



# PUSH FORWARD NOW

## Congressional Modernization and the Future of Democracy

REPORT TO THE  
117TH CONGRESS

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By Lorelei Kelly

**beeckcenter**  
social impact + innovation

# About the Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation

The Beeck Center is an experiential hub at Georgetown University that trains students and incubates scalable, leading edge ideas for social change. We believe impact at scale requires the courage to think and behave differently. Our work centers on investing in outcomes for individuals and society. We equip future global leaders with the mindset to promote outcome-driven solutions, using the tools of design, data, technology, and innovation. We convene actors across the public, private, and civic sectors to advance new tools, frameworks, and approaches necessary to achieve these outcomes.

## About this Document

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# Introduction

Even before the Capitol siege on January 6, 2021, Congress had a fraught agenda. It faced a contested election, social upheavals demanding justice from our public and private institutions, and a surging pandemic. Yet a potential silver lining exists beneath the surface of these crises; they have brought to the forefront the urgent need to modernize our government, especially the U.S. Congress. Accelerated by COVID-19 emergency measures, the [Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress](#) provides both the recommendations and the process model for how to proceed in our post-insurrectionary democracy.

*The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress was established by H.Res. 6 on January 4, 2019. It is tasked to investigate, study, make findings, hold public hearings, and develop recommendations to make Congress more effective, efficient, and transparent on behalf of the American people. The Select Committee is one of the only truly bipartisan committees in Congress, with an equal number of Republican and Democratic members.*

Congress reauthorized the Modernization Committee for two more years in January 2021, the same week as the Capitol siege. This official action marked a critical step towards a stronger American democracy. Insurrection is a system shock that can also signal a dynamic moment—a time for Congress to leverage data and digital tools for reform. The information in this report provides an overview of this hopeful way ahead.



Credit: Lorelei Kelly

# The Impact of Insurrection on Modernization

On January 6, 2021, a global audience watched in shock as a violent horde ransacked the United States Capitol—headquarters of Congress, the world’s most powerful representative assembly. The immediate institutional response to the Capitol siege included criminal prosecutions of rioters plus a second impeachment trial—and acquittal—of an ex-president. Internal [investigations in Congress](#) about safeguarding people and establishing [physical security](#) continue, as well as social and [cultural aftershocks](#) for Congressional staff members and Capitol workers.

Still, the American public remains fractured, as do relationships inside Congress itself. The weaponization of Congress’ internal sanctuary has left congressional colleagues fearful and the workaday deliberative process injured. Misinformation remains rampant and members of Congress, like the constituents they represent, lack a shared vision of the future.

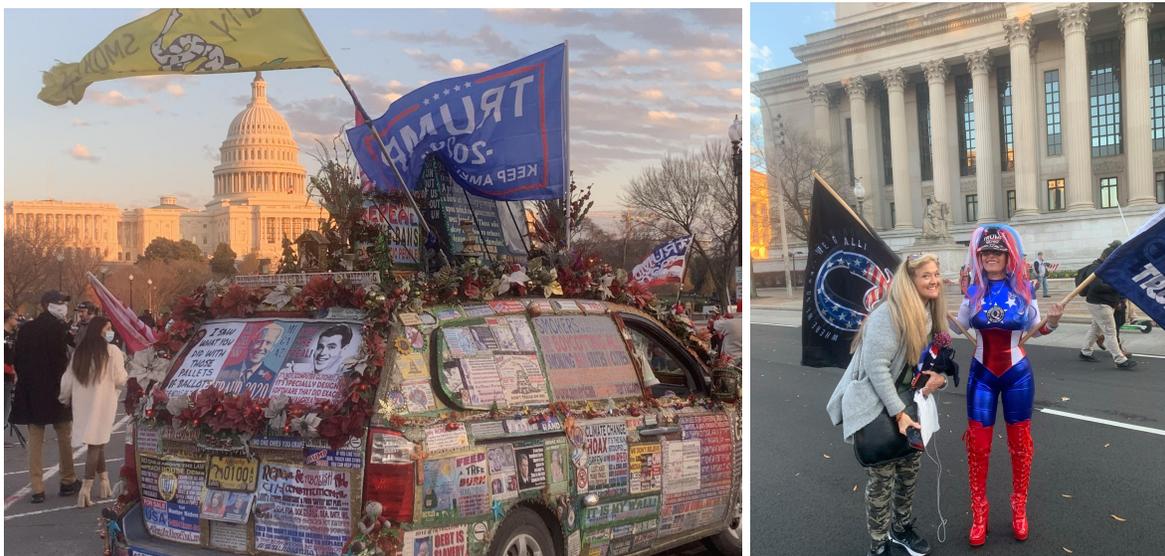
Indeed, the actions that our lawmakers take in the coming months to re-establish a sightline to a common national horizon will deeply impact the fate of our multi-racial democratic system. Already tasked with responding to a pandemic and working with the new president, **Congress must find a way to govern and inspire hope in the wake of insurrection.**



