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## [ONLINE ACCESS TO LEGISLATIVE INFORMATION]

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Abstract: The coverage and adequacy of various online sources of legislative information are discussed. Five types of legislative information are examined: publications, proceedings, voting records, current legislation, and members' activities. Information regarding the United States Congress is emphasized; however, sources of information on State legislatures are also discussed. For each type of information, data bases providing significant information are described and evaluated. In the case of Congress, major data bases include CIS, CRECORD, VOTES, LEGISLATE, and FEDERAL INDEX; others provide additional access to information. For State legislative information, useful sources include STATE PUBLICATIONS INDEX, PAIS, LEGISLEX, LIBCON, and the various news data bases. In conclusion, the adequacy of online coverage of legislative information is assessed. The question of the need for any additional online information sources is considered, and the types of information such sources might provide is discussed.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The term "legislative information" covers a variety of meanings, including, first, information emanating from a legislature; second, information about a legislature's activities or those of its members; and third, information available to a legislature to assist in conducting its business. In this paper I will address only the first and second types of legislative information, which are the ones most generally available to the public. Similarly, in discussing online access to this information, I will confine myself to those online systems which are publicly available, excluding internal systems available only to members of a legislature.

Information about, or emanating from, a legislature may be divided into five types: first, publications, such as the hearings, reports, documents, and committee prints published by Congress; second, legislative proceedings, such as the Congressional Record; third, legislation and its status; fourth, members' voting records; and fifth, general information about members and their activities.

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## 2. CONGRESSIONAL INFORMATION SOURCES

The United States Congress produces all of these five types of information in large volume. Some idea of the sheer mass of material involved may be gained by considering the fact that in the 96th Congress alone, over 600 bills became law, hundreds more were introduced only to fail, and more than 6000 publications were issued (Ref. 1). Fortunately, most Congressional information is well documented and accessible not only through printed indexes, but also, in recent years, through a variety of online sources.

### 2.1 Congressional Publications

The best documented type of information emanating from Congress is that represented by its many publications. The outstanding online source of such information is the CIS data base. Produced by Congressional Information Services, Inc., CIS is available through both Lockheed and SDC, and covers the period beginning in 1970. It provides detailed indexing and abstracts for individual publications, as well as analytic entries summarizing and indexing the testimony of individual witnesses at hearings. It can be searched using not only terms from the title, abstract, and descriptor fields, but also bill numbers, session of Congress, names and affiliations of witnesses, committee codes, and Superintendent of Documents number. Legislative histories for bills which have become law are added annually, and are searchable by public law number, as well as by title, bill number, subject, etc. The CIS online file corresponds in coverage and detail to the printed CIS abstracts and indexes.

A second useful and comprehensive source for Congressional publications is the GPO file, produced by the Government Printing Office. Available online through Lockheed from 1976 to the present, GPO differs from CIS in the amount of detail provided, and in its selection policy. GPO includes all government publications handled by the Government Printing Office. It provides essentially the information one would expect to find on a library catalog card, with the Superintendent of Documents number as well. Congressional publications can be retrieved relatively easily by searching for Congress as a corporate author, or by using the Superintendent of Documents number. GPO's brief citations, however, make it impossible to retrieve the testimony of a particular witness unless he or she is unusually important--for example, the subject of a confirmation hearing--and hence mentioned in the title of the publication in question. Furthermore, the absence of any abstract, and the general nature of the indexing provided by one or more Library of Congress subject headings, make specific subject searching in this file rather difficult. Certainly GPO is useful as a general source of government publications. As a source of Congressional publications, however, its only real advantage over CIS is one of cost; as a government-produced file, GPO is cheaper to use. GPO corresponds, of course, to the printed Monthly Catalog of United States Publications, which provides historical coverage not available online.

In addition to the complete coverage provided by CIS and GPO, some information is provided by PAIS. This general public affairs data base, available through Lockheed, goes back to 1976, and includes many Congressional hearings and committee prints. It occasionally includes committee reports as well. Selection is based, according to a statement in the print version, on the importance and uniqueness of a partic-

ular item in relation to national policy issues. (Ref. 2) The online citation consists of a bibliographic citation, an indication of language, a document type code (e.g. M for monograph), one or more descriptors, and sometimes a brief note. There may be a series note identifying the session of Congress. To search for Congress as a corporate author, it is advisable to use the "expand" command to browse a section of the index in order to see which forms have been used. A comprehensive search for Congressional publications would need to account for such variants as the following:

- United States. Cong. Joint...
- United States. Cong. Comm...
- United States. House...
- United States. Senate...

