



State of the Congress 2022

July 7, 2022

BY KATHY GOLDSCHMIDT

CONTRIBUTORS: CHAYENNE POLIMEDIO, BRADFORD FITCH AND NICOLE FOLK COOPER



About CMF

Citizen trust in an effective and responsive Congress is essential to democracy. The Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) advances this goal by working directly with Members of Congress and staff to enhance their operations and interactions with constituents. CMF works directly with citizen groups to educate them on how Congress works, giving constituents a stronger voice in policy outcomes. The results are: a Congress more accountable, transparent, and effective; and an informed citizenry with greater trust in their democratic institutions.

About the Partnership

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works. The Partnership teams up with federal agencies and other stakeholders to make our government more effective and efficient.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	7
<i>About the Exemplary Congressional Staff Cohort</i>	10
Key Findings	13
1. <i>Congressional Exemplars Generally Believe Congress is Not Functioning as It Should</i>	13
2. <i>Congressional Exemplars Believe Polarization and Rhetoric Are Making It More Difficult to Get Things Done in Congress</i>	17
3. <i>Solving Constituents' Problems is What Congressional Exemplars View as Members' Primary Role, But They Are Torn About Congress' Current Performance</i>	22
4. <i>Congressional Exemplars Think It is Very Important for Members and Staffers to Be Civil and to Work Across Party Lines</i>	27
5. <i>Congressional Exemplars Suggest Areas Where There is Clear Opportunity for Improvement</i>	31
6. <i>Congressional Exemplars Believe Improvement in Congress Will Likely Require Building Its Capacity and Infrastructure</i>	34
Conclusion	37
Acknowledgements	39
Author	40
Methodology and Sample	41
Select Resources	46
Project Team	47

Executive Summary

Legislatures are the glue that holds democratic societies together. The United States Congress should be the bulwark against the forces that seek to tear democracy apart through division, violence, misinformation, and hate. Congress should be a place where people throughout the country are represented through difficult conversations and problem-solving that leads to the greatest good. Unfortunately, Congress is one of the least trusted American institutions. Today, Members of Congress are seen favorably by only [30%](#) of the public. Americans express strong distrust of Congress. During the last few years, historic levels of polarization and hyperpartisanship have led to the erosion of the public's trust in the institution and a general feeling that those in Congress aren't honest and that they don't care about serving the people. Internally, declining levels of capacity and a reckoning with the challenges that congressional staff face on a daily basis due to poor working conditions have contributed to an overall image that Congress is broken and beyond repair.

Yet, 80% of Americans also believe that an effective Congress is essential to running the country well. And, contrary to popular belief, Senators, Representatives, and staff are dedicated public servants trying to make Congress work for everyone. They are invested in the institution and in the American form of representative democracy. While many feel Congress is not performing as it should, the current climate of polarization and rancor make it difficult for Members and staff to speak out for change without fear of ridicule or in some instances, even threats of violence against Members, staff, and their families.

Reconciling this mismatch between the reality of Congress and the public's perceptions and expectations of the institution is key to rebuilding trust. A change in how the public views Congress will come in two main ways: First, narratives that are aspirational and highlight the work that those in the institution do to serve the American people will be key to challenging the public's skepticism that Congress can be fixed. Second, a commitment from Congress to identify areas where it needs to change so it can better perform its job will show the public that those in the institution are committed to making Congress work for everyone.

In collaboration with the Partnership for Public Service, the Congressional Management Foundation assembled a group of 128 congressional staffers to provide insights into civility, functionality, and capacity in Congress. These "Congressional Exemplars" are "knowledgeable institutionalists" respected by their peers and represent diverse demographics, positions, and perspectives. They work in personal, committee, leadership, and institutional support offices throughout Congress. Two-thirds have worked in Congress for more than 10 years, most are senior managers, and all care deeply about the institution.

Congressional Exemplars were recruited in December 2021 and January 2022, and surveyed in February 2022. The key findings from the research are:



1. **Congressional Exemplars generally believe Congress is not functioning as it should.**

When asked if they agree with the statement, “Congress currently functions as a democratic legislature should,” only 24% of those surveyed agreed and 76% disagreed. Party affiliation had some bearing on the response: More than three-quarters (80%) who work for Democrats and more than two-thirds (68%) who work for Republicans disagreed. They are split in their opinions about committee effectiveness, but unified in their sense that Members and staff should have a strong understanding of Congress’ role in democracy. More than three-quarters (81%) of the staff surveyed said Member and staff understanding of Congress’ role in democracy is “very important,” but only 4% are “very satisfied” with the current state.



2. **Congressional Exemplars believe polarization and rhetoric are making it more difficult to get things done in Congress.** Though the strength of the sentiment varies depending on whether they work for Democrats or Republicans, a significant percentage of the Congressional Exemplars are frustrated. For example, two-thirds (66%) of Democrats and more than half (54%) of Republicans “strongly agree” that otherwise non-controversial legislative ideas have failed due to polarization among Members. And an almost equal number of Democrats (66%) and Republicans (70%) “strongly agree” that congressional leadership should enforce the rules and norms of civility and decorum.



3. **Solving constituents’ problems is what Congressional Exemplars view as Members’ primary role, but they are torn about Congress’ current performance on that front.** About half of those who work for Democrats (47%) and Republicans (52%) identified “solving constituents’ problems” as Senators’ and Representatives’ most important role. The role in second place for Democrats, with 22%, was lawmaking. For Republicans it was supporting political party policy, with 24%. Financial oversight was in third place for both Democrats and Republicans. Congressional Exemplars also were generally more satisfied with aspects of public engagement and accountability than with most other aspects of congressional functionality and capacity that we explored with them.



- 4. Congressional Exemplars think it is very important for Members and staffers to be civil and to work across party lines.** More than three-quarters (77%) said it was “very important” to encourage civility and more than half (59%) said it was “very important” to encourage bipartisanship among Senators and Representatives, but only 1% were “very satisfied” with the current state of either. Party had no impact on the response. Congressional Exemplars also felt strongly that it is necessary for Members and staff to work across party lines, but indicated that it is easier for staff to build cross-partisan relationships than it is for Members. However, they do not feel there are strong incentives for staff to build such relationships.



- 5. Congressional Exemplars suggest areas where there is clear opportunity for improvement.** When asked about the importance of certain reforms recommended by the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, there were four that rose to the top as being “very important” to the Congressional Exemplars: reclaiming Congress’ constitutionally-defined duties (74%); improving staff recruitment, diversity, retention, compensation, and benefits (69%); reforming the budget and appropriations process (61%); and ensuring continuity of congressional operations in emergencies (61%). There were only two differences by party. Democrats were more concerned about staff work-life (79% vs. 55% “very important”), and Republicans were more concerned about reforming the budget and appropriations process (68% vs. 49% “very important”).



- 6. Congressional Exemplars believe improvement in Congress will likely require building capacity and infrastructure.** Regarding congressional capacity and infrastructure, there were large gaps between Congressional Exemplars’ assignment of importance and their satisfaction with the current state. More than three-quarters (80%) of the Exemplars said it was “very important” that Congress have adequate capacity and support to perform its role in American democracy and almost as many (74%) said it was “very important” that Congress’ technological infrastructure is adequate to support Members’ official duties. Yet only 5% were “very satisfied” with the current state of capacity and support and just 4% were “very satisfied” with the current technological infrastructure.



Photo Credit: Architect of the Capitol

Introduction

For decades, trust in and approval of Congress have been extremely low.¹ Contrary to popular belief, however, most who work for Congress—Senators, Representatives, and staff—are dedicated public servants trying to make Congress work for everyone. They are invested in the institution and in the American form of representative democracy. While many Members and staffers feel Congress is not performing as it should, the current climate of polarization and rancor make it difficult for them to speak out for change.

Congress only works when Senators and Representatives elected by Americans throughout the country can deeply understand and respond to their constituents’ needs and come together to communicate, collaborate, deliberate, and respectfully work through data and ideas to reach agreement on ways to improve as a nation. To do that, they need the best possible information and knowledgeable and diverse staff along with a robust capacity to support their work. Unfortunately, the challenges to Congress’ capacity, functionality, and civility are nearly unprecedented in U.S. history, which makes it difficult for the institution to perform the People’s work.

The Congressional Management Foundation and the Partnership for Public Service engage with Members of Congress and their staff every day through our work supporting them on issues of management, leadership, and modernization. Our organizations’ missions are rooted in the certainty that, when Congress has the capacity to function as the representative and deliberative hub for national public policy, we will have better government and a stronger democracy. We see good people working hard and doing good things behind the scenes where the national media spotlight seldom shines. We also see where the institution is not working as well as it should, and

¹ As regularly demonstrated by public opinion polling, including Gallup data collected over time in [“Congress and the Public;”](#) a 2022 report by the Partnership for Public Service [“Trust in Government: A Close Look at Public Perceptions of the Federal Government and Its Employees;”](#) 2020 research conducted by the Pew Research Center [“Americans’ Views of Government: Low Trust, but Some Positive Performance Ratings;”](#) and 2019 research by the Program for Public Consultation at the University of Maryland [“Responding to Voters’ Dissatisfaction with Government.”](#)

we wanted to ask those who know Congress best where problems exist and how to improve them.

