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The Media's Role in Fomenting Public Disgust with Congress

John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse

Congress as an institution is not well thought of by the general population. However, when individual members face the voters on election day they fare much better. In most congressional elections since World War II, over 90 percent of all incumbents seeking reelection have won.

Many explanations have been offered for the dim view taken of Congress by the general public. The most compelling has to do with the long time Congress takes to arrive at decisions, the lack of immediate positive impact that can be attributed to most of those decisions, and an impatience with politics inside the government, both within Congress and between Congress and other important players, especially the president.

Some have also advanced the notion that the shallow, often negative, often sensationalist coverage given Congress in the mass media, both print and electronic, produces the public's negative view. In the following reading, University of Nebraska political science professors John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse examine that hypothesis carefully. Their work is based on careful analysis of a large amount of data, even though this article

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implies reports the findings and summarizes the analysis in very broad terms.

Their bottom line is that the public image of Congress is not uniformly negative, that negative views of many aspects have been around as long as Congress has, and that there is no evidence that media coverage, even though it is far from informative and thorough most of the time, causes negative views. Such coverage may, however, reinforce preexisting negative views.

The compromises that are necessary to get anything done in any free legislature may never sit well with the majority of the American people. We tend to demand immediate solutions and immediate results. Congress, by definition, is not likely to produce such results. Neither, for that matter, is our political system in general with its foundations in checks and balances that make compromise—and the time it takes to reach compromise—major enduring features of the system.

Media coverage of serious political matters has declined in quantity and quality in recent decades—and coverage of Congress is no exception to this general statement. Likewise, the public's image of Congress is extremely negative, with disapprobation reaching an all-time high in 1996. Many observers have put these two situations together and concluded that the media, through negative and shallow stories, have caused the decline in popular approval of Congress. While we are not in total disagreement with this line of thinking, it is, at the same time, only partially accurate. Drawing on recent research we have done concerning public attitudes toward Congress, we present a more complete and objective assessment of the role of the media in public evaluations of Congress. In the process, we hope to clarify the real relationship between media coverage of and public attitudes toward Congress.

To examine the relationship between increased media negativity and increased public disapproval of Congress, we must first determine if the media have indeed become more negative in recent years. While media coverage of the modern Congress is undeniably hostile, this does not necessarily mean that cov-

erage long ago was different. In the nineteenth century, Mark Twain was far from the only journalist to heap scorn upon the nation's legislature. Congress could expect a barrage of uncharitable stories from the press associates of whichever political party did not control a majority in Congress. The twentieth century saw a continuation of press negativity. In 1906, William Randolph Hearst acquired *Cosmopolitan* and commissioned a series of articles by journalist David Graham Phillips entitled "The Treason of the Senate." These articles were vintage muckraking and were disavowed by virtually all members of the responsible press. Still, they doubled *Cosmopolitan's* circulation and were widely discussed and reprinted. Coming as they did, hard upon well-publicized congressional scandals involving John Mitchell of Oregon and Joseph Burton of Kansas, the articles fanned the flames that would eventually produce direct elections of U.S. Senators and other populist reforms. Public suspicions about the absence of integrity in Congress seemed to be confirmed by the articles. While negativity may have diminished during the two world wars, on the whole Mark Rozell must certainly be correct when he concludes after extensive content analysis of the print media that "although the tone in recent years has become more severe, more disturbing, negative and superficial congressional coverage is nothing new."

Though the Congress of 100 years ago may have had to contend with the likes of Twain and Hearst, it did not have to deal with electronic media—and modern electronic coverage of Congress is decidedly unfavorable. Content analyses of television news stories reveal, to the surprise of few, that "television networks have paid less and less attention to Congress, and their coverage has become progressively less policy oriented and more heavily focused on scandals and unethical behavior." Radio is no better and probably worse. A recent survey revealed radio talk-show hosts to be more hostile to Congress than any other group working in mass media.

Negative electronic coverage of Congress is especially dangerous because most citizens receive news from electronic sources, specifically television. In our random national survey of 1400 adults conducted in 1992, we found that nearly 60 percent of respondents

claimed to "usually obtain their news" from television; about 30 percent usually received their news from newspapers; and 10 percent relied primarily on radio. By more than a 2 to 1 ratio, people receive their news primarily from electronic sources; and, since we know there is a tendency for people to claim to read the newspaper when they do not actually do so, the real ratio is probably closer to 3 to 1. Thus, the "gotcha" journalism popular in television newsmagazine[s], the preference of nightly news broadcasts for scandals rather than issues, and the inflammatory rhetoric that has become de rigueur on radio talk shows all leave their mark. While we should not lose sight of the fact that coverage of Congress has almost always been unfavorable, evidence exists that, more than before, the image of Congress conveyed to most Americans by the media today typically is an institution that is "lobby-ridden, incompetent, and slow."