*Military vehicles surround the Capitol complex ahead of the inauguration of President Biden.  
Credit: Lorelei Kelly*

How do we begin to repair post-insurrection? How do we prevent violent extremism from further harming democracy? These questions echo across the United States as everyday Americans absorb information about the vulnerabilities in our governing system. Thankfully, Congress already has the beginning of an answer. True to the creative nature of democracy, the destructive first week of January 2021 also held a promising path forward. On January 4, just two days before the Capitol siege, the House of Representatives reauthorized the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress. This group of members—known as the “Fix Congress” Committee—had already spent two years fortifying American democracy from the inside-out.

From its earliest days, the Modernization Committee understood that bringing the “People’s House” into the current era would be a challenge for the whole of society. The Committee has invited a broad cross-section of voices to testify about its [recommendations](#) and in so doing has helped educate the entire institution of Congress. Equally important, the Committee members viewed modernization not just as a long-term goal, but as a method to reconnect Americans to their most democratic branch of government. To be sure, **a primary mission for post-insurrection Congress is to become a credible, competitive content moderator on behalf of our most representative governing institution.**



*Conspiracies amplified by popular social media platforms have weakened democracy. Left: A car plastered with conspiracy memes parked near the Capitol. Right: "Q Anon Patriot" stands in front of the National Archives. Credit: Lorelei Kelly*

# How a Consultant and a Small Business Owner Helped Modernize Congress

Led by Rep. Derek Kilmer, a Democrat from the state of Washington with a background in state government and strategic consulting at McKinsey, and Tom Graves, a now-retired Republican from Georgia with finance and small business experience, the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress was created by H. Res. 6, in January 2019. Its six Democratic and six Republican members were appointed by [House leadership](#), and began building a teamwork model for congressional process, one that should now be emulated across the entire institution. The committee operated under the belief that a good process can yield good outcomes.

By March 2020, as COVID-19 began taking hold across the United States, every small and large business in America scrambled to transform into digital enterprises in order to survive. Yet Congress—with its metal file cabinets and three-ring binders—had no [communications continuity plan](#) in place when the pandemic struck.<sup>1</sup>

But while Congress does not have much good karma to spare, it did have kismet, with [Congressional modernization jumpstarting because of COVID-19](#). In the early days of the pandemic, representatives did not have Zoom licenses for telework<sup>2</sup>. But, after laboring largely unseen for a year, reform-minded members responding to the crisis had already familiarized their House colleagues with the benefits of modern communications technology.

In mid-May 2020, the House of Representatives passed [emergency measures](#) in order to keep functioning, giving members options for remote participation. The House obtained a Zoom license at the end of July, opening up a menu of video-conferencing platforms. Even more, according to an October 2020 modernization letter from the outgoing [Chief Administrative Officer](#), these early COVID-19 measures only hinted at a transformative digital overhaul.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Congress has no modern continuity of government plan. See [Remote Options for Congressional Continuity Amid the Covid19 Outbreak: Briefing Book](#), April 16, 2020 and Norm Ornstein [Congress Desperately Needs a Contingency Plan](#), The Atlantic, March 13, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> For background, see [Modernizing Congress: Bringing Democracy into the 21st Century](#) Beek Center for Social Impact + Innovation at Georgetown 2019.

