democratic party was therefore not the victim of a negative assessment of President Clinton in 1998, which was surprisingly nonexistent. Rather, the Democratic party was saved further seat losses by a thriving economy.

Conclusion

The hypotheses laid out above can be tested by examining election outcomes and the general political environment during the election cycles of 2010, 1998, 2002, and 1994. “Two factors that previous analyses of congressional elections have generally shown to have an important impact on outcomes are the economy and evaluations of the president” (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1999, 255). I posit that low approval ratings of Congress along with the economy and evaluations of the president, as they become pressing issues, can negatively impact incumbents’ reelection rates. For example, I believe that the most pressing issue in 2010 was the economy, which, combined with a low approval rating of President Obama and low approval ratings of Congress, led to the loss of a majority in the House of Representatives for the Democratic party. The power of the economy is also evidenced by the positive impact of the economy on the approval ratings of President Bill Clinton in 1998, which protected the

Democratic minority in Congress from potential backlash from the president's personal scandals. Public disapproval of Congress is primed to have an effect on elections when the economy and the performance of the president are at the forefront of public awareness. Additional factors can outweigh the economy and the president's performance in their impact on congressional elections. For example, national security, I believe, was the most important issue in the 2002 elections, as evidenced by the maintenance of the Republican majority in spite of an unsettling economy. In addition, the emerging issue of the size and direction of the government, popularized by Newt Gingrich and the "Contract with America" in 1994, negatively impacted Democratic incumbents' prospects for reelection. Although not a single issue, the "Contract with America," in concert with low approval of Congress, mobilized the people to oust the majority party. In all, the economy, the performance of the president, and newly emerging pressing issues all have the potential to combine with low approval ratings of Congress to impact congressional elections. A closer look at these issues, utilizing the cases of 2010, 2002, 1998, and 1994, can serve to test these hypotheses. Doing so will test whether these three issues have the potential to combine with and/or augment low approval ratings of Congress to disrupt the incumbency advantage and precipitate majority party turnover.

Chapter Three

The Economy, Public Approval of Congress, and Incumbent Reelection Rates

In this chapter, I focus on what I believe to be the effect of the economy on both public approval of Congress and the incumbent reelection rate. As previously noted, the incumbent rate for members of Congress has remained in the mid-ninety percent range since World War Two, with few exceptions (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1999, 2003, 2007). I hypothesize that a poorly performing economy has the potential to negatively impact incumbent reelection rates by combining with the already low public approval rating of Congress to yield a level of dissatisfaction unacceptable to the public. As a result, the people will be more likely to oust incumbents than if the economy was performing well or was not perceived to be an urgent issue. The effect of the economy on incumbent reelection rates is most pronounced when the people perceive the economy to be among the most pressing of issues.

Two types of data can be utilized to test the potential effect of the economy on voters' willingness to oust sitting incumbents. Unemployment is one of the most well known statistics that the public uses in forming opinions about the state of the economy. I hypothesize that high unemployment will correspond with low incumbent reelection rates. The other statistic to test the viability of the economy as an indicator of public voting patterns is consumer sentiment. I posit that low levels of consumer sentiment will precipitate high turnover and relatively low incumbent reelection rates. Graphing these data alongside incumbent reelection rates will illustrate a correlation, if one exists. In addition, graphing public approval levels of Congress will show if the state of the economy and the people's perception of Congress are correlated.

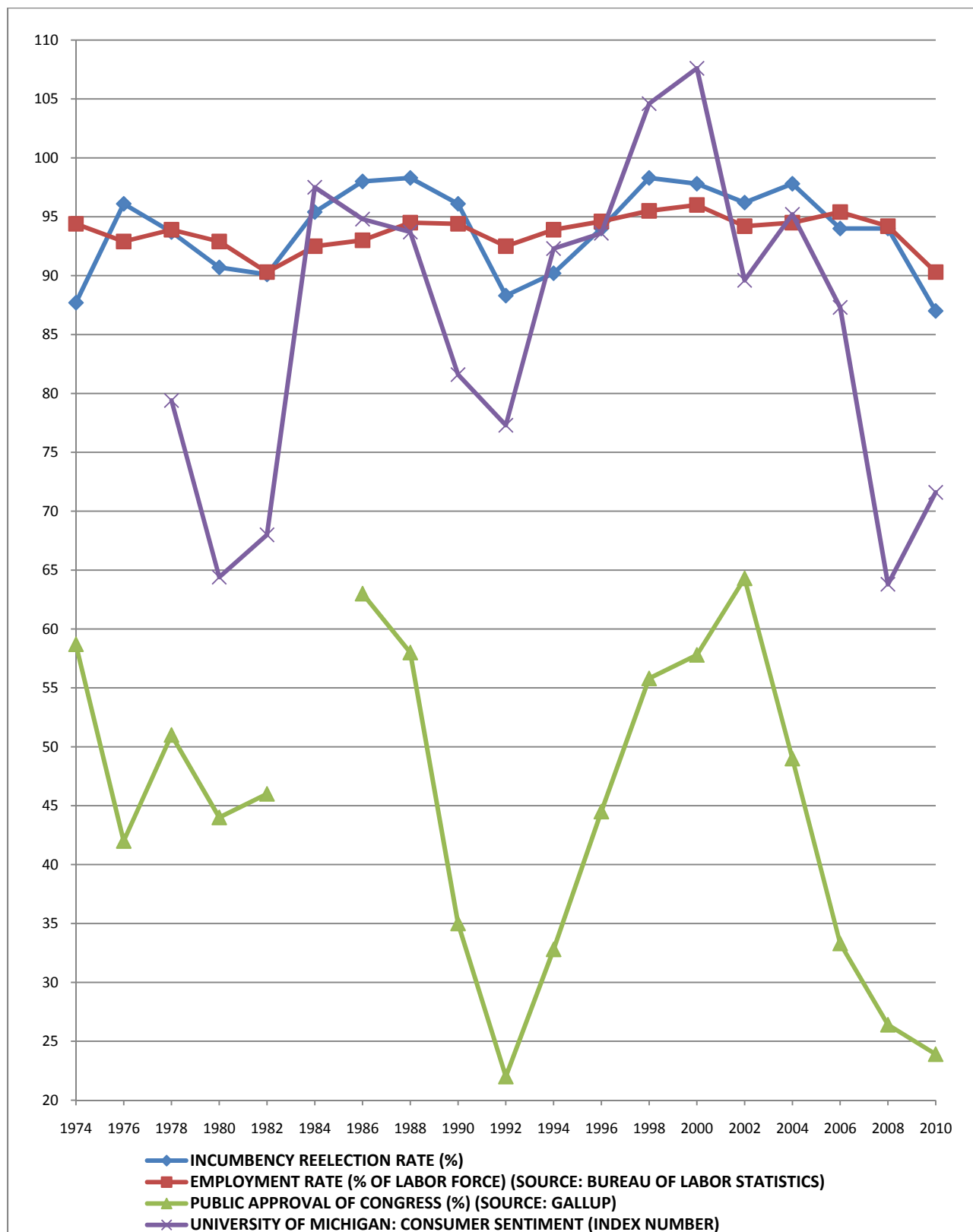
Should a correlation surface, one could more convincingly make the case for the potential of the economy to upset the incumbent advantage.

Unemployment

Figure 3.1, reproduced below, is a graph of incumbent reelection rates compared with the unemployment rate, as well as consumer sentiment and public approval of Congress. However, I am devoting this section to the potential impact of unemployment levels on congressional election outcomes. I believe that levels of unemployment are a sufficiently public issue to arouse the angst of the public during times of economic downturn. Unemployment is a widely reported statistic and significantly affects individuals' perceptions of the state of the economy. The data for incumbent reelection rates was gathered from the Gallup organization, and the unemployment rate for each of the election years from 1974 to 2010 was gathered from the United States Bureau of Labor (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). Instead of plotting unemployment rates, I plotted employment rates by subtracting the unemployment rate from one hundred so as to make the graph more visually appealing in that the employment line would track with the reelection rate. If my hypothesis is correct, in certain election years when the percentage of adults employed was relatively low, thus indicating high unemployment, incumbent reelection rates would be lower than usual. Unfortunately, I found that my graph is not completely convincing of such a correlation. There are certain years, for example 2010, for which low employment levels and a low incumbent reelection rate coexist. In 2010, the unemployment rate was a high 9.7%, coinciding with a low incumbent reelection rate of 87%. Thus, it seems that high unemployment played a part in undermining the incumbency advantage.

Likewise, in 1982, a relatively low employment rate of 90.3%, translating into a 9.7% unemployment rate corresponded with a low 90.1% incumbent reelection rate for that election cycle. Yet, such correlations are not universal for the data set. For example in 1974, the unemployment rate was a reasonable 5.6%. Yet, in that same election year, only 87.7% of incumbents were reelected. The lack of a strong correlation could be explained by the opinion that there were years when the economy was not the most pressing issue. Perhaps other issues trumped the economy, which speaks to my hypothesis that topical issues have the potential to dominate an election cycle.

Figure 3.1- Incumbency, Unemployment, Public Approval of Congress, and Consumer Sentiment



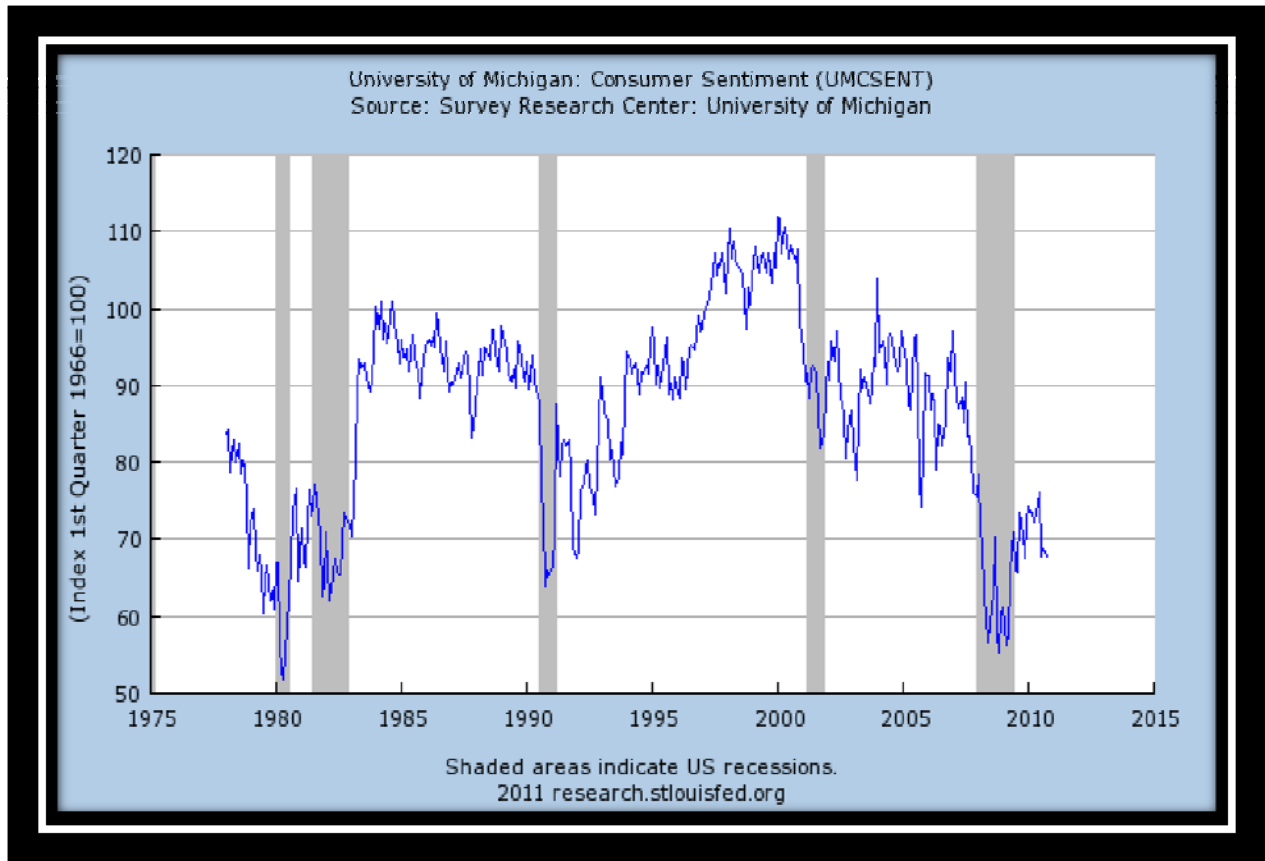
I did not find a particularly convincing correlation between unemployment and public approval levels of Congress either. It seems that public disapproval of Congress is impacted not by unemployment, but by other issues. Midterm evaluations of presidents and topical issues, two additional variables I will be analyzing in future chapters of this thesis, hopefully will provide more examples as to why public approval levels have fluctuated. Although unemployment was not a fruitful avenue of research, graphing incumbent reelection rates with consumer confidence could further test my hypothesis that a poorly performing economy, or the perception of such, negatively affects incumbent reelection rates.

