



West Virginia University George R. Farmer, Jr. Law Library

Guide to Federal Legislative History Research: Basic Concepts and Important Resources

“**Legislative history**- the background and events leading to the enactment of a statute, including hearings, committee reports and floor debates.” - Black’s Law Dictionary, 8th ed. (2004)

Legislative history research involves locating and examining the content of the relevant background documents created during the legislative process. The goal of legislative history research is to find evidence of legislative intent that will aid in interpreting the text of a statute.

The major documents that are created during the legislative process include:

Bills - the draft versions of proposed statutes or amendments to proposed statutes.

Committee reports - reports contain important explanatory language about the text of a bill.

Floor debates - transcripts of debates on a bill on the floor of the House or Senate.

Hearings - transcripts of committee hearings in which witnesses testify as to the merits of a bill.

Other documents created during the legislative process include:

Committee prints - publications prepared for committees to aid their study of a bill.

Presidential signing statements - any statement issued by a President upon signing a bill.

Important Legislative History Research Databases:

Congressional Universe - This database lists all legislative history materials for public laws passed since 1970 and contains links to the full-text of congressional bills and House and Senate committee reports (1990 to date) and House and Senate floor debate (1985 to date). It provides summaries of all congressional documents published since 1789. These summaries include important information, such as bill numbers, report numbers and SuDoc numbers, that allow researchers to locate print or microform copies of the full-text documents in the WVU Libraries.

Thomas - This database lists all legislative history materials (except hearing transcripts) for public laws passed since 1973 and contains links to the full-text of House and Senate committee reports (1995 to date) and congressional bills and House and Senate floor debate (1989 to date). An excellent source for tracking the status of bills currently before Congress.

LexisNexis - LexisNexis makes the Congressional Universe database available through two files located within the "General Federal" library. "US-CIS Legislative Histories" lists legislative history materials for public laws passed since 1970 and provides the same full-text coverage of congressional documents as Congressional Universe. "CIS/Historical Indexes" provides summaries of all congressional documents published since 1789.

Westlaw - Westlaw makes available the full-text of congressional bills (1995 to date), House and Senate committee reports (1990 to date) and House and Senate floor debate (1985 to date). It also provides brief legislative history lists for public laws passed since 1974 and has incorporated links to the lists in the online United States Code Annotated (USCA). Selected, excerpted committee reports are available from 1948 as part of the online United States Code, Congressional and Administrative News (USCCAN).

Important Legislative History Research Print Resources:

CIS Index/Abstract - This print resource is the basis for the Congressional Universe database. It has been published since 1970 in an Index volume and an Abstracts volume. Prior to 1984, legislative history citation lists for public laws appeared in the Abstracts volume. From 1984 to date, expanded citation lists have been published as a separate "Legislative Histories" volume. The Abstracts volumes provide summaries of congressional documents that include important information, such as bill numbers, report numbers and SuDoc numbers, that allow researchers to locate print or microform copies of the full-text documents in the WVU Libraries. **(Located on the top floor- Reference KF 49 C62)**

Congressional Index - This looseleaf service has been published as one House volume and one Senate volume for each two-year Congress since 1947. It contains a detailed subject index for bills, bill summaries and a bill status section that is updated weekly. A very useful source for tracing the history of bills that did not become statutes and for tracing statutes passed from 1947 to 1969. **(Most recent two years located on the top floor- Reference KF49 C6. Older years located on the middle floor- KF49 C6)**

Congressional Record - An annual "History of Bills and Resolutions" volume is published to accompany each year of the Congressional Record, the official transcripts of the debates and proceedings of Congress. This volume is arranged by bill number in House and Senate sections and brief legislative history lists appear next to the bills with page citations to the Record. It also contains a subject and sponsor index to bills and floor debate. An essential source for tracing the history of laws passed prior to 1950. **(Most recent two years located on the top floor- Reference KF35 A55. Older years located on the bottom floor in the Government Documents Collection.)**

United States Code, Congressional and Administrative News - USCCAN provides the full-text of all statutes passed from 1948 to date in a series of annual volumes published in public law number order. Within this annual series, another sequence in public law number order publishes selected, excerpted legislative history documents such as conference committee reports, House and Senate committee reports, floor debates and Presidential signing statements. **(Located on the top floor- Reference KF48 W45)**