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All politics is local? Not today
Citizens say national issues more important
than constituent service in congressional elections

PHILADELPHIA — What do citizens want from their member of Congress?

The answer, a new study finds, is partisan representation on national issues, which is more highly valued today than constituency service or bringing federal money home to a congressional district.

“What Do Citizens Want from Their Member of Congress?” to be published in [Political Research Quarterly](#) (and available online early [here](#)), finds that citizens do not see a difference between the Republican and Democratic parties on traditional duties of the office such as constituency service, getting federal money for the district, and standing up to special interests. But citizens do see “an enormous difference between the parties when it comes to representation on the issues,” according to a team of researchers at the University of Pennsylvania.

The study is based largely on data from the [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania, notably APPC’s Institutions of Democracy (IOD) survey, which was conducted in June-July 2014 and September-November 2014 and comprises more than 21,000 total interviews. The researchers also used data from The American Panel Survey (TAPS) conducted by GfK Knowledge Networks for the Weidenbaum Center at Washington University, a monthly panel study of about 2,000 households, with data from August and November 2013.

Although citizens consider traditional services from members of Congress to be important, those services are not as highly valued as issue representation. The researchers note that it’s “more difficult and potentially more politically risky” in the era of the tea party to take credit for bringing home federal money. The provision of district services, like helping someone with a lost Social Security check, is seen as “simply part of the job” that anyone in office would do. But the dramatic polarization of the parties in Congress has come to mean, for many voters, “that to elect a member from their party is to elect someone who shares their views across a range of issues.”

“This study helps to explain why many congressional races turn on national issues like ISIS, Obamacare, and Supreme Court nominees, rather than local issues relevant to just that area,” said [Matt Levendusky](#) of the Political Science Department at the University of Pennsylvania and an APPC distinguished [research fellow](#). “Voters today think these are the issues their member should prioritize, so that’s what members do.”

In the Annenberg surveys, 81 percent of respondents said issue positions matter “a great deal” or “somewhat” in casting their vote, more than constituency service (66 percent) or spending in the district (67 percent).

When asked which party they felt would better perform a variety of tasks, a majority said there was no difference between their own party and the opposite party, with one exception: how well a

member of Congress represented the respondent's own position. More than 60 percent of the respondents thought a member of their own party would do a better job at representing their position.

The researchers said that citizens' preferences for issue representation have important implications for congressional elections. Highlights:

- "Voters' prioritization of ideological/partisan considerations effectively nationalizes elections, making them much more about national issues and concerns than about local issues." Issues such as Obamacare, the spread of ISIS, and the Ebola virus were evidence of this in 2014, the study said.
- "Instead of all politics being local, all politics – at least congressional politics – is now trending in a national direction (though local factors still, of course, matter)."
- "A same-party challenger becomes a much more attractive candidate than an opposite-party incumbent: voters think that both candidates will deliver the services but only one – their party's nominee – will represent them on the issues."
- "The tendency we observe here also likely exacerbates congressional polarization. When voters value issue representation, that makes position-taking all the more important. It gives members an incentive to engage in polarizing behavior, and it makes it more difficult to engage in the nonpartisan cultivation of support that was at the heart of the personal vote."

The study found that two groups of citizens had a particularly strong preference for issue representation – people with a college degree and "sorted partisans," that is, liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans. Both groups are among the citizens who are more likely to vote. The study noted that the elderly are the only group of high-participation voters who prioritize constituency service over issue positions.

Overall, the study concluded, "as voters have shifted to wanting more partisan/ideological representation from their members in Congress, Congress has delivered."

To download the study [click here](#).

In addition to Levendusky, the authors include lead author [John Lapinski](#) of the Department of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania and an APPC distinguished [research fellow](#); [Ken Winneg](#), APPC's managing director of survey research; and [Kathleen Hall Jamieson](#), director of APPC.

[The Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) (APPC) was established in 1994 to educate the public and policy makers about the media's role in advancing public understanding of political and health issues at the local, state and federal levels.

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