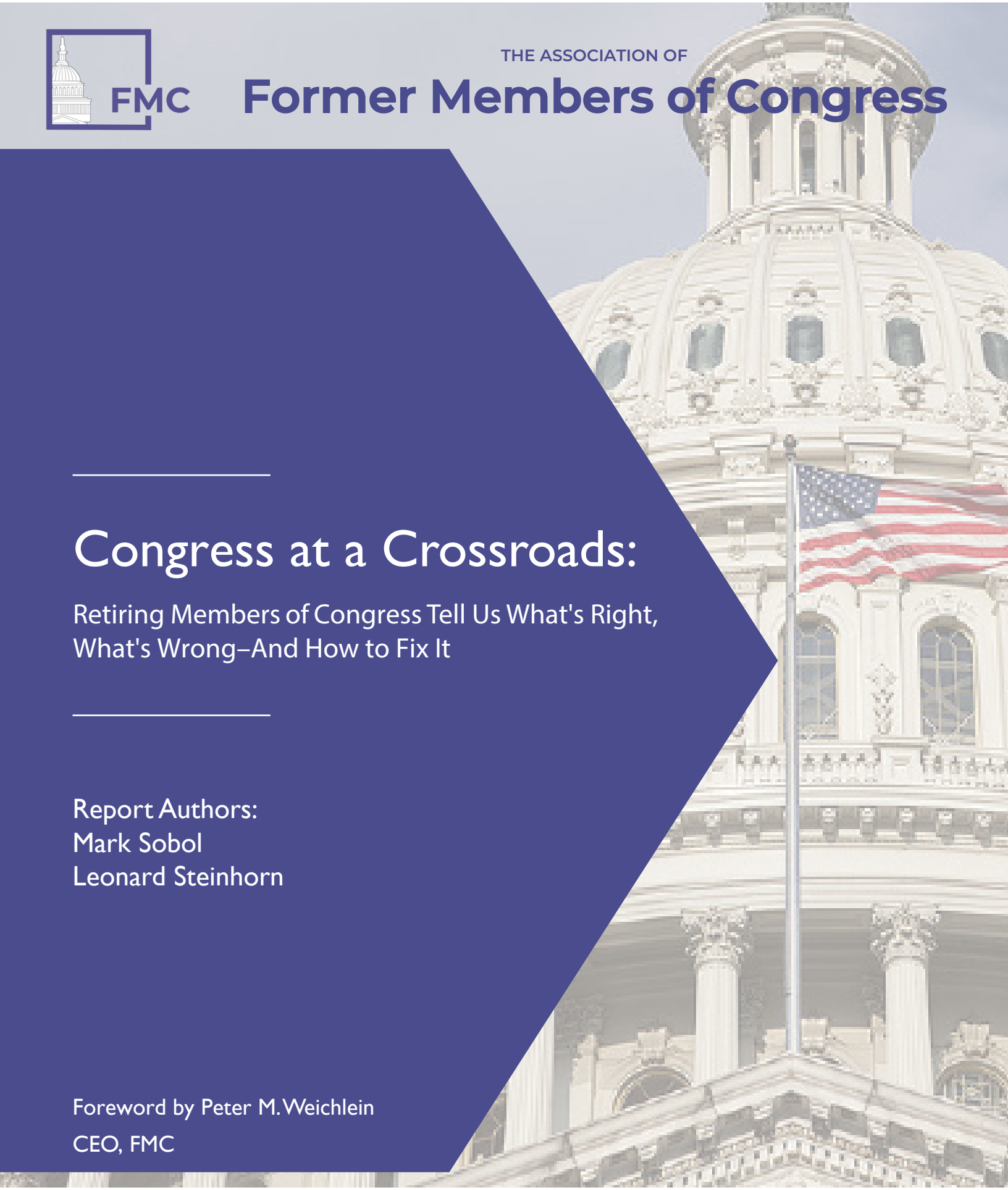

THE ASSOCIATION OF

Former Members of Congress

Congress at a Crossroads:

Retiring Members of Congress Tell Us What's Right, What's Wrong–And How to Fix It

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FOREWORD

No matter what your political persuasion is, sometime in the recent past you inevitably have asked yourself, "why isn't Congress doing something on this?"

This report answers that question – and in the process offers a vision for a better functioning Congress.

We are living in a moment of big challenges and dire needs, and Americans want their elected representatives to fix them. But solutions in a nation as complex as ours require collaboration, thoughtful debate, an exchange of ideas rather than a clash of talking points, and a foundation of trust between colleagues. In today's Congress we have 100 Senators and 435 Representatives, the vast majority of whom would much rather change the nation – change the world – for the better than fight endless and useless political battles. What prevents them from doing so? A political process that encourages hyper-partisanship, places Members into opposing teams rather than encouraging collegiality, and prevents leadership from giving even the smallest victory to the other side.

There are two main lessons to take away from the following report. One is worrisome: our current legislative branch is dysfunctional and highly volatile. When the nation is faced with crisis, and at this moment, multiple crises, we all hold our collective breath to see whether Congress can rise to the occasion. The other is reassuring: for 116 Congresses and counting, American citizens from all corners of the nation have chosen to be public servants, bring their ideas and ideals to Washington, and do the difficult work of legislating in a representative democracy. Most of these public servants want to find common ground for the good of the country – and find ways to productively and respectfully work together. It is up to us, the citizens, to help them do so.

The following report, made possible via a grant from the Hewlett Foundation, is the culmination of months of interviews, analysis and reflection. It would not have been possible without the tireless work of its two authors, Mark Sobol and Professor Leonard Steinhorn, who interviewed almost three dozen retired and retiring Members of Congress over the period of about one year. They then digested these hours upon hours of interviews and pulled from the recordings the common themes and overarching conclusions that educate the reader about today's Congress. We hear directly from those who made public service their calling and walked the halls of Congress on a daily basis. They inform us about the passion that they and their colleagues bring to the job every day, about the obstacles that frustrate many Members, and about solutions they themselves suggest to help Congress function at the higher level that most Americans expect.

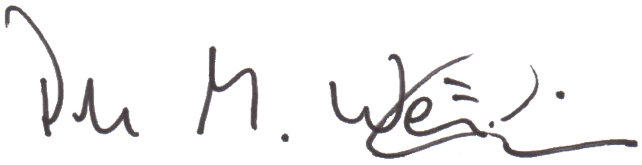
This report is not merely a transcript of dozens of interviews, but rather a thorough examination of how Members of Congress go about the task of legislating and representing their constituents, what helps them succeed, and what prevents them from fully accomplishing what they set out to do. While we learn much about process in this report, we learn even more about the human aspect of our current politics: how the most effective legislation is built on personal relationships and trust among colleagues, especially colleagues from across the political aisle; how commuting to and from the nation's capital to do the people's business takes a toll on family life and working relationships in Washington alike; how hyper-partisanship is often thrust upon Members, especially by cable news and social media; and how the bond between these representatives and those they represent is one of the greatest rewards of public life.

But this report doesn't merely diagnose the institutional challenges and problems facing Congress. Because we spent so much time listening to these Members – hearing what inspired them to serve, what worked, what

frustrated them, and what they thought would make things better – we developed a number of recommendations designed to improve the institution and make it work better not only for Members of Congress but for the American people. Perhaps most important, our report is aimed at rebuilding relationships and trust between Members across the aisle – helping them learn about one another's districts and communities and how they might work better together, on behalf of the country, to solve our toughest problems.

FMC was founded in 1970 as the "United States Association of Former Members of Congress," and chartered by Congress in 1983. FMC is a bipartisan, nonprofit, voluntary alliance of former United States Senators and Representatives, standing for America's Constitutional system. FMC works to strengthen the Congress in the conduct of its Constitutional responsibility through promoting a collaborative approach to policy making. FMC seeks to deepen the understanding of our democratic system, domestically and internationally, and to engage the citizenry through civic education about Congress and public service. This report is a prime example of FMC's ability to bring together former and current public servants, regardless of political persuasion, so that we can foster a pragmatic and productive discussion about our representative democracy.

Lastly, and most importantly, FMC wants to thank the former Members of Congress who participated in this project. They gave us their expertise, insight and time, and in many instances did so while still serving on Capitol Hill. They were candid, engaged and passionate. Their respect for their colleagues, for their constituents and for Congress as an institution was palpable in every interview, and it is abundantly clear that they seek a Congress that functions at its highest possible level. We thank you for your time to make this report possible, and we thank you for the public service you rendered to our country.



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Executive Summary

Amid this unprecedented moment in American history, with a pandemic destabilizing our country and millions insisting that we address centuries of racial injustice, FMC, the association of Former Members of Congress, is issuing this report from its Legacy Project with four core goals in mind: to sound an alarm about congressional dysfunction, to recommend needed changes in the institution's culture, to help Congress function better, and to facilitate the ability of Congress to meet the urgent and long-term demands of our democracy.

To accomplish these goals, FMC's Legacy Project – supported with a generous grant by The Hewlett Foundation – interviewed 31 retiring or departing Members of Congress in 2018 and 2019 to understand from a Member perspective how the institution works and how to make it better. These interviews shed light on why Members serve, how they work together, what keeps them from working better together, why the institution too often falls into dysfunction, and how this dysfunction keeps them from addressing our nation's critical needs. Among the findings:

- **Institutional Dysfunction:** Although Members cite some bipartisan cooperation, mostly on minor bills and during crises, Congress has largely become a dysfunctional institution unable to meet the critical needs of our country.
- **Weakened Relationships:** Congressional relationships across the aisle have broken down, and there are few political and institutional incentives to rebuild them. Yet Members say the surest way to solve problems and pass major legislation is to form relationships across party lines. Failure to foster these relationships will only exacerbate the polarization and further incapacitate Congress.
- **Schedule Impedes Collegiality:** Spending time in Washington and away from their district has become a political liability, so the schedule is structured to limit their days in DC, which then limits their ability to form relationships. Raising money takes up too much of their time in Washington.
- **Hyper-partisanship:** Leadership prioritizes power over bipartisanship, political advantage over consensus, and gaining or holding the majority over passing bills that give the other side credit.
- **Echo Chambers:** Media, particularly cable, fuel polarization, and social media exacerbates this conflict model, creating ideological and partisan echo chambers.
- **Polarization:** Civility within the institution has declined, mirroring the polarization of society.
- **Zero Sum:** An "us versus them" mentality pervades the institution, and a zero-sum culture has emerged: if the other side gets a win or credit, your side loses.
- **No Voice:** Minority party Members feel they have no voice.
- **Safe Havens, Maybe:** Committees and subcommittees can be safe havens for bipartisan work and cooperation, but much depends on whether chairs create a bipartisan culture, which isn't always the case.

The report also offers solutions and recommendations, based on these interviews, that if implemented could improve the condition, performance and effectiveness of Congress and help it better serve our democracy. Among them are creating more opportunities to build relationships, implementing changes in the congressional schedule, allowing more debates and amendments, providing more voice for members of the minority, restoring earmarks but holding them to a standard of transparency, and promoting more bipartisan voices in the media.

The status quo, this report concludes, is unacceptable and does not serve our democracy well. Change is possible, and these Members – regardless of party – say it is imperative. But it can happen only if Members individually, and their leaders, accept responsibility for the state of their institution and the utter necessity to change it.

Introduction

"We are at an extraordinary moment in time when the American people feel like they are not being well served by the establishment institutions of this country."

"I think it will change. I think it'll get better. I don't know when and I don't know how."

"I don't know that there is a magic wand."

"I still go into the building every day with that awe and idealism about where you are and the importance of what you're doing."

"If you really want to move the needle, you've got to step into the arena and try to leave the place a little better than when you found it."

