Getting the Vote: How Congressional Constituency Contact Equals Positive Public Opinion

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Americans hate Congress, but love their Congressmember. But why? Data from a national survey shows that although a positive job rating is not necessarily correlated to whether the responded has contacted his/her representative or not; individuals who have contacted their representative are more likely to indicate "positive" attributes regarding their representative. The analysis finds that incumbent House candidates enjoy a higher percentage of constituent contacts than non-incumbents and a corollary higher thermometer (feelings) rating. A "vote" (via public opinion) of confidence—good job rating—in most cases equals a vote at the ballot box.

Introduction

In the spirit of the "rational-choice" approach, some scholars theorize that most actions by congressmembers are for primarily three goals: re-election, influence policy, and in-House (Washington) influence (Fiorina 1989; Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1978). Some might argue however, that without achieving the first goal (re-election) the other goals are impossible. With this in mind, one of the most important measures for the congressmembers (interested in re-election) is how the constituency rates their individual job performance.

Job rating is most likely based on a number of variables such as: whether constituents believe the representative is bringing enough projects to their district; or if the representative votes on particular issues that support the constituent's preferences; or how the constituent feels about the representative personally. How the constituent feels about the representative can be based on a number of things such as personality, presentation and direct or indirect contact. This research project attempts to analyze how constituency contact influences congressional job ratings based on several different measures.

Review of the Literature

Constituent-congressmember contact happens year-round and can be the source of interesting analyses. For this review, constituent contact is an action initiated by the constituent or the congressmember. It can be direct contact like a personal meeting; writing a letter; or receiving a newsletter; or it can be indirect, (i.e., through mass media). This review highlights some initial findings in the area of constituency contacts and integrates more recent analyses that deal specifically with casework and elections (i.e., the incumbent advantage).

In his book on constituent communication, Stephen E. Frantzich (1986) uses figures calculated by the U.S. Postal Service[1] to show how the volume of incoming congressional mail increased from approximately 77.5 million in 1977 to just over 92 million in 1981 (Frantzich 1986:11). Approximately 47% of congressional incoming mail is issue-related and about 30% of the mail is related to casework. The volume of outreach mail from congressmembers to constituents also increased during this time period. Newsletter usage grew by over 20% from 1969 to 1983-40% of this growth was used for self-promotion. Congressmembers also use polls and targeted mailings more (Frantzich

1986:89). Looking at casework for representatives alone, the following excerpt sums up the change in demand in the 1970s:

> "Johannes (cited in Commission on Administrative Review, 1977a, Vol. 2:41) estimates that the volume of casework has doubled in the last 10 years. The volume of mail entering and leaving the House tripled between 1969 and 1975, escalating from 14 million to 42 million pieces annually. In 1965, a George Gallup Survey found that 19% of the public had written to their congressman; by 1973, a Harris survey uncovered 33% who had contacted their representative." (Cavanagh 1979:230)

It is clear that the amount of contact between constituents and their representatives has continued to increase. Other works in the field begin to answer the question: "Who is initiating contact and how is contact made?" In his seminal work on congressional casework, Johannes (1984) uses three sets of data to determine the correlation between general demographics (age, race, income, etc.) and casework requests. He conducts a bivariate analysis using data from the 1977 Obey Commission (the House Commission on Administrative Review) and the 1978 and 1980 National Election Studies (NES) data. Johannes (1984) determines that "[r]equesting casework assistance essentially is unrelated to demographic characteristics; but for making contact to express opinion, there are slightly more robust...and consistent relationships, indicating a small bias in the direction of white, better-educated, more affluent, white collar, and higher social status constituents" (1984:26). The 1978 analysis does show however, that there is a significant (albeit slight) correlation between requesting casework assistance and working for the government, the age of the respondent, and individuals living in either the east or mid-west.

In addition to knowing who is contacted, how the constituents are contacted is also important. Although in The Politics of Congressional Elections Jacobson's focus is on elections, his section on contact provides general information that can be used in the analysis of constituent contact. Using the NES data from 1988, Jacobson finds that a voter is more than twice as likely to have had contact with an incumbent House Congressmember as with a challenger (91% verses only 41%). Interestingly, the same analysis using the 1994 NES data shows that the difference decreased by nearly 22%

(90% verses 52%). Conducting a slightly different analysis than presented by the author, we see that in 1988 the most frequent mode of contact was through the mail (73%); followed by "read about in newspaper" (66%). In the 1994 analysis, these two modes of contact remain the top two; however, the percentages were virtually the same. Approximately 65% had contact with the incumbent candidate by reading about him/her in the newspaper and 63% had received mail. Other ways of contact studied were (1994 figures): saw on TV (51%); family or friend had contact (38%); heard on radio (30%); met personally (20%); saw at meeting (19%); and talked to staff (13%) (Jacobson 1992:123; Jacobson 2001:117).

This contact with congressmembers (whether initiated by the constituent or the Congressmember) sets up a variety of issues regarding expectations on the part of the constituent and the congressmembers' ability to deliver. What is the role of the Congressmember? The Harris survey commissioned by the House Commission on Administrative Review (1977) found that the public considers "representation of the district" as the highest priority. A close second was that a representative should vote according to the wishes of the district. The roles that received the lowest rankings were: "to be knowledgably about legislation;" "hammer out positions on legislation;" and "use media and or newsletters to keep district informed about what he is doing" (Keefe 1980). From the member's point of view, the "ombudsman role" was identified as important 27% of the time. However, when representatives were asked what he or she thought the public would rate as congressmembers' roles, the ombudsman role was thought to be a high expectation of the public 52% of the time (Cavanagh 1979).

Along with expectations, the relationship between constituency and congressmember can influence performance ratings. The 1977 Harris survey showed that a positive rating for a congressmember can be attributed to either the fact that the respondent felt that the representative represents his district well (18%) or because of his contact/availability (17%). There is also a positive correlation between casework satisfaction and performance rating. At least 78% of the respondents who requested assistance and were either very satisfied or moderately satisfied, gave their congressmember a rating of pretty good or excellent. In addition, 42% of the respondents indicating that they were not at all satisfied with their casework experience, nevertheless indicated a job performance rating of pretty good or excellent (Cavanagh 1979).

