Follow the Leader?
Presidential Approval, Perceived Presidential Support, and Representatives' Electoral Fortunes

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Abstract

Theory: While the link between presidential approval and congressional election outcomes is long established, scholars have generally ignored the role of a member's own voting record in mediating these effects. If citizens truly use the congressional vote to express support or opposition toward the president, then they should not punish or reward all of his fellow partisans equally. Instead, the degree of reward or punishment meted out by voters ought to depend on the member's level of support for the president's legislative initiatives.

Hypotheses: Citizen perceptions of a member's level of presidential support should be substantially grounded in reality—that is, actual presidential support should be a large and significant determinant of perceived presidential support. Citizens who dislike the president and perceive their member as supportive should rate the member lower on a feeling thermometer, be less likely to approve of the member's job performance, and be less likely to vote for the member's reelection. These same patterns should hold for citizens who like the president and who perceive their member as generally in opposition. These effects should outweigh simple partisan cues in explaining citizen attitudes toward congressional incumbents.

Methods: All data are drawn from the 1993, 1994, and 1996 National Election Studies. Perceived presidential support is modeled as a function of actual support, member's party, strength of partisanship, and projection effects. Incumbent feeling thermometer ratings, job approval, and congressional vote choice are modeled as a function of the interaction between presidential approval and perceived member presidential support, along with several control variables. All equations are estimated using OLS, probit, or ordered probit, as appropriate.

Results: Perceived member presidential support is strongly related to actual support, tracking it closely in all three years data among all groups of respondents. Additionally, the interaction of citizens' attitudes toward the president and their perceptions of how often their members supported his proposals powerfully influence feeling thermometer ratings, incumbent job approval, and congressional vote choice, dwarfing the effects of simple partisan heuristics. Thus, citizens appear to be much more sophisticated than is typically assumed in using the congressional vote as a referendum on presidential policy.

Introduction

By all accounts, assessments of presidential performance figure prominently in citizens'

evaluations of Congressional incumbents. One of the most firmly established facts of electoral

politics is that voters with low opinions of the incumbent President vent their anger by voting

against his fellow partisans in congressional elections, particularly at the mid-term (Abramowitz

1984, 1985; Abramowitz and Segal 1992; Campbell 1993; Cover 1986; Jacobson 1997; Kernell 1977;

Marra and Ostrom 1989; Tufte 1975). The policies, programs, and outcomes associated with the

current administration serve as important voting cues in these races, and citizens cast the

congressional ballot at least in part as an expression of their attitudes toward the President's agenda.

Thus, the congressional vote is, in large part, a referendum on the performance of the sitting

president. According to the "in-party culpability thesis" (Stein 1990; Fiorina 1983; Hibbing and

Alford 1981; Tufte 1975), if a President is popular and successful, *all* of his fellow partisans will reap

some electoral benefit; if he is not, *all* will suffer considerable harm.[1]

In our view, the in-party culpability thesis offers an unsatisfying account of the relationship

between presidential performance evaluations and congressional vote choice. It fails to consider the

impact of a representative's actual voting record in mitigating or exacerbating his ties to the

incumbent President.[2] We contend that when voters distribute punishments or rewards in accord

with their appraisals of the President's job performance, they do not do so on a strictly partisan

basis. Instead, they are more discriminating, taking into account a representative's degree of support

for the President's policy proposals. Not all Democrats in Congress are loyal supporters of

Democratic Presidents, nor are all Republicans implacable opponents. Anecdotal evidence suggests

that members of Congress are well aware of the importance of presidential popularity for their

electoral fortunes, and that they cast their roll-call votes accordingly. They may choose to oppose

the President at certain strategic points, attempting to minimize the electoral damage that may befall

them if they are associated with an unpopular leader; alternatively, they may seek to benefit from a popular President by consistently supporting his agenda.[3] Unfortunately, little is known about whether such strategic behavior actually changes public opinion.

Here, we address precisely this question. We examine the extent to which citizen perceptions of a representative's level of presidential support are grounded in reality, and the degree to which these perceptions influence incumbent evaluation and congressional vote choice. We compare two images of the congressional voter: one who is largely ignorant of his representative's behavior in Washington and who defaults to simple partisan cues in assessing praise or blame, versus one whose evaluation of his incumbent is more sophisticated, drawing on the actual pattern of roll call votes. In the following section, we elaborate the theoretical and empirical background of our argument. Next, we introduce briefly the data used in our empirical analysis. We then outline our models of how citizens perceive representatives' presidential support, and of the role these perceptions play in candidate evaluation and vote choice. Finally, we subject these models to empirical test, and conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for accountability in congressional elections, for policy representation, and for citizens' political sophistication.

In-Party Culpability and the Rational Electorate

The restricted in-party culpability thesis maintains that citizens distinguish only between the political parties in assigning blame and credit for national conditions, not between candidates *within* a party based on how closely they are associated with the activities and programs of the President (Hibbing and Alford 1981). In essence, this view of the electoral process resembles the party-in-government model of electoral control: by utilizing partisan and incumbency cues, voters hold accountable elected officials of the party that controls the Presidency.[4] Citizens are granted the

sophistication to distinguish between candidates with regard to their partisanship and incumbency status, but little beyond that.

We find two substantial problems with the in-party culpability thesis. To begin with, it underrates the rationality of the voting public. A truly rational electorate is one sensitive not only to simplifying devices like the party of the representative and the President, but also to the fact that members of the same party vary, some being more supportive of the President and some less so. In concrete terms, why should a voter punish a Democratic member of Congress for a failed Democratic administration if that member seldom supported the Democratic President? The chief failing of the in-party culpability thesis is its assumption that citizens see congressional politics solely through the black-and-white lens of member partisanship, ignoring the substantial variation in levels of presidential support.

Another problem with the in-party culpability thesis is that it ignores substantial evidence that representatives (and their electoral opponents) act systematically to affect public perceptions of the member's level of support for the President.[5] As discussed above, members of Congress certainly believe that they can affect their electoral prospects by strategically granting or withholding support from the President. "Home style" activity by members is designed at least in part to claim credit for successful administration policies, and to avoid blame for unsuccessful ones (Fenno 1978). Congressional incumbents' well-publicized decisions to have the President appear in districts where he is popular and stay away from ones where he is not suggest that they view perceived presidential proximity or distance as an important element of their re-election strategies. Thus, those with the greatest stake in the electoral process, congressional incumbents themselves, clearly behave as if the in-party culpability thesis is an over-simplification of political reality.