During the past two decades, organizations that monitor and support legislatures throughout the world have turned considerable attention to developing benchmarks and frameworks for assessing the democratic performance of these institutions. In addition to those developed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which heavily influenced our work, there have been frameworks developed by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, and others. These efforts and case studies of their use with national legislatures—including Canada and Australia—were described in the 2016 World Bank Group report [“Benchmarking and Self-Assessment for Parliaments.”](#)

In 2017, CMF began to use this body of work to produce our report [“State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate.”](#) The report was based on a survey of senior staffers in Senators’ and Representatives’ personal offices about some of the benchmarks for legislative capacity, and it provided insight into possible paths to strengthen Congress by describing resource and operational challenges facing the House of Representatives and the Senate. The report helped lay groundwork for the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress when it was established by the House in January 2019.

Now, CMF has partnered with the Partnership to expand our State of the Congress research to include functionality and civility of the institution. This is the first of what will become an annual assessment of congressional performance by the people who know the institution best: congressional staff. The congressional staff we surveyed were not unanimous in their responses, but there is a great deal of bipartisan, bicameral agreement on many of the challenges facing Congress. There is also incredible strength in their opinions, with many questions where the majority chose the strongest possible positive or negative response, leaving no doubt as to their sentiment. Where there is strong and widely-held sentiment we are confident that there is also strong need and leverage for change.

It is our hope that, by taking an annual pulse of the State of the Congress, we can help keep attention focused on these important measures and demonstrate where we are and are not making progress over time.

At present, partisanship is changing the nature and practice of American democracy, and we no longer agree on what were once deeply-held and understood democratic values. Without a national conversation centered on a high-functioning national legislature, we cannot work out our differences and align on a common understanding of how we will practice our democracy moving forward. By sharing this data, the CMF and the Partnership hope to contribute to this critical conversation.

The results of this research may seem disheartening, but this is more than just another “Congress is broken” story. The Exemplary Congressional Staff Cohort we recruited to participate in this research see the need for change in Congress. But their comments also indicate a deep desire to see the institution be its best and to function as it should. They also have confidence that Congress and the country can rise to the occasion. They have faith that, if Senators, Representatives, staff, and the People turn their minds to strengthening the institution, upholding civility and decorum, and reasserting the role laid out for Congress in Article 1 of the Constitution, the institution and our democracy can once again be shining beacons to the world.



Photo Credit: Shutterstock

About the Exemplars

In collaboration with the Partnership for Public Service, the Congressional Management Foundation assembled a group of 128 of the best staff in Congress, who we termed “The Exemplary Congressional Staff Cohort,” or the Congressional Exemplars. Through our networks of former congressional staff, we identified staff who are “knowledgeable ‘institutionalists’” respected by their peers and recruited them to provide insight into civility, functionality, and capacity in Congress.

Chamber	
House	73%
Senate	26%
Both	2%

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

Tenure

Fewer than two years	2%
Two to five years	12%
Six to 10 years	19%
11 to 20 years	34%
More than 20 years	32%

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

Party

Democrat	46%
Republican	39%
Nonpartisan	15%

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

Role

Management	66%
Legislative	17%
Communications	5%
Constituent Service	4%
Administrative	3%

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

Sex

Female	47%
Male	51%

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

Generation

Generation Z	4%
Millennials	34%
Generation X	48%
Baby Boomers	14%

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

Workplace

Personal office	66%
<i>DC</i>	51%
<i>District/state</i>	15%
Committee	15%
Everywhere Else	18%

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper



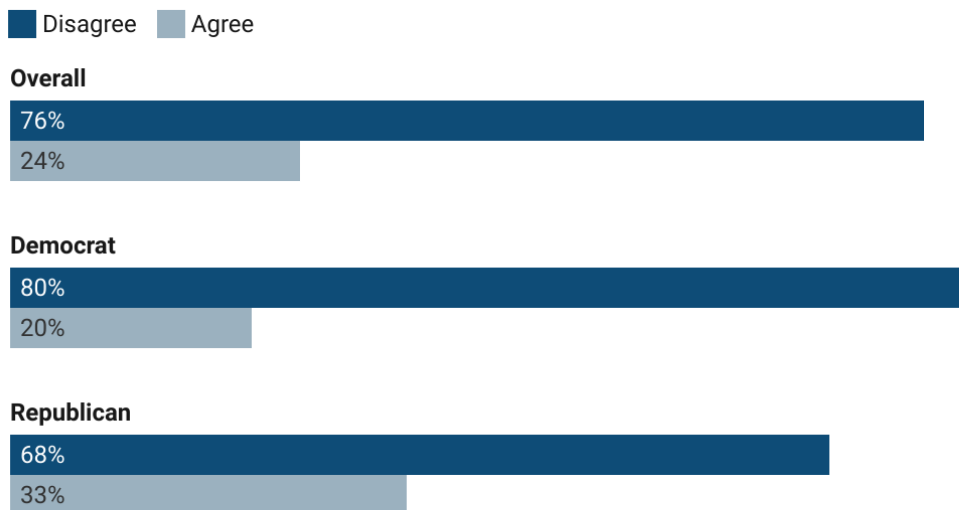
Photo Credit: Architect of the Capitol

Key Findings

1. CONGRESSIONAL EXEMPLARS GENERALLY BELIEVE CONGRESS IS NOT FUNCTIONING AS IT SHOULD.



Figure 1.1 | “Congress currently functions as a democratic legislature should”



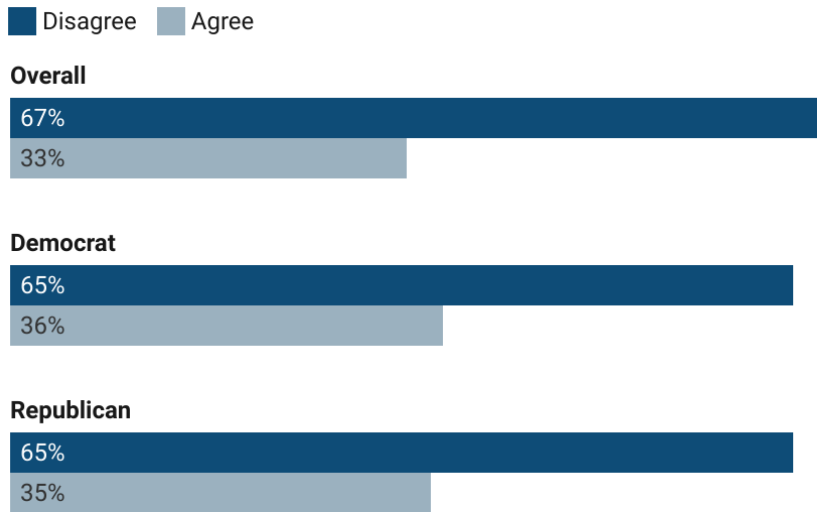
n=112

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“A majority of Congressional leadership, Members and staff don't seem to have the institutional knowledge of best practices to know how Congress can better function, which seems to be leading to a vicious cycle of continual breakdown of the institution.”

—Professional Staff, House committee

Figure 1.2 | “Congress is currently an effective forum for debate on questions of public concern”



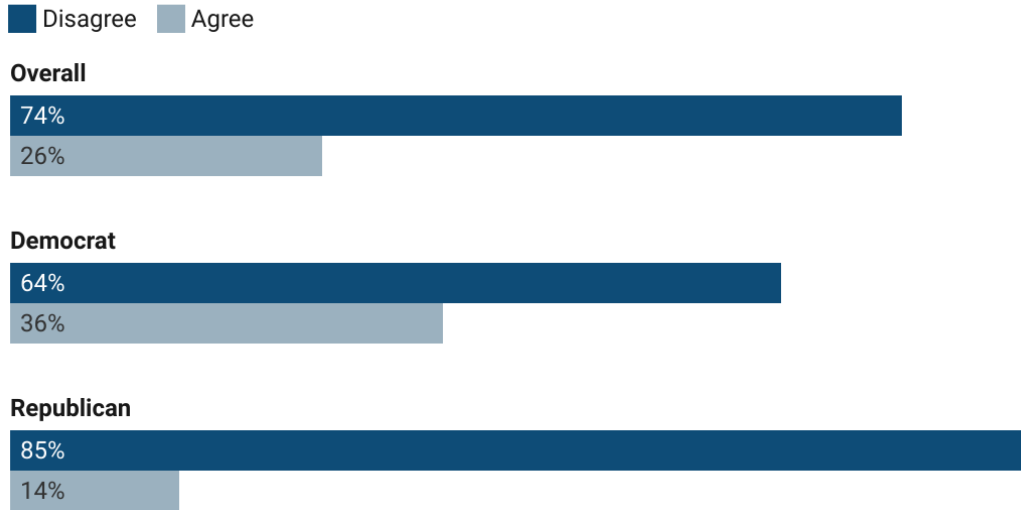
n=119

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“The pace at which Congress functions is too fast. Deliberations do not occur as a result. The increasingly large bills in terms of page size and scope of policy make refinement of the legislative text impossible. This leaves the Executive Branch and the President free to interpret the intent of Congress when Congress should be clearer in their intent.”

—Manager, House support office

Figure 1.3 | “Current procedures used by Congress to extract necessary information from the Executive Branch are sufficient to fulfill Congress’ constitutional responsibilities”



n=105

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“In recent years it seems leadership has consolidated a lot of power and weakened the committees. As a result, very little legislation is passed via regular order, and members and staff are frustrated by the lack of input, particularly on big bills.”

—Manager, House support office

Figure 1.4 | It was “very important” that “Members and staff have a strong understanding of Congress’ role in democracy,” but few were “very satisfied” with the current state



Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“Member and staff training in foundational skills/knowledge that are unique to the work of the legislative branch could have an outsized impact on capacity.”

