

THE INSTITUTIONS-INCUMBENTS GAP:

A Reassessment of Institutional Support and Approval for Members of Institutions in American Government

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Abstract:

In this paper, we reevaluate the claim of a “gap” between support for institutions and support for members, forwarded more forcefully by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995). Here we show that the institutions / members gap is historically contingent. In 2002, six months after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, and after an historic rally in public acclaim for social and political institutions, we find a far smaller gap. The constellation of public opinion toward institutions, then, seems to be more responsive to public events than some previous theories have found.

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Introduction

Americans, it seems, love their institutions yet dislike the officials who populate those institutions. At least such has been the conclusion of a pathbreaking and rightly acclaimed book by John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Congress as Public Enemy* (1995).

Through innovative questions designed to tap evaluations of the institutional setup of Congress, the Supreme Court and the presidency, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse captured analytically something that political scientists suspected for a long time: namely, views of the components of the American political system are distinct from attitudes toward the actual performance of the members of those institutions in practice. For each of the three branches of government, citizens reported substantially higher approval when respondents were asked about “the institutions, not the people currently in office,” than when they evaluated how “the people in government” within the Supreme Court, the presidency and Congress “are handling their job” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, Figure 3.1). This institutions-incumbents gap was strongest for Congress, followed by the executive branch, then the Supreme Court.

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's findings fit a conclusion that has attained the status of conventional wisdom in political science: Americans have become cynical and discontented about the performance of government (for a representative overview of this perspective, see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001). Indeed, while measures of trust in government climbed, experiencing something of a “rally effect,” in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, the public's willingness to trust the government returned to previous levels within six months (Pew Center 2002, Clymer 2002, Cook and Gronke 2005).

Elsewhere, we have raised serious doubts about the conventional portrait of Americans as distrusting, cynical and/or alienated (Cook and Gronke 2005). Through a national survey we conducted in the spring of 2002, when levels of trust had returned to pre-September 11 levels, we have shown how the National Election Studies questions of political trust and responsiveness and, to a slightly lesser extent, the General Social Survey measures of confidence in the leaders of institutions have exaggerated the levels of distrust. Relatively few Americans anticipate have high distrust, that is, that the government will “do what is wrong.” Instead, the lowest values of both the NES trust-in-government measure and the GSS confidence measures lump together those relatively few people who are actively distrustful with a more numerous group that say they “neither trust nor distrust government.”

We thus argued that, at least when it comes to trust in government, Americans are more accurately viewed as *skeptics* rather than *cynics*. This conclusion made us wonder if other portraits of the dissatisfaction of Americans with politics were similarly overdrawn. Here, we re-assess Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's depiction of a gap between approval of institutions and relative disapproval of the performance of members of those institutions.

We see two reasons for re-assessing Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's conclusions about the institutions-incumbents gap.

First, *does the gap apply to all of American government?* Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's main focus is on Congress. Indeed, while their third chapter compares Congress against the Supreme Court and the executive branch, later chapters concentrate on the determinants of and consequences of approval of Congress as an institution and disapproval of the leaders and

members of Congress, without doing the same for the other two branches. They sketch a highly thought-provoking model of how the Supreme Court, the presidency and Congress are differently situated in what they term “the constitutional system” and “the Washington system” (1995, Figure 5.1) but apart from some informative results from their focus groups, go no farther.

More deeply, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's work is characteristic of most work in political science on trust and confidence: it looks at the three branches of government in isolation from other institutions, many of which enter directly into political life. The GSS questions about confidence in “people running these institutions” may not be ideal. However, at least they offer us a chance to gauge alternative expectations: Does a willingness to express confidence in, say, each of the three branches of government partake of a more general tendency of confidence in social or political institutions, as Lipset and Schneider (1987) suggested? Or is there something unique about government that causes people to assess it, and its components, differently than other institutions?

Going beyond the three branches of government seems vital to us for another reason. Many components of the American political system do not easily fall under the rubric of the Supreme Court, Congress and the presidency -- and there is no reason to suspect that public opinion about the rest of government is similar to public opinion about the three branches. Consider the two institutions that received the highest and lowest levels of confidence in the GSS in both 2000 and 2002: the military and the press. Both are integral to American government and politics today. But the military receives significantly higher confidence, and the media receives significantly lower confidence, than the three branches. Thus, the institutions- incumbents gap could easily be narrower or broader than Hibbing and Theiss-Morse suggest for the three branches. The survey we report extended the Hibbing and Theiss-Morse methodology to both the military and the media.¹

A second reason for re-assessing Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's conclusions is: *does the gap hold in different time periods?* Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's survey was conducted in 1992, a period of unusual discontent and aggravation in American politics. President George Bush's approval ratings had slid from a then- record level at the conclusion of the Gulf War in 1991 to the point where he lost re-election the following year. The remarkable independent presidential candidacy of Ross Perot suggested that many Americans were alienated from the two parties. And Congress was in the midst of a check-writing scandal that would provoke the defeat of an unusually high number of incumbents in the 1992 elections.

We may then wonder if Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's findings are broadly generalizable beyond the contentious context of 1992. We report on a survey conducted in another singular period, the spring of 2002, starting on March 11, 2002, on the six-month anniversary of the September 11 attacks. At this point, although levels of trust in government had returned to the pre-September- 11 baseline, a strong rally effect persisted in the evaluations of President Bush and even Congress. To be sure, we would be skittish about generalizing too much from our results in the spring of 2002, but perhaps that is the whole point. Our study provides an opportunity to revisit, reanalyze, and update Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's conclusions from a distinctively disapproving moment in American politics to another unusual period, where Americans were far more satisfied with the performance of the incumbents within political institutions than they had been in the recent past.

Data and Methods

Our data come from a national random digit-dial telephone survey specifically designed to address these questions (see Cook and Gronke 2005). The survey was conducted by the Public Policy Research Lab at Louisiana State University between March 11 and April 30 of 2002 under the auspices of the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs (we call the survey the Reilly Center poll).

We interviewed 1140 individuals in a survey that lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Our cooperation rate was 47%, following AAPOR guidelines for calculation (AAPOR 1998).² Since our sample overrepresents women (58%), liberals (33% reported “liberal” or “somewhat liberal”), and respondents with some college or a college degree (64% reported either “some college,” “college degree” or “post-graduate degree”), we weighted our sample by sex, age, and educational level for all descriptive statistics reported in this paper.³ However, since these variables are included as predictors of our dependent variables, we do not weight the data in the multivariate analyses (Lyberg and Kasprzyk 1997).

The survey included several batteries of questions dealing with attitudes toward government and a variety of political and social institutions. It used the NES trust battery and the GSS confidence in institutions battery, plus a new measure we call active trust-distrust ranging from zero (very strong distrust of government, to do the wrong thing) to ten (very strong trust of government, to do the right thing), with the midpoint, five, meaning that the respondent neither trusted nor distrusted the government. As we report elsewhere (Cook and Gronke 2005), the NES trust-in-government measure is the most sensitive to contemporary assessments of political and especially personal economic circumstances, whereas the active trust-distrust measure is most closely linked to aspects of early socialization (notably religiosity, and to a lesser extent gender and interpersonal trust).

One question we sought to answer was whether the evaluations of trust diverged between government and other sources of social and political power. One problem in evaluating the levels of trust in government is whether or not government is viewed more or less favorably on this dimension compared to, say, business, the military and the media. We thus adapted one of the questions from the NES trust battery which, as Chanley, Rudolph and Rahn (2001) have suggested, measures the responsiveness of government: “Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?” We repeated this question, somewhat adapted to read “Now we’d like you to think about other institutions. How about the media (business, the military)? Do you think that the media (business, the military) looks out for a few big interests, or do you think that the military looks out for the benefit of all the people?”