For our criticism of the in-party culpability thesis to be compelling, we must establish conclusively the link between a representative's votes for presidential initiatives and his standing

among his constituents. In order to do so, we must first demonstrate that citizens are reasonably accurate in their perceptions of how often their members support the President. Long-standing research on policy representation casts doubt on the notion of an electorate that is attentive to legislative behavior and evaluates members according to their activity in Washington (Miller and Stokes 1963; Stokes and Miller 1962). Empirical research demonstrates that many citizens have difficulty naming their representative and his opponent. Many are unable to recall correctly even high-profile votes (although they seem to be able to infer fairly accurately—see Alvarez and Gronke 1996; Wilson and Gronke 1997). Indeed, much research on Congress has emphasized the importance of a member's "personal vote," an underlying stratum of support completely unrelated to roll call voting behavior (Brady *et al* 1996; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Fenno 1978). Thus, at first glance it seems doubtful that citizens can distinguish representatives who have been loyal supporters of the President from those who have offered only lukewarm support, if not outright opposition.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to suspect that voters may be better at estimating their representative's general level of support or opposition to the President's program than they are at identifying individual roll call votes. No political figure receives the media coverage accorded the President, and presidential initiatives almost always receive a great deal of attention from lawmakers. Even more importantly, as discussed above, assessments of presidential performance shape vote choice in congressional elections. Since citizens cast their congressional vote largely as a referendum on the incumbent President, they have some incentive to learn how supportive their member has been of the President's legislative proposals, forming an overall impression based at least in part on substantive information. The first set of empirical analyses presented here is devoted to an exploration of this proposition. We seek to ascertain whether citizens simply lump all members of the President's party together as strong supporters and assume that all members of the opposing

party are strong opponents, or, alternatively, whether they are more sophisticated in their perceptions of presidential support.

Even if citizens are substantially accurate in their perceptions of how often members support the President, however, it remains to be seen if these perceptions actually influence evaluations of congressional incumbents and subsequent vote choice. Political parties in Congress often afford their members generous latitude, granting them the freedom to break from the party line if the President's initiatives are particularly popular (or unpopular) in their districts. Indeed, much scholarly commentary on the contemporary American Congress emphasizes the difficulties that party leaders and Presidents sometimes face in gaining the support of fellow partisans in Congress for their legislative proposals (Jacobson 1997; Mayhew 1974). But do representatives benefit electorally when they exercise such independence, or do voters punish and reward members strictly according to party, without regard to their degree of support for the President's legislative proposals? If an unpopular president exerts an equal drag on all of his fellow partisans, no matter how often they actually vote with him, then the costs of allowing members to deviate from the party line clearly do not produce commensurate benefits. Alternatively, if perceptions of a member's level of presidential support really mediate the impact of presidential performance assessments on congressional vote choice, the discretion given members would make considerably more sense.

Survey Data on Perceived Presidential Support

Most of the data for the analyses presented here are drawn from the 1993, 1994, and 1996 National Election Studies (NES). Each includes a measure of the respondent's perception of his representative's degree of presidential support. In each survey, respondents were asked whether

their representative generally supported the President's legislative proposals more than half the time,

half the time, or less than half the time, or if they did not know. The exact question wording is:

> *(IF INCUMBENT RUNNING IN R'S DISTRICT): How often has Representative*
> *(Name) supported President Clinton's legislative proposals: More than half the time, half the time,*
> *less than half the time, or are you not sure?*
>
> *(IF R ANSWERS MORE/LESS THAN HALF): Would you say that it was almost*
> *always/never?* [6]
>
> *(IF R ANSWERS "NOT SURE"): What would be your best guess: (1993) more than half the*
> *time or less than half the time? (1994) more than half the time, half the time, or less than half the*
> *time?*

Unfortunately, the NES changed these items each year. In 1993 and 1994, respondents who

initially failed to offer an estimate were asked to guess how often their member had supported the

president. Confusingly, only in 1994 did the follow-up include "about half" as a response choice,

thus remaining parallel to the initial query. In 1996, the NES chose not to further probe

respondents who initially answered that they were "not sure" how often their member supported

President Clinton's legislative proposals. The reason behind this choice, presumably, is the fear that

prompting respondents to guess will introduce random variance into the item. As shown in

previous work, however, the "guess" responses are systematically related to characteristics of the

representative and respondent in the same way that the "know" responses are (Alvarez and Gronke

1996; Wilson and Gronke 1997). Ultimately, we believe that the idea of a true, sharp distinction

between "knowers" and "guessers" is unsustainable. Instead, there is a continuum ranging from

those with highly sophisticated, specialized knowledge about member behavior to those who are

guessing purely at random without any relevant knowledge.[7] In any event, because the follow-up

query was omitted in 1996, analyses employing data from that year will be hampered by substantially

reduced case counts.

For data on representatives' voting records, we use the presidential support scores reported in the *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report.* *CQ* first identifies the set of bills during a particular session on which the President took a public position, excluding those on which the eventual vote was unanimous or near unanimous. The proportion of the time that a member voted with the President's position comprises the support score, ranging potentially from zero to one hundred. In reality, levels of support and opposition are not quite so widely ranged. As shown in the top panel of Figure 1, observed presidential support in the 103rd Congress ranged from 21% to 100%.[8] The observed range for members representing congressional districts falling into the 1994 NES, reported in the bottom panel of Figure 1, has the same maximum and minimum, but a slightly flatter distribution.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The distribution of support *within parties* (the first and third panels in Figure 1) is more constrained. Presidential support ranged from 60% to 100% among Democrats and from 21% to 80% among Republicans. This pattern is a potential concern, as individuals represented by Democratic members should *all* respond that their members supported the President "more than half the time." This assumes, of course, that the response categories in the survey item are faithfully used *and* that respondents are sensitive to actual patterns of legislator behavior. Are both of these conditions satisfied? We turn to this question in the next section, where we evaluate the correlates of perceived presidential support.

