



# AMERICA'S FAVORITE PUNCHING BAG

## The Role of Ideological Intensity in Attitudes Toward Congress

### Abstract

Congressional scholars have increasingly turned their focus toward studying what factors influence congressional approval ratings and feelings toward the institution. While understanding the public's views toward Congress is a complex endeavor, this study suggests that where one falls on the political spectrum plays a role in how one views the legislative branch. Specially reformatted American National Election Studies data was obtained to test the relationship between ideological intensity and attitudes toward the institution. While Congress is not exceptionally popular amongst any ideological group, people who self-identify as extreme conservatives or extreme liberals like Congress even less than those who fall elsewhere on the spectrum.

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## **Introduction**

Understanding why people hold their respective views of Congress is a complex endeavor. As Kimball and Patterson (1997:702) write, “Congress is... a popularly and freely elected, quite representative, and constituency-oriented national legislative institution exercising major lawmaking powers. Americans deeply support its institutional part in the constitutional constellation and believe in the importance of the institution in the abstract.” Ask nearly anyone about their view toward the composition of current congressional membership beyond their own representative, however, and chances are it will be quite negative. Indeed, Congress consistently earns low approval ratings from the electorate. According to Gallup, congressional approval ratings have hovered between 20 and 30 percent since the 1970s. In 2013, congressional approval ratings reached a new low of 9 percent (Gallup Polling 2016). The decline in congressional approval is intriguing because of the corresponding consequences on incumbent reelection and on political legitimacy. Understanding what drives perceptions of Congress is important both for protecting the legitimacy of representative democratic government and for giving Congress the capacity for effective performance when faced with increasing negativity and distrust.

Past studies have focused on factors that could explain feelings toward Congress such as age, perceptions of the strength of the economy, partisan affiliation, and approval ratings of the president. This study seeks to focus specifically on intensity of political ideology as a factor that contributes to perceptions of Congress. Political ideology is different yet closely related to partisan affiliation. For this study, political ideology corresponds to a continuum ranging from extreme liberals to extreme conservatives with several options in-between. As this study will show, those who identify with the extreme fringes of either political ideology, regardless of

whether it is conservative or liberal, approve of Congress less than those who belong anywhere else on the political spectrum.

### **Literature and Theory**

Near the turn of the last century, studies of congressional approval ratings became increasingly important to political scholars. The connection between institutional approval ratings and incumbent electoral performance is one reason for this uptick in research. Despite the greater support for individual members of Congress than the institution as a whole (Cook 1979), Born (1990) found that how people judge the performance of Congress is a strong predictor of a congressman's reputation back in his district, which then has an impact on his chances at reelection. Born's study seems to suggest added complexity in congressional politics, where institutional approval ratings play a role in individual elections. One can find anecdotal evidence of this theory in House Majority Leader Eric Cantor's (R-Virginia) shocking primary loss to challenger Dave Brat in 2014 (Caldwell and Diamond 2014). Additionally, Jones and McDermott (2004) showed that low levels of institutional support decrease the reelection rates of members of the majority party, while Fowler and McClure (1990) discovered that low levels of congressional support attract higher-quality challengers indirectly contributing to lower incumbent reelection rates. Thus, understanding how people view Congress can provide insights into important congressional elections.

Beyond the electoral connection, views toward Congress can play a role in the relationship between the public and the government. Rudolph (2002) summarizes that public support for representative institutions is important because it helps to secure citizen compliance with policy outputs (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995), ensure the consent of the governed (Patterson and Caldeira 1990), and preserve the legitimacy of a democratic system in which a

diverse array of opinions exist (Easton 1965). Indeed, “through the established deliberative procedures for attending to issues, Congress is able to influence the willingness of affected parties to accept decisions” (Dennis 1981:320). If Congress becomes increasingly unpopular in the eyes of the public, it will be unable to give its stamp of legitimacy on public policy. Finally, low levels of congressional approval may reflect inadequate policy responsiveness by the legislative branch to the wishes of the American people (Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan 1992) and suggest adverse consequences for the public's trust in government as a whole (Hetherington 1998; Williams 1985). Thus, the critical importance of how the American people view Congress has been clearly established in previous work. This makes uncovering what variables account for such views all the more important.

One of the most salient factors that influences a person's view toward the legislative branch is party affiliation and partisan conflict. Simply put, people have higher approval ratings for others that share their own political beliefs. One of the easiest identifiers of political beliefs is political party identification. Thus, citizens give higher approval ratings to politicians of their own partisan persuasion and, more importantly, prefer governmental institutions when the latter are controlled by those who share the citizens' political party affiliation (Citrin 1974; Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan 1992). Indeed, “citizens' partisan attachments deeply influence whether or not they perceive Congress as woefully gridlocked, overly beholden to the president, or overly professional” (Kimball and Patterson 1997:702). Ramirez (2009) found a link between partisan conflict in Congress and public evaluations of the institution, noting “public esteem for Congress [in the aggregate] diminishes when political parties unite in Congress to represent their partisan constituencies” (Ramirez 2009:92). Of course, ideological subsections of the American electorate by which Ramirez did not explore may view partisan conflict in a positive light. The

point remains that the importance of partisan affiliation and partisan conflict in views toward Congress cannot be overstated.