We are at a critical moment in our democratic experiment. A pandemic is ravaging communities nationwide, and as we publish this report, it has taken the lives of nearly 150,000 of our fellow citizens – more than twice the toll of the Vietnam War. It also has caused widespread and historic unemployment, and businesses large and small are struggling to survive. The pandemic alone is a call to our elected officials for the type of leadership and vision we expect at a moment of crisis. But we are also facing another reckoning, one over our nation's original sin and the racial inequities that have beset our country since its founding. In the aftermath of the brutal killing of George Floyd, millions of Americans of all ages and backgrounds – but especially younger Americans – have taken to the streets of our nation to decry racial injustice and demand change.

But as with the coronavirus pandemic, Americans know that protests and demands alone cannot address our challenges and problems. They expect action from our leaders and elected officials – they expect them to rise to the occasion and work together to address our nation's needs. They are impatient for answers, and do not accept as an excuse that Members of Congress cannot work together because of their disagreements. Instead, they expect Members of Congress to work together in spite of their disagreements.

In many ways, this report is a physician's diagnosis about the health of our body politic – with a prescription to make it better. As polarized as our politics were before the pandemic and the George Floyd killing, what we face today are outsize challenges that place in stark relief the inability of Congress to address some of our nation's most critical needs.

Because of the pandemic Congress was forced to conduct much of its business virtually, and we certainly understand why. But as much as that may have been a necessity, it should not be interpreted as a virtue. What we found in this report, and what we emphasize in our recommendations, is the need for more and not less in-person interaction among Members of Congress. They need to learn about each other's districts, hold civil conversations aimed at finding common ground, build relationships of trust that can lead to understanding and solutions.

Members say the surest way to solve problems and pass major legislation is to form relationships across party lines. Yet over the years Congressional relationships across the aisle have broken down, and there are few political and institutional incentives to rebuild them. This is a diverse country in so many ways, yet Members default to a vision of America that is increasingly circumscribed by their ideology, their favored media, and

the partisan perspective they represent. Failure to build bridges, to foster relationships across regions and communities and ideologies, will only exacerbate the polarization and further incapacitate Congress. This report envisions a better way.

Our detailed findings and conclusions are built around almost 100 hours of in-depth interviews we conducted with more than 30 retiring or departing Members of Congress in 2018 and 2019. What emerges is a vibrant portrait of public servants trying their best to navigate and make a difference within an institution beset by challenges that are partly its own making and partly a result of larger political and social dynamics over which these Members have only limited control. As motivated as these Members were to address our nation's challenges, they all too often found themselves thwarted and frustrated by a congressional culture that mirrored and at times exacerbated the polarization and partisanship coursing through our body politic.

Thus our report diagnoses and prescribes: we lay out the institutional difficulties plaguing Congress that impair its functioning and ability to serve our democracy – and offer recommendations designed to address the dysfunction, improve the institution and show us what a better and perhaps even a good Congress could look like.

Every former Member interviewed for this project – even those with the most partisan voting records from the most partisan districts – acknowledges that our democracy will be better served by a Congress that prioritizes bipartisan consensus, works across the aisle to address our nation's problems and expresses it through broadly supported legislation. But they also accept responsibility for acting otherwise and argue that the institution and its leadership as well as the larger political culture offer few incentives for building the bipartisanship necessary to find common ground.

These are Members constantly pulled between competing political pressures and institutional demands. They want to build relationships with Members of the other party, which to them is the "secret sauce" for creating the bipartisan consensus necessary to grapple with and solve our nation's most vexing challenges. But because of various factors – scheduling, fundraising, leadership demands, spending as little time in Washington as possible, the pace of work, and the polarizing attacks that demonize those who cooperate across the aisle – opportunities to create and nourish these relationships and build a more productive Congress infrequently arise.

They also claim to seek more civility in their work and believe it is their responsibility to set a respectful tone even when they disagree. More civility, they argue, creates an opening to mitigate dysfunction and open dialogue with the other side. But because districts are drawn to maximize a party's power, it leaves many beholden to base voters who expect fiery rhetoric and a hardline approach to compromise, and the media rarely rewards or covers civil conversations and bipartisan efforts – which then stokes even more conflict at the expense of civility.

What emerges is an institutional portrait that too often elevates political power and advantage over all other considerations. Even Members who say they want to work across the aisle accede to leadership demands that they place party first. For example, many of the interviewees – from both parties – say that Members of the minority party should be given more opportunities to coauthor legislation and propose amendments. But then leadership warns them to avoid giving opponents in swing districts any opportunity to claim credit or to offer an amendment that might leave their own majority party Members casting a difficult or unpopular vote.

To be sure, Members describe many instances in which they work together and accomplish more than voters and the media recognize. But way too often, and especially on major issues our nation needs to address, power and political advantage trump any instinct toward bipartisanship and comity.

The cumulative voice of these interviews portrays a Congress defined by earnest and hard-working representatives from across the political spectrum who are united by a shared dedication to serve both their communities and the national interest – but who are also hamstrung by polarization, partisan distrust, political calculation, leadership pressure, institutional dysfunction and too little encouragement to address it.

As the words of these former Members detail, it is a complex and often conflicted institution – and one in need of significant change.

The quandary, of course, is that there's no "magic wand" to address Congress' institutional problems. Given the stark polarization of our politics and the varied factors contributing to it, many of the issues facing Congress are far greater than the institution's ability to solve them on its own.

But Members also acknowledge, as one put it, that we are at an "extraordinary moment" in which public confidence in our political institutions is slipping away, and democracy cannot do its work if people increasingly don't trust it. That recognition creates an opening and opportunity – to offer recommendations that may mitigate the dysfunction and build a more productive and healthy institution that best serves the American people.

Chapter 1: Spirit of Public Service

Despite what one Member called the public perception that Members of Congress are self-serving and only "care about … getting reelected," what comes through in these interviews is a deep dedication to serving their communities and a genuine desire to represent the voice of their constituents in Congress.

Rootedness in their districts and the lives of their constituents is a common theme. "It's a privilege to be able to serve and to represent your district and work for them," said one Member, summing up what most expressed about their motivation for running and serving. Once in Congress, a big part of the job, as one Member put it, is "trying to identify what will impact your district." Another said, "I find when I'm home and I deal with the folks in my district, I'm very optimistic about this country, the innovation, the goodwill, the generosity."

While the news media typically focus on Members who rise the ranks of leadership, for many the job is all about immersing in their communities, providing constituent services, listening to the people back home, and translating what they hear into the policy mix.

Constituent Focus

"If you stay here and build a lot of relationships, you can get higher up and higher up, but for me, I always thought that my base was back home," said one longstanding Member who rose to chair a major committee. "I love this town and I love serving in the House, but I'm a down home legislator." Another described the advice he received in his first term, "You're either going to have a district agenda or a Beltway agenda." He chose his district: "I didn't care about the J.P. Morgans of the world, but I did care about the community banks that gave the mortgages out."

Many describe their constituent services and the local programs they sponsor as among the most rewarding parts of the job. They spoke with pride about bringing resources home, answering constituent requests, addressing community concerns, and finding ways to improve local transportation, healthcare, and public services.

"I learned at an early age that elected officials are public servants, and I never forgot that. So, when I ran for Congress and got elected, I brought my experience of focusing on helping constituents to my new job," said one Member. Said another, "Where you really make a difference is in constituent services." One described his job as "not just about going to Washington and voting yes or no. It's about being that conduit between the public and their government." As one observed, "Those things are big back home, and your constituency doesn't forget about that." Another put it this way: "I didn't go there expecting to find a high functioning body, so that's not really the reason. The service component and helping people, constituents, and meeting with people has been very rewarding. That was the motivation for me."

A few Members noted that constituent services offer them a way to serve and represent voters in their district who may not agree with their politics or ideology: "I don't just represent the people who voted for me. I represent the people who didn't vote for me too."

All Politics Are Local (Mostly)

Many also view national policy through their local prism. "I believe that politics all comes down to local issues," said one. "Families needed to be represented, children needed to be represented, health care needed

to be changed," another said. To another Member, you need a representative "who understands what a two-family house is, somebody who understands what a student loan is from both ends of it." Or as one said, "I loved being able to offer some proposals that would benefit my state and my district within the national context."

And it's not just proposing policies grounded in local concerns. Also important is how national policies play out at home. "If things were going to work, it couldn't be in theory. It had to be in results. You had to make it work on the ground." And to ensure that, many Members seek policy guidance not merely from experts in Washington but from local officials, businesses, and residents. "By listening to them you're giving them a voice," said one. In crafting and implementing policies it's essential to have "collaboration and coordination on the state and local level" and to "have that feedback loop all the time," said another. Members of Congress "do some of their best thinking about what they should be legislating when they're listening to their constituents back home," said one.

However, being grounded in their communities does not mean these Members merely reflect what they hear from constituents. While they avoid deviating too much from what their districts support, respecting constituents also means leveling with them and explaining why they favor certain positions or vote a certain way even if it's not wholly popular. "I just firmly believe you've got to say what you believe and then tell people why you believe it," one said. "It's my job to listen to the people I represent, but it's my job in a republic to go there and with the best of my ability to discern what's the right decision for the American people, for the people in my district. And every two years the people in my district can weigh my judgment … whether they think I should represent them again," said another.

Or as one Member summed it up, "I would tell this to … Members all the time: 'You're not smarter than your constituents. But at times, you're going to have more information than your constituents. And you have a duty to act on the information that you have, not the information that they have.' … Members need to understand that they have been entrusted with this. And it's a responsibility."

Where Public Service Meets Congressional Reality

Despite their determination to produce results for their constituents and the sense of empowerment they feel when elected to Congress, upon entering the institution many Members are met with a lack of empowerment and a political reality they did not necessarily expect.

As one Member put it, those who come in saying "I'm going to deliver great things in my district" are too frequently disappointed in large part because leadership prioritizes accomplishments and bills for the more vulnerable members of their caucus. "Look, the only people in this institution who are delivering big things in their first four or six years in Congress are people in swing districts, where the legislative leadership of their caucus has determined that they get to put their name on a bill that they didn't really write, so that they can go home to their district and pretend that they got big things done."

That's not to say leadership doesn't recognize the political imperative all members face to demonstrate their responsiveness to constituents and local concerns. The bond Members have with their local communities is so strong that party and committee leadership will accept it as one of the few legitimate reasons for breaking with the party on an important vote. One Member said he never saw his party leader "begrudge someone who … is fighting for their district and taking the position that their constituency believes is important." Leadership may exert pressure, but ultimately they understand that Members must first and foremost answer to their constituents.

But the common theme is the power of leadership to influence and to some extent control how Members serve their constituents. "It is all done by the benevolence of whoever happens to be in a certain leadership position, whether that be a chairman or the majority leader or speaker. And you have very little ability as an individual to push the institution," one said. "I think most, even highly informed American voters would not understand how little power an individual member of Congress has to push this institution."

Another Vision of Public Service: All Politics Are National

While most Members described how their priorities and perspectives are rooted in their districts first, a number also argued that as elected officials they have a responsibility to address national issues regardless of whether that directly benefits their local communities.

"I think a great Congress is one that really focuses on the most important issues of our time. You know, I think both parties can agree on some of the major problems that we have today. It's getting both parties to actually sit down and come together on a solution," said one. According to another: "I think in many ways we're falling short of that as a nation. For the first time, you have young men and young women growing up in this country who I believe I don't see a path, that live their dream - at least many of them. And we need to change that."

Some Members say that we risk avoiding national issues such at our peril: "Both parties realize that they're major issues, but it's going to take the political will not only of the president and leaders of both parties and both houses, but it's going to be rank and file members that are willing to put their careers on the line for the better good of the country versus their own political positions."

To have "a district agenda or a Beltway agenda," as one Member put it, is not mutually exclusive. But like so much else in Congress, those who want to tackle the big national issues run up against institutional resistance and limitations. "If you have a Beltway agenda, you're going to be able to do a lot of things, but you're going to be driven by leadership of your party, and you don't have flexibility."

Chapter 2: Relationships Among Members

If there's a "secret sauce" to building consensus, solving problems, passing legislation, and getting anything done, it's "the personal relationships that you develop." Getting to know other Members may be the most effective antidote to the partisanship – or as one Member put it, the "separation of parties" – that defines the dynamic on Capitol Hill.

