Talking about Congress: The Limited Effect of Congressional Advertising on Congressional Approval

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Abstract

Fenno's (1978) classic statement that politicians run *for* Congress by running *against* Congress has long been taken as fact. However, neither the actions of congressmen nor public reactions have been thoroughly tested. This study combines new data on congressional advertising with survey data and finds that candidates only infrequently mention Congress. Moreover, congressional approval is unchanged in the wake of critical ads. These results are confirmed experimentally. Subjects viewing an ad supportive of Congress were less likely to support the ad sponsor, but there were no effects of either supportive or critical ads on respondent's attitudes toward Congress.

Mark Twain once famously quipped that congressmen are the only "distinctly native American criminal class." To hear some congressional candidates talk, they also hold distinctly negative opinions of the legislature. Consider Iowa Senator Jim Leach, who noted in a television advertisement in 2002, "if there was one thing that I could change it would be the moral fiber of Washington." Florida Representative Vern Buchanan lamented in 2008 that "gas prices reach new highs, the border still not secure, spending out of control, and Congress does nothing." South Carolina Senate candidate, Buddy Witherspoon, was more direct in 2008, stating, "Washington's become the problem. I refuse to be a part of that system of corruption. Start with term limits, ethics, ban contributions from corporate lobbyists and big oil companies. It's time for Americans to take back America."[1] Given what candidates appear to think of Congress, then, it is perhaps not surprising that approximately 85 percent of Americans disapprove of the way Congress is handling its job (Jones 2014).

Congressional researchers have long conjectured a direct link between criticism by members of Congress and low congressional approval (Cook 1979; Farnsworth 2003; Fenno 1978; Lipinski 2004; Parker 1981; Patterson and Magleby 1992). And political scientists are not the only ones concerned. A House Report from 1977 suggested that congressional approval would increase if only incumbents would stop attacking Congress (cited in Parker 1981). Ten years later, on the Senate floor, Wisconsin Senator William Proxmire, after noting that "no one and I mean nobody ever defends the Congress," urged his colleagues to "stand up for this institution" (cited in Patterson and Caldeira 1990). It is now simply received wisdom that "members of Congress run *for* Congress by running *against* it" (Fenno 1978, p. 168). However, this particular claim has only rarely been put to an empirical test (c.f., Lipinski 2004) and no work to date has evaluated the effects of this electoral strategy on public opinion.

Using new data from congressional advertisements, I show that most of the expectations

about the extent of and response to congressional criticism are not supported by the evidence. Congressional criticism is rare. Moreover, any effects of such criticism are limited and ephemeral. Survey respondents living in media markets where many ads critical of Congress were aired are no less likely to express approval of Congress than respondents living in areas where no such ads were aired. These results are robust to a variety of model specifications and alternate data sources. I replicate these null findings using original experimental evidence, where neither an ad critiquing Congress nor one offering support for Congress influenced congressional approval relative to an ad that did not mention Congress.

Understanding what does or *does not* influence congressional approval is critical, as recent research has demonstrated that low approval of Congress can have wide-ranging consequences. Specifically, congressional approval influences congressional elections through attitudes toward the incumbent (Born 1990), majority party vote share (Jones and McDermott 2009), and changes in party seats, especially in key elections, such as 1994 or 2006 (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Hibbing and Tiritilli 1997; Jones and McDermott 2009, 2011; Mann and Ornstein 1994). Second, low levels of congressional approval have also been found to change legislative behavior (Cooper 1999; Dancey 2010; Parker 1981). As one example of this, Lipinski (2004) surveyed members of Congress in the mid-1990s and found that a majority said it was harder to do their jobs during times of low approval, claiming that legislating was more difficult because of increased public apathy and reduced risk tolerance on the part of the representative. Third, interest in holding congressional office decreases when public opinion toward Congress is more negative (Fowler and McClure 1990; Maestas et al. 2006; Wolak 2007). Finally, Hetherington (1998) showed that an individual's trust in government more broadly was significantly linked to his approval of Congress.

In the following sections, I first review the literature surrounding the links between congressional criticism and congressional approval. Next, I describe new data on how

candidates talk about Congress in their campaign ads, as well as the survey and experimental data I use to test claims about the role of congressional criticism. I then present results about what kinds of candidates are more likely to criticize Congress, as well as the effects such criticism has on congressional approval and for approval of the candidates themselves. I conclude by exploring some of the implications of these findings for how we think about what is driving low congressional approval.

Understanding the Received Wisdom: Running Against Congress

> Members of Congress run *for* Congress by running *against* Congress. The strategy is ubiquitous, addictive, cost-free and foolproof ... In the short run, everybody plays and nearly everybody wins. Yet the institution bleeds from 435 separate cuts. In the long run, therefore, somebody may lose. (Fenno 1978, p. 168)

The above quote from *Home Style* succinctly encapsulates theories of candidate behavior and the public reaction to it that are now deeply ingrained in how we think about campaigns. Specifically, Fenno makes three testable claims: (1) that all congressional candidates criticize Congress, (2) that they do so because it is effective electorally, and (3) that doing so has deleterious effects on how the public views Congress.

The only direct test of any of Fenno's claims comes from Lipinski (2004), who analyzed franked mail from a sample of districts from 1991 to 1995.[2] He found that approximately 65 percent of members analyzed sent positive messages about Congress; only 22 percent sent critical messages. Positive messages, not surprisingly, came overwhelmingly from the majority. This finding is dramatically different from Fenno's observation of "ubiquity," but there are some reasons we might expect messages in franked mail to differ from those in public speeches. Most importantly, congressional rules mandate that franked mail cannot

speak in partisan terms. When a member of the Democratic majority wants to claim credit for the passage of a key bill, therefore, she must do so in non-partisan terms. An easy way to do that is to frame the bill passage as an accomplishment of the Congress as a whole and hope informed constituents will make the appropriate connection to the majority party. In fact, 89 percent of members of Congress surveyed by Lipinski said they thought members' franked mail often used "Congress" to refer to actions of the majority party. Even accounting for partisan motivations, however, Lipinski's data show that members of the minority also frequently expressed support for Congress.

Fenno's second contention is that criticizing Congress is electorally beneficial for candidates. Lipinski, Bianco and Work (2003), using the same franked mail data, found that making positive statements about Congress (what the authors refer to as "loyalty") increased the likelihood of defeat for Democratic incumbents in 1994, though institutional loyalty did not seem to impact Republican members' electoral fortunes. Their data suggest that institutional *disloyalty*–or criticizing Congress in campaign ads–may lead to positive electoral outcomes.[3] However, research on ads that attack an opponent[4] would predict the reverse: Lau, Sigelman and Rovner (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of over 100 studies on attack ads and found that the sponsor of such ads often faced a backlash from voters. The authors conclude that attacking one's opponent is, in general, not a good campaign strategy.[5]

Finally, Fenno predicts that criticism of Congress by its own members will depress public support for the institution.[6] Many authors have taken Fenno's conjecture at face value (Cook 1979; Parker 1981; Patterson and Magleby 1992). Others provide limited empirical evidence to support Fenno's claims (Farnsworth 2003; Lipinski 2004). Several authors also point to the example of Newt Gingrich (Elving 1994; Fried and Harris 2001; Mann and Ornstein 2012). In the late-1980s and early-1990s, Gingrich led a concerted effort to depress congressional approval as a means of indicting the long-standing

Democratic majority. Although no studies provide any causal evidence, these authors link the effort of Gingrich and his colleagues to the decreased congressional approval of the early 1990s. David Broder extends this argument, claiming that Republicans were able to avoid losing their new-found majority in 1996 by moderating their campaign strategy to boost congressional approval (cited in Jones and McDermott 2009).

Additional evidence that attacks on Congress may lead to lower public approval of Congress can also be found in the literature on attack ads. Lau, Sigelman and Rovner's (2007) meta-analysis finds that attitudes toward the target of an attack ad fall slightly.[7] Moreover, while many of the studies analyzed by Lau and his colleagues had results that pointed in opposite directions (some showing positive effects, others showing equally sizable negative effects), one area in which the findings were overwhelmingly negative (if perhaps substantively small) was in terms of people's trust in or satisfaction with government. Among 40 studies that evaluated opinions toward the political system, 33 report negative effects of attack ads. Both of these findings suggest that ads critical of Congress should indeed lead to more negative attitudes toward the legislature.

Harbridge and Malhotra's (2011) well-designed experimental research on attitudes toward bipartisanship in Congress also lends credence to the idea that negative information about Congress can depress public attitudes. Their survey informed respondents about the level of bipartisanship during a recent session of Congress, either in bill introduction (low) or bill passage (high). When respondents were then asked about their confidence in Congress, those exposed to the bill introduction treatment were significantly less confident than those in the bill passage group.

To summarize the literature, while Fenno predicted criticizing Congress was a "ubiquitous" and "foolproof" strategy, the evidence to date suggests we might find that such critical ads are neither ubiquitous nor foolproof. In his analysis, Lipinski (2004) showed members were three times as likely to be loyal to Congress than to criticize it,

though he and his colleagues did find that criticizing Congress was the better strategy electorally. The negative advertising literature, on the other hand, finds that members who attack their opponents do so at their own peril, a pattern that may extend to members who criticize Congress. Finally, while the empirical evidence is quite limited, it all appears to confirm Fenno's conjecture that criticizing Congress depresses congressional approval.

This paper aims to directly evaluate who criticizes Congress through their television advertising and whether such criticism influences opinions toward the ad sponsor or toward Congress. Using a wealth of data on congressional communication and public opinion, as well as experimental results to bolster the findings, I am able to address many of the shortcomings of the research to date. First, the reach of advertising is wider than franked mail and the content of such ads is less strictly monitored by the Federal Election Commission than franked mail is by the Franking Commission. By developing new data on how advertisements talk about Congress, I am now able to use this much richer dataset of congressional communications. Second, the combination of observational and experimental results on the impact of criticism on electoral success is broader (in that it covers more candidates) and more nuanced than previous findings. Third, the recent increase in interest in attitudes toward Congress has made it possible to bring data to bear on these questions. In years past, there simply was not enough survey data on congressional approval to parse the relationship between criticism and approval. These observational results are also enhanced by experimental results testing an explicitly causal claim about the role of congressional criticism.

