HUMAN CAPITAL & INSTITUTIONAL DECLINE IN CONGRESSIONAL APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEES

BY CASEY BURGAT AND RYAN DUKEMAN

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U.S. CONSTITUTION, ART. 1, SEC. 9

FOREWORD

Given their authority over the purse strings of the federal government, the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations are two of the most prestigious in all of Congress. Yet, despite their notoriety, not much is known about the inner workings of the two committees responsible for overseeing a $4 trillion government budget.

We know they are important and we often decry their processes as broken but do we know how the appropriations committees actually work?

In an effort to answer this question, we felt it warranted to focus on the relatively anonymous individuals who execute much of the committees' day-to-day work: House and Senate Appropriations Committee staff.

For members of Congress, committee work is just one aspect of their elected office. For committee staffers, it is their entire focus. Though they are necessarily involved in appropriations processes, lawmakers rely heavily on their committees' staffers to negotiate with federal agencies and committees of jurisdiction; schedule hearings and markups; request and field reporting requirements; conduct oversight of appropriated funds to reduce waste, fraud and abuse; and to make recommendations (decisions, even) for actual dollar amounts to be appropriated in legislation.

It follows, then, that a deep dive into "approps." staff—including their numbers, tenures, salaries and career paths—is essential to understanding the committees and the congressional appropriations process at large. We also think this report offers context to and support for calls for reform.

In the lead up to this report, I held several off-the-record conversations with current and former approps. staffers about the committees and their work. Three common themes emerged.

First, the two appropriations committees are staffed with extremely capable people. They are smart, generally nonpartisan and care about the institution of Congress. They want the appropriations process to work better and share many of the same ideas about how to achieve that goal.

Second, the rest of Congress—to say nothing of the public at large—would be dismayed to know how little oversight of appropriated funds is actually conducted. Staffers work on several fiscal years at a time and are subject to political brinksmanship with the budget, which has inevitably led to continuing resolutions and funding via omnibus legislation. Very little time is left for staffers to review the effectiveness of the committees' appropriations decisions.

And finally, despite employing professional, expert staff, the committees can't keep them employed long enough. Serving as an approps. committee aide is seen as the pinnacle of a congressional career but it is not treated as an endpoint. Each of the people I talked to mentioned how hard it is to become a true expert on the appropriations process and quickly followed with some version of "just as a staffer begins to master what we do, they move on, often to the private sector."

Members and experts alike often call for a return to regular order. But, Congress is fast approaching a point where very few current members or staffers were around the last time regular order was followed. Can we reasonably expect to return to something no one has experience in doing?

Casey Burgat
Governance Fellow, R Street Institute

INTRODUCTION

Though the power of the purse famously resides within the legislative branch, Congress regularly and increasingly ignores its own laws that structure how the federal government is to be funded.[1] Regular order—the passage of twelve separate appropriations bills that traditionally make up the federal budget—has been replaced by last-minute "omnibus" legislating. The breakdown has been so complete that a 2015 Brookings Institution report concluded "The annual appropriations process is in a state of collapse."[2]

The result is a Congress and federal government that lurches from one continuing resolution to the next. Outside budget experts, and even members themselves, characterize the current ad hoc, omnibus-driven appropriations processes as ineffective, unpredictable and costly.[3] Moreover, omnibus appropriating has limited the opportunity for debate and oversight of congressional spending and has created a persistent threat of government shutdown, as has occurred twice already in 2018.

> Regular order has been replaced by last-minute "omnibus" legislating… The result is a government that lurches from one continuing resolution to the next.

This collapse of regular order has not occurred under staid conditions or in a vacuum. As more experienced senators and representatives are gradually replaced with new members, a growing percentage of the appropriations committees' membership has never seen a fully functional appropriations process during their congressional tenure. With this decline of institutional memory, it becomes ever harder to restore the appropriations process to its intended form. Instead a broken appropriations cycle has become the "new normal" for most committee members.

» ***So, what?*** In the past, seasoned committee staff provided an important counterweight to the inexperience of new members. These veteran aides, who in many cases hold their positions longer than even the most-senior committee members, have served as connective tissue between present circumstances and historical experience. Such experienced, expert staffers have provided a vital source of institutional memory to the committees and Congress.

[1] Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974

[2] Peter C. Hanson, "Restoring regular order in congressional appropriations," Brookings Institution, Nov. 19, 2015.

[3] "Leon Panetta testimony on Budget and Appropriations Process Reforms," Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, July 12, 2018.

However, as this report demonstrates, **the institutional expertise and human capital of staff is on the decline in both chambers,** even as the federal budget continues to grow. As a result, **staff who would traditionally be an important remedy to the decline of the congressional appropriations process are instead subject to the same limiting conditions as committee members themselves.**

» Without the expertise, experience and institutional memory of long-term staff, the committees are left with staff and members that have never experienced a normal appropriations process. This only becomes more troubling as their workloads increase with the size of the federal budget

Institutional expertise and human capital among appropriations staff is declining as the size of the federal budget continues to grow.

Our report provides **the largest analysis conducted on staffers who have served on either the House or Senate Committees on Appropriations.** Integrating nearly 35,000 payment records from as far back as 2001, this report transforms raw data from Legistorm.com into a comprehensive database of individual and committee-wide insights on the state of human capital in Congress's appropriations committees.

KEY, ORIGINAL INSIGHTS INCLUDE

» a measure of workload increase for each committee staffer in light of the continuing increase in government spending;

» novel analytics on the average salaries of staffers in various positions on the committees;

» counts of appropriations staffers who have served as lobbyists, and the subsequent pay differences between those who have and have not lobbied;

» in-depth analysis of gender dynamics among appropriations committee staff—including pay and tenure discrepancies—as well as typical paths staffers take to reach the appropriations committees, often seen as the most prestigious jobs the Hill has to offer.

