

Testimony of Congresswoman Katie Porter (CA-45)
Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
March 12, 2019
H-313

Chairman Kilmer and Members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify and share my views.

I am eager to see the work of this new Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress. As part of a historic freshmen class of legislators, I want to help guide this institution to better serve the American people.

I have a great appreciation for the traditions and norms that shape the Congress. Processes and customs – crafted over centuries of careful debate – are important for the stability and continuity of our great country.

At the same time, I understand that this Congress must adapt to effectively do its work. If we modernize how Congress functions, opportunities will expand for more people to serve. And those who serve can do a better job for the people.

I'm organizing my testimony into four points today, but with one guiding theme: **Congress is not built for the middle-class.**

I encountered this problem head-on while trying to represent people of my district. Our constituents deserve an accessible district office – one where they feel welcome, are able to have their voices heard, and are able to talk to me and my staff about the problems they're facing.

As I worked to secure a lease, most landlords – very understandably – wanted a security deposit before they would rent to me. But puzzlingly, that security deposit couldn't be paid with Congressional funds – it had to come out of the Members' personal bank account. Like millions of Americans, writing a check for \$5,000 or more caused me a lot of stress. If I didn't have the money sitting around, would it mean the 45th District would go without the office they deserved? That didn't seem fair to my constituents.

I ultimately found a landlord that did not require a security deposit, but my constituents were deprived of a district office for weeks because of the presumption that newly elected members have significant personal financial resources.

The experience left me thinking – how could any new Member of Congress that previously worked as a TSA agent at John Wayne Airport, or as a mechanic in Mission Viejo, or even a pediatrician in Irvine working to pay off medical school debt – ever reasonably be expected to serve in Congress?

Even in my orientation, I confronted the bias in Congress against Members without significant financial resources. Human resources told me that even though I'd take the oath of office on January 3rd, my health insurance wouldn't start until February 1st.

This left me panicking – would my three kids have to go without medical coverage for a whole month? What if one of them got sick or had an emergency?

When I raised this with H.R., and asked how other members navigated this, they told me to go on my husband's insurance, or to buy COBRA. Well, first, I don't have a husband. I'm a single mom. And second, I had not planned to have a lapse in insurance and therefore confronted very high COBRA premiums.

Again, I was ultimately able to solve this problem by working with my former employer, but other Members may not be as fortunate and could go uninsured while serving in the U.S. Congress. This is unacceptable.

Congress also isn't built for the middle-class when it comes to hearing the voices of everyday Americans. The House rules silence those who cannot afford to travel to Washington, D.C. on their personal resources to appear before us. Our hearings are impoverished of the diverse set of experiences of the American people as a result. The result is an echo chamber of D.C. insiders and those with significant resources to fly across the country. People from California and from rural areas all over the country, which have high travel costs, could likely never make it out to D.C. unless they are rich. This helps special interests and hurts ordinary people with important stories to tell and information to share. This is another area the Select Committee should consider.

Also, Congress could better promote rules that allow young staff from working families to serve. The paid internships authorized by the House are a good start, but not enough. As someone that taught at, and now is fortunate enough to represent, a university where 50 percent of bachelor's degrees are awarded to first-generation college students, I know how early experiences like getting that diploma, or finding a key internship, or landing that first job, can shape a lifetime of professional success. This body should help amplify the talents of ambitious young people, particularly those whose voices have not traditionally been heard.

Thank you again to the Chairman and Members of the Committee for allowing me to testify today. The Select Committee is tasked with important work, and I stand ready to provide my input and voice so that we can better serve the American people.