

REPORT | JONATHAN FINCH AND TA'CORIAN TILLEY

Congressional Data, Redefined

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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 The Modernizing Congress project

As part of a broader coalition working to build capacity and re-establish trust in Congress, we have been leveraging technology, data, and design to maintain and renew democracy with a focus on increasing the voice and lived experience of constituents. Our work helps lawmakers use civic information assets such as civic testimony and structured data to contribute to a digital infrastructure in Congress. Read more about our work [here](#).

About The Authors

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- + [From Digital Dinosaur to a Digital Service](#), an event hosted by the Beeck Center, with panelists from the [Belfer Center](#) at Harvard University, House Digital Service, [House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress](#), and [Popvox](#)
- + [2022 Congressional Hackathon](#), hosted by Majority Leader Steny Hoyer and Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy

This work builds on a rich foundation of research on Congressional and government modernization, with particularly relevant contributions from the "FixCongress" Cohort, including the Congressional Data Coalition, Congressional Institute, Congressional Management Foundation Center, Demand Progress, Open Gov Foundation, Popvox, the R Street Institute, and TechCongress.

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Introduction

The fundamental roles of Congress are to represent varied constituent interests across the nation and to legislate on their behalf. Congress, and especially the House of Representatives, has the potential to be a diverse market for ideas that reaps the benefits of the nation's creativity and knowledge. Although the institution has taken fundamental steps to adopt modern workflow practices, poor digital infrastructure and data practices thwart its transformative potential.

Understanding the byzantine inner workings of Congress is tremendously challenging, which makes it difficult for the public to provide feedback to members as a normal part of the lawmaking process. Likewise, the many transactions and communication interactions in a typical workday present missed opportunities to capture data that can be used to both improve the practice of democracy and inform policy making. Constituent engagement should encompass more than just correspondence over mail or email and should be equal parts sharing data and collecting data.

The eventual data standards of Congress have huge implications. The institutional memory of U.S. democracy is mission-critical data and the digital architecture that will be built in the coming years is as important as any other critical infrastructure. In order to rebuild trust, fulfill its constitutional duties, and live up to its full potential as a representative body, Congress must modernize its data practices.

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Shape → Structure → Share

This report builds on the Beek Center's [Shape, Structure, Share](#) roadmap, which provides a vision for how individuals and communities can participate in policy making in support of a more modern and inclusive Congress.



The research and findings contained within this report are broadly applicable for anyone interested in improving the representative capacity of our government. However, this report is particularly useful for Congressional staff (on the Hill and in districts) and members of local media who are interested in understanding the role they can play in improving how information flows in and out of Congress. Congressional staff are critical to the structure phase, as they are the gatekeepers to elected representatives and are often responsible for reviewing and aggregating constituent feedback. Likewise, members of local media are critical to the share phase because they are perhaps the most common channel by which district or state-specific information is disseminated to constituents.

Addressing the Issue of Trust

According to the Georgetown Institute of Politics and Public Service [Battleground Civility Poll](#), conducted in February 2022, division in our country is one of the most important issues for voters. It ranked higher than COVID-19 and fell behind only the rising cost of living and jobs/the economy. This same poll revealed a significant lack of respect for our political and media institutions:

| | |
|--|--------|
| Large television networks (Fox News, MSNBC, CNN) | 49-61% |
| Members of the Republican Party | 48% |
| Members of the Democratic Party | 47% |
| President | 46% |
| Large newspapers (Washington Post, New York Times) | 45% |

*Percent of respondents indicating "A little" or "no" respect in the specified institution
Source: Georgetown Institute of Politics and Public Service Battleground Civility Poll (February 2022)*

Differences in viewpoints should be expected in any modern democracy but the significant lack of respect, nearly or exceeding 50 percent across entities, signals eroding trust in our representative institutions.

