

# The Responsible Party Government Model in House and Senate Elections

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*Responsible party government theory requires that voters hold parties electorally accountable for their performance in control of government. Existing literature suggests that voters do this only to a limited extent—holding the presidential party's candidates responsible for government performance on Election Day. While this method of voting may hold the executive accountable for his performance, it is not really an effective way to hold the party in control of Congress accountable for its performance. The method falls short particularly when Congress is controlled by a different party than the president, but also whenever a Congress controlled by the same party pursues policies different from the president's. Using surveys of voters leaving the polls in the 1990, 1994, and 1998 midterm congressional elections, this study tests whether voters' evaluations of Congress's job performance also affect their support for majority party candidates in House and Senate elections, during both unified and divided government.*

In the normative theory of responsible party government, elections are mechanisms crucial to enforcing party responsibility. According to Austin Ranney's classic work, *The Doctrine of Responsible Party Government*, "party government in its ideal form" should work such that when a party has been in power, "at the next election the people decide whether they approve of the general direction the party in power has been taking—in short, whether their wants are being satisfied. If the answer is yes, they return that party to power; if the answer is no, they replace it with the opposition party" (1954, 12).<sup>1</sup> If voters behave along these lines, members of the party in power have more of an incentive to cooperate in order to accomplish collective policy goals. If voters cannot or do not hold the party in power accountable, then individuals in government are likely to feel freer to act in ways that serve only their own narrow goals—goals that may come at the expense of the collective good (Mayhew 1974).

Scholars have argued that two key features of the American system of government make it difficult for voters to hold the ruling parties in our government responsible (Cutler 1988; Fiorina 1996, 109–11; Sundquist 1988). While it can be relatively easy to do so when party control of government is unified and when parties are cohesive, our system does not guarantee either of these two conditions. During divided government voters who are unhappy with the policy achievements of government will have difficulty deciding which party to reject: the party in control of Congress or the party in control of the White House. In addition—since Mayhew (1991) finds that legislative achievements can be just as common during divided government as unified—voters who agree with the policies enacted or results achieved by divided government will have difficulty deciding which party to embrace.<sup>2</sup> Since parties are not always cohesive, even unified government presents potential problems for voters.

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<sup>1</sup>We view this description as largely consistent with the performance evaluation measures discussed in the literature review and used in the subsequent analysis. For a review of the literature on party government, see Sundquist (1988).

<sup>2</sup>For example, consider a voter in 1998 who is pleased with financial conditions or who supports the balanced budget agreement reached between the Democratic president and the Republican Congress.

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Deciding whether or not to vote for candidates from a particular party becomes more difficult if you are happy with that party's actions in one branch, but not in the other branch.

Given that the institutional features of American government do not meet the classic ideals of the responsible party government model, are individual voters still capable of holding the ruling party in each branch of government independently responsible? To the extent that there is any evidence of individuals following the responsible party model in elections, the literature suggests that the public holds the president accountable for his record as the nation's chief executive—either through votes for or against his reelection, votes for or against his party's nominee for president, or even by votes for or against his party's candidates for the House of Representatives (e.g., Fiorina 1981). In contrast, there has been very little empirical analysis of whether individuals hold the majority party in Congress electorally responsible for its record while in control of the legislative branch. Certainly there are national partisan tides that affect congressional elections. But it is not entirely clear whether, or to what extent, these tides reflect voters' reactions to the performance of Congress independent of the president. The dominant view appears to be that voters generally do not take the record of the legislative branch into consideration when voting for Congress (e.g., Mayhew 1974; Stokes and Miller 1962). However, other work suggests that the record of the majority party in Congress does, or at least should, matter to voters (Cox and McCubbins 1993).

Using exit poll data from House and Senate elections, this study empirically tests whether American voters do, in fact, hold the majority party in Congress responsible for the performance of the legislative branch, independent of the performance of the executive branch.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not an effect is found carries significant implications. If voters do not hold the majority party in Congress responsible for the performance of this institution, then there will be little incentive for members of the majority party in Congress to cooperate legislatively. Even worse, if congressional parties are not held responsible, the majority party may have an incentive to sabotage public policy during times of divided government since voters will blame the president, not the congressional majority (Mayhew 1974, 29–30).

<sup>3</sup>Another possibility is that voters may hold all incumbents responsible, regardless of party. But the literature is much more pessimistic about the likelihood that voters would assign responsibility for policy outcomes to individual legislators than to members of the party in power (see Arnold 1990, ch. 3). Accordingly, we find no evidence in our data to support the idea that incumbents in general are held responsible for congressional performance.

