TechCongress

Building Dynamic and Diverse Tech Capacity in Congress

PRESENTED BY

Siegel Family Endowment

We are a foundation focused on understanding and shaping the impact of technology on society.

ABOUT SIEGEL

Siegel Family Endowment employs an inquiry-driven approach to grant making that is informed by the scientific method and predicated on the belief that philanthropy is uniquely positioned to address some of the most pressing and complex issues facing society today. Our grant making strategy positions us to be society's risk capital. We support high quality work that will help us derive insights to timely questions and has high potential for future scale. Our focus is on organizations doing work at the intersection of learning, workforce, and infrastructure. We aim to help build a world in which all people have the tools, skills, and context necessary to engage meaningfully in a rapidly changing society. Siegel Family Endowment was founded in 2011 by David M. Siegel, co-founder and co-chairman of financial sciences company Two Sigma.

OUR FOCUS ON INFRASTRUCTURE

We believe that strong social, physical, and digital infrastructure is a prerequisite for cultivating an equitable society. Our work aims to make the infrastructure of today and tomorrow work for all people. We do this by supporting organizations that foster the growth of resilient social networks and communities, strengthen public spaces and buildings, and expand access to digital life.

PUBLIC INTEREST TECHNOLOGY

As technology's role in all parts of society continues to expand, it's our goal to ensure that everyone is conversant with technology as it affects all areas of our lives. We work with policymakers, technologists, researchers, and educators to ensure that the design, deployment, and use of technologies are leveraged in a way that advances the public interest. Our grantees use technology to enhance public institutions, imagine solutions that will fulfill unmet needs, and to critically examine technology's impact on civic life.

About Grantee

TechCongress powers better policymaking and public discussion around technology by bringing technological expertise to the halls of Congress. It does so by placing computer scientists, engineers, and other technologists as fellows in congressional offices, where they advise on everything from AI to digital privacy. TechCongress is nonpartisan and does not take positions on issues. Instead, the organization aims to elevate technology-related discussion and build the diverse expertise and capacity necessary to advance better outcomes for all constituencies and congressional districts.

Executive Summary

HOW CAN WE BUILD capacity in Congress to encourage better, more effective, and more informed policymaking around technology? That question has particular urgency as advancements in generative AI, new research on social media, and ongoing considerations about digital privacy and security dominate the news. Building expertise and capacity is the primary objective animating TechCongress, a nonprofit organization that recruits and supports technologists to serve in congressional offices through two fellowship programs:

- The Senior Congressional Innovation Fellowship places mid-career technologists on Capitol Hill for twelve months; and
- The Congressional Innovation Fellowship places early career technologists, including graduates of technical degree programs, on Capitol Hill for ten months.

In addition, during the early COVID-19 pandemic, TechCongress ran the Congressional Digital Service Fellowship, a one-time program to help Congress manage the digital challenges posed by the pandemic. Over the course of each fellowship program, TechCongress provides support for fellows and creates connections to other congressional groups and entities that can eventually help fellows transition into full-time roles.

In doing so, TechCongress is bucking two conventional, outside-the-Beltway perceptions about Congress: that Congress is beset by partisan divisions that grind any meaningful and innovative policy solutions to a halt, and that Congress is out-of-touch with the people that it serves. It counters these perceptions in the following ways:

- By actively recruiting technologists from a diverse set of backgrounds, TechCongress aims to reflect the multitude of racial, ethnic, gender, and other identities that comprise the nation; and
- By cultivating ideological diversity in each cohort, and placing fellows in congressional offices from both parties, TechCongress offers a range of perspectives on how technology and industry should be regulated.

TechCongress' approach presents an opportunity to transform both the government and technology sectors by building better informed, more thoughtful connections between the two. Most of all, it supports the establishment of technology-related policies in the public interest, and the ability for government to advocate for the public in flexible, responsive, and fast-moving ways as technology advances and evolves.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Establishing technologists as advisors in congressional offices benefits both policymakers and technologists - as well as their wider professional and civic communities. Embedding subject matter experts in the policymaking process improves policymaking, elevates discourse, and brings diverse perspectives into the halls of Congress. It also exposes technologists to the challenges and complexities of considering the public interest in technological innovations. These insights have carry-on effects that can be felt in networks in industry and beyond, offering more opportunities for dialogue.

Focusing on the quality and expertise of government staffers offers a powerful way to transform government. This approach rests on a commitment to nonpartisanship and a healthy respect for both governmental institutions and the people who serve them. At the same time, this focus on staffing creates opportunities for greater impact when governmental offices reflect the diversity of the populations that they serve and the expertise that will help achieve improved outcomes for all.

