Federal Legislative History

A. The purpose of legislative history research:

1. To monitor the progress of pending legislation.

2. To determine the legislative intent behind an enacted statute in order to resolve ambiguities created by the words of the statute.

B. The two-step process of legislative history research to find legislative intent:

1. Identify the documents that were produced as the proposed legislation made its way through the legislative process.

2. Examine these documents for statements of legislators and other noteworthy individuals who addressed this legislation. Hopefully, their statements will shed light on the meaning and purpose of an enacted law’s provisions.

C. Identifying the types of documents:

There are four main types of legislative history documents produced by Congress during the legislative process: bills, hearings, reports and debates.

D. This diagram of the legislative process shows where each type of document is produced in the legislative process.
E. What each document tells you about legislative intent:

- **Bills.** As a bill is amended during the legislative process, it is reprinted. Each printing contains new language. Progressive additions, deletions and alternatives in language are direct evidence of deliberate thinking. Remember to also examine the differences between companion bills (other bills on the same subject).

- **Hearings.** These are transcripts of testimony offered by invited experts on the subject of the proposed legislation. Hearings suggest what information the legislature had when it enacted the statute.

- **Reports.** These are the most useful of all the legislative documents in proving intent. A report could include a detailed analysis of each section of a bill; an explanation of the purpose of any committee amendments; an indication of what the bill is designed to accomplish and how it changes existing law; and the committee’s explanation of its recommendation for action on the bill.

- **Debates.** These are statements about proposed legislation made by legislators on the floors of the Senate and House. Statements for or against passage of a bill can indicate legislators’ interpretations of the bill’s language.

F. Legislative history research entails identifying relevant bills, hearings, reports, and debates and then examining them to determine legislative intent. The following sources can help you in this endeavor:

**Print Sources**

1. **Statutes at Large** (1789- ) (Main Reading Room KF 50 .U5). The official source of federal session laws, *Statutes at Large* is a finding tool for legislative history documents (1963- ). A legislative history summary appears after the text of each law enacted (1975- ). This summary includes citations to House, Senate, and Conference reports. It also lists the law’s dates of passage and consideration in each house as well as references to presidential statements. However, the summaries do not provide references to exact *Congressional Record* pages, or to hearings and other relevant documents. From 1963 to 1974, legislative history information appeared at the end of each *Statutes at Large* volume in a table called “Guide to Legislative History.”

2. **U.S. Code Congressional and Administrative News (USCCAN)** (1941- ) (Main Reading Room KF 48 .W45). *USCCAN* is an unofficial session law source for federal statutes. It is also the legislative service for *USCA*. *USCCAN* volumes are divided by Congressional session; volumes within a session are further divided into “laws” and "legislative history.”

The legislative history volumes contain edited versions of selected committee reports (and occasionally other documents as well). They provide citations to all of the committee reports, the *Congressional Record*, and presidential signing statements (1986- ). Both laws and legislative histories in *USCCAN* are arranged by public law number.
USCCAN provides a quick legislative history overview, but for a more complete legislative history, you will need to use other sources.

3. CCH Congressional Index (1965- ) (Main Reading Room KF 49 .C6). This publication is solely a finding tool. It doesn’t provide the text of Congressional documents.

It is a very good source for monitoring the status of proposed legislation or reconstructing the chronological history of an enacted law. It is published weekly while Congress is in session, in a two-volume looseleaf format, with one volume for the House and another for the Senate. It contains important basic information about Congressional activity with indexes of all public general bills by subject and by sponsor; digests of each bill; a status table of actions taken on bills and resolutions; a table of companion bills and much more.

Print Sources with Accompanying Microfiche

1. Congressional Information Service (CIS) (1970- ) (2nd Floor Microform Area Cabinets 1-5). In addition to indexing hearings, reports, and other legislative documents, this service provides both abstracts and full-text microfiche reproductions of these documents.

