

DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION: AMERICANS' FRUSTRATION WITH WHOSE VOICES ARE REPRESENTED IN CONGRESS

With Americans' disapproval of Congress reaching record levels in recent years, the strength of the country's legislative system and America's faith in its outcomes have come into question. This study reveals a new explanation for Americans' dissatisfaction with their elected representatives by showing that people's approval of Congress is tied to their beliefs about *how* lawmakers are making decisions.

The study—conducted by researchers at Stanford University and the University of California, Santa Barbara, in collaboration with The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research—shows that negative attitudes toward Congress relate to the gap between who people think members of Congress *should* pay attention to when voting on a law and who people think they *do* pay attention to when voting. The phenomenon cuts across partisan lines, and these perceptions of the decision-making process affect both Democrats' and Republicans' approval of Congress.



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Three Things You Should Know

About The AP-NORC Poll on
Democratic Representation

- 1) **Listen to the public.** Most Americans say Congress should pay attention to the wishes of the public when voting on laws.
- 2) **Republicans and Democrats agree.** Majorities in both parties report lawmakers *should* pay attention to the majority of Americans, but believe lawmakers *actually* pay attention to donors and elites.
- 3) **Beliefs about the decision-making process impact attitudes toward Congress.** Those most dissatisfied with the decision-making process are most likely to disapprove of Congress.

Many Americans, regardless of political party, want a government in which lawmakers pay a lot of attention to the general public, especially those in the public who hold strong opinions about an issue. Few Americans want a democracy in which lawmakers pay a lot of attention to elites, donors, political party leaders, or the president.

Yet, there is a discrepancy between how the public believes representatives *should* make decisions and how the public believes members of Congress *actually do* make decisions. When it comes to how Congress actually makes decisions, the majority of Americans perceive that members are paying a lot of attention to elites, donors, and party leadership, and that they are not paying much attention to the general public or members of the public who feel strongly about a law.

Americans believe lawmakers are paying attention to the wrong sources when making decisions.

	Percent who say representatives...	
	Should pay attention to	Actually pay attention to
The Public		
Majority of those in state/district	68%	20%
Majority of those in the United States	65%	18%
Best interests of those in the United States	62%	20%
Elites and Donors		
Majority of people who gave money to their last campaign	14%	60%
Majority of wealthy people in the United States	12%	58%
Lobbying organizations that gave money to last election campaign	11%	66%

Questions: When deciding how to vote on a proposed law, how much attention do you think a member of Congress should pay to whether the new law is favored by [ITEM]?

During the last six years, when they decided how to vote on proposed laws, how much attention do you think members of Congress paid to whether the new law was favored by [ITEM]?

Source: AP-NORC Democratic Representation Poll conducted September 17-October 19, 2015, with 1,021 adults nationwide.

The public's assessment of Congress's decision-making process, calculated as the difference between who Americans want Congress to pay attention to and who they think Congress actually is paying attention to, is a new explanation for the current low levels of approval of Congress. Many past studies have focused on how the number of laws passed by Congress and legislative outcomes impact Americans' attitudes toward their representatives. This research accounts for these factors of "volume disapproval" and "outcome disapproval," and additionally reveals that opinions of Congress also depend on this idea of "decision-making process disapproval": who people think Congress is paying attention to when making laws, and who they are not.

The results show that Americans' negative views of Congress are related to their belief that representatives are listening to the wrong people and groups. More than 9 in 10 of those with the largest overall difference in opinions between how representatives should decide and how they actually decide disapproved of Congress, compared to 7 in 10 people with the smallest overall difference. Additionally, those with the highest disapproval of Congress's decision-making process are

more likely to rate Congress as doing a poor or very poor job (84 percent), compared to those with the lowest levels of process disapproval (36 percent).

Democrats and Republicans are largely united on this issue. Both Democrats and Republicans report that Congress should pay a lot of attention to the public but believe representatives instead listen to elites and donors. Americans who identify as Democrats and those who identify as Republicans are both more likely to disapprove of Congress overall and see government as not working well the more they are dissatisfied with Congress's decision-making process.

