

**Reforming Congress Project  
Sunwater Institute  
Interview with Hugh Halpern**

**CHERVENAK:** Mr. Halpern, thank you so much for joining us.

**HALPERN:** I'm happy to be here.

**CHERVENAK:** Why don't we start with your background, you know, where did you start off, the arc of your career, and what you're doing now?

**HALPERN:** Sure, so I started working for my local congressman as sort of an intern driver while I was in college here in DC in the late 1980s and moved on from there, started working for the Energy and Commerce Committee, spent I don't know, about a little less than ten years there, and in the middle we, I was, I got to experience a change that not a lot of folks had experienced before that, which was the shift in majorities in the House of Representatives from Republican to, or from Democratic to Republican for the first time in 40-odd years.

And you know, as I shifted into more of a majority role in at the Energy and Commerce Committee, I sort of developed a proficiency and interest in the procedural side of things, and that led to me joining the new Financial Services Committee in 2000 as their general counsel. I was working for a guy named Mike Oxley, who passed away a few years ago, but Mike is the Oxley in Sarbanes-Oxley. And then in 2005 I was recruited by then chairman David Dreier to come over and be the staff director, the chief staff person on the House Rules Committee, which is part of leadership and is responsible for running the floor day-to-day on behalf of the Speaker. So I spent a little bit more than a decade there before being asked by Speaker Ryan to come over to the Speaker's office and run the floor for him.

And I had had a very close relationship with, you know, the floor directors for both, for Speaker Hastert, Speaker Boehner, and Speaker Ryan for the first part of his term, so it was kind of a natural fit when the person who held that role decided to move on. So it was a great run, more than thirty years in the House, and I retired when Speaker Ryan retired. I was actually the last Paul Ryan employee to leave the building. And then I have what I affectionately refer to as my gap year, where I was trying to figure out what to do next and was approached by some folks both in the House and the Senate and asked to think about taking over as the head of GPO.

And it was interesting because I had been a long time customer of GPO's, not always a particularly happy customer of GPO's, and it was a really interesting opportunity. So fast forward a little bit, and I was nominated by President Trump to be the head of GPO in mid-October of 2019, and I was unanimously confirmed by the Senate about forty odd days later in mid-December and took the oath of office a little bit later and suddenly found myself running a billion-dollar government enterprise that had almost 1,600 employees. And shortly after I began found myself in the middle of COVID, which kind of realigned all of our priorities.

I had to figure out how to how to keep GPO running during that period, and two years later we're starting to get back to normal, and we're working through our strategic planning for the next five years and looking forward to a prosperous future.

**CHERVENAK:** Fantastic. So it's quite a variety of different positions you've had on the Hill. Can you talk a bit about what's similar about these positions and what's different? Obviously, your current position is quite different than what you did previously, but I'd be curious to hear on a perspective over such a long period of time and so many different positions, like sort of what was the same and what was different among all those?

**HALPERN:** I spent a lot of time involved in, frankly, very transactional kinds of roles, so when I worked in committees, Energy and Commerce, Financial Services, when I was doing more issues, you tended to take a little bit of a longer view. But really when I was at Financial Services, I was concerned with what are the milestones we need to hit to move legislation that week, and the next week, and the week after that. What do we need to do to make sure all of our hearings are moving forward, keeping the just the paper flow of the committee moving.

When I was at the Rules Committee, that was highly transactional because you're prepping, you know, anywhere between one and three or four bills in any given week, and you're working closely with the majority leadership to try and figure out what the terms of debate are going to be, how long something's going to get debated, if there are going to be amendments, what amendments, how many, all of those kinds of things. And it was very, very rapid fire, and particularly when I was at the Rules Committee and later in the Speaker's office, you know, those were those were very high-stress, very long hours that you spent. It was probably similar both at the Rules Committee and in the Speaker's office, it was the kind of thing where you would start your day at 8:30 or nine o'clock in the morning, and if you were lucky, when the House was in session, you were home by eight or nine o'clock at night, and if you weren't lucky it was in the wee hours of the next morning.

So yeah, the op tempo of those roles was really at the high end of the scale. Here at GPO, things tend to be a little bit sleepier for lack of a better term. We are a twenty-four/seven operation. GPO serves all three branches of government, publishing and producing information for them. While we run twenty-four/seven, there isn't, there aren't the same kind of imperatives particularly for somebody at the at the executive level. It's not that same kind of op tempo. I mean, you know, we do produce basically the equivalent of two big-city newspapers a day between the Federal Register and the Congressional Record, but you know, that process has been running pretty much the same for several decades, and unless something goes wrong, there isn't a huge change from day to day on either of those things.

