

What is the nature of congressional oversight of executive branch decision making? Do members of Congress oversee the work of federal agencies on a routine, ongoing basis? Or, alternatively, is congressional attention to the bureaucracy driven by disasters and other high-profile events? Arriving at an accurate sense of the balance between these two archetypes is crucial for gauging the accountability and performance of executive branch organizations operating in the American separation of powers system.

For decades, the working assumption of many researchers and practitioners has been that Congress treats oversight as a “neglected function,” preferring to engage in other, more electorally salient activities. Furthermore, when members of Congress do turn their attention to executive branch programs and policies, this attention is itself a function of electoral considerations. As Mathew D. McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz posit in their seminal work, “Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrol versus Fire Alarms,” members seldom initiate active oversight of the details of bureaucratic decision making. Rather, members eschew such “police patrols” for an alternative form of oversight, dubbed “fire alarms.” In fire-alarm oversight, members establish mechanisms through which citizens and organized interests can monitor agencies and alert legislators about actions to which they are in opposition. This latter approach is desirable electorally, say McCubbins and Schwartz, in that it relieves members from the burdens of oversight and ensures that legislators will be informed about those bureaucratic activities that most raise the hackles of important constituencies.

Such claims about the decentralized, reactionary nature of congressional oversight have been in currency for decades, despite the fact that the police patrol-fire alarm dichotomy has received scant empirical attention. In a newly published article in *Congress & the Presidency*, Christopher J. Deering and I have collected information and performed an analysis of the relative prevalence of police patrols and fire alarms in congressional hearings. The data collection entailed coding all of the hearings conducted by eight House and Senate committees during four Congresses spanning a period of several decades as either event driven or routine, ongoing legislative activities. In analyzing these coded hearings, we find that, contrary to widely-held expectations, hearing activity is predominantly police patrol in its orientation, both as a general matter as well as across chambers, committees, political parties, and election cycles.

Our approach, to be sure, is characterized by a number of limitations. We consider only one form of oversight. Hearings are undoubtedly important manifestations of oversight. Our results, however, are not necessarily generalizable to other mechanisms through which members oversee agency programs and policies. In addition, our coding of hearings as police patrols or fire alarms must withstand assessments of validity and reliability to ultimately be of widespread utility. Toward these ends we make clear in the article precisely the criteria we employ to code specific hearings, and spend time laying out examples of hearings we found both easy and difficult to



classify. Such transparency, it is our hope, will make transparent our conceptual understanding of the distinction between police patrols and fire alarms, as well as the manner in which we operationalized this distinction across a large number of hearings. In the end, our aim is to contribute to the building of an empirical body of knowledge about the conduct of oversight—knowledge that can provide normative insight into the operation of policymaking under separate powers in the United States. Going forward, it is only through sustained empirical attention to oversight in all of its forms that a fuller understanding will emerge of the conditions under which police patrols or fire alarms most accurately characterize legislative surveillance of the bureaucracy.

