CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Prior to the 2006 congressional elections, conventional wisdom in political science suggested that the battle for control of the House would be close. Some academic forecasting models predicted that Republicans would hold on to a narrow majority, others that Democrats would gain enough seats to overtake them. Virtually none, however, predicted that Republicans would lose as many as the thirty seats they actually lost, giving the Democrats a majority advantage of thirty-one seats.¹

Four years earlier, during the 2002 congressional elections, the American Political Science Association held a symposium of election experts one month before the vote. Every forecasting model presented in the symposium predicted that Democrats would retake majority control of the House from the Republicans.² On election day, however, not only did the Democrats not win a majority of seats, but the Republicans actually increased the size of their majority.

This clear discrepancy between political science theory and political reality is troubling and begs the question, why are these political forecasting models failing so consistently? A close look at both the models and reality points to an obvious shortcoming. Despite the fact that public approval of Congress's performance was near record lows just before the election in 2006 (26 percent in the Gallup Poll) and at record highs just before the election in 2002 (50 percent in the Gallup Poll), not a single academic model of the congressional elections took into account public evaluations of the institution.³ Instead, these models focused on such factors as presidential approval ratings and the nation’s economy.

If one believes that Americans care not just about the general performance of the president and the economy but also about the performance...
of Congress specifically, the results of these elections become understandable and even predictable. In 2006, the lowest public approval ratings of congressional performance in twelve years led to greater losses for the House majority party than expected (the greatest losses in twelve years). In 2002, record high approval ratings of Congress’s performance helped the House majority to increase its seat margin—rather than decrease it, as predicted.4

Unfortunately, the failure of academics to seriously consider public evaluations of Congress in their 2006 or 2002 forecasts is illustrative of the current state of scholarly thinking in this area. In fact, no standard model of congressional elections has ever included public judgments of congressional performance. Why? Put simply, traditional political science theory and research suggest that Americans do not care much about what policies the collective Congress is pursuing and that even if they did care, Congress and its members are insulated from public judgments of the institution’s performance.

This standard view that neither the public nor the Congress is responsive to the other is quite disturbing from the perspective of normative democratic theory. In the classic model of democratic responsiveness, citizens evaluate governmental institutions on the basis of their policy performance, then government institutions decide their policy behavior in light of public judgments—shifting their policy behavior in response to significant public disapproval and maintaining it when the public approves. According to the conventional scholarly portrait, then, Americans and their Congress fail the basic test of democratic responsiveness. If Americans’ attitudes toward Congress have no basis in actual congressional policy behavior and if their evaluations have no electoral effect in any event, then Congress is free to act in any way it sees fit in terms of the policies it formulates and enacts.

We believe that the conventional academic view underestimates the democratic capabilities of both Americans and their Congress. The purpose of this book is to show that democracy is actually working better—in terms of the public-Congress relationship—than much of the existing scholarship portrays. We demonstrate how Americans use policy direction to evaluate congressional performance, how they use these judgments when voting in congressional elections, and how Congress is ultimately responsive to these judgments of its performance. In making our case, we challenge long-standing assumptions of scholarship on public opinion, elections, and congressional behavior. In the end, we tell a story
that is quite different in both its assumptions and its conclusions from current evaluations of American democracy.

We are not arguing that the traditional factors the literature has found to be significant in explaining public opinion, voting, and congressional behavior are unimportant. Quite the contrary, we believe they are essential to any good explanation of these political phenomena. Nor are we arguing that the factors we choose to focus on are necessarily more important than the factors emphasized in existing research. We do, however, argue that the discipline’s traditional explanations of the relationship between the public and Congress are incomplete. Our book seeks to address this gap in an effort to contribute a missing piece to this scholarly puzzle. Before we present our full argument, however, it is important to take a closer look at the existing research.

PUBLIC EVALUATIONS OF CONGRESS—THE CONVENTIONAL VIEW

The study of democratic responsiveness is fundamentally about the relationship between the government and the governed. Given the wide scope of this topic, questions about the democratic responsiveness of Americans and Congress necessarily relate to large and disparate bodies of research. Here, we are interested, first, in public opinion research related to the question of how Americans evaluate the performance of political actors generally and Congress in particular. Second, we are interested in behavioral research on how Americans vote in congressional elections and how Congress and its members perceive and react to public evaluations of the institution’s performance.

