

Hoyer Testimony Before Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress

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WASHINGTON, DC – House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer (MD) testified before the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, chaired by Rep. Derek Kilmer (WA-06), at today’s Members’ Day hearing. Below are his remarks as prepared for delivery:

“Thank you, Chairman Kilmer and Ranking Member Graves. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today about the importance of modernizing Congress to make it more accountable and responsive to those it serves.

“One of the ways I believe we can achieve those goals is by giving Members the opportunity to have a greater say in directing spending toward critical public projects in their communities. Yes – I’m talking about restoring earmarks, which I believe can be great instruments of good when done in a way that is fully transparent and accountable. When Democrats were last in the majority, we reformed the earmark process substantially, requiring Members to post all their earmark requests online and justify every dollar. We banned earmarks to private entities and required Members to certify they had no financial interest as well.

“Transparency and accountability fixed what was wrong with earmarks in earlier years. Eliminating them altogether, which was a winning talking point but a misguided policy, has had the effect of taking Congress out of key funding decisions. No executive branch official knows a district and its needs better than that district’s Representative. I believe it is time to bring earmarks back with the reforms Democrats instituted.

“I also believe it is time to address the issue of Member and staff pay and benefits. I know this isn’t the most politically popular issue, but it is an important one. Americans ought to have our nation’s diversity of economic backgrounds better reflected in this House. The cost of rent, child care, and other necessities has risen substantially in Washington and across the country in recent years, but Member and staff pay and benefits have not kept pace with the private sector. Many talented, bright, and patriotic citizens are choosing not to step up and serve because they believe doing so would

place them under financial burden. Others are choosing to leave mid-career, and the result is that we lose their expertise and institutional knowledge. If we want to attract a more diverse group of Americans to run for office and work on Capitol Hill, we need to make it financially possible for them to do so.

“The other area where I believe we can take significant steps to modernize Congress is with technology. This is an area where we have already made strides. I was proud to partner with the Leader McCarthy in recent years to host 'hack-a-thons' and release legislative data in new forms that can be used by digital platforms to make our work more accessible to those outside Capitol Hill. The 'Whip Watch' app that I launched in 2015 and updated in 2017 has brought Floor proceedings and updates directly into the hands of Members, staff, and the general public. And I'm pleased to share with you that, in the coming days, my office will be releasing the latest version of this app with a new name and a lot of exciting new features.

“But plenty more needs to be done to modernize Congressional technology. I've been working with Leader McCarthy on a bill to create a Congressional Digital Service, modeled after President Obama's successful U.S. Digital Service. The idea is to assemble a group who can create new systems and online tools. We must also find a secure way to adopt within Congress the latest industry-leading cloud software tools. American businesses are seeing rapid gains in efficiency and usability through adoption of these tools, and we must not allow government to fall behind. I recommend that this committee look to initiatives like the Bulk Data Task Force, the Communication with Congress project, and docs.house.gov for examples of how to modernize government technology.

“By putting Members back in the driver's seat on funding decisions, by making it easier for citizens to step up and serve, and by using technology to increase transparency and responsiveness, we can modernize the Congress and make it work for the people in the way our Founders intended. I thank the Committee again for this opportunity and for taking on this challenge of bringing Congress into the twenty-first century.”