Consumer Sentiment

Although the unemployment rate did not prove to be a reliable variable impacting incumbent reelection rates, consumer sentiment may prove to be a more productive avenue for exploring the effect of the economy on the incumbent reelection rate. Consumer sentiment may be a more accurate reflection of how the voters will respond to the state of the economy. Figure 3.2, reproduced below, is a graph from the University of Michigan which plots consumer sentiment, while noting those periods in United States history of economic recession (Economic Research: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis 2011). Sentiment indexes are “constructed from answers to survey questions” posed to the general public (Desroches and Gosselin 2004, 942). It is believed that levels of consumer sentiment and confidence are linked to “employment and financial conditions” (Desroches and Gosselin 2004, 942). Thus, if consumer sentiment is low, the people are more likely to find their economic prospects unacceptable. As per my hypothesis, if consumer sentiment is low, the people will be more likely to vote out incumbent

representatives as consumer sentiment will negatively impact the public's approval of Congress. I included the consumer sentiment index derived from Figure 3.2 for each year in Figure 3.1. A correlation between consumer sentiment and incumbent reelection rates is evident. During the recession leading up to the 2010 midterm elections, consumer sentiment was low, with a rating of 71.6. Figure 3.1 shows that incumbent representatives fared worse off than usual during the 2010 midterms, with only 87% reelected. In addition, incumbency reelection was a relatively low 90.1% in 1982, as seen in Figure 3.1. In 1982, consumer sentiment toward the economy was at another low point, achieving an index of 68. In 2004 and 2006, the incumbent reelection rates were 97.8% and 94.0%, respectively. In the time between those election years, consumer sentiment dropped from 95.2 in 2004 to 87.3 in 2006. Conversely, in 1996 the incumbent reelection rate was 94%, while two years later the incumbent reelection rate was 98.3%. In 1996 and 1998, the consumer sentiment index achieved a score of 93.6 and 104.6, respectively. Admittedly, the correlation between consumer sentiment and incumbent reelection rates is not universal. There are some years for which consumer sentiment is relatively high and incumbent reelection rates are uncharacteristically low. However, in general, a correlation between incumbent reelection rates and consumer sentiment exists, and the evidence is such that I believe the correlation is telling as to the impact of the economy on incumbents' prospects for reelection.

Figure 3.2- University of Michigan Consumer Sentiment Graph



A relationship between consumer sentiment and public approval ratings of Congress was also evident. In general, when consumer sentiment increased, public approval of Congress increased as well. Figure 3.1 illustrates the positive correlation between consumer sentiment and public approval of Congress. For example, from 1996 to 1998, consumer sentiment rose from 93.6 to 104.6. In 1996 and 1998, public approval levels of Congress reached 44.5% and 55.8%, respectively. Likewise, from 2006 to 2008, consumer sentiment fell from 87.3 to 63.8, while the public approval levels of Congress for 2006 and 2008 were 33.3% and 26.4%, respectively. Although a correlation was evident, the decade from 2000 to 2010 seems to undermine evidence of a relationship between consumer sentiment and public approval of Congress. I believe events

such as September 11th, 2001 and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan overshadowed consumer sentiment in its effect on public approval levels of Congress.

Figure 3.2 highlights the effect of periods of economic downturn on consumer confidence. The shaded areas in the graph represent periods of U.S. economic recession. During those periods, consumer confidence is lower than for those years not plagued by recession. The shading around 1992 in Figure 3.2 corresponds with a low incumbent reelection rate in 1992 as evidenced in Figure 3.1. In the 1992 election, 88.3% of incumbents were reelected, which represents the third lowest percentage of incumbents reelected since 1974. Although 1992 was a presidential election year, the correlation between consumer sentiment and incumbent losses is evident. Figure 3.2 also indicates that the United States faced a recession during the 2002 election. However, as will be explained in a future chapter, the recession of 2002 was not the deciding factor in determining the election outcome. National security superseded the economy as the most important issue for the 2002 election cycle. Regardless, by analyzing both Figures 3.1 and 3.2, it is evident that the economy and the public's perception of the performance of the economy, specifically consumer sentiment levels, can have a significant effect on incumbent reelection rates. The public's great concern for their economic prospects and their responsiveness to economic downturns as evidenced by their ousting of usually popular incumbents, illustrates the importance of the economy in determining election outcomes.

Public Disapproval of Congress

Throughout this chapter, which contains my analysis of the economy's influence on congressional elections, with the potential to upset the incumbency advantage, there is evidence

of public approval of Congress also being impacted by the state of economy. As part of my general hypothesis, I put forth that public disapproval levels of Congress have the potential to precipitate high turnover and supersede the incumbency advantage. However, in many election years, high disapproval with Congress does not by itself indicate seat changes on Election Day. In general, public disapproval of Congress, however varying, has been a mainstay of politics since World War Two. Still, most years incumbents gain reelection. Figure 3.1, above, contains the public approval levels of Congress since Gallup began collecting this data in 1974. In the 2010 election, 76.1% of the public disapproved of the way in which Congress was handling its job. In 2002, the people were more approving of Congress, as only 35.7% of those polled expressed disapproval. In 1998, the public again largely approved of the way Congress handled its job, as 44.2% disapproved. Finally, in 1994, 67.2% of those polled indicated disapproval with Congress. Looking at these percentages on the surface, when a majority of the public disapproved of Congress, the majority in the House of Representatives switched parties. However, only under certain circumstances will public disapproval levels reach a high enough level to spur incumbent losses. I believe that a particularly poorly performing economy is a sufficient enough circumstance for such losses.

I believe that when the economy is perceived to be performing poorly, evidenced by high unemployment and low consumer sentiment, the public disapproves of the way in which Congress is handling its job more so than when the economy is performing well. Figure 3.1 shows that both consumer sentiment and unemployment share an inverse relationship with public approval levels of Congress. When consumer sentiment is high, public disapproval levels are low. Likewise, in general, when more people are employed, public disapproval of Congress is lower than when unemployment is elevated. Thus, I conclude that public disapproval levels of

Congress and economic factors such as unemployment and consumer sentiment are linked. One piece of the puzzle in figuring out when public approval levels impact congressional elections is, I believe, the performance or perceived performance of the economy on behalf of the electorate. Since the economy is a strong factor in determining how voters cast their ballots, I can safely propose here that public approval levels of Congress do indeed have the potential to impact congressional elections, and upset the incumbency advantage should the economy be performing poorly.

Case Studies: The 1998, 2010, 1994, and 2002 Midterm Elections

Case studies of midterm elections will allow me to further explore the effect of the economy on incumbent reelection rates and public opinion of Congress. Each midterm election year, 1998, 2010, 1994 and 2002 offers a different twist to the impact of the economy on elections and approval ratings. The importance of the economy as a variable of elections and a deterrent of the incumbency advantage and approval ratings of Congress can be thoroughly tested via the use of case studies. I chose these midterm election cycles due to the fact that all were impacted by the economy, in positive as well as negative fashions, yet illustrate the shortcomings of the economy as the end-all variable of elections and congressional approval ratings. Therefore, further analysis of what impacts public approval of Congress and congressional elections is needed, and will be investigated in future chapters of this thesis.

The 1998 Midterm Elections

Analyzing an election cycle for which the economy was relatively strong can highlight the effect of a weak economy on incumbents' chances for reelection. The 1998 election cycle, with the backdrop of a well-performing economy, can serve as the antithesis to an election for which a weak-economy dominated the outcome. As a result of the 1998 election cycle, the Democratic party gained five seats in the House of Representatives (Highton 2002). This result runs contrary to the historical pattern that the president's party usually loses seats in the House of Representatives during midterm elections (Highton 2002). One of the reasons for the success of the president's party during the 1998 midterm elections was the strong performance of the economy (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1999). As Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde (1999, 255) discuss, "the performance of the U.S. economy in 1998 was very good by objective standards, with unemployment and inflation at low levels." The attitudes of the people toward the economy are illustrated by examining the exit polls after the 1998 elections. That year, the proportion of respondents that indicated their economic prospects "had improved over the two previous years was 41 percent, while only 13 percent said it was worse" (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1999, 255).

Analyzing Figure 3.1 above can further illustrate the importance of the economy in ensuring a positive election cycle. Although Bill Clinton's party benefitted due to positive associations with the president, the Republican party in terms of the number of incumbents returned to office was successful as well. A healthy 98.3 percent of incumbents were reelected in 1998, and I argue that the performance of the economy ensured the incumbents' success. Figure 3.1 also illustrates that a normal and reasonable amount, 4.5%, of adults were unemployed during 1998, highlighting the economic health of the nation. Public disapproval of

Congress was at a low 42.2 percent, I argue due to the economic vitality of the people and the nation as a whole. Finally, consumer sentiment as measured by the University of Michigan achieved an index of 104.6, good for the second highest score ever measured from 1978 to 2010. Analyzing the good fortunes of incumbents in 1998 from an economic perspective underscores the importance of the economy in shaping the decisions of the people, based on their collective satisfaction.

The economy is only one factor in any election cycle, and other variables impacted the 1998 midterms. Benjamin Highton (2002) argues that the 1998 elections were also impacted by public evaluations of both President Bill Clinton and House Speaker Newt Gingrich. Negative reactions to Gingrich were due in part to the fact that “in January 1997, the House voted to reprimand Mr. Gingrich and [fine] him \$300,000, after the ethics committee concluded that he had used tax-exempt money to promote Republican goals” and lied to the committee upon questioning (New York Times 2010). Gingrich was also denounced for hypocrisy, moving to impeach President Clinton for perjury regarding his extramarital affair while committing adultery himself. The biggest news story of 1998 was President Clinton’s personal scandal surrounding his relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Bill Clinton’s image “as a person” deteriorated, seemingly spelling trouble for the Democratic party in the upcoming midterms (Highton 2002, 3). However, Clinton’s approval ratings in terms of his job performance did not suffer losses. “Clinton’s level of presidential approval remained high throughout the year and on election day...a clear majority (56 percent) of voters approved of ‘the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as President’” (Highton 2002, 3). Thus, much to the surprise of political pundits, the Democratic party suffered negligible ill effects from the Lewinsky scandal. Throughout the year Clinton highlighted his professional success in office, and

“economic issues were at the forefront” (Highton 2002, 4). In fact, “the budget was balanced and a surplus...was expected; unemployment, inflation, and interest rates were low; the pace of economic growth was robust” (Highton 2002, 4). Thus, high approval ratings of Clinton, which were in large part the result of a well performing economy, were so influential to the outcome of the 1998 midterm elections that even the most prominent personal scandal in presidential history and the historical pattern of losses of the president’s party during midterm elections did not negatively impact Democrats’ prospects for election.

Although other factors led to gains for the Democratic party, the economy was the single most important factor impacting the election in 1998. Granted, negative evaluations of Newt Gingrich in 1998 and Clinton’s shift toward a more moderate agenda helped the Democratic party win seats (Highton 2002). Gingrich was “largely blamed for the partial government shutdown that lasted 27 days in the winter of 1995-1996” and suffered general failure concurrent with Clinton’s success (Highton 2002, 4). The relative failure that was the 1998 election cycle for the Republican party was highlighted by the resignation of Gingrich from the House of Representatives in 1998 after the elections. Yet, the powerful and well performing economy eclipsed all other issues in spurring success for the Democratic party. The ability of President Clinton to capitalize on a growing and strong economy and translate such prosperous times to party gains in Congress is a testament to not only Clinton’s skill as a politician, but also to the importance of the economy for its impact on congressional election outcomes. As CNN noted on Saturday, October 31, 1998, “what people care about most...is the pocketbook.”⁴

⁴ “Pocketbook Outweighs Impeachment in U.S. Elections,” *CNN.com Election 98*, 31 Oct. 1998. Accessed: 20 Jan. 2011 <<http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/stories/1998/10/31/elex.pocketbook/>>.

The 2010 Midterm Elections

The importance of the economy in its potential to negatively impact incumbents' reelection rates is evidenced by the case of the 2010 midterm elections. As illustrated in Figure 3.1, the unemployment rate hovered around 9.7% for most of the year, tied with 1982 for the highest unemployment rate since 1974. The public in general was dissatisfied with the economy, and unemployment was a key indicator of its underperformance. Public disapproval of Congress was 76.1% as measured by Gallup, the highest rate of disapproval since 1992. Finally, consumer sentiment, although up from 2008, reached an index score of 71.6, a relatively low number. These two economic factors, which indicated a poorly performing economy, translated into a mere 87% of incumbents achieving reelection. In 2010, the economy became the biggest issue impacting the midterm elections.

I believe that the 2010 midterm elections are a good representation of the power of the economy in impacting voters' decisions. A poorly performing economy can spell trouble for usually safe incumbent candidates. Dennis Jacobe (2010a, 2010b) in a lead-up to the 2010 midterm elections noted a significant downturn in consumer confidence beginning in mid-August. During the beginning of September, "47% of Americans rated current economic conditions as 'poor'" (Jacobe 2010a). During the same time period, "63% of consumers...said economic conditions [were] 'getting worse'" (Jacobe 2010a). In an exit poll conducted by ABC News, "eighty-nine percent of voters said the national [economy was in] bad shape—nearly as many as the record 92 percent who said so two years ago" (Langer 2010). In addition, a mere fourteen percent responded that their family's economic standing improved from 2008 to 2010, which accounts for the lowest percentage of voters since 1984 (Langer 2010).

