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Problem-Solving**

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Abstract

A major development in the modern Congress is the increased centrality of fundraising. Although raising money has long been a component of members' responsibilities, until recently it was a more moderate one. As this issue brief describes, numerous factors have contributed to the development, including the reduced role of seniority in determining committee positions, the rise of the internet as a medium through which challengers can raise funds from out-of-district donors, and reforms to campaign finance law that have handicapped parties' ability to serve as the dominant fundraising organizations. These changes, individually and in combination, have been quite detrimental to congressional problem-solving. The increased amount of time needed for fundraising means that members have less time for problem-solving; donor opinion has an outsized impact on members' policy behavior; and the types of members and candidates who are interested in problem-solving are now less willing to run for office. The issue brief concludes by offering potential reforms to the campaign finance system and congressional rules that would better incentivize problem-solving in the contemporary Congress as well as suggestions for future research that would help us better understand the current dynamics.

Key Words

problem-solving
Congress
campaign finance
fundraising

One of the most striking developments in the modern Congress is the increased dominance of fundraising in members' responsibilities and legislative organization. As early as freshmen orientation, newly elected legislators are instructed to spend a notable portion of their days calling donors. The leadership gives each member specific fundraising targets for contributing to the party in addition to their own race. Success in meeting these targets is then a significant factor in committee assignments, chairmanships and leadership positions, and advancing bills to the floor. Of course, raising donations for reelection has always been a part of members' activities, but never has the act of fundraising been so central to the operation of the legislative body.

This issue brief explores the implications of the increased centrality of fundraising in Congress for its capacity to engage in problem-solving. As with other essays in this collection, I assume problem-solving encompasses both identifying a societal issue that may require government attention and considering policy responses to it. In adopting this definition, I am attentive to the fact that not every existing problem is best addressed by the federal government rather than at the state or local levels, and that policy cures can at times be worse than the diseases. Correspondingly, I readily acknowledge Arnold's (2016) warning that a sole focus on metrics such as bill passage can be ideologically biased in a left-wing direction—not every issue demands new legislation. Yet the capacity of Congress to solve pressing national problems is fundamental to our constitutional order, which places the governmental body that is closest and most accountable to the American people as the primary lawmaking authority.

The brief proceeds in four sections: a review of scholarship on the increasing centrality of fundraising to modern congressional operations; the implications of this development for problem-solving by Congress; reform proposals that could produce an immediate impact; and finally, a partially hopeful conclusion that discusses data and scholarship that would provide greater insight into these issues.

The Centrality of Fundraising

A variety of evidence suggests that fundraising is now the primary task each member undertakes day-to-day. For instance, a leaked presentation by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee suggests members spend at least four hours each day calling donors while only two hours on committee and floor work combined, and even less on constituent visits and other responsibilities (Grim and Siddiqui 2017). Similarly, press reports suggest both parties instruct their members to plan for 30 hours each week of fundraising (O'Donnell 2016). Because members cannot call from their official congressional offices, the party committees provide "off-campus" call centers located within walking distance of the Capitol (Issue One 2017).

Members who fail to heed these instructions fall out of the party's good graces. As Canes-Wrone and Miller (2022) document, party leaders circulate dues reports on a regular basis, ensuring that all caucus members are aware of who is on track to meet their targets. These results are also displayed in caucus meetings so that members can feel "shamed" into giving if they are behind (Issue One 2017). A legislator's likelihood of bringing a bill to the floor is associated with their fundraising success (Currinder 2009; Pearson 2015). Moreover, key committee assignments, chairmanships, and leadership positions depend upon it, both in the House (Heberlig, Hetherington, and Larson 2006; Cann 2008) and Senate (Powell, forthcoming). As observed by former Representative Tim Roemer of Indiana, "There's a deeply troubling contradiction here. They [committee chairs] are diverting previous time to fundraising when they need to be applying expertise to hearings, solving our nation's problems and conducting the arduous task of shepherding bills through Congress" (Issue One 2017, 9-10).

Although fundraising has long been a component of members' duties, until recently it was a more moderate dimension of their responsibilities. Research on congressional behavior during the 1960s-1980s

emphasizes the importance of committee and subcommittee work, constituency relations, and position-taking (e.g., Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1974; Shepsle 1989). Even as parties became more central to congressional organization and behavior by the 1990s, the shift was less focused on fundraising than legislative agendas and voting (e.g., Aldrich and Rohde 2001; Cox and McCubbins 2005).

