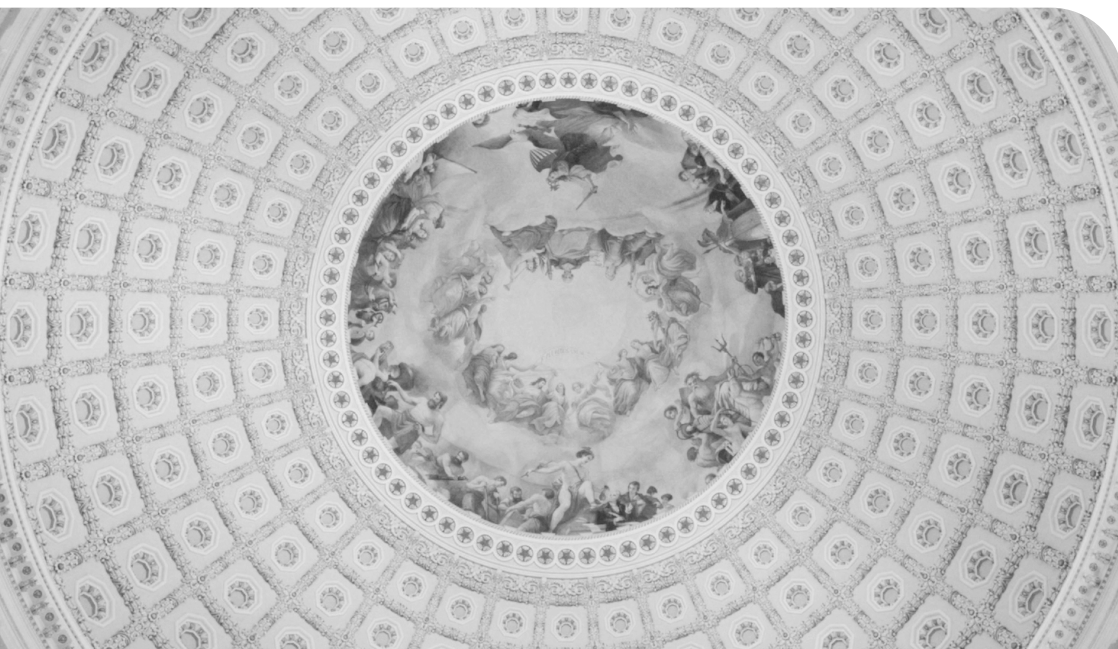


CONGRESS 2076



PROJECT
RETROSPECTIVE

Executive Summary

ABOUT THE EVENT

The Congress 2076 interactive workshop was collaboratively hosted in May 2024 by Democracy 2076 and POPVOX Foundation. The project was designed to provide expert feedback and insight on the Congressional reform ideas surfaced in Democracy 2076's "A Constitution for 2076" December 2023 convening, identify potential interest from organizations in the Congressional modernization space in these proposed ideas, and explore how long-term projections and scenario work could be applied in a Congressional setting.

The project involved three components:

1. Call for ideas

A call for ideas invited submissions on creating a more responsive, representative, and effective Congress to be included in the menu of ideas for consideration at the upcoming May 2024 Congress 2076 event. Over five weeks, 23 individual ideas were submitted by thirteen contributors. Ideas were evaluated by a group of Congressional experts from diverse backgrounds who scored and approved a final list.

2. Expert survey

Respondents were also invited to provide feedback on ideas related to Congressional reform previously surfaced at the 2023 Democracy 2076 event through an Expert Survey. Six experts with backgrounds from Congressional service to political science and philanthropy completed the survey.

3. Congress 2076 convening

The in-person Congress 2076 convening on Capitol Hill brought together current and Congressional staff; staff from institutional support offices; representatives from civil society and philanthropic organizations; political scientists; and futurists for a shortened and modified version of the original Democracy 2076 program. Participants engaged in world-building and scenario planning activities, discussed the future of Congress, and identified areas of potential improvement and barriers to those reforms.

BIG TAKEAWAYS

Futures thinking in Congress is hindered by limited overall capacity.

After years of underinvesting in its own ability to govern, Congress continues to face a crisis of capacity, from labor and workforce retention challenges to technical debt. Efforts to highlight potential benefits of futures thinking for Congress without acknowledging the institution's limited capacity can feel out of touch and unrealistic for staff and experts who are closer to the institution's day-to-day limitations.

There is a deep fundamental disconnect between Congressional modernizers, activists, and state or local-level organizers.

The Congressional modernization community is largely composed of individuals and organizations with experience working within or alongside the institution. Most are focused on targeted, high leverage ideas that cause minimal disruption in the short-term, with the potential for larger impacts in the future. To be effective, these civil society organizations must work in a bipartisan way and view electoral reforms as outside of their scope. This stands in stark contrast to many state- and issue-based organizers (and general public sentiment) who see Congress from the outside as in need of structural reform and view traditional organizing tactics as a more desirable approach. A tension between “fix Congress” reformers and “dramatically reshape Congress” activists was notable at the event.

AREAS OF ALIGNMENT

Despite the creative tension between tactical-reform and structural-reform efforts, participants identified three main areas for productive future exploration:

1. Checking corporate power

Both groups highlighted the potential imbalance between powerful corporate interests and democratic legislatures, and asked for specific ideas on what Congress could do to address this imbalance.

2. Refining the relationship between Executive and Legislative branches

Participants noted the need for smarter relationships between policymakers and implementing agencies.

3. Closing the gulf between DC's legislative power center and local, on-the-ground expertise

Both groups also identified that for Congress to maintain its democratic legitimacy and ability to govern, it must do more to escape the “beltway” and make use of local expertise.

ABOUT POPVOX FOUNDATION

With a mission to inform and empower people and make government work better for everyone, POPVOX Foundation is focused on ensuring that democratic institutions are equipped to address the “pacing problem” — the gap between emerging technologies and governance.

The POPVOX Foundation team views the US Congress as a fulcrum for policy and process evolution with influence on all branches and levels of American governance, and ripple impacts around the world. We believe that a modernized Congress can “lift all boats” with more informed policymaking, increased public engagement, and transparent, trustworthy processes. This not only means investing in technology and continuous learning but also fostering a governance structure that remains resilient and informed in the age of AI and other exponential technologies.

Learn more at popvox.org

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Introduction

In the face of disruptive new technologies, the ongoing aftermath of a pandemic that exposed the pain points of governments' abilities to respond to a crisis, rising political violence, and a contentious election year for 49% of the world's population,¹ it's no wonder that "the future" feels all at once utopian, dystopian, predatory, too late, and already here — and above all, urgently worth discussing.

Governments in a range of political systems often incorporate long-term future visions into their policymaking, planning, and communications as a way to develop and message a political agenda. This includes future planning processes in democratic countries, like the Welsh Commissioner for Future Generations,² the UK's reforms around strategic decision-making,³ Japan's Future Design councils,⁴ and Canadian Futures planning process⁵ that all incorporate public feedback and visioning into planning for the long-term future. However, it also includes authoritarian governments and top-down imposition of a dominant nationalist future vision, like Russian president Vladimir Putin's increasingly explicit vision of a neo-Soviet empire,⁶ or China's "strategies of displacement" incorporating visions stretching years into the future.⁷

Beyond governing institutions, *Plurality*⁸ co-author, E. Glenn Weyl has identified three "triangle points" of emerging alignment around strong visions for a future world that do not map neatly onto the left/right divisions that still structure most contemporary politics⁹ — or even take into account the role of current democratically elected governments at all. These emerging visions seem to bake in the assumption that current liberal democracy is failing or is on the cusp of failure,¹⁰ relegation, or irrelevance — either imagining a future where representative democracy is replaced by tech-mediated direct democracy, where the private sector's better ability to meet public needs renders government irrelevant, where technocratic systems of governing render the messy, inefficient human system obsolete, or where the only piece of the future worth focusing on is whether or not the AI singularity will kill off the human race.

Unlike some peer countries that have successfully augmented strategic foresight capacity in their

1 Ewe, K. (2023, December 28). Elections around the world in 2024. Time Magazine. <https://time.com/6550920/world-elections-2024/>

2 Acting Today for a better tomorrow. The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/>

3 Agency, P. N. (2024, May 29). MPs call for urgent reform of government culture to make the UK "fit for future." Watford Observer. <https://www.watfordobserver.co.uk/news/national/24351635.mps-call-urgent-reform-government-culture-make-uk-fit-future/>

4 Japan's movement of Future Design Councils. FDSD. (2021, December 21). <https://www.fdsd.org/ideas/future-design-japan/>

5 Policy Horizons Canada. <https://horizons.service.canada.ca/en/home/index.shtml>

6 Dickinson, P. (2024, February 13). Putin's history lecture reveals his dreams of a new Russian Empire. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-history-lecture-reveals-his-dreams-of-a-new-russian-empire/>

7 A thorough explanation of China's long-term strategy. War on the Rocks. (2021, August 17). <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/a-thorough-explanation-of-chinas-long-term-strategy/>

8 Plurality: The Future of Collaborative Technology and Democracy. <https://www.plurality.net/>

9 Political ideologies for the 21st Century. RadicalxChange. (2022, February 17). <https://www.radicalxchange.org/media/blog/political-ideologies-for-the-21st-century/>

10 Smith, N. (2024, May 22). How liberal democracy might lose the 21st Century. <https://www.noahpinion.blog/p/how-liberal-democracy-might-lose>

governments, the US Congress does not have any explicit program or personnel tasked with developing a vision for the future, and despite recent modernization successes, high-profile coverage of Congress over the past decade has left many with the image of the institution as a bumbling, reactionary, unrepresentative relic. Participants in the December 2023 “A Constitution for 2076” convening — mostly made up of state-level organizers and activists — largely saw a poorly functioning Congress as an urgent impetus for large-scale structural reform, or a vestigial limb of government that could be productively eliminated in favor of more local and/or global control.

