

**Testimony of the Honorable Tim Roemer**  
**Before the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress**  
**May 1, 2019**

Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chairman Graves, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the invitation to testify today about my experience in serving as a Member of this body. This committee has such important work to do and I'm committed to doing whatever I can to help you succeed in your mission. I look forward to hearing from my colleagues here at the witness table and hope that we can offer concrete recommendations for how to change the current culture of dysfunction.

My name is Tim Roemer and I served in the House from 1991 to 2003. I had the honor of representing Indiana's 3rd Congressional district and serving on the 9/11 Commission. I was also privileged to serve as U.S. Ambassador to India in the first term of President Obama's Administration.

Today, I focus much of my time and energy on reforming the political system to which I dedicated my career. I currently serve as co-chair of the Issue One ReFormers Caucus, along with my fellow former Members, Representative Zach Wamp (R-TN) and Ambassador Connie Morella (R-MD). The ReFormers Caucus is a bipartisan group of over 200 former Members of Congress, Cabinet officials and Governors, united around the common goal of repairing the system. Issue One is the leading cross-partisan organization focused on political reform. I greatly appreciate being asked here today on behalf of Issue One and my co-Chairs, as well as on behalf of the more than 200 former elected officials who are a part of Issue One's bipartisan ReFormers Caucus.

My years in Congress underscored my belief that the first branch of government is the authentic manifestation of the needs, desires and aspirations of the American people. However, too many Americans are deeply dissatisfied with Congress and doubt its willingness — and ability — to respond to the people's interest. Congress is detached from the American people, dysfunctional in its work and disconnected from solving our nation's problems. The Select Committee has the potential to repair its reputation and restore its proper place in the balance of powers in our system. As the problems are big, so must be the solutions.

When I first joined Congress, I questioned the capacity of this body to organize itself and to work efficiently. In 1993, an effort co-led by one of my Hoosier colleagues, Congressman Lee Hamilton, established the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress and set out to examine issues and offer recommendations for the improvement of Congress. Unfortunately, many of those solutions fell by the wayside. I hope that this Committee can succeed where the 1993 Joint Committee failed to bring lasting institutional changes.

My first words of advice to those of you on this Select Committee are that second chances don't often come back around. Yet fortunately you are here by bipartisan agreement. I believe that the Committee must seize this opportunity to execute changes that make a meaningful difference in this great

institution and that each of you has a duty to do everything you can to make sure this opportunity does not go to waste. As Susan B. Anthony said, “Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputations...can never effect a reform.” In support of your efforts, I am pleased to offer some suggestions on how you can make the House of Representatives more in line with the body envisioned by the Founders - a representative body that works more efficiently, that empowers Members to better represent their constituents, and a body that better serves the American people.

**There are four general areas that I believe the Committee should particularly focus on to adequately address the problems facing this venerable institution. They are:**

**I. Modernizing technology and procedures to improve the effectiveness of Congress;**

**II. Reclaiming the constitutional power and appropriate role of Congress as laid out in Article I of the Constitution;**

**III. Ethics, transparency and accountability; and**

**IV. Forging better connections with the American people.**

### **I. Modernizing the Institution**

Modernizing the technology used by Congress is a key reform that I believe most every Member will support. Congress still uses some of the same systems from when I was first elected back in 1991. Recent surveys reveal that only 6% of senior staffers believe that the current technological infrastructure is adequate to support Members’ vital duties<sup>1</sup>. If Congress is going to respond to 21st century challenges, it needs to use 21st century technology. Right now, it has neither the tools to do its job for the constituents it serves, nor the technology to fully protect itself from foreign attacks.

Of course, with technological advances come new cyber security threats and it is imperative for Congress to act to defend itself and the nation’s infrastructure — including our election systems — from foreign hostile and asymmetric warfare. I strongly suggest updating the basic systems that Congress uses daily, such as the constituent services online system, to ensure they are secure and that privileged information is protected.

Speaking of technology, I strongly recommend restoring the Office of Technology Assessment. The OTA produced hundreds of nonpartisan studies examining diverse technological and scientific issues, leading to informed and innovative policies. The OTA had a budget of \$22 million before it was defunded in 1995<sup>2</sup>. However, today the Office could be restored as a pilot program with far more modest funding, perhaps less than \$3 million. It could lead the charge in administering technological and cybersecurity advances as well as training Congressional Members and staff on the proper usage of the new

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<sup>1</sup> Goldschmidt, K. (2017). State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate. *Congressional Management Foundation*.