Similarly, we produce the US passport, and that process runs pretty well, and those you know, we obviously have challenges particularly with supply chain and labor and things like that, but that that operation also runs pretty well on its own. And we've got other lines of business as well, but all of that, all that, you know, sort of comes together. The skills that I learned on the

Hill, both as a manager and understanding what the needs of the members and the staff on the Hill are, those have been huge benefits to me here at GPO because it lets us really understand both our customer, and in fact, you know, I guess the best equivalent is our board of directors.

So Congress has both roles, so they are a large customer of ours, but they're also our oversight and appropriations entities. So given that, they're probably our most important customer, so the experience I gained on the Hill really lets me understand what their needs are, and then the experience I gained managing small teams on the Hill serves me well here at here at GPO as I lead our executive team and the rest of our 1,600 crafts people and professionals at GPO.

**CHERVENAK:** So before we dive a little bit deeper into GPO, can you talk about the floor director kind of position? That one's a little bit different. You know, we've talked to a couple of parliamentarians here, Tom Wickham and Charles Johnson. What is the role that, what role were you playing there, and how did it interact with parliamentarians?

**HALPERN:** Sure, so the Speaker's floor director is basically the person in the Speaker's office who controls the floor, who's in charge of the floor and the Speaker's representative to make sure that the floor is running smoothly. So it's a little bit of a different model in the House than it is in the Senate. In the Senate, the people who perform those functions both for the majority and minority are actually officers of the Senate, they're the secretary for the majority and the secretary for the minority, and they sort of have their own offices and operations.

In the House, the Speaker's floor team, headed by the floor director and then usually they're anywhere between two and three floor assistants, is actually embedded in with the parliamentarians because the parliamentarians are non-partisan appointees of the Speaker, but they often need to consult with the Speaker or somebody who can offer advice on behalf of the speaker, and that's the Speaker's floor director. So when I was the floor director, I actually sat inside a room called the Speaker's rooms, and it's kind of divided down the middle, and you know, as you walk in on the right side are the Speaker's staff and on the left side are the deputy parliamentarian and the assistant parliamentarians.

So we really worked together closely, the parliamentarians often called on us to make decisions several times a day, for everything from, usually bill referrals were being made according to the precedence of the House, but sometimes those were politically-dicey issues and came up to our level, but we usually deferred to the parliamentarians and their read on those. Things like appointing conferees or how long a committee's additional or joint referral might be, or things like that.

The other element that actually is fairly important, and this was usually the role of the deputy floor director, was making sure that we had members available to serve as Speaker ProTemp, so, you, know the Speaker's office was really key to making sure that we had capable members who could preside over the House because the Speaker himself spent a lot more time working on a whole variety of policy and political issues.

My other role was really managing the floor operations of the leadership in its entirety, so, you know, it's working closely with the majority leader as that office schedules the floor, working closely with the whip's office as they gauge support or opposition for certain things throughout the Republican conference, and it's working with the Democrats as well to make sure that things operated as smoothly as they could on the floor, and also coordinating between the Senate and the White House on the Speaker and the House's institutional roles, so for instance one of the things that got managed through our office was what we call the enrollment process, so the process by which a bill, after it's been passed by the House and Senate, is printed on parchment. The clerk's office handles that, but then getting it signed by Speaker, the president pro temp of the Senate or their designees, and then getting that delivered to the White House for the president's signature.

So, you know, it's a pretty broad portfolio, mostly inwardly focused, but you know if something's coming to the floor, if there's a policy or political issue or procedural issue, the person who serves as the floor director is really, you know, the Speaker's eyes, ears, and hands in many respects in working through those issues.

**CHERVENAK:** It sounds like a pretty cool position.

**HALPERN:** It very much is. The position's been known as a bunch of different things over the years, but the floor director role really over the last probably three decades or so has been sort of at the center of a lot of the action that goes on in the in the House. And I may have forgotten to mention it, you know, the floor director is really the Speaker's emissary to the Rules Committee as well, so whoever the staff director of the Rules Committee is works very, very closely with the Speaker's floor director.

**CHERVENAK:** Excellent, well let's move on to the GPO, then, since that's where you've been spending the last couple of years. And it has a very important role in the government. Can you talk a little bit generally about GPO, and then let's talk then specifically about what GPO does for Congress.

**HALPERN:** Sure, so in general, GPO is a government enterprise that publishes trusted government information for the American people, and what we do is we provide services to all three branches of government. We run as a business, so appropriations make up only about twelve percent of our total revenue and budget, and large portions of those appropriated funds are really nothing more than deposit accounts. So, for instance, Congress appropriates about eighty million a year for its own printing and publishing needs, and we view that as, for lack of a better term, a big gift card that we can bill against for services rendered.

So we perform services for Congress. That's most of what we do in our plant here in Washington, DC, behind Union Station, but we also do other services. Our next biggest operation in terms of manufacturing is we manufacture the US passport. So that actually is in the process of a product change, so the blue passport that the most folks have with the chip in it, it's been around for about fifteen years, that product is end of life and has recently been

retired, and we're now manufacturing for the State Department a new product called the Next Generation Passport. The biggest difference that most folks will be able to see is the identity page is made of a new material. It's a polycarbonate material that we also manufacture, rather than contracting that out, so that's also a pretty large manufacturing operation that we run here in DC and at another facility down in Mississippi as well.