For champions of Congress as an institution best-suited to understand and carry out the will of the people, this is a frustrating state of affairs.

POPVOX Foundation’s focus is to mitigate the “pacing problem,” or the need for democratically elected legislative bodies to keep pace with rapidly changing developments in technology and society. This work, often led by former Congressional staffers, requires balancing an empathetic insight into the capacity challenges that make it difficult for Congress to engage in forward planning with the recognition that Congress must constantly reinvent itself and adapt to carry out its responsibilities and maintain its legitimacy.

Addressing the pacing problem requires understanding the developments and discourse in science and technology fields and policy circles. But as POPVOX Foundation Executive Director, Marci Harris, recently noted at the The Impacts of Civic Technology (TICTeC) conference in London: “I have never seen these two worlds [Silicon Valley and Congress] further apart in what they think the future is going to be,” referring to the rapid development of generative AI, new energy technologies, genomic editing and life-extending technologies, and the social disruptions and policy interventions these new technologies will require. “In Silicon Valley,” she said, “there is a ‘hair on fire’ attitude. Nothing is going to be the same. This absolutely changes everything... And in DC, there’s a lot of ‘we’ve been here before: there was social media, whatever happened to crypto or blockchain, you know, is this really such a big deal?’”

Against this backdrop, in May 2024, POPVOX Foundation joined Democracy 2076 to host an experimental “Congress 2076” event to tackle the following questions:

- » How could futurist techniques work in a Congressional setting?
- » What do Congressional staff, modernizers, champions, and scholars see as Congress’ appropriate role in these ongoing cultural discussions about the future?
- » How can Congress be both an active participant and a convenor/facilitator for public input around a shared vision for the future, both in the US and the world?
- » What reforms to Congress would allow it to be more resilient across multiple potential future scenarios?

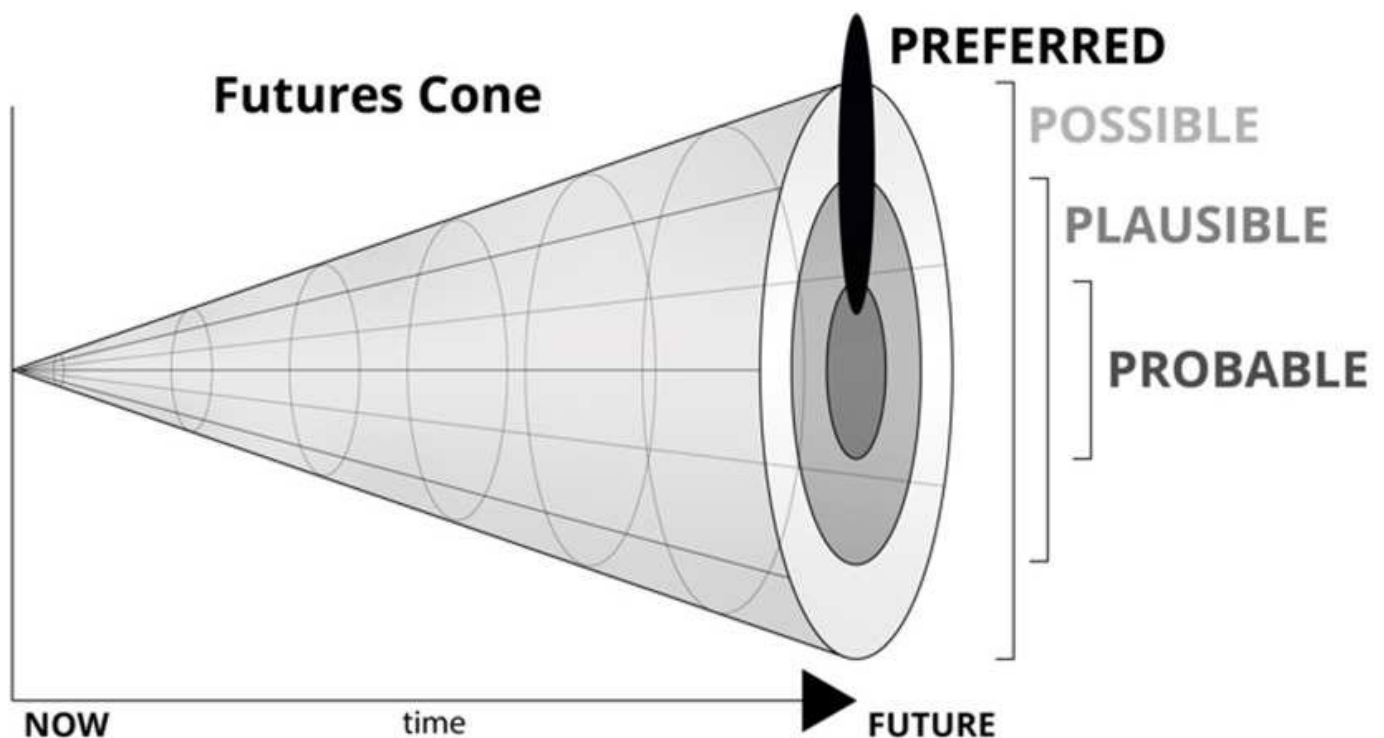
The project unearthed several foundational insights that will guide future conversations and work around strengthening Congress for the next fifty years and beyond.

Background

THE DEMOCRACY 2076 PROJECT

Democracy 2076 started as a moonshot idea to reimagine American democracy for the tricentennial anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, focusing on proposed amendments to the Constitution.¹¹ The inaugural Democracy 2076 event in December 2023 convened organizers, futurists, artists, journalists, comparativists, and constitutional law scholars to envision what a Constitution for 2076 would need to include to ensure an effective, responsive, and representative democracy.

The event was a participatory process in itself, incorporating futurist analytical techniques: the facilitation team split participants into groups, and provided each group with a global context scenario for the future. Scenarios were modeled on Hawaii Institute for Future Studies Director Jim Dator’s work,¹² and expressed a range of possible options from the “official future,” or a continuation of current trajectories, to more dramatic departures.¹³ In addition to the scenario, each group was given a menu of ideas for potential amendments, across four categories – jurisdiction, lawmaking, rights/responsibilities, and elections – drawing from other countries’ constitutions as well as state constitutions.



¹¹ Democracy 2076. <https://www.democracy2076.org/>

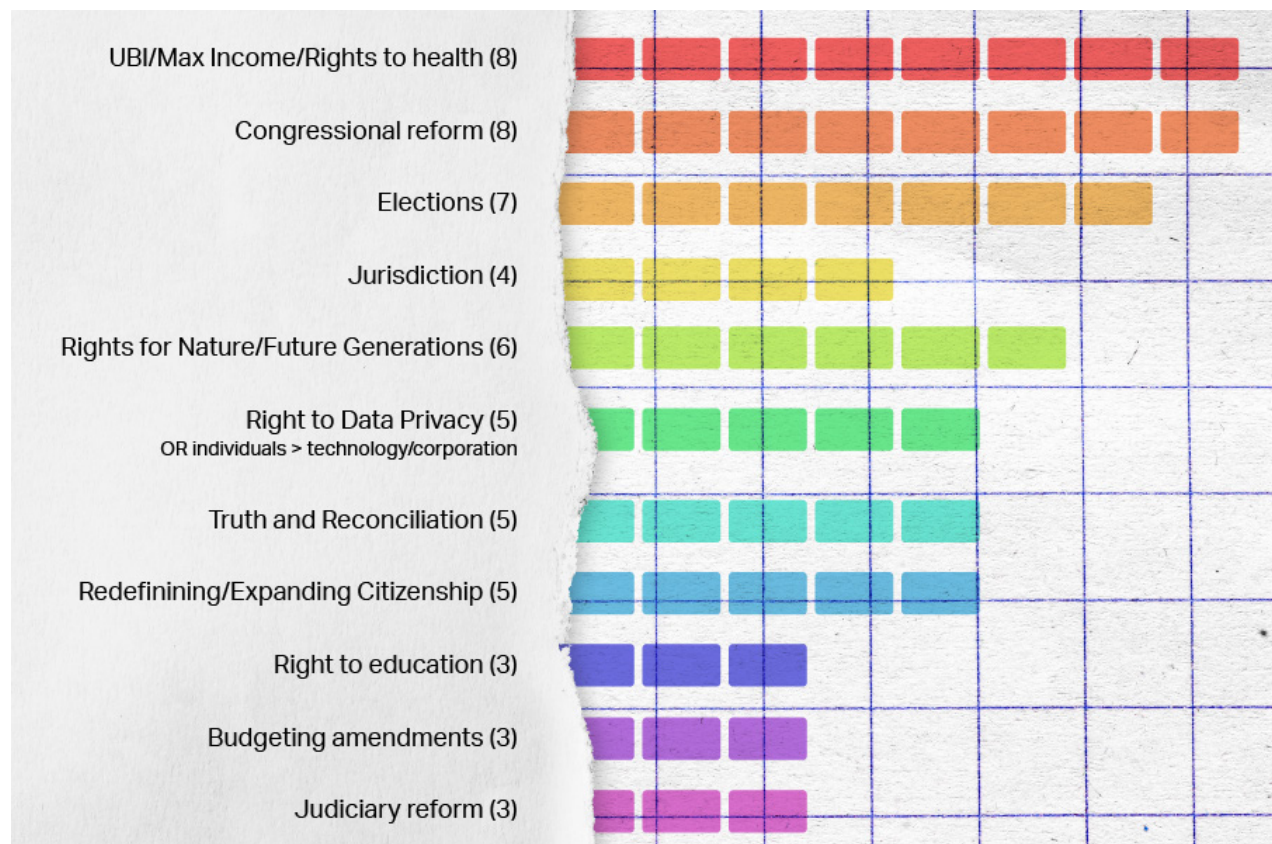
¹² For an overview of Jim Dator’s work, see: <https://foresightguide.com/dator-four-futures/>

¹³ Tjark Gall, Flore Vallet, Bernard Yannou, How to visualise futures studies concepts: Revision of the futures cone, *Futures*, Volume 143, 2022, 103024, ISSN 0016-3287, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2022.103024>.