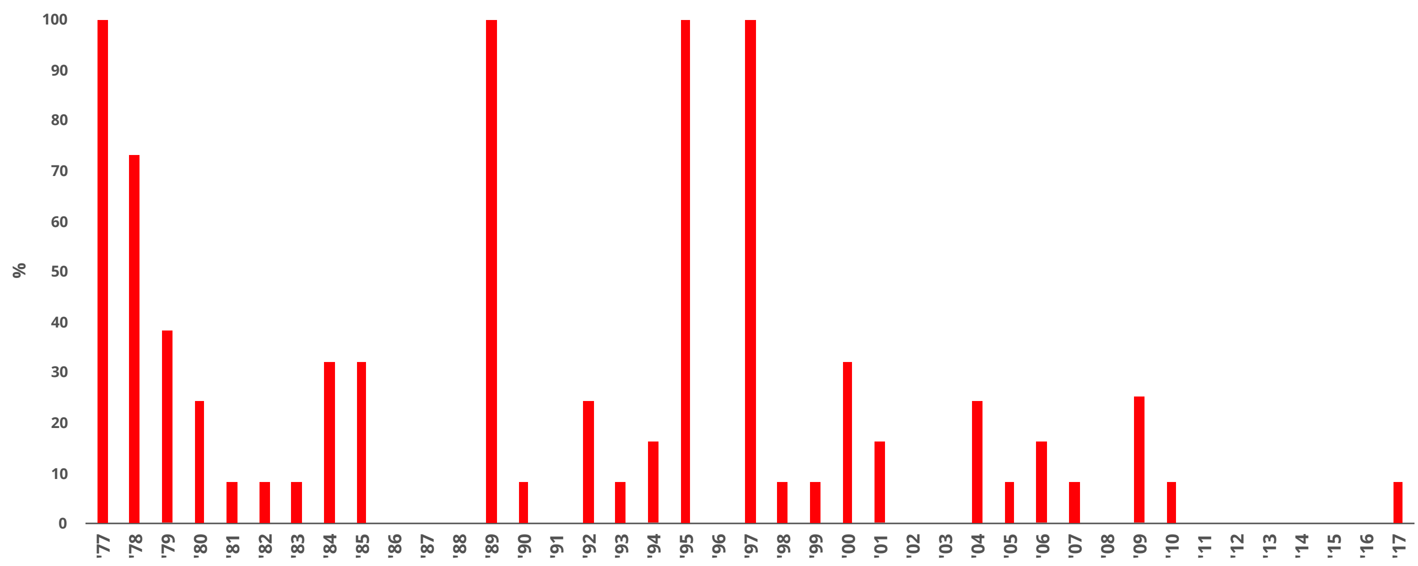
In an era of fractured, dysfunctional congressional appropriations processes, this report presents a stark picture of the challenges that face staffers who oversee the $4 trillion federal budget. These staffers operate under conditions of heightened politicization, decreasing real-dollar salaries and rapidly growing workloads. Ultimately, the capacity decline within these committees over the past two decades has produced a less-effective, less-scrutinized, less-predictable federal budget. Such conditions affect all facets of government and the American taxpayer.

Figure 1: Irregular Appropriations and the "New Normal"

INSTITUTIONAL BREAKDOWN IN THE CONGRESSIONAL APPROPRIATIONS PROCESS

Since FY 2011, Congress has only passed 2 regular appropriations bills, as reliance on continuing resolutions and omnibus measures has become the "new normal"

Percentage of Stand-Alone Appropriations Bills Enacted On or Before October 1 of Each Fiscal Year



SOURCE: Congress.gov via Pew Research Center

Under "regular order," the House and Senate each pass 12 separate appropriations bills, to be signed into law by the president before the start of the fiscal year in question. The process is scheduled to take place from February (when the president's budget proposal is submitted to Congress) through September, with the federal fiscal year beginning on Oct. 1. When Congress and the president are unable to agree on a set of regular appropriations bills, Congress traditionally resorts to "continuing resolutions" (CRs)––stopgap measures that fund government programs at current levels for a specified period of time––or an "omnibus bill"––a single proposal that combines multiple appropriations measures.

When funds are not authorized by the expiration of current funding measures, the federal government enters a "shutdown," as has happened six times since Fiscal Year (FY) 1991, including twice in FY2018.

Irregular appropriating via continuing resolutions and omnibus measures greatly increases risk and decreases effectiveness in the federal spending process. They tend to result in last-minute, back-room agreements, void of the open hearings and legitimate scrutiny that regular order provides. This irregularity also reduces the certainty and predictability of billions of dollars in agency funding for programs on which Americans' state and local governments depend.

As **Figure 1** shows, since FY1998, and especially since FY2011––the first budget cycle following the Tea Party wave in 2010––regular order has largely disappeared from Congress's appropriations process. Instead, appropriations have been executed overwhelmingly by continuing resolutions and omnibus spending bills.

How dysfunctional has the congressional appropriations process become? Since FY1990, Congress has followed regular order and passed a complete set of appropriations bills only twice (FY1995 and FY1997). This means that any member or staffer serving fewer than 20 years in Congress has not seen the appropriations process work on time as prescribed by the 1974 Budget Act. Only 16 percent of current Representatives and 14 percent of Senators were in Congress the last time regular order was followed.

Since FY2011, congressional appropriators have only passed two regular funding bills. They haven't passed a full set of appropriations bills on time since 1997.

Since FY1997, Congress has passed 50 percent of the 12 separate appropriations bills only once (FY2010). In fact, Congress has passed a total of two individual appropriations bills over the last eight fiscal years.

Against this backdrop of institutional dysfunction and decreasing ability to pass a regular set of appropriations bills, congressional actors necessarily increase their reliance on staff to make many of the critical, last-minute technical and legislative decisions about haphazard, ad hoc agreements covering the federal budget. Such a situation serves to raise and illustrate the importance of well-resourced, experienced, knowledgeable staff; unfortunately, as the rest of the report shows, these levels of human capital are decreasing in both appropriations committees, further compounding the risk of dysfunction and institutional decline.

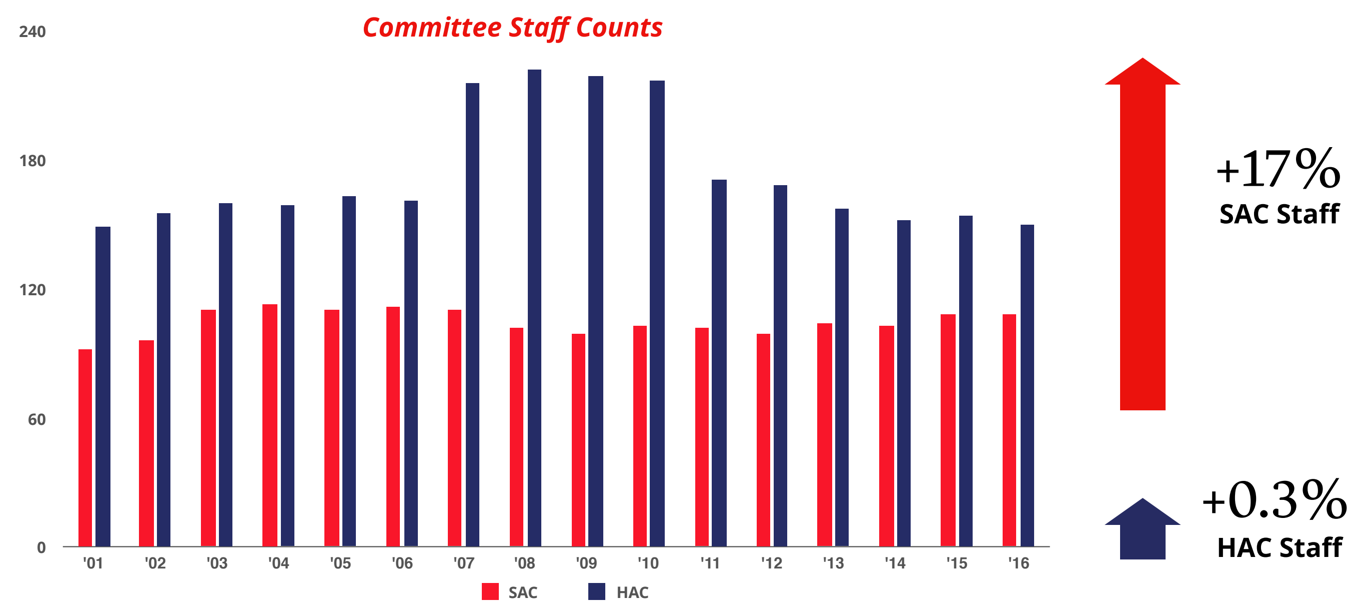
COMMITTEE-LEVEL DATA AND ANALYSIS

Given their crucial role, and despite year-to-year fluctuations, the House and Senate Appropriations Committees maintain some of the highest staff counts in Congress. From 2001 to 2016, the Senate Appropriations Committee (SAC) increased its staff totals from 92 people to 108—a 17 percent increase in 16 years.

