

Interviewee: Kristine Simmons
[Partnership for Public Service](#)

PART 1 (Part 2 starts on page 11)

CHERVENAK: Kristine, thanks for joining us.

SIMMONS: Thank you for having me. Glad to be here.

CHERVENAK: Why don't we start with a little bit of your background and your history on the Hill and before that. And then where you are today.

SIMMONS: Sure. I started my career right out of college. I was on the committee called Government Operations—it's now a subcommittee—but it was the committee that has jurisdiction, essentially, over the entire operations of government. And what's really fun about that is that you can get into all kinds of issue areas, so I learned a ton about state and local government relations and inspectors general and essentially how government works.

I was then able to take that experience, after several years in the House, and went to the Senate, worked on the Governmental Affairs Committee—that's now known as the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. It's much more known as a homeland security-focused committee, but it's also a committee that has very broad jurisdiction.

And from there I went to work on the White House Domestic Policy Council Staff under the George W. Bush administration, and then on to my current position with the Partnership for Public Service, where I'm the vice president for Government Affairs, and I oversee our advocacy and policy agenda.

CHERVENAK: Why don't we start a little bit with your time on the Hill, originally and being a staffer. Can you talk a little bit about that experience, and did it change over time? Was it the same when you started as when you left? And was the House much different than the Senate? Can you give us a little flavor of how that progression went?

SIMMONS: It's a great question, and it's interesting you did not plant those questions because, boy, I have all kinds of things to say on that, so I will try to keep it very brief and happy to answer any follow-up.

I started in the House when I was on a Republican staff and Republicans were in the minority and had been in the minority for decades. And it was interesting to see how little authority and power we had to set the agenda for the committee hearings for the oversight activities. There was oversight we did and could do, but being in the minority was a very different experience, which became clear to me when we suddenly became the majority party following the 1994 elections.

And it was unexpected, and we had a mock markup, mock business meeting very early when we first organized because the members of our committee had never been in the majority and never had to run a hearing or a markup as the chair. And that was a really fascinating experience, where we had the parliamentary experts come and sit with us and help us be in that position of actually running the hearing.

So having the opportunity to set the agenda, be on the floor for many pieces of the legislative priority list that year, was really fascinating to give me a whole insight into how supportive the floor staff are and how good they are. The professionals who work in the offices of the clerk and other places are not political staff but are people who are essential to making the place run. Incredibly interesting.

From there my chairman was retiring, and rather than stay with the new chairman, I decided to try my luck in the Senate and had a brand new appreciation for the Senate. We always thought, in the House, that the Senate wanted to just kill all of our good ideas, and once I got there, I really understood how truly essential it is to get bipartisan support because you're not going to move legislation given the 60-vote threshold unless you have, at a minimum, some neutrality on the part of the other party. It was a very good lesson for me on working across the aisle and compromise and how different the two bodies at that time were. I see a little bit less of that today, and we can talk about that.

And then I was very fortunate to have an opportunity to work on the Domestic Policy Council staff and to see from the executive branch side how the executive branch engages with the Congress and ways that that process works, could work better, and the different behind-the-scenes actors at the center of government, like OMB, that wield incredible influence, yet are very poorly understood and even unknown, by and large, among the American public.

CHERVENAK: Can you talk a little bit about the way, or the kind of day-to-day role you had when you were on the executive branch? What kind of activities were happening in your role? And would you go to the Hill physically and talk to people? Or was it remote? Was it on the phone? And were you trying to help shape policy and bills, or was it more just high-level communication? Can you give us a sense for what that role and what that job really is?

SIMMONS: It was really two jobs: before 9/11, and after 9/11. I went over there to work specifically on an executive order that was in a topic area that I had worked on as a policy matter on the committees that I had worked on. So I was over there primarily working on that issue, but much like in a congressional office, people on the staff will have a portfolio of issues that they're working on, and one of the issues I worked on, at a very minimal level, was postal service and postal reform. That took up a tiny amount of my time. It's amazing how many lobbyists there are in postal. I met with a lot of the people. It wasn't a great deal of policy emphasis, and really we're there to try to execute the president's agenda and what the president wants to get done.

After 9/11, the job really changed. The entire center of government became oriented towards recovery and response and preventing something like that from ever happening again. You may remember that 9/11 was closely followed by the anthrax attacks. That's where some of my postal work and experience came in. I remember sitting in meetings with some of the smartest scientists I'd ever met talking about how little we actually know about anthrax and how much it exists, you can even find it on farms today. It doesn't necessarily connote an attack. So the difficulty of detecting anthrax and then determining, Is that an attack or not? And how do we know that? And how do we allow mail to be delivered to the Capitol complex and to the White House—these are democratic institutions, people need to communicate with their representatives—how can we do that safely when the mail had been used as a means of delivering a deadly weapon essentially to Capitol Hill?

