

**How the American Public Views Congress:  
A Report Based on the Center on Congress' 2004 Public Opinion Survey**

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**Executive Summary**

The results of the Center on Congress at Indiana University's 2004 public opinion survey provide new evidence that citizens have a decidedly negative view of Congress, have a high sense of civic duty, but low levels of civic engagement, and rely mainly on television for their information about Congress. Citizens prefer that Congress and the president share responsibility for handling the nation's problems with Congress taking a more central role than the president on domestic, but not foreign policy. This report also provides evidence that education influences what people know and think about Congress, as well as where they get their political information and whether they engage in the political process.

This report is based on the first of an annual series of national public opinion surveys sponsored by the Center on Congress at Indiana University that are designed to understand "Congress in the public mind." The over 1400 telephone interviews were conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of California-Berkeley during the period from November 2004 to January 2005. The key findings regarding public approval of Congress are:

- A solid majority, 57 percent of the public, disapproves of the way Congress is doing its job.

- Only 49 percent of citizens think their congressional representatives have their constituents' interests in mind when voting on policies, while over 63 percent of the public thinks their representatives have special interests in mind when casting roll call votes.
- While 54 percent of younger Americans, age 18-34, approve of the way Congress is doing its job, only 38 percent of Americans 35 and older approve of Congress' performance.

In the areas of civic duty and civic engagement:

- While over 90 percent of Americans believe it is their duty to communicate with their representatives in Congress, only one-fifth has actually contacted their House member or one of their Senators.
- About 20 percent of the public gives money to candidates, political parties, or ballot initiatives with most gifts coming in at less than \$100.
- Over half of the public tries to persuade others how to vote.

Regarding where citizens learn about Congress:

- More Americans get their news about Congress from television than from any other source.
- While 64 percent of Americans trust the national network news, approximately the same percentage trust cable television's Fox News
- Both younger and older people are more likely to use television news as their main source of information about Congress

On public preferences concerning congressional responsibility:

- The public prefers that Congress and the president share equal responsibility for handling the nation's problems.
- After sharing responsibility equally, the public prefers that the president take the lead on foreign policy issues like the situation in post-war Iraq and the war on terrorism and Congress assume more responsibility for domestic issues like education.

## **Introduction**

In his award-winning book *How Congress Works and Why You Should Care*, former Congressman and Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University Lee H. Hamilton wrote that “when people are upset about Congress, it undermines public confidence in government and fosters cynicism and disengagement.” The findings of the Center on Congress’ survey of public attitudes about Congress and citizen engagement reveal a public that generally disapproves of how Congress handles its job, believes House and Senate members are more likely to have special interests, and not constituent interests, in mind when lawmaking, and, as Hamilton predicted, largely avoids engaging in the political process.

The survey reveals that a strong majority of citizens do not communicate with their representatives in Washington, do not volunteer to work for political parties, and get most of their congressional news from the television set. These results are not likely to warm the hearts of those who believe that an informed, engaged citizenry is necessary for the American experiment to flourish.

On the other hand, the survey also suggests conditions under which citizens show a greater understanding of what Congress does and increase their civic participation. The survey

shows that in nearly all cases,<sup>1</sup> the more educated people are, regardless of age, the more likely they are to vote in elections and communicate about politics – both with their representatives and their friends. The results also suggest that civic education programs designed to provide useful information about the role of democratic institutions such as Congress can foster better-informed citizens.

This report summarizes the results of the Congress survey that focus on the following topics: congressional approval, citizens' understanding of civic duty, civic engagement, where people get their information about Congress, and public preferences regarding how Congress should handle various contemporary issues. Rather than only chronicle the public's evaluations about Congress, which the survey does, it also aims to improve our understanding of the components that make up "Congress in the public mind."