Figure 2: Committee Staffing Levels Over Time

SAC & HAC STAFF COUNTS, FY 2001-2016

While SAC staff levels have gone up nearly 20%, HAC counts peaked during the Great Recession and then fell to prior levels



SOURCE: Created by author using data from LegiStorm.com.

As **Figure 2** (above) shows, staff totals peaked in 2004 at 113 before falling to 99 in 2009 and 2012, then rising again to their present levels.

In contrast to the relatively steady rise, fall and rise of SAC staff totals, staff changes on the House (HAC) side have been much more extreme. While overall staff levels remain essentially unchanged between 2001 and 2016 (at 149 people and 150, respectively), the flat trend-line belies major shifts in the committee's staff composition in the intervening years.

As Figure 2 shows, HAC staff levels remained relatively flat from 2001 through 2006 (149 to 161), then jumped significantly (to 216) following the Democratic takeover of the House in 2007. Staff levels then stayed essentially consistent during the four years of Democratic control, during which time major federal spending changes such as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, bailouts of the auto and finance industries, and the Affordable Care Act took place in response to the Great Recession.

Following the Republican takeover in 2010, HAC staff levels closely tracked those previously seen under Republican leadership, precipitously falling from 217 to 171 within the first year of Republican control, then steadily declining to 150 over the next five years.

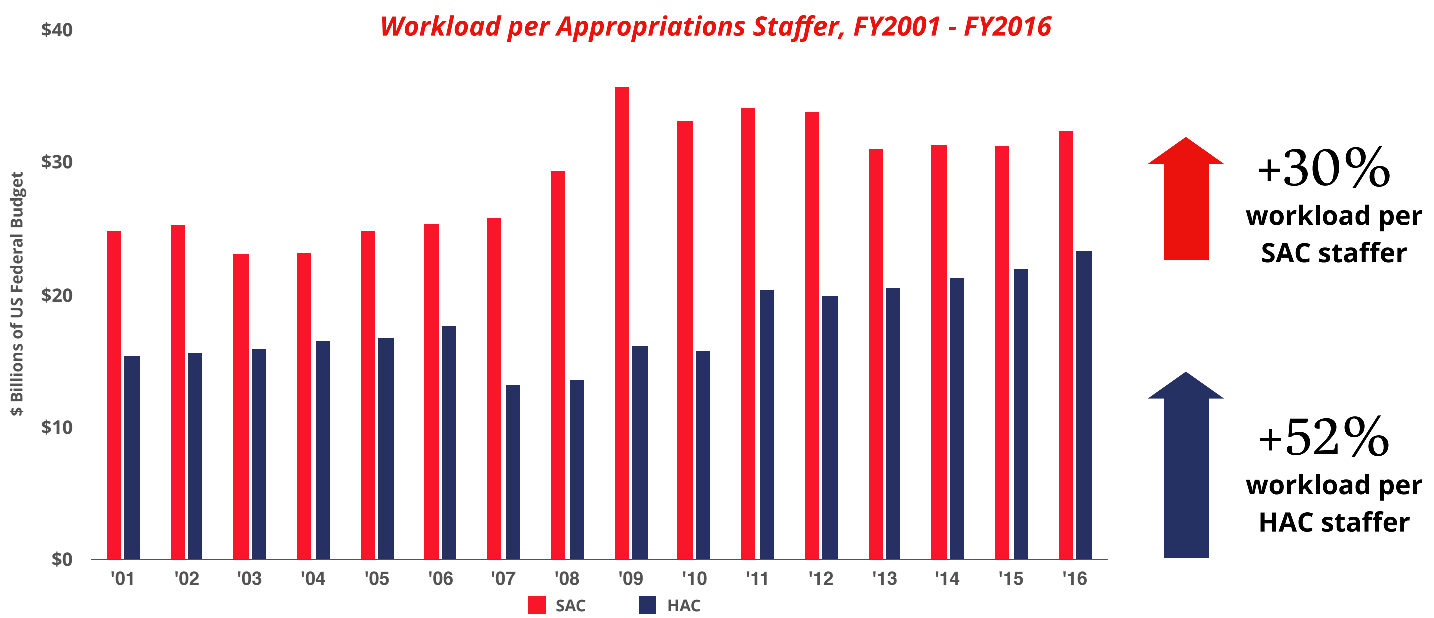
HAC staff levels surged nearly 40% after the Democratic takeover of the House in the 2006 midterm elections, then fell to previous levels when Republicans regained control of the chamber.

The data present a strong correlation between appropriations staff levels and partisan control of the chamber––but only on the House side. Initial hypotheses behind this cross-chamber difference include both greater cooperation and greater gridlock in the Senate. However, further research into these dynamics is needed to fully assess the reasons behind difference across the House and Senate staffing patterns.

Figure 3: Workload Increases

SAC/HAC WORKLOAD INCREASES

As the size of the federal budget has increased, congressional appropriations staff levels have not kept pace, leading to a dramatically higher Appropriations-per-Staffer workload responsibility



SOURCE: Created by author using data from the Office of Management and Budget's "Historical Tables."

Growing or stagnant appropriations committee staff levels may seem good relative to other congressional committees that have dramatically divested staff in recent years. The House Committees on Judiciary and Oversight and Government Reform, for example, have experienced 13 percent and 29 percent decreases in staff-level support, respectively.[4] But in order to determine the capacity of the House and Senate appropriations committees, the growth of the federal budget must be taken into consideration.

Accounting for the growth in spending on federal programs, our analysis creates a metric for appropriations staff "workload" from 2001 through 2016.[5] Measured as the size of the federal budget divided by the number of appropriations staffers for the HAC and SAC, their workload has increased dramatically in recent years, as the federal budget has far outpaced growth in House and Senate Appropriations Committee staff levels.

More specifically, according to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the U.S. federal budget––measured in constant, 2009 dollars to account for inflation––grew from $2.3 trillion in 2001 to $3.5 trillion in 2016. This roughly 53 percent increase in the federal budget has far outpaced growth in staff levels of the HAC (no change) and SAC (17 percent) over the same period.

» **As a result, workload per committee staffer has increased dramatically across both appropriations committees** in the last several years. In the Senate, each SAC staffer in 2016 was, on average, responsible for $32.24 billion in federal funds, compared to $24.74 billion in 2001. In the House, staffers saw their workload increase from $15.28 billion in spending per staffer to $23.21 billion. **This represents a 30 percent increase in workload for SAC staffers and a 52 percent increase in workload for HAC staffers** over the 16-year period studied.