In addition to these various measures of trust in government and confidence in institutions, we adapted Hibbing and Theiss-Morse’s invaluable questions designed to compare and contrast the evaluations of institutional arrangements against the assessment of the officeholders themselves within those institutions. For theoretical reasons, we dropped Hibbing and Theiss-Morse’s consideration of the executive branch and the presidency (though we did ask respondents to evaluate the performance of George W. Bush as president--in general as well as on the war on terror and on the economy). Instead, we focused our attention on the Supreme Court and Congress (traditionally the respectively highest and

lowest-rated political institutions) and on the military and media (traditionally the respectively highest and lowest-rated institutions overall).

We asked for *incumbents' job approval* as follows:

I'd like to get your feelings toward some important leaders in society. Thinking about these leaders, please tell me if you: strongly approve, approve, disapprove, or strongly disapprove of the way these people are handling their jobs.

How do you feel about the way the nine justices of the Supreme Court have been handling their jobs?

We then asked similar questions for “the 535 members of Congress,” “the leaders of Congress,” “your own representative in the U.S. House of Representatives,” “the military leaders of the armed forces,” and “journalists.”

Next, we adapted Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's question as follows:

I've asked you to rate some important leaders in government and society. But sometimes, when we talk about the parts of the Supreme Court, the Congress, the armed forces, and the news media, we mean the INSTITUTIONS themselves, no matter who is working in them. These institutions have their own historical traditions and purposes laid out in the Constitution. I'd like to know if you strongly approve, approve, disapprove, or strongly disapprove of these institutions in American society and government.

In general, do you strongly approve, approve, disapprove, or strongly disapprove of the Supreme Court, no matter who the justices are?

We then asked similar questions “What about the U.S. Congress, no matter who is in office?” “What about the armed forces of the United States, no matter who is serving?” and “What about the news media, no matter who the journalists are?” We term these indicators of *institutional support*.

Finally, we also included a large set of measures which concerned the media, political indicators (partisanship, ideology, assessment of national and personal financial situations) and demographics (education, income, race, etc.).

We compare the results from our survey with those obtained in 1992 by John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, and reported in their book *Congress as Public Enemy* (1995). The Hibbing and Theiss-Morse survey (hereafter referred to as HTM) is described in detail in the Appendix to their book, but in brief, it was a RDD national survey conducted at the University of Nebraska. As noted above, we repeated many of the items used by HTM as well as developing some of our own.

There is an important difference between the surveys, however, that does limit our ability to compare them. The Reilly Center study was conducted with an eye to four main goals: a) developing a new measure of trust in government that captured the possibility that

individuals may *distrust* as well as trust government (Cook and Gronke 2005); b) testing the relationship between the General Social Survey measures of “confidence in the leaders of” various social and political institutions and the National Election Study measures of interpersonal trust, efficacy, and trust in government (Cook and Gronke 2005, 2001); c) extending the HTM distinction of members vs. institutions to other, non-governmental entities; and d) examining in-depth the performance of the mass media in the six months after 9/11.

As a consequence, in the analyses that follow, we report relatively sparse multivariate comparisons between the Reilly Center poll’s and HTM’s evaluations of institutions and members, even though HTM included extensive batteries that probed for additional assessments of the performance of the Supreme Court, Congress, and the Presidency. The trade-off is that we lose some of the explanatory power of the models but we gain an invaluable opportunity to assess over-time comparability.

In the following sections, we report the following (where possible, using both Reilly and HTM data):

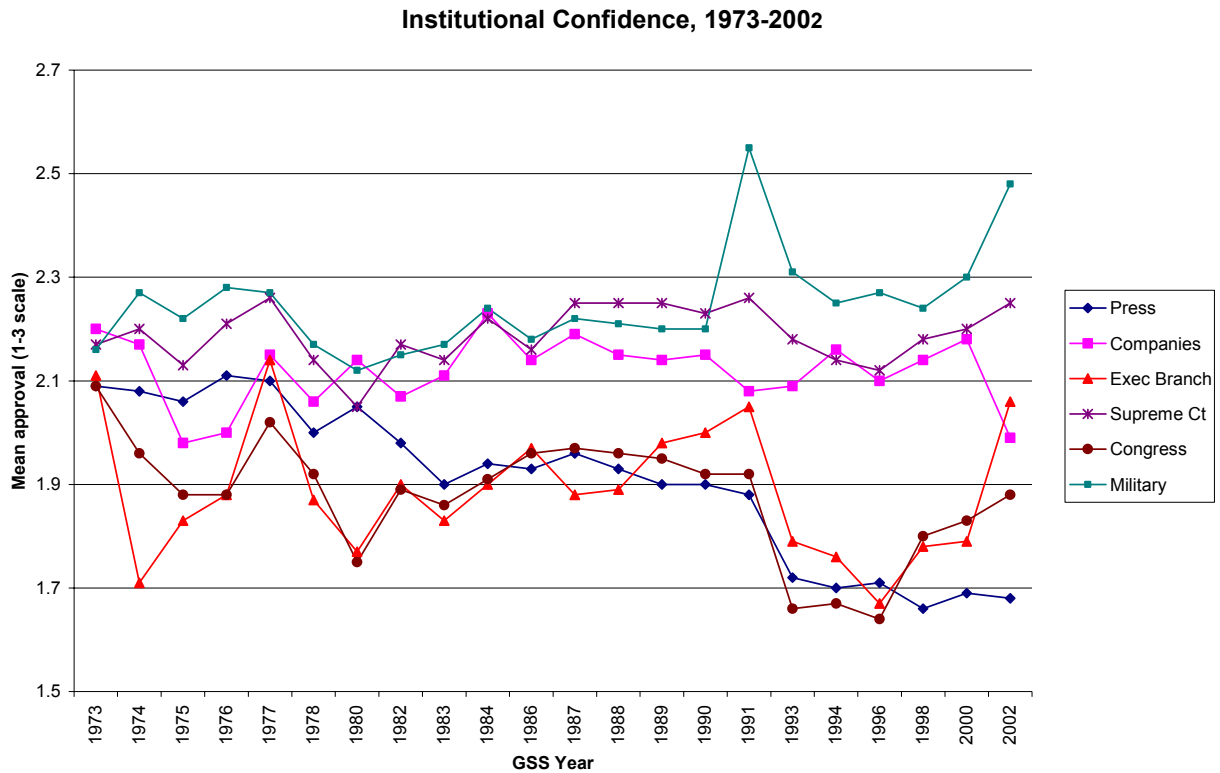
- descriptive statistics comparing confidence in the leaders of various institutions (the well-known GSS question), approval of the *members* of an institution (HTM measure), the evaluation of the *institution itself* regardless of who the members are (HTM measure), and finally whether or not the institution is *responsive to the public or to “big interests”* (the measure adapted from the NES).
- a correlation matrix reporting the association of our various measures of institutional and member approval and a parallel matrix from HTM
- multivariate probit equations predicting member approval for Congress, the Supreme Court, and presidential approval for both Reilly and HTM
- multivariate probit equations predicting member approval for all institutions included in the Reilly Center survey
- multivariate regression equations predicting general institutional support, using a scale derived from the Reilly Center poll.

Confidence in Institutions, 1992 and 2002

To put the HTM and Reilly Center polls into context, consider Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 shows the mean value on a scale of one to three of confidence in leaders of the six institutions we examine (military, Supreme Court, executive branch, Congress, major companies and the press) as charted in the GSS from 1973 to 2002. We have commented on the trends in this series in previous work (Cook and Gronke 2001). For the discussion here, we note two things. First, prior to 1978, in line with Lipset and Schneider’s analysis of these data, confidence across a broad array of institutions was roughly comparable. After 1978, two distinct arrays emerge: one set of institutions that enjoyed high levels of public acclaim (the military, companies, and the Supreme Court), and another set that experienced a collapse in support (the press, the Congress, and the executive branch). Second, there appears to us to be three periods in these data: the period prior to 1978 (noted already), an initial period of separating the institutions from 1978 until 1991, and then a third period of increased

separation after 1991. Public attitudes post 9/11 may have entered a new phase, though one with uncertain lasting power.

