Summary of the NAPA Report on Congressional Capacity on Science and Technology

Overview. The ability of Congress to legislate upon and oversee science and technology (S&T) policy has been the subject of debate recently with high profile hearings (*e.g.*, Facebook and Google) and rapid societal changes driven by technology. Recently, Congress mandated a report on S&T expertise in the FY 2019 Legislative Branch Appropriations bill. The Congressional Research Service contracted with the National Academy of Public Administration to complete the one year study (published October 2019). NAPA, a nonpartisan nonprofit that has been advising Congress since 1967, was directed to meet three goals:

1. Produce a report detailing the current resources available to Members of Congress within the Legislative Branch regarding S&T policy.

2. Assess the potential need within the Legislative Branch to create a separate entity charged with the mission of providing nonpartisan advice on S&T issues, such as the former Office of Technology Assessment (OTA).

3. Address whether the creation of a separate entity would duplicate services.

Report Findings. After identifying gaps in S&T expertise, NAPA recommended[1] that Congress increase capacity at CRS and GAO and establish a new congressional office to coordinate S&T advice to increase Congress's "absorptive capacity" (the ability to take in and use new information). Congress is the most advised body in the world, yet does not have the resources to filter and evaluate this information. NAPA also recommended new authorizing legislation.

Analysis of the Report's Strengths and Weaknesses. The report does an excellent job in providing a comprehensive overview of congressional capacity, identifying absorptive capacity as an issue, and the need for authorizing legislation.[2] However, it contains significant weaknesses:

- It does *not* evaluate whether to restore OTA nor does it address similar proposals like that put forward by Sen. Tillis and Rep. Takano.
- While there is a critical analysis of GAO, there is no corresponding critique of CRS.
- Its assessment of the political landscape is fundamentally weak and underdeveloped. NAPA was not directed to evaluate political considerations (arguably Congress's role), yet it makes conclusions on "viability" and "feasibility" without considering a broader analysis of legislative branch appropriations.
- Costs are likely significantly underestimated. For instance, NAPA concludes enhancing resources at both CRS and GAO would only cost $1-2 million (when GAO itself estimated $15 million to expand STAA's capacity).
- It fails to address the congressional user's perspective (*e.g.*, where staff will find these reports, if they will be cross-indexed, and who will be authorized to request reports).
- It lacks sufficient detail about the institutional design of the coordinating office.

Next steps. The House's Science and Technology held a hearing on Congress S&T capacity at the end of 2019. Our detailed analysis on modern technology assessment for Congress was published by the Harvard Kennedy School in January 2020.[3] For more information, contact Daniel Schuman, Demand Progress, at daniel@demandprogress.org or Zach Graves, the Lincoln Network, at zach.graves@joinlincoln.org.

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[1] The NAPA report is available at https://www.napawash.org/studies/academy-studies/science-and-technology-policy-assessment-for-the-us-congress
[2] The Demand Progress Education Fund + Lincoln Network report is available at https://s3.amazonaws.com/demandprogress/reports/2019-12-03_Evaluation_of_the_2019_NAPA_Report_on_ST_Policy_Assessment_and_Resources_for_Congress.pdf.
[3] https://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/293408_hvd_ash_sciecne_tech_and_democracy_report.pdf