"I've always said in politics, you really shouldn't get into this business if you really don't like being around people, interacting with them," said one Member who speaks for most. "In Washington," said another, "you work on relationships about 100 percent of the time, and about 10 percent of the time you get to work on legislation."

"It's all relationships, and if you work to build relationships, you respect where people are coming from," said one Member. To another, "You don't do deals with people you don't trust. You don't trust people you don't know. You need to get to know people." Or as one put it, "It's much harder to be mad at somebody or to say something unkind if you actually know them, their family and their children and so forth."

Relationships Create Opportunities

Beyond the actual friendships, what these relationships create is an opportunity to see an issue from another perspective and potentially identify mutual needs and common ground. "You need to stand next to people, see through their eyes," and understand their fears, hopes, and needs and "how they … align with the things that you also want, so they can actually structure a win-win, thinking about what they are going to need in their district," said one. "Part of what I was able to accomplish either as a committee chair, or just getting stuff for the district, is because of those relationships," said another.

Almost every Member interviewed echoed this statement: "When you start building relationships you get to be known as a trustworthy type … and somebody who understands. We have differences of opinion but can still get things done. And you start getting things done." Said another, "It's those relationships that have been really the things that have helped me be a better Member of Congress."

If Relationships Don't Develop

But for all the promise these relationships offer, the flip side is when they don't have a chance to develop, which leads to what one Member called a politically "siloed institution" that keeps Members apart and fuels the type of partisanship and even disrespect that arises from not knowing each other.

"Being around people is a good dynamic, and it has a restraining influence on what we'll say about one another. Because you've got to look at somebody. As opposed to waking through the tunnel, going to the floor, getting recognized for two minutes, sandblasting somebody, and then walking off and just having not much of an interpersonal or a social accountability for that," one Member said. It's "easy to demonize people if you don't know them," said another. "Unless you make an opportunity to get to know people beyond the daily routine, nothing's going to change."

As another Member put it, "We don't sit together on the floor. … There are very few opportunities … I've never been and sat in the office of a Democrat, and a Democrat has never come over. I haven't had a reason to call, and nobody's had a reason to call me and say, 'Come on, … just come over and sit and talk."

Members cite any number of causes for this breakdown in congressional relationships and collegiality. Some blame the general polarization coursing through our body politic. Others say it's the constant pressure to raise money, return to their districts and campaign back home. A number say leadership could do more. All worry that the growing distance among Members hastens the loss of civility which then makes the problem even worse.

Some Pine for the "Good Old Days"

In bemoaning this loss of collegiality, some describe "the good old days," when "families move to Washington and people back at home didn't expect to ever see you until maybe Election Day. Everybody had their kids in the same schools and regardless of partisanship, they were all on the soccer teams and the Girl Scout cookie sales and things. Now, if there's not a vote on the floor, nobody's here."

Another said "you could move your family here. And you were here three or four weekends out of every month. And you and your colleagues, you could coach a little league, you could go to the beach, you could go fishing, you could go skiing up in the mountains, you could just have a fun cocktail party with your colleagues, and really have fun if you brought one along that knows how to play the piano. And sing songs. There was a great deal more collegiality and opportunities for collegiality because of the process." To this Member, that produced results: "I get to know you on a personal level at the park, or on the weekend. I get to know you on an intellectual level about how you think and how you vote and what's important. And we start getting to know each other in a lot of different and better ways."

But Those "Good Old Days" Are Not Returning

A primary reason why Members today have few opportunities or occasions to build relationships is that expectations for our elected representatives have changed markedly from years past. "I come in, I go to work, I leave, and I go … to the airport," said one Member. "So, there's very little opportunity, not so much to socialize with one another." Another Member echoed this: "Members of Congress get here … right before votes on Tuesday, and then as soon as the gavel hits on Friday, and the Speaker says 'amen,' everybody's headed to the airport." Such a schedule, he said, "does not allow the ability to … know each other on a personal basis."

Nowadays, "very few people actually live here and bring their families here. That certainly plays a role in the decline of collegiality," said one Member expressing a view shared by all. "If you could spend the time in Washington, yes, you'd develop relationships, but I just don't see how that happens," said another. The result, as one Member put it, is a very functional approach to their time in Washington. With Members "flying in and out" and then using much of their spare time for fundraising and politics, their attitude becomes: "Don't enjoy your time here. This is like business and business only. Don't do anything else."

Staying in the District Outweighs Relationship Building in DC

What Members face are the competing pressures to stay in their districts as much as possible versus the need to build relationships in Washington – and for a variety of political and personal reasons the districts win. Part of it, of course, is the connection Members have with their neighbors and communities back home. They enjoy being rooted in their district.

Meeting with voters at home thus takes precedence over socializing with Members in DC. "People are expecting you, every time the Brownies are baking cookies, to be there and give them a certificate. So how do you spend time in Washington when you've got all these events going on at home?"

Nor is it just a personal preference to socialize with constituents. As one Member put it, "When your political survival is on the block every two years, you don't feel the need to make friends with the other party as much. And that's a shame."

Moderate Members from swing districts feel especially vulnerable to charges that they're out of touch – though even Members in deep blue or red districts worry about primary opponents who might attack them for not spending enough time in their district. It's hard to establish friendships in Washington because "you've got to get back to your district, you've got to survive."

Living in Washington Is a Political Liability

A large part of it is what constituents expect: they want to see their Members back home as much as possible. "The public expects Members of Congress to commute … But that brings a problem of not being able to know everybody in the House," said one. As another put it, "If there's not a vote on the floor, nobody's here. That's what the public demands. They want you back home. The media expects that as well. … I go home and wear that as a badge of honor to say, 'I'm not up there to get settled in.'"

And campaigns know that, so when Members bring their families to live in DC and not in their districts, that becomes fodder for 30-second ads that lambaste these Members for ignoring their districts and not being "one of us." Several Members talked about the difficulty of getting attacked if they don't come back to their district every week. One Member almost wistfully noted that relationships would improve "if we'd stop disparaging people who do move their families" to DC.

Another Disincentive: Cost of Living

Money, too, is an issue. Many Members can't afford to keep two residences. "It's hard to maintain a house in your home district and then maintain a place here … and try to travel back and forth. It's certainly a good salary based on what most people make, but most people don't have to maintain two homes," said one Member. One Member who brought his family to DC and maintained two residences put it this way: "rubbing nickels together is not easy."

The Congressional Schedule Diminishes Opportunities

Despite their expressed desire to form relationships with other Members and to build bridges across the partisan divide, the very demands and dynamics of their political lives keeps far too many of them from doing that. "The biggest problem I've had in the 20 years I've been here is making friends on the other side of the aisle. Not because I don't like them or because … it has nothing to do with political philosophy. It has to do with my life and their lives are so much quicker now than they used to be. … There's no down time."

The schedule is specifically designed to accommodate Members who travel back and forth. But that makes it even more difficult for those whose families stay in Washington especially if the Members are expected to be back in their districts over the weekend – all of which creates even less of an incentive for their families to live in DC.

"Good Lord, why would I bring my family here? Because I come in on a Monday night, and then … we're out of here on Thursday. If we come in on Tuesday, we're out of here on Friday. … I'm voting at night. I'm not having time with my family. And then because you've squeezed everything into the other two days … I've got half a dozen or a dozen receptions I have to go to. And many nights we're in session late. … There's no way you could bring your family here and have any time with them." One Member spoke for many: "The reality is that the lifestyle of this institution is not sustainable for a young family."

Another Competing Priority: Raising Money

Nor is it just late-night votes and evening receptions that dominate their time. Raising money, as one Member put it, "takes such an extraordinary amount of time, where it's crowding out other work." Some describe a culture in which Members leave the office in the early evening and head to call centers. "You are always raising money, and you're always dialing for dollars." The time spent on that, they say, also keeps them from socializing.

How Political Polarization Compounds the Problem

Circumstances, schedules and obliging constituents aren't the only reasons why Member relationships suffer. They also fall victim to the rampant political polarization that leads even well-intended Members to distrust the motives of those in the opposing party. As one Member described it, polarization feeds into a political culture in which "all they need to know" about another Member is whether they are for or against a particular issue.

Ideally, most Members would respect and listen to one another, but as one put it, "I don't know that there is a magic wand." The reality is quite different: "Far too often, and I'm watching it as it happens, where while a member is talking, they're not being listened to. The rebuttal is being formulated. So, you don't really have an understanding of what that person is trying to get across." In a hyper-polarized environment, posturing and scoring points become the norm, listening and understanding the exception.

The result is that Members who try getting together will sometimes resort to cloak and dagger tactics so as not to be seen together. One described how he and another Member "had to arrive at separate times, sit at a table in the corner and then leave separately. He would have a staff member and I would have staff member to take notes. He had to make sure it was in a place that no one could see us. I thought, 'This is ridiculous.' I felt like it was like the envelope drop for the Russian spies. Couldn't be seen doing it. That's the kind of thing."

Leadership Needs to Do More

Members are under no illusions about one of leadership's primary roles: to maximize the power and strength of its caucus. Indeed, Members expect nothing less. But they also see the downside – that it can too often come at the expense of the bipartisan relationships that are critical to building a healthy institution and necessary for tackling the larger problems facing our country.

A congressional culture that prioritizes power and winning over bipartisan solutions leaves the work of nourishing relationships to individual Member initiatives. "Both sides of the aisle are, I think, equally guilty of trying to score points and having victories and doing it their way. I don't want to say that it's impossible to do, but it's very difficult. So, then it's left to Members. It's left to Members to do on their own," one said.

What these Members are saying is that leadership must do more to foster relationships which they believe will mitigate the institutional dysfunction. Said one Member, "I don't think we learned the lessons so much on how to build relationships and get things done, but we continued to run a less than optimally functioning system and end up with the same kind of results. It's not like it was tried and found wanting; it was found difficult and left untried … How do you get out of that? Well, by leadership saying, 'You're going to work together.'"

The bottom line, according to many of these Members? "If the leadership of each party would really see good relationships as goal, there are things that they can do to set the tone," said one. Or as another put it, "If people really saw that they could elect leaders who would say, 'My job is to get something done, and you all are going to work this. We can win if we get something done.' As opposed to just, 'Beat the other side into submission.' This stand would work."

Making the Best of It: How Some Make Connections

Despite the many political and structural impediments they face in forming relationships, many Members find ways to do so and use that to create as much bipartisan understanding and comity as possible – all with the goal of getting the nation's work done and accomplishing goals on behalf of their own congressional districts.

Most frequently cited are congressional delegations and trips, known as CODELs. The public may not understand their value, and some may view them as "boondoggles," but to Members of Congress they are a lifeline toward collegiality. "You build some pretty strong relationships" on CODELs, one said. "When you travel with somebody, you get to know them, and then all the other stuff kind of goes away," said another. "I can say to you that one of the only areas where I actually got to know Members of the other side was through trips," another said. Added another, "I found out that you become closer friends with other Members that you travel with more than in any other way. … Some of the most valuable things I've done since I've been in Congress."

One Democratic Member summed up the value of CODELs: "I will tell you unequivocally, the CODELs in my life were the best things. Of course, I do think it's important for Members of Congress to travel the world. … But the most important thing to happen at every CODEL is I get to be friendly with one or more attending Republicans."

Caucuses too play an important role, binding Members with common interests and goals. "They're bipartisan groups, that when you're in one of those breakfast meetings, you think we could conquer the world. We could do anything. … But there are not enough of them that happen, and the schedule is so crazy, that when you try to schedule something, people can't make it, and then it's left by the boards."

Similarly, committee work provides Members with opportunities to work together and find out more about one another – especially when they work on bills with broad bipartisan appeal. Field hearings in particular bring Members together – much like CODELs – and have the added benefit of helping Members learn about each other and each other's districts.

In some cases Members will simply travel to another's district, tour the community and meet with their constituents: "If you're working together in committee you ought to be able to work together in a home community too. I've recently seen some members that you know are from different parts of the country that

are going to different states with their Democrat or Republican colleague and really seeing a difference between their communities."