We also have a very large print procurement operation, so we do about three hundred, four hundred million dollars a year in business, where, for mostly for the executive branch, we procure printed items for the executive branch, so everything from blank treasury checks to IRS forms to the Medicare and You booklet, those are all things that we procure on behalf of the executive branch using contractors in all fifty states and some of the territories as well.

And then we also run the Federal Depository Library Program. So there are about eleven hundred libraries all across the country that are depositories for federal information. In the past a lot of that has been what we call tangible products, so products that we actually print here at GPO, so physical copies of the Congressional Record or the Federal Register get sent out to these libraries, and they would hold on to them.

In the digital age we have the world's only ISO-certified trusted digital repository, and that's our site govinfo.gov, and that's really the repository for the digital forms of information for the entire federal government, and you'll find a lot of the information from Congress on there as well as the court, the US courts. There are all sorts of opinions. Not all of the courts in the United States are part of that, but many of them, and we actually just passed, I'm trying to think, it was a few months ago we passed our nine billionth retrieval through govinfo and its predecessor system, so we're very proud of that. We're very proud of the work we do on behalf of all three branches of government.

You know, in terms of what we do for Congress, we run a congressional printing operation, and again it runs twenty-four hours a day, probably about between five and six days a week, depending on workload, can run seven if we have to, so, you know, for instance, a good example is a bill. So a member introduces a bill in the House, and I'm a house guy, so almost all my references will be to the House, but the clerk does their, does her processing on that, putting basically metadata onto that that document, and then GPO gets the physical manuscript of that measure, so when that comes to GPO, if it was drafted by the Office of Legislative Counsel, we can usually pull the electronic file, and what we do is we produced another paper copy of the output of that electronic file. Then we have a whole proofreading team whose job it is, is to make sure that the manuscript matches the electronic file because ultimately the paper document is the document of record, so the imperative for us is really making sure that that document, that the electronic file, really reflects that paper copy that we got from the House.

Then there's a whole process to get this either into our type setting system or make some changes if we've got a good electronic file to work from, and then depending on the size of the document, what will happen is it, there are some automated processes that get that onto

govinfo, onto congress.gov, and sent over to the archives for their record-keeping purposes, and then if it's smaller than about two hundred pages, it'll go to what we call our digital print center, where if you, where it will be printed on essentially large office copiers, large office printers.

If it's more than 200 pages, it'll require more specialized binding, so we now print those bills on our digital inkjet presses, and then it goes through the bindery here at GPO to put that document together and then send that to the Hill. We're doing fewer and fewer, we're doing fewer and fewer printed copies, but the process to get the printed copy and the process to get the digital copy are really very similar, so, you know, the printed copy is just an extra handful of steps.

And you know, once we get that digital copy, then everything's going pretty well, but we do that. We do follow a very similar process for the Congressional Record, and then when Congress has more specialized projects, you know, if they want to publish a historical book, for instance, or every two years they publish the House Rules Manual, and this document is printed here at GPO. And then you'll notice that there's marbling and tabs and nice leather binding. We do all of that here at GPO as well.

So, I like to talk about the people here at GPO. We've got everybody from artisanal book bookbinders who are trained in these marbling techniques that are thousands of years old, all the way up to cutting-edge software developers on sort of the other end, and we've got everybody in between.

**CHERVENAK:** So in terms of the products that you're producing, or the I guess the deliverables you're creating for Congress itself, can you go through, you mentioned the Federal Register, you mentioned, sorry, you mentioned the Congressional Record, you mentioned bills. What's the range of other things they have you basically publish for them?

**HALPERN:** Sure. So we print the Congressional Record, is a big one, but we will print bills, resolutions, and that kind of thing. We also do committee hearings, so if a committee wants to have a printed hearing record, we will produce that for them. In fact, we have a lot of GPO personnel detailed to congressional committees to help them put together those hearing records and prepare them to be typeset and printed by GPO. We also do committee reports, so depending on the length and volume of those, they can be of various levels of complexity, and like I said, we'll also do a whole host of more one-off kinds of things, special books, if there are ceremonies, like for instance when somebody lays in state, or is otherwise, or receives the Congressional Gold Medal, we'll produce those programs for Congress.

And we also do more secure documents, so we will produce tickets for things like the State of the Union and those or the inauguration and those have a lot of security features to prevent counterfeiting as well, so you know it, like I said it's a whole range of products. The day-to-day legislative stuff or really bills, you know, bills, reports, hearings, and the Congressional Record. But the other thing to keep in mind is GPO also produces all the tools that Congress uses to

produce these documents. So I was talking with a group a few weeks ago, and I really described it as, GPO owns the process when Congress hits control P, when they say print, it's our software that takes over and produces those, that typeset copy. And frankly, we're in the process of changing that software. We're building a new system. The software that we've been using to date is a system called Microcomp, which was originally developed by GPO in the early 1980s. It's still operating today, although it's really kind of held together with band-aids and baling wire.

