

The Center on Congress

Indiana University

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Experts Surveyed on Congress' Performance Give The Institution a "C" for 2007

BLOOMINGTON, Ind., Jan. 16 — The verdict is in on Congress' work in 2007, and the grade is a solid "C," according to political scientists asked by the Center on Congress to rate the performance of the national legislature. This is a notch better than the "C-minus" grade Congress earned in 2006, when the Center conducted a similar survey of experts.

"Going from a C-minus to a solid C — almost a C-plus — is not a dramatic improvement, but it is a real improvement," said political scientist Edward G. Carmines, who is Director of Research for the Center on Congress. "It shows that Congress can change."

The non-partisan Center on Congress conducted the online survey, getting a select group of 51 top academic experts on Congress from around the country to give the institution grades on 19 questions.

Democrats took control of the House and Senate in 2007, and the experts saw notable improvement during the year by Congress in "carrying out effective oversight of the president and executive branch" (C-plus) and "protecting its powers from presidential encroachment" (C). Congress got D's in those areas in 2006, when Republican majorities in both chambers were seen as generally deferential to President George W. Bush.

"Competition with a president of the opposite party typically leads Congress to play a more important role in policymaking," Carmines said.

Congress also moved up on three questions related to operational performance: whether it "engages in productive discussion and allows all points of view to be heard" (C-plus); whether it "allows Members in the minority to play a role" (C-plus); and whether it "follows good process and conducts its business in a deliberate way" (C). In 2006, Congress got D's on all three counts.

The experts also gave C's in 2007 on the questions of "Does Congress keep the role of special interests within proper bounds?" and "Does Congress hold members to high standards of ethical conduct?" — again, up from D grades in 2006.

But Congress still is doing a poor job of "keeping excessive partisanship in check." The experts' grade on that count for 2007: D-plus, barely changed from a D in 2006.

However, that was the only D grade Congress received for 2007 — compared to eight D's in 2006 — and in 2007 Congress was awarded five above-average marks (in the B range). Still, 13

of the 19 survey questions drew grades in the C range. “Several weaknesses found in 2006 were still rather weak areas in 2007,” Carmines said. “A GPA of C is not a high standard. There is obvious room for improvement.”

The three highest grades for 2007 came on these questions: “Do legislators make a good effort to be accessible to their constituents?” (B-plus); “Does Congress make its workings and activities open to the public?” (B); and “Do legislators broadly reflect the interests of their constituents?” (B).

The Center on Congress has an annual tradition of conducting a year-end survey of experts’ opinions on the performance of Congress. “Our interest is not to dwell on past shortcomings, but to develop a sense of what areas are most in need of improvement, as well as what areas are generally handled well by Congress,” explained Lee Hamilton, Director of the Center.

For the first time, the Center’s survey for 2007 included an additional set of questions to gauge how the experts assess the public’s knowledge of and interaction with Congress. “We want to know, are the citizens holding up their end?” said Carmines.

The answer from the experts: The public, like Congress, has significant room for improvement. Citizens managed to earn C grades on “contacting their members of Congress on issues that concern them” and “working through groups that share their interests to influence Congress.” But otherwise, the citizenry got Ds — on questions such as “understanding the main features of Congress and how it works” and “following what is going on in Congress on a regular basis.”

“The experts were quite critical of what the public knows about Congress as a national policymaking institution,” said Carmines. “Much more work needs to be done to help citizens understand Congress and its role in our system of representative democracy.”

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 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