The second part of the media-disapproval relationship points to the recent decline in the public's approval of Congress. Yet current descriptions of public disapproval often downplay the extent to which Congress has been unpopular for most of the country's history. It is hard to make confident historical statements for the time predating modern survey research techniques, but it appears there is little evidence that Congress was ever popular with a sizable majority of the American public for an extended period of time. Blips of popularity appear in the 1950s and the mid-1960s, and the last twenty-five years reveal a slight downward trend in approval, but Congress has never had the chance to get used to being popular. It has consistently been the least approved political institution, and levels in 1996 are only a few points lower than in 1971.

Like media coverage of Congress, public approval of Congress has inched down from a low level, not, as we are sometimes led to believe, fallen off the table of issue-steeped, balanced, charitable coverage and cheery, approving people. Still, the key question is whether media coverage has played a role in fostering the negative public attitude toward Congress. Here again, the popular answer is yes, but a more empirically based response encourages caution.

Through standard statistical techniques, we controlled for other factors such as respondents'

partisanship, education, ideology, age, gender, and so on. Once this was done, we found that the source of a respondent's news (television, newspapers, or radio) and the number of times in a week that respondents were exposed to news had little to do with their approval or disapproval of Congress. Interestingly, however, the source and amount of news were both strongly related to whether or not respondents had negative emotional reactions to Congress. In other words, a typical American is not led by the media to be more or less approving of Congress but is led by the media to have negative emotional reactions to Congress. The media do not seem to affect what we *think of Congress* but they do affect how we *feel about Congress*. People who rely on television or radio for news and who absorb a substantial amount of news are much more likely to be angry, disappointed, and disgusted with Congress than are people who rely on print media. But people who rely on television or radio and who obtain much news are not more likely to be disapproving of the job members of Congress are doing.

This combination of findings may seem confusing at first but upon reflection makes perfect sense. Television, especially, is renowned for its ability to inspire emotional reactions, and this can be seen in the case of Congress. Media coverage of Congress is not responsible for the low approval ratings but must apparently shoulder an important share of the responsibility for stirring up the poisoned mood, the emotional caldron of bad feelings swirling in so many people these days. And, we would argue, it is these negative feelings toward Congress that are at the core of the modern public mood. Disapproval of Congress is much less novel than the wild-eyed anger and palpable hostility citizens direct at Congress so frequently these days.

These negative emotional reactions as well as the low approval ratings are generally confined to the members of Congress. If people can be made to think of Congress as an institution rather than a collection of 535 squabbling, fallible humans, approval soars. Eighty-eight percent of all respondents approve of Congress as an institution whereas only 24 percent approve of Congress as a collection of members. People make a distinction between Congress as a set

of buildings and historical traditions on the one hand and Congress as a cadre of politicians on the other. Today we hear too much loose talk about public negativity toward Congress when the truth is that people like parts of Congress (their own member; the institution) and dislike others (congressional leaders; members generally).

We have attempted in this brief article to clear up some of the confusion surrounding the extent to which the media have caused the negative public attitude toward Congress about which we hear so much these days. Our analyses demonstrate that the media are partially responsible for negative emotional reactions to members of Congress. But we also find that:

- (1) the public is favorable toward aspects of Congress;
- (2) the public has never been particularly favorable toward Congress; and
- (3) evidence of the media causing disapproval is lacking.

This situation leads us to conclude with a plea to be more discriminating in associating the media with negative public attitudes toward Congress. Members of Congress and close observers alike are fond of giving the impression that if Congress could just get a better public relations agent, everything would be right with the world. We have argued elsewhere that the problem is deeper than this. We wish the media would treat Congress in a more responsible fashion, but at the same time we believe the root explanation for public negativity is that people have not been taught to appreciate the messiness of democracy. If they were, people could better put the media's coverage of Congress into perspective.

