



REBUILDING CONGRESS FROM WITHIN

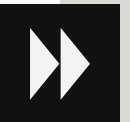
**How Factions Facilitate
Deliberation and
Lawmaking**

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Introduction

Congress is broken. The House and Senate do not deliberate—much less legislate—on the issues most important to voters. On the rare occasions when Congress works, it does so by relying on a centralized process dominated by party leaders that makes it harder for rank-and-file lawmakers to influence the legislative process. Instead of an inclusive and deliberative process, party leaders work with committee chairs and their staff, as well as with administration officials, to craft major bills behind closed doors with little or no input from most lawmakers. Rank-and-file lawmakers—Democrat and Republican alike—often don’t know what’s happening in negotiations until party leaders unveil the final product of their private deliberations. Leaders then rely on deadlines, or “cliffs,” to force quick floor action on the legislation. And they structure floor debate to limit rank-and-file participation and therefore make final approval likely using special rules in the House and by filling the tree and filing cloture preemptively in the Senate.

This paper is written for members of Congress, congressional staff, and donors who want Congress to function as a deliberative, legislative institution—and who are looking for practical ways to engage that do not bypass or weaken it. Healthy and robust factions are a key tool for Congress to organize disagreement and decision-making.

For lawmakers and staff, the paper explains how factions operate inside the House and Senate, when they matter most in the legislative process, and how they can be used to expand participation, influence outcomes, and navigate internal party divisions. For donors and philanthropic organizations, it offers a framework for understanding

factions not as partisan obstacles, but as institutional infrastructure that channels political energy into legislating rather than around it.

The central claim is that Congress's dysfunction is not primarily a failure of expertise or goodwill, but a failure of internal organization. Factions are one of the few tools available—within existing rules and incentives—to address that failure. The sections that follow are intended to help readers evaluate when factions are likely to be effective, how they interact with parties, committees, and outside groups, and what kinds of support strengthen Congress rather than substitute for it.

This paper considers how factions can help decentralize Congress's decision-making process. Factions have a proven record of empowering lawmakers to participate in the legislative process in both parties and in both chambers. To that end, the paper defines factions, outlines the conditions in which they form, and details how they empower lawmakers to influence policy outcomes and win elections. The paper then reviews the relationship between factions and outside advocacy groups. The paper concludes by considering the ways in which philanthropy can help solve Congress's gridlock problem—and reduce dysfunction in the House and Senate—by encouraging factions.

The Gridlock Problem

Congress's centralized decision-making process is responsible for its present gridlock. Crafting legislation behind closed doors and relying on crises and deadlines to force floor action limits how many bills the House and Senate can pass in each two-year period—even when it works. Outside the annual appropriations process, there are few crises and deadlines that leaders can leverage to pass legislation while limiting rank-and-file lawmakers' participation. A centralized process also makes it harder for lawmakers to compromise with one another, especially when negotiations involve controversial issues. The process does not reveal needed information about lawmakers' preferences. Its secretive nature also incentivizes negotiators to take a hard line because a private decision-making process imposes few political or personal costs on lawmakers. Making decisions behind closed doors allows lawmakers to take public positions while rejecting proposals that fall short of them in private.

A centralized decision-making process also causes Congress's present gridlock because it limits the ability of rank-and-file lawmakers and, by extension, their constituents to influence House and Senate deliberations between elections. Crafting legislative proposals behind closed doors, waiting until the last minute to release them, and limiting debate and amendment opportunities on the House and Senate floors to ease their passage obscures the inflection points in the process at which people interested in the process can best influence it.

The process is designed so that rank-and-file lawmakers, their constituents, and outside advocacy groups lack the time and information needed to influence the substantive provisions of bills before Congress votes on them. Without that ability, there are few reasons for lawmakers to accept suboptimal outcomes in major debates.

Congress's gridlock is persistent because its centralized decision-making process produces a self-reinforcing dynamic. Relying on party leaders and committee chairs to craft legislation leads lawmakers to think about policy change primarily in terms of

elections. With only a few pivotal lawmakers playing an outsized role in the legislative process, Congress begins to look like a complex factory that produces legislation instead of a deliberative assembly where elected representatives adjudicate their differences and legislate. This is because the party that controls a majority of the House and Senate gets to pick the party leaders and committee chairs, who then get to negotiate the bills that rank-and-file lawmakers are asked to vote for or against in each chamber. And party leaders use the prospect of losing (or not winning) the majority in the next election to deter rank-and-file lawmakers from acting independently to achieve their goals and instead acquiesce in a decision-making process that limits their ability to participate. Consequently, what a lawmaker does in office is less important to policy outcomes than the political party to which they belong.

