

Testimony of Congressman Reid J. Ribble (WI-8; 2011-2016)
Before the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
May 1, 2019

Thank you Chairman Kilmer and Vice Chair Graves for inviting me to appear before this committee. It is especially encouraging to me to see such a talented group of members leading the effort on such a very important topic. I had the privilege in my three terms in Congress to serve with ten of you and I have profound respect for all.

My own story is a simple one. I ran for Congress in 2010 and told voters that I would impose a term-limit on my service to no more than four terms. I left voluntarily after serving three. When I announced my retirement from congress I was, up until that point, running for re-election, was serving in the majority, and for the first time in my political career had no opponent. On paper circumstances could not have been better. So why did I choose to leave a job that many people feel is the pinnacle of their career?

Like many others I made a value judgment. I determined that the time away from my family was no longer a worthy sacrifice given how badly Congress was broken. What I discovered was that the House operated with a severe bias toward the leadership and party fealty. Most major legislation was driven by, and in some cases written by those in leadership, and regular order was nothing more than a talking point to the ill-informed.

When legislation actually did move through committees, committee chairmen often lorded over or ignored the members rather than engaging the minds of committee members themselves. Too much legislation was driven by committee chairmen and staff, and as a rank-and-file committee member we were often left out of the discussion until a mark-up occurred...at which point you are often expected to simply vote the party line. I routinely joked that as a member of Congress I was nothing more than a figure head. Unfortunately, in this case the joke was real, because the process itself discourages active participation by those members who came to congress as servants, trying to make things better.

The current system encourages good members to leave, just as they are gaining the needed experience to be effective. This is partly due to the message being sent by leadership that individual members don't really matter. Just trust the leaders and good things will happen. Well if you are serious about modernizing this place here are some specific recommendations you might want to consider.

1. Insist that the Speaker become the Speaker of the entire House, rather than just another de facto party leader. Empower the majority and minority leaders to direct their party efforts and have the Speaker be the umpire between the two, forcing the House to work its will - in an open and fair process.
2. Open up the rules process to bring more bills to the floor. Legislation can often be perfected by the great wisdom of the crowd. It seems as if letting the "House work its will" has become a punchline in a bad joke. An open process can correct this. We can't continue to be fearful of legislation *not* passing. Instead members should learn from the occasional 'no' and improve legislation until the body as a whole gets to 'yes'.
3. Enforce regular order. Committees exist for a reason. It is during genuine committee work that legislation matures and improves. This process is all too often circumvented by leadership.
4. Just as the Speaker is selected by the members, so too should committee chairmen be selected by members. This would make the chairmen subject to the committee members. By devolving this power back to the members and the voices of the citizens they represent, these voices are

more likely to be heard. Who better to choose who should lead a committee than the members of the committee? Right now chairmen are selected by leadership and as such are subject to them. This is backwards and should be changed.

5. End the practice of leadership PACS. While I know that campaign finance is not part of this committee's work, certainly the corrupting influence of cronyism in the House itself ought to be. Members should not be promoted or given committee assignments because they raise more money than another. Leadership should not use money as a cudgel or the price of admission when assigning committees or chairmanships. Whenever I sought a committee change, I was never asked about my professional experience or how I can bring a benefit to the committee but I was always asked how much money I was raising and how was I using it? Both parties decry cronyism when it comes to corporations but then sit on the sidelines as cronyism in the House silently grows and infests like mold.
6. Change the work calendar to reflect the importance of the work you must do. Keep members here for full work weeks. Use the calendar to enforce action. Congress has never completed its budget and appropriations bills on time in the last forty years. Not once. Use the calendar as an enforcement trigger to get this work done. Cancel all recess times and don't allow members to leave for more than three days until the work gets done. If you force cancellations of CODELS and time with family you would be amazed at what compromises can be achieved. If you want to do big things here, do this.
7. Reform the legislative process whereby legislation that garners a certain number of bipartisan cosponsors is guaranteed a hearing and markup in the committee of jurisdiction. If any member is able to persuade a large number of cosponsors in bipartisan fashion, then that legislation should be given a chance to advance to the floor of the house. All too often big reform ideas are squelched by a few powerful voices overriding the will of the House.

I realize I have been critical in my comments but I do this because I care deeply about this institution and what it represents in our great republic. It seems that the leadership no longer trusts a fair process...or maybe, better stated, they no longer trust what may *result* from a fair process, so they rig the system to get the result they want.

Is it any wonder, that the two biggest pieces of legislation passed in the last decade, The Affordable Care Act and the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act were passed on a straight party line vote? In fact, the only bipartisan stance on these two historic pieces of legislation were from the members who voted against the bills. Maybe if the Congress had sought a principled compromise both of these things could have been done in a way that the American people would have accepted. If this body is going to do big things, or do anything, it's going to have to actually work versus politicize, legislate versus demagogue and govern versus posture. I have heard it said that we live in an era where partisanship masquerades as principle. There is maybe no place on earth where that statement rings as true than right here in what we, without a sense of irony, call "the people's House." Maybe someday in the future it will actually live up to that ideal. I pray this committee, that each of you, take a step in that direction with your work here.

Thank you and with that I will be happy to answer any questions.