

“A decline in prosocial language helps explain public disapproval of the US Congress”

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- Observation: Between 2002 and 2014, public approval of Congress dropped from over 50% to under 10% (an all-time low)
- Hypothesis: The decrease in approval rating was caused by a decrease in prosocial language
- Method:
 - Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC)
 - Data consisted of transcripts of all sessions of the U.S. House of Representatives from January 1996 to November 2014
 - Each word was checked against a dictionary of prosocial word and word stems
 - Prosocial language density (the percentage of words spoken that are found in the dictionary) was calculated for each month
- Results:
 - The level of prosocial language in the House followed the same trend as Congressional approval ratings
 - Possible explanations:
 - Decrease in prosocial language → decrease in approval rating (hypothesis)
 - Decrease in approval rating → decrease in prosocial language
 - Dysfunctional governance → decrease in prosocial language and decrease in approval rating
 - External factors → decrease in prosocial language and decrease in approval rating
 - Analysis showed that prosocial language changes first, with approval rating following ~29 weeks later
 - When controls were added for dysfunctional governance (measured by partisan conflict, number of bills passed, and presidential vetoes) and external factors (measured by the President’s use of prosocial language, the US unemployment rate, and the Index of Consumer Sentiment), prosocial language in the House still predicted public approval
- How might the language of representatives affect public approval of Congress?
 - Direct route: some voters watch debates, form opinions, and influence their friends (prosocial language → public approval)
 - Indirect route: journalists watch debates, form opinions, and write editorials (prosocial language → positive media coverage → public approval)
 - Mediation analysis suggested that indirect influence partially accounts for the link between prosocial language and approval ratings