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Final Paper

You Can't Make Everyone Happy All The Time<sup>1</sup>:  
Why Partisans Wanting Different Legislative Outcomes Might Mean Disapproval is Here to Stay

If the United States Congress is supposed to be a legislative body that represents the population, it is very alarming for this democracy if the population regularly, sternly, strongly, and consistently demonstrates a wide variety of disgust for the institution. More troublingly, Congress tends to be singled out as the most hated of all government institutions, including the federal government as a whole (Dennis 1981; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Hibbing and Larimer 2005). It therefore becomes important to understand why citizens dislike Congress so much, among and above all other institutions, and then consider policy changes necessary to bring Congress back in line with public opinion.

Many political scientists have proposed theories as to why people have a negative view of Congress, and come to conflicting ideas as to what the main cause of this disdain happens to be. This disagreement has coalesced around three main theories about who we should blame for the failures of Congress: First, that we should blame the people for being averse to the extended debate and prolonged disagreement of Congress, not understanding that this is the only process under which democracy can function (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Hibbing 2002; Hibbing and Larimer 2005). The second main theory proposes that we should blame Congress and the media, because Congressmen act especially extreme and make visible attempts to dodge accountability and subvert legislative processes to their own ends (Brady and Theriault 2001;

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<sup>1</sup> Rejected titles for this paper are "Different Strokes For Different Partisan Folks", "Democrats are from Mars, Republicans are from Venus", and "It's the Political Parties, Stupid".

Hibbing 2002), which ends up highlighted by an especially large and unfavorable treatment in the media that is skewed to the most extreme members (Page, et al.1987; Patterson and Caldeira 1990; Brady and Theriault 2001). Finally, the third main theory proposes we should blame the economy, suggesting that the disdain for Congress is instead part of a general disdain for all government institutions and the Federal Government as a whole, and that this disdain rises and falls with a retrospective mood about how the economy is doing (Patterson and Caldeira 1990; Hibbing 2002; Stimson 2004; Hibbing and Larimer 2005).

Therefore, I pose two questions: (1) To what extent do these three theories account for why people disapprove of Congress? and (2) Given our understanding of Congressional disapproval, what, if anything, could Congress consider doing differently to improve its reputation?

## **Data and Measurement**

To get information on how people feel about Congress, I will look at survey questions from the 2006 Congress Pre-Election Survey conducted by the Indiana University Center for Survey Research. This survey asked the respondent how he or she feels about Congress on a 4-point scale, and also asked a wide variety of questions that probe all three of these theories – questions about deliberation and cooperation help examine the blame-people theory, questions about whether the respondent thinks their representative or Congress are selfish and media consumption help examine the blame-Congress theory, and questions about presidential approval and the state of the economy help examine the blame-economy theory.

The CES also gave the respondent the opportunity to *grade* Congress on an A through F scale on how well they oversee and control the actions of the President: how well they encourage

bipartisan cooperation, how well they conduct business in a careful and deliberate way, how well they represent all of American's diverse groups and interests, how well they tackle key issues facing the country, how well they hold themselves to high standards of ethical conduct, how well they hold productive discussions, how well they make their workings open to the public, and how well they control the influence of big interests. The different scores on these grades allow different parts of Congress to be viewed independently, being able to test to what extent there are differences within specific complaints of Congress.

## **Hypotheses**

These different grades also allow the three theories to be tested even further. If the blame-people theory is correct and people dislike Congress because they are adverse to the level of disagreement in Congress, I would hypothesize that the grades for cooperation, deliberation, discussion, and tackling issues would be most predictive of Congressional approval, largely exclusive of other factors.

Likewise, if the blame-Congress theory is correct and people dislike Congress because they see especially extreme Congresspeople on the media and don't like how they act, I would hypothesize that Congress and/or the respondent's individual representative would be deemed to be selfish, since they are subverting the collective democratic process for their own gains, and I would hypothesize media consumption to play a large explanatory role. Additionally, I would expect that people seeing Congress as selfish would also involve bad grades on ethics and control of big interests.

Lastly, if the blame-economy theory is correct and people dislike Congress because they have a general disdain for all institutions during periods of economic downturn, we would expect

retrospective opinions about the economy to have a large effect on views for Congress and we would expect approval of the President to have a significant and large effect on Congressional approval, given that it is theorized to be a disdain of all institutions, including the Executive Branch.

