Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists

FACT SHEET

Are Partisanship and Industry Influence Compromising the Mission of the House Committee on Science?

HIGHLIGHTS

The number of witnesses representing industry has increased fairly steadily over the past 12 years as a percent of all witnesses of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, regardless of which party controlled the House of Representatives or the White House. Our findings show that in the 112th Congress, for the first time in the 12-year period analyzed, the committee heard from significantly more industry witnesses than from any other category, including academia, government, nongovernmental organizations, or political appointees. Furthermore, during the 12-year period studied, the percentage of committee hearings addressing substantive legislative or science policy issues sank to a low of less than 40 percent in the 112th Congress.

It is clear to most observers that the political environment in Washington has shifted from cooperative and collegial to one marked by extreme partisanship. This situation not only produces gridlock on a regular basis but also raises concerns about the independence and quality of information that our elected officials are receiving in the first place—particularly on matters of science and technology—according to an extensive analysis by the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists.

The Center for Science and Democracy's approach was to examine the number and types of expert witnesses called to testify before the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology—a committee that plays a central role in science-related matters and has historically been known both for its strong reliance on science in decision making and for its bipartisanship. We reviewed the committee's witness lists from 2001 through 2012, which spanned more than 500 hearings and involved some 2,000 witnesses (see p. 4 for more information on our methodology). During this period the committee held hearings on a variety of topics, reflecting its broad jurisdiction. They included, but were not limited to, energy, climate change, space exploration, weather monitoring, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, appropriations and other agency budgetary issues, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education.

Growing Industry Influence, Shrinking Role for Independent Scientists

Our analysis showed that the number of witnesses representing industry has increased fairly steadily over the past 12 years as a percent of all witnesses of the

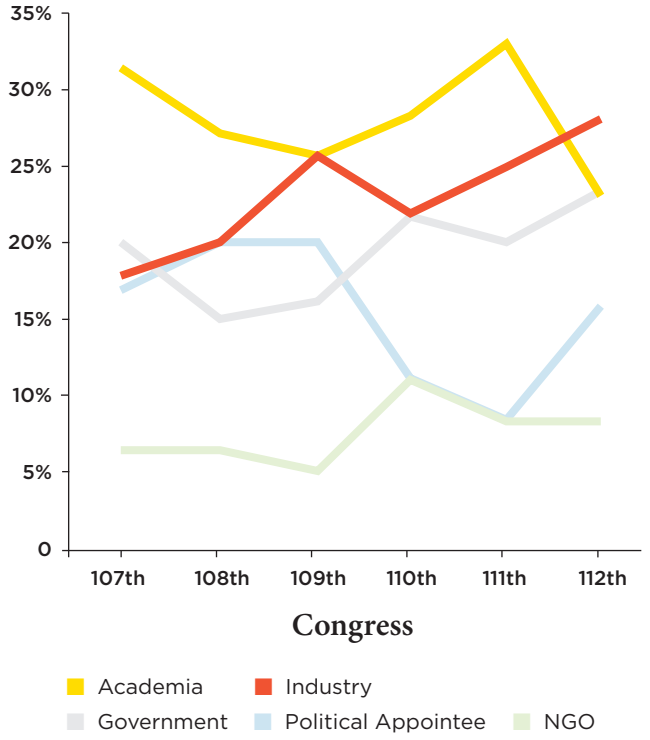
A full committee hearing of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, chaired by Lamar Smith (R-TX), on June 4, 2013. For the first time in the 12 years studied, during the 112th Congress (2011–2013), the committee heard from more witnesses representing industry than from academic scientists or other independent experts.

> ***Our analysis showed that the number of witnesses representing industry has increased fairly steadily over the past 12 years.***

committee, regardless of which party controlled the House of Representatives or the White House. Industry witnesses to the committee represented roughly 18 percent of the total pool in the 107th Congress (2001–2003). More recently, in the 112th Congress (2011–2013), industry witnesses made up 28 percent—an increase of more than 50 percent. Our findings also showed that in the 112th Congress, for the first time in the 12-year period, the committee heard from more industry witnesses than from any other category, including academia, government, nongovernmental organizations, or political appointees.

While the proportion of independent academic experts in the committee's witness pool fluctuated over the period studied, during the 112th Congress this sector dropped to its lowest level. Academics made up less than one-quarter of the total number of witnesses testifying before this committee, down from a high of 33 percent in the 111th Congress (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. Percent of Witnesses from Each Sector for All Hearings

