



PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND



**RESPONDING TO
VOTERS' DISSATISFACTION
WITH GOVERNMENT**

Primary Investigator
Steven Kull

Research Staff

Evan Fehsenfeld, Evan Charles Lewitus and Emmaly Read

January 2019





PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

The Program for Public Consultation is part of the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland.

It seeks to improve democratic governance by consulting the citizenry on key public policy issues governments face. It has developed innovative survey methods that simulate the process that policymakers go through—getting a briefing, hearing arguments, dealing with tradeoffs—before coming to their conclusion. It also uses surveys to help find common ground between conflicting parties.



Voice of the People is a non-partisan organization that seeks to re-anchor our democracy in its founding principles by giving ‘We the People’ a greater role in government. VOP furthers the use of innovative methods and technology to give the American people a more effective voice in the policymaking process, especially by developing Citizen

Cabinets—a large, scientifically-selected, representative sample of citizens to be consulted on current issues.



Common Ground Solutions (CGS) was founded in 2017 by business leader Howard Konar, seeking ways to respond to our divisive moment, move past the current gridlock, and

bring civility, comity, and common sense back to our politics and government. CGS has been working to bring active civic engagement back into everyday life through publications and educational materials and media outreach, public events, and partnerships with national and local organizations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research for this project was supported by generous grants from the Democracy Fund, Hewlett Foundation, the Circle Foundation and Common Ground Solutions.

All PPC surveys were conducted online with a sample provided by Nielsen Scarborough from its larger probability-based panel recruited by telephone and mail. Special thanks to Scott Willoth and Neil Schwartz of Nielsen Scarborough for their continued support.

Julie Anbender and Bert Brandenburg of Ward Circle Strategies and Allison Stettler managed press outreach and dissemination of the report. Allison Stettler managed the design and production of the report with assistance from Evan Charles Lewitus and Emmaly Read.

Table of Contents

Overview	1
Design of the Study.....	2
The Erosion of Confidence in Government	3
Violation of the Founders’ Social Contract	3
Failing to Serve the Common Good.....	6
Serving Special Interests and the Wealthy	6
Serving Partisan Interests Over the Common Good.....	8
Failing to Consult and Be Influenced by the People	10
Perceived Responsiveness and Voting	13
Being Responsive to All the People vs. Supporters or Partisans.....	15
Public Confidence in the Positive Effects of Being Responsive to the People	16
What Can Be Done?	18
Structural Reforms.....	18
Consulting the People	20
The Citizen Cabinet	24
Public Response to the Citizen Cabinet Idea	27
Does It Make Political Sense for a Candidate to Support Having a Citizen Cabinet?	29
Will Partisanship Override Support for a Citizen Cabinet?	29
Will a Candidate Proposing a Citizen Cabinet Be Vulnerable to Attacks?.....	31
Will Voters Have a Negative Response to the Recommendations of Citizen Cabinets?	35
Will Citizen Cabinets Find Common Ground? Findings from a Pilot Study	38

Overview

In the runup to the 2020 election, one of the biggest challenges to all candidates—for President as well as for Congress—will be to respond effectively to voters' dissatisfaction with the federal government. In this report, we will explore research that seeks to discern what this dissatisfaction with government is about and what strategies for addressing it are most likely to be effective by Congress as a whole, by specific elected officials and by aspiring candidates.

Our key finding is that American voters' dissatisfaction with the federal government is rooted in a perception that government broadly and elected officials specifically have violated a social contract that goes back to the Founders. This social contract says that in exchange for the privileges of being an elected official, they will serve the common good—over their personal or special interests—and that they will consult and be influenced by the people they represent when making policy decisions.

Overwhelming majorities perceive that Federal elected officials have consistently failed to fulfill this contract. Nine in ten believe that elected officials serve special interests, campaign donors, and their political parties over the common good. Equally large majorities say that elected officials are only marginally responsive to their constituents and that they should be much more responsive than they are. Substantial research confirms the public's perception that the Federal government is minimally responsive to the views of the people.

The perception that this contract is being violated has been on the rise for some decades now and has played an increasingly prominent role in elections. In 2016, two presidential candidates who were initially dismissed as implausible candidates—Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders—drew heavily on this narrative and succeeded exceptionally well, with one even being elected to the White House. In 2018, Congressional candidates who pushed out an incumbent in the primary or in a general election, such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, aggressively pushed this narrative as well. There is every reason to believe that this will be the case in 2020 as well. Successful candidates in 2020 will be ones who formulate a meaningful response to voters' deep dissatisfaction with government.

The idea that a democratically-elected government can fail to serve the common good is not a uniquely American phenomenon. All around the world, leaders have been elected by making such a charge against their political establishment. Some have subsequently taken steps to weaken liberal norms. Right now, there is no democratically-elected establishment leader who is in a solid position with his or her electorate. Polls show a rise in support for authoritarian ideas in many countries. The very model of liberal democracy is being challenged. Thus, it appears that the crisis of confidence in democratically-elected leaders is a crisis of democracy itself.

How can this crisis be addressed? In this report we will also explore public responses to strategies for mitigating voter dissatisfaction by restoring the social contract.

The most commonly promoted efforts are structural reforms. Some reforms seek to reduce the influence of campaign donors, special interests and the wealthy; paramount are campaign finance reforms, but they also include limits on lobbying. Other reforms aim to counter partisanship, including efforts to depoliticize Congressional redistricting and to enable independent and third-party candidates. All of these reforms are widely popular. However, they face the bootstrap problem that they require the passage of legislation by Members of Congress who have benefitted from the existing arrangement. And if adopted, they would require substantial time before voters would discern changes in the way elected officials act.

Another strategy that does not depend on collective Congressional action is one that enhances the ability of individual elected officials to directly consult with their constituents on key issues and to visibly consider their views when making decisions. Overwhelming majorities support such a strategy. They believe that it would not only increase constituent influence but would also lead to greater bipartisan consensus and outcomes more likely to serve the common good.

Overwhelming majorities respond favorably to a new method for citizens to give input to Members of Congress called a 'Citizen Cabinet.' This is a large representative sample of citizens from a specific state or district, who go through an online process called a 'policymaking simulation.' Respondents receive a briefing on a current issue, evaluate arguments for and against the policy option, and finally, make policy recommendations. The simulation is reviewed in advance by experts and advocates across the spectrum of views to ensure accuracy and balance.

Most striking, support for candidates who endorse having such a Citizen Cabinet was found to even override partisanship. When respondents were presented a candidate who endorsed having a Citizen Cabinet, but was from a party different than their own, large majorities nonetheless expressed a positive view of the candidate and a greater likelihood to vote for that candidate.

To simulate the rough and tumble of a campaign, a separate sample was presented a hypothetical debate between a candidate who endorsed a Citizen Cabinet and their opponent, and asked to evaluate a series of hard-hitting attacks on the candidate as well as the candidate's rebuttal. Based on this debate, overwhelming majorities said they would be more likely to vote for the candidate who favored the Citizen Cabinet, even when the candidate was not associated with the respondent's party.

But will Citizen Cabinets really find common ground? The report summarizes the findings of a major pilot study with a national Citizen Cabinet, as well as in eight states and in two Congressional districts. We found that bipartisan majorities agreed on dozens of policy positions on a wide variety of controversial topics.

Design of the Study

For some years now, the Program for Public Consultation (PPC) has conducted research seeking to discern the roots of dissatisfaction with government, conducting focus groups as well as surveys. In mid-2016, PPC conducted a survey in which those who expressed dissatisfaction with the government in Washington were asked to state why they felt that way in an open-ended question. The recurring themes were distilled down to 49 fundamental critiques. A separate sample of voters were asked how much they agreed with each critique.

For this study, the 2016 survey was repeated October 15- November 5, 2018 with a sample of 3,045 registered voters. Additional surveys on views of government and possible reforms were fielded:

- January 5-March 23, 2018 with 4,886 registered voters,
- September 22-October 17, 2017 with 2,569 registered voters,
- August 3-16, 2017 with 3,045 registered voters,
- December 22-28, 2016 with 2,980 registered voters.

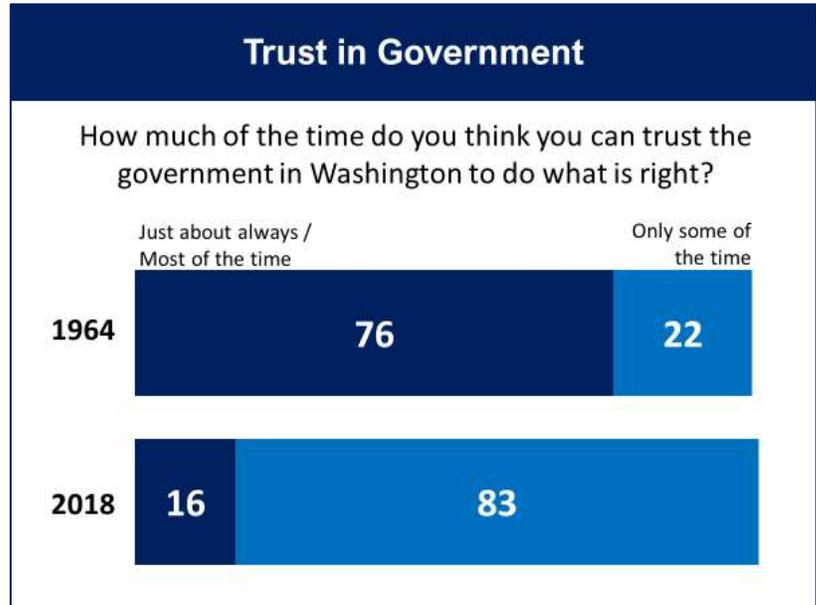
The margin of error varied from +/-1.8 to +/-2.2% for questions that were asked to the full sample. For questions that went to partial samples the margin of error was as high as +/-4.5%.

The total number of respondents surveyed was 16,525. All surveys were conducted online with a sample provided by Nielsen Scarborough from its larger probability-based panel recruited by telephone and mail.

The Erosion of Confidence in Government

The decline in the American people's confidence in their government is breathtaking. While in the 1960s a clear majority of Americans said they trusted the government to do the right thing at least most of the time, according to National Election Studies polls, today only a small minority does. In recent polls, conducted by Quinnipiac (January 2018) and PPC (November 2018), just one in six expressed this level of confidence.

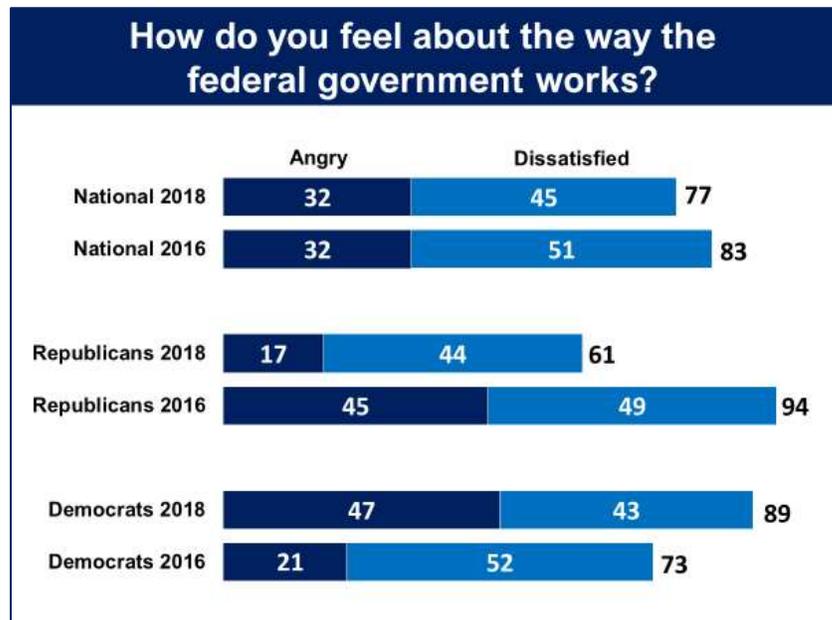
Very large majorities say they are "dissatisfied" or "angry" about the way the federal government works." While partisan views fluctuate depending on who is in the White House, the overall number remains above three in four. Only one in five approve of the job that Congress is doing, according to October and November 2018 polls by Gallup, CBS News, Fox News and CNN.



Violation of the Founders' Social Contract

From our own research, as well as a review of data from other sources, it appears that the most fundamental critique of the federal government is that it has violated a core social contract between the government and the citizenry that originates with the Founders of the Republic.

This social contract has deep roots based on a narrative that all Americans learn. According to this narrative in the 18th Century the American people, like most people at the time, were governed by a ruling elite, led by a monarch with arbitrary powers. The state offered citizens little more than protection from foreign invasion and crime in exchange for their submission to the state. The ruling elite had extraordinary wealth compared to common citizens.



In the American colonies, a group of truly brilliant thinkers rejected the legitimacy of this order and proposed a whole new social contract that made the will of the people the central source of authority and the process of elections the means by which leaders would be selected.

While there were many points on which the Founders disagreed, they were quite unanimous that the people are the source of the authority of government. By making the enlarged words “We the People” the first three words of the constitution they sought to emphasize, as James Madison said, “all power should be derived from the people,” that a republic was by definition a government derived from “the great body of the people,” and that “the ultimate authority...resides in the people alone.” Thomas Jefferson wrote that the people “are in truth the only legitimate proprietors of the soil and government” and the “safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society.” Benjamin Franklin stated that “In free governments the rulers are the servants, and the people their superiors and sovereigns.”

Throughout the history of the Republic, American leaders have harkened back to this basic principle. All Americans are taught, and many are required to memorize, the Gettysburg address in which Abraham Lincoln called for preserving government “of the people, by the people and for the people.” After World War II, Eleanor Roosevelt led most nations around the world to sign a declaration saying that, “The will of the people is the basis of the authority of government.”

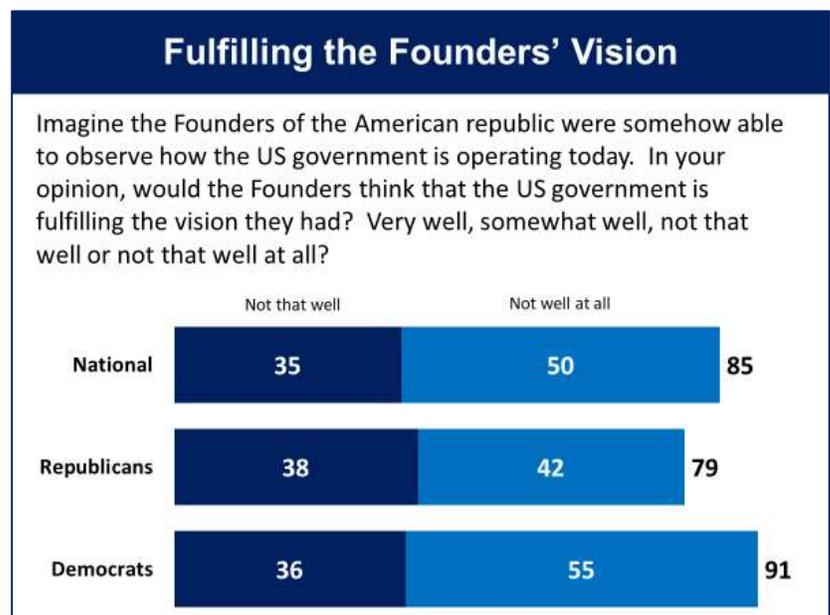
There is little sign that American voters have lost faith in the Founders’ vision. An overwhelming bipartisan majority of 91% agree that “the will of the people should be the basis of the authority of government.”