How Americans Evaluate Congress

Do Americans respond to congressional policy behavior when evaluating the institution? By and large, the public opinion literature says no. It portrays American citizens as overwhelmingly uninterested and uninformed about the policy actions of government (A. Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Smith 1989). Looking at the 1956 presidential election, the authors of The American Voter (A. Campbell et al. 1960) famously find that only a small proportion—12 percent—of the electorate spontaneously and knowledgeably evaluated the parties and candidates in terms of their placement on a liberal-conservative policy spectrum. More than four
decades later, in their book *Stealth Democracy*, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue that not much has changed: “The people as a whole tend to be quite indifferent to policies and therefore are not eager to hold government accountable for the policies it produces” (2002, 2).

This characterization of Americans as uninterested and uninformed about policy matters is considered particularly applicable in the case of Congress (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Stokes and Miller 1962). In contrast to the single president, the 535-member Congress is seen as an institution too complex for citizens to understand or even consider. Fenno muses, “Most citizens find it hard or impossible to think about Congress as an institution. They answer questions about it; but they cannot conceptualize it as a collectivity” (1978, 245). Congress is also less likely than the president to receive coverage in the national news media (Jamieson 1988). Perhaps as a result, scholars note that the public’s ability to answer seemingly simple survey questions about Congress is quite poor. According to Stokes and Miller, “the electorate sees very little altogether of what goes on in the national legislature. . . . and much of the public is unaware even of which party has control of Congress” (1962, 545). Summarizing the literature, Mondak and his colleagues state that “nothing in the empirical record suggests that citizens are at all well informed regarding the people, politics, and procedures of Congress” (2007, 34).

If Americans do not think in policy terms and do not have much information about Congress and its policy actions, it becomes difficult to imagine them evaluating Congress on policy or ideological grounds. Indeed, in their important work *Congress as Public Enemy*, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse find that “policy is rarely mentioned by people when asked about their dislikes of Congress” (1995, 48). Rather than reflecting Americans’ concerns with the policy direction of Congress, public evaluations of Congress’s job performance are thought to stem mainly from concerns with the style and pace of the legislative process (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995) or from general concerns with national conditions, such as the state of the economy (Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997; Parker 1977; Patterson and Caldeira 1990; Stimson 2004).

**Consequences of Public Judgments of Congress**

Even if Americans’ evaluations of Congress were related to policy concerns, the literature does not view public evaluations of Congress as providing any real impetus for responsiveness on the part of Congress (Fenno 1975, 1978; Mayhew 1974; Stokes and Miller 1962). In his semi-
nal work Home Style, Fenno notes that in such a large and diverse body as Congress, “it is easy for each congressman to explain to his own supporters why he cannot be blamed for the performance of the collectivity” (1978, 167). Fenno finds that House members feel so safely insulated from any negative public evaluations of their institution that they often “run for Congress by running against Congress”—actually denigrating the performance of the rest of the institution in their interactions with constituents (168). The notion that congressional evaluations do not affect the fortunes of individual members is supported mainly by a simple yet dramatic observation: despite the fact that a majority of Americans tend to disapprove of the collective Congress, individual members of Congress are regularly reelected at astonishingly high rates—an average of over 90 percent in House elections and only slightly less in Senate elections. That Americans appear to simultaneously “hate Congress” and “love their own member” is so widely known that it is often referred to simply as “Fenno’s Paradox” (Fenno 1975; see also Cook 1979; Jones 2003; Mutz and Flemming 1999; Parker and Davidson 1979).

If incumbents can avoid individual responsibility for congressional performance, might Congress at least be subject to some sort of collective responsibility, with disapproval leading to electoral tides that produce institutional turnover? Mayhew suggests not, noting that “national swings in the congressional vote are normally judgments on what the president is doing . . . rather than on what Congress is doing” (1974, 28). Stokes and Miller concur that congressional performance considerations are “unlikely to bring down electoral sanctions” on the majority party (1962, 545). Hibbing and Tiritilli argue that the public generally does not attribute responsibility for Congress’s performance to the majority party, so that “most of the time, even when people are quite disapproving of Congress, this disapproval does not have direct electoral repercussions” (2000, 128).

