

Democracy Fund Governance Program

2015-2020 Evaluation Report | *External Version*

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Introduction

Since 2015, the Democracy Fund (DF) and Democracy Fund Voice's (DFV) Governance program have invested in helping to strengthen the U.S. Congress. In 2020, after five years of work dedicated to this goal, DF and DFV invited an evaluation team¹ to assess the relevance and effectiveness of their investment. This report describes the purpose, context, and design of the evaluation, highlights the evaluation's key findings, and offers considerations for the future.

Key Evaluation Findings

- Since 2015, Congress, especially the House of Representatives, has increased its capacity to fulfill its constitutional duties. This was most evident in Members' and staff's increased awareness of and attention to the need to strengthen congressional capacity.
- External organizations – most of them DF, DFV, and/or Hewlett Foundation grantees – have contributed to changes in Congress's capacity.
- Grantees have appreciated DF, DFV, and the Hewlett Foundation's leadership, which has facilitated the creation of a field of organizations dedicated to this work and supported their efforts to strengthen their collective effectiveness.

Purpose, Context, and Design

DF and DFV's Governance program seeks to help Congress strengthen its capacity to advance legislation, conduct oversight, provide constituent services, protect the rule of law, and check executive power. Since 2015, DF and DFV have supported nonprofit organizations across the ideological spectrum to advance these goals, using both project and general operating support. The Hewlett Foundation was a partner in much of this work, as it shared similar goals and supported many of the same grantees.²

¹ The evaluation team was comprised of BLE Solutions, González Consulting, and ORS Impact.

² As a private foundation, the Hewlett Foundation U.S. Democracy Team collaborated with the Democracy Fund, but not with Democracy Fund Voice. Hewlett's grantmaking was limited to 501(c)3 organizations advancing their charitable missions.

Reflecting on DF and DFV’s investments in strengthening the capacity of Congress since 2015, and in light of visioning, strategic planning, and grantmaking decisions arising in 2021, DF sought to better understand system-level changes in the capacity of Congress. These included changes in the capacity of Congress since 2015; what is facilitating those changes, including the roles of external organizations; what is hindering those changes; and what needs to happen next to continue to help Congress strengthen its capacity to perform its constitutionally defined duties. This evaluation report responds to those questions to help inform DF’s strategic decisions about its investments, while also providing the field with valuable knowledge, insights, and suggestions regarding possible ways forward.

Although the evaluation was designed to gather insights into changes in the capacity of Congress between 2015 and 2020—the time period of DF and DFV’s latest Governance program strategy—the enormity of recent events shifted the evaluation’s focus to the latter half of that time period plus the beginning of 2021. The evaluation team realized we could not assess changes in the capacity of Congress within the evaluation time period without also reflecting on the early events of 2021 and their implications for Congress’s capacity.

Because of the timing of interviews, the January 6, 2021 insurrection defined how most interviewees assessed the environment in Congress, although they observed that, for underrepresented groups on the Hill, the environment had been difficult for a long time and had steadily worsened during the Trump administration. The movement for racial justice and against oppression rooted in racism and white supremacy was given greater urgency in the United States after the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. This urgency was very much on interviewees’ minds as they discussed efforts to build diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging within Congress in a broader societal context of deeply embedded systemic racism and a white dominant culture. While interviewees could point to some progress made during earlier years, these events and dynamics were overwhelming, with a number of interviewees reporting that Congress would not be able to strengthen its capacity without adequately addressing them.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began to be more widely felt in the United States, including in Congress, around March 2020, and which continued to have a devastating impact through 2021, was also very much on interviewees’ minds. They reflected on its contribution to the United States’ racial reckoning in how it brought greater attention to health and economic disparities in the country. Positively, they noted how it forced Congress to modernize some of its practices.³

The evaluation team used qualitative methods to respond to DF’s evaluation questions, relying on multiple data sources to triangulate data and produce credible findings. The evaluation team reviewed documents; interviewed 94 current and former Members of Congress and staff, external stakeholders,

