BILL CLINTON, NEWT GINGRICH, AND THE 1998 HOUSE ELECTIONS

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Abstract   The outcome of the 1998 congressional elections was an exception to the rule that the president's party loses seats in midterm House elections. This article reviews and draws together theoretically the distinctive characteristics of the political context in 1998 and assesses the effects of the public's evaluations of Bill Clinton (as president and as a person) and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. The findings suggest that voters' views of Bill Clinton as president exerted a sizable effect on the elections. A substantial influence of public opinion toward Newt Gingrich is also revealed. The estimated effects of voters' opinions of Bill Clinton as a person were much smaller. Two estimates of the combined effects indicate that if public opinion toward Clinton and Gingrich had been evenly balanced, the Democratic party would have lost seats in the 1998 House elections as the president's party traditionally has. In addition to providing insight into the 1998 elections, the findings answer broader questions about congressional elections. They also bear on important questions regarding the extent to which the determinants of political judgments are subject to influence ("priming") by the political environment.

> Our intention is to brand every single Democrat in the state with the scarlet "C." . . . We will gratuitously use Clinton's face on all our literature. (TREY WALKER, executive director of the South Carolina State Republican Party, August 1998, quoted in Foerstel 1998a, p. 2281)
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> It would have been much less of a political problem if he [Clinton] had told the truth [about Monica Lewinsky] at the beginning. . . . There was a feeling we were approach-

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> ing the election in pretty good shape. . . . Now the agenda
> is changing to our disadvantage because of the president's
> problems. (Democratic Representative LEE HAMILTON, Sep-
> tember 1998, quoted in Foerstel 1998b, p. 2385)
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>   I frankly don't understand all the things that happened
> yesterday [on election day] . . . , and I'm not sure anyone
> else in the country does either. (Soon to be former Speaker
> of the House NEWT GINGRICH, November 4, 1998, quoted
> in Congressional Quarterly 1999, p. 7-5)

In 1998, for the first time in 58 years, and only the third time since the Civil War, the president's party picked up seats in the midterm House elections (Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin 2000, p. 54).[1] The Democratic party gained five House seats in 1998, which compares quite favorably to the 52-seat loss it suffered in 1994 and the average midterm loss of 25 seats for the president's party since the end of World War II. This article assesses the effects on the 1998 House elections of voters' assessments of the two most prominent national political leaders at the time, President Bill Clinton and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. The process involves developing and estimating a model of individual vote choice and then using the estimates to calculate how the partisan balance in the House would have changed if public opinion had been different. The findings provide insight into the 1998 House elections and congressional elections in general. They also bear on important questions regarding the extent to which the determinants of political judgments are subject to influence ("priming") by factors in the political environment. The article proceeds by reviewing the context of the 1998 congressional elections, considering the relevant scholarly research, and then presenting and interpreting results based on an analysis of survey data on voting in House elections.

The Political Context of the 1998 House Elections

The outcome of the congressional elections was not the only notable political event in American national politics in 1998. Throughout the year details of the president's sexual relationship with a White House intern were revealed and received tremendous media attention.[2] During the last 10 weeks of the

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1. In 1934 the Democrats, with Franklin Delano Roosevelt as president, picked up nine seats. In 1902, although the Republicans, with Theodore Roosevelt as president, picked up nine seats, their position in the House was weakened because the Democrats picked up 25 seats as the size of the House was expanded after the 1900 census.
2. The revelations culminated with the Senate voting on two articles of impeachment that passed the House. On February 12, 1999, neither received the necessary two-thirds vote to remove the president from office.

Table 1. Voter Evaluations of Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich on Election Day, 1998

Evaluation	Bill Clinton		Newt Gingrich (%)
	As Person (%)	As President (%)	
Positive	34	56	34
No opinion	8	2	11
Negative	58	42	56
Positive minus negative	−24	+14	−22

Source.—1998 Voter News Service General Election Exit Poll.
Note.—Percentages are calculated based on the responses of the 5,747 voters who answered VNS national questionnaire version W. Respondents' opinions of Clinton as a person and Gingrich were measured with favorable/unfavorable options. Presidential assessments were measured with approve/disapprove options.

election season, there was a flurry of activity. On August 17, Clinton provided more than 4 hours of grand jury testimony and then in a nationally televised speech admitted that his relationship with the intern was inappropriate.[3] He acknowledged that "in fact it was wrong. It constituted a critical lapse in judgment and a personal failure" (Congressional Quarterly 1999, p. D-13). In addition, on September 11, the House approved the public release of the special prosecutor's report (the "Starr Report"), which described in detail the president's sexual indiscretions, and it was widely disseminated, including being posted on the internet. On October 8, the House, in a highly partisan and visible decision, voted to begin an open-ended impeachment inquiry. Near the end of October, the Republicans waged a media blitz, "a last-minute, multi-million-dollar infusion of commercials by the Republican Party reminding voters of the Clinton scandal" (Berke 1998b, p. A1), intended to damage the Democratic party's prospects in the congressional elections.

