

Researching Recent and Current US Legislation

In the past two issues we have explored ways of finding information about past legislation and its supporting documents. In this issue we will look at current legislation and ways of tracking it through its process of becoming law. Keep in mind that most proposed bills do not become law, however, and many that do are primarily ceremonial. But when a significant piece of legislation becomes law—or doesn't, but does go through extensive debate and consideration—the process can generate an impressive amount of verbiage.

GovTrack (<https://govtrack.us>) provides a free tracking service for information about current bills. When a bill is of particular interest, such as Senate bill 3021 (America's Water Infrastructure Bill of 2018) for example, track the bill through this website as you wish, but if you create an account, you'll receive updates automatically from GovTrack whenever changes occur to that bill—in the House, the Senate, or in joint committees—to resolve differences. Note that GovTrack is not operated by the US government. The site has some typical social-media features to it and allows organizations to post position statements on its bill summary pages, so it is important to recognize the source of various parts of the webpage's content. It also provides summaries written by its own staff, regarding several bills. These are often interesting reads and can be useful for providing context.

LegiScan (<https://legiscan.com>) provides a similar service to GovTrack, but for state legislative bills rather than federal bills. LegiScan includes a tracking service and information on related bills, and has direct links to the authoritative state record on the bill in question. LegiScan allows posting from Facebook, so some bills will have a lot of comments from the public about the legislation. A number of LegiScan's advanced features are only available after subscribing, though the fees are very reasonable.

The official **US Congress website**, <https://congress.gov>, provides a useful overview of activities taking place in both houses of Congress, and includes extensive background information about active legislation, organized by subject or by sponsor. It also offers a useful series of videos that explain the legislative process (<https://www.congress.gov/legislative-process>). I found that results from GovTrack tend to be more relevant than results for the same terms at Congress.gov, but each site has its own benefits and drawbacks.

Congress creates a lot of information. **The Congressional Record** is “the official daily record of the debates and proceedings of the US Congress,” and as such it reprints the discussions that take place on the floor of Congress, along with comments and documentation that senators and representatives add after the session has concluded. The Congressional Record consists of sections for the Senate, the House, the additional comments, and the “Daily Digest.” These can be searched simultaneously at <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record>, covering 1995 to today. The Congress.gov site is quite comprehensive and includes all current reports from congressional committees and their subcommittees. This site is vital for following these reports as they work their way through the legislative system.

The Federal Register serves as the federal government's official journal. It is published daily and contains various rules, amendments, executive orders, regulations, and more. The content of laws published in the Register are then consolidated into the annual publication of the **Code of Federal Regulations** (CFR). Federal Register content is available online back to 1936 at <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/FR>, and content since 1994 is searchable at <https://www.federalregister.gov>.

GovInfo also has the annual CFR back to 1996 at <https://www.govinfo.gov/help/cfr>, and perhaps even more useful is the list of parts of the CFR that have been updated through Federal Register changes since the last published version of the CFR, at <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/cfrparts/month>. A nicely organized version of the current CFR can also be found at **Cornell Law School's Legal Information Institute**, at <https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text>.

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at peter@shipindex.org. See <https://www.shipindex.org> for a free compilation of over 150,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals. ⚓



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