So, and it's been way past its end of life for years now. We're replacing that with a new system called XPub, which is based on xml-formatted structured data. That's the format that Congress has been using to draft legislation for probably about fifteen years or so at this point, maybe a little longer. But in the past what we've had to do is sort of convert that xml into other formats, including GPO's own proprietary formats to get that that output, and there are all sorts of hiccups that that process can create. When XPub comes online hopefully in the next year to eighteen months, we'll have a process that'll sort of go and have a lot fewer steps. So you'll be able to print from an xml document and get good typeset copy and good copy that'll look good on the web in a responsive format that's easy to use in a browser, on a tablet, or on a phone.

**CHERVENAK:** So, Congress is creating all kinds of information every day, right? It's creating everything from official things like bills, to I guess what could be considered a semi-official things, like hearings, transcripts, to highly informal information, just conversations between members, you know. So there's all this information being generated. How do they decide what goes through GPO and what doesn't? Is it just ad hoc, or is it structure to it?

**HALPERN:** The official documents, so GPO is governed by Title 44 the United States code, and Title 44 specifies that congressional printing needs to go through GPO. And so documents that could sort of conceivably be in that printed format at the end of the day have to go through GPO. So all of the real official stuff, so things like the Congressional Record and bills and hearings, hearings are official as well, committee reports, all of those kinds of things come through GPO. In fact, [I] can't speak really for the Senate, but in the House, there would be certain procedural touch points that would kick off a new print of a bill. So for instance when a committee reports a measure to the House, they've got a printed report that goes along with that, but there's also a new print of that bill that kicks off at the same time.

So there's all of that. Some of the stuff that we aren't necessarily responsible for producing but work very closely with our other legislative branch partners on is sort of the metadata, so what is the status information of a particular piece of legislation? How do we make that data available to folks? And in the House there's something called the Bulk Data Task Force, and that task force has representatives from the clerk, legislative counsel, GPO, and lots of other legislative branch customers and you know, it works to make that data available and works on data standards among all of the players there to make that more accessible for folks in the public.

And so for instance, one of GPO's roles is we maintain the GitHub, or the Git library, for all of that stuff, the Git repository. It's our GitHub site that that all of that stuff gets posted to, so whether it's sort of the bulk legislative status information that we make available to folks, whether it's that, whether it's getting text of legislation through our govinfo API, or any of those kinds of things, we're pretty intimately involved with making that stuff available.

**CHERVENAK:** And are there different types of information in Congress today that you feel like should go through the GPO that that don't yet, and are sort of low-hanging fruit to expand, or do you feel like you've got all the official records that are required by the title?

**HALPERN:** Well, so I think we get all of the stuff we're required to get by Title 44, but I think one of the things that we need to work on with our partners is making it easier for, frankly, our customers to provide us with that data as data. So here is just one good example, and there are a lot of smart people who are working on this, and my guess is this problem is going to be solved sooner rather than later, but for instance there's requirement in the House that that you list all of the votes taken in committee and you show who voted which way. Well, so often, that information is really just shown as scans of the committee tally sheets.

And what that does is that provides a high degree of accuracy, but it really makes it hard to use that information as data, and what I'd like to see, and hopefully we can be helpful in doing this, is helping our customers have an easy way to structure that data, so that as they put that into their committee report, either somebody in the House or somebody on the outside can take that data and they can come up with new applications for that. They can create a gigantic vote database. They could apply some AI against that, and you could probably see trends that you wouldn't be able to see other ways. You know, the House has done, and the House and the Senate have done a lot of the preparatory work, the foundational work. So for instance, every member has a unique identifier through the biographical guide. So when new member gets, elected they get assigned a new ID, and if you're including that data with, say, vote data, you can track how that member votes across committees throughout their entire career and all of those kinds of things.

And like I said, I do view that as kind of low hanging fruit, and I know there are a lot of smart people who are working on that particular problem. I know that's something that the House Modernization Committee has identified as a need, so my guess is we'll have an answer to that problem pretty shortly, but it's a good example of some of the kinds of things that you can do when you start looking at this information as data, rather than just sort of static information on the page.

**CHERVENAK:** Yeah, it's interesting, you know, the standards question, or those identifiers, is such an important thing, and Congress is such a complex place. Like even the metadata around bills in the actions that can be taken related to a bill and, or parliamentary procedures, how do you give each potential procedure an ID that could then be standardized? So does GPO play a role in that kind of standardization or creating those ontologies, or is that something—?

