

Instructions for Tracking Legislation

A key activity of the Equity & Inclusion Campaign is pursuing legislation that supports our policy agenda. This sheet explains how to track legislative bills online in four steps. Step #3 is the most important. **Tracking requires an internet connection and an e-mail address.**

STEP 1: Keep in mind how legislation is passed. Although this process is governed by intricate rules of conduct and procedure, the basic route for legislation is:

- a. **A bill is introduced** in either the House or Senate (a “chamber”) by one or more members and referred to the relevant chamber committee (e.g., Senate Committee on Banking, Housing & Urban Affairs). Most bills stop here.
- b. **The committee votes:** After a relevant subcommittee studies the bill, the full committee debates it, makes changes as they deem necessary, and votes on whether or not to pass the bill. This is where the politicking really begins.
- c. **The full chamber votes:** If the bill is approved, it is then referred up to the full chamber for a vote. If the full chamber passes the bill, it is then sent over to the other chamber where it is introduced and submitted to a committee.
- d. **The other chamber committee votes:** It then goes into committee in that chamber. Sometimes, as when H.R. 1227 went to the Senate, a companion bill (S. 1668) is introduced in its place.
- e. **The other chamber votes:** If it makes it out of committee in the second chamber, it goes for a full vote there.
- f. **The two versions are reconciled:** If it passes, then the two chambers get together with the two versions of the bill and reconcile them into one that can be sent to the President for his/her vote.
- g. **The President approves or vetoes the bill.**
- h. **Congress can override the veto** if two-thirds of both chambers vote to pass the bill.

In general, the House passes a lot more bills than the Senate.

STEP 2: Bookmark *Thomas*, the federal government’s online legislative database at The Library of Congress. The web address is: <http://thomas.loc.gov/>. You can search *Thomas* for information on current and past bills, using keywords or phrases, or the bill number. You can also search by legislator (e.g., Landrieu) or by issue area (e.g., housing).

Thomas is useful as an original source of information on bills, but other websites, outlined below, are more helpful and user-friendly for our campaign. *Thomas* does not offer a tracking feature. Use *Thomas* to double check other websites' information as needed.

STEP 3: Track legislative information through the citizen-run website *GovTrack.us*:

<http://www.govtrack.us/>. *GovTrack* is an “independent website for tracking the United States Congress, helping you follow the status of federal legislation and the activities of your senators and representatives.” Data is automatically collected daily from official government websites. *GovTrack* is an independent, citizen-run website. The information it provides is open source and you can reuse it as needed.

This page explains how to use the tracker: <http://www.govtrack.us/users/aboutmonitors.xpd>. “Trackers are available for every person, bill, subject term or committee in Congress.” Here’s how it works:

- a. **Register for free at *GovTrack*** here: <http://www.govtrack.us/users/register.xpd>. Then sign up via the “Your Account” page: <http://www.govtrack.us/users/account.xpd> for daily or weekly e-mail updates about the issues, legislators, or bills you decide to track.
- b. After you have looked up a bill, person, or issue area, look for the **Add Tracker** button on the left-hand side of the page.
 - i. **If you want to track a particular representative**, you will receive alerts about:
 - Any speeches they make during meetings of Congress.
 - Their votes on bills.
 - ii. **If you want to track issue areas**, you will receive alerts about:
 - Related bills that are introduced, voted on, and/or enacted.
 - Speeches during Congress that mention bills related to these issue areas.
 - iii. **If you want to track individual bills**, you will receive alerts about any action taken on those bills.
- c. **Click the **Add Tracker** button to subscribe to events that are relevant to the page that you are on.** Your “Tracked Events” page will then list all recent matching events for all of your trackers, and tracker alerts will be sent to you by e-mail.
- d. Above the **Add Tracker** button, **you can also sign up for “feeds”¹ about your tracked choices.** Feeds are like subscriptions to sites, meaning that *GovTrack.us* will send you regular updates about your choices (e.g., speeches, votes, etc.) to your web browser, such as My Yahoo!, your Google reader, My MSN, or My AOL. Then you can read the feeds right in your personalized home page.

¹ For more about feeds, see: <http://www.sixapart.com/about/feeds/>.

GovTrack also provides excellent background information about legislators (e.g., if they are “radical” versus “rank-and-file,” or their success at passing legislation), the different legislative committees that debate and make changes to bills (e.g., members), and what other bills are related to the ones you are following.

STEP 4: Make use of other public policy websites to evaluate the Campaign’s policy agenda.

- a. **Use Progressive Punch** (<http://www.progressivepunch.org>) **to see how progressive our legislators are.** You can look legislators up by name on this non-partisan website to see an assigned score regarding their support of progressive legislation; you can also select your three representatives (House Rep. and two Senators) or three legislators and compare them. You can also see members ranked by progressive score.
- b. **Use Project Vote Smart** (<http://www.votesmart.org/index.htm>) – a citizen watchdog group – **to evaluate the voting records, special interest support, background and campaign finances of legislators and political candidates.** At this website, you can learn more about which issue areas and special interest groups elected officials support, and how their public statements match up with their actual voting records.
- c. **Use The National Low-Income Housing Coalition** (<http://www.nlihc.org>) **for policy analysis of housing legislation and government activity.** The National Low-Income Housing Coalition also has launched a presidential campaign website about housing called Housing2008 (<http://www.housing2008.org/index.php>).

NOTE: There are other issue-related advocacy groups in D.C. and independent websites that you should rely on for policy analysis. If you know of other resources that would be useful as the E&I Campaign builds its policy agenda, please send a note to jainey@equityandinclusion.org so that we can spread the word. Thanks!