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## **Center Releases Findings of Inaugural Survey Of Public's Attitudes Toward Congress**

BLOOMINGTON, Ind., Aug. 11 — Although 57 percent of Americans disapprove of the way Congress is doing its job, younger and better-educated people are more positive about the institution than older and less-educated people, and most Americans see Congress as highly relevant, regarding its work as affecting their lives “most of the time” or “just about always.”

These are key findings of the first Survey on Congress, sponsored by the Center on Congress at Indiana University. The Center will conduct the non-partisan national public opinion survey annually, filling a gap in knowledge about how citizens learn about Congress and evaluate its performance.

“For American democracy to work, citizens must have a close and productive relationship with their representatives in Congress,” said Lee H. Hamilton, Director of the Center on Congress. “There’s a lot of polling on how people feel about the president, but our Center’s survey focuses attention on the vital link between citizens and those whom they elect to Congress.”

The survey reveals a clear “generation gap” in how the public rates Congress. Among Americans 35 and older, only 38 percent approve of Congress’ performance. Among those ages 18 to 34, the approval rating is 54 percent.

One-fifth of survey respondents said their lives were “just about always” affected by congressional decisions, and another 36 percent said Congress’ decisions affect them “most of the time.” Also, the survey found that the public prefers the president and Congress to share equal responsibility for handling issues, such as the post-war situation in Iraq, the war on terrorism, the economy and education.

“The media’s coverage of the federal government in Washington tends

to focus on the actions of the President, but the survey shows that most Americans believe Congress should — and does — play an important role,” said Edward G. Carmines, Research Director of the Center on Congress and a professor of political science at Indiana University-Bloomington.

The survey shows that an overwhelming majority of Americans feel it is their duty to participate in civic affairs, even though many people do not actually fulfill that duty. For example, while more than 90 percent of those surveyed believe they should keep in touch with their representatives in Congress, only one in five has actually contacted their House member or one of their Senators.

Similarly, more than 80 percent in the survey said they voted in the 2004 election, which reveals either faulty memories or embarrassment about admitting failure to vote, since only about half of the public is even registered to vote, and only half of those registered actually did vote in 2004.

“The public has a high sense of civic duty, but a low level of formal civic engagement,” said Carmines. Education is a key factor that leads people to become more engaged. “The survey shows that in nearly all age groups, the more educated people are, the more likely they are to vote in elections and communicate about politics — both with their representatives and with their friends.”

The survey results suggest that civic education programs that are designed to provide information about the role of democratic institutions such as Congress can foster better-informed, more politically engaged citizens.

Other highlights of the survey findings:

- 67 percent of Republicans approve of the job performance of Congress, which has Republican majorities in both chambers, while only 26 percent of Democrats approve. Clearly, the public’s evaluation of Congress reflects the larger polarization that characterizes contemporary American politics.

- More Americans get their news about Congress from television than from any other source. 47 percent of the public turns to television for congressional news, 23 percent use newspapers as their main source of information about Congress, 11 percent primarily rely on the internet, and 8 percent depend mostly on radio.

□ 49 percent of citizens think their congressional representatives have their constituents' interests in mind "most of the time" or "just about always" when voting on policies, while 64 percent of the public thinks their representatives have special interests in mind when casting roll call votes.

"This initial survey of the public's knowledge of and attitudes toward Congress raises a number of questions we will study more closely in the Center's subsequent annual surveys," said Hamilton. "In our representative democracy, Congress must reflect the views and interests of the American people as it frames the laws of the land, so it really does matter what people think about Congress. It's crucial that we understand what is at the core of the public's negative views of Congress, and that we develop strategies for combating public cynicism and disapproval of the institution."

The survey findings are based on telephone interviews of more than 1400 people from November 2004 through January of this year. Interviews were conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of California-Berkeley. Questions were crafted by the Center on Congress' Carmines, and survey data were analyzed by Carmines and two Ph.D. candidates at Indiana University, Jessica C. Gerrity and Michael W. Wagner.

The survey focused 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.

The full report on the survey is at <http://centeroncongress.org>

### **About the Center**

Survey research is part of the Center on Congress' extensive program of civic education activities, which include books and other print publications; Web-based, interactive e-learning modules; newspaper and radio commentaries; video and television in the classroom resources; and lecture series, conferences and awards.

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, and its impact on the lives of ordinary people every day.

For more information about the Survey on Congress and the Center's array of efforts to foster an informed electorate that understands our system of government and participates in civic life, contact:

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