Even some members of Congress seem to have accepted this conventional wisdom. Former Speaker of the House Thomas “Tip” O’Neill famously declared that “all politics is local.” More recently, in the months leading up to the 2006 election, the chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, Representative Tom Reynolds, seemed to be (optimistically) channeling Richard Fenno.

Congress’s approval rating is a little flat. My self-esteem wants to see it a little higher. But it is what it is. The most important thing is people love their congressman, no matter what. (Reynolds quoted in Nagourney 2006)
At the time, prominent political consultants were advising Republicans that gerrymandered districts and a focus on local issues would protect them from any negative electoral effects of low congressional approval.7

Without a threat of electoral defeat when the public disapproves of Congress, there would also appear to be little strategic incentive for members to alter their policy behavior in response to public disapproval of Congress. Indeed, numerous studies find that members exhibit very little ideological change throughout their legislative careers (Carson et al. 2004; Lott and Bronars 1993; Poole and Romer 1993; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Poole 2007).

Overall, the view that congressional performance evaluations do not affect Congress and its members is so dominant that few scholars have even thought it necessary to empirically test for such effects. Standard studies of individual voting behavior (e.g., Jacobson 2004), congressional election outcomes (e.g., Tufte 1975), ideological change among individual members (e.g., Poole and Rosenthal 1997), and collective congressional responsiveness (e.g., Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002) do not consider congressional approval as a possible causal variable.

REASONS FOR GREATER OPTIMISM

Despite the impressive weight of scholarly opinion reflected in the preceding discussion, there are important reasons to suspect that both Americans and their Congress are more capable of producing a responsive system than is traditionally argued. Certain politicians, pundits, and even some scholarly studies suggest that citizen capacity for policy-related evaluation of Congress is greater than commonly thought. Additionally, others suggest that members of Congress may not be as insulated from public judgments of their institution as has been traditionally believed.

Congressional Policy Direction and Congressional Approval

An initial issue in questioning the conventional wisdom in political science is establishing whether or not Americans actually have enough information about policy matters to effectively evaluate Congress along these lines. The standard academic view, based on survey data, is that they do not. This view has, however, been seriously challenged in other quarters as being far from conclusive (Kuklinski and Quirk 2001).

One prominent avenue of research suggests that the public has ways
of dealing with information shortages. For example, literature on information shortcuts, or heuristics, argues that, in practice, voters mitigate against their relatively low levels of political sophistication by relying on familiar cues to guide them (e.g., Popkin 1991). Other literature shows that political information does regularly reach even politically inattentive citizens indirectly through their social networks—friends, family, and coworkers (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995).

In the field of political psychology, research into online, or impression-driven, processing suggests that while Americans may not be able to readily recall specific political information when questioned by survey researchers—thereby scoring poorly on typical knowledge tests—they nevertheless do form general impressions of governmental actors based, at least in part, on such information (e.g., Gant and Davis 1984; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995; Lodge and Stroh 1993). According to this school of thought, individuals regularly come into contact with political information, even if inadvertently, and they absorb the information by updating their impressions of political actors as a result of it. Once they have updated their judgments, individuals have no more use for the specific information and are likely to forget it. In this way, Americans may well base their judgments about governmental actors on factual information—including policy—even if they cannot recall the information itself.

Although researchers have predominantly examined such theories in terms of individual candidates, this logic could potentially also apply to judgments of the collective Congress. Lipinski (2004) finds that in their mailings to constituents, approximately three-quarters of representatives send messages concerning Congress’s collective performance. His research also shows that these messages about Congress focus primarily on congressional policy. Lipinski claims that the content of these mailings are “an excellent proxy for all of a member’s communications with constituents,” be they through personal interactions or through the news media (9; see also Cannon 1999). Thus there may actually be a considerable amount of policy information about Congress available to citizens, either directly from members themselves or indirectly through the news media or via opinion leaders who closely follow Congress. Citizens could potentially use this information about the policy activity of Congress to update their general impressions of Congress—even if they cannot recall a single specific bill on which Congress has worked.