So, incredibly interesting challenges. Incredibly important work. And it felt, to me, very rewarding in that the public was supporting public service and what public servants were doing. The lines of partisanship largely dissolved because of the national urgency to respond to the crisis that we had.

I see something very different today, and that's one of the reasons we have launched, along with some other good government organizations, an effort called Capitol Strong to just let congressional staff know that we are supporting them in this period of post-insurrection when it's a very difficult time to work there.

Unlike 9/11, we do not have a message of national unity. We don't have leaders who are really coming together and setting that tone for the nation and for people working in public service on Capitol Hill.

So that's a long answer to your question, but it was really a fascinating experience. I learned a lot about working with OMB, but it was a very different job after the 9/11 attacks.

CHERVENAK: Why don't we talk more about what you're doing now at Partnership. Can you introduce that in the different areas of work as it relates to Congress?

SIMMONS: I'm happy to. The Partnership for Public Service was founded as an organization dedicated to a more effective government. And we started primarily focused on people, the need to get great new talent serving in public service and all different roles, the challenge of getting those people in place. But we've since expanded our footprint over the years to look at things that contribute to an effective government beyond just people, but the organizations and systems in which people are having to work.

For example, we are keenly interested in leadership and the important tone that leaders set. We know from the *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government* rankings that we do, that how people regard their leaders is the number one driver of employee engagement, and there's a high correlation between employee engagement and organizational performance.

So in other words, if we want government to work better, we need to have better leaders who know how to engage their workforces and get the best out of those people. We clearly need to get some of the hiring processes fixed and find ways to inspire people to return to public service or to try public service for the first time.

There are many mission-critical jobs that go unfilled. It's difficult to keep people. I believe, it's over half of people who are hired into public service in the executive branch today, leave within two years. And that's a problem. Why is that happening?

We think that there are issues around technology. They're operating under old, outdated technology. There's a contributing factor on Capitol Hill, which we can talk about, and it's difficult to collaborate across silos, and yet many people today, and especially young people, they want that opportunity to work with other people, to solve problems, and it's harder to do that than it needs to be.

So government has made some great strides. We have programming and research and advocacy in all of the areas that I just mentioned, but there's much more to be done. And why we're involved now, doing more around Congress, is that we have looked across all of these challenges that faced the executive branch and identified a contributing factor on the legislative branch side.

Whether that is the difficulty that Congress has reauthorizing programs—for example, DHS has never been reauthorized, that's a problem, it means they're operating under a statute that dates to '03/'04. The difficulty of passing appropriations bills on time—it's been over twenty years since they've passed appropriations bills on time. Leaving Senate-confirmed positions vacant for months and even years at a time takes a toll on an agency and its ability to operate and to perform at the level at which we need it to perform.

All of these things that are not working well in Congress have a consequential impact for the executive branch, so that's why we are now dipping our toe into the water, to do more around the health of Congress itself, beyond the work we already do around the health of the executive branch.

CHERVENAK: Why don't we, of all those areas, why don't we take appointments as a place to start. Can you talk a little bit about how that process is happening, a little bit more of the detail of that, and then what do you see are the biggest problems inherent in that process? Now, obviously, this is something that's spelled out in the Constitution; the Senate has to do it. How does it actually happen in practice?

SIMMONS: The way it happens in practice is that an administration will have an office of presidential personnel that works with the political team and the legislative team, figure out what kind of people do we need, and all the positions available to fill. They will nominate someone after they've been vetted internally, and the Senate will do its own vetting, hold a hearing, usually—for lower level positions, they may not hold a hearing and there are some

exceptions—but, generally, they'll hold the hearing. They will ask questions, both in the public hearing and often in a staff interview that happens outside of public view—and then they will vote on that person's nomination in committee, and if there's a favorable vote to advance them, they will go to the full Senate for consideration.

CHERVENAK: And so for each of those steps, which steps are transparent to the public and which ones are not?

SIMMONS: Where most people find out about a president's choice to nominate is when that person is announced as a nominee. There's an announcement of an “intent to nominate,” and then the actual nomination happens when that person's paperwork goes up. That's more of a formality. It's really the intent to nominate.

With the typical administration, and this is what the Biden administration is doing, they will do some vetting behind the scenes before they announce the person because they want to make sure that there are no red flags or surprises in that person's background before they announce them.

For those who are interested in serving in a political appointment, we developed a website called Ready to Serve that explains this process because there are multiple types of political appointments. There are 4,000 that an administration has to fill. About 1,250 are Senate confirmed. That's a very high number, but there are other ways to get appointment. An appointment without the Senate confirmation is available for select positions, but usually the most senior appointments are Senate-confirmed.

What the Trump administration did—and this is just the nature of that particular president—he would often meet someone and find he had a rapport, got excited about them for a particular job, and they would be announced before they had been vetted. And this really threw a lot of people for a loop because it was an aberration in a process that had been well-understood and well-established. People would go up to the Senate, their nomination would be submitted, and the Senate normally would expect that would be accompanied by a full package, meaning their ethics paperwork had been filled out and there had been some initial work with the Office of Government Ethics on that, their FBI background check was done, etc.

