Dear Friend,

2021 was POGO’s 40th anniversary. Forty years, seven different presidents, 15 Supreme Court justice appointments, and 21 different Congresses later, we are still here fighting to build a better government that fulfills its promise to serve the people.

The last few years have felt perhaps more perilous and more uncertain than years before. Less than a week into 2021, the country watched a sitting president actively encourage a violent attack on the U.S. Capitol building to undermine a free and fair election. Despite those events, the new, duly elected president was sworn in two weeks later.

Still, the attacks revealed that our democracy is more fragile than we thought, and the deep divisions in our country that led to those moments are widening. Our community must build a stronger foundation for our democracy so we can achieve what we know is possible: an effective, accountable, and just federal government.

We saw encouraging signs that lawmakers were willing to come to the table on many of our recommendations that will build a better,
more responsive government, including strengthening the inspectors general system, improving the way the government tracks federal spending, and cutting fat from the massive Pentagon budget.

We also saw signs that some of our work is going to be more challenging. Efforts to advance comprehensive reforms like the For the People Act and the Protecting Our Democracy Act that would address a series of problems in our government by ensuring voter protections, implementing stronger ethics rules, restoring the balance of power between branches, and reducing the power of the president didn’t gain the groundswell of support from Congress they should have.

POGO and our community of supporters and partners have faced challenges before, and our forty-year history of achieving success in the face of long odds has prepared us to tackle this moment, too. We know we must persevere, get creative, and fight harder than ever before.

This year, in an effort to step up our advocacy and increase the pressure on our government, I did something I’ve never done in my life: I was arrested at a peaceful protest in front of the White House calling on President Joe Biden to ensure federal voter protections are passed. I walked away from that experience with a clarified sense of purpose, and hope. Collectively, the millions of people across the country who care deeply for our democracy can build strong guardrails against abuse of power, root out corruption, and ensure our government is acting in the best interests of all of us, the people it represents.

We may have a long journey ahead before we can fully realize the promise of American democracy, but I am so grateful that POGO and our amazing community remain hopeful and resilient.

Sincerely,

Danielle Brian
Executive Director
Our Mission

The Project On Government Oversight (POGO) is a nonpartisan independent watchdog that investigates and exposes waste, corruption, abuse of power, and when the government fails to serve the public or silences those who report wrongdoing.

We champion reforms to achieve a more effective, ethical, and accountable federal government that safeguards constitutional principles.

How We Work

POGO is a leading voice in the fight for accountability in the federal government no matter who sits in the Oval Office or runs Congress, and our teams help build a more effective, responsive, and just democracy by identifying and addressing challenges to good government no matter how daunting they may be.

Our investigations and research team uncovers systemic problems within the federal government, and the wrongdoing that results. They collect information from whistleblowers and insiders, documents, and datasets to bring corruption and abuse of power to light and to inform POGO’s policy work.

Our public policy team explores and pushes for evidence-based policy reforms that address systemic issues in our government and build a stronger democracy.

Our civic engagement team connects with new and existing supporters, stakeholders, and partners “beyond the beltway” to bring voices from your communities to the fight for reform.

These teams address corruption and abuse of power in all three branches of the federal government. We also have three projects that drive good governance in specific areas:

The Center for Defense Information (CDI) aims to secure a far more effective military at a significantly lower cost.

The Congressional Oversight Initiative (COI) provides congressional staff with resources and knowledge to perform their oversight responsibilities more effectively in order to strengthen the legislative branch’s ability to counterbalance executive power.

The Constitution Project (TCP) safeguards constitutional rights that are threatened by abuse of the government’s national security and domestic policing powers.
# Table of Contents

- Director’s Note ................................... 2
- About POGO ..................................... 4
- 40 Years of Fighting for Democracy ........... 6
- 2021 by the Numbers ............................ 7
- Defending Democracy ............................ 8
- Watching the Watchdogs ......................... 10
- Protecting Whistleblowers ....................... 12
- The Ridenhour Prizes ............................. 13
- Fighting Federal Corruption ..................... 14
- Improving the Supreme Court .................. 15
- Training Congress ................................ 16
- Digging into Organ Procurement Industry Lobby .... 17
- Defending the Constitution ...................... 18
- Growing Our Influence .......................... 20
- Improving Federal Spending .................... 22
- Battling the Inflated Pentagon Budget .......... 24
- Zeroing in on Michigan and Ohio for Civic Engagement .... 26
- We Couldn’t Do It Without You ................. 28
- New Staff ........................................ 34
- Current Staff ..................................... 36
- Our Board and Advisors ......................... 38
- Stay up to Date! .................................. 39
40 Years of Fighting for Democracy

In 2021, POGO celebrated our 40th anniversary. We were founded in 1981 as a small organization whose mission was to expose waste and abuse in the defense budget. Since then, POGO has expanded its mission to investigate waste, corruption, and abuse of power across the federal government.

In the pages ahead, you’ll find messages from the POGO community celebrating what you’ve helped us accomplish. Whether you have been with us from the beginning or just joined us in our fight to root out corruption and demand accountability, we could not have made it four decades without you.

1981:
Project on Military Procurement was founded.

