A Roadmap for Enhancing Congressional Capacity on Science and Technology

Overview of a Report from the Harvard Ash Center[1]

Background

The debate over building science and technology (S&T) expertise and capacity in the legislative branch has largely centered on whether to restore the Office of Technology Assessment—a legislative branch support agency that has been unfunded since 1996—or increase capacity at existing support agencies like the Congressional Research Service and the Government Accountability Office. Despite the debate "how," there has been consistent bipartisan agreement about the need to address this problem.

A new paper from the Harvard Ash Center evaluates several different paths and institutional design challenges to build congressional S&T capacity and restore a technology assessment capability. This includes expanding and improving the GAO's Science, Technology Assessment, and Analytics (STAA) unit, as well as creating a new entity modeled on OTA called the Technology Assessment Service (TAS) designed to augment and compliment STAA. In addition, the authors recommend increasing staff capacity in committees and at CRS.

In contrast with OTA, which primarily served committees, the focus of this new capacity would also empower rank-and-file members with timely information to help them make decisions that are responsive to the value preferences of their constituents. The key value proposition of this new service will be informing policymakers to help them see value trade-offs more clearly and, therefore, efficiently hash out competing values.

Proposal

The authors argue the best strategy to build S&T capacity is to enhance the work being done by the GAO's STAA team by giving them more resources and independence, and establish a new Technology Assessment Service within Congress. This would entail:

- New authorizing legislation that gives STAA greater autonomy and increased resources;
- Making some technology assessments available to rank-and-file Members of Congress;
- Delivering reports on a timeline that is responsive to Congress's needs;
- Addressing non-technical values such as the ethical implications of new technologies;
- Incorporating best practices from similar efforts in other countries;
- Including "horizon scanning" about emerging technologies and their impact;
- Creating additional S&T policy positions in committees and personal offices; and
- Placing greater emphasis on economic analysis and market-oriented approaches (that is, not assume regulation and government involvement is the answer).

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[1] https://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/293408_hvd_ash_sciecne_tech_and_democracy_report.pdf