While the process of democratic elections was central, the Founders’ social contract went much deeper. In exchange for the people giving elected officials the reins of power, submitting to that power and paying taxes, the Founders stressed that:

1. Elected officials should serve the common good of the people, rather than their own interests or any type of special interest.
2. Elected officials should consult and be influenced by the views of the people they represent.

While most American voters are not deeply versed in the Founders’ writing, there is nonetheless remarkable consensus that the US government is failing to fulfill the Founders’ vision.

Asked, “Imagine the Founders of the American republic were somehow able to observe how the US government is operating today. In your opinion, would the Founders think that the US government is fulfilling the vision they had,” 85% said not that well or not well at all.



THE FOUNDERS' SOCIAL CONTRACT

Elected officials should serve the common good of the people, rather than their own interests or any type of special interest.

John Adams said, "Government is instituted for the common good; for the protection, safety, prosperity and happiness of the people; and not for the profit, honor, or private interest of any one man, family, or class of men." James Madison said that for government, "the supreme object to be pursued" is "the public good, the real welfare of the great body of the people." Thomas Paine wrote, "the word republic means the public good or the good of the whole."

To the Founders, the greatest threat to the Republic was what they called "factions"—what in modern parlance is called 'special interests'—which would compete with the common good. Madison defined a faction as "a number of citizens... actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community."

The Founders feared such factions would come to dominate parties, leading to polarization and the loss of the ability to think collectively. Alexander Hamilton wrote that leaders should "fear that the pestilential breath of faction may poison the fountains of justice. The habit of being continually marshaled on opposite sides will be too apt to stifle the voice both of law and of equity."

Partisan polarization was seen as one of the key ways that leaders could lose track of the common good. Madison denounced those who "divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good" and mourned that "the public good is disregarded in the conflict of rival parties."

Elected officials should consult and be influenced by the views of the people they represent.

At the constitutional convention, George Mason said, "the genius of the people must be consulted." Alexander Hamilton wrote,

"Is it not natural that a man who is a candidate for the favor of the people and who is dependent on the suffrages of his fellow citizens for the continuance of public honors, should take care to inform himself of their disposition and inclination and should be willing to allow them their proper degree of influence upon his conduct?"

Hamilton wrote that representatives should create a "strong chord of sympathy between the representative and the constituent." In summing up both aspects of the social contract, Hamilton wrote, "A government ought to [be] ... free from every other control but a regard to the public good and to the sense of the people."

James Madison also wrote about the need to create this sympathetic rapport: "As it is essential to liberty that the government in general should have a common interest with the people, so it is particularly essential that [Congress] ... should have ... an intimate sympathy with the people." The Founders were also unequivocal that the views of the people should have significant influence on policy. Madison wrote, "it is the reason, alone, of the public, that ought to control and regulate government."

Thomas Paine wrote that elected representatives "are supposed to have the same concerns as those who have appointed them and... act in the same manner as the whole body would act if they were present," and that they should show "fidelity to the public." James Madison wrote that all governmental bodies were "agents" as well as "trustees" of "the people," and that government in its proper role could not take action "subversive of the authority of the people."

The failure to consult and be influenced by the people was seen as having dire consequences as the narrow interests of leaders will come to dominate in fractious ways. Madison wrote that without "that communion of interests and sympathy of sentiments" with the people, government "degenerates into tyranny," and that "sympathy with the great mass of the people" helps control the "caprice and wickedness" of leaders. Similarly, Jefferson wrote, "Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves, therefore, are its only safe depositories," and that if the people "*become inattentive to the public affairs, you and I, and Congress...shall all become wolves.*"

Similarly, in an October 2017 Monmouth University poll, asked if the Founders would be happy or upset with the way the institutions of our government, such as Congress and the presidency, have been working over the past ten years? 81% said upset. In a June 2017 Fox News poll, asked, “Do you think the Founding Fathers would be proud of the country if they could see it today, or not?” 79% said they would not.

More specifically, large majorities say that the US government has failed to fulfill the two components of the social contract: serve the common good and consult the people.

Failing to Serve the Common Good

This lack of confidence that the Federal government serves the common good has not always been the case. Since the 1960s pollsters have regularly asked the question, “Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?” In the 1960s, two-thirds said that the government is run for the benefit of all the people, but this belief has gradually collapsed in the subsequent decades so that now less than 10% have this confidence. Nine in ten say that the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.

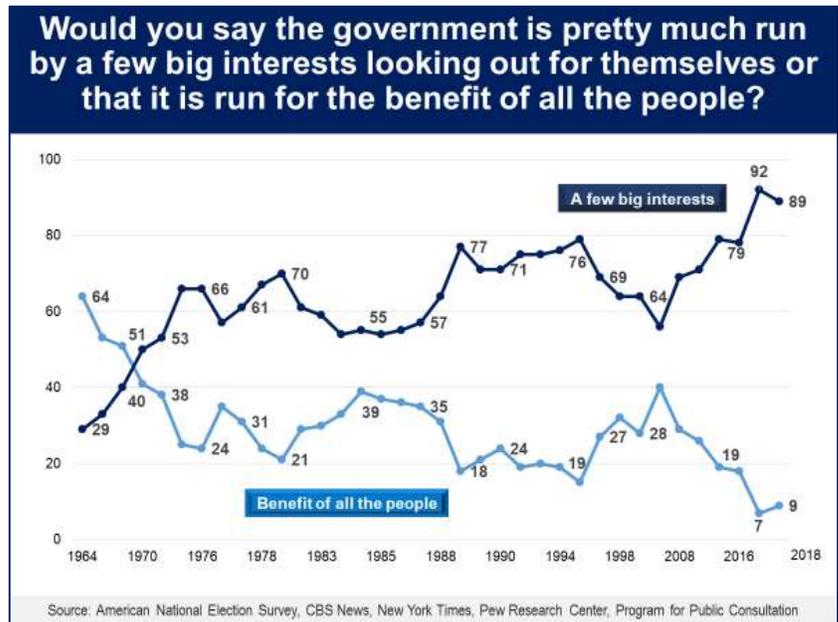
In the PPC study, eight in ten agreed with the critique that: “Congress does not serve the common good of the people.” Asked how well the government serves the common good of the people on a scale of 0 to 10, the mean response was a meager 3.7.

Similarly, in a July 2014 PRRI poll, 64% mostly or completely disagreed with the statement “The government is really run for the benefit of all the people.”

Serving Special Interests and the Wealthy

Rather than serving the common good, overwhelming majorities perceive elected officials as being overly influenced by special interests and the wealthy. Very large majorities agreed with the following critiques:

- “Organized interest groups and their lobbyists have too much influence” 86% (60% strongly), Republicans 89% (56% strongly), Democrats 85% (65% strongly).
- “Corporations and their lobbyists have too much influence” 88% (66% strongly), Republicans 86% (55% strongly), Democrats 92% (77% strongly).
- “Rich people have too much influence” 80% (58% strongly), Republicans 64% (32% strongly), Democrats 94% (78% strongly).



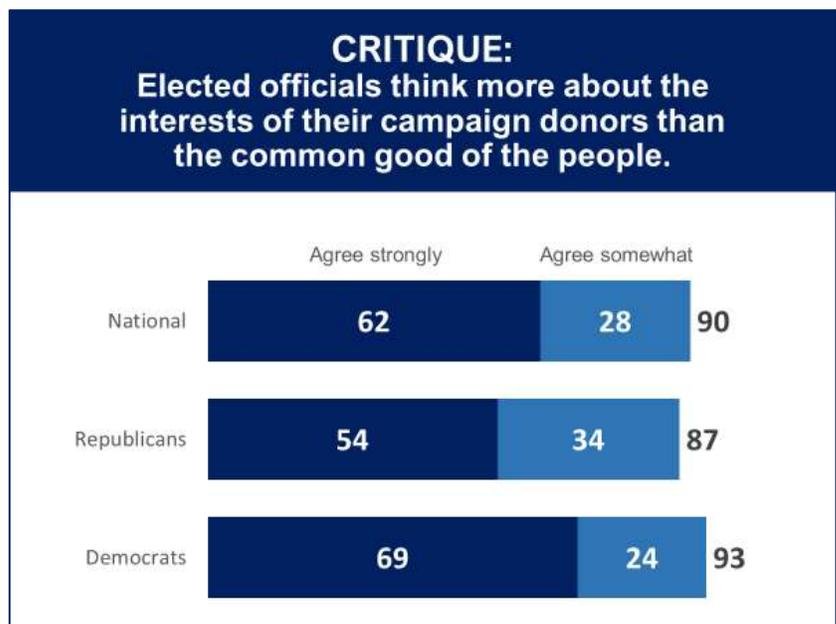
A June 2018 PRRI poll found 66% say that “wealthy individuals and corporations having too much influence” is a “major problem” in “our current election system,” with another 20% saying it is a minor problem. Only 10% said it is not a problem.

Among Republicans, 79% also say “labor unions and their lobbyists have too much influence,” but only 34% of Democrats concur.

The mechanism for this disproportionate influence is seen as being derived from campaign donations. Asked, “How often do you think members of Congress put a higher priority on serving the interests of organizations and individuals, who have donated money to their election, rather than serving the good of the country?” 84% said almost always (50%) or often (34%), as did 84% of Republicans and 89% of Democrats.

Large majorities also agreed with the following critiques:

- “Elected officials think more about the interests of their campaign donors than the common good of the people,” 90% (62% strongly), Republican 87% (54% strongly), Democrats 93% (69% strongly).
- “Big campaign donors have too much influence,” 91% (69% strongly), Republicans 89% (54% strongly), Democrats 93% (82% strongly).
- “There is too much money flowing into campaigns,” 86% (68% strongly), Republicans 83% (59% strongly), Democrats 88% (75% strongly).



This disproportionate influence of the wealthy and special interests appears to be linked to high levels of concern about growing inequality and persisting poverty. Large majorities cited these as reasons for their dissatisfaction with government, though less so among Republicans.

- “There is growing inequality between the rich and everyone else and the government isn’t doing enough about it,” 66% (45% strongly), Democrats 92% (69% strongly), Republicans 34%.
- “There is too much poverty in the US and the government is not doing enough about it,” 71% (43% strongly), Democrats 90%, Republicans 48%.

Serving Partisan Interests Over the Common Good

Consistent with the Founders’ fears, a specific type of special interest (or faction) the public sees as distracting elected officials from serving the common good is political parties. Very large majorities agreed that:

- “Members of Congress think mostly about their party, not about what is good for the country,” 89% (66% strongly), Republicans 88% (60% strongly), Democrats 90% (70% strongly).

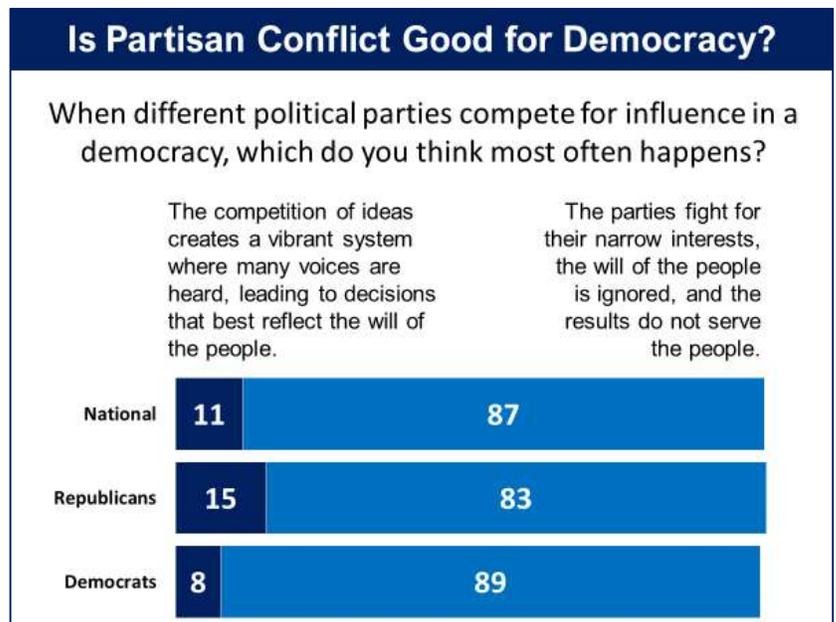
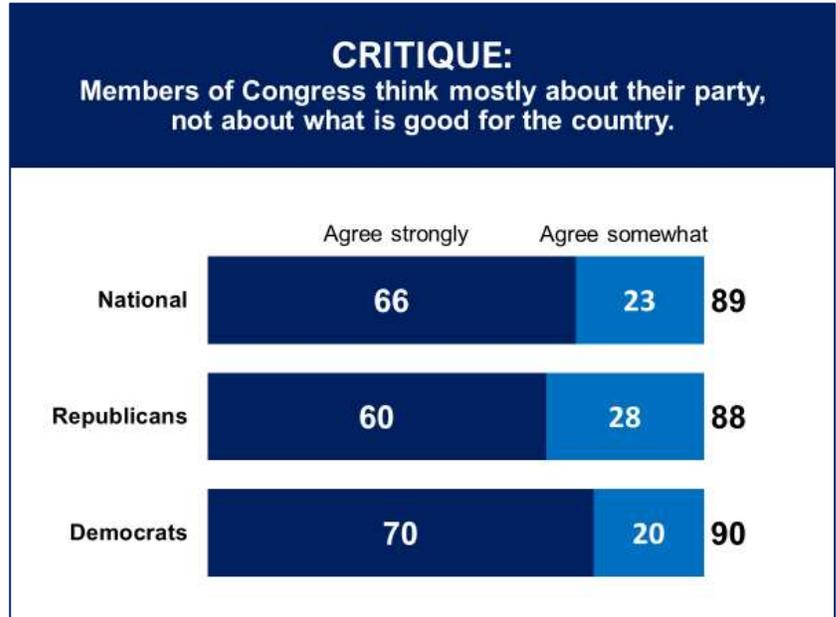
Partisanship is seen closely linked to Congressional responsiveness to competing special interests which exert their influence through campaign donations. Large majorities agreed that: “Political parties are too beholden to special interests.” 87% (61% strongly), Republicans 87% (57% strongly), Democrats 89% (66% strongly).

Even when presented the argument that the conflict between the parties is a natural and positive process, overwhelming majorities reject it in favor of the argument that it does not serve the people.

Similarly, in a CBS New York Times poll in October 2015, offered two options, only 22% endorsed the view that “The US political system is working the way it is supposed to work with both sides fighting hard for what they believe is right,” while 74% endorsed the view that, “The US political system is not working because of all the fighting and gridlock.”

Large majorities agreed with the critique that: “There is too much partisanship in government,” 81% (63% strongly), Republicans 79% (60% strongly), Democrats 84% (68% strongly).

Besides distracting elected officials from serving the common good, overwhelming majorities bewail the negative impact of partisanship on the functioning of government. Large majorities agreed that:



- “Government has too much partisan gridlock,” 82% (63% strongly), Republicans 85% (63% strongly), Democrats 82% (66% strongly).
- “Politicians have forgotten how to compromise, so they can’t get anything done,” 87% (60% strongly), Republicans 87% (59% strongly), Democrats 89% (61% strongly).
- “Too often a faction, or even a single Member in Congress, can block legislation or appointments supported by the majority,” 69% (37% strongly), Republicans 77% (41% strongly), Democrats 63% (35% strongly).
- “The government has been unable to agree on a plan for fixing immigration policy,” 89% (64% strongly) Republicans 93% (71% strongly), Democrats 88% (61% strongly).

