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The Legislative Effectiveness of Congressional Oversight Reports

Sean M. Theriault

Government Department, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, USA

Correspondence: Sean M. Theriault (seant@austin.utexas.edu)

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ABSTRACT

This article assesses the linkage between the House and Senate oversight committees' reports and subsequent legislative efforts in those policy areas from the 106th to the 116th Congresses (1999–2020). The analysis finds support for the three proffered hypotheses. First, the policy topics covered in the reports spur the referral of bills on those topics to the oversight committees. Second, the oversight reports on topics that the majority staff releases are more reflected in downstream legislative activity than the topics covered in the minority staff reports. Finally, the majority's advantage in pushing legislation related to its oversight reports' topics is greater in the House than it is in the Senate. These initial findings substantiate the importance of gathering and coding congressional oversight reports for not only how Congress conducts oversight, but also how it legislates.

By almost any measure, Congress spends less time legislating (Lewallen et al. 2015; Jones et al. 2019; Lewallen 2020). In the 1970s, Congress regularly enacted more than 700 bills into law; it has not enacted as many as 500 since the 108th Congress (2003–4) and over the last five congresses analyzed in this study, it enacted an average of 339 bills into law each congress. In the 1970s, the House regularly cast more than 1000 votes every 2 years; over the last five congresses analyzed in this study, they averaged fewer than 800. While senators still cast as many roll calls as they had in the past, an increasing number of them are on cloture and fewer of them are on the substance of legislation (Theriault 2008, 2013).

In lieu of legislating, Congress has conducted more oversight. In the 1970s, committees regularly held more than 1000 congressional hearings tied to legislation; these days it holds fewer than 500 legislative referral hearings each congress. In contrast, the number of oversight hearings has gone from around 500 to more than 2000 (Lewallen 2020). In part because of these decreases in legislating and increases in overseeing, congressional scholars have added "oversight" as an important third part of members' job description beyond legislating and representing (see, for example, Theriault and Edwards 2020).

Richard F. Fenno (1977, 890), in explaining why he traveled with members to their districts, gave the powerful rationale: "If it is worth *their* time to go home so much, it is worth *our* time to take a commensurate degree of interest in what they do there and why" (italics in original). The same rationale can be used for why congressional scholars should spend more time studying congressional oversight. If it is worth *their* time to do it, it is worth *our* time to try and understand why and how they do it and to what effect.

These trends suggest that members may be overseeing in lieu of legislating. That conclusion is based only on the overall trends in the data. It very well may be true that if members can accomplish policy change by sending a letter to the bureaucracy or berating an agency head in a hearing, they forgo the arduous process of trying to enact policy change by passing a new law. I argue that the relationship between the two activities could also be mutually reinforcing. A congressional investigation may

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reveal that the laws are insufficient, which propels members to introduce bills to solve public policy problems.

In this article, I find that the policy topics covered in reports released by the oversight committees increase their referral of bills on those topics. I make and test this argument in four sections. The first section describes the oversight reports released from the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability (HOC) and the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs (SOC).[1] I describe three dimensions of these reports. First, the reports' authors, which can include committee-approved reports or staff-released reports. The latter of which are broken down into three categories: bipartisan, majority, or minority. Second, the number of reports that the committees release across time. Third, the policy topics that are covered by the reports.

Having laid the groundwork for the subject of the study, I next turn to an analysis of the relationship between the reports and the legislative agendas of the members, committees, and chambers. In the second section, I develop three hypotheses that are then tested in the third section. In short, my analysis suggests that the oversight reports are systematically related to legislation and its downstream success in predictable ways. First, the oversight reports' topics are reflected in the bills that the oversight committee considers. Second, the topics of the majority party's oversight advance further legislatively than the oversight topics of the minority party. Third, the advantage to the majority party is bigger in the House than it is in the Senate. Finally, the fourth section concludes.

1 | A Descriptive Analysis of Congressional Oversight Reports

In this section, I provide a broad descriptive analysis for congressional oversight reports, which become the key independent variable throughout the remainder of the paper. In doing so, I spell out the authorship and subject of these reports as these characteristics provide the leverage by which the role of reports can be assessed in legislative efforts. The results reveal that the underlying partisan dynamics become more present the finer grained the analysis.

Members' roles as legislators have well-defined boundaries. When they introduce bills, they are legislating. When they amend or vote on legislation, they are legislating. In comparison, their role in overseeing is not nearly as well defined (though see Selin and Moore 2023 for a rich description of "oversight"). The product of "oversight" is also more ambiguous and sometimes harder to quantify (see Leavitt 2026 for an excellent analysis on how to measure investigations discretely), especially because of the strategic decisions that committees make in the oversight arena (Kim et al. 2026). Members' letters to the bureaucracy or committee hearings that seek accountability, for example, are clearly examples of oversight that can—and have been—cataloged and analyzed (see Ritchie 2023).