Even if citizens do absorb policy-related information about Congress,
to what extent do they actually use such information to evaluate government actors? While the traditional view is that Americans generally do not think in policy or ideological terms, some scholars offer a less pessimistic assessment. Challenging the perspective put forth in *The American Voter*, Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1980) argue that 1956 was a low point of ideological distinction between presidential candidates and between political parties in government. According to this alternative view, citizens who otherwise would use ideology to evaluate political candidates may not bother to dwell on this criterion when few ideological differences exist among political actors. But when ideology is salient and differences are clear, ideology can be an important factor for ordinary citizens (see also Wright and Berkman 1986). If Americans are more likely to judge political actors on ideological grounds when policy differences are salient, they are almost certainly doing so more now than in the past. American parties in government have become increasingly ideologically polarized over the past three decades (Aldrich 1995; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Rohde 1991). Many scholars argue that this elite polarization has in turn increased both the awareness and the importance of ideology among the public (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998, 2000; Hetherington 2001; Levine, Carmines, and Huckfeldt 1997).

Consistent with this research showing a greater ideological orientation among the American public than traditionally thought, scholars have found that citizens’ performance evaluations of a variety of governmental actors are based at least partly on ideological or issue proximity. Specifically, ideological discrepancy has been shown to significantly contribute to Americans’ performance evaluations of the president (Ragsdale 1991) and of individual members of Congress (Binder, Maltzman, and Sigelman 1998). If the public can make policy-based judgments of the performance of individual members of Congress, it seems plausible that they could do the same with regard to the performance of the collective Congress. Whether or not they actually do so remains an open question.

However, some real-world evidence leads us to suspect this is the case. In April 2005, public approval of Congress dropped significantly after Congress passed legislation attempting to help keep Terri Schiavo—a severely brain-damaged woman—on life support. Polls conducted concurrently showed that over three-quarters of Americans opposed this policy action. Given this evidence, several media commentaries speculated that Congress’s policy action with regard to Schiavo was partly responsible for the drop in congressional approval (e.g., Harwood 2005). This was not
merely an isolated incident during the period of Republican control in Congress. In the late 1990s, some Republican representatives, such as Brian Bilbray, complained that while the right-wing agenda of the leadership in Congress delighted conservative citizens, it was hurting public approval of Congress among moderate Americans, such as those in his home district (Rosenbaum 1998). In July 1999, Representative Michael Forbes of New York cited this very reason in explaining his decision to leave the Republican Party to become a Democrat (Dao 1999).

Political Effects of Congressional Approval

Moving from the issue of how Americans evaluate Congress to the issue of whether such evaluations have any political impact, one again finds voices at odds with the conventional wisdom in political science. Many of these voices come from the political world itself, where members of Congress, the news media, and political pundits have begun to recognize the potential electoral importance of congressional approval ratings. This was particularly noticeable during the 2006 elections. In April 2006, Senator John McCain predicted, “We Republicans are going to have a tough race in 2006 because the country is not happy with us. We have a 25 percent approval rating in Congress” (Pierce 2006). In September, the New York Times ran a front-page story on Congress’s low approval rating, noting the potential ramifications.

Across the board, the poll found marked disenchantment with Congress, highlighting the opportunity Democrats see to make the argument for a change in leadership and to make the election a national referendum on the performance of a Republican-controlled Congress. (Nagourney and Elder 2006)

Other journalists were similarly broadcasting alarms for the Republican Congress that year, noting that the low levels of congressional approval were eerily similar to the levels prevailing prior to the electoral tidal wave that hit the Democratic Congress in 1994 (e.g., Traub 2006). The electoral implications of congressional approval ratings have also been noted in years where no major electoral tide was evident. One particularly astute observer of American politics, David Broder (1996), credited Republicans’ relative success in the 1996 elections to a moderated legislative strategy that “boosted public approval of Congress and made it harder for Democratic challengers to press their case.”
Even evidence in existing scholarly research provides reason to question conventional thinking in political science that congressional evaluations have no electoral consequences. To begin, we know that candidates for Congress are not judged merely on their own individual merits. Literature on retrospective voting demonstrates that Americans’ congressional votes are partly based on their performance evaluations of the president (Fiorina 1981). If Americans were to view the president as overwhelmingly responsible for national policy, it would make sense not to consider the influence of other institutional evaluations. There is, however, ample evidence that Americans actually view Congress as a more powerful institution than the presidency and as the branch that is more responsible for a variety of policy areas (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Rudolph 2003). Given Americans’ belief that congressional performance is at least as consequential as presidential performance and given that a winning congressional candidate will have more impact on congressional performance than on executive performance, it would be strange if voters based their congressional ballot solely on their evaluation of the president and not on their evaluation of Congress. Yet there is minimal systematic research on whether and how voters use congressional evaluations when making a decision in congressional elections.10

