October 4, 2016

The Honorable Pete Sessions  The Honorable Louise M. Slaughter
Chairman, Committee on Rules Ranking Member, Committee on Rules
U.S. House of Representatives U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515 Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Sessions and Ranking Member Slaughter,

We write to you today to ask that you remove the unilateral subpoena power of committee chairs for the 115th Congress. The Subcommittee on Rules and Organization of the House recently held a hearing on proposed changes to the standing rules of the House and we appreciate your request for input.

At the beginning of the 114th Congress, several House committees, including the Energy and Commerce Committee and the Science, Space, and Technology Committee, adopted new rules that gave their chairmen the authority to issue subpoenas without consulting the ranking members of those committees. This change signals a break with years of tradition and has proven to be a power too easily abused. For example, the Science, Space, and Technology Committee has issued over 20 subpoenas during the 114th Congress, this exceeds the combined number of subpoenas issued by the Committee in the last three decades. The newly created Select Panel investigating Planned Parenthood has used its unilateral subpoena power to harass and endanger researchers, patients, and providers. The Financial Services Committee has issued 14 subpoenas; 6 for document productions and 8 for depositions to the agencies both within and outside of the Committee’s jurisdiction. These are just a few examples of the wide-spread abuse of unilateral subpoena power this Congress.

This is not a partisan issue. Neither Democratic nor Republican chairs should have this authority and, to their credit, some committees such as the Committees on Appropriations, Intelligence, Armed Services, and Veterans’ Affairs wisely chose not to expand subpoena power for their chairs. The 114th Congress has shown that unilateral subpoena power can too easily be used as weapon against those expressing views with which a committee chair does not agree, and we write to urge that this rule be changed to prevent further abuse and partisanship.

We urge you to correct this overreach in the 115th Congress and look forward to working with you to ensure that this body operates in a manner worthy of our Constitutional duty.

Sincerely,

Bill Foster
Member of Congress

Eddie Bernice Johnson
Member of Congress
Adam Smith
Member of Congress

Donna F. Edwards
Member of Congress

Katherine Clark
Member of Congress

Suzanne Bonamici
Member of Congress

Mark Pocan
Member of Congress

Michael M. Honda
Member of Congress

Earl Blumenauer
Member of Congress

Mark Takano
Member of Congress

Ami Bera, M.D.
Member of Congress

Jim McDermott
Member of Congress

David N. Cicilline
Member of Congress

Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress
Mike Doyle
Member of Congress