

PUBLIC OPINION TOWARD LEGISLATING FOR THE FUTURE:
AN UPDATE, 2008

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Summary

The past two years have been unsettled at best for Congress. Public approval toward Congress remains low, legislative debates have been contentious, polarization remains high, and Congress has a mixed record in dealing with major long-term issues such as Social Security and Medicare. The State Children's Health Insurance program has been delayed awaiting a compromise that might expand coverage, immigration reform has been waylaid by the intensity of opposition across the party lines, energy reform was diluted by ongoing disputes about how to reduce the nation's dependence on foreign oil, and the war in Iraq continues to dictate the pace of major legislative debates.

This update on the Brademas Center's 2006 survey of Americans suggests three patterns regarding the agenda of long-term issues that so frustrate Congress:

1. *Americans remain deeply concerned about the major long-term policy issues that face the nation.* They almost certainly do not agree on the specific solutions to tough questions about what to do about the issues that face the nation ten-twenty years from now, but have become increasingly worried about the impact of Social Security, Medicare, energy, and global warming on the nation's future. They are also running out of patience regarding the lack of action, and want decisions even when Congress may not know enough to act.
2. *Worries about global warming have not increased as far as one might have expected over the past two years, and demand for action has actually fallen.* The issue seems to have lost some traction as a cause for concern, perhaps because national attention has shifted to other issues such as the 2008 election or economy or because the strategy for action has involved a top-down approach.
3. *Americans have actually become more hopeful over the past eighteen months regarding the basic motivations of members of Congress.* Approval of Congress may be at all time lows, but confidence in the basic commitment of the members is actually increasing, and not just among Democrats who might be inclined to see members of their new majority in Congress as somehow more noble than the Republicans who held control from 1994 to 2006. Asked what motivates a person to serve in Congress, Democrats and Republicans both saw cause for greater confidence. Simply put, Congress may have a reservoir of confidence that it has yet to tap in addressing the future.

About the Surveys

This portrait of worry and hope emerge from a survey of 1,001 randomly-selected Americans in late March 2008. The survey was conducted on behalf of the John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress by Princeton Survey Research Associates, and included a set of questions asked in an August 2006 survey of 1,000 randomly-selected Americans. With these sample sizes, both surveys have margins of error of ± 3 percent, meaning that any given result for the full samples could be 3 percent higher or lower due to sampling error. The questionnaire and comparisons between the 2006 and 2008 surveys are attached to this report.

The Call to Action

Not surprisingly given the absence of visible action on the long-term issues that face the nation, Americans expressed continued worries about the “big four” problems that loom just beyond the horizon: Social Security, Medicare, energy, and global warming.

WORRIES. These worries are palpable in the 2008 Brademas Center Survey, which showed increased worries regarding issues:

- 59 percent of respondents in the March 2008 survey said they were very worried about the future of the country when it comes to issues involving Social Security, up 11 percent from the July 2006 survey.
- 56 percent of respondents in the March 2008 survey said they were very worried about the future of the country when it comes to issues involving energy, up 14 percent from the July 2006 survey.
- 54 percent of respondents in the March 2008 survey said they were very worried about the future of the country when it comes to issues involving Medicare, up 16 percent from the July 2006 survey.
- 39 percent of the respondents in the March 2008 survey said they were very worried about the future of the country when it comes to issues involving global warming, up 7 percent from the July 2006 survey, but obviously the lowest mark of the four issues in total concern and rate of change.

The increased worries about the Social Security, energy, and Medicare are even sharper when respondents who said they were very worried are combined with respondents who said they were somewhat worried. At the same time, worries about global warming seem less urgent. Table 1 shows the comparisons between 2008 and 2006.

