

STATE OF THE CONGRESS:

Staff Perspectives on
Institutional Capacity in the
House and Senate



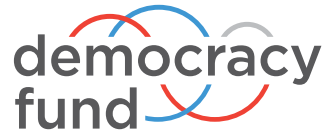
CONGRESSIONAL
MANAGEMENT
FOUNDATION

STATE OF THE CONGRESS:

Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate

By **Kathy Goldschmidt**
Director of Strategic Initiatives
Congressional Management Foundation

Funded by a grant from



© 2017, Congressional Management Foundation. All rights reserved.

This content is the intellectual property of the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF), and is protected by Title 17 of the United States Code covering copyright law. By copying and using this material, you are breaking federal law, and are subject to legal action as defined in Title 17, Chapter 5 of the United States Code. You have one way to prevent this level of action: refrain from reproducing the mentioned works in any manner without the prior express written permission of CMF. Federal law provides severe civil and criminal penalties for the unauthorized reproduction or distribution of copyrighted content. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and may constitute a felony punishable by up to five years in federal prison and/or a \$250,000 fine.

Congressional Management Foundation
710 E Street SE
Washington, D.C. 20003
202-546-0100
CongressFoundation.org
[@CongressFdn](https://twitter.com/CongressFdn)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

4	About the Congressional Management Foundation
4	About This Report
5	Introduction
9	Figure 1. Benchmarks for Congressional Performance by Gap
10	Findings
10	Figure 2. Staff Knowledge, Skills and Abilities
11	Figure 3. Human Resource Infrastructure
14	Figure 4. Time and Resources for Legislation
15	Figure 5. Trends in Committee and Subcommittee Meetings
17	Figure 6. Access to Nonpartisan Legislative Branch Information
18	Figure 7. Trends in Committee Staffing
20	Figure 8. Technological Infrastructure
20	Figure 9. Technological Accessibility
24	Figure 10. Capacity to Perform Role in Democracy
26	Figure 11. Understanding of Role in Democracy
27	Conclusion
30	Methodology
31	Figure 12. About the Respondents
32	Acknowledgements
33	About the Author
34	Appendices
34	Appendix A. Results for All Senior Staffers
35	Appendix B. Selected Works Consulted

About the Congressional Management Foundation

The Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) is a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan nonprofit whose mission is to build trust and effectiveness in Congress. We do this by enhancing the performance of the institution, legislators and their staffs through research-based education and training, and by strengthening the bridge between Congress and the People it serves. Since 1977 CMF has worked internally with Member, committee, leadership, and institutional offices in the House and Senate to identify and disseminate best practices for management, workplace environment, communications, and constituent services. CMF also is the leading researcher and trainer on citizen engagement, educating thousands of individuals and facilitating better understanding, relationships, and communications with Congress.

About This Report

This report grew out of the work of the [Resilient Democracy Coalition](#) (RDC). Many smart, dedicated people inside and outside of Congress are thinking of ways to support Congress in being as informed, responsive and effective—as resilient—as the nation needs it to be. Through a one-year grant from [Democracy Fund](#) in 2016, the [Congressional Management Foundation](#), in collaboration with [Voice of the People](#) (VOP), the [Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate](#) (EMKI), and [Lorelei Kelly](#), explored possibilities for bringing some of these people together to facilitate information-sharing and collaboration for positive institutional change in Congress.

RDC researchers conducted 35 interviews—and built on scores of others—with current and former Members of Congress, congressional staffers, and institutionalists close to Congress about what it would take to build a resilient Congress. The findings primarily centered on concerns about Congress' capacity to perform its democratic role in modern society. Based on those findings, the researchers hosted roundtables to discuss key issues, engaged in thought leadership in a range of venues, and conducted the research that resulted in this report.

INTRODUCTION

Americans widely believe that Congress is not working because it does not want to work. Conventional wisdom holds that the blame for any democratic dysfunction lies primarily with current occupants of Capitol Hill. The [Congressional Management Foundation](#) (CMF) offers an alternative perspective. Congress may not be working well because it does not currently have the *capacity* to work well.

In campaign ads, television shows, movies, and the news, Congress is portrayed as lavish, profligate and corrupt, but this is not the case. The reality is that most of the 541 Senators, Representatives, and Delegates in Congress are honorable, dedicated individuals trying to represent their constituents and the country as best they can. However, the processes, rules, practices, and external forces that influence our democracy have changed in ways that are making it very difficult for legislators to effectively fulfill their mission.

Within this context, and because there is an urgent need to quantify and correct these corrosive effects in the Congress, CMF conducted a survey of senior staff in U.S. Senators' and Representatives' offices to understand their perceptions of certain aspects of congressional performance. These staffers are on the front lines of democracy in both Washington, D.C., and back home in congressional districts and states. Their opinions are key to understanding and assessing congressional performance. We wanted to hear from the individuals most integrated with the work of Senators and Representatives about where institutional problems lie. Our goal is to lay a foundation for benchmarking, assessing, and better understanding congressional performance, so that any proposed solutions address the core symptoms of what ails the institution.

To collect senior staffers' feedback, we adapted several benchmarks for democratic legislatures from work being done internationally.¹ In the past decade, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), legislators and legislative staff throughout the world have given considerable thought to defining what is required for a democratic legislature to function effectively. The efforts have led to a compelling body of benchmarks and

Conventional wisdom holds that the blame for any democratic dysfunction lies primarily with current occupants of Capitol Hill. CMF offers an alternative perspective. Congress may not be working well because it does not currently have the *capacity* to work well.

¹ | [Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures](#) (pdf). Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank Institute and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2006. More detailed information can be found in the [Study Group Report](#) (pdf) on the benchmark development process.

“People will put up with a lot when inspired by their work and their boss, but there is a breaking point and I think that every office is getting close to significant staff disruptions that will limit the members' and the institution's ability to function.”

—House District Director

assessment tools for citizens and legislatures to measure legislative capacity and performance.²

We used a subset of the benchmarks to develop survey questions for senior staffers, and we received 184 responses from Chiefs of Staff, Deputy Chiefs of Staff, Legislative Directors, Communications Directors, District Directors (House), and State Directors (Senate). We surveyed staff on 11 key aspects relating to institutional capacity and public access. We asked staff how important each aspect was for the effective functioning of their chamber, and how satisfied they were with their chamber's performance for that aspect. Figure 1 shows the 11 aspects we explored, the percentages of senior staffers who considered each aspect “very important,” and the percentage who were “very satisfied” with that aspect. Clearly, senior staffers have concerns about some of the foundational aspects of legislative performance.

More specifically, the key findings are that senior staffers feel:

1. Congress needs to improve staff knowledge, skills and abilities.

Talented and experienced employees are the most valuable assets in any knowledge-based workplace, and Congress is one of the most important, complex, and information-rich knowledge-based workplaces in the world. Both Congress and the public should be concerned that senior congressional staffers do not feel their human resources are adequate to support Senators' and Representatives' official duties.

2. Senators and Representatives lack the necessary time and resources to understand, consider and deliberate public policy and legislation.

In the past few decades, under both parties, House and Senate leadership have either implemented strategies or allowed conditions to evolve that diminish the ability of individual Senators and Representatives to deeply consider and influence public policy. These include the reduction of the role and strength of committees, the limiting of debate and amendments on the House and Senate floors, and the atrophying of institutional resources. Understanding and deliberating public policy issues and identifying sound solutions is the core function of a legislature and central to a robust democracy. If the Congress is not working, we must question whether democracy is working.

3. Congress needs to improve Member and staff access to high quality, nonpartisan policy expertise within the Legislative Branch.

Congress has less nonpartisan internal policy capacity than it used to.

² | [Benchmarking and Self-Assessment for Parliaments](#), Mitchell O'Brien, Rick Stapenhurst, and Lisa von Trapp (editors), World Bank Group, 2016.

Over the past few decades, it has made considerable cuts to staffing in committees, the Congressional Research Service and the General Accountability Office and eliminated the Office of Technology Assessment. This has occurred while other players in the public policy arena—the Executive Branch and the private sector—have added considerable heft and expertise. Congress seems to have reached a point where senior staffers are concerned whether the Legislative Branch has the intellectual infrastructure to study, deliberate and decide serious questions of public policy.

4. Congress needs to improve its technological infrastructure.

Technology in Congress has not kept pace with the expectations of Members, staffers and citizens. Many of the challenges to improving technology lie in tradition, procedure, rules, budgeting practices, cybersecurity, and politics. Congress is under extraordinary simultaneous pressures to create the most transparent institution in the world while being subjected to unprecedented hacking attempts and increasing demands from constituents. Resolving these competing forces will require both political will and resource investment. Yet it's clear that senior congressional staff feel the technological infrastructures in Congress are inadequate to support Members' official duties and that this is an area on which the institution should place considerable attention.

5. Congress should re-examine its capacity to perform its role in democracy.

Senior staffers are fairly comfortable that Members and staff understand their role in democracy, but they question whether their chamber has the resources it needs to perform its role. As discussed above, respondents have deep concerns about staff skills and technology, which are important components of Congress' capacity to perform its role in democracy. The root of these concerns may lie in the fact that congressional budgets and staffing levels in key Legislative Branch organizations have declined over the past few decades. Congress may not have the resources it needs to be effective.

While these findings alone are disturbing, they must also be viewed in the context of the current state of politics and democracy. Democracy is under strain, in part due to a range of leadership decisions over the past few decades about how Congress operates. Much of the communication and decision-making in Congress has been consolidated within party leadership, which has diminished the voices of rank and file Members and the constituents they represent. It has also increased political

“Offices don't have nearly enough money for a good legislative staff. My boss wants issue experts on most issues, and unfortunately with our budget that is just impossible. He is a frosh Member and was definitely shocked by the youth and lack of resources for staff upon entering Congress.”

—House Legislative Director

polarization.³ Congress is receiving unprecedented amounts of information and outside pressure while the capacity of congressional staffs has declined. With Congress not functioning as expected, the trust deficit between citizens and legislators is growing, demonstrated in part by historically low congressional approval ratings. We are also experiencing population growth and unprecedented social, economic, technological, and global change.

All of this is taxing our democracy, and much of it is occurring without regard to the fundamental principles at the core of our civic activity, such as political equality; representation of, and consent by, the people; informed deliberation; and distributed and limited power. We may be beyond a tipping point where there are just too many people, too much communication, too much pressure, and too many crises for Senators and Representatives to manage without some serious rethinking of congressional operations and capacity. The cornerstone institution of our democracy must be equipped to respond to the challenges we face. Congress must adapt in the face of social transformation so it can effectively govern and lead.

