

Divided Government, United Approval: The Dynamics of Congressional and Presidential Approval

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Abstract

A theory of partisan control might expect that during times of divided government, approval of Congress and the presidency would move in opposite directions. Yet, the congressional approval question is an ambiguous one in the minds of voters and makes understanding the movement of the aggregated series much more difficult. Here, monthly congressional and presidential approval data for the 1995-2005 period are studied and found to move in tandem, even during periods of divided government. Multivariate ARFIMA models show a strong and positive relationship between congressional approval and lagged presidential approval, even during the period of fiercely divided government under President Clinton. This means that, rather than paying attention to partisan control, the electorate transfers feelings about the president to the institution of Congress.

In the fall of 2007, less than a year after the Democrats took over both chambers of Congress, polls showing the approval rating for Congress to be at a record low were prominently discussed in the press.¹ What did this mean? Did the American public believe this Congress to be the least capable ever? Should we expect the public's dissatisfaction with the Democratic Congress to translate into a major shift back to the Republicans in 2008? Perhaps such inferences give too much credit to the American public—indeed, they imply a number of factors that are difficult to defend. First, that Americans are evaluating the current Congress in relation to the many that preceded it. Second, that the electorate is paying attention to the partisan control of Congress and, third, that voters are likely to use this information in upcoming elections to punish a party they deem to be doing a poor job.

More likely, the record low congressional approval numbers are simply indicative of the public's general unhappiness with government. Low levels of approval for Congress—an institution Americans love to hate—are just one manifestation of general unhappiness that does not necessarily spell doom for the party controlling Congress. Given the emphasis placed on congressional approval in the press and political commentary, these questions require more careful examination. For example, the assumption that during times of divided government the approval ratings of Congress are good predictors of the future electoral fortunes of the majority party makes several leaps in logic that may be unfounded.

A closer study of the dynamics of congressional approval should shed a good deal of light on how reliable a measure it truly is.

Certainly, low levels of support for Congress are one of the principal indicators of Americans' dislike and distrust of their government. Several explanations have been put forward for why support for Congress, the "People's Branch," is perpetually miserable. Among these reasons are the propensity of congressional candidates to ride anti-Congress rhetoric to victory (Fenno 1975), the public's general dislike for the legislative process (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997), and a lack of institutional maintenance by members (Mayer and Canon 1999). While dynamic models of presidential approval have been helpful in explaining the links between economic factors and the approval of the president (e.g. Mueller 1970; MacKuen 1983; Clarke and Stewart 1994; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992) studies of the dynamic properties of congressional approval are far more rare—a fact that can be blamed partly on the relative lack of time-series data and partly on a basic uncertainty over what approval for Congress as a whole means.

In fact, the public's inability to precisely and consistently grasp the concept of "Congress" in the question: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Congress is handling its job?" is what distinguishes congressional approval from a series such as presidential approval (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Does the question ask for an evaluation of the leaders of the Congress? Or is it asking about approval of the majority party, recent legislation, or the latest nomination fight in the news? Most likely, each of these is foremost in the mind of some survey respondents at one time or another thereby making the long-term dynamics of congressional approval difficult to understand.

This is manifest in two ways: first, the variables we might expect to be good predictors of congressional approval are hard to pin down. Below, it is shown that a very good positive predictor of monthly congressional approval is the lagged level of presidential approval—a fact true even during President Clinton's last six years in office, a time of bitterly divided government. This indicates that the electorate's opinion about Congress, rather than being thoughtfully constructed, may simply be an artifact of their general feelings towards government. A second distinguishing factor of the congressional approval series is its memory. The level of presidential approval held by a group of voters may be mostly a running tally of how they interpret the actions of the president. In terms of evaluating Congress, however, the same group of individuals—with various levels of knowledge and interest in Congress and with each perhaps defining Congress differently—are more likely to be mixed in the extent to which past events affect current opinions. Over time, the way in which the aggregated approval measures of the two institutions evolve should differ.

This paper discusses the dynamics within and between the congressional and presidential approval series. Tests are performed to demonstrate the electorate's "shorter" memory of the congressional series. Finally, multivariate models are presented that show the importance of presidential approval as a predictor of congressional approval during times of both divided and united government. This

counterintuitive finding points to the general ambiguity of the congressional approval question and to the relative inability of the congressional index to provide meaningful information about the actual “way Congress is handling its job.”