Other studies have looked at additional demographic and political support variables. Jones (2004) found that younger voters tend to give the highest job approval ratings to Congress. Socioeconomic status also plays a role. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) and Patterson, Hedlund, and Boynton (1975) found that strong institutional support comes from those higher on the socioeconomic spectrum and low institutional support comes from those lower on the same spectrum. Patterson and Caldeira (1990) determined that fluctuations in congressional popularity are tied to presidential popularity, negative media coverage of Congress, and reporting on unethical conduct. Lebo (2008) emphasized that the electorate tends to transfer feelings about the president to the institution of Congress. Further, Kimball (1995) showed that experts evaluated Congress in a partisan manner while citizens with less political knowledge more closely linked their evaluations of the president and Congress. Rudolph (2002) discovered that perceived economic conditions guide how people view the legislative branch. Kimball and Patterson (1997) indicated that congressional expectation-perception discrepancies independently influence evaluations.

Political scholars are divided on the question of the role ideological intensity plays in congressional approval ratings. Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht (1997) studied the link between congressional passage of major legislation and approval ratings and found that when major legislation is enacted, congressional approval declines because of the large number of policy losers and “general level of dissatisfaction with what is seen as an overly-compromised, excessively political outcome” (Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997:199). They argue that the passage of important legislation requires compromise from ideologues on both the left and right.

Legislative compromise results in centrist policies. The resulting centrist policy fails to satisfy ideologues, leading both liberals and conservatives to reconsider their support for the institution. While the authors of the study found empirical support for their hypothesis, backing can also be found anecdotally. When then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-California) began her push for the Affordable Care Act in July 2009, congressional approval ratings were at 32%. Following passage of the bill in March 2010, ratings had dropped to 23% (Gallup Polling 2016). While several factors undoubtedly influenced such a drop, the passage of the legislation certainly played a major role among conservatives who disliked the law for ideological overreach and liberals who believed the law did not go far enough. More recent studies have failed to find the proposed link between passage of legislation and congressional approval, however, seemingly debunking Durr et al.'s theory of the relationship between ideological intensity and approval ratings (Ramirez 2009; Rudolph 2002).

This study seeks to determine the true role of ideological intensity in individual attitudes toward Congress. Similar to Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht, I hypothesize that those who identify with either extreme of the political spectrum (i.e. identify as extreme liberal or extreme conservative) have statistically significant worse feelings toward Congress than those who belong elsewhere on the spectrum. The proposed mechanism by which this occurs is as follows. Since Congress is a reflection of the American people, the diverse plurality of political opinions that exists in a country comprised of over 300 million people also exists in Congress, making compromise between varying factions of equal status<sup>1</sup> necessary in order for legislation to pass. Such compromise is difficult, however. Many political ideologues on both sides of the political

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<sup>1</sup> By equal status, I mean that every senator and every representative has one vote. Each vote is weighted equally, so, party and constitutional office hierarchy notwithstanding, every senator and representative matters in the legislative process.

spectrum see the trait as a capitulation of values (Gutmann and Thompson 2010), and so it is reasonable to suggest that those further out from center on the political spectrum, either to the left or to the right, would have more negative views of an institution where compromise, whether it be inter-party or intra-party, is generally necessary for legislative passage. This is not to say that those toward the middle of the political spectrum like Congress all that much; they simply have a higher tolerance for the institution than those on the extremes. While I cannot prove my projected mechanism using data at my disposal, this study will strive to establish the statistically significant differences in opinion between the extremes and “mainstream”/other groups.

### **Methodology**

This study used data collected by Philip Pollock’s 2012 American National Election Study (NES) SPSS data set that accompanies his book *An SPSS Companion to Political Analysis*. This data set is a subset of the larger 2012 NES housed at the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor and has in some instances undergone recoding so as to make it easier to use for those learning about SPSS statistical analysis software. The number of variables have also been condensed from the original NES. The election study is designed to present data on Americans’ social backgrounds, enduring political predispositions, social and political values, perceptions and evaluations of groups and candidates, opinions on questions of public policy, and participation in political life. Data were collected using in-person and online interview methods both before and after the 2012 presidential election. The random sample of voting age citizens from across the United States consisted of a cross-section of respondents that yielded 5,916 interviews in the pre-election study (2,056 face-to-face and 3,860 on the internet). Of those respondents, 5,513 also completed the



post-election interview (1,932 face-to-face and 3,581 on the internet) (Pollock 2016:2; University of California – Berkeley).

The independent variable for this study is a respondent's ideological intensity, determined by whether or not a person considers himself to be extreme. The spectrum was measured on a seven-point scale ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative, with other options including liberal, slightly liberal, moderate/middle of the road, slightly conservative, and conservative. The scale is not perfect; for example, people often flip their ideological identification depending on the issue at hand. Thus, someone who considers himself a conservative on economic issues may be liberal on social issues. However, this scale was the best approximation of a person's total ideology contained within the data set.

