

***EMBARGOED UNTIL
SEPTEMBER 29, 2006
AT 11AM (ET)***

PUBLIC OPINION TOWARD LEGISLATING FOR THE FUTURE
August 2006

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Summary

Even as the congressional elections concentrate on public worries about the war in Iraq and the economy, many Americans remain deeply concerned about long-term issues such as global warming, Social Security, and Medicare. Half of Americans are even very or somewhat worried about the condition of their aging roads and bridges. Although these issues will be in the background in coming weeks, congressional candidates must recognize that questions about the future of the nation are part of the public's agenda for coming sessions of Congress. If the members of the next Congress want to be remembered as part of a "Do Something" Congress, it must address these issues.

This conclusion comes from a survey conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International on behalf of New York University's Brademas Center for the Study of Congress and the Organizational Performance Initiative, which is housed at the Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service. According to the random-sample telephone survey of 1,000 adults conducted in July 2006, long-term issues provoke intense worries among many Americans and may yet influence electoral politics. The survey has a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percent and reveals two major findings:

1. Favorability toward Congress remained expectedly low in July. Only six percent of Americans were very favorable toward Congress in July, while 53 percent were somewhat or very unfavorable.

The Legislating for the Future Project is an initiative of New York University's John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress and the Organizational Performance Initiative, and is co-sponsored by the Brookings Institution and the RAND Corporation. The project will examine the capacity of Congress to address long-term problems facing the nation, probe the public's attitudes towards Congress' ability to make long-term decisions for the 21st Century, and analyze specific long-term policy issues. The Legislating for the Future Project will convene experts for discussions of specific long-term issues, such as global warming, and seek to generate strategies to make Congress more flexible and adaptive to future problems. The Advisory Committee for the project is headed by Former Representative Lee H. Hamilton. The project is funded by the John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress, the Smith Richardson Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation. For more information, please visit: www.nyu.edu/wagner/performance and www.nyu.edu/brademas.

The views and opinions of the author do not necessarily state or reflect those of the co-sponsoring or funding organizations.

Embargoed until September 29, 2006 at 11am (ET)

2. Americans expressed deep worries about the eight long-term issues presented in the survey—Social Security, energy, Medicare, immigration, terrorism, treatment for new diseases, global warming, and repairing the nation’s older roads and bridges:
 - 81 percent were very or somewhat worried about Social Security
 - 81 percent were very or somewhat worried about energy
 - 80 percent were very or somewhat worried about Medicare
 - 80 percent were very or somewhat worried about immigration
 - 78 percent were very or somewhat worried about terrorism
 - 70 percent were very or somewhat worried about treatment for new diseases
 - 70 percent were very or somewhat worried about global warming
 - 50 percent were very or somewhat worried about repairing the nation’s older roads and bridges

These questions about the eight issues were split between the sample of 1,000 Americans—half were asked about one set of four issues, while the other half were asked about the other set of four issues. The margin of error on these questions is plus-or-minus four percent.

3. The survey suggests that Americans do not believe Congress is paying enough attention to seven of these eight issues. Although 81 percent felt that Congress is paying a great deal or fair amount of attention to terrorism, only 52 percent said the same about Medicare, 48 percent about energy, 47 percent about Social Security, and just 33 percent about treatment for new diseases.
4. Americans were almost equally split on whether Congress has the knowledge to act on these eight long-term issues. Half believe Congress knows enough to make decisions on in the interest of the American people on Social Security, and more than 40 percent say the same about terrorism (48 percent), energy (46 percent), repairing the nation’s older roads and bridges (42 percent), immigration (42 percent), and Medicare (41 percent), and a third or more believe it has the information to act on global warming (36 percent), and treatment for new diseases (33 percent).
5. Not surprisingly, Americans thought little of congressional performance on these issues. Only 29 percent said Congress was doing a very good job on terrorism, 17 percent on treatment for new diseases, 15 percent of repairing the nation’s older roads and bridges, and ten percent or less on immigration, Social Security, Medicare, and global warming.
6. Americans have mixed opinion regarding why Congress is doing a poor job, raising questions again about whether the institution has the capacity to act. Half believe that treatment for new diseases and terrorism are just too complex for Congress to handle, while 40 percent or less feel the same about the other six issues. The rest said the lack of action was Congress’s fault.

