

Study finds Americans don't think they have the ear of elected officials

February 27 2018, by Melissa De Witte

In an era of sharp disagreements between Democrats and Republicans, there is one thing Americans can agree on: They believe that elected officials are not paying enough attention to the general public. This finding emerged from a study led by Stanford scholar Jon Krosnick about how Americans think legislators should and do decide to vote.

"Americans are startlingly unhappy with Congress, and this is importantly because of what they perceive as an off-the-rails [decision-making](#) process," said Krosnick, a professor of communication and of political science at Stanford who has studied the political attitudes of the American public for almost 40 years.

Public perception of political processes

At a time when approval of Congress is at a historic low, Krosnick's latest research provides a possible explanation for dissatisfaction: a public disapproval of the influences they see in policy-making.

Conducted in collaboration with the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs, which published the study Feb. 26, Krosnick and his collaborators from Stanford and the University of California, Santa Barbara, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,021 American adults in 2015 and a similar sample in 2017. Despite the change to a unified government under a new president, Americans' views of congressional decision-making did not change.

"A thoughtful, responsible legislator can consider a wide range of considerations when making voting decisions, and we set out to understand how Americans perceive that decision-making process and how Americans want that decision-making to be done," Krosnick said.

The researchers found that there is a perception among the American public that lawmakers are influenced too much by wealthy people, the people and organizations who helped them win their elections, the people who voted for them and their own political parties.

Americans surveyed believe that the most important factor that should guide representatives' voting decisions is the general public's wishes. Eighty percent of respondents wanted representatives to pay substantial attention to the general public when making decisions about how to vote and 57 percent ranked the opinions of the general public as meriting the most attention of any source of influence, the researchers found.

However, only 28 percent of Americans surveyed think that their representatives actually paid substantial attention to the general public's views. Instead, 70 percent of respondents perceive that elected officials pay substantially more attention to the preferences of campaign donors and economic elites than they do to the general public.

"When people talk about draining the swamp and corruption, they are really talking about decisions being made based on the wrong criteria. I hope that if legislators choose to be more transparent about their decision-making in the future and do so more as the public wants, the country might say, 'Washington is not as swampy as I thought,'" said Krosnick.

Transparency in voting decisions

One of the study's central findings is the importance of transparency in

decision-making. Understanding the [decision-making process](#) is key to shaping citizens' perception of the legitimacy of democratic institutions, said Krosnick. He found that when representatives provide appealing explanations about the rationales for their voting choices, public perceptions improve.

To test this claim, national survey respondents read various descriptions of a hypothetical U.S. senator explaining his/her voting decisions. Statements confirming the senator's focus on the general public led to more positive appraisals, whereas statements explaining voting decisions by attention to the wishes of economic elites and campaign donors led to lower evaluations of the hypothetical senator.

Krosnick sees these findings as an opportunity to educate elected officials about how they can communicate decisions in a way that connects favorably with members of the public.

"If members of Congress want to improve their standing in the public's eyes, they can pay close attention to the preferences of their constituents and explain the rationales for their voting decisions to those people," said Krosnick, noting that the perception of how legislators make decisions is crucial to how much faith people have in government.

"Explaining rationales for voting decisions is evidence of the respect that the public deserves – transparency and accountability will help."

More information: The study is available online:
www.apnorc.org/projects/Pages/HTML%20Reports/Democratic-Representation-Americans%E2%80%99-Frustration-with-Whose-Voices-are-Represented-in-Congress.aspx

Provided by Stanford University

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