THE DYNAMICS OF CONGRESSIONAL AND PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL

Polls continually show Congress to be the least popular branch of government and scholars agree that the dominant opinion towards Congress lies somewhere between distrust (Patterson and Magleby 1992; Kimball and Patterson 1997) and disgust (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Miller (1974) and Citrin (1974) both discuss a general decline in popular support for government during the 1960s as compared with the 1950s and 1940s implying the newness of Americans’ dislike of government and Congress. Mayer and Canon (1999), however, persuasively argue that the collective dilemmas facing members of Congress—running for Congress by running against Congress and the impossible balancing act of constituency versus national interests—have made congressional unpopularity the norm since its very beginnings. Thus, a fundamental dislike of the institution is a defining characteristic of congressional approval and should exert a strong pull on the series toward consistently low levels.

Before examining its properties, however, a fair question is “what is congressional approval?” Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) argue that while constituents may have “affection for their own representatives, Congress as an institution is more removed and abstract.” Fenno (1975) points out that most people “find it hard or impossible to think about Congress as an institution.” Indeed, one further step backward in the process is necessary—as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) point out, we must ask “what is ‘Congress’ in congressional approval?” In their important book *Congress as Public Enemy* these authors show a great deal of variation in the level of positive sentiment towards Congress depending upon how questions are asked. For example, when people are asked to evaluate the members of Congress, the collection of members fares quite poorly (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 44-46). Yet, the same respondents give positive evaluations when asked to think about Congress as an institution. Respondents are also far more favorable towards their own representatives than the membership as a whole. However, despite the fact that with properly worded questions the public expresses more positive feelings towards Congress, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) show that when asked the simple “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Congress is handling its job?” people usually think first of the members of Congress. This leads to a strong bias towards negativity in the traditional congressional approval question and dooms the index to reflect people’s worst feelings towards the institution.

To be sure, reference points for evaluating Congress may vary a great deal across time and across voters. Overall, the level of knowledge about Congress is low and in particular below that of the president (Bernstein 1989). If the approval question cues thinking about the members of Congress, which members are respondents thinking about? For some it may be their own senator or

representative, while others think of congressional leaders or a particular member prominent in the news. Still others may consider the handling of a recent issue, bill, or scandal.

With so many possibilities, the focal point of the public's attention on Congress will inevitably shift as time passes. Thus, when an event causes a change in the monthly level of congressional approval, some voters may well remember the reason in the months that follow. But, for others, the aim of their view of Congress will move and the impact of the event will be washed away. This process, along with the basic dislike of the institution, will create some underlying reversion to an average low level in the aggregated variable even as events move the series over the short- and medium-term. Since the basic dislike of Congress will be more common in some—specifically, men, the wealthier, the better educated, the more politically active, and those sharing the party identity of the congressional minority (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 114)—we should expect heterogeneity in the mean reversion of individuals.

The psychological perspective of Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau (1995) is helpful in understanding this process. They show that voters may not remember the actual facts that lead them to some sentiment towards a candidate. Yet, the existence and strength of that sentiment may be quite enduring and powerful. This could be extended to the study of opinions towards institutions. If many have a negative view of Congress as a whole and events are easily forgotten, that negative affect can be a permanent drag on the level of congressional approval. This may be especially true if motivated reasoning plays a role inasmuch as people will expend some effort to maintain their existing opinions (Taber and Lodge 2006).

Thus, we can explain a lot of the movement in the congressional approval series before we even get to a discussion of explanatory variables. The series has a short memory and a tendency to return to some natural, low level. And, given the uniquely vague notions of what approving of Congress means, there is reason to expect that the memory of the series is of particular interest—faster mean reversion can be seen as an indicator of the electorate's weaker understanding of the institution.

In contrast, the president is a much more identifiable actor for whom individuals have daily information with which to update their opinions. Predicting today's level of approval of the president as the sum of impacts of events during his presidency is certainly more feasible than in the case of Congress. Presidential approval may indeed be a running tally of events following, or nearly following, the behavior of a random walk. Even if facts are forgotten, changes in voters' affect towards the president can long endure (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). Nevertheless, the effects of long-past events may eventually fade as partisanship or basic attitudes towards the presidency lead to long-term mean reversion. In such a way, the presidential approval series is likely to be longer memoried than the congressional series.²

The difficulty of conceptualizing Congress should also be evident in multivariate models that seek explanatory variables for congressional approval. A long

history of scholarship has documented the impact of economic measures on presidential approval in dynamic models (see, for example: Mueller 1970; MacKuen 1983; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992; Clarke and Stewart 1994; Norpoth 1996). Scholars studying congressional approval have followed and developed similar models estimating the impact of the economy (Durr 1997; Box-Steffensmeier and Tomlinson 2000; Rudolph 2002). In particular, Box-Steffensmeier and Tomlinson (2000) find a very close, fractionally cointegrated relationship between the Index of Consumer Sentiments and congressional approval and Rudolph (2002) finds the congressional series to be determined by personal subjective evaluations of the economy in contrast to the dominance of national measures in the case of presidential approval.

