

Statement to the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
Delivered by Former U.S. Rep. Martin Frost, President of the Board, FMC
May 1, 2019

I want to thank this Committee for holding this hearing.

I represented the 24th District of Texas for 13 terms in this House. For 26 years, I was a member of the House Rules Committee. I also served on the Budget and House Administration Committees. I was Democratic Caucus Chair for four years and chair of the Caucus Rules Committee for ten.

Congress has been on my mind for much of my adult life.

I've reviewed all the statements submitted from your committee's previous hearings.

All were helpful but I must admit that my favorite proposal was Bennie Thompson's "No Couches for Congress" Act. Stopping members from sleeping in their offices would certainly modernize Congress, and improve its image among Americans.

Transparency will also improve that image, as my good friend Majority Leader Steny Hoyer noted, when addressing earmarks. Leader Hoyer was right when he said that earmarks can create bipartisan cooperation in appropriations. Importantly, he focused on transparency in any return of earmarks. American citizens MUST know where their money is being spent AND who asked that it be spent that way.

Transparency is the only way to effectively do the people's business.

Doing that business also requires trusted, talented people, who are mentored by their Members. I am proud that one of my former staffers, Marc Veasey, now represents part of my district. An intern of mine on the Rules Committee, Dennis Cardoza, eventually became a Representative from California.

These two men, and hundreds of women and men working on Congress today, share important career aspirations: Public service and improving our nation. Congress must identify leaders -- and servants -- in its staff. Then, they must be given the education and career growth needed to advance their public service careers. Congress runs the largest employer in the country, the American government. You don't run a company by failing to retain - and grow - your best and brightest.

Transparency and growing talented staff should be bipartisan.

Bipartisanship is very important for me.

I was pleased to Chair the Frost-Solomon House Task Force, created to help mold the legislatures of 10 emerging Eastern and Central European democracies, following the breakup of the Soviet Union. I focused on bipartisanship in all our actions. We worked hand in hand with the George H.W. Bush State Department. No CODEL was undertaken unless it was bipartisan.

That bipartisan spirit led to great impact by our Task Force, creating new allies in Europe.

Without bipartisanship, we cannot accomplish great things. We can only fight.

I now serve as President of FMC, the association of Former Members of Congress. We are the premier organization using bipartisan work by former members to foster bipartisanship in today's Congress.

I think what FMC does can be instructive to our conversation today. We are all united, Republicans and Democrats alike, by the appreciation of what a great privilege it was to represent our constituents in Congress. We understand like few others the honor of earning the trust of thousands of our fellow Americans, who chose us to be their voice in the government of our representative republic, here in Washington.

FMC's membership is uniquely aware that public service is a noble calling. Through FMC, there is a united, bipartisan effort to share with the next generation that our representative democracy is one that thrives when citizens participate and when engaged men and women step forward to run for office and put their ideas to the test.

FMC is an organization of more than 600 former Members, both House and Senate, and we are 100% bipartisan. We have Members from all political persuasions work together energetically under our umbrella. We are proof that healthy partisanship can co-exist with collegiality and a willingness to work together. Our Members do so through myriad programs, most prominently the Congress to Campus program, which sends bipartisan teams of former Members to almost 40 university campuses per academic year so that we can engage the next generation in a dialogue about civic participation and public service.

This ability to work together is not solely based on the fact that we're former rather than current Members, but primarily because we have a chance to get to know each other and build relationships that transcend political labels.

For many of FMC's members, there was more to be accomplished after leaving Congress. FMC is a way to encourage current Members to use bipartisanship to achieve as much as they can, to avoid that regret of unfinished improvement.

In fact, for more than a year, thanks in part to a grant from the Hewlett Foundation, FMC has interviewed more than 30 retiring Members, from both sides of the aisle, following the 115th Congress. We conducted an oral history of their experience serving in Congress. In a sense, this has been "exit interview" for them and more importantly a historical record that FMC is donating to the Library of Congress when our project is complete.

Our goal is to conduct at least 30 additional sessions, bringing us close to interviewing every Member who did not return for the 116th Congress. Researchers and historians will have a tremendous resource to better understand how Congress has worked. For the purposes of this Committee and its task, I hope to share with you in the not-too-distant future our record and analysis of these interviews as we chart how the experience of serving in Congress has evolved.

Shared, early insights have emerged, regardless of party affiliation. We hope that they may serve to further the understandings of this committee:

1. **GREATER GOOD TAKES A BACK SEAT IN THIS ERA OF POLARIZATION.** We heard from these legislators that their enthusiasm to move the country forward and be a voice for their constituents was often stifled by a process that is overly focused on maintaining majority, raising money, the diminished power of committees, scoring political points and getting the partisan win in a more polarized nation heavily influenced by social media - especially in vulnerable districts.

2. THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS. Members need more time with each other, getting to know their colleagues better as people to establish the close connections that are necessary for better collaborations. Presently, regardless of party affiliation, those opportunities are much too rare. Reconsidering how Congress schedules its business may be but one of several ways to bring a more humanizing tone to the institution.
3. HOPE. There is good reason for hope: multiple members reported numerous instances of collaboration and bipartisanship on behalf of the greater good that the public perception of Congress likely does not include - for the simple fact that these are not sufficiently social media/news worthy to attract enough viewership in today's polarized, conflict-focused political climate. We must find ways to share and build upon the good news.

We continue with our interviewing process and have collected ample data so that an initial analysis will be fruitful, and we would most certainly welcome the opportunity to provide this committee a more detailed report later in the year.

I want to echo Congressman Lipinski's testimony. His government classes watched the Schoolhouse Rock video on "How a Bill Becomes a Law." My students at George Washington University do the same. Unfortunately, I have to tell them that's not how Congress works today.

I hope your work here will help get us closer to the Schoolhouse Rock ideal of transparency, bipartisanship and public service and, in doing so, help prevent some of the public cynicism about our government.

Thank you, I will extend my remarks in written testimony and I look forward to your questions.