This trend is also found in a study of constituency service as it relates to the incumbency advantage. Rivers and Fiorina (1992) look at incumbency reputation as an advantage and whether how (direct or in-direct) the incumbent acquires a reputation impacts job ratings. For Rivers and Fiorina, indirect

contact can be through friends, relatives and the media. The indirect contact is important in that even if a voter has never sought an incumbent's help he or she can often make an assessment of how helpful the congressmember would be if he or she needed assistance. This assessment then encourages the voter to vote for (or against if it's negative) the incumbent. The important point here is that an expectation or assessment of an incumbent's "helpfulness" may not necessarily be based on actual contact; it can also be based on this indirect (second hand) contact.

The analysis reveals that constituents who expect their congressmember to be helpful are much more likely to rate the incumbent favorably-which may ultimately lead to a vote for the incumbent. Using OLS estimates, Rivers and Fiorina find that "[t]hose who identify with the incumbent's party or who are in ideological agreement with the incumbent or who have had a satisfactory direct contact with the incumbent all have high expectations of helpfulness (Rivers and Fiorina 1992:38). Rivers and Fiorina also find that "[a]llocating more staff to district offices, becoming personally involved in casework, and visiting the district more frequently do strengthen the incumbent's reputation for constituency service" (1992:38). This increased reputation of "helpfulness" proves profitable for the congressmember at the polls.

Gary Jacobson's (2001) work in constituency contact as it relates to electoral races supports these findings. The incumbency advantage includes the ability to provide casework which builds support and a reputation of helpfulness. As Jacobson points out, casework is nonpartisan. In service delivery the affiliation of the party of the member delivering the service and the person receiving the service is irrelevant. What matters, at least to the constituent, is that he or she gets the service. This way of thinking concurs with Rivers and Fiorina's point regarding an incumbent's reputation for helpfulness. Their research shows that 55% of the individuals who expect that the incumbent would be very helpful will vote for the incumbent, compared to 4% that would vote against the incumbent. This amounts to more than a 50% difference. Contrasting this point to the influence of partisanship, the authors point out that the difference between the percent of incumbent party identifiers that vote for the incumbent and the percent of challenger party identifiers that vote for the challenger is only 22%. They conclude that "...from the prospective of the incumbent, persuading a voter that he would be "very helpful" if the voter contacted him about a problem is as good or better than persuading the voter to switch his or her party identification" (Rivers and Fiorina 1992:24). Not only is it "good or better" than persuading the voter to switch his or her party identification; I'd argue that it is more doable.

Jacobson further highlights the importance of constituency contact for the incumbent in his analysis of how the different types of contact can influence the voter's evaluation of the congressmember. Jacobson finds that there is a relationship between constituency contact (direct and indirect) and whether the respondent likes something about the congressmember. For instance, if the respondent has had indirect contact with the congressmember, the probability that he or she will like something about the candidate is .42. However, there is only a 24% chance that a respondent that has had indirect contact with the congressmember will indicate that he or she dislikes something about that congressmember (Jacobson 2001:120).

This is an important point when considering Rivers and Fiorina's discussion regarding contact though casework. Their findings indicate that approximately 95% of the people who had no casework contact with the incumbent, but expected the incumbent to be helpful if needed, would vote for the incumbent (Rivers and Fiorina 1992:27). The authors suggest that that although there is evidence that this relation exists, there is no information on what the incumbent can do to acquire this reputation of helpfulness. While Jacobson's work does not specifically speak to the acquisition of the helpfulness reputation, it does begin to shed some light on where positive associations with congressmembers might come from. If through the indirect and other types of contact (other than casework), there is an increased probability that the voter will "like" something about the candidate, is there that much of a leap from "likeability" to an "expectation of helpfulness?"

The final component of this literature review looks at contact through the media. An interesting point to note in comparing Jacobson's 1988 and 1994 findings in this area is the change in the effect of contact through the media. In 1988, if the respondent had contact via mass media the probability that he would like something about the candidate was more than three times as great as the probability that he would dislike something about the candidate. In 1994, that same comparison only differs by 3%. The 1994 analysis shows that the probability that the respondent whose contact was through the media will like something about the candidate is .39. Alternatively, the probability that the respondent whose contact was through the media will dislike something about the candidate is .33. This could be a definitive example of the possible impact of negative media coverage.

Media bias, or negative media coverage is the topic in Out of Order by Thomas E. Patterson (1994). In his analysis, Patterson uses several different types of studies to show trends in increased media bias. Over 4,200 paragraphs from Times and Newsweek between 1960 and 1992 were coded. The analysis revealed that the percentage of bad news coverage of presidential races rose

from approximately 22% in 1960 to nearly 60% in 1992. If this trend has trickled down to congressional coverage, then we may be seeing the consequence in the increased probability that a respondent will report something he or she dislikes about incumbent candidates-a conclusion found by comparing Jacobson's' 1988 and 1994 analyses.

Analyses in the area of media bias, incumbency reputation, direct and indirect contact and casework has helped scholars begin to understand the significance of constituency contact. This review of the literature has shown that constituency contact with their congressmembers has risen significantly. More individuals are requesting casework and more congressmembers are reaching out to their members. In addition, contact through the media or indirectly through friends and relatives has proven to influence how a voter feels about his or her congressmember.

Explaining the Relationship Between Constituency Contact and Job Rating

While there is some literature on who contacts congressmembers for casework, there is very little on who is contacted in general (directly by the congressmember or through other means) and how contact affects how the voter rates the congressmember. This paper fills the gaps in the literature and provides updated trend analyses of constituent contact. In addition to the traditional measures of job rating (i.e., asking the constituent to "rate" his/her representative) this research argues that similar measures of "positive" attributes can also be used to analyze how a constituent rates his/her representative. The use of additional measures provides a more comprehensive analysis of the job rating and for this research, a more vigorous analysis of the relationship between constituency contact and representative job rating.