## **Analysis**

### *Mean Grades for Congress Among Categories*

The mean Congress grade given for each category is displayed in Figure 1, where the grades are converted to a descending numeric format, where A is represented by 1, B by 2, etc. While Congress got a mean grade of worse than a C on each category, there are significant variations among different categories. T-tests reveal that the grade for ethics is statistically significantly what respondents find to be the worst about Congress, trailed by their control of Big Interests and their ability to cooperate, all of which are statistically significantly distinct from each other<sup>2</sup>.

Trailing those three grades are two groups that are insignificantly different within each group, yet statistically significantly different between groups<sup>3</sup>. These differences in means reveal that people might dislike Congress for *specific reasons* – that Congress is doing a bad job at some functions, but not at others. If people dislike Congress for specific reasons, it means they are likely paying Congress some attention either directly or indirectly, and not simply disliking Congress as a whole.

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<sup>2</sup> The t-test between big interests and ethics is  $p=0.0295$ , and between cooperate and Big Interests is  $p=0.0002$ .

<sup>3</sup> The first group is deliberation, representation, and tackling. The second group is oversee, discussion, and transparency. These groups have p-values  $p>0.05$  between each other with the exception of transparency and discussion at  $p=0.04$ . The difference between the lowest of the first group (deliberate) and the highest of the second group (discussion) is significant at  $p=0.0056$ .

### *A Model of Congressional Approval*

The problem with this comparison analysis is it cannot be used to understand to what extent these grades on specific parts matter for Congressional approval overall. It could turn out that bad grades in certain categories are driven by completely different factors, like the respondent's mood about to what extent the economy is improving, or how much media they are consuming. To see if these differences in strength bear out, we will have to turn to making a model of Congressional approval where other aspects potentially affecting the respondent's approval rating are controlled.

To have adequate controls, it will be important to include standard demographic controls like age, race gender, and political affiliation, while also including the variables needed to test all potential theories at once, to ensure that one theory isn't obsoleted by referring to a different theory. For example, it would be necessary to include variables about the economy to see if mood about the economy drives both Congressional approval and how favorably they grade Congress. Thus, to construct our model of congressional approval, we attempt to predict the result of the 4-point scale with a wide variety of independent variables meant to test all three theories. We will use an *ordered logistic regression* because it is the most appropriate to model this interval data and use a wide variety of independent variables to test all three theories. The results of this model are shown in Table 1.

### *Testing the Blame-People Theory*

The model shows that after controlling for many factors, the grades for how well Congress cooperates, deliberates, and tackles important issues are all statistically significant predictors of Congressional approval. However, this theory doesn't appear to apply universally – not everyone dislikes the debate and argumentation within Congress – as Table 2 shows, the

number of people stating that the two parties in Congress need to compromise more instead of stick to their principles is a slight minority at 47.95%. Furthermore a plurality of people, 48.03%, say that Congress does not argue too much, and a large majority, 74.98%, want Congress to discuss each issue *more often* than they currently do. Inter-item correlations between these three questions, shown in Table 3 further reveal that there is not much relationship between answering “yes” to one of these questions and answering “yes” to another – just because one thinks Congress argues too much doesn’t mean he or she would want Congress to compromise more.

Table 4, which shows regressions sorted by party affiliation<sup>4</sup>, helps further clarify this effect by showing that grading Congress on their ability to cooperate does not play an explanatory role for Democrats, and grading Congress on their ability to tackle issues only plays an explanatory role for Leaners. Likewise, deliberation and productive discussion only help explain the rating of Democrats, and when we look back at whether people think congress should discuss or compromise more, as seen in Figure 2, we see Democrats again wanting more discussion and compromise<sup>5</sup>. Such an outcome makes sense when we understand that at the time this data was collected, the Democrats were the party out of power<sup>6</sup> – no wonder those who’s preferred party is out of power are much more likely to think that Congress isn’t being bipartisan enough, because more bipartisan cooperation would result in more favorable legislation. Thus this effect isn’t one of all people generally being averse to the lack of compromise in Congress,

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<sup>4</sup> To form a variable for party affiliation, strong and moderate Democrats were grouped into a “Democrats” category, strong and moderate Republicans were grouped into a “Republicans” category, and people who were weak Democrats, weak Republicans, and independents were grouped into a “Leaners” category. The leaners were included because they were speculated to not be partisan enough to have a stake in which party controls Congress.

