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Questions for the Record Responses
U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on House Administration
Subcommittee on Modernization
Legislative Branch Advancement: GAO Modernization

- 1. During the hearing, you discussed how GAO’s annual reports on duplication, overlap, government fragmentation, and cost savings opportunities have yielded incredible cost savings since their first publication in 2011. How have these reports empowered GAO and Congress to achieve greater cost savings for the American taxpayer?**
 - a. In your perspective as a former congressional staffer, what other products or services have best enhanced GAO’s return on investment?**
 - b. Are there any other products or services that GAO could provide in the future to enhance the agency or Congress?**

In 2010, Senator Tom Coburn passed legislation requiring GAO’s annual reports on duplication. He passed the law creating this mandate after GAO denied his office’s request to do this review. According to GAO’s 2023 report, this work has resulted in approximately \$600 billion in financial benefits since 2011, including \$46.8 billion last year.¹ This mandated work likely increased GAO’s return on investment. Between 2002 and 2010, GAO’s annual ROI averaged \$92 for each dollar it received from Congress. From 2011 to 2022, GAO’s annual ROI averaged \$125 to \$1. (Even if we exclude GAO’s unusually large ROI of \$338 in 2019, GAO averaged an ROI of \$106 between 2011 and 2022, or about 15 percent higher than its ROI from 2002 to 2010.) It is reasonable for Congress to assume that some of the financial benefits achieved by GAO’s work would not have happened without Senator Coburn’s mandate.

From my perspective as a former congressional staffer, GAO’s work provides significant value for Congress and the federal government. GAO’s recommendations provide a nonpartisan starting point for bipartisan legislation and oversight, as well as valuable

¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-23-106089, *2023 Annual Report: Additional Opportunities to Reduce Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication and Achieve Billions of Dollars in Financial Benefits*, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-106089>.

guidance for executive branch leaders to improve the efficiency and operations. Beyond the duplication reports, GAO's high-risk list and related work helps Congress focus oversight and legislative actions on key challenges facing the federal government. In addition, GAO's work related to certain departments has yielded more financial benefits than others. My 2021 analysis of nonpublic data from GAO found that, from 2002 and 2019, GAO's recommendations for the Defense and HHS Departments, for example, resulted in \$420 billion and \$185 billion in savings, respectively.²

In the future, GAO could help Congress in several ways. First, GAO could set deadlines or target completion dates for their recommendations. This would improve transparency and public accountability, allowing Congress and the executive branch to monitor federal agencies' progress implementing GAO's recommendations. Second, GAO could provide Congress with additional recommendations for congressional consideration (as well as new legislative and oversight options) that could be taken to enact GAO's unimplemented recommendations or unimplemented priority recommendations. For example, Congress could direct GAO to provide draft legislative language to each authorizing committee annually or at the beginning of a new Congress to enact GAO's recommendations. Third, Congress could require GAO to provide information about any delays that the nonpartisan watchdog agency experiences requesting information from the executive branch, which could allow Congress to help GAO receive information in a timely manner and improve the timeliness of their reports.

2. You have supported the idea of re-examining and reauthorizing GAO's statutory authorities. In your view, what statutory revisions or updates would benefit GAO and Congress?

Congress should re-examine and reauthorize GAO to ensure that its watchdog agency is independent, effective, and meeting the needs of Congress.

One important revision that Congress could consider would be changing the current process for nominating and confirming the Comptroller General. Law currently requires the president to nominate the Comptroller General and Deputy Comptroller General. Congress could revise the statute to give the legislative branch the authority to nominate

² Dan Lips, *Reviewing the Data: How GAO Saves Taxpayer Dollars*, Lincoln Network, 2021, <https://www.thefai.org/posts/reviewing-the-data-how-gao-saves-taxpayer-dollars>.

and confirm the Comptroller General through a bipartisan process involving the leaders of the House and Senate.

Congress could also authorize GAO's Science, Technology Assessment, and Analytics team to strengthen congressional science and technology capacity. Congress could grant the head of the STAA team additional hiring and acquisitions authorities.³

Congress could also establish new requirements for GAO's reporting to Congress, including requirements for GAO to provide "target completion dates" for recommendations, estimates of financial benefits for implementing recommendations if appropriate, and additional matters for congressional consideration to help Congress enact GAO's nonpartisan recommendations in a timely manner.

While the Comptroller General stated at the hearing that GAO did not need additional authorities to access information, it is possible that Congress could help GAO improve their ability to conduct oversight of the executive branch by establishing statutory authorities for GAO to obtain information in a timely manner. For example, Congress passed the GAO Access and Oversight Act of 2017, a law that ensured GAO access to certain information under the Social Security Act.⁴ Congress could work with GAO to establish additional statutory authorities to ensure that GAO has timely access to information, including information in an electronic format, to improve the timeliness of GAO's work.

Congress could also reestablish authorities for GAO that were created by the Truth in Regulating Act of 2000, which created a pilot project for GAO to conduct independent regulatory analysis of "economically significant" agency rules.⁵ While this pilot project was not funded and expired, authorizing and establishing new independent regulatory analysis and review capabilities within GAO would help Congress better oversee federal regulations and the administrative state.

³ Zach Graves, Testimony, House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, U.S. House of Representatives, 2021, <https://www.thefai.org/posts/testimony-of-zach-graves-to-the-us-house-of-representatives-select-committee-on-the-modernization-of-congress>.

⁴ Pub. Law 115-3 (2017).

⁵ Pub. Law 106-312 (2000).

3. Your testimony highlighted the need for GAO to improve its reported responses to the provisions in the Improving Government for America's Taxpayers Act. What specific improvements in GAO's implementation of the law would best equip GAO and Congress to close open recommendations?

The bipartisan Improving Government for America's Taxpayers Act established new reporting requirements for GAO to consolidate its open matters for congressional consideration, identify any additional congressional oversight actions that can help agencies implement unimplemented priority recommendations, and publish any known costs of unimplemented priority recommendations. While GAO's report responding to the Improving Government for America's Taxpayers Act provided additional information about open matters for congressional consideration, it did not highlight additional legislative or oversight actions that Congress could take or provide an estimate of potential savings that could be achieved for unimplemented priority recommendations.

Fully answering the requirements of the Improving Government for America's Taxpayers Act would help Congress close open recommendations. First, providing additional legislative and oversight recommendations would enable bipartisan legislation and oversight actions, which would allow Congress to ensure that GAO's open recommendations are closed in a timely manner. Faster closure of GAO's open recommendations would improve government efficiency and likely increase GAO's return on investment. Second, providing estimates of potential cost savings or financial benefits that could be achieved from specific unimplemented priority recommendations would help Congress prioritize potential legislative and oversight actions to achieve taxpayer savings. Congress could direct GAO to provide information to Congress about each unimplemented priority recommendation, including whether implementing it will yield financial benefits and, if so, estimating the potential cost savings that could be achieved. While GAO could provide context and uncertainties about the estimates where necessary, providing Congress with a basic estimate of cost savings could enable bipartisan legislative or oversight work to reduce the federal government's deficit.