

Congress Has Become a Toxic Mess. Can It Be Saved?

A new report says that a sweeping change in institutional culture is needed for Congress to regain public trust. The challenges of the coronavirus are feeding the dysfunction.



The Capitol before a storm in Washington on Wednesday. Credit...Anna Moneymaker for The New York Times

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WASHINGTON — A conservative Republican House member profanely accosts a Democratic congresswoman as she strides up the Capitol steps to do her job during multiple national calamities.

With expanded jobless benefits supporting tens of millions of fearful Americans about to expire and a pandemic raging, Senate Republicans and the Trump White House cannot agree among themselves about how to respond, let alone begin to bargain with Democrats.

In a private party session, archconservative Republicans ambush their top female leader and demand her ouster over political and policy differences.

And that's just the past few days.

By nearly any measure, Congress is a toxic mess seemingly incapable of rising to the occasion even at a time of existential threats. No one knows that better than those who, until recently, served there.

“Congress has largely become a dysfunctional institution unable to meet the critical needs of our country,” says a new report, “Congress at a Crossroads,” produced by the Association of Former Members of Congress. Scheduled to be issued publicly next week, it is a damning indictment of the steady deterioration of a congressional culture that today rewards power over progress and conflict over consensus.

And it warns that, while recent moves to allow Congress to function safely during the pandemic may be necessary, they could make things worse.

Can Congress be saved? Read the [forthcoming report](#).

Based on 40 hours of interviews with 30 House members and a senator who left Congress after the 2018 elections after serving a combined 275 years, the report offers some hope, asserting that most lawmakers arrive on Washington yearning to be constructive.

But overall, it paints a grim portrait of an institution that has ceased to work as it should. A course correction may be more critical now than ever before, the report says, as the nation faces “outsized challenges” that place congressional shortcomings in stark relief.

“The pandemic alone is a call to our elected officials for the type of leadership and vision we expect at a moment of crisis,” says the report, which grew out of interviews conducted by Leonard Steinhorn, a professor of communication at American University, and Mark Sobol, an author and expert on organizational development and executive leadership. “But we are also facing another reckoning, one over our nation’s original sin and the racial inequities that have beset our country since its founding.”

The study ticks through familiar themes when it comes to assessing the sorry state of Congress: the lack of any real across-the-aisle relationships, a schedule that limits opportunities for interaction, too much power concentrated in leadership, constant fund-raising demands, discouragement of bipartisanship, the negative influence of round-the-clock media, the fact that the most important election for lawmakers is often their primary, and the shutting out of minority-party voices.

It also warns that the shifts toward a more virtual Congress as a result of the pandemic, such as a [new system of proxy voting in the House](#) that allows lawmakers to cast their votes without traveling to Washington, could exacerbate the existing problems. If the idea of a remote Congress takes hold, the report suggests, it would be a serious setback to efforts to enhance bipartisan interaction.

“Because of the pandemic, Congress was forced to conduct much of its business virtually, and we certainly understand why,” the report said. “But as much as that may have been a necessity, it should not be interpreted as a virtue.”

The document says Congress needs “more and not less in-person interaction among members of Congress. They need to learn more about each other’s districts, hold civil conversations aimed at finding common ground, build relationships of trust that can lead understanding and solutions.”

In a week when Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Democrat of New York, was [verbally assaulted without provocation](#) by Representative Ted Yoho, Republican of

Florida, and fellow Republicans ganged up on Representative Liz Cheney, Republican of Wyoming, [in a hostile confrontation](#), the call for civility rang especially true.

Image



Credit...Anna Moneymaker for The New York Times

At its core, the report said that the most important thing lawmakers and leaders of both parties could do was to find ways to promote more communication and understanding across the aisle.

It is a longstanding complaint about Congress that with time spent in Washington now deemed a negative, lawmakers just do not interact socially, and consequently find it much easier to dismiss the other side. The disconnect has been exacerbated in recent years as the polarization intensified and Republicans and Democrats now have little contact with one another. The authors say that situation must change if there is any chance for Congress to become more functional.

“Those relationships are the secret sauce for getting things done, understanding each other and building bridges across geography and ideology,” said Mr. Steinhorn.

One lawmaker who took part in the study, former Representative Michael Capuano, Democrat of Massachusetts, said he had been struck by the concerted effort by leaders of both parties to keep the sides separated from the start, intentionally discouraging any cross-party bonding.

“I didn’t come into Congress as a novice, and the concept of partisanship was not new to me,” said Mr. Capuano, who was first elected in 1998. “But the concept of not even talking to the other side was new to me. All day long there was an intention to split you up. There was not one iota of an attempt to bring us together.”

And with the most serious challenge to a sitting lawmaker coming chiefly from a primary these days, the incentive to find common ground is vastly reduced, inhibiting the search for compromise, which has become a dirty word politically speaking.

“The political reward too often is to tack hard to the base, not to seek consensus,” said former Representative Charlie Dent, a centrist Republican from Pennsylvania who saw his ranks shrink considerably during his 14 years in the House. “Until that reward is there, I don’t see things changing. Now if you are in the middle of the road, it is likely you are going to get hit.”

The report notes that even the most partisan members of Congress typically arrive with good intentions and a desire to be productive for their communities. But they are quickly subsumed into a system where exposure goes to those most willing to spar.

Recognizing the need for more communication, the report offers multiple recommendations, including encouraging lawmakers to travel as part of congressional delegations, as well as for field hearings, visits to districts of lawmakers from the other party and bipartisan retreats. It also recommended more social functions and even scheduled weekend sessions of Congress to give lawmakers more time to interact.

“There is going to be no substitute for connecting with people, building relationships and staying connected,” said Mr. Sobol. “Forging relationships in action is what we are advocating.”

Given the media’s role in modern politics, the study even raises the prospect of a press operation run jointly by the parties to highlight bipartisanship and promote efforts across the aisle — an idea that would seem highly unlikely to anyone spending significant time on Capitol Hill these days.

The authors and the lawmakers they interviewed acknowledged that they did not have the answers or a magic wand to make the polarization that promotes gridlock and conflict disappear.

“This condition that we find ourselves in has been decades in the making,” said Mr. Sobol. “There is no quick fix.”

Yet the authors and the former lawmakers who informed them said the time to make institutional changes is now. Otherwise, they warn, Congress risks continuing the downward spiral that is depleting the trust of the public and the capability to serve the nation at a time when a functioning legislature is vital.

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