

Chapter 2

Did the Media Do it?

The Influence of News Coverage on the 2006 Congressional Elections¹

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Elections are notoriously blunt instruments. As such, it is often difficult to interpret what the results mean or why the elections favored the winners in the first place. In an era where competitive elections are increasingly scarce, the 2006 midterm elections turned a 232–201 Republican advantage in the House of Representatives to a 233–202 Democratic majority. Similarly, and in some ways more remarkably, the Senate narrowly slipped out of the GOP's hands as well, giving the Democrats a majority in both chambers of the legislative branch of the federal government for the first time since 1994.

Despite the fact the results of the 2006 midterms comport nicely with traditional explanations of a mid-term loss in elections occurring during the “sixth year itch”² of two-term presidential administrations, times of war,³ and years of economic tumult, political pundits have been quick to point the finger at another source: the news media. A November 13, 2006 *Washington Times* op-ed from former Sen. Robert Dole's press secretary Douglass MacKinnon claimed that “the remnants of objectivity in the mainstream media were all but exterminated by some on the left” because “many in the media have worked in concert with the Democratic spin doctors to indoctrinate the American voter into believing this election had to be a referendum on President Bush and the ‘failed’ war in Iraq.” *National Review Online* editor Jonah Goldberg wrote in the November 9, 2006 *USA Today* that though the Democrats' victory was hardly impressive, it occurred, in part, “because Democrats—with the help of a transmission-belt media—convinced a lot of voters that they could simply change the channel on the war by voting for ‘change.’”

Do these claims have merit? Or, are they the excuses and accusations of the electorally vanquished? In this chapter, we examine these issues by asking, first, did the news media cover Republicans more negatively than the Democrats in the 2006 elections by tying negative coverage issues such as the war in Iraq and congressional scandals to Republican congressional candidates? Second, we ask the following about media coverage of the 2006 congressional elections: did it help the Democrats?

To answer these questions, we present the results of content analyses of broadcast news coverage of Congress by NBC and FOX News during the fall

2006 election season.⁴ Using that analysis as a starting point, we turn to more formal analysis, using data from the 2006 Congressional Elections Study (CES) to explore questions regarding the news media's role in affecting the 2006 midterms. In particular, we examine how media use among survey respondents affect public attitudes toward congressional partisans and citizens' vote choice.

The analysis suggests a more complicated story than those told in the *Washington Times* and *USA Today*. Depending on the source, coverage toward congressional partisans and partisan congressional challengers varied during the final months before the election, typically in response to newsworthy events or institutional factors. Regarding the media's real political consequences in 2006, we demonstrate that when being a television news watcher independently affected items such as vote choice, attitudes toward congressional partisans and attitudes toward specific candidates, use of television news as one's main source of information about Congress slightly *helped* Republican candidates. On the other hand, when we *interact* variables measuring television viewers and political knowledge, the Democrats gained the advantage at the ballot box. Indeed, the finding that it is the interaction of one's preferred source for news and one's political knowledge that affects vote choice improves our understanding about how voters make decisions in contemporary American politics.

Congressional Elections and the News Media

Typically, studies of House and Senate races focus on local radio, television, and newspaper campaign coverage (Cook 1989). If there are any general truths that stem from work in this area, they are that television coverage is hard to come by and incumbent's have the advantage in grabbing the few morsels of attention local television provides (Cook 1989; Schaffner 2006). Examining local coverage makes sense as many congressional campaigns turn on community issues rather than national tides (Fenno 1978).

As with the elections of 1994, though, many congressional candidates in 2006 focused on a national issues strategy, centering campaign messages on the Iraq war, the war on Terror, congressional scandals, and the election-as-referendum on President Bush. While local news pays scant attention to congressional candidates, we demonstrate that stories about Congress and the midterm elections were regularly covered on national network television news during the 2006 election season.

The mass media are a crucial intermediary between elite actors and the public. What is more, the news media's institutional structure regularly requires giving attention to both Republicans and Democrats in political news coverage. Professional norms of journalistic objectivity regularly lead the news media to cover "both sides" of an issue⁵ (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Downie and Kaiser 2002; Graber 2002; Schudson 2003). Since political parties provide institutional structure for American political debate (Schattschneider 1942;

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Wright and Schaffner 2002; Sniderman and Bullock 2004), they are often key players in media stories that provide two “sides” to an issue (Hershey 1999). Naturally, elite partisans make up a clear majority of the “official sources” that are routinely relied upon in political news stories (Cook 1989).

With respect to congressional elections, media consumers bemoan the regular occurrence of Republican vs. Democrat “horserace journalism” that focuses on campaign strategy and survey numbers even as reporters often prefer covering the horserace as they can more readily defend themselves from charges of bias by claiming that they are merely reporting the polls (Graber 2002). Specifically regarding television coverage, there is reason to explore whether often dramatic storytelling style and vivid pictures resonate with viewers during an election season. Zaller (1992) argues that people tend to resist the persuasive attempts often found in campaigns, as reported by the news media, to the extent that people can apply their predispositions to the relevant information, suggesting important roles for the content of information and the political awareness of the individual. We argue that the interaction of these two items can have an important, independent influence on vote choice and attitudes toward congressional partisans.

