

## RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# The House Appropriations Committee Surveys & Investigations Staff and the Arc of Congressional Competence

Matthew Dull 

Center for Public Administration &amp; Policy, School of Public &amp; International Affairs, Virginia Tech, Arlington, Virginia, USA

Correspondence: Matthew Dull ([mdull@vt.edu](mailto:mdull@vt.edu))

Received: 3 June 2025 | Revised: 1 June 2026 | Accepted: 9 June 2026

## ABSTRACT

This article follows the arc of congressional competence through the development and decline of the House Appropriations Committee (HAC) Surveys & Investigations (S&I) staff, an enduring oversight unit whose investigations were unobserved by design. S&I was quietly reorganized out of existence in December 2024. Why? What, if anything, is lost? Drawing on committee reports, archival materials, and interviews, this study shows how Chairman Clarence Cannon's design for S&I shaped its distinctive nonpartisan, under-the-radar oversight, filling a once-powerful niche made untenable in recent decades by partisan conflict. Time-series analysis of S&I study activity (1975–2024) indicates divided government and partisan disagreement constrained bipartisan S&I oversight. The conclusion situates S&I's history in research on congressional oversight, grounding abstract models, tracing institutional change, and revealing unexpected consequences.

## 1 | Introduction

The House Appropriations Committee (HAC) has long maintained a reputation as “the most powerful committee in Congress,” a “closed corporation,” famous for “hard work, specialization, and unity.”<sup>1</sup> Wilson's *Congressional Government* (2017, 87) describes appropriators as “white button mandarins,” “clothed with extraordinary privileges,” empowered to balance the dual imperatives of state-building and institutional maintenance. In *The Power of the Purse*, Fenno (1966, 16) explains, “...some institution must protect the federal treasury against the excessive claims made upon it by the manifold special interests in American society.” In *Congressmen in Committees*, Fenno (1973, 49) reasons that the Appropriations Committee was created to pull the metaphorical purse string and “an effective purse string is a tight purse string.”

House Appropriators cultivated a distinctive budget cutting ethos, integrating famously independent subcommittee “cardinals” around a shared sense of mission and a powerful corporate metaphor. Kingdon (1966, 70–71) observes, “Committee

members come to perceive their role as protector of the taxpayer and maintainer of the fiscal well-being of the entire nation.” They used facts to uncover and root out government waste. Fenno (1966) writes:

They believe that hard work will inevitably produce ‘the facts’. If you ‘get the facts’, you will usually uncover waste in the bureaucracy. And the revelation of waste will be followed by cutting the budget. Therefore, according to Committee syllogism, hard work will result in cutting the budget.<sup>2</sup>

The Committee's unique jurisdictional autonomy and its reputation for expert budgetary discipline were of a piece. “By keeping resources scarce, they magnify their allocative power. By denying, limiting, or withholding funds, they keep environmental groups more mindful of them,” Fenno (1973, 49) explains. This “negative posture” was a vital reputational resource for appropriators buffered by a shared confidence that, “he knows a great deal more about the agencies for which he appropriates

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2026 The Author(s). *Legislative Studies Quarterly* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Washington University in St. Louis.

than other members of the House—indeed, more than the entire Congress” (Fenno 1966, 202; 345).

This article is about how House appropriators maintained a reputation for knowing more with the assistance of investigators, auditors, analysts, and agency experts on detail who identified unused and wasted spending; investigated programs, agencies, and individuals; and watchdogged committee turf. From 1943 to 2024, the House Appropriations Committee Surveys & Investigations (S&I) staff provided facts appropriators used to pull Congress’s metaphorical purse strings.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 tabulates S&I study titles reported from the 94th to the 118th Congress (1975–2024). At the peak of its productivity, S&I completed more than 100 study titles per congressional term, staffed by a rotating cadre of 100 or more investigators detailed from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), General Accounting Office (GAO), and 10 or more federal agencies. S&I filled a powerful niche as HAC’s investigative arm, operating almost entirely outside of public view. In recent decades, however, growing partisanship and shifting power in the House transformed committee politics and strained S&I’s tradition of nonpartisan, under-the-radar investigations. S&I study titles declined sharply from the 114th through 118th Congress; its staff dwindled, and, in December 2024, the S&I staff was quietly reorganized out of existence by Chairman Tom Cole. No press release was issued. There were no articles in *Roll Call* or *The Hill*. A venerated staff institution is gone and no one wrote its obituary.

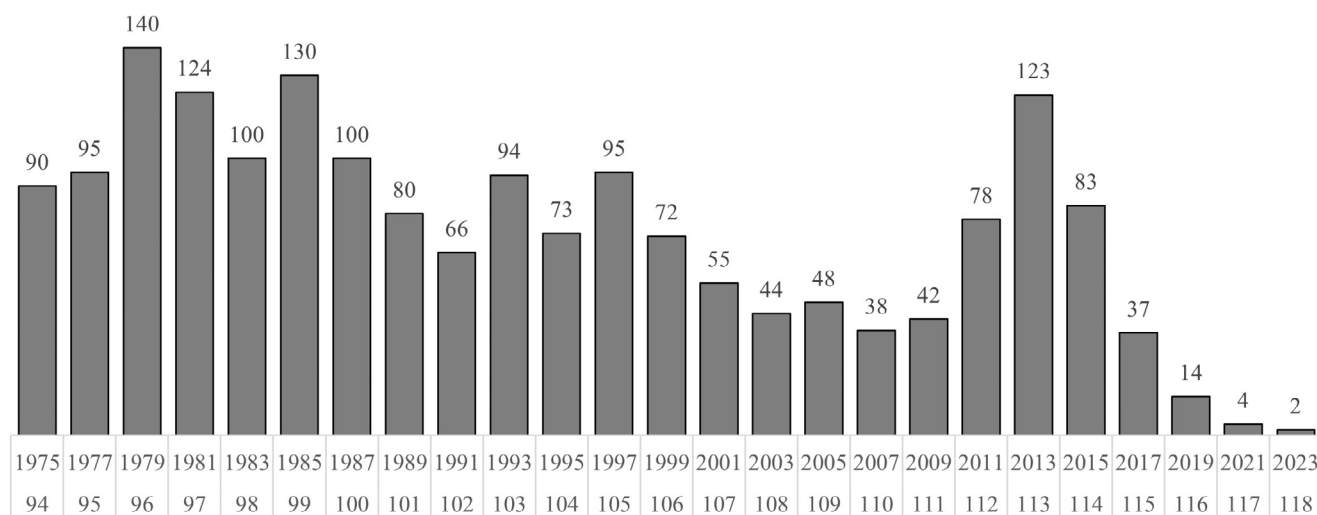
Drawing from committee reports, archival documents, and research interviews, this article contributes to the empirical study of congressional oversight by reconstructing stories of S&I’s development and decline, bringing forward the overlooked history of a consequential capacity the House Appropriations Committee kept mostly out of sight. This study contributes to longstanding research highlighting congressional staff as an “invisible force” and the role of staff expertise in committee influence (Fox and Hammond 1977; Dittmar 2023; Ommundsen 2023; Fagan and McGee 2022; Fong et al. 2025).

The study’s empirical contribution grounds a second, methodological contribution: S&I’s history demonstrates the usefulness

of historical narrative for the study of oversight. Most oversight scholarship is guided by abstract models of delegation, information, and control. S&I’s history shows what is gained when models are placed in conversation with research attentive to events and sequences unfolding over time. Drawing on Abbott’s (2004) *Methods of Discovery*, this article highlights four ways narrative contributes to explanation in social science: narrative situates abstract explanations in context, introduces temporal movement, illuminates overlooked dynamics, and supports counterfactual reasoning. Abbott’s four heuristics organize the article’s basic claim: S&I was neither police patrol nor fire alarm oversight, but oversight out of sight, an institutional capacity kept behind closed doors that remains unseen without close attention to people and process (Abbott 2001, 2016).

Four sections follow. Section 2 describes S&I’s creation and design set out by institutional architect Chairman Clarence Cannon around four organizing pillars: the S&I staff were meant to be invisible, ad hoc, impersonal, nonpartisan agents of the committee. Section 3 shows that, as S&I evolved into a distinctive and enduring institutional resource, the imprint of Cannon’s design insulated its investigations and shaped its adaptation to a changing environment. Characters and events reconstructed around Cannon’s pillars—No Publicity, Staffing on Detail, Anonymity, and Neutrality—reveal evidence of persistence, but also the unexpected, incongruous, and hidden. S&I generally produced no publicity, but dramatic exceptions reveal its latent power. Cannon said S&I was designed for flexibility and to avoid favoritism; but in practice he used S&I to secure a decades-long alliance that empowered J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI. And, while S&I’s independence and neutrality were vital pillars of its oversight, under the pressure of increasingly divided committee politics, its model of neutrality arguably proved its undoing.

One former staffer explained, “S&I was an important part of congressional oversight. But like with most other things in our nation and certainly in Congress, partisanship killed S&I over time.”<sup>4</sup> Was growing partisan conflict associated with declining S&I studies? Section 4 tests this proposition using multivariate time-series analysis of S&I study titles across subcommittees



**FIGURE 1** | Surveys and investigations study titles by Congress, 94th–118th (1975–2024).

from 1975 through 2024. Finally, Section 5 summarizes findings and reflects on what S&I's history of oversight out of sight means for scholarship on congressional oversight, returning to these four narrative heuristics to interpret its development and decline. S&I's history reveals unexpected consequences, infuses change into static models, contextualizes abstraction, and promotes counterfactual reasoning.

## 2 | Chairman Clarence Cannon: S&I's Institutional Architect

On January 21, 1943, at the first HAC meeting of the 78th Congress, Chairman Clarence Cannon proposed the creation of an ad hoc staff of committee investigators. Cannon's resolution was approved the following day by the full House (U.S. House of Representatives 1943). For noted Congress scholar Arthur McMahon, Cannon's new staff of investigators exemplified the assertion of Article I powers through ongoing scrutiny. "A new stress is rising in crescendo in the Congress of 1943," McMahon announced (1943a, 1943b). Appropriators supervised unprecedented wartime spending as guardians of the public purse with a stature buttressed by a reputation for knowledge and experience.<sup>5</sup> The authority of the Appropriations Committee depended on its expertise, McMahon (1943a, 161–163, 182; 1943b) observed, pointing to Cannon's staffing initiative as a model for building congressional capacity.

In December 1943, Chairman Cannon reported that S&I had produced "invaluable results" in its first year. Casting its investigations as a practical solution to "an old problem and one to which a great amount of thought has been given," Cannon told the House, "[S]ound legislation is based on sound information," but "from the beginning of the Congress, committees have been handicapped by lack of essential data." Cannon continued, "The Committee on Appropriations has especially felt the need of an agency for research and investigation which could be relied upon to supply data to supplement that submitted by the departments in their annual hearings on the general appropriations bills." (Cannon 1943, 10994). S&I was designed to strengthen Congress's institutional prerogative, the power to tighten the purse strings. To accomplish this, Cannon outlined four design principles that left an indelible imprint on S&I in the decades that followed.

First, Cannon explained that "tasking letters" required to initiate S&I studies must be co-signed by the chairmen and ranking minority members of both the full committee and the responsible subcommittee. Requiring bipartisan approval "precludes any attempt to use the agency for personal or political purposes," Cannon reasoned, noting "...As a matter of fact, there has never been any suggestion or intimation of politics or partisanship in any of these investigations" (Cannon 1943, 10995). S&I was designed for partisan neutrality.

Second, S&I's studies were not released without committee approval. Consequently, few people outside of the relevant subcommittees saw the results of its investigations. Secrecy and neutrality were tightly coupled in Cannon's design, insulating S&I investigators from political interference. Cannon argued:

The system cannot be used for the publicizing or aggrandizement of the chairman or any member of the committee. Requests submitted by the subcommittees are for facts. Opinions are not admitted. The investigators receive written assignments and make written reports, and from those facts reported the members of the committee deduce their own opinions. Results of the investigations are not released to the newspapers. The Department which has been investigated does not itself know what the investigator has reported and as a result must be on its toes ready for any development when its representatives appear before the committee in the hearings on the Budget estimates.

(Cannon 1943, 10995)

Third, relations between committee members and S&I investigators were "wholly impersonal." S&I staff were located in separate offices and generally did not interact with committee staff. "I have never been in the office and no member of the staff has ever been in my office," Cannon (1943, 10995) continued, "I would not know one of them if I should meet him in the street." The S&I staff was designed for impersonalism to insulate its experts from political interference.