This national distress stemming from the economy hurt the Democrats' chances of maintaining control of the House of Representatives. Two years prior, "in 2008 54 percent of [voters who noted the poor state of the economy] favored Barack Obama. This year, 55 percent backed Republicans for the House" (Langer 2010). Highlighting the state of the economy as an issue of paramount importance was the fact that during an exit poll conducted for ABC News, "62 percent of voters [polled] picked [the economy] as the single most important issue in their vote...It was the first time economy voters favored Republicans" (Langer 2010). When asked directly if the "economy [was] the most important issue facing [the] country," 63% of respondents answered yes in confirmation (CNN 2010). As for picking what respondents believed to be the highest priority for the next Congress, 18% chose cutting taxes, 40% chose cutting the deficit, and 37% chose spending to create new jobs (CNN 2010). All of these responses are partly economic in nature, underscoring the importance of the economy. A full 86% of respondents to the exit poll were "worried about economic conditions" (CNN 2010). In addition, 90% of respondents noted that the "state of the nation's economy" was "not good/poor" (CNN 2010). In all, 61% of respondents noted that they believed the country was on the "wrong track" for the future, a testament, I believe, to their dissatisfaction with the current state of the economy (CNN 2010). A clear majority of respondents indicating that the economy is on the wrong track is evidence of dissatisfaction with the current state of the economy, in that a future economic outlook is impacted by current evaluations of the state of the economy and economic policies. Jacobo (2010b) forecasted that "there is no doubt that declining consumer sentiment is not good for incumbent politicians." His forecast proved to be correct in that, as previously noted, a mere 87% of incumbents were returned to office in the latest election cycle, which is a

historically low percentage. As a result, the Democratic party lost the majority in the House of Representatives.

The poor performance of incumbents during the 2010 election cycle was due to the poor performance of the economy. Related is the fact that in 2010, Congress ranked last in maintaining the confidence of the public as an institution (Saad 2010a). Only “eleven percent of Americans say they have ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in Congress,” good for “ranking dead last out of the 16 institutions rated this year” (Saad 2010a). Half of those polled reported that they had “‘very little’ or ‘no’ confidence in Congress” (Saad 2010a). The poor ratings of Congress in terms of confidence are related to the poor performance of the economy and the lack of an effective response by Congress. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995, 2002) illustrate that the people disapprove of Congress due to, among other things, suspected inefficiency. Since the people expect Congress to fix the economy as necessary, a poorly performing economy coupled with the appearance of inefficiency would negatively impact public approval levels of the national legislature. The lowest incumbent reelection rate since 1974 was, in great part, the result of the poorly performing economy in 2010.

The 1994 Midterm Elections

I argue as part of my hypothesis that the results of the 1994 midterm elections, which brought about the “Republican Revolution,” were due mostly to a growing dissatisfaction with what was popularized by Republicans as “big government.” However, it may be fruitful to analyze the economic conditions of the country to see if poor economic performance, in part, stimulated the Republican takeover. As illustrated in Figure 3.1, in 1994 public disapproval of

Congress was 67.2 percent, down from 77.3% in 1992, but still relatively high in comparison to percentages later in the decade. Perhaps public disapproval of Congress was due to tough economic times. The unemployment rate and levels of consumer sentiment would provide us with answers as to the economic health of the nation in 1994. During that year, the unemployment rate was 6.1%, which was lower than the 1992 proportion of people unemployed, which rested at 7.5%. Thus, unemployment, a key factor in how the public judges the economic performance of the country, was indeed improving. As a result, I posit that unemployment was not a key variable in precipitating the Republican Revolution. In 1994, consumer sentiment as measured by the University of Michigan achieved an index of 92.3, up significantly from the 77.3 index measured in 1992. Finally, the incumbent reelection rate in 1994 was 90.2 percent, which ranks for the fourth lowest incumbent reelection rate since 1974. In comparison to 1990, the incumbent reelection rate was almost six percentage points lower in 1994, even though consumer sentiment was 10.7 points higher. In addition, public approval of Congress in 1990 was 35%, while that in 1994 was 32.8%. Therefore, some factor proved strong enough to upset the incumbency advantage. However, I believe that the economy, which had been improving since the 1992 election cycle, was not a factor in disturbing the incumbency advantage.

The perception of a positive economy and its impact on public opinion is evidenced by analyzing the exit polls from 1994. As Alan I. Abramowitz (1995, 875) notes, “thirty-six percent of respondents said their family’s financial situation had improved in the previous year while 28 percent said that it had deteriorated.” A mere eight percent of respondents believed that their economic prospects would worsen in 1995 (Abramowitz 1995). These polls indicate that the people in general felt positive about the economy in 1994. In a future chapter, I will go into further detail as to why I believe the Republican Revolution came about. I agree with Hibbing

and Tiritilli (2000, 122), that the effects of “congressional disapproval, [were] greater in 1994 than in most years.” However, I can safely rule out the economy as the reason for the approval ratings and low incumbent reelection rate.

The 2002 Midterm Elections: A Conflicting Case

The 2002 midterm elections offer a twist in my hypothesis for the impact of the economy on incumbents’ reelection prospects. An analysis of Figure 3.1 can serve as a starting point for measuring the economic health of the nation leading up to the 2002 midterms. The unemployment rate in 2002 was 5.8%, which, although not devastating, was greater than the 4% unemployment in 2000. Thus, compared to two years prior, in 2002 unemployment impacted more of the electorate. Figure 3.1 also indicates that consumer sentiment in 2002 achieved an index of 89.6. Although respectable, that number is much lower than the indexes measured in 1998 and 2000, the two previous elections, which measured 104.6 and 107.6, respectively. Therefore, consumer sentiment was more negative in 2002 than in the years immediately preceding the election. Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde (2003) echo the fact that the economy in 2002 was declining in comparison with previous years. “The performance of the U.S. economy in 2002 was not very good by objective standards, with unemployment higher than in the Clinton years, and a stock market that was headed for its third consecutive year of losses” (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2003, 259). In a poll the day before Election Day 2002, CBS News found that “53 percent of respondents believed that the condition of the economy was bad or very bad. Moreover, 34 percent thought the economy was getting worse,” compared with only seventeen percent believing the economy was improving (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2003, 259).

Analyzing the economic data and the public's perception of the state of the economy, I would expect public disapproval levels of Congress to be higher than in previous years. However, only 35.7% of the people disapproved of the way Congress handled its job, as indicated in Figure 3.1. In addition, only 3.8% of incumbents weren't reelected on Election Day in 2002.

Although the economy was relatively weak leading up to the 2002 election cycle, the Republican party was able to maintain and strengthen their majority due to, in part, "the undeniable, if unintended, gift of Osama bin Laden" (Jacobson 2003, 1). As noted in a previous chapter, the Republican party was better equipped to handle what would become the political issue of national security. George W. Bush and the rest of the Republican leadership had a more concrete plan for addressing terrorism (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2003). Thus, in 2002, although the economy was perceived to be weak, especially in the wake of the 1990s economic boom, the Republican party expanded their majority in both houses of Congress. Gary C. Jacobson (2003) also notes that the high approval ratings of President Bush could account for the Republicans' victory in 2002. Yet, the source of Bush's high approval ratings were rooted in his handling of the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, thus underscoring the great relevance of the issue of national security for the 2002 elections, which will be discussed in further detail in a later chapter of this thesis.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the economy and its impact on public approval levels of Congress and the incumbency advantage. I created Figure 3.1 to examine key variables together, specifically to determine whether a relationship exists between the economy and congressional

elections. Figure 3.1 plotted the percentage of incumbents reelected, the unemployment rate, consumer sentiment, and public disapproval levels of Congress from 1974 to 2010. Although the unemployment and incumbency reelection rates didn't correlate enough to form a convincing argument as to a connection between the two, comparing consumer sentiment and incumbent reelection for each year proved to be a successful avenue. In general, when consumer sentiment was high, incumbents enjoyed their expected advantage in the elections. When consumer sentiment was low, incumbents were more likely to be ousted from office. In addition, I found that the people are more likely to disapprove of Congress when they have less confidence in the economy.

After analyzing the data, I delved into specific case studies to further scrutinize my hypothesis. First, the midterm elections of 1998 illustrate the power of a strong economy in benefitting incumbents as well as the president's party in Congress. President Clinton's personal scandal and the historical pattern of losses for the president's party in the House of Representatives during midterm elections were superseded by one of the strongest performing economies in this country's history. Conversely, in 2010, the poorly performing economy spelled disaster for the majority party in Congress. The Democratic party lost the majority in the House of Representatives, mostly due to high unemployment, low consumer sentiment, and low public approval of Congress. As a result, the lowest proportion of incumbents since 1974 were reelected, a diminutive 87 percent. The election cycle of 2010 served as the prototype year for demonstrating the negative effects of a poorly performing economy on incumbent reelection rates. The 1994 midterm elections show that the economy is not the only factor that can impact congressional elections and yield incumbent losses. In comparison to 1992, the economic health of the nation was improving in 1994. However, the "Republican Revolution" upset the

incumbency advantage to such an extent that the Republican party regained control of the House of Representatives for the first time in over forty years. A future chapter will analyze such topical issues as having the potential to impact congressional elections. Finally, the 2002 elections also illustrate the importance of emerging topical issues for congressional election outcomes. In 2002, the economy was suffering high unemployment and low consumer confidence. Yet, the incumbency advantage remained intact while public disapproval of Congress was comparatively negligible. As a future chapter will discuss, national security saved incumbent Republicans from the ill effects of a languishing economy.

In all, I believe that this chapter offers convincing evidence to the importance of the economy in congressional elections, less convincing evidence to a correlation between the economy and public approval levels of Congress, and a real potential of the economy to disrupt the incumbency advantage. I believe that the economy has a stronger influence on congressional elections than on public approval levels of Congress. Consumer sentiment was a more reliable correlate than unemployment with incumbent reelection rates, most probably due to the fact that sentiment measures overall perceptions, and unemployment affects a smaller proportion of the population directly. This does not diminish the influence of the economy on elections and public approval levels of Congress, as sentiment and unemployment are both economic indicators. However, this relative weakness must be kept in mind when evaluating the impact of unemployment. The economy is only part of the puzzle in determining when incumbents lose their long-standing advantage. Midterm evaluations of the president and emerging salient issues offer further explanations of congressional election outcomes. The next two chapters will analyze these issues in detail by examining election years as case studies and discovering what the major news stories were in those years. Public disapproval of Congress had the potential to

become a factor when the economy was performing poorly. Similarly, public disapproval of Congress, I believe, will develop into a factor in determining election outcomes for those years in which presidential evaluations and emerging contemporary issues disrupt the incumbency advantage.

Chapter Four

Midterm Evaluations of the President, Congressional Approval Ratings, and Incumbent Reelection Rates

In this chapter, I will be focusing on the relationship among midterm approval ratings of presidents, incumbent reelection rates, and public disapproval of Congress. Part of my hypothesis is that, in certain cases, the performance or perceived performance of the president can impact how the public views Congress. If the public disapproves of the performance of the chief executive, they are more likely to disapprove of Congress, especially if the majority is of the president's party. I posit that public approval of Congress, approval of the president, and the fortunes of incumbent congressional candidates are linked. As a result, if the public approves of the president's performance, the president's party will benefit during the midterms, and vice versa. In addition, public approval of Congress and public approval of the president, I hypothesize, are correlated. The historical pattern has been that the president's party loses seats in midterm elections (Campbell 1985). However, this trend is not universal and the extent of seat losses, when they do occur, can be affected by the level of public approval of the chief executive. As Gronke, Koch, and Wilson (2003, 785) demonstrate, "perceived levels of presidential support...shape attitudes toward congressional incumbents." When the level of support for the president is low, individual members of the public are more likely to have negative evaluations of incumbent representatives, precipitating midterm losses for members of the president's party.

James E. Campbell (1985) discusses two types of theories to explain midterm losses for the president's party. The first group is the "coattails/surge and decline theories," which note that a strong performance by the president in the election immediately preceding the midterms will prompt higher losses in the midterm cycle (Campbell 1985, 1140). The lack of a presidential race during midterms precipitates the removal of the coattail effect which benefits congressional candidates. "In effect, the bigger they are, the harder they fall" (Campbell 1985, 1140). The second group of theories Campbell dubs the "economy/popularity theories," which argue that the midterm election is a referendum by the public concerning the state of the economy, the president's handling of the economy, and the president's general popularity among the electorate (Campbell 1985, 1140). The second group of theories purports to explain the outcome of the midterm elections as a result of the state of the economy as well as the public's approval level of the president.