7. Given their worries, the vast majority of Americans want Congress to act now on the long-term issues:

- 92 percent said immigration demanded action now
- 91 percent said the same about terrorism
- 90 percent said the same about both energy and Medicare
- 88 percent said the same about Social Security
- 86 percent said the same about treatments for new diseases
- 75 percent said the same about global warming
- 65 percent said the same about repairing the nation's older roads and bridges

There are important party differences in the responses to these questions—Democrats are generally more worried about issues such as global warming, for example, but there are surprisingly few differences in public attitudes regarding congressional attention, knowledge, and performance. Except for terrorism, where Democrats think Congress is doing a poorer job than Republicans, members of the two parties are just as likely to agree that Congress is not doing a good job on the other seven long-term issues identified in the survey. Indeed, the survey reveals fewer party differences than one might otherwise expect from a survey taken in the summer before a major mid-term congressional election. Americans simply do not believe Congress is doing enough about the major long-term issues they are worried about.

Indeed, in the whole, the survey speaks to the potential difficulty in acting on any of these issues given the public's lack of confidence in Congress's deliberative capacity. It is one thing to be worried about an issue, to damn congressional performance, and to demand immediate action. It is quite another to have confidence that Congress knows enough about these complex issues to inspire confidence and support in the actual decisions. In short, it is not immediately clear that the public would accept action on the long-term issues explored in this survey even if Congress were to act. It depends in part on whether Congress is ready to spend enough time debating the issues, collect enough information to educate itself and the public alike, and give the issues the attention they deserve on the congressional agenda. Moreover, as the immigration debate shows, the public is sharply divided about how Congress should act on these long-term issues, suggesting that there is plenty of need for public education as part of addressing long-term concerns.

Favorability toward Congress

There were few surprises in the survey regarding attitudes toward Congress and the people who seek to influence it, though some of the figures are higher than one might expect given the general reporting on the depth of public anger toward what some have characterized as a "Do Nothing" Congress. Moreover, although Americans are very unfavorable toward members of Congress and Congressional lobbyists, they are somewhat more favorable toward congressional staff, reporters, and people who study the issues that Congress covers:

- 53 percent were somewhat or very unfavorable toward members of Congress
- 63 percent were similarly unfavorable toward lobbyists who try to influence Congress
- 48 percent were unfavorable toward reporters who cover Congress
- 29 percent were unfavorable toward congressional staff who work for members of Congress
- 23 percent were unfavorable toward people who study the issues that Congress covers

These opinions did vary by party. With Republicans in charge of Congress, Republicans interviewed for this study were more favorable toward the institution—just 32 percent of Democrats expressed either very or somewhat favorable opinions toward Congress, compared with 53 percent of Republicans. Similarly, just 35 percent of Republicans expressed favorable opinions toward reporters who cover Congress, compared with 56 percent of Democrats. Although there is strong support for congressional staff, these findings suggest that Congress should rely more on policy experts who study the issues that Congress covers if they want increased credibility in making long-term decisions.

Respondents from both parties agreed, however, on why Congressional members choose to serve, and how they behave once in office:

- 54 percent said that members of Congress serve for the financial rewards and benefits of being in Congress
- 49 percent said members serve for the desire to make more money after they leave Congress
- 36 percent said members serve to make important decisions.
- 31 percent said members serve to make a difference through working in government
- And just 29 percent said members serve to make America a better place

When asked how Congress picks the issues it decides, Democrats and Republicans also agreed on what matters most to members. Given a choice of motivations, 56 percent of the respondents said that members of Congress only care about issues that make a difference in the next election, while 37 percent said that members care about issues that affect the country's long-term future as well as issues that affect the next election.

These percentages suggest that there may well be a reservoir of support for congressional action—although this survey reveals plenty of distrust toward Congress, there are bright spots in the results, including the substantial minority who believe Congress wants to make America a better place and care about issues that affect the long-term future. Nevertheless, the figures confirm the public's general lack of confidence in Congress.

What are Americans Worried About?

