

# Modernizing Congressional Capacity

*A Report of the APSA Presidential Task Force Subcommittee on Congressional Capacity*

## Executive Summary

Congress today is overwhelmed. After decades of self-imposed disinvestment in expertise and staffing, Congress lacks the resources and knowledge to stand on an equal footing either with the executive branch, or with the tens of thousands of lobbyists who now overwhelm Washington (many of whom are former staffers now earning multiples of their Capitol Hill pay). On issue after issue, Congress's available in-house expertise is inadequate to support fully-informed independent judgment of executive or lobbyist proposals, and certainly inadequate to lead in policy innovation.

But Congress is not helpless. Both the House and the Senate can choose to invest in their own expertise and capacity. In this report, we examine the House's options for bulking up its resources, so that it can best represent the people as a powerful "first branch" of government.

In this report, we explore five approaches the House could take should members decide they want to bulk up resources. We examine options for investing in: individual member offices; committees; support agencies; caucuses and shared staff; and party leadership. We provide ideas for both straightforward and innovative staffing arrangements, and review the pros and cons of each in modest detail.

Ultimately, how Congress adds resources should depend on which problem members believe added resources should solve. In our assessment, as well as the assessment of many representatives, a major problem facing Congress is that it doesn't know enough — that too much crucial policy expertise exists outside of the institution, either in the executive branch or among lobbyists. And these information asymmetries leave Congress at a severe disadvantage. This is the problem that added capacity can most directly solve.

We believe that adding capacity directly to committees is most likely to both increase substantive policy expertise and at least offer some potential opportunity for reducing polarization by creating more potential venues for unexpected bipartisan coalitions. We also encourage the House to explore and experiment with a mix of alternative arrangements we have suggested.

# Introduction

Congress today is overwhelmed. After decades of self-imposed disinvestment in expertise and staffing, Congress lacks the resources and knowledge to stand on an equal footing either with the executive branch, or with the tens of thousands of lobbyists who now overwhelm Washington (many of whom are former staffers now earning multiples of their Capitol Hill pay). On issue after issue, Congress's available in-house expertise is inadequate to support fully-informed independent judgment of executive or lobbyist proposals, and certainly inadequate to lead in policy innovation.

If representative government is to remain the defender of the people's liberty, and a pluralist bulwark against both the narrow interests represented by expert lobbyists and the imperial tendencies of an expanding and unitary executive, it must invest in itself. At hearings of the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, both current and former representatives have stressed the need for an investment in staff resources and expertise. At the current representatives' hearing, for example, Rep. Bill Pascrell (D-NJ) testified:

*For the last 25 years we have watched as our Congress — the Article 1 branch — has become more and more feeble. This decay is from deliberate institutional vandalism. Through our own efforts, we have made the Article 1 branch into the third branch.*

*Our tiny staffs are overwhelmed by the army of corporate lobbyists roaming our halls and a world growing more socially, economically, and technologically complex at a stunning rate. ...*

*We need don't need a brain surgeon to tell us what needs to be done to fix this decay. Actually, we might: because we need a new brain! We need to reverse the congressional lobotomy. ... We need to retain skilled staffs who can preserve institutional memory.*

At the former representatives' hearing, retired Rep. Tom Davis (R-VA), noted that without long-term experience, congressional staff are not well-positioned to "second guess" legislative language that lobbyists often draft. Davis is now a lobbyist, and so speaks from experience.

This report is premised on the belief that the House needs to invest in more staff capacity, especially by hiring more experienced and senior staff.

But if a consensus has emerged in favor of adding capacity in the general, there is no consensus on how to add capacity in the specific. The House is a large and sprawling institution, with 435 member offices and dozens of committees and subcommittees. Individual offices have many demanding responsibilities, from policymaking to legislative oversight to constituent service.

