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# *The Media's Role in Public Negativity Toward Congress: Distinguishing Emotional Reactions and Cognitive Evaluations\**

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*Theory:* The nature of political news as presented by the mass media in the modern United States is such that it affects people's emotional reactions more than their cognitive evaluations of political actors and institutions.

*Hypotheses:* People who rely on electronic media for their news and people who consume a great deal of news from the mass media will *not* be more likely to evaluate Congress negatively but *will* be more likely to have negative emotional reactions to Congress.

*Methods:* Regression analysis of data from a 1992 national survey (N = 1430) on public attitudes toward political institutions, *inter alia*.

*Results:* People who primarily obtain their news from television or radio are not any more or less likely to evaluate Congress negatively than are people who primarily obtain their news from newspapers. Similarly, people who are exposed to news a great deal do not evaluate Congress more negatively than those who pay little attention to the news. The same cannot be said for emotional reactions: a primary reliance on television and especially radio for news and a generally heavy exposure to news generate significantly more negative emotions than newspaper use and low exposure to the news.

Congress is currently held in low regard by the public. Given Congress's status as the people's branch as well as its influential position in the constitutional structure of government, it is appropriate, maybe necessary, to attempt to determine why. Explanations abound, but one is particularly in vogue: the media did it (see Fallows 1996, for the clearest statement of this position). While blaming the media for Congress's poor standing with the public has *prima facie* appeal, we urge caution. Theory and evidence on the topic are difficult to locate and the relationship may not be that which is widely anticipated.

In this article, we argue that interpretations of the media's impact on public negativity toward Congress depend on both the type of medium people use and the reactions being measured. While researchers have been fairly diligent about distinguishing among the various types of media (television,

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radio, newspapers, and news magazines), they have been lax in distinguishing among the specific reactions of people to Congress. We contend that the media have an impact on people's *emotional* reactions toward Congress but not on their *cognitive* evaluations of Congress. This distinction has important ramifications for, among other things, understanding public opinion toward Congress.

### **Different Public Reactions to Different Aspects of Congress**

Central to our contribution is the recognition that both Congress and public attitudes toward Congress are multifaceted. While this may sound trite, much of the survey work on the topic unthinkingly asks about "leaders of Congress," "the job being done by Congress," or just "the Congress," without considering that disparate aspects of Congress may engender disparate reactions. Similarly, pollsters ask the public about their confidence, trust, approval, warmth of feeling, and so on, and the results are often presented as interchangeable indicators of whether or not the public supports Congress.

But attitudes toward Congress are not dichotomous and Congress is not monolithic. If we are to make progress in understanding the manner in which the public relates to Congress and in understanding the role of various entities, such as the mass media, in affecting that relationship, we must exercise much more care in specifying both referent and attitude. We stress this point because we believe casual approaches to the wording of survey questions partially account for our current, somewhat muddled, understanding of the public mood. Accordingly, our contribution hinges on recognition of the widely varying ways the public can respond to Congress and its many components.

### *Referents of Congress*

Turning first to Congress itself, Fenno (1975) alerted us some time ago to the fact that people often think more highly of their own member of Congress than they do of Congress as a whole. This situation remains today, although approval of individuals' own incumbent has decreased somewhat. To Fenno's distinction we might add that people have vastly different attitudes toward Congress as an institution than they do toward Congress as a collection of members. If people think of Congress as a body with history, buildings, and a constitutional role in government, they are much more favorable than when they think of Congress as a group of 535 breathing, fallible politicians. This is further indication of the importance of being clear in specifying the feature of Congress with which the researcher is concerned.

The leaders of Congress are yet another possible referent. In fact, this is the referent found in the Harris battery of questions on confidence in the leaders of various institutions—a battery that has been widely employed in

many time-series evaluations of the public mood.<sup>1</sup> Asking about the leaders could possibly yield very different assessments from the other referents mentioned to this point, yet an experiment by Lipset and Schneider (1987, 89–93) suggests that people's thoughts about the leaders of Congress may not be much different from their thoughts about the congressional membership generally. Both conjure up visions of politicians other than "my own," and both may therefore elicit less than enthusiastic responses.

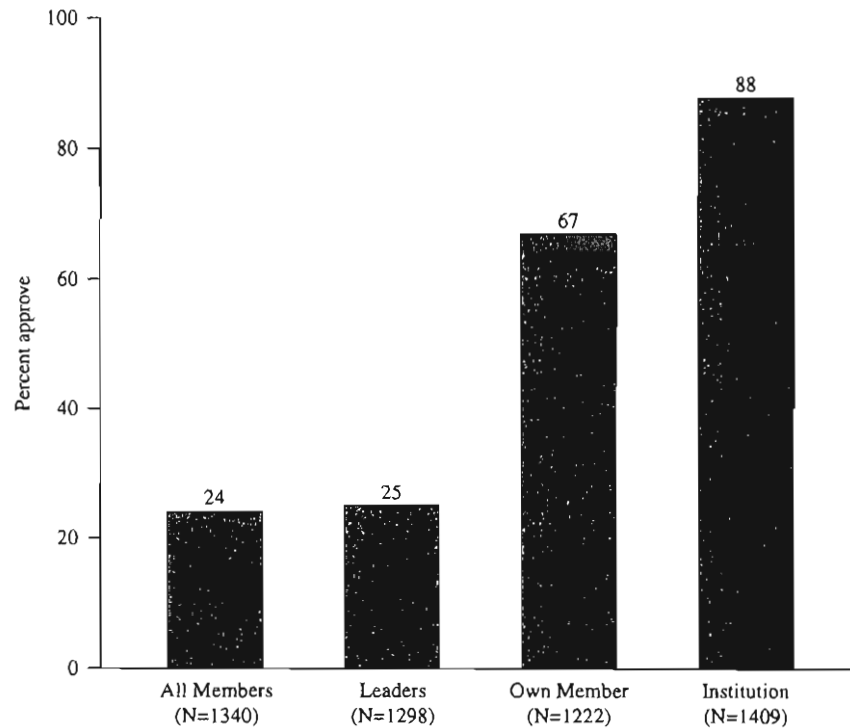
That different referents do indeed engender different public responses is apparent in Figure 1. These data, like most of the data used in this project, come from a random sample of over 1,400 voting age residents of the United States. The survey was commissioned explicitly for the purpose of determining public attitudes toward political institutions and was conducted over the telephone in the summer of 1992.<sup>2</sup>

In the figure, we see that people react much more favorably to Congress as an institution and much more negatively to the leaders of Congress and to the membership generally. Clearly, the kind of evaluation people proffer depends upon the congressional referent they are given.