Using Gap Analysis to Assess Priority

Generally, an examination of the gap between “very important” and “very satisfied” can yield valuable information to help prioritize organizational improvements. Those with the highest importance and the greatest gap between “very important” and “very satisfied” are generally the areas where attention and resources will yield the most benefit. The larger the gap, the higher priority the organization should place on addressing the issue.

³ | Documented by, among others, Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein in *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (2012) and *It's Even Worse Than It Was* (2016) and Barbara Sinclair in *Unorthodox Lawmaking: New Legislative Processes in the U.S. Congress* (2017).

Figure 1 | Benchmarks for Congressional Performance by Gap

Survey Questions: "In your opinion, how important are the following for the effective functioning of your chamber?" and "How satisfied are you with your chamber's performance in the following?"

	Very Important	Very Satisfied	Gap
Staff knowledge, skills and abilities are adequate to support Members' official duties	83%	15%	68%
Members have adequate time and resources to understand, consider and deliberate policy and legislation	67%	6%	61%
Members and staff have access to high-quality, nonpartisan, policy expertise within the legislative branch	81%	24%	57%
The technological infrastructure is adequate to support Members' official duties	60%	6%	54%
The chamber has adequate capacity and support (staff, research capability, infrastructure, etc.) to perform its role in democracy	62%	11%	51%
The chamber's human resource support and infrastructure is adequate to support staffers' official duties (e.g., training, professional development, benefits, etc.)	49%	5%	44%
The chamber is technologically accessible to the public	58%	17%	41%
Members and staff have a strong understanding of the chamber's role in democracy	52%	20%	32%
The chamber is transparent to the public in the conduct of its business	49%	19%	30%
Constituents have sufficient means to hold their Senators/Representative accountable for their performance	47%	29%	18%
The chamber is physically accessible to the public	36%	38%	-2%

(n=128-130)

Note: Aspects are sorted by the "gap" column showing the difference between "very important" and "very satisfied." Complete results included in Appendix A.

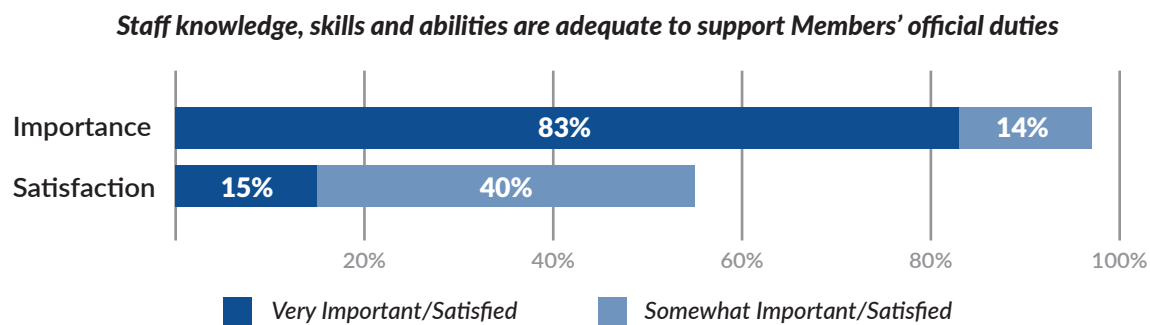
Source: 2016 survey of House and Senate senior staff, published in *State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2017.

FINDINGS

1. Congress needs to improve staff knowledge, skills and abilities.

Almost all of the respondents to our survey considered staff knowledge, skills and abilities to be important to their chamber's effectiveness, and 83% felt it to be "very important" (Figure 2). However, only 15% were "very satisfied" with their chamber's performance in this area. Of all the aspects of congressional operations we asked senior staffers about, this was the most important to them, and it had the greatest gap between "very important" and "very satisfied," at 68 percentage points. With such a large gap, this clearly indicates this is something to which Congress should devote attention.

Figure 2 | Staff Knowledge, Skills and Abilities

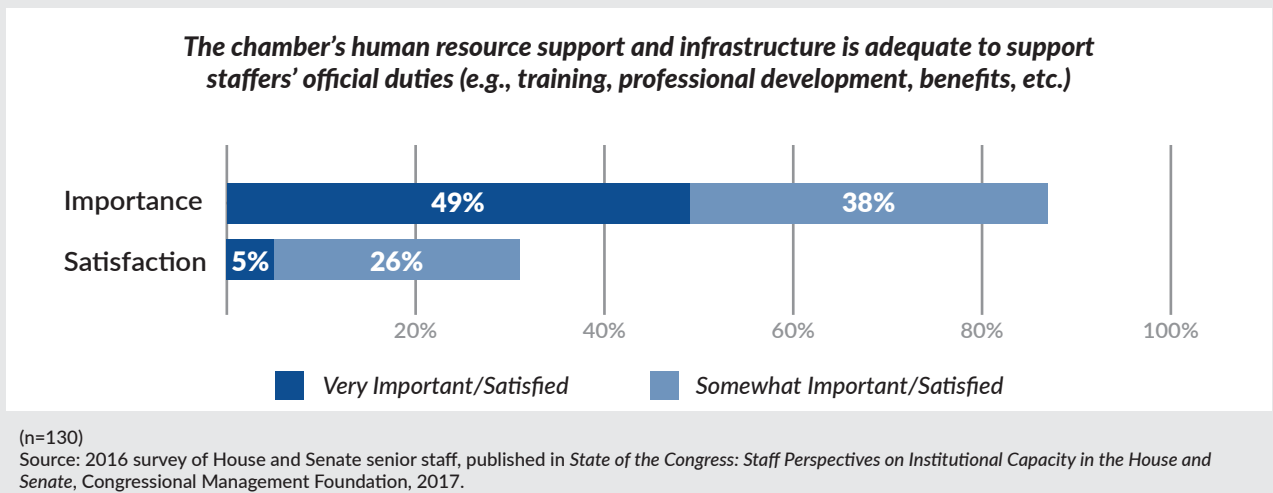


(n=129)

Source: 2016 survey of House and Senate senior staff, published in *State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2017.

Of slightly less importance to the respondents was their chamber's human resource infrastructure in support of its staff. Still, 49% said it is "very important" that their chamber's human resource (HR) infrastructure adequately support staffers' official duties, and only 5% were "very satisfied" with their chamber's performance (Figure 3). This aspect of congressional performance had the sixth-largest gap of the 11 we explored, but it is important to consider the role an organization's HR infrastructure plays in ensuring the knowledge, skills and abilities of its employees are up to par. In most organizations, it is directly responsible for ensuring employees are adequately prepared for, and supported in, doing their jobs effectively.

Figure 3 | Human Resource Infrastructure



Skilled and experienced employees are the most valuable and precious assets in any knowledge-based workplace, and Congress is one of the most important, complex, and information-rich knowledge-based workplaces in the world. As such, it should be concerning to both Congress and the public that senior staffers on Capitol Hill do not feel their human resource support is adequate. Congressional staff must discern knowledge from vast repositories of information and misinformation to thoroughly understand the complex challenges facing our country and support Senators and Representatives in developing sound public policy to respond. To do this well takes skill, experience, and training. If congressional staffers' skills and the infrastructure supporting their work are inadequate, Congress cannot rise to the needs and challenges the nation faces.

That said, Congress is a unique workplace. Rather than being a unified institution, Congress is more akin to a federation of hundreds of independent small businesses. The House and Senate function autonomously, and each Senator, Representative, and Delegate establishes his or her own HR policies and employment practices. The chambers provide some centralized HR support services, but they do not operate in the same way HR infrastructures in other organizations do. There are little to no: workforce planning resources; management and leadership identification and training programs; job-specific training opportunities; professional development curricula or career tracks; and institutional recruiting, onboarding or retention strategies.

For many staffers in Members' personal offices, work in Congress starts as an unpaid intern shortly after earning a college degree. They often

"You can start out in politics after college and make your way forward without any skills except political ones. Going to work in Congress is less a career and more a stepping stone."

—Former House and Senate Committee Staff Director

“The Hill is a difficult environment for retaining quality staff. High pressure, tight deadlines, long hours, bad management, and low (comparable) compensation all contribute to high employee turnover and make it difficult to ensure that quality staff is developed, trained, and retained.”

—Senate Legislative Director

quickly leave due to the punishing schedule, comparatively low pay, high stakes, and/or public derision. Alternately, due to rapid turnover on Capitol Hill that ensures abundant job openings, they quickly advance.⁴

In fact, there are no staff positions in Senate or House committees or personal offices with a median tenure of more than four years. That means most of the key staffers on Capitol Hill—the ones who directly support the policy and constituent engagement work of Senators and Representatives—are fairly new to their jobs. This has been the case for at least 10 years.⁵ Staff turnover on Capitol Hill is continuous.

In surveys and interviews for the “Life in Congress” research program (a collaboration by CMF and the Society for Human Resource Management) staff indicated their reasons for leaving their jobs have mostly to do with the human resource infrastructure. Their desire to earn more money is the top reason staff cite for leaving their job.⁶ Given that congressional salaries have largely remained stagnant or declined in the past decade or so⁷ and that historically staff have earned less than peers in other sectors—especially when overtime and benefits are factored in—this is hardly surprising.⁸

Staff cite inadequate opportunities for professional development almost as often as the desire to earn more money as a reason they leave their jobs. Congressional staffers are well-educated, motivated, ambitious employees who want their careers to progress. With little consideration given to professional development on Capitol Hill, the best way for staff to advance is to leave their jobs or leave Congress. The skills and knowledge they develop during their short tenures make them highly marketable in prestigious jobs throughout the country.

The other significant reasons staff have for leaving their current job or office are frustration with management and the desire for a job that will make better use of their skills and abilities. And one of their top reasons for leaving Congress altogether is to seek a better balance between work and personal life.⁹

Turnover on Capitol Hill results in costs to the institution. The loss of institutional memory, policy expertise, and process knowledge all take a toll. There is also significant time and expense associated with continuously hiring and training new employees. Turnover also leads to

⁴ | See the “Life in Congress” project, a partnership between CMF and the Society for Human Resource Management, particularly [Life in Congress: Job Satisfaction and Engagement of House and Senate Staff](#), a Joint Research Report by CMF-SHRM, 2013.

⁵ | Data compiled from multiple Congressional Research Service reports on staff tenure in personal and committee offices (listed in Appendix B).

⁶ | [Life in Congress: Job Satisfaction and Engagement of House and Senate Staff](#), a Joint Research Report by CMF-SHRM, 2013.