Data and Methods

Evaluating the extent and effect of congressional criticism requires data on congressional advertising as well as survey data on attitudes toward Congress. I use advertising data

compiled by the University of Wisconsin Advertising Project for the campaigns in 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2008.[8] These data include "storyboards" of each ad, which provide a complete transcript as well as images from every fourth second of the ad. The data track every instance that an ad was aired, including information on the date(s) and media market(s) in which the ad was broadcast.[9] Additionally, the research team at Wisconsin compiled a variety of information about the content and sponsor of each advertisement. Unfortunately, the data do not include information on incumbent status or who ultimately won the election. To account for this, I merged Wisconsin's data with information from the Federal Election Commission (FEC) about the candidates in each race.[10]

The work done to date on negative advertising has focused on criticism of the opposing candidate rather than attacks on other important political objects, such as the parties or Congress.[11] The Wisconsin team helpfully rated each ad as to whether it promoted a sponsor, attacked an opponent, or contrasted the candidates; however, my data are the first to rate ads on whether they criticize Congress. Each of more than 10,000 ads aired in these campaigns is classified as to whether it mentions Congress and, if so, whether the comments are negative, positive, or neutral. I worked with coders on Amazon's Mechanical Turk and a similar website, Elance, to make these classifications. While it is not always easy to determine how to code the candidates' statements,[12] I had 85 percent inter-rater reliability as to both whether Congress was mentioned and how the candidate discussed the institution. For more information on how I developed this measure, as well as text from some example advertisements, see Appendix A.

I also use data on public opinion toward Congress from the 2008 National Annenberg Election Study (NAES). The NAES study was implemented using a rolling cross-section design, which allows researchers to examine the election dynamics over the course of the survey period. Moreover, the data from this election are particularly appropriate for my work as congressional approval was asked throughout the survey period (from January

through November 2008).[13] Because of the rolling cross-sectional design, I can treat the date of interview as a random variable itself (Johnston and Brady 2002) and evaluate how respondents react to the campaign as it is happening, including how they react to any campaign ads that are critical of Congress. Overall, approval of Congress fell during the course of 2008, as figure 1 shows.

[[Figure 1 about here]]

In the main model below, I identify the ads aired by any House or Senate candidate in the survey respondent's media market in the two weeks prior to the date the survey took place. Media markets and congressional districts do not neatly align, so in many cases, respondents may be seeing ads for candidates running in different districts or even different states. I discuss several models below, and provide further robustness checks and alternate models in Appendix B. In all cases, the results are largely similar to those reported below.

In addition to these observational results, I also ran a survey experiment to assess more explicitly causal claims about the effects of criticism of Congress. I created three mock ads, based on text from actual ads in the Wisconsin database: one ad criticized Congress, one ad made positive statements about Congress, and the third ad did not mention Congress. The two treatment ads were designed to be as similar as possible in both visuals and language. Specifically, I identified ads with content that was positive toward Congress and borrowed language from several to create the positive ad. I then reversed the tone of all statements that implied support of Congress to create the negative ad. The video clips used in both were identical, though not necessarily in the same order. The control ad text was taken almost verbatim from a real ad, aired in 2002, and features some unique video clips.[14] While one campaign ad may be insufficient to influence attitudes, the Harbridge and Malhotra (2011) results suggest that even a short statement about Congress can substantively change confidence in Congress.

After viewing a randomly-assigned ad, respondents were asked about their likelihood of voting for the candidate appearing in the ad as well as their judgment about whether the candidate was honest, knowledgeable, or "someone like you." Later in the survey, respondents were asked about their approval of Congress.[15] The survey was administered to a diverse national sample by Survey Sampling International to 1,023 respondents;[16] however, 52 respondents indicated they had trouble viewing the advertisements and were dropped from the analysis, giving a functional sample size of 971.

Results

Who Criticizes Congress?

Criticizing Congress is easy, and may be an effective way for representatives to connect with their constituents, but how often does it happen? Rarely. In advertising data spanning four elections, only nine percent of ads even talk about Congress. Furthermore, not all of these ads are critical of the legislature. Seventy-eight percent of ads that mention Congress do so in a critical way, but many (19 percent) are neutral and some (3 percent) are even supportive of Congress. Looking at the 1701 candidates in my dataset,[17] only 31 percent, or 525, of candidates air *any* ads that mention Congress; twenty-two percent (118) of these candidates only speak about Congress in a neutral or positive way. This leaves only 407 candidates across four elections who criticize Congress in at least one of their campaign ads.

If congressional criticism is not ubiquitous, who is more likely to criticize? Figure 2 shows the percent of ads aired by candidates that are critical of Congress. Challengers are much more likely to criticize Congress than are incumbents (panel a). On average, 11 percent of challengers ads are critical of Congress, while only 4 percent of incumbents' ads were critical, a statistically significant difference.[18] This accords with findings in the

literature on attack ads, where challengers are also more likely to "go negative" (Kaid 2004). Other results in the left column show that more extreme candidates[19] (panel b) and candidates who ultimately lose their elections (panel c) are also more likely to criticize Congress. However, both these results are driven by the fact that challengers are more likely to be extreme and to lose. Once I control for incumbency, these differences disappear.[20]

[[Figure 2 about here]]

Data in the right column show that there are no statistically significant differences between Senators and Representatives (panel d), nor are there differences by whether the candidates' party is in the majority or minority in Congress (panel e).[21] This finding runs contrary to Lipinski (2004), who found the minority party was much more likely to criticize Congress in their franked mail messages. The difference likely relates to constraints on partisanship in franked mail–the minority is not permitted to explicitly criticize the opposing party in franked mail and so uses "Congress" as a stand-in for the majority party. In television advertising, no such constraints exist.

Finally, there are large and statistically significant differences across election (panel f). Specifically, in the early 2000s, when public approval of Congress was relatively high (around 40 percent approved of the job the Congress was doing), few candidates criticized Congress in their advertisements. By 2008, however, congressional approval dropped; as figure 1 showed, approval was around 27 percent in February 2008 and had fallen to 16 percent by Election Day in November. In this election, nearly 15 percent of ads aired were critical of Congress, as opposed to an average of 5 percent of ads in the previous elections. Fenno (1978) believed that candidates criticized Congress as a means to connect with his constituents. If this is indeed the reasoning behind congressional criticism, then it is not surprising to find additional criticism being levied at Congress when more of a member's

district is likely to disapprove of the job they are doing.

Does Running Against Congress Improve a Candidate's Electoral Prospects?

The observational evidence in panel (c) of figure 2 suggests that congressional criticism is not a winning strategy, but these data are not suited to make such causal claims. Instead, I turn to my experimental results. After viewing one of three ads–one that criticized Congress, one that supported Congress, and a control ad that did not refer to Congress–respondents answered questions about their probability of voting for the candidate and their impressions of the candidate's characteristics. The results in figure 3 show that congressional criticism has very little impact on the public's perception of the ad sponsor. This figure graphs coefficients and confidence intervals from regressions of the stated dependent variable (standardized) on dummy variables for the two treatment conditions. Because the dependent variables are standardized, the results should be interpreted as how many standard deviations the dependent variable changes when the respondent viewed a treatment ad relative to the control ad.

[[Figure 3 about here]]

Panel (a) of figure 3 shows that viewing an ad critical of Congress made respondents no more or less likely to support the candidate relative to viewing the control ad. In fact, the critical ad only influenced perceptions of candidate honesty, where respondents who saw this ad were 0.25 standard deviations more likely to perceive the ad sponsor as honest relative to those who saw the control ad. These experimental findings lend credence to the observational results: running ads critical of Congress is unlikely to change a candidate's electoral fortunes.

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On the other hand, the results in figure 3 caution against supporting Congress. Respondents who saw the supportive ad were 0.18 standard deviations less likely to vote for the ad sponsor. This result seems primarily due to a similarly large decrease in respondents' impressions that the candidate was "like them."[22] This result lends credence to Fenno's (1978) assertion that supporting Congress could drive a wedge between candidates and their district. It also echoes Lipinski's (2004) findings that institutional loyalty leads to electoral defeat.

Does Congressional Criticism Influence Congressional Approval?

The results thus far show that congressional criticism is far from ubiquitous and that it is unlikely to be foolproof. But does congressional criticism play a role in depressing people's attitudes toward Congress? Looking at a basic comparison between survey respondents who were potentially exposed to any ads critical of Congress in the past two weeks and those who were not, it appears that negative advertising has a substantively and statistically strong effect, reducing congressional approval by approximately four percentage points. However, this result is driven primarily by the fact that respondents were more likely to see such ads during the later months of the election, just as approval of Congress was dropping.[23] Including fixed effects for month eliminates any statistical or substantive relationship between the airing of negative advertisements and respondent congressional approval.[24]

Figure 4 shows that these null results are robust to a more complicated model. This figure shows coefficients and 95 percent confidence intervals for all demographic, political, and ad-related variables in my primary model, where the dependent variable is a binary measure of congressional approval. The independent variable of interest is the log of the number of ads critical of Congress that were aired in the survey respondent's media market in the two weeks prior to the date of interview. In this regression, I control for a range of

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demographic and political variables known to correlate with congressional approval, including presidential approval (Abramowitz February 11, 2010; Lebo 2008) and political knowledge (Mondak et al. 2007). I also control for media-related variables, such as the number of hours of television watched the previous evening and the total number of congressional campaign ads aired in the media market during the previous two weeks (also logged). Finally, the regression includes linear time trends for each media market (though these coefficients are not shown in the figure).[25] All continuous variables have been standardized.

