THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

PROPOSALS TO STREAMLINE AND IMPROVE US GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE

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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

In December, Brookings launched the Blueprints for American Renewal and Prosperity Project to offer federal policy recommendations in five challenge areas. These are: Racial Justice and Worker Mobility; Economic Growth and Dynamism; International Security; Governance, both domestic and international; and Climate and Resilience.

On this fourth episode from the Blueprints project, two Brookings experts discuss their proposals to streamline and improve domestic governance. Senior Fellow Molly Reynolds talks about how to make Congress a better place to work; and Senior Fellow Elaine Kamarck discusses how to build an agile government for an era of mega change. You can find these and all of the essays at brookings.edu/blueprints.

Also in this episode, Amar Bhattacharya, Senior Fellow in Global Economy and Development and the Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings says, this is a decisive decade for the planet as we face the two crises of COVID-19 and climate change. In this sustainable development spotlight, Bhattacharya calls for strong and coordinated action across the world on four interrelated priorities.

You can follow the Brookings podcast on Twitter @policypodcasts to get information about and links to all of our shows, including Dollar and Sense: The Brookings Trade Podcast, The Current, and our events podcasts.

First up, here is Amar Bhattacharya with a new Sustainable Development Spotlight.

BHATTACHARYA: I'm Amar Bhattacharya, Senior Fellow at the Center for Sustainable Development in the Global Economy and Development Program, here with a Sustainable

Development Spotlight, a regular segment to highlight work from the Brookings Center for Sustainable Development.

I would like to talk to you today about the imperative for the world to act forcefully in response to the two crises that we are concurrently facing, that of COVID and climate, both of which are of immense proportions. These two challenges are fundamentally global and require a global response on great scale and with real urgency.

A decade following the 2009 financial crisis culminating in the COVID crisis was characterized by growing structural weaknesses including a slowdown in growth, productivity and employment generation, slower progress on poverty reduction, rising debt levels and a growing gap between emission levels and what is sustainable for the planet.

The COVID pandemic has greatly amplified these challenges, especially for developing countries. The damages due to climate change and biodiversity loss could be even bigger and more long-lasting than those we are experiencing from COVID-19.

This coming decade could be still more problematic than the last, putting the 2030 SDG down (phonetic) at said risk, or it could bring much stronger development progress and chart a new route to sustainable and rising living standards across the world.

It is a decisive decade for the planet, delay is dangerous. Now is the time to choose and to act, all parts really at more risk. But in this crucial moment ambition is much less risky than caution.

Overcoming the COVID-19 crisis and setting apart to more sustainable, inclusive and resilient growth requires strong and coordinated action across the world on four interrelated priorities.

Managing the pandemic and rebuilding health systems, restoring growth and jobs,

confronting inequality and fostering social cohesion, and tackling the immense risks of climate change and biodiversity loss.

The imperative now in recovery is to build back better through an integrated response to these challenges on a par to sustainable and inclusive growth. Coordinated green investments must be at the center of global cooperation in building back better and the drive to net zero.

We need to scale up investment in all forms of capital—human, social, physical and nature—and at the scale needed. In scaling up investments, there is tremendous opportunity to harness advances in technology and private sector dynamism and innovation.

A sustainable recovery can boost productivity through discovery and innovation, learning by doing and economies of scale. It can boost employment in areas that need it the most and create the jobs of the future. And it can generate strong multipliers for economic recovery and growth and can be accompanied by powerful coven (phonetic) efforts including reduced congestion and pollution.

The realization of this vision requires practical, strong action now, shaped by a clear, shared, and purposeful strategy. Given the synchronized collapse only a coordinated and concerted recovery will yield the greatest impact for all. A strategy for sustainable growth delivers the greatest and most durable benefits but requires higher upfront investments and resources.

There is tremendous opportunity to channel the vast amount of savings that are earning low or no yields to financing sustainable investments everywhere, and especially in emerging markets and developing countries. There is a grand bargain to be made that can deliver prosperity for all and a sustainable future for people and planet.

What is needed is something like a global martial plan, in which the U.S. helped Europe recover and reconstruct after World War II. Absent this, given the experiences of Latin America's lost (phonetic) decade in the 1990s, there is a risk of multi-year development distress across large parts of the developing world.