## The Congressional Majority Party as a Responsible Party

Key (1966) provides one of the first pieces of empirical evidence that voters in America hold political parties responsible for the actions of government. He finds that when voters make a decision in a presidential election, one of the major determinants in that decision is the ruling party's record during the past four years of governance. "Events, over which government may, or more likely may not, have control, shape the attitudes of voters to the advantage or disadvantage of the party in power" (1966, 9–10). In other words, voters judge the party in power according to how the country is faring and the direction in which it is heading, and then decide whether to return or replace that party on Election Day.

Since Key's time, extensive empirical research has been done supporting the idea that the public holds the governing party responsible—but mainly through evaluations of the performance of the executive branch. Performance of the party in power in the executive branch has even been found to affect congressional elections. For example, Fiorina (1981) demonstrates that when the president is perceived as performing well, voters are more likely to support House candidates from his party, but when the president is performing poorly, voters are less likely to support House candidates from the president's party.

While this research provides evidence that some version of responsible party government exists in America—one in which the party in power of the executive branch is judged by the performance of the executive—this focus on only one branch of government ignores the issue of separation of powers. In our nation's system of separated institutions, the performance of government is determined not only by the president, but also by Congress. Separate electoral mechanisms mean that the policy actions of the executive are not always the same as the policy actions of the legislature. For this reason, it will often be inappropriate, as well as ineffective, to attempt to hold accountable all of those responsible for the performance of government by voting for or against a party based solely on the president's performance. Not surprisingly, advocates of responsible parties frequently lament the American system of separately elected institutions in part because they feel it subverts the ability of voters to hold the parties responsible (Cutler 1988; Sundquist 1988). Their main concern is that with separately elected institutions, the same party does not always control both the legislative and executive branches; and that with both parties playing important roles in government, it may be difficult

for voters to ascertain who is responsible for government performance.

Scholars have also argued that even when party control of government is unified rather than divided, the performance of the president is not necessarily reflective of the performance of his party in Congress. This is because the president and his party in Congress do not always work together as a team, pursuing the same agenda. Members of the president's party in Congress may oppose the president's agenda and may even put forward their own initiatives (e.g., Cutler 1988, 488). In this case, the president's party in Congress may rightly bear less responsibility for some policy outcomes than the president, or vice versa. What is a voter in a congressional election to do when that voter supports the presidential party's performance in the White House but not their performance in Congress?

Arnold (1990) speculates that the solution to these problems would be for the voting public to hold the majority party in the House responsible for the actions of the House, the majority party in the Senate responsible for the actions of the Senate, and the president's party responsible for presidential action (42, fn 10). Citing previous literature, Arnold goes on to suggest that this is actually *not* the case, and that in practice it is really only the president's party that matters. However, other work suggests that voting behavior in congressional elections could bear some resemblance to Arnold's hypothetical model of a separation of responsibility.

Cox and McCubbins (1993) were among the first to argue that presidential (and economic) evaluations are not the only national factors that affect congressional elections. While they admit that presidential and economic evaluations may account for a large part of the partisan tides in congressional elections, they suggest that members of Congress and their legislative parties also have the potential to impact congressional elections. They can influence partisan voting not only indirectly by influencing presidential actions or outcomes, but also directly through legislative actions of their own. The actions of members of Congress impact the image of their party, and thereby the electoral fortunes of their party's candidates on Election Day.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, there has been scant empirical research regarding the possible connection between evaluations of Congress's job performance and voting for majority party candidates in congressional elections. The empirical research on why voters approve (or disapprove) of

Congress's job performance is not dominated by any single variable, but is generally compatible with our belief that to a significant degree, approval of Congress represents an assessment of how the institution is being run by the majority party. Research finds that approval is more likely when citizens feel their financial situation has improved (Rudolph 2002). People are more likely to approve when they feel that Congress is acting in ways that represent the interests of people like them and when they feel that Congress is operating in a reasonably efficient manner (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). People are more likely to approve when the majority party in Congress is compatible with their own party identification (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Kimball and Patterson 1997; Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan 1992) and when the majority party seems closer to their own ideological views (Jones and McDermott 2002).<sup>5</sup> Approval is less likely when the House Speaker—a top majority party official—is involved in a scandal (Rudolph 2002). Finally, since some of these studies control for the impact of presidential approval (Kimball and Patterson 1997; Jones and McDermott 2002), we also know that assessments of Congress are not merely a function of attitudes toward the president, but are, to a significant degree, formed independently. This is encouraging, since a perfect correlation between these variables would preclude any unique effect of congressional approval on voting.

As for electoral effects, McDermott and Jones (2003) look at pooled data on House elections from 1980 to 2000 and find that attitudes toward Congress's job performance do affect whether self-reported voters support or oppose House majority party candidates, while Hibbing and Tiritilli (2000) find that in most years congressional approval has no significant effect on House elections. However, both of these studies are based on postelection surveys rather than surveys of actual voters on Election Day (see data section for a discussion of the pros and cons of the use of Election Day surveys rather than post-election surveys), and both look exclusively at House elections. To our knowledge, no research has been done on the effect of evaluations of Congress in Senate elections, and certainly no comparison of such effects between House and Senate elections.