While we should not lose sight of this fact, it can also be noted that, for the most part, when people reflect in a nonspecific way on Congress, they generally envision the current membership, not their own member and not a sterile institution. We determined the correlates of approval of each of the distinct aspects of Congress represented in Figure 1 as well as the correlates of approval of Congress generally and discovered that the signs and significance levels were nearly identical for "members of Congress" and "Congress generally" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). The public reacts differently to different parts of Congress, but for most people "Congress" is the membership. Consequently, we will focus in this article on the current membership of Congress rather than the other referents.

<sup>1</sup>The best and most relevant study for our purposes is by Patterson and Caldeira (1990). Patterson and Caldeira used both the Harris poll question on confidence in the leaders of Congress and content analysis to record the number of references to Congress found each day in *The New York Times* to determine if public approval of Congress is inversely related to the number of times Congress is in the news, or at least in the *Times*. The rationale for expecting a negative or inverse relationship is that media coverage of Congress tends to be negative. Their time-series analysis covers the years 1963 to 1985. Patterson and Caldeira's results are decidedly mixed, with the various types of media references affecting people's evaluations of Congress only about half the time.

<sup>2</sup>The Public Perceptions of Congress survey was administered to 1,430 adults living in the United States. The Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, randomly selected respondents using a purchased list of telephone numbers from a national random sample to which they randomly generated the last digit. When a household was reached, interviewers asked to speak with the person in the household who was at least 18 years old and who had celebrated his or her birthday most recently (Salmon and Nichols 1983). The interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and had a 57% response rate.

**Figure 1. Evaluations of Congressional Referents**

Source: Public Perceptions of Congress survey.

### *Cognitive Evaluations and Emotional Responses*

Just as answers to questions about the public mood are sensitive to congressional referents, survey respondents' answers are also sensitive to the type of popular reaction in which researchers are interested. It is unfortunate that the reactions asked about in surveys are so disparate and that so little rationale has been given for the selection of particular words. Support, job approval, trust, confidence, respect, warmth, and emotional reactions should not be viewed as measuring the same reaction, yet they are often used interchangeably without much thought.

Rather than attempt to sort out the implications of each and every type of reaction solicited in surveys on attitudes toward Congress, we intend to address what we believe to be the most important categorical distinction: cognitive evaluations and emotional reactions. Social psychologists and po-

litical scientists have focused primarily on cognitive evaluations and the cognitive processes that people use when confronted with information (what is known as information processing) (e.g., Ferejohn and Kuklinski 1990; Hastie 1986; Lau and Sears 1986). Sensing that something was being missed by this emphasis on cognition, psychologists and political scientists have more recently turned to the study of emotions. As a new area of study, researchers have struggled with how emotions ought to be conceptualized and measured (as unidimensional or bipolar, for example) (e.g., Diener and Emmons 1984; Marcus 1988; Watson and Tellegen 1985). The literature also contains a debate on the relationship between affect and cognition, trying to pin down whether cognitions happen before, after, or at the same time as emotions (e.g., Lazarus 1982, 1984; Tsai 1985; Zajonc 1980, 1984; Zajonc and Markus 1982).

A question more pertinent to our concerns, though, is whether people's cognitive evaluations can differ from their emotional reactions. Can a reliance on cognitions or on emotions lead people to make different judgments? While only a handful of researchers have addressed this question, they have found that people do indeed often make different judgments when they rely on cognitions rather than emotions when making a decision (Kuklinski et al. 1991; Millar and Tesser 1986; Ottati et al. 1989; Wilson et al. 1989). Social psychologists Wilson and Schooler (1991) found that students made judgments significantly different from experts when they focused on cognitions rather than on their instincts. Research in political science has shown a similar cognition versus emotion effect (e.g., Kuklinski et al. 1991). For example, Marcus et al. (1995) found that people who were instructed to rely on their feelings were significantly less tolerant than people who were instructed to rely on their thoughts when making a tolerance judgment.

The difference in the judgments people make may be due in part to the different processes they use when relying on cognitions as opposed to emotions. When people make a cognitive judgment, they are more likely to be thoughtful and deliberative, trying to determine the reasons for their judgment. When people make judgments based on emotions, however, they react from the gut, which means they often react instinctively. Several studies show that there is greater consistency between attitudes and behavior when people make judgments based on emotions than when they make judgments based on cognitions (Millar and Tesser 1986, 1989; Tesser and Clary 1978; Wilson et al. 1989). These findings suggest that emotional reactions, uncluttered as they are by reasoned deliberations, may be a better indicator of people's true inclinations.

This distinction between cognitive evaluations and emotional reactions is an important one and may help to clear up much of the current confusion regarding the nature of the public mood and its causes. Questions on both

trust and support could be viewed as containing primarily cognitive but also some emotional components. For example, lack of trust could be related to the emotion of fear—"I have no trust in Congress and am fearful of what the members might do"—and thus may conflate cognitive and emotional reactions. To provide the most pristine cognitive evaluative measure, we will utilize responses to a question focusing on whether or not people approve of the way the members of Congress are handling their job. This question is a straightforward assessment of Congress and does not entail much in the way of specific emotions. As such, it contrasts markedly with emotionally-laden questions asking respondents if, for example, they have ever felt "anger," "unease," "fear," or "disgust" toward members of Congress. These latter questions compose our emotional reaction measure.