The event then provided stress tests for the scenario and each group's chosen amendments to the Constitution.¹⁴ Given a projection for how an aspect of global life may change in fifty years (including climate change, demographic change, economic changes, etc.), groups worked through the implications of their chosen amendments, and evaluated whether the government created by their amended Constitution would be able to adequately respond to changing conditions. After the convening, the Democracy 2076 team compared the amendments that would contribute to a functioning democracy across multiple different anticipated futures to identify the amendments that were common across scenarios.

In addition to introducing a longer timescale and new techniques in scenario planning, the event also was a departure for many participants used to issue-based advocacy at the state-level to think structurally about the government itself. Results from the event's post-survey noted dramatic changes in participants' level of optimism around the existence of a set of reforms that could make American democracy more effective, responsive, and representative (from 7.5% confident to 75% confident) and a large majority of participants indicated that they planned to incorporate techniques explored in the event into their work going forward (78%).¹⁵

Looking at the constitutional reform ideas selected by participants at the December event, several clear themes emerged:



¹⁴ For example, a dramatic increase in the number of climate refugees following increased severe weather and rising sea levels that would render most of the East Coast of the US uninhabitable.

¹⁵ A Constitution for 2076. Democracy 2076. <https://www.democracy2076.org/a-constitution-for-2076>

The frequency of ideas around reforming Congress is notable for two reasons:

First, few of the attendees had any background working in Congress or in Congressional reform roles. Instead, many attendees noted that in their experience, Congress is a roadblock to efforts at other levels of government or on issue-based initiatives, including policies with broad support in the US.

Second, ideas to reform Congress themselves were focused at a structural level rather than operational changes. Ideas selected included:¹⁶

- » Enacting quotas and reserved seats for underrepresented populations (focused on blue-collar workers) in legislatures
- » Establishing a federal unicameral Congress (combining the House and Senate into one legislative body)
- » Implementing multi-member districts with proportional representation
- » Expanding the House of Representatives with longer terms and term limits
- » Incorporating Citizen Assemblies (bodies of citizens chosen to deliberate and make binding recommendations on a specific topic) into the policymaking process
- » Reducing the authority of the Senate and establishing majority rule through elimination of the filibuster

Additionally, many groups proposed electoral reform ideas that would also impact the structure and function of Congress, including campaign finance reform and independent redistricting boards.

The parameters of the exercise focusing on constitutional amendments may have nudged groups to think along these lines of large-scale reforms, but feedback from participants emphasized the real appetite for seeing major change in Congress, grounded in deep-seated frustration with a Congress that many participants see as out of touch, undemocratic, captured by special interests, and feeble.

CONGRESSIONAL MODERNIZATION EFFORTS

In contrast to the big-picture constitutional-amendment ideas discussed at the Democracy 2076 convening, many efforts to reform Congress today (both within the institution itself or in the community of civil society organizations and scholars most closely connected to Congress) are alive and vibrant, and often working toward the same goals — but largely focused on smaller, targeted interventions.

A note on terms is helpful to identify specific elements of this landscape: an extremely strict legal and operational distinction between Congressional “official” (post-election) operations and “campaign”

16 Note that some ideas are contradictory because they were chosen by different working groups.

activities trickles down into reform efforts. The term “modernization” almost exclusively refers to efforts to impact the governing/official side of Congress, not election reform or campaign reform.

Congressional reform spanning both categories has been an episodic project in the last hundred years and more. Intermittent periods of reorganization or modernization have impacted Congress’ ability to process incoming information, its relationship with the Executive branch, the role of parties, the role of committees, standards of conduct for Members, and much more. Rapid developments in technology have led to changes in the support institutions Congress creates to facilitate its work, including the Government Accountability Office and the Congressional Research Service. For example, in the late Cold War era, Congress established the Office of Technology Assessment to provide nonpartisan, factual insight for Congress on areas of emerging technology and scientific research, and their forecasted impact on American industry and government.¹⁷

Partisan dynamics have also led to institutional change: for example, reforms under Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America” in the 1990s dramatically reduced numbers of committee staff and legislative support staff,¹⁸ including eliminating the Office of Technology Assessment. In a recent example, the intra-party conflict over Democratic leadership in 2018 was a significant factor in the creation of a bipartisan Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress that ran through the end of the 117th Congress.¹⁹ This committee’s bipartisan success led to the creation of a standing Subcommittee on Modernization under the Committee on House Administration (CHA) in the 118th Congress.²⁰

Today, stakeholders of Congressional reform and modernization efforts are largely comprised of three groups:

1. Internal modernizers

Modernization efforts focused on official-side operations and capacity are primarily concentrated in the House. Internal modernizers include Members and staff committed to improving the House (notably, Members currently serving on the CHA Modernization Subcommittee, former Members of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, Members serving on the House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees on the Legislative Branch, Members and staff of the Fix Congress Caucus, and the Modernization Staff Association), and staff in nonpartisan institutional support offices in both chambers like the House’s Chief Administrative Officer, the Senate Sergeant at Arms, the House Clerk, and House Digital Services. This may also include individual staff members with a personal or

¹⁷ Ruiz, S. (2024, May 22). How to assess the Future’s technologies. Statecraft. <https://www.statecraft.pub/p/how-to-assess-the-futures-technologies>

¹⁸ Paul Glastris and Haley Sweetland Edwards. (2014, June 9). The big lobotomy. Washington Monthly. <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2014/06/09/the-big-lobotomy/>

¹⁹ Skinner, R. (2019, January 7). Congress finally stands up for itself. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/mischiefs-of-faction/2019/1/7/18171417/congress-finally-stands-up-for-itself>

²⁰ Alder, M. (2024, April 12). House modernization panel advances bill to improve CRS’s data access in first-ever markup. FedScoop. <https://fedscoop.com/house-modernization-advances-crs-data-access-bill/>

professional interest in modernization, especially participants in tech-focused staff fellowship programs like Tech Congress.

2. Civil Society: official and governing capacity

Between and within internal periods of substantial reform, the torch for Congressional capacity and official-side effectiveness has been carried by external civil society organizations and academic scholars, often operating in networks. These groups advocate for specific ideas around improving Congressional operations, but also create and retain institutional memory of previous modernization efforts, connect internal and external modernizers who may not even be aware of each other's existence, work to build a public case for modernization, provide technical assistance on modernization ideas, and generally — within strict limits set by Ethics rules in both chambers — supplement the internal capacity of modernization-focused staff and institutions. Depending on organizational expertise, tax status, and funding restrictions, some groups may engage in lobbying in support of pro-institution reforms, especially funding for modernization initiatives. Organizations operating in this space (including POPVOX Foundation) are also often but not exclusively founded and/or staffed by former Congressional employees. For example, organizations operating in this space include POPVOX Foundation, the Bipartisan Policy Center, Congressional Management Foundation, Foundation for American Innovation, Rebuild Congress Institute, and individual scholars from the American Enterprise Institute, Brookings Institution, Brennan Center, Joint Center for Policy and Economic Studies, and more.

3. Civil society: electoral and campaign reform

Separate from the organizations and networks with a strict focus on governing capacity, other groups focus more broadly on big-picture structural reform, shading into efforts to reform campaign and electoral structures and systems: for example, advocating for a shift to proportional representation, multi-member districts, or expanding the size of the House. For example, organizations operating in this space include Fix Our House, Protect Democracy, Fair Vote, and individual scholars including Harvard's Danielle Allen and New America's Lee Drutman.

While helpful for understanding the spectrum of efforts to improve Congress, it is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive: individuals and organizations may shift back and forth between categories at different periods, or larger organizations may have separate verticals focusing on these different areas.

It is also worth noting explicitly that the landscape of civil society groups are dependent on funding that support these specific efforts, but that internal reform dynamics also reinforce the external ecosystem of civil society. Seeing an opportunity to drive impactful change with the establishment of the Select Committee on Modernization in 2019, several large funders — namely Democracy Fund and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation — heavily invested in field-building around Congressional

modernization efforts as a point of upstream leverage to improve the quality of policy coming out of Congress and address larger challenges in US democracy. This not only led to new organizations focused on Congressional operations, but also encouraged collaboration around a modernization agenda — most notably, organizations of the “Fix Congress Cohort.”²¹

On many levels, the recent period of Congressional modernization has been a success.²² Examples of successful modernization initiatives include:

- » Significant reform to allow Congress to attract, hire, retain, and support talented staff at all levels, including the establishment of a House Intern Resource Office and standard orientation and onboarding, raising the Members’ Representational Allowance (MRA) to allow Members to increase staff pay, and creating new support and training options to facilitate the sharing of best practices between offices.²³
- » The development and acquisition of modern technology to streamline House operations, including the creation of a House Digital Service that has been the driving force behind a new purpose-built committee scheduling tool, digital cosponsorship system,²⁴ and encouraging the responsible adoption of generative AI tools for legislative operations.²⁵
- » Enhancing Congress’ access to accurate, real-time information on emerging developments in science and technology through the Government Accountability Office Science, Technology Assessment, and Analytics team and Innovation Lab. Supported by civil society, other efforts like TechCongress have also vastly increased Congress’ access to science and technology expertise.²⁶
- » And many more.²⁷

On the whole, the reforms championed by this ecosystem fall closer to the “targeted upstream intervention” than the “completely overhaul the system” end of the scale: the general theory of change in this ecosystem posits that these seemingly small advances in promoting Congressional capacity, innovation, and engagement will have larger downstream ripple effects that promote Congressional effectiveness, responsiveness, and representation. For example, efforts underway to ensure that more