<sup>2</sup> Graves, Z., & Kosar, K. (2018, January). Bring in the Nerds: Reviving the Office of Technology Assessment. *R Street Institute*.

technology and best practices to ensure cyber security. Back in 1995, Google, Amazon, Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp were invisible. Today, they are some of the biggest companies in the world and directly impact our privacy. We should not only know the right questions to ask about them, but more importantly know the essential answers, including our most sensitive information and national security.

Additionally, online tools and staffing of the Congressional Research Service need to be addressed. This resource is vital to providing Members and staffers with the facts and historical information necessary to develop informed policy. Yet research by the Brookings Institution found that the CRS, along with two other crucial support agencies - the Congressional Budget Office and the Government Accountability Office - have lost 45 percent of their staff since 1975<sup>3</sup>. By increasing CRS staff, we can decrease the wait time for staffers who request information to help them draft or amend legislation. I certainly remember how much my staff and committees relied on the CRS while I was in office. As Benjamin Franklin reminds us, "An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest."

Closely related to technological improvements is the challenge of the Congressional schedule. Members need more time to read a bill and offer changes before voting upon it. Currently, it is all too common for multiple committee meetings and votes to be scheduled at the same time. How can Members fully engage with legislation if they do not even have the time to stay at a full committee meeting? A website or user-friendly app can be used for scheduling to make sure that multiple meetings, votes, and hearings are not scheduled at the same time. Simple scheduling reforms could have a lasting impact on the effectiveness of Congress for years to come. Scheduling is also an issue for keeping Members in touch with their districts and voters. A reliable schedule of 3 weeks working 5 days a week in Washington and one full week in the district (per month) is something to consider. This allows you to perform your legislative duty and stay in close contact with your constituents

And just a final note on technology. If there is anything that has demonstrated the need for more expertise in technology and cyber issues in Congress, it was the Facebook hearings. In that instance, we saw in both bodies a primary case made before the public for more tech knowledge and expertise in Congress - for its own operation and for the public as well.

## **II. Reclaiming Article I**

With regards to improving legislative effectiveness, it is important to remember that Congress is the first and most vital branch of the government because it is the most direct link to the will of the people. George Washington said, "the basis of our political system is the right of the people to make and to alter their constitutions of government." However, over the years we have seen the approval ratings of Congress plummet as gridlock increases while legislating decreases and power is ceded to the Executive Branch. This body should reclaim its constitutional power and appropriate role of Congress as laid out in Article I of the Constitution. Members of Congress should improve the body's standing with the American people by doing what they were elected to do: listen to constituents, hold hearings, perform

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<sup>3</sup> Kramer, C. (2017, May 24). Vital Stats: Congress Has a Staffing Problem, Too. *The Brookings Institute*.

oversight, engage in debates, and pass legislation. There are several ways to give Congress additional capacity to do just that and function better tactically, strategically and more effectively.

For one, many experts recommend that Congress consider increasing its staff size and fairly compensating its staffers. I started my public service working as staff to Congressman John Brademas (D-IN) and later for Senator Dennis DeConcini (D-AZ). Members of Congress rely on staff to do vitally important legislative work, such as understanding issues, legislative briefings, and meeting with constituents. Our country is too big and the job is too important to think any individual can do it alone without adequate staff help. Whether it's writing complicated tax reform, buying new defense equipment, or overseeing how trillions of dollars of taxpayers' hard-earned money is spent, the consequences and costs are enormous. More, better trained staff - and most importantly, the ability to retain quality staff - would allow Congress to better serve the American people and regain their trust.

Staff retention is a major challenge for Congress. A study by the nonpartisan research organization R Street Institute found that staff tenure on most committees is short, even as low as 1.4 years<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, the Congressional Management Foundation found that only 15 percent of senior staffers were confident that more junior staff possessed the knowledge, skills and abilities to adequately support their Member<sup>5</sup>. This is largely because staffers are lured away from Capitol Hill as they gain experience, often due to low pay. Instead, they funnel into lucrative lobbying and advocacy jobs. If we want staffers to stay in the public service longer and gain more specialized legislative experience, Congress needs to compensate them fairly. One idea many people endorse is creating a uniform pay scale, similar to the GS system that federal agencies use. Such a system would add structure to the Congressional pay system without handcuffing Members to organize their offices according to individual whims or peculiar trends. With distinct salary ranges for each type of staff position, information about retention rates, diversity and equal pay could more quantitatively be compared. Moreover, staffers would be incentivized to stay longer. Increasing staff tenure would increase institutional knowledge and help improve the expertise needed for Congress to perform its constitutional duties. It would also save money for the taxpayers.