<sup>4</sup>Cox and McCubbins provide persuasive evidence that there is a common element in the electoral fates of congressional candidates from the same party, even controlling for economic evaluations and presidential performance (1993, 122, fn 11). They do not, however, directly test the effect of congressional performance evaluations.

<sup>5</sup>This is not to say that evaluations of Congress are exactly the same as evaluations of the majority party. For example, it is theoretically possible that a Democratic voter might actually approve of Congress when it is *not* accomplishing what a Republican majority party wants. But even in this case, we would expect such a "status quo tolerant" voter to be relatively more likely to accept "harmless" Republican candidates than a voter who actually disapproved of Congress because it wasted a session trying in vain to enact this unwanted agenda (rather than the voter's preferred agenda).

This study is an attempt to fill this gap in the literature on how voters hold government responsible. It analyzes the effect of actual voters' evaluations of congressional performance in both House and Senate races in a variety of political contexts, comparing effects between the two types of races.

The existing literature on House and Senate elections provides no clear basis for predicting whether evaluations of Congress will have more of an effect in Senate elections or House elections. On the one hand, some studies suggest that because of the higher information nature of statewide races for Senate—relative to more localized House races—voters may use different criteria when making up their minds in a Senate race than in a House race. If voting on the basis of a party's performance is considered a shortcut for voters who do not have much political information (e.g., see Key 1966), then we might expect that its impact would be greater in House elections, where information tends to be less readily available, than in Senate elections, where information tends to be more readily available. Contrary to this, however, Hibbing and Alford (1982) find that economic performance has a larger effect on Senate elections than in House elections. Abramowitz and Segal (1990) find similar results for economic performance in the 1988 elections, but they find the opposite effect for presidential performance—it matters in House elections, but not Senate elections. Finally, Gronke's (2000) work suggests that there may actually be no difference at all between the effects in House and Senate elections, as voters' decision-making processes are strikingly similar across both election types. Given the differences in the literature and since none of these works looks at congressional evaluations in particular, we do not have a specific prediction about whether the effects of congressional performance evaluations will be greater or smaller in the Senate than in the House. We do hypothesize, however, that evaluations of Congress will play at least some role in both types of elections.

We set out to test empirically the notion that to a significant degree voters view the majority party as responsible for the record of Congress, and therefore their evaluations of Congress's performance affect their voting in both House and Senate elections, above and beyond the effects of presidential evaluations. Specifically, this modified version of the responsible parties model suggests that regardless of whether government is unified or divided, voters who approve of the job Congress is doing will be more likely to support majority party candidates for both the House and the Senate, thereby giving that party credit for congressional performance. Voters who disapprove of the job Congress is doing will be less likely to support majority party candidates for the House and Senate, thereby

holding the majority party responsible for what they judge a disappointing congressional performance.

## Data and Method

To analyze voting behavior in congressional elections we use national exit poll data from House and Senate general elections in 1998, 1994, and 1990—every election in which voters exiting the polls were asked their opinion of the overall job performance of Congress.<sup>6</sup> Included in these three elections are instances of both unified and divided government. Two of the Congresses occur during divided party control of the legislative and executive branches of government—one with a Democratic House and Senate and a Republican president (Bush 1990) and one with a Republican House and Senate and a Democratic president (Clinton 1998). The third election occurs during unified party control of government (Democrats 1994).

The use of exit poll data is not common in academic research, perhaps because of the limited nature of the surveys in any given year. Our choice of these data has both advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage of exit polls, relative to other surveys such as the ANES, is that they interview actual voters as they leave the polling places on Election Day. This provides three advantages over nonexit poll data. First, in an exit poll there is no doubt that the respondent is actually a voter.<sup>7</sup> Second, there is less reason to believe that a respondent to an exit poll would have trouble remembering how they voted in that particular election. Third, it is impossible for a respondent's representation of his or her vote to be biased in favor of the actual election outcome in an exit poll.<sup>8</sup> The advantages of exit poll data over ANES data are evident empirically when one compares their accuracy in predicting a known population parameter: the actual vote. In the six elections analyzed here (House and Senate in 1990, 1994, 1998), the exit poll surveys always come within two percentage points of the actual aggregate two-party

<sup>6</sup>Produced by Voter News Service (1994, 1998) and Voter Research and Surveys (1990). Distributed by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. Data are based on interviews with a probability sample of voters exiting polling places around the country on Election Day.

<sup>7</sup>For an analysis of survey respondents' tendency to overreport their participation see Silver, Anderson, and Abramson (1986). While ANES once regularly conducted postelection vote validation on their survey respondents, only one of the three elections included here was vote validated by ANES (1990).