SAC and HAC staff workloads have increased 30% and over 50%, respectively, since 2001.

[4] Please see LegBranch.com "Committee sheets" for these respective committees.

[5] Office of Management and Budget, "Table 1.3—Summary of Receipts, Outlays, and Surpluses or Deficits (-) in Current Dollars, Constant (FY 2009) Dollars, and as Percentages of GDP: 1940–2023," Historical Tables, accessed July 2018.

Even when accounting for the fact that roughly half the federal budget is mandatory entitlement spending and not up to the discretion of congressional appropriators, these workload increases are stark. Appropriators and their staffers do not have the same discretion to set spending levels on, for example, Social Security as they do on national defense or the Interior Department. But they remain responsible for understanding the drivers of increasing mandatory spending, scrutinizing trends, program performance and the underlying formulas behind mandatory spending levels. As such, even discounting for the portion of the federal budget not requiring the same degree of active scrutiny as the rest, the increases in workload faced by appropriations staffers in recent years should give Americans pause.

During the time period studied, federal spending increased greatly across a number of areas, including national security following 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; economic policy and financial regulation following the Great Recession; and healthcare in response to an aging population, rising costs and the establishment of Affordable Care Act subsidies and exchanges. In these and many other important areas, appropriations staffers are losing their ability to conduct rigorous oversight of how the government spends taxpayer funds.

Faced with growing workloads and a breakdown in appropriations order, congressional staff are stretched thin, responsible for managing, in some cases, over 50 percent more funds per staffer than they were 15 years ago.

» These trends, should they continue, convey risks that Congress will become increasingly unable to oversee and thoughtfully appropriate federal spending, and will continue to react in an ad hoc, inefficient manner to the priorities and problems of the federal budget.

STAFF-LEVEL DATA AND ANALYSIS

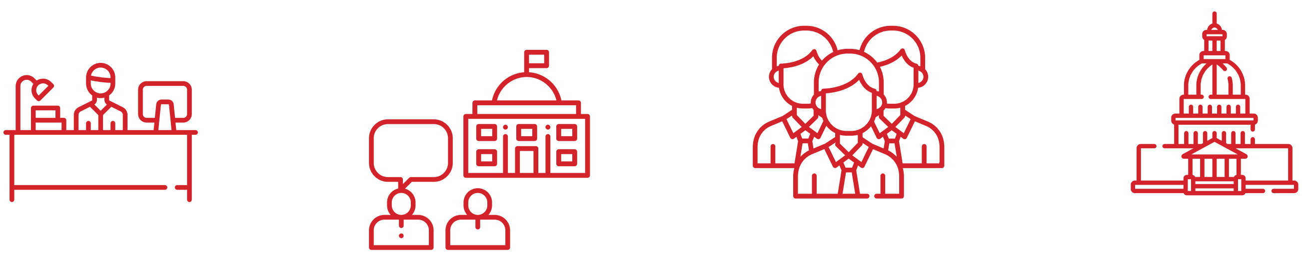
In an appropriations process that lurches from one "fiscal cliff" to another, spending decisions are decreasingly subject to open, methodological scrutiny by members and staff of key appropriations (sub)committees. With major legislation affecting the federal budget now sometimes literally written at the eleventh hour in illegible handwriting, last-minute decisions that affect billions of dollars in federal spending often fall to staffers who are most familiar with key programs and procedures. As a result, it is crucial to understand the level of human capital these staffers can bring to bear.

Accordingly, this section details common career paths, congressional tenures, average salaries, the financial returns from lobbying, gender dynamics and key House/Senate contrasts among appropriations staff from 2001 to 2016.

Figure 4: Career Paths

CAREER PATHS PATHS TO THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEES

Movement between committees is far less common than movement between personal offices, committees, and lobbying stints



52% of SAC and HAC Staff **previously worked in a member's office**, where they stayed for an **average of 3.6 years for the Senate and 6.6 years for the House**

30% of Appropriations Staff **leave to lobby *and* return to the Committees**

Once they make it to SAC and HAC, **staff tenures** average **4.8 years in the Senate and 4.5 years in the House**

Fewer than 3% of staffers jump from one chamber's Appropriations Committee to the other's (i.e. have worked for both HAC and SAC)

SOURCE: Created by author using data from LegiStorm.com.

Perhaps the most interesting set of findings from our original dataset are those regarding the career paths of appropriations committee staffers. Data on nearly 1,000 individual staffers paints several pictures, including how Hill staff find their way to the appropriations committees – seen as some of the most prestigious and powerful in Congress – and how long they stay in each role along the way.

- Just over half (52 percent) of staffers on each appropriations committee previously worked in a member's personal office.
- Those aides who previously served within a personal office stayed in that role for an average of 3.6 years in the Senate and 6.6 years in the House before joining Appropriations.
- Roughly 15 percent of staffers studied (144 of 987) served in both the House and Senate at some point during their careers.
- While overall, cross-chamber mobility was about 15 percent, cross-chamber mobility on the appropriations committees was extremely low. Across the period studied, fewer than 3 percent of staffers served on both chambers' Appropriations committees, which suggests that the vast majority of inter-chamber career transitions happen before one reaches appropriations.

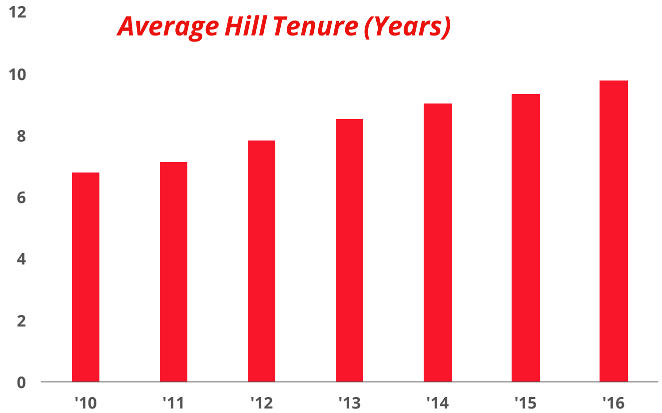
52% of appropriations committee staffers previously served in a member's personal office. Only 15% worked in both chambers of Congress.

