

Think They're So Similar There's No Point in Voting? Think Again.

Republicans and Democrats: How They Vote in Congress

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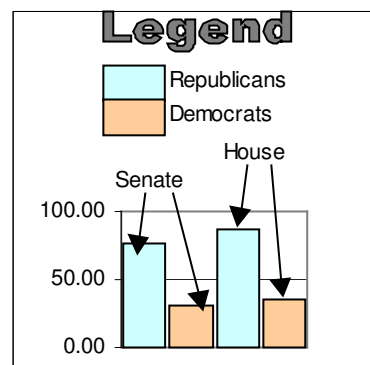
(This article is also available on the Internet at <http://members.telocity.com/graceken>)

Except for meaningless platitudes and similar hairstyles the Democrats and the Republicans are very different. Let's look at how they vote.

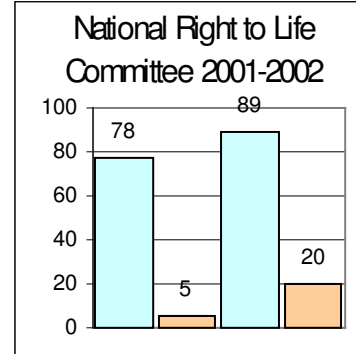
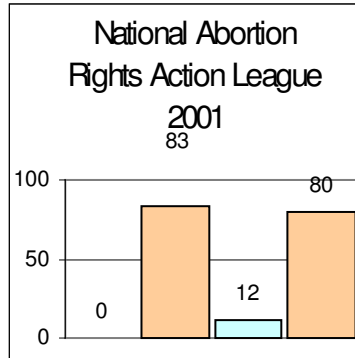
Some advocacy groups examine the voting records of elected officials and rate them, usually from 0% (poorest) to 100% (best) based on how their votes conform to the recommendations of the group. For convenience, we have taken the scoreboards of several groups from their listings on the website of **Project Vote Smart (PVS)** (<http://www.vote-smart.org/>). PVS has standardized the voting records from different groups for easy comparison. We then took the ratings of individual Democrats and Republicans in Congress on different issues and averaged them out for each political party. In this way we can see how the Democrats vote as a class and how the Republicans vote as a class. We highly recommend the PVC website for its thorough, nonpartisan, information about political candidates and elected officials, both national and regional.

Here is the Legend for the scoreboards in this article and a brief explanation of them:

Graphs in this article show ratings given Democrats and Republicans by advocacy groups based on the way they vote on specific issues in a one year period. The ratings are for the latest full year available for each group. Descriptions of every group mentioned are listed at the end of this article.



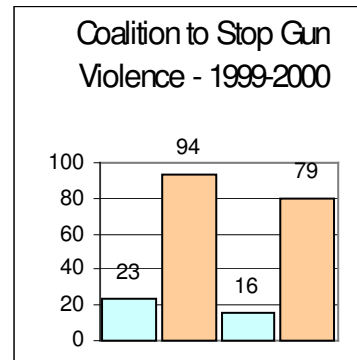
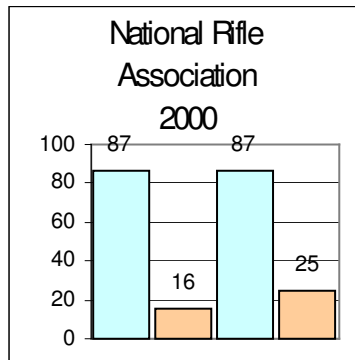
Pro Choice or Pro Life?



For example, let's take the incendiary issue of abortion - pro and con:

We can tell from these charts that Republicans, by and large, vote pro-life whereas Democrats vote pro-choice.

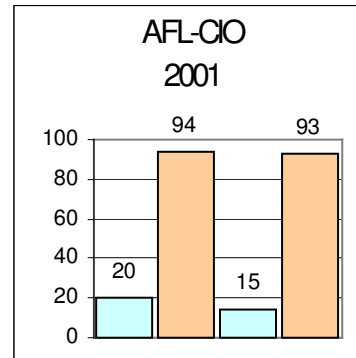
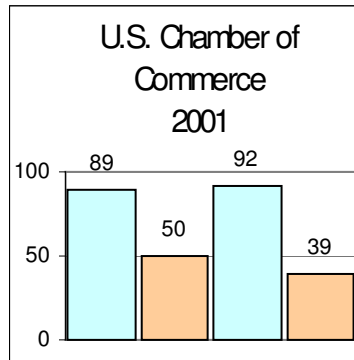
Gun Control



Another no-brainer is the gun control issue. It's clear from the voter scorecards of the 2 opposing pressure groups below that Republicans are generally pro gun, Democrats pro gun control.