As past attempts to reform and reorganize Congress have revealed, efforts to

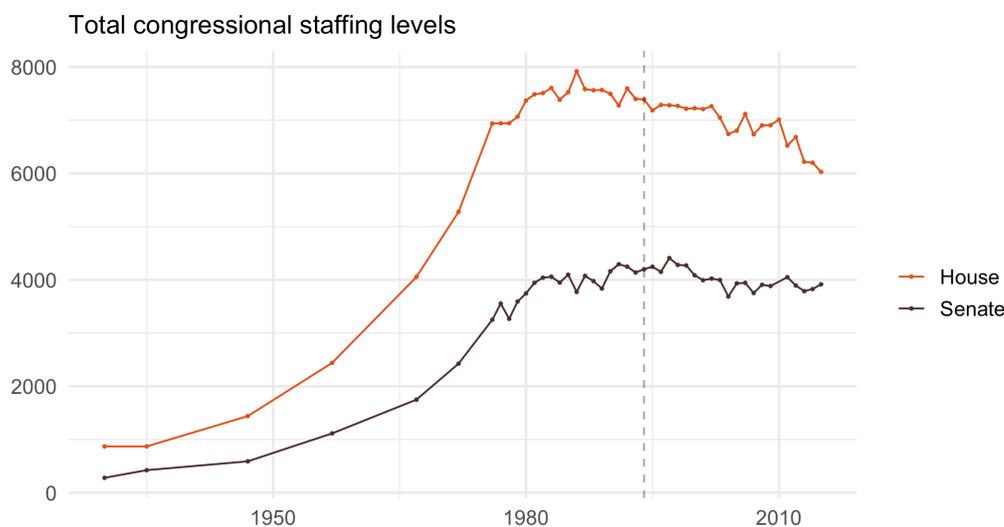
reallocate resources also become de facto efforts to reallocate power.<sup>1</sup> Thus there are many important questions to address: Will additional resources be shared equally among representatives? Will some representatives gain more influence by virtue of their positions in party or committee leadership? How much will different resource allocations strengthen Congress as an institution vis-à-vis the executive branch or private lobbyists? What impact, if any, will different investments have on overall Congressional capacity?

## Background: The Brain Drain

A few figures can provide a broader background and context to Congress's current staffing levels and investments and illustrate the need for adding capacity.

As shown in Figure 1, both the House and the Senate added staff capacity steadily through the 1980s, then began to flatline. The dashed line marks 1994. In 1995, when Newt Gingrich became House speaker, he centralized power considerably, and investments in capacity began to decline. This is especially apparent in Figure 2, which shows the decline in committee staff.

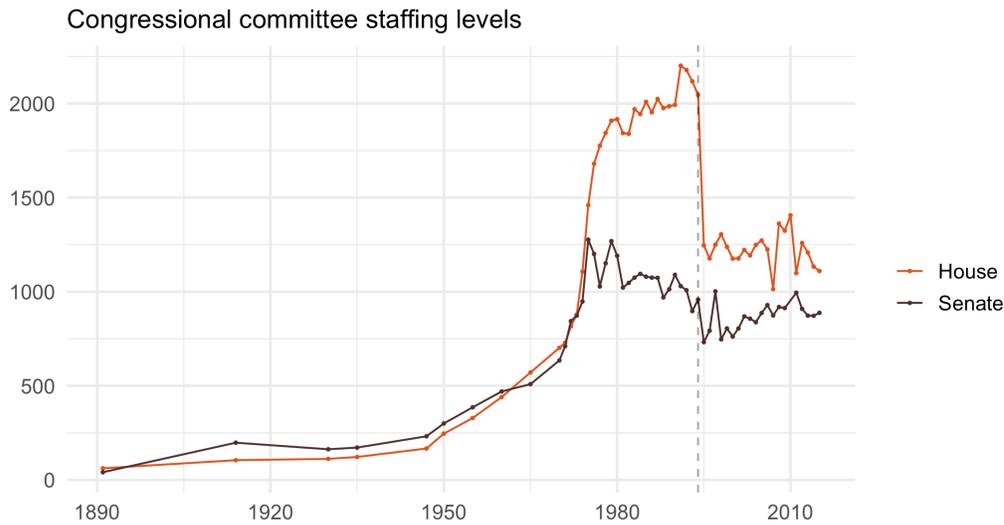
Figure 1. Total congressional staffing levels



Source: Brookings Vital Statistics

<sup>1</sup> For useful history, see Eric Schickler, *Disjointed Pluralism: Institutional Innovation and the Development of the U.S. Congress*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Figure 2. Congressional committee staffing levels