Up until the creation of the Congressional Oversight Records Database (CORD), no database or depository existed to document the results of investigations and oversight in a systematic way (though see Leavitt 2024, 2026; for more on CORD, see Moore et al. 2026). Oleszek (2013, 294), who devotes 28 pages to a chapter on "Congressional Oversight," never explicitly mentions the term "congressional oversight report," though he clearly implies their existence in the "Hearings and Investigations" section, in which he writes: "The traditional method of exercising congressional oversight is through committee hearings and investigations into executive branch operations." The development of the oversight reports database is one attempt to quantify the "exercis[e of] congressional oversight."

The House oversight committee released 462 oversight reports from the 106th to the 116th Congresses; the Senate oversight committee released a bit more than half that (257) over the same time period.[2] Of the 462 HOC (257 SOC) reports, the committee formally approved 30 (5) of them. Those reports not officially approved by the committee, yet still released to the public, are considered "staff" reports, of which 57 (55) were released by both parties, 95 (140) were released by the majority party, and 280 (57) were released by the minority party (see Figure 1).

The number of reports by HOC fluctuates considerably by congress (see Figure 2). While the 114th Congress (2015–6) saw the fewest number of reports (20), the following congress had the most (76). As indicative of these two congresses, the HOC shows almost no time trend in the data (see Table 1, column A). The SOC does show a clear increasing time trend (see Table 1, column B). With each passing congress and while controlling for other factors, the SOC released 6.7 additional reports. While a few congresses had only a single digit number of reports (the 106th Congress had eight, the 108th had five, the 111th had three, and the 112th Congress had nine), the 114th Congress had the most at 95. The 114th Congress was the only one where the SOC had more congressional reports than the HOC.

Independent of time, the partisan dynamics among the House, Senate, and president may also play a role in the number of reports the oversight committees release. While some scholarship suggests that institutional or partisan dynamics are at play in conducting oversight (see, for example Kriner and Schickler 2016; MacDonald and McGrath 2016; Mayhew 1991; Parker and Dull 2009; Drolc and Butcher 2026; Lowande and Weiss 2026; Dull 2026), Selin and Moore (2023) find "little relationship" in the partisan institutional dynamics in their investigation of program evaluations conducted by the Government Accountability Office, congressional oversight reports, and committee hearings. I test for the influence of institutional and partisan dynamics in the number of reports in three ways.

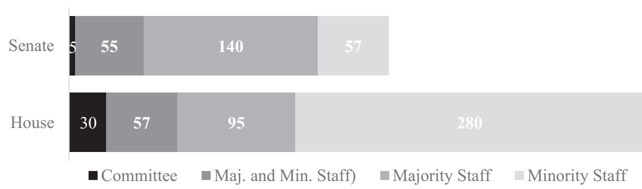

FIGURE 1 | The author of congressional reports by chamber, 106th to 116th Congress. Over the 11 Congresses under consideration, very few of the reports (only 5 in the Senate and 30 in the House) were officially approved by the oversight committees. Most of the reports are staff reports, though the distribution of them between bipartisan staff, majority staff, and minority staff varies by chamber.

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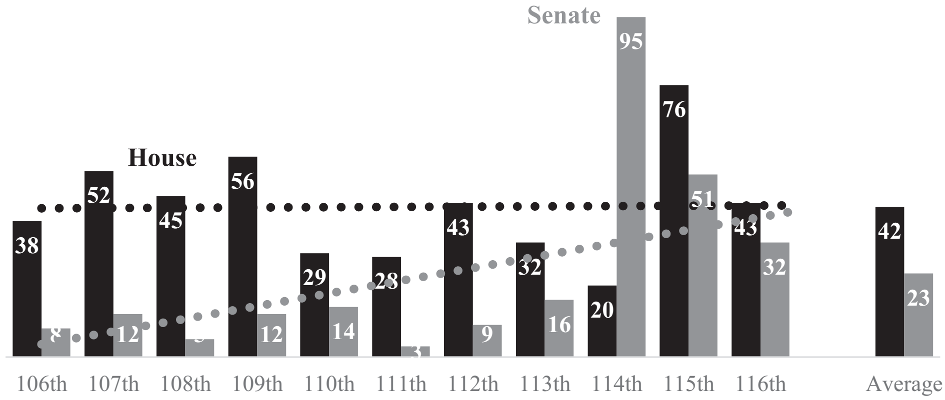

FIGURE 2 | The frequency of congressional oversight reports by chamber, the 106th to 116th Congress (1999–2020). The number of reports from the House oversight committee fluctuates over time such that the trend line (black dotted line) is flat. The Senate oversight committee shows an increasing number of reports across time (gray dotted line).

