The Center on Congress
Indiana University

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Experts Surveyed on Congress’ Performance
Give The Institution a “C-minus” for 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ind., Jan. 24 — A year of pitched partisan battles in Congress earned the institution a C-minus for its performance in 2011, according to political scientists asked by the Center on Congress to grade the national legislature.

The experts surveyed “believe that excessive partisanship limits the policymaking capacity of Congress and prevents the institution from being a full partner in governing the nation,” said Indiana University political scientist Edward G. Carmines, who is Director of Research for the Center on Congress.

On the survey question about “keeping excessive partisanship in check,” the House received an F and the Senate a D. On the question asking whether the legislative process involves a proper level of consensus-seeking and compromise, the House drew a D grade, and the Senate a C-minus.

And the experts gave D-range grades to each chamber in several other areas related to operational competence — on “engaging in productive discussion” (D for the House, D-plus for the Senate); on “following good process in conducting business” (D-plus for the House, D for the Senate) and on “balancing careful deliberation with being able to act” (D for both chambers).

Congress also drew poor grades on “keeping the role of special interests within proper bounds” (D); on “exercising its proper role in determining the federal budget” (D-plus); and on “considering the long-term implications of policy issues, not just short term” (D).

In one of the survey’s open-ended questions, an expert commented, “Congress came close this year to total failure in its main functions of making laws and being a governing branch.” Said Carmines, “That view wasn't shared by all the experts, but overall, the grades are quite low. This was a severe assessment of Congress.”

The report card did have a few bright spots. The experts gave Congress a B on “making its workings and activities open to the public,” and they also gave legislators a B on “making a good effort to be accessible to their constituents.”

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 40 questions. This is the Center’s sixth 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 2011 survey included a set of questions asking the experts to assess the public’s knowledge of and interaction with Congress. In the six-year history of the survey, the public has never received high marks, and much the same was the case for 2011.

The public got D grades for “following what is going on in Congress on a regular basis,” for “understanding the main features of Congress and how it works,” and for “having a reasonable understanding of what Congress can and should do.” The public drew D-plus grades for “understanding the role of compromise in Congress” and “being able to get to the core facts of issues before Congress.”

The experts gave citizens C 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; video and television in the classroom resources; survey research; 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.