

Comparison of Legislative Resources on *GPO Access* and Selected Government and Non-Government Web Sites

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Executive Summary

This is the third in a series of legislative resource comparison reports, following the October 1999 and July 2000 findings that reviewed the congressional and other legislative branch information available through *GPO Access* and compared the data to other relevant Government and non-government Web sites. The following factors were analyzed:

- What resources are available
- The scope of those resources
- The source of those resources

To preserve continuity from previous reports, the same sites were again re-evaluated to see if any changes had occurred since July 2000. In-depth comparison and analyses were conducted on four Government Web sites: *GPO Access*, THOMAS (run by the Library of Congress), the House of Representatives Web site (<http://www.house.gov>), and the Senate Web site (<http://www.senate.gov>).¹ These analyses were also conducted on three commercial, fee-based Internet services: Congressional Universe, CQ.com, and Lexis-Nexis.

The comparative analysis yielded these key findings:

- *GPO Access* is still the leader among the compared sites, housing nineteen of the twenty-two legislative resources measured.
- *GPO Access* has not added any new categories of legislative resources since July 2000; however, there is now a Browse feature for the *United States Code*, which increases the usability of and access to current legislative resources.
- THOMAS does not actually contain three of the resources previously identified as being housed on that site: congressional documents, the *House Journal*, and the *Statutes at Large*. These resources are located on the Library of Congress' Law Library site, a separate entity from THOMAS.
- The *Statutes at Large* are represented as being housed on Lexis-Nexis; however, this is merely a table indexing the *Public Laws*.²
- While Lexis-Nexis provides a great deal of information, second only to *GPO Access* as far as this comparison is concerned, much of that information is broken down into smaller, even more specific categories than those measured here. This could be either a help or a hindrance to researchers.

¹ These Web sites shall not be referred to as "house.gov" and "senate.gov", since the "www" prefix is necessary to access both sites, and such reference might be misleading.

² The *Statutes at Large* are a chronological compilation of slip laws and session laws. The text of these laws can be found in the *Public Laws*, but since there is a separate method of citation for the *Statutes*, they have been included as a separate searchable database.

- Whereas the commercial sites appeared to be playing “catch-up” in July 2000 by adding more of the resources found on *GPO Access*, no resources have been added to the sites since then. Hence, none of the sites have gained any more ground on *GPO Access*.
- No site houses all twenty-two legislative resources compared, but *GPO Access* makes available the greatest number of resources, in addition to always providing up-front information about the dates of coverage.
- Often, even if THOMAS, the House Web site, or the Senate Web site has a particular legislative resource, there is often a link back to *GPO Access* for other available file formats of a document. There are also disclaimers stating that the GPO produces the only “official” version of certain legislation.

Available Online Resources

The findings of this comparative analysis were based upon comparative reviews of *GPO Access* and selected Government and commercial Web sites for twenty-two legislative resources. All general categories of legislative resources that appear on at least one compared Web site are included in the analysis. Additionally, this study does not differentiate between multiple methods of accessing the same base of information. For example, congressional bills are counted as only one resource, even if access to them is provided through both a keyword search and a list of major legislative topics.

Below is a list of the twenty-two different resources compared. The abbreviations used in the data tables and charts are provided for those resources where the full name and extent of the database may not be obvious from looking at the abbreviation.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bills (full text) ▪ Bills (history) ▪ Congressional committee markups (“Comm. Markups”) ▪ Congressional committee prints (“Comm. Prints”) ▪ Congressional committee schedules (“Comm. Schedules”) ▪ Congressional documents ▪ Congressional floor/roll call votes (“Floor Votes”) ▪ Congressional hearings ▪ Congressional member profiles (“Member Profiles”) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Congressional Pictorial Directory</i> (“Pictorial Directory”) ▪ <i>Congressional Record</i> ▪ Congressional reports ▪ <i>Congressional Record Index</i> (“CRI”) ▪ <i>Economic Indicators</i> ▪ GAO Comptroller General decisions ▪ GAO reports ▪ <i>House Calendar</i> ▪ <i>House Journal</i> ▪ Public Laws (full text) ▪ <i>Senate Calendar</i> ▪ <i>Statutes at Large</i> ▪ <i>U.S. Code</i> |
|--|---|

The tables below present a summary comparison of the number of resources on each service:

GPO Access compared to
Government Web sites:

<i>GPO Access</i>	19
THOMAS	6
House Web site	4
Senate Web site	3

GPO Access compared to
non-Government Web sites:

<i>GPO Access</i>	19
Lexis-Nexis	16
Congressional Universe	12
CQ.com	8

Compared to the October 1999 baseline report and the July 2000 follow-up, *GPO Access* still has the greatest number of online legislative resources, when comparing Government and non-government Web sites included in this study. *GPO Access* is also the only one of the compared Web sites to offer the following resources:

- *House Calendar*
- *House Journal*
- *Congressional Pictorial Directory*

The following legislative resources appear in some form on one or more of the compared Web sites, but are lacking on *GPO Access*:

- committee markups
- committee schedules
- *Statutes at Large*³

More detailed information concerning the resources and scope of particular services is provided on the attached tables and graphs.

