

The Center on Congress

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Center on Congress

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Public's Knowledge of Congress is Thin, And What it Knows, It Mostly Doesn't Like

BLOOMINGTON, Ind., June 27 - While Americans acknowledge that there are substantial shortcomings in the public's knowledge of and engagement with Congress, this doesn't restrain them from taking an extremely negative view of the legislative branch, according to a public opinion survey commissioned by the Center on Congress.

Asked to grade Americans on "following what is going on in Congress," 71 percent of survey respondents gave the citizenry either a D or F. And on "contacting members of Congress on issues that concern them," 69 percent of those surveyed gave citizens either a D or F.

"Matching this harsh judgment of citizens' failings are equally poor marks for Congress' performance," said Edward G. Carmines, Director of Research for the Center on Congress.

Survey respondents were asked to grade Congress' performance in seven areas, and by far the most frequent grades given were D's and F's. Seventy-seven percent of those surveyed gave Congress a D or F on "controlling the influence of special interests" and almost as many (74 percent) gave Congress a D or F on "holding its members to high ethical standards."

Even the areas in which the public was most generous in its grading of Congress - "carrying out effective oversight of the President and executive branch" and "conducting its business in a careful, deliberate way" - 63 percent gave Congress either a D or F.

The public's dim view of Congress as an institution brightens little when people are questioned on the integrity of individual members. Asked, "Are members of Congress honest people, of good character," only five percent of respondents said "almost all" are honest, and 42 percent said "few are honest." The remaining 53 percent said "some are honest."

When those surveyed were given five characteristics - honesty, positions on issues, good judgment, religious convictions, and ability to get things done - and asked to rank what they look for in a member of Congress, honesty came out far ahead. It was rated a 1 (most important) or 2 by 80 percent of respondents. Good judgment was rated a 1 or 2 by 48 percent, and positions on issues a 1 or 2 by 47 percent. Trailing in importance were ability to get things done (rated a 1 or 2 by 17 percent) and religious convictions (rated a 1 or 2 by nine percent).

One bit of good news for Congress is that a large majority of the public (88 percent) thinks the national legislature has a "major impact" or at least "some impact" on their lives.

However, 51 percent think Congress does not "listen and care about" what people like them think, and 90 percent think Congress "listens more to the lobbyists" than to "the voters back home." In a similar vein, 82 percent of respondents said that members of Congress contact them "only around election time," not "regularly."

The survey evidence suggests that one way to close the communications gap would be for members to make more use of online outreach tools. Seventy-three percent of respondents said they would more likely use an online survey than a mail-in questionnaire if members of Congress wanted to get their opinions on issues. And 63 percent said they would more likely participate in an online, virtual forum than attend a public meeting held by a member of Congress.

The findings are based on a March 2008 survey of 1000 people nationwide conducted by the internet polling firm Polimetrix, as part of a yearlong, multi-phase public opinion study of the 2008 elections. For complete survey data, go to www.centerongoncongress.org.

About the Center

The Center on Congress is a non-partisan, educational institution established in 1999 to help improve the public's understanding of Congress and to encourage civic engagement.

The Center developed out of Lee Hamilton's recognition during his 34 years in the U.S. House of Representatives that the public should be more familiar with Congress' strengths and weaknesses, its role in our system of government, and its impact on the lives of ordinary people every day.

The Center seeks to inspire young people and adults to take an active part in revitalizing representative government in America. To that end the Center offers an extensive array of civic education resources and activities, including: print publications; Web-based, interactive modules and other online learning tools in English and Spanish; commentaries for newspapers, radio stations, podcasts and a Web log; video and television in the classroom resources; survey research; teacher awards; and seminars, conferences, and a lecture series.

For more information about the Center, go to www.centeroncongress.org.