Our basic theoretical expectation is that the way people cognitively react to Congress is not the same as the way they emotionally react to Congress. Thus, when observers speak loosely of the public's "support" for Congress or of the public's mood, we cannot be sure about what exactly they are speaking. By distinguishing between emotional responses and cognitive evaluations, we should be able to clarify the nature of the public's reactions to Congress and, therefore, the potential sources of these reactions.

Relating this line of thought to the central independent variable of this study, media usage, we hypothesize that a person's *cognitive* evaluation of Congress will be little affected either by the particular medium people most often use or by the overall extent to which they pay attention to the media for news. On the other hand, we hypothesize that the medium most often used by a respondent and the overall exposure of that same respondent to news media will be closely related to *emotional* reactions to Congress. The modern media, we argue, are generally only weakly connected to the kind of information a person uses to form evaluations of politics, and are likely merely to reinforce existing positive or negative inclinations. Most media presentations are not chock-full of new information on Congress of the sort that is likely to be used to update and significantly change previous evaluations. When opinions are weakly held, media exposure can lead to opinion change over the long term. But changing stable cognitive evaluations is difficult at best. Among preexisting opinions that are highly stable, "the political information required to produce systematic changes in these opinions must be very distinctive" (Bartels 1993, 274). In terms of cognitive evaluations, media presentations are usually confirmatory.

On the other hand, when it comes to emotions we believe the modern mass media, especially the electronic media, are uniquely capable of affecting reactions to political actors and institutions. "Among various types of media, television is the most unique. It appears to be a more potent stimulus than print sources for stirring emotions and creating vivid mental pictures" (Graber 1984, 137; see also Graber 1996). This argument has intuitive ap-

peal. Reading a story in a newspaper about atrocities committed in Bosnia or Rwanda seems likely to evoke less emotional intensity than watching pictures on television of war-ravaged houses, mass graves, and families dealing with loss and death.

Despite the intuitive appeal of this reasoning, previous research has raised questions about it.<sup>3</sup> Much of this past research, however, has failed to take into account the variation in audience attentiveness to different media. In everyday life, the media must compete with dinner preparation, telephone calls, children's needs, and so on. Research that takes into account the variability of attentiveness *has* found that vividness affects attention and learning (Taylor and Thompson 1982). Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992: 92) use experiments to show that the vivid video presentations on television break the attention barrier, which helps to make more apparent the personal relevance of issues. Once the attention barrier is broken, people are then in a position to be emotionally aroused by what they see (Graber 1996; Owen 1991). According to Graber (1996, 90), "Visual stimuli excel in creating a sense of drama. Drama enhances learning because it attracts and holds attention by engaging the viewer's emotions" (see also Heuer and Reisberg 1990).

Unfortunately, most of the research to date has been concerned with television's cognitive impact rather than its emotional impact. For example, Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar (1993), in their discussion of media effects, focus on cognitive effects, including learning and persuasion (see also Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992). Yet if intuition and the implications of research on attention and vividness are correct, we would expect television to be especially well positioned to arouse emotions, certainly more so than newspapers. Radio may also be emotionally arousing given the recent trend toward talk radio, controversial commentators, and often inflammatory political rhetoric. We therefore expect people who rely heavily on television and radio to be more emotionally aroused than those who rely primarily on newspapers for their news. We do *not* expect these same individuals to have fundamentally different cognitive evaluations.

### Reactions to Congress Over the Past Quarter Century

The value of separating emotional reactions and cognitive evaluations concerning Congress is further suggested by a brief inspection of recent history concerning media trends and shifts in the public mood. At first glance, it may seem nothing is amiss. After all, is it not the case that public regard

<sup>3</sup>For example, Neuman, in a review of the literature, found that "there is no evidence of consistent or significant differences in the abilities of different media to persuade, inform, or even to instill an emotional response in audience members" (Neuman 1991, 99). Iyengar and Kinder's (1987) direct test of the vividness hypothesis—that personalized, vivid stories are more persuasive than impersonal stories—shows that vivid stories are generally less persuasive, perhaps because people get so caught up in the story that they lose sight of the issue itself.



for Congress declined just as Congress bashing by the media increased, thus preserving the strong possibility that there is a causal link? Upon closer inspection, the situation is not nearly this clean.

We have little quarrel with the contention that media coverage of Congress has become more hostile over the course of the last few decades. To be sure, negative coverage of Congress is hardly new, although in the days of the partisan press it may have been easier for citizens to put the criticism in perspective. Today, with a less overtly partisan and more overtly investigative press, Congress is short on defenders in the media. Certainly, the changing incentive structure in the world of mass media would not seem to produce defenders of Congress. In this post-Woodward-and-Bernstein era, rewards seem to flow toward reporters who expose or accentuate "scandal and sloth" (Ornstein 1983, 201). David Broder, for example, has described how much easier it is to convince editors to publish a story on petty scandal than a story of larger consequence (1987, 216).

Hard evidence for this trend is present in both print and electronic media.<sup>4</sup> Mark Rozell performed a detailed content analysis of three major weekly news magazines and three national newspapers and concluded that "negative and superficial congressional coverage is nothing new but in recent years the extent and tone have become more severe, more disturbing. . . . Many reports resort to humiliating caricature" (1994, 109). By 1992 (the last year covered by his analysis), criticism of Congress was "unrelenting" and "left the overwhelming impression of the institution as self-indulgent, scandal ridden, incompetent, and corrupt" (1994, 108). All told, Rozell found that increasingly "influential editorialists and columnists had nothing positive to say about the institution" (1994, 108). The pattern uncovered by Rozell also appears in content analyses of the print media. Charles Tidmarch and John Pitney analyzed 10 major dailies and concluded that the nature of congressional coverage stressed perceived breaches of trust and only served to "harden the image of Congress as a defective institution" (1985, 482).

