Civics at the Forefront: The Institute’s Second Annual Civics Survey

Our second annual national poll probed Americans knowledge of the Senate, levels of civic interest, and attitudes towards government.

Two months after the start of the 115th Congress, Americans are taking a wide range of actions to influence the government and many are blending traditional technologies with new methods to engage. Knowledge of the U.S. Senate and our system of checks and balances continues to be lacking, but Americans remain optimistic about the power of civic education and civic engagement to improve our democracy. The following short memo outlines our key findings:

Half of Americans polled recently took civic action to influence the government via social media, contacting their Members of Congress directly, boycotting a company, attending a protest, or making a financial donation, and many plan to be more engaged in the coming year.

- **One-half (51%) have personally taken action over the past two months to influence the government.** This incredible show of civic action is spread across a wide range of possible ways to participate. The most common forms of action are posting to social media (17%), emailing Members of Congress (14%), or boycotting a company or a corporation (12%). Overall, 11% report having attended a protest or rally or donating money to a public policy organization.

- A majority (56%) of those who took action received information on the action they took from social media; 38% used their social media newsfeed to gain information and 18% used private social media groups.

A majority of Americans trust the media to provide accurate reports on Congress, and only 2% of that polled stated mistrust in news sources.

- **Americans trust the media to provide accurate political reports.** Television news stations are considered the most accurate reporters of news regarding the President and Congress. Overall, 31% point to television news stations, followed by online or print newspapers and magazines (20%). Social media (10%), talk radio (10%), elected officials (8%), and political commentators and online video hosts (8%) each have smaller, but critical, role. **Just 2% volunteer that they do not trust any media.**
Social media is the top catalyst to action; private social media groups play central role

- A majority (56%) of those who took action received information on the action they took from social media; 38% used their social media newsfeed to gain information and 18% used private social media groups. Both liberals and conservatives rely more heavily on social media to get information, but liberals also employ private social media groups and listservs to gain information. News organizations, including print, television or online sources, also are top method to gain information, followed by word of mouth (31%) or listservs or email (21%).

Optimism remains among Americans about Congress and our democracy, even as knowledge of the Senate and how our government works remains low.

- A slight majority (52%) know that each state has two Senators, up from 46% last year. An additional 22% who give a wrong answer and 27% who cannot answer the question. As we found last year, knowledge of this basic fact varies across key demographics: older adults (aged 55 and over), higher income, more educated Americans and whites disproportionately know each state elects two Senators.

- **Despite elections in 34 states, only 20% could name both of their Senators and 41% could name at least one without prompting.** Registered voters continue to outpace those not registered to know their Senators (49% of voters can name at least one Senator, up from 42% last year, while only 14% of non-voters can name one of their Senators, virtually unchanged over the past year).

- Despite the cynical cloud surrounding America, optimism continues to prevail. Last year, we found that most Americans agreed that educating youth can make a difference and agreement has increased in face of strong cynicism. **Fully 90% agree that "Educating youth about our government leads to a better-functioning democracy,"** including an amazing 69% that strongly agree with the statement. Last year, 85% agreed with this statement, including 60% who strongly agreed.

- At the same time, there is virtual agreement that **“Ordinary citizens need to become more active to safeguard our democracy”** (91% total agreement, including 70% who strongly agree).
Americans believe that Senators can find places of agreement, but also say Senators’ principled positions should take priority, even if it causes gridlock. Two conflicting agreement statements garner strong agreement.

• First, agreement is much higher in 2017 that “Senators are able to find places for agreement and get things done across party lines;” this year, 60% agree with this statement and 39% disagree, while last year opinion was divided (45% total agree, 49% total disagree). Agreement has grown across parties (Republicans +20, Democrats +12, and independents +12).

• However, an equal sized group agrees that “Senators should take principled positions even if it causes gridlock” (70% agree/26% disagree). Three-quarters of Republicans and Democrats agree (73% Republicans, 76% Democrats). An incredible 81% of liberal Democrats agree that Senators should take principled positions even if there are consequences.

