



College of Law

Federal Legislative History

Ronald Jones
Reference Librarian

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Federal Legislative Histories

A legislative history assembles the documents produced by Congress during the legislative process by which a bill becomes a law.

These documents include:

- Bill Texts
- Committee Prints
- Hearings
- Committee Reports
- Congressional Debates
- Conference Reports
- Presidential Statements

Before one tackles the process of compiling a legislative history, it is important to familiarize yourself with the legislative process. Below is a condensed version of how a bill becomes a law.

How a bill becomes a law:

- The bill is introduced in House/Senate
- Assigned to a Committee
- Debated and voted on
- If passed, sent to other Chamber to repeat the process
- Assigned to a Committee
- Debated and voted on
- If passed, sent back to originating Chamber.
- Originating Chamber votes to accept bill or to send it to Conference Committee
- Compromise bill sent back each Chamber for final approval
- If passed, bill sent to President to sign/veto

Congressional Documents

Bill Texts

The legislative process begins with the introduction of a bill in the House and/or the Senate. Each bill is numbered, printed, referred to a committee, and often amended many times before it is finally passed. There are many versions of a bill

and comparing the various versions of a bill may provide insight into the intended meaning of the law.

The bill number is an important piece of information in tracing a legislative history. Bills are numbered consecutively by the house in which they are introduced. Each bill has its own legislative history.

Sample Citation:

H.R. 4509, 81st Cong., 2d Sess. (1950)

S. 101, 101st Cong., 1st Sess. (1989)

Print Sources

Congressional Bills & Resolutions (1979 to date)

Text of bills are often reprinted in hearings and committee reports. Selected bills, especially older ones, are reprinted in the Congressional Record

Online Sources

[Thomas](#)

1989 to date in text format

1997 to date in pdf format

[Congressional Universe](#)

1989 to date in text format

[Lexis](#)

1989 to date in text format

[Westlaw](#)

1995 to date in text format

Committee Prints

A committee may rely on reports or studies prepared by committee staff, consultants, or others. These materials may be published as committee prints, reissued as House or Senate Documents or Reports, or published in the Congressional Record. Committee prints are not significant in determining legislative intent but they can contain otherwise valuable information.

(Note: Committee Prints are somewhat rare and do not appear for every piece of legislation enacted into law.)

Sample Citation:

Staff of Senate Comm. on the Judiciary, 81st Cong., 2d Sess., Report on Antitrust Law 17 (Comm. Print 1950).

Print Sources

CIS Microfiche
1970 to date

Online Sources

[Congressional Universe](#)
1995 to date

[GPO Access](#)
1997 to date

[Lexis](#)
1995 to date

Hearings

After a bill is assigned to a congressional committee, a hearing is frequently scheduled. The primary function of the hearing is to provide committee members with information that may be useful in their consideration of the bill. In many instances, transcripts of the hearings are published.

Although committee hearings do not contain congressional deliberations, they may contain information supplied by non-legislators as to what the non-legislators thought the bill under consideration should accomplish. In addition, the views of some of the committee members may be gleaned from their statements made while questioning a particular speaker.

Sample Citation:

Proposed Amendments to the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure: Hearings Before Subcomm. On Criminal Justice of the House Comm. On the Judiciary, 95th Cong., 1st

Sess. 92-93 (1977)(testimony of Prof. Wayne LaFave).

Print Sources

CIS Microfiche
1970 to date

CIS U.S. Congressional Committee Hearings Microfiche
1833 to 1969

Online Sources

[Congressional Universe](#)

Selected transcripts (1988 to 1993)
More comprehensive written submitted testimonies (1993 to date)

[GPO Access](#)

Selected transcripts from 1997 to date

[Lexis](#)

Selected transcripts from 1993 to date

[Westlaw](#)

Selected transcripts from 1993 to date

Committee Reports

Committee reports often provide a section-by-section analysis of a bill and include recommended amendments. They are extremely important in determining the legislative intent of Congress. These documents are known as 'House Reports' or 'Senate Reports.'