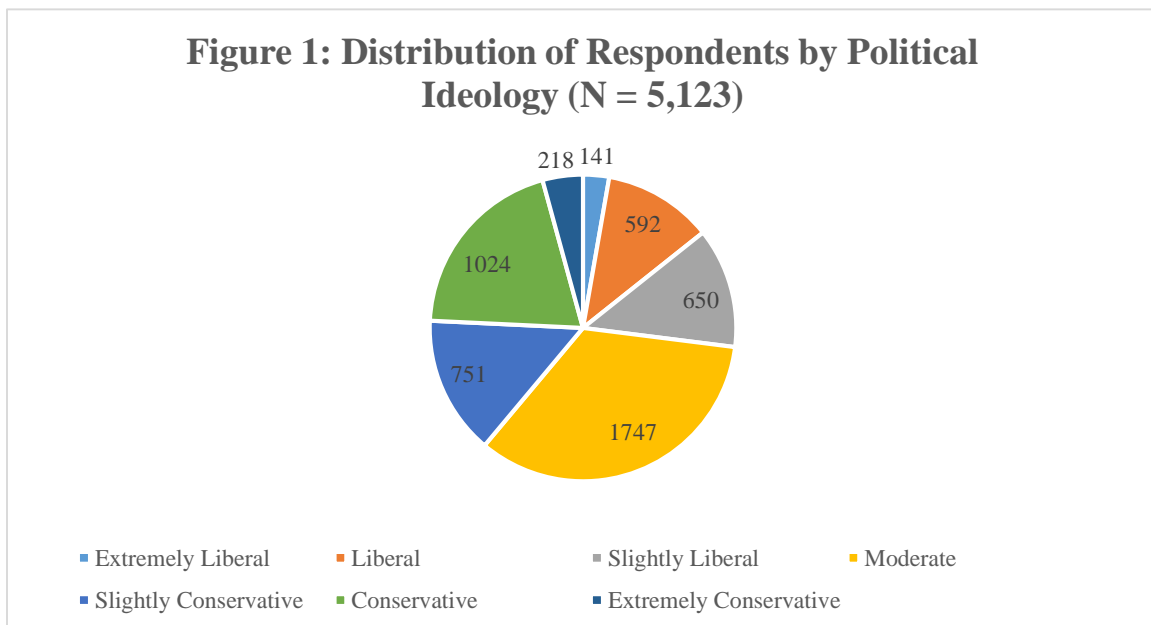


Figure 1 displays the frequency counts for political ideology in a pie chart. Of the 5,123 respondents who answered this question, the most frequent response was a moderate/middle of the road political ideology (N = 1,747). The second most frequent response was conservative (N

= 1,024), followed by slightly conservative (N = 751), slightly liberal (N = 650), liberal (N = 592), extremely conservative (N = 218), and extremely liberal (N = 141).

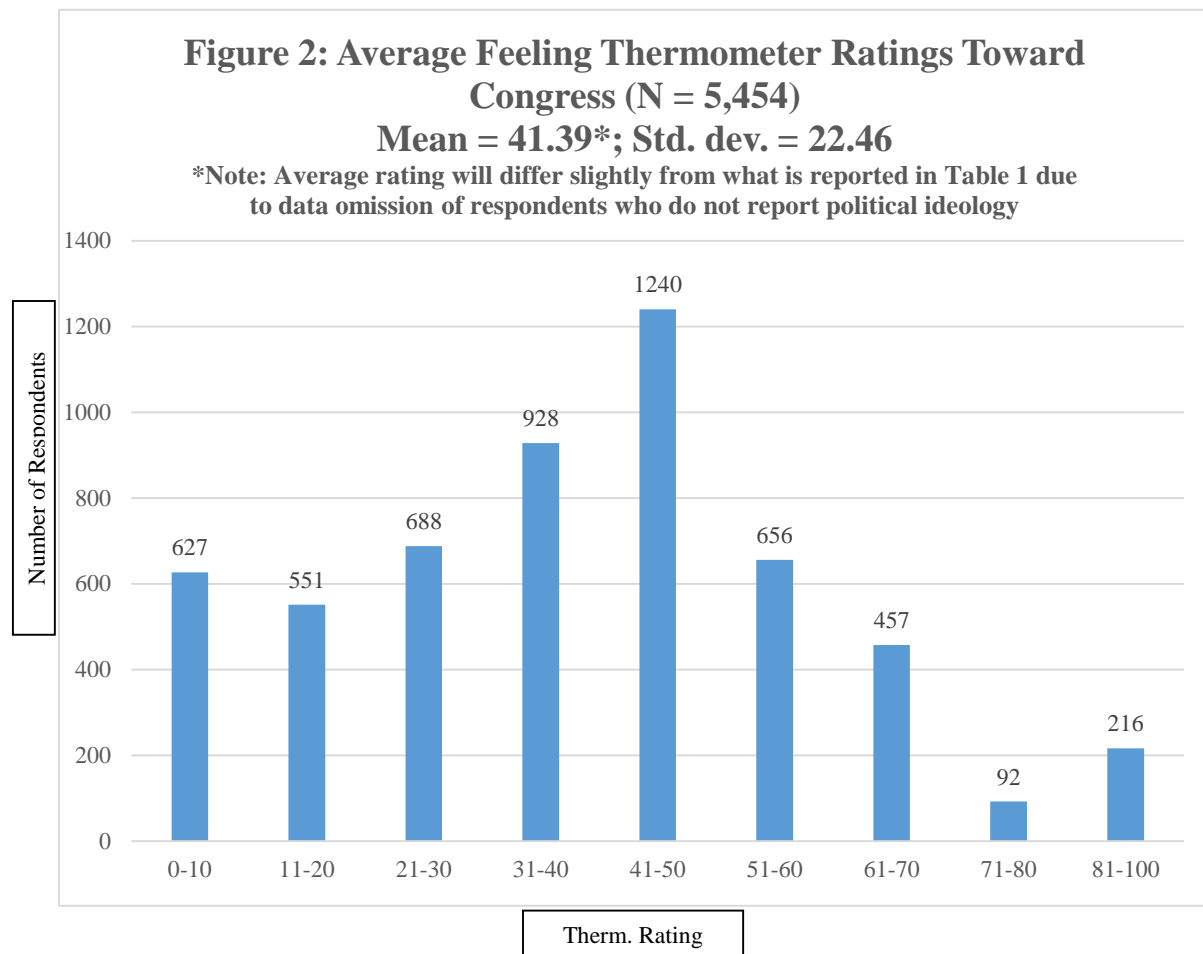
The dependent variable for this study is a respondent's degree of warmth or favorableness toward the U.S. Congress. This was measured using a feeling thermometer scale running from 0 (cannot stand the institution; "cold" toward the institution) to 100 degrees (love Congress; "hot" toward the institution). The use of a thermometer as opposed to a standard approval-disapproval survey question gives respondents much greater latitude in assessing their views toward Congress. The distribution of the congressional thermometer ratings without sorting by political ideology is displayed in Figure 2.<sup>2</sup> Americans leaned to the unfavorable side of the thermometer, reporting an average thermometer rating of 41.39 degrees. To compare Congress with other federal institutions, Americans reported an average thermometer rating of 79.58 degrees for the military, 56.42 degrees for President Obama, and 56.41 degrees for the U.S. Supreme Court. The average temperature toward the entire federal government was close to that of Congress, measuring 42.07 degrees. One can see that Congress was the least popular federal institution, clocking in lower than even the federal government as a whole.