Business, Labor and Taxes

Business legislation is a bit more complicated. Two groups that represent almost opposite viewpoints on business issues are the AFL-CIO (the federation of America's labor unions) and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The AFL-CIO represents more than 13 million working women and men. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is the world's largest not-for-profit business federation. According to its promotional material, "Since 1912, the U.S. Chamber has been your voice of business in Washington."



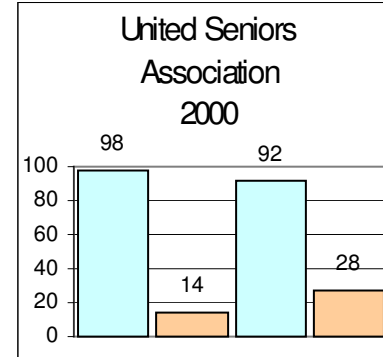
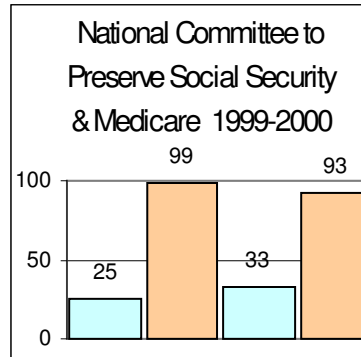
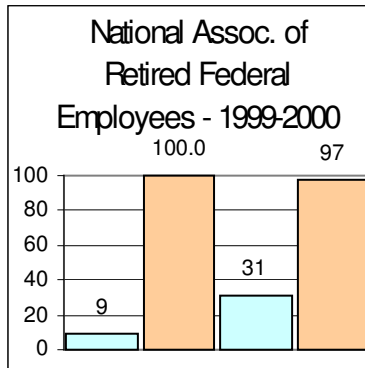
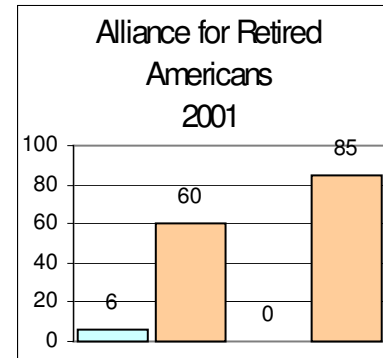
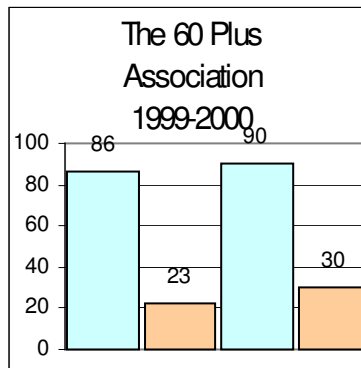
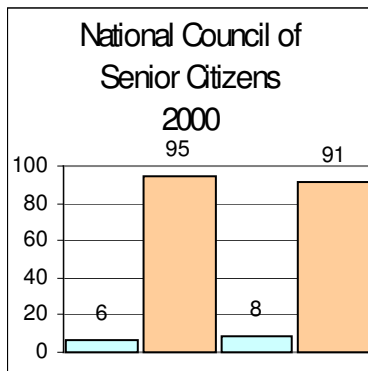
These 2 organizations agree on one or two things but more often than not have opposing views. In 2001, for instance, the AFL-CIO supported ergonomic safety rules to prevent crippling repetitive stress injuries in the workplace. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce opposed them because they would increase business costs.

The Chamber favored the Trade Promotion Authority Act ('Fast Track'), which would weaken Congressional oversight over trade agreements and give the President more power to negotiate them. Not surprisingly, the AFL-CIO opposed this because it could worsen worker rights and protections and harm the environment.

The Chamber, by and large, favored tax cuts including the elimination of inheritance taxes. The AFL-CIO opposed several pieces of legislation dealing with tax cuts and incentives for businesses including H.R. 1836 which it calls the 'millionaire tax cut.' They point out that according to Citizens for Tax Justice, more than 38% of the tax cut benefits would go to the wealthiest 1% of taxpayers who make \$373,000 or more annually. Even if lower income people get some reduction in taxes, those reductions would be negated by decreased services. Lower tax revenue to the Federal Government would make it virtually impossible for Congress to strengthen Social Security and Medicare in future sessions. Also, it is doubtful there would be enough funds available for a Medicare prescription drug benefit or for other needed investments in education and health care.

The Chamber supported containing health care costs by making it harder for HMO patients to sue health maintenance organizations. They also favored capping the potential liability that HMOs could be subject to from lawsuits brought by patients. The AFL-CIO opposed this legislation.