Sample Citation:

H.R. Rep. No. 353, 82d Cong., 1st Sess. (1951).

S. Rep. No. 84-2, at 7 (1955)

H.R. Conf. Rep. No. 98-1037

Print Sources:

United States Code Congressional and Administrative News
1941 to date

CIS US Serial Set
1789 to 1969

CIS Microfiche
1970 to date

Online Sources:

[CIS Congressional Universe](#)
1990-date

[Thomas](#)
1995 to date

[GPO Access](#)
1995 to date

[Lexis](#)
1990 to date

[Westlaw](#)
1948 to date (1948 to 1989 reports as published in the U.S.C.C.A.N)

Congressional Debates

The Congressional Record, published since 1873, is the official record of the proceedings and debates of the United States Congress. It contains transcripts of floor debates including remarks by members of Congress, their votes, proposed amendments, conference committee reports, messages from the President, and occasionally the text of the bills.

Sample Citation:

99 Cong. Rec. 2988 (1953)

Print Sources:

The Congressional Record
1874 to date

The Congressional Globe
1833-1873

The Register of Debates
1825-1837

The Annals of Congress
1789-1824.

Online Sources

[GPO Access](#)

1994 to date

[Thomas](#)

1989 to date

[Lexis](#)

1985 to date

[Westlaw](#)

1985 to date

Online Sources (Historical)

[The American Memory Project: A Century of Law Making](#)

Congressional Globe
1833 to 1873

Register of Debates
1824 to 1837

Annals of Congress
1789 to 1824

Conference Committee Reports

Often both chambers of Congress pass related, though not identical, bills. In this case, a conference committee consisting of members from both bodies is formed to work out the differences in the two bills. Once completed, a compromise version of the bill is then sent to each chamber for final approval. Sometimes, this compromise version of the bill is accompanied by a conference report from the conference committee.

Sample Citation:

H.R. Conf. Rep. No. 89-711 (1965)

Print Sources

United States Code Congressional and Administrative News
1941 to date

CIS US Serial Set
1789 to 1969

CIS Microfiche
1970 to date

Online Sources:

[CIS Congressional Universe](#)
1990-date

[Thomas](#)
1995 to date

[GPO Access](#)
1995 to date

[Lexis](#)
1990 to date

[Westlaw](#)
1948 to date (1948 to 1989 reports as published in the U.S.C.C.A.N)

Presidential Statements

When the President signs or vetoes a bill, the President may issue a signing statement or a veto message stating his or her rationale for the action taken. Since these statements are usually short and are not from Congress, they are not significant in determining legislative intent.

Sample Citation:

Voting Rights Act Amendments of 1982, [President Reagan's] Remarks on Signing H.R. 3112 Into Law, 18 WEEKLY COMP. PRES. DOC. 846 (June 29, 1982).

Print Sources

Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents
1965 to date

Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States
1929 to date

Online Sources

[GPO Access](#)
1993 to date

[Lexis](#)
1979 to date

Compiling a Legislative History

Don't reinvent the wheel! Check for compilations.

LLSW, Union List of Legislative Histories

Nancy P. Johnson, Sources of Compiled Legislative Histories

[Lexis](#)

[Westlaw](#)

Compiling a Legislative History From Scratch.....

Step one

Find the Public law number.

To find the Public Law number:

If you have a particular code section, look up the section and see the historical references that appear immediately after the statutory text. You will see original and amending public law numbers, dates they were approved, and citations to the *Statutes at Large*.

If you do not know the code section but know the name of the legislation, begin with the Popular Name Table found generally at the end of the set.

Otherwise, begin with the Subject Index.

Step Two

Check U.S.C.C.A.N. for references to legislative history documents.

Step Three

Use finding tools to find CIS accession or SUDOC numbers for each document.

Step Four

Locate the documents in our fiche collection or online.

Note:

1970 to date

Use Congressional Universe to locate the document or to find the Accession or SUDOC number, which uniquely identifies the document in our microfiche collection.

Pre-1970 Legislation

Use Congressional Universe to find Accession or SUDOC number or the Congressional Record Index “History of Bills and Resolutions”