

January 30, 1995

TO: National Election Studies Board of Overseers

FROM: John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse *Beth Theiss-Morse*

Re: Democratic Process Values

The public mood in the U.S. has been undeniably ornery in the past few years. People are upset and disgusted with government. A feature article in the Atlantic Monthly begins by noting that "from the term-limitation movement to the rise of Ross Perot, the signs of discontent with the political status quo are everywhere" (Lind, 1992). Nelson Polsby, the director of The Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California-Berkeley, recaps a recent workshop organized around the question "What is Wrong with American Political Institutions?" by noting the "rising tide of dissatisfaction with the functioning of the American political system" (1991: 1). Alan Ehrenhalt writes that "it is hard to find anyone in America these days who does not believe that something has gone wrong with the country's political system. Anger and frustration seem to spill out the moment politics comes up in casual conversation" (1991: xviii). The title of E.J. Dionne, Jr.'s popular book on the topic is Why Americans Hate Politics (1991). And Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report, a publication not usually given to hyperbole, refers to "tidal waves of discontent" (Hook, 1990: 2473).

Numerous examples of such sentiments could be offered, but this sampling will do for our purposes. We believe that the recent public mood is not primarily a reflection of discontent with policies or personalities. Rather, we contend that an integral part of this mood is a turning away from the political process itself and from political institutions, specifically the U.S. Congress.

If we are right, and we will provide evidence to support our contention in this memo, the ramifications for the political system are serious. Reform movements aimed at altering the political system will likely gain a large following among the discontented. The term limitations movement is a good example. Rather than focusing on reforms such as changes in campaign finance laws, people instead are eager to back the more fundamental systemic reform limiting who can run for Congress. Support for independent candidates, especially those who run against the system, is also an outcome of this mood. Ross Perot, who garnered a very high 19% of the 1992 presidential vote, is a prime example. Finally, this

mood may contribute to a decline in people's sense of obligation to be actively part of the disliked political system.

Institutional Approval and Institutional Referents

The ramifications of decreased support for political institutions are serious, which means that political scientists must be acutely aware of what constitutes the public mood and what explains institutional support. To do this, we believe that NES and other survey organizations need to be more concerned about obtaining good and relevant measures of institutional support. First, we need to develop better questions that measure institutional approval and that clarify institutional referents. As we began our study of public attitudes toward political institutions (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995), we were disappointed with the poorly worded and sporadically posed questions available on institutional approval. Conclusions on approval of Congress, for example, are frequently based on the Harris question on confidence in the leaders of Congress, a question that has been asked usually just once a year and even then only since about 1971. Many NES surveys have included job approval and feeling thermometer questions on Congress and the president, and of course there is the battery of questions on trust/cynicism and efficacy. None of these directly addresses the concept of system support and certainly not support for individual political institutions. We think there is a need for better questions on how the public relates to the political system and its parts. Especially salient here is the distinction between the institutions themselves and the membership of those institutions (see Figure 3.2 from Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995) People do make distinctions among various institutional referents: they very much approve of the institution of Congress, for example, but heartily disapprove of the members. Unfortunately for Congress, most people think of it in terms of its members.

While these concerns are important, and we would be happy to expand on this point if you would like, we intend to focus in this memo on a second set of measures that provide possible explanations for institutional support. What lies behind the current lack of support for political institutions and in particular the U.S. Congress? If we are to understand the public mood, survey research organizations like NES must ask questions of the public that are relevant to institutional support. Without these measures, we cannot begin to understand what so upsets the American public.

What Explains Institutional Support?

If we are to understand support for the separate political institutions, it naturally follows that we utilize explanatory variables relevant to institutional support. One such set of variables, we think, concerns political values. NES has tended to concentrate in its election studies on what we would call social values: for example, moral traditionalism, egalitarianism, individualism, racial prejudice, and feminist consciousness (from the 1992 American National Election Study). While these social values certainly have political implications, more questions need to be asked that measure explicit political values or predispositions. For example, NES has questions on patriotism, which is a political value. Another area that has

garnered much attention is support for civil liberties, also a political value.

But what political values shape people's support for the political system as a whole, and specifically the separate political institutions? We argue that the values people hold concerning democratic processes are key. In light of the dearth of good data on institutional support, we conducted our own national random sample survey of about 1400 adults in 1992, thanks to a grant from the National Science Foundation. One of the major findings coming out of that survey was that to a great extent, people's support for, say, Congress is produced by their predispositions toward political processes and by their perceptions of the extent to which desirable or undesirable processes are present in the institution in question.