Are electronic media any better? Hardly. Doris Graber notes that stories usually picture Congress as "lobby-ridden, incompetent, and slow" (1989, 265). S. Robert Lichter and Daniel R. Amundson undertook the time-consuming task of content analyzing television news stories from 1972 to 1992. They found that stories about Congress and policy matters fell nearly 20% while stories about Congress and scandals increased 400% (1994, 133–4). Moreover, when Lichter and Amundson looked for judgmental or evaluative statements in the news about Congress they found that by 1992, nine out of

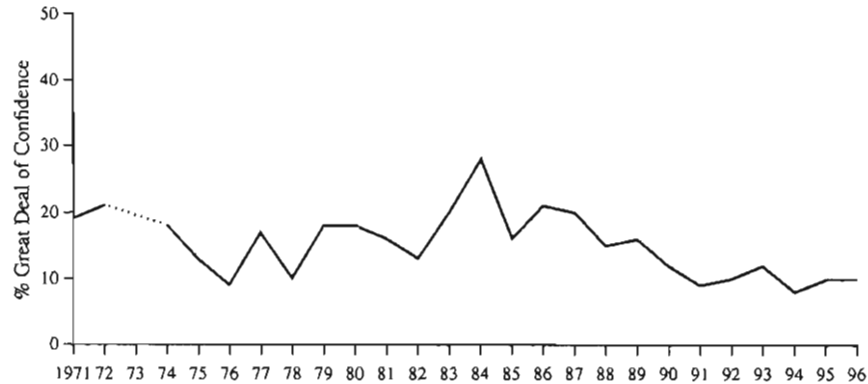
<sup>4</sup>On the general trend toward negative reporting, Thomas Patterson notes that "since the late 1980s, news coverage of [Congress and the presidency have] been highly negative in tone" (1996, 105; see also, Sabato 1991; Patterson 1993; and Jamieson 1992).

10 evaluations were critical of Congress. Coverage at the beginning of their time period (1972) was also negative but not nearly as negative (74% of the stories then were deemed negative in tone) (1994, 137–8). This conclusion meshes nicely with earlier work by Michael Robinson and Kevin Appel. They, too, found that network news coverage of Congress was quite critical of the institution, even during Watergate (1979; see also Gilbert 1989; Ornstein 1989). Television, with its fixation on stories of sensational wrongdoing, with its ability to incite visceral reactions from viewers, and with widespread public reliance on it for news and information, is in all likelihood the most dangerous medium in the minds of those who worry about public perceptions of our political institutions.

Still, the “other” electronic medium—radio, and especially talk-show radio—has garnered even more attention of late than television. Observers often detect an “alarming . . . level of hostility” on these shows (Parker 1994, 163). In a recent survey, radio talk-show hosts were found to give Congress lower ratings than any other group working in mass media (Parker 1994, 160). The audience of these shows has been “growing steadily in number and diversity” (Owen 1995, 60) and “one can only assume that some of them are buying the messages the shows are sending” (Parker 1994, 166). On balance, while Congress is not portrayed favorably by any mass medium, most observers would agree that the electronic media tend to be even more unfavorable than the print media. Further, previous research makes it clear that for all media, “press coverage of Congress has moved from healthy skepticism to outright cynicism” (Rozell 1994, 109).

And is it not the case that Congress has become less popular over the very time period during which the negativity of congressional media coverage has been increasing? Lichter and Amundson write that “public support for Congress is at its lowest since the onset of scientific polling” (1994, 131). Pundits all seem to agree since they maintain that in the 1990s the American people “hate Congress” (Morin and Broder 1994), that the people are “ready to revolt” (Balz and Morin 1991), that “the signs of discontent are everywhere” (Lind 1992), that the country is being washed with “tidal waves of discontent” (Hook 1990), that “Congress is in trouble” (AEI/Brookings 1992), and that Congress is “under siege” (Mann and Ornstein 1994). Simply by reading recent articles on the topic, one would conclude that public support for Congress has undoubtedly fallen off the table since Watergate and the Vietnam War.

But before we embrace this conclusion, we should look at the data. As mentioned, the Harris question on “confidence” has been the most consistently posed question and thus has been the subject of most time-series analyses of the topic. We present in Figure 2 the results of the Harris question for the last 25 years. Despite the claim of Lichter and Amundson and

**Figure 2. Confidence in Congress, 1971–96**

Source: Harris Poll.

Note: Data are missing for 1973.

despite the implications of so many pundits, the truth of the matter is that the trend in public confidence in Congress has been mostly flat since 1971.

To be sure, there were times prior to 1971 when confidence in Congress (and virtually everything else in society) was higher. The mid-1960s was one such time, as was the mid-1950s. Still, though it is difficult to tell because the pertinent question was asked only sporadically prior to 1971 (when annual soundings were regularized), the proper conclusion would seem to be that periods of public confidence in Congress are typically ephemeral. Congress has never been consistently popular with the public (see also Parker 1981). This general conclusion certainly fits the data presented in Figure 2, with the possible exception of the Reagan feel-good year of 1984.

So how do we explain the widespread belief that public support for Congress has decreased dramatically when Figure 2 suggests instead that at most it has inched down from never-particularly-high levels? We believe there is a ready explanation for the inconsistency between conventional wisdom and the data. Survey questions utilizing terms such as “confidence” are useful but also limiting. To be specific, they do not capture the emotional aspects of public attitudes toward Congress and, as we argue, it is this more emotional negativity that the pundits and others are sensing when they write of the dire straits facing members of Congress who dare to venture out among the people. The public, we believe, has maintained roughly constant *cognitive evaluations* of the job being done by Congress even while negative *emotional reactions* to Congress increased dramatically. The new style of media coverage led the public to react to Congress more negatively from an emotional point of view, not necessarily from a cognitive point of view.

### Differential Media Effects on Cognitions and Emotions

But of course these hypotheses cannot be tested over time. Although the works cited above have attempted, usually via content analysis, to provide evidence of changes in the nature of coverage provided by one medium or another, there is as yet no composite measure of media coverage and how it has varied from year to year. More tellingly, annual soundings of the emotional side of the public's reaction to politics and political institutions are simply unavailable over time.