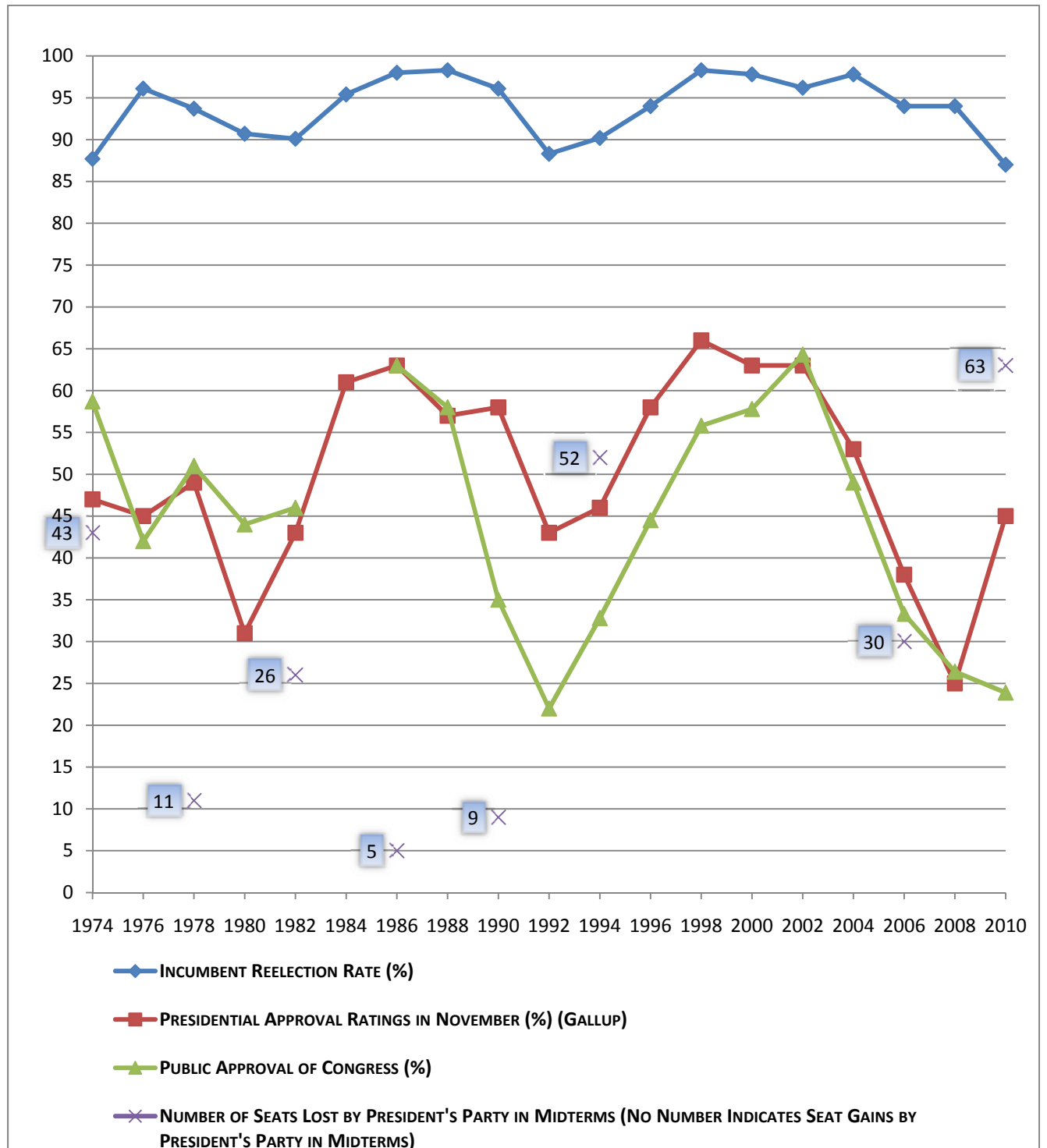
For the purposes of this chapter, my discussion will center more on the second set of theories discussed by Campbell (1985). Even though both sets of theories can help to explain midterm election outcomes, I am primarily concerned with presidential popularity. Presidential popularity fluctuates over time, based on individual performance. This fluctuation and the public's response to presidential performance, as well as its effect on approval levels of representatives in the House, will be my primary focus.

The Data

Figure 4.1, reproduced below, is a graph of incumbent reelection rates, presidential approval ratings, public approval levels of Congress, and the number of seats lost by the

president's party in the midterms for each election cycle from 1974 to 2010. I included both midterm and presidential years to ensure a more holistic view of the trends among incumbent reelection rates and public approval ratings of both the president and Congress. Although my overall analysis is narrowed to midterm elections, including presidential election years in Figure 4.1 does not detract from my analysis. Analyzing this graph will demonstrate whether or not there is a correlation between presidential approval ratings and congressional incumbent losses, as well as congressional approval ratings. More specifically, Figure 4.1 can give insight as to the effect of negative evaluations of the president on his own party, measuring how many seats the president's party loses in midterm elections.

Figure 4.1- Incumbent Reelection Rates, Presidential Approval Ratings, Public Approval of Congress, and Number of Seats Lost by President's Party in Midterms



Presidential Approval Ratings and the Incumbent Reelection Rate

In analyzing Figure 4.1, there is a strong correlation between presidential approval ratings and the incumbent reelection rate. In general, as the public becomes more approving of the president, incumbents are more likely to be reelected. For example, from 1990 to 1992, the percentage of respondents who approved of the president fell from 58% to 43%. In those same years, the percentage of incumbents winning reelection fell from 96.1% to 88.3%. From 1994 to 1996, presidential approval increased from 58% to 66%. In those same years, the percentage of incumbents reelected rose from 90.2% to 94%. In general, the percentage of people who approve of the president and the percentage of incumbents reelected track together in a positive relationship. However, the two ratings are not universally correlated. For example, from 2002 to 2004, presidential approval ratings fell from 63% to 53%. Yet, from 2002 to 2004, the proportion of incumbents reelected rose from 96.2% to 97.8%. This lack of a positive relationship could be the result of 2004 being a presidential year, which speaks to Campbell's (1985) argument regarding the coattail effect in presidential election cycles. The election cycles from 2008 to 2010 also offer conflicting information. During those years, presidential approval rose from 25% to 45%, yet the incumbent reelection rate fell from 94% to 87%. Presidential approval most likely increased as a result of the election of a popular President Obama and the exit of the increasingly unpopular George W. Bush. The decline of the incumbent reelection rate from 2008 to 2010, again, could be the result of the lack of a coattail effect (Campbell 1985).

The data in Figure 4.1 confirm a relationship between presidential approval and incumbent representatives' reelection rates. The presence of such a relationship is convincing of an impact of presidential approval ratings on congressional elections. Public approval of Congress, which I believe to be a determinant of incumbent reelection rates, may also be

impacted by presidential approval. The presence of such a relationship will be tested in a later section of this chapter. First, however, I want to measure the extent of the effect of presidential approval ratings on election outcomes, by discovering how many seats the president's party has lost in midterm elections. I posit that lower approval ratings of the president will prompt a more negative outcome for members of the president's party during midterm election cycles.

Presidential Approval Ratings and the Number of Seats Lost by the President's Party

The impact of presidential approval ratings on the fortunes of members of the president's party can be evaluated by examining the number of seats lost by the president's party in midterm elections. I posit that if the incumbency advantage were to be overcome by a high level of presidential disapproval, more seats belonging to the president's party in midterm elections would be lost. Figure 4.1 can be used to compare presidential approval ratings and the number of seats lost in the midterms by the president's party. In eight out of ten midterm elections from 1974 to 2010, the president's party has lost seats, evidence of the pattern illustrated by Campbell (1985). In 1998 and 2002, the president's party actually gained seats in the midterm elections, but these are aberrations sufficiently explained, I believe, by extenuating circumstances of one of the most prosperous economies in 1998 and national security issues in 2002.

The pattern of midterm losses for the president's party is a firm one. In 1974, presidential approval rested at 47%, corresponding with 43 seats lost by the president's party. In 1978, 49% of the public approved of the president and 11 seats were lost by the president's party. In 1982, 43% of those polled approved of the president and 26 seats were lost by the president's party in the midterms. In 1986, presidential approval rested at a higher 63%, and

only five seats were lost by the president's party. In 1990, presidential approval was 58%, and nine seats were lost by George H.W. Bush's party. In 1994, 46% of the public approved of Bill Clinton, and 52 seats were lost by the Democratic party. In 2006, a small 38% of the public approved of President George W. Bush, and the Republican party lost thirty seats in the House. Finally, in 2010, forty-five percent of the public approved of Barack Obama, and the Democratic party lost a record-breaking 63 seats. It seems that the higher the approval of the president, the lower the number of seats the president's party loses in the midterms, most evident in 1986 and 1990. Likewise, the lower the approval rating, the higher the number of seats lost by the president's party in the midterms. However, there is not a purely positive correlation with presidential approval and the number of seats lost by the president's party. For example, approval was higher in 1974 compared with 1982, yet in 1974, 43 seats were lost compared with only 26 lost in 1982. Similarly, in 2006, a smaller percentage of the public approved of the president than in 2010, but more seats were lost in 2006. The correlation between presidential approval and the number of seats lost by the president's party is not perfect, that is, there is no formula for assessing the number of seats the president's party will lose just by evaluating the chief executive's approval rating. Still, I find the overall evidence convincing of a relationship between presidential approval and congressional election outcomes.

Presidential Approval Levels and Public Approval of Congress

A relationship between presidential approval and public approval of Congress is not wholly clear after an analysis of the data. A correlation exists, as illustrated in Figure 4.1, and is evidence, I believe, of a tentative link between presidential performance and public approval of

Congress. When presidential approval levels rise, public approval levels of Congress likewise increase, and vice versa. The years 1988-1990, 1998-2000, 2000-2002, and 2008-2010 represent the only instances between election cycles when public approval of the president and public approval of Congress did not trend together. From 1988-1990, presidential approval increased while public approval of Congress decreased. From 1998-2000, presidential approval decreased while congressional approval increased. From 2000-2002, presidential approval remained the same, yet public approval of Congress increased. Finally, from 2008-2010, presidential approval increased, yet congressional approval decreased. In every other year from 1974 to the present, a positive correlation existed. The highest level of presidential approval, 63% reached in 2002 under President George W. Bush, correlated with the highest level of public approval of Congress, which rested at 64.3% in that year. The lowest public approval rating of the president, 25% for George W. Bush in 2008, correlated with the third-lowest public approval rating of Congress, at 26.4%. The only other lower levels of approval of Congress were in 2010, when a mere 23.9% of the public approved of the body and in 1992, when 22% of the public approved of Congress.

Although presidential approval levels and congressional approval levels trend together, Figure 4.1 illustrates that the relationship between public approval of the president and public approval of Congress is not clear cut. An analysis of the number of seats the president's party loses in the midterms and public approval of Congress suggests that a positive correlation between public approval of Congress and presidential performance may not be steadfast. One would hypothesize that if a strong link existed between public approval of Congress and public approval of the president, when public approval of Congress decreases, the number of seats the president's party loses in the midterms increases from one midterm cycle of the next. The

opposite relationship would also be true, in that when public approval of Congress increases, the number of seats lost by the president's party would decrease. Similarly, when presidential approval is low, the number of seats lost by the president's party would increase, and vice versa. These scenarios do not pan out as expected. The only years when such a relationship manifests itself in a convincing manner is from 1978 to 1982, 1982 to 1986, and 2006 to 2010. Figure 4.1 illustrates that from 1978 to 1982, public approval of Congress decreased from 51% to 46%. Also, presidential approval decreased from 49% to 43%. The number of seats lost by the president's party increased from eleven to twenty-six over this time period. From 1982 to 1986, public approval of Congress increased from 46% to 63%, presidential approval increased from 43% to 63%, and in those years the president's party lost 26 and 5 seats, respectively. Finally, from 2006 to 2010, public approval of Congress decreased from 33.3% to 23.9%, yet presidential approval increased from 38% to 45%, and the number of seats lost by the president's party increased from thirty to sixty-three seats. One may be led to believe that from 2006 to 2010, changes in public approval of Congress increased the number of seats the president's party lost more so than did the increase in presidential approval. Although this evidence may seem convincing, further analysis proves otherwise.

From 1986 to 1990, public approval of Congress decreased from 63% to 35%, presidential approval decreased from 63% to 58%, and the number of seats lost by the president's party increased from five to nine seats. However, the change in the number of seats is negligible, especially considering the large drop in the percentage of those approving of Congress. Similarly, from 1990 to 1994, public approval of Congress fell from 35% to 32.8%, yet the number of seats lost by the president's party increased dramatically from nine to fifty-two seats. If the relationship between public approval of Congress and presidential performance was

steadfast, a large increase in the number of seats lost by the president's party should have coincided with a larger drop in public approval of Congress than the 35% to 32.8% drop. The large increase in the number of seats lost by the president's party is also not adequately explained by the decrease in presidential approval ratings from 58% to 46%. More convincing of the lack of such a relationship is the fact that from 1974-1978, 1994-1998, 1998-2002, and 2002-2006, the expected relationship between public approval of Congress and the number of seats lost by the president's party at the midterms, should such a relationship exist, did not manifest itself. Similarly, the relationship between presidential approval and the number of seats lost by the president's party, should that relationship exist, did not yield the expected outcomes in those years.

The relationship between public approval of Congress and the performance of the president is ultimately not clear. Public approval levels of Congress and approval ratings of the president do trend together, which point to a relationship between the two. However, public approval levels of Congress and the number of seats lost by the president's party at the midterm elections do not show a strong relationship. Presidential approval and the number of seats lost by the president's party similarly do not show a firm relationship. This uncertainty forces me to conclude that a relationship between presidential performance and public approval ratings of Congress is not immediately evident. This does not detract from the evidence pointing to a relationship between public approval of the president and midterm election outcomes, but the role of public approval of Congress is not clear.

Case Studies

Case studies allow us to further delve into the impact of presidential performance on congressional elections and congressional approval. The 1994, 1998, 2002, and 2010 elections will serve as case studies, in that each year offers a different example of the impact of presidential performance. Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama are all polarizing figures for different reasons, and impacted midterm elections in different ways. Data such as exit polls, newspaper and scholarly accounts of presidential performance, and the way in which the public perceived each president had an impact on each of these midterm election cycles.