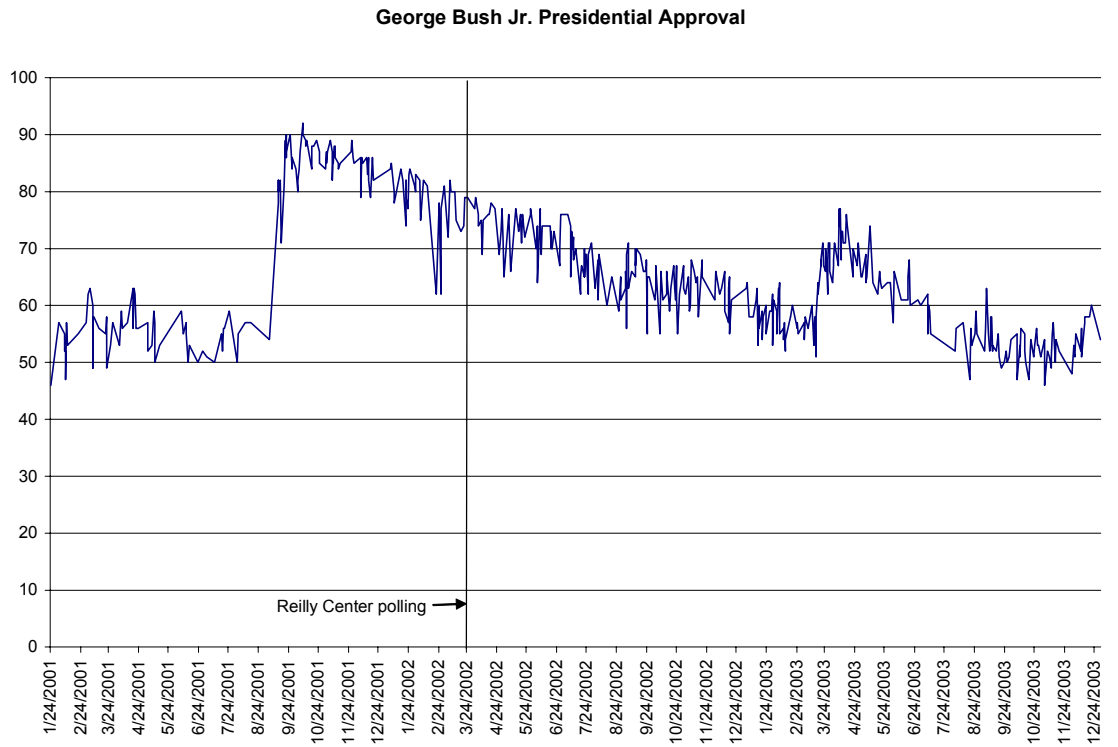
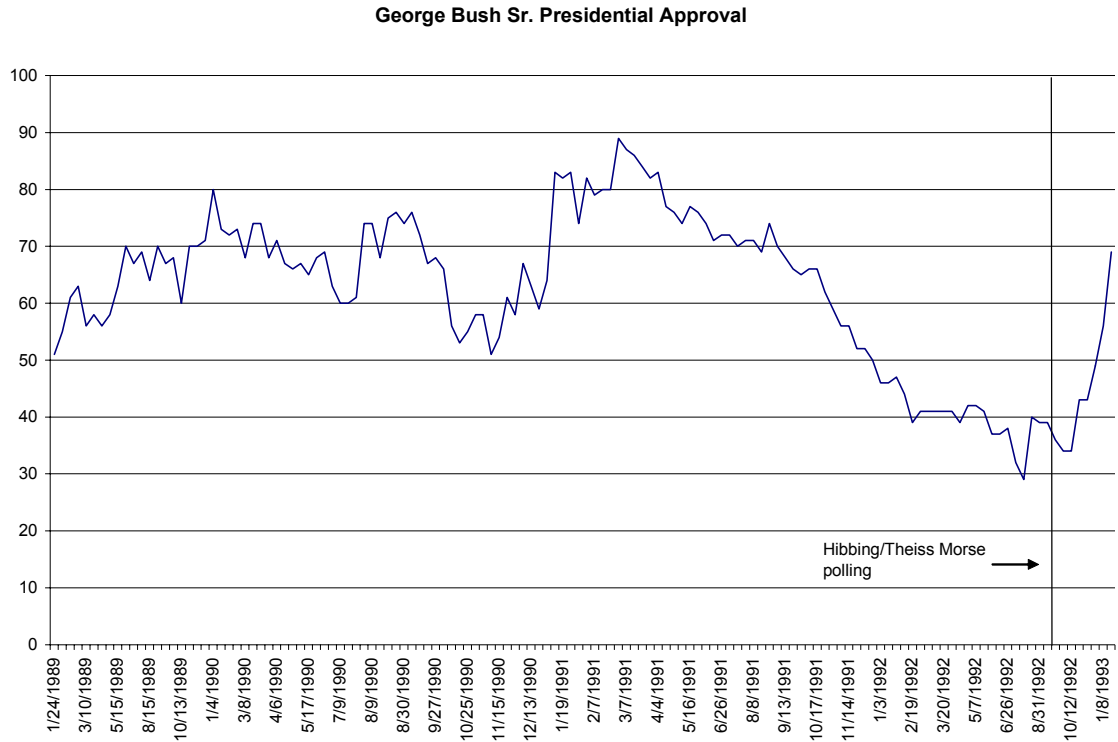
The two surveys under examination here fall into interesting places in this time period.



The absolute levels of confidence in the two periods (September 1992 and March 2002) are in the same region (except for a severe drop in “companies” in 2002—not surprising given the corporate accounting scandals in 2002). The *trend*, however, is very different. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse conducted their study almost precisely at the point when two of the three governmental institutions were experiencing a major collapse in confidence (at least the “leaders of ...”). The Reilly Center survey, in contrast, was taking the pulse of the nation at a period when the nation had just experienced what, at the time, seemed to be an historic recovery in public faith, confidence, and trust.

Presidential approval figures tell a different tale. In Figure 2, we display presidential approval for George Bush Sr.’s and George Bush Jr.’s administrations.⁴ The first and most obvious observation is that George Bush Sr.’s approval rating was among the lowest ever experienced by an incumbent president, while Bush Jr. was in the midst of some of the *highest* ratings ever received. Of course, observers of American politics recall the context of these ratings: George Bush Sr. received plaudits for the short and successful Gulf War I, but was then heavily criticized for a deteriorating economy and stagnant domestic policy agenda. The HTM survey was conducted, in fact, in the midst of what was eventually a losing reelection

Figure 2: Comparative Presidential Approval, George Bush Sr. and Jr.



bid by Bush Sr. The Reilly poll was administered just after a dramatic rise in approval, as a result of public reactions to the 9/11 terrorist attack noted above.

In summary, the HTM survey, then, was taken just at the end of a collapse in presidential approval and in the midst of a decline in public confidence in institutions, while the Reilly Center poll took place just after a strong climb in public approval of both the president and institutions.

Is it possible that this historical context may have led Hibbing and Theiss-Morse to overemphasize differences between the Supreme Court, the executive branch, and the Congress? After all, 1992-2000 does seem to have been something of a low point in public esteem for the leaders of the latter two institutions. On the other hand, it may be that the post-9/11 period is unique, and beyond providing a snapshot of public opinion at this very important period, says little about enduring patterns of public trust and confidence.

These questions form the core of the rest of the paper.

Levels of Confidence in Institutions and Members: The Disappearing Institutions-Incumbents Gap in 2002

As a first test, we compare levels and intercorrelations among the various confidence measures between the two surveys. Table 1 presents the overall levels of evaluation across four different measures: the GSS measure of confidence in the leaders of institutions, the Hibbing and Theiss-Morse measure for incumbents' job approval, the Hibbing and Theiss-Morse measure of institutional support and the NES responsiveness question of whether the institution "looks out for a few big interests or looks out for the benefit of all the people." We recoded all variables to run from 0 to 1 (from unfavorable to favorable evaluations) to show the mean value and for comparability.