[[Figure 4 about here]]

As Figure 4 shows, many variables behave as we would predict. Presidential approval is the strongest positive correlate with congressional approval (Lebo 2008). Additionally, as Mondak et al. (2007) and others have shown, when political knowledge increases, congressional approval falls. Democrats are much more likely to approve of a legislative body entirely controlled by Democrats (as it was in 2008) than are Independents or Republicans. While these expected relationships are all born out by this analysis, the coefficient on the variable of interest, "number of ads criticizing Congress (log)" is substantively small and statistically insignificant. There does not appear to be a relationship between critical advertisements and low congressional approval.

It may be, however, that congressional criticism only has an effect if viewers are subjected to a large number of such ads. The data shown in figure 5 investigates this possibility. This figure plots the coefficients and 95 percent confidence intervals for several alternate variables of interest. The top line in the figure provides the coefficient and confidence interval from the full model shown in figure 4 as a point of comparison. The next two lines show the results where, in place of the logged number of critical ads, I use dummy variables indicating whether (respectively) 200 or 500 critical ads were aired in the

respondents' media market in the previous two weeks. As the figure shows, both variables are statistically insignificant, though the coefficient on "more than 500 ads" is noticeably larger. Specifically, the coefficient (-0.025) is somewhat more negative than the coefficient on having some college or more in the main regression (-0.017), though that coefficient was statistically significant.

[[Figure 5 about here]]

The fourth line in figure 5 evaluates whether ads from different sources have more or less influence on public opinion. Specifically, constituents might expect challengers to criticize Congress as a means of demonstrating their superiority to the sitting candidate, and thus not react to their critique. Incumbents, on the other hand, are part of Congress and might be an unexpected source of criticism. Research has shown that people put more stock in claims made by unexpected sources (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007) and, therefore, the effects of incumbent criticism may be greater. As members of the institution in question, moreover, the statements of incumbents might also be seen as more credible (Birnbaum and Stegner 1979). These data, though, show no differences in the effects of incumbent ads on congressional approval relative to ads aired by any candidates. Both effects are statistically insignificant and substantively small.[26]

Finally, the final line in figure 5 attempts to correct for endogeneity in my estimates. It may be that candidates running in districts that are relatively more critical of Congress are more likely to air ads that criticize the legislature. Therefore, were I to observe a relationship between congressional criticism and low congressional approval, the direction of causation would actually be running from public attitudes *toward* critical advertising, rather than the direction I hypothesize. To account for this possibility, I exploit the fact that many media markets cover several congressional districts and that respondents living in these districts will view ads directed toward constituents in another district. The

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regression in the final line of figure 5, then, uses as a dependent variable the (logged) number of ads critical of Congress that were aired by candidates running in districts other than the respondent's. The coefficient on this variable is almost exactly the same size as in the original regression and remains statistically insignificant.

Appendix B contains a variety of additional robustness checks and alternative measures, all of which show results of similar size and significance.

Observational results cannot necessarily identify a causal relationship between congressional criticism and congressional approval. However, I complement these findings with my experimental results. Because respondents were randomly assigned to view an ad critical of Congress, as opposed to an ad that is supportive or one that does not mention Congress, I can attribute any differences in congressional approval to viewing the critical ad. Figure 6 shows that, as with the observational results, viewing an ad critical of Congress does not influence congressional approval. Similarly, there is no effect of viewing the ad supportive of Congress. These results may be an indication that congressional approval is so low that an ad criticizing Congress cannot push it lower. However, only a third of respondents selected the most extreme negative attitude toward Congress and congressional approval does vary as a function of other variables. For example, respondents who indicated they would be likely to vote for the candidate in the ad were a statistically significantly 10 percentage points more likely to approve of Congress. It seems that congressional approval *did* move in ways we would expect, but that the advertising message *about Congress* may not have a particularly strong effect on approval.

[[Figure 6 about here]]

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Conclusion

The evidence presented in this paper is, to my knowledge, the first rigorous test of Fenno's (1978) oft-repeated claims about congressional criticism. His wide-ranging insights into how members of Congress communicate with their constituents included observations that (1) all candidates criticize Congress, (2) this is an effective electoral strategy designed to connect a candidate with his constituents, and (3) this criticism causes public attitudes toward Congress to fall. I find that few candidates criticize Congress, a strategy that does not help them come Election Day, and that these messages have little to no effect on attitudes toward Congress. On the other hand, Fenno's suggestion that congressional criticism serves as a way for candidates to establish connections with his constituents appears to be born out by the experimental results. In particular, candidates who criticize Congress may be seen as more similar to their constituents than those who support Congress, a key valence advantage during a time when many view Washington, DC, as geographically and psychologically distant.

These results, though compelling, leave some open questions. First, are my results time-bound? Perhaps there may have been an impact of congressional criticism when Fenno did his research in the 1970s. But, since then, approval has fallen so far or criticism has become so common-place that the causal relationship has faded. This is unlikely, as congressional criticism appears to be, if anything, rarer than when Fenno did his work and, moreover, congressional approval has not linearly decreased since Fenno's time. Indeed, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw some of the highest levels of congressional approval in the history of the time series.

Second, what are the differences in the effect of congressional criticism across mode of contact? It is notable that Fenno (1978), Lipinski (2004), and myself all evaluated different types of communication: stump speeches, franked mail, and television advertising,

respectively. If, as the findings demonstrate, the likelihood of congressional criticism varies by mode, do people's reactions to such criticism *also* vary? Also, do these disparate findings illustrate a larger pattern of stylistic differences across mode of communication? Political science research to date (understandably) has tended to focus on congressional communication via one outlet, such as television advertising (Lau, Sigelman and Rovner 2007), press releases (Grimmer 2013), twitter feeds (Golbeck, Grimes and Rogers 2010), or websites (Druckman, Kifer and Parkin 2009). Perhaps we need to start evaluating whether and how communication strategies vary across these media.

Third, what distinguishes my experimental results from those of Harbridge and Malhotra (2011)? Why did they find statistically- and substantively-significant effects on confidence in Congress while I have null results? There are several key differences between our experiments. The message content–personal opinion in the case of my work and factual in the case of Harbridge and Malhotra–likely influenced the effects. Knowing that one more person dislikes Congress may not provide information that causes people to update their attitudes toward Congress in the same way that statistics about bipartisanship could. Similarly, the message source may be important. Harbridge and Malhotra do not provide an explicit source cue, perhaps encouraging respondents to view the (presumably well-informed) survey researcher as the source. In my experiment, the ad is narrated by the purported candidate, who may be seen as less trustworthy than an academic researcher.

The fact that I find no substantive impact of congressional criticism on congressional approval over the course of a variety of empirical tests suggests the need for additional scholarly focus on the causes of low congressional approval and how, if at all, members can influence opinions of their institution. An easy answer in the past was that members should cease criticizing Congress, but it appears that will have little influence on public opinion. Perhaps Fenno (1978) may have an answer: he notes that members spend a lot of time educating their constituents about their own behavior but will not waste political

capitol on educating the public about Congress. The literature on congressional approval has coalesced on the idea that people dislike Congress largely because they do not understand the complex inner-workings of the legislature (Davidson 1999; Durr, Gilmour and Wolbrecht 1997; Mann and Ornstein 2006). Hibbing (2002) concludes his aptly-titled article, "How to Make Congress Popular," by noting

> the most promising approach to making Congress popular may be to work at convincing people that the policy decisions made in the legislature are important and that political conflict often occurs because not all ordinary people care about the same policy issues and have the same preferences for solutions to policy problem.

If members of Congress did a better job explaining the hows and whys of legislative behavior, the theory goes, the public would have a better appreciation for the legislature.

However, my results, in combination with Lipinski's (2004) earlier findings, suggest members of Congress are not likely to be willing to engage their constituents in this manner. If supporting Congress (even implicitly through education efforts) lowers your chances of victory come election day, few members will agree to do so. As countless articles have noted (Elving 1994; Hibbing 2002; Mayhew 1974), there is a collective action problem for Congress and no clear leader to hold members accountable for their behavior or to provide inducements to support Congress (Olson 1965).[27] Moreover, Mondak et al. (2007) takes a common finding–that the more politically knowledgeable tend to like Congress less–to its logical conclusion by calling into question the education campaign that other scholars propose. If more knowledge leads to less trust in the legislature, will Congress be served by spending political capital to educate the public? These open questions suggest a continued need for research into what motivates public distrust in the legislature and how members (or others) may be able to affect what people think about Congress.

Notes

[1]These are all direct quotes from advertisements obtained from the Wisconsin Advertising Project, which is described more below.

[2]Franked mail is official correspondence from a member of Congress, signed by the member as postage in lieu of a stamp.

[3]Cook (1979) also suggests that his results lend empirical support to Fenno's argument, though they do so far less directly than Lipinski's tests.

[4]While the literature uses a variety of terms to describe this kind of ad, including what might be ambiguous in this case–"negative"–I will always use the term "attack." Ads that are negative toward Congress will generally, though not exclusively, be referred to as "critical."

[5]Many of these studies suffer from endogeneity problems: a candidate down in the polls may be more likely to attack her opponent, but that does not mean the attack caused approval of the ad sponsor to fall. I take several steps, described below, to ameliorate similar concerns in this project.

[6]There are many possible ways to measure such support for Congress; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1998) explore the variations in "approval" for Congress that come from differently-phrased questions. Throughout this work, I look specifically at the question "Do you approve or disapprove of the way the US Congress is handling its job?" This question (or slight variants) has been asked more than 600 times since the 1970s (data collected by Durr, Gilmour and Wolbrecht (1997); Ramirez (2013); and myself).