Although sorting out the effects of each disclosure and event is difficult, the cumulative impact was quite clear. The public's view of Clinton as a person deteriorated. On election day, barely one-third of voters had a favorable view of "Bill Clinton as a person." As table 1 shows, his negative ratings were fully 24 points higher, 58 percent, than his positive ones.

Although held in low personal regard, Clinton's level of presidential approval remained high throughout the year and on election day when a clear majority (56 percent) of voters approved of "the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as President," compared to 42 percent who disapproved. Beginning

3. On September 18, by a party-line vote, the House Judiciary Committee voted to release Clinton's videotaped testimony, which was broadcast by four television networks on September 21 (Congressional Quarterly 1999, p. 12-5).

with his State of the Union address on January 27 and continuing to election day, Clinton and his supporters drew sharp distinctions between his "private life" and his presidential performance. With regard to the latter, economic issues were at the forefront. The budget was balanced and a surplus, for which the president proposed to "save Social Security first," was expected; unemployment, inflation, and interest rates were low; the pace of economic growth was robust. Clinton also publicly supported popular positions, like a "Consumer Bill of Rights" for HMO patients. And, through his support for policies like welfare reform, he clearly removed himself from the liberal wing of the Democratic party. As Zaller (1998, p. 185) summarized it, the focus was "peace, prosperity, and moderation."

While Clinton had a high level of presidential approval, the Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, suffered. Gingrich became a nationally prominent and recognized political figure when he was elected Speaker after the Republicans took control of the House for the first time in 50 years following the 1994 elections. While he presided over the House for the next 4 years, he became "the most divisive figure in the recent history of the House" (Clymer 2000, p. A20). Given the widely held view of Gingrich as the architect of the Republican takeover and the Republicans' public battles with Clinton and their growing number of defeats, Gingrich's reputation suffered. For instance, he was largely blamed for the partial government shutdown that lasted 27 days in the winter of 1995–96, which turned into a public relations debacle.[4] In general, success for Clinton, the Democratic party leader, meant failure for Gingrich, the Republican leader.

During the fall campaign, Democrats regularly invoked the Speaker in their campaign against Republican House candidates. For example, after the Republican party's ad campaign about the Clinton scandal, Gingrich was skewered by Democrats for purportedly politicizing the impeachment process and engaging in the "politics of personal destruction." A "parade of prominent Democrats . . . pounced gleefully" (Berke 1998a, p. A1). Vice President Gore claimed that "these attacks, personally devised by Speaker Newt Gingrich, are wrong" (quoted in Janofsky 1998, p. A9).[5]

By election day, almost six in 10 voters (56 percent) had an unfavorable view of Gingrich, compared to just 34 percent who viewed him positively. In the wake of the elections and with threats to his leadership brewing, Gin-

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4. Contributing to the problem was Gingrich's admission that his push for the shutdown was motivated, in part, "to spite President Clinton for failing to show adequate courtesy" (Purdum 1995, p. A1) on Air Force One during the trip to Israel for the funeral of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. "You just wonder: Where is their sense of manners? Where's their sense of courtesy?" (Gingrich, quoted in Purdum 1995, p. A1).

5. The Democrats' use of Gingrich as a campaign issue was not new. In advance of the 1996 congressional elections, Martin Frost, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, said, "We've been telling our challengers for some time now that their opponents' middle name is Gingrich" (quoted in Toner 1995, p. B18).

grich announced that he would not seek reelection as Speaker and resigned from the House.