DEWS: You can hear previous sustainable development spotlights from scholars at the Center for Sustainable Development on The Brookings Institution Sound Cloud channel. And now, here is my interview with Molly Reynolds and Elaine Kamarck on their Blueprints for American Renewal and Prosperity papers.

Elaine and Molly, welcome to you, both, back to The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast.

GUESTS: Thanks for having me, yeah.

DEWS: It's great to see you both, and I'm looking to this conversation about Domestic Governance Reforms, as part of the Blueprints for American Renewal and Prosperity project. You both have papers in the newly published series of papers that people can find on our website, brookings.edu/blueprints. And I want to go into both of your papers. They're on different topics, but both about domestic government reforms. But I do want to hear, at the start, if you could very quickly lay out for listeners kind of the top-line issue that you're talking about in your paper. So, Elaine, why don't we start with you on that.

KAMARCK: Sure. What I am talking about is the way the Executive Branch functions. And the problem that we have faced in a series of crises, whether it's 9/11, whether it is Katrina, or the current coronavirus, is that there are lots of pieces of the federal government with enormous knowledge and capacity.

And what we find, time and time again, is that in a crisis we have to make them all work together in ways that they are not accustomed to doing. And so I have provided in this paper a

game plan, if you will, of how to get that to happen more seamlessly than we have discovered in the past.

DEWS: Molly, over to you. What's your top-line in your Blueprints paper?

REYNOLDS: Sure. So my paper is about how we need to think about and invest in accordingly Congress—not just as a place where elected legislators serve, but also where people, the legislators, their staffs, the staffs of Congressional support agencies, the Capitol police, custodians, food service workers—where all of these people work, making sure Congress is a good place to work is necessary but not sufficient condition for ensuring that Congress is capable of addressing the big policy problems facing the country to talk about some general categories who performs that would support this goal.

DEWS: Excellent. Well, let's dive into the papers. Elaine, why don't we start with you? In your paper, you call for building, "An agile government for an era of mega change."

Can you define both agile government and also what you mean by mega change?

KAMARCK: Well, the mega change is really these events that are overarching, they consume everybody in society, they are unexpected, they have never happened before, and they leave in their wake enormous disruption.

And one of the reasons we are in an era of mega change is, of course, because of climate change. Let's face it, we didn't do our job in the last 50 years on climate change and so things are getting worse and worse and storms are worse, hurricanes are worse.

Whatever you're talking about, the disruption is greater. And when you have these large climatic disruptions they then cause more traditional kinds of disruption: like mass migrations; like wars over resources, like, water.

So there is a huge amount of change that we're going to encounter in the 21st century that we have never encountered before. And, therefore, the government has to be able to react quickly and effectively to deal with each of these changes.

We can't build static structures anymore—static structures, static bureaucracies, where the invention of max vapor and the 20th century. And the structures sometimes work, but the static nature of them doesn't work in response to these enormous problems.

DEWS: And looking back, in recent history, at least, can you talk about what have been some of the examples where government was just not up to the challenge, the federal government, in particular, was not up to the challenge, where a more agile government may have been better at responding to a particular crisis?

KAMARCK: Well, there is a lot of them. For instance, 9/11, one of the reasons 9/11 came as such a surprise was because we had an intelligence community that was very siloed, where information collected in one piece of the system never made it to a different piece of the system.

And the two commissions that looked at the post-9/11 world, the 9/11 Commission, and then the Commission on Nuclear Threats, both concluded that somehow we had this intelligence community capable of finding out all sorts of things, and yet they could not make a coherent threat picture for us. And that was one of the biggest conclusions out of the whole 9/11 experience was that the intelligence community needed to be able to connect the dots and they simply couldn't.

DEWS: As I hear you talk about that, Elaine, I'm reminded of a conversation we have had in the past on this show about your book, "Why Presidents Fail and How They Can Succeed

Again." And you talked about some of these kinds of issues where the government kind failed to meet the challenge at the time.

I'll let listeners go find that on our website, but it was a very interesting conversation we had. In your current paper, again, it's, "Building an Agile Government for an Era of Mega Change," you talk about four practices that the federal government should adopt, should incorporate into government processes.

Can you quickly walkthrough what those are, and what their origin is?

KAMARCK: Well, almost all of them originate in the military. Okay? And the military, unlike other pieces of government, as always known that it has to be ready for the totally unanticipated. Okay? So fighting a war in the desert is different from fighting a war in the Swiss Alps and they have to have different strategies working towards it.