Yet, if the “Congress” of congressional approval is an elusive concept in the minds of survey respondents, perhaps other explanations are worth exploring. The electorate’s opinion regarding Congress may, in fact, be more of an indicator of general satisfaction with the government than a well thought out evaluation of the legislative branch. Davidson, Kovenock, and O’Leary (1968) first suggested nearly 40 years ago that the level of support of other institutions may matter. Using individual-level data, Kimball and Patterson (1997) find that presidential approval is a good predictor of congressional approval. However, we might expect this relationship to vary according to the parties in control of these two branches of government.

Bernstein (2001) offers a theory he calls *general-cynicism* that posits that, regardless of the parties in control, those with a general distaste for government will dislike both branches, and those with less cynicism will like both. He contrasts this with the *partisan control* hypothesis in which the parties in power determine approval so that a negative correlation should exist during times of divided government. There is nothing dynamic, however, to Bernstein’s two hypotheses and it remains to be seen if the positive relationship he finds in both the 1990 and 1993 NES studies will hold up using monthly data.³ As shown below, this is exactly the case and is true to such an extent that the positive impact of presidential approval is much stronger at times than even that of the economy. It even holds up during the Clinton years, a time of divided government and lengthy impeachment proceedings when we would expect that an individual from a consciously partisan electorate would approve of the job performance of either the Democratic president or the Republican Congress, but likely not both.

To be sure, the positive relationship between the two variables does not say much for the astuteness of the American electorate or, ultimately, for the value of congressional approval as a measure of congressional performance. For example, we would expect that as a sophisticated electorate grew more frustrated with President Bush and his administration they would have a higher opinion of the Democratic Congress fighting against him in one policy area after another. Certainly, if the electorate is truly evaluating the job Congress is doing, some attention to partisan control should be evident in the relationship between congressional and presidential approval. Next, I turn to an explanation of the data and methods used and then to the models that demonstrate this relationship.

DATA AND METHODS

The data set employed consists of monthly aggregate data on congressional approval, presidential approval, and four subjective evaluations of the economy for the period of January 1995 to June 2005. The sample period thus encompasses the years of divided government during Bill Clinton's presidency and a little more than the first term of George W. Bush's presidency under united government.⁴ Congressional approval is calculated as the monthly percentage of people responding affirmatively to the question: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Congress is handling its job?"⁵ Presidential approval is gathered by Gallup and calculated as the monthly percentage of people responding affirmatively to the question: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way _____ is handling his job as President?" Figure 1 shows the movement of these two variables over the sample period. It is evident that the congressional series is consistently lower than the presidential series but otherwise follows its fluctuations fairly closely. Also, the high volatility over short periods should make it apparent that approval of Congress is not simply a matter of party control. The remaining variables are subjective economic evaluations—personal expectations, personal retrospections, national expectations, and national retrospections.⁶

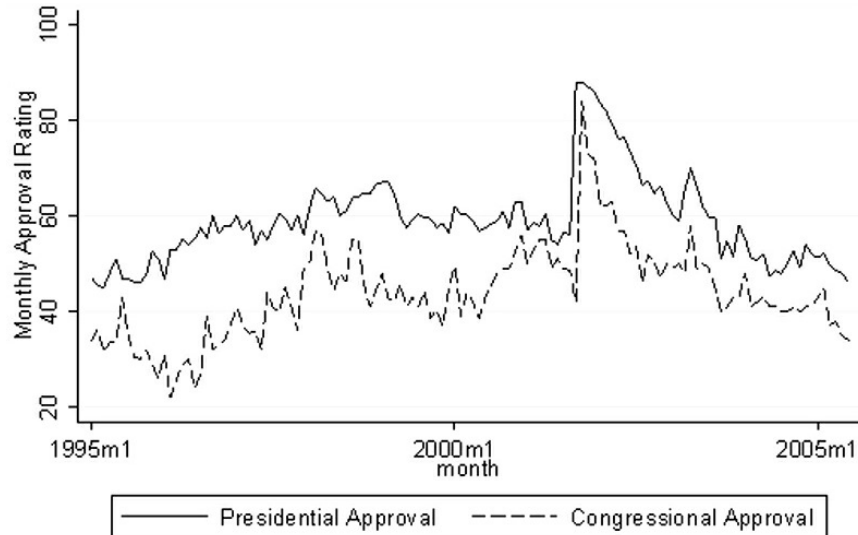
From the discussion above, the properties—in particular the memory—of the congressional and presidential series can tell us a good deal before we proceed to multivariate relationships. The univariate characteristics of a time series can be summarized in an ARFIMA (autoregressive fractionally integrated moving average) model. The ARFIMA model for variable Y_t can be summarized as:

$$(1 - \phi_p L_p) (1 - L)^d y_t = (1 + \theta_q L_q) \varepsilon_t$$

This consists of stationary autoregressive (AR) and moving average (MA) parameters denoted by ϕ and θ , respectively, the "lag operator" L such that $(L^k)Y_t = Y_{t-k}$, and ε_t , the error term $\sim N(0, \sigma^2)$. The d term is the fractional differencing parameter so that Y_t reverts to a short memory, stationary ARMA process when $d=0$ and to a perfect memory, unit-root ARIMA process when $d=1$.⁷ If d holds intermediate values between 0 and 1 it is said to be fractionally integrated or "long" memory. In such a case recent events are remembered longer than in the case of a simple ARMA model, but not so long as in the perfect memory ARIMA model.

Which value of d should we expect for the congressional series? To begin, if some portion of the electorate continually updates their view of Congress based on new information, the series will have more than just the short memory of an ARMA process. Yet, the hypothesis that an aggregate measure of congressional approval could be a unit-root (ARIMA where $d=1$) process is untenable, as it implies that approval is the sum of perfectly remembered events *for each and every individual*, that is $Approval_t = Approval_{t-1} + \varepsilon_t$ where $\varepsilon_t \sim N(0, \sigma^2)$.⁸ If, for only some voters, the "Congress" of congressional approval is impermanent, so must be the impact of events. Overall, a mixture of autoregressive behavior in terms of the impact of events should be a key characteristic of both the congressional and pres-

FIGURE 1
Congressional and Presidential Approval, 1995-2005



idential approval series and, as a result, the series should prove to be fractionally integrated with d between 0 and 1. And, because of the relative clarity of “the president” compared to “Congress” in the approval questions, we should expect longer memory for the presidential series.

The origins of these series are important in considering their properties. Fractional integration is a common occurrence when aggregation is used to create time series. Granger (1980) explains that a series Y_t created by aggregating J individuals gives us: $Y_{j,t} = \alpha_j Y_{j,t-1} + \varepsilon_{j,t}$ and $\varepsilon_{j,t} \sim N(0, \sigma^2)$. Note that if there is variation in the degree to which individuals rely on their past behavior, α is not constant. Rather, we have $\alpha_j \sim \beta$ where the β distribution is bounded between zero and one.

Several studies have shown the prevalence of fractional integration in public opinion data (Box-Steffensmeier and Smith 1996; Lebo, Walker, and Clarke 2000; Byers, Davidson, and Peel 2000; Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef, and Lin 2004; Lebo and Cassino 2007) and in the general literature on Congress (Dickinson and Lebo 2007; Lebo, McGlynn, and Koger 2007). Fractional integration is particularly likely for public opinion series not only due to aggregation but because the bounds put on the series (0 and 100) force them to be mean reverting in the long run and exhibit finite variance (Box-Steffensmeier and Smith 1996). For all of these reasons, the congressional series should prove to be fractionally integrated.

The degree of fractional integration is tested using Robinson’s (1995) estimator.⁹ Table 1 show the results of these tests. The congressional series clearly is fractionally integrated and has a lower level of integration than the presidential

TABLE 1
Tests of Fractional Integration for Public Opinion Series, 1995-2005

Variable	N	Robinson's d	t value that $d \neq 0$	t value that $d \neq 1$
Congressional Approval	130	0.65	9.01	4.85
Presidential Approval	130	0.94	13.03	0.83
Personal Prospections	130	0.48	7.13	6.58
Personal Retrospections	130	0.66	9.05	4.66
National Prospections	130	0.74	10.14	3.57
National Retrospections	130	1.01	13.85	0.14

series. This indicates the shorter memory of the congressional series. That is, events that move the series are forgotten relatively faster as the series returns to a long-term mean level. The presidential approval series is nearly a unit-root and clearly has long, if not quite perfect, memory.¹⁰

These findings support conjectures that the president and the national economy are more fixed targets for public opinion than are Congress and the personal economic measures.¹¹ An event that moves approval of the president is likely to be forever associated with him. On the other hand, Congress is a more ephemeral concept in the minds of voters and the presence of a lower level of integration in the series indicates a mixture of memory as voters may shift their focus in answering the congressional approval question. Some careful conclusions can also be made regarding the values of d for the economic series. Opinions about the future of the economy appear shorter memoried than those regarding the past. Also, the memory of personal financial series are shorter than national measures. The latter depends more on news that continually updates perceptions, while the former will be more determined by the pull of underlying pessimism or optimism that individuals possess regarding their personal economic well-being.