Although the current congressional elections are focusing heavily on immediate-term issues such as the war in Iraq, gasoline prices, and the economy more generally, Americans expressed significant worries about longer-term issues that have either stalled in Congress (e.g., immigration), continue to be of great concern short- or long-term (terrorism), or have been set aside for the future. As Table 1 suggests, Americans have significant worries about the eight issues addressed in the survey—issues that were selected for the survey because they have long-term impacts that often lead members of Congress to believe that the issues can be set aside in the short-term. Many of the issues also involve policies that cannot be solved without inflicting significant short-term pain such as higher gasoline taxes and mileage standards (global warming), higher taxes and benefit cuts (Social Security and Medicare), or significant costs (terrorism, treatment for new diseases, repairing the nation’s roads and bridges).

Once again, immigration is a long-term issue that has been widely debated in Congress as an immediate-term issue with no results, in part because Americans disagree sharply on the policy choices for resolving the issue. The fact that so many remain worried about the issue may reflect the desire for some resolution, even if many Americans are divided on just what to do. Just because Americans want action does not mean they agree on the outcome—education and reasoned debate may bring them to consensus.

Table 1: Personal Worries about the Future: Percent very or somewhat worried about:

	All	Rep	Dem	
Social Security	81%	74%	89%	*
Energy	81%	77%	88%	*
Medicare	80%	69%	85%	*
Immigration	80%	84%	76%	*
Terrorism	78%	81%	78%	
Treatment for new diseases	70%	58%	81%	*
Global warming	70%	52%	81%	*
Repairing older roads and bridges	50%	46%	50%	

* Statistically significant party differences.

As the table shows, there are significant party differences in worries about the future, with Republicans less concerned about six of the eight issues. Indeed, the only issue about which Republicans were significantly more worried than Democrats was immigration. This heightened worry may reflect the intense congressional debate about the president’s immigration reforms, which are currently stalled between the House and the Senate.

The list is particularly important for two reasons. First, it shows the range of concerns about issues that are not part of the election debate. Although terrorism is certainly on the president’s mid-term election agenda, and immigration is central in key congressional districts, the other six issues are simply not being debated in the halls of Congress.

Members of Congress are generally remaining silent about their positions on these key long-term issues, in part because elections so often turn on short-term issues, but in part because members have done so little to actually move reform forward. Of course, debates on contentious long-term issues may be best held as far from the next election as possible, which is how the 1983 Social Security rescue occurred.

Is Congress Spending Enough Attention and Time on Long-Term Issues?

Members of Congress are also relatively quiet about many of the long-term issues tested in the survey because they may know that the public thinks they have not been paying enough attention to the questions. Although Americans have no doubts that Congress has been paying a great deal or fair amount of attention to terrorism, the other long-term issues pale in comparison. Table 2 shows the pattern:

Table 2: Congress Paying Attention: Percent who say Congress is paying great deal or fair amount of attention to:

	All	Rep	Dem	
Terrorism	81%	85%	79%	
Medicare	52%	61%	46%	*
Energy	48%	52%	42%	*
Social Security	47%	50%	43%	
Repairing older roads and bridges	46%	50%	46%	
Immigration	46%	50%	46%	
Treatment for new diseases	43%	52%	36%	*
Global warming	35%	44%	30%	*

* Statistically significant party differences.

Americans are clearly convinced that Congress is not paying enough attention to most of the long-term issues about which they care, a point made emphatically when one examines the percentage of Americans who believe that Congress is paying a great deal of attention to issues about which they are very worried. These disconnects create a worry/attention gap that speaks to the lack of congressional responsiveness on long-term issues. For example, 81 percent of Americans said they were very or somewhat worried about Social Security, but only 47 percent said Congress is paying a great deal of attention to the issue; 81 percent said they were very worried about energy, but only 48 percent said Congress is paying a great deal of attention to the issue; and 80 percent said they were very worried about Medicare, but only 52 percent said congress is paying a great deal of attention to the issue. Terrorism was the only issue on which the level of personal worry appeared to match the level of congressional attention.

These concerns about congressional inaction pervade opinions about whether Congress is spending enough time on each of the eight long-term issues. As Table 3 shows, the survey's respondents are convinced that Congress is spending too little time working on the long-term issues that face the country.