## **Congressional Approval and Government Satisfaction**

Not surprisingly, Table 1 shows that 57 percent of the Center on Congress' survey respondents answered the question, "do you approve or disapprove of the way Congress is handling its job?" by disapproving of the way the legislative branch is carrying out its duties. As has long been known, Americans tend to hate Congress but love their own congressperson. What is more startling, however, is that one-third of the survey's respondents *strongly* disapprove of Congress, while only 17 percent of the public strongly approve of the House and Senate's handling of the nation's business.

Looking at congressional approval by party affiliation, the survey shows that Americans register more support for Congress when their party is in control of the institution. Sixty-seven

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<sup>1</sup> Those who are between 18-34 without a four year degree are about 1 percent more likely than 18-34 year olds with a four year college degree to contact their House representative either by writing, calling or emailing. This

percent of Republicans approve of Congress, which has a Republican majority in both houses, while 26 percent of Democrats approve. Thirty-three percent of Republicans disapprove of the legislative branch while 73 percent of Democrats express disapproval.

Meanwhile younger people seem to approve of Congress more than older people do. Fifty-four percent of those under 35 approve of Congress' handling of its job while 38 percent of those 35 and older approve of the way Congress does its job.

Even though a substantial majority of the public disapproves of how Congress handles its work, only one-fifth of the survey respondents said that they thought their lives were "just about always" affected by congressional decisions. However, 36 percent of the public believe that their lives were affected by Congress' decisions "most of the time" and 39 percent said that they feel the effect of Congress' work "some of the time."

When it comes to whom a members of Congress consider when he or she casts a vote, the public has a seemingly cynical view of the nation's lawmakers. While almost half of the respondents said that members of Congress have their constituents' interests in mind either "most of the time" or "just about always," 64 percent of the survey respondents said that citizens' representatives have "special interests" in mind when making decisions.

## **Civic Duty and Civic Engagement**

Turning our attention to how citizens behave as well as how they think people living in a democracy *should* behave, we find that over 80 percent of the survey respondents say that they voted in the 2004 election. Clearly, many of our respondents either have faulty memories or are embarrassed about failing to cast a ballot in 2004 since just over half of the public is even

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difference does not fall outside the survey's margin of error.

registered to vote (and only half of those people actually did vote in 2004!). Regardless, it is impressive that over four-fifths of the public either voted or at least believe they *should have* voted.

Besides simply voting, there are many other ways that citizens can participate in the political process. Despite citizen's generally negative view of Congress, extraordinarily high majorities of the public believe that they should keep in touch with their elected officials. However, the public less frequently acts in accordance with their civic views. Ninety-four percent of the survey respondents either strongly or somewhat agree with the statement that "citizens in a democracy have a responsibility to communicate with their elected congressional members." But barely one-fifth have ever contacted their House member, less than one-fifth have contacted one of their senators, and less than nine percent have ever volunteered to work for a campaign, political party, or ballot initiative.

Both age and education affect a person's likelihood of contacting their representative. Twenty-four percent of people over the age of 35 have contacted their representative in the previous year while only 13 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 34 have done so. Similarly, 21 percent of college graduates but only 14 percent of those with only a high school education report contacting their representative.

When it comes to monetary contributions, only about 20 percent of the public report giving money to a political campaign, political party or political action committee in 2004. Of those, 8 percent were Democrats, and 6 percent were Republicans. Just over 50 percent of the contributors reported giving 100 dollars or less, and 25 percent of contributors reported giving exactly 1,000 dollars. Fifty percent of Republican contributors report giving over 1,000 dollars, while 33 percent of Democratic contributors report giving over 1,000 dollars.

Even though citizens do not contact their representatives or give money to political causes in high numbers, a majority of the public do participate in the political process through their own social networks. Fifty-six percent of the survey respondents spent time during the 2004 campaign trying to convince people they knew to vote for particular candidates or parties.

### **Sources of Information About Congress**

Where do people's evaluations of Congress come from? One place to look for the foundations of public opinion about Congress is to examine the sources of information people use to learn about Congress.