Presidential (and Speaker) Evaluations and Voting for the House

The potential significance for the 1998 House elections of the mass public's views of Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich emerges from a number of considerations. The first concerns the explanation for the connection between presidential approval and aggregate congressional election outcomes. Tufte (1975) was the first to demonstrate a strong relationship between the two. To explain the finding, he developed a "theory about the behavior of individual voters," which specifies that voters "reward or punish the party of the President by casting their votes for representatives in line with their perceptions and evaluations of the President" (Tufte 1975, p. 826). Subsequent research has demonstrated the veracity of the proposition.[6] Abramowitz (1984, 1985), Born (1986), Cover (1986), and Jacobson and Kernell (1990) all show that voters' evaluations of the president influence their ballot choices.[7]

Although voters' assessments of the president are related to their congressional ballot decisions, the magnitude of the effects is not uniform from election year to election year. Abramowitz (1985) noticed this and made a significant theoretical advancement. He suggests that presidential evaluations do not automatically and with equal force affect voters' decisions across elections. Rather, he contends that the size of the relationship between presidential assessments and vote choice is determined by a political factor, "the salience of national issues in the election campaign," which varies from election year to election year. For example, in 1978 "neither party made much of an effort to wage a unified national campaign" (Abramowitz 1985, p. 32), and the effects of presidential evaluations were small. "In 1982, however, President Reagan's performance was a major issue in the congressional election campaign and evaluations of Reagan had a substantial impact on voting for House candidates" (Abramowitz 1985, p. 42). Understanding the impact of presidential evaluations on voting behavior, therefore, requires taking into account the president's prominence and the degree to which the national parties, the media, and even the president himself connect the elections to the president.

Abramowitz's argument fits nicely into the growing interest of public opinion researchers in "priming" effects, which began with Iyengar and Kinder's

6. Subsequent research (Jacobson 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1981) has demonstrated that other factors, namely, the behavior of "strategic politicians," contribute to the aggregate relationship between national conditions and congressional election outcomes, too.

7. Some have investigated whether the negative effects of disapproval are greater in magnitude than the positive effects of approval (e.g., Kernell 1977; Lau 1985). Fiorina and Shepsle (1989) conclude that "the jury is still out" on "whether the phenomenon is artifactual, psychological, or situational" (p. 439). The results reported in this article provide little evidence that the effects of positive and negative evaluations are different.

(1987) model of the influence of television news on public opinion. They argue that "by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged" (p. 63). The determinants of citizens' political judgments and decisions (including vote choice) are not immutable. Rather, they are subject to influence, or "priming," by the larger political environment. Abramowitz's argument may be considered a special case of this more general phenomenon.

Thinking of the variable effects of presidential approval on congressional voting across election years raises a number of important issues. By emphasizing the role of the political environment in influencing the determinants of individual vote choice and moving away from the notion that voters simply and identically incorporate their evaluations of the president into their ballot choices, factors that previously would not be considered gain potential significance. For instance, as the earlier discussion indicates, two distinct aspects of Bill Clinton were prominently shown to the public. On the one hand, Clinton and his supporters emphasized his legislative priorities and accomplishments as president. On the other hand, Clinton's opponents focused on the Lewinsky scandal and his personal character. If factors that influence voters are primed by the political environment, then in contrast to other elections where such a dual emphasis was absent, voters' assessments of Bill Clinton both as a president and as a person may have influenced their ballot decisions.

The logic of priming also leads to a related hypothesis. Compared to previous Speakers, Newt Gingrich's prominence among the mass public was truly striking. As Representative Bob Barr (R-GA) put it: "Before Newt became Speaker, I doubt that one in 50 Americans could tell you who the Speaker was. Now it's more like 80 percent" (quoted in Greenblatt 1998, p. 3068).[8] Gingrich's visibility as the leading Republican critic of Clinton and the favorite target of Democrats suggests that voters' views of him may have been primed and consequently influenced how they voted.

A related issue concerns the degree to which the public is susceptible to priming. Zaller (1998) has recently distinguished accounts of priming that I call "strong" and "weak." A strong view may be drawn out of work like that of Iyengar and Kinder (1987), Krosnick and Kinder (1990), and Zaller (1992). This research emphasizes the amount of media attention an issue receives and links it directly to the structure of citizens' political judgments: "Hence, by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, news media may alter the foundations of public opinion. . . . [Effects] can be directly traced to the changes in the media's agenda" (Krosnick and Kinder 1990, pp. 500, 509).

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8. Although an exaggeration, Barr's comment makes the important point that Gingrich was much better known than any recent Speaker of the House. According to the National Election Studies (NES) surveys, fully 74 percent of voters in 1998 correctly identified Gingrich as Speaker of the House compared to 48 percent and 31 percent who correctly identified Speaker Foley in 1994 and 1992, respectively.

The strong view of priming focuses almost exclusively on the role of external factors in determining the degree to which individuals rely on presidential assessments, for instance, when voting for Congress. People respond regularly and routinely to the cues in the political environment.

