

The Role of Government and the Constitution

American Attitudes and Support for
Reaffirming Representative Government

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The Role of Government and the Constitution

American Attitudes and Support for Reaffirming Representative Government

Executive Summary

Americans believe government is broken. Dissatisfaction with political parties and the offices the people's elected representatives hold is widespread. Many Americans see Washington working for the politically-connected, but when it comes to representing and carrying out the will of the people, the polls are clear: elected officials are doing a poor job.

This feeling among many Americans that the country is heading in the wrong direction is only compounded by a lack of ideas about how to fix the problem. Fewer than one out of five Americans feel like they know what needs to be done to fix government—they are looking for answers and good examples.

Despite this feeling of helplessness, an exceptionally high number of Americans do believe that it is very important for government and its elected leaders to follow the rules and principles outlined in the U.S. Constitution. The American people believe strongly in the principles and structure set forth in the Constitution for how government *should* operate.

They also strongly believe those powers are granted *by the people*. It's for this reason that many Americans are concerned when any branch of the government ignores the limits set on it by the Constitution. The repercussions of these types of actions impact the foundation of every person's freedom.

In order to change American's perceptions of government, elected leaders must first recognize the importance of following the principles of the Constitution, which outline a structure by which the people are able to shape and guide government.

Communications and messaging centered on this idea prove to be impactful and garner broad agreement. In particular, messages and terms which emphasize the power granted to elected leaders by the people in order to maintain a democratic and free society are among the most effective. Americans believe these core principles create opportunity for all and eliminate favoritism and preferences for a select few.

Methodology

The American Perceptions Initiative, a project of The Heritage Foundation, conducted a market research study of voters' familiarity, attitudes, and perspectives on the role of the U.S. Constitution in government. The market research also gauged their level of support and agreement with different messages and communications related to the proper role of government in American life.

The American Perceptions Initiative's research is conducted in partnership with Vision Critical and Heart+Mind Strategies, and is fielded online with the Springboard America platform. Vision Critical is a well-respected research firm based in North America, with research specialists that cover subjects including public opinion, health, technology,

consumer goods, media, and travel. They work with household brands, government bodies, not-for-profit organizations, and the media to help them better understand their customers and stakeholders. Heart+Mind Strategies is an experienced and award winning consulting firm specializing in winning the hearts and minds of the people that matter most to their clients' success.

The American Perceptions Initiative's study on government and the Constitution was conducted online from January 6-13, 2016 among 1,020 registered voters.

Note: Figures may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

Part I: General Landscape

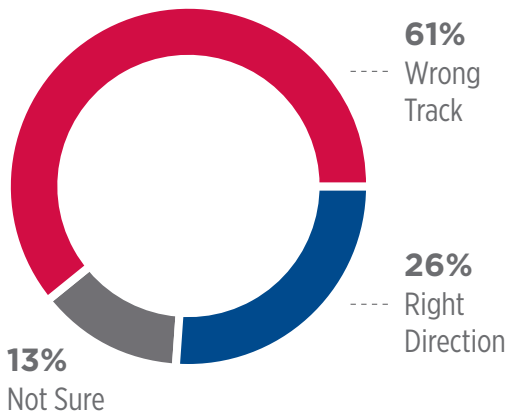
Awareness

There are many problems with the way government is working today. The president regularly sidesteps Congress and uses executive authority to change existing laws or federal regulations; something many Americans believe oversteps his authority and some believe is outright illegal. Congress has at times failed to perform its basic duties and responsibilities such as developing and approving a budget to manage the debt and appropriating funds

for priority programs. The Supreme Court and other judges misinterpret laws and create special privileges and rights for individuals or groups that are not expressly outlined in the Constitution.

