



NATIONAL GOVERNING INSTITUTIONS STRATEGY — 2021-2025 —

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Complementing this strategy is Hewlett’s Trustworthy Elections Strategy 2021-2025 (June 2021, [link](#))



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(Cover image) Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) swears in new members of congress during the first session of the 117th Congress in the House Chamber at the U.S. Capitol on January 03, 2021 in Washington, DC. (Photo by Tasos Katopodis/Getty Images)

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Executive Summary

Democracy in the United States is at a historical crossroads. The past decade — culminating in the first interruption in the nation’s long-standing tradition of a peaceful transfer of power — has raised fundamental questions about the long-term viability of U.S. democracy. Perhaps the only silver lining in this stain on American history is that it has helped lead to a new awakening about the fragility of democracy, and the potential for philanthropy to play a worthwhile role in safeguarding and bolstering democracy’s long-term health. At the Hewlett Foundation, which announced its own long-term commitment in this issue area in April 2020, we are grateful to see ourselves amid a broader array of democracy-supporting donors. Many in philanthropy are focusing on a range of issues that form the “inputs” of democracy, such as voter rights, voter mobilization, and election reform; one of our own new strategies focuses on the area of trustworthy elections. However, we believe that it is just as essential to focus on the “throughputs” of democracy — that is, the work of national governing institutions that can make and administer laws and policies that respond to the needs and desires of people. Success on the “inputs” of democracy — the engagement and representation of all voters in free, fair, and legitimate elections — will not matter if, once the campaigning ends, *governing* itself fails.

This may, at first blush, seem dry or technocratic. But a democracy whose governing institutions cannot perform essential functions that earn the trust of its citizens — that not only cannot manage disasters but can barely manage even its quotidian responsibilities of budgeting and oversight — will not remain a democracy for long. In a vicious cycle, institutional failures go on to undermine public confidence and stoke apathy, which in turn leave the institutions and democracy itself on shakier ground, vulnerable to would-be tyrants and the mobs they incite. And unfortunately, today, our national government’s legislative and executive branches are increasingly hard-pressed to fulfill their basic constitutional responsibilities, even as they must face a host of complex and thorny challenges — from the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic to accelerating climate change, continuing economic dislocations from globalization and automation, a profoundly uncertain international order, and an overwhelmed immigration system, to name just a few. The stakes are high if national governing institutions fail. Ultimately, as our governing institutions go, so goes the fate of our democracy. The health and basic serviceability of these institutions is, indeed, a precondition for a functioning democracy.

We believe, therefore, that philanthropy can and should help bolster the capacity of our national governing institutions to make and administer laws. It is the sort of consequential endeavor especially well-suited to philanthropy because the reform and revitalization of our national governing institutions requires thoughtful, sustained, nonpartisan work undertaken with a longer-term time-horizon and a high tolerance for risk and failure.

The discussion below outlines our strategy for strengthening our national governing institutions in the years ahead. The strategy builds on work we have done over the past seven years — initially as the foundation’s Madison Initiative — to shore up Congress. But while that work is paying off in tangible ways, especially when it comes to improving the institution’s capacity, a more functional legislative branch is insufficient for our country to meet the governance challenges that lie ahead. We also need a competent executive branch, capable of administering policies and responding to emergencies effectively. Toward this end, we are launching a new line of grantmaking to help revitalize the federal workforce by attracting new generations of Americans — demographically diverse, digitally native, and so far, slow to join government — to public service to help revitalize the civil service system.

The paper begins with a survey of the problems we seek to address. We then preview our refreshed strategy, outline the considerations that have informed it, and describe the grantmaking we are launching to improve the executive branch and will be continuing, stopping, and starting to bolster Congress. Finally, we share our plans for evaluating progress, learning, and correcting our course as we implement the strategy.

I. The Problems We Seek to Address

A. Polarization and the Institutional Decline of Congress

When the Hewlett Foundation commenced its work to strengthen U.S. democracy back in 2014, our primary focus was on a cluster of problems associated with political polarization and the widening ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans, including hyper-partisanship and gridlock. These problems had come to confound national political institutions, especially Congress, which struggled to legislate on a growing number of issues about which Americans were anxious and frustrated. Public confidence in what is ostensibly the people's branch had plummeted, further reducing legislators' ability to negotiate and compromise. The idea of a loyal opposition, perhaps the lynchpin of representative democracy, was falling by the wayside as each party came to think the worst of its rivals.

We believed that philanthropy could do something to help alleviate the problem of polarization. To test our hypothesis, we decided to focus on the keystone institution of Congress, where the problem of polarization was most clearly manifest and from which it was rapidly spreading to other parts of the political system. We set out to ascertain whether we could help create conditions in which Congress and its members could deliberate, negotiate, and compromise in ways that more Americans would support.

As the Madison Initiative initially developed, we zeroed in on four longer-run outcomes we sought to advance in our efforts to strengthen Congress:

1. Congress has a culture of bipartisan deliberation, negotiation, and compromise; a critical mass of members reflects this culture in how they work; and the institution has established norms, practices, and rules that support this behavior.
2. Congress has a functional budget process resulting in regular adoption of federal budget and appropriations legislation with reduced use of sequesters, continuing resolutions, government shutdowns, and debt ceiling crises to resolve budgetary disputes.
3. Congress conducts effective oversight in a bipartisan fashion, using the full suite of tools at its disposal to regularly monitor federal programs and agencies, support the checks and balances of our constitutional system, investigate abuses in the private sector to protect the public interest, and solicit the information it needs to draft and pass legislation.
4. Congress provides itself with the quantity, quality, and diversity of staff and expertise it needs to carry out its constitutional responsibilities and represent the American people effectively.