A November 2018 CBS News poll asked: “Over the coming year, do you think President Donald Trump and the Democrats in Congress will or will not be able to work together?” 67% predicted that they will not. Most also perceive the problem as getting worse.

Asked whether, “compared with 10 years ago...when it comes to the amount of bipartisanship and cooperation in government, things in this country have generally gotten” better or worse, 82% said worse (Republicans 73%, Democrats 92%).

Consistent with their concerns about partisanship, respondents were quite responsive to critiques that are linked to the dominance of incumbent parties.

- One such critique is that “The boundaries of Congressional districts are drawn so that incumbents get hardly any competition from the other party (this is known as gerrymandering):” 67% agreed (44% strongly), Republicans 56% (27% strongly), Democrats 79% (59% strongly).
- Another is that, “Because there are no term limits Members of Congress stay in office too long:” 82% agreed (61% strongly), Republicans 88% (71% strongly), Democrats 78% (54% strongly).

Failing to Consult and Be Influenced by the People

The second major violation of the social contract is that elected officials fail to consult and be influenced by their constituents. Arguably, this is the flip side of the views that elected officials pay too much attention to special interests and their political parties. Large majorities agreed with the blunt critique that:

“Members of Congress do not listen to the people they represent,” 84% (50% strongly), Republicans 84% (48% strongly), Democrats 85% (53% strongly).

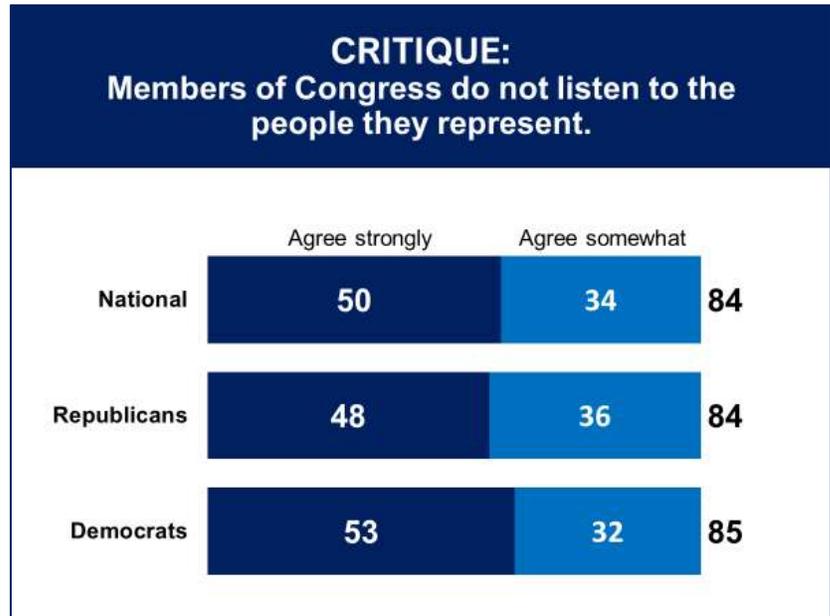
There is also a widespread assumption that, as a result, elected officials have a poor understanding of the views of most Americans. Asked, “In general, how well do you think elected officials in the Federal government understand the views of most Americans?” 73% said not that well or not well at all. Interestingly, independents were particularly critical on this front with 84% giving a negative rating.

Large majorities also agreed with critiques that elected officials are not influenced by their constituents:

- “Congress does not do what the majority of the people would do,” 81% (49% strongly), Republicans 80% (44% strongly), Democrats 83% (54% strongly).
- “Members of Congress do not do what the majority of their constituents would do,” 79% (43% strongly), Republicans 79% (41% strongly), Democrats 82% (47% strongly).

Similarly, in a November 2018 CNN poll 65% said they feel “the government in Washington represents the views of people like yourself” not too well or not well at all. A Chicago Council on Global Affairs poll in May 2014 asked, “How large a gap, if any, do you think exists between American public opinion and decisions taken by American political leaders” and found 87% saying very large (42%) or somewhat large (45%).

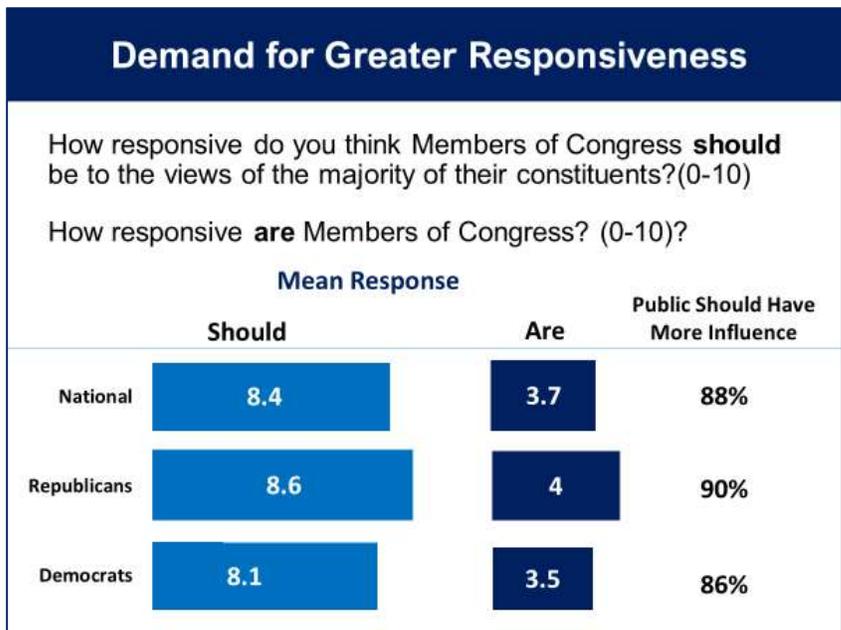
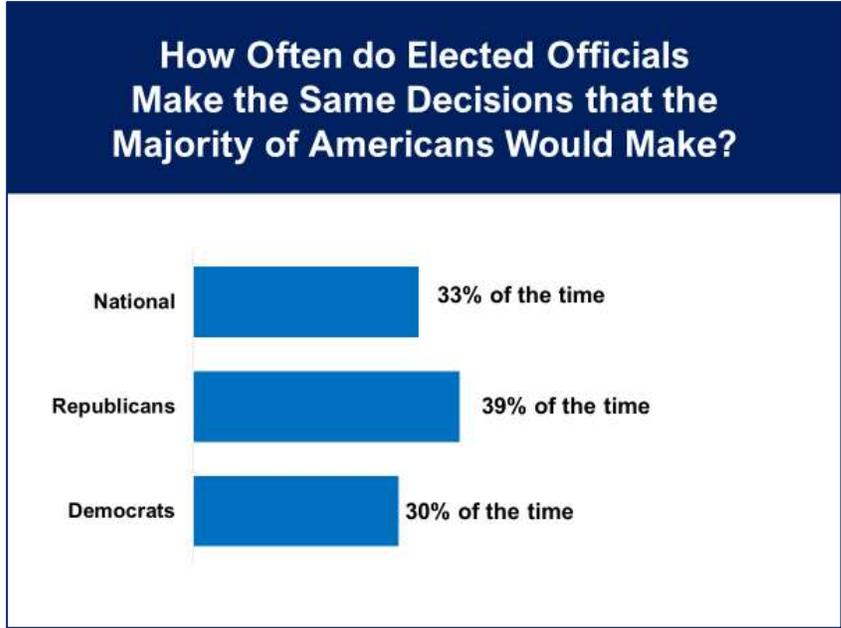
Asked, “About what percentage of the time do elected officials in the Federal government make decisions that are the same as the decisions that the majority of Americans would make?” the mean estimate was just 33% of the time (Republicans 39%, Democrats 30%).



So how much influence do American voters think the views of the public should have on government decisions? This question was explored several ways. Asked, “As a general rule, when Members of Congress are considering how to vote on major bills, how responsive do you think they **should** be to the views of the majority of their constituents?” the mean response was 8.4 (Republicans 8.6, Democrats 8.1). Less than half (49%) said that the level of responsiveness should be a 10.

But when asked how responsive Members of Congress **are**, the mean response was 3.7 (Republicans 4.0, Democrats 3.5). An overwhelming 88% rated the actual level of responsiveness as lower than what they indicated it should be (Republicans 90%, Democrats 86%).

Similarly, when asked, “How much influence **should** the views of the majority of Americans have on the decisions of elected officials in Washington?” the means response was 8.0 (Republicans 8.1, Democrats 7.9). Asked, “How much influence **do** the views of the majority of Americans have on the decisions of elected officials in Washington?” the mean estimate was 3.5 (Republicans 4.3, Democrats 2.9). 84% rated the actual level of influence as lower than what they indicated it should be (Republicans 80%, Democrats 89%).



IS IT TRUE GOVERNMENT IS NOT DOING WHAT THE PEOPLE WOULD DO?

Some may ask whether it is true that the public has so little influence over government. Since the electorate can vote the government out, can we not assume that ultimately what the government does is representative of the people? Isn't it true that elected officials are constantly adjusting their positions according to polls and focus groups?

An abundance of evidence says that in the United States, the process of democratic representation is working poorly. Studies suggest that after controlling for effects of the interest groups and affluent citizens, average citizens appear to have no influence; the correspondence between public opinion and government decisions has been declining and is now barely better than chance; public attitudes in specific districts have no correspondence to the way their Members vote; elected officials do not adjust their policies according to polls; and policymakers have a poor understanding of public opinion on many issues.

An extensive study by Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page examined 1,779 cases of proposed changes to federal policy on a wide range of issues. Using polling data, as well as an analysis of interest group positions, they determined that the views of interest groups and highly affluent citizens were highly correlated with government action. But while the views of average citizens corresponded to some of the government's actions, this was only the case when interest groups and/or highly affluent citizens favored them. The researchers' conclusion was that there was no evidence of any influence from the views of average citizens.

A series of studies by Alan Munroe examined the correspondence between public opinion and government decisions between 1960 and 1999—the same period during which there was a decline in confidence that the government is acting consistent with the public interest. He found that between 1960 and 1979 the correspondence between public opinion and government action was 63 percent. Between 1980 and 1993 this correspondence dropped to 55 percent and for the period between 1992 and 1999 it dropped further to 53 percent. Since the questions posed were largely binary, by chance the government is likely to be consistent with the public's preferences about half the time. Thus these findings suggest that public preferences play a small role in shaping decisions.

Another set of studies by the Program for Public Consultation compared public attitudes in districts where the member had voted for legislation, to districts where their member had voted against it. If the process of representation were occurring effectively, we would expect there to be significant differences. However, on the many issues explored, in the vast majority of cases, not only did the majorities in the two sets of districts agree, there were not even any significant differences between them.

The question of whether candidates and elected officials adjust their positions to the findings of focus groups was addressed in an in-depth study by Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro that included extensive interviews. What they heard consistently—summarized in their book, titled *Politicians Don't Pander*—is that candidates use polls and focus groups not to adjust their positions, but to find more effective ways to present the positions that they have already decided to take.

Furthermore, it appears that the extent to which elected officials even know the positions of their constituents—other than on the few issues that they highlight in their campaigns—is sketchy at best. Several studies by PPC have asked government officials to estimate the views of the general American public, and in the case of Congress, the views of their constituents on a variety of questions. Both in terms of the country as a whole and in terms of the constituents they represent, the majority of Congressional staffers and Executive Branch officials, for most of the questions asked about, failed to correctly estimate even the general direction of majority views, much less its magnitude.

Respondents were asked to rate the responsiveness of various institutions to the American people. Congress overall got a low rating of 3.3-3.4 overall and from both Republicans and Democrats. Asked to rate the parties and the party leadership in Congress Democrats give their party and leadership lukewarm ratings just above 5. Republicans come in at 4.3-4.5 for their party and leadership.

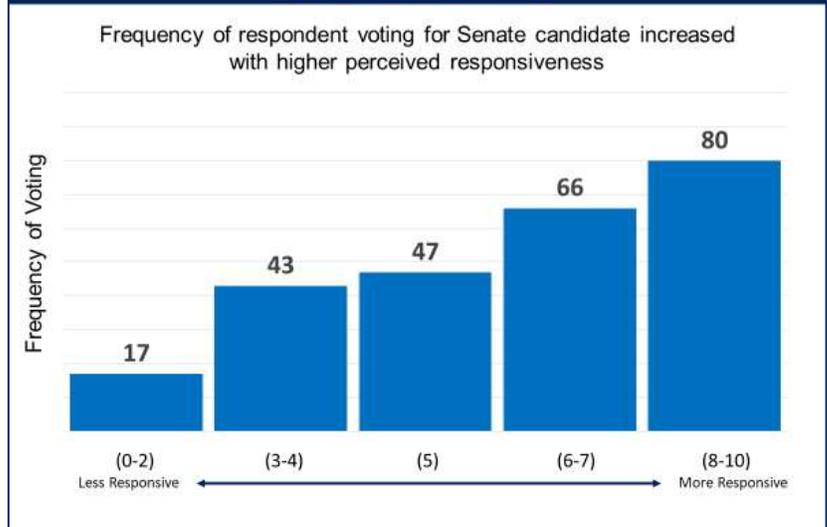
For each of the following, please rate how responsive they are to the American people in general: (0-10)					
	Congress Overall	Democratic leadership in Congress	Republican leadership in Congress	Democratic Party Overall	Republican Party Overall
National	3.3	3.9	3.2	3.8	3.4
Republicans	3.4	2.1	4.3	2.2	4.5
Democrats	3.3	5.6	2.5	5.5	2.6

Perceived Responsiveness and Voting

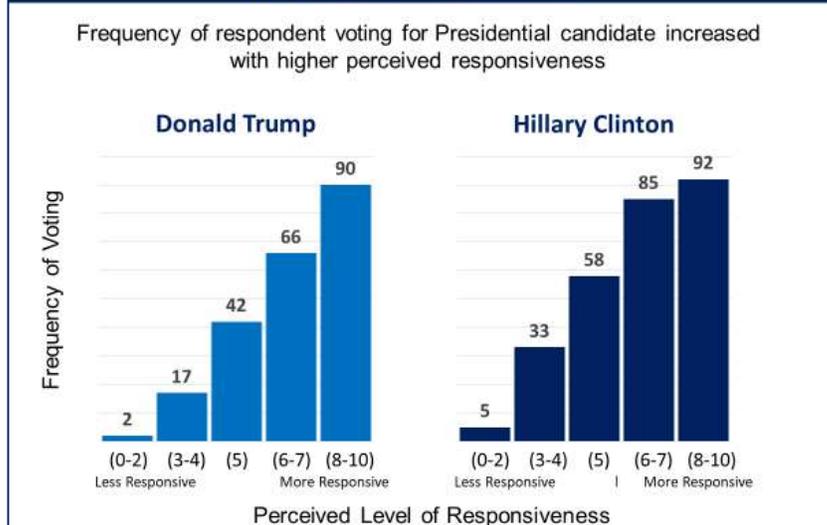
Perhaps the most dramatic indicator of voters' concern with the responsiveness of their representatives is the relationship between perceived responsiveness and voting behavior. Shortly after the 2016 election, PPC asked voters to rate the responsiveness of the incumbent Senator coming up for election on a 0 to 10 scale (the Senators name was provided). We also asked if they voted for that senator. There was a very high correlation between the level of perceived responsiveness and the intention to vote for the incumbent. Among those who gave ratings up to 5, less than half said they voted for the incumbent. For those who gave ratings above 5, clear majorities voted for the incumbent.

