

February 23, 2021

The Honorable Charles Schumer  
Majority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Minority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar  
Chairwoman  
U.S. Senate Committee on Rules &  
Administration  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roy Blunt  
Ranking Member  
U.S. Senate Committee on Rules &  
Administration  
Washington, DC 20510

**RE: Increasing the Capacity of the U.S. Senate**

Dear Majority Leader Schumer, Minority Leader McConnell, Chairwoman Klobuchar, and Ranking Member Blunt:

The COVID-19 pandemic, growing economic hardship for many American families, a national reckoning over racial injustice, and the January 6 siege of the Capitol have strained our democracy, underscoring the need for a strong, well-prepared Congress. While democratic norms and long-standing Senate traditions provide a firm grounding, the times require a dynamic Senate, one capable of evolving to meet these 21st century challenges.

We, the undersigned, urge the bipartisan Senate leadership to take critical steps to ensure Congress has the capacity to meet this foundational moment, providing the kind of leadership the American people need and deserve. We strongly urge you to task a group of senators with evaluating institutional capacity and advancing recommendations to strengthen the Senate's internal rules, norms, and operations. Such a body—whether created as a task force outside of the committee structure, a special subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Rules & Administration, or a hybrid approach—should have bipartisan representation and be sufficiently funded and staffed to thoroughly examine the complex issues facing the Senate.

Failure to take action of this kind will leave the Senate insufficiently prepared to address the serious challenges of today and tomorrow.

**Congressional Culture**

The challenges facing the country require civility and cross-partisan collaboration. Unfortunately, the incentives that drive political tribalism in Congress are stronger than ever. The unchecked rise of social media has invited disinformation and created political echo chambers,

while partisan redistricting and record spending in campaigns are alienating many voters. The Senate must be intentional about the rules and norms it has formed, and how these structures either build up or break down partisan divides. For example, introductory training and leadership development programs for incoming members and staff present the opportunity to establish a culture of bipartisanship at the outset. Committee structures and deliberative processes should be reviewed with an eye toward changes that could maximize collaboration across party lines.

Creating a healthy congressional culture also requires institutional support for ethical and transparent conduct. This means embracing practices that allow stakeholders to participate in and readily follow the legislative process, strengthening ethics training for senators and staff, and examining the ethics rules governing senators. This suite of policies is vital to help build public trust in Congress as a representative body.

### **Article One: Rebuilding Congressional Capacity**

There are a number of procedural mechanisms that the Senate should examine to reclaim its powers and responsibilities, as established by Article One of the U.S. Constitution. A Senate body with this charge could look to reform the budgeting and appropriations process to maximize efficiency, examine steps the institution can take to ensure robust oversight of the executive branch, and evaluate whether the committee process is working to the satisfaction of both senators and external stakeholders. Separately, the Senate must ensure that it is employing the strongest tools available to meet 21st century challenges. This means continuing to bring the technological infrastructure of the Senate up to date and ensuring that both senators and staff have the training necessary to fully utilize these resources.

### **Staff Compensation and Retention**

Congressional staff, both on Capitol Hill and in district offices, are crucial to the daily operations of the institution—crafting policy, advancing legislation, and interacting daily with constituents. Despite the responsibilities and wide range of challenges facing these public servants, congressional staff receive lower pay compared to executive branch and private sector employees. Staff compensation has declined across communications, legislative, and administrative staff, prompting 65 percent of staffers to say that they plan to leave Congress within five years.<sup>1</sup> Many enter the Congress-to-K Street pipeline, a dynamic that causes Congress to turn to lobbyists for expertise and undermines voters’ faith in their elected representatives.

These challenges are heightened when it comes to recruiting and retaining staff of color. According to a recent report by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, “People of color make up 40% of the U.S. population, but only 11% of all Senate personal office top staff.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Furnas, A. and LaPira, T. (2020, September). Congressional Brain Drain. New America.

<https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/congressional-brain-drain/>

<sup>2</sup> Brenson, L. (2020, August). Racial Diversity Among Top Staff in Senate Personal Offices. Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, [https://jointcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2020-Senate-Report-Draft\\_08-21-20-5AM.pdf](https://jointcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2020-Senate-Report-Draft_08-21-20-5AM.pdf)

In order to ensure that Congress is representing all constituents, the institution must work to foster diversity in the staff recruitment process and create an inclusive work environment by instituting internal diversity, equity, and inclusion practices.

## **Conclusion**

A functional representative legislature is the hallmark of a functional democratic republic. Unfortunately, congressional productivity has broken down, resulting in unacceptably low public trust in the institution and impeding our nation's ability to address the real issues that afflict American communities. In order for the Senate to fulfill its constitutional duties and confront these challenges, Senate leadership should establish and prioritize a body dedicated to making the Senate more transparent, representative, efficient, and effective.

As organizations and individuals committed to seeing a strong legislative branch, we would welcome the opportunity to support and amplify the efforts of this body. We would also be happy to discuss this matter further if you have any questions. Please contact Meredith McGehee, Executive Director, Issue One at [meredith@issueone.org](mailto:meredith@issueone.org) or Jamie Neikrie, Coordinator, Fix Congress Cohort at [jneikrie@issueone.org](mailto:jneikrie@issueone.org).

Sincerely,

Advocacy Blueprints

Bipartisan Policy Center

College to Congress

Congressional Management Foundation

Demand Progress

Democracy Fund Voice

Issue One

Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

Kevin M. Esterling, University of California, Riverside\*

Kevin R. Kosar, American Enterprise Institute\*

Lincoln Network

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Unite America

\* Affiliations listed for identification purposes only.

Cc: Senator Dick Durbin, Senate Majority Whip  
Senator John Thune, Senate Minority Whip