It is undeniable that the media play up scandals and play down issues, and this hurts Congress. But setting this aside, the public reacts negatively to the way members of Congress do their job as well. This is not the fault of the media; it is the fault of the people. It is the people who ignore the fact that they disagree with each other on almost every major policy issue. Survey results from reputable polling agencies during early 1996 indicate that on many key issues the public could hardly be more divided. On the issue of flag burning, 51 percent supported a constitutional

amendment and 48 percent said no; on the issue of balancing the budget, 45 percent supported Clinton's plan and 42 percent supported the Republican plan; on the related issue of cutting social programs, 45 percent feared the country would go too far in cutting while an identical 45 percent felt the danger was that we would not cut far enough. The list could be extended to other issues but there is no need. Americans disagree deeply with each other.

Yet Americans expect elected officials to represent this divided public opinion by never disagreeing with other elected officials. Every time politicians lock horns, the public cries out about the evils of gridlock and about the pointless bickering of partisan politicians. Every time politicians attempt to compromise to manufacture some solution from diverse popular sentiments, the public becomes apoplectic about deal-making and selling out on principles. The people somehow believe that real leaders do not debate and real leaders do not compromise. This belief, of course, could not be further from the truth. Real leadership in a democracy is nothing without reasoned debate and sensible compromise. Without these things, we know from Arrow's Theorem and common sense that solutions in a divided polity are unlikely to be in the offing.

Given that the people are split down the middle and that politicians are supposed to reflect the beliefs of the people, how can they be expected to reach an agreement without debate and compromise? The people have unrealistic expectations about democratic procedures, and politicians and the educational curriculum are primarily to blame. To remove Congress from the unhealthy swamp of public negativity, members of Congress must quit promising that they can achieve substantial changes without compromising, and students must be taught that when they see Congress debating and compromising, this is not evil; this is democracy. As tempting as it might be to hold up the media as the sole source of public negativity toward Congress, it is also quite wrong. At the same time, it would certainly be welcome if the media would assist in the process of reeducating citizens about the nature of democratic procedures in a divided society. We disagree with traditional media critics in the following regard: the usual complaint is that the media need to emphasize issues more and

"horse races" less; our complaint is that the media do not do enough to show people that disagreements in a democracy such as ours are a natural course of events and that the difficult, ugly process of working through these disagreements is not a sign that something has gone wrong with the system but rather is a sign that something has gone right.

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Media and Democracy

Ronald Berkman and Laura Kitch

In this selection, political scientist Ronald Berkman and sociologist Laura Kitch examine the role that the media, particularly television, have played in American democratic processes. Historically, they note, information was derived at the local level. As society grew more complex newspapers and, subsequently, television became the citizenry's major informational sources. The early dominance of newspapers contributed to inequality in public access to information, because newspapers were not available universally and illiteracy was widespread. Consequently, information tended to trickle down through American society, with considerable reliance on interpretive elites. Arguably, the widespread accessibility of television would bring about a more equitable source of public information but, Berkman and Kitch assert, this has not occurred.

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The authors picture a reality in which media conglomerates dominate the marketplace of ideas, public access to the media is quite limited, and people serve primarily as receivers of the media's message. The passive television medium requires little of its viewers who, for the most part, treat information as background noise. The media public is characterized as bored, apathetic, and unlikely to evaluate critically the content of media messages. Cynicism and confusion reign in a manipulable citizenry. While television can manipulate, it is also manipulable as well, responding largely to those forces favoring the status quo.

Berkman and Kitch argue that the political impact of the media can be seen in many ways, most broadly in fostering changes in campaigns and elections that have trivialized political dialogue while reducing the role of political parties as viable linkages between the citizenry and politics. With parties no longer capable of building policy consensus, the media often become the means through which government governs. The consequences of this include weakened public links to democratic processes (evidenced in low voting turnout) and fragmented interest-group politics. Policy development occurs in a media environment favoring the advantaged and the authors conclude ominously that the media serve as censors in American politics with respect to the ideas, groups, and policies receiving public attention.

POLITICAL INFORMATION AND DEMOCRACY

Information is the fuel of democracy. In a society in which citizens are expected to participate in political decision making, it is essential. Without the availability of reliable, objective, and politically diverse information, citizens are without the raw material needed to exercise their political franchise intelligently. While good information will not, in and of itself, guarantee a healthy democracy, it represents an important step in that direction.

The difficulty of providing citizens with the information necessary to promote effective participation was never squarely faced by the early democrats.

