

# FORESIGHT IS 20/20

## Challenges and Opportunities in Congress' Future



# Technology and Trust

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At a time when the public shows little confidence in the ability of Congress to get things done, the Foresight is 20/20 project is a starting point for new, fresh thinking approaches that can make Congress more proactive and less reactive. We believe Congress can earn back the public's trust by tackling challenges and solving problems more effectively, thus living up to its mission to serve the public. At the core of this project was the question "What will the world look like in 2032 and how will that impact the way Congress functions and how it meets constituents' needs?"



## HIGH IMPACT AND HIGH UNCERTAINTY TRENDS IN CONGRESS' FUTURE

To build scenarios that help us understand how Congress may operate in 2032, we considered the intersection of two trends that will shape America's future in consequential yet still unpredictable ways: trust and technology literacy and access.

### Trust

America is experiencing a lack of trust in major institutions. Only 4 in 10 Americans [say](#) they trust the federal government to do what is right at least some of the time. Six out of 10

Americans express strong distrust toward Congress and just [30%](#) of the public sees members of Congress favorably.

During the next several years, public trust in our federal institutions and leaders will play a significant role in how people interact with government and see its value for a healthy democracy. Based on the current state of trust in public institutions, one possible direction is further decline and erosion where distrust in government and our leaders becomes a systemic and self-reinforcing problem. This will continue to create a barrier to our government's ability to meet urgent needs and fully engage the public, which in turn will add to the public's belief that government cannot serve them.

Another possible direction, and we're seeing the early beginnings of this change, is one where key stakeholders realize the grave cost of low trust and are making concerted efforts to impact its direction. If this becomes the case, our public institutions will be able to better meet public needs and enact reforms that address systemic issues. In turn, this will earn back the public's trust and shift the path we're currently on.

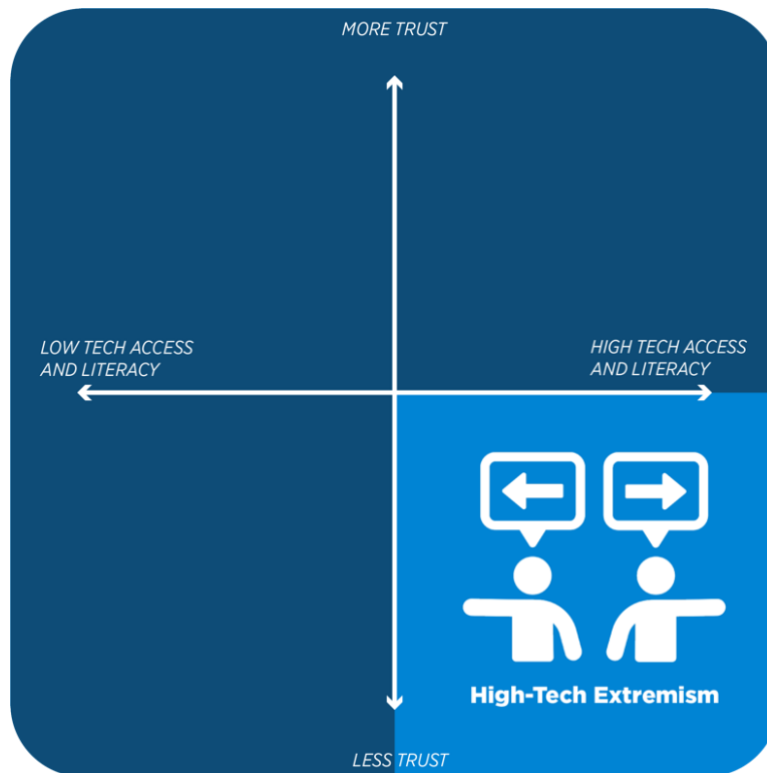
## **Technology Access and Literacy**

We are living in a world where technological advancements have become increasingly hard to predict, understand, or even manage. From self-driving cars and the ubiquity of algorithms to the Metaverse and cryptocurrency, our leaders will need to keep up with advances more than ever before. In 10 years, it is likely that technology will play an even greater role than it does today in reshaping the cultural and political landscapes, and may offer solutions to some of America's major problems. However, current trajectories along a wealth divide will determine who has access to emerging technologies and the education to promote literacy in using them. The government will have to account for and understand that not every constituent will have access to the same levels of technology, and they will have to build policies that bridge those divides.



