

## **E - CONGRESS PROS, CONS DISCUSSED**

By Dale Andrews

*Roll Call*

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From a suitcase bomb detonating in the Capitol to a plague keeping Members quarantined in their homes, there was no shortage of doomsday scenarios at a hearing yesterday about creating an "electronic Congress."

The House Administration Committee held the hearing to discuss contingency plans if a terrorist attack or natural catastrophe prevented Congress from assembling.

Four experts and two Members addressed both the benefits and perils of an e-Congress - an electronic system that would enable Members to communicate from separate locations if they couldn't meet centrally.

Chairman Bob Ney (R-Ohio) said Congress needs a plan that would "not compromise the integrity of the institution or the principles of democracy."

Rep. James Langevin (D-R.I.) testified that the goal of the yet-to-be developed system is "a two-way backup communication system that is reliable and secure."

"E-Congress is about preparing for an emergency situation," Langevin said. "I don't want this to substitute for our daily face-to-face interaction."

Norman Ornstein, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and a frequent *Roll Call* contributor, said an e-Congress system is attractive because of Congress' symbolic significance.

"Keeping Congress running is especially important after a catastrophe," he said.

The system would likely utilize some combination of teleconferencing, e-mail and online bulletin boards. Langevin said any e-Congress would have to accommodate those Members who are "unfamiliar with the Internet."

Robert Tibadeau, director of security architecture for California-based Seagate Technologies, said existing technology isn't good enough. "Instead, Congress should think about the deliberative structure desired, then make the technology to suit the desired model," he said.

Tibadeau raised other technical concerns, including protecting the authenticity of votes and internal communications.

Many of the Members and experts were concerned with losing the beneficial qualities of a central location.

"Face-to-face interaction is one of the most important features of this House," said Rep. David Dreier (R-Calif.), who testified.

Dreier cautioned that an e-Congress would be a radical shift from the Founding Fathers' vision: "We need to think long and hard about anything that could undermine our deliberative opportunities and responsibilities."

Rep. John Linder (R-Ga.), a member of the panel, worried that meeting electronically would show that Congress had been terrorized into submission. "The legislative assembly must not be deterred from assembling," he said.

Donald Wolfensberger, director of the Congress Project for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, said the creation of an e-Congress to serve in times of extreme distress would create a slippery slope, introducing the possibility of becoming permanently virtual. He warned that such a system would be a "reverse 'Field of Dreams.'"

"In that movie, a voice whispers to Kevin Costner, 'If you build it, they will come.' Well, in this case, if you build it, they will stay away."

Ornstein added to the argument: "I am afraid that many of your colleagues would jump at the chance to vote from home."