³ While interviewees referenced the #MeToo movement and its effects on Congress, it did not contribute to the evaluation’s recency bias as heavily as the movement for racial justice and the COVID-19 pandemic.

and DF, DFV, and Hewlett Foundation grantees and staff members; and conducted a sensemaking workshop with DF, DFV, and Hewlett Foundation grantees and staff members. The evaluation team faced limitations in collecting and analyzing data for this evaluation, including the time available to conduct the evaluation and the timing of it, interviewees' recency bias, and our own biases as evaluators. We took measures to maximize the credibility of the evaluation's findings in response to these limitations.

Findings

A functioning U.S. Congress is capable of performing constitutionally defined duties, according to DF, the Hewlett Foundation, and their grantees. These duties include advancing legislation, conducting oversight, and providing constituent services. In addition, in a functioning Congress, Members work together to solve problems, polarization within Congress decreases, Members have an important connection with the public, and Congress reflects the people it serves.

Since 2015, Congress has increased its capacity to fulfill its constitutional duties, according to most interviewees. This was most evident in Members and staff's increased awareness of and attention to the need to strengthen congressional capacity. For many, this represents a culture change inside Congress, where Members and staff are pushing for and advancing change. The creation of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress (SCOMC) was seen as an example of this. According to a former Member of Congress:

"Congress has admitted, and is admitting, and in a bipartisan way, that it has a problem. I left Congress at the beginning of 2015 and that was not the case. And so, I think tremendous progress has been made. I think the Modernization Committee and its outputs are an acknowledgement of that."

Congress has maintained its capacity to legislate, in spite of increased partisan pressures. According to an external stakeholder:

"Capacity for lawmaking has held even, and given these circumstances of the last five years, I actually think that that's an accomplishment." The reinstatement of earmarks is anticipated to strengthen Congress's legislative capacity. Congress's lack of improvement in its ability to provide oversight of the executive branch was the victim of increased partisanship. Interviewees reported that changes in Congress's capacity to provide constituent services has depended on the interest of each Member of Congress's personal office. Congress has also made progress in strengthening its capacity to maintain institutional continuity.



Since 2015, Congress, especially the House of Representatives, has increased its capacity to fulfill its constitutional duties. This was most evident in Members' and staff's increased awareness of and attention to the need to strengthen congressional capacity.

Since 2015, Congress has increased appropriations for the legislative branch year over year⁴, and recently increased House Members' Representational Allowances (MRAs) and staff salaries and benefits. While the greatest percentage increase so far for legislative branch appropriations occurred in FY2018, Congress has continued increasing them each fiscal year. MRAs experienced their largest year-on-year increase in FY2020 and continue an upward trend. The House has also adopted changes to officer and staff salaries and benefits in an effort to make compensation packages more competitive.

While it is too soon to see much evidence of systems-level change from DF, DFV, and Hewlett Foundation-supported efforts to help Congress better fulfill its constitutional duties, progress is evident in the House at the individual level and sometimes at the personal office or committee level. Some progress is evident in strengthening Members of Congress's personal offices. Although appropriations for House committees increased in FY17, FY19, FY20, and FY21, interviewees reported little change in committee capacity. They have seen some positive change in the capacity of legislative support offices and in Congress's investments in its own capacity. They reported that Congress has changed some rules, although implementation has been inconsistent. They credit the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress with accelerating specific reform areas, through their presentation of 97 recommendations for reform on which they had achieved bipartisan consensus.⁵ While further research is required to provide evidence of DF and DFV grantees' contributions to changes in congressional capacity, correlations between the two are clear.

While there is more diversity among Members and staff in the 117th Congress, the institution still fails to reflect the diversity of the United States overall. Interviewees acknowledged the advances that contributed to Congress's increased diversity: the establishment of the House Office of Diversity and Inclusion and the Senate Diversity Initiative served as resources to Members of Congress and staff; paid internships and fellowships helped to attract staffers from underrepresented groups; and professional development offerings for Members of Congress and staff provided critical knowledge and skills.