In addition to these substantive thoughts, the test results also give a prescription for how to handle the various series in multivariate models. A nonstationary series—including one that is fractionally integrated—should be (fractionally) differenced, that is, a new series is created by measuring the differences between time points in the original series. Research in both econometrics and political science has shown the serious consequences to statistical inference of failing to properly difference nonstationary data (Granger and Newbold 1974; Clarke and Stewart 1994; Lebo, Walker, and Clarke 2000).

To avoid threats to inference, the series that are clearly FI, congressional approval, national prospections, and the personal subjective series, should be differenced by their respective values of d (Clarke and Lebo 2003) and the remaining series should be first-differenced (Granger and Newbold 1974; De Boef and Granato 1997). This pre-treatment is done prior to the specification of the models that follow. This process leaves filtered series that do not rely on their own past histories and these univariate “noise models” are then used in multivariate models.

MODELS OF CONGRESSIONAL APPROVAL

As discussed, the concept of congressional approval is an elusive one (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). With the public paying so little attention to the day-to-day workings of Congress, what factors—aside from its own memory—affect the movement of the aggregated series? Certainly, subjective evaluations of the economy should matter as shown by Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht (1997), Box-Steffensmeier and Tomlinson (2000), and Rudolph (2002). In addition, the variable new to dynamic models of congressional approval here is the level of presidential approval. This should assess the hypothesis that congressional approval reflects some basic feeling towards the government not captured by reactions to the economy. Finally, the impacts of important events on congressional approval ratings are also estimated.

In all, four models are estimated with two presented in each of Table 2 and Table 3, for the presidencies of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, respectively. For the Clinton presidency, the models include a constant, presidential approval¹² lagged one month, and dummy variables for the month when the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke (January 1998) and the month when the impeachment trial of President Clinton ended (February 1999). In addition, the first model estimates the impact of the personal financial prospections series with lags of zero, one, two, and three months¹³ and the second model does the same using personal financial retrospections.¹⁴ The two models for 2001-2005 are identical except that the dummy variables used are for the September 11, 2001 attacks and the beginning and end of the invasion of Iraq in 2003.¹⁵

The models of congressional approval¹⁶ in Table 2 show noticeable differences for the two presidencies under study. For the Clinton years of divided government, there is strong support for Rudolph's (2002) finding that personal prospections (shown in the first column) are the best economic predictor of congressional approval. However, the results here are more informative than Rudolph's in that they estimate four parameters in a distributed lag setup rather than a single contemporaneous parameter. Thus, during the 1995-2000 period we can see that a one unit increase in personal prospections is met with a contemporaneous increase of 0.358 in congressional approval and followed the next two months by increases of 0.295 ($p=.021$) and 0.158 ($p=.121$).¹⁷ In the fourth month, most of these increases evaporate as congressional approval declines by 0.504 ($p=.000$). This again points to the underlying distrust of Congress that plays such a role in the dynamics of congressional approval—even the impacts of positive financial feelings have a difficult time working themselves into the long-term level of the series. In addition, the impacts of the Lewinsky revelations and the Clinton acquittal were an increase of 10 points and a decrease of eight points, respectively.

Of particular interest is the impact of the presidential approval series, lagged one month and cleansed of the impact of the economic variables.¹⁸ An increase of the presidential series of one percentage point is followed the next month by an increase of 0.348 percentage points for congressional approval. Of course, this is over a time period of divided government defined by the open combat between

