

The Center on Congress

Indiana University

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Contact:

Center on Congress

Ted Carmines, Research Director

(812) 856-4706

Poll of Public's Regard for Congress Detects Signs of Positive Movement

BLOOMINGTON, Ind., Dec. 12, 2008 — A newly released survey of public opinion on Congress' performance indicates that Americans are somewhat less negative about the legislative branch than they were earlier this year.

"The public has a more positive view of Congress' performance," said Edward G. Carmines, Director of Research for the Center on Congress at Indiana University, which commissioned the October poll, and a companion survey in March. "It's only a modest improvement, but it is consistent across several measures."

Congress in the October survey got a passing grade from almost half the public (46 percent) for "overseeing the activities of the President and executive branch." Back in March, well over 60 percent of people flunked Congress on the oversight question.

Forty-eight percent of those polled in October gave Congress either an A, B, or C grade on "representing America's diverse groups and interests." When the March survey asked the public to grade Congress on "representing the American people," 71 percent slapped Congress with either a D or an F.

The public also credited Congress with improving a bit in five other areas: keeping excessive partisanship in check (seven point improvement); holding its members to high standards of ethical conduct (six points better); controlling the influence of special interest groups (also six points up); and conducting its business in a careful, deliberate way (three points higher).

However, Carmines cautioned that though Congress nudged the public-opinion needle in a positive direction from March to October, it still has very far to go to achieve an overall positive report card from the public. Even in its highest-rated area — oversight — Congress still got D or F ratings from 54 percent of those polled. On the questions of partisanship, ethics, and special interests, two-thirds or more of the public graded Congress a D or F. And when asked, "Do you believe that members of Congress listen and care about what people like you think?" 68 percent answered "No."

"Even though there has been improvement, you'd have to say that the public's overall rating of Congress is still pretty dismal," Carmines said.

Members of Congress can take some comfort in what the October survey learned about the public's views on the role of the legislative branch in the American system of government. When asked, "Which of the three branches of government did the Founding Fathers intend to be the most powerful?" 59 percent of people correctly identified the legislative branch, while 21 percent thought the Founders favored the executive branch and 20 percent the judiciary.

And when asked, "Under our system of government, who was given the main power to set federal spending?" 83 percent correctly named Congress, and only 17 percent said the president.

To the question, "Who was given the main power to declare war?" 60 percent correctly said Congress. But that did leave a sizable 40 percent putting primary war-declaring power in the hands of the president. Carmines speculated that with the media's daily focus on the president's role as Commander-in-Chief of the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, an increasing number of people are losing sight of the fact that the Constitution specifically assigns war-declaring power to Congress.

The poll also indicated that the public has a tolerance for Congress being actively engaged in policymaking, not merely a junior partner to the president. Sixty percent of those polled said that over the past several years, the power of Congress has been "about right" or "too little." A smaller portion of respondents (53 percent) said that the power of the president has been "about right" or "too little" in recent years.

The most recent findings are based on an October 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.centeroncongress.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.

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