Fortunately, all is not lost. Our goal of providing evidence that the media influence people's emotional reactions to but not cognitive evaluations of Congress can be attained by turning to specially-designed cross-sectional individual-level data on media exposure and attitudes toward Congress. In many ways, in fact, individual-level data are preferable for testing our hypotheses. The aggregate-level time-series data have question wording problems, are based on only once-a-year soundings, and afford no protection against the ecological fallacy (i.e., we cannot demonstrate with certainty that people noticing the more negative coverage are the ones who react more negatively to Congress). Thus, we turn to the survey data described earlier in order to estimate the following two equations:

$$Y_c = \beta_{c1} + \beta_{c2}X_{c2} + \beta_{c3}X_{c3} + u_c \quad [1]$$

where  $Y_c$  = the public's cognitive evaluation of members of Congress,  
 $X_{c2}$  = a set of control variables,  
 $X_{c3}$  = a set of media-use variables,  
 $u_c$  = stochastic disturbance term.

$$Y_e = \beta_{e1} + \beta_{e2}X_{e2} + \beta_{e3}X_{e3} + u_e \quad [2]$$

where  $Y_e$  = the public's negative emotional reaction to members of Congress,  
 $X_{e2}$  = a set of control variables,  
 $X_{e3}$  = a set of media-use variables,  
 $u_e$  = stochastic disturbance term.

We hypothesize that:

$$\begin{array}{ll} H_1^A: \beta_{c3} = 0 & H_1^0: \beta_{c3} \neq 0 \\ H_2^A: \beta_{e3} > 0 & H_2^0: \beta_{e3} \leq 0 \end{array}$$

We identify the control variables presently, but the key point is that, with other forces accounted for, we believe media-use variables will influence emotional reactions but not cognitive evaluations; thus, we expect that  $\beta_{c3}$  will not be different from 0 but that  $\beta_{e3}$  will be larger than 0 (additional media use will lead to more negative emotional reactions).

The nature and strength of media effects should vary with the type of media exposure. To be more specific, we believe that the corrosive effects of the media will be the least apparent for those respondents who rely primarily on newspapers for their news. While newspapers clearly contain many negative stories about Congress (Rozell 1994), stories in the electronic media are likely to be more vivid and dramatic than stories appearing in daily newspapers (Graber 1984; 1996). And within the category of electronic media, we hypothesize that radio will be somewhat more negative than television (see Parker 1994, 162–3, for some possibly supportive comparative evidence; see Lichter and Amundson 1994, for non-comparative information on the negativity toward Congress found in television news; see Parker 1994, 163–6, for non-comparative information on the negativity toward Congress on radio).

Even if certain types of media exposure are more negative than others, we still believe that, *ceteris paribus*, the more overall exposure a person has to the media, the more that person will register negative emotional reactions to Congress regardless of the person's primary source of news. Thus, we expect that the variables measuring number of exposures to media news in a typical week will have an independent effect on negative emotional reactions to Congress.

#### Who Uses What Medium?

With these general contours in mind, we now proceed to the specific operationalization of the media-use variables. We employ four. Three of these are dummy variables for the medium from which people "receive most of their news about what is going on in the world today." Survey respondents were asked to choose one of five options—newspapers, radio, television, magazines, and talking with others—but only a couple dozen people listed magazines or talking with others so we have eliminated these categories and focused on the remaining three. The final media variable is an indicator not of the primary medium used but of the number of weekly exposures to news. Respondents were asked how many days in the past week they had watched news on the television. They were also asked how many days they had read the newspaper. We combined these two measures (both ranging from 0 to 7) to create our media use variable that ranges from 0 to 14, with the former being a person who typically does not see news on TV or in the newspaper and the latter being a person who typically does both each day.<sup>5</sup>

Turning first to the primary medium from which people obtain news, we find that out of 1,371 usable respondents, 811 (59%) said they usually re-

<sup>5</sup>It may come as a surprise to some that the number of days per week a person watches news on television is positively ( $r = .17$ ) and significantly ( $p < .01$ ) related to the number of days per week that person reads a newspaper. Doing one frequently is directly related to doing the other frequently.

ceived their news from television, 428 (31%) said newspapers were their primary source, leaving only 132 (10%) to cite radio as their primary source of news. Despite all the attention that radio and talk-radio shows have received in recent years, radio is still not a primary source of news for most people.

Are there important demographic differences in the people who rely on different media for their news? A reasonable expectation would be that those getting their news from newspapers, a slightly more demanding source than electronic media, would be more educated, politically-active, well-to-do, older, efficacious, and knowledgeable about politics. Profiles of those relying on different media for news are presented in Table 1.

This is not a central part of our study so we will not dwell too long on these results. Still, it is interesting to note that people who rely on newspapers for their news are indeed older (though just a little older than those who receive most of their news from television), more male, more wealthy, more educated (than television watchers and as educated as radio listeners), and more knowledgeable about political matters than those receiving their news

**Table 1. Most Frequent News Source with Demographic and Political Attitude Variables**

Variables	Usually get most of my news about what is going on in the world today from:			
	Newspapers	Radio	Television	F
Mean Age	45.3	40.8	44.8	3.7*
% Male	55.1%	46.2%	40.4%	12.4**
Income	8.3	8.0	6.8	32.6**
Education	5.6	5.6	4.9	22.9**
Knowledge	2.5	2.4	2.1	15.6**
Ideology	3.1	3.4	3.2	0.9
Party: % Republican	32%	36%	29%	2.0
% White	89%	92%	84%	5.2**
External Efficacy	1.03	.97	.83	8.9**
Pol. Involvement	3.79	3.73	3.21	17.3**
N	428	132	811	

Source: Public Perceptions of Congress survey.