A weaker form of the priming argument views the magnitude of priming as determined jointly by media attention and the public's "own conception of what matters" (Zaller 1998, p. 186). This perspective suggests that some opinions and beliefs are more susceptible to priming than others. Zaller (1998) focuses on Clinton's level of presidential approval in the immediate wake of the first round of revelations regarding his relationship with Monica Lewinsky and suggests that despite the media attention, the determinants of presidential approval were largely unaltered. They remained fixed on "political substance," and the bottom line of "peace, prosperity, and moderation . . . was so unassailable that, to much of what the president said in the State of the Union, the Republican leadership could only offer polite applause" (Zaller 1998, p. 185).[9] If the weaker form of the priming theory is correct, then despite the huge amount of attention Clinton's relationship with Lewinsky received, one would expect voters' presidential assessments of Clinton to loom larger than their personal assessments of him in their ballot choices. In addition, if voters resisted the "priming" of their views of Clinton as a person, they may have held accountable the person widely believed to be responsible for the attempt, Newt Gingrich, which suggests another reason why voters' views of Gingrich may have influenced their ballot decisions.

In sum, the theory of priming provides reasons to hypothesize that the public's assessments of both Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich influenced voting behavior in the midterm elections of 1998. If the weaker form of the priming hypothesis is correct, then the effect of presidential approval of Clinton would have mattered more than his personal approval, which could help explain why the president's party accomplished the extremely rare feat of picking up House seats in a midterm election year. Similarly, the public's low esteem for Newt Gingrich and his national visibility as the president's primary opponent may have also contributed to the Democratic gains. The remainder of the article is devoted to estimating the effects of evaluations of Bill Clinton (as a president and a person) and Newt Gingrich on individual vote decisions and how they contributed to the overall outcome of the 1998 congressional elections.

Data and Variables

In order to ascertain the effects of voters' views of Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich on the 1998 House elections, I proceed in several steps. First, I

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9. "In particular, the notion that the public responded mechanically to media coverage [of the Lewinsky matter] cannot explain how Clinton ended up with higher job approval ratings [at the end of January] than he began with" (Zaller 1998, p. 184).

model vote choice in the House elections with the Voter News Service (VNS) 1998 National General Election Exit Poll (Voter News Service 1998).[10] The data were collected through interviews conducted with voters as they left their polling places on election day.

The 1998 VNS general election national exit poll is based on a probability sample of 239 precincts. Precincts were chosen with a probability proportionate to their numbers of voters. Within precincts, voters were selected throughout election day and asked to complete a one-page (double-sided) questionnaire. Accompanying the data are weights, which adjust for selection factors and observed characteristics (age, race, and sex) of those who refused to be interviewed. All of the results reported in this article are based on analyses of the weighted data.[11]

Although not commonly used for scholarly research, given the purposes of this article, the VNS data are more suitable than the traditional NES election survey for a number of reasons. First, the VNS survey includes distinct questions about respondents' views of Clinton as president and as a person. The NES has a straightforward question about presidential approval but not one about personal approval. The second comparative advantage of the VNS data is that it includes 4,065 voters in 145 contested House elections from 37 states.[12] The corresponding numbers for the 1998 NES are substantially smaller: 461, 89, and 26, respectively. Finally, whereas the VNS survey was administered on election day, the NES interviews continued for 7 weeks after the elections, with the average being 3 weeks. This delay introduces a potential problem of measurement error with regard to respondents' evaluations being influenced by postelection political events and media coverage.[13]

The primary independent variables of interest are voter evaluations of Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich. Assessments of Clinton as president were measured with a question that asked whether voters approved of "the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as president." Personal evaluations of Clinton were elicited with a question that asked whether respondents had a favorable "opinion of Bill Clinton as a person." A similar question with "as a person" removed was used to ascertain voters' opinions about Newt Gingrich.[14]

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10. The data are available from the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR).

11. In addition, the logit model of vote choice, reported below, was estimated with STATA for Windows (release 6) and its "cluster" option, which takes into account the clustering of individual observations by precinct and provides robust standard errors (Huber 1967; White 1980, 1982).

12. One-half of the VNS sample was asked both Clinton approval questions. The total number of voters in contested House races was 8,041.

13. There are, of course, comparative advantages of the NES, too. I take advantage of one of them, comparability of question format over time, below.