Scope of Resources

In this report, scope is defined as the range of years or sessions of Congress covered by a particular resource, as well as the comprehensiveness of that resource's coverage. To maintain consistency from the baseline and follow-up reports, congressional sessions are instead represented as years. The assumption is generally that coverage begins with the first year of a session, unless otherwise indicated on the Web site.

As far as comprehensiveness is concerned, the baseline report established a standard of including all legislative resources found on a site, regardless of whether "full coverage" is provided. Indeed, there are many sites that offer only a certain selection of resources from a particular range of years.

³ There are currently plans at GPO to include *Statutes at Large* on *GPO Access* in the future.

Nevertheless, there must be a standard for this kind of incomplete information, and that standard appears to be set by *GPO Access*. When *GPO Access* does not provide 100% of coverage for a particular resource, it is specified that the agency making the resource available provided only a certain percentage of the information from a given year. For example, on the *GAO Reports* database on *GPO Access*, it specifies that full coverage of publicly released documents begins in 1995, whereas coverage for 1994 is approximately 85% and 1993 coverage is approximately 3%. Because this information is made available on *GPO Access*, resources on all sites have been included if there is a measurable standard of their scope for a particular range of years. If a site simply says that it has coverage of a resource since 1995, the assumption is that they mean either full coverage or as close to full coverage as possible. Along these lines, Lexis-Nexis contains some committee hearings from the mid-1980s, and even one from 1969. However, because no actual percentage of coverage is given, and because there appears to be no real standard for the scope of this information, the date of coverage is listed in this report as beginning in 1995 (the date listed on Lexis-Nexis as the beginning of their full coverage).

In light of the inconsistency of date information and actual coverage, the scope of the resources available was sometimes the most difficult information to find. The dates and statements within this report and its attachments regarding the resources available from a particular service are based primarily on publicly available information on selected Web sites. Information can be difficult to locate or even restricted by commercial, fee-based subscription Web sites that limit the amount of information available to non-subscribers. Since it is difficult to navigate the fee-based sites themselves without actually paying, it was still not always possible to obtain dates for the information contained on commercial sites. Some of the information that was otherwise unable to be located was instead obtained from comprehensive legislative resource listings on these University of Michigan sites:

<http://www.lib.umich.edu/libhome/Documents.center/federal.html> and
<http://www.lib.umich.edu/libhome/Documents.center/fedlaws.html>.⁴

For further verification, the data was also compared to a 2001 Law Librarians' Society of Washington, D.C. (LLSDC) report on online legislative and regulatory information.⁵ Although this report was published by a private organization, it was written as part of the LLSDC Legislative Source Book, a print and online resource for finding legislative information. Both the LLSDC report and the University of Michigan sites proved to be viable sources in establishing the general scope of certain resources, especially for those located on fee-based sites that restrict access to such information.

⁴ Every attempt was made to locate and verify the accuracy of information presented in this report. It should be noted that there is the possibility of omissions or misstatements when reviewing and reporting data on the commercial, fee-based Web sites, due to the likelihood of limited access. Also, the information about government and educational resources is not guaranteed, as it is always a possibility that some information was missed during the research procedure.

⁵ McKinney, Richard J. "Internet and Online Sources of Legislative and Regulatory Information." Prepared for LLSDC's Legislative Source Book. Washington, D.C.: Law Librarians' Society of Washington, D.C., Inc, 2001.

Comparison of Legislative Resources on *GPO Access* and Government Web Sites

No new legislative resources have been added to *GPO Access* since the July 2000 report, nor have any resources been added to THOMAS, the House Web site, or the Senate Web site.⁶

In fact, since THOMAS should be distinguished from the Library of Congress' Law Library site,⁷ the scope of its resources is actually less than it was previously stated to be. The resources that would be affected by this distinction are the historical congressional documents, *House Journal*, and *Statutes at Large*. These resources are found under a heading labeled "Historical Collections *Related to THOMAS*" (italics added for emphasis). Both sites are run by the Library of Congress, but this information is not actually contained on THOMAS itself, and the resources found on the Law Library site or other Library of Congress sites should not be confused with those on the separate THOMAS site.