Other Members mentioned how they seek out opportunities in the House gym. "A lot of bills are from people who I've gotten to know from the gym," one said. Some Members talked about bipartisan dinners, past retreats, the bipartisan and bicameral women's softball team, even what one referred to as a "date night" that years ago paired Members from each party.

As one member reminded us of the importance of relationships: "Once you develop those personal relationships ... and I really feel that a good part of what I was able to accomplish either as committee chair, or just with in getting stuff for the district, is because of those relationships. And they work. They really work. People will listen to you. You've got to gain their trust. You've got to show them that you're real."

These good intentions and outreach efforts are all a start, but beyond them "there's nothing really drawing people together," as one lamented. With Members not living in DC, added another, "we need to figure out some way of people getting to know each other."

Chapter 3: The Bipartisan Dilemma

The near universal desire for civility and better relations that Members expressed derives in part from a core belief: that the institution will work better – and the nation will benefit – if Congress acts in a more bipartisan way. To be sure, some say that bipartisanship is a necessity to get anything done. To get most bills through the Senate, or to move bills on suspension in the House – all need support from both parties.

But to these Members, bipartisanship is far more meaningful than merely the functional role it plays in getting things done. It is the core ingredient in making Congress the institution that best reflects on our democracy. Said one Member, "I think a great Congress is one that really focuses on the most important issues of our time. I think both parties can agree on some of the major problems that we have today. It's getting both parties to actually sit down and come together on a solution."

Many noted the critical role of bipartisanship in some of our nation's landmark legislation – and how bipartisanship creates better and more lasting outcomes. As one put it: "The civil rights bills in the '60s were bipartisan. So usually it is better when you have these big, game changing bills that they be bipartisan, because then you'll get more of a balance in there."

Members from both parties say that sitting down in an atmosphere of respect must actively be encouraged by leadership and carried forward by the rank and file: "There are some major issues that both parties I think have been close to resolving. Both parties realize that they're major issues, but it's going to take the political will not only of the president and leaders of both parties and both houses, but it's going to be rank and file members that are willing to put their careers on the line for the better good of the country versus their own political positions."

It's not that a more bipartisan Congress approach will solve every big problem. But it will get much closer than is currently the case. "Just being bipartisan doesn't mean it's necessarily good," one said, "but I just think it's always better when you're collaborating and listening to both sides. So that you understand at least some of the arguments against what you're doing as well as why you're doing it."

More Bipartisan in Practice?

Many Members argue that the House is more bipartisan in practice than is commonly understood. "There's far more bipartisanship than people realize on the outside," one said, adding that he always seeks out support from across the aisle when trying to pass legislation. "There is more of a working relationship today than the media wants to allow for," said another who echoes what others were saying.

One noted that the Members featured in the media "are really not the ones who are getting things done," noting that "the rest of us are worker bees, and I believe that good legislation for the country long-term, regardless of what it is, is always better if it is bipartisan." He cited an important human trafficking bill that passed with bipartisan support: "You don't hear about that legislation because it's just not publicized, and I really believe, right now, today, we worked … very well on bipartisan issues."

Bipartisanship presently works best, many say, when they treat issues as regional problems to be solved rather than agendas to be imposed. "When you come at the issues from a problem-solving way," one said, "it's easier to get a bipartisan coalition together." What this involves is focusing on the resources available and "trying to depoliticize something that obviously still could be political."

For example, shared one: "I think there can be more that can be done by individual members that are willing to work with members of the other party that live within their region. Town halls together. Let the public see that Republicans and Democrats can stand on a stage together and have a conversation rather than talking past each other."

As a member reflected: "The same can also be said about some of our national emergencies. Some of the hurricanes that we've seen that have devastated the east coast. Well, the west coast we've had some fires that have devastated or earthquakes. You have bills that are addressing some of these national emergencies, nothing better than to have members see what those same challenges are in different states that force the two to work together."

One Member described how her bipartisan outreach as a Member of the majority paid dividends when she ended up in the minority. "I didn't know that by reaching across the aisle, in the majority, that when in the minority that I would benefit from a reciprocity."

How Some Work in Support of Bipartisanship

Another argued that the most productive legislators are those not willing "to let the perfect be the enemy of the good. … If you're going to be a purist on everything, when you need people to back you, you will have alienated so many people, that you're not going to get any help." That doesn't mean one should abandon their values or compromise "for the sake of reaching across the aisle and compromising," and it's important to advocate for one's beliefs, but "you don't let your ideology or partisanship prevent you from reaching across the aisle when you've got a common goal."

Among minority party Members, many try to avoid committees in which the chair is "unwilling to compromise on anything," said another, who added that if a committee chair "is willing to compromise, you can get things done." A subcommittee chair described his bipartisan working relationship with the ranking Member: "We got along on everything. Where we had a little different thought, we sat down, we worked it out. We talked about how we were going to proceed with the committee. Were we going to do hearings? Whether we were going to do roundtables. Whether we were going to do one-on-ones. How we were going to do this." "I don't understand," this Member added, why this can't be more "widespread."

Members have made efforts to normalize bipartisanship and make it part of the standard operating procedure in Congress. One spoke of a freshman class retreat in Williamsburg where Members made a pledge to "endeavor in any possible way to do bipartisan legislation, bipartisan resolutions, letters to the President, letters to the executive branch, whatever you might be doing." If this Member wanted to introduce a bill, she told her staff not to move ahead till they found a Member from the other party.

Less Bipartisan in Practice Than Some Want to Admit?

If so many Members embrace a bipartisan impulse and believe the institution works better because of it, why doesn't it seem that way? These Members say that on bills charting the future direction of our country, bipartisanship is rarely to be found. Many who tout bipartisanship even acknowledge that it fell apart completely when their parties passed major bills on healthcare and taxes – and in some cases they refused to take responsibility for the partisan vote and instead blamed the minority party, or they basically said the bill was too important to compromise.

Bipartisan Optics Versus Partisan Reality

One said that too many Members talk about working together because it makes them look reasonable, but not on anything important. "It's a total joke." Others said that bipartisanship arises after crises but rarely at other times. "Unfortunately, all of those moments tend to be pretty fleeting and not last very long. We kind of retrench." Said another: "It always surprises me, pleasantly surprises me, when we can compromise on things of a significant nature. They're almost always minimal." One Republican noted how his party celebrated the 1,175 bills they passed in the previous Congress, but then candidly added: "I wonder how many of those are entirely partisan. I guarantee on all the important issues they're entirely partisan."

Some simply say that bipartisanship is more an illusion than a reality nowadays – a good talking point but not at all reflective of reality. "I've come to believe that, at least for the times we're in, we should stop talking about compromise. Actually, the public says they want it and they really don't. They want everyone else to compromise, but you to stick. … I would say the 100 percent rating from an interest group, or zero, you're way better off. If you're 75 or 80 percent you're unreliable. … That's a bad place we've gotten to."

One Member described the irony of bipartisan rhetoric. Particularly for some who hold power, bipartisanship to them becomes "you vote for my stuff" rather than "let's negotiate and find common ground." Or as another Member said, "In my observation, there is a group of, there's a voice that says if I don't get 100 percent of what I want, then I'm not going to support it."

No Reward for Compromise

Said one Member, "there's no reward for compromise, because now that we are in a polarized environment, if Party A says, 'it's great,' Party B has to say, 'it's not great.'" Compromise has been "vilified the last ten years," another said, "and we were assaulted by our base for even suggesting that we could compromise."

Some say there aren't enough Members willing to step up and take the lead. "There has to be more people… that actually try to engage. Not add to the flame-throwing, but engage, accept that the other side has a valid viewpoint, and try to find some actual compromise that works into legislative language." Or as another Member described it, "the incentive structures have changed very rapidly, and I would say they've changed in a way which deteriorates our political culture and the art of compromise."

Compromise Could Be Politically Risky

In fact, more than one described how talking or socializing with a Member of the other party could, in some districts, taint them at home as consorting with the enemy. One noted how viewers watching C- SPAN might call or email their office asking why the Member is talking with an ideological opponent. That Member described a dinner with a Member of the other party: they had to arrive separately, leave separately, and find a table in the corner of the restaurant. "If people do agree to get together," one said, "they say it has to be somewhere where no one can see them." Said another, "Your loyalty is to your party. … The institutional interests are a lot less now to a lot of Members."

Acquiring and Retaining Power Undermines Bipartisanship

Members acknowledge that any bipartisan impulse they have too often loses out to the partisan imperative of keeping or obtaining power. A Member lays it on the line: "if you are not in power, all you're thinking about is gaining power. If you're in power, all you're thinking about is keeping power. If you're not in power, you

don't want to see the other side get any credit, because my God, they're going to be able to use that to reestablish their power base. So, if you can point to people being ineffective and unsuccessful and don't get a result, it's to your political advantage." Or as one member who served in a leadership position admitted, "I will stipulate … that the first thing that leaders are thinking of is maintaining the majority. There's no doubt."

What these Members are saying, effectively, is there are few incentives to pass big bipartisan bills that could end up helping a Member of the other party. "When you are in a competitive seat," one said, "the other side actually will look and try to make sure you're not crossing the finish line too much legislatively." Another noted that no one wants to give an opposing Member in a swing district a talking point about their bipartisanship. A lot of Members are told, "Hey, these people are on our target zone for being opposed in the next election. We have a chance of winning this seat, so don't go out of your way to help these Members, either with co-authoring bills or supporting … their initiatives to make it look like they're getting support."

Or as one Member put it: "The sad thing is, in the end there are those Members that are more moderate, who can think a little differently. Those are the ones we target because they're in seats … that are more independent, give us an opportunity if we retake it to reclaim the majority. And so … you reinforce the partisanship in the interest of having the power."

Two Members put it more bluntly. One said that elections have become "Gotcha" moments "because the power can be easily swayed from one party to the next." On bipartisanship, the other said: "Not only is it not rewarded, but it's punished, because the money raised by both political parties is used mostly to destroy the character and reputation of those in the middle on the other side."

Safe Districts Reinforce Polarization

Getting "primaried", as one Member put it, is "a verb now," and what he meant is that a large number of districts throughout the country are either so red or so blue – R plus 20 or D plus 20, as Members call them – that the only danger to an incumbent is facing a primary challenge for not being what one Member called "doctrinaire enough."

One Member summed up the prevailing view: "We all know 20, 40 years ago that it was all about running to the center in the general. Now it's not about that. People are more worried about their flanks. With these districts becoming brighter in each of their colors, we see it. Who can out-liberal themselves in their district, who can out-conservative, because you're worried about the primary? That's where the race is. Here's my talking point. When you can go to Washington and throw bombs and come home to a ticker tape parade because you're the bomb thrower, that's kind of the environment that we are operating in. Remember, people want you to go to Washington and stir it up, drain the swamp, raise hell. Coming back home and saying I'm really working in a bipartisan way … What? I think that's some of the challenges, because the districts have become more polarized."

Or as one Member put it, "I'm gonna be farther right or I'm gonna be farther left to ensure that I can get elected in the primary."

Getting primaried also worries more moderate Members from swing districts. To win these primaries, these Members may say things to satisfy base voters that their purple districts might find too extreme. "If you walk too far into the wilderness of the other political party's issues, you could potentially face a primary." Whether in a safe or swing district, this Member said, there are few incentives to moderate.

Another Member related a conversation she had with a colleague from across the aisle in which they were bemoaning the polarization that has taken over the institution. He told her how he gets pushed in his very red district to become "more extreme." As she recounted it, he told her how "Gerrymandering is an issue there. … We're at a point now where that has made it really hard. People don't understand, we each only have one vote. We're sent here to try to hammer out something that is good for the whole country, not to defeat each other. It's got to stop being zero sum. It's got to stop being red team versus blue team."