21 Stid, D. (2023, January 3). The best-kept secret of the secret Congress. The Art of Association. <https://www.theartofassociation.org/blog/the-best-kept-secret-of-the-secret-congress>

22 For an accounting of the Select Committee’s progress, see its final published report: “Final report.” Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress. (2022, December). Congress.gov. <https://www.congress.gov/117/crpt/CRPT-117hrpt646/GPO-CRPT-117hrpt646.pdf>

23 Marquette, C. (2022, March 9). Legislative branch bill boosts members representational allowance, Capitol Police. Roll Call. <https://rollcall.com/2022/03/09/legislative-branch-bill-boosts-members-representational-allowance-capitol-police/>

24 Jones, J. H. (2022, April 4). House of Representatives to launch New Digital Services Team. FedScoop. <https://fedscoop.com/house-of-representatives-to-launch-new-digital-service-team/>

25 Wilson, A. (2023, November 21). Keeping pace with AI: The Legislative Branch Charges Forward in Second flash report. POPVOX Foundation. <https://www.popvox.org/blog/ai-flash-report>

26 TechCongress to place more technologists in Congress with a \$2.5M investment from Knight Foundation. Knight Foundation. <https://knightfoundation.org/press/releases/techcongress-to-place-more-technologists-in-congress-with-a-2-25m-investment-from-knight-foundation/>

27 For an up-to-date accounting of modernization initiatives, see the Bipartisan Policy Center’s Modernization Tracker: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/modernizing-congress/>

than one Member can be listed as a bill’s sponsor²⁸ may on its face seem like a small technical change, but could help incentivize bipartisanship by allowing more than one sponsor to claim credit for a bipartisan idea.

Despite the success of the “fix Congress” effort, for several of these funders, January 6th changed the calculus around prioritizing Congressional operations: some shifted resources away from Congressional capacity and institution-strengthening to prioritize electoral changes or partisan campaigns. Others turned their attention to state and local governments. In response to the withdrawal or refocusing of several major funders, the current landscape of Congress-focused civil society groups is in a period of realignment, with some organizations shuttering, merging, or pivoting to related issue areas.

It is also noteworthy that public pressure is largely absent from this work. While Congress is perennially low ranked in public opinion surveys,²⁹ Members championing modernization efforts often point to the low traction of these efforts “back home.” The niche and technical areas of focus for organizations focused on modernization — and the fact that many modernization efforts must remain relatively under the radar to avoid becoming captured by partisanship — means that there is relatively little interest or resourcing available to either gauge or create public interest around these efforts.

²⁸ Reps. Cleaver, Kim introduce BUDS resolution to bolster bipartisan collaboration in Congress. Congressman Emanuel Cleaver. (2023, August 31). <https://cleaver.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/rep-cleaver-kim-introduce-buds-resolution-bolster-bipartisan>

²⁹ For example: Bell, P. (2024, June 24). Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>

How the Project Worked

Initial conversations between the Democracy 2076 and POPVOX Foundation teams around a collaborative project identified three broad goals:

1. Provide expert feedback and vetting on the Congressional reform ideas surfaced in the Democracy 2076 convening, and surface additional ideas for consideration that were not discussed at the December convening

As noted above, participants in the original Democracy 2076 convening were largely not previously involved in efforts to reform Congress, although they identified Congressional reform as a primary need. To allow participants at the subsequent June 2024 convening to think through the effort it would take to realize some of these goals, the project needed to bring in Congressional experts with insight into the current landscape of Congress, barriers to reform, and an understanding of the wider impact of potential reforms.

2. Identify organizations in the Congressional reform and modernization ecosystem that are or would be interested in pursuing some of the big-picture reforms identified in the project

Project partners did not come into this experiment thinking that participants would immediately overhaul their entire slate of priorities and reorient around constitutional amendments for the next fifty years. However, part of the hope for the project was that in nudging organizations in the Congressional modernization ecosystem to experiment with longer-term strategic planning, the project may surface some areas of productive alignment and collaboration beyond today's short-term priorities.

3. Trial run for futurist thinking and techniques for Congress and the Congressional-reform community

The least-defined but perhaps most important goal was an experiment and landscape assessment. Understanding that experimenting with very long-term planning would be a new experience for many in the Congressional modernization ecosystem, project partners expected there would be some level of excitement, hesitation, discomfort, and frustration in this process — the exact contours of which would help project partners identify next steps. Part of this goal was simply identifying the logistical barriers (e.g., staff time, portfolio allocations, funding cycle incentives) that currently make long-term planning difficult. But more broadly, the project asked: what assumptions baked into futurist thinking work or don't work in a Congressional context? How can futurist language and techniques be adapted for the specific

incentives and dynamics of Congress? How does planning on a 50-year time horizon, instead of through the next election or end of the next administration, provide depth and direction to participation organizations' work?

In designing the Congress 2076 project, both host organizations agreed on a scope that aimed to build on the high-impact work of the original Democracy 2076 convening, while adapting it for the specific cultural and political dynamics of Congress. This included three connected components.

CALL FOR IDEAS

The project kicked off with a Call for Ideas, asking scholars, modernizers, staff, and others in our network to review the future planning scenarios used in the original Democracy 2076 event and submit their best ideas for Congressional reforms that would contribute to an effective, responsive, and representative government across all four scenarios.

This component of the project had two goals:

1. Create the menu of ideas that participants at the Congress 2076 event would be able to consider
2. Surface some of the ideas and goals that participating organizations and individuals may want to work on in the future: if each group realized their current goals in the next 2-5 years, what would be next on the agenda? What sequencing of modernization priorities would need to happen to unlock larger impacts?

The Call for Ideas was held open for around five weeks, and received 23 individual ideas from thirteen contributors. The range of ideas represented was very broad, ranging from changes to Congressional operations to changing the jurisdiction of chambers. A full list of submitted ideas is in the appendix.

After ideas were submitted, to create the list of ideas for the event, POPVOX Foundation recruited a small group of Congressional experts from diverse backgrounds to review and evaluate submitted ideas. Evaluators scored ideas on the following criteria:

- » Originality and Innovation
- » Relevance and Application
- » Feasibility and Practicality
- » Potential for Impact
- » Clarity and Coherence
- » Relevance across scenarios

The final list of ideas for consideration at the event included the top-scoring newly-submitted ideas, as well as the ideas that ranked highest in the expert survey.

EXPERT SURVEY

Also in line with goals for the project, participants were also offered the chance to provide feedback on ideas around Congressional reform previously considered in the Democracy 2076 event through an Expert Survey. The Expert Survey was circulated to the same audience that received the Call for Ideas. In total, six experts completed the survey, with backgrounds from Congressional service to political science and philanthropy.

In addition to providing specific feedback, experts were also invited to rate Congress's level of preparedness to address changes in society in the next 50 years: on average, the experts surveyed rated Congress at a 3.6 out of ten.

Comments submitted alongside the rating were particularly illuminating:

The institution has a toolbox full of procedures, processes, and solutions it can use to address problems that may come its way. The problem is that fewer Members and staff know how to utilize these tools. Partisanship, strong party rule, and conjoining with the Executive branch — all resulting in less trust in institutions by the American people — are all areas of concern for Congress now and in the years ahead.

— Aubrey Wilson, Director of Innovation, POPVOX Foundation

Members of Congress are increasingly steeped in partisanship, preventing them from working with each other to get things done, particularly the most important things. Compromise has become a dirty word, but without it nothing will get done. Congress' focus needs to move away from partisan politics toward what is best for the country.

— Barry McLerran, Senior Constituent Services Advisor, Senator Mitt Romney [R, UT]

Congress has a very limited ability to deal with gridlock, which gets increasingly worse with elite polarization and the perverse incentives created by the two party system. People do not see themselves represented in Congress (again, because of the two-party system), which erodes the legitimacy of Congress among the public.

— Anonymous, political scientist

Congress still has the resilience and flexibility to develop stronger policy and oversight capacity over the next few decades. I am most worried about political hostility to expertise in general and the capture of Congressional decision-making by corporate interests. Our electoral system is forcing a binary artificial conflict. Congress lacks the expertise and staff capacity to be a 21st century legislature.

— Chris Nehls, POPVOX Foundation

While Congress has made many advances in building its capacity the past few years, it still has a long way to go to be able to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society. The dynamic of Members campaigning against the institution and purposely starving it of resources will only make it further irrelevant to the policymaking process as time goes on. Beyond capacity problems, the institution is in need of reforms that better incentivize legislative behavior and bipartisan oversight investigations.

— JD Rackey, Senior Policy Analyst, Bipartisan Policy Center

Many of these themes would be further addressed at the Congress 2076 convening.

CONGRESS 2076 CONVENING

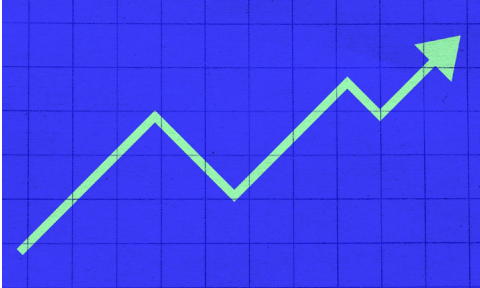
The event and project were advertised through POPVOX Foundation’s website, social media, and through existing networks, including the Fix Congress cohort, as well as through Democracy 2076’s social media and individual outreach by partners to targeted staff and potential participants. The in-person event was eventually hosted in collaboration with the Modernization Staff Association, an official association of junior and early-career Congressional staff dedicated to improving Congress, which also shared the event information among members.

