A New Hope: Congress

OCTOBER 20, 2022
BY ANTHONY VETRANO
CONTRIBUTORS: DIANE HILL AND CHAYENNE POLIMEDIO
About the Partnership

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works. The Partnership teams up with federal agencies and other stakeholders to make our government more effective and efficient.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bearers of Good News: Americans are Rooting for Congress</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call to Action: Building a New Narrative</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serve the People First</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Represent Everyone</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Together</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put People in the Picture and Connect them to Congress</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Team</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Trust in and approval of Congress and the federal government has remained low for decades, with the fallout from the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection and the COVID-19 pandemic serving as recent inflection points in the way Congress is perceived by the public.

According to a poll conducted by the Partnership for Public Service and Hattaway Communications in October of 2021, 63% of Americans said they had little to no trust in the federal government’s ability to look out for their best interests, a troubling sign for the health of our democracy.

However, the polling also showed the public is hopeful about the future of Congress and the nation, with eight out of 10 Americans believing that Congress is essential to the country and their lives. Eighty four percent said they believe the level of confidence in the federal government can be improved, and 55% indicated they are interested in learning more about the impact of Congress on their lives.

This research suggests that the public wants the government and Congress to function effectively despite the overall negative views that are influenced by heightened partisanship and a range of controversies that dominate the news, social media and popular culture.

The public, however, seldom hears about much of the day-to-day work on Capitol Hill, where lawmakers help constituents access government services and solve problems impacting local communities. The public also is often not attuned to enactment of important legislation on a wide variety of issues affecting the economy, veterans, health care, transportation, the environment, national security and much more.

While Congress has its problems, there is often a gap between what it accomplishes and public perceptions.

There is an opportunity to bridge this gap. Members of Congress, their staff and key stakeholders such as advocacy and good government organizations can increase trust by doing a better job of informing the public of the accomplishments and the positive impact that Congress has on the lives of everyday Americans.

Below are some of the key findings of our research that highlight the value of sharing positive stories about Congress, and that offer some tools and examples of how a different narrative can help alter public perceptions.
Bearers of Good News: Americans are Rooting for Congress

Our data shows that Americans do not feel hopeless about Congress, but rather are ambivalent. In other words, survey respondents and focus group participants who contributed to our analysis believe Congress is important while simultaneously feeling it is not trustworthy. The public, however, believes that change is possible.

While the public has these conflicting feelings, it generally believes in Congress’ role in American democracy and wants it to work. Social science research suggests that when people feel uneasy because of inner conflicts, they may change deeply held beliefs to achieve peace of mind. If steps are taken to show Americans that Congress is a working, productive body, progress can be made to alter negative perceptions.

Our polling found that nine in 10 Americans (94%) said it’s “very” or “somewhat” important to improve the level of confidence Americans have in the federal government. The public wants to have confidence in our government’s ability to deliver on its mission. There is no denying that Congress has work to do to address major public concerns, but there are stories to be celebrated on Capitol Hill.

As part of our research, an audience segmentation study shows that there are potentially 46 million Americans who both hold feelings of ambivalence (“I don’t trust Congress, but I believe in its role”) and want to hear aspiring narratives about the institution.

Moreover, about 25 million people might be interested in receiving news about actions taken by Congress that affect people's lives, and more than 15 million people are potentially interested in following social media channels dedicated to sharing news, information and stories about members of Congress focused on solving problems.
The graph above outlines several examples from our survey that highlight the good news about Congress that people are interested in learning more about. This research shows a key bright spot in the future of Congress’ relationship with the public.
Call to Action: Building a New Narrative

We developed an approach that focuses on spreading positive stories and ways to tell those stories. Beyond survey data, part of our study focused on testing positive communication on a variety of key audiences from across the political spectrum and seeing what the response would look like.

We found that those who were experiencing conflicting feelings about Congress were most likely to embrace positive news stories. Our hope is to encourage members of Congress, Capitol Hill staff, media, advocacy organizations and good government champions to lead the way on changing the political discourse by engaging in communication that highlights aspirational narratives.

As seen in our study, aspirational narratives have the power to help quell the internal conflicts some Americans face when it comes to Congress. These narratives can help change the way people think about their relationship with the institution and our democracy. And the public can develop changed attitudes by engaging in a variety of ways by contacting their representatives, visiting local offices, attending public meetings or joining organizations that work with Congress on issues important to them.

Our aspirational narrative for Congress focuses on messages that 1) serve the people first, 2) represent everyone, 3) work together and 4) put people in the picture and connect them to Congress.