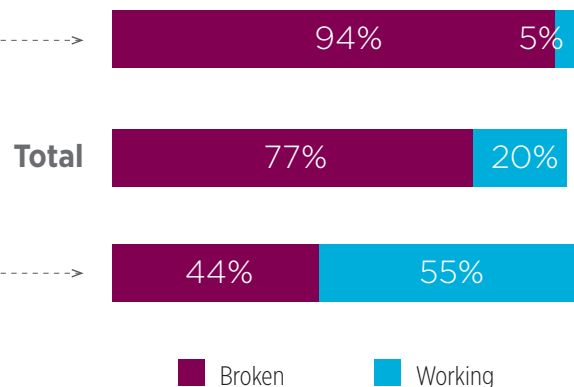
These and other circumstances have contributed to a majority of voters (61%) believing America is off on the wrong track. Of those who think government is on the wrong track, nearly all of them (94%) say government is broken. Even 44% of voters who

Strong Pessimism Over Direction of Country and Government



Generally speaking, do you feel things in this country are generally going in the right direction or do you feel things have pretty seriously gotten off on the wrong track?

77% Government Is Broken



Generally speaking, do you feel our government is working pretty much like it is supposed to or do you feel our government is broken?

believe government is on the right track say government in the U.S. is broken. Overall, 77% of voters think government is broken.

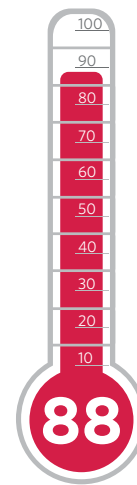
This perception is not surprising considering the gap Americans see between the exceptionally high level of importance they place on “government and elected leaders following the rules and principles

outlined in the U.S. Constitution” and government’s ability to follow through. When asked how important this is to them, Americans rated it very high, an 88 out of 100. However, the reality that they experience fails to measure up. Americans rated the job government is doing of following the rules and principles in the Constitution a dismal 46 out of 100.

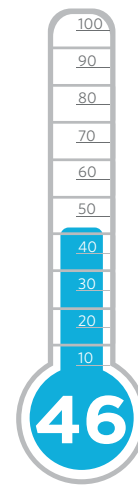
Gap Between Importance and Reality of Following Constitution

In order to establish justice and promote peace and prosperity in our country, how important do you believe it is for the U.S. government and elected leaders to follow the rules and principles outlined in the United States Constitution? Please use a scale from 1 to 100, where a “100” means extremely important and “1” means not at all important.

How well do you believe the U.S. Government and elected leaders are following the rules and principles outlined in the United States Constitution? Please use a scale from 1 to 100, where a “100” means they are doing a “perfect” job and “1” means they are doing the “worst possible” job.



Importance



Performance

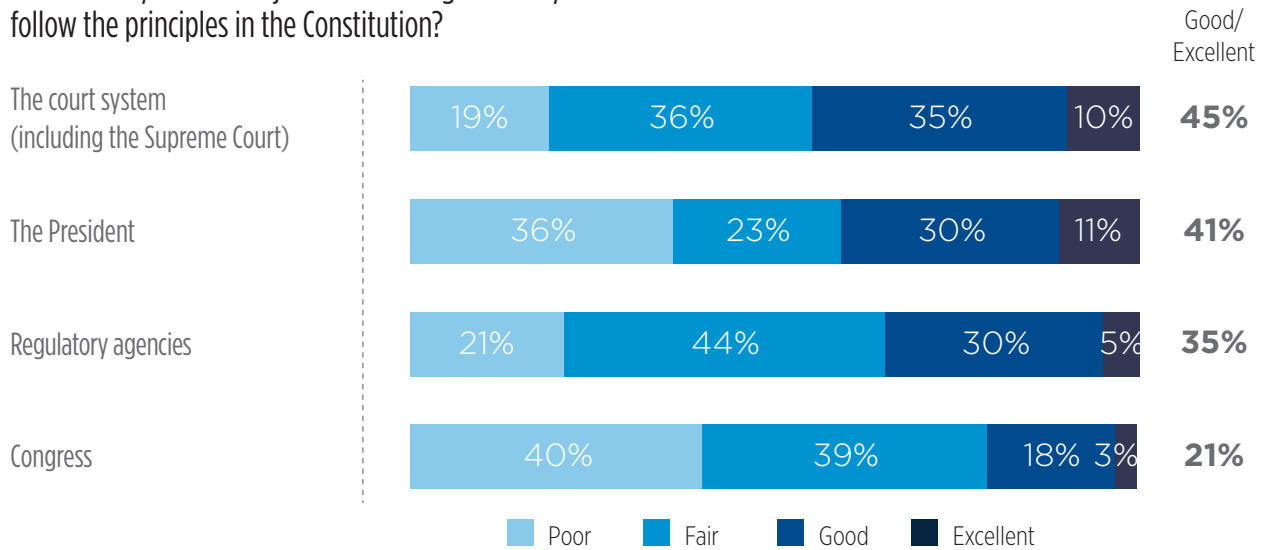
When considered by branch, Congress does especially poorly, with half as many as other branches, only two in 10, saying they do an excellent or good job at following the principles of the Constitution. In fact, a plurality (40%) thinks it does a poor job.