In total, 42 people registered for the event, representing a broad range of industries and specializations: fifteen were currently-serving Congressional staff (including Member office and committee staff from both chambers and both sides of the aisle, as well as nonpartisan support offices), eighteen were in nonprofit or advocacy roles, four in academic positions, and additional participants from philanthropy, media, and other observers.

Around twenty participants joined for the event itself, which took place over the course of an afternoon on an out-of-session day to allow Congressional staff maximum flexibility to attend.

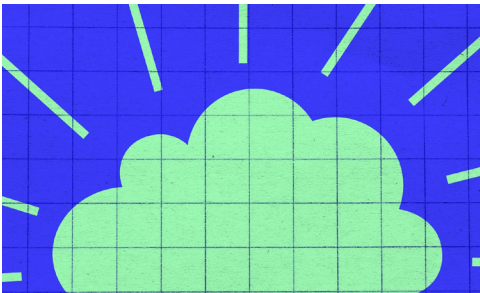
After opening remarks, participants were randomly divided into two groups. Each group was asked to start with a world-building exercise where they discussed what the country and world might look like in two scenarios per group. As part of the world-building exercise, participants were asked explicitly to consider the potential role and structure of Congress and how it might differ from today. Event organizers moderated and facilitated the group discussions, answering questions and prompting participants to think through aspects of the scenarios that were not being covered.

Scenarios presented:³⁰



Continued Growth or the “official future:” assumes continuation of current growth trajectories

The global economy continues to grow due to technology, despite the slow global population growth. We continue to live in an increasingly globalized world as it has for the last 50 years and cross-country inequality continues to decline globally, as it has been for the last 40 years. The bifurcation between capitalism and democracy continues to grow as more and more people adopt values of consumerism and individualism as democracy continues to decline globally (as it has been for nearly 20 years). The global population continues to age and the number of international migrants continues to grow, resulting in the global loneliness crisis continuing to grow. Finally, global temperatures continue to rise, leading to more frequent and severe natural disasters.



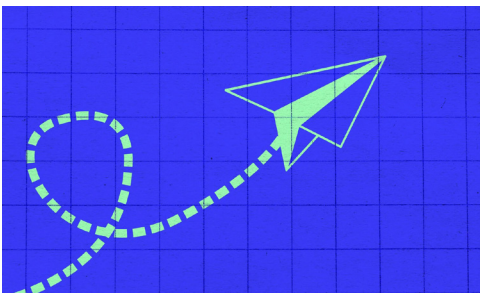
Silver Linings: dominant systems have run out of runway and show signs of decay.

Amidst intersecting existential crises (e.g. wars, pandemics, climate crises, social unrest), trust in large cities and national institutions deteriorates even as those cities and institutions continue to exist, leading many to seek solace in homogeneous communities with localized, self-sustaining economies. Traditional forms of value tied to materialism and interaction amongst different types of people are replaced by an emphasis on community traditions within small homogeneous groups due to the immediate needs of survival, security and self-sustainability with technology as a tool of adaptive resilience.



Constrained Society: constraints are navigated through the imposition of limits.

In response to global challenges, societies adopt strong governance models, with the help of technology, to ensure resource sustainability and pricing that reflects true costs and limit externalities. Some are democratic whereas others are not. The emphasis shifts from personal freedom to personal responsibility, where the ability to be constrained in consumption of resources is seen as a personal achievement and provides social capital because it ensures security and adheres to tradition.



Transformation: a world in which new possibilities are unlocked by upending old rules.

Driven by disruptive technologies and alternatives to economic growth measures, societies experience a paradigm shift from focusing on material consumption and efficiency to experiential social pursuits and technology as a tool to support human endeavors. This leads to a tremendous reduction in income inequality and a reduction in consumption. The transformation heralds a future where value is rooted in social bonds that provide new experiences and where care for others provides meaning to individuals.

³⁰ For a full description of the four scenarios considered, please see Democracy 2076: A Constitution for 2076, Final Report. <https://www.democracy2076.org/a-constitution-for-2076>

Following the world-building exercise, groups were then asked to consider two projections for anticipated future shifts in US demographics (including the changing ratio of employed vs. retired workers), and the future of work (economic realignment with the rise of AI and other unpredictable emerging technologies). Given these predicted changes, participants were asked to consider the submitted ideas for reforming Congress and asked to identify changes that would make the Congress of their scenarios more resilient, representative, and responsive. Previously-submitted ideas were on display in the event space, but participants were instructed to not limit themselves to the submitted ideas in considering potential Congressional reforms. Lastly, the event wrapped up with a happy hour where many conversations continued into the evening.

Takeaways

On the whole, participants reported on the event's post-survey that the event was a helpful exercise in thinking about the future and Congress' role in a new way. Participants specifically noted the usefulness of this type of scenario planning for Congress, and the contrast with the normal pace and short-term focus necessitated by the political process:

“Bringing in additional resources to support foresight and long term strategic planning work was a really important takeaway for me, and it mirrors what I see in my day to day work in Congress.”

“I did not know nearly as much about forecasting/long-term trends... so much of the Hill is day-to-day chaos/thinking about 2-year terms.”

When asked about the insights or realizations from the event that would inform their future work, others also noted the importance of a strategic exercise that pushed them to think differently about problem-solving:

“Sometimes it’s easier to assess solutions when you take a dramatic look at the future (i.e., our group had a doomsday scenario) because you work backwards and are able to figure out which solutions might fix certain issues.”

“I think the reframing for the question of ‘how do we get good things’ to happen was useful. We often only focus on the bad, but in the scenario planning for solutions we reframed to say: how do we avoid having these things happen?”

As covered further below, while the mood in the room veered fairly negative at times, participants on the whole came away somewhat positive about the potential for Congress to find solutions to address future problems.

“Not so much changed but asserted that democracy is resilient, and that we can always find solutions. And we will. Might be a bit of a road to get there, but if workshops like this lead to concrete policy change: that’s a huge step.”

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE ROOM

Because the purpose of the event was in large part experimental, beyond the specific takeaways, one of the most illuminating elements of the event itself was the general mood in the room throughout the exercise. In particular, participants at the event and in discussion afterward identified three primary observations that may shape directions for future events.

Futures thinking is stymied by limited Congressional capacity.

There was no disagreement in the room that this type of long-term forward planning is of value to Congress. The sense of frustration that began to set in after the first hour of the event stemmed from a deep knowledge of how difficult it would be to implement.

Consider the following facts about serving and working in Congress:

- » Funding for the Legislative branch is approximately 0.5% of the federal budget, and significant amounts of that funding do not directly support legislative operations, but go to the US Capitol Police and the Architect of the Capitol.³¹ While Congress is the first named branch of American government and has authority over all decisions related to allocating funding and authorizing programs, it often struggles to attract and retain talented staff,³² or to increase its own capacity with technological modernization.
- » The number of constituents each Member represents has increased dramatically in the last several decades to almost 800,000 people per Member. Members receive a fixed allocation for their office budgets, meaning they have to balance allocating staff between constituent correspondence and engagement, direct constituent service, communications, and legislative responsibilities.
- » Congress appropriates money to agencies (more or less) in one-year increments.³³ A shift in party control in one or both chambers can mean dramatic changes in agency funding and authorized programs.
- » As recent writing from former US Deputy CTO and Code for America founder Jennifer Pahlka observes,³⁴ Congress' current model of policymaking is relatively separated from the actual implementation and delivery of policy objectives. Oversight is largely an investigative project, focusing on identifying problems in agency work and looking backward to what caused them.
- » Member “churn” means that a Member who may have introduced a policy is likely not still in Congress and able to monitor its implementation for the long term — or a Member in a swing district may feel that they have to prioritize “quick win” policies instead of long-term strategic planning that will be realized after they are out of office.

While civil society organizations are not directly affected by the specific capacity restraints of Congress, for organizations that work closely with Congress (and measure success on the same two-year election cycle) it can also be difficult to plan for a longer-term future.

³¹ Based on FY25 funding levels from the House: <https://appropriations.house.gov/news/press-releases/committee-releases-fy25-legislative-branch-appropriations-bill>

³² Furness, A. C., & LaPira, T. M. (2020, September 8). Congressional Brain Drain. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/congressional-brain-drain/>

³³ Saturno, J. V., & Lynch, M. S. (2023, May 17). The appropriations process: A brief overview. Congressional Research Service. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47106>

³⁴ Pahlka, J. (2024, March 31). On “Liberating Evaluation from the Academy.” <https://www.eatingpolicy.com/p/on-liberating-evaluation-from-the>

In this context, efforts to highlight for Congress the potential benefits of incorporating futurist thinking without acknowledging the institution's limited capacity can feel out of reach. Recommendations to establish dedicated staff or dedicated offices for future planning, such as those that are being proposed in the UK,³⁵ are currently victim to a zero-sum game where a gain in capacity in one area necessarily means a loss in another.

However, Congress has also taken other steps to genuinely expand its own capacity, instead of just reshape it: for example, as noted above, the 21% increase in funding in MRAs in 2022 represents an enormous increase in individual Member offices' ability to attract and retain talented staff, increasing the available expertise to make policy.

Participants also noted that there are forcing functions on the horizon that may force Congress to reckon with its current ability to write policy well. The recent Supreme Court decision in *Loper Bright v. Raimondo* ended the principle of “Chevron deference” that previously instructed courts to defer to agency decisions where Congress did not clearly articulate its intentions in statute. As POPVOX Foundation founder and Executive Director put it, in considering the impact of the decision on Congressional capacity:

“The Loper and Relentless decisions emphasize that when courts now interpret statutes to assess the appropriateness of agency rulemakings, instead of deferring to agency interpretation, they should use the standard rules of statutory interpretation that they use for interpreting every other kind of law. The decisions clarify that this activity is not ‘policymaking’ but rather legal interpretation or ‘judicial review’ — the power the judicial branch established in Marbury v. Madison back in 1803. That means the language Congress uses in statutory text is going to be more important than ever to ensure that agencies follow intent and that their actions are upheld when challenged in court.