Table 1: Confidence in Institutions and Members

Variable *	Reilly Center Poll (March 2002)				Hibbing/Theiss-Morse Survey (1992)	
	Confidence in the leaders of Institution	Approval of Members	Institutions (regardless of members)	Institution looks out for big interests?	Approval of Members (HTM)	Institutions (regardless of members) (HTM)
Military	0.76	0.74	0.78	0.19		
Supreme Court	0.55	0.65	0.74		0.57	0.73
Executive Branch	0.53	0.78			0.45	0.73
Congress	0.49	0.57	0.69		0.36	0.68
"Government"	0.47			0.63		
Big Business	0.42			0.84		
Press	0.42	0.58	0.65	0.61		

* For "government" confidence, we have entered the mean value for trust in government "to do what is right" (1-4 scale, recoded to the 0-1 range, where 1=just about always). For executive branch approval, we have entered presidential job approval as measured in both surveys.

Not surprisingly, in 2002, the highest evaluations tend to be for institutional support. Also not surprisingly--and in line with Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995)--there is relatively

little variation from one institution to the next in approval, although approval is highest for the military, followed by the Supreme Court. The public even approves the institution of the news media, no matter who the journalists are. However, the public does make some distinction between the institutions -particularly in the proportions of those who “strongly approve” which varies from 42% of the sample for the armed forces down to 25% of the sample for the news media. Since the results are not identical across institutions, we suggest -as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue for their results on Congress -that “the ‘institution’ question is picking up something more than knee-jerk patriotic expressions of devotion to the constitutional structure itself” (1995: 44 n. 2)

More unexpected, and at odds with Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (1995) conclusions, the gap in evaluations of institutions and incumbents is fairly narrow. The results from 2002 contrast with Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's findings from 1992, where institutional set-ups were adored and incumbents disdained (see the right hand panel in Table 1). Instead, in 2002, both the institution and the incumbents were approved, extending once again to such oft-unpopular political actors as members of Congress and journalists. Indeed, in a noteworthy reversal of the logic of “diffuse support” and “specific support,” incumbents' job approval is uniformly higher than the confidence the respondents report in the leaders of the same institutions elicited by the GSS questions, with the sole exception of the military.

How do we explain these surprising results?

Our hypothesis would be that the evaluation of institutions is fairly stable over time and relatively impervious to short term effects. If anything, however, the levels of institutional support are somewhat lower than the stratospheric levels Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) identified for 1992. Approval of the members of institutions, by contrast, would presumably be more affected by evaluations of contemporary political and economic conditions as well as by political predispositions such as partisanship and ideology.

Under this interpretation, the large gap in 1992 is a result of unhappiness with current events--reflected in declining support for the “leaders of...” institutions and the collapse in Bush's approval rating (Figures 1 and 2). We would suggest that the spring 2002 results show a continued “rally effect” from the events of September 11 six months before. As we report elsewhere (Cook and Gronke 2005), the relatively lower levels of confidence in leaders of institutions, however, shows a skepticism on the part of citizens, an unwillingness to anticipate beneficial outcomes, even during a time when both the institutions and the incumbents are rather strongly approved.

Such skepticism also holds for our respondents' assessment of the responsiveness of different institutions (these were not probed by HTM). While a majority of our respondents did not see government as “looking out for the benefit of all the people,” the proportions are very similar for government and the press. While almost 82% of our sample suggested the military does indeed look out for the benefit of all the people, only 16% said the same for business.

For the remainder of the paper, we are going to concentrate on the comparisons of approval of institutions and approval of incumbents. We begin with Table 2, which reports the intercorrelations of our various measures of institutional support and incumbent approval.

Table 2: Intercorrelations of Institutional and Member Approval

Reilly Center (2002)		Institution:				Members:			Presidential Approval
Institution:		Military	Court	Congress	Press	Military	Court	Congress	
	Supreme Court	0.4640							
	Congress	0.4963	0.6450						
	Press	0.3412	0.4541	0.5981					
Members:	Leaders of the Military	0.4008	0.2496	0.2314	0.1501				
	Supreme Court Justices	0.1522	0.3595	0.2886	0.2061	0.2705			
	435 Members of Congress	0.1722	0.2810	0.3512	0.2675	0.2941	0.5304		
	Presidential Approval	0.1992	0.0828	0.0481	-0.0218	0.2804	0.2364	0.1497	
	Journalists	0.1072	0.2286	0.3083	0.5129	0.2801	0.2541	0.3987	0.0248

Hibbing/Theiss-Morse (1992)		Institution:			Members:	
Institution:		Court	Congress	Presidency	Justices	Congress
	Congress	0.5440				
	Presidency	0.6270	0.5200			
Members:	Supreme Court Justices	0.1649	0.0159	0.0417		
	435 Member of Congress	-0.0708	0.1532	-0.0758	0.0038	
	Presidential Approval	0.0857	-0.0290	0.1247	0.2273	0.0428

First of all, note the very high intercorrelations among our different measures for institutional support. Indeed, the correlation between the variables for institutional support for the Supreme Court and for Congress is so high ($r=.65$) that we cannot say the two are measuring different concepts. The same might even be true for the correlation of the variables for institutional support for Congress and the press ($r=.60$). Even the institutional support for the armed forces is strongly intercorrelated with institutional support for the Supreme Court, Congress and the press. These findings could point to two --potentially compatible-- interpretations. One is that our respondents displayed response set, particularly for questions where we asked “What about...?” in close succession. But another conclusion is a substantive one: when cued to think in terms of “institutions [that] have their own historical traditions and purposes laid out in the Constitution,” and then asked to evaluate “these institutions in American society and government,” citizens respond in a fairly uniform way across institutions. Moreover, there is limited variation: relatively few of them reporting disapproval of them in any way. A factor analysis (rotated by the varimax method) produces only one at all statistically significant factor. The four measures also scale well ($\alpha = .7966$).

We approach these measures of institutional support in two ways. Since we asked our respondents to evaluate different institutions than did Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, our comparisons must be limited to those that both surveys probed - Congress and the Supreme Court. Our fuller model will be reserved for predicting the variation in the scale of institutional support.

Intercorrelations among the measures of incumbents' job approval are fairly healthy as well--ranging from .25 to .53--though not generally as high as those for institutional support. Here, at least, we can remove the effects of response set, since we asked our respondents to evaluate the performance of President George W. Bush at the very beginning of our survey, several minutes prior to the series of questions about how various political actors were handling their jobs. While the correlations of the job approval of Bush with the other incumbents' job approval are lower, they are often sizable and all (with the exception of the correlation with job approval of journalists) statistically significant. In other words, we can

surmise that some people are more willing than others to approve the performances of political actors and some are less willing to do so -- much as Lipset and Schneider (1987) suggested, and our earlier work has confirmed, that some people are more willing than others to express confidence in a variety of institutions and some people are less willing to do so.

Table 2 also allows us to gauge whether institutional support and incumbents' job approval are connected. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) found the correlation in 1992 between support for the institution of Congress and approval of the job performance of members of Congress to be low ($r=.16$). Indeed, they suggested (p. 122) that once one controlled for a variety of predictor variables in a two-stage-least-squares analysis, there was no linkage of any sort between the two variables, thereby precluding any need (or ability) to measure its causality.

Again in contrast, our results for 2002 produce correlations between the same measures for Congress of institutional support and approval of the performance of members of Congress that are substantially higher ($r=.35$) than those Hibbing and Theiss-Morse report for 1992. The correlations for institutional support and incumbents' job approval are of about the same magnitude for the military ($r=.40$) and the Supreme Court ($r=.36$). Thus, contrary to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's suggestion that the gap between "the constitutional system" and "the Washington system" is substantially narrower for the Supreme Court than for Congress, we see equally strong relationships between the institutional support and incumbents' job approval for both Congress and the Supreme Court. Intriguingly, the correlation between institutional support and incumbents' job approval is highest for the news media ($r=.51$), presumably because respondents rightly have greater difficulty in separating out attitudes toward the institution of the news media--which, after all, does not have its own building or address--from news practitioners themselves.