The findings indicate a possible path out of the current rut of congressional disapproval. The data clearly reveal that most people want their representatives to pay more attention to the views of the public. To do this, members of Congress need to know what those views are. While they do hear from interested publics who write letters and participate in the political process, congressional representatives do not have a clear way to understand the views of their general constituency, which often do not align with the views of those publics especially engaged in an issue. High-quality public opinion polling at the state level is rare, and it is virtually non-existent at the level of congressional districts. Furthermore, what polling does occur is often focused on electoral politics and not policy issues. Beyond the need for better measurement of public opinion on key legislative issues facing representatives, the findings also suggest that it would be beneficial for Congress, as an institution, to be more transparent in its decision-making process and make clear to the public how different groups—from the public to donors—are contributing to voting decisions.

The results are based on a nationally representative online survey of 1,021 Americans conducted from September 17 to October 19, 2015, using AmeriSpeak, the probability-based panel of NORC at the University of Chicago. The study was funded by the Woods Institute for the Environment at Stanford University and by NORC at the University of Chicago. In the survey, Americans were asked, in a systematic and comprehensive way, about what type of representation they both want and perceive by examining beliefs toward 21 potential sources of influence.

The study was replicated with a second survey in 2017 that confirmed the initial findings. The 2017 survey was conducted with 355 Americans using the AmeriSpeak Panel between August 29 and September 8. This survey asked the same questions as the 2015 study about who members of Congress should pay attention to, who they actually pay attention to, and evaluations of congressional output and approval. Like the 2015 survey, the results of the 2017 survey find that Americans' approval of Congress is closely tied to perceptions of who policymakers actually listen to versus who they should listen to, and this finding remains consistent across Democrats and Republicans. This report will focus on the 2015 survey findings, with differences between the 2015 and 2017 results noted when applicable.

The complete topline results are available at www.apnorc.org, and a technical report detailing the study findings is available at <https://pprg.stanford.edu/democratic-representation>.

Key findings from the report include:

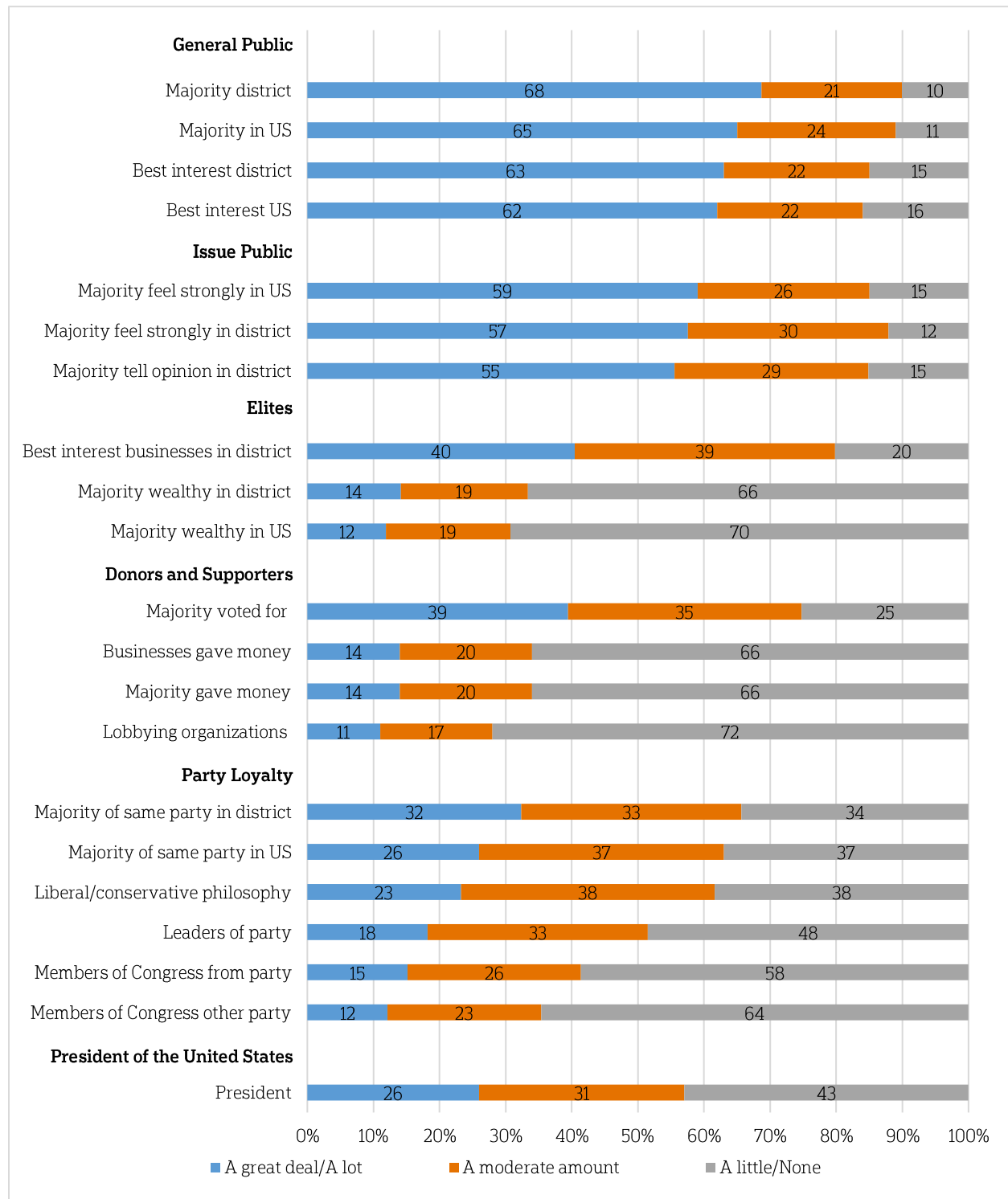
- More than 6 in 10 Americans say members of Congress should pay a lot of attention to their constituents and the general public, while only 1 in 10 say they should pay a lot of attention to donors and lobbyists.
- However, 6 in 10 adults report that representatives pay a lot of attention to people who donate money to their campaign, while only 2 in 10 report representatives pay such attention to the majority of Americans.
- Fifty-eight percent of Americans say members of Congress pay a lot of attention to party leaders, but only 18 percent say representatives should pay such attention to party leaders.
- The third of Americans most dissatisfied with the decision-making process are more likely to disapprove of Congress (93 percent) than the third of Americans who are less dissatisfied with the process (72 percent).