Instead, the Senate was getting nominations where none of that had been completed, and so it really caused a challenging and rocky start for the Trump administration because of their nominees. The Biden administration is having a similarly rocky time but for some different reasons, and in some ways, it goes back to the delay caused by ascertainment in the election outcome that prevented the Biden team from getting access to FBI background investigation services for their nominees. That stuff accrues. And then obviously there was the [Georgia Senate seats] runoff and multiple other factors that have been contributing.

But Biden has the most nominees of any president—of any modern president—at this point in his presidency, and yet by far the fewest confirmed people. I think they're only at ten confirmations at this point, which is historically low among modern presidents.

Just to finish answering your question about transparency, the other things the public does not see are the nominees' conversations with senators, especially for senior positions. Nominees will usually meet with the senators on that committee, and possibly others, to try to assure them that they will have a friend at the agency and that they will work collaboratively. And then some committees hold the staff interview, which gives the staff an opportunity to really get to know, on a policy level, the views of that nominee, and it helps them prepare for the public hearing.

CHERVENAK: And so in your experience, when the Senate is—whether it's the committee members or the staffers—when they're looking at these appointees, what are the criteria by which they're judging them? Is it fitness for the job? Is it a vision for the agency? Is it political considerations? What are the factors that go into that decision? I mean, there's the ideal factors and then there's the real ones. Can you give a sense for how that process works? Or is it totally different from committee to committee, person to person?

SIMMONS: It's all of the above, and it varies from senator to senator, committee to committee. There is a culture on each committee that is different. And the Armed Services Committee is, I'll use as an example of a committee, that is highly bipartisan in its approach to nominations. They confirm general officers as well, so not just civilians, but they have to confirm the general officers, and they really do approach it in a fairly bipartisan way. And they are looking for fitness for the job.

Having said that, there are always going to be considerations that are parochial in nature, for example. The late senator Ted Stevens and the late senator Daniel Inouye—and Daniel Akaka, as well, also of Hawaii—were well known for asking questions about how that nominee would respond to issues that were of particular interest to Alaskans or Hawaiians. And the interesting thing is that they would often invite or request that nominees come to their state.

Dan Sullivan, one of the current senators from Alaska, is well known for asking nominees to make a trip to Alaska to visit whatever facility, whether it's a VA facility for a veteran's nominee, or whatever other agency is in mind, because he wants to make sure that those people are going to be responsive to his state. So it really runs the gamut.

And then you'll obviously see people who end up withdrawing their nomination or being withdrawn for reasons that are not about their qualifications but are about issues in their background that were not well known until they came to light through the hearing process or because of things that—we're seeing this in the news today—things that they had tweeted and been active on social media become controversial at some point in time.

It's treacherous territory because things that people might have written in law school come back to haunt them twenty and thirty years later when they're being considered for a position that might have nothing to do with what they even wrote about.

It really depends on the climate in which that confirmation hearing is occurring and the broader ecosystem of negotiations between the branches and whether there's a desire to compromise or a desire to score a win. A lot goes into it.

CHERVENAK: And from your perspective are there ways that you think that whole process could be improved?

SIMMONS: We have a lot of ideas for that process. One of the ideas that we have is to make sure that nominees are well prepared for what the process entails. Many people are excited about going into public service, especially in a political appointment. They don't really understand that they're going to be asked to make, in some cases, very significant financial sacrifices as a result of that service because they need to divest themselves from certain assets or whatever.

There have been multiple examples of people who have said yes to public service and then found that they could not extricate themselves from their family business or whatever business holdings or personal commitments they might have. And that's too bad because we want great people to serve in government, but they need to know what they're getting into going in. It's one of the best jobs people ever have. It's also very demanding, and there's a public trust aspect of it that is unique.

What makes this more challenging is that the sheer number of positions subject to Senate confirmation means it's almost more than the Senate can process in a reasonable amount of time, particularly in an environment where nominations are not getting a rubber stamp. Every nomination is being scrutinized, and there's often extended and prolonged debate on nominations. So 1,250, give or take, nominations is more than could get confirmed by the Senate in the year even if the Senate did nothing else.

We would like to see fewer positions subject to Senate confirmation. Congress did this on a bipartisan, bicameral basis in 2011, 2010—I think it started 2010 basically through 2012—and that yielded a list of close to 170 positions that were converted from Senate confirmed to non-Senate confirmed, and another 200 or so positions that were put on something that was created called the Privileged Calendar.

The Privileged Calendar was intended as a way to expedite nominees for non-controversial positions, largely boards and commissions, but for constitutional reasons, there was still the requirement that they be Senate confirmed. It was also used for some other positions, like chief financial officer, that shouldn't be heavily political, partisan positions because they're more management in nature.

