

Helping Legislators Be Legislators Again at the Congressional Institute

By [Kellie Mejdrich](#), CQ

Mark N. Strand has spent more than a decade helping those in Congress learn how to do their jobs better — work that's become more difficult in Washington's seemingly perpetual state of gridlock.

As president of the Congressional Institute, a nonprofit that also organizes the GOP's annual retreat, he's got plenty of personal experience on Capitol Hill and is hoping his efforts will help restore some bipartisanship.

Strand spent almost 24 years in Congress, most recently serving as chief of staff to then-Sen. James Talent, a Missouri Republican, until Democrat Claire McCaskill won his seat in 2006. Before that, he worked for two House Republicans, Bill Lowery of California and Stan Parris of Virginia.



Strand (Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call)

The institute was founded in 1987 by a longtime GOP congressional aide, Jerry Climer, to help members of Congress better serve their constituents. Strand succeeded Climer as president in 2007.

The institute has been running free retreats for Republican representatives and senators for over 30 years. In recent years, Strand has launched retreats for chiefs of staff, legislative directors and communications directors. Strand also does individual office retreats for members, paid out of their own office budgets.

The institute also conducts research and issues advisory reports on everything from improving the budget process to Senate floor procedure.

“Staff is so anxious to get additional tools to do their job,” says Strand, who co-authored a book, “Surviving Inside Congress,” that provides advice on how to operate under the dome, from making it on time to meetings to developing relationships with staff and the media to help advance policy.

One of the greatest problems Strand sees in Congress today is the lack of relationships between staffers — Republicans with Democrats, and even within parties — and that’s a sea change from when he was working on the Hill.

“There’s so much happening. It’s all happening in 15-minute increments, and the ability to develop relationships, sometimes even with your own party, is diminished,” Strand says.

Politics, he adds, is “all based on relationships — and democracy, especially, is based on relationships of people working together and compromising. When you have a constant refusal to compromise, why start the conversation?”

Strand sees the retreats the institute organizes as opportunities for GOP lawmakers to get to know each other. But he’d like to see members travel more often with those in the other party too.

“One of the big things I’d love to see members do more of is foreign travel,” Strand says, specifying that he means in the form of bipartisan congressional delegation trips. “Because when you spend a week with somebody it’s hard to come and attack them on the floor gratuitously next week.”

“If you want members to represent you adequately, you have to let them do what they need to do, to do it right,” Strand explains when pressed on how voters would tolerate spending on foreign travel.

Strand notes “they’re not going to tolerate you running up to the Paris Air Show. But when you go to Brussels and you meet with the [European Union] and talk about trade, or go to China, or you go to Sudan and see the poverty . . . you go and see these things for yourself, you come away with a different perspective. And you become a different representative,” he says.

The institute often funds lawmaker and staff travel, a legal practice that has drawn scrutiny from ethics experts. A primary reasoning behind the institutes’ founding was to create a private entity that would not use tax dollars to conduct the members’ retreat, an institute spokeswoman said. She added that funding for travel is done in close consultation with Congressional ethics committees.

It’s not just members and staff where Strand sees a culture evolving in the wrong direction. He believes the increasing competitiveness and volume of media outlets on Capitol Hill has also created a situation where many reporters don’t look at the longer-term. At the same time, news consumers are spending more time with outlets on the extremes of both the right and left.

All this boils down to a greater need for lawmakers and staff to cultivate relationships with reporters and be honest with them, Strand says. “A reporter will tolerate rather creative ways of you saying you don’t have an opinion, or ‘I’ll get back to you,’ ” he says. “But they won’t tolerate you lying to them. You’ve upset the relationship now.”

Reporters can do better, too, he says, by giving attention to efforts to build comity, and not just partisan feuds. Strand points to the new Joint Select Committee on Budget and Appropriations Process Reform as an example of potentially fruitful work that's gotten little coverage in mainstream press.

"It's one of the most important things they're doing because if the budget process doesn't work, nothing works," he says. "If no one reports it, there's no pressure to produce legislation that does something positive."

More broadly, Strand envisions a Washington that puts rubber to the road on process: "One of my goals is to help legislators be legislators again."

He sees hope in that. "A lot of these people were state legislators. A lot of them were business people who are used to dealing with problems that came up and having to find a creative solution," Strand says.

"We're not taking advantage of all this talent we have in the Congress. You're having one person make a deal with the president and then 534 people voting on it. It's just not taking advantage of the full strength of the legislature you have."

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