—Legislative Advisor, Senate personal office

Figure 1.5 | It was “very important” that “Members have adequate time and resources to understand, consider, and deliberate policy and legislation,” but few were “very satisfied” with the current state



Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“Congressional leadership has taken over control of some work previously done by Committees, especially in negotiating compromises. In doing so, legislation is more directed than debated, leading to inefficient processes.”

—Professional Staff Member, Senate committee

Figure 1.6 | Exemplars were split in their opinions on current committee oversight and legislative effectiveness

Disagree Agree

Committees in Congress are effective at carrying out their oversight function. (n=115)



Committees in Congress are effective at carrying out their legislative function. (n=111)

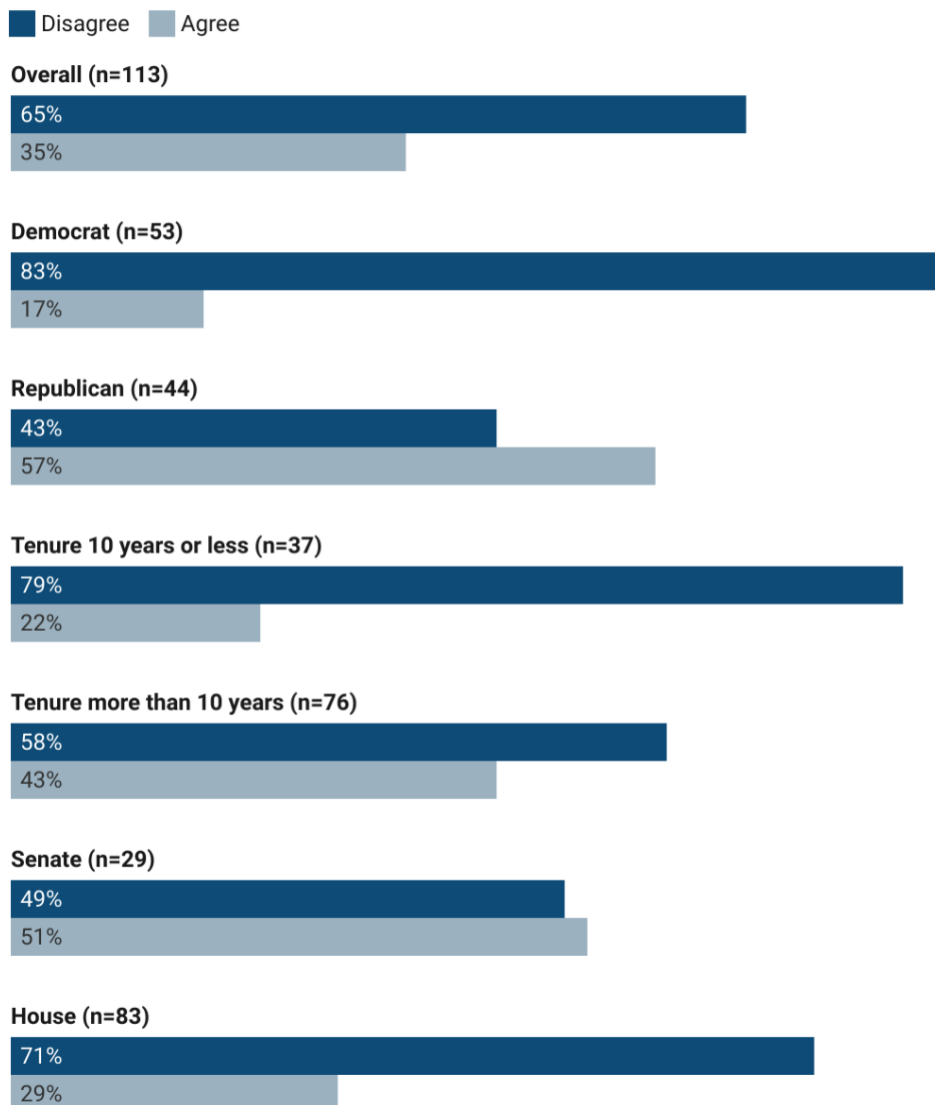


Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

2. CONGRESSIONAL EXEMPLARS BELIEVE POLARIZATION AND RHETORIC ARE MAKING IT MORE DIFFICULT TO GET THINGS DONE IN CONGRESS.



Figure 2.1 | “The agreed-upon rules and codes of conduct for Senators and Representatives are sufficient to hold them accountable for their words and deeds”

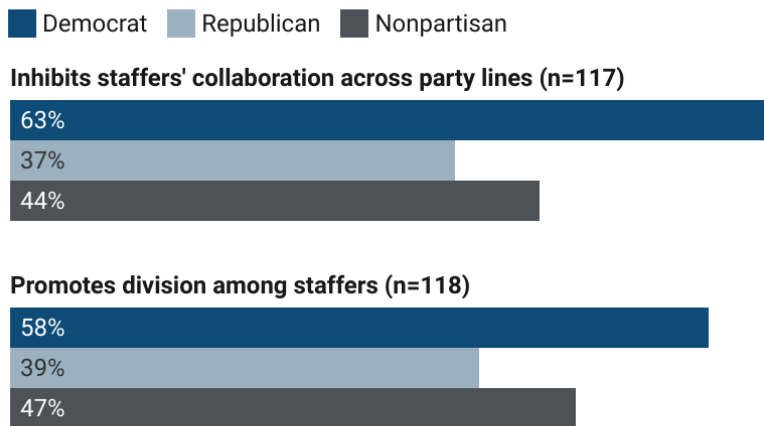


Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“Over the years the extremes in the parties have prevented efforts to advance legislation important to the American people. Moderates and those who worked across the aisle have diminished in number and few now want to work across the aisle to get things done.”

—Legislative Director, House personal office

Figure 2.2 | Party had an impact on whether Exemplars “strongly agree” that the rhetoric by some Senators and Representatives impacts staff behavior



Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“The breakdown in decorum and respect for opposing views, highlighted by the polarization of both parties to be drawn to their edges has made the institution a shadow of itself.”

—Chief of Staff, House personal office

Figure 2.3 | “In the past few years, otherwise noncontroversial legislative ideas have failed due to polarization”

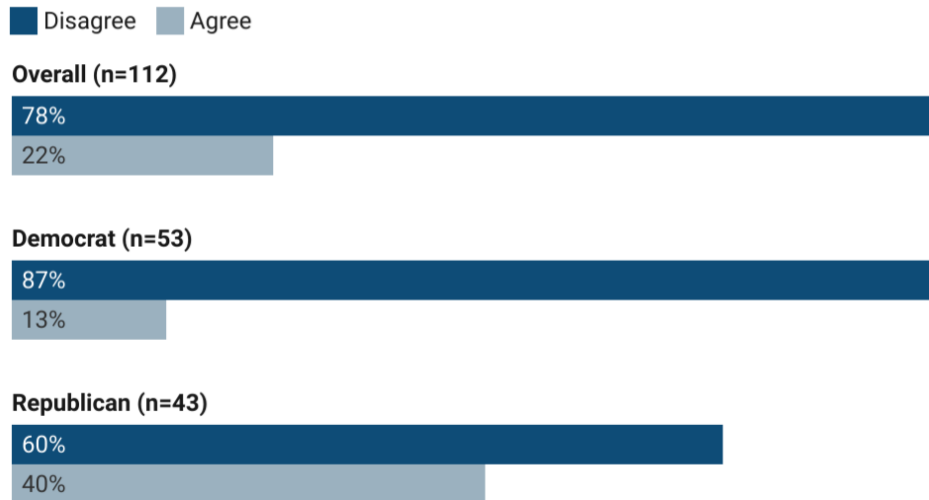


Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“Ideological and partisan differences are always going to be there. But a social reward and incentive structure for shaming and injuring others has turned debate into rhetorical warfare and point scoring. Many are afraid to offer alternative views and opinions for fear of being damaged. Even within the same party.”

—Manager, House support office

Figure 2.4 | “It is more important for Members to be able to speak as they wish than to adhere to the rules and norms of civility and decorum in Congress”



Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“There is no trust. Many see the other party as the enemy, which is incredibly dangerous.”

—Staff Director, House committee

Figure 2.5 | “Congressional leadership should enforce the rules and norms of civility and decorum in Congress”

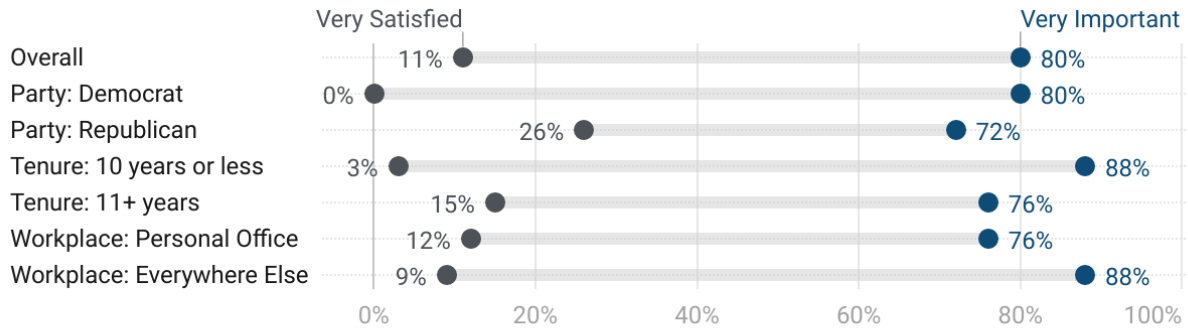


Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“The majority of people that serve (staff and members) are here for the right reasons and want to function and govern. It's a small but vocal minority that is trying to change that.”

