Over recent years, “Congress is broken” has become a common refrain by voices inside and outside of the institution. The legislative branch neither engages effectively with those it seeks to represent nor makes headway on substantive issues. Special interests, meanwhile, have undue influence over what policy its chambers do advance.

A healthy democracy requires that we have a legislative branch that is able to carry out its responsibilities and earn the trust of the American people. And while there is no shortage of ideas for fixing Congress, reformers have to consider the complex incentives that drive behavior within the institution if they are to make meaningful improvements.

Through our working systems map, the Democracy Fund has sought to describe the core drivers of congressional dysfunction in order to find opportunities to improve how the institution fulfills its obligations to the American people. Our map is built from the insights and experiences of a diverse, bipartisan group of former members of Congress, staffers, lobbyists, journalists, and scholars. This work builds on the efforts of our partners at the Madison Initiative of the Hewlett Foundation. It reflects our current understanding of the system and is a work in progress.

From these consultations, we concluded that Congress is struggling to keep up with the mounting demands and pressures coming at it from a diverse, wired society. Further, the hyper-partisan political climate in both chambers has greatly weakened the institution’s capacity to function. Weakened congressional capacity has in turn further eroded public trust and satisfaction in the institution. This drives some segments of the public away from political engagement altogether, robbing Congress of different points of view while intensifying the impact of the loudest and shrillest partisan voices.
The struggle to translate intense political demands into legislative action is nothing new for Congress. Indeed, it is Congress’ job to listen and respond to the needs and priorities of the American public. As the map illustrates, present-day intensity of competition between ideologically-polarized parties for congressional control has spurred the hyper-partisanship that hampers congressional legislative capacity. Reduced resources, meanwhile, have made Congress more vulnerable to outside interests’ influence, weakening its ability to represent the will of ordinary citizens.

The map explores how external pressures like those generated by the threat of primary competitors and by establishment and partisan media intensify these trends. It also depicts the balances of power that shape relationships within the institution, including between party and committee leadership, between the rank-and-file of members of different parties, and between the executive branch and oversight committees. The intersections of these relationships further impact congressional effectiveness.

In trying to capture a full picture of congressional dysfunction, this map leaves out some of the productive processes that Congress continues to execute despite current challenges. Legislative bright spots do happen, displaying sparks of what could be possible in a higher-functioning system. Our goal in creating this map was to produce a document that could help uncover useful intervention points for improving the institution that would not rely on systemic changes to the legislative branch or require a wholesale reinvention of American politics.

The map’s multiple factors are organized in a series of loops or subsystems. Loops are characterized by the connections made between individual factors, and reflect how the increase (+) or decrease (−) in the significance of a given factor affects other related factors. As you view each loop, you will find associated research, case studies, and both supporting and any countervailing evidence.

We expect this map to evolve. It will be shaped and reshaped by how those working within the system decide to operate, how well Congress remains engaged with the public, and how political divisions within the electorate play out over the longer term.

THE DEMOCRACY FUND INVITES YOU TO USE AND IMPROVE THIS MAP.

The Congress & Public Trust systems map is an open-source tool that welcomes engagement by former members of Congress, hill staffers, lobbyists, journalists, academic scholars, government and nonprofit agencies, funders, and others. Through user involvement, we expect this map to be made more accurate, complete, and practical as a vehicle for improving the health of Congress and understanding the ways in which different forces and dynamics are contributing to the institution’s dysfunction.

You can explore the map and its elements at democracyfund.org/congressmap. As you do, we hope you will tell us how to better describe and illuminate the dynamics of the Congress & Public Trust system. Please contact us at congressmap@democracyfund.org to share your feedback or related resources for the map.