The Mediated Context of the 2006 Midterm Elections

In order to more fully understand what television news viewers were seeing with respect to the midterm elections, we examined congressional elections coverage from the *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams* and *FOX News' Special Report with Brit Hume* from mid-September through Election Day.⁶ We coded the transcripts for every story that mentioned any of the following terms: “Congress,” “congressional,” “House,” “Senate,” “Senator,” or “Representative” for a variety of factors.⁷ For this chapter, the crucial coding categories include the issues present in the news stories and tone of the coverage aimed at the institution of Congress, Republicans in Congress, and Democrats in Congress. We coded for the possibility of 17 different issues (see Coding Appendix) present in the stories. For each story containing one or more of the search terms, we recorded up to four issues. The most prominent coverage focused on the Iraq war, the “War on Terror,” congressional scandals, and stories related to the 2006 horserace.

We coded the category of Congress as an institution when all or part of the story dealt with Congress, the House, or the Senate and not specific members of the legislative branch. The stories were coded as being generally negative about Congress, generally neutral/equally positive or negative about Congress or generally positive about Congress. The categories relating to the tone of coverage about congressional Republicans and congressional Democrats were coded when all or part of a story specifically referred to a partisan member of

the House or Senate *or* when a story referred to congressional partisans as a group. Once again, the stories are coded as being generally negative, neutral/equally positive and negative, or positive about congressional partisans.

Coders determined whether the stories were mostly positive, mostly negative or neutral by categorizing each statement referring to the subject in question (congressional Republicans, for example) as positive, negative, or neutral. The coder then assessed whether, on balance, the story was mostly positive, negative, or neutral toward that source.⁸ For example, a story on the October 12, 2006 *NBC Nightly News* that focused on the U.S. Senate race in Montana included several mentions of Republican Senator Conrad Burns' ties to disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff, his dwindling support among many Montana Republicans, and criticisms of his position on the Iraq war. The story also included a sound bite from Burns in which he claimed that he had "weathered the worst of the attacks;" it also mentioned how the national Republican Party was supporting Burns by sending GOP "all-stars" to campaign for him. On balance, the information was more negative than positive and the story was categorized as mostly negative.

On the Democratic side, the same story aired a sound bite from Democratic challenger Jon Tester which explained his beliefs about the important issues in the campaign, mentioned how one of those issues (honesty and integrity) was a big benefit to his Senate bid, noted how Democrats were making significant gains in Montana more generally, and quoted a long-time Republican voter as saying he would not be voting for the Republicans in the election. The story did air a snippet of a negative advertisement about Tester claiming that while his haircut was conservative, his behavior was not. In the main, though, the information was much more positive about Tester and his chances to win than it was neutral or negative, so the story was categorized as mostly positive for congressional Democrats.

Special Report with Brit Hume aired 46 stories mentioning Congress or congressional partisans between mid-September and Election Day while the *NBC Nightly News* aired 71 stories.⁹ Figure 2.1 highlights week by week measures of the tone of the *NBC Nightly News* and the FOX News program *Special Report with Brit Hume's* nightly coverage of Republican candidates and members of Congress during the midterm election season. With respect to congressional Republicans, late September and early October were weeks of decidedly bad news as the GOP's Mark Foley made headlines when it was revealed that he had sent sexually explicit electronic messages to male congressional pages. The Republican leadership, notably Speaker Dennis Hastert, was also the target of negative coverage in the fallout of the Foley revelations as allegations surfaced that complaints about Foley had been made to Speaker Hastert long before ABC News first broke the story of Foley's inappropriate instant messages to pages. Republicans also endured negative coverage about the party's dealings with convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff (for further discussion of these scandals, see Chapter 5 of this volume).

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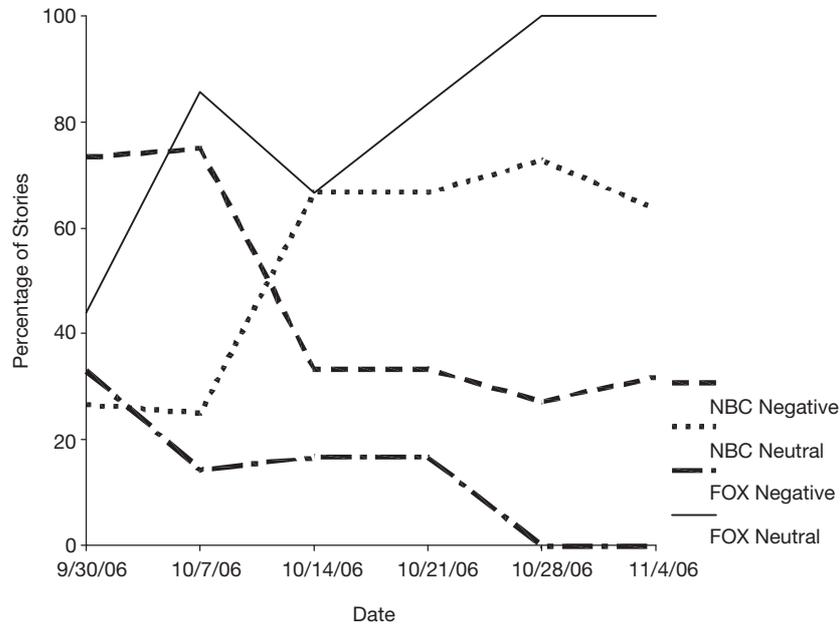


Figure 2.1 NBC and FOX News Coverage of Republican Congressional Candidates

As Figure 2.1 highlights, NBC's reports that included congressional Republicans were decidedly negative during the two weeks that the Foley scandal erupted. However, once the scandal passed and no new information became available to report, NBC's coverage of Republican candidates for and members of Congress was mostly neutral. Indeed, between 64 and 73 percent of NBC stories mentioning congressional Republicans were neutral while no more than 36 percent were negative. NBC did not air a single story that treated GOP congressional hopefuls in a mostly positive manner.