14. The VNS survey did not include separate questions about Gingrich as Speaker and as a person as it did for Clinton (as president and as a person), but this is not especially problematic because the dual and competing characterizations that were evident with regard to Clinton were not evident with regard to Gingrich. For Gingrich, a more important distinction to draw is between voters' views of him and their views of Congress, which was controlled by the Republicans. To

Of course voters' opinions of Clinton and Gingrich are not independent of their other political views and demographic characteristics. To accurately estimate the effects of Clinton and Gingrich assessments, the model also includes gender, race, ethnicity, age, family income, education, religion (Jewish and Religious Right membership), union membership, party identification, ideological identification, congressional approval, personal financial assessments, and incumbency status of the candidates.

All of the demographic variables are dichotomous and coded 0–1, with the exception of age, family income, and education, which are coded 1–5. The attitudinal variables and incumbency status are coded on 3-point scales, with values of -1, 0, and $+1$.[15] Assessments of Clinton and Gingrich are also on a -1 to $+1$ scale with disapproval/unfavorable coded -1, approval/favorable coded $+1$, and respondents without an opinion coded 0.[16]

Because the vote choice variable is dichotomous, I estimate a logit model.[17] To facilitate interpretation of the coefficients, I use them to compute predicted probabilities of voting for the Democratic House candidate. Specifically, for each independent variable the difference in the estimated probability of voting Democratic between its highest and lowest values is calculated after setting the values of the other independent variables to their medians.

Results

Table 2 provides the estimated effects of the independent variables on voting for the Democratic House candidate in 1998.[18] The results show that voters'

do this, in addition to opinions about Gingrich, the vote choice model includes congressional approval, which was measured by asking respondents if they approved "of the way Congress is handling its job."

15. The codes are as follows: party identification—Republican (-1), independent (0), Democrat (1); ideological identification—conservative (-1), moderate (0), liberal (1); approval of Congress—disapprove (-1), no opinion (0), approve (1); personal finances (compared to 2 years ago)—worse (-1), same (0), better (1); incumbency—Republican (-1), open seat (0), Democratic (1).

16. To test for the possibility that negative evaluations exert a stronger influence than positive ones I estimated two models. One constrained the effects to be identical in magnitude. A second allowed them to differ. Comparing the likelihoods of the two models indicates that the improvement in fit of the latter is only trivial; an improvement of its size would commonly be observed if the effects were identical ($\chi^2_{(3)} = .96, p = .81$). Therefore, I employ a single indicator for each evaluation instead of including separate ones for positive and negative assessments.

17. Vote choice is coded (0) Republican or (1) Democratic. Voters in uncontested races are excluded from the analysis of individual voting and included when calculating the contribution of assessments to the national division of the two-party vote.

18. Although not directly related to the discussion at hand, it is worth noting that the control variables appear to influence vote choice as one would expect. Democrats, liberals, those whose financial situation had improved in the past year, blacks, Latinos, the less wealthy, and Jews were all more likely to vote for the Democratic House candidate. Republicans, conservatives, those whose financial situation had not improved, white non-Latinos, the wealthy, and members of the Religious Right were all more likely to vote Republican. (The effects of gender, age, education, and union membership could not confidently be distinguished from zero.) The incumbent advantage was also evident in voting. Voters in districts with incumbent Democrats

Table 2. Estimates of Voting for the Democratic Candidate in 1998 Contested House Elections

Variable	Logit Coefficient	Standard Error	Effect in Probability
Evaluation of Bill Clinton:			
As a person	.214*	.079	.09
As president	.672*	.063	.32
Evaluation of Newt Gingrich	−.418*	.081	−.21
Party identification	1.565*	.105	.62
Ideological identification	.554*	.129	.25
Approval of Congress	−.243*	.080	−.12
Personal finances	.231*	.091	.11
Female	−.050	.136	−.01
Black	.767*	.274	.15
Latino	1.553*	.560	.25
Age	.045	.051	.04
Family income	−.197*	.056	−.18
Education	.068	.060	.06
Jewish	1.384*	.353	.24
Religious Right	−.557*	.193	−.14
Union member	.164	.152	.04
Incumbency	.635*	.076	.29
Constant	−.239	.259	…

SOURCE.—Voter News Service 1998 General Election Exit Poll.

NOTE.—Number of observations: 4,065. Log likelihood: −1,268. Proportion correctly predicted: .86. Sample mean: .49. For each independent variable the "effect in probability" is the difference in the estimated probability of voting Democratic between the highest and lowest values of the variable after setting the values of the other independent variables to their medians. See text for further details.

   * $p < .05$.

personal and presidential assessments of Bill Clinton exerted statistically discernible effects on their ballot choices ($p < .05$). The estimated effect of personal approval is nine percentage points; voters who approved of Clinton as a person had a .09 higher probability of voting for the Democratic House candidate than those who disapproved. The effect of presidential approval was much greater, more than three times as large.[19] Estimated support for Democratic House candidates was 32 percentage points greater among those who approved of Clinton compared to those who disapproved.