TABLE 2
Models of Congressional Approval—The Bill Clinton Presidency

Independent Variable	President Clinton, 1995:01-2000:12			
	Personal Prospections Model		Personal Retrospections Model	
	Coeff. (s.e.)	<i>p</i> value	Coeff. (s.e.)	<i>p</i> value
Constant	0.320 (0.593)	.591	0.322 (0.589)	.587
Pres. Approval ^a	0.348 (.197)	.041	0.452 (0.218)	.021
Personal Prospections	0.358 (0.141)	.007		
Personal Prospections _{t-1}	0.295 (0.142)	.021		
Personal Prospections _{t-2}	0.158 (0.134)	.121		
Personal Prospections _{t-3}	-0.504 (0.134)	.000		
Personal Retrospections			0.181 (0.122)	.072
Personal Retrospections _{t-1}			0.101 (0.136)	.229
Personal Retrospections _{t-2}			0.184 (0.130)	.079
Personal Retrospections _{t-3}			-0.097 (0.119)	.207
Lewinsky Breaks	10.676 (4.054)	.005	10.842 (4.610)	.011
Clinton Acquitted	-8.050 (4.087)	.026	-4.889 (4.523)	.142
N	68		68	
Durbin-Watson	1.92		2.04	
R ²	0.40		0.24	

^aThis is approval less the effects of the economy. It is lagged back one month.

Speaker Newt Gingrich and Republicans in Congress on one side and the embattled Democratic president on the other.

What exactly does this indicate? One explanation is that voters did not evaluate the two branches of government in strictly partisan terms but were, rather, open to rewarding or punishing both on the basis of their level of satisfaction with government, life in general, or long-term economic growth not captured in the subjective measures.

More likely, the importance of some of these factors is complemented in large part by the public's low level of attention to Congress. For most of the electorate if they are paying attention to politics at all it is to the president and it is the evaluations of him that filter through when voters are asked to register opinions of other institutions about which they know very little. The models that follow show the consistency of these effects despite the fluctuations in the efficacy of the economic variables.

Thus, the second column of Table 2 shows the personal retrospections variable to have a similar, though much dampened, pattern to the prospections variable. Indeed, the variable has a significant ($p < .05$) impact at none of the 4 lags specified. Nevertheless, the presidential approval series is an even stronger predictor of the congressional series than in the first model.

As for Table 3 and the two models of the George W. Bush years, the effects of the economic variables become small and insignificant.¹⁹ Clearly, through the War on Terror, economic performance has become less important in the minds of voters when evaluating Congress. Presidential approval remains a significant predictor ($p = .015$ in the personal prospections model and $p = .009$ in the personal retrospections model) though at about half the size of its impact during the Clinton years. Thus, at least for the 10-year period under investigation here, we can say that the relationship between the two approval series is stronger during times of divided than united government. Rather than being paradoxical, it seems more likely that divided versus united government is simply a distinction to which most voters are not attuned. More accurately, the party in control seems absent in the minds of most voters when they evaluate Congress.

As final points, the tremendous rally effects of the 2001 terrorist attacks and the invasion of Iraq are highly significant in the two models of the Bush years. These effects are strong enough that, along with presidential approval, they explain 83% of the variance in the congressional approval series for each of the last two models. Certainly, these effects are an indication that during the 2001-2005 period, congressional approval was driven in large part by international events rather than the day-to-day workings of Congress itself.

In sum, the positive relationship between presidential and congressional approval is strongly evident in each of these two very different presidencies. To be sure, even during a period when the Republican Congress was impeaching a Democratic president, the public's approval ratings of the two moved in tandem. This does not seem to say much for how attuned to the political environment the American electorate is. Following that, political scientists and analysts should be cautious in how much credibility they give the congressional approval measure.

In addition, following Rudolph (2002), subjective evaluations of personal finances are found here to be important predictors of congressional approval. Patterson and Caldeira (1990, 39) make the point that "in all likelihood, Americans do not think of Congress as the place where their economic fates are decided. Credit and blame for economic conditions reside with the President." As such, Patterson and Caldeira expect to see little connection between these variables. Yet, this view likely gives too much credit to the deliberations—or lack thereof—of

TABLE 3
Models of Congressional Approval—George W. Bush Presidency

Independent Variable	President Bush, 2001:01-2005:06			
	Personal Prospections Model		Personal Retrospections Model	
	Coeff. (s.e.)	<i>p</i> value	Coeff. (s.e.)	<i>p</i> value
Constant	-1.000 (0.415)	.020	-1.063 (0.444)	.021
Pres. Approval ^a	0.186 (0.083)	.015	0.191 (0.077)	.009
Personal Prospections	0.029 (0.105)	.393		
Personal Prospections _{<i>t</i>-1}	0.007 (0.094)	.469		
Personal Prospections _{<i>t</i>-2}	-0.120 (0.095)	.711		
Personal Prospections _{<i>t</i>-3}	-0.090 (0.103)	.193		
Personal Retrospections			0.056 (0.076)	.469
Personal Retrospections _{<i>t</i>-1}			-0.062 (0.080)	.447
Personal Retrospections _{<i>t</i>-2}			-0.072 (0.075)	.341
Personal Retrospections _{<i>t</i>-3}			0.016 (0.074)	.830
September 11, 2001	40.623 (3.004)	.000	40.645 (3.063)	.000
Iraq Invasion Begins	9.833 (3.045)	.001	9.340 (3.158)	.002
Iraq Invasion Ends	-4.862 (3.101)	.062	-3.399 (3.269)	.152
N		54		54
Durbin-Watson		2.30		2.18
R ²		0.83		0.83