Finally, even if Americans consider congressional performance as one factor when voting for Congress, is there any reason to think that this would affect congressional behavior? While Fenno’s impression from traveling with House members in the early 1970s was of members almost uniformly unconcerned about low institutional approval, more recent research paints a very different picture. In a survey of House members serving in 1997–98, Lipinski (2004) finds that over two-thirds of representatives themselves believe that low congressional approval harms the reelection prospects of majority party incumbents. He goes on to argue that member concern over congressional approval ratings helps drive at least one aspect of congressional behavior: communications with constituents. Specifically, Lipinski finds that members of the majority party actively try to improve the institution’s image by portraying it in a positive light in the mailings they send to constituents.11 For our purposes, this finding has two important implications. First, as with John McCain’s comments previously cited, it suggests that politicians perceive a real electoral threat from congressional disapproval, even though the academic world generally has not. Second, if congressional approval drives incumbent behavior when it comes to communications, it seems logical that it could also have an impact on their policy behavior.
In sum, although the prevailing academic view is that Americans do not seek policy responsiveness from the collective Congress and that Congress is unlikely to provide it in return, other political observers raise doubts about the accuracy of this portrait. Given the conflicting perspectives presented in the two previous sections and given the surprising dearth of empirical evidence specific to this question, it is simply impossible to say for sure what we know and what we do not know. What is missing is a specific theory about how Americans use policy considerations to evaluate the performance of Congress and how such evaluations lead to congressional policy responsiveness, with systematic empirical tests of each element of that argument.

OUR ARGUMENT

The idea that citizens think in policy terms and attempt to hold government accountable in elections is certainly not new (Downs 1957; Key 1966). What is new is applying these concepts to public evaluations of the collective Congress. Building on the strands of literature hinting that both the American public and Congress are more capable of forming a responsive democratic system than expected, we argue that Americans do make policy-based evaluations of Congress and do use these evaluations in elections. Additionally, in doing so, the public provides the electoral threat or reward necessary for Congress and its members to be responsive to the public's judgments and preferences. In the remainder of this section, we lay out the argument that we make throughout the course of this book.

We argue that, just as Americans prefer their president and their own member of Congress to be in sync with their personal political outlook, they also prefer that the collective institution of Congress be so. For citizens to gauge whether this is the case, they must have at least a basic understanding or knowledge level about Congress and its actions. If existing research is correct, this requirement is unrealistic—citizens cannot even name the majority party in Congress on a regular basis. However, consistent with research in political psychology, we argue that the public can have an overall impression of what Congress is doing even if they cannot cite relevant facts and details at a given point in time. While Americans may not pay close attention to the institution's daily actions, they nevertheless form a general sense of its policy direction based on bits of information absorbed in various forms, including from coverage of major policy actions in the media, from member communications, or indirectly through opinion leaders who are more attentive to public affairs.
Because Americans have the capacity to gauge the policy orientation of Congress, they also have the ability to compare it with their own ideological or policy preferences and make judgments of Congress based partly on how well they feel Congress represents their views. At the end of the day, when asked to evaluate congressional job performance, citizens who perceive the general ideological stance of Congress as distant from their own preferences will be more likely to give Congress low marks for performance, while those who feel that congressional actions match their preferences will be more likely to give the institution positive ratings.

Citizens use these evaluations of congressional representation, along with other factors, when voting in congressional elections. Retrospective voting theory contends that voters who are unhappy with the performance of government hold the party in power accountable during elections. While the prevailing view of retrospective voting in congressional elections is that these elections are a referendum on the performance of the president, we believe that voters also hold Congress accountable for its own performance during elections, much in the same way they do the president. In accord with retrospective voting theory, voters evaluate the performance of Congress, observe—either consciously or unconsciously—which party is in control of the institution, and then hold the majority party responsible for congressional performance. On election day, voters reward or punish candidates from the majority party based partly on their evaluations of Congress. In particular, voters who approve of the job Congress has done will be more likely to vote for congressional candidates from the majority party. Voters who disapprove of Congress's performance will be less likely to vote for congressional candidates from the majority party.