MOST AMERICANS WANT THEIR REPRESENTATIVES TO PAY A LOT OF ATTENTION TO THE PUBLIC, AND FEW THINK CONGRESS SHOULD PAY A LOT OF ATTENTION TO ELITES, DONORS, OR LOBBYING ORGANIZATIONS.

More than 6 in 10 Americans say that, when deciding how to vote on a proposed law, members of Congress should pay attention to the wishes and interests of the general public. Majorities of Americans also think members of Congress should pay attention to those members of the public who feel most strongly about a law.

On the other hand, only about 1 in 10 Americans say members of Congress should pay attention to donors, supporters, and moneyed interests. Likewise, less than 2 in 10 think representatives should pay attention to partisan loyalties when making decisions on how to vote. Less than half of Americans think representatives should pay attention to elite groups such as businesses or wealthy people.

Many Americans say members of Congress should pay a great deal or a lot of attention to the wishes and interests of the public.



Question: When deciding how to vote on a proposed law, how much attention do you think a member of Congress should pay to whether the new law is favored by [ITEM]?

Source: AP-NORC Democratic Representation Poll conducted September 17-October 19, 2015, with 1,021 adults nationwide.

WHEN IT COMES TO HOW REPRESENTATIVES ACTUALLY BEHAVE, MOST PEOPLE THINK CONGRESS PAYS TOO MUCH ATTENTION TO LOBBYING ORGANIZATIONS, DONORS, AND PARTY LOYALTIES AND TOO LITTLE ATTENTION TO THE PUBLIC.