A number of Members placed the blame on the gerrymandering involved in creating as many partisan advantages as possible, but others said it simply reflects the increasing polarization and siloing of our society and politics. "I think it's more reflective that the differences across the country have been sharpened," said one. "It's not so much that the body has changed as it is that people come reflecting very different views, shaped by their places." Said another, "you have those people come into Congress who are polarized because those constituents elected them to be polarized." Constituents tell these Members "never give in, never compromise."

Or as one Member summed it up, "I think culture speaks a lot more to our polarization than political parties. I think our political parties have just organized our cultural grievances, and as a consequence … you can't compromise someone's grievance."

How Media Compound the Problem

Almost every Member called the media a problem. Whatever impulse they have to act in a more bipartisan manner is constantly ignored and undermined by a media business model and culture – particularly on cable – that rewards conflict, inflammatory statements, and the reporting of grievance. "People forget it's a business. The business model has changed," one said.

This sentiment is universally shared. To them, the media gain eyeballs, clicks, advertising revenues, and profits from "selling controversy." It's "the controversy that sells the advertising, not the cooperation," as one Member put it. Another stated that "the media magnifies the problem. And it's interesting at times to listen to the media get very sanctimonious and complain about the dysfunction of government. But at the same time they profit off it." Or as another graphically put it, "Look, politics is entertainment now more than it's ever been, and so every single night, MSNBC and FOX need to hook those viewers up to the IV and sell them something, and usually it's through the funnel of outrage and hypocrisy to the other side."

One described the disincentives media create for bipartisanship: "You may take a vote that's designed as part of a grand compromise to help a friend or to get something in return that you're seeing down the road, but turn on the television, you're a traitor or you sold out your values or whatever. After a few times, … you get reluctant to do that." Or as another put it, "most of the incentives for an elected leader as it relates to the media is to go out and say highly partisan comments that inflame your base, and not in any way stay focused on the truth."

To those who say there's more bipartisanship than people realize, they blame the media for not reporting when Members work across the aisle and produce results. "The media wouldn't cover anything. We tried so hard to get the media to show that we were working together, and we're trying to work together and put our bills out. They didn't care. They don't want to hear about how we are working together. They wanted the usual suspects." Said another, if the media saw "some of the most partisan Democrats and partisan Republicans sitting and talking and trying to figure out how to solve a problem, … they wouldn't report it,

other than unless somebody took a swing at somebody." Working across the aisle, one said, "doesn't make good copy."

But it's more than ignoring bipartisan efforts that concerns Members about the media. To them, the media are "looking for a story … And conflict is stories." Conflict and controversy have become the grammar of news coverage, and hyping it is what drives viewers to their shows and sites. "How do they get people to watch their show?" one asked. "They want controversy. They don't want Members of either body to be too thoughtful, because that's not exciting. They prefer, not always but more often than not, … to have two Members on TV calling each other names. … The result is everyone thinks we hate each other. Everybody thinks we do nothing but call each other names."

What emerges is a media culture in which "the crazy talking heads … are guiding much of the political discourse in our country today." If there were a way to step outside their glare, "there is a lot of common ground where you can come to agreement on things." Said another, if "you turn off outside communications, whatever they are, Members of Congress would work pretty well together, on both sides of the aisle."

Summing up, one Member said that media may even be far more important than districting in dividing Members and pulling them apart.

But Members Are Also Complicit in this Media Culture

But not all the blame belongs to the media, many Members concede. The fault, they say, must be shared by Members who choose to feed the media's need for conflict. "You have a lot of Members on both sides of the aisle that love the TV cameras and would like to say something shocking to get a rise out of the media or a rise in their district versus working productively to have a real dialogue, a real conversation about an issue," one said. Members who stoke conflict and tension in committee sessions are "trying to get on the nightly news," another said. With "outrageous behavior," said another, "they get home and they get applauded for it. What are they going to do? They're going to come back and double down."

As one concluded, "the threat to Congress" is from the outside pressures fueled in part by many Members who seek media visibility and fame. "It is definitely true," he said, "that if you turn those television cameras on, people's behavior changes, and I think that's unfortunate." And the threat to Congress is a threat to our nation: "I just think it renders Congress less effective at a pretty dangerous time to not be effective. There are looming issues that simply won't fix themselves. … There's a lot hanging in the balance."

Social Media Also Fuels Polarization

While most view cable news as the main culprit, many expressed dismay at the toxic culture that social media breed. They acknowledge the potential for social media to play a constructive role – just as they do with quality journalism. And they see benefits that people are engaging democracy and providing feedback through social media. "The more people know about Members of Congress and where they stand, … that's good."

But they also see social media magnifying the discord and sowing even greater polarization than what we already have. Social media exacerbates the conflict model of TV, creating ideological and partisan echo chambers that confirm biases, create conflict, and undercut bipartisan efforts. "Social media," one said, "has created a polarizing effect on our society. It didn't start with Congress, but it very much affects Congress." Said another, through social media "a limited number of angry people get a massive amplifier." The ugliness

in our politics today, one said, is "the price we pay for the democratization of the Internet and the flow of information."

And just as Members find temptation when cameras are around, their immediate access to social media gives them a chance to express grievances and magnify arguments before passions are able to cool and Members are able to talk through differences. "After a hearing or after a meeting, instead of turning to our colleagues to say what do you think, let's let this settle, let's negotiate it, we run outwardly to the social media, which really is not conducive to thoughtful deliberation."

One Member described it this way: "We're in a conference talking about what we're going to do this week," said one, "and people are tweeting out 'this is what we're doing,' and then our base gets all excited and says, 'we're against that,' and … you can't do that because you won't be able to raise money because your base is going to be against you, and so it just polarizes us even more." Or as another put it, social media allows "people to establish their own brand and platform and be rewarded for it. The more extreme positions are rewarded more."

The immediacy of social media can distort congressional priorities. A tweet or post can lead to a surge in calls and emails, which forces Members to focus on "the issue of the day versus … what is really important on some policy." And it undermines relationships and compromise: "I think that the social media intensity component of how constituents … and activists would engage their elected representatives made it more challenging for Members to want to compromise, or to appear that they weren't compromising their ideals or their principles in order to make progress.

Chapter 4: Institutional Dysfunction

Is Congress Working as Designed? Some Say Yes

To some Members, Congress may have many problems, but despite the many jeremiads about its dysfunction, it largely works as it was designed. "It's survived all these years, part of it due to the checks and balances, the incrementalism. It can't get much better than that, and it's still working." What these Members argue is that the Founders created a system to channel, curate, sometimes cool and ultimately reflect and moderate popular passions, needs, and interests – and to do it in a way that balances the competing interests and factions of our country. "The system is designed to be an adversarial process so that you push back and against each other," one said, suggesting that the partisanship we see today, notwithstanding its intensity, isn't all that different from what our Founders imagined.

Further, even within a 'designed adversarial process', there are some who say that they still see the glass as half-full: "I would tell people that you may think from watching the media that the Democrats and Republicans are at each other's throats 100% of the time in Washington. I'd say that's really not true, it's only 50% of the time. But people don't even, they don't even know that. They don't even know that, that there's a lot of collegiality, camaraderie, bipartisan impulses among many people in the House."

Many Say No: Dysfunction Rules

But even those who put today's Congress in the context of a vibrant and at times unruly system still worry that the institution today is close to a breaking point – that dysfunction has overcome function, that the glue of coming together to solve big problems has degraded to the point of no return. "I think that our Constitution set up our rules in Congress to be dysfunctional. It should not be easy to pass bills," said one. "But at the same time, we gotta be working much better than we are today."

Members from both parties generally agree that the institution is not well. "I don't know how anybody can say it's working well. I mean, we're just not getting results," said one. "Other than these must-pass pieces of legislation and keeping the government open," said another, "there's not a whole lot we do." To some, the real energy in Congress is in raising money, keeping power, and getting reelected. "There's the old saying on Election Day: you go from part of the solution to part of the problem immediately."

Lost Civility

In today's hyperpolarized environment, an "us vs. them" mentality pervades, and it becomes far easier to dehumanize those with whom we disagree. Civility suffers greatly. "We aren't really an example for other Americans" when it comes to civility, one Member observed.

It may well be that Congress is as much a reflection as a catalyst for our caustic political culture, but regardless of how it started, many Members find it deeply harmful. "I don't like some of the rhetoric that comes out of our public officials today, where the other side can't just be wrong, they have to be evil. It's not helpful." To that Member, "the thing that I don't know that I ever completely got over is the ugliness of some of it." As another put it, "when you treat your opponent with contempt, that inspires other reactions that are far more injurious to our body politic."

One Member noted that politics has always been nasty, but with our relentless media echo chamber people are constantly exposed to it. In fact, Members nearly universally agreed that the media have changed the

dynamics of Congress, reinforcing the divisiveness and accelerating the decline in civility and disdain for opposing views. Context and perspective dissolve before the cameras. "Nothing's taken in context today," one said. "There is zero context in terms of the immediate reaction" on television or social media. Added another, "after you take the first vote, you're already in the cross hairs of the social media, the Twitterverse, just saying I can't believe he took that vote."

Said another, "…Cameras are there, and the media's there to exploit the process. When we walk out of Republican conference, and we go down the hall, there's a battery of media. There's 12, 15 media people, probably more, some days, and eight or ten cameras, and they're looking for a counterpoint. And they put that mic in front of you, and they know who they can go to. Time and again to get a counterpoint. To take a punch at the Speaker. Take a punch at the President. They got a story. They're looking for a story. That's all they want's a story. I don't care anything about open process. They just want a story."

The incivility relentlessly amplified by media wears many Members down and leaves them with the impression that there's little choice but to dig into their partisan foxholes. After seeing the stream of media vitriol "you get reluctant" to express an openness to compromise. It puts people more in their own little camp, like I've got to stay here, I can't reach out."

The question to many is how to undo the damage. "I am not a believer that you have to tear somebody else's house down to build your own. Unfortunately, the art of personal destruction is now sport. You see it in negative campaign ads. You see it in society. That is very concerning, the direction. How do you turn it around in Congress? How do you turn it around in society as a whole?" Or as another put it, change would mean "not being rewarded for saying vicious stuff."

Zero Sum Culture

Part of the problem, some say, is the preeminence of power over policy. For some Members, one said, "their rewards are not solving problems; their rewards are stopping the other side from getting anything done, either so that they can get power or so that they can keep power." So, there's a mentality that if the other side gets a win or credit, your side loses. "Part of what I think we need as a restored political culture is the ability to not view politics as a zero-sum game. And it is very much a zero-sum game right now. It is, 'you benefit at my demise.' And that's not healthy," one Member said. It comes down to reelection and gaining or losing power: "It's always the people that'll be: 'Well, yeah, but if you have her or him succeed, then that'll help their election next time, and we're planning on spending $5 million to take them out, so why would we want to help them?'" said one.

That culture of constantly gaining advantage plays out in bills that are designed to send messages and put the other side on the defensive, not to solve problems. "We're using the floor … more as opportunities for messaging, ... messaging our differences as opposed to messaging … our commonality."

And some see payback – for past slights and power plays – driving the dynamics in Congress today. "Much of the back-and-forth between the parties is essentially living in a rear-view mirror, where one grievance is then meted. One procedural grievance is then meted out in the next switch of the gavel. And that's a breakdown in the process, in my view."

Playing to the Extremes

Most Members, even those who themselves hold strong ideological perspectives, believe that Congress and particularly each side's leadership are too beholden to the fringes and extremes of their respective parties. "Many Members of Congress, on both sides, … are afraid of fringe elements in their bases. Many Members of the leadership in Congress are afraid of their Members. Fear, fear, it's all about fear. So, I think that leads to much of the paralysis around here. They're just all afraid."

It's a widely shared view among Members that the extremes hold the institution, its leaders and Members hostage, and it gets manifested in several ways. One is on legislation. "We have these folks fighting to keep their purity and we have a big, huge issue that 70 percent of the country probably agrees with 90 percent of the stuff in any particular bill, and we don't allow the 70, who agree with the 90, to even get their vote, because we have everybody on the ends griping about the 10 percent in there that they don't like," one explained.