Fourth, S&I's investigators occupied temporary appointments. Cannon reasoned that staffing with short-term contracts would enable the committee flexibility to hire experts for specific investigations while avoiding the favoritism and influence engendered by permanent committee staff. Experts from FBI, GAO, the Secret Service, and other agencies would staff S&I investigations on detail, and, "As soon as the assignment is completed he is returned to the department and goes off the House roll back to his original roll" (Cannon 1943, 10995).

The S&I staff would be nonpartisan, impersonal, under-the-radar, and temporary. Calling Cannon's design "ingenious," the American Accounting Association's Kohler (1945) praised his floor speech, noting, "His exposition of the safeguards that should accompany legislative investigations of executive agencies is both able and forthright; his insistence on arm's-length relationships qualifies him as a first-rate auditor" (Kohler 1945, 37). The next section looks at the enduring imprint of Cannon's design on S&I's development. For 80 years, with notable exceptions, the S&I staff served as nonpartisan, invisible investigators on detail.

## 3 | Cannon's Design and S&I's Development

Created in 1943, S&I's growth and institutionalization during the 1950s and 1960s and a decade of peak investigative activity between roughly 1976 and 1986 were followed by retrenchment and adaptation in the 1990s and 2000s, a brief period of renewal in the 2010s, and ultimately, in December 2024, it closed shop.<sup>6</sup> Over eight decades through transformational changes, Cannon's imprint was discernible in S&I's formal structure, symbols, routines, and organizational culture. This section traces the persistence of Chairman Cannon's four founding pillars in the

S&I staff's development (Becker 2025). S&I conducted invisible, impersonal, nonpartisan investigations on demand much as Cannon envisioned.

The four subsections that follow—No Publicity, Staffing on Detail, Anonymity, and Neutrality—use stories of Cannon's imprint to bring forward four narrative heuristics for scholarship on congressional oversight. The first subsection, No Publicity, shows that while S&I was mostly invisible, a few exceptions reveal it as a powerful latent factor in committee oversight. The second subsection, Staffing on Detail, shows that while Cannon described S&I's design as instilling change and avoiding favoritism, its staff was dominated for decades by FBI agents under a personal arrangement between Cannon and Director J. Edgar Hoover. When S&I's alliance with the FBI drew scrutiny, its staffing model enabled S&I to adapt and develop an alliance with GAO and to change staffing again after that relationship dissolved. S&I evolved as a venue in which different specialized actors competed to define and supply authoritative investigative expertise (Abbott 1988). The third subsection, Anonymity, shows that Cannon's imprint instilled in the S&I staff a distinctive character that shaped its adaptation to a changing environment and ultimately inhibited its resilience. Finally, Neutrality describes how Cannon designed S&I for neutrality, and a commitment to neutrality formed a central pillar in S&I's institutional identity until it buckled under a rising tide of partisan institutional conflict. S&I's history reconstructed around the imprint of Cannon's founding design reveals the overlooked and unexpected, infuses static models with movement, contextualizes abstraction, and promotes counterfactual inference.

### 3.1 | No Publicity

In January 1943, Chairman Cannon and first S&I Director Hugh Clegg agreed "there should be no publicity" (Stockham 2011, 177–178). Four years later Republican Chairman John Taber assumed the Committee gavel and along with S&I's third Director Robert Emmet Lee emerged center stage at the confluence of anti-New Deal "war on waste" and anti-communist "watchful eye" oversight. Chairman Taber, "lord high executioner of federal budget requests," battled inefficiency and subversion (Reynolds 1948, SM10), making conspicuous use of S&I to recruit auditors and analysts for temporary service rooting out government waste. A *Wall Street Journal* (1947) article headlined, "Taber's 'Mystery Men' Snoop for Loopholes In Truman's Budget," describes faceless investigators on temporary rotation, "As employees of the committee, they go into the various departments of government and ask searching questions: What supplies are on hand? How much money is left from old appropriations?" But their work is secret, the newspaper reports. Although the Republican's "chief economizer" Chairman Taber is "keeping mum" about his crack investigators, "Two of the special experts have been assigned to work on the War Department Appropriation bill from which the Republican budgeters hope to pare close to \$1 billion." Chairman Taber, "became something of a national figure," his biography observes, "Several popular magazines featured articles on his hard work, perseverance, personal frugality, and, above all, his iron determination to cut spending" (Henderson 1964).

S&I Director Lee also often appeared in newspaper articles portrayed as a hero investigator rooting out waste, fraud, and subversion. Citing a few examples: In June 1947, *The Washington Post* credited Lee with exposing waste in the Federal Public Housing agency; in July, Lee revived a probe of DC crime statistics and the *Post* noted, "lively interest in such an inquiry as Mr. Lee will do;" and in December, Lee was featured uncovering the misuse of funds by the Boston "March of Dimes."<sup>7</sup> But one S&I study brought Director Lee real notoriety: a January 1948 report scrutinizing State Department administration accompanied by an appendix listing 108 numbered personnel cases compiled by committee investigators.<sup>8</sup> The so-called "Lee list," containing derogatory information drawn from Department personnel files, became infamous in 1950 when it was repurposed by Senator Joseph McCarthy. After his Wheeling speech claiming to have a "list" of State Department subversives captured national headlines, McCarthy came into possession of the Lee List, which served as the basis for the list he read on the Senate floor.<sup>9</sup> Lee and McCarthy became fast friends and partisan allies.<sup>10</sup> In 1953, Eisenhower appointed Lee to the Federal Communications Commission, where he served for almost three decades.<sup>11</sup> Director Lee's dramatic career trajectory is unmatched in the 80-year history of S&I. But the exception reveals its latent potential for publicity and reputation building.

Selectively deployed by committee chairmen, S&I studies became vehicles for communicating authoritative at-a-distance messages. In 1965, an S&I report requested by Agriculture Subcommittee Chairman Jamie Whitten questioned the "alarming statements" about the ill-effects of pesticides in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, concluding:

The staff was advised by scientists and physicians that the book is superficially scientific in that it marshals a number of accepted scientific facts. However, it is unscientific in (a) drawing incorrect conclusions from unrelated facts, and (b) making implications that are based on possibilities as yet unproved to be actual facts.

(U.S. House Committee on Appropriationsnull. Surveys and Investigations Staff 1965)

Whitten published the report, convened hearings to promote its findings, and subsequently used the research in his book rebutting Carson, entitled *That We May Live*, a book, "conceived and subsidized by pesticide industry officials" (Kotz and Mintz 1971; Mart 2015; Marvin 1967; Summers 2000).

A 1975 S&I report made news when it called the Office of Minority Business Enterprise, "paralyzed," with "little hope for major improvement" (Levy 1975). A 1979 S&I report criticized the National Endowment for the Arts for being so "deficient in its management policy and practices," that it "fails to meet its legislative mandate" (A critical congressional study 1979; Shirley 1979). A blockbuster 1983 report criticized the Interior Department's lease of government coal reserves at "fire sale" prices, a quote repeated again and again (Lash et al. 1984; Russakoff 1983c, Russakoff 1983b). A 1992 report criticized FEMA as "a political dumping ground," widely viewed

as “a turkey farm, if you will, where numbers of positions exist that can be conveniently filled by political appointment,” a quote that long persisted in public discourse (Dvorchak 1992; McAllister 1992a, 1992b; Roberts 2006).

But even when their reports went public, the S&I staff were always just out of view. S&I's investigators embodied “a passion for anonymity,” in Louis Brownlow's phrase, extolling the virtues of a neutrally competent public sector professionalism.<sup>12</sup> In Fenno's (1966) account of the House Appropriations Committee as an integrated social system governed by roles and norms, the invisible committee clerks embodied a similar dedication to service as “anonymous assistants.” Fenno (1966, 184) describes committee clerks as difficult to locate and reluctant to be interviewed, observing, “They try to remain as faceless in the world of congressional staffs as their Committee members are in the world of political celebrities. And this behavior makes possible a closer relationship with the subcommittee chairmen whom they serve.” The clerks were renowned for long years of dedicated service (Harris 1964, 79). S&I staff, by contrast, operated on short-term assignments. Like the faceless clerks, the anonymity of S&I investigators and the confidential nature of their investigations bound their work closely to the committee. Unlike the long-tenured committee clerks, however, S&I staff were short-timers, whose visibility was narrowed by the scope of tasking directives. With norms of secrecy and impersonalism marking sharp asymmetries of information at committee boundaries, S&I served a powerful latent function. The following section describes how S&I's staffing model reinforced the authority of the chairman as a broker of expert, under-the-radar investigations on demand.

### 3.2 | Staffing on Detail

The S&I staff was designed to serve on temporary rotation. “If an auditor is needed the General Accounting Office is asked to supply the man. If a chemist, the Bureau of Standards; if a lawyer, the Department of Justice; if a civil-service expert, the Civil Service Commission; if a detective, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, or the Secret Service of the Treasury Department; and so forth,” Chairman Cannon envisioned in 1943, “No other system yet suggested will so promptly supply just the exact character of qualification needed for any specific investigation.”<sup>13</sup> By making S&I staff temporary, Cannon sought to avoid the patronage dominating prior staff appointments (Brudnick 2014, 151–152). “What happens when you put men permanently on the staff?” Cannon once asked rhetorically, answering himself, “They get lazy” (Harris 1964, 80).

S&I's limited-term staffing shortened horizons and reinforced norms of secrecy and impersonalism. Its detailees fit quietly in the “complex network of relationships,” the “continuing and sometimes almost daily pattern of contacts between the Committee on Appropriations and the executive branch” (Carroll 1966 quoted in Oleszek 2007, 300). Agency detailees were vital sources of policy expertise, interbranch intelligence, and legislative capacity for congressional committees (Mills and Selin 2017). Rather than the permanent subcommittee staff advocated by Republican minority members, the S&I staff became

a resource for discrete, problem-oriented sampling supervised by the chairman for the subcommittees.<sup>14</sup>

During the two terms Republican Chairman John Taber chaired the Appropriations Committee, S&I's staffing model served wildly different purposes. Chairman Taber made conspicuous use of S&I to recruit accountants and business analysts from industry. In January 1953, Chairman Taber announced the recruitment of industry experts to “hunt” for government waste, including a member of a New York accounting firm, an auditor for Consolidated Edison, assistant treasurer of the United States Rubber Company, and an executive for the Prudential Insurance Company.<sup>15</sup> “The first project for the staff, Mr. Taber announced, would be a study of unspent appropriations,” the *New York Times* (1953) reported. Taber and House Republicans envisioned Appropriations Committee oversight in sharp contrast to what emerged under decades of control by House Democrats. Under Chairman Taber, S&I hunted security risks, recruited business experts, and communicated partisan messages. What emerged under House Democrats was not only different but suggests Cannon's design for S&I's staffing structure served unarticulated purposes at the intersection of an institutional alliance with J. Edgar Hoover's FBI.

Cannon's (1943) exposition of S&I's design contrasts with this alternative account of its creation retold by former FBI Special Agent and S&I investigator Ash:

It is said that on one occasion in the early 1940's the Honorable Clarence Cannon (D) of Missouri, then Chairman of the Appropriations Committee was seated next to Director J. Edgar Hoover at some function at the Mayflower Hotel. Representative Cannon, after complimenting Mr. Hoover for the successes of the FBI and its complement of Special Agents, said he wished he had a similar group to help him with the committee's oversight responsibilities. Mr. Hoover is said to have replied, ‘How many do you want?’

(Ash n.d.)