^aThis is approval less the effects of the economy. It is lagged back one month for the Clinton presidency and three months for the George W. Bush presidency.

survey respondents. If respondents know little about who Congress is and what they are doing, their evaluations should be all the more influenced by the feelings created by their personal economic circumstances and by other factors such as their inherent distrust of the institution.

CONCLUSION

What does it tell us that during such partisan times as the late 1990s an increase in approval for the Democratic president is followed by a similar increase for the Republican-held Congress? In sum, when we also acknowledge the importance of economic factors over which Congress has little control, the impact of rallying events, and the strong pull of general distrust of Congress, it tells us that the congressional approval series does not have much relation to the actual “way Congress is handling its job.” Nevertheless, the congressional time series proves to be an interesting one here in that its statistical characteristics live up to what the cross-sectional literature would suggest. In short, the many ways Congress can be defined and evaluated lead to a variety of ways in which information is assimilated by voters thus creating a long memory, fractionally integrated series. As such, it is distinguishable from presidential approval whose memory seems noticeably longer.

While political scientists pay a great deal of attention to the idea of divided government, it is not a great predictor of how the electorate will judge the two institutions of the presidency and Congress. With control split, we cannot assume that approval of one leads to disapproval of the other. Indeed, it is surprising that in the data studied here it is the Clinton era that shows the strong and positive ties between approval for the two institutions. By comparison, the first years of George W. Bush’s presidency could be characterized as bipartisan with a shared desire to focus on the war on terror or, perhaps less charitably, as a period with a Democratic Congress afraid to challenge a sometimes popular president during wartime.

It should not be surprising then that the optimism with which the Democrats’ 2006 takeover of Congress was met was quickly turned into abysmal congressional approval ratings (an October 2007 Ipsos poll had approval at 22% and disapproval at 73%).²⁰ Regardless of what Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid do, the opinions of the institution they manage are closely tied to those of their political rival, George W. Bush, and to the generally pessimistic view of the future his presidency has fostered in the electorate. With presidential approval near record low levels, the electorate’s feelings toward government can be described as nearly inconsolable. Indeed, any survey question that cues people to evaluate the people in Washington D.C. is going to be met with negativity. Given the relationships found here, it seems that no Congress could be well thought of in such an environment.

How is it then that if the president’s poor ratings are partially to blame for those of Congress, the president still maintains a rating above that of Congress? Perhaps this goes to the relative ease with which partisan citizens can grasp the concept of “the president” as compared with “Congress.” For example, as of this writing, the level of approval among Republicans towards President George W. Bush is still relatively high. We can speculate that many Republicans cannot bear to register disapproval with the leader of their party. Yet, a similar story cannot be told for Democrats looking at a Democratic Congress and thus any stable base of support for the institution’s majority party is much smaller. The diffuse nature of

“Congress” in the minds of voters does not allow them to jump to the defense of their party’s leaders. Very few people—Democrats or Republicans—are willing to look at anything going on in Washington today and say “I approve.”

Notes

¹For example, from Fox News: “Poll: Congress, Bush Approval Ratings Lowest Ever” at <<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,299497,00.html>>; and Reuters: “Bush, Congress at Record Low Ratings: Reuters Poll” at <<http://www.reuters.com/article/politicsNews/idUSN1844140220070919?sp=true>>; CNN: “Poll: Record Number of Voters Unhappy with Congress” at <<http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/11/09/congress.poll/index.html>>. All accessed November 9, 2007.

²In a similar fashion, we can hypothesize about the characteristics of series built from subjective economic evaluations. For example, series based on less certain information (such as projections about the unknown future compared to retrospections about the known past) should have shorter memory.

³In fact, despite its use in many cross-sectional analyses, the results below are the first to incorporate presidential approval as an independent variable explaining congressional approval over time.