<sup>5</sup> The effect is statistically significant: the effect of party on discussion is  $p < 0.001$  and on compromise is  $p = 0.047$  for Chi<sup>2</sup> test and  $p = 0.0019$  and  $p = 0.0268$  for t-test.

<sup>6</sup> In 2006 prior to the election when this survey was taken (109<sup>th</sup> Congress), the Republicans controlled the House, Senate, and Presidency. The election would later change control of the House and Senate.

but perhaps non-partisan people being adverse to the lack of compromise, and partisan people being only adverse to the lack of compromise when they are not benefiting from it.

### *Testing the Blame-Congress Theory*

While respondents definitely give Congress exceptionally bad marks on their ethical standards and ability to reign in corrupting Big Interests, Table 1 shows that transparency, ethics, and big interests all do not play an explanatory role in predicting Congressional approval once other factors are controlled for. On the other hand, a general feeling that Congress is selfish is statistically significant, even if thinking the respondents own legislator is selfish does not matter, perhaps resulting from a well-established “hate Congress, love your Congressperson” effect (Feno 1975; Hibbing and Larimer 2005). These two factors end up in direct tension to each other, because the grades for ethics, transparency, and controlling big interests don’t become significant even when the variables for selfishness are taken out.

Looking to media consumption, however, can unravel this contention. If the blame-congress theory is right, we also need to find the blame-media subcomponent – according to this theory, not only are Congresspeople acting extreme, but the media is focusing on the most extreme Congresspeople, and people see these Congresspeople acting out and dislike Congress as a whole. Yet despite the media effect being well documented, the effect of media consumption is insignificant in our model, and remains insignificant even when you replace the variable with a “have consumed media or not” dichotomous variable. Others have found that media only affect public opinion in very specific circumstances (Page, et. al 1987; Forgette and Morris 2006), and even then, the effect is weak (Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse 1998). Likewise, negative political advertisements likewise do no more to weaken citizen’s attitude toward Congress (Jackson, et. al 2009). Thus it does not seem that the public reacts much to the

actions of extreme members in Congress, nor are these actions affected by skewed media reporting.

Additionally, Table 4 shows that only for partisans is the selfishness of Congress an important explanatory variable. It seems only people who have a stake in the legislative outcomes of Congress – preferring legislation of a certain partisan stripe – see Congress as selfish, perhaps condemning Congresspeople for not producing favorable legislation. Given that 26.86% of respondents call their representative selfish when that representative is of the opposite political party, compared to only 19.83% of respondents who call a same-party representative selfish, it seems that the “selfish” label is mostly motivated by partisanship<sup>7</sup>.

Overseeing the President is also a very partisan issue, as Table 4 shows the grade for overseeing the President mattering for both Democrats and Republicans, but not for Leaners. Likewise, Table 5, which contains correlations between factors of Congress and political conservatism, backs this up by showing a -0.4040 correlation between the grade given to Congress on overseeing the President and how conservative the Respondent is. Democrats give Congress a statistically significantly worse grade on how well they oversee the president, even when compared to the baseline average grade across all nine factors. Furthermore, nearly half of Democrats say that Congress’s priority should be to oversee the President rather than help their constituents, bring federal dollars back to their districts, or make decisions on national policy issues, compared to only 18.37% of Republicans.

### *Testing the Blame-Economy Theory*

If the blame the economy theory is right as stated by Stimson 2004, we should expect that the disdain for Congress is actually just a disdain for the federal government as a whole. The

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<sup>7</sup> Statistically significant at p-value = 0.022 with both a t-test and Chi<sup>2</sup> test.



CES dataset allows us to compare approval of Congress with approval of the President, and we do find a very strong, significant correlation between the two approval ratings of 0.3515.

However, as seen in Table 1, this effect becomes less strong when controlling for how well respondents think Congress is *overseeing* the actions of the President, and as seen in Table 2, presidential approval itself only matters for Republicans. Therefore, it seems the connection between the Executive and Legislative branch in terms of public approval is one of people who dislike the President criticizing Congress specifically for not reigning in the actions of the President, less so because they dislike both institutions simultaneously for a separate reason.