Television news is far and away the most prominent source used by the public to get information about the legislative branch of government. While 47 percent of the public turns to television for congressional news, only 23 percent use newspapers as their main source of information about Congress. Over 11 percent of citizens primarily use the internet to catch up with Congress and 8 percent listen to the radio. Fewer citizens, 7 percent and 2 percent respectively, talk to others or read news magazines to get their Congress fix.

Education appears to influence the public's choice of information, with 55 percent of those with only a high school education relying on television for their information about Congress, and 21 percent using newspapers for their information. This contrasts with 44 percent of college graduates obtaining their information about Congress from the television while 23 percent say that they get most of their information about Congress from newspapers.

Of course, getting information and believing information are two different things. Of those who named television as their primary source of information about Congress, 29

percent regularly watch Fox News on cable television. Of those who watch Fox News regularly, 86 percent either “completely” or “somewhat trust” the information they receive from this cable network. But these Fox News viewers only trust the national network news at a rate of 56 percent. For those whose primary source about Congress is a newspaper, 63 percent either “completely” or “somewhat” trust what they see in print each morning.

How did those sources influence what people know about Congress? As Table 3 indicates, over 90 percent of the public knew that Republicans were in the majority of both the House and Senate after the 2004 elections. Of those who report that the newspaper is their main source of information about Congress, 82 percent knew that Republicans held the majority in the Senate and 85 percent were clear on the Republican majority in the House after the 2004 elections. As for those who report that television is their primary source of information about Congress, 76 percent knew that Republicans were in the majority in the House, and 66 percent were aware of the Republican majority in the Senate. Members of the public who rely on the internet for their news of Congress fell somewhere in the middle, with 75 percent reporting knowledge of the Republican majority in the Senate, and 80 percent in the House.

### **Public Preferences of Congressional Responsibility**

So we have an idea of what the public thinks of Congress, how engaged the public is civically, and where the public gets their information. But what exactly does the public want Congress to do? The Center on Congress’ survey in 2004 asked respondents about who they believed was “most responsible for handling” the post-war situation in Iraq, the war on



terrorism, the economy, education, and implementing the recommendations from the 9/11 Commission. The results are shown in Table 4.

In general, the public seems to prefer that the president and Congress take equal responsibility for dealing with the nation's major problems and issues. However, on foreign policy issues, such as the international effort to fight terrorism, 67 percent of the public prefers an equal distribution of responsibility between the executive and legislative branches, but 16 percent favored presidential leadership in the terror fight while only 7 percent gave primary responsibility to Congress. Regarding the post-war situation in Iraq, 54 percent of survey respondents favor an equal handling of the situation from the president and Congress, 16 percent put the president in the driver's seat, and 9 percent placed Congress upfront. Interestingly, 21 percent of the public wanted "someone else" to be responsible for dealing with Iraq.

On domestic issues, the public prefers that Congress take a more central role. Regarding education, nearly a quarter of the public wants Congress in charge while only about 5 percent of citizens give the president primary responsibility. About 47 percent prefer the president and Congress share equal responsibility for dealing with education and the rest of the public (25 percent) would rather "someone else" handle it. While more citizens place chief responsibility on the president to handle the economy than to handle education (13 percent to 5 percent), the public would rather have Congress alone (15 percent) or the president and Congress equally (60 percent) be mostly responsible for helping the economy.

As for who should lead the way in regards to implementing the recommendations of the 9/11 commission, the public was ambivalent. Eighteen percent of survey respondents put the

president first, 18 percent had Congress up front, and 56 percent placed equal responsibility on both.