Voters' use of congressional evaluations in their electoral choices leads to larger systemic effects. First, public evaluations of Congress affect the decision making of strategic politicians who are considering a run for Congress. Existing literature finds that experienced politicians are alert to meaningful tides in public opinion that could affect their potential electoral fortunes (Jacobson and Kernell 1983). To date, the literature has not considered the possible effects of tides in congressional performance evaluations. But if politicians recognize that congressional approval affects voting, they will react strategically to this aspect of their electoral context. When public approval of Congress is low, this represents an electoral threat to majority party candidates. Therefore, politi-
cally experienced candidates will be more likely to challenge majority party incumbents, while majority party incumbents will be more likely to retire. Since disapproval of Congress does not represent a threat to minority party candidates, it will not increase challenges to or retirements by minority party incumbents.

Finally, public evaluations of one Congress significantly affect the ideological makeup of the next Congress. When approval of Congress is low, the combined effects of having less appeal among voters, sustaining more retirements, and facing stronger challengers will mean that more members of the majority party are replaced with minority party candidates who have distinctly different ideological outlooks than their predecessors. Furthermore, incumbents who do manage to win reelection when the public disapproves of Congress will recognize the change in the electoral landscape and react accordingly, shifting subtly away from the ideological positions taken by the majority party prior to the election. The collective result of majority party members being replaced with minority party members while incumbents move away from the majority party will be a shift in the overall policy behavior of Congress. Specifically, the more the public disapproves of Congress before an election, the more the next Congress will shift away from the previous majority party position.

While each piece of our argument is important, the most significant point is the larger story it tells about congressional policy responsiveness. When Americans register their disapproval with the performance of Congress, they do so in part because they are unhappy with the policy actions of Congress as run by the majority party. By factoring this policy-related institutional evaluation into their congressional votes, along with other political considerations, citizens are able to affect the overall ideological profile of their Congress. This entire process provides a portrait of both Congress and the American public that may prove surprising to some. Scholars in particular have found fault with both the citizenry and the government for not fulfilling their democratic responsibilities. Our theory argues that to some extent, they actually do.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Because our argument runs somewhat counter to standard expectations and because these specific issues have generally not been subjected to systematic empirical analysis, our methodological approach in this book
is to test the predictions of our hypotheses at each stage of the argument, using a wide variety of data sources and research methods. We present both individual and aggregate empirical evidence covering more than three decades of congressional history and public opinion. Our data include not only traditional survey data but also a survey experiment, panel data, election returns, and roll call voting records, among other data.

This pluralistic empirical approach has two main benefits over the limited empirical work to date on this topic, much of which has relied on one type of analysis using data from one particular point in time. First, showing support for our arguments regardless of which method is used to test them provides a high degree of confidence that our claims are accurate, not merely an artifact of any one particular analytical technique. Second, showing support for our arguments across a large time frame and a wide range of historical contexts (e.g., Democratic as well as Republican majority Congresses) helps demonstrate that our findings are generalizable beyond any single period or political environment.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

In the remainder of this book, we systematically address each aspect of our argument and discuss the overall implications of our findings. Chapter 2 examines the basic question of whether or not Americans even care about the policy representativeness of the collective Congress. If they do not, there is no point in taking additional steps to explore their capacity to evaluate Congress along such lines. We begin by reviewing the limited empirical research on this specific question and find some evidence that is surprisingly supportive of our view. We then introduce a survey experiment we designed to test whether or not there is a causal relationship between the policies Congress pursues and citizens’ evaluations of congressional job performance. We present original data from this experiment demonstrating that Americans do recognize and react to certain policy actions of the collective Congress. In particular, we find that self-described conservatives become substantially less approving of Congress after hearing about a specific liberal policy action Congress has taken, while liberals become a bit more approving.

