



COMMITTEE CLERK OVERVIEW

House and Senate committee clerks operate under a variety of formal and informal rules, arrangements, and traditions. In the Senate, for example, most committee and subcommittee clerks work for both parties at the same time, receiving half their compensation from each party. In contrast, many House clerks work for just one party, although some may work for whichever party is in the majority. Some clerks work alone; some have assistants. Some work primarily on legislative hearings; others primarily on investigative hearings. Some provide parliamentary advice; some don't. Some have decades of experience; some are still learning the ropes. In most cases, congressional clerks have to exercise creativity, persistence, and resourcefulness to get their jobs done. The following is an overview of some of the issues clerks have to navigate, especially when working in the oversight field.

Neutrality and Bipartisanship. Committee and subcommittee clerks play a key role in ensuring a civil, productive, and pleasant work environment. They often set the tone on the extent to which the body acts in an even-handed way and shares information between parties. Even on committees with partisan tensions, clerks can create a safe space for civil interactions.

Institutional Memory. Clerks can contribute to the institutional memory of a committee or subcommittee by researching, maintaining, and alerting others to relevant precedents. Clerks can also recommend precedents that worked well and warn against those that produced discord. In unprecedented situations, such as remote work during a pandemic, clerks can assist in laying out new protocols that are consistent with previous committee practices and adjusting timelines to account for logistics problems.

Workplace Duties. Because work assignments vary among committees and subcommittees, clerks may need to clarify or map out their responsibilities and who can provide them with assistance. Key activities in the oversight area include document requests and storage, logging and tracking letters and responses, interviews and depositions, in-person, online or hybrid hearings, running video conferencing software, reports, website upkeep, media matters, and archiving. Clerks may also be charged with administering procedures related to detailees, interns, law clerks, and other volunteers, including those working on oversight.

Training. Clerks can facilitate staff participation in training opportunities offered by CRS and others. In the oversight area, clerks can alert staff to the monthly oversight seminars offered by POGO; twice-yearly oversight boot camps jointly offered by POGO, the Levin Center, and the Lugar Center; and online oversight tutorials available on the Levin Center website. Additionally, clerks can coordinate with congressional Education and Training Offices and the House Whistleblower Ombuds Office to help staff learn how to use available resources.

Great congressional oversight investigations typically depend upon great clerks who know how to facilitate bipartisanship, manage effective office operations, and work with staff to produce well-run inquiries, reports, and hearings.