Additionally, Congress and its staff should look more like America. Congress should take steps to recruit and retain a diverse staff population that reflects what America looks like. Thankfully, through studies, Members of Congress have been able to see, statistically, the lack of diverse staffers that currently work on the Hill. Following this insight, now is the time to reverse this trend. The House of Representatives has a Diversity Director now who collects resumes and works with offices to attract diverse staffers. Yet, that office is understaffed. The Diversity Director should have enough capacity to attract a broad range of candidates.

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<sup>4</sup> Burgat, C., & Dukeman, R. (2019, March). Who's on the Hill? Staffing and Human Capital in Congress's Legislative Committees. *R Street Institute*.

<sup>5</sup> Goldschmidt, K. (2017). State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate. *Congressional Management Foundation*.

The Diversity Director could also be in charge of conducting seminars on diversity for each office and ways to create inclusive work environments. In actuality, creating an inclusive environment helps build morale and retain all staff, not just diverse staff. A similar practice could be applied to interviewing for higher level positions in the House, such as Chief of Staff, Legislative Counsel, and Legislative Director. Studies have shown that the number of diverse candidates in higher level legislative positions, such as Chief of Staff or Legislative Counsel, are even smaller<sup>6</sup>. These reforms could have a monumental impact on the numbers of diverse staff in the House and can lead to Congressional staff being more representative of our country and the private sector environment.

In that same vein, I urge the Select Committee to recommend a plan for conducting leadership development for Members and staff. Such a systematic practice would better equip Members with the tools to adequately lead their offices and districts and become better legislators. Having staff that is willing to assert themselves as leaders is just as important as making sure Members can do so. Staffers are the heartbeat of Congress and are critical to helping Members represent their constituents and achieve their goals as duly elected Representatives.

There should also be a substantive program that will bring Members and staff together across the aisle to encourage civility and increased bipartisanship. Currently, hyper-partisanship is a plague on the institution and in the body politic. In order to mitigate its effects, it is important to bring Members together to learn about each other, regardless of where they are on the political spectrum. It would be useful for all the caucuses focused on civility to work together and with bipartisan House leaders to create regular programming to foster civility amongst Members and staff. Requiring that overseas travel and CODELs be comprised of bipartisan delegations might be adopted and enforced.

The fact that some freshmen and newer Members have said they had virtually no interaction with Members of the other party is sadly true. Those Members are beginning their Congressional career without understanding the importance of working across the aisle.

One thing I have heard repeatedly from the Members I have talked to in the last couple of years on behalf of Issue One is that they are frustrated and demoralized by the hyper-partisanship that has made legislating even more difficult. Simply finding venues to listen to different ideas is often difficult.

I urge the Select Committee to recommend a series of meetings where Members could convene while in DC at least twice every quarter in smaller rotating groups, beginning at the orientation for freshman Members. This should be a required part of the orientation schedule. Interesting icebreaker activities, communication style questionnaires, and non-political group problem-solving activities are all ideas that can be used to get Members to interact with each other positively.

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<sup>6</sup> Bell, D., McCray, K. W., Overton, S., & Scott, E. L. (2018, September). Racial Diversity Among Top U.S. House Staff. *Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies*.

At the minimum, there needs to be a standard of respect for each Member. This Select Committee working together to promote bipartisanship and practicing new ideas can be a major tool in fighting against the partisan divide.

### **III. Transparency, Ethics and Accountability**

Like those of you who have agreed to serve on this Committee, I strongly believe that public service is a public trust and that each individual Member should proactively work to improve transparency, ethics, and accountability. Meaningful transparency allows the public to become more engaged with policy and monitor what their elected officials are doing instead of thinking that nothing ever happens on Capitol Hill. It also helps Members work more cooperatively while respecting deeply held partisan and ideological differences.

One possible way to increase transparency relates to my earlier comments on technology. Creating an online “amendment impact program”, for example, where Members can update and see bills being marked up in real time would streamline and promote the process of suggesting changes to bills.

Increased transparency within the chamber can also increase public confidence. Establishing a user-friendly app that is connected both to social media and the “amendment impact program” would allow for the public to actually feel like they are involved with the legislative process and informed of the choices their elected official is making.

Taking that into consideration, I would encourage you to invite and listen to experts on improving civic education. More Americans must know about our rich history and effort to become “a more perfect union”. More Americans need to understand and appreciate the opportunity to engage with the legislative process and their Representatives. I know that while I was in Congress, I constantly worked to find ways to communicate to my constituents tangible results from my activities and accomplishments in Congress. Increased public transparency would also help hold Members accountable while also potentially rewarding them for the legislative work they do.

