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CONTACT: Kathleen Jamieson
215-898-7041 (until 3/9)
304-536-7925 at the Greenbrier 3/10
Erika Falk
202-879-6703/703-836-9073

106th Congress Was One of The Most Civil Congresses in the Last 15 Years

The 106th Congress was better than five of the last eight Congresses on four measures of civility -- name calling, the use of the word lie, vulgarity and pejoratives for speech -- according to a new study released by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania at the 3rd bi-partisan House Retreat at the Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia.

The 106th was one of five Congresses since 1985 and one of 21 since 1935 in which no words were ruled out of order and no requests to "take down" went to a ruling. Taking down is a procedure in which the Member's words are stricken from the record and the Member is prohibited from speaking on the floor for the remainder of that day unless given permission by the majority of Members. In the 104th Congress, taking down tended to inflame tempers rather than cool them; in the 106th, Members would caution each other that they were close to requesting that words be taken down, and this tended to calm rather than aggravate tension.

"The 106th demonstrated that Members of Congress can disagree without being disagreeable and can express strong conviction without being uncivil," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication and Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center. "The Leadership of both parties and the Members who took part in the first two bi-partisan retreats deserve credit for improving the day-to-day civility of the floor discussion in the House. If good news is no news, there is no news here."

The Annenberg Public Policy Center has analyzed the rhetoric of the last eight Congresses (1985 –2000) and found that incivility increases when there is a significant change in the number of seats that each party controls. The high levels of civility in the 106th congress were probably affected by the fact that relatively few seats changed party between the 105th and 106th Congresses.

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“Only four seats changed party hands leading up to the 106th Congress, this low level of change directly correlated to a more civil Congress. With the 2000 elections, even fewer seats changed hands leading into the 107th Congress, this bodes well for a more civil session,” added Jamieson.

The conclusions in this report are based on word searches of the Congressional Record from the 99th Congress, first session (1985) through the 106th Congress, second session (2000). During this 16-year period, words were looked for that might indicate that personal attacks were on the rise and for procedures that indicated comity was threatened. The record for each Congress was searched for over 360 words divided into six categories (name-calling, aspersions, lying, non-cooperation, pejoratives for speech, vulgarity). We also searched for the phrases, “The House will be in Order” and “Member Requested to Suspend.”

Prompted by the perception among Members and observers that civility was on the decline during the 104th Congress, the Annenberg Public Policy Center of University of Pennsylvania (APPC) began monitoring the quality of discourse in the House. In response to the threat of decreasing comity, a bi-partisan retreat was organized during the first session of the 105th Congress. In 1997 two-hundred Members of the House of Representatives, 165 spouses, and 100 of their children attended the three day gathering in Hershey, Pennsylvania coordinated by The Aspen Institute and funded by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. In 1999 Annenberg again examined the quality of discourse in the House and released the results at the 2nd House retreat in Hershey, Pennsylvania. This is the third Annenberg Public Policy Center analysis of the quality of discourse in the House of Representatives.

The research on civility in the House of Representatives is coordinated by the Aspen Institute and made possible by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. The full report can be found at the Annenberg Public Policy website, appcpenn.org.

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The Annenberg Public Policy Center was established by publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg in 1994 to create a community of scholars within the University of Pennsylvania that would examine the role of communications in public policy issues at the local, state and federal levels. The Center has four ongoing research foci: Information and Society; Media and the Developing Mind; Media and the Dialogue of Democracy; Health Communications. The Annenberg Public Policy Center supports research and sponsors lectures and conferences in these areas.