TABLE 1 | The effect of partisan dynamics on the number of oversight reports.

	House	Senate
Congress Time Trend	1.048	6.627**
	(1.31)	(1.58)
Democratic President	−15.421	9.675
	(8.57)	(9.37)
Dem. Senate	−14.505	−31.246*
Majority	(8.84)	(12.74)
Senate-President	−12.051	20.460**
Split	(9.51)	(9.83)
Senate-House Split	5.068	−5.573
	(9.84)	(14.27)
Constant	−58.416**	−707.625**
	(143.36)	(173.33)
R^2	0.699	0.848

Note: $N = 11$.
*Statistically significant at 0.10. **Statistically significant at 0.05.

First, given the proclivity of the Democratic Party to use the government to solve public policy problems, I expect more reports under Democratic presidential administrations (presumably, when the engines of the federal government are working more than during Republican presidential administrations) and when Democrats have a congressional majority. Second, when the president is of the opposite party of the chamber majority, the number of oversight reports should increase because the majority party looks harder to uncover malfeasance against an opposite-party president and his administration. Furthermore, divided government makes the legislative path even more difficult, which incentivizes oversight (Lewallen 2020). Third, if the two chambers have different parties in the majority, I expect more oversight reports because their partisans in the other chamber are positionally disadvantaged to conduct meaningful oversight, which means that the majorities in the respective chambers are incentivized to act.

The results suggest some of these partisan dynamics are in play when I jointly test for them. The HOC releases 15 fewer congressional reports under Democratic administrations and 14 fewer reports with Democratic congressional majorities (Table 1, column A). A split between the president's party and the House majority results in 12 fewer reports, and a split between the two chambers' majorities led to 5 more reports, though none of these are statistically significant, probably due to the low number of observations and the high number of independent variables.

The regression results for the SOC are a bit different than the results for the HOC. Democratic presidents spur 10 additional reports, and Democratic majorities release 31 fewer reports (Table 1, column B). A partisan split between the Senate majority and the president yields 20 additional reports, and a split between chambers reduces the number of reports by 6. The results for the Democratic president and split chambers are not statistically significant.

These quixotic results suggest that the number of congressional reports in their totality may be too blunt a measure to tease out particular partisan dynamics. An analysis of the kind of congressional report may show more vividly the partisan dynamics at play. For example, a split between the president's party and a chamber majority should increase the number of majority staff reports released and decrease the number of minority staff reports released. The dependent variable in these analyses—the number of reports broken down by author—shows great variation in the House and the Senate (see Figure 3).

Even though Democrats may be the party more likely to use the federal government to solve problems, the House oversight committee does not release more reports of any kind when the Democrats have a majority or when a Democratic president resides in the White House (see Table 2, panel A). When the House majority is different from the president, the number of reports is consistent with my expectations: more bipartisan and majority staff reports and fewer minority staff reports. When the chambers have different majorities, the only statistically significant finding is that more bipartisan staff reports are released.

The positive time trend in the Senate is driven by majority and minority staff reports (see Table 2, panel B). More majority

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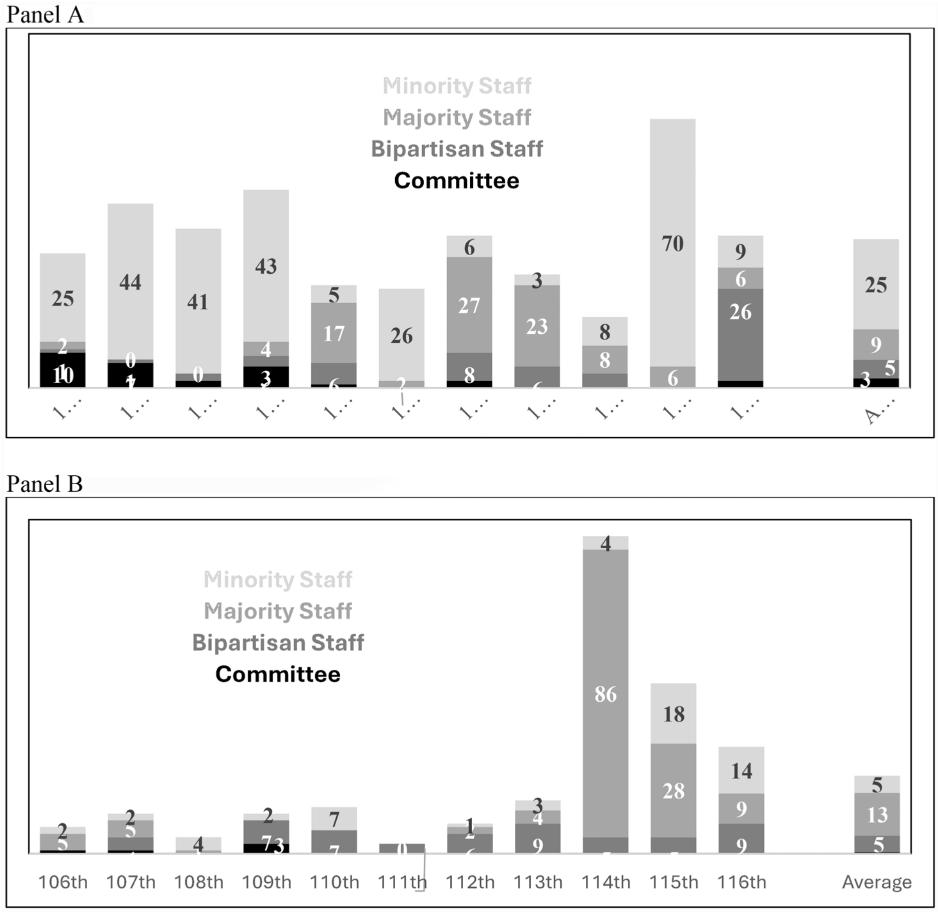