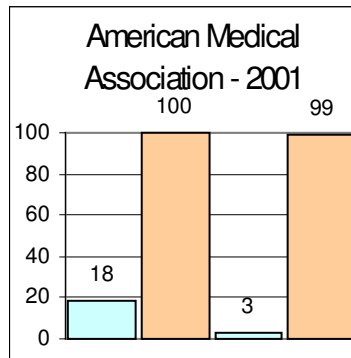
Seniors



As you can see from the above graphs, most senior citizen groups give Democrats higher ratings than Republicans. Senior citizen groups tend to favor Democratic positions on issues. They are afraid that tax cuts and excessively high defense spending will squander the Social Security and Medicare surpluses that will be needed when baby boomers retire. They also want adequate resources to be available for a meaningful Medicare prescription drug benefit. Also, Democrats have proposed more generous Medicare drug coverage legislation than Republicans have.

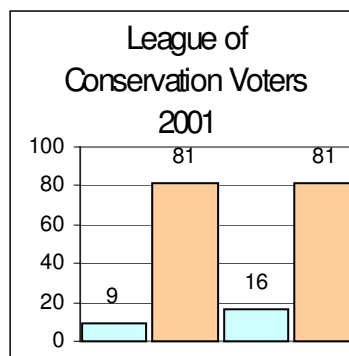
Health

The American Medical Association resoundingly supports the way Democrats have been voting recently. Why is that? Let's take a look at some issues of interest to this group. The AMA is working on the passage of a meaningful Patients' Bill of Rights, the expansion of health insurance options, relieving physicians of counterproductive administrative and regulatory burdens, funding research and medical education, and other objectives that promote individual and public health.



Environment

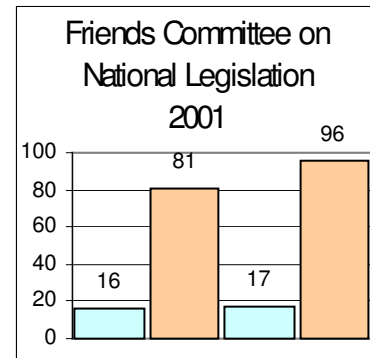
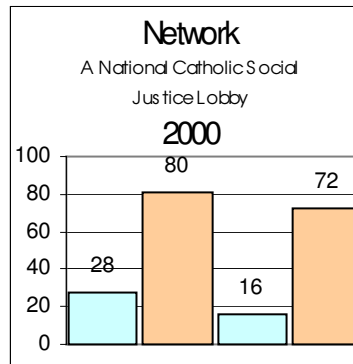
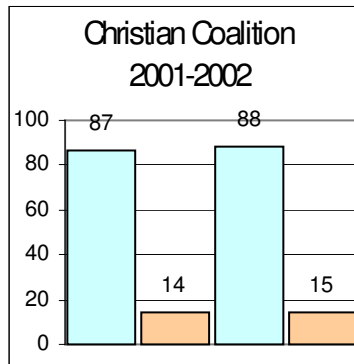
Let's take the environment as an issue. The League of Conservation Voters is a well-known, national organization that keeps track of votes relating to environmental protection. Let's see how they rate the two parties:



What does this environmental rating mean? It means that the vast majority of Republicans have voted against funding for alternative energy. They favor drilling for oil instead and have voted in favor of drilling under the Great Lakes, in the Gulf of Mexico, in the Alaskan Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and in National Monuments.

Also, Republicans have voted to allow more arsenic in drinking water, to cut funding for farm preservation, and to cut funding for the Environmental Protection Agency, thus diminishing that Agency's capacity to enforce environmental laws. They voted against raising fuel economy standards for light trucks which would save 1 million gallons of oil a day, and also voted for fast track trade legislation which puts the environment at risk. Democrats, on the other hand, have generally voted in an environment-friendly manner.

Religion



The Christian Coalition is well known for the political pressure it exerts. We will list here some of the stands it takes on legislation voted on in 2001. It is *against* campaign finance reform, *against* human cloning, *against* abortion, and *against* benefits to domestic partners. It is *for* the recent tax cuts (see earlier explanations under 'seniors' and 'business'). It is also *for* government funding for religious organizations providing community services, *for* school vouchers, and *for* legislation that removed the marriage penalty in tax law and raised the child tax credit from \$500 to \$1000.

Two other large religious organizations also rate members of Congress. One of them is Network, a National Catholic Social Justice Lobby. According to its literature, Network "educates, lobbies and organizes to influence the formation of federal legislation to promote economic and social justice." Network rates elected officials on issues that reflect Christian attitudes toward providing for the poor, working for a more equitable society, seeking social justice and the common good and striving for world peace and environmental sustainability.