Yet, this doesn't spell the downfall for the blame-economy theory – people could just focus their disdain for the economy specifically on Congress with the expectation they should be doing something about it. Table 1 does make this plausible, with Congressional approval decreasing as feelings about the economy turn sour. Yet, Table 4 and Table 5 show this might again be an effect of partisan leaning – feelings about the economy correlate highly with political party, only predictive of approval for partisan Republicans, and don't affect the sentiments of leaners or Democrats once other factors are controlled for. This effect can also be seen in Figure 3, which shows that Republicans are far more likely to state that the economy is recovering<sup>8</sup>.

## Conclusions

### *People With Different Political Preferences Want Different Outcomes*

Overall, people's view on Congress sours when their preferred political party is out of power, when they think Congress is selfish, when they disapprove of the President, and when they disapprove of how well Congress is checking the power of the President, cooperating in a bipartisan manner, deliberating carefully, and tackling important issues. Surprisingly, while

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<sup>8</sup> Statistically significant at p-value < 0.001 with both a t-test and Chi<sup>2</sup> test.

people give Congress the worst grades on their ethical standards, transparency, and control of Big Interests, none of these affect their approval of Congress as a whole. Thus it is clear that all three theories about approval we considered perform well, and collectively to the exclusion of other factors. We should blame people, Congress, and the economy altogether, and nothing else.

Stopping there doesn't tell the whole story, however. While feelings about Congress are definitely not all about whether your preferred political party is in power or not, and people do want more from Congress than to simply be controlled by their political party, one's party affiliation does say a lot about what they want from Congress, and those with different parties have different views on what Congress should do better. Those leaners with little party preferences are simple and act as you would expect – they just want a bipartisan cooperating Congress that tackles important issues.

#### *Partisans Will Like Congress if They Win*

However, when it comes to the partisan Democrats and Republicans, they want Congress to not just cooperate, but in a way that gets them what they *want*, calling those who don't work for their political party *selfish*. Democrats, being out of power, predictably want more deliberation, productive discussion, and representation. Republicans, being in power, want to use this power to secure a better economy, and accomplish their legislative goals with more bipartisan compromise. When it comes down to it, Democrats and Republicans both just want everyone to agree with them, and produce legislation favorable to their party interests, or at least what they think their party interests are.

This shouldn't be taken to reflect negatively upon the populace. Instead, it makes a lot of sense to view Congress this way. If Congress is to be a genuinely representative body, people

should want Congress to represent them, specifically, and it's hard to imagine people are being represented well if the final outcome doesn't fit with their preferences.

### *How to Make Congress More Popular*

Surprisingly, it does not seem possible to improve Congress by giving it a better public image in the media, by implementing reforms to curtail the influence of special interests, or by increasing the ethical standards of Congressmembers, though these things, to the degree they are possible, probably would help at least a little bit. It seems that as long as partisan Republicans and Democrats are split, it may be impossible to make everyone happy.

Thus the culture of partisanship within Congress seems to be the source of negativity about Congress: similarly partisan Congresspeople are already exceptionally dedicated at trying to make only their own party happy, knowing that they'll lose their job if they don't (Canes-Wrone, et al. 2002; Gulati 2004). It is no surprise that Congresspeople obsess about re-election (Mayhew 1975), try to act more partisan when with partisan constituents (Feno 1977), often try to represent their own partisan constituents to the exclusion of people elsewhere in the country outside their district (Weissberg 1978), try to "steal" accomplishments from the other party via issue-uptake (Sulkin 2005), act like cartels to organize their party interests and achieve goals at the expense of the other party (Cox and McCubbins 2005), and deploy a large amount of resources to boost their party and hurt the opposing party (Smith 2007), even if these resources are occasionally inexact and ineffective (Pearson 2008). As Hibbing 2002 points out, it is only during periods of tragedy when the rally-around-the-flag effect is in full force, that Congress is also highly bipartisan, highly cooperative, and not focused on gamesmanship surrounding divergent legislative goals.

It seems quite straightforward that as long as the American public have different legislative goals, and approve Congress based on how well they are personally represented, Congress will continue to be unpopular. Congress is caught in a kind of partisanship dilemma, where Congresspeople act to make their partisan supporters happy, thus creating more partisan strife, further polarizing people's opinions of Congress, and further reinforcing Congress's image as a place of do-nothing bickerers. Even if Congress were to somehow magically get along, they still would produce specific legislative accomplishments, and therefore annoy those who do not feel represented. Thus, ironically, it seems only possible to remedy people's approval of Congress by getting people to not know what is going on within the branch, turning it into something more like the well-hidden and well-approved Supreme Court. Congress simply can't represent everyone at once, even if people would like them to. Perhaps the current level of Congressional disapproval is something we will just have to accept as a consequence of there being winners and losers in democracy.