Numerous developments, some within members' control and some outside of it, contributed to the rise in the centrality of fundraising. Once Republicans held the House majority in 1995 for the first time in 40 years, Speaker Newt Gingrich and the Republican caucus eliminated the traditional seniority-based norm for assigning committee chairs and imposed term limits (Deering and Smith 1997). Soon thereafter, the Democrats reduced the weight on seniority for chairmanships (e.g., Stewart 2012). With the new emphasis on revolving these positions, an opening was created for fundraising to become a primary – if not the primary – determinant.²

Without other developments, however, the changes regarding committee chair selection may have been less consequential. Traditionally, the primary source of campaign contributions for members were political action committees (PACs) associated with corporate interests and advocacy groups. The dissemination of the internet in the 1990s made reaching out to individual donors much easier and consequently, the pool of individuals who donated regularly to out-of-district candidates increased substantially.

Challengers could readily raise higher sums of campaign contributions, particularly from out-of-district donors, incentivizing incumbents to raise more from out-of-district individuals as well (e.g., Barber 2016). Members and parties increasingly shared with and bought from each other lists of donors to target for contributions, and the percentage and amount of donations from individuals skyrocketed, especially from those outside a legislator's district or state (e.g., Canes-Wrone and Miller 2022). The shift towards needing (or at least believing in a need) to grow a national donor base to keep pace with potential challengers increased members' and parties' electoral incentives to focus on the money race at the expense of problem-solving.

Hypothetically, party organizations rather than individual congressional members could shepherd the lion's share of fundraising. However, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) of 2002, the culmination of seven years of efforts by Senators John McCain and Russ Feingold, severely reduced the capacity of parties to serve as the primary fundraising vehicle. The act restricts "soft money" donations to party committees, and as La Raja and Schaffner (2015, 161) note, before BCRA the term soft money characterized "campaign funds given to political parties with no limits on the source or size of the contribution." This provision of the bill, as well as other components of it, were designed to reduce the influence of large donors.

BCRA has had some unintended effects, however. La Raja and Schaffner (2015) discuss how it has significantly increased the influence of outside organizations that are technically independent of formal party and candidate organizations. Additionally, and centrally to the operation of Congress, the law created a greater reliance of parties on individual members' fundraising. The parties suddenly faced strict limits in donations from any given individual or group, but all members could receive contributions (up to legal limits) from the same individual or group, regardless of whether the individual or group had residence in their district/state.

² Even before these procedural reforms, fundraising had occasionally been a factor in chair selections, but as an exception to the general rule (Currinder 2008).

Furthermore, members could raise funds not just for their own campaign committee but also for so-called leadership PACs that are set up to transfer funds to the party as well as to members facing tough races.

Following all these developments came *Citizens United*, the 2010 Supreme Court decision that ruled organizations independent of campaigns, including corporations and labor unions, could spend unlimited amounts on election activities. The growth in independent expenditures that had begun following BCRA increased substantially after the decision (e.g., Institute for Free Speech 2020). Not surprisingly, this growth ratcheted up the pressure to spend time fundraising. Reid Ribble, a Republican who represented Wisconsin's 8th district from 2011-2017, observed while serving, "...if you want your voice to be heard as opposed to some outside group speaking for you...you better do your job and raise enough money that you can" (O'Donnell 2016). Likewise, Steve Israel, a Democrat who represented New York's 2nd district from 2001-2013 and 3rd district from 2013-2017, reported that for most of his career, he would "put in about an hour, maybe an hour and a half, at most, two hours a day into fundraising. And that's the way it went until 2010, when *Citizens United* was enacted. At that point, everything changed. And I had to increase that to two, three, sometimes four hours a day, depending on what was happening in the schedule" (O'Donnell 2016). A final factor that has arguably contributed to the centrality of fundraising is the high competition for majority status of Congress, with neither party maintaining a secure majority for an extended period (e.g., Lee 2016). Of course, in another world, such as one in parties were less dependent on members for fundraising, the competitiveness of Congress could potentially have alternative effects, such as in the most optimistic world, an increased focus on problem-solving. However, under the current campaign finance structure and broader dynamics, parties are highly dependent on House members' efforts for fundraising, and this context has significant downstream consequences for legislative problem-solving.

