

# Exploring the Causes of Congressional Unpopularity: The Role of Policy & Valence in Citizen Attitudes about Congressional Job Approval

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## A Changing & Unpopular United States Congress

*“I appeal to the distinguished minority leader whose patriotism has always taken precedence over his partisanship, to join with me, and I know he will, in finding the Senate’s best contribution at this time to the resolution of this grave national issue.” - U.S. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D-MT)*

*“I trust that the time will never come in my political career when the waters of partisanship will flow so swift and so deep as to obscure my estimate of the national interest.” -U.S. Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen (R-IL)*

At the height of the congressional debate on the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D-MT) appealed to his Republican counterpart, Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen (R-IL), to join him in overcoming legislative obstruction to bring the landmark legislation to the floor.<sup>1</sup> In appealing to his colleague, whom he held in high personal esteem, Mansfield hoped Dirksen’s public support of the Civil Rights Act would bring the Republican votes needed to overcome a filibuster by Southern Democratic Senators. In response, Dirksen pledged his support for the landmark suggestion by suggesting that partisan politics would not distort his desire to solve significant policy issues. As a result of bipartisan negotiations between Mansfield, Dirksen, and Senate Majority Whip Hubert Humphrey (D-MN); the Senate was able to overcome the Southern-led filibuster and pass the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawing racial discrimination in public accommodations and satisfying mass demand for policy change (Jeong, Miller & Sened 2009).

The exchange between Senators Mansfield and Dirksen highlight a perceived by-gone era of congressional politics, typically referred to as the “Textbook Congress.” Scholars remark that the era’s healthy dearth of moderate and autonomous legislators facilitated bipartisan cooperation across various policy domains (Shepsle 1989). Scholarly and media accounts of today’s Congress are marked by polarized parties (Theriault 2008), pronounced legislative gridlock (Binder 2014), non-ideological partisan warfare (Lee 2009), and chronically low congressional approval (Griffin 2011). To that point, Frank Newport of Gallup observed that congressional approval reached its nadir during the Fall 2013 government shutdown resulting from the inability of the Congress to raise the debt ceiling.<sup>2</sup> In an in-depth analysis of this record low approval, citizens cited the ineffectiveness by Congress to overcome petty partisan politics and a lack of integrity among its members<sup>3</sup>.

Indeed, one of the rare sources of bipartisan agreement is the public’s shared belief that Congress is incapable of carrying out its constitutional prerogative of deliberation and moral obligation to craft policy and legislate in the interest of the entire country. No matter the partisan majority of Congress, the public has striking bipartisan agreement on congressional approval. This is in stark contrast to the public’s job approval ratings of the President, the other elected national institution, which is highly polarized by partisan identification. In addition, the President tends to enjoy higher overall performance ratings than Congress; this trend has become especially pronounced in the past decade. Indeed, the lack of variation in congressional job approval appears to be a relatively new phenomena. Figure 1 shows the approval of presidential and congressional job performance by citizen partisan attachment.

The figure articulates two significant trends. First, the global mean shows that while Congress never approaches the levels of institutional job approval found in the American presidency, citizens gave Congress far higher job approval marks during the 1980’s, 1990’s, and early 2000s. Second, while the president seems to have sported polarized job approval assessments since 1980, Congress has traditionally seen relatively little variation in partisan evaluations of its job performance. Stunning by today’s partisan environment, both Democratic minority and Republican majority partisans gave Congress over a 45% approval rating during from the late 1990’s to the early 2000’s. Today, there is clear bipartisan disapproval in congressional job performance. During the last Congress, one featuring a Republican majority, both Democrats and Republicans gave

<sup>1</sup>Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden at the Soles Lecture, University of Delaware (9/16/2011).

