UC SANTA BARBARA

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Bipartisan Disapproval

In this era of hyper-partisanship, Americans still agree on one thing: They don't like the job Congress is doing. Newly released research reveals that the public disapproves of Congress because they think its members are listening to the wrong people, namely donors and elites.

"There's a deep sense — and it shows in the data — that members of Congress are not paying attention to the general public, even though Americans from both sides of the aisle wish they would," said Sarah Anderson, an associate professor of environmental politics in UC Santa Barbara's Bren School of Environmental Science & Management and a co-author of the study.

The research, conducted by Stanford University, the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and UCSB, found large majorities in both parties — upwards of almost 70 percent — want lawmakers to pay attention to the wishes of voters. But Americans, the study revealed, instead believe members of Congress vote to please campaign donors, the wealthy and lobbyists.

Anderson, who helped design the research, called the bipartisan dismay striking given the deep political divide in the country. Normally, she said, a person's political affiliation would accurately predict how he or she feels about politics.

"Always! And it doesn't here," she said. "It's just not a factor. Instead, they really agree on what process they see and what process they would like to see. It's just shocking, actually, given the partisan polarization right now."

Polling conducted by Gallup in January 2018 found just 20 percent of Americans approve of the way Congress is handling its job, while 75 percent disapprove. Five percent had no opinion.

Previous studies on the public's attitudes toward Congress had focused on the number of laws passed and the impacts of legislation. But they didn't explain adequately why lawmakers have such low approval ratings.

"Some of it, of course, is probably that they're not doing what people want them to do, or not doing enough or doing too much," Anderson said. "But we delved deeply into a third possibility, which is that people think they're paying attention to the wrong elements of society when they make those decisions."

In short, she said, lawmakers are "paying not enough attention to what the general public wants, for example, and too much attention to what donors and folks like that want."

The grim numbers suggest members of Congress won't have an easy time regaining the approval of their constituents. But it can be done, Anderson said. What's likely needed is for those lawmakers to more effectively demonstrate the care with which they make decisions, and how the public factors in.

"I think it's about conveying that they're really trying to represent their constituency and their interests even when they don't specify which interests they're trying really hard to represent," she said.

The study is based on a survey of 1,021 Americans in 2015. A second study in 2017 confirmed the initial findings.

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