

A photograph of the U.S. Capitol dome in Washington, D.C., featuring its iconic white marble structure, columns, and the American flag flying in front. The sky is overcast with grey clouds.

GovTrack.us 2017 Backer Update **Tracking the US Congress**

A Project of **Civic Impulse LLC**
July 1, 2017

www.GovTrack.us

The background of the entire page is a photograph of the United States Capitol building in Washington, D.C. The image shows the iconic white dome with its ribbed structure and the surrounding neoclassical architecture, including columns and statues. An American flag is visible on the left side of the frame. The sky is overcast and grey.

A Letter to Our Supporters

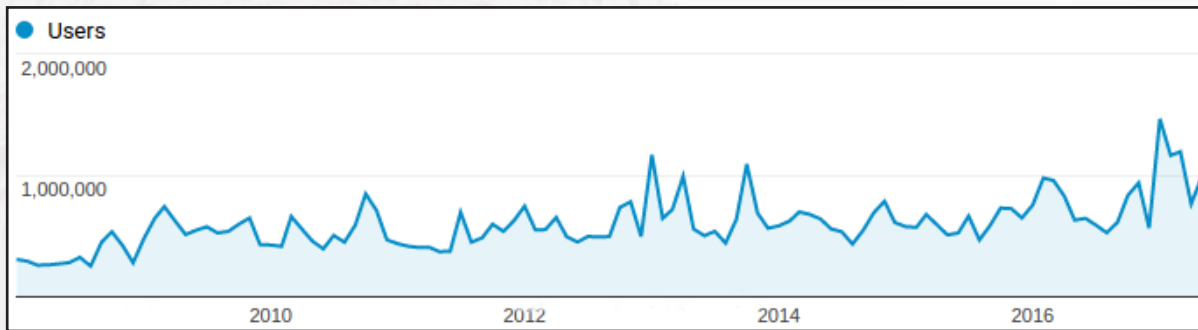
For over a decade GovTrack.us has been a comprehensive database for current legislation and votes in Congress, all in one place, and always free. We are committed to continuing to do so for as long as the American public needs a place to research and learn about their Congress and its activities.

Thanks to your support we raised \$36,000 in a Kickstarter campaign in 2015 and subsequently started a [Patreon page](#) that has doubled our ongoing operating budget. That money has allowed us to grow our team and to make tracking Congress easier than it's ever been.

We are excited to tell you about how your contributions have helped to improve and expand the site. We will discuss how we're making information about Congress more accessible, our commitment to integrity, and our commitment to democracy. Lastly, and always, we would like to thank you for your support and readership.

GovTrack in 2017

This year started off with a bang. January marked our highest-trafficked month yet, with an uproar over changes to Congress's ethics rules and then the start of the Trump Administration driving nearly a million and a half individuals to the site.