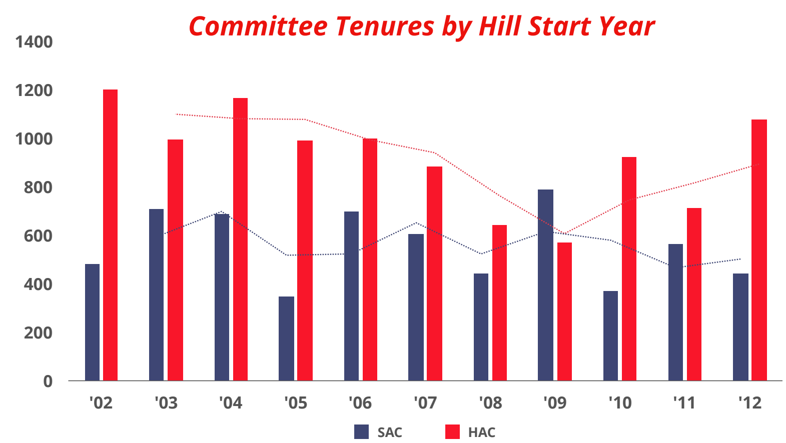
A number of factors may help explain such low rates of cross-chamber mobility for appropriations staffers. First, each chamber's appropriations committee may require specialized knowledge not easily transferable to the other chamber. Second, despite the overlap in substance and duties, the professional networks needed for mobility may be relatively weak. Third, staffers may not improve their potential future earnings or job prospects by serving in both chambers; it may be that service on one appropriations committee is enough. Finally, staffers may not be motivated to jump to the other chamber's appropriations committee, perhaps out of satisfaction with their current role.

- Having made it to a position on the committee staff, SAC staffers stay for an average of 4.8 years while HAC staffers stay for an average of 4.5. The main distinction across chambers, then, is not in **how long staff remain on the committee, but how long it takes them to get there. HAC staff who formerly served in a House personal office spent nearly twice as long in the personal office as their SAC counterparts in the Senate.**

Figure 5: Tenure

APPROPRIATIONS STAFF TENURES OVER TIME





Hill tenures since FY 2001 (when the data begin) have been steadily increasing at stable rates, suggesting available data do not capture the full tenure of senior Hill staff.

SAC and HAC tenures do not substantially increase with an earlier Hill start date, suggesting a consistent "Appropriations Staffer Lifespan"

Taken together, these findings suggest that a growing percentage of appropriations staffers have not been on the committee, or even the Hill, long enough to remember a "normal" appropriations process, leading to further erosion of institutional memory.

SOURCE: Created by author using data from LegiStorm.com.

Historical limitations in the dataset yield complicated conclusions with respect to appropriations staffer tenures. Because the data begin in 2001, tenure lengths face an artificial maximum of 17 years. Furthermore, we are unable to reliably determine tenures for staffers who served in years prior to the years available within our sample. A staffer may have started her service in 1995 but she will only show up in our database beginning in 2001. Thus, in 2003, she will show a tenure of two years rather than the correct eight.

Despite these limitations, analyzing a combination of Hill and committee tenures suggests that human capital and institutional memory in the committees are, in fact, declining.

Figure 5 (above) shows at left that the average number of years spent in congressional offices (personal and committee) by appropriations staffers has been increasing at stable rates.

While this would seem to be encouraging, further study reveals that committee expertise is not increasing as the dataset grows over time. In fact, the opposite is more likely.

The right side of Figure 5 shows the average tenure on the Senate and House Appropriations Committees for staff who started on the Hill in a given fiscal year, from 2002 through 2012. In essence, it shows whether the "lifespan" of appropriations staffers has been increasing or decreasing with the rise of a new generation of staff on the Hill.

As the graphs show, appropriations tenures appear to hit an inflection point with staff who came to the Hill in 2009. **Eventual HAC tenures for Hill staff starting as freshmen in 2002 through 2009 declined precipitously, falling from over 1,200 days to under 600 during the period.**

This aggregate trend is likely the result of both shorter stays for HAC aides as well as the attrition of longer-serving senior staff on the committee. But HAC tenures started to rebound in 2009, rising to nearly 1,100 days by the 2012 class. **Interestingly, this suggests that HAC staffers who started on the Hill in 2012 have nearly as much experience in appropriations as staffers who started on the Hill a decade earlier, in 2002.**

> The committee "lifespan" for appropriations staffers is such that HAC staff who started on the Hill in 2012 have essentially as much HAC experience as those who started on the Hill a decade earlier.

These shifts have not been as dramatic in the SAC but as the average line clearly shows, SAC tenures have been stagnant or slightly declining for Hill start-classes since 2002. **2012 Hill freshmen staffers currently have shorter tenures on SAC than do staffers from the Hill start-classes of 2009 and 2011, a subtle indication that SAC tenure lengths are decreasing.**

Taken together, these conclusions—that SAC and HAC tenures do not substantially increase with an earlier start date, nor with the addition of more years-worth of data—**strongly suggest there is an appropriations committee staffer lifespan of about four to five years that has slightly decreased over the last several years.** Specifically, as illustrated in Figure 5, SAC staffers over the entire period had an average tenure of about 4.8 years, while staffers on HAC had a committee tenure of about 4.5 years.

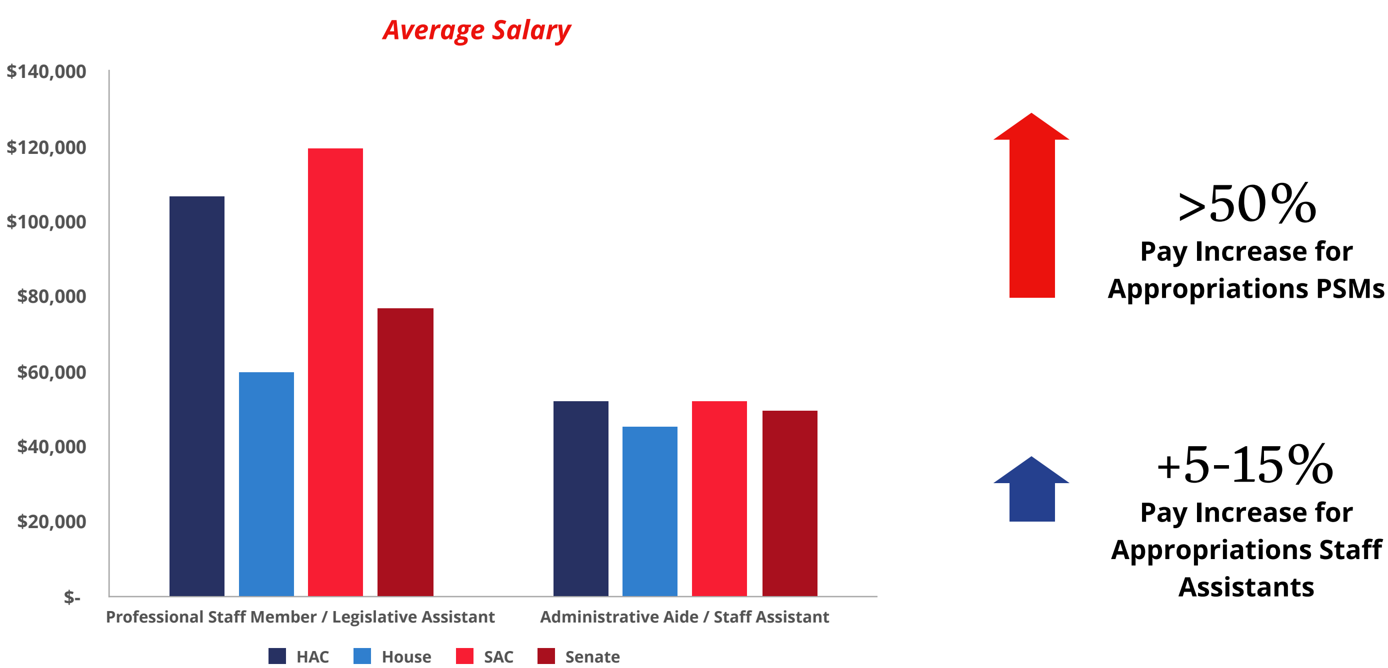
Why does this matter and what does it mean for the quality of appropriations bills and federal spending policies these committees produce?