Voters were also asked how responsive they thought Donald Trump was likely to be to the people, and for Hillary Clinton, how responsive she would have been on the same 0 to 10 scale. Respondents were also asked who they voted for in the 2016 election. The assumptions regarding responsiveness were highly correlated with voting.

Perceived Responsiveness and Voting Behavior in Senate Election



Perceived Responsiveness and Voting Behavior In Presidential Election



THE THEME OF RESTORING THE SOCIAL CONTRACT IN THE 2016 AND 2018 ELECTIONS

In the 2016 presidential election, two outsider candidates—Donald Trump, who had never held elected office, and Bernie Sanders, who was a self-described socialist—gained remarkably high levels of public support using the narrative that government had violated the social contract to serve the common good of the people over special interests and campaign donors. Trump went so far as to say that under his administration the people would “be in charge.”

In 2018, numerous Congressional candidates played on these themes, including two candidates who unseated a long-standing incumbent—a Democrat Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and a Republican Mark Harris.

2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION



Donald Trump

A [Trump] victory will be a win for the voters – not the pundits, not the journalists, not the lobbyists, not the global special interests funding my opponent's campaign. This is going to be YOUR victory.

The government will work for the people again. Voters, not special interests, will be in charge.

I'm asking for the votes of students, parents, retired Americans, union workers, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and all Americans who are tired of a government that works for Wall Street but not THE PEOPLE.

We are fighting for every American who believes government should serve the people– not the donors, and not the special interests.



Bernie Sanders

This great nation and its government belong to all of the people, and not to a handful of billionaires, their Super-PACs and their lobbyists.

American democracy is not about billionaires being able to buy candidates and elections...to elect candidates who will make the rich richer and everyone else poorer. ...we know what American democracy is supposed to be about. It is one person, one vote – with every citizen having an equal say.

We must create a government that works for all of us, not just powerful special interests.

...the struggle of the people to create a government which represents all of us and not just the 1 percent... I look forward to being part of that struggle with you.

2018 MID-TERM ELECTIONS



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

*I'm fine being called a bull in a china shop, because politics that answers to special interests more than the American people *should* be disrupted.*

Ocasio 2018 fights for families, not special interests. It's time we had a Congress member that puts the needs of working Bronx and Queens families FIRST - not after special interests.

The idea that you can maintain independence while you depend on those same lobbies to get re-elected is also laughable.

I really just felt like we had to have a turning point and that it wasn't going to come from the Democratic establishment, that it had to be people. It had to be everyday people...



Mark Harris

For far too long, Congress has allowed lobbyists and special interests to have undue influence over the process. We can do better! The 9th District deserves better.

While most Americans were asleep last night, Congress passed a massive spending bill further mortgaging the future of our kids and grandkids.

Every special interest was funded in this budget... I'm proud to announce that I have signed a pledge to support a Constitutional Amendment for term limits for Members of Congress. I truly believe that's the only way to break the backs of the special interests.

Being Responsive to All the People vs. Supporters or Partisans

When voters say they want elected official to be responsive to the people a key question is whether they mean all the people or those who voted for the elected official. Respondents were asked, "To whose views do you think your representatives in Congress should be more responsive?" and offered the options:

- "The views of the people who voted for them"
- "The views of all their constituents."

Two thirds (68%) said the latter. But while 78% of Democrats concurred, a more modest majority of 58% of Republicans agreed.

To up the ante a bit, with a different sample, we sought to put them directly in the situation by asking them to think about elected officials for whom they have voted. We also underscored that some constituents voted against the elected officials. They were asked, "Thinking about the elected officials you voted for, do you think that they should pay the most attention to the views of:

- the majority of the people who voted for them, **like you**
- the majority of all of the people they represent, including ones **who did not vote for them.**"

Interestingly, in this case support for paying attention to all constituents was substantially higher at 83%, including 74% of Republicans, as well as 90% of Democrats.

But what they think should be happening is not what they think is happening. Asked, "In general, do you think elected officials in Washington, in fact, pay more attention to the views of..."

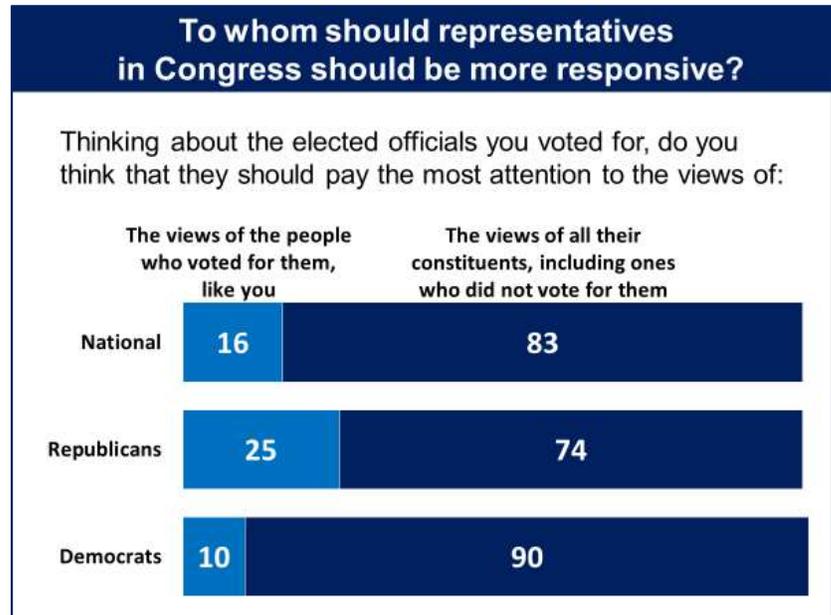
- the majority of the people who voted for them,
- the majority of all the people they represent.

Seventy-nine percent said the former, including 75% of Republicans and 84% of Democrats.

We also asked these questions in terms of partisan affiliation. Though one might expect that their commitment to the policy agenda of their party might lead respondents to endorse the views of those in their party, a large majority say that the views of the public as a whole should have greater influence. Respondents were asked, "Which of the following would you prefer to have the most influence on the government:

- the views of the majority of the public as a whole
- the views of the majority of Republicans
- the views of the majority of Democrats."

Three quarters (73%) said the views of the majority of the public as a whole. Once again Republicans were a bit lower at 61% (36% said views of Republicans), while Democrats were at 78%.



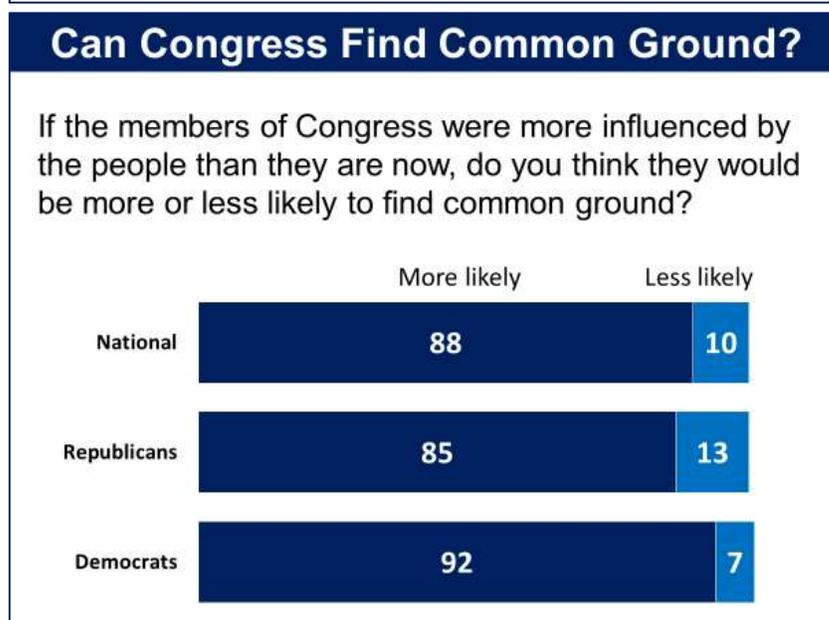
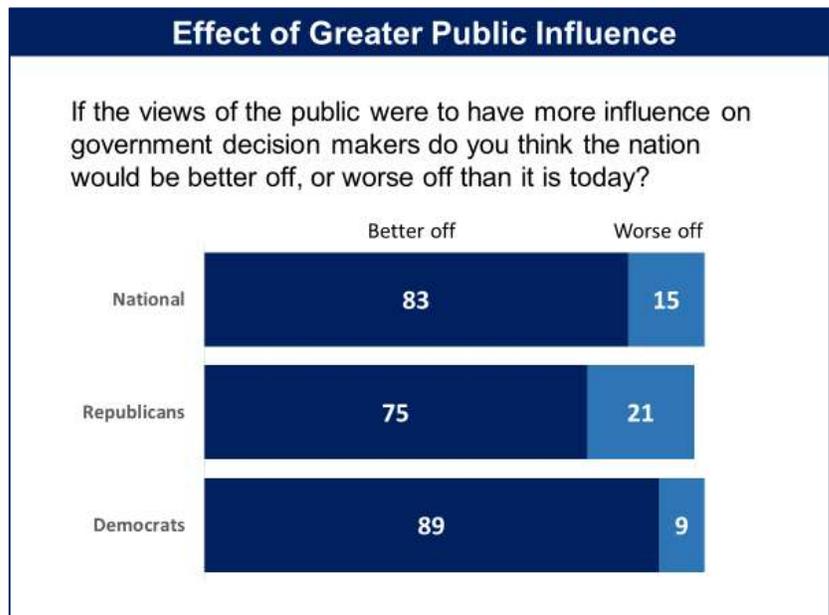
Public Confidence in the Positive Effects of Being Responsive to the People

Americans are remarkably optimistic about the positive effects of elected officials listening to and being influenced by the people.

- In a September 2011 Gallup poll, asked, “If the leaders of the nation would **follow the views** of the public more closely, do you think the nation would be better off, or worse off than it is today,” 87% said better off (Republicans 82%, Democrats 91%).
- In an April 2011 Harris poll, asked, “If the views of the public were to **have more influence** on government decision makers do you think the nation would be better off, or worse off than it is today,” 83% said better off (Republicans 75%, Democrats 89%).
- Asked, “If the American public would have more influence on government policy, in the long term, do you think that this would have a positive or negative effect on the economic position of people like you?” 74% said positive (Republicans 69%, Democrats 80%).

They also show optimism that greater public influence would help Congress find common ground.

- Asked, “If the members of Congress were more influenced by the people than they are now, do you think they would be more likely or less likely to find common ground?” 88% said more likely, (Republicans 85%, Democrats 92%).
- Asked, “When Congress gets stuck in gridlock do you think: listening to the views of the people would help break the logjam” or “listening to the views of the people would not help,” 74% said it would help (Republicans 65%, Democrats 84%).



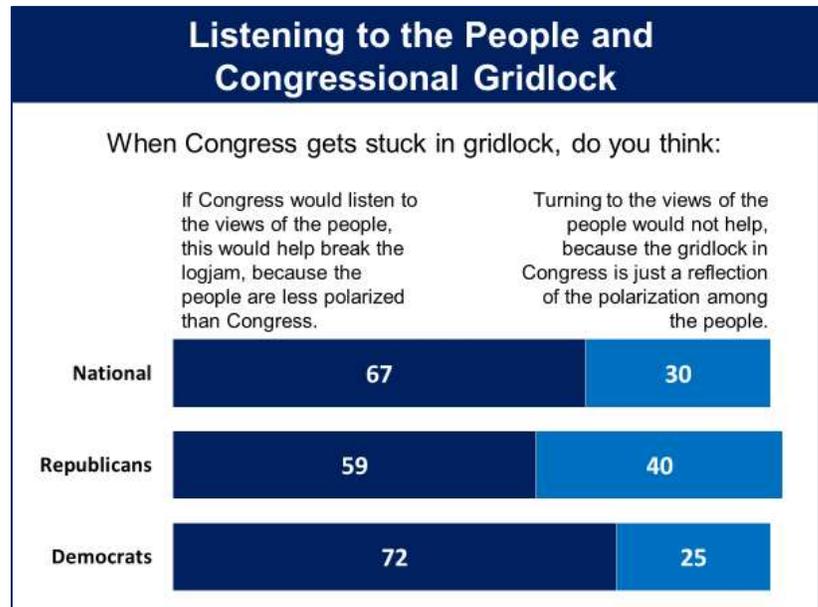
Even when presented the counter argument that the public would not exert a unifying effect because it is also polarized, large majorities still assert their confidence that the public would be better at finding common ground than Congress alone.

Asked, “When Congress gets stuck in gridlock, do you think: If Congress would listen to the views of the people, this would help break the logjam, because the people are less polarized than Congress,” or “Turning to the views of the people would not help, because the gridlock in Congress is just a reflection of the polarization among the people.” 67% chose the former (Republicans 59%, Democrats 72%).

Similarly asked, “Which is closer to your view: The American people are so polarized along party lines that it is NOT possible for the Members of Congress to reach across the aisle and work with people from the other party” or “There is enough common ground among the American people that it IS possible for Members of Congress to reach across the aisle and work with people from the other party,” 60% chose the latter (Republicans 54%, Democrats 65%).

American voters express far more confidence in the common sense of the public than the government. Asked, “Which do you think has more common sense: the American People or the American government,” 87% said the American People (Republicans 90%, Democrats 85%).

And, sadly, they believe that the government often fails to act in a way that is consistent with the public’s common sense. “In general, how much of the time would you say that the Federal government acts in a way that is consistent with the common sense of the American people,” 89% said “only some of the time,” or “hardly ever” (Republicans 87%, Democrats 90%).



What Can Be Done?

Structural Reforms

The most common ideas for addressing the public's lack of confidence in government are to make structural reforms. These include seeking to limit the influence of campaign donors through campaign finance reform, tightening limits on lobbying by former government officials, and seeking to make Congress more representative through more competitive elections and enabling independent candidates. As shown below, previously released in-depth surveys conducted by PPC have found that most of these ideas are very popular with the American public.

Limit the Influence of Campaign Donors Through Campaign Finance Reforms

Enable governments to impose limits on campaign spending

- Pass a constitutional amendment that would allow limits to be set on corporate spending on elections and regulate campaign financing by candidates and others (effectively overturning *Citizens v. United*) by letting Congress and the states make a legal distinction between people and corporations: 75% approve, including 66% of Republicans and 85% of Democrats.

Offset the influence of big campaign donors by promoting more donations by small donors

- Allow citizens that contribute up to \$50 to a candidate (no more than \$300 total) to claim half of that contribution in the form of a tax credit: 60% approve (Republicans 53%, Democrats 67%).
- Provide support to US Senate candidates who only take small donations (up to \$150) and have gathered enough small in-state donations to show they are viable, by providing a six to one match of small donations, as well as a grant and credits for campaign ads, with funds from a new 0.5% fee on large government contractors (over \$10 million): 66% approve (Republicans 58%, Democrats 73%).

Reduce the likelihood that campaign donations will result in a quid-pro-quo

- Prohibit Members of Congress from personally asking a donor for money at any time (in one-on-one appeals), although they can still go to and speak at fundraising events: 55% approve (Republicans 51%, Democrats 58%).

