



The American Panel Survey Brief Report

Public Attitudes About Congress and Members of Congress, January 2012

With the extremely low approval ratings for Congress in recent years, and reaching record low levels in the current Congress, the observation that Americans hate Congress but love their individual members of Congress has resurfaced in many commentaries. In the fall of 2011, Gallup found a record low percentage of registered voters who think that “most members of Congress” deserve to be reelected, but this may not be inconsistent with wanting the local member of Congress to be reelected.¹

The January 2012 survey of *The American Panel Survey* allows us to explore the attributes of Americans who continue to approve of their own member in the U.S. House of Representatives and disapprove the performance of the Congress. About 40 percent of Americans fall in this category in early 2012.

We have estimated models of attitudes about Congress and representatives based on the match between the respondent’s party affiliation and the representative’s party, education, and political sophistication. Not surprising, the factors related to attitudes about Congress differ considerably from the factors related to attitudes about individual legislators.

For attitudes about Congress, more educated and political knowledge is associated with a higher probability of disapproving of Congress’s performance. The match between a respondent’s party affiliation and the legislator makes no discernible difference.

¹ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/148904/record-low-say-congress-deserve-election.aspx>. Accessed February 20, 2012.

For the representative, the party match increases approval and political knowledge reduces approval, but education *per se* has little or no effect.² Knowing Congress is to dislike Congress in early 2012, but liking the local legislator remains mainly a matter of liking his or her politics.

The correlates of falling into the category of approving of the representative but disapproving of Congress follow naturally from these patterns. The more educated and knowledgeable matched partisans are most likely to be in this category.

Advocates of dumping incumbents in protest of gridlock and partisanship in Washington have an uphill battle. They must persuade knowledgeable Americans to vote against incumbents they like.

The Survey

The American Panel Survey (TAPS) is based upon a national probability sample. As a panel, the survey returns to the same respondents each month, which allows for measuring change in attitudes among individuals over time and results in the accumulation of more data about the respondents than in most surveys. The typical monthly survey includes about 1600 respondents from a larger panel of 2100. The margin of error is 2.4 percent.

TAPS is a project of the Weidenbaum Center on the Economic, Government, and Public Policy at Washington University in St. Louis. The survey is implemented by Knowledge Networks of Palo Alto, California.

Additional information is available from the project director, Steven S. Smith, at taps@wustl.edu.

² Age, party affiliation or intensity of partisanship, and income had no measurable effect on either attitude.

Documentation

	Different Party than Representative		Same Party as Representative		Total
	Low Knowledge	High Knowledge	Low Knowledge	High Knowledge	
Approve Representative, Disapprove of Congress	16.23	28.15	23.62	52.61	39.58
All Others	83.77	71.85	76.38	47.39	60.42
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0