The 1994 Midterm Elections: President Bill Clinton

Public evaluations of President Bill Clinton had some impact on the election of 1994, known as the “Republican Revolution.” The rise of Newt Gingrich and the nationalization of the election, the issue of greatest importance in 1994, will be discussed in a future chapter. In addition to the prominence of Speaker Gingrich and his role in restoring the Republican party to the majority in the House of Representatives, evaluations of President Clinton had a part in spurring Democratic losses in 1994. Figure 4.1 demonstrates that Clinton’s job approval rating in 1994 was 46%. This level was significantly lower than the presidential job approval ratings for 1988, 1990, and to a lesser extent, 1992. In 1994, the public had been experiencing a downward shift in its approval of the president. Clinton’s lowest approval rating was 37%, measured in 1993 (Gallup 2001). Clinton’s worst approval ratings were measured at the dawn of the 1994 midterms, adding to the public unrest which resulted in the second highest seat change

since 1974. At the time of the election, CNN reported that 48% of the public approved of President Clinton (PollingReport.com 2001). Self-identifying Republicans anchored an increasingly vehement and negative public evaluation of the president (Gallup 2001).

James E. Campbell (1997, 832) explains that “midterm elections are partially referenda on the incumbent administration.” President Clinton’s midterm approval rating in 1994 was “nine points below the average presidential rating at the midterm” (Campbell 1997, 832). Clinton’s relatively lower approval rating, although not the primary cause of the Republican Revolution, negatively impacted incumbent Democrats’ chances of reelection in the House. Public approval of Congress at the 1994 midterms was 32.8%, which, although an increase from 1992, was low from a historical standpoint. The impact of low approval levels of Congress on the 1994 midterm elections will be analyzed in greater detail in a future chapter. Public approval of Congress became relevant in 1994 once the Republican leadership pointed out the alleged shortcomings of the Democratic majority. Although Clinton’s approval ratings were low, I do not believe that they were the primary cause of the 1994 outcomes. Still, it can be said that Clinton’s low approval ratings did not benefit Democratic incumbents, and most certainly added to their downfall.

The 1998 Midterm Elections: President Bill Clinton

At the time of the 1998 midterm elections, President Clinton’s approval ratings had increased dramatically. As illustrated in Figure 4.1, in 1998 Clinton’s approval rating rested at 66%. That proportion of people who approved of Clinton was up from 46% in 1994 and 58% in 1996. Immediately before the election, NBC News reported that Clinton’s approval rating

among the electorate was 68% (PollingReport.com 2001). The upward trend in the proportion of people who approved of the president benefitted Democratic incumbent members of the House of Representatives. In 1998, Clinton's Democratic party did not lose any seats in the House of Representatives, one of only two midterm cycles in which the president's party did not lose seats, the other being the 2002 midterm election. In fact, the Democrats gained five seats in the House of Representatives, a much more favorable outcome for the party than the fifty-two seat loss in 1994 (Highton 2002). Clinton's high point in terms of approval rating was in December of 1998, when 73% of the people approved of the president (Gallup 2001). Correspondingly, public approval of Congress in 1998 rested at 55.8%, a relatively high proportion from a historical standpoint. This high approval rating of Congress could have accounted for the Democrats' seat gains. I believe that the increased legislative role of the president in setting an agenda and proposing legislation causes the electorate to conflate the performance of Congress and the chief executive. Therefore, a high public approval of Congress could be the result of high approval ratings of the president, and vice versa. Although the 1998 Congress was a Republican majority, Clinton's high approval ratings had a positive effect on the federal government as a whole.

The portrayal of Clinton in public impacted the way in which people evaluated the president. His supporters characterized Clinton as an accomplished president whose legislative successes spurred economic prosperity (Highton 2002). His opponents characterized Clinton as a man of questionable moral character in light of the Monica Lewinsky affair (Highton 2002). Exit polls from Election Day 1998 allow us to analyze the effectiveness of these two characterizations of President Clinton. Evaluations of Clinton can be divided into two categories: Clinton "the person" and Clinton the president (Highton 2002). Clinton "the person"

did not fare well at the exit polls, where 58% held a negative evaluation as compared with 34% of the electorate holding a positive evaluation (Highton 2002). The Republican scheme to tarnish Clinton's image in hopes of yielding Democratic losses seemed to have affected the category of evaluations pertaining to Clinton's personal qualities. Clinton as an adulterer and perjurer was not held in high regard at the exit polls in 1998 (Gallup 2011d). However, Clinton the president fared well at the exit polls. "As president," 56% of the electorate polled held a positive evaluation of Clinton (Highton 2002, 3). Forty-two percent of those polled held a negative evaluation of the president (Highton 2002). Therefore, in terms of Clinton's performance in his role as chief executive, the public found him to be more than satisfactory.

The Republican party's attempt to portray Clinton as a man of questionable moral character did not negatively impact the way in which the public evaluated his performance as president. "Beginning with his State of the Union address on January 27 and continuing to Election Day, Clinton and his supporters drew sharp distinctions between his 'private life' and his presidential performance" (Highton 2002, 4). A strong economy, highlighted by a surplus, and popular stances on issues such as a 'Consumer Bill of Rights' for patients under an HMO and a more moderate agenda enhanced Clinton's approval ratings to the point of benefitting the Democratic party immensely (Highton 2002, 4). Clinton's high approval along with Speaker Gingrich's low approval ratings positively affected Democrats' chances in the 1998 midterm cycle. The 1998 midterms serve as a case study of a president's high approval positively impacting his party's fortunes in the House of Representatives.

The 2002 Midterm Elections: President George W. Bush

The 2002 election, in part, was impacted by President George W. Bush's response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The public had an extremely positive view of both President Bush and Congress post-9/11 (Jacobson 2003). A poll conducted by ABC News from October 31 to November 3, 2002, reported that 67% of the public approved of the way President Bush handled "his job as president" (PollingReport.com 2009). "The events of September 11th and their aftermath profoundly transformed the electoral context of 2002, most importantly by redefining the Bush presidency and transforming public perceptions of the president" (Jacobson 2003, 3). The impact of September 11th on Bush's approval ratings is evidenced by Figure 4.2, a reproduction from Gary C. Jacobson's (2003, 4) article on the 2002 midterms. The spike in presidential approval in early September was the result of Bush's popular response to the terrorist attacks.

Figure 4.2

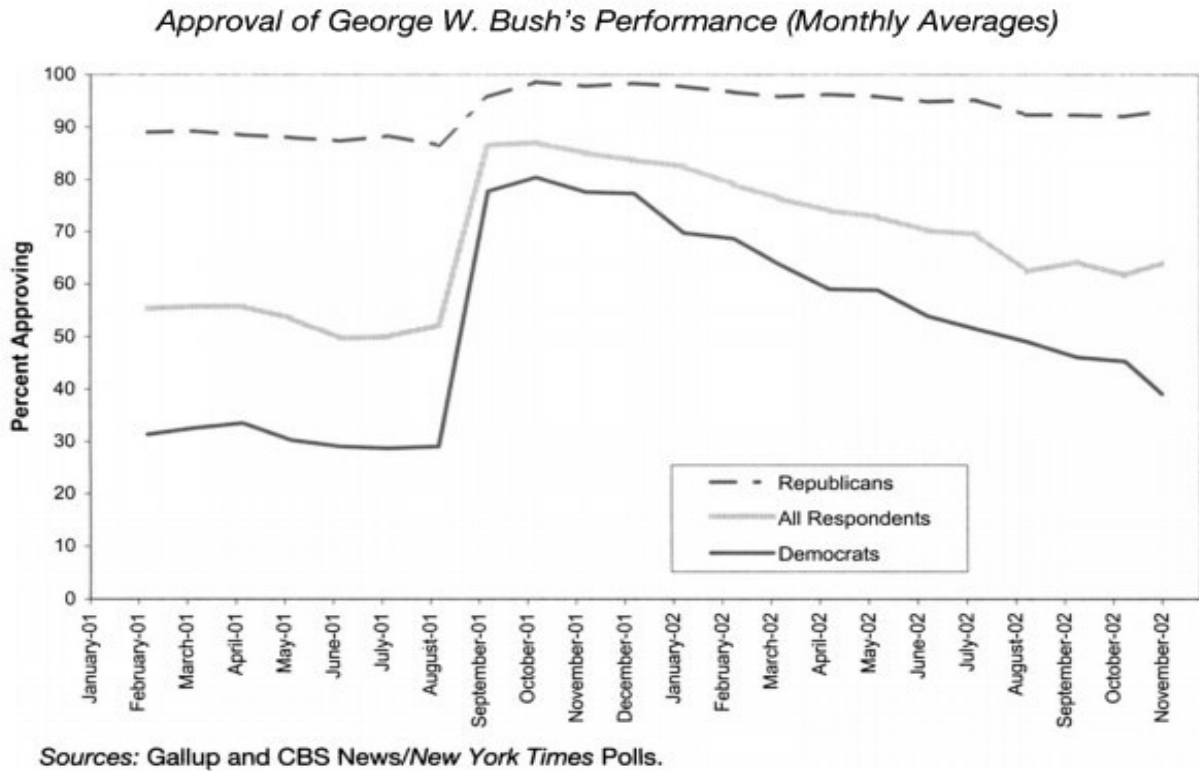


Figure 4.1 demonstrates the popularity of the government in 2002, a result I believe of an increased sense of patriotism across the country. The role of patriotism following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks will be analyzed in a future chapter of this thesis. President Bush's approval rating in November of 2002 was 63%, second best only to Clinton's approval rating of 66% in 1998, and tied with those of 2000 as well as 1986, under President Ronald Reagan. The iconic image of Bush standing atop a heap of rubble at the World Trade Center and the symbolism of that moment positively affected Bush's approval ratings. The approval rating of Congress was also higher than average, resting at 64.3%. That percentage ranks first for approval ratings of Congress since 1974, the year Gallup began measuring congressional

approval. In 2002, Bush's Republican party did not lose any seats in Congress, an atypical midterm outcome by historical standards (Campbell 1985). The popularity of President Bush and Congress after 9/11 will be discussed in a future chapter to this thesis, on the importance of topical issues for congressional election outcomes and public approval of Congress.

The 2010 Midterm Elections: President Barack Obama

The 2010 midterms were part of the focus of Chapter Three of this thesis, on the power of the economy in spurring public disapproval and incumbent losses. The 2010 election cycle is also, however, a good example of how decreasing public approval ratings of the president can negatively impact incumbents' chances for reelection. Coming off a popular 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama's approval ratings fell dramatically in 2010, spelling trouble for a Democratic-majority Congress. Figure 4.1 shows that public approval of President Obama in November of 2010 rested at 45%. However, in 2009, Obama's approval rating was 69%, his highest since taking office (Gallup 2011b). Likewise, public approval of Congress also decreased, falling to 23.9% as seen in Figure 4.1. In the largest ever number of seats lost by a president's party in a midterm, the Democratic party lost 63 seats, enough for the Republican party to gain control of the House of Representatives. Only 87% of incumbents were reelected, making 2010 the year with the lowest incumbent reelection rate since 1974.

The exit polls from the 2010 midterm elections can give more insight into how the public felt about Obama and Congress. When "asked about Obama's policies overall, about half of voters predicted he would hurt the country" (Swanson 2010, 1). A Gallup poll from Election Day indicated that 44% of the electorate approved of President Obama's "job as president"

(PollingReport.com 2011a). The economy seems to have been the reason for Obama's and Congress' low approval ratings (Gallup 2011c). In an exit poll conducted for ABC News, only "a third said the administration's economic stimulus program had helped the economy" (Langer 2010, 1). The stimulus package was signed into law by the Democratic Congress, and both it and Obama seemed to have taken part of the blame for the \$800 billion legislation.

Underscoring the Democratic party's unpopularity, "seventy-four percent [of respondents to the exit poll] described themselves as dissatisfied or even angry about the way the federal government is working" (Langer 2010, 1). The 2010 election cycle, therefore, was a manifestation of the impact of negative approval ratings of the president and of Congress on midterm elections. The particularly potent effect yielded a change in the majority party in the House of Representatives. Although not as important as the state of the economy, President Obama's approval ratings in 2010 hurt his Democratic party's chances in the midterm elections.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the impact of presidential approval ratings both on midterm election outcomes and public approval of Congress. I found that presidential approval ratings strongly correlated with the chances an incumbent wins reelection. However, the relationship between presidential approval and public approval of Congress was not immediately clear. It seems that public approval of Congress is not directly impacted by nor directly impacts presidential approval ratings. Thus, for this portion of my analysis, public approval of Congress has not proved to be a significant variable. The relationship between public approval of

Congress and the fortunes of members of the president's party in the midterms, specifically the number of seats lost by the president's party, was inconclusive.

Figure 4.1 graphs presidential approval ratings, incumbent reelection rates, public approval of Congress, and the number of seats the president's party has lost, if any, in each midterm election from 1974 to 2010. As presidential approval decreases, the chances an incumbent wins reelection also decreases, generally speaking. As presidential approval decreases, the chief executive's party is likely to lose more seats than if the president's approval was higher. As presidential approval decreases, public approval of Congress also decreases, as the two seem to be linked. Yet, this correlation is not universal, and therefore I cannot confirm an impact of public approval of Congress on presidential approval ratings. Therefore, my hypothesis in this regard has been proven incorrect. What I can give evidence for is that the incumbency advantage can be overcome if a president is deemed to have done a poor job in office.