"You hear … a lot of people say, they want all or nothing, all or nothing. And they're not going to get it all, and they know it, but they'll take nothing," one Member said. Echoing that sentiment, another noted: "If you can keep convincing your base that something's an issue over and over and over and over, through the media outlets that they choose to watch, so every single night it's … more of the same thing, you look at the other party and you say, 'That party's against that,' … and so therefore, when you're trying to compromise on a legitimate issue that the other party doesn't even view as legitimate, you're never gonna get any votes, 'cause there's no incentive structure to crossover."

One Member summed it up, calling this all-or-nothing culture "a disgrace to our political system and it's a disgrace to what the objective of this institution is, which is to wrestle through that stuff and have everybody say, 'Yeah, I don't like all of it, but it's better than what we have now.' We've lost the incentive to say, 'It's better than what we have now.'"

Playing to the extremes leads to two scenarios when bills come up for consideration. With bills that express a broad consensus but don't include provisions or cuts that the ideological extremes want, many Members who like the bill still vote no to protect themselves from charges that they've deviated from ideological purity. "We call it the Hope Yes/Vote No Caucus. You hope it passes, but you're going to vote no."

In other cases, leadership and bill sponsors accept provisions from the extremes as a way to mollify them, but then the extremes still oppose the bill. "We take the advice and input from people who are telling us what should go into the bills, but they have no intention of voting for them."

Indeed, it's not just the "average Member" who must constantly navigate what one called the "bomb throwers." Leadership must as well. One Member described how party leaders must sometimes toe the line or remain silent on issues pushed by the extremes – "because they fear being called out, and then ultimately maybe have their leadership position put in jeopardy." This is "empowering to the ideological extremes," as one Member put it, and it diminishes leadership's ability to advance compromise or bipartisan legislation. The extremes, as one Member said, are not giving leadership "any rope in order to actually try and negotiate something larger." As one Republican Member noted, if Speaker Ryan sat down with then Minority Leader Pelosi and crafted a bipartisan solution, "there would have been a motion to vacate the chair. He would have been thrown out. He couldn't sit down and talk to Pelosi."

Magnifying the problem is the ability of these extremes to rouse outside groups which then agitate their grassroots. These groups apply "litmus tests" to issues, and when they raise money and arouse their supporters, "it definitely paralyzed … Members in how they thought about certain issues or what they should do." The key, this Member said, is to find "ways to prevent the bomb throwers from generating outside activist support." That will free up "the average Member to do what's right or be willing to take risks and vote one way, even though they know" these activists won't agree.

The Leadership Dilemma

Members across the board express respect and admiration for their party leaders, praising their character and appreciating the difficult jobs they have. They also grasp the fundamental dilemma of leadership: that the priority leaders place on keeping their Members safe and either maintaining or obtaining majority status often works against the bipartisanship and compromise essential to legislation that addresses the common good. Members want their party to be in the majority, but they also worry about the workings of the institution, and they recognize that processes and decisions put in place to keep or obtain majority status may well undermine the health of Congress.

One Consequence: Avoiding Votes

This dilemma creates a number of consequences. One is that leadership tries to avoid any votes that may put their most vulnerable Members in jeopardy – which means they are less likely to bring significant bills to the floor, even many bills that pass out of committees.

Let's say there's a compromise bill. Leadership doesn't want to risk a vote that might arouse the wrath of the party base and potentially bring on a primary challenge to a Member who wants to support the bill. Or let's say there's a bill that the more extreme Members of a party prefer. In that case, leadership doesn't want their swing district Members alienating the vocal party base by voting against such a measure – or, inversely, they don't want these Members facing attacks from the other party for supporting a bill that can be labeled outside the mainstream.

"They want their party to stay in power. They recognize that vulnerable Members can't lose their seats," said one Member. Noted another, "they want to protect Members who may lose the primary … Each party is worried about protecting within their membership, people who would in fact, if pressed to vote on an issue. … The disconnect has become all about controlling the gavel." One Member asked somewhat rhetorically: "What good is the majority if you're not going to use it" to get things done?

Another Consequence: Unending Continuing Resolutions

Because so few major bills make it to the floor, Congress too often defaults to end-of-year bills and "unending continuing resolutions … that come at the last minute, that … are thousands of pages long, that nobody's had a chance to read," which "makes it internally dysfunctional," as one Member described it. Members expressed frustration that they are being asked to cast a vote on a bill with little knowledge of what's in it – "you are forced … with up-and-down votes on large packages where you didn't feel like you had a lot of input."

Another Consequence: Stifling Ideas, Silencing Voices

What leaders aim to do is keep tight control over bills when they reach the floor, and they do that by limiting the rules of debate and the ability to offer amendments. Some Members acknowledged that closed rules – which prohibit amendments other than those proposed by the committee reporting the bill – can at times make sense, especially to avoid chaos, posturing and amendment overload on the floor when considering a simple bill. They also say that committees typically allow all their Members to offer amendments, so much of the debating goes on there.

But they almost universally agreed that leadership overuses closed rules as a way to protect their Members, and the result is a near silencing of legislative voices and ideas that some – especially in the minority party – find deeply demoralizing. As one Member put it, "the biggest pushback" against more open rules and amendments is that leadership "doesn't want to lose control of the floor. They don't want the other side offering" amendments that could force tough votes. Or as another said, it's all done at "the will of the majority."

To many, finding ways to allow for more amendments would help to restore Member morale and confidence in the institution – as well as its role in democracy. "If an idea is good, and it comes from a minority, it ought to have an open debate, be discussed, and voted on. That would be good," one Member said. "And you wouldn't be worried about who gets credit, and what gets done. There would be a more equal opportunity. But that would take a lot of pixie dust."

One recalled an earlier era when open rules were far more the standard: "Everything got its moment. … And it was arduous. We were here Monday through Friday listening to everybody's cockamamie ideas. But in there were some bold, new, important, visionary ideas that got their hearing. Today less than five percent of the measures that come before the Congress come up under an open rule." The bottom line, as another Member put it, is to "put those bills on the floor, have debates and then have votes and hold us accountable."

So if Members feel they have little voice, and if everything is controlled by committee chairs and leadership, "this disempowers every Member. What do you see? You see people going outside, going to TV, going to the Internet to make their point." The very same media grandstanding Members seem to resent may be a function of their inability to have a say or at least a vote on an idea important to them and their constituents.

Earmarks

Some years back earmarks seemed to symbolize congressional dysfunction at its worst: backroom deals involving little scrutiny or accountability that gave Members funding for projects, businesses, or organizations in their districts. Derided as "pork," Congress eliminated them early this decade. But the issue has now come full circle. Earmarks essentially linked a Member's ability to provide for their districts with larger bills designed to advance the common good. Eliminating them, many say, has reduced incentives for collaboration and compromise.

As many Members pointed out, legislation and negotiation are by nature transactional – particularly for Members of Congress who want to do as much for their districts as possible. Earmarks, they said, were a lubricant for compromises and deals. Not having them "was a very significant decoupling of incentives… from a legislative point of view." What earmarks did, many acknowledged, was entice Members from across the aisle to support legislation their leadership didn't particularly like – and it also gave Members a local win

that helped them neutralize criticism from casting a difficult vote. As one Republican quipped, "I would have done a lot for Obama if I got $30 million" for a local road.

This isn't to say that Members seek a return of the backroom deal making that characterized earmarks of old. But they do see earmarks as a way to break the partisan gridlock and get things done. "I think, upon reflection, if there would have been ways to reform the earmark process, that would have insulated it from abuses, while at the same time creating the types of incentives that have Members voting for bills."

Another agreed: "Certainly earmarks were one of the ways that you had Members working together to pass bills. While I do think that there were some abuses with earmarks, I think that it is our constitutional obligation for the House, for Congress to control the purse strings. I do think that there's an obligation from Members to be involved in the funding issues and I think that if every Member had a stake in that you'd have every Member working together better than we do."

The key, one said, is to "make them transparent." They become both a carrot and stick, often more effective than the leverage leadership has now. "Better than threatening them with losing a committee assignment, which makes them a martyr."

Money

While Members from both parties support greater transparency in campaign finance – "the biggest problem with money … is the lack of transparency," one said – they also generally agree that raising money is a fact of life in Congress and that's not about to change in the foreseeable future.

And its impact is significant – on time, relationships, committee assignments, and legislative priorities. It "changes the way people can do the job," one said.

"You are always raising money, and you're always dialing for dollars," said one. "It's a constant thing." The need to raise money, said another, limits time Members have for socializing. It also takes away time and energy from what Members can do "for their district, or their own community." Added another, "you're working on fundraising when you go home a lot. You're working over here, you go across the street, you make phone calls, you do whatever you gotta do."

One even argued that a reason why leadership frowns upon open rules – allowing amendments on the floor – is it would limit "time to go across the street" to call centers where they raise money. "The closed rule accommodates the money in politics" by giving Members time to fundraise. "You have all these Members of Congress sitting over there in these call centers like a bunch of middle level telemarketers dialing for dollars instead of doing the work of the Congress."

But it's not just raising money for their own campaigns. It's raising it for the party committees: "At least on the Republican side, to the NRCC, there is a written down requirement and you are held accountable. They'll come up to you on the House ... Well, they won't come up to you on the House floor, but they'll catch you somewhere and give you a card that shows how much of an assessment you have and how much you've raised. I'm sure the Democrats have a similar procedure." Success in that can lead to committee chair appointments ("the "buying and selling of chairmanships," as one put it), priority and high-profile committee assignments ("there's a huge amount that you're required to raise to be on a committee"), and even getting a bill on the floor. "The best and easiest way" to get things done, one said, is to "raise a million dollars" for

the campaign committee, and then go to the Speaker and Majority leader and say you expect a vote on this resolution.

Many decry the corrosive effect of money on relationships among Members and the overall institutional culture – even if they don't know any way to avoid it. "Money in politics has all kinds of other effects," said one. "It discourages good people from running, it denigrates the entire process, it denigrates all the candidates, it distorts the truth. … You have to sit there and watch people just slandering and libeling the hell out of you, and there's nothing you can do about it. Except raise enough money of your own to make sure you can get your message out there. And counter the negative stuff they're saying about you."

Chapter 5: Committees – Part of the Solution or Part of the Problem?

Part of the Solution?

To many Members, committees and especially subcommittees provide a welcome counterbalance to the dysfunction they see in the rest of Congress. The democratic process works best, one said, "probably only at a much lower level, … possibly the subcommittee level, only because you have a chance to banter back and forth more openly and freely."

Members often spoke about bipartisan legislation that their committees took up, approved, and advocated. As one Member put it: "Compromise should not be a bad thing. If you've invested from that standpoint in putting together a piece of legislation, you've also spent a great deal of time talking with stakeholders, witnesses in committees to understand the intricacies of the bill. If it's a true compromise, then you had both parties involved in it as well. You should have the members who understand the legislation the most whether that's their authorship or co-authorship or their committee chair or ranking member of those committees that have invested in the issue."

For Members of the majority party, serving as a committee or subcommittee chair gave them "a great deal of influence in terms of how you're framing a debate. How you're treating other Members on the subcommittee. How you're interacting with the full committee. And I found it to be very invigorating." One Member found much more gratification as a subcommittee chair than serving in leadership: "I had a lot more success in moving things, and just getting things done. And there was much more joy … that I found than in essentially moving some other committee's work product."

And when relations are good between chairs and ranking Members – when they cooperate, negotiate in good faith, include Members from both parties in their deliberations – the committee experience can be a highlight of one's congressional experience. "I think committee chairmen and ranking Members collaborate more than their counterparts at the top of the parties … There's more compromise at the committee level," one stated.

Optimal, many say, is when the chair and ranking Member work closely together, "sit down and dispassionately evaluate legislation and search for common ground," even letting the ranking Member have some decision-making power on bills and hearings.

Or Part of the Problem?