FIGURE 3 | The frequency of congressional reports by author, the 106th to 116th Congress (1999–2020). Panel A: The House Oversight Committee. Panel B: The Senate Oversight Committee. The authorship of the oversight reports varies by Congress and by chamber.

staff reports and fewer minority staff reports are released during Democratic presidential administrations, and fewer majority staff reports are released when the Democrats are in the majority. Finally, when the Senate majority is opposite the president's party, more majority staff reports are released. These results, across both chambers, suggest that lumping all the reports together obscures important variation in the frequency of the kinds of reports that are released. For the most part, the systematic variation is consistent with my expectations.

The Policy Agendas Project (Jones et al. 2023) classifies government action—everything from Supreme Court opinions to laws and introduced bills to quasi-sentences in the State of the Union Address—into 20 major topic codes. The overwhelming percentage of the reports released by the oversight committees is categorized as Government Operations (26% from HOC and 58% from SOC; see Figure 4). The next most utilized categories are Health (32% from HOC and 7% from SOC) and Defense (10% from HOC and 5% from SOC). No other category reaches even 5% in either chamber.

Having fleshed out the kinds of congressional reports and the topics that they cover, the next section outlines arguments for how congressional oversight reports affect the development of legislation.

2 | The Influence of Congressional Reports on the Legislative Process

Members of Congress engage in both oversight and legislating. The congressional literature suggests that the two are at odds with one another. Whether because of the effort involved, or the roadblocks that they may face—or both—members sometimes try to achieve policy goals by pressuring bureaucrats (Lewallen 2020; Ritchie 2023). Polarization exacerbates this situation because it makes legislating all that much more difficult (McCarty et al. 2006; Theriault 2008). What I outline in this section (and test in the following section) is a different take on the relationship between oversight and legislation; rather than being at odds with each other, I suggest that they are positively linked to each other.

Although polarization complicates the transformation of legislation into law (Sinclair 2000; Reynolds 2024), it has no effect on the first stage of the process—bill introduction. As has always been the case, the only thing that is required for bill introduction is a member putting in the effort to write a bill, sign it, and place it in the hopper.[3] At least for this first stage, I expect that topics for which the oversight committees release reports experience an increase in the number of bills referred to the committees on that topic.[4] The positive relationship between oversight reports and bills could result from at least

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TABLE 2 | The role of partisan dynamics in the frequency of congressional reports by author.

Panel A: The House of Representatives

	Committee	Bipartisan	Majority	Minority
Congress Time Trend	−0.827**	0.456	0.411	1.009
	(2.02)	(0.47)	(0.96)	(1.26)
Democratic President	−1.275	−5.803	2.031	−10.374
	(2.02)	(3.07)	(6.30)	(8.28)
Dem. House Majority	−1.327	4.650	−2.189	−15.640
	(2.09)	(3.16)	(6.50)	(8.54)
House-President Split	1.424	5.620*	7.285*	−26.381**
	(2.24)	(3.41)	(6.99)	(9.19)
House-Senate Split	0.911	7.331**	6.847	−10.021
	(2.32)	(3.52)	(7.24)	(9.51)
Constant	94.434	−49.420	−43.469	−59.961
	(33.82)	(51.31)	(105.35)	(138.51)
R^2	0.650	0.829	0.554	0.856