Increase requirements for public disclosure of campaign contributions to make it more visible if a Member provides a favor to a donor

- Require all individuals or organizations that donate or receive at least \$10,000 in total for campaign-related activities (e.g., campaign ads) to register with the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and have their name and amount donated publicly listed on the FEC's website: 82% approve (Republicans 77%, Democrats 88%).
- Require corporations, unions and other groups to report any spending on campaign-related activities to the FEC for public disclosure, as well as their shareholders and members: 85% approve (Republicans 83%, Democrats 88%).
- Require significant donors report the money they spend on TV or radio ads that support a candidate or a controversial public issue to the FEC: 81% approve (Republicans 74%, Democrats 89%).

- Have the President require federal contractors to publicly disclose any donations to groups that spend money on campaign-related activities: 85% approve (Republicans 84%, Democrats 89%).

Preserve the limits prohibiting non-profits from supporting candidates

- Continue the prohibition against non-profits that receive tax-deductible donations from endorsing and providing financial support to candidates: 79% approve (Republicans 71%, Democrats 88%).

Extend Limits on Lobbying

Significantly extend the period that former elected officials and their staffers must wait before working as a lobbyist, thus limiting their capacity to leverage their influence.

- For former Members of Congress, extend the waiting period in between working for Congress and working as a lobbyist from two years to five years: 77% approve (Republicans 80%, Democrats 73%).
- For former Congressional staffers, extend the waiting period from one year to two years: 77% approve (Republicans 79%, Democrats 74%).
- For former senior Executive Branch officials, extend the waiting period from 1-2 years to five years: 75% approve (Republicans 77%, Democrats 71%).
- For former senior Executive Branch officials, prohibit lobbying for foreign governments for the rest of their life: 75% approve (Republicans 81%, Democrats 70%).

Increase the Representativeness of Congress

Increase the representativeness of Congress by making elections more competitive and enabling independent candidates.

- Take the power to design their state's Congressional districts away from politicians and give it to a commission of citizens, in order to prevent Congressional redistricting that favors one political party (aka gerrymandering): 66% (Republicans 53%, Democrats 80%).
- Limit House Members to three 2-year terms and Senators to two 6-year terms: 71% (Republicans 76%, Democrats 66%).
- Use ranked-choice voting in federal elections, where everybody ranks their first, second, third choice (etc.) candidate and when the votes are counted the candidate with the least votes is eliminated and their votes are redirected to those voters second choice until one candidate has a majority: 55% (Republicans 46%, Democrats 64%).
- Create multi-member districts, so that in states with five or fewer representatives those representatives are elected by everybody in the state, and in states with more than five representatives each district would have 3-5 representatives: 55% (Republicans 44%, Democrats 66%).
- Make it more possible for independent and third-party candidates to compete in Congressional elections: 74% (Republicans 71%, Democrats 75%).
- Make it more possible for independent and third-party candidates to compete in Presidential debates: 77% (Republicans 75%, Democrats 77%).

Consulting the People

While numerous structural reforms are popular with the public, there are several reasons why they have limitations as a strategy for addressing public dissatisfaction with government. The prospects that the structural reforms will be put in place to counter special interests are not high. As mentioned, such changes face a bootstrap problem. It is difficult for Congress to change itself when it is operating within a system of rewards that intrinsically resists such reforms.

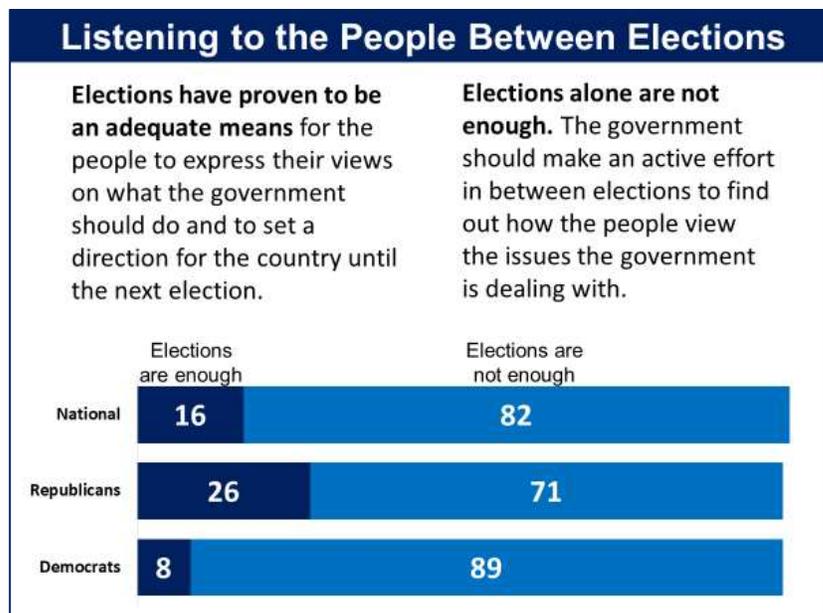
Furthermore, most structural reforms, such as campaign finance reform, could impose some constraints on the influence of special interests, but will not eliminate them entirely. Voters are likely to continue to hear about large campaign donations coming from special interests and the wealthy. Lobbying will continue even if there are more limits on former government officials. It could take quite a few elections before the tenor of the process and the types of candidates elected could discernibly change.

In addition, as discussed above, overwhelming majorities of American voters are not only looking for structural reforms but think that elected officials should actively listen to and be influenced by the people much more than they are. This is an intrinsic value to Americans and consistent with the social contract originating with the Founders.

Finally, creating the means for the people to have greater influence, especially efforts to give the people a substantive voice on specific policies, may be critical to countering special interests. The people as a whole are one force that cannot be contained or controlled by special interests. This means that the voice of the people has the potential to highlight and clarify the effect of special interests, because whenever Members of Congress are behaving at odds with it this raises the question of whether special interests are in fact governing.

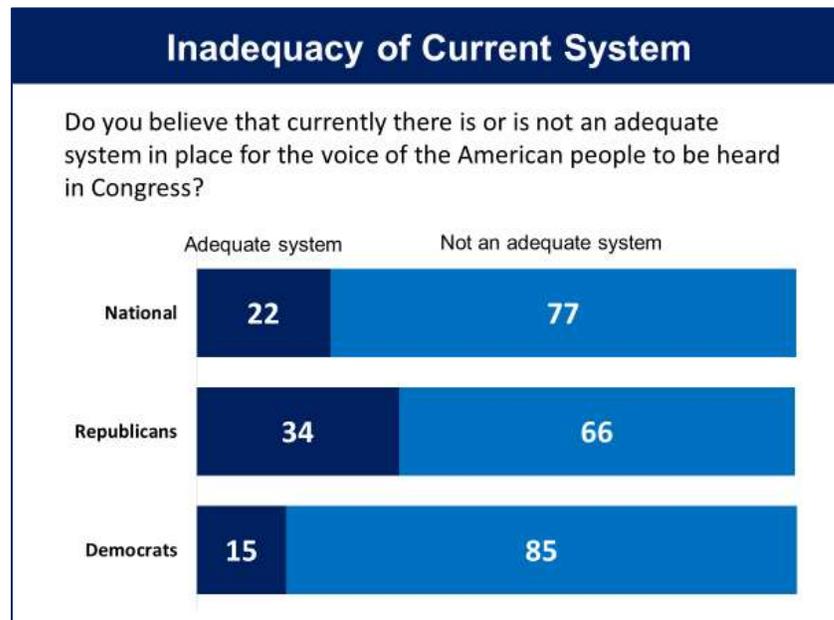
One might ask, “What is the problem? Americans already choose the government in periodic elections. If they do not like what government is doing, they can vote their representatives out.”

American voters believe that periodically voting in elections is not enough. When the American system was designed in the 18th Century the country was very different from today. There were few options for citizen input other than to elect officials, send them off to the capital and hope for the best. Since it often took months to communicate by mail between American cities, not much else was possible back then. But the 21st Century is quite a different world. Today the electorate is far more educated, and the Internet provides a capacity for large numbers of citizens to receive information and communicate with the government almost instantaneously.



Thus, it is not surprising that American voters emphatically say that *between* elections leaders should pay attention to the views of the people, even when presented the counter argument that elections are an adequate and proven system for giving the people a voice.

- Eighty-seven percent, (80% of Republicans and 92% of Democrats), said that in the United States today elections alone are not enough. (see box)
- Perhaps most germane, a large majority (77%) said there is not currently “an adequate system in place for the voice of the American people to be heard in Congress,” including 66% of Republicans and 85% of Democrats.



The Role and Limits of Standard Polling

Though standard polls have a valuable role to play in the process of consulting the people they also have important limitations. Contrary to popular assumptions, American voters do think that policymakers should pay attention to polls. Asked, “When government leaders are thinking about an important decision, do you think they should or should not pay attention to public opinion polls on the issue?” an overwhelming 85% said they should. There are other examples:

- Asked if the “nation would be better off or worse off” if “leaders of our nation followed the views of public opinion polls more closely,” 68% believe that it would be better off.
- Asked if “opinion polls have too much or too little power and influence in Washington,” 53% said they have too little power and influence. (Harris Poll, April 2011)

Polling has produced some remarkably accurate predictions of election results and the consistency of results from different organizations has helped to validate its methods. At the same time, standard polling has a number of key limitations for giving policymakers meaningful input on public policy decisions.

For issues that people have thought about extensively, their responses to poll questions are quite stable and reliable. However, for many important public policy issues people’s views are not so well formed, and thus their answers to poll questions can be skewed by even very subtle biases in the way questions are asked.

Sophisticated pollsters have learned to identify and reduce the effect of biases in questions, and to also analyze multiple versions of questions so as to ascertain the public’s underlying values, which have proved to be fairly stable and coherent. However, it has become clear that standard polls should not be used as a kind of

referendum. Thus, many observers are uneasy about the potential for polls to be used in a misleading way and to play a more distorting role in governance.

It has also been discovered through polling that many Americans are poorly informed or misinformed about key issues. In some cases, it even seems the public may have been disinformed, as on some issues the public's perceptions are so heavily skewed in the same mistaken direction that it is hard to account for this as simply a lack of information. Such mistaken assumptions have been shown to have significant impacts on respondents' policy positions. All this has added further to a lack of confidence about the ability to use standard surface-level polls to accurately assess the public's views on public policy issues.

Advanced Survey Methods: The New Science of Public Consultation

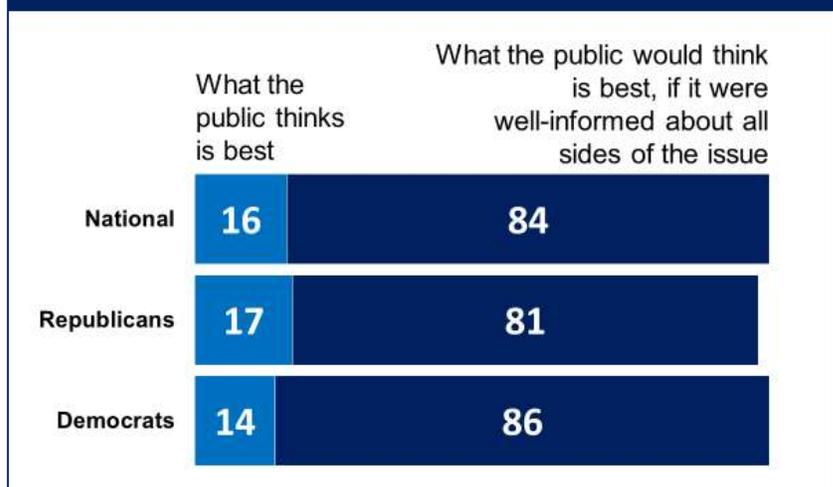
More recently, advanced methods of survey research have gone beyond the limitations of standard polls in ascertaining the views of the public on policy matters. These methods are sometimes known as "public consultation". The process involves taking a representative sample of citizens and giving them a well-balanced presentation of information on policy issues, letting the citizens hear and evaluate a wide range of arguments on different sides of the issue, and finally, have them evaluate a range of policy options. In some cases, this is all accomplished online, while in other citizens have in-person interactions in which they discuss and deliberate with other citizens. These public consultations—each with their own unique variations in how they are performed—have been called Citizen Juries, Deliberative Polls, Citizen Advisory Panels, Choice-Dialogues, and so forth.

By having an opportunity to get complete information, to hear various arguments and thus deliberate on the issues, the response tends to be of a more thoughtful and stable character. It has also been found that in a few cases, after receiving correct information, views are markedly different than uninformed responses. This does not mean that people's fundamental views have changed; people's underlying values have proven to be quite stable over time. Rather, through the process of getting information and hearing different perspectives, respondents are able to more effectively express those values in relation to specific policy issues.

American voters are very supportive of the idea that what should influence policymakers are the views that people express when they have had a chance to deliberate, rather than off-the-cuff public reactions. Eighty four percent overall, said that Congress should primarily consider "what the public would think is best, if it were well-informed about all sides of the issue."

Further, such methods of public consultation expand the range of issues on which the public can meaningfully engage. Many of the issues that policymakers deal with are ones on which many ordinary people do not have well-formed views—not because they do not care about the outcome but because they do not have enough information to come to a meaningful conclusion. The

What do you think members of Congress should consider most when making key decisions?



process of public consultation makes it possible to reveal how the public's underlying values to come to bear on such policy issues.

These processes may require respondents go into a problem-solving mode. For example, respondents may be presented the problem of balancing a budget, given the details of the options available, and then asked to solve the problem as they see fit. This demands that respondents compare different programs against each other, to weigh the benefits of services to the costs of revenues, and to do so in a highly granular fashion.

This is yet another example of how such processes can elicit results that are quite different from a standard poll. Standard polls, asking a series of separate questions, have found majorities supporting a balanced budget, but opposing both spending cuts and tax increases—leading some observers to throw up their hands in bewilderment with the public. However, when given the exercise of making a budget with much latitude, the public made deep spending cuts and substantial tax increases.

Some argue that the responses people give in this kind of context are not relevant, because once people have more information and a chance to deliberate, they are no longer typical. Arguably, this makes sense if one is only thinking about getting elected. Playing to the public's misperceptions may make more short-term political sense than trying to correct them. But dealing with the public in this manipulative way is just the kind of thing that the public finds so frustrating about the political process today. If the public were to perceive leaders as not trying to play on or add to misinformation, but rather to base the political discourse on trying to clarify the public's values in relation to correct information, the public's confidence in the democratic political process is likely to improve.

The process of public consultation also goes beyond standard polls in that it is not focused on the response to single questions. Too often standard polls are treated like a quick referendum. When polls focus only on a favor-oppose response to a single policy option, poll respondents often complain that the lack of a full range of options does not give them a chance to express their real point of view.

The quick referendum model can also lead to abuses. In some cases, interest groups will test numerous questions until they find one that they can use to make the claim that "the American people favor our position." As people have grown aware of this happening, suspicion of polls has grown, with many coming to the mistaken conclusion that it is possible to get people to say anything in a poll.

The Potential of the Internet

Another key tool that has become available for interacting with the public is the Internet. This makes it possible to have in-depth interaction with large samples of the population.

Unlike standard telephone polls, surveys that are conducted over the Internet give the respondent a real opportunity to deliberate. Respondents can take as much time as they like to read and re-read questions. Research shows that in surveys conducted over the Internet respondents give more thoughtful answers.

