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Members of Congress share tech advice with incoming freshmen

WASHINGTON, DC — On December 9th, 2020, Members-elect of the 117th Congress joined current members, staffers, technologists, scientists, academics, and advocates for the inaugural Tech, Science, and Data New Member Orientation, hosted by the First Branch Tech, Science and Data (TSD) cohort.

Lawmakers shared advice on how to set up an office, find the right staff, and make use of technology, experts, and data to be more effective.

House Select Committee on Modernization Chairman, Derek Kilmer [D, WA], told the freshmen, “Congress is a fixer-upper. … My hope for you is that regardless of what side of the aisle on which you serve, and what motivated you to run for Congress, that you commit to putting in the work, to be part of the best parts of Congress.”

Ranking Member on the Committee on House Administration, Rodney Davis [R, IL], shared tips for navigating Congressional processes and urged the Members-elect: “That day when you raise your right hand and you become one of us, you are now part of the institution that you ran against. So do what you can to make it better!”

The TSD Cohort was founded by three former Congressional staffers in the wake of COVID-19 as a forum for collaboration and information-sharing. The Orientation is the first in a series of planned events to connect Members and staffers to resources to help them do their jobs better and operate more efficiently.

“We created the Tech, Science and Data cohort to bring together Congressional thought leaders to share their best practices and unique insights on how to leverage technology and become more data-driven to produce results for the American people. When Congress works better, we ultimately strengthen democracy,” said Melissa Dargan, CEO of TourTrackr.

“With COVID-19, it has never been more evident that now is the time for Congress to transform its technology and make sure it has access to the best and most useful tools. It gave me hope to see Members of Congress and congressional staffers participate in the orientation to discuss how to make Congress more accessible in these difficult times,” said Nicole Tisdale, Founder of Advocacy Blueprints.
“Members and staffers want to make Congress work better and there are many organizations and experts who want to help them do that. We hope this event helps the Freshmen understand the resources available to them and their own role in helping the institution evolve and improve to better serve the American people,” said Marci Harris, POPVOX CEO and Co-founder.

About the TSD Cohort

The First Branch Tech, Science, and Data Cohort was convened in the wake of Covid-19 by former Congressional staffers, Melissa Dargan, Marci Harris, and Nicole Tisdale, as a forum for information sharing and collaboration. The cohort is supported by Democracy Fund, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Siegel Family Endowment, and POPVOX. Cohort members include the Modernization Staff Association, AEI, Advocacy Blueprints, American Federation of Scientists, Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation, College to Congress, Congressional Management Foundation, Demand Progress, Democracy Fund, GovLab at NYU, Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability at OSU, the Lincoln Network, POPVOX, vendors for House-approved Congressional technology, and more.

For a full list of participants, please see below, and the attached program. Videos from the event are being released on a rolling basis. For further information, please contact tsd@popvox.com.
Members of Congress

Representative Derek Kilmer, WA-7, Chairman of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress

“There’s some good news and bad news about being a new Member of Congress,” Chairman Kilmer said in his opening remarks for the TSD Orientation. “The good news is that serving as a Representative has the potential to be one of the most rewarding and impactful experiences of your life. You can make a real difference for your neighbors and for your community. The bad news is that Congress is a fixer-upper. [...] My hope for you is that regardless of what side of the aisle on which you serve, and what motivated you to run for Congress, that you commit to putting in the work, to be part of the best parts of Congress.”

As Chairman of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, Representative Kilmer and Vice-Chair Fmr. Representative Tom Graves modeled that spirit of bipartisan collaboration, leading a bipartisan committee that empowered freshmen and longer-serving Members of Congress to set goals for a 21st century Congress, and submit recommendations for how we can get there. Many of the Select Committee’s recommendations have been implemented already in the 116th Congress, but work remains to be done. For more information, please see the Committee’s full list here.

Representative Rodney Davis, IL-13, Ranking Member of the Committee on House Administration.

As a former Congressional staffer himself, Ranking Member Davis discussed in his remarks the role technology must play in establishing a modern office: “At the heart of Congress’s duties is serving the American people. Adopting modern technology and increasing access and use of data to produce more impactful legislation are key advancements that not only bring Congress into the 21st century, but make it more efficient and effective. Events like this show Members of Congress how technology can save taxpayer dollars while leading to smarter lawmaking and better constituent service.”

Rep. Davis told the incoming Members, “That day when you raise your right hand and you become one of us, you are now part of the institution that you ran against. So do what you can to make it better!”

Representative Mark Takano, CA-41, Chairman of the VA Committee and winner of the 2020 Congressional Management Foundation award for Innovation and Modernization.

Chairman Takano and Deputy Chief of Staff/Legislative Director Yuri Beckelman focused on how Members of Congress can build a forward-thinking office by hiring entrepreneurial staff and empowering them to
innovate: “It is more important than ever for Congress to innovate and embrace technology, not only to be effective legislators but also to reach our constituents. From day one, my staff and I made this a priority and we have contributed to House efforts to modernize Congress by embracing innovation, science, and technology in our office practices. I encourage all of my new colleagues to take creative approaches to the legislative process and to constituent services to ensure that Congress stays relevant and keeps up with the ever-evolving needs of the people. Their constituents will appreciate it and, in turn, they will move America, and Congress as an institution, forward,” said Mr. Takano.