Implications for Problem-Solving

Perhaps the most obvious effect of the centrality of fundraising is that members have significantly less time for problem-solving. The time crunch is a recurring observation of current and former members (e.g., Deutch 2015; Roemer 2015; Issue One 2017). As Ted Deutch, a Democrat who represented Florida from 2011-2023, pointed out while in office,

"Members of Congress are dedicating more of their time in Washington to fundraising...Doing so may help protect themselves in the next primary or maintain their scorecard grade, but it discourages thoughtful debate on the issues, and erodes the public's confidence that we are able to compromise on solutions that move our country forward" (Deutch 2015).

Scholarship suggests that due to these time pressures from fundraising, policymaking ends up being shortchanged or outsourced to others such as lobbyists (e.g., Torres-Spellicy 2018). Likewise, research on state legislatures shows that those which have instituted bans on in-session fundraising have then produced a higher volume of collaborative, significant legislation (e.g., Kistner forthcoming). While similar quasi-experimental analysis of Congress is not feasible due to a lack of variation in this policy, there is no reason to think that the broader implication of the finding – that time spent fundraising takes away from time on problem-solving – is limited to the states.

A reduced amount of time on problem-solving is not the only downstream effect, however. Scholarship suggests that donor opinion has a significant impact on the policies that House members (Canes-Wrone and Miller 2022) and Senators (Canes-Wrone and Gibson 2019b) support, and preliminary analysis indicates this influence is higher now than it was four decades ago (Canes-Wrone and Gibson 2019a).

These findings align with evidence that individual donors are motivated by members' issue positions and roll call records when deciding whether to give to a particular candidate (e.g., Barber, Canes- Wrone, and Thrower 2017; Meisels, Clinton, and Huber 2023). Moreover, since donors' policy preferences diverge from those of the public (e.g., Barber 2016; Broockman and Malhotra 2020), the influence is suggestive of a world in which members cater to donors' preferences rather than solve problems in ways consistent with the preferences of voters. Of course, in theory divergent donor preferences could incentivize problem-solving.

However, existing work suggests individual contributors are more ideologically extreme on domestic issues than even primary constituencies are (e.g., Bafumi and Herron 2010; Broockman and Malhotra 2020), and that this polarization incentivizes policy gridlock on issues over which Americans favor compromise and government action (e.g., Bonica et al. 2013; La Raja and Schaffner 2015).

In sum, current congressional dynamics are ill-suited to the hard work of problem- solving. Members are incentivized to allocate much of their time and effort towards fundraising for themselves and their party. Accordingly, even those members who would strongly prefer to focus on negotiating policy solutions find themselves without the bandwidth. And ironically, under the contemporary system, this bandwidth is particularly in short supply for those with high-level committee and chairmanship responsibilities—the members who traditionally would take the lead on problem-solving.

Consistent with these dynamics, surprising numbers of members with prominent positions are voluntarily stepping down, claiming that the lack of rewards for working on policy is a major factor (e.g., Draper 2024). Likewise, potential new members are discouraged by the prominence of fundraising and corresponding deemphasis on problem-solving. As former Representative Rick Nolan states, who served Minnesota's 6th district from 1975-81 and then returned to serve the 8th district from 2013-19, "I could give you names of people who've said, 'You know, I'd like to go to Washington and help fix problems, but I don't want to go to Washington and become a mid-level telemarketer, dialing for dollars, for crying out loud' " (O'Donnell 2016).

Potential Reforms

What might shift the demand for problem-solving by Congress? At least two types of reforms could alter the dynamics in the near term. First, to reduce the dependence of the parties on members for fundraising, we could allow the parties to raise more money directly. Most importantly, such a reform would give members more time for problem- solving. Additionally, because party organizations have incentives to support moderate candidates that are more likely to win in general elections (e.g., Hall 2015), the development could result in lower polarization within Congress and by extension reduce the likelihood of gridlock. La Raja (2025), which describes the recommendations of an elections task force of which I am a member, argues for this change to campaign finance law in detail.