<u>Accuracy in Citizen Perceptions of Presidential Support</u>

What is the relationship between *actual* support (what we use as a shorthand for the observed level of presidential support by the respondent's member of Congress) and the *perceived* level of presidential support (the response on the three-point scale)? As a first cut at citizen accuracy, we present a bivariate analysis of the relationship between a representative's actual level of support for the President and the perceptions of that member's level of presidential support among his constituents. The results of this analysis are reported in Table 1 and Figure 2. First, we see that, as expected, "guessers" outnumber "knowers" in the sample. In none of the three years did more than a third of respondents initially offer a response to the query about their representative's level of presidential support. In both 1993 and 1994, however, the great majority of the remaining respondents were willing to venture a guess (recall that they were not given this option in 1996). More importantly, among both "knowers" and "guessers," actual levels of member presidential support track perceived levels of support. Across all items in all years (that is, all initial queries and follow-ups), there is not a single instance in which the actual level of support does not increase steadily with the perceived level of support. For example, among "knowers" in 1994, members perceived as having supported the President more than half the time actually supported him at a 75% rate. Members perceived to have been mixed were on average 7% less supportive, and those thought to have been on balance hostile to the President were another 22% less supportive (averaging a 46% rate of support). The pattern is quite similar if we look at other years (1993 or 1996), or if we look at "guessers" instead of "knowers." There appears to be a strong factual basis to these responses.

[INSERT TABLE 1 AND FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

It is also clearly true that respondents systematically underestimate the level of support that members give to the President's legislative agenda. This is particularly apparent if one looks at the average levels of presidential support among members perceived to have been supportive "about half the time." In all contexts, these figures are in the upper sixties, indicating that citizens underestimate the presidential support of these members by fifteen to nineteen percent. This level of misperception on the part of respondents is not really surprising. The actual average level of presidential support in 1993-94 was just over 60%, and even in the Republican-controlled 104th Congress (1995-96), average presidential support continued at a 50% pace. As scholars of presidential support in the legislature have long noted, representatives from both parties show the President at least some measure of deference (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Edwards 1989). Furthermore, it is important to remember that presidential support scores are calculated as the percentage of votes with the President *on issues where he has taken a public position*. No President is going to continually expend political capital on losing causes; likewise, Presidents support many initiatives that are relatively non-controversial. Actual presidential support scores will thus be skewed upwards, and the degree of this skew is unlikely to be perceived by the general public. In any event, absolute levels of support are not particularly important for our analyses. It is comparative levels in which we are most interested, and here the data are unmistakable. There is a substantial difference between the answers given by respondents whose representatives were reliable supporters of the President and respondents whose representatives supported him less frequently. It remains to be seen, however, whether these differences survive a more rigorous multivariate analysis.

For a more thorough examination of citizen accuracy in perceiving representatives' presidential support, we construct a model with these perceptions as the dependent variable. Because the dependent variable is trichotomous (less than half, half, more than half), we employ

ordered probit estimation. The model is relatively parsimonious, with only four independent variables. Still, we believe it captures the central dynamics of the perceptual process. The first variable, and the one of most theoretical interest to us, is the member's actual level of presidential support in the 103rd Congress (1993-94). As mentioned before, the measure ranges from 21 to 100 in the actual data, with a mean of 63. To the extent that this variable is significant, we may infer that citizen perceptions of representatives' presidential support are indeed rooted in fact. Additionally, we have included in the model two measures intended to capture any purely partisan basis to citizen perceptions of presidential support. One is a simple, dichotomous measure of the representative's partisanship, coded 0 if the member is a Democrat and 1 if he is a Republican. The other represents a more sophisticated interaction of individual partisan intensity and member partisanship. In our view, individuals with stronger partisan attachments are more likely to use partisan cues in processing political information than are individuals with weaker partisanship. Thus, strong partisans are more likely to overestimate Democratic support for Clinton and to underestimate Republican support, all else equal, than are other respondents (Lodge and Hamill 1986). An interaction term, what we refer to as a "partisan schematic" term, reflects this tendency. The variable is coded 1 to 4, according to the intensity of the respondent's partisanship, and signed positive for those represented by Democrats and negative for those represented by Republicans (for a total range of -4 to 4).[9] Finally, we have included in the model a variable to test for projection effects that may color citizen perceptions. Previous work (Wilson and Gronke 1997) has shown substantial projection effects in citizen perceptions of member positions on individual roll-call votes, so it is reasonable to assume that such effects may also be present in perceptions of a member's *pattern* of votes. We would expect respondents, if they like both their member *and* the President (or if they dislike both), to exaggerate the extent to which the representative has supported Clinton. Conversely, if they like one but not the other, they should underestimate the member's degree of

presidential support. Based on these possible combinations, the projection variable is coded either 1 or -1, depending on the hypothesized direction of the effect.

Results of the ordered probit model are presented in Table 2. To aid in interpretation of the results, we have presented first differences at both thresholds.[10] Clearly, partisan cues, projection, and actual support all play a role in citizen perceptions. First, note that the partisan schematic term is highly predictive of perceived support. Compared to strong partisans represented by Republicans, strong partisans represented by Democrats are 38% less likely to believe that their member supported the president less than half the time and are 35% more likely to believe that their member was supportive more than half the time. These effects are calculated with all else held constant -- including the member's actual level of support.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Does this model perform better than one containing the unmediated party of member? Party of member has a large and statistically significant coefficient under this alternative specification; however, the log likelihood test ($\chi^2 = 23.2$) indicates that strength of partisan leanings significantly improves the fit of the model to the data.[11] This provides additional evidence that individual perceptions as well as member characteristics and performance matter when citizens evaluate their members of Congress. These perceptions are far from perfect, however. There is systematic bias in the form of projection effects creeping into citizen perceptions. Those who like both their representative and the President (or who dislike both) are 16% more likely to believe that their member supported Clinton more than half the time, *ceteris paribus*. Most importantly, however, a member's actual level of presidential support is a highly significant predictor of citizen perceptions, even after taking into account the biases of partisan heuristics and projection effects. Judging by the

first differences (-.34 and .29), actual support over its full observed range affects citizen perceptions

to roughly the same extent as partisan cues.[12]

Citizen perceptions of member presidential support are to some degree both inaccurate

(generally too low) and biased. Party provides an important shortcut, and projection effects are

clearly discernible. Nonetheless, perceived and actual support correlate to a high degree. The

significance of actual support in predicting perceived support is encouraging, indicating that citizen

perceptions on this score are substantially grounded in reality. What remains to be seen is how

consequential these perceptions are for subsequent political judgment and behavior.