1990:
We renamed ourselves the Project On Government Oversight. At the same time we expanded our focus beyond the Pentagon to cover the whole federal government.

2012:
The Center for Defense Information merged with POGO to fight for Pentagon reform and effectiveness.

2016:
The Center for Effective Government (formerly OMB Watch) merged with POGO and bolstered our federal spending transparency efforts.

2020:
POGO launched our civic engagement program to mobilize communities across the country most affected by our issues.

2021:
POGO has grown to meet the challenge of fighting for a stronger democracy.

2006:
We launched the Congressional Oversight Initiative.

2017:
The Constitution Project merged with POGO to protect our right to privacy, ensure access to justice, and strengthen the rule of law.
Testimonies. POGO provided testimony to Congress on a range of issues including improving whistleblower protections, strengthening the inspector general system, and cutting the Pentagon budget.

Op-Eds published. POGO’s opinion editorials were placed in major news outlets including CNN, the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post, and NBC News.

Congressional mentions. Congress cited our expertise in press releases, floor mentions, “Dear Colleague” letters, reports, and social media posts.

Attendees at our congressional trainings. Hill staff attend these trainings to learn how to conduct oversight more effectively.

Roundtables with lawmakers and constituents. POGO organized roundtables with lawmakers’ offices and constituents in our target states of Michigan and Ohio.

Actions taken by supporters. POGO supporters across the country took actions like writing letters to their representatives, submitting letters to the editor for a newspaper, or signing a petition.
Defending Democracy

Threats to the very foundations of our democracy have rarely been more menacing than those in 2021. A sitting president refused to concede a lost election, and his followers took up arms in an insurrection at the Capitol on January 6. Nineteen states passed restrictive laws to address nonexistent problems that will make it harder for historically marginalized communities, particularly Black, Indigenous, Latino, and low-income people, to vote. Those laws also threaten the integrity of elections, as several turn the certification of votes over to partisan entities. Political polarization has made efforts to enact change feel futile at times.

Our democracy has always been a work in progress, struggling to realize its full potential to work for and protect everyone. And there have always been champions like POGO fighting for a government that serves the people. We are prepared to face the challenges recent years have brought and will continue to fight for a stronger democracy.

Partnering with the People to Build a Stronger Democracy

The challenges to our democracy have left many feeling hopeless and exhausted. POGO is working to give people the tools they need to make a difference. We are building a community of powerful voices across the country calling for a government that protects voting rights, ensures accountability for wrongdoing, and ultimately serves all people, not just the wealthiest or most well-connected.

Civic engagement on pro-democracy reform is a key part of our strategy. We organize in-district meetings with constituents and lawmakers’ offices, draw attention to our issues in local media where lawmakers are more likely to notice them, and provide tools the public can use to effectively work with their lawmakers. These strategies are far more likely to influence Congress than “inside the beltway” (working in Washington DC) advocacy work alone. Many of the successes we had this year were thanks to the work of our supporters fighting alongside us for a better government.

Calling for Essential Voter Protections

We’ve worked in close partnership with other civil society groups to advance democracy reforms. POGO was a founding member of the Declaration for American Democracy coalition, a group of more than 240 organizations committed to protecting the freedom to vote, which is key to achieving an inclusive, just, and accountable democracy in the United States.

Throughout 2021, POGO and the rest of the coalition worked to build support for federal voter protections like the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act that would address the restrictive laws being passed in states across the country.

Such laws are necessary to protect the foundational right to participate in our government, and although the Senate did not make much meaningful progress on legislation in 2021, we will continue to search for innovative ways to pass voter protections.
Supporting Accountability for January 6

POGO believes there must be accountability for the events of January 6 to ensure nothing like it happens again. In early 2021, we mobilized over 6,000 of our supporters to take action and call on their lawmakers to certify the election, impeach former President Donald Trump for his role in the violence, and form the January 6 committee in the House to investigate the attack.

We also organized a letter signed by 30 former Republican lawmakers who called on Congress to impeach Trump. Seven Republican senators voted to convict him, the most votes to convict a member of the same party in an impeachment trial in history. While Trump was not convicted in the Senate, the historic vote was a notable rebuke.

The insurrection also revealed significant intelligence failures, a Capitol Police staff with reduced capacity to respond, and gaps in equipment inventories. In May, POGO testified before Congress about the need to make Capitol Police inspector general reports public in order to provide greater oversight of the Capitol Police and to ensure they are prepared to effectively respond to future crises. In June, Congress directed that office to make its reports public whenever practicable.
Watching the Watchdogs

Inspectors general are independent, nonpartisan government officials who conduct oversight of the executive branch by investigating waste, fraud, and abuse in executive agencies. These watchdogs are an indispensable part of the puzzle in ensuring an effective, accountable, and just federal government.

POGO was instrumental in the creation and passage of laws that bolstered the inspector general system, including the Inspector General Reform Act of 2008 and the Inspector General Empowerment Act of 2016 that made these critical offices more effective, independent, and professional. Without this work, the system would not be as strong as it is today. However, in order to fulfill its promise as independent watchdogs, the inspector general system still needs further reform.