**HALPERN:** We do. So for some of the metadata that's handled by, say, our partners over at the Library of Congress because they run congress.gov, but the base xml data standard that is used by both the House and the Senate, GPO has been instrumental in developing that over the last twenty years or so, and that standard is evolving into something we call USLM, so United States Legislative Markup. It's a newer standard. We've worked with other partners over at the Office of Law Revision Counsel, and as a legislative branch, we are trying to center on that particular data standard, and it's easily compatible with similar international standards.

So we're, we haven't quite gotten to the point where we've evolved everything to USLM, but the Office of Law Revision Counsel new revisions of the US Code are fully in USLM and produced using XPub, the system I was talking about earlier, which has been a huge time savings for them. I think as you see the House and Senate move to XPub as part of their printing process, you're also going to see, it'll be easier for us to move to a full USLM-based system. So that's still a few years down the road, but we work very, very closely with our House and Senate partners and our other alleged branch partners.

**CHERVENAK:** Interesting, and so that comes, you know, that's part of your ingestion of data, right, and trying to structure that so that you can then have, I guess, a more diverse and easier set of outputs, right, from if it's standard on the way in, it's easier to standardize it and make different things of it on the way out. So I'm curious about the way you perceive, you know, the audiences for this information that you're printing. You know, is it your average citizen? Is it, you know, Congress itself? Is it everybody, and you know, when you think about those audiences, how do you also think about the forms, the way to deliver that information to those audiences?

**HALPERN:** So, this is one of the things that I personally have been very, very excited about, and one of the things that attracted me to this role. When we were a very young country and we were deciding sort of the methodology for how we were going to write laws, we made a couple of really bad decisions. So one of those decisions was that any time we were going to amend a law, it was going to be a series of instructions to an unseen clerk. Now when you're sitting there and bills are literally handwritten, then that metaphor makes sense. But the problem is that that doesn't scale very well. So what happened was, as we grew as a nation, as our system of laws became more complex, as you develop multiple codes, so we've got the US Code, that's the big one that everybody thinks about, but folks forget that, say, the tax law, the Internal Revenue Code, that is its own body of law, it is its own code, and you know, we don't have sort of that unified system of laws that a lot of other countries have, or frankly a lot of states have, and that has resulted in a whole wide variety of different drafting styles, different typographic styles, and over the years we have had to build systems to account for all of those things.

So now we find ourselves in 2021, and if you want to make a change, that creates all sorts of ripples through all of those systems, and it then becomes really, really difficult. One of the features of the way that we draft laws is we are tied to the typographic instruction, so if you're going back and making an amendment, unless you specify that a heading is bold-faced, small cap, unless you're accurately representing that, it's going to go into the US Code in a different

way, and that can cause all sorts of problems. It screws up the cues for readers and that kind of thing.

So because our system is tied to the visual typographic layout, we've run into problems as we try to modernize because the primary thing that we're delivering is that PDF that accurately represents the paper output. But the problem is, other formats don't translate quite as well. So, for instance, if you've ever tried to pull up the text display of a bill, just pick almost any one, it's terrible. It is awful. And you know, on behalf of GPO, on behalf of my former bosses of Congress, like I feel the need to apologize to people we actually put something this bad out into the world because there are hard returns at the ends of lines, if you're copying and pasting and trying to reuse that information, you have to do a lot of work to get that into a usable format.

So one of the things that when we shift over to XPub we're going to be able to do is we're going to be able to provide a real responsive text display like you'd find on any website, where if you're just copying and pasting, it's just a paragraph of text and then, you know, whether you're pasting that into Word or Google Docs or wherever, like systems, know how to handle that stuff.

So that's just sort of the medium term. It's trying to provide all of these documents in more usable formats, so in formats that can be reused and easily accessed, whether you're at a public library someplace, on a public terminal, or you're looking at it on paper, or you're looking at it on your phone or a tablet. Now one of the things that XPub is going to enable us to do is sort of break out of the system where we are tied to these very traditional typeset formats. So the example I've used in prior testimony before our Congress is, the design of a committee report has basically been exactly the same since GPO was created at the beginning of the Civil War.

So if you look at a document from the 1860s, the general format looks the same as it did in the 1940s and 50s, when we were using a hot lead type, in the 1860s we were using handset type, to the 1990s early 2000s today, when we're using digital type. That format has always been largely the same, in fact, it was a requirement, but in the intervening couple hundred years, what people are asking for from their documents has changed a lot, and our old systems really couldn't deliver that.

So things that are really, really easy to do in say Microsoft Word or Google Doc or any other commercially available system, now you want to insert an image or a table or a chart or a graph, those are all really easy things to do with modern systems. They are really complex and hard to do with our existing typesetting systems. XPub will change that, so it will give us a lot more flexibility in terms of being able to create even like Word templates for our customers so that they can author content that way in systems they're very familiar with, and we can ingest that and process it, and then you sort of combine XPub with some changes in manufacturing equipment that we've made. So we've shifted from those big offset presses to more modern digital inkjet presses.