Role of Data & Information

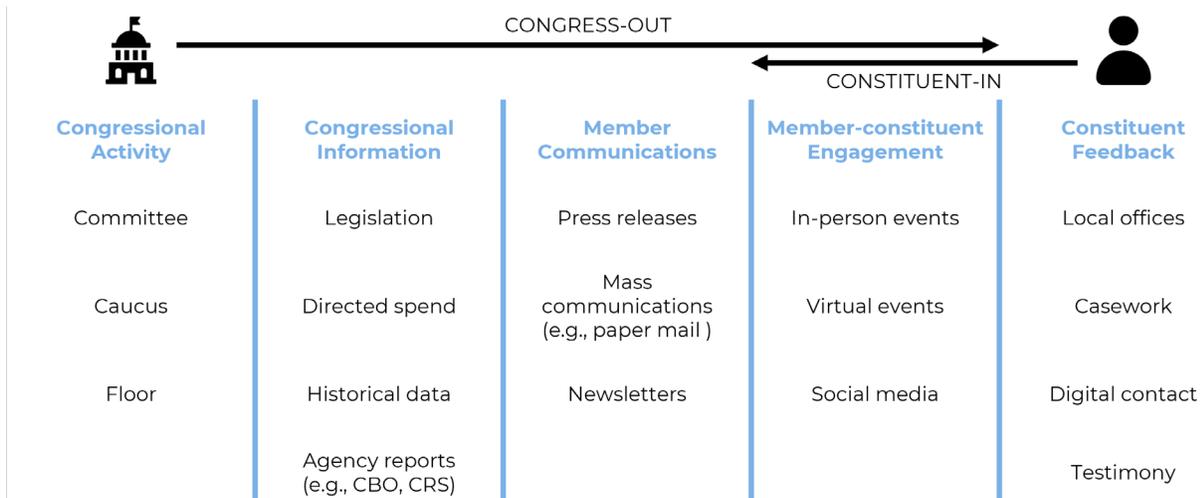
One potential path forward to reducing division and improving respect toward institutions is **improving the flow of data in and out of Congress**. Civic voice and constituent input can and should be a valuable part of the lawmaking process. A modern engagement strategy in Congress can and should utilize data to improve capacity, increase public understanding, and build trust. The [Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act](#), signed into law in 2019, provided direction for a future in which more data is made accessible and used to support policymaking.

In order to realize the full ambition of this future state, Congress must continue to think critically about new and innovative ways to capture and deploy data. Better data practices have the potential to improve visibility into legislative activity, increase opportunities for civic participation, and create a common factbase of public information.

- + Broaden the definition of Congressional data
- + Highlight challenges related to data capture, accessibility, and amplification
- + Recommend actionable steps for Congress, member offices, and the news media to increase Congressional data capacity

A New Definition of Congressional Data

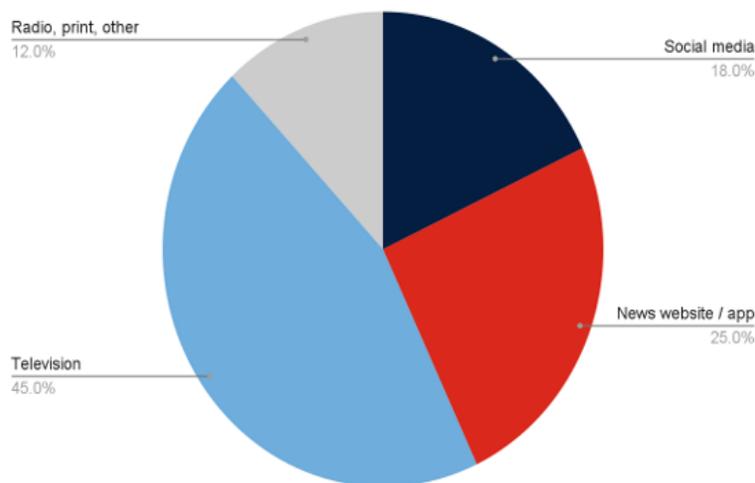
In order to improve the flow of data, we must first align on a **new and broad definition for Congressional data**. Activity and information beyond votes and budgets should be thought of as forms of data. Member communications and constituent interactions should also be thought of as forms of data. Congressional data, broadly defined, should encompass any and all information that informs an understanding, whether for a policymaker or constituent.



Icon credits: Adrien Coquet (Noun project), Elizabeth Lopez (Noun project)

Role of Traditional and Digital Media

Despite shifts in mediums and formats, **the news media continues to play a critical role in sharing information from and about Congress**. While many elected officials have taken to social media to more directly engage their constituents, fewer than 20 percent of U.S. adults use social media as their primary source of political news. As long as media outlets—particularly local outlets, which account for a significant portion of the traditional television, radio, and print mediums—continue to serve as conduits to the public, they must participate in efforts to improve both the capturing and sharing of Congressional data.



