Panel on Congressional Oversight Databases

Online Panel Presented by
Levin Center at Wayne Law/Wayne Law Review

May 27, 2020
Establishing Historical Norms for Congressional Oversight

oversight-index.thelugarcenter.org

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The Lugar Center

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What is the COHI?

Analytical tool that academics, news organizations, and members of Congress can use to assess the oversight performance of congressional committees.

**Data**

Twelve years of congressional hearings (around 20,000 hearings) from 2009-2020.

**Methods**

Hearings are consistently and objectively categorized based on relevance to oversight.

**Results**

Categorizations are quantified and committees are graded on their oversight activity.

[oversight-index.thelugarcenter.org](https://oversight-index.thelugarcenter.org)
Problem – How to measure oversight?

Lack of congressional oversight reduces government efficiency, hands more power to unelected bureaucrats, and expands unchecked executive power.

No standards or norms have been established that indicate what is normal for oversight within each committee.

Committee chairs use anecdotal evidence to support their claims of performing adequate oversight.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solution</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Approach</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Data</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Results</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Constructing an **objective** standard

Defining our dataset

Almost all significant oversight involves congressional hearings.

Determining historical norms

Every committee has its own historical baseline.
Categorizing Hearing Data

The COHI sorts hearings into eight categories based on their relevance to oversight:

- **Agency Conduct Hearings**
- **Private Sector Oversight Hearings**
- **Legislative Hearings**
- **Policy Hearings**
- **Nomination Hearings**
- **Fact Finding Hearings**
- **Field Hearings**
- **Closed Hearings**

These categories can be further divided into:

- **Investigative Oversight**
- **Policy/Legislative**
- **Other hearings**
Deriving a score

Every committee in each congress is given a score, based on the number of hearings held within each weighted category.

Investigative Oversight Weighted Score + Policy/Legislative Weighted Score + Other Hearings Weighted Score = Total Score

Assigning a grade

Each committee is graded according to its own historical performance.

\[
\frac{\text{Total Score in Current Congress}}{\text{Best Score in Past Congresses}} = \text{Letter Grade}
\]
## Analyzing Oversight Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Committee</th>
<th>Current Congress (projected)*</th>
<th>Chair</th>
<th>Investigative Oversight Hearings</th>
<th>Policy/Legislative Hearings</th>
<th>Total Hearings</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aging</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Susan Collins</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry</td>
<td>C-</td>
<td>Pat Roberts</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>Appropriations</td>
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<td>Richard Shelby</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>64</td>
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<td>A-</td>
<td>James Inhofe</td>
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<td>64</td>
<td>83</td>
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<td>Mike Crapo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Budget</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>C</td>
<td>Adam Smith</td>
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<td>Financial Services</td>
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<td>Maxine Waters</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Eliot Engel</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>94</td>
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<tr>
<td>Homeland Security</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Bennie Thompson</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>78</td>
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<tr>
<td>House Administration</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Zoe Lofgren</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intelligence (Permanent Select)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Adam Schiff</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Judiciary</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Jerrold Nadler</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>81</td>
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<tr>
<td>Natural Resources</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Raul Grijalva</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analyzing Oversight Performance

For every congressional committee, COHI provides analysis of oversight responsibilities and history.

- Projected grade updated based on time elapsed in congressional session.
- Narrative of committee oversight responsibilities and history.
- List of historical committee chairs.
For every congressional committee, COHI provides information on current and historical performance.

Current oversight performance metrics

Historical committee oversight performance
Browsing Congressional Hearings

Browse full list of nearly 20,000 hearings that are continually updated on a weekly basis with access to transcripts, witness statements, and videos.
Have more questions?

Learn more at oversight-index.thelugarcenter.org

Sign up for our tutorial and Q&A session

Email jamie@thelugarcenter.org with any questions
The Brookings House Oversight Tracker

Molly E. Reynolds
Senior Fellow, Governance Studies
The Brookings Institution

May 27, 2020
Goals of the Oversight Tracker

1. Provide comprehensive picture of House effort to oversee Trump administration after 2018 election

2. Provide resource that would be useful to scholars of congressional oversight

https://www.brookings.edu/interactives/tracking-house-oversight-in-the-trump-era/
How the Tracker Works: What We Track

- Letters sent by House committees/subcommittees and signed by committee/subcommittee chairs
- Hearings held by House committees/subcommittees
How the Tracker Works: How We Collect Data

- Hearings: web scraper applied to hearings calendar in the House of Representatives’ Committee Repository
- Letters: data collection team collects information from sections of House committee web sites weekly
How the Tracker Works: What is Oversight?