Since the entries in PAIS are almost as brief as those in GPO, subject searching can be difficult; however, the more specialized nature of the PAIS file makes the difficulty less severe than it is in the case of GPO. PAIS is useful for a search within its subject area where the object is to include major Congressional publications without being exhaustive. PAIS corresponds to the printed Public Affairs Information Service Bulletin, published since 1915, in its English-language coverage.

A fourth data base, which can be a help in finding slightly older Congressional publications, is LIBCON. Produced by 3-M using Library of Congress cataloging, LIBCON is available through SDC. It covers cataloging done from 1969 to 1979; as of January 1981 it had not been updated beyond mid-1979. It is of no use, therefore, in finding recent Congressional publications. This shortcoming is less serious than it might be, since the Library of Congress is cataloging an ever-decreasing number of U.S. government publications as the Government Printing Office assumes that responsibility; even if LIBCON were up to date, it would be a far from comprehensive source of Congressional publications. LIBCON provides exactly the information normally found on a catalog card. Congressional publications are cataloged with "Congress" as part of the main entry, and thus are easy to find.

In addition to these four data bases, other specialized subject data bases, such as ASI or AGRICOLA, include some Congressional publications from time to time.

## 2.2 Congressional Proceedings

Congressional proceedings present a less complicated situation than publications. They are issued, of course, as the Congressional Record. Commercially available online access is provided by two data bases, CRECORD and FEDERAL INDEX. CRECORD, available through SDC, covers only the Congressional Record, going back to 1976. It abstracts and indexes the text comprehensively, including the House, Senate, Extension of Remarks, and Digest sections. FEDERAL INDEX, available through Lockheed, and, as FEDEX, through SDC, covers government activities as reported not only in the Congressional Record, but also in other publications, principally the Federal Register, the Washington Post, and the Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents. It is both broader in the publications covered and less comprehensive in the coverage provided than is CRECORD. Entries in FEDERAL INDEX are extremely brief, making it difficult to retrieve items on highly specific subjects. Like CRECORD, FEDERAL INDEX goes back to 1976.

### 2.3 Congressional Legislation

Congressional bills and their status are less thoroughly covered by the most widely used online services than other forms of Congressional information. Lockheed, SDC, and BRS have no files devoted to bill tracking. It is possible, however, to track some of the actions relating to a particular bill by searching for the bill number in CRECORD or FEDERAL INDEX to find the Congressional Record citations mentioning that bill. For more comprehensive tracking it is necessary to turn to the specialized subscription service offered by LEGI-SLATE, an online system which tracks bills and resolutions and also provides subject access. LEGI-SLATE includes titles, subject terms, sponsors' names, actions, and status for each item. Bill digests and full texts are not included, but copies of bills are available from LEGI-SLATE.

### 2.4 Congressional Votes

The recent voting records of members of Congress are deeply interesting to people who are following a particular issue, especially around election time. Online information on this subject is provided by LEGI-SLATE, and also through Lockheed and SDC, by the more recently introduced VOTES file. The two files differ in their ability to allow the user to manipulate the data to produce desired results. LEGI-SLATE has a feature permitting the user to set up various profiles against which the voting records are analyzed, producing custom lists showing how a particular group of members voted on a bill, or what percentage of their votes were for or against the user's position on a particular set of bills. VOTES, lacks this computational capacity. It provides the total number of votes for and against a particular bill, and also lists the members and their votes on a bill.

### 2.5 Information about Members of Congress

Information about members of Congress and their activities is most readily found in the various news data bases, such as SDC's NDEX and MONITOR files, Lockheed's NEWSEARCH, MAGAZINE INDEX, and NATIONAL NEWSPAPER INDEX, the INFORMATION BANK, and NEXIS. The INFORMATION BANK goes back to 1969; the others are all considerably more recent. In the case of NEXIS, a full-text data base, all names mentioned are searchable, as is any other part of the text. In the case of the other news data bases, names mentioned in articles are normally included in the indexing as well. Thus it is not difficult to retrieve information about a particular member of Congress; it would be much more difficult to search for information about members of Congress in general without specifying names.