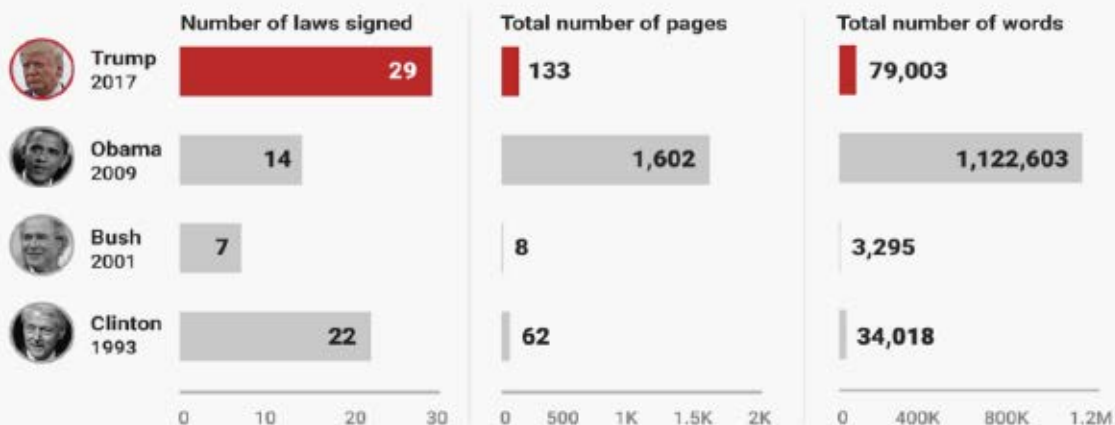
Monthly Site Usage 2008 - 2017

Using our data, [The Washington Post](#) and [National Public Radio](#) were able to report on the number of bills signed into law during President Trump's first 100 days. [Business Insider](#) did too, with comments from site founder Josh Tauberer. GovTrack was also featured on Wired.com for our project [revealing the browsing history of Congress and the White House](#) after a law rolled back an internet privacy regulation.

More laws, fewer words

LAWS SIGNED

TRUMP'S FIRST 100 DAYS



SOURCES: GovTrack; Congress

BUSINESS INSIDER

Skye Gould/Business Insider



How we're making information about the United States Congress accessible, understandable, and actionable.

GovTrack Insider Reporting

It doesn't help to see how your members of Congress voted without knowing what the vote was about. So in 2015 we began our largest project, GovTrack Insider, where we explain votes and legislation. Lead by our staff writer Jesse Rifkin and our new communications manager Amy West, GovTrack Insider has produced 239 original articles making Congress more accessible. Here's a selection of articles from this year:

Will the Constitution ever be amended again? [We asked the man behind the Twenty-Seventh Amendment.](#) The person who's done more than anybody else alive to change the U.S. Constitution wonders where his next paycheck will come from.

Almost Unanimous: Which bills passed with only one dissenting vote? And why did that Congress member dissent? [GovTrack Insider contacted all the dissenting members of Congress to find out.](#) The reasons included everything from spending concerns to a mistaken ballot that should have been a "yes" vote.

[The American Health Care Act of 2017 \(AHCA\)](#): We covered the House Republicans' leading proposal to "repeal and replace" the Affordable Care Act and "defund" Planned Parenthood.

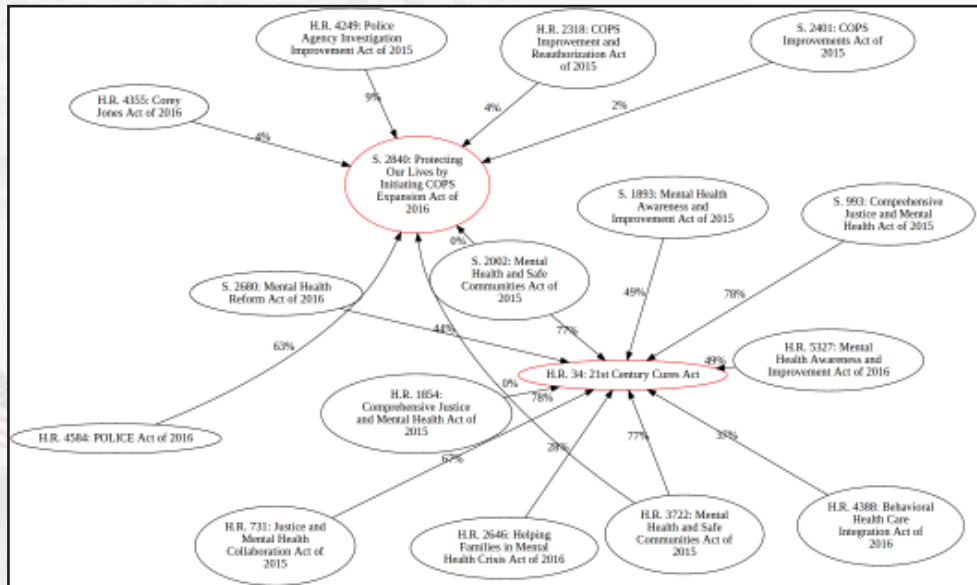
[Defunding Planned Parenthood](#): Vice President Mike Pence [broke a Senate tie vote](#) on legislation to allow states to withhold funding for Planned Parenthood. The bill was signed into law two weeks later on April 14.