- » If the average committee tenure is consistently less than five years (as over a decade's worth of data suggest), then **we are currently at least one full "generation" removed from a normal appropriations process.**
- » Taking Figure 1 and Figure 5 together, the implication is clear: **a large and ever-growing percentage of appropriations staffers have never been on the Hill for a normal appropriations process** and will only know the irregular processes that have been normalized over the last several years.
- » Without staff who have experienced the appropriations process as intended, **committees will continue to rely on an ever-more-entropic system for governing trillions of dollars in federal funds. Staff will not be able to provide members with institutional knowledge and committee know-how if they lack it themselves. And, in turn, the ad hoc, messy and unsuccessful appropriations process we now know will become ever-more entrenched**, increasing risk and decreasing public and congressional oversight of trillions of federal dollars.

Figure 6: Salaries

APPROPRIATIONS SALARIES

Financial returns to joining the appropriations committees confirm the conventional wisdom that appropriations posts are among the most desirable on the Hill



SOURCE: Created by author using data from LegiStorm.com and the Congressional Research Service.

Salary data is a rare area where our analysis confirms, rather than rebuts, conventional wisdom. To understand the financial benefits of joining the appropriations committees' staff, we took the two most common positions—Professional Staff Member (PSM) and Administrative Aide/Staff Assistant—and compared average salaries for these positions in appropriations (from 2001 through 2015) with average salaries for them in the House and Senate as a whole.[6]

- The results of this comparison show a clear and distinct boost in pay for appropriations committee staffers compared to Hill averages for the same positions.
- At the bottom of the ladder, HAC and SAC Staff Assistants made up to 15 percent more than the Hill average for Staff Assistants.
- While the range of roles is greater for Professional Staff Members/Legislative Assistants, and thus harder to compare, the difference in pay was even more striking. Appropriations PSMs earned over 50 percent more than the average Legislative Assistant on the Hill.

These differences between appropriations and Hill-wide pay for given positions reflect the premium that members and senators place on good candidates for appropriations roles. Whether causal or the result of selection effects, the link between an appropriations career and a boost to one's salary is dramatic. Appropriation of funds for the federal budget is among the most important responsibilities in Congress and the notion that the need for top-tier staff would drive up salaries is strongly borne out by the data.

In order to counteract the erosion of human capital faced by congressional committees as a whole, appropriators must consider how to attract and retain the best talent from the public and private sectors. Among departing congressional staff, the most frequently cited reason for leaving the Hill is the notoriously low pay.[7] As discussed in the next section, special interest organizations often provide an attractive compensation package that often lures talent away from important roles responsible for some of Congress's most pressing work.

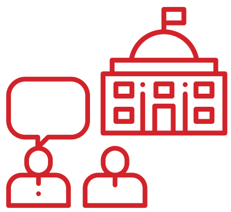
[6] House and Senate aggregate data come, respectively, from the 2008 (median year) average constant-dollar pay figures for each position. Note that given limitations in available data, appropriations committee salaries in our dataset are compared against House and Senate member office salaries from the Congressional Research Service. See: "Staff Pay levels for Selected Positions in House Member Offices, 2001 – 2015," Congressional Research Service, Nov. 9, 2016.; and "Staff Pay levels for Selected Positions in Senators' Offices, 2001 – 2015," Congressional Research Service, Nov. 9, 2016.

[7] "Life in Congress: Job Satisfaction and Engagement of House and Senate Staff," Congressional Management Foundation, 2013, p. 65.

Figure 7: Lobbying Concentration & Returns to Lobbying

LOBBYING CONCENTRATION & RETURNS TO LOBBYING

Counts and returns to lobbying are likely even higher than presented here, as the data only capture lobbyists who return to the Hill

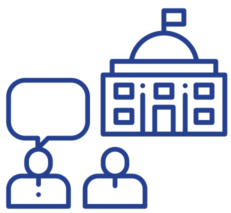


SAC Lobbyists

101
SAC Staffers lobbied before returning to the Hill, or
28%

$

+$15,000
Higher Average Salary for SAC staff who lobby at some point during their career



HAC Lobbyists

198
HAC Staffers lobbied before returning to the Hill, or
30%

$

+$19,600
Higher Average Salary for HAC staff who lobby at some point during their career

SOURCE: Created by author using data from LegiStorm.com.

It pays to have lobbying experience. Congressional aides who once served on the Hill and left for any amount of time to lobby often walked back through the revolving door to higher salaries from one of the appropriations committees.

- Over the period studied (2001-2016), **roughly 30 percent of appropriations committee staff returned to the Hill after a lobbying stint.**
- At 30 percent, **the share of appropriations committee staff who formerly lobbied is more than double that of the Hill as a whole.**[8]
- The financial benefits of doing so were significant. SAC staffers who returned to the Hill after lobbying earned roughly **$15,000 more per year over the course of their congressional career.** On the House side, the return was even greater at a nearly **$20,000 average annual salary boost.**
- Given the congressional staff salary cap of $172,500,[9] these findings represent a significant increase in average salary over the course of one's congressional career. They suggest that committee members and senior staff place a notable premium on lobbying experience when hiring (or in most cases, re-hiring) congressional staff for appropriations roles.

> Appropriations staff are roughly twice as likely to be former lobbyists as Hill staff overall, and make $15k-20k more per year on average than non-lobbyist appropriations staff.

[8] The 30 percent figure is an original finding. A 2011 study by National Journal found that 13 percent of Republican congressional staffers and 11 percent of Democratic congressional staffers had previously lobbied. For a summary of the study, see: "Fewer Top Aides are Minorities, Lobbyists," The Atlantic, June 15, 2011.

[9] "Congressional Salaries and Allowances: In Brief." Congressional Research Service, Report No. RL30064. April 11, 2018.

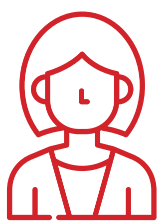
The reverse, a selection bias, could also be true. That is, lobbying firms tend to recruit the most skilled and most highly valued congressional staffers for corporate roles. In either scenario, the link between lobbying and higher salaries on the Hill is valid and significant.

Notably, the data only cover congressional staffers who return to (or first work on) the Hill *after* a stint lobbying and only include changes to those staffers' *congressional* earnings. Together, these limitations suggest an even stronger relationship between K Street and the career paths of appropriations committee staffers, as it is likely that many additional staffers leave the committee to lobby without returning to the Hill, and are therefore not captured in this analysis.