⁷ | Data compiled from multiple Congressional Research Service reports on staff pay levels in personal and committee offices (listed in Appendix B).

⁸ | See CMF’s [Staff Employment Studies](#) of Senators’ and Representatives’ personal offices, Congressional Research Service data above, and articles on congressional staffing from the [Legislative Branch Capacity Working Group](#).

⁹ | [Life in Congress: Job Satisfaction and Engagement of House and Senate Staff](#), a Joint Research Report by CMF-SHRM, 2013.

loss of productivity and disruption to teams and workflows. However, unlike any other workplace, a limited infrastructure exists to manage these problems or quickly get new staffers trained and productive on their jobs. It isn't hard to infer that the resulting problems directly impact the public policy by which the entire nation must abide.

In any other workplace, high staff turnover resulting from lack of career advancement, non-competitive pay and benefits, poor management, and unworkable work-life fit would be cause for an overhaul of human resources practices. As discussed in more detail in Finding 5, Congress has instead cut its funding and reduced its staff. An institution that cannot help its employees develop the knowledge, skills and abilities they need to perform their duties—or compensate and retain them once they do—becomes significantly less effective than it has the potential to be. When that institution is Congress, and the employees are those supporting the people at the heart of our representative democracy, the entire nation has cause for concern.

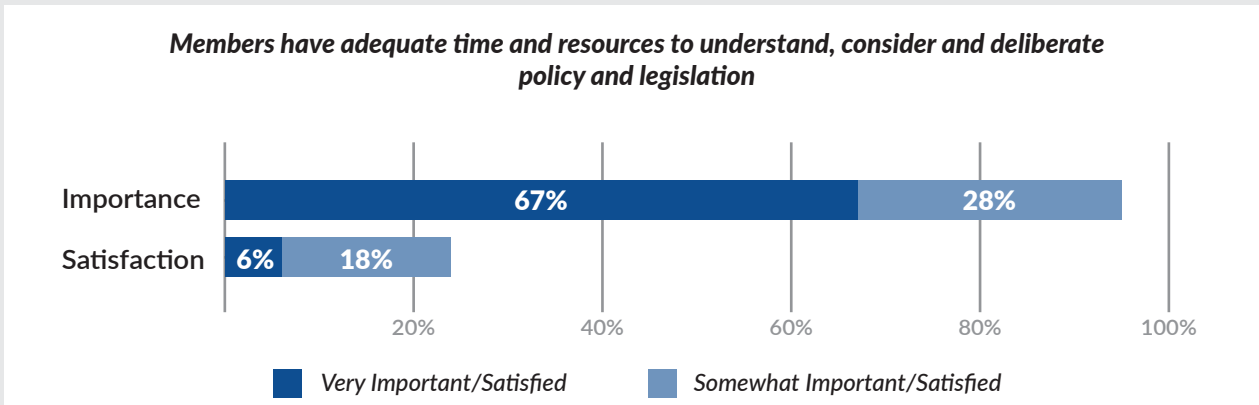
2. Senators and Representatives lack the time and resources they need to understand, consider and deliberate public policy and legislation.

Two-thirds (67%) of the survey respondents consider it “very important” that Senators and Representatives have adequate time and resources to understand, consider and deliberate policy and legislation, but only 6% were “very satisfied” with their chamber’s performance in this area (Figure 4). In fact, 23% were “very dissatisfied.” The gap between importance and satisfaction for this dimension of congressional performance is 61 percentage points, the second-largest gap of all dimensions we explored.

“Federal law is still being made. It’s just being made with less and less input from the American people’s elected representatives, which is to say, with less and less input from the American people themselves.”

—Senator Mike Lee

Figure 4 | Time and Resources for Legislation



(n=129-130)

Source: 2016 survey of House and Senate senior staff, published in *State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2017.

This finding is corroborated by Members. In a 2011 survey of 25 Representatives conducted by CMF and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), half disagreed with the statement “I have the time and resources I need to accomplish my goals in Congress.” Additionally, one-third of them felt they spent too little time on legislative/policy work.¹⁰ The nation should be alarmed that Members and senior staffers do not feel that Senators and Representatives have time to understand, consider and deliberate policy and legislation—the very core of their jobs and their role in our democracy.

“When members are allowed to actually vote in committee and offer amendments and vote on the floor and make those decisions that they were sent here to do then they will be happier and we’ll all be better off.”

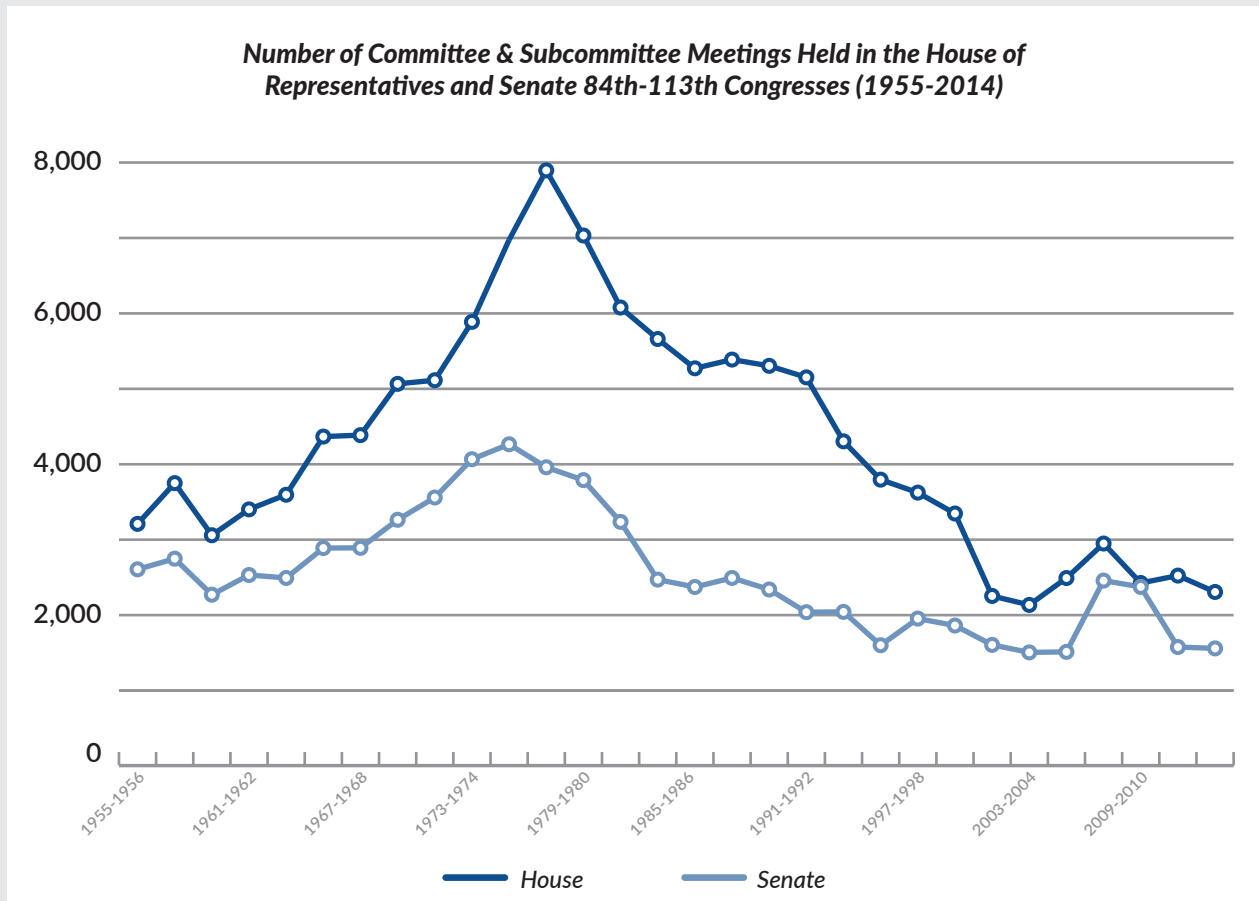
—Senate Communications Director

A variety of changes in House and Senate rules and practices, as well as societal factors, have likely contributed to this state of affairs. For example, as Figure 5 shows, committees and subcommittees in recent congresses have been meeting less often than at almost any other time in recent history. Congressional committees are where the thoughtful and comprehensive policy research and deep deliberation of Congress is supposed to occur. Through committees, Senators, Representatives, and staff are supposed to develop subject matter expertise to better inform public policy. Committees are intended to identify and investigate emerging issues and hold hearings to learn from the range of stakeholders in, and experts on, an issue. They consider proposed legislation within their areas of expertise and hold the Executive Branch accountable for its actions and/or lack thereof. Committees are supposed to represent the voice of the people in our democratic process and make sound public policy recommendations to the rest of their chamber. They are also where individual Members have, in the past,

¹⁰ | [Life in Congress: The Member Perspective](#), a Joint Research Report by CMF-SHRM, 2013.

had the greatest opportunity to make the most difference to public policy. However, even though legislative issues have been complicated by high-speed communications, rapidly-advancing technology, growing populations, and global societal challenges, Congress is relying less on committees to consider and address these issues.

Figure 5 | Trends in Committee and Subcommittee Meetings



Source: *Vital Statistics on Congress*, Brookings, January 2017

In fact, leadership is increasingly bypassing committees altogether on major legislation. Prior to the 1970s, almost all legislation considered on the House and Senate floors was reported out of committee. Since the 1990s, the percentage of bills that skip committees altogether has risen steadily. In the 113th Congress (2013-2014), more than half of the major legislation that came to the floor of the Senate and about 40% in the House bypassed committees.¹¹ This prevents Members and staff on committees—who are supposed to be the experts on the issues under

¹¹ | *Unorthodox Lawmaking: New Legislative Processes in the U.S. Congress* (Fifth Edition), Barbara Sinclair, 2017.

their jurisdiction—from deeply considering proposed major legislation and offering their informed insight and guidance.

At the same time, rules for consideration of legislation on the House and Senate floors have been increasingly restrictive. In the House, very little legislation in recent congresses has been considered under open rules. In the 1970s, most bills were considered using open rules, meaning that any Member could offer amendments. In recent congresses, most bills are considered under restrictive rules, where few or no amendments are allowed during floor consideration.¹² Similarly, in the Senate in recent congresses the majority party—regardless of who is in power—has been making it increasingly difficult for Senators to offer amendments on the floor.¹³ Restrictions to floor activity, committee engagement, and Senators' and Representatives' involvement in the legislative process means that few of our national legislators have the capability to influence legislation and accomplish their own—and their constituents'—legislative goals.