On the other hand, the coverage that FOX News provided during *Special Report with Brit Hume* was decidedly different. When the Foley scandal broke, FOX coverage of Republicans often presented the Foley story as an anomaly, one in which most Republicans were not involved; FOX also took time to point out similar indiscretions from the past made by congressional Democrats. During the two weeks when approximately 75 percent of NBC's stories about Republicans in Congress were decidedly negative, reflecting the Foley scandal and its fallout, between 16 and 33 percent of FOX coverage of GOP congress members was negative. Remarkably, though not shown in Figure 2.1, during the first week of the Foley scandal, 25 percent of FOX stories about Republicans were purely positive in tone.

After the Foley scandal, both FOX and NBC's coverage of congressional Republicans was predominantly neutral, though NBC was slightly more likely

to air negative stories than was FOX News. During the last weeks of the campaign, all of FOX's stories treated Republicans with a neutral tone; meanwhile, the negatively-toned stories broadcast by NBC typically dealt with horserace coverage, showing polls suggesting trouble was in store for the GOP on Election Day.

Figure 2.2 reports the tone of the coverage NBC and FOX gave to Democratic congressional candidates and representatives. In the main, Democrats escaped negative coverage during the time when the Mark Foley scandal was most prominent; notably, however, they were not able to generate positive coverage in response to the scandals from either NBC or FOX. Indeed, the Abramoff scandal touched Democrats as well, but not as severely as it did Republicans in NBC's coverage. This resulted in congressional Democrats receiving relatively equal amounts of positive and negative coverage in stories about legislative scandals while Republicans took more negative heat from NBC.

From mid-October to Election Day, congressional Democrats received predominantly neutral coverage from NBC. As was the case with NBC's coverage of congressional Republicans, coverage of congressional Democrats and Democratic hopefuls saw a notable rise in neutral coverage during the last week of the campaign. While the coverage during the final push was relatively equal for congressional partisans, Democrats still received less negative coverage than Republicans on NBC. Typically, negative coverage about congressional Republicans centered on public dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq, poll numbers predicting a Democratic victory in the midterms, and congressional scandals with a Republican face.

Even a quick glance at Figures 2.1 and 2.2 reveal strong differences between the coverage choices of NBC and FOX's flagship news programs. During the time that the Foley scandal broke, FOX actually aired more negative stories about congressional Democrats than Republicans, while simultaneously airing some positive stories about GOPers in Congress. During the time period coded, FOX never aired a positive story about congressional Democrats. However, FOX's coverage of Democrats was still more likely than not to be neutral as well. As was the case with NBC, the percentage of stories that were

	Non-English	Very limited	Limited	Limited fluency
L1 literacy				
None				
1-2 years				
3+ years				

Figure 2.2 NBC and FOX News Coverage of Democratic Congressional Candidates

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either neutral or equally positive and negative about partisans on both sides of the aisle rose during the final weeks of the campaign in FOX's coverage.

It is particularly interesting that neither network aired a story that was generally positive in tone towards the Democrats even though poll numbers predicted that the majorities of both houses of Congress could shift in their favor. Stories mentioning this possibility were quick to point out items such as Democratic culpability in the Abramoff scandal, the possibility that voter turnout would favor Republicans, and suppositions that the Democrats advantage in the polls was related to President Bush's unpopularity, and not due to any resonant campaign messages from the minority party.

Figure 2.3 breaks down the tone of congressional partisans' coverage by issue. With the exception of the coverage NBC gave Republicans on congressional scandals, both parties had more neutral stories about the war in Iraq, the "War on Terror," and the horserace than positive or negative stories. However, in many cases, NBC coverage of Republicans on these issues consisted of more stories that were negative in tone compared to the negative coverage of the Democrats. NBC aired 44 stories about campaign numbers and/or strategy that treated the Democrats in a neutral manner; nine stories treated Democrats negatively and four were positive in tone. For the

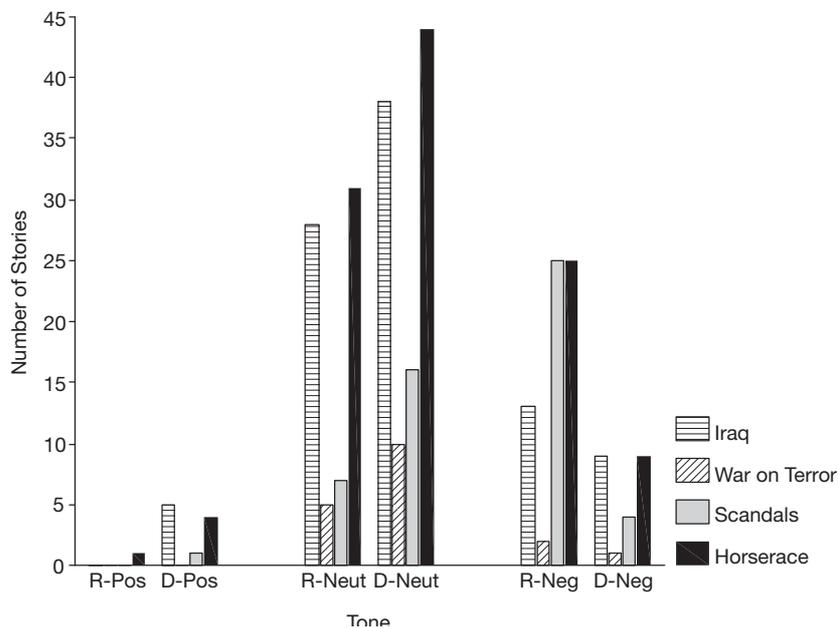


Figure 2.3 Tone of NBC Coverage about Prominent Issues, September 30–November 7, 2007

Republicans, a majority (31) of the horserace coverage was neutral, but another 25 stories were negative while only one was positive.