Unfortunately, for the past forty years, this skill has not been cultivated in Congressional staff and Members. And, as I experienced back in my interning days, few staffers have even been taught these rules of statutory interpretation that courts will use when statutes are eventually challenged. That has to change. As Georgetown Law professor Victoria Nourse tweeted: ‘Upshot for lawyers, firms, law profs: it’s not enough to take admin law anymore. Statutory interpretation is a must, and those classes must teach textualism.’

Congressional staff and Members now need to be introduced to these principles as a part of their orientation and training for policy roles, with ongoing updates and professional development as a new policy status quo develops.”³⁶

The bottom line is that discussions about how and why Congress should incorporate futures thinking are inextricably linked to efforts to increase Congressional capacity. While Congressional capacity is

³⁵ Agency, P. N. (2024, May 29). MPs call for urgent reform of government culture to make the UK “fit for future.” Watford Observer. <https://www.watfordobserver.co.uk/news/national/24351635.mps-call-urgent-reform-government-culture-make-uk-fit-future/>

³⁶ Harris, M. (2024, June 29). Post Chevron, Congress has to get serious about capacity. POPVOX Foundation. <https://www.popvox.org/blog/post-chevron-congress-has-to-get-serious-about-capacity>

still so constrained, civil society can play a role by socializing and demonstrating the value of these types of thinking, including providing staff training and hosting events like Congress 2076. Several organizations, including the Federal Foresight Advocacy Alliance³⁷ (in attendance at the event), are exploring new models and methods to provide exactly this support to Congress and to state legislatures.³⁸

Modernizers believe in Congress, sometimes to a fault.

Internal and external modernizers universally came into the event with a deep belief in Congress itself as a product of American ideals and ongoing efforts to live up to them, as the center and symbol of a rich history and tradition of democracy, and as an instrument and vehicle for necessary deliberation and action. As noted above, many of the civil society organizations participating in modernization efforts are made up in large part of former Congressional staffers whose work continues to be animated by personal experience of serving in the institution and wanting it to work better. Every attendee who has been involved in Congressional modernization efforts has seen a good idea (or many good ideas) fail; yet every attendee involved in Congressional modernization nonetheless remains in the space because of this belief.

The problem this event surfaced is in the fundamental incompatibility of attitudes toward Congress held by institutional modernizers and organizer/activist communities.

The first-person experience working in and with the institution means that current institutional modernizers are smart on targeted, small-change ideas that may have larger ramifications down the road — and skeptical of proposed structural reforms that may throw the proverbial baby (under-the-radar areas where Congress *does* function well) out with the bathwater, or create equal or greater problems than those they are intended to solve.

This skepticism played out in the event in discussions that quickly veered into why potential problems were unsolvable or why proposed changes would fail, instead of creatively gaming out what a solution could look like. As one attendee put it on the event’s post-survey, a big takeaway was the necessity of “second level thinking — not letting the first layers of barriers to reform be the end of the conversation.”

Correspondingly, attendees from organizing or futurist backgrounds noted after the event that they were struck by the sense of skepticism toward more structural reforms among some modernizers, and concerned that widespread public feelings of anger, betrayal, and frustration toward Congress are just not penetrating deeply enough into the communities focused on Congressional reform. After the December 2023 Democracy 2076 event where multiple groups somewhat seriously toyed with ideas around eliminating a federal government and Congress altogether, the smaller-scale ideas submitted in the Congress 2076 process felt like tinkering around the edges — or rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

³⁷ Federal Foresight Alliance. <https://www.ffaa-us.org/>

³⁸ For example, see a similar event hosted by the Future Caucus with state legislators: <https://futurecaucus.org/futures-thinking-with-young-legislators/>

Many future scenarios bake in the assumption of a failed Congress.

As one attendee asked, half joking: would the Congress 2076 project pay for the therapy the attendees would need after leaving the event?

By the end of the convening, the mood in the room was dark. Especially for the group assigned to Scenarios 1 and 2, the experience of imagining a future, specifically a Congress-related future, drawn from elements of *Terminator*, *The Hunger Games*, *Minority Report*, *Ready Player One*, *Her*, and other dystopian sci-fi was an unfamiliar and jarring experience. At the post-event reception, one attendee articulated that it felt like the scenario-planning exercise they had just completed baked in the assumption of a Congress that had already failed. Given that assumption, what was the point of debating the finer details of how many constituents a Member should represent?

Crucially, within the facilitation materials for the event, the scenarios were deliberately worded to avoid steering participants into any specific outcome with regard to the existence and function of Congress. But attendees still clearly felt that they leaned toward a future without Congress.

What this may suggest is that attendees came in already having absorbed some elements of future visioning that *do* either attack or ignore the potential role of Congress in future society. Additionally, it may suggest that participants struggled to identify a role for Congress in preventing undesirable scenarios for the future. This may perhaps be due to the points outlined above about the lack of capacity in Congress and the focus on more short-term targeted solutions in changing Congress in this community. This can be seen in examples such as venture capitalist Marc Andreessen’s widely cited “It’s Time to Build” manifesto³⁹ that blames a failure of democratic governments, especially the US Congress, to foster economic and technological dynamism and innovation. Similarly, several privately led processes have been promoted as “democratic” while sidestepping government altogether, such as OpenAI’s “Democratic inputs to AI”⁴⁰ or Anthropic’s “Collective Constitutional AI.”⁴¹ But democracy requires a social contract and power given by the people to carry out their will. Referencing these projects at TICTech, POPVOX Foundation Executive Director Marci Harris noted, “That’s not democracy. That’s customer research.”

For Congressional staffers or external Congress champions, these scenarios in which Congress is seemingly bypassed or not trusted can be frustrating. However, this emphasizes the need for Congress champions and Congress itself to make a proactive case for why and how Congress as an institution and tool to translate public will into governing policy is and should be relevant — not just relevant, critical — to creating a just future.

39 Andreessen, M. (2023, August 30). It’s time to build. Andreessen Horowitz. <https://a16z.com/its-time-to-build/>

40 Democratic inputs to AI. Open AI. <https://openai.com/index/democratic-inputs-to-ai>

41 Collective constitutional AI: Aligning a language model with public input. Anthropic. (2023, October 27). <https://www.anthropic.com/news/collective-constitutional-ai-aligning-a-language-model-with-public-input>

42 Malkin, C., & Almenr, N. (2024). Big Tech-driven deliberative projects. Global Citizens’ Assembly Network. <https://glocan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Technical-Paper-2-2023-Malkin-et-al.pdf>

SUBSTANTIVE TAKEAWAYS

Coming out of the event, participants who provided feedback on the post-event survey indicated that they were pessimistic about how well-suited our current system is to handle the challenges foreseeable in the next fifty years, with no participants scoring our system higher than a three out of five. However, participants were slightly more optimistic about the existence of potential solutions that could help Congress and the rest of the US governing system adapt.

Unlike the December convening, participants at Congress 2076 engaged in a more open discussion rather than drilling down to seek group consensus on particular amendments. However, groups did identify areas of interest and alignment, as well as areas of disagreement or conspicuous absences that may provide insight into how similar futurist exercises work in a Congressional context going forward.

Areas of interest and alignment

Across both groups and all four scenarios, three clear areas emerged as places where participants saw necessary reforms to make Congress more effective, responsive, and representative. While groups differed on the specific ideas that could address these identified challenges, the clear alignment nonetheless points to areas of productive future work.

1. Closing the gulf between DC-based policymaking centers and local engagement and expertise

The one submitted idea that was specifically chosen by both groups in every scenario was “Getting Congress out of DC.” Under this umbrella, groups discussed ideas that included additional field hearings, virtual participation, and regional sub-chambers making laws at a level between state and federal. Discussions focused on rebuilding constituent trust, tapping into on-the-ground expertise, and making Congress more responsive and agile in addressing local concerns.

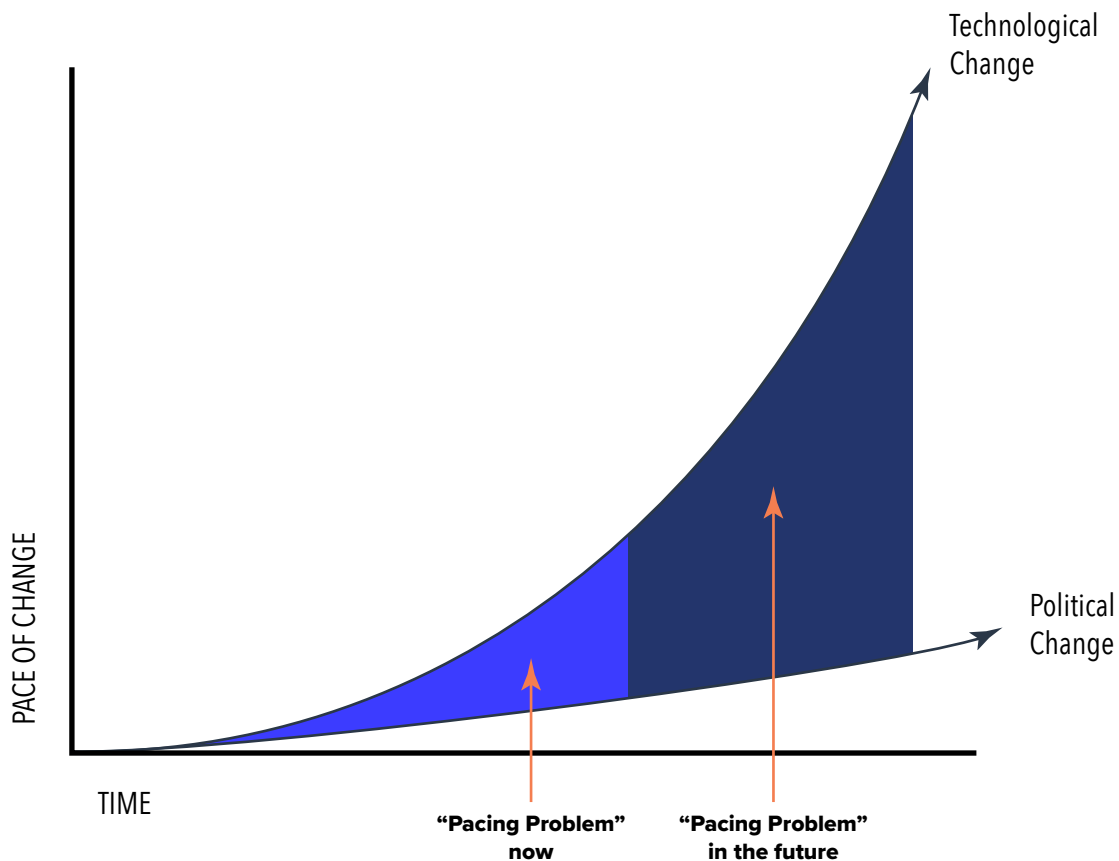
One group in examining Scenario 3 (resource-constrained future) suggested that district and state offices may become the new power centers for Congress: tapping into local approval numbers for individual Members of Congress, this group suggested that Members could continue to build on their current local roles in providing constituent services, convening stakeholders in deliberative processes, and acting as a unified voice to provide trustworthy information to constituents. However, it is worth noting the contrast between this vision of Congressional power and the vision put forward by the group examining Scenario 2 (dominant systems decay), where the sense was that Congress would shift into a weaker and more ceremonial role and cede increasing amounts of power to local, state, and regional governments.

