Experts Surveyed on Congress' Performance
Give The Institution a "C-plus" for 2008

BLOOMINGTON, Ind., Jan. 12 - Congress' work in 2008 merits a solid "C-plus," according to political scientists asked by the Center on Congress to rate the performance of the national legislature. This is one rung higher than the "C" grade that the experts gave Congress in 2007.

"Though Congress still has ample room for improvement, the experts do at least see modest progress," said political scientist Edward G. Carmines, who is Director of Research for the Center on Congress.

The non-partisan Center conducted the survey online, getting a select group of 41 top academic experts on Congress from around the country to give the institution grades on 23 questions.

Two years ago, when the Center first conducted its experts' survey, Congress' GPA for its 2006 work was barely above a D.

Helping pull up the 2008 rating were B-minus grades that the experts gave Congress on two questions: "Does Congress focus on the key issues facing the country?" and "All things considered, how well does Congress represent the American people?" In 2007, Congress drew C-plus grades on those questions.

The experts also bumped Congress up from C-plus to B-minus on "reflecting our nation's diversity," and from B-plus to A-minus on "making a good effort to be accessible to their constituents."

Other areas where Congress rated well include "making its workings and activities open to the public" (B), and on seeing to it that "conflict in Congress reflects substantive differences, rather than political game-playing." (B-minus).

But on numerous other criteria, the experts saw little or no improvement in Congress' performance from 2007 to 2008. The 2008 report card is replete with C's, reflecting the experts' judgment that Congress had a passable-but-undistinguished record on "holding members to high standards of ethical conduct," on "passing the federal budget," on "considering the long-term implications of policy issues, not just short-term," and on "protecting its powers from presidential encroachment."

Although both the House and the Senate scored a little better in 2008 on "keeping excessive partisanship in check," their grades on that count were still lackluster C's, the same grade that Congress as a whole earned for its ability to "generally fulfill its national policymaking
The experts also took a dim view of Congress' ability to "reform itself sufficiently to keep up with changing needs."

Still, after receiving eight D's and 2006 and one D in 2007, Congress in 2008 did well enough to draw no grade lower than a C.

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.

The 2008 survey also included a set of questions asking the experts to 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 is that the public has a long way to go. The citizenry got D's on "following what is going on in Congress on a regular basis," on "understanding the main features of Congress and how it works," and on "having a reasonable understanding of what Congress can and should do."

Citizens managed to earn C-plus grades on "voting in congressional elections" and "working through groups that share their interests to influence Congress."

"The experts were quite critical of what the public knows about Congress as a national policymaking institution," said Carmines. "There is much work 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