To be clear, in specifying these outcomes, we recognized that they would take years to achieve. At the same time, we wanted to define what success would ultimately look like for this work so we could focus our grantmaking and track and evaluate progress toward these ends. In the spirit of transparency, in an appendix below we review the progress (or lack thereof) in realizing these outcomes in more detail, with links to several third-party evaluations we have commissioned to assess it.

With respect to general institutional developments and trends since 2014, we should begin by stating the obvious. Polarization remains as serious a problem as ever in Congress. If anything, the hyper-partisanship and gridlock in Congress have gotten worse in the intervening years. Congress still finds it exceedingly challenging to act collectively across party lines. The ongoing contest for control of Congress in which each election finds one or both houses up for grabs gives both parties incentives to confront rather than collaborate to get things done. In a recent nadir, the attack on the counting of electoral votes in the Capitol on January 6, 2021, in the aftermath of which 147 G.O.P. legislators still voted in support of President Trump's baseless efforts to overturn the election results, has further rendered the fabric of congressional civility and tolerance. Even that nadir, as severe as it was, may have been superseded by the subsequent inability of Congress even to agree to investigate the Capitol riot.

At the same time, our core belief in the ongoing need for and possibility of better deliberation, negotiation, and compromise across the aisle in Congress has held up. Political scientists James Curry and Frances Lee have confirmed several salient facts that tend to get lost in media and scholarly discussions of polarization and the apparent demise of bipartisanship on Capitol Hill. Their research, which we helped underwrite, has identified considerable continuity in how Congress operates. They summarized their key findings for us in a grant report as follows:

Congressional majority parties fail to enact party agenda priorities for the same reasons as in the past. Both intra-party disagreements that disrupt the abilities of majorities to unify behind party proposals, and obstructionist tactics from the minority party, have and continue to play a role in majority party failures on agenda items. Neither reason for failure has become more or less common over time. Congressional majority parties succeed on agenda items in the same manner as in the past. Largely, they either seek broadly supported, bipartisan proposals, or work across the aisle to come to bipartisan compromises. Cases of the majority party steamrolling the minority party and passing laws over persistent opposition are rare and have not become more common in recent years. While Congress has adopted more unorthodox and centralized legislative processes to achieve lawmaking successes, these new processes have yielded the same bipartisan outcomes as traditional processes did in the past. Unorthodox legislative tactics are best thought of as a different means to achieving the same ultimate legislative ends.¹

In sum, most bills enacted into law continue to have the support of bipartisan majorities in both houses of Congress. There is no escaping the need for deliberation, negotiation, and compromise in Congress, both within and between parties. This is not because legislators are naturally inclined to these behaviors but because the difficulty of national legislation in a diverse and disputatious country demands it. That is by far the prevailing way that promising ideas survive the institutional gauntlet and become law.

And notwithstanding the media's focus on conflict and polarization, surveying the legislative track record of all recent Congresses demonstrates that each passed several pieces of landmark legislation and that most of these bills enjoyed substantial bipartisan support. The party-line voting on the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 continues to be the exception, not the rule, for bills that become law.

Consider the recently completed 116th Congress, which met during the last two years of Donald Trump's presidency. It was marked by intense partisanship, especially during President Trump's first impeachment and trial and the run-up to the bitterly fought 2020 election. Nevertheless, the 116th Congress passed the annual National Defense Authorization Act both years, as it has for the past 60 years, with bipartisan support, even overriding President Trump's veto the second time around. The 116th Congress also passed sweeping public lands legislation that was years in the making and approved the revised North American Free Trade Agreement. Most significantly, during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the 116th Congress passed five major emergency bills that appropriated more than \$3 trillion in response to the crisis, all with overwhelming bipartisan support.

These patterns and trends have affirmed our core assumption about how Congress functions. We have gotten plenty of critical feedback over the years that we are overly optimistic, if not on a fool's errand, in working to support bipartisan deliberation, negotiation, and compromise in Congress. For our part, what we see is a deep disconnect between the give-and-take that inherently occurs in the institution's functioning and the deeply partisan rhetoric that tends to surround it.

Over the past several years, we have also observed positive institutional developments, often happening quietly, inside Congress. Considerable forward motion has come via the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress — created in January 2019, at the outset of the 116th Congress, on an overwhelming bipartisan vote of 418-12. The Select Committee, which consists of six members from each party, has developed and reported out consensus bipartisan recommendations for 97 proposals to improve how the House functions, e.g., how it orients and supports new members, hires and trains staff, uses and secures technology, and makes data and information about its work available to the public. At the end of the 116th Congress, the House reauthorized the Select Committee for another two years, and many of its reform recommendations were adopted in the House rules package in January 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed Congress to take some radical steps to keep itself operating, such as holding remote committee hearings and collecting digital signatures from legislators. The House of Representatives went even further during the pandemic, allowing electronic filing of bills, amendments, co-sponsorships, Congressional Record statements, and other technology-based advances that had been stalled for years.