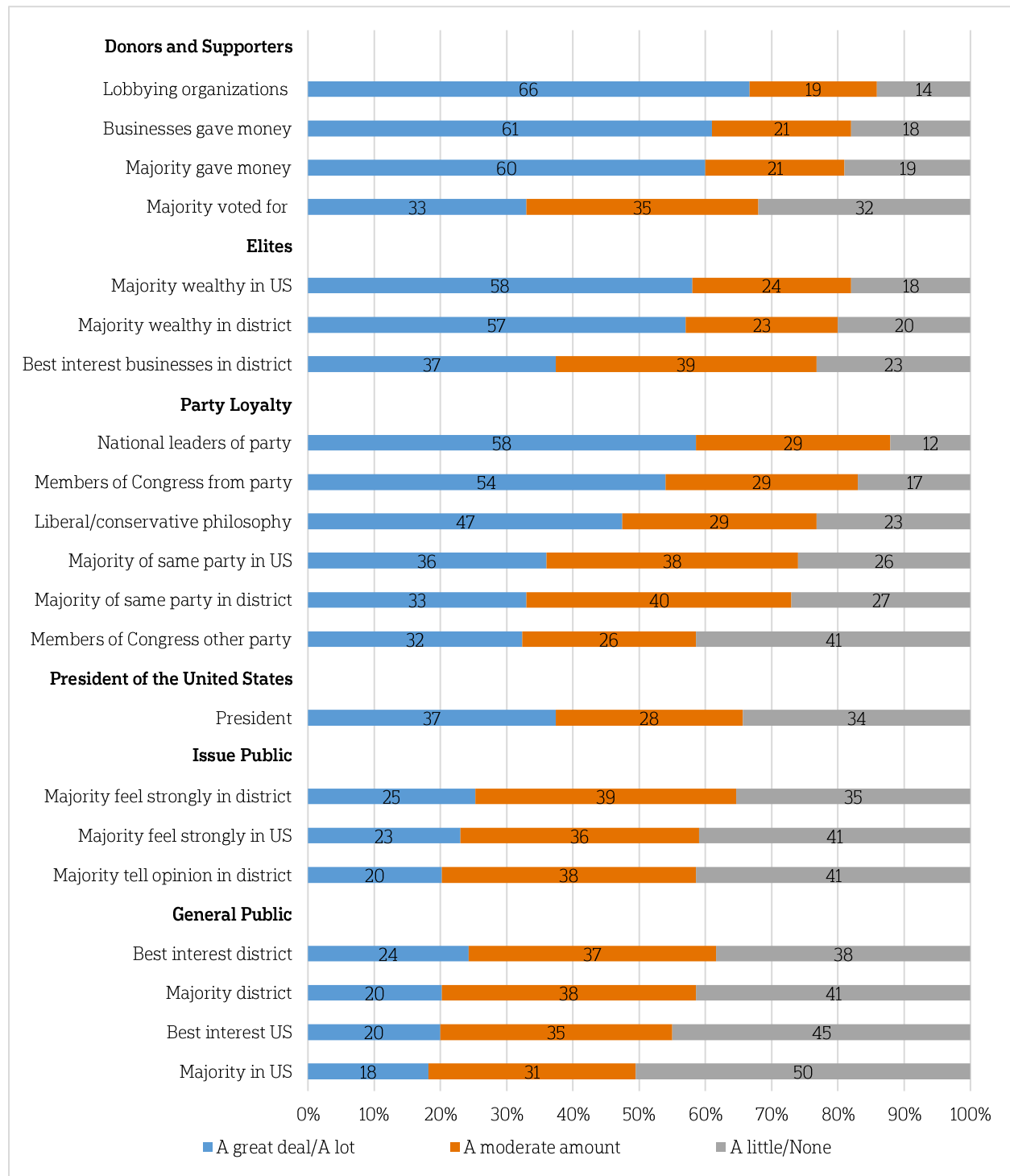
While majorities of Americans believe members of Congress should pay little attention to elites, donors, and party loyalty when deciding how to vote on proposed legislation, many Americans perceive that these groups are actually dominating representatives' attention.

More than 6 in 10 Americans say members of Congress have paid a lot of attention to donors or supporters, while just 3 in 10 say they have paid attention to the majority of people who voted for them. Nearly 6 in 10 also say lawmakers have paid a lot of attention to wealthy people, and about 4 in 10 say they have paid a lot of attention to the best interests of businesses in their district.

More than half of Americans say representatives have paid a lot of attention to their party loyalties such as the national leaders of their party and other members of Congress from their party. Likewise, nearly half say they have paid a lot of attention to their liberal or conservative philosophy of politics.

On the other hand, less than a quarter of Americans think members of Congress have paid much attention to the wishes and interests of the general public. Similarly, few Americans think members of Congress have paid a lot of attention to those who feel most strongly about an issue.

Americans think members of Congress have paid the most attention over the past six years to lobbying organizations, businesses, and people who contributed money to election campaigns.