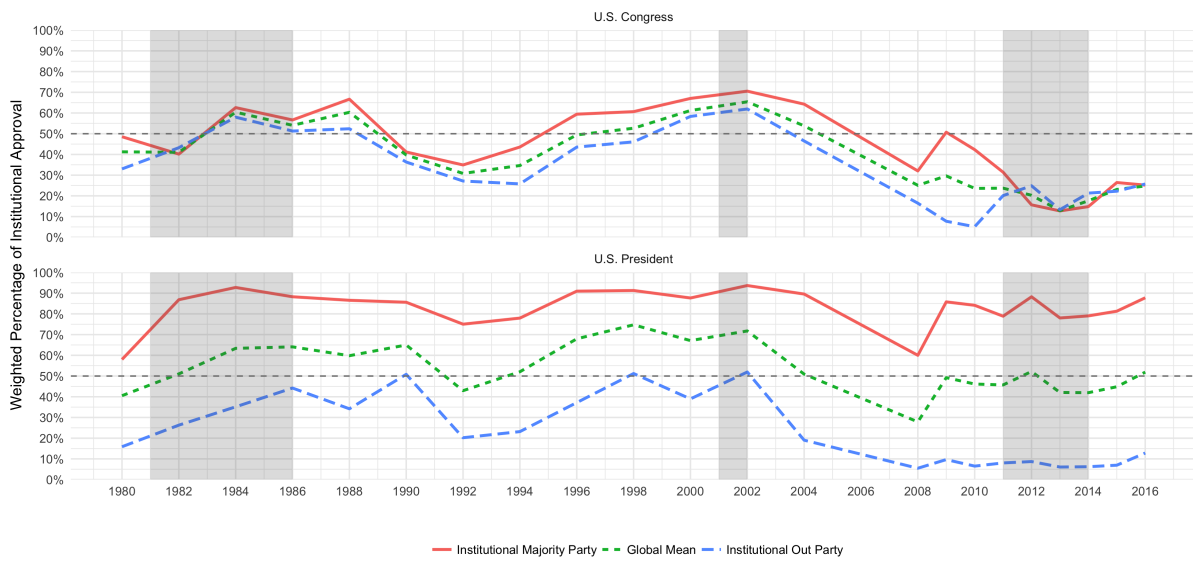
<sup>2</sup>Gallup: Congressional Approval Sinks to Record Low (10/12/2013)”

<sup>3</sup>Gallup: Gridlock Is Top Reason Americans Are Critical of Congress 6/12/2013

Congress approximately a 25% approval rating. What is perhaps more striking is that Republicans scored their co-partisan majority Congress only approximately 12% higher in job approval than Democratic President Barack Obama. Nevertheless, the contemporary Congress is not only unpopular relative to the president, its unpopularity transcends partisan divides.

This presents a clear question: what causes the low levels of congressional approval that defines the contemporary Congress? The remainder of this proposal aims to provide a potential theory explaining the puzzle of low Congressional approval. Drawing on new research of how citizens evaluate and choose candidates, we present a model of congressional approval which posits that citizens evaluate Congress on the degree of ideological congruence between their preferences and congressional policies and their perceptions of collective congressional leadership (valence). Given the relatively limited literature on citizen perceptions of Congress, this theoretical model is the first to argue that congressional approval is a function of ideological congruence and citizen perceptions of congressional leadership valence.<sup>4</sup> Using the limited amount of data on citizen attitudes of congressional leadership valence, we show descriptively that higher assessments of leadership are associated with higher congressional job approval assessments. We then propose a conjoint experimental design which would assess how varying degrees of ideological and leadership valence representation impacts the level of job approval expressed by citizens. Such a study would be the first investigation of the determinants of congressional approval in a causal framework.

Figure 1: Job Approval of the U.S. Congress & Presidency by Partisan Attachment, 1980-2016



Data: Cooperative Congressional Election Study & American National Election Study. Shaded areas indicate divided Congress.

## Models of Approval & Significance of Leadership Valence

Recent work on how citizens select their elected representatives can provide some insight into specifying a unified model of congressional approval.<sup>5</sup> Stone (2017) finds support for a model of vote choice positing that citizens evaluate candidates on two distinct mentions, a policy dimension and a valence dimension. The model posits that while citizens select candidates close to their ideological policy preferences, they also select candidates they believe to be competent, honest, and able to work well with other leaders for the interests of the district. Termed “leadership valence”, Stone (2017) suggests that citizens want to be represented by individuals that are effective in the legislature, work well with their legislators, and have high integrity to be faithfully represent their district rather than seeking office for personal gain (see Fenno 1978, for qualitative evidence).

The insights of developments on model of candidate-choice can help us provide a significant understanding of how citizens feel about the job performance of their collective Congress. As infamously declared by James Madison in *Federalist 51*, “in republican government, the legislative authority necessarily predominates.” Given the constitutional prerogative that Congress legislates, citizens receive collective ideological representation by Congress. In the ideologically polarized and partisan Congress, this increasingly means that the level of policy representativeness is conditional on which party controls

<sup>4</sup>While not presented in this proposal due to space limitations, we find preliminary statistical evidence for our forthcoming model positing a valence & ideological component of congressional approval. The grant committee can find this model statistical analysis here in this on-line supplemental appendix: [https://calgara.github.io/dirksen\\_center.html](https://calgara.github.io/dirksen_center.html).