Table 3: Congressional Time: Percent who say Congress is spending too little time on:

	All	Rep	Dem	
Social Security	73%	67%	78%	*
Energy	71%	67%	79%	*
Medicare	68%	57%	73%	*
Global warming	66%	47%	80%	*
Repairing older roads and bridges	65%	59%	67%	
Treatment for new diseases	60%	53%	69%	*
Immigration	58%	59%	57%	
Terrorism	42%	40%	44%	

*Statistically significant party differences.

Again, the survey shows a serious disconnect between the issues about which Americans worry, and the level of congressional attention. Congress has earned its reputation for doing little about the pressing issues of the day by doing just that.

As Table 3 shows, there are important party differences on attitudes toward congressional time. Democrats are more likely to have said that Congress is spending too little time on the issues about which they care. Nevertheless, substantial majorities of Republicans appear to be convinced that Congress is not spending enough time on key long-term issues, and agree with Democrats that Congress may not have the priorities in setting its agenda. Indeed, except for terrorism, where 38 percent of Americans said that Congress was spending the right amount of time on the issue, the vast majority of Americans appeared to want a rebalancing of priorities to give great attention to the issues about which they worried most.

Thus, action on long-term issues may first require a national debate about priorities for the future. Americans appear to have such significant doubts about Congress that they might not trust action even if Congress provides it.

Does Congress have Enough Knowledge to Act?

Questions about attention and time have to be balanced with public attitudes regarding congressional capacity to act. To the extent knowledge is one measure of the capacity to decide, the public has a mixed impression of Congress's ability to make wise decisions on the eight long-term issues addressed in the survey. As Table 4 shows, roughly half of the public thinks Congress has the knowledge to act on these issues, while the other half thinks Congress needs more information.

Table 4: Knowledge: Percent who say Congress has enough knowledge to act on:

	All	Rep	Dem
Social Security	50%	49%	52%
Terrorism	48%	53%	44%
Energy	46%	45%	45%
Repairing older roads and bridges	42%	40%	42%
Immigration	42%	40%	42%
Medicare	41%	40%	47%
Global warming	36%	33%	38%
Treatment for new diseases	33%	32%	31%

* No statistically significant party differences in table.

The results are hardly an endorsement of congressional deliberation, however. Even on an issue such as Social Security – which has been in the headlines for years and the subject of heated debates in both chambers of Congress, as well as blue-ribbon commissions and presidential speeches, – only half of the public believes that Congress has enough information to act. So, too, for energy, Medicare, and global warming, where the flood of information has been significant by any measure, albeit often contradictory.

When coupled with the earlier attitudes about attention and time, the survey presents a serious dilemma for Congress. On the one hand, the public is personally worried about these eight long-term issues, thinks Congress is not paying enough attention, and wants Congress to spend more time on each issue. On the other hand, the public thinks Congress does not have the knowledge to do so. If Congress is to act, therefore, it needs to reassure the public that it actually has the knowledge to make thoughtful decisions, which means that it needs to increase its deliberative capacity. It cannot act with strength and reassurance if the public believes it does not have the knowledge to do so.

Is Congress Doing A Good Job Addressing Issues?

Given these general attitudes and disconnects between worries and action, it is no surprise that most Americans have little positive to say about actual congressional performance on the eight long-term issues addressed in this study. As Table 5 shows, Americans did not give Congress the benefit of the doubt on the major issues it faces:

Table 5: Congressional Performance: Percent who rated congressional performance as very good or good

	All	Rep	Dem
Terrorism	29%	42%	19%
Treatment for new diseases	17%	17%	14%
Repairing older roads and bridges	15%	15%	17%
Energy	11%	12%	10%
Immigration	10%	14%	9%
Social Security	9%	9%	7%
Medicare	9%	13%	8%
Global warming	7%	10%	7%

*Statistically significant party difference.

The table is particularly notable for the lack of party differences on all but terrorism. Republicans certainly thought that Congress had done a better job on the issue than Democrats, but even here, less than half of Republicans endorsed congressional performance. On the other seven issues, Americans generally closely agree that Congress simply has not done its job in addressing their worries about the long-term issues.

Americans were somewhat more forgiving when asked why the performance was so poor. When given a choice, Americans who said Congress had done a fair or poor job often laid the blame on the issue itself. As Table 6 shows, however, the attribution was not even across the eight issues, and often varied by party.