Question: During the last six years, when they decided how to vote on proposed laws, how much attention do you think members of Congress paid to whether the new law was favored by [ITEM]?

Source: AP-NORC Democratic Representation Poll conducted September 17-October 19, 2015, with 1,021 adults nationwide.

ATTITUDES TOWARD CONGRESS AND THE GOVERNMENT ARE TIED TO DISAPPROVAL OF CONGRESS'S DECISION-MAKING PROCESS.

With congressional approval at near record low levels,¹ it is important to identify what causes this dissatisfaction. People offer a variety of complaints against Congress, including that people are upset about the number of laws passed (“volume disapproval”) and the legislative outcomes (“outcome disapproval”). This study is offering a new explanation: that people’s dissatisfaction with Congress’s decision-making process—calculated as the gap between what people think Congress should pay attention to and what Congress actually pays attention to—influences overall approval of Congress.

This study finds that public approval of Congress is strongly associated with beliefs about the process representatives use to make decisions. While this analysis finds that volume disapproval and outcome disapproval do influence overall congressional approval, Americans’ attitudes toward Congress also depend on process disapproval—calculated here using the difference between people’s opinions of how much representatives should and do pay attention to the 21 sources of influence in this study. This is true even when controlling for volume and outcome disapproval and demographic and social factors like age, income, and party identification.

In order to assess the impacts of process disapproval on public opinion, respondents are divided into three roughly equal size groups: a high process disapproval group (those with the largest overall difference in opinions between how representatives should and do decide when looking at their opinions on all categories surveyed), a middle process disapproval group, and a low process disapproval group (those with the smallest overall difference in opinions between how representatives should and do decide).²

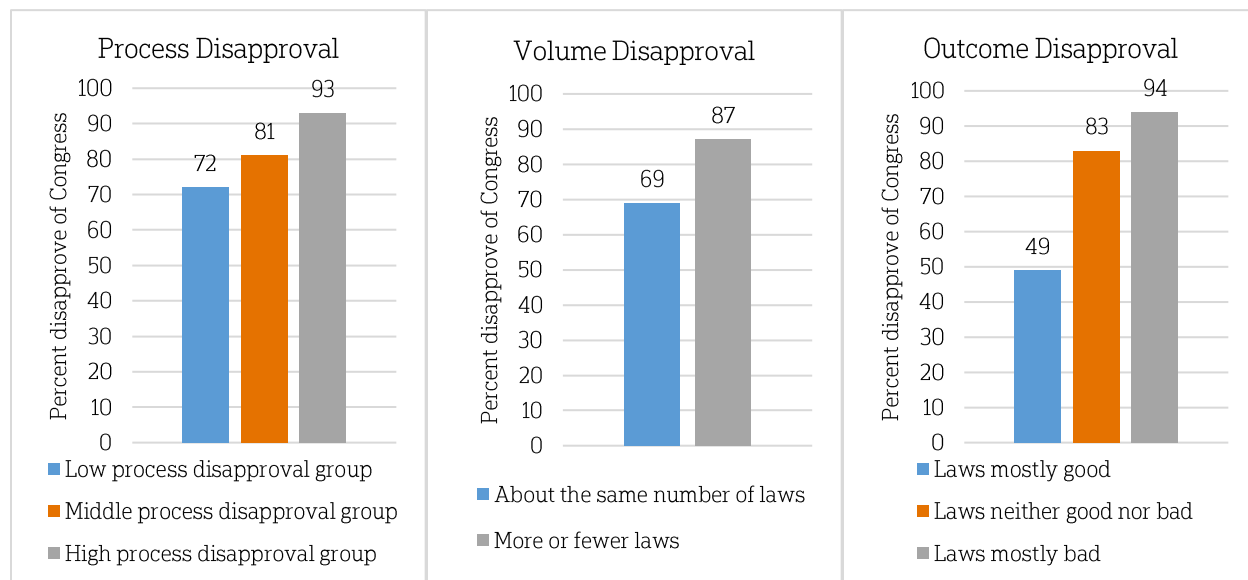
Based on this division, Americans who are more dissatisfied with Congress’s decision-making process are more likely to have negative attitudes toward Congress and government than those with lower process disapproval. Ninety-three percent of those in the high process disapproval group disapprove of Congress, compared with 81 percent of those in the middle group and 72 percent of those in the low process disapproval group.