That hasn't worked as intended, so we'd like to do more to fix that. Those are just a few of the ideas that we're hoping to get some traction on.

CHERVENAK: And are all those positions necessary? One of the questions is, Is part of the motivation for not filling certain positions because some people think they shouldn't exist?

SIMMONS: That's a fantastic question, and we did a report on this very issue late last year called *The Replacements*, and it looked at the impact of having so many vacancies in senior level positions. We found that, in some cases, the position has been vacant so long and filled by a career person in the absence of a confirmed leader that it really makes us question, Do we need that position to be Senate confirmed? If the agency is executing on its mission effectively and successfully and has done so for, literally, years, do we need to try to fill that with the Senate confirmed role? Could we just convert that job?

So that would be one way to think about it.

Another way to think about it is that the vacancies are a reflection of an administration's priorities and what's important to them. The Trump administration chose not to fill positions related to climate change, for example. That's a reflection of the administration's priorities. President Trump chose not to fill some positions related to human rights in North Korea because he was working through his State Department and through other positions. So, in some cases, it's not that he doesn't think that the position, that the policy area is not important, but maybe that position is not the position he wants to use to try to execute the policy. It might be somewhere else.

So this is what the Biden team is doing right now. They're making strategic decisions about the positions they want to fill, the priority that they're giving those positions. They've moved very quickly to fill the deputy roles faster than most administrations, so I think they're signaling an interest in getting strong leaders in place, and I expect to see that those leaders of the agencies getting some sway over who fills the Senate-confirmed slots below them.

CHERVENAK: And who ultimately could change that whole process in those positions? Is the Senate itself?

SIMMONS: If a position is Senate confirmed, it's done so in law, and the law needs to be changed to change the status of those positions. This is not one of the things that President Biden can do with an executive order or a presidential memorandum. At the same time, though, this is an area where collaboration and cooperation between the branches is critically important because the administration and the House and Senate working on this together would give it some staying power and would yield, at the end of the day, probably a better and longer list than either of the branches trying to attempt this on their own.

CHERVENAK: Got it. So it would need to go through both chambers and the president in order to change.

SIMMONS: Right.

CHERVENAK: Well, let's move on to another topic, which is oversight. So you've spent a lot of time on oversight, and from both sides of it, from the executive side and the legislative side. And we've talked previously with the Levin Center about oversight, but primarily from an investigations point of view. I think there's the regular oversight of the Congress, making sure that the executive branch is doing what the law says it's supposed to do, and an ongoing kind of maintenance of that information.

Can you talk about your experience in oversight from both sides? And how does it work? How does the information flow? What works? What doesn't?

SIMMONS: Sure. That's a big question, and there are a lot of aspects to congressional oversight, so I'll just share a few thoughts at a high level, and we can take the conversation wherever you think most helpful.

Often, oversight issues are surfaced by constituents, and this is a place that I think is underappreciated, but the number of people who reach out to their congressional offices for help with an agency matters. First of all, it's a fantastic service that members of Congress play, and it is often a constituent who's coming to the member of Congress as a last resort because they've not been able to get what they need from a federal agency and they're hard places to navigate. They're getting better. There's a lot of great work going on around customer service, but it's still often a place that a congressional office can really help a constituent with.

I'll give you one example. We had a constituent, one of my first real oversight efforts was hearing from a constituent who was having a challenging issue with the Legal Services Corporation, and so that led me to get to know a little bit more about the organization but also the inspectors general and what the IGs look at. I learned that Congress relies on a number of really professional, capable bodies to support it in its oversight.

So whether that's trying to figure out how on a routine matter agencies are performing or whether it's an investigation, which is more the focus of the Levin Center, offices like the Inspector General, the General Accounting, excuse me, Government Accountability Office—the General Accounting Office is what it used to be called, it's now Government Accountability Office—and the Congressional Research Service. Offices like this are enormously helpful when Congress is trying to understand, What's happening in these agencies? And, Are there changes that are needed to make them work better? What's the consequence of having an absence of leaders?

The Ways and Means Committee held the hearing on that very topic about the Social Security Administration. You know, What does it mean for the performance of this agency when there are vacancies at a senior level? And these are places where these support agencies that are around Congress can be enormously helpful to fill out that oversight, sort of, scorecard.

Scorecard's not the right word, but really they give a more complete picture than congressional staff could get on their own.

CHERVENAK: If we could go a little bit deeper on the system by which Congress is collecting information about what the executive branch is doing. So we talk about constituents, obviously they can come in through the back door of a member to complain about what's happening with a particular agency, but the unit of oversight seems to be the committee or the subcommittee, right? And so, ultimately, that subcommittee or that committee needs to be executing a number of oversight actions, and one of those is collecting information from constituents. Another one is maybe collecting information from the executive branch itself, maybe through some of the mechanisms you talked about.

My question is, Is there any kind of formal mechanism by which these subcommittees or committees are collecting this information about their areas of oversight?