<sup>5</sup>Traditional citizen-level models of congressional approval tend to focus on partisan (Kimball & Patterson 1997), political sophistication (Mondak et al. 2007), and symbolic ideological identification (Jones & McDermott 2002). At the aggregate-level, scholars have long noted that presidential evaluations (Durr, Gilmour & Wolbrecht 1997), partisan conflict (Ramirez 2009), policy divergence (Ramirez 2012), the economy (Rudolph 2002), and trust in government (Stimson 2004) correlate with congressional approval. While each piece makes a unique contribution to the literature, there is no assessment of a unified model assessing what shapes citizen evaluations of collective job performance.

the Congress (Cox & McCubbins 2005). Since the majority party sets the agenda in the chamber, the ideological orientation of policy produced by Congress is conditional on which party is in the majority. Yet, no standing model of citizen congressional approval explicitly incorporates the degree to which citizen ideological preferences align with the policies produced by the majority party. If Congress’s chief constitutional prerogative is deliberating and passing policies responding to the ideological demands of the American polity (Schattschneider 1942), then Congress’ job assessment should be tied to how well it provides collective ideological representation on public policy.

Secondly, no standing model assesses the degree to which citizen assessments of collective congressional valence influence their perceptions of congressional job approval. Indeed, qualitative focus group work articulates that citizens want a legislature that is deliberative, transparent of its activities, free of petty partisan politics in exchange for focusing on the nation’s policy problems, and comprised of ethical and thoughtful legislators (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 1995). A lack of investigation into the leadership valence component of job approval is in part due to the lack of survey data on citizen attitudes about the leadership valence qualities of the entire Congress.<sup>6</sup> To date, only two surveys have sought to measure how citizens feel about the collective valence attributes of their Congress. These two surveys are the 2006 Congressional Elections Study, sponsored by Former U.S. Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-IN) and the Center on Congress at Indiana University, and the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study Indiana University Module. These surveys feature a nationally representative sample of citizen attitudes of congressional leadership valence across multiple dimensions, such as the degree to which Congress holds itself to a high ethical standard or the degree Congress spends its time working to solve the nation’s problems. Citizens evaluate their assessments on these dimensions of congressional valence on a scale from “F” (0) to “A” (4).<sup>7</sup>

**Table 1: Summated Citizen Perceptions of Collective Congressional Leadership Valence**

	Leadership Valence Grade				
	F	D	C	B	A
<i>2006 CES Study</i>	32.24%	36.53%	27.40%	3.01%	0.82%
<i>2014 CCES IU Study</i>	51.59%	20.98%	21.70%	4.50%	1.23%

*Note:* Cell values are weighted percentages from study respondents.

Table 1 articulates a summated mean scale of citizen perceptions of congressional valence across all of these items ranging from 0 (F) to 4 (A). These scores can be interpreted as a collective grade on leadership valence each respondent gives Congress.<sup>8</sup> As one can see, citizens generally share a poor view of the leadership valence perceptions of their Congress. In 2006, approximately close a third (32%) of citizens gave Congress a failing grade on leadership valence across salient dimensions, such as the ability to hold its members to high ethical standards and conducting bipartisan deliberative discussions on legislative debates. By contrast, the percentage of citizens giving Congress the same failing grade skyrockets to close to over half (52%) in the 2014 data.

This descriptive analysis, across both time points, suggests that citizens hold Congress in low regard for its collective leadership valence. Moreover, the distribution of marks in 2014 suggests that citizens are becoming more negative about the leadership valence exhibited by Congress. Nevertheless, there is reason to suspect that assessments of Congress’ job approval should be higher among citizens that give Congress higher marks in leadership valence. Similar to citizens that find Congress is providing congruent ideological policy representation, citizens with high leadership valence perceptions should be more likely to approve of Congressional job performance. In other words, more positive evaluations of how Congress functions in its non-ideological leadership deliberations should raise its job approval rating citizens. Indeed, when congressional leadership valence assessments were higher in 2006, the approval rating of the U.S. Congress stood at approximately 38%. By 2014, a year in which over half of respondents give Congress a failing grade in congressional leadership valence, the approval rating plummets to approximately 10%.

These trends present descriptive evidence that lower leadership valence assessments by citizens are associated with lower assessments of congressional job performance. While not presented in this proposal given page limitations, we present supplemental information of a preliminary statistical test of our comprehensive approval model using these unique data (the

<sup>6</sup>This is in stark contrast to the comprehensive data provided by the *American National Election Study*, which provides rich data on valence attributes (such as honesty, integrity, competence individual qualities) of presidents and even presidential candidates.