Source: Pew Research Center (2020)

Current Challenges

Legislative Activity

The general public has varying levels of understanding of the inner workings and activity of its representative legislative bodies. However, even for the most knowledgeable members of the public, **it can be challenging to stay informed on Congressional activity.** In response, a whole host of external organizations (FiscalNote, GovTrack.us, LexisNexus, Prolegis, Popvox, Quorum and others) have begun to fill the void. Still, these resources are most commonly used by Congressional or government affairs staff, and not the general public.

The challenge is in part driven by the manner in which data is distributed across different government websites. Following a piece of legislation end-to-end, from introduction in a committee, to passage on the floor, to final publication, would take a user across a minimum of three distinct platforms, not to mention various subsections of each platform.

| | Schedule | Webcast | Votes | Past Activity | Videos / Transcripts | Schedule | Webcast | Votes | Past Activity | Transcripts | Legislation | Directed Spend |
|----------------------------|----------|---------|-------|---------------|----------------------|----------|---------|-------|---------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|
| Congress.gov | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Committee sites | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | | | ✓ |
| GPO | | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | ✓ | |
| House site | | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| House majority leader site | | | | | | ✓ | | | | | | |
| Senate site | | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |

Source: Beeck Center analysis

A related challenge is the intended audience for the various sources of information. Many of the sites are not structured to be accessible to the average member of the public. Searching for and comprehending the information presented requires a level of familiarity that likely only resides with those most interested in the space. This often concentrates understanding in narrow interests with a significant stake in legislative outcomes.

Model for Success: Congressional Research Service

The Congressional Research Service (CRS), a federal legislative branch agency within the Library of Congress, was explicitly established to serve Congressional committees and Members of Congress. The CRS is responsible for, among many other tasks, preparing high-level (2-3 sentence) summaries of in-progress legislation. Such information, if designed for public consumption and promoted more broadly, could help to fill a critical gap in public understanding of legislative activity.

Institutional Data

Members of Congress receive thousands of pieces of constituent correspondence each year. Some of this correspondence is scripted messages on behalf of advocacy organizations. Some of it is unique stories, experiences, and challenges from everyday residents. In either case, **constituent correspondence should be viewed and treated as a form of data**. Further, with an increasing percentage of correspondence coming in via digital channels (website forms), the opportunity has never been greater to effectively structure the captured data.

The challenge lies in access to and the use of this data. Constituent correspondence is managed by each member office and not typically published or shared more broadly. In fact, members likely have an incentive to limit access to this data as it can provide unique insights into the needs of future voters. However, the potential is immense. Anonymized data from constituent correspondence, if properly structured, could provide a real-time pulse of the nation on widespread needs like unemployment benefits, access to healthcare, or local infrastructure.

A related and equally critical form of data is constituent testimony. The COVID-19 pandemic revolutionized the process for providing testimony. Previously, the need to be in person in Washington, D.C. created a significant barrier to participation as witnesses had to assume the cost of transportation and accommodation. The typical witness population was locals or a small pool of practitioners and academics routinely brought to town to share their expertise. While this testimony can be assessed via recorded hearings or transcripts, accessibility remains a challenge. Although pre-prepared witness statements are released following hearings, there is a lag—often months—between when a hearing is held and when official transcripts are published by the [Government Publishing Office](#) (GPO). Relatedly, while there is a basic search function across all GPO publications, it is limited in functionality. To understand what witness testified (e.g., home state, professional occupation, demographic group) and on what topics would require a thorough review across hearing transcripts.