Panel B: The Senate

	Committee	Bipartisan	Majority	Minority
Congress Time Trend	−0.122	0.445	5.043**	1.261**
	(0.11)	(0.27)	(1.77)	(0.39)
Democratic President	−0.352	−1.480	17.325*	−5.818*
	(0.64)	(1.59)	(10.53)	(2.32)
Dem. Senate Majority	−0.717	1.698	−30.089*	−2.137
	(0.87)	(2.16)	(14.32)	(3.15)
Senate-President Split	−0.204	0.319	18.539*	1.806
	(0.67)	(1.66)	(11.04)	(2.43)
House-Senate Split	0.384	1.849	−7.436	−0.369
	(0.97)	(2.42)	(16.04)	(3.53)
Constant	14.423	−45.238	−545.10**	−131.71**
	(11.81)	(29.36)	(194.84)	(42.87)
R^2	0.389	0.657	0.778	0.786

Note: $N = 11$.
*Statistically significant at 0.10. **Statistically significant at 0.05.

three different dynamics. First, the facts uncovered during congressional investigations may require legislative solutions prompting the introduction of bills on the topic. Second, a member or members may spur an investigation and release a report to draw attention to an issue area that they had already pegged for proposed legislation. Third, reports may act in a similar way as hearings in how non-legislative actions have legislative consequences. King (1997) finds that committees try to encroach on the jurisdictions of other committees by organizing non-legislative hearings on a topic that falls either in between two committees' jurisdictions or even sometimes is completely within a different committee's jurisdiction. He finds that over a series of hearings, the committee may gain legitimacy in claiming the topic sufficiently so that the parliamentarian begins to refer bills to the committee. So might be the case with investigations and reports. The oversight committees may seek to expand their jurisdictions by releasing reports on topics that don't fall neatly within their—or any other committee's—jurisdiction. The parliamentarian may reward enterprising committees by referring more bills to the committee in the areas in which it has conducted investigations. Regardless of the dynamic that causes it, the more reports in an area, the more bills on the topic that are referred to the oversight committee.

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FIGURE 4 | The policy topics of congressional oversight reports by chamber, 106th to 1116th Congresses. Government Operations is the topic of the congressional oversight reports by the oversight committees across the 11 Congresses. The next most popular topics are Health, Defense, and Law and Crime. The negative signs on the House are only an artifact of Excel getting the magnitude to move to the left in House rather than the right (as with the Senate).

> Oversight and Bill Introduction Hypothesis: The policy topics of oversight reports are related to the number of bills referred to the oversight committees on that topic.

We expect a steady flow of legislation on a topic across time, especially because so many bills are reintroduced each congress (Wilkerson et al. 2015). To account for the natural flow of legislation, I include the lag of bills on the topic that the committee received in the previous congress. If reports spur legislation, a counter variable for the number of oversight reports should be positively related to the number of bills that the parliamentarian refers to the committee on that policy topic.

While they face little constraint in introducing bills, members face increasingly more constraints in taking the next steps in the legislative process. Members in the minority face even bigger constraints because, by virtue of that status as the minority party, they have fewer members. Also, the majority party enjoys substantial agenda setting advantages over the minority party (Cox and McCubbins 2005; Den Hartog and Monroe 2011). At every step beyond bill introduction, I expect that the majority party's agenda as determined by the reports they release becomes increasingly related to the topics considered in downstream legislative activity:

> Majority Party Bonus Hypothesis: The agendas of the majority party as reflected by the oversight reports it releases are more reflected in the legislative steps after bill introduction than the minority party's agenda.

As with the first, this hypothesis also includes the lag of the dependent variable in the analysis. I test if the majority party's agenda as reflected by the oversight reports it releases is more reflected than the minority party's agenda at three distinct stages of the legislative process: (1) bills reported by the oversight committee, (2) bills passed by the chamber, and (3) bills that become law.

The legislative process in the House is more systematic than it is in the Senate where so much is left to the individual discretion of the senators and their party leadership. Unlike the Senate in almost all cases, the House majority party can pass bills without the support of any individual minority party members (Palazzolo and Theriault 2023). As such, the majority party advantage should be greater in the House than it is in the Senate (Volden and Wiseman 2014).

> House Majority Bonus Advantage Hypothesis: The majority party's advantage in pursuing its agenda relative to the minority party is greater in the House than it is in the Senate in downstream legislative activities.

Because the analysis for the Majority Party Advantage Hypothesis is separated by chamber, the separate set of chamber results are compared to test the House Majority Bonus Advantage.

3 | How Congressional Oversight Reports Affect the Legislative Process

Most congressional decision-making requires a collective effort, and the further a bill gets in the legislative process the greater the collective effort required from a committee (deciding to report a bill) to a chamber (deciding to pass a bill) to both chambers (passing the same bill) to two of the three branches of government (the president deciding to sign the bill into law or sufficient support in Congress to override a veto). The step that begins this entire process is mandated by the

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rules in both chambers to be an action by one single legislator to introduce a bill. Members can introduce as many bills as they like—or none at all.

