



Latest Polls Reveal Little Faith In National Leaders, Perhaps A Sign of Public Wisdom

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Public skepticism about our permanent political class, both Democratic and Republican, may be the beginning of wisdom.

The president's current approval rating stands at 46 per cent, up from a low of 42 per cent in November. More Americans rate his performance negatively, with 50 per cent disapproving. Just 37 per cent say they have either a good amount or a great deal of confidence in the president to make the right decisions for the country's future, while 63 per cent say they do not.

Obama's approval ratings are almost identical to those of George W. Bush at a similar point in his presidency in 2006. Confidence in Democrats and Republicans in Congress is even lower. Twenty seven per cent say they have confidence in Democrats to make the right decisions for the country, while 72 per cent do not, and just 19 per cent have confidence in Republicans, while 80 per cent do not. Almost half lack confidence in all three.

Interestingly, for Republicans, lack of faith in their decision-making includes their own followers. Just 36 per cent of self-identified Republicans say they believe their party's lawmakers will make good decisions. Overall, just 16 per cent approve of the way Congress is doing its job.

Public skepticism about our permanent political class, both Democratic and Republican, may be the beginning of wisdom. The evidence seems to point to the conclusion that this class largely serves its own political interests and the interests of those who finance it, not the larger public interest.

The examples are many. The recent farm bill approved by Congress, to cite one particularly egregious case, maintains its subsidy to sugar cane farmers. "The sugar program is the most Soviet (style) centrally planned of all the agriculture programs," says Chris Edwards, director of policy studies at the Cato Institute. "It really is astounding."

To help protect U.S. sugar growers from foreign competition, the Department of Agriculture regulates the flow of imported sugar. The USDA also provides loans to sugar cane and sugar beet producers and processors that guarantee a minimum price. This artificially inflates prices for consumers and critics argue that the powerful sugar lobby squeezes lawmakers of both parties to embrace the policies. "I don't think there's another program in the federal budget that shows you the power of a narrow interest. It's not like U.S. agriculture wouldn't survive without subsidies and protections---it certainly would. It would look different and it would be more efficient."

In the case of the ban on traditional light bulbs as a result of the Energy Independence and Security Act, many believe that the impetus for this action came from environmentalists. Under the law, any bulbs that couldn't produce a given brightness at the specified energy input would be illegal. The new standards were not opposed by General Electric, Sylvania and Philips---but eagerly promoted. After all, the new, far more expensive bulbs produced far more profit than the older, inexpensive bulbs.

WASHINGTON EXAMINER columnist Timothy Carney explains that, "Capitalism ruining their party, the bulb makers turned to government. Philips teamed up with NRDC. GE leaned on its huge lobbying army---the largest in the nation---and soon they were able to ban the low-profit-margin bulbs. The high-tech, high-cost, high-margin bulbs have advantages. They last longer and use much less electricity...But depending on your circumstances, these gains might be mitigated or eliminated...There's a middle-ground between everyone using traditional bulbs and making traditional bulbs illegal. It's called free choice. Let people choose if they want more efficient and expensive bulbs..But consumer choice is no good for nanny-staters or companies seeking high profit margins. Technologies often run the course from breakthrough innovation to obsolete anachronism. Think of the 8-track cassette, the Model T Ford or Kodachrome film. But the market didn't kill the traditional light bulb. Government did it, at the request of big business."

Politicians---both in Congress and the White House, and of both parties----spend a lot of time raising money from those who have business in Washington. Those who contribute large sums usually get their way. Sugar producers and light bulb makers, of course, are only the tip of an iceberg. Both Democrats and Republicans spend a lot of time gathering money on Wall Street. It was hardly surprising that they would join together to use taxpayer money to bail out failing institutions.

What do members of Congress do with all of the money they raise? The majority of members today are in non-competitive, one party districts. They don't really need that much money for campaigning. This is where the Leadership Political Action Committee (PAC) comes in.

Leadership PACs are ostensibly about raising money to help political colleagues hold and win seats. But the Federal Election Commission (FEC) has few restrictions on how this money can be used and does not restrict the "personal use" of such funds.

In one case, that of Rep. Paul Gilmore (R-OH), PAUL PAC spent almost \$6,000 on personal expenses: fast food, doughnuts, bar tabs and golf. The problem: Rep. Gilmore was dead---but the PAC lived on. Over the course of his career, Sen Saxby Chambliss (R-GA), has played a lot of golf paid for by his PAC. In 2012, his PAC spent \$107, 752 at the Breakers in Palm Beach. He also spent \$26, 814 at Ruth's Chris Steakhouse and \$10, 344 at Pebble Beach.

Rep. John Conyers (D-MI) raised \$99,300 in 2012. He gave only \$1,430 to other candidates, which is the stated purpose of his PAC. Instead, he spent more than six times that amount on the National Football League (\$6,595) and ESPN (\$6,900) to attend award events. He spent more on limousine services for himself (\$1,500) than he did on candidates.

In the case of Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY), he paid \$64,500 from his leadership PAC funds to commission a painting of himself. He also paid one of his sons \$79,560 to make a website for the National Leadership PAC. POLITICO reported that the website looked as if it had been out together in an hour or two. It even included spelling errors, such as "Give Contribution." One web designer said the website was so bad that the fee should not have been more than \$100.

Discussing Leadership PACs, former FEC commissioner Brad Smith, who usually opposes tighter campaign finance rules, states that, "For the most part it's really kind of an incumbent racket."

The founding fathers would be disappointed with the state of affairs in Washington, but it is unlikely that they would be surprised. They knew that man was imperfect---and that power corrupts. John Adams expressed the view that, "Whoever would found a state and make proper laws for the government of it must presume that all men are bad by nature."

That government should be clearly limited and that power is a corrupting force was the essential perception held by the men who created the nation. In The Federalist Papers, James Madison wrote: "It may be a reflection on human nature that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed, and in the next place control itself."

Perhaps we should not lament the low esteem in which the President and Congress are now held. They have, it seems, earned their current approval ratings. Although it often seems unlikely, the American people may be paying more attention to developments than we suppose. It is familiarity which seems to have produced the lack of confidence we now observe.