[7]As mentioned above, however, attitudes toward the sponsor of the ad fall even more, which is why the authors claim this is not a good campaign strategy.

[8]This is a project of the University of Wisconsin Advertising Project that includes media tracking data from TNSMI/Campaign Media Analysis Group in Washington, D.C. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the

views of the University of Wisconsin Advertising Project (Goldstein and Rivlin 2005, 2007; Goldstein, Franz and Ridout 2002; Goldstein et al. 2011).

[9]In 2000, the data only cover the 75 largest markets; in 2002 and 2004, the data include the 100 largest markets; the 2008 data cover all media markets.

[10]In a few cases, candidates aired ads without filing with the FEC, but in these cases, given the strict FEC requirements, it was obvious that these candidates were neither incumbents nor winning candidates and so the ultimate coding was relatively straight-forward.

[11]Though not used in this paper, I also rated all ads as to how they discuss the political parties.

[12]For example, in 2008, Kentucky Representative John Yarmuth aired the following ad:

> I'm John Yarmuth. To me, public service is about helping people, listening to their concerns and making their lives better. Over the past two years, I've been to more than a thousand community meetings and events to hear from you how we can get our country moving again. You said college was too expensive, so I helped pass the biggest increase in financial aid in more than 60 years. You wanted us to help families afford health care so I fought to pass the largest expansion of children's health insurance in more than a decade and we doubled the child tax credit. And you felt Congress had not done enough to honor our veterans, so we passed the largest increase in veterans health care in history and a new GI bill giving our vets free college tuition. I also secured 45 million for our new VA hospital. Now I'm helping develop alternative energy, fighting to tap our oil reserves and increase production to reduce gas prices. I'm John Yarmuth and I approve this ad because I want to keep moving us forward, listening to you, taking your fight to Washington and getting results for Louisville families.

This ad discusses legislative successes in Congress, but does so only with an eye to the specific

role Yarmuth played. It also criticizes Congress' role in honoring war veterans and indicates that Yarmuth needs to "fight" in Washington. The ad was ultimately rated as speaking neutrally about Congress but, like many other ads, determining an appropriate rating was not straight-forward.

[13]In previous years, the NAES asked about confidence in Congress, but only during limited, pre-election, periods.

[14]See Appendix A for more information about how I created these ads.

[15]Respondents were also asked two manipulation check questions: whether the candidate was an incumbent (he was portrayed as such) and what policy areas were mentioned in the ad (there was no explicit policy content). Although respondents were not very accurate in these manipulation checks, the results shown below are robust to including only those who answered the questions correctly.

[16]SSI recruits participants through various online communities, social networks, and website ads. SSI makes efforts to recruit hard-to-reach groups, such as ethnic minorities and seniors. These potential participants are then screened and invited into the panel. When deploying a particular survey, SSI randomly selects panel participants for survey invitations. The survey did not employ quotas but asked SSI to recruit a target population that matched the (18 and over) census population on education, gender, age, geography, and income (based on pre-measured profile characteristics of the respondents). The resulting sample is not a probability sample, but is a diverse national sample.

[17]Technically, these are candidate-election observations, as I have not merged candidate data across elections. However, there are relatively few candidates who advertised in multiple years, so the results are unlikely to be substantively different were I to take this additional step.

[18]Throughout this paper, I will use a standard p-value of less than 0.05 to indicate statistical significance.

[19]I measure extremity here by a CF score (Bonica 2013) outside the [-1,1] range, a criteria that includes about a third of the candidates in my dataset. CF scores are preferable to the more commonly-used DW-NOMINATE (Poole and Rosenthal 2000) given that they are also calculated for challengers who never enter Congress. Nonetheless, results are comparable when DW-NOMINATE is used instead.

[20]These data do not support any causal claims about the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of ads that criticize Congress. As with research on attack ads, it may be that candidates resort to criticizing Congress when their campaigns are not going well. The fact that these same candidates go on to lose is not indicative of any effect of their strategy to criticize Congress. The experimental results below are better able to identify this causal relationship, at least for incumbent candidates.

[21]I did not include data from 2002 in this last analysis, as the parties each controlled one of the two chambers. The analysis also drops independent candidates.

[22]The sense that these two variables are linked that is provided by figure 3 is born out in a regression of vote for candidate on the three candidate characteristics. While all have statistically significant effects on probability of voting for the candidate, the relationship between vote and impressions that the candidate is "like you" is the strongest (both substantively and statistically).

[23]While approximately seven percent of NAES respondents interviewed prior to September were potentially exposed to ads critical of Congress, approximately 26 percent of respondents in September could have seen such ads, and nearly half of respondents interviewed in October had such ads aired in their media market.

[24]It is plausible that including fixed effects is inappropriate in this case–perhaps congressional approval is falling *because* of an increase in critical ads during this period. However, Appendix B presents results of an alternate analysis using a difference-in-difference design, where I also find null results. Because the difference-in-difference approach tracks "treated"

and "control" units separately throughout the election, I can separate the general pattern of falling approval from the specific effects of airing critical ads.

[25]Specifically, I include fixed effects for month and media market, as well as the interaction between the two.

[26]This regression depicted in the fourth line of figure 5 includes a control both for the total number of ads aired in the last two weeks, as the total number of ads from incumbent candidates; both were small and statistically insignificant but had some small effects on the coefficient on critical advertising.

[27]The party-based collective action solutions identified by Cox and McCubbins (2007) may not work for Congress as a whole given that the goals of the legislature may be conflict with those of the party.

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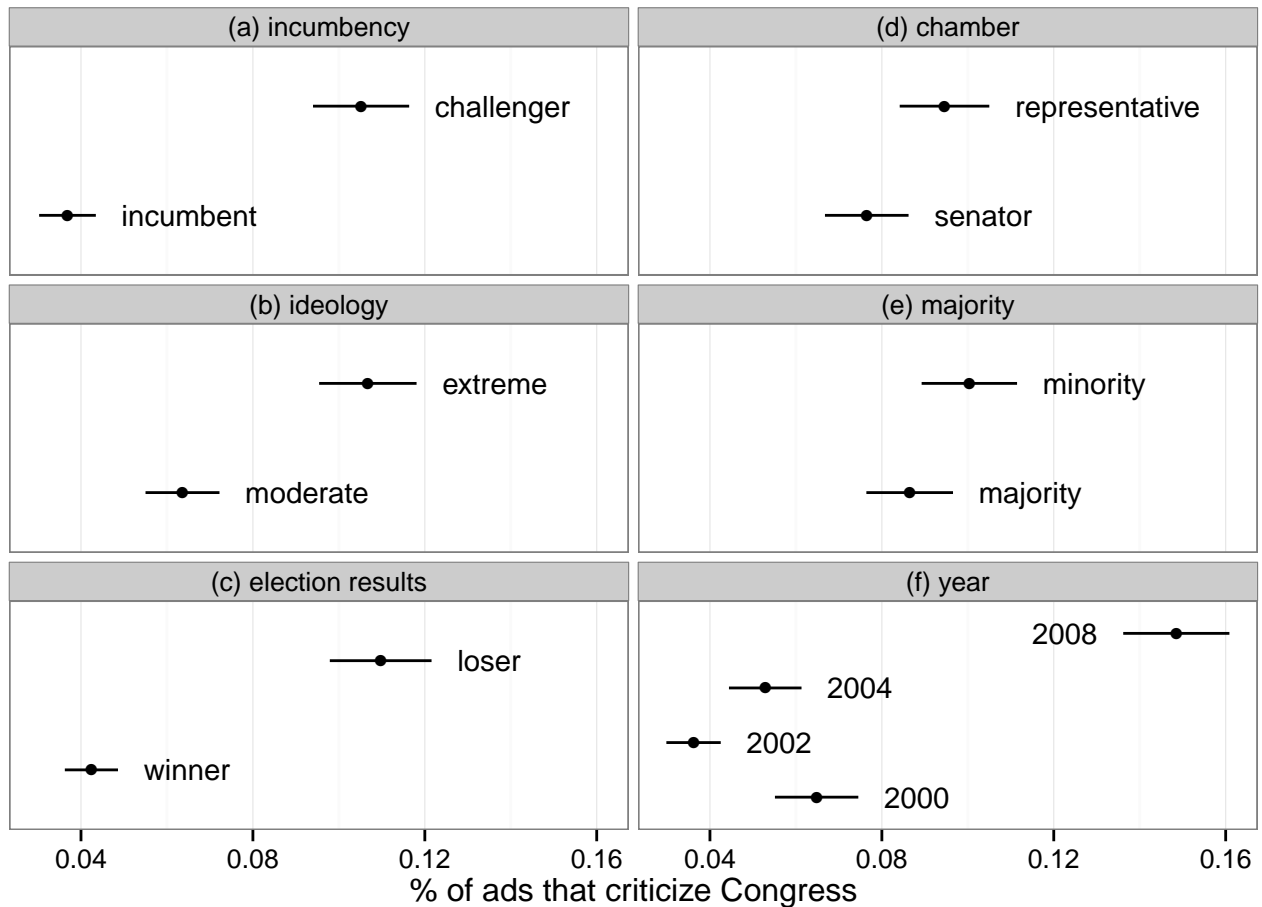
Figures