Data and Measures

In order to examine the concept of constituency contact and job rating, I use several sources of data. The main source of data is a multivariate analysis of the National Election Studies (NES)[2] 1994 data set. The NES 1994 data set is the most recent complete data set that includes a comprehensive section on constituent-congressmember contact. In addition to general descriptive measures (age, race, income, etc.), the analysis includes responses to questions regarding the type of contact with congressmembers, how the respondent rates Congress in general and what the respondent likes or dislikes about his/

her representative. Supplementary data sets from various sources are also used to augment the analysis and to determine possible trends. The use of multiple resources provides an opportunity to confirm results that are usually based on one source (i.e., the National Election Studies). Overall, this multiple data set approach provides a more comprehensive review of the phenomenon being studied.

Congress and Congressmember Contact and Approval—Trends

With this research I am interested in exploring the connection between representative-constituency contact and representative job rating. An important part of this research includes an analysis of congressional job rating in general. This section will explore questions such as: "What have been the trends in this area?" "How do they relate to individual job ratings?" and "Can any differences in congressional job ratings and individual job ratings be attributed to representative-constituent contact?" To begin exploring the question of job rating, we will first look at the general trends in congressional job ratings.

Congressional approval has been tracked by the National Election Study (NES) for over 20 years. In addition, other national survey groups such as the Washington Post or New York Times conduct surveys of the voting population to gauge how America rates its government. For example, a recent poll conducted by ABC News and the Washington Post (January 2002), found that 61.7% of the respondents (n=752) indicated that they trust the President more than Congress to do a better job with handling national problems.[3] These various sources can provide a telling picture of how Americans tend to think about Congress and their representative overall.

What have been the trends? With regard to overall approval, we can look at several sources. From the General Social Survey (GSS)[4] we see that when asked about the level of confidence the respondent has in Congress, the average percentage of respondents indicating some level of confidence (between 1972 and 1998) is nearly 66%. Figure 1 provides a graph of the responses by selected years. Interestingly, the level of confidence decreased significantly between the late-1980s (just under 75% in 1989) and the early-1990s (just over 55% in 1993). Figure 2 provides a second source of trend analyses conducted by the Harris Poll.[5] In this survey, respondents where asked to give Congress (Democrats and Republicans separately) a job rating of either excellent, pretty good, only fair, or poor. The graph provides the percentage of positive ratings by year from 1995 to 2001.

Although the Democrats were consistently rated higher than the Republicans (after 1996), the percent of positive responses have followed the

same general trend of incremental increases. In 1996 the percent of positive job ratings for both parties was around 30% to 33%. In 2001, the same statistic rose to just over 40% for the Republicans
and just under 50% for the Democrats. A final source for trend analyses of congressional approval ratings is the NES survey (see Figure 3) in which respondents where asked: ""Do you approve or disapprove of the way the U.S. Congress has been handling its job?" Over the years, nearly 42% of the respondents indicated that they approve of the way the Congress has been handling its job.

Looking at the graph (Figure 3), we see that in the mid-to-late 1980s, the Congress enjoyed a relatively high percentage of respondents indicating approval (the average was around 50%). This average took a significant dive through the early-to-mid 1990's (lowest being 28% in 1992) and began to rise to nearly 52% in 2000.

In summary, a general look at the trends from several sources shows that for the most part, confidence and overall job ratings tended to be relatively high in the early years of study (1970s and 1980s). This trend dipped significantly for a few years and now (or in the early 2000s) it is beginning to recover-although not surpassing the rates in the earlier years. Do these trends translate to the individual representative?

To answer the question whether general trends regarding the Congress are similar to trends regarding individual representatives, we can look at the approval of congressmembers running for re-election. Figure 4 provides a trend analysis of the approval rate for congressmembers running for re-election from 1980 to 2000. We see that at any point in time, more than 50% of the respondents indicated that they approved of their congressmember. In 1984 we see the highest percentage of individuals who approve of their congressmember (69%). And, while this level of approval seemed to be declining in the late-1990s, the average is still around 60%. Comparatively, we saw in the discussion above that at some points during this same time period, the percentage of individuals who approved of Congress in general dips to an all-time low of 28%. This difference has been studied by a number of congressionalists (see for example, Rivers and Fiorina, 1992). One explanation for the difference in the ratings could be the level of personal contact an individual congressmember has with his or her constituents. The balance of this analysis will explore constituent contact. I will analyze who makes contact with their representatives or congressional candidates (demographics), the type of contact (personal, media, etc.) and how the type of contact might relate to how the constituent rates the representative.

The most recent comprehensive National Election Study (NES) that contains questions relating to constituency contact is the 1994 NES data set. The 1994 NES data set has 1,795 respondents. It includes questions regarding general contact with representatives as well as specific types of contact with House candidates. Table 1, provides an overview of some sample descriptive statistics. Generally, as with all surveys of this type, more than 85% of the respondents were white, a little over 36% of the respondents were between 31 and 45 years old, over 31% of the respondents considered themselves either "strong" Democrats or Republicans, and over 48% of the respondents had more than 12 years of education.

Who is contacting their representative? Nearly 13% of the individuals who responded to the question: "Have you ever contacted your representative?" indicated that they had contacted their representative. Table 2 provides a summary of descriptive statistics on who is contacting their representative. The second column of the table represents the percentage of the sample that has contacted their representative. For example, 36.1% of the individuals in the sample were in 31-45 age group. We see that individuals who indicated that they have weak party identification or independent but "leaning" party identification, make up nearly 60% of the respondents who had contacted their representative. Respondents in the $25,000 and $49,000 income range represent the largest income group that had contacted their representative (31.5%). Interestingly, respondents who live in the south are more than twice as likely to contact their representative as respondents who live in the northeast. The statistical test of independence (chi-squared statistic) includes some interesting surprises. As one might expect, income, age, and years of education are significant at the p=.05 level. Although students of political efficacy suggest that racial minorities are less efficacious and therefore less likely to participate in politics (see for example, Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1996 and Campbell, et al., 1960), this test finds that race is not statistically significant. We find however, that region (.08) and gender (.07) are statistically significant at the p=.1 level.