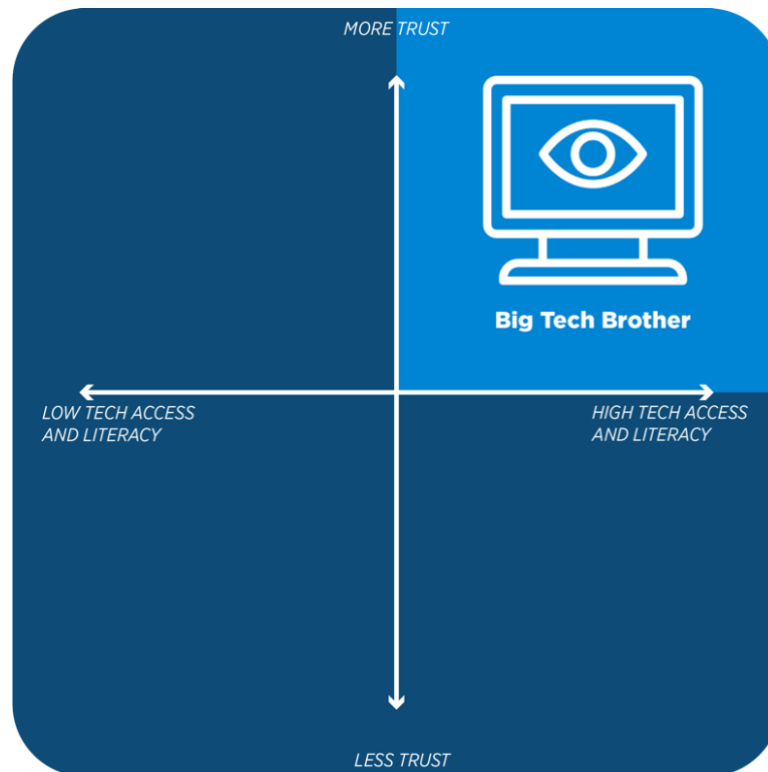
## BUILD IT: TWO TRENDS AT PLAY

### Low Trust and High Tech Access and Literacy: High-Tech Extremism



An increasing reliance on social media and virtual workspaces means that it is likely for people in 2032 to spend even more time in online spaces. If the current lack of trust in institutions and each other persists, people will continue to move away from mainstream media outlets and become even more reliant and trusting in niche online sources for advice and information. There will be an increase in sources that are highly specific to people's existing viewpoints and be a next step in the progression of the current online echo-chamber trends that lead to extremist breeding grounds. With greater technology access and literacy, these online radicalized populations will be able to mobilize using advanced technology for potentially dangerous purposes. A notable example of this would be the availability of deep fake software that can create convincing fraudulent videos. Combating disinformation will grow to become the top priority for most, if not all, government agencies and offices in order for them to function successfully.

## High Trust and High Tech Access and Literacy: Big Tech Brother



More people will use advanced technology in their everyday lives and have a greater trust in technology companies. In this scenario, one group of winners will be consumers who value convenience. High trust in technology companies' transparency and privacy policies will make these consumers feel secure in their online habits, such as consuming digital media and making online purchases and financial transactions regardless of how their personal information will be used and shared. These consumers will have few doubts about the ability of their favorite technology companies to keep them safe even in the case of a cyberattack. However, those who are skeptical about the ability of technology companies to self-regulate will have few legitimate pathways to address concerns and ensure enforcement of safety practices. Governing bodies will have a hard time inserting themselves into cybersecurity and privacy conversations due to the political and economic power of technology companies.