<sup>3</sup> The Committee on House Administration maintains a [document repository](#) for modernization.

Congress reconvened in January 2021 and the Modernization Committee was reauthorized for another term. Now, along with resilient infrastructure and secure communications, continuity of government itself is on the table.

Congress has choices to make: (1) surge forward with recent digital advances to improve our government; (2) demand a democracy that can compete on behalf of the public in today's weaponized information environment; or (3) build a whole resilient system including an informed, responsive and effective legislature. The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress has already focused momentum on all of these worthy goals. Thirty of their final [recommendations](#) have been implemented, yet the remaining 67 recommendations hold the key to our democracy's future.

The Committee's recommendations give us instructions on how to mend today's precarious disconnects. Many are basic workflow items, like secure telework capacity and a common calendar portal—efficiencies that most businesses took advantage of decades ago. Other recommendations seek a more satisfied and diverse legislative workforce so that Congress can [attract and keep](#) experienced staff. The disregard that many Americans feel for their government is generated by a belief that [legislation is captured](#) by [self-serving private interests](#). In contrast, a congressional staff that can compete on behalf of public interests is an investment in America's shared future. Modernization will help Congress build this mutually beneficial outcome.

Over the course of the 116th Congress, a consistent theme during modernization hearings was expanding possibilities for civic voice in the deliberative process. If done thoughtfully, more civic involvement will provide valuable feedback while also demonstrating that a strong democratic system includes institutions that can reform themselves and evolve.

In spring 2020, changes to rules in response to COVID-19 allowed for the introduction of [remote participation](#) practices and jolted congressional modernization into action. Both chambers moved hearings online, for example, [making available a nationwide pool](#) of public witnesses.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the institution's COVID-19 pivots sparked a potential [Article One renaissance](#) and opened the door to opportunities for civic innovation.

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<sup>4</sup> The House convened 151 fully remote hearings by November, 2020 and also hired an Innovation Architect. See details on digital adaptation in the Committee on House Administration's [staff report](#) p. 5. Also see CAO Catherine Szpindor's [recent testimony](#).

The January 6 insurrection brings the mandate to strengthen and protect democracy into stark relief.<sup>5</sup> To do so will necessitate improved physical security, but will also require safeguarding, a concept that speaks more to [prevention and preparedness](#). A shift in cultural norms and perceptions will need to occur so that a broader swathe of Americans identify Congress as a symbol of common purpose—something worthy of protection, and which they are included in. Modern technology and data are critical tools to achieve this outcome.