⁴The Republicans’ hold on both houses of Congress was temporarily interrupted by Senator Jim Jeffords’s resignation from the Republican party in May 2001, giving Senate Democrats a 50-49 edge. The Senate Republicans won back majority status in the midterm elections of 2002.

⁵The series includes polls from several sources including Gallup, CNN, ABC News, CBS News, and NBC News. Most are available in the archives of pollingreport.com.

⁶These are components of the Index of Consumer Sentiment. The questions are: (a) personal expectations: “Now looking ahead—do you think that a year from now you (and your family living there) will be better off financially, or worse off, or just about the same as now?” (b) personal retrospections: “Would you say that you (and your family living there) are better off or worse off financially than you were a year ago?” (c) national expectations: “Looking ahead, which would you say is more likely—that in the country as a whole we’ll have continuous good times during the next 12 months or so, or that we will have periods of widespread unemployment or depression, or what?” (d) national retrospections: “Would you say that at the present time business conditions are better or worse than they were a year ago?”

⁷Enders (2005) explains three conditions for series Y to be weakly stationary: First, the series must first be mean stationary such that $E(y_t) = E(y_{t-s}) = \mu$; second, it must be variance stationary where $E((y_t - \mu)^2) = E((y_{t-s} - \mu)^2) = \sigma_y^2$; and, third, it must be covariance stationary with $E((y_t - \mu)(y_{t-s} - \mu)) = E((y_{t-j} - \mu)(y_{t-j-s} - \mu)) = \gamma$. These conditions hold for all s . And, μ , σ_y^2 , and γ are constants.

⁸This is referred to as perfect memory because shocks are not forgotten at all but accumulate over time with no discounting. Thus, the approval level at a given time is just the sum of its original value plus all the monthly shocks in ε_t since that time.

⁹Robinson’s estimator provides similar results to using Sowell’s (1992) exact maximum likelihood estimator (Lebo, Walker, and Clarke 2000). For each series, post estimation testing and Sowell’s tests confirm that the series can be rendered stationary using a simple $(0,d,0)$ model without AR or MA parameters. In terms of both substantive and empirical explanation these more parsimonious univariate models are preferred.

¹⁰Another possibility for the presidential series is the near-integrated (NI) or “strongly autoregressive” case where $d=0$ and ϕ_1 in $(1 - \phi_p L_p)(1 - L)^d y_t = (1 + \theta_q L_q)\varepsilon_t$ is very close to 1 (De Boef and Granato 1997). Near-integrated series do not emerge from the aggregation of heterogeneous individuals but can arise merely from some process’s relying a great deal, but not completely, on its previous value.

¹¹With aggregate data, reaching beyond speculation of individual-level behavior risks making an ecological fallacy. Panel data would be best able to test some of these conjectures.

¹²Presidential approval was first filtered for the effects of the economy by using the residuals obtained from a vector autoregression (VAR) that regressed differenced presidential approval on all four subjective economic variables at lags of zero, one, and two months.

¹³This lag structure is chosen because there is no theoretical reason to choose a lag of any particular month. The timing in terms of how opinions about the economy translate into opinions about institutions may vary across individuals. Thus, we may see effects at any one of these lags and to exclude any would miss this information.

¹⁴Similar models were also estimated using the national prospections and national retrospections variables. Just as Rudolph (2002) found, these variables proved to be far worse predictors than the egocentric measures and thus the results are not shown.

¹⁵In addition, the filtered presidential approval series was found to have its effect with a three-month rather than a one-month lag.

¹⁶Fractionally differenced by 0.65 based on Robinson's (1995) *d* estimates. The personal prospections series is differenced by 0.48 and personal retrospections by 0.66.

¹⁷Thus, the combined impact of 0.811 is very large. In comparison, Rudolph (2002) finds a coefficient of 0.17 for contemporaneous personal prospections using quarterly data from 1974 to 1998. Though this is the most significant economic variable in his congressional approval models, it is obviously much smaller than the overall effect here. This indicates, firstly, the additional detail monthly data contribute and, secondly, the increased importance of the economy during the 1995-2000 period. To be precise, these changes are the increase in the *fractionally differenced* version of the dependent variable based on a one-unit increase in the *fractionally differenced* version of the independent variable. Practically, however, these are very similar to the usual interpretation of coefficients.

¹⁸That the effect of presidential approval occurs with a lag clears up the possibility of endogeneity in the estimates.

¹⁹Models were again estimated for these years using the national prospections and retrospections variables. However, neither variable approached conventional levels of significance at any lag.

²⁰See <<http://pollingreport.com/CongJob.htm>> for this poll and recent trends.

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