When we wrote our survey questions, we knew we wanted to discover how the public responded to some democratic processes that Congress scholars have been thinking about for some time. We therefore asked what respondents thought about aspects of professionalization and representation as they are played out in modern democratic polities such as the U.S. For example, some individuals are supportive of the general concept of political professionalization (sometimes called institutionalization). These individuals might believe that in an increasingly complex world it makes sense for political entities to engage in a division of labor, to hire large numbers of assistants, and, more generally, to develop a large and intricate infrastructure. Other individuals (in fact, the majority, as you might have anticipated) see political professionalization as anathema. They believe government can still be conducted in a pastoral, simple fashion without trappings, entourages, and life-time politicians.

People also differ in their beliefs about representation. Some people might recognize the necessity of having interest groups represent people's interests in a large, heterogeneous, diverse democracy. Similar to a pluralist vision of democratic politics, these people might value the competition among groups representing diverse interests. Other people might view interest groups as insidious, cutting off the voice of ordinary Americans and buying their way into the political system. These people (again, not surprisingly the majority) would see "special" interests as having nothing to do with the interests of ordinary people.

Those people who dislike professionalization and group representation and who see these procedures as being present in Congress are much more likely to disapprove of Congress, even after controlling other relevant factors such as partisanship and education (see Table 6.4 from Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995). In some respects, it would have been surprising if this were not the case, but previous research has neglected the centrality of democratic process values. These values are crucial to understanding why some people are so negative toward parts of the political system. People these days are much more likely to be upset not because H.R.1 rather than H.R.2 became law but because of their perceptions of the process by which H.R.1 became law. What we are advocating is increased attention to process values. They are essential to understanding modern public attitudes toward politics. Previous surveys, including those of the NES, have all but ignored process values.

But we are not just talking about whether the public likes or dislikes political professionalization or group representation. Our research suggests the public's procedurally-based dissatisfaction actually runs much deeper than that. Many citizens, it seems, are quite put off by aspects of democratic politics that are fundamental and inevitable. Unfortunately, the questions we asked in our survey to measure these more fundamental values were less than adequate.¹ We were fortunate, however, to have a second data set upon which to rely. Along with the national survey, we conducted a total of eight focus group sessions in four parts of the U.S. These sessions helped us tremendously to discover people's beliefs about these more fundamental values.

The focus group participants complained vociferously about the extent to which politicians disagree with each other, about debate, about compromise, and about the pace of the political process. They talked extensively about the bickering that goes on in Washington, about Congress getting in the way of the president and the president not having enough power to overcome an obstructionist Congress, and about their desire in essence to have a knight ride in on a white horse to take care of the problems facing the nation. The focus group participants often talked about the American public's interests as if they were monolithic, as if everyone agreed about what needed to be done. Since everyone agrees, the logic follows, then the blame falls on Congress's shoulders since it is not doing what "the people" want. They seemed not to realize that disagreement is unavoidable in a complex, large, and diverse society where little consensus exists on important issues of the day, and that debate, compromise, and a deliberate pace are inevitable if we are to work through these disagreements. So, difficulties stem not just from the highly professionalized and group representative version of governing currently practiced in the United States but from the very core of democratic political procedures themselves.

A key point here is that while many people are negative toward democratic processes, some people are not. Attitudes toward these processes, just like attitudes toward political professionalization or representation, constitute a variable. Some people are quite tolerant of what Crick calls the "open canvassing of interests" (1992: 18), what Madison recognized to be part of the "necessary and ordinary operations of government" (#10, 1961: 79). Others have no time for such ideas and persist in the belief that if the political system were running properly we would not be exposed to bickering, partisanship, special interests, selling out, and ponderous deliberation. The location of individuals on a spectrum ranging from tolerance of democratic processes to intolerance is, we maintain, one of the most politically central characteristics of individuals. If we are really interested in values, what could be more basic and necessary than to understand people's values concerning the democratic

¹ We asked respondents how important they thought various parts of a representative's job were. Included in this list were "Compromising with the president" and "Discussing and debating controversial issues." Asking respondents what parts of a representative's job they consider important is not the same as asking them questions that measure their approval of these democratic processes.

process itself? We believe it is time some attempt was made to measure process values because they are so central to democratic politics.