## **Where Do We Go from Here?**

The findings of this public opinion survey suggest that despite the founding fathers' intention that Congress would provide the most direct representation of the citizenry, today Americans register a very different view of how Congress operates and how well it works. Well over half of the respondents in this survey disapprove of Congress, with over a third *strongly* disapproving of Congress' performance. This fact alone may not astound many political observers, but underlying this decidedly negative view of Congress lies a strong current of civic responsibility. Indeed, over 90 percent of our respondents believe that citizens have a responsibility to vote and a duty to contact their legislators. These lofty sentiments are in stark contrast with the fact that barely half of the eligible voters typically turnout to vote, only 20 percent of the respondents surveyed reported contacting their representative in the House, and only 15 percent contacted one of their senators. What explains this disconnect?

The findings presented here point to several potential answers. Partisan affiliation appears to affect the public's willingness to give Congress a thumb up or thumb down, indicating that Americans muster more support for Congress when their party is in control of the institution. Clearly, the public's evaluation of Congress is part of the larger polarization that characterizes contemporary American politics.

Education and age also appear to influence the public's evaluations. Younger people, those under the age of 35, show more approval for Congress than those over the age of 35.

Respondents with a four year college degree are more likely to register support for citizen participation in a representative democracy, as well as actively participate by contributing their time and money to political causes. What do these differences mean? Will these findings hold over time? If not, what explains changes in the public's assessment of Congress?

In his book, *How Congress Works and Why You Should Care*, former Congressmen and Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University Lee H. Hamilton wrote that "in a representative democracy like ours, in which Congress must reflect the views and interests of the American people as it frames the basic laws of the land, it really does matter what people think about Congress." Because the public's preferences lie at the very heart of our representative democracy, it is crucial that we not only understand what is at the core of the public's cynicism and disapproval of Congress, but that we understand how to combat it. The survey findings discussed here represent the first installment of what we hope will be an annual survey examining the public's attitudes toward Congress which will be sponsored by the Center on Congress at Indiana University. The Center on Congress believes that a regular assessment of the public's attitudes toward Congress will fill a gap in our general understanding of the public's perceptions of Congress and allow us to measure changes in citizens' understanding and evaluation of Congress across time. In doing so, the Center on Congress endeavors to provide the public, Congress, the media, and congressional scholars with an in-depth assessment of the public's perceptions as well as possible solutions to combat the public's cynicism and disapproval of Congress.

**Table 1: Congressional Approval**

	Overall	Republicans	Democrats	Under 35	Over 35
Approve	43%	67%	26%	54%	38%
Disapprove	57%	33%	73%	46%	62%
Strongly Approve	17%	29%	10%	23%	14%
Strongly Disapprove	33%	14%	46%	23%	38%

**Table 2: Do Citizens Contact their Congressional Lawmakers?**

	Overall	Under 35	Over 35	High School Graduates	College Graduates
Citizens have a duty to contact legislators <sup>1</sup>	94%	93%	92%	90%	96%
Citizens do <i>not</i> have a duty to contact their legislators <sup>2</sup>	6%	5%	7%	7%	3%
Did contact House member	20%	13%	24%	14%	21%
Did not contact House member	80%	87%	76%	85%	79%

Note: <sup>1</sup>Includes respondents who "somewhat" and "strongly" agree. <sup>2</sup>Includes those who "somewhat" and "strongly" disagree.

**Table 3: The Influence of Citizens' Main Source of Information about Congress on Citizens' Knowledge About Congress**

	Overall	Newspapers	TV	Internet
Knew Republicans were majority in the House	92%	85%	76%	80%
Knew Republicans were majority in the Senate	91%	82%	66%	75%

**Table 4: Public Preferences Regarding Who Is Most Responsible for Handling Major Problems Facing the United States**

Most Responsible	Economy	Education	9/11 Commission Recommendations	Situation in Iraq	War on Terrorism
President	13%	5%	18%	16%	16%
Congress	15%	24%	18%	9%	7%
Both Equally	60%	47%	56%	54%	67%
Someone Else	13%	25%	9%	21%	11%

Note: The numbers on tables 1-4 may not add up to 100% due to rounding.