So, the first thing I propose that is taken from the military is scenario planning, where you're given a problem, a pandemic—the U.S. government did, in fact, do a scenario plan called "Crimson Tide," around a pandemic, a category 5 hurricane, and terrorist attack, a dirty bomb on a big city, all sorts of these.

The importance of scenario planning is that it shows you where the weaknesses are in your system. And in a system like we have, where there is plenty of government, plenty of knowledge, but we have federal, state, local government, and we have an enormous federal government that doesn't necessarily talk to each other, you find these things out by running through scenarios.

Now the military has been doing scenario planning—they call it war gaming—for many, many decades. In the domestic side, it's just not as commonly used. And for one very simple reason, it's very expensive, okay, in terms of personnel, et cetera.

The second thing I advocate is surge capacity. Now, in the military, we have surge capacity via the National Guard, and via the Reserve troops, and this enables us to keep a standing military of about 1.4 million active duty, but enables us ramp up very quickly with other people, and other personnel, and other skills very quickly from the Reserves.

Obviously, we could use surge capacity in the healthcare system. That's one of the things that coronavirus has shown us very clearly. We need to have surge capacity for treating people during pandemics for delivering vaccines. Do we want to create a permanent standing entity around pandemic? No, because they don't happen very often. But when they do, you need to be able to ramp up quickly.

The third one is, dual-use technology. The military understood a few decades ago, basically, in the Clinton Administration that there were a lot of commercial technologies that could, in fact, be simply converted to military use. And this was much cheaper in terms of development, it was just a much more efficient way to do business, so they started identifying and talking and changing procurement to look at dual-use technologies. Again, if you take that concept to a pandemic, drugs that are used for one thing that could easily treat something else becomes a dual-use technology. And there are many, many aspects of this that really fit well in the medical field.

And, finally, is just simply leadership. Okay? To make all of this happen you need competent leadership and you need leaders who know something about government, to weave government together.

One of the reasons Donald Trump is no longer president is that it was very clear he had no idea what the Defense Production act was until somebody mentioned it to him, nor could he use that concept to do what needed to be done.

In the spring, it was all about testing. And then, as time went on, they did use more of it in terms of vaccine creation manufacturing. But the fact is that to respond quickly you need leaders who are familiar with all the parts, all of the moving parts, and who can put these parts together. And that means, frankly, we can't keep electing people who don't know anything about government. That's not a liberal or a conservative states, and I want to make that very clear. Okay?

You can look at the people who ran against Donald Trump in the 2016 primaries and there were a whole bunch of them: Lindsey Graham, Marco Rubio, Chris Christie, who would have done a much better job—Ted Cruz, who, clearly, would have done a much better job in this pandemic than Donald Trump did, mostly because they were familiar with the government and with the sources of power in the government.

So I think those are the most important things that we have to move into the next era with.

DEWS: I think what you're saying right there also is very interesting in terms of the argument that some people have made that government should be run like a business. And I think in all of these areas—scenario planning, search capacity, dual-use technology, and competent leadership—I mean there are some aspects of running a business, but it's still not the same. Can you talk about why these recommendations, these things that should be incorporated into better government really aren't the same as running government like a business?

KAMARCK: The biggest difference is that business has a clear metric. Right? It has a profit/loss statement. And that's basically how businesses organize themselves. Government has very different metrics. Right? It's saving lives; it's protecting property. It's doing things like that that are not easily reducible.

And, secondly, government, as it stands, is created to do certain things. When you have a disaster happening, business doesn't do disasters. Right? (Laughter) That's not their job. They don't do disasters.

You find the most conservative person out there, and if there is a blowup of something in their town, a chemical factory blows up and burns down a bunch of houses, what's the first thing they say: Where is the government? What was the government doing?

So the government just does different things than business. Now, at a much lower scale—I participated in this myself when I ran, "Reinventing Government"—you can have the Army's motor pool look to Avis to figure out how to efficiently clean cars, and turn them around, and make them ready to go the next day. So there are definitely operational aspects of government that, frankly, can learn from business.

But, at the leadership level, when you have to respond to life or death crises there really isn't an analogy ion business. And somebody skilled in business may or may not know, probably, may not know how to make a system work.

DEWS: Before I turn to Molly and her paper, I'm going to ask you, Elaine, just one more question to follow up on the competent leadership recommendation.

