KENNEDY INSTITUTE POLL:
AMERICANS SPEAK ON THE UNITED STATES SENATE

In an effort to better understand Americans’ knowledge of and perceptions about the United States Senate, the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate partnered with leading Republican and Democratic polling firms Public Opinion Strategies and Hart Research Associates to conduct a bipartisan national survey assessing how voters think elected leaders can make Congress work better, the issues voters want Senators to prioritize, and voters’ levels of civic engagement.

The survey results demonstrate a disconnect between voters and the U.S. senators who represent them. Voters express dissatisfaction with the performance of Congress and want senators who are responsive to the people they represent. At the same time, the data points to an American electorate that lacks basic knowledge about our political system.

But there are encouraging notes, too: Americans across different political parties are aligned on the top issues facing the United States and believe that senators working together to find common ground is key to progress. Further, Americans express keen motivation to vote in the upcoming elections, value increased diversity in senatorial ranks, and demonstrate high levels of civic engagement.

All of these findings underscore the ongoing and increasingly urgent need to educate current and future generations about how government works, and to continue creating opportunities for elected leaders and community members to come together for meaningful conversation. All of us – elected leaders and voters alike – have work to do in building a more responsive and representative democracy.

Senator Edward M. Kennedy believed the Senate to be the “greatest deliberative body in the world.” He envisioned the Kennedy Institute as a place that would educate the public about the essential role the Senate plays in democracy and that would empower the next generation of leaders.

The data in this year’s poll serves as a resource in informing how we can engage more Americans in the political process and forge productive connections in our political system.

Mary K. Grant, Ph.D., President of the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate
KEY FINDINGS

The most important quality voters say they want in a senator is listening to the people. A large majority of voters, however, say that the typical senator is out of touch with the people they represent.

- When presented with a series of qualities that people want in a U.S. senator, the most important quality cited by voters is someone who is in touch and listens to the people (57%).

- Also higher on the list of qualities that voters want in a U.S. senator are being smart and knowledgeable about the issues (48%), being effective and getting things done (41%), being compassionate and caring about people (38%), and being open to compromise and willing to work with those with whom they disagree (37%).

- Three-quarters (76%) of voters say that most senators are out of touch with the people of their states.

- More voters want their senator to do what their constituents want (43%) than want their senator to follow the dictates of his or her own conscience (21%), though 36% say both are important.
Many more voters say they would prefer a senator who makes compromises to get things done rather than one who refuses to compromise on his or her principles, but few think senators actually are willing to make compromises to get things done.

- Half (48%) want a senator who is willing to make compromises to get things done, compared with just one-fifth (18%) who prefer a senator who will not compromise on his or her principles; 34% say they want both equally. Both Republican and Democratic voters are more likely to prefer a senator who makes compromises to one who does not.

  In each pair, which statement do you think better describes most U.S. senators today?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very little gets done because most senators are unwilling to compromise or work across party lines</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most senators are willing to make compromises and work across party lines in order to get things done</td>
<td>16%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Most just vote a party line and follow what their party leaders want when they take positions on issues</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most make independent decisions when they take positions on issues</td>
<td>20%</td>
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- Fully 84% of all voters say that most senators are unwilling to make compromises in order to get things done.

The biggest improvements that could be made to the U.S. Senate focus on changing campaign finance laws and term limits—though the emphasis depends on the voters’ party preference.

- When presented with a number of ways that the U.S. Senate could be improved, 38% of voters say that the single biggest improvement would be changes to campaign finance laws to reduce the influence of special interests. Democrats are more likely to mention reducing the influence of special interests (50%).

- The second biggest improvement to the U.S. Senate is placing term limits, with 29% of voters citing this, and Republicans are more likely to mention this than other voters (41%).
Voters identify voting on legislation and providing oversight of the executive branch as the most important constitutional responsibilities of the U.S. Senate. Regardless of who the president is, a majority of voters want their U.S. senator to provide a check and balance on the president.

Voters were shown a list of responsibilities for the U.S. Senate as defined by the U.S. Constitution and asked which ones are most important to them. Three in five voters say that the most important constitutional responsibilities for the U.S. Senate are considering and voting on legislation along with the House (63%) and overseeing the actions of the executive branch of the federal government along with the House (61%). Democratic voters are more likely to emphasize oversight, while Republicans are more likely to emphasize passing legislation.