Model for Success: Data Lab (USASpending.org)

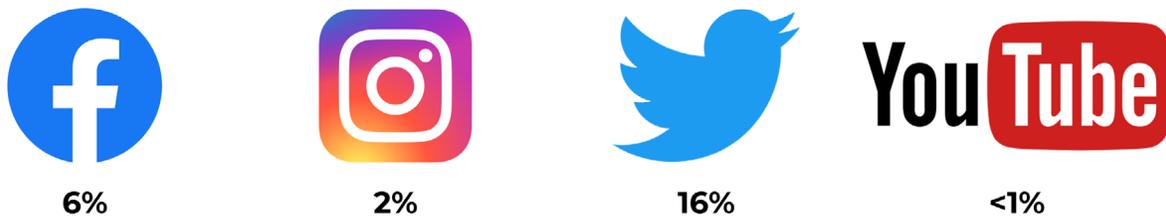
Platforms from other branches of government have demonstrated the potential for improving the accessibility of data through visualization. Data Lab, a platform currently available to the public in beta form, aggregates federal government revenue and spending and allows users to dynamically “click-down” into areas of interest. The platform is a model for improving access to complex topics. Similar platforms could be built for the various forms of institutional data discussed.

Member Constituent Engagement

Even as data capture improves, there still remains the question of **how to best share information with the public**. Congressional communication with the outside world has evolved, much like other institutions within the larger modern media ecosystem. It has traversed this sequence:

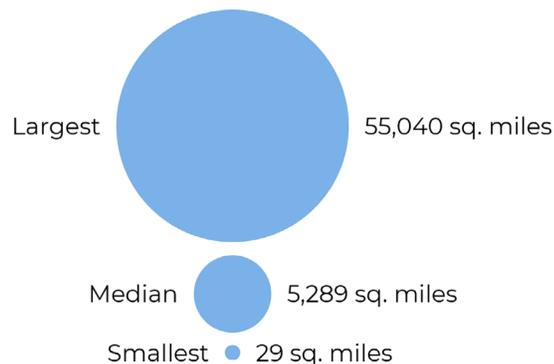
- + **One to Many:** For members, this top-down method is an official press release or newsletter.
- + **Many to One:** Far from becoming a modern public square, social media is currently a place where meaningful feedback is often overshadowed by hyperpolarized discourse.
- + **Many to Many:** Ideally, members will integrate communications with constituent service, leveraging staff and community partners to both collect and share data.

It is undeniable that social media and other forms of digital communication have had a significant impact on how members of Congress are engaging their constituents. However, they should not be thought of as the end-all and be-all of the future of member-constituent engagement. Only a fraction of the population are active on these platforms. A further fraction of the population follows their elected representatives. For the purposes of assessing member engagement, we looked at a sample of 30 Senate and House members encompassing the leadership of the major political parties, the leadership of the major demographic and ideological caucuses, and those with the largest social media followings. Only nine of the 30 offices had a following on at least one social media platform that was larger than 50 percent of their constituent population. This of course does not account for the fact that many followers live outside of a given representative's constituency, which is especially true for those representatives with a more national platform.



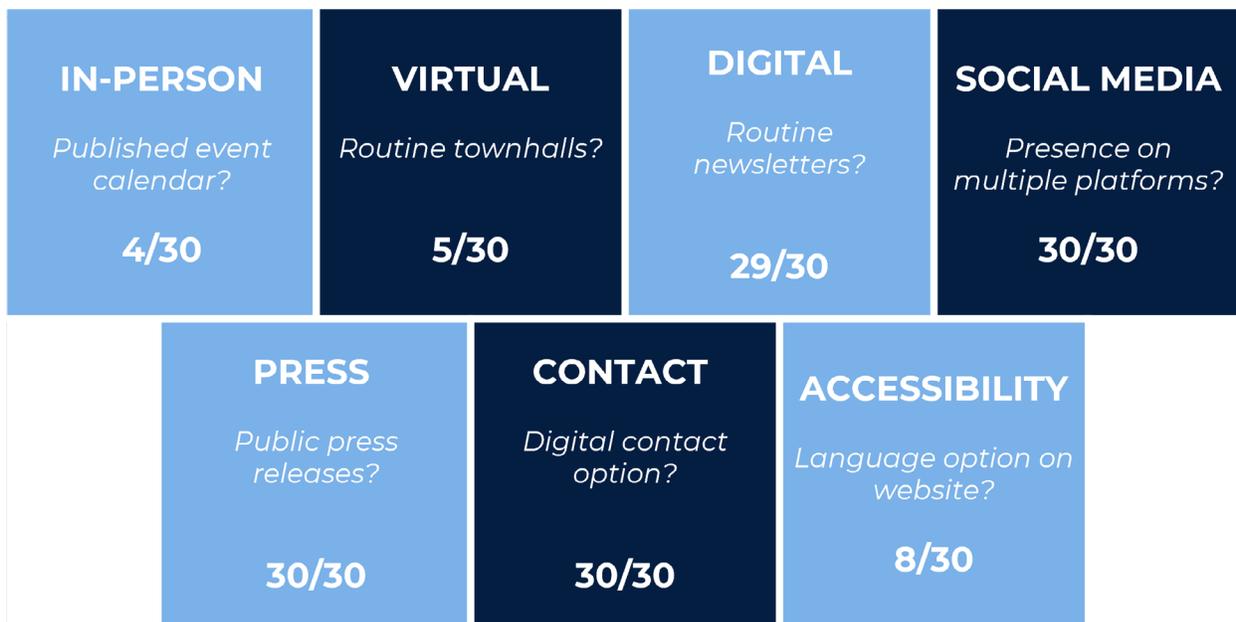
Median percent of followers as a % of constituent population for 30 select members of Congress
 Source: Population - U.S. Census (2019); Followers measured in April 2022