On the other hand, the judicial and executive branches rate better, but still have tepid support.

Even regulatory agencies fare better than Congress at 36%, despite having no defined role in the Constitution. All branches receive a positive rating from less than a majority of Americans.

Plurality Say Congress Does a Poor Job of Following the Constitution

How would you rate the job each is doing to closely follow the principles in the Constitution?



Misperceptions

Despite their dissatisfaction, most Americans are not sure exactly what needs to be done to fix government. Only 22% of registered voters would say they know a lot about what needs to be done to correct the problem.

Voters' uncertainty extends beyond the necessary solutions to current government problems. While a majority of Americans (86%) know the three branches of government—executive, legislative, and judicial—and some of their Constitutional responsibilities, there is confusion among some about whose responsibility it is to carry out many of the basic functions of government.

- Half of all Americans (51%) believe it is the President's responsibility to declare war. The Constitution grants that power to Congress, the branch most reflective of the will of the people.
- Only six out of 10 Americans (58%) believe it is the responsibility of Congress to control federal spending and manage the national debt.
- Nearly half of all Americans (46%) believe federal agencies and bureaucrats are responsible for enforcing the law. The Constitution grants this responsibility to the president.

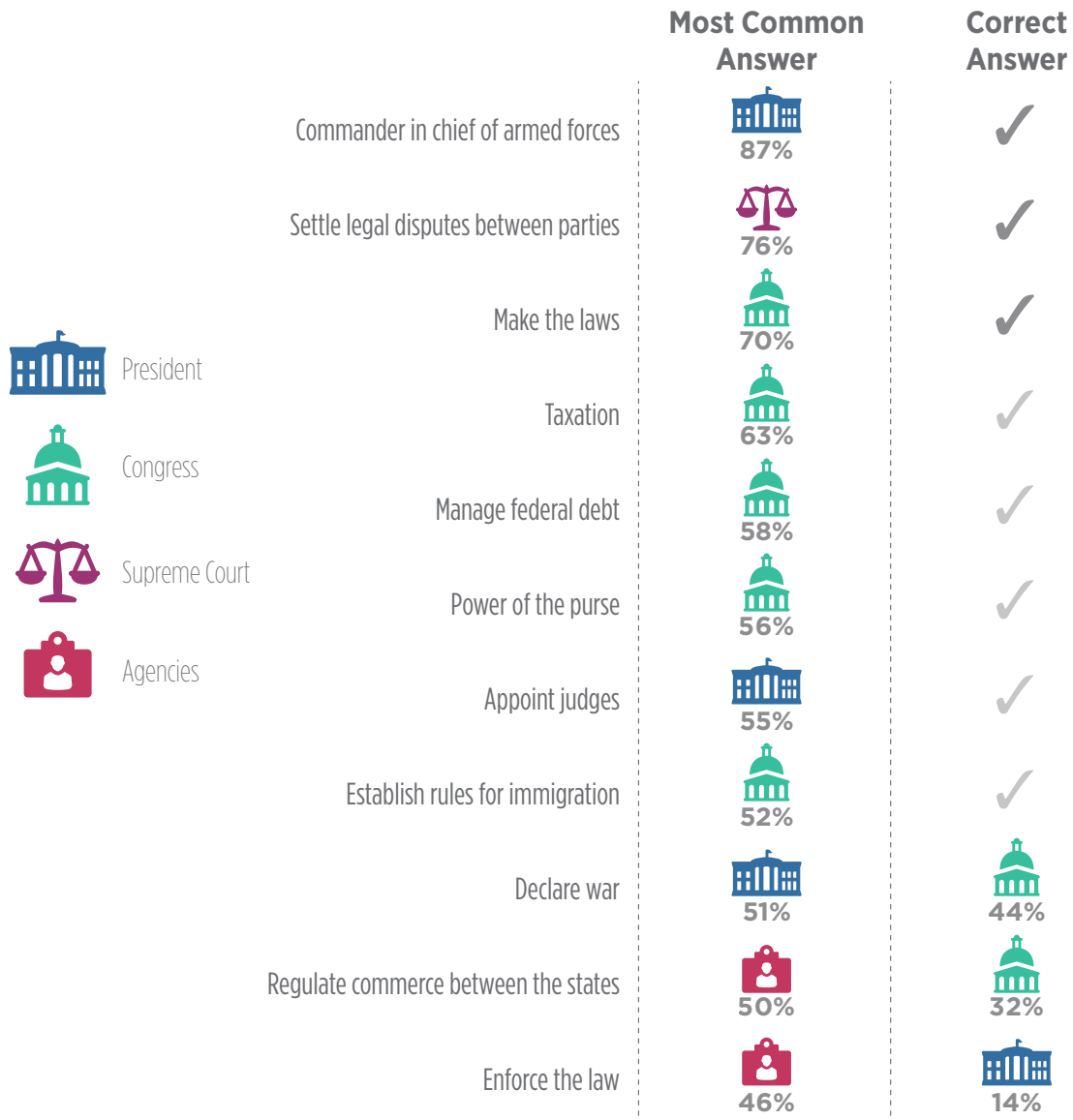
The confusion over the proper role of each branch of government is only complicated by executive overreach, judicial interpretation, and congressional inaction. The blurring of responsibility often adds to the public's confusion.