These positive internal developments have been paralleled and actively supported by a promising external development in civil society, namely, the emergence of a large, robust, well-resourced, well-led network of grantees of the foundation who are able to self-organize and collaborate productively. We have underwritten and helped foster this network over the past seven years in close collaboration with our funding partners at the Democracy Fund. In some instances, we funded the continuation and/or expansion of work already underway to strengthen Congress at think tanks and advocacy groups. In other instances, we supported the launch of new programs and activities working toward these ends at existing organizations. In still others, we provided the equivalent of philanthropic venture capital to support the launch and scaling of promising new organizations dedicated to improving how Congress operates.

In our theory of change, we know we are heading in the right direction in building up a field when our grantees join forces and collaborate on their own initiative, making the whole greater than the sum of the parts. A subsequent success indicator is when legislators working for change inside Congress actively engage with grantees we support — picking up on and using their ideas and proposals, inviting grantee leaders to testify at hearings, and speaking at grantee events. This indicates that our grantees are shaping their work in ways that are relevant and responsive to reformers in Congress. The third and final indicator is that all this activity is contributing to concrete improvements inside Congress.

The ways in which our grantees have rallied to inform, support, and help the House Select Committee since its inception and Congress as a whole during the COVID-19 pandemic are examples of our theory of change in action. Throughout its existence, the Select Committee's leaders and members have relied on our grantees as they developed their proposals for change. Our grantees have facilitated the Committee's retreats, served on its staff, testified at its hearings, and continue to beat the drum for its work. Likewise, during the pandemic our grantees have helped set the pace and illuminate the path forward for reform-minded members inside Congress. We want to build on and increase this momentum with our refreshed strategy in the years ahead.

B. Institutional Incapacity in the Executive Branch

But even if, over time, we succeed in our efforts to rectify Congress, it will not be enough. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare, in a way that cannot be minimized or denied, the chronic incapacity of the executive branch of the federal government to respond to pressing national challenges. Much of the blame in this instance could be attributed to maladministration in the White House. Still, the pandemic also highlighted deeper, more fundamental weaknesses within the federal bureaucracy — e.g., the C.D.C.'s botched development and rollout of a test for the disease at the outset of the pandemic, the F.D.A.'s overly stringent and burdensome initial requirements for confirming positive tests, and the muddled communications from both agencies throughout the pandemic. When we fail to invest in and develop administrative competence, we do not have it when the country needs it. We observe the same dynamics and lack of governing capacity on many other complex and controversial issues, like climate change and immigration.

The people most affected by government failure are usually in the marginalized groups that already bear the burdens of disparities in our society, as is demonstrated not only by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, but also by the disastrous responses to Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico; contaminated water in Flint, Michigan; the botched rollout of healthcare.gov; the Deepwater Horizon oil spill; and Hurricane Katrina, among other government failures. This is one of the primary reasons we are approaching the breakdown in government capacity with a sense of urgency.

In recent decades, ideological opposition to “the era of big government” fostered bipartisan neglect, underfunding, and disinvestment; hollowed out expertise through outsourcing to consultants; demoralized career staff; tarnished the luster of their public service; and failed to update and upgrade the technology, processes, and management of the federal government. When President Trump sought to “deconstruct the administrative state” by appointing administrators hostile to the mission and staffs of the agencies they headed up, and endlessly attacking the civil servants and agency leaders in the executive branch he led, he was battering what had already been rendered a rusty shell of a governing apparatus.

In the summer of 2020, we asked ourselves: Alongside our work to strengthen the legislative branch, could we do something to help address these fundamental shortcomings in how our executive branch functions? If so, would the opportunities for impact be sufficient to warrant repurposing some resources from our work in Congress to focus on strengthening the executive branch?

The change in administrations after the 2020 election increased the urgency of these questions in our minds. It opens a window for rebuilding and revitalizing the executive branch. This has pushed us to consider where our resources could potentially have the most impact.

We subsequently explored a few different options for where we might focus. Several grantees worked closely with the Biden transition working groups on restoring and repairing the norms, processes, ethics rules, and policies that underpin competent administration. This work is essential, and over the past four years our grantees have engaged in fruitful efforts to specify the changes needed. But now, the path forward depends on decisions in the administration and Congress about whether and how to go forward with these reform efforts. Given the fraught inter-branch and inter-party dynamics, grantee organizations are not in a strong position to influence those inherently political decisions.

We also considered supporting organizations working on deeper rebuilding in particular agencies and departments that were hardest hit in the previous administration, e.g., the E.P.A., State Department, or Department of Justice. But we recognized that the Biden administration was already responding to this imperative. It is stocking the agencies with experienced leaders and appointees whose careers have been dedicated to the missions of the agencies in which they now serve and lead, and there is little that new funding from us could add to this short-term imperative.

The more we reflected on the situation and solicited input from partners, grantees, and advisors, the more we concluded that the best use for the long-term funding we could offer in this area would be to help solve a looming set of problems that cut across the federal workforce. Consider this passage from the recent congressional testimony of one of our grantees, Max Stier, C.E.O. of the Partnership for Public Service, on the full sweep of the issues needing resolution. It is worth quoting at length:

The disincentives for talented people to join federal service are significant. The private and nonprofit sectors have more agile hiring and talent management systems, the political crosscurrents are strong, and many federal employees have been maligned as members of a “deep state.” This is unfair and wrong. Public servants – be they surgeons at the V.A., national park rangers, F.B.I. agents, social workers, astronauts, cybersecurity specialists, T.S.A. officers or diplomats – are not the enemy; they are incredibly smart, dedicated people working to serve your constituents. They deserve our respect, and they deserve to work in a modern system that makes good use of their talents, provides them with updated technology to do their jobs and allows them to work collaboratively to solve problems.