<sup>8</sup>For an analysis of voters' misrepresentations of their actual vote choices see, for example, Atkeson (1999), Box-Steffensmeier, Jacobson, and Grant (2000), and Wright (1993).

vote (avg. House error = 0.7, Senate = 1.3). The ANES surveys, on the other hand, are more than four points off the actual two-party vote in half the elections (avg. House error = 3.9; Senate = 4.7).

The key disadvantage of the national exit polls is the limited nature of the questionnaires. One consequence is that sometimes certain questions are not asked. For example, in the twenty-plus years in which national exit polls have been conducted, respondents have been asked whether they approve of Congress's job performance only three times. This limits our analysis in this article to the effects of congressional performance in these three midterm elections.<sup>9</sup> Another consequence is that the number of answer alternatives for each closed-ended question is sometimes more limited than in longer surveys. For example, party identification is generally measured on a three-point scale, not seven (used by ANES). Overall, however, when it comes to analyzing actual voting behavior we believe the advantages offered by the exit polls outweigh these disadvantages.<sup>10</sup>

Using logistic regression, we test whether attitudes about congressional job performance affect voting behavior in both House and Senate elections.<sup>11</sup> The dependent variable in each model is a dichotomous vote choice equal to 1 for respondents who voted for the majority party candidate, and equal to 0 for respondents who voted for the minority party candidate. The key independent variable is a dichotomous measure of congressional job approval that equals 1 for those who approve of the job Congress is doing

and 0 for those who disapprove of congressional job performance. If voters do hold the majority party in Congress responsible for the overall performance of Congress, then the congressional approval variable should have a positive and significant effect on voting for the majority party candidate in both House and Senate races. In other words, voters who approve of the job Congress is doing should be more likely to vote for the majority party candidate in their district or state, while those who disapprove of congressional performance should be more likely to vote for the minority party candidate.

To control for presidential approval we use a similar dichotomous approval variable equal to 1 for those who approve of the job the president is doing and 0 for those who do not. In years of divided government control we expect the variable to have significantly negative effects on voting for the majority party congressional candidate, as those who approve of the job the president is doing would want to reward the president's party rather than the congressional majority party. In years of unified control, however, we expect the variable to have positive effects, indicating that those voters who approve of the job the president is doing are positively disposed toward his party's congressional candidates.

As control variables, we also include in our model other factors that have been shown to affect voting behavior in congressional elections.<sup>12</sup> To control for the effects of party identification we employ a variable coded 1 for voters whose self-reported party identification matches the majority party candidate (Republicans in 1998; Democrats in 1990 and 1994), 0 for Independents, and -1 for voters whose party is the opposite of the majority party candidate (Democrats in 1998; Republicans in 1990 and 1994).<sup>13</sup> Since Republican candidates are generally more conservative than their Democratic opponents, we control for voters' ideological leanings in a similar way. In years when the majority party candidate is a Republican, conservative voters are coded 1, moderates 0, and liberals -1. In years when the majority party candidate is a Democrat, the coding is reversed (liberals 1, moderates 0, and conservatives -1). Both the party and ideological variables are coded such that we expect their coefficients to always be significantly positive, indicating

<sup>9</sup>There is, however, reason to believe that this article's findings also hold in presidential election years. VNS did ask a somewhat similar question in 1996 (approval of the "Republicans in Congress"). Analysis of those data provides very similar results to the analyses here, as discussed briefly below.

<sup>10</sup>Our belief that these disadvantages of exit poll data are minimal was bolstered by additional tests of our model using ANES data. The results, reported in the appendix, found that the few additional model specifications that are possible with ANES data do not alter the basic findings. Therefore, we opted for the greater empirical accuracy of exit poll data.

<sup>11</sup>If any of the years in question had split party control of Congress, we would not be able to test the hypothesis without separate measures of approval for the House and the Senate—questions which are rarely asked in national commercial or academic polls and to our knowledge have never been included in national exit polls or the ANES. Because all of the years used here have single-party congressional control we are able to use the general congressional approval measure for both House and Senate elections. If separate measures did exist, it is likely that they would be highly correlated in the standard case of single party control of Congress. To the extent that voters might evaluate the performance of each chamber differently, we would expect that the effects of a chamber-specific variable would be even stronger than the effects for the general congressional approval variable tested here.

<sup>12</sup>One variable that we tested but do not include in the final model is education. We were particularly interested in whether a voter's educational level conditions the effects of congressional approval. However, our analysis did not reveal any significant pattern of conditioning effects or any independent effects.