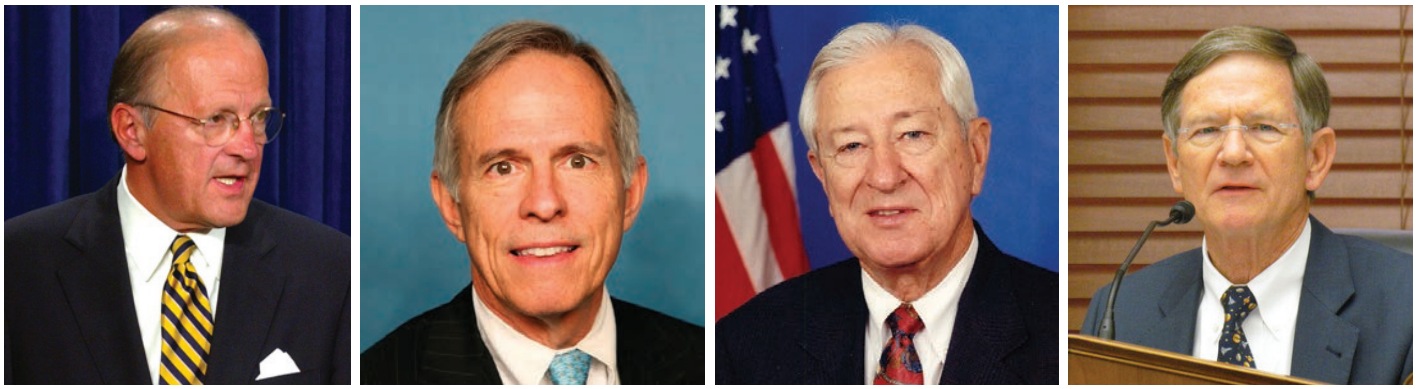


In the 112th Congress, for the first time during the 12 years studied, the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology heard from more witnesses testifying on behalf of industry than from any other sector.

Shifts in the Types of Hearings Held

Although this snapshot analysis focused on the witness pool for the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, it also revealed the change in the kinds of hearings held over time.

Over the course of the period analyzed, when the party leadership of the House was different from that of the White House, the committee increasingly held oversight hearings designed primarily to take aim at the administration and



The past four chairmen of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, from 2001 to this writing (January 2014), are shown above. From left to right: Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY), 2001–2007; Bart Gordon (D-TN), 2007–2011; Ralph Hall (R-TX), 2011–2013; and Lamar Smith (R-TX), 2013–present.

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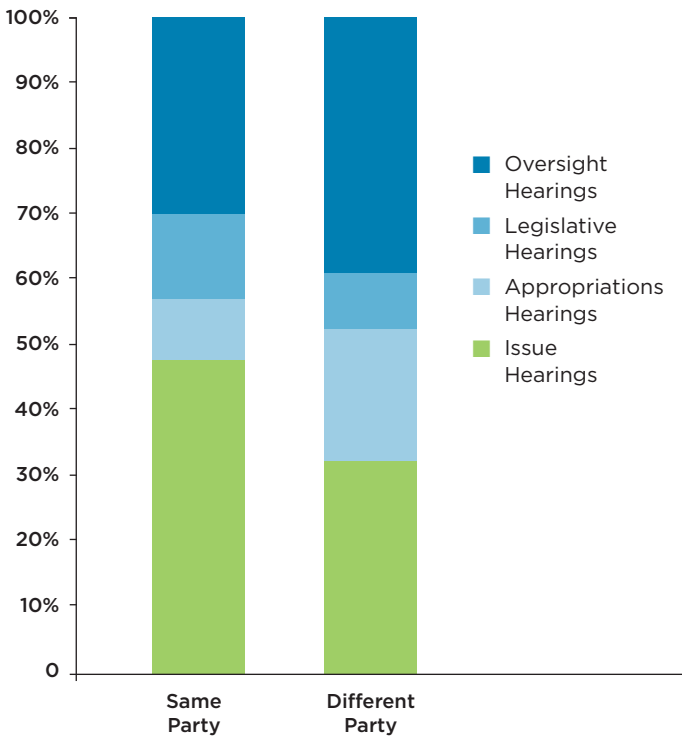
federal agencies rather than to address substantive science policy issues (Figure 2). Our findings also showed that during the 12-year period studied, the percentage of committee hearings addressing substantive legislative or science policy issues sank to a low of less than 40 percent in the 112th Congress. By contrast, such hearings constituted 68 percent of the committee agenda in the 108th Congress (Figure 3).

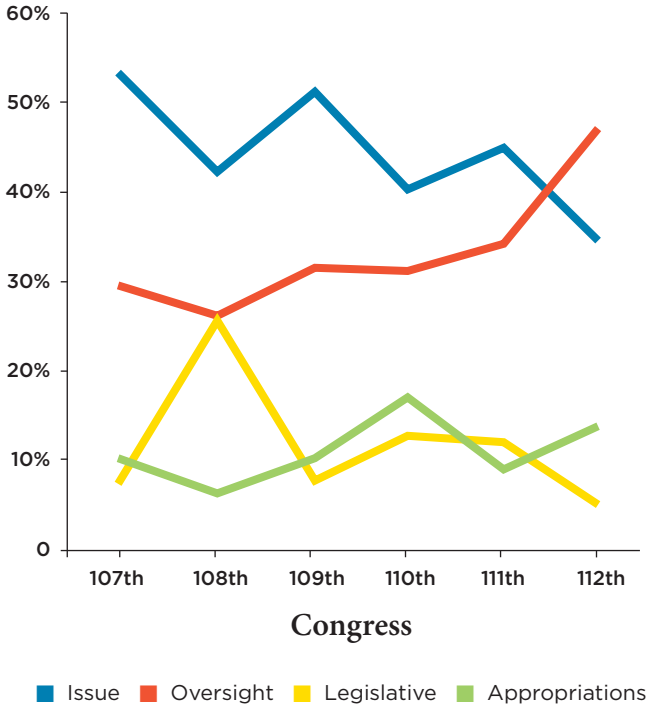
It is not surprising that House leaders would be more inclined to scrutinize the policies of a president of the opposing party. What is surprising is that instead of exploring various issues, the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, which historically transcended party affiliation, has become increasingly partisan in recent years. Consider, for example, that the ratio of oversight and appropriations hearings to legislative and issue hearings is greater when the majority party in the House is different from the party that holds the White House.