The NES 1994 respondents were also asked about the reason for their contact. Although respondents could select more than one reason for contacting their representative, the most common reason for contacting a representative was to get help with a problem (50%), followed by to express an opinion (40%), and to get information (28%). A little over 90% of the respondents indicated that they received a response from their representative and for the most part, these individuals were satisfied with their response

(88%). Similarly, the respondents who indicated that they knew of a family member or friend who had contacted their representative (16% of the sample) indicated that the friend or family member received a response (95%) and were most likely satisfied (89%).

We know from this analysis that individuals who make contact with their representative usually receive a response, and for the most part, the constituent is satisfied with the response. Does contact with the representative and satisfaction with the response translate into "positive" feeling about the representative? I employ a crosstab analysis to explore this question. The crosstab includes the respondents who answered the contact question as well as the question: "Do you approve how your representative is handling his/her job?". In our sample of constituents who answered both of these questions, a little over 80% of the respondents indicated that they approved of how their representative was handling his/her job. Just over 85% of the respondents that had contact with their representative indicated that they approve of how the representative is doing his/her job. What about those individuals who have never contacted their representative? Interestingly, nearly 79% of the respondents who indicated that they have not contacted their representative, also indicated that they approve of how the representative is doing his/her job. The Pearson chi-square statistic is insignificant indicating that the relationship between contact and job approval rating is probably not statistically significant. The next step in the analysis is to see if there are additional measures of approval.

NES participants were asked a number of questions about their representative that can be used as measures of approval. They were asked (1) whether they could remember anything special about their representative, (2) if they thought their representative would be helpful if needed, and (3) if they felt their representative kept in touch with the district. Table 3 provides a summary of the responses by sample groups (contacted representative, not contacted representative, and total sample).[6] We see that in all instances, a larger percentage of the constituents who had contacted their representative indicated that the representative possessed the positive quality. Comparatively, the same questions for the entire sample yield significantly different responses. For example, only a little over 19% of the sample as a whole could remember something special about the representative, while nearly all of those who had contacted the representative and a great majority of those who indicated that they had not contacted the representative indicated that they could remember something special about the representative. All of these indicators are statistically significant at $p<.001$. To ensure the statistics are portraying reliable results, I test for multicollinearity.

As with a lot of social science analyses, the variables theoretically associated with attitudinal measures (such as these) may be similar in nature. A suggested "rule of thumb" for detecting multicollinearity is to test the bivariate correlations of the variables. If the correlation coefficient between the variables is high (around .8 or higher), then it is thought that multicollinearity is a serious problem.[7] Based on this "rule of thumb," multicollinearity does not appear to be a problem. The highest correlation is between the "helpful" and "keep in touch" (.388). All of the correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This means for example, that if a respondent answered positively for one variable it doesn't necessarily follow that the respondents consistently answered positively on another variable. We can conclude from this test that the responses can be considered separate tests of positive attributes.

In summary, we find when asked directly, a positive job rating is not necessarily correlated to whether the respondent has contacted his/her representative or not. However, we do find that individuals who have contacted their representative are more likely to indicate other "positive" attributes regarding their representative such as keeping in touch and being helpful. This discovery suggests that further investigation of additional measures of positive attributes and how they may relate to constituency-representative contact is warranted.

To look at other types of constituency contact with representatives in the 1994 NES survey, we must turn to data regarding contact with candidates for House seats. The 1994 NES data set is the most recent survey that includes constituency contact with candidates at a meaningful level. The survey delineates the type of contact as well as the things constituents indicated that they liked and disliked about the candidates. The last two columns on Table 2 provide descriptive statistics on the sample populations that had contact with either (or both) the Democratic and Republican congressional House candidates.

Looking at the demographics of the sample, we see from Table 2 that the 31–45 year old age group is the highest percentage of individuals that indicated having had contact with a candidate (for both political parties). Interestingly, respondents who identify themselves as having "weak" or "leaner" party identification were the most likely to have had contact with the political candidates. Contact for these individuals also seems to be even across the board; meaning weak/leaner Democrats were just as likely to have had contact with a Democrat as a Republican and vice versa. Over 16% of the individuals who had contact with a Democratic candidate had less than 12 years of education. This same group only accounted for a little less than 10% of the individuals who had contact with a Republican candidate.

Similarly, roughly the same percentage of low-income respondents ($4,999 or less) had contact with either type of candidate. Referring back to the first column on Table 2 (page 16), we see that no respondents in that income range indicated that they had contacted their representative. The racial breakdown of the respondents who had contact with Democratic candidates virtually mirrors the sample racial demographics. Conversely, the percentage of African-American respondents who had contact with Republican candidates (5.6%) is almost half of the percentage of the sample population (11.5%). Clearly, the Republican candidates aren't reaching the African-American constituents at the same rate as the Democratic candidates. Another interesting point regarding the racial demographics is similar to the trend found with the low-income respondents. None of the Asian respondents indicated having contacted their representative; however the respondents did indicate having contact with candidates. Note also that the Asian respondents are overrepresented in the percentage of respondents who had contact with a Republican candidate. Although the Asian respondents make up a little over 1% of the sample, they account for 5.6% of the respondents who had contact with a Republican candidate. These general comparative demographics provide some insight on who has contact with congressional candidates. Further analysis will provide insight on how this contact might affect job ratings (or potential job ratings in the case of a challenger or someone running for an open seat).

First we look at some general NES trend data that relates to the difference between the percentage of respondents who have had contact with congressional candidates. The top line in Figure 5 outlines the difference between the percentage of respondents who had contact with the incumbent congressional candidate and the percentage of respondents who had contact with the challenger from 1978 to 1994. For example, in 1990 54% more respondents had contact with the incumbent candidate (77%) than the challenger (23%). On average, during this time-frame, over 41% more respondents had contact with the incumbent than the challenger. How does this trend relate to overall ratings? Respondents were asked to rate candidates they recognized on a thermometer scale where "0" indicated the most unfavorable, "100" indicated the most favorable and "50" indicated a neutral feeling.