It's something that you and I have, again, talked about before in previous podcasts, and it's something you have written extensively about in papers on the Brookings website and also you talked about it, the history of it, at least, in your book, primaries, "Political Primaries"—and that's how can political parties conduct some kind of a peer review to make sure that people who have some competency in government are their candidates for office?

KAMARCK: Well, this is unpopular, certainly, it's an unpopular statement, but political parties have really dropped the ball here. They have got to get back into the business of

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determining, at least, in part, who their candidate is and whether or not that person is, in fact, able to be president of the United States. It's a big job. It does not go, it should not go to first-timers, who have never done anything in government.

Now, how you do that in an era of primaries is pretty difficult and pretty controversial, but there are some possibilities. Other political leaders could do something like a vote of confidence or no-confidence in people running for office; that may not count them out. There might be people in the primaries who still want to vote for that person.

But, frankly, just a mark of confidence that, yeah, this person I don't agree with their philosophy. They come from this wing of the party, not that wing of that party, but they would be competent to do the job, is maybe a beginning step.

I don't think we can go back to the era of smoke-filled rooms. I mean there is a lot of reasons not to do that. But we have also gone too far in the other direction where a demagogue with no governmental experience can manage to win the nomination of a major party and nobody can stop him, and I think that's very dangerous.

I will refer you all to the book by Dan Ziblatt, at Harvard, "How Democracies Die." And one of the things they point out in there is that in European countries that have withstood takeovers by demagogue authoritarian types, it has been the political party's screening candidates that have done that. And I think that's a useful real-world example.

DEWS: I'll put a link to that book in the show notes, and also links to the other materials that I just talked about.

KARMARCK: Good.

DEWS: Molly, let me turn to you now. And I think this question of running government like a business is a good Segway into your paper on, "Making Congress a Better Place to Work," because you say, specifically, in your paper, that Congress should not be run like a business.

Why is that and how should it be run kind of at a high level?

REYNOLDS: Yeah, so a lot of what I'll say is consistent with what Elaine was just saying about government probably, but specifically in the context of Congress. So when we think about business, we think about maximizing profits.

With Congress, government generally doesn't have profits to maximize. It is the public good to serve. It has big policy problems to address; compromise is really important.

I do a lot of work on the Senate's rules, and the Senate filibuster, which, as the popular debate right now reflects, forces compromise in some situations ion Senate. There ae value tradeoffs to confront in legislating that aren't present in running a business.

But all of that said is kind of why I raise this issue in my paper about, "Making Congress a Better Place to Work," is that we can't ignore the fact that for Congress to work towards this mission of serving the public good effectively, it needs to be a good place to work.

And there ae some lessons about how to make it a better place to work on a day-to-day basis that folks can, I think, learn from the private sector and from thinking, again, about Congress as a workplace and not just a place where that output is the legislation or the other governing actions that they do.

DEWS: And you make a really critical point in your paper that Congress—and you said it earlier—Congress is not just the 500-and-something elected Senators and Representatives, it's thousands of other people that work on Capitol Hill. How many people are we talking about, and what kind of jobs do they do?

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REYNOLDS: Yes, it's tens of thousands of people. So we start with the elected members, and then each of those House members and Senators has a staff in his or her personal office.

Those folks are the folks who answer the phone, if you call; they're the folks who sort of the mail; they help the members with their schedules; help prepare them for different votes and different hearings; they meet with constituents, with other groups, and that sort of thing.

There are folks who work on Congress's committees, where even in an era where we see less committee activity than we once did, those are real policy experts who know more than you or I have forgotten about certain—or they have forgotten more than we ever knew about certain policy areas.

They are the Congressional support agencies; so there is the Congressional Budget Office, the Congressional Research Service, the Government Accountability Office, there is the Capitol Police.

We're having this conversation, obviously, and I think we're going to talk about this in a little bit, in the aftermath of the January 6th attack on the Capitol. So we see a lot of discussion of the Capitol Police, who are a really sizeable police force.

There are custodial and physical plant employees. Again, if you saw any of the photos of folks cleaning up the Capitol after the attack on January 6th, those were the folks who worked for the architects of the Capitol. They were contract custodians and janitorial staff; there are food service workers.

So it's a whole sort of city almost within itself, within Washington, D.C. And so, yeah, even, obviously, in the midst of a pandemic there are fewer folks who actually go to work physically there every day, but there are tens of thousands of people who work in different capacities to make the Legislative Branch run.