To revitalize the workforce, the administration and Congress must both repair recent damage to the federal workforce and address long-standing problems. Key data points signal the need for attention to the workforce. These trends are not new but will be harder to fix the longer we wait: Just 6.8% of full-time federal workers are under the age of 30. By comparison, almost 20% of the employed U.S. labor force in 2020 was under age 30. In the federal I.T. workforce, more than 19 times more employees are over 50 than under 30. On the other end of the spectrum, of the full-time employees on board as of the beginning of fiscal year 2019, 25% will be eligible to retire by the end of 2021; 35.5% will be eligible to retire by the end of 2024.

This situation is precisely the kind of longer-term, complex, and thorny problem that we believe our U.S. Democracy Program is uniquely situated to help address. Rather than trying to address every discrete area of failure, we are presuming that a younger and thus more demographically diverse and digitally native workforce will lead to a higher functioning executive branch, which will in turn be better able to administer policies, deliver services, and respond to emergencies across the board.

II. Our Strategy to Strengthen National Governing Institutions

We turn now to how we plan to adapt and focus our strategy to bolster the institutional capacity of not only the legislative branch but also the executive branch of the U.S. government.

In the most significant change in our strategy, we will launch a new line of grantmaking to revitalize the federal workforce. We believe it is essential to inspire rising generations of Americans to serve, given the energy, diverse perspectives, and tech savvy they will bring with them into government. To help make this happen, we recognize the need to reform an increasingly outdated civil service system that tends to turn young people away from starting their careers in the federal government.

We also plan to expand the capacity-building work that continues to gain momentum in Congress. To support it, we are underwriting a substantial new effort, the Alliance for Congress, that seeks to change the public narrative and understandings of the institution — and thereby support constructive changes within it.

The overall goal of our strategy is to ensure the legislative and executive branches of the federal government have the high-quality and diverse workforce, technological sophistication, expertise, and funding needed to fulfill their responsibilities in the 21st Century and earn the confidence of the American people.

We have identified four new outcomes representing clear and specific changes we hope to see over the next three to five years in furtherance of our goal. They include the following:

1. A larger and more diverse pool of talented young people seek to work in the federal government.
2. There is a growing consensus among federal policymakers on the need for civil service reform and the principles and goals that should guide it.
3. Members of Congress increasingly take responsibility for the health of their institution and adopt reforms to modernize both the House and Senate.
4. Congress and the executive branch have increased funding in their internal expertise, leadership, and technology to improve the functioning of government.

We decided what lines of grantmaking to continue, wind down, and start up based on a range of considerations. These included the opportunities and barriers for each over the next three to five years based on the outcome of the 2020 elections; the constraints of our staffing and budget; what lines of work would amount to the highest and best use of these scarce resources; and potential synergies (or lack thereof) across different potential combinations of work. In the remainder of this section, we map out the considerations that led to these strategic shifts and preview the approaches and theories of change we will be pursuing in our respective substrategies. We begin with the new work we have planned in the executive branch.

A. Substrategy for Strengthening the Executive Branch

Because of the scale of the government, the heterogeneity among agencies, and the limited budget and bandwidth of the foundation's Democracy Program, this substrategy must choose its points of leverage carefully. We plan two related lines of grantmaking: 1) revitalizing the federal workforce and 2) reforming the civil service system to facilitate this transformation. Before describing how we will begin pursuing these outcomes, we should state the key assumptions underpinning our emergent theory of change.

Our executive branch strategy is based on several assumptions about the nature of the opportunity. First, the Biden administration is eager to rebuild the capacity of the executive branch (even if it has many competing demands on its leaders). Second, an opportunity is emerging for government to appeal to the desire of millennial and Gen Z Americans for careers that offer purpose and impact, job security, and a workplace that is diverse and comfortable with technology. Third, the generational shift in the electorate and talent pool points to increasing support for seeing government as a potential solution to problems rather than as the source of them. Fourth, focusing our strategy on the rising generations of civil servants has the additional benefit of lifting up opportunities to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion in government given the demographic composition of these generations. Finally, a coalition for systemic reform will need to include organizations offering diverse perspectives that speak to the generations we are targeting.

Our strategy also rests on some assumptions about the nature of the problem. First and foremost, the “people problem” is the key one: Public administration experts, when asked what is most needed to strengthen the capacity of the federal government, place people-related issues at the top of the list. Second, “the big lobotomy” associated with outsourcing needs correction by bringing knowledge, expertise, and technological know-how back inside government. Third, an aging workforce, many of whom postponed retirement, is out of touch with the needs of the future. Fourth, the present civil service system is a demonstrable barrier to timely talent acquisition or replacement. Its antiquated technology, outdated approach to human resources and professional development, and 20th-century workplace design and culture are unappealing to younger generations. The system of hiring is so slow (18 months on average) and so poorly understood that many candidates just give up and go elsewhere. For certain careers, especially in information technology, the pay scale is too low and has too little flexibility to be attractive. There are significant barriers to inclusion of diverse employees and perspectives in the upper ranks of the civil service, and they must be identified and removed to attract and retain the next generation of talent.

