

The Irony of Congressional Oversight

Establishing the Department of Homeland Security involved merging the activities of more than 40 agencies and an estimated 2,000 separate congressional appropriations accounts.¹ Given the diversity and complexity of the department's policies, *The 9/11 Commission Report* urged that "Congress should create a single, principal point of oversight and review for homeland security" to ensure that Congress would be effective in overseeing the department's policies.² Yet, oversight of the Department of Homeland Security now involves 108 distinct congressional committees and subcommittees. How does this abundance of oversight committees influence the ability of Congress to direct agency policy?

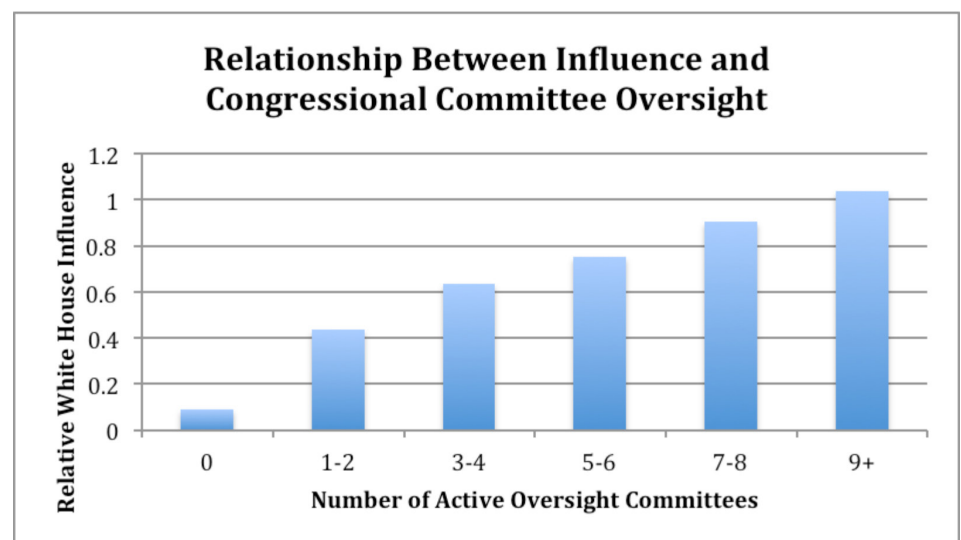
This question is answered in a forthcoming article in the *American Journal of Political Science* authored by Joshua D. Clinton, CSDI Co-Director and Associate Professor of Political Science, David E. Lewis, CSDI Co-Director and William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Political Science, and Jennifer L. Selin, Ph.D. candidate and CSDI graduate affiliate, all at Vanderbilt University. The authors explore whether the structure of congressional oversight that relies on multiple committees with overlapping jurisdictions adversely affects the

ability of Congress to control the bureaucracy. By surveying nearly 2,000 federal executives responsible for implementing agency policy in 128 agencies and bureaus, the authors find that the more committees that are involved in monitoring and directing agencies, the less influence Congress has relative to the president over agency policy decisions.

To measure influence over policymaking, Clinton, Lewis, and Selin ask key federal administrators, "In general, how much influence do the following groups have over policy decisions in your agency?" [0-None; 1-Little; 2-Some; 3-A Good Bit; 4-A Great Deal] and they examine the difference between each administrator's perception of congressional influence and White House influence. The authors also ask executives to report how many

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congressional committees actively oversee their agency to measure the extent to which executives are aware of congressional pressure. Using these responses, the following figure of the difference in perceptions of White House versus congressional influence shows that as the number of congressional committees involved in overseeing an agency increases, surveyed executives report that the relative influence of the White House grows.



¹Firestone, David. 2002b. "Some Conservatives Question the Value of Reorganizing Domestic Security." *The New York Times*. July 1, 2002.

²National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. 2004. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

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The authors employ statistical models to explore how this relationship varies both across and within agencies, but the basic relationship holds. Even when accounting for aspects such as the complexity of an agency’s work or the importance of that work to the president’s agenda, as the number of congressional committees that are involved in overseeing an agency increases so too does the president’s influence relative to Congress.

What may explain this relationship? There are at least two possible explanations. First, as the number of committees involved in overseeing an agency increases, the time and resources needed for committees

to work together also increases. In contrast to the president, who can act unilaterally to direct agency policy, Congress must coordinate a collective response to agency actions. For example, when directing an agency like the Environmental Protection Agency, whose programs span many committee jurisdictions, congressional committees must share information to determine the extent to which the agency is pursuing congressional goals. Practices such as information gathering and dissemination, coalition building, and vote recruitment become more costly as the number of committees increases, even if all committees agree on a course of action. Second, increasing the number of committees makes it more likely that there will be disagreements between the involved committees. If committees are divided on what they want an agency to do, these divisions may limit the ability of Congress to articulate a clear directive or response to agency policymaking.

Overall, this research suggests that the more Congress cares about an issue, at least as reflected in the structure of the congressional committee system, the less influence Congress may have over the direction of agency policymaking. Increasing the number of committees with access to an agency may enable

members to involve themselves in policies that are important to their constituents, but at the cost of undermining the ability of Congress as an institution to respond collectively to the actions of the executive branch. What is optimal for the reelection efforts of an individual member of Congress may not be optimal for the institution as a whole, and this has important implications for the ability of the legislative branch to compete with the president in shaping policy in the United States.

—Jennifer L. Selin

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The research summarized in this policy brief can be found in CSDI Working Paper 5-2012, “Influencing the Bureaucracy: The Irony of Congressional Oversight” by Joshua D. Clinton, David E. Lewis, and Jennifer L. Selin.

http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csdi/research/CSDI_WP_05-2012.pdf

A revised version of this manuscript is forthcoming in the *American Journal of Political Science*.

For further information about this policy brief, please contact Alan Wiseman, Associate Professor of Political Science and Law (by courtesy), CSDI Co-Director. Email: alan.wiseman@vanderbilt.edu.

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