Lawmakers—Democrats and Republicans alike—are frustrated with this dysfunctional *status quo*, even when they are in the majority. House and Senate majorities have difficulty advancing their legislative agendas because they are divided internally on what issues they should prioritize and how aggressive they should be in pushing them. And Congress's centralized process is especially ill equipped to advance major legislation when the parties are divided internally on the underlying issues. Consequently, internal division among party members makes it harder for leaders to advance legislation through the House and Senate when it is negotiated behind closed doors, and opportunities for rank-and-file lawmakers to debate and amend proposals are limited.

How Factions Can Help

In today's Congress, most leverage flows through party leadership and committees. Factions reallocate leverage horizontally, among rank-and-file lawmakers, by coordinating action at predictable moments in the legislative process. While political parties remain the primary formal structures of coordination in Congress, factions can become essential complementary mechanisms through which rank-and-file lawmakers organize participation, share information, and exercise leverage within—and sometimes across—party lines.

Factions can help fix Congress and change its gridlocked *status quo* because they decentralize its decision-making process. The key is to make it easier for rank-and-file lawmakers to participate in the legislative process, not harder. When they do, the result will be more debate, deliberation, voting, and compromise. History demonstrates that lawmakers can deliberate and legislate on major issues using an open and inclusive process, even when they disagree deeply with one another. Its lesson is that the only way the House and Senate can sustain their legislative productivity in the context of today's divided parties is by using an open and deliberative process that facilitates the participation of interested lawmakers.

Factions can help solve Congress's present gridlock problem because they make it easier for lawmakers to participate in the legislative process, especially in the current environment. Factions allow rank-and-file lawmakers who are not invited into closed-door negotiations with committee chairs and party leaders to force their way in and, in the process, influence the policies that Congress ultimately approves. Factions also empower lawmakers to participate meaningfully in floor debate and offer amendments. And they make it easier for people outside Congress to influence what happens inside it, both between and in elections.

Creating more opportunities for lawmakers—and the people they represent—to participate in the legislative process can help Congress legislate on major issues because

an inclusive process reveals more information about their preferences than a centralized process relying on private negotiations. The legislative process reveals information only to the extent that it generates opportunities for lawmakers to play an active role in it. A centralized process denies lawmakers operating in an uncertain environment with incomplete information the feedback they need to successfully negotiate compromises.

Increasing the information available to rank-and-file lawmakers, their constituents, and outside advocacy groups during major debates can therefore help Congress fulfill both its representative and deliberative functions while maintaining its legislative productivity. This is because compromise arises out of the “development of the group struggle itself, for the vicissitudes of this struggle create the conditions that promote cooperation and make it possible.”¹

Importantly, factions are not a departure from Congress’s institutional role; they are a mechanism for restoring it. As a leading scholar of congressional factions, University of Chicago political scientist Ruth Bloch Rubin notes, “intraparty organization represents a unique source of institutional authority that does not first require members to control majoritarian institutions.”² By organizing disagreement and collective action *within* the House and Senate, factions concentrate political conflict where the Constitution intended it to be resolved. Rather than displacing legislative bargaining into elections, the courts, or the executive branch, factions channel competing interests into Congress’s internal processes—committee work, floor debate, amendment strategy, and coalition building. In doing so, they redirect political ambition and ideological disagreement into the legislative chamber itself. Factions therefore strengthen Congress not by suppressing conflict, but by institutionalizing it, making disagreement productive, legible, and governable within the body.

1 Bertram M. Gross, *The Legislative Struggle: A Study in Social Conflict* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1953), 31.

2 Ruth Bloch Rubin, *Building the Bloc: Intraparty Organization in the U.S. Congress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 312.

What Are Factions?