The first line of grantmaking will thus focus on recruiting, retaining, and developing employees for careers in government. The federal government is the largest employer in the U.S., and it requires top-quality talent in every sphere. It needs the skills and talent of the younger generations, but it will fail to attract them unless it becomes an appealing work environment for the 21st Century. Millennials, Gen Z, and those who follow are digital natives who value diverse perspectives in the workplace and will bring much-needed energy and forward-looking ideas to a too-often-sclerotic employer. However, more needs to be known about what it will take to move them into long-term federal service. The first year of grantmaking will seed learning to guide future funding.

The initial steps in this portfolio will thus be research grants to learn more about the intersection of young workers’ aspirations and talents and federal jobs. The research will explore questions such as: What characteristics do young workers (across the spectrum, from high school graduates to postgraduate degree holders) seek in employment? What are their perceptions of government as an employer? What misconceptions do they hold? What needs to change in government to attract them? Given the pressing need for next-generation civil servants with expertise in information technology, cybersecurity, and national security, we will be especially attuned to their aspirations and viewpoints. Armed with these results beginning in 2022, we will update our strategy, identifying the best points of leverage and intervention.

The second line of grantmaking will begin laying the groundwork for an overhaul of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 that would modernize executive agencies’ structure, systems, and employment practices.² This would require legislation, not just executive action. Many proposals exist for updating the government as a workplace, most recently the [2020 report](#) of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service. But Congress has not acted.

An initial project grant will assess prospects for an overhaul of the outdated civil service laws and regulations. The partners leading this project will include, from inception, organizations representing diverse perspectives across the political and demographic spectrum. The project will address questions such as: What would a broad, bipartisan consensus on restructuring the civil service look like? Who would be advocates, and where are the obstacles/opponents? Can an influential coalition of advocates for a civil service reform agenda be established? What are the prospects for success? What level of investment will be needed over the next three to five years? With answers to these questions, we will update the strategy, deciding whether and how to proceed. To accelerate our learning in the meantime, we may also provide general operating support to one or two nonprofits engaged with education and advocacy on the National Commission’s report.

Across both lines of grantmaking, we envision setting up a cycle of testing and learning for the first 18 months, experimenting with pilot projects and new grantees to bring in new approaches and perspectives, and cocreating long-term opportunities for greater leverage than we can define now. Instrumental to this approach will be rounding out the range of grantee and funder partnerships we will need to be successful. This will also be a priority for the first one to two years of this work. While there is currently a cohort of several capable nonprofits who collaborate on these executive branch issues, we anticipate needing to bring in new grantees with specialized expertise and a greater diversity of perspectives to round out the portfolio.

We also will need to expand the number of funders willing to invest in executive branch capacity. We are considering whether and how we might use the foundation's standing in philanthropy to invite and encourage other funders to support national governing institutions generally, recognizing that some may focus on executive or legislative branch opportunities as their present strategies allow.

B. Substrategy for Strengthening the Legislative Branch

With respect to our ongoing work related to Congress, we have to begin by acknowledging that the narrow Democratic majority in the House and the razor-thin Democratic majority in the Senate (courtesy of Vice President Kamala Harris as the tiebreaker in the 117th Congress) means that the next four years will see intense partisanship, polarization, and contestation for control of both chambers in the 2022 and 2024 elections. These factors are interrelated. We know that when both parties believe they have a legitimate shot at gaining or keeping control of one or both houses of Congress in the next election, their incentives are not to negotiate and compromise but rather to confront and embarrass the other side. We do not presume that any action our partners or grantees can take will materially change these divisive political dynamics. We need to plan adaptations for our strategy that will hold up in the face of them.

In addition, to free up resources to support the new executive branch work we have planned, we will need to wind down some lines of grantmaking to strengthen Congress, even though they remain worthy undertakings. In considering what we might trim back in order to launch new efforts, for example, we considered that there would be a limited likelihood of progress in the short term for budget and appropriations process reform. The core set of reform proposals have been developed and vetted, but broader will to act in both chambers has not yet been forthcoming, despite glimmers of interest in the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress. We plan to keep supporting the organizations working on this reform effort, including the budget experts, think-tankers, and practitioners involved in the national budgeting roundtable.

We also have decided to suspend the targeted funding we have provided over the years to improve the culture of Congress by fostering networks and relationship-building across the aisle. We continue to think bipartisan relationships are essential for a functional Congress, and many of our grantees continue to emphasize bipartisan collaboration to make their work effective. But given our limited resources and other opportunities we have to help improve how Congress operates, we are shifting this funding to new priorities. To support grantees who will continue working toward this goal, we are making one last round of transitional grants to give them time to find new sources of funding.

Considering the momentum behind it on Capitol Hill, we will continue to support institutional competence and capacity building in Congress. We will do this in part by underwriting staff training in oversight, legislative negotiation, constituent communications, and other fundamental processes. Over the next four years, this work will include increased emphasis on technology and modernization, applying lessons learned during the pandemic to spur more rapid adoption. We will also augment our investments in diverse pipelines and networks of congressional staff, as well as research on and advocacy to improve senior staff demographics. We will underwrite work on the continuity of government, including congressional leadership and operations, a festering problem brought to light most recently by the January 6 attack. Finally, we provide support for a cohort of grantees with Senate experience to more actively educate and advocate for modernization, rules, processes, and technology the Senate needs to fulfill its responsibilities in the post-COVID, 21st-century world. Our grantees have to date focused heavily on the House of Representatives, with encouraging results, but now is the time to test prospects for change in the Senate and learn how to achieve results in this very different chamber.

