

Public Access to Congressional Research Service Reports

All non-confidential Congressional Research Service (CRS) reports should be published online. Just like with GAO and CBO reports, CRS reports written for a wide audience should be available to the public to help inform debate. Member-requested memos should remain confidential.

We support H. Res. 110, introduced by Rep. Mike Quigley.

Public Access to CRS Reports Is Important

- **Nearly half of adult Internet users search for information about policy issues online.** CRS offers non-partisan, comprehensive policy analysis on matters before Congress.
- **Taxpayers spend \$100 million per year to fund CRS, yet they cannot easily access the reports.** Congressional staff have direct access to non-confidential CRS reports, but citizens do not. They must call their representative and directly request a specific report; to do so, they must first know it exists. Several government and non-profit websites collect CRS products and make them available to the public, but these unofficial sources are not comprehensive or timely. Commercial vendors charge \$20 per report for access.

Existing Legislation on CRS Is Outdated

- **The prohibition against publishing CRS reports predates CRS and concerns mailing costs, not public access.** Since 1954, outdated language has been reinserted into appropriations bills to prevent CRS from printing reports for public access. In the Internet era, this prohibition no longer makes sense.
- **H. Res. 110 would direct the House Clerk to publish CRS reports** in “a centralized, searchable, bulk downloadable database” that holds CRS products “intended or available for general congressional distribution through the CRS website.” Many organizations have repeatedly endorsed this approach.

Background

- **What is CRS?** CRS issues taxpayer-funded, non-partisan reports on matters of importance to Congress. The vast majority of CRS reports are written for a wide audience, although some are written solely for individual members of Congress.
- **Who can access CRS reports?** Members of Congress and their staff can access CRS reports directly through an internal congressional website. In addition, upon request CRS makes reports available to the press and to the executive and judicial branches. Through these sources, a fair number of CRS reports are made available to the public, although not always in a timely fashion and not always the most up-to-date version.
- **Precedents for public access?** Legislative support agencies, such as the GAO and the CBO, routinely release reports to the public. They do so without running afoul of copyright concerns or constitutional concerns with the “speech or debate” clause. CRS, which plays a similar advisory role, should follow their lead. In addition, CRS used to make their reports more widely available, including publishing a newsletter in the 1980s.
- **Cost?** CRS publishes its reports on an internal website. CRS could release reports to the public at minimal cost.