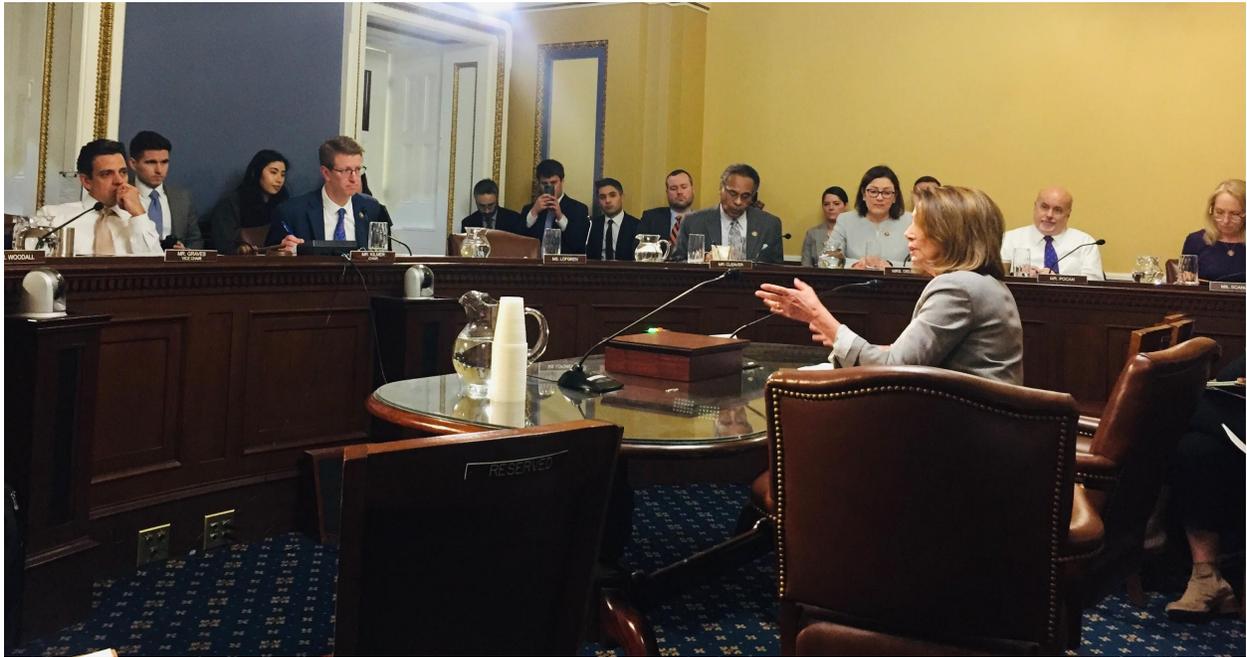


*In March, 2021, the Capitol campus remains barricaded with security fences, and protected by the National Guard. Credit: Lorelei Kelly*

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<sup>5</sup> Please see [Capitol Strong](#) to learn more about supporting congressional staff and public servants in the wake of insurrection. #CapitolStrong

# Plays from The Modernization Committee Model



Speaker Nancy Pelosi testifies at Member Day, March 2019. Credit: Lorelei Kelly

Lessons from the private sector percolated throughout the workflow of the committee and amplified the good fortune of its timing. For example, the group of members began with a deep knowledge of enterprise problem solving—essential given their goal of reform recommendations to the House of Representatives.

Congress is the most complex governing assembly on the planet. While it might look like a big marble sand box on the National Mall, the institution has more than 900 offices across the country. Every member of Congress becomes the head of a sizable civic business the day after they are elected. For example, a member must start up an office, work within multiple layers, and lead different staff teams. Members must work asynchronously and across time zones. They must become subject matter experts upon receiving committee assignments.

While the COVID-19 emergency did not inspire Congress to completely move into the modern world, it did reveal how much the Modernization Committee had achieved. For 20 months, the modernizers worked diligently under the radar, convening [16 committee hearings](#). In so doing, they established a rare model of bipartisan collaboration. Out the gate, the committee members wrote and then unanimously supported a bill incorporating its first year of recommendations (named [MODCOM](#)).

## Plays for Running A Committee

**Shared vision.** The committee had a simple, function-focused mission statement: “To make Congress work better for the American people.”

**Rolling recommendations.** This emergent style yielded bountiful results (97 bipartisan recommendations). Plus, ideas generated with consensus support by the committee did not get stymied in a congressional end-game logjam.

**Shared process/shared outcomes.** Working within a divided institution, the committee persistently modeled collaboration. It shared staff and sequenced opportunities for input. All members were invited to the “[Member Day Hearing](#)” right out the gate, for example, and 32 testified.

**Collaborative prep.** Pre-hearing bipartisan meetings without the glare of camera lights, roundtable discussions with reform experts, and one shared bipartisan committee staff.

**Broad institutional feedback.** Information gathering included “listening sessions” with a cross section of congressional staff in DC and in district.

**Layered institutional feedback.** Chair Kilmer and Vice Chair Graves also did many information gathering “listening sessions” with member groups like the New Dems, the Republican Study Committee, freshman members, and various issue caucuses to hear members' concerns and solicit ideas.