Factions are informal groups of like-minded lawmakers who coordinate their efforts in the House and Senate to achieve shared goals. Factions are similar to Legislative Service Organizations (LSOs) and Congressional Member Organizations (CMOs) in the House and informal issue caucuses in both the House and Senate. However, this paper uses “faction” to refer to intraparty groups of like-minded lawmakers. That is, a faction is a group of lawmakers with the same party affiliation who work together on a regular basis to achieve shared policy and/or procedural goals. Factions also employ staff to provide various services to their members and who are responsible for facilitating their day-to-day activities.

While factions exist on both sides of Capitol Hill, they have been more prominent in the House. Lawmakers have formed factions such as the Democratic Study Group (DSG), Republican Study Committee (RSC), Freedom Caucus, Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC), Blue Dog Coalition (“Blue Dogs”), New Democrat Coalition (“New Democrats”), and Republican Governance Group (RG2) to enhance their ability to influence House deliberations and win elections. The Steering Committee (“Steering”) similarly helps its members influence Senate deliberations from an ideological location similar to the RSC or the Freedom Caucus.

These House and Senate factions operate differently because of each chamber’s unique institutional characteristics. The House factions have historically emphasized staff-level policy services and electoral branding. In contrast, the Senate faction has emphasized member coordination during major floor debates in the past. However, the Freedom Caucus and Congressional Progressive Caucus have emphasized member coordination in major House debates. And the Senate’s Steering Committee has expanded its initial emphasis on member coordination to include staff-level policy services.

Recent scholarship suggests that a faction’s majority-minority status affects its ability to influence policy outcomes in the House.³ It argues that minority-party factions have had more success in shaping House deliberations than majority-party factions. However, recent cases demonstrate that majority-party factions can influence policy outcomes at critical junctures in the legislative process and in major policy debates. In 2021, the Congressional Progressive Caucus opposed a \$1.2 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill until it received assurances that the House’s Democratic majority would also pass a \$1.85 trillion social spending and climate bill.⁴ And in 2023, members of the Freedom Caucus refused to support Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) for House Speaker until he agreed to their demands for seats on the Rules Committee and other important panels, as well as changes to the House rules.⁵

3 Andrew J. Clarke, Craig Volden, and Alan E. Wiseman, “The Conditional Lawmaking Benefits of Party Faction Membership in Congress,” *Political Research Quarterly* vol. 77, no. 1 (2024), p. 121–136, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10659129231196566>.

4 CPC members refused to support the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Public Law 117-58) until the Senate passed the Build Back Better Act (Public Law 117-169). The CPC successfully delayed passage of the infrastructure bill until November 2021 and secured reassurances from Democratic leaders in the House and Senate that they would vote on the Build Back Better Act.

5 In exchange for conservatives’ votes in the Speaker election, McCarthy agreed to give them seats on the Rules Committee and Appropriations Committee, committed to freezing topline discretionary spending at FY 2022 levels, and pledged to support conservatives’ preferred strategy when the House debated the debt limit later that year.

Why Do Lawmakers Form Factions?

Lawmakers form factions when Congress’s more formal forms of legislative organization—committees and parties—do not help them achieve their goals. Consequently, factions exist outside Congress’s committee system and separate from its party organizations. Lawmakers use factions to influence decision-making in both spheres. Joining a faction gives lawmakers access to information and bargaining leverage to influence private negotiations among committee chairs and party leaders that they otherwise would not have. In that way, factions decentralize the legislative process by facilitating their members’ ability to participate in it.

Lawmakers also form factions when their parties are divided on policy and/or the strategies and tactics best suited to enact it. As a result, leaders often see factions as obstacles to passing legislation that ultimately serve to weaken their party. Yet factions strengthen parties that would otherwise be divided by facilitating communication across intraparty differences earlier in the legislative process, especially in the House. They also act as pressure valves within those parties by giving disgruntled lawmakers a way to voice disagreement with party strategy, an opportunity to act independently if needed, and a distinct identity when their party brand polls poorly among their constituents. Recent scholarship has validated that strong factions can actually help leaders balance interests within the party.⁶

Understanding the conditions in which lawmakers form factions highlights why lawmakers form them. Lawmakers form factions to access policy services and coordinate their activities in the House and Senate when Congress’s committees and its party organizations do not help them achieve their goals. Factions help lawmakers affect what Congress does—and doesn’t do—by pooling their resources to hire staff and coordinating their activities inside the House and Senate, as well as building coalitions. Lawmakers also form factions to help them win elections. Factions are therefore tools

6 Ruth Bloch Rubin, *Divided Parties, Strong Leaders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025).

that empower their members to participate in the legislative process and/or win elections. Consequently, a faction's activities reflect its members' needs and the failure of committees and parties to meet them.