Grantee organizations have contributed to increasing diversity in congressional positions using a variety of approaches, according to grantees, external stakeholders, and Members of Congress and staff. They conducted research, offered fellowships and internships, provided training and professional development programs, did outreach to specific Members of Congress's personal offices, and modeled embracing diversity in their work.

⁴ <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R46469.pdf>

⁵ The Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee has enacted many of these recommendations.

Additional progress is needed in policies, practices, and Congress’s environment to further contribute to Congress’s increased diversity, according to the majority of interviewees who commented on this topic. Almost all stated that internship pay is inadequate to attract interns from underrepresented groups; staff salary benefits packages are non-competitive; recruitment, hiring, and promotion practices do not adequately address biases and non-inclusive practices; and professional development opportunities—including diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging and in cultural competency training—are insufficient. Additionally, the majority noted that the culture and workplace environment on the Hill is toxic, with reports of poor management within some Member of Congress’s personal offices, sexual harassment and misconduct by some Congressmen, and racial microaggressions. This toxicity was made even more evident by the January 6 insurrection. An external stakeholder stated, *“The overall culture on the Hill includes sexual harassment, racial microaggressions, and the January 6 insurrection. Do folks want to work there?”* Similarly, a donor team member stated, *“A lot of people are going to work on the Hill right now in a toxic environment and are literally scared of some of the Members of the opposite party.”*



“The overall culture on the Hill includes sexual harassment, racial microaggressions, and the January 6 insurrection. Do folks want to work there?”

Factors facilitating progress toward strengthening Congress’s capacity have included necessity, external organizations’ engagement, and Member and staff interest, according to current and former Members of Congress and staff. However, political pressures and ideological opposition to spending money on government, Members of Congress and staff turnover, and the difficulty of attracting and retaining staff from diverse backgrounds were seen as hindering Congress’s capacity. These are worsened by insufficient funding for congressional operations and Congress’s overwhelming schedule. The January 6, 2021 insurrection and subsequent vote further hindered progress toward reform. According to one external stakeholder, *“Competition between the two parties for control of the chambers has not been so intense since the Civil War.”*

While this evaluation focused on system-level change within Congress, most interviewees pointed to ways that external organizations—most of them DF, DFV, and/or Hewlett Foundation grantees—have contributed to the system-level changes they described. They described factors important to their effectiveness, including offering relevant programming, building trusted relationships, and being perceived as an authoritative source. Factors that hindered their success included programming disruptions due to COVID-19, low numbers of program applications, and Members’ and staff’s busy schedules. Additionally, a donor team member observed Members’ lack of willingness to spend political capital on institutional issues as a major hindrance.

Grantees have appreciated DF, DFV, and the Hewlett Foundation’s leadership. They have appreciated their flexibility as funders, their thought partnership, and their grantee convenings. They valued the

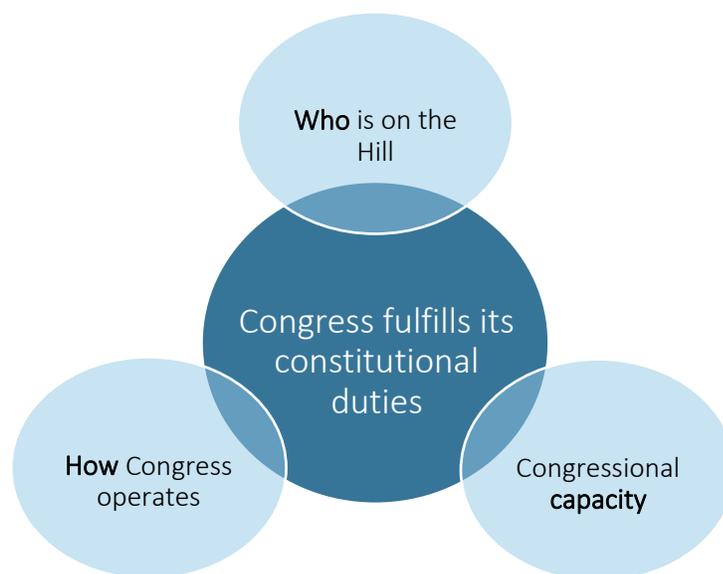
coalitions that DF, DFV, and the Hewlett Foundation have helped convene: Fix Congress and Representative Democracy. As a result of them, nearly half of grantee interviewees described feeling like the field was more connected and that they had new and different partners in the field. A grantee shared that *“pre-2015 there was almost no foundation funds to be found to support this work. Hewlett and [Democracy Fund] stepping in was a gamechanger. Pre [Democracy Fund] and Hewlett, we were knocking on 20 individual doors to hire one junior staff. I appreciate the two working together to empower organizations with funding, connecting me with other organizations doing similar work. Up until 2015, none of that existed.”* A number of grantees also expressed concern about how DF, DFV, and the Hewlett Foundation’s potential changes in strategic direction might affect the field and their progress.