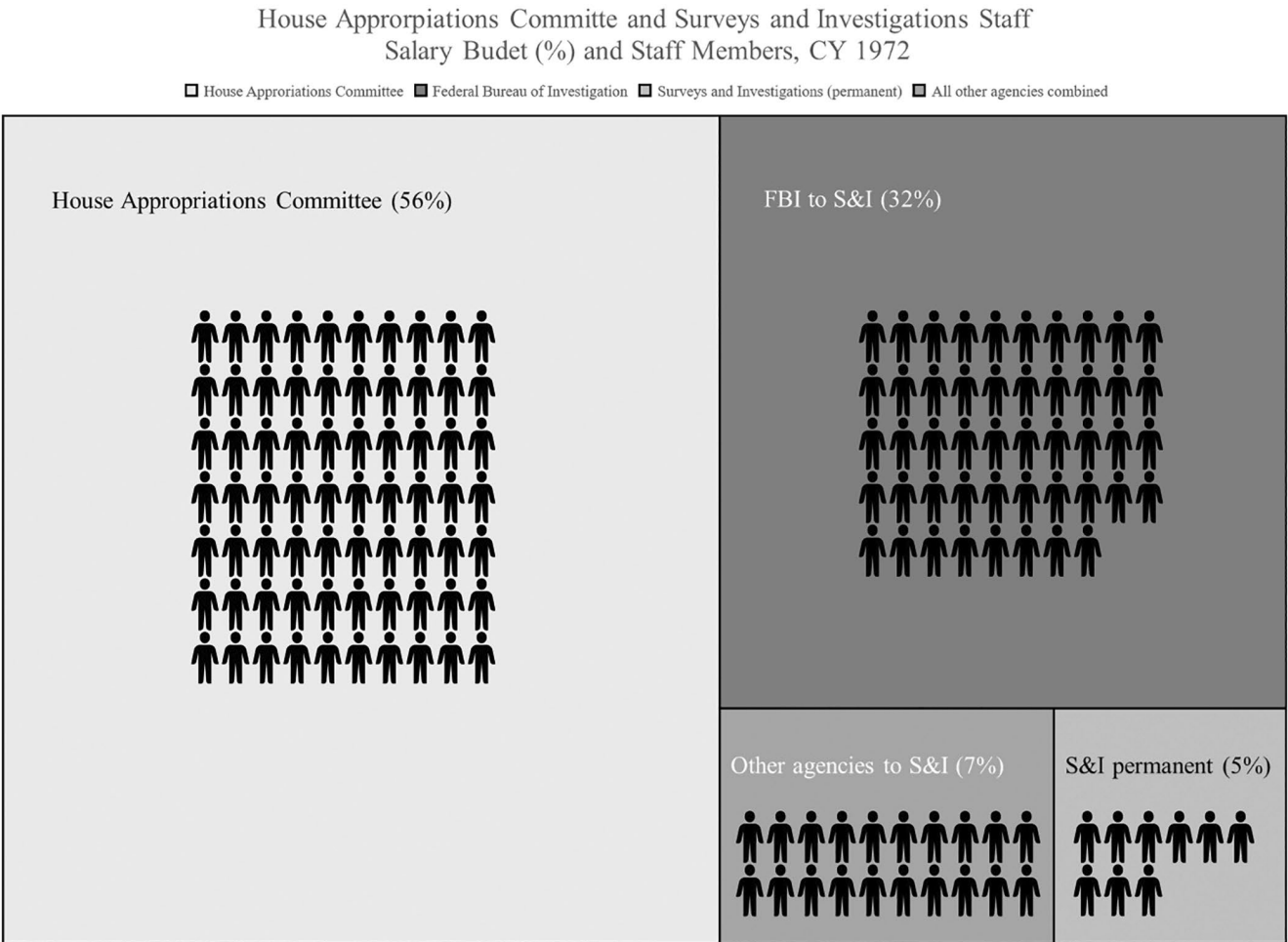
Director Hoover had already arranged to “lend” FBI agents to organize and staff the committee's new investigative unit prior to Cannon's January committee proposal. In a January 2, 1943 memo obtained by Stockham (2011, 2013), FBI Director Hoover informed Attorney General Francis Biddle that Chairman Cannon, “had decided that it was necessary to establish some sort of check and investigation of requests for appropriations which came before his Committee,” and requested Hoover, “effect arrangements whereby Special Agents of the Bureau might be made available to the House Appropriations Committee to make such checks” (Stockham 2013, 503). Attorney General Biddle objected that detailing FBI agents to the committee would put the Justice Department in an “impossible position” by assigning personnel from a subordinate agency as its monitors. Nevertheless, Biddle relented in a January 4 memo telling President Roosevelt he had, “no objection to ‘lending’ one Agent to the Committee to help it set up such an organization” (Stockham 2011, 176).

Two of Hoover's "top men" were assigned to the committee. Hugh Clegg organized the unit and R.H. Laughlin served as S&I director from 1943 to 1946. Laughlin advocated staffing S&I with Bureau agents, reasoning this would ensure, "close contact and control over an investigative organization making inquiries for the Appropriations Committee." Reluctant to give up the agents, Hoover nonetheless agreed it was "better for FBI to do it than some other agency" Stockham (2013, 507). In order to accommodate Attorney General Biddle's objection to a formal detail, Directors Clegg, Laughlin, and Lee resigned from the FBI while staffing the committee. Ash (n.d.) describes the process, "...in the early years the FBI Agents, when assigned, went off the FBI rolls with only Mr. Hoover's word that they would return to their Special Agent positions after completing their Congressional assignments. There was nothing in writing to guarantee this." Director Lee (1997, 99–100) remembers, "I did resign but only after I had an interview with the Director in which he assured me he would welcome me back in the FBI at any time." In practice, S&I's rotating staff of FBI agents on-loan became Director Hoover's personal footprint on the Appropriations Committee.

Hundreds of FBI agents were detailed to S&I, sustaining an alliance that lasted more than three decades. In 1972, almost one-third of the entire HAC salary budget paid for 48 FBI agents detailed to S&I, as Figure 2 illustrates.<sup>16</sup> All 25 S&I Directors between 1943 and 1977 were FBI agents on detail.<sup>17</sup> Fenno (1966, 374–375) observes, "with FBI men helping to staff

the Committee, it is no wonder that Committee members come to look upon the Bureau as having a special relationship," noting the Appropriations Committee "appears as the arch support of the FBI within the American political System." FBI agents dominated S&I staffing into the 1970s, long after the alliance began attracting scrutiny.<sup>18</sup> "The Federal Bureau of Investigation holds a unique position among agencies in the federal government," wrote *The Washington Post's* Walter Pincus in 1971, "its agents are in charge of investigating their own congressional appropriation." So, Pincus (1971, A1) observed, the FBI's budget requests were never cut. "While the House Appropriations Committee benefited from the expert investigatory skills of Bureau agents," historian Stockham (2013, 501) writes, "Bureau officials gained unprecedented access to one of the most powerful committees on Capitol Hill, fueling the Cold War growth of the Bureau's power."

During the 1970s, S&I's staffing pivoted to GAO, forging an alliance that proved crucial during its most productive period. In 1977, the position of S&I Director began alternating between FBI and GAO staff. GAO detailees almost doubled. In 1982, GAO detailed 57 employees to S&I, accounting for more than 60% of GAO staff detailed to the Hill.<sup>19</sup> S&I acquired from GAO more than just personnel. GAO-trained analysts brought new methods modeled on audits and evaluations. GAO had emerged post-war as the government's supreme audit institution. Comptroller General (CG) Joseph Campbell (1954–1965) described GAO as "the public accounting agency for the Federal Government," and



**FIGURE 2** | Comparing House Appropriations Committee and S&I salary budget, CY 1972.

supervised its transformation from a workforce of mostly clerks and a few lawyers before the war to almost 60% accountants by the late 1960s (Mosher 1979, 145). During the 1970s and 1980s, GAO again transformed its workforce as CG Campbell and successor CG Elmer Staats (1966–1981) embraced comprehensive auditing, a term first equated with financial auditing broadened in subsequent decades to include program evaluation and management performance (Mosher 1984, 136).<sup>20</sup> GAO veterans possessed analytic skills that fit the era's informational demands. One former staffer recalls GAOers “were the ones who could pull together all the facts and get a report out.” GAO staff employed rigorous methods, another staffer observes, “...you had to have good evidence, you had to have convincing evidence that withstood different people attacking it.”

Many aspects of S&I retained the FBI imprint. S&I's instrument for interview write-ups, the Contact Report, which was modeled on the FBI's Form 302, survived into the 2000s. S&I staff who served in the 1980s remember investigators were issued FBI-style badges, a practice discontinued as the GAO model took hold.<sup>21</sup> “Historically, because the FBI was the founding father,” a staffer recalls, the term “investigations” was used to describe S&I oversight. S&I staff debated and shifted its nomenclature to “studies” in the 2000s. The FBI's investigative routines and its bureaucratic symbols formed the initial conditions patterning S&I oversight practices decades later.

S&I's transformation also shows routines are not static but processual and generative. Anonymous staff on rotation were empowered by routines that buffered and enabled S&I's adaptation. Routines can be understood as patterned behavior, “performance programs” (March and Simon 1958) or organizational “genes” and “truces” (Nelson and Winter 1982), but they are also ongoing “effortful accomplishments,” which generate learning and change (Becker et al. 2005; Feldman 2000, 613; Pentland and Rueter 1994). For Feldman and Pentland (2003, 2022), routines emerge from the interplay of shared understandings, formal artifacts, and their enactment in practice, producing patterns of both stability and change. S&I's oversight routines were powerful in part because these elements, especially their artifacts, were shielded from public view.

A succession of reforms anchored by the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 opened up committee oversight activities (Zelizer 2004, 61, 128), amplifying the costs associated with visible congressional staff. “Congressmen, sensitive to charges of unnecessary spending and concerned that a congressional bureaucracy is highly visible, hesitated to vote themselves staff assistance,” (Fox and Hammond 1975, 113) explain. Open committee hearings incentivized posturing and partisan messaging (Schickler 2001, 209–212; 226–227). Framed by cultural antipathy (Balogh 2009; Jacobs et al. 2009) and a gathering populist distrust of expert professionalism (Barker et al. 2022; Brint 1994), committee staffing evolved into a salient electoral issue. The 1994 Republican Contract With America promised to reduce congressional bureaucracy by one third, a pledge that ultimately brought about the dissolution of S&I's alliance with GAO. By the 2010s, GAO typically detailed zero employees to S&I.<sup>22</sup> Its staffing model again enabled S&I's adaptation and resilience, shifting toward greater use of contract investigators, many retired from federal service.

### 3.3 | Anonymity

For Chairman Cannon, objectivity meant facts on paper. “The investigators receive written assignments and make written reports,” Cannon said of the S&I staff, “no member of the staff has ever been in my office” (Cannon 1943). A passion for anonymity came to define S&I's distinctive organizational character, reinforcing boundaries that insulated its authority as a source of nonpartisan, “at-a-distance” intelligence. Amid the “pervasive uncertainty” characterizing oversight of agency expenditures, Fenno (1966, 683) observes, “The agencies' dominant concern seems to be for a high degree of predictability or certainty in their Committee relations,” continuing, “Conversely, the manipulation of uncertainty is a key weapon in the hands of the Committee” (Fenno 1966, 273). One bureau chief is quoted:

They come down here and they are like the Gestapo. We don't know what they are doing. Then we go to the hearing and they present the evidence. We don't know what evidence they have against us or what information they have. It's a Russian-like inquisition. (Fenno 1966, 284)

Another official complains, “It's like a criminal investigation. You are confronted by evidence you can't see from investigators you don't know...” (Fenno 1966, 284). S&I's rotating cadre of faceless investigators shifted the balance of uncertainty, supplying evidence agency officials had not seen from investigators they did not know. From the beginning, S&I staff had a reputation for rooting out unspent or misused agency appropriations (Harris 1964). In 2011, S&I investigators were described making detailed reviews of agency spending in reports deemed vital to subcommittee members and staff, noting, “their findings that often form the basis of recommended areas to reduce spending, protect spending levels or provide an increase” (Stanton 2011). Yet because secrecy and impersonalism made the S&I staff virtually invisible, the question remains: What did S&I oversight actually look like?

Appendix S2 describes an expanding archive of S&I study titles, tasking directives, reports, and related documents. Although documenting only a small fraction of S&I studies, this sample nonetheless reveals their breadth across issues and specializations, from investigations into government land acquisitions and maintenance of military installations to investigations of EEOC, public welfare programs in DC, and pollution control. Collated sets of S&I reports for calendar years 1969 and 1972 were located, 36 reports total, permitting unique visibility into those years.<sup>23</sup> About half examine DOD programs, military installations, and land acquisitions. Others examined environmental and public health issues, trade, technology, social policy, and civil rights. One constant across reports is an authoritative, at-a-distance tone, often referencing third-person assessments of “the investigative staff.”

S&I's short-term staffing and culture of impersonalism buffered investigators from political distractions and enabled its changing mix of experts, but they also insulated its investigators from feedback. By long-standing policy, S&I reports were not altered after they were delivered. Anecdotally, some studies

deemed useless were simply filed in the trash. Some said its investigators fell out of step. One former contractor acknowledged S&I had developed a reputation for “make work,” noting some people thought, “What they were doing is taking care of old FBI guys” (Dennis 2006a). And little countered this narrative. Impersonalism prevented the S&I staff from developing an identity and reputation that reached beyond a few Hill offices. That was Cannon’s design. Cannon designed an instrument, not an institution. Consequently, amidst growing turbulence, S&I lacked bureaucratic resilience.