The congressional capacity portfolio is relatively mature, with crosscutting work by a core group of anchor grantees and small clusters of grantees organized around specific issues. Collectively, they are working to maintain momentum in the House and help build support in the Senate to modernize and bolster the capacity of Congress in such areas as science and technology, diversity and inclusion, oversight, and more. In large part because of convenings and cross-fertilization of these organizations by the Hewlett Foundation and the Democracy Fund over the last seven years, the grantees are now well networked and collaborative, rather than solo actors and competitors, which was too often the case before. As new organizations form or new opportunities for impact arise, we will selectively add new groups to the portfolio.

We will also be providing substantial funding to launch a major new project at the Partnership for Public Service called the Alliance for Congress, to fill a communications and public education void we have increasingly felt over the past seven years. The purpose of the Alliance will be to change the narrative about Congress and rally public support for it — and for legislators seeking to invest in and reform the institution. The Alliance will build on Partnership’s work to help create a more responsive and innovative federal government and to strengthen federal leadership at all levels. The Alliance will work with allied organizations, most of whom are grantees, to promote public service and effective government and help Congress become a healthier and more capable institution that tackles big issues and better serves people from all backgrounds.

We cannot conclude the discussion of our efforts to strengthen Congress without touching on a critical success factor, namely, attracting and engaging additional co-funders to support this work. Support for legislative branch capacity building has always been a very narrow slice — less than 5 percent — of aggregate foundation funding for U.S. democracy. The majority of funding to support such efforts in Congress has come from the Hewlett Foundation and the Democracy Fund over the past seven years. If we cannot broaden the set of funders working toward this end, we will be hard-pressed to realize the goals and outcomes we seek. Accordingly, we plan to adopt a more concerted effort of outreach and engagement, both with other democracy funders and with funders focused on specific policy domains, to find points of commonality and opportunities for impact regarding investing in this area.

III. How We Will Evaluate and Learn from our Work

In this final section, we convey the evaluation plans and learning questions we will use to assess our progress and learn as we implement the strategy outlined above. We are not presuming that we have all the aspects of our strategy right and success is assured. We know we have not and that we will encounter challenges, new information, failed assumptions, and unforeseen developments that will require us to change course. By specifying how we will evaluate our results and learn along the way, we will be better positioned to learn and realize when we need to adapt our plans.

A. Planned Evaluations of our Grantmaking.

We have two evaluations of this work planned in 2021. The first evaluation is a developmental evaluation of our efforts to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion within our grantee portfolios and the broader democracy field. The scope of this evaluation is not limited to our work to strengthen national governing institutions but spans our entire program. We expect that this effort will help us identify and realize opportunities to improve our grant practices and strategies. We will share a public report from this evaluation when it is completed.

In the second evaluation, we will be joining in the learning process for Democracy Fund's comprehensive evaluation of our shared cohort of grantees focused on congressional capacity building. Given our close working relationship with the Democracy Fund, the virtually complete overlap in our grantee portfolio in this area, and our lean staffing model, we decided to learn from the evaluation they commissioned rather than undertaking our own separately. We are working together to develop learning questions and the framework for this evaluation. The findings and learnings from this evaluation will undoubtedly lead to some fine-tuning in the focus and approach of our efforts to build congressional capacity.

Approximately 18 months into the implementation of the new executive branch strategy, in the second half of 2022, we anticipate the need and opportunity to take stock of what we have learned, reset our assumptions, and spell out our proposed approach and theory of change in more detail. Whether we will use an outside evaluator to support this review will be determined by the incoming program director and program officer.

Further out, we expect that in 2024, in the final year of the current strategy, the U.S. Democracy Program would commission evaluations of both substrategies and commence a refresh process that would be completed in the first part of 2025, after the current strategy has run its course.

B. Learning Questions

In the meantime, we have developed several learning questions to guide our reflections and learning during the first 18 months of implementing our revised strategy. These questions include the following:

1. What will it take to recruit, retain, and promote rising generations of Americans to serve in the federal government?
2. How can we build a consensus behind solutions to address long-term challenges in the civil service system?
3. What will it take to achieve more equitable rates of retention and advancement for people of color and women in the career civil service? Are there particular leverage points where philanthropy can make a difference?
4. How can we ensure that organizations serving diverse populations are included and positioned to be a significant part of the governing institutions field?
5. What would it take for the Senate to engage in bipartisan modernization efforts that would improve the capacity of the chamber to carry out its core functions?
6. What does it take to coalesce a field of funders around strengthening national governing institutions? Why are funders interested (or not) in investing in this?

IV. Conclusion

To sum up, our new strategy for strengthening national governing institutions resizes and refreshes the long-standing congressional portfolio and adds new grantmaking focused on improving the executive branch's capacity. Both institutions suffer from long-term decline; both are failing to meet the needs and expectations of the American people. The health and viability of our democracy depend on fixing these problems.

We thus conclude as we began — with the imperative need to bolster the capacity and effectiveness of our national governing institutions. We must not mince words on the importance of this effort. If the governing institutions of the world's oldest democracy cannot rise to the challenge and prove their merit by dealing with the nation's problems, those seeking to undermine constitutional democracy will continue to gain momentum, both here at home and around the world.

The challenge is stark, but we have a powerful historical legacy upon which to draw. The U.S. Constitution was framed and adopted in response to a crisis of governance borne of shortcomings in our fledgling national institutions under the Articles of Confederation. Then and at each subsequent crossroad in our nation's history — the Civil War, the Progressive Era, the Great Depression and World War II, and the tumult of the 1960s and '70s — reformers working inside and around the legislative and executive branches remade and revitalized those institutions so they could meet the challenges of the moment and earn the people's trust. We can do no less. We must do no less.