## LIVE IN IT: IMPLICATIONS FOR CONGRESS

### Low Trust and High Tech Access and Literacy: High-Tech Extremism

**Opportunities:** In 2032, a historic lack of public trust in Congress will deeply impact the way lawmakers use technology to try and bridge the trust gap. They will have to put more work into public-facing efforts to rebuild trust and re-election efforts. With the installation of advanced technology in Congress, members and staffers will have more information, resources and capacity. Insight into congressional decision-making will be more detailed than ever before. In attempts to build trust, lawmakers will take advantage of high-tech access and literacy to create content justifying their reasonings behind votes. While it is up to constituents whether they trust the content or not, the public will have greater insights into their representatives than ever before.

**Challenges:** Extremist groups will have access to advanced technology that is currently expensive and difficult to use, such as deep fake software. The 2032 version of this technology will give anyone with a smartphone greater capacity than exists today to create convincing fake images and videos. The potential for this technology to disrupt the operations of Congress could be enormous in a world where there is a lack of public trust. Radical groups will convey dangerous messages of disinformation to target Congress as an accountability institution and a model of democracy. They will be able to target specific members and congressional candidates in many ways, from creating convincing fake images of members committing crimes to fake videos of candidates promoting extremist values. The disinformation will spread rapidly and, without any institutions of trust, may have an unstoppable reign.

### High Trust and High Tech Access and Literacy: Big Tech Brother

**Opportunities:** Lawmakers will be able to build public trust by following through on promises to improve constituent services. The services will be provided faster, for more people, and will be easily accessible online. Internal technology systems will increase Congress' efficiency in completing administrative tasks, which will give staffers and members more time to focus on trust efforts. As a result, Congress will host more substantive and frequent hearings where more constituents have better insight into seeing what is working and what is not. Additionally, Congress will have improved oversight and accountability based on the technology trusted model set by the private sector. Oversight and regulation will be seen as activities needed for the common good and as a key congressional priority.

**Challenges:** With high levels of trust in big technology companies, current accountability institutions like Congress will face a dangerous decline of relevance. In order to take advantage

and participate in the highly personalized, convenience-based products of 2032, consumers will need to give technology companies more and more of their personal information. Even though most people will be trusting and feel comfortable in doing so, a great deal of personal information will be required to interact in the world and stored in company databases. Without Congress as an accountability institution to provide legislative authority, the privacy of millions of consumers will not be protected and left vulnerable to threats by unsavory actors.



## PLAN FOR IT: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TODAY

Whether the goal is to attain the utopia or avoid the dystopia, our scenarios offer Congress and those who care about the institution the opportunity to take a more focused approach to the future. We want to emphasize that these possible and plausible scenarios aren't forecasts of what will or won't happen in Congress during the next 10 years, but rather frameworks to help us deal with high degrees of uncertainty. These frameworks can then help us back cast to our current state and examine what actions we can take today to be better prepared for an uncertain future. Through our research, we gathered recommendations based on the above futures. These are not novel—in fact, many of them are recommended by the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress. Others come from other research conducted by the Partnership for Public Service with the goal of rebuilding the public's trust in government and fostering a narrative of hope and change for Congress.

- **Prioritize the modernization of tools and resources**
  - Introduce easy to use software focused on listening to constituents and responding in real time.
  - Improve constituent services to prioritize efficiency.
- **Work with media to promote good work Congress is doing today.**
  - Spread meaningful information to constituents on successful congressional work to foster public trust.
  - Prioritize dissemination of positive accomplishments to lay the groundwork for fighting distrust and preventing extremism.
- **Support the recommendations made by the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.<sup>1</sup>**
  - Offer technology tools to facilitate collaboration in Congress on legislation and issues of mutual interest.
  - Modernize the congressional support agencies.
  - Promote bipartisan committee websites for the public with nonpartisan information about committees and their operations.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://modernizecongress.house.gov/116th-recommendations>

- Provide accessible information on organizations and resources to help lawmakers manage conflict and foster common ground.
- Prioritize nonpartisan summaries for legislation receiving floor votes.

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