The Effects of Perceived Presidential Support on Political Choice

To establish that members can substantially affect their own electoral prospects by altering

their pattern of support for the sitting President, we must demonstrate that citizens are reasonably

accurate in their perceptions of a representative's presidential support, and that these perceptions are

influential in their evaluations of the congressional incumbent. The previous section of the paper

has been devoted to the first of these tasks; we now turn to the second. We show here, contrary to

the in-party culpability thesis and in line with our theoretical expectations, that citizens who like the

President reward members who support him and punish members who oppose him, and that

citizens who dislike the President do exactly the opposite.

The central issue for our analysis is whether perceptions of a representative's degree of

support for the President mediate the effects of presidential approval on incumbent evaluation and

vote choice. To explore this question, we consider three dependent variables: incumbent feeling

thermometer ratings, incumbent job approval, and congressional vote choice.[13] The independent

variables are the same across all three models. We include a dichotomous measure of whether the

member and respondent share the same partisanship, on the assumption that Democratic

respondents will be more favorably disposed toward Democratic members, and that Republicans

will prefer Republican members. The models contain an interaction term for member's party and

the respondent's ideology for a similar reason: liberals should be more favorably disposed towards

Democrats and conservatives towards Republicans. Also included is the respondent's attitude

toward Congress generally, on the assumption that attitudes toward the institution as a whole might

exert at least some influence on the evaluation of individual members.

Our concepts of critical interest are measured in a series of dummy variables.[14] Combining

the dichotomous (approve/disapprove) measure of presidential approval with the three-fold

measure of perceived member support for the President's agenda (more than half/half/less than

half) results in six possible categories into which a respondent may fall. As our omitted control

group, we have chosen respondents who believe that their member has supported the President

about half the time.[15] We have reported coefficients on each group of respondents who either

approve or disapprove of the President. Additionally, we have included two dummy variables to

control for the possibility of a simple partisan backlash against Democrats. One includes

respondents who are represented by Democrats and who approve of the President; while the other

includes respondents who are represented by Democrats and who disapprove of the President. The

control group in this case is respondents represented by Republicans. If voters were simply

punishing all Democratic incumbents because their party had been in control of the House for too

long, then both of these coefficients should be significant and negative. If voters who disapproved

of Clinton were taking out their wrath on all Democrats indiscriminately, the second coefficient

should be significant and negative. If, alternatively, voters were *not* employing a simple partisan cue

in assessing praise or blame (but rather were relying on a member's perceived voting record), then

neither of these coefficients should be significant.

Finally, we allow for the possibility of negativity effects. A considerable body of literature maintains that an office-holder's violation of citizen preferences is likely to produce a stronger reaction than behavior that follows those preferences; in other words, negatively valenced judgments register a stronger impact on political preferences than do positively valenced ones. V.O. Key (1966) articulated this proposition with the pithy observation that "the people only vote against, never for." Individual-level evidence for this proposition, however, has been mixed. Kernell (1977) and Lau (1982) examined the effect of presidential approval on vote choice in congressional elections. Kernell, however, did not subject his hypotheses to multivariate testing, thereby failing to address alternative interpretations of the patterns revealed in his bivariate analysis. Lau measured negativity by counting citizens' likes and dislikes of candidates, ascertained by open-ended questions. Recent work, however, casts doubt on whether these responses reveal the true reasons behind citizens' preferences, maintaining that they are largely rationalizations of candidate choice (Rahn, Krosnick, and Breuning 1994). Finally, attempts by Cover (1986) to demonstrate negative voting using the 1974, 1978, and 1982 NES surveys turned up only weak evidence. In our context, the theory of negative voting implies that citizens will penalize a representative more for supporting an unpopular President than they will reward a representative for supporting a popular President. Similarly, the punishment for opposing a popular President should be greater in magnitude than the reward for opposing an unpopular one. We test negativity effects in all three models: feeling thermometers, job ratings, and vote choice.

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

We report the results from our feeling thermometer model in Table 3. As expected, common partisanship and ideology both make citizens more favorably disposed toward their

representatives (though the effects of partisanship are larger than those of ideology, and ideology

falls short of conventional significance levels in 1996).[16] Approval of Congress as a whole has a

negligible substantive impact in all three years, and is statistically significant only in 1996. Focusing

on our key variables of interest, one of the dummy variable combinations is significant across all

three years: those who approve of the President and perceive their members as hostile to his agenda

penalize their incumbents significantly on the feeling thermometer (by between 8 and 12 points). In

1994 and 1996, respondents who disapprove of the President and perceive their members as

supportive react negatively as well, penalizing their incumbents 12 to 14 points on the feeling

thermometer. All other combinations, excepting "approve President/Rep supports" in 1996, are

not significant. Clearly, these results, especially when viewed across years, support the negativity

thesis. Finally, it is important to note that only one of the partisan dummies is marginally significant

in one year. At least in feeling thermometer ratings, citizens seem to be relying on perceived

patterns of presidential support rather than simple party-based cues in evaluating incumbents. In

1994, Democrats were not punished indiscriminately; instead, voters specifically penalized those

members who were tied to Clinton. The assumptions of Brady and colleagues and Jacobson about

1994 are borne out in the feeling thermometer results in one respect: supporting Clinton in the face

of citizen opposition hurt members. Our results from other years, however, suggest that 1994 was

not an unique election, but merely a dramatic manifestation of the negative voting that operates

across electoral cycles.

[INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Turning to Table 4, we find a very similar pattern in incumbent job approval. The

dependent variable here is citizen responses to the question: "Do you approve or disapprove of the

job Representative (Name) is doing as your member of Congress?" As in the feeling thermometer

model, we find strong evidence of negativity effects in the interactions of presidential approval and

perceived member support for the President. In 1994, those who approve of the President and

perceive their members to be opposed to Clinton's agenda are 16% less likely than the control group

to believe that their incumbents are doing a good job, while those who disapprove of the President

and perceive their members as supportive are fully 26% less likely to approve of their incumbent's

job performance. The other two combinations are statistically significant as well, though the effects

are smaller in magnitude. Other variables in the model function as expected. Once again, shared

partisanship is an important predictor. Ideology is not significant in 1994, while approval of

Congress as a whole exerts a moderately positive effect. Finally, unlike the feeling thermometer

model, there is some evidence here of a generalized backlash against Democrats, particularly among

those respondents who dislike Bill Clinton. The effect, however, is not nearly as large as that of

perceived member voting patterns.