Building Bipartisan Support for Inspector General Reforms

The last several years have revealed a number of deficiencies in the laws and norms governing the inspector general system. Over the course of two months in the spring of 2020, then-President Donald Trump fired, publicly attacked, or replaced five inspectors general. Much of that activity seemed to be a thinly veiled attempt to undermine investigations into his administration. Trump is by no means the first president to retaliate against investigators who don’t serve their political interests, and without reforms, he won’t be the last.

Then in 2021, President Joe Biden did not take action to remove an inspector general who demonstrated that they weren’t independent or effective. Ultimately, he failed to send a strong signal that inspectors general who abuse their authority will be removed, and to protect the integrity of these watchdogs in the process.

We need stronger laws empowering inspectors general to fully investigate wrongdoing without fear of retaliation, and an accountability system that enables the removal of ineffective inspectors general from their posts. POGO made significant progress advancing the IG Independence and Empowerment Act in 2021, which would do just that. We identified the biggest challenges facing the watchdog community, crafted recommendations for legislation that would address those challenges, and helped build the political support in Congress and the executive branch necessary to advance the solutions.

POGO testified twice in the House, led civil society engagement through diverse coalition actions including letters to Congress and meetings with officials, and activated our civic engagement network to increase the in-district pressure on officials to consider the bill. As a result, critical lawmakers who had not previously been engaged in these reforms were speaking publicly about their importance and working behind the scenes to iron out details.

The bill passed the House on a bipartisan vote in June. On November 3, the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee unanimously passed the bill through committee. We will continue to put pressure on the Senate to pass the legislation, which will transform this important oversight system. We expect the bill to advance through the full Senate in 2022.
Calling out Bad Inspectors General

In April 2021, a POGO investigation revealed that Department of Homeland Security Inspector General Joseph Cuffari diverged from oversight best practices and quashed two investigations involving the Secret Service. The first would have scrutinized the Secret Service’s use of force in Lafayette Square outside the White House during the June 2020 protests of the killing of George Floyd; the second would have examined Secret Service policies for handling the threat COVID-19 posed to agents protecting high level government officials. Our investigation found that potential criticism from Trump was likely a factor in Cuffari’s decision. As a result, the Secret Service was not scrutinized for its decisions, and its possible abuse of power went unchecked.

In June 2021, we called out another inspector general. POGO published an op-ed in the Hill arguing that Biden needed to remove Federal Housing Finance Agency Inspector General Laura Wertheimer. In April, a special committee of inspectors general released a report finding that she had abused her authority by bullying staffers who cooperated with congressional investigations, and obstructed an investigation into her own conduct. Two senators called for her resignation in April, but it wasn’t until hours after our op-ed was published in June that she resigned.

These investigations reveal how important it is that inspectors general are qualified, independent of political maneuverings, and held accountable for abuse of authority or mismanagement.
Protecting Whistleblowers

Whistleblowers are the first line of defense against corruption and abuse of power in our government. When they notice wrongdoing and report it, they enable us to make necessary changes and address the problems. However, when whistleblowers come forward, they are almost universally met with hostility and retaliation. When whistleblowers lose their jobs or are otherwise harmed for coming forward, it discourages other potential whistleblowers from reporting wrongdoing and deprives the public of information we need to know.

Continuing a Legacy of Whistleblower Advocacy

For 40 years, we’ve fought for stronger whistleblower protections, exposed unjust and unlawful retaliation, and provided critical resources to whistleblowers that can help guide their efforts to expose corruption, waste, and abuse of power.

Throughout 2021, POGO worked to advance a variety of whistleblower reforms. Notably, our advocacy resulted in the introduction of the bipartisan Whistleblower Protection Improvement Act. The bill would expand protections to more federal employees, ensure due process for whistleblowers, and clarify that no government official may interfere with or retaliate against a federal employee sharing information with Congress.

POGO also worked to restore a quorum on the Merit Systems Protection Board, an independent agency in the executive branch that settles federal whistleblower cases and other disputes. The board has lacked a quorum since 2017, and has been unable to convene in five years. The result is a huge backlog of about 3,500 cases, and federal truth tellers are stuck in bureaucratic limbo. In October 2021, POGO worked with lawmakers to advance three nominees out of the Senate committee that has jurisdiction over the board. We will continue our work with the Senate to ensure these three nominees get a vote, and won’t stop our efforts until we restore the full functioning of the board.
In 1969, Vietnam War veteran Ron Ridenhour wrote to Congress blowing the whistle on the Mỹ Lai massacre. He went on to become an award-winning investigative reporter of international prominence. The Ridenhour Prizes were established in his honor, with a mission to elevate voices of those who have been silenced.

Each year, the prizes recognize outstanding acts of courage and truth-telling, and celebrate books and documentary films that aim to protect the public interest. In doing so, they amplify voices that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Our belief is that public recognition of their courage and their impact will inspire others to speak out and help build a more just world. We are excited to uplift brave truthtellers every year at the Ridenhour Prizes, and to continue our legacy of supporting and protecting courageous dissent.