And the big difference is, in an offset world, there's a lot of pre-press work you have to do, so you have to create a metal plate with the images of the pages you're printing on, and there's a, because that process is so expensive both in terms of labor and raw materials, there is a strong incentive to keep that process as economical as you can. It makes color really, really expensive because for every page with color on it, you need multiple, you need those multiple plates to produce those.

On digital inkjet press, it functions like a large office copier or like your home inkjet, except it's the size of your SUV or a tractor trailer, but you sort of combine where we're going with software, where we're going with our press hardware. That gives us an opportunity to take another look at what our congressional documents look like. So no longer we constrain to sort of weird page sizes because we can fit a whole lot more pages on a plate that way than we could with eight and a half by eleven or letter half or something like that. No longer is color really prohibitive, and you know, graphics and other things are pretty easy for us to do.

So you combine all of those things, and it's really an opportunity for Congress to take a look at its own documents and try and modernize that process and try and modernize the design so you're conveying more information. And they, you know, I sort of got this inspiration from a trip I took at this point fifteen, twenty years ago to the UK, and I was talking with one of their clerks for the House of Commons, and I said, you know, your documents actually look pretty modern. They use regular-sized paper, and they use commercially available typefaces and even color, like everything in the British Parliament is color-coded it's. It's red for the House of Lords, it's green for the House of Commons.

And you know the clerk over there just said, oh yeah, no, we just, a few years before we just decided everything looked too Victorian, so we just changed it, and you know when I came back and tried to talk to GPO about making those changes, you would have thought I had asked everybody to give up their first-born child. Like it was very, very hard, but I think now we are at that inflection point where all of these things are coming together, and it's an opportunity for Congress to really take a good hard look at its own documents and figure out what, if there's a better way to design those documents.

**CHERVENAK:** Well it's interesting. What do you, in your mind, for the GPO, what's its role when it comes to the different audiences? Like you could print everything just like you did it a hundred years ago, or you could print nothing and just print, you could just have an API, right, where any third party could just grab the API and print out any way they want, put on a website they want, and GPO basically doesn't have to do any of the, I would say, rendering of that data into a physical or digital form for a consumer. You know, what, is there a philosophy behind, that do you have like a mandate, you know, it has to be readable by your average citizen? You know, what kind of drives what decisions you make in terms of the way you present the data or the content?

**HALPERN:** So, it depends on what data we're looking at. So, for instance, a congressional record or a committee report or a hearing, those are all fairly flexible formats, like the, what you're

presenting is something that could easily be reformatted in a bunch of different ways. When you get to actual legislation, that's where we're really hemmed in by the system we use. So, again, because we made the decision long ago that changes were to be expressed as instructions to an unseen clerk, legislation, amendments to legislation, whether it's, as it's working its way through the process, is expressed in terms of page and line numbers, so you need that static display that shows you what page it's on and what line number that change is on to give that a mandatory instruction.

I think both, we recognize that's difficult for our users and for our end users, as do a lot of other folks involved with this process. I don't think any of us have really good answers as to how you address that going forward, and this is one of those cases where change is really hard. But it's a question we're actively thinking about. You know right now, Title 44 is kind of tied to print output. I don't think it's going to stay that way forever, and our own package of suggested legislative changes for Congress really move us from that print metaphor to that published metaphor, but at some level you need a common language for what all this stuff looks like, and you know, authors of documents, authors of information often do want their information presented in a particular way. That doesn't mean it can't be reused and repurposed by folks in using different metaphors, but it's one of the things that I'm very, very interested in. And you know, good vendors help their customers sometimes see past some of their own inertia, and we're trying to do that with Congress.

**CHERVENAK:** Yeah, I would think that's got to be a big challenge, you know, because, and plus your customer's changing every couple years.

**HALPERN:** That's true. Although I've got to say there's been a lot of bipartisan agreement on the need to continue modernizing the system and building the infrastructure, and I really think that given the chance, either, whoever our customer is, whether it's a Democratic majority or Republican majority or something in between, they're going to see the value of looking at these things differently, and I'm very hopeful in that respect.

**CHERVENAK:** So it's been a couple years in the role. So how has it been in running, and obviously it's been a very difficult time because of pandemic, but in terms of your ambition for changing the GPO versus where you are now, has it been easier? Has been harder? Is it the challenge more on the customer or the management?