Fellowships are an effective way to seed expertise in government, but sustaining the fellowship model in the long-term is challenging and inefficient. Creating pathways that can help fellows progress to full-time staff roles offers a more efficient and sustainable framework for elevating discourse and policy in Congress.

Crowdfunding can be an effective tool for raising the profile of a fledgling public service organization and forcing rapid development. Media exposure and incubation within an established nonprofit organization can also help. At the same time, larger investments from philanthropy or other sources are crucial to helping organizations make more significant and sustainable long term impacts.

▲

Core Elements: What Makes the Program Work?

IN LESS THAN A DECADE, TechCongress has gone from an ambitious idea to a fully-executed program that is increasing capacity and improving technology discourse and policymaking in Congress. TechCongress has benefitted from the experiences of other fellowship programs, incubation within an established nonprofit, media exposure, and the support of philanthropic foundations and private individuals. It has also held fast to its guiding values of intentionally recognizing the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion; working in a bipartisan fashion; and centering its work around respect for ideological differences. Even as these features remain constant, TechCongress has evolved in other ways, in the service of increasing effectiveness and impact—most notably through its shift to treating the fellowship as a pipeline to establishing technologists in full-time congressional staffing roles.

▶ BENEFITS TO MULTIPLE SECTORS AND COMMUNITIES

WHEN TRAVIS MOORE, a former legislative director for a member of the U.S. House of Representatives first began to think about how to build more technological expertise in Congress, he was focused on better policymaking. He had seen the transformative effects of fellowship programs in public health and health care sectors to build capacity, expertise, and knowledge within the halls of Congress. And while he saw a possibility for advocacy work to advance tech policy, Moore was fully committed to the idea that working to change the staffing of Congress could move the needle on the substance of and attention to tech policy knowledge in the legislative body.

It was only later that Moore began to think about the positive secondary effects that the fellowship model could offer. First, because TechCongress intentionally recruits fellows with diverse backgrounds and identities, the congressional staff population is made more diverse in turn, helping to reverse a known problem. Staffer voices collectively become more representative of the constituencies that they serve.

Second, Moore says that technologists bring an important perspective that cuts across ideological lines. "Technologists are builders. They take a constructive view. They're problem solvers." Moore contrasts this with the typical approach of the institutionalists who often serve in government. "People in Washington often follow the norm, swallow traditions, and do what has been done before us," Moore says. "Technologists bring a user-centered design mentality that is very valuable in encouraging governmental staffers to start from the perspective of the constituent."

Finally, technologists who serve as TechCongress fellows bring their findings back to their own networks. This gives those in industry a better appreciation for the complexity and challenges of policymaking,

TOP: TechCongress Fellow Emily Paul speaks with Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) at the start of her fellowship.
BOTTOM: TechCongress Founder Travis Moore welcomes attendees at the inaugural Public Interest Technology Fellowship Networking Event.

and can encourage more constructive dialogue about tech in the public interest. Moore says that the fellowship has been transformative for technologists who may have previously viewed government with skepticism. "It brings a tremendous amount of empathy and nuance and knowledge about what it takes to really move the needle in Congress and in politics," Moore says.

TechCongress Fellow B Cavello reflects on finishing their fellowship with Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) outside the Senate office buildings.

TechCongress Fellow Anita Rao staffs Senator John Hickenlooper (D-CO) at a hearing about artificial intelligence regulation.

TechCongress Fellow Geoffrey Cain interviews President Volodymyr Zelensky for Wired Magazine in 2022 following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

▶ CHANGING STRATEGY TO MAXIMIZE IMPACT

BY ALMOST EVERY METRIC, the first few cohorts of TechCongress fellows were successful. The organization had recruited hundreds of high-quality and diverse technologist applicants. Previously reluctant congressional offices were now clambering to host TechCongress fellows. TechCongress was hearing positive feedback about the impact that fellows were having. Despite these accomplishments, Moore couldn't help but feel that TechCongress wasn't having as substantial an impact as it could.

Moore describes the early model for the fellowship as "let's have technologists come in, work on some hard problems, and then send them back to industry." However, Moore reflects that over the course of its first few cohorts, TechCongress learned that technologists are more effective in their congressional staffer roles the longer they spend in the institution. The learning curve is steep, and it can take a long time before fellows are able to contribute to their full potential.

Moore says, "We realized that a fellow could produce one X in their fellowship year. In their second year, they can produce three X. In their third year, they can produce nine X and then in their fourth year they can produce 27 X." Moore says that this realization about exponential impact was the impetus for changing the fellowship from "a tour of duty" to a pipeline that would move fellows into full-time staff positions.