Jefferson, for example, put great faith in local institutions as a means for fostering dialogue and participation. In part, this faith was justified because America was largely an agrarian society, composed of thousands of small hamlets and villages, each with a local government. . . . But as America grew more industrialized and urban, many fewer citizens directly participated in local political activities. If they wanted to acquire political information, they had to find alternative sources.

In the past, the most widely available source for political information was newspapers. Even while town hall democracy flourished, newspapers were regarded as the means for citizens to learn about national and international issues, which were unlikely to be debated at town meetings. Early democrats regarded newspapers as a panacea for the defects of democracy. This faith is reflected in Jefferson's very strong stance in favor of press freedom and in the constitutional protections afforded the press. But newspapers were not available in many parts of the country, and many citizens were simply not able to read. While newspapers provided a direct source of information for the educated classes, the majority of the population had to depend on a "trickle down" effect for their information and news. At the time, politics was much more of a local grassroots activity than it is today, and there were a variety of opinion leaders who acted as conduits for political information. Consequently, there was a means for the citizen who could not read to acquire information. Despite this flow of information, the direct access and control of information enjoyed by the governing classes became an important tool for maintaining political power.

With the growth of the newspaper industry and the birth of the mass circulation newspaper, information became more widely available, but the innovations which held the promise of eliminating the inequality of access were radio and television. Soon after its invention, radio became an affordable commodity, and millions of Americans purchased radio sets. With the invention and subsequent mass production of television, the means to close the information gap, to democratize the dissemination of information, seemed available.

The early democrats' faith in the ability of newspapers, was matched by the faith of those who heralded the electronic media as a means to revitalize the democratic process. At first, while newspapers, radio, and television were essentially local enterprises, there seemed reason for optimism. Decentralized ownership provided opportunities for greater and more diverse participation. However, local ownership and control of both electronic and print media had a rather short life span. Radio and television were quickly consolidated into the hands of a few giant corporations. Newspaper chains extended their empires. Media conglomerates, involved in all aspects of the production and dissemination of printed and electronic entertainment and news, became the growth industries of the sixties and the seventies. Today, the ownership of virtually all mass media is vested in fifty giant corporations.

The political consequences of this centralized control are far-reaching. Several giant news organizations influence the portraits of reality that appear in all the national media. Another result of this consolidation has been a substantial change in the ratio of givers of opinions to receivers of opinions. . . . The opportunities for access to the mass media are limited, and the costs are prohibitively high. The mass media have become the center of political action, but only a select number of groups and individuals are able to participate. The remainder of the population is confined to the role of receivers of information. It is impossible to have a political dialogue with television, radio, or newspapers.

THE POLITICS OF CONFUSION

It is not that there is any lack of political information being sent through the mass media. Although television began as an entertainment medium, it has, over the years, become increasingly political. In the last five years, the amount of programming devoted to news has vastly increased. On the average, an affiliate television station will air 100 minutes of national news (minus commercials) and somewhere between 65 and 240 minutes of local news. This increase is not the result of any hunger for news in the general population. In fact, the majority of Americans seem

to have a limited interest in politics. There is more news on television because news has turned out to be a profitable enterprise, more profitable than a lot of entertainment programs.

If the sheer quantity of news produced greater competency in the citizenry, we would have a society of political masters. Yet, just the opposite is occurring. There has certainly been no significant increase in voting since television began delivering increasing quantities of news into American households. There is little evidence to support the claim that Americans are better informed politically than they were immediately before the advent of television news. In fact, the evidence seems to point in the other direction; political knowledge and interest seem to be continually declining. Of course, all the blame for limited participation cannot be laid at the door of the media. Television news may have actually created greater participation among some segments of the population. Black political participation may have been heightened by the attention given to the Civil Rights Movement during the sixties and seventies. And there is an increasing body of evidence which shows that television has had a significant impact on citizens' knowledge of, and attitudes toward, politics.

Television may not have created a better-informed public, but it has certainly created certain political effects in the viewing public. . . . Television is essentially a passive medium. It requires less involvement than reading a newspaper. Because there is less effort involved in receiving and processing the message—a message which is dominated by visual symbols—there is less of a sustained reaction to the message being transmitted.

Unless news is directly perceived as signaling a potential or actual personal threat, most people accept such information in the same manner as they accept the sounds of music they like. News is sensed rather than appreciated or analyzed. News has become so much background stuff.

The continual use of a set of standard stereotypes further limits the involvement of the viewer. Many viewers eventually become bored and apathetic. Few take the time to evaluate critically the content of the messages. The very low level of involvement in the