Lugar Center Issues New Measure of Congressional Oversight

Congressional Oversight Hearing Index gives nine A’s to House committees, eight F’s to Senate.

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WASHINGTON, DC — To help inform the ongoing debate about Congressional oversight, The Lugar Center today released a new index to measure the oversight activity of each committee of Congress. The Congressional Oversight Hearing Index (COHI) categorizes and catalogs all congressional hearings held during the last twelve years (roughly 20,000 hearings). Using this data, the Index assigns grades to the oversight performance of current congressional committees and past committees going back to 2009.

“Most Americans agree that robust Congressional oversight of the workings of our government and society is an important element of American democracy,” said Dan Diller, policy director of the Lugar Center, which was founded by former U.S. Sen. Richard Lugar. “But until now, there has been no objective criteria for gauging whether Congressional committees are living up to their oversight responsibilities. The Congressional Oversight Hearing Index, allows the public to measure the current oversight performance of each committee against an objective historical standard.”

The Lugar Center believes that Congressional oversight is an essential component of American democracy that improves the transparency and performance of government, illuminates ethical malfeasance within the government or the private sector, and guards against the accumulation of unchecked power in the executive branch.

Congressional oversight could be improved in numerous ways. But the most fundamental oversight problem is Congress’s failure to consistently assert its prerogatives, thereby ceding authority and power to the executive branch. If a House or Senate committee is failing to meet historical standards,
because of partisan bias, the inattention of the committee chair, or any other reasons, the COHI will illuminate that shortfall.

“Committees contain the deepest issue-area expertise in Congress, and they wield the most oversight resources,” said COHI project director Jamie Spitz. “Our intent is to hold committees and their leaders accountable for how actively they perform their oversight responsibilities.”

Although hearings are not the only form of oversight, most cases of significant oversight involve or are accompanied by hearings. A thorough examination of the hearing record captures a large percentage of Congress’s most notable oversight efforts.

Using an objective formula that quantifies oversight hearing activity, the Index grades each Congressional committee on its performance based on the record of that committee in the previous five Congresses. Current committees are graded on the degree to which they are on pace to match that historical record. Special consideration has been given to the effects of the COVID-19 virus on the pace of hearing activity, so that current congressional committees are not unduly penalized for the weeks when Congress shut down or operated at lower capacity due to the virus.

In the current Congress, the Congressional Oversight Hearing Index found that most House committees are meeting or exceeding the historical standards for oversight hearings. Of the 17 House Committees graded, 9 received A’s, 2 received B’s, and 3 received C’s. However, the opposite was true in the Senate. Of the 17 Senate committees graded, only 2 earned A’s, none received B’s, and 4 received C’s. Eight Senate committees received F’s.

Because the database of hearings is updated as new hearings occur, the grade of each committee can change from week to week during the Congress. The formula for grading Committees is straightforward. An increase in the tempo of oversight hearings will cause a committee’s grade to go up. A failure to hold oversight hearings will cause a grade to decline.

The Index also offers insight into how oversight activity since 2009 has varied with changes in political control of the House, Senate and White House.

Beyond its focus on oversight, the new Lugar Center Index can be used by researchers and members of the public to efficiently access any hearing held in the last twelve years. This new hearing database is searchable by title, contains both House and Senate hearings, is updated weekly, provides links to transcripts and video, and is free to the public.

The non-profit Lugar Center is a non-partisan platform for informed debate and analysis of global issues, including nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, global food security, foreign assistance effectiveness and global development, energy security, and enhancing bipartisan governance. In addition to publishing the Congressional Oversight Hearing Index, the Lugar Center co-publishes the Bipartisan Index, which measures the frequency with which members of Congress sponsor and co-sponsor legislation with members of the opposite party. http://www.thelugarcenter.org