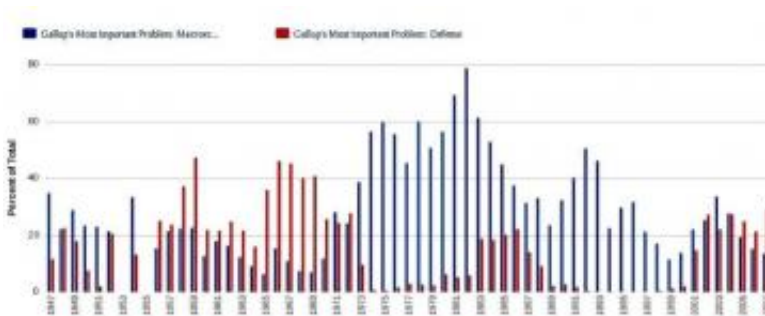


# Web site tracks congressional, presidential priorities

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Over the years, the public had generally believed that the top problem facing the nation is either national defense or economics.

(PhysOrg.com) -- As a new Congress prepares to take office, a powerful online tool from University of Texas at Austin political scientists can help answer questions about lawmakers' shifting focus over time, differences between Republican and Democratic priorities and whether wave elections correlate with policy changes in Washington.

The [Policy Agendas Project](#) database allows [journalists](#), scholars and [interest groups](#) to easily track and compare the issues that presidents and members of Congress have taken up since 1947 and to assess how those actions reflected the mood of the country.

The interface lets users sift through dozens of issues and sub-issues —

health care, the environment, taxes — to look at the topics leaders dealt with in congressional hearings, new laws, executive orders and State of the Union addresses, as well as public opinion about problems facing the nation.

"The study of public [policy](#) was historically plagued by poor information. We wanted to overcome that so scholars and citizens could take a more systematic look at what happens in Washington," says Government Professor Bryan Jones, the J.J. "Jake" Pickle Chair in Congressional Studies, who developed the database with funding from the National Science Foundation.

"Our datasets help you understand what goes on in Congress when policy change is seriously being considered," says Samuel Workman, an assistant professor of government who works with the project.

The data generated by the project are free and publicly available. They come with software that allows them to be used in classrooms. Jones and his colleagues released earlier versions of the Policy Agendas Project while he was a professor at the University of Washington.

"This unique database will help researchers explain how Congress prioritizes issues and will hopefully shed light on how our political system reacts to the will of the people," says U.S. Rep. Michael McCaul, a Texas Republican whose district runs from Austin to Houston.

The latest, most powerful version was developed with University of Texas at Austin graduate students Michelle Wolfe and Trey Thomas and the Liberal Arts Instructional Technology Services.

Within minutes, users can graphically plot such questions as:

- Did Congress lose interest in health care after Republicans took over in

1994?

- Is there a correlation between the public's focus on economic issues and congressional hearings on economic policy?
- What happened to federal education spending and public attention to education after No Child Left Behind was passed in 2001?

Jones is a national leader in studying public policy, which includes the patterns of actions and inactions taken by governments, as well as the impacts, costs and benefits of policy initiatives.

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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