Figure 1: **Approval of Congress throughout 2008 election.** This figure shows average daily approval of Congress throughout 2008 (dotted line), along with average weekly approval (solid line). National approval of Congress fell from an average of 27 percent in February 2008 to 16 percent in October 2008.
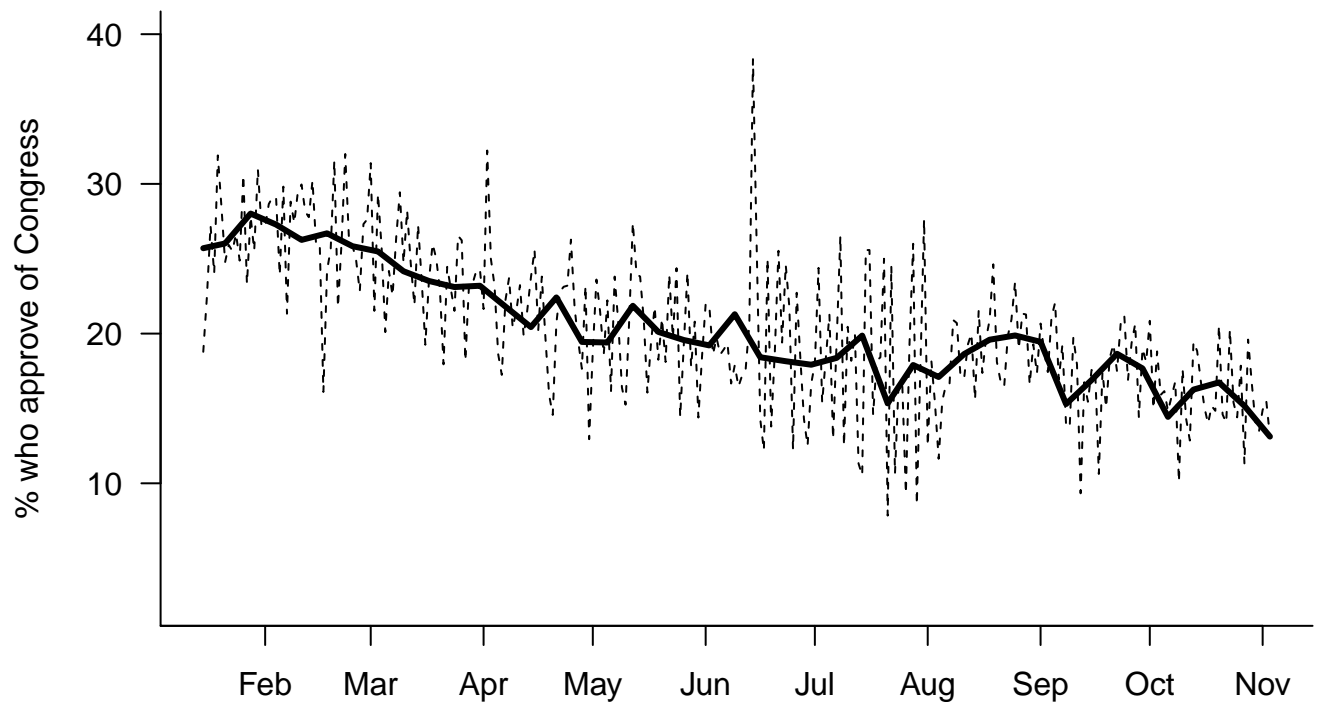

Source: 2008 National Annenberg Election Study.

Figure 2: **Percent of ads that criticize Congress.** This panels in this figure show comparisons of what percent of ads aired by different types of candidates were critical of Congress. Panel (a) compares incumbents and challengers; panel (b) compares ideologically extreme candidates to more moderate candidates; panel (c) compares candidates who ultimately won their election to those who lost; panel (d) compares members running for the House and Senate; panel (e) compares candidates in the majority and minority party; and panel (f) compares candidates running in the elections of 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2008. Differences in panels (a), (b), (c), and (f) are statistically significant, though differences in panels (b) and (c) are driven by incumbency status. Once incumbency is held constant, there are no differences in ads across ideology or electoral success.
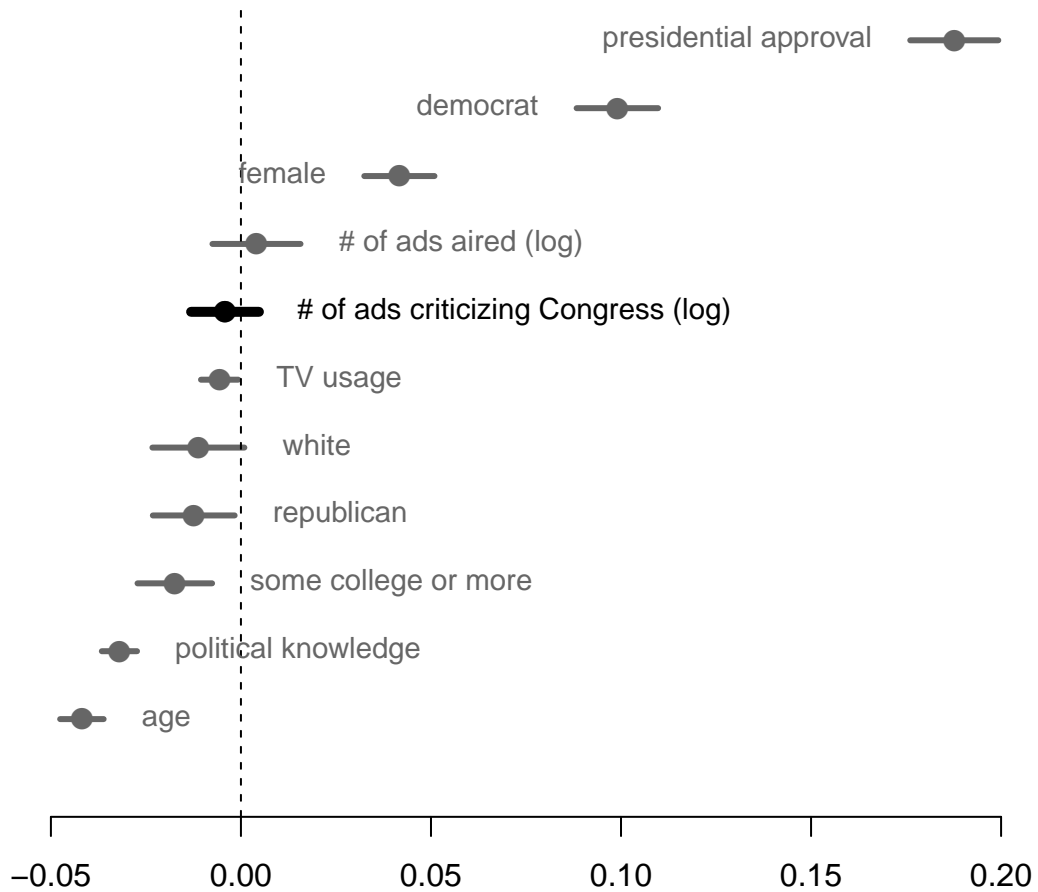

Source: Analysis of Wisconsin Advertising Project data.

Figure 3: **Effects of congressional criticism or support.** The panels in this figure show experimental treatment effects (and 95 percent confidence intervals) on several variables related to the ad sponsor, where all comparisons are to the control ad. The top line in each panel is for the ad supportive of Congress; the bottom line is for the ad critical of Congress. The dependent variables in each panel have been standardized, so effects can be interpreted as the standard deviation change, given that the respondent saw the supportive (critical) ad relative to if the same respondent had viewed the control ad. Panel (a) shows effects on likelihood of voting for the candidate; panel (b) shows effects on impressions that the candidate is someone like you; panel (c) shows effects on impressions of the candidate's knowledge; and panel (d) shows impressions of the candidate's honesty.
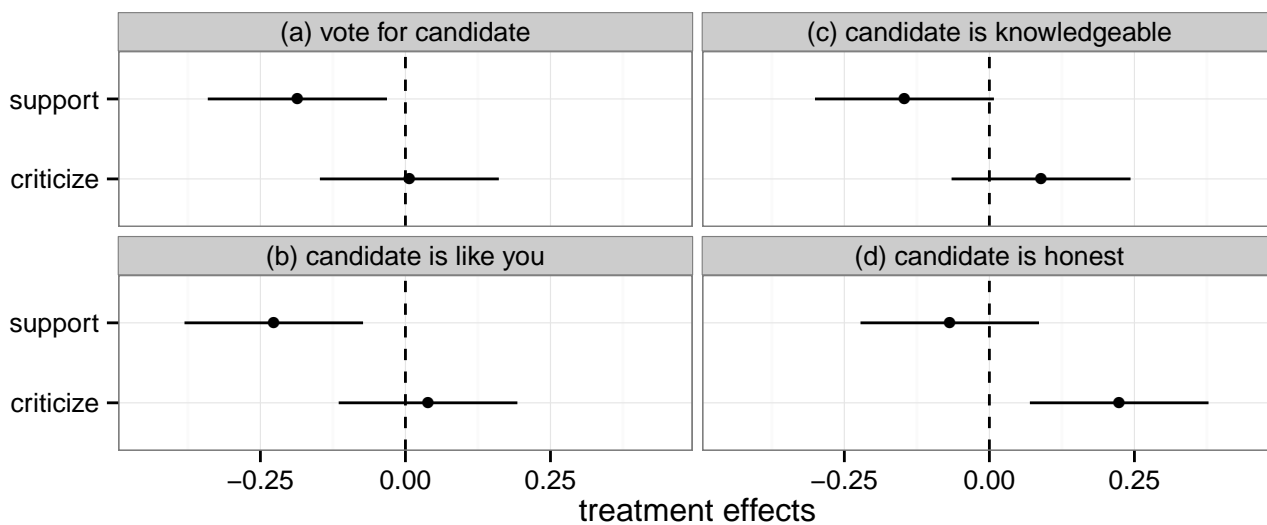

Source: Experimental results.

Figure 4: **What varies with congressional approval?** This figure plots the coefficients and 95 percent confidence intervals from a regression of congressional approval on a wide range of potentially relevant independent variables. All continuous variables have been standardized. While not shown in the figure, the regression also includes linear time trends by media market. The variable of interest, number of ads criticizing Congress (logged), is emphasized in the figure.


Source: Analysis of Wisconsin Advertising Project and National Annenberg Election Study data.