The Internet also makes it possible to have respondents go beyond simply answering questions and actually participate in problem-solving exercises that require making tradeoffs, such as developing a budget.

The idea of using the Internet as a means to consult the people makes sense to the American public. A large majority says, "the government should make use of the Internet as a means for the American people to express their views on the issues the government is facing."

The Citizen Cabinet

The Citizen Cabinet is a method for a representative sample of voters—in a specific state, specific Congressional district, or the nation as a whole—to provide informed recommendations to their elected officials on important decisions being made in Congress and the Executive Branch. The Citizen Cabinet members go through an online process called a ‘policymaking simulation’ in which they are put in the shoes of policymakers. They are given a briefing on an issue before the government, presented one or more policy options under consideration, asked to evaluate arguments for and against each policy option, and finally asked for their recommendations. In some cases, these recommendations are imbedded in an interactive process that requires the respondent to address the tradeoffs associated with each response option. The responses of the Citizen Cabinet members are aggregated, weighted to the demographics and partisan distribution of voters in the state, district or the nation, and delivered to elected officials and to the media. The entire content of the policymaking simulation and the responses of the Citizen Cabinet are made public.

The Citizen Cabinet method has been extensively developed over many years by the Program for Public Consultation of the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland. The ‘policymaking simulation’ approach has been developed and refined since 1993 and administered to dozens of national samples. Between 2016 and 2018, a pilot study was conducted with Citizen Cabinets in nine states (California, Texas, Oklahoma, Ohio, Florida, North Carolina, Maryland, Virginia, and New York) and two specific districts in Oklahoma and Maryland.

Selecting the Citizen Cabinet

To date Citizen Cabinets have been primarily recruited by sampling companies with large representative panels of American voters—most notably Nielsen-Scarborough. In specific states and districts where the panel was not large enough, additional selected voters were recruited by telephone and mail.

While it is important to have a core representative sample recruited by a sampling company, it is also possible to send out broad invitations to all voters in a specific state or district. The Member of Congress can play a role in this recruitment process. The Members’ clear and visible signal of interest in constituents’ views is an important part of the process of restoring public confidence in elected officials and the process of democratic decision making. Naturally, the responses from voters recruited in this way would need to be weighted together with the core sample to control for any bias. In theory, an unelected candidate could also support having a Citizen Cabinet, encourage voters to join, and be briefed on the results.



Developing the Policymaking Simulation

The aim of the policymaking simulation is to simulate the process a Member of Congress or Executive Branch officials goes through in coming to a decision.

Generally, topics for policymaking simulations involve policy choices that are controversial in Washington. They may be key elements in Congressional legislation, or key choices being considered by the Executive Branch. Of particular interest are recognized problems that Congress has failed to address.

Once a subject for a policymaking simulation is selected, researchers review the discourse in Congress, proposed legislation, analyses conducted by government agencies such as the Congressional Budget Office, studies from research institutes from across the political spectrum, academic analyses, news accounts, and statements by advocacy organizations on all sides of the issue.

Briefing

The briefing on the topic first clarifies the historical context of the issue. Key statistics are provided, often in multi-colored charts. Government sources, such as the Congressional Budget Office or the Office of Management and Budget are preferred. The aim is to describe the issue in neutral terms, but in a way that allows respondents to understand the underlying value of issues involved. Partisan labels for ideas are avoided whenever possible as these can discourage respondents from deliberating on the issue itself.

The challenge is to concisely cover the most relevant background information in a form which can be easily grasped by the user, but with enough detail to ensure that it will lead to useful guidance from an informed public. Finding the right balance is the key so that the process can be completed in about 20-25 minutes.

Pro and Con Arguments

To develop paragraph-long arguments for and against each policy option researchers first study closely the arguments in speeches and statements made by advocates and opponents in Congress or the Executive Branch, with special emphasis on floor speeches and Committee hearings when available. In addition, arguments made in the media and by advocacy groups are considered.

Ultimately, these arguments are distilled down to the essential points that respondents can relate to in terms of their own values. Arguments that entail partisan or ad hominem attacks are avoided in favor of those that make the case based on principles, historical experience, research, or scientific analysis.

When the pro and con arguments are presented to the respondent, they are immediately asked how convincing they find them, rather than whether they agree or disagree with them. The aim is to not force an early closure, but to keep the respondent in a deliberative process. This has generally proven to be successful as it is very common for respondents to say that they find both the pro and con arguments at least somewhat convincing.

Final Recommendations

In some cases, the final recommendation is a fairly simple question of whether the respondent favors or opposes a specific proposal such as a piece of legislation that would get a simple up-or-down Congressional vote or an Executive Branch decision. While the aim in the pro and con arguments is to elicit subtle feelings and possibly conflicting values associated with the issue, final recommendations aim to pose a clear and crisp choice.

In other cases, the choices are not so binary. Respondents might select from a menu of options or may be presented with a more complex task that involves contending with trade-offs. For example, in one policymaking simulation, respondents are asked to propose a Federal budget. In this case the respondent is presented the main line items in the discretionary budget with current spending levels as well as existing and possible revenue sources. They are then given the opportunity to make changes as they see fit changing spending or revenue levels up or down. As they go along a bubble follows them and gives them immediate feedback about how their choices are affecting the budget deficit.

Respondents may also be asked to address a problem. For example, in another policymaking simulation, they are briefed on the Social Security shortfall and presented options for mitigating it, each one scored in terms of its impact on the shortfall. After evaluating pro and con arguments for each one they are asked to offer their recommendations. As they make their recommendations, they get immediate feedback about their effect on the shortfall. Respondents are not required to eliminate the shortfall, just as Congress is not required to do so. They are also allowed to modify their recommendations right up to the end.

Outside Review

After the draft of the policymaking simulation is completed it is sent out for review by experts and advocates on both sides of the issue. In most cases these are Congressional staffers from each party who are the Congressional experts on the issue. In some cases, they have even been willing to sit down and go over the draft together with us. In cases of proposals from proposed legislation we always seek out its lead sponsors and any leading vocal opponents. We also seek out advocates and opponents within the Executive Branch, advocacy organizations and experts in the field.

When going through the simulation, we ask reviewers to assess the briefing in terms of its accuracy and balance. We also ask them to assess whether the arguments are the strongest ones being made. When assessing the arguments of the opposing position, we also ask them to comment if they think that any statements are false or misleading. While many people have the impression that people from different parties in Congress cannot agree on anything, we have generally found that this process has gone fairly smoothly. Also, after releasing the survey we have virtually never received complaints that the briefing or the arguments were problematic.

A final step is to field the revised draft simulation to a small group of “beta-testers” who are members of the general public who volunteer to test the simulations and provide user feedback.

Public Response to the Citizen Cabinet Idea

In our initial polling on the idea we explored the possibility of having a very large national Citizen Cabinet with over 100,000 selected participants, enabling every Member of Congress to hear from several hundred of their constituents. The proposal was presented as something that would be supported by Congress and be administered by a new academy, supported by Congress. The idea was favored by a bipartisan majority of three in four.

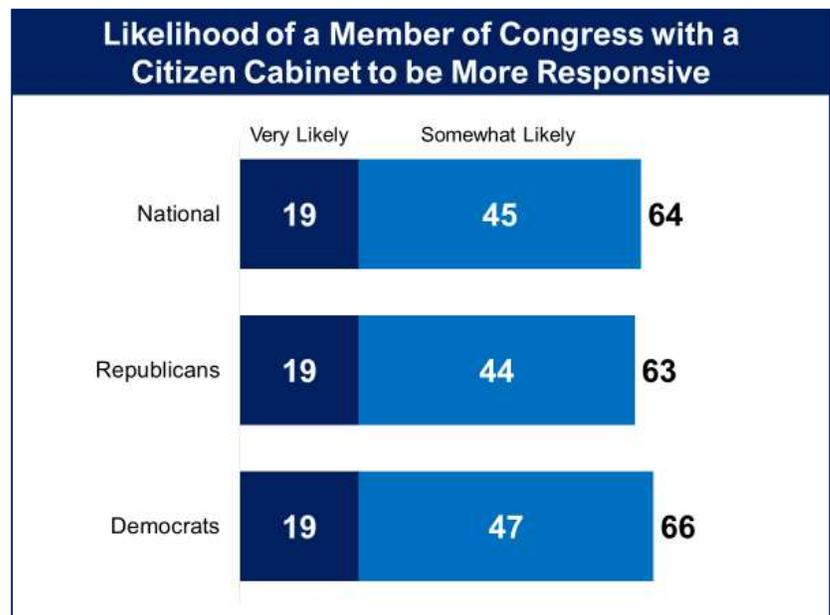
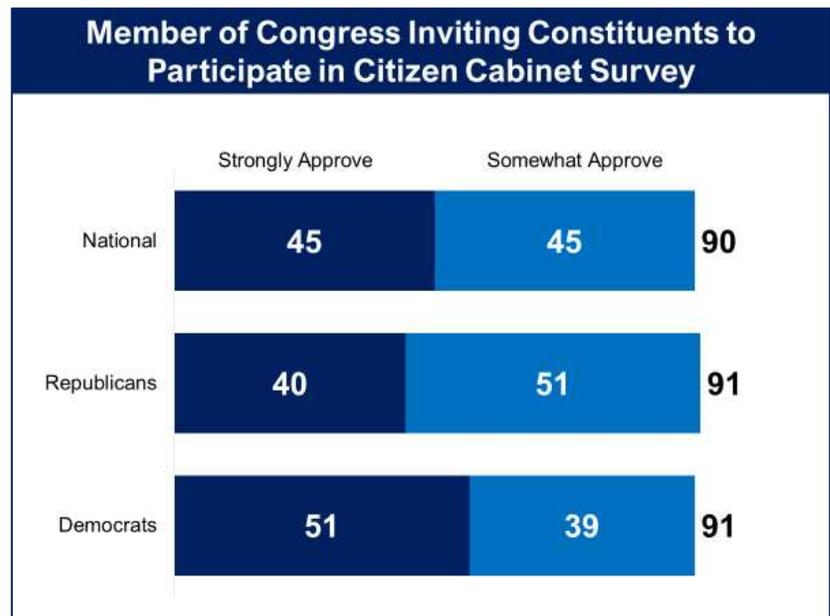
American voters expressed substantial optimism that “if a Citizen Cabinet were to have influence on Congress” it is somewhat or very likely that Congress would:

- “show more common sense” (69%);
- “more often move beyond polarization and gridlock” (65%);
- “more often find common ground and resolve political conflicts” (67%);
- “make decisions that are more fair” (71%).

More recently, we presented the idea as an initiative from the respondent’s own Member saying that “Your Member could invite all the people he or she represents to give their input on an important issue Congress is considering by taking a special online survey.” The Citizen Cabinet process was then described. This elicited an even more favorable response.

An overwhelming 90% approved of the Member doing this (45% strongly) including 91% of both Republicans (40% strongly) and Democrats (51% strongly).

Equally significant, asked “If your Member were to do this, how likely is it that this would lead him or her to be more responsive to the views of the people he or she represents?” Two-thirds said that it would be somewhat or very likely (Republicans 63%, Democrats 66%).



The Town Hall Variant

We also explored an in-person variant that was described as follows:

Your Member of Congress announces that he or she will hold a town hall meeting on a particular issue and invites all the people he or she represents to first go online to complete the special kind of survey just described and send their recommendations to the Member. The Member then holds a town hall meeting—either in person or by telephone—and discusses with citizens the issue and their recommendations, including giving them the opportunity to explain their thinking.

Once again, nine in ten approved of the idea and two thirds thought that it would lead the Member to be more responsive to the views of the people he or she represents. There were only minor variations between the parties.



Does It Make Political Sense for a Candidate to Support Having a Citizen Cabinet?

Ultimately the Citizen Cabinet model rests on a particular Member of Congress or a Congressional candidate deciding they want to have a Citizen Cabinet in their state or district. Crucial to the model is the idea that Members of Congress will listen to and consider the recommendations of the Citizen Cabinet. Why else would citizens go to the trouble of taking a policymaking simulation survey?

But will it make political sense for a Member or an aspiring candidate to express their support for having such a Citizen Cabinet, to actively and visibly encourage constituents to join it, and to be briefed on the results? To address this question, we consulted a prominent and seasoned political pollster. We presented our findings showing the high correlation between perceived responsiveness of an incumbent and the likelihood of voting for that incumbent. And we showed her the extraordinary level of support for a candidate who would say that they will support having a Citizen Cabinet.

We then asked her how she would feel about recommending to a client to have a Citizen Cabinet and more importantly to run on it as a key part of their agenda. She presented three challenges:

- While voters may respond to the idea in principle when the candidate is identified with a party, the partisan response will override the support for the Citizen Cabinet idea.
- A candidate who supports having a Citizen Cabinet will be vulnerable to a range of attacks and it will be difficult for the candidate to counter them.
- Once people see the actual conclusions of the Citizen Cabinet, even if they only see a few they don't agree with, they will get turned off to the whole idea.

We then developed an elaborate survey to test these challenges. To control for numerous variables, we surveyed a large national sample of 4,686 registered voters.

Will Partisanship Override Support for a Citizen Cabinet?

A large sample was asked initially: "Imagine that you are considering which candidate to vote for in a general election for your Member of the House of Representatives. One candidate is Republican and the other Democrat." Half the sample was told, "Imagine that the Democratic candidate were to make the following statement" while the other half were told to imagine a Republican candidate making the statement. (See box)

A portion of the sample was then immediately asked, "What is your view of the idea of having such a Citizen Cabinet?" Overall, nearly nine in ten once again said that they would have a positive view. But the key question was whether support would be sharply lower when the idea was proposed by a candidate from the party the respondent was not affiliated with.

There was some partisan effect, but it was quite small. For both partisan groups, very large majorities had a positive view even though the idea was being posed by the candidate from the opposing party. For Republicans, 75% said they would have a positive view when the idea was proposed by a Democratic candidate—only moderately lower than the 89% who approved when a Republican proposed it. For Democrats, 92% approved of

Candidate Statement About Citizen Cabinet

I think it is very important for Members of Congress to listen to and be guided not by special interests, but by the people they represent. This country was founded on the idea that elected officials should listen closely to the people.

Today I am making a pledge. If I am elected, I pledge to consult with my constituents on major issues before Congress and to take their views into account when deciding how to vote. I commit to listening to the people over special interests. I believe the people have common sense and their voice needs to be at the table when important decisions are being made.

Now, lots of candidates say they will listen to the people. But I am taking another step. I am supporting the creation of something called a "Citizen Cabinet" in our district, so that I can hear from the people as a whole, in addition to the people who reach out to me directly.

A Citizen Cabinet would consist of at least several hundred constituents, who mirror the district as a whole, and who would be consulted on key votes I will cast in Congress. I will work with a university-based survey research center that will set up and run the Citizen Cabinet in a scientific way.

Here is how it will work. First, I will send out a message to every constituent inviting them to be a member of the Citizen Cabinet. The university program will make sure the Cabinet mirrors the district in terms of gender, age, race, education and political party affiliation.

The Citizen Cabinet will be consulted on key issues under consideration in Congress. Working online, members of the Citizen Cabinet will take surveys on these issues. On each issue, they will be:

- given a briefing*
- presented policy options Congress is considering; and*
- asked to evaluate arguments for and against each option.*

Then, they will be asked to make their recommendations on how I should vote. The survey will be developed by the university survey research center. It will be reviewed by experts from both parties and advocates with different points of view, to ensure that the briefing is accurate and the key arguments are fairly presented. Everything will be completely transparent, so that everybody can see exactly what the Citizen Cabinet saw and what the results were.