It should be noted that the congressional feeling thermometer "refers specifically to the members of Congress, and not broadly or diffusely to Congress as a political institution" (Kimball and Patterson 1997:706). Markus (1986:39) showed that respondents rate Congress with the members of Congress in mind, while Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995:45) "demonstrated... while only a minority of Americans are satisfied with the members of Congress (other than their own representative), respondents are strongly positive about Congress as an

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<sup>2</sup> Note: Thermometer ratings change slightly when sorting views by political ideology due to data omission from respondents who fail to answer both questions. All shifts are less than one degree. When sorted, the order of approval changes to Military (most liked institution), Supreme Court, President Obama, Congress, and the Federal Government (least liked institution).

institutional part of the constitutional system” (quoted in Kimball and Patterson 1997:706). Thus, Americans like the idea and role of Congress in the U.S. political system. Most would agree the institution is important. The thermometer merely shows dislike for the composition of current congressional membership.



My hypothesis is that those who hold intense ideological views, regardless of whether it is extreme liberal or extreme conservative, have lower ratings of Congress than “mainstream”/other ideological groups defined as liberals, slightly liberals, moderate/middle of the road, slightly conservatives, and conservatives. I began by sorting congressional feeling thermometer data by political ideology using all seven categories. Table 1 shows the results. In line with my hypothesis, one will observe a parabolic shape as one proceeds along the political

spectrum from extreme liberals to extreme conservatives. Extreme liberals (N = 140, Mean = 36.14 degrees, Std. dev. = 23.13) had a lower average rating than all but extreme conservatives. The feeling thermometer ratings crest at 41.84 degrees for both moderates and slightly conservatives before descending again for conservatives and extreme conservatives (N = 217, Mean = 34.41 degrees, Std. dev. = 24.69).

**Table 1: Average Feeling Thermometer Ratings Toward Congress by Political Ideology**

<b>Political Ideology</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>Extremely Liberal</b>	36.14 (23.130)	140
<b>Liberal</b>	41.25 (23.280)	584
<b>Slightly Liberal</b>	41.35 (20.120)	646
<b>Moderate/Middle of the Road</b>	41.84 (22.248)	1741
<b>Slightly Conservative</b>	41.84 (21.807)	751
<b>Conservative</b>	38.73 (23.496)	1017
<b>Extremely Conservative</b>	34.41 (24.690)	217
<b>Total</b>	40.62 (22.508)	5097

*Notes: Standard deviation in parentheses*

The next step in the process was to show that statistically significant differences actually existed between all seven ideological groups. Significance thresholds of 0.05 were used on all statistical tests. An ANOVA test on the average ratings toward Congress sorted by political ideology showed significant differences amongst the groups (F-Statistic = 6.326,  $p < 0.00$ ), allowing me to proceed with further testing.

I then showed that I could collapse my existing political categories into two groups; extreme liberals and extreme conservatives in one and the rest of the respondents in the other. Almost all of the “mainstream” categories other than conservatives had an average rating of around 41 degrees, allowing me to confidently combine them into a single group. Interestingly, conservatives (N = 1,017, Mean = 38.73, Std. dev. = 23.5) had an average rating 2.84 degrees lower than the average of the other “mainstream” groups. An ANOVA test confirmed that the conservative category had a statistically significant different average than the other “mainstream” groups (F-Statistic = 13.83,  $p < 0.00$ ). This is somewhat expected in that at the time of the survey, conservatives had endured four years of a Democratic president (2008-2012) and two years of a Democratic Congress (2008-2010) that produced legislation such as the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, which conservatives vehemently oppose (Republican Platform Committee 2012:32). In addition, conservatives tend to believe in the power of the individual and grow wary of government in general (Republican Platform Committee 2012:i). Despite this difference in average ratings, I decided to include conservatives in my “mainstream” category since they also differed significantly from the two extreme groups (ANOVA Test: F-Statistic = 6.26,  $p = 0.01$ ). Further studies should break conservatives into their own group for analysis.

In order to create my second category for those on the political extremes, I proceeded by comparing the mean scores for extreme liberals and extreme conservatives. The results indicated that no statistically significant differences existed (ANOVA Test: F-Statistic = 0.44,  $p = 0.51$ ). Thus, the average degree ratings by extreme liberals and extreme conservatives were close enough to justify combining the two into an extreme category. Means testing was completed

with a final ANOVA comparison of “mainstream” groups and the extremes to test my hypothesis.