   Voters' assessments of Newt Gingrich also appear to have played a role in

were more likely to vote Democratic than those in districts with an open seat, who in turn were more likely to vote Democratic than those in districts with Republican incumbents.

19. The difference in the size of the two estimated coefficients (.458) is sufficiently large to confidently rule out the possibility that the parameters are identical ($p < .01$).

their ballot choices. Approving of Gingrich lowered the probability of support for Democratic House candidates by .21 compared to disapproving of the Speaker. The magnitude of the effect is midway between that of presidential and personal approval of Clinton. Given that the model also includes a variable that taps voters' assessments of Congress, the possibility that the estimated effect of evaluations of Gingrich, the most prominent leader in Congress, reflects voters' approval or disapproval with Congress in general may be ruled out. Moreover, the estimated impact of public opinion of Gingrich on ballot choices was almost twice as large as the estimated influence of congressional approval, which was .12.

Thus the findings demonstrate support for two propositions. First, voters' assessments of Bill Clinton (as president and as a person) and Newt Gingrich influenced their congressional voting decisions in 1998. Second, the estimated magnitudes of the effects vary. The effect of presidential approval of Clinton is the largest, followed by evaluations of Gingrich, and the smallest estimated effect is for personal approval of Clinton.

Determining how voters' opinions of Clinton and Gingrich may have contributed to the national election outcome requires taking into account both the distribution of opinions (table 1) and their effects on vote choice (table 2). The first part of the procedure I employ has been used in a number of different contexts including voter turnout (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), constituency influence on congressional voting behavior (Bartels 1991), and presidential elections (Miller and Shanks 1996).[20] First, the vote choice model estimates are used to generate each voter's predicted probability of voting for the Democratic House candidate based on his or her actual values for all the independent variables. Then, a second probability is calculated after setting the value of the variable, or variables, of interest to a "baseline" value, in this case the midpoint of the evaluation scale, which indicates neither a positive nor a negative evaluation. Averaging the differences in these two probabilities for all voters provides the estimate of the net contribution to the Democratic party's share of the national two-party congressional vote in contested House elections in 1998. Table 3 reports the findings.

The results provide an estimate of less than 1 percent of the national vote (0.5 percent) that the Democratic party lost due to the public's generally unfavorable view of Clinton as person. This finding is a consequence of the comparatively modest impact of voters' assessments of Clinton as a person on their ballot choices. Voters gave greater weight to their presidential evaluations of Clinton, and therefore, despite a smaller margin between positive and negative views, the magnitude of the contribution of presidential approval to the two-party division of the vote was substantially greater. Clinton's net

20. Abramowitz (1984, 1985) used the procedure to calculate the contribution of presidential evaluations to the national party distribution of the congressional vote in 1974, 1978, 1980, and 1982.

Table 3. Estimates of the Net Contributions to the 1998
National Vote in Contested House Elections

Voters' Assessment of	Net Contribution to the Democratic % of the National House Vote
Bill Clinton as a person	−.5
Bill Clinton as president	+1.8
Newt Gingrich	+1.4
Congress	+.5
Bill Clinton (as a person and as president) and Newt Gingrich	+3.0

SOURCES.—Voter News Service 1998 General Election Exit Poll and logit
estimates reported in table 2.

positive presidential evaluations added an estimated 1.8 percentage points to
the Democratic party's congressional vote share, substantially more than the
size of the contribution of voters' personal assessments of him.[21]

The public's assessment of Newt Gingrich very nearly matched its assess-
ment of Clinton as a person. However, because the influence of former on
vote choice was larger, the contribution to the outcome was greater. The
Democrats gained, and the Republicans lost, an estimated 1.4 percent of the
national congressional vote due to the public's low esteem for Newt Gingrich.
The magnitude of this estimate is nearly three times as large as the one for
the contribution of the public's generally disapproving view of Congress,
which is 0.5 percentage points.[22]

The last row of table 3 reports the combined effect of the public's evalu-
ations of Clinton (as a person and president) and Gingrich.[23] Setting all three
measures to their baselines produces a positive Democratic contribution of
three percentage points. Thus the estimated net effect of voters' views of both
Clinton and Gingrich was to increase the Democratic share of the national
vote by three percentage points.[24]

The political impact of these contributions to the congressional vote depends
on how many House seats they influenced. One way to estimate this quantity