By 58% to 10%, voters prefer that their senator act as a check and balance on the president rather than supporting the president, regardless of who the president is, with 32% indicating that they want a senator who does both. Majorities of Democrats (76%) and independents (55%) want their senator to serve as a check and balance, and Republicans also are more likely to feel this way than to want their senator to support the president, by 40% to 18%; 42% of Republicans say that supporting the president and checking the president are equally important.

Voters also assign a high priority to the Senate’s role in providing advice and consent on a president’s nominees—including those who prioritize the Senate’s role in considering a president’s nomination for the Supreme Court and other federal courts (44%). Conservative Republicans and college-educated men are most likely to emphasize the importance of the Senate’s role in judicial nominations.
Satisfaction with the United States Senate is low and negative attitudes about the Senate are expressed across the political spectrum.

- Overall, 28% of voters say that they are satisfied with the U.S. Senate and 72% are dissatisfied, including 34% who are very dissatisfied.

- Dissatisfaction with the U.S. Senate crosses partisan lines, as strong majorities of Democrats (82%) and independents (82%) are dissatisfied, and while Republicans are more divided, 56% say they are dissatisfied (44% are satisfied).

- Attitudes toward the U.S. House of Representatives (29% satisfied, 71% dissatisfied) are as lopsidedly negative as those expressed about the Senate.

Many voters are not aware of basic facts about the United States Senate, including how long a term is, who their senators are, and that there are two senators per state.

- **54% don’t know** that U.S. senators serve a six-year term.

- **47% are not aware** of both of their senators.

- **39% don’t know** that there are two U.S. senators per state.

- A majority of voters do not know that senators serve a six-year term (54%), 47% are not aware of both of their senators, and 39% don’t know that there are two senators per state.

- Taken together, just 31% of voters know all three of these facts about the U.S. Senate. There is a wide disparity here by age, just 14% of 18- to 34-year-olds know all three of these facts, 25% of 35- to 49-year-olds, and while the proportion increases for older age cohorts, just 42% of 50- to 64-year-olds and 43% of seniors are able to answer these facts correctly.
Nearly four in 10 voters cannot recall hearing anything at all recently about the Senate or their senators; the most likely topics of recall tend to relate to election campaigns.

It is notable that a third of voters who live in states with Senate races this year are unaware there will be a Senate election in their state (and 41% of those in states without Senate elections incorrectly say the Senate will be on the ballot in their state).

For the most part, voters who know a lot about the Senate and their senators are not much more favorable than those who know little.

Turning to this November’s elections, healthcare dominates all other issues in voters’ decisions for the U.S. Senate and House.

A majority of voters (57%) say that healthcare is one of the three most important issues in deciding their vote this November, with no other issue coming close. Healthcare is far and away the most important issue for Democrats (64%) and independents (66%), while healthcare is near the top of the list for Republicans (46%), along with immigration (49%), national security/terrorism (48%), and jobs/economic growth (46%).
Voters already are extremely motivated to vote in the November elections, but younger voters are less motivated than others.

Overall, 52% of voters say they are extremely motivated to vote in the November elections, including 60% of Democrats and 52% of Republicans, though independents are far less motivated (31%).

However, just 30% of 18- to 34-year-old voters say they are extremely motivated, compared with 71% for seniors.

Three in five voters believe that it is important to elect more women to the U.S. Senate.

When informed that currently 23 out of 100 senators are women, 62% of voters say it is important to elect more women to the U.S. Senate. Majorities of both men (52%) and women (71%) feel it is important to elect more women, and 75% of 18- to 34-year-olds also feel this way, the highest proportion of any age group.

Three in five voters also believe that it is important to elect more people of color to the U.S. Senate.

When informed that currently 9 out of 100 senators are people of color, 61% of voters say it is important to elect more people of color to the U.S. Senate. This includes majorities of whites (54%), African Americans (86%), and Hispanics (78%). Again, 18- to 34-year-olds (76%) are most likely to feel that this is important, compared with their older counterparts.
Americans report that they are engaging in many different ways with their members of Congress and are taking other steps to be civically engaged.

- Three in ten respondents (29%) say they have had some form of contact with their senators or congressional representatives in the past year, either by mailing/emailed, phoning, or visiting an office. Liberal Democrats (41%) and highly-educated voters are most likely (41%) to report this type of engagement. Engagement correlates with a feeling that what the Senate does has an impact on the respondent’s life.

**METHODOLOGY**

The survey was conducted online among 1,041 registered voters nationwide from June 5 to 13, 2018 by Hart Research Associates and Public Opinion Strategies on behalf of the Edward M. Kennedy Institute. View the poll’s complete findings, as well as accompanying infographics and slides [here](#).