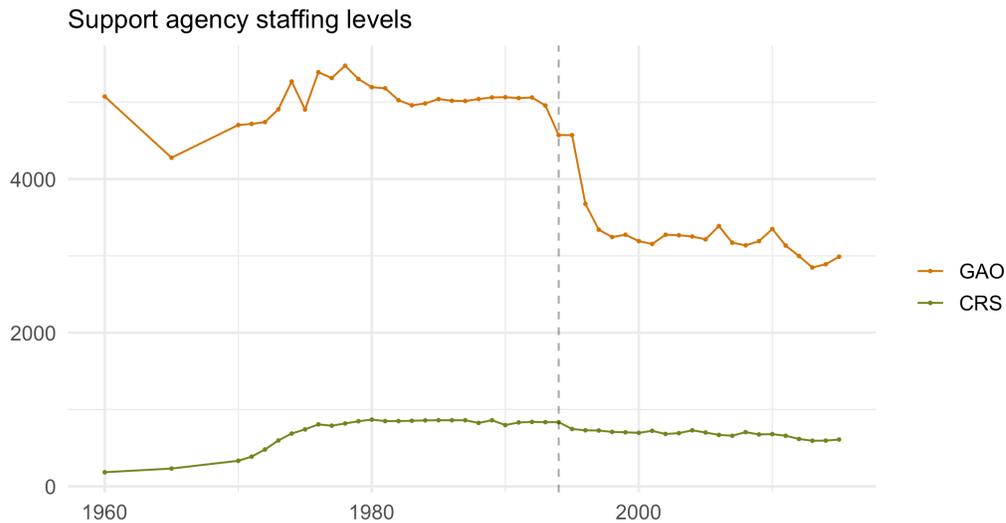


Source: Brookings Vital Statistics

Taken together, Figures 1 and 2 tell a straightforward story: Congress made major investments in staffing capacity between 1950 and 1980. In the decades since, investments have flatlined or declined, with only a few occasional bumps upward. As lobbying industry grew and grew, as the executive branch continued to expand, and as economy and the country grew in size and complexity, Congress voluntarily stopped investing in its capacity to keep up. The past two decades especially have also been marked by higher rates of staff turnover, and declining salaries, especially relative to the increasing costs of living in Washington and the proliferating number of high-paying outside options to work in policy development, especially on K Street.

In addition to reducing its own internal capacity, Congress has also reduced the capacity of its support agencies, which provide an independent, Congress-specific source of expertise. Figure 3 charts the decline in staff at both the Congressional Resource Service (CRS) and the Government Accountability Office (GAO). Both are below 1980 levels.

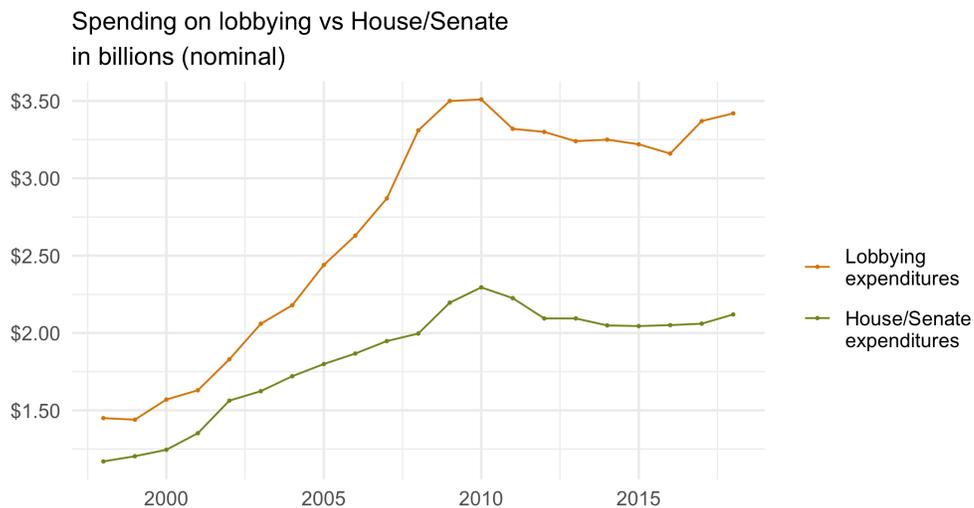
Figure 3. Staffing levels at CRS and GAO



Source: Brookings Vital Statistics

Finally, for context, compare what Congress spends on itself to total Washington lobbying expenditures. The combined budget for the House and the Senate is now slightly over \$2 billion a year. By contrast, expenditures on reported lobbying are now about \$3.5 billion a year.