Also in this chapter, I conducted case studies of the midterm elections in 1994, 1998, 2002, and 2010. In each election year, the impact of the president was demonstrable, yet varied in importance to the outcome of each election cycle. In 1994, a poor evaluation of President Clinton hastened the Republican Revolution, even though presidential approval was not the issue of paramount importance. The 1994 election cycle and the rise of Newt Gingrich will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter of this thesis. In 1998, President Clinton's approval ratings had bounced back, reaching one of the highest marks in recent history at 66%. Clinton's impressive approval ratings were in spite of his personal scandals, which the Republican party tried to capitalize on in a public relations campaign against the president. The Republicans were generally successful in denigrating the president regarding his personal life,

but that did not transcend to evaluations of his professional performance as chief executive (Highton 2002). Thus, in 1998, Clinton's Democratic party fared better than expected (Highton 2002). In the 2002 election cycle, President Bush and the Republican controlled Congress enjoyed historic approval ratings, mostly due to patriotic fervor following the events of September 11, 2001. As a result, the president's party gained seats in the House of Representatives. The midterm election of 2002 is a good example of the influence of a positive evaluation of the president and its effect on congressional elections. However, the 2002 election will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter of this thesis, as I believe patriotism played a key role in the outcome. Finally, the 2010 elections serve as an example of the negative impact of low approval ratings of the president on his party's chances in midterm elections. Low approval ratings of President Obama and of the Democratic Congress hurt the Democrats' chances in 2010, hastening the majority takeover by the Republican party. In all, case studies gave me the opportunity to delve further into the impact of presidential approval ratings on congressional elections, while reaffirming the lack of a role of public approval of Congress in this area.

I believe that a convincing case for the influence of presidential approval ratings on congressional elections has been laid out in this chapter. In contrast, the link among public approval of Congress, presidential performance, and midterm election outcomes could not be proven. Exit polls, approval ratings, academic journal articles, and newspaper accounts of presidential performance and the public's opinion of the president made it possible to analyze its effect on midterm elections. The same cannot be said of the role of public approval of Congress. My overarching hypothesis of the potential for the impact of public approval of Congress on congressional elections must be amended in light of this information. In the next chapter of this

thesis, I will discuss the impact of topical issues, namely the emergence of Newt Gingrich and the issues spurring the Republican Revolution as well as national security following September 11, 2001 on public approval of Congress and congressional election outcomes.

Chapter Five

Salient Issues and Their Effect on Public Approval of Congress and Congressional Elections

This chapter focuses on the impact of salient issues on midterm congressional elections and public approval of Congress. It is my hypothesis that issues of immediate importance have the potential to play a paramount role in determining an election outcome. These issues are specific to the election cycle in question, and were important only within the electoral context of a given midterm year. Based on which of the two major political parties support a popular issue, or are deemed by the public to put forth a stronger platform concerning an issue, one party will benefit more than the other in the midterm elections for which the issue played a significant, overriding role. The economy and midterm evaluations of the president routinely impact congressional election outcomes and public approval levels of Congress, as evidenced by the analyses in the two immediately previous chapters of this thesis. However, issues of urgent importance, what I label salient issues, have the potential to severely impact midterm congressional elections and influence public approval levels of Congress. It is my belief that in those years for which an emerging issue of paramount importance manifests itself, the issue overrides the economy and midterm evaluations of the president in their impact on election results. The issue could encompass the president's role as chief executive as well as the work of Congress, as will be seen in the analysis of the 1994 and 2002 midterm elections. However, in general, the emerging issue becomes the most important issue impacting the election.

The first salient issue I will be analyzing is the relevance of the emergence of Newt Gingrich and the issues he and the Republican leadership emphasized, which led to the subsequent “Republican Revolution” of 1994. The Republicans’ “Contract with America” and the Republican-fueled arguments against big government became the most important factors affecting the outcome of the 1994 midterms. The second salient issue I will analyze is national security and its impact on the midterm elections in 2002. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, national security became an emerging and important issue for the upcoming 2002 midterm cycle. The Republican’s response to 9/11 was applauded by the public, allowing the party to maintain a majority in Congress (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2003). In all, salient issues round out my matrix of theories to explain outcomes in congressional elections and fluctuations in public approval of Congress. This chapter will not include analyses of the 1998 and 2010 midterm elections, which were used as case studies in the previous two chapters. In those years, the economy and evaluations of the president sufficiently explain the election outcomes. Newly emerging and salient issues did not impact the 1998 and 2010 midterm elections as was the case in 1994 and 2002. In all, I believe that an analysis of the importance of salient issues, combined with the evidence in the balance of this thesis, give a well-rounded explanation to the question of what impacts congressional election outcomes and public approval levels of Congress in general.

The Republican Revolution- The 1994 Midterm Elections

The most salient set of issues in the 1994 midterm election was the rise of Newt Gingrich and the subsequent so-called Republican Revolution. “The Republican Party gained 53 seats in

the House of Representatives in the midterm elections, ending four decades of Democratic rule” (Abramowitz 1995, 873). The result truly was upending, for “Bill Clinton would be the first Democratic President to govern with a Republican Congress since Harry Truman from 1947-1949” (Abramowitz 1995, 873). Economic factors and midterm evaluations of the president do not fully explain the outcome of the 1994 midterm elections. “Economic resurgence and [President] Clinton’s foreign policy ‘successes’” did not benefit the Democratic party to the point of maintaining the majority in Congress (Economic and Political Weekly 1994, 3006). Yet, by considering the impact of the salient issue of the emergence of Newt Gingrich, the investigation into what impacts congressional approval and midterm election outcomes may become more complete.

The incumbent reelection rate in 1994 was 90.2% (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2007). This reelection rate is relatively low by historical standards. The low incumbent reelection rate and the turnover in majority party, I believe, stem from the same source. The outcome of the 1994 elections was impacted by “deep discontent among voters with the federal government” (Economic and Political Weekly 1994, 3006). The skill of Newt Gingrich and the Republican leadership to blame the Democratic party for the seemingly malfunctioning legislature prompted the electorate, in large part, to support Republican candidates for congressional office. “Most Americans [believed] that government [was] too big, intrusive, wasteful and incompetent and Democrats in particular [were] identified with big government and high taxes” (Economic and Political Weekly 1994, 3006). In a gesture to play upon the public’s disdain for a lack of transparency, Newt Gingrich put forth a Republican national proposal for the public’s consideration. That platform was dubbed the “Contract with America.”

The Contract with America begins by purporting to “restore the bonds of trust between the people and their elected representatives” (United States House of Representatives 1994). The need to restore such bonds alludes to the notion that the long-standing majority of the Democratic party lost a necessary bond with the people in a republican form of government. The Contract promises “no fine print,” highlighting the straightforwardness of the Republican plan, which would have been a welcome change from what was perceived as congressional inefficiency and ambiguity (United States House of Representatives 1994). The Contract recalls President Lincoln, an enormously popular figure in American society, by promising “to act ‘with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right’” (United States House of Representatives 1994). Alluding to both President Lincoln and God allowed the Republican party to form a bond with an increasingly conservative population across the country. In a straightforward manner, the Contract (United States House of Representatives 1994) thereafter lists eight proposals to be enacted immediately upon the installation of a Republican majority:

FIRST, require all laws that apply to the rest of the country also apply equally to the Congress; SECOND, select a major, independent auditing firm to conduct a comprehensive audit of Congress for waste, fraud or abuse; THIRD, cut the number of House committees, and cut committee staff by one-third; FOURTH, limit the terms of all committee chairs; FIFTH, ban the casting of proxy votes in committee; SIXTH, require committee meetings to be open to the public; SEVENTH, require a three-fifths majority vote to pass a tax increase; EIGHTH, guarantee an honest accounting of our Federal Budget by implementing zero base-line budgeting.

These eight proposals answer the fears of the people as outlined by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995), namely a lack of accountability, efficiency, and fairness, while proposing to fix the problems of “big government,” such as tax increases, proxy voting, and a federal deficit. In addition, the Contract proposed that within the first hundred days of the 104th Congress, ten bills

would be presented for debate, after the people had a chance to scrutinize each bill. The bills focused on fiscal responsibility, conservative social reform, tax reductions, and lowering the unemployment rate (United States House of Representatives 1994).

The Contract with America promised to cut taxes for the middle and upper-middle classes, lower unemployment, and balance the federal budget (Economic and Political Weekly 1994). Gingrich's platform was straightforward, national in scope, and was supported by much of the electorate, which seemed to self-identify with conservatives to a greater degree in 1994 (Abramowitz 1995). As a result, Gingrich was able to mobilize voters across the country to support the long-time minority Republican party in Congress. Part of the platform centered on social conservatism, playing into the "moral/religious conservatism" that had been growing across the country in the years immediately prior to the 1994 election cycle (Economic and Political Weekly 1994, 3006). In addition to the proposals laid out in the Contract with America, Gingrich continued his assault on the Democrats by labeling President Clinton a liberal elitist, contrasting the chief executive with what he characterized as every day, middle-class Americans (Economic and Political Weekly 1994).

Public approval of Congress in 1994 rested at 32.8%. In 1992, that rate was an even lower 22%. Therefore, it seems that public approval of Congress in this case was not a directly contributing factor of Democratic losses in 1994. Yet, Newt Gingrich effectively characterized the Democratic party as the party of big government and inefficiency, playing on the fears of the public espoused by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995, 2002) that Congress is too cumbersome in its legislative output and ignores the true needs of the people. Although public approval of Congress is historically low, Gingrich and the Republicans effectively capitalized on the growing

discontent among the electorate with the workings of Congress. Therefore, public approval of Congress was made into an important factor through the campaigning of Newt Gingrich. Evidence of Gingrich's success can be found in "the influence of ideological identification on the vote" (Abramowitz 1995, 881). As Abramowitz (1995, 881) explains, "the most dramatic increases in Republican voting came among self-identified Republicans and conservatives." The Republicans, who "overwhelmingly" supported Gingrich's measure, put for a "much more unified and ideological campaign than normal for a midterm election cycle" (Abramowitz 1995, 882). Newt Gingrich's organizational skills and popular message enabled Republican gains. This effective capitalization is what spurred the Republican Revolution. An ideological shift took place in 1994, as more members of the electorate self-identified as conservative while simultaneously identifying the Democrats as too liberal (Abramowitz 1995). In addition, the people were excited oust the Democratic party, as 42% of the electorate who identified themselves as Republicans or Republican-leaners were more enthusiastic about the 1994 election cycle than previous midterm elections (Jones 2010). That percentage would not be beaten until the 2010 midterm elections, when 59% of Republicans and Republican-leaners were more enthusiastic about the midterm elections than during previous years (Jones 2010).

The emergence of the issue of big government and the ability of Newt Gingrich and the Republican party to capitalize on the growing discontent of the public became the most salient issue in the 1994 midterm elections and spurred the Republican Revolution. The election cycle of 1994 serves as an outlier in that neither the economy nor the midterm evaluation of Bill Clinton can wholly account for the massive seat losses incurred by the Democratic party. Thus, I hypothesized that a salient issue became most paramount in affecting the election outcome. The

issues pointed out by the Contract with America, which spurred the Republican Revolution, I believe, more fully accounts for the outcome of the 1994 midterm elections.

Terrorism- The 2002 Midterm Elections

The outcome of the 2002 midterm elections also cannot fully be explained by the state of the economy or by midterm evaluations of President Bush. As is discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis, the economy was performing poorly in the lead up to the 2002 midterms. Consumer sentiment was at a low point, achieving an index of 89.6 as measured by the University of Michigan Consumer Sentiment Index. In addition, 5.8% of the people were unemployed in 2002, an increase from the unemployment rates in 2000 and 1998. Yet, the Republican party gained seats in the 2002 midterm elections, strengthening its majority. Presidential approval ratings do, in part, explain the successes of the Republican party in 2002. President Bush's approval ratings were relatively high in 2002, as were those of Congress. Public approval of Congress in 2002 rested at 64.3% (Gallup 2011a). In addition, the incumbent reelection rate in the House of Representatives was 96.2%. I believe that public approval of Congress helped the Republicans' chances of reelection given the importance of national security as an issue in the 2002 midterms and the emergence of patriotic fervor. One may ask the question, how did Congress and the president escape negative consequences of a poorly performing economy? In answering this question, the favorable approval ratings of the president and of Congress, as well as the high incumbent reelection rate in 2002, were supported by the emergence of terrorism as a salient issue.

In September of 2002, a surprisingly small percentage of the American public, 19%, believed that terrorism was “the most important problem facing the country” (Gallup 2002). Yet, in October of 2002, one month before the congressional elections, 32% of the public believed that terrorism was “the most important problem facing the country” (Gallup 2002). This percentage was lower than the 46% of Americans who maintained that terrorism was the most important issue in October of 2001, but that higher percentage was to be expected so soon after September 11, 2001. It is interesting to note that come July 2002, the economy eclipsed terrorism as “the most important problem facing the country” (Jones 2002, 1). Still, terrorism was a close second, and had been identified as the most important issue by a plurality of respondents since January of 2002 (Jones 2002). I believe that the economy, although understandably identified by the public as the most important issue given high unemployment and low consumer sentiment, did not have as big an impact on the election outcomes as did the issue of terrorism. The general emergence of terrorism as an issue, the first time in our history terrorism was identified as an important issue, had the greatest impact of any variable on the 2002 elections.