Our vision for an aspirational narrative seeks to show the public that they can be active participants in our democracy, that they can and should be engaged with Congress, and that there is hope. It’s also about showing Americans that they are a crucial component of the work of Congress.
Serve the People First

Americans are looking for a Congress that serves them with honesty and integrity. They recognize that when they see that lawmakers put the needs of real people first, not political parties, powerful interests, or their own careers. Trust can be rebuilt by the dissemination of positive stories of Congress serving the people.

Survey respondents were asked to choose the most important qualities they’d like to see in a member of Congress. Sixty percent of the respondents cited honesty. This sentiment was reflected in a comment by one respondent, who said, “They forget about the people who they’re supposed to serve. [...] They’re just doing everything that’s going to put them at the next level.”

Represent Everyone

Americans believe the job of Congress is to represent all the people of our diverse nation in making decisions. They expect members to represent everyone in their state or district, not just the people who voted for them. Spotlighting members of Congress who make this a priority is key to changing hearts and minds.

Six in 10 respondents strongly agree with the statement, “Congress has a responsibility to represent all the people of our diverse nation in making decisions.” Some mentioned a lack of representation by members of Congress who seemed hostile to constituents who didn’t share their political leanings. One said, “Most representatives, whether you voted for him or not, they represent you. [...] If I have an issue, I have a right to call upon that person.”
Work Together

People feel hopeful when they see members of Congress working together to solve problems, not scoring political points.

Our survey suggests some 16 million people in our target audience would be interested in seeing conversations between Democrats and Republicans in Congress. The survey also found a relatively high level of public trust in members of Congress identified as recipients of awards for bipartisan service. One responded, “[The public wants bipartisanship], but all that gets reported is everybody fighting.”

Put People in the Picture and Connect them to Congress

People need to know their voices are heard in Congress. Stories of successful advocacy by average Americans give people a sense of empowerment. Examples of legislation and constituent service that respond to the concerns of everyday people offer hope. Connecting people to Congress to get help and express their opinions can give them firsthand experience as empowered citizens.

In our focus groups, sharing stories of people taking action and having an impact countered the negative narrative that, “I can’t make a difference.” A majority of respondents to our survey (52%) strongly agreed that Congress would work better if “responsible Americans do our part by voting in every election and communicating our concerns to those we elect.” One survey respondent said, “Maybe if you get a little bit more involved, or if we had a greater percentage of the population who cared enough to push their congressmen, we might see some change.”
Conclusion: With Action, There is Hope

There is great reason for hope. Rebuilding trust is key to building a better, more effective government and strengthening our democracy. By sharing important stories, we can find the power in the narrative to foster meaningful congressional reform and an engaged and informed public.

At the Partnership for Public Service, we believe that a strong Congress is fundamental to a well-functioning government that serves the people and earns their trust. In addition to supporting efforts to reform Congress to make it more effective, efficient and transparent, we also see an opportunity to reframe the conversation about the institution. The aspirational narrative we propose and its accompanying toolkit, have the power to not only remind the public, but also those serving and working on Capitol Hill, that Congress works best when it puts the people first.

If this mission and work appeals to you and you are interested in learning more, check out our work on Congress.
Anthony Vetrano supports the Partnership’s qualitative research work, including projects on civil workforce and using foresight in Congress. He is also one of the research team’s intern hiring managers. He first developed a love for research at university through his favorite course titled Gender, Migration, and International Development which gave him the opportunity to assist in a research project on how COVID-19 impacted the Latin American immigrant communities in the DMV. Anthony then developed a strong passion for public service while interning at the State Department’s Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs. Anthony’s favorite public servant is his grandmother Ellen Vetrano who dedicated many years at their local branch of the Social Security Administration.
Acknowledgements

We thank the Hewlett Foundation for their support for this work and Hattaway Communications for their partnership.
# Project Team

**Bob Cohen**  
Senior Editor

**Loren DeJonge Schulman**  
Vice President, Research, Evaluation, and Modernizing Government

**Samantha Donaldson**  
Vice President, Communications

**Diane Hill**  
Senior Manager, Government Affairs

**Austin Laufersweiler**  
Communications Manager, Center for Presidential Transition

**Nicky Santoso**  
Digital Design Associate

**Max Stier**  
President and CEO

**Audrey Pfund**  
Senior Design and Web Manager

**Chayenne Polimedio**  
Senior Manager, Research, Evaluation and Modernizing Government

**Anthony Vetran**  
Associate and Wellde Fellow, Research, Evaluation and Modernizing Government

*(Header photo credit: Architect of the Capitol)*