

# Field Building for Congressional Reform

Lessons for Philanthropy

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For the better part of a decade, Democracy Fund and Democracy Fund Voice invested in civil society organizations seeking to shift a gridlocked and under-resourced Congress onto a more productive footing. We aimed to improve the responsiveness and performance of this essential democratic institution. At the time we started around 2015, some anchor organizations with considerable experience working with congressional offices on institutional reform existed, but many institutional issues facing Congress either went unaddressed or were poorly understood in civil society.

Much of our work, therefore, was building up and connecting a field of organizations and experts who could provide a broad understanding of the interrelated challenges holding congressional productivity back and intervening as trusted allies when institutional stakeholders took on specific capacity issues in the House and Senate.



This guide looks back at how we approached that field-building work, as it became critical to our success in this area of democracy reform. It is our hope that philanthropic organizations interested in Congress as part of their democracy work or who rely on congressional action to advance their issues can learn from our experiences. We also believe our field-building work has lessons for democracy reformers engaging with other parts of our governing institutions, be they the executive branch, state agencies, or municipalities. Being able to work with governmental partners is essential to institutional reform at any level. We found that a broad, well-networked field was most effective for providing congressional partners what they needed when they needed it – to begin restoring the institution.

Our field-building approach grew out of our **systems change approach** to philanthropic investment, which seeks points of leverage where achievable change in one place can spur broader change within a complex system. It is a strategic approach that rejects focus on single causal factors to problems and “silver bullet” solutions. It also allows for flexibility in how we respond to momentum in the system, often in unexpected ways or places.

Like any large governing institution, Congress has a large and sometimes bewildering set of individuals whose knowledge and decisions about the institution affect its performance as a legislature. Of course, members of Congress themselves, especially leadership, matter quite a lot in determining how well the engine of our democracy operates, as do the

political incentives those members are responding to. But offstage, congressional staff do a tremendous amount of the heavy lifting. Congress has its own bureaucracy that manages and publishes the information it produces, acquires and approves information technology, and offers expert policy knowledge and analysis upon request.

In addition to experts inside the institution, scholars at universities and think tanks regularly publish work on specific aspects of how Congress works and what contributes to its dysfunction. Some scholars work directly with congressional offices on experiments to understand how changing practices in, for example, constituent engagement, could lead to better outcomes for the public and member offices. Nonprofits conduct their own research about Congress as a workplace as well as a democratic body.

Decision making and institutional knowledge, therefore, are broadly distributed within the congressional system, including both on and off Capitol Hill. Field building creates opportunities for those with essential institutional knowledge to connect in ways they otherwise do not and for decision-makers to understand problems differently. Philanthropic organizations can become the connective tissue between organizations through their convening and networking power as well as their funding. This dynamic works in two broad ways:

## 1. SETTING AN UNDERSTANDING

There's no shortage of opinions about what is wrong with Congress. Accordingly, a myriad of ideas about how to fix it percolate in the public discourse. But which ideas actually would be impactful in how Congress really works? Which would be ineffective or even harmful to the institution? Of the variety of potentially fruitful ideas out there, which deserve highest priority? What political challenges within Congress stand in the way of success?

The first benefit a robust field offers institutional reform is setting a clear understanding of the problems that really matter to how the governing body operates. The field acts as a filter for the ideas floating around and gives structure to a conversation about institutional performance.

Organizations that can define the problems of the institution play an important foundational role in field building. They often articulate issues that institutional insiders understand intuitively but are unable to do anything about because of the limitations of time and workplace politics. Problem definition often involves delving into topics that don't get much attention from academics or journalists. For example, grantees have written detailed research reports on the state of information technology in Congress and on the long-term funding patterns for congressional staff. It also involves focusing stakeholder conversation on a few select issues that are particularly relevant to institutional progress.

Problem definition was particularly effective when organizations across the ideological spectrum collaborated to elevate the conversation above the partisan fray or draw different audiences into understanding a topic's broader importance. Both parties have shared responsibility for the institution's lack of appropriate resources and top-down leadership styles. The [Legislative Branch Working Group](#), a partnership



of a liberal and a libertarian think tank, defined congressional dysfunction by elevating the work of specific scholars in the field of congressional studies. Right-leaning **Foundation for American Innovation** (formerly Lincoln Network) and progressive Demand Progress Education Fund frequently collaborated to highlight persistent staffing and technology resourcing issues.

After defining the problems, the field then helps institutional stakeholders see the forest for the trees. It regularly provides information about key indicators of institutional health and encourages audiences to see challenges as interrelated to one another. Our grantees regularly produced reports on specific themes and issue areas for congressional audiences. Sometimes, these reports would benchmark progress, like the regular **reports** that the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies at George Washington University issues on racial diversity among Capitol Hill senior staff and the Congressional Management Foundation's "State of Congress" **surveys** of senior congressional staff. Others, like the OpenGov Foundation's user-centered **research** on processing voicemail, used a specific problem to understand the broader range of challenges facing congressional information technology. The field provided forums to discuss each other's work and keep ideas circulating.

The field then generated a deeper understanding of how specific types of reforms related to broader problems within the institution. Members of Congress frequently express frustration about their limited input into substantive bills and lack of opportunities to have their legislation receive votes on the floor. They are overscheduled and required to spend inordinate amounts of time on non-legislative tasks like fundraising. Grantees often connect how sets of reforms could empower members. The rules and structures of Congress make a significant difference in how dynamic and productive a legislature it will be. Grantees in the field help members and their staff understand their place in the system better, and how it could change in a positive direction.