As this happens, Americans are increasingly prone to cede power to the President in the face of uncertainty over who is ultimately responsible for carrying out certain tasks. Confusion over roles and responsibilities of government are greatest among the millennial generation (18-34 year olds). This generation is more likely to wrongly assume the President has roles and responsibilities on such things as:

- Make laws—20%
- Taxation—16%
- Manage the federal debt—25%
- Establish rules for naturalization and immigration—23%

If these trends continue, oversteps by the executive, judicial, or legislative branches could come to be considered the norm.

Confusion Over Constitutional Responsibility For Basic Functions of Government



Please match each of the following roles of government with the person or group that should do most of each, regardless of what seems to be happening right now.

Deeper Engagement

In the face of this uncertainty and increasing dissatisfaction with government, elected leaders must reaffirm the importance of following the principles of the Constitution—both in word and deed—which means representing and putting into action the will of the people. Nine out of 10 Americans (90%) agree that “the government should be accountable to the American people”, and the basic principles outlined in the Constitution create a structure by which the people are able to shape and guide government.

Nine out of 10 Americans (92%) believe that the three branches of government should be true to the

powers expressly defined for them in the Constitution. A similar number (88%) believe that when any branch ignores the limits set on it by the Constitution, it destroys the foundation of U.S. system of government and undermines every American’s freedom.