### 3.4 | Neutrality

For Chairman Cannon, FBI special agents were collectors of authoritative facts whose professional status transcended bureaucracy. “Does the gentleman charge that an FBI man is a bureaucrat?” Cannon once snapped when challenged on the House floor, “Nobody has ever charged that the Director or any of the staff or any of his investigators are bureaucrats” (Fenno 1966, 375).<sup>24</sup> Hoover’s FBI built a powerful institutional identity by owning facts that solved crimes, made arrests, and demonstrated the Bureau’s accomplishments (Wilson 1978, 171, 213; 1989, 62). Under Hoover, the Bureau’s unrivaled degree of jurisdictional autonomy integrated a well-specified professional role, a strong sense of mission, and a resonant public image (Carpenter 2002; Wilson 1989).<sup>25</sup> However, social and political events, punctuated by Hoover’s death and the Church and Pike Committee investigations (Johnson 2004, 2014), tarnished the Bureau’s reputation as a neutral arbiter of facts (Theoharis 2004; Theoharis and Cox 1988).

S&I’s alliance with GAO provided an infusion of neutral expertise at peak demand. More than a staffing resource, GAO became a normative model for studies deemed more rigorous. GAO’s embrace of program evaluation and management performance had expanded the scope and impact of its oversight activities. “After a half-century of near anonymity, the General Accounting Office—Congress’s fiscal FBI—has begun to wield enormous influence on the performance of government agencies,” the *Washington Post* reported in 1973 (Mouat 1973, K2).<sup>26</sup> GAO veterans remember a stint with S&I offered welcome contrasts. S&I was less hierarchical and more agile.

“It’s exactly the same kind of work GAO does, but quicker fuse,” one explains; while GAO was highly structured, “S&I was more intimate—you could just go in, talk to people, and get things done.” S&I also carried prestige and power. “Your access is much better than GAO...they get resisted all the time, and what GAO says is not as consequential. If you went back to the committee and said an agency wasn’t cooperating, that could have a budget effect immediately. They knew it, so agencies were more responsive—in some ways, they were afraid...these guys could do you some harm.” Unlike GAO’s published reports, S&I’s were seen only by committee members. “The report was delivered to the Committee... and that was all you ever heard of it,” one staffer remembers. Confidentiality generally promoted agency cooperation.

When S&I reports went public that equilibrium was disrupted, sometimes seriously annoying agency officials. S&I’s 1983

report critical of Interior’s leasing of government coal reserves was called “a poorly prepared and deceitful political document” that was “replete with factual errors” by an aide to Secretary Watt (Carruthers 1983; Russakoff 1983a, 1983c, 1983b). A 1984 S&I report critical of military readiness prompted Secretary of Defense Weinberger to call a news conference where he claimed it included “serious and potentially dangerous” misstatements (Halloran 1984). When a 1988 S&I report on the \$700 million VIABLE program leaked an Army official dismissed S&I investigators as “turkeys... hired to vindicate the prejudices of the staffers that sent them” (Bass 1988). Evolved to serve decentralized subcommittees, serving national agendas of powerful party caucuses increased pressure on S&I’s model of neutral competence.

In 1995, Republicans took the House for the first time in a generation, having pledged to cut congressional staff by one third. That promise meant a 39% reduction of GAO’s workforce (Kaiser 2007, 14). Service to S&I provided GAO no leverage. To the contrary, Kosar (2020, 138) sees, “political punishment meted out by Republicans,” because GAO had been too useful to Democratic committee chairs. The Gingrich Republicans nationalized congressional reform as a partisan project, portraying House Democrats as corrupt and demanding procedural changes that centralized power in party leaders, such as term limits on committee chairmen (Evans and Oleszek 1997). As co-operation between partisan committee and subcommittee leaders became harder to sustain, S&I’s model of partisan neutrality became increasingly untenable.

The single term of Appropriations Chairman Jerry Lewis brought partisan conflict over S&I to a dramatic public crescendo. In 2005, Republicans selected Lewis to succeed term-limited Chairman Bill Young through a “strenuous vetting process” during which rivals were made to “jump through hoops,” as one aide put it, pitching fellow partisans. His selection represented “a dramatic consolidation of power in the hands of a few key leadership types,” according to former committee staffer Scott Lilly. The once independent cardinals were now “safely under the sway of the House leadership” (Morgan 2005).

Chairman Lewis’s term got off to a contentious start when a memo authored by S&I Staff Director Robert Pearre leaked to the press. “I want impact! I want blood on the floor!” Pearre’s memo exclaimed, continuing:

The first rule is: There aren’t any ‘good’ programs anywhere in this government...They are all chock full of fraud, waste and abuse; frittering away millions in appropriated funds. Believe it, focus on it, find it, and report on it...Second rule is: All program managers should be considered liars...Never buy into their line of BS; never drink the Kool Aid they’re serving.

(Cohn 2005)

Committee clerk Frank Cushing seemed unfazed by the publication of an internal committee document with such overheated rhetoric, noting, “There was a feeling at the top level that some of the investigators were not pursuing their work with the intensity that has been traditional. It was meant as a wake-up call, a kick

in the pants” (Cohn 2005). One message was clear, Chairman Lewis would seek to expand S&I’s public profile.

In September 2005, Chairman Lewis announced that S&I would initiate a review of federal disaster assistance following Hurricane Katrina and the results would be made public.<sup>27</sup> A bold departure from S&I’s tradition, Lewis’s announcement elicited a swift rebuke from ranking member Obey. Labelling Lewis’s assertion, “simply wrong,” Obey’s press statement pointedly revisited a proposed S&I investigation of DOD blocked by Lewis the previous term (Cohn 2005; Obey 2005). S&I’s system of under-the-radar, bipartisan cooperation on committee tasking directives began to buckle under the stress of partisan acrimony.

Then, on October 16, 2006, Chairman Lewis dismissed the entire S&I staff en masse. Weeks before the electoral defeat that cost Republicans control of the House, Chairman Lewis’s action brought briefly into public view committee tensions that had been intensifying for years. Details surrounding this unprecedented decision remain ambiguous, but the public response from former S&I staff was not. “It reeks, it really does,” retired FBI agent and former S&I Director Joseph Stehr told *Congressional Quarterly*, “It just amazes me that after 60 some years, that just with the swipe of a pencil the thing could all go away.” Dismissing the S&I staff, “eviscerates the investigatory function. There is little if any ability to do any oversight,” another investigator told *CQ* (Dennis 2006b). Committee spokesman John Scofield shrugged off the controversy. “Frankly, the work we’ve been getting as of late has not been that good,” adding, “there is nothing sinister going on.” Scofield continued, “This is the time of year we decide to renew or not renew contracts and we are deciding how best to use our resources. We are doing it in full concert with the Democrats.” But even defense subcommittee Chairman Bill Young appeared puzzled, telling reporters he had no “inkling” before the announcement. S&I’s investigations save taxpayers, “billions of dollars of Defense budget savings,” each year Chairman Young countered, “I thought they did a good job...They really know what they are doing” (Dennis 2006b). Critics cast Lewis’s action as an attempt to obstruct independent oversight.<sup>28</sup> But Chairman Cannon designed the S&I staff to be easily dismissed. Without “opportunities to establish cordial relations,” Cannon (1943a) said S&I’s staff on rotation would act as, “new faces and new brooms—and they sweep clean.” In 2006, Chairman Lewis swept S&I clean.

In 2007, Committee Chairman David Obey undertook to rebuild S&I and, by 2011, Chairman Hal Rogers told *Roll Call* that S&I was “doing more with less,” still providing vital, “background information,” enabling subcommittee members, “to do their actual work” (Stanton 2011). During the 112th Congress (2011–2012), S&I completed 78 studies tasked by 10 of 12 Appropriations subcommittees with titles including the names of 10 cabinet and more than 20 independent agencies, bureaus, and other government organizations.<sup>29</sup> S&I completed more than 120 study titles during the 113th Congress (2013–2014), rivaling any period in half a century. But then S&I study titles declined dramatically under Republican Chairs Rogers and Ferlinghuysen and under Democrats Lowey and DeLauro. S&I staff dropped from 15 in 2011 to 3 in 2024. The committee reported only 2 S&I titles in the 118th (2023–2024). In December 2024, the remaining staff

were terminated. No decision was announced. Anecdotally, S&I’s bipartisan tasking directives and nonpartisan oversight were not front office priorities.

Mounting pressures tested Cannon’s pillars. No Publicity, which was always selective, proved difficult to sustain under partisan scrutiny. Staffing on Detail became less viable as transparency requirements and institutional conflict made it more difficult to “borrow” agency personnel. Anonymity, long a defining feature of S&I’s organizational character, lost its appeal among legislators operating in a more public and polarized environment. And Neutrality, the central pillar that bound the others together, came under increasing pressure as the committee’s bipartisan tasking process became more difficult to sustain.

As power in the House shifted from committees to party caucuses (Evans and Oleszek 1997; Schickler 2001), S&I’s institutional patrons, subcommittee chairmen and ranking members, were transformed into disciplined partisan agents. As partisan polarization intensified, reshaping incentives for majority and minority members (Lee 2013; Kriner and Schickler 2016; Parker and Dull 2009, 2013), securing the four bipartisan signatures required for S&I tasking letters became increasingly difficult. One former staffer explained: “When the two parties would no longer sign the directive, that’s the end of your investigation. It doesn’t start. There is no investigation.”

Fenno’s Appropriations Committee was an internally integrated social system built around norms of cooperation, expertise, and minimal partisanship, patterns he argued were contingent on conditions in the political environment. But when external partisan pressures intensify, committee-oriented norms are displaced by party demands (Fenno 1966, 1973). One observable implication of the requirement of bipartisan agreement for S&I tasking directives is that, as partisan conflict increases, tasking directives should decline. The next section examines this proposition.

## 4 | Analyzing S&I Studies by Appropriations Subcommittee

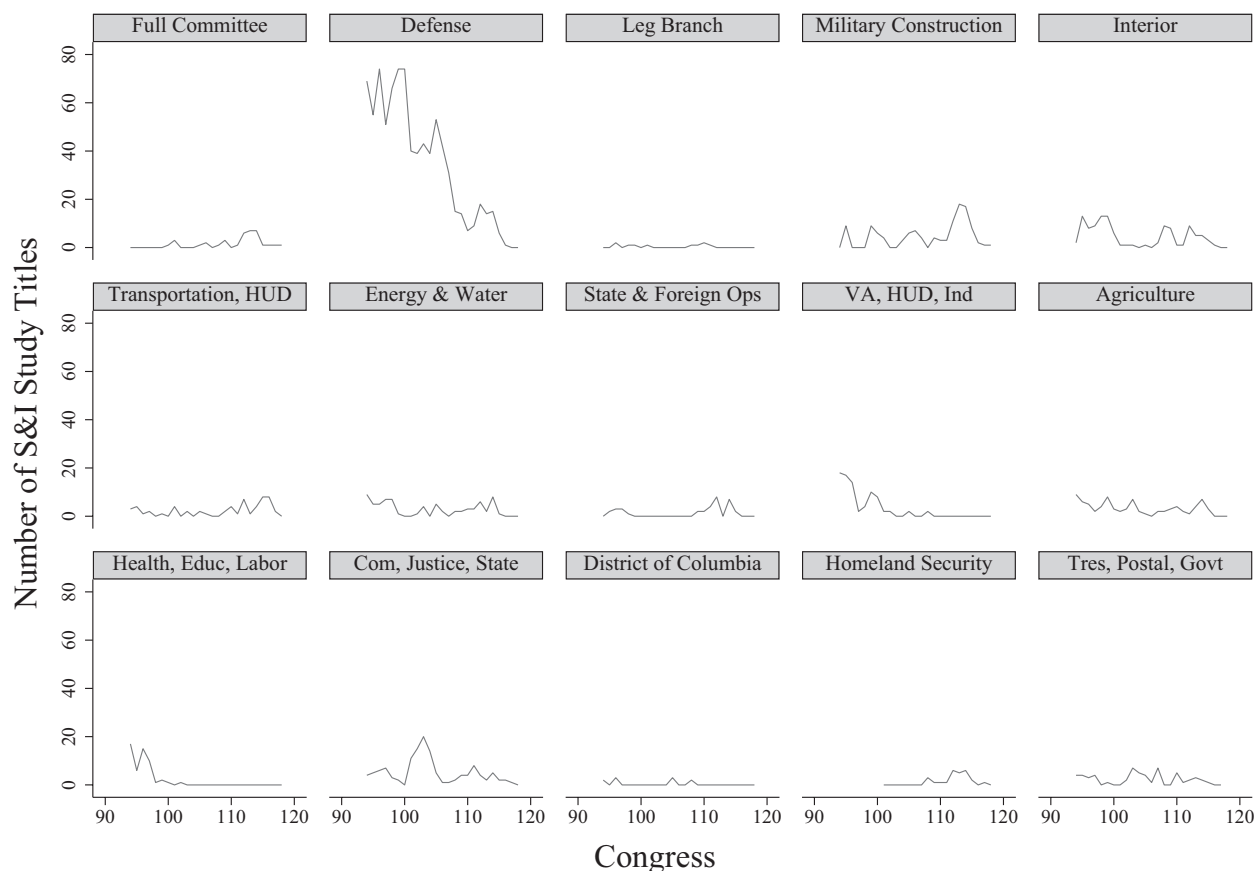
Did widening partisan divisions hinder bipartisan subcommittee cooperation on S&I tasking directives? Study titles published by the committee permit an empirical test.