But optimal is sometimes the exception, not the rule, particularly when the chair treats the committee as a fiefdom. Not all committees are run in a collegial way, some Members pointed out. "Committee chairs are very powerful," one said, and "if the chairman of the committee is not in favor" of a piece of legislation you support, "it's never going to see the light of day. Ever. That's just the reality of it." The trick is not to "get all mad about it," but "to go convince the committee chair that this is the greatest thing in the world." You can try to "go around the committee chair" by getting the Speaker or Minority Leader involved, but "you do that at your own peril." Another mentioned that some committee chairs wouldn't let minority Members offer amendments – and some even denied Members of the majority a chance to offer theirs. One Member noted that it's common knowledge which chairs disregard minority party voices or refuse to allow for compromise.

Committees can also exacerbate a larger criticism that rank-and-file Members have about Congress: that leadership – either committee or party leadership – determines when they can have a say and a voice. A number mentioned bills they wrote, refined, and then spent considerable time – even years – advocating for and seeking support. But they never got credit for authoring the legislation. Chairs instead commandeered the bills as their own, or gave them to favored Members, or leadership assigned authorship to help vulnerable Members in the caucus. Said one Member who accepted this as the price paid for accomplishing goals: "You do all the work and give someone else credit. It's amazing what you can get done. I hate doing it. I hate that I have to do it. But I also know that's how it gets done." This was by no means universal, and some chairs made sure to give credit where credit was due. But the fact that it happens was, to many, demoralizing.

That committee chairs have power does not mean they don't face obstacles as well. As one former chair noted, they need to move the bills their party wants; otherwise, they might not be renewed as chair. And if a chair wants a bill to reach the floor, they need to convince leadership and argue that it will benefit the party. And if leadership wants a provision to pass, they can circumvent committees and normal processes by getting it into "the omnibus spending bill," as one Member noted. "I just want to get it done and I've got the power at the end," he said, referring to leadership.

A few Members mentioned the power of committee and legislative staff, calling them gatekeepers and noting the influence they have in getting things done. "I think what's not talked about a lot is just how dependent we are on staff. … Committee staff becomes a repository of knowledge," said one. Another added that even when talking to a colleague on the floor, "I have no idea what staff is saying." One said that some staff Members can be "hyper-polarizing" once they get involved with a bill. "One of my chief frustrations was seeing the power of legislative staff, who aren't elected. Often you wouldn't know who was making decisions behind the scenes. And you'd find out later." To be sure, Members expressed deep gratitude toward their staff and respected the time and public service they perform. But as these comments suggest, some wondered if staff can at times assume a bunker mentality and worsen the polarization and partisanship that currently pervades Congress.

One Republican Member summed up the concerns many in both parties expressed: "I think that the committee process leaves a lot to be desired, the way in which we consider legislation. Where the lack of consideration, often you'll have stuff that's packaged. Like what the Democrats did with the ACA, with what we may have done with the tax bill, etc. There's really not a lot of nitty-gritty work that's done at the committee level. A lot of it is just the administration working with leadership, coming up with a plan, and then the members fall in line behind it."

And because many Members feel they don't have a voice in what gets considered and passed, they substitute posturing for legislative work. A Member offered up the following: "I think the committee structure is not particularly effective. I think that there's so much posturing that goes on. Everyone gets their five minutes to question a witness; can't really get much in that time. I've seen people filibuster for four minutes. Then they ask a 20-second question and leaving the witness 40 seconds to answer. I don't think the committee process works as well as it did, that I recall, when I was a staffer on a committee in the late '70s, early '80s."

The bottom line, according to one Member: "I think we've got to figure out a way with the leadership to find better opportunities for the committees to function; that's where the first relationships are formed …"

Chapter 6: Recommendations and the Path Ahead

Despite the many problems and shortcomings these Members describe, they hold to the idealism that led them to run and serve, continuing to "stand in awe" when looking out at the Capitol and grasp the privilege they've had to serve in Congress. "I still go into the building every day with that awe and idealism about where you are and the importance of what you're doing," said one. "When I walk up those worn steps to the Capitol and go to vote, and I see the dome, I know what it stands for," said another. To be part of "the great sweep of history" is how one Member put it. "I always thought that government can be a force for good," said another.

What worries these Members is the ability of our current political system, particularly Congress, to address the complex and compelling issues of our time. And that worry unites them in recognizing that Congress as an institution needs to make significant improvements and changes – in its procedures and its culture.

Compounding this worry is their concern about the impact of Congress' problems on public perceptions of the institution. "When it gets to the point that we're losing some of the fabric of our republic because the American people believe this institution is virtually meaningless, that is dangerous," one warned. Members mentioned how voters may have trust in their own representatives but not the institution as a whole.

This distrust then becomes a petri dish of misconceptions – about congressional pay, perquisites, ambitions, ethics, relations, and accomplishments – which further undermine confidence. "There's so much mythology, and there's so much negativity toward Members of Congress," said one. "Everyone thinks we hate each other. Everybody thinks we do nothing but call each other names," said another. Even when Congress enacts legislation, voters remain skeptical: "We pass a lot of bills that people don't realize."

As a result, people think they're not being represented or heard. And therefore they elect what some called the "bomb throwers" to blow up the institution, which leads to still greater polarization and more dysfunction. "Voters don't care, because they think that if you're part of the system and you have that experience, you're part of the problem, and then if you're willing to be disruptive from the outside, then they don't care if you have experience. … In no other profession is one's experience held against them."

To address the danger posed by this eroding confidence in our political system, many Members offered recommendations designed to improve the institution. They are under no illusions that some of the big and systemic issues can be fixed. Money will remain an outsized factor; media will seek conflict; Americans will continue to sort themselves ideologically and culturally for the foreseeable future.

But given the priority all of these Members placed on serving their communities, building relationships, and getting things done, they believe the system could better amplify and reinforce what they have in common – which would then build greater bipartisanship, which then might lead to more compromise, which could result in more accomplishments, which then might lower the partisan temperature to allow them to better serve the public and do the people's business. It just might, some hope, set a standard of respect and understanding necessary for the larger public conversation to grapple with and address our nation's greatest challenges.

Furthermore, due to ongoing social distancing guidelines necessitated by covid-19, many of the recommendations outlined below would clearly take a different form. While traditional, in-person relationship building may remain difficult for the foreseeable future, the core principles underlying these

findings can still apply. Regardless of whether it happens physically or virtually, cooperation and communication can lead to a better Congress.

More Opportunities for Members to Engage with One Another

Creating more opportunities for Members to interact, engage with and learn about one another – and their respective districts – may be one of the most essential recommendations these Members make. The universal praise for CODELs and caucuses and the occasional social opportunities as well as the widespread call for more civility all reflect a real desire among Members to find time and space to learn about each other, discuss issues, and understand their different backgrounds, perspectives, and communities. This is especially important now that fewer and fewer Members have moved their families to DC, which deprives them of the down time they used to have for socializing.

Among the ideas they propose or discuss to create more interaction:

CODELs: Leadership should encourage more participation on CODELs and must make the case publicly and repeatedly about the value of CODELs for Members of Congress. As one Democratic Member put it when urging more participation in CODELs: "If you do it judiciously, you really do get to know people on these trips, and you get educated non-confrontationally. You go into Israel, or you go into Iran or Pakistan or Afghanistan or South America, go to Ecuador, the people that are briefing you, they're not Republicans or Democrats. They're just telling you what the situation is. And you build trust. … Of course, I do think it's important for Members of Congress to travel the world. I do believe that. To get to meet parliamentarians and businesspeople and see things. But, the most important thing to happen at every CODEL is I get to be friendly with one or more attending Republicans."

District Visits: The more Members learn about other districts and how they influence and mold their colleagues' perspectives, the more they might consider bipartisan legislation that encompasses the diversity of views that Congress represents. "Sponsoring more Members to go into districts of the opposite parties" could help break down some of the ideological and personal barriers that divide Congress, one said. Another added: "You really have to put yourself in their shoes to understand … not only their personal thoughts on the issue, but what their districts would expect out of them as well." Town halls with Members from other districts is another idea. "Let the public see that Republicans and Democrats can stand on a stage together and have a conversation rather than talking past each other." Added another, "There are certainly some unique problems, unique challenges in certain regions of our country, but it's a real eye opener when you go to other districts and you see that there are some of the same problems too. … When you start realizing that members have many of the same unique problems, unique challenges in their districts, you find ways to work together."

Field Hearings: Chairs and ranking Members should consider holding field hearings in each other's districts, drawing from concerned citizens and experts from those communities. Said one Member who has found both district visits and field hearings valuable: "I think it's opening up their own eyes and the rest of Congress' eyes that Members can work together and understand the unique backgrounds that others have in different areas of the country." Or as another put it when urging field hearings, "what works in Massachusetts is gonna be different from what works in some other parts of the country. And we don't necessarily understand how those different forces shape the way we do our job."

Caucuses: Many Members said that caucuses provided them with opportunities to identify common interests and seek common ground – and to develop common solutions. Leadership should encourage caucus

membership and make sure that time is reserved for such meetings. "Leadership should almost demand that. Go and join a caucus, and get something done," one said. They're also a way to build trust that "can translate over to another area," said another.

Lunches, Dinners, Retreats: Members spoke positively about informal interactions with one another – opportunities simply to openly socialize and listen without penalty or criticism. One described bipartisan retreats they used to hold in which a Republican and Democrat partnered up for the entire time. Another mentioned a bipartisan dinner group that spawned relationships and legislation. One suggested quarterly bipartisan meeting with open discussion. The key is organizing and scheduling: "You have to make sure you're doing it in a way that Members will attend, because their lives are overwhelmed." Also key: leadership has to encourage attendance, and chairs could tell Members they're expected to attend.

Scheduling: One way to address the weekend exodus to districts and encourage more interaction is to schedule one weekend in DC for votes – with time allotted for Members to gather socially afterward. "I think actually having one weekend a month, I've been recommending one weekend a month at Congress, be in over the weekend … to just get to know people as people," said a Member.

A couple of Members suggested that Congress create the equivalent of a dormitory or apartment building where Members could live while they're in town during the week. That would be far preferable to Members living in their offices, which some do, and it would help offset the expense of maintaining two residences. That, said one, "would force Members of both parties to be hanging around each other and socializing and building relationships." This might be an unrealistic idea given the potential blowback it could create about spending taxpayers' dollars. But it speaks to the need Members feel to learn about each other in ways that aren't rushed or framed by partisan posturing and struggle.

More Voice and More Credit

Whether it's through an open rule or more debate or more opportunities to offer amendments in committee or on the floor, Members universally expressed frustration with leadership's tight control over what comes to the floor and what they're able to propose.

Some said the House should restore regular order – the open rule. Another suggested a minimum rule that allows a certain number of amendments and debate which leadership could then broaden and expand to allow for more. Others endorsed a version of what the Problem Solvers Caucus supports: allowing any bill with, say, 290 Members signed on to come up for a vote. Regardless of the particular reform they support, and irrespective of party, they all strongly recommend greater voice and input for rank-and-file Members during the legislative process.

Members recognize why leadership might oppose these ideas – they don't want to give up control over the floor schedule, and they want to protect Members from tough votes. But for most of these Members, the status quo is stifling.

Especially important, many say, is giving minority party Members not only an opportunity to offer more legislation but to get some wins for themselves. The majority shouldn't feel threatened if a Member across the aisle can claim credit for a bill. Let "your opponents take a victory lap," one said. "Just let them take a victory lap. Let them take credit for something. And it takes a lot of the edge out. Let your opponent speak. Give them time. Let them offer amendments. Let them speak. And it takes out some of the pent-up feeling of not being included. They don't necessarily have to win. But the process matters." And as some point out,

the majority might actually benefit if Congress accomplishes more, partisan antagonism declines, the public sees results, and the institution as a whole gains a more positive image.