<sup>13</sup>We also tested whether a voter's partisanship conditions the effect of congressional approval, but found no significant pattern of effects.

that partisan and ideological compatibility with the majority party candidate increases the likelihood of voting for this candidate.<sup>14</sup>

The model controls for candidate characteristics as well. We control for the effects of incumbency using a variable coded 1 when the majority party candidate is an incumbent, 0 when neither candidate is an incumbent (open seat), and  $-1$  when the minority party candidate is the incumbent.<sup>15</sup> We expect the direction of the coefficient to be positive, indicating that voter support for the majority party candidate is more likely when that candidate is an incumbent and less likely when the opponent is an incumbent. The literature on candidate quality suggests that candidates who have held elected office are at a comparative electoral advantage over those who have not (Jacobson and Kernell 1983). In every estimation except the 1994 House,<sup>16</sup> we are able to control for the relative difference in the quality of the two candidates facing a voter using a variable coded 1 when only the majority party candidate has held elected office, 0 when both candidates (or neither) have held elected office, and  $-1$  when only the minority party candidate has held elected office. We expect the coefficient for this variable to be positive, indicating that voters are more likely to support candidates with political experience.

Finally, the model controls for whether the financial situation of the voter's family has gotten better (1), stayed the same (0), or gotten worse ( $-1$ ) over the past two years.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Further tests suggest that accounting for variation in the strength of party identification and ideology in the model does not substantially alter the results (see Appendix).

<sup>15</sup>Results are similar if the model uses separate dummy variables for Democratic and Republican incumbents instead of this combined variable. These exit polls do not measure voters' approval of their incumbent, but further tests suggest the presence or absence of this additional variable does not substantially affect the results (see Appendix).

<sup>16</sup>VNS does not provide House district codes in 1994. We thank Gary Jacobson for providing data on House candidate experience. Data on Senate candidates was compiled by the authors from various issues of *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* and the *Almanac of American Politics*. For purposes of consistency, the standard used in Senate elections is the same as in House elections: any previous elected office. For a discussion of alternative measures of Senate candidate quality, see Squire and Smith (1996).

<sup>17</sup>On the greater relevance of personal finances to congressional evaluations see Rudolph (2002). Nevertheless, results are similar if the model uses voters' evaluations of the national economy instead. Because the two items are highly correlated ( $r = .31$ , the highest of any bivariate correlation among model variables), including both measures leads to collinearity problems in the model, while excluding either one of the two produces only a minimal loss of information.

## Findings

We first test the effects of congressional approval on voting for majority party candidates to the U.S. House of Representatives. Table 1 contains the House model for all three years in the analysis. In each year, the first column presents the coefficients for each variable, while the second column uses these coefficients to determine the "effect" of each variable on the probability of voting for the majority party candidate. The effect is calculated as the difference in the probability of a majority party vote from an otherwise average voter (all other variables held constant at their mean) at the highest value of the variable compared to an otherwise average voter at the lowest value of the variable.

The standard party responsibility model found in the literature suggests that when things are going well in the country, candidates from the president's party will get an electoral boost. This is indeed what we find when we look at presidential approval. Approving of the president's performance boosts support for the House majority party candidate when the House majority party is the same as the president's party (positive coefficient in unified government, 1994), but hurts the House majority party candidate when the House majority party is not the same as the president's party (negative coefficient in divided governments, 1990, 1998). Evaluations of one's financial situation also follow this familiar pattern, with positive effects during unified government and negative effects during divided government. Regardless of which party controls the House, candidates from the administration's party benefit from positive evaluations of both the president and one's financial situation.

These effects are not the only responsible party effects, however. This article's hypothesis, that opinions of congressional job performance affect voting for congressional candidates, also receives strong support. In all three years in the analysis, among three different governmental configurations, voters' attitudes toward Congress's job performance significantly affect voters' willingness to support majority party candidates. Specifically, the positive coefficients indicate that voters who approve of Congress are more likely to vote for majority party House candidates, and (more often) those who disapprove of Congress are less likely to vote for majority party House candidates. These results demonstrate that voters can and do separate government performance and responsibility by party and branch, even during unified government when one party is in control of both branches. The hypothesized effects hold true even while controlling for a voter's party identification and ideology, as well as for

**TABLE 1 Congressional Approval and Voting for Majority Party Candidates in House Elections**

Variables	Divided Government				Unified Government	
	1998 Republican Majority		1990 Democratic Majority		1994 Democratic Majority	
	Coefficient (s.e.)	Effect	Coefficient (s.e.)	Effect	Coefficient (s.e.)	Effect
Congressional approval	.593** (.109)	+.15	.303** (.072)	+.07	.332* (.136)	+.08
Presidential approval	-1.733** (.112)	-.41	-.738** (.061)	-.18	1.796** (.102)	+.41
Financial situation	-.163* (.079)	-.08	-.087* (.038)	-.04	.162* (.070)	+.08
Party identification	1.736** (.071)	+.70	.918** (.036)	+.42	1.572** (.065)	+.64
Ideology	.582** (.086)	+.28	.448** (.041)	+.22	.533** (.075)	+.26
Incumbency	.554** (.102)	+.27	.409** (.064)	+.20	.549** (.054)	+.26
Candidate quality difference	.101 (.108)	+.05	.147* (.068)	+.07		
Constant	.757** (.100)		.509** (.047)		-1.218** (.075)	
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.706		.352		.669	
$\chi^2$	2861**		2236**		2946**	
N	3794		7300		4238	

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .001 (all tests one-tailed).

