

# Your Ideas Count!

## Representative Democracy and You

CONGRESSIONAL EDITION



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The Center on Congress at Indiana University

Lee Hamilton, Director

SPEA 316

Bloomington, IN 47405-1701

Phone: (812) 856-4706

Web site: <http://congress.indiana.edu>

E-mail: [congress@indiana.edu](mailto:congress@indiana.edu)

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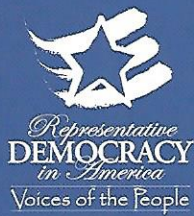
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# Your Ideas Count!

## Representative Democracy and You

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A Project of the Alliance for Representative Democracy:  
The Center on Congress at Indiana University  
The National Conference of State Legislatures  
The Center for Civic Education

# Sample Question

## Take a Personal Opinion Poll

Throughout this booklet, you will find survey questions that challenge you to consider your relationship with representative democracy. While the booklet explains some of the strengths of our system, the decisions are up to you. Use the scorecard at the end of this brochure to calculate your answers and determine whether America's system of democracy meets your expectations.

Circle the number that most closely matches how you feel about the statement.

SAMPLE		x	Your Take on Democracy		
Representative democracy is the most effective form of government.					
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	
1	2	3	4	5	

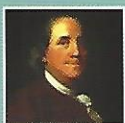
Circle the number 3 if you don't have strong feelings about the statement. However, if you agree strongly that representative democracy works, circle number 1. Similarly, if you completely disagree, choose number 5.

# Challenging Times

## QUESTION 1 Your Take on Democracy

Representative democracy is the most effective form of government.

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	2	3	4	5



Have you ever stopped to wonder how our system of government really works?

This question is more important than ever.

More than 200 years ago, the Founding Fathers designed a democratic government that still endures today and is the model for many governments worldwide. The basis for this system of self-governance is the people, who elect individuals to represent their views at local, state, and national levels of government. We call this form of government “representative democracy” or a “republic.”

However effective and durable this seemingly simple, powerful concept of governance has proved to be, it can be weakened by the public’s cynicism.

As Americans, we sometimes feel ambivalent. Many of us have trouble finding time for making democracy work. We want choices, but sometimes categorize political campaigns as partisan and negative. We value representative democracy, but might view debate as bickering, compromise as “selling out,” and stalemates as obstructionism.



If we all agreed on how to run our society, there would be no need to elect representatives. Instead, we might rely on a monarch or dictator to run things. But in a country as large and diverse as ours, disagreements are natural. Since most people don't have the time, patience, or knowledge of all the issues involved in governing our society, we've set up a system of representative democracy. By representing the multitude that we are, Congress and our state legislatures essentially have the task of reconciling our many points of view on the great public issues of the day.

# Government and You



QUESTION		2 Your Take on Democracy		
Government affects my everyday life, so I need to pay attention.				
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	2	3	4	5

Legislatures are far from perfect. Yet amid all the conflict and confrontation in politics there is also ongoing cooperation and consensus. Although these points of agreement are sometimes not as well-publicized as the disagreements, they have led to many extraordinary legislative achievements over the years.

The next time you take a trip in your community, think about some of the following ways in which government affects your everyday life.

- If you travel on the highway or take the bus, remember that federal and state funds help support transportation.
- If you spend time in public parks, keep in mind that your elected officials set aside these recreation areas.
- When you go to the bank to withdraw money, you can rely on your money being there because the federal government regulates financial institutions.
- If you buy vitamins, cosmetics, or prescription medications, you can be confident that they meet federal standards for safety.

*government and you*



When Congress takes up issues—like the education of children, the quality of the water we drink, or the government’s responses to natural disasters—our representatives and senators do their best to improve the quality of individual lives and to strengthen our nation as a whole.



What is hard for many to understand is that representative democracy can work only if people participate. You may assume that a lack of participation has no impact. But in government, as in life, being passive has consequences.

It withholds potential energy from a democracy and, even worse, allows the views of the few to affect the lives of many.

Blanket distrust and cynicism are the great enemies of democracy. They make much more difficult the dialogue between represented and representative, weakening our legislative institutions and undermining our system of government.

Keeping America strong means going beyond proudly displaying the flag or feeling moved during the singing of our national anthem.





