



# The Government Accountability Office (GAO): The Watchdog

## Overview

Debates in Washington are too often over before they begin, as both parties refuse to agree on a set of facts to trust. In an era of increasing polarization, even the most independent of experts are dismissed as partisan or prejudiced. Amid allegations of bias and distrust, Congress, the President, and the media seek out independent analysis of the complex problems facing lawmakers. Regardless of party, policymakers consistently promote the Government Accountability Office (GAO) as a powerful, yet impartial, voice in reforming federal policies and programs.

## What is the GAO?

Congress established the GAO in 1921 to provide an honest assessment of the nation's finances following the First World War, which had substantially increased the debt and expanded the scope of the federal government. While federal agencies within the Executive Branch administer federal programs and related spending, the GAO's auditors and investigators to verify the accuracy of federal accounting and to identify and examine mismanagement of government programs. To encourage independent analysis, Congress organized the GAO outside of the Executive Branch structure, established a 15-year term for the top official at the GAO (aka "the Comptroller General"), and ensured that the GAO workforce consists of civil servants rather than political appointees. While Congress has several support agencies, none rival the GAO's size and nationwide field structure.

## What does the GAO do?

Today, Congress relies on the GAO to provide an accurate depiction of federal finances and to independently investigate specific concerns about government operations and spending. At the request of Congressional leadership or committees, GAO initiates extensive investigations into government operations. One previous Comptroller General noted these investigations "go beyond the question of whether federal funds are being spent appropriately to ask whether federal programs and policies are meeting their objectives and the needs of society." In addition to responding to requests, GAO proactively publishes a biannual "High-Risk Update", which highlights areas of government especially vulnerable to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement.

## What role will the GAO have in solving our big issues?

As Congress searches for ways to reduce the deficit or offset targeted investments, wasteful spending or potential program improvements recommended by GAO offer a simple solution and result in substantial influence in the legislative process.

In a larger context, the GAO has in recent years focused both lawmakers and the media on the fiscal threats resulting from the imbalance between future revenues and expenditures. Congressional interest in addressing tax and entitlement reform in 2013 and GAO's high-profile analyses on these topics combine to position GAO to be a prominent voice in identifying large-scale fiscal reforms.

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## Key Facts

- Measurable Financial Benefits from GAO Work (FY11): **\$45.7 billion**
  - Total Taxpayer Dollars Spent: **\$43.8 million**
  - Return on Investment: **\$81 savings for every \$1 spent**
- GAO Recommendations Implemented (5 years later): **80 percent**
- Number of GAO Staff (FY2011): **3,134**
- Complete List of Comptrollers General:
  - '21-'36: **John McCarl**
  - '39-'40: **Fred Brown**
  - '40-'54: **Lindsay Warren**
  - '54-'65: **Joseph Campbell**
  - '66-'81: **Elmer Staats**
  - '81-'96: **Charles Bowsher**
  - '98-'08: **David Walker**
  - '09-Present: **Eugene Dodaro**

## Other Resources

- Government Accountability Office —
  - [Overview](#)
  - [FY2013 Performance Plan](#)
  - [FY2013 Budget Request](#)
  - [Federal Debt & the Fiscal Outlook](#)
- Congressional Research Service (CRS) — [GAO: Government Accountability Office & General Accounting Office \(RL30349\)](#)
- Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) — [Shooting the Messenger: Congress Targets the Taxpayers' Watchdog](#)
- CBS 60 Minutes — [Wake Up Call](#)

## Links to Other Resources

- Government Accountability Office (GAO) – Overview  
<http://gao.gov/about/>
- Government Accountability Office (GAO) – FY2013 Performance Plan  
<http://gao.gov/products/GAO-12-463SP>
- Government Accountability Office (GAO) – FY2013 Budget Request  
<http://gao.gov/products/GAO-12-463SP>
- Government Accountability Office (GAO) – Federal Debt & the Fiscal Outlook  
<http://gao.gov/products/GAO-12-463SP>
- Congressional Research Service – GAO: Government Accountability Office & General Accounting Office  
<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL30349.pdf>
- Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) — Shooting the Messenger: Congress Targets the Taxpayers' Watchdog  
[http://www.coburn.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?File\\_id=c6bdbe64-ad37-4571-9c6a-8d97a3154253&a=Files.Serve](http://www.coburn.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?File_id=c6bdbe64-ad37-4571-9c6a-8d97a3154253&a=Files.Serve)
- CBS 60 Minutes — Wake Up Call  
<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-7461407498377956300>