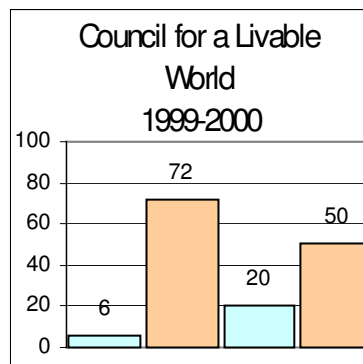
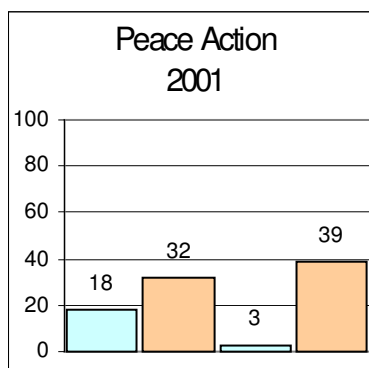
The Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) -- a Quaker group -- also rates Congress. In 2001 the FCNL was *against* school vouchers, *against* large tax cuts that mainly benefit the very rich, *against* medical savings accounts that would, in the opinion of FCNL, benefit pharmaceutical companies at the expense of seniors and begin a slide toward the privatization of Medicare, *against* military recruitment on school grounds, *against* the U.S. embargo on Cuba, *against* oil drilling in the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge, and *against* increased funding for the Andean Regional Counter-Narcotics Initiative (the War on Drugs in Columbia). FCNL was *for* increased education spending, *for* after school programs, *for* a Medicare prescription drug benefit, *for* Head Start funding, *for* additional military base closures, *for* global health funding, *for* the International Criminal Court, *for* paying the U.S. debt to the UN, and *for* normal trade relations with China, among many other issues.

National Security: Strength through Peace or Peace through Strength?

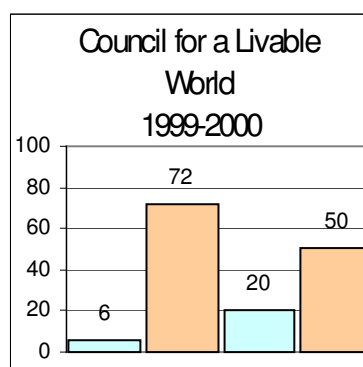
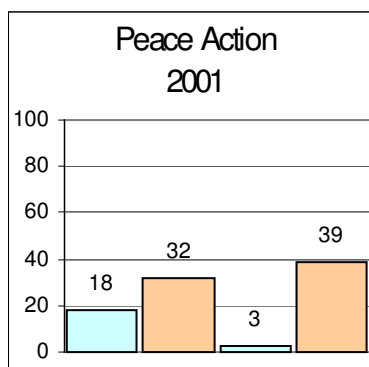
Although there are no groups that rate elected officials exclusively on defense matters, many groups do include national security issues in judging elected officials.

Peace organizations give poor marks to both political parties, but are generally more disappointed with the way Republicans vote than the way Democrats vote. Peace groups favor lowering military spending and using the differential for education, environmental protection, human needs, medical research and so on. In 2001, for example, Peace Action favored military base reorganization and some base closures to obtain greater efficiency and save money. Peace groups favor diplomacy and good faith efforts to ameliorate grievances as the first response to conflict, rather than threats, military incursions and wars. Preferring diplomacy and cooperation between nations, they strongly support the United Nations. They see war as either immoral or as the very last resort after all other possibilities have been exhausted.

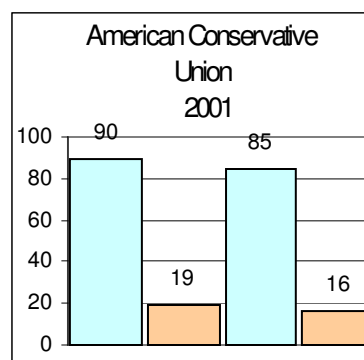
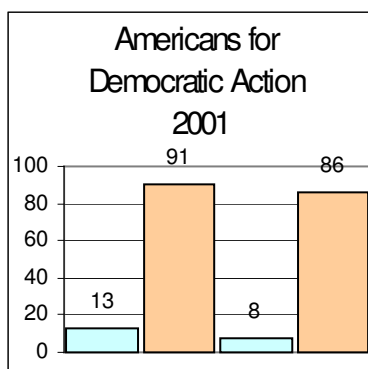
Peace groups favor verifiable arms control agreements and treaties negotiated through the United Nations that decrease the number and scope of weapons, particularly nuclear, biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction. In 2000, for instance, Peace Action and the Council for a Livable World strongly urged Congress to terminate further production of the Trident II (D-5) submarine-launched nuclear missile program. In 2000, the Council for a Livable World was also a proponent of U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, lowering nuclear stockpiles and cutting funding for some costly weapons systems.