Although no categories of resources were added to the House Web site, it appears to have increased the scope of one of its existing resources. The *U.S. Code* coverage actually extends back to Supplement II of the 1988 revision, containing laws in effect as of January 1991.

The Senate Web site appears to have a lesser scope of resources than before. The Senate Calendar is not actually available on that site; rather, it links to *GPO Access*. Additionally, the committee schedules on that site appear to be for the current session of Congress only.

Comparison of Legislative Resources on *GPO Access* and Non-government Web Sites

None of the fee-based sites appear to have added legislative resources since July 2000.

Lexis-Nexis and some other sites have more specifically differentiated resources in the way of congressional information, especially bills and committee-related information. The categories of resources did not seem important enough to differentiate them from those already included in this report; however, it is certainly worth noting this wealth of information and more specific organization. Nevertheless, since these differentiations within categories seem to qualify as "multiple methods" of searching one database, they have not been included in this report.

CQ.com claims to have most resources back to 1995, with "archives" stretching back from one to ten years previous. Whereas the Federal Reserve Board report references these archives as existing, it does not explain the differentiation between the "archives" and the regular database, which goes back only to 1995. Additionally, we cannot access these archives to see the information for itself.

⁶ As previously addressed, *GPO Access* does now have a browseable version of the U.S. Code; however, since different methods for searching one database are not considered to be altogether different resources, this feature is not mentioned here.

⁷ <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lawhome.html>

Fee-based sites such as *Congressional Quarterly* (CQ) sometimes offer services that *GPO Access* does not. For example, you can personalize and save your searches at CQ, but since *GPO Access* does not use certain kinds of “cookies” due to privacy laws, it is impossible to do anything comparable to this. However, on *GPO Access*, searches can be saved on WAIS and SWAIS.

Sources of Resources

The final category of this comparative analysis seeks to answer the question of whether the legislative resources on a given Web site are produced and/or housed by the sponsoring organization, or whether they are provided through links to another Web site, such as *GPO Access*.

The Web sites were initially chosen for comparison based on the comprehensiveness of their resources. When evaluating the legislative resources of the sites compared in this study, one of the criteria used to measure the legislative data was that it had to reside on the provider’s server, and not link to *GPO Access*, THOMAS, or any other source. This is the main reason behind the exclusion of many library and educational Web sites. There was interest in including educational and library sites, but these sites tend to have limited or specialized resources, and usually link to a number of other sources in lieu of housing their own information.

While all of the Web sites included in this study contain a substantial base of their own legislative resources, several of them also provide links to other Web sites to augment their content. THOMAS, the House Web site, and the Senate Web site all link to *GPO Access*, either for different document file formats, or for supplementary information. The following table presents a glimpse of the resources on each Web site that contain links to *GPO Access*:

Web Site*	Resources that link to <i>GPO Access</i> for alternate file formats or supplementary information
THOMAS	Bills (full text), <i>Congressional Record</i> , <i>Congressional Record Index</i> , Congressional reports**
House Web site	Congressional hearings and reports (link from committee Web pages)
Senate Web site	Bills (full text), <i>Senate Calendar</i> ; committee prints and Congressional hearings (link from committee Web pages)
Congressional Universe	Information unavailable***
CQ.com	Information unavailable***
Lexis-Nexis	Information unavailable***

* *GPO Access* does not link to any other Web site for legislative resource content compared in this report.

** THOMAS links to *GPO Access* only for alternate file formats and related information, whereas the House and Senate sites actually link to *GPO Access* legislative resources for a significant amount of content. The Senate site has a bill search function that links to THOMAS, which has PDF files linking to *GPO Access*. Also, the Senate site links to the *Senate Calendar* for information about bill status. Both the House and Senate sites have some committee hearings and other information on-site, but they also link to *GPO Access* for these resources.

*** Information about possible links to *GPO Access* from commercial Web sites is unavailable to non-subscribers.

Conclusion

In comparison to other governmental and commercial sites, *GPO Access* continues to be the innovative leader and guardian of legislative resources, providing a high level of comprehensive, free legislative information to the public. The attached graphs and tables show that the U.S. Government Printing Office provides a wide variety of free legislative resources to the public, in comparison to other governmental and commercial sites.