—Chief of Staff, Senate personal office

Figure 2.6 | Importance of “Members and staff feel safe doing their jobs” and satisfaction with the current state

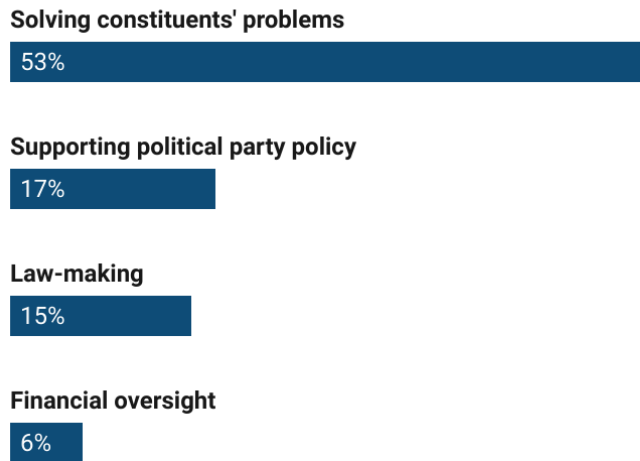


Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

3. SOLVING CONSTITUENTS' PROBLEMS IS WHAT CONGRESSIONAL EXEMPLARS VIEW AS MEMBERS' PRIMARY ROLE, BUT THEY ARE TORN ABOUT CONGRESS' CURRENT PERFORMANCE.



Figure 3.1 | A majority of Exemplars believe that solving constituents' problems is the most important role of Senators and Representatives



n=127

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“Please describe in 10 words or less what you consider to be Congress’ primary purpose.”

PUBLIC SERVICE

- “To serve the American people.”
- “Be the People’s voice in government.”
- “To work together for the common good of all people.”
- “Improve people’s lives, restrain vices, and empower people to succeed.”
- “Serve as the voice of the people in government.”
- “To create laws to protect and empower the American people.”

Figure 3.2 | Party had an impact on whether law-making or supporting party policy was the second most important role

■ Democrats (n=58) ■ Republicans (n=50) ■ Nonpartisan (n=19)

Solving constituents' problems



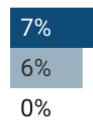
Supporting political party policy



Law-making

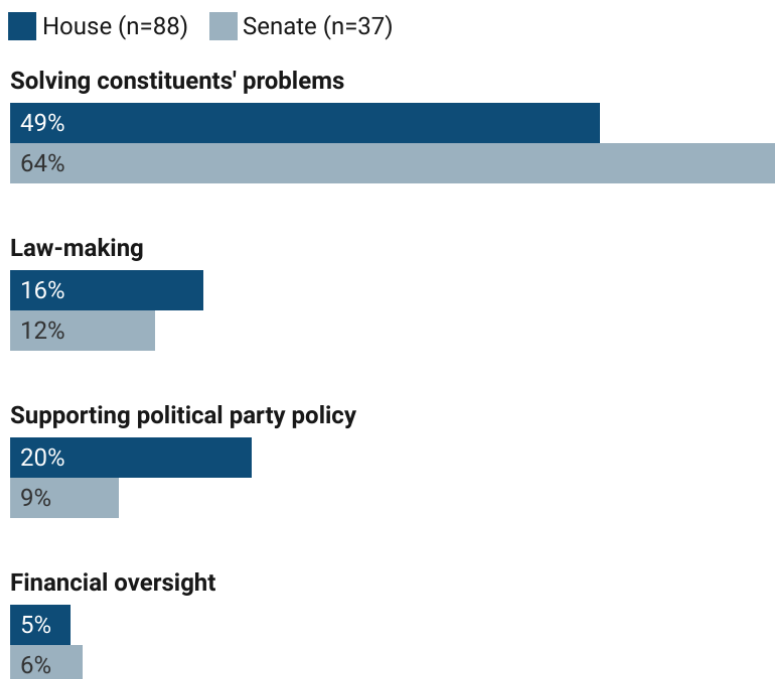


Financial oversight



Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 3.3 | Chamber had an impact on Exemplars' views on Members' most important role



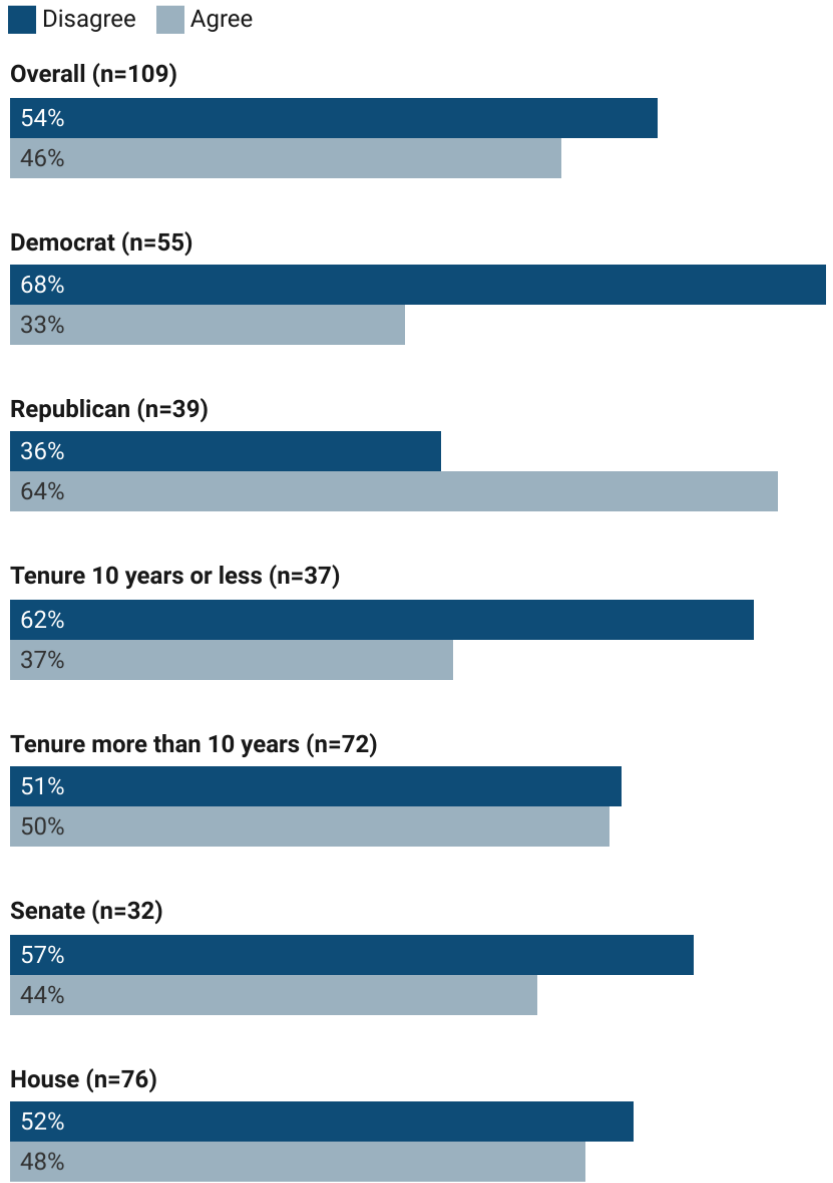
Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“Please describe in 10 words or less what you consider to be Congress’ primary purpose.”

CONSTITUTIONAL DUTIES

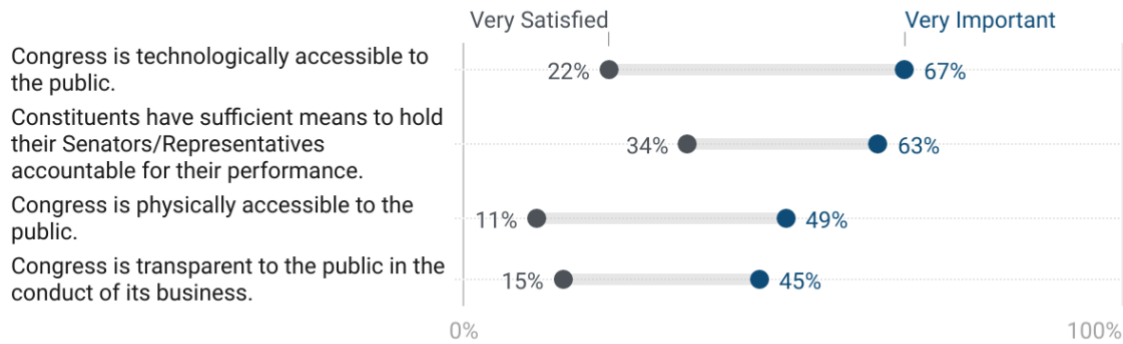
- “The legislative powers defined in Article 1.”
- “To make laws, declare war, raise and allocate money, and conduct oversight.”
- “Legislate, appropriate, confirm (nominees), and facilitate (constituents with their govt.)”
- “Oversight is job one. Raising and spending revenue is next.”
- “Pass laws that fit within the framework of the Constitution.”
- “Congress has the power of the purse.”