Note: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ . *Income*: 1 = under 5 thousand; 2 = 5 to 10 thousand; 3 = 10 to 15 thousand; 4 = 15 to 20 thousand; 5 = 20 to 25 thousand; 6 = 25 to 30 thousand; 7 = 30 to 35 thousand; 8 = 35 to 40 thousand; 9 = 40 to 50 thousand; 10 = 50 to 60 thousand; 11 = 60 to 70 thousand; 12 = 70 to 100 thousand; 13 = 100 thousand or more; *Education*: 1 = less than high school; 2 = some high school; 3 = high school graduate; 4 = some technical school; 5 = technical school graduate; 6 = some college; 7 = college graduate; 8 = postgraduate or professional degree; *Knowledge*: 0 = low level of knowledge to 4 = high level of knowledge; *Ideology*: 1 = Liberal, 2 = slightly liberal, 3 = moderate, 4 = slightly conservative, and 5 = conservative; *External Efficacy*: 0 = low efficacy to 2 = high efficacy; *Political Involvement*: 0 = low involvement to 6 = high involvement.

from other sources. All this is largely in line with what might be expected. Those receiving their news from the radio are much younger than the other two groups, are just as educated and nearly as knowledgeable as newspaper readers, and are much more likely to be white. Those relying on television are more likely to be female, the most poor, the least educated, the least knowledgeable, and the most nonwhite.

As noted, our other media variable measures the number of exposures to media news in a typical week with a possible range of 0 to 14. By categorizing respondents into high (10–14 exposures in a week), medium (5–9 exposures in a week), or low (0–4 exposures in a week), we can provide a quick indication of the traits typically associated with news junkies, news flunkies, and those somewhere in-between. Impressively, and perhaps suspiciously, 662 of 1,424 respondents (46%) claim to fall into the high category, 535 (38%) are located in the medium category (so had more or less daily exposure to the news), and just 227 (16%) are found in the low category. Not surprisingly, exposure to news increases with age, income, education, and political knowledge. On the other hand, media exposure does not seem to have a relationship—or at least a linear one—with gender, race, partisanship, or ideological differences.

### **Media Exposure and Reactions to Congress**

We are now well-positioned to turn to the main event which is determining if variations in media use are related to people's evaluations of Congress.<sup>6</sup> We use the variables listed in Table 1 for the battery of control vari-

<sup>6</sup>An alternative hypothesis is that people's evaluations of Congress affect the media outlets preferred or the extent to which media news is consumed, whereas we maintain that media news may be a partial cause of people's reactions to Congress. We believe existing theory and common sense back us up in our assumptions about causal order. It seems more reasonable to expect exposure to certain media and overall level of media news consumption to affect reactions to Congress than to believe that people decide which medium to use and how much news to be exposed to based on how they feel about Congress. "I hate Congress so I am going to watch television rather than read the newspaper" seems an unlikely process to us. Just to make sure we were not off track, though, we regressed each of our media variables (news exposure, television use, radio use, and newspaper use) on the control variables listed in Table 2 along with the cognitive evaluations measure or the emotional reactions measure. Neither the cognitive evaluations measure nor the emotional reactions measure was significantly related to any of the media use variables. Thus, we remain confident that the causal relationship we suggest is the most logical one.

Another possibility is that people who get their news from newspapers are more cognitively oriented to begin with while people who rely primarily on television for their news are more emotionally oriented. Television users may be predisposed to react emotionally while newspaper readers may be predisposed to react cognitively. This alternative hypothesis also suggests that the cognitively oriented do not have strong emotional reactions whereas the emotionally oriented do not have strong cognitive reactions, although this argument runs contrary to social cognition research which finds that "experts" (the more cognitively sophisticated) generate greater emotion than "nov-

ables required for Equations 1 and 2—age, gender, income, education, knowledge, ideology, partisanship, race, efficacy, and political involvement. This practice should help us to isolate the independent effect of media-use variables on reactions to Congress. We first regress cognitive evaluations of members of Congress and then emotional reactions to members of Congress on the 10 control variables mentioned as well as on three of the four media variables: a dummy for television as the primary source of news, a dummy for radio as the primary source of news, and the news exposure variable. The third dummy variable (newspapers as the primary source of news) is omitted from the equation to avoid perfect multicollinearity; the effects for this group are thus reflected in the constant.

The operationalization of cognitive evaluations employed here is the response to the standard approval question on the way members of Congress are handling their jobs (0 = strongly disapprove; 1 = disapprove; 2 = approve; 3 = strongly approve). The operationalization of emotional reactions involves responses to four questions: Have members of Congress ever made you feel angry? afraid? disgusted? uneasy?<sup>7</sup> The emotional reactions scale ranges from 0 to 4, where 0 indicates none of these negative emotions were felt and 4 indicates all of these negative emotions were felt. Our basic expectation is that, once we have controlled for other effects on people's reactions to Congress, the nature of a respondent's exposure to media news will be much

ices" (Schul and Burnstein 1988). To test the alternative hypothesis, we ran an ANOVA on emotional reactions and political expertise, under the assumption that political experts are more cognitively oriented and that they should have less strong emotional reactions than the less cognitively oriented. We found a significant relationship between political expertise and emotional reactions, but in the opposite direction from the one proposed by the hypothesis: the more knowledge people had, the more strongly they reacted emotionally to members of Congress. People who got none of the political knowledge questions correct had an emotional reaction score of .58, those with one correct .66, those with two correct .67, those with three correct .75, and those with four correct .76 ( $p < .01$ ). The cognitively oriented are therefore not less likely to have strong emotional reactions, and in fact have stronger emotional reactions as the social cognition literature suggests, so we again remain convinced of the causal relationship we lay out and test in this research.

<sup>7</sup>Self-reports of emotional reactions certainly have their drawbacks, including the possibility that people will falsely state their emotional reaction or falsely remember what their emotions have been. Emotional responses are themselves complex. For example, Roseman (1984) has identified five components of emotional response: subjective, physiological, body language, behavioral, and emotivational goals. Self-reports only measure the first component. It is important to note, however, that research comparing physiological and self-report measures of emotional response often find high correlations between the two measures, suggesting that people have "a coherent style of responding to emotional events" (Grossman and Wood 1993, 1019; see also Notarius et al. 1982). Diener (1994), in a study of subjective well-being, argues that self-reports are the measure of choice when it comes to measuring emotions because they exhibit good levels of validity and reliability and because their strong covariance with other measures suggests that they tap a shared variance in emotional responses.



