

Overview

It is widely known that the American electorate disapproves of Congress and the level of partisanship that is taking place in the public policy environment, but there are deeper reasons behind the disapproval and dissatisfaction in the national voter outlook. In recent research commissioned by the Congressional Institute, there is significant concern about the future for the next generation and frustration over partisanship, but going beyond partisanship alone, there is also a concern about a lack of accountability in Congress and a perception that Congress is not truly acting in the best interest of the people. Compounding this problem, the media is viewed as a source of promoting conflict in Congress, with many voters acknowledging that there may be good things happening in Congress but the media does not report on it nor is the media incentivized to report on positive events. As a result, the electorate is not fully clear on what is truly happening in the legislative process. Given these elements, the majority of the electorate - including voters of all partisan affiliation - feels that their voices are not heard effectively in the current policy discourse.

These concerns also result in a partisan view about the present constitutional balance of power, with Democrats feeling that power has shifted too much toward the legislative branch, blocking the President's agenda. Republicans believe the opposite - that power has shifted too much toward the executive branch, while independents are evenly split on this question. This difference is even more of a reflection of which party currently holds the executive branch than simple partisan disagreement.

These elements provide a natural construct for an effort to begin reforming Congress and introducing proposals that would have a direct impact on increasing the level of accountability in Congress, also providing voters with greater clarity into the legislative process.

National Context

Congressional Job Approval

Views about Congress have declined since the 2006 study for the Congressional Institute. Congressional job approval now stands at 12-83 approve-disapprove (compared to 27-66 in 2006). Disapproval of Congress is very high across voters of all partisan affiliations.

Outlook on the Next Generation

Disapproval of Congress is being further compounded by concerns about the direction of the country and the future for the next generation, with about six in ten (61%) voters believing the statement that *the next generation will not have the same quality of life as you had* (61-37 believe-do not believe), with that concern being even more prevalent among conservative Republicans (73-26) and tea party voters (78-20). This concern about the next generation is a structural change.

Role of the Media

Given the current discourse, less than 1 in 5 (19%) voters believes that their voice is heard effectively (19-79 yes-no). Consistent with the findings of the focus groups, the media is not viewed as playing a positive role in the current policy discourse, with a clear recognition from voters that the media is more inclined to *make people frustrated about what is not getting done in Washington* (81%) rather than *making people happy about what is getting done in Washington* (15%). This cuts across party, with both Republicans (84-14) and Democrats (77-18) sharing the belief that the media promotes conflict in Congress.

Independent voter: The media is going to make more money by making me frustrated about what Congress is not passing instead of making me happy about what Congress should pass.

As a result of this outlook toward the media, there is also a strong preference for more coverage of issues and policy discussions in Congress (89%) rather than personalities in Congress (7%). This also cuts across party and ideology.

Understanding of the Legislative Process

Reflecting what we heard in the qualitative research, voters tend to feel that they have some understanding of what is happening in Washington, but are not fully clear on how the process works. This lack of certainty about what is truly happening in the legislative process is exacerbated by the belief that the media is holding back on reporting on good things that are happening in Congress and only reporting the conflicts to keep up ratings. While the majority of the electorate says that they understand the legislative process well (78% well), the largest percentage (55%) feels that they understand the process only “*somewhat well*” with only 23% understanding it “*very well.*”

Independent voter: We really don't know what's going on up there. And I'm sure they've passed legislation. I just don't think we've heard about it.

Because of the lack of certainty of what is happening in the legislative process and distrust of the media’s reporting on Congress, this leads to concerns about Congress not presenting a clear plan to voters and following through.

Concerns about Congress

Reflecting what we heard in the qualitative research, while there are many concerns about Congress, lack of accountability is one of the most serious concerns, and is an obstacle to getting things done. Among voters overall, the top three concerns were *lack of accountability* (7.58), *the way Congress spends my money* (7.54) and not presenting a clear plan to voters (7.36).

Concerns about Congress (on a scale of 1-9 with 1 being it does not concern you at all, 5 neutral and 9 being extremely concerning to you)

	Overall	Republicans
Lack of accountability	7.58	7.79
The way Congress spends my money	7.54	7.96
Not presenting a clear plan to voters and following through	7.36	7.36
Your voice not being heard	7.26	7.33
Not fulfilling its Constitutional role	7.23	7.21
Influence of special interests	7.12	7.08
Partisanship	6.71	6.41
Gerrymandering of Congressional districts	6.34	6.00

- Not unexpectedly, Republicans are most troubled by the way Congress spends money (7.96), but this concern is followed very closely by lack of accountability (7.79) which they may also connect to spending problems.
- As one Republican voter stated in the qualitative discussions, *[Members of Congress] are accountable to their party and not to the people.*

Constitutional Balance of Power

As a result of the concerns about Congress and what voters hear reported in the media, there is a partisan view about the current constitutional balance of power, with this view being impacted by which party holds the executive branch. Republicans see the balance as having shifted too much toward the executive branch (72% shifted too much toward the President, 16% too much toward Congress), and Democrats see the balance as having shifted too much toward Congress (62%) rather than to the President (11%). Independents tend to be evenly split between too much power toward the President (39%) and too much toward Congress (38%).

Which of the following statements best describes the current Constitutional balance of power?

	Overall	Cons Rep	Rep	Ind	Dem
It is just as the Founders intended it to be	15	4	7	20	19
It has shifted too much toward the President	40	76	72	39	11
It has shifted too much toward Congress	39	13	16	38	62

Goals of Reform

Given the concerns people have about Congress particularly over accountability, voters need a structure that will enable them to gain insight into the legislative process and help their voices to be heard, which will ultimately increase accountability in Congress. Reforming Congress can help provide that structure, which will also help Members of Congress define value to their constituents.

Methodology

This report is a summary of findings from a recent national survey for Congressional Institute (April 20-21, 1000 registered voters), including findings from focus groups of Republican and independent voters in Columbus, OH, in December 2015.

The research was conducted by The Winston Group.