Methodology

The study was conducted for the Edward M. Kennedy Institute via telephone by Beck Research and SSRS, an independent research company. Interviews were conducted from February 22 - 27, 2017 among a sample of 1,015 adults, including 828 registered voters. Interviews were conducted via live callers on landline and cell phones; 60% of the interviews were completed via cell phone and there were 37 respondents who completed the survey in Spanish. The margin of error for total respondents is +/-3.56 % at the 95% confidence level. More information about Beck Research can be obtained by visiting www.beckresearch.com and about SSRS can be obtained by visiting www.ssrs.com.
1. Now I want to ask you some questions about Congress. How many U.S. Senators represent each state in Congress?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Correct, respondent said</th>
<th>Incorrect, respondent did not say</th>
<th>Don’t know/refused</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Each state has two U.S. Senators. What are your Senators’ names?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Named Both Senators</th>
<th>Named One Senator</th>
<th>Incorrect Senator</th>
<th>Don’t know/refused</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. As you may know, presidents can issue executive orders to direct the various agencies or departments under the president to take certain actions. The Constitution grants presidents this power. Do you know if there are any checks or balances on these executive orders?

54% Yes, checks on balances on orders (also accept: court can review)
27% No, no check and balances on orders
18% (DO NOT READ) Don’t know
* (DO NOT READ) Refused

4. Now I want to shift gears and ask you something different. Thinking about the next year, do you expect to get more engaged in your community, less engaged, or have about the same amount of engagement?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>More</th>
<th>Less</th>
<th>Same</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>65%</td>
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</table>
5. Which of the following do you think provides the most accurate reports regarding the President and Congress?

- 31% Television news stations
- 20% Online or print newspapers and magazines
- 10% Social media
- 10% Talk radio
- 8% Your elected officials
- 8% Political commentators and online video hosts
- 5% Friends and family
- 1% Other
- 2% (DO NOT READ) None/Don’t trust any media
- 3% (DO NOT READ) Don’t know
- 1% (DO NOT READ) Refused

6. For each of the following statements, please tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with the statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>DK</th>
<th>Refused</th>
<th>Total Agree</th>
<th>Total Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6-A Senators are able to find places for agreement and get things done across party lines</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016:</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-B Senators should take principled positions even if it causes gridlock.</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>DK</td>
<td>Refused</td>
<td>Total Agree</td>
<td>Total Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>6-C</td>
<td>Ordinary citizens need to become more active to safeguard our democracy.</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-D</td>
<td>The Senate provides critical leadership in times of crisis.</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>68%</td>
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<tr>
<td>6-E</td>
<td>Educating youth about our government leads to a better-functioning democracy</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>2016:</strong></td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>85%</td>
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</table>
7. Which of the following specific actions do you think is the best way to interact with your government to have the largest possible impact?

34% Contact elected officials
15% Work or volunteer for a political party, candidate, or campaign
13% Support a group that tries to influence public policy or government
11% Attend a political rally, speech, or campaign events
8% Publicly express your support for a political campaign on social media
7% Contribute money to a candidate or a political group
3% Display a button, poster or bumper-sticker related to a political campaign
3% (DO NOT READ) None
1% (DO NOT READ) Other
4% (DO NOT READ) Don’t know
* (DO NOT READ) Refused

8. Thinking back over the past two months, which of the following actions have you personally taken to influence your government? If you have not done any of these, just say so. [MULTIPLE RESPONSE]

17% Posted to social media
14% Emailed Members of Congress
12% Boycotted a company or corporation
11% Attended a protest or rally
11% Donated money to a public policy organization
10% Phoned Members of Congress
9% Supported a grassroots organization
7% Mailed Members of Congress
49% (DO NOT READ) None
4% (DO NOT READ) Other
1% (DO NOT READ) Don’t know

34% Took one action
6% Took two actions
10% Took three or more actions
51% Took one or more actions
9. [IF YES IN PREVIOUS QUESTION] Did you use any of the following to get information to the action you took?

- 46% News organizations, including print, television or online sources
- 38% Social media newsfeed
- 31% Word of mouth
- 21% Listservs or email
- 18% Private social media group
- 1% Through an organization
- 1% Through elected officials
- 1% Internet (non-specific)
- 4% (DO NOT READ) Something else
- 4% (DO NOT READ) None
- 1% (DO NOT READ) Don't know
- 1% (DO NOT READ) Refused