Americans who are unsatisfied with the number of laws passed and those who have either neutral or negative feelings about the outcome of the laws passed also report higher levels of disapproval.

¹ http://surveys.ap.org/data/GfK/AP-GfK_Poll_October%202015%20Topline_Speaker.pdf

² All respondents received a process disapproval score based on the sum of the absolute differences between how much they believed representatives should and do pay attention, for each of the 21 sources of influence. Of the 1,021 respondents, 1,008 completed both questions for at least 19 sources of influence, and the process disapproval scores were standardized based on the number of questions answered. These 1,008 respondents were then split into roughly thirds, with 325 in the high process disapproval group, 348 in the middle process disapproval group, and 335 in the low process disapproval group.

Americans most dissatisfied with Congress's decision-making process are more likely to disapprove of Congress overall.



Questions: Do you approve or disapprove of the way members of Congress have been doing their jobs?
During the last six years, should Congress have passed more laws than it did, fewer laws than it did, or about the same number of laws as it did?
During the last six years, were the laws passed by Congress mostly good, mostly bad, or neither good nor bad?
Source: AP-NORC Democratic Representation Poll conducted September 17-October 19, 2015, with 1,021 adults nationwide.

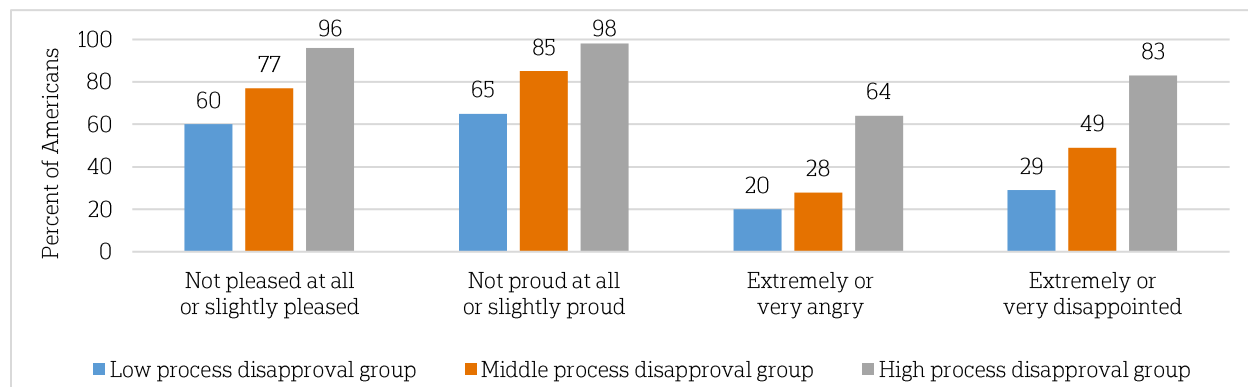
Decision-making process disapproval is also tied to a variety of other public attitudes toward Congress and the U.S. government.

Those in the high process disapproval group are more likely to rate Congress as doing a poor or very poor job (84 percent) than those in the middle group (56 percent) and those in the low process disapproval group (36 percent). Likewise, 82 percent of those in the high process disapproval group say the government has been working only slightly well or not well at all during the last six years, compared with 68 percent of those in the middle group and 50 percent of those in the low process disapproval group.

Although the study does not examine changes over time or prove that process disapproval directly causes disapproval of Congress, the findings indicate there is a clear link between attitudes toward Congress and beliefs about who representatives should and do pay attention to when making laws.

Americans in the high process disapproval group also report more negative emotions about how Congress has voted during the last six years than those in the lower process disapproval groups. Those in the high process disapproval group are more likely to feel disappointed or angry, and they are less likely to feel pleased or proud about how Congress has voted during the last six years.

Decision-making process disapproval is related to emotions people feel toward congressional votes in the last six years.