Figure 8: Aggregate Gender Dynamics

APPROPRIATIONS GENDER DYNAMICS IN AGGREGATE

Women in Appropriations face barriers not encountered by their male colleagues, as reflected in committee composition, salaries, and other career outcomes



Appropriations staff were **54% male and 46% female**. While SAC was nearly balanced, **HAC staff skewed male by nearly 14 points**

Male appropriations staffers had **12% higher average salaries** ($108,000/ year vs. $96,000/ year)...

...despite female staffers having **slightly longer average tenures** (7.6 years vs. 7.3 years)

SOURCE: Created by author using data from LegiStorm.com.

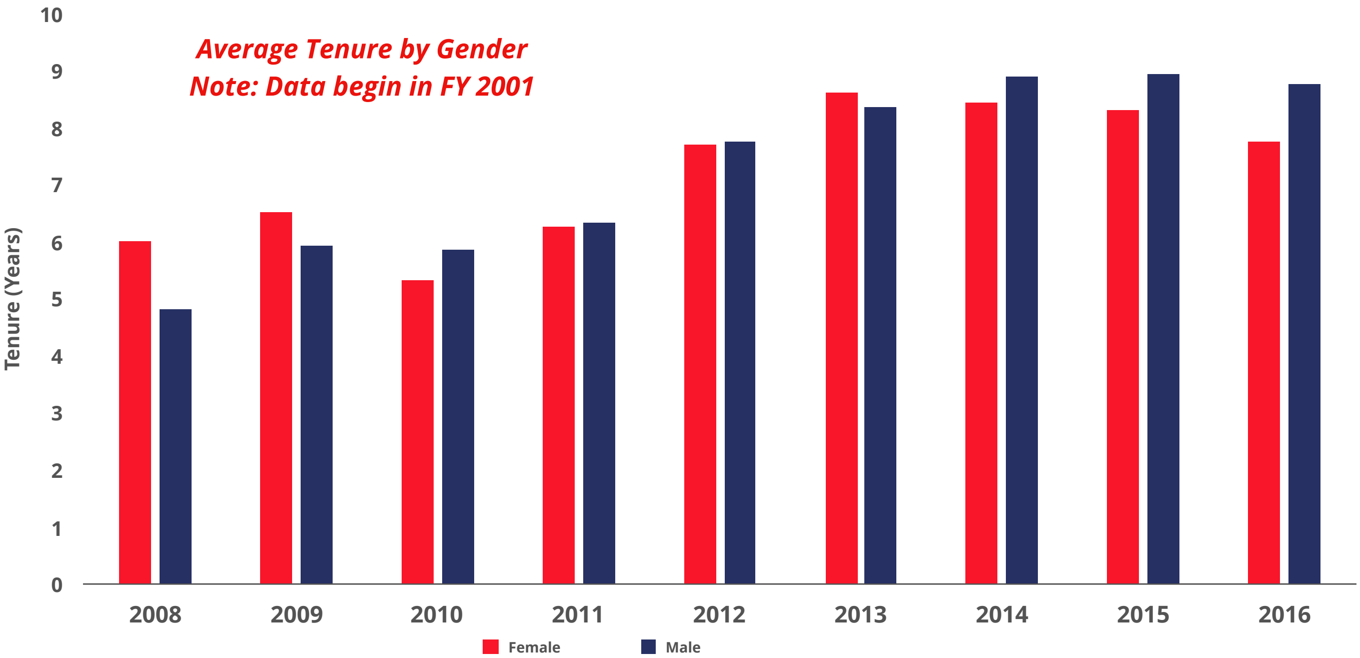
The career experiences of men and women in the appropriations committees, like those on the Hill more broadly, have not been equal. As Figure 8 shows, **women who work in appropriations face barriers not encountered by their male colleagues**. Fewer women reach senior positions on the committees and the ones that do make less than similarly placed men over the course of their careers.

- Overall, appropriations staffers were 54 percent male and 46 percent female. **However, this discrepancy was wildly unequal between the two chambers.**
- While SAC had a roughly equal distribution of male and female staffers, **HAC staff skewed male by a resounding 14 points, 57 percent to 43 percent**, during the same period.
- Across both chambers, **male appropriations staffers earned roughly 12 percent higher annual salaries** during the course of their Hill careers, despite the fact that female staffers' tenures were roughly 2 percent longer. This implies that it took women longer to reach higher-paying positions than men, which, coupled with the salary disparity, creates a strong disincentive for ambitious female staffers to stay on the Hill or in appropriations.

Figure 9: Average Tenure by Gender

APPROPRIATIONS GENDER DYNAMICS OVER TIME

Women in Appropriations face barriers not encountered by their male colleagues, as reflected in committee composition, salaries, and other career outcomes

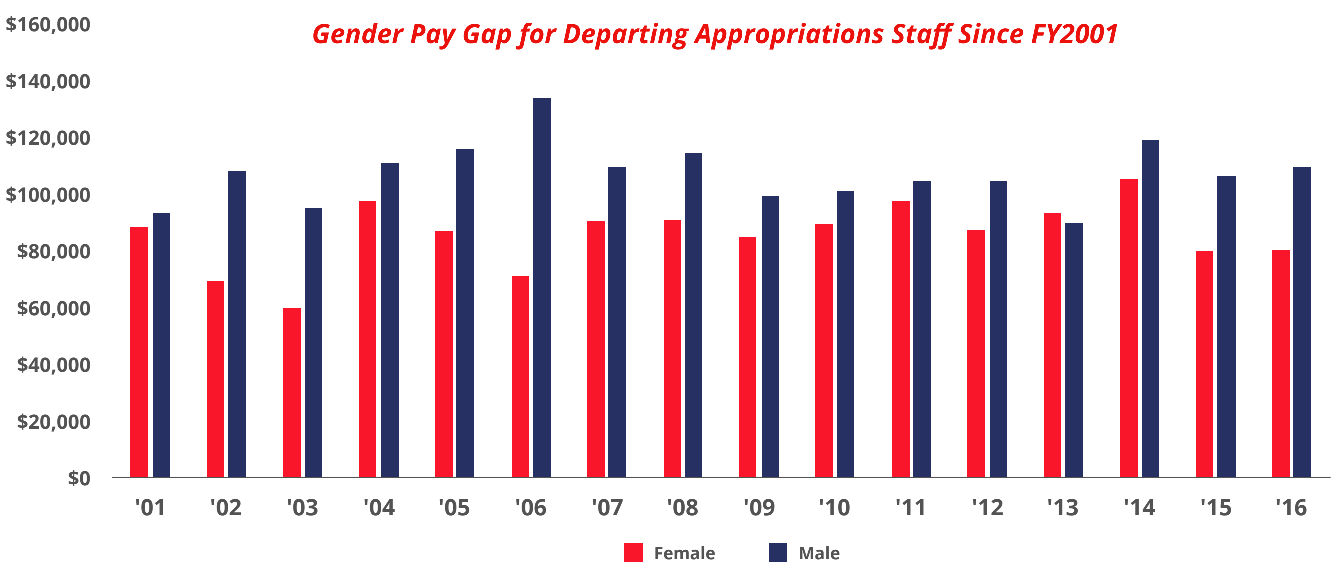


SOURCE: Created by author using data from LegiStorm.com.