How Do Factions Impact Congress?

Factions offer their members policy services, coordinate their internal efforts to prevail in major debates, and build coalitions outside Congress to support them. Factions compete with party leaders to prioritize issues on the House and Senate agendas, define acceptable policy solutions to address those issues, and advance their members' priorities in major debates.

Policy Services

Factions offer their members' various policy services that enhance their ability to participate in the legislative process. They emphasize policy development and information-sharing when committees do not address their members' priorities or actively work against them. For example, liberals formed the DSG in 1959 to serve as a policy counterweight to committees dominated by conservative southern Democrats. And conservatives formed the RSC in 1973 because they were concerned that the Democrats and Republicans who controlled the House's committee system were not developing policy ideas they supported.

A faction's staff is largely responsible for providing policy services to its members.⁷ Faction staff work with their members' personal office staff and allied outside experts to research policy ideas and promote them in staff-level working groups.

Factions also develop and define comprehensive policy agendas reflecting faction priorities. For example, the New Democrat Coalition outlined a pro-growth "American Prosperity Agenda" in 2015. Both the RSC and CPC regularly propose alternative budget resolutions on the House floor.⁸ During the 2011 debt limit debate, Steering and the RSC

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- 7 Today, faction staff are funded out of members' personal office accounts in the House and Senate. Senate factions have always operated this way. In the House, faction staff were once funded out of official "shared staff accounts" for each individual LSO. Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) ended this arrangement by abolishing LSOs and their shared staff accounts in 1995. Prior to 1995, the House rules allocated funding for an LSO's/faction's shared staff account in proportion to a LSO/faction's total membership.
 - 8 Just as the House Budget Committee takes the lead on developing the majority party's annual budget resolution, the RSC's Budget and Spending Task Force takes the lead on developing its annual budget proposal. The CPC's annual

outlined a cut, cap, and balance proposal for raising the debt limit that included immediate cuts in federal spending, long-term statutory spending caps, and passage of a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution. The CBC increases members' legislative effectiveness by pooling staff capacity, coordinating bill drafting, and helping members navigate the committee and floor processes more strategically.⁹ And the Conservative Opportunity Society, a precursor to the RSC, advocated a proactive policy vision focused on economic growth during President Reagan's first term in office.

Faction staff also analyze legislative proposals under consideration in the House and Senate. DSG staff compiled detailed legislative reports, fact sheets, and issue briefs for its members. Staff also write and distribute in-depth policy analysis to provide members with an analytical and conceptual framework within which to make sense of complex issues. And they conduct "policy clinics" to help their members' personal office staff learn the ins and outs of priority issues. For personal office and faction staff, this means that policy influence increasingly depends on shared analytic capacity and coordination across offices, not just the strength of any single member's legislative shop.

Member Coordination

Factions engage in several activities to coordinate the efforts of their members in legislative debates, especially when committees and party leaders do not share their priorities. For example, conservatives created the Steering Committee in 1974 to protect their rights on the Senate floor and amplify their bargaining power in negotiations with the chamber's committees and party leaders. In contrast to the DSG and RSC in the House, Steering's focus was primarily coordinating floor strategy and tactics. According to one of its early executive directors, Steering's "sole purpose was to allow the conservatives . . . to gather and talk about what was happening on the floor."¹⁰

budget proposal is called "The People's Budget."

9 LaShonda Brenson, "*Where's the Caucus? A Study of Minority Agenda-Setting Behavior*," PhD diss., Department of Political Science, University of Michigan (2019).

10 Jade West, "Executive Director of the Senate Steering Committee (1982–1996) and Staff Director of the Republican Policy Committee (1996–2002)," Oral History Interviews, Senate Historical Office.