Figure 4. Lobbying expenditures have outpaced Congress



Source: CRS reports / Opensecrets.org

# Options for adding capacity

In this report, we lay out some approaches to augmenting congressional capacity and consider the implications of each. We present them as a menu of recommendations, with commentary on the consequences for both internal politics and institutional capacity.

Our goal is to boost the overall institutional capacity of Congress, and in particular the House of Representatives, by increasing the knowledge, expertise, and commitment of the staff who do the hard policy and oversight work at the core of the “first branch” of American government, and that enables individual representatives to most effectively use their talents and perform their constitutional duties.

## 1. Individual member offices

### *A. Increase MRAs (Members’ Representational Allowances) across the board*

Perhaps the simplest approach to increasing House capacity would be a straightforward across-the-board increase in the annual budget for individual offices. In 2018, each member’s office was allocated (on average) \$1.37 million, which offices are free to spend as they wish.

### *B. Remove caps on the number of permanent employees per office*

Increasing the MRA would pair well with lifting the cap on the number of permanent employees each House office may employ (it is 18, plus 4 short-term or part-time “additional” employees), giving representatives the freedom to hire more staff.

Across-the-board MRA increases and removing the cap on the number of employees would give individual representatives the most discretion over how best to increase their own capacity. The obvious benefit of a straightforward across-the-board increase is that all representatives would benefit equally.

Such an approach has a few drawbacks. One is representatives may use the money to hire more communications staffers to boost their public visibility, rather than hiring policy experts who would add to the institutional capacity of Congress. For many representatives, this would be a perfectly rational investment. Given the current top-down organization of the House, few representatives have meaningful opportunities to participate in substantive policymaking. Thus, an investment in policy expertise might seem a waste. But having more representatives each polishing their individual brands through social media and television seems unlikely to strengthen Congress as an institution.

Moreover, some representatives already do not take full advantage of their existing MRA, since representatives sometimes view the performative frugality of sending money back to the Treasury as good politics. Voting for a direct increase in their own staff may also

appear to create a political vulnerability, by creating an issue for a future challenger.

Despite these limitations, across-the-board MRA increases would be better than holding MRA budgets flat. At the very least, we would expect some offices to invest the money in increased salaries for key policymaking positions, and we expect that higher salaries would retain and attract more experienced and talented staffers.

## 2. Committees

### *A. Increase staff budgets, allocated at the discretion of committee chairs*

Since committee staff tend to have more experience and policy focus than individual member staff, an increase in committee staff would be more likely to improve overall institutional expertise. If committees had larger budgets, they could hire more experienced staff, who would support committees in more precise lawmaking and oversight. More resources should reduce staff turnover, allowing committees to benefit from institutional memory.

Unlike an across-the-board MRA increase, committee allocations could generate more political conflict. How much would staff be controlled by committee chairs? Would all committees get the same baseline budget increase? How much of these increases would go to subcommittees? And what would the partisan breakdown look like? Certainly, these are navigable challenges. But any package of reforms that includes blanket increases for committee staff must wrestle with these considerations.

One advantage of more staff at the subcommittee level is that it would give more representatives an opportunity to participate in the policymaking process, and expand the ability of the House to tackle more issues simultaneously. The more different venues available for policy development, the more likely the House would develop innovative solutions and broker new coalitions for pressing public problems.

The partisan nature of the House makes it obvious why members hire partisan staff. However, if staff are hired on a partisan basis, some staff will be out of a job when the House changes partisan control, which now happens every few cycles. (This may or may not continue.) Obviously, this depends on the balance of majority-to-minority staff. Our recommendation would be as much parity as possible between majority and minority staff to support maximal continuity in staffing. If staff expect to work together over a longer-term period, we might expect them to build more cross-partisan relationships than if they expect to be in a position for a few years and then move on.

### *B. Add nonpartisan committee staff*

Committees could hire nonpartisan staff, in the model of professional civil service employees who serve regardless of which party is in power. This model has often been proposed, including by the 1945 Joint Committee, but never adopted, because committee leaders have wanted their own staff. Certainly, at times, various House committees in less partisan jurisdictions (e.g. Armed Services, Appropriations) have approached quasi-non

partisanship.

One practical approach to nonpartisan expert committee staff would be for each committee to establish something akin to an in-house think-tank, to serve only that committee. Committee leaders would retain their partisan staff, and each committee would get additional nonpartisan expert staff to neutrally assist both Democrats and Republicans.