Whatever the reasons for the increase in the proportion of people who deemed terrorism to be the most salient issue between September and October of 2002, whether as a consequence of newly perceived threats or the result of effective campaigning by the Republican party, the emergence of terrorism and national security as a leading issue benefitted the Republicans in Congress. Jeffrey M. Jones (2002) forecasted that the Republicans would benefit if they could make terrorism a vital campaign issue. The fact that a mere 16% of the public noted that they were “very worried” about another terrorist attack in August of 2002 leads me to believe that the Republicans’ campaigning, rather than actual terrorist threats, made terrorism a salient issue in

2002. (Pew Research Center Publications 2010). The Republican party was deemed by the public to be more able to handle national security issues than the Democratic party (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2003). Jeffrey M. Jones (2002, 1) noted in August of 2002 that “to the extent that Republicans can make terrorism the central issue in the 2002 midterm elections, they stand to benefit in their quest to maintain control of the U.S. House.” Jones (2002) was correct in his assessment, in that terrorism became the central issue for many Americans by the time of the 2002 midterm elections. As a result, the incumbent reelection rate was higher than expected given the state of the economy, and the Republican party maintained their control of the House of Representatives. George W. Bush’s party even managed to gain seats in the House in the 2002 midterms, going against the historical pattern of the President’s party losing seats in the House during the midterm elections (Campbell 1985). The importance of the issue of terrorism to the outcome of the 2002 midterm elections is evidenced by the fact that, considering the weak state of the economy, “had the terrorist attacks not occurred, Bush’s overall approval rating...might have cost Republicans control of the House” (Jacobson 2003, 6-7).

In a poll for the Pew Research Center conducted in November of 2002, 69% of respondents indicated that the federal government, which at the time had a Republican president and Republican majority in the House of Representatives, was doing “very well” or “fairly well” in “reducing the threat of terrorism” (PollingReport.com 2011b, 3). Therefore, given the relative importance of terrorism as an issue identified by the public, the Republican party would stand to benefit from such praise. In October of 2002, less than one month before the midterm elections, 52% of respondents to a CNN poll indicated that the Republicans would “do a better job of dealing with” terrorism (PollingReport.com 2011b, 4). That percentage compares favorably to only 23% of respondents who indicated that Democrats would do a better job handling the issue

of terrorism (PollingReport.com 2011b, 4). The public confidence in the Republican party in managing terrorism benefitted Republicans' chances of election and reelection in the 2002 midterms. Given the importance of the issue to the public and the perception that the Republicans were better able to protect the country from terrorism, the 2002 election results were in large part a positive evaluation on the performance of the Republican leadership. The Republican party was awarded with an increase in their majority in the House of Representatives. High public approval of Congress, to be discussed in the next section in greater detail, therefore benefitted the Republican party in the 2002 elections.

Of interest to the relative importance of national security and terrorism for congressional elections is the fact that after the 2002 midterm election cycle, terrorism was not an issue of paramount importance to the American public. Frank Newport (2010, 1) wrote in September of 2010 that "nine years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, 1% of Americans mention terrorism as the most important problem facing the country." The graph, adapted from Newport's (2010) article, of the proportion of Americans naming terrorism as the most important problem facing the United States, is reproduced below.

Terrorism as Most Important U.S. Problem

September 2001-August 2010

■ % Naming terrorism



GALLUP

After a spike in the percentage of respondents who cited terrorism as the most salient issue facing the country in September of 2001, that proportion dropped significantly over the decade. Yet, despite this drop from 2001 to 2010, terrorism was still an issue of importance for the 2002 midterm elections. I believe that the drop in the percentage of Americans who identified terrorism as the most important issue facing the country supports my hypothesis of the potential importance of salient issues for congressional elections outcomes. Terrorism seems to have been an issue of great importance only for the 2002 midterm elections. By 2006, the year of the next midterm election cycle, only approximately 5% of the American public named terrorism as the issue of paramount importance facing the country. Thus, the impact of this salient issue within the electoral context of 2002 is emphasized by the drop demonstrated in Newport's (2010) graph.

Public Approval of Congress and Salient Issues Pertinent to a Specific Election Cycle

The importance of salient issues in their impact on public approval of Congress is not readily apparent. At some level, public approval of Congress and salient issues are linked. The response of Congress to emerging crises could impact the manner in which the public approves of the national legislature. If the public is receptive to the way in which Congress responds to an issue of great importance, public approval of Congress will become more positive. The example of the 2002 midterm elections attests to this, in that the public was approving of the response of George W. Bush and the Republican Congress to the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2003). A resounding 86% of respondents approved of the way President Bush was “handling his job as president” three days after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 (Gallup 2009). Public approval of the Republican-majority Congress as an institution increased, albeit for a short time. In October of 2001, 84% of respondents approved of the way “Congress [was] handling its job,” up from 42% immediately before 9/11 (Gallup 2011a).

The midterm elections of 1994 also display a link, in that high levels of public disapproval of Congress were a necessary factor for the Republican Revolution. Public approval of Congress in 1994 was 32.8%. However, I believe that without a galvanizing Republican leadership, the Republican takeover would not have occurred. Indeed, high levels of disapproval of Congress are a staple of modern national politics. A necessary condition of the Republican Revolution in 1994 seems to have been the catalyst that was the leadership of Newt Gingrich. Without the emergence of Gingrich, public approval of Congress would probably not have been a factor in the outcome of the 1994 elections. The addition of Gingrich’s popularity and leadership to low public approval of Congress resulted in the importance of public approval of Congress to the outcome of the 1994 elections.

I can conclude that public approval of Congress has the potential to combine with salient issues to effect congressional election outcomes. In the examples of the elections of 1994 and 2002, public approval of Congress was inherent to the issues which emerged as highly important. However, other salient issues may not have the inherent element of public approval of Congress. For example, regardless of the congressional response, a future terrorist attack could spur the electorate to vote for a specific party. In 2002, the Republicans were thought to have a better plan of attack in addressing terrorism and national security (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2003). This fact, rather than congressional responses, is what was most important for the Republican party in maintaining its majority in the House of Representatives. Another example could be focused on healthcare. If healthcare became a pressing and urgent issue, the political party with the plan most agreeable to the public would benefit, regardless of public approval of the previous Congress. Therefore, as a general rule, only in certain cases will public approval of Congress combine with salient issues to impact congressional election outcomes. Such a relationship can only be assessed on a case by case basis. Further research and analysis of subsequent midterm election cycles will most probably offer more insight, as new issues become salient in upcoming years.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the role of emerging salient issues in congressional election outcomes and public approval of Congress. I cannot in good faith point to a universal link between salient issues and public approval of Congress. In 1994 and 2002, public approval of Congress was central to the issues which became pressing and urgent. Therefore, in these cases,

the issues of the emergence of Newt Gingrich and national security, and public approval of Congress impacted each other. However, we will not know the extent of the impact of salient issues on public approval of Congress until those issues manifest themselves in future election cycles.

I did find a link however between emerging topical issues and congressional election outcomes. I picked the years 1994 and 2002 because they were outliers in my initial analyses of the impact of the economy and midterm evaluations of the president on congressional elections. In 1994 the economy was strong and evaluations of President Clinton were positive, yet the Democratic party lost a historic number of seats. Another issue must have accounted for the abnormal election outcome. The biggest issue in the 1994 elections was the Republican Revolution under the leadership of Newt Gingrich, who would become Speaker of the House. The skill of the Republican party to nationalize the election and effectively denounce the Democratic majority served to mobilize the electorate more so than in other election years. Their Contract with America served as the Republicans' platform, and was met with resounding approval by the public. In 2002, the emerging issue was national security. The economy was performing poorly, and the positive evaluations of President Bush and Congress were boosted by their response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The Republican party strengthened its majority in the House due to what the public perceived as a more coherent party platform in comparison with the Democrats concerning the issue of national security (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2003). Neither the economy nor midterm evaluations of the president directly affected the outcome of the 2002 congressional elections. Rather, the emergence of national security as an issue is what most impacted the midterm elections.

This chapter completes my inquiry into what impacts congressional elections and public disapproval levels of Congress. Emerging issues of urgency have the potential to impact an election outcome to a greater extent than the standbys of the economy and midterm evaluations of the president. These issues do not necessarily impact public approval levels of Congress, but may inherently contain an element of public opinion. What I can offer with confidence is when the economy and midterm evaluations of the president do not wholly account for congressional election outcomes, another issue of emerging importance can account for which political party fares better in a given election cycle.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

This thesis endeavored to discover what influences midterm congressional election outcomes, and to see if public approval of Congress plays a role in these outcomes. I asked three main questions: under what conditions does public approval of Congress change, what are the determinants for congressional election outcomes, and what is the link, if any, between public approval of Congress and election outcomes? First, I began with an overview of why the public dislikes Congress. There are a variety of reasons the public disapproves of Congress, including distrust of the members of Congress, disdain for the legislative process, disagreement with the policies of the legislative branch, perceived inefficiency and corruption of Congress as an institution, and negative perceptions of Congress fostered by the media and external variables such as the state of the economy. These variables have the potential to lower public approval levels of Congress. Approval levels of the first branch of government have suffered in modern times. In the literature review of this thesis, I also discussed the variables impacting congressional election outcomes in general. Incumbency, gerrymandering, campaign finance, party identification, national trends, the media, and the economy all, to some extent, affect congressional election outcomes. Incumbency plays the biggest role in congressional election outcomes, in that since World War Two, incumbents have enjoyed a mid-ninety percent reelection rate in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Discussing public approval of Congress and congressional election outcomes in general set the stage for my research, which was to analyze the potential impact of public approval of Congress on the outcomes of midterm

congressional elections. Yet, the influence of public approval of Congress on election outcomes remained unclear. Developing a theory for a link between public approval of Congress and midterm election outcomes was the necessary next step for analyzing whether or not public approval of Congress truly impacted congressional election outcomes.

Public Approval of Congress and Congressional Elections: A Link

Forming a theory about the link between public approval of Congress and congressional elections was the focus of Chapter Two. In the second chapter of this thesis, I formed my own hypotheses to test the presence of a link between public approval of Congress and election outcomes in the House of Representatives. I chose to limit my research to the House of Representatives because it is more susceptible to fluctuations in public approval, given that Senators are elected to longer six-year terms in office. I posited that changes in the state of the economy, midterm evaluations of the performance of the President of the United States, and the emergence of pressing issues particular to a given election cycle have the potential to both upset public approval of Congress and impact congressional election outcomes. I hypothesized that the economy had the biggest effect on congressional election outcomes and public approval of Congress. However, any of these groups of issues could negatively impact incumbents' reelection rates, thus affecting congressional election outcomes, as well as impact public approval levels of Congress.

Chapter Three of this thesis explored the effect of the economy on congressional election outcomes and public approval of Congress. I first began with an analysis of unemployment, in the belief that high levels of unemployment would precipitate low incumbent reelection rates and high disapproval of Congress. Incumbent reelection rates were not routinely impacted by fluctuations in the unemployment rate. In addition, I found that unemployment did not steadily impact levels of public approval of Congress. There were years when unemployment was high and approval of Congress was low, but there were also years when unemployment was low and approval of Congress was likewise low. Therefore, still believing that the economy plays a significant role in approval levels of Congress and congressional election outcomes, I analyzed consumer sentiment, a measurement routinely gathered by the University of Michigan.

Consumer sentiment proved to be a stronger link to approval levels of Congress and incumbent losses than did unemployment. In general, when consumer sentiment was low, incumbents were more likely to be ousted from office. Likewise, when consumer sentiment was high, incumbent candidates maintained their long-standing advantage. Pertaining to public approval of Congress, when consumer sentiment was high, approval ratings of Congress rose, and when consumer sentiment was low, approval ratings dropped. There was a strong positive correlation between consumer sentiment and both approval levels of Congress and incumbent reelection rates. Thus, consumer sentiment as a measure of the economic health of the nation made for a convincing argument as to the effect of public approval ratings of Congress on congressional election outcomes. Part of the link between public approval of Congress and election outcomes was discovered through an economic analysis focusing on consumer sentiment. Consumer sentiment affected public approval levels of Congress and congressional

elections in much the same way, making for a persuasive case for a relationship between congressional approval and midterm election outcomes through the variable of consumer sentiment levels.

In general terms, when analyzing the effect of the economy on public approval of Congress, I did find a relationship existed. Consumer sentiment trended well with public approval of Congress. The unemployment rate proved to be a less useful variable in analyzing public approval of Congress and election outcomes. An analysis of specific midterm election cycles confirmed the data I analyzed in Chapter Three. In 1998, a strong economy, marked by high consumer sentiment and low unemployment, helped maintain high incumbent reelection rates. In addition, public approval levels of Congress and of President Clinton were higher than usual. Therefore, despite the personal scandals of President Clinton, the economy benefitted members of Congress in both political parties. In 2010, a poorly performing economy, namely one in which consumer sentiment was at a low point and unemployment hovered around 9.7%, hurt the chances of members of the Democratic majority in Congress. As a result, the incumbent reelection rate was historically low. Underscoring the turnover in majority party in the House of Representatives was the fact that public approval levels of Congress in 2010 were very low. In 1994, a well-performing economy was not enough to halt the progress of the Republican party and the leadership of Newt Gingrich. Despite a powerful economy, with high consumer sentiment and a reasonable unemployment rate, the Democratic party suffered historic losses in the midterm elections. The cycle of 1994 forced me to expand my set of hypotheses examining what impacts congressional elections and public approval of Congress. Likewise, the 2002 election cycle took place on the background of a poorly performing economy, marked by high unemployment and low consumer sentiment. Yet, the Republican party maintained its majority

in the House of Representatives. The election cycles of 1994 and 2002 served as outliers in need of further explanation.