Figure 3.4 | “The current means of public engagement/input directed to individual Senators and Representatives are adequate for understanding the needs of U.S. residents”



Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 3.5 | The gaps between importance and satisfaction for public access and accountability were significant, but most are smaller than gaps for other benchmarks measured



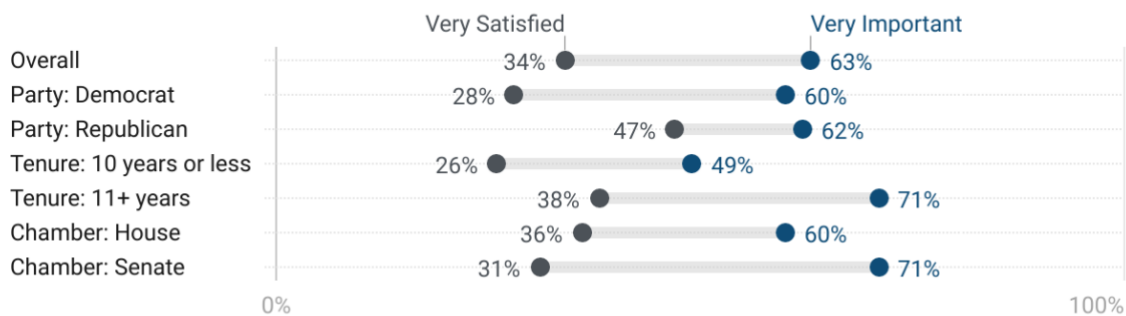
Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“Please describe in 10 words or less what you consider to be Congress’ primary purpose.”

LAWMAKING

- “To legislate and provide oversight.”
- “Deliberating the law that govern this nation.”
- “To make and amend federal laws.”
- “To make laws to advance the priorities of the nation.”
- “To legislate and provide a national platform for the public.”
- “To pass legislation agreed to by the people.”

Figure 3.6 | “Constituents have sufficient means to hold their Senators/Representatives accountable for their performance”

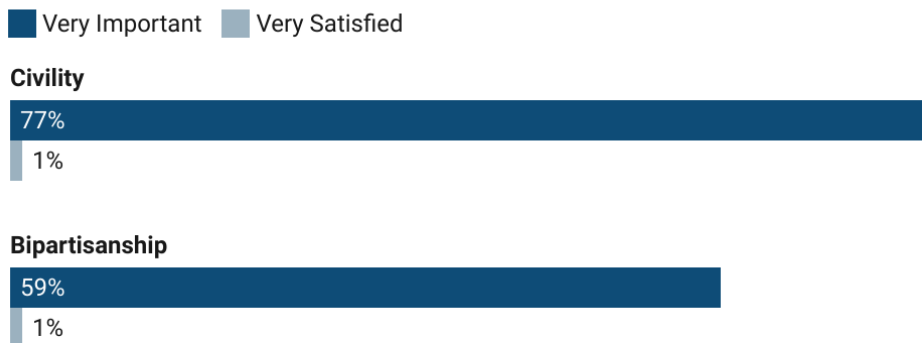


Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

4. CONGRESSIONAL EXEMPLARS THINK IT IS VERY IMPORTANT FOR MEMBERS AND STAFFERS TO BE CIVIL AND TO WORK ACROSS PARTY LINES.



Figure 4.1 | Civility & bipartisanship among Senators and Representatives are “very important,” but Exemplars are dissatisfied with the current state of both



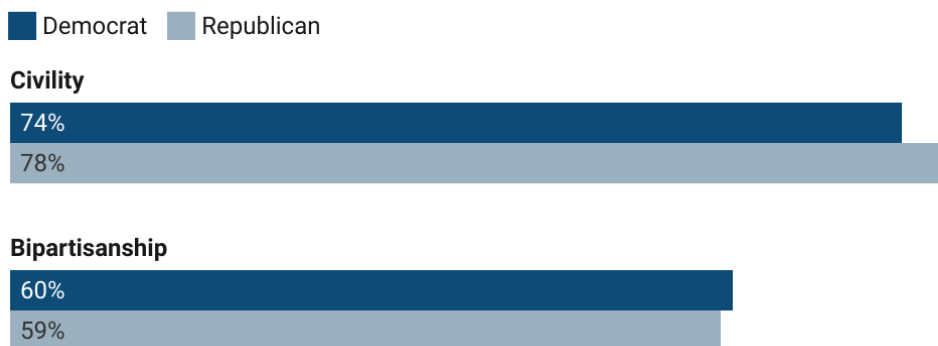
n-Satisfied=114 (Bipartisanship), 119 (Civility); n-Important=115 (Bipartisanship), 120 (Civility)

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“Members have increasingly turned into bit players acting out a part in a political theatrical production vs. engaging as serious legislators/policymakers.”

—Chief of Staff, House personal office

Figure 4.2 | Party had little impact on whether civility & bipartisanship among Senators and Representatives were “very important”



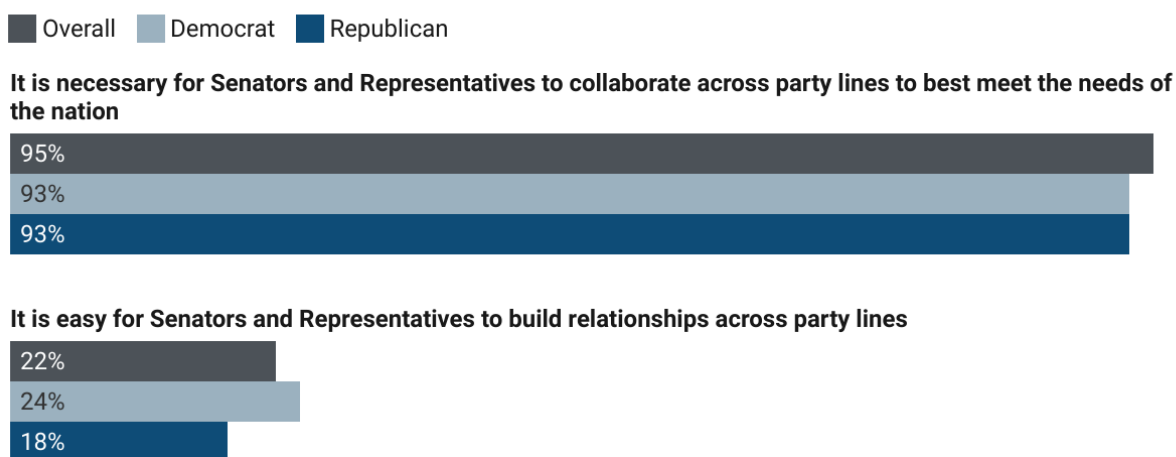
n-Bipartisanship=44 (Republican), 52 (Democrat); n-Civility=46 (Republican), 57 (Democrat)

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“My sense is that most staff would generally welcome greater collaboration across the aisle, but that the political dynamics on both sides present a chilling effect on efforts to do so.”

—Chief of Staff, Senate personal office

Figure 4.3 | Exemplars agree it is necessary for Members to collaborate across party lines, but they do not think it is easy for them to build cross-partisan relationships



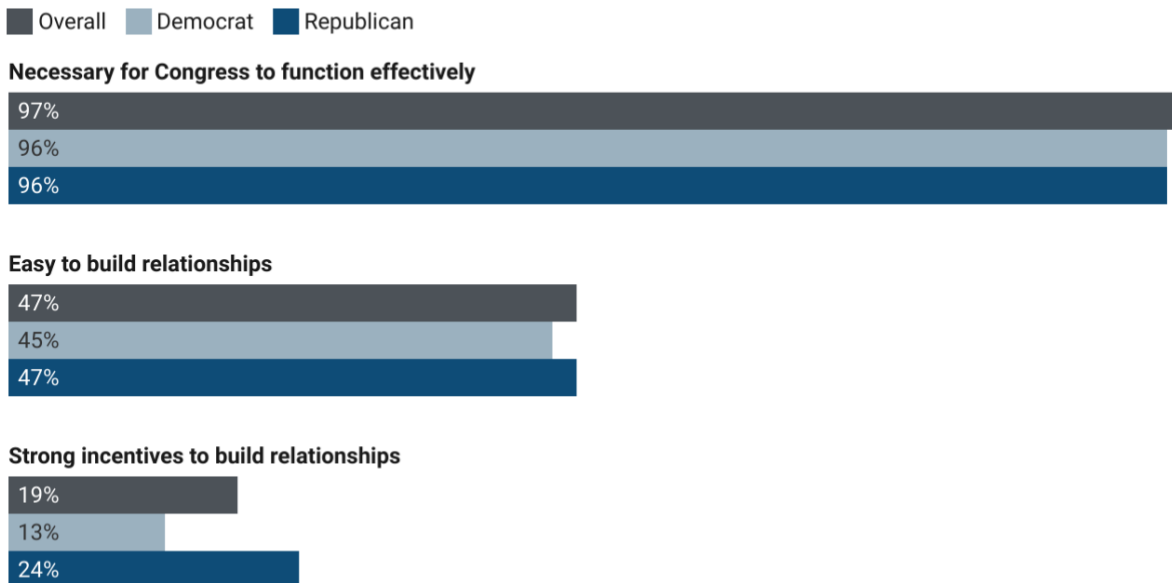
n-Easy=115 (Overall), 55 (Democrat), 44 (Republican); n-Necessary=121 (Overall), 56 (Democrat), 46 (Republican)

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“Bipartisanship is a misnomer. Members and staff working on behalf of their constituents in a manner consistent with a set of core beliefs—instead of a focus on generating social media metrics or feeding news media's constant need to generate content—will produce sound policy that the majority of Americans will support.”

—Chief of Staff, House personal office

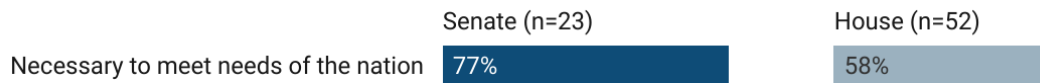
Figure 4.4 | Exemplars agree it is necessary for staffers to collaborate across party lines, and they think it's easier for staffers than for Members to build cross-partisan relationships, but there is not much incentive for them to do so



n-Incentives=104 (Overall), 45 (Democrat), 43 (Republican); n-Easy=110 (Overall), 49 (Democrat), 45 (Republican); n-Necessary=122 (Overall), 58 (Democrat), 46 (Republican)

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 4.5 | More Senate than House Exemplars “strongly agree” it is necessary for Members to collaborate across party lines to meet the needs of the nation



Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“There's nothing wrong with members having strong views that are rooted in principle, but too many members seem to be chasing the applause of media and grassroots activists without any real understanding of the policy or why they believe what they do.”