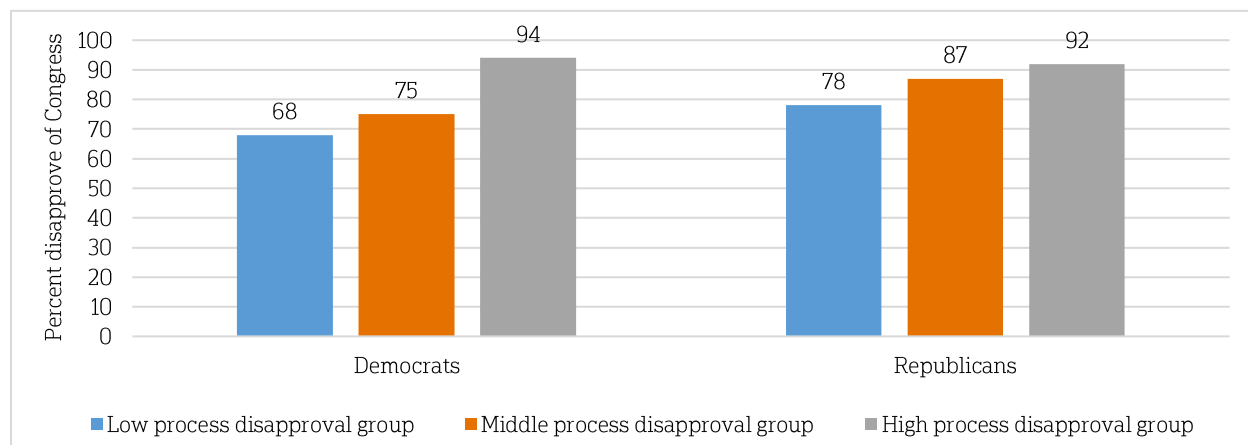
Questions: When you think about how members of Congress decided how to vote during the last six years, how pleased does that make you feel? Extremely pleased, very pleased, moderately pleased, slightly pleased, or not pleased at all? When you think about how members of Congress decided how to vote during the last six years, how proud does that make you feel? Extremely proud, very proud, moderately proud, slightly proud, or not proud at all? When you think about how members of Congress decided how to vote during the last six years, how angry does that make you feel? Extremely angry, very angry, moderately angry, slightly angry, or not angry at all? When you think about how members of Congress decided how to vote during the last six years, how disappointed does that make you feel? Extremely disappointed, very disappointed, moderately disappointed, slightly disappointed, or not disappointed at all?

Source: AP-NORC Democratic Representation Poll conducted September 17-October 19, 2015, with 1,021 adults nationwide.

DECISION-MAKING PROCESS DISAPPROVAL HAS SIGNIFICANT EFFECTS ON THE OPINIONS OF BOTH DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS.

For both Democrats and Republicans, decision-making process disapproval is tied to attitudes toward Congress and government. For partisans on both sides, those most dissatisfied with Congress's decision-making process are more disapproving of Congress overall than those in the lower process disapproval groups.

Among both Democrats and Republicans, disapproval of Congress is tied to dissatisfaction with Congress's decision-making process.