2021 was the 18th annual celebration of these awards. POGO has been co-sponsoring this annual event for years in partnership with the Fertel Foundation, the Stewart R. Mott Foundation, the Government Accountability Project, and Type Media Center (formerly the Nation Institute). Beginning this year, POGO took over as the lead organization running the prizes.

This year, the prizes recognized four honorees.

The Ridenhour Courage Prize, presented to an individual in recognition of their passionate commitment to social justice, was awarded to José Andrés, chef, humanitarian, and bestselling author.

The Ridenhour Truth-Telling Prize, presented to an individual or group for bringing a specific issue of social importance to the public’s attention, was awarded to Cariol Horne, a 20-year veteran police officer from Buffalo, New York, who was fired and who lost her pension after she physically stopped a fellow officer from using a choke hold on a suspect. She went on to advocate for police reforms.

The Ridenhour Documentary Film Prize, presented for a documentary film that reflects the legacy of Ron Ridenhour, was awarded to Ramona S. Diaz, director of A Thousand Cuts examining Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s war on the press.

The Ridenhour Book Prize, presented for an outstanding work of social significance, was awarded to Claudio Saunt, author of Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory.

Visit www.ridenhour.org to learn more.
Fighting Federal Corruption

Former President Donald Trump’s term in office exposed significant gaps in the laws meant to prevent conflicts of interest and ensure government accountability. But his was by no means the only administration that took advantage of loopholes in laws or norms: Government officials from both parties have demonstrated ethical lapses that raise questions about whose interests they’re truly serving, and it’s past time to resolve those issues.

Launching an Ethics Initiative

In February 2021, POGO launched an ethics initiative led by former head of the Office of Government Ethics Walter Shaub. The initiative focuses on advocating for robust executive, judicial, and legislative branch ethics laws.

POGO has helped revitalize public discussion about governmental ethics. We were extensively cited in the media highlighting the potential conflicts of interest in President Joe Biden’s son’s art sales to secret buyers, congressional conflicts of interest, and judicial transparency problems. We highlighted the strengths of Biden’s ethics executive order, but also called on him to ensure Congress passed comprehensive ethics reforms. The initiative will continue to raise awareness of ethics issues and to make a case for reform.

Advocating to Reduce Financial Conflicts of Interest

POGO built support for legislation in both the House and Senate that would require members of Congress and their families to put their assets in a blind trust for as long as they are in office, so they cannot use inside information for their own profit.

In the fall of 2021, POGO provided testimony to a House Judiciary subcommittee recommending they require that all financial disclosures by judges be posted online. A Wall Street Journal investigation previously found that more than 130 federal judges had financial conflicts of interest that should have legally triggered recusals in cases they ruled on; amending the legislation would help ensure judges fulfill their duty to recuse themselves since those conflicts would be public. The legislation passed unanimously out of the House committee in mid-November, and passed the full House on a bipartisan vote on December 1, 2021. POGO will work with the Senate in 2022 to pass laws to reduce financial conflicts of interest in Congress and the judicial branch.

40 YEARS OF STORIES

Working for justice, accountability, and universal dignity is a multi-generational endeavor. As such, one must face this work with courage and faith. While the road is long, POGO’s efforts are invaluable.

Lia Epperson. POGO board member. Law professor.
Improving the Supreme Court

The Supreme Court plays an outsized role in our government; with just the vote of five people, it can give or take away the rights of millions. Given the high stakes of the institution, ensuring transparency and accountability in the Supreme Court is essential to strengthening our democracy.

Ensuring Access to Live Oral Arguments for All

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Supreme Court transitioned to telephone conference oral arguments, and allowed the public to stream live audio of those arguments online. The court has previously resisted providing this kind of access, and did not have plans to maintain the public calls after they returned to in-person arguments.

POGO reviewed data on public access to the oral arguments and learned that the sessions were streamed millions of times. We compiled a database of that information, reached out to the court to discuss continued access, and sent a letter to the court signed by 80 organizations asking the court to provide live audio access on a permanent basis. Following this advocacy, the court announced it would continue the live audio for the duration of 2021. POGO will continue to fight to make this change permanent.

Recommending Meaningful Solutions to Reform the Supreme Court

The political stakes of selecting justices, and the power each justice wields on the court, are too high. POGO is working to lower the stakes by advocating for term limits, to strengthen ethics rules, and to implement structural reforms that limit each individual justice’s power.

In the summer of 2021, POGO released a report by a task force of judicial experts, including leading state and federal judges and scholars, that defined the problems facing the Supreme Court and proposed meaningful solutions. Following the report, the Presidential Commission on the Supreme Court of the United States that was studying the issue asked us to submit a report on our recommended reforms.

In December 2021, the commission released its public report on Supreme Court reform. The tone of the report was underwhelming for most who want to reform the court and to resolve the issues that have undermined its legitimacy, but it did recommend some of POGO’s key reforms, including a code of ethics for the Supreme Court. POGO hopes to build support in Congress throughout 2022 for these reforms.
Training Congress

Since 2006, POGO’s Congressional Oversight Initiative has been providing oversight trainings and resources to staff members on Capitol Hill. It is the only program of its kind that holds bipartisan, year-round trainings for Hill staff on oversight topics.

