The District-D.C. Connection: A Semester Project for an Undergraduate Congress Course*

Christopher Z. Mooney, *West Virginia University and University of Essex, United Kingdom*

Instructors of undergraduate courses on the U.S. Congress face two major challenges. First, like teachers of other upper-level courses, they must provide students with a meaningful opportunity to do original research. But, undergraduates unfamiliar with the joys and frustrations of the research process must be led to the trough with a careful hand: too rigorous an assignment and they are overwhelmed; too simplistic an assignment and they fail to experience the satisfaction of the creative pursuit of knowledge.

The second challenge that these instructors face involves their subject matter: the U.S. Congress, arguably the most inscrutable institution in American government. While most students have a rudimentary familiarity, for example, with the presidency (from television news), and the courts (from "People's Court" and "LA Law"), the Congress remains distant and mysterious. It is unlike any institution in the student's experience, and the information the news media provides about it is less than systematic and often less than complimentary. How can an instructor overcome this unfamiliarity and impart a deep understanding of Congress to undergraduates?

I address this two-fold challenge by requiring my students to undertake a "District-D.C. Connection" project. Each student studies a single member of the U.S. House of Representatives and analyzes the link between that member's district and legislative activities in a term paper. Students compile and analyze a variety of information about the legislator's district and Washington activities from documentary sources available in most college and university libraries. A series of short, data-gathering assignments are also used to guide students in their research and to enhance the classroom experience.

The Term Paper

One of the key political concerns in a republic is how well elected officials represent their constituents. This issue has been of special concern in the United States recently, as public trust in government is again on the decline. Congress in particular has taken quite a beating in this regard. Scandals surrounding the House bank, post office, gym, and party leadership, and the chronic concern over what some consider to be excessively high rates of re-election all fuel concerns that members of Congress are out of touch with their constituents. Perhaps as a result of these attitudes and events, the American National Election Study's 1990 Post-Election Survey found that over 38% of respondents strongly disapproved of the job Congress was doing, as opposed to 11% who strongly approved of it (Miller et al. 1992, 97). The wide success of term limit referenda and the turnover of over 25% in the U.S. House in the 1992 election cycle is likely at least in part a result of this negative public image of the Congress.

But as congressional scholars know well, individual representatives go to great lengths to endear themselves to their constituents (Fenno 1978; Parker and Davidson 1979; Parker 1989). Both in Washington and in the district, the needs and desires of voters are constantly in the thoughts (and reflected in the deeds) of congresspersons. Members of Congress, in fact, tend to represent their districts only too well, and there are significant consequences from this sort of activity (Mayhew 1974; Ehrenhalt 1992, chap. 1).

The District-D.C. term paper is designed to drive home this hyper-representation to students and to provide a springboard for discussions of its effects. I hand out the assignment on the first day of class. This sets the tone for the semester: the class will be research-oriented, with the underlying theme being the relationship between members of Congress and their districts. I present the task to the students as follows:

> The key to this paper is *linking* a congressperson's congressional activities to his/her district. You are to use the characteristics of the constituency to *explain why* this member behaves as he/she does. If there are obvious incongruities between his/her legislative activity and the constituency, discuss them, explain how he/she gets away with this activity, and explain why it has arisen in the first place.
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> Among the questions you will address about the district are: What are its demographic characteristics? How does it vote (e.g., turnout and party predispositions)? Are there politically distinctive regions within it? What is the history of that congressional seat, in terms of who wins it and its districting? What are the major economic forces and groups in the district? Who gave the member money to run for office? Who gives it to his/her opponents? From the answers to these questions, and from any other sources you can find, what can you say about the policy preferences of these citizens, and how do these vary across the district?
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> Among the questions you will address about the member's congressional activities are: On which committees and sub-committees does he/she sit? What positions of leadership does he/she hold? To which informal congressional groups does he/she belong? How did he/she vote on key issues, on the floor and in committee? What bills has he/she introduced? What questions does he/she ask in committee hearings? Does he/she speak on the floor, and if so, on which bills and what does he/she say?

This project can be used with virtually any Congress course syllabus and set of readings because it cross-cuts all of the major issues in the study of that institution: elections,

representation, legislation processing, committees, leadership, and so forth. I have found that having students read portions of Fenno's *Homestyle* and Mayhew's *Congress: The Electoral Connection* is particularly useful in getting students thinking about the constituency-D.C. linkage, however. A good case study of legislative policy making (e.g., Cohen's *Washington at Work* or Birnbaum and Murray's *Showdown at Gucci Gulch*) also facilitates their understanding of the importance of the connection, and therefore the assignment.

As the project is to be an integral part of the entire course, students are required to select their member within the first two weeks of class. I also require that they clear their choices with me so that three requirements for the representative can be met. First, only one person may study any given member. This ensures that each student will search out and analyze the data on his/her own, and it also provides a wider range of data for in-class work. Second, I require that students study members of the House of Representatives. The greater homogeneity of House districts, and their two-year terms make House members better subjects for this study than Senators. And finally, members should have served at least three terms in office to allow time for the paper trail on their activities in Congress to take shape.