Source: Voter News Service General Election Exit Polls (1998, 1994); Voter Research and Surveys General Election Exit Poll: National File (1990).

incumbency status and candidate quality—all of which generally behave as expected. Looking at the estimated probabilistic effects of the variables (reported in the second column of each year), we see that the effect of congressional approval is substantial. For example, in 1998, attitudes toward congressional job performance had an estimated 15-point impact on a voter's probability of voting for the majority party House candidate. While not as large as the effects of variables such as party identification or presidential approval, it is generally at least as large or larger than the effect of other key variables such as financial situation and candidate quality.

How does the impact of congressional performance evaluations in Senate elections compare to their impact in House elections? The results in Table 2 demonstrate that even though Senate elections are generally higher information settings, evaluations of Congress affect individual voting behavior in Senate elections much the same way they do in House elections. Regardless of party control in government, approval of Congress increases the likeli-

hood of voting for the majority party candidate for Senate, while disapproval of Congress decreases the likelihood of voting for the majority party candidate for Senate.

Table 3 helps to facilitate comparison of the effects of congressional evaluations both across chambers and across government types. For each of the six estimations in Tables 1 and 2, we report the predicted probability of voting for the majority party candidate among those who approve of Congress, those who disapprove, and the difference in these two probabilities ("effect"). Row 1 displays the effects found in House elections. Row 2 displays the effects found in Senate elections. A comparison of the data between the two rows reveals that there is very little difference in the effect of congressional approval in House races as opposed to Senate races. The effect is slightly larger in the House in the 1998 and 1994 elections, but is slightly larger in the Senate in the 1990 election. The last column reveals the average effect during the three House elections is .10, while the average effect during the three Senate elections is almost identical at .09.

TABLE 2 Congressional Approval and Voting for Majority Party Candidates in Senate Elections

Variables	Divided Government				Unified Government	
	1998		1990		1994	
	Republican Majority		Democratic Majority		Democratic Majority	
	Coefficient (s.e.)	Effect	Coefficient (s.e.)	Effect	Coefficient (s.e.)	Effect
Congressional approval	.438** (.094)	+11	.453** (.095)	+11	.236* (.132)	+0.6
Presidential approval	-1.460** (.101)	-.35	-1.125** (.081)	-.27	1.747** (.105)	+41
Financial situation	-.244** (.069)	-.12	-.109* (.051)	-.05	.154* (.070)	+0.8
Party identification	1.136** (.060)	+51	1.012** (.049)	+47	1.161** (.065)	+52
Ideology	.496** (.075)	+24	.519** (.055)	+25	.553** (.075)	+27
Incumbency	.393** (.063)	+19	.536** (.047)	+26	.370** (.078)	+18
Candidate quality difference	.373** (.106)	+18	-.061 (.087)	-.03	.184* (.091)	+0.9
Constant	.576** (.090)		.541** (.063)		-1.152** (.080)	
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.560		.406		.582	
$\chi^2$	2001**		1528**		2003**	
N	3670		4215		3498	

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .001 (all tests one-tailed).

Source: Voter News Service General Election Exit Polls (1998, 1994); Voter Research and Surveys General Election Exit Poll: National File (1990).

In other words, on average, judgments of congressional performance can impact a voter's probability of voting for majority party House and Senate candidates by 10 points and nine points, respectively. For voters who are not firmly decided—the ones who often determine which candidates win and which lose—the effect of this variable can be more than enough to tip the balance between supporting or opposing the majority party candidate.

The table shows slightly more variation across election years than across chambers. Looking across the bottom row in the table, the smallest average effect of congressional approval is in 1994, during a period of unified Democratic government. The largest average effect is in 1998 during divided government with a Republican Congress. However, Chow tests suggest that these differences are not of sufficient magnitude to make any definitive claims. Specifically, the effect of congressional approval in Senate races is not statistically significantly different in any one year compared to any other year. In House races, the only statistically significant difference in

the effect of congressional approval is that the effect is larger in 1998 than in 1990 (but not significantly larger than in 1994). This difference could be a product of the unusually salient partisan battle over impeachment in the House in 1998, but it is impossible to be sure.