[The Equal Rights Amendment](#): On March 22, 2017 [Nevada voted to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment](#) (ERA), a U.S. constitutional amendment proposal that passed Congress in the 1970s. The ERA fell three states short of the necessary 38 state ratifications by the 1982 deadline. With three of those missing states poised to ratify the amendment this year or next, legislation introduced in Congress would eliminate that 1982 deadline—potentially paving way for the amendment's passage.

We also covered two bills introduced to the House intended to abolish some federal agencies: the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) and the [Department of Education](#).

New Data and Analysis

A [new analysis](#) we incorporated into GovTrack late last year reveals when provisions of bills are incorporated into other bills. Our new tool will reveal more about how Congress works.



After 15 years of asking Congress for access to better raw data about the status of pending legislation, Congress addressed our concerns in 2016 by creating a [new legislative data publication system](#) which we are now using to bring our users more timely and accurate information about bills. We thank the staff in Congress who worked with us over many years to reach this achievement.

Other Achievements

- Statistically determined key votes on pages for members of Congress
- Geographic maps (actually cartograms) of votes
- More accurate bill prognosis scores from Skopos Labs
- A redesigned homepage that makes finding bills and members of Congress easier



About **You**, Our Users

In line with our mission to make Congress a more accessible institution, our primary audience is the general public — anyone interested in learning more about how their government works. But our users also tell us that they are students, educators, and librarians, as well as journalists, lobbyists at nonprofit organizations, and legislative affairs professionals at small businesses, government agencies, and even staff within Congress.

What do our users have in common? They can't afford the expensive pro tools or have the insider connections that corporate lobbyists and megadonors have in their arsenal. We'll keep working until everyone has the same ability to peer inside and understand their government as the insiders do.

We're also invested in reaching a diverse audience. A 2015 survey of our users in partnership with mySociety revealed that our users are older and more educated than the population at large. But our user base was similar to the population at large on gender and employment status. We're working now on ensuring that our site can be used by those with visual disabilities and will continue to explore how we can help all people in the years ahead.

Our Commitment to Integrity

GovTrack has a [new charter](#). This is our way of clarifying our mission, how we plan to achieve it, and our responsibilities in doing so. As we move forward the charter will serve to keep us on the right track to providing unbiased, nonpartisan news about Congress. The charter will be a written commitment to our supporters.

Staying unbiased means we don't take sides with parties or ideologies, but we do side with the truth. We will always report the facts as they are, along with their implications, and we will never misconstrue or omit data to favor a conclusion.

Our Charter

1. GovTrack.us's mission is to help Americans participate in their government.
 - a. We make information about the United States Congress accessible, understandable, and actionable for public use.
 - b. We do this by putting the information in context, tracking new developments on issues our users care about, and helping our users take action to make a meaningful difference.
 - c. We actively seek out any information relevant to our mission and new ways to analyze and explain that information.
 - d. GovTrack.us and the information we publish will always be free to view, use, and share by anyone.
2. We are committed to integrity.
 - a. We know that government decisions have grave consequences, and so we carry out our work respectfully and responsibly.
 - b. We never misrepresent or exclude information to favor one side. We never side for or against any policy, politician, or organization — except policies that further our mission as described in this charter.
 - c. We do not accept grants from partisan organizations or the government. Our advertising space is made available to all advertisers without regard to political views.
3. We are committed to democracy.
 - a. We believe that transparency and education are crucial for achieving equity in rights and representation for all Americans.
 - b. We believe that the best outcomes can be achieved not only with an informed public but also with a Congress that has the capacity to make informed decisions.
 - d. We love the legislative branch (i.e., Congress). That's why we think about it so much.