## Tables and Figures

**Table 1: Ordered Logistic Model of Congressional Approval (4-pt Scale)**

Variable	Coefficient
<b>R.'s Age</b>	+0.0000
<b>R. is Not White</b>	-0.0632
<b>R. is Female</b>	+0.4128***
<b>Education</b>	+0.0076
<b>Income</b>	-0.0431
<b>Conservatism</b>	+0.0986**
<b>Political Knowledge</b>	+0.0089
<b>Media Consumption</b>	+0.0066
<b>Contacted Rep.?</b>	-0.1564**
<b>R.'s Rep. is Selfish</b>	-0.2745
<b>Congress is Selfish</b>	-0.6521***
<b>Presidential Approval</b>	+0.1644**
<b>Economy Getting Worse</b>	-0.1937***
<b>Grade on Overseeing the President</b>	-0.3670***
<b>Grade on Cooperating</b>	-0.3301***
<b>Grade on Deliberation</b>	-0.1919**
<b>Grade on Representation</b>	+0.0662
<b>Grade on Tackling Issues</b>	-0.2588***
<b>Grade on Ethics</b>	+0.0287
<b>Grade on Productive Discussion</b>	-0.1148
<b>Grade on Transparency</b>	-0.1154
<b>Grade on Controlling Big Interests</b>	-0.0641
<b>/cut1</b>	-6.0695
<b>/cut2</b>	-3.6488
<b>/cut3</b>	+0.4886
<b>N</b>	952
<b>Prob &gt; Chi<sup>2</sup></b>	<0.0001
<b>Pseudo-R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.2179

Source: 2006 CES; \*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .10$

**Table 2: Percentage of Respondents Reporting Aversion to Congressional Debate**

Variable	% Yes	% No
<b>Congress Should Discuss More</b>	74.98	18.33
<b>Congress Should Compromise More</b>	47.95	48.95
<b>Congress Argues Too Much</b>	46.78	48.03

Source: 2006 CES; N = 1195 for all questions; % Yes and % No do not add up to 100% because some respondents indicated they did not know their answer or refused to answer the question.

**Table 3: Inter-Item Correlations Among Variables Testing Aversion to Debate**

Variable	Discuss More	Compromise
	<i>Insignificant</i> (p = 0.5537) (N = 1090)	
<b>Congress Should Compromise More</b>	-0.0742 (p = 0.0153) (N = 1090)	<i>Insignificant</i> (p = 0.2773) (N = 1104)

Source: 2006 CES

**Table 4: Ordered Logistic Model of Congressional Approval by Political Knowledge**

Variable	Democrat Coefficient	Leaners Coefficient	Republican Coefficient
<b>R.'s Age</b>	-0.0084	+0.0000	-0.0024
<b>R. is Not White</b>	-0.2389	+0.4644	-0.2704
<b>R. is Female</b>	+0.0280	+0.3356	+0.6628***
<b>Education</b>	+0.0520	-0.0905	+0.0926
<b>Income</b>	+0.0118	-0.0939	-0.1004
<b>Political Knowledge</b>	-0.2711*	+0.3315*	+0.1111
<b>Media Consumption</b>	+0.0099	+0.0054	+0.0272
<b>Contacted Rep.?</b>	-0.1647	-0.0779	-0.2860**
<b>R.'s Rep. is Selfish</b>	-0.2508	-0.5506*	-0.4918
<b>Congress is Selfish</b>	-0.7992***	-0.2443	-0.8915***
<b>Presidential Approval</b>	+0.0026	+0.2389*	+0.2700**
<b>Economy Getting Worse</b>	-0.1472	-0.0999	-0.3540***
<b>Grade on Overseeing the President</b>	-0.4377***	-0.3081*	-0.3570***
<b>Grade on Cooperating</b>	+0.0278	-0.4703***	-0.4000***
<b>Grade on Deliberation</b>	-0.3441**	-0.1816	-0.2479
<b>Grade on Representation</b>	+0.2665*	-0.0659	-0.2215
<b>Grade on Tackling Issues</b>	-0.1191	-0.6583***	+0.0497
<b>Grade on Ethics</b>	+0.0577	+0.1072	-0.0902
<b>Grade on Productive Discussion</b>	-0.3698**	-0.0228	+0.0351
<b>Grade on Transparency</b>	-0.1938	-0.2179	+0.0405
<b>Grade on Controlling Big Interests</b>	-0.1130	+0.0558	-0.0814
<b>/cut1</b>	-6.7815	-8.1822	-5.5293
<b>/cut2</b>	-4.1541	-5.6244	-3.0690
<b>/cut3</b>	-0.5044	-1.8189	1.8038
<b>N</b>	290		
<b>Prob &gt; Chi<sup>2</sup></b>	<0.0001		
<b>Pseudo-R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.1883		