—Chief of Staff, House personal office

Figure 4.6 | Years working for Congress had significant impact on whether Exemplars “strongly agree” civility and bipartisanship had been better during their tenure than now

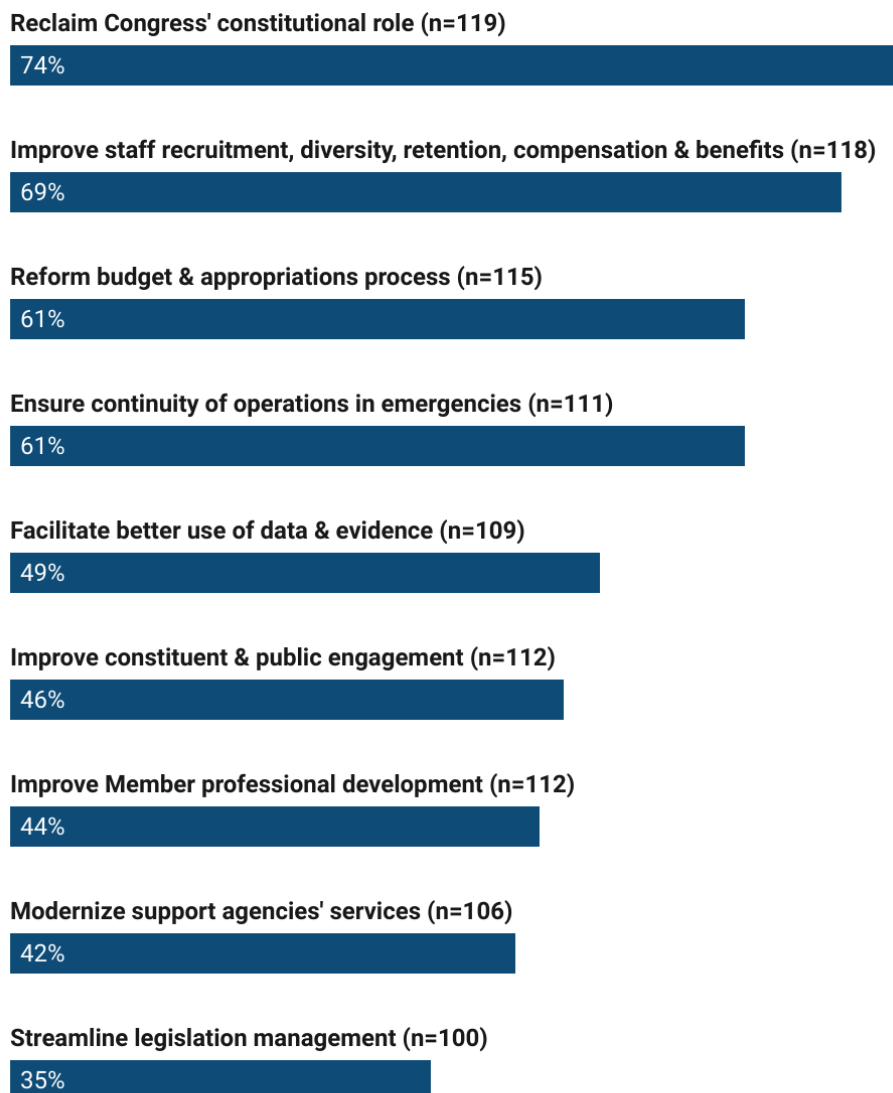


Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

5. CONGRESSIONAL EXEMPLARS SUGGEST AREAS WHERE THERE IS CLEAR OPPORTUNITY FOR IMPROVEMENT.



Figure 5.1 | Exemplars had clear preferences for which improvements recommended by the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress were “very important” for Congress to make, and party had no significant impact on responses



Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

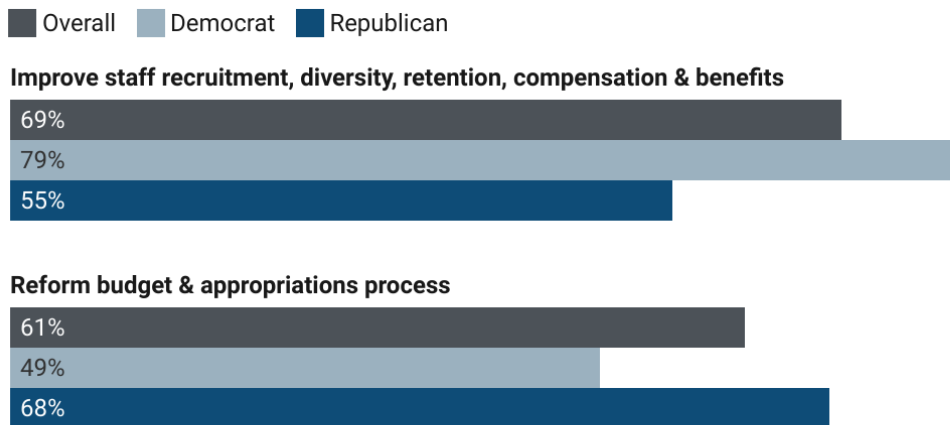
“When you think about the size of Congress versus the size of a single agency in the Executive Branch, it’s clear why everyone is stretched thin and most people have wide but shallow expertise.”

—Chief of Staff, House personal office

“Members should not and can not be experts on everything. Neither can leadership staff. Committees are where experience and expertise should be centralized.”

—Chief of Staff, House personal office

Figure 5.2 | The only Modernization Committee recommendations on which Exemplars differed by party were improving staff worklife and reforming the budget and appropriations process



Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“The demands for a Member's attention, expectation of constituents, and everything else comes at a speed we could not have imagined when I started in Congress. The information flow is extraordinary. Little time to think, reflect and make reasoned [decisions] at the current, expected pace.”

—Constituent Service Staffer, Senate personal office

“I believe there are solutions to the problems Congress has; the question is whether we have the collective will to implement them.”

—Legislative Director, Senate personal office

Figure 5.3 | It was “very important” that Members and staff have the skills, time, and resources to perform their jobs, but few were “very satisfied” with the current state

■ Very Important ■ Very Satisfied

Staff knowledge, skills, and abilities are adequate to support Members' official duties (n-Important=125; n-Satisfied=105)



Members and staff have access to high quality, nonpartisan policy expertise within the Legislative Branch (n-Important=122; n-Satisfied=109)



Members have adequate time and resources to understand, consider, and deliberate policy and legislation (n-Important=122; n-Satisfied=106)



Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“Congress is overwhelmed and overmatched (vis a vis the Executive Branch). It lurches from crisis to crisis and is unable to effectively “think”, be strategic and proactive, and look ahead to future, or less pressing, problems.”

—Staff Director, House committee

“People who stay and have the institutional knowledge leave after a few years to make ‘real’ money. We need to do a lot to prevent good staffers from giving up on Congress.”

—Communications Director, House personal office

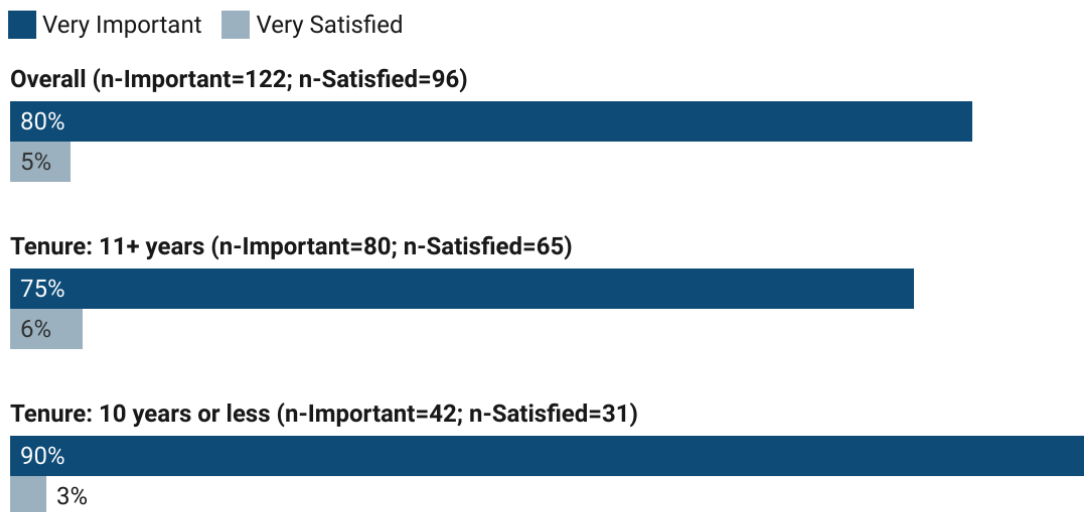
6. CONGRESSIONAL EXEMPLARS BELIEVE IMPROVEMENT IN CONGRESS WILL LIKELY REQUIRE BUILDING ITS CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE.



“I believe the one thing we definitely need to adjust is staff salaries to ensure we are keeping the best staff. They are the backbone of any office and their historical knowledge is essential to ensure performance of Members.”