For representative democracy to succeed and continue to solve the problems we face, while still preserving our personal freedoms, everyone must actively participate. Some ways to support our democracy are relatively easy:

1. **Vote.** Have a say in who represents you.
2. **Stay Informed.** Educate yourself about current political issues.
3. **Discuss Politics.** Show interest in solutions as well as problems.
4. **Don't Go It Alone.** Join with groups who share your point of view.
5. **Get Involved.** Work to help solve problems in your community.
6. **Be Heard.** Stay in touch with your elected officials.

Your ideas are welcome and they count. The process of reaching agreements and passing laws in our system of government takes time. It requires patience and tolerance for differences and disagreements, as well as a willingness to compromise. Once you understand how the democratic process works, you can ensure that your voice is heard and become effective in making a difference.

# We the People

## QUESTION 3 Your Take on Democracy

Most elected officials are working for the public good.

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	2	3	4	5

What kind of person do you think is elected to Congress? To answer accurately, you'd have to include professional athletes, former teachers, physicians, astronauts, social workers, and Internet entrepreneurs.

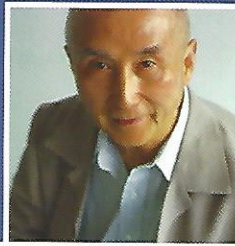
Representatives and senators are everyday people—our neighbors and friends who answer a calling to public service.

What motivates people to run for elected office? There are a variety of reasons.

Most people run for public office because they have a commitment to public service—they want to work to make things better.

Some may be moved by a triggering issue, such as civil rights, which inspires them to work within the system for change. Before he was elected, a passion for equal rights inspired Congressman John Lewis, the son of a sharecropper, to organize lunch counter sit-ins, march, protest, and even become imprisoned.

Others may be drawn to public service through a seminal event in their lives. Before she was elected, Congresswoman Carolyn McCarthy's husband was murdered and her son critically wounded in an assault by a cheaply acquired handgun. She has now centered her political career on handgun control. Senator John McCain's interest in public service was shaped by his years as a POW in Vietnam.



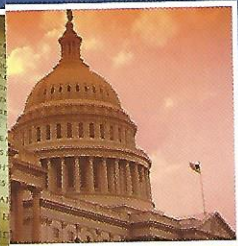
Whatever their motivations for seeking public office, good representatives and senators take into account all constituent comments and then seek to help the largest number of people, or those who need help most. "One of the greatest challenges is deciding which to do first," said one senior U.S. senator.

It's a popular belief that members of Congress are simply out for themselves, lacking integrity and acting unethically. America sometimes enjoys dressing down its elected officials—at times with good reason.



Yet most political observers would say that the vast majority of legislators are dedicated to promoting the public good as they and their constituencies see it, and that they work hard to be fair and ethical.

*we the people*



# Don't We All Agree?

QUESTION

4

Your Take on Democracy

There is a great diversity of opinion in the country, and legislators must resolve the clash of values and interests fairly.

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	2	3	4	5

Throughout life many of us feel most comfortable with people who share our views. We naturally gravitate toward a circle of friends who are like us. You may recall times, however, when certain political issues seemed to have obvious answers, but your views didn't win out. How is that possible, you might ask, when most of us agree?

### What some people think:

The public mostly agrees on what is right so Congress should simply pass the laws that the people want.

### How it really works:

There are many different opinions in our society and typically very little agreement except at a general level. For instance, it's easy to agree that we want better schools or better financing for health care. The hard part is selecting the best methods and details that will accomplish these goals most effectively. It is the job of Congress to find common ground among various points of view. That way, it can pass laws that work well and that benefit the most people.

### Have you ever wondered?

Why do we think there is more disagreement in Congress than there is in most families, friendships, and workplaces?

*don't we all agree?*



**Consider this:**

You are president of your local neighborhood association and many residents are raising concerns about the increased speed of the traffic on residential streets. Many children ride their bicycles after school; you want to do something to slow down the cars before someone gets hurt.