Turning to NBC's coverage of scandals, Democratic coverage that was neutral in nature appeared four times more than negative coverage and 16 times more than positive coverage. NBC's coverage of Republicans and scandals was decidedly more downbeat, with 25 stories treating congressional Republicans negatively compared to seven even-handed stories and no positive coverage. Most of the negative stories appeared in late September and early October, when the Mark Foley scandal was at its height, while the lion's share of the neutral offerings from NBC were in the final weeks of the campaign.

Coverage of the Iraq war was more even-handed, though NBC's coverage was less favorable to congressional Republicans. The Democrats were covered in more stories than were congressional Republicans as the minority party was often used as a counterpoint to President Bush's positions on the war. Thirty-eight stories treated Democrats in a neutral way while nine stories had a negative tone. In five stories, the Democrats came off positively; in three of those cases the positive nature of the coverage reflected how the war was helping the Democrats' chances in the midterm elections.

Congressional Republicans received more neutral treatment than anything else from NBC (28 stories), but they still received more negative treatment (13 stories) than the Democrats, even though congressional Democrats found their way onto the evening news more frequently than GOP lawmakers with respect to the Iraq issue. NBC coverage of the war in Iraq that dealt with congressional Republicans yielded no positive stories. NBC's treatment of the "War on Terror" focused on the president; when congressional partisans were brought into the mix, the coverage tended to be neutral for both parties.

Even though *Special Report with Brit Hume* is an hour-long program and the *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams* is 30 minutes, NBC had more coverage about Congress than their FOX counterparts. Figure 2.4 illustrates the tone of the issue coverage congressional partisans received for the four most frequently covered issues. Twenty-three horserace stories treated the Democrats in a neutral fashion while 14 had a negative view of Democratic campaign strategy, their chances for taking the House and the likelihood that they'd win back the Senate. No FOX News horserace stories had a positive take on congressional Democrats. On the GOP side, 19 stories were neutral while six were negative and three were positive.

Nearly all of the positively-toned stories came during discussions of the FOX "All-Star Panel," typically consisting of pundits Fred Barnes, Mort Kondracke, Charles Krauthammer, and Mara Liasson. Many of the negatively-toned Democratic stories also came from these discussions rather than conventional news reporting. FOX's coverage of the Iraq War and the "War on Terror" were overwhelmingly neutral to Republicans while slightly more neutral than negative for congressional Democrats. Regardless of both the issue and the

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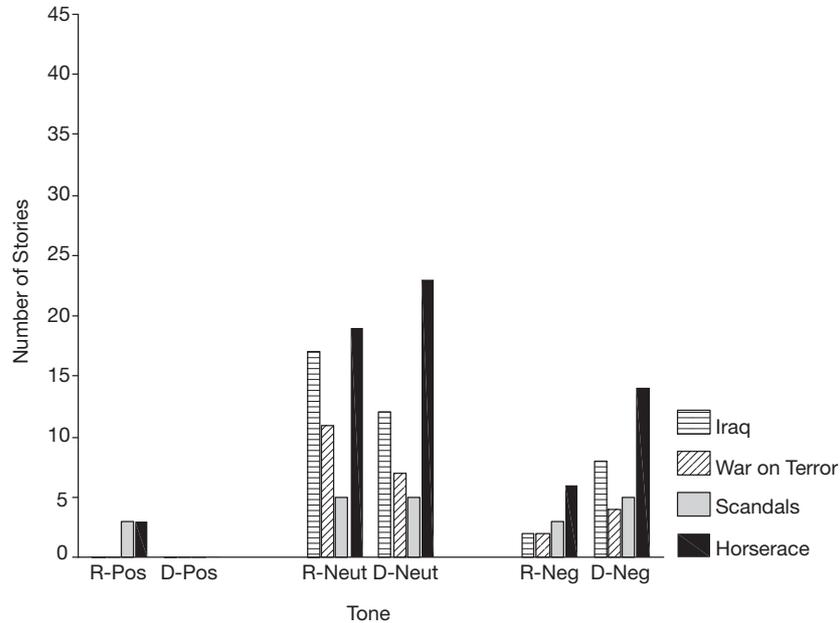


Figure 2.4 Tone of FOX News Coverage about Prominent Issues, September 30–November 7, 2007

network, congressional Democrats received more coverage in every instance save for scandals on NBC and the “War on Terror” on FOX.

Taken together, our review of the news media’s coverage suggests that, in the main, Democrats and Republicans were treated neutrally by the television media. However, in most instances, Republicans in Congress received more negative coverage than Democrats did on NBC, the most watched network, while Democrats received more negative coverage on FOX News, the most watched cable station. What role, if any, did this coverage play in evaluations of Congress and citizens’ congressional vote choices?

In the week following the highest level of negative stories about Republicans broadcast on both NBC and FOX (the week after the breaking of the Foley scandal), 64.5 percent of respondents surveyed on the 2006 CES reported their intent to vote Democrat in the midterm House elections. As network and cable news coverage treated congressional partisans with increasingly neutral gloves, the percentage of voters siding with the minority party dropped back to “pre-Foley” scandal levels of just under 60 percent.¹⁰ Of course, in order to understand what systematic role media coverage of Congress and congressional partisans may have had in the 2006 election season, it is crucial to conduct more sophisticated analyses.