### **IV. Reconnecting Congress with Constituents**

Of course, convincing all politicians to conduct themselves in the highest ethical manner has been a challenge throughout the history of our Republic. But our experiment with self-government is unique and the burdens that Representatives bear are greater than in other nations that do not see themselves as the beacon of freedom and representative democracy that we as Americans do.

But the challenges today are even more critical. The House must work to regain the confidence and trust of the American people. Congress finds itself deep in the abyss and it’s time to climb out.

That is why I want to focus on a cancer in the institution that is undermining the efforts of men and women of goodwill to effectively function as the people's Representatives.

Raising money should not be the top priority for Members. I have run campaigns. I understand that campaign funds are needed to get re-elected. But every Member of Congress was elected for a reason — just as I was elected for a reason — and that reason is to prioritize the American people. Above all else, putting constituents first should always be the number one duty that takes up the majority of a Member's time. The public should be able to engage with elected Members in various ways, not just by making campaign contributions. To foster that engagement, this Committee should explore ways to reduce the pressure to constantly raise money at the expense of doing the people's work. Now, Members raise money for their own re-election, for their committee assignment, and for their national party dues. This means prioritizing time with wealthy contributors, lobbyists and special interests. Many Americans feel they are last in this line.

This Committee should also think about ways that Congress can connect better with the American people. Members need to hold more public hearings, travel domestically, and figure out new and innovative ways to interact as much as they can with constituents. We have already seen examples of some states using technology-enhanced town hall meetings or other tactics to increase civic participation. It is imperative that this movement continues to better serve the people of this country and build trust.

Congress should also reconsider traditional practices that no longer fit the time. For example, increasing the number of minutes a Member with particular expertise and background can question a witness at a hearing could make hearings run more smoothly. Instead of a Member having to request multiple rounds of questioning, allowing a Member to ask all their questions in one sitting could streamline the hearing process. Institutional structure and traditions that are no longer relevant might be changed or dropped.

## **V. Conclusion**

The mandate for this Select Committee is broad and historic, and I strongly believe that the work of this Committee is just the first step. I urge Congress to work towards the next challenge of this Committee and look to solving some of the more difficult problems. For example, Congress should also start looking at ways to solve big picture ideas that affect the entire fabric of Congressional capabilities and capacity. For instance, they should closely examine the reasons why more and more Members — and staff — are deciding to leave Congress after a relatively short time. Being a Member and representing thousands of constituents should be an honor that everyone in this country should cherish. Instead, there has been an increase in Members leaving Congress after serving just one or two terms. This means that Members often do not have the time to build the expertise that would benefit policy-making and their constituents. We need to figure out why Members decide to leave, what exactly makes this job so aggravating in these times, and other reasons why the American public continues to give Congress a single-digit approval rating.

I want to draw your attention to a recent study put together by Issue One entitled: “Why We Left Congress”. As the report notes, 52 House Members chose not to run for reelection in 2018, well above the historic average<sup>7</sup>. A number of those interviewed by Issue One cited partisanship and dysfunction. I ask the Committee’s permission to submit this report for the record with my testimony.

As I stated earlier, I believe this Committee does have the power and the capabilities to promote true change in this chamber. You are all currently dealing with the day to day hustle of managing life as a Representative in the U.S. House. As a former Member, I offer this advice out of my love for the institution and my belief that this experiment in self-government remains the last best hope for our nation and the world.

Be bold. Be courageous in your task. Congress is indeed the first branch and it needs to reassert itself. This demands that you be creative, tenacious and visionary, just as our Founders did. The American people have very little faith in this body, and much work needs to be done to improve its standing in the eyes of our citizenry. The recommendations that I present in this testimony are just a few of many ideas for reform. That is why I am excited about the potential of this Committee to enact meaningful change.

Abraham Lincoln, who served as our President in time of great division and civil war, used language to inspire, unite and guide us. In his Second Inaugural Address, he talked about a rebirth through saving our Union: “Let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds”.

You have much responsibility and vital work to do. When you are successful, it will go a long way to restoring trust in our first branch of government, healing our ugly divisions, and reviving our Founders’ dreams.

Thank you again for allowing me the opportunity to testify and Godspeed with the task before you.

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<sup>7</sup> Beckel, M., Currinder, M., & Ratliff, A. (2018). *Why We Left Congress: How the Legislative Branch is Broken and What We Can Do About It. Issue One & R Street Institute.*