Considerations for the Future

Our findings demonstrated that, while **helping Congress strengthen its capacity** is essential to Congress’s effectiveness, it is not sufficient. It also matters **who is on the Hill** (both Members of Congress and staff), and **how Congress operates** (the opportunities Members and staff have to use their capacities). We present some considerations regarding what else might be necessary to truly help Congress fulfill its constitutional duties. These considerations are based on ideas proposed by interviewees, grantee feedback in the sensemaking workshop, and our experience as external evaluators.

Some of these options are large undertakings. To make a difference, DF and DFV’s Governance program would need to prioritize where it could have the most impact. In addition, it may not only need to work closely with other programs within DF, but also find external partners with which it could work in coalition.

Figure 1 | What is Required to Help Congress Fulfill its Constitutional Duties



Congressional capacity

Strengthening congressional capacity remains essential to helping Congress fulfill its constitutional duties.

Advancing changes like these takes time and requires patience and perseverance. Many interviewees believe it is essential to continue those investments that are making progress. As one grantee observed:

“Building the capacity of Congress is necessary and needs to happen. If you take away strengthening the capacity of Congress, you’ll only get worse outcomes. You don’t want a less well educated and informed Congress. You want Members of Congress and staff informed about legislative processes and issues. Without this, people will be in a polarized environment and will have no knowledge about the legislative process or about issues in a non-partisan way.”

As interviewees noted, advancing changes like these takes time and requires patience and perseverance. Many interviewees believe it is essential to continue those investments that are making progress. However, these changes alone cannot alter Congress’s ability to fulfill its constitutional duties.

Who is on the Hill?

Who is on the Hill matters twofold: who is elected, and how well those on the Hill, including both elected officials and staff, reflect their constituents.

Who is in the institution?

Members of Congress must want to fulfill their constitutional duties. This was voiced by several interviewees. An external stakeholder stated:

“I see that people coming into Congress are less capable and interested in the operations of Congress.... A focus on high quality leaders with moral courage coming into Congress would have been helpful. I think an examination of the balance of inside and outside the institution would be important. Where are you going to have the greatest impact? Not with people with a mandate for tearing down the institution.”

To help increase effectiveness of Members of Congress, work must be done to influence how elections are conducted. This could be accomplished through continued partnership with DF’s Elections program and/or through supporting ranked choice voting, campaign finance reform, electoral reforms including redistricting and open primaries, and/or proportional representation.

How do those on the Hill reflect their constituents?

To generate legislation that meets the needs of all people in the United States, Members of Congress, congressional staff, fellows, and interns must reflect the constituents they serve. Although it is making improvements, Congress does not yet reflect the gender, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, dis/ability, and

other social identities of the people who live in the United States. With broader representation on the Hill, Members of Congress and their staff could bring a greater range of perspectives and ideas to issue discussions. With greater diversity in their lived experience, Members of Congress and their staff could generate legislation that is more relevant and responsive to their constituents' needs.