Figure 5: **Alternate dependent variables.** This figure shows coefficients and 95 percent confidence intervals from regressions where I varied the dependent variable of interest, with all other model specifications equivalent to figure 4. The top line replicates the results from the original model for reference. The second and third lines use a dummy variable indicating whether there were more than 200 or more than 500 critical ads aired in the media market in the previous two weeks. The fourth line uses the log of the number of critical ads aired by incumbent candidates only. Finally, the final line uses the log of the number of critical ads aired in the media market by candidates running in districts *other* than the respondent's congressional district. In all cases, the effects are statistically insignificant.
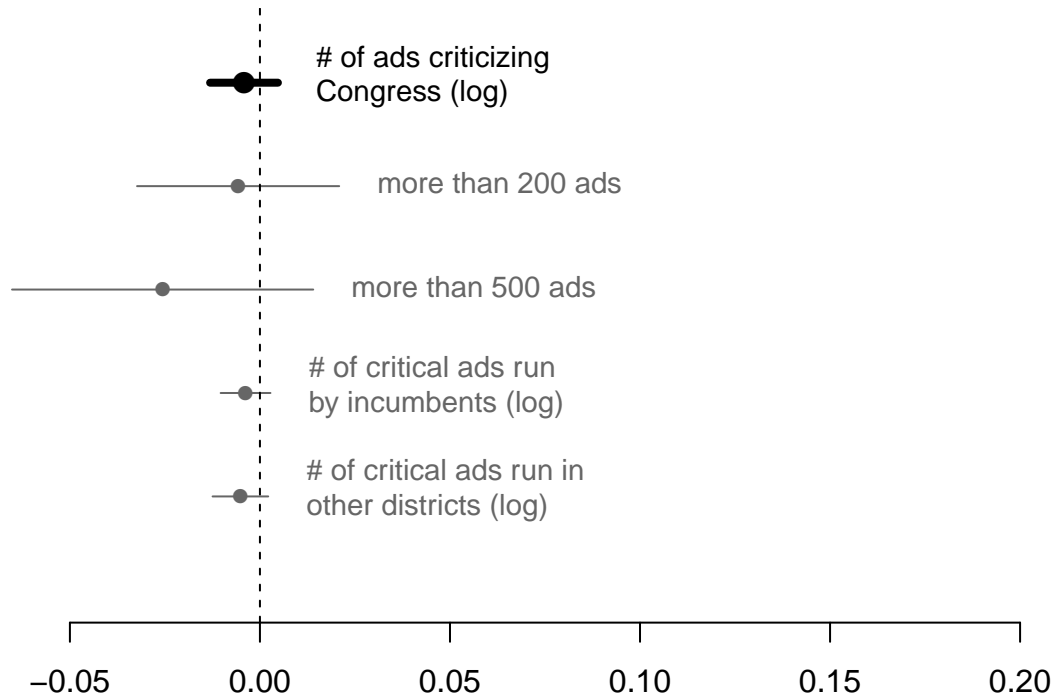
Source: Analysis of Wisconsin Advertising Project and National Annenberg Election Study data.

Figure 6: **Effects of congressional criticism or support on congressional approval.** This figure shows experimental treatment effects (and 95 percent confidence intervals) of viewing an ad critical or supportive of Congress on congressional approval, where the comparison is to the control ad that did not mention Congress. The top line represents the effect of viewing the ad supportive of Congress; the bottom line is for the ad critical of Congress. The congressional approval variable has been standardized, so effects can be interpreted as the standard deviation change, given that the respondent saw the supportive (critical) ad relative to if the same respondent had viewed the control ad.
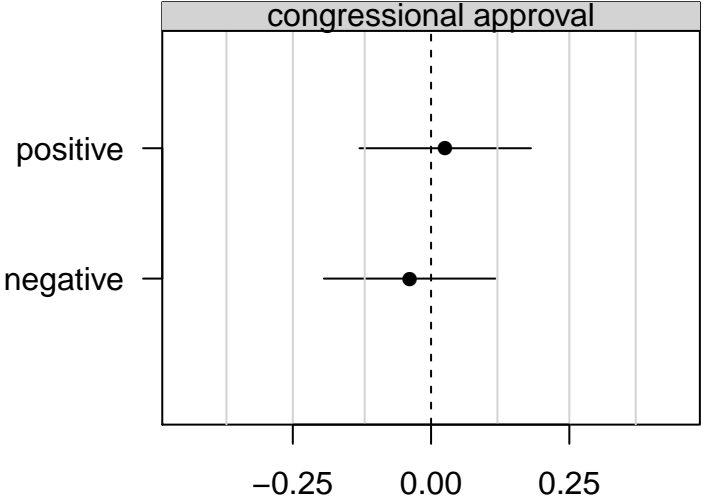
Source: Experimental results.

Supplemental Information / Online Appendix

Appendix A: Creating Mock Advertisements

To increase the credibility of any causal claim I made about the effects of congressional advertising, I wanted to include a survey experiment. As I explain further below, it was not possible to use real advertisements that I had analyzed for the observational component, though these served as useful sources for the text of the ads I ultimately designed. The following contains information on the steps I took to (1) analyze the text of advertisements for common phrases in support of or critical of Congress, (2) test the realism of the advertisements I designed, and (3) create realistic-sounding and -looking advertisements for use in a survey experiment.

I include this appendix as a resource for future researchers, as new technology has made it surprisingly easy to complete this third step. While the first two steps continue to be critical components of a well-designed survey experiment, it is gratifying that designing the actual ads is no longer as much of a constraint for researchers looking to test various media effects in the future.

Here are links to the ads used as treatment:

- Positive (http://youtu.be/TxTVZEsfpDY)

- Negative (http://youtu.be/Pvhvr8xv9r4)

- Control (http://youtu.be/8Fyx6bAddao)

Analyzing Real Advertisements

The data on congressional advertisements comes originally from the wonderful resource at the University of Wisconsin Advertising Project. From this center, you can obtain PDFs of all advertisements aired in a subset of media markets for the 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2008

elections. These PDFs contain a transcript of the advertisement, along with screenshots of the video (there are typically 7-8 screenshots per 30 second commercial).

My first step in analyzing these ads was to convert the transcription into a readable format. This was relatively straight-forward for the later years of these data, as the PDFs are rendered with optical character recognition (OCR) and thus the text can simply be copied and pasted (or automated through PDF-to-TXT software). For the earlier two elections, I used workers from Amazon's Mechanical Turk service to re-type the text from the PDFs.

Once I had the text from the approximately 10,000 ads in Wisconsin's database compiled in a CSV file, I again engaged 4 workers from MTurk and a related website, Elance, to evaluate whether and how the advertisements talked about Congress. It wasn't possible to use a simple word-search mechanism, as many ads included information about the ad sponsor (such as the "Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee" or "Pelosi for Congress") that would inappropriately count some ads. Other ads discuss "Washington politicians" or other entities that implicate Congress without actually using the term. Indeed, the correlation between the data provided by the workers I recruited to those from a simple word search is only 16 percent.[28]

I went through several iterations to determine the best way for relatively untrained workers to complete this task. In the end, I found that it was more effective to work with specific people to rate many ads, rather than having thousands of workers rate only a few ads (a strategy that worked well with the more mechanistic task of re-typing the ad transcription). Ultimately, this decision allowed me to interact with the workers in the same way that researchers more typically work with undergraduate research assistants. Specifically, we had an on-going conversation about how they were rating the ads. I would spot-check their ratings and looked specifically at any ads that were rated as positive toward Congress, partly because their rarity suggested the increased possibility of a typo

and partly because of a personal interest in how candidates were speaking positively of Congress.

For each ad, two workers determined whether the ad mentioned Congress. If so, the worker then evaluated whether the statements about Congress were positive, negative, or neutral. Neutral ads could mean Congress was discussed in an impartial way or that the ad was both positive and negative. I also worked with an Elance worker as an arbiter if the two original raters disagreed. However, this was empirically rare, as I had 85 percent inter-rater reliability. This high level of reliability was surprising, given that I recruited non-trained workers and paid them very little (approximately 3 cents per ad).

Table 1 shows a few examples of ads rated in each of the four categories (not mentioned, negative, neutral, and positive).

Table 1: Examples of Campaign Ads

Not mentioned	
Darcy Burner (D-WA) 2008 challenger	[Announcer]: Congressman Reichert says he's independent. But after four years in Congress, Reichert hasn't passed one bill. He's ranked 401st out of 429 members and dead last in the Washington State delegation in his ability to get things done. He even ranks behind non-voting members from Guam and American Samoa. So, when it comes to describing Reichert's record in Congress, the only word that comes to mind is ineffective. For new solutions, we need Darcy Burner in Congress. [Darcy Burner]: I'm Darcy Burner, and I approve this message.
Mike Briggs (R-CA) 2002 open seat	[Autry]: You know, it's farms like these that are the heart and soul of the San Joaquin Valley. Mike Briggs understands that. That's why he helped to secure $200 million in tax breaks when our farmers needed it the most. Mike loves his family, he loves his country and he loves this valley. And it's values like that that will not only provide strong leadership in Washington but leadership we can be proud of. Mike Briggs, a good man for Congress. [Announcer]: Mike Briggs, Republican for Congress. Let's keep him working for us.
Negative	
Will Shafroth (D-CO) 2008 challenger	[Video of football players hitting each other] [Will Shafroth]: You expect it out here, but in Washington, D.C., things just get ugly, and constant bickering in Congress means nothing gets done. I'm a political outsider who spent 27 years bringing people together to solve tough problems. I'm Will Shafroth, and I approve this message because Washington politicians need to stop hitting each other and finally start tackling America's challenges.
Mark Pryor (D-AR) 2002 incumbent	[Jesse James]: "Alright open it up!" [Mark Pryor]: It's like asking Jesse James to guard a bank. Washington all but opened the vault, looked the other way, and let greedy executives steal our savings. Congress caved in to special interests, weakened enforcement, and made it easier for corporations to hide losses and cheat stockholders. Washington is just too cozy with big business. Guilty companies should be held accountable and dishonest executives put behind bars. [Announcer]: Mark Pryor. Arkansas values. Arkansas first.