3. Congress needs to improve Member and staff access to high-quality, nonpartisan policy expertise within the Legislative Branch.

“This is a business. And we keep punishing ourselves by eliminating the tools necessary to run our businesses properly.”

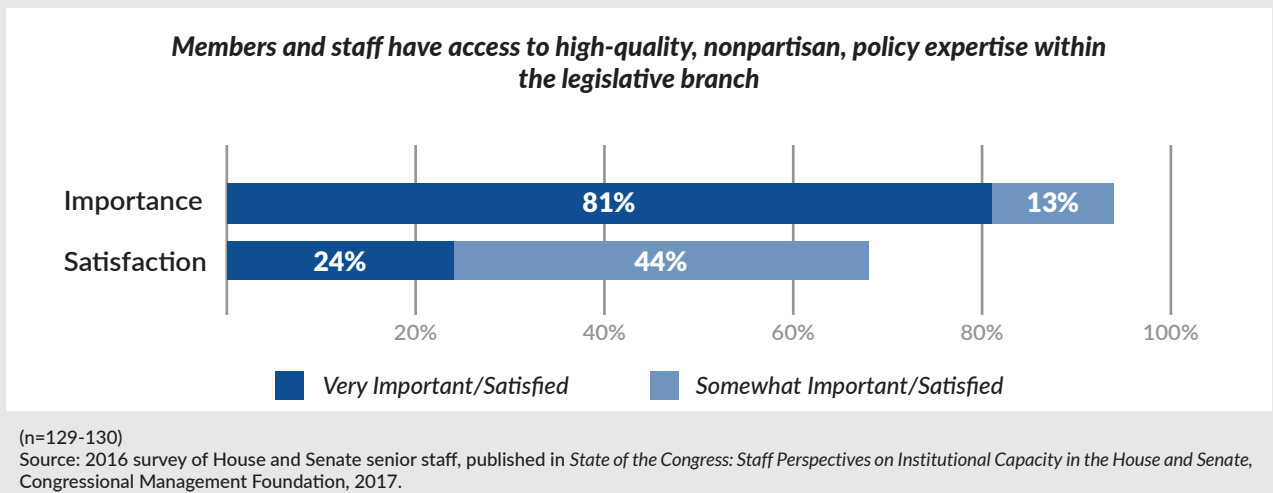
—Senate Chief of Staff

Member and staff access to high-quality, nonpartisan policy expertise within the legislative branch was only slightly less important to the senior staffers we surveyed than their staffers' skills and abilities. Most (81%) considered it “very important,” and only 24% were “very satisfied” (Figure 6). There were also 44% of the staffers who were “somewhat satisfied.” Still, with a gap of 57 percentage points between “very important” and “very satisfied,” this issue merits attention by the House and Senate.

12 | “House Rules Data: Open vs. Restricted Rules in the House 94th-113th Congresses,” Donald R. Wolfensberger, Bipartisan Policy Center, February 2013.

13 | “Unprecedented: Informal Rules and Leader Power in the U.S. Senate,” James Wallner, paper prepared for the Congress and History Conference, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, June 2016.

Figure 6 | Access to Nonpartisan Legislative Branch Information



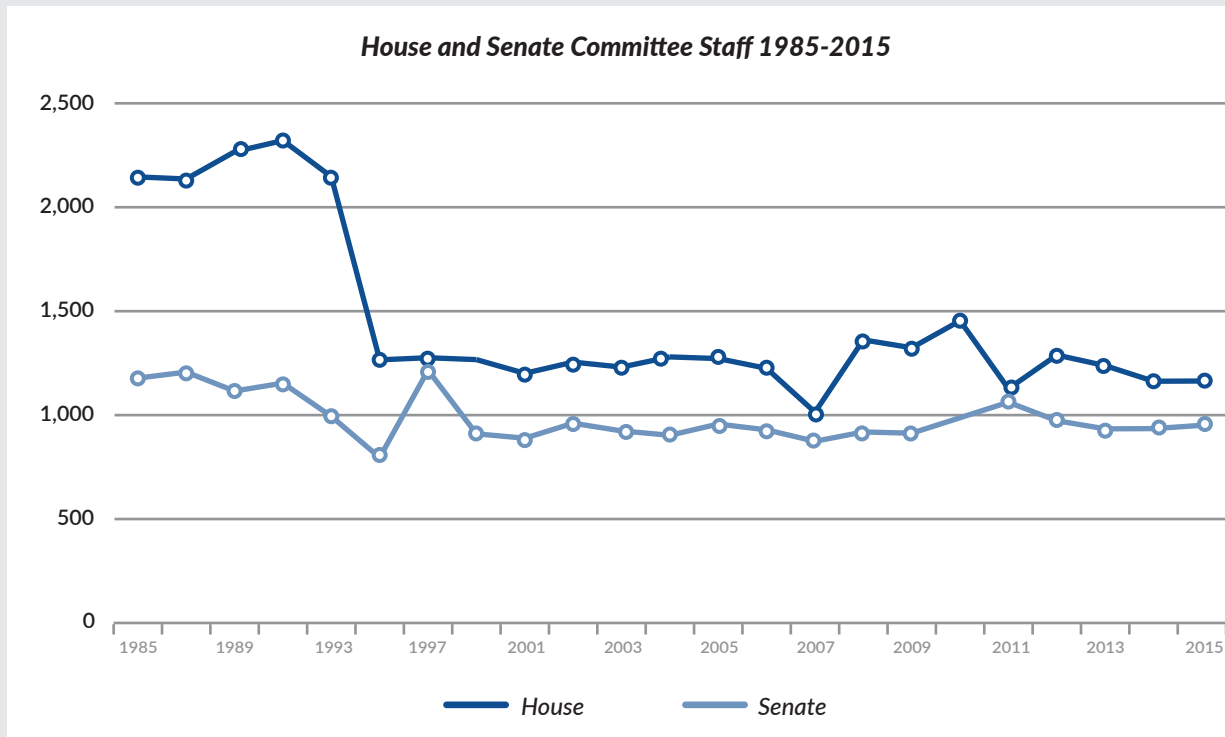
The organizations that provide nonpartisan policy expertise within the Legislative Branch are primarily the Congressional Research Service, the Congressional Budget Office, the Government Accountability Office, and committees. All of these organizations have taken considerable hits to their staffing in recent decades. Since 1985, Congress has cut the Congressional Research Service staff by 29%, the Government Accountability Office staff by 41%, and it eliminated the Office of Technology Assessment altogether in 1995. In actual numbers, the Congressional Research Service has reduced its staffing by about 250 employees and the Government Accountability Office has about 2,000 fewer employees. Staffing of the Congressional Budget Office has remained fairly consistent, with numbers hovering in the low-200s.¹⁴

House committees have 50% fewer employees than they did in 1985 and Senate committees have 20% fewer. As Figure 7 shows, these levels have fluctuated over the years, but dropped considerably in the early 1990s, especially in the House, and have largely maintained their lower levels.

“Now I know if there was overall relief in the budget allocation that we'd see more investments in the staff and facilities in the legislative branch. But we're starting to cut into bone in some places—and that is unwise.”

—Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz

14 | *Vital Statistics on Congress*, Brookings, 2017.

Figure 7 | Trends in Committee Staffing

Note: Staff data are for full-time, paid employees. Only data for odd years are displayed.

Source: *Vital Statistics on Congress*, Brookings, January 2017

Some of the reductions in staffing can be explained by improved technology and automation, but Congress has also lost institutional and policy expertise.¹⁵ In recent years, scholars and congressional observers on both sides of the aisle have expressed concern that Congress has diminished its internal nonpartisan policy expertise. Some fear that it has reached the point where Senators, Representatives and policy staffers must rely too heavily on information from, and interests of, party leadership, the Executive Branch and outside interests (associations, corporations, nonprofits, think tanks, etc.) rather than producing its own high-quality, nonpartisan policy analysis.

During the same timeframe, partisan staff in leadership offices in both the House and Senate have increased. House leadership staff is currently at about 140% of 1985 levels and Senate leadership staff is at 147%. When the total number of employees in either case is only around 200,

¹⁵ | "So What if Congressional Staff Levels are Declining?" Tim LaPira and Herschel Thomas, June 27, 2016, a preview of the book [Revolving Door Lobbying: Public Service, Private Influence, and the Unequal Representation of Interests](#), 2017.

¹⁶ | Among them: Lorelei Kelly in "[Congress' Wicked Problem: Seeking Knowledge Inside the Information Tsunami](#)"; Anthony Madonna and Ian Ostrander in "[A Congress of Cannibals: The Evolution of Professional Staff in Congress](#)"; Lee Drutman and Steven Teles in "[Why Congress Relies on Lobbyists Instead of Thinking for Itself](#)"; Kevin R. Kosar in "[Why I Quit the Congressional Research Service](#)"; and James M. Curry in "[To Be Effective Legislators, Members of Congress Need Expert Resources of Their Own](#)" (a preview of the book *Legislating in the Dark: Information and Power in the House of Representatives*). Additional scholarship and thought leadership in this area can be accessed through the [Legislative Branch Capacity Working Group](#) founded by Kosar and Drutman.

the increases appear less stunning, except that these partisan staff increases are the only significant staffing increases in the Legislative Branch (except possibly for the U.S. Capitol Police, for which staffing data is not easily accessible).¹⁷ Additionally, there is evidence that congressional committees have become significantly more partisan than they used to be,¹⁸ so they can be less relied-upon to provide nonpartisan policy expertise.

Evidence also indicates that both Congress¹⁹ and the country²⁰ have become more divided along partisan lines. When Congress is more polarized and ideologically-motivated than cooperative and evidence-motivated, Members' access to, and trust and understanding of, neutral policy data and analysis is diminished. Polarization makes it easier for Members and staff to lose sight of their role in democracy, causing them to focus more on partisan victories than public good, and it certainly makes it more difficult for Congress to get much done when Members are entrenched.

4. Congress needs to improve its technological infrastructure.

The technological infrastructure in support of Members' official duties was "very important" to 60% of the respondents to our survey, but only 6% were "very satisfied" (Figure 8). In fact, 20% were "very dissatisfied" and another 32% were "somewhat dissatisfied" (Appendix A). The gap between importance and satisfaction was 54 percentage points, indicating there is significant room for improvement.

"What we're seeing is a 19th century institution often using 20th century technology to respond to 21st century problems. We need to change that."

—Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers

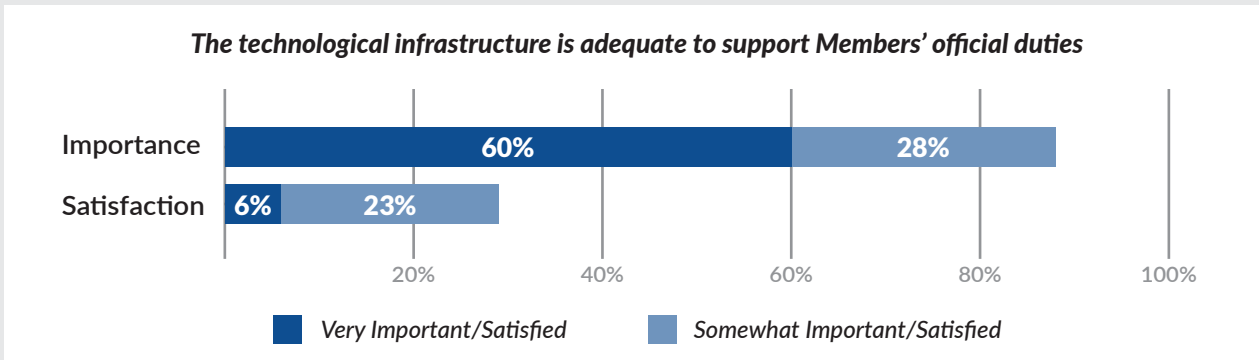
¹⁷ | *Vital Statistics on Congress*, Brookings, 2017.

¹⁸ | *Ibid.*

¹⁹ | *Ibid.*

²⁰ | *Political Polarization in the American Public: How Increasing Ideological Uniformity and Partisan Antipathy Affect Politics, Compromise and Everyday Life*, Pew Research Center, 2014.

Figure 8 | Technological Infrastructure

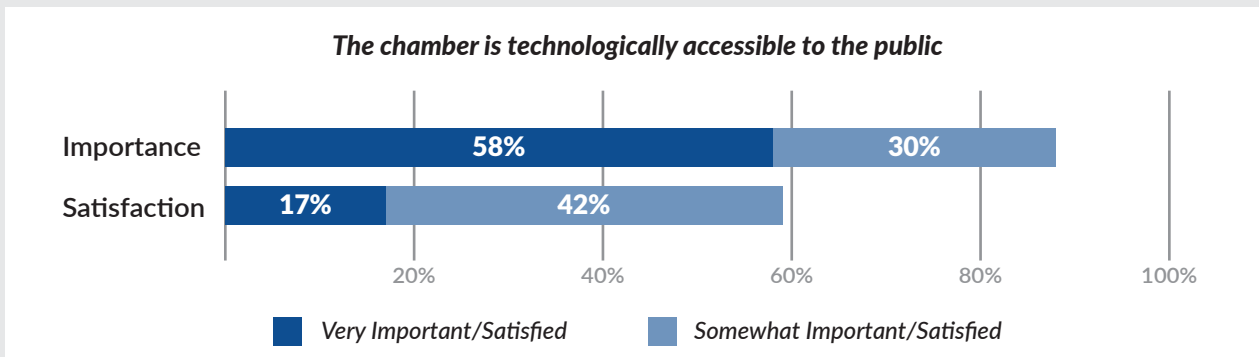


(n=129-130)

Source: 2016 survey of House and Senate senior staff, published in *State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2017.

Senior staff also felt it was important that their chamber be technologically accessible to the public, with 58% saying it was “very important” but only 17% saying they were “very satisfied,” a gap of 41 percentage points (Figure 9). Although respondents were more satisfied with Congress’s technological accessibility than its infrastructure, the large gap indicates this is another area ripe for improvement on Capitol Hill.

Figure 9 | Technological Accessibility



(n=128-130)

Source: 2016 survey of House and Senate senior staff, published in *State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2017.

The technological infrastructures in both the House and Senate have not kept pace with the needs of Members and staff;²¹ the demands of information and data-intensive policy work;²² and the expectations of Internet and mobile-enabled citizens wanting to have their voices heard

21 | “Coming to the House of Representatives From Silicon Valley is Like Going in a Time Machine,” Andrew Zaleski, *Politico*, September 13, 2015.

22 | “Slowly but Surely, Congress Will Join Us in the 21st Century,” Lorelei Kelly, *TechCrunch*, September 10, 2016.

in the public policy process.²³ In 2006, the Committee on House Administration conducted a hearing on the findings from an information technology assessment and ten-year vision for technology in the House of Representatives, developed by Gartner and CMF under contract to the House.²⁴ This research has guided some of the House's efforts—especially efforts to modernize the systems that support legislative document management and access.²⁵ However much of the ten-year vision for technology remains to be realized a decade later. The House has laid critical groundwork for realizing the vision, and there are legitimate reasons for not yet attaining it, but demands and expectations have far outpaced infrastructure modernization.

Some of the key institutional challenges to implementing state-of-the-art technological infrastructures in the House and Senate include:

- **Balancing security, accessibility and mobility.** Congress is a constant target of cyberthreats. As a repository and consumer of vast amounts of sensitive data, those threats must be foiled every time. At the same time, Congress strives to be an open and accessible legislature where citizens can engage in the public policy process. And Members and staff are increasingly demanding that technology support their highly-mobile and collaborative work. These needs are regularly in conflict in the implementation of technology in Congress.
- **Maintaining the deliberative nature of Congress.** By both tradition and design, Congress is meant to be slow and thoughtful so the public policy it creates is sound, has broad support among legislators and citizens, and provides long-lived solutions to national challenges. Technology removes the administrative time to produce and access documents, and the time it takes to build coalitions and support them. This can speed the legislative process, but does not remove the strong arguments for providing Senators and Representatives ample time to thoughtfully process, understand, consider, and debate legislation.
- **Accommodating paper-centric rules and traditions.** The federal legislative process remains a paper-dominated system, and paper versions—not electronic versions—are the documents of record throughout. Among other things, this enables bills and amendments to be written and marked up by *hand* during debate—an important prerogative of Senators and Representatives. However, this

“It seems like the biggest obstacle to getting systems to talk to each other is the Senate Rules and technical requirements. We seem to accept things the private sector would never accept just because ‘that’s the way it’s always been done around here.’”

—Senate Chief of Staff

²³ | See the research and reports in CMF's [Communicating with Congress](#) project.

²⁴ | [Hearing on IT Assessment: A Ten-Year Vision for Technology in the House](#), a hearing before the Committee on House Administration, House of Representatives, 109th Congress, September 27, 2006.

²⁵ | Legislative Documents in XML at the United States House of Representatives (<http://xml.house.gov/>)

antiquated system complicates legislative document management and workflow.

- **Working with legislative branch funding and election cycles.**

Legislative branch funding operates on the same one-year timeframe as the rest of the federal government and there are rules and procedures that make it difficult to fund multi-year projects. Congress as an institution operates on a two-year election cycle, and in recent decades there has been tremendous change with each new congress. It is difficult in the current climate to generate sustained funding and leadership for the large, expensive, long-term technological infrastructure projects necessary to modernize and transform congressional operations.

- **Supporting the federated nature of Congress.** Congress is not a single enterprise, it is a federation of enterprises and no one of them has absolute authority over the rest. For example, each of the 100 Senators have significant autonomy to establish policies, procedures, and even software to guide their individual office operations. Also, no formal Legislative-Branch-wide governance structure exists for considering the operational needs, standards, processes, strategies, and goals of the institution overall. It is hard to implement wholesale change across largely independent fiefdoms.

- **Preserving the integrity of historic buildings.** Many of the buildings in which Senators and Representatives spend their time were designed and constructed before the invention of electricity. Solid marble walls and historic art and architecture complicate wiring and Wi-Fi on Capitol Hill.

“The management challenges are not only the draconian reductions in our budget but the lack of leadership in Congress, both Houses and both parties, to address those obvious problems.”

—House Chief of Staff

These institutional challenges are not insurmountable, but they are important factors to consider as approaches for modernizing Congress are developed. There are also external challenges to the comprehensive adoption of technology to modernize Congress. Technology has had a tremendous impact on citizens’ practice of democracy. From live streaming committee hearings to enabling immediate and abundant constituent communication to Capitol Hill, technology has facilitated greater, more open access to legislative information and faster and more direct venues for expressing views to Congress than at any point in history.

However, it remains unclear how this access has changed Congress and democracy. In fact, the full impact of technology on democracy, to date, needs to be more fully assessed. Many important questions remain, including:

- Has modern technology resulted in a more informed citizenry and better public policy?
- How does technology-enabled real-time transparency of legislative proceedings affect deliberation, policymaking, and polarization?
- How does a democracy effectively reconcile the pace and volume of modern communications with the pace and resources of its national legislature?
- What is the best way for legislators to use technology to hear and understand the views of the people they represent?
- How does a legislature use technology to most effectively turn big data into wisdom and informed public policy?
- How do we reconcile the possibilities of technology-enabled direct democracy with our constitutionally mandated structure of representative democracy?

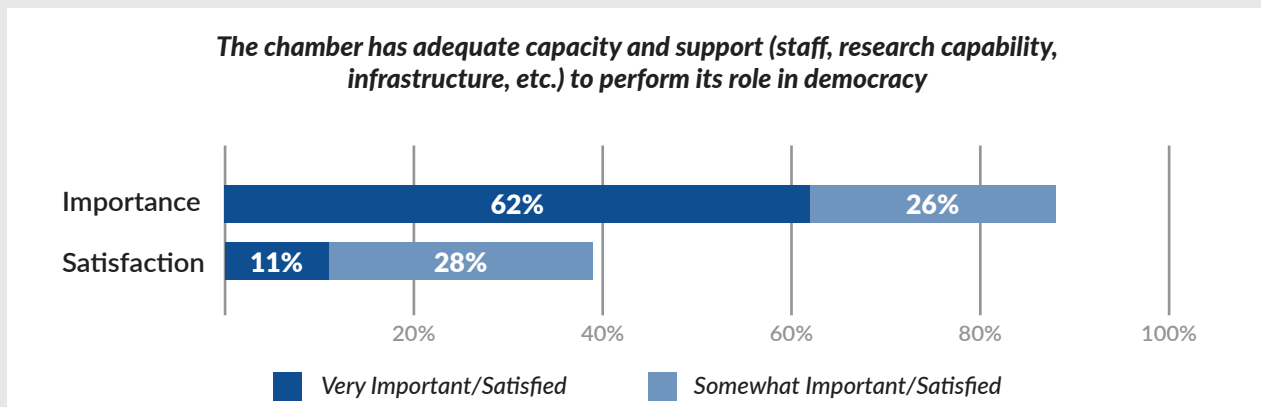
“As citizens, we have to learn how to solve problems in a representative democracy. We have to learn to work with people who hold different views, forge common ground with them, and hold our representatives to account—not alone for their political views, but for their ability to get things done.”

