



Who Files the Most FOIA Lawsuits Against the Federal Government

Original analysis of 11,389 records from the Federal Judicial Center, FY2006–FY2025 (federal fiscal years, Oct–Sep); ranking FY2025. Published October 21, 2026. <https://settlementinsight.com/research/who-files-most-foia-lawsuits>

Judicial Watch was the first-listed plaintiff in 58 of the 961 Freedom of Information Act lawsuits commenced in U.S. district courts in fiscal 2025 (6.0%), more than any other filer. Protect the Public's Trust (37), the Center to Advance Security in America (29), the Informed Consent Action Network (28) and American Oversight (26) follow. Organizations led 64.1% of all FOIA cases; individuals, whom we do not name, led the rest.

961

FOIA lawsuits commenced in FY2025

58

FY2025 cases with Judicial Watch as first plaintiff

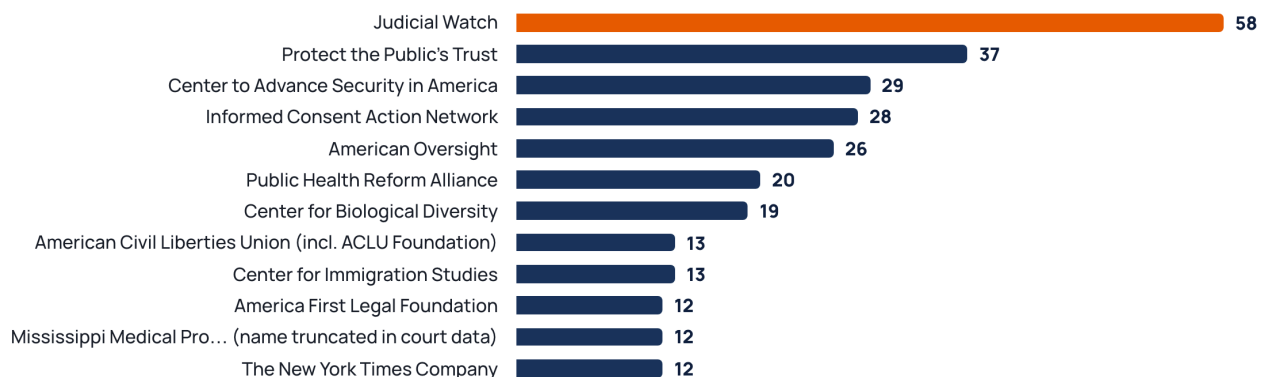
64%

FY2025 cases with an organization as first plaintiff



FOIA lawsuits by first-listed plaintiff organization, FY2025

Cases · Top 12 of 69



Source: Settlement Insight analysis of data from the Federal Judicial Center
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Who brings FOIA cases to federal court

- Judicial Watch leads.** Judicial Watch was first plaintiff in 58 FOIA cases in FY2025 (6.0% of 961), 1.6× as many as the second-ranked filer, Protect the Public's Trust (37).
- A small group files a large share.** The 12 organizations with 12 or more cases each were first plaintiff in 279 FOIA cases, 29.0% of the FY2025 total.

3. **Nonprofits lead most cases.** Nonprofit and advocacy groups led 531 cases (55.3%). News organizations led 39 (4.1%), including 12 by The New York Times Company.
4. **Homeland Security leads identified defendants.** Where the first-listed defendant can be assigned to an agency, the Department of Homeland Security and its components lead with 158 cases, ahead of the Justice Department (140) and Health and Human Services (106).
5. **Filings have nearly doubled since FY2016.** FOIA cases rose from 488 in FY2016 to 961 in FY2025, an increase of 96.9%. The District of Columbia received 626 of the FY2025 cases (65.1%).

How we measured

Data come from the Federal Judicial Center's Integrated Database (IDB) of civil cases, which compiles the case records U.S. district courts report to the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts. We used the release imported into our database on 2026-10-10, which covers cases filed through 2026-06-30. The judiciary's published tables were retrieved on 2026-10-21.

We selected all records with nature of suit code 895 ("Freedom of Information Act", actions under 5 U.S.C. § 552) and a filing date from October 1, 2005 to September 30, 2025, and assigned each to a federal fiscal year. Each record is one case commenced, as in the judiciary's own tables: original filings, removals, transfers and reopened cases. We removed 12 duplicate records that carried the same district, docket number and filing date.