More Power Sharing

Members frequently mentioned that they get some of their best and most bipartisan work done at the committee and subcommittee level. Minority party Members are under no illusions that they should have equal power to determine a committee or subcommittee's agenda, but Members from both parties agreed that the best and most productive committees and subcommittees are those in which the chair integrates the views, priorities, and suggestions of the ranking Member. Power, they say, must be leavened with respect; giving the ranking Member some say over bills and hearings could go a long way toward healing the rifts and lowering the overall feeling of partisanship.

Members also recommended more interaction across the aisle among committee staff. "I also suggested that our chiefs of staff have lunch regularly to keep communications flowing," a former committee chair said. Staff working together more collegially will help to facilitate better relations among Members of the committee.

More Transparency, But With An Important Caveat

Throughout these interviews, Members expressed concern about the way Congress is perceived – particularly the diminishing trust Americans have for the institution. They noted how the media will highlight any transgression or lack of transparency, which then compounds public distrust. Public cynicism grows, many said, when people hear about secretive or sweetheart deals with lobbyists and special interests.

At the same time, Members also worried about their ability to have the types of private conversations and negotiations that are necessary to compromise, enact laws and get things done. Legislation, they collectively said, is a complex process with arguments, counterarguments, compromises that work and some that don't. To have all congressional business open at every step can at times diminish opportunities – and incentives – for the private interactions necessary for bipartisan consensus and legislative success. Compounding the problem, as a few reported, some Members will tweet a conversation or negotiation out of context as a way to feed the partisans among their base.

In essence, Members were saying that they need more transparency at times – but also less.

To many Members, money in politics is one area that could use more transparency as a way to promote public trust. The outsized role of money troubles Members from both parties, but given Supreme Court decisions, they had no specific solutions to limit its influence beyond a generalized sense that the campaign financing system needs more transparency. "The Supreme Court decided that money is speech," one said, "but I don't think those First Amendment requirements ought to mean that you could spend whatever you want and nobody gets to know about it." The consensus view among many Members: If money flows into Super PACs or independent committees, the public ought to know who's supplying it.

Transparency also could be the key to restoring earmarks to the legislative process. Members recognize the uphill public relations climb it would take to do so, but they also understand the transactional nature of every legislative negotiation. Earmarks, they say, could lead to more bipartisan accomplishments.

But as many of these Members indicated, transparency is not always the preferred operating principle when negotiating a bill that requires give-and-take and compromise. They urged Members not to negotiate in public and especially by social media, to place the larger goal of reaching bipartisan consensus over the partisan goal of tweeting frustrations when things don't exactly go their way. When Members from across the aisle feel they must hide their conversations with one another for fear that they will be accused of consorting with the other side, which is not a healthy environment for serving the public interest.

What emerged from these interviews was a sense that the legislative process is best served when Members accumulate as much information as possible through public hearings and research and then gain the negotiating bandwidth to do their work and exercise their skills as politicians and legislators without having to respond to every news cycle and answer for each objection a Member may raise in public. Many said this is doable, but it will take a pledge from Members not to air every frustration on cable or social media, as well as a commitment by committee chairs to normalize the types of private bipartisan conversations and negotiations essential to getting things done.

More Bipartisanship

Every Member interviewed claimed to want more bipartisanship, and not a single one wanted to see more of the polarized and adversarial rhetoric that characterizes politics today.

So how do we get there?

Leadership must make it more of a priority, these Members say. The problem is that leadership on both sides of the aisle are "equally guilty of trying to score points and having victories and doing it their way," one said. Another noted that the tone is set on day one during orientation for freshman Members when leadership splits them into opposing groups. "If, and it's a big if, if the leadership of each party would really see good relationships as a goal, there are things that they can do to set the tone," one stated, reflecting the view of many others.

But it can't come only from leadership. Members acknowledge that they too must fight off the partisan temptation and conduct themselves in a more bipartisan way. Said one, summing up for many: "It would be that members really respect other members and what they say publicly and privately. And that members listen." Though some admitted to joining the cable fray, most scoffed at those Members who appear on television to attack and demonize. Yes, they realize that Congress is a reflection of the larger society, and voters often support them for their strong and vocal views. But they also believe they have a special responsibility to set a more respectful and civil tone for our nation's political culture and other aspects of our nation's life.

Nor is it just raw partisanship that poisons the well and generates distrust. When Members use rhetoric to describe Congress in ways that undercut public respect for the institution, that too can erode the comity and civility necessary to reach across the aisle. Political positioning then overwhelms relationship building and legislative negotiation as a priority. Attacking Washington or Congress may be good for electoral politics, but it may diminish the incentives Members need to generate public confidence in their work. "Your position," one said, "is not only to represent people, also hopefully educate them," reminding us of the motivation that brought them to Congress in the first place.

And given the powerful role media play in our political culture, one idea emerged to mitigate the conflict and controversy model that dominates so much of the cable and online ecosystems: offer more problem-solving

and consensus-building Members to the press; relentlessly promote bipartisan bills and accomplishments; and encourage media to do more stories on the common ground efforts and initiatives that take place far more often than they are reported. Whether leadership from both parties would be willing to set up a joint press operation to support such an idea is an open question. But it would show how the rhetoric of bipartisanship so many Members expressed in these interviews could, even in this small way, be matched in practice.

Epilogue

The United States Congress is a unique institution, the voice of our democracy, the representative body that speaks for this very diverse and complex nation of ours. "What we do here is a reflection of America," one Member put it, "and what we do impacts the world." Congress is certainly transactional and thoroughly political, which these Members acknowledge, and yes, we see that reported almost daily in the media. But as these interviews also make clear, it is also sustained and nourished by the very principles and ideals that brought these many Members there to serve. Every Member interviewed for this project wants to make Congress better – because they believe it will better serve the American people.

As unique as Congress may be, it is also an institution built on many of the same ideas that serve to guide most other high-performing organizations and businesses. And it is through these principles that we gain hope for a better Congress.

The discipline of Human and Organizational Development is clear on this: we can look to institutions of all sizes and types to identify the fundamental principles commonly found in each of them. What we first see is a shared vision of a better future – and what follows are the strategies, organizational structures, and ways of working that help turn that shared vision into reality. Together they provide a powerful framework for progress. These elements must be in place for an institution to be recognized as effective, fit for its purpose, and operating as it was intended – as long as a singular essential quality is also present.

This singular quality is an inherent atmosphere of respect, trust, and collaboration. It is experienced as an environment in which people desire to labor together to do the hard work to overcome the issues, obstacles, and barriers that stand in the way of a better future for our Nation.

We refer to this quality in several ways when we see it in action. Some name it in just one word: culture; "the way we do things around here". Others describe it as a sense of connection they feel with their colleagues. Several say that it is the trust they experience and the cooperation they enjoy when solving tough problems together. The very epicenter of this quality, this beating heart of it all depends upon one thing: *relationships*.

In our report, the former Members revealed the myriad of ways in which they are pulled away from each other and from the meaningful relationships and associations they desire for a better functioning Congress. They also say this status quo is unacceptable. Every former Member interviewed for this project – regardless of party affiliation – insisted that they would have preferred more productive relationships in their work. They recognize it is their responsibility as Members of Congress to set a respectful tone even when they disagree. After all, that's what a democracy is all about. More civility, they say, creates an opening to mitigate dysfunction by engaging with the other side.

It is against this setting that we find ourselves reckoning with a number of serious and consequential questions facing our Nation – questions involving our response to a pandemic, to a struggling economy, to racial inequality, among others. These questions represent both immediate and long-term leadership challenges for all Members of Congress. We recognize that many of the problems within Congress are reflections of much greater social and political problems outside of Congress, and there is no magic elixir to cure them. But the best and most effective way for Congress to address these national challenges is for Congress to address its institutional challenges.

For Congress to best serve our democracy at this important time, it must first build the healthy culture and facilitate the types of institutional changes that emphasize and respect the need to be working across the aisle.

This means making the commitment to facilitate, seek, and reach bipartisan consensus on our nation's most pressing problems - prioritizing common ground solutions over partisan posturing – because they have a duty to both represent well their constituencies and balance that with leadership that serves the greater good of this diverse and complex nation of ours. The policies and legislation they will enact cannot reflect this urgent yet delicate balance without first finding healthy and productive ways of working together – the very qualities that Americans expect of their Congress.

We express with optimism that the recommendations we have included in this report are powerful ways to enhance the quality of relationships that support the sort of environment Members seek and our Nation most certainly desires. And what lies beyond these recommendations are still additional opportunities and strategies for building healthy and trusting relationships among Members of Congress. It is these relationships that will support reaching across the aisle and working better together to pass the broadly supported legislation for the progress our country so urgently needs.

Finally, as we reflect upon the voices of our former Members, it is important to point out that every organization of every type has seasons. It is the nature of things. We all move through extended periods of creating, of operating, of grappling, of improving. There are also times of drifting away from what was once considered the very best expression of our ideals; moments that are less successful and more challenging than our founders ever could have envisioned. But from challenges we also need to remember that great organizations can and do change – and rise.

If the interviews have revealed anything, it is that we, in this most "extraordinary moment," this season, have a Congress and a nation that just may want to opt for a better way forward.

About the Congressional Legacy Project

The Congressional Legacy Project of FMC, made possible by a generous grant from the Hewlett Foundation, conducted over 40 hours of interviews with 31 retiring or departing Members of Congress in 2018 and 2019, amounting to more than 800 pages of transcripts. The goal: to understand from a Member perspective how the institution works and how to make it better, and to donate the interviews to the Library of Congress.

About the Members we interviewed:

- All belonged to the House of Representatives except for one who served in the Senate.
- They represent 31 years in U.S. history, serving from 1988 to 2019, from the 100th to the 115th Congress.
- They served in Congress during the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union, during two Iraq wars and the war in Afghanistan, during the September 11th attack on the United States, during Hurricane Katrina and other natural disasters, during the Great Recession.
- During their time in Congress, there were five different presidents and one impeachment of a president.
- Those interviewed served a combined 275 years – an average of nearly nine years in Congress.
- During their years in the House of Representatives, each party was in the majority twice, meaning the majority changed three times, and they served under seven Speakers.
- Of those interviewed: seven committee chairs and two vice chairs on five different committees; twelve chairs and one vice chair on multiple subcommittees; seven ranking members of committees. Every committee in the House but one was represented in these interviews.
- The Members interviewed introduced an average of 88 bills each and had five of these bills enacted as law.
- Our group of 31 former Members interviewed for this project mirrors the ratio of departing members in 2018: 25 Republicans and 6 Democrats, roughly equivalent to the 76% Republicans and 24% Democrats who left Congress that year. Regardless of party, we found common themes and overall agreement on almost every topic covered in these conversations.

The authors of this report and principal investigators who conducted the interviews are Leonard Steinhorn and Mark Sobol. Leonard Steinhorn is a professor of communication and affiliate professor of history at American University, where he teaches and writes about American politics, the presidency, media, and recent American history. He is the CBS News Radio political analyst and author of two books on American culture and politics; he speaks regularly on American politics and history, and has been published in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Politico*, *The Hill*, *Chicago Sun-Times, Political Wire*, *History News Network*, among others. Mark Sobol, founder and CEO of Longwave Partners, is an organizational development expert and executive coach to corporate leaders and governing boards of major American businesses, public agencies, and nonprofit groups. He writes and speaks regularly on leadership, learning and organizational effectiveness, and is the co-author of two books, *Leading the Global Workforce*, honored as a Best Practice book by Linkage, and *The Visionary Leader*, which guides corporate and organizational leaders on ways to build strong, cohesive, strategic and mission-driven teams.

Our analysis relied upon a process that has evolved over three decades to help private sector organizations become better aligned, operate as they were designed, and assist them in seeing the gathering risks that, if not addressed, will prevent them from functioning at full capacity. Our process blended the best practices found in the disciplines of Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness, Cultural Change, and Sustainability,

among others, to provide a clear-eyed view of Congress in its natural state. Our focus on strategic and operating strengths and challenges enabled us to identify key insights into institutional culture, processes, structures, and design – revealing what we believe to be a promising and more actionable pathway to developing a sustainably healthier and more productive Congress.

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