

The Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
Testimony to the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
May 1, 2019

Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chairman Graves, and members of the Committee,

It's nice to be back, and on this side of the dais! I appreciate the invitation to testify today about my experiences in serving and I look forward to a conversation with the committee members and my colleagues here at the witness table about how this place could work better. I think we can all agree that there's a lot of work to do and I'm thrilled this committee was formed to begin tackling some of the problems we all confront in trying to do our jobs as efficiently and effectively as possible.

I will focus most of my remarks on the breakdown of civility here in Congress. We need to be in a big, group therapy session to figure out how to solve problems without attacking each other.

I was elected to the House in 1989 in a special election to replace Claude Pepper, who had passed away. Claude was a model politician who helped everyone. He didn't care what your politics were. If you were his constituent, he was there to help you with your social security, your Medicare, immigration issues ... you name it. Those were big shoes to fill, and I was lucky to have such a role model in Claude.

Since I was elected in a special election, I arrived in Washington in the middle of session. I didn't get to do the Kennedy School freshman orientation or anything like that – I was just thrown into the fire.

But people helped me and wanted me to succeed.

Bill Lehman, a Democrat from Miami (whose middle name was Marx if that tells you anything about his politics!) took me aside and taught me about how the mail operation and franking privileges worked. I had no idea! He didn't care that I was a Republican, he just wanted to help a Florida colleague.

Dante Fascell, another Democrat from Florida, chaired the House Foreign Affairs Committee at the time. He knew that a seat on Foreign Affairs was important to me and he made sure it happened. There was literally no room for me on the committee because all of the committee's allotted seats were taken, but he told me not to worry about it. He would see to it that the ratio was changed, add another Democrat to the committee if he had to, just to get me on the committee. And he did. He even set me up with a little card table and a folding chair because there wasn't space for me on the dais.

Can you imagine a committee chair doing that today? Wouldn't happen.

But back then, I was just another Republican and my presence wasn't going to change anything for the Democrats because they were in the majority and had been for a long time.

What's different now is that control of the House can change in one election – everyone worries about their votes, how they're going to be scored, what their colleagues are doing and saying, what it means for the next election. Bipartisanship gets lost in all of that.

When Ed Royce chaired Foreign Affairs and Elliot Engel was ranking, the committee had an unwritten rule that unless a measure was supported by both sides, the committee would not take it up. Isn't that incredible? And they really stuck to it. We got stuff done because we worked together.

Speaking of getting things done in committee, it would be a lot easier if we could better coordinate hearings and voting. If Foreign Affairs is holding a hearing on an issue like the AUMF, the last thing committee members want to do is put debate on hold so that we can run back and forth to the Capitol to vote. We should be able to schedule votes so they interfere less with hearings.

We should also do more to ensure that Congress reflects the diversity of views and people that make up this country. That goes for members and staff. We need to do a better job recruiting diverse candidates and staff so that Congress looks like the rest of the country. There are concrete steps we can take to ensure that we're recruiting, interviewing, and hiring staff from different socio-economic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds.

I was never one of those name-callers that thought the other side didn't have a single good idea. Of course they do – we all do – and we all need to start listening to each other more and pointing fingers less.

My advice for new members is don't be afraid. Don't assume that people will automatically turn against you because of a position you take or a vote you cast. I've always found that people are a lot more accepting than you think. When you explain yourself, you will find great acceptance.

Also, don't be afraid to work across the aisle and build coalitions. We are not encouraged to do that anymore, but we should. That's how things get done.

I think there are common-sense ways to encourage greater bipartisanship in the process, a more sensible schedule, and more updated staff hiring practices. I look forward to discussing some of those ideas in Q&A.

Thank you.