

Paper Abstract:

Recent scholarship has concluded that congressional committee investigations of alleged executive branch wrongdoing are more common during periods of divided government. In this paper, I review recent congressional oversight of the Bush and Obama administrations during periods of divided and unified government. This review of recent oversight and investigation of executive branch malfeasance demonstrates how polarized politics has changed the nature and goals of oversight. Instead of patrolling for violations of congressional intent or responding to fire alarms pulled by external actors, congressional oversight and investigations of the executive branch are motivated by party majorities seeking to protect the party's brand. The desire to advance party goals has led to more partisan-style inquests and so-called "fishing" expeditions designed to embarrass administrations in divided government. Likewise, unified government dampens congressional investigatory ardor in favor of protecting friendly administrations. Our findings call into question much of the political science wisdom concerning oversight, and we provide recommendations to address the recent and troubling polarization of oversight.

Academic Biography:

David C.W. Parker is an associate professor of political science at Montana State University Bozeman. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Professor Parker worked on a presidential, two Senate, and a mayoral campaign before joining the academy, and provides non-partisan political analysis on Montana politics to local, state, national, and international media outlets including *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *NPR*, and PBS' *Frontline*. He is the author of *The Power of Money in Congressional Campaigns, 1880-2006* (University of Oklahoma Press) and co-editor of the recently published *Doing Archival Research in Political Science* (Cambria Press). He received APSA's 2011 Alan Rosenthal Prize with Craig Goodman for their *Legislative Studies Quarterly* article "Making a Good Impression: Resource Allocation, Home Styles, and Washington Work".