It is worth noting that since the effects of congressional evaluations are independent of the effects of presidential evaluations, the partisan effect of congressional evaluations can sometimes offset and sometimes exacerbate the partisan effect of presidential evaluations on House and Senate elections. For example, it is well known that voters in midterm elections take out any frustrations they may have with the president on congressional candidates from the president's party. According to probability transformations from the coefficients in Table 1, during unified government in 1994 the effect of disapproval of Democratic President Clinton on the otherwise average voter was to decrease the probability of voting for the Democratic House candidate by 20 points. However, if this voter disapproved of the Democratic president *and*

**TABLE 3** Effect of Congressional Evaluations on the Probability of Voting for a Majority Party Candidate in Congressional Elections

	Divided Government						Unified Government			
	1998			1990			1994			
	Republican Majority			Democratic Majority			Democratic Majority			
	Approve	Disap.	Effect	Approve	Disap.	Effect	Approve	Disap.	Effect	Average Effect
House	.60	.45	+.15	.59	.52	+.07	.48	.40	+.08	+.10
Senate	.58	.47	+.11	.58	.47	+.11	.48	.42	+.06	+.09
Average effect			+.13			+.09			+.07	+.10

Note: Entries represent the probabilities of voting for the majority party candidate as affected by attitudes toward Congress, based on coefficients from Tables 1 and 2 with all other variables set at their mean value. "Effect" is the difference in the probability of voting for the majority party candidate when one approves of Congress versus when one disapproves.

disapproved of the Democratic Congress, the probability of voting for the Democratic House candidate would decrease by 23 points rather than 20 points, further exacerbating the negative effect of presidential disapproval. In contrast, if this voter disapproved of the Democratic president but *approved* of the Democratic Congress, the probability of voting for the Democratic House candidate would decrease by only 17 points rather than 20 points, partially offsetting the negative effect of presidential disapproval.<sup>18</sup>

The opposite effects occur under divided government: similar evaluations of a Congress controlled by one party and a president from another party serve to partially *offset* one another's partisan effects, while differing attitudes toward these two referents *enhance* one another's partisan effects. For example, during divided government in 1998 the effect of disapproval of President Clinton on the otherwise average voter was again to decrease the probability of voting for the Democratic House candidate by 19 points. However, if this voter disapproved of the Democratic president *and* disapproved of the Republican Congress, the probability of voting for the Democratic House candidate would decrease by only 13 points rather than 19 points, partially offsetting the negative partisan effect of presidential disapproval. In contrast, if this voter disapproved of the Democratic president but *approved* of the Republican Congress (attitudes which would be consistently partisan under divided government), the proba-

bility of voting for the Democratic House candidate would decrease by 25 points rather than 19 points, enhancing the negative partisan effect of presidential disapproval.<sup>19</sup>

As these probabilities demonstrate, the effects of congressional job performance serve to either exacerbate or partially mitigate the effects of presidential approval, depending on control of government and the combination of attitudes of the voters toward the president and Congress.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that, as hypothesized, voters in both House and Senate elections base their voting decisions to a significant degree on the performance of the legislative branch. Voters who approve of the performance of Congress are more likely to support majority party candidates in both House and Senate races, while those who disapprove are less likely to support majority party candidates in these contests. These effects are significant above and beyond the effects of presidential evaluations, even when the party controlling Congress and the presidency are the same.

Finally, while the data in this study focus on midterm elections, we believe that the theory could also apply to congressional elections in presidential years. Though VRS/VNS chose to ask the congressional approval question only in midterm elections, its 1996 national exit poll asked voters whether they approved or disapproved of the performance of the "Republicans in Congress" over the

<sup>18</sup>"Offsetting" opinion combinations are generally not as likely as "enhancing" ones, but they do occur with some regularity. In 1994, 37% of voters approved of the performance of one branch but not the other (33% president only, 4% Congress only), even though both branches were controlled by Democrats. Of the three partisan camps (Dem., Ind., and Rep.), Democrats were most likely to have offsetting opinions (usually approving of the president but not Congress).

<sup>19</sup>During divided government in 1998, 37% of voters felt the same way about the Republican Congress as they did about the Democratic president (18% approve both; 19% disapprove both). Of the three partisan camps (Dem., Ind., and Rep.), Democrats were the most likely to approve of both branches; Republicans were the most likely to disapprove of both. In 1990, 50% felt the same way about the Democratic Congress as they did about the Republican president (14% approve both; 36% disapprove both). Republicans were the most likely to approve of both; Democrats were the most likely to disapprove of both.

previous two years. Though not directly comparable to our results because of the slightly different nature of the question, the pattern of results in that presidential year is strikingly similar to the pattern found during these three midterm elections—significant and positive effects of the congressional approval measure in both House and Senate elections (results available by request).

## Discussion

These findings carry important implications for theories of legislative behavior and representation, as well as the literature on voting behavior. Existing literature on responsible party government suggests it is nearly impossible for the public to hold government responsible through party voting when party control of government is divided or when the majority party in Congress does not follow in lock-step with a president from their own party. One possible solution to this problem, as discussed by Arnold (1990), would be for voters to hold each institution responsible for its actions separately. This study finds that voters do in fact discriminate between the performance of the president and the performance of Congress when making their voting decisions.