SIMMONS: There are formal means of sharing information and that inform the process, but having said that, oversight hearings and ideas come from all over the place, including the media. I actually worked with someone who got an idea for an oversight hearing from *Rolling Stone* magazine. It actually was a very well-covered hearing. There were some celebrities at that hearing. Very interesting.

A place I would start is the president's budget request. Every year, the president will submit a budget request, and along with something called the Congressional Budget Justifications that explains, what are we asking for, why do we need this, why is this our request for our level of funding. And the budget is also accompanied by something called the Analytical Perspectives, and that is just a treasure trove of information, including foreshadowing the administration's plans on different management issues. So we spend a lot of time looking at that. What are the plans for workforce? What are their plans for technology?

The committees will be looking through all of that material to determine, How do these issues align with the priorities of that particular chairman and the areas that that chairman's interested in digging into? How has that aligned with the district of certain members on the committee? But also, what's in the news, what do people care about, what are people worried about. And those are the going to be the issues at the end of the day that drives oversight.

What I think is unfortunate is that because the members are pulled in many different directions—there's a finite amount of time, there's never enough time to do all the oversight on all of the issues within the jurisdiction of a committee—that there are organizations and offices and agencies that just slip through the cracks and don't get regular oversight until there's a failure, until something goes wrong.

I think we're seeing this now with the Capitol Police that there have been very few just general oversight hearings on the Capitol Police, outside of the Appropriations Committee. I should mention the appropriations process is another place where some of these agencies might get

their only opportunity for the year to be before Congress and answering questions. And that's in the context of their budget requests very specifically, so if that's the only time that they're coming before Congress, and Congress is not really spending a lot of time on them, over the years, it's not surprising that there is going to be an issue that, for whatever reason, results in some kind of a massive failure that then becomes the center of attention.

Rather than using oversight to prevent problems, it's often trying to diagnose what happened and how to fix it going forward. That's where Inspectors General and GAO can be really helpful. The GAO high risk list that's going to be coming out very soon is a really valuable document. Everybody on Capitol Hill pays attention to it, and it is an early warning system that these are areas at risk of waste, fraud, abuse, system failure on a massive or very large and consequential level, and they need attention.

I know when I was on the committee, we regularly had a hearing on the high risk list itself that featured GAO to talk through these issues, but then we would pick discrete issues on the list. For example, the strategic management of people in government was added to their list several years ago, so we would spend time on hearings just on those topic areas because they are complex and they defy easy solutions, but they need that time and investment and depth of understanding that you get from just staying with it and asking hard questions.

PART 2

CHERVENAK: Is the hearing the main mechanism by which things get done in oversight? Or are there other kinds of meetings or places where a whole committee will go and be informed about what's happening with a particular part of the executive branch?

SIMMONS: For the committee staff, the hearing is an important but a small piece of the oversight process. I spent much more time, hours and hours with GAO, trying to understand the history behind different issues, and the why—Why are things the way they are today? Why were they set up this way.

What the hearing does is allow you to build a record for a legislative fix or to extract commitments from the executive branch on actions that Congress wants them, or expects them, to take to address an issue.

As we would take on the oversight hearings, we often had in mind some kind of a legislative attempt to address whatever the issue was. It wouldn't necessarily be full solution but to make positive progress on solving some of these problems. But it's best practice, frankly, to have some legislative history behind some of these, behind bills, right. It doesn't always happen. A lot of bills that get moved without legislative history, but people go back and look to understand, what did Congress intend, what do the hearing records show. I frequently, in my work, will go back decades to hearings and committee reports, and try to find what the intent behind Congress's actions were.

That's what you get from a hearing that you don't get from all of the other oversight activity and the meetings and all of that unless it's pulled into the hearing record. So that's the real benefit there, and that's a nice nod to the value of transparency, too, because it makes these things available to people in the future who want to go back. Or a solution that might have worked twenty years ago isn't working anymore, so being able to go back in time to figure out what the considerations were there and then bring that to the current day as you're trying to find solutions is incredibly helpful.

CHERVENAK: I would think that when it comes to oversight, if you define oversight in a narrow sense of, Is the executive branch executing on the laws? There's a couple of theoretical problems that could be happening. One is that the law is impossible to execute, right? Another is that it's possible to execute, but it's not being managed well by some individual or group of individuals, so it's a management problem versus an impossible legislation kind of problem. So how does that concept get teased out during this process?

SIMMONS: Well, one of the things we try to do is to make sure Congress is educated on the agencies that it's overseeing, and we created, over the past year, we're calling them Agency Oversight Snapshots, but it's very visually friendly, lots of graphics, snapshots of different indicators of the health of some of these departments. We looked at the CFO Act agencies. We'd love to do this for more agencies. We don't have the capacity to do more right now, but we're thinking about what else we can do.

But we try to pull in information about the demographics of the agencies—the age of the workforce, the diversity of the workforce, the people in senior positions who are retiring, the *Best Places to Work* rankings of that department, the GAO high-risk areas, open IG recommendations, customer service metrics where they exist.