Two permanent volumes were produced, an Index volume and an Abstracts volume (1970-1983). The back of the Abstracts volume contained comprehensive legislative histories of public laws. Since 1984, these legislative histories have been published in a third annual volume entitled Legislative Histories. This third volume includes references to bills, hearings, committee reports, debates and other House, Senate and presidential documents. This is the most complete hardcopy source for legislative history information.


3. U.S. Congressional Serial Set (1789- ). The Serial Set contains the full text of all Congressional committee reports and House and Senate Documents. House and Senate Documents include executive communications to Congress, special reports to Congress, and special studies. As a general rule, the Serial Set does not contain hearings.

Serial Set publications (1789-1969) are available in microfiche in Kresge Library (2nd floor, Microform area, MF Cabinet 7-8). Indexing is available with the print CIS U.S. Serial Set Index (Reserve KF 12 .U52).

Many documents (1969- ) that would normally be published in the Serial Set can be found in the Congressional Information Service (CIS) microfiche set mentioned above.

The Serial Set is also available electronically in ProQuest Congressional (1789- ) and U.S. Congressional Serial Set (1817-1994) by Readex.
1. Congress.gov

Congress.gov is the official website for federal legislative information. It is presented by the Library of Congress (LOC) using data from the Office of the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives, the Office of the Secretary of the Senate, the Government Publishing Office, Congressional Budget Office, and the LOC’s Congressional Research Service. It replaces the nearly 20-year-old THOMAS.gov site, but until all data sets from the legacy system are available from the new system, THOMAS will be accessible.

Bills

Click the Legislation link on the Congress.com home page. Contains the full text of all bills and resolutions (1993-), with bill summary and status information (1973-). The names of the bill’s sponsors and cosponsors, its popular name, and a chronology of legislative action are provided. The chronology includes the dates of referral to committees and subcommittees, and Congressional Record page references for floor debate information. The bill text files are updated several times a day. Bill status information is usually available one day after the action occurs.

Hearings

Not available.

Reports

The full text of most published House and Senate committee reports (including conference reports) (1995-) can be found through the Committee Reports link at the foot of the homepage.

Debates

Click the Congressional Record link at the top or bottom of the home page. Congressional Record contains the full text of the daily edition of the Congressional Record (1995-). The Congressional Record is the edited daily transcript of what is said on the floors of the Senate and House.

Public Laws

After a bill is approved by Congress and signed by the President (or his veto is overridden) it becomes a public law. Click the Public Laws link under Bill Searches and Lists (1973-). Clicking the bill number link will lead to a public law number link. Only contains public laws enacted in the current Congress (2013-2014).
United States Code

Not Available.

The Legislative Process

For videos (with transcripts) describing the steps involved in the federal law-making process, select the Legislative Process link at the foot of the homepage.

2. FDsys

The U.S. Government Printing Office’s Federal Digital System (FDsys) provides free online access to official federal government publications. There is overlap with information on Congress.gov, so consider FDsys a worthy alternative site to use. The documents are found under Browse on the homepage.

Bills

All published versions of bills (1993- ) are available in full text in Congressional Bills. History of Bills under Browse All provides a bill summary, the names of the bill’s sponsors and cosponsors, and a chronological list of actions on the bill. The chronology identifies the related legislative documents that were produced as each bill (1983- ) moved through Congress. The file is updated daily.

Hearings

Selected hearing transcripts (1985- ) are available in Congressional Hearings.

Reports

Congressional Reports provides the full text of House and Senate reports (1995- ).

Debates

The edited transcripts of Congressional proceedings and debates (1994- ) are available in Congressional Record. Congressional Record Index (1983- ) is also available under Browse All.