If members of the majority party are held electorally accountable for their own record in office, then they have an incentive to act responsibly, regardless of whether government control is unified or divided (Cox and McCubbins 1993). Existing work laments that the only incentive members of the president's party have to act responsibly during unified government is the marginal effect that the president's approval ratings have on their electoral fates. This study's findings suggest a somewhat different story. First, when the president's agenda is popular with voters the majority party in Congress actually has two potential reasons to cooperate legislatively: not only might majority party members benefit from making the president seem effective, but also from making themselves seem effective. Second, even when a president is unable to formulate a legislative agenda that is popular with voters, majority party members still have an incentive to act responsibly: by putting forward their own legislative initiatives they might partially counteract the effect of presidential unpopularity.

Scholars have argued that divided government is even more likely to lead to legislative gridlock in part because the majority party has little incentive to engage in any serious legislative activity. Even worse, if only the president's party is held responsible for government performance, the majority party in Congress may have an incentive to act in ways that are counter to the national welfare, in

an effort to make the president look bad (Mayhew 1974). Fortunately, this study's findings show that divided government may carry less perverse incentives than originally thought. Since the majority party in Congress is held responsible for its actions, even during divided government, the majority party has an incentive to act constructively to enact its own agenda. This could help to explain why the Congress elected in 1994—changing unified government into divided party control—ended up being one of the most legislatively productive in over two decades, according to Mayhew (2002). Despite the fact that they could have tried to blame any and all legislative failures on the Democratic president, the Republican majority in Congress was determined to create a record of accomplishment for itself, and did manage to enact major items on their legislative agenda.

Finally, this study also carries implications for the voting behavior literature. While it has traditionally been thought that voters' only electoral reflections on the performance of government came through their attitudes toward the president (for example, Fiorina 1981), or their own congressional incumbent, this research demonstrates that voters are paying attention to the performance of Congress as a whole as well. Specifically, voters can and do differentiate between the performance of the president and the performance of the majority party in Congress—regardless of whether those parties are the same or different—and their assessments of those performances significantly affect their voting decisions.

## Appendix

As a check on the validity of the results presented in the body of this work, we conducted tests of the model using ANES data from the same elections. Table A.1 contains the pooled results for each chamber. The model specification and variable coding is largely the same as above, with a few minor variations noted here. First, the partisanship and ideology variables both range from  $-3$  to  $3$  (seven-point scales). Second, in the House we were able to code a respondent's evaluation of his/her incumbent: approval of a majority party incumbent or disapproval of a minority party incumbent =  $1$ , no incumbent or no evaluation =  $0$ , disapproval of a majority party incumbent or approval of minority party incumbent =  $-1$  (no similar variable exists for the Senate). Finally, since the effects of presidential approval and financial situation are expected to have a different sign in years of unified control, the model includes interactive terms for these variables (along with year dummies).

**TABLE A.1 Congressional Approval and Voting for Majority Party Candidates in House and Senate Elections, NES Postelection Surveys 1990, 1994, 1998**

Variables	House Elections	Senate Elections
Congressional approval	.423* (.185)	.183 (.169)
Presidential approval	-.598* (.263)	-.971** (.239)
Financial situation	-.062 (.142)	.011 (.134)
Party identification(seven-point)	.579** (.050)	.520** (.044)
Ideology (seven-point)	.269** (.076)	.343** (.068)
Incumbency	.143 (.196)	.848** (.119)
Candidate quality difference	.205 (.183)	-.063 (.163)
Evaluation of incumbent	1.777** (.143)	
1990	.618* (.242)	.295 (.224)
1994 (unified government)	-.657* (.338)	-1.208** (.313)
Presidential approval × unified government	1.282** (.402)	1.815** (.357)
Financial situation × unified government	-.058 (.219)	-.034 (.201)
Constant	-.062 (.242)	.482* (.243)
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.708	.548
χ <sup>2</sup>	1090**	653**
N	1440	1226

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .001 (all tests one-tailed).  
Source: American National Election Studies.

Despite the use of different data and alternative specifications, the pattern of results is generally consistent with those presented in the body of this work. In particular, the coefficient for the congressional approval variable is in the correct direction for both chambers. In the House, the variable reaches statistical significance and is of the same general magnitude found in Table 1 (effect = .10). In the Senate, the magnitude and statistical significance appear a bit weaker. However, when the least predictively accurate ANES survey is excluded from the analysis (1990: 7.7 points off the actual two-party vote), the coefficient for this variable increases to the level of those in Table 2 (.423, effect = .11) and becomes statistically significant. (Excluding 1990 also corrects the signs on the coeffi-

cients for the financial situation and candidate quality variables.)

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