**HALPERN:** So, the pandemic really sort of threw a wrench into things. Just by way of example, you know, GPO was never really designed to work in a COVID environment. One example is our passport production line. People are like literally on top of each other, and so it took us several months to figure out how to operate that line in a way that was safer for our teammates and could still maintain something near the production volumes that we had to for our customer. Similarly, you know, we had to alter a lot of our processes, like even in the proof room, again, because particularly for second and third shift, you know the afternoon and overnight shifts, people were just on top of each other, and so we had to cut our personnel in half. So what we did was we basically paid half of our team to stay at home for a particular week so that one,

you could have a little bit more social distancing, and two, if you did have an outbreak that was going to sideline a large portion of our team, our work didn't stop. We could still do the Congressional Record every single day, as we were required to by Congress. But, you know, it was a very, very difficult period. In fact, we missed publication on the Federal Register one day. It was one of those perfect storm kind of situations. It was, we were operating with half the staff we normally do, we had a particularly long edition of the Federal Register that was very, very complicated from a type-setting standpoint, and we had a water main break, or a sprinkler head break, that doused one of our offices and required us to relocate from there. But, and that was the first miss I want to say since the 1940s.

And it was an important lesson for us, but I spent a lot of time just trying to figure out that, how we manage through that. We, what I didn't get a chance to do, and what we've started doing over probably the last eight, nine months or so, is really getting back to that long-term vision for GPO. Our new draft five-year strategic plan is out for public comment on our website, and we'd encourage anybody to take a look at that. You know, we've got some real challenges coming up over the next several years. The average age of the folks who work at GPO is higher than the average for federal employees. Over half of my workforce is going to be eligible to retire in the next five years. Doesn't mean they're all going to retire, but that's something we've got to factor in. You know, it is, in today's labor environment, it is hard to find people in general and particularly the kinds of skilled craftspeople that we're looking for, whether they're typesetters or bookbinders or press operators, you know, all of those kinds of things are in very, very short supply.

So we're trying to restart our apprenticeship programs to try and create some of those folks and get them into the pipeline, but all that stuff takes time, and it's a little bit like trying to, it's not rearranging deck chairs on the on the Titanic, that's the wrong metaphor, but it's trying to rearrange how everybody's sitting in a car while the car is moving because you still have to produce product, you still have to collect from your customers so that so that you can pay people at the end of every two weeks.

**CHERVENAK:** Excellent. Well, I think at this point we need to move on to the phase of the program where I ask you questions that I've asked everybody and so that someday we can compare the answers. So you ready to move on to the next phase?

**HALPERN:** Sounds great.

**CHERVENAK:** All right. Well, the first question here is what do you think congressional representation should mean? And, you know, are you a, where do you come down in terms of your philosophy about judgments that, you know, members should make and who they're making them for?

**HALPERN:** So my old boss at the House Rules Committee David Dreier, who at the time was the only LA-area Republican, you know, he would always remind me that we are a representative democracy, we're a representative republic, and key in that was that notion of representation.

That meant that he needed to talk to his constituents frequently, but at some point he needed to exercise his own judgment. And as he always said, you know, people don't necessarily elect me on what I will do. They'll look at what I've done and decide that they want more of that, and he, you know, there were a lot of times where he had some difficult things that he had to consider. You know, I think his position on immigration was very different than some of his constituents', but he very firmly believed that having a situation where goods and people could move freely across borders with appropriate regulation were really important, and it was really important to the health of the economy. Not all of its constituents agreed with that, but he thought it was the right thing to do, and ultimately he was unable to convince enough of them until he was ready to retire, so.

**CHERVENAK:** So individual judgments, in your mind, are—

**HALPERN:** Absolutely.

**CHERVENAK:**—by representatives. And in terms of who they represent, is it primary voters? Is it the majority? Is it the whole district, or is it the future generations? Who are they representing?

**HALPERN:** I think the easiest answer is when you're elected to represent districts, you represent everybody in that district, and I realize in our polarized environment it's a little bit hard sometimes to, you know, to work through those issues, but, you know, once you're elected, you are constitutionally the representative for that political subdivision, and if folks thought about it a little bit more that way, we might be in a slightly different position than we are. That said, unless you win a primary, you can't get elected either, so that creates some competing needs I guess is one way to put that.

**CHERVENAK:** Great. Next question is, how would your ideal Congress allocate its time? And by that I mean should they be working twenty-four hours a day in DC, in committee, should they be back in their districts ninety-nine percent of the year? Where do you come down on that?

**HALPERN:** So, I actually, you spoke with my good friend Kyle Nevins in an earlier one of these series, and I remember in 2010, when we were talking, Kyle worked for Eric Cantor, who was the incoming majority leader, and we designed actually a fairly decent schedule, one that I really liked some elements, of which the current majority has maintained, the idea of where you reserve time in the mornings for committees to do their work. I think that's really important, and that's not something that we had in the early years when I was sort of coming up, either through committees or on the House floor.