The bottom line on Figure 5 outlines the average thermometer rating difference between incumbent candidates and challengers from 1978 to 1994. For example in 1990, the average thermometer difference between incumbents and challengers was only 1 degree (65 degrees for incumbents and 64 degrees for challengers). The average thermometer difference for the time period (1978 to 1994) was 15 degrees (this statistic includes the unusual spike of a

44 degree difference in 1986). This means that on average, at any given time, incumbents received thermometer readings that were 15 degrees higher than the challengers' thermometer readings. In conclusion then, we see a trend that shows incumbents have a higher percentage of constituent contact as well as higher thermometer readings. These trend analyses begin to provide some interesting insight on the relationship between contact and job rating. We will now turn to an analysis of the NES 1994 data specifically.

We know from Jacobson's (2001) work with this data set that a voter is nearly 60% more likely to have had contact with an incumbent House congressmember than with a challenger. We also know from his work that constituents had contact with incumbents in the following manner: read about in newspaper (65%), received mail (63%), saw on TV (51%); family or friend had contact (38%); heard on radio (30%); met personally (20%); saw at meeting (19%); and talked to staff (13%) (2001:117).

Jacobson's analysis also finds that there is a probability of .75 that a constituent will indicate that he/she likes something about an incumbent candidate if she/he has had contact with the incumbent either through the mail, mass media, in person (met or attended a meeting) or through some other indirect contact (family or friends had contact). There is a probability of .42 a respondent who has had all four types of contact will list something that he/she dislikes about the incumbent candidate. Interestingly, the data indicate that there is a 33% chance that someone who has had no contact with the incumbent candidate will indicate that he/she likes something about the candidate.

Comparatively, the data shows that there is a 24% chance that the respondent will indicate that there is something he/she dislikes about the candidate even though he/she has not had any contact with the candidate. These analyses seem to indicate that contact with constituents is extremely important for incumbent representatives running for re-election. It is difficult infer however, whether the contact the respondents listed for incumbent candidates was in relation to the campaign or just general contact.[8] In any event, whether the respondent had contact during a campaign or in general, this data provides an opportunity to make some possible inferences about contact and positive attributes.

What do respondents like and/or dislike about the candidates? The list below is a sample of the likes and dislikes listed by the respondents. The list includes the top three likes and dislikes divided by party. For example, the top attribute listed for Democratic candidates was "honest/sincere, keeps promise." That attribute was also the second most common attribute mentioned regarding Republican candidates.

We see for the most part, that the top likes and dislikes listed-with the exception of perhaps the ideological views and the campaign tactics-can be associated with incumbency. For example, a constituent might think that an incumbent is dishonest or honest based on his/her record and actions during his/her tenure as a representative. Similarly "helps the district" and "represents (well) the views of the district" can be considered attributes of an incumbent. This list combined with the earlier analyses suggests that keeping in contact with the district, representing the district well and helping individuals are important attributes when considering how well a representative is doing his or her job.

These findings are consistent with the findings discussed in the literature review. The Harris Poll for example, found that the most popular answers to the most important job of the congressman as seen by the public was solving problems in the district (33%) and voting according to the wishes of the district (37%) (Keefe 1980). This theme is also present in Fenno's 'home-style' model (1987) which describes decision-making as a combination of resource allocation, presentation of self and explanation of the Washington behavior. For Fenno, congressional decision-making is based on pleasing the constituents. It seems that a positive reputation, no matter how acquired (direct, indirect or no contact) is an important determinant of job rating. These findings seem to dovetail nicely with trend analyses of job ratings for congressmembers running for re-election discussed earlier. As you will recall, the average percentage of approval ratings for congressmembers seeking re-election was over 61% compared to 42% for Congress overall (see Figures 3 and 4).

Discussion and Conclusions

As far as Congress in general, the findings of this paper conclude that for the most part, confidence and overall job ratings tended to be relatively high in the early years of study (1970s and 1980s), dipped significantly for a few years, and are now (or in the early 2000s) beginning to recover-although not surpassing the rates in the earlier years. On average, nearly 42% of the respondents indicated that they approve of the way the Congress has been handling its job. But, on average, 60% of the respondents indicated that they approved of their congressmember. We turned to representative-constituency contact to see if this relationship influences how the constituent rates the representative.

The findings reported in this study provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between constituency contact and representative rating. We found that when asked directly, most respondents tend to give their representative a positive job rating. We did not find that this positive job rating is related to whether the respondent had contacted his/her representative or not. We did find however, that other variables that can be attributed to job ratings did differ based on whether the respondent contacted his/her representative. The results of the analysis demonstrated that individuals who had contacted their representative are more likely to be able to list something special about their representative, declare that their representative keeps in touch with the district, and think that their representative would being helpful if needed.

To look at the relationship between constituent contact and positive attributes, we turned to an analysis of the relationship between constituency contact and House incumbent candidates. The analysis demonstrated a trend that shows incumbent candidates have a higher percentage of constituent contact as well as higher thermometer readings (how the respondent felt about the candidate) than challengers. In addition, for the most part, that the top likes and dislikes listed for the candidates where attributes that can be associated with incumbency. These attributes included "helps the district and "represents (well) the views of the district."

If re-election is one of a representative's top priorities, this analysis suggests that constituency contact is important. This of course is not news. However, what this research uncovers is not only the relationship between constituency contacts and job rating, but the relationship between constituency contact and various attributes that can be considered a part of job rating. We know from Chong's (1993) experimental work on survey responses that respondent's answers depend on the wording and format; therefore, "top-of-the-head" responses are likely to be especially unreliable if the question itself is a bit fuzzy or unspecific" (1993:875). The question "Do you approve how your representative is handling his/her job?" may seem specific, but what is meant by the term "approve?" Other questions that measure the approval phenomenon provide additional information on how the respondent rates his/her representative. This research provides an analysis of different aspects of job approval and finds that keeping in contact with the district, representing the

district well and helping individuals, are important attributes when considering how well a representative is doing his or her job.