Conservative groups like the American Conservative Union (see chart in next section), the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the John Birch Society and so on, tend to favor increased military spending, limiting the power given to the United Nations, maintaining weapons stockpiles and supporting research and development of new weapons systems. For example, in 2001, conservatives opposed a piece of legislation that would have cut \$60 million dollars from the Department of Energy's weapons production budget and in order to invest the money that would have been saved in alternative energy. This legislation failed to pass the House of Representatives. Conservatives favor going forward with defense projects such as the Strategic Defense Initiative (colloquially known as 'Star Wars'). President Bush, for instance, withdrew the U.S. from participation in the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in order to pursue deployment of a Star Wars system outlawed by the ABM Treaty. Most conservative and pro-military groups championed this action, whereas peace groups desecrated it.

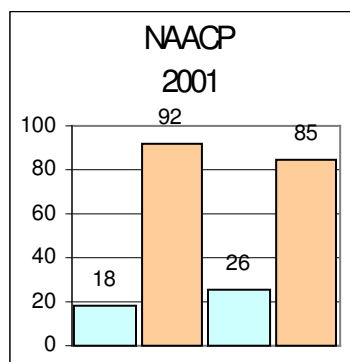
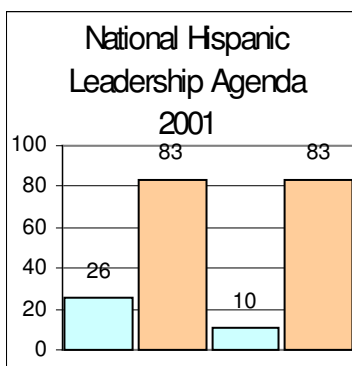


Liberal vs. Conservative



Not surprisingly, Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) and the American Conservative Union (ACU) take almost completely opposite positions on a broad range of domestic, foreign, economic, military, social and environmental issues. ADA, founded in 1947, is the nation's oldest independent liberal political organization. The ACU is the nation's oldest conservative lobbying organization. It supports capitalism, a strict interpretation of the Constitution based on the original intent of the framers, traditional moral values, and commitment to a strong national defense. Let's look over some legislation in 2001 that contrasts the positions of the two groups. ACU is *for* the recent tax cuts; ADA is *against* them. ACU is *in favor* of drilling for oil in the Alaskan National Wildlife Reserve, the Gulf of Mexico and in National Monument parks; ADA *opposes* this. ACU *favors* 'Fast Track' trade legislation which gives the President more authority to negotiate trade agreements with little or no Congressional oversight; ADA *opposes* this. ADA is *against* school vouchers; ACU is *in favor*. ACU is *against* abortion rights; ADA is *in favor*.

Minority Concerns



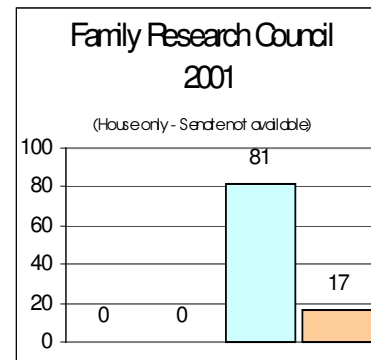
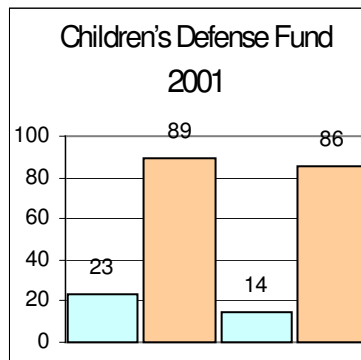
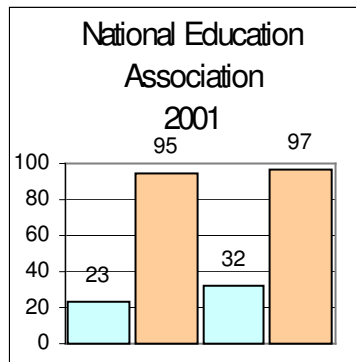
The above graphs show very clearly how the National Organization for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), one of the largest organizations advocating for minority rights, and the National Hispanic Leadership Agenda (LULAC) feel about our two major political parties. A specific bill that concerned LULAC in 1998, for example, was H.R. 629. LULAC views this bill as an example of environmental racism. Why? Because it allows the construction of a nuclear waste dump near Sierra Blanca, Texas, a poor Mexican American community, already the site of one of the largest sewage sludge projects in the country. This bill passed 305-117 in July 1998. Besides the opposition of both groups to environmental racism, both also support affirmative action, gender equity and greater spending on education and social needs.

