

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-575](#), a report to the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

FACA requires federal agencies to ensure that federal advisory committees make decisions that are independent and transparent. In fiscal year 2019, nearly 960 committees under FACA played a key role in informing public policy and government regulations.

GAO was asked to review the transparency and independence of FACA committees and data collected in GSA's FACA database. This report examines (1) selected agencies' and committees' adherence to transparency requirements; (2) their practices to help ensure that agency officials do not exert inappropriate influence on committee decision-making; and (3) the extent to which GSA's FACA database contained accurate, complete, and useful cost information for these committees.

GAO selected a non-generalizable sample of 11 FACA committees serving three agencies, based in part on costs incurred and numbers of recommendations made. GAO analyzed documents and interviewed agency officials and committee members. GAO also reviewed FACA database cost data for the 11 committees.

What GAO Recommends

Congress should consider requiring online posting of FACA committees' documents. GAO is also making nine recommendations to agencies to improve FACA committee transparency and data accuracy. Agencies agreed with six recommendations, and GSA described steps to address recommendations to it.

View [GAO-20-575](#). For more information, contact Michelle Sager at (202) 512-6806 or SagerM@gao.gov.

September 2020

FEDERAL ADVISORY COMMITTEES

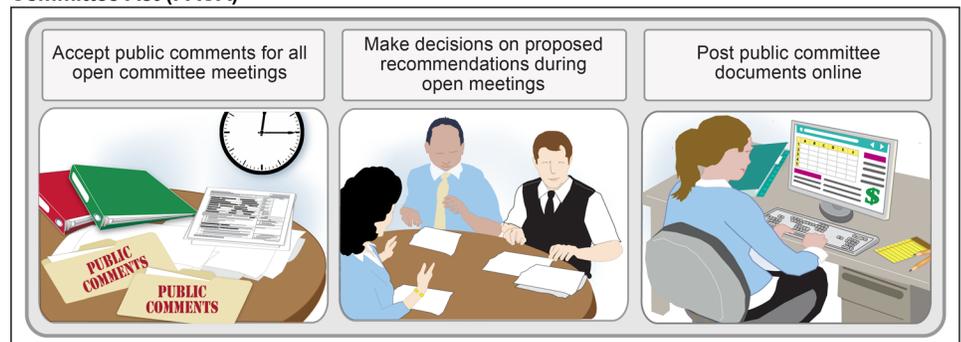
Actions Needed to Enhance Decision-Making Transparency and Cost Data Accuracy

What GAO Found

GAO reviewed 11 selected committees covered under the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) that serve the Departments of Commerce, Health and Human Services, and the Treasury. GAO found that these committees met many, but not all, selected transparency requirements established by FACA, General Services Administration (GSA) FACA regulations, and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). FACA committees GAO reviewed published timely notices for 70 of 76 meetings and solicited public comments for all open meetings held by the committees. However, four of the 11 committees did not follow one or more selected requirements to renew charters, decide on proposed recommendations during open meetings, or compile minutes.

Five FACA committees GAO reviewed did not always follow requirements in OMB Circular A-130 for federal agencies to make public documents accessible online. GSA encourages agencies to post committee documents online consistent with OMB requirements. However, according to GSA's Office of the General Counsel, GSA's authority under FACA is not broad enough to require agencies to fulfill the OMB requirements. Eight of the nine selected FACA committees in our original sample that make recommendations to agencies attempt to track the agencies' responses to and implementation status of recommendations. However, many committees do not make this information fully available to the public online. Improved public reporting could enhance congressional and public visibility into the status of agencies' responses to committee recommendations.

Selected Requirements for Advisory Committees Covered under the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA)



Source: GAO analysis of FACA, GSA regulations, and OMB requirements. | [GAO-20-575](#)

The selected agencies and FACA committees reported that they implemented a range of practices to help ensure agency officials do not exert inappropriate influence on committees' decisions. These practices include limiting committee members' interactions with agency officials outside committee meetings.

GAO also found that about 29 percent of the 11 selected committees' cost data elements in GSA's FACA database for fiscal years 2017 and 2018 were inconsistent with corresponding cost data from selected agency and committee records and systems. In the absence of reliable cost data, Congress is unable to fully rely on these data to inform decisions about funding FACA committees.