   The results from the feeling thermometer and job approval models are impressive, and

support most of our expectations. Still, they do not address the central element of political choice:

actual voting in congressional elections. Only by establishing a direct link between perceived

presidential support and the likelihood of voting to re-elect an incumbent member of Congress can

we conclusively demonstrate that representatives can help themselves by moving closer to (or away

from) the incumbent President. In Table 5, we present the results of our model of House vote

choice in the 1994 election. This model is a bit different from most vote choice models, in that the

dependent variable is not vote for the Democrat or Republican, but vote for the incumbent or

challenger. Respondents who voted to re-elect their incumbent are coded 1; those who voted for

any other candidate are coded 0.[17] Setting the model up this way allows for direct comparisons with

the feeling thermometer and job approval models.

[INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

As the results show, the voting story here is consistent with our hypotheses. Only three

variables in the model estimated for 1994 have a large substantive impact: shared partisanship and

the two negative voting indicators. Not surprisingly, the impact of shared partisanship is quite large:

respondents represented by incumbents of their own party are 45% more likely to vote to re-elect

their members than are respondents represented by incumbents of the opposite party. Once again,

the two most significant interactions of presidential approval and perceived member support are

those where the representative diverges from the citizen's preferences. Respondents who like the

President and who believe that their representatives generally opposed him are 12% less likely to

vote for re-election than are others. Those who dislike the President and believe that their members

were generally supportive respond even more negatively, with a 30% falloff in likelihood of voting

for their incumbents. The other combinations are both properly signed, but only "Disapproves of

President/Rep Opposes" attains marginal statistical significance. In 1996, shared partisanship,

shared ideology, and a partisan backlash dummy are statistically significant, along with one of the

negative voting combinations. Since the partisan dummies are insignificant for 1994, this should

dispel any notion of the congressional vote in 1994 as a simple, indiscriminate repudiation of all

Democrats, even by those who disliked President Clinton. Ironically, we only have evidence of this

effect in 1996, and sample differences between the two years make the 1996 analysis somewhat

problematic.[18] Clearly, one must look to perceptions of presidential support for the real story.

The importance of this last finding cannot be emphasized enough. The 1994 election was

historic. The Republican takeover of the House, and resulting changes in American institutions, will

have longstanding consequences. Among the electorate, however, the revolutionary character of

1994 is far less evident. Our results, the first based on a comparison of attitudinal and voting

models across three surveys spanning this critical election, strongly indicate consistent behavior over the period. A public disillusioned with government, a weak President, a unified opposition, and an ill-fated choice by the governing party to accede to "nationalizing" the election, all conspired to sabotage Democratic candidates nationwide. Yet, the aggregate level dynamics long associated with congressional elections were also in evidence in 1994. Reexaminations of the election by Jacobson (1996), Campbell (1997), and others (see Klinkner 1996) all show that, while some forces operated with unusual strength, 1994 did not render the conventional wisdom obsolete. Our individual-level findings reinforce this conclusion. Negative voting is no more evident in 1994 than in other years, nor is there any evidence of indiscriminate punishment of Democratic incumbents. There is strong, uniform evidence of the negative voting effect, across all three surveys and eight separate models. In 1994, negativity trended almost completely against Bill Clinton and the Democrats.

Discussion

Citizens look to the President for a cue as to how the country is doing, how things are going in Washington, and how well Congress is doing its job. It is unrealistic for citizens to place this much emphasis on presidential performance, but it happens all the same. This paper confirms the central role that presidential approval plays in evaluations of congressional incumbents. In that respect, our findings are consistent with previous research. However, we shed light on an important feature of presidential approval that has been heretofore ignored. A rational citizen should not indiscriminately punish members of the President's party and reward the opposition. The only way such behavior would be reasonable would be under an individual-level variant of the responsible party model, and we have little evidence that Americans are widespread adherents to theories of responsible party government. Similarly, psychological models such as balance theory or cognitive dissonance would not predict that an individual would punish a member whom they like and who

distances himself from a President that the individual dislikes. The only way this behavior would be expected is if individuals misperceived the attachment between their members and the President. Our first section indicates that this does occur to some extent, but also shows that actual support substantially determines variance in perceptions of support.

In this research, we demonstrate the conditional nature of the impact of citizens' presidential performance assessments on congressional vote choice. Voters are concerned with more than the President's performance—they also take into account their representative's level of support for his agenda. Only when a member's perceived record of support or opposition toward the President runs counter to their own preferences do voters penalize him to any significant degree. Moreover, these perceptions of member support for the President appear to be substantially grounded in reality, tracking actual levels of support quite closely.

This analysis offers a more complex picture of negative voting as it applies to congressional elections. Bloom and Price (1975), Kernell (1977), and Lau (1982) demonstrate the effects of negative assessments of the economy and of presidential performance in congressional elections, but in their analysis the actions of the representative are ignored. Our findings suggest that negativity effects come into play even when a citizen holds the President in high regard, if the congressional incumbent is viewed as having been hostile to the President's legislative agenda. The most powerfully negative effects, however, are reserved for those members who have supported the President's program, if constituents back home view the Chief Executive unfavorably. A more nuanced picture of negative voting is supported in our analysis, one that views voters as acting with a certain degree of sophistication and that sees representatives' strategic positioning *vis-a-vis* the President as electorally consequential.

The overall picture that emerges is of an electorate much more discerning in its preference formation than is appreciated in previous work. Models of voting in congressional elections must

take account of these nuances if they are to capture fully the dynamics of congressional vote choice.

Prior work on the influence of presidential performance assessments in congressional elections

ignores the activities of the representative, thereby casting him as the passive victim or beneficiary of

the President's public standing. There is, to be sure, some validity to this view. Perceptions of a

representative's presidential support are strongly influenced by partisan cues. However, the

member's actual pattern of roll call votes also plays a roll of at least equal importance. In sum,

strategic positioning by incumbents with respect to the President's legislative agenda is electorally

prudent. If a representative correctly calibrates his support for the President, he can substantially