Education, Children and Family Values

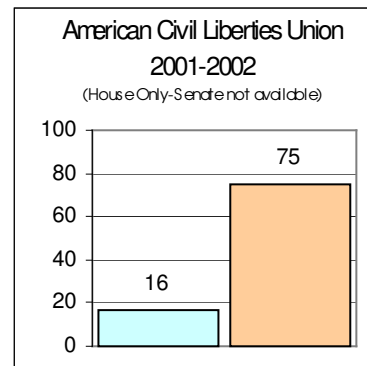
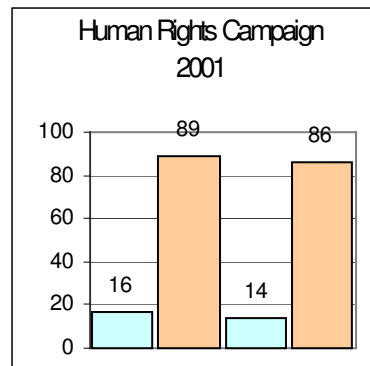
The National Education Association, a professional organization and union of elementary and secondary school employees and others interested in education, gives Democrats high marks. The National Education Association is opposed to vouchers and supports improvement in public education on all levels. It lobbies for increased education funding, benefits for teachers, school safety, the expansion of after school and Head Start programs, etc.

The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) is focused on beefing up federal programs to enhance public education, such as expanding Head Start funding. It is concerned about the thousands of children becoming victims of violence. Thus, it favors gun safety legislation and domestic violence programs. The CDF considered it a victory that the Child Tax Credit was greatly improved in 2001, providing major new tax assistance to millions of low income families with children.

The Family Research Council (FRC) generally gives Republicans high marks. The FRC states that it "promotes the Judeo-Christian worldview as the basis for a just, free, and stable society." It favors school vouchers, legislation against pornography, prayer in schools, and is against abortion.



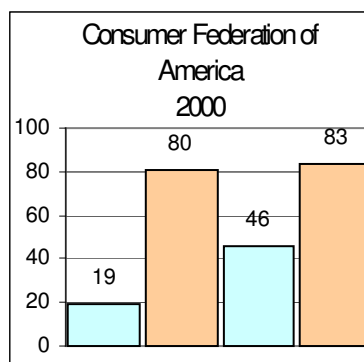
Human Rights, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties



Many groups advocate for human rights, civil rights and civil liberties. To take two examples, the Human Rights Campaign advances the cause of lesbian and gay civil rights. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) "champions the rights set forth in the Bill of Rights." Both groups often take controversial stands. The ACLU opposed anti-terrorism legislation that passed Congress by a large margin in October 2001. The ACLU argues that this legislation gives unwarranted power to the executive branch of our government that could be used against U.S. citizens in criminal investigations unrelated to terrorism. The ACLU was also against campaign finance reform legislation that passed in 2001 on the grounds that it would limit freedom of speech.

Consumer Issues

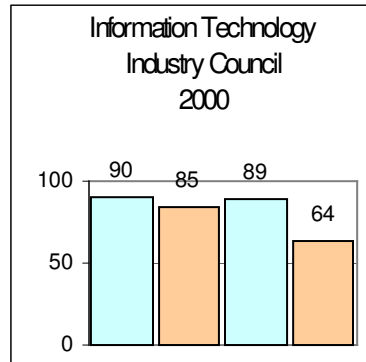
The Consumer Federation of America (CFA) charts a very broad spectrum of issues that affect us all, particularly those of us in the middle class. They keep track of and demystify legislation on health care, changes in bankruptcy law, food labeling, product safety, utility deregulation, etc. A good example is CFA's assessment of Commodities Futures Deregulation legislation that passed both houses of Congress in 2000 (H.R. 4541, S. 2697). This deregulation reduces regulatory oversight of derivatives markets. CFA



opposed the bill on the grounds that it reduces or eliminates already minimal protections against fraud and manipulation in these markets. Further, back in 2000 CFA explained, prophetically, that consumers would be harmed both because derivatives markets affect prices throughout the economy and because those markets create enormous systemic risk through the high degree of leverage they produce.

Information Technology

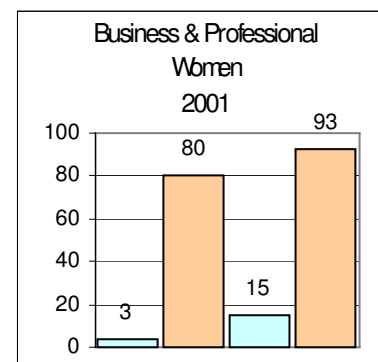
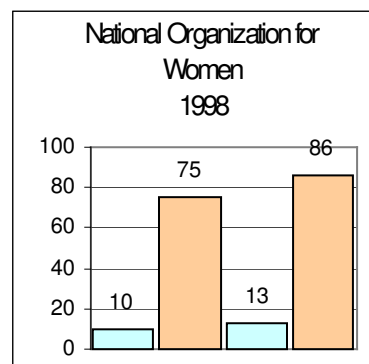
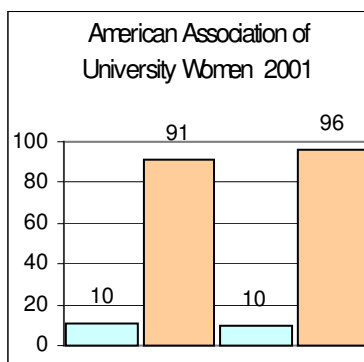
According to its literature the Information Technology Industry Council (ITIC) "represents the leading U.S. providers of information technology products and services. In 2000, ITIC member companies employed more than one million people in the United States and exceeded \$668 billion in worldwide revenues." This group gave slight preference to the voting records of Republicans in 2000. Some of the