**Iterative curation style.** The committee staff sought ideas and received input from public-minded experts and organizations outside of Congress.

**Deep issue capacity.** Committee members formed working groups to examine reform topics, then the whole committee vetted, discussed and moved forward together with unanimous recommendations.

**Constituent focus.** Effectiveness, efficiency, and constituent accessibility to information about lawmaking were prioritized as nonpartisan functional themes. This facilitated low-risk, bipartisan collaboration.

**Minimized hierarchy.** The committee disrupted the top down, seniority-oriented convention of who gets recognized on the dais by allowing

the most junior members to also lead hearings and act as full partners in the working groups.

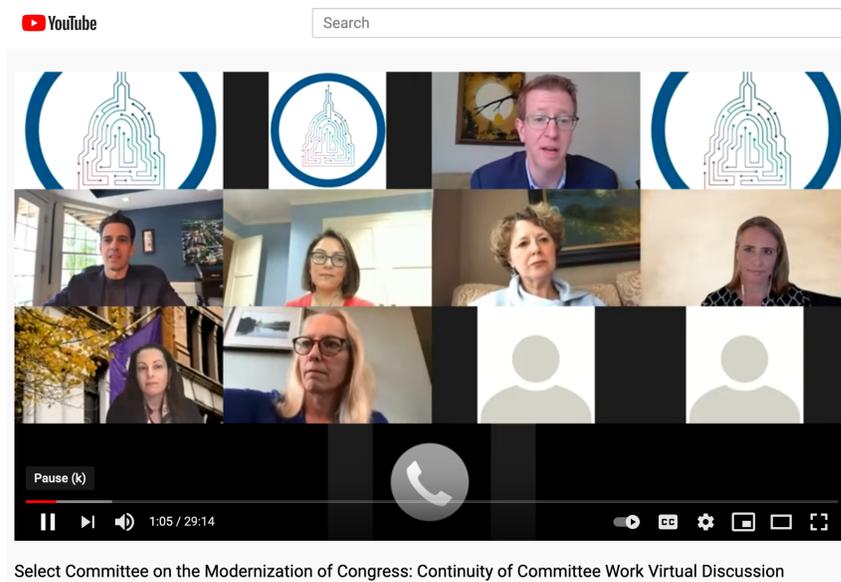
**Common ground design.** The committee encouraged different seating arrangements as an alternative to the intentional socialization of division dictated by the political parties.

**Institutional stakeholders.** The committee membership included crucial oversight stakeholders in Congress like the chair and ranking member of the Committee on House Administration—a systems axis.

**Congress-adjacent support system:** Modernizers in Congress worked in tandem with a collaborative cohort of public and private experts as well as congressional reform organizations.

**Content moderation.** The committee was visible on social media ([@ModernizeCmte](#)) and [live streamed](#) hearings on its dedicated channel. The official House website included a standard public input template. A [crisp micro site](#) displayed the committee's final report.

**COVID pivot.** The committee adapted [to virtual](#) and/or hybrid workflow formats.



*The Modernization Committee's first virtual discussion during COVID, March 7, 2020.*

*Credit: Modernization Committee*

Strengthening democracy requires trust and collaboration. The public interest cohort that worked adjacent to the committee shared information and coordinated together to support Congress' own internal reform efforts. With decades of institutional memory between them, the cohort participants offered constructive criticism and [nimble feedback](#). They sent timely letters with recommendations. They produced specialized research on [technology](#) and on how [other parliamentary systems](#) modernize. The cohort dug into the [details](#) on [staffing](#), [racial diversity](#), [floor procedure](#), [appropriations](#), and how to reimagine the antiquated scheduling system, which causes members to be constantly double-booked. Indeed, last session members were allocated more days to travel than to legislate.<sup>6</sup>

Most importantly, this committee's work was bipartisan and unanimous. Unmistakably, the thoughtful diligence in how it was organized and managed facilitated an outstanding result.