diminish the electoral punishment that might otherwise befall him.
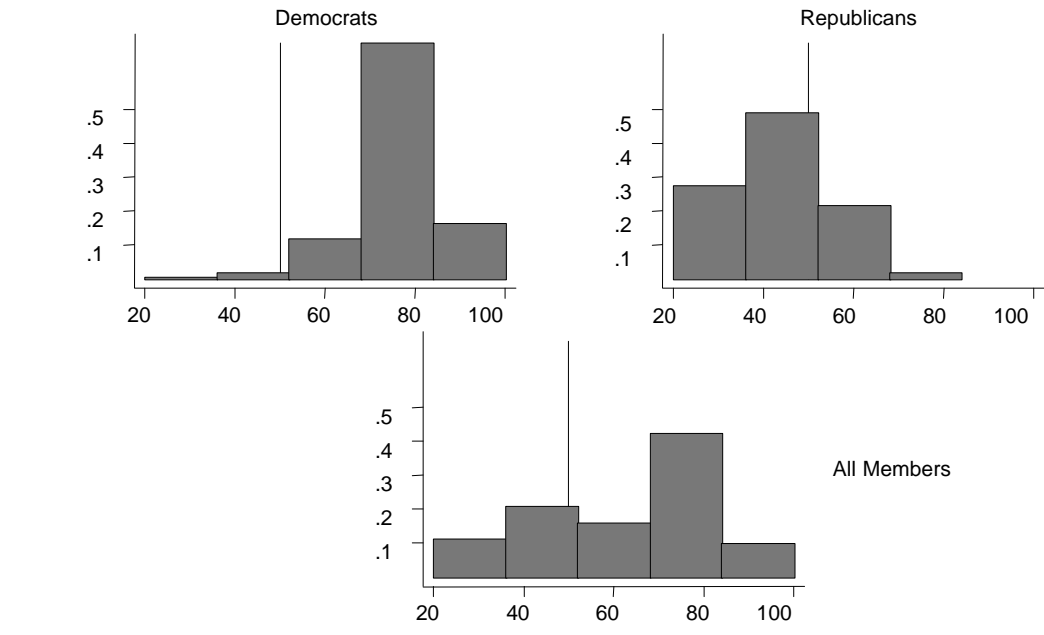
Actual Presidential Support
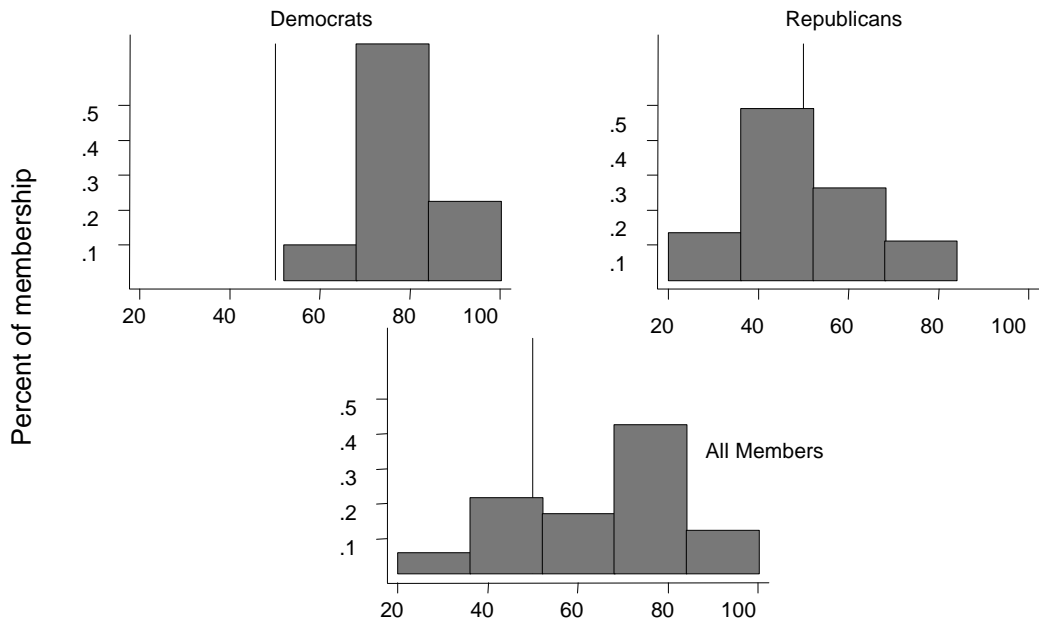
Members in 1994 NES Sample

Figure 1: Presidential Support Levels, Total and in the NES Sample

Table 1: Perceived and Actual Levels of Presidential Support

	More than Half	*About Half*	*Less than Half*	*Don't Know*
Respondent Knows Support, 1993				
Mean	74.3	68.9	44.3	61.5
(std dev)	(16.0)	(18.6)	(18.3)	(21.9)
Percent of sample	12.6	5.6	5.7	76.0
Respondent Guesses Support, 1993				
Mean	69.1	--	53.9	60.4
(std dev)	(18.4)	--	(21.4)	(22.7)
Percent of Sample	46.2	--	39.5	14.2
Respondent Knows Support, 1994				
Mean	75.3	68.3	46.2	63.5
(std dev)	(9.0)	(16.7)	(16.8)	(18.6)
Percent of Sample	10.8	6.4	12.1	69.7
Respondent Guesses Support, 1994				
Mean	74.4	65.5	52.1	63.6
(std dev)	(11.6)	(17.5)	(19.6)	(18.5)
Percent of Sample	19.5	33.2	28.6	18.3
Respondent Knows Support, 1996				
Mean	77.3	67.0	49.9	63.9
(std dev)	(11.4)	(16.6)	(15.2)	(18.8)
Percent of Sample	16.2	5.9	11.5	66.4