Just as social media has inherent limitations, so does in-person engagement. Within the sample of 30 members, there is significant variance in the physical size of their home districts. The largest district is more than 10 times the size of the median district, which in turn is more than 150 times the size of the smallest district. As district size increases, it is increasingly more difficult to reach constituents through in-person programming.



Given inherent challenges in both digital and in-person engagement, it is clear that **members of Congress must deploy a range of tools to best connect with their constituents.** To assess these tools, we identified seven engagement methods and related accessibility metrics:

- + **In-person events** - Do they have a published event calendar?
- + **Virtual events** - Do they hold routine town halls (at least quarterly)?
- + **Digital engagement** - Do they routinely send newsletters?
- + **Social media** - Do they have a presence (on at least 2 platforms)?
- + **Press engagement** - Do they publish press releases?
- + **Constituent engagement** - Do they have a digital contact option?
- + **Language accessibility** - Do they have a website with multiple language options?



Source: Beeck Center analysis

Unsurprisingly, some engagement methods have become table stakes. Almost all of the surveyed offices publicize press releases, distribute newsletters, have a presence on social media, and have options for constituents to digitally contact their representative. However, only four of the 30 offices had a published event calendar to make it easier for constituents to identify opportunities to engage with their representative. Likewise, only five of the 30 offices held routine virtual town halls. Finally, only eight of the 30 offices had websites with multiple language options. Inconsistencies across these metrics reveal opportunities for members of Congress to improve constituent engagement.

Model for Success: Member-level Initiatives

Beyond improving baseline standards and expectations, a number of member offices have demonstrated potential opportunities to improve and enhance constituent engagement and the sharing of Congressional data:

Mobile office hours - In an effort to make services more accessible, particularly in large districts with limited physical offices, members and their staff host periodic mobile office hours across varying neighborhoods.

Direct-spend requests - Congressionally Directed Spending, brought back in 2021, is perhaps the most clear-cut example of a way in which a representative can take action to directly benefit their constituency. Members are soliciting input on spending requests and are featuring this call for input on the homepage of the websites.

Newsletter promotion - Newsletters provide opportunities for members to directly address their constituency. In an effort to increase the scope of this communication method, members push newsletter sign-ups through pop-up windows upon entering their websites.

Media Amplification

The role of local media with respect to Congressional data and constituent engagement is clear: these outlets are a direct conduit between Congress and constituents. When the system works well, local media outlets amplify information coming from Congress and a given area's elected representatives. Likewise, local media outlets provide a critical layer of public oversight and can aggregate local sentiment that could inform an elected representative's decision making. The challenge is that it is becoming increasingly difficult for local media outlets to play these critical roles.

National political news is increasingly superseding and displacing local coverage. This is in part driven by the concentration of power in party leadership and a small number of particularly influential members of Congress. However, national news is also simply filling a void left by a shrinking local news sector. The COVID-19 pandemic only accelerated pre-existing trends. According to research conducted by the Pew Research Center, between 2008 and 2020, weekday newspaper circulation dropped by nearly 50 percent. Over this same period, newsroom employment—encompassing newspaper, television, and radio—dropped by more than 25 percent. See additional data from Pew's State of the News Media project [here](#). National media outlets mostly report on matters that pertain to Congress as a whole. Following this practice is the assumption that individual members on the Hill don't warrant national coverage unless they are: 1) a part of the leadership or 2) a notable individual known for their strong or sometimes controversial remarks. In the absence of strong local media, many members of Congress are left with limited channels to share information.