You call a special meeting of the association to rally support before approaching the city council to request speed bumps. You're surprised when several neighbors show up and raise objections to speed bumps. They are angered you have made the assumption about what everyone wants. They say speed bumps will damage their cars, needlessly slow down fire trucks and ambulances, and devalue their homes. You are surprised that not everyone in your neighborhood agrees with your point of view.

**Representative democracy is about similar challenges:**

Few issues are simple or clear-cut. America is strengthened by the perspectives of the wide variety of people within it. But this diversity also means that as an individual, your views won't always prevail, because others might have valid, but different, desires and goals.

*don't we all agree?*



**Think about this:**

The surprising truth is that there is far less consensus in the country than is often thought. Surveys of Americans on current political issues reveal that most years there is little agreement on what the main issues are, let alone what specific steps should be taken to address them.

If we fail to recognize the wide range in beliefs and opinions that people hold, we will not understand the difficulties facing a democratic government as it tries not only to reconcile conflicting views and needs, but also to face the hard truths of limited resources. It is important to build relationships of trust with our elected representatives so that we can work out our differing points of view.

*don't we all agree?*

# Where's My Voice?



**QUESTION 5** Your Take on Democracy

Members of Congress consider what the people they are representing think and try to reflect those opinions in their policy decisions.

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	2	3	4	5

It is likely that you have been in conversations where the topic turns to politics and the question arises, "How did that law ever pass?" Such a conversation usually entertains the suspicion that everyday, ordinary people do not matter when it comes to politics.



**What some people think:**  
Members of Congress do not care what common people think.

**How it really works:**  
Members of Congress are very concerned about learning what the people in their state want and need. After all, representing constituents is their job, and they must do their job successfully to be reelected.

Senators and representatives invite correspondence from constituents and send out mailings to seek responses. They have local field offices and encourage people to meet with them or their staff personally. All have Web pages and e-mail addresses to simplify communications with voters. Everybody's opinions are welcomed.

**Have you ever wondered?**  
How can I get my elected representatives to pay attention to my ideas and suggestions?

*where's my voice?*



**Consider this:**

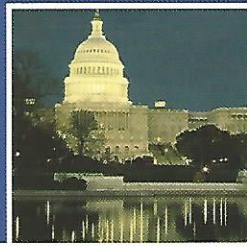
You are watching television, and as you flip through the channels, you notice the cable provider in your town has placed a movie channel that contains adult content next to a station geared toward families. You call the cable company to ask them to move the location of the adult channel, but you're told that nothing can be done. You mention the exchange to your neighbor, who is president of the local parent-teacher association. When she brings it up at a meeting, she learns that many other families share a similar concern. A group of parents and students decides to raise the issue at a city council meeting, and the mayor pledges to bring the concerns of the community to your local cable company.

**Representative democracy is about similar challenges:**

Lawmakers need to hear from you to understand which issues you care about most. When they add your voice to the many individual voices that express the same opinion, a clear pattern begins to emerge and to make an impression on them.

Your point of view and your efforts to bring about changes are especially important when combined with the efforts of other citizens.





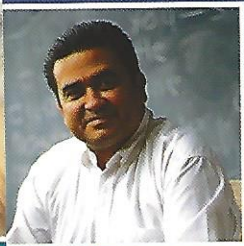
**Think about this:**

Very few Americans will ever contact their members of Congress to convey their thoughts about the kinds of laws they'd like to have passed. Unless nearly everyone in a state agrees about a particular issue—which rarely happens—one of the best ways for lawmakers to know what people care about is to check with interest groups. These groups focus on the various sides of current issues and stay in touch with the views of their membership.

There is power in numbers and organization. People who join with others to encourage the passage of laws they want are likely to have more influence. It is important to keep in mind that there are many people with strong views different from yours who are also attempting to get laws passed. While your position will be represented and heard, it may not prevail. But the larger and more involved your group is, the more attention your representatives are likely to give it.

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*where's my voice?*



# Whose Special Interests?

## QUESTION 6 Your Take on Democracy

The number and diversity of special interest groups ensure that all sides of an issue are heard.

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	2	3	4	5

Ask Americans whether special interests have too much influence, and you might feel as if you are in an echo chamber. Everyone seems to believe the other side is better represented, and many people feel that special interests can undermine a clear public consensus.