**Table 2. Explaining Variation in Cognitive Evaluations of and Emotional Reactions Toward Members of Congress**

Variables	Cognitive Evaluations		Emotional Reactions	
	B	se	B	se
Age	.059*	.033	-.151***	.044
Sex	-.026**	.012	.015	.017
Income	-.092***	.025	-.008	.034
Education	.005	.025	.002	.033
Knowledge	-.030*	.018	.059**	.024
Ideology	-.036*	.019	.015	.026
Party ID	-.113***	.020	.029	.026
Race	-.004	.019	.042*	.025
External Efficacy	.133***	.015	-.112***	.021
Political Involvement	-.061**	.025	.148***	.034
TV Use	-.019	.013	.031*	.018
Radio Use	-.023	.022	.085***	.031
News Exposure	.022	.024	.087***	.033
Constant	.467***	.031	.556***	.042
	Adj. R <sup>2</sup> = .14		Adj. R <sup>2</sup> = .07	
	F <sub>(13,1081)</sub> = 14.38***		F <sub>(13,1112)</sub> = 7.65***	

Source: Public Perceptions of Congress survey.

Note: \* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ . All of the dependent and independent variables have been transformed to range from 0 to 1.

more influential in the area of emotions than in the area of cognitions. The results contained in Table 2 indicate that this is precisely the pattern we find.<sup>8</sup>

The control variables deserve brief comment, although some of them have been discussed elsewhere (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995) and some of them indicate unsurprising relationships. Positive evaluations of Congress, other things being equal, are more likely for the efficacious, females,

<sup>8</sup>Since our two dependent variables (cognitive evaluation and emotional reaction) have just four and five possible values, respectively, one option would be to present probit or logit results rather than the ordinary least squares results presented in Table 2. As is well-known, however, the findings produced by these more complicated models are usually only trivially different from those obtained with OLS (this is particularly true with large sample sizes, such as we have here, since in such situations it is common for the binomial distribution to converge to the normal distribution [Gujarati 1992, 421]) and interpretation is rendered significantly more cumbersome. For these reasons, most recent work in this area—even that utilizing dependent variables with fewer potential values than are present in our study—opts for the “more accessible” linear formulation (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995, 184). We follow convention here. Probit results are available from the authors on request as is a methodological appendix detailing issues involving multicollinearity, heteroskedasticity, and simultaneity.

liberals, and Democrats (remember the survey was administered prior to the changing of the congressional guard in 1995), the elderly, the poor, the politically uninvolved, and the politically ignorant. For many observers, the negative relationships between income, knowledge, and involvement on the one hand and favorable evaluations of Congress on the other will be the most surprising, but, consistent with recent research, we find it is simply the case that more knowledgeable and involved people have higher expectations and thus are more likely to believe Congress may have fallen short of expectations (Kimball and Patterson, 1995).

For our purposes, the key findings have to do with the media variables. A primary reliance on television as a source of news does not produce a less favorable cognitive evaluation of Congress than does a primary reliance on newspapers, which is the baseline: the coefficient is negative but is statistically insignificant. A primary reliance on radio similarly does not produce lower approval of Congress than does a reliance on newspapers. Finally, an overall heavy dose of media news, regardless of whether it is electronic or print, does not lower approval. The coefficient is insignificant and not even in the direction predicted by those assuming media exposure will make people more negative in their cognitive evaluations of Congress.

When we shift attention to the results obtained by analyzing *emotional* reactions to Congress, the signs should change direction since higher values on the dependent variable now mean negative reactions to Congress (see the right half of Table 2) whereas with cognitive evaluations, higher values meant a positive reaction. Thus, despite sign reversals, the young, the knowledgeable, the inefficacious, and the politically involved still are most likely to render negative judgments. The most noticeable difference between the two columns of coefficients, however, has to do with the media variables. Conclusions change dramatically when we compare media effects on cognitive evaluations to media effects on emotional reactions, just as we anticipated.

Those who rely on television as a source of news may not be more likely than those reliant on newspapers to evaluate members of Congress more negatively but they are certainly more likely to have negative emotional reactions to members of Congress. The pattern for those who rely on radio for their news is even more clear-cut: compared to those getting their news from the print media (the constant), radio listeners are significantly more likely to have negative emotional reactions to members of Congress, other things being equal. Finally, regardless of the source of media news, those who are heavily exposed to the news are significantly more likely to admit to negative emotional reactions, even after we have controlled for the effects of political knowledge, involvement, efficacy, education, partisanship, and other variables. The media may not influence whether we approve or disapprove

of Congress but they do influence our emotions toward Congress. More exposure to the media and, especially, more exposure to electronic media increases negative emotional reactions.<sup>9</sup>

It may seem surprising that media exposure is not related to cognitive evaluations of Congress but *is* related to emotional reactions toward Congress. After all, is it not the case that emotional reactions toward Congress are related to evaluations? If people are angry and disgusted with the members of Congress, are they not also likely to disapprove of what Congress is doing? Not necessarily. Negative emotions and cognitions are related, but perhaps not as strongly as might be expected: the correlation coefficient is  $-.27$ , a significant and properly signed but not terribly large correlation. Emotional reactions may influence evaluations, but evaluations of the members of Congress include cognitive assessments concerning policy outcomes, the manifestations of democratic procedures used in Congress, and so on. Our findings that media exposure affects emotional reactions but not evaluations suggests, just as we theorized, that preexisting, stable cognitive evaluations of Congress are largely unaffected by media use whereas the provocative and often sensational media coverage of a "scandal-ridden" Congress arouses strong negative emotions against members of Congress.

