

Written Testimony
Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress Hearing
“What's the Big Idea? Innovative Approaches to Fixing Congress”
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Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, and Members of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, thank you for the opportunity to participate in the “Big Ideas” hearing.

One big idea is increasing the size of the House of Representatives. Well, maybe it's not that big of an idea actually, since it's something that the US did for the first 120 years of our history.

So let's dig into that history. In 1790, when the US House of Representatives first met, there were only 65 members, each with approximately 30,000 constituents. Of course, the US only had 13 states, and the country was much smaller. But because this was to be the people's house, the Framers envisioned representatives with close connections to their constituents, and districts small enough to make that representation meaningful.

Obviously, the country has grown considerably since then, but for 120 years, after each Census, Congress added more seats. But after 1911, the House settled at 435 for no other reason than they couldn't agree on how to add more seats during a divisive and polarized time in our history. Since 1911, the population of this country has more than tripled, and with women's suffrage and the enfranchisement of African-Americans, the eligible voting population has increased more than six-fold. But the number 435 hasn't budged. Today, the average number of constituents per district is 760,000. It's hard to feel heard when you're one in 3/4 of a million.

The larger the district, the more distant constituents are from their representatives, and vice versa. Distance breeds distrust and frustration and poor representation. It's not the way the

Framers intended the House to operate, and it's just bad for our form of representative, republican democracy.

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences report I co-authored as part of the Our Common Purpose Project, which I am submitting for the record, recommends increasing the House by 150 members, to a total of 585. This corresponds to the number of seats that have shifted between states, even as their populations have grown, since the cap was instituted. This would not need to happen immediately – in fact, the ideal timing might be after the 2030 census. Once instituted, the number would continue to expand as the population grows.

In addition to bringing constituents and representatives closer, an expansion would have other benefits. It would bring new faces and new ideas to Washington. Incumbency reelection rates are extremely high (your constituents love you all, I guess), but over time that can make Washington a little too Washington, keeping fresh perspectives out. The People's House should be close to the people.

All this could shake things up a bit for sure, but given how stuck and dysfunctional things are right now, a little shake-up might bring some new creativity and energy to Congress, and could even help to short-circuit some of the destructive hyper-partisan polarization that is undermining our system of government. On that front, I do think that pairing an increased House with another of the Academy's recommendations, multimember districts, would go a long way. With multimember districts, the diversity of perspectives in Congress would expand beyond the highly polarized binaries of solid Republican vs solid Democratic districts, and new possibilities for creative problem solving and a more committee-oriented congress I think would emerge.

Even more broadly, as a scholar of history, I see this decade as a potential moment of transformation. The status quo is broken. There are those who want to burn it all to the ground. But I, at least, want to restore and renew the promise of liberal, republican democracy in America, and I am 100% convinced we are going to need some big bold ideas to innovate and modernize towards a brighter future for this country. I look forward to working with you all to achieve these innovations.