We suggest that congressional attitudes and citizens' voting behavior in the 2006 midterms is, in part, affected by the news media's coverage of Congress and its members. Of course, there is reason to believe that the news coverage will not influence all people equally (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1998; Graber 2002). We believe that one's source of information about Congress, the information that source provides about Congress and one's political knowledge (Huckfeldt *et al.* 2007) should independently and jointly influence congressional vote choice. Specifically, congressional evaluations should be higher for those citizens with a high degree of political knowledge and a high level of media use. As Mondak *et al.* (2007) argue, there is nothing that should automatically suggest that the politically knowledgeable disapprove of Congress.

However, this does not mean that negative coverage about Congress or congressional partisans automatically translates into disapproval of Congress. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1998) demonstrate that the news media differentially influence cognitive and emotional evaluations of Congress. The questions in the CES do not allow us to make this distinction; indeed, the dependent variables we explore are cognitive evaluations, the precise process in which we traditionally should not expect the specific contents of media coverage to bring influence.

Media Coverage, Congressional Approval, and Voting in the 2006 Midterms

We examine these expectations by utilizing data from the CES. The CES expands the effort initially made by the Center on Congress at Indiana University's 2002 midterm election survey. As was the case in 2002, survey interviews were conducted by telephone by the Center for Survey Research at Indiana University. The CES draws respondents from 100 randomly selected congressional districts and an additional set of districts the developers of the CES identified as competitive (a total of 72 districts, 17 of which were already in the random sample) for a total of 155 districts in the sample (for additional discussion of the properties of the 2006 CES, see Chapter 1 of this volume).

Four different interviews were conducted as part of the 2006 CES. First, 1,023 pre-election interviews were completed between September 28, 2006, and the November 7 election. The reasonably comprehensive interviews lasted an average of 33 minutes. Second, a "past-tense" version of the full pre-election survey was completed by an additional 174 respondents later in November, after the elections. Next, 766 of the pre-election survey respondents also completed a 22-minute post-election survey in the weeks following the November 7 elections. In this chapter, our analysis is restricted to those who participated in both the pre- and post-election surveys, to maximize the amount of questions available to us for analysis. The CES does not distinguish what type of national television news program respondents generally watch, so it is impossible to isolate independent effects, if any, that exist for NBC and FOX's coverage of the midterm elections.

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First, we turn our attention to the determinants of the 2006 midterm vote among CES respondents. Among the major independent variables of interest are *TV*, which is coded 1 if the respondent uses television as her or his main source of news about Congress and 0 otherwise; *Knowledge*, coded from 0–3 based on the number of questions about American politics answered correctly; *TV × Knowledge*, an interaction which multiplies the *TV* and *Knowledge* (see below) variables together to help us determine their joint effect; and *Newspaper*, which is coded 1 if the respondents name newspapers as their top source for congressional news and 0 otherwise. Likewise, *News × Knowledge* multiplies the *Newspaper* and *Knowledge* variables. *Competitive* is a dichotomous variable coded 1 if the respondent’s congressional district was deemed competitive before the 2006 elections and 0 otherwise.¹¹ *TV × Competitive* and *Newspaper × Competitive* interact respondents’ favored source for information about Congress and the closeness of the House races in the respondents’ congressional districts.

Party is coded 1 for Republican and 0 for Democrat (including “independent leaners”), *Age* is the respondent’s age, *White* is coded 1 for a white respondent and 0 otherwise, *Date of Interview* is coded on a 6-point scale based on the week the survey was completed (higher scores indicate a survey completed closer to the election). *Bush Approval* is coded 1–4 from strongly approve to strongly disapprove of the job George W. Bush is doing as president. *Iraq* is a 5-point scale moving from 1 for most unfavorable to 5 for most favorable with respect to the respondents views about the war in Iraq. *Age* and *Income* are 5-point scales that range from lowest to highest. *Scandals* reports a numeric value for the letter grade respondents give Congress for behaving in an ethical manner coded 1–6 (grades of A–F). *Congressional GOP Evals* and *Congressional Dems Evals* are coded 1–5 (most favorable to least favorable).

Table 2.1 reports the coefficients and standard errors for a logistic regression model seeking to predict the factors that affect vote choice in the 2006 midterms. The dependent variable is coded 1 for a vote for the Democratic House candidate and 0 for a vote for the Republican candidate. On its own, the *TV* and *Newspaper* coefficients are negatively signed, suggesting that both mediums breed support for Republican House candidates, but the variables ($p < .13$, $p < .28$) do not approach statistical significance. Political *Knowledge* also fails to have an independent influence on the 2006 congressional vote. Still, the direction of these variables suggest that the chorus of complaints about how the nature of news coverage propelled the Democrats to office are ill-conceived as, *ceteris paribus*, the seeking of information about Congress from the television or the newspaper seemed to help the GOP, albeit to a degree that falls short of a statistically meaningful effect.