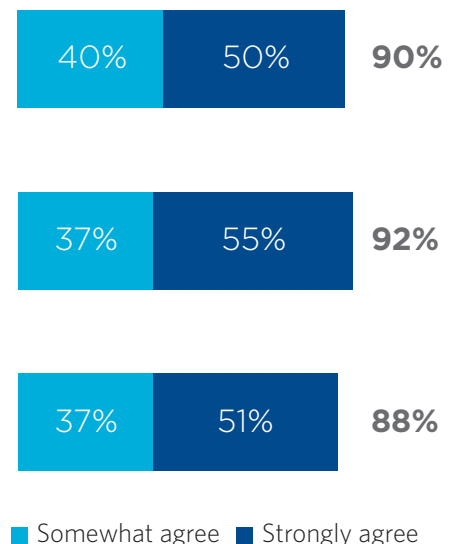
Government must be accountable to the people, and when the Congress, the President, and the Courts operate in principled and defined ways, every American is ensured liberty, the opportunity for economic prosperity, and a flourishing civil society.

Government Should Be Accountable to the People and True to the Constitution

The government should be accountable to the American people, allowing every person to pursue his or her dreams.

The three branches of the federal government should be true to the powers expressly defined for them in the Constitution, ensuring liberty, the opportunity for economic prosperity, and a flourishing civil society for every American.

The three branches of government were created by the people through the Constitution. When any branch ignores the limits set on it by the Constitution, this destroys the foundation of our system of government and undermines every American’s freedom.



Part II: Building Support for Fixing Government

The Language of Constitutionality

While a multitude of voters are dissatisfied with government and some are confused by the various roles each branch of government plays, nearly all Americans are open to ideas and messaging centered on fixing government by returning to the principles outlined by the Constitution. These ideas resonate most strongly when connected to the Constitution as the origin of government's power and the people as the seat of its legitimacy.

Communications and messaging centered on the notion of principled government that reflects the will of the people proved to be impactful and garnered broad agreement. In particular, messages and terms which emphasize the power granted to elected leaders by the people in order to maintain a democratic and free society are among the most effective. These core principles create opportunity for all Americans and eliminate favoritism and preferences for a select few.

The research identifies the most positively and negatively charged words and phrases being used

to frame both the improper and proper role of government. Positive power phrases such as “the will of the people” reflect an understanding that elected officials should represent their constituents, not lobbyists or a select few who are politically connected. Furthermore, phrases such as “checks and balances” and “democracy” are important ways to characterize how government should work.

Just as important, “lawless”, “ignore the voice of the American people”, and “thinks he/she knows better than the American people” are powerfully negative words that can be used to describe the actions taken by any specific branch of government that oversteps its authority.

Even “U.S. Congress” has a negative connotation. In order to restore and revitalize the U.S. Congress, elected officials should reframe it as an instrument of the people. Phrases such as “the people’s house” and “the people’s elected representatives” are stronger characterizations than the word “Congress” itself.

Positive (% Positive):

- Constitution—**72%**
- The will of the people—**66%**
- Opportunity for all—**65%**
- Democracy—**62%**
- Checks and balances—**60%**
- Opportunity for all. Favoritism to none.—**59%**
- The people’s house—**46%**

Negative (% Negative):

- Ignore the voice of the American people—**75%**
- Lawless—**70%**
- Thinks he/she knows better than the American people—**66%**
- Federal bureaucrats—**65%**
- Overstep—**64%**
- U.S. Congress—**54%**

This study also tested a series of messages by asking voters to read each one and indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree. While all messages tested received agreement from the majority of voters surveyed, the following types of messages should be used to frame solutions for fixing government:

1. Law of the Land: Fixing government and changing Americans’ perceptions is a multipart process that starts with recognizing the importance of following the principles of the Constitution, which outline a structure by which the people are able to shape and guide government. Messages that focus on reining in government overreach stir strong support among the American people.

Elected leaders should proactively address these instances to help shape voters’ understanding and further clarify the proper role of each branch of government. For instance, messaging that characterizes presidential overreach as “lawless” and “ignoring the voice of the people” was most impactful.