The names of the Citizen Cabinet members will not be made public, so no one, including me, can influence their conclusions. Once the Citizen Cabinet's recommendations are summed up, I will be given a briefing on the results.

Naturally, in the end, I will need to make the final decision about how to vote. But I will pay close attention to the recommendations of the Citizen Cabinet and take them into account when I decide.

the idea when proposed by a Republican candidate—as compared to 94% when proposed by a Democratic candidate.

We then asked their view of a candidate who would make a commitment to:

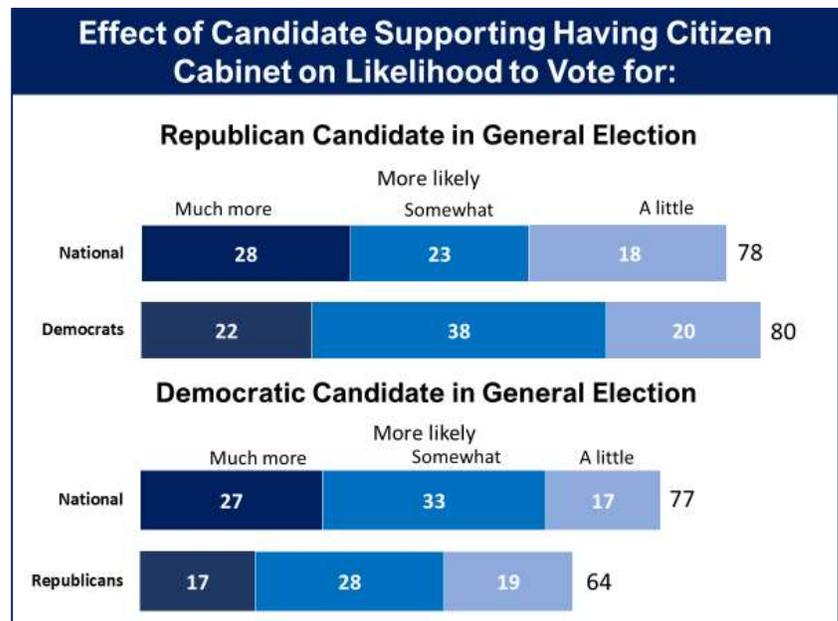
- consult his or her constituents
- support having a Citizen Cabinet for their district; and to
- take into account the recommendations of the Citizen Cabinet when deciding how to vote.

The results were similar to the data in the earlier survey. Approximately nine in ten said they would have a positive view (just over half very positive). Among Republicans, 79% said they would have a positive view of such a Democratic candidate (38% very positive). Among Democrats, 92% said they would have a positive view of a Republican candidate.

Perhaps most relevant, respondents were asked whether the fact that the candidate has made this commitment would make you more or less likely to vote for this candidate. Here we thought we would find the greatest impact of partisan identification.

Obviously, this is not a real vote and the question was not who they would vote for—we did not think that they had enough information to answer the question—but rather how it would affect their likelihood to vote for a candidate not of their party.

Nonetheless, large majorities said that commitment to a Citizen Cabinet would increase their likelihood to vote for a candidate of the opposing party. Among Republicans, 64% said they would be more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate—17% much more likely. Among Democrats 80% said they would be more likely to vote for the Republican candidate—22% much more likely.



Will a Candidate Proposing a Citizen Cabinet Be Vulnerable to Attacks?

The second major challenge that our political pollster raised was that, even if people say they like the idea of a Citizen Cabinet at first blush, in the intensity of a campaign the candidate who proposed the idea would be vulnerable to a whole variety of attacks. Our political pollster suggested to us that the idea would be “target rich” and put forward a series of possible attacks that we developed into a series of arguments and formulated possible rebuttals as well. We presented them to a different sample of respondents and asked them to evaluate each one in terms of how convincing they found them.

The first attack was one that would not likely be made by another candidate as it included derogatory statements about the public. But it could well be made by a journalist or other thought leaders. They were asked to “imagine that you were to read a criticism of the idea of a Citizen Cabinet as follows:”

Too many Americans are emotional, volatile and not all that smart. Most issues are difficult to understand, and a Citizen Cabinet of typical Americans would not have the necessary expertise to make sound judgements on policy issues. It would just be a distraction for Members of Congress and interfere with their efforts to solve complex problems. Congress may not be perfect, but they are more reliable than a group of randomly chosen average citizens.

This argument did quite poorly. Overall it was found convincing by just 29%, including 34% of Republicans and 27% of Democrats.

They were then presented the following counter-argument:

The Founders built this country on the principle that nobody knows what's best for the people better than the people. The Citizen Cabinet is a good idea for the same reason the Founders thought that juries are a good idea. Both are founded on the common sense of ordinary citizens when they are provided with the facts and have a chance to deliberate. Research shows that given correct information the majority of citizens come to conclusions that are reasonable and even show wisdom—probably more than Congress.

This produced an extraordinarily different response. An overwhelming 85% (Republicans 84%, Democrats 88%) found it convincing.

Imagining a Debate

We then asked the respondent to “imagine that the candidate, who commits to consult the people through a Citizen Cabinet, is in a debate with his or her opponent.” We presented a series of three dueling positions, leading with an attack on the Citizen Cabinet idea and then a rebuttal by the candidate who favored the idea. In every case, the attack was found convincing by less than four in ten, while the rebuttal was found convincing by eight in ten or more. There were only slight variations by party.

We then asked respondents their views of the idea of having such a Citizen Cabinet. Support was slightly lower than the sample that did not hear the arguments, but it was nonetheless overwhelming even when proposed by the candidate of the opposing party. Seventy-six percent of Republicans expressed a positive view even though it was proposed by a Democratic candidate. Eighty-nine percent of Democrats had a positive view even when proposed by a Republican candidate.

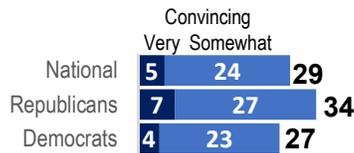
Asked about their views of a candidate who would make such a proposal, 84% of Republicans said they would have a positive view of a Democratic candidate (39% very positive). Ninety-three percent of Democrats said they would have positive view of such a Republican candidate (49% very positive).

Asked how making this proposal would affect their likelihood to vote for the candidate, large majorities said it would increase it. Among Republicans, 69% said they would be more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate—26% much more likely. Among Democrats, 80% said they would be more likely to vote for the Republican candidate—22% much more likely.

Candidates Who Support The Citizen Cabinet: Attacks and Rebuttals

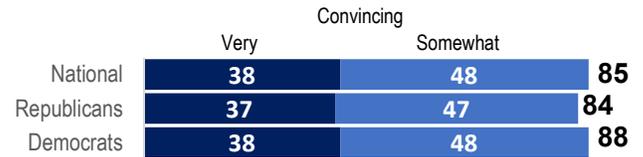
ATTACK

Too many Americans are emotional, volatile and not all that smart. Most issues are difficult to understand, and a Citizen Cabinet of typical Americans would not have the necessary expertise to make sound judgements on policy issues. It would just be a distraction for Members of Congress and interfere with their efforts to solve complex problems. Congress may not be perfect, but they are more reliable than a group of randomly chosen average citizens.

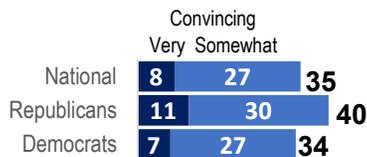


REBUTTAL

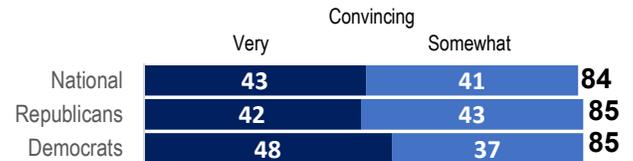
The Founders built this country on the principle that nobody knows what's best for the people better than the people. The Citizen Cabinet is a good idea for the same reason the Founders thought that juries are a good idea. Both are founded on the common sense of ordinary citizens when they are provided with the facts and have a chance to deliberate. Research shows that given correct information the majority of citizens come to conclusions that are reasonable and even show wisdom—probably more than Congress.



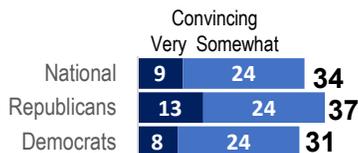
Members of Congress shouldn't govern by putting their finger to the wind, reacting to every shift in public opinion. The American people elect Members of Congress to show leadership and make decisions. Having a Citizen Cabinet would make it harder for members of Congress to exercise their independent judgment, make the hard decisions and do what is best for the country—rather than what they think is popular.



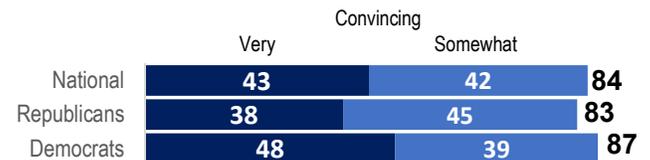
The problem with Congress is not that they're too reactive to public opinion—it's that they're too reactive to special interests. The Citizen Cabinet will give me advice from people who have heard all sides of an issue and come to well-considered conclusions that accurately reflect the will of the people. This way we can all be sure that the special interests are not in charge. I think that when the people have accurate and balanced information, they can give valuable advice about what is best for the country.



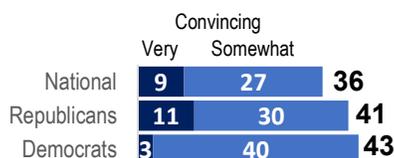
A Citizen Cabinet is not really necessary. When Americans want to make their voice heard they already have lots of options. Besides voting in federal, state, and local elections, they can write letters, attend town hall meetings, sign petitions, join advocacy groups, go to rallies, or walk the halls of Congress.



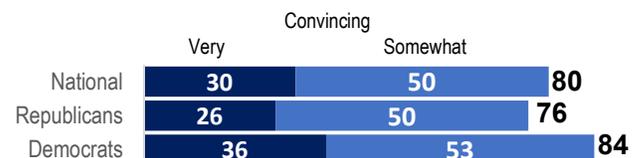
While Members of Congress make an effort to listen to those self-selected people who are outspoken on an issue, their views often do not reflect how most people think. Organizations and people with money often make a disproportionately loud voice. A Citizen Cabinet, designed to mirror the district as a whole, will give me a much more accurate read of what the people as a whole really think.



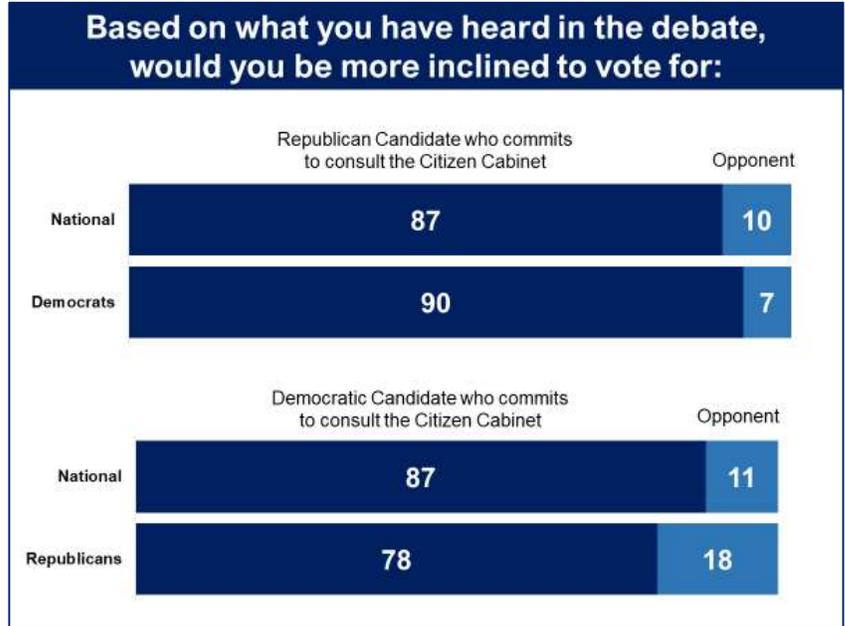
This whole effort is really about some outsiders from Washington DC coming in and telling us what the people here think. I don't believe we can trust this outside group. It can pick and choose the issues it cares about—not us. Who knows what their real agenda is? How can we be sure that it won't try to manipulate people to say what they want them to say?



The plan is for a non-partisan organization in Washington DC to track what is going on in Congress and to make sure the briefings and arguments presented in the surveys are an accurate reflection of what is being discussed. That's the best way we can make sure that the input from the thousands, of citizens who participate in Citizen Cabinets across the country will be relevant and ultimately influential in Congress.



Most compelling of all, in this case we felt that the respondent had enough information about the two hypothetical candidates that we could ask, “Just based on what you have heard in the debate, would you be more inclined to vote for...” This produced the most stunning finding. An overwhelming 78% of Republicans said they would be most inclined to cross party lines and vote for the Democratic candidate and ninety percent of Democrats said they would be more inclined to vote for the Republican.



Will Voters Have a Negative Response to the Recommendations of Citizen Cabinets?

The third challenge from our political pollster was that while voters might like the idea of the Citizen Cabinet in principle, when they confront the actual majority positions of the Citizen Cabinet and find that there are some with which they disagree, they will turn sour on the whole idea and will have a negative view of the candidate who supports having a Citizen Cabinet.

To find out we presented a subsample the following direction:

You may be wondering what kinds of conclusions Citizen Cabinets would come to. We are now going to show you the recommendations made by a large national Citizen Cabinet consisting of a representative sample of voters from across the country. The Citizen Cabinet was given a briefing on the issue and evaluated arguments for and against each policy option, before making their recommendations. All of the content was reviewed for accuracy and balance by experts from both parties.

All of the recommendations you will see were recommended by a substantial majority, including a majority of Republicans and a majority of Democrats. This was true of the country as a whole, and also in states and districts that are predominantly red (Republican) or blue (Democrat).

As we present each of the recommendations, please select how much you agree or disagree with it.

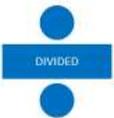
We then presented them sixty such positions with each respondent getting thirty. Topics covered were:

- The Federal Budget
- The Defense Budget
- Reforming Social Security
- Energy and the Environment
- U.S. Postal Service
- The Iran Nuclear Deal

Overall, respondents were pleasantly surprised by the recommendations. We asked, "Based on your judgment of what you think is best" how did the recommendations they saw compare to their expectations.