To get back to our original question, why are people so upset with politics and why is their anger so focused on Congress? We will address two possible answers to this question, one of which we have tested empirically and the other which needs better survey data to answer. The first answer centers on institutional power. The assumption in political science has traditionally been that the president is the powerful figure in American politics (see, e.g., Schlesinger, 1973; Graber, 1982; and the literature on attributions of responsibility for the state of the economy, such as Peffley, 1985). We asked our survey respondents if each of the three institutions -- the Supreme Court, the Presidency, and the Congress -- had too much, about the right amount, or too little power. Respondents' answers were surprising to us (see Figure 3.3 from Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995). Forty-three percent said Congress had too much power, compared to only 19 percent who said the Presidency had too much power. The percentages saying Congress and the Presidency had too little power are similarly lopsided: 9 percent said Congress had too little power compared to 25 percent for the Presidency. It makes sense for people to be most upset at the institution that has the power but apparently not the will to do something for the people. The power of Congress, we argue, rests in its institutional procedures.

The second explanation is more speculative but, we believe, highly compelling. We argue in our book that people are especially upset with Congress because the work Congress does is so public. The American public gets to see all of the dirty laundry aired -- from the partisan squabbling to the incessant debates to the inevitable glee when one side of the aisle scores a point. The Supreme Court's work is mainly done behind closed doors, with the Justices emerging on occasion to release an opinion. The Presidency certainly works in a more open environment than the Court, but even in this environment most of the decisions are made in private meetings with advisors and cabinet secretaries. Because the Presidency is a hierarchical institution, most decisions are announced as a decision of the president. Leaks sometimes confound the picture, but the American public rarely gets a direct view of the debates and compromises that go on behind the White House doors. Congress is a different animal altogether because Congress's democratic processes are played out in public. With the move to put television cameras in the House and Senate, anyone can turn on C-SPAN to see the workings of Congress played in full view. Congress is the public enemy in large part because it is so public.

These two explanations for public disgust with Congress highlight the need to have survey questions that begin to unearth public values concerning institutional structures and functions. More survey questions that address people's perceptions of and beliefs about political institutions are essential for understanding the public mood.

With the addition of a handful of questions (and possible improvements on measures of support), the NES could speak to the issue of how the public values democratic practices. We propose the addition of questions designed to measure individuals' attitudes toward

inevitable democratic processes such as debate, compromise, deliberation, and disagreement. Possible items might include (with responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree):

1. When you get right down to it, most Americans basically agree on what needs to be done to fix the problems facing the country.
2. Having public officials debate each other about important issues is a good way to make decisions.
3. Often public officials reach the best solutions to problems when they are willing to compromise.
4. Politicians should go slowly when they are making laws to make sure they consider all sides to an issue.
5. Politicians should listen to interest groups because they represent the views of ordinary people.
6. Politicians need many assistants and people on staff if they are to do their job properly.
7. There would be a lot fewer problems in this country if members of Congress would listen to ordinary people.
8. I'd prefer it if Congress would not spend so much time debating the big issues facing the nation and just decide what to do.
9. With all of the compromising that goes on in Congress, it's not surprising it makes such bad decisions.
10. I like the fact that Congress moves at such a slow pace because that is how Congress is supposed to work.

Since we are not professionals in the survey research business, these are preliminary ideas for questions. But we think this short battery of questions would allow us to classify people according to their procedural predispositions, classifications which, we believe, are likely to be strongly related to a wide variety of other concepts included in the survey, including the questions on support for the modern political system and its parts.

Finally, a question of obvious relevance to the NES is "What effect does institutional support have on voting and elections?" We are not pretending that questions relevant to institutional support would be good predictors of vote choice. They obviously would not be. But the last two national elections could have been better anticipated and understood, we believe, had the political science community had a better understanding of people's political values. The high

level of support for Ross Perot in 1992 and the historical shift in power in Congress in 1994 both reflect the public belief that the political system is not working as it should, which is obviously a concern about democratic processes. We cannot truly understand these electoral events without understanding people's democratic process values.