All of those to make sure that Congress has as much information at its disposal in a quick and easy to digest format so they could at least have a baseline understanding of the department. We also have the mission statement of the department, like what does it do and where is it located, where are the major components of this agency.

Why is that valuable? Because, to your point, there could be a mission that Congress will give an agency that they can't execute on because they don't have the people in that area or they don't have the internal expertise. They need recruitment tools to bring people in who are able to execute.

An example of this would be several years ago, gosh ten years ago now, a stimulus bill included a provision to create more green buildings, LEED-certified and green buildings, which is great, but the people who were actually working on the HVAC and the systems within federal buildings knew how to operate boiler systems. They had not been trained, so there had to be a separate piece of legislation passed to help them bring in and train people who would be able to execute on this new mission, which made a lot of sense to everybody.

But it's those things that get overlooked, so what we try to do is make sure that Congress is asking itself, whatever the policy is, Does this agency have the people? Does this agency have the technology? Does it have the systems in place to allow it to execute on the mission we're giving them and to do so in collaboration with other agencies and other departments? Because very few challenges facing government today are within the control of any one department. Most of them are crossing agency silos, and it just demands that agencies are collaborating.

We don't have to look any further than response to the pandemic and the effort to get the vaccine out as quickly as possible. How many agencies are actually involved in that? It's really quite extraordinary.

CHERVENAK: So when I think about oversight, and you talk about your cheat sheet for the committee, in my experience, at least on the business side, is I think of it more as a board of directors in a room, and you've got a huge wall full of data coming from all those different constituencies and being prioritized. And you can go through one by one. Is it the constituents say X, the employees say Y, the leaders say Z, and then walking through that in a systematic basis every month, say, where you have some expert presenting, and you can ask questions back and forth.

It sounds like you're taking the first step towards that kind of a system with at least making sure that the committee members know the basics about that agency.

SIMMONS: We're trying. I love thinking about it that way, and we're trying. The challenge is that it's a very crowded day, every day, for everyone up there, and so trying to find ways to get information to people who can use it in real time and make it easily accessible is probably the bigger challenge. How can we make sure that they know what's available? And that when an issue arises or something is now on the radar that needs immediate attention, How can we accelerate their learning?

And this is especially true when we have fewer and fewer congressional staffers who are highly tenured. We know that a lot of people at mid-career are starting to leave the Hill, which is something I never thought I would see, but it's happening now. And so how can we make sure that people at all levels of their career, whether they're tenured or whether they're many of the people who are in their first year or two of a Hill job, have access to information that is easy to understand and easy to operationalize and apply.

CHERVENAK: The other final question I have, at least on the oversight side, is the way that it's organized in Congress. Obviously, you have your committee and your subcommittee that are focused on particular parts of the executive branch. Is that the logical way? Is it divvied up properly? Do you have some committees that have half the government and others that have less than 1 percent? What's your thought on the way that that should be organized?

SIMMONS: I am not a fan of massive overhaul of the committee system, and it's been done in pieces here and there. Notably, when the Department of Homeland Security was created,

everybody is very familiar with the challenges that came along with that. While there was a committee created and then my old committee assumed jurisdiction, other committees retained jurisdiction over pieces of the department as it was put together. And that was part of the negotiation and the sausage-making, if it were.

But I think what's more important than the stated jurisdiction or reorganizing is making sure that the members on those committees have knowledge and understanding of the agencies that they oversee and are able to carve out the time necessary to develop some level of fluency in what they're working on. I think it's less about reorganizing the committees and thinking more about how we onboard members to the committees and make sure that they're getting a steady diet of information that is useful and relevant and going to help them be more effective.

CHERVENAK: Let's move on to this executive branch to Congress information connection. We've talked about it in relation to oversight, but I think you've been involved in a wider array of communication. Can you tell us a little bit how that works? How does the executive branch really communicate with Congress? Either in terms of bringing legislative ideas or priorities, or whether it's listening to what the Congress is saying. How does that dialogue happen? I think most people don't really have an understanding of that.

SIMMONS: Well, Congress has a real interest in what's happening inside the agencies, yet few members of Congress have actually been to an agency headquarters or talked to the people working inside the agencies, so the conversations typically happen at the senior level or staff to staff level, where the Congressional Affairs Office and the agency or department acts in some way as the gatekeeper.

So one of the things we would love to see is additional, free-flowing information and a chance for members of Congress to actually go and visit these agencies. Mark Meadows and Gerry Connolly—Mark Meadows, when he was a Republican member of Congress from North Carolina; Gerry Connolly, still a member of Congress, a Democrat from Virginia—they both have made a point of visiting federal agencies and talking to the workforce, the career people, not through legislative affairs, but to learn more about what they do and what their challenges are.