### 4.1 | Model Variables and Expectations

Table 1 summarizes model variables. The dependent variable, *S&I Study Titles*, is a count of titles listed in the Report of Committee Activities by appropriations subcommittee.<sup>30</sup> *Congress* equals the congressional term from 94 to 118. Figure 3 depicts *Study Titles* by subcommittee by *Congress*, revealing that declining S&I activity varied across subcommittees. The Defense, Commerce, and Interior subcommittees initiated dozens of studies, for example, while the last S&I study tasked by the Health, Education, and Labor subcommittee was in 1993. These figures show a downward trajectory in S&I activity over time, with temporal variance captured in the analysis by the inclusion of Congress fixed effects.

**TABLE 1** | Variable definitions and descriptive statistics.

| Variable definitions and descriptive statistics |                  |                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                 | Mean (SD)        | Min-max         | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <i>S&amp;I Study Titles</i>                     | 4.69 (10.88)     | 0 to 74         | Count of S&I study titles listed in the Appropriations Report on Committee Activities, by subcommittee                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>Congress</i>                                 | 106.16 (7.18)    | 94 to 118       | Congressional term, count from 94th to 118th Congress                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <i>Congressional Era</i>                        | 2.10 (0.79)      | 1 to 3          | Categorical variable measuring three time periods (1976–1988 = 1, 1989–2006 = 2, 2007–2024 = 3)                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <i>Appropriations (z-score)</i>                 | -1.91e-07 (0.96) | -0.76 to 3.15   | Standard score of the total dollar amount (\$) of the appropriations bill passed by the House subcommittee                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <i>Appropriations vs. President</i>             | -0.05 (0.70)     | -12.09 to 1.21  | Percent difference between enacted subcommittee appropriations bill and president's budget request                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <i>Subcommittee Sessions</i>                    | 59.40 (55.97)    | 0 to 262        | Number of subcommittee hearing sessions (Jones et al. 2023)                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <i>Chair-Ranking Difference</i>                 | -0.51 (9.18)     | -35.89 to 27.61 | Index of subcommittee Chair and Ranking member disagreement: difference of first dimension DW NOMINATE ideology score (Lewis et al. 2025), difference of presidential support score (J. Lewis 2023), and percent of roll-call votes that disagree (J. B. Lewis et al. 2025) |
| <i>Divided</i>                                  | 0.60 (0.49)      | 0 to 1          | Divided party control between House and presidency = 1, Unified party control of House and presidency = 0                                                                                                                                                                   |

**FIGURE 3** | S&I investigations by requesting subcommittee, 1975–2024.

*Chair-Ranking Difference* is an index combining three variables measuring ideological and behavioral conflict between subcommittee chair and ranking members: *Chair-Ranking*

*Vote Disagreement* is the percent of all recorded roll-call votes when chair and ranking members' votes are different (Lewis et al. 2025); *Chair-Ranking Ideology Difference* is the absolute

difference of the first dimension DW NOMINATE ideology scores of the subcommittee chair and ranking member (Lewis et al. 2025); and *Chair-Ranking Presidential Support Difference* is the absolute difference of the presidential support scores of the subcommittee chair and ranking member (Lewis 2023). If a growing partisan divide prevented bipartisan subcommittee cooperation on S&I oversight then *Chair-Ranking Difference* should be associated with fewer *S&I Study Titles*.

*Divided* is a dichotomous variable equal to 1 when party control of the House and presidency is split. Divided control activates partisan incentives (Kornberg 2023; Kriner and Schickler 2016). Majority members may prioritize oversight for partisan signaling, whereas minority members may resist scrutiny of co-partisan executives (Eldes et al. 2024; Lee 2013; Parker and Dull 2013). *Divided* is therefore expected to be associated with fewer *S&I Study Titles*.

*Appropriations versus President* is the percent difference between the appropriations bill passed by the subcommittee and the president's budget request. If appropriations and oversight are complementary instruments of congressional control (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991) and S&I studies are used to identify cuts, reallocations, or conditions on spending, then greater divergence between the president's request and the subcommittee's bill should be positively associated with *S&I Study Titles*.<sup>31</sup>

*Appropriations (z-score)* measures the standardized (\$) amount of the subcommittee appropriations legislation reported in the Report of Committee Activities. All else equal, if legislators tend to allocate scarce oversight capacity toward more high-stakes programs (Aberbach 2001; Clinton et al. 2014; MacDonald and McGrath 2016), subcommittees with larger jurisdictions should positively correlate with S&I oversight.

*Subcommittee Sessions* is the number of subcommittee hearing sessions by congressional term, drawn from Policy Agendas Project Congressional Hearings data (Jones et al. 2023). If S&I studies operate as complementary oversight instruments (Kennedy 2023; Lewallen 2020; Selin and Moore 2023), hearings should be positively correlated with *S&I Study Titles*.

## 4.2 | Estimation

The data have a panel structure with a non-negative count dependent variable characterized by overdispersion. Models are therefore estimated using conditional fixed-effects negative binomial regression. Fixed effects for 13 subcommittees and 24 congressional terms absorb cross-sectional and temporal heterogeneity, so the estimates analyze within-subcommittee variation over time. Standard errors are clustered by subcommittee.

## 4.3 | Model Results

Table 2 reports model results. *Chair-Ranking Difference* is negative as expected in Model 1, but the effect is small and short of statistical significance. *Divided* is associated with a large, negative, statistically significant effect. Although aggregate levels of S&I activity are similar across unified and divided congress, within-subcommittee comparisons over time indicate divided government is associated with substantially fewer *S&I Study Titles*.

Covariates *Appropriations versus President* and *Appropriations (z-score)* are positive as expected but not statistically significant when fixed effects are included. *Subcommittee Sessions* is positively associated with *S&I Study Titles*, as anticipated, meaning S&I's oversight out of sight correlated with public facing oversight activities. Congress fixed effects, which are reported in the appendix, reflect higher S&I activity early in the time series and increasingly negative effects in later terms, mirroring the downward trajectory of *S&I Study Titles* in Figures 1 and 3.

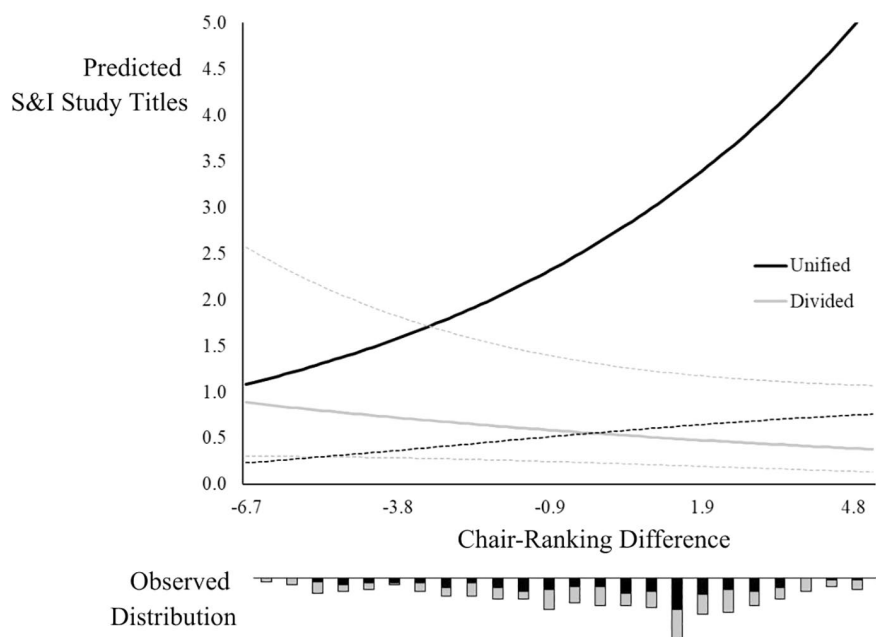
Model 2 incorporates *Difference*  $\times$  *Divided*, an interaction between *Chair-Ranking Difference* and *Divided Government* testing the interplay between subcommittee partisan disagreement and partisan alignment of the House and the presidency. *Chair-Ranking Difference* becomes positive and significant when the interaction term is included. During periods of unified party control, differences between subcommittee chair and ranking members are positively associated with *Study Titles*, but that

**TABLE 2** | Analyzing S&I study titles, 1975–2024.

| Analyzing S&I study titles by subcommittee, 95th–118th Congress (1975–2024) |                          |                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
|                                                                             | Model 1 coefficient (SE) | Model 2 coefficient (SE) |
| <i>Appropriations (z-score)</i>                                             | 0.109 (0.116)            | 0.106 (0.116)            |
| <i>Appropriations Difference</i>                                            | 0.451 (0.351)            | 0.409 (0.355)            |
| <i>Subcommittee Sessions</i>                                                | 0.00449** (0.00198)      | 0.00405** (0.00196)      |
| <i>Chair-Ranking Difference</i>                                             | −0.0019 (0.0426)         | 0.132* (0.074)           |
| <i>Divided Government</i>                                                   | −1.289** (0.634)         | −1.564** (0.632)         |
| <i>Interaction: Difference <math>\times</math> Divided</i>                  | —                        | −0.204** (0.092)         |
| <i>N</i>                                                                    | 256                      | 256                      |
| Log Likelihood                                                              | −524.01                  | −521.58                  |

Note: Dependent variable: *S&I Study Titles*. Conditional negative binomial estimates with Congress and subcommittee fixed effects. Groups = 13 House Appropriations subcommittees. Observations per group = 9–23. Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ .



**FIGURE 4** | Predicted S&I study titles by subcommittee chair-ranking difference, unified vs. divided government.

effect is overtaken when partisan control is divided. *Divided* and the interaction term *Difference*  $\times$  *Divided* are both significant and negative. *Appropriations* (z-score) and *Appropriations* versus *President* remain positive but nonsignificant. *Subcommittee Sessions* again produce a small but statistically significant positive effect, meaning public-facing subcommittee hearings and under-the-radar S&I investigations are correlated. Congress fixed effects again reflect declining S&I oversight over time.

Figure 4 plots predicted *S&I Study Titles* by *Chair-Ranking Difference* under unified and divided partisan control of the House and the presidency, holding other covariates at observed means. The solid black line representing unified government increases steadily across the range of disagreement, rising from approximately 1 at the low end of the distribution to approximately 5 predicted study titles at the highest values. The solid gray line (divided government) slopes downward, declining from just under 1 predicted study title at lower levels of disagreement to below 0.5 at the upper end of the range. Dashed lines indicate the confidence intervals. These intervals widen at higher levels of disagreement, particularly for unified government, and overlap across much of the observed range, even as the predicted values diverge. The lower panel displays the observed distribution of chair-ranking member differences. The distribution spans the full range shown in the upper panel, with observations for unified government represented by black bars and divided government by gray bars. Although the confidence intervals overlap across much of the range, the divergence of predicted values is consistent with recent scholarship, including contributions to this special issue, emphasizing the increasingly public character of congressional oversight.

## 5 | Conclusion

The House Appropriations Committee Surveys & Investigations staff was quietly reorganized out of existence in December 2024.

A staff institution that once played a vital role in congressional oversight is gone. Why? And what, if anything, has been lost?

Using evidence drawn from committee reports, archival documents, and research interviews, this article reconstructs the development and decline of S&I in search of explanations. Section 2 described Chairman Cannon's (1943) design for producing the "sound information" needed by congressional appropriations, built on four pillars: S&I staff were to be invisible, ad hoc, at-a-distance, and nonpartisan. Section 3 showed how these pillars shaped S&I's growth and institutionalization. Created to produce no publicity, S&I's work remained largely invisible, yet noteworthy exceptions reveal it as a powerful latent factor in committee oversight. In 1947, Chairman Taber and Director Lee demonstrated S&I's capacity for public communication; by 2006, Chairman Lewis found that capacity more difficult to leverage. Between these moments, S&I conducted decades of high-stakes, low-visibility investigations. Cannon designed S&I for flexible staffing and used it to secure a decades-long alliance with Hoover's FBI. Impersonalism came to define S&I's character and reputation, but the same culture of facelessness and detachment ultimately reduced its institutional resilience as its political environment changed. The system of bipartisan tasking directives, Cannon's central mechanism for ensuring nonpartisan investigations, arguably became its undoing.