Visual inspection of Table 2 reveals the same result across most institutions: the intercorrelations between the institutional approval and member performance measures are generally lower for the 1992 survey than we found in 2002. Note also that the correlations of institutional support and of incumbents' job approval are always strongest for the measures for the same institution than across different institutions. This finding is additional evidence that while the institutional support variables highly overlap, they vary in meaningful ways that reflect the respondents' attitudes toward the performance of the incumbents within that institution.

In sum, both in terms of the absolute differences in the marginals between support of an institution and the job approval of the members of that institution, and in terms of the correlations of the same measures, the portrayal we see of the institution-incumbents gap in 2002 diverges from what Hibbing and Theiss-Morse found for 1992. The disjuncture between evaluations of institutions and incumbents has shrunk on both aggregate and individual levels. This change is especially intriguing given our conclusions and those of others that, by the spring of 2002, trust in government and confidence in leaders of institutions had snapped back to pre-September 11 levels, whereas the institutions-incumbents gap had not re-emerged.

Predicting Incumbents' Job Approval and Institutional Support

What then accounts for the levels of institutional support, of incumbents' job approval-and, by extension, of the gaps between? In this section, we compare multivariate equations to predict the following variables:

First, we compare equations predicting our various measures of *incumbents' or members' job approval*: approval of members of Congress, the nine justices of the Supreme Court, and presidential job approval for Presidents George W. Bush Jr. and Sr. While, as we have noted above, we could justifiably combine these together into a scale, we decided not to do so. For one, the intercorrelations are not as high as those for institutional support. More conceptually, political scientists have long known that job approval ratings for different parts of the federal government co-vary highly but have opted to analyze them individually given that the approval ratings of politicians, unlike the institutional support variable, can have powerful real-world consequences for the incumbents of those institutions.

These models are presented in two parts. First, we hold to a strict comparison between Reilly and HTM. As we noted at the outset, we drew liberally on HTM when designing our survey, but did not intend at the time to replicate their study. Therefore, the comparative models presented below are sparser relative to the richer set of indicators that Hibbing and Theiss-Morse collected. So that the reader can see a full model, we also present this for all five of our measure of member support (journalists and leaders of the military, along with members of Congress, the nine Justices, and presidential approval).

Next, we present parallel analyses for the two measure of *institutional support* that were included in both studies, Congress and the Supreme Court. Finally, due to the very high intercorrelations between our measures of institutional support, and because each individual measure displayed such a low level of variation, we decided to create an additive scale of institutional support. Our final table uses this measure as a dependent variable.

As with our earlier inquiry (Cook and Gronke 2005), we theorize that each of these indicators of institutional support and job approval are determined by four sets of measures.

The first set refers to the strengths of the connections that individuals have with other persons and with social and political institutions, all of which should, following the logic of "social capital" made famous in Putnam (2000), boost both institutional support and job approval ratings and also be negatively correlated with the gap between institutions and incumbents. Thus, we include among our predictor variables a scale of interpersonal trust ($\alpha = .7213$) based on three measures replicated from the NES. Relatedly, we use the new measure we have devised of "active trust-distrust" which we have shown (Cook and Gronke 2005) to be a deeper, less ephemeral orientation toward government than the standard NES trust-in-government measures, and a scale ($\alpha = .6785$) of the standard four measures of political efficacy derived from the NES. We add strength of partisanship as an expression of loyalty to a political institution, namely political parties, and respondents' self-report of the frequency of their attendance of religious services as an indicator of their ties with religious institutions. Likewise, we would expect that the politically engaged would rate both the institutions and the incumbents more highly, so we included standard measures of political interest and whether the respondent reported having talked about politics within the last day.

A second set of predictor variables encompasses one's evaluation of contemporary social conditions. We include three such variables here: the respondents' evaluation of the economic conditions of themselves as individuals and of the country as a whole; and a question asking respondents to assess current conditions: "Do you think things in this country are generally going in the right direction or are they seriously off on the wrong track?"

A third set of measures are of longstanding political commitments to party and ideology. These encompass partisan affiliation (the traditional seven-point scale going from strong Democrat to strong Republican) and ideology (a seven-point scale going from strong liberal to strong conservative).

A fourth set adds a set of demographic controls: gender (coded so that "female" is high), race (coded so that "black" is high), age, and education.

Table 3 compares identical multiple probit equations for the three measures of approval of incumbents' job performance that were identical for the Hibbing and Theiss-Morse survey of 1992 and the Reilly Center survey of 2002. Despite the substantially higher approval of the president and of the members of Congress in 2002, the equations predicting these two variables have more in common than they do not. In other words, while the mean rating for president and Congress may well have differed widely between 1992 and 2002, the variation around that mean was often for similar reasons.

However, such is not the case with the job approval of the justices of the Supreme Court. Both of the equations explain only around 3% of the variance, and the predictors that are statistically significant at a .05 level or better are completely different in 1992 and 2002. However, the signs of the coefficients are almost always consistent between 1992 and 2002. Whereas approval of the justices was influenced by partisanship (Republicans being more approving), race (blacks being less approving) and age (the young being more approving) in 1992, it was affected by respondents' assessment of their personal financial conditions, their political efficacy and political interest. While we can conjecture after the fact why such patterns might emerge--for instance, the significant impact of race in 1992 could reflect disappointment with newly-installed Justice Clarence Thomas--we might be better off simply arguing that approval ratings of the justices are closer to "non-attitudes" both by the low variance explained and the shifting effects.

The equations for the two presidents Bush show the most similarity. Presidential approval ratings not surprisingly are powerfully affected in each year by the respondents' assessment of the national financial condition, although there is an equally substantial impact of "pocketbook" assessments on the basis of one's own personal financial condition in 2002. Whites and less educated respondents were both more favorable to the president in both years, though race misses statistical significance in 2002 and education misses in 1992.

The job performance of George H.W. Bush in 1992 and George W. Bush in 2002 were powerfully influenced by partisanship and ideology. In contrast, the members of Congress seemed to be viewed similarly by both Democrats and Republicans and by both liberals and conservatives in 2002, whereas liberals and Democrats were significantly more approving of them in 1992. Since we lack separate questions on the House (controlled by Republicans in 2002) and the Senate (controlled by Democrats--if barely--in 2002), we can only wonder if

the split control of the two chambers of Congress may have pre-empted the impact of partisanship and ideology.

In both 1992 and 2002, feelings of efficacy--possibly because the NES questions we borrowed refer to connections with legislators-- were closely linked to the assessments of the jobs that members of Congress were doing. In both years, the less educated and less politically engaged (in 1992, those who discussed politics less, and in 2002, those who expressed lower interest in politics) were more inclined to rate the legislators' jobs more highly. However, there was a demographic shift: women, all other things being equal, tended to be more favorable to members of Congress in 1992 but not so in 2002; younger respondents were more favorable in 2002 but not so in 1992. And assessments of national financial condition were a powerful influence in 2002 while not in 1992.

Overall, for Congress and the president but not for the Supreme Court, there seems to be more continuity than discontinuity in the predictors of job approval. In both years, presidential job approval was a function of economic evaluations, partisanship, ideology and (more marginally) low education and race. In both years, job approval of members of Congress was a function of feelings of efficacy, political disengagement and low education. The latter point underscores a central insight of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) that has been reproduced elsewhere: those who are most favorable to Congress tend not to be attentive and educated but instead to be more disengaged and less educated.

In Table 4, we turn exclusively to the Reilly Center data from 2002. We are able to expand our inquiry in two key ways. One is to supplement the ratings of the incumbents of the three branches of government with the assessments of members of the armed forces and of journalists, in line with our interest in expanding our understanding of public opinion to other parts of government. Second, we can add additional variables that previous work or our own hypotheses have suggested may be substantial contributors to individuals' views of members of political institutions, thereby providing a fuller specification. Table 4 compares the coefficients for equations predicting the five different indications of incumbents' job approval.