## 2. HELPING THE INSTITUTION FIND SOLUTIONS

Like any large organization, Congress has its ways of doing things. Too often, reformers seek to graft ready-made solutions onto parts of the institution without a deeper understanding of its workplace culture, constitutional limits, and internal rules and customs. Often, there are very good reasons congressional offices do the work the way they do, ranging from cybersecurity threats to ethics rules. Working with institutional stakeholders, therefore, is one essential way the field-building approach enables tailored solutions for a complex governing body.

In the area of congressional reform, groups across the political spectrum came together to push for a forum inside Congress to prioritize these issues. In part as a result of this advocacy, the House of Representatives in 2019 created a perfect partner in the **Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress**. The committee immediately engaged organizations and experts in our network and continued to consult the field throughout its



unprecedented four years of work. The field organized early in 2019 into an informal “Fix Congress” cohort to coordinate efforts and facilitate communication. Nearly every member of the cohort testified to the committee during its hearings on a broad range of topics and the committee cited the organization’s work in its reports. Committee leaders and staff regularly met or held conference calls with the organizations involved. The committee was remarkably productive. It issued more than 200 recommendations on topics ranging from staff benefits and professional development to information technology, from the use of data in legislative work to strengthening bipartisan working relationships of members. The field also supported **implementation of these recommendations**, working with a range of institutional stakeholders to provide technical assistance on how to proceed and to ensure the resources were appropriated that were necessary to make them reality.

As the committee worked, cohort members were able to shine a light on the progress made, creating a virtuous cycle of effort and recognition. Ultimately, the Committee on House Administration converted it into a new **permanent subcommittee** on modernization, keeping that conduit open between Congress and civil society, and it has continued to make progress.



In other opportunities, grantees provide support directly to reformers and experimenters in Congress. Grantees joined with congressional offices on several pilot projects to improve constituent engagement and participation in legislative processes. One pilot with POPVOX and the Beeck Center at Georgetown University worked with the House Natural Resources Committee to crowdsource every part of the bill drafting cycle with local and national organizations on an environmental justice measure, from problem definition to final draft. Other grantees ran a machine learning experiment with several congressional offices to experiment with natural language processing in batching constituent email or developed Congress-specific applications with heavy member and staff input. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the field collaborated with congressional committees and offices to help move hearings to video conferencing platforms and to support remote internships.

The field also connected its solutions for institutional progress to better democratic outcomes that come with higher congressional performance, broadening the circle of interest in congressional reform among civil society and on the Hill. For example, **TechCongress**’ early successes in placing technology fellows in congressional offices as policy resources spurred greater interest from science and technology-focused philanthropies in investing

more substantively in congressional science expertise. They drove a larger conversation that encouraged Congress to establish significant new capabilities like the Science, Technology Assessment, and Analytics team at the Government Accountability Office.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: ADVANTAGES TO A FIELD-BUILDING APPROACH**

- A field-building approach to philanthropic strategy – and institutional reform in particular – creates a reservoir of capacity, knowledge, and expertise across a range of topics that can be tapped when opportunities or crises arise or specific reforms gain momentum in a democratic institution. These moments are unpredictable and often unexpected. For example, we assumed initially that the issue of congressional staff pay was too politically difficult to advance given congressional hostility to looking like it is spending lavishly on itself. In fact, we made tremendous gains on that issue after congressional stakeholders understood the importance of staff retention and morale to institutional capacity, in part through the work of our field. On the other hand, this kind of readiness can also provide support in crisis moments, like the support provided to congressional staff after the January 6 attack on the Capitol. Casting a broad net for expertise and perspective allows for a response within the system when it's needed.
- Funding with building a field in mind inherently connects different networks together, be they institutional stakeholders, academics, practitioners, advocates, or reformers. These networks make creative and productive connections and collaborate on projects that otherwise may not have happened. In the case of the congressional reform field, it also included stakeholders, organizations and experts with a range of ideological perspectives who did not always agree, but could often find common ground and support bipartisan efforts within Congress to make institutional changes.
- Having a field at the ready allows for responsiveness to institutional interest and uptake, which will be uneven. People in Congress don't sit around all day thinking about what would make the institution better; they have their day jobs to do. But when presented with a framework for these issues and the opportunity to engage, they did think about it and became animated about specific issues.
- Advocacy capacity in the field is important. It allows reformers to more effectively take advantage of opportunities that arise in appropriations legislation or in the establishment of House or Senate rules – both of which are key potential leverage points.
- At the same time, by focusing on partnerships with civil society, a field-building approach to institutional reform does not need to rely solely on advocacy to achieve change. Instead, a partnering approach empowers people inside the institution to make change as it benefits their own goals. This approach builds trust between internal stakeholders and civil society and helps ensure that changes are more enduring.

Congress still has a long way to go to becoming a highly effective national legislature, as discussed in the [evaluation report](#) we published in 2021, and some of the changes required to achieve that goal will need to happen outside of the institution and in the broader politics of our country. But the work of congressional reformers in alliance with institutional stakeholders has generated remarkable change on issues that make the institution work better, and we hope these lessons will be helpful to others seeking to achieve institutional change.