The obvious challenge is whether, in a highly polarized Congress, neutral expertise is anywhere close to possible. We will revisit this challenge when we discuss the Congressional Research Service, which has recently taken an overly cautious, just-the-facts approach that sometimes makes it less helpful than representatives would like. Nonetheless, like a just-the-facts CRS, a committee-specific research think tank could at least provide a neutral baseline source of expertise for a committee, helping partisan and member staff be more effective in their roles.

### *C. A hybrid approach: rotating permanent committee staff*

Another approach to improved committee staffing would be to hire additional committee staff employed as quasi-permanent civil-service positions, while also converting existing committee staff to such quasi-permanent civil-service positions.

Half the staff would work directly for the committee, split between the majority and the minority. But each member of the committee would be permitted to employ committee policy “detainee” on a two-year basis, to help the member with committee issues. Committee staff would go back and forth over time between working exclusively for the committee and working for particular representatives.

Because individual staffers would be employed by the committee, their jobs would not depend on whether individual representatives won or lost. This would free them up to think more about the long-term policy needs, instead of being so tied to the short-term electoral fortunes of an individual representative. By rotating between different representatives and working solely for the committee, staff would build broader networks, but their core network would remain the committee.<sup>2</sup>

A rotation system would also keep the job interesting. Different offices would have different priorities and different takes on issues and provide staffers new opportunities to learn based on these different priorities and perspectives. An assignment system could be created where staffers and congressional offices jointly rank each other and then get matched based on an algorithm, modeled after the system by which medical students get assigned to residency programs. Here, reputation would matter, which means that representatives and staff who develop a good reputation for quality work would be more likely to get their favored choices. In such a system, if a staffer were repeatedly ranked as a last choice by representatives, that staffer would be fired, preventing the accumulation of dead wood that too often plagues executive branch agencies. This is important, because meritocratic systems should have ways of removing the poorest performers.

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<sup>2</sup> For a fully detailed version of how this approach could work, see Lee Drutman and Steven M. Teles. “A New Agenda for Political Reform.” *The Washington Monthly*, May 2015. <https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/maraprilmay-2015/a-new-agenda-for-political-reform/>.

This approach would give individual representatives additional staff capacity, by virtue of their membership on the committees. But because these staff would be employed by committees, they would be more invested in policy expertise than the short-term electoral concerns of any particular Member. One concern is that the rotating nature of these relationships might foster distrust. Individual representatives may prize loyalty over expertise, putting staff in a difficult position, but this doesn't reduce the institution-wide benefits.

### *Conclusion*

Different approaches may work for different committees. A nonpartisan staffing model is more likely to work well for committees where issues are relatively consensual across parties; it is unlikely to work well where issues are highly polarized. The House may wish to experiment with different models for different committees.

But however the House wishes to expand staff capacity, putting more resources into committees has historically been the most effective way to increase institutional strength, since committees are the natural place for expertise and oversight. Though party leadership may view stronger committees as an institutional challenge, more powerful committees may help party leaders by giving them more sought-after positions to distribute and give more members responsibilities to keep them busy. When many rank-and-file members have nowhere to direct their talents and energies, they can grow frustrated. A leadership structure with few positions of power to distribute can become weak and brittle.

## 3. Support agencies

### *A. Expand existing agencies*

The Congressional Research Service (CRS) and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) are valuable, trusted, independent resources for congressional offices. Both institutions house experienced issue experts who have a long record of independent fact-based research. But, as with other sources of expertise, CRS and GAO, too, have suffered cuts over the last decades. Many also lament the demise of the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), unfunded since 1995. OTA was a prestigious technology research group that advised Congress on technology policy.

One way to increase congressional capacity would be simply to expand the budgets of both CRS and GAO. With this money they could hire more researchers and experts to support Congress's knowledge capacity. Congress could also revive the OTA — or, more likely, create a modern variation of it, one targeted to members' current needs. Expanding these existing agencies, or perhaps creating some new specialized agencies in particular issue areas, would add general-use, neutral, fact-based expertise to Congress, equally available to all representatives.

In many respects, expanding support agencies would be the safest, least controversial way for Congress to expand its expertise. However, a two caveats.

First, while support agencies are extremely useful resources for Congress, they can only be as useful as the staff and representatives who use them. If inexperienced staff make inappropriate or highly partisan demands, or merely call upon support agencies to answer crazy constituent questions, additional resources for support agencies will be largely wasted.