To measure the influence of congressional oversight reports on legislation, I analyze the number of introduced bills referred to the oversight committees by policy topics by congress by chamber.[5] The key independent variable is the number of reports that the oversight committee released on that topic in each congress. Presumably, the oversight committees have a regular flow of legislation on topics that are referred to it. In congresses when it releases a report, the oversight committee may get a bump in the number of bills that are referred to it on the topic of the report. To isolate the estimate of this bump as a result of the report, I control for the natural flow of legislation (i.e., the number of introduced bills referred to the oversight committee on that topic in the previous congress).[6] I test the relationship separately for each kind of report, which results in 5 separate regressions to account for the total number of reports, the committee released reports, and bipartisan staff, majority staff, and minority staff reports.[7]

The House analysis on bill introductions shows that the oversight committee receives 0.4 more bills in a policy area for each report that it releases in that policy area (see Table 3, panel A, first column). This result appears to be driven by the number of majority and minority staff reports, which are both statistically significant. The overall number of reports matter a bit less in the Senate (0.34), but the coefficient is still statistically significant. Each of the kinds of reports except bipartisan staff reports is also in the predicted direction and majority staff reports and committee-approved reports are statistically significant. The coefficient on committee reports is a whopping 10.29, driven mostly by the two reports that the committee released during the 109th Congress (on abuses in credit counseling and the ill-preparedness for Hurricane Katrina). In that Congress, the SOC had 37 bills referred to it on the topic of Domestic Commerce, the policy topic of both oversight reports. The previous congress, no bill that it received was in that topic area. Not unsurprisingly, the regular flow of legislation as measured by the lag variables for the dependent variable is always statistically significant and close to 1.0.

Having provided evidence for the Oversight and Bill Introduction Hypothesis, every additional step in the legislative process requires a coalition of members and each step requires a more expansive one than the step before. Because of the advantages that accrue to the majority party—including, but even in addition to, their greater numbers—the kinds of reports that they had a hand in drafting should matter more as the legislative process moves away from bill introduction.

To test if the oversight reports are related to the steps further down the legislative process, I do parallel analyses to what I did for bill introduction, just replacing bill introductions for the bills reported by the oversight committees, the bills passed by the chambers, and the bills that become law (in total, 4 different stages of the legislative process). Each of these stages

TABLE 3 | The effect of oversight reports on bills referred to the Oversight Committees.

Panel A: The House of Representatives					
	All reports	**Committee**	**Bipartisan**	**Majority**	**Minority**
Number of Reports	0.412**	−0.152	−0.576	0.903*	0.409**
	(2.14)	(1.09)	(1.17)	(0.63)	(0.24)
Bills Lagged	0.979**	1.001**	1.003**	0.984**	0.992**
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.12)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Constant	0.195	0.622	0.648	0.483	0.293
	(0.75)	(0.72)	(0.72)	(0.72)	(0.74)
R^2	0.951	0.950	0.950	0.951	0.950
Panel B: The Senate					
	All reports	**Committee**	**Bipartisan**	**Majority**	**Minority**
Number of reports	0.339**	10.294**	−0.796	0.331**	0.514
	(0.07)	(1.99)	(0.64)	(0.07)	(0.83)
Bills Lagged	0.964**	1.003**	1.011**	0.968**	1.006**
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Constant	0.393	0.136	0.551	0.503	0.331
	(0.43)	(0.42)	(0.47)	(0.43)	(0.46)
R^2	0.918	0.950	0.909	0.917	0.908

Note: $N = 180$.
*Statistically significant at 0.10. **Statistically significant at 0.05.

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TABLE 4 | The effect of congressional reports on the further steps in the legislative process.

Panel A: The House of Representatives					
	All reports	**Committee**	**Bipartisan**	**Majority**	**Minority**
Introduced Bills	0.412**	−0.152	−0.576	0.903*	0.409**
	(2.14)	(1.09)	(1.17)	(0.63)	(0.24)
Committee-reported Bills	0.096*	1.127**	0.426*	1.434**	0.012
	(0.05)	(0.53)	(0.24)	(0.26)	(0.06)
House-passed Bills	0.074**	1.012**	0.379**	0.946**	0.011
	(0.04)	(0.41)	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.05)
Laws	0.028*	0.821**	0.107*	0.158**	0.010
	(0.02)	(0.15)	(0.11)	(0.08)	(0.02)
Panel B: The Senate					
	All reports	**Committee**	**Bipartisan**	**Majority**	**Minority**
Introduced Bills	0.339**	10.294**	−0.796	0.331**	0.514
	(0.07)	(1.99)	(0.64)	(0.07)	(0.83)
Committee-Reported Bills	0.316**	0.283	−0.386	0.347**	−0.070
	(0.04)	(1.39)	(0.37)	(0.04)	(0.02)
Senate-Passed Bills	0.094**	−0.271	−0.190	0.107**	−0.084
	(0.02)	(0.68)	(0.18)	(0.02)	(0.13)
Laws	0.079**	0.079	−0.120	0.088**	−0.018
	(0.01)	(0.40)	(0.11)	(0.01)	(0.08)