### Political Knowledge and Media Effects

A sensible next step is to attempt to determine the kind of people who are especially likely to have their emotional reactions or their cognitive evaluations affected by media exposure. Following the work of Zaller (1992) on the important differences between what have sometimes been called experts and novices, Kimball (1995) hypothesized that responses to current events will vary substantially depending upon the level of political

<sup>9</sup>We have assumed in this analysis that the relationship between news exposure and negative emotions is linear; that is, the more exposed people are to news media, the more negative their emotional reactions toward Congress will be. An alternative way to look at the relationship is to assume that people reach a saturation point beyond which their emotional reactions do not become more negative. In this case, after a certain level more exposure to the news does not increase negative emotional reactions because people have already seen or heard enough. The same argument can be made concerning cognitive evaluations. To test this saturation hypothesis, we ran the regression analyses from Table 2 but replaced our news exposure variable with the natural logarithm of that variable, allowing us to test if there is a diminishing effect of news exposure on cognitive evaluations and on emotional reactions. The results do not provide evidence that the curvilinear model is an improvement over the linear model. With cognitive evaluations as the dependent variable, the logged news exposure variable has a coefficient of  $.01$ , a standard error of  $.01$ , and a  $t$ -value of  $.96$ , and the model has an  $R^2$  of  $.15$  and an  $F$  of  $14.4$  (virtually unchanged from the linear specification). With emotional reactions as the dependent variable, the logged news exposure variable has a coefficient of  $.04$ , a standard error of  $.02$ , and a  $t$ -value of  $2.5$ , and the model has an  $R^2$  of  $.08$  and an  $F$  of  $7.6$  (actually a little worse than the linear specification). We therefore present the linear model in our paper.

knowledge and sophistication possessed by the individual involved. A cognate hypothesis would thus be that media exposure could have differential effects depending upon the individual's level of political knowledge and sophistication. The anticipated relationship is that media exposure should matter much more for political novices than for political experts since experts are more likely than novices to hold opinions that are difficult to shake, regardless of their media exposure. Experts should therefore be better able to dispute messages received from the media (Zaller 1992). While we included political expertise as a control variable in Table 2, no interactive terms were computed.

Consequently, we repeated the analyses leading to Table 2 but this time we included interactive terms:  $(1/\text{knowledge}) \cdot \text{radio}$ ;  $(1/\text{knowledge}) \cdot \text{TV}$ ; and  $(1/\text{knowledge}) \cdot \text{news exposure}$ . The reason for taking the inverse of knowledge instead of its actual value in computing the interactive term is that we hypothesize it is novices ( $1/\text{knowledge}$ ) and not experts ( $\text{knowledge}$ ) who will be most influenced by media. Thus, novices should be accorded higher values. To save space we will only mention the key findings generated when interaction terms are included.

As has been the case throughout, when cognitive evaluation is the dependent variable, television use and radio use do not matter, even when they are allowed to interact with level of political knowledge (see Table 3). Relevant coefficients are minuscule and statistically insignificant.<sup>10</sup> The interaction between news exposure and political knowledge, however, is significant at the .10 level, but it should be noted that the coefficient is incorrectly signed given our expectations. Surprisingly, the more exposed to news the politically unknowledgeable are, the more they approve of members of Congress. When negative emotional reactions are the dependent variable, the interaction term for radio and lack of political knowledge is positive though not significant, but the interaction terms for lack of knowledge and TV and for lack of knowledge and overall news exposure are both positive, of reasonable size, and statistically significant. Here then is a preliminary indication that, as we anticipated, the emotional reactions of political novices are particularly sensitive to media exposure, whereas political experts are less likely to exhibit a relationship between their media use and emotional reactions to Congress. Once again, a focus on emotional reactions rather than cognitive evaluations permits expected patterns to materialize.

<sup>10</sup>It should be noted, however, that given the high level of multicollinearity created when an interaction term and the variables used to compute it are in the same equation, the variances are inflated and statistical significance may exist even when it appears it does not. While the variances are inflated when there is multicollinearity, the coefficients themselves remain unaffected. In other words, multicollinearity makes significance tests overly conservative in this case.

**Table 3. Political Knowledge and Media Effects: Interaction Terms**

Interaction Terms	Cognitive Evaluations		Emotional Reactions	
	B	se	B	se
(1/Knowledge) * TV Use	.000	.033	.071*	.044
(1/Knowledge) * Radio Use	-.012	.061	.071	.083
(1/Knowledge) *				
News Exposure	.103*	.057	.138*	.076
Constant	.443***	.037	.496***	.050
	$R^2 = .15$		$R^2 = .09$	
	$F_{(16,1078)} = 11.94***$		$F_{(16,1109)} = 6.55***$	

Source: Public Perceptions of Congress survey.

Note: \* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ . All of the independent variables in Table 2 plus the interaction terms listed were included in these regression analyses. The results for the variables listed in Table 2 changed little if at all, so we are only reporting the interaction results here.

### Conclusion

Congress is held in low regard by the public, and media coverage of Congress is almost invariably negative, but does this mean the negative media coverage is what has *caused* Congress to be held in low regard? While our research does not permit a definitive answer to this important question, it does afford a start. We find little evidence that, in a multivariate model, the nature and extent of a person's exposure to media news has an identifiable effect on that person's cognitive evaluations of Congress as a collection of members. On this score, people relying on electronic media are not appreciably different from people relying on print media, just as people who are true news-hounds are not appreciably different from people who get little or no media news.

All this changes when the topic shifts from the public's cognitive evaluations of Congress to the public's emotional reactions to Congress. Our results suggest that media exposure is clearly related to negative emotional reactions. A reliance on electronic media for news, especially radio, produces more in the way of negative emotions toward Congress than a reliance on print media. And, regardless of source, the more media news a person is exposed to, the more likely that person is to have negative emotional reactions to Congress. The media, according to our data, cannot be blamed for Congress's low evaluations (as noted, these low ratings predate hostile media coverage anyway), but they can be blamed, at least in part, for the public's negative and often visceral emotional reactions to Congress.

Blanket condemnation of the media for the public's lack of support for Congress is easy—indeed, the media have served as an explanation for just

about every recent societal problem—but are not appropriate in this case. Negative cognitive evaluations of Congress seem to have their source somewhere besides the media. This does not mean, however, that the media can escape all responsibility for the currently hostile public climate in which Congress finds itself. The media have a singular ability to stir up public emotions against Congress (and presumably other entities as well) and this effect seems to be especially evident among the more politically naive segment of the citizenry. In the case of orientations to Congress at least, the media play a role in shaping what people feel but not necessarily what they think. Our theory of media effects on the public mood leads us to expect this basic pattern will be repeated when scholars investigate media impact in other areas.

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