I completed analytical testing with regression analysis to analyze whether ideological intensity was a significant predictor of a respondent’s attitude toward Congress, including when demographic controls of race (measured as 0 = racial minority, 1 = white), gender (measured as 0 = female, 1 = male), age, education level (measured from less than a high school education to graduate degree), attendance at religious services (measured from low religious service attendance to high attendance), and family income were added. The use of age and family income variables as controls was based in previous literature. As previously stated, Jones (2004) found that younger voters tend to give the highest job approval ratings to Congress. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) and Patterson, Hedlund, and Boynton (1975) found that strong institutional support comes from those higher on the socioeconomic spectrum and low institutional support comes from those lower on the same spectrum. The other variables came from intuitive reasoning about standard demographic factors that can influence one’s perceptions of government.

My new ideological intensity variable was transformed into a dichotomous variable with 0 equaling a respondent in the “mainstream” category and 1 equaling a respondent in the extreme category. I did not control for political variables for two reasons. The first is because other political variables such as partisan affiliation are intertwined with one’s political ideology. The second is because many of the political variables I wanted to look at would not make sense to analyze when also using my dichotomous ideological intensity variable. For example, views toward President Obama would definitely be different for extreme conservatives and extreme

liberals, meaning the regression analysis would not make sense when the extreme categories were combined.

## Results

An ANOVA test comparing the average thermometer ratings of the newly condensed extreme and “mainstream” categories can be found in Table 2. Extremes (N = 357, Mean = 35.09, Std. dev. = 24.07) had a nearly six degree reduction in their average thermometer ratings than the “mainstream” group (N = 4,739, Mean = 41.03, Std. dev. = 22.33). The ANOVA test confirmed that the means were different from one another (F-Statistic = 23.26,  $p < 0.00$ ). An eta squared value of 0.005 was also obtained.

**Table 2: ANOVA of Feeling Thermometer Ratings Toward Congress by Ideological Intensity (N = 5,096)**

	DF	SS	MS	F-Statistic
Between	1	11729.692	11729.692	23.255***
Within	5095	2569646.635	504.394	

Notes: \* $p < 0.1$     \*\* $p < 0.05$     \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

*Eta Squared = 0.005*

A linear regression table with the congressional feeling thermometer as the dependent variable can be found in Table 3. The first model looked solely at the relationship between ideological intensity and thermometer ratings. It found that ideological intensity was a significant predictor of the dependent variable. The negative standardized beta coefficient of -0.067 confirms that extreme political ideologues dislike Congress to a greater extent than other ideological groups. However, the model did report a low adjusted R-squared of 0.004. Further regression revealed that ideological intensity remained a statistically significant predictor of how one viewed Congress when controlling for the demographic variables of race, gender, age, education level, attendance at religious services, and family income (model 2). With a negative

standardized beta coefficient of -0.074, those on the extremes were still more likely to give a lower degree rating of the institution than someone in a “mainstream” group. However, the ideological intensity variable was a weaker predictor than all but two of the control variables. Race, education level, gender, and attendance at religious services were all more influential in determining congressional attitudes. Also of note, the adjusted R-squared value of 0.083 remained low, meaning the model as a whole explains very little about why one feels the way they do about Congress. Still, all of the control variables were statistically significant predictors, showing how complex our feelings toward Congress truly are.

**Table 3: Linear Regression of Feeling Thermometer Ratings  
Toward Congress**

Variables	(1) Ideological Intensity	(2) Ideological Intensity w/ Demographic Controls
Ideological Intensity (Others/Extremes)	-0.067*** (1.232)	-0.074*** (1.218)
Race (Minority/White)		-0.146*** (0.718)
Gender (Female/Male)		-0.098*** (0.621)
Age Groups		-0.073*** (0.093)
Level of Highest Education		-0.110*** (0.294)
Attendance at Religious Services		0.107*** (0.193)
Family Income		-0.053*** (0.043)
Constant	(0.326)	(1.203)
Observations	5096	4864
Adjusted R-squared	0.004	0.083

*Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; Table reports standardized beta coefficients  
\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$*



## Discussion

The ANOVA test comparing the extreme and “mainstream” categories shows that their average ratings differ significantly from one another. Indeed, extremes gave an average degree rating of 35.09 degrees, nearly six degrees less than the average of 41.03 degrees for the combined other groups. With a  $p$ -value of essentially zero, it is safe to conclude that those who hold an extreme political ideology, whether they are conservative or liberal, approve of Congress less than those relatively close to the ideological center. The conclusions of the ANOVA test seem to corroborate the findings of Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht in that it shows these differences exist, and later regression tests strengthen this claim. Unfortunately, the data available for use did not contain survey questions revealing why the respondents held their respective views toward Congress, and so I cannot make any claims as to why the extremes are more negative than the “mainstream” groups. As stated earlier, I postulate that views toward the necessity of cooperation and compromise in order for passage of legislation play a large role. Future research should attempt to determine the mechanism explaining what this ANOVA test has discovered.

The eta squared score of 0.005 is important to consider. Essentially, only one half of one percent of the variance within the congressional thermometer variable is explained by a person’s ideological intensity. This should not be surprising. As the literature makes quite clear, perceptions of Congress are influenced by countless numbers of variables. It would be quite extraordinary indeed if one variable accounted for a large percentage of the variation in attitudes toward Congress. The eta squared value simply confirms that ideological intensity is one factor, albeit somewhat small, out of many that affects how people formulate their opinions on the legislative branch.