Table 6: Issue Complexity: Percent who said issue was too difficult/complex to resolve

	All	Rep	Dem
Treatment for new diseases	50%	56%	41%
Terrorism	50%	51%	50%
Global warming	48%	55%	45%
Immigration	41%	31%	49%
Medicare	36%	39%	37%
Energy	33%	38%	28%
Repairing older roads and bridges	33%	33%	38%
Social Security	32%	36%	26%

* Statistically significant party differences.

These responses may simply mirror America’s own views of the long-term policy issues—e.g., disease is complex, therefore, inaction is due to complexity; terrorism involves uncertainty, therefore, inaction is due to complexity. At the same time, however, the results do suggest that Americans may have a better sense of the difficulties of long-term issues than their leaders may believe. Ironically, Social Security remains the “third-rail” of the political subway—Americans do not believe it is particularly difficult to fix, but disagree sharply on the nature of the action. The results confirm earlier speculation about the need to have a national debate about priorities before Congress takes on these long-term issues.

This debate might well include conversations about the need for national sacrifice to actually make progress.

Do Americans Want Congress to Act?

Whatever their doubts about the lack of knowledge or the difficulty/complexity of a given issue, Americans are quite clear that they want action now on the long-term issues described above. Their personal worries translate into clear demands. As Table 7 shows, the demands are hardly easy to ignore. The vast majority of Americans want Congress to do something now.

Table 7: The Need to Act: Percent who say issue requires action now

	All	Rep	Dem
Immigration	92%	94%	90%
Terrorism	91%	95%	90%
Energy	90%	92%	94%
Medicare	90%	89%	93%
Social Security	88%	91%	89%
Treatment for new diseases	86%	80%	89%
Global warming	75%	58%	87%
Repairing older roads and bridges	65%	59%	66%

*Statistically significant party difference.

The table shows only small party differences with one exception, global warming. Democrats are overwhelming in their demand for action now, compared to a much smaller majority of Republicans. However, even Republicans have come to believe that global warming demands a response, which remains contrary to the prevailing Republican leadership position in the White House and on Capitol Hill.

Demographic Differences

There are relatively few differences in the survey between the young and old, rich and poor, women and men, and among whites and minorities. However, there are several differences worth noting.

First, young Americans remained the most hopeful about the future, perhaps because they have more time to imagine possible solutions to their problems. Older Americans are consistently the most pessimistic about the future, especially regarding Social Security and Medicare.

Second, women tended to be much less favorable to Congress and less confident in congressional knowledge to act on Social Security and Medicare, while men are more likely to believe that Congress is spending about the right amount of time on terrorism and immigration.

Finally, minorities were much more likely than whites to express worried about rebuilding the nation's roads and bridges and address energy, perhaps because they are more likely to live in urban areas and tend to fall into lower income groups that are more affected by energy prices.

Conclusion

Overall, this survey provides an outline for a "Do Something Congress" for the next session. Americans are clearly saying they want Congress to devote the attention, collect the knowledge, spend the time, and take action on the key long-term issues the nation faces. Although no one can say whether the public will accept that action, particularly if it involves the kind of pain needed to repair programs such as Social Security and Medicare, members of Congress may yet pay a price for inaction.

The survey also strongly suggests that Congress may be ignoring a large and unhappy constituency for debate and action on a range of long-term issues that have been mostly ignored in recent legislative debates. Whatever one thinks of President Bush's Social Security proposals or former Vice President Gore's calls for action on global warming, the survey suggests that the public is ready for debate.

The challenge is to collect the institutional resources needed for vigorous resolution. This means better knowledge, more time, deliberative energy, and the political will to tackle issues that have very little short-term appeal, but great long-term impact. These issues also involve a demand for sacrifice in almost every case, whether in the form of increased budgets, benefit cuts, and changes in basic national behavior. As the Brademas Center's "Legislating for the Future" project will explore, there may be new forms of legislating that might help Congress make these painful decisions, not by deferring decisions further into the future, but by linking decisions to key indicators of the need for action—e.g., further decreases in the ratio of young people to Social Security beneficiaries. But whatever the device, there is a constituency for long-term action. Whether it can be called to action depends in large measure on how Congress makes the call—through contentious debate or a long-need conversation about national priorities.