Over time, this strategy will eliminate the need for TechCongress. Moore is okay with pivoting away from the current model for his organization if it means institutionalizing technology expertise and understanding in the halls of Congress. "The true impact comes from these folks being embedded long-term within the institution," Moore says.

▶ LEVERAGING CROWDFUNDING, MEDIA EXPOSURE, AND INCUBATION TO BUILD AN ORGANIZATION

MOORE RECOUNTS THE CHALLENGES that he faced in getting TechCongress off the ground: finding congressional offices to host fellows, recruiting technologists willing to leave well-paying jobs to work in Congress, and, most of all, money. "I took my first meetings in January 2015 and I thought I'd have money in the door by March or April," Moore says. Instead, he didn't raise necessary funds until November.

Moore says that several elements converged to help him put TechCongress on solid financial footing. First, Moore raised around $8,000 through a crowdfunding campaign. He says that the sum wasn't terribly impactful on its own, but it transformed his idea into something actionable. "Crowdfunding forced me to put together a minimum viable product and forced accountability," Moore says. The exposure that Moore received through his crowdfunding campaign also resulted in the *Washington Post* running a profile on Moore's efforts. That article gave Moore a degree of legitimacy that would help him access a host of funders, including the Ford Foundation.

Moore says that the *Washington Post* piece also opened the door to incubation within New America, a nonprofit "think and action tank" whose work includes projects on tech policy. Incubation offered further legitimacy in addition to operational and logistical support that would help transform TechCongress into a full-fledged, independent nonprofit organization. It also raised TechCongress' profile in the philanthropic community and helped Moore establish funding and thought partnership relationships that have produced substantial value for TechCongress.

Impact

UNLIKE MANY ORGANIZATIONS, TechCongress' goal is not to grow exponentially. Instead, drawing on a lesson from the former White House CTO, TechCongress aims to outfit Congress with the capacity to have at least one technologist staffer present when any policy is being discussed. Moore estimates that congressional offices collectively would need to have around 60 technologists on staff to realize that vision. TechCongress' goal is to help achieve that number by 2026. Because of TechCongress' efforts, the number of staff technologists currently stands at just under 30.

Moore explains that TechCongress' impact can be measured not just by whether it reaches its numeric goal, but also by the impact that each congressional staffer has—a crucial reason that TechCongress decided to look for pathways for fellows to be hired into full-time positions as congressional staffers at the conclusion of their fellowships. Moore says that this growth in technologists' impact over time is observable and routinely commented upon by both fellows and existing staffers in placement offices. But he also points to two additional barometers of success: more sophistication in policy discourse around technology issues in Congress, and greater focus on technology issues in Congress:

- Moore points to the difference in quality between congressional hearings featuring the Facebook CEO in 2018 compared to the Facebook whistleblower in 2021 or the OpenAI CEO in 2023. "There was a much more thoughtful exchange," Moore says of the latter two hearings.

- Moore attributes Congress' current attention to developments in AI and interest in establishing guardrails in the public interest to the presence of technologists in congressional offices. "We see congressional leaders saying, 'We need to do work as an institution to figure out what the right regulatory approach is,'" Moore says. He continues, "That was not at all the case with social media a few years ago," before TechCongress began in earnest.

- Moore points to an increase in the number of congressional hearings on technology-related issues since TechCongress has placed technologists on congressional staff. "In the two year lead-up to the [Facebook CEO] hearing in 2018, the Senate Judiciary Committee had four technology-related hearings," Moore explains. "And already in this Congress, the Senate Judiciary Committee has eleven technology-related hearings."

- As Congress pays more attention to technology-related policy issues, congressional offices increasingly see a need for in-house technology expertise. Moore recalls that when he

TechCongress Fellows staff Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and Sen. Brian Schatz (D-HI) at hearings with leading tech executives.

began TechCongress, some offices were skeptical. Now, many congressional offices and committees that were previously skeptical are open to hiring TechCongress fellows as full-time staffers.

Next Steps

TechCongress invites a range of stakeholders to get involved in its work:

- Computer scientists, engineers, and other technologists with varying levels of career experience can apply for fellowships offered by TechCongress.

- Those who know a promising candidate for TechCongress' fellowship program can nominate that person. TechCongress also operates a special referral bonus program for people who recommend diverse candidates who are nominated, apply, are accepted, and join the program.

- Those interested in TechCongress' approach and programs can sign-up for the organization's newsletter, or for a specialized newsletter on public interest tech policy jobs.

To learn more and contact Siegel Family Endowment, visit www.siegelendowment.org