Students tend to select legislators with whom they are at least casually familiar. This means that they first consider their own representative, leading to the rapid depletion of members representing districts near students' homes. For my students at West Virginia University, this means West Virginia's representatives, as well as those from New Jersey and the Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C. areas, are typically studied each year. Students also tend to choose "famous" members, typically the House leadership. Newt Gingrich, Thomas Foley, and Richard Gephardt have often been studied in my classes. It is quite useful to have a few of these leaders under study each term, because they will have different patterns of activity, and therefore present an interesting variation on the questions discussed in class.

As a way of getting my students started on this project, I provide a list of information sources they might use. These include:

Barone and Ujifusa, *The Almanac of American Politics*
Makinson, *Open Secrets: The Dollar Power of PACs in Congress*
Congressional Quarterly, *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*
Congressional Information Service, *CIS Index*

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Scammon and McGillivray, *America Votes*
U.S. Government Printing Office, *The Congressional Record*
Monitor Publishing Co., *Congressional Yellow Book*
U.S. Census Bureau, *Congressional District Data Book*
U.S. Census Bureau, *State and Metropolitan Area Data Book*
U.S. Government Printing Office, *Congressional Directory*
U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*
Congressional Quarterly, *Politics in America*
Congressional Quarterly, *Congressional Districts in the 1980s*
Congressional Research Service, *CRS Bill Digest*
U.S. Government Printing Office, *Cumulative Index of Congressional Committee Hearings*

While these volumes are familiar to

legislative scholars, few undergraduates have ever examined them in depth. I have found that even with this list, considerable time and effort are required for students to gather the information they need for their papers.

I require that the paper be 15-20 double-spaced pages in length, and submitted two weeks before the end of the semester. I have found that requiring at least one consultation on the project around mid-semester enhances the quality of the final product considerably. In order to prevent cross-year plagiarism of this assignment (particularly by members of those campus organizations that keep files on this sort of thing), I require the submission of two copies of the paper, one of which I let the students know will be kept in my own permanent file. This provides a deterrent for plagiarism and a ready check when such an infraction is suspected.

Most students are capable of finding the range of information on both the district and congressperson required for this assignment. The best students also meet the deeper challenge of analyzing the relationship between the member and the district. Indeed, it is this infusion of meaning into the data they gather that distinguishes the top students from the rest of the class. Such an A-level paper offers insightful analysis into why a member acts as he/she does, creatively using a range of evidence and systematic argument. C-level papers will simply piece together the data required for the sub-assignments (see below) and/or offer only description of the district and member activities with no connecting analysis. B papers will fall into the middle range, either offering insightful analysis on limited data, or a very thorough description of the district and member activities with little analysis. And because the project requires considerable initiative on the part of the student, there will inevitably be the very weak D-level papers, with major holes in the data and/or logic, and with no analysis.

Sub-Assignments

Both to guide students in their research for the final paper and to

enhance the classroom experience, I give a series of short assignments requiring them to turn in specific data on their congressperson and his/her district. These assignments are timed to coincide with the classroom topic for the day. I then incorporate the data they supply into class discussion, or compile it in a way that helps to reinforce a point from the lecture. The class can be divided into small groups to compile this data, facilitating student input. I grade these assignments on a $-/\checkmark/+$ scale, with a premium being placed on timely completion.

For an example of such an assignment, during a unit on roll-call voting, I ask students to bring in their congressperson's Party Unity scores, Presidential Support scores, COPE and CCUS ratings, as well as two bills on which the member violated his/her normal voting pattern on each score and rating. In class, small groups are assigned the task of developing plausible hypotheses about voting influences relevant to each index. These groups then compile the class's data to test their hypotheses. Finally, the class reconvenes and each group reports its hypotheses and data analysis, while the rest of the class reacts and assesses each group's conclusions. The non-group members will have insight into the indices they did not discuss because they each know their own representative and district quite well by this point in the semester (usually the 12th week in my course). The bills for which members violate their normal patterns are often particularly fruitful in provoking discussion.

One obvious benefit of using these sub-assignments is that it gets students into the library early in the semester. This avoids the last-minute paper and allows students to really grapple with their assignment throughout the term. This short assignment approach also has other important benefits. First, it brings to life the often abstract theories and findings of political scientists in a way that really clicks with students. An instructor may tell students that incumbents get more PAC money than challengers, but if a student finds out that his/her congressperson received $305,361 from PACs last election cycle, while that member's

opponent only received $6,968, it becomes real to him/her. And when the entire class compiles its data and the aggregate results confirm these findings, the lesson sticks with them.

These sub-assignments also provide fodder for classroom discussion that is often less artificial than questions posed only by the instructor. When students see an obvious pattern in, for example, committee assignments, it piques their interest spontaneously. For instance, they ask themselves why so many legislators from Kansas, Nebraska, and California are on the Agriculture Committee, and why the sub-committee seats are distributed as they are.