Neutral	
Steve Kuykendall (R-CA) 2000 incumbent	[John McCain]: "There are people making a difference in Congress, one of them is Steve Kuykendall. Steve Kuykendall is independent, straight talking and not afraid to buck party leaders. He served America as a Marine and now brings that same sense of duty to Congress. Steve Kuykendall shares my passion for campaign finance reform and delivers for the people he represents. We can clean up Congress with more people like Steve Kuykendall on the job. [Announcer]: Kuykendall, Congress. On the job for us.
Roger Kahn (D-GA) 2000 challenger	[Announcer]: When Bob Barr cast the only vote against lowering the import tax on cancer drugs, he said it was to make a political point. And when Congress voted to stop nursing homes from replacing Medicaid residents with wealthy patients, Bob Barr called it "feel good" legislation and voted against it. No one doubts Bob Barr's willingness to take the fight and make a political stand but lately Bob Barr has been fighting the wrong people. This time, let's elect a Congressman who'll fight for us.
Positive	
Phil Gingrey (R-GA) 2004 incumbent	[Gingrey]: As a doctor, I've always cared deeply about the burden that soaring prescription drug costs have on our seniors. So I went to Congress determined to help. We put partisan politics aside and crafted a historic prescription drug benefit under Medicare. It's a great start, it'll cut the cost of medicine for millions of Americans, but especially low income seniors. So they worry less about the price of medicine, and spend more time enjoying a healthier life. I'm Phil Gingrey and I approved this message.

Mark Foley (R-FL) 2004 incumbent	[Foley]: I'm Mark Foley, I'm proud of what we've accomplished in Congress to protect our children. We worked hard to keep predators away from kids by giving groups like Boys and Girls Clubs access to FBI background checks, cracked down on child pornography, and toughened penalties for anyone who hurts a child, but there is more to do. In Congress I'll keep up the fight to protect children. That's why I need your support. [Announcer]: Mark Foley, our Congressman. [Foley]: I'm Mark Foley and I approved this message.[29]

Creating and Testing Text of Mock Advertisements

I had hoped to use real ads as my experimental treatment, but this proved difficult for several reasons. First, these ads were originally aired many years ago, and often prior to the proliferation of YouTube channels for candidates, where ads are now routinely stored. Even if the video were available at the time of the election, it is unlikely that I would be able to find these videos today. Second, I also could not simply use the text from these ads and incorporate my own video, as many of the ads discuss policies or events that are time-bound. For example, a lot of ads in 2000 discuss the budget surplus–a situation that would not have much meaning given the current political concern with the deficit and debt ceiling. Finally, I wanted to control as much of the ads (and their purported sponsor) as possible, in a way that would not be possible when using real ad text. Given these constraints, I instead used the text from the real ads as a starting point for drafting mock advertisements.

Because it seemed harder to design a credible advertisement that spoke highly of Congress, I started there. I pulled the text of all ads rated as positive by any worker and read through each for phrases that were not time-bound and lacked policy content.[30] I also looked online for various press accounts or blog posts that were supportive of Congress. These would have the advantage of being more relevant to the political world of 2014 than

ads aired 10-15 years ago.[31] Using these key phrases, I drafted three mock ads that were generally supportive of Congress but that I hoped could be taken seriously during a time when approximately 85 percent of the public disapproved of Congress. I next drafted text for ads that were roughly parallel to the positive ads but that were nonetheless critical of Congress. Finally, for the control advertisement, I lightly edited text from an ad aired in 2002 by Rick Renzi.

After running these mock ads by colleagues for initial feedback and dropping one set of positive/negative ads, I again employed MTurk workers to evaluate the credibility of the remaining ads. I included text from three real ads for each mock ad and asked the MTurkers to identify which ad was fake. I did not select ads entirely at random, as I wanted to have a few parallels with the mock ads: specifically the use of one primary speaker and limited policy content. These features are not empirically unusual, so selecting on them did not seem to invalidate the effort. I also wanted ads in which the identity of the candidate could be obscured, so ads with references to district geography or committee assignments were excluded.

If MTurk workers were selecting among the four ads at random, we would expect that the mock ad was identified no more than 25 percent of the time. In only one case was the mock ad identified even that often. On average, the mock ad was selected about 13 percent of the time. This gave me confidence that the ad text was credible, even when the candidate made statements in support of Congress.

Creating Audio and Video of Mock Advertisements

With ad text now in hand, it was surprisingly easy to create videos that looked similar to real campaign ads. I used primarily stock photos available online that showed pictures of Congress or a town the hypothetical candidate would be from. I supplemented these photos with stock video of a family gathering. I downloaded these royalty-free clips from

Video Blocks, which offers an introductory 7-day period of free downloads. Because I knew what kinds of clips would be useful in my video, I was able to collect all of the video clips I wanted during this introductory period.

Obtaining a quality audio recording of the ad was more expensive, but not prohibitively so. I used an online voice actor service, VoiceBunny, which allowed me to "audition" 3 voice actors, who read a short segment of the ads. After providing the full text of the ad to the actor I selected, I obtained a full reading within 24 hours. The total cost, including VoiceBunny commission was approximately $120.

To knit these components together, I used iVideo (a video-editing software free on Macs) and Audacity (an audio-editing software that is free to download). Audacity allowed me to slow down the recording, to make the pacing more realistic for a commercial. I was also able to insert additional pauses into the recording where it seemed appropriate. Using iVideo, I pulled together the video clips to match the audio.[32] One technique I found helpful in iVideo was the "Ken Burns" effect, which pans the screen across a still photo.

Certainly, real campaigns spend more time and money crafting their advertisements (though, like me, a lot of the effort probably goes into message development rather than filming itself). Nonetheless, I was pleased at the realism of these ads given the small budget used to create them.

Appendix B: Alternative Tests and Robustness Checks

Alternative Measure of Criticism of Congress

As described in Appendix A, two raters reviewed each ad to determine whether and how Congress was depicted in the ad. At the same time, the raters evaluated whether and how the ad talked about the Democratic and Republican parties. If the two ratings differed (on either Congress or the parties), a third worker evaluated the ad on both dimensions. Finally, if the third rating was different than either of the two initial ratings (again, for either Congress or the parties), I personally reviewed the ad. In the end, less than 200 ads (out of more than 10,000) required my review based solely on the congressional dimension. My review included both an independent (blind) rating as well as a more comprehensive evaluation that considered how the other raters viewed the ad.

Given this process, my measure of ad tone used in the paper is calculated as follows: (1) if the ratings of the first two raters agree, this is the final rating; (2) if the third rater agrees with either of the first two raters, this is the final rating; (3) if there is no agreement amongst the first three raters, my comprehensive evaluation serves as the final rating.

However, because some ads were reviewed more than twice due to disagreement on the parties dimension (rather than the Congress dimension), there are ads where I have up to 4 ratings even when the original raters agreed. This allows for additional opinions about the content of the ad that, perhaps, should not be ignored. Therefore, a second measure of congressional criticism is the average rating given by anyone who evaluated the ad. If all raters considered the ad to have not mentioned Congress, the average is not calculated. I also created a 4-level variable based on this measure, where an average rating below a neutral rating was considered negative, an average above neutral was considered positive, and an ad where the average rating was exactly neutral was considered neutral.

The two measures correlate at a respectable 0.52, where additional comparisons confirm

Table 2: Ad classification, by original and alternate measure

	Alternate measure			
Original measure	Not mentioned	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Not mentioned	8357	429	473	68
Negative	3	694	0	0
Neutral	2	38	120	11
Positive	0	0	0	28

these initial results. Table 2 shows the number of ads classified in each of the categories. Approximately 90 percent of the ads were classified identically by both methods. The biggest difference seems to be that the original method was more likely to classify an ad as not mentioning Congress, with approximately 95 percent of the errors in the top row of the table. Importantly, no ads were considered positive by one method and negative by another–instead, the errors appear to be one of emphasis.

Given these findings, it seems that the two ratings methods produce substantially similar results. Indeed the results in the next section illustrate that using the alternate measure does not alter the results.

Robustness Checks

Figure 7 illustrates the coefficients and 95 confidence intervals on the "treatment" variable using a variety of alternate specifications of the model. While the estimated effect of ads critical of Congress varies somewhat, the confidence intervals always span zero and largely overlap each other. More details on each of the specifications are below:

1. **Number of ads critical of Congress (log):** This is the relevant variable from the model reported in the paper (Figure 4) for comparison with the alternative specifications.

Figure 7: Alternate measures
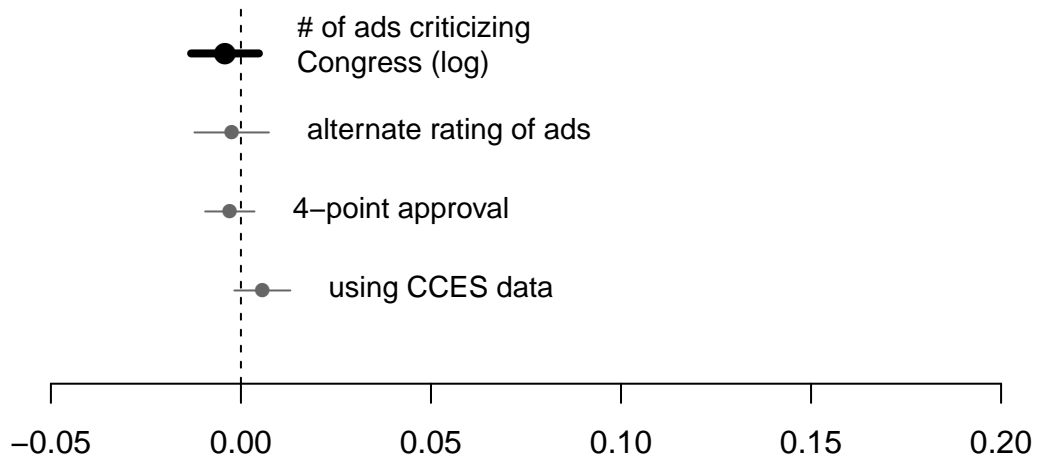
2. **Alternate rating of ads:** As alluded to in the previous section, using the alternate measure for rating the ads in Wisconsin's database had no effect on the estimated coefficient in the model of congressional approval.

