



The House GOP's investigations are flopping

House Republicans are still looking for their next Benghazi. But their investigations are unpopular.

By Christian Paz | @realcpaz | Mar 28, 2023, 6:00am EDT



House Oversight Committee Chair Rep. James Comer (R-KY) and Reps. Lauren Boebert (R-CO) and Jim Jordan (R-OH) at a committee hearing on Capitol Hill on February 8. | Alex Wong/Getty Images

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Even before they had taken control of the House, House Republicans were **promising** **payback**.

Using the powers of the various congressional committees that they would soon take over, ultraconservative House Freedom Caucus members, led by Reps. James Comer of Kentucky and Jim Jordan of Ohio, were **pledging investigations** of everything: the Biden family's business practices, Hunter Biden's laptop, the origins of the coronavirus pandemic, alleged government bias against conservatives, and the Biden administration's border policies.

But so far, these investigations seem to be flopping. They don't seem to be sticking in the public consciousness. They haven't uncovered page one news about Hunter Biden's laptop, or about the origins of Covid-19, or about a supposed government conspiracy to silence conservatives on Twitter. A bit more than two months into Republican control of the House, plenty of these investigations are well underway. Hearings have been held, letters sent, witnesses summoned, and hours spent **appearing on Fox News**.

The House GOP investigations also aren't making the president's reelection campaign untenable — many Democratic operatives suspected that was their goal — and they don't seem to be damaging the president as many Republicans had hoped.

Of course, it's still early, and in the more than year and a half before the 2024 presidential election, Republicans could still weaponize their committee investigations into better political cudgels. A handful of additional hearings are on the calendar, but more remain unscheduled. If Republicans had hoped to establish the same kind of cloud of confusion and innuendo that they did during the Obama years to tarnish the president's reputation and hurt Hillary Clinton's presidential hopes, they have yet to achieve that with Biden.

New **polling** provided to Vox by the progressive research group Navigator further demonstrates this trend: Half of American adults believe Republicans are overreaching in their oversight of the Biden administration, **up from** the 46 percent who said so in a February poll and the 30 percent who said so in January. The number who view the GOP's investigations as a form of overreach is also rising among political independents, while Republican support for the investigations is remaining steady.

The president's approval rating remains **virtually** unchanged (though it's **trended up** since the midterms). House Republicans continue to be tremendously unpopular. And more Americans today see the House GOP's oversight investigations negatively when compared to when they took control.

Americans' feelings toward GOP oversight aren't very positive

The big reason these investigations don't seem to be breaking through is pretty simple: They just aren't that popular, and never really were. And it's not just Navigator's polling that shows Americans aren't very receptive to whatever comes out of these hearings. Since January, a series of Pew, **NBC**, and **Public Policy Polling** surveys have shown that most Americans don't see these investigations as priorities for Congress, or would rather Republicans spend less time pursuing these lines of inquiry in favor of addressing more tangible, everyday issues (first among them being inflation and the cost of household goods).

For example, when Pew Research asked Americans in mid-January how they felt about the GOP's new focus on investigating the Biden administration, the answers were pretty definitive — 65 percent worried Republicans would focus “too much,” while 32 percent thought they wouldn't pay enough attention. Even Republicans were split closely; **42 percent of Republican adults said they thought Republicans would focus on oversight too much**, compared to the 56 percent who feared lawmakers wouldn't go far enough.

Navigator also found that **a plurality of Americans** don't see these inquiries as serious, good-faith efforts at oversight — including 38 percent of independents who think they are “political stunts.”

Navigator's chief of polling, Bryan Bennett, told me that in the runup to and aftermath of the midterms, Republicans may have misjudged just how much to play up their proposed investigations, and made a strategic error hyping up the investigations that are of least interest to Americans.