Our Commitment to Democracy

At GovTrack we love Congress because it's the most democratic branch of government — where the voices and votes of the people are most directly represented. That's why we seek to empower Americans with a greater understanding of their government. We also believe a smart Congress and a more open and effective government creates a stronger democracy.

Earlier this year GovTrack joined a number of organizations [in a letter to endorse](#) the [OPEN Government Data Act, S. 760](#), which would codify the practices of open government data that we helped to pioneer, this time for the executive branch. The bill would give Americans more access to their government, which is what GovTrack is all about.

GovTrack founder Joshua Tauberer [testified before House appropriators this year](#) to explain the importance of continuing Congress's open access to the legislative information that we display. He also asked Congress to increase its staffing levels beyond the branch's current historical low, so that representatives and senators have the expertise they need without relying on lobbyists.



The Future for GovTrack

GovTrack is growing. In December of last year, just over half a million unique users visited the site. Last January that number nearly tripled. Further, earlier this year [donations to our Patreon](#) peaked at just above \$3,000 a month. That money has expanded GovTrack Insider reporting on Congress.

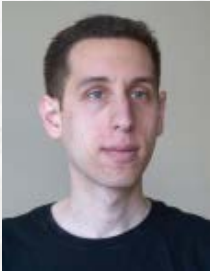
A GovTrack Reading Group

What's the best way to learn more about government? GovTrack! The second best? Books! We're starting a [GovTrack reading group on GoodReads](#), to give our users a chance to read and discuss some of our favorite literature on Congress. We're covering topics from the first Congress all the way to open government data.

Ending GovTrack's Bulk Data and API

GovTrack was the first organization to provide bulk raw data and an "API" that software developers and academic researchers used to perform their own data analysis and create their own apps using legislative information. Following our lead, other organizations including ProPublica and Congress itself have since begun making these specialized data resources available. Now that other organizations have taken over our role as a specialized data provider, we'll be ending our bulk raw data and API this summer so we can use our time more effectively on other parts of GovTrack.us.

Thanks From the GovTrack Team!



Joshua Tauberer, Founder

Joshua Tauberer created GovTrack.us in 2004, initially as a hobby. He is a software developer and entrepreneur that has also worked with government agencies on improving the publication process of the law. He is a member of the Open Government Advisory Group to the District of Columbia mayor. Tauberer holds a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania.



Jesse Rifkin, Staff Writer

Jesse Rifkin is a staff writer covering Congress for GovTrack Insider. Jesse was named one of 2016's top three best "general interest" columnists in the country by the National Society of Newspaper Columnists. His writings have been published by the Washington Post, Politico Magazine, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, USA Today, Huffington Post Politics, and Daily Beast. Jesse lives in Washington, D.C.



Amy West, Communications Manager

Amy West has been the GovTrack communications manager since February 2017 when she realized she didn't want to retire quite so early after all. From 1999-2015, she was a librarian at the University of Minnesota Libraries specializing in government publications and government data.



Ben Hammer, External Relations Associate

Ben Hammer joined GovTrack.us in 2015 to experiment with reporting for the site, which marked the start of GovTrack Insider. Ben works to grow GovTrack.us and to keep it in touch with users. He hopes this update was informative and enjoyable.

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Growing GovTrack

At our current budget, if every GovTrack user gave a one-time donation of just \$5, we could continue our work as-is for the next three centuries (that's another history of the United States all over again!)

But we don't just want to continue as-is. We want to do more. We want to write more original summaries, find ways to improve citizen advocacy, and even include information on the other branches government, such as executive orders. To do that we need your help. Please [support our work](#) to make GovTrack the best it can be.

Once again we'd like to thank our supporters and our readers. We hope you will all keep tracking Congress.

Sincerely,
The GovTrack Team

See us on [twitter](#), [facebook](#), [goodreads](#). Support us on [patreon](#).