Keeping this analysis in mind then it seems as though representatives who want to acquire and/or maintain a reputation among constituents as an individual who is doing a "good job" should ensure that his/her actions highlight the attributes discussed in this research.

Figures

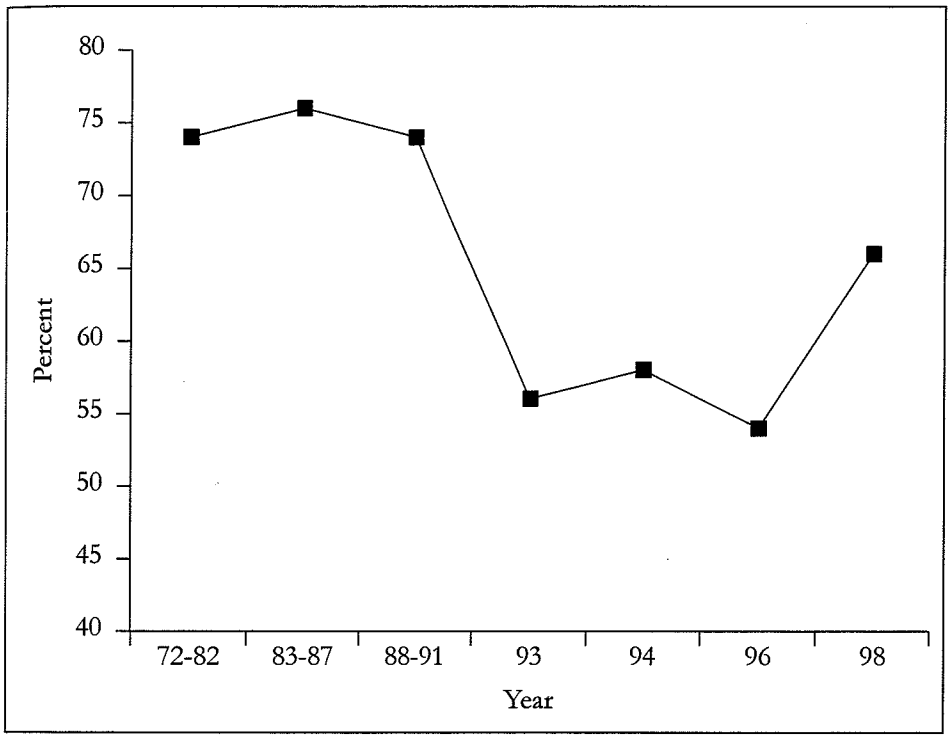

Figure 1. General Social Survey (GSS) percent confidence in Congress, (1972–1998). Question: *I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?* Graph shows percent of respondents who indicated "a great deal of confidence" or "only some confidence" by year.

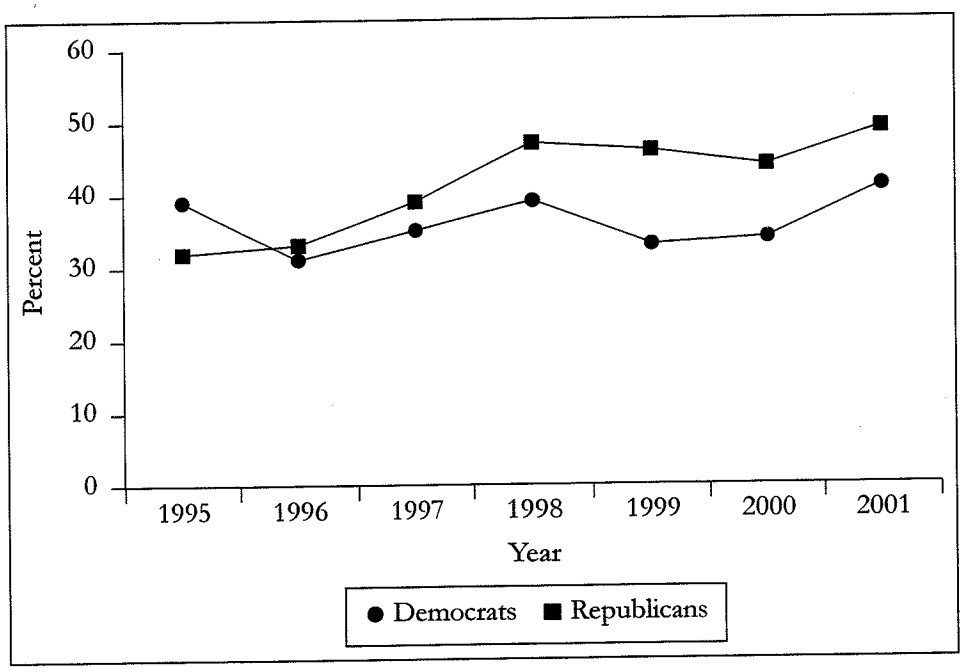

Figure 2. Harris Poll Congressional Job Rating (% Positive). Question: How do you rate the job Democrats/Republicans in Congress are doing - exce*llent, pretty good, only fair or poor?* Graph shows average (polls conducted several times a year) percent of positive responses for each year.

