

Chapter One

Introduction and Overview

A Crisis of Representation?

Congress lies at the heart of both our political tradition and our political process. It also maintains a firm, if not necessarily positive, grip on the public imagination; as public opinion research consistently shows, “Congress gets more blame for the country’s problems than do other institutions or the president.”¹ Congress is, in a word, *important* to the American people. The institution’s actions (or lack thereof) appear to have a significant impact on the public’s level of satisfaction with the political process, as well as on its perceptions of the appropriate role of government in society. Greater understanding of the relationship between Congress and the public thus is of inherent value to students and practitioners of American politics.

This relationship, as the quote above hints, has been rocky for quite some time. In Robert Lane’s classic study of the “common man’s” political beliefs, *Political Ideology*, the section dealing with our national legislature was entitled “The Warm, Friendly Congress.” How times have changed. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that public support for Congress has been in a free fall over the past forty-five years. Whether measured as confidence in the institution, satisfaction with its policy performance, overall effectiveness, or attitudes toward most of its members, positive evaluations of Congress in opinion polls have declined sharply since the late 1950s, the time of Lane’s research.² The past two decades have been a particularly turbulent period for the institution. Early in the 1990s Congress’s standing with the American people dipped to record lows, and remains near the bottom for all major public institutions.³ The movement to limit legislative terms, driven in part by public dismay with the congressional political process, attained surprising success over the course of the decade and continues to reshape legislative politics (and careers) at both state and national levels. The 1994 elections ended the

Democrats' forty-year reign in the House of Representatives and appeared to signal a new era of Republican ascendancy in congressional politics. Yet 1998 brought both the impeachment of a Democratic president and a historically unprecedented rebound for his party in that year's mid-term elections, while the 2000 campaign resulted in an evenly divided Senate. Republicans subsequently regained control of both houses of Congress, but by 2006 disenchantment with the institution again approached record levels in the wake of high-profile corruption charges, lobbying and personal misconduct scandals, public dissatisfaction with congressional policy actions, and growing discontent with the "war on terror," resulting in a Democratic takeover of the House and Senate that year. In such a highly volatile and contentious political environment, the road ahead for Congress and its (current or future) members does not appear any smoother.

Congress's travails, however, are only one manifestation of American's general discontent with political life. Indeed, we have witnessed a long-term decline in public trust and confidence in government institutions and officials, a decline that has continued during, *and* been largely unaffected by, extended periods of peace and prosperity over the past two decades.⁴ By the mid-1990s, in fact, public support of Washington reached its modern nadir, even as the country was in the midst of one of the longest stretches of economic growth in its history. Rising optimism about one's personal prospects and the state of the nation during this time also did not translate into increased support for political institutions. And while public confidence in the national government soared in the wake of 9/11, it has once again plummeted, hovering well below the levels seen in the 1960s. Books, television reports, and journalistic accounts continue to chronicle public discontent with Washington. "Why Americans hate politics" has become an all-too-familiar refrain.

It may be going too far to say that we are in the midst of a crisis of representation. A certain degree of skepticism about government, after all, is deeply ingrained in American political culture (and arguably healthy); some would even call it central to our national character. But given chronically low levels of trust in government, pervasive cynicism about elected officials and the political process, and enduring dissatisfaction with most public institutions, few would deny that the rift that emerged between citizens and government in the late 1960s and early 1970s has widened into a more substantial fissure. A fundamental disconnect appears to have developed between the American people and their governing institutions, particularly at the national level, which the highly charged impeachment process, bitterly contested 2000 presidential election, and divisive 2004 campaign only served to exacerbate. Representation provides the essential link between these institutions and the public. Investigating citizens' fundamental beliefs about representation

therefore might enhance our understanding of public discontent with politics and disenchantment with representatives and representative institutions. The centrality of Congress—in our political process, in public evaluations of the national government, in many accounts of our current political malaise, and in calls for both minor and sweeping political reform—make it almost incumbent to do so.

The Missing Public

Democratic political theorists have long emphasized that effective representation is a key component in a stable and healthy political order. In the democratic ideal, government institutions (and actors) are presumed to be relatively open and accessible, responsive to public preferences, and accountable for their actions. These properties historically have been considered the special province of the legislative branch, and representation the means by which to achieve them. “Through the process of representation, presumably, legislatures are empowered to act for the body politic. . . . And because, by virtue of representation, they participate in legislation, the represented accept legislative decisions as authoritative” (Eulau 1978, p. 111). Renowned for their native distrust of politicians, Americans also consider elected representatives to be a vital, and perhaps their most essential, link to the political process. When this link is believed to be in jeopardy, public discontent with politics usually follows.⁵ In this way, Congress’s lifeblood as a political institution is its “representative character.” At some basic level the institution has to be perceived as representative and responsive in order to be considered legitimate.