<sup>7</sup>Specifically, these items ask respondents to rate Congress on how transparent it is with its activities (2006 study), the extent it provides legislative oversight (2006 study), the extent Congress collectively represents the diverse views of the country (2006 study), whether its processes are productive and deliberative (2006 & 2014 study), how well it encourages bipartisan involvement (2006 & 2014 study), whether it deals with the key issues facing the country (2006 & 2014 study), whether it controls special interest influence on legislative matters (2006 & 2014 study), and whether it holds its members to high ethical standards (2006 & 2014 study). The summated rating scales have a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  reliability coefficient of 0.88 for 2006 & 0.93 for 2014, indicating reliable measures of leadership valence.

<sup>8</sup>For interpretative purposes, the resulting mean scale was coded into ordinal categories ranging from F to A. For example, a citizen with a summated mean rating of 3.0 are coded as giving Congress a “B.”

2006 Congressional Election Study & 2014 Indiana University Cooperative Congressional Election Study Module) assessing citizen attitudes about congressional leadership valence and ideological preferences. We find **strong** preliminary evidence for our model, motivating the need for exploring the causal mechanisms of approval. The grant committee can find this model statistical analysis here: [https://calgara.github.io/dirksen\\_center.html](https://calgara.github.io/dirksen_center.html).

## Proposed Causal Experiment Assessing Congressional Job Approval

To that end, we construct a conjoint experimental design in order to gain inferential leverage on the relative strengths of policy and valence effects on congressional approval ratings. Conjoint analyses have been commonly applied in marketing and consumer research for several decades. However, the usage of conjoint analysis has only recently begun to gain traction in political science literature and, as of yet, has not been utilized to address congressional valence. In forming the structure of our design, we follow the lead of political scientists, such as Hainmueller & Hopkins (2015), pioneering the application of conjoint analyses in the study of citizen attitudes.

Conjoint analyses are constructed such that participants weigh multiple pieces of information in hypothetical scenarios in order to determine which scenario is most preferable. Participants are exposed to a pair hypothetical scenarios, each containing multiple randomized characteristics, or “attributes.” Participants are forced to choose one of the two scenarios that is most preferable given the information available to them. Forcing participants to choose one scenario over another enables us to discern which attributes of congressional action are driving approval ratings, as the participants are engaged in making trade-offs between conflicting preferences of the varying attribute values. This process of establishing relative scenario preferences based on attribute trade-offs places the effect of each attribute on the same scale, essentially making the effect of policy and the effect of valence directly comparable.

The sets of attributes that participants are exposed to in the present experiment are designed to emulate the level of information that lay news-consumers might be exposed to in their daily lives. The attributes include considerations that participants might take to develop and update their congressional attitudes, thus granting our approach a good degree of external validity. The attributes in our present design include *majority status*, *policy area*, *policy outcome*, *congressional valence*, and *public support*.

**Table 2: Attribute Values for Congressional Scenarios in Conjoint Experiment**

Attribute	Values
Majority Status	Republican Control
	Democratic Control
	Divided Congress
Policy Area	Immigration
	General Economy
	Foreign Affairs
Policy Outcome	Passage
	Gridlock
Congressional Valence	Extensive Debate & Amendments
	Limited Debate & Amendments
	No Debate & Amendments
	Party-Line Vote
	Written Behind Closed Doors
	No Time to Read the Bill
Public Support	Bill Written by Lobbyists
	[Randomized %] of Public Supports
	[Randomized %] of Republicans Support
	[Randomized %] of Democrats Support
Note: Table cells indicate the attributes and attribute values that may be combined to construct congressional action scenarios.	

This set of attributes will allow us to determine the relative causal effects of partisanship, polarization, legislative effectiveness, valence or leadership, and representativeness on congressional approval, respectively. This unique design will allow us to test the effect of valence characteristics such as the amount of debate allowed on a bill directly against considerations for who is in power (e.g. Republican control of both houses) or the policy area’s level of ideological polarization (e.g. immigration reform).

Finally, as a robustness check, participants are also asked to rate the performance of Congress based on each scenario. This robustness check supplements the initial relative preference question, which does not indicate the participants’ level of congressional approval in response to the congressional action. This process then repeats such that each participant responds to a series of six scenario pairings, resulting in nearly 8,000 observations for our analysis (assuming funding for the successful recruitment of approximately 1,300 participants). The sets of attributes are displayed to participants as brief summaries in a table format so as to avoid participant fatigue but also to ensure that the attributes of interest are emphasized for the participants’ consideration.

