

The Honorable Bill Pascrell, Jr.
Testimony Before the
House Subcommittee on Legislative Appropriations
April 3, 2019

Chairman Ryan and Ranking Member Herrera Beutler, I apologize for not being able to participate in person. Thank you for receiving my testimony. Funding for the legislative branch is a critical component of larger conversations about how to make Congress work again.

For the last 25 years we have watched as our Congress – the Article I branch – has become more and more feeble. This decay is the product of deliberate institutional vandalism. Through our own efforts, we have made the Article One branch into the third branch.

Our streams of independent information have been cut off. Our small staffs have been overwhelmed and made subservient to the executive branch and flotillas of corporate lobbyists – neither of which have the best interests of the people’s Congress, or sometimes the people themselves, at heart.

Our investigatory muscles are atrophied, as our committees have been stripped of their ability to develop policy through analysis and debate. Instead, we have shifted funding to the leadership, leaving the legislative process solely in their hands.

Congress, unfortunately, is increasingly unable to effectively counter a bloated and increasingly aggressive executive branch; Congress is likewise unable to comprehend and manage a world growing more socially, economically, and technologically multifaceted; with studies showing that, today, corporations [spend more](#) to lobby Congress than Congress spends to fund itself.

Evaluating congressional capacity and investment starts with funding our body. Between FY2010 and FY2019, the total monies we have allocated for all House of Representatives salaries and expenses decreased by more than \$136,000,000, or 10% -- approximately 15.9%, adjusted for inflation.

Digging deeper, the picture becomes even starker. Between 1980 and 2016 (the most recent year for which [data is available](#)), the number of House member office staff dropped almost half a percent, and the House shed 693 committee staffers, or 34.8% of the total. [From 2006 to 2015](#), House legislative staff salaries were uniformly down. To put that in some perspective, between 1980 and 2016, the U.S. population rose by nearly 97 million people, with congressional districts growing by 40 percent on average (or about 200,000 people per seat to approximately 750,000 today). We represent more people with fewer staff or resources. Similarly, as our nation and the world continue to evolve exponentially, we cut our bedrock expert committee policy staffers.

To give an illustration of the real-world impacts of this underinvestment we need look no further than our congressional tax panels. Between 1980 and 2016, staff levels on the House Ways and Means Committee plummeted nearly one-third. The fall across both chambers was so precipitous that in 2017, the watchdog group Public Citizen [found](#) that there were more than 6,200 registered

tax lobbyists, versus [130 aides](#) on the Senate Finance Committee and the Joint Committee on Taxation, a staggering ratio approaching 50-to-1 disfavoring the American people.

We don't need a brain surgeon to tell us what we all know needs to be done to fix this decay.

We must make a massive commitment to our institution. We need to drastically reform Members' Representational Allowances (MRA) to keep staff. Staff should not be enticed to leave for lobbyist pay, taking their expertise with them. This would help us keep staff who can preserve institutional memory. Currently, the MRA is used first, for salaries; second, for member travel; and third, for office supplies. New technology and members' travel should not impact an office's ability to offer competitive salaries to retain staff. I encourage the committee to decouple these funding streams and increase funding across the board. We also should study ways to remove the politics from salary increases and benefits, such as student loans and parental, vacation, and sick leave.

We need personal offices and committees to be laboratories of democracy once more. We need empowered chairmen and women who can assemble legislation organically. We need the resources to retain skilled staffs who can preserve institutional memory. To reverse the congressional lobotomy we have seen, we must allocate more for our research arms: the Congressional Research Service, Governmental Accountability Office, Congressional Budget Office, and Office of Technology Assessment – across-the-board. No tinkering at the edges: we need to think big here. Based on the dire need, I recommend that you authorize an increase of approximately 25 percent to these existing programs and to existing MRAs.

You get what you pay for. If you care about a Congress that is the First Branch, the preeminent branch, you support it that way. An institution that spends less on itself than corporations spend on lobbying it is not a healthy institution.

Consider it for what it is: an investment in America's future. Doing what's necessary will take boldness to overcome a generation of calcified thinking and courage to take politically vulnerable positions. So I call on you: be bold and have courage.

I would like to submit for the record a copy of my essay published in the Washington Post on January 11th entitled, "[Why is Congress so Dumb](#)," which has some more background on these ideas. And I will note that while I authored the piece, the editors came up with the headline.

I look forward to working with you and the Committee to protect the institution we all enjoy. Thank you.