The key to understanding representation lies in defining and explaining the bond between representative(s) and represented. Over the past three decades scholars have learned a great deal about certain aspects of this relationship. We now have a much better grasp of the representative process from the legislator’s point of view, for example, while theoretical perspectives on representation have become more informed and complex. Significant strides have additionally been made in explaining public evaluations of government institutions and officials, especially those regarding congressional job performance. There is also a large and increasingly sophisticated body of research on the internal processes of legislatures.

Yet significant gaps remain in our understanding of the representative process. One of the most important concerns the origin and nature of *public* conceptions of representation. Much of the research that deals with the public’s view of representation has been driven by the narrow goal of explaining the “paradox of congressional support”: enduring dissatisfaction with Congress coupled with generally positive appraisals of individual representatives.⁶ Very little of this work touches on what

citizens actually *think* about the representative process. There have also been a few, and now quite dated, forays into the representational “roles” people favor for their legislators.⁷ And that is essentially it. In fact, given the plethora of academic research and political discourse devoted to the representative process, not to mention its central importance in our political system, it is remarkable how little attention has been paid to ordinary citizens’ fundamental ideas and expectations about representation.

The result is that some of the most intriguing issues about the public side of representation have not been adequately addressed. At the broadest level, we have little grasp of what people believe about representation *en toto*: what it means to them as a political idea, how they conceive of the representative process, and whether they feel the process actually works as it should. It is certainly not clear that citizens think of representation in ways that academics have depicted it, such as in terms of policy outputs, issue congruence, or even the provision of district and constituency services. People’s expectations of the representative process, including the roles that they want representatives to play, are likewise poorly understood. Finally, in part because of its particular methodological orientation, current research in the field fails to illuminate the set of beliefs that may underlie people’s evaluations of their representatives and representative institutions.⁸

The implications of this are profound. This study turns on the idea that there is an integral relationship between individual political beliefs, the nature of representation, and the legitimacy of our political institutions and actors. No matter how ill-defined, citizens’ basic understanding of representation—their bedrock ideas and expectations about the representative process—may condition their assessments of political actors, institutions, and events, their political attitudes, their participation in politics, and even their faith in the political process. Those who perceive a substantial gap between the way the representative process works and the way they believe it *should* work, for instance, are more likely to feel cynical and disconnected and perhaps to withdraw from political life altogether. There is, in sum, an integral link between people’s political beliefs and their political attitudes and behaviors.

All of this suggests how critical people’s political beliefs are to the workings of a democratic polity. *Individual-level* attitudes, which naturally are influenced by larger forces, also can have profound *systemic-level* effects. Citizens’ ideas about representation in part reflect the political milieu they are in; their beliefs are shaped, and at times reshaped, by the political environment. It is equally true, however, that people’s representational convictions can have real consequences for the democratic process. This interrelationship between the political world, citizens’ political views, and civic attitudes and engagement underscores the impor-

tance of examining people's political beliefs. Individual political discourse is, quite simply, a major part of democratic political life. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the representative process.

A Different Approach

To better understand our contemporary political process and political culture, then, it is necessary to delve into the ideas and expectations individuals have about representation—and to consider whether representatives and representative institutions are meeting them. More specifically, in order to better comprehend the public's view of Congress and its members, we need to specify the latent notions of representation that citizens use to help make sense of the political world.⁹ My interest therefore lies in individuals' conceptions of representation and how these conceptions are related to the political environment. The representational issues I will address in this book fall into three overarching categories:

The Idea of Representation The Representative Relationship Institutional Representation

At heart, the study was designed to disclose what the concept of representation means to people. The second and third objectives were derived from this larger question; they guided my investigation of people's ideas about representation at the congressional level.

The Idea of Representation

The foremost objective of my research was to reveal people's most fundamental and global ideas about representation. There are two related aspects to this:

1. *What* people think about representation.
2. *How* people think about representation.

The underlying intent here was to uncover the actual images, ideas, and ideals citizens hold about representation and the representative process. In so doing I also wanted to find out how sensitive these beliefs are to the political universe. By listening to how people talk about representation, we may gain a better sense of the relationship between representational norms and expectations and such factors as the behavior of incumbents, institutional processes, and (changes in) the policy environment.