—Former Rep. Lee Hamilton

We must grapple with these questions and more as technology is implemented to support and transform the work of Congress and the practice of democracy.

5. Congress should re-examine its capacity to perform its role in democracy.

Just under one in three (62%) of the senior staffers surveyed considered it “very important” that their chamber have adequate capacity and support to perform its role in democracy, but only 11% were “very satisfied” with their chamber’s performance (Figure 10). With a gap of 51 percentage points, this aspect of congressional operations should be of concern on and off Capitol Hill, though it is less important to our survey respondents than the other aspects of congressional performance we explored.

Figure 10 | Capacity to Perform Role in Democracy

(n=129-130)

Source: 2016 survey of House and Senate senior staff, published in *State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2017.

One measure of capacity in Congress is staffing levels.²⁶ Since 1985, there have been deep staff cuts in policy positions and nonpartisan support organizations. As discussed previously in Finding 3, staffing in the nonpartisan support organizations of the General Accountability Office and Congressional Research Service and in House and Senate committees have declined significantly. Staffing in many other Legislative Branch organizations has declined, as well, including in Senators' and Representatives' personal offices and in the institutional support organizations that provide congressional infrastructure and support services.

“Regular office budget cuts severely impact Congress' ability to work effectively, and to help Americans.”

—House Chief of Staff

In the House, the number of employees who work in Representatives' personal offices is 20% less than in 1985. The officers and officials who provide institutional support to Representatives—such as the offices of the Clerk, Sergeant at Arms, and Chief Administrative Officer, among others—have 83% fewer staffers than they had in 1985. There has been less of a decline in the Senate. Senators' personal office staffs are only down 4% since 1985, and the officers of the Senate are staffed 13% less than what they were in 1985.²⁷

Another measure of congressional capacity to perform its role in democracy is funding. Excluding Senators' and Representatives' salaries (\$174,000 annually for most Members²⁸), which are managed independently of the Legislative Branch budget, the entire Legislative Branch represents only about 0.1% of the cost to operate the federal

²⁶ | “So What if Congressional Staff Levels are Declining?” Tim LaPira and Herschel Thomas, June 27, 2016, a preview of the book [Revolving Door Lobbying: Public Service, Private Influence, and the Unequal Representation of Interests](#), 2017.

²⁷ | [Vital Statistics on Congress](#), Brookings, 2017.

²⁸ | *Congressional Salaries and Allowances: In Brief*, Congressional Research Service, July 14, 2016.

government. In 2015, that was around \$4.3 billion, or less than \$20 per eligible voter in the country. The entire Legislative Branch costs less to operate than the Army Corps of Engineers (\$6.7 billion), the National Science Foundation (\$6.8 billion), or the Judicial Branch (\$7.1 billion), which receive some of the lowest outlays among all federal government entities.²⁹

In nominal dollars, the Legislative Branch organizations for which data is available collectively increased from about \$1.6 billion to about \$4.3 billion between 1985 and 2016.³⁰ In constant dollars, that is only about 30% higher than it was in 1985. Given that the total number of employees in most Legislative Branch organizations has declined, that increase has clearly not been used to maintain or increase staffing levels. More likely, the increases are the result of technological, communications and post-9/11 security needs. Interestingly, in the past few years both the House and Senate have cut their budgets while the total Legislative Branch budget has increased slightly overall. The Senate has reduced its budget by about 6% since 2010 and the House has reduced its budget by 14%.³¹ Budget cuts to Congress have been used in recent years to demonstrate fiscal responsibility. However, at some point—possibly long since passed—budget cuts hobble the institution by negatively impacting the quality, expertise, morale, and tenure of employees; reducing communication and responsiveness to constituents; delaying the purchase of big-ticket items such as updated technology; and damaging the effectiveness and reputation of the legislature.³²

“Both parties have severely weakened the legislative branch over decades and accelerated it much the past few years.”

—Senate Communications Director

Since 1985 the Executive Branch budget, on the other hand, has increased more than four-fold. A significant component of the duty of Congress is to perform oversight over the Executive Branch to ensure it is working effectively. With resources so imbalanced, however, some doubt exists about Congress’ capacity to perform its oversight role effectively.

The survey respondents were less concerned about Senators’ Representatives’ and congressional staffers’ understanding of their chamber’s role in democracy. Just over half (52%) considered this to be “very important,” and 20% were “very satisfied” (Figure 11). With a gap of 32 percentage points, it seems that the senior staffers we surveyed do not consider this as high a priority to address as other institutional issues already outlined.

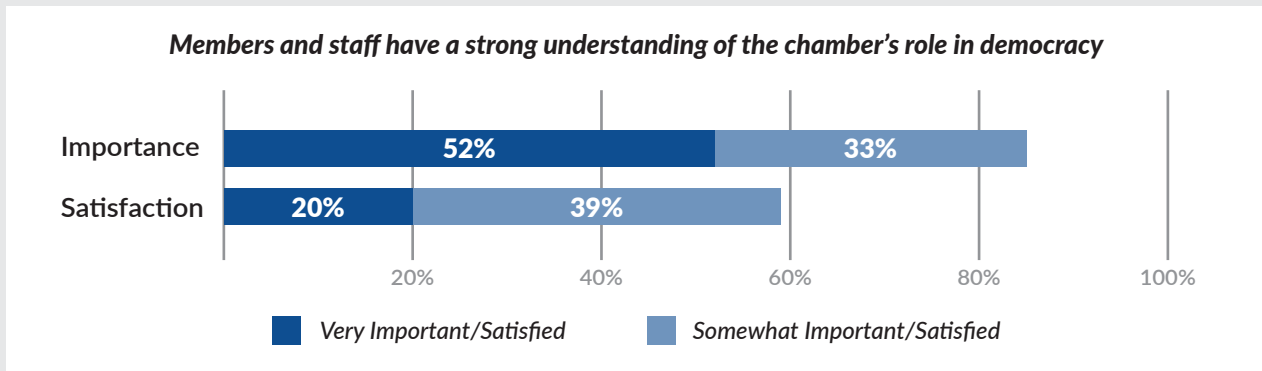
29 | “Fiscal Year 2017 Historical Tables: Budget of the U.S. Government,” Office of Management and Budget (undated).

30 | *Vital Statistics on Congress*, Brookings, 2017.

31 | *Ibid.*

32 | Discussions of the cuts and their impact were published by CMF in the 2011 report *Managing the 2012 Budget Cuts in House Offices* and by *National Journal* in the 2015 article “How Congress Cuts its Own Budget.”

Figure 11 | Understanding of Role in Democracy



(n=130)

Source: 2016 survey of House and Senate senior staff, published in *State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2017.

“I’d like for staff to understand that working in the House isn’t just a stepping stone to a well-paying career in private industry. People all over the U.S. are depending on this place.”

—House Communications Director

However, congressional approval ratings have stood under 50% since July 2003 and under 30% since October 2009,³³ and the public increasingly feels that Congress is more motivated by partisanship and moneyed interests than the public good.³⁴ Members, themselves, are feeling pressure to be better fundraisers than legislators or representatives of the people, and they are challenged by the number and passion of messages they receive from—and interactions they have with—constituents.³⁵ That said, throughout our national history, the public has always harshly criticized Congress, and Congress has always evolved to address the challenges and step up to its responsibilities. Congress is designed to be messy and slow and open to input from any citizen who cared to provide it.³⁶ Though there is justifiable concern inside and outside Congress about Member and staff understanding of their role in democracy, this aspect of congressional performance may merit less attention at present than some others.

³³ | [Congress and the Public](#), Gallup, as of March 2017.

³⁴ | [Voter Anger with Government and the 2016 Election](#), Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, et al., a survey of American voters conducted by the Program for Public Consultation, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland, November 2016.

³⁵ | [Communicating with Congress: Perceptions of Citizen Advocacy on Capitol Hill](#), Congressional Management Foundation, 2011.

³⁶ | [The Evolving Congress](#), prepared in 2014 by the Congressional Research Service for the Committee on Rules and Administration of the U.S. Senate, provides history and context for the current Congress and describes many instances throughout its history where Congress has adapted to challenges and changes in society.

CONCLUSION

Mounting evidence suggests that Congress is struggling to perform its role in democracy. The deliberation, assessment, and learning that are at the heart of the keystone institution of our democracy are being given short shrift in favor of expediency and the appearance of action in the face of mounting pressures. This has happened during both Republican and Democratic majorities in Congress. Members, staff and citizens are all frustrated with how Congress and democracy are performing right now, and existing reform efforts have not helped Congress become the resilient institution it needs to be.

The concept of resilience is central to many fields. In international development, it is measured by social cohesion—a society’s ability to stick together during crisis. In disaster response, it is the capacity to anticipate, mitigate, adapt, and adjust intelligently to crisis and to manage ongoing risk. With technical systems, resilience is the capacity to handle glitches, attacks and outages through redundancy, distribution and backup. While no widely adopted definition of resiliency yet exists for Congress, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), legislators and legislative staff outside the United States have begun to define what a democratic legislature needs to perform effectively. The efforts have led to a compelling body of benchmarks and assessment tools for citizens, nongovernmental organizations, and legislatures to measure legislative capacity and governance performance, independent of politics.⁴¹

The language and emphasis vary from instrument to instrument, but they all generally agree on basic principles. A high-functioning, resilient democracy requires: a connected, inclusive legislature that benefits from a well-informed process; effective communication from and to citizens; a non-political infrastructure that supports the legislature and its work; and time and space to deliberate.

Here in the United States a growing body of scholars, practitioners, technologists and institutionalists are turning their attention to the *operational* challenges Congress faces in facilitating our democracy. There is momentum building for identifying ways to modernize and transform Congress to best equip it to perform its duties in a world that has changed dramatically since the early 1990s, when it last reassessed

A high-functioning, resilient democracy requires: a connected, inclusive legislature that benefits from a well-informed process; effective communication from and to citizens; a non-political infrastructure that supports the legislature and its work; and time and space to deliberate.