21. Additional perspective on the size of the estimated contributions is provided by calculating
the net contribution of party identification to the Democratic percentage of the national con-
gressional vote. The estimate is 1.5 percentage points, slightly less than the estimated contribution
of Clinton presidential approval.
22. According to the VNS exit poll, voters who disapproved of Congress outnumbered those
who approved of it by 14 percentage points.
23. The combined contribution is not simply the sum of the three separate effects because the
model of individual voting does not specify effects that are linear in probability. It specifies
effects that are linear in log-odds.
24. If public opinion toward Congress is set to its baseline, too, the estimated net effect increases
to 3.6 percentage points.

is by analyzing the relationship between the two-party division of the national House vote and the two-party division of seats in the House (Tufte 1973). Data from the last 27 election years reveal a strong relationship.[25] An OLS regression produces an estimate that each additional percentage point of the national vote is associated with an increase of 8.4 Democratic seats.[26] So, in terms of seats, the estimated net contribution of voters' assessments of Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich was 22 seats.[27] A more conservative estimate is arrived at by calculating how many winning Democrats would have lost if three percentage points were subtracted from their vote shares and added to their Republican competitors. Nine races fit this criterion.[28]

Whether one uses the larger (22 seats) or smaller (nine seats) estimate of the combined contribution of public opinion toward Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich, the implication is the same. Because both estimates are greater than the actual number of five seats the Democrats picked up in 1998, both suggest that public opinion toward Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich provides an explanation for the rare event of the president's party picking up seats in the 1998 midterm elections. Using the seats/votes method produces an estimate of a 17-seat loss for the president's party $(5 - 22 = -17)$ if the net effect of public opinion is removed. The margin of victory approach yields an estimate of a four-seat loss $(5 - 9 = -4)$.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has attempted to tie the distinctive characteristics of the political context of the 1998 congressional elections together theoretically and to assess the extent to which voters' views of Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich help to explain the results of the 1998 House elections. In short, the public's evaluations of Bill Clinton as a president and a person and Newt Gingrich influenced the elections. Of the three, the most powerful factor, both in terms of

25. The data are provided in Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin (2000, pp. 50–51).
26. Regressing the number of Democratic seats on the Democratic percentage of the two-party vote for the 27 observations produces an R^2 of .88 and a slope coefficient of 8.4 with a standard error of .6 and a t-value of 14.2 $(p < .01)$. In addition, although Tufte (1973, 1975) suggests otherwise, there is little evidence to indicate that there has been a weakening of the relationship over time. Including an interaction term that allows the slope to linearly increase or decrease over the course of the 27 elections produces an estimate that it has decreased by the nearly zero amount of .01 with each successive election, a sufficiently small quantity that ruling out chance as the explanation would not be warranted $(p = .88)$.
27. The estimated net Democratic contribution of 3.0 percentage points in contested House elections translates into 2.6 percentage points of total vote when uncontested elections are included. (In uncontested races, public opinion on election day could not change the distribution of votes.) To arrive at the estimate of the number of seats, 2.6 is multiplied by 8.4 (the estimated coefficient from regressing seats on votes) and then rounded to the nearest integer, 22.
28. Three percent or less provided the margin of victory for nine Democrats (Congressional Quarterly 1998).

its estimated effect on vote choice and its contribution to the election outcome, was voters' assessments of Bill Clinton as president.

At the individual level, compared to those who disapproved of Clinton as president, support for Democratic House candidates was an estimated 32 percentage points higher among those who approved. National Election Studies data provide a useful comparative perspective (Miller and the National Elections Studies 1999). Table 4 reports the effect of presidential approval on voting for House candidates from the president's party in each of the six midterm elections from 1978 to 1998.[29] The high-water mark is 1998.[30] The results substantiate the view that the determinants of vote choice are not uniform and understandable apart from the larger political context. When the president is salient (as he was in 1982, 1994, and 1998), voters' presidential evaluations are primed and the effects are larger than when the president is less visibly a part of the election scene (1978, 1986, 1990).[31]

Clinton's high level of presidential approval combined with its especially strong influence on voters' ballot choices explain the substantial estimated net contribution of 1.8 percentage points of the national congressional vote. To be sure, Clinton's low personal evaluations among the public appear to have hurt Democratic House candidates, just as the Republicans had hoped. However, the effects were much smaller in comparison. Despite having negative personal evaluations that were 24 percentage points higher than his positive ones (a larger difference than the margin between his level of presidential approval and disapproval), the Democratic party lost just an estimated 0.5 percent of the national congressional vote as a result. Voters were influenced by their personal evaluations of Clinton, but the magnitude was small, less than one-third the size of the estimated effect of their presidential evaluations.