The first finding to notice is the strong and consistent impact of the question asking the respondent whether the country is on the right track or going off seriously in the wrong direction. The job performances of all five sets of the members of institutions were judged more favorably by those who saw the country on the right track. Clearly, by answering the question, "How are we doing?", respondents can draw conclusions about how well members of many institutions are doing their respective jobs. Perhaps as a result, some variables that were important predictors in Table 3, such as race and ideology, now drop out of these equations.

Table 3: Support for the Institutional Members

	435 Members of Congress				Nine Justices of Supreme Court			
	Reilly Poll		HTM		Reilly Poll		HTM	
Personal financial condition	0.0771	0.0603	0.0155	0.0432	0.1247	0.0611 *	0.0566	0.0457
National financial condition	0.1611	0.0584 **	-0.0280	0.0577	0.0833	0.0584	0.1010	0.0613
Efficacy	0.2865	0.0433 ***	0.6939	0.1206 ***	0.1161	0.0427 *	0.0561	0.1262
Political interest	-0.1521	0.0520 **	-0.0711	0.0502	-0.1426	0.0519 *	-0.0784	0.0529
Political discussion	0.0678	0.0924	-0.0433	0.0155 *	0.0342	0.0940	-0.0097	0.0165
Party ID (Republican)	-0.0161	0.0218	-0.1049	0.0190 ***	0.0318	0.0221	0.0674	0.0199 **
Strength of Party ID	0.0549	0.0377	0.1235	0.0369 **	0.0072	0.0382	-0.0446	0.0389
Conservatism	-0.0160	0.0317	-0.0794	0.0278 *	0.0483	0.0323	0.0227	0.0292
Education (Yrs)	-0.0430	0.0216 *	-0.0429	0.0186 *	-0.0344	0.0218	0.0268	0.0197
Black	0.0632	0.1454	0.0737	0.1374	-0.1088	0.1464	-0.3329	0.1373 *
Age	-0.0063	0.0027 *	0.0039	0.0022	-0.0054	0.0028	-0.0069	0.0023 *
Female	0.0637	0.0826	0.2148	0.0693 *	-0.0717	0.0832	-0.0836	0.0730
Ancillary parameters	-2.0150	0.2433	-1.5190	0.2128	-2.1148	0.2457	-2.1522	0.2319
	-0.6809	0.2343	0.3550	0.2088	-1.3113	0.2375	-0.9238	0.2225
	1.0410	0.2361	2.5573	0.2847	0.4858	0.2350	1.4895	0.2272
Pseudo R2	0.0510		0.0634		0.0307		0.0348	
	Presidential Approval							
	Reilly Poll		HTM					
Personal financial condition	0.2482	0.0802 **	0.0559	0.0414				
National financial condition	0.2871	0.0876 **	0.3092	0.0566 ***				
Efficacy	0.0861	0.0582	0.1227	0.1150				
Political interest	-0.0789	0.0690	-0.0902	0.0475				
Political discussion	-0.1518	0.1254	-0.0365	0.0148 *				
Party ID (Republican)	0.2278	0.0338 ***	0.2606	0.0193 ***				
Strength of Party ID	-0.0001	0.0547	0.1369	0.0355 ***				
Conservatism	0.1122	0.0431 **	0.0774	0.0267 **				
Education (Yrs)	-0.0616	0.0300 *	-0.0278	0.0179				
Black	-0.3091	0.1643	-0.4165	0.1304 ***				
Age	0.0014	0.0038	0.0018	0.0021				
Female	0.1955	0.1115	-0.0267	0.0667				
Ancillary parameters	0.4158	0.3162	-0.4995	0.2032				
			0.9535	0.2026				
			2.8820	0.2203				
Pseudo R2	0.2149		0.1510					

Source: Reilly Center and Hibbing Theiss-Morse polls (see text for details). Entries are ordered probit coefficients, except for presidential approval, which was estimated in probit. * p<.05; ** p<.01 *** p<.001

But, to borrow the terminology from the trust-in-government literature, we find strong evidence of a “socialization” effect as well as a “performance” effect by the consistently positive effect of our new measure of active trust-distrust on job performance ratings for members of Congress, the justices of the Supreme Court and the armed forces. (The coefficient for presidential job approval shows a similar trend that does not reach statistical significance) As we have discussed in more detail elsewhere (Cook and Gronke 2005), this measure seems to capture a longer-standing predisposition of trusting authority than is the case with the more politically sensitive measures of trust-in-government from the NES or the GSS measures of confidence in leaders of institutions.

Table 4: Full Models of Member Approval

	435 M's of Congress	Nine SC Justices	Journalists	Leaders of the Military	Presidential Approval
Right / Wrong track	0.2764 0.1107 *	0.4500 0.1129 ***	0.2410 0.1046 *	0.3743 0.1113 **	0.9956 0.1370 ***
Trust / Distrust	0.0703 0.0197 ***	0.0527 0.0201 **	0.0197 0.0187	0.0744 0.0199 ***	0.0502 0.0280
Interpersonal trust	0.0039 0.0414	0.0051 0.0426	0.0432 0.0396	-0.0309 0.0417	-0.0819 0.0596
Personal financial condition	0.0623 0.0673	0.0413 0.0691	0.1038 0.0642	0.0634 0.0675	0.2241 0.0942 *
National financial condition	0.1450 0.0635 *	0.0863 0.0644	0.0605 0.0605	0.0652 0.0640	0.2235 0.0995 *
Efficacy	0.2212 0.0495 ***	0.0529 0.0495	0.0398 0.0463	0.0047 0.0489	-0.0208 0.0701
Political interest	-0.1490 0.0577 **	-0.1550 0.0583 **	-0.0428 0.0542	0.0279 0.0570	-0.0108 0.0782
Political discussion	0.0439 0.1003	0.0194 0.1035	0.0768 0.0956	-0.0064 0.1007	-0.0537 0.1417
Party ID (Republican)	-0.0428 0.0238	0.0162 0.0243	-0.0479 0.0228 *	0.0060 0.0242	0.2101 0.0378 ***
Strength of Party ID	0.0447 0.0422	0.0025 0.0432	-0.0205 0.0408	-0.0258 0.0427	-0.0027 0.0629
Conservatism	-0.0239 0.0353	0.0352 0.0362	-0.0625 0.0338	0.0664 0.0360	0.0714 0.0501
Church Attendance	-0.0413 0.0180 *	-0.0495 0.0185 **	-0.0188 0.0171	0.0112 0.0180	-0.0141 0.0258
Education	-0.0463 0.0243	-0.0399 0.0249	-0.0669 0.0232 **	-0.0508 0.0245 *	-0.0410 0.0348
Black	0.1321 0.1607	0.0495 0.1623	0.1376 0.1508	-0.1890 0.1557	-0.2929 0.1855
Age	-0.0077 0.0030 *	-0.0048 0.0031	0.0033 0.0029	-0.0006 0.0031	0.0026 0.0043
Female	-0.0004 0.0920	-0.1267 0.0939	0.2427 0.0883 **	-0.0012 0.0931	0.2345 0.1317
Ancillary parameters	-2.0509 0.2780	-2.1155 0.2820	-1.6625 0.2593	-1.6611 0.2818	-0.3448 0.3846
	-0.7108 0.2690	-1.3202 0.2744	-0.6178 0.2543	-0.8764 0.2685	
	1.0911 0.2708	0.6078 0.2720	1.0586 0.2563	1.0596 0.2697	
Pseudo R2	0.0673	0.0527	0.0291	0.0461	0.2809

Source: Reilly Center poll (see text for details). Entries are ordered probit coefficients, except for presidential approval, which was estimated in probit. * p<.05; ** p<.01 *** p<.001

One more pattern consistently emerges: those who rate the job performance of members of institutions highly tend to be either less politically engaged or less educated. The sole exception here is the president, for whom levels of political interest, political discussion and education make no difference.