⁴¹ | [Benchmarking and Self-Assessment for Parliaments](#), Mitchell O'Brien, Rick Stapenhurst, and Lisa von Trapp (editors), World Bank Group, 2016.

and reorganized itself through the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress.⁴² Currently, efforts are underway to:

- Better understand the dynamics involved in the relationship between congressional operations and the public trust;⁴³
- Consider congressional capacity to perform its role in democracy;⁴⁴
- Explore technology's role in supporting Congress and democracy;⁴⁵
- Call for Congress to examine and reform itself through a modern Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress;⁴⁶ and
- Direct the attention of scholars, journalists and thought leaders toward the challenges democracy faces in modern society.⁴⁷

These are just a few of the governance-focused initiatives currently in progress to help Congress and democracy perform better. Within this context, CMF offers the findings from this study, our previous research, and our interactions with Congress during the past 40 years.

“There seems to be little attention to the matter of democracy and/or governance and way too much attention to matters of partisan politics.”

—House Chief of Staff

This research—and the body of other research on congressional capacity—is just the beginning of thoroughly understanding and assessing the performance of Congress. To modernize Congress, as an institution, and democracy as a system and practice, we must clearly define timeless benchmarks, better understand the current state, and assess our democracy with the care, respect, and rigor it deserves. We must clearly understand where we are today in relation to the vision laid out in our great documents—the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, Bill of Rights, and Federalist Papers—so we can determine where we need to go. We need Congress and democracy to be resilient in the face of disruptive social change.

This work cannot be accomplished without the participation of current and former Senators, Representatives, staffers, and congressional institutionalists who intimately understand and care deeply about the institution. Democratic and congressional reform cannot be successful when the efforts begin with the assumption that Congress is corrupt,

⁴² | The results of the 1991-1994 Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress can be found in the [Committee's final report to Congress](#). Other 20th century efforts to reorganize Congress were the 1965-1966 Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress that led to the [Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970](#) and the 1945-1947 Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress that led to the [Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946](#).

⁴³ | Democracy Fund has developed a [governance map](#) describing the interplay of numerous interrelated factors which impact Congress and democracy. The map is succinctly described in a blog post by Betsy Wright Hawkings entitled “[Deconstructing Congressional Dysfunction: A Systems-based Approach](#).”

⁴⁴ | [Legislative Branch Capacity Working Group](#), a joint project of [R Street Institute](#) and [New America](#) is exploring capacity deficits on Capitol Hill while the Project on Government Oversight's [Congressional Oversight Initiative](#) and the [Levin Center at Wayne State University Law School](#) are providing training and assistance for strengthening congressional oversight.

⁴⁵ | The [Congressional Data Coalition](#) and the [OpenGov Foundation](#) are exploring ways for congressional information to be more accessible to the public and to Senators, Representatives, and congressional staffers.

⁴⁶ | [Congressional Institute](#), [CMF](#), [Bipartisan Policy Center](#) and others have publicly supported the introduction by Reps. LaHood and Lipinski of a [House resolution to establish a Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress](#).

⁴⁷ | Social Science Research Council's [Anxieties of Democracy Program](#).

irrelevant, and useless, or when they are directed *at* Congress instead of being developed *with* Congress.

Congress is the most important institution for our democracy. It is where citizens' voices are supposed to be heard and considered in policymaking and governance processes. When Congress is not working for citizens, we all must focus on solving this fundamental and considerable challenge rather than demonizing and vilifying the institution, especially when the institution may not have the capacity to change itself alone. It is time we collectively figure out how to pragmatically assess and understand how to strengthen the institution at the core of our democracy and make it eternally resilient so our democracy continues to be a beacon for the world.

METHODOLOGY

Overview: Between August and October 2016, CMF collected data from senior staffers in House and Senate personal offices to better understand and quantify the challenges Congress faces in performing its role in democracy. More than 1,900 employees were contacted to participate in an online CMF survey on constituent correspondence, technology, congressional capacity, and office operations. Email invitations were sent to staff in the following positions: Chief of Staff, Legislative Director, Communications Director/Press Secretary, and District/State Director. A total of 206 responses were received, yielding a response rate of 11%. Participants who responded that they served as Legislative Assistants or “Other” staff positions were excluded from this report, bringing the total number of responses to 184, or 9.5%. Demographics for these respondents are shown in Figure 12.

Data included in this report: CMF asked congressional staff to indicate their opinion of the importance of 11 key aspects of democratic legislatures that were adapted from the *Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures* published by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.⁴⁸ We then asked respondents to indicate their satisfaction with their chamber’s performance in each area. Specifically, congressional staff were asked:

- “In your opinion, how important are the following for the effective functioning of your chamber?”
- “How satisfied are you with your chamber’s performance in the following?”

Figures: Unless otherwise noted in a specific figure, the following are applicable to data depicted throughout this report.

- Percentages for a question may not total 100% due to rounding.
- Percentages for a question may not total 100% if some answers are excluded.

Number of respondents: The number of respondents (indicated by “n” in figures) varies from figure to figure because some respondents did not answer all of the questions.

⁴⁸ | [Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures](#) (pdf). Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank Institute and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2006. More detailed information can be found in the [Study Group Report](#) (pdf) on the benchmark development process.

Generalization of results: As with all research, it is important to note that the results presented are only truly representative of the survey respondents and readers should exercise caution when generalizing results. While we cannot statistically validate these opinions, CMF is confident in this research and findings. Our firsthand experience in working with the Congress for more than 40 years corroborates the results published in this report. Through more than 1,000 interactions with Members and their staff annually through our training programs, research projects, and management services, we find this data to be reliable. Whenever possible, we have offered commentary to illustrate the broader congressional context for our findings.

Figure 12 | About the Respondents

Chamber (n=183)	
House of Representatives	80%
Senate	20%
Party (n=182)	
Democratic	51%
Republican	49%
Office Location (n=184)	
Washington D.C. office	70%
District/state office	30%
Position/Role (n=184)	
Chief of Staff	30%
Deputy Chief of Staff	6%
Legislative Director	25%
Communications Director/Press Secretary	15%
State or District Director	24%
Tenure in Congress (n=184)	
Less than one year	3%
One to three years	18%
Four to 10 years	36%
More than 10 years	43%
Age (n=183)	
Younger than 25 years old	2%
25-30 years old	14%
31-40 years old	42%
41-50 years old	22%
Older than 50 years old	20%

Note: Survey was in the field August-October 2016.

Source: 2016 survey of House and Senate senior staff, published in *State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2017.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report builds on the work of innumerable great minds, many of whom are referenced throughout. Most especially, I would like to thank Lorelei Kelly and Rick Shapiro. Lorelei invented the concept of Resilient Democracy and is working with me and others to develop a framework for understanding and assessing congressional resilience. Rick has been my mentor for 20 years and has been instrumental to my professional development and knowledge of Congress. He worked with me in the early stages of this report, and his input has always made my work better.

I also wish to thank our partners on the Resilient Democracy Coalition project—Voice of the People and the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate—and the funder, Democracy Fund. Though it was a small project, it was important for galvanizing partnerships and ideas that are leading to promising efforts to help strengthen Congress and democracy in the United States.

Our collaborators on the project—most of whom donated their time and expertise out of dedication to the Congress—were also critical to this research. Lee Drutman, Marci Harris, Lorelei Kelly, Kevin Kosar, Seamus Kraft, Steven Kull, Richard Parsons, and Daniel Schuman are a delight to work with, and their ideas have greatly contributed to and pushed ours.

The support and interest of Betsy Wright Hawkings and Chris Nehls at Democracy Fund and Jean Bordewich and Daniel Stid at the Hewlett Foundation's Madison Initiative were invaluable, as well. The thoughtful, pragmatic attention they are giving to Congress as an institution, and the funding and networking opportunities they are providing to organizations whose missions involve strengthening democracy and national governance, will prove to be historic.

I must also warmly thank my colleagues at CMF—especially Nicole Folk Cooper, Brad Fitch, and Kelsey Tokunaga—who pushed the writing and ideas, checked the facts, and enabled the long hours I spent researching and writing.

Finally, this work would not have been possible without the input and participation of current and former Senators, Representatives, staffers, and congressional institutionalists. Dozens of individuals participated in surveys, interviews, roundtable discussions, and other interactions that culminated in this report. I hear the pain and frustration—as well as the dedication to public service and democracy—in their voices every time we discuss their jobs and Congress. I hope this report contributes productively to the discussion about solutions.

Kathy Goldschmidt

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathy Goldschmidt | Director of Strategic Initiatives

Kathy is a strategic thinker who has been engaged in plotting the [Congressional Management Foundation's](#) course for 20 years. She joined CMF in 1997 after working in the House of Representatives. She has been involved in much of CMF's research during her tenure, and her focus has been on legislative capacity, strengthening and technology use. She has been integral to seminal CMF projects, including the [Resilient Democracy Coalition](#) and the [Congress 3.0](#) project, which are considering different aspects of congressional capacity-building and modernization. She was co-creator and lead researcher for the Congress Online Project—through which CMF developed the [Gold Mouse Awards](#) for congressional websites and social media practices—and the National Science Foundation-funded Connecting to Congress project. She was also instrumental in envisioning and planning for the [Partnership for a More Perfect Union](#).

Kathy has led a number of contracts with the Congress to develop strategies for legislative information and communications technologies. One of these was an intensive, two-year project to develop a 10-year vision and strategy for technology in the House of Representatives, on which she [testified before the Committee on House Administration](#) (pdf).

Kathy also co-created the [Communicating with Congress](#) project and has authored or contributed to dozens of research reports, publications and articles on Congress, including: [Citizen-Centric Advocacy: The Untapped Power of Constituent Engagement](#); [Face-to-Face with Congress: Before, During, and After Meetings with Legislators](#); [#SocialCongress 2015](#); [113th Congress Gold Mouse Awards: Best Practices in Online Communications on Capitol Hill](#); and [Life in Congress: Job Satisfaction and Engagement of House and Senate Staff](#).

APPENDICES

Appendix A | Results for All Senior Staffers

Survey Questions: “In your opinion, how important are the following for the effective functioning of your chamber?” and “How satisfied are you with your chamber’s performance in the following?”