Since the July 2000 update, the non-governmental sites have not continued their game of “catch-up”, leaving *GPO Access* as the undisputed leader in terms of the number of available resources. Also, the government sites are still far behind *GPO Access* in terms of available resources, not to mention the scope and source of those resources. Some of the sites have even fewer legislative resources than previously thought, as the historical documents supposedly housed on THOMAS are actually located on the Law Library of Congress site. Additionally, even if these documents were housed on THOMAS, they would provide only a historical perspective, and not the same kind of access to current government documents and contemporary issues provided by *GPO Access*.

Since this study covers only the available legislative resources, their source, and their scope, further studies should be done on this topic to more fully represent access to congressional information, or even general federal government information. These studies may include an analysis of executive, judicial, regulatory and/or administrative information, or a comparison of the different methods of access to legislative resources on different sites, such as browsing, searching, topical lists, etc. Also, a usability study should be done across sites to see which site makes their resources most easily available and accessible.

GPO Access fulfills the congressional mandate of Public Law 103-40 to provide official free public access to electronic Federal government information, using the latest information dissemination technology available to search, browse, and maintain archival and current information “at one’s fingertips.” The attached tables and graphs represent the data that was gathered and used to make the observations and conclusions in this report. The data includes a comparison of the twenty-two legislative resources and their scope (as far as years covered) on each of the seven Web sites.

Comparison of Legislative Resources on *GPO Access* and Selected Government Web Sites

This table presents the scope of each resource on the indicated Web site. Congressional sessions have been converted into years for ease of comparison. Dates followed by a plus sign (+) signify that the specific resource is covered from the given year through the current year.

	<i>GPO Access</i>	THOMAS	House Site	Senate Site
Bills (Full Text)	1993+	1989+		
Bills (History)	1983+	1973+		
Committee Markups				
Committee Prints	1997+			
Committee Schedules			2001+	2001+
Congressional Documents	1995+			
Congressional Hearings	1997+			
<i>Congressional Record</i>	1994+	1989+		
Committee Reports	1995+	1995+		
<i>Congressional Record Index</i>	1983+	1995+		
<i>Economic Indicators</i>	1995+			
Floor/Roll Call Votes	1994+		1990+	1989+
GAO Comptroller General Decisions	1995+			
GAO Reports	1993+			
<i>House Calendar</i>	1995+			
<i>House Journal</i>	1991-6, 1998			
Member Profiles	1995+		1999+	2001+
<i>Pictorial Directory</i>	1997+			
Public Laws	1995+	1989+		
<i>Senate Calendar</i>	1995+			
<i>Statutes at Large</i>				
<i>U.S. Code</i>	1994+		1991+	

Note:

The House and Senate sites contain some bills, committee markups, committee prints, congressional documents, congressional hearings, and congressional reports on individual committee Web pages. However, there is no standard scope for these resources across all committees on either the House or Senate site, so no corresponding dates are included on this table or its accompanying graph.

Comparison of Legislative Resources on *GPO Access* and Selected Non-Government Web Sites

This table presents the scope of each resource on the indicated Web site. Congressional sessions have been converted into years for ease of comparison. Dates followed by a plus sign (+) signify that the specific resource is covered from the given year through the current year.

	GPO Access	Lexis-Nexis	CQ.com	Congressional Universe
Bills (Full Text)	1993+	1989+	1995+	1989+
Bills (History)	1983+	1989+	1995+	1989+
Committee Markups		1995+	1995+	
Committee Prints	1997+	1995+		1993+
Committee Schedules		2000+	1995+	
Congressional Documents	1995+	1995+		1995+
Congressional Hearings	1997+	1995+		1988+
<i>Congressional Record</i>	1994+	1985+	1995+	1985+
Committee Reports	1995+	1990+	1995+	1989+
<i>Congressional Record Index</i>	1983+			
<i>Economic Indicators</i>	1995+			
Floor/Roll Call Votes	1994+	1987+	1991+	1988+
GAO Comptroller General Decisions	1995+	1921+		
GAO Reports	1993+	1994+		
<i>House Calendar</i>	1995+			
<i>House Journal</i>	1991-6, 1998			
Member Profiles	1995+	1995+	1995+	1997+
<i>Pictorial Directory</i>	1997+			
Public Laws	1995+	1988+		1988+
<i>Senate Calendar</i>	1995+			
<i>Statutes at Large</i>		index 1789+		1789+
<i>U.S. Code</i>	1994+	1994+		1994+