

The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/TbmKOK>

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PULSE OF THE PEOPLE

Congress and Us: A Hate-Love Relationship

JUNE 19, 2014

Justin Wolfers

Dear Congress: Our relationship has soured. I no longer have confidence in you. I've asked my friends, and they all agree. Only 7 percent of my fellow Americans now tell Gallup they have either a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in you. A mere 15 percent approve of the way you're handling your job. They never really liked your friends — big business, organized labor and the banks — but now they tell me they have more confidence in each of them than they have in you.

Our relationship has been falling apart for years. Remember the 1970s? Back then, around two-fifths of my friends thought you could be trusted. And while I didn't ask them exactly the same question in the 1960s, they sure seemed to trust you even more back then.

Every year I keep thinking things can't get worse, but then you disappoint me again. How much longer can this go on?

I've searched for explanations. Perhaps the weak economy is to blame for our recent fights; after all, unemployment takes its toll on most relationships. Upon careful reflection I can see that the ups and downs in our relationship track the ups and downs of the economy. For sure, things between us seemed to improve during the long boom in the 1990s. But this doesn't explain our long-term decline.

I had hoped that this year would be different. The economy is improving, and in any case, it's hard to see how things could get worse between us. But your behavior over the past year proved me wrong, and we find our relationship at an all-time low.

With the bonds between us unraveling and the midterm elections fast approaching, is it time for you and me to separate?

My friends all say yes, but I'm just not ready. We stick it out, you and I. Think back to June 2012, when only 13 percent of Americans expressed confidence in you; yet only a few months later, we decided to stay together, re-electing over 90 percent of those who ran.

My therapist calls it an abusive relationship; my political scientist calls it **Fenno's Paradox**: Even if I don't like you as a whole, I love the small part of you that comes from my district. It's that love that keeps us together. I know you'll continue to treat me badly, but I don't see any other option.

I don't blame you. After all, if I don't really tell you what I want, how would you know to act any other way? I know that you could be better; I just give you no reason to try. The failure's all mine.

Sweetie, it's not you, it's me.

(Full disclosure: I consult for Gallup as a Senior Scientist, although I did not work on this particular poll.)

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