Chapter 3 looks at the question of how much Americans really know about Congress. We begin by reviewing the scholarly debate over the informational capacity of the public. Building on existing work in this area, we present an argument explaining how it is possible for Americans to
gain a general sense of the policy direction of Congress even while they may score poorly on factual survey questions about Congress. Our argument predicts that public evaluations of congressional performance will change systematically when salient aspects of Congress change—even among citizens traditionally viewed as less knowledgeable. Taking advantage of natural pseudoexperiments afforded by actual changes in party control, we analyze an American National Election Studies (ANES) panel survey conducted before and after the 1995 change in party control in the House and Senate, original surveys we commissioned before and after the 2001 midsession change in party control of the Senate alone, and media surveys of opinion changes during the early days of the 1995 and 2007 sessions of Congress. Our findings support the claim that most Americans—not just a small, politically savvy segment, as is typically thought—possess enough information about Congress to at least partly base their judgments of the institution on its policy orientation.

Chapter 4 elaborates on Americans’ understanding and use of ideology and then puts discussion of this issue together with the parts of the story presented in the two previous chapters to test our full theory of how Americans judge congressional performance. We argue that Americans evaluate the job performance of Congress based partly on their perceived ideological distance from Congress as run by the majority party, with greater distance leading to less approval. We test this argument in two ways. First, to test the effect of ideological distance on an individual citizen’s approval of Congress, we analyze ANES surveys from thirteen different Congresses with available data (1980–2004). Even after controlling for other important factors—including partisanship, presidential approval, congressional process concerns, and the national economy—we find that in each Congress, the more ideologically distant a citizen is from the majority party in Congress, the less likely it is that the citizen will approve of Congress’s job performance. Second, we test whether the effect of ideological distance we find among individuals is replicated at the level of aggregate approval ratings of Congress. Using a quarterly time series of congressional approval ratings from 1974 through 2006, we demonstrate that increases in the overall ideological divergence between the public and Congress decrease the percentage of people who approve of Congress, while reductions in the ideological divergence between the public and Congress increase the percentage who approve of Congress.

Chapter 5 analyzes whether Americans take into account their retrospective evaluations of Congress when casting their congressional ballots.
We theorize that disapproval of Congress decreases voting for majority party candidates. We then test this prediction in two ways. First, we use ANES surveys from 1980 through 2004 to see whether individual voters who disapprove of Congress are less likely to vote for majority party candidates in House elections. Next, we use actual election returns from 1974 through 2006 to test whether individual majority party candidates for the House receive a smaller share of the vote when public disapproval of Congress is high, compared to when it is low. In both tests, the evidence demonstrates that across all race types—whether there is an incumbent from the majority or minority party or the seat is open—Americans are indeed less likely to vote for majority party candidates when they disapprove of Congress and more likely to vote for them when they approve.

Chapter 6 looks at the potential effect of congressional approval ratings on candidates’ strategic decisions of whether or not to run for Congress. Specifically, we analyze the effect of congressional approval ratings on the decision of experienced candidates to challenge an incumbent and on the decision of incumbents to retire rather than run for reelection. We test our model at the level of the individual House race, using data covering every contested House election from 1974 through 2006. Consistent with our expectations, we find that incumbents from the majority party are more likely to face experienced challengers and more likely to retire when approval of Congress is low, while incumbents from the minority party are not.

Chapter 7 addresses a question at the heart of this book: is Congress responsive to public evaluations of its performance? We analyze two ways in which ideological responsiveness might be achieved: through incumbent replacement and through incumbent adjustment. First, adding congressional approval to a standard model of congressional seat swing, we find that greater disapproval of Congress significantly increases the number of seats lost by the House majority party. Using ideological scale scores of House members developed by Poole and Rosenthal (1997), we further show that partisan change in a seat almost always produces ideological change. Second, we demonstrate that greater disapproval of Congress also produces a greater shift by reelected House members away from the average ideological position of the majority party in the previous Congress—though this effect is much less dramatic. Finally, we demonstrate that the combined result of these two effects is that greater disapproval of Congress actually shifts the average ideological prefer-
ence and average winning policy outcome in the House away from the position of the majority party in the previous Congress.

In chapter 8, we conclude with a reassessment of the conventional scholarly wisdom regarding public evaluations of Congress. We also discuss the broader implications of our findings for the study of public opinion, Congress, and democratic responsiveness.