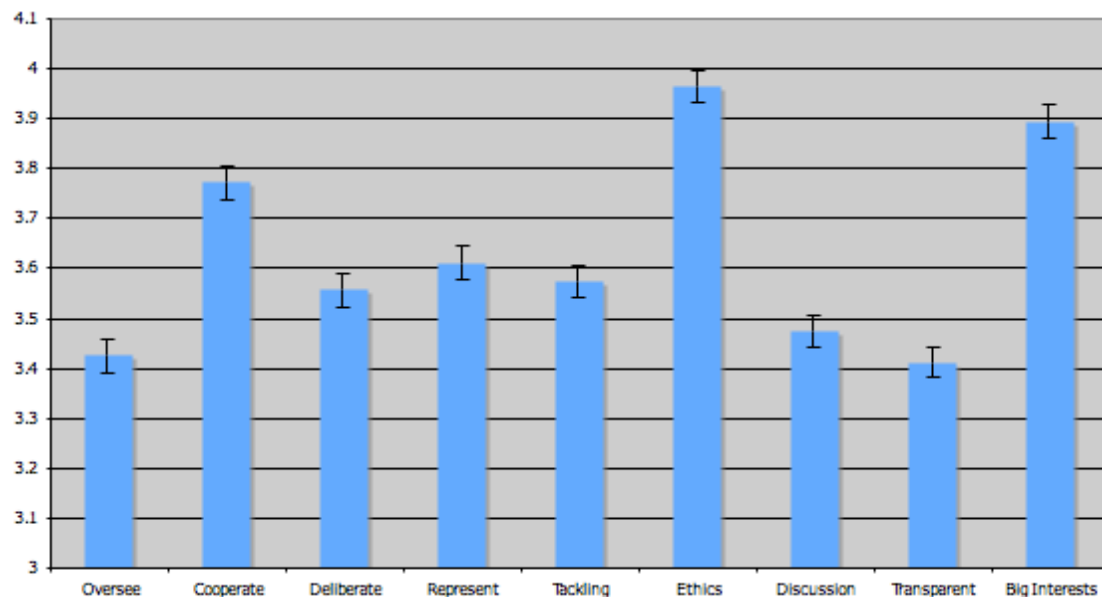
Source: 2006 CES; \*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .10$