Note: $N = 220$ (except for Introduced Bill, which is 180). The values are the coefficients (and standard errors) for the number of various kinds of reports on the latter steps of the legislative process while controlling for the lagged dependent variables. Panel A summarizes 20 different regressions with only two variables—the number of reports (all, committee approved, bipartisan, majority, and minority) and the lagged dependent variable (the number of bills at the various stages in each policy area in the previous congress). Similar analysis is reported in Panel B.
*Statistically significant at 0.10. **Statistically significant at 0.05.

is analyzed with the key independent variable of the number of reports by policy area as well as the lag of the dependent variable, though the table only reports the coefficient on the former (see Table 4).

Consistent with the Majority Party Hypothesis, the topics addressed by the oversight reports released by the HOC minority staff are practically inconsequential to the steps in the legislative process beyond introduction, though Drolc and Butcher (2026) show that they play other important roles for the minority party. Because of the minority staff report's inclusion in the overall numbers of the total oversight reports, the relationship is weaker than it is for the other kinds of reports. The reports released by the committee and the majority staff reports show the strongest relationships with advancing in the legislative process. Substantively, each additional oversight report in a policy area released by the majority staff results in 1.4 more bills reported by the committee, almost an additional bill (0.95) passed by the House, and about one-sixth more bills signed into law in that policy area.

The results for the SOC tell a similar story, though using slightly different words. The minority staff reports, again, have no consequence on the legislative steps beyond introduction. And, again, the majority staff reports show the most consistent set of results throughout the legislative process. Because of the overwhelming strength of the majority staff reports, which comprise 54% of the SOC reports, the total number of reports is also significant at each of the three downstream legislative steps. Each additional oversight report released by the majority staff in a policy area results in more than one-third of a bill reported by the committee, more than one-tenth of a bill passed by the Senate, and almost one-tenth of new law in that policy area.

Having provided evidence for the first two hypotheses, let me now turn to the third hypothesis that the majority party's advantage is greater in the House. Indeed, it is, at least in the two steps beyond bill introduction. The 95% confidence intervals of the coefficient on the number of majority staff reports in a policy area do not overlap in the House and Senate for bills reported by the oversight committees and the bills passed by the respective chambers (see Figure 5). At both steps, the number of majority staff reports in a policy area is greater in the House than it is in the Senate. The confidence intervals do overlap for laws, so I cannot say with any certainty that the advantage to the majority party is greater in the House than it is for the Senate in terms of passing laws.

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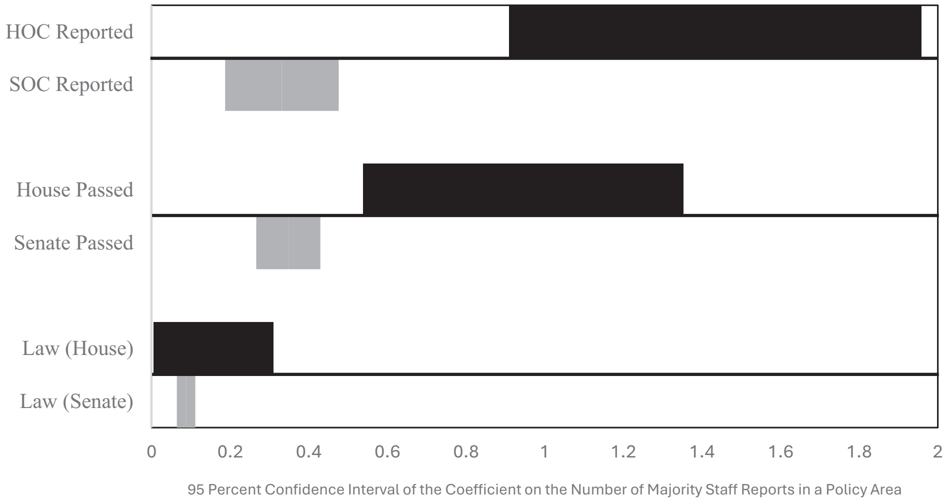

FIGURE 5 | The 95% confidence intervals for the coefficient on the number of majority staff reports in a policy area on advances in the legislative process. The shaded regions are the 95% confidence intervals for the coefficient on how the number of majority staff reports within policy areas affects downstream legislative activity in the House (black shaded region) and Senate (gray shaded region). Because none of the shaded regions cross 0, all of the coefficients are statistically significant. Furthermore, because the shaded regions for the House and Senate in the committee reported bills and the chamber passed bills do not overlap, we can say that the effect of majority staff reports is bigger in the House than in the Senate.

