

COLOMBIA

PROGRAM PROFILE



History of Partnership

The House Democracy Assistance Commission approved a legislative strengthening partnership with the Colombian parliament in September 2006. The Commission focused its work with the Chamber of Representatives and Senate on strengthening independent research and analysis capabilities, the Chamber's budgetary oversight and drafting capacity, and legislative oversight of the executive branch.

The Commission has implemented the partnership by sending three Congressional delegations to Colombia and hosting training seminars for Colombian members of congress and staff. The current focus of the program with Colombia includes anti-corruption, constituent relations, and modernization of the legislature through use of information and communication technology (ICT).

Accomplishments

- Assisted staff of the Afro-Colombian caucus in developing tool for evaluating how government programs assist underprivileged groups
- Provided models for developing independent research and budget units.

Background

In 1991, the Republic of Colombia adopted a new constitution which decentralized the state and reinforced the separation of powers among the government's three independent branches. The Colombian legislature is bicameral; the Chamber of Representatives has 166 members and the Senate 102 members, all of whom serve four-year terms.

Congressional Delegations

In November 2011, Commission Chairman Rep. David Dreier led a congressional delegation of six Members of Congress to Colombia. Since the election of President Juan Manuel Santos in 2010, the Colombian Congress has enacted several major laws to address entrenched challenges facing the country, including a major law to compensate the victims of Colombia's internal conflict. The visit allowed HDP members to take stock of these and other developments in Colombia, including the recently enacted U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement. The delegation's program in the Colombian Congress included visits with the leadership of the House and Senate, a meeting with members of the Afro-Colombian and Women's caucuses, and peer-to-peer meetings with their counterparts in the Colombian Congress.

In August 2009, U.S. Representative David Price led a congressional delegation of eight Members of Congress to Colombia to meet with the leadership of the Chamber of Representatives and Senate. The purpose of the visit was to assess the state of the legislative strengthening partnership with the Colombian legislature, three years into Colombia's membership. The U.S. delegation concluded the visit

with a visit to Cartagena, a center of Colombia's Afro-Colombian population and a focal point of the government's efforts to demobilize and reintegrate paramilitary and guerrilla fighters.

Two years prior, in August 2007, Representative Price led a congressional delegation of seven Members of Congress to Bogota to meet with members of the Colombian legislature to engage in peer-to-peer dialogue focused on the role of political parties in a legislature, fundamental committee operations, and the benefits of an independent budget analysis office in order to conduct legislative oversight of the executive branch. The U.S. congressional delegation also met with Colombian President Alvaro Uribe to discuss issues of importance to the U.S.-Colombian relationship. Following its program in Bogota, the congressional delegation traveled to Medellin to meet with local officials and discuss their relationship with the federal government.

Staff Delegations

In May 2015, a delegation of current staff from the offices of Ranking Member Rep. David Price (D-NC) and Rep. Diane Black (R-TN) met in Bogota with committee chairs, members of parliament, the secretary general of the parliament, the director of research and parliamentary staff to gauge the extent to which the Colombian Congress has evolved since joining the HDP and how satisfied they were with the level and quality of engagement they had with the partnership. The delegation was pleased to learn of the democratic growth that had occurred and how HDP supported those democratic reforms as well as ways in which Colombia was interested in partnering with HDP to continue strengthening their democracy. Legislative staff from Colombia and the United States were eager to continue fostering the peer-to-peer relationships formed during the visit.

MP Seminars

In February 2015, the National Democratic Institute facilitated a parliamentary exchange program that represented a departure from the previous technical subjects of focus, tackling "leadership in the digital economy." The program was jointly supported by HDP and the Institute for Representative Government (IRG), a bipartisan organization of former members of Congress dedicated to strengthening the legislative institution. The program included 22 members of parliament in total, representing the legislatures of Colombia, Georgia, Ghana, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Kosovo, Nepal, Peru, Serbia and Tunisia. The program explored how, from the use of social media and mobile platforms by members of parliament to connect with constituents to enhanced capabilities for voter targeting, new technologies are changing how politics functions and parliamentary business is conducted in many countries. The program also probed how the burgeoning use of technology also raises a number of policy issues for parliaments around the world, including how best to support economic development and trade, protect citizens' privacy interests, and defend against cybercrime. As an emerging field of policy expertise, issues relating to technology also present opportunities for women and young politicians to assert leadership, bringing new skills that may not otherwise exist within traditional party and parliamentary structures. During the exchange program, delegates explored these topics through dialogue with fellow members of parliament, parliamentary staff, policy experts and industry leaders in both Washington, D.C., and Silicon Valley, CA. The Silicon Valley portion of the trip was especially appreciated by delegates, who have been experimenting with several new applications, platforms, and technological initiatives to narrow the gap between parliament and citizens.

In April 2007, the House Democracy Assistance Commission organized a weeklong program for visiting members of the Colombia parliament. The program began with an overview of how the U.S. Congress works, led by the office of the Clerk of the House and the Congressional Research Service. Participants were then divided into three smaller workshops focusing on (1) the role of politics and political parties in the legislature; (2) the importance of an independent legislative research service; and (3) the benefits of independent budget analysis information and oversight of the executive branch.

An additional workshop on the role of committees in the legislative process was led by Members of the U.S. House of Representatives, who shared their experiences with their Colombian counterparts. Following the Washington, D.C. program, the Colombian legislators travelled to the congressional district of Representative Sam Farr in California to discuss constituent relations, public accountability, and community outreach.

Staff Seminars

Staff of the Colombian Congress participated in a Legislative Staff Institute organized by the Commission in March 2015. The staff institute hosted 22 participants from 7 partnership countries for a week-long seminar that focused on strengthening legislative oversight mechanisms. The delegates identified strategies for strengthening legislative oversight mechanisms and increasing communication between legislatures, supreme audit institutions and civil society in addition to meeting with members of the U.S. House of Representatives, expert staff of Congressional committees; representatives from government support agencies, and representatives from non-governmental organizations. The seminar was a forum for the sharing of reform agendas between fellow participants and experts from the U.S. Congress and created an opportunity for delegates to present on examples of successful oversight mechanisms in their home legislatures, furthering a peer-to-peer exchange of information.

In January 2015, a staff member of the Colombian Congress joined colleagues from 14 other countries for the largest HDP staff institute to date. Facilitated by the National Democratic Institute, the weeklong program focused on strengthening committee operations. The program sought to provide participants an overview of committee operations in the U.S. Congress, and covered topics such as internal and external policy analysis resources, the oversight role and oversight tools available to committees, as well as legislative and executive branch relations. Emphasis was placed on organizing, preparing and conducting public hearings. The program also provided the delegates the opportunity to discuss the role and functions of committees in their home legislatures.

Staff of the Colombian Parliament participated in a Legislative Staff Institute organized by the Commission in October 2008. The staff institute hosted 25 participants from 11 partnership countries for a 10-day program focused on congressional oversight and budgeting. Participants were given an overview of the budget process in the United States and the structure, organization, and services provided by the Congressional Budget Office. Issues of particular importance were the need for transparency, how to conduct revenue estimation, and how key policy issues such as health, defense, agriculture, infrastructure, and education affect the budgeting process.