Public Laws (and Private Laws)

The final laws resulting from bills approved by Congress and signed by the President (1995- ) are contained in Public and Private Laws. The Office of the Federal Register (OFR) under the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) prepares and publishes these documents, so the database is updated when publication is authorized by the OFR.
United States Code

Every six years, public laws still in effect and of a general and permanent nature are arranged by subject and incorporated into the United States Code. Thereafter, any reference to the statute should include the U.S.C. citation. The text of United States Code editions (1994-2012) is available in United States Code.

Electronic Resources—Subscription Services

1. HeinOnline

Debates

Congressional Record (1873-2011) and Congressional Record Daily (1980-2016) are available in the U.S. Congressional Documents collection under Debates of Congress. The Congressional Record’s predecessors, Annals of the Congress of the United States (1789-1824) and Congressional Globe (1833-1873) are also included.

Public Laws (and Private Laws)

Contains Statutes at Large volumes (1789-2011) in the U.S. Statutes at Large collection.

United States Code


Compiled Legislative Histories

U.S. Federal Legislative History Library > U.S. Federal Legislative History Title Collection. A collection of full-text legislative histories on selected “important and historically significant legislation.” Also includes Nancy Johnson's work, Sources of Compiled Legislative Histories, as a finding aid.

2. Lexis Advance

Bills: Bill Text (Current Congress)

Browse Sources > Type “Congressional full text bills” in the Sources search box. Select Congressional Full Text Bills-113th Congress to Current Congress: full text of all published versions of bills introduced in the current Congress.

Bills: Bill Text (Congressional Archive)

Browse Sources > Type “Congressional full text bills” in the Sources search box. Select any of the Congressional Full Text of Bills archive options: full text of all published bill versions from earlier Congresses (1989-).
Bills: Bill Tracking (Current Congress)

Browse Sources > Type “bill tracking” in the Sources search box. Select Bill Tracking Report - Current Congress: tracks status of bills introduced in the current Congress.

Bills: Bill Tracking (Congressional Archive)

Browse Sources > Type “bill tracking” in the Sources search box. Select any of the Congressional Bill Tracking Reports archive options: tracking information for bills from earlier Congresses (1989- ).

Hearings

Browse Sources > Type “Congressional testimony” in the Sources search box. Select CQ Congressional Testimony: updated daily with the written statements of witnesses at hearings before committees of the U.S. House of Representatives, the U.S. Senate, and Joint Committees of the House and Senate (1993- ).

Reports

Browse Sources > Type “committee reports” in the Sources search box. Select Committee Reports from the pull-down menu. The Committee Reports file contains the full text of House and Senate Committee Reports (1989- ) (selected coverage from 1981-1982 and 1989-1992).

Debates

Browse Sources > Type “Congressional Record” in the Sources search box. Select view table of contents under Congressional Record (1985- ).

Public laws

Browse Sources > Type “USCS – Public Laws” in the Sources search box. Contains all public laws (1988- ).

3. ProQuest Congressional

A Web-based alternative to the hardcopy Index, Abstracts, and Legislative Histories volumes of Congressional Information Service (CIS). Searchable, PDF, full-text versions of bills (1789- ); selected hearing transcripts (1824- ); reports (1817- ); debates (Congressional Record Permanent Edition) (1789-1997) and (Congressional Record Daily Edition) (1985- ); other legislative documents (1817- ); and public laws (1988- ) are available.

The Legislative Histories in ProQuest Congressional (106th Congress, 1998- ), cite the relevant enacted bill, related bills, hearings, reports, and debates for each public law and often provide links to the full-text documents (although not all are available in PDF).
4. ProQuest Legislative Insight

Compiled federal legislative histories containing digital full-text versions of bills, Congressional Record debates, committee hearings, and reports for enacted U.S. public Laws (1789- ). Committee prints, CRS reports, and miscellaneous Congressional publications are provided as background material. Presidential signing statements are also included.

5. Westlaw

Bills: Bill Text (Current Congress)

Home > Proposed and Enacted Legislation > Federal > Congressional Bills: contains the text of all versions of Congressional bills introduced in the current Congress.