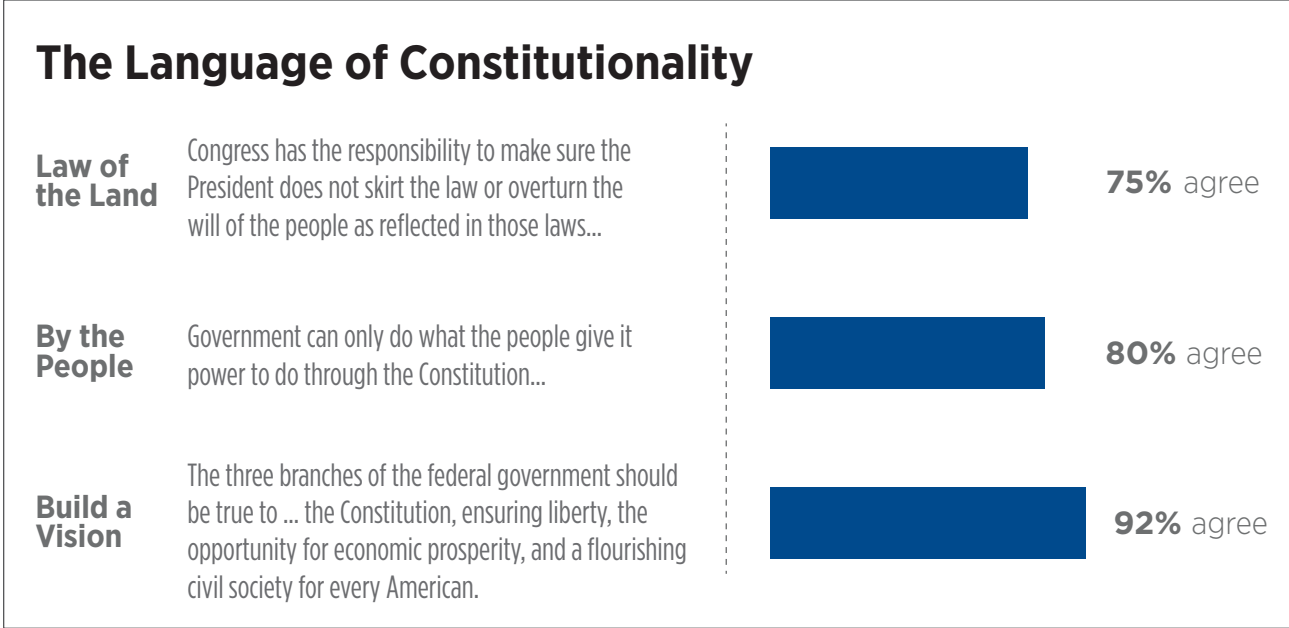
“Congress has the responsibility to make sure the President does not skirt the law or overturn the will of the people as reflected in those laws. Congress should use the “power of the purse” to deny funding to unconstitutional presidential actions.” (75% agreement)

2. By the People: Elected officials should focus on restoring the basic principles outlined in the Constitution. Messages that acknowledge these structures and are rooted in the power government is granted from the people resonate strongly and perform best.

“Government can only do what the people give it power to do through the Constitution. Government can’t give itself more power and authority over people’s lives, businesses, or associations. The three branches of the federal government should be true to the powers expressly defined for them in the Constitution.” (80% agreement)

3. Benefits of Representative Government: Messages that build a vision of the benefits of government actions within its proper role perform best. The American people will unite around a shared vision of a government that is responsive to the will of the people. Offering solutions anchored in the benefits of principled governance garnered the most support.

“The three branches of the federal government should be true to the powers expressly defined for them in the Constitution, ensuring liberty, the opportunity for economic prosperity, and a flourishing civil society for every American.” (92% agreement)



Conclusion

Elected officials that desire to change the perception of government have a clear path forward. Underscoring the importance of the principles that guide government's actions, acknowledging the limits of what government can and cannot do, and casting a vision of the future that benefits all Americans will build support for fixing government.

In order to change perceptions of government, elected officials must reaffirm principled governance

that gives a voice to the people it represents. Communications and messaging centered on this idea successfully garner broad agreement. If elected officials tie these core Constitutional principles to the visible benefits good governance creates, Americans will unite around this solution to broken government.