Appendix: Looking Back at Our Efforts to Strengthen Congress, 2014-2020.

The strategy outlined above builds on our work over the past seven years to strengthen Congress as an institution, and what we learned while doing it. This appendix conveys the key learnings (with links to underlying reflections and evaluations) across the four outcomes we were seeking to advance through this work with respect to the culture of Congress, its powers of the purse and oversight, and congressional capacity.

A. Culture of Congress.

Outcome: Congress has a culture of bipartisan deliberation, negotiation, and compromise. A critical mass of members reflects this culture in how they work, and the institution in which they serve has established norms, practices, and rules that support this behavior.

Pragmatic, cross-party problem solving on pressing issues is essential for an effective and responsive Congress. Legislating in a bipartisan fashion is more likely to take into account all relevant perspectives, achieve enduring policy settlements, and build support for Congress. Such lawmaking presumes a critical mass of legislators who want to engage in it and can do so, as well as personal relationships based on trust between and among these members and staff. From 2014 through 2020, we provided millions of dollars in grants to promote bipartisan networking, gatherings, briefings, and trips by members and staff, in the belief that stronger interpersonal relationships could help overcome ideological and policy differences, encourage productive problem solving, and help change the culture of Congress.

Evaluations conducted by third parties indicate that these programs are valuable and popular with members and staff of both parties. Our [2020 evaluation](#) of this work found that over 70% of all member offices, including Republican and Democratic leadership offices, had participated in at least one such program supported by the foundation, as had every House and Senate standing committee. This evaluation, reprising an initial one conducted in 2016, found greater levels of participation and reach within the institution than expected, along with some influence on individual members' behavior. Given the scarcity of member and staff time and competing claims on it, this finding offers evidence of the perceived value of these programs.

A correlation between participation in these programs and specific legislative outcomes has been more elusive to confirm. But two promising new indices developed by grantees at [the Lugar Center](#) and the [Center for Effective Lawmaking](#) indicate that such relationships and working styles are a critical enabling condition for individual legislators seeking to advance their legislative agendas.

At the same time, we recognize this work has been proceeding in the face of strong headwinds given the intensity of conflict between the parties and concentration of power in partisan leadership offices rather than bipartisan committees. Political incentives continue to impede bipartisan collective action within the House and Senate. Additional factors identified by the evaluation as deterrents to bipartisan behavior included legislators spending less time together in Washington, D.C.; membership turnover in Congress; the rise of social media and the 24/7 media cycle; and challenging relationships between presidents and members of Congress. These factors are difficult for philanthropy to influence.

B. Power of the Purse.

Outcome: Congress has a functional budget process that results in regular adoption of a federal budget and appropriations legislation and reduces the use of tools such as sequesters, caps, continuing resolutions, and the resort to fiscal brinksmanship.

The Constitution gives the taxing and spending “power of the purse” to the legislature. These are arguably the most critical powers of Congress, as they enable legislative problem solving as described above and check and balance the executive by withholding appropriations for actions Congress does not support. In recent years, however, the exercise of these fiscal powers has been waylaid by polarization and hyper-partisanship. Getting this recurring core process back on track will enable Congress to get beyond the frequent disruptions, stalemates, and midnight-hour fiscal showdowns over taxing and spending issues. Being able to exercise the powers of the purse once again via predictable, consistent, and timely passage of budgets and appropriations legislation will raise the public’s esteem for Congress and free up time for legislators to address other vital issues.

Our grantees working on Congress’s powers of the purse span the political spectrum, yet they hold many goals in common. They have gathered regularly in Washington for many years now in an ongoing national budgeting roundtable of federal budget experts, scholars, and practitioners; participated for 18 months in a broad stakeholder table that hammered out a bipartisan consensus on [recommendations](#) for changes to the budget and appropriations processes; and shared these recommendations with congressional committees and members. When House Speaker Paul Ryan led the establishment of a Joint Select Committee on Budget and Appropriations Process Reform (J.S.C.) in the 115th Congress, the foundational work of these grantees immediately provided a menu of reform options for the Committee.

An [evaluation](#) of our work on the power of the purse found that this preparatory intellectual work and advocacy is an essential part of the process of seeding reform. Unfortunately, that process can be slow: In the 115th Congress, the J.S.C. failed to report any recommendations, and Speaker Ryan, a catalytic sponsor for the effort, retired. In the 116th Congress, Senate Budget Chair Mike Enzi introduced a budget reform bill that picked up on many of the proposals our grantees had fleshed out, though it came too late in his term for it to advance (he has since retired). In the House, the final recommendations from the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress touched on budget and appropriations proposals (most borrowed from the J.S.C.), but no further action was taken before the 116th Congress ended. Several budget policy entrepreneurs in Congress, including Select Committee Chair Derek Kilmer, continue to push for budget and appropriations reforms, supported by grantees seeking to advance these reform efforts outside of Congress. As is common, these ideas are inching forward from Congress to Congress. If or when the political incentives align, we expect some will be adopted.

C. Effective Oversight.

Outcome: Congress conducts effective oversight in a bipartisan fashion using the full suite of tools at its disposal to regularly monitor federal programs and agencies; support the checks and balances of our constitutional system; investigate abuses in the private sector to protect the public interest; and solicit the information it needs to draft and pass legislation.