		Very Important/ Satisfied	Somewhat Important/ Satisfied	Neutral	Somewhat Unimportant/ Dissatisfied	Very Unimportant/ Dissatisfied	Don't Know/ No Opinion
Staff knowledge, skills and abilities are adequate to support Members' official duties	Importance	83%	14%	2%	1%	0%	1%
	Satisfaction	15%	40%	11%	28%	5%	2%
Members have adequate time and resources to understand, consider and deliberate policy and legislation	Importance	67%	28%	3%	1%	1%	1%
	Satisfaction	6%	18%	10%	39%	23%	4%
Members and staff have access to high-quality, nonpartisan, policy expertise within the legislative branch	Importance	81%	13%	4%	1%	0%	2%
	Satisfaction	24%	44%	11%	14%	5%	2%
The technological infrastructure is adequate to support Members' official duties	Importance	60%	28%	7%	2%	2%	2%
	Satisfaction	6%	23%	16%	32%	20%	3%
The chamber has adequate capacity and support (staff, research capability, infrastructure, etc.) to perform its role in democracy	Importance	62%	26%	7%	5%	0%	1%
	Satisfaction	11%	28%	21%	25%	12%	3%
The chamber's human resource support and infrastructure is adequate to support staffers' official duties (e.g., training, professional development, benefits, etc.)	Importance	49%	38%	8%	2%	2%	1%
	Satisfaction	5%	26%	23%	31%	14%	1%
The chamber is technologically accessible to the public	Importance	58%	30%	7%	3%	2%	1%
	Satisfaction	17%	42%	15%	19%	6%	1%
Members and staff have a strong understanding of the chamber's role in democracy	Importance	52%	33%	9%	3%	1%	2%
	Satisfaction	20%	39%	17%	16%	5%	3%
The chamber is transparent to the public in the conduct of its business	Importance	49%	34%	8%	6%	2%	1%
	Satisfaction	19%	40%	15%	22%	2%	1%
Constituents have sufficient means to hold their Senators/Representative accountable for their performance	Importance	47%	31%	15%	5%	1%	1%
	Satisfaction	29%	39%	12%	12%	8%	1%
The chamber is physically accessible to the public	Importance	36%	38%	12%	11%	2%	2%
	Satisfaction	38%	36%	15%	3%	2%	5%

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: 2016 survey of House and Senate senior staff, published in *State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate*, Congressional Management Foundation, 2017.

Appendix B | Selected Works Consulted

CMF's repository of original research, including data collected for:

- [Congress 3.0](#)
- [Resilient Democracy Coalition](#)
- [Communicating with Congress](#)
- [Life in Congress](#)
- [House and Senate Employment \(Salary, Tenure, and Demographic\) Studies](#)
- [Setting Course: A Congressional Management Guide](#)
- [Keeping It Local: A Guide for Managing Congressional District & State Offices](#)

Baker, Ross K., "[Congress' Wounds Largely Self-Inflicted](#)," *The Hill* (May 4, 2017).

Binder, Sarah, "[Polarized We Govern?](#)" (May 2014)

Bipartisan Policy Center, "[Congress and Evidence-Based Policymaking: Creating a 21st Century Legislature](#)" (May 2017).

Brookings, [Vital Statistics on Congress](#) (January 2017).

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, "[Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures](#)," a study group report (December 2006).

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, "[Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures: A Study Group Report](#)" (December 20, 2006). (pdf)

Congressional Management Foundation, [Citizen-Centric Advocacy: The Untapped Power of Constituent Engagement](#) (2017).

Congressional Management Foundation, [Communicating with Congress: Perceptions of Citizen Advocacy on Capitol Hill](#) (2011).

Congressional Management Foundation, [Managing the 2012 Budget Cuts in House Offices](#) (2011).

Congressional Management Foundation and Society for Human Resource Management, [Life in Congress: Job Satisfaction and Engagement of House and Senate Staff](#) (2013).

Congressional Management Foundation and Society for Human Resource Management, [Life in Congress: The Member Perspective](#) (2013).

Committee on House Administration of the U.S. House of Representatives, [Hearing on IT Assessment: A Ten-Year Vision for Technology in the House](#), 109th Congress (September 27, 2006).

[Congressional Data Coalition](#), various blog posts, events and conversations, with special thanks to Daniel Schuman.

Congressional Institute and the Winston Group, [Congressional Institute Study: What Working and Middle Income Voters Want from Their Government](#) (February 2017).

Congressional Research Service, “Congressional Salaries and Allowances: In Brief” (July 14, 2016).

Congressional Research Service, [The Evolving Congress](#), (2014). (pdf)

Congressional Research Service, “House Committee Funding Requests and Authorizations, 104th-115th Congresses” (March 31, 2017).

Congressional Research Service, “Legislative Branch Appropriations: Frequently Asked Questions” (July 14, 2016).

Congressional Research Service, “Members’ Representational Allowance: History and Usage” (January 30, 2017).

Congressional Research Service, “Senate Committee Expenditures Resolutions, 115th Congress, and Funding Authorizations Since 1999” (March 31, 2017).

Congressional Research Service, “Senate Staff Levels in Member, Committee, Leadership and Other Offices, 1977-2016” (September 13, 2016).

Congressional Research Service, “Staff Pay Levels for Selected Positions in House Committees, 2001-2015” (November 9, 2016).

Congressional Research Service, “Staff Pay Levels for Selected Positions in House Member Offices, 2001-2015” (November 9, 2016).

Congressional Research Service, “Staff Pay Levels for Selected Positions in Senate Committees, FY2001-FY2015” (November 9, 2016).

Congressional Research Service, “Staff Pay Levels for Selected Positions in Senators’ Offices, FY2001-FY2015” (November 9, 2016).

Congressional Research Service, “Staff Tenure in Selected Positions in House Committees, 2006-2016” (November 9, 2016).

Congressional Research Service, “Staff Tenure in Selected Positions in House Member Offices, 2006-2016” (November 9, 2016).

Congressional Research Service, “Staff Tenure in Selected Positions in Senate Committees, 2006-2016” (November 9, 2016).

Congressional Research Service, “Staff Tenure in Selected Positions in Senators’ Offices, 2006-2016” (November 9, 2016).

Curry, James M., [“To Be Effective Legislators, Members of Congress Need Expert Resources of Their Own,”](#) a preview of the book *Legislating in the Dark: Information and Power in the House of Representatives* (May 2015).

Democracy Fund, [Systems Map on Congress and Public Trust](#) (2016).

Drutman, Lee, "[Congress Needs More and Better-Paid Staff](#)," *Roll Call* (March 21, 2016).

Drutman, Lee, "[Congress Should Do Its Job. But the Job Members Can Do Depends on the Resources They Have](#)," *Vox*, (February 15, 2017).

Drutman, Lee and Steven Teles, "[Why Congress Relies on Lobbyists Instead of Thinking for Itself](#)," *The Atlantic*, (March 10, 2015).

Ehrenfreund, Max, "[Yes, Congress Is Getting Less Smart. No, It's Not Trump's Fault](#)," *Washington Post* (June 12, 2017).

Gallup, "[Congress and the Public](#)" (as of March 2017).

Gluck, Abbe, Anne Joseph O'Connell and Rosa Po, [Unorthodox Lawmaking, Unorthodox Rulemaking](#), *Columbia Law Review*, Vol. 115, No. 7 (2015).

Hamilton, Lee, various [commentaries on Congress](#), Indiana University Center on Representative Government.

Hawkings, Betsy Wright, "[Deconstructing Congressional Dysfunction: A Systems-based Approach](#)" (April 11, 2016).

Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress, [Final Report of the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress](#) (December 1993).

Kelly, Lorelei, [Congress' Wicked Problem](#), Open Technology Institute at New America (December 4, 2012).

Kelly, Lorelei, "[Slowly but Surely, Congress Will Join Us in the 21st Century](#)," *TechCrunch* (September 10, 2016).

Kosar, Kevin R., "[How to Strengthen Congress](#)," *National Affairs* (Fall 2015).

Kosar, Kevin R., "[Why I Quit the Congressional Research Service](#)," *Washington Monthly*, (January/February 2015).

Kosar, Kevin R., et al., "[Restoring Congress as the First Branch](#)," R Street Policy Study No. 50 (January 2016). (pdf)

Kosar, Kevin R. and Adam Chan, "[The Case for Stronger Congressional Committees](#)," R Street Policy Study No. 66 (August 2016). (pdf)

Kull, Steven, Clay Ramsay, et al., [Voter Anger with Government and the 2016 Election](#), a survey of American voters conducted by the Program for Public Consultation, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland (November 2016).

LaPira, Timothy and Herschel Thomas, "[So What if Congressional Staff Levels are Declining?](#)" Legislative Branch Capacity Working Group blog post, a preview of the book *Revolving Door Lobbying: Public Service, Private Influence, and the Unequal Representation of Interests* (June 27, 2016).

Lee, Frances E., *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign* (2016).

[Legislative Branch Capacity Working Group](#), various blog posts, papers, and events, with special thanks to Lee Drutman and Kevin Kosar.

Madonna, Anthony and Ian Ostrander, "[A Congress of Cannibals: The Evolution of Professional Staff in Congress](#)" (2016). (pdf)

Madonna, Anthony J. and Kevin R. Kosar, "[Could the Modern Senate Manage an Open-Amendment Process?](#)" R Street Policy Study No. 42 (October 2015).

Mann, Thomas E. and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism*, reprint edition (September 3, 2013).

Mann, Thomas E. and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (also called *It's Even Worse Than It Was*), revised, expanded edition (April 5, 2016).

Mansbridge, Jane and Cathie Jo Martin (editors), *Political Negotiation: A Handbook* (2016).

O'Brien, Mitchell, Rick Stapenhurst and Lisa von Trapp, editors, [Benchmarking and Self-Assessment for Parliaments](#), World Bank Group (2016). (pdf)

Office of Management and Budget, "[Fiscal Year 2017 Historical Tables: Budget of the U.S. Government](#)" (undated).

[OpenGov Foundation](#), various blog posts, events and conversations, with special thanks to Seamus Kraft.

Pew Research Center, [Political Polarization in the American Public: How Increasing Ideological Uniformity and Partisan Antipathy Affect Politics, Compromise, and Everyday Life](#) (June 12, 2014).

Roubein, Rachel, "[How Congress Cuts Its Own Budget](#)," *National Journal* via *The Atlantic* (August 3, 2015).

Sinclair, Barbara, *Unorthodox Lawmaking: New Legislative Processes in the U.S. Congress* (Fifth Edition) (2017).

Sinclair, Barbara, "[Is Congress Now the Broken Branch?](#)" *Utah Law Review*, 2014.

Troy, Tevi, "[Reclaiming the Congressional Hearing](#)," *National Affairs* (Fall 2015).

Wallner, James, "[Unprecedented: Informal Rules and Leader Power in the United States Senate](#)," paper presented at the Congress and History Conference, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma (June 2016).

Wolfensberger, Donald R, "[House Rules Data: Open vs. Restricted Rules in the House 94th-113th Congresses](#)," Bipartisan Policy Center (February 2013).

Zaleski, Andrew, "[Coming to the House of Representatives From Silicon Valley is Like Going in a Time Machine](#)," *Politico* (September 13, 2015).