DEWS: Does your conception of Congress as a workplace also include the staffers in Congressional home districts?

REYNOLDS: it does. Even I, who have these kinds of conversations a lot tend to—or can't often overlook the needs of state and district staff. But one of the projects that were done at Brookings is called, "Vital Statistics on Congress."

And one of the things that Vital Stats has tracked over time is the degree to which there has been an increase over time in the number of the share of Congressional staff are actually back in the states and districts. And those folks perform really important functions, especially in terms of providing constituent services.

So, in a moment like this one, where constituents might be having trouble accessing unemployment benefits, or social security benefits, or various other things that they need to help them survive and the government is supposed to provide them, those district and state caseworkers are often really frontline employees helping ordinary Americans get what they need from their government.

DEWS: I do want to ask you to go into some detail on your policy recommendations. But, first, I want to ask you one more broad question that you talk about which is a distinction you make, it's a very vital distinction between two major challenges.

And the first is, the way that politics has caused policymaking to become centralized in Congressional leaders' offices, and then the way that the decentralized administrative side of Congressional operations. Can you expand on that duality? Why is that important?

REYNOLDS: Sure. So, for several decades, legislative power in Congress has become centralized in the hands of party leaders in the House and the Senate. We live in an era, and have

for the past 40-so years, in an era of close partisan competition for control of the House and the Senate.

So both parties kind of look at the next election and think that it might be possible to take the majority. And in that kind of competitive environment, both parties have an incentive to draw really clear distinctions between one another that fit by some procedural changes and rule changes in both chambers has meant that much of the decision-making about policy happens in the hands of relatively few individuals.

But, at the same time, many decisions about members actual office operations, how they actually run their individual offices are made at that individual office level. So there is often a reference that Congress is like 535 small businesses.

Those individua members are making decisions about who they hire, who they fire, what kinds of staff to hire. So there have been some stores lately about members actually choosing to hire very few policy-oriented staff, focusing more on hiring communications staff.

That's totally up to the individual House member or Senator. They have some latitude over what kinds of workplace policies the implement. And so, why I draw attention to this is because it means we need to be really precise when we talk about centralization in Congress, and it also means that sometimes we get into some gray areas.

And I think the COVID crisis actually has been a good example of this. So almost a year ago, when the Capitol community was faced with the advent of the COVID crisis, it was not particularly well-equipped for this crisis that sat at the intersection of policy and administrative procedure.

So if Congress needed to act legislatively, but was not necessarily equipped administratively to make the kinds of decisions it needed to do so, it needed to do to operate in a safe way, and so when these two axis intersect it's not always well-equipped to deal with that.

DEWS: Let me ask you to turn now to the po policy recommendations and, like Elaine's paper, you also have four specific policy recommendations for how to make Congress a better place to work.

Can you quickly describe what those four are?

REYNOLDS: Sure. So the first one, which has only—I was just talking about COVID—but this has only risen in an importance in the aftermath of the January 6th attack on the Capitol, which is ensuring employee health and safety.

And so, one of the things that we saw on January 6th, that we have seen since then is that there are a lot of staff members, especially staff members of color—so black and brown Congressional staff—who simply do not feel safe in the workplace.

We saw this around COVID, around COVID testing for members and staff on the Hill. We have also seen it in the aftermath of that attack. So the first set of recommendations have to do with making sure that individuals—again, especially staffers of color—feel physically safe going to work every day.

The second set of recommendations have to do with making Congressional staff more diverse and ensuring that individuals who look like the United States, that the United States Congress serves, have pathways into Congressional employment and into service on the Hill.

We know from lots of research that diverse perspectives produce better, deliberative outcomes. And so, we need to make sure that we make the Congressional workplace more

inclusive and create a place where staff can feel like they belong and are contributing to the policymaking process.

The third involves making sure that Congressional offices have the resources they need to recruit and retain top talent, so if you are to talk about things like the pay for staffers, making sure that they have access to benefits that are competitive, what they might find in the private sector, or even in other parts of the public sector.

And then, lastly, I talk about streamlining some of Congress's administrative operations, particularly around things, like, information technology, I mean, other places where, again, if you have come to Congress from time spent in the private sector, you will be surprised by some of the ways in which Congress lags behind non-legislative workplaces in terms of things like, IT and cybersecurity.