And that's an incredibly valuable way for them to round out the information they get through official channels, which would be the president's budget request and responses to congressional letters. Departments are always receiving letters from members of Congress on different issues. Or asked to do a report on something. There are hundreds and hundreds of reports that agencies have to submit to Congress every year. Many of those are public, a few of them are not public. There's an effort to make more of them public, and I think that would be a good thing, but augmenting all of that is a chance to have conversations. The information flow now is through official channels, but there are also unofficial channels that are very helpful.

And, sometimes, it's beneficial to just have a leader pick up the phone and call another leader. I had a really interesting conversation with a former deputy secretary of a department who said that his committee of jurisdiction wanted to hold a hearing on something. It didn't make any

sense to him. He thought it was a non-issue, and he basically just ignored the request to testify until he was—mind you, this is not someone who'd ever served in Congress before, so if he had, or had been a staffer, he might have had a different approach, but he basically ignored the committee—until he got a subpoena. So he called the chairman, and they had a conversation, and he was able to get them what they needed, and it really just took a phone call.

Fostering personal relationships between the branches and between the leaders is, I think, an essential way to augment the official channels that exist. Because, really, if you want to solve problems and get meaningful information, it's going to happen when there is some trust, when there is an understanding about objectives and goals, and there are the relationships that allow that to occur.

CHERVENAK: And subpoenas.

SIMMONS: And, yes, and subpoenas. The threat of subpoena.

CHERVENAK: Why don't we move on to some of the questions that I ask all the guests on the program. I'd like to get your personal opinion on some of these. Are you ready?

SIMMONS: Very happy to. I'm ready.

CHERVENAK: My first one is, What do you think congressional representation should mean?

SIMMONS: I think congressional representation should mean representatives who are solving problems that matter for our public but also who are being good stewards of the institution of Congress. If they only come to Congress worried about their district and their constituents and not the country as a whole and not the institutions that uphold our democracy, it's going to be very hard for them to see the point of view of their colleagues or to reach compromise with their colleagues. So I believe it means a combination of representing your district well, but understanding that that district is part of a larger country with democratic institutions that serve all and finding a way to bring all of that together to solve meaningful problems.

CHERVENAK: On the district side, when you say represent their districts, there are the two ways of thinking about that. One is the district's beliefs—people have their beliefs in that district and the representative can reflect those beliefs directly. Or, he can think about his district's long-term interest, and he can vote what his judgment is on what he thinks is the long-term interest of that district. So where do you fall on that spectrum? I think I know from your previous answer, but I'd like to hear you talk about that.

SIMMONS: One of the reasons I think it's so important for members of Congress to learn more about our government and the government in which they are serving as stewards and leaders is because they're going to be called upon to make judgment calls and to use their judgment on behalf of the people that they're serving. I strongly feel that there's no way—there are so many issues that come before Congress, and some of them are difficult and challenging and it

requires an understanding and breadth of exploration and information to make an informed decision—it's not possible for the public, in every case, to be able to just answer a poll question and for the member to make the right call every time. I think people are well-served by sending representatives who have good judgment and willingness to learn the job and execute the job effectively.

CHERVENAK: How would your ideal Congress allocate its time?

SIMMONS: I would love to see a Congress, and individuals in Congress, spend more time on the routine oversight issues that we were talking about—on developing relationships with their colleagues but also with their colleagues in the executive branch, with leaders in the executive branch, and really learning about the institution in which they're serving.

Congress is an incredible place with an amazing history. I love the institution, and sometimes I wonder how much the members who are serving there really have time to think about what an incredibly special place it is and how important it is to preserve it as a democratic institution that really is underpinning of our entire democracy. So, I would like to them to have more time to learn and reflect and build relationships.

I know that the amount of money that they have to raise in order to run for reelection is very high and that requires fundraising activities pretty much every week for their entire term. Most members of Congress I've talked to don't like having to raise that much money. They don't enjoy that, so I don't have a solution to, and then I'm not trying to get into a campaign finance conversation, but I know that many members of Congress would love to devote the time they must spend raising money to other activities.

CHERVENAK: So if you had to break it down with percentages—oversight versus legislation versus other kinds of activities.

SIMMONS: I'm not going to answer that question because I don't think it's a static answer. I mean, there are going to be times where we need several committees involved in oversight. Just look at the covid response. It's going to require, I hope, a very heavy oversight activity on the part of multiple committees before we can fix some of the flaws that we've seen in the national response to covid.

There will be times where it's heavier on legislation, times where it's heavier on oversight. I think that there's a close to healthy—nah, I might retract that. I think the balance is not in favor of good policymaking right now. I think there's too much on the politics and the messaging and the fundraising that is detracting from the real reason they're there.

CHERVENAK: So more percentage towards legislation oversight than other activities?

SIMMONS: Yes, I'll give you that. I'll answer that, yes.

CHERVENAK: So how about out of Washington versus in Washington?