• Two-tiered, key word and key witness/recipient approach
  » Primary key words include “oversight,” “investigate,” “examine,” “review,” “supervision,” “inefficiency/efficiency,” “abuse,” “transparency,” “accountability,” “waste,” “fraud,” “abuse,” “mismanagement,” and “implementation,” as well as variants of these words.
  » Primary witnesses or letter recipients included GAO officials and officials in agency Offices of the Inspector General.

• If a primary key word or witness/recipient appears, an additional set of conditions must be satisfied
  » Federal government must be target of oversight
  » Must target behavior since November 8, 2016
  » Must not target state government or involve a legislative proposal/program reauthorization
How the Tracker Works: What is Oversight?

• Secondary key words/witnesses:
  » Key words include “update,” “effects,” “preparation,” “improve,” and agency “actions.”
  » Key witnesses and letter recipients include current and former heads of agencies or agency subunits, individuals affected by program mismanagement, and individuals or organizations with knowledge of White House or executive branch operations.

• Subject to higher scrutiny

• All work is done by two coders working independently
Relationship to Other Data Sources

- Lugar Center’s hearing data
  - Oversight = agency conduct hearings, some policy hearings, and agency budget request hearings within legislative hearings category

- Policy Agendas Project
  - All content is coded into one of 20 major policy areas (2015 codebook)
  - For web interactive, 20 major policy areas are collapsed into 10 topics

- Use the Vital Statistics on Congress committee codes

- Use OMB/Treasury codes for agencies and bureaus
## Tracking House oversight in the Trump era

### HEARINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>HEARING / LETTER</th>
<th>INVESTIGATION</th>
<th>COMMITTEE(S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Witness**

Donald W. Washington  
Director  
U.S. Marshals Service

**KEY POINTS**

- U.S. Marshals COVID-19 Custody Handling
- USMS COVID-19 Response
- Judiciary
Overview of Findings
Overview of Findings
Overview of Findings
Information and Attention in Congressional Oversight:
U.S. Policy Agendas Project and Hearing “Purposes”

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ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF TAMPA

FACULTY ASSOCIATE, U.S. POLICY AGENDAS PROJECT
U.S. Policy Agendas Project Hearings Dataset

Policy Agendas Project founded by Drs. Frank Baumgartner & Bryan Jones
- Began with study of agenda setting and attention in U.S. politics: *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*
- Devised issue coding scheme:
  - 20 major topics (e.g. Energy, Defense)
  - 220 subtopics (e.g. Youth Employment, Food Inspection & Safety)
- First dataset was Congressional Hearings
  - Today the U.S. Project covers 20+ government, media, public opinion, and interest group datasets
  - Expanded to the Comparative Agendas Project: 21 countries, 2 U.S. states, European Union
  - Website: [comparativeagendas.net](http://comparativeagendas.net)
  - U.S. Project based at the University of Texas at Austin

Congressional Hearings Dataset today: 100,254 hearings from 1946-2017
- Collected from Congressional Information Service
- Coded for whether they are legislative (referral) or non-legislative
- Whether a hearing deals with a proposed new agency or program
- Whether a hearing deals with an administration proposal
# CAP Datasets and Codebooks

## Parliamentary & Legislative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Codebook</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
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<td>France</td>
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<td>Germany</td>
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<td>Hungary</td>
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<td>Italy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
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<td>Spain</td>
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<td>State of Florida</td>
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<td>State of Pennsylvania</td>
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<td>Switzerland</td>
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<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<td>United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>Congressional Bills</td>
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<td>Congressional Hearings</td>
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<td>Congressional Research Service Reports</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public Law Titles</td>
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<td>Public Laws</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roll Call Votes</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
CAP Trends Tool

![Graph showing trend of hearings over years]

**Additional Options**
- Click on data points for additional options.

**Chart type**
- Line

**Dates**
- Year
  - 1947-48
  - 2015-16
- US Congress
Drilling Down Into Congressional Hearings
Non-Legislative Hearings Over Time
Hearings On Proposed New Agencies & Programs
Hearing “Purpose” and “Stance”

Lewallen, Theriault, and Jones 2016/2018/2020:
• What information is Congress receiving/processing in hearing? And has that information changed?

Started with Congressional Hearings dataset, devised additional codes
• **Purpose**: what are they talking about?
  • new problem vs. implementation of existing policy vs. proposed solution (bill or regulation)
• **Stance**: how are they talking about it?
  • range of opinions and analysis vs. every witness takes the same position

Our data: 21,830 hearings from 1971-2010 (data from 25 committees)
• Trends over time:
  • Number of witnesses testifying per hearing has decreased dramatically
  • Decrease in “solution” hearings, increases in both “problem” and “implementation” hearings

Differences across issues:
• Biggest witness decreases in Social Welfare, Education, Labor/Employment, Agriculture policies
• Science/Technology, Defense hearings have become more problem/implementation-oriented, more “exploratory” over time
Thanks for joining us!

Levin Center at Wayne Law, https://law.wayne.edu/levin-center