To strengthen the argument that ideological intensity plays a role in congressional approval, regression model 1 shows that political extremeness predicts a lower approval rating of Congress than those who belong in the combined group of liberal, slightly liberal, moderate/middle of the road, slightly conservative, and conservative. The variable even shows startling good statistical significance at the 0.01 level. Of course, the major drawback of the model is the adjusted R-squared value of 0.004. This simply means that ideological intensity by itself only accounts for around one half of one percent of the variation within the congressional thermometer variable, confirming what was discovered by the eta squared test from before. As in that test, the low value makes sense due to the myriad factors that combine to influence views on Congress.

The results of the second regression model show that ideological intensity remains a statistically significant predictor of views toward Congress, actually increasing in its predictive capabilities from when it stood alone. Despite this increase, it remains less of a predictor than race, gender, education level, and religious service attendance. This outcome is somewhat surprising. Political ideology is linked closely with political party affiliation, a variable that literature suggests is one of the most important factors explaining views toward Congress. Perhaps one explanation could be that during the time of the study, Congress was divided between a Democratically-controlled Senate and a Republican-led House of Representatives. Previous studies have established that citizens prefer governmental institutions when the latter are controlled by those who share the citizens' political party affiliation (Citrin 1974; Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan 1992). Using this reasoning, conservatives would like the House but dislike the Senate, and liberals would like the Senate but dislike the House. When evaluating Congress as a whole, however, respondents would be unsure whether their disdain for one chamber

overcomes their appreciation for the other. It is possible then that other factors thus become stronger predictors of one's view toward Congress.

Among the demographic control variables, the most interesting outcomes regarded family income, attendance at religious services, and level of highest education. Previous research by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) and Patterson, Hedlund, and Boynton (1975) tells us that those higher on the socioeconomic scale view Congress in a more favorable light than those lower on the scale. The negative sign on the standardized beta coefficient, however, shows that as a respondent's family income increases, they are in fact less likely to approve of Congress. The reasoning behind such a finding is plausible. Congress is, after all, the only branch of the federal government that is granted the power by the Constitution to tax the American public, with all revenue bills originating in the House of Representatives. It makes sense that those who make more money would like the institution less, considering that particular institution can take income away. Of course, socioeconomic status is more than just family income. Perhaps a more robust scale of socioeconomic variables would confirm the previous research. Future studies should look to reconcile the discovered discrepancy.

In regards to religious attendance, the positive beta coefficient explains that the more someone attends a religious institution for worship, the higher their appreciation for Congress. One wonders if this may have something to do with the Republican takeover of the House of Representatives in the 2010 midterm elections. Ever since the start of their majority, House Republicans have on multiple occasions passed bills repealing the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. This bill, among other things, requires companies to provide contraceptive care for their employees. Many religious based groups view this as a violation of religious freedom and have sued the federal government for relief (see *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores*,

*Inc.; Little Sisters of the Poor v. Burwell*). House Republicans have been vocal regarding their disdain for this provision of the law. Combined with their attempts to overturn it, it is likely that those who hold strong religious beliefs have begun to see the Republican House, and therefore Congress, as a defender of religious rights when compared to the Obama Administration.

Education level is interesting in that one would expect those with more education to have better evaluations for Congress because they should understand the characteristics of the institution. However, the regression table shows the opposite. As one's education level increases, his or her evaluations of Congress grow more negative. After further review, Kimball's 1995 study may shed some light on this phenomenon. He found that experts, who almost always are educated, evaluated Congress in a partisan manner, meaning those who know more about the institution judge the institution based on political affiliations. While partisanship in Congress has existed since its founding, it has grown more prevalent and more visible in recent decades (Groppe 2015). The debate over what has caused this increased partisanship is outside the scope of this study, but since educated people judge Congress based on political party, the regression analysis makes sense.

The other three variables of age, race, and gender were also significant predictors of attitudes toward Congress. In terms of age, the data confirmed that as one grows older, he or she is less likely to view Congress in a favorable light as when he or she was younger. This is in line with what Jones (2004) discovered. The strength of the standardized beta coefficient on the race variable is somewhat surprising in that it is the strongest predictor of the dependent variable. In addition, the negative sign attached to the coefficient shows that racial minorities tend to have a higher appreciation for Congress. This may make sense when one considers that many of the battles for racial equality have been waged within Congress' hallowed halls. Combined with