Second, to retain their reputations as neutral and nonpartisan, support agencies have grown more cautious. While they are still useful as valuable sources of expertise, they typically hesitate to help too much with policy development, lest they be accused of being partisan or pushing a perspective. In polarized times, neutrality can be especially limiting. Some have accused CRS of becoming overly bureaucratic in order to preserve its perceived neutrality.

#### *B. Create a new support agencies*

Given the wide range of issues on which Congress legislates, one possibility is to set up several smaller in-house congressional support agencies, on the model of the Office of Technology Assessment, to specialize in different issue areas. Given that different issue areas may each have their own culture and level of polarization, variety may be more sensible. Moreover, variety could allow different support agencies to experiment with different approaches, so that they can better learn what works and what doesn't.

#### *C. Create a new House consulting service*

Or, perhaps it is time for something entirely new: The House could create an in-house policy consulting service, with consultants available to individual representatives' offices or committees on a renewable 3-month basis.

They would advise on and develop policy in specific domains. As opposed to the just-the-facts CRS approach or a specific investigation task-oriented GAO approach, they would work with member offices and members more directly in making specific recommendations, and even engaging directly with outside interests and constituents. Basically, consultants would do anything a good staffer would do, helping members develop and pursue innovative new policy ideas.

Depending on the demands of the projects, consultants could work for multiple offices, they could accept or turn down office clients as they like. And the workflow should build in some flexibility for consultants to have "off" time in which they catch up on new developments in their policy area and/or work on independent scholarship and reports. But if they are under-utilized for too long by member offices, they would eventually get fired.

Over-time, the matching process should improve. Consultants would rate client offices, and client offices would rate consultants. Client offices rated as desirable (or high-profile) will attract the best consultants, and consultants rated as desirable will attract the best and highest-profile offices.

Consultants who are consistently poorly rated would be under-utilized and eventually

let go. Offices that are consistently poorly rated will have a tough time attracting consultants, creating a strong incentive for offices to improve their workplace cultures. These office ratings should be transparent.

The consulting service would be run by a managing director, overseen by a board of current and former representatives, and they will hire staff to meet the House's needs, both substantive and partisan. Staff will technically be nonpartisan, but realistically, some staff will be more comfortable working with Republican offices, and some with Democratic offices.

Some policy areas will also be more in demand than others, and over time, the office can shift its stock of consultants to match member and committee interests. Undoubtedly, however, consultants will have an interest in stimulating demand for their areas of policy expertise, and this may encourage them to develop their own innovative policy proposals, which they can shop to interested members. The consulting service would help offices and consultants to "match" by talking to offices about their needs and recommending consultants and helping consultants decide which offices would be a good fit for their strengths.

## 4. Caucuses and Shared Staff

### *A. Expand and Empower Caucuses*

Another way in which the House could increase its capacity is to allocate more resources to Congressional Member Organizations (CMOs), more commonly known as caucuses. Currently, CMOs do not employ staff directly, but many representatives actively participate in caucuses, and devote some staff time to them. Caucuses are among the few spaces left for bipartisanship.

Committees have a more formal role in the political process, but the informal role that caucuses play may be an advantage in creating a less adversarial process of knowledge generation and developing bipartisan networks.<sup>3</sup> They are also a way for representatives to share staff on an ad-hoc basis. Whereas committee jurisdictions tend to be fixed and contentious because they drive the formal policymaking process, caucus jurisdictions can be flexible as issues arise, creating economies of scale for individual representatives who might not have the resources to hire a staffer to work on an emerging issue, but might join with a dozen others to hire two staffers to work with representatives who have shared priorities to develop legislation.

One straightforward proposal would be to give all representatives an annual CMO budget, which they could choose to allocate based on their interest and priorities. Congress could also restore the ability of representatives to devote a share of their MRAs (perhaps up to 10 percent) to CMOs.

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<sup>3</sup> On potential for bipartisanship, see: Stuart M. Butler and Matthew Sommerfeld, "Could Caucuses Help Rebuild Bipartisanship on Capitol Hill?" Brookings Institution, February 9, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/could-caucuses-help-rebuild-bipartisanship-on-capitol-hill/>.

If Congress wishes to incentivize bipartisanship, it could allocate additional funding for caucuses that meet a bipartisan threshold, available once individual member offices allocate their annual CMO budget. So, for example, any caucus that gets no more than 60 percent of its budget from one party would be entitled to a 20 percent bonus in funding.