Table 1

Issue	Very + Somewhat Worried 2006 → 2008	Not too worried + Not at all worried 2006 → 2008
Social Security	81% → 86%	20% → 14%
Energy	81% → 87%	18% → 12%
Medicare	80% → 84%	19% → 15%
Global Warming	70% → 67%	19% → 22%

GLOBAL WARMING. Worries about Social Security, energy, and Medicare all increased significantly between 2006 and 2008, but concerns about global warming have taken a somewhat different path.

As Table 1 shows, the percentage of Americans who said they were very *or* somewhat worried about the issue actually fell slightly, even as the percentage who were very worried increase, suggesting that worries about the issue have remained relatively flat.

More significantly, as discussed more generally below, the percentage of Americans who said that global warming requires attention now actually fell 6 percentage points from 75 percent in 2006 to 69 percent in 2008, while the percentage who felt that members of Congress know enough about global warming to make decisions that are in the best interest of the American people fell 8 percentage points from 36 percent in 2006 to 28 percent in 2008.

Consider four possible explanations for this drift.

First, the issue may be exhausting itself as it moves through the traditional “issue-attention cycle,” as political scientists call. The cycle begins with alarmed discovery of the kind that came with Vice President Al Gore’s Academy-Award winning documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, peaked with continued scrutiny, and faded somewhat as the public tired of the issue and the media turned more heavily to the 2008 campaign and rising economic crisis.

Second, the national strategy for action on global warming has generally concentrated on relatively complicated concepts such as “cap-and-trade” that many Americans simply do not understand. If true, advocates of action on global warming may need to consider new tactics for keeping the agenda visible among all Americans, especially demographic groups that express less worry about the issue.

Demographically, worries about global warming are lower among men than women (35 percent of men were very worried v. 44 percent of women), older Americans than

younger Americans (30 percent of Americans aged 65 and older were very worried v. 45 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29), whites than minorities (37 percent of whites were very worried v. 47 percent of black/African Americans, 46 percent of Hispanics, 46 percent of Native Americans or Alaskan Natives, and 42 percent of Asian American), and higher income earners than lower income earners (36 percent of those with family incomes over \$100,000 were very worried v. 47 percent of those with family incomes under \$25,000).

Third, there is a strong partisan tone to the issue. In a relative sense, Democrats and independents were much more worried about global warming than Republicans—81 percent of Democrats were very or somewhat worried in 2008, compared with 71 of independents, and just 46 percent of Republicans.

But the worries were actually down among both Democrats and Republicans, and remained virtually unchanged among independents. The percentage of Democrats who were very or somewhat worried about global warming fell from 85 percent in 2006 to 81 percent in 2008, while the percentage of Republicans who were very or somewhat worried about global warming fell from 53 to 46 percent during the same period. Independents moved just 2 percentage points up, from 70 percent who were very or somewhat worried in 2006 to 71 percent in 2008. Advocates of action need to build bipartisan support for action—history suggests that bipartisanship is essential for building the coalitions needed to push painful issues over the thresholds needed for passage.

Finally, Americans may have fewer worries about global warming because they believe Congress and/or private businesses are moving forward. As the issue is resolved through new mechanisms such as “cap-and-trade” and eco-friendly approaches, perhaps respondents are less anxious. This explanation requires a partial suspension of reality, however, especially given the acceleration of many of the trends that mark global warming. But it is a possibility that must be considered.

ACTION NOW. Given the overall levels of worries about the future, it is not surprising that respondents might believe that each of the four issues demands action now. Asked whether the issues require attention now or can wait, the vast majority of Democrats and Republicans alike answered that the four issues demanded action now.

- 89 percent of the March 2008 respondents said Social Security required attention now, up 1 percent from 2006, a statistically insignificant change.
- 89 percent said energy required attention now, down 1 percent from 2006, again a statistically insignificant change.
- 86 percent said Medicare required attention now, down 4 percent from 2006, a small statistically significant change.
- 69 percent said global warming required attention now, down 6 percent from 2006, a somewhat larger statistically significant change.

CONGRESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE. The demand for overall action on all four issues persists, however, even when respondents believe that members of Congress do not know about the four issues to make decisions that are in the best interests of the country. Asked whether members have enough knowledge, a slender majority said “yes” on only one of the four issues:

- 54 percent of the 2008 respondents said members of Congress have enough information to act on Social Security, up 4 percent from 2006, a statistically significant change.
- 47 percent of the 2008 respondents said members of Congress have enough information to act on Medicare, up 6 percentage points from 2006, another statistically significant change.
- 40 percent of the 2008 respondents said members of Congress have enough information to act on energy, down 6 percent from 2006, a statistically significant change.
- And just 28 percent of the 2008 respondents said members of Congress have enough information to act on global warming, down 8 percent from 2006, another statistically significant change.

Confidence

The key question is not why respondents would remain so worried about the four issues between 2006 and 2008: Congress has done very little, if anything, to address the concerns. Moreover, confidence in Congress remains exceedingly low.

Rather, the key question is why respondents would demand action even when they see so little evidence that members know enough to act in the national interest. Part of the answer rests on higher confidence that members of Congress are motivated to do the right thing even in the absence of knowledge. It is a troubling indicator of worry, but a strong indicator of hope.

The evidence comes from a battery of questions about what motivates members of Congress, all of which have changed toward the positive. Asked about the many reasons that a person would serve in Congress, Americans became much more positive over the past eighteen months.

Table 2

Reason to serve	Very big role 2006 → 2008	Gain/loss in positive impression
Make America a better place to live	24% → 40%	+16%
Make important decisions	36% → 48%	+12%
Make a difference	31% → 38%	+7%
Make more money	49% → 45%	+4%
Desire most to serve country	20% → 30%	+10%

A RESERVOIR OF CONFIDENCE. All of the trends are in a more hopeful direction. Americans still do not think much of Congress, but do think much more positively about members, and not just the one that serves their district. Not only do Americans appear to “love their *member* of Congress, but not Congress,” as the saying goes, the two surveys suggest that many Americans also “love most *members*, but not Congress.” The finding parallels other research on support for federal employees. By focusing on the motivations of individual members, surveys elicit much more favorability than focusing on the institution.

There was still disquiet toward Congress in the Brademas Center’s surveys, however. Asked whether a person who serves in Congress is motivated primarily to serve the country’s best interests or to advance their careers, majorities in both surveys picked the latter. But even here the answers are headed in a more hopeful direction.

At the same time, the percentage who said that Congress only cares about issues that affect that affect the next election remained virtually unchanged between the two surveys at 56 percent win 2006 and 54 percent in 2008. Even here again, the result is very much at odds with the dismal approval ratings found in national surveys of approval toward Congress, while the percentage of respondents who said that members care most about making decisions in the national interest went up by 10 percent from 20 percent to 30 percent as more Americans moved from the “don’t know” category to the positive answer.

PARTY DIFFERENCES. These questions all moved in a more positive direction regardless of the respondent’s party affiliation, again on a lower trajectory among Republicans. Among Republicans, the percentage who said a person serves in Congress to make America a better place to live rose from by 31 percent in 2006 to 38 percent in

2008, while the percentage among Democrats rose from 29 percent in 2006 to 45 percent in 2008. The rest of the measures of confidence showed similar patterns:

- The percentage of Republicans who said that making important decisions plays a very big role in serving in Congress rose from 37 percent in 2006 to 45 percent in 2008, while the percentage of Democrats rose from 36 percent to 52 percent.
- The percentage of Republicans who said that making a difference through working in government plays a very big role rose from 29 percent in 2006 to 39 percent in 2008, while the percentage of Democrats rose from 33 percent to 41 percent.
- The percentage of Republicans who said making more money after they leave dropped plays a very big role dropped from 46 percent in 2006 to 45 percent in 2008, while the percentage of Democrats dropped from 53 percent to 45 percent.