FIGURE 2. Percent of Hearing Types Based on the Political Makeup of the House of Representatives and the White House



The kinds of hearings held by the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology depend on whether or not the House majority and the president are of the same party.

FIGURE 3. Percent of Hearings of Each Type in the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology



The types of hearings that the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology is holding have shifted dramatically. Its members, seemingly obsessed with conducting oversight, have moved away from discussing critical issues and legislation. In the 112th Congress, oversight accounted for nearly 50 percent of all the committee's hearings.

Recommendations

The proportion of independent scientific experts called to testify before Congress serves as one significant measure of the extent and caliber of the science-related advice that legislators receive. As the country's challenges—including those that involve our health, economy, environment, and overall national well-being—become increasingly technical in nature, it is ever more important that leaders consider the most credible and unbiased science in shaping public policy. This goal is best served by experts whose testimony is based solely on their independent evaluation of scientific evidence, unconstrained by special interests.

(continued on page 5)

Methodology

The House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology was originally established as a standing (permanent) committee on January 3, 1959, and named the House Committee on Science and Astronautics (Dodge 2008). Established by the 86th Congress in the context of the space race, the committee was initially responsible for matters related to space research, development, and exploration as well as for scientific research, science scholarships, and legislation regarding science-based agencies. After a number of name changes, the current name finally reflects the panel's broad jurisdiction as well as the importance of scientific research and space exploration for fostering American innovation and competitiveness (CSST 2014a).

In addition to its role regarding science-related legislation in the House of Representatives, the committee is also charged with the oversight of numerous federal agencies, including the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Department of Energy, Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Aviation Administration, Federal Emergency Management Agency, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, National Science Foundation, and U.S. Geological Survey (CSST 2014b).

To assess changes over time in the types and numbers of witnesses called before the committee, we examined and categorized in an Excel spreadsheet some 2,000 witnesses who testified at more than 500 hearings (not including markups) spanning the six sessions of Congress from 2001 through 2012 (CSD 2014).

For this analysis, we categorized these witnesses in accordance with the professional affiliation stated in their testimony and their identification in congressional transcripts. Witnesses were sorted into one of five main categories: academia, industry, government (civil service), political appointee, or nongovernmental organization. We also classified the types of each hearing as legislative (considering specific legislation), oversight (reviewing executive branch agency actions), issue (focused on educating the committee about specific topics), or appropriations (considering spending plans).

Our analysis spanned the two presidential terms of Republican George W. Bush and the first term of Democrat Barack Obama. The 12-year period was also marked by a mix of Republican and Democratic leadership in the House of Representatives, including intervals during which the majority party in the House coincided with that of the White House and intervals when it did not (Table 1). The makeup of the committee varied somewhat over the study period, as did the chairmanship, which was held by four different members of Congress during those 12 years.

> ***We examined and categorized some 2,000 witnesses who testified at more than 500 hearings spanning the six sessions of Congress from 2001 through 2012.***

TABLE 1. The Parties that Held the White House and Made Up the Majority in the House of Representatives

Congress (Years)	White House	House of Representatives
107th Congress (2001–2003)	Republican	Republican
108th Congress (2003–2005)	Republican	Republican
109th Congress (2005–2007)	Republican	Republican
110th Congress (2007–2009)	Republican	Democrat
111th Congress (2009–2011)	Democrat	Democrat
112th Congress (2011–2013)	Democrat	Republican

During the 12-year period analyzed, both presidents, Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Barack Obama, had the opportunity to work with committee leadership from the same and opposing party.

We thus recommend that the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology:

- Increase its use of independent expert witnesses, who tend not to represent special interests, and reduce its reliance on industry witnesses who may have a conflict of interest.
- Require witnesses to disclose any conflicts of interest that could influence the testimony they present. Such disclosures could help to distinguish between independent scientific advice and views that drive a special-interest agenda.
- Bring greater balance to the types of hearings held, in order to more fully explore issues, enhance understanding, inform decision making and legislation, and convey accurate information to the public. In particular, the committee will best fulfill its mandate by focusing on science and technical issues and reliable evidence.

The public, aided by the media, can hold Congress more accountable for its decisions. Constituents should demand a transparent and evidence-based dialogue from their congressional delegation, and they should urge these legislators to secure the best-available independent expert advice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Constituents should demand a transparent and evidence-based dialogue from their congressional delegation, and urge these legislators to secure the best-available independent expert advice.

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