**Table 3: Conjoint Experiment as Displayed to Participants**

Please read the following scenario descriptions carefully, then select the scenario you believe to be the relatively preferable congressional action.

	<b>Scenario A</b>	<b>Scenario B</b>
Majority Status	Divided Congress	Republican Control
Policy Area	General Economy	Immigration
Policy Outcome	Gridlock	Passage
Congressional Valence	Extensive Debate/Amendments	No Debate/Amendments
Public Support	80% of Public Supports	43% of Public Supports

Out of the two scenarios above, which congressional action is most preferable?

On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 indicates strong disapproval and 7 indicates strong approval, how would you rate the congressional action taken in Scenario A?

On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 indicates strong disapproval and 7 indicates strong approval, how would you rate the congressional action taken in Scenario B?

## Contribution of this Experimental Framework to The Study of Congress

Building on a new methodology in the study of political opinion, we hope to strengthen our collective understanding of what causes citizen perceptions of their Congress. Our proposed innovative experimental design allows us to manipulate the ideological collective representation provided by Congress and the level of congressional valence exhibited in Congress. In the event of generous funding from the Dirksen Congressional Center, which would allow for the recruitment of an experimental panel, our framework allows us to empirically test the causal effect of valence and policy simultaneously and independently. For example, we can causally assess whether more extensive debate on congressional matters causes higher assessments of Congressional approval or whether passage of citizen preferred policies causes greater congressional approval. Given the strong randomization component of our framework, the study will have a high degree of causal leverage to evaluate our model of congressional approval. Moreover, this study would be the *first* causal study of citizen attitudes about their collective Congress.

If privileged with support from the Dirksen Congressional Center, our study will not only contribute to the study of congressional public opinion but will also have strong normative implications. Low approval in the ability of Congress to fulfill its constitutional prerogative contributes to lower trust in government by citizens and more pessimism about the state of national political affairs (Stimson 2004). Considering that our study will shed light on what causes citizen perceptions of the job performance of their Congress, these experimental results could point to potential non-policy related congressional reforms which may help raise its collective approval. For example, if more thoughtful deliberation processes by Congress causes an increase in approval, our findings would suggest that Congress will be well-served to codify more deliberative processes in its legislative work-flow. Indeed, greater collaboration and legislative compromise, in the spirit of Senators Dirksen and Mansfield, would surely help stem the tide of chronic congressional unpopularity and low esteem that citizens hold for their paramount policymaking institution, the U.S. Congress.

## Proposed Dirksen Congressional Center Research Budget

Our experiment is designed such that it should take participants no longer than fifteen minutes (15) to complete. We are committed to paying Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers (survey respondents) a fair compensation for their time and attention (\$7.25 per hour). Moreover, recent work assessing data quality of Amazon MTurk samples argues that such compensation is necessary to ensure high integrity of the data (Berinsky, Huber & Lenz 2012). Moreover, this funding model is standard in political science experimental designs that recruit nationally representative samples for publication-level studies. To ensure the validity of our results, we limit our survey sample to the pool of MTurk workers verified to have voted in the 2016 election; limiting our sample to voters ensures a minimum standard of political knowledge, interest, and sophistication. The increased quality of data comes at a cost, however, at \$0.10 per unit. The per-unit cost for a voter's 15-minute experiment participation is thus \$1.9125.

On top of the per-unit cost, Amazon's MTurk collects a 40% fee for workers' wages earned ( $\$1.8125 \times 0.40$ ) and 20% for any premium qualification bonus granted to workers ( $\$0.10 \times 0.20$ ). The table below calculates the total expected cost of conducting the experiment on the condition that approximately 1,300 MTurk workers participate in our experimental survey. However, partial funding from the Dirksen Center (approximately \$2,600) will allow us to run the experiment with a high quality nationally representative sample of 1,000 Amazon MTurk workers. We should note that this is the minimum number of respondents that validation studies suggest is necessary for confidence-threshold hypothesis testing in a conjoint

experimental research design (Hainmueller & Hopkins 2015).

**Table 4: Budget Proposal: Congressional Valence Conjoint Analysis**

Expenditure	Unit Cost	Quantity	Amount
Personnel			
Hourly Wage (7.25 * .25)	1.8125	1,317	2,387.06
Bonus: 2016 Voter	0.10	1,317	131.70
Mandatory MTurk Fees			
Wage Fee (40%)	0.725	1,317	954.83
Bonus Fee (20%)	0.02	1,317	26.34
<b>Total</b>	2.6575	1,317	<b>≈3,500.00</b>

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