

Primary Points in Levin Center Testimony before the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress

March 25, 2021

Why Oversight. Legislative oversight is fundamental to a sustainable democracy. Good government requires good oversight to ensure effective programs, intelligent spending of taxpayer dollars, and government response to evolving conditions, needs, and values.

Problems. Problems impeding effective congressional oversight include an absence of Congress-wide oversight standards and norms, Executive Branch defiance of congressional information requests, inexperienced and untrained investigative staff, five-minute time limits on Member questions during hearings, and excessive partisanship.

Damage. Some oversight investigations become a partisan brawl that deepens divisions, confuses the facts, stymies reforms, and damages public confidence in Congress. To strengthen government performance and increase its public standing, Congress needs to improve its oversight function.

Six Possible Reforms. Possible oversight reforms that build on the oversight work by this Committee in the 116th Congress include the following:

--**Legal opinions.** Forming a bipartisan task force to develop a process for issuing oversight-related congressional legal opinions to counter legal opinions issued by DOJ.

--**Longer questioning periods.** Amending House rules to encourage longer questioning periods by House Members at oversight hearings.

--**Joint administrative staff.** Requiring administrative staff supporting oversight inquiries to be jointly hired and paid by the committee chair and ranking member.

--**Bipartisan investigative techniques.** Encouraging bipartisan investigative techniques in oversight inquiries and banning partisan committee websites.

--**Oversight training.** Increasing training opportunities for staff and new House Members on how to conduct effective oversight.

--**Committee funding.** Altering committee budget allocations to ensure the funding split more closely reflects the actual majority-minority division in the House and avoids disrupting committee funding and staff retention, including oversight investigators.