Representative Takano’s office has put that advice into practice. As Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, Rep Takano hosted the first virtual hearing of the COVID-19 pandemic. His staff also founded the Digital Dem staff association, and hosted the first virtual conference for Congressional staff to share best practices on digital implementation at the Digital Day on the Hill 2020.

Representative Seth Moulton, MA-06, winner of the 2020 Congressional Management Foundation award for Constituent Services

Representative Seth Moulton and District Director Rick Jakious focused on how the office integrates technology and transparency as a fundamental part of team culture, and on building a mission-driven team culture for success. “I think the value that perhaps underlies the more unique approach we take to serving our constituents is a sense of humility—that we don’t have all the best ideas. And if we’re serious about not just listening but acting on the ideas and suggestions, requests and complaints of our constituents, then we’re ultimately going to do a better job,” said Mr. Moulton in his remarks.

Two-time CMF Democracy Award winner Representative Seth Moulton has been a consistent innovator since election in 2014. Some specific tips his office shared for new Members included taking time at the start of your Congressional career to set a mission and values; a daily morning standup videocall to set priorities and a work tempo for the day, and creating a culture of shared consciousness through asynchronous platforms like Slack.

Representative Anthony Gonzalez, OH-16, member of the House Committee on Space, Science, and Technology; member of the House Committee on Financial Services

As a Freshman member of the House Committee on Space, Science, and Technology, Representative Anthony Gonzalez has led on big issues from safeguarding American intellectual property to fostering the development of high-tech manufacturing sectors. In conversation with Ali Nouri, president of the American Federation of Scientists, Representative Gonzalez had this advice for new Members on leveraging local and national tech expertise:

“Like anything, you start researching or getting yourself into, one book or one article is going to lead you down a particular trail. And what we do is typically reach out to the author, whether it’s a researcher or a reporter or whoever, and get them on the phone and say look, I love your research, I want to learn more about it, what else can you tell me? Those conversations are invaluable. And as a
Member of Congress, you can get most people on the phone. It’s one of the perks of the job. So if you’re very curious about a particular area, whether it’s research or otherwise, find the person you think is smartest in the world at it, and see if they’ll take your call. The way we engage researchers and technologists is that we just reach out to people directly. They may not want to engage as part of their day-to-day lives, but if you call them, you show interest, I’ve found that people are very excited to tell you about what they’re working on.”

Representative Raul Grijalva, AZ-7, Chairman of the House Committee on Natural Resources

Presenting another perspective on consulting sources of expertise in the policymaking process, House Committee on Natural Resources chairman Raul Grijalva shared the story of how his committee started the process of drafting the Environmental Justice for All bill at the source, by seeking input communities affected by the environmental issues the bill was intended to address before the bill was drafted, then continuing to seek feedback in partnership from stakeholders and communities through the bill’s drafting and launch.

In reflection on what new Members can learn from this process, he offered these thoughts: “We all come to Congress rooted in some values, and representing a constituency. When we get to Washington, that’s the urgency that we come there with. Having been here a while, there’s things that work against making that the constant priority that one should have. The pressure, the bubble that we’re in in DC… any mechanism that keeps us connected is important. What I saw, what I experienced, is that previously, we always tried to go get the buy-in after the fact, so you didn’t have the public support, the public will, pushing for pieces of legislation, simply because they weren’t involved, and they had no real investment in the issues. On major pieces as we go forward, on reconstruction and rebuilding our nation once we deal with this pandemic (God willing!) and come out of this dark period—I think that’s a lesson to be learned. How do you involve the people who have been most impacted—how do we rebuild, and how do we recover. I think that principle of inclusion and accountability serves us all well.”

Representative Scott Peters

In addition to offering a case study on introducing and coalition-building around a bipartisan piece of data-driven legislation addressing the COVID-19 crisis, Representative Scott Peters and Senior Legislative Assistant Anais Borja again stressed some of the themes from the conference about the breadth and quality of resources available to new offices, and the importance of curiosity and keeping an open mind in approaching finding the right-sized legislative solution to a problem.

“I’ve been in local government for a long time, in California, but you may not appreciate the amazing access to information that every member of Congress has. And then the people who want to help you get it right. So you’re right, I’ve got a great staff, I love my staff, but there’s only a few of them.”
Imagine—you know, I remember the first time I mentioned to someone you know, I'd love to just have a meeting about Mexican border policy. They said we'll put that together for you. The next thing I know, I get two ambassadors, I get a professor from the Wilson School. And it's almost more than I can use. But the thing I would say is, take advantage of the amazing intellectual horsepower and problem-solving horsepower outside your office in Washington. You'll find that you're not relying so much on the CRS (which is great!) to get back to you or your staff or get up to speed on something that he or she may be learning about for the first time. There's amazing resources in Washington. You just trip over smart people in Washington, so I think it's not that hard to get access to them and take advantage of that.”