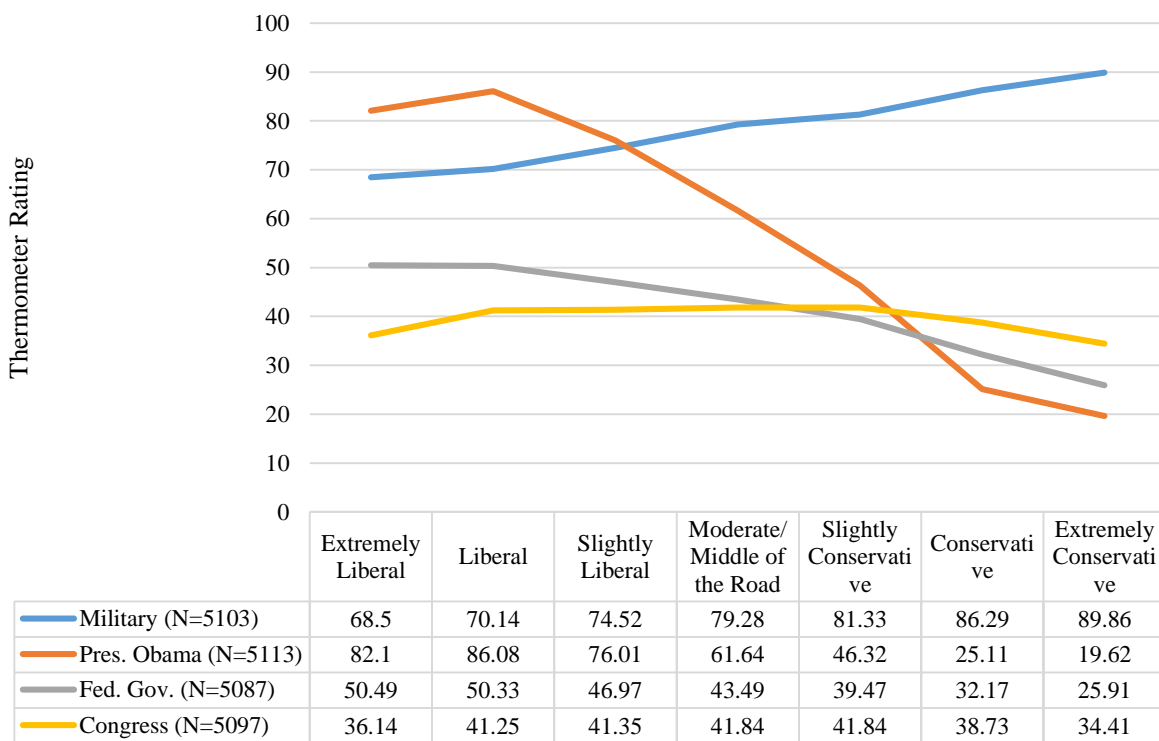
legislation that benefits racial minorities and the institution serving as a platform to espouse minority viewpoints, it is not unreasonable to suggest that minorities are beginning to see Congress in a better light. Finally, the fact that women have a greater appreciation for Congress than men may have something to do with the increased numbers of elected women. With this numerical increase comes a natural shift to women's priorities on the congressional agenda. Thus, it is understandable that women have begun to positively evaluate Congress.

The adjusted R-squared value for model 2 remains low at 0.083. While model 2 fails to account for a large variation in congressional views, the result makes sense in that many additional political variables including partisan affiliation and approval ratings of an individual incumbent are omitted. On another note, it is pleasing to see that the observation counts do not drop too much in model 2. If the counts had fallen dramatically, the accuracy of the study in explaining behaviors for the entire American electorate would have been seriously challenged. The applicability of the model to the entire population does decrease somewhat, but not enough to preclude generalized observations.

Beyond the effect extreme political ideology has on individual congressional views, a next logical step is to understand its influence on other federal institutions. Contained within the NES data were four additional feeling thermometers for the U.S. Supreme Court, President Obama, the military, and the federal government as a whole. The initial means comparison using the entire seven point ideological scale for the latter three institutions can be seen in Figure 3. As the line graphs show, the feeling thermometers for President Obama, the military, and the federal government as a whole do not show the parabolic pattern across ideologies seen for Congress, thus making them unsuitable for extreme vs. "mainstream" group comparison. All are linear except for President Obama's rating chart. The military's approval rating increases as a

respondent becomes more conservative. The federal government’s approval rating decreases as a respondent becomes more conservative. President Obama’s approval rating is almost linear. It shows extreme liberals liking him by 3.98 degrees less than liberals. This should not be unexpected. Obama ran on a Democratic platform comprised of many liberal priorities including closing the Guantánamo Bay prison facility in Cuba, strongly combating climate change, creating a public health care option, and creating a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants (Sack, Carter, Ellis, Hossain, and McLean 2008). The realities of governing and dealing with two other coequal branches of government prevented full achievement of these goals. Thus, it makes sense that extreme liberals are slightly more disappointed in President Obama for his inability to fully fulfill issues important to them.

Figure 3: Average Feeling Thermometer Ratings Toward Federal Institutions



— Military (N=5103) — Pres. Obama (N=5113) — Fed. Gov. (N=5087) — Congress (N=5097)

The one other federal institution that does mostly fulfill the parabolic shape requirements for extremes vs. “mainstream” comparison is the U.S. Supreme Court. The one exception is slightly conservatives, showcasing a 2.9 degree increase instead of decrease over moderates (Table 4). The Roberts Court has shown itself to be fairly conservative during Chief Justice John Roberts’ tenure (POLITICO Magazine 2015), although the decision upholding the Affordable Care Act, *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*, was issued just months before the 2012 elections. With the Court’s normal conservative bent tempered by some high profile liberal decisions, it is plausible that slightly conservatives appreciate the institution more than moderates or conservatives.