Most Hill staff are not experts on oversight and investigations, but they are often the primary people working to carry out those duties of Congress. POGO provides these staffers with the knowledge and tools they need to conduct oversight effectively.

At a time when executive power has been expanding under presidents of both parties, strengthening Congress’s ability to serve as a counterbalance is a critical guardrail to protecting democracy.

Building a Library of Knowledge

In response to COVID-19, POGO held our trainings online, recorded them, and made them available on demand. Anyone can now find recorded trainings on oversight topics like planning a hearing, working with whistleblowers, and leveraging the expertise of inspectors general. Along with our other resources like our handbook *The Art of Congressional Oversight*, POGO now has an online library of oversight knowledge that can help Congress do its job.

Increasing Attendance

2021 was the initiative’s biggest year ever! In addition to our nine regularly scheduled seminars on helpful topics, we also held two “boot camps” — two-day intensive trainings conducted jointly with the Levin Center at Wayne Law and the Lugar Center — as well as a variety of custom trainings for specific committees and offices that requested our expertise. We trained 652 congressional staffers this year, a 54% increase over our second largest year on record.

The initiative is proud that about 40% of all congressional committee staffers have attended at least one of our monthly training sessions.

While reforms can take a long time to achieve, they are worth fighting for. Just this past year, we saw the administration change a decades-old policy that limits the information given to members of Congress. It doesn’t matter how long change may take, the change will never come if you stop working for it.

Tim Stretton, Director of POGO’s Congressional Oversight Initiative.
Digging into Organ Procurement Industry Lobby

Promoting accountability can sometimes lead POGO to unexpected places. One of our most surprising impacts was to improve oversight and accountability in a little known but important industry: the organ procurement industry that recovers organs for transplant.

Back in late 2020, POGO published an investigation examining aggressive lobbying efforts by the organ procurement industry that were aimed at defeating a bipartisan rule governing the industry and making it more accountable. That investigation was cited by Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA) in a letter to the Department of Health and Human Services inquiring about improved oversight, and the rule was finalized in late November of that year. But of course the industry didn’t stop its efforts to escape accountability, and turned its attention to fighting implementation of the rule.

In 2021, our work was cited again in a bipartisan letter led by Grassley and Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) and signed by eight other members of Congress as the industry fought implementation of the rule. In March, the rule went into effect despite the industry’s efforts to stymie it, and is expected to save 7,000 lives each year.
Defending the Constitution

The United States Constitution protects rights and liberties, including providing protections from inhumane treatment by government officials and from overbroad government surveillance. POGO works to address government failures to uphold constitutional rights.

Fighting for Stronger Oversight of Customs and Border Protection

In September 2021, footage of U.S. Border Patrol agents on horseback chasing Haitian migrants back across the U.S.-Mexico border using whips stunned the country; unfortunately, this wasn’t an isolated incident. Customs and Border Protection is the largest law enforcement agency in the country and is one of the least accountable. Advocates have exposed patterns of behavior that violate the Constitution, including racial profiling, excessive force, and dehumanizing conduct by the agency.

In October, POGO released a report providing a blueprint to Congress on how to hold the agency accountable. Those recommendations include reforming the hiring process, improving the management of complaints and discipline, and reevaluating the agency’s responses to excessive use of force.

The secretary of Homeland Security, members of Congress, and Customs and Border Protection officials all contacted POGO to discuss our proposed reforms, and we are actively working on getting many of them implemented through legislation, agency guidance, and internal rules. Members of Congress have already taken action on one of our recommendations by sending a letter to the Justice Department asking that it investigate allegations of “shadow units” that may have attempted to hide evidence in lethal incidents involving U.S. Border Patrol agents.

Nixing Invasive Surveillance Rule

In a public comment period, POGO opposed a biometric data collection rule for immigrants that would have required the submission of data including DNA, eye scans, photographs for facial recognition, and voiceprints at entry-exit points. Such information has been found to often result in misidentification, misuse, and more pervasive surveillance. At the end of the comment period, the Biden administration withdrew the proposal.
Reducing Surveillance by Local Governments

In addition to working to limit government surveillance at the federal level, POGO worked in local jurisdictions to fight for limits on surveillance technology. **POGO provided testimony to the Massachusetts state legislature advocating for restrictions on the state’s use of face recognition technology.** Our recommendations were included in legislation expected to be brought to a vote in mid-2022.

POGO also helped organize a letter signed by 25 civil society groups calling on the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments to halt the operation of the National Capital Region Facial Recognition Investigative Leads System. As a result of that pressure from civil society, the council ended the operation of the system permanently.
Growing Our Influence

POGO has grown significantly since 1981 to an organization with many experts on a wide variety of subjects. Our influence and ability to push for reforms that improve our government has grown too.

In 2021, POGO was invited to provide testimony to Congress a record-breaking 18 times on a huge range of issues, from the defense budget to inspector general reform to judicial branch reform and more.

Testifying before Congress is one of the most effective ways to engage lawmakers and provide expertise. Lawmakers are not experts on every issue they are involved in, but can call on people who are. POGO has worked hard over the past 40 years to develop a reputation as an honest, independent broker that speaks to members of both parties to fight for a better government. Members of Congress have come to know that we provide accurate information and fact-based recommendations that they can trust.

