



March 4, 2020

The Honorable Tim Ryan
Chairman
House Appropriations Subcommittee
on the Legislative Branch
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Jaime Herrera Beutler
Ranking Member
House Appropriations Subcommittee
on the Legislative Branch
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Ryan and Ranking Member Herrera Beutler:

Democracy Fund Voice is a nonpartisan organization established by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar to help America build a stronger, healthier democracy. Effective governance in Washington is critical to this mission, and our philanthropic efforts focus in part on ensuring that congressional leaders have the resources and capabilities they need to represent and serve the American people.

Through your leadership on this subcommittee, Congress has made important progress in restoring the resources needed for the proper functioning of the legislative branch. Appropriations for the legislative branch in fiscal year 2020 continued to reinvest in the people and systems required for the first branch of government to do the people's work. In a bipartisan fashion, congressional appropriators provided funds to raise staff salaries, bolster legislative support agencies, and upgrade information technology systems.

We urge you to build upon the growing momentum to restore the capacity of Congress to fulfill its constitutional responsibilities by including adequate resources in the Fiscal Year 2021 Legislative Branch Appropriations bill.

Although Congress has increased funds for the legislative functions of the federal government for consecutive fiscal years, from a historical perspective it is still significantly behind funding levels of decades ago. The legislative branch receives only *seven tenths of one percent* of non-defense discretionary federal funding. Most recent increases in spending for the legislative branch, meanwhile, have been directed toward critical needs like building renovations and campus security. Spending on other areas that are critical to the legislative and oversight work of the

House of Representatives, like committee allotments and member representational allowances, has been flat for 25 years.¹

Members of the 116th Congress have distinguished themselves for their interest in strengthening and reforming the first branch of our federal system. This Congress has established new offices to strengthen positive workplace practices and encourage diversity in staff hiring and retention on a bipartisan basis. The House of Representatives empaneled the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, the first committee to examine broad institutional reform in a generation. Growing ranks of experts in scientific and technical fields once again are coming to work in legislative support offices to provide lawmakers and their staff with their knowledge and expertise. This subcommittee should appropriate funds to continue these and other reform-minded innovations that will improve Congress's capacity to face the challenges of the 21st century.

Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress

The House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress has been the exemplar of the reform-mindedness of this Congress. Under the leadership of Chair Derek Kilmer and Vice Chair Tom Graves, it has developed 45 recommendations for reform in a unanimous and bipartisan fashion. These recommendations address many of the challenges facing Congress as a workplace and as a representative body. They highlight ways to make Congress more transparent and efficient in its business, more accessible to all Americans, and more responsible in its use of appropriated funds. The committee made concrete recommendations for modernizing the process through which the House adopts new information technology and communicates with constituents electronically. It also recommended ways to promote civility and bipartisanship in Congress, beginning with the venues in which new members are educated about their jobs. To take full effect, these recommendations need appropriated funds.

Democracy Fund Voice believes these recommendations have great merit. We urge you to partner with the committee and appropriate funds necessary to see their recommendations come to fruition.

Staff pay

The subcommittee should continue to prioritize increasing funding levels for staff pay in congressional offices. As every member of Congress understands, staffers are both the brain and heart of the institution, providing vital support for members of Congress through mastery of the complex issues facing a modern nation and providing important services to constituents in home districts.

This subcommittee has led the way on this issue, providing funds to pay interns in Member offices and increasing the Member Representation Allowance (MRA) for the

¹ "The Undermining of Congress," First Branch Forecast, February 17, 2020. Available at <https://firstbranchforecast.com/2020/02/17/the-undermining-of-congress>

first time in nearly a decade. But there is still much to do to reverse long-term trends in staff pay that have eroded congressional legislative and oversight capacity. Even with last year's increase, funding for the MRA is 15 percent lower than it was in FY 2010 when adjusted for inflation.² The Congressional Research Service (CRS) has found that the average salaries for staff have declined by thousands of dollars in recent decades,³ pushing many qualified public servants out the door and reducing the average tenure of staff to just a few years.⁴ Spending on House committees, where staff play particularly vital roles on oversight and legislative matters, is down 35 percent over the last decade.⁵

We recognize that appropriating more funds for the MRA and committee allotments is challenging given the sizeable resource constraints imposed by building renovations and campus security. Nevertheless, the knowledge and skills of congressional staff constitute critical infrastructure for the functioning of the institution as well. We encourage the subcommittee to think creatively about ways to restore funding for congressional staff back to established norms of previous decades.

Representative offices

Inadequate funding is contributing to the lack of diversity among congressional staff, depriving Congress of the experience and expertise that are so vital to successful constituent representation and policy formation. The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies found in a recent survey that only 13.7 percent of top House staff positions are occupied by people of color and that three quarters of House members in both parties had no top staff of color in their personal offices.⁶ To support a Congress that looks more like America, the subcommittee should continue its support for paid internships and consider expanding the program to committees. It also should fund permanent research and training personnel for the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, so it can execute its mission to support diverse hiring and inclusive workplace practices.

Conclusion

We at Democracy Fund Voice believe deeply in the vital role of the legislative branch in our federal system. A Congress that is hampered in its ability to formulate policy and exercise oversight cannot serve as a check on a disproportionately powerful executive branch. We and our sister organization Democracy Fund support dedicated and resourceful nonprofits that train congressional staff in legislative procedure, educate members and staff on complex policy issues, strengthen

² *Ibid.*

³ Molly Reynolds, "The Decline in Congressional Capacity," Brookings Institution, February 23, 2018 (citing multiple CRS reports).

⁴ Eric R. Petersen and Sarah Eckman, "Staff Tenure in Selected Positions in Senate Committees, 2006-2016," Congressional Research Service, November 9, 2016, accessed March 14, 2019. Available at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44685.pdf>.

⁵ "The Undermining of Congress"

⁶ Elsie L. Scott, Karra W. McCray, Donald Bell, and Spencer Overton, "Racial Diversity Among Top U.S. House Staff," September 2018. Available at:

<https://jointcenter.org/sites/default/files/Racial%20Diversity%20Among%20Top%20US%20House%20Staff%209-11-18%20245pm.pdf>

committee staff's ability to perform rigorous oversight of executive branch agencies, and develop solutions to office communications and technology challenges. We are proud to support this work, but only Congress itself can solve underlying resource problems in the legislative branch.

We believe the bipartisan momentum for congressional renewal and reform is very encouraging. This moment represents an opportunity to build a modern Congress that can serve the American people for decades to come. We look forward to supporting your role in that process.

Sincerely,

Joe Goldman, President
Democracy Fund Voice