Section 4 tests the hypothesis that growing partisan divisions contributed to the decline of S&I studies using time-series analysis of *S&I Study Titles* across House Appropriations subcommittees from 1975 to 2024. Results suggest shifting partisan alignments conditioned when subcommittees initiated S&I oversight. Periods of divided government are associated with fewer *S&I Study Titles* overall, signaling reduced bipartisan cooperation on S&I tasking directives. Subcommittee partisan divisions, measured by *Chair-Ranking Difference*, show that while under unified government, greater disagreement is

associated with more S&I oversight; under divided government, disagreement is associated with significantly fewer S&I studies. Limitations of the study abound. *S&I Study Titles* are visible but incomplete, and it is clear at least some classified studies were omitted. The time series is also left-truncated, so the models capture late S&I rather than its formative decades. Using a time-series design with many potentially confounding factors, misspecification and omitted variables remain valid concerns. But the quantitative results provide further evidence that partisanship was a factor in S&I's decline.

The House Appropriations Committee is a monument of institutional design built on jurisdictional turf defined by bargaining under uncertainty. The history of the appropriations committees is governed by layering and fragmenting institutional orders, as appropriators wielded authority as agents of the House chamber as a whole, leaders, parties, committees, and peers based on a reputation for expert discipline (Stith 1988). Appropriations Chairman Cannon and his successors built a bulwark of authoritative facts protecting taxpayers, tightening Congress's purse string, and maintaining the integrity of the House as an institution. Their institutional autonomy was inseparable from a reputation for expert budgetary discipline, a reputational resource that underwrote their authority and influence (Wilson 1989; Carpenter 2002). This article reconstructs an overlooked chapter in that story and in the history of congressional oversight. Recovering this history is the study's empirical contribution. The next section turns to its methodological implications.

## 5.1 | Oversight Out of Sight

Why does congressional oversight so often appear weak or ineffective? McCubbins and Schwartz's (1984), "Oversight Overlooked," answers that timeless question with an intuitive model and a durable metaphor, contrasting centralized police patrol surveillance with decentralized, incentive-based fire alarms as instruments for reducing asymmetric information between principals and agents (Miller 2005). "Oversight Overlooked" presented both a model of oversight and a model for how congressional oversight should be studied, an approach taken up in generative research programs and undergraduate government classes. Contrasting police patrols and fire alarms became the textbook model (= Brass et al. 2026).<sup>32</sup>

Models clarify. But they also create blind spots. McCubbins and Schwartz's (1984) distinction between police patrols and fire alarms remains a useful heuristic for understanding congressional oversight. S&I's history suggests what can be gained by placing model-building in conversation with modes of explanation drawn by sociology and history. The resilience and ultimately the decline of the S&I staff followed from its function as neither police patrol nor fire alarm. S&I performed oversight out of sight. Its investigations were unobserved by institutional design. S&I's historical narratives are used here to build explanations by tracing sequences of events in context (Abbott 2001, 129–160; Pentland 1999). Four narrative heuristics drawn from Abbott's (2004, 146) *Methods of Discovery* organize events and stories from S&I's development: situating abstracted explanations; infusing models with movement; illuminating the overlooked and unexpected; and inviting counterfactual reasoning.

First, S&I's history of oversight out of sight illuminates the overlooked and reveals unexpected consequences. Designed in 1943 to produce confidential facts that could not be politicized, S&I investigators in 1947 produced the Lee List, later implicated in among the most notorious congressional lies of the 20th Century. A powerful capacity left latent under decades of Democratic dominance became manifest when controlled by House Republicans opposing a Democratic administration. Among students of Congress, Ogul's (1976) distinction between formal and latent equates latent with informal. S&I reports were formal but deliberately unobserved, a latent function (Merton 1968, 116–120). Fenno's (1966, 1973) appropriators empowered by anonymous staff and McCubbins and Schwartz's (1984) fire alarm model likewise turn on functionalist reasoning about latent capacities. Although in 1943 Cannon said of S&I it, "cannot be used for the publicizing or aggrandizement of the chairman or any member of the committee," its record reveals an ironic history of invisibility with exceptions.<sup>33</sup>

The contributions to this special issue demonstrate how the Levin Center's Congressional Oversight Records Database (CORD) enriches the empirical study of congressional oversight. CORD data are used to analyze how oversight reports structure legislative activity (Theriault), contribute to policy development through committee investigations (Leavitt), and shape the content of congressional knowledge claims (Lowande and Weiss), whereas also identifying selection effects in observable oversight data (Kim, Kinnard, and Patty). Appropriations Committee Reports of Committee Activities included in the CORD are complemented in this article with additional evidence to illuminate a forgotten chapter in the history of congressional oversight. The S&I reports surfaced by this study fit criteria for inclusion in the CORD, but are omitted because they were not made publicly available. S&I reports constitute data that are missing by design. Inferences from observable artifacts should be tempered by what is unobserved, latent, and missing. Recent scholarship on oversight as performance (Chafetz 2020; Kornberg 2023) invites reflection on what is meant to be seen and unseen.

Second, narrative infuses models with movement. Stories of S&I's evolution from a few FBI agents on loan to a GAO-infused oversight juggernaut show oversight institutions are not static but processual and changing. S&I was embodied and empowered by routines anchored in formal artifacts. S&I's tasking directives and reports functioned as "informally embedded formality," that appropriators did not need to "go behind," coordinating a dense ecology of informal expertise (Stinchcombe 2001). Yet S&I's design isolated its performance and, in the long run, constrained its adaptive capacity as House institutions were transformed through reforms of procedures, committees, and party leadership (Evans and Oleszek 1997). This emphasis on sequences of events and evolving institutional arrangements aligns with approaches that center the ordering and timing of events and actor interaction in shaping change over time (Abbott 2001).

Third, S&I's history situates oversight in historical context. Stories of S&I's development and decline place congressional oversight institutions in time, embedding the politics of delegation and monitoring in the contingencies of 20th century state-building (Carpenter 2002; Dodd and Schott 1979; Wilson 1989).

As expanding government and social change transformed oversight politics, S&I's ethic of anonymity became a defining character, commitments that both enabled its distinct competence and bound it to particular practices, limiting its capacity to adapt when environments shifted.<sup>34</sup> As the locus of congressional activity shifted toward bureaucratic "fixit services" (Fiorina 1989, 45) and problem-focused, message-oriented hearings (Lewallen et al. 2024, 2016), S&I's model of invisible investigations may have fallen out of fit with dominant incentives. S&I's ethic of anonymity became both a source of distinctive competence and a constraint. Practices that once enhanced its authority limited its ability to adapt as institutional and political conditions changed. S&I's historically situated development shows how institutional practices are constituted through relationships that are contingent and shifting.

Finally, S&I's history invites counterfactual reflection. Aaron Stockham's account of the alliance between Cannon and Hoover challenges a dominant historiography that locates Hoover's power primarily in the expansion of the Cold War executive. As Stockham shows, this focus overlooks the role of congressional institutions, and in particular the relationship between the FBI and the House Appropriations Committee (Stockham 2013, 501). Without the alliance embodied in S&I, what might have been the implications for Hoover's unrivaled consolidation of bureaucratic autonomy?

A second counterfactual follows for the study of congressional oversight. How might the field have developed if its dominant analytic methods had been in closer conversation with Fenno's organizational understanding of Congress, employing approaches attentive to events, sequences, and institutional development over time? Placing these perspectives in dialogue holds the promise of a richer and more relevant account of oversight as an institutional inheritance requiring active stewardship (Bean 2018). Recognizing and sustaining these capacities remains a vital part of the work of legislative studies at a moment of great uncertainty about the future of congressional institutions.

## Acknowledgments

This article is dedicated to the memory of Elise Bean. Thank you to Clint Brass, Mark Mereand, Jim McConkie, Aaron Stockham, Michael Evans, Kevin Kosar, Dan Schuman, Jay Lerner, Paul Carver, Chris Piper, Austin Bussing, Mark Weiss, Joshua Kennedy, Grace Moore, Sean Theriault, John Patty, Jason MacDonald, Tim Nokken, Larry Evans, Matthew Green, David King, David Parker, Patrick Roberts, Karen Hult, Jaime Kucinskis, Drennan Dudley, Eloise Pasachoff, Douglas Pasternak, John Medeiros, Ed Hollandsworth, e. j. dionne, and Rachel Girshick. Katherine Stigers assisted with figures. Aditya Phutane replicated and helped refine the statistical analysis. I am especially grateful to the anonymous staffers who generously shared their time and knowledge of S&I. Earlier drafts were presented at the 2024 Levin Center CORD Workshop, the 2024 American Political Science Association meeting, the 2025 Midwest Political Science Association meeting, and the 2025 Conference on Political Polarization and Its Policy Impacts at the University of Maryland.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Member descriptions quoted in Fenno (1966, 202; 1973, 3; 196–197).
- <sup>2</sup> Fenno (1966, 105–107) lists verbs used by members to illustrate the committee's budgeting-cutting zeal, such as: cut, carve, slice, prune, whittle, squeeze, wring, trim, lop off, chop, slash, pare, shave, fry, and whack.
- <sup>3</sup> This article contributes to longstanding empirical research highlighting congressional staff as the "invisible force" (Dittmar 2023; Fox and Hammond 1977; Ommundsen 2023) and staff expertise as a factor in committee influence (Curry 2019; Fagan and McGee 2022; Fong et al. 2025; LaPira et al. 2021; Romzek and Utter 1997).
- <sup>4</sup> Appendix S4 describes research interviews.
- <sup>5</sup> King (1997, 96–97) describes Chairman Cannon's role in the development of the House parliamentarian. Cannon famously authored a text on parliamentary procedure. Fenno (1966, 125) quotes one member, "He wrote the book."
- <sup>6</sup> Appendix S5 includes a chronological timeline.
- <sup>7</sup> Boston Tax Office Hit by House Group (1947), Police Inquiry (1947), Treasury-P.O. Bill Passed Despite Threat (1948) and Strand (1947).
- <sup>8</sup> Congressional Record, 81 (1950) H6111.
- <sup>9</sup> The Tydings Committee report (1950) compares McCarthy's list and the Lee list side by side (S1815–1818, 1771–1809). Accounts of the Lee list include: (Buckley 1999, 122; Evans 2007; Fried 1976; Friendly 1950; Griffith 1987; Haynes 2007; R. E. Lee 1997; Reeves 1982; Hove 2011). Johnson (2023, 23) notes that it was through the Lee list that McCarthy identified the two cases of homosexuality mentioned in his Senate speech, helping to ignite the "lavender scare," which ultimately rooted out many more homosexuals than subversives from government service.
- <sup>10</sup> In 1950, Director Lee and his wife Rex Lee worked with McCarthy's research assistant and future wife Jean Kerr on a shadow campaign that defeated McCarthy critic Senator Millard Tydings (R. E. Lee 1997; Reeves 1982; Senate Committee on Rules and Administration 1951, 42). Rex Lee was Jean Kerr's matron of honor when she and Senator McCarthy wed in 1953.
- <sup>11</sup> Hill Republicans lobbied to have Lee appointed GAO's Associate Comptroller General, the position he actually sought, but he was passed over and Eisenhower recess-appointed him to the FCC instead.
- <sup>12</sup> Brownlow (1958, 469), concludes, "The prime requisite of successful administration of any large governmental unit is the devotion and dedication of anonymous persons."
- <sup>13</sup> S&I's 1943 creation signifies HAC's power to "borrow" staff from agencies over which they possessed significant leverage. Dickinson (1999, 64–67) describes how FDR's White House likewise built capacity from agency experts. In 1943, two-thirds of White House staff were agency employees serving on detail.
- <sup>14</sup> In 1943, Committee Republican Representative Ben Jensen advocated for establishing permanent staff. In 1947, under Republican Chairman Taber the committee adopted Jensen's (1943) proposal establishing a permanent subcommittee staff (U.S. House of Representatives 1943). Debate over whether S&I staff should be made permanent remained a point of sustained partisan controversy (Fenno 1966, 107, 154–155; Harris 1964, 81–82).
- <sup>15</sup> Taber recruited about 40 investigators in the 80th and 75 in the 83rd Congress (Harris 1964, 81).
- <sup>16</sup> Figures are based on semiannual committee staffing reports included in the *Congressional Record* under the Legislative Reorganization Act. A 1970 analysis of S&I staff over a 6 month period found three quarters of S&I detailees were FBI special agents. The analysis found S&I detailees included: 32 FBI agents, 3 NASA, 2 Army Audit Agency, and

one each from CIA, USDA, Commerce, Transportation, Veterans, and the Defense Contract Audit Agency (FBI Agents Investigate for House Committee 1971).