Oversight is a critical prerogative and responsibility of Congress, enabling it to check and balance the executive branch and gather the information it needs to legislate more effectively. Like the budget and appropriations processes, oversight can be used to heighten polarization or to govern better despite it. Thus, here too, we have sought to highlight the importance of a core constitutional responsibility of Congress, and to improve the institution’s ability to discharge it. In each case, we hoped that practical progress in a concrete task would help members and staff regain a broader commitment to and feel for the constitutional prerogatives of the institution in which they served. To counter the partisan perspectives that tend to shape views of congressional oversight, we have funded grantee organizations working across the political spectrum. Regardless of which party controls Congress and the presidency, they have emphasized the critical role of oversight in our democracy, developed new approaches, and highlighted time-tested ones for how to conduct it.

Even when there is a willingness to conduct bipartisan oversight, it cannot be done without knowledge of the tools and experience in the processes involved. Because of the prolonged period of polarization, the commitment of legislators and staff to this kind of oversight, as well as the institutional knowledge and experience to conduct it, have atrophied from lack of use. They need to be re-established. Several grantees, led and staffed by experienced practitioners, provide training, information, and technical assistance to members and staff from both parties on how to conduct more effective oversight. While robust bipartisan oversight by congressional committees is still not the norm, the number of staff trained in its principles has grown significantly. For example, over the past seven years, 2,295 congressional staff have participated in oversight training conducted by our grantees.

An [evaluation](#) we undertook of our oversight work in 2016 found that training and individual capacity building is an indispensable step toward better bipartisan congressional oversight, given shrinking staff sizes and tenure and the growing complexity of the federal government. However, it also found that skills and know-how will make a sustained, observable difference only where other elements are already in place, such as bipartisan relationships, permission from leadership, and electoral incentives. Individual capacity building alone is unlikely to produce changes at sufficient scale or breadth to trigger a broader rebalancing of institutional responsibility with partisan imperatives in the oversight process. As a result, the evaluation recommended finding additional complementary strategies for catalyzing or triggering change at the institutional level. In a potentially helpful step toward this end, legislators, staff, watchdogs, and the public at large are now able to track both the quantity and quality of all committee oversight efforts (including the extent to which it has been conducted in a bipartisan fashion) by using the comprehensive new [Congressional Oversight Hearing Index](#) developed by Lugar Center, one of our anchor grantees in this area.

D. Congressional Capacity.

Outcome: Congress provides itself with the quantity and quality of staff and expertise it needs to carry out its constitutional responsibilities and represent the American people effectively.

One of the main reasons Congress has faltered in recent years is that it has not equipped itself with the staffing and expertise it needs to carry out its responsibilities. It is not too much to say (as one of our grantees has put it) that Congress gave itself a big lobotomy in the 1990s and has beggared itself ever since, reducing the staff resources it has available to support its work — especially policy staff on committees and experts in legislative branch agencies — even as the policy demands on the institution have escalated. While there are many qualified and experienced individual staffers working on the Hill, to function effectively, Congress needs more staff with policy and technical expertise, more staff with the ability to negotiate policy resolutions, and more staff bringing diverse perspectives to bear within the institution. Given these challenges, several of our grantees provide training and professional development opportunities to congressional staff. Others undertake surveys and academic research to ascertain congressional staffing and expertise requirements and advocate for Congress to meet them. Still others seek to bring much-needed socioeconomic and racial diversity to the ranks of congressional staff through innovative recruitment programs.

We have seen the most progress on this outcome. Over the past several years, Congress has been investing more in itself, increasing annual appropriations for its operations by 3-5 percent annually. This increased funding has equipped the institution with more resources to attract and retain talented staff. As noted above, we have also observed considerable forward motion via the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, which reported out consensus bipartisan recommendations for 97 proposals to improve how the House functions. As mentioned, at the end of the 116th Congress, the House reauthorized the Select Committee for another two years, and many of its reform recommendations were adopted in the House rules package in January 2021.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed Congress to adopt radical steps such as holding remote committee hearings and collecting digital signatures from legislators. The House of Representatives went even further during the pandemic, allowing electronic filing of bills, amendments, co-sponsorships, Congressional Record statements, and other technology-based advances that had been stalled for years. Here, too, our grantees have helped set the pace and illuminate the path forward for reform-minded members inside Congress.

In other breakthroughs, our grantees have thrown a spotlight on the lack of racial and ethnic diversity on congressional staffs and pushed congressional offices to do better. They have also highlighted how different workforce policies at the entry level, in particular paid internships — which Congress has now adopted — can help enable a congressional workforce that more closely reflects and represents our increasingly diverse country. Other grantees have taken the lead in helping Congress identify how it can develop and house the scientific and technical capacity it needs to make and oversee laws on these topics. Finally, the new Program on Legislative Negotiation at American University catalyzed by the Hewlett Foundation has trained over 200 senior staff in less than two years, and its offerings are oversubscribed. This Program also is creating a pipeline of diverse, emerging scholars and writing and disseminating curricular materials for university courses in this new field.³

Endnotes

1. See also Curry and Lee, [The Limits of Party: Congress and Lawmaking in a Polarized Era](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).
2. Note that any work we support will be in the form of nonpartisan idea generation, research and analysis, and public education — that is to say, we will not be lobbying or earmarking support for lobbying for any specific legislation.
3. This Program can trace its antecedents back to the Hewlett Foundation’s investments decades ago in the field of conflict resolution and academic centers to develop and teach it.