## How Modernization Strengthens Checks and Balances

The implications of congressional reform are dramatic. [Improving access](#) and accountability will influence national policy decisions that impact all Americans. If the recommendations of the Modernization Committee are carried out, they will reaffirm the promise of an inclusive society and give us a chance to rebalance and improve our government.

[Article One of the U.S. Constitution](#) details the primary importance of the legislature. The People's House is the beating heart of the First Branch of the U.S. government, yet we have allowed too much power to consolidate into the Executive Branch and its agencies. Our government is built like a three-legged stool, and years of neglect have made our legislature dysfunctional and our stool wobbly. Checks and balances—vital to maintain a productive relationship between Congress, the presidency and the courts—have diminished.

Although the recommendations put forth by the Modernization Committee might seem like unremarkable workflow tweaks, they are a significant leap forward for a neglected institution—one operating at [1970s staffing levels](#) and which funds its own systems maintenance at 25 percent less than a decade ago. As our nation seeks common ground for moving government forward, the recommendations provide an inventory of requirements to shore up Congress. Just recently, the House of

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<sup>6</sup> The Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation is part of this adjacent cohort, guided by this Democracy Fund [systems map](#).

Representatives restored members' ability to [direct spending](#) to worthwhile community projects back home in their districts. This action reflects one of the Modernization Committee's recommendations, which also stressed transparency and accountability. Ideally, these funds will incentivize mutual interests and inclusive, bipartisan policy collaboration. .

In the best of all worlds, COVID-19 will prove to be a modernization tipping point in Congress. Even more, the January 6th insurrection must become the final straw for any holdouts about the need to increase funding and systemwide support for the legislative branch. A post-insurrection imperative for American democracy is to assure that Congress can be a credible content moderator, a trustworthy social communicator and a strong competitor for public attention like every other successful 21st century organization.

The House is on its way to making permanent the digital workflow changes created by pandemic emergency measures. Both political and institutional leadership agree that Congress should have a resident capacity for continual innovation. Across the Hill, [the Senate must act](#) promptly to navigate its own map toward modernization. Finally, in the wake of violent attacks on the American democratic system, a [continuity of government](#) plan for Congress remains critical.



*Democracy is always under construction. Credit: Lorelei Kelly*

# Conclusion: Modernization Supports Legitimacy and Inspires Hope

Democracy is at risk across the globe. COVID-19, a contested election, and an organized insurrection inside the U.S. Capitol have shown how our governing system is more fragile than most Americans would like to think. Both in style and substance, the Modernization Committee tells a story about how to positively govern forward. Members must come together and make the existing recommendations law and then push ahead with the freshly reauthorized Modernization Committee—one that [includes new voices](#)—leading the way.

The private sector inspired many of the committee's recommendations, and now has a vital role in proceeding onward. Congress needs connecting technologies that incorporate the best industry standards, built to serve the public. Corporate America spends [billions of dollars](#) influencing the lawmaking process to benefit itself, and now it must speak to a greater cause and support this bipartisan progress.

Will Congress experience a successful transition to the modern era or be consigned to a brittle, fragile existence? Stabilizing and strengthening American democracy is more important than short-term profits or party politics. Indeed, renewing our most democratic institution should be an opportunity to [reimagine a shared future](#) and reinvigorate our global reputation.

Congress has [legislated mandates](#) and funding for the Executive Branch to incorporate technology and data in service to the American people. It must now do the same for itself. Modernization is the story of democracy's ability to regenerate abundance in our information-rich world. Inaction is inexcusable.

We have before us detailed instructions to take steps toward institutional reform. Let's act so that 10 years hence, we will look back on this fraught moment as the pivot, when we decided to [renew trust](#) in our democracy and make the "Article One renaissance" a defining time in American history.

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*Lorelei Kelly is a Fellow at the Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation at Georgetown University. She recently wrote a [playbook](#) on how Members and their communities can use the new digital capacity of Congress to deliberate on and inform policy.*