Table 4 also exhibits intriguing contrasts from institution to institution. Evaluations of economic conditions—at least over and above the respondents’ assessments of the right track or wrong direction - only influence job ratings of the president and members of Congress—who thus are the only officeholders subject to accountability for the state of the economy. Partisanship is a significant predictor of job performance ratings for President Bush in 2002 and for journalists, and just misses statistical significance for Congress. Republicans tend to judge President Bush and, to a considerably lesser extent, members of Congress favorably—and to assess journalists unfavorably. But partisanship has no impact one way or the other on two institutions that consistently try to present themselves as “above politics”: the Supreme Court and the military. That is not to say that the Supreme Court has been totally successful at that strategy; those who attend religious services more frequently tend to downgrade the job approval ratings of the justices (along with members of Congress).

Finally in Tables 5 and 6, we report the results for equations predicting institutional support. Table 5 compares identical equations from the Hibbing/Theiss-Morse survey of 1992 and the Reilly Center survey of 2002 for the two measures of institutional support that both surveys contained: the evaluation of Congress as an institution and the Supreme Court as an institution, no matter who is serving. The first thing to notice is that the explanatory power of the equations predicting institutional approval for Congress and for the Supreme Court in 2002 is low. The difficulty with predicting support for the institutions of Congress and the

Court is undoubtedly a result of the fact that these variables do not vary greatly. But that methodological point is also a substantive finding: there is generally such consensus about institutional support that variation tends to be “noise” rather than being systematic.

Table 5: Support for Institutions

	Congress				Supreme Court			
	Reilly Center		HTM		Reilly Center		HTM	
Personal financial condition	0.1156	0.0585 *	0.0534	0.0433	0.1228	0.0600 *	0.0241	0.0451
National financial condition	-0.0494	0.0560	0.0062	0.0573	-0.0686	0.0577	0.1086	0.0602
Efficacy	0.1238	0.0409 **	0.5699	0.1213 ***	0.1175	0.0418 **	0.2365	0.1247
Political interest	-0.0730	0.0491	0.1310	0.0499 **	-0.0062	0.0496	0.1106	0.0516 *
Political discussion	0.1300	0.0886	0.0185	0.0155	0.1632	0.0897	0.0322	0.0161 *
Party ID (Republican)	-0.0033	0.0213	-0.0231	0.0189	-0.0079	0.0216	0.0304	0.0197
Strength of Party ID	0.0478	0.0369	0.0221	0.0367	0.0063	0.0376	0.0852	0.0381 *
Conservatism	-0.0169	0.0310	0.0058	0.0279	0.0068	0.0314	0.0370	0.0290
Education (Yrs)	0.0303	0.0208	0.0716	0.0187 ***	0.0064	0.0213	0.0726	0.0195 ***
Black	-0.0487	0.1378	-0.1021	0.1367	-0.0175	0.1376	-0.2381	0.1413
Age	0.0022	0.0027	0.0038	0.0022	0.0003	0.0027	-0.0052	0.0023 *
Female	0.0164	0.0800	0.0028	0.0695	-0.1093	0.0817	-0.1719	0.0724 *
Ancillary parameters	-1.5637	0.2383	-1.2112	0.2291	-1.6744	0.2431	-2.4317	0.3753
	-0.4079	0.2225	0.0038	0.2086	-0.7879	0.2258	-0.7554	0.2200
	1.0054	0.2243	2.1447	0.2177	0.7173	0.2252	1.6328	0.2236
Pseudo R2	0.0142		0.0469		0.0130		0.0548	

Source: Reilly Center and Hibbing Theiss-Morse polls (see text for details). Entries are ordered probit coefficients. * p<.05; ** p<.01 *** p<.001

In spite of these uninspiring pseudo-R²s, there is one notable continuity between 1992 and 2002: feelings of efficacy predict institutional support (though the coefficient for the Supreme Court just misses statistical significance in 1992). And there are revealing contrasts. The respondents’ assessments of their personal financial condition had a powerful impact on support for the institutions of Congress and the Court in 2002 but not in 1992. By contrast, with the exception of the continuing power of the efficacy measure, the indications of tighter integration into the political and social structure (political interest, political discussion, strength of partisanship and education) that boosted institutional support for Congress and/or the Court in 1992 have no impact that is statistically significant in 2002. These results are limited, and given the poor explanatory power of the equation in 2002 must be treated with caution. Nonetheless, they raise an intriguing possibility that, in the post-9/11 world, institutional support is now more closely connected with performance evaluations.

This point about how institutional support in 2002 had become linked to “performance” evaluations is reinforced by Table 6, which presents a fuller specification for a multiple regression equation predicting our scale of institutional support, combining together the evaluations of the institutions themselves of Congress, the Supreme Court, the armed forces and the news media. The equation still explains relatively little of the variance. If it is any consolation, however, this explanatory power is greater than that for any of the individual measures, some of which failed, as an equation, to reach statistical significance.

Table 6: Support for Institutions

	Institutional Support	
Right / Wrong track	0.1171	0.0535 *
Trust / Distrust	0.0113	0.0095
Interpersonal trust	0.0501	0.0201 *
Personal financial condition	0.0580	0.0329
National financial condition	-0.0446	0.0314
Efficacy	0.0256	0.0233
Political interest	-0.0285	0.0274
Political discussion	0.1062	0.0485 *
Party ID (Republican)	-0.0077	0.0117
Strength of Party ID	-0.0008	0.0207
Conservatism	0.0006	0.0173
Church Attendance	-0.0035	0.0087
Education	-0.0062	0.0119
Black	0.0993	0.0768
Age	0.0012	0.0015
Female	-0.0080	0.0448
Constant	2.8790	0.1274
R squared	0.0227	

Source: Reilly Center poll. Estimates are least squares regression coefficients. Dependent variable is an index made up of support for Congress, Supreme Court, the mass media, and the military.

As Table 6 reveals, institutional support in 2002 can best be explained as a function of three variables: the respondent’s assessment of whether the country was on the right track or heading in the wrong direction; levels of interpersonal trust; and whether or not the respondent reported discussing politics within the previous day or so. These results are tantalizing in their elegance: whether different Americans rate the institutional structure of the American political system higher or lower depends upon performance (right track/wrong direction) and socialization (interpersonal trust) and political engagement (political discussion). Much as we, and others, have found with trust in government and confidence in leaders of institutions, we cannot rely on solely a “performance” explanation or a “socialization” explanation. Support for the institutions of American governance is no exception to this emerging general rule.

Conclusion

Let us review our findings. First of all, the institutions-incumbents gap, which Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) portrayed as a nearly permanent part of the contemporary American political landscape, diminished substantially in the wake of September 11. Though one may object that the time period when we conducted our survey (the spring of 2002) was an anomalous moment in political history, we could retort that the same is also true of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse’s chosen moment of the fall of 1992. At this point, we cannot say whether or if one or the other result is more typical of American politics. What we can begin

to discuss, however, are the dynamics of the shift. At the aggregate level, the stability of high evaluations of “the institutions themselves, no matter the members” between 1992 and 2002 is remarkable. Moreover, as we found by supplementing Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's questions about Congress and the Supreme Court with identical questions about the leaders of the armed forces and the news media, we found that Americans rarely distinguish very much between the components of the institutional structure when they are asked to do so.

The institutions-incumbents gap thus shrank between 1992 and 2002 not because Americans changed their views about the institutions in the aggregate but because they did so about the members of those institutions. A majority of the respondents in our poll in the spring of 2002 approved the job performance of the president, members of Congress, justices of the Supreme Court, members of the armed forces, and even of journalists. It is worth pointing out, however, that what we surmise is a rally effect in the months after September 11 extends neither to the institutions themselves (which are as but no more highly evaluated than before) nor to an increased willingness of respondents to trust government or place confidence in the leaders of institutions (with the salient exception of the military), as the indicators of trust and confidence had fallen from their meteoric post-9/11 rise to the levels seen before the attacks.