—Chief of Staff, House personal office

Figure 6.1 | Tenure had some bearing on the percentage of Exemplars who considered it “very important” that “Congress has adequate capacity and support (staff, research, infrastructure, etc.) to perform its role in democracy,” but few were “very satisfied” with the current state



Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

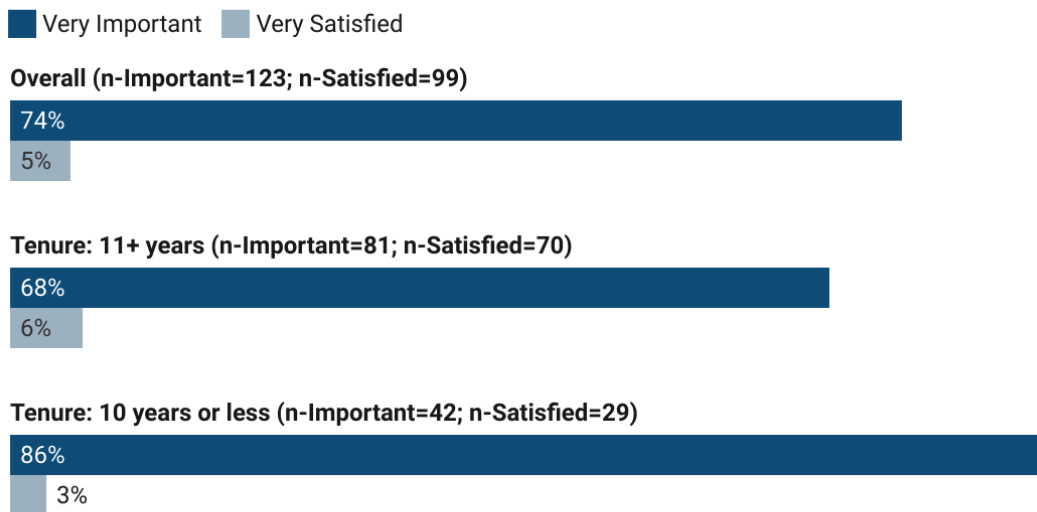
“Congress is only as strong as its staff. As long as we aren't paying to recruit and retain the best, we won't have the best and Congress will suffer.”

—Legislative Director, Senate personal office

“I think there are structural issues that hamper Congress' ability to be effective, but there is an entirely separate bucket of issues (partisanship, media, etc.) that magnify the structural issues.”

—Manager, Senate support office

Figure 6.2 | Tenure also had some bearing on whether it was “very important” that “the technological infrastructure is adequate to support Members’ official duties,” but few were “very satisfied” with the current state

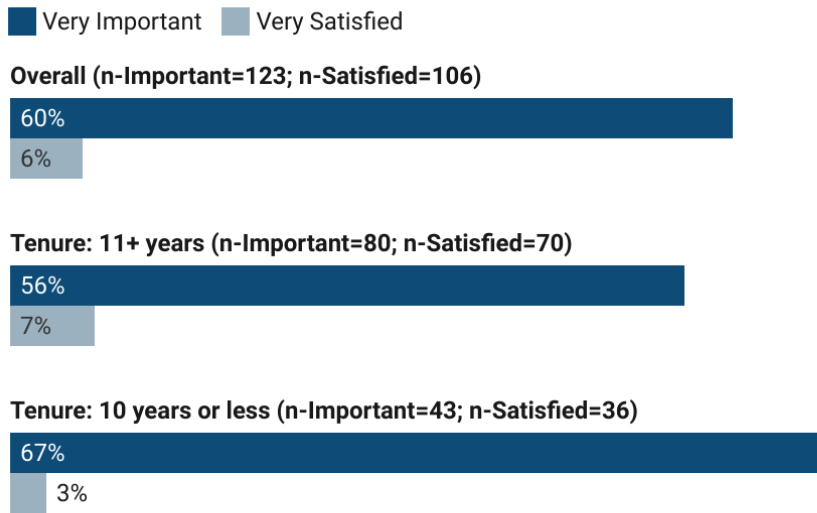


Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“While improvements are being made, technology and resources that expand Congressional bandwidth significantly lag behind the private sector.”

—Director of Operations, House personal office

Figure 6.3 | Tenure had some bearing whether it was “very important” that “Congress’ human resources support and infrastructure is adequate to support staffers’ official duties (e.g., training, professional development, benefits, etc.),” but few were “very satisfied” with the current state



Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

“Dialogue between the public and Congress is more structurally broken than anytime I can recall . . . while there are certainly more avenues for people to communicate, the sheer volume of incoming communication makes it hard to have any kind of dialogue, and it is not clear that the vast majority are actually even interested in a dialogue rather than monologue.”

—Chief of Staff, Senate personal office



Photo Credit: Architect of the Capitol

Conclusion

The “State of the Congress” series is not designed to malign Congress, but to help guide and measure its improvement. Our intention is to provide timeless benchmarks grounded in a significant body of international research that enable Members of Congress, congressional staff, supporting organizations, and the public to understand Congress’ performance in key areas now and over time. We believe strongly that this can lead to conversations and solutions that genuinely improve our democracy. “State of the Congress” offers a new window into the inner-workings of government through benchmarks to measure the keystone institution of our democracy.

We hope that the dedicated public servants of our nation, inside and outside of government, do not take these findings as a final judgment of the Congress, but rather as a call to action. The creators of this series intend it to be a regular assessment, with “State of the Congress” reports published annually after the President’s State of the Union Address (the next report will be published in early 2024). Let the supporters of democracy assume these benchmarks are measuring the low watermark of the Congress, and seek ways to improve it.

Some of the work toward improving Congress is already underway through the productive and bipartisan Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress and the strong cohort of institutionalists inside and outside Congress using its recommendations as a focal point for reform efforts. To date, the Modernization Committee has offered 142 recommendations to make Congress more effective, efficient, and transparent. They have all been thoroughly researched and vetted, and almost all received the full support of all of the Committee’s members, both Democrat and Republican. The [recommendations](#) span every aspect of congressional operations, and many have already been fully or partially implemented.

Nonprofit coalitions and groups have emerged during the last decade to address the growing challenges to our democracy. Coalitions such as the Fix Congress Working Group and FixUS, along with nonprofits like the Bridge Alliance, represent a growing cadre of institutionalists in Washington and a passionate public throughout the nation who are investing time, money, and labor to improve our democratic institutions. Finally, over the past 10 months the Partnership has been working in collaboration with CMF and many other organizations that are champions of

Congress to develop a narrative change strategy and campaign concept to renew trust and hope in Congress, increase the public’s sense of efficacy, and mobilize engaged citizens to encourage others to connect with Congress on issues that matter to them.

With continued efforts to modernize and improve Congress, picture the exciting prospect of future reports in this series where we could see:

- Improved satisfaction with civility and bipartisanship among Members and staff, signaling enhanced collaboration and better relationships.
- Smaller gaps between importance and satisfaction in the benchmarks for institutional capacity and Member and staff expertise, signaling enhanced support of Members and the legislative process.
- Strong agreement with “Congress currently functions as a democratic legislature should,” rather than at the current level of 24%, signaling a strong Congress and a strong democracy.

This report is far from being the final chapter on Congress. This institution has seen highs and lows, starting from its early days of seeking its moorings with the United States as the only democracy in the world, to the tragedies of many wars, and now the polarization that led to the crisis of January 6, 2021 that continues to plague us. If Congress is to function as intended—if America is to function as a democratic society—there is only one path ahead, and that’s through a high-functioning national legislature.

Legislatures are indeed the glue that holds democratic societies together. Unfortunately, in the last few years America has witnessed what happens when the bonds are tested and strained. Let the findings of this report be one measurement of the strength of American democracy and a guide forward. Let them serve as a lodestar to those who aim to improve—or perhaps save—this grand constitutional experiment conceived in 1789. It is our hope the future “State of the Congress” reports will not give cause for lament, but for celebration. Just as we have seen the pendulum of democracy sometimes swing in dangerous directions throughout our history, the brilliant resilience embedded in the U.S. Constitution by our founders always seems to bring us back on a positive national course.

We hope this research is both roadmap and compass for that course, offering informed advice and hopeful assurances along the way that a better Congress, and a better democracy, is our collective destiny.

Acknowledgements

This report was made possible by grants from the Hewlett Foundation U.S. Democracy Program. Through the leadership of Daniel Stid and Jean Parvin Bordewich, the U.S. Democracy Program has been instrumental in supporting the modernization of Congress. We will deeply miss Daniel and Jean, whose terms as program officers ended this year, but look forward to Hewlett's continued focus on U.S. democracy and the institution that is its keystone.

I deeply thank the respondents to this survey, the Exemplary Congressional Staff Cohort, or Congressional Exemplars. Their commitment to Congress shines through in the passion of their responses and the thoughtful comments so many wrote (at length). I hope this report does them justice and that it stands as a baseline for measuring and celebrating the work so many of them are already doing to improve the institution. I am honored by their participation.

I also thank my colleagues at CMF and the Partnership. The full team is listed below, but I must especially acknowledge Chayenne Polimedio, Nicole Folk Cooper, Diane Hill, and Abby Kielty, who collaborated in such substantive ways that I consider them contributors. The State of the Congress program and the thinking reflected in this report are as much a product of their work as mine.

This also would not have been possible without my bosses at CMF. Brad Fitch, the current President & CEO, was an important contributor to this project and report. His thinking helped shape it, and his support enabled it. Rick Shapiro and Betsy Wright Hawkings, who hired and mentored me, saw in me someone who could be shaped into a thinker, observer, and visionary. Beverly Bell took that person and let her fly, and Brad Fitch has helped keep her aloft. I am honored to have had leaders like these, and colleagues like those I work with at CMF. Thank you.