Notes: 1993, 1994, and 1996 NES. Voting data coded by authors. Cell entries are the mean presidential support scores for the members representing citizens in the various response categories, the standard deviations of those scores, and the percentage of respondents in each respective response category.
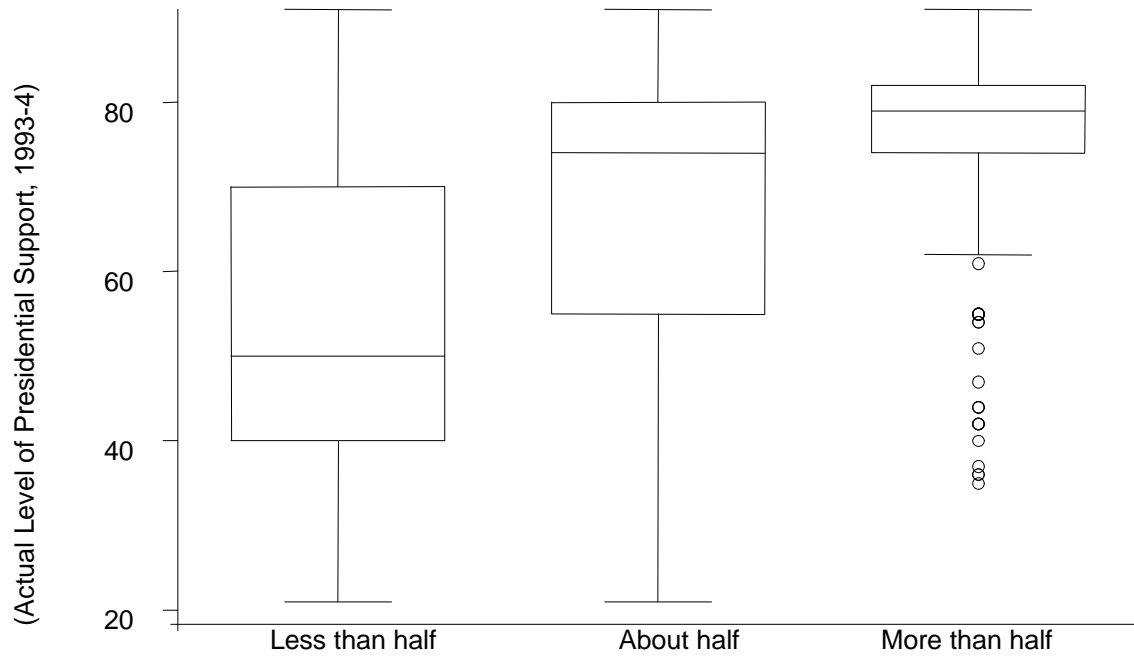
Figure 2: Actual Support by Perceived Support, 1994

Table 2: Citizen Perceptions of Member Presidential Support, 1994

Variable	Coefficient (standard error)	Effect at 1st Threshold	Effect at 2nd Threshold
1st Threshold	.331 (.343)		
2nd Threshold	1.524 (.344) ***		
Actual Support	.014 (.004) ***	-.34	.29
Incumbent Party	-.260 (.281)	.09	-.08
Incumbent Party * Strength of Party ID	.139 (.041) ***	-.38	.35
Projection	.250 (.040) ***	-.08	.16

N of cases = 989	LL = -851.53	*** p < .01	
χ^2 = 469 (4 df)	Pseudo R^2 = .2162		

Notes: Data: 1994 NES. Estimates were obtained via maximum likelihood ordered probit, estimated in STATA. Effects at each threshold indicate the change in probability that a case will be in category one or category three, relative to the other <u>two</u> categories.

Table 3: Incumbent Feeling Thermometer Ratings and Perceived Presidential Support

Variable	1993	1994	1996
Constant	62.43 ***	57.05 ***	57.25 ***
	(4.60)	(2.18)	(4.12)
Rep. Shares R's Partisanship	5.74 **	8.43 ***	17.96 ***
	(2.51)	(1.80)	(3.24)
Rep. Party * R's Ideology	4.63 **	5.78 ***	3.01
	(2.38)	(1.94)	(3.64)
R Approves of Congress	-0.61	1.62	-1.78 ***
Generally	(0.50)	(1.65)	(0.71)
R Approves of President/	-1.24	1.18	6.58 *
Rep Supports	(4.09)	(2.40)	(4.03)
R Approves of President/	-8.06 **	-9.61 ***	-11.82 ***
Rep Opposes	(4.16)	(2.58)	(3.70)
R Disapproves of President/	-11.71 ***	-13.74 ***	-3.43
Rep Supports	(4.22)	(2.73)	(6.19)
R Disapproves of President/	-3.15	-1.95	3.46
Rep Opposes	(4.11)	(2.40)	(4.13)
R Approves of President/	-3.05	2.17	-3.00
Rep is Dem.	(2.87)	(2.40)	(4.07)
R Disapproves of President/	-2.05	-2.91	-10.01 *
Rep is Dem.	(3.38)	(2.52)	(6.19)
N =	429	940	370
R^2 =	.088	.190	.365

Notes: Data from 1993, 94, and 96 National Election Studies. The estimation for 1996 includes only "knowers" due to question format; see text for more details. Standard errors are in parentheses.
*** = p<.01, ** = p<.05, * = p<.10, one-tailed test

Table 4: Incumbent Job Approval and
Perceived Presidential Support

Variable	1994	Max. Effect	1993	1996
Constant	0.86 *** (0.17)	--	1.86 (0.42)	1.61 *** (0.38)
Rep. Shares R's Partisanship	0.82 *** (0.14)	.17	0.88 *** (0.22)	0.96 *** (0.28)
Rep. Party * R's Ideology	0.20 (0.17)	.04	0.28 * (0.21)	0.44 * (0.30)
R Approves of Congress Generally	0.55 *** (0.13)	.10	-0.19 *** (0.05)	-0.15 ** (0.06)
R Approves of President/ Rep. Supports	0.45 ** (0.22)	.07	0.34 (0.37)	-0.54 (0.43)
R Approves of President/ Rep. Opposes	-0.64 *** (0.18)	-.16	-0.84 *** (0.35)	-1.39 *** (0.34)
R Disapproves of President/ Rep. Supports	-0.86 *** (0.18)	-.26	-0.96 *** (0.35)	-0.50 (0.44)
R Disapproves of President/ Rep. Opposes	0.27 * (0.18)	.05	-0.03 (0.37)	0.31 (0.60)
R Approves of President/ Rep. is Democrat	-0.57 *** (0.19)	-.12	-0.10 (0.29)	0.15 (0.37)
R Disapproves of President/ Rep. is Democrat	-0.38 ** (0.18)	-.08	-0.51 ** (0.26)	-1.00 ** (0.47)
N =	869		406	382
LL	-335.75		-157.7	-122.4
(χ^2 [df])	212.4 (9)		84.7 (9)	152.5 (9)
Pseudo R^2 =	.24		.21	.38

Notes: Data are from 1993, 1994, and 1996 NES. The sample includes "knowers" only for 1996; see text for details. Entries are maximum likelihood probit estimates. "Max effect" represents the change in probability of a "good job" response produced by shifting from the minimum to the maximum on the variable in question, holding all other variables constant at their means.
*** = $p < .01$, ** = $p < .05$, * = $p < .10$, one-tailed test

