

The Honorable Tom Davis
Testimony to the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
May 1, 2019

Chairman Kilmer and Vice Chair Graves,

Thank you for providing me the opportunity to testify before this select committee. Although there are numerous recommendations I could offer drawn on my past experience as both the Chairman and ranking member of the Government Oversight Committee, chairman of the DC Subcommittee and member of the Republican leadership (serving as NRCC chairman) I will briefly outline four recommendations that are less controversial, badly needed and, most importantly, can be easily implemented.

Increase Pay Caps for Committee Staff

My first recommendation is in an increase in the pay caps for Congressional committee staff.

There currently exists an imbalance in Congress's ability to attract and, more importantly, to retain high caliber talent. Unlike Congressional staffers, many Federal employees have a career path that includes Senior Executive Service status with pay caps and bonuses well above what a member of Congress earns. These government employees have a career path that incentivizes them to stay in government, lending their experience, knowledge and historical perspectives to legislative and regulatory policy, but this is not the case for Congressional staffers.

Hill salaries should not be held hostage to the ongoing political discourse over Congressional pay. Congress finally bifurcated judicial pay from their own pay and, now, it is time to do the same for professional Congressional staffers. Otherwise, the talent gap will widen and Congress will continue to be disadvantaged in their dealings with the Executive Branch and the private sector. Additionally, moving Congressional staff back to the FEHBP will add an additional incentive for staff to stay.

Re-staff the Congressional Research Service and the GAO

My second recommendation is to bolster the staff at both the CRS and the GAO. Over the past two decades the staff and budgets of both the CRS and GAO have been cut. In an effort to show its budgetary "chops", Congress has set an example by trimming and, ultimately, undermining the ability of these two legislative agencies to do fulfill their obligations.

The GAO is the literal umpire of the efficiency of government programs. They are unbiased "truth tellers", informing Congress as to whether or not a federal program is successfully fulfilling its mission. No other agency has this task and, as Congress considers discretionary spending, it is important to proceed and legislate with unbiased studies, rather than by anecdote and/or ideology.

The GAO is a vital tool for the Article One branch of the Federal government as it has the authority to ask the appropriate questions, follow through on the requisite research and apply the proper metrics to determine if taxpayer money is being utilized as intended. Each Congress submits many more requests than the GAO is able to fulfill at its current staffing level, hindering Congress's ability to create good public policy.

Ditto the Congressional Research Service, a professional, unbiased, non-partisan center of information that can cut through the talking points and media hype to produce solid research for members on complex issues of public policy.

Institute a More Formal Detail Arrangement with the Executive Branch

My third recommendation is for Congress to institute a more formal detail arrangement with the Executive branch for Congressional staff.

Although some Executive Branch agencies detail employees to Capitol Hill for short stints, the arrangement is rather Ad Hoc. Moreover, there are few examples of House staffers taking a six month to one-year assignment to the agencies they oversee. Such cross-pollination could be helpful for the staffs of both branches of government in developing a better understanding of one another. It would also lead to better job satisfaction among Congressional staffers, allowing them the opportunity to widen their experience and perspective, while at the same time increasing their subject matter knowledge.

The alternative of the “Revolving Door”, from Congressional staffer to Schedule C, does not provide for the same job security and does not contribute to the long-term career path this is needed to keep expertise in place, yet refreshed, in the halls of Congress.

Reinstate the Page Program

My fourth recommendation is for the House of Representatives to reinstate the Page program, even if only for the summers as a trial. The Page program in the House was not dissolved because of the actions on the part of the Pages, but because of the atrocious actions of a few members. Prior to that time, the Page program was successful and encouraged young people to consider public service for their career. The program produced many future Members, such as myself, Ben Sasse, Mike Lee and Michael Bennett, along with hundreds of staffers and business leaders, including Bill Gates, Sheryl Sandberg and Ben Jealous.

Pages gave the House youth and energy and inspired generations of students to join the ranks of government servants. The costs were minimal and the benefits were high. Abandoning the program was a copout, a risk adverse move in the face of bad headlines. With the passage of time, Congressional approval ratings haven't improved and the adverse news columns about the perpetrators have long been forgotten. I believe that some traditions provide great value to this institution and, with that in mind, it is time to reconsider reinstating the House Page Program.

Once again, I thank you for allowing me and my fellow former members the opportunity to share our thoughts with you today. I am proud to serve with my colleague, Martin Frost, on the board of FMC, the association of Former Members of Congress. FMC is a bipartisan non-profit, chartered by Congress, that receives no federal funds, but works to improve Congress, including sponsoring study tours of our transatlantic and transpacific allies, for current Members and staff. Our goals are the same as yours: a more effective Congress, that better serves the American people.