I also acknowledge the contributions of the individuals and organizations working with us at the intersection of Congress and democracy reform. Friends and colleagues at the Fix Congress Cohort, Hewlett Democracy Program, FixUS, Bridge Alliance, and others are helping revive and modernize our democratic institutions.

Finally, I acknowledge that this report is grounded in the work of international organizations like the Interparliamentary Union, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, NDI, and IRI, as well as Members of Parliament and parliamentary staff around the globe. They have spent years developing benchmarks for democratic legislatures. To date, the U.S. Congress and civil society have not deeply engaged in this work. I hope this changes. We need a national conversation about Congress' role in democracy and how to fulfill it.

Thank you.
Kathy Goldschmidt

Author



Kathy joined CMF in 1997 after working in the House of Representatives. She has been involved in much of CMF's research during her tenure, and her focus has been on the democratic dialogue and institutional capacity and modernization. Most recently Kathy has led CMF's State of the Congress work to benchmark and track key aspects of congressional functionality, civility, and capacity over time. This project—a collaboration with the Partnership for Public Service—is designed to help monitor the progress of congressional modernization efforts already underway. She was the author of [State of the Congress 2022 and State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate](#).

Kathy has also led much of CMF's [democratic dialogue](#) work during her tenure, from the early days of our research and guidance to Congress on websites and email overload to our more recent work envisioning the [Future of Citizen Engagement](#). She has advised the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress on citizen engagement and [focused her remarks on this topic at a Committee listening session](#). She was co-creator and lead researcher for the Congress Online Project—through which CMF developed the [Gold Mouse Awards](#) for congressional websites and social media practices. She led CMF's engagement in the original [Connecting to Congress](#) project, seminal research on virtual town hall meetings, which lives on at the [Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability](#) at The Ohio State University. She was also instrumental in envisioning and planning for the citizen-advocate-focused [Partnership for a More Perfect Union](#).

Methodology and Sample

OVERVIEW

Between December 2021 and January 2022, the Congressional Management Foundation and the Partnership for Public Service recruited exemplary congressional staffers to answer a survey aimed at providing insight into civility, functionality, and capacity in Congress. Staffers were identified through outreach to respected contacts on and off of Capitol Hill to provide names of current legislative branch employees respected by their peers and with an institutional mindset. We collected nearly 400 names and reached out to all via email, with 128 of them agreeing to participate as Congressional Exemplars and completing our survey. They were surveyed in January and February 2022.

In this report, we present only what we deemed the most critical findings from a large data set. The [toplines and select crosstabs are available in a separate workbook](#) for further review and analysis. Below is information that clarifies the non-contextualized findings, figures, and quotes included in this report.

THE SURVEY

The Exemplary Congressional Staff Cohort—or “Congressional Exemplars”—responded to an eight question demographic profile and a 19 question survey that had many multi-part questions and five open-ended questions from which we drew select quotes. We made the questions as clear and straightforward as possible, but intentionally chose not to define terms (e.g., “functionality,” “civility,” “decorum,” “capacity,” etc.) to allow participants’ own definitions to guide them. The survey was organized as follows:

- **Functionality:** Congressional Exemplars were asked to describe, in 10 words or less, Congress’ primary purpose. Their responses were hand-categorized and examples from the most common categories appear with Finding 3. We also asked level of agreement with eight statements about select functions of Congress adapted from Inter-Parliamentary Union benchmarks for democratic legislatures. Finally, we asked two questions about the work of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress and an open-ended question about their sense of Congress’ functionality.
- **Civility:** We asked the importance of civility and bipartisanship among Senators and Representatives and satisfaction with the current state of each. We then asked level of agreement with six statements about civility-related activities of Members and five statements about staffers in Members’ personal offices and committees. Finally, we included an open-ended question about civility and bipartisanship in Congress.
- **Capacity:** We asked the importance of 12 aspects Congress’ operations and satisfaction with each. All but one were slightly modified versions of those we used as the basis of our 2017 report *State of the Congress: Staff Perspectives on Institutional Capacity in the House and Senate*. Rather than asking about participants’ chamber, as we did then, we asked about Congress as a whole. Finally, we asked an open-ended question about

Congress' capacity to perform its role in democracy and another open-ended question asking for any additional thoughts they wanted to share.

PRESENTATION OF DATA

We chose to streamline the figures to make them as easy to read and understand as possible, so details are excluded. Unless otherwise noted, the following are applicable to data depicted throughout this report:

- Percentages reported were derived by removing the neutral and “don’t know” responses. They indicate the percentage of those who had an opinion on the question. As a result, the number of respondents varies from figure to figure and ranges from 96 to 127.
- Percentages for a question may not total 100% due to rounding.
- Percentages for a question may not total 100% if some responses are excluded.

GENERALIZATION OF RESULTS

As with all research, it is important to note that the results presented are only truly representative of the survey respondents and readers should exercise caution when generalizing results. While we cannot statistically validate these opinions, CMF and the Partnership are confident in this research and findings. Our firsthand experience in working with the Congress corroborates the results published in this report.

About the Respondents

Chamber (n=128)

House of Representatives	73%
Senate	26%
Both/Legislative Branch Agency	2%

Party (n=128)

Democrat	46%
Republican	39%
Nonpartisan	15%

Workplace (n=128)

Personal office in Washington, D.C.	51%
Personal office in District/state	15%
Committee	15%
House or Senate Support Office	17%
Legislative Branch Agency	2%

Role (n=128)

Management	66%
Legislative	17%
Communications	5%
Constituent Service	4%
Administrative	3%
Other	5%

Tenure in Congress (n=128)

Less than two years	2%
Two to five years	12%
Six to 10 years	19%
11 to 20 years	34%
More than 20 years	32%

Generation (n=128)

Generation Z (after 1996)	4%
Millennial (1981-1996)	34%
Generation X (1965-1989)	48%
Baby Boomer (1946-1964)	14%

Sex (n=128)

Male	47%
Female	51%
Other	1%

Hispanic, Latino, and/or Spanish Origin (n=128)

Yes	5%
No	88%

Race & Ethnicity (n=128)

Asian/Asian American	3%
Black/African American	5%
Middle Eastern/North African/Middle Eastern American	0%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1%
White/Caucasian	82%
Multiracial	1%
Other	2%

Percentages may not add up to 100% due to some participants indicating "Choose not to respond" in response to some demographic questions.

Source: Congressional Management Foundation and Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

Header photo credit: Architect of the Capitol

Select Resources for Legislative Benchmarking and Assessment

[*Benchmarking and Self-Assessment for Parliaments*](#); Mitchell O’Brien, Rick Stapenhurst, and Lisa von Trapp, Editors; World Bank Group, 2016.

[“Common Ethical Principles for Members of Parliament,”](#) Open Government Partnership’s Legislative Openness Working Group, 2015.

[“Common Principles for Support to Parliaments,”](#) Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2014.

[“Comparative Research Paper on Parliamentary Administration,”](#) Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020.

[*Evaluating Parliament: A Self-Assessment Toolkit for Parliaments*](#), Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2008.

[*Global Parliamentary Report 2022: Public Engagement in the Work of Parliament*](#), Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022.

[“Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services,”](#) Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015.

[“Putting Parliamentary Self-Development into Practice,”](#) Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019.

[*World e-Parliament Report 2020*](#), Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021.

We also direct attention to the important work of the [Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress](#), [including testimony from its hearings](#) and [virtual discussions](#), its [recommendations](#), its [final report for the 116th Congress](#), and the [Moving Our Democracy and Congressional Operations Towards Modernization Resolution](#) passed by the House of Representatives. Its work will continue through at least the end of the 117th Congress in 2022.

Project Team

CONGRESSIONAL MANAGEMENT FOUNDATION

Ian Chenoweth

Research Assistant

Nicole Folk Cooper

Director of Research & Publications

Crystina Darden

Office Administrator and Fundraising
Assistant

Bradford Fitch

President & CEO

Kathy Goldschmidt

Director of Strategic Initiatives

Stephen Jackman

Research Assistant

Abigail Kielty

Data and Methods Consultant

Bradley Joseph Sinkaus

Associate Manager of Congressional
Operations

PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

Katie Bryan

Senior Communications Manager

Bob Cohen

Senior Writer and Editor

Lia Collen

Associate Marketing Manager

Samantha Donaldson

Vice President, Communications

Daniel Durak

Senior Manager, Government Affairs

Diane Hill

Senior Manager, Government Affairs

Halea Kerr-Layton

Press Associate

Austin Laufersweiler

Press Secretary

Tim Markatos

UX Design Manager

Andrew Parco

Associate Digital Design Manager

Audrey Pfund

Senior Design and Web Manager

Chayenne Polimedio

Senior Manager, Research

Nicky Santoso

Digital Design Associate

Parker Schaffel

Senior Marketing Manager

Loren DeJonge Schulman

Vice President, Research, Evaluation and Modernizing Government

Kristine Simmons

Vice President, Government Affairs



216 7th Street Southeast
Second Floor
Washington, DC 20003

congressfoundation.org
(202) 546-0100

 [congressfoundation](https://www.facebook.com/congressfoundation)

 [@congressfdn](https://twitter.com/congressfdn)

 [Congressional-Management-Foundation](https://www.linkedin.com/company/Congressional-Management-Foundation)



600 14th Street NW
Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005

ourpublicservice.org
(202) 775-9111

 [partnershipforpublicservice](https://www.facebook.com/partnershipforpublicservice)

 [@publicservice](https://twitter.com/publicservice)

 [rpublicservice](https://www.instagram.com/rpublicservice)