<sup>17</sup> Appendix S1: Table S1 lists House Surveys and Investigations Staff Directors.

<sup>18</sup> 1971 Congressional Quarterly (1971, 62) and FBI Agents Investigate for House Committee (1971).

<sup>19</sup> Analysis of GAO's *Annual Report of the Comptroller General*. Volume 2 (1971–2012).

<sup>20</sup> GAO's oversight responsibilities were expanded by the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970, which gave it authority to "review and analyze the results of government programs and activities" (Mosher 1979, 176). By 1980, half of GAO reports consisted of program evaluations and policy analyses; about 30% were management studies; and only 7% consisted of financial auditing (Mosher 1984, 145–146).

<sup>21</sup> One former staffer remembers the practice was discontinued. "When I left, there were no badges issued. It would have been considered counterproductive, to put it diplomatically." The S&I staff concluded agencies would be "more forthcoming if they don't think the cops are there."

<sup>22</sup> Analysis of GAO's *Annual Report of the Comptroller General*. Volume 2 (1971–2012).

<sup>23</sup> Documents were accessed at the National Archives Center for Legislative Archives in Washington, DC.

<sup>24</sup> Cannon separately employed the metaphor of a judge in describing the professionalism of both FBI agents and HAC members (Fenno 1966, 375; Fenno 1973, 166).

<sup>25</sup> The mythologies of apolitical objectivity and neutral competence that permeated 20th Century government administration (Dickinson and Rudalevige 2004; Portillo et al. 2022; Sweeting and Haupt 2024; West 2005) bound together organizational commitments and bureaucratic turf (J. Q. Wilson 1989, 167–168).

<sup>26</sup> Insulated from political pressure by the CG's fixed term, GAO developed a reputation for nonpartisan, fact-based reports (Kennedy 2023). Mosher's (1984) comparison of GAO and OMB regarding the organizational consequences of the CG's fixed term is consistent with recent efforts to conceptualize agency independence (Selin 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Its Katrina investigation provoked a rare public dispute over S&I access to agency information. The Committee's FY2007 DHS appropriations report alleges DHS's General Counsel had obstructed S&I's study, warning continued "obfuscation" could have consequences for the office's budget (H. Rep. 109–476, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> S&I investigators probing Capitol security contracts claimed Speaker Hastert's chief counsel, "hindered" a probe into alleged "bid-rigging and kickbacks" on Capitol Hill security, engaged in "screaming matches," and ultimately ordered them to "get out of there by sundown" (CREW 2006; Dennis 2006b; Lilly 2006).

<sup>29</sup> About 15 permanent S&I staff accounted for almost 10% of Appropriations Committee staff salaries during the 112th Congress (U.S. House Appropriations Committee 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Changing subcommittee names and jurisdictions, particularly subcommittee reorganizations during the 108th–110th Congress, required adjustments (Tollestrup 2013). Policy Agendas Project subcommittee codes were used (Jones et al. 2023).

<sup>31</sup> Cha and Rogowski (2025) show divergence from presidential requests increases as appropriations subcommittees become more ideologically distant from the president.

<sup>32</sup> In hindsight, however, it is hard to miss the normative frame. What looks like abdication is reinterpreted as rational outsourcing to third parties. McCubbins (1999) made clear his skepticism of abdicationist

warnings of congressional decline. Yet warnings of institutional erosion today seem prescient (Glastris and Edwards 2014; LaPira et al. 2021).

<sup>33</sup> Nelson, drawing on Niebuhr, describes historical irony as an "apparently fortuitous incongruity," between intentions and outcomes that is not fortuitous at all but is caused by a "hidden relationship" (Nelson 1982, 749; Niebuhr 1952).

<sup>34</sup> On organizational character, see Khademian (2002), Selznick (1957), Wilson (1989).

## References

- Abbott, A. 1988. *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*. University of Chicago Press.
- Abbott, A. 2001. *Time Matters: On Theory and Method*. University of Chicago Press.
- Abbott, A. 2004. *Methods of Discovery: Heuristics for the Social Sciences*. University of Chicago Press.
- Abbott, A. 2016. *Processual Sociology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Aberbach, J. D. 2001. *Keeping a Watchful Eye: The Politics of Congressional Oversight*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Ash, R. H. n.d. "The Surveys and Investigations Staff."
- Balogh, B. 2009. *A Government Out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth-Century America*. Cambridge University Press.
- Barker, D. C., R. Detamble, and M. Marietta. 2022. "Intellectualism, Anti-Intellectualism, and Epistemic Hubris in Red and Blue America." *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 1: 38–53.
- Bass, B. 1988. "Secret VIABLE Report Has Army Brass Nervous. Army's Vertical Installation Automation Baseline." *Government Computer News*, August 15. 7 (17).
- Bean, E. J. 2018. *Financial Exposure: Carl Levin's Senate Investigations Into Finance and Tax Abuse*. Springer International Publishing.
- Becker, M. C. 2025. "Mechanisms of Organizational Imprinting." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 70, no. 1: 119–156.
- Becker, M. C., P. Salvatore, and F. Zirpoli. 2005. "Applying Organizational Routines in Analyzing Organizations: Methodological Issues and Analytical Contributions." Paper presented at the Second Routines Workshop, Sophia Antipolis, France, January.
- Brass, C. T., I. A. Brudnick, M. P. Carey, et al. 2026. *Congressional Oversight Manual*. CRS Report RL30240. Congressional Research Service. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL30240>.
- Brint, S. 1994. *In an Age of Experts: The Changing Roles of Professionals in Politics and Public Life*. Princeton University Press.
- Brownlow, L. 1958. *A Passion for Anonymity: The Autobiography of Louis Brownlow*. University of Chicago Press.
- Brudnick, I. A. 2014. "Congressional Staffing: The Continuity of Change and Reform." In *The Evolving Congress*, 145–162. S. Prt. 113–30. 113th Cong., 2nd sess. U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Buckley, W. F. 1999. *The Redhunter: A Novel Based on The Life of Senator Joe McCarthy*. Little Brown and Company.
- Cannon, C. 1943. "Statement of Rep. Clarence Cannon." Proceedings and Debates of the 78th Congress: First Session; Volume 89—Part 8, December 21, 1943, 10994–10996.
- Carpenter, D. P. 2002. *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862–1928*. Princeton University Press.
- Carruthers, G. E. 1983. "Statement of Garrey E. Carruthers, Assistant Secretary, Land and Water Resources, Department of Interior, Before

- House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior." Collection Sen. H. John Heinz III, Carnegie Mellon University Digital Collections.
- Cha, J., and J. Rogowski. 2025. "Mechanisms of Checks and Balances: Appropriations, Congressional Committees, and Interbranch Conflict." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 3: e70028. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lsq.70028>.
- Chafetz, J. 2020. "Congressional Overspeech." *Fordham Law Review* 89: 529.
- Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW). 2006. "CREW Sends Letter to AG Asking for Investigation Into Hastert's Blocking Approps Probe Into Illegalities Surrounding Hill Security Upgrades."
- Clinton, J. D., D. E. Lewis, and J. L. Selin. 2014. "Influencing the Bureaucracy: The Irony of Congressional Oversight." *American Journal of Political Science (Oxford)* 58, no. 2: 387–401.
- Cohn, P. 2005. "Memo: Prober Wants 'Blood On Floor' Sees Fed Program Managers as 'Liars'." *National Journal Congress Daily*.
- Congressional Quarterly. 1971. "F.B.I. Agents Vital to a House Panel: Appropriations Unit Uses 3 Full Time for Inquiries." *New York Times*, April 25, 62.
- Curry, J. M. 2019. "Knowledge, Expertise, and Committee Power in the Contemporary Congress." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 2: 203–237.
- Dennis, S. 2006a. "Investigators Say Speaker's Aide Hindered Inquiry of Hill Security Contracts." *CQ Today*, October 28.
- Dennis, S. T. 2006b. "House Appropriations Committee Dismisses 60 Investigators." *Congressional Quarterly*, October 15.
- Dickinson, M. J. 1999. *Bitter Harvest: FDR, Presidential Power and the Growth of the Presidential Branch*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dickinson, M. J., and A. Rudalevige. 2004. "Presidents, Responsiveness, and Competence: Revisiting the 'Golden Age' at the Bureau of the Budget." *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 4: 633–654.
- Dittmar, K. 2023. "Invisible Forces: Gender, Race, and Congressional Staff." *Politics, Groups and Identities* 11, no. 1: 1–17.
- Dodd, L. C., and R. L. Schott. 1979. *Congress and the Administrative State*. Wiley.
- Dvorchak, R. 1992. "Beleaguered FEMA Finds Itself in the Eye of the Storm—Again." *The Associate Press*, September 12.
- Eldes, A., C. Fong, and K. Lowande. 2024. "Information and Confrontation in Legislative Oversight." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 2: 227–256.
- Evans, C. L., and W. J. Oleszek. 1997. *Congress Under Fire*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Evans, M. S. 2007. *Blacklisted by History: The Untold Story of Senator Joe McCarthy and His Fight against America's Enemies*. Crown Forum.
- Fagan, E. J., and Z. A. McGee. 2022. "Problem Solving and the Demand for Expert Information in Congress." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 1: 53–77.
- Feldman, M. S. 2000. "Organizational routines as a source of continuous change." *Organization Science* 11, no. 6: 611–629.
- Feldman, M. S., and B. T. Pentland. 2003. "Reconceptualizing Organizational Routines as a Source of Flexibility and Change." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 48, no. 1: 94–118.
- Feldman, M. S., and B. T. Pentland. 2022. "Routine Dynamics: Toward a Critical Conversation." *Strategic Organization* 20, no. 4: 846–859.
- Fenno, R. F. 1966. *The Power of the Purse: Appropriations Politics in Congress*. Little, Brown.
- Fenno, R. F. 1973. *Congressmen in Committees*. Little, Brown.
- Fiorina, M. P. 1989. *Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establishment*. 2nd ed. Yale University Press.
- Fong, C., K. Lowande, and A. Rauh. 2025. "Expertise Acquisition in Congress." *American Journal of Political Science* 69, no. 1: 5–18.
- Fox, H. W., and S. W. Hammond. 1977. *Congressional Staffs: The Invisible Force in American Lawmaking*. Free Press.
- Fried, R. M. 1976. *Men against McCarthy*. Columbia University Press.
- Friendly, Alfred. 1950. "The Noble Crusade of Senator McCarthy." *Harper's Magazine*, August 1. 34.
- Glastris, P., and H. S. Edwards. 2014. *The Big Lobotomy: How Republicans Made Congress Stupid*. Washington Monthly. <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2014/06/09/the-big-lobotomy/>.
- Griffith, R. 1987. *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Halloran, R. 1984. "Weinberger Attacks House Study of Military: Weinberger Says Report by Panel On Readiness Threatens Security." *New York Times* July 24.
- Harris, J. P. 1964. *Congressional Control of Administration*. Brookings Institution.
- Haynes, J. E. 2007. *Senator Joseph McCarthy's Lists and Venona*. John Earl Haynes. April. <https://www.johnearlhaynes.org/page62.html>.
- Henderson, C. S. 1964. "Congressman John Taber of Auburn: Politics and Federal Appropriations, 1923–1962." Doctoral Dissertation, Department of History, Duke University.
- Hove, M. T. 2011. *History of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security of the United States Department of State*. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Diplomatic Security. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/176703.pdf>.
- Jacobs, M., W. J. Novak, and J. E. Zelizer. 2009. *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History*. Princeton University Press.
- Johnson, D. K. 2023. *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*. University of Chicago Press.
- Johnson, L. K. 2004. "Congressional Supervision of America's Secret Agencies: The Experience and Legacy of the Church Committee." *Public Administration Review* 64, no. 1: 3–14.
- Johnson, L. K. 2014. "Intelligence Shocks, Media Coverage, and Congressional Accountability, 1947–2012." *Journal of Intelligence History* 13, no. 1: 1–21.
- Jones, B. D., F. R. Baumgartner, S. M. Theriault, D. A. Epp, C. Lee, and M. E. Sullivan. 2023. "Policy Agendas Project: Congressional Hearings."
- Kaiser, F. M. 2007. "Legislative Branch Staffing, 1954–2007." CRS. R40056. October 15.
- Kennedy, J. B. 2023. "Always Watchful: Political Context and Congressional Oversight Through the Government Accountability Office." *Congress and the Presidency* 50, no. 3: 342–360.
- Khademian, A. M. 2002. *Working With Culture*. CQ Press.
- Kiewiet, D. R., and M. D. McCubbins. 1991. *The Logic of Delegation*. University of Chicago Press.
- King, D. C. 1997. *Turf Wars How Congressional Committees Claim Jurisdiction*. American Politics and Political Economy. University of Chicago Press.
- Kingdon, J. W. 1966. "A House Appropriations Subcommittee: Influences on Budgetary Decisions." *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 47, no. 1: 68–78.
- Kohler, E. L. 1945. "Expenditure Controls in the United States Government." *Accounting Review* 20, no. 1: 31–44.
- Kornberg, M. 2023. *Inside Congressional Committees: Function and Dysfunction in the Legislative Process*. Columbia University Press.