The obvious challenge with shared staff is that members may not share staff well. However, the number of caucuses has been growing steadily in the House, from 56 in the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress (when they replaced Legislative Service Organizations) to 518 in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress, suggesting representatives do find value in them.<sup>4</sup>

Another challenge is that a more developed caucus system could be seen as contributing to more fracture in Congress. Because these caucuses have no formal authority structure (other than whatever internal rules they agree on), they could develop into free-floating entities with no clear accountability. Certainly, the House could agree on rules to prevent caucuses from getting too big, such as budget, staffing, or even membership caps.

## 5. Party Leadership

### *A. Increase party leadership staff*

Another approach acknowledges the reality that Congress is currently a centralized institution, and the policymaking process now takes place primarily within the confines of parties, not between parties, as was once the case. The argument is that in these polarized times Congressional parties have essentially become parliamentary parties, and to be effective parliamentary parties, they should have the expert staff resources needed to develop good policies.

This proposal, however, faces two obstacles. First, it is unlikely that most representatives would support more putting resources in even fewer hands, voluntarily reducing their power even further. Second, it is unlikely that if party leadership offices had more resources, they would invest those resources in policy capacity. Leadership staff is the only area where resources have grown over the past three decades, and most of the additional staff roles have been devoted to communications, not policy expertise.

If the pressing concern is Congress's declining expertise and institutional knowledge, locating additional staff in partisan leadership offices is unlikely to improve the situation. Moreover, more staff under party leadership would probably make Congress even more polarized, since it will give party leaders more tools for enforcing partisan unity.

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah J. Eckman, "Congressional Member Organizations (CMOs) and Informal Member Groups: Their Purpose and Activities, History, and Formation." Congressional Research Service, 2019.

## General considerations

### *How much of an increase is enough?*

This report has talked very generally about “more” capacity, without specifying a particular percentage or dollar increase. Given decades of de-investment in congressional capacity, major investments would be needed to catch up to the executive branch and the lobbying community – perhaps as much as 50 percent across-the-board. However, we recognize the political impossibility of a onetime 50 percent increase, as well as the destabilizing effects of hiring many new staff. More realistically, we’d urge a decade of annual increases of 5 percent over cost-of-living adjustments.

While Congress has clearly erred on the side of too little staff, we are also mindful of critiques that emerged in the late 1970s that individual representatives had too many staff, and that these “unelected representatives” stood between representatives and their constituents, and between representatives and each other, replacing member-to-member deliberation with complex “enterprises” in which too much was mediated through staff.<sup>5</sup>

Such is the eternal dilemma of any complex governing body – its decision-makers must be generalist enough to share in a common conversation, but expert enough to approach that conversation intelligently. Given the range of issues on which members today vote on, this is a daunting balance. Yet, while any perfect balance is inevitably a moving target, it is clear Congress has moved too far in the direction of knowing too little about too much, and being too much at the mercy of external experts. A re-investment in expert capacity, even if it entails more specialization, is long overdue.

### *Centralization vs. Decentralization*

All decisions about allocating resources are ultimately decisions about where to locate power. Giving more resources to individual representatives (or to generalized support services all representatives can access equally) gives individual representatives more power. Giving more resources to committees gives committees more power. Giving more resources to party leaders gives party leaders more power.

Currently, the House is a party-leadership-driven institution. In earlier eras, committees had more independence and therefore more power. Political scientists who study Congress are divided on whether it is advisable for the House to attempt to re-allocate power to committees and create a more decentralized process, or whether the current high levels of partisan polarization make such decentralization not only politically infeasible, but also an organizationally undesirable trade-off. Ultimately, however, representatives must decide what arrangements they collectively prefer. All modes of organizing the House have their trade-offs. Throughout its history, the House has oscillated between being a centralized, top-down institution and a decentralized bottom-up institution. Too much centralization breeds discontent among individual members, who eventually revolt and win devolution. Too much

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Malbin, *Unelected Representatives*. Basic Books, 1980.

devolution breeds disorder, and eventually members are willing to delegate powers if it means some order and structure in service of accomplishing shared legislative priorities.

Members may wish to increase staffing resources in all of the above areas across the board, effectively preserving the overall balance of power between party leadership, committees, rank-and-file representatives, and legislative service organizations. In our view, any allocation of resources would be an improvement over the inadequate status quo.