Given the tremendous exposure Clinton's personal life received from both partisan sources and the mass media, the conclusion that the size of the estimates reported here is closer to a ceiling than a floor seems warranted. To be sure, the public's views of Clinton as a person were "primed," but the magnitude of the effect on voters' ballot choices was relatively small. Thus the weaker form of the priming hypothesis has received support. If the size of the effect was determined solely by the attention the issue received in the media, then the effect of voters' assessments of Clinton as a person should have been larger. Instead, the public appears to regulate the level of priming

29. The NES first began collecting data such as whether or not races were contested and the incumbency status of the congressional candidates in 1978. The estimates in table 4 are based on a model of congressional voting in contested races that includes party identification, ideological identification, incumbency, and presidential approval, all coded on a -1, 0, $+1$ scale.
30. The similarity in the magnitudes of the estimated effects of presidential approval in 1998 derived from the NES data and the VNS data is reassuring.
31. These findings lend further support to Abramowitz's (1985) view that the explanation for some other scholars' results (e.g., Mann and Wolfinger 1980) showing the effects of presidential approval to be small is due to their use of the 1978 NES data.

Table 4. Determinants of Voting for the House Candidate of the President's Party in Midterm Contested Elections, 1978–98

Variable	Logit Coefficient	Standard Error	Effect in Probability
Presidential approval in:			
1978	.145	.099	.07
1982	.549*	.121	.27
1986	.221*	.106	.11
1990	.204	.131	.10
1994	.440*	.104	.21
1998	.660*	.154	.32
Party identification	1.244*	.054	.55
Ideological identification	.419*	.067	.21
Incumbency	1.322*	.053	.58

SOURCE.—American National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948–98.

NOTE.—Number of observations: 4,236. Log likelihood: −1,695. Proportion correctly predicted: .81. Sample mean: .48. Although not reported in this table, the model also included estimates of separate intercepts (constants) for each election year. The effects in probability report the estimated difference in supporting the House candidate of the president's party between the highest and lowest values of the specified variable while holding the other variables at their medians.

* $p < .05$.

by "recognizing and focusing on its own conception of what matters" (Zaller 1998, p. 186).

Bill Clinton was not the only national political leader who voters appear to have held accountable in the 1998 midterm elections. The public's evaluation of the Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, also influenced the elections. Although most Speakers are not especially well known, as the architect of the Republican takeover of the House in 1994 and the first Republican Speaker in 40 years, Gingrich achieved a high level of visibility among the public. His 4 years as Speaker and the final month of the 1998 election season left voters with highly negative evaluations of him. As a partisan, national political leader, his unpopularity could have been an impediment for Republican House candidates. The results reported in this article suggest that it was. In terms of individual ballot choice and contribution to the national congressional vote, public opinion of Gingrich mattered more than public opinion of Congress. The public's low esteem for Gingrich cost the Republicans an estimated 1.4 percent of the national vote in contested House elections in 1998. Perhaps the public's assessment of no single other House member has ever influenced House elections this much.

Overall, Jacobson (1999) points out that in the 1998 House elections "voters did opt for the status quo" (p. 32). He notes that only six House incumbents lost and only 17 seats switched party control. What is surprising about this outcome is that voters generally do not opt for the status quo in midterm elections. The president's party usually loses seats, often many seats, in midterm elections. The findings reported in this article suggest that the public's views of the leading national partisan political leaders, Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich, contributed to the unusual "status quo" outcome. The strong effect of Clinton's high presidential approval combined with the impact of Gingrich's low ratings appears to have provided Democratic House candidates with an electoral advantage that helped the Democratic party pick up seats.[32] At the same time, the low regard with which the public held Clinton personally was not of much help to the Republicans.

To conclude, voters do not cast their ballots on the basis of a decision rule impervious to influence from the larger political environment. Nor do they mechanically respond to the level of media attention a putatively important issue receives. The proper conception lies in between. In the case of the 1998 House elections, Bill Clinton's presidential popularity and the public's generally unfavorable impressions of Speaker Newt Gingrich combined to enable the president's party to accomplish a feat that had not been observed in 54 years, picking up House seats in a midterm election.

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32. Moreover, the Democratic party could have done even better if quality Democratic challengers had not been scared away by the Lewinsky scandal, "leaving Democrats poorly prepared to take full advantage of their unexpected good fortune" (Jacobson 1999, p. 50).

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