4 | Conclusion

Congressional oversight reports are important. In their own right, they are a final product of the investigative and oversight role in which Congress is increasingly engaged. They also play a direct role in the legislative process. My analysis shows that the reports released by the oversight committees are systematically related to the development of legislation from a bill's introduction to it becoming a law. The kinds of reports and the topics that they cover systematically vary in predictable ways. The minority staff reports are related to bill introductions and no other legislative step, whereas the topics of the majority staff reports are related to the topics of bills that the oversight committees report, the chambers pass, and the president signs into law.

This paper is the first step in analyzing congressional oversight reports, and the results suggest that the continued collection of the reports and their analysis may well be a fruitful avenue of research. Perhaps the most benign way that the reports influence the process would be merely that the committees are investigating the same things that they are legislating, and that outside events shift attention to these topics. Under this scenario, something happens, and the committee responds with both oversight and legislation that are unrelated to each other. While such a scenario seems implausible, it still suggests that Congress has more weapons in its arsenal than just legislation. When an event happens, Congress can respond with legislation or with an investigation that culminates in a congressional oversight report.

A more plausible scenario is that an event happens, and Congress responds by investigating and that the fruits of that investigation ultimately lead to legislation. I provide no evidence in this paper that the connection is that direct or causal, but it certainly is plausible. Further research should be done to flesh out the relationship between investigating and legislating to see what the precise mechanism is at work that links the two and to see if the link extends beyond the oversight committees.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Harvard Dataverse at https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi%3A10.7910%2FDVN%2FDSUCZB&version=DRAFT.

Endnotes

[1] The names of these committees have gone through various name changes. In 1952, the old "Committee on Expenditures" became the "Committee on Government Operations." In the 106th Congress (1999–2000), the Committee was renamed "The Committee on Government Reform." In the 110th Congress, when its jurisdiction absorbed the old jurisdictions of the Committee on the Post Office and Civil Service and the Committee on the District of Columbia, the names changed to "Committee on Oversight and Government Reform." In the 116th Congress, the committee drop the modifier "Government" from its title. In the 118th Congress (2023–4), the named changed to Committee on Oversight and Accountability. In the 119th Congress, the name went back to it's 110th Congress's name: Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

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The Senate counterpart has had fewer name changes. In 1977, the "Committee on Government Operations" become the "Committee on Government Affairs." In 2005, it took on its current name of "Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs."

Since at least the early 2000s, the committees have been considered the "oversight" committees for their respective chambers. Due to these name changes (and likely future name changes), I call these committees the House oversight committee (abbreviate as HOC) and the Senate oversight committee (SOC) in this paper. Because these are not the proper names of the committees, I do not capitalize them.

[2] Deleted from both numbers are the activity reports that they released, which totaled 15 for HOC and 11 for SOC.

[3] In this analysis, I do not mean to imply that the release of reports and the introduction of legislation are both first stage actions. Bill introduction can be an entirely individual activity for a member, whereas releasing a report usually involves other legislators. Furthermore, in some instances it is the end stage of an investigation, whereas bill introduction is merely the beginning.

[4] Using the Policy Agendas Project's major topics is but one way of linking congressional oversight reports and bills. A more direct test may be to compare the language in the reports to the language in bills or to use the 225 minor topic codes of the Policy Agendas Project. Both of these alternatives are more rigid because of their level of specificity. The more general test that I employ in this paper permits for spillover effects from the specific focus of the oversight report. The investigation may have revealed an opportunity for a legislative solution outside the direct focus of the report that may be missed with a more specific test, but still within the broader 21 major topic codes.

[5] Minor bills that rarely see committee action are not included in the analysis. For more about the "important bill" filter, see Wilkerson et al. (2023) and http://www.congressionalbills.org/codebooks.html.

[6] In a more comprehensive analysis that also considers the lag of the number of reports by policy area, the results are largely the same (analysis not presented).

[7] In a more comprehensive analysis, I use the number of majority and minority party sponsored bills to test for the effect of majority and minority staff reports. In a sign of the robustness of the results, the estimates increase consistent with the expectations. Majority (and minority) sponsored bills to the committee increase even more when the majority (minority) staff release a report (analysis not presented in this article).

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