Evaluations of the President, Public Approval of Congress, and Congressional Elections

One of the explanations I put forth for explaining the outliers that were the midterm elections of 1994 and 2002 was that midterm election cycles are impacted by public evaluations of the president at the time of the midterms. Chapter Four explores the effect of midterm evaluations of the president on public approval levels of Congress and congressional election outcomes. Presidential performance did not have a great impact on the results of the 1994 and 2002 midterm elections, but more light was shed on the power of presidential performance after analyzing the 1998 and 2010 midterm elections. My data show that as the public is more approving of the president, incumbent reelection rates are more likely to be maintained than when the president is looked upon with disfavor by the public. This long-term correlation provided evidence for the influence of presidential approval ratings on congressional election outcomes. In addition to the impact of presidential approval ratings on incumbent reelection rates, I hypothesized that midterm evaluations of the president also affect the number of seats the president's political party loses during the midterms. I believed that the higher the approval of the president, the lower the number of seats the president's party loses in the midterms. Likewise, the lower the approval rating, the higher the number of seats lost by the president's party in the midterms. My hypothesis in this regard was incorrect. The data showed mixed results as to the effect of presidential popularity on the number of seats lost by the president's party during the midterm elections.

The impact of presidential approval ratings on public approval of Congress at the time of the midterm elections is evident. In general, when presidential approval levels rise, public approval levels of Congress increase. Likewise, when the public disapproves of the president's performance, approval ratings of Congress are lower. A strong positive correlation across time exists for public approval levels of Congress and presidential approval levels during the midterm elections. Perhaps the enhanced role of the president in proposing legislation and being a more persuasive and public force in what has historically been Congress' domain has led the people to conflate the performances of the chief executive and the national legislature. Regardless, a link between presidential approval ratings and public approval levels of Congress is apparent. It is possible that a third factor influences both presidential approval and congressional approval simultaneously and with similar effects. A persuasive argument could be put forth for the effect of patriotism in such a manner for the 2002 midterm cycle. In addition, one could put forth an argument that public approval levels of Congress are what really impact presidential approval ratings. However, to this point, I believe that the notoriety of the President of the United States outweighs that of individual members of Congress and Congress as a whole. Thus, barring a third variable, I believe that midterm evaluations of the president impact public approval levels of Congress as well as congressional election outcomes. A link between the three exists, much like that between the economy, midterm election outcomes, and public approval levels of Congress I found in Chapter Three.

I finished Chapter Four with case studies of the elections of 1994, 1998, 2002, and 2010 to see if midterm evaluations of the president impacted these election years and/or public approval levels of Congress during those years. I found that evaluations of the president impacted election outcomes as well as approval levels of Congress, although to a lesser extent.

In 1998, a positive evaluation of Bill Clinton helped the Democratic party regain seats in the House of Representatives. This positive association with Clinton was due in large part to a bustling economy, in spite of Clinton's personal scandals. The public based its positive evaluation of Clinton not on the Lewinsky scandal, but on the president's success as an officeholder. In 2002, positive evaluations of George W. Bush helped the Republicans maintain their majority. The positive reaction to the way in which Bush and his party responded to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, accounted for Bush's high levels of public approval. In 2010, the public in large part found the performance of Barack Obama unsatisfactory, most probably due to the poorly performing economy and the inability of the president to remedy the situation, whatever the reasonableness of such a demand. As a result, Democratic candidates could not count on President Obama to influence voters in a positive manner to the benefit of the party as they had with Bill Clinton in 1998. Finally, public opinion of the president in 1994 was more negative than usual, but did not account for the massive seat losses incurred by the Democrats in what became known as the Republican Revolution. Rather, the emerging issue of the nationalization of the election by Newt Gingrich and the effective nature of his mobilizing the public against the Democratic party spurred Republican gains.

Salient Issues, Public Approval of Congress, and Congressional Elections

Chapter Five focused on the impact of emerging salient issues on congressional election outcomes and public approval levels of Congress. I focused on the election cycles of 1994 and 2002 in this chapter, in that the economy and midterm evaluations of the president sufficiently explained the election outcomes and the role of public approval of Congress in 1998 and 2010,

but did not fully explain the outcome or the role of public approval of Congress in 1994 and 2002. Public approval of Congress proved to be an important factor in the outcomes of 1994 and 2002. Another factor became paramount in importance for the years 1994 and 2002. In 1994, that salient issue was the emergence of Newt Gingrich and the subsequent Republican Revolution. The Republican Revolution, which stressed the importance of transparency in government and the inefficiency of the “big government” of the Democratic party was the most important issue for the outcome of the 1994 midterm elections. Gingrich effectively mobilized a large portion of the electorate to oust the Democrats from the majority in the House of Representatives. For his efforts, Gingrich was made Speaker of the House, symbolizing and solidifying the importance of his leadership for the Republican party. Low public approval of Congress in 1994 was a necessary factor for the advent of the Republican Revolution. Although levels of public approval of Congress were not abnormally low, Gingrich and the Republican leadership effectively capitalized on the public’s disapproval to secure the majority in Congress. Thus, public approval of Congress played a crucial role in the outcome and was inherent to the issue of paramount importance in the 1994 midterm elections.

The salient issue of 2002 was national security, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Neither the economy nor midterm evaluations of President Bush could account for the triumph of the Republican party in the midterm elections of 2002. The economy was not performing well, marred most noticeably by low consumer sentiment. One would expect the majority party in Congress to suffer with the background of a suffering economy. Yet, the Republican party gained seats as a result of the 2002 midterms. President Bush’s approval ratings most probably helped the Republicans in Congress, but positive evaluations of the president stemmed from the Republican response to 9/11. The Republicans were thought to

have a better plan for ensuring the safety of the country and combating terrorism in comparison with the Democratic party. In 2002, what mattered most was not the state of the economy, which according to historical patterns should have benefitted the Democrats, but the fear of subsequent terrorist attacks. Public opinion at the time ranked terrorism as one of the most important problems facing the country, and therefore the unique issue of national security affected the 2002 midterm election outcome more so than did the economy or evaluations of President Bush.

Public approval of Congress was augmented by its response to the terrorist attacks. Solidarity with the president most probably added to the Republican majority's benefit as a manifestation of patriotism. The public in general supported Congress, especially since the body was willing to act to ensure the nation's security. In 2002, public approval of Congress was historically quite high, a result of increased patriotism and approval of the way in which the Republican majority responded with President Bush to 9/11. Therefore, the salient issue of national security in 2002 positively impacted public approval of Congress to the benefit of the majority in the House of Representatives. This high level of public approval of Congress most probably positively impacted Republican incumbents' chances of reelection.

Public Approval of Congress and its Impact on Congressional Election Outcomes

In general, I can tentatively put forth the argument that public approval of Congress does indeed impact congressional election outcomes, but only in certain circumstances. A poorly performing economy will hurt incumbents' chances of reelection in the midterm elections, and vice versa. Related is the fact that a poorly performing economy will negatively impact public approval of Congress. The midterm cycle of 2010 testifies to this phenomenon. Negative

evaluations of the president will hurt the president's party in the midterm elections, and positive evaluations of the president will benefit incumbents. Interestingly, the president's performance does not have as great an effect on the outcome of midterm elections, in that the president's party has lost seats in the midterm elections every year since 1974 save the 1998 and 2002 cycles. Still, a connection between presidential approval and election outcomes is evident. In general, if the president is evaluated positively, incumbents will be more successful in the midterms. It seems to be the case that a poorly evaluated president negatively impacts public approval levels of Congress, and vice versa. Still, a third factor may influence both presidential approval and congressional approval, as was the case in the 2002 midterm elections when patriotism affected both of these levels. The election cycle of 1998 testifies to the importance of external factors, in that President Clinton's approval ratings were high, as were those of Congress. A correlation exists here, although a causal relationship is suspect due to the positive economy in 1998. Perhaps further research will test the existence of a causal relationship. Regardless, a correlation between presidential approval and congressional approval can yield insight into the forces affecting congressional elections. Finally, salient issues impact public approval of Congress, in that the public will either approve or disapprove of Congress' response to newly pressing issues, such as national security or the unacceptable rise of "big government." The election cycles of 1994 and 2002 demonstrate the power of pressing issues. I believe that salient issues impact public approval of Congress, but can only be determined to have such an impact after the fact, given that issues unique to an election year can become pressing without prior notice. In all, I believe that public approval of Congress can impact congressional elections, but such a relationship is not universal for every election cycle. The potential exists, especially when the economy, the performance of the president, and newly pressing issues are at the forefront of the

public agenda, but public approval of Congress does not necessarily impact all congressional elections. The conclusions I reached in studying the election outcomes of 1994, 1998, 2002, and 2010 are mixed when assessing the role of public approval of Congress. In 1994 and 2002, public approval of Congress played a role, I believe, in the election outcomes. The 1994 election cycle witnessed the negative effects of public disapproval of Congress when that dissatisfaction was capitalized upon by Newt Gingrich and the Republican leadership. In 2002, positive evaluations of Congress allowed the Republicans to maintain their majority with the assistance of increased patriotism. However, in 1998 and 2010, public approval of Congress was not a central factor in the election outcomes. In 1998, positive evaluations of President Bill Clinton benefitted the Democratic party, and in 2010 a poorly performing economy negatively impacted the Democratic majority in the House. In all, public approval of Congress can impact election outcomes, but only, it seems, in unique circumstances.

Limitations

There were limitations to the hypotheses I put forth and the data I collected in trying to prove these hypotheses. First, I encountered a lack of data in some areas. For example, the exit polls available for most years were not available for the 2002 midterm elections. The Voter News Service, the organization which conducts exit polls for major news sources, cited problems with the reporting of the exit polls. I used exit poll data for much of my research on how the public perceived the state of the economy, Congress, and the president. The fact that major news sources such as ABC and CNN would not release exit polls made finding this information much more difficult given my immediate resources and time constraints. Although I was able to gauge

the mood of the public and gather other data for the 2002 midterms, such as consumer sentiment, the unemployment rate, the incumbent reelection rate, public approval of Congress, and evaluations of President George W. Bush, the exit poll data for that year may have enhanced my analysis.

Another obstacle to my research was a lack of specific information about public approval levels of Congress. Although the data on public approval ratings of Congress were easy to find, less available was polling as to why the public disapproved of Congress. My literature review on the overview of why the people dislike Congress was beneficial, but lacked specific examples for the reasons put forth. Original research on my part, I believe, helped to fill this hole, given my cross-analyses of public approval of Congress and the way in which the public evaluated other factors, such as the economy and the president. However, given my limitations, the results I gathered may not tell the whole story as to why the public disapproved of Congress across election cycles. Scholarly accounts and news stories helped answer this question, but hard evidence explaining why public approval ratings of Congress fluctuated for multiple years was largely unavailable. Although the inability to holistically answer this question did not undermine my own conclusions, having this information available could have provided more insight as to the role of public approval of Congress in determining midterm election outcomes.

Given my time limitation, working on the project from September 2010 to March 2011, I had to choose selectively which election years I would analyze in detail. I chose the years 1994, 1998, 2002, and 2010 because they fit well with my hypothesis. I posited that public approval of Congress may have an effect on congressional election outcomes when external factors, such as the performance of the economy, the performance of the president, and newly emerging issues of urgent importance dominate the public agenda. I initially chose the 1994 midterm election cycle

because the Republican Revolution was a unique occurrence and I wanted to discover the underlying reasons for its emergence. I chose the 2010 election cycle because I believed it to be a classic example of the importance of the economy on the election outcomes. The 2002 election cycle was unique for the legacy of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which I believed to have great importance on the outcomes. Finally, the 1998 election provided the unique backdrop of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. The 1998 midterms therefore provided an opportunity to uncover the role of presidential approval on election outcomes. The effect of the state of the economy, midterm evaluations of the president, and salient issues on public approval of Congress and congressional elections could be thoroughly analyzed through an in depth study of these four election cycles. Yet, deeper analyses of other election cycles could broaden the scope of research in this area. For example, the 2006 midterm election cycle provided the Democratic party with its first majority in the House of Representatives since 1994. Uncovering why the Republicans lost the majority could provide additional insight into how public approval of Congress impacts congressional elections. Perhaps the intricacies of other election years could shed light on nuances I did not uncover in my research pertaining to public approval of Congress and congressional elections.

My hypothesis on the impact of newly emerging salient issues on public approval of Congress and midterm elections did account for the outlier years, 1994 and 2002, which could not fully be explained by the economy nor by midterm evaluations of the president. Although perhaps not a limitation of this thesis, the hypothesis I put forth cannot be tested until emerging issues besides the economy and presidential performance surface. That is, one won't be able to analyze the impact of a salient issue until it manifests itself in a specific election year. The

formation of a more concrete hypothesis, one that can be tested objectively and across time may help to alleviate the subjective nature of this portion of my hypothesis.

Conclusion

I believe that an examination of public approval of Congress and congressional elections is beneficial to expanding the knowledge in this area. As of now, analyses of elections focus on the outcome, rather than the underlying psychological mechanisms which produce that outcome. Perhaps the outcomes of election cycles are rightfully the focus, instead of why those outcomes took place. Yet, the role of public approval of Congress is demonstrable and can provide insight into why voters choose certain candidates over others. This information could be used by the representatives themselves to more effectively advocate on behalf of their constituents and their political desires. I believe that, although future research is warranted given my time and resource limitations, reading this thesis will allow students of political science to more easily predict the outcome of future elections and understand why a certain outcome took place. In addition, studying public approval of Congress yields a better understanding of our democratic system, how it works, what its problems are, and how to improve upon the relationship between citizen and representative. Doing so, it is my hope, can restore the respect that I believe the first branch of our government deserves. Congress is seen as ineffective and is derided by the general public. The founders of this country determined that Congress should be the most powerful of the branches, but it has fallen in esteem. Perhaps a better understanding of Congress, public approval of the branch, and election mechanisms, central to our democratic style of government, will benefit the institution as well as those living under its auspices.

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