In Navigator voter **focus groups** in Wisconsin, Virginia, and Texas, voters seemed most open to investigations into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic, China-US trade practices, and the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

But those aren't the investigations that House Republicans have prioritized. The panel investigating the origins of the coronavirus, for example, has only met once, earlier in March, and a second hearing is scheduled for Tuesday (scrutinizing school closures). The Foreign Affairs Committee, which is investigating the Afghanistan withdrawal, meanwhile, has sent letters to the State Department requesting more information **and held one hearing on the fall of Kabul**, but it did not have any witnesses from the executive branch testifying. Meanwhile, James Comer, the chair of the oversight committee, has spent hours

on Fox News pushing the committee's investigation into Hunter Biden's laptop and the Biden family's business practices. They've held one hearing already and have more planned.

These hearing topics, Bennett said, are the ones that independent voters are most likely to view with disdain and distrust. "The reasons that were cited for that included that there was kind of this broad perception that it was seen as being like a revenge list or a tit-for-tat, or a 'get even' list, and that it wasn't really particularly focused on ... the priorities that people want Congress to focus on."

Comer has also managed to become Republicans' standard-bearer for investigations, assuming the role of chief White House congressional antagonist on Fox News, Newsmax, and One America News. But the decision to take on that role also poses a problem — not many people know him outside of conservative circles, and **scrutiny into his past** has dredged up old **allegations of abuse of a girlfriend** and a **shady track record of political maneuvering**. (Comer's office did not respond to a request for comment.)

Why the GOP's investigations aren't sticking

Beyond the general unpopularity of these investigations, Republicans have some other structural and political obstacles. Democrats are not letting these probes go on unanswered, a lesson from the Benghazi investigations during the Obama years. **A collection of Democratic and progressive groups**, like the Congressional Integrity Project, are working hard outside of government to paint these Republican investigations as illegitimate and the investigators as abusers of congressional power.

The White House itself is also proactively responding to various Republican lines of attack with frequent conversations with reporters, led by Ian Sams, the White House's chief spokesperson on these investigations. Sams and the White House Counsel's office have also gotten ahead of other potential vulnerabilities, like the discovery of classified documents at Biden's home and private offices, by preemptively briefing reporters and blasting out clips and quotes of Comer, Jordan, and other Republicans talking about the political nature of these investigations.

There's also a problem of novelty and nicheness. Many of the subjects that Republicans have pledged to investigate don't feel fresh or new. Hunter Biden's laptop and his business dealings were a 2020 matter; the Afghanistan withdrawal and coronavirus pandemic feel like years-old issues; and the questioning of social media companies and alleged

government bias against conservatives are issues that may only truly resonate with the most partisan, internet-pilled Republican voters.

The oversight committee, especially, may simply be picking too many targets to pursue — it's also investigating the conditions of January 6 defendants in the DC jail, the capital city's legislative work, the impact of "progressivism" on the military, pandemic relief fraud, and coronavirus school closures, **among many other things**.

"The American public is already tired of these," Brad Woodhouse, a senior adviser to the Congressional Integrity Project, a group of Democratic operatives, told me. "I understand there's some support within the Republican base, but the American public writ large are already tired of these extreme tactics."

There are also real questions about productivity: The committees simply haven't held that many meetings, and none have featured people who have enough of a high profile to garner attention beyond niche conservative spaces. "I haven't seen a single guy sweating under the bright lights," Fox News host Jesse Watters **complained in early March**. "Are we gonna drill down on anything? Are we going to see anybody squirm and cough up the truth or at least plead the Fifth or something, so that we can start showering these goons with subpoenas? Where are the bombshells? Have the investigations even started?"

Donald Trump himself is also sucking up the energy and attention of the political press and the American public. As his presidential campaign blunders on, and a number of federal, state, and local investigations into his dealings with campaign money, classified documents, liability for January 6, and potential obstruction of justice continue, he has reinforced himself as one of Democrats' best tools for diverting attention from the House investigations.

Finally, Republicans will also face a longer-term problem of political inertia. Given how unfavorably the public has been viewing these probes so far, they have limited time to change opinions, Bennett said. "The longer that you have these kind of [negative] ratings, the more entrenched that view is going to become, and the harder it's going to be to recover."

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