A second type of reform that would increase the incentives for problem-solving would be to amend congressional rules and procedures to better reward members' and committees' efforts at this endeavor. Over the past decades, in each party the leadership has increasingly centralized policymaking (e.g., Lee 2016). Correspondingly, bills reported out of committee have become less likely to receive a vote or be enacted (e.g., Canes-Wrone et al. 2024). Obviously, members' incentives to exert efforts in committees on problem-solving are lower if the bills produced by these efforts are unlikely to receive consideration by the floor. In *Revitalizing the House: Bipartisan Recommendations on Rules and Process*--a report produced by a task force I co-led of former members, staffers, and academics—we make multiple proposals to better incentivize problem-solving. For instance, we suggest reforms to the discharge petition, the consensus calendar, and to rules on amendments that receive a minimum threshold of co-

sponsors from each party. Additionally, we propose a new rule that we call “Guaranteed Regular Order,” which would allow standing committees each year to receive a floor vote on a designated bill that has gone through a robust committee process, including markups, and garnered a sufficient threshold of committee support (Canes-Wrone et al. 2024).

Of course, in addition to these types of reforms, there are other developments that could shift the incentives for congressional members. The decline of local news has reduced a critical source of position and policy accountability for members (e.g. Arnold 2004; Canes-Wrone and Kistner 2023), and local newspapers have been experimenting with new market models to increase readership in the age of the internet (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2019). Alternatively, some scholars argue that ranked choice voting (e.g., Foley 2025) or a shift to proportional representation (e.g., Drutman 2025) would alter members’ policymaking incentives towards problem-solving. These actions are less directly within congressional control (even the electoral reforms would require state government action), and I have focused on ones that Congress could directly and immediately undertake.

Conclusion

A common theme in writings about the current Congress is that it has become dysfunctional in ways that limit its ability to solve the critical issues of the day (e.g., Mann and Ornstein 2012, Binder 2015). This brief has argued that a major source of the dysfunction is the current dynamics surrounding members’ need to spend so much of their time and energy fundraising for their parties. These dynamics have resulted from a series of developments both inside and outside of Congress, and this brief has outlined some potential reforms related to campaign finance and congressional rules that could help incentivize problem-solving. Of course, as Mann and Ornstein (2012) point out, if voters simply rewarded problem-solving rather than obstruction or grandstanding, members would adapt their behavior accordingly. I therefore end with some suggestions for data and research related to accountability and representation; at least one such case, the data themselves might incentivize members to spend more time on problem-solving.

First, while fundraising is a metric that can be publicly disseminated to ward off challengers and signal support from constituents, members’ attendance at committee meetings -- the activity that in theory is most associated with the hard work of problem-solving -- is not made public. Members therefore have limited ability to showcase stellar participation and challengers little capacity to highlight a lack thereof. Recording this information and making it publicly available would incentivize better attendance and participation. Moreover, as scholars, we currently lack systematic data from which to assess how committee attendance corresponds to metrics such as legislative effectiveness (Volden and Wiseman 2014) or other measures theoretically associated with problem-solving. Data on committee attendance would enable this type of analysis.

Second, although there is preliminary evidence that the relationship between donor opinion and legislative voting is higher now than four decades ago, this evidence is limited to only a few issues and congresses. Ideally, a more systematic study would assess if over time legislators’ votes have become more closely aligned with donor opinion and less aligned with district opinion. This type of analysis would help evaluate whether the documented changes regarding the role of fundraising in congressional activities and organization correspond to outcomes related to representation. As such, the analysis could bear on questions regarding why trust in Congress has plummeted to historic lows (e.g., Binder 2015).

The 119th Congress will be the first to begin since the Supreme Court reversed the 1984 *Chevron* decision that required judges to defer to agency interpretations of congressional statutes. The reversal arguably encourages Congress to delegate less authority to agencies and craft bills with more precise

language, given that the courts will now scrutinize whether an agency action complies with the original congressional intent and statutory language. At the time of writing, it is unclear how Congress will respond to this development. For the past forty years, members have known that agencies would ultimately have wide discretion in implementation. Now that agencies' discretion is substantially reduced, and alongside it their ability to take charge when Congress delegates or avoids problems, members may possibly pay a higher price electorally if they fail to address the major issues of the day. This brief has offered ways forward should members wish to improve the likelihood that they will meet the challenges of a post- *Chevron* world.

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