Coordinating the floor efforts of Steering’s members fell into two areas. First, Steering developed a floor watch system separate from the Republican Conference floor staff and party leaders to monitor the Senate floor and protect their rights. This was needed to ensure that party leaders would not propound objectionable unanimous consent requests in their absence. The members also discussed ways in which they could coordinate their efforts to offer amendments. Their amendments would advance their policy priorities and “would put the liberals on the defensive and give conservative candidates issues upon which they could run in November.”¹¹

Steering’s example demonstrates the ability of a faction’s members to influence the legislative process by working together to shape the procedures that regulate it. Procedure is important because policy outcomes reflect more than individual member preferences. The process that members use to aggregate their preferences to make a collective decision also matters. The rules determine how the House and Senate prioritize problems, when and where each chamber considers legislative solutions, and which lawmakers get to participate in the process. Consequently, factions may use the rules that govern the legislative process to advantage their preferred outcomes.

Altering the balance of power in a debate requires members on the outnumbered side to expand their coalition. They may do so in one of two ways. First, they may persuade their opponents to change their mind on the underlying policy. Second, and more importantly for the purposes of this paper, members may act strategically to create a situation in which their colleagues feel pressured to join them even when they are not persuaded of the merits of the underlying proposal. To do so, members may reframe the debate to emphasize issues that are better suited for mobilizing previously disinterested, or unsympathetic, colleagues to join them or acquiesce to their demands. Members may also use procedure to set up the debate so that their colleagues feel forced by circumstances to join them despite their underlying policy disagreements.

Historically, factions have played an outsized role in determining the rules by which the institution operates. In doing so, their members enhanced their influence in the

11 Paul Weyrich, Senate Steering Committee, *Memorandum for the Files* (1974).

legislative process. In 1923, a progressive faction within the Republicans opposed the election of Frederick H. Gillet (R-MA) to be Speaker until its members obtained concessions on House rules. In exchange for their eventual support, faction members received a commitment from the Republican leadership to allow an open-rule debate on a package of rules reforms. In the subsequent debate, the House adopted a rules package that included most of the faction's original demands.¹²

Members of the Freedom Caucus similarly used the 2023 Speaker election as leverage in negotiations with Republican leaders over committee assignments and changes to House rules. They were using their leverage to extract concessions from McCarthy and his allies to force them to share power. The Speaker election gave faction members leverage because McCarthy could not become Speaker without their votes.

The success of factions in these two Speaker elections highlights the influence they can wield by reframing the debate and/or structuring the legislative process to advantage their preferred outcomes. Their influence was made possible by their determination to act jointly at critical junctures. Their unity allowed them to obtain concessions from party leaders that they could not have achieved acting alone.

Coalition Building

Factions increase their members' ability to influence the legislative process by building coalitions of outside actors to support their policy priorities in major debates. Coalitions of administration officials, outside advocacy groups, and/or voters help factions level the playing field inside the House and Senate in struggles with intraparty rivals. Expanding the scope of conflict therefore allows faction members to compensate for the greater

12 The House adopted the rules reform package by a vote of 253 to 114. The package liberalized the discharge rule to make it more workable for members. Specifically, it created a discharge petition and stipulated that 150 signatures were required to successfully circumvent committee consideration of legislation. It also stipulated that discharge petitions would be the first order of business on two Mondays every month. The reform package prohibited the chairman of the Rules Committee from bottling bills up in committee with a pocket veto and repealed the so-called Underwood Rule of 1911 that made it harder to amend tariff and tax legislation on the House floor. The reform package required a two-thirds vote for same-day consideration of special orders reported from the Rules Committee and changed the procedures governing the Consent calendar to require three objections instead of one to block a member from calling up a measure on it.

institutional resources enjoyed by committees and party leaders (i.e., their gatekeeping and agenda-setting powers).

Factions see like-minded administration officials as powerful allies in debates with party leaders. Steering Committee members tried to strengthen their position *vis-à-vis* more moderate Republicans by persuading President Nixon to nominate conservatives to serve in his administration. The Freedom Caucus sought to leverage its close ties to President Trump during his first term to increase its influence in the House Republican Conference.

Factions often work with outside advocacy groups to generate pressure on non-faction lawmakers to support their policy priorities, even when they are not persuaded to do so on the merits. The RSC, Freedom Caucus, and Steering Committee worked closely with outside groups such as Americans for Prosperity, the Club for Growth, FreedomWorks, and Heritage Action to get House and Senate Republicans to join their effort to repeal Obamacare shortly after it was signed into law.