3. **4-point approval:** In the original model, I used a dichotomized specification of NAES's congressional approval question: did the respondent either strongly or somewhat approve of Congress? However, the response options have more information that this binary obscures. This figure shows that using the full 4-point scale does not seem to influence the estimated coefficient on negative ads.

4. **Using CCES data:** This estimate uses 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) data to show that results are robust to other survey data. The model is slightly different, due to different questions asked by the two survey groups. The most notable difference is the lack of over-time data, as CCES was only in the field during the month of October. The NAES data indicated that survey respondents were most likely to have had negative ads aired in their media markets during

October, so this result suggests that even as more critical ads are being aired, their effect is no greater. It is possible that the effects of negative ads are drowned out by the sheer volume of advertising that has occurred by this point in the campaign cycle. In looking more closely at the NAES data during this period, I used a dummy for campaign season (where respondents were coded as 1 if interviewed in September or October and 0 otherwise) and interacted this with the treatment. These results show that the original negative coefficient is driven by respondents earlier in the year when total advertising was lower. However, the results remain statistically insignificant.

I also ran a series of robustness checks that are shown in Figure 8 and described below.

Figure 8: Robustness checks
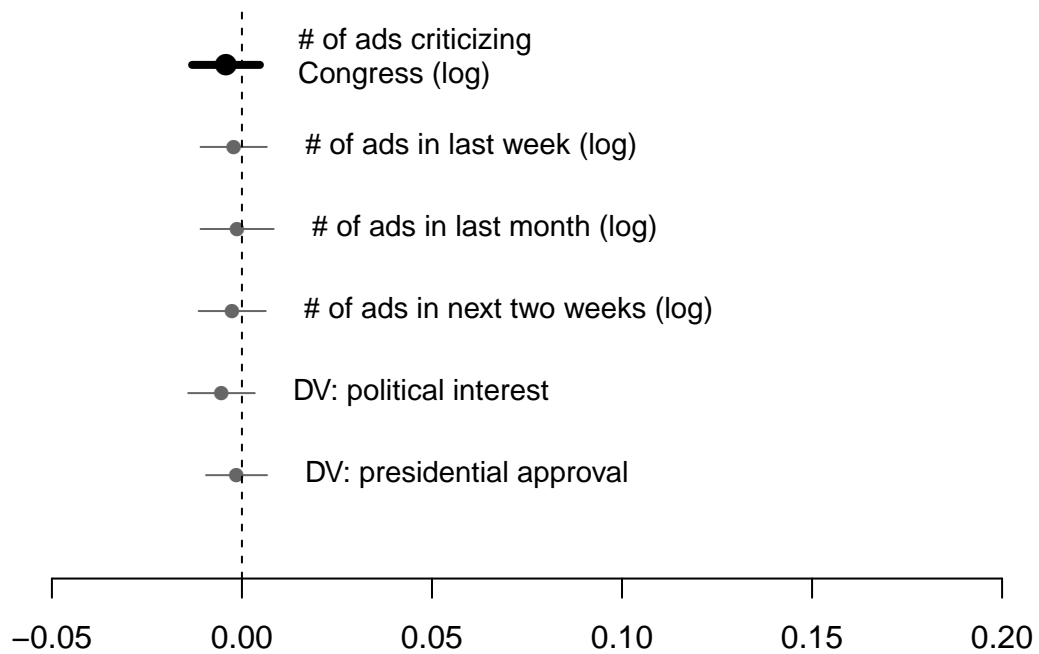
1. **Number of ads critical of Congress (log):** Again, I provide the result from the paper as a point of comparison.

2. **Ads aired in the last week (log):** I chose a two-week time frame somewhat arbitrarily but this estimate of the effects of negative ads being aired in the last week provides credence to the claim that ads aired over a shorter time horizon are no more likely to influence congressional approval. Note that, in this regression, I control for the total number of ads aired in the last week rather than the two-week period. Other than this change, the regressions are equivalent.

3. **Ads aired in the last month (log):** Like the previous estimate, this is included to illustrate that the choice of a two-week period did not lead to unusual results. While likely not significant, the fact that the estimated coefficient is even closer to zero may point to the fact that any effects of negative ads are not long-lasting.

4. **Ads aired after survey (log):** This placebo test shows that respondents are not affected by ads aired in the two-weeks *after* they are surveyed by NAES. The estimate is approximately the same size and significance as in the original model. This may suggest that candidates are more likely to air negative ads in places that are predisposed to disapprove of Congress. However, the estimate in figure 5, showing that ads run by candidates in other congressional districts are no more or less correlated with approval, speaks to this point. Additionally, the difference-in-difference results below add confidence to my claim that candidates are not strategically targeting critical ads.

5. **Presidential approval:** This model substitutes presidential approval as the dependent variable, with a similar array of dependent variables. This is another placebo test, as we would not expect criticism of Congress to have any influence on presidential approval. Indeed, the result is again small and statistically insignificant.

6. **Interest in politics:** Similar to the previous estimate, his model substitutes interest in politics as an alternate dependent variable. In this case, interest in politics is not a

placebo test, but rather an alternate outcome of interest. The literature on negative advertising suggests that attack ads may depress interest in politics or turnout (Lau, Sigelman and Rovner 2007). While I do not have data on turnout, this regression suggests that ads critical of Congress do not have any important effects on political interest.

Alternate Method and Different Survey Data

There may something about the method I used that is obscuring a public reaction to advertising that is critical of Congress. Therefore, I used publicly available survey data from Gallup and CBS and a difference-in-difference design to test these relationships. Specifically, I collected individual-level data from 14 surveys that asked about congressional approval and contained congressional district identifiers that were fielded between October 2007 and October 2008. I next compiled data into four periods: (1) the last quarter of 2007, (2) the first quarter of 2008, (3) the second quarter of 2008, and (4) the last week of October 2008.[33] Within each of these four periods, I have data on congressional approval for approximately 3,000 respondents; from these individual-level responses, I aggregated the data to identify average district-level congressional approval in each of the periods.

I again paired these data with the data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project. Joining these datasets was a little more difficult than with the Annenberg survey data, as I do not know the media market of the respondents. Instead, I used Geographical Information System tools to determine the geographic overlap between districts and media markets. Some districts are wholly within a media market. Therefore, all of the constituents would be (potentially) exposed to the same advertisements. Districts which are split across media markets are more complicated. In these cases, I created a weighted average of negative advertising in a district. For example, if 70 percent of a district was in one media market, where 100 ads critical of Congress were aired, and there were 500 negative ads aired in the

Table 3: Results from Difference-in-Difference Analysis

	Treatment (all values logged):		
	# of negative ads	# of incumbent negative ads	# of late negative ads
Post-treatment period	0.27	-0.11	0.45
	(0.54)	0.60	(0.49)
Treated	-0.91	1.51	-0.48
	(6.90)	(8.21)	(6.97)
Post-treatment*Treated	-0.54	-0.84	-1.01
	(1.09)	(1.68)	(1.41)
Intercept	16.05	18.50	15.69
	(3.45)*	(2.95)*	(2.42)*

Standard errors in parenthesis; * $p < 0.05$

media market that covers the remaining 30 percent of the district, I would estimate that survey respondents in this district saw $(.70 * 100 + .30 * 500 =)200$ negative ads.[34] This weighted average is subsequently used as my treatment.

In Table 3, I show the results of three difference-in-difference regressions. Treatment in the first column is the log of the number of negative ads shown in the district over the course of the entire election. In the second column, treatment is the log of the number of negative ads aired by incumbent candidates. Finally, in column three, treatment is the log of the number of negative ads aired (by any candidate) from October 11 to October 25 (two weeks prior to the final round of surveys). For these analyses, I only use survey data from the final two periods (second quarter of 2008 and the last week before the election). In all cases, the coefficient of interest is the interaction term. For each of the three models, the coefficient is correctly signed but relatively small and statistically insignificant.

The key assumption of difference-in-difference designs is that, in the absence of treatment, both treated and control units would have changed (or not changed) similarly. One typical way to increase confidence in this assumption is through showing parallel movement in pre-treatment periods. I have attempted to do this with data from the first

two periods in Figure 9 below. However, while the volume of advertising increased dramatically between the end of the second quarter of 2008 and the election, it is certainly the case that some negative advertisements were shown prior to that time. Therefore, the figures should be interpreted with some caution. In all cases, the continuous treatment has been discretized by splitting the data at the median; treated units are those districts where more than the median number of negative ads were aired.

The bottom-most of the three figures is probably the most credible case for parallel trends in the pre-treatment periods. In this case, the treatment of viewing more than the median number of negative ads in the previous two weeks is associated with a 5 percentage point drop in the level of congressional approval. While sizable, this effect remains statistically insignificant. When taken in conjunction with the null (and substantively small) results elsewhere, I do not put much stock in this effect. It is possible that ads critical of Congress have some influence on public approval of Congress, but at most this effect is small, lasts only a short time, and may only arise in certain circumstances, such as when incumbent candidates criticize Congress. Moreover, the fact that candidates only rarely criticize Congress should alleviate much of the concerns raised by Fenno in his classic statement.

Figure 9: Difference-in-difference analysis

All negative ads

Incumbent negative ads

Late negative ads