DEWS: Let me ask you to expand, Molly, on the diversity question, as we have talked about a lot at the institution on these podcasts and our writing. It's all over our website. We're in a time of racial reckoning, great attention to equity issues. And I just want to cite a datapoint from your paper.

And you write that, "While people of color make up almost 40 percent of the U.S. population, they comprise only about 14 percent and 11 percent of the top staff positions in the House and Senate, respectively."

So what are your thoughts on why that disparity exists, and what are some of the ideas that can overcome that gap?

REYNOLDS: So there are number of reasons why we see the current Congressional staff workforce, particularly, in these top positions, not necessarily resemble the country as a whole. From the biggest picture further down we have—obviously, Congress, like other major

American institutions, has a long legacy of structural racism and structural disadvantage for black and brown individuals.

In the case of Congress specifically, one place where we really have seen a lot of focus that's very important involves internships so that breaking into employment in Congress often requires having had what have historically been unpaid internships in a Congressional office.

So if you want to get even the lowest level staff job on the Hill, folks are often looking for you to have had a Hill internship. And, again, historically, those internships have been unpaid making it very difficult to build a pathway for folks who come from backgrounds where they need to seek paid employment over the summer to support themselves and their families makes it harder for them to get on this pathway to serve as a House or Senate staffer.

So, as we think about kind of specific ways to address this in the future, there is a lot of focus on expanding opportunities for paid internships. There has been some progress made in this area, more progress can be made.

There has also been some attempts in the House and among Senate Democrats to build some institutional capacity. There is a House Office of Diversity and Inclusion, which, hopefully, will be made permanent and made a non-partisan office.

There are also efforts to try and make sure that individual legislators offices¸ again, in this really decentralized administrative environment are thinking strategically about how to make sure that their individual offices are inclusive and foster a sense of belonging for all staff.

DEWS: Listeners should know that in both of these papers, it's not just diagnostic, there are very specific policy recommendations how to implement each of the four areas that you both talk about.

And so, as we kind of start to wind up this conversation, I do want to ask both of you that kind of question: How do these policy ideas get implemented?

In other episodes in the Blueprint series, I have been able to ask a question like: Well, how does the Biden Administration advance a the particular policies that have been talked about?

In this case—and there might be some combination of the Biden Administration, but maybe Congress as well, are we talking about new laws, or new regulations, or executive orders? How do these policy ideas start to get implemented?

Elaine, maybe, do you want to start with that?

KAMARCK: That's a great question. I think for the Executive Branch, this involves presidential leadership. And it involves how you structure the appropriations for each Executive Department. So take scenario planning, that cost a lot of money.

To do a real scenario plan in the United States, you need all levels of government,, you need people who are taking time off from their day jobs to participate in the scenarios. It's a big deal. The military spends a lot of money on scenario planning and war gaming, and the domestic part of the government needs to do that.

Now, one way to do that is you literally start building into budgets money to participate in these scenarios plans, and I think that's the first thing. I think also in certain areas you need to think about surge capacity. In the wake of the pandemic, you do not need to create the department of governmental pandemics and have a standing workforce of 30,000 people. Right?

What you do need to do is say, okay, in crises where we will need intense medical assistance to the population, how do we build that capacity? Members of the military reserves are paid a very small amount of money to train about every month or so, and they are literally on-call. They are on-call for when they're needed usually in combat situations.

So that's the sort of thing you can actually build that in. You can imagine building this into the public health service. You can imagine building this into the CDC in some respects, in a variety of ways.

Ditto for dual-use technology. You can imagine at the Food and Drug Administration being very proactive about trying to identify common drugs easy to produce, where there is large numbers of them, that can deal with a variety of medical situations. Okay?

And that's just one of the ways. Bottom line is that, to the extent that we have made some progress in how we deal with, in the aftermath of crises, we have done this because there has been a commission forum to look at how the government operated, not to cast blame, but to say, okay, what went right here and what went wrong.

And so, my final recommendation would be, we need to have a COVI-19 Commission put together, perhaps, sometime later in the year, at the end of the year, hopefully, when we're past the most difficult part of the crisis.

We need something that looks at that. Because every time you do that, every time you put together a lookback composed of people who are expert in government, the government can make improvements and those improvements should inform leadership.

One of the saddest things about the situation we're in now is that there was a scenario done and nobody in the Trump Administration paid any attention to it and those who did didn't last long into the first term.

