

The Honorable Bill Pascrell, Jr.

Testimony Before the
Select Committee for the Modernization of Congress
March 12, 2019

Chairman Kilmer and Ranking Member Graves thank you for having me testify this morning. I am delighted to participate in this critical process to make Congress work again.

For the last 25 years we have watched as our Congress – the Article I branch – has become more and more feeble. This decay is from deliberate institutional vandalism. Through our own efforts, we have made the Article One branch into the third branch.

Our streams of independent information have been cut off, leaving each of us reliant on and subservient to the executive branch and flotillas of corporate lobbyists – neither of which have the best interests of the people’s Congress or sometimes the people themselves at heart.

Our investigatory muscles are atrophied, as our committees have been stripped of their ability to develop policy through analysis and debate. Instead, we have shifted funding to the leadership, leaving the legislative process solely in their hands.

Our tiny staffs are overwhelmed by the army of corporate lobbyists roaming our halls and a world growing more socially, economically, and technologically complex at a stunning rate.

Think about this a second: each of us represents approximately 750,000 Americans, armed with small policy staffs managing portfolios of hundreds of issues. This is the product of fiendish cuts set in 1995 that we have inexplicably never bothered to reverse.

We need don’t need a brain surgeon to tell us what needs to be done to fix this decay.

Actually, we might: because we need a new brain! We need to reverse the congressional lobotomy begun in 1995.

We need empowered chairmen and women who can assemble legislation organically. We need to retain skilled staffs who can preserve institutional memory. We need committees to be laboratories of democracy once more.

To start, we should re-fund the Office of Technology Assessment, or OTA. This is a no-brainer. In a world of artificial intelligence, biomedical research, self-driving cars, cybersecurity, and of course climate change, we need the best information at our fingertips.

But we’ve been here too long to beat around the bush. Ultimately, nearly all our problems come back to staggering underinvestment. We need to drastically reform Members’ Representational Allowances to keep staff. Staff should not be enticed to leave for lobbyist pay, taking their expertise with them.

Currently, the MRA is used first, for salaries; second, for member travel; and third, for office supplies. New technology and members' travel should not impact an offices' ability to offer competitive salaries to retain staff. We need to decouple these funds and find ways to remove the politics from salary increases and benefits, such as student loans and parental, vacation, and sick leave.

We need to allocate more for our research arms: CRS, GAO, CBO, OTA – across-the-board. No tinkering at the edges: we need to think big here.

For example, we each represent enormous districts with limited resources. The size of the House is not in stone and has been changed by legislation before. This committee should order a study for efficacy of increasing the size of our membership.

And we should study the cumbersome process for awarding highest-level secret security clearances. We should streamline the ability for more staff to become better vessels for oversight and expertise. Administration staff and contractors should not have priority over the House.

You get what you pay for. If you care about a Congress that is the First Branch, the preeminent branch, you support it that way. An institution that spends less on itself than corporations spend on lobbying it is not a healthy institution.

Consider it for what it is: an investment in America's future. Doing what's necessary will take boldness to overcome a generation of calcified thinking and courage to take politically vulnerable positions. So I call on you: be bold and have courage.

I would like to submit for a record a copy of my piece published in Washington Post on January 11th entitled, "Why is Congress so Dumb" which has some more background on these ideas. And I will note that while I authored the piece, the editors came up with the headline.

I look forward to working with you and the Committee to protect the institution we all enjoy. Thank you.