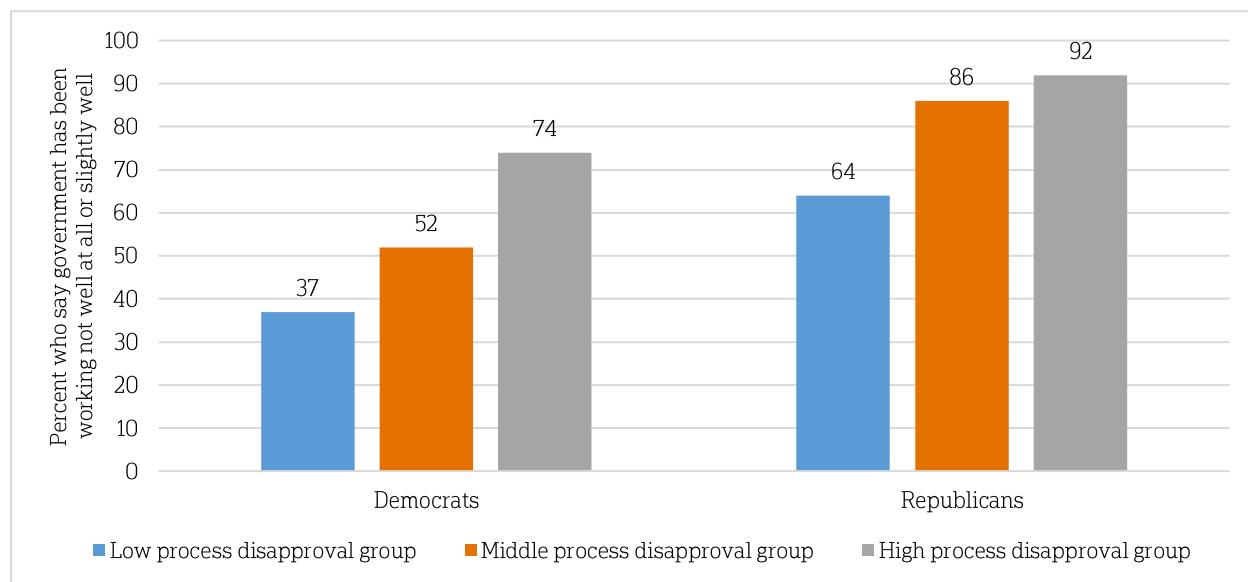


Question: Do you approve or disapprove of the way members of Congress have been doing their jobs?

Source: AP-NORC Democratic Representation Poll conducted September 17-October 19, 2015, with 1,021 adults nationwide.

For both Democrats and Republicans, process disapproval is tied to attitudes toward how well the government is working. Among Americans in both parties, those in the high process disapproval group have more negative views of how the government is working compared to those in the middle or low process disapproval groups. Likewise, process disapproval impacts negative emotions toward Congress similarly for both Democrats and Republicans.

Decision-making process disapproval is associated with more negative views of how government has been working among both Democrats and Republicans.



Question: During the last six years, how well would you say that government has been working in America? Extremely well, very well, moderately well, slightly well, or not well at all?

Source: AP-NORC Democratic Representation Poll conducted September 17-October 19, 2015, with 1,021 adults nationwide.

The attitudes of both Democrats and Republicans remained relatively similar between 2015 and 2017, with one notable exception—beliefs about paying attention to the president. Under Democratic President Barack Obama in 2015, Democrats were more than twice as likely as Republicans to want lawmakers to pay a great deal of attention to the president (35 percent vs. 15 percent). In contrast, under Republican President Donald Trump, there is no significant difference among Democrats and Republicans in saying Congress should pay a great deal of attention to the president (22 percent vs. 28 percent).

ABOUT THE STUDY

Survey Methodology

This study was designed by researchers in the Political Psychology Research Group at Stanford University and at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The research was completed through a collaboration of The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, Stanford University, and the University of California, Santa Barbara. The data were collected by NORC at the University of Chicago using AmeriSpeak®, which is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the

U.S. household population. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households are sampled with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame, and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone, and field interviewers (face-to-face). The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97% of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with P.O. Box only addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings.

The project was funded by the Woods Institute for the Environment at Stanford University and by NORC.

Interviews for this survey were conducted online from September 17 to October 19, 2015, with adults age 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak®, and 1,021 completed the survey online. Interviews were conducted in English. The final stage completion rate is 32 percent, the weighted household panel response rate is 36.6 percent, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 99 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 11.6 percent. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 3.95 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.

A second survey was conducted online from August 29 to September 8, 2017, with adults age 18 and over from the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members who elected to take surveys online were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak®, and 355 completed the survey. Interviews were conducted in English. Panelists who completed the 2015 survey were excluded from sampling. The final stage completion rate is 30.4 percent, the weighted household panel response rate is 33.5 percent, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 89.2 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 9.1 percent. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 7.03 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.

Once the sample has been selected and fielded, and all the study data have been collected and made final, a poststratification process is used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any non-coverage or under- and oversampling resulting from the study-specific sample design. Poststratification variables included age, gender, Census division, race/ethnicity, and education. Weighting variables for 2015 were obtained from the 2015 Current Population Survey. Weighting variables for 2017 were obtained from the 2017 Current Population Survey. The weighted data, which reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18 and over, were used for all analyses.

All analyses were conducted using STATA (version 14), which allows for adjustment of standard errors for complex sample designs. When differences between subgroups of the U.S. population are noted in the report, the differences are statistically significant at the 95 percent level, meaning that there is only a 5 percent (or lower) probability that the observed differences could be attributed to chance variation in sampling. A comprehensive listing of all study questions, complete with tabulations of top-level results for each question, is available on The AP-NORC Center website: www.apnorc.org. A full technical report on the survey's findings can be found at <https://pprg.stanford.edu/democratic-representation>.

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- NORC at the University of Chicago is one of the oldest and most respected, independent research institutions in the world.

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