

Governing in Crisis Teaching Guide

Susanne Sachsman Grooms, Deputy Staff Director and Chief Counsel
House Committee on Oversight and Reform

The Role of Oversight in our Democracy

Interview Summary

The checks and balances built into our federal system of government deliberately create a level of ongoing tension between its three branches. Among the main checks on executive power are congressional investigations and oversight, designed to ensure that our government is operating effectively and efficiently and in ways that meet the needs of the American people. In recent years, tensions related to congressional oversight have become more pronounced and more public, as investigations have been resisted, subpoenas have been ignored, inspectors general have been removed from office, and the President has been impeached. Susan Sachsman Grooms, Deputy Staff Director and Chief Counsel for the Democratic Staff of the Committee on Oversight and Reform of the U.S. House of Representatives, discusses the authority of Congress to investigate and the need for oversight of the executive branch. She also discusses how higher levels of partisanship have impacted oversight and the relationship between Congress and the Presidency.

Video Topics

- 0:00) Introduction
- (2:03) Importance of Government Service
- (4:19) Purpose and Authority of Congressional Oversight
- (28:55) The Role of Inspectors General
- (34:49) Leadership of Former Rep. Elijah Cummings
- (38:46) Closing

Potential Uses:

- Post a governance series video on Canvas and ask students to respond to a discussion question about the video, as well as comment on 1-2 of their classmates' posts.
- Show a clip of the video during class to enrich learning, emphasize a point, and/or contextualize a topic.
- Create a resource folder on Canvas that includes governance series videos, accompanied by "learn and do more" documents, as well as other links to support student growth related to current events.
- Incorporate a governance series video into pre-class readings for a live discussion using or adapting the questions below.

Suggested Written Reflection Questions

- Susanne Grooms provides two examples of investigations carried out by the House Committee on Oversight and Reform. Using outside research, please identify another investigation undertaken by the House Committee on Oversight and Reform that is not mentioned in the interview.
- What tools can Congress use to hold government officials accountable and honest?
- Research the *Protecting Our Democracy Act* recently introduced in Congress. What is the purpose of the bill and how does the bill plan to fulfill that purpose?
- What did you find interesting in the interview? What is something that you disagreed with?

Suggested Classroom Discussion Questions

- According to Susanne Grooms, what is the purpose of congressional oversight and why is it important to protecting democracy?
- How have “presidential attitudes” towards congressional oversight changed over the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations?
- What is the role of inspectors general and how do they contribute to oversight of the government?

Related Reading

- Read the Brennan Center’s *Why We Need to Protect the Rule of Law in the Federal Government*.
- Check out House Committee on Oversight and Reform’s [website](#).
- Learn about the history of [Congressional Oversight Powers](#).
- Find out how Congress can overcome the delay and obstruction tactics by the executive branch to fulfill its oversight Lawfare’s *How Congress Could Get Some of Its Power Back*.
- Read *The Purse Is Mightier than the Sword. Now Congress Needs to Use It* from the Project on Government Oversight.
- Brookings’s House Oversight Tracker monitors the actions being taken by House committees to conduct oversight of administration actions and policies since the 2016 election. Learn more with [Tracking House oversight in the Trump era](#).
- Learn why *It’s more clear now than ever: Inspectors general need stronger protections*.
- Read the Washington Post’s *Trump loves to fire his watchdogs. The Supreme Court just made it easier*.
- Learn more about how oversight works by reading the [Congressional Oversight Manual](#) and [The Art of Congressional Oversight](#).

Stay Informed via Social Media:

 iop.pitt.edu

 thornburghforum.pitt.edu

 [@Pitt.IOP](https://www.facebook.com/Pitt.IOP)

 [@DickThornburghForum](https://www.facebook.com/DickThornburghForum)

 [@PITT_IOP](https://twitter.com/PITT_IOP)

 [Institute of Politics](https://www.youtube.com/InstituteofPolitics)

 [Institute of Politics](https://www.linkedin.com/company/InstituteofPolitics)