2. Checking and balancing corporate power, including tech power

Especially in Scenario 1 (the “official future” or a continuation of current trends) and Scenario 4 (“transformation” driven by disruptive technologies and economic change), groups identified growing

corporate power as a potential factor impacting Congress' ability to function and serve constituents into the future. Specific elements of this concern were the growing power of global or multinational corporations, corporations increasingly taking on activities and services that have previously been handled by government as a part of the social compact, potential impacts to the workforce stemming from technological advances like AI, and the growing culture-war focus on influencing corporate behavior over government action.

This was a clear articulation of the problem of “external pacing” for Congress,⁴³ in which the gulf between the pace of change in technology and society significantly outpaces the pace of change in legislative and governing institutions without substantial intervention to enhance the capacity and capability of the governing side.



While groups were divided on the exact form this balancing should take, discussion around this specific area ranged among topics like increasing Congress' access to data and information, tax reform, pro-labor policies like mandatory job retention in the face of AI, strengthening Congress' foresight capacity, devoting funding available to universal civic education, and anti-consumerist cultural shifts like a rejection of conspicuous consumption to embrace “conspicuous sacrifice.”

⁴³ Harris, M. (2019, August 23). Congress vs. the “pacing problem[s].” Medium. <https://medium.com/g21c/congress-vs-the-pacing-problem-s-a887e3ca953f>

3. Refining the relationship between the Executive and Legislative branches

Elements of imbalance between the Executive and Legislative branches were areas of concern and fruitful discussion for both groups.

Not surprisingly for a group mostly drawn from pro-Congress organizations and current Congressional staffers, much of the discussion focused on strengthening Congress relative to the Executive branch — including, for example, Congress strengthening its sole authority to authorize the use of military force. However, one group dove into the ideal form the relationship between Congress and Executive branch agencies should take, landing on the articulation of a Congress with adequate foresight capacity to empower agencies to achieve concrete outcomes. This group noted that this shift to outcomes-driven legislation⁴⁴ would require strengthening and enhancement of both the Executive and Legislative branches, reshaping their relationship and methods of working together (without going so far as to move Executive branch agencies into the Legislative branch entirely).

Both groups also noted an interest in preserving legislative capacity by tying Legislative-branch funding to Executive-branch funding to formally link the two branches' ability to keep pace with each other, although noted that the utility of this depended on the continued existence and importance of the federal government with relatively co-equal branches.

What wasn't discussed, and what does this tell us about areas of weakness?

As the event wound down and attendees shifted to the reception, small and informal conversations about the event itself returned again and again to the uniqueness of an event like this for Congress. While also reflected in the post-event survey, these discussions in particular were helpful in surfacing the attendees' impressions of an event for Congress specifically focused on foresight and scenario-based planning, including in particular their surprise at several topics that were not as central as they may have expected.

Electoral reform

As noted above, a key dynamic of Congressional offices that is not often well-understood by outside advocates and scholars is the clear, bright line between campaign and official operations. Official offices are prohibited by Ethics rules in both chambers from sharing resources or non-public information with the campaign, and rules enforced by the Communications Standards Commission prohibit the use of official resources for anything that comes too close to campaign goals or messaging.⁴⁵

This dynamic is largely replicated and amplified in the civil society organizations that work on modernizing Congress: people and organizations that focus on electoral reform tend to be separate

⁴⁴ Harris, M. (2024). Outcomes Driven Legislation: Updating the policy process for the 21st century. <https://www.popvox.org/s/Outcomes-Driven-Policy-Brochure.pdf>

⁴⁵ For an example of where this is coming up, see: Metzger, B. (2024, May). The questionable way lawmakers get taxpayers to fund borderline-political ads. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/shri-thanedar-tax-money-billboards-ethics-franking-2024-3>

from groups focused on capacity and modernization. At several points in the discussion, participants noted how electoral reform may impact the proposed amendments, or how problems with the electoral system directly impact Congress — including one group who included a proposal to ban fundraising while Congress is in session in their list of chosen ideas — but several attendees noted that they did not feel qualified to dive in deeply.

Productive future events in Congress may consider ways to bring together campaign- and electoral-reform organizations in structured, closed-door events to consider how these agendas may intersect.

Partisan (re)alignment

As one attendee shared at the post-event reception, it was noticeable that in a discussion about proposed reforms to the US Constitution, the discussion nonetheless avoided getting deep into philosophical questions about the ideal size of government despite the scenarios prompting different levels of trust in the federal government and different levels of globalization and localized government. Notably, at the December 2023 gathering with explicitly partisan (left-leaning) state and grassroots organizers, conversations about politics and size of government were more robust. Other topics around partisanship, potential political realignment, and the role of political parties were also — for the most part — absent.

Part of this was certainly in an event design that did not explicitly nudge participants to head down these avenues. However, the fact that they did not emerge organically also likely speaks to the dynamics of participants in the room: many of the organizations participating were 501(c)(3) organizations, prohibited from engaging in campaign activities and limited in how much organization time can be spent in lobbying. Many, including POPVOX Foundation, were also nonpartisan or bipartisan organizations who are sensitive about the perception of taking a partisan stance (or taking a partisan stance without counterbalance of some kind) that may jeopardize their relationships and effectiveness. Even for staff working in Member offices, with POPVOX Foundation as the lead host and organizer, attendees' expectations were likely that the event would be nonpartisan, and therefore may have been reticent to represent a political position.

Avoiding partisan issues in the room meant that although there was tension at times in other areas, the conversation never devolved into the partisan bickering that attendees working in and around Congress are all too familiar with. However, the absence of political discussion was an elephant in the room.

Climate change

Several attendees noted with surprise that the given scenarios and materials did not mention the impact of climate change. One experienced futurist suggested that the concrete, experiential nature of climate change projections would have made it easier for groups to imagine themselves in dramatically different future scenarios (for example, imagining policies to respond to the uninhabitability of the East Coast due to climate-related sea level rise).

One insight from this feedback may be that future scenario exercises in a Congressional setting may need additional detail and support materials: several attendees noted that because this was such a new way of thinking, they wished that they had been given more detail, especially in the provided scenario materials, and more hands-on facilitation support to help them process and participate effectively.

What's Next?

Ultimately, the Congress 2076 project surfaced one key area of universal agreement: that there *are* potential reforms that could make Congress more representative, responsive, and ready to take on the challenges of the next fifty years, and that without those reforms, it will likely fall behind and lose its effectiveness and relevance for America and the world. To avoid this fate, Congress must increase its effectiveness, negotiate its relationships with the private sector and other branches of government, and find ways to strengthen its legitimacy with the people it represents.

Participants in the room bridged many key divides themselves: they represented both sides of the aisle, both chambers, Member-office staff and institutional staff, funders and nonprofits, modernizers and reformers. All unanimously agreed on the value of long-term planning capacity for Congress, although different participants brought different perspectives on how to achieve this. However, participants identified two big-picture takeaways that limit the institution and its champions in investing in this capacity:

Long-term thinking in Congress is hindered by limited overall capacity.

After years of underinvesting in its own ability to govern, Congress continues to face a crisis of capacity, from labor and workforce retention to modernizing technical debt. Efforts to highlight potential benefits of futurist thinking for Congress without acknowledging the institution's limited capacity can feel out of touch and unrealistic for staff and experts who are closer to the institution's day-to-day limitations.

There is a deep fundamental disconnect between Congressional modernizers, pro-reform activists, and state or local-level organizers.

The Congressional modernization community is largely composed of individuals and organizations with experience working within or alongside the institution. Most are focused on targeted, high leverage ideas that cause minimal disruption in the short-term, with the potential for larger impacts in the future. To be effective, these civil society organizations must work in a bipartisan way and most eschew electoral reforms. This stands in stark contrast to many state- and issue-based organizers (and general public sentiment) who see Congress from the outside as in need of structural reform and view traditional organizing tactics as a more desirable approach. A tension between “fix Congress” reformers and “dramatically reshape Congress” activists was notable at the event as well as at the subsequent June 2024 Democracy 2076 convening attended by several participants in the Congress 2076 event.