The Representative Relationship

The relationship between members of Congress and their constituents remains the focal point of representational research. However, the vast majority of this work has dealt only with the legislators' side of the coin. While there have been some inquiries into public evaluations of Congress and its members, as discussed above, we still know relatively little about what citizens think about and expect from the representative process. What we do know has been drawn from truncated opinion surveys rather than in-depth explorations of people's ideas about representation expressed in their own words. My project sought to address these deficiencies by examining:

1. What people look for in congressional representatives.
2. The roles members of Congress are supposed to play.
3. How people perceive the representative relationship.
4. The impact of representatives themselves on people's representational views.¹⁰

Institutional Representation

One of the underlying rationales for my study is that it is essential to understand what people believe about Congress as a representative body. Among its major premises are that ordinary citizens have the capacity to think about Congress as an institution and that they may also possess some enduring notions about what I call "institutional representation."¹¹ Therefore, I decided to investigate:

1. The expectations people have for Congress as a political institution.
2. What people think about Congress in its representative (and especially its deliberative) capacity.
3. Whether citizens appear to hold any conceptions of institutional representation.¹²

My last major concern was whether citizens feel they are being adequately represented today. It is important to tap into views on the health of contemporary representation not only because many citizens may have them, but also because they might provide a window into people's fundamental beliefs about how representation *does* and *should* work. These assessments may also have an impact on their expressed attitudes towards Congress and the political system. Accordingly, while exploring people's general ideas about representation and the congressional representative process, I tried to determine:

1. How well people feel they are being represented.
2. What people believe is good and bad with representation today.
3. How people think the representative process can be improved.

Exploring all these issues means going to the heart of representational theory to define and explain the relationship between represented and representative. There are two main elements to this. One, of course, is what Hannah F. Pitkin long ago identified as a crucial component in any representational research: pinpointing “how a representative ought to act or what he is expected to do, how to tell whether he has represented well or badly” (Pitkin 1967, p. 58). Doing so includes defining how people perceive the congressional representative relationship, such as what members of Congress should do in office, the qualities they should possess, the inherent conflicts they face, and the impediments that members and others might pose to effective representation.

The second, and equally important, side to the congressional representative equation is the link between Congress as an institution and ordinary citizens. People’s conceptions of institutional representation have been largely neglected in the literature, but exploring them is essential if we are to gain a deeper understanding of the public’s views about the political process. Ascertaining what citizens think about Congress as a representative body—including its primary role(s) in the political system and how well it is serving the American people—is as necessary an ingredient in this kind of representational study as any analysis of the member-constituent relationship.

Much work has been done on the “supply-side” of the representative process. We have learned a great deal about how representatives make voting decisions, the internal dynamics of legislatures, modern campaign practices, and so on. Our knowledge of how representatives serve their constituents and approach the representative relationship has also grown considerably. But the “demand-side” of the representative process remains much more of a mystery. This book is conceived as a first step toward filling this gap in the existing literature on representation. It is guided by two convictions: one, that we can greatly enrich our knowledge of contemporary political culture, the representative-constituent process, and even public attitudes toward Congress by taking stock of the ideas, assumptions, hopes, and critiques that ordinary citizens have about representation; and two, that we can best do this by engaging people to talk *directly* and *at length* about the subject in extended conversational interviews.

The work that follows is based upon twenty-eight conversations with a wide range of individuals in order to ascertain their fundamental beliefs and expectations about the representative process. Chapter two

outlines the research methodology employed in this study, including the rationale for using in-depth individual interviews, the process undertaken to code and analyze the interview transcripts, and the key variables that helped guide my interpretation of the data. Chapter three presents and analyzes the central ideas—the basic “building blocks”—in the subjects’ general conceptions of representation. Chapter four explores how these core beliefs are put into practice through participants’ answers to a pair of hypothetical voting questions for members of Congress. By examining how these citizens expect congressional representatives to resolve classic decision-making dilemmas, we gain valuable insights into their understanding of the representative process, insights that could modify how this process is portrayed in the literature. Chapter five addresses the respondents’ views about the congressional representative relationship, and offers some surprising findings that challenge the conventional wisdom of ordinary citizens as both reflexively critical and ignorant of the challenges faced by members of Congress. Chapter six looks at how these citizens perceive Congress as an institution, including their views on the state of contemporary representation and how the representative process might be improved. In the concluding chapter, we revisit the participants’ fundamental ideas about representation, examine the most important and intriguing aspects of their conceptions of the representative process, and consider the larger implications of my findings for both the representational literature and the contemporary political process.

Revealing how citizens make sense of representation in a complex political world has intrinsic value for students of American politics. It can significantly enrich our understanding of the public side of the representative process, something that has generally received short shrift by scholars. It can also help provide empirical grounding for underlying assumptions about the process; theories of representation, for instance, turn on the belief that citizens’ expectations of their representatives are politically significant, yet little is known about the nature of these expectations or how they matter. But considering the representative process from the vantage point of ordinary citizens takes on added importance given the long winter of our discontent with politics. Greater awareness of people’s fundamental beliefs about representation might help us to get at the roots of public disenchantment with elected officials and representative institutions. It may also provide valuable insight into how, and to what extent, the contemporary political process can be revitalized.

At a time when many Americans appear to be questioning anew what they want from government and their elected representatives, it seems fitting to try to discern what representation really means to them—and to explore the implications this might have for our democratic polity.