And similarly, the idea of two, four-day weeks interrupted only by a two-day weekend, followed by, you know, a longer four-day weekend, and then another four-day work week, so that three-week cycle where, you know, you had a longer weekend that made it easier for West Coast members to go home over that time. I thought that that was a really, really good schedule. I thought it made a lot of sense. And keep in mind that committee activities can go on in the

afternoon. You're just not guaranteed not to be interrupted by floor votes then. Now the problem is that the members are human beings, and I think there were a whole series of incentives where members, particularly Republican members, really felt that they wanted to be back in their districts on any weekend. So while that was really easy to execute if you were basically east of the Mississippi, when you're talking about western members, that was harder to execute, say on a two-day weekend, and what would end up happening is they would start putting pressure on the leadership to let them go earlier and earlier in the day on a Friday and pushing them to let them come back later on Mondays.

And so that was sort of the one flaw in the system, but overall as a concept I thought it worked pretty well. You know, I know not everybody else did, but I think, certainly in the abstract and frankly in the practical as well, I think it was far better than what we had previously.

**CHERVENAK:** Great, well next question is, how should debate, deliberation, or dialogue occur or be structured in Congress? And since you spent time on the floor and then in committee, you know, where should this discussion happen? Everywhere? Where should we focus on one particular area, and should the cameras be on, or should there be some privacy to it?

**HALPERN:** I think one of the issues that the Congress is going to have to grapple with is the sort of the push and pull about cameras. And I'm a big believer that members need private time, that they need the opportunity and the ability to talk to one another, and the more barriers we put in the way of that, the worse off it is for the institution. So my particular view is, you know, there needs to be balance. And I think members do pretty well in in committees, but I can tell you, you know, we put cameras in the Rules Committee in 2011 when we became the majority there, and in 2011, 2012, years run together, but we put cameras in there, and what happened was our meetings got a lot longer, and it wasn't because the members were talking to themselves. They were talking to the cameras.

So, you know, on the one hand it was good to allow people to sort of see how that process worked. On the other hand, you know, you run the risk that the people are talking to the audience beyond the buildings, and that frankly was something that the founders were actually very, very concerned about. And while I think they believed in some level of transparency, there's, they recognized that the members are people and they need the time to have conversations amongst themselves. So, you know, I think there needs to be a balance, and I think, frankly, the members need to put a little bit more emphasis on having time to talk to one another, having private conversations, and I know I've got good friends in the sort of transparency and good government world, and I'm sure they would push back on that a lot, but I think there's a far greater need for some of that than what we've seen so far.

**CHERVENAK:** Next question is, what fundamental institutional improvement should Congress make within fifty years?

**HALPERN:** Well, I talked about one of them, and I would love to see Congress change its documents because I think if we change the documents and we change the way the Congress

sort of officially transmits information, it's going to have two effects. One, it's going to make that information more available, and my personal belief is that somebody who is better informed can make better decisions about what their government ultimately looks like and the policies that government undertakes. But the second thing is if we can change those documents, we can make them more flexible and improve the kinds of information we can put inside those documents, then, and make it easier to author, then a lot of the impediments that exist now to producing government information will come down, and folks won't look for alternatives that don't get captured by our systems to preserve information to keep it for the long term. You know, it's great that you put a really whiz-bang web calculator on your website, but that doesn't get preserved forever, whereas a committee report that might have some really interactive diagrams or charts or graphs or whatever, that does get preserved. You know, a copy of that goes into a cave someplace so that we preserve that for all time.

**CHERVENAK:** Great. Next one is, what book or article most shaped your thinking with respect to congressional reform?

**HALPERN:** So yeah, the short answer to that question is I don't know that I can identify one. I spent thirty years of my life working in the House of Representatives, and more than half of that time working on the floor. I guess if there were any book it would be, it'd be the House Rules Manual. You know, an old professor of mine who worked for Speaker Wright, he held up his copy of this book and said, you know, there's, at the time, there was some fifty-odd rules, and it was it was about 1,500 pages, and he said but really in the House of Representatives, there's only one rule that matters, and that's whoever has two hundred eighteen votes wins.

But, you know, I've spent a lot of time working through the rules of the institution and making sure it functions, and sometimes we've been successful at that. Other times we've fallen short, but as we as we look towards making the institution better, making it serve its members and the public better, you know, I think there's actually a lot of wisdom to be found in in the House Rules Manual.

**CHERVENAK:** Excellent. The last question is really about your plans for the future. Obviously, you're at GPO, and you've got still a big set of things that you want to accomplish there. What else do you have on the horizon?

**HALPERN:** You know, I think that's the big thing for now. We're happy to be getting back to normal and looking at things, and frankly I'm looking to get out and travel and meet a lot of our stakeholders in the broader community, and whether that's our suppliers or a lot of our contractors or folks out in the world who use our products, that's what I'd really like to spend some time on as the world opens back up.

**CHERVENAK:** Excellent. Mr. Halpern, thank you so much for your time, thanks for your service, and best of luck with all your ambition with the GPO, and we look forward to seeing the results.

**HALPERN:** Awesome. Thanks so much.

**CHERVENAK:** Thank you.