**Table 4: Average Feeling Thermometer Ratings Toward the Supreme Court by Political Ideology**

<b>Political Ideology</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>Extremely Liberal</b>	50.98 (21.295)	141
<b>Liberal</b>	57.29 (18.929)	584
<b>Slightly Liberal</b>	60.05 (16.828)	646
<b>Moderate/Middle of the Road</b>	56.07 (19.809)	1734
<b>Slightly Conservative</b>	58.97 (18.028)	749
<b>Conservative</b>	54.05 (20.782)	1012
<b>Extremely Conservative</b>	48.05 (25.409)	215
<b>Total</b>	56.26 (19.801)	5081

*Notes: Standard deviation in parentheses*

As one can see, the average ratings for extremely liberal (N = 141, Mean = 50.98, Std. dev. = 21.30) and extremely conservative (N = 215, Mean = 48.05, Std. dev. = 25.41) are below the ratings for the rest of the ideological groups. An ANOVA test of significance confirms that the two extreme categories do not significantly differ from one another (F-Statistic = 1.275,  $p = 0.260$ ) and so can be combined for further analysis contrasted against the “mainstream” political groups.

The combined extreme liberal and conservative category (N = 356, Mean = 49.21, Std. dev. = 23.88) recorded lower degree ratings than the combination of the other groups (N = 4,726, Mean = 56.79, Std. dev. = 19.36). The ANOVA test in Table 5 comparing the two shows a statistically significant difference in the average degree ratings.

**Table 5: ANOVA of Feeling Thermometer Ratings Toward the Supreme Court by Ideological Intensity**

	DF	SS	MS	F-Statistic
Between	1	19029.283	19029.283	48.993***
Within	5079	1972825.852	388.407	

Notes: \* $p < 0.1$     \*\* $p < 0.05$     \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

*Eta Squared = 0.010*

This result is in line with what was observed with the congressional ANOVA test. It supports the hypothesis that for institutions containing multiple factions which force compromise as an institutional characteristic, ideological fringes grow wary. In Congress, the multiple factions can either be inter-party (i.e. Democratic or Republican) or intra-party (i.e. conservative, moderate, or liberal Democrats; conservative, moderate, or liberal Republicans). On the Supreme Court, the factions include conservative justices (i.e. Justices Thomas and Alito), swing justices (Justices Kennedy and Roberts<sup>3</sup>), and liberal justices (Justices Ginsburg, Breyer, Sotomayor, and

<sup>3</sup> Justice Roberts is usually conservative. Recent opinions upholding the Affordable Care Act have caused some court observers to wonder if he is actually as conservative as was once thought.



Kagen). In both institutions, one also sees that members of these factions have equal status. Each justice on the Supreme Court carries equal voting power, just as each senator or representative in Congress may only cast one vote. The presidency and military, on the other hand, have clear chains of command. One man or woman is in charge, and he or she is not forced to compromise with equal elements within his or her organization. It appears as if this helps to make the latter two institutions' approval ratings linear when sorted by political ideology, although other factors certainly play a role.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the institutions representing multiple political viewpoints and containing members equal in status attract greater scorn from both liberal and conservative ideological extremes.

To reinforce the conclusions of the ANOVA test, I ran a linear regression in order to see if ideological intensity remained a significant predictor of feelings toward the Supreme Court when controlling for the same demographic variables used in the congressional regression. The results can be seen in Table 6. Of note, ideological intensity remains a statistically significant predictor of a person's view toward the Supreme Court. The negative standardized beta coefficient confirms what was observed in the ANOVA test above; namely, that extremes like the institution less than other "mainstream" ideological groups. Also of note, the intensity variable is the second strongest predictor of views on the Supreme Court. This makes more sense since the Court is not meant to be representative of the American public at large. While people may judge a representative institution such as Congress based on common demographic factors, they should be less likely to do so with the Supreme Court, basing their feelings instead on political and ideological factors. Finally, the low adjusted R-squared value of 0.027 for model 2

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<sup>4</sup> The federal government has no clear chain of command since all three branches of government are coequal. It is unclear how compromise affects views toward the government as a whole since it incorporates so many different institutions. It is likely that the relationship with political ideology is linear because conservatives tend to disapprove of government intervention while liberals welcome it.

confirms that views toward the Supreme Court, just as they are with Congress, are based on a host of variables.

**Table 6: Linear Regression of Feeling Thermometer Ratings  
Toward the U.S. Supreme Court**

Variables	(1) Ideological Intensity	(2) Ideological Intensity w/ Demographic Controls
Ideological Intensity (Others/Extremes)	-0.098*** (1.084)	-0.099*** (1.111)
Race (Minority/White)		-0.101*** (0.654)
Gender (Female/Male)		-0.033** (0.566)
Age Groups		0.055*** (0.085)
Level of Highest Education		0.045*** (0.268)
Attendance at Religious Services		0.046*** (0.176)
Family Income		0.036** (0.039)
Constant	(0.287)	(1.094)
Observations	5081	4851
Adjusted R-squared	0.009	0.027

*Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; Table reports standardized beta coefficients  
\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$*

## Conclusion

This study has sought to determine whether or not ideological intensity matters in one's view of Congress. In line with Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht (1997), it has found empirical evidence to support its role. ANOVA tests and linear regression demonstrates that extreme liberals and extreme conservatives like Congress less than those in the ideological "mainstream." This relationship holds even when controlling for demographic factors that can also influence

one's perception of the legislative branch. In an expansion of the study, further tests showed that this pattern was observed when looking at the U.S. Supreme Court.

The study was unable to verify the mechanisms by which this phenomenon occurred. However, I maintain that a likely mechanism involves compromise. Simply put, those on the ideological fringes view compromise as a capitulation of values. They place ideological purity over the practicalities of governing. Institutional characteristics in regards to factions and equal status of members make Congress and the Supreme Court more amenable to compromise, or at least to the perception of compromise. Thus, extreme liberals and extreme conservatives evaluate both institutions lower than other ideological groups. Further tests should seek to explore this postulated mechanism.

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