issues of concern to this organization include maintaining favorable trade relations with China and extending the moratorium on the taxation of internet commerce.

Women's Issues

The American Association of University Women (AAUW) is "a 150,000-member organization with more than 1,500 branches nationwide that lobbies and advocates for education and equity." This group lobbies in favor of the right of women to safe and legal abortions, it is *against* vouchers, *in favor of* increases in education spending, *against* the big 2001 tax cuts that endanger education and welfare spending and that might endanger the Social Security Trust Fund, and *against* the erosion of civil rights and liberties. For example, in 2001 AAUW was strongly *against* the nomination of Senator Ashcroft as Attorney General because of his history of opposing abortion and not strenuously protecting the civil rights of women and minorities.



Business and Professional Women/USA has the following mission: "To achieve equity for all women in the workplace through advocacy, education, and information." This group, founded in 1919, has 30,000 members in more than 1,600 Local Organizations.

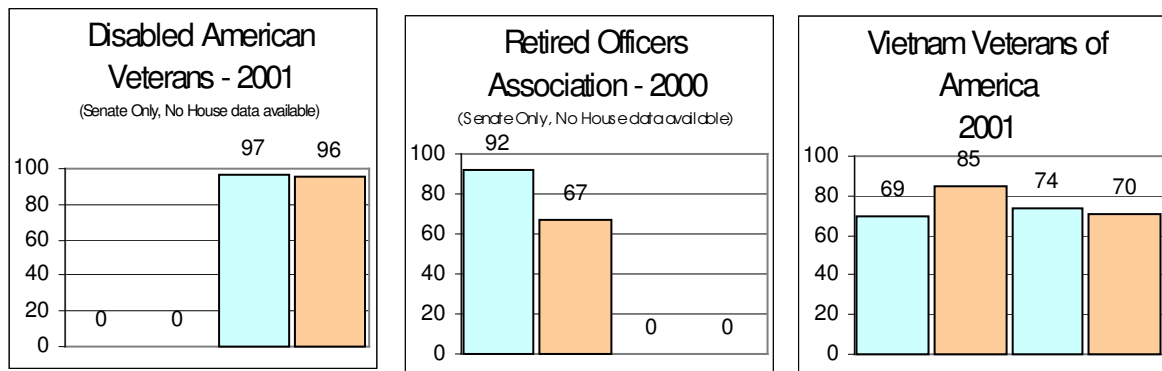
Concerned Women for America (CWA), with 500,000 members, states that its mission is "to protect and promote Biblical values among all citizens—first through prayer, then education, and finally by influencing our society—thereby reversing the decline in moral values in our nation." It is *pro-life*, *pro* prayer in schools, *pro* vouchers, *pro* decreased funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, and *pro*

religious organizations being allowed to engage in political speech. This group is *against* internet gambling, *in favor of* displaying the Ten Commandments in government buildings, and *against* most favored nation trade status for China because of its poor human rights record. In 2001 CWA was *in favor of* withholding \$244 million from the U.N until the U.S. is allowed back into the UN Human Rights Commission. It is *against* the International Criminal Court, *supports* the Marriage Tax Penalty Relief Act, *opposes* Campaign Finance Reform and *supported* the nomination of John Ashcroft as U.S. Attorney General.

Although the National Organization for Women (NOW) has not put out a scorecard for Congress since 1998 we are including it here because it has half a million contributing members and hundreds of chapters and because it is very politically active. NOW works *for* legislation that aims to lessen violence against women. It strongly *supports* laws requiring employers to provide family and medical leave and laws that strengthen enforcement of child support awards. It is *for* affirmative action, *for* a safety net for poor women and children and is a proponent *for* basic civil rights including fair treatment for lesbians and gay men.