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Figure 3.2
Evaluations of Congressional Referents

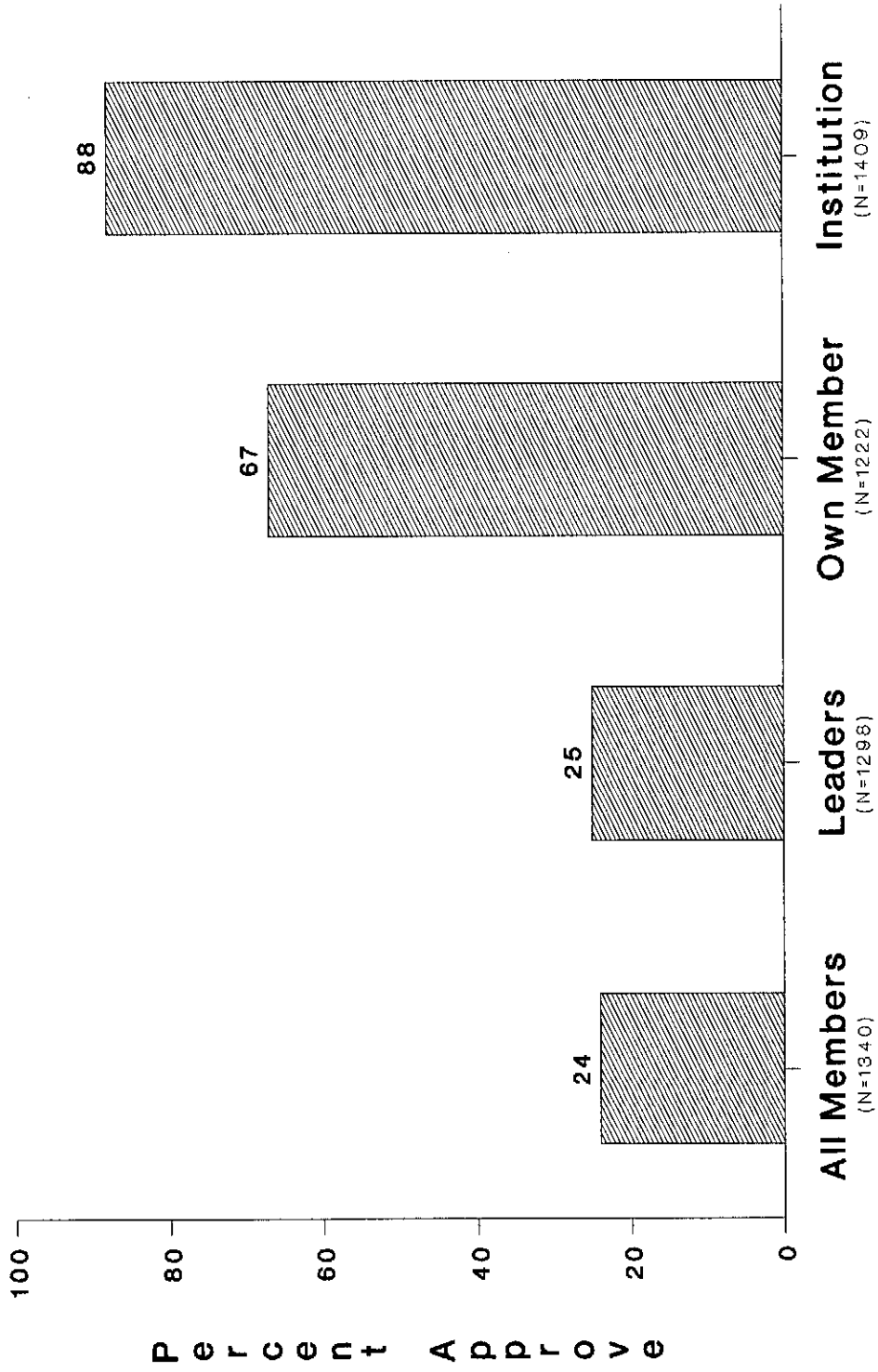


Table 6.4

Approval of Members of Congress:
General Model with Process Variables and Approval of Own Member

Variable	b	se	t
Sex	-.02	.01	-1.4
Education	.00	.02	0.1
Income	-.09	.03	-3.5**
Party Identification	-.08	.02	-4.3**
Ideology	-.04	.02	-1.9
External Efficacy	.05	.02	3.0**
Political Involvement	.01	.02	0.3
Democratic Procedures	-.03	.02	-1.2
Professionalization	.28	.05	5.9**
Representation	.23	.04	5.3**
Approve Own Member	.21	.03	7.5**

$F_{(11,833)} = 36.7$ Adj. $R^2 = .32$

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Figure 3-3 Perceptions of Institutional Power