Figure 10: Gender Pay Gap

APPROPRIATIONS GENDER DYNAMICS OVER TIME

Women in Appropriations face barriers not encountered by their male colleagues, as reflected in committee composition, salaries, and other career outcomes



SOURCE: Created by author using data from LegiStorm.com.

Since 2001, women serving the appropriations committees have never out-earned male counterparts over the course of their Hill careers.

Together, Figures 9 and 10 (above) show this dynamic in more granular detail. Figure 9 shows the total Hill tenure—that is, total number of years served in all congressional offices—of appropriations staffers broken down by gender. Importantly, tenure lengths are limited to 2008 to account for lack of prior data.

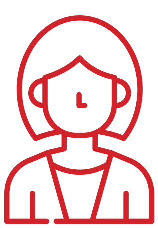
In four years studied, women had longer average tenures than men and only in the last three years of the dataset do women's tenures begin to decline as men's stay roughly equal, creating a growing gender tenure gap that may reflect the early departure of women from congressional professions. **Over the course of the period studied, though, women's tenures remained longer than their male colleagues' by roughly 2 percent.**

As Figure 10 shows, **however, the difference in pay far outpaces any difference in tenure between female and male staffers on appropriations committees.** While in several years, women had longer tenures than men, in no year was the average pay of departing staff members equal across genders. In 2006, departing female staffers earned nearly 48 percent less than departing male staffers (though these figures fluctuate significantly due to the relatively small number of people who leave each year). Nevertheless, there has not been a single year this century when women who departed appropriations had out-earned their male colleagues during their Hill careers.

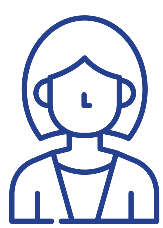
Figure 10: Gender Pay Gap

APPROPRIATIONS GENDER DYNAMICS – SELECT POSITIONS

Women who left the Hill in 2016 faced a gender pay gap that outpaced differences in tenure from their male colleagues, just as women did in the early 2000s.
This implies the gender pay gap in Appropriations is not closing with the passage of time



Female **Professional Staff Members** on appropriations earned an average of \$114,000/yr., compared to \$124,000/yr. for men – a difference of **8%**



The pay gap is slightly larger, at **9%** for **Staff Assistants**, a category where women are overrepresented

SOURCE: Created by author using data from LegiStorm.com.

Focusing on select positions helps illustrate these dynamics. Roughly 48 percent of Professional Staff Members on appropriations were women. However, these women earned roughly 8 percent less than male Professional Staff Members who served in similar roles. Likewise, women earned 9 percent less as Staff Assistants than male colleagues and were slightly overrepresented in these lower-earning roles. Over the years studied, 52 percent of staff assistants were female. By the time staffers retired from the Hill, just 20 percent of Chiefs-of-Staff were female.

- In the aggregate, these dynamics suggest the gender pay gap in appropriations is due not just to salary discrepancies within the same position title but also to the fact that women are disproportionately represented in the lowest-earning tiers of Hill jobs.
- Taken together, these statistics suggest that it is more difficult for women to reach the same high-ranking positions and level of compensation as similarly-placed men, due not to differences in human capital (as measured by years of Hill tenure) but to outside factors.

CONCLUSION

The power of the purse is one of Congress's most important authorities. Yet, its appropriations and budget processes that fund the federal government are widely acknowledged to be broken. Last-minute continuing resolutions and omnibus appropriations that persistently threaten to shut down the government are now the norm rather than the exception.

Congress is over two decades removed from the last time the government was funded via the regular order appropriations process. A total of 83 currently serving members of Congress (15.5 percent) have seen the process work as it was intended—a problem that will only worsen with an influx of freshman members in the 116th Congress.

Congressional staff who serve on the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations are increasingly unable to make up for the loss of institutional memory found at the member level. Appropriations committee staff levels in both chambers have remained relatively stagnant since 2001 despite a **123 percent increase** in the size of the federal budget over the same period.[10]

If we are to begin to fix the broken congressional appropriations and budget processes, a commitment must be made to retain and expand the expertise of staffers serving on the committees. Though these staffers generally remain anonymous, they are the public servants who execute detailed negotiations between Congress and federal agencies and oversee the effectiveness of appropriated funds, all under increasingly political circumstances. Their impact on the process thus cannot be overstated.

Of course, regularizing the appropriations process will require a commitment on behalf of members. Even then, large-scale change is likely to be slow. Any calls to return to regular order—whether from budget experts, academics or even members—must recognize that the return will necessitate a reinvestment in the appropriations committees themselves. Maintaining current staff levels and salaries—particularly for women—will only perpetuate the status quo, both in the types of funding bills being reported, and the inability of committees to hire and retain staffers who see their service as a career rather than a stop on their way to better opportunities.

[10] "Historical Tables," U.S. Office of Management and Budget, May 23, 2017.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Raw payment-level data used within this analysis were provided by LegiStorm.com. LegiStorm digitizes and cleans office disbursement records submitted to the House and Senate going back to 2001. The House submits disbursement records each quarter, the Senate semi-annually. Each of these records contains the staffer's name, the payment amount, the specific office/member from which the payment originated, as well as dates for which the payment was associated.

The staffer database was constructed by isolating aides who were provided a payment by either the House or Senate Committee on Appropriations at any point from 2001 through 2016. Compensation averages were created by totaling the payments for each staffer by fiscal year. Payment amounts were annualized for staffers who departed during a given year.

Tenure lengths were created by summing the number of days associated with each individual payment by staffer, transforming the unit of analysis of the data from "payment" to "staffer." To avoid double-counting when individuals were given multiple payments during the same time period (for example, if an individual was paid by both a member's personal office and the appropriations committee), tenures in a given year were capped at one year. This method accounts for Hill employment gaps and avoids double-counting the many individuals who simultaneously work for various congressional offices/committees. Because the data begin in 2001, the maximum tenure is capped at 17 years.

Lobbying information was also provided by LegiStorm.com and is a binary indicator of which staffers have served as lobbyists. No data regarding type of lobbyist or their industry nor length of lobbying tenure were used within this study. Additionally, the data only capture Hill staff who served after lobbying—i.e. those individuals who leave the Hill, lobby and return to Congress or those who work on the Hill having served as a lobbyist.

One methodological concern the authors welcome further refinement and insight into concerns the overcounting of staff for each committee. Analytical formulas used in programming to identify the number of staffers who served on each committee in a given year returned amounts higher than the official record of staff counts for that committee. To correct this problem, the authors divided metrics such as workload-per-staffer and average-pay-per-committee-staffer by a "corrective ratio" (the ratio of the overcounting number to the known actual committee staff- count number).

Congressional fiscal year and federal budget information used within this report are adapted from the Office of Management and Budget's authoritative historical data on the federal budget, and uses 2018 real dollars to account for inflation.

Data used in this analysis are available from the authors. We welcome refinements and discussion via methodological feedback to encourage greater rigor going forward.

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