Outside advocacy groups help factions mobilize the constituents of non-faction lawmakers in support of their policy position in major debates. During the 2011 debt limit debate, a coalition of outside groups asked lawmakers to sign a pledge committing to oppose legislation increasing the debt limit without spending cuts, enforceable spending caps, and passage of a Balanced Budget Amendment to the Constitution. And the groups created a website to enable voters to easily determine if their elected representatives signed the pledge. Outside groups spearheaded a similar effort in 2013 in support of RSC and Steering letters pledging to vote against appropriations bills if they funded Obamacare. They created a citizen petition asking lawmakers to sign the letters and organized signatures by district and state so that lawmakers could easily track their constituents' support for the effort.

Outside groups also give factions important organizational support. They provide space for factions to convene their members (e.g., the Conservative Partnership Institute and House/Senate conservatives), host regular issue briefings, and host public policy conferences (e.g., the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's Annual Legislative Conference). The Heritage Foundation hosted weekly lunches for Steering and RSC staff.

Heritage also held RSC member retreats and hosted a leadership retreat for members of the Freedom Caucus. Outside groups also provide factions with policy research (e.g., the Progressive Caucus Center and the CPC, Third Way and the New Democrats Coalition). Finally, outside groups enhance factions' staff capacity with fellowships, internships, and staff training (e.g., the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, Congressional Progressive Caucus Center, Asian Pacific Institute for Congressional Studies, and Conservative Partnership Institute).¹³

13 The Senate maintains an up-to-date list of recognized fellowships at "Congressional Fellowships and Internships," Senate Employment Office: <https://employment.senate.gov/outside-fellowships-and-internships>.

How Do Factions Impact Elections?

Lawmakers also form factions to help them win elections. Membership in a faction gives lawmakers a “party sub-brand” distinct from their party affiliation that allows them to credibly communicate policy positions to their constituents.¹⁴ For example, House Democrats representing conservative districts created the Blue Dog Coalition in 1995 to signal their support for fiscal responsibility and national defense and to distinguish themselves from the cultural liberalism of the Democratic Party. Blue Dogs took faction-wide positions on issues to help their members oppose leadership and gave them a talking point to use in their districts—“I am a Blue Dog Democrat, not a liberal Democrat.” The CPC similarly gives its members a distinct party sub-brand centered on support for progressive policies like Medicare for All.

Factions also give their members access to a different donor base. For example, members of the House Freedom Caucus have access to affiliated PACs like the House Freedom Fund and the support of allied outside groups like the Club for Growth, which raises money from conservative donors to support like-minded candidates in elections. The Blue Dog Coalition also recently created outside organizations to support its candidates and give its members access to a network of like-minded donors.¹⁵ The Senate Conservatives Fund (SCF) supported leading members of the Steering Committee. SCF created the House Conservative Project in 2013 and supports conservative candidates in Republican primary elections, along with groups like the Club for Growth.

From the perspective of reelection-oriented chiefs of staff and policy-focused senior advisors, faction affiliation helps lawmakers manage their political risk and signals their policy positions to their constituents and key stakeholders. It gives members a credible way to distinguish themselves from the national party brand—without breaking with the party—when district or state conditions demand it.

14 Andrew J. Clarke, “Party Sub-brands and American Party Factions,” *American Journal of Political Science* vol. 64, no. 3 (March 2020), p. 452–470, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12504>.

15 The Blue Dogs are supported by Blue Dog PAC and Blue Dog Action, a 501(c)(4).

How Can Philanthropy Help Factions?

Philanthropy has invested heavily in making Congress work, primarily through a technocratic channel. However, it has historically avoided supporting factions, seeing them as too partisan or destabilizing. In short, philanthropy has seen factions as the problem causing Congress's gridlock, not its solution.

Factions are one of the few mechanisms inside Congress that translate political incentives—ideology, constituency pressure, electoral risk—into sustained institutional behavior. They allow lawmakers to pursue political goals through legislative procedures rather than around them. In this way, factions connect politics to institution building by channeling conflict, ambition, and disagreement into committee work, floor strategy, coalition building, and policy development inside the House and Senate.