**Table 5: Correlations Between Political Party and Factors of Congressional Approval**

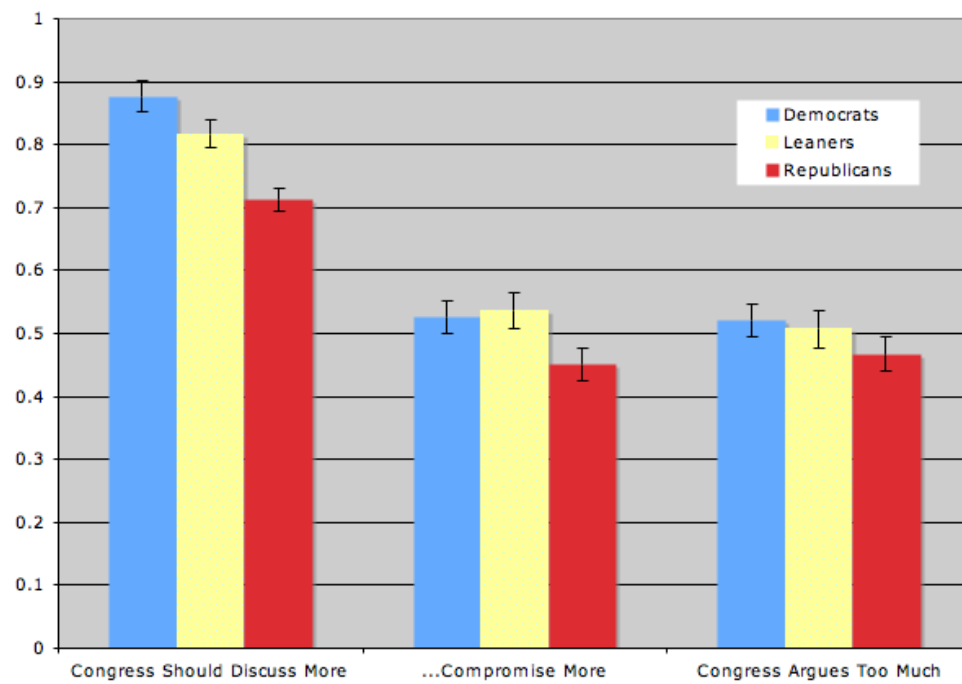
Variable	Correlation	N
<b>R.'s Legislator Effectiveness</b>	-0.2179	1046
<b>R.'s Rep. is Selfish</b>	<i>Insignificant</i>	1137
<b>Congress is Selfish</b>	+0.0135	1138
<b>Presidential Approval</b>	+0.6366	1187
<b>Economy Getting Worse</b>	-0.4165	1175
<b>Grade on Overseeing the President</b>	-0.4040	1160
<b>Grade on Cooperating</b>	-0.0837	1143
<b>Grade on Deliberation</b>	-0.1355	1167
<b>Grade on Representation</b>	-0.2533	1169
<b>Grade on Tackling Issues</b>	-0.2294	1176
<b>Grade on Ethics</b>	-0.1414	1178
<b>Grade on Productive Discussion</b>	-0.1509	1171
<b>Grade on Transparency</b>	-0.1956	1156
<b>Grade on Controlling Big Interests</b>	-0.1283	1155
<b>Congress Should Discuss More</b>	-0.1770	1114
<b>Congress Should Compromise More</b>	-0.0794	1157
<b>Congress Argues Too Much</b>	<i>Insignificant</i>	1132

Source: 2006 CES; All correlations not marked "Insignificant" are significant at  $p < 0.01$

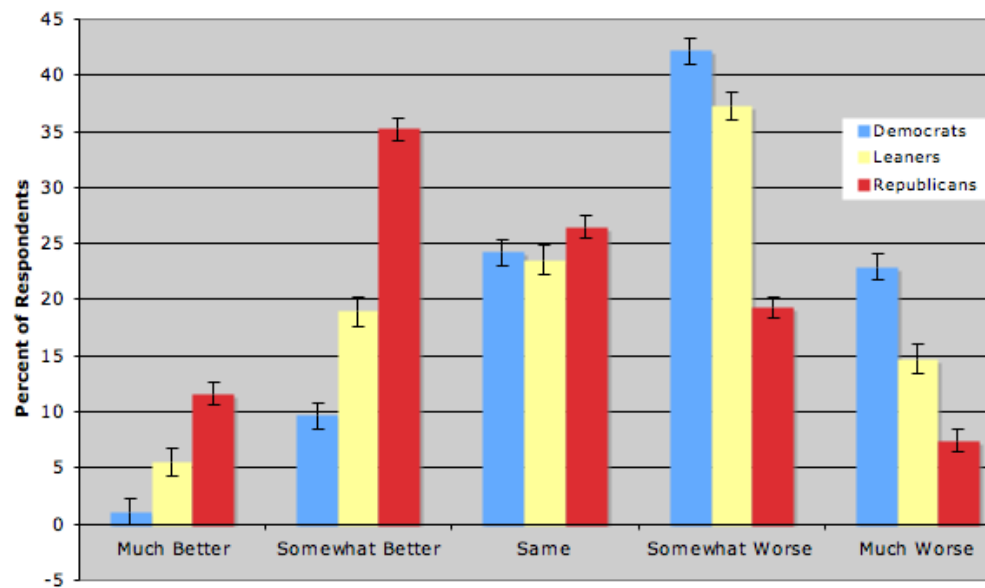
**Figure 1: Level of Disapproval (Grade Closer to F) Within Each Category**



**Figure 2: Attitudes Toward Congressional Debate by Party Affiliation**



**Figure 3: Mood about How The Economy is Doing, By Party Affiliation**





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