

Indiana University

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## **Experts Surveyed on Congress' Performance Give The Institution a "C-minus" for 2006**

BLOOMINGTON, Ind., Dec. 22 — Congress scrapes by with an overall grade of "C-minus" in a newly released survey of political scientists who were asked to rate the performance of the national legislature during 2006.

The non-partisan Center on Congress at Indiana University conducted the online survey, getting a select group of 39 top academic experts on Congress from around the country to give the institution grades on 18 questions.

Members received just one "A" — on the question "Do legislators make a good effort to be accessible to their constituents?" A few "B"s were given out — one on the question "Do legislators broadly reflect the interests of their constituents?" and another on "Does Congress make its workings and activities open to the public?"

But Congress' overall GPA was dragged way down by "D"s on questions such as whether Congress keeps excessive partisanship in check, whether it carries out effective oversight of the executive branch, and whether it protects its powers from presidential encroachment.

And the experts dished out low "C"s in abundance, taking a dim view of how Congress in 2006 "kept the role of special interests within proper bounds," and "held members to high standards of ethical conduct," and "allowed members in the minority to play a role."

"C" was also the grade Congress got for "following good process and conducting its business in a deliberate way." Another "C" came on the question "Does Congress engage in productive discussion and allow all points of view to be heard?"

"If our sons or daughters brought home these grades, we'd be talking to the teacher the next day," said political scientist Edward G. Carmines, who is Director of Research for the Center on Congress and analyzed the results of the survey.

To the experts, Carmines says, Congress looks like an underachieving student who has the ability to perform better. "These experts see Congress as having the authority and power to improve its performance and image. Its weak areas are things it has control over — it can use its oversight power, reduce partisanship, tighten ethics standards. The question is, do members have the will?"

The Center on Congress plans to make an annual tradition of conducting a year-end survey of experts' opinion on the performance of Congress. "Our interest is not to dwell on past shortcomings, but to develop a sense moving forward of what areas are most in need of improvement, as well as what areas are generally handled well by Congress," explains Lee Hamilton, Director of the Center.

The Center already conducts a biennial nationwide opinion survey on the public's knowledge and evaluation of Congress, and citizen involvement in politics and elections. Findings from the 2006 survey of the public will be released in early 2007.

### **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 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; commentaries for newspapers, radio stations, podcasts and a Weblog; 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](http://www.centeroncongress.org).