### What some people think:

Members of Congress are the servants of special interest groups that only look out for themselves, not the will of the regular people. A few big interests run the government.

### How it really works:

There is an organized group for almost every policy interest that anyone might have. Particularly on the major issues, the number and diversity of organized interests help ensure that the merits of all sides of an issue are heard, and no one group comes out ahead every time.

### Have you ever wondered?

If I join a group that fights for what I believe in, will I have a better chance of persuading my legislator to vote for what I want?



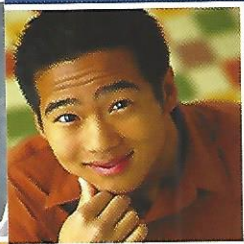
**Think about this:**

Most of us think of our own interests as representing the public will. It's usually other people's desires that we view as "special interests."

Yet, nearly 8 in 10 Americans belong to an organized group with a policy agenda, and about 40 percent of adults are members of two or more groups. Even without formally joining an organization, many individuals identify with a particular group. An African American citizen, for example, might not belong to the NAACP, but might nevertheless sympathize with the group's platform.

Even though some big groups have money and can get a lot of attention, legislators also hear other points of view from smaller interest groups, executive agencies, legislative staff, the media, and concerned individuals. Because special interest groups often disagree, representatives must closely consider the policies each group supports, discuss them with their constituents and other legislators, and then use their judgment when casting a vote in Congress.

*whose special interests?*



## The Ten Most Influential Interests

Rank	Influential Interests in Washington, D.C.
1	National Rifle Association
2	AARP
3	National Federation of Independent Business
4	American Israel Public Affairs Committee
5	Association of Trial Lawyers
6	AFL-CIO
7	Chamber of Commerce
8	National Beer Wholesalers Association
9	National Association of Realtors
10	National Association of Manufacturers

Source: *Fortune*, May 2001

*whose special interests?*

# Compromise or Cop-out?

## QUESTION 7 Your Take on Democracy

Debate, disagreement, and compromise are a natural part of the legislative process.

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	2	3	4	5

Some citizens are uncomfortable with all the quarrelling and disputes they see in our system.

### What some people think:

The lawmaking process doesn't work well because of needless conflict.

### How it really works:

Conflict is a natural part of democracy. Various opinions exist among groups, districts, parties, and legislative houses, as well as different branches of government.

In reality, it takes time to come to an agreement, and the process of debate is often difficult or unpleasant. It is a lot better than solving disputes by violence or civil war, however. Legislating can be contentious. However, most disputes are negotiated and settled—at least for a while.

### Have you ever wondered?

How do any laws get passed when lawmakers must deal with the opposing demands of so many groups of people?

*compromise or cop-out?*



### Consider this:

You recently inherited the post of chair of your community's Outdoor Festival and Concert, and along with it, a giant headache. Neighborhood groups are protesting your committee's request for a permit to close First Avenue for the two-day event because the street is a main thoroughfare for automobile traffic. Furthermore, these groups are still angered by the late night concert noise, unruly crowds, and trash that spilled over into other neighborhoods last year. However, the business community—which provides the financial backing for the festival—wants the festival to stay in the same area as last year.

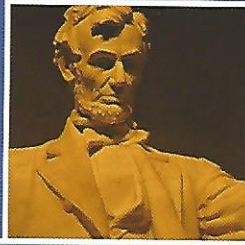
Community leaders ask your committee to work on a compromise everyone can live with. After meeting with local businesses and residents, you discover that everyone is willing to give in a little. In the end, the compromise results in plans to hold the festival on nearby Third Avenue, end the concert an hour earlier, and provide extra trash containers and security guards in the area. Local businesses will set up a hotline for neighbors to report any disturbances.

### Representative democracy is about similar challenges:

Our country is strengthened by the diversity of people within it. It's not easy to come to an agreement when there can be so many right answers and so many different desires and goals. It is only through compromise that most agreements can be made.



*compromise or cop-out?*



Too often, compromise is seen as selling out on one's principles. Watchful constituents remember the strong stands taken by a candidate during the campaign, and become wary after the election when the official appears to be making deals or compromising on key issues. People naturally pose the question, "How can important values give way to compromise?" Similarly, however, a politician too rigid about his or her stance can create needless conflict.



