

Congress' image sinks to a new low —maybe we can help



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The United States Congress has a big problem and we might just have the solution. The only problem is, can we get lawmakers to listen?

First, the problem. The country hates the Congress. OK, maybe that is a little strong. But the country really doesn't like Congress.

Over the past couple of years, the polling numbers on Congress have been abysmal. In June, Gallup released a poll that gave Congress an approval rating of just 17 percent, while confidence in Congress fell to an historic low of 10 percent. A recent poll by Rasmussen was even more shocking: Just 7 percent of Americans think Congress is doing an "excellent or good" job. Although

neither party is especially popular, the Pew Center found that the Republican leadership in Congress faces an extremely high disapproval rating: an eye-popping 68 percent.

None of this should come as a complete surprise. The GOP-led House of Representatives has refused to take action to help the nation's economy recover from the Great Recession, while the Senate minority leader is daily setting records on the abuse of filibusters to block legislative action and to stop President Obama from even filling his cabinet and other executive branch positions. He has blocked the appointment of a secretary of labor (the pro-labor Tom Perez) and has sought to essentially close down the National Labor Relations Board by refusing to give President Obama's appointees an up-or-down vote.

Congress is basically sitting on its hands while millions of Americans are jobless or forced to work part-time and as wages continue to stagnate. It has refused to adopt bipartisan measures that would repair our crumbling infrastructure and put people back to work. Earlier this year, it actually made the situation worse—implementing damaging across-the-board budget cuts through sequestration instead of making a balanced, long-term budget deal with the president. And let's not forget, it has failed to address the crisis at the Postal Service, which it largely caused in 2006 by imposing the retiree health pre-funding mandate just before the economy collapsed.

But fixing the crisis at the Postal Service may be the solution to Congress' problems. More pointedly, addressing the postal crisis may be a solution to the GOP's woes with the public. That's because the American people love the Postal Service and want to see it thrive again.

The thought came to me when I came across another poll conducted by NBC News and the *Wall Street Journal* earlier this year. The table below summarizes the positive and negative attitudes Americans expressed toward different leaders, national institutions and interest groups:

Summary of Public Images

	Total Positive	Total Negative	Difference Pos-Neg (+/-)
The U.S. Postal Service	60	13	+ 47
Gov. Chris Christie (R-NJ)	36	12	+ 24
Pope Benedict XVI	30	17	+ 13
President Obama	49	40	+ 9
The Democratic Party	41	36	+ 5
The Republican Party	29	46	- 17

I really wish the GOP leaders in the House of Representatives would study this chart. The Postal Service is more popular than the Pope or Gov. Chris Christie! Strengthening the Postal Service would be a huge political winner with the American people. And if they paused long enough to think about it, both mainstream Republicans and Tea Party activists should support the Postal Service.

For the Tea Party, the Postal Service is no creation of the modern welfare state. It was founded in 1775 and specifically authorized by the Constitution (Article 1, Clause 8). It is operated on business principles and abides by private-sector accounting rules. Its pension funds are fully funded (something that is not true for most private companies). It receives no taxpayer subsidies—though the Postal Service is reimbursed for free mail for the blind and for overseas voting by soldiers—and did not seek taxpayer help during the Great Recession. Instead, working with its unions, it rapidly adapted to the loss of mail volume (reducing employment by 160,000 jobs) and used the collective-bargaining process to restructure itself to capture a growing share of the booming e-commerce market.

For traditional Republicans, the Postal Service is a crucial partner to millions of small businesses, like the hundreds of thousands of merchants who sell products on eBay, and the countless pharmacies, realtors, dry cleaners and professional offices that rely on USPS for billing and advertising. It also is essential to the health of thousands of big businesses as well—from paper manufacturers and publishers to printers and prescription-benefit managers. It also is a major provider of last-mile delivery services to UPS and FedEx and is playing a growing role for companies like Amazon.com.

If Congress can avoid making postal reform just another skirmish in the ideological war over the size of government, it can repair its image and do something good for the country at the same time by strengthening the Postal Service, not dismantling it. As the saying goes, good policy is good politics. Strengthening the Postal Service is good politics.