### *The politics of adding capacity*

Ultimately, every decision Congress makes is a political decision, and any roll call vote or public position a member takes may be used against them in an upcoming election. Understandably, Congress is an unpopular institution, as every member knows well. Thus, most representatives expect that spending money on an unpopular institution will be unpopular.

Very few constituents have any understanding of how much Congress spends on itself. In an era of highly charged partisan politics, few are likely to vote based on such an obscure issue. And while both parties could conceivably make a bipartisan agreement to vote together to support any increases, this does not inoculate incumbents from primary challengers, who might make a political issue out of any spending increase.

By sheer math, even doubling the money spent on Congress would be tiny compared to the overall federal budget. The 2018 federal budget included \$2.1 billion to fund the entire House (\$1.2 billion) and the Senate (\$919 million).<sup>6</sup> That's 0.05 percent of a \$4.1 trillion total federal budget, a rounding error on top of a rounding error.

In June 2019, leaders from both parties tried to steer a \$4,500-a-year pay raise (less than three percent) for members of Congress, only to face opposition from vulnerable representatives who believed that any pay raise, no matter how minimal, would be risky politically.

One argument in favor of the pay raise was that it would also increase the salary range for individual staffers, who by law cannot make more than their bosses. But the House does have another option: it could allow senior staff to operate on a different salary scale, decoupling staff pay and member pay.

Certainly, members of Congress should earn a high salary, given the high personal expense of needing two residences and the demanding nature of the work. The higher the salary, the more Congress will attract the best and brightest wishing to serve. But the thorny politics of increasing member pay should not limit possibilities for raising staff pay by de-linking it from member pay.

But reform politics are ultimately what representatives themselves make of it. A grassroots movement demanding more public spending on Congress is unlikely to be forthcoming. But Americans ultimately do want a functional, productive Congress. And if individual representatives do not defend the institution, who will? Understandably, the tenor of the times is to bash Congress and government institutions. But as any parent

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<sup>6</sup> Ida A Brudnick, "Legislative Branch: FY2018 Appropriations," Congressional Research Service, 2018, 37.

understands, endless shaming and self-flagellation is counter-productive. For Congress to realize its potential as a governing institution, we need to invest in its full development.

### *Even-bigger problems: polarization and gridlock*

We recognize that adding capacity, however it is achieved, cannot necessarily solve larger problems of congressional polarization, which have contributed to a gridlocked Congress. And while we believe that, on the margins, more expertise and more long-term staff will contribute to a more institutionalist view (as opposed to short-term novices who see Congress as a stepping stone), we are not under any illusions that Congress's problems can be solved by more capacity alone. And as we've noted, even choices on where to locate additional capacity cannot be held separate from larger questions about who has power within Congress.

## Conclusion

It is clear that Congress needs more resources and capacity to perform its role in our Constitutional system of government. But Congress is a complex and multi-faceted institution. Simply increasing the budget for the legislative branch says very little about how those resources might be used.

Ultimately, how Congress adds resources should depend on which problem members believe added resources should solve. In our assessment, as well as the assessment of many representatives, a major problem facing Congress is that it doesn't know enough — that too much crucial policy expertise exists outside of the institution, either in the executive branch or among lobbyists. And these information asymmetries leave Congress at a severe disadvantage. This is the problem that added capacity can most directly solve.

An equally important problem, of course, is that Congress is too polarized, and this hyper-partisanship has rendered the institution dysfunctional. While we acknowledge that added capacity will not directly solve this problem, we also believe that any recommendations should at least not contribute to further polarization, and offer some potential for easing some of the tensions.

We believe that adding capacity directly to committees is most likely to both increase substantive policy expertise and at least offer some potential opportunity for reducing polarization by creating more potential venues for unexpected bipartisan coalitions. We also encourage the House to explore and experiment with a mix of alternative arrangements we have suggested.

We would be more cautious about adding more staff directly to partisan leadership offices or simply increasing MRAs across the board, which we believe would have the least likely to improve overall congressional expertise and institutional functioning. However, we

think that even these would be superior to the status quo.

In a moment of challenge for American democracy, Congress remains the indispensable institution of pluralistic American governance. The one body that can truly represent the broad diversity of the vast American republic, and forge complex compromises across competing and overlapping interests and values. This is the hard work of governing. It requires knowledge, skill, patience, and most of all resources. It can not be done on the cheap. As with so much in life, you get what you pay for.

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