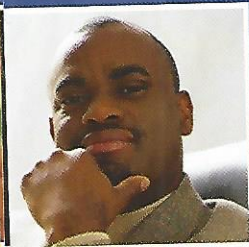
**Think about this:**

The U.S. Constitution resulted from a number of major compromises—including the "Great Compromise" of having both a House and a Senate—and has proved an enduring document.

Legislators must continually discuss competing views, attempt to reach solutions, and alter proposals until they can foster a majority. This is not politics at its worst, but politics at its best.

Debate, negotiation, and compromise are essential for arriving at a common ground that represents the opinions and interests of as many people as possible. In this way, consensus is built. This is what representative democracy is all about.

*compromise or cop-out?*



# Your Ideas Count

QUESTION

8

Your Take on Democracy

The basis of representative democracy is public involvement and participation.

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	2	3	4	5

History is full of examples of ordinary people who have had a major influence on our political system, even from its very beginning. James Madison was neither rich nor powerful, and had never been considered a great speaker. Nevertheless, Madison was sent in his late 20s to represent Virginia in the Continental Congress of 1780. He rose to the occasion and became not only a key figure at the convention, but also the main architect of our system of government.

There are several modern examples of individuals who have made a difference. People like Rosa Parks, who fought racial segregation and refused to sit at the back of a public bus, or Howard Jarvis, who started a property tax revolt in California.

In every community and every state, there are stories of people who have worked within the system and pushed for change. One example is Candy Lightner, who helped form Mothers Against Drunk Driving after the tragic death of her 13-year-old daughter.

All of these people were ordinary citizens who made a difference. They felt passionately about a particular matter and decided that something needed to be done. They presented their case well, proved persistent, enlisted the support of others, and brought about important change.

*your ideas count*



**Get involved:**

Now it's time for you to take some action and get involved. You can start by learning more about the issues currently being debated in your community. Take some time to review your local newspaper or search for Internet sites where you can read about these issues and how they affect you and your family. If you feel strongly about an issue, write or call your legislator and share your point of view.

Congress deals with many of the issues that affect you every day. If you would like to learn more about how Congress works and how to get involved in your government, one source is the Center on Congress Web site at [congress.indiana.edu](http://congress.indiana.edu).

To contact your U.S. representative and senators, or to find out what issues they are working on, visit the House and Senate Web sites at [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) or [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov). You can also reach them through the Senate switchboard, (202) 224-3121, or the House switchboard, (202) 225-3121.

Members of Congress really do want to hear your views—your ideas do count.

*your ideas count*

# What's Your Opinion?

## Your Take on Democracy

### SCORECARD

Go back through the pages and add up the numbers you gave to the questions you answered. Write down your scores below and add them together for a total.

QUESTION	1	<input type="text"/>
QUESTION	2	<input type="text"/>
QUESTION	3	<input type="text"/>
QUESTION	4	<input type="text"/>
QUESTION	5	<input type="text"/>
QUESTION	6	<input type="text"/>
QUESTION	7	<input type="text"/>
QUESTION	8	<input type="text"/>
<b>TOTAL</b>		<input type="text"/>

KEY	
8 - 13	You appreciate and are trustful of representative democracy.
14 - 20	You have a few questions, but mostly feel the system works for you.
21 - 27	You seriously question whether elected officials act in your interest.
28 - 34	You have doubt in our system of representative democracy.
35 - 40	You have difficulty trusting our system of representative democracy.

# Find Out More



## Find Out More about Representative Democracy

The Center on Congress at Indiana University  
[congress.indiana.edu](http://congress.indiana.edu)

Center for Civic Education  
[www.civiced.org](http://www.civiced.org)

Trust for Representative Democracy  
National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL)  
[www.ncsl.org/trust](http://www.ncsl.org/trust)

## For In-Depth Reading

Frantzich, Stephen E. *Citizen Democracy: Political Activists in a Cynical Age*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004.

Hamilton, Lee H. *How Congress Works and Why You Should Care*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004.

Rosenthal, Alan, Burdett A. Loomis, John R. Hibbing, and Karl T. Kurtz. *Republic on Trial: The Case for Representative Democracy*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2002.

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