Investing in factions is an underutilized and cost-effective way for philanthropic organizations to invest directly in Congress as an institution. Unlike strategies that seek influence primarily through elections, litigation, or executive action, factions operate inside the House and Senate and work through their formal procedures and informal norms. Because factions organize lawmakers to act collectively within the legislative process, philanthropic support enables political contestation to take institutional form—channeling disagreement into deliberation, negotiation, and collective decision-making rather than displacing it outside Congress. By aligning the interests of donors, advocates, and constituents with the internal incentives of legislating, support for factions strengthens Congress's capacity to govern from within instead of bypassing or weakening it.

Philanthropic support is most effective when it reinforces the ways Congress already organizes power and participation. While parties remain the primary formal mechanisms of coordination in the House and Senate, factions increasingly function as the principal vehicles through which rank-and-file lawmakers coordinate meaningfully—within parties and, at key moments, across them. Factions enable members to share information, develop policy positions, and act collectively when party leadership and

committees do not provide sufficient opportunities for participation. By strengthening these forms of internal coordination, philanthropic support deepens lawmakers' capacity to deliberate, negotiate, and bargain within existing rules and incentives, enabling institutional behavior to emerge from political contestation rather than displacing it outside the legislative process.

Factions are uniquely situated to help Congress work in the current environment. Lawmakers from across the political spectrum form factions to help them participate in the legislative process and win elections. Factions provide policy services, help coordinate member activity, and build coalitions that serve to decentralize Congress's centralized decision-making process. They democratize the legislative process and strengthen the accountability link between voters and their elected officials in the House and Senate.

Supporting factions is also a cost-effective way to improve Congress. It does not require creating new structures and organizations to bypass political parties. Philanthropy can help Congress function by resourcing the connective tissue lawmakers already use to participate in the legislative process: factions. Helping lawmakers build stronger factions strengthens institutions by directing action into the legislative process.

Philanthropy can strengthen lawmakers' ability to participate in the legislative process by supporting factions on many fronts. First, it can fund 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations that partner with factions and provide some services to factions such as policy development, member convening, or coordination, in compliance with House and Senate ethics rules.¹⁶ Second, philanthropy can support convenings at which representatives from different factions learn from one another's experiences and discuss best practices. Third, philanthropy can fund staff trainings and pipeline infrastructure in rules-compliant, 501(c)(3)-compatible programs. Philanthropy can also fund fellows at various factions to improve their staff capacity.

16 A 2025 example is the "Forward Together" report from the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation and the Joint Center. Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, "Forward Together: The Black Policy Playbook," accessed January 7, 2026, <https://www.cbcfinc.org/black-civic-engagement-hub/forward-together-the-black-policy-playbook-for-an-equitable-america>.

Conclusion

Congress's dysfunction is not caused by its members' lack of lawmaking expertise or their intent. Congress is dysfunctional because the members of the House and Senate are not organizing to deliberate and legislate in the present environment. Both chambers use a centralized, leader-driven process that limits participation and obscures the inflection points in the legislative process. Gridlock becomes the default. And when Congress works, it relies on cliffs, closed-door negotiations, and procedural choke points that leave most lawmakers and staff reacting to events instead of shaping them on behalf of their constituents.

Factions are one of the few tools available that can reverse this dynamic without changing the House and Senate rules or altering lawmakers' incentives. By reallocating leverage horizontally among rank-and-file lawmakers, factions make participating in the legislative process easier. They reveal information about lawmakers' preferences earlier in the process, avoiding last-minute blowups. And they create predictable moments when advocacy groups and the American people can influence negotiations, floor strategy, and coalition formation.

Factions help lawmakers in practical ways. They offer their members policy services that increase the analytical capacity of rank-and-file offices *vis-à-vis* leadership. And they facilitate lawmakers' coordination, helping to turn their shared priorities into collective action when it matters most. Factions also facilitate coalition building and empower their members to expand the scope of conflict when party leaders and congressional committees monopolize agenda control and limit deliberation on the House and Senate floors.

For institutional-reform-minded organizations, the implication is straightforward: supporting factions is an underutilized, cost-effective way to strengthen Congress's deliberative and lawmaking capacities from within—without bypassing party organizations or House and Senate committees, or by changing the rules. Helping factions function resources the connective tissue lawmakers already use to deliberate and legislate. If done well, supporting factions channels political conflict into deliberation and bargaining inside Congress, precisely where the Constitution expects it to be resolved in the first place.

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