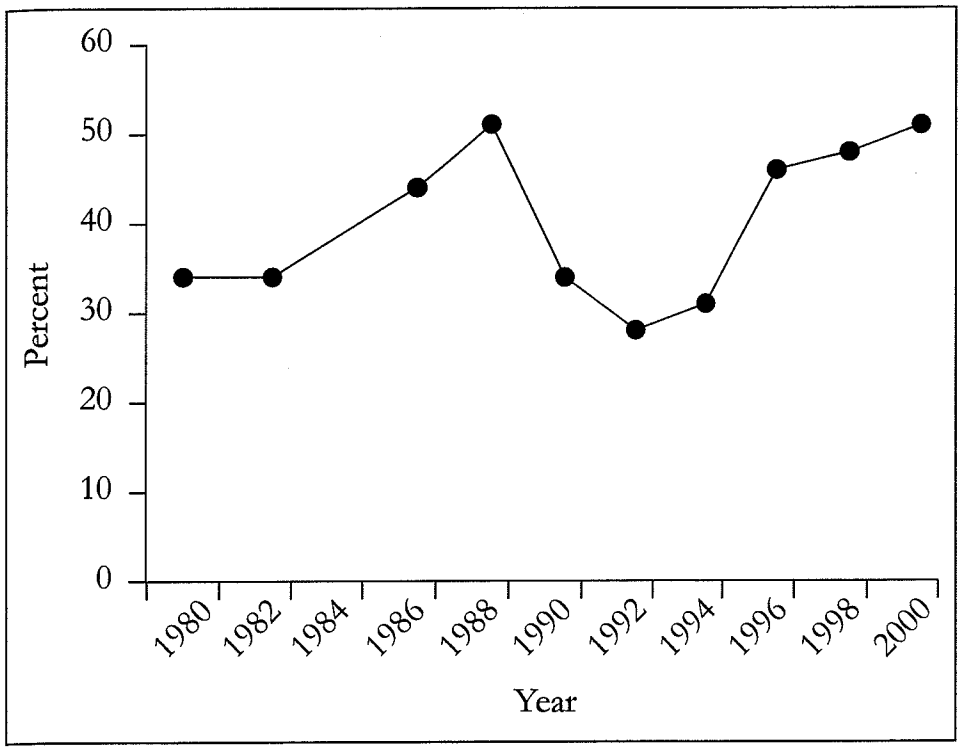

Figure 3. Approval of Congress (1980–2000). Question: *"Do you approve or disapprove the way the U.S. Congress is handling its job?"* Source: National Election Study

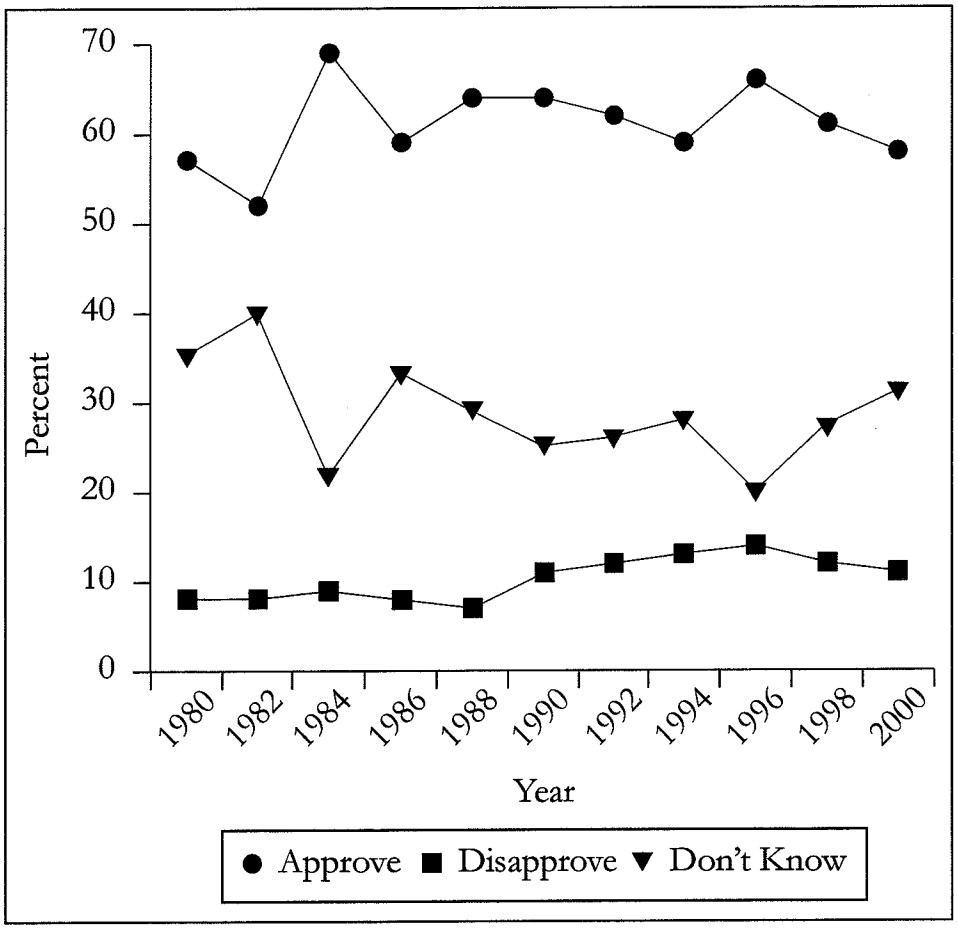

Figure 4. Approval of Congressmember Running for Re-election (1980-2000). Question: *"Do you approve or disapprove the way the way _____ is handling his/her job?"* Source: National Election Study