## 3. STATE LEGISLATIVE INFORMATION SOURCES

For Congressional information, there are a variety of online sources available. Each type of legislative information is covered by at least one source. The same cannot be said at the State level, unfortunately. One reason for this may be a lack of uniformity among the States in their legislative practices. For example, some states publish reports which consist only of a recommendation for or against passage, without any accompanying analysis or discussion. Some States keep no official record of their committee hearings. State procedures are simply less standardized

and less well documented than Congressional ones. (Ref. 3) In spite of these difficulties, however, there are some online sources of State information.

### 3.1 State Publications

No one file is devoted solely to State legislative publications. There is, however, a data base covering State publications in general; it is STATE PUBLICATIONS INDEX, available through BRS. It provides subject access to publications of the various branches of State government. Some additional online coverage is provided by PAIS and LIBCON. In both cases, the user needs to know what a particular legislature is called. The words "state" and "legislature" will not suffice, since one State's legislature may be another's general assembly or house of delegates. In some cases, however, the best source of information may be to call the appropriate State library.

### 3.2 State Legislative Proceedings

The proceedings of State legislatures are not covered by any generally available online data base. News data bases may help to provide some information about major legislative events, assuming that the State in which the user is interested has a newspaper which is indexed. Again, the appropriate State library may be the best source.

### 3.3 State Legislation

Bill tracking for current sessions of all State legislatures is provided to subscribers by the LEGISLIX data base. While LEGISLIX covers all States, however, it does not cover all bills. Rather, it emphasizes legislation which is of interest to the business community. For each bill included, it provides a history, an abstract, and its status.

### 3.4 State Legislative Votes

No generally available data base records the votes of the State legislatures. As in the case of proceedings, news data bases may sometimes be helpful.

### 3.5 Information about Members of State Legislatures

The news data bases mentioned above in connection with finding information about members of Congress are also helpful in providing information about State legislators. Unfortunately, many States have no newspaper which is covered by any data base, making it difficult to find information unless a newspaper in another State sees it as being of regional or national significance.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This brief description of current online resources shows that while Congress is generally well covered, State legislatures receive inadequate attention. The obvious consequence is that State legislative information can be very difficult to find online, particularly if the State does not have a newspaper of national importance. For example, in connection with

the 1980 District of Columbia referendum on whether to institute a lottery, I attempted to find out whether it was true, as an opponent of the measure had stated, that the Maine State Legislature was considering abolishing the Maine lottery. I tried various news files, using both Lockheed and SDC, without success. Even after the Maine State Library provided me with the appropriate pages of the Maine Legislative Record, I still was unable to find any newspaper references online. Existing files simply do not cover most State legislatures, or indeed State governments in general, in enough depth for this kind of search. Since none of the files available to me normally include any New England newspapers, the activities of New England State governments are especially poorly covered.

Greater access to information about State legislatures, and indeed subnational governments in general, could be provided by the introduction of two new data bases. First, it would be helpful to have a newspaper file devoted to the systematic and comprehensive coverage of the regional, State, and local point of view. Such a file should cover as many different papers as possible, drawing on the New York Times and the Washington Post only for State and local news. It should be designed to permit the user to limit the search to information about a particular State or region if desired.

A second possible data base would be one devoted to State governments in general, assuming that the legislatures alone might not provide enough material either as sources or as subjects of publications. This data base would include major State publications, journal articles about State government, and the publications of such organizations as the Council of State Governments and the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations.

These two data bases would provide increased access to information about State legislative publications, activities of State legislators, and also, to a lesser extent, State legislation and legislative votes, at least insofar as these last two points are covered by newspapers. They would bring us a little closer to making comprehensive online access to legislative information a reality.

#### 5. REFERENCES

1. Figures are based on searches using the SCORPIO bill file for the 96th Congress and CIS.
2. Public Affairs Information Service Bulletin, vol. 65, p. vii-ix, 1980.
3. Fisher, Mary L., ed. Guide to State Legislative Materials, Littleton, Colorado: Rothman, 1979.

#### 6. NOTE

Data base descriptions are based on vendor and producer documentation, conversations with data base producers, and personal experience. Any errors or omissions are my own.