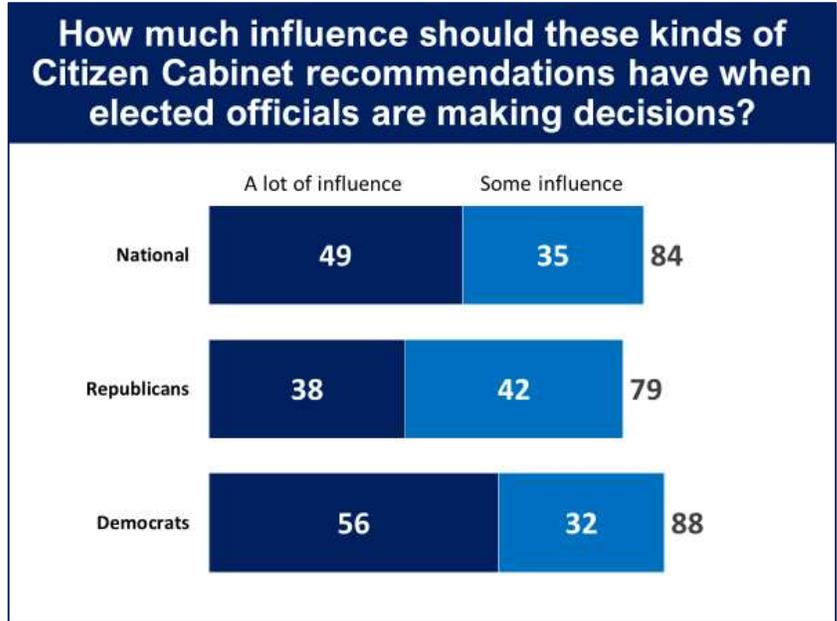
Overall, 61% said they were better than they expected, 29% said they were about the same, and only 9% said they were worse. Republicans were not as pleasantly surprised but still those saying they were better (50%) were far greater than those saying they were worse (14%, about the same 36%). Democrats were overwhelmingly pleased with 72% saying they were better than they expected (same 22%, worse 5%).

Overwhelming majorities also thought that it was important for elected officials to hear these recommendations and to be substantially influenced by them. Asked, "How important do you think it is for elected officials in Washington DC to hear these kinds of recommendations?" An overwhelming majority (92%) said it was important (73% very) including 88% of Republicans (63% very) and 97% of Democrats (83% very).

Agreement with 60 Policy Positions Supported by Citizen Cabinet				
Respondents were presented 60 policy positions supported by bipartisan majorities in national Citizen Cabinet surveys and asked whether they agreed or disagreed.				
	BIPARTISAN MAJORITY	MAJORITY OVERALL AND IN ONE PARTY	REPUBLICANS	DEMOCRATS
	48 Positions	11 Positions	51 Positions	58 Positions
	1 Position		4 Positions	1 Position
			5 Positions	1 Position

Asked, “How much influence do you think these kinds of recommendations should have when elected officials are making decisions?” 84% said that it should have a lot of influence (49%) or some (35%), including 79% of Republicans (a lot 38%), and 88% of Democrats (a lot 56%).

Perhaps most importantly, exposure to these positions had a clearly positive effect on their view of the Citizen Cabinet idea. Asked, “Having considered these different recommendations” what effect did it have on their view of having a Citizen Cabinet in their district, 68% said that it made their view more positive (Republicans 60%, Democrats 77%), while just 6% said that it made their views more negative (Republicans 10%, Democrats 30%). One in four said that their view was about the same (Republicans 30%, Democrats 19%).

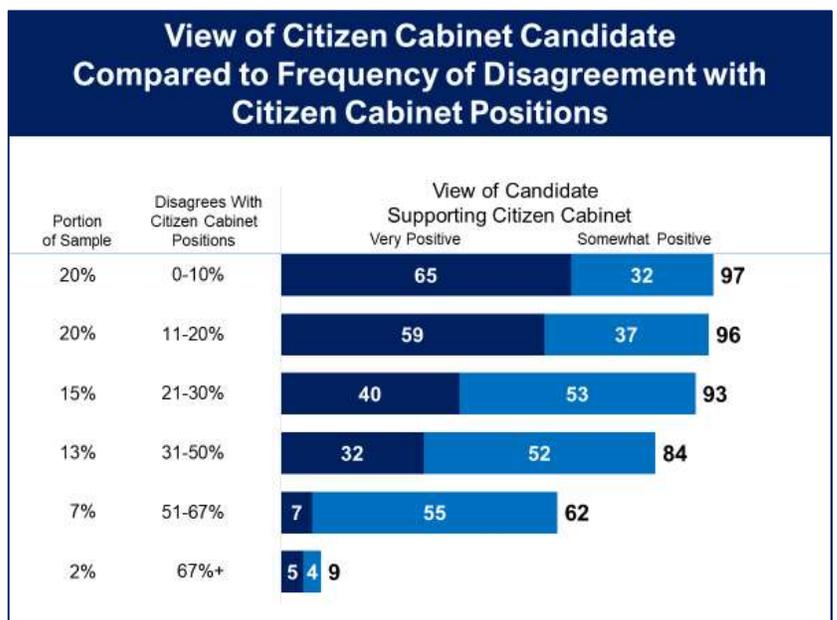


Effect of Disagreement with Recommendations on Views of Candidate

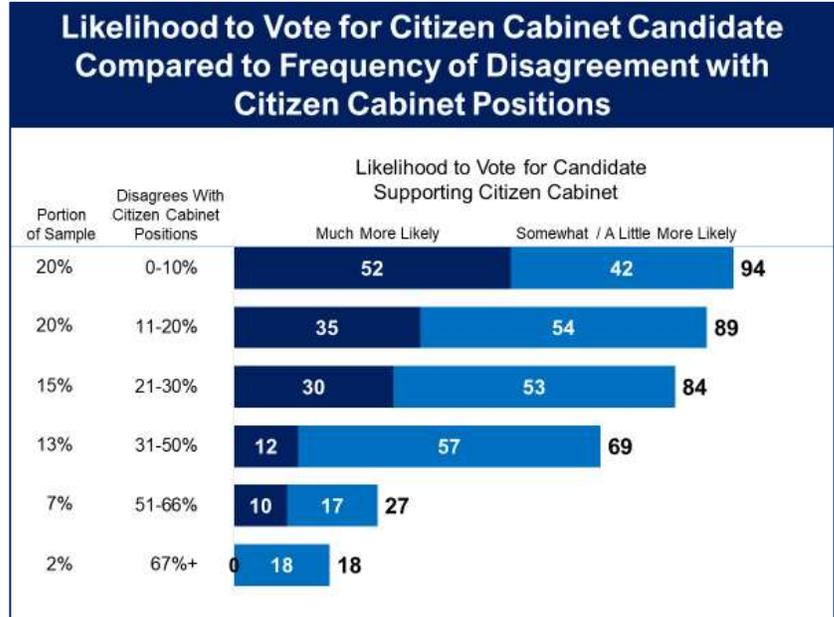
Most relevant was how exposure to the Citizen Cabinet recommendations would affect their view of a candidate who would support having a Citizen Cabinet. After evaluating the recommendations support remained very high. Overall, 89% said they would have a positive view of such a candidate (48% very), including 85% of Republicans (41% very) and 94% of Democrats (58% very).

Upping the ante further, we also asked a separate sample, “Suppose a candidate were to endorse these recommendations and say that they are positions he or she would likely take if elected.” An overwhelming 81% said they would be more likely to vote for the candidate (32% much more) including 73% of Republicans (23% much more) and 89% of Democrats (42% much more).

For the sample as a whole, exposure to the recommendations of the Citizen Cabinet had a positive effect on views of the Citizen Cabinet idea. But how did this vary according to the level of agreement? To find out, we divided the sample according to their level of agreement with the recommendations of the Citizen Cabinet and then looked at the level of support in each group for the candidate proposing a Citizen Cabinet.



Not surprisingly, we found that people who rarely disagreed with the Citizen Cabinet positions showed greater enthusiasm for a candidate who supported having a Citizen Cabinet in their district. With greater disagreement this decreased. But what was striking was that it was only when the respondents disagreed more than half the time that positive views of the candidate dropped off significantly, and it was only among the very tiny number (3%) who disagreed more than two thirds of the time that the majority actually turned negative.



General Tolerance for Disagreement with the Citizen Cabinet

Respondents also reported that they would be quite tolerant of a substantial level of disagreement with the Citizen Cabinet and still support the Citizen Cabinet and a candidate who proposed one even when they assumed that they would be at odds with the Citizen Cabinet a substantial amount of the time.

Before being exposed to the Citizen Cabinet positions respondents were asked how much of the time they thought they would agree with the views of the Citizen Cabinet. On average respondents estimated that they would agree just 57% of the time, with Republicans estimating just 55% of the time and Democrats 60%.

We then looked at the relationship between the level of assumed agreement and support for the Citizen Cabinet. Once again support for the Citizen Cabinet and a candidate who would support having a Citizen Cabinet in their district was overwhelming even among those who assumed that they would agree with the Citizen Cabinet just one third to one half of the time. It was only among the 13% who assumed that they would agree less than a third of the time that support dropped sharply, but even then, support did not fall below half.

Will Citizen Cabinets Find Common Ground? Findings from a Pilot Study

Naturally, a key question is whether Citizen Cabinets will in fact find common ground. One could well assume that Congress is simply a mirror of the public and that citizens will be no better at finding common ground than Congress.

From 2016 to 2018, PPC conducted a series of policymaking simulation surveys with a national Citizen Cabinet, and additionally for some of the surveys in nine states and in two Congressional districts. Bipartisan majorities agreed on dozens of policy positions on a wide variety of topics. There was remarkable similarity in the results in very Republican states, such as Oklahoma, and very Democratic states, such as New York. While the findings are too extensive to cover fully, some highlights are as follows. Full reports can be found at www.publicconsultation.org.

Social Security

The Social Security program faces a shortfall and needs major reform, yet Congress has been unable to even start the process of addressing the Social Security shortfall. The problem is widely seen as a third rail in politics. Standard polls can contribute to this impression because when asked as separate questions, majorities have shown resistance to reducing benefits and to increasing the taxes that support the program.

In the policymaking simulation, respondents were briefed on how the Social Security program works and the projected shortfall. They evaluated a series of options for addressing the shortfall that have been presented in the public debate and scored by the Social Security Administration, including options advocated by Republicans and by Democrats. Respondents received immediate feedback about the aggregate effect of their recommendations on the shortfall. Large bipartisan majorities (76-88%) recommended steps that have been advocated by both parties and that eliminated two-thirds of the shortfall, including: raising the retirement age to at least 68, reducing benefits for at least the upper 25% of earners, increasing the payroll tax from 6.2% to at least 6.6%, and raising the cap on income subject to the payroll tax to \$215,000 or eliminating it. Fifty-nine percent favored eliminating the cap on income subject to the payroll tax, which, together with the other steps approved by a majority, would eliminate the shortfall entirely.

Medicare

Medicare is another program widely recognized as needing reform and facing an imminent shortfall, but once again Congress has been unable to act. Respondents were briefed on how the Medicare program works and projected shortfall. They evaluated a series of options for addressing the shortfall that have been presented and scored by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), except for one scored by the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission or MEDPAC. They include options that have been advocated by Republicans, others by Democrats, and some by Members from both parties. Respondents received immediate feedback about the aggregate effect of their recommendations. Majorities of Republican and Democratic respondents agreed on policies advocated by both parties, which would reduce the Medicare shortfall by 22%, while the overall majority reduced it more than 30%.

The Federal Budget

The Federal budget deficit is another issue that is widely recognized as problematic, but Congress has failed to address it. In this policymaking simulation respondents were not prompted to reduce the deficit. They were simply allowed to modify the Federal budget as they saw fit, getting immediate feedback on the impact of their changes on the deficit. They were presented the discretionary budget broken into 31-line items and allowed to make changes. For revenues, they were able to make changes to effective tax rates and considered possible new taxes as well, with all options scored in terms of the impact on the deficit. In making a budget for FY 2019, through a combination of spending cuts and revenues increases, the overall majority reduced the deficit \$348 billion. Republicans and Democrats converged on steps that reduced the deficit \$128 billion.

Federal Poverty Programs

Respondents were given a briefing about the current state of poverty and the various federal poverty alleviation programs in the United States. They evaluated Congressional legislative proposals for reforming existing programs and creating new programs from both sides of the aisle. Bipartisan majorities favored Democratic proposals to increase SNAP (aka food stamps) benefit levels for single mothers and individuals living alone, but also supported Republican proposals to not allow SNAP benefits to be used for sweetened soda or candy. Majorities of Republicans and Democrats agreed on raising the minimum wage to \$9 an hour; Democrats raised it further, but not as far as the \$15 some Democratic legislation has proposed. Large bipartisan majorities favored setting up federal jobs programs to have them ready in the event economic conditions worsen. A slight majority of Republicans joined a large majority of Democrats in support of making pre-kindergarten available to all 4 year-olds in low-income families and expanding the availability of Early Head Start programs.

Immigration

Not surprisingly there were areas of partisan differences such as on whether to invest in building a wall along the US-Mexican border or to reduce the number of green cards issued. However, there was robust bipartisan support for the Republican proposal to require employers to use the E-Verify system to ensure that all hires are legal, and bipartisan proposals to increase guest worker visas. The Democratic proposal to provide “dreamers” a path to citizenship also elicited bipartisan support among respondents. Few respondents of either party favored eliminating any of the family-based immigration programs or the diversity lottery, though Republicans favored reducing the number for some of these programs.

Sentencing Reform

Respondents evaluated the key proposals of Republican-sponsored and bipartisan-supported Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act, which has since been passed into law. Large majorities from both parties endorsed all of the proposals to lower mandatory minimum sentences, give judges more discretion in releasing certain prisoners early, and retroactively apply the changes to sentencing for crack cocaine.

Environment and Energy

Proposals that specifically mentioned climate concerns did not elicit robust bipartisan support—only a bare majority of Republicans supported the Paris Climate Agreement proposal to reduce emissions by 2% a year. Nonetheless, robust bipartisan majorities supported steps that would reduce carbon dioxide as well as other pollutants, including providing tax credits for installing fuel-efficient lighting, doors, windows and insulation for homes and businesses; building new energy efficient homes; and installing wind and fuel cell micro-turbines.

Bipartisan majorities favored higher fuel efficiency standards for light cars, trucks and heavy-duty vehicles, and requiring electric companies to have a minimum portion of their electricity come from renewable sources. In addition, large bipartisan majorities favored tax credits for building biogas facilities on farms to turn methane emissions into energy and requiring businesses to gradually replace hydrofluorocarbons with alternative refrigerants.

In regard to offshore drilling, bipartisan majorities opposed lifting the regulation requiring that oil drilling equipment be inspected by independent auditors certified by the federal government, favored renewing and raising the tax oil companies pay to a special fund to cover the cost of oil spills, and favored granting appeals that the ban on offshore drilling be kept in place for the 15 out of 17 states that requested it.

US Postal Service

The problems of the US Postal service are a particularly apt topic for a policymaking simulation survey as few Americans have enough information about the issue to give meaningful input. Respondents were briefed about the current funding problems of the US Postal Service and evaluated recommendations put forward by the Postmaster General and the Inspector General, as well as in legislation sponsored by Democrats and Republicans. Large majorities from both parties recommended reforms that came from both sides of the aisle that would help USPS lower its costs and increase its revenues, including reducing the pre-funding requirement for employee health benefits from 100% pre-funding to 80%, allowing the Postal Service to offer a wider range of products and services, allowing up to five percent of unprofitable post offices to be closed each year, allowing elimination of Saturday letter delivery and more.

Net Neutrality

Respondents were briefed about net neutrality, and the FCC decision to repeal it. An overwhelming majority of respondents from both parties opposed repealing net neutrality.

Government Reform

As was discussed above, bipartisan majorities supported a variety of reforms including ones advocated by Republicans (term limits for Members of Congress), by Democrats (campaign finance reform, and independent commissions in charge of redistricting), and by Members from both parties (extended lobbying restrictions on former government officials).



1301 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 750
Washington, DC 20036
202.232.5075
www.VOP.org



PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

1301 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 750
Washington, DC 20036
202.232.7500
www.publicconsultation.org