- Kosar, K. R. 2020. "Legislative Branch Support Agencies: What They Are, What They Do, and Their Uneasy Position in Our System of Government." In *Congress Overwhelmed: The Decline in Congressional Capacity and Prospects for Reform*, edited by T. M. LaPira, L. Drutman, and K. R. Kosar. University of Chicago Press.
- Kotz, N., and M. Mintz. 1971. "Pesticides Firms Aided Whitten Book." *The Washington Post*, March 14, 1971.
- Kriner, D. L., and E. Schickler. 2016. *Investigating the President*. Princeton University Press.
- LaPira, T., L. Drutman, and K. Kosar, eds. 2021. *Congress Overwhelmed*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lash, J., D. Sheridan, K. Gillman, et al. 1984. "Reagan Administration's Attack on the Environment." Pantheon Books.
- Lee, F. E. 2013. "Presidents and Party Teams: The Politics of Debt Limits and Executive Oversight, 2001–2013." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (Washington) 43, no. 4: 775–791.
- Lee, R. E. 1997. *In the Public Interest: The Life of Robert Emmet Lee From the FBI to the FCC*. University Press of America.
- Levy, C. 1975. "Minority Aid Unit Assailed: Hill Probers Find OMBE 'Paralyzed' Minority Business Aid Unit 'Paralyzed,' Hill Probers Say." *The Washington Post*, May 27.
- Lewallen, J. 2020. *Committees and the Decline of Lawmaking*. University of Michigan Press.
- Lewallen, J., J. Y. Park, and S. M. Theriault. 2024. "The Politics of Problems Versus Solutions." *Policy Studies Journal* 52, no. 3: 515–531.
- Lewallen, J., S. M. Theriault, and B. D. Jones. 2016. "Congressional Dysfunction: An Information Processing Perspective." *Regulation & Governance* (Evanston) 10, no. 2: 179–190.
- Lewis, J. 2023. "Presidential Support Scores: Calculating Presidential Support Scores from Vote view."
- Lewis, J. B., K. Poole, H. Rosenthal, A. Boche, A. Rudkin, and L. Sonnet. 2025. "Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database." <https://voteview.com/>.
- Lilly, S. 2006. "Coverups Lie Behind Hastert's Curtain: Foley Scandal Exposes Ethical Problems." Center for American Progress, October 30. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/coverups-lie-behind-hasterts-curtain/>.
- Los Angeles Times. 1971. "FBI Agents Investigate for House Committee." B. May 5.
- MacDonald, J. A., and R. J. McGrath. 2016. "Retrospective Congressional Oversight and the Dynamics of Legislative Influence Over the Bureaucracy." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 4: 899–934.
- MacMahon, A. W. 1943a. "Power of the Purse I." *Political Science Quarterly* 58, no. 2: 161–190.
- MacMahon, A. W. 1943b. "Power of the Purse II." *Political Science Quarterly* 58, no. 3: 380–414.
- March, J. G., and H. A. Simon. 1958. *Organizations*. Wiley.
- Mart, M. 2015. *Pesticides, a Love Story: America's Enduring Embrace of Dangerous Chemicals*. University Press of Kansas.
- Marvin, P. H. 1967. "Pesticides: Overstated Dangers." *Science* 156, no. 3771: 14.
- McAllister, B. 1992a. "Appropriations Report Calls FEMA 'A Political Dumping Ground.'" A. *Washington Post*, July 31.
- McAllister, B. 1992b. "Overhaul Plans Proceed at FEMA, Agriculture; White House Opposes Disaster Agency Changes." A. *Washington Post*, November 19.
- McCubbins, M. D., and T. Schwartz. 1984. "Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrols Versus Fire Alarms." *American Journal of Political Science* 28: 165–179.
- McCubbins, M. D. 1999. "Abdication or Delegation-Congress, the Bureaucracy, and the Delegation Dilemma." *Regulation* 22: 30.
- Merton, R. K. 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Free Press.
- Miller, G. J. 2005. "The Political Evolution of Principal-Agent Models." *Annual Review of Political Science* 8: 203–225. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.8.082103.104840>.
- Mills, R. W., and J. L. Selin. 2017. "Don't Sweat the Details!" *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 4: 611–636.
- Morgan, D. 2005. "Lewis Gets Appropriations Chair: Californian Prevailed After Stringent GOP Selection Process." *The Washington Post* 6, January 6.
- Mosher, F. C. 1979. *The GAO: The Quest for Accountability in American Government*. Westview Press.
- Mosher, F. C. 1984. *A Tale of Two Agencies: A Comparative Analysis of the General Accounting Office and the Office of Management and Budget*. Louisiana State University Press.
- Mouat, L. 1973. "Congress' General Accounting Office Becomes 'Fiscal FBI.'" *The Washington Post*, June 17, K2.
- Nelson, M. 1982. "A Short, Ironic History of American National Bureaucracy." *Journal of Politics* 44, no. 3: 747–778.
- Nelson, R. R., and S. G. Winter. 1982. *An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change*. Harvard University Press.
- New York Times. 1947. "Boston Tax Office Hit by House Group."
- New York Times. 1953. "40 Experts to Aid in Cutting Budget."
- New York Times. 1979. "A Critical Congressional Study."
- Niebuhr, R. 1952. *The Irony of American History*. Scribner.
- Obey, D. R. 2005. "Committee Press Release. September 16."
- Ogul, M. S. 1976. *Congress Oversees the Bureaucracy: Studies in Legislative Supervision*. University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Oleszek, W. J. 2007. *Congressional Procedures*. CQ Press.
- Ommundsen, E. C. 2023. "The Institution's Knowledge." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 2: 273–303.
- Parker, D. C. W., and M. Dull. 2009. "Divided We Quarrel." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3: 319–345.
- Parker, D. C. W., and M. Dull. 2013. "Rooting Out Waste, Fraud, and Abuse: The Politics of House Committee Investigations, 1947 to 2004." *Political Research Quarterly* 66, no. 3: 630–644.
- Pentland, B. T. 1999. "Building Process Theory With Narrative: From Description to Explanation." *Academy of Management Review* 24, no. 4: 711–724.
- Pentland, B. T., and H. H. Rueter. 1994. "Organizational Routines as Grammars of Action." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 39, no. 3: 484–510.
- Pincus, Walter. 1971. "FBI Probes Its Own Appropriations." *Washington Post*.
- Portillo, S. K., N. Humphrey, and D. A. Bearfield. 2022. *The Myth of Bureaucratic Neutrality: An Examination of Merit and Representation*. Routledge.
- Reeves, T. C. 1982. *The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy: A Biography*. Stein and Day.
- Reynolds, J. L. 1948. *Taber: 'The Third House of Congress'*. New York Times.
- Roberts, P. S. 2006. "FEMA and the Prospects for Reputation-Based Autonomy." *Studies in American Political Development* 20, no. 1: 57–87.
- Romzek, B. S., and J. A. Utter. 1997. "Congressional Staff." *American Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 4: 1251–1279.

- Russakoff, D. 1983a. "Report Says Watt Mismanaged Coal Leases." *Washington Post*, April 25.
- Russakoff, D. 1983b. "Interior Department Officials Deny Leasing U.S. Coal at 'Fire Sale' Prices." *Washington Post*, April 28.
- Russakoff, D. 1983c. "GAO Investigation; Watt Leased Coal at a Loss." *Washington Post*, May 11.
- Schickler, E. 2001. *Disjointed Pluralism: Institutional Innovation and the Development of the US Congress*. Princeton University Press.
- Selin, J. L. 2015. "What Makes an Agency Independent?" *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 4: 971–987.
- Selin, J. L., and G. Moore. 2023. "Keeping Tabs on the Executive." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 2: 186–208.
- Selznick, P. 1957. *Leadership in Administration*. Harper & Row.
- Shirley, D. 1979. "Report Blasts Endowment: House Investigators Attack 'Closed Circle' House Investigators Blast Arts Endowment on 'Closed Circle'." *The Washington Post*. May 4.
- Stanton, J. 2011. "'Doing More With Less' on Oversight." Roll Call.
- Stinchcombe, A. L. 2001. *When Formality Works: Authority and Abstraction in Law and Organizations*. University of Chicago Press.
- Stith, K. 1988. "Congress' Power of the Purse." *Yale Law Journal* 97: 1343–1396.
- Stockham, A. J. 2011. "Lack of Oversight: The Relationship Between Congress and the FBI, 1907–1975." In *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*. Ph.D., Marquette University. 865835534. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Stockham, A. J. 2013. "'I Have Never Cut His Budget and I Never Expect to': The House Appropriations Committee's Role in Increasing the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Cold War Power." *Historian* 75, no. 3: 499–516.
- Strand, W. 1947. "Public Housing Agency Branded Costly Failure: Probers Charge Waste." *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 12.
- Summers, M. 2000. "The New Deal Farm Programs: Looking for Reconstruction in American Agriculture." *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2: 241–257.
- Sweeting, K. D., and B. B. Haupt. 2024. "Overcoming Neutrality as an Organizational Learning Impediment." *Public Administration Review* 84, no. 1: 143–154.
- Theoharis, A. G. 2004. *The FBI & American Democracy: A Brief Critical History*. *FBI and American Democracy*. University Press of Kansas.
- Theoharis, A. G., and J. S. Cox. 1988. *The Boss: J. Edgar Hoover and the Great American Inquisition*. Temple University Press.
- Tollestrup, J. 2013. "Appropriations Subcommittee Structure: History of Changes From 1920 to 2013. RL31572." *Congressional Research Service*, February 5.
- United States Congress. House. Committee on Appropriations. 2011. *Semiannual Report of Committee Activities: One Hundred Twelfth Congress, First Session, January 5, 2011 through December 31, 2011*. H. Rep. 112–354. U.S. Government Printing Office. Accessed through the Levin Center Congressional Oversight Records Database.
- United States Congress. Senate. Committee on Rules and Administration. Subcommittee on Privileges and Elections. 1951. *Maryland Senatorial Election of 1950: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Privileges and Elections of the Committee on Rules and Administration, United States Senate, Eighty-second Congress, First Session, Pursuant to S. Res. 250, 81st Congress, 2nd Session*. U.S. Government Printing Office.
- United States General Accounting Office. 1971–2012. *Annual Report of the Comptroller General of the United States*. U.S. Government Printing Office.
- U.S. House Committee on Appropriations. n.d. "Activities and Summary Report on the House Committee on Appropriations. Levin Center Congressional Oversight Records Database (CORD) 102nd (1991)—118th (2023); Proquest Historical 94th (1975)—101st (1991)."
- U.S. House Committee on Appropriations. Surveys and Investigations Staff. 1965. "A Report to the Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives on the Effects, Uses, Control and Research of Agricultural Pesticides." April.
- U.S. House of Representatives. 1943. "House Appropriations Committee Journal."
- Wall Street Journal. 1947. "Taber's 'Mystery Men' Snoop for Loopholes in Truman's Budget." May 5.
- Washington Post. 1947. "Police Inquiry." July 30.
- Washington Post. 1948. "Treasury-P.O. Bill Passed Despite Threat." March 12.
- West, W. F. 2005. "Neutral Competence and Political Responsiveness: An Uneasy Relationship." *Policy Studies Journal (Oxford, UK and Malden, USA)* 33, no. 2: 147–160.
- Wilson, J. Q. 1978. "The Investigators: Managing FBI and Narcotic Agents."
- Wilson, J. Q. 1989. *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*. Basic Books.
- Wilson, W. 2017. *Congressional Government*. Transaction.
- Zelizer, J. E. 2004. *On Capitol Hill: The Struggle to Reform Congress and Its Consequences, 1948–2000*. Cambridge University Press.

## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Appendix S1:** Surveys and investigations staff. **Appendix S2:** Selected S&I study titles and tasking directives. **Appendix S3:** Quantitative analysis of S&I study titles. **Appendix S4:** Research interviews. **Appendix S5:** S&I Timeline.