Although working directly with Congress can be effective, experience has taught us that our advocacy alone isn’t always enough. POGO has built a civic engagement program that reaches out to people across the country and amplifies their voices to put pressure on government officials to meaningfully protect our democracy.
POGO was invited to provide testimony 18 times in 2021

1. Pentagon Waste on March 23
2. Congressional Oversight on March 25
3. Military Whistleblowers on April 15
4. Extractives Industry Accountability on April 16
5. Strengthening Watchdogs on April 20
6. Whistleblower Reforms on April 21
7. Congressional Ethics on April 28
8. Checks and Balances on April 29
9. Preventing Corruption on May 3
10. Capitol Police Accountability on May 7
11. Pentagon Waste on May 12
12. Protecting Whistleblowers on May 19
13. Extractives Industry Accountability on May 19
14. Surveillance on July 13
15. Pentagon Waste on July 20
16. Federal Spending on October 21
17. Judicial Ethics on October 26
18. Congressional Oversight on November 4
Improving Federal Spending

The federal government spends trillions of dollars every year through contracts, grants, loans, and assistance. But tracking that spending is far more difficult than it should be. POGO has long worked to pressure the federal government to do a better job, and in 2016 we improved our ability to do this work when the Center for Effective Government, previously known as OMB Watch, merged with us. This group was the original creator of the website that would become USASpending.gov, which the government took over and now uses as their main reporting platform for spending. Staff from the Center for Effective Government brought their expertise as independent monitors of the Office of Management and Budget to POGO. Using that expertise, POGO has invested in monitoring federal spending in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and federal spending more broadly.

Tracking Federal COVID-19 Spending

In 2020, POGO launched the most comprehensive federal COVID-19 relief spending tracker available anywhere. After two updates in 2021, the tracker accounts for $3 trillion in federal government spending from a variety of pandemic relief bills, including $1.2 trillion in loans and $64 billion on contracts.

The tracker uses overlays of unemployment data, minority population data, corporate accountability data, and an industry-by-industry breakdown of relief to help put federal spending during the pandemic into context.

View our COVID-19 relief spending tracker at www.covidtracker.pogo.org/.

In 2021, our tracker served as an important resource for policymakers. We were invited to present the tracker and the lessons we learned creating it to the Presidential COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force. We also met with staff on multiple congressional committees, the Office of Management and Budget, and the Small Business Administration to discuss data transparency and quality issues.

Learning Lessons about Tracking Federal Dollars

Our tracker project helped make clear just how difficult it is to effectively track where any federal dollars are going. Reporting gaps in much of the government’s spending data leave us without vital information, and whole categories of assistance aren’t reported at all.

The government’s failure to collect and report reliable data makes it impossible to accurately assess federal spending.

Neither government nor independent watchdogs like POGO can answer key questions about the spending: What was it used for? Were communities missed? Did the money help the people it was supposed to? It is essential to resolve gaps in federal spending tracking to better understand whether and how government programs are serving their purpose.
Releasing a Blueprint to Fix Reporting of Federal Spending

These lessons drove POGO to create a blueprint that would resolve many of the underlying issues that prevent effective tracking of federal spending of all types, ranging from pandemic relief, to a response to a hurricane, to the improvement of clean water infrastructure and more. Some of our recommendations will need to be passed as legislation while others can be implemented immediately by executive agencies. We will work tirelessly in 2022 to advance these recommendations — some of which have already caught the attention of policymakers — and to improve government transparency and accountability.

POGO lives and breathes oversight and, most importantly, accountability. They are consistent and hold everyone to the same high standard.

Battling the Inflated Pentagon Budget

The United States has the largest defense budget of any country in the world. Even as the military is drawing down from multiple conflicts, the Pentagon has continued requesting budget increases, and has resisted oversight from Congress and the public.

Every year, POGO fights to reduce unnecessary spending and improve accountability within the defense budget legislation; and despite the strength of defense contractors perpetually trying to push for more, we have made progress.

Ending a Massive Slush Fund

The Overseas Contingency Operations account was originally created to support emergency operations costs in Iraq and Afghanistan, and later Syria. Over time, the account evolved to act as a “slush fund” with tens of billions of dollars that weren’t being used in those countries at all, and which weren’t subject to normal oversight processes or budget caps. In 2020, only 15% of the $165 billion funded through the account was for missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Syria.

POGO worked with the Biden transition team to end the Pentagon’s reliance on the off-budget slush fund. We also testified before the House Appropriations Committee’s Subcommittee on Defense about the need to end the account altogether. Finally, President Joe Biden’s 2022 budget ended the account and Congress did not resurrect it.

Ensuring Transparency on Weapons Programs

POGO secured two victories to ensure accountability for Defense Department weapons programs. Our advocacy ensured that annual weapons testing reports remain available to the public, and we preserved a requirement that the Pentagon publish annual reports on weapons costs. Combined, these reports allow the public to evaluate whether weapons work and how much it’s costing taxpayers and harming service members when they don’t. These reports have been some of our most powerful tools in evaluating whether weapons are safe for troops to operate in the field, and whether the spending is effectively advancing our national security, or harming it.