REYNOLDS: yeah, so, to think about my paper which, again, as you said, focuses mainly on Congress, some of the changes would likely flow through the annual appropriations process where Congress determines how much money it's going to spend on itself.

There are actually some kind of tricky politics around that. It's hard to convince Congress to spend more money on itself because members believe, rightly or wrongly, that investing in themselves is unpopular.

There are other changes, however, that wouldn't necessarily require legislative action, or legislative action where both chambers would have to address and it would have to be signed by the President.

I mean here I want to highlight some really great work that I talk a lot about in the paper that's been done by a House committee, a special House Committee called the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, Over the past two years; that Committee has been extended for this year and next
year, and they have really focused on developing consensus recommendations.

They released nearly 100 of them during the course of the last Congress. I talk about several in the paper. But they have really focused on how to make some changes to the way the House works that don't necessarily require legislative action, but could be implemented administratively, again, within the House itself.

And I am really excited to see where they go over the next two years. And I think that will be an important venue for some of this kind of change.

DEWS: So, Molly and Elaine, as we wrap here, I'd like to ask you both to look forward, to look at a super high level and consider what's going on in our country these days and answer the question: What's at stake in both of your proposals? What should we hope for in the end by achieving all or even some of these kinds of reforms?

Elaine, do you want to start with that?

KAMARCK: The one thing that, as I listen to Molly—and, of course, I have read her paper twice now, it's a great paper—one of the things that is common to both the Executive Branch and the Legislative Branch is the fear that they are being dumbed down; that, basically, they are losing the intellectual and the experiential capacity to govern effectively.

Molly talks about the ways that's been happening in the Congressional Branch. In the Executive Branch, you also have pay caps in places where, frankly, they are just simply so wildly uncompetitive with the private sector that the government keeps screwing up things.

Look at this Deloitte contract that they granted for vaccinations. I'm sure it was many, many billions of dollars and it seems to be something that states are abandoning right and left. Okay?

Now, why can't we contract for IT? Well, because, in fact, the IT specialists in the federal government make maybe one-tenth of the top IT people in the private sector. We cannot be competitive when we're stuck in a civil service system that is just antiquated.

And so I think what's at stake in both the Executive Branch and the Legislative Branch is they need to be ready to govern and they need just a lot more expertise, a lot more capacity to do the job in the 21st Century and right now they don't have it.

Molly touched on it. I mean Congress hates to spend money on themselves, even though, in point of fact, it's a trivial amount of money in the context of the federal government.

And ditto for the Executive Branch, upgrading the Executive Branch to be competitive for the private sector is a trivial amount of money, but there is huge political problems ion both of them and doing that in each branch. And I think it poses a real problem for us in the future.

REYNOLDS: I agree with everything Elaine said about the stakes of making sure that we can hire really talented people and pay them appropriately in both the House, and the Senate0, and the Executive Branch.

I would also add, as I had mentioned this sort of at the top that, to my mind, these questions of Congressional capacity and making sure that Congress is a good workplace is really necessary but not sufficient for ensuring that Congress can address the policy problems of the country.

So we could have lots—and there are lots of big conversations going on right now about democracy reforms, should we abolish the filibuster, should we expand people's access to the ballot box, all kinds of really big thorny questions and we could address all of those, or some of those.

But even if we got a Congress, even if we made structural changes that would make Congress work better, we still need to make sure that Congress has the resources it needs to do the hard day-to-day work of legislating.

And so that's really what I think is at stake, even if having a conversation about, where does the IT structure of the House of Representatives sit, might seem kind of trivial, it's all this foundation on which actually addressing the policy problems of the country rests.

DEWS: Well, Molly and Elaine, I want to thank you both very much, again, as always, for sharing with us your time and your expertise on these very important matters. It's been a great conversation.

REYNOLDS: Thanks for having us, Fred.

KAMARCK: Great, thanks, Fred.

DEWS: You can find the papers by Molly Reynolds on, "Making Congress a Better Place to Work," and Elaine Kamarck on, "Building an Agile Government for an Era of Mega Change," on the Blueprints for American Renewal and Prosperity section of our website which is brookings.edu/blueprints.

They are but two of the new set of papers on domestic governance reform. And there you can also find the already published policy briefs and past podcasts on, "Racial Justice and Worker Mobility on Economic Growth and Dynamism," and also on, "International Security." And, finally, stay tuned in the coming weeks for additional sets of papers on, "Climate and Resilience," and on, "International Governance Reforms."

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