As for the choice between advancing one's own career versus or serve the country's best interests, Republicans and Democrats both moved in the more positive direction, although each group remained skeptical. The percentage of Republicans who said that members serve to advance their careers fell from 65 percent to 55 percent, while the percentage of Democrats who said the same dropped from 74 percent to 51 percent.

These trends reveal two patterns. First, respondents from both parties had more hope toward members of Congress in 2008 than in 2006. Second, the increase among Democrats was always larger, no doubt because the 2006 congressional elections gave their party control of Congress.

Whatever the party differences, Congress appears to have created a reservoir of at least some good will over the past eighteen months. It is good will that might be used to justify action on the big four long-term issues highlighted in the surveys.

Conclusion

Congress clearly faces enormous challenges in dealing with long-term policy challenges such as Social Security, Medicare, energy, and global warming. The issues require significant trade-offs and short-term pain for uncertain long-term gain.

Measured by favorability toward Congress, which continues to hover at 25-30 percent, one might easily argue that Congress does not have the political capital to tackle these long-term issues. But measured by public support for the individual members of Congress, there appears to be significant public support for action. The public is worried, wants action now, and even wants Congress to act on issues where its knowledge is limited. Although one would need a much deeper survey to prove that the public is ready to give Congress wider latitude to decide, the 2006 and 2008 Brademas Center surveys suggest that the public is increasingly confident that members of Congress are well motivated for the task.

No one can tell how long this short-term burst of confidence might last, or whether it will be overwhelmed by continued doubts about both congressional and presidential performance on specific issues such as the war in Iraq and economy. But as long as the public is willing to suspend its harsh judgments about the congressional motives, there appears to be an opening for spending some of this political capital for immediate action on complicated long-term issues.

Topline Report

Brademas Survey on Congress—Public

Prepared by Princeton Survey Research Associates International
for New York University

n = 1001 adults 18 and older

Field Dates: 3.10.2008 – 3.16.2008

Margin of Error = $\pm 3\%$ for results based on full sample

3.21.2008

The columns tested indicators (A, B, etc.) shows statistically significant differences between the 2006 and 2008 Brademas surveys.

Q1a. The first few questions are about Congress. There may be many reasons why a person serves in Congress. How big of a role do you think the desire to make America a better place to live plays in a person's decision to serve in Congress—a very big role, a moderate role, a small role, or no role at all?

		Study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	1000
	A very big role	40% B	29%
	A moderate role	34%	39% A
	A small role	15%	22% A
	No role at all	7%	6%
	Don't know	3%	2%
	Refused	*	*

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q1b. How big of a role do you think the desire to make important decisions plays in a person's decision to serve in Congress—a very big role, a moderate role, a small role, or no role at all?

		Study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	1000
	A very big role	48% B	36%
	A moderate role	34%	41% A
	A small role	9%	16% A
	No role at all	5%	5%
	Don't know	3%	2%
	Refused	*	*

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q1c. How big of a role do you think the chance to make a difference through working in the government plays in a person's decision to serve in Congress—a very big role, a moderate role, a small role, or no role at all?

		Study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	1000
	A very big role	38% B	31%
	A moderate role	38%	40%
	A small role	14%	20% A
	No role at all	6%	5%
	Don't know	3%	3%
	Refused	1%	1%

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q1d. How big of a role do you think the desire to make more money after they leave Congress plays in a person's decision to serve in Congress—a very big role, a moderate role, a small role, or no role at all?

		Study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	1000
	A very big role	45%	49%
	A moderate role	30%	30%
	A small role	12%	12%
	No role at all	7%	5%
	Don't know	6%	3%
	Refused	*	-

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q2. All in all, do you think a person who serves in Congress is motivated primarily to serve the country's best interests or to advance their own career?