40 YEARS OF STORIES

POGO is a critically important Washington institution, one that brings us closer to the founders’ vision of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Clark Kent Ervin. Former inspector general of the Departments of State and Homeland Security.
Spearheading a Strong Vote on Cutting the Pentagon Budget

In September 2021, 142 members of the House voted in support of an amendment to cut $25 billion from the Pentagon’s budget. It was the strongest vote since 2012, when the House supported cutting $1 billion. That stronger vote followed POGO testimony before both the House Armed Services and House Defense Appropriations subcommittees about the need to reduce Pentagon spending. Ultimately, the budget cut didn’t pass, but the strong vote reflects a growing discussion across the country about the inflated budget, and a willingness among lawmakers to take a strong position on cutting it.

Slowing the Revolving Door

POGO successfully advocated that Congress pass two amendments to the national defense budget restricting the Pentagon’s “revolving door,” which is the practice of Pentagon officials leaving to work for corporations they oversaw, or industry officials taking government posts overseeing their former employers. The revolving door can create the appearance of, or actual, conflicts of interest that drive inflated and unnecessary defense spending.

The most recent defense policy bill extends the recusal period for people coming from the industry to government posts to two years, so they cannot immediately shape policy to benefit their recent employer. The bill also ensures existing restrictions on the revolving door will be included in regulations and contracts going forward, enhancing enforcement of existing laws.
Zeroing in on Michigan and Ohio for Civic Engagement

While POGO has been asking supporters all over the country to take action, we deepened our efforts to build civic engagement in two pilot states this year: Michigan and Ohio. These two battleground states have diverse populations that can inform our future civic engagement work, and elected officials who are persuadable on oversight and accountability issues.

Conducting Polling to Learn Where Voters Stand on POGO Priorities

In fall 2021, POGO polled likely voters in Michigan and Ohio, asking them for their opinions about corruption. The results indicated that more voters see corruption as a more serious problem facing the country than any other issue, and identified strong support across party lines for many of POGO’s leading reforms for a more accountable government. This polling underscores the need for our work and helps us make a case to government officials that anticorruption reforms are popular.

Opposing New F-35s

POGO has been investigating the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter for years, and based on our findings has advocated against this boondoggle. The program has been a magnet for billions in wasted funds and, more than a decade after the deadline for having a working system, the planes still don’t work.

In the spring of 2021, we worked with our supporters to pressure Congress to cut funding for the F-35. People from across the country responded, sending emails to Congress asking them to pull the plug on the program. We also engaged constituents in our target states to call on their lawmakers to oppose the program.

For the first time since the start of the program, four representatives from Michigan declined to sign a letter asking the federal government to select a Michigan Air National Guard base as an F-35 foreign sales training center, reflecting the success of our targeted local efforts.

Most notably, the 2022 defense budget was the first time in years that no additional F-35s were added beyond the original request, and Congress ensured that future F-35 purchases will be contingent on bringing maintenance costs of the fighter down. One of the representatives in our target states started speaking publicly for the first time about wasteful defense spending at the same time. Our pressure is working, and our community can make a difference.
Take Action with POGO!

We want to harness voices across the country to help push for a more effective, accountable, and responsive government.

Go to pogo.org/subscribe, where you can sign up for updates on our campaigns, send letters to your members of Congress, write Letters to the Editor of your local paper, and even join meetings with your lawmaker and their staff. We want to help our supporters push to make the federal government accountable!

I remain committed to anything that helps further a better democracy, and POGO does just that. They understand that policy can move needles because there is so much resistance to change.

Tim Lewis. Former federal appeals judge.
POGO is incredibly grateful for your donations.

Corruption and abuse of power are difficult problems to address, but our supporters have enabled us to make real progress toward a more effective, accountable, and just federal government.

Our story started 40 years ago, and a lot has changed since then. But the generosity of our supporters has remained steadfast, and we cannot thank you enough. **You have helped POGO stand the test of time.**

Whether you’ve been with us for the whole 40 years fighting for a stronger democracy or have just joined us, accomplishments like advancing inspector general reform in Congress, fighting overbroad government surveillance, eliminating a Pentagon slush fund, and engaging more supporters across the country in this fight are all possible because of your support. **We could not do this work without you. Thank you.**

Names indicated in orange and with an asterisk are monthly supporters.

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**ESTATE GIFTS**

The Center for Defense Information at POGO would like to thank the Mary Eloise Halperin Trust for their generous legacy gift. Your support allows us to continue the good work that you’ve entrusted us to do for many years to come.

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Looking for financials?

Our 2021 Annual Financial Report will be released this spring. In the meantime, POGO's previous financial reports can be found at [www.pogo.org/about/financial-information/](http://www.pogo.org/about/financial-information/).
The integrity and the passion for this work, the commitment to all of us, I felt so comfortable in my relationship with POGO. A lot of times Indian issues are looked at as the exotic other... POGO was like coming home in a lot of ways.