Second, the institutions-incumbents gap closed in another way: we find generally stronger interrelations both in institutional support across different institutions and in the association between support for an institutional structure and support for the members within that institution. We have already noted Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (1995) conclusion that the correlation of support for the institutional set-up of Congress and of support for its members was weak in 1992; their data provide similar results for the Supreme Court. By contrast, the evidence from 2002 suggests a closer alignment between an individual's attitudes toward the institutional set-up and the members occupying that particular institution. Given the aggregate stability of institutional support, we can speculate whether the rally effect created by the crisis of September 11 provoked Americans to evaluate the job performance of the incumbents within an institution through the lens of their overall adulation of the institutional structure. Stated differently, whereas support for an institution could become grounds for a critique of the incumbents in 1992 (see Farnsworth 1997), it might be the basis of approval of the incumbents in 2002.

Third, we found both continuities and discontinuities in comparing constructing identical equations for the surveys from 1992 and 2002 on the job approval ratings of the president, of the members of Congress and of the justices of the Supreme Court. One leitmotif links support for all three branches: that the less educated and/or the less politically engaged tend to be more favorable to the incumbents in power. However, with that exception, attitudes toward the Supreme Court, whether its institutional structure or its occupants, are the most difficult to pin down, suggesting that these responses may be most likely of these to be non-attitudes. The equations were most similar in predicting the job approval of President George H.W. Bush in 1992 and his son President George W. Bush in 2002, with strong influences from partisanship, ideology, and assessments of economic conditions. The results for the job performance of the members of Congress shift substantially between 1992 and 2002, in ways that may be explicable by the change from unified Democratic control of both chambers in 1992 to split control in 2002. However, once we expand our purview to include the military and the news media in 2002 alone, we find that job approval ratings are

influenced both by measures of performance, notably the question of whether the respondent considers the country to be on the right track or the wrong direction, *and* of socialization, namely the “active trust-distrust” measure we developed.

Fourth, our analysis of the respondents' evaluations of the institutional structures of Congress and of the Supreme Court, comparing results from 1992 and 2002, and of a scale designed to measure support for the overall components of the institutions of American government provide what in some ways are the most thought-provoking results.

There is so much consensus among Americans on the worthiness of the political system established most notably by the Constitution that there is little variation to be explained. To the extent that we can do so, the causes for support for the two institutional structures examined in both 1992 and 2002 -- Congress and the Supreme Court -- are distinct. The more politically efficacious are more supportive of the institutions, no matter the members, in both years. But whereas the politically engaged and more educated are more likely to rate the institutional structures of Congress and the Court more highly in 1992, the same is not the case in 2002. And in 2002, unlike 1992, such institutional support is now influenced by respondents' assessments of their personal financial condition.

We must be cautious about these findings given the low percentage of variation explained. Nevertheless, they offer a hint that the bases for institutional support after September 11 shifted away from being integrated into the political and social structure to a retrospective evaluation of contemporary conditions. This message is reinforced by our analysis of a scale of support for the institutional structure of the American political system. Much like the literature on trust-in-government has suggested, such institutional support draws on performance *and* socialization explanations, as well as indications of greater support from those who are more politically engaged.

In broader terms, our results from 2002 suggest that, at the very least, a gap between high assessments of the institutional structure created by the Constitution and low evaluations of the members of those institutions is far from inevitable. In a sense, the gap shrank from 1992 to 2002 for reasons that David Easton's famous distinction between diffuse support and specific support might explain. At the aggregate level, there is remarkable stability in Americans' evaluations of the overall institutional structure, and the gap may close when, as happened after September 11, rally effects boost Americans' appreciation of the job performance of the incumbents of those institutions. But in other ways, Easton's clean division between diffuse and specific support is not easy to justify. One's attitudes toward an institutional structure and toward the incumbents who occupy that structure inform one another. And while Easton's model suggests that diffuse support is primarily a product of early socialization while specific support is largely a response to current conditions, we find that both institutional support and evaluations of incumbents rely on socialization and performance explanations.

The narrowing of the gap between institutions and incumbents in 2002 also raises doubts about the cultural bases of such a divide. It is true that the media habitually encourage an institutions-incumbents gap. Recall sociologist Herbert Gans's (1979) acute point: “The news endorses, or sets up as a standard, the formal norms of democracy and the formal structures of democratic institutions as established by the Founding Fathers. Concurrently, it treats as suspect the informal norms and structures that have developed in the polity to

allocate power and resources; in effect, the news defends democratic theory against an almost inevitably inferior democratic practice.” Such a media frame is often found in entertainment media as well, reaching its most developed manifestation in the 1939 Frank Capra film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Capra's theme -- of how a virtuous individual redeems a political system, which is above reproach but fragile, from former idealists turned cynics -- has echoed throughout films and television in the decades since, most recently in the 2003 Reese Witherspoon vehicle, *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White and Blonde*.

But Americans do not invariably contrast infallible institutions and all-too-fallible incumbents. At a time of crisis, they make their assessments of institutions and incumbents more consistent. In part, this occurs because the media, too, turn to more patriotic and reassuring coverage of political actors idealistically pursuing the collective good. But we may speculate that a rally that, after all, influences many evaluations of government beyond presidential job approval also impels Americans to think of the job performance of incumbents through the lens of their high endorsement of the political system bequeathed by the Constitution. Consider the argument of Suzanne Parker (1995: 526-527), who interprets her findings from a series of surveys of Floridians before, during and after the first war against Iraq as follows:

Rally events invoke feelings of allegiance toward national political institutions and policies... Citizens rally to the support of the entire political system, which leads them to see government policies, societal conditions, and public officials in a far more positive light, if only for a brief period of time.

Yet these rally effects have different durations. We see no evidence of a rally, for instance, in institutional support, presumably because of a ceiling effect where it was unlikely to go much higher. By the time we were in the field in the spring of 2002, the rally in trust-in-government had already ended. Thus, the shrinking of the institutions-incumbent gap persisted well after Americans had returned to pre-September 11 levels of trust in government and confidence in leaders of institutions. This is also a central finding: the reduction of the gap that we see in the spring of 2002 was not then a function of Americans deciding they trust the government more or have greater confidence in the institutions' leaders. Indeed, Americans' unwillingness to explicitly give the benefit of the doubt to government or to leaders is strikingly shown by the fact that levels of confidence in the leaders of a given institution were always lower (with the salient exception of the military) than the approval of the members of the institution.

Of course, we cannot speak to the current state as of 2005, let alone the future prospects, of the institutions-incumbents gap. We would be fascinated to find out whether or not it has returned along with the return of the deep divisions in American politics. What we can say, however, is that the institutions-incumbents gap is not an invariant part of American politics, and that Americans do have moments where they see the institutions and the members of institutions working in sync.

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Endnotes

¹ We should note here that when we asked about the media, we were sensitive to journalists' concern that this is a pejorative term, compared to the more venerable "press." However, we conducted a split-half test where half of the respondents were asked a question about the "press" and the other half an otherwise identical question about the "media." We found no statistically significant differences between the two questions and have combined the results together for "press" and "media".

²: These cooperation rates are less than optimal, though recent work suggests that different response rates occasion only marginal differences in attitudinal measures, though somewhat stronger differences in demographics (Curtin, Presser and Singer 2000; Keeter et al. 2000). As a result, we ran a test to assure that those who declined to cooperate and those who agreed to take the survey were not significantly different. By offering a "short form" option for respondents who initially refused to take a survey, we gathered a limited set of demographic and attitudinal indicators for 194 respondents. The only statistically significant difference between those who refused to cooperate and those who agreed to take the survey was work status (more of the partial refusals reported working full and part time).

³ We created the weights by calculating the proportion of the population in combined sex, age, and educational categories using the most recently available U.S. Census data (the 2000 Census Supplementary Survey data, based on twelve monthly samples during 2000). These were applied to the sample so that the total working sample size is identical to the original sample size. The weights vary from a high of 8.2 (for males over 65 with less than a high school education) to .09 (for females 18-24 years old with a graduate or professional degree). While these extreme values are large, 95% of the calculated weights fall between .51 and 1.52; 99% of the calculated weights fall between .39 and 4.0.

⁴ These data were collected from the Roper Center website (<http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu>). The jagged nature of Bush Jr's graphic is due to the very high number of survey observations—and the natural variability across survey organizations--that are available in this period.