The Center on Congress
Indiana University

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Experts Surveyed on Congress’ Performance
Give The Institution a “C-plus” for 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ind., Jan. 28 — Congress earned a grade of C-plus for its work in 2010, according to political scientists asked by the Center on Congress to rate the performance of the national legislature. This is a slight improvement over 2009’s C grade.

The experts saw the second session of the 111th Congress as “functional, but not in any way superb,” said Indiana University political scientist Edward G. Carmines, who is Director of Research for the Center on Congress.

Congress earned solid B grades on “exercising its proper role in setting the legislative agenda” and for “focusing on the key issues facing the country,” and B-minus grades on “generally fulfilling its national policymaking responsibilities” and “protecting its powers from presidential encroachment.”

Accessibility and openness were other areas of strength. Congress earned a B-plus on being “accessible to constituents,” and B grades on being “open to the public” and “broadly reflecting constituents’ interests.”

Pulling down Congress’ overall rating were very weak grades on “keeping excessive partisanship in check” — the House received a D-plus and the Senate only a slightly higher C-minus in that area. And on whether the legislative process in each chamber “involved a proper level of compromise and consensus,” the Senate got a C-minus and the House a barely-better C.

The experts also gave Congress C-minus grades on the questions “Does Congress keep the role of special interests within proper bounds?” and “Does Congress consider the long-term implications of policy issues, not just short-term?”

Carmines noted that while the results of the 2010 survey track pretty closely with the 2009 survey, the Senate this time “gets a little more positive assessment… The Senate got more attention in 2010. It was so crucial to Congress getting anything done. Maybe the experts picked up on that.”
The non-partisan Center on Congress conducted the survey online, getting a select group of 40 top academic experts on Congress from around the country to give the institution grades on 37 questions. This is the Center’s fifth annual experts’ survey. “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 Center Director Lee Hamilton.

As in the past, the 2010 survey included a set of questions asking the experts to assess the public’s knowledge of and interaction with Congress. In the five-year history of the survey, the public has never received high marks, and much the same was the case for 2010.

The public got D grades for “following what is going on in Congress on a regular basis” and for “understanding the main features of Congress and how it works.” But the experts did give citizens slightly improved marks for 2010 on a couple of questions — C-plus grades for “contacting their members of Congress on issues that concern them” and for “working through groups that share their interests to influence Congress.”

About the Center
The Center on Congress 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 programs, projects and resources that foster an informed electorate which understands our system of government and participates in civic life. These include: print publications; Web-based, interactive modules and other online learning tools in English and Spanish; commentaries for newspapers and radio stations; video and television in the classroom resources; survey research; teacher awards; and seminars, conferences, and a lecture series.

The Center on Congress is supported in part by the Office of the Vice Provost for Research at IU Bloomington. For more information about the Center, go to www.centeroncongress.org.