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Howard and Greta Herskowitz
David A. and Roberta R. Hertzfeldt
I was excited when I discovered POGO and that they offered research fellowships. I discovered that not only were they a tenacious underdog, punching above their weight, but they were (and are) an incredible group of people.

Jeff Ludwig, Donor. Former POGO fellow.
New Staff

**Shelby Brown, Operations Manager**
Shelby helps run POGO’s day-to-day operations, including managing the internship program. She previously worked in operations and membership at CORE Group.

**Julia Delacroix, Supervising Editor**
Julia leads the editorial team, managing POGO’s editing and fact checking processes. Before joining POGO, Julia was senior editor at the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Learning for Justice program. She brought to that work more than a decade of experience in editing and writing instruction.

**Joanna Derman, Policy Analyst**
Joanna conducts legislative analyses and develops policy recommendations on various issues. Before coming to POGO, Joanna worked for four years for then-Senator Kamala Harris (D-CA).

**Austin Fialkow, Civic Engagement Associate**
Austin assists the civic engagement program in building constituent support behind POGO’s advocacy efforts. He graduated from New York University in 2020.

**Julia Gledhill, Analyst, Center for Defense Information**
Julia conducts research to expose government waste, corruption, and wrongdoing that impacts our national defense, focusing on the Department of Defense. Before joining POGO, Julia worked for the Friends Committee on National Legislation, where she lobbied Congress on a variety of defense policy issues.

**Henry Glifort, Associate Editor**
Henry edits investigations, analyses, testimony, newsletters, and other products to make them clear and accessible for POGO’s readers. Before joining POGO, Henry worked as a senior editor at the American Radio Relay League.

**Kayla Hauge, Digital Marketing Manager**
Kayla manages the email marketing campaigns and products and leads the digital program to advance POGO’s brand among key audiences. Before joining POGO, Kayla worked as the marketing manager for an environmental nonprofit focused on water quality.
Irene Laws, Development Assistant
Irene helps to build and develop POGO’s donor programs by assisting in maintaining and managing donor relationships. She earned her bachelor’s degree in social science, with a minor in political science, from Stetson University.

Maren Machles, Researcher
Maren works on the investigations and research team to investigate federal corruption, conflicts of interest, abuse of power, and other wrongdoing. Maren previously worked with the Institute for Local Self-Reliance researching and advocating for community-led solutions to the digital divide across the country, and specifically within tribal communities.

Julienne McClure, Research Fellow
Julienne works across teams to help expose waste, corruption, and abuse of power involving the federal government. Before joining POGO, Julienne worked at Diamond6 where she compiled reports about geopolitical events in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East in order to prepare the organization’s leadership for diplomatic meetings.

Amaya Shoshannah Phillips, Fact Checker
Amaya reviews POGO-produced writing to ensure the information meets POGO’s standards for accuracy, quality, nonpartisanship, and fairness. Prior to joining POGO, Amaya worked for CNN and Fox News. Amaya is a graduate of Emory University.

Janelle Williams, Special Events Manager
Janelle leads and organizes the Ridenhour Prizes, where she creates authentic and organic connections between the Prizes and our audience. Before joining POGO, Janelle worked as an experiential events manager.

40 YEARS OF STORIES

I appreciate the fact that POGO is nonpartisan; it enables a meaningful impact by working with people with differing views.

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David Janovsky, Analyst, The Constitution Project

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Lynn Mandell, Financial Manager

Julienne McClure, Research Fellow

Johanna Mingos, Data Intelligence Strategist

Sean Moulton, Senior Policy Analyst

Chris Pabon, Director of Development

40 YEARS OF STORIES

POGO taught me how a small team can create powerful work when the heads are all together — and also remembering to have fun!

Rebecca Rotenberg, Former intern. Producer at CNN.
Nicholas Pacifico, Associate General Counsel
Amaya Shoshannah Phillips, Fact Checker
Zoë Reiter, Director of Civic Engagement
Keith Rutter, Executive Operations Officer and Executive Financial Officer
Pam Rutter, Director of Individual Giving
Nick Schwellenbach, Senior Investigator
Aisha Shafi, Program Associate, Congressional Oversight Initiative
Walter M. Shaub, Jr., Senior Ethics Fellow
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Mia Steinle, Senior Fact Checker
Tim Stretton, Director of the Congressional Oversight Initiative
LaPorsha Thomas, Major Gift and Planned Giving Officer
Mark Thompson, National Security Analyst
Sarah Turberville, Director of The Constitution Project
Renzo Velez, Designer
Janelle Williams, Special Events Manager
Adam Zagorin, Senior Journalist

POGO would like to extend a special thanks to our 2021 fellows and interns:
Shriya Brahme
Peri Meyers
Madison Monfreda
Fernanda Oliveira
Ryan Summers
Zach Watson

Special thanks to POGO’s Impact Report team for the work on the production of this report:
Alexis DiSanza, Renzo Velez, Leslie Garvey, Johanna Mingos, LaPorsha Thomas, Irene Laws, Caitlin MacNeil, Pam Rutter, Mia Steinle, Julia Delacroix, and Danni Downing
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Melissa Wasser. Former POGO policy counsel.
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