CHAPTER 1

Why Don't We Trust Congress and the Media?

This book investigates how changing news-gathering habits are affecting our public perceptions of politicians and the media broadly. Particularly, I argue that the sources and devices we use to access news have grown dramatically with the advent of new communications technologies, and these changes are affecting public perceptions of politics. The ultimate goal of this book is to understand better how public perceptions of Congress and the media are formed and to explain how these perceptions are shaped by our own media choices.

Politicians and journalists have never been trusted professional classes comparatively. Gallup Polls have tracked the public's trust of different professions over time. According to Gallup, members of Congress, as a professional class, are less trusted than car salespeople and telemarketers (Gallup 2016). Journalists, meanwhile, have declined in public standing. The percentage of Americans rating journalists as having "low" or "very low" honesty and ethical standards has doubled since the early 1990s. Hetherington and Rudolph (2015) argue how the contemporary decline in political trust is reaching unprecedented levels and contributing to a polarized Congress.

Of course, the American political system is largely based on public distrust of political elites. It is grounded in principles of popular sovereignty, checks and balances, separation of powers, and limited government. This constitutional design was partly an outgrowth of public distrust toward centralized authority. While it is part of our American political ethos to distrust centralized power, we also tend to distrust congressional compromise, denouncing it as unprincipled and political (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Instead, most Americans prefer elected politicians who remain consistent with their base constituencies and core values.

For these reasons, Congress has remained unpopular over time, sometimes referenced as the "broken branch" of our federal government (Fenno 1975). Congress has generally been held in lower public esteem over time compared to the executive branch and Supreme Court. It is precisely because of its public transparency and conflicting voices compared with the other branches that Congress is disliked. Congress is on public

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display, exposing Americans to the wheeling and dealing, appeals to special interests, and partisan rhetoric of representative government. This public transparency is mediated through a television, computer, and smartphone screen increasingly, and this mediated communication is another thing this book is about.

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) find that Americans do not like partisan conflict, long debate, and crass bargaining, instead wishing for a quieter, more agreeable Congress. Of course, this public preference for a populist consensus—a democratic wish that we will all agree with a well-defined national interest—does not occur in practice (Marone 1998). It is at odds with a legislative process that reflects our national diversity. Most Americans prefer politicians who remain consistent with their base constituencies and core values. In practice, though, effective legislatures compel broad-minded leadership, dialogue, and conciliation among diverse interests to bring about collective action. Americans do not trust or like Congress in practice.

Acknowledging this long tradition of congressional disapproval, I argue that the level of public acrimony toward Congress has deepened in the past decade. According to Gallup Polls, public approval of Congress in 2001 stood at a high of 84 percent. This brief, transcendent point of congressional approval reflected a rally-around-the-flag effect after 9/11. Public approval of all government institutions—Congress, the presidency, Supreme Court, and the military—peaked after the 9/11 terror attacks. Since 2001, though, public approval of Congress has steadily declined more sharply than for other institutions. In fact, congressional public approval dipped to about 10 percent approval or even single digits in 2013 after Congress's government shutdown battle. By 2017, Gallup Polls measured that public approval of Congress increased after the 2016 presidential election to 28 percent and then regressed back to now routine low numbers for both Republicans and Democrats. Despite some variability and regardless of your partisan views, we do not like Congress.

Likewise, we increasingly distrust the media. Americans' trust in the news media was at its highest in the mid-1970s in the wake of investigative journalism regarding Watergate scandal and Vietnam. Americans' trust leveled to the low to mid-50s throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. However, since then, Americans' trust in the media has fallen slowly and steadily. By 2016, less than a third of Americans stated that they had "great deal" or "fair amount" of trust in mass media to "to report the news fully, accurately and fairly" (Gallup 2016).

There are many explanations for why we do not trust politicians and the media. Trust in government, generally, has declined from highs in the

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1950s and 1960s, and congressional distrust is just part of this larger issue. My interest, though, is to point out a connection between media and congressional distrust. I argue that our practices and attitudes toward news media are driving the more recent depths and intensity of congressional distrust over the past two decades. By proposing and investigating a new media explanation for congressional distrust, I do not imply that other explanations should be discounted. For instance, I am *not* arguing that excessive partisanship, crass pork barreling, special-interests lobbying, incumbency advantages, or political scandal are not all possible sources of congressional disapproval. I am only suggesting that an explanation grounded in the role of media is less recognized and understood.

My thesis is that our changing news-gathering habits are contributing to recent public distrust of Congress. The media outlets in which we view, read, or hear about Congress have expanded as new media technologies have supplanted traditional news media. Additionally, the diffusion of media devices, like smartphones, DVRs, and tablets, has resulted in an increasingly fragmented and distracted news audience. Media choice is not only altering who accesses news and how they do it; more important, I argue that it is also changing the news itself. I posit a news-grazing explanation of how the public views Congress that I describe subsequently.

News Grazing

Today's media consumers are flooded by choice. We click a remote control, tap a computer keyboard, or touch a tablet screen. But consider for a moment a world without these media screening devices. Would we watch the same programs and access the same information without them? When watching television, would we still be apt to turn from channel to channel if we had to get out of our seats and stand in front of the TV while doing it? Maybe not. If people were less apt to click from channel to channel, would so many channels exist today? Maybe not. Beginning with the remote control, media-screening technology has facilitated media choice. The remote control facilitated greater levels of television watching and highly influenced the manner in which we watched TV. We can be more selective, making a split-second judgment in our viewing. If a program does not tickle our immediate fancy, it takes little to no effort to merely click to another channel . . . and another . . . and another.

The remote control, though, was merely one of the first communication technologies that allowed us to screen or manage media messages. (I would emphasize that the remote control is old technology.) Consider the

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