For FY2025 we grouped cases by the first-listed plaintiff and by the first-listed defendant. Organizations were identified by name, spelling variants were merged, and each was classified as a nonprofit or advocacy group, news organization, business, law firm, or state, tribe or public body. Defendants were assigned to their department or independent agency by name. A name cut off in the court data was assigned only where the remaining letters fit a single agency.

To check the data, we recomputed the judiciary's published counts. Table C-2A lists 961 FOIA cases commenced in FY2025, the same as our count of 961; over FY2021–FY2025 our total of 4,170 differs from the published 4,182 by 0.29%. Table C-2 lists 792 FY2025 FOIA cases with the United States as defendant; our count of 795 differs by 0.38%.

Checked against published figures

- Freedom of Information Act cases commenced in U.S. district courts, FY2021: published 641, our count 639 (0.31% apart). [Table C-2A. U.S. District Courts - Civil Cases Commenced, by Nature of Suit, During the 12-Month Periods Ending September 30, 2021 through 2025](#)
- Freedom of Information Act cases commenced in U.S. district courts, FY2022: published 775, our count 771 (0.52% apart). [Table C-2A. U.S. District Courts - Civil Cases Commenced, by Nature of Suit, During the 12-Month Periods Ending September 30, 2021 through 2025](#)
- Freedom of Information Act cases commenced in U.S. district courts, FY2023: published 846, our count 839 (0.83% apart). [Table C-2A. U.S. District Courts - Civil Cases Commenced, by Nature of Suit, During the 12-Month Periods Ending September 30, 2021 through 2025](#)
- Freedom of Information Act cases commenced in U.S. district courts, FY2024: published 959, our count 960 (0.10% apart). [Table C-2A. U.S. District Courts - Civil Cases Commenced, by Nature of Suit, During the 12-Month Periods Ending September 30, 2021 through 2025](#)

- Freedom of Information Act cases commenced in U.S. district courts, FY2025: published 961, our count 961 (exact match). [Table C-2A. U.S. District Courts - Civil Cases Commenced, by Nature of Suit, During the 12-Month Periods Ending September 30, 2021 through 2025](#)
- Freedom of Information Act cases commenced in FY2025 with the United States as defendant: published 792, our count 795 (0.38% apart). [Table C-2. U.S. District Courts - Civil Cases Commenced, by Basis of Jurisdiction and Nature of Suit, During the 12-Month Periods Ending September 30, 2024 and 2025](#)

Limitations

- The data record only the first-listed plaintiff and defendant, cut off after 30 characters. An organization named second or later is not counted, so each figure counts the cases an organization leads, not every case it joined.
- The classification of plaintiffs is ours and is based on names alone. Organizations with only one FY2025 case are reported by type, not by name, and a few truncated names may be assigned to the wrong type.
- Records are cases commenced, not distinct disputes: 36 of the FY2025 records are reopened, transferred, removed or remanded cases, and one dispute can produce more than one record.
- The counts do not show whether agencies withheld records improperly or how the cases ended, and they are not adjusted for how many FOIA requests each organization files or each agency receives. In the FJC data, 166 FY2025 FOIA cases are coded under federal-question jurisdiction rather than as cases with the United States as defendant. Most of them still name a federal agency or official as first defendant; only 12 name a defendant outside the federal government, so the gap between all FOIA cases and the U.S.-defendant column reflects how cases were coded, not suits against private parties.
- Courts can correct or add records after the fact. FY2025 ended more than a year before this analysis, but a later FJC release may change individual counts slightly.

Data files

- [FOIA lawsuits by first-listed defendant agency, FY2025](#) (CSV, 36 rows)
- [FOIA lawsuits by fiscal year, FY2006-FY2025](#) (CSV, 20 rows)
- [FOIA lawsuits by first-listed plaintiff organization, FY2025](#) (CSV, 69 rows)
- [FOIA lawsuits by type of first-listed plaintiff, FY2025](#) (CSV, 6 rows)

How to cite

Goldberg, L. (2026). FOIA lawsuits against the federal government — cases by plaintiff organization and agency (FY2006–FY2025) [Data set]. Settlement Insight. <https://settlementinsight.com/research/who-files-most-foia-lawsuits>

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