Table 5: House Vote Choice and
Perceived Presidential Support

Variable	1994	Max. Effect	1996
Constant	-0.05 (0.19)	--	0.12 (0.35)
Rep. Shares R's Partisanship	1.50 *** (0.16)	0.45	1.94 *** (0.29)
Rep. Party * R's Ideology	0.19 (0.19)	0.06	0.53 ** (0.29)
R Approves of Congress Generally	0.20 * (0.15)	0.06	-0.09 (0.07)
R Approves of President/Rep Supports	0.12 (0.22)	0.04	-0.49 (0.39)
R Approves of President/Rep Opposes	-0.36 ** (0.22)	-0.12	-0.62 ** (0.32)
R Disapproves of President/Rep Supports	-0.72 *** (0.21)	-0.30	-0.08 (0.49)
R Disapproves of President/Rep Opposes	0.32 * (0.24)	0.09	0.32 (0.57)
R Approves of President/Rep is Dem	-0.19 (0.22)	-0.06	-0.09 (0.39)
R Disapproves of President/Rep is Dem	-0.14 (0.22)	-0.04	-1.31 *** (0.48)
N =	624		336
LL	-248.2		-104.8
χ^2 (df)	289.4 (9)		222.2 (9)
Pseudo R-squared =	.37		.51

Notes: Data from 1994, 1996 NES. Entries are maximum likelihood probit estimates. "Max effect" represents the change in probability of a vote for the incumbent produced by shifting from the minimum to the maximum on the variable in question, holding all other variables constant at their means.
*** p<.01 , ** p<.05, * p < .10, one-tailed test

Notes

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[1] Hibbing and Alford (1981) differentiate between long-term incumbents and party novices, but not according to the representatives' levels of support for the President.

[2] A more nuanced treatment of the subject, taking into account the impact of presidential support, is found in Brady *et al* (1996). Their analysis, however, focuses exclusively on aggregate level data and cannot be used to infer individual level behavior. Our analysis should provide more insight into the psychological and perceptual dynamics underlying mid-term candidate evaluation and vote choice.

[3] Neustadt (1980), for example, argues that members "have to think about the president's standing with the public outside of Washington," and that "public standing is another factor bearing on their willingness to give him what he wants." The same points are echoed by Kernell (1997).

[4] The restricted in-party culpability thesis holds that presidential performance assessments are of little consequence in open-seat races; only in-party incumbents are substantially tied to the sitting President.

[5] For example, *Congressional Quarterly* observed that Republican Al Beverly's "unrelenting criticism of [Buddy] Darden for supporting controversial Clinton administration policies, such as the budget reconciliation vote in 1993, overshadowed Darden's efforts to present a centrist image in the mold of the state's most popular Democratic figure, Senator Sam Nunn." Beverly defeated six-term Democratic incumbent George "Buddy' Darden in Georgia's 7th congressional district in 1994.

[6] While this follow-up question should in theory provide insight into important distinctions between members, in practice it sheds little additional light. Virtually everyone (upwards of 90%) who answered "more than half" followed up with "almost always;" likewise, the great majority of those who answered "less than half" followed up with "almost never." As a result, we have generally ignored this question in our analysis, retaining the "more than half, half, less than half" trichotomy.

[7] We believe that the number of purely random responses is small, even within the "guess" category. The roughly 15% of the sample who refuse to hazard a guess even when prompted captures most of the respondents who truly have no basis on which to answer the question.

[8] While separate scores are reported in *CQ* for 1993 and 1994, they track each other quite closely (correlating at .98), so we have averaged each member's scores for the two years.

[9] Independents are not dropped from this analysis. Since Independents are coded "1" on the partisan strength variable, the resultant interaction term has a score of "1" for Independents with Democratic representatives, and "-1" for Independents with Republican representatives. There is no extra "boost" for Independent identifiers, which is as it should be.

[10] The two columns of first differences represent the change in probability that a respondent will be in the lowest or highest category (respectively) of the trichotomous dependent variable, based on a shift of the independent variable in question from its observed minimum to its observed maximum while holding all other variables constant at their means. Thus, first difference figures for a variable of +10 and -8 would mean that going from the minimum to the maximum on that variable makes an individual 10% more likely to have responded "less than half," and 8% less likely to have responded "more than half" when asked how often a member supported the president.

[11] The actual specification is as follows. The case count is identical, so this model is nested within the model in Table 2. The log likelihood ratio statistic tests whether the unconstrained model provides significantly improved fit of the model to the data (roughly analogous to a Chow test). The actual statistic is $-2*(LL(0)-LL(1))$ and is distributed as a chi-square. This model has one constraint (the interaction term is constrained to zero), so the Chi has a single degree of freedom. The results demonstrate that the model reported in Table 2 fits the data better than the simpler model with unmediated party.

Alternative Specification: No Interaction		Model Statistics
1st Threshold	-.080 (.319)	N = 989
2nd Threshold	1.104 (.319)	LL = -863.17
Actual Support	.014 (.004) **	χ^2 = 23.2 (1 d.f.) (p<.0001)
		(*compared to Table 2*)
Incumbent Party	-1.05 (.156) **	
Projection	.272 (.040) **	

[12] In fact, the effects of actual support are greater than those of partisan cues for all but the strong partisans. The reported first differences compare strong partisans represented by Republicans to strong partisans represented by Democrats. If we compare instead weak partisans, independent leaners, or pure independents, the party schema differences decline to approximately .3, .2, and .1, respectively.

[13] In the analysis that follows, we comment most extensively on the results from the 1994 National Election Study, although we report results from all three years in the tables. We choose 1994 as our exemplar because it affords the largest sample with the most complete battery of questions (i.e. including the "guessers" follow-up). The relative stability of the results across all three years, however, should dispel any notion that our results are an artifact of the 1994 election context; this is not just another paper about the 1994 election.

[14] One could construct a single, scaled variable to get at essentially the same concepts. We use the series of dummies, however, in order to gain more insight into the effects of each individual combination of presidential approval and perceived member support (and thus to test more fully the idea of negative voting).

[15] It is our feeling that respondents in this category are the closest to "neutral," relative to the other groups.

[16] As noted above, the "ideology" variable is actually ideology interacted with the member's party. We have no hypothesis about ideology alone. Being liberal or conservative should not make an individual more or less likely to support an incumbent. Only once we take into account the incumbent's party, does the respondent's ideology give us any leverage on attitudes toward the member.

[17] Respondents in districts where there was no incumbent or where the incumbent ran unopposed are excluded.

[18] Remember that in 1996, only "knowers" fall into this sample. This accounts for the smaller sample size and the larger standard errors in 1996.

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