Even where local media outlets have persevered, there remain gaps in important political coverage. The pandemic brought about important changes in the means by which members of Congress seek to engage local constituents, forcing a transition to virtual mediums. Members began hosting webinars, virtual or telephone town halls, and social media livestreams. These mediums provided perhaps better opportunities for direct constituent engagement that had been previously available. However, a review of media activity surrounding these types of events revealed inconsistent coverage. While hosting an event itself may not be "newsworthy" enough to warrant coverage, the discussion and outcomes of such events also failed to receive extensive coverage.

Congressionally Directed Spending—originally labeled "earmarks"—was brought back in 2021 after being banned since 2012. Now, under strict new requirements, these requests are publicly available and can be accessed via member and relevant committee websites. Despite the clear connection to local constituents, local media coverage was again inconsistent. Of the selected 30 members of Congress referenced earlier, five members submitted direct-spend requests. These five members submitted more than 500 requests, resulting in hundreds of thousands of dollars being allocated to their districts. However, of the five members, only two received extensive local coverage on their requests and resulting budget allocations.

The Path Forward

The challenges and models for success highlighted in this report can add momentum to the continued modernization of Congress, and specifically Congressional data. The following recommendations are natural extensions of the findings and merit further exploration and discussion.

Congress

- + **Establish data standards across offices** (D.C. and district) so that constituent feedback is captured in a consistent and uniform way, unlocking opportunities for broader aggregation.
- + **Develop institutional data sources** to further enable data-driven deliberation, monitoring, and evaluation in line with the goals of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act.
- + **Approach data sharing through the lens of human-centered design** so that reports, publications, and databases are designed with members of the general public as primary audiences and users.
- + **Explore opportunities to create consolidated landing pages** with upfront, easy access to key Congressional business (schedules, live streams, hearings, votes, etc.).
- + **Seek opportunities to work with trusted, public-serving information intermediaries** (state and federal libraries, public universities) to model authenticated, structured, and discoverable data archive methods.

Member offices

- + **Re-imagine community engagement** beyond town halls, traditional correspondence and social media methods.
- + **Institutionalize a broad constituent engagement toolkit** that spans different mediums (in-person, virtual, social), sets clear expectations (advanced scheduling, routine events), and reduces barriers to engagement.
- + **Highlight roles for constituents to play in providing input into the Congressionally directed spending process** through both direct public engagement and the press.
- + **Highlight roles for constituents to play in virtual committee hearings**, through both direct public engagement and the press.
- + **Consolidate and aggregate constituent feedback across mediums** (email, direct mail, social media, drop bys, casework, etc.) so that it can serve as an actionable representation of civic voice.

Media sector

- + **Utilize news products that leverage technology** to identify and push out updates from Congressional activity, particularly for activity that doesn't merit staff coverage.

Improving Congressional data begins with a broader definition of what such data entails. From there, the onus falls on both Congress as an institution and individual member offices to take steps to ensure data is better captured, stored, and communicated to the public. This will undoubtedly also involve innovation in the media sector which continues to face an uncertain future, particularly at the local level. There is also a role to play for other public-serving organizations, as Congress will need pilot projects and proofs of concept.

Fortunately, there is considerable momentum that can serve as a catalyst for the actions proposed in this report. The recent [Congressional Hackathon](#) brought together stakeholders from in and outside of government to generate tactical ways to better deploy technology across Congress. [The House Digital Service](#)—announced in January and staffing up over the summer—will provide some institutional capacity to build and deploy new solutions. The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress continues to push for and support implementation of their own recommendations.

The need to improve the flow of data in and out of Congress is clear. Political division has manifested into an alarming lack of legitimacy surrounding our political and media institutions. Increasing the accessibility of Congress, better engaging the public, and more actively bringing civic voice into the lawmaking process will each play a key role in rebuilding trust.

