
Summary of Key Findings

While there is no shortage of media coverage on the politics of Congress, it is somewhat overlooked as a workplace. This “Life in Congress” project provides a behind-the-scenes look at this unique workforce with the goals of improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the institution and enhancing the public’s understanding of America’s premier democratic institution.

For this report, our research focused specifically on the work-life of Members of the U.S. House of Representatives. This data, based on questionnaires of 25 Members of Congress (and corroborated by other research and work conducted by the Congressional Management Foundation), shows them as: hard-working; focusing the bulk of their time on public policy and constituent services; finding great satisfaction in their work; and accepting the personal sacrifices they make for their jobs.

Members work long hours, regardless of whether the House chamber is in session or not.

The schedule of a Member of Congress can vary greatly depending on the fluctuating congressional schedule and on current events. Members spend an above average amount of time working, similar to other highly demanding jobs such as airline pilots, firefighters, and physicians. They also share many characteristics of workers with “extreme” jobs, such as CEOs of major corporations.

- When asked about their hours in a typical seven-day week, Members report that they work on average 70 hours per week while the House of Representatives is in session, and 59 hours per week when their chamber is out of session.
- When the House is out of session and not voting, or when the House has scheduled “district/constituent work periods” (otherwise known as “recess”), the majority of Members return to their districts. In this study, 78% of Members report spending more than 40 weekends each year in their district.

Members focus most of their time on legislative/policy work and on constituent services—not political activities.

Despite the perception that Members spend a great deal of time on “politics,” legislators report that most of their work is focused on official activities—primarily public policy and legislation in Washington, D.C., and services for constituents in their districts.

- When in Washington, D.C., Members reported spending their time as follows:
 - 35% on “Legislative/Policy Work”
 - 17% on “Constituent Services Work”
 - 17% on “Political/Campaign Work”
 - 9% on “Press/Media Relations”
 - 9% with “Family/Friends”
 - 7% on “Administrative/Managerial Work”
 - 6% on “Personal Time”
- When in their congressional districts, Members reported spending their time as follows:
 - 32% on “Constituent Services Work”
 - 18% on “Political/Campaign Work”
 - 14% on “Press/Media Relations”
 - 12% on “Legislative/Policy Work”
 - 9% with “Family/Friends”
 - 8% on “Personal Time”
 - 7% on “Administrative/Managerial Work”

Members describe themselves as highly committed to their work and find great satisfaction in their jobs.

Members appear to be energized, not necessarily stifled, by their long hours and are motivated by their contributions to society. They also reported being very pleased with their staff’s performance.

- Members rated “Staying in touch with constituents” as being the job aspect most critical to their effectiveness, with 95% rating it as very important. Overall, 85% of Members were satisfied with this aspect of their jobs.
- Additionally, a majority of Members rated the following aspects highly in importance and in satisfaction:
 - “Feeling that you are performing an important public service” (84% very important, 89% satisfied);

- “Feeling invested in the work you are doing” (84% very important, 89% satisfied); and
- “Understanding how your job contributes to society as a whole” (75% very important, 90% satisfied).
- When asked to respond to, “My work gives me a sense of personal accomplishment,” 95% of Members agreed or strongly agreed.
- When asked about the work of their staff, a clear majority responded positively, and not a single Member disagreed or strongly disagreed:
 - “My staff clearly understands and is motivated by what I am trying to accomplish,” 95% agreed or strongly agreed.
 - “My staff is good at keeping focused on my goals and priorities,” 89% agreed or strongly agreed.
 - “My staff provides sufficient support to help me effectively do my job,” 89% agreed or strongly agreed.

Members are generally accepting of the personal sacrifices they make for their jobs.

While Members are not satisfied with the amount of time they spend on personal activities, they do not report being particularly *dissatisfied* either. This data suggests that Members (and to some degree their families) are accepting of the significant personal trade-offs they make for their work.

- Regardless of whether they are in Washington, D.C., or in their congressional districts, House Members spend the majority (83%-85%) of their time working. Members spend only 15%-17% of their time on their personal lives (with friends or families and on personal activities).
- Nearly 9 out of 10 (86%) Members feel they spend too little time with family and friends and too little time on other personal activities. However, a majority of Members (83%) also report that their families are supportive of their congressional work.
- While 68% of Members cited “Spending time with family” as very important, only 16% were satisfied with this aspect—giving it the lowest satisfaction rating among all 25 job aspects studied. Thirty-two percent of Members were dissatisfied with this aspect, while more than half (53%) answered “neutral” to this question.