SIMMONS: I think it matters what relationships they have, and they are accountable to their districts and their voters, so I don't begrudge them having a district work period. There's this misconception that that's vacation. For some, it might be vacation, and we see a little bit of that in the news, but by and large, they have a lot of—some of them, especially some of the members who represent more rural areas—huge territory to cover, so even traveling within their district or their state is very time consuming. And they need that time to connect with their district.

I think what's far more important is having meaningful working relationships. By keeping them locked in Washington, it doesn't guarantee that those meaningful relationships are developing. Some great relationships have been fostered by virtue of the fact that, through Zoom or other platforms, they're actually able to participate in each other's district events or different things that otherwise wouldn't have been possible. So I think what's more important is their productivity, their relationships, their desire to learn than how much time they're in Washington or not.

CHERVENAK: How should debate, deliberation, or dialogue, occur or be structured in Congress?

SIMMONS: I would love to see more conversation in the committees, and I've been privileged to be part of what some committees describe as a legislative roundtable instead of a hearing, and I found those to be incredibly productive conversations. So rather than the traditional dais where members are raised and you have the witness table down below, everyone's sitting around the table together, witnesses and members, and they're having a conversation. They can react to each other and what they say. The witnesses can react to each other in real time. And those have been some of the most fruitful, substantive conversations that I've been part of, so I would love to see, as a general practice, a little bit more of the roundtable format.

I don't know what we'll see post-covid. I mean, governments and Congress are fundamentally different places today than they were before the pandemic, so knowing what of the current practices will stick and what won't, I'm not sure, but I think if we can encourage conversation, ideally, in-person conversation, and not just with people of their own party or on their own side of an issue but with a variety of viewpoints, that will yield better relationships and better policy outcomes.

CHERVENAK: Do you see those best done in a private setting or with the cameras on?

SIMMONS: I think it's probably a mix. They are going to be times—I'm sure you've probably had other guest comment on this—where some of the conversation, in order to be candid and to have those breakthroughs, it needs to happen outside of an open environment where people have the glare of the spotlight on them. I think, by and large, I support as many congressional hearings as possible being open to the public, open for people to see and to learn and to find ways to engage with their members of Congress and make their views known.

I'm generally in favor of openness, recognizing that there are times where to get the breakthrough, there might need to be a private conversation.

CHERVENAK: What fundamental institutional improvement should Congress make within fifty years?

SIMMONS: Gosh. Well, I hope it doesn't take fifty years for Congress to do more to effectively onboard new members of Congress and to provide constant and consistent opportunities for learning that are valued and not something to skip because you don't have time, but something that's both available and something that members will perceive helps them do their job better. There are really positive movements I'm seeing in this direction, so I hope those are fruitful.

I also think it's essential to have a more diverse workforce in Congress and for people to feel like the people representing them both reflect their interests and also represent their interests so that we have a Congress that looks like America but also takes up the issues that matter for all people, not just issues that are important to people who have political power. And, again, I think we are tracking in the right direction although there's a lot of work to be done.

CHERVENAK: What book or article most shaped your thinking with respect to congressional reform?

SIMMONS: I'm going to give you two. One is *Profiles in Courage*. I read it when I was a brand-new congressional staffer, and I still think about it. I've not reread it in a long time, but I'd like to do so because I reflect on the number of members of Congress who I have great respect for who are leaving the institution or have left the institution. And it's a good reminder for me that sometimes to vote against your political interest, or to speak against your political interest, but because it's core to your values, that takes courage. I admire that. I want to do whatever I can to foster that and the people who are working there to really feel that there's nothing more important than their values and the values of the country that they serve and to put that above their political interests. And that's why I like *Profiles in Courage*.

More currently, the very recently updated—by the amazing Molly Reynolds—*Vital Statistics on Congress* is one of my favorite resources. I have it bookmarked. I'm always going to it for insights on, whether it's the number of women serving or the number of days in session. How do you overlay all these incredibly interesting data points to extract the insights that really help you understand the institution and how it's working or where it could work better.

I'm a huge fan of that. It's a big labor of love by Molly and her colleagues, and I just think it's a terrific resource.

CHERVENAK: Well, the last question is around the plans for the Partnership and for yourself in the short term, and in the longer term. Where are your interests? Where do you want to

focus the resources and attention?

SIMMONS: Well, our organization is about making government work better and helping build the critical connections to enable that. And that could mean helping executive branch leaders work better together, work better with state and local governments, but it also means helping Congress and the executive branch work together effectively on actual problems, having real share of meaningful information, not talking points and marketing materials, but really getting into where we can all move the needle collectively to serve the public better.

I am very encouraged by this work, and I think we will be increasingly focused more on how Congress itself is operating and how we can help Congress be that steward of the executive branch and be the steward of its own institution in ways that are going to sustain that for the foreseeable, for forever. We don't want it to ever go out, so that's what's next for us. A lot more work in the space.

CHERVENAK: Kristine, thanks so much for your time.

SIMMONS: Thank you for having me. This was a pleasure.