		Study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	1000
	Serve country's best interests	30%	20%
	Advance their own career	56%	68%
	Both (VOLUNTEERED)	10%	8%
	Neither (VOLUNTEERED)	*	*
	Don't know	4%	3%
	Refused	*	1%

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q3. Some say Congress only cares about issues that affect the next election, while others say Congress cares about issues that affect the long term future AS WELL AS issues that affect the election. Which comes closest to your views?

		study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	1000
	Members of Congress only care about issues that affect the next election ¹	54%	56%
	Members of Congress care about issues that affect the country's long term future as well as the next election	40%	37%
	Don't know	5%	5%
	Refused	1%	1%

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q4a. How worried are you personally about the future of the country when it comes to issues involving Social Security—very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried or not at all worried?

		Study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	509
	Very worried	59%	48%
	Somewhat worried	27%	33%
	Not too worried	9%	11%
	Not at all worried	5%	9%
	Don't know	*	*
	Refused	*	-

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

¹ In 2006 study, response category was worded "Members of Congress only care about issues that *make a difference in the next election*"

Q4b. How worried are you personally about the future of the country when it comes to issues involving energy—very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried or not at all worried?

		Study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	509
	Very worried	56% B	46%
	Somewhat worried	31%	35%
	Not too worried	8%	13% A
	Not at all worried	4%	5%
	Don't know	1%	1%
	Refused	*	*

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q4c. How worried are you personally about the future of the country when it comes to issues involving Medicare—very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried or not at all worried?

		study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	491
	Very worried	54% B	42%
	Somewhat worried	30%	38% A
	Not too worried	10%	14%
	Not at all worried	5%	5%
	Don't know	1%	1%
	Refused	*	1%

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q4d. How worried are you personally about the future of the country when it comes to issues involving global warming—very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried or not at all worried?

		study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	491
	Very worried	39% B	32%
	Somewhat worried	28%	38% A
	Not too worried	17%	17%
	Not at all worried	15%	12%
	Don't know	1%	1%
	Refused	1%	*

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q5a. Some people say issues involving Social Security require attention now. Others say we can wait to deal with these issues. Which point of view is closer to your own?

		study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	509
	Require attention now	89%	88%
	Can wait	9%	10%
	Don't know	2%	2%
	Refused	*	1%

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q5b. Some people say issues involving energy require attention now. Others say we can wait to deal with these issues. Which point of view is closer to your own?

		study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	509
	Require attention now	89%	90%
	Can wait	10%	8%
	Don't know	1%	2%
	Refused	*	*
			A

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q5c. Some people say issues involving Medicare require attention now. Others say we can wait to deal with these issues. Which point of view is closer to your own?

		study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	491
	Require attention now	86%	90%
	Can wait	12%	6%
	Don't know	2%	2%
	Refused	*	1%
			B

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q5d. Some people say issues involving global warming require attention now. Others say we can wait to deal with these issues. Which point of view is closer to your own?

		study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	491
	Require attention now	69%	75% A
	Can wait	28% B	21%
	Don't know	2%	3%
	Refused	1%	1%

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q6a. Do you feel that members of Congress know enough about issues involving Social Security to make decisions that are in the best interests of the American people?

		study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	509
	Yes	54%	50%
	No	40%	45%
	Don't know	5%	5%
	Refused	*	*

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q6b. Do you feel that members of Congress know enough about issues involving energy to make decisions that are in the best interests of the American people?

		study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	509
	Yes	40%	46% A
	No	53%	48%
	Don't know	6%	5%
	Refused	1%	1%

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q6c. Do you feel that members of Congress know enough about issues involving Medicare to make decisions that are in the best interests of the American people?

		study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	491
	Yes	47%	41%
	No	46%	53% A
	Don't know	7%	4%
	Refused	1%	1%

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B

Q6d. Do you feel that members of Congress know enough about issues involving global warming to make decisions that are in the best interests of the American people?

		study	
		2008 Brademas Study	2006 Brademas Study
		A	B
	WEIGHTED BASE	1001	491
	Yes	28%	36%
	No	63%	57%
	Don't know	8%	6%
	Refused	1%	1%

- Column Proportions:
Columns Tested (5%): A/B