Assistance could be given to initiatives aimed at preparing candidates from diverse backgrounds for elections and encouraging them through the election process—though careful consideration would be needed to assess the likelihood of impact given the amount of money in the campaign finance system. This might include working with the party apparatuses to help widen their understanding of what kinds of people might be winning candidates (if deemed permissible after legal review). According to a former Member of Congress:

“I constantly bumped up against the notion of who should be a Member of Congress. When I was trying to recruit more women, you couldn’t look in elective offices. There was an awful lot of pressure to go with the tried and true – people who held office and were part of the party apparatus. This was the opposite of diversity. The Democratic party is not great at recruiting people of color, running, and supporting them for winning in non-majority districts. There’s lots of pressure on recruitment to avoid people of color running in non-majority people of color districts. There’s a misplaced notion that white people won’t vote for black and brown people. Incoming classes [are] described as more diverse than ever. True. But in the scheme of 535 Members of Congress, not so much.”

To help congressional staffers better reflect their constituents, Congress needs to deepen its awareness and understanding as an institution of the negative impacts of, for example, racism, sexism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and antisemitism on people from underrepresented backgrounds on the Hill. This could include reflection on individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels, as well as the skills, behavior changes, and policies needed to support more inclusive workplaces in Congress.

DF, DFV, and the Hewlett Foundation could also continue supporting efforts to attract, retain, and advance congressional staffers from underrepresented backgrounds, and could strengthen their efforts to support the thriving of underrepresented Members of Congress and Hill staff. They could continue to support research that raises awareness about the nature of the problem. Focusing on three levels—individual, interpersonal, and institutional, they could continue to support or offer new support in the following areas:

Individual level

- Training and development with a diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging focus

Interpersonal level

- Communicating across difference
- Leadership training
- Mentorship programs

Institutional level

- Diversity, equity, and inclusion offices
- Centralized human resources functions
- Outreach and networks with partners serving people from underrepresented groups
- Transparency for people trying to learn about working in Congress
- Pay and benefits
- Workplace policies that support equitable, fair, welcoming, and inclusive workplaces

DF, DFV, and the Hewlett Foundation grantees have been instrumental in garnering awareness about these areas—their need and value, offering services that respond to some of these areas, and providing support for Congress to begin working directly on these areas. Continued support for Congress is needed to help Congress strengthen its current efforts and initiate work in other areas.

How Congress operates

How Congress operates determines the opportunities Members of Congress and staff have to use their capacities. How Congress operates is determined by policies—the rules, regulations, and laws it has in place—and by practices. In addition to continuing to support policy changes, DF and DFV could consider how they could address (or continue to address) the following practices and suggested solutions (again, if permissible after legal review):

Balancing control of power with leadership, committees, and/or rank-and-file Members

- Monitor the reinstatement of earmarks
- Consider committee chair and staff tenure
- Reassess leadership composition

Bipartisanship vs. partisan priorities

- Foster bipartisan relationships
- Advocate for campaign finance reform
- Counter disinformation and overly partisan rhetoric
- Foster leadership support for greater participation in the legislative process
- Support conditions needed to make space for a third political party

Reelection vs. governing

- Foster local journalism and its coverage of the achievements of Members of Congress
- Continue to support constituent services
- Change elections processes

No single donor can successfully support Congress in all of these ways. Rather, it will take a concerted effort on the part of Congress and the external organizations that support it to help Congress advance toward better fulfilling its constitutional duties.

Conclusion

The U.S. Congress has faced unprecedented challenges over the past five years. In response, DF and DFV's Governance program – in partnership with the Hewlett Foundation – has supported work to help Congress strengthen its capacity to fulfill its constitutional duties. This report summarized changes in Congress's capacity that have taken place over this period, as well as factors that have facilitated and impeded those changes. It highlighted the roles of DF, DFV, the Hewlett Foundation, and their grantees in supporting these changes. Finally, it presented considerations for the future. We hope all working in this field find this report useful, as they make strategic decisions regarding how to continue helping Congress strengthen its capacity.