Veterans' Concerns

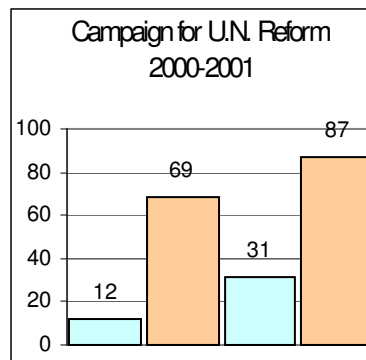
The three organizations above have given pretty high marks to both political parties. These groups



are concerned with veterans benefits. They lobby *for* adequate funding for the Veterans' Administration. They work *for* adequate U.S. military defense. They also lobbied hard *for* the expeditious construction of the National World War II Memorial on the Mall in Washington, between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, which President Bush signed into law on Memorial Day 2001.

The United Nations

Many groups include issues related to the United Nations in their evaluations of Congress. Conservative groups, such as the American Conservative Union and the Christian Coalition are generally less supportive of the UN than more liberal groups such as Peace Action and the Council for a Livable World. Graphs for these groups are included earlier in this article and are, thus, omitted here. The



Campaign for UN Reform supports the UN although it advocates reforms which would make it more effective. The Campaign is *for* legislation that advocates U.S. endorsement and implementation of UN resolutions, including the Kyoto Protocol, to slow global warming and aid the environment. It is *for* U.S. endorsement of the International Criminal Court. It is *for* U.S. financial support for the UN. It is *for* greater funding of UN programs that provide health, medical and relief aid around the world.

Your Vote Counts!

According to a press release issued on November 10, 2000 by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate only "51 percent of eligible voters voted in the second closest Presidential race in more than a century."¹ The power of just a relatively small number of votes became very clear to us all during the last presidential election. Members of the entire House of Representatives face elections every two years. Senators serve six year terms, thus one-third of the Senate is up for election every two years. According to Jonathan Mott, Ph.D. in ThisNation.com (<http://www.thisnation.com/question/048.html>): "Congressional elections in non-presidential election years are called 'midterm elections' because they occur halfway through a sitting president's four-year term. Voter turnout in midterm elections has hovered around the 35% mark for the past several years. In other words, slightly more than one-third of eligible voters actually turn out at the polls and vote in midterm elections. However, that figure jumps by 15 to 20 percentage points during presidential election years." If you vote in a midterm election it's as though your vote counts for three eligible voters. If you take into account that perhaps a quarter of the population is not eligible to vote because they are new immigrants or too young you can see that when you vote you are speaking for at least 5 people. Because elections are often close, especially local ones, anyone who persuades his friends and neighbors to vote in a certain way can potentially change the outcome of an election.

One or two congressional seats are sometimes enough to pass legislation that profoundly influences us all. There were quite a few very close votes in Congress in 2001. House Resolution 3090, the Economic Stimulus bill, passed the House by a 216-214 vote. The Chamber of Commerce favored this bill because it provided a stimulus to the economy after the shock of 9/11 by reducing business taxes. The AFL-CIO strongly opposed it because it favored business but did very little to ameliorate the hardship of workers laid off after 9/11. Though this bill passed the House it was narrowly defeated in the Senate.

The Trade Promotion Authority Act ('Fast Track') squeaked through the House in a 215-214 vote. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce strongly supported 'Fast Track' because it would have minimized Congress' power to modify trade agreements with other countries thus giving the President broader powers to negotiate them. The AFL-CIO, on the other hand, opposed 'Fast Track' because it rules out congressional action to include or strengthen workers' rights or environmental protections in trade agreements. This Act has not gone into effect as the Senate has not yet taken up this matter.

Another very close vote was on House Resolution 2975, the Anti-Terrorism Authority Bill. This is a very controversial bill because it challenges the basic civil rights of U.S. citizens to due process, freedom from secret surveillance, etc. It would expand law enforcement's power to investigate suspected terrorists and beef up domestic surveillance. While most Republicans consider these new law enforcement powers an absolute necessity in fighting terrorism, most Democrats see them as a threat to the civil liberties, civil rights, and due process protections guaranteed individuals in the United States. It passed by the very close vote of 214-208 on October 12, 2001.

Why Should We Care?

Although most of us don't think about it much, government often affects our lives more than anything else. It can create more havoc than a bad romance, more financial ruin than a stock market crash

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and more physical damage than a natural disaster. Government controls most of the schools we send our kids to. It decides what's right and wrong -- or at least what we can be put in jail for. Government can draft our young and send them to war, or keep our country at peace. Government can protect our civil liberties or withdraw them. Government can control where we work, travel and live.

Our forefathers had great foresight in creating a system that has many checks and balances, that allows every citizen to have a voice and that distributes power broadly. However, our system depends on a civic-minded populace that educates itself on issues of local, regional, national and even international concern. For our nation to run properly we as citizens must groom and elect well-meaning and well-informed representatives who do their best to shape government so that it creates a working system of common agreements and functions that best serve us all.

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