The instructor can set these sub-assignments up in such a way so as to fit into any syllabus. For just about any topic, there is relevant district or legislative activity data available. The following are examples of the types of information that I have students bring in throughout the semester for these sub-assignments:

• A map of the member's state with his/her district highlighted (districting and apportionment unit)

• Voter turnout rates for the district in the primary and general elections in the previous off-year and presidential year (elections unit)

• The amount of money spent in the previous two primary and general election campaigns by both the member and his/her opponents, and the percentage of this money raised from PACs (campaign finance unit)

• The percentage of the vote the member received in the past three primary and general elections, the number of terms he/she has served, and a list of political positions held before entering Congress (election results unit)

• Two or three paragraphs briefly describing the district, e.g., demographics, economics, voting patterns, distinctive regions and cities, etc. (constituency relations unit)

• Congressional committees and subcommittees on which the member serves (committees unit)

• Congressional party leadership positions the member holds (parties and leadership unit)

• Informal congressional groups to which the member belongs, noting any leadership positions held (informal groups unit)

• The title and brief description of five bills for which their member was the principal sponsor in the previous year and the committee to which each of these was referred, the total number of bills the member sponsored and co-sponsored, and the percentage of these that "received action" (according to the CRS Bill Digest) (agenda-setting unit)

• The member's ratings by the following groups: CCUS, COPE, ACLU, CFA, LCV, NTLC, NSI, and the CEI (interest groups unit)

Conclusion

This "District-D.C. Connection" project yields a variety of benefits for each student, the class as a whole, and the instructor. First, the student has an in-depth look at a single member of Congress, providing him/her with valuable insights into and concrete examples of the theories and patterns of behavior described in the course curriculum. The student can also feel a deep sense of accomplishment in having produced a truly original bit of research. Some of my students have had their papers solicited by the office of the members on whom they wrote. (One of these students was even informed that his paper was used in developing campaign material for the representative!) This hands-on approach also begins to move a student away from being a passive research consumer to an active research producer—a new experience for many undergraduates, and one that may help smooth the transition to graduate school or work as an analyst in a government agency.

The class as a whole benefits from this series of projects because the quality of student commentary is raised significantly over that of the typical classroom discussion. This results primarily from students engaging the material throughout the course (i.e., by completing the sub-assignments). As a result, students speak up who would not normally participate in class, and all students' comments tend to be more thoughtful. Classroom discussion also is enlivened by the use of actual data to illustrate points. The knee-jerk skepticism some students hold toward

abstractions tends to melt in the face of the evidence they themselves have helped collect. This allows the class to move directly to the more interesting questions of the causes and effects of the relationships they find.

Finally, I have found that this series of projects makes the classroom experience much more productive and enjoyable for the instructor as well. First, there is the satisfaction of presiding over an active and interested cadre of scholars, as opposed to force-feeding information to reluctant undergraduates. Further, because the data these students bring in vary from semester to semester (as the members who are studied vary), the instructor never knows exactly what points will be made in discussion. Certainly, some results are more predictable than others, but there is always the random component of the processes that keeps the course fresh even after many times through it. I also enjoy not having to read 35 identical papers at the end of the semester. Each District-D.C. Connection paper is unique, because each member and district is unique. And along the way, each semester I learn a great deal about at least a half dozen members of the U.S. House with whom I am unfamiliar.

In sum, this project allows the instructor to meet the two-fold challenge outlined above: it provides students with a hands-on research experience, and it allows them to understand more deeply that most fascinating and inscrutable of institutions, the U.S. Congress.

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About the Author

Christopher Z. Mooney

Christopher Z. Mooney is assistant professor of political science at West Virginia University. During 1993-95, he is visiting lecturer of government at the University of Essex, United Kingdom, where he teaches American politics and political methodology.

Using E-Mail to Enhance Class Participation*

Barbara Welling Hall, *Earlham College*

Bluebook number 7. This student has never said a word in class. You barely remember what she looks like; her essay is . . . well organized, thoughtful, even witty in places. Too bad that she didn't speak up in class. Too bad that other class participants didn't hear what she had to say about the material. But can you do anything if she doesn't want to talk? This article describes one successful experience in using electronic communication to publicize the voices of otherwise silent students and, in general, enhance the equitability and liveliness of class participation. The particular course under investigation was a senior seminar in feminist international relations theory.

The discussion of participation in my syllabi encourages students to synthesize the thoughts of one or more people by bringing together what has been said to form a new insight, conclusion, or question; to share materials (library books, newspaper and journal articles, current events, etc.) relevant to the course; and cooperate in creating a supportive atmosphere.

As a rule, I like to weight participation as a fairly hefty portion of the final course grade (at least 20%) because I believe that the process of teaching and learning ought not to be exclusively "top-down," or what Paulo Freire (1968) would call "banking education" with the teacher making deposits into the students' supposedly blank minds. Feminist challenges to "banking education" have been significant (Belenky 1988; Harding 1991; Minnich 1990); for this reason, creating a conducive environment for active sharing of interpretations and experiences is an especially important goal for a course that is identified as "feminist."

This goal does not make evaluating participation any easier. If anything, the task of evaluating participation feels more difficult when more is expected than answering the teacher's questions in the teacher's presence.

Grading is, in some respects, inherently at odds with honoring the varied experience of different speakers. Those students who talk the most frequently and the most loudly rarely have the most insight. By the same token, those students who are most shy occasionally write elegant