Potential productive avenues to address these disconnects may include:

Continue to socialize futurist techniques and approaches for Congressional staff and civil society modernizers.

Participants universally noted the potential usefulness of this type of scenario planning to their work, but also its novelty. Continuing work here may help socialize futurist techniques and build enthusiasm for them in Congress and associated civil society organizations, and further refine the most effective places for them to be utilized. These efforts should address current capacity constraints while demonstrating the tangible benefits of long-term strategic planning. By integrating more detailed scenario materials, concrete future projections, and enhanced facilitation support, future initiatives can make these exercises more accessible and impactful for those less familiar with futures thinking.

Groups working to advocate for the federal government's internal futures capacity like the Federal Foresight Advocacy Alliance⁴⁶ will undoubtedly lead the way in this regard, but may benefit from additional support from some of the internal and external participants at the Congress 2076 event.

Continue to build bridges between Congressional modernizers and reformers.

Equally crucial is the need to build bridges between Congressional modernizers and reform advocates. The disconnect between these groups, as revealed in the project, highlights a significant obstacle to comprehensive and effective reform. To address this, future efforts should facilitate structured dialogues that bring together diverse perspectives, including those focused on electoral reform and those dedicated to institutional modernization. These conversations can help identify common ground, reconcile competing visions, and develop more holistic approaches to strengthening Congress. By fostering understanding between those deeply invested in the current system and those pushing for transformative change, reformers can create a more nuanced and effective reform agenda that balances tradition with innovation.

In conclusion, the Congress 2076 initiative has provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of applying futures thinking to Congressional reform. As work in this area continues, it is essential that practitioners refine and adapt these approaches to the unique context and culture of Congress. By doing so, they can foster a more forward-looking, adaptive, and resilient Legislative branch capable of meeting the complex challenges of the coming decades. This work is not just about improving an institution; it's about ensuring that American democracy remains vibrant, responsive, and representative in the face of rapid global change. The path ahead may be challenging, but the stakes are too high to ignore the critical task of preparing Congress for the future.

46 Federal Foresight Alliance. <https://www.ffaa-us.org/>



Appendix

REIMAGINE CONSTITUENT CORRESPONDENCE

By the year 2076, Congress has revamped its institutional capacity by hiring specialized experts, particularly in the House where Legislative Correspondents (LCs) have been abolished. Instead, legislative staff handle specific issue areas and constituent correspondence, mirroring the Senate's structure. Advocacy groups submit petitions for collective response rather than form letters. Individual messages from constituents are received via various channels and personally addressed by relevant expert staffers. Virtual small group town halls are hosted regularly to engage constituents on specific topics. Detailed reports on constituent correspondence inform policy briefs and legislative decisions, with ideas and concerns shared across offices through an aggregated portal.

Submitted by: Ananda Bhatia

ESTABLISH A CONGRESSIONAL OFFICE OF LEGAL COUNSEL

By 2076, Congress will have in place a bipartisan, bicameral Congressional Office of Legal Counsel (OLC). Congress will use this office to protect its prerogatives to conduct effective oversight and perform its constitutional responsibilities. For many years, the Executive branch has used the DOJ Office of Legal Counsel to issue legal opinions that undermine Congressional authority to obtain information from the Executive branch. During those years, Congress had no mechanism to respond to those opinions. Building upon a 2023 Government Accountability Office (GAO) study, the Congressional OLC uses staff from the House General Counsel's office and the Senate's Legal Counsel's office, on a part-time basis, to develop legal opinions that support Congress' ability to obtain information it needs.

Submitted by: Elise Bean and Betsy Hawkings

CREATE SHARED CONGRESSIONAL OVERSIGHT INVESTIGATIVE STAFF

By 2076, Congressional committees have normalized hiring nonpartisan committee administrative and investigative staff whose compensation is paid by both the majority and minority. Standard job descriptions in the House and Senate Resume Banks have helped committees hire qualified personnel and helped job applicants understand that they are expected to perform their administrative and investigative functions in a nonpartisan manner. The standardized job descriptions have not only simplified and modernized the hiring process, but also hiring nonpartisan administrative and investigative staff has helped conserve committee resources by using investigative staff and clerks capable of serving both sides of the aisle; and encouraged less partisan investigations and oversight inquiries. Such roles foster continuity, professionalism, and trust, and help avoid partisan biases when conducting oversight.

Submitted by: Elise Bean and Betsy Hawkings

GETTING CONGRESS OUT OF DC – NATIONWIDE HEARINGS

By 2076, remote hearings have become the norm where committees travel across the country to hold hearings in communities where they can meet the people where they are. Congressional staff has been expanded to allow Members to send staff (whether they be district staff who are experienced in community outreach, DC-based policy staff, or a combination of both) to hearing locations in advance to hear from constituents, business owners, industry leaders, and more in the area, breaking Congress' reliance on DC-based lobbying firms and expertise. With Congress on the road so often, Americans see their legislature in action and, due to the more regional feel of these hearings, Congress has become less “stuffy.”

Submitted by: Aubrey Wilson, POPVOX Foundation

FIRST BRANCH LLM — DIGITAL FEDERALISM ARRIVES

The information properties of the First Branch of Government provide the critical infrastructure for the institutional memory of American democracy and one of the largest publishing entities on the planet — the US Congress. Accessible, accountable, and authenticated, the First Branch LLM is a mission critical data system, a coast-to-coast network that will be a foundational knowledge system bolstering shared public outcomes. This includes support for lawmakers, local governments, news media, and democratic norms. Modernizing and repurposing existing First Branch infrastructure will achieve most of the goal. The addition of a constituent voice archive and community data trust will facilitate whole-of-nation feedback and input. The First Branch LLM concept map illuminates an evolutionary path forward that befits the most consequential representative assembly in the world.

Submitted by: Lorelei Kelly, Georgetown



REIMAGING CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEES AND JURISDICTION



Congressional committees must be reimagined to effectively address the evolving needs of Congress and the American public. There must be a strategic reconfiguration to incorporate expertise in emerging technologies, environmental sustainability, cyber security, and global health, reflecting the multifaceted challenges of the 21st century. Committees dedicated to technology and digital governance should be established to navigate the complexities of artificial intelligence regulation, data privacy, and digital infrastructure.

Submitted by: Taylor J. Swift, POPVOX Foundation

LINKING CONGRESSIONAL FUNDING TO OVERALL SPENDING

By 2076, Congress has committed to its own funding by tying legislative branch funding to a set percentage of the federal budget - likely 1% or 1.5%. The Legislative branch, essential for the functioning of American democracy, faces intricate challenges that underscore the need for sufficient funding to effectively create laws and respond to the needs of the American populace. Despite the Executive branch employing millions and expending trillions, the Legislative branch's budget of \$6.9 billion—under 0.5% of the total federal budget—seems inadequate. This increase could markedly improve Congress' ability to tackle both existing and unforeseen challenges with superior tools and highly skilled personnel.

Submitted by: Taylor J. Swift, POPVOX Foundation

RETHINKING CONGRESSIONAL STAFF POSITIONS

By 2076, Congressional offices will adopt specialized roles to navigate emerging challenges. Led by the Chief of Staff and Legislative Director, operations and legislative agendas will be managed. New positions include a Technology and Cybersecurity Advisor, Environmental and Sustainability Officer, Artificial Intelligence Ethics Analyst, Public Health Strategist, Space Policy Advisor, Digital Engagement Director, Future Workforce Analyst, and Privacy Rights Advocate. District staff and constituent engagement teams will expand for improved local outreach. These roles ensure adaptability and proactive response to future complexities.

Submitted by: Taylor J. Swift, POPVOX Foundation


PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION FOR THE US HOUSE

By 2076, Congress has adopted proportional representation, creating multi-member Congressional districts where candidates win seats in proportion to their party's amount of support. This reform would 1) create incentive for compromise instead of conflict; 2) make gerrymandering irrelevant; 3) represent conservatives in liberal areas and liberals in conservative areas, creating more opportunities for coalitions to form; 4) scramble the binary us-vs-them approach to politics; 5) improve voter participation, and much more. It is the highest impact, lowest disruption reform that can make other important reforms easier to achieve by creating a more functional Congress.

Submitted by: Dustin Wahl, Fix Our House



PROPORTIONAL FUNDING OF COMMITTEE STAFF




By 2076, Congress establishes a percentage-based formula to fund committees based on the total discretionary budgets of the federal agency/agencies under the jurisdiction of the committee. Committee budgets, in other words, would have a proportional match to the size of the agencies under their oversight.

Submitted by: Chris Nehls, POPVOX Foundation



INVEST IN STREAMLINED APPROPRIATIONS DATA & TECHNOLOGY



By the year 2076, Congress has invested in streamlined, modern appropriations data and technology. This investment in a modernized Congressional appropriations process offers the potential to reduce staff workloads and increase Congressional capacity while increasing access to appropriations data in ways that can promote citizen engagement, advance understanding of the federal budgeting and spending process, and support the types of research that can help improve the government's efficiency and effectiveness.

Submitted by: Jason Lemons, Prolegis



DEVELOP CONGRESSIONAL FORESIGHT CAPACITY



By 2076, Congress embeds robust foresight practices (scenarios, horizon scanning, backcasting, visioning, role play) and anticipatory governance into its policy- and decision-making. Each Member and Committee employs a Chief Foresight Officer. Standing Foresight and Futures Committees in both chambers liaise with the US Office of Strategic Foresight. Legislation mandates annual State of the Future plans, guiding budget and policy negotiations. Every four years, joint trend reports are issued by Congress and the President. Foresight capacity building is funded nationwide, supporting community visioning processes. This anticipatory governance approach ensures longer-term, intergenerationally fair policies and decisions, fostering trust, transparency and public engagement.

Submitted by: Suzette Brooks Masters, Better Futures Project, Democracy Funders Network