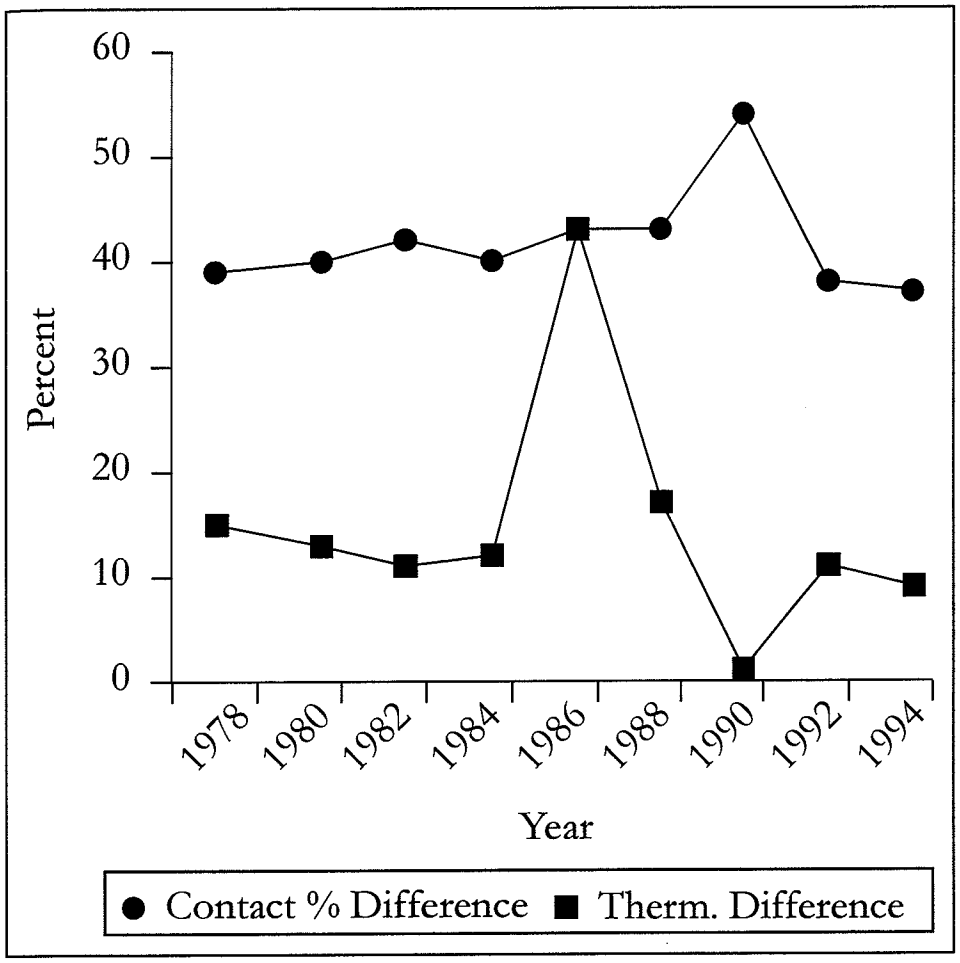

Figure 5. Incumbent/challenger - Contact & Thermometer Difference

Tables

Table 1
1994 NES Sample - Descriptive Statistics

Variable	% of Sample
Age: 31–45	36.1
Female	53.4
White	86.3
Years of Education: 13–16	38.6
Years of Education: 17+	10.3
Income: $25K–$45K	33.8
Region: South	36.5

Table 2
Contact with Representative and Candidates
Descriptive Statistics (1994 NES Sample)

Variables	Percent of Sample		
	House	Candidates	
	Representative	Democrat	Republican
Age Group			
18–30	9.7	18.2	20.3
31–45	36.1	37.8	40
46–55	25	12.9	13.5
56–70	16.7	19.3	16.5
71+	12.5	11.8	9.6
Strength of Party ID			
Strong Democrat	19.4	17.1	12.3
Weak Democrat/ Leaner	32	32.4	27.9
Independent	2.8	8.8	8.5
Weak Republican/ Leaner	27.8	26.2	29.7
Strong Republican	18.1	15.3	21.5
Other	0	.2	.3
Education			
Less than 12 years	5.6	16.6	9.7
12 years	23.6	36.5	35.8
13–16 years	25	37.7	41.7
17+ years	45.8	10.8	12.8
Female	58.3	52.6	52.1
Income (respondent's)			
$4,999 or less	0	3.9	3.3
$5,000–$24,999	25.8	33.1	28.9
$25,000–$49,999	31.5	38	36.3
$50,000–$74,999	15.7	15.7	18.8
$75,000–$104,999	11.4	5.2	7.5
$105,000+	15.7	4.1	5.6
Employed	83.6	79.9	82.8

Race			
Asian	0	1.3	5.6
American Indian/ Alaska Native	1.5	.9	.7
Black	14.7	11.5	5.6
White	83.8	86.3	92.6
Region			
North East	18.1	13.8	11.5
North Central	20.8	30.9	31.7
South	38.9	34.2	36.2
West	22.2	21.1	20.7

Table 3
1994 NES Sample—% indicating positive quality in their representative

Variable	% by sample grouping		
	Contacted	Not Contacted	Sample
Special	50	22.5	19.3
Helpful	95.5	80.9	72.7
Keep in Touch	90.1	69.8	83.2

Table 4
Top Three Likes and Dislikes by Party

Likes	Dislikes
Honest/sincere, keeps promise (D1) (R2)	Campaign tactics (D1) (R1)
A good Democrat/Republican (R1)	Very liberal (D2)
Helps the district (D2)	Dishonest/insincere, breaks promise (D3) (R2)
Represents (well) the views of the district (D3)	Inexperience (R3)
Very conservative (R3)	

Notes

1. Information also included analyses obtained from Congress and the New Politics by John Saloma (1969).
2. The "NES conducts national surveys of the American electorate in presidential and midterm election years and carries out research and development work through pilot studies in odd-numbered years. The NES time-series now encompasses 23 biennial election studies spanning five decades." http://www.umich.edu/~nes/overview/overview.htm. Visited on 11/27/02
3. The question read: "Overall, who do you trust to do a better job coping with the main problems the nation faces over the next few years, (George W. Bush) or the (Democratic Congress)?"
4. "The GSS (General Social Survey) is an almost annual "omnibus," personal interview survey of U.S. households conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC)... The first survey took place in 1972 and since then more than 38,000 respondents have answered over 3,260 different questions." (http://www.icpsr.umich.edu:8080/GSS/homepage.htm) visited 11/27/02.
5. "The Harris Poll publishes new survey data on a wide variety of subjects including politics, the economy, health care, foreign affairs, science and technology, sports and entertainment, and lifestyles. Many of the survey questions are repeated throughout the years, thereby providing invaluable trend lines." http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll. Visited 11/27/02.
6. It is important to note, that the contacted and not contacted samples only include individuals who responded to both of the questions in each case (N average = 430). The "sample" statistic includes all of the respondents irregardless to whether they answered the contact questions (average N= 450 except for the "special" variable where N=1491).
7. Gujarati describes the "classic" symptoms of multicollinearity as R2 in excess of .8 with few significant t ratios (1995:335). Gujarati also states that this is not an infallible guide in models involving more than two explanatory variables. Therefore, the analysis includes other measures.
8. The question read: "Think of ___ who ran for the U.S. House of representatives from this district in the last election. Have you come into contact with or learned anything about (him/her) through any of these ways?"

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