Bills: Bill Text (Congressional Archive)

Home > Proposed and Enacted Legislation > Federal. Select Historical Proposed Legislation (Bills) under Tools & Resources: bills from earlier Congresses (1995-2014) are available in historical databases such as 104th Congress.

Bills: Bill Tracking (Archive)

Home > Proposed and Enacted Legislation > Federal. Select Bill Tracking under Tools & Resources > U.S Congress: summaries and status information on federal legislation introduced in the current Congress.


Hearings

Home > Legislative History > U.S. Congressional Testimony: Witness lists and both written and oral statements made in committee hearings (January 1993- ). Full coverage (1996- ) and selected coverage (1993-1996). Updated daily while Congress is in session.

Reports

Home > Legislative History > U.S. Code Congressional & Administrative News > Legislative History Reports: edited texts of committee reports (1948-1989). The information is the same as that found in U.S. Code Congressional and Administrative News (USCCAN)—except USCCAN only has reports for bills that have become law. Contains full-text versions of all committee reports (1990- ) regardless of whether or not a bill became a law. Also includes legislative history of Securities Laws (1933- ).
Debates

Home > Legislative History > Congressional Record: the Congressional Record (1985-). Cites to the daily editions of the Congressional Record.

Public laws

Home > Proposed and Enacted Legislation > Federal > U.S. Public Laws: public laws enacted during the current Congress.


United States Code

Home > Statutes & Court Rules > United States Code Annotated (USCA). Retrieve a code section and click its History Tab for Legislative History Materials.

Compiled Legislative Histories


Home > Legislative History. Select Arnold & Porter Legislative Histories under Tools & Resources: selected, compiled full-text legislative histories.
### PRINT SOURCES

**CCH Congressional Index** (1965–) (Main Reading Room KF49.C6)
- **Bill**
- **Hearing**
- **Report**
- **Debate**
- **Statute**
- **Citations**
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**U.S. Statutes at Large** (1789–2011) (available in HeinOnline)
- **Bill**
- **Hearing**
- **Report**
- **Debate**
- **Statute**
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- **Citations**
- **Full-text PDF**

- **Bill**
- **Hearing**
- **Report**
- **Debate**
- **Statute**
- **Citations**
- **Citations**
- **Edited Text**
- **Occasionally Full Text**
- **Full-text PDF**

### PRINT SOURCES WITH ACCOMPANYING MICROFICHE

**Congressional Bills, Resolutions, and Amendments** (1988–2011)
(Lower Level Microform Area Cabinets 5-6)
- **Bill**
- **Hearing**
- **Report**
- **Debate**
- **Statute**
- **Full-text PDF**

**Congressional Information Service (CIS)** (1970–) (2nd Floor Microform Area Cabinets 1-5)
- Abstracts volume (1970–83); Legislative Histories volume (1984–)

**U.S. Congressional Serial Set** (1789–)
(available in ProQuest Congressional and U.S. Congressional Serial Set)
- **Bill**
- **Hearing**
- **Report**
- **Debate**
- **Statute**
- **Occasionally Full Text**
- **Full-text PDF**
- **(some 19th century hearings)**
### ELECTRONIC SOURCES—FREE GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

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## ELECTRONIC SOURCES—SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES continued

### Lexis Advance

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| Bill Tracking Report—Current Congress<br>see also Bill Tracking Report—archive<br>(1989– ) |

### ProQuest Congressional

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### Proquest Legislative Insight (1789– ) (only for enacted legislation)

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**Westlaw**

- Full Text Congressional Bills (current Congress)
- Bill Tracking (current Congress)
- Bill Tracking Historical (2005– )
- Full Text Congressional Record (1985– )
- U.S. Public Laws-Historical (1973–2014)
- United States Code Annotated (under History tab click Legislative History Materials)
- Compiled Legislative Histories: U.S. GAO Federal Legislative Histories (1921–1995); Arnold & Porter Legislative Histories