On the other hand, the interaction of *Television × Knowledge* significantly predicts support ($p < .05$) for the Democratic House candidate. Similarly, but to a lesser degree of significance, *Newspaper × Knowledge* has the same effect ($p < .10$). Citizens who get their information about Congress from the

Table 2.1 Determinants of Congressional Vote

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Democratic Vote</i>
TV	-1.734 (1.17)
Newspaper	-1.503 (1.4)
Knowledge	0.865 (0.549)
TV × Knowledge	0.78** (0.395)
Newspaper × Knowledge	0.776* (0.471)
Competitive District	0.362 (1.395)
TV × Competitive	0.156 (1.111)
Newspaper × Competitive	0.141 (1.2)
Knowledge × Competitive	-0.378 (0.409)
Party	-3.292** (0.466)
Ideology	-0.007 (0.213)
Congressional Approval	-0.573** (0.286)
Congressional Evals of GOP	-0.969** (0.22)
Congressional Evals of Dems	0.318 (0.217)
Bush Approval	0.764** (0.278)
Age	-0.000 (0.000)
Scandals	0.05 (0.182)
Iraq	-0.328 (0.17)
Income	-0.293** (0.113)
White	-1.633 (1.31)
Date of Interview	0.0636 (0.123)
Constant	5.789** (2.148)

Note: N = 547, LR $\chi^2 = 527.30^{**}$, Pseudo $R^2 = .70$, *, $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$

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Table 2.2 Determinants of Evaluations of Congressional Partisans and Candidates

	<i>Congressional Republicans Evaluation</i>	<i>Congressional Democrats Evaluation</i>	<i>Democratic Candidate Evaluation</i>	<i>Republican Candidate Evaluation</i>
TV	1.296** (0.461)	0.233 (0.445)	-0.286 (0.441)	0.204 (0.441)
Newspaper	0.352 (0.638)	0.010 (0.633)	-0.604 (0.632)	-0.57 (0.657)
Knowledge	0.318 (0.344)	0.234 (0.321)	0.236 (0.201)	0.288 (0.273)
TV × Knowledge	-0.428** (0.155)	0.017 (0.149)	0.239 (0.151)	-0.003 (0.151)
Newspaper × Knowledge	-0.944 (0.217)	0.176 (0.213)	0.184 (0.213)	0.216 (0.225)
Competitive District	-0.208 (0.632)	1.334** (0.615)	0.988 (0.635)	0.408 (0.681)
TV × Competitive	-0.606 (0.469)	-0.511 (0.458)	-0.303 (0.483)	-0.418 (0.489)
Newspaper × Competitive	-0.225 (0.485)	-0.329 (0.476)	0.415 (0.5)	-0.115 (0.504)
Knowledge × Competitive	0.201 (0.193)	-0.443** (0.188)	-0.449** (0.19)	-0.135 (0.2)
Party	1.203** (0.247)	-0.774** (0.24)	-1.527** (0.247)	0.995** (0.246)
Ideology	0.248** (0.091)	-0.178** (0.086)	-0.267** (0.089)	0.359** (0.09)
Congressional Approval	-0.525** (0.121)	-0.385** (0.116)	-0.323** (0.119)	-0.234** (0.117)
Bush Approval	-0.785** (0.132)	0.742** (0.13)	0.437** (0.128)	-0.576** (0.13)
Age	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.001)
Scandals	-0.222** (0.083)	-0.150* (0.081)	-0.141* (0.082)	-0.282** (0.087)
Iraq	0.265** (0.09)	0.038 (0.086)	0.08 (0.086)	0.095 (0.867)
Income	0.076 (0.049)	-0.004 (0.046)	0.03 (0.048)	0.075 (0.051)
White	-0.012 (0.385)	-0.743** (0.353)	-0.261 (0.338)	-0.239 (0.354)
Date of Interview	0.000 (0.051)	-0.272 (0.049)	-0.018 (0.051)	-0.014 (0.051)

Notes:

Model 1: N = 621, LR $\chi^2 = 507.55^{**}$, Pseudo $R^2 = .28$, *, $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$ Model 2: N = 623, LR $\chi^2 = 221.99^{**}$, Pseudo $R^2 = .12$, *, $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$ Model 3: N = 561, LR $\chi^2 = 218.01^{**}$, Pseudo $R^2 = .12$, *, $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$ Model 4: N = 563, LR $\chi^2 = 323.85^{**}$, Pseudo $R^2 = .18$, *, $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$

television saw coverage that highlighted Republican scandals and the war in Iraq while still providing, more often than not, neutral coverage of congressional partisans and candidates. Nonetheless, the negative information about the Republican financial and moral scandals, and steady news about an unpopular war was especially influential when interacted with high degrees of political knowledge. Knowing about politics and learning about contemporary issues combined to give Democrats an advantage in 2006. Interestingly, *Competition* and the various interactions with that variable in Table 2.1 have no effect in the model.

Aside from the interactions of the media use and knowledge variables, the only other factors in the model that affect the midterm vote are *Congressional GOP Evals*, *Congressional Approval*, *Party*, *Income*, and *Bush Approval*. As disapproval of the president increases, so does the likelihood of a Democratic congressional vote. When evaluations of congressional Republicans increase, the likelihood of a Republican ballot rises as well. Wealthier respondents were also more likely to vote Republican, as were folks who were already GOP identifiers. As operationalized here, hot-button issues like congressional scandals and the war in Iraq did not have a statistically significant effect on vote choice in the 2006 midterms. One's ideology is also notably absent from the statistically significant variables in the model.

Table 2.2 reports the coefficients and standard errors for four different ordinal logistic regression models relating to determinants of the public's evaluation of both congressional partisans and the actual candidates seeking the CES respondents' votes in the 2006 elections. The left-hand column of results explores the factors predicting positive evaluations of congressional Republicans. As was the case in Table 2.1, the *Television* coefficient is positive, suggesting a benefit for Republicans; this time the variable is also statistically significant ($p < .05$). Getting one's information about Congress from the tube has a positive, independent effect on evaluations of congressional Republicans. *Newspaper* has a positive coefficient, but does not come close to achieving statistical significance.

Similar to the case with vote choice, *Television* \times *Knowledge* negatively affects ($p < .05$) favorability ratings of congressional GOPers. *Newspaper* \times *Knowledge* has a negative coefficient, but is not significant. While scandals did not affect vote choice, they did take their toll on Republicans in the House. *Scandals* has a significant ($p < .05$), negative coefficient. Republicans and self-identified conservatives (*Party* and *Ideology*) are more likely to positively evaluate congressional conservatives. Positive evaluations of the progress of the Iraq war bred support for House Republicans as well (*Iraq*, $p < .05$). As disapproval of Congress and the president increased, negative evaluations of Republicans in the House of Representatives did too ($p < .05$). Living in *Competitive* districts has no systematic affect on the dependent variable.

The next column to the right illustrates that evaluations of Congressional Democrats did not come from the news media. None of the media variables

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and their interactions affected evaluations of congressional Democrats. Indeed, living in a *Competitive* district led to more positive evaluations of the Democrats already in Congress while the interaction between one's congressional district and *Knowledge* led to less favorable takes on the minority party ($p < .05$). While conservative editorialists were quick to blame the media for harping on GOP scandals, those who gave bad grades to Congress' ethical behavior also were more likely to negatively evaluate congressional Democrats (*Scandals*, $p < .05$). The same is true for *Congressional Approval*. As disapproval of the body of Congress increases, so do negative evaluations of House Democrats. However, disapproval of the president led to improved favorability toward the president's Democratic opponents in the House. Non-whites ($p < .05$) had more positive evaluations of Congress than whites while Republican and conservative identifiers were more likely to have less favorable appraisals of congressional Democrats.

Thus, media coverage of Congress seemed to influence evaluations of congressional Republicans more than their Democratic counterparts. Meanwhile, Democrats in Washington were not immune to the ill-effects of scandal and negative evaluations of the institution of Congress more generally. Living in a competitive electoral environment affected assessments of Democratic congress members, but did not have a similar independent effect on public views about Republican representatives.

The third column from the right examines the factors that affect evaluations of the individual Democratic candidates running for the House in the CES respondents' districts. $TV \times Knowledge$ once again had a positive coefficient, suggesting more favorable views toward Democratic candidates, but the variable falls short of conventional levels of statistical significance ($p < .11$). The other media variables fall well short of statistical significance, though the direction of the *TV*, *Newspaper*, and $Newspaper \times Knowledge$ coefficients are in directions equal to their position in the other models.

The coefficient for living in a *Competitive* district also has a positive, but non-significant ($p < .12$) effect on Democratic candidate evaluations. However, $Knowledge \times Competition$ negatively and significantly ($p < .05$) affected public views of Democratic candidates for the House. Indeed, *Party* (Republican) and *Ideology* have negative effects on the dependent variable, as does increasing disapproval of Congress. Negative assessments of President Bush benefit the standing of individual Democratic candidates while Congress' ethical lapses hurt the candidates of the minority party.

The far-right hand column assesses determinants of positive evaluations of Republican candidates for the House. None of the media variables, competition variables and knowledge variables affects evaluations of individual GOP candidates for the House. As is often the case in midterm elections, assessments of the president and Congress as an institution led to more negative evaluations of GOP candidates. Variables representing Republican and conservative identifiers show positive and significant independent effects ($p < .05$) on the dependent variable.

Discussion

The 2006 elections swept the Democrats back into the legislative majority in both houses of Congress for the first time in 12 years. After the election, explanations for the GOP loss centered on a familiar tune, “blame the media.” Our analysis here suggests a more complicated story. On the one hand, interacting television coverage, which did aggressively cover the war in Iraq and congressional scandals, with citizens’ knowledge about politics, helped the Democrats in 2006. On the other hand, we demonstrate an independent affect in favor of GOP votes for those who chose television as their main source of news about Congress during the election season. Public views about scandals and about the institution of Congress consistently led to negative evaluations of Republicans *and* Democrats. Meanwhile, the vast unpopularity of President Bush was consistently associated with negative views of Republicans and positive views of Democratic office seekers. Explanations of the 2006 results should start by examining public evaluations of the president (for one such examination, see Chapter 7 of this volume).

Our content analysis of television news coverage of Congress and its members allows us to suggest three broad conclusions. First, NBC and FOX treated congressional partisans differently. FOX paid less attention to congressional scandals and chose to cover them in ways that were more negative about Democrats than Republicans. NBC’s coverage focused on the more explicit nature of the scandals and prominent Republicans involved in the stories, such as former Representative Mark Foley. NBC’s reporting of the horserace was generally neutral to the poll leaders (the Democrats) but negative to the party trailing in public surveys (Republicans). FOX was nearly the opposite. Second, both television news outlets covered congressional news in a more even-handed manner as Election Day drew near. It is possible that both outlets wanted to avoid charges that they were trying to sway an election in the final week, but it is equally possible that the information they were reporting did not lend itself as well to positive or negative coverage.

Interestingly, the competitiveness of the district mattered only when considering evaluations of congressional Democrats or when interacting it with political knowledge. Much as pork barrel spending only helps congress members when people are aware that their district is receiving the benefits of the government trough, living in a district with a close congressional race matters for the politically knowledgeable—the precise people likely to be aware that the election is a competitive one.

While the story isn’t as simple as “the media did it,” we believe that the sketch that we supply here suggests that the national broadcast media’s coverage of Congress and congressional partisans is a factor that ought to be more carefully considered in studies seeking to understand how congressional elections work and how American political institutions are evaluated by the citizenry.

Appendix: Content Analysis Coding Procedures**A. The Search Process. Coders conducted the search for news stories using the following directions**

TV search terms:

- Using Lexis-Nexis, click the “news” button
- Select “Transcripts” in the drop-down box
- For NBC Only
- Then choose “NBC Transcripts”
- Type “NBC Nightly News” (in quotes)
- For FOX Only
- Then choose “FOX News Transcripts”
- Type “Special Report with Brit Hume” (in quotes)
- For both NBC and FOX
- Then type the word—“and”—and then type the following (no quotes):
Congress or congressional or house or senate or Republican or Democrat
or senator or representative
- Search from September 1, 2006-November 7, 2006
- Coders code the following categories in an Excel spreadsheet provided by the authors:

Note: You should code *anything* that refers to “Congress” “the House of Representatives/the House” or “the Senate”—the same is true for things like “House members” “Senators” etc.

B. Information Recorded. Upon identifying relevant stories, coders recorded the following information

Date: The date of the story (e.g. 11/1/2006)

Source: The source of the story:

NBC = 1

FOX = 2

Length: Number of words in the story

Congressional Prominence: Would you say that Congress is one of the central features of the news article or a peripheral part of the news article/story?

1 = Central

0 = Peripheral

Congress Tone:

In regards to how the institution of Congress is treated, would you say that the article/story is:

Mostly Negative = 1
Equally Positive and Negative/Neutral = 2
Mostly Positive = 3
Not Applicable = .

Republican Tone: In regards to Republicans in Congress, would you say the article/story is:

Mostly Negative = 1
Equally Positive and Negative/Neutral = 2
Mostly Positive = 3
Not Applicable = .

Democrats Tone: In regards to Democrats in Congress, would you say the article/story is:

Mostly Negative = 1
Equally Positive and Negative/Neutral = 2
Mostly Positive = 3
Not Applicable = .

Use "Not Applicable" only if that particular category is not present in the story. If Democrats in Congress, for instance, are mentioned, you must choose a value from 1 to 3.

Coders noted the first four issues considered in each story from the following list:

- 1 = War in Iraq
- 2 = War on Terror/national security issues/Patriot Act
- 3 = Health Care
- 4 = Economy/taxes/budget
- 5 = Gun Control
- 6 = Environment
- 7 = Abortion
- 8 = Gay Marriage
- 9 = Stem Cell Research
- 10 = Katrina/hurricanes
- 11 = Education
- 12 = Racial issues
- 13 = Immigration
- 14 = Scandals

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15 = Judicial Appointments

16 = Horserace/election

17 = Other

Notes

- 1 The authors would like to thank Joanna Follman, Rachel Beeson, Allie Scheer, Courtney Ruwe, and Amanda Crook for research assistance on various pieces of our project. We would also like to thank Jeff Mondak, Scott McClurg, and an anonymous referee for Routledge for their helpful comments on the chapter. All interpretations of the data and any errors remain our own.
- 2 Presidents Eisenhower, Johnson, and Nixon lost over 45 fellow partisans in the House in each of their sixth year midterm elections. On the other hand, the last two “sixth year itch” elections resulted in President Reagan’s Republicans losing a mere five seats in the House in 1986 and President Clinton’s fellow Democrats *gaining* five seats there in 1998.
- 3 Interestingly, however, public opinion just before the 2006 elections with respect to whether voters believed the war in Iraq has been worth it (53 percent claiming the war has not been worth it) looks strikingly similar to public beliefs about the war in September of 2004 (51 percent claiming the war has not been worth it) (ABC News/Washington Post polls). Of course, in 2004, President Bush won re-election and gained a small number of seats in both the House and the Senate.
- 4 NBC generally had the number one rated network newscast while FOX News was the number one rated cable news source for the time period analyzed.
- 5 This, to the dismay of some media critics, occurs even when an issue has more than two sides. Typically, only two sides of an issue are reported; just as typical, these sides are Republican and Democrat.
- 6 We call all coverage related to Congress or the congressional elections “congressional elections coverage.” Our content analysis validated this choice as the vast majority of stories mentioning Congress during the time period analyzed tied the coverage to the elections.
- 7 Of course, if a story containing the word “house,” for example, was about the White House or how a tornado destroyed a person’s house, the story was not coded. In other words, the search terms led us to the possible universe of stories to code and our coders made judgments from there as to whether the story was mentioning Congress, congressional Republicans, or congressional Democrats in some way.
- 8 Initially, we tried to have our coders categorize the stories as mostly negative, somewhat negative, neutral, somewhat positive, or mostly positive. Inter-coder agreement ranged between 62–77 percent; most of the disagreements were with respect to the degree of the tone (e.g. somewhat positive or very positive). Thus, we had the coders collapse the categories relating to the degree of positive or negative messages in the stories.
- 9 One of the authors and four advanced undergraduates completed the coding. Inter-coder reliability was never below 91 percent for any category. All inter-coder disputes were settled through discussion between the coders and one of the authors.
- 10 Aside from the week following the highest level of negativity in congressional Republican reports on NBC.
- 